A REVIEW OF SURPRISED BY THE VOICE OF GOD A BOOK BY JACK DEERE

A Paper

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A REVIEW OF SURPRISED BY THE VOICE OF GOD

Jack Deere's book "Surprised by the Voice of God" sets out to help Christians today hear and understand God's voice in an effort to revolutionize their Christian walk. Deere has a deep desire to help believers grow and understand more about the early church, and more importantly, about the importance of God's word and how God communicates to us. While he provides some thoughtful insight, there are many inconsistencies and issues with his arguments. The purpose of this paper is to briefly and graciously point out some inconsistencies and flaws in Deere's exegesis of scripture, and his view of revelation, authority, and sufficiency.

It will first be helpful to define what revelation is from an evangelical perspective. Revelation succinctly put is "God making Himself known";¹ it is God revealing Himself to mankind, or making His will known through general and special revelation. General revelation encompasses making Himself known through His creation, through organization, mankind and being.² Special revelation encompasses God making Himself known through dreams, visions, Theophanies, angels, prophets, Christ, and scripture. Deere would undoubtedly hold to this definition. However, he states that "I did not believe in any real revelation from God apart from the Bible."³ This appears inconsistent because he does recognize the ways in which God has revealed Himself throughout the ages; "the people of the Bible heard God speak in a variety of ways. He spoke through an audible voice, through dreams, visions as well as through scripture."⁴

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¹ J.B. Bond, *II Timothy* 2:2 *Discipleship Training* (Stillwater, Oklahoma: Countryside Bible Church., 1998), 4.

² Dr. Charles Ryrie, *Basic Theology: A Popular Systematic Guide to Understanding Biblical Truth* (Chicago, Illinois: Moody Press, 1999), 31-36.

 ³ Jack Deere, *Surprised by the Voice of God.* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1996), 18.
⁴ Ibid., 19.

Inconsistency aside, Deere effectively makes a delineation between the Bible as revelation, and visions and dreams etc. as revelation, with which I would agree. However, he goes on to say that those forms of revelation have two different levels of authority.

Authority is simply the rightful⁵ and legitimate⁶ exercise of power⁷. Revelation from scripture, he states, has its own authority, and revelation from God's voice is another authority. He states that each have different levels of authority, or differing degrees of authority. In this way, Deere can affirm the authority of Scripture, and maintain the authority of the words spoken by those who claim to hear the voice of God. The problem is if they're both from God, then they both have divine authority. There has never been a time when God's spoken word has taken a backseat to his written word and vice-versa. The precedent has been set that it's all equivalent in its authority; but because Deere allows for varying degrees of authority, he can allow for those who have the gift of prophecy to make errors. But just what is a prophet according to Deere?

Deere broadly defines a modern day prophet as one who is "prophetically gifted."⁸ That is to say, an individual who hears from God may "predict the future, tell you secrets of your heart, receive accurate impression and dreams, see accurate visions, and some are even used to

⁵ Rightful in the sense that scripture, being the Word of God (2 Timothy 3:16), has a justifiable basis for being authoritative. Just as Christ was given authority (Matt. 28:18), scripture has authority to direct and guide mankind in the ways of God's righteousness.

⁶ Legitimate in the sense that scripture is acknowledged as having God as its source. This is "reinforced by Jesus of Nazareth, the prophetically promised Messiah who identified as God's Spirit breathed Word not only the prophetic writings but also the apostolic witness that was to constitute the NT." (Carl F.H. Henry, *The Authority and Inspiration of The Bible*, 5)

⁷ Scripture has the power to change lives. "Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of Christ." – Romans 10:17 (NASB) (see also Gal. 3:2, 5). Scripture has the ability to produce a desired result; "So is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it." - Isaiah 55:11.

do miracles."⁹ But Deere tries to steer away from the word prophet, "Pushing aside the debate over terminology and theory, consider this fact: We do have *prophetically gifted* people in the church."¹⁰ Po-tay-to, po-tah-to as one might say. Unfortunately, they are one in the same and perform the same function, so changing the terminology doesn't help.

