

Putting Amos in its Place

Israel: God's People From Old To New or

Reading the Old Testament with the Apostle Paul

Romans 11:1-36 (esp 25,26)

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Introduction:

First, I want you to know that Russ asked me to conclude our Amos series with an examination of Romans 11. The eleventh chapter of Paul's letter to the churches at Rome does not quote or have a direct allusion to the book of Amos. But I knew what Russ intended with this assignment. Then Russ made a bit of an adjustment when he directly used the current debates over the role of "social justice", Christian social justice specifically, as an application of proper interpretation of Amos, since the exposition of Amos has been misused over that topic. That affected a bit how I should approach my task. I then have vacillated several times over the best approach to present the text and theological issue. This is the one I decided upon. Forgive me if it fails, but I think it best allows us to get a better grasp on, not just the meaning of Romans 11, particularly verse 26, but just why we insist on challenging you to read, interpret and understand the Old Testament the way we do.

Let me also, from the outset this evening, provide a bit of a disclaimer for those sitting in the auditorium, listening currently online or those who will access this later either audibly or in print, I do not claim to be an expert here. There are many great minds who differ as to how to understand and explain this passage. Some differences are very subtle. You may disagree with where I seem to finally land on this text, but I hope you understand how I got there and why it truly impacts our reading of Amos in fact the whole of the Old Testament.

As I have suggested, we are looking at this particular text in Romans this evening because it follows as to how Amos was presented to be understood. How you read Amos (and other OT texts) impacts how you will understand Romans 9-11. And how you read Romans 9-11 (and other NT texts) will impact how you read Amos. So, this evening we are in some sense affirming both how we read and understood Amos and how we apply Amos to the reading and understanding of Romans 11. The underlying basic question as to how this works has occupied my thinking and reading for many years now. This was one topic that Russ and I discussed a bit when I first came to Clearcreek Chapel, and we were both trying to be consistent in our thinking and teaching in this area. It is somewhat difficult, because there are few teachers and writers who think this exact same way, but that number seems to be growing. So, tonight's presentation is organized more as a Bible lesson than a sermon with an introduction, three points and an application summary, I hope that you can follow along and grasp what I am saying.

The Context in the Letter to the Romans:

We will begin by looking at the overall, general argument of Romans. This flows from his statement in verses 16 and 17 of chapter one which reads:

For I am not ashamed of the gospel,
for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes,
to the Jew first and also to the Greek.
For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith,
as it is written, "The righteous shall live by faith."

This section serves as the thesis statement for Paul's letter. He is writing to the churches in Rome to secure support for his Spanish mission, to address his concerns for their unity and to affirm their understanding of the power and principles of the reception of the Gospel. As he walks through this letter, he affirms the universality of the need for the Gospel because of sin for both Jew and Gentile. He describes the nature of the centrality of Jesus's work for the Gospel (although he does not elaborate on this concept, the objective work of Christ as the Gospel). He elaborates on the essential nature of faith rather than works in the appropriation of the Gospel. He then presents the role of the Holy Spirit in the securing and continuing life in the Gospel.

When we come to chapter 9, we come to an objection. Paul has used this rhetorical technique of posing a question or problem and then discussing its answer several times already in this letter. This assumed objection follows the end of chapter 8 that affirms that because nothing can separate us from God's love. This objection would be stated in today's jargon something like this: "You say we are secure, is this a different God who promised great blessings to the Jews in what you refer to as the Scripture? Didn't he fail them and abandon those promises? Couldn't he just up and abandon us as well? Is he fickle? Is he inconsistent? Is the Bible contradictory?"

That is why chapter 9 begins as it does. Let us read the beginning of chapter 9, from verse one to the beginning of verse 6.

I am speaking the truth in Christ—I am not lying;
my conscience bears me witness in the Holy Spirit—
that I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart.
For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ
for the sake of my brothers, my kinsmen according to the flesh.
They are Israelites,
and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants,
the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises.
To them belong the patriarchs,
and from their race, according to the flesh,
is the Christ,
who is God over all, blessed forever. Amen.

But it is not as though the word of God has failed.

After his praise to God for certainty Paul expresses his angst over the general unbelieving condition of his nationality. The nation of Israel had a long history as the people that God used to reveal himself and his workings to the remainder of the world. Paul asserts the fundamental, human thinking as to why this might be so. They have God's word and work. How is it that this group of people have rejected Jesus as Messiah and the fulfilment of their religious history? God says that he chose them from the nations, he called Abraham personally and instructed them directly. So, a natural response to this observation could come from three directions, first, the message is false, or at least misunderstood; second, God clearly isn't able to "make it happen"; and third, God can't make up his mind as to how he is working, can he be trusted to continue in this way, or should I seek an alternative?

