

God's Purpose for the Present Age

An Examination of Acts 15:14-18

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Acts 15:14

“Simeon hath declared how God at the first did visit the Gentiles, to take out of them a people for his name.”

The setting of this text of Scripture was the Jerusalem council where the apostles and elders came together in order to determine whether or not Gentiles needed to follow the Law and become Jewish proselytes by undergoing circumcision. Judaizers were teaching that the Gentiles needed to be circumcised in order to be saved and inherit the blessings promised to the Jews (Acts 15:1). This was an incredible hoax on the Gospel message and was a matter that needed to be addressed by the council. An official answer needed to be given to the church in order that a stance could be taken against all legalism.

James was apparently the presiding speaker and he stood up to back up what Peter had just said and taught about the Gentile blessing of salvation by grace in the present church age (Acts 15:7-11). James stood up and addressed Peter as Simeon (Greek - Symeon) which was the original Jewish name given to Peter. Peter was addressed by this name in view of the Jewish nature of the council. But James reminded the council about what Peter had already “declared” back in verses 7-11, how God first concerned Himself about taking from among the Gentiles a people for His name (15:14).

James completely agrees with Peter. And he states the plan of God for today. Is God going to save the whole world? No. Is God using Christians to bring in the Kingdom today? No. Then what is God doing today? He is visiting the Gentiles to take out of them a people for His name. It's not what man is doing it is what God is doing! This announcement points to God's present purpose and ministry, which involves saving Gentiles and making them a part of the New Testament body called the church. This is why Peter officially opened the door of salvation to the Gentiles (Acts 10:34-47). The Gentiles

needed to be officially welcomed as “fellowheirs” with the Jews in this new body that Christ was framing together called the church.

Ephesians 3:6 says:

“That the Gentiles should be fellowheirs, and of the same body, and partakers of his promise in Christ by the gospel.”

The wording of this text I Acts 15:14 is important. God is calling out a people “for his name” in the present dispensational order. The word “church” (ekklesia) speaks of a called-out assembly. This text gives a very appropriate description of the church in the New Testament. The church is essentially a called-out assembly of people. It is a company of called-out ones gathered in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, which means to glorify the Lord for His person and work. A name stands for what a person represents and does. Thus, when these Gentiles are called out from among lost humanity by God to salvation, they will glorify the Lord (“his name”) for who He is and the marvelous things that He has done.

Acts 15:14-18 is a key pivotal passage that needs to be exegeted properly so that we can understand what James was teaching. Like Daniel’s prophecy of the seventy weeks (Daniel 9:24-27), we must take great care that we do not spiritualize these passages of Scripture nor do away with both the dispensational and *futuristic* or *prophetic* elements attached to them. Most Reformed theology of today rejects the teaching about a literal future for the nation of Israel and a literal fulfillment of the covenant promises given to national Israel. Many interpreters undermine the clear teaching about the rapture, a literal tribulation and millennium. Great attempts are made to spiritualize the prophetic portions of the Word of God about the millennium and those covenant promises given to Israel. Amillennial writers apply the covenant promises of Scripture, which were given to Israel, to the church today. They see the covenants of the Old Testament as primarily an extension of the so-called one covenant of grace, which was supposedly given to Israel - the church of the Old Testament.

This interpretive scheme spiritualizes the covenant promises given to Israel and most prophetic portions of the Scripture making the church of the New Testament a spiritual extension of the Israel of the Old

Testament. The church, as Jesus Christ rules it today, is said to be the fulfillment of the kingdom promises. It's erroneously believed that the church (the new Israel) is the kingdom today as Christ rules over it as its sovereign king. Therefore, the great prophecies of the Bible, such as the millennium, are said to be fulfilled presently in the church today in a spiritual way. Also, many of the prophecies are viewed as being fulfilled historically in A.D. 70 when wicked Jews were judged by the Romans (preterist or past historical view). The dispensational and futuristic elements of Scripture are primarily disregarded as the literal interpretation of Scripture is abandoned for the method of allegorization, which came from the forefathers of Origin and Augustine.

I do not believe that it is an understatement to affirm that much which is being written today neglects the great prophetic portions of the Word of God because a literal interpretation of prophecy is not used to interpret passages that deal with the end time. As a result, God's dispensational workings are blurred, major components of God's prophetic program are rejected and confusion abounds concerning the meaning of many passages of the Bible. How a person interprets this passage of Scripture will usually demonstrate where he stands in his theological outworking of eschatology or future events. In short, if you miss the teaching in this passage you will miss the overall teaching of God's prophetic blueprint.

God's Dispensational Program of the Church

(Key Word is "first")

Acts 15:14 states:

"Simeon hath declared how God at the **first** did visit the Gentiles, to take out of them a people for his name."

The word "first" (vs. 14) must refer to what James is referring to next in his line of reasoning or thought: "After this I will return, and build again the tabernacle of David, which is fallen down ..." (vs. 16). In other words, before the Lord revives Israel's fortunes, He must first of all save Gentiles through this new stewardship or dispensational era of the church. James separates the present period of Gentile blessing from Israel's future glory. First there must be Gentile blessing and

then Israel's future kingdom will be restored. The "first" establishes an order of priority and prominence in God's working program.