The reason for his insistence on steering clear of the term prophet, or making the term irrelevant, is because the Bible is quite strong in how it defines one. A prophet is only a prophet from God if he or she is one hundred percent accurate. Deuteronomy 18:19-22 states:

"It shall come about that whoever will not listen to My words which he shall speak in My name, I Myself will require it of him.'But the prophet who speaks a word presumptuously in My name which I have not commanded him to speak, or which he speaks in the name of other gods, that prophet **shall die**.' "You may say in your heart, 'How will we know the word which the LORD has not spoken?' "When a prophet speaks in the name of the LORD, if the thing does not come about or come true, that is the thing which the LORD has not spoken The prophet has spoken it presumptuously; you shall not be afraid of him."

It can clearly be seen that if someone prophecies a word from the Lord, he or she is speaking on behalf of God. If that person's revelation from God is not accurate, it wasn't a revelation from God and thus a false prophet will become a dead prophet.¹¹ Some may say this is an Old Testament law that is no longer applicable. Whether or not that is true is beside the point, the fact

¹⁰ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹¹ This is also reinforced by Deuteronomy 13.

remains that if a prophet receives a revelation from God, and God is a God who cannot lie,¹² then the prophet, or one who is prophetically gifted, cannot be wrong.

But Deere says otherwise, stating that a prophet's revelation doesn't need to be one hundred percent accurate. "Some people think one missed or failed prediction makes a person a false prophet. The Bible, though, doesn't call someone a false prophet for simply missing a prediction."¹³ Yet Deere relents briefly to the term prophet when he states "I'll go along with the idea that we can't call someone a prophet who is not 100 percent accurate. Then what do we call them?"¹⁴ I don't know, but don't call them prophetically gifted, because they aren't gifted in prophecy according to scripture.

Deere however, continues his use of the term prophet throughout the text and tries to shift the focus from terminology to their work; "as long as we are wise enough to see the value of their ministries and benefit from them." The problem is discerning how one might benefit from a prophet who is not one hundred percent accurate all the time. Maybe it's from God, maybe not. He continues, "False prophets are those who *contradict* the teaching and predictions of true prophets and attempt to lead people away from God and his Word."¹⁵ But the fact remains, if a prophetically gifted person is incorrect, they are by default leading people away from God, and particularly away from what God has already clearly written down. Deere defends his argument by the use of Matthew 7:15; "Jesus tells us in Matthew 7:15ff, that the way to discern between a false and true prophet is to examine the fruit of the prophet's ministry. Bad fruit

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¹² God does not make mistakes nor can he lie. "in the hope of eternal life, which God, who cannot lie, promised long ages ago," - Titus 1:2

¹³ Ibid., 68.

¹⁴ Ibid., 69.

¹⁵ Ibid., 68.

comes from a false prophet. Good fruit comes from a true one."¹⁶ Deere masterfully shifts any attack from a prophet's speech and their accuracy, to a prophet's produce.

However, his defense for a prophet breaks down once one understands that fruit in Matthew 7 is a prophet's speech, the words that proceed from their mouth. Fruit here is not works as many understand this passage. The passage in question is Matthew 7:15-20:

> ""Beware of the false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves. "You will know them by their fruits. Grapes are not gathered from thorn bushes nor figs from thistles, are they? "So every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit."A good tree cannot produce bad fruit, nor can a bad tree produce good fruit. "Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire." So then, you will know them by their fruits." - NASB

What is fruit? Is it works as Deere says, or is it a prophet's teaching? The key to understanding what the fruit is in this passage, is quickly revealed in the first phrase "false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing." In other words, a false prophet can act and behave just like a believer should, they look just like sheep. They can do works just like a believer should, outwardly there is no difference; their ministry can produce good works. However, the fruit Jesus is discussing is clearly not works; it is the words the prophet speaks which ultimately come from the heart. ""But the things that proceed out of the mouth come from the heart, and those defile the man."¹⁷ "Indeed, this is the very point of Jesus' warning to look beyond the outward appearance to what is in the hearts of these false prophets."¹⁸ This is also solidified in a parallel passage in Matthew 12 when Jesus is dealing with the Pharisees again:

¹⁶ Ibid., 69.

