

THE USE OF AMOS 9:11-12 IN ACTS 15:16-18

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INTRODUCTION

Many interesting and important topics come under the general heading of hermeneutics. One such area which has provided no lack of scholarly discussion is the question of the interpretation and use of the Old Testament scriptures with regard to New Testament doctrine and practice. Inevitably, discussion of this topic must consider the way in which the New Testament authors understood and applied the Old Testament, and while this brings up many potentially difficult passages, few are as thorny as James' citation of Amos 9:11-12 during the Jerusalem Council as recorded in Acts 15:16-18.

The council was called to resolve "the issue of whether to accept the Gentiles."¹ After Peter related his experience at the home of Cornelius, and Paul and Barnabas told of their work among the Gentiles, James acknowledged these works of God as true, and corroborated the experiential evidence with the testimony of the prophets, citing Amos specifically. In his citation James quotes from the Septuagint (LXX) rather than from the Hebrew text (MT), and herein is the problem for it would seem that the LXX version of the passage is based upon a flawed reading of the Hebrew, which upon first reading seems to be entirely unrelated to James' argument.

The import of this discrepancy reaches beyond hermeneutics to a question of errancy. Was a major crisis of the early church solved on the basis of an erroneous understanding of the book of Amos, and if so how does this affect our formulation of a doctrine of the inspiration of Scripture? Can we simply conclude with Augustine that "whatever is found in the Septuagint and not in the Hebrew manuscripts, the one and the same Spirit chose to say it through the Seventy rather than through the Hebrew manuscripts; and He showed thereby the prophetic character of both"² Surely claiming inspiration for both the LXX and the MT in this case merely compounds the problem.

It shall be the goal of this paper to argue that James does quote from the LXX, and that this version is based upon a misreading of the Hebrew, but that upon close observation of the three versions (MT, LXX and NT) it can be seen that James' use of the passage does no violence to the intended meaning of the prophet. It shall be shown that the incorporation of the Gentiles into the believing community of God was present in the Hebrew text of Amos. Therefore, even though James cites a faulty translation, his use of Amos 9:11-12 was by no means in contrast to its author's intent, and the integrity of the scriptural witness remains intact.

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THE MASSORETIC TEXT

In the ninth chapter of the book of Amos, the prophet has a vision of the Lord executing judgment (verse 1). There will be nowhere to hide from His wrath (verses 2-4), for He is the Almighty God (verses 5-6). Israel has become like the heathen nations (verse 7) and thus must face judgment, but destruction will not be total for He will separate out the sinful from the faithful (verses 8-10)

In that day, "i.e. when the judgment has fallen upon the sinful kingdom, and all the sinners of the people of Jehovah are destroyed"³, God will raise the fallen booth of David. This is a reference to the Davidic dynasty, but the word choice "booth" (sukkah) instead of house emphasizes the "degenerate condition of the royal house of David"⁴ — a booth "was a rude structure usually made by setting up a simple frame and spreading branches over it."⁵ Not only has the house of David been reduced to a rustic tent, but even the tent has fallen. But Yahweh will raise David's house, and this restoration is further defined by three clauses. First, the Lord promises to "wall up their breaches" (that is, to repair the parts of the walls which have been ruined). The Greek versions (as well as most modern translations) smooth out the differences in the suffixes of each of the three clauses, referring each back to the feminine "booth," when in fact these differences can and should be taken as intentional. Keil insists that the Hebrew feminine plural suffix, "their broken places," must be seen as referring to the two kingdoms, which this restored house of Israel would consist of.⁶ Kaiser sees this as an anticipation of the unification of the northern and southern tribes such as would be later predicted in Ezek. 37:17-28.⁷

Second, Yahweh promises to "raise his ruins." Again noting that the masculine suffix "his" does not refer to the grammatically feminine booth, Kaiser suggests that it "must refer to none other than David himself," and understands this to be a messianic reference to the restoration of the Davidic line of rulers in Christ.⁸

Finally, the Lord will "rebuild it as in the olden days," the feminine singular suffix referring back to "booth." The olden days certainly refer back to the "halcyon period of David . . . a past distant in time and different in conditions"⁹ when Israel enjoyed Yahweh's favor. The use of the verb "to build" may also be reminiscent of Yahweh's promise to David to build a house for him and raise a seed whose throne would be established forever (II Samuel 7:11-16).

To summarize, in verse eleven Yahweh promises that in the day when Israel has been purged of sin He shall raise again the fallen and humbled house of David. This restoration will include a reestablishment of the Davidic kingdom, royal line, and dynasty. Thus a complete restoration to past glory is foretold.