Well, Paul says that it is not that the God has lied or been a failure, in fact this is the proper understanding of how God has been working all along. This is not a new or adjusted plan. If we go on to read in chapter 9 in verses 6-8 we see:

For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel,
and not all are children of Abraham because they are his offspring,
but "Through Isaac shall your offspring be named."

This means
that it is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God,
but the children of the promise are counted as offspring.

He then goes on to show from the Scripture itself that God's true people are defined in more than national or family categories. The flow of the argument in the letter, a letter that is a presentation of the gospel, now moves to "justify" God and the Scriptures to demonstrate that this new reality is consistent and congruent, the actual intention of the Scriptures we know as the Old Testament. We often see chapters 9 and 10 as defending a strong doctrine of election, and this is a correct application and extension of this passage but that is not the reason for them in the flow of the argument. I don't have near the time to present that tonight, those interested can go back to Russ's sermon archives and read the manuscripts for the exposition of Romans for further details. But we want to jump on into Romans 11.

But before we go there, I think it is important to notice a passing thought in verse 7 that seems to be overlooked by many when commentators when they discuss the meaning of Romans 11. Here at the beginning even though he is primarily referencing Israel as a genetic/racial/cultural entity, he indicates that Israel as "children of God" are distinct from the mere family connection. We have already been told in chapter 4 the same thing. In verses 16 and 17.

That is why it depends on faith,
in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his offspring
—not only to the adherent of the law
but also to the one who shares the faith of Abraham,
who is the father of us all,
as it is written, "I have made you the father of many nations"—
in the presence of the God in whom he believed,
who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist.

The Context in Romans 11:

After defending God's prerogative in his choosing, he then gets back to the main question in chapter 11. Let's read verses 1-10

I ask, then, has God rejected his people? By no means!

For I myself am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, a member of the tribe of Benjamin.

God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew.

Do you not know what the Scripture says of Elijah, how he appeals to God against Israel?

“Lord, they have killed your prophets, they have demolished your altars,
and I alone am left, and they seek my life.”

But what is God's reply to him?

“I have kept for myself seven thousand men who have not bowed the knee to Baal.”

So too at the present time there is a remnant, chosen by grace.

But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works; otherwise grace would no longer be grace.

What then? Israel failed to obtain what it was seeking.

The elect obtained it, but the rest were hardened, as it is written,

“God gave them a spirit of stupor, eyes that would not see and ears that would not hear,
down to this very day.”

And David says,

“Let their table become a snare and a trap, stumbling block and a retribution for them; let their eyes be darkened so that they cannot see, and bend their backs forever.”

He uses a rhetorical question to frame his point and asks, “has God rejected his people?” He affirms “by no means,” absolutely not, may it never be or the KJV's rendering “God forbid.” He answers this from two perspectives. One is that he himself, and therefore some in his audience are indeed Israelites. They are Jews who recognize Jesus as the Messiah and have faith in his words and work. But this other is a bit more subtle. He says that he “counts” because God has always seemed to work with the concept of his people being a “remnant” or a subset of the larger group with the same name. For the sake of the Romans argument, this affirms the necessity of the faith response to God's word as the original and intended way that one is indeed “God's people.”

As we go on we read in verses 11-24 this elaboration and second perspective on his point.

So I ask, did they stumble in order that they might fall? By no means!

Rather through their trespass salvation has come to the Gentiles, so as to make Israel jealous.

Now if their trespass means riches for the world, and if their failure means riches for the Gentiles, how much more will their full inclusion mean!

Now I am speaking to you Gentiles. Inasmuch then as I am an apostle to the Gentiles, I magnify my ministry in order somehow to make my fellow Jews jealous, and thus save some of them. For if their rejection means the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance mean but life from the dead? If the dough offered as firstfruits is holy, so is the whole lump, and if the root is holy, so are the branches.

But if some of the branches were broken off, and you, although a wild olive shoot, were grafted in among the others and now share in the nourishing root of the olive tree, do not be arrogant toward the branches. If you are, remember it is not you who support the root, but the root that supports you. Then you will say, "Branches were broken off so that I might be grafted in." That is true. They were broken off because of their unbelief, but you stand fast through faith. So do not become proud, but fear. For if God did not spare the natural branches, neither will he spare you. Note then the kindness and the severity of God: severity toward those who have fallen, but God's kindness to you, provided you continue in his kindness. Otherwise you too will be cut off. And even they, if they do not continue in their unbelief, will be grafted in, for God has the power to graft them in again.

For if you were cut from what is by nature a wild olive tree, and grafted, contrary to nature, into a cultivated olive tree, how much more will these, the natural branches, be grafted back into their own olive tree.

This next section is a bit more difficult. He again frames this with a question, "did they stumble in order that they might fall?" To follow the answer, we must understand the question correctly. I think this is asking, did the Jews, Israel, reject Jesus as Messiah as a "group" in order then to prevent Jews, Israel, from coming to faith in him? In this then, there is a complete and radical "discontinuation" of God's work with the natural descendants of Abraham.

