

## The Angelic Promise in Acts 1:11: is it Past or Future?

### - a Structural Analysis of Acts 1:9-11



In this very short article, I wish to give a possible chiasmic analysis of these verses which describe Jesus' ascension into heaven and the words of the two men/angels to the apostles which immediately followed His departure. I also wish to discuss, again very briefly, the exegesis of these verses, and in particular whether the chiasmic structure aids us in our exegesis.

On the next page is the interlinear text of these verses (using the Received Text) and also the KJV translation.

### Some Preliminary Thoughts

One of the reasons that I wish to consider these verses is that verse 11 is almost universally interpreted as a reference to a still future return of Jesus Christ either at the end of history, or to inaugurate a series of eschatological events that are still in the future. I currently believe this view to be mistaken, and currently hold to a "partial preterist" interpretation which sees the coming described in Acts 1:11 as having occurred in the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70, and that this verse, which questions the "looking up and gazing into heaven" of the apostles, should be read in the light of Luke 21:28 which tells the disciples/apostles *when they should*

<p>τῆς γῆς. 9 Καὶ ταῦτα εἰπὼν, βλέπόντων αὐτῶν ἐπήρθη, καὶ νεφέλη ὑπέλαβεν αὐτὸν ἀπὸ τῶν ὀφθαλμῶν αὐτῶν.</p> <p>10 Καὶ ὡς ἀτενίζοντες ἦσαν εἰς τὸν οὐρανὸν πορευομένου αὐτοῦ, καὶ ἰδὸν ἄνδρες δύο παρειστήκεισαν αὐτοῖς ἐν ἑσθῆτι λευκῇ, 11 οἱ καὶ εἶπον, "Ἄνδρες Γαλιλαῖοι, τί ἐστήκατε βλέποντες εἰς τὸν οὐρανόν; οὗτός ὁ Ἰησοῦς ὁ ἀναληφθεὶς ἀφ' ὑμῶν εἰς τὸν οὐρανὸν οὕτως ἐλεύσεται ὁμοίως ἐπὶ τὸν οὐρανόν. 12 Τότε ἐθεάσασθε αὐτὸν πορευόμενον εἰς τὸν οὐρανόν. 12 Τότε</p>	<p>And these things having said, beholding [him] they he was taken up, and a cloud withdrew him from their eyes.</p> <p>And as looking intently they were into the heaven as was going ward heaven as he went up, behold, two men stood by them in white apparel; 11 which also said, Ye men of Galilee, why stand ye gazing up into heaven? this same Jesus, which is taken up from you into heaven, shall so come in like manner as ye have seen him go into heaven. 12 Then returned they unto Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet.</p> <p>ye beheld him going into the heaven. Then</p>	<p>most part of the earth. 9 And when he had spoken these things, while they beheld, he was taken up; and a cloud received him out of their sight.</p> <p>10 And while they looked stedfastly toward heaven as he</p> <p>11 stood by them in apparel</p> <p>12 Men Galileans, why do ye stand looking into the heaven? This Jesus who was taken up will come in the manner</p> <p>12 Then</p>
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start to “raise their heads”. Furthermore, we know from Luke 21:33 that “all these things” will take place in the generation of Jesus’ hearers. Despite this clear teaching, the “futurist” interpretation currently holds sway.

Although the promise of Jesus’ return is given in v. 11, verses 9 and 10 are relevant to the interpretation of the angels’ words because verse 11 speaks of Jesus’ “coming” as being “in like manner” to His “going into heaven” which is described in the previous two verses.

