

Acts 15:14-17 and The Rebuilding of David's Tabernacle

A Redemptive Historical Understanding

1

Understanding the Old Testament

- The Christian understanding of the Old Testament is determined by the christocentric focus by which the New Testament writers interpreted the Hebrew Scriptures. Therefore it is essential for a Christian to discover the principles and procedures according to which Christ and His apostles understood and expounded the writings of Moses, the Psalms, and the Hebrew prophets. Otherwise he is in grave danger of reading the Old Testament prophecies in an unchristian way, and hence of misinterpreting and distorting the biblical prophecies simply by not interpreting the Old Testament by the New Testament key.

2

Understanding the Old Testament

- The Old Testament is no longer the last word on end-time prophecies since the Messiah of prophecy Himself has come as the last Word. The New Testament has been written as the ultimate norm for the fulfillment and interpretation of Israel's prophecies. A Christian would deny his Christian faith and Lord if he reads the Old Testament as a closed entity, as the full and final message of God for Jews irrespective of the cross and resurrection of Jesus, the Messiah, and apart from the New Testament explanation of the Hebrew writings" (Hans K. LaRondelle, *The Israel of God in Prophecy: Principles of Prophetic Interpretation* [Barnes Springs: Andrews University Press, 1963], 8).

3

Acts 15:14-18

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4

Outline

1. The prophecy of Amos (mid 8th century B.C.) – OT context
2. Acts 15 and the Jerusalem council
3. The Dispensational Interpretation of Acts 15:13-21
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5

A. The Prophecy of Amos (mid 8th Century B.C.) – OT Context

Context

- Israel had become both inwardly prosperous and secure from outward threat (2 Kings 14:25)
- Wealth brought injustice and greed
- Religion become formalistic
- The Rich dominated
- God commissioned Amos to take a message of judgment
- Israel refused to repent
- In 722 B.C. the capital of the northern kingdom, Samaria, fell to the Assyrians

6

Amos 9:8-10

- ⁸Behold, the eyes of the Lord God are upon the sinful kingdom, and I will destroy it from the surface of the ground, except that I will not utterly destroy the house of Jacob," declares the Lord. ⁹"For behold, I will command, and shake the house of Israel among all the nations as one shakes with a sieve, but no pebble shall fall to the earth. ¹⁰All the sinners of my people shall die by the sword, who say, 'Disaster shall not overtake or meet us.'

7

Is the Judgment of Israel unavoidable and universal?

- Although the judgment of Israel is unavoidable (8a), it is not universal (8b). The house of Israel will be punished but not annihilated. It will not be totally destroyed (8b) but shaken, as if in a sieve (9).
- This ray of hope shines in v. 11:
 - ¹¹"In that day I will raise up the booth of David that is fallen and repair its breaches, and raise up its ruins and rebuild it as in the days of old,

8

How has the condition of David's "house" changed from 2 Samuel 7:5-17 to Amos 9:11?

- David's once great "house", promised to him and his seed in perpetuity in the covenant of 2 Samuel 7, is now but a "booth", a mere "hut".

9

Carl Keil

- "As the stately palace supplies a figurative representation of the greatness and might of the kingdom, so does the fallen hut, which is full of rents and near to destruction, symbolize the utter ruin of the kingdom. If the family of David no longer dwells in a palace, but in a miserable fallen hut, its regal sway must have come to an end" (10:329-30).

Gerhard Hasel

- "a proclamation which expresses that the booth of David has fallen with the disintegration of Israel into two kingdoms at the time of the death of Solomon and that since that time it is 'falling' through the continual loss of much of its former power and splendor as is dictated by the whole chain of events – political, social, and religious – which followed the divisions of the united monarchy to the time of Amos" (*The Remnant*, 211).

However, this "hut/booth" will one day be rebuilt and restored, described in three phrases:

- First, God will "repair its breaches"
- Second, God will also "raise up its (lit. his) ruins"
- Third, God will "rebuild it as in the days of old."

Amos 9:12



- *...that they may possess the remnant of Edom and all the nations who are called by my name," declares the Lord who does this.*

Why is only "Edom" Mentioned and not also the Philistines, Moabites, and Ammonites?

- Evidently Edom (the descendants of Esau) is singled out as representative of a wider circle of people. Because of her marked hostility toward Israel, the role of Edom "was similar to that of the Amalekites, the earliest nation to represent the kingdom of men (Exod. 17:8ff.; Deut. 25:17-19), which stood violently against the kingdom of God. Moreover, Edom's representative role is further stressed by the exegetical note in v. 12 – "and even all the nations/Gentiles who are called by My name."

What does Amos mean in saying that the people of the restored Davidic kingdom will "POSSESS" the remnant of Edom?