Way back in 1844, F. A. Tholuck D.D. wrote in *Bibliotheca Sacra*: "What then is the meaning of the quotation of James? What relation does it have to the problem faced by the council at Jerusalem? The question considered by the council was one of Gentile participation in the church. It apparently was difficult for the apostles to adjust themselves to equality with Gentiles in the Gospel. The evident blessing of God upon the Gentiles, their salvation, and spiritual gifts were indisputable evidence that a change in approach to the Gentiles was necessary. They must face the fact that both Jew and Gentile were saved by grace in exactly the same manner.

"How was this to be reconciled with the promises of God to Israel? It is this which James answers. He states, in effect, that it was God's purpose to bless the Gentiles as well as Israel, but in their order. God was to visit the Gentiles *first*, "to take out of them a people for his name." James goes on to say that this is entirely in keeping with the prophets, for they had stated that the period of Jewish blessing and triumph should be *after* the Gentile period: "After these things I will return, And I will build again the tabernacle of David, which is fallen." Instead of identifying the period of Gentile conversion with the rebuilding of the tabernacle of David, it is carefully distinguished by the *first* (Gentile blessing), and *after this*, referring to Israel's coming glory. The passage instead of identifying God's purpose for the church and for the nation, Israel, established a specific time order. Israel's blessing will not come until "I return," apparently reference to the second coming of Christ.

"That it could not refer either to the Incarnation or to the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost is evident in that neither are "return's." The passage under consideration constitutes, then, an important guide in determining the purpose of God. God will first conclude His work for the Gentiles in the period of Israel's dispersion; then He will return to bring in the promised blessings for Israel. It is needless to say that this confirms the interpretation that Christ is not now on the throne of David bringing blessing to Israel as the prophets predicted, but He is rather on His Father's throne waiting for the coming earthly kingdom and interceding for His own who form the church."

James is telling us that God is going to do something before He brings Israel back into blessing. First on God's plan is His special dealings with the Gentile people. He is going to extend His grace to the Gentiles in a marvelous way by officially introducing them into God's blessing by incorporating them into the organism of the church, which began to be formed back on the day Pentecost (Acts 2). The truth that Gentiles would share in the blessing of the church through the baptism of the Holy Spirit was verified by Peter in Acts 11:7-18 and clearly taught in the epistles. The Lord had turned to the Gentiles in a dispensational way and granted them repentance unto life in this new body called the church (Acts 11:18). This dispensational turn was also evident by what Paul said in Acts 13:46-47:

"Then Paul and Barnabas waxed bold, and said, It was necessary that the word of God should first have been spoken to you (Jews): but seeing ye put it from you, and judge yourselves unworthy of everlasting life, lo, we turn to the Gentiles. For so hath the Lord commanded us, *saying*, I have set thee to be a light of the Gentiles, that thou shouldest be for salvation unto the ends of the earth."

There could be no mistake about it. The new grace dispensation or administration would have as its special grace feature great Gentile blessing (Gal. 3:26-29). When the text in Acts 15:14 says that God was going to "take out of them a people for his name," it means that God was going to call and save many Gentiles from among the unsaved masses of Gentiles. It also means that those Gentiles who are saved would represent His name and glorify the Lord on earth. In short, James verifies Peter's message which declared that the purpose for this present new dispensational order of grace was to include great Gentile blessing where both Jews and Gentiles would be united together in the mystical body of Christ called the church (Ephesians 2:22; Col. 1:18).

The emphasis is given to the Gentiles in this body simply because the Jews at the council found it hard to believe that God could bless the Gentiles with the Jews in such a special way. After all, there were no covenant promises given to the Gentiles. So Peter and then James had to make sure that the Jewish believers understood about the Gentile blessing with the Jews in this new administration called the church. The Gentiles inclusion in this place of blessing would be a

clear manifestation of God's grace. The Lord would save the Gentiles and bring them into the place of privilege along with the Jews in the organism of the church (Ephesians 2:11-15).

The emphasis on the Gentiles is important since Israel rejected the Messiah (John 1:11-12) and His kingdom program was postponed (Matt. 21:43; Luke 17:22; Acts 3:19-21). This meant that God was now turning to the Gentiles in a dispensational way to bring them into the place of God's special blessing in the new dispensational order (Ephesians 2:11-17). The Gentiles would have a prominent place of privilege in God's new dispensational program of the church. This is because the church, though made up of Jews and peoples from all the nations, is prominent with Gentile believers. Thus, a special mention of the Gentiles is given as James mentions the Gentiles being called out by God to become part of this New Testament body called the church (Ephesians 3:6).

The Gentiles would be "grafted in among them (Jews), and with them (not replacing them) partake of the root and fatness of the olive tree" (Romans 11:17). Of course, this figure of grafting an olive tree explains how the Gentiles were brought into the place of blessing in the church. They would be blessed alongside the remnant of Jews who would believe on Christ in the present dispensation (Romans 11:5). Together both Jew and Gentile would constitute Christ's mystical body – the church.

