Prophetic fulfillment in Luke – Acts

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(Note: All underlining of Scripture quotations for emphasis has been added by the author.)

The author of both the Gospel of Luke and its sequel, the book of Acts, was Paul's travelling companion, Luke the physician (Ac 16:10-17[1]; Col 4:14). Luke composed both works for a certain "Theophilus" — probably a Roman administrator[2] and recent convert to the Christian faith. Luke's gospel account (composed first) was intended to help confirm what Theophilus had already been taught concerning Jesus (Lk 1:1-4; cf. Ac 1:1).
But Luke undoubtedly intended a wider audience too, who might benefit from his research and witness.

In both his gospel and in Acts, Luke has a unique focus on the <u>first-century fulfillment</u> of Old Testament (OT) promises and prophecy.
We see this already in his gospel's introduction (Lk 1:1):
Many have undertaken to compose an account of the things that have been <u>fulfilled</u> among us.[3]

Luke's concern with prophetic fulfillment may be ascertained from the following:

1. His reporting of the Songs of Mary, Zechariah, and Simeon (Lk 1:46-55; 1:68-79; 2:29-32).
   Each song recalls God's promises to Israel and anticipates their fulfillment through the Christ-child.
   First-century Jews longed for Israel's "redemption" and "consolation" (Lk 2:25, 38; 24:21) which God had promised in Isaiah — to be accomplished through the work of his Servant. See Isaiah 52:9.
2. The related Jewish hope concerning the promised kingdom (Lk 21:31; 23:51; Ac 1:6).
3. His reporting of Jesus' own emphasis on prophetic fulfillment (Lk 4:21; 21:22; 22:37; 24:25-27, 44-47).
4. His accounts of apostolic (and other) preaching that emphasized specific fulfillment of prophecy.
   See Acts 2:16ff.; 3:18ff.; 4:10-12, 25-28; 8:30-35; 13:27ff.; 15:15-18; 26:22-23.
5. The way he summarizes the gospel as the proclamation of God's promised kingdom (Lk 4:43; 8:1; 9:2; Ac 1:3; 8:12; 19:8; 20:25; 28:23, 31).
6. His specific reference to the "hope of Israel" (Ac 28:20) — the Jewish expectations relating to the Messiah, to his righteous kingdom, and of final resurrection.
   For the Jewish hope of resurrection, see Acts 24:15; 26:6-8 (cf. Dan 12:2; Isa 25:7-8; Jn 11:24).

[1] The book of Acts contains four blocks of text known as the "we passages" (Acts 16:10-17; 20:5-15; 21:1-18; 27:1 – 28:16), where the narrative shifts from the third person ("he" or "they") to the first-person plural ("we", "us", "our").
[2] Luke addresses him as "most excellent Theophilus" (Lk 1:3). Compare this with the use of "His Excellency" and "most excellent" when addressing the Roman Procurators Felix and Festus in Acts 23:26; 24:3 (24:2 in ESV); 26:25.
[3] The NET also has "fulfilled" here, justifying this usage with the following footnote:
Luke 1:1 tn Or "have been accomplished." Given Luke's emphasis on divine design (e.g., Luke 24:43-47) a stronger sense ("fulfilled") is better than a mere reference to something having taken place ("accomplished").

Luke's focus on the first-century fulfillment of OT prophecy is important, for there are many Christians in our day who believe that the majority of OT prophecy is yet to be fulfilled:
Premillennial dispensationalists look for much prophetic fulfillment in an as-yet-future millennial kingdom.

Luke reports how Peter, in his Pentecost address, cited three OT prophecies that foretold:

1. the outpouring of the Holy Spirit; Acts 2:16-21 = Joel 2:28-32.
2. Jesus' resurrection; Acts 2:25-28 = Psalm 16:8-11.
3. his exaltation to God's right hand; Acts 2:34-35 = Psalm 110:1.

In his next address to the Jews of Jerusalem, Peter again emphasizes prophetic fulfillment:
Acts 3:18:
"… God has fulfilled what He foretold through all the prophets, saying that His Christ would suffer."

