

# THE FATHERS ON THE FUTURE

A 2nd-Century Eschatology for the  
21st-Century Church

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## Go Deeper Excursus 23 Joel 2 in Acts 2: The Day of the Lord in Peter's Sermon

The first New Testament occurrence of the technical phrase “Day of the Lord” appears in Acts 2 in the midst of Peter’s Pentecost message to a Jewish audience. In the context of the coming of the Spirit as promised by Jesus (Acts 1:4–9), the Spirit indeed was poured out upon the disciples gathered in Jerusalem (Acts 2:2–4). In response to this miraculous ability to speak languages unknown to the speakers, by which they were “speaking about God’s deeds of power” (2:11), Jews from all over the world who had gathered in Jerusalem for Pentecost expressed confusion and astonishment (2:5–12). However, some accused them of being drunk (2:13). At this point, Peter stands up and preaches his famous Pentecost message, dispensing with the false charge of drunkenness (Acts 2:14–15) and affirming that what they were witnessing in the miraculous ability to proclaim the things of God in languages they had never learned was “what was spoken through the prophet Joel (τοῦτό ἐστιν τὸ εἰρημένον διὰ τοῦ προφήτου Ἰωήλ)” (Acts 2:16).

Luke’s report of Peter’s quotation from Joel 2:28–32 (LXX) closely matches the Septuagint,<sup>1</sup> in some places exactly (see comparison below). The different opening line “in the last days” (Acts 2:17) and “after these things” (Joel 2:28) are best explained by Peter both acknowledging the eschatological context of Joel 2 and notifying his audience that the outpouring of the Spirit indicated that the “last days” had in some sense arrived. Approaches to the quotation of Joel 2 in Acts 2 have varied from maximalist to minimalist with regard to the realization of eschatological events prophesied in Joel. On the “maximalist” side, amillennialist Oswald Allis understood Peter’s quotation of Joel as indicating that the kingdom of God has now come, representing the fulfillment of the Old Testament expectation.<sup>2</sup> Likewise, premillennialist Grant Osborne suggests Peter applied a *Pesher* approach to the passage, declaring that the events in Acts 2 were a direct

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<sup>1</sup> The passage in the Hebrew Bible is Joel 3:1–5; in the LXX, the passage is Joel 2:28–32. Most English translations follow the LXX versification.

<sup>2</sup> Oswald T. Allis, *Prophecy and the Church* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1945), 136.

fulfillment of the prophecy of Joel 2.<sup>3</sup> So, for instance, the “portents in the heaven above and signs on the earth below” (Acts 2:19) corresponds to the coming of the Spirit with wind and fire while the “blood, and fire, and smoky mist” (2:19) refer to the darkness, earthquake, and torn veil associated with Christ’s death.<sup>4</sup> On the minimalist side, A. C. Gaebelein suggests, “When the Holy Spirit came on the day of Pentecost it was not in fulfillment of Joel’s prophecy. This prophecy has never been fulfilled nor will it be fulfilled during this present age, in which the church is being formed.”<sup>5</sup> As indicated even by my quotation from a century-old source, this minimalist approach is usually found among older dispensational premillennial interpreters, though even that tradition has tended to opt for a mediating position on Peter’s use of Joel 2 in Acts 2.

The mediating approach often sees some elements of the Joel prophecy fulfilled in Acts 2 while other elements await a future fulfillment; a present spiritual fulfillment in anticipation of a future literal fulfillment; or a partial fulfillment in anticipation of a more complete fulfillment in keeping with the pattern of iterative fulfillments related to the Day of the Lord. For example, Polhill notes, “The signs in v. 19 are standard apocalyptic language and almost certainly refer to the final cosmic events preceding the Parousia.”<sup>6</sup> Polhill’s language applies to the heavenly and earthly signs of the Day of the Lord, and they do not rule out a present, partial, spiritual fulfillment of other aspects of the prophecy. Many understand the fulfillment at Pentecost to be inaugural or a “partial” fulfillment of the prophecy, with the complete fulfillment to await the parousia.<sup>7</sup> David Peterson attempts to relieve the tension by noting, “The prophet Joel does not indicate the length of time between the outpouring of God’s Spirit and the outpouring of his wrath, but the former is a sign that the latter will most definitely take place.”<sup>8</sup> And C. K. Barrett notes that in Luke’s eschatological understanding, “God has begun, but not completed, the work of fulfillment; Christians are living in the last days, but the last day has not yet come.”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Grand R. Osborne, *Acts: Verse by Verse*, Osborne New Testament Commentaries (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2019), 48; Aaron W. White, *The Prophets Agree: The Function of the Book of the Twelve Prophets in Acts* (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 57. The “missing link” that connects the pouring out of the Spirit (Joel 2:28) and the enthronement of the Messiah is T. Jud. 24.1–6 (cf. White, *Prophets Agree*, 88–94). This demonstrates that a messianic reading of the prophecy of Joel 2 was not unknown in the first century, but the collage of images of the coming kingdom in the Old Testament and their association with the future Davidic king would already have established that thematic connection (see Go Deeper Excursus 11).

