

THE FULFILLMENT OF JOEL 2:28–32: A MULTIPLE-LENS APPROACH

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Peter's citation of Joel 2:28–32 in Acts 2:16–21 is a significant text for our attempts to define the relationship between Israel and the Church and to understand God's eschatological program. Pivotal questions concerning the Joel text include how wide its application is, how to interpret its apocalyptic imagery, and whether it was fulfilled on the day of Pentecost when Peter cited it.

Three major positions have emerged in response to these questions. Typical of a dispensational approach is A. C. Gaebelein:

Careless and superficial expositors have often stated that Peter said that all this happened in fulfillment of what was spoken by Joel. He did not use the word fulfilled at all. Had he spoken of a fulfillment then of Joel's prophecy, he would have uttered something which was not true, for the great prophecy of Joel was *not* fulfilled on that day.¹

In this understanding, Peter uses Joel 2 as an analogy or rhetorical device but as nothing more.

Alternatively, John Stott presents a more covenantal approach: "We must be careful not to quote Joel's prophecy as if we are still awaiting its fulfillment, or even as if its fulfillment has been only partial, and we await some future and complete fulfillment."² While Stott has recognized the reality of a Pentecost fulfillment, this position typically extends the fulfillment to include the apocalyptic imagery as well. Further, it neglects any future aspect of the Spirit's renewal of ethnic Israel.

Therefore a third position has emerged. Characteristic of the multiple-fulfillment³ approach is Walter C. Kaiser, Jr.:

All interpreters know that Pentecost took care of only the first two verses in that prophecy, and that only to an initial degree. Where were the "wonders

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¹ A. C. Gaebelein, *The Acts of the Apostles: An Exposition* (New York: Our Hope, 1912) 53. For a more recent advancement of this position, which argues that Peter cited Joel 2 because of only one "point of similarity," see T. D. Ice, "Dispensational Hermeneutics," *Issues in Dispensationalism* (ed. W. R. Willis and J. R. Master; Chicago: Moody, 1994) 41.

² J. R. W. Stott, *The Message of Acts* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1990) 73.

³ The terminology probably will vary among this view's adherents. W. C. Kaiser, Jr., speaks of "ultimate and final" fulfillment in the land yet future ("The Promise of God and the Outpouring of the Holy Spirit," *The Living and Active Word of God: Studies in Honor of S. J. Schultz* [ed. M. Inch and R. Youngblood; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1983] 119). P. D. Feinberg, who is obviously indebted to Kaiser, speaks of "multiple referents" ("Hermeneutics of Discontinuity," *Continuity and Discontinuity* [ed. J. S. Feinberg; Wheaton: Crossway, 1988] 126–127).

in the heavens and on the earth, blood and fire and billows of smoke”? “The sun will be turned to darkness,” promised Joel, “and the moon to blood.” These events yet await the consummation of history.⁴

Here the difficulty is that overemphasis on the future as ultimate tends to minimize the magnitude of what happened at Pentecost and creates a disjunction between God’s Pentecost work and Israel’s future.

Despite the conviction with which these three scholars advocate their conclusions, I remain unsatisfied with each proposal. While it is vital that the fulfillment of Joel 2 on Pentecost be acknowledged, this should not be done through simplistically explaining away its apocalyptic language. Nor should we isolate the passage from its broader context in Acts, in which there are several occurrences of the Spirit being outpoured. Further, a dogged insistence on an ultimate fulfillment of Joel 2 undermines the redemptive-historical significance of Pentecost and inappropriately truncates the effects of that day.

I would argue that we can arrive at a proper understanding of the fulfillment of Joel 2 only as we examine it through different interpretive lenses. In this way we can account for the progress of revelation and redemptive history in our exegesis. As we apply that method in this paper, a new paradigm for understanding Joel 2 will emerge. The single fulfillment of this pivotal text can be embraced, even as we acknowledge Peter’s brilliant homiletical usage of it and the multiple stages in which its fulfillment is actualized.

I. THE LENS OF JOEL

1. *Background.* Our first step in considering the fulfillment of Joel 2 is to interpret the intention of Joel, the original author. This prophet wrote in a time of turmoil for Israel, though the dates of his life cannot be fixed with certainty. His message centered on a severe locust plague, which had wreaked havoc on the nation’s crops and livelihood.⁵ As Joel addressed the nation in its distress he drew a comparison between the locust plague and the ultimate day of the Lord that was yet future.⁶ The demonstration of God’s judgment through the locusts⁷ called for a response of repentance. Indeed the

⁴ W. C. Kaiser, Jr., *Back Toward the Future: Hints for Interpreting Biblical Prophecy* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1989) 43.

⁵ One’s conclusions regarding the date of the book and its setting are interrelated. The options are numerous, and that discussion is beyond the scope of this paper.