The words of the angels that Jesus will come “in like manner as you have seen Him go into heaven” appear to be part of an explanation for why the Apostles should not continue to gaze into heaven. The angels do not give a “time frame” for this coming of the Lord, but it seems unlikely to me that the angels intended, or that the Apostles would have expected from the words of the angels, that thousands of years would elapse before the coming of Jesus to which they referred. The Apostles would have been dead and with the Lord in heaven for centuries, and so this would only very indirectly, and somewhat cryptically, explain why they should not be looking up to heaven *now*! (In fact, under these circumstances, looking up to heaven in the hope that the heavens would open and that they would be granted a vision of the departed Lord, and thereby maintain contact with Him, would seem a reasonable action.) On the other hand, if Jesus’ coming were something soon, something connected with events immediately in the Apostles’ future, then the angels’ words would be directly relevant and could mean something like, “There’s no need to look up to heaven for Jesus, because He will be coming to you on the earth—you will know all about it down here!”. This seems to me to fit very well with Jesus’ encouraging words to the disciples in Luke 21:28 as already described.

Most commentaries do not seem to me to wrestle with the “oddness” of the angels’ words when interpreted as describing an event so far into the future. One strategy used by commentators is to say that the angels were suggesting that the knowledge that Jesus would come to the earth at some time in the future *was the incentive* the Apostles needed to stop looking up to heaven and instead to get on with work down here on the earth during the Lord’s absence. This is possible, but the angels do not actually say anything about getting on with work—this new factor has to be supplied by the commentators. On the other hand, if Jesus’ coming to earth in the near future, and in a way that the Apostles will experience, is the actual meaning, then this really does explain why the Apostles do not need to keep gazing up to heaven, and no additional factors need be inferred (the “Occam’s razor” principle).

I don’t think that the chiasmic analysis to be described will really help to determine whether the interpretation of the majority of commentators is correct or not. However, two articles which “point” in the direction suggested in the previous paragraphs and which I think are excellent and most helpful in this regard are by Mike Rogers and can be accessed at the following locations on the internet:

[www.mikerogersad70.com/questions-and-answers-part-4-a-visible-return-acts-19-11/](http://www.mikerogersad70.com/questions-and-answers-part-4-a-visible-return-acts-19-11/)

and

[www.mikerogersad70.com/a-review-of-acts-19-11-and-the-hyper-preterism-debate-by-keith-a-mathison/](http://www.mikerogersad70.com/a-review-of-acts-19-11-and-the-hyper-preterism-debate-by-keith-a-mathison/)

I would like to add another similar verse to the very helpful ones that Mike has provided, (and which he discusses in his recent book) and that is Matt. 26:64 where Jesus says to Caiaphas, the scribes, the elders, the chief priests and the whole Council, “. . . from now on you (pl.) will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of power and coming on the clouds of heaven”. This verse appears to be saying that the heavenly session of our Lord and His (simultaneous) coming on the clouds of heaven was something that would be a continuous reality and it would be starting immediately or very soon, or, if not a “continuous” reality, it would be something imminent, and not something postponed far into the future. A reasonable interpretation would be that Christ’s “heavenly session” at the right hand of power began definitively when our Lord ascended into heaven as described in Acts 1:9-11, and that His coming on the clouds of heaven refers to Christ’s coming in judgement of Jerusalem and the definitive end of the Old Covenant in AD 70.

The bible teaches that there will indeed be a “final consummation of all things” - including a final judgement and a bodily resurrection (1 Cor. Ch. 15) but I suggest that this is not the “time frame” of our verses in Acts 1:9-11.

On the subject of Jesus' coming, besides this very specific coming on the clouds of heaven described in the Olivet discourse to which we have already referred (and which partial preterists understand as the judgement on Jerusalem and related events and the definitive beginning of Jesus' messianic kingdom at the end of the 40 years between AD 30 and AD 70 during which the definitive transition from the Old to the New Covenants occurred), the Lord does seem also to be “coming” in judgement and blessing all the time. Thus for example in Revelation, the Lord speaks of coming to almost all the seven churches of Asia in Revelation chs. 2 and 3 (e.g. Rev. 3:20) and throughout that book, He is described as coming. Indeed the book ends with the pleas of the Spirit and the Bride and of John himself for Christ to come. A simultaneous “coming yet also being in heaven” also appears to be described in the (rather enigmatic) verse, John 3:13 (Received Text) and also in Peter's words in Acts 3:19-21 which speak, in connection with his hearers repentance, of Jesus being “sent” by the Lord as well as being (simultaneously) received by heaven “until (during) the times of restitution of all things”. (On this latter topic, there is an alternative to the widespread view that the “restitution of all things” has to refer to the final consummation of everything. After all “restoring all things” was done by John the Baptist too (Matt. 17:10-13). An uncompromising “Preterist” reading of this expression in Acts Ch. 3 is given by Kurt M Simmons (*The Coming of Christ and the Restitution of All Things*. This article can be read at [www.Preteristcentral.com](http://www.Preteristcentral.com)) and I hope, (D. V.) to post an article on this important topic soon also).

