



# Dispensationalism in Transition



Challenging Traditional Dispensationalism's "Code of Silence"

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## "THE MOST IMPORTANT PASSAGE IN THE NEW TESTAMENT" PART THREE

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### "1 Will Return"

Both Scofield and Walvoord see the phrase "1 will return" as a reference to the Second Coming of Christ.<sup>1</sup> Once again, this portion of James's paraphrase is not found in Amos. Some scholars believe James is quoting several prophecies by this quotation (the plural "prophets" of v. 15), so he may be referring to Jeremiah 12:15.

Whatever the case, the reference is the familiar Hebrew word *ashov*. This word is used frequently to refer to a "return of favor" rather than a "personal return." All would agree that the first coming of Christ was certainly a "return of favor" to Israel. Even leading dispensational commentators admit that the second coming of Christ is not in view here.<sup>2</sup> Once more, the preconceived notions of dispensationalism dictate to its defenders how they must interpret the text of the Holy Scripture.

Walvoord argues that James does not identify "the period of Gentile conversion with the rebuilding of the tabernacle of David."<sup>3</sup> James's paraphrase says:

After this I will return and will rebuild the tabernacle of David which has fallen down. I will rebuild its ruins, and I will set it up, so that the rest of mankind may seek the Lord, even all the Gentiles who are called by My name, says the Lord who does all these things (Acts 15:16-17 NKJV).

To understand what James is referring to, we must first ask the question, What will it take to fulfill God's promises to David? This is simply another way of asking, What does it mean to "rebuild the tabernacle of David"? Once we answer these questions, we are then in a position to ask, To what end will God rebuild the tabernacle (or dynasty) of David? We will then be in a position to appreciate James's statement in Acts 15.

First then, What will it take to fulfill God's promises to David? The answer may be found in Peter's sermon on the day of Pentecost. Peter says:

For David says concerning Him: "1 foresaw the Lord always before my face, for He is at my right hand, that I may not be shaken; therefore my heart rejoiced, and my tongue was glad; moreover my flesh will also rest in hope, because you will not leave my soul in Hades, nor will you allow Your Holy One to see corruption. You have made known to me the ways of life; you will make me full of joy in Your presence."

Men and brethren, let me speak freely to you of the patriarch David, that he is both dead and buried, and

his tomb is with us to this day. Therefore, being a prophet, and knowing that God has sworn an oath to him that of the fruit of his body, according to the flesh, He would raise up the Christ to sit on his throne, he, foreseeing this, spoke concerning the resurrection of the Christ, that His soul was not left in Hades, nor did His flesh see corruption. This Jesus God has raised up, of which we are all witnesses.

Therefore, let all the house of Israel know assuredly that God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ (Acts 2:25-36 NKJV).

Peter quotes first from the Septuagint version of Psalm 16:8-11, a psalm of David. The promise to David here is that God "will not leave my soul in Hades" (the grave), or "allow your Holy One to see corruption." Now it was a matter of common knowledge in and around Jerusalem that David died and was buried south of Jerusalem near Siloam (cf. Neh. 3:16). As Peter notes, "his tomb is with us to this day."

These promises cannot therefore, refer to David himself. Rather they refer to the Messiah of David's line. Peter is arguing that these words have been fulfilled in Jesus of Nazareth and in no other. Jesus is, therefore, the long-awaited Messiah.

Peter goes on to refer to the oath God swore to David that "of the fruit of his body He would raise up the Christ to sit on the throne." He is here referring to Ps. 132:11: "The Lord has sworn in truth to David; He will not turn from it; I will set upon your throne the fruit of your body." Peter explains to his audience that it was with this descendant in mind that David, as an inspired prophet, spoke of the resurrection from the dead and deliverance from the corruption of death.

And then in a brilliant climax, Peter exclaims that it is Jesus of Nazareth whom God raised from the dead, and that these men who stood before them are eye-witnesses of that event. It is Jesus of Nazareth Who is now exalted to the right hand of God, and it is He Who has poured out His Holy Spirit, as they all had witnessed.

Furthermore, it is He Who is now on His throne in heaven, there to reign until the Lord makes all His enemies His footstool. In His death, resurrection, ascension, and exaltation, Jesus Christ fulfilled the promises of God to David.

As F.F. Bruce notes, "From early days the Christian church maintained that his exaltation of Jesus took place in fulfillment of God's promise to David."<sup>4</sup> Through the exaltation of Christ, God has fulfilled His dynastic promises to David. Contrary to dispensational dogma, Peter asserts that the rebuilding of "the tabernacle of David" has already

1. See Walvoord, *The Millennial Kingdom*, 206; Scofield Reference Bible, 1170.

2. Bell, *Critics/ Evacuation*, 199-200.

3. Walvoord, *The Millennial Kingdom*, 205.

4. F.F. Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of Acts*, revised edition, 64

occurred. If more evidence is needed, one has but to refer to the same line of argumentation by Paul in Acts 13:23ff.

