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How Should We Understand the Word “Until” (*achri*) in v. 21?

In this chapter, I wish to do two things: first I wish to show that there is an inherent ambiguity in Acts 3:21 when the Greek word *achri* is translated as “until”, as well as a minor logical issue. Secondly I argue that *achri* in v. 21 should be translated as “during”.

1) An Ambiguity in v. 21

A key aspect of the interpretation of the application section of Peter’s sermon concerns the meaning of the expression translated as “the restoration of all things”. In this present chapter I wish to draw attention to the fact that this is part of the larger clause, “. . . Jesus Christ, whom heaven must receive until (*achri*) the times of the restoration of all things . . .”

I will be assuming that, in this larger clause, Jesus Christ being received by heaven refers to His ascension (Acts 1: 9, 11). This provides us with a *terminus a quo* for the “times of restoration”.

However, it seems to me that there is a difficulty in interpreting the meaning of the word *achri* as it occurs in Peter’s sermon. It is always translated as “until” or similar in bible translations of Acts 3:21. On this understanding, Christ will be in heaven for a certain amount of time, and then the “times of restoration” will start. The commentators usually infer from this passage that it is Christ’s future coming from heaven—in accordance with the doctrine of the Second Coming of Christ - that brings about the times of the restoration of all things.

[A Minor Logical Digression

Actually, from a purely logical point of view, this does not strictly follow: the passage only tells us that Christ will be in heaven until the (start of) the times of restoration of all things. It just does not tell us where Christ will be *after* those times have started.

(Perhaps I could give an example of another situation where “until” occurs. In a verse in the Old Testament, we read (2 Sam. 6:23) that “Michal bore no children until the day of her death”. Now, we obviously *don’t* infer

from this verse that she started bearing children after her death! That aspect did not change subsequently! So why do commentators assume that Jesus’ situation in heaven did change with the commencement of the “times of restoration of all things”? It is an inference (maybe a correct inference) but not an implication!

End of Minor Digression]

With the understanding that *achri* should be translated as “until”, and with conventional Evangelical eschatological views, the passage gives the Second Coming of Christ as the *terminus ad quem* for the start of the times of restoration of all things.

However, there is a difficulty here, and that is that the above view treats the expression “until the times of the restoration of all things” as though it actually read “until *the start of* the times of the restoration of all things”. The problem here is that the word “until” usually refers to a circumstance which obtains continuously up to a particular point in time, (or up to a period of time that can, in context, be treated as “compressed” into a single point in time), but the expression “the times of the restoration of all things” refers to an extended period of time - so the translation “until” here is either ambiguous or wrong.

Now it is certainly true that the word *achri* (or *achris* before a vowel), in the context of time (rather than space), in most occurrences in the New Testament, refers to a continuous period of time up to a particular point in time (see for example the entry in BDAG for details about this).

The difficulty here is that here in Acts 3:21 Peter, as we have noted above, is not describing a point in time—rather, he refers to times (*chronon*) in the plural! So, are we to take Christ’s reception by heaven as existing until the *beginning* or until the *completion* of those times (to give just two possibilities)? As we can see from the rest of v. 21, the expression “times of restoration of all things” covers all the relevant events spoken of by God through the OT prophets. Following the Lutheran scholar J. A. Bengel, (1687-1752) I will be proposing that it is the *completion* of these “times of restoration” that is being referred to, (i.e. that, in effect, *achri* in Acts 3:21 means “during” rather than “until” and, later in this chapter, will try to demonstrate this.

The relationship of Christ’s presence in heaven to the times of restoration of all things is part of a more complex nexus of hermeneutical factors which all need to be considered together in attempting to understand our

passage, and which include the important question of whether Peter understands Christ’s presence in heaven to be an alternative to his presence on earth, or whether Christ can be received by heaven and yet be simultaneously present - at least in some senses - on earth. This will be discussed further later, when I will be suggesting that the “simultaneous” view is the correct one, and, *inter alia* that the senses in which Christ is sent to, and present with, His people on earth are indeed fully valid, although they differ from the very direct and immediate sense in which He is simultaneously in heaven.