### Setting the Scene

Before looking at the chiastic analysis, I would like to offer a few thoughts to “set the scene”:

#### 1) Heaven

In Acts 1:9-11, the Lord leaves the Apostles and departs into heaven, having previously promised that they will receive power to witness when the Holy Spirit has come upon them.

Verse 9 describes how, with the disciples looking on, Jesus was lifted up and a cloud received him out of their sight. This is all that they see. Thus they do not see, for example, a vision of the Lord in heaven. They see Jesus

is appearing in the cloud, and then . . . nothing. It is thus natural that they should continue “gazing into heaven” (v.10) - presumably trying to catch a further glimpse of the Lord to see what may have happened to Him.

This then leads us in to verse 10 where we are introduced to the two men/angels who appear to be tasked with reassuring the Apostles and offering explanatory words regarding what has just occurred. They first give a very gentle rebuke to the Apostles: “Men, Galileans, why do you stand looking in to heaven?” and this is followed by an explanation for why such gazing is unfruitful.

The use of the word “heaven” in these verses I think needs to be “interpreted”. If we go right back to the creation in Genesis ch. 1, there are two meanings to heaven. First there is the “real” heaven, (the “throne-house” of God), which is created, along with the earth in Gen 1:1. But after that, there is a sort of “model” of the real heaven, which is also called heaven, which is created on Day Two as an “expanse” separating the “waters above” from the “waters below”, and it is this “sky-heaven” which we see when we look upwards. James Jordan describes this very well in chapter 4 of his book, *Through New Eyes* which can be freely downloaded from the Internet. The word “heaven” appears four times in vs. 10-11, and in each case we will try to work out whether it is possible to determine which “heaven” is meant.

In the Greek of the New Testament, the same word, *ouranos*, is used to refer to both “heavens” - thus, in Matt. 16:2-3, *ouranos* is translated as sky, but in the expression “kingdom of heaven” for example, it clearly refers to the “real” heaven—God’s “throne-house”.

In vs. 10-11a, we are told that the Apostles are gazing into heaven, and that the two angels appear and ask the Apostles *why* they are “looking into heaven”. I suggest that it is the straightforward “sky-heaven” being referred to in both cases. The gentle rebuke, (a “rhetorical question”) delivered to the Apostles suggests to me that part of what the angels are, in effect, “saying” that it is futile to look into the “sky-heaven” for Jesus, because he is no longer there. If this is true, then it is reasonable to expect that what the angels will go on to say will be something about where Jesus is now. Yes, He has been “taken up from them” (v. 11b), but where is He now? This I suggest would be uppermost in the minds of the Apostles, and why they need angelic help at this point: according to my understanding of the situation, at this point they only know that Jesus has disappeared in the cloud—they do not know what has become of Him. If

this is correct, then the angelic message would provide reassurance about Jesus location in heaven in the present and the immediate future (as well as information about His coming within their generation (Luke 21: 27, 32)) - in which case the second two occurrences of the words “into heaven” (v. 11b) would reasonably refer to the “real” heaven which is God’s “throne- house”. Interestingly, my interlinear bible (translated and edited by J. P. Green) gives “heaven” for the first two occurrences, but “Heaven” (capital H!) for the second two occurrences of this word.

