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Volume 25
Issue 613

The Acts of the Apostles and Paul's Acts Epistles

Considered Historically and Dispensationally

by — J.J.B. Coles

In the Four Gospels we have portrayed in plain and strikingly solemn language the rejection and crucifixion of the One Who was and is the true King of Israel, the true Servant and Prophet of Jehovah, the lowly and yet glorious Son of Man, and the One Who was and is the Son of the Living God.

This rejection is set forth in order, and by a number of historical incidents, in the Synoptic Gospels; while, at the commencement of John's Gospel, we are told what the solemn and tragic result of His ministry was: namely, that "He came unto His own and His own received Him not" (1:11).

In the Four Gospels the well-beloved Son of God came and tabernacled among Israel, but they hated both Him and the Father Who sent Him in love and grace.

So, too, with the Book of the Acts of the Apostles, it is not only the coming of the Holy Spirit to Israel with the "signs following," as in Joel, but we have the solemn record of the rejection of the Spirit and of the offer made with accompanying miraculous signs of the return (or the *Parousia*¹) to introduce the Kingdom of the risen Christ, those "times of refreshing" which cannot come to Israel and the world generally so long as the "blindness" is upon the chosen earthly people.

1. [Editor:] Strong's G3952 (παρουσία), commonly translated "coming," and found 24 times in the Greek Scriptures, never once in Paul's Prison Epistles in reference to Christ's return, or second coming.

The witness of Stephen was,

... you do always resist the Holy Spirit: as your fathers did, so do you. Which of the prophets have not your fathers persecuted? And they have slain them which showed before of the coming of the Just One; of Whom you have been now the betrayers and murderers (Acts 7:51-52.)

Let us notice some facts recorded in Acts which ceased when the period of 33 years was over: a unique interval between the "age-times," the special character of which has not been sufficiently emphasized.

Just as Christ was offered to Israel and was deliberately refused, being a stone of stumbling to both of the houses of Israel, so too was the offer made by the Holy Spirit, through Peter, that if there was a national repentance on the part of the Jews of Judaea and Israel in the Dispersion, those "times of refreshing" would come, and God would send back the Lord Jesus Christ (Acts 3:19-21). ►

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Stephen saw Him “standing” at the right hand of God (Acts 7:56). Not as yet had He sat down to wait *until His enemies should be made His footstool* (Hebrews 10:12-13).

The sentence of national blindness, foretold in Isaiah 6, seven hundred years before this critical point in Israel’s history, was impending over the favored nation.

The Lord Himself had twice referred to this awful sentence of judicial blindness, but it was left to the Apostle Paul to follow in the steps of Isaiah and to say, “*Here am I, send me*” (to deliver this solemn message).

When at Rome, as recorded in Acts 28, he addressed the Jews for the last time as a corporate body at the close of his ministry, as far as going to them in their synagogues was concerned; he quoted that “*one word*” – that dreadful sentence of blindness which now for nearly two thousand years has darkened the eyes and hardened the hearts of that still-rebellious and unbelieving People.

The Apostle Paul had already warned them in the Synagogue of Antioch in Pisidia (Acts 13):

Since you judge yourselves unworthy of age-lasting life, lo, we turn to the Gentiles (:46).

It was then that they were being provoked to jealousy by them which were “*no people,*” and made angry by “*a foolish nation*” (Romans 10:19), who asked that they might on the following Jewish Sabbath have the privilege of hearing, for themselves, those good tidings of the proffered return of Christ, and of the coming of that time when it was foretold that not only would the tabernacle of David be restored, but the Gentiles also should share in the blessings: as it was written,

Rejoice you Gentiles with His people (Deuteronomy 32:19-21, 43).

“*The prisoner of Christ Jesus for you Gentiles*” (Ephesians 3:1), after he had pronounced the sentence of blindness of Isaiah 6, was sustained in his prison at Rome, and he was soon afterward inspired to write the most profound of all of the sacred writings: the Epistles to the Ephesians, Philippians and Colossians, oracles of God which contain far deeper truth

concerning Christ and the church,² the Mystery hidden during and from “*the age-times,*” to which there is no reference in the Acts of the Apostles.

The transitional and unique period of time – “*this untoward generation*” – recorded in Acts (2:40), was concluded before the *Epistles of the Captivity*³ were written, and, so, when it is affirmed by some that “the Church began at Pentecost,” we must remember that Pentecost had its Jewish application first, as in Leviticus 23, and not allow this partial truth to carry with it a wrong application.

