

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](https://paypal.me/robbradshaw)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Evangelical Quarterly* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_evangelical_quarterly.php

A STUDY IN ACTS XV. 16-18

DR. C. I. SCOFIELD, in his Reference Bible, and in a note beneath Acts xv. 16-18, says: "Dispensationally, this is the most important passage in the N.T. It gives the divine purpose for this age and the beginning of the next", etc. We take it, therefore, that this is the most important passage in the Bible in support of the "Dispensational" method of interpreting the Scriptures, since the Scriptures are "not manifold, but one" (*Confession of Faith*, I, ix.). We shall show that this passage cannot possibly bear the weight of interpretation which the Dispensational School puts upon it.

I

Acts xv. 16-18 is a quotation from Amos ix. 11, 12. In comparing the passages we see some marked differences between them. James quotes: "That the residue of men might seek after the Lord"; the passage in Amos reads: "That they may possess the remnant of Edom." The verb in Acts is "seek", the verb in Amos is "possess". The noun in Acts is "men", the noun in Amos is "Edom"; and Acts inserts the two words, "the Lord". The translators of our English Bible followed the Masoretic Hebrew text in Amos, while James is quoting from the LXX. Applying the science of textual criticism to this passage in the LXX we find that A adds the words, "the Lord", and B omits them. So far as these two words are concerned, the problem is narrowed down to a choice between the readings of these MSS. But what about the differences between the verbs and the nouns? Apparently the LXX read יִדְרְשׁוּ for יִרְשׁוּ, a variation between ך and ך, which is very common; and also apparently they read אֲדוֹמִים for אֲדוֹמִים, a difference only in the pointing or the vowels; and we must remember that they had only the consonantal text before them. But James, in Acts xv. 16-18, is following the LXX closely, and quotes the addition of A. How are we going to dispose of this problem before we can advance into an interpretation of the passage? Two alternatives are open to us:

1. We might say that the Masoretic Hebrew text is to be corrected by the reading of the LXX in Amos ix. 11, 12. But

the evidence from textual criticism is too strong to allow that. Upon examination, we conclude that the LXX rather is to be corrected by the Masoretic Hebrew text.

2. We assume, therefore, that the Hebrew text in Amos ix. 11, 12 is correct as we have it. But, in view of the problem before us, this assumption implies at least three things :

(i) James is not striving for a literal interpretation of Amos ix. 11, 12, but quoted from the LXX as being sufficiently accurate for his purpose at that time. We know that Edom is used in other Scriptures to refer to the Gentiles, and the conquest of Edom and the conversion of the Gentiles are used synonymously.

(ii) James is not quoting Amos specifically, and did not intend to do so. He is giving us the gist of O.T. prophecy on the subject, using language closely resembling that of Amos. Note what he says : " To this agree the words of the *prophets* " (plural).

(iii) James is intentionally " spiritualizing " and broadening Amos's prophecy.

II

The context of Acts xv. 16-18 helps greatly to an understanding of James's use of Amos ix. 11, 12. In xv. 1 we are told that " certain men which came down from Judaea taught the brethren, and said, Except ye be circumcised after the manner of Moses, ye cannot be saved ". Then when Paul and Barnabas came to Jerusalem they told the brethren there what God had done through them among the Gentiles (verse 4). Then Peter arose and supported Paul and Barnabas in their inclusion of the Gentiles, recalling his own experiences in that connection (verses 7-10). " And then all the multitude kept silence and gave audience to Paul and Barnabas, declaring what miracles and wonders God had wrought among the Gentiles by them " (verse 12). The natural interpretation of this passage is that the Lord had builded again the tabernacle of David which had fallen, and that the people were seeking God, the Gentiles having received the Holy Spirit. But Dr. Scofield applies the passage entirely to the future. He applies the phrase, " I will return ", to the second advent of Christ ; and the clause, " And will build again the tabernacle of David which is fallen ", he refers to a

re-established Davidic rule over the nation Israel upon earth in the Millennial age. Dr. James M. Gray, late beloved Dean of the Moody Bible Institute, takes the same view (*Commentary for Christian Workers*, p. 353). The significant thing is that neither one takes the passage as having had any fulfilment at all, even in part. But surely Peter, Paul and Barnabas are reciting what God had already done among the Gentiles through them, and surely also this is what called forth the quotation. The Dispensational School applies this passage to the future and to the Millennium; while Peter, Paul and Barnabas were referring to something which had already taken place. But was not James also referring to that? James said, Simeon hath declared . . . and to *this* agree the words of the prophets. To what agree the words of the prophets? To what Simeon has just declared—how that the Gentiles had received the Holy Spirit the same as the Circumcision, and were already seeking God. Is it possible that James arose in that electric moment and began to talk about something removed from the matter in hand by untold millenniums? That is beyond the scope of the passage, and beyond all true principles of Scriptural exegesis. James quoted Amos ix. 11, 12 as having fulfilment in his day. This is what Luke quoted him as saying, this is what the Bible says, and that is final. Even if it be said that the passage had only partial fulfilment, yet the passage was “spiritualized” by James, and there is no reason to suppose that any possible future consummation might not also be spiritual. But the language of James seems to exclude any partial fulfilment, and would rather carry the idea that James regarded the prophecies in question as having fulfilment in the facts presented by Peter, Paul and Barnabas.