## 2) Dan 7:13

As a second point in this “setting the scene” section of the article, I would like to mention the connection, well-recognised in the commentaries, between the Ascension of Jesus described in these verses and the seminal Old Testament reference, Daniel 7:13.

In the Septuagint, Dan. 7:13 reads,

“I beheld in a vision of the night, and behold, with the clouds of heaven, One as the Son of Man coming and to the Ancient of Days He came on and was brought near to Him.”

The Hebrew (actually Aramaic) of Dan. 7:13 reads as shown below:

7:13	חָזָה	הָיִיתָ	בְּחִזּוֹי	לַיְלָא	וְאַרְוֵי	עִמָּי -	עֲנַי -
	chze	euith	b·chzui	lili·a	u·aru	om	- onni
	perceiving <sup>(A)</sup>	I-was <sup>(A)</sup>	in·visions-of <sup>(A)</sup>	night·the <sup>(A)</sup>	and·behold! <sup>(A)</sup>	with <sup>(A)</sup>	clouds-of <sup>(A)</sup>
	שְׁמַיָא	קְבֵר	אַנְשֵׁי	אַתְהָ	הָיָה	וְעַד -	עֲתִיק -
	shmi·a	k·br	ansh	athe	eue	u·od	- othiq
	heavens·the <sup>(A)</sup>	as·son-of <sup>(A)</sup>	mortal <sup>(A)</sup>	arriving <sup>(A)</sup>	he-was <sup>(A)</sup>	and·unto <sup>(A)</sup>	one-transferring-of <sup>(A)</sup>
	יּוֹמָא	מָסָה	וּקְדָמֵיהִי	הִקְרִיבוּהִי		:	:
	iumi·a	mte	u·qdmu·ei	eqrbu·ei		:	:
	days·the <sup>(A)</sup>	he-reached <sup>(A)</sup>	and·before·him <sup>(A)</sup>	they- <sup>c</sup> brought-near-him <sup>(A)</sup>		:	:

We will return to this topic, but we note for now 1) that the words “seeing/perceiving”, “behold”, “cloud(s)”, “heaven(s)” and “coming/arriving” occur both here and in our passage, 2) that the “coming” referred to here in Dan. 7:13 is a coming *to* heaven, not a coming *from* heaven and 3) that, as in our passage describing Jesus’ ascension, the movement is described in both active (“coming”) and passive (“he was brought near”) terms.

## 3) The Men/Angels at the Tomb (Luke 24:1-8)

The women visiting the tomb on Easter Sunday also encountered two men/angels who, as in our passage, also gave a gentle rebuke in the form of

question—“Why do you seek the Living One with the dead?” And this is followed with an explanation why the present behaviour of the women is inappropriate or unfruitful for the new situation: “He is not here but was raised . . .”

The two encounters with men/angels thus follow a common pattern and there are some other similarities—for example, Galilee is mentioned in both passages, and Jesus uses the expression “Son of Man” in Luke 24:7 which again provides a link to Dan. 7:13.

### Chiastic Analyses of Acts 1:9-11

Well, let’s now look at two possible chiastic analyses of these verses:

