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Some Comments on the Commentaries!



In the introduction, I mentioned that one of my reasons for attempting an exegetical analysis of Peter’s sermon in Acts Ch. 3 was my difficulty with some aspects of the commentaries, notwithstanding the very helpful insights that I have obtained from them. In this chapter, I wish to discuss two of these aspects— 1) the tendency to ignore the momentous events of AD 70, (and thereby treating these events as not having relevance, or only marginal relevance, for the interpretation of Peter’s sermon), and 2) my personal perception that the commentaries have a tendency to see Peter’s sermon as lacking a clear, logical and coherent development.

Before discussing these topics in more detail, I would like to give a list of the main commentaries I have used in writing the present book.



F. F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts, Revised Edition (NICOT)*, Eerdmans, 1988.

Craig S. Keener, *Acts an Exegetical Commentary Vol 2, Acts 3:1—14:28*, Baker Academic, 2013

I. Howard Marshall, *Acts (TNTC)*, IVP Academic, 1980.

C. K. Barrett, *Acts 1-14 (ICC)*, T&T Clark, 2004.

Joseph A Fitzmeyer, *The Acts of the Apostles, The Yale Anchor Bible Vol. 31*, Doubleday, 1998.

James D. G. Dunn, *Beginning from Jerusalem: Christianity in the Making, Vol. 2*, Eerdmans, 2009

Darrell L. Bock, *Acts, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament*, Baker Academic, 2007.

Robert W. Wall, *The Acts of the Apostles, in The New Interpreter's Bible, Vol. 10*, Abingdon Press, 2002

Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament. Edited by G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson, Baker Academic/Apollos, 2007.

William S. Kurz, SJ, *Acts of the Apostles, Catholic Commentary on Sacred Scripture*, Baker Academic, 2014.

Ernst Haenchen, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Commentary*, Westminster John Knox Press, 1971



1st Aspect of the Commentaries: Lack of References to AD 70

First then, the commentaries generally see Peter's sermon as dealing with three different times: the past, namely the Old Testament prophecies and the death, resurrection and ascension of Christ, the present - the situation of Peter's hearers, including the power of the risen Christ to heal and the need for repentance by Peter's hearers accompanied by promises and warnings - and then finally, leaping forwards in time, with the future golden age at the end of history when all things will be restored following the Second Coming of Christ. What is missing from the "forwards look" however is any reference to the fact that, within the lifetimes of many of those present, Jerusalem and its temple would be catastrophically destroyed (AD 70) and with this would come the definitive end of the Old Covenant, of Jewish privilege and of Israel's national life in the land, but that believers in Christ would continue to receive God's blessing as part of the people of God in the New Covenant. This vitally important historical reference to the destruction of Jerusalem is omitted by commentators on Acts Ch. 3, even though Peter in his sermon had told his hearers that fail-

ure to respond to Christ's words would result in them being "utterly destroyed from the people" (Acts 3:23). This omission by the commentators is really surprising when we bear in mind, that not only did Jesus predict this destruction (please see for example, Luke 19:41-44 and Luke 21:5-36), just two months or so before Peter's sermon, but that He announced Himself, the Son of Man, as the One who would come at the very climax of these events in both judgement as well as redemption (see for example, Luke 19:44b and Luke 21:27) and that "this generation will not pass away until all has taken place" (Luke 21:33)!

Furthermore, in his Pentecost sermon, Peter specifically warns his hearers to save themselves from "this wicked generation" (Acts 2:40)! How can many commentators fail even to *mention* these cataclysmic events about to be visited upon Peter's hearers when speaking of the sending of Jesus (in Acts 3:20) and of the destruction from the people of those who do not listen to Jesus' words (in Acts 3:23)?