What then is the meaning of James's quotation? For what purpose did God rebuild the tabernacle of David? James's argument is that the promised dominion over the nations ("Edom" in the original passage from Amos) by the house of David is taking place here and now through the reception of the Gentiles into the Church. The Gentile mission by men like Paul and Barnabas is being used by God to fulfill the prophesy of Amos 9. Jesus, the Christ, is now ruling over an area for greater than David ever did. As more and more Gentiles enter into the Kingdom of Christ, it will truly be said that "the rest of mankind" will seek the Lord. James's summation is that the Gentile mission is a work of God. He made it known in advance through Amos, and now we see it being brought to pass.

To summarize this section, let me borrow from one dispensationalist's conclusions about his own system's interpretation of this passage. After very careful study, Halstead Gates concludes that the typical dispensational interpretations of Acts 15 is invalid for the following reasons: (1) It ignores James's identification of God's current work among the Gentiles with the Amos prophesy, (2) It attributes to James unwanted "dispensational insight," (3) It misinterprets "after this," (4) It fails to recognize in the birth of "David's Greater Son" the rebuilding of the fallen house of David, (5) it fails to note the identification of the Gentiles of verse 14 whom Peter visited with those of verse 17 in the Amos prophesy, and (6) It fails to furnish James with adequate and relevant grounds on which to base his conclusion.<sup>5</sup>

### Conclusion

Finally, I want to point out one other feature that is extremely important for our consideration of dispensationalism. As noted above, James's quotation of Amos 9:11-12 is really more of a paraphrase rather than a direct quotation, even if we assume that James is quoting the Septuagint. There is, nevertheless, a significant difference that is not immediately apparent.

We've already noted above the differences between James's quotation and the Septuagint. What was not called to your attention is the difference between the Hebrew, Masoretic text and the Septuagint. The Septuagint version of v. 12 (from which James quotes) reads, "that the remnant of men, and all the Gentiles upon whom my name is called, may earnestly seek me, says the Lord who does all these things." The Hebrew text, however, reads as fol-

lows: "that they may possess the remnant of Edom, and all the Gentiles who are called by my name. . . ." Of particular importance is the rewording of the Hebrew clause "that they may possess the remnant of Edom."

Bruce notes:

The primary sense of MT [Masoretic Text] is that God will restore the fallen fortunes of the royal house of David, so that it will rule over all the territory which had once been included in David's empire, not only what is left of the Edomites but also "all the nations [Gentiles] who are called by my name." The LXX [Septuagint] rewording involves two variant readings, but the result is a complete spiritualization of the passage (emphasis mine): "that they may possess the remnant of Edom" becomes "that the remainder of humanity may seek [me]". The LXX spiritualization is in line with Israel's mission to bring the knowledge of the true God to the Gentiles. It thus paved the way for James' application of the prophecy to the church's Gentile mission.<sup>6</sup>

The importance of this "spiritualization" can hardly be overstated. First of all though, we must assume that James was not simply playing fast and loose with the text of Scripture, which I believe is an unavoidable assumption. Furthermore, we must assume that the probable reason James used the Septuagint was because it was the common Bible of most of the people (similar to my quoting the NIV or the KJV or the NKJV, depending upon the audience) but at the same time, we must assume that as far as James was concerned, the Septuagint preserved the original meaning of the Hebrew, else he would have called attention to the error, or quoted his own translation of the Hebrew. Any other assumptions present problems in terms of our high view of inspiration of the Scriptures.

That being the case, we must assume that the "spiritualization" of the prophecy of Amos was entirely in line with how James interpreted the Old Testament. In this case, Amos's prophesy that Israel would one day possess the land of Edom, and ultimately, all the nations is spiritually fulfilled in the conversion of the Gentiles and their entrance into the Church.

This passage is then, a primary source document of the hermeneutical method employed by the Apostles in interpreting the Old Testament. "Edom" means "Gentile nations," and "Israelite conquest" means "spiritual conversion." Such interpretations are a far cry from the rigid, wooden literalism characteristically found in dispensationalism. It seems that the New Testament doesn't always interpret Old Testament prophesy "literally," much to the consternation of Scofield, Walvoord, Pentecost, et al.

5. M. Halstead Gates, "The Amos Quotation in Acts Fifteen," (unpublished Master's thesis, Dallas Theological Seminary, Dallas, Texas, 1940), 20-22; referred to in Bell, *Critics/ Evaluation*, 202.

6. F. F. Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of Acts*, revised edition, 293-294