⁶ J. A. Thompson, “The Use of Repetition in the Prophecy of Joel,” *On Language, Culture, and Religion: Essays in Honor of Eugene A. Nida* (ed. M. Black and A. Smalley; The Hague: Mouton, 1974). Thompson calls this “repetition for correspondence” and notes that this repetition of a present judgment points to a climactic future judgment.

⁷ The debate over whether the locusts are natural locusts or a foreign army is also beyond the scope of this paper. For a defense of the natural-locust view see L. C. Allen, *The Books of Joel, Obadiah, Jonah and Micah* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976) 29–31. For the idea that a foreign army is in view see D. Stuart, *Hosea–Jonah* (WBC; Waco: Word, 1987). For the view that both a locust attack and a human attack are involved see H. Hosch, “The Concept of Prophetic Time in the Book of Joel,” *JETS* 15 (1972) 31–38.

people evidently did repent, as Joel 2:18 would suggest.⁸ God's action because of their repentance would be to pour out blessing.

The blessings that God would pour out are twofold: physical (2:18–27) and spiritual (2:28–32). An obvious question concerns the timing of this divine action. It must be admitted that some of the language in 2:18–27 could lead one to interpret the physical blessings eschatologically. Several considerations, however, cause us to see a more immediate fulfillment. First, the physical blessings are designed to ameliorate the effects of the locust plague that led the people to repent.⁹ Second, the passage's form and poetic language lend to rich imagery rather than wooden literalism.¹⁰ Third, many of the images, such as rain, communicate the idea of covenant harmony, which would be present upon repentance.¹¹ This would also make such blessings contingent upon covenant faithfulness rather than requiring an interpretation of eschatological finality.

2. *The Spirit is poured out (2:28–29).* When we reach 2:28 we find a significant time marker in the words *ʔhry kn*. Willem VanGemerén proposes that we should translate this as “when,” not communicating chronological sequence but a transition between related material.¹² But a better translation would be the normal rendering of “after this.” Because *whyh* precedes *ʔhry kn*, it seems best to deny that God's actions in 2:28–32 are immediately subsequent to those in 2:18–27.¹³ This phrase sometimes does introduce prophetic predictions,¹⁴ and yet it does not necessarily point to eschatological times. The best approach is to view *ʔhry kn* as establishing the chronological sequence between the two stages of blessing,¹⁵ but with an indefinite time referent that is defined later in the passage.

The passage can be divided into three parts, each beginning with a converted perfect.¹⁶ The first section (vv. 28–29) contains an inclusio that speaks of the outpouring of the Spirit. In the second section (vv. 30–31) Joel announces signs of the day of the Lord. The final section (v. 32) contains an inclusio with the concept of calling. Not only has God called his people; his people are those who call upon him. Joel structured his material so that God's action of pouring out his Spirit would motivate them to call upon him.

This gracious outpouring of the Spirit would be upon “all flesh.” Understanding Joel's intended referent for this phrase is crucial for appropriate interpretation of the passage's fulfillment. Kaiser argues strenuously for taking

⁸ Kaiser suggests that the book hinges on the repentance described in this verse (“Promise” 114).

⁹ Joel 2:25.

¹⁰ Allen notes that 2:21–23 are an adapted form of a cultic hymn and constitute a reversal of prior lament (*Books of Joel* 90–91).

¹¹ *Ibid.* 93.

¹² W. A. VanGemerén, “The Spirit of Restoration,” *WTJ* 50 (Spring 1988) 84–87.

¹³ T. J. Finley, *Joel, Amos, Obadiah* (Chicago: Moody, 1990) 71.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ D. A. Hubbard, *Joel and Amos: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1989) 68.

¹⁶ Kaiser, “Promise” 114–115.

this as all people without exception, including Gentiles.¹⁷ Of significance to his position is the fact that this construction is used throughout the OT to refer to or include Gentiles. Kaiser maintains that it never refers exclusively to Israel.¹⁸

The majority of scholars, however, take the phrase as a reference to Judah or Israel.¹⁹ Thomas Finley writes that its “sphere of application is restricted by the context. . . . There is no reason to think Joel is not still addressing the community of Judah and Jerusalem.” The contextual clue that narrows the scope of “all flesh” is chap. 3, which deals with God’s judgment on the nations, suggesting a focus of blessing upon ethnic Israel. Further, the OT elsewhere refers specifically to Israel regarding the coming of the Spirit.²⁰ Finally, the “your” pronouns in 2:28 relate the statement to Israelites.²¹ The appropriate conclusion is that as Joel wrote the prophecy, he intended “all flesh” to denote Israelites.

