

A promise of future blessing - Amos 9:11-15

The book of Amos closes with a note of hope against the background of the many preceding pronouncements of judgment.

There has been much discussion about two questions which pertain to this final section of the book.

1. This section is the one most frequently challenged with respect to its authenticity (i.e. as part of the original writing of Amos himself). The line of argument is related to the nature of prophecy. As R. S. Cripps says (p.74, 75):

"The historical background implied is not that of Amos' time.

(1) The situation indicated in the concluding verses is that Judah has now been taken captive by the Babylonians. . . . Furthermore it is difficult to believe that, at a time when David's dynasty was standing, men were bidden to look for the restoration of his 'fallen hut, the closing up of 'the breaches thereof', the raising up of 'his ruins' and its rebuilding 'as in the days of old' (v.11). In other words, in the Epilogue, the viewpoint is shifted; and the problem becomes similar to that of the authorship of Isaiah, chs. xlff."

In response it can be asked why a prophet might not presuppose the occurrence of what he himself had earlier predicted? Could not Amos, who prophesied the fall of Jerusalem (2:4,5) presuppose its having happened and then look beyond it? (see Motyer, NBC p. 728).

2. How is one to interpret vss. 11-15, including the use of vss 11,12 by James at the council of Jerusalem (Acts 15:14-17), and what is the relationship of the interpretation of vss 11-12 to the interpretation of vss. 13-15?

J. A. Motyer (NBC, 741) says of Amos 9:11-15: "The world wide rule of the Davidic Messiah is a regular prophetic feature and figures prominently in the royal Psalms. The warlike metaphor in many of these passages is of course to be understood in terms of the kingship of the Lord Jesus Christ and the missionary expansion of the church. This is the interpretation authorized by the N.T. in Acts 15:12-19."

Allis, 145. ". . . perhaps the best passage in the NT for testing the correctness of the dispensational method of interpreting Scripture."

"Old" Scofield Notes (Acts 15, p.1169): "Dispensationally, this is the most important passage in the N.T."

The passage has been used in the manner of Motyer and Allis by many in the amillennial school of interpretation. The conclusions drawn from this passage are then used to support similar interpretations of other OT "kingdom prophecies" as references to the church. The line of argument that is developed by those of this view is as follows:

1. Verse 11. The "raising up of the tabernacle of David that is fallen" is taken as a reference to the power of Christ as the Son of David in the present time of the preaching of the gospel.

Laetsch, The Minor Prophets, p. 191.

"He will raise up the fallen hut, and raise it to glory far surpassing that of its highest former splendor. . . .this was fulfilled in the days of Messiah. Jesus and the Apostles began their work by calling to repentance the lost sheep of the house of Israel (Matt. 10:6; 15:24; Luke 24:27; Acts 1:8; 2:5ff.; 13:46; 14:1). Among these converts from the Jews there were undoubtedly a number of members of the ten tribes (cp. Matt. 4:12-25; Luke 2:36). In the Church of the New Testament the breach separating the Northern and the Southern Kingdom of Israel will be healed."

Allis, Prophecy and the Church, p. 148,149.

"The words 'I will raise up the tabernacle of David which is fallen' do not refer to a future Davidic kingdom. The house of David, the mighty kingdom of David and Solomon, had sunk to the level of a lowly 'booth' (cf. Isa. i.8 where the same word occurs; it has no connection with the Mosaic tabernacle). When Immanuel-Jesus, the Son of David, was born in Bethlehem, He was heralded and acclaimed by angels; and the incarnation of the Second Person of the Trinity as David's Son was the beginning of the raising up of the fallen booth of David. And when David's Son rose triumphant over death and commissioned His disciples with the words: 'All power is given unto me in heaven and on earth,' He claimed a sovereignty far greater than David ever knew, or ever dreamed of possessing. So, when Peter and the other apostles declared that God had raised up Jesus and 'exalted him with his right hand to be a Prince and a Saviour' (Acts v.31), they were insisting that the mighty acts which they were enabled to perform were the direct exercise through them of His sovereign power."

2. Verse 12. "Possessing the remnant of Edom" (from the statement: "That they may possess the remnant of Edom, and of all the nations, which are called by my name . . .") is made equivalent to the "conversion of the gentiles". This is based on the change of wording in the quotation of the Amos passage in Acts 15:17 where it reads: "That the residue of men might seek after the Lord, and all the nations upon whom my name is called." This significant change in wording is construed as a deliberate and inspired interpretation of the Amos passage by means of which the OT statement is raised to a higher level of meaning. It is to be noted, however, that James quotes from the wording of the LXX. See Allis, p. 146.
3. Verses 13-15. These verses are usually taken as descriptive of the Christian church. See Laetsch, 192. (Hoekema takes them as descriptive of the new earth/eternal state - but one might ask why, then, the emphasis on Israel).