He goes on to declare (Acts 3:24):
"Indeed, all the prophets from Samuel on, as many as have spoken, have proclaimed <u>these days</u>."

The prophets all spoke of "these days" — events of the 1st century.
Specifically, we may say that they foretold the advent, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus; his exaltation to the Father's right hand, and the establishment of the promised kingdom.
Peter reiterates all this in his first epistle (1 Peter 1:10-12):
The prophets foretold the grace and salvation to be offered to the world through the gospel.

It cannot be emphasized enough that Jesus did not fail to inaugurate the messianic kingdom.
It was not postponed, so that God moved to plan B (the Church).
Jesus in fact emphatically promised that the kingdom would come "with power" in that generation:
Mark 9:1:

> *Then Jesus said to them, "Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the kingdom of God arrive with power."*

I hear premillennialists pleading:
"But what about prophecies relating to Israel's restoration? Surely these weren't fulfilled in the 1st century.
Have we not seen them fulfilled before our very eyes with the establishment of the modern state of Israel?
Did not the apostles ask the Lord this very question just before he left them (Acts 1:6)?
Nor did Jesus deny their hopes and assumptions:
He simply stated it wasn't for them to know the precise times the Father had determined for such fulfillment."

Response:
The entire book of Acts is an answer to the apostles' question.
The answer is this: **Yes, Israel is about to be restored, but not in the way you apostles anticipate**.
Not in the literal (political) sense that might be expected from reading the prophecies; not in the sense that the nation enjoyed under David and Solomon.
Rather, Israel is to be restored through the gospel, through the faithful remnant who believe.

And not just in this Jewish remnant, but also through the inclusion of many Gentiles:
The nation is to be greatly enlarged!
Believing Gentiles together with a faithful remnant of Israelites will be brought into one body, one kingdom, one Church, under the heavenly rule of King Jesus.
But as for those Israelites who refuse to believe, they will be cut off from the nation (Ac 3:23).[4]

That this is indeed the case, and that Luke intends for us to understand these important truths, can be garnered from his reporting of the deliberations that took place at the Jerusalem Council.
At this Council, James, the Lord's brother, interprets a certain prophecy from Amos.
In that prophecy the Lord threatens Israel with judgment and exile, but almost in the same breath he promises final restoration. Much like what we see with other OT prophecies.
The way this particular prophecy is interpreted by James can therefore serve as a model for how we ought to interpret OT restoration prophecies generally.

The Jerusalem Council (Acts 15)

Luke provides a fairly detailed account of the Jerusalem Council and its decisions (15:6-29).
The date is ca. 49 AD, just after Paul's First Missionary Journey (related in Acts 13:4 – 14:28).
The apostles convened this Council to address the contention of the Judaizers that those Gentiles who were coming to faith in Christ ought to be circumcised and obey the Law of Moses — that such was even necessary for their salvation (15:1, 5-6).
These Judaizers sought to uphold Israel's privileges as the special people of God.
Hence their focus was on the so-called "identity markers" that marked Israel out as God's special people: Circumcision, Sabbath observance, kosher (food) laws, and perhaps also the Jewish festivals.[5]

The Mosaic Law actually made provision for Gentiles to be fully incorporated into Israel (e.g., Ex 12:48).
Many Gentiles in the 1st century had already attached themselves to their local Jewish synagogues.
Such "God-fearers" worshipped the God of Israel without submitting to circumcision or the rituals of the Law.[6]
Now that many more Gentiles were coming to faith, the question became more urgent:
Should Gentile believers be fully incorporated into Israel via circumcision and obedience to the Law?
Should they be compelled to do so?
Is such action necessary for salvation?

After much discussion at the Council, Peter related his experience with Cornelius, and how God had clearly demonstrated his acceptance of these Gentile believers by granting them the gift of his Spirit (15:8).
Consistent with his vision of the unclean animals (Ac 10:9-16), Peter asserts that God makes no distinction between people but spiritually cleanses everyone who believes (15:9).
All are saved by God's grace (15:11). Not through circumcision or outward rituals.