We must also bear in mind that “*Dispensation of the Secret*” “*hid in God*” (Ephesians 3:9) was not set forth until “*the age-times*” were over and the period covered by the present interval of grace began – Christ, “*the Hope of Glory*” (Colossians 1:27).

After the glorious translation as revealed in *the Secret* in Philippians 3:21, when these bodies of our humiliation will be transfigured into the likeness of the body of His Glory, then the broken-off events which commenced at Pentecost, with the miraculous signs and speaking with tongues, will again begin to run their course, to be followed by the remaining portion of the unfinished prophecy of Joel:

And I will show signs in heaven above and in the earth beneath, blood and fire and pillars of smoke. The sun shall be turned into darkness, and the moon into blood, before that great and terrible day of the Lord come. And it shall come to pass that whosoever shall call upon the Name of the Lord shall be delivered ... (2:30-32).

First, however, *the Secret* revealed by Paul in Ephesians and Colossians must be “*preached among the Gentiles, believed on in the world, and received up into Glory*” (I Timothy 3:16).

Again, the recognition of the peculiar and unique

2. [Editor:] The Greek word often translated as “church” in most English versions is ἐκκλησία (*ekklēsia*, or *ecclesia*). The word is a compound word meaning “called-out” (*ek* = “out”; *kaleō* = called). The *ecclesia* is God’s “called-out” ones. The *ecclesia* is not a building or denomination; not a meeting, or doctrinal creed; it is not somewhere we go, or something we do, it is who we as believers *are*.
3. [Editor:] Also known as the Prison Epistles, Perfection Epistles, or Latter Epistles.

nature of the 33-three year history recorded in Acts leads to a very important question as to the *dispensational* teaching and the *chronological* order of the Pauline Epistles.

The earlier Epistles of Paul, written before the close of the historical period covered by the book of Acts, involved the *Parousia*, or return, and Kingdom of Christ, still being offered to Israel and the nations.

Have we not here an answer to the insinuation that Paul was mistaken in hoping that the *Parousia* might occur even while some of those who were then waiting for God's Son from heaven were still alive, and who might therefore be actually be "*preserved blameless*" "*in spirit, soul and body*" (I Thessalonians 5:23) until the day of His then expected *Parousia*?

So long as the offer of Christ's *Parousia* was being made, within those 33 years covered by Acts, of the *possible immediate return of Christ*, those earlier Epistles of Paul, written before that offer was definitely and hopelessly refused by Israel (both in Judaea and in the Dispersion), and which contain special references to the *Parousia*, would be, *in their scope*, in accordance with the then distinct offer and dispensational dealing of God.

It is remarkable that it is only in these earlier Epistles of Paul, written before his imprisonment at Rome, and during the course of those 33 years covered by Acts, that the *Parousia* is mentioned.

The word *Parousia* does not once occur in Ephesians or Colossians, and the translation referred to in Philippians 3 is in connection with the "*On-High Calling*" and "*the Prize*" which was connected with the great Secret of Christ and the Church. This Secret purpose of God was not fully declared when the *Parousia*, immediately to precede the Kingdom, was the

The Acts Period Dispensation

The Acts of the Apostles covers a whole and complete dispensation, up to the end of which no Gentile ever received blessing except in connection with Israel.

— E.W. Bullinger (1837-1913)

Letter written to A.E. Knoch, March 5, 1909

goal then offered to faith.

To His faithful and beloved servant Paul, when in prison in Rome, God would yet more fully reveal this wondrous Glory of Christ as the future head of the Universe. With the Church as His fullness (*pleroma*⁴), a deeper and more exalted truth followed the rejection of the *Parousia* and the Kingdom of I Thessalonians 4, which was now postponed indefinitely.

After the Secret, hidden in God, has been consummated and we are "*received up in Glory*," the *Parousia* will surely come, notwithstanding its long postponement; for none of God's words will fall to the ground. However, the "*Blessed Hope*," as found in Philippians 3:21, I Timothy 1:1, 11 and Titus 2:13, will be fulfilled before that public *Parousia* comes.

It will also be evident, when the foregoing historical aspect of the Book of Acts is recognized, that the miracles and "*powers of the world to come*" (Hebrews 6:5), which were so distinct a feature of that exceptional period, naturally ceased when the testimony of the Holy Spirit, which they were intended to emphasize, was finally rejected by Israel, as Christ Himself had been.

