

Lion and Lamb Apologetics

How OT Scriptures Changed the Course of History at the Jerusalem Council

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1



A Crucial Moment in the Early Church

Tensions were running high. The “who’s who” were all there, for the stakes were simply too enormous to miss this meeting. The mother city played host. The keynote addresses were set to begin.

It was AD 49, and on the docket was a pivotal issue that early followers of Jesus had to hash out for the explosive new movement to go forward. It had begun almost entirely with *Jewish* followers of Jesus. But recently, *non-Jews* (Gentiles) had been joining the movement in droves, upsetting the status quo and raising tremendous theological questions. *What are we to do with Gentiles?*

Do they need to convert to Judaism to be on the varsity team of early Christianity? Or, more seriously, do they need to adhere to Mosaic customs and laws in order “to be saved” ([Acts 15:1, 5](#))? Would Christianity be *gospel* for some and *gospel + law* for others? The apostles and elders gathered in Jerusalem to sort it out, famously recorded in [Acts 15:6–21](#).

Peter spoke first, recounting how the Gentile Cornelius’s household had experienced an outpouring of the Holy Spirit—like Pentecost 2.0—after Peter himself saw a vision from the Lord declaring all things “clean” ([Acts 15:7–11](#), referring to [Acts 10–11](#)). Paul and

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Barnabas then “related what signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles” ([Acts 15:12](#)). But was this enough proof?

The decisive speech fell to James, the brother of Jesus. Yet his speech mainly quoted Scripture ([Acts 15:13–18](#)). Visions and miracles do not truly matter unless *God himself* has spoken authoritatively on the matter. The turning point at the Jerusalem Council was a passage from the Word of God.

2

Scripture and the Apostles

James’s appeal to the Old Testament (OT) comes as no surprise to those who are familiar with how the New Testament (NT) works. Nearly every writing of the NT engages verbatim with the OT somehow, and you can hardly drive through a chapter in some books (like Romans) without hitting the OT. Why? The apostolic writers were simply following Jesus’s instructions. As one of his last acts on earth he “opened their mind” to understand the Scriptures, so that through them they might witness to the whole world ([Luke 24:44–47](#)).

The NT authors apply the OT along three main veins:

- To present the *gospel* of salvation (e.g., [Genesis 15:6](#) in [Galatians 3:6](#))
- To describe the person and work of *Christ* (e.g., [Deuteronomy 18:15](#) in [Acts 3:22](#))
- To capture the identity and mission of the *church* (e.g., [Exodus 19:5–6](#) and [Hosea 1:6–10](#) in [1 Peter 2:9–10](#))

Though OT literacy is waning,¹ it is exhilarating to dive deeper into the use of the OT in the NT. It may not be easy, but it is always worth it.

So let us trace through what James does with the OT to solve the conundrum at Jerusalem. What is it about the OT that brings clarity—and *changes the history of the world in the process*? Let us follow three steps.

Step 1: Identify the passage(s)

The first (but often overlooked) step is to notice that an NT author is using the OT in the first place. Footnotes and study Bibles help, but quite often the writer plainly tells us.

¹ Justin Dillehay, Ivan Mesa, “Bible Literacy Crisis! (And What You Can Do About It in 2020),” January 14, 2020, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/bible-literacy-crisis/>.

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Here James doubles down with “words of the prophets” and “as it is written” ([Acts 15:15](#))—it is hard to miss that he is using the OT here. The citation reads like a single quotation and is presented like that in most English Bibles. However, James tips his hand with plural “prophets.” He is actually combining passages:

“After this I will return” → [Zechariah 8:3](#)

“I will rebuild the tent of David . . . called by my name” → [Amos 9:11–12](#)

“Who makes these things known from of old” → [Isaiah 45:21](#)

With this combination strategy, James is stressing that the entire prophetic witness is authoritative for the matter at hand. God has spoken, and his word settles it.

But why does James pick these passages and put them together?

Step 2: Double-click on the OT

Once we identify that a NT author is using the OT, the second (and also regularly overlooked) step is to look up the passage.

