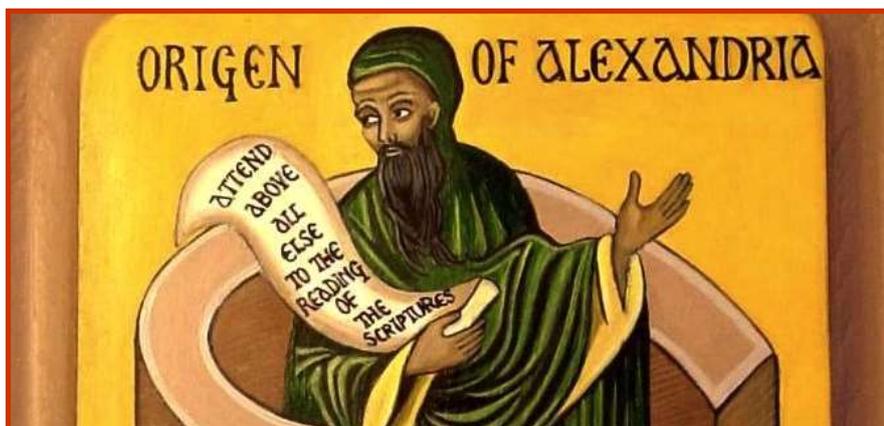


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Two Interpretations of “The Restoration of All Things”



Origen of Alexandria, (c. AD 184—c. AD 253) also known as Origen Adaman-tius, was an early Christian scholar, ascetic, and theologian who was born and spent the first half of his career in Alexandria.

As Christians, we believe that a glorious final consummation awaits at the end of history in which we, as collectively the Bride of Christ, will enjoy wonderful sinless and unbroken communion with the Triune God forever. This wonderful truth, which we believe by faith, has historically informed the interpretation of the expression “the times of the restoration of all things” in Peter’s sermon: part of the reason for this understanding is that the expression seems so complete and comprehensive in its scope that it is perhaps hard to entertain the possibility of alternative interpretations. Whilst we fully subscribe to the Scriptural truth of this glorious future, we can, and should, nevertheless ask whether this is actually what Peter is referring to *by his use of this expression in this specific sermon*. In this chapter, I would like to look at two interpretations of the expression “the restoration of all things” in Acts 3:21 and to offer four observations. Later in the book I will be suggesting an alternative interpretation for Peter’s use of this expression.

1st Interpretation

There is a very old interpretation of this term, (which we have already

looked at very briefly), dating back at least to Origen (c. AD 184—c. AD 253) which places this restoration (*apokatastasis* in Greek) at the end of history, and which refers to the restoring of everything to its pristine original state before the Fall. This view, in various forms, has continued until today, and many commentators understand the restoration of all things as the time following the Second Coming of Christ when the saints will enjoy the eternal blessings prepared for them through the redemptive work of Christ.

Other parts of the Peter's sermon are then understood in the light of this. For example, the sending of Jesus Christ in v. 20 is seen as referring to the Second Coming, and the "times of refreshing" in the same verse to the happiness and bliss of the saints following that event.

For many reasons, I think that this view does not represent an accurate exegesis of Acts 3:21-26, and I will be attempting to put forward a very different view, one which nevertheless has a number of features in common with a second interpretation of Acts 3:21-26, described below, (and in particular with the interpretation of the term "the restoration of all things" which is found, albeit briefly, in I. H. Marshall's contribution to the 2007 *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*. Edited by G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson but not in I. H. Marshall's 1980 Acts commentary).

2nd Interpretation

This second view, (again one that we have already noted), holds that "the times of the restoration of all things" refers to the continuing extended period of time that goes on to, but does not actually include, the Second Coming (e.g. I. H. Marshall, 2007 rather than 1980). Again, the sending of Jesus Christ in v. 20 is seen as a reference to the Second Coming, but the "times of refreshing" are understood as corresponding to the present age, (that is, to the times referred to as "these days" in Acts 3:24 - the times when the Holy Spirit is poured out, (c.f. Acts 2:38). Thus this period is seen as co-extensive with the times of restoration of all things.