¹⁷ Matthew 15:18

"Either make the tree good and its fruit good, or make the tree bad and its fruit bad; for the tree is known by its fruit."You brood of vipers, how can you, being evil, **speak** what is good? For the **mouth speaks** out of that which fills the heart. "The good man brings out of his good treasure what is good; and the evil man brings out of his evil treasure what is evil."But I tell you that every **careless word** that people **speak**, they shall give an accounting for it in the day of judgment. "For by your **words** you will be justified, and by your **words** you will be condemned." – Matt. 12:33-37 [emphasis mine]

The point being, "'fruit' unambiguously refers to words, it seems apparent that the fruit that identifies the individuals in Matthew 7 as false prophets is the testimony of their mouths, not their behavior."¹⁹ Jesus in essence is saying that "you shouldn't look at a person's works to determine whether or not they are a prophet." Deere teaches just the opposite.²⁰ Consequently Deere's entire argument for a prophet's good works being the characteristic quality of a true prophet breaks down. Thus, it all comes back to whether or not what the prophet says is accurate one hundred percent of the time. But beyond this, even if one were to grant him that fruit were works; who determines what are good fruit and bad? How much, how often, and who qualifies as the fruit inspector?²¹ Deere attempts to deal with this and goes so far as to put the onus on others,

¹⁸ Dr. J.B. Hixon, *Getting the Gospel Wrong, The Evangelical Crisis No One Is Talking About.* (Xulon Press, 2008), 318.

¹⁹ Ibid. 318.

²⁰ What's interesting here is that this passage is commonly used to determine if one is a genuine believer. It's been said that if you place your faith in Christ, you will show works (by their definition, this is fruit), it is the litmus test for judging the genuineness of one's salvation. "Since justification must result in good works, we have some ability to discern the 'root' of faith by its 'fruit'." (R.C. Sproul, *Before the Face of God Book Three: A Daily Guide for Living from the Book of Romans* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1992, 147). This discussion of soteriology is beyond the scope of this paper however, I will say that I find it inconsistent for one to say that this passage refers to whether or not one is a believer when the focus is whether or not one is a prophet.

as if it's a majority vote. Ultimately though, the focus becomes one's feelings rather than faith; a subjective feeling versus an objective faith. This is not unlike the inner experience model described in Dulles' book.²²

For the sake of argument, were I to concede and grant Deere his point that the litmus test for a true prophet is good works, it can be shown that even that fails under many Biblical examples. For example, when Nathan provided the revelation from God regarding punishment for King David's infidelity and murder, the prophecy for all intents and purposes, on the surface, would not produce something one would typically consider good; the death of his son. "Because by this deed you have given occasion to the enemies of the LORD to blaspheme, the child also that is born to you shall surely die."²³ Point being, a prophetically gifted person doesn't always have an idea as to whether or not his or her ministry will produce something pleasant or desirable.²⁴

Deere also goes outside of revelation and apparently has a set of rules for prophetically gifted people. Deere self refutes regarding revelation and actually contradicts scripture; "the lady on our ministry team was violating one of our basic rules of etiquette, no private revelation is ever to be forced on another person."²⁵ Deere never expounds on these rules nor does he provide any scriptural basis for them. It certainly begs the question of how she was

²⁵ Deere, 112.

²¹ Deere moves on to show "modern day" or post reformation prophetically gifted people (a.k.a. prophets) such as George Wishart, John Knox, John Welsh, Robert Bruce and Alexander Peden. All of whose stories are really no different than the unbeliever Nostradamus. Is he prophetically gifted as well? ²² See Avery Dulles' book *Models of Revelation*.

²³ 2 Samuel 12:14

²⁴ Intentional or not, Deere never makes a distinction between a prophetic result that is "good" versus a result that is "beneficial".

supposed to know that this revelation was from God and that it was a private revelation. Deere's answer to this is not Biblical in nature but subjective; in essence he says that you just know.

In addition, why are we not to force a revelation upon someone? If it's from God it comes with authority, and unless God instructs a prophet otherwise, he or she is supposed to provide the information to whom God has directed the prophecy to. There were no sets of rules for prophets in sharing, other than what God instructed them to do.