Verse twelve continues the theme of the restoration of Israel. The masculine plural subject of the verse refers to the righteous ones remaining in Israel when Yahweh restores her, and this restoration will increase the borders of the kingdom to include the "nations," (goyim) here used in the sense of the heathen nations.¹⁰

Edom, one of the nations originally brought under the subjection of David, had recovered its freedom by the time of Amos. It is mentioned specifically here "because of her marked hostility toward the people of God."¹¹ A remnant is spoken of in light of God's judgment which is coming against Edom (see Amos 1:12; Obadiah; etc.), and thus this verse refers to those who survive Yahweh's judgment.

The crucial question is the nature of the incorporation of the nations into the restored kingdom. The verb "yrsh" means to "take possession of especially by force, (to) have as a possession, often with the collateral idea of taking in place of others, succeeding, (or) inheriting."¹² The normal use of the word would infer that the restored Israel will subject, possibly by force, the people (here referring to the "last remnant of people"¹³ as opposed to simply land or territory) of the Gentile nations and Edom specifically. The key to the interpretation lies in the phrase (lit.) "which my name is called upon them." According to Kaiser, "the usage of this phrase in the OT always placed each of the objects so designated under divine ownership."¹⁴ The Gentile nations, and even the remnant of the despised Edom, thus will become God's own possession incorporated into His kingdom, making "the nations citizens of God."¹⁵ Here, and in verses such as Isa. 54:1-8, a time is seen in which Israel's "descendants will possess the nations, i.e. instead of defeating them in battle the nations will also become God's people."¹⁶ Therefore, regarding verse twelve, Kaiser concludes, "It definitely meant to teach that Gentiles will be included in some future reign of God."¹⁷ The passage ends with a firm statement that these are the words of Yahweh, that these works will be accomplished by Him, and therefore that these promises are trustworthy.

To summarize, Amos 9:11-12 predicts a time following the judgment of Yahweh when He shall restore the kingdom and royal line of David. The reign of the seed of David will encompass not only Israel, but will expand to include the Gentile nations as well, reminiscent of the conquests of David. In this future kingdom the Gentiles will not be included as slaves, however, but instead will be members of the believing community which is called by the name of Yahweh. This all will be accomplished by the strength of Yahweh Himself.

THE SEPTUAGINT

In the Greek translation of the Old Testament, Amos 9:11 remains very close to the Hebrew. Aside from the substitution of the more general "I shall build up again those things which have fallen" for "I shall wall up their breaches," and the practice of changing all suffixes to the feminine singular and relating them all back to "tent," the LXX follows the meaning of the MT here quite closely.

In verse twelve, however, a discrepancy arises. Whereas in the Hebrew the subject is the people of Israel, the verb is "to possess," and the objects are

Edom and the nations, the LXX places Edom and the nations as the subjects, gives “they shall seek out” as the verb, and offers no object.¹⁸ This change certainly alters the Hebrew, and can probably be best explained as a misreading of the Hebrew rather than a deliberate editorializing. Instead of yrsh “to possess” drsh “so see” is read due to a very small difference between two Hebrew letters (similar to the difference in English between ‘a’ and ‘d’). Instead of “Edom”, “man” is read (“adam” involving only a change of vowels, which are not found in the original Hebrew text). The Hebrew accusative particle is omitted altogether, thus allowing the Hebrew object to become the Greek subject.¹⁹

Therefore, the Greek becomes, “in order that the rest of the men and all the nations which are called by my name might seek out,” the implied object of their search being God Himself. As can be seen, while both versions promise a restoration of David’s fallen tent in verse eleven, the MT states in verse twelve that the restored Israel will possess the nations, while the LXX suggests that Israel’s restoration will initiate the nations’ own seeking of God. Although there are differences, the crucial point maintained by both MT and LXX in verse twelve is the inclusion of Gentiles as God’s people, called by His name. Therefore, while the LXX is based on a misreading of verse twelve, the primary point of Gentile inclusion is still present (in fact, it is amplified in the LXX reading). The Lord will restore Israel, and this work will also include the Gentiles. Thus the intent of the passage is not seriously harmed by the translation error. It now remains only to observe how James uses this verse in Acts.

THE NEW TESTAMENT

As has been stated, the fifteenth chapter of Acts relates the proceedings of the council called at Jerusalem to put to rest the issue of Gentile inclusion into the church. After some debate, Peter rises and gives his view based upon the witness of the Spirit having been given to Gentiles just as He came to the Jews on Pentecost (verse 7-11). Then Paul and Barnabas tell of the mighty workings of God among the Gentiles which they had witnessed (verse 12). James responds that these witnesses show God’s design to take for Himself a people from the Gentiles (verses 13-14), and then backs up this statement with the proof of the scriptures (verses 15-18). Note that James states that these events agree with the general messages of the prophets, not simply a single proof text. He then offers as an example the passage under consideration.