- Some see military subjugation in this word, yet in Acts 15 James changes "possess" to "seek".

LaRondelle writes:

- "while Amos prophesied the physical conquest of the Davidic rulership over the remnant of Edom, James translates this political-military kingship into Christ's higher, spiritual conquest and reign over the hearts of gentile believers.
- Amos' phrase 'so that they may possess the remnant of Edom' becomes in Acts 15:17, 'that the remnant of men may seek the Lord'" (*Israel of God*, 150).

Walter Kaiser refuses to see in the word "possess" any notion of military conquest:

- "the reference is not to be understood in a negative or retaliatory sense – i.e., as a punishment to Edom for one or more of its rivalries with Israel. On the contrary, 'Edom' along with the other nations would be brought under that reign of the Davidic King who is to come – the Messiah. This 'remnant' must also share in the covenant promise to David" ("The Davidic Promise and the Inclusion of the Gentiles (Amos 9:9-15 and Acts 15:13-18): A Test Passage for Theological Systems," *JETS* 20 (June 1977):103).

Conclusions in the fulfillment of the prophecy in Acts 15

- The "remnant of Edom" consists of those who are saved in the judgments that befall her.
- "All the nations" refers to those from among the rest of the Gentiles who are incorporated into the restored kingdom of David
- In other words, the "taking possession of the remnant of Edom" and the "rest of mankind seeking the Lord" alike refer to the "ingrifting" of believing Gentiles into the olive tree of Israel (Romans 11).

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B. Acts 15 and the Jerusalem Council

What was the Jerusalem council concerned with?

- The council was convened to address the question of the status of believing Gentiles (see 15:1-2): must they become Jewish proselytes, keep the Mosaic Law, and be circumcised, or should they be admitted to the church on the basis of faith alone?

What did the Counsel Decide?

- Paul and Barnabas describe in detail the grace of God in saving Gentiles (15:3) and upon their arrival in Jerusalem repeat the story (15:4). This news did not meet with universal approval (15:5). However, based on the testimony of Peter (15:7-11), as well as Paul and Barnabas (15:12), the council decided that they should not discriminate between believing Jews and believing Gentiles.

What did the Apostles base their decision on in this council?

- God specifically set apart Peter some 10 years earlier to take the gospel to the Gentiles (Acts 10:1-11:18);
- God bestowed the gift of the HS on believing Gentiles in the same way he did on believing Jews (Acts 15:8);
- God refused to distinguish between Jews and Gentiles, cleansing the latter even as he did the former, through faith (15:9);
- It would be useless to require of Gentiles an obedience to the law that not even Jews were able to maintain (15:10);
- Both Jews and Gentiles are saved by the grace of Christ apart from circumcision or any old covenant law (15:11); and
- God blessed the Gentiles with signs and wonders accompanying salvation no less than he did the Jews (15:12).

James' Summary of the evidence and Issue

- "Brethren, listen to me (v. 13b). Simeon [Peter] has related how God first concerned Himself about taking from among the Gentiles a people for His name (v. 14). And with this the words of the Prophets agree, just as it is written (v. 15), **"After these things I will return, and I will rebuild the tabernacle of David which has fallen, and I will rebuild its ruins, and I will restore it (v. 16), in order that the rest of mankind may seek the Lord, and all the Gentiles who are called by My name (v. 17), says the Lord, who makes these things known from of old (v. 18)."**

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C. The Dispensational Interpretation of Acts 15:13-21

- ¹³After they finished speaking, James replied, "Brethren, listen to me. ¹⁴Simeon has related how God first visited the Gentiles, to take from them a people for his name. ¹⁵And with this the words of the prophets agree, just as it is written, ¹⁶**"After this I will return, and I will rebuild the tent of David that has fallen; I will rebuild its ruins, and I will restore it. ¹⁷that the remnant of mankind may seek the Lord, and all the Gentiles who are called by my name, says the Lord, who makes these things ¹⁸known from of old."** ¹⁹Therefore my judgment is that we should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God, ²⁰but should write to them to abstain from the things polluted by idols, and from sexual immorality, and from what has been strangled, and from blood. ²¹For from ancient generations Moses has had in every city those who proclaim him, for he is read every Sabbath in the synagogues."

What do most dispensationalist believe James is doing in vv. 14-18?

- Most dispensationalists believe that in vv. 14-18 James is outlining God's program for the future.
- They argue that James responds to the problem of Gentile salvation by saying that God has always intended to bless Gentiles as well as Israel, but in their **proper prophetic sequence**.