[4] Paul affirms all these truths in his olive tree metaphor (Romans 11:17-24): Natural branches are broken off through unbelief; shoots from a wild olive are grafted in by God's grace. Faith makes one a child of Abraham; faith is what defines the true Israel (Rom 4:11-12; cf. 9:6-8).
[5] See Galatians 4:10; 6:12-15; Philippians 3:2-6; Colossians 2:8-17. "Law of Moses" in Acts 15:5 refers to these identity markers and not to the (universally applicable) moral stipulations of God's law.
[6] These so-called "God-fearers" are mentioned in Acts 13:43, 50; 16:14; 17:4, 17; 18:7.

Then James, the Lord's brother, addresses the Council.
And it's his suggestion that is relevant to our present discussion.
James sees the incorporation of the Gentiles as fulfilling what "the prophets" (plural) had foretold.
Then he cites just one example — from the ninth chapter of Amos.
Acts 15:14-19:

> [14] *"Simon has told us how God first visited the Gentiles to take from them a people to be His own.*
> [15] *The words of <u>the prophets</u> agree with this, as it is written:*
>
> > [16] *'After this I will return and rebuild the fallen tent of David.*
> > *Its ruins I will rebuild, and I will restore it,*
> > [17] *so that the remnant of men may seek the Lord, and all the Gentiles who are called by My name, says the Lord who does these things*
> > [18] *that have been known for ages.'*
>
> [19] *It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not cause trouble for the Gentiles who are turning to God."*

James quotes here from Amos 9:11-12.
Amos prophesied ca. 755 BC, threatening God's judgment on the northern kingdom of Israel at the hands of an unnamed enemy. This was 20+ years prior to the Assyrian invasions and conquest.

The Expanded Bible (EXB) rendition of Amos 9:11-12 is helpful:

> [11] *"In that day I will ·restore [rebuild; raise up] the ·tent [hut; shack; [C] referring to the weakened state of the Davidic dynasty] of David that has fallen, and ·mend [repair] its broken places. I will ·rebuild [restore; raise up] its ruins as it was ·before [in days long ago/of antiquity].*
> [12] *Then Israel ·will take over [possess; conquer] ·what is left [the remnant] of Edom and the other nations that ·belong to me [[L] are called by my name]," says the LORD, who will make it happen.*

A brief overview of <u>Amos 9</u> is now in order:

- The Lord threatens the northern kingdom (Israel) with judgment and exile (9:1-10).
- The prophecy anticipates both the ruin and final restoration of Davidic kingship:
  David's "fallen tent" will be finally restored "as in the days of old" (9:11) — as under David and Solomon.
  Davidic kingship had already been weakened with the schism of the 10 tribes.
  But with coming judgment on Judah as well (Am 2:4-5), the demise of David's line was inevitable.
  At the very least Amos here is reminding his northern audience that God's salvific purposes are tied to the house of David, which they had long rejected.[7]
- Additionally, Israel's former extensive rule (enjoyed under David and Solomon) over their enemies ("Edom") and over tributary nations will be restored.[8]
  The "remnant of Edom" refers to those of that (hostile) nation who survive God's judgment (cf. Am 1:11-12).

[7] Hosea similarly anticipates the northern kingdom's ultimate return and submission to Davidic rule (Hos 3:4-5).
[8] The territorial extent of David's victories and Solomon's reign are related in 2 Samuel 8:1-14 and 1 Kings 4:21, 24.

- The phrase "and all the nations that bear My name" (9:12, BSB) anticipates God's ownership of the world's nations. Bearing (or being called by) God's name was a privilege belonging to his covenant people (Isa 43:7; 63:19), but someday the nations themselves will enjoy this privilege. They, too, will belong to God.
- Israel will return from exile and the ruined cities will be rebuilt (9:14). They will enjoy Edenic prosperity (9:13; cf. Joel 3:18); never again will they be uprooted from their land (9:15).