See Hoekema, The Bible and the Future, p. 209, 210 for an example of how this passage is used to justify a hermeneutic that can be applied to other passages as well.

"Prophecies of this sort may, however, also be fulfilled *figuratively*. The Bible gives a clear example of this type of fulfillment. I refer to the quotation of Amos 9:11-12 in Acts 15:14-18. At the Council of Jerusalem, as reported in Acts 15, first Peter and then Paul and Barnabas tell how God has brought many Gentiles to the faith through their ministries. James, who was apparently presiding over the council, now goes on to say, 'Brethren, listen to me. Simeon [Peter] has related how God first visited the Gentiles, to take out of them a people for his name. And with this the words of the prophets agree, as it is written, 'After this I will return, and I will rebuild the dwelling (or tabernacle, KJ and ASV) of David, which has fallen; I will rebuild its ruins, and I will set it up, that the rest of men may seek the Lord, and all the Gentiles who are called by my name, says the Lord, who has made these things known from of old'" (Acts 15:14-18). James is here quoting the words of Amos 9:11-12. His doing so indicates that, in his judgment, Amos's prediction about the raising up of the fallen booth or tabernacle of David ('In that day I will raise up the booth of David that is fallen . . .') is being fulfilled right now, as Gentiles are being gathered into the community of God's people. Here, therefore we have a clear example in the Bible itself of a figurative, nonliteral interpretation of an Old Testament passage dealing with the restoration of Israel. . . . *Here, then, we find the New Testament itself interpreting an Old Testament prophecy about the restoration of Israel in a nonliteral way. It may well be that other such prophecies should also be figuratively interpreted* (italics mine). At least we cannot insist that all prophecies about the restoration of Israel must be literally interpreted."

Lets look at these interpretative questions by beginning with point #2 (v. 12) which is of particular importance because:

- 1) of the NT quotation which it involves.
 - 2) the conclusion that one draws concerning the issues involved in #2 (v. 12) have an important bearing on the interpretation of points #1 (v. 11) and #3 (vv. 13-15).
1. The textual problem.
(See A. A. MacRae, "The Scientific Approach to the OT," BibSac 110 (1953) 309-320)

MacRae notes that the wording in Acts is a quotation of the LXX. This is agreed to by Allis as well. MacRae notes further, however, that if there is any lifting of the OT prophecy to a higher level of meaning as amillennialist interpreters suggest, it is the LXX that initially did this, not James. Certainly the unknown writers of the LXX are not to be considered inspired. So how are we to explain the difference between the LXX and the MT? Is not the most logical answer that the LXX and the Hebrew text were in agreement at the time of the Jerusalem Council, and that the same wording was found in both? If James had used a quotation that was different from what the men at the Council knew to be the Hebrew original, why did someone not say "wait a minute, an inaccurate quotation of the OT is not going to be the basis for deciding the issue of this council for us!" What makes this suggestion particularly feasible is that the change of just one Hebrew letter (ך to ך) which is easily confused anyway, gives a Hebrew original agreeable to the LXX

(plus the addition of two vowel letters which may have been introduced in the Hebrew text after the time of the translation of the LXX). This suggestion is strengthened by the observation of J. de Waard that one of the Dead Sea Scrolls (4QFlor 1.12) alludes to Amos 9:11-12 in Hebrew wording exactly corresponding to the wording of the quotation in Acts (J. De Waard, A Comparative Study of the Old Testament Text in the Dead Sea Scrolls and in the New Testament, Leiden: Brill, 1965, 25-26. de Waard comments: "It would not be necessary to pose this question if a careful examination of Am 9,11 in 4QFlor I, 12 and in Acts 15,16 did not compel us to do so. The text form of the Amos quotation in Acts differs from that of the MT and the LXX, but it is exactly identical with that of 4QFlor.).

2. What was the issue of discussion at the Jerusalem Council and how does the Amos prophecy address this issue?

The issue under discussion at the Jerusalem Council needs to be clearly understood. The issue was not whether Gentiles could become Christians. That question had already been settled (cf. Acts 11:1-18). The issue was whether those Gentiles who had been converted would also need to be circumcised, i.e., first become Jewish proselytes (cf. Acts 15:5,6) in order to be acceptable in the church. James quotes the Amos passage to settle this question. His argument is as follows:

- a. He summarizes Peter's reference (vss. 7-11) to the conversion of Cornelius and his household (Acts 10) in vs. 14 (see vss. 7-11).
- b. He then says that the words of Amos agree with this (vs.15). He does not say that the Amos passage predicted the specific matter that Peter described, i.e., the conversion of Gentiles and the beginning of the church. We must remember that the point at issue at the Jerusalem council was not whether Gentiles could be converted; but, rather, would Gentiles be required to circumcise and to keep the law of Moses. It is not logical to hold that James quoted an OT prediction saying that Gentiles will come to Christ, and then from this concluded that since the OT says that Gentiles will come to the knowledge of Christ they do not need to be circumcised. Such a conclusion would beg the question that was being asked. The interpretation which maintains that James was quoting a verse to establish that Gentiles will be converted does not directly address the circumcision issue. Since the Council agreed to adopt James' advice, we must assume that the passage he quoted did address the question of circumcision in some way. The amillennial interpretation, normally, does not give adequate recognition to this point.
- c. If one assumes that the Amos passage is speaking about the eschatological kingdom, and about a fulfillment subsequent to the time of the Jerusalem council, then, the use which James makes of the passage takes on a different meaning.