There would be, though, a widening scope in God’s revelatory program through this diffusion of the Spirit. Significant evidence²² of the Spirit’s outpouring would be new revelation. Moses’ desire²³ that revelatory activity not be restricted to those of prophetic office or training could be realized. All would experience the Spirit regardless of age, sex, or social status. Even slaves would receive the Spirit, and this may have included Gentiles within the framework of Israel.²⁴

3. *The signs are provided (2:30–31).* The next two verses take on an eschatological and apocalyptic focus. God promises to manifest wonders that will arrive sometime before the great and terrible day of the Lord and announce its coming. As the locust plague punished the people for wickedness, so the final day of the Lord will be a time of judgment. But God’s intention in pouring out his Spirit is that the people will be faithful to him, thereby reserving the judgment of that day for the neighboring sinful nations.²⁵

All of the difficulties inherent in the interpretation of apocalyptic imagery are present here. Scholars suggest two major possibilities as the backdrop for these signs. The first is the deeds of God in the exodus complex of events, including the plagues in Egypt. The second is images of war.²⁶ Nei-

¹⁷ *Ibid.* 119. Feinberg characteristically follows Kaiser’s view; he seems to base this upon his view of how the NT uses Joel 2 to refer to the Church (“Hermeneutics” 127).

¹⁸ Kaiser, “Promise” 119.

¹⁹ In addition to those cited below see Allen, *Books of Joel* 98; W. S. Prinsloo, *The Theology of the Book of Joel* (New York: DeGruyter, 1985) 84, 89; R. B. Dillard, “Joel,” *The Minor Prophets* (ed. T. E. McComiskey; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992) 1.295.

²⁰ Finley, *Joel* 71–72.

²¹ Hubbard, *Joel* 69.

²² According to Hebrew expression, this would not necessarily be the only evidence (Finley, *Joel* 72).

²³ Num 11:29.

²⁴ Finley, *Joel* 73.

²⁵ Joel 2:32; chap. 3.

²⁶ Hubbard, *Joel* 71.

ther is out of step with the theology of Joel, who is emphasizing the day of the Lord as redemption for God's people but judgment for the wicked. Regardless of how one interprets the signs, clearly Joel expected apocalyptic events to forecast the coming day of the Lord and to call for a response of faithfulness.

4. *Salvation is proclaimed (2:32)*. Such faithfulness is described in 2:32 as calling on the name of the Lord. This terminology signifies "exclusive commitment" to God, which results in salvation.²⁷ To describe the salvation, Joel speaks of Mount Zion and Jerusalem, which connote "stability and security."²⁸ Although we cannot disconnect this verse from the spiritual change seen previously, its primary focus is on physical deliverance. Joel uses the promise of future salvation to call for a present response.

5. *Summary*. Indeed that is his pattern throughout these five verses. The locust plague has graphically demonstrated the reality that God will judge even his own people for their wickedness. While Joel promises that God will pour out his Spirit in the future, he also warns that God will pour out signs that the day of judgment is near. For those who respond with wholehearted allegiance to Yahweh, there is no fear of wrath but rather the blessed expectation of life in the Spirit. The Spirit will manifest his presence through an outburst of revelatory activity among all the Israelites without any social distinctions.

II. THE LENS OF PETER

1. *The speaker*. We move now to Acts 2, which chronicles the Spirit's coming on the day of Pentecost. The ecstatic speech of the disciples in languages that they had not learned caused the crowd to wonder if the early Christians were drunk despite the early hour. According to Luke, Peter countered this misunderstanding with the first apostolic sermon.

The accepted position of much Biblical scholarship, however, is to deny the authenticity of Peter's words.²⁹ If such is the case—that Luke has created the speech and inserted it in Peter's mouth—then we do not have a distinctive Petrine lens. Alternatively, H. N. Ridderbos presents a more moderate position: "These speeches should be regarded not as the literal record . . . but as illustrations of apostolic preaching in various characteristic situations. As such they reproduce the general form of the original preaching of the apostles."³⁰ Consistent with this position is the proposal that Luke followed

²⁷ Ibid. 72.

²⁸ Prinsloo, *Theology* 86–87, 90.

²⁹ For example see H. Conzelmann, *Acts of the Apostles* (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987) xlv; R. J. Dillon, "The Prophecy of Christ and His Witnesses According to the Discourses of Acts," *NTS* 32 (October 1986) 544; R. F. Zehnle, *Peter's Pentecost Discourse* (SBLMS 15; Nashville: Abingdon, 1971).

³⁰ H. N. Ridderbos, *The Speeches of Peter in the Acts of the Apostles* (London: Tyndale, 1962) 11.

a Thucydidean model, using language that mirrored what the apostles would have really said.³¹

There may be some truth to these arguments concerning Luke's historical method and the literary magnificence of the speeches in Acts. That the Joel text is quoted from the LXX³² may indicate at least one divergence from what Peter actually spoke. On the other hand, the notion that Luke invented or substantially altered Peter's speech is based more on assumption than fact and is inconsistent with belief in inerrancy. Richard Longenecker addresses the matter well:

All of the speeches in Acts must of necessity be paraphrastic in their present form, for certainly the original delivery contained more detail of argument and more illustrative material than presently included—as poor Eutychus undoubtedly could testify. Stenographic reports they are not. . . . But the recognition of a styling which produces speeches of others compatible with the narrative in which they are found should not be interpreted as a necessary declaration of either inaccuracy of reporting or a lack of traditional material.³³

So I conclude that Peter did preach the essence of the Acts 2 sermon on the day of Pentecost in response to the mocking crowd.