A related question regarding the “until” in v. 21 is this: if we take the “welcoming/receiving by heaven” to last until the completion of this extended period of time, then how far into the future are we to understand that these (particular) OT prophecies extend—a question which I hope to look at in more detail later, but which is usually considered to cover the period leading up to, sometimes including, and sometimes extending beyond, Christ’s Second Coming.

However, this time period is understood differently by others (though they are in a minority): in the “national Israel” context of Peter’s sermon and with reference to the only OT example of such prophecies that Peter gives in his sermon i.e. the prophecy regarding the Prophet, it is held by some that this time period extends until A.D. 70 and the judgement on Jerusalem and national Israel and the definitive ending of the Old Covenant arrangements with Israel. (The writings of my friend Mike Rogers on “Inmillennialism” - both in his recent book and on his website www.mikerogersad70.com - are excellent resources for exploring the “partial preterist” view regarding the significance of A.D. 70.)

As regards the interpretation of “the times of the restoration of all things” in Peter’s sermon, I am arguing in the present work primarily that these times include the time when Peter is preaching. This view does not require a definitive understanding of the duration of that time period into the future, only that Peter’s hearers are included within it.

2) “Until” or “During” in Acts 3:21?

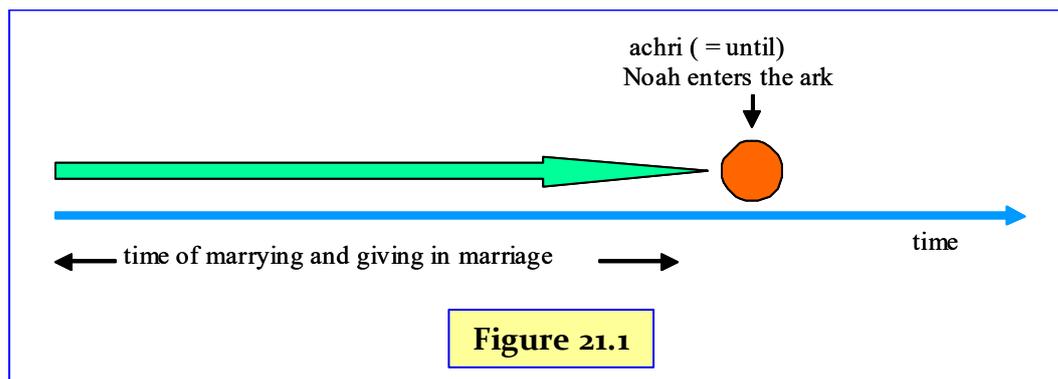
Well, coming back to the meaning of *achri* in Acts 3:21, I would like suggest that the meaning here is “during” and not “until”. But how I can be so radical and unreasonable as to suggest that “everyone is out of step but me!” and that every translation and every commentary which understands and translates *achri* as “until” in this verse may well be wrong?!

First, I would like to consider two New Testament verses where the standard definition of *achri* that we find in Greek lexicons etc. simply doesn't apply. The standard definition of *achri* (with respect to time) is that it is a marker of time up to a certain point in time, hence *until*, and a typical example of this would be Matt. 24:38:

For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until (achri) the day when Noah entered the ark,

This extended period of time during which people are marrying and giving in marriage (“marriage and giving in marriage” is/was by definition a “long term”, even dynastic, activity—years, decades, centuries?) is brought to a sudden end in a single day by Noah entering the ark. This contrast is what makes *achri* here fit the standard definition above.

We can diagram this as in the diagram below (Figure 21.1) :



The red circle represents the “point in time” when the marrying and giving in marriage (the green arrow) comes to an end.

