

“Let Us Remove Hence”

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When futurists quiz me about the first-century Parousia, they usually want to see some historical documentation for it. Scripture is never enough for those who use tradition and creeds to circumvent the Word of God (Matt 15:6). When I provide them the standard quotes from Josephus about the angelic armies being seen in the sky above Palestine (*Wars* 6.5.3 in Whiston; 6.296-300 in Thackeray), they often follow up with the question, “But what about the *Resurrection* and the *Rapture*? Where are they documented?”

For over three decades I have been studying Josephus and other first-century historical sources searching for that very information. After repeated treks through Josephus’ *Wars* and *Antiquities*, I kept coming back to the following eyewitness account from the Jewish priests about what they felt and heard in the Temple on Pentecost in the year AD 66, at the very time when the Zealot war with Rome was about to begin:

... at that feast which we call Pentecost, as the priests were going by night into the inner [court of the] temple, as their custom was, to perform their sacred ministrations, they said that, in the first place, they felt a quaking, and heard a great noise, and after that they heard a sound as of a great multitude, saying, “Let us remove hence.” [*Wars* 6.5.3 (6.299-300)]

Note that Josephus gives us the exact *day and hour* **when** this event occurred (on the day of Pentecost at the hour of the evening sacrifices), **where** it occurred (in the Jerusalem Temple), and **who** witnessed it (the officiating priests).

Furthermore, Josephus puts this story in the mouths of his fellow priests who were in the Temple at the very time these events occurred. He seldom gives this kind of strong eyewitness testimony to confirm his account, especially to the point of giving a date and place, and naming his sources, as he does here. The fact that he quotes these witnesses and identifies them, lends much credence to his story. Out of all the possible eyewitnesses who could be deemed reliable in the first century, the priests in the Temple would have been at the top of the list. Those priests were lawyers, judges, scribes, and teachers of the Law. They understood the penalty for false testimony. Some of those priests survived the destruction of Jerusalem, and could have easily discredited Josephus’ account. Yet, as far as we know, this account was never challenged by them, but instead verified “at the mouth of two or more” reliable first-century eyewitnesses (Deut 19:15) and accepted as true by contemporary historians such as Tacitus.

R. C. Sproul, Sr., calls this particular section of Josephus “one of the weirdest passages you ever read in ancient history” (“Last Days Madness” speech, Ligonier Ministries National Conference, Orlando, Florida, 1999). When quoting this passage in *The Last Days according to Jesus*, he describes it as a “most remarkable record” (pp. 123-127). He notes that this story is “corroborated by others” in the first century such as Tacitus (Eusebius, Yosippon, and Hegesippus also record this event). As Sproul suggested, this testimony of Josephus “lends credence” to the idea that there was some kind of coming of Christ associated with the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70 (“Last Days Madness” speech, Ligonier Ministries National Conference, Orlando, Florida, 1999).

Every time a preterist uses something out of Josephus to substantiate first-century fulfillment, critics throw a tantrum. They first demand that we produce the documentation, and then when we do, they work overtime trying to downplay its significance, and ridicule us for using “uninspired” testimony. Yet, when they wish to justify their own unscriptural doctrines of *creedalism*, *sacramentalism*, or *hierarchicalism*, they do not hesitate to quote from the Church Fathers, whom they admit are uninspired! They want freedom to use uninspired tradition when it helps their cause, but deny that freedom to others.

Preterists do not claim that Josephus’ accounts are God-breathed. However, an event does not have to be recorded by an inspired author in order to be true. The story about Julius Caesar being stabbed by two

of his best friends is true, but it is not inspired. Moses, Jesus, and the apostles all affirmed that something could be verified as true in a court of law if there were two or more credible eyewitnesses to back it up. This event described by Josephus has that kind of reliable attestation. It could truly have happened, regardless of whether or not the historians recording it were inspired. All we need for historical credibility is “testimony at the mouth of two or more reliable eyewitnesses,” and we have that here with the numerous priests who witnessed these things in the temple on Pentecost in AD 66.

Furthermore, we all need to remember that *uninspired* testimony, even if it is “at the mouth of two or more eyewitnesses,” can never negate *inspired* scripture, no matter how well-attested it is. Scripture stands supreme, regardless of how much uninspired historical testimony or church tradition is stacked against it. History and tradition can *only support and explain* Scripture, but can *never refute it or discredit it*. And this is the way we are using Josephus’ testimony: to help support and explain inspired scripture. This is a valid use of history and tradition. With that in mind, let’s examine this story to see if we can understand what really happened and how it might relate to the Resurrection and Rapture events.

Pentecost and the Wheat Harvest

Notice that neither the priests nor Josephus offer any explanation of this event. In fact, it seems that none of them understood it. Josephus simply laid out the facts as the priests gave them, and we are left to draw our own conclusions about what took place and how it relates to the “end of the age.”