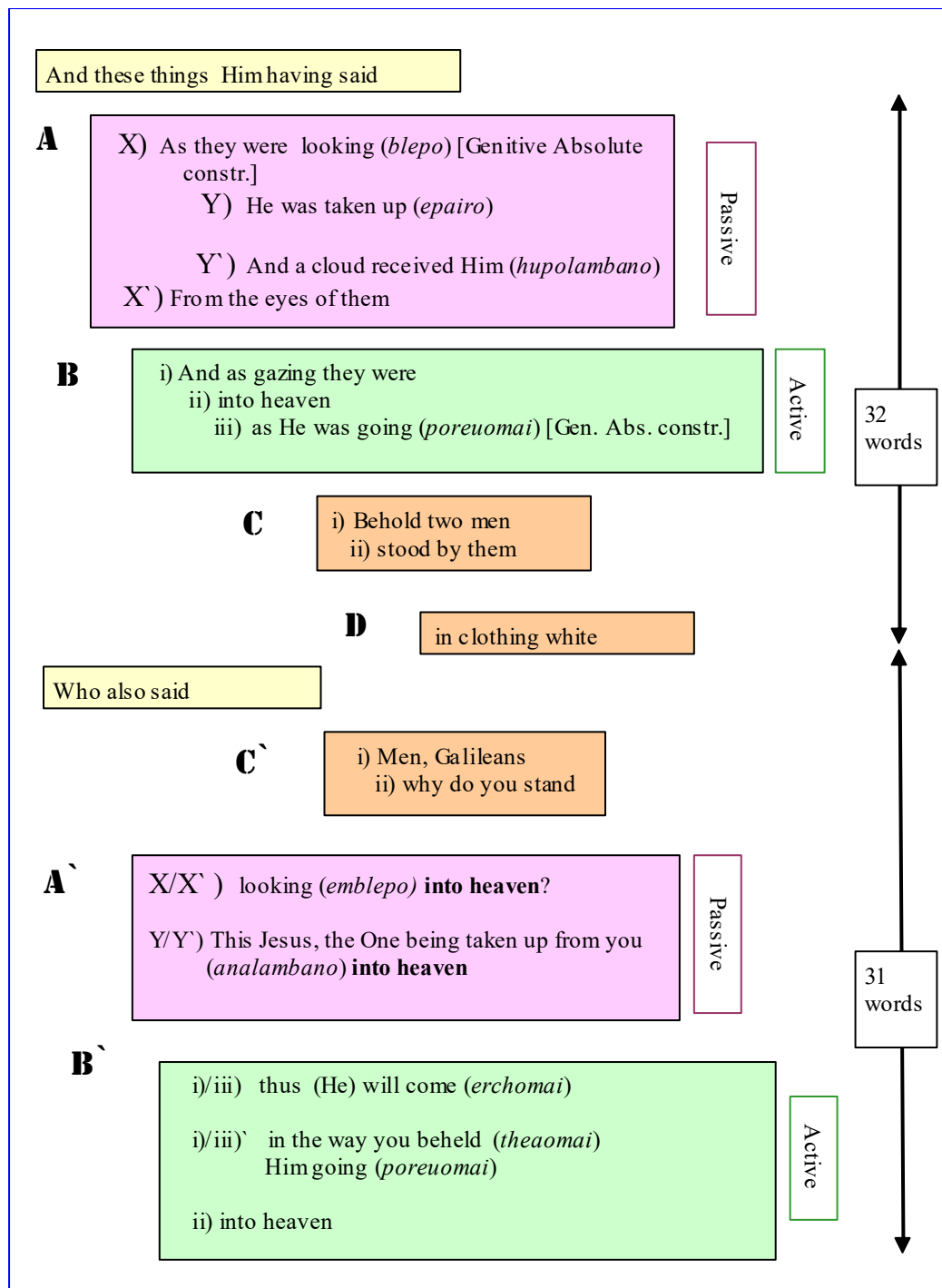
#### 1st Analysis: (two “panels” A,B and A’,B’ within the chiasm)

This analysis is based on two main features. The first is vocabulary, and the second is the pattern of “active” and “passive” modes of the Lord’s ascension: He both goes into heaven (active) and is simultaneously taken or received up (passive). Of course, all the “seeing and “beholding” by the Apostles is active! Furthermore, for each active or passive action involving Jesus there is a corresponding “seeing” (or not seeing!) type action by the Apostles. Please see the diagram on the next page.

Notes:

1) The central section (C, D, C’) in orange is fairly straightforward. The “white clothing” (D) at the centre indicates that these men are actually angels, and so we can expect a revelation from heaven to be given. C and C’, besides the references to “standing”, are also linked since there are two men in C, and they address the Apostles in two ways—both as men and as Galileans. This might seem trivial or coincidental. However, I have noticed a similar phenomenon in the opening verses of Paul’s epistles: he matches senders and recipients. This is a bit of a digression, but look, for example, at Phil. 1:1 where Paul and Timothy as senders are matched by “overseers and deacons” as recipients (Paul=overseer, Timothy = deacon?!) and their role as slaves of Jesus Christ is matched by the Philippians’ role as saints of Jesus Christ. Thus a “numerical rapport” is established between the givers and the receivers of a message, despite the actual numerical discrepancy!