Disp. Proper Prophetic Sequence


- God purposed **"first"** (15:14) to visit the Gentiles in this present age to take from among them "a people for his name" (15:14b).
- Only **"after these things"** (15:16a), i.e., after this present age of Gentile salvation, will He "return" (15:16a) in the person of His Son, Jesus Christ, at the second advent, and rebuild or restore the national, earthly, territorial dynasty of David in fulfillment of 2 Samuel 7.
- This rebuilding of the Davidic "house/kingdom/dynasty" will **occur in the millennium**. Israel's regathering and restoration in the millennium will also make possible the salvation of Gentiles (15:17).

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CRITIQUE OF THE DISPENSATIONAL VIEW

Critique 1 – Meaning of “First”

- First, the word **“first”** in James’ statement (v. 14) is an echo of Peter’s declaration (v. 7) of how *“in the early days* God made a choice among you”
- In other words, **“first”** means **“for the first time.”** It refers to the **initial saving work of God among the Gentiles** through Peter as recorded in Acts 10 and again through Paul (15:12).
- Thus **“first” cannot mean “first”** in the sense of **sequence**, in contrast to **“after this”**.

Critique 2 – “After These Things...”

- Second, James uses the phrase **“after these things”** (v. 16a) instead of Amos’s **“in that day”** to emphasize that the “day” in which the tabernacle of David would be rebuilt was **“after”** the “things” described by **Amos in 9:8-10** of his prophecy, namely, the judgment that was to befall Israel as manifested in the progressive deterioration of David’s tabernacle.

Oswald Allis

- “The words ‘After these things I will return and build’ **do not refer to a time which was still future when James used them.**
- In the Amos passage the words are used simply, **‘in that day,’** which is the most general formula used by the prophets to introduce an utterance regarding the coming **Messianic age.** ‘After these things I will return and build’ is a slightly more emphatic form of statement.

Oswald Allis

- Viewed in the light of their context in Amos, they **refer to a time subsequent** (later) to the complete destruction of the northern kingdom, which had ceased to exist centuries before the New Testament age in which James was living.

Oswald Allis

- The words **‘I will return and build’** are simply an emphatic way of saying, **‘I will build again.’** There is no warrant for making them refer directly to the second advent. **They naturally refer to the first advent** and to the whole of the great redemptive work of which it was the beginning and which will culminate in the second advent.
- The only **natural interpretation** of this passage is that it refers to the **Church age** and to the ingathering of the Gentiles during that age, as a signal proof of the world-wide sovereignty of the Son of David” (*Prophecy and the Church*, 149).

Critique 3 – the “return”

- Third, as Allis briefly noted, the **“return”** of God mentioned by James in v. 16a, at which time the Davidic tabernacle will be restored, was **future to Amos, not James!**
- The **“return”** of God to which James refers had **already occurred in the person and work of Jesus**, more specifically, in his glorious exaltation to the right hand of the Father thereby seating David’s son on David’s throne in fulfillment of David’s covenant.
- The **“rebuilding”** of David’s tabernacle as a result of this “return” of God was inaugurated by the resurrection and exaltation of Christ and is being progressively realized in the gathering of Gentile believers into the covenant people of God.

J. Barton Payne concludes:

- "The reference [to the rebuilding of David's fallen tent] must be to His [Christ's] first coming; for Acts 15:16 emphasizes that it is **this event** which enables the Gentiles, from the apostolic period onward, to seek God. . . .
- [Then] came the engrafting of the uncircumcised Gentiles into the church, to which Acts 15 applies the OT passage, so it cannot refer to times yet future" (*Encyclopedia of Biblical Prophecy*, 417).

Critique 4 – Relevance

- Fourth, the dispensational view makes it impossible for James to say anything relevant to the problem at hand (i.e., the status of believing Gentiles in relation to Jews).

A problem

- At most, they might argue there is an *analogy* between the future millennial age (outlined by Amos), in which Gentiles will be blessed along with Jews, and the present church age.
- But this creates a problem, for dispensationalists have always argued that Gentiles in the millennium will have a somewhat inferior status in relation to believing Jews.

A problem

- If James believed this, "then the point to be gained from his quoting of Amos 9:11-12 **would be not to grant the Gentiles equal status** with the Jews but only a status like that which they would have in the millennium.
- The result would have been that those who argued that Gentiles must be circumcised to be saved (Acts 15:1) would have been strengthened, and **the truth of the gospel (cf. Gal. 2:5) would have been endangered**" (Daniel Fuller, *Gospel and Law*, 180).

The Key to interpreting this Text

- The key to interpreting this text in Acts is found in the prophetic perspective of Amos. Amos prophesied divine judgment against Israel, to be followed "in that day" by the rebuilding of David's kingdom. Consequently, **the "day" of restoration was future to Amos, not James.**
- The "*things*" of which James speaks "after" which God will return and build David's tabernacle are the judgments against Israel from the time of Amos in the 8th century to the coming of Christ in the 1st century.