I believe several details in this story are significant: (1) the **day** of occurrence (Pentecost), (2) the **hour** of occurrence (night), (3) the **place** of occurrence (the Jerusalem Temple), (4) **who** witnessed the event (officiating priests), and (5) **what** they felt, heard, and experienced.

The first two points certainly remind us of Jesus’ predictions about “*the day and the hour*” of His return (Matt 24:36, 50; 25:13; Mark 13:32; Luke 12:46). Furthermore, this occurred on the pilgrim feast of *Pentecost*, which was connected with the grain and fruit harvests. *Passover* was the time of the barley harvest in the Spring, during which the priests brought an “omer” of barley flour into the Temple courtyard and waved it (i.e., lifted it up and presented it) before the Lord (Lev 23:10-11, see Edersheim’s *The Temple*, chapter 13). *Pentecost*, which occurred fifty days after Passover, was the time of the wheat harvest in early summer. It was “the presentation of the two loaves [made of leavened wheat flour] . . . which distinguished this festival” (Edersheim, p. 172). At the time of Pentecost, the wheat harvest had already begun and was nearing completion.

Jesus used the harvest metaphor in His teaching about what would occur at His Parousia at the end of the age. A good example of this is the Parable of the Tares (Matt 13:24-30, 36-43), where He uses the wheat harvest motif in connection with the angelic gathering of the wheat into His barn at the End of the Age. In a previous article (Summer 2011, Vol. 6 Issue 2) we explained how this parable was pointing to the Resurrection of the Dead out of Hades and the change of the living into their immortal bodies, at which time both groups were gathered together in the unseen realm and presented to Christ at His Parousia (1 Cor 15:52; 1 Thess 4:17). John the Baptist also connected the wheat harvest with the End of the Age (Matt 3:12; Luke 3:17), and Paul used wheat imagery in his seed analogy to illustrate how the Resurrection would take place (1 Cor 15:37).

Therefore, it would be no surprise to discover that this event mentioned by Josephus, which occurred at Pentecost, at the time of the *wheat harvest*, might have something to do with the *Resurrection of the Dead out of Hades*.

What Did the Priests Experience?

The connection of Pentecost with the Resurrection becomes even more apparent when we look at the way the priests described their experience of this event:

. . . they said that, in the first place, they felt a quaking, and heard a great noise, and after that they heard a sound as of a great multitude, saying, “Let us remove hence.” [*Wars* 6.5.3 (6.299-300)]

Notice there were *no visuals* here. It all involved hearing and feeling. This means that the multitude that the priests heard were *invisible*. They were in the UNSEEN realm. The priests were only allowed to *hear* what was said, but not allowed to *see* those speaking. This raises some very interesting questions:

- *Who* were these folks in the unseen realm?
- *From where* had this multitude (in the unseen realm) come?
- *To where* (in the unseen realm) were they going?

The fact that these people existed in the unseen realm significantly limits the possibilities of their identity. What group of people in the unseen realm would be leaving one part of that realm for another part of it, and why? [*Hint: The disembodied souls of the dead saints left Hades and entered heaven.*] And what does the Temple have to do with this transfer from one location to another? [*Hint: According to Jewish tradition, it was the one place on earth where heaven and earth met. It was the gateway to heaven in the unseen realm.*]

Furthermore, it is worth remembering that this event occurred on *Pentecost* about 45 days after the angelic armies were seen in the clouds a few days after Passover [*Wars 6.5.3 (6:296)*]. If the angels were there, then Christ was present with them in the unseen realm above. In Matthew 24:31, Jesus said that after His arrival He would send forth His angels to gather together the elect. This transfer of a large multitude of souls from one place to another in the unseen realm sure sounds like the Resurrection of the Dead out of Sheol (Hades) and their entrance into the heavenly realm above. If this was in fact the Resurrection, then it was also the very “moment in the twinkling of an eye” when the living saints were “changed” into their immortal bodies (1 Cor 15:52) and “caught up” together with the resurrected dead to meet Christ in the unseen realm above (1 Thess 4:17).

For More Information:

For more detailed information I have created a couple of PDF files which provide other translations of Josephus’ account of this event by Greek scholars, as well as the parallel accounts found in Tacitus, Yosippon, Hegesippus, and Eusebius. If you would like to have this amazing information, simply email me (preterist1@preterist.org) to request the two PDF files by name (“Let Us Go Quotes” and “Let Us Go Chart”). For more information about the Resurrection, Change, and Rapture events, here are some excellent resources available for order from the IPA website (<http://preterist.org>):

- Ian D. Harding. *Taken to Heaven in A.D. 70* (book)
- J. Stuart Russell. *The Parousia* (book)
- Ed Stevens and Parker Voll. *2011 Garrettsville Seminar DVDs*, dealing with the Resurrection, Change, and Rapture (DVD album)
- Ed Stevens. *Expectations Demand a First Century Rapture* (book)
- Ed Stevens. *First Century Events in Chronological Order* (prepub manuscript)