Warren Wiersbe has well stated:

"We today have a better grasp of this truth because Paul explained it in Ephesians 2–3 and Romans 9–11. Saved Jews and Gentiles are both members of the same body and "one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:28). The truth about the church, the body of Christ, was a "mystery" (a sacred secret) hidden in past ages and revealed to the church by the Spirit. God's "mystery program" for the church does not cancel His great "prophecy program" for Israel. Paul makes it clear in Romans 9–11 that there is a future for Israel and that God will keep His "kingdom promises" to His people."

There can be no mistake about it. Before the Lord would return and deal with the nation of Israel once again and give to them the covenanted kingdom (vs. 16), there would be a *great parenthesis* of

time that would elapse. This gap of time that would exist could properly be labeled the church age. It's a special time period where Gentiles would be included in God's blessing through incorporating them into the body of believers called the church (vs. 15). In this *prophetic gap of time* God would work in a different way bringing both Jew and Gentile into salvation's blessing. This time period of the church would be a new display of God's grace where both Gentiles and Jews would be joined together in a new believing body of people illustrated as Christ's body (1 Cor. 12:13). This is God's purpose for this present period of time in which we live. The Scriptures are crystal clear about what God is doing today and what God wants us to do – save souls through the building of this new organism called the church.

God's Prophetic Program with the Jews

(Key words are “return,” “build again,” “tabernacle of David”)

Acts 15:16

“After this I will **return**, and will **build again** the **tabernacle of David**, which is fallen down; and I will build again the ruins thereof, and I will set it up.”

Before we mention anything else in this portion of Scripture we cannot help but see that God still has a future for national Israel. God has not given up on His nation people. They are written upon the palms of His hands (Isaiah 49:16). When Jesus returns (“I will return”) following the seven-year tribulation period He will miraculously gather His national elect people from all over the earth (Matt. 24:31). His plan is to bring them through a time of national judgment so that a remnant will be saved and populate the millennial kingdom and receive the covenant promises (Matt. 24:40-51; Ezekeil 20:38). God will keep His kingdom promises to Israel. The present church age does not cancel out God's promises to national Israel.

Romans 11:1 records this question and answer:

“I say then, Hath God cast away his people? God forbid. For I also am an Israelite, of the seed of Abraham, of the tribe of Benjamin.”

The tabernacle of David in Acts 15:16 has reference to David's people (national Israel). These words were used as a figurative expression of David's house of posterity, which would once again be raised to a place of blessing and prominence. Right now Israel was in the form of a tabernacle or tent, which speaks of the lowliness of Israel's condition before God turns His attention to them again. The promise James is giving is that David's royal family will be restored spiritually and then physically to the land of Palestine at some future day in God's prophetic program (Romans 11:26-27; Ezekeil 37:21-23). The truth is this. Davidic rule will once again be established over Israel when David's greater Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, returns to restore Israel's fortunes. We can be sure that God is going to build again or bring back His chosen people to a place of spiritual and physical blessing in the messianic golden age of the kingdom.

There can be no mistake about what God's plan is for national Israel. They will be brought back into the place of blessing, "grafted into their own olive tree" of blessing once again (Romans 11:23-24). God is able to do this and He will do this for His chosen people! God is not finished with Israel. And the returned fortunes of Israel (Acts 15:16) will mean the returned fortunes to the Gentiles during the future kingdom (Acts 15:17).

God's Prophetic Promise for the Gentiles

(Key Words are "agree," "prophets," & "After this")

Acts 15:15-17

"And to this **agree** the words of the **prophets**; as it is written, **After this** I will return, and will build again the tabernacle of David, which is fallen down; and I will build again the ruins thereof, and I will set it up: **That** the residue of men might seek after the Lord, and all the Gentiles, upon whom my name is called, saith the Lord, who doeth all these things."

Considerable debate centers on the meaning of "After this." Some writers see no significance attached to the statement "After this" but simply view the expression as a free quotation of Amos 9:11 which was not intended to convey any chronological order. They claim that James simply wanted to explain how Amos prophesied of similar

Gentile blessing in the kingdom after Israel's restoration to salvation, following the return of Christ to earth. In other words, many conclude that James quoted the passage of Amos without any concept of chronological order or events. He was simply making a point of comparison about Old Testament Gentile salvation following Israel's restoration and blessing.

Others do see a chronological emphasis in this passage since James mentioned "first" in verse 14 and now "After this" in verse 16 when quoting the prophecy of Amos. It seems better to see this expression "After this" as looking back to James' previous thought where he dealt with the Gentiles "first" being blessed in the present dispensational order before Israel will come back into the place of blessing. There are several reasons for accepting the chronological approach. First, James did not quote the Amos passage as it is in the Old Testament Scriptures. The Amos passage says, "In that day" and not "After this" which would indicate that James had the freedom under the Spirit's guidance to insert an Old Testament passage in a different way in order to illustrate a chronological point in God's dispensational program for the present age. Second, some writers suggest that James also quoted a text of Scripture similar with the Greek Septuagint. But it must not go unnoticed that the words "After this" do not appear in the Masoretic or Greek Septuagint text.