An apparent difficulty with this approach is that, i) if the "times of restoration of all things" had already arrived back in the 1st century, and ii) the remaining of Jesus in heaven is only until these times, and *then* He is sent, (as is assumed in the above (2007) commentary) then why is it held that the sending of Jesus refers to the Second Coming? Although I. H. Marshall does not draw attention to or discuss this difficulty, I will be proposing that this difficulty is actually only apparent in this interpretation since (as

I argue later) the word *achri*, translated as "until" in Acts 3:21, should actually be translated as *during*—in effect moving the "sending of Jesus", which is understood in this interpretation as a reference to Jesus' Second Coming, to the end of the times of restoration of all things as required. (I mention this as, although I don't currently agree with this interpretation of the sending of Jesus in v. 20, my reasons for not agreeing do not include the difficulties for this point of view created by translating *achri* as "until".)

As well as putting forward a third, somewhat different, interpretation of Acts 3:21-26 in the present book, I will continue to discuss both of the above interpretations, and will attempt to show ways in which this proposed third interpretation allows for a rational and developmental coherence in Peter's sermon which (as I have already tried to show) is not present at all points with the above two interpretations.

Four Preliminary Observations

Before we start on the formal structural analysis and exegesis of Peter's sermon in the next section of the book, here are four preliminary observations (one long observation and three shorter ones) to help set the context for the approach that will be taken.

1st Observation:

The first is that the view that the restoration of all things refers to the final consummation of everything at the end of history is deeply ingrained—most Christians are familiar with this understanding, and an alternative will naturally be viewed with suspicion. Some of the reasons why I believe that, nevertheless, this "final consummation of everything" view should be questioned are:

1) Our Lord describes John the Baptist as restoring all things (*apokatastesei panta*) in Matthew 17:11-13, and this is in line with Gabriel's promise to Zechariah in Luke 1:17, but John the Baptist's ministry, although vitally important, lasted only a few years and was significantly geographically constrained. Also it was essentially delivered to Israel (e.g. "Think not to say we have Abraham as our father . . .", Luke 3:8), just as was Peter's message in Acts Ch. 3. Given that the expression "all things" in Matthew was so severely "reigned in" contextually, then surely the onus should be on commentators to *demonstrate*, rather than assume, such a wide remit as the *universal* restoration of absolutely *everything*" for the phrase when it occurs in Acts Ch. 3.

2) A further difficulty here is that Peter makes no (further) reference to the Second Coming in this sermon. (Nor, I believe, does he refer to the Second Coming in his Pentecost sermon, as I discuss further later). Rather, his warning is to Israel to heed the words of the Prophet (that is, to the words of Jesus) or be utterly destroyed from the people. As already noted in this article, this exactly corresponds, with Peter's words to Israel in Acts 2:40—"Save yourselves from this wicked generation" and with Jesus' words in Luke's Gospel that this judgement is coming within the generation of His hearers (Luke 21:32) - and this surely refers to the destruction of Jerusalem and the definitive end of the Old Covenant in AD 70 when Jesus, as the Son of Man came with power and much glory in judgement on the wicked city. (Luke 21:23).

Interestingly, Jesus describes this as the days of vengeance when "all things having been written are to be fulfilled". This is very similar language to Peter's description of the "times of restitution of all things God spoke through the mouth of all the holy prophets", and "all the prophets from Samuel . . . proclaimed these days". Some commentators on Luke's Gospel are so committed to the view that Jesus in this section of Luke (and in the corresponding sections of Matthew and Mark) must be speaking about the Second Coming, that they have great difficulty in explaining Jesus' emphatic insistence that all these things would happen in the generation of His hearers, and it is this "mindset" that I suggest has frequently been carried over into the "Second Coming" interpretation of the second part of Peter's sermon.

(In case the above description of some of the commentaries seems like an exaggeration, please look at Darrell Bock's commentary on Luke. In commenting on Luke 21:32 (pages 1688—1692) he rejects the view that Jesus really actually straightforwardly and literally meant that "this generation will by in no way pass away before all these things take place", and after spending several pages exploring alternatives to this straightforward understanding, he concludes, "It is hard to be dogmatic about the meaning of this difficult text". My personal view is that here we have a clear and transparent text and that it only becomes a difficult text when it is being applied to events to which it does not apply!)

3) Although I will be frequently referring in this article to what I suggest are inadequacies in the "Second Coming" interpretation of Peter's words, I would just like to give now one more example of a difficulty that arises when this interpretation is applied to Acts 3:20 i.e. when the words, "*and He may send the before-proclaimed-One to you, Jesus Christ*" are taken as a reference to the Second Coming.