Even if one were a prophet in this dispensation, one has to answer the question of sufficiency. Deere sets up a straw-man against many people, and assumes that his former viewpoint is one that they hold to. "For him, the sufficiency of Scripture means that the Bible is the only way God speaks to us today."²⁶ This may be what he held to, but it in no way describes what I and many others view as sufficiency. Sufficiency of scripture means that the sixty-six books of the Bible are all that one requires in order to recognize how to be saved from the penalty of sin and wholly equips us to be delivered from the power of sin. 2 Timothy 3:17 states that "so that the man of God may be complete and equipped for every good work."

Scripture, in other words, provides all the necessary information that we require for daily living; be it outwardly and inwardly. This does not mean that scripture contains all truth.²⁷ "This also doesn't mean that new revelation from God, even propositional today or in the future contradicts sufficiency. One can hold to the sufficiency of scripture and there still be propositional revelation from God today or in the future. "²⁸ Whether or not one experiences

²⁶ Dr. Glenn Kreider, *Sufficiency of Scripture, part 4*. Unpublished class notes for ST 101. (Dallas Theological Seminary, Fall 2008).

²⁷ One wouldn't go to the Bible to learn how to fix a car, the car manual would contain this truth. Although the Bible can provide you with the attitude with which to fix it, and instruct on using the proper language.

²⁸ Dr. Glenn Kreider, *Sufficiency of Scripture, part 4*. Unpublished class notes for ST 101. (Dallas Theological Seminary, Fall 2008).

prophetic revelation from God today I do not know. I do know He will work in this manner in the future. Deere states people unlike him say that "prophecy and prophets, along with supernatural revelation, died out with the last of the NT apostles. They believe the only **reliable** form of communication from God is the Bible."²⁹ [emphasis mine].

There are two problems with that statement. First, anyone who holds to a futurist view of Revelation would disagree with that because God uses two prophets to speak to the nations which are undergoing judgment during the tribulation. In Revelation chapter 11 John records "And I will grant authority to my two witnesses, and they will prophesy for twelve hundred and sixty days."³⁰ If Deere were to state that those who say that there will no longer be any New Testament apostles, yet hold to a futurist view of Revelation were inconsistent, I would not argue that point. Second, there is the question of reliability. Deere in essence states that we are human and make mistakes so we're not one hundred percent right all of the time. With all due respect then, that view is *not* reliable. If a prophet makes a mistake, then reliability comes into question. Contrast that with the scriptures which are inspired by God, inerrant and authoritative, hence reliable.³¹ Based on the occurrence of the two witnesses, I do not believe in the cessation of prophecy, and believe God can do anything He desires. So, the question isn't whether or not it can occur, but whether or not it is a common activity and whether or not the prophetic activities of the early church described in Acts are to be modeled today.

Questions need to be raised; did the early church solely rely on the revelation from God (though visions, dreams etc) to determine their activities? And if so, why, and was this

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²⁹ Deere, 67.

³⁰ Revelation 11:3

³¹ I do not limit reliability to scripture alone; however scripture is 100% reliable.

"normal"? Deere states that "The ultimate source of revelation in the early church is God the Father."32 and "when God chooses to reveal something to one of his servants in the book of Acts, the agents of revelation are the Holy Spirit, Jesus, or angels."³³ Two comments here, one is that the ultimate source of revelation throughout time has *always* been God the Father. The other is that within the early church people were still relying much upon the Old Testament scriptures for guiding them towards salvation and for daily living. So the "agents of revelation" aren't limited to the Holy Spirit, Jesus, or angels as Deere tries to argue. Case in point; In Acts chapter 8 Philip encounters an Ethiopian eunich who was reading the Old Testament "and he [the eunich] was returning and sitting in his chariot, and was reading the prophet Isaiah."³⁴ Philip was able to use the Old Testament to witness for Christ, "Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning from this Scripture he preached Jesus to him." Point being, the Old Testament appears to have been sufficient to point the eunich to Christ.³⁵ There wasn't any prophetic revelation required. In Acts chapter 17 we have the Bereans who searched the scriptures daily, they were not unfamiliar with them as they were verifying the very words Paul was speaking, again pointing them to the Messiah.