2. *The sermon's method and structure.* Peter's homiletical method is prompted by the need to explain the shocking events of Pentecost and the desire to confront the crowd with God's demand for repentance. He therefore uses the *pēšer* form of interpretation in quoting Joel 2:28–32, proclaiming that the Pentecost event “is” what Joel had looked toward and altering the text to say “in the last days” rather than “after this.” This method was especially common at Qumran, whose covenanters often altered texts in order to suggest a present eschatological fulfillment specifically related to them.³⁴ Such an orientation toward an inaugurated eschatology was characteristic of NT Christianity. If C. H. Dodd is correct, Joel 2–3 is one of the early Church's key “apocalyptic-eschatological” Scriptures.³⁵ Rabbinic tradition also interpreted Joel 2 eschatologically as Peter did. Joel 2 is connected

³¹ This position is discussed in R. Longenecker, *Biblical Exegesis in the Apostolic Period* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975) 80–81.

³² R. G. Bratcher, *Old Testament Quotations in the New Testament* (3d rev. ed.; New York: United Bible Societies, 1987) 28.

³³ Longenecker, *Exegesis* 81–82; I. H. Marshall, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980) 72. Luke notes in Acts 2:40, using a “well-known stylistic abbreviatory device,” that Peter's sermon contained many unrecorded words (P. W. van der Horst, “Hellenistic Parallels to the Acts of the Apostles,” *JSNT* 25 [1985] 57).

³⁴ E. E. Ellis, *Prophecy and Hermeneutic in Early Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993) 189–190, 201–202. Specific nuances of the definition of *pēšer* are still under discussion. Its basic elements include the explanation of a mystery that now has direct eschatological application to a present situation and the use of text alteration or wordplay by a divinely-inspired figure (ibid. 160–161; Longenecker, *Exegesis* 38–42).

³⁵ Longenecker, *Exegesis* 95; C. H. Dodd, *According to the Scriptures: The Sub-Structure of New Testament Theology* (London: Nisbet, 1952) 61–108 (cited in Longenecker, *Exegesis* 90 n. 36).

to passages such as Numbers 11 and Ezekiel 36 in eschatological midrash texts.³⁶

While Peter's use of *pēšer* and his eschatological orientation are in line with Jewish thinking, his sermon is distinctive nonetheless. For what shocked the audience was not Peter's eschatological understanding of Joel 2 but his insistence that the fulfillment was now because of Christ. Moreover typical Qumran *pēšer* moved from the Scripture passage to the current event, whereas Peter's thinking moved from the current event to the Scripture passage.³⁷ Such a "this is that" *pēšer* theme would characterize Peter's later preaching as well.³⁸

Jewish elements are found not only in Peter's perspective but also in his sermon's structure. It parallels the proem sermon of rabbinic literature, in which there is an opening text (Joel 2) and an exposition given using a series of texts.³⁹ These multiple Jewish elements do not imply that Peter consciously migrated between discrete modes of interpretation.⁴⁰ Instead they inform us regarding the interpretive grid with which Peter was familiar and comfortable. This grid also alerts us to Peter's dependence on Joel 2 throughout the sermon, which allows him to explain the Spirit's outburst and to call for repentance in a sort of climactic midrash on Joel 2:32, using the larger context of Joel.⁴¹

3. *The sermon's interpretation of Joel 2:28–32.* We have seen that Peter begins his Pentecost sermon with a *pēšer* application of Joel 2 to explain the events of that special Pentecost and that he ends his sermon with an appeal to repentance that finds its basis in 2:32. With that framework we can understand some of the specific details concerning Peter's exegesis of Joel.

Since *pēšer* characterizes Peter's method, we know that he saw an immediate fulfillment of Joel 2 on Pentecost in the revelatory phenomenon that occurred among those early believers. How, then, did Peter understand the words "all flesh"? Probably he considered them in light of the current events and the prophetic activity that emanated from common, nonprofessional prophets such as he. When the listeners came to repentance the Holy Spirit

³⁶ Zehnle, *Discourse* 29–30; C. A. Evans, "Prophecy and Polemic: Jews in Luke's Scriptural Apologetic," *Luke and Scripture: The Function of Sacred Tradition in Luke-Acts* (ed. Evans and J. A. Sanders; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993) 186–187. *Deut. Rab.* 6.14 (on Deut 24:9) is a specific midrash mentioned.

³⁷ Ellis, *Prophecy* 203–204.

³⁸ Longenecker, *Exegesis* 100.

