

Acts 15:15–20 — To This Agree the Words of the Prophets

*Agreement Not Fulfillment, the Tabernacle of David and the Millennium,
Wherefore I Judge, and the Slide Toward Judaism*

Scripture Reading: Acts 15:13–20; Amos 9:8–15

“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.

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

“Wherefore my sentence is, that we trouble not them, which from among the Gentiles are turned to God.”

Agree, Not Fulfil: A Critical Distinction

Many Bible teachers and commentators, reading verse 15, see words they do not read. What the text says is: to this agree the words of the prophets. What they read is: this is the fulfillment of the words of the prophets. These are not the same statement, and confusing them produces serious dispensational error. The distinction is everything.

James is not saying that the present work of God among the Gentiles fulfills the Amos passage. He is saying that it agrees with it — that it is not inconsistent with what the prophets foretold. The prophets had prophesied Gentile blessing. God saving Gentiles now is not contradicting those prophecies; it is agreeable with the

general direction of God's purpose toward the nations. That is a much more limited and careful claim. The present work was not predicted in the Old Testament; the mystery of God taking out a people for his name from the Gentiles was hidden from ages and generations. But it does not contradict what was prophesied; it agrees with it.

The second thrust of James's citation is equally important. The Amos passage about Gentile blessing says not one word about those Gentiles being circumcised. The millennial Gentiles who come to worship at Jerusalem will not be required to be circumcised or to keep the Jewish ritual. If the Old Testament prophecies of Gentile blessing make no such requirement, what grounds do the Pharisaic brethren have for insisting on it now? The quotation serves double duty: it shows that Gentile salvation is agreeable with the prophets, and it shows that Gentile salvation without circumcision is equally so.

The Tabernacle of David and the Millennium: Context in Amos 9

To understand what James quotes, the context of Amos 9 must be read. Amos 9:8–11 speaks of God sifting the house of Israel among all nations, preserving every grain of his elect through the sifting, and then: in that day I will 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 restoration comes after the sifting of Israel is complete.

The sifting of Israel is not complete now. Israel is back in the land in unbelief. The times of the Gentiles are not yet over — their being in the land does not of itself mark the end of the times of the Gentiles. The great tribulation, Jacob's trouble, such as never has been, is still impending. When that is passed and the Lord returns in power and glory, then he will raise up the tabernacle of David. Then he will sit on the throne of David. Until then, the words of Acts 15:16 — after this I will return and rebuild — cannot be applied to anything in the present

age. The word after this in James's quotation means after the things described in Amos 9: after the sifting, after the judgment. Not after Peter spoke; not after Paul's first missionary journey.

The Lord Jesus is not now on the throne of David. Revelation 3:21 is plain: he that overcometh, I will grant to him to sit with me in my throne, as I also have overcome and have sat down with my Father in his throne. He is on the Father's throne now — seated at the right hand of God, as Psalm 110 declares, until his enemies are made his footstool. His own throne, the throne of David, awaits his coming. Those who teach that the Lord is already reigning in a Davidic sense are moving toward covenant theology and away from the clear words of the scripture. The position is unstable and its trajectory leads toward post-tribulationism.

The Lord Who Doeth All These Things

Verse 18 closes the quotation: known unto God are all his works from the beginning of the world. Or in J.N. Darby's translation: known from eternity. This is the foundation of the whole thing. It is not that men have arranged a meeting and come to a wise decision and are doing something impressive. It is that the Lord who doeth all these things has known from eternity what he would do. The sovereignty of God over his whole purpose — toward Israel, toward the Gentiles, in this age and in the age to come — underlies everything James says.

Notice how consistently throughout the proceedings of Acts 15 everything is referred back to what God has done. God made choice (verse 7). God bore witness (verse 8). God wrought among the Gentiles (verse 12). God visited the Gentiles (verse 14). The Lord who doeth all these things (verse 18). Self is absent throughout. The assembly was not exalting any man's wisdom or any committee's decision. The question was what God had done and what his word said, and those two things were what settled the matter.

Wherefore I Judge: Moral Authority Without Office

Verse 19 in J.N. Darby's translation reads: wherefore I judge. This required courage. James could have quoted the prophet Amos and then said: so I suppose we all agree, then. He could have let the consensus form around him without putting his own name on a conclusion. But he did not. He said: wherefore I judge. A clear, individual, personal judgment, openly declared, on a matter that had divided a room.

The authority behind it was not official. James was not the bishop of Jerusalem in any hierarchical sense. His authority was moral — the authority that comes from walking with God, knowing the scripture, and being in condition of soul to speak for the Lord. Paul writes in Galatians that those who seemed to be somewhat — a phrase that acknowledges their weight without endorsing a system — added nothing to him. James had that weight. When he spoke, it bore upon consciences. But it was moral weight, not clerical position. The assembly was not a democracy; every man's opinion did not carry equal weight. And yet it was not a hierarchy; no one commanded. The Holy Spirit through the word and through a man in spiritual condition brought the assembly to common mind.

The Slide Toward Judaism: Then and Now

James's quotation of Amos refers to the tabernacle of David as something fallen, its ruins as something needing to be rebuilt. This language was pointed. Those who had formerly been Pharisees might have had great admiration for the Mosaic system and Jewish forms of religion. James, quoting the scripture, referred to those very things in terms of a collapsed tent and ruins. You want to put Gentiles under something that the scripture calls fallen? You want to attach them to ruins?

The slide toward Judaism has been the characteristic danger of Christendom from the first century onward. At first it was the direct pressure of Judaizing teachers, as in Acts 15 and in Galatia. Then the whole system of the church slid toward a

sanctuary, an officiating priesthood, and a clerical structure — all of which are Judaistic. The Reformation recovered justification by faith but did not shake off the Judaistic forms. Covenant theology arose and brought the law in as the rule of Christian life. The Lord's Day was transmuted into the Sabbath. The present-day movement of Messianic Judaism is the latest form of it: well-named, because Judaism is exactly what it is. What the chapter before us makes plain — that Gentile believers are not to be put under the things that characterized Israel as Israel — is precisely what Messianic Judaism blurs.

The recovery of truth in the 1830s and following saw clearly that to have an officiating minister over a congregation and a sanctuary in which he ministered was Judaism brought into Christianity. Clergymen, rich and poor, high and low, left those positions by the hundreds to gather simply to the name of the Lord. The Lord Jesus is the minister of the sanctuary above (Hebrews 8:2); his saints worship there in spirit, with boldness by the blood of Jesus (Hebrews 10:19–20). To reproduce a sanctuary and an appointed minister here below is to set up something that belongs to what James called a collapsed tent.

To this agree the words of the prophets. Wherefore I judge.