To pray now for a renewal of Pentecostal gifts while the Secret is still to be preached among the Gentiles, though doubtless with sincere intent, is surely not according to knowledge. "*Blood and fire and pillars of smoke*," and other celestial and terrestrial terrors, will follow that renewal of Joel's prophecy, which is only in abeyance so long as this wondrous Day of Grace is yet "*preached among the Gentiles*." ■

— *Things to Come*

Dr. E.W. Bullinger, Editor

February 1907, Volume XIII, pages 15-17

(*edited & abridged*)

Coles was an associate of Dr. E.W. Bullinger and contributor to *Things to Come* magazine.

TOPICS:

Major: Acts, Book of; Paul's Epistles; Right Division; Second Coming

Minor: Mystery; Secret; Gifts; Signs; Israel; Blessed Hope

4. [**Editor:**] Strong's G4138 (πλήρωμα). Just as it pleased God that the fullness (*pleroma*) of Deity dwell in Christ bodily (Colossians 1:19; 2:9), so, in turn, we are Christ's Body, "*the fullness (pleroma) of Him Who fills all in all*" (Ephesians 1:23).

The Three Spheres

Distinguishing Between Them

by — H.W. Fry

When we set ourselves to study the Scriptures, we should especially acquaint ourselves with the deep things of God, such as the “Mystery” spoken of by Paul in Ephesians 3:4.

It is important, for instance, to note that God’s calling relates to three distinct *spheres*: an Earthly sphere; a second, Heavenly (or spiritual) sphere; and a third or still more exalted sphere, which is called by the Apostle Paul, the “On-High Calling” (Philippians 3:14).

THE FIRST SPHERE: Earthly

The Earthly sphere encompasses the *first* Covenant with Abraham, where God gave him the Land of Palestine, and he was to be the father of a mighty nation, with earth-seed like unto the sand of the sea (Genesis 22:17). This earthly kingdom was entirely temporal, centered on the nation Israel. In Moses’ day the Law was added to this Earthly Sphere.

1. [Editor] “High” is the Greek adverb ἄνω (*anō*) meaning “up,” “upward, or on the top” (Strong’s), i.e., “the upward calling” (Rotherham).

This is the “sphere of glory ‘where Christ sitteth at the right hand of God’ (Colossians 3:1,2) ... the third and highest sphere of blessing ... This third sphere of blessing is said to be ‘far above all principality and power’ ‘in the super-heavenlies’ (Ephesians 1:20,21).” – Charles Welch, “Above,” *Alphabetical Analysis*

THE SECOND SPHERE: Heavenly

The Heavenly (or spiritual) sphere is represented by God’s *second* covenant with Abraham. Some thirty years after the first covenant God promised Abraham another seed, a heavenly-seed, likened this time to the stars of heaven.

This seed was to be spiritual, and was to include all of those of “many nations” who would believe God as Abraham did. Abraham was thus to be the father of the faithful. This was not a temporal seed or kingdom, but was entirely spiritual, or heavenly, encompassing an election out of Israel and the “many nations.” It was to culminate in the new or Heavenly Jerusalem, the “city whose Builder and Maker is God” Himself (Hebrews 11:10).

Abraham and the elect from Israel and the “many nations” inherit this city as “the Bride, the Lamb’s wife.” When this Covenant was made its sphere was much higher than the Earthly, though it would run concurrent with it. The first sphere was Earthly, while this second sphere was Heavenly.

THE THIRD SPHERE: Far Above All Heavens

When the Earthly and Heavenly Spheres were rejected by the Jews, God authorized Paul to proclaim a new calling,



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Each of us must allow the objective, unchanging truth of who God has made us in the Lord Jesus Christ to transform our minds. This is the spiritual message and journey of “*I Choose*.”

the “Mystery,” with its accompanying new sphere. This sphere was vastly higher than the previous spheres.

After Israel was declared *Lo-ammi*² (Hosea 1:9), God not merely extended His grace, but revealed the “*exceeding riches of His Grace*” (Ephesians 2:7), which exposed a far grander sphere – the “*On-High Calling*” (Philippians 3:14). This calling does not culminate in the Heavenly Jerusalem which comes down to earth, but up into a sphere that is “*far above all heavens*” (Ephesians 4:10). This is the sphere of “*the Church,³ which is His Body*” (Ephesians 1:22-23).