Paul again answers, "by no means." He then uses two concepts to explain this as well. One is that the ministry to the Gentiles, bringing them in as God's people to somehow move Jewish people to a sense of jealousy for "some of them" to believe, to reassess their rejection and embrace the Messiah. The other then is explained in the extended olive tree metaphor that then is the capstone of God's plan for redemption. All of us are grafted in by faith, Gentile and Jew and so neither has cause to boast at this point. But don't forget what he has already said in the flow of the full text, there is and always has been an "Israel" that is defined as a believing/faith-possessing contingent.

Israel: God's People From Old to New

So let's move on to the next segment. And finish reading the chapter, verses 24-36.

Lest you be wise in your own sight, I do not want you to be unaware of this mystery, brothers: a partial hardening has come upon Israel, until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in.

And in this way all Israel will be saved, as it is written,

"The Deliverer will come from Zion, he will banish ungodliness from Jacob";

"and this will be my covenant with them when I take away their sins."

As regards the gospel, they are enemies for your sake.

But as regards election, they are beloved for the sake of their forefathers.

For the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable.

For just as you were at one time disobedient to God

but now have received mercy because of their disobedience,

so they too have now been disobedient

in order that by the mercy shown to you they also may now receive mercy.

For God has consigned all to disobedience, that he may have mercy on all.

Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!

“For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor?”

“Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?”

For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen.

This brings us to the problematic sentence. This paragraph brings the 9-11 argument to a conclusion, that the Gospel’s power is in God’s plan to demonstrate his mercy. That is why we sing songs like Amazing Grace. That is why we speak of grace and mercy in such hallowed tones. This is embedded in seeing and knowing God’s glory and giving Him all glory because he is the one that surpasses our wisdom to overcome our sin. And rightly so, this section ends with a great and penetrating doxology.

So, what exactly is the problematic sentence? How you understand this sentence impacts how you read the Old and the New testaments. It impacts your theology in seismic ways. And your theology impacts how you approach this sentence as well. The grid/lens that you read is very important here. The sentence in question is: “And in this way, all Israel will be saved.”

Simple, right. But to read it correctly we must understand in what “way”, who is “Israel”, how many is “all”, and what does it mean to be “saved”?

First is the “way” referring to what has been said before or anticipating what comes next? It is probably a bit of both, I think directly he is referring to the full inclusion of the Gentiles and not just about the deliverer coming from Zion. Some would say the way is when the deliverer is seen at the end of the age, I don’t think that is the best way to see it. And later in verse 28 he references the gospel as the key to his point and then finishes with a doxology as to God’s unsearchable ways. When the Gentiles have come in then we will see the completed return from exile and life in the covenant.

And only then will “all Israel”, the true Israel from 9:7 and sons of Abraham in faith from chapter 4, will finally and completely be saved. Israel as those who believe that remnant together with those grafted into the vine. And it is all because God’s work will not lose or miss any he has chosen. Some think the word Israel must be limited to the meaning most near in context, but Paul has played that exchange already in Romans as we have seen.

Saved in the full and future sense of the word. The same redemption in Christ because of faith in Christ that brings us to Christ. Some think it is something special and different for this group of Jews but that messes up the entire flow of Romans. There is a true Israel for Paul that includes ethnic Jews as well as ethnic Gentiles. That is the goal and focus for God’s work. His work in the Old Testament didn’t fail, we just need to see that the pictures used are looking for something more and inclusive.

Reflect and Respond

So, when we read this, we now think of the implications to our reading of the Old Testament. This is just the tip of the iceberg for interpreting your Bibles and simply listen to these three introductory points:

We need to see the forward focus to the Gospel reality that begins in Genesis chapter 3.

We need to see the central role of faith from the story of Abraham extending throughout the entire Old Testament.

We need to see the weakness and failure of relying merely on Law and ethnicity from the story of Israel as a nation.

Amos is a warning concerning the judgment of God on unbelief. Unbelief in Jew and Gentile just as it was spelled out in the opening of Romans. And unbelief found in those who claim to be God's people. Peter spells it out in II Peter 1:10 to "make your calling and election sure." Read the rest of II Peter considering Amos and you will see why the end of Amos brings hope with the warning of judgment. Read, as Russ has been doing frequently during the series, James, and his challenge. And lastly, read Hebrews and its warnings in this light.

Are you embracing the gospel in faith? Are you living a life of faith? Indeed, we should be characterized as a people of justice and mercy but is in response to the gospel and in faith, not to bring about the change in the world somehow without faith. Let Amos challenge our complacency lest we be numbered among the merciless, unjust, so not to hear the Lion roaring from Zion against our trespasses but instead be called by His name and be planted in His land of blessing, at His side forevermore!