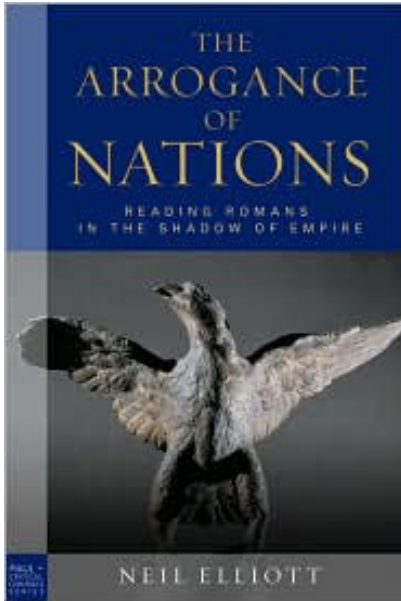


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Elliott, Neil

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

Paul in Critical Contexts

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The Arrogance of Nations, part of the Paul in Critical Contexts series by Fortress Press and a continuation of Neil Elliott's work on Romans (*Rhetoric of Romans*, 1990; *Liberating Paul*, 1994), reads Paul's letter in the context of Nero's Rome. Neither a commentary like Jewett's nor a thematic exposition like Stowers's, Elliott's study is structured according to themes shared by Roman imperial ideology and Paul's letter to the Romans: *imperium*, *iustitia*, *clementia*, *pietas*, and *virtus* (chs. 1–5). With strategic deployment of critical theories and methods, *The Arrogance of Nations* offers a consistent but selective study of the letter, dislocating Rom 5–8 while providing the most “localized” reading of the letter to date. It is worthwhile reading, in the trajectory of the Paul and Politics Group of the SBL, presenting a perspective that is neither Old nor New.

One of the study's most significant contributions occurs at the level of presuppositions. Over and against the Jew/Gentile dichotomies that dominate Pauline studies, Elliott encourages a linguistic and ideological shift: taking the lead of several predecessors, he suggests that, rather than interpreting and translating the Greek term *ethnē* as “Gentiles,” it should be understood as “nations,” and *Ioudaioi* should be taken as “Judeans” rather than as “Jews” (see esp. the discussions at 13–16 and 44–50). On this proposal, there is no longer within Paul's letter a dichotomy—religious and/or ethnic—between Jews and

Gentiles; instead, Paul's uses of *Ioudaioi* and *ethnē* are set within broader discursive practices of naming geopolitical entities. This shift away from theological and genealogical perspectives to a political one allows Elliott to read Romans not as a Christian critique of Judaism nor as a Jewish critique of Gentiles but as a critique of non-Judean believers in Rome who judge local Judean believers as among the conquered nations. (In addition to Elliott's references, see the recent work of Davina C. Lopez, *Apostle to the Conquered: Reimagining Paul's Mission* [Paul in Critical Contexts; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2008].)

Chapter 1, "Imperium: Empire and the 'Obedience of Faith,'" discusses how the rhetorical program of Paul's letter, as presented in Rom 1:13–15 and Rom 15, implies an opposition between Christ's rule and the Roman emperor's claim to rule the nations. Using James C. Scott's theory of public and hidden transcripts and Edward Champlin's work on the hidden transcript during Nero's rule (54–68 C.E., when Romans was written), Elliott argues that the rhetoric of Romans constitutes the hidden transcript of a subordinate minority under Roman rule. Paul's call to the "obedience of faith" invites his hearers/readers to be ruled not so much by Rome's emperor as by Israel's God. Given his "ideological constraints" (Fredric Jameson), Paul can only imagine the replacement of one "kyriarchy" (Schüssler Fiorenza) with another. Paul therefore functions within an apocalyptic framework in which the current unjust order, which is temporary and to be endured (Rom 13:1–7), will be replaced by an ideal just order that is imminent.