2) A and A’ correspond since they both describe the Lord’s ascension in “passive” terms: Jesus is “taken up” and “received up from below” in A,



and “taken up” in A'. The X's and Y's refer to the seeing (or not seeing!) by the Apostles and things that happen to Jesus respectively. Also the “looking” by the Apostles uses very similar Greek verbs in A and A'. A' represents a development on A because of the repeated “into heaven” in A' (X/X') and A' (Y/Y') and whereas there is no mention of heaven in A. Thus the second half of the chiasm has three occurrences of the words



“into heaven” compared with a single occurrence in the first half—these thrice repeated words by the angels are presumably intended to reassure the Apostles regarding Jesus’ glorious destination.

3) B and B’ correspond since they both describe the Lord’s ascension in active terms (they both use the same Greek verb for “going”). Also they both refer to heaven, but B’ represents a development on B since it additionally describes the Lord’s coming in the same way as His going.

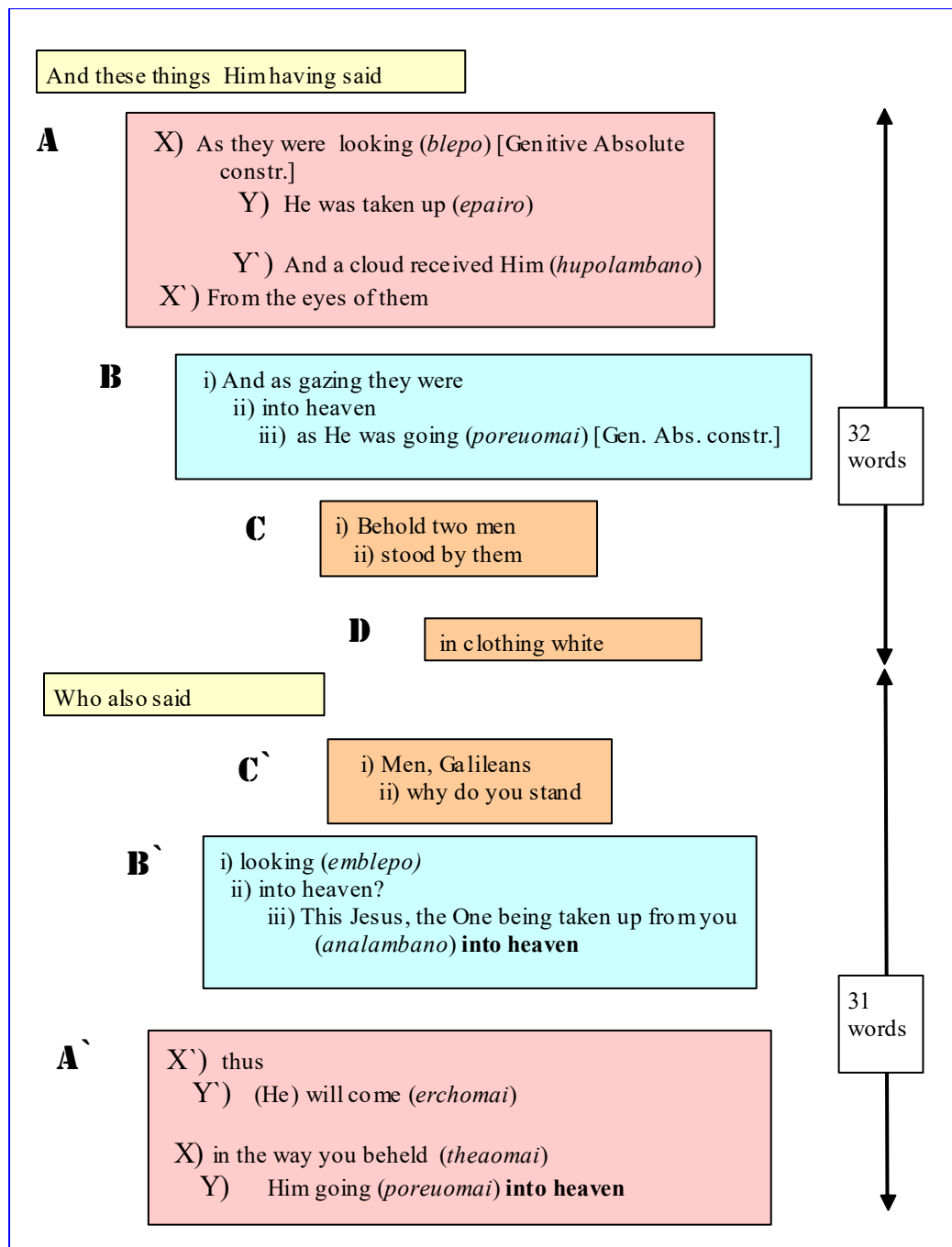
4) There are a number of different Greek words for “looking” and “seeing” etc. in these few verses! It would take a better scholar than me to tease out the likely significance of each of these different words. This topic should really be investigated properly, although this will not be done here.