Some suggest that it would not be too difficult to visualize James as using a Hebrew variant of Amos 9:11-12 that was current in his own day. Many commentators have complained that the Jewish Christian James would not have used a Septuagint text in Jerusalem. Others suggest that it would be appropriate to use the Septuagint in view of the fact that they were talking about Gentile salvation. However, the best explanation might simply indicate that the intent of James was to quote the Hebrew Old Testament text of Scripture in a loose fashion instead of its exact form to prove a chronological point about God's dealings with Israel after the church age has elapsed.

This explanation preserves the complete inspiration of the Masoretic text (not the Septuagint) and at the same time allows for variations of this text only by the apostles who were being led by the Holy Spirit to write down Scripture in their day (2 Peter 1:20-21). In other words, God chose to fit an Old Testament text of Scripture into a New

Testament setting to prove a chronological point of how God would deal with Jews and ultimately save the Gentiles by grace following the present church dispensation.

Many worthies of the dispensational persuasion have spoken about how James used this chronological approach to this passage. They understood how James was revealing that Israel would once again be restored to the place of blessing following the church age and God's blessings to the Gentiles.

Arno C. Gaebelin wrote:

"Now, according to the statement of James, the Gentiles must be visited first; a people (the church) is to be taken out of them. After this is accomplished and the full number, which constitutes the church, is called out, the Lord will return. It is not his coming for His saints, as revealed in 1 Thessalonians 4:16-18, but His visible Return in power and glory, of which the prophets speak."

Merril F. Unger writes:

"The prophecy of verse 11 was quoted by James at the first great church council held in Jerusalem (Acts 15:16) to unfold God's program for the future with reference to the church and Israel. The passage in Acts discloses God's program after the church period is consummated. When that is accomplished in the calling out of the church, the Lord will return and restore the promised Davidic Kingdom (2 Samuel 7:8-15) to His ancient people, Israel."

Mal Couch said:

"To make this point, James expanded upon and explained further the context of the verses from Amos. James added, "After these things" which is not in Amos. This must refer to "after God has called out Gentiles for his name" (Acts 15:14), i.e., the church. Thus, God will work with the Gentiles before He restores the kingdom to Israel."

We do know that following the Tribulation (Amos 9:8-10) God will establish the messianic kingdom (Amos 9:11-12). The message of James in Acts 15:14-17 does not mention the tribulation period. However, it must be understood that the intent of James was not to fill in all the gaps of the prophetic chronology but to broadly sweep the general course of God's present dispensational workings with the

Gentiles with those prophetic events connected with Gentile salvation during the kingdom. These texts dealing with Gentile salvation during the kingdom were clearly revealed by the prophets and should have been known by the experts of the Scriptures in the Jerusalem conference.

We must be careful not to miss the major point or real intent of the teaching of James. When Israel's fortunes return, following the present order of Gentile blessing in the church, there would be another time of Gentile blessing. This will occur when Gentiles are saved by grace, without the law, during the kingdom age. And this prophetic peak of the future should provide the Jerusalem council with enough Old Testament proof that Gentiles can be saved by grace without the circumcision of the law.

It would then seem that the chronological point of this passage, though true and significant, is only a secondary emphasis designed to ultimately demonstrate how God will save the Gentiles by grace following Israel's blessing in the future. This will be during the kingdom age. Therefore, an indirect chronological approach is taken of Israel's blessings, following the church age, in order to highlight a prophetic portion of the Word of God that promises salvation by grace to the Gentiles during the millennium. And this is done to demonstrate that God's purpose for the present age is similar. God intends to save Gentiles by His grace without circumcision, without the sacrifices, without the works of the law!

It's also very important to see that what was happening in the present church blessing was only in agreement ("agree") with Old Testament prophets. It does not say that it was the fulfillment of the Old Testament prophets. In other words, James did *not* say that this prophecy of Amos was being fulfilled at the time he spoke. Rather, he said that the salvation of Gentiles which was then taking place was *in harmony* or agreement with what Amos said would take place later. The two events agree in the fact that Gentiles will be blessed though they are not identical in their timing.

Amillennial interpreters, who reject the teaching about a literal millennium, try and make the New Testament church an extension of Old Testament Israel which in the present dispensation fulfills the

covenants given to Israel. Covenant theology claims that the rebuilt house of David is the church of the New Testament.

F.F. Bruce spiritualizes the entire text and wrongly concludes:

“But James’s application of the prophecy finds the fulfillment of its first part (the rebuilding of the tabernacle of David) in the resurrection and exaltation of Christ, the Son of David, and the reconstitution of His disciples as the new Israel, and the fulfillment of its second part in the presence of believing Gentiles as well as believing Jews in the church.”