Chapter 2, "Iustitia: Justice and the Arrogance of Nations," complements the previous chapter by revisiting a theme already mentioned: the competition between Roman justice (*ius/dikaiosynē*) and divine justice (*dikaiosynē tou theou*). Building on the claims of Taubes and Georgi, Elliott offers an interpretation of Rom 1:1–4 over and against the propaganda of Nero. These verses, often understood as part of a creed with one or more layers of redaction (e.g., Jewett), are reread with diplomatic vocabulary as a political declaration. On this reading, Paul's descriptions of Christ at once echo and critique Nero's claims to divine sonship and rule, providing an equivalent to the hidden transcript in Seneca's *Apocolocyntosis*. From the very beginning of the letter, therefore, Paul uses political vocabulary to elicit in his hearers expectations for the kind of rhetoric normally reserved for the stadium or theater (see 41 and 43). This implicit critique of the emperor is explicated in Rom 1:18–2:16 in terms of the justice of God (75). Accepting Stowers's argument that the passage is not a critique of humanity or Gentiles in general (1:18–32) followed by indictment of Jews in particular (2:1–16), Elliott suggests that the *kind* of pretentious person (*ho alazōn*) Paul is critiquing is "one or another recent member of the Julio-Claudian dynasty" (82; perhaps Gaius Caligula). Thus the revelation of God's wrath, in "handing over" the emperors to their ever-increasing wickedness, constitutes an opposition to Roman claims of justice.

Chapter 3, “Clementia: Mercy and the Prerogatives of Power,” compares and contrasts the competing claims to mercy. It is in this chapter, building on the work of Slingerland and Wiefel, that Elliott situates the addressees of Paul’s letter within Nero’s Rome. Rereading the historical events of 38–41 C.E. in Alexandria and 49 and 54 C.E. in Rome, Elliott works to determine how a typical resident of Rome would have regarded *Ioudaioi*. Already a conquered people whose “atheism” was interpreted as *superstitio* (for the political connotations, see Martin, *Inventing Superstition*), Nero’s act of clemency for the *Ioudaioi* in Rome, allowing them to return to the capital in 54 C.E., would have increased Nero’s prestige while adding further condescension toward the *Ioudaioi*. Residents of Rome would thus have viewed the Judeans as weak, conquered, superstitious, or worse. With this in mind, and reinscribing Stowers’s axiom that Paul’s letter was addressed only to *ethnē* (no longer “Gentiles” but glossed here as “non-Judeans”), Elliott argues that Rom 2–3 and 9–11 must therefore be interpreted not as a theological critique of Gentile arrogance against Jews but as a political critique of Roman arrogance against Judeans. Elliott thus offers a helpful rehearsal of the dialogic interplay between Paul and his fictitious interlocutor, the *Ioudaios* of Rom 2, who is understood to argue against Roman condescension toward Judeans (see esp. 205–6 n. 74 for a tabular comparison of Stowers’s and Elliott’s readings). So also, Rom 9–11 is written against Roman condescension toward *Iudaea capta*, arguing that “present circumstances in Rome had little to do with genuine mercy or with the justice of God” (106).

Chapter 4, “Pietas: Piety and the Scandal of an Irreligious Race,” compares the functions of Augustus’s *pietas* and Abraham’s *pistis* by reading Augustan propaganda with Rom 4. Appealing to the works of Gordon, Zanker, and Price, Elliott rehearses the propaganda for Augustus’s piety as depicted especially in statuary and public monuments such as the Ara Pacis. He emphasizes that the piety attributed to Augustus’s legislation, cultic reform, and sacrificial service is part of a myth(ology) in which the present is portrayed as the dawning of the Golden Age prophesied to Octavian’s ancestor Aeneas—an age ushered in through human works. Over and against such ideology is Abraham’s claim to be ancestor of the nations. Building on the work of Fredriksen, Eisenbaum, and Nanos, Elliott contends that Paul—allegedly like his fellow Judeans—would have understood Abraham to be the first proselyte and would have understood Judeans also to become sons of Abraham not through lineage but through adoption (e.g., circumcision, à la later rabbinic ideology). In Rom 4, Paul is not therefore writing against a Judean who claims to be the only heir of Abraham; rather, Paul is explaining to non-Judeans that they have entered into Abraham’s line with their Judean siblings, participating in Abraham’s *asebeia* (“impiety,” in the sense of abandoning traditional gods; see Rom 4:5). Such ancestry is not acquired, as in the Augustan program, through human works; rather, *erga nomou* (“works of law”), which Elliott understands as shorthand for an accommodationist

presentation of Judean law according to Hellenistic debates about justice, fails to bring about *dikaïosynē tou theou*.