<sup>4</sup> Osborne, *Acts*, 49.

<sup>5</sup> A. C. Gaebelein, *The Prophet Joel* (New York: Our Hope, 1909), 136.

<sup>6</sup> John B. Polhill, *Acts*, The New American Commentary, vol. 26 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1992), 110.

<sup>7</sup> Kenneth O. Gangel, *Acts*, Holman New Testament Commentary, vol. 5 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1998), 27–28; George Eldon Ladd, *The Presence of the Future* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 272; I. Howard Marshall, *Acts: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, vol. 5 (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1980), 79.

<sup>8</sup> David G. Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 143.

<sup>9</sup> C. K. Barrett, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles*, vol. 1, *Preliminary Introduction and Commentary on Acts I–XIV*, The International Critical Commentary on the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments (London: T. & T. Clark, 1994), 135.

Amidst this mere sampling of views along the “maximalist—mediating—minimalist” spectrum, my own “both/and” approach to the Day of the Lord and to the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies places my view among the “mediating” positions. I understand the vision of Joel 2 as referring ultimately to a future eschatological Day of the Lord (cf. similar imagery as Joel 2:31 and Acts 2:20 in Rev 6:12). However, as we have seen in Go Deeper Excursus 11, even these ultimate pictures of the Day of the Lord involve numerous partial historical iterations. Peter’s application of the passage to his audience appears to add another dimension—that the end-times pouring out of the Spirit has in some real way arrived, even if partial, and the events of Pentecost advance the realization of the kingdom of God while also heralding an eschatological judgment that demands urgent repentance.

Looking closer at this passage, Acts 2:17–18 (quoting Joel 2:28–29) is intended to establish that common people—not merely official prophets—will be recipients of the prophetic gifts: prophesying, seeing visions, and dreaming dreams.<sup>10</sup> Though both Acts 2:17–18 and Joel 2:28–29 include the same spiritual phenomena, the order is different: Acts has prophesying, visions, and dreams; Joel has prophesying, dreams, and visions. However, as seen in the comparison chart, it is merely a swapping of the second and third items; both have the older men dreaming dreams and the younger men seeing visions. At the end of an almost exact quote of Joel 2:29, though, Luke has Peter repeating a reference to prophesying: both male and female slaves will receive the Spirit “and they shall prophesy (καὶ προφητεύσουσιν).” The repetition of the phenomena of prophesying is likely intended to reemphasize the fact that this Jewish audience was witnessing prophesying in other languages, not drunken mutterings.

Peter could have stopped the quotation there, and it would have sufficiently accomplished his purpose of explaining that the amazing phenomena of speaking the things of God in unlearned languages was a last-days manifestation of the Spirit. Yet he continues the quotation with the threat of the coming of judgment: that is, the “great and spectacular Day of the Lord (ἐλθεῖν ἡμέραν κυρίου τὴν μεγάλην καὶ ἐπιφανῆ)” (Acts 2:20, my translation). In essence, Peter’s sermon intends to place pressure on his audience to respond rightly to his message in light of a coming theophanic visitation in judgment (see discussion in Go Deeper Excursus 22).

It should be noted that Peter did not say that what they were experiencing at that precise moment was itself the Day of the Lord. Rather, those signs and wonders—as well as the stock imagery of portents in heaven and earth, darkening of the sun, and the turning of the moon to blood—would come “before (πρὶν)” the great and spectacular Day of the Lord. His Jewish audience

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<sup>10</sup> Blumhofer’s detailed study of Luke’s minor adjustments to the quotation from the LXX of Joel 2:28–32 claims to discover deep theological motives in the alterations, alternations that change the meaning of the Old Testament prophecy to apply the words better to the church’s fulfillment of Israel’s restoration. See C. M. Blumhofer, “Luke’s Alternation of Joel 3.1–5 in Acts 2.17–21,” *NTS* 62 (2016):499–516. Blumhofer’s arguments seem too subtle for a narrative in which Peter’s rhetorical purpose in the Pentecost sermon was to convince his hearers that Jesus was the risen Messiah and that the miracle of speaking unlearned languages was a sign of the presence of the Spirit of God and imminent doom for unbelievers.

would have understood that implicit in the quotation was a warning of divine judgment if they failed to repent: “Yet even now, says the Lord, return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; rend your hearts and not your clothing. Return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from punishment” (Joel 2:12–13). This is confirmed by Peter’s answer to their question, “What should we do?” (Acts 2:37). He replies, “Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven.... Save yourselves from this corrupt generation” (Acts 2:38, 40).