[Please note, I am here using the TR, and associating the "to you" with the sending, (for which there is grammatical warrant), rather than with the "before-proclaimed-One") which, as I see it, does not have grammatical support. This matter is discussed later in the book, but for now I note that the understanding of the verse that I believe to be correct, although currently a minority viewpoint, has been adopted by the God's Word translation and the Contemporary English Version. Here is the God's Word translation, (which uses the Nestle-Aland text, but the grammatical issues are the same):

"Then times will come when the Lord will refresh you. He will send you Jesus, whom he has appointed to be the Christ."

Here is a more literal word-for-word translation:

"Repent therefore, and be converted for the blotting out of you the sin so that may come times of refreshing from the presence (lit. the face) of the Lord and [that] He may send the before-proclaimed-One to you, Jesus Christ."

(The association of the words "to you" with Jesus being sent is also found in Acts 3:26.)

End of note.]

Now, although I, along with others, hold that the sending of Jesus is *to* those of Peter's hearers who repent, it has readily to be admitted that this verse does not specifically claim that the times of refreshing are intended *for* them. There is thus a theoretical possibility that their repentance and faith produce times of refreshing for others, but not for them. There are several lines of evidence, including structural aspects which I hope to discuss later which, to me, indicate that the *presence*, (or literally, the *face of God*—an OT and NT expression which is surely relevant here) is in fact, as we would expect with our wonderful and gracious God, kindly disposed towards these repentant ones in the way this verse describes. (God is also described elsewhere as setting His face against people (e.g. Lev. 26:17) or hiding His face from them (Deut 31:17-18) as signs of judgement; here, by contrast, repentance results in God's kindly disposition towards repentant ones).

However, for now we note that, grammatically, both the coming of times of refreshing, and the sending of Jesus (to them) are actually subjunctives,

and are both equally dependent on the main clause "Repent therefore and be converted . . .". The difficulty for the "Second Coming" interpretation is to explain why there should be a delay of two thousand or more years between the repentance and the refreshing/sending! By the time of the Second Coming, Peter's repentant hearers will have died long ago and gone to heaven where they will already have been with the Lord (e.g. 2 Cor. 5:8) and enjoying directly Christ's wonderful personal presence for almost all of this time period: they will not need Him to be sent to them, nor for refreshing to come from the presence of the Lord since they have been with Him and have been refreshed for this long time. When we compare Peter's Pentecost sermon with the present sermon (as a number of scholars have noted and whose work we will draw upon later in the book), it appears that the gift of the Holy Spirit in the earlier sermon corresponds with the times of refreshing in this sermon. I will also be arguing, as many have done before me, such as the excellent John Gill, (1697-1771), that the sending of Jesus here is something that happens immediately upon, and indeed through, their repentance in response to the preached word, as well as in other manifestations of Christ's presence through the Spirit. Here is a quotation from John Gill's commentary:

"And he shall send Jesus Christ: Or "that he may send Jesus Christ", as the Syriac and Arabic versions render it: not in person, for this regards neither his first, nor his second coming, both which might be terrible to the awakened Jews; the former, because he had been sent, and was come, and was gone again; and therefore might fear there was no hope for them, who had denied him, and crucified him; the latter, because they might conclude he would be sent, and come to take vengeance on them, when they should look upon him whom they had pierced with horror and trembling; but here it regards his being sent, and his coming in the ministration of the word, and by his Spirit, to the comfort of their souls:"

Christ surely does not delay two thousand years or more before He comes to the sinner who repents and refreshes Him with spiritual blessings!

In line with this thoroughly biblical view expressed by John Gill here are two verses which describe Christ's coming *in* the word preached . . .

Eph. 2:17:

"And [He] came and preached peace to you which were afar off, and to them that were nigh".

Here is John Gill again commenting on this verse:

"And came and preached peace to you which were afar off; . . . Which is to be understood not of Christ's coming in the flesh; for when he came in the flesh, he came only to the Jews that were nigh, and preached the Gospel in his own personal ministry to them, and not to the Gentiles, who are the persons afar off; (Ephesians 2:12) but of his coming by his Spirit in the ministry of his apostles, to whom he gave a commission after he had made peace and reconciliation by the blood of his cross, to go into all the world and preach the Gospel to the Gentiles in the furthest parts of the earth; and on whom he bestowed gifts, qualifying them for such service, and succeeded them in it by his power and grace: and the subject of their ministry was peace, Christ who is our peace, and peace made by his blood, and the Gospel of peace, which declares both these; and it is the means of making persons of peaceable dispositions; its doctrines and promises, when powerfully applied, give peace to distressed minds, and quiet to doubting saints; and it shows the way to eternal peace:

and to them that were nigh; to the Jews, to whom the Gospel of peace was preached in the first place, not only by Christ and his apostles, before his death; but by his apostles after his resurrection, and after the commission was given to preach it to the Gentiles; though they are mentioned last, because the apostle was speaking to Gentiles; and this also verifies what Christ says, the first shall be last, and the last first . . ."