Appendix: Lessons from the way James interprets Amos

1. Luke's summary (in Acts 15:13-21) of James' address to the Jerusalem Council seems to reflect Luke's own interest in prophetic fulfillment. Moreover, his summary sheds considerable light on how we should interpret OT restoration prophecies generally.
   The principle is simply this:
   OT prophecies relating to Israel's restoration are fulfilled (or are being fulfilled) through the gospel.
2. So, in answer to the apostles' question (Ac 1:6), the kingdom has indeed been restored to "Israel".
3. Israel has been restored and greatly enlarged through the incorporation of believing Gentiles.
   But these have not become Jews; they belong to God as Gentiles.
   Yet spiritually they are God's people, true Israelites.
   Together with the faithful remnant of believing Israelites, these Gentile believers constitute the new Israel.
   Thus, Paul can call the (mostly Gentile) churches of Galatia "the Israel of God" (Gal 6:16).
4. Jesus' "gospel conquest" of the Gentiles proves that David's throne has been fully restored (Ac 15:14-18).
   Jesus is enthroned in heaven, from whence he rules over the new Israel.
   All nations are his reward and inheritance; blessing comes to the nations through the gospel.
   See Psalm 2; Matthew 28:18-19; Romans 4:3; Galatians 3:8, 14; Revelation 11:15.
   In time, all nations will be drawn to Christ, and the world will ultimately be a Christian world.
   See Psalm 72; Psalm 86:9; Isaiah 2:1-4; 9:6-7; 11:1-10; Luke 1:32-33. Revelation 15:4.
5. If the prophecy of Amos 9:11-12 is fulfilled via Jesus' rule over (a greatly enlarged) spiritual Israel, then surely we should interpret similar OT promises and prophecies accordingly:
   - Promises involving the nation's restoration under Davidic kingship.[9]
   - Threats of judgment of the wicked within the nation — of covenant apostates.[10]
   - Promises concerning a saved but chastened remnant of the nation.[11]
   - Promises concerning the ultimate reunion of Israel and Judah.[12]
   - Promises that anticipate Gentile inclusion; the Gentiles as beneficiaries of God's saving action.[13]
   - Promises where those gathered are so numerous that the nation (or Jerusalem itself) will have to be enlarged to accommodate them all.[14]

[9] See: Isa 9:1-7; 11:1-12; 16:5; 32:1; 33:17; Jer 23:5-6; 30:3, 8-9; 33:14-17; Eze 34:23-24; 37:15-28; Hos 3:4-5; Am 9:11-12; Zec 3:8; 6:12-13.
[10] See, for example, Isaiah 1:24-25, 28; Malachi 3:2-5, 18; 4:1, 3, 5-6. Compare with Matthew 3:7-12; Acts 3:23; Hebrews 10:30, 39.
[11] See: Isa 1:27; 4:2-3; 6:13; 10:20-23; 11:11, 16; 28:5; 37:31-32; 46:3; 49:6; 57:13; 59:20; Jer 3:14; 23:3; 31:7-9; 50:20; Dan 12:1; Joel 2:32; Am 9:8; Ob 1:17; Mic 2:12; 4:7; 5:7-8; 7:18; Zeph 2:7, 9; 3:12-13; Zec 8:6; 13:8-9; Mal 4:2.
[12] See: Isa 11:12-13; Jer 3:18; 23:5-6; 30:3; 31:1-14, 27, 31; 50:4-5; Eze 37:15-25; Hos 1:11; 3:5.
It's noteworthy that James addresses his epistle to "the twelve tribes of the Dispersion" (Jas 1:1). Early Jewish believers evidently came from all 12 tribes, not just from Judah and Benjamin. See Luke 2:36; Acts 4:36; 6:7; Revelation 7:1-8.
[13] See: Isa 2:1-4; 11:10; 14:1; 19:23-25; 25:6-8; 42:1-7; 49:6; 52:15; 55:4-5; 56:6-8; Jer 3:17; Am 9:12; Mic 4:1-4; Zec 2:11; 8:22.
[14] See: Isa 9:3; 26:15; 49:19-20; 54:2-3; Zec 2:4; 10:8-10.