In other words, according to Reformed Theology, the Old Testament Israel becomes the New Testament Israel called the church and there is no future kingdom since the kingdom exists today while Christ reigns over the church as King. According to the *spiritualizing method* of interpretation, the church today is simply a new form of Old Testament Israel and has inherited Israel’s covenant blessings in a spiritual way, where Christ reigns over the church as King. This simply is not true since the church was a sacred secret unknown in Old Testament times (Eph. 3:5-6; 5:32; Col. 1:25-27; Rom. 16:25). Furthermore, Christ is always called the head of the church and not the King of the church (Eph. 5:23; Col. 1:18). In addition, it’s a stretch of the imagination to identify Christ’s exalted entrance into heaven, to rule as King over the church, as the return that James is speaking about in this text. The return of Christ to earth is contrasted to Christ’s entrance into heaven.

Acts 1:11

“Which also said, Ye men of Galilee, why stand ye gazing up into heaven? this same Jesus, which is taken up from you into heaven, shall so come in like manner as ye have seen him go into heaven.”

The resurrection and exaltation of Christ cannot be described as a “return” to heaven as the text and any logical interpretation clearly reveals. Such conclusions involve Scripture twisting and exegetical gymnastics. It is actually a return to earth that all the prophets of the Old Testament Scriptures revealed and spoke about in such a dramatic fashion. Covenant Theology tries to do away with Christ’s return to earth in connection with a literal future for national Israel. This is because their system of interpretation rejects the entire ideal

of any prophetic program and earthly covenant promises given to Israel as a national people. According to this scheme of interpretation, the great prophetic portions of the Word of God have already been fulfilled historically (preterism) in Israel's return to the land and Israel's judgment in A.D. 70. For this reason, God has abandoned His program with national Israel forever. Today God is said to be working with the new Israel, which is the New Testament church, and the Old Testament prophecies are spiritualized and made to fit in the context of Christ's reign over the church today in the form of a present day spiritual kingdom. In other words, the prophecies of Christ's return in relationship to Israel's earthly blessings are seen to be prophecies pointing to God's description of Christ reigning over the New Testament church in a spiritual kingdom.

The amillennial writer, Louis Berkhof, writes:

"Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the prophets occasionally transcended their historical and dispensational limitations, and spoke in forms that pointed to a more spiritual dispensation in the future. In such cases the prophetic horizon was enlarged, they sensed something of the passing character of the old forms, and gave ideal descriptions of the blessings of the New Testament Church."

The amillennial writers consistently interpret the prophecies of the Old Testament in a non-literal fashion and relate them to prophecies given about the New Testament church in the present church age.

A. A. Hodge, who advocates the allegorization trend, writes:

"The Old Testament prophecies ... which predict this [Davidic] kingdom, must refer to the present dispensation of grace [the church], and not to a future reign of Christ on earth in person among men in the flesh ... The New Testament is entirely silent on the subject of any such return [of the Jews to the land of their fathers] ... the spiritual interpretation of these Old Testament prophecies – which regards them as predicting the future purity and extension of the Christian church is both natural and accordant to the analogy of Scripture."

Of course, such conclusions are disbelief in what the Bible actually says. These conclusions flatly deny the normal understanding of Scripture, which verifies time and time again about Christ's literal

return to earth so that Israel as God's national people can inherit their earthly promises.

F. A. Tholuck, D.D. comments on the tabernacle of David in Acts 15:16: "The entire passage confirms that the "tabernacle of David" is an expression referring to the whole nation of Israel, and that in contrast to the Gentile nations. By no possible stretch of the plain meaning of this passage can the "tabernacle of David" be made to be the equivalent of the New Testament church. The prophecy concerns the *rebuilding* of that which was fallen down. The "ruins" are to be rebuilt "as in the days of old." The nature of the blessings are earthly, territorial, and national, and have nothing to do with a spiritual church to which none of these blessings have been promised."

When using the sane literal hermeneutic or interpretation of Scripture it stands to reason that the church could not be referred to in Amos. Nor could the tabernacle of David be referring to the church. James surely knew that Christ had not yet returned to rebuild the tabernacle of David. Furthermore, the word "return" in verse 16 refers to an actual literal, bodily return (note Luke 5:22). This return cannot be spiritualized as referring to Christ's return to heaven and His present day reign over the church today from David's throne in heaven. Christ is not on the Davidic throne today. David's throne is never seen to be in heaven. Today Christ is associated with the throne of His father, which is located in Heaven and not on earth (Rev. 3:21; Heb. 1:3). The throne of the father and the throne of David are two different thrones. Only when Christ returns to earth will He sit upon David's earthly throne and fulfill the Old Testament prophecies promised to his national people Israel (2 Sam. 7:16; Ps. 89:4; Matt. 19:28; 25:31).

