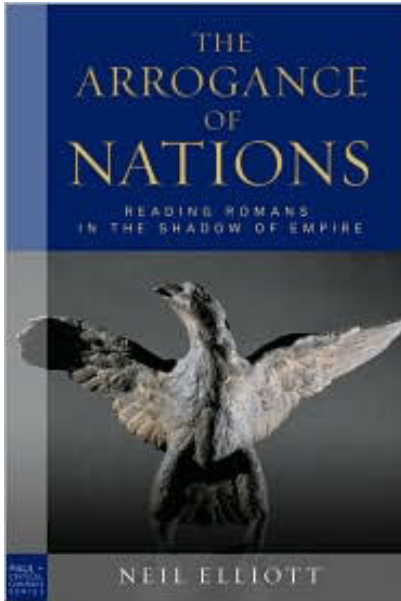


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**Elliott, Neil**

*The Arrogance of Nations: Reading Romans in the Shadow of Empire*

Paul in Critical Contexts

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Elliott, adjunct faculty at Metropolitan State University and United Theological Seminary (Minneapolis), has offered several books and articles on the relationship between Paul and the contemporary Roman Empire (e.g., *The Rhetoric of Romans*; *Liberating Paul: The Justice of God and the Politics of the Apostle*). In these writings, as well as the present tome, he avidly pursues the thesis that Paul wrote political diatribes rather than theological treatises (4, 9). Elliott assumes that *Romans* was written primarily to “non-Judeans” in the Roman churches (19–20) who carried with them an imperial political subconscious (23, 159). Paul’s *Romans* must be understood as addressing from the beginning this imperial backdrop (44–47). In the first six verses of *Rom 1*, Paul refers to prophetic literature comparable to Virgil’s *Fourth Eclogue* and *Aeneid*, as well as other Roman texts; a genealogy from David, in contrast to the Roman genealogy from Aeneas; Jesus as the Son of God, as compared with the Roman *filius dei*; Jesus as Lord, over against the Roman *kyrios*; and a call for “obedience of faith” in Jesus rather than obedience to the Roman tradition (see 44, 144–45).

Given this political approach, Elliott does express sympathy with those who read Paul in terms of a sociohistorical approach (48–50), but he finds the political analysis more true to Paul’s intention. He references liberation writers such as Miranda, Tamez, Jennings, and those expressing a Marxist viewpoint as more sympathetic to the intent of Paul (3–4,

13, 159). Following this introduction, Elliott describes Roman arrogance in five subsections: *imperium*; *iustitia*; *clementia*; *pietas*; and *virtus*.

Under the rubric *imperium*, Elliott contrasts the empire's policy of "winning the hearts and minds" of conquered people by forced subjection, while Paul called for willing obedience to Christ (25). The Roman Empire maintained *iustitia* by ruling through compliant local aristocracies (the wealthy) and spoke of the Caesar as the embodiment of divine justice. Although that meant that justice did not extend to the poor, Paul does not directly attack the empire. Instead, he speaks of the justice of God (*dikaiosynē tou theou*) for all people in contrast to imperial justice for a few (59–61). Mercy (*clementia*) was vital to the ideology of Rome (89–91). The empire was merciful—to those who submitted to its authority. The emperors, even Nero, were described as benevolent rulers. Paul argues that history has not reached a climax in Rome, for the time will come when God's mercy will be known to all (119). The emperors were not only just and merciful, but they were known as holy (*pietas*). In many statuary examples Augustus frequently appeared clothed with the toga of sacrifice (122–24). Paul, on the other hand, named Abraham as the person whose piety led to Christ and the eventual incorporation of all nations (4:1–12; pp. 136–38). Roman imperial ideology placed Aeneas at the top of history, with unworthy people, such as Judeans, at the bottom, the virtuous and the wretched (143–44). Again, Elliott understands Paul's apocalypticism to imply that the roles will someday reverse (148).

Elliott's thesis is straightforward: Paul consciously, or even subconsciously, wrote a letter to the Roman Christians that placed the reign of Jesus Christ above imperial power and authority. The other theses are more complex: the letter was written to non-Judeans in the Roman churches in order to dislodge the imperialist subculture in which they were raised. Consequently, the letter contains no negative attack on the Judeans. They, and Paul, recognize that eventually the Judeans will coalesce with the Christians to form a people of God for all nations (20). In order to clarify seemingly negative statements about the Judeans, Elliott utilizes a complex literary device he calls "dissociative argumentation" (148–51) in which apparent critiques are actually used for instructive dialog (e.g., 100–107, 111–19).

Of course, the most complex passage for his argumentation would be 13:1–7 (152–56). Elliott references several contemporary solutions, then, somewhat in desperation, turns to his "dissociative argumentation" to suggest that Paul uses "obedience to the governing authorities" as a dialogical way of stressing submission to God (8:7; 10:3; p.156).

Elliott has made an important contribution to the study of Romans. Paul's affirmations about Jesus Christ do subvert the power of the imperial cult, and Roman Christians

would have understood that. If that is a correct reading, then Romans was indeed written for the Gentile Christians of Rome and not for Judeans, who would not have shared the imperial subconscious tradition. With his “dissociative argumentation,” Elliott disavows Paul’s apparent conflict with the Jews. Most readers then and now will consider his methodology too complex to understand. Romans 2 and 9–11 still remain a theological puzzle with their conflicting affirmations about law and grace. Nevertheless, his primary argument can be affirmed: nations were arrogant then and are today. According to Elliott, Paul urged the Roman Christians to share their life with the oppressed and to care for the poor. He urges modern Christians to do the same (163–66).