³⁹ Ellis, *Prophecy* 199–200; R. B. Sloan, "'Signs and Wonders': A Rhetorical Clue to the Pentecost Discourse," *With Steadfast Purpose* (ed. N. Keathley; Waco: Baylor University, 1990) 152. The speech structure that L. Wills proposes (authoritative *exempla*-conclusion-exhortation, with possible cycle repetition) seems to flow out of the Jewish elements we have seen ("The Form of the Sermon in Hellenistic Judaism and Early Christianity," *HTR* 77 [July-October 1984] 298–299).

⁴⁰ Longenecker, *Exegesis* 103.

⁴¹ C. S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary on the New Testament* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1993) 328. Keener notes that Acts 2:39 answers the question "Who may call on the name of the Lord?" and thus has midrashic characteristics.

would be their gift as well, and at least the “all flesh” would include dispersed Jews.⁴²

Does the statement of 2:39 that “all who are far off” would receive the gift cause us to conclude that Peter expected Gentiles to receive the Spirit? This interpretation would ease the theological tensions we face in relating Israel and the Church and is proposed by Kaiser, Robert Tannehill and Richard Zehnle, among others.⁴³ Supporting this idea is its connection to Isa 57:19 and Ephesians 2.

An alternative solution is to differentiate between Luke’s and Peter’s probable intentions. F. F. Bruce relates the phrase “not only to the people of Jerusalem but to those of distant lands (and, as appears later in Luke’s narrative, not only to Jews but to Gentiles also).”⁴⁴ Similarly I. Howard Marshall suggests that the immediate referent is scattered Jews, that Luke’s referent includes Gentiles, and that we really cannot be sure what Peter intended.⁴⁵ In the context of Acts and with the events of Acts 10 in mind, it is certainly not clear that Peter included Gentiles. To read later Pauline theology back into the formative days of the Jewish Church is dubious from a Biblical theology perspective. A more likely view is that Peter considered “all flesh” as Joel did, in light of the widening scope of God’s revelatory activity among his people, who continued to be dispersed in Gentile lands.

While Peter’s understanding of Joel 2:28–29 is fairly clear in view of the Pentecost events, his approach to 2:30–31 is more difficult to fathom. Did Peter find a fulfillment of these cosmic disturbances in the crucifixion of Christ, as some suggest?⁴⁶ Or would he have taken the signs metaphorically as “convulsions of history” throughout the Church age?⁴⁷ Kaiser’s understanding is that these cosmic disturbances await fulfillment at the consummation of history.⁴⁸ An outgrowth of that view would be that Peter cited 2:30–31 to arrive at 2:32 so that he could close the sermon with his appeal for repentance.⁴⁹

As Robert Sloan points out, however, if Peter begins and ends his sermon with dependence upon the Joel passage it is appropriate to expect the middle

⁴² Acts 2:39.

⁴³ This interpretation fits well with Kaiser’s position that Joel intended “all flesh” to include Gentiles (*Back* 101); cf. R. C. Tannehill, *The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts: A Literary Interpretation* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990) 2.27, 134; Zehnle, *Discourse* 124. Of course Zehnle does not face the difficulty here since he views the speech as a Lukan creation. Nevertheless he does see the Gentiles included in this statement.

⁴⁴ F. F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts* (NICNT; rev. ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988) 71.

⁴⁵ Marshall, *Acts* 82.

⁴⁶ Bruce, *Acts* 62. He refers to C. J. Humphreys and W. G. Waddington, “Dating the Crucifixion,” *Nature* 306 (1983) 743–746. A problem with their view is the question of whether or not the crucifixion could have occurred in AD 33.

⁴⁷ Stott, *Message* 74–75.

⁴⁸ Kaiser, *Back* 123.

⁴⁹ Sloan, “Rhetorical Clue” 154. Sloan points out that quoting two middle verses to reach the end of a text is unlikely since the NT frequently cites texts selectively. Peter or Luke could have left the verses out.

to relate to Joel as well. Indeed the Christological focus of the middle section finds its genesis in the accreditation of Jesus by wonders and signs, which also validate the apostles' ministry.⁵⁰ Luke or Peter added "signs"⁵¹ (*sēmeia*) to the LXX rendering of Joel 2 in order to display the harmony between the text and the material that follows, both in the sermon (2:22) and the narrative (2:43). The miracles the crowd had seen during Jesus' ministry and would see in the future were signs of impending judgment, which called for repentance.