Jesus did not teach the apostles to cherry-pick passages and splash them on nature backgrounds for out-of-context inspiration. Rather, when they draw on the OT they point to the entire passage. Thus, we need to “double-click” and do the hard but rewarding work not only to read the cited phrase but study its whole context.

Let’s begin with [Zechariah 8](#), the first snippet used by James. In this beautiful prophecy, we are reminded that God sent his wayward people into Babylonian exile, but he promises a future day when he will do two main things. He will restore Jerusalem with a family reunion to beat all reunions and be present with the remnant as their God once more ([Zech. 8:3–19](#)). At the same time he will usher in “peoples” from the nations, grasping the hand of Jews and going to Zion to worship *together* in the presence of God ([Zech. 8:20–23](#)). The promise is stunning: in a glorious future time, God will dwell among *Jews and Gentiles* united as one people under his lordship.

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We turn now to James's primary passage, [Amos 9](#). This prophet promises that the "fallen booth" or "tent" of David—referring to the kingdom that has fallen into disrepair through exile—will be rejuvenated by God in some future time ([Amos 9:11](#)). Yet this blessing is not just for Jews. The "nations" who are "called by my name" will also come under the sway of this renewed kingdom ([Amos 9:12](#); note: this theme is pinpointed more clearly in the Greek translation, which is what [Acts 15](#) is using). Indeed, when these days arrive all creation will abound forever ([Amos 9:13–15](#)).



Finally, [Isaiah 45](#) records God's invitation to all nations—foretold "from of old"—to abandon false gods, turn to the true God, and worship him from one end of the earth to the other ([Isa. 45:21–23](#)). Strikingly, when this happens the remnant of Israel will be glorified as well ([Isa. 45:25](#)).

All three passages play the same note: the fate of both Jew and Gentile is intertwined. When God intervenes in a future "day" to restore his wayward people, he will also gather in Gentiles who turn to him by faith.

How, then, does James astutely bring these prophecies together to cut the knot at the Jerusalem Council?

Step 3: Listen to the remix

When a NT author engages an OT passage, he does not simply copy and paste it unchanged. The apostles were convinced that Scripture addresses the church as people "on whom the end of the ages has come" ([1 Cor. 10:11](#)). God did not stop working in the OT. Thus, the OT is never left static and untouched; it grows in depth as God's work—now manifest most fully in Christ—continues to deepen. We can see NT authors as "remixing" the OT: not *changing* it, but bringing out the melodies and rhythms with freshness as they apply it to a new situation.

James does precisely this when he combines Zechariah, Amos, and Isaiah as "prophets" who "agree" with what is happening before their eyes. Jesus has come as the Davidic king to establish a forever kingdom at long last. The day of restoration has arrived!

He inaugurated this kingdom among his own people first ([John 1:11](#); [Rom. 1:16](#)). But—and this is absolutely essential—this kingdom is not, and never has been, limited to Jews within the mind of God. It was always designed to enfold believers from Jew and Gentile alike. *That* is the insight that the prophets bring to the table. They painted a stunning picture that the people of God would be a third thing made up of Jews and Gentiles, with all mutual hostility gone. And James's insight is this: what they foresaw *is now*. That's

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why Cornelius converted. That's why Paul and Barnabas saw miracles among Greeks. God is moving among Jews *and Gentiles*, and the two are now one.

Not varsity and junior varsity Christians.

Not faith for one and circumcision for the other.

All are saved by faith and brought into the same rebuilt "tent" under the same Lord, Jesus Christ. The mic of the prophets of old has dropped. The matter is settled.

5

Wrapping up

James's appeal to Scripture at the Jerusalem Council changes the course of history. God has spoken, and that changes everything. Stepping back, his use of the prophets has amazing things to teach us about:

- The *gospel* of God's plan of salvation, from ancient Israel to the present
- *Christ* as the enthroned king on David's throne, reigning forever
- The *church* as one people made up of believers from all walks of life, regardless of DNA, just as God intended

[Acts 15](#) shows us, if nothing else, that the OT is *our story*, now completed in Christ!

Greg Lanier is the author of [Old Made New: A Guide to the New Testament Use of the Old Testament](#).



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