Notice that James speaks of the experience of Peter saying: "*Simeon hath declared how God at the first did visit the Gentiles to take out of them a people for his name*" (vs. 14). When James connects the quotation from Amos with the

conversion of the Gentiles he says (vs 16a) "***After this I will return and . . .***" James' "***after this***" sequences with "***at the first***" of vs. 14 and is a clear modification of the Hebrew wording of Amos 9:11. Amos 9:11 begins: "*In that day will I raise up . . .*" The words "***After this I will return and***" are not in the Hebrew of the book of Amos, nor are they in the LXX. There would seem to be little doubt that James deliberately substituted "***After this I will return and***" for the general time expression with which the Amos passage begins (*In that day*) in order to introduce his quotation by placing it in a more specific time frame.

In addition, as was noted above, James does not say that Amos had predicted that God would "*visit the Gentiles to take out of them a people for his name*" (Acts 15:14b), because he says "*And to this agree the words of the prophets . . .*" James is not suggesting that Amos specifically predicted the events which Peter had described, but, rather, he is suggesting that Amos envisions a time when such a people would already be in existence. So, according to James, what Amos says agrees with the fact reported by Peter and Paul, that God has begun to "*visit the Gentiles, to take out of them a people for his name.*"

If the entire passage is read with these considerations in mind, then it is not difficult to see the relation of the passage to the question of circumcision. To the members of the council, the argument seems to have been quite clear.

Remember, the issue at the council was not whether Gentiles could become Christians, but whether they could become Christians and remain Gentiles. Thus the quotation from Amos must, in some way, give a clear and logical reason why the council should decide that it was not necessary for new Gentile converts to be circumcised. It does this, only if it is understood to be a description of the situation that will exist at the time Christ returns to set up his kingdom. If Amos is not speaking of this future time, when there will be Gentiles upon whom Christ's name is called, but is merely predicting that Gentiles will be saved, then the prophecy has no clear bearing on the issue of circumcision. Conclusion. Those who interpret the quotation from Amos as a description of the establishment of the church are:

- 1) attributing a "figurative interpretation of Amos" to James, when in fact he was simply quoting the correct OT text, which was subsequently corrupted.
- 2) taking the quotation in a way that has no direct bearing on the central question which was before the council, the question of whether or not Gentile converts would have to be circumcised.
- 3) disregarding the way in which James introduced the quotation, by omitting Amos' phrase "*In that day*" and substituting a phrase (*After this I will return and*), in order to indicate the particular time when the Amos prophecy will be fulfilled.

This position on #2 (v. 12) above (p.13) gives strong weight to the interpretation of #1(v. 11) above as a reference to the eschatological kingdom of Christ established at his 2nd advent (rather than the church at Christ's first advent), and to vv. 13-15 (#3 above) as descriptive of conditions that will exist at that time.

J. B. Payne takes a mediating position (EBP, 417). He views vs. 11 as the "revival of the line of David in the person of Jesus Christ" - with the reference to his first coming on the basis of Acts 15:16. The fulfillment of vs. 12 he sees in the "engrafting of Gentiles into the Israel - that is the church." He takes the phrase "*after these things I will return*" (Acts 15:16) as meaning after the exile and preservation of Amos 9:9-10 (thus simply an equivalent for the Amos expression "*in that day*" in the Amos context rather than Acts context). Vss. 13-15 he sees as descriptive of millennial prosperity.

Aalders, Het Herstel van Israel-Volgens Het Oude Testament, 33.

"My conclusion is therefore that we have two separate prophecies in Amos 9:11-15 which are concerned with two separate subjects and which find fulfillment in two entirely different periods. The first (vss. 11-12) is a proclamation of the Messianic rule of the Davidic dynasty. This is fulfilled with the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and its fulfillment continues in the conversion of the heathen by the preaching of the gospel. The second (vss. 13-15) is a promise of return from exile, and is fulfilled in the return decreed by the Persian King Cyrus. With this approach I oppose on the one hand the chiliasts who understand vss 13-15 as a reference to the return of the Jews to Palestine in the messianic time, but on the other hand also various non-chiliastic expositors who spiritualize vss. 13-15, and entirely against the clear sense of the words see here the spiritual benefits which Christ bestows on His church. Neither the one nor the other idea is correct. We can only do justice to the words as they now stand if we keep both prophecies (in agreement with what is often seen in prophecy) separate and understand the first as a reference to the Messiah, but the second as Israel's return from the Babylonian captivity.

