

A PEOPLE FOR HIS NAME IN ACTS 15

Tom's Perspectives

by Thomas Ice

"Simeon has related how God first concerned Himself about taking from among the Gentiles a people for His name. And with this the words of the Prophets agree, just as it is written, '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, in order that the rest of mankind may seek the Lord, and all the Gentiles who are called by My name.'"

—Acts 15:14–17

One of the most important New Testament passages that lays out a framework for God's plan for history, in light of the establishment of the church, is Acts 15:12–21. Where does the church fit into God's overall plan for history? Within evangelicalism today there are currently two basic answers. One view holds that the church has forever replaced Israel as the instrument through which the Lord works. The other view, which I believe the New Testament teaches, is that the church is a temporary instrument until the rapture, after which God will complete His plan for Israel. Acts 15:12–21 supports the latter view.

REPLACEMENT VIEW

Covenant theology generally teaches that James' quotation of Amos 9:11–12 in his Acts 15 statement is a direct fulfillment of the Amos quotation. Amos 9:11–12 says: "In that day I will raise up the fallen booth of David, and wall up its breaches; I will also raise up its ruins, and rebuild it as in the days of old; that they may possess the remnant of Adam and all the nations who are called by My name," declares the LORD who does this." Speaking of Acts 15, Oswald Allis says, "if James' quotation refers to the Christian Church, the claim of Dispensationalists that prophecy skips over the Church age cannot be maintained: it is directly refuted by this passage."ⁱ Kenneth Gentry speaks of "passages in the New Testament that illustrate how the church fulfills prophecies regarding Israel." He specifically speaks of the church as "the ultimate fulfillment of many promises to Israel, symbolically depicted *as* Israel." He also says of Amos 9: "I note above that some Old Testament prophetic passages apply to the Gentiles' calling in the New Testament. Consequently, they speak of the church."ⁱⁱ

The replacement theologians attempt to say the present church age is fulfilling prophecies that in their original context speak of Israel and not the church. Further, in taking such a stance, they deny a future for Israel by teaching that the current church age is the final phase of history. They do not believe that the future redemption of Israel includes land and national promises to God's chosen people.

DISPENSATIONAL VIEW

The second view teaches that James quotes the Old Testament to teach that Gentiles can be saved as Gentiles in this present age and redemption for the Jewish nation will occur after this time of calling out a people from the Gentiles. John Nelson Darby explains:

Verses 11, 12, of this chapter, are quoted in Acts 15, not for the purpose of

shewing that the prophecy had then come to pass; but to prove that God had all along determined upon having a people from out of the Gentiles; and that, therefore, the language of the prophets agreed with that which Simon Peter had been relating of what God had done in his days. It is not the accomplishment of a prophecy, but the establishing of a principle by the mouth of the prophets, as well as by the word of the Spirit through Simon Peter.ⁱⁱⁱ

THE TEACHING OF JAMES

Must a Gentile become a Jewish proselyte in order to receive forgiveness of their sins through Jesus the Messiah? This is the issue that the Jerusalem Council met in order to deal with in the early church as recorded in Acts 15. In verses 7–11, Peter speaks of God’s eternal plan, where He chose to include Gentiles, not just Jews, to become recipients of God’s blessing through the word of the gospel. Now James, the half-brother of Jesus, who, as Arnold Fruchtenbaum says, “was the elder-in-chief so he would naturally speak last. As the head of the Church at this time, it was his responsibility to offer a solution,”^{iv} arises to explain the council’s decision in verses 13–29.

James explains in verse 14 how Peter said, “God first concerned Himself about taking from among the Gentiles a people for His name.” The vocabulary chosen by James paints the picture of God surveying the Gentiles and based upon His scrutiny, He then selects out from the mass of Gentile humanity “a people for His name.” Since this council took place around A.D. 50, just about 17 years after the church was founded. This would mean that almost all attending this early church event were Jewish. Thus, Paul later explains in Ephesians 2 that the church is composed of Jewish and Gentile believers who are made one in Christ during this age.

