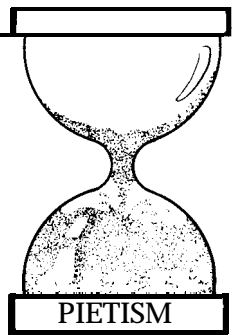


Dispensationalism in Transition

Challenging Traditional Dispensationalism's "Code of Silence"



Vol. II, No. 6

©ICE, 1989

June, 1989

"THE MOST IMPORTANT PASSAGE IN THE NEW TESTAMENT" PART TWO

by Michael R. Gilstrap

We saw last month that Dr. C.I. Scofield wrote in his notes to Acts 15 that this passage is "the most important passage in the NT" for the dispensationalist.¹ That sentiment is at least partially shared by one of the foremost dispensational scholars of our day, Dr. John Walvoord, Chancellor of Dallas Theological Seminary. Although Dr. Walvoord might stop short of calling Acts 15 the "most important" passage, he does agree that it is a key passage to the dispensational system.²

Both Scofield and Walvoord see James' statement to the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15:13-21 as outlining for the reader "the divine purpose for this age, and for the beginning of the next."³ First, God calls out a "Church" made up of Gentiles. Then Christ returns to set up the fulfillment of the Davidic Kingdom (i.e., the Millennium). During the Millennium, Israel is drawn to the Lord, but Gentiles also continue to be saved during this period.

As Dr. Walvoord carefully points out, critical to this interpretation are two key phrases. The first is found in v. 14 where James is quoted as saying, "Simon has declared how God *at the first* visited the Gentiles", etc. The dispensational understanding is that God was to visit the Gentiles *first* "to take out of them a people for His name."

The second phrase is found in v. 16 where James is quoting Amos 9:11-12, "*After this* I will return and will rebuild the tabernacle of David which has fallen down", etc. The point being that according to Scofield and Walvoord, God has established a definite time order in terms of His purposes for this age and the next. In this age – the Church age – he will bless the Gentiles, and then, after the second coming, He will bless the Jews by inaugurating the Millennium and setting up the fulfillment of the Davidic Covenant.

In his commentary on the book of Acts, F.F. Bruce notes "The terms in which James summarized Peter's speech . . . have been misused in the interests of modern dispensationalism."⁴ Bruce writes that instead of seeing that "(James meant that God had clearly shown His pleasure that the new community which was to display His glory in the world should be drawn from Gentiles as well as from Jews,"⁵ the dispensationalist twists James' words to support his own peculiar system which he has foisted on the Biblical text.

As Bruce correctly calls attention to, the dispensational interpretation completely falls apart when the passage is carefully examined. Because of the crucial nature of the two phrases, "at the first" and "after this", that is where we will begin. We'll also look at the feasibility of seeing the phrase in v. 16 "I will return" as a reference to the second coming. By showing the exegetical impossibility of maintaining the dispensational position on Acts 15, we will see once again the unBiblical nature of dispensational theology.⁶ After all, if the "most important passage in the N. T." doesn't teach what they say it does, what does that say about the rest of their "prooftexts?"

"At the First"

After Peter had spoken to the Council, followed by Paul and Barnabas, all eyes turned to James, the acknowledged leader of the Jerusalem Church. He begins by saying, "Listen up, my friends. Simon just told you how God *at the first* visited the Gentiles. . . ." What James does is summarize Peter's speech. He once more reminds the Council of how God through Peter *for the first time* visited the Gentiles when Peter brought the gospel to the house of Cornelius (Acts 10).

The word that James uses is *proton*, and from the context, it obviously means "for the first time." What Scofield and Walvoord are trying to do with the word is use it to mean "first" in the sense of sequence, in contrast to the next temporal phrase in v. 16 "after this." Contextually, there is no way *proton* is a "first" of sequence. The only way one might derive such a meaning from the text is to have a preconceived notion of what the text is saying, and then find ways to prove one's assumptions. *This is exactly what dispensationalism is doing when it comes to Acts 15.*

The incredible bankruptcy of the dispensational interpretation is further revealed by the fact that I think Scofield understood that he was *reading into* the text. In his marginal reference to v. 14, Scofield notes that "at the first" is literally "*for the first time*, i.e., in the house of Cornelius."⁷ Yet in his notes on the passage, he surreptitiously proceeds as if the translation is a "first" establishing sequence. This is a major sleight of hand in dealing with the Scriptures.

Interestingly, the editors of the revised edition of the *Scofield Reference Bible* correct Scofield's blunder. Their revised translation of v. 14 reads, "Symeon bath declared how God first did visit the nations to take out of them a people for his name." The marginal reference simply notes

1. C. I. Scofield, ed., *The Scofield Reference Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1945 [1909]), 1169.

2. See John Walvoord, *The Millennial Kingdom* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1959), 205-206.

3. *Scofield Reference Bible*, 1169.