The Davidic kingdom is inaugurated

- The "return" of God to "rebuild" and "restore" the tabernacle of David is preparatory to, indeed, the **means** by which "the rest of mankind" (15:17a), i.e., the Gentiles, will seek the Lord and be saved.
- If James finds the fulfillment of Amos's prophecy concerning Gentile salvation in the events associated with the ministries of Peter and Paul (recounted in 15:1-12), then the **Davidic kingdom must already in some sense have been restored or inaugurated.**

When and in what manner would Jesus, son of David, ascend this throne and fulfill the promise of an everlasting kingdom?

- Has it been postponed until the millennium?
- Or did Jesus, on the basis of his death and subsequent to his resurrection, ascend to the throne of David in the heavenly Jerusalem from which place of sovereign glory he even now rules as Davidic king?
- Two texts answer this question. **Read them closely!**

Acts 13:32-37

- ³²And we bring you the good news that what God promised to the fathers, ³³this he has fulfilled to us their children by raising Jesus, as also it is written in the second Psalm, "You are my Son, today I have begotten you." ³⁴And as for the fact that he raised him from the dead, no more to return to corruption, he has spoken in this way, "I will give you the holy and sure blessings of David." ³⁵Therefore he says also in another psalm, "You will not let your Holy One see corruption." ³⁶For David, after he had served the purpose of God in his own generation, fell asleep and was laid with his fathers and saw corruption, ³⁷but he whom God raised up did not see corruption.

Acts 2:29-36

- ²⁹Brothers, I may say to you with confidence about the patriarch David that he both died and was buried, and his tomb is with us to this day. ³⁰Being therefore a prophet, and knowing that God had sworn with an oath to him that he would set one of his descendants on his throne, ³¹he foresaw and spoke about the resurrection of the Christ, that he was not abandoned to Hades, nor did his flesh see corruption. ³²This Jesus God raised up, and of that we all are witnesses. ³³Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this that you yourselves are seeing and hearing. ³⁴For David did not ascend into the heavens, but he himself says, "The Lord said to my Lord, Sit at my right hand, ³⁵until I make your enemies your footstool." ³⁶Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified."

O. Palmer Robertson

■ "It is difficult to imagine any way in which Peter could have expressed more pointedly that **Jesus Christ's current exaltation fulfilled God's promise to David that his descendant was to reign as the anointed one of Israel**. The question cannot be relegated to one of 'literal' or 'non-literal' interpretation. Jesus Christ 'literally' is the descendant of David. He sits 'literally' on David's throne, since from both the Old Testament and the New Testament perspectives the 'throne of David' is to be identified with the throne of God. As the figures of David's throne and God's throne merged in the theocracy of the old covenant, so God's throne and Jesus' position as heir to David's throne seated at God's right hand merge in the new covenant. Today Jesus reigns 'literally' in Jerusalem because the 'Jerusalem' of the old covenant represented the place of God's enthronement, just as the 'Jerusalem' of the new covenant represents the place of God's throne today" (*The Christ of the Covenants*, 221).

In what way does this bear upon the use in Acts 15 of Amos 9?

■ "James cites the prophecy of Amos 9:11-12 to prove that Peter's experience with Cornelius was a fulfillment of God's purpose to visit the Gentiles and take out of them a people for his name. It therefore follows that the 'rebuilding of the dwelling of David' which had resulted in the Gentile mission, must refer to the exaltation and enthronement of Christ upon the (heavenly) throne of David and the establishment of the church as the true people of God, the new Israel. Since God had brought Gentiles to faith without the Law, there was no need to insist that the Gentiles become Jews to be saved" (George Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, 355).

Conclusion

- *The exaltation and enthronement of Jesus Christ at the right hand of the Father IS the inaugural step in the restoration of the fallen booth of David.*
- *The grafting in of Gentile believers IS the prophesied regathering of the true Israel.*

Conclusion

- *The restoration of the Davidic kingdom and the fulfillment of the covenant promise in 2 Samuel 7 have been inaugurated in the resurrection and exaltation of David's "greater son", the Son of God, Jesus Christ.*
- *It is this, then, that has made possible the rebuilding of the Davidic dynasty which consists in nothing less than the ingathering of believing Gentiles as the true Israel of God (Gal. 6:16).*
- *Therefore, to say that believing Gentiles should enter the fellowship of the saints on a different basis from believing Jews is contrary to the prophetic purpose for redemptive history as defined by Amos in the 8th century b.c.*