How did Peter's hermeneutic allow him to interpret the apocalyptic imagery in this way? Moreover does this suggest that there will not be a direct fulfillment of the cosmic disturbances in the future? I would suggest that Peter, guided by the Holy Spirit, used a structure that is foreign to us but nevertheless valid: an advance typology. The eschatological portents qualify as a valid type if we accept their prediction as a guarantee of their historicity and certainty.⁵² Peter finds the function of the apocalyptic disturbances in Joel to be an incentive to faithfulness to Yahweh. Therefore he suggests that Jesus' miracles have a similar function. They announce the coming of the *eschaton* and its judgment as well as the concomitant reality of the need to repent. Concordant with this typological hermeneutic is the distinction Peter makes between heavenly signs and earthly signs.⁵³ It seems that the heavenly signs are future, while the earthly signs focus upon Christ. An additional consideration is the apparent expectation of the Lord's imminent⁵⁴ return that permeates Acts, especially chaps. 1–3.⁵⁵ If Peter had this conception he may have thought that the cosmic disturbances would begin at any moment.

4. *Summary.* If this proposal is correct we can account for Peter's usage of Joel 2:28–32 as the foundation for his sermon. The beginning explains the outburst of revelatory activity in light of Christ's pouring out the Spirit,⁵⁶ the middle points to the life of Christ as an indicator of the coming intervention of God in history, and the end calls people to repentance in view of this impending judgment from God and the available blessing of the Spirit. Such a structure is consistent with the context and theology of Joel and fits the purpose of Peter perfectly. We can not only allow for Peter's homiletical technique related to Joel 2 but can also expect a more direct fulfillment of the

⁵⁰ Acts 2:22, 43.

⁵¹ Along with the qualifiers regarding the heavens and the earth.

⁵² R. M. Davidson argues that a valid type is either a person, an institution, or an event. The eschatological portents would fall under the category of event (*Typology in Scripture: A Study of Hermeneutical τῶπος Structures* [Berrien Springs: Andrews University, 1981] 395).

⁵³ Acts 2:19.

⁵⁴ By this I do not intend to convey a particular theological stance, but the sense of anticipation found in the early Christians.

⁵⁵ Contra Ridderbos, *Speeches* 15. It seems to me that those who do not see anticipation of a speedy return of Christ in the NT Church have a lot to explain away.

⁵⁶ Acts 2:33 is a reference to this terminology from Joel as well.

cosmic signs that is in line with their purpose: to announce the ultimate day of the Lord.⁵⁷ Then we see Peter's sermon as relevant to the Pentecost events without violating the intent of OT Scripture. As Tannehill writes: "The wonders and signs on earth are already occurring through Jesus and his apostles, even if the heavenly wonders and signs are still future."⁵⁸

III. THE LENS OF LUKE

1. *Joel 2 and Lukan theology in Acts.* Our consideration of the authenticity of Peter's words led us to consider the role of Luke in faithfully crafting the narrative to remain accurate while communicating theological truth. For Luke recorded Peter's speech on Pentecost not only for the sake of history but also to accentuate theological truths that were important to him.

Tannehill points out that Acts 2 is foundational for the book, much as Luke 3:21–22; 4:18 ff. are for the first half of Luke-Acts. In each there is an endowment of the Spirit in response to prayer, a speech based upon Scripture that refers to the giving of the Spirit and relates to the commenced mission, and narrative of the mission that focuses on fulfillment of Scripture, rejection and ultimate accomplishment.⁵⁹ This causes us to conclude that the Pentecost event as forecast in Joel is foundational for Luke's structure and thought in Acts.⁶⁰

One theological theme that arises from the Joel-Pentecost event is the inauguration of the *eschaton*. The fire associated with the Spirit's outpouring can only come after Christ's redemptive events, and "the gift of the Spirit is the fire Jesus came to cast on the earth to effect the eschatological judgment among men through the apostolic preaching."⁶¹

Acts 2 also constitutes for Luke the formation of the Church. Regardless of one's position on the covenantal-dispensational continuum, we can at least acknowledge the redemptive-historical significance of Pentecost for the people of God. I would side with Hans Hübner in noting the "pneumatological ecclesiology" in Acts, which demonstrates that Luke tied the Spirit to the formation of the Church.⁶²

The most dominant theme arising out of the Joel-Pentecost event is the expansion of God's redemptive program to include all peoples, even Samaritans and Gentiles. From the listing of different lands represented at Pentecost to the words used in the narrative,⁶³ Luke weaves together a masterpiece that

⁵⁷ Acts 2:20. A full discussion of the background for the signs and their meaning is beyond the scope of this paper. For helpful discussion of hermeneutical principles in this regard see Kaiser, *Back* 47, who notes that the signs must be related to realities known to the original audience; for specific discussion of these signs see van der Horst, "Hellenistic" 49, 56; Zehnle, *Discourse* 117; C. A. Evans, "The Prophetic Setting of the Pentecost Sermon," *Luke and Scripture* 214–215.

⁵⁸ Tannehill, *Narrative Unity* 32.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.* 29.

⁶⁰ Zehnle, *Discourse* 17, 95.

⁶¹ Luke 12:49 (cf. Zehnle, *Discourse* 117).

⁶² H. Hübner, "The Holy Spirit in Holy Scripture," *Ecumenical Review* 41 (July 1989) 328–329.

