

THE PAROUSIA

The Term and its Signification

by
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The term employed in the New Testament to denote the second coming of our Lord is, in the original, THE PAROUSIA. "What shall be the sign of thy *Parousia*?" (Matt. 24:3). "So also shall be the *Parousia* of the Son of Man" (Matt. 24:27, 37, 39). It will be our first endeavor to ascertain its exact meaning.

How the word came to be used in this special application is not known. I am not aware that the Jews had ever been accustomed to apply it to the appearance of the expected Messiah. It is found but twice in the Septuagint (2 Macc. 8:12; 15:21), and there only in its ordinary secular meaning. In the New Testament it first occurs in this inquiry of the four disciples on the Mount of Olives. They had now become in a degree familiar with the idea that their Lord was about to leave them for a time and afterwards return, and that he would then set up the kingdom they were looking for and reward therein his faithful friends who had followed him unto death (Matt. 16:27, 28). Their conceptions were indeed very imperfect; but such as they were, they awoke in them the highest expectation, and prompted to unseemly rivalries for the foremost place in its honors. Contrasting, then, that eagerly expected period with the brief duration of his present stay with them, they seem to have fondly named it *The Presence*, as implying that he would thereafter permanently remain with them and admit them into an intimacy of intercourse and of relations surpassing all they had before enjoyed.

It matters little, however, in what way the word came to be used by the disciples in this sense, for it was immediately sanctioned and confirmed by Christ himself. Thrice does he employ it in the same sense, in the discourse that follows. Like the lightning which fills the whole heaven with its splendor, and like the deluge which surprised the old world in the midst of its business and its pleasures, "so likewise," he declares, "shall be the *Parousia* of the Son of man."

The signification of the word is the *Being with*, or the *Presence*. It is derived from the compound verb *παρῆμι*, from *παρά* with, and *εἰμί* to be. Instances of the use of this verb in the New Testament are the following:

"There *were present* at that season some that told him of the Galileans" (Luke 13:1).

"(Certain Jews) who ought *to have been here* before thee" (Acts 24:19).

"I verily . . . have judged already, as though I *were present*" (1 Cor. 5:3).

"I beseech you that I may not be bold when I *am present*," etc. (2 Cor. 10:2).

"I told you before, and foretell you, as if I *were present* the second time" (2 Cor. 13:2).

"I desire *to be present* with you now, and to change my voice" (Gal. 4:20).

The word *parousia* is twice translated presence in our version:

"His bodily *presence* is weak" (2 Cor. 10:10).

"As ye have always obeyed, not as in my *presence* only, but now much more in my absence" (Phil. 2:12).

If the translators had been uniform in their renderings, they would [have] used the same word in the following instances:

"I am glad of the coming (the *presence*) of Stephanas and Fortunatus and Achaicus" (1 Cor. 16:17).

"God . . . comforted us by the coming (*presence*) of Titus; and not by his coming (*presence*) only" (2 Cor. 7:6-7).

"That your rejoicing may be more abundant in Jesus Christ for me by my coming to you again (by my *presence* again with you)" (Phil. 1:26).

The only remaining instances of its use in the New Testament are the following, in all which it refers to what is called Christ's second coming:

"Christ the firstfruits; afterward they that are Christ's at his coming (in his *Presence*)" (1 Cor. 15:23).

"What is our hope, or joy, or crown of rejoicing? Are not even ye in the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ at his coming (before our Lord Jesus Christ in his *Presence*)" (1 Thess. 2:19).

"At the coming (in the *Presence*) of our Lord Jesus Christ with all his saints" (1 Thess. 3:13).

"We which are alive and remain unto the coming (the *Presence*) of the Lord" (1 Thess. 4:15).

"Preserved blameless unto the coming (the *Presence*) of our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Thess. 5:23).

"Now we beseech you, brethren, by the coming (the *Presence*) of our Lord Jesus Christ" (2 Thess. 2:1).

"And shall destroy with the brightness of his coming (his *Presence*)" (2 Thess. 2:8).

"Be patient therefore, brethren, unto the coming (the *Presence*) of the Lord. . . . The coming (*Presence*) of the Lord draweth nigh" (Jas. 5:7,8).

"We made known unto you the power and coming (*Presence*) of our Lord Jesus Christ" (2 Pet. 1:16).