Deere continues and states that, "Right at the beginning of church history we are being taught that the church will be built by supernatural revelation, not by cleverly devised human programs."³⁶ Certainly that's how it started out, but once God's word was recorded and canonized, there was no longer a need for Him to operate in this manner in this dispensation.

³² Deere, 57.

³³ Ibid., 58.

³⁴ Acts 8:28

 $^{^{35}}$ "Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of Christ." – Romans 10:17

³⁶ Ibid., 51.

Again, I'm not saying He can't; I'm asking the question of why He would need to when Scripture proclaims that it is sufficient to wholly equip a believer? Deere continues his argument that revelation from God was necessary and that the Old Testament was, in effect, insufficient as a model for the church, thus prophetic revelation from God was necessary. Deere states, "not even the apostles were capable of designing an adequate blueprint for the church."³⁷ I couldn't agree more, but they didn't understand there was going to be a church, so how could they possibly create a blueprint; this was a mystery in the Old Testament. It would seem strange to me for God *not* to work in this manner early on in this dispensation. Deere continues "He promised his disciples that the Holy Spirit would teach them all things, remind them of his words, testify about him, guide them into all truth and show them things to come."³⁸ I agree that the Holy Spirit is a helper and is promised to all who believe. But I believe it's a stretch to go from saying that "the Holy Spirit reminded me of a passage perfect for this situation" to "the Holy Spirit showed me a vision that you have the word porno written on your forehead." Scripture seems to be sufficient for discerning the various situations Deere encounters, from both the sinner's perspective and from the "prophet's" perspective.

So why did God work in this way in the early church if it was not meant to be the *normative* experience? I believe the early miracles, signs, wonders, and prophecies in the early church were for the early church because they did not have the New Testament canonized, and because we were moving into a new way in which God deals with man; a new dispensation.³⁹ We moved from the age of law to the age of grace. "For sin shall not be master over you, for you

³⁷ Ibid., 51.

³⁸ Ibid., 61.

³⁹ A dispensation is a period of time in which God deals with man in a specific way. (J.B. Bond, *II Timothy* 2:2 *Discipleship Training: Lesson* 5 (Stillwater, Oklahoma: Countryside Bible Church., 1998), 1).

are not under law but under grace.⁴⁰, "For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes." Deere says that "Some try to dismiss the testimony of Acts⁴¹ and asserts that those who try to do so are holding to a " form of Christianity [that] is not a transition forward, but rather backward, to the religion of the Pharisees who preferred the Book over the living, speaking Word of God (John 5:36-47).⁴² This is simply not the case. The Pharisees didn't prefer the book as much as they preferred their traditions and commentators who came before them. In addition, is the experience of the early church a normative experience? In other words, is prophetic revelation from God in the form of the visions, dreams, etc the common experience in Biblical times and therefore should it be the common experience today?

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Deere says that prophetic revelation is 'normal', "I believe Acts does represent normal Christianity."⁴³ This again begs the question, normal in what way? But the question isn't whether or not the early church had a "normal" experience, it's whether or not this is a common occurrence. It's a question of normativity; normativity being something that is common-place or a typical occurrence. This is very close to the term normal, which has the connotation of fitting in or being commonplace. However, the opposite of normal is abnormal which has a negative connotation and is very different from the opposite of normativity, which is non-normative or uncommon. Deere confuses this issue and doesn't clearly distinguish between normalcy and normativity.

⁴³ Ibid., 63.

⁴⁰ Romans 6:14

⁴¹ Deere, 61.

⁴² Ibid.

Deere states that "the experience of some Christians leads them to conclude the Christianity of Acts is **not the normal** [a.k.a. abnormal] Christian experience."⁴⁴ [emphasis mine]. What Deere has effectively done is to take a limited number of non-normative miraculous events throughout Acts and argue that God wants to work in this way all the time. The miraculous experiences of the first century church was normal for them and apparently somewhat normative.