And here is the Expositor's Greek New Testament Commentary:

But to what coming does the ἐλθών [He came] refer? Not to the incarnation (Chrys., Anselm, Harl., etc.); for the preceding sentences, which speak of His blood and of the peace effected through His cross, make it clear that the time in view is not before the crucifixion but after it. Nor can the reference well be to the event of His Resurrection, nor even to His own direct teaching during the forty days (Beng.). What is in view is rather His coming in His Spirit (cf. John 14:18; Acts 26:23, etc.). That the idea of His spiritual Advent in the Holy Ghost which is prominent in the Fourth Gospel is not a Johannine idea only, but one entirely consistent with Paul's teaching, appears from the Pauline doctrine of the dwelling of Christ Himself or His Spirit in the believer (Romans 8:9-10; 2 Corinthians 12:17; 2 Corinthians 13:5; Galatians 2:20); as also from the relation of the Holy Ghost to the Apostle's preaching (Romans 15:18), etc. The preaching meant by the εὐηγγελίσσατο, therefore, is Christ's mediate preaching through His Apostles and others, especially that declaration of His truth which made these Gentiles Christians. Those "afar off" are mentioned first, as the Gentiles in the persons of these Ephesians and other Asiatics were the writer's immediate concern."

Harold Hoehner speaks to the same effect in his excellent commentary on Ephesians:

A second verse with the same general tendency is Acts 26:23:

"that the Christ must suffer and that, by being the first to rise from the dead, He would proclaim light both to our people and to the Gentiles".

Here, it is Christ who is said to proclaim light, (even though the message came through Apostles, evangelists etc.)

Finally, here is Is. 55:11:

"So shall my Word be that goeth forth out of my mouth: it shall not return unto me void, but it shall accomplish that which I please, and it shall prosper in the thing whereto I sent it." (cf. Rev. 19:13).

This very important topic of the presence of the risen and glorified Christ with and within believers here on earth and His simultaneous presence in heaven is found in many bible verses, and is part of Christ's divine omnipresence. Also there are private (e.g. John 14:23) and public (e.g. Matthew 26:64) aspects of His being sent and His coming to people in blessing and judgement and I attempt a very incomplete and inadequate review of these vital topics later in the book.

2nd Observation

The second observation is what I see as the difficulty and perhaps even awkwardness shown in the commentaries as the authors of these commentaries seek to make the contents of the second part of Peter's sermon "fit" this "end of history" interpretation.

3rd Observation

The third observation is that the Greek word *achri* in Acts 3:21 is almost certainly mistranslated. Rather than meaning "until" it almost certainly has the sense "during" or "whilst" as I believe I demonstrate conclusively later in the book. This makes a difference! Here is verse 21 when *achri* is translated in this way:

Whom the heaven must receive during the times of restitution of all things, which God hath spoken by the mouth of all his holy prophets since the world

began.

4th Observation

Peter's sermon is addressed to individual Jews, but it is also addressed to these Jews as "Men of Israel". This suggests that perhaps in some sense, Peter's message is addressed to the nation, with his hearers as representatives of the nation. Peter certainly seems to suggest that his hearers are in part responsible for the betrayal and death of Jesus, even though as individuals, they may not have been involved, or even present, at the time of Christ's trial and crucifixion.

After these preliminary comments, here is an outline of the rest of the book:

Topics to be discussed in the Book

In this book, I would like to do three things. First, I would like to offer an attempted structural analysis of Peter's sermon—both as a whole and with respect to its various sub-units. Secondly, I would like to concentrate on the second part of the sermon, the "application" section, and, after comparing it with aspects of Peter's Pentecost sermon, to explore in some detail a number of textual and hermeneutical matters including two expressions that occur in Acts 3:20-21. These are "the times of restoration of all things" in v. 21 and, to a lesser extent, "the times of refreshing" in v. 20. I will be discussing the best translation of the Greek word *apokatastasis* (restoration) in v. 21 and the likely range of events included within its meaning. Thirdly, I would like to suggest an alternative interpretation of these verses within a broadly "partial preterist" eschatological framework. I hope that this alternative interpretation will have some success in accounting for the logical flow of Peter's "argument" in the sermon.