"Where is the promise of his coming (*Presence*)?" (2 Pet. 3:4).

"Looking for and hasting unto the coming (*Presence*) of the day of God" (2 Pet. 3:12).

"We may have confidence, and not be ashamed before him at his coming (in his *Presence*)" (1 John 2:28).

It is important to observe that in all the instances thus cited the word is accompanied in the original by the article *the*, which in Greek is distinctive and emphatic,--implying that it is, in some sense, a special and unique presence, to be distinguished from all others. Accordingly, we find that the term is never applied to his first advent, when he dwelt among men in the flesh. That was indeed a coming to men, a sojourn with them, but it is never called *The Parousia*. Nor is the word "second" ever joined to it, as if implying that there was a first. We often speak of the "second advent," the "second coming," etc., but the Scriptures never speak of a "second Parousia." Whatever was to be its nature, it was something peculiar, having never occurred before and being never to occur again. It was to be a presence differing from and superior to all other manifestations of himself to men, so that its designation should properly stand by itself without any qualifying epithet other than the article,--THE PRESENCE.

From this view of the word it is evident, I think, that neither the English word "coming" nor the Latin "advent" is the best representative of the original. They do not conform to its etymology; they do not correspond to the idea of the verb from which it is derived; nor could they appropriately be substituted for the more exact word, "presence," in the cases where the translators used the latter.

Nor is the radical idea of them the same. "Coming" and "advent" give most prominently the conception of an *approach* to us, motion *toward* us; "parousia" that of *being with* us, without reference to how it began. The force of the former ends with the arrival; that of the latter begins with it. Those are words of motion; this of rest. The space of time covered by the action of the former is limited, it may be momentary; that of the latter unlimited, continuance that may be eternal. So in respect to place. A coming implies an arrival at some locality; a presence may be universal, "wherever two or three are met." The promise of the Lord's coming to men, therefore, is not the same thing as a promise of his presence with them. The one implies nothing more, necessarily, than a single manifestation, a visit however short; the other implies a stay with them, relations of permanence--not the performance of a single act but rather a dispensation including within it many acts and covering a long period of duration, possibly eternal.

It may be thought that I make more of this distinction than is needful, but I am persuaded otherwise. Had our translators done with this technical word "parousia" as they did with "baptisma,"--transferring it unchanged, or if translated using its exact etymological equivalent *presence*--and had it been well understood as it then would have been (that there is no such thing as a "second Presence"), I believe that the entire doctrine would have been different from what it now is. The phrases "second advent" and "second coming" would never have been heard of. The church would have been taught to speak of THE PRESENCE OF THE LORD as that from which its hopes were to be realized, whether in the near future or at the remotest period--that under which the world was to be made new, a resurrection both spiritual and corporeal should be attained, and justice and everlasting awards administered. There would have been no difficulty in conceiving that that Presence began to be near at the time when in the primitive age it was expected, in that existing generation, and would continue long enough for everything to happen under it which prophecy connects with it.

And even now, if we could get rid of the limiting and localizing ideas implied in a coming and substitute for them the universal and eternal possibilities of a *presence*, I believe that nine-tenths of the difficulties attending the subject would disappear, and we should easily return to those simple views which made the *Parousia* to the apostles and primitive churches a perpetual spring of activity and hope and holy joy.

But we are anticipating. There are other terms which are not unfrequently applied in the New Testament to the same event, but not in the same distinctive way as the one we have considered. Such are ἀποκάλυψις, translated "revelation" in 1 Pet. 1:13, "appearing" in 1 Pet. 1:7, [and] "coming" in 1 Cor. 1:7; ἐπιψάνεια, rendered "appearing" in 1 Tim. 6:14, 2 Tim. 1:10, 4:1,8, Titus 2:13, and "brightness" in 2 Thess. 2:8; [and] ἔλευσις, translated "coming" in Acts 7:52. It is not necessary to dwell upon either of these, for they are used only incidentally and in an ordinary way which throws no special light upon the nature of the event itself. The great diversity of signification given them by the translators shows that they saw nothing technical or distinctive in them.

Chapter I of *The Parousia: A Critical Study of the Scripture Doctrines of Christ's Second Coming; His Reign as King; the Resurrection of the Dead; and the General Judgment* (Portland: Hoyt, Fogg, & Donham, 1879). (Punctuation has been modernized and long paragraphs divided.)