Joel 2:28–32	Acts 2:17–21
<p><sup>28</sup> καὶ ἔσται μετὰ ταῦτα καὶ ἐκχεῶ ἀπὸ τοῦ πνεύματός μου ἐπὶ πᾶσαν σάρκα, καὶ προφητεύσουσιν οἱ υἱοὶ ὑμῶν καὶ αἱ θυγατέρες ὑμῶν, καὶ οἱ πρεσβύτεροι ὑμῶν ἐνύπνια ἐνυπνιασθήσονται, καὶ οἱ νεανίσκοι ὑμῶν ὀράσεις ὄψονται·</p>	<p><sup>17</sup> καὶ ἔσται ἐν ταῖς ἐσχάταις ἡμέραις, λέγει ὁ θεός, ἐκχεῶ ἀπὸ τοῦ πνεύματός μου ἐπὶ πᾶσαν σάρκα, καὶ προφητεύσουσιν οἱ υἱοὶ ὑμῶν καὶ αἱ θυγατέρες ὑμῶν καὶ οἱ νεανίσκοι ὑμῶν ὀράσεις ὄψονται καὶ οἱ πρεσβύτεροι ὑμῶν ἐνυπνίους ἐνυπνιασθήσονται·</p>
<p><sup>29</sup> καὶ ἐπὶ τοὺς δούλους μου καὶ ἐπὶ τὰς δούλας ἐν ταῖς ἡμέραις ἐκείναις ἐκχεῶ ἀπὸ τοῦ πνεύματός μου·</p>	<p><sup>18</sup> καὶ γε ἐπὶ τοὺς δούλους μου καὶ ἐπὶ τὰς δούλας μου ἐν ταῖς ἡμέραις ἐκείναις ἐκχεῶ ἀπὸ τοῦ πνεύματός μου, καὶ προφητεύσουσιν·</p>
<p><sup>30</sup> καὶ δώσω τέρατα ἐν τῷ οὐρανῷ, καὶ ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς αἶμα καὶ πῦρ καὶ ἀτμίδα καπνοῦ·</p>	<p><sup>19</sup> καὶ δώσω τέρατα ἐν τῷ οὐρανῷ ἄνω καὶ σημεῖα ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς κάτω, αἶμα καὶ πῦρ καὶ ἀτμίδα καπνοῦ·</p>
<p><sup>31</sup> ὁ ἥλιος μεταστραφήσεται εἰς σκότος καὶ ἡ σελήνη εἰς αἶμα πρὶν ἔλθειν ἡμέραν Κυρίου τὴν μεγάλην καὶ ἐπιφανῆ·</p>	<p><sup>20</sup> ὁ ἥλιος μεταστραφήσεται εἰς σκότος καὶ ἡ σελήνη εἰς αἶμα, πρὶν ἔλθειν ἡμέραν κυρίου τὴν μεγάλην καὶ ἐπιφανῆ·</p>
<p><sup>32</sup> καὶ ἔσται πᾶς ὃς ἂν ἐπικαλέσῃται τὸ ὄνομα Κυρίου σωθήσεται· ὅτι ἐν τῷ ὄρει Σειῶν καὶ ἐν Ἱερουσαλὴμ ἔσται ἀνασωζόμενος, καθότι εἶπεν Κύριος, καὶ εὐαγγελιζόμενοι οὗς Κύριος προσκέκληται</p>	<p><sup>21</sup> καὶ ἔσται πᾶς ὃς ἂν ἐπικαλέσῃται τὸ ὄνομα κυρίου σωθήσεται·</p>

In hindsight, it seems likely that Peter was warning his audience about the coming judgment just as Jesus had prophesied in his Olivet Discourse about the pending destruction of the temple (Matt 24:1–2; Mark 13:1–2; Luke 21:5–24). In fact, it is probable that Peter expected this coming period of tribulation, invasion of Jerusalem, and destruction of the temple in mind when he quoted from Joel 2. Yet this does not demonstrate that the first-century events constituted the ultimate fulfillment of the Day of the Lord. We must recall that even by Peter’s time, the Day of the Lord was understood as an archetype that had many historical fulfillments that would climax in the ultimate Day of the Lord at the literal second coming. Whether Peter comprehended a distinction between the first-century Day of the Lord and the ultimate eschatological Day of the Lord is impossible to know. However, he knew that if the people of Israel failed to repent and turn to

Christ, then judgment would certainly come. For that, he needed no special prophetic knowledge; all he needed was a basic knowledge of the Day of the Lord motif from the Old Testament prophets and Jesus' sayings concerning the destruction of the temple and siege of Jerusalem.