Keil p. 336 - fulfillment in church - the land is the domain of the Christian church so far as it has received the blessings of Christianity.

Hoekema, p. 211,212 - new earth - eternal state.

Nevertheless, Hoekema uses this passage and its NT interpretation as a basis for justifying a hermeneutic that can be applied to other passages as well. See Hoekema, The Bible and the Future, 209, 210. This is the reason why the way in which one interprets this passage becomes so important.

Acts 15:17 - that the residue . . . does this not indicate result and thus favor a 1st advent view for vs. 16?

This depends on how one understands "*seek after the Lord*." If in the sense of conversion, it would seem to favor 1st advent view. But the word is not always used in this sense. TDNT (Vol 2, pp. 894,895 [εκζητεῖν]) says: "ε'κζητειν τὸν κύριου denotes the attitude of the righteous as they ask after God and are concerned about his grace" (cf. Isa 11:10, Heb 11:6; Ps 77:2(3); Ps

105:4). And there is still the problem of the logic of the passage as a whole, and the use of the quotation to settle the dispute concerning circumcision.

In Continuity and Discontinuity (J. S. Feinberg, Editor, Crossway Books, 1988) O. P. Robertson contributes an article entitled "Hermeneutics of Continuity" (pp 89-108). Almost the entirety of this article is given over to a discussion of Amos 9:11-15. Although Robertson is amillennial in his eschatology, he stresses that the issue under discussion at the Jerusalem council was circumcision. He says (p. 94, 95):

"The question was whether Gentiles ought to be received without having to undergo the initiation rite of circumcision. The whole question at issue may be lost if the significance of circumcision is forgotten. . . . While no specific reference was made to circumcision, James' remarks supported the view that Gentile believers should not be required to be circumcised in order to become full, participating members in the New Covenant community . . . But precisely how does Amos 9 resolve the question of circumcision for the Gentiles? The passage nowhere mentions the rite of circumcision. Yet James is confident that this passage speaks to the issue before the council, and his argument prevails."

It seems to me that Robertson has here faced an issue that has often been ignored by amillennial interpreters. Usually the focus has been on suggesting that the Amos prophecy simply envisions a time when Gentiles will be saved. This leaves aside the issue of circumcision, and does not do justice to the use of the passage at the Jerusalem council. How then, does Robertson connect his understanding of the passage to the question of circumcision?

Robertson concludes:

"This perspective explains the significance of Amos' quote for the debate concerning circumcision. Why should the Gentiles be brought under the externalities of the old administration as a way of becoming God's people? Already they possess the highest blessing of the New Covenant. By the baptismal seal of the Holy Spirit, they have the name of God placed indelibly on them. It is as Gentiles that they have entered the blessings of the covenant. They need not become 'Jews' in the Old Covenant sense in order to experience the blessing of being God's people. They already possess the full privilege of having God's name on them. An introduction into the patterns of the old ritual would gain them nothing and would contradict the new openness of God's purposes to men of all nations."

While this rationale is a decided improvement over older amillennial expositions of the passage, it is, in my view, not as clear cut as the approach defended above. In addition, Robertson has little to say about how one is to fit the interpretation of verses 13-15 with this view. He says (pp 107, 108):

". . . the interpreter could propose that all the language of Amos must be spiritualized so that the blessings of the present 'church age' are equated with the restoration of paradise.

But the present agonies of the redeemed in Christ testify against this position. Paradise in its full glory hardly has been restored in the present day and the Scriptures do not give encouragement to the dualism that is satisfied with a 'spiritualized' fulfillment of God's consummation purposes.

So another possible understanding of the fulfillment of Amos' prophecy could be suggested. A genuine fulfillment is occurring in the present age, in harmony with the argument of James. The selection of Gentiles to be God's people on an equal footing with Jews may be seen as the consummation of God's plan of redemption from ages past. Israel's unique role indeed may be recognized in its being the 'servant' by which the gospel has been brought to the nations. Israel continues to have significance in God's inclusion of Jewish people among the redeemed.

Yet at the same time the present fulfillment of Amos' prophecy may be seen as only the 'first stage' of God's consummation activity. The restoration of the Davidic throne takes on the lowly form of a 'booth' or 'tent'. Yet the final installment of the Spirit as possessed by Gentiles today guarantees the future restoration of all things. Endowed in the end with bodies transformed by the resurrection power of the same Holy Spirit believers in Christ ultimately shall participate in the restoration of all things at the re-creation of heaven and earth."