4. F.F. Bruce, *Commentary on The Book of the Acts* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1954), 309.

5. Bruce, 309-310.

6. The main lines of this argument have been gleaned from Dr. William E. Bell as found in his dissertation *A Critical Evacuation of Pretribulation Rapture Doctrine in Christian Eschatology*

7. *Scofield Reference Bible*, 1170.

that the King James Version reads "at the first."⁸

Other than dispensational authors, no other commentator sees James establishing a sequence for the ages. All agree that he was merely summarizing Peter's address prior to issuing his decree.⁹

A second feature of the text which mitigates against the dispensational understanding of the phrase "at the first" is James' unique use of the words "Gentile" and "people." F.F. Bruce observes:

The English translation of the words, "God first visited the Gentiles to take from them a people for his name," scarcely bring (sic) out the paradoxical force of the Greek. In the Old Testament the "nations" or "Gentiles" (Gk. *ethne*) stand in contrast to the "people" (Gk. *laos*, that is to say, Israel. When Moses says to the Israelites in Deut. 14:2, "Yahweh has chosen you to be a people for his own possession, out of all the *nations* that are on the face of the earth," the Greek version uses *laos* for "people" over against *ethne* for "nations"; the two terms are opposed the one to the other. But when James uses the same two terms here, he does not speak of God's taking a people *in contrast to* the Gentiles, but of his taking a people *consisting of* Gentiles – an "outstanding paradox," as Bengel says. What James states concisely here is implied throughout the New Testament: one example is 1 Pet. 2:9, where God's description of the returning exiles of Judah, "the people whom I formed for myself, that they might declare my praise" (Isa. 43:21), is applied to Gentile converts to Christianity. Cf. also Tit. 2:14.¹⁰

Scofield and Walvoord did get one thing right – James was outlining the divine purpose for this age – *it just isn't dispensationalism's purpose for this age*. Far from carefully distinguishing between Jew and Gentile as Walvoord asserts,¹¹ James does the opposite. By using the terms "Gentiles" and "people" the way he does, he is arguing for a blurring and abrogation of such distinctions.

"After This"

The dispensational understanding of this phrase is that it points to the sequential event which must follow the "at the first" of v. 14. As we've seen, first must come the Gentile blessings, and afterward, the period of Israel's glory. According to this line of thinking, Israel's time of blessing will not come until after the Church age – the age of the Gentiles. God will first conclude His work with the Gentiles, and then (following the Second Coming), bring in the promised blessings to Israel.¹² The dispensationalist must, there-

fore, relate "after this" sequentially to James' statement summarizing Peter's address to the Council.

Contextually, this is an impossible position to maintain. "After this" occurs at the beginning of the Old Testament quotation James is citing. It must be related, therefore, sequentially to the context of Amos, *not to James' statement regarding Peter's earlier experience at the house of Cornelius*. It is a very strange hermeneutic that completely ignores the contextual relationship of a quotation in order to prove one's position!

James quotes Amos 9:11-12. In context, the prophet is speaking of the coming judgment of God on Israel, and their subsequent dispersion among the nations:

For surely I will command, and will sift the house of Israel among the nations, as grain is sifted in a sieve; yet not the smallest grain shall fall to the ground. All the sinners of My people shall die by the sword, who say, "The calamity shall not overtake us nor confront us." (Amos 9:9-10).

Amos then goes on to write the passage James quotes:

On that day I will raise up the tabernacle of David, which has fallen down, and repair its damages; I will raise up its ruins, and rebuild it as in the days of old; that they may possess the remnant of Edom, and all the Gentiles who are called by My name, says the Lord who does this thing. (Amos 9:11-12).

If we compare James' quotation with the original passage in the prophecy of Amos, there are several slight variations. Most scholars are agreed that James is here quoting the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament. Of particular importance for our immediate purpose is James' substitution of "after this" for "on that day" or "in that day." Most commentators feel that James was simply paraphrasing the passage from Amos, and therein substituted an essentially equivalent expression. Bell notes, "The strongest argument for the paraphrase is the almost parallel case in Acts in which Peter quotes Joel as being fulfilled on the day of Pentecost. The expression of James, "after this" is found in the Septuagint of Joel 2:28, but in quoting Joel 2:28, Peter substitutes "in the last days" (Acts 2:17). Thus Peter seems to equate "after this" with "in the last days," which in itself is an equivalent expression for "that day" in prophetic usage."¹³

Regardless of the reason for the differences in James' quotation,¹⁴ the meaning is quite clear. James is saying that Amos prophesied that after the judgment and dispersion which was to befall Israel, the Lord would once again return to bless and glorify Israel. The phrase "after this", therefore, refers to the promised judgment on Israel prophesied by Amos, *not to the "taking out a people (Gentiles)" of Acts 15*. The dispensational notion of a sequential plan of the ages must be read *into* the passage; it does not arise out of the text.

(This article will continue next month.)

8. *The New Scofield Reference Bible*, edited by E. Schuyler English, et al. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), 1186.

9. See F.F. Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of Acts*, 309-310; F.F. Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of Acts*, revised edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1988), 293; J.A. Alexander, *A Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles* (1857; reprint, Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1980), 80; Ernest Haenchen, *The Acts of the Apostles*, trans. Bernard Noble and Gerald Shinn (1965; reprint, Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1971), 447; French L. Arrington, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1988), 152-155.

10. F. F. Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of Acts*, revised edition, 293.

11. John Walvoord, *The Millennial Kingdom*, 205-206.

12. See Walvoord, *The Millennial Kingdom*, 205-206; *Scofield Reference Bible*, 1169-1170.

13. Bell, *Critics/ Evacuation*, 199.

14. We will return to a consideration of James' quotation at a later time. His paraphrase has profound implications in considering the validity of the dispensational hermeneutic.