That Jesus' words in Luke 21:5-36 about the destruction of Jerusalem within a generation are *in fact* about the destruction of Jerusalem within a generation should be clear. Here for example, are the comments of John Gill (1697-1771) (speaking on the parallel passage in Matthew's Gospel):

"Verily I say unto you, this generation shall not pass. . . . Not the generation of men in general; as if the sense was, that mankind should not cease, until the accomplishment of these things; nor the generation, or people of the Jews, who should continue to be a people, until all were fulfilled; nor the generation of Christians; as if the meaning was, that there should be always a set of Christians, or believers in Christ in the world, until all these events came to pass; but it respects that present age, or generation of men then living in it; and the sense is, that all the men of that age should not die, but some should live

till all these things were fulfilled; (see Matthew 16:28) as many did, and as there is reason to believe they might, and must, since all these things had their accomplishment, in and about forty years after this: and certain it is, that John, one of the disciples of Christ, outlived the time by many years; and, as Dr. Lightfoot observes, many of the Jewish doctors now living, when Christ spoke these words, lived until the city was destroyed; as Rabban Simeon, who perished with it, R. Jochanan ben Zaccai, who outlived it, R. Zadoch, R. Ishmael, and others: this is a full and clear proof, that not anything that is said before, relates to the second coming of Christ, the day of judgment, and end of the world; but that all belong to the coming of the Son of Man, in the destruction of Jerusalem, and to the end of the Jewish state.

*2nd Aspect of the Commentaries:
Perceived Lack of Continuity*

Secondly, (quoting my own comments from the Introduction!) what seems to me to be a feature of many talks and commentaries on Peter's sermon in Acts Ch. 3 is that they often do not, in my opinion, exegete the passage, particularly the second part of the sermon, in a way that shows Peter's argument being developed in a logical, reasonable and consistent manner! Now I expect that many readers will say that, on the contrary, the talks and commentaries really do bring out the reasonableness, logic and consistency of Peter's sermon, and that I clearly either haven't been paying sufficient attention, or am a hyper-critical sort of person, unwilling to give credit where it is due.

However, I would like to give three examples where it is the commentators themselves who recognise difficulties in accounting for the flow of Peter's sermon.

The first two are from a critical scholar, Joseph Fitzmeyer, and are found on pp. 282-3 of his Acts commentary. He has been discussing Acts 3:18, and then, referring to the transition between verses 19 and 20 (or between v. 19a and v. 19b—depending on which bible translation is being used), he says,

“Then on the heels of the following call to repentance comes an apocalyptic digression (3:20-21) which speaks of Jesus as the Messiah appointed and awaited (apparently at the parousia).”

(Please note the word “digression” in the above quotation!)

Later, in speaking of “the times of recovery” (3:20) and “the time of universal restoration” (3:21), he says,

“Those peculiar expressions fit little into the Lucan eschatology, and it is difficult to understand their real function in the appeal for conversion that Peter's speech makes at this point”.

The third example is from the conservative Evangelical scholar, I. Howard Marshall. He appears to acknowledge a difficulty in accounting for the flow of one of the “transitions” occurring in the second part of Peter's sermon. Here is a quotation from I. Howard Marshall's 1980 Acts commentary in the Tyndale New Testament Commentaries series. In this quota-

tion, he is commenting on the transition from verse 21 (in which he understands the “times of restoration or “fulfillment” as referring to the parousia (the Second Coming of Christ)) to verses 22-23:

“The speech now takes a fresh tack as Peter makes a new point. He uses a quotation based on material from Deuteronomy . . .”

I. H. Marshall does not attempt to explain or justify why Peter should make this somewhat unexpected “continuity break” in his sermon. In later comments on these verses (in his contributory chapter to the excellent and helpful 2007 *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* ed. G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson) it seems clear that I. H. Marshall (apparently influenced by C. K. Barrett’s writings on Acts) has somewhat modified his understanding of “the times of restoration of all things” since, in his contributory chapter to this later book he allows, somewhat cautiously, that,

“ . . . the “restoration of all things” can signify the process that goes on until the return of Jesus rather than the completion of the process”.