With some minor alteration, James quotes Amos from the LXX, as was his custom.²⁰ He alters the beginning (“in these days” becomes “after this,” the end (“the Lord God who does these things” becomes “the Lord who does these things which has been known for ages,” possibly in reference to the LXX reading of Is. 45:21), consistently substitutes “rebuild” for “raise up” (which he may have considered a technical term for the resurrection of Christ), and adds the direct object “the Lord” to verse twelve.²¹ Aside from these changes, it is obvious that James quotes from the LXX rather than the Hebrew.²²

The question which must be considered is: Is James' use of Amos 9:11-12 contrary to its intended meaning specifically because his use is based upon a faulty translation? James' argument is that the experiential evidence may be accepted because it is confirmed by scripture. The inclusion of the Gentiles into God's kingdom is not something new, but rather something which God had not only planned long before but which He had also made known long ago through His prophets. James had just related how God had desired "to take a Gentile people for His name," (verse 14), and it was most likely the phrase "for His name" which "was the trigger thought that brought to the mind of James the words of Amos."²³ As has been suggested, the theme of Gentile inclusion is intrinsic in both the Hebrew and the Greek, and while the LXX is surely more forceful to this point (did James choose it for this reason, or was this simply the version he remembered?), "even our Massoretic Hebrew could have served the present purpose admirably, since it predicted that the 'tabernacle of David,' i.e. the church of the Messiah, would gain possession of all the nations which are called by name [of the God of Israel]."²⁴

CONCLUSION

There is certainly a difference between the Hebrew text of Amos 9:11-12 and the Greek of the LXX, which James cites in Acts 15:16-18. We need not, however, solve this dilemma as did Augustine, who claimed inspiration for the LXX, nor as some modern critics, who would remove the words from the mouth of James entirely and place them into the hands of a Greek editor who was unaware of the problem he was creating. Instead, a careful consideration of the versions in question reveals that the theme of Gentiles included in God's kingdom, called by His name, and part of the believing community, is present in each, even the Hebrew. And it was this point which James brought out. In choosing the LXX he may have had a clearer argument, but it was not an argument foreign to the original intent of the Hebrew.

NOTES

1. S. Toussaint, "Acts," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, ed. J. Walvoord, and R. Zuck (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1987), 393.
2. Augustine, *City of God*, quoted in R.V.G. Tasker *Old Testament in the New Testament*, (London: SCM Press, 1954), 78.
3. C. F. Deil, *Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament: Minor Prophets* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954), 329.
4. *Ibid.*
5. James L. Mays, *Amos: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1969), 164.
7. Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *The Uses of the Old Testament in the New* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1985), 182.
8. *Ibid.*
9. Mays, 164.
10. R. Laird Harris, "goy", in *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, (TWOT) R. L. Harris, G. L. Archer and B. K. Waltke (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980), 153.
11. Kaiser, 183.
12. F. Brown, S. R. Driver, C. A. Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford: University Press, 1907), 439.
13. Brown, Driver, Briggs, 984.
14. Kaiser, 184
15. Keil, 332.
16. John E. Hartley, "yrsh", in TWOT, 410.
17. Kaiser, 185.
18. Although some LXX versions do contain an insertion of *me* to complete what is implied. See Earl Richard, "The Creative Use of Amos by the Author of Acts", *Novum Testamentum* 24 (1982): 44-52.
19. A discussion of these changes may be found in Keil, 334, note 1.
20. Bruce points out that in the Epistle of James nearly all of the OT quotations are from the LXX. F. F. Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Chicago: InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, 1952), 298.
21. For a fuller discussion of the redactional significance of these changes see Richard, 44-53.
22. Although it is not within the scope of this paper to investigate the significance of James' choice of citing the LXX rather than the Hebrew, it seems unnecessary to conclude with Munck that "this indicates that the words of James have been thoroughly reworked" (J. Munck, *The Acts of the Apostles*, The Anchor Bible [Garden City: Doubleday & Company, 1967], 39) or with Lake and Cadbury that "either the whole source of this chapter was Greek, or the speeches at least are due to a Greek editor" K. Lake and H. J. Cadbury. *The Beginnings of Christianity Part I*, vol. 4, *The Acts of the Apostles* [Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979], 176).
23. Kaiser, 184.
24. C.C. Torrey, cited in *Commentary on the Book of the Acts* by F. F. Bruce (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954), 310.