Next, in verse 15 James says, “with this the words of the Prophets agree.” Fruchtenbaum explains as follows:

This falls into the category of Literal Prophecy plus Application. Literally, Amos 9 speaks of the Kingdom when Gentiles will be saved. Then, by way of application, because of only one point of similarity, the salvation of the Gentiles, he applied this verse to their present situation. When he stated: *as it is written*, he was pointing out that the Old Testament actually predicted the salvation of the Gentiles.^v

The important thing to note is that James quotes an Old Testament passage that speaks of Gentile salvation in the millennium. The implication is that if Gentiles are going to be saved as Gentiles, without converting to Judaism, in the millennium, then Gentiles do not need to convert to Judaism in order to be saved in the present church age. Since James spoke of prophets (plural), he indicates that more than once the prophets spoke of Gentile salvation, even though his example comes from Amos 9 (see Isa. 42:1; 49:4–5). Willard Aldrich agrees: “The prophets anticipate a future dealing with the Gentiles and so this present visitation of God to the Gentiles is not out of harmony with the divine attitude toward them. The quotation serves to voice God’s approval of the present extension of salvation to the Gentiles although it is fulfilled by a future work among them.”^{vi}

When we look at Amos 9:11–12 that James quotes, we see that he drops the phrase “in that day,” which begins verse 11 and adds in Acts 15:16a “After these things I will

return.” “In that day” in Amos 9:11 orients the fulfillment of when the Lord will rebuild the fallen tabernacle of David, which is within a millennial context (compare Amos 9:13–15). James’ prologue of “after these things I will return” orients the Old Testament quote to the current church age. Clearly “after these things” refers to the period of time that James and his fellow believers were in, which is the church age. James was telling the council, which was primarily Jewish, that after the present church age is complete, then the Lord will “return” and He will fulfill the promises for Israel. This provides a clear outline for history—current church age followed by fulfillment of the Davidic promises to Israel in the millennial kingdom.

CONCLUSION

Stanley Toussaint, has provided four reasons why “James simply asserted that Gentiles will be saved in the Millennium when Christ will return and rebuild David’s fallen tent, that is, restore the nation Israel.”^{vii} They are as follows: First, “This fits the purpose of the council. If Gentiles will be saved in the Kingdom Age (the Millennium), why should they become Jewish proselytes by circumcision in the Church Age?” Second, “This approach suits the meaning of ‘in that day’ in Amos 9:11. After the Tribulation (Amos 9:8-10) God will establish the messianic kingdom (Amos 9:11-12). James (Acts 15:16) interpreted ‘in that day’ to mean that ‘at the time when’ God does one (the Tribulation) He will then do the other. In that sense James could say ‘After this.’” Third, “This interpretation gives significance to the word ‘first’ in verse 14. Cornelius and his household were among the first Gentiles to become members of Christ’s body, the church. Gentile salvation will culminate in great blessing for them in the Millennium (cf. Rom. 11:12).” Fourth, “A number of prophets predicted Gentile salvation in the Millennium, as James stated in Acts 15:15 (e.g., Isa. 42:6; 60:3; Mal. 1:11).”

C. I. Scofield said in his Bible notes: “Dispensationally this is the most important passage in the N.T. It gives the divine purpose for this age, and for the beginning of the next.”^{viii} Scofield is right! This passage supports the distinction between God’s plan for Israel and the church and lays out a dispensational time-line. The present church age will be followed by God’s redemption of His people Israel. Maranatha!

ENDNOTES

ⁱ Oswald T. Allis, *Prophecy and the Church: An Examination of the Claim of Dispensationalists that the Christian Church is a Mystery Parenthesis which Interprets the Fulfillment to Israel of the Kingdom Prophecies of the Old Testament* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1978), p. 147.

ⁱⁱ Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr., *He Shall Have Dominion: A Postmillennial Eschatology*, 3rd ed. (Draper, VA: Apologetics Group Media, 2009), pp. 171–72.

ⁱⁱⁱ J. N. Darby, “The Hopes of the Church of God, in Connection with the Destiny of the Jews and the Nations as Revealed in Prophecy” *The Collected Writings of J. N. Darby*, 34 vols. (n.d.; repr., Winschoten, Netherlands: H. L. Heijkoop, 1971), vol. 2, p. 366.

^{iv} Arnold Fruchtenbaum, “The Jerusalem Council: Acts 15:1–35” in *The Messianic Bible Study Collection* (Tustin, CA: Ariel Ministries, 1983), vol. 170, p. 8.

^v Fruchtenbaum, “Jerusalem Council,” p. 9.

^{vi} Willard M. Aldrich, “The Interpretation of Acts 15:13–18,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* (vol. 111; no. 444; Oct. 1954), pp. 319–20.

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- ^{vii} This quote and subsequent ones from Toussaint are from the following source: Stanley D. Toussaint, "Acts" in John F. Walvoord & Roy B. Zuck, eds., *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, New Testament Edition (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1983), p. 395.
- ^{viii} C. I. Scofield, ed., *The Scofield Reference Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1909), p. 1169.