III

I shall now suggest a detailed exegesis of Acts xv. 16.¹ The A.V. reads, “after this”; the A.R.V. reads, “after these things”; the verse in Amos reads (both versions), “in that day”. These are all familiar Biblical expressions, but they must not be regarded as having only future significance. According to regular N.T. usage, for example, we are now living in the “last days” (Heb. i. 2), and have been for nearly two thousand years,

¹ This exegesis was suggested to me in lectures by Prof. O. T. Allis, Westminster Theological Seminary, Philadelphia.

at least. The expression, "in that day", means sometimes, with its various kindred expressions, something which has already passed. Gen. xlix. 1, "And Jacob called unto his sons, and said, Gather yourselves together that I may tell you that which shall befall you in the latter days." Here are things using this expression which terminated upon the death of Jacob's sons—long before the coming of our Lord the first time. A study of such expressions will show that they are rather broad. It is simply beyond the bounds of true exegesis to pin them down, as does Dr. Scofield, for example, and assert definitely that "after this" refers to the time immediately after the calling out of the Gentiles, and yet future. All we wish to show here is that the same expression is used in the O.T. of events that had already been fulfilled. It is plainly impossible to treat such an expression as having solely a future significance.

The next expression that arrests us is, "I will return". The Greek word used is *ἀναστρέψω*. This word is never used in the N.T. of the Second Coming of our Lord, for we believe this passage is no exception. It is often used to translate the Hebrew word *בָּשַׁב*. It is difficult not to understand the sense of this verb as transitive in this instance, as in many others, in view of the fact that the LXX apparently supplied the word, since it is not in the Masoretic Hebrew text. Why did they supply the word? Was it not because they were using it in the sense of "again", according to regular O.T. usage? See Gen. xxvi. 18, etc. If the decision of the meaning of the verb here rests upon a question of interpretation, as Professor Thayer seems to imply, then there is plenty of argument from the analogy of O.T. usage for the transitive sense. It seems to me that the LXX, being themselves Hebrews, and therefore acquainted with the Hebrew idiom, are simply telling us what Amos is telling us, viz. that God is going to build again the tabernacle of David that is fallen. But no matter whether we reject or adopt the transitive use of the verb, it does not here refer to the Second Coming of Christ. If there is any Messianic advent purported by the LXX in their insertion of this verb, then James took it, if he so understood them, to refer to the first advent, and its consequent outpouring of the Spirit, upon the Gentiles.

But what does the expression, "build again the tabernacle of David which is fallen", mean? The first word of interest to us is "tabernacle". The word at once suggests the Mosaic

tabernacle of the wilderness wanderings. But we are mistaken. It is not the same word. The word here is הַבֵּית , meaning "a booth", and has no connection with the Mosaic tabernacle. It is used of the Feast of Tabernacles, or booths, when the Israelites dwelt in tents or booths during the time of the Feast. It means simply a little tent, such as may be carried while travelling. But plainly in this connection it refers to the Davidic kingship. This is not the usual word employed for this. The usual word is "house". The word "tabernacle" here is clearly an allusion to that state of the Davidic kingship which had fallen to the condition of a little tent that had crumpled down. Isa. i. 8 is a good commentary on this: "And the daughter of Zion is left as a cottage in a vineyard, as a tent (הַבֵּית) in a garden of cucumbers, as a besieged city." So to build again the tabernacle of David means to restore the Davidic line to dignity and power in the person of the Messiah. It has no possible connection with a supposed restoration of the service of the Mosaic tabernacle, nor with a temporal reign of David's line upon the earth at any time. Surely the Davidic line could receive no greater homage than is now its due. The Messiah of the seed of David according to the flesh was declared to be the Son of God with power by the resurrection from the dead. God hath highly exalted Him, and given Him a name which is above every name, and in His name every tongue shall swear, and every knee shall bow. Surely from His coming no one could call David's line a little "booth" that had crumpled up. And to do so now—to put this Scripture entirely in the future—is to contradict the teaching of the present exaltation of "great David's greater Son".

CLAUDE E. HAYWARD.

The Manse, Thorburn, Nova Scotia.