⁶³ Acts 2:9–11; according to Evans, "Prophetic Setting" 215–216, Luke's setting for Peter's sermon contains twenty words from the Greek version of Joel.

prepares us for what is to follow in Acts. Earl Richard writes: “Pentecost for Luke is a paradigmatic episode that, in parallel with Jesus’ reception of the Spirit, signals conferral of power for and the beginning of the mission and witness to the ends of the earth.”⁶⁴ This theme of redemptive expansion through the Spirit will enable us to understand Luke’s conception of Joel 2’s fulfillment.

2. *Joel 2 and its fulfillment in Acts.* Clearly Luke emphasizes the expansion of the Church to include previously excluded peoples. This inclusion is possible as people commit to Christ as Yahweh in line with Joel 2:32. Accrediting the apostolic mission are the miraculous signs recorded throughout Acts, which signal the coming intervention of God in history and the necessity of repentance. Further, as new peoples call upon the name of the Lord they receive the gift of the Spirit whom Christ has poured out.

After Acts 2 we see the early recipients of the Spirit exercising the new-found power to accomplish their mission. Peter in Acts 4:8 and the larger group in 4:31 experience the Spirit’s filling for bold speech. Richard finds this and the filling of Paul in 9:17 to be repetitions of Pentecost.⁶⁵ But it is doubtful that Luke intends 4:8 to be a repeated Pentecost since Peter is involved, and that leads me to conclude that “filling” terminology does not constitute another Pentecost.

Acts 8, on the other hand, seems to mark another stage in the redemptive history of the Spirit. The Samaritans responded to the preaching of Philip, which was accompanied by great miracles and signs.⁶⁶ Upon learning of the Samaritans’ faith, the apostles came to Samaria and were the instrumentality through whom God lavished the Spirit upon this despised group. The miraculous activity apparently escalated upon the Spirit’s coming, for Simon desired the apostles’ ability in order to further his magical ends.⁶⁷ This demonstrates a fresh arrival of the Holy Spirit, another stage in the fulfillment of Joel’s prophecy that the Spirit would come upon “all flesh.”

In Acts 10 we reach yet another stage in the fulfillment of Joel 2. Of course Peter has a reluctance about fellowship with the Gentiles that God must overcome. Once he goes and preaches at Cornelius’ house the results are similar to Acts 2 and 8. Repentance and faith are accompanied by an outward manifestation of the Holy Spirit’s outpouring. In fact the words “poured out” appear in 10:45 and serve as a link to Joel 2 and Acts 2. Peter remarks that “they have received the Holy Spirit just as we have.”⁶⁸ Moreover the repetition of “gift” in Acts 2:38; 8:20; 10:45 furnishes an important connection between the passages and points out the iterative unity of these stages in the fulfillment of Joel 2.⁶⁹ Another link is the fact that Peter is involved in each of these outpourings.

⁶⁴ E. Richard, “Pentecost as a Recurrent Theme in Luke-Acts,” *New Views on Luke and Acts* (ed. Richard; Collegeville: Liturgical, 1990) 148–149.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.* 135.

⁶⁶ Acts 8:13.

⁶⁷ Acts 8:18.

⁶⁸ Acts 10:47 (NIV).

⁶⁹ Zehle, *Discourse* 126–127; Tannehill, *Narrative Unity* 30–31; Richard, “Pentecost” 135.

Peter also becomes involved in Acts 11 when shocked believers in Jerusalem seek an explanation for the events of Acts 10. In 11:15 he states that the Holy Spirit came upon the Gentiles just as he had come upon the early Jewish believers. Two verses later we find the word “gift” again, along with Peter’s question: “Who was I to think that I could oppose God?”⁷⁰ This manifests the uneasy tension for Peter and the Jewish Church as they dealt with God’s blessing on the Gentiles and apparently confirms our opinion that Peter had previously restricted “all flesh” to Jews.

Acts 15 and 19 conclude our tour of Luke’s theology of Joel 2. Again in 15:8 Peter says that God gave the Holy Spirit to the Gentiles just as he did to the Jews at Pentecost. Four verses later Luke mentions that “signs and wonders” (the same phrase as in Acts 2) had occurred among the Gentiles, just as among the Jews.⁷¹ Finally, Acts 19 records the Spirit’s coming upon those who merely had the baptism of John. While terminology from Acts 2 is absent, there still appears to be a parallel. Reference is made to a contrast with John’s baptism, which is seen in Acts 1 and 11. Also the recipients of the Spirit spoke in tongues and prophesied.⁷² This is a result that has accompanied the outpouring of the Spirit to this point.