5) A number of English translations of verse 11 use the word “return” or “come back” to translate *eleusetai* (from *erchomai* = to come) in verse 11. This may not be correct, even though it is an understandable interpretative decision given that the “coming” referred to is clearly linked with the “going” (*poreuomenon*) later in the verse, (and this “going” is described earlier in the verse as a “being taken up from you”). Therefore it is reasoned that the “coming” must be in some sense a “return” or a reversal of the original movement. However, the text itself only speaks of a “coming”, not a coming back or a returning, so I think it is better to translate what the text actually says at this point, and thereby to allow that the “coming in the way (*hon tropon*) you beheld Him going” may have a greater degree of interpretive flexibility than implied by the use of the somewhat more restricted word “return”. In particular, the “coming” can be interpreted as Jesus’ apocalyptic “coming on the clouds of heaven” which could describe a range of apocalyptic judgements including the imminent coming in judgement on Jerusalem in AD 70.

2nd Analysis: (again, corresponding A and B sections but this time with a more fully chiastic structure). (Please see the diagram on the next page.)

Notes:

1) A and A’ correspond since the X’s refer to the “seeing” (or not seeing) by the Apostles (A’ (X’) is the word “thus” which links to A’ (X) (the way you beheld)). Also the Y’s describe what Jesus does or what happens to Him. There is a “complementary” aspect to the Y’s since in A they represent Jesus using two passive verbs, but in A’, two active verbs



are used, The structures of A and A' differ slightly however.

2) The active/passive theme also occurs in B and B' (Jesus is active in B but passive in B' - the reverse of the situation in A and A').

3) Both A' and B' have an additional "into heaven" compared with A and B.

## Another Structure

Finally, we can see that v. 11b has its own structure consisting of two nearly parallel sections each of 10 words, though with “development” in the second section:

- A) This (*houtos*)
- B) i) Jesus the One being taken
- ii) from **you**
- C) into heaven (*eis ton ouranon*)
  
- A') thus (*houtos*)
- B') i) He will come
- ii) in the way you beheld
- i) Him going
- C') into heaven (*eis ton ouranon*)

## Conclusion

I hope this has been an interesting analysis of this short section of Acts. One way in which the structure might help in exegesis is that in the corresponding sections, the expression “in the same way” (*houtos . . hon tropon*) which describes Jesus’ coming links to the receiving of Jesus by the cloud and to His “going”. There is nothing in the structure to require or even suggest that Jesus will return to the same location (i.e. the Mount of Olives) as required by some interpretations of this passage. Structurally, the emphasis is rather on the association between Jesus’ coming and those clear indicators of His heavenly power and authority, the clouds of heaven.