When interpreting this text literally, we will discover that James was making a valid case about Gentile salvation in the Old Testament without the law or circumcision. And he does this to prove the point that the Gentiles in the present dispensation of the church could also be saved without circumcision. You will also notice that the word "prophets" (Acts 15:15) is in the plural. This means that there were other prophets who talked about what Peter had referenced in his message – mainly Gentile salvation. Amos is but one prophet representative of the rest of those prophets. In other words, the passage of Amos is used as a *representative* or *example* of what the

other prophets spoke about in regards to Gentile salvation. Of course, the Old Testament prophets did not give witness to the blessing of the Gentiles in the church dispensation since this was an unknown mystery not revealed in the Old Testament (Ephesians 3). But he is using the prophets, Amos in particular, to illustrate how God has promised to bless the Gentiles in the millennial kingdom through salvation by grace without the law. These illustrations give ample prove that Gentiles could be saved in the present dispensation without circumcision or the law. The Old Testament gave reference after reference to Gentile blessing in the future kingdom.

Isaiah 11:10

“And in that day there shall be a root of Jesse, which shall stand for an ensign of the people; to it shall the Gentiles seek: and his rest shall be glorious.”

Isaiah 42:6-7

“I the Lord have called thee in righteousness, and will hold thine hand, and will keep thee, and give thee for a covenant of the people, for a light of the Gentiles; To open the blind eyes, to bring out the prisoners from the prison, and them that sit in darkness out of the prison house.”

Isaiah 55:1 prophetically records:

“Ho, every one that thirsteth, come ye to the waters, and he that hath no money; come ye, buy, and eat; yea, come, buy wine and milk without money and without price.”

Chapter 54 of Isaiah envisions Israel’s reception of the Gospel at Christ’s return to earth. But chapter 55 envisions the glorious kingdom era when the invitation of salvation will be offered to the entire globe during the millennium. This passage envisions the Gospel being carried to the ends of the earth during the kingdom days through the redeemed remnant of Israel. A free Gospel of grace will be offered to the Gentiles without the circumcision of the law. No honest reader of the Old Testament Scriptures could miss this clear invitation.

Isaiah 60:3-5 also speaks of the conversion of Gentiles during the kingdom era: “And the Gentiles shall come to thy light, and kings to

the brightness of thy rising. Lift up thine eyes round about, and see: all they gather themselves together, they come to thee: thy sons shall come from far, and thy daughters shall be nursed at thy side. Then thou shalt see, and flow together, and thine heart shall fear, and be enlarged; because the abundance of the sea shall be converted unto thee, the forces of the Gentiles shall come unto thee.”

Malachi 1:11 also records:

“For from the rising of the sun even unto the going down of the same my name shall be great among the Gentiles; and in every place incense shall be offered unto my name, and a pure offering: for my name shall be great among the heathen, saith the Lord of hosts.”

Even in Psalm 2:8 of Israel’s hymnbook we read:

“Ask of me, and I shall give *thee* the heathen *for* thine inheritance, and the uttermost parts of the earth *for* thy possession.”

The text in Amos 9:11-12 says:

“In that day will I raise up the tabernacle of David that is fallen, and close up the breaches thereof; and I will raise up his ruins, and I will build it as in the days of old: That they may possess the remnant of Edom, and of all the heathen, which are called by my name, saith the LORD that doeth this.”

“In the day” refers to Israel’s regathering to Palestine and their subsequent conversion to Christ, which marks the beginning of the kingdom (Zech. 12:10-13:1). Israel’s salvation and restoration to the land is spoken as the time when the Messiah or Deliverer will restore the lowly fallen estate of David’s people to their promised blessings in the kingdom (“I raise up the tabernacle of David that is fallen”). In fact, the salvation and restoration of Israel (David’s people) to the land is further explained as closing up or walling up “the breaches” or broken places and raising “up his (David’s) ruins, and I will build it as in the days of old.” This expression means that the Messiah will build up the nation as in the days of her former glory and prospering under David and Solomon before the division of the kingdom had occurred (2 Samuel 3:1). These expressions of building and raising up refer to David’s people, the Jews, who will be restored spiritually and then literally to the land of promised blessing.

The millennial scene in Amos 9:12 is then depicted when the prophetic text describes the redeemed remnant of converted Israel possessing the nations of Gentile people, even their former enemies (“Edom”) for the Lord. This speaks of Israel’s witnessing ministry to those who will be born during the 1,000-year kingdom era and how the Jewish remnant will lead Gentiles to Christ by their witness of the true Messiah. Amos reveals that those Gentiles who have been “called by my name” or by the Lord’s sovereign purpose and plan in the kingdom dispensation will respond to the Gospel message in that glorious time. Israel will take the Gospel of salvation to the Gentiles during the kingdom era of 1,000 years and possess them for the Lord (“That they may possess the remnant of Edom, and of all the heathen”

The lovely verse of Isaiah 52:7 reads:

“How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him that bringeth good tidings, that publisheth peace; that bringeth good tidings of good, that publisheth salvation; that saith unto Zion, Thy God reigneth!”