Chapter 5, “Virtus: Virtue and the Fortunes of Peoples,” continues the work of chapters 1 and 3 by interpreting Rom 12–15 in the context of Neronian Rome. Here Elliott repeats his opinion that non-Judean members of the *ekklēsia(i)* in Rome had internalized imperial judgment of the Judeans as conquered and dominated. Paul, like the author of 4 Maccabees, challenges the myth that Rome’s Golden Age had arrived with the nations bowing to Caesar, for Paul exhorts his auditors to worship the one who is God of both Judeans and non-Judeans, with non-Judeans submitting to Judean practices not simply for unity at a common meal but in anticipation of the eschatological state soon to be revealed. Romans 13, as intimated in chapter 1, is thus an anomaly for Elliott, though no longer as it used to be (see Elliott’s essay “Romans 13:1–7 in the Context of Imperial Propaganda,” in Horsley, ed., *Paul and Empire* [1997]). Its unambiguous call to submit to Roman *imperium* is, in Elliott’s current opinion, due to the material and ideological constraints imposed by Roman rule: in Paul we have what Jameson calls a “voice under domination” who can imagine only the replacement of one kyriarchy with another. For Elliott, however, there is hope for the dawning of a new day, even as we have moved from Roman imperialism to the new order of global capitalism (whose ideological underpinnings are being further questioned with the current economic crisis). Though he may not know what agency may usher in the world to come, Elliott is confident in Sobrino’s dictum *ex pauperes nulla salus*, “There is no salvation outside the poor.”

The Arrogance of Nations thus offers a reading of Paul’s letter to the Romans in the context of Nero’s Rome, arguing that Paul’s “dissociative argumentation” (à la the new rhetoric) was inherently political and intended to dissuade non-Judean believers in Rome from regarding their Judean fellows as other Romans did: a conquered, condemned, and superstitious people. Such a reading provides a localized interpretation of the letter that deserves a wide readership among both students and scholars, especially with its contemporary reflections. (The volume, and perhaps the series as a whole, is “accessible scholarship,” with careful analysis, readable text, and responsible but selective notes.) To be sure, the interpretation is one-sided, as it reads Romans consistently and only as if it were a political treatise. But it is precisely because of such a perspective that one is able to see things that otherwise elude the scholarly gaze. I therefore recommend the work to all in the subdiscipline and consider it especially valuable for advanced undergraduate and master’s level instruction.

I should add, however, that Elliott’s work would benefit from further analysis of the terms formerly grouped together under one or more forms of the Jew/Gentile dichotomy (*Ioudaios*, *Ioudaioi*, *Israēlitēs*, *Israēlitai*, and *Israēl*, on the one hand, and *Hellēn*, *Hellēnes*,

and *ethnē*, on the other; also relevant are the terms *Ioudaismos*, *ioudaizō*, *Ioudaikōs*, and *ethnikōs*, which among the “undisputed” letters are exclusive to Galatians). Elliott’s proposal for rereading these terms provides a geopolitical context rather than a theological and/or ethnic one, which has the ethical upshot of precluding Christian anti-Judaism by situating Paul within what we now call Judaism. But it also reinscribes the dichotomy in the manner that Buell and Johnson Hodge describe Paul as forming a *Judean* identity. We must therefore learn to interpret Paul’s uses of the terms more precisely so that we are able to understand how he forms a messianic Israelite identity not only in relation to the Roman Empire and in relation to other Israelites but in relation to the geopolitical realia of then-contemporary Judea, with its diverse constituency of Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes, and so forth. Mirroring the identity-formative discourses of modern Jews and Israelis, Paul formed his diasporic identity in a context where certain of his kin—and some nonkin, such as the Idumeans and Itureans—governed a region with laws that were understood by some to promote local if not worldwide justice. Just as today it is argued that one may be a Jew without being an Israeli, so did Paul argue that one may be an Israelite without being a Judean. Thus it is that Paul consistently describes himself as an *Israēlitēs* from the *phylē* of Benjamin (Rom 11:1; Phil 3:5–6), whereas only once—and, I would argue, not even there—does he possibly refer to himself as a *Ioudaios* (Gal 2:15); indeed, 1 Cor 9:20 (“for the *Ioudaioi* I became [as] a *Ioudaios*”) seems to imply that he was not a *Ioudaios*. Moreover, Paul repeatedly advocates the formation not of a new Judea but of a new Israel. So as we continue to locate Paul in his local and imperial contexts, and as we strive to interpret his letters ethically (e.g., with attention to historical and contemporary relations between Jews and Christians), we must develop a way of describing how Paul was a first-century Israelite who formed his identity, among other ways, in opposition to the ideology of certain Judeans. Only by doing so will we offer a reading that is thoroughly and properly political, not to mention historical.