The majority of this day, if they have any definite ideas on the subject, probably consider the new Jerusalem as their future home, where they will be gathered as “*the Bride*”

(Revelation 21:9), and this is precisely what the Old Testament saints expected (Hebrews 11:10). This is true of all who are “*born again*” as were the Old Testament saints when they kept the Law and thus obeyed God, and were not “*cut off*” (Exodus 12:15) from their privileges.

However, the distinctive privilege of the present is that an elect are called, through the Sovereign Will of God, to an inheritance in the third sphere of which very little is generally known, but which ought to be our special study.

The thorough comprehension of the relative importance of each of these spheres will greatly assist in “*rightly dividing the Word of Truth.*” It is worth a great effort and every careful attention in order to have this knowledge always available. ■

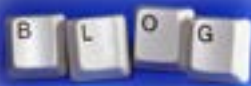
2. Israel was not to be rejected without ample warning, and so God in His mercy specially endued the Apostles with spiritual gifts and great powers, by which they could show great “*signs and wonders,*” in order to prove that they were messengers sent by God. But notwithstanding these signs of tongues, healing, etc., the nation was stubborn in their rejection of Christ, until Paul was finally authorized to declare their rejection by God, as narrated in Acts 28:25-28.
3. [Editor:] The Greek word often translated as “*church*” in most English versions is ἐκκλησία (*ekklēsia*, or *ecclesia*). The word is a compound word meaning “*called-out*” (*ek* = “*out*”; *kaleō* = *called*). The *ecclesia* is God’s “*called-out*” ones. The *ecclesia* is not a building or denomination; not a meeting, or doctrinal creed; it is not somewhere we go, or something we do, it is who we as believers *are*.

Editor’s Note: This is a continuation of a series of articles on “*The Three Spheres.*” The first installment was Dr. E.W. Bullinger’s (1837-1913) *The Three Spheres of Future Glory*, [Bible Student’s Notebook 596](#).

Fry was an associate of E.W. Bullinger and contributor to *Things to Come* magazine.

TOPICS:

Major: Spheres, Three; Heavens, Three; Celestials; Mystery; Right Division
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Ephesians, Philippians and Colossians

In our remarks on the teachings of Paul's earlier epistles, we noted that the burden of their message concerned the things on the earth – in other words, the Adamic race.

If explicit mention of the things of heaven is absent from Paul's earliest writings, that certainly cannot be charged to his later epistles, Ephesians, Philippians and Colossians. These, forming perhaps the smallest group of the New Testament writings, have the largest scope of any of the groups.

The group is a complete Bible in itself, though. These epistles especially contain the solution of the problem of universal destiny, as Paul's earlier writings solve the question of human destiny.

— A.E. Knoch (1874-1965)
Unsearchable Riches, vol. 4, pages 260, 261

Present Truth: The Present Secret Administration

Brother Gelesnoff and I agreed that the great need among the saints was an understanding of present truth, as found in Paul's epistles, especially the prison group, which make known these riches of Christ which had been hidden during previous revelation.

The great truths revealed through Paul were rejected even before his death. All in the province of Asia, to whom Ephesians and Colossians were sent, turned away from him (II Timothy 1:15). We cannot expect it to be otherwise in these last days. Indeed, when very few are granted the spirit of wisdom and revelation (Ephesians 1:17) which is essential to a grasp of the present Secret Administration, we must expect it to be opposed and rejected once again, for faith is to decrease as the consummation of the eon approaches.

— A.E. Knoch (1874-1965)
Unsearchable Riches, Volume 31, 1940

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- the "preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery, which was kept secret in ages past" (Romans 16:25);
- true freedom and liberty apart from law (Galatians 5:1);
- the organic nature of the Body of Christ (I Corinthians 12);
- the distinct message and ministry of Paul, the apostle to the nations (Ephesians 1:1-3);
- the importance of receiving all whom Christ has received (Romans 14-15);
- the recovery of rich Biblical truth that has too long remained hidden under the veils of traditionalism, prejudice, misunderstanding, and fear (Mark 7:7, 13);
- the completeness of the believer in Christ (Colossians 2:10), with:

- total freedom from sins (Colossians 1:14);
- union in His death, burial and resurrection (Romans 6);
- adult sonship position (Galatians 4).

We do not claim infallibility for the contents of this publication. Our readers are asked to be as the Bereans and search the Scriptures (Acts 17:10-11; I Thessalonians 5:21).

This publication is not connected with any "church," "denomination," "movement," "organization," "mission," "creed," "meeting," "school," "conference" or "fellowship."

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