The beautiful feet of the Jewish redeemed remnant will share the Gospel with the Gentiles during the kingdom. Converted Israel will be evangelists, bearers of the Gospel of grace, to the nations of the earth during the Golden Age. This is what Amos was talking about, as he mentions about the people (Israel) possessing Edom and the Gentile nations for the Lord. And this is what James elaborated on at the Jerusalem council. Gentiles will be saved by grace, without the law, during the kingdom even as the prophets, like Amos, clearly unfolded to us in their prophetic portions of Old Testament Scriptures.

Our text in Acts 15:17 says:

“That the residue of men might seek after the Lord, and all the Gentiles, upon whom my name is called, saith the Lord, who doeth all these things.”

Evidently those remaining converted Gentiles (“residue of men”) who enter the kingdom following the Second Advent of judgment (Matthew 25:31-46), and those Gentile people (“all the Gentiles”) who respond to the Jewish witness during the kingdom reign and are saved, will be saved by grace without circumcision or the law. The message of the

prophets, as represented by the free quote from the passage of Amos, cannot be overlooked by the Jerusalem council. Gentiles can be saved without circumcision and the law. All of the “prophets” give witness of this coming Gentile conversion by grace without the law (Acts 15:15).

J. C. Macaulay once said:

“The words of the prophets are like a symphony, the voices of many instruments so attuned and blended that they are one in the presentation of a great theme, and the theme is their very procedure of God – grace toward the Gentiles.”

We must then rightly conclude that the Old Testament prophets were used to illustrate before the Jerusalem council that Gentile blessings were already spoken about from the sacred writings as they give reference to Gentile blessings during the future reign of Christ. Therefore, it should be no surprise that God would want to work with Gentiles during the present church age. After all, the Old Testament prophets, like Amos, have already *illustrated* to us that God has promised to bless the Gentiles in the future. Therefore, it’s only reasonable to assume that He will bless them in the present church age as Peter had promised. The whole conclusion is then this.

The main point is clear and cannot be missed. Gentile salvation apart from the Law of circumcision does not contradict the Old Testament prophets. The inserted message about the church in the present dispensation and Israel’s fortunes following the present order is used as a means to an end. The Gentiles of today could be saved by grace (not law) and become part of the New Testament church in view of the promised blessings of salvation in the Old prophets. These prophets revealed that Gentiles would be saved by grace, without the law, in the coming kingdom.

William MacDonald wrote:

“Then James quoted from Amos 9:11, 12. Notice that he did not say that the calling out of the Gentiles was in fulfillment of the prophecy of Amos, but rather that it *agreed* with the words of the prophets. The assembly should not think it a strange thing that God should visit the Gentiles with salvation, because this had been clearly predicted in the OT. God had foretold that Gentiles would be blessed as such, and

not as believing Jews. The quotation from Amos looks forward to the Millennium, when Christ will sit upon the throne of David and when the Gentiles will seek after the LORD.”

Once again we must understand that verses sixteen and seventeen are a free quote of the Old Testament passage of Amos 9:11-12. *The best explanation seems to be that the same Holy Spirit who originally inspired the words now permitted them to be changed in order to meet the problem at hand.* James does not seem to be concerned about quoting verbatim the Old Testament passage. For instance, the verb “possess” is changed to “seek” and the name “Edom” is changed to “of men” which indicates the Spirit’s intent to use the passage to teach a general truth about Gentile salvation during the millennium (“and all the Gentiles upon whom my name is called, saith the Lord, who doeth all these things” – verse 17).

As God by His grace would call out a people for his name in the present dispensation of the church so He has already promised in the Old Testament Scripture to call out a Gentile people by His grace during the coming kingdom. Therefore, it should be no surprise that God can save the Gentiles of the present order by grace without the circumcision of the law.

The prophecy of Amos and other Old Testament prophecies reveal Gentile salvation in the kingdom – “In that day” (Amos 9:11) or during the restoration and subsequent blessing of the Gentiles in the kingdom (Amos 9:12). The point seems to be this. If the Gentiles will be saved by grace in the coming kingdom age, then why should they become Jewish proselytes by circumcision in the church age? In verse 17 the text says this: “Gentiles upon whom my name is called.” James’ point is that Amos makes no mention of Gentiles becoming Jewish proselytes in order to be saved. If Gentiles can be saved without becoming Jews in the kingdom, there is no need for Gentiles to become proselytes in the present age.

So let’s reiterate the reason James had for quoting Amos 9:11-12? James quotes these verses in order to verify Peter’s exegeted message, which he revealed concerning God’s dispensational dealings with the Gentiles in the present church age. In doing this he was showing the uniqueness of God saving Gentiles by grace and

including them in the present blessings of the church with the Jews in what is called the body of Christ.

We agree with what Dr. Scofield who said:

“Dispensationally this is the most important passage in the New Testament. It gives the divine purpose for this age, and for the beginning of the next.”

This does not suggest that Amos prophesied about the church in the Old Testament. James freely quotes the Old Testament passage to prove that God will turn to the nation of Israel only “after” His program with the church is completed to ultimately one day bless the Gentiles by grace during the millennium. *Gentile blessing always follows Jewish blessing!*

God’s Sovereign Plan of the Ages

(Key words are “his works”)

Acts 15:17-18

“That the residue of men might seek after the Lord, and all the Gentiles, upon whom my name is called, saith the Lord, who doeth all these things. Known unto God are **all his works** from the beginning of the world.”