3. *Summary.* Whether or not Luke intended Acts 19 to represent another stage of Joel 2’s fulfillment, the iterative unity of Acts 2, 8 and 10 is clear. Luke’s view of “all flesh” is wider than Peter’s was. Bruce writes:

Luke sees in these words an adumbration of the worldwide Gentile mission, even if Peter could not have realized their full import when he quoted them on the day of Pentecost. Certainly the outpouring of the Spirit on 120 Jews could not in itself fulfil the prediction of such outpouring “on all flesh”; but it was the beginning of the fulfillment.⁷³

Richard sums up Luke’s theology of Pentecost well:

The pentecost theme acquires an iterative character and function; that is, the Spirit’s manifestations participate, by their repetitive features, in the paradigmatic pentecost experience and yet, through their unitive character, transcend this episode and represent the outpouring of the Spirit in the end-days.⁷⁴

IV. CONCLUSION: OUR LENS

In reconsidering the fulfillment of Joel 2:28–32, especially as it relates to Acts 2:14–21, I have attempted to focus upon the original author’s intent without neglecting the exegetical conclusions of two key NT figures, Luke

⁷⁰ Acts 11:17 (NIV).

⁷¹ Evans, “Prophetic Setting” 219.

⁷² Acts 19:6.

⁷³ Bruce, *Acts* 61.

⁷⁴ Richard, “Pentecost” 135.

and Peter. We must be able to reconcile these three perspectives, for each of these figures operated under the influence of the Spirit of God.⁷⁵

Joel's prediction concerning the outpouring of the Spirit began to be fulfilled on the day of Pentecost. But what should we make of the difference in the intended referents of "all flesh"? Were Peter and Joel wrong to assume this referred to Israel, or did Luke inappropriately read current events into the text? The latter is incorrect, for Luke by the Spirit correctly interpreted the events he experienced. The former may be partially correct. While God apparently invested these words with meaning for the Gentiles because of his redemptive program, it would have been difficult for Peter or Joel to foresee the widening scope of that program. Whatever the evils of *sensus plenior*, some type of similar structure must account for the divergence here between the expectations of Peter and Joel (which are natural in their historical context) and the reality of God's expanding redemptive program.

I have also tentatively suggested a structure that could reconcile Peter and Joel concerning the apocalyptic signs. If Peter used a typological hermeneutic to connect Christ's miraculous ministry to the need for repentance, then there is no conflict. The cosmic disturbances Joel predicted can happen in the future without invalidating the brilliant homiletical usage of Joel 2 by Peter.

A final issue we must consider is whether the accomplished fulfillment of Joel 2 in Acts negates the possibility of a future fulfillment related to ethnic Israel. It seems to me that the previous outpourings of the Spirit have been fresh redemptive-historical workings of God with people groups, specifically Jews (Acts 2), Samaritans (Acts 8) and Gentiles (Acts 10). If Acts 19 is included we have another fulfillment stage concerning one of the previously-blessed people groups. Therefore a reasonable conclusion would be that God could again pour out the Spirit on the Jews in a fresh, new way, even though they were partially involved in the beginning. Such a fulfillment would not be a referent that is discrete from the redemptive-historical complex of events inaugurated at Pentecost. Instead it would involve yet another stage or iteration in the single fulfillment of Joel 2:28–32.

⁷⁵ A recent unpublished paper by B. G. Toews has challenged this assumption ("Joel 2 in Acts 2: Luke or Peter?"). He argues for a separation between the theology of Luke and of Peter, with Peter's understanding of Joel 2 being incorrect. Toews' method of distinguishing between Luke and Peter is remarkably similar to mine in this paper. But while Toews is correct that Peter believed Joel 2's fulfillment to have begun and that the apostolic Church's theological understanding was in process, his thesis presents significant difficulties. How can we reconcile this view with the blessing God poured out upon Peter's sermon, which is heavily dependent on Joel 2? How are we to know that Peter is wrong on Joel 2 but not the other OT texts, when there is no clear contextual clue? How do we know which parts of Peter's speech are directed by the Spirit (as is clear in the context) and which are not? How can Luke consistently portray Peter as a hero when he was so blatantly wrong? Did all of the disciples (Acts 2:14) agree with Peter's error? A better solution is to accommodate our understanding to Peter's. If we do not rigidly equate the kingdom with the millennium, and if we more carefully understand what is meant by the "day of the Lord," then we need not resort to the extreme of insisting that Peter must have been wrong.

The future-fulfillment issue, then, is an open question for me, and it cannot be decided on the basis of Joel 2 alone. Instead it joins the matter of apocalyptic imagery as a subject that is tremendously influenced by theological presuppositions and as a fertile area for continued contemplation and research.

What we can know for certain regarding Joel 2:28–32 is that its fulfillment has had radical implications for the past two thousand years. Tannehill notes:

Much more is meant than the coming of the Spirit to a relatively small group at Pentecost. The subsequent narrative shows an interest in the full realization of this promise, for the response of new groups to the word of God brings similar outpourings of the Spirit in progressive movement toward realization of the promise for all.⁷⁶

⁷⁶ Tannehill, *Narrative Unity* 30–31.