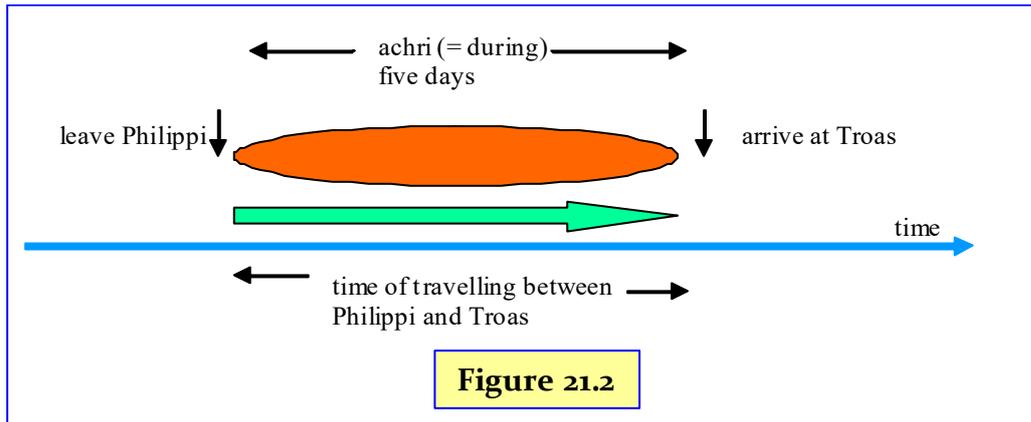
In Acts 20:6 however, we have a verse where *achri* is followed by an extended period of time which is described using a plural noun (five days), and the meaning “until” clearly does not apply:

In Acts 20:6 we read,

We sailed from Philippi after the days of Unleavened Bread, and came to them at Troas within (achri) five days; and there we stayed seven days. (NASB)

Now the meaning of “*achri* five days” is completely unambiguous: the journey from Philippi to Troas took five days. However, the five days do

not constitute a “point in time” - rather they cover an extended period of time, so this time period cannot really be represented by a circle—but rather by a very wide oval stretched out along the time axis. (Figure 21.2 below). Furthermore, the wide oval is co-extensive with the time of the journey from Philippi to Troas—it doesn’t come after the journey (Acts 20:6 has a separate seven day period in that slot!) The red oval and the green arrow lie side-by-side on the time axis: the journey takes place *achri* (= within or during!) five days.



It is perhaps worth mentioning at this point that, with both of these understandings of *achri*, the definition only really strictly covers what will happen until or during the punctiliar event or extended time period in question, and context or other considerations must help us decide what happens afterwards.

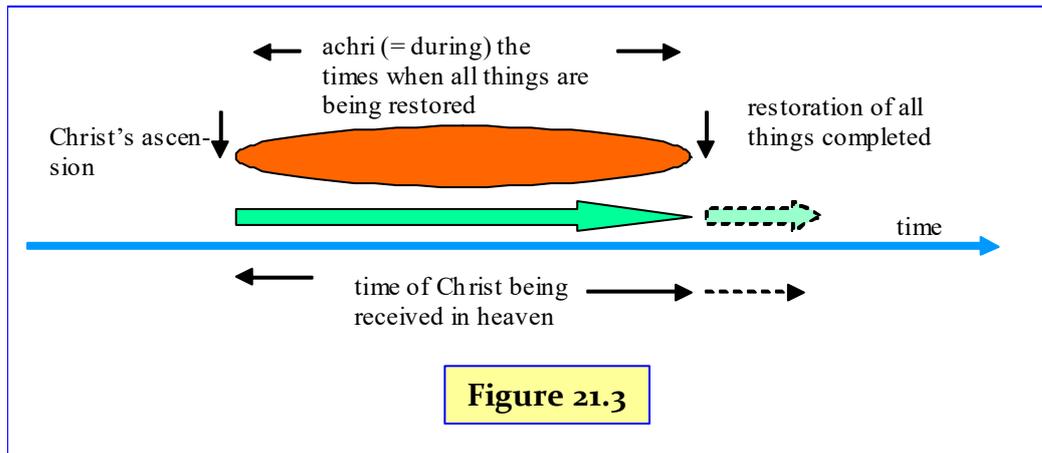
So, with the first example, if the text had just read, “They were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage until the day when Noah entered the ark”, then we would not know for sure that these things stopped after Noah entered the ark—only that they were definitely practised before that time. In this case, the actual text provides us with additional information. Likewise, in the Acts 20:7 text, we know that Paul and his companions remained at Troas for seven days after their arrival, so we know that the travelling had ceased after the five days had completed.

I think that in other cases, both in Scripture and elsewhere, we cannot be sure what happens “afterwards”, so I will be cautious about assuming that the event in question ceases once the “until” or “during” has occurred.

Now, the use of *achri* in our verse, Acts 3:21, corresponds to its use in Acts 20:6 since in Acts 3:21, it is followed, not by a point in time as required by the standard definition but by an extended period of time— “the times

(plural) of restoration of all things . . .” - and there are lot of things here to be fulfilled since we are told that God spoke about all these things through all the prophets from the beginning.