[This view is a lot closer to the approach that will be adopted in the present article, although I currently see the “times of restoration of all things” as having in context, as a *primary* referent, the events occurring during the generation of Peter’s hearers from c. A.D. 30 to A. D. 70].

Nevertheless, in this chapter of the book also, (even with this modified view), I. H. Marshall continues to detect a change in the direction of Peter’s sermon in vs. 22-23 and proceeds to comment as follows:

“Instead of pursuing this line [i.e. the restoration of all things in Acts 3:21] further, however, Peter returns to one of the earlier prophets, Moses, and cites his statement in Deut. 18:15-20 . . .”

I. Howard Marshall again does not offer a justification for Peter’s “return to the past” at this point in his sermon, but it is (to me anyway) a welcome recognition by this leading Evangelical commentator that, at least here, a somewhat unexpected “continuity break” has occurred, (even with his new understanding of the “times of restoration”). The “continuity break” now occurs, I think, because of I. H. Marshall’s understanding of Moses’ prophecy as described in Acts 3:22-23. In the 2007 commentary already quoted, he says,

“The prophet is raised up “from among your own people.” Here then the fo-

cus is on Jesus as a Jewish man . . .”

Clearly, I. H. Marshall is adopting a “conventional” (pre-ascension) interpretation of “raising up” in which Jesus is “raised up” in His earthly ministry as the Prophet—hence the difficulty in explaining why Peter should now refer to Jesus’ earthly ministry in connection with this OT passage when Peter has, immediately prior to this, just been speaking of the “post ascension” times of the “restoration of all things”.

By contrast, the present book views the “raising up” as referring primarily to Jesus’ ascension, and the “restoration of all things” as referring precisely to what Moses and the other OT prophets describe in Peter’s quotation in Acts 3: 22-23—namely the hearing (and obeying) the words of Jesus (spoken through Peter c.f. Acts 26:23, Eph. 2:17) and by means of the convicting of the Holy Spirit, or, if they will not listen, of coming under judgement. On this understanding, there is no “continuity break” at all! In commenting on Christ’s post-ascension preaching described in Eph. 2:17, John Gill says that His preaching refers to “*his coming by his Spirit in the ministry of his apostles*”.

(A further thought about the raising up in v.22 is that although I understand the “raising up” to be that of resurrection/ascension, I do not currently concur with the translations which almost all associate the words “from among your own people” with the raising up. Rather, I suggest this is a mis-reading of the Greek of Acts 3:22, and of the Hebrew of Deut. 18:15 and I currently believe that the expression “from among your own people should be associated (adjectivally rather than adverbally) in the translation with the word “Prophet”—about which more later).

I hope that the above examples from modern commentators have shown that there are real “continuity” difficulties when Peter’s sermon is seen to jump from addressing the present situation forwards to the end of history and then back to the past and then forwards again to the present. By contrast, Peter seems, throughout the sermon, to link all the events described to the present situation and behaviour of his hearers.

A related point to this which I hope to discuss further later is that the man has been miraculously restored to physical health, and one might expect this physical restoration to represent “typologically” the spiritual restoration in Christ that Peter is promising to his hearers if they repent. This would then be similar to Peter’s sermon following the “tongues” miracle on the day of Pentecost in which the miracle pointed typologically to the inclusion of Gentiles, and to the worldwide giving of the Holy Spirit to be-

lievers from all nations in the New Covenant. I suggest (as already noted) that the “times of refreshing” and in particular, the “restoration of all things” could perhaps analogously refer to present New Covenant realities for Peter’s hearers, and that they were being encouraged to believe that this spiritual restoration was possible by the sign of the physical healing.

In the next chapter, I would like to narrow the focus somewhat, and look at the “standard” interpretation—common to many commentaries—of one particular expression—the restoration of all things— in Acts 3:21.