The quotation from Amos closes with the statement that these are the words of the LORD “who doeth all these things.” We must understand that all of these blessings to the Gentiles came about in accordance with the sovereign plan of God. God had the plan of the church and Gentile blessing in His mind from eternity past. God runs the ages and works all things “after the counsel of his own will” (Ephesians 1:11). The events of eternity present are governed by God’s decrees in eternity past. And God has decreed and known His saving works from eternity past.

Acts 15:18

“Known unto God are all his works from the beginning of the world.”

These works are “his works” which indicate that God is in control of the present church age and all the ages in which He declares His

special working and activities. The church age has superceded the kingdom age. The kingdom has been postponed. But kingdom prophecies will have a future literal fulfillment so national Israel can inherit their long awaited covenant promises. The calling out of the church comes first. But let not the Jews think that God has forgotten His promise to David or imagine that this promise will have no literal fulfillment (2 Samuel 7:15-17). All will be accomplished in God's sovereign timing.

God has His own calendar. Certainly God is in control of the dispensations (Eph. 1:10; Heb. 1:2) and His plan will come to fruition exactly as He has planned. Nothing will be left undone in God's plan. For now, the Gentiles will be blessed in the present dispensation or stewardship of time. Later they will be blessed once again following Israel's own blessings. God works in exactness and according to His own timetable. Nothing will alter the plan of God. God is completely in control of these glorious events that transpire. God's sovereign plan of the ages will not be thwarted.

Ephesians 3:10-11

"To the intent that now unto the principalities and powers in heavenly *places* might be known by the church the manifold wisdom of God, According to the eternal purpose which he purposed in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Concluding Remarks

The present dispensation of the church age was not the primary focus in this passage, even though it inserts the working of the Lord in connection with the church and becomes an important text of great dispensational significance. The primary goal of this passage was to teach that the Gentiles should not need circumcision in view of what the Old Testament prophecies taught. They revealed that the Gentiles salvation in the future earthly kingdom would be by grace, without circumcision. The purpose of James was to highlight the Old Testament prophecies in order to focus on Gentile salvation in the coming kingdom. The mention of the church age was simply a starting point in a chronological order of events to emphasize Peter's present teaching about Gentile salvation. Mentioning about the church was a means to an end and not the main thrust of the

passage. However, we cannot dismiss the important truth which Peter taught or exegeted for this church age and understand that James used this teaching for a springboard to teach about how Israel's future blessing, following the church age, would again translate into Gentile salvation as predicted by the Old Testament prophets.

In other words, the truth about the Gentiles in the church was used as the beginning of a chronological order to teach how Israel's blessings would once again come "after" the church age has expired resulting once again in the blessing of the Gentiles in the kingdom. The main thrust of these chronological events was the culminating event that centered upon the blessing of the Gentiles in the future kingdom. And the prophetic message of Amos ("the prophets") was given as an illustration to prove that the Gentiles could be blessed in the present church age. James uses the words "after this" and not "in that day" as in Amos to give a transition from the church age into the millennial age of blessing, which is seen in the Old Testament prophecies and which foretold of the Gentile blessing of salvation by grace without the law.

The pattern seems to be repeated. God first blessed the Jews as a special people in the Old Testament and then in the New Testament we discover how God primarily blessed the Gentiles in the church age in a special body called the church. So it will be in the future when Israel is blessed and restored. Israel will be blessed first at the return of the King to the earth (Romans 11:25-26). Following Christ's return to the earth multitudes of Gentiles, born during the kingdom reign, will once again receive blessing through salvation by grace. And this prophetic picture of Gentile blessing in the kingdom gives ample evidence to the Jerusalem counsel that Gentiles in the present order can be saved by grace without the circumcision of the law.

Let's recapture the chronological order of both the dispensational and prophetic statements in this passage of Scripture - Acts 15:14-17. The culminating event in this progressive order of dispensational and prophetic events is used to teach about the Gentiles salvation by grace, without circumcision, during the kingdom.

1. The taking out of the Gentiles a people for His name during this present dispensation of grace (v. 14).

“After this:”

2. The restoration of the believing portion of the nation of Israel at Christ’s Second Advent (vv. 15-16).

Resulting in:

3. The salvation of Gentile nations during the millennium following the restoration of Israel (v. 17). These Gentiles are referred to as “all the Gentiles, upon whom my name is called.”

The conclusion:

4. Gentiles can be saved without becoming a Jewish proselyte through submitting to circumcision. This is because the prophecy of Amos illustrates Gentile salvation by grace during the millennium. What will be true in the future is also true for today. Gentiles are saved by grace.

Application to present situation:

Acts 15:19

“Wherefore my sentence is, that we trouble not them (with circumcision – the Law of Moses), which from among the Gentiles are turned to God.”