

PETER'S QUOTATION OF JOEL IN ACTS 2 by Thomas Ice

But Peter, taking his stand with the eleven, raised his voice and declared to them: "Men of Judea, and all you who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and give heed to my words. For these men are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only the third hour of the day; but this is what was spoken of through the prophet Joel."

—Acts 2:14–16

Many advocates of preterism, replacement theology and covenant theology often cite Acts 2:16 as support for their interpretation of Scripture. However, I do not believe that Peter's statements furnish a basis for their conclusions. "Preterists . . . generally see these signs as predictive descriptions of the A.D. 70 destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans."¹ Gary DeMar believes that this passage was fulfilled in the first century.² Instead, Peter merely references the Joel passage as support that the Holy Spirit is the cause of the events in Acts 2 just as the Holy Spirit will be the cause of events in Joel 2. Let's look more closely at the details in the passage.

WHAT'S THE QUESTION?

The first dozen verses in Acts 2 describe the coming of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost and the response it drew from those who continued in unbelief. The question posed by the mockers suggests that Christ's disciples "are full of sweet wine" (2:13). Peter answered this specific question by declaring that "these men are not drunk, as ye suppose, . . . but this is that which was spoken by the prophet Joel" (2:15-16). Peter then quotes from Joel 2:28-32. The Joel passage describes the supernatural activity of God's Spirit at work in events surrounding a yet future coming of Christ. Thus, Peter's point is that of similarity or analogy between what the Holy Spirit will do in the future with the nation of Israel and what He was doing in the first century when the church was founded.

A comparison of the events in Joel 2 with what occurred on Pentecost in Acts 2 falls short of fulfillment at any point. The Spirit's activity in Joel cannot be separated from the events that will transpire during the tribulation, thus it could not have been fulfilled in Acts 2 unless the tribulation had taken place at that time, which it did not. As noted in verse 16, the unique statement of Peter ("this is that"), is the language of comparison, not fulfillment.

FULFILLMENT IN ACTS 2?

Many believe that at least part of Joel 2 was fulfilled in Acts 2 since it is quoted by Peter. However, a close look at Peter's reference to Joel is not that of fulfillment (the word "fulfill" is not used in Acts 2), but one of similarity ("this is that," i.e., *like* that in Acts 2:16) between the working of God's Spirit in the future—as noted in Joel—and what the Holy Spirit was doing in starting the church.

Peter quotes extensively from Joel 2:28-32 in his Pentecost sermon (2:17-21). In Acts 2:17, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, Peter changes the phrase "after this" in Joel 2:28 to "in the last days," underscoring the fact that his citation of the Joel passage was not being fulfilled in his day, but must await the future time of the tribulation. "Last Days," as used by Peter refers to the tribulation (cf. Deut. 4:30; 31:29; Isa. 2:2; Jer.

23:20; 30:24; 48:47; Ezek. 38:16; Dan. 2:28; 10:14; Micah 4:1). After Israel experiences the material blessings described in Joel 2:21-27, they will experience the spiritual blessings noted in 2:28-29.

What does Joel describe in 2:28-32? Joel describes the activity of God's Spirit at work in events surrounding a yet future second coming of Christ. Thus, Peter's point is that of similarity between what the Holy Spirit will do in the future with the nation of Israel and what He was doing almost 2,000 years ago. The pouring out of the Spirit upon all flesh, in the context of the Joel passage, refers to the conversion of Israel during the future tribulation period as supported by the subsequent reference to the various echelons of Jewish society, "and your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, Your young men will see visions" (Joel 2:28). These are categories of individuals who have been excluded in the past as vehicles of God's prophetic inspiration. But in the future a time will come when all aspects of Israel's society will be impacted by the Spirit. The context clearly limits the scope to Israel. Such a limitation means the passage is not describing what will happen within the Gentile believing community. As opposed to a mere trickle, at this time in the future, God will pour out His Spirit upon Israel. The exact meaning of the phrase relates to a time when God will provide maximum revelation through all echelons of Israel's society. Proverbs 1:23 says, "I will pour out my spirit unto you, I will make known my words unto you." The second line explains more precisely what is meant by the first line.

Further support can be seen from Joel 2:18-21 and in a parallel passage (Zech. 12:10-14). Had Israel believed on Jesus as their Messiah in Peter's day then it would have likely taken place in conjunction with the supernatural events described in Joel. Instead, the ingathering in Acts 2 was the birth of the church and explains why not one of the physical signs and wonders in the sky occurred on the Day of Pentecost. All of these things, including a pouring out of the Holy Spirit upon the Jewish people leading to their conversion, will occur at the end of the tribulation in conjunction with Christ's return. However, the Holy Spirit, and not wine, was the cause of events on the Day of Pentecost. The tribulation will be a period of new revelation from God.