We can diagram this similarly (please see Figure 21.3 below):



Let us see what Acts 3:21 looks like with this understanding of *achri*:

“Whom it is right heaven to receive during (achri) the times of restoration of all things of which God spoke . . .”

On this understanding, everything that happens during the times of restitution takes place under the control and authority of the risen Christ in heaven (the green arrow), and that, as I understand it, is an important part of the significance of Peter’s linking these two important and wonderful truths “in parallel” in this way.

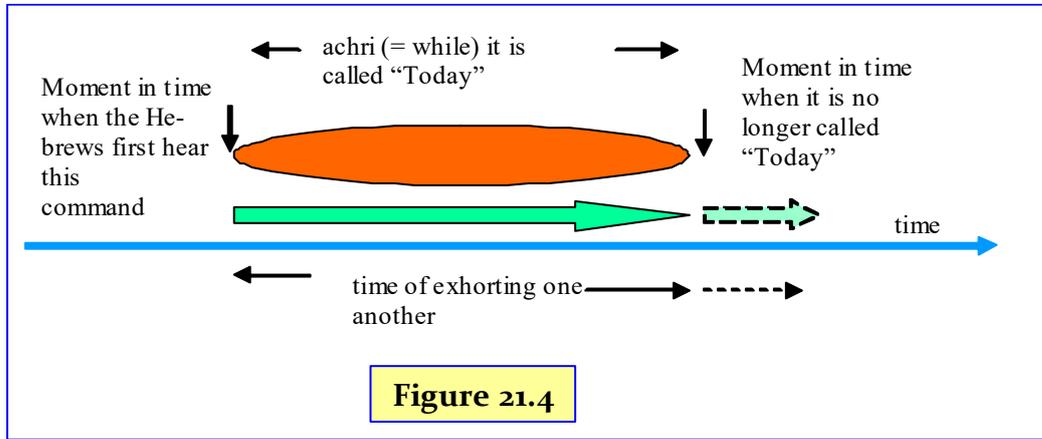
In the diagram, I’ve extended the green arrow in a “provisional” way to indicate that the text doesn’t actually say that Christ will *stop* being in heaven once the restoration of all things is completed.

For the second New Testament example of *achri* followed by an extended period of time, I would like us to look briefly at Heb. 3:13:

But exhort one another daily, while (achri) it is called To day; lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin.

Clearly here, *achri* cannot be translated as “until” because the extended period of time referred to as “while it is called today” is not future to the period of time during which the Hebrews are to exhort one another! Rather, the two time periods are exactly co-extensive! Hence it is appro-

priate to translate *achri* with “while” which again indicates events taking place at the same time. We can diagram this in a similar way to the previous two diagrams (please see Figure 21.4 below):



I’ve again provisionally extended the green line once again, as the exhorting might be able to be continued after it is no longer called “today”. However, if the context of Hebrews is the end of the Old Covenant, the destruction of Jerusalem and so the end of the Jerusalem church as a specifically “Jewish” church, then the conditions for the particular exhortation might not apply after “the Day”. (Note that exhorting is to be increased as the Day (of judgement for Jerusalem?) approaches, Heb. 10:25.)

So, to conclude this section, I am proposing that when *achri* is followed by an extended time period, (as opposed to a “point in time”), this time period is to be understood as covering the same period of time as the events or situations that are stated before the word *achri*, and so *achri* should in these cases be translated using an English word that reflects this co-temporality—such as “during” or “while”. In the case of Acts 3:21 this produces a very coherent linkage between Christ’s heavenly authority and the restoring all things as described in verses 21-24.

As a final note, perhaps it is helpful so see the two definitions of *achri* not so much as alternatives or opposites, but more as different modes of the same basic meaning. Perhaps we could see *achri* (with the expression that follows it) as acting like the brakes of a car. The brakes will bring the car to a stop, but they can act suddenly and bring the car to an emergency stop—this is like the “until” meaning of *achri*—or they can act slowly and gently whilst the car continues to travel along the road until it is eventually brought to a halt—this corresponds to the “whilst” or “during” meaning. The green arrow is the car travelling down the road and the red circle

or oval is the sudden or gentle action respectively of the brakes!