It is a bit arrogant of Deere to set forth the proposition that if one doesn't experience God in this way one must be having an abnormal experience. "All of these things [the various forms of prophetic revelation] were important in the New Testament church. Without them, no church-however good the music or gifted the speaker-can really claim to be a New Testament church."⁴⁵ The first question I would raise is this; is everyone prophetically gifted? Do all believers have the gift of prophecy? It seems that according to scripture some would and others wouldn't, but does it mean that those who do not have this gift are abnormal? Deere seems to think so when he focuses on Acts 2:17-21. "In other words, the coming of the Holy Spirit inaugurated an age of revelation. Instead of having only a few prophets in each generation, now "your sons and daughters will prophecy." Visions and dreams were now normal for the people of God. There was no longer age, economic, or gender restrictions on the Holy Spirit's revelatory ministry."⁴⁶

I believe this is a misinterpretation of the passage in Joel, which leads to a misapplication in this case. When was there ever a restriction on age, economic, or gender in

⁴⁴ Ibid., 61.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 167.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 53.

God's revelatory ministry? It was God's choice who would and wouldn't speak on His behalf. God used men and women alike.⁴⁷ The prophecy Joel speaks of in Joel 2:18-32 is that God would not just pour out his spirit on specific individuals, but all believers. In addition, Joel is prophesying specifically about the Jews and their nation during the tribulation, or the great day of the Lord, not the events at the day of Pentecost. ""I will display wonders in the sky and on the earth, Blood, fire and columns of smoke. The sun will be turned into darkness And the moon into blood before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes."⁴⁸ Many claim that what Joel was talking about took place during the time of Pentecost and cite Peter's sermon in Acts 2:17-21. I agree with Dr. Arnold Fruchtenbaum when he states:

> "Virtually nothing that happened in Acts 2 is predicted in Joel 2. What actually did happen in Acts two (the speaking in tongues) was not mentioned by Joel. What Joel did mention (dreams, visions, the sun darkened, the moon turned into blood) did not happen in Acts two. Joel was speaking of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the whole of the nation of Israel in the last days, while Acts two speaks of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the Twelve Apostles or, at most, on the 120 in the Upper Room. This is a far cry from Joel's all flesh. However, there was one point of similarity, an outpouring of the Holy Spirit, resulting in unusual manifestations. Acts two does not change or reinterpret Joel two, nor does it deny that Joel two will have a literal fulfillment when the Holy Spirit will be poured out on the whole nation of Israel. It is simply applying it to a New Testament event because of one point of similarity."⁴⁹

⁴⁷ For example, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, etc.. And the lesser known, Miriam (Exodus 15:20), Deborah (Judges 4:4), and Huldah (2 Kings 22:14, 2 Chronicles 34:22).

⁴⁸ Joel 2:30-31

In light of this, Deere's argument falls short again for prophecy being a normative experience for the church.

Conclusion

The point of this paper was to bring into question the arguments used by Deere to support the idea that prophetic gifts should be a normative experience by the church today, and to bring into question his view of revelation, authority, and sufficiency. Deere's arguments and anecdotal evidences fall short of defending his positions on revelatory prophecy. I will give him credit though, Deere does recognize and address a fundamental problem in the church; "Yet the main reason the Bible is ineffective in the lives of so many Christians is that they simply don't read it."⁵⁰ His position though, by default, does not help believers dig deeper into God's word, rather he pushes them to dig further into their experiences.

The fact of the matter is that scripture is inspired by God, thus authoritative, inerrant, and sufficient for bringing people to salvation, and to help us lead lives of discipleship in order to make us complete and equipped for every good work. God's prophecy should never be touted as some sort of cosmic eight-ball that can provide a person with information about their future. In fact, God says not to worry about those things. ""So do not worry about tomorrow; for tomorrow will care for itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own."⁵¹ God's Word is sufficient and does not return void. "So will My word be which goes forth from My mouth; It will not return to Me empty, without accomplishing what I desire, and without succeeding in the matter for which I sent it." – Isaiah 55:11

⁴⁹ Dr. Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum, *Israelology: The Missing Link in Systematic Theology*. (San Antonio, Texas: Ariel Ministries, 1994), 844-45. I also recommend Dr. Constable's notes on Acts for further clarification, available at soniclight.com.

⁵⁰ Deere, 112.

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