JEWISH QUOTATION OF THE SCRIPTURES

Arnold Fruchtenbaum claims that the New Testament writers (all were Jewish) quote the Old Testament in the common Jewish way in the first century. "They often gave a spiritual meaning or a new application to an Old Testament text without denying that what the original said literally did or will happen."³ Fruchtenbaum cites four ways the New Testament quotes from the old and notes that Matthew 2 contains an example of all four uses. The four uses are 1) a literal Old Testament prophecy that is literally fulfilled in the New Testament,⁴ 2) a literal fulfillment of a type made by the New Testament writer from the Old Testament,⁵ 3) a literal fulfillment in the New Testament of an application from the Old Testament,⁶ 4) a summary of what the prophets actually said in the Old Testament, which is then said to be fulfilled literally in the New Testament.⁷

Fruchtenbaum cites Peter's quotation in Acts 2 of Joel 2 as corresponding to his third category and notes the following:

This example is found in Matthew 2:17-18 which is a quotation of Jeremiah 31:15. In the original context, Jeremiah is speaking of an event soon to come as the Babylonian Captivity begins. As the Jewish young men were being taken into captivity, they went by the town of Ramah. Not too far from

Ramah is where Rachel was buried and she was the symbol of Jewish motherhood. As the young men were marched toward Babylon, the Jewish mothers of Ramah came out weeping for sons they will never see again. Jeremiah pictured the scene as Rachel weeping for her children. This is the literal meaning of Jeremiah 31:15. The New Testament cannot change or reinterpret what this verse means in that context, nor does it try to do so. In this category, there is a New Testament event that has one point of similarity with the Old Testament event. The verse is quoted as an *application*. The one point of similarity between Ramah and Bethlehem is that once again Jewish mothers are weeping for sons that they will never see again and so the Old Testament passage is applied to the New Testament event. This is literal plus application. The original text may be history or prophecy. The Jeremiah quote is an example of history. An example of prophecy is in Acts 2:16-21 which quotes Joel 2:28-32. Virtually nothing that happened in Acts 2 is predicted in Joel 2. Joel was speaking of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the nation of Israel in the last days. However, there was one point of similarity, an outpouring of the Holy Spirit, resulting in unusual manifestations. Acts 2 does not change or reinterpret Joel 2, nor does it deny that Joel 2 will have a literal fulfillment when the Holy Spirit will be poured out on the whole nation of Israel. It is simply applying it to a New Testament event because of one point of similarity.⁸

CONCLUSION

The “this is that” to which Peter refers in Acts 2 from Joel 2 is the point of similarity that the Holy Spirit was producing both results. The manifestations on the Day of Pentecost were not produced by wine but by God’s Spirit. Further, there was no spiritual fulfillment of the darkening of the sun, moon and stars on Pentecost, nor does this provide a precedent for the allegorical interpretation of Old Testament prophecy in the New Testament. Joel 2 will be fulfilled in the future, just before the second coming of Christ. Maranatha!

ENDNOTES

¹ Francis X. Gumerlock, “Blood, Fire, And Vapor of Smoke: The A.D. 70 Destruction of Jerusalem in Ancient Exegesis of Acts 2:19–21” in Gary DeMar and Francis X. Gumerlock, *The Early Church and The End of The World* (Powder Springs, GA: American Vision, 2006), p. 158.

² Gary DeMar, *Meet the Real Last Days Scoffers: A Response to Ed Hindson’s “The New Last Days Scoffers” – Part 2*, www.americanvision.org/articlearchive/05-27-05.asp.

³ Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum, *Israelology: The Missing Link in Systematic Theology*, rev. (Tustin, Calif.: Ariel Ministries, 1992), p. 842.

⁴ Fruchtenbaum picks up these classifications from David L. Cooper, *Messiah: His Historical Appearance* (Los Angeles: Biblical Research Society’ 1958), p. 74. These classifications are also supported by Emil Schurer, *A History of The Jewish People in The Time of Jesus Christ*, 2nd Division, Vol. I (Hendrickson Publishers Edition, 2003, [1890]), pp. 346–50.

⁵ Fruchtenbaum, *Israelology*, pp. 843–44.

⁶ Fruchtenbaum, *Israelology*, pp. 844–45.

⁷ Fruchtenbaum, *Israelology*, p. 845.

⁸ Fruchtenbaum, *Israelology*, pp. 844–45.