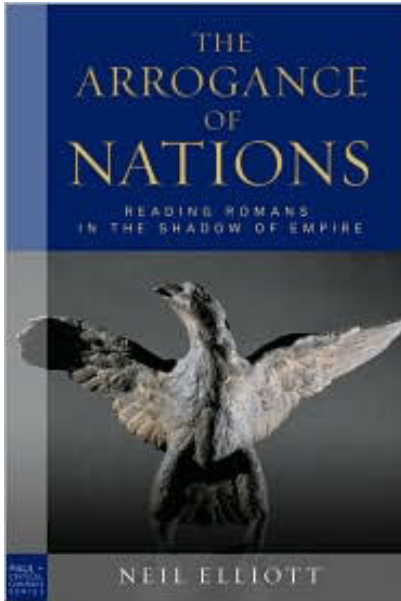


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Elliott, Neil

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

Paul in Critical Contexts

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Neil Elliott is known for his careful scholarly analysis of the New Testament using a sociorhetorical approach, and, in the wake of his helpful study on *The Rhetoric of Romans*, one has a right to expect considerable further insight into Romans in this study, in which Elliott seeks to show that Romans and many of its key terms reflects the rhetoric of empire and Paul's response to imperial ideology. In fact, Elliott does not disappoint, as there are many fresh insights into Romans in this slender volume. Elliott believes that a socially and rhetorically thick description of the Roman matrix into which this letter was written sheds important fresh light on the meaning of Paul's magnum opus. In this approach Elliott registers yet one more complaint in a growing chorus of complaints about the traditional treatment of Romans as if it were some sort of abstract theological treatise that is not historically situation specific, or if it is, it is to be seen as some sort of rebuttal to Jewish antagonists. To the contrary, argues Elliott, the real force of Paul's words only come to light when we hear or overhear the allusions and echoes to the rhetoric of empire and Paul's rebuttal of that rhetoric.

The issue of methodology is a sticky one, as Elliott realizes, and it will be helpful to discuss what the author says about this matter from the outset. The matter can be framed in this way: In interpreting Romans, should more emphasis be placed on Paul's own

narrative thought world, as manifested not only in Romans but in the earlier Pauline epistles (particularly, say, Galatians, 1 Thessalonians, 1 Corinthians) as the clue to the meaning of the main terms in Paul's Roman's discourse, or do we need to read more between the lines, looking not for echoes and allusions of the Old Testament (à la Richard Hays, Ross Wagner, and others) but for echoes of Roman imperial discourse? Should there be more stress on what the words seem to say and mean in their Pauline literary context or their larger Scriptural context, or more stress on how the largely Roman Gentile Christian audience might have *heard* this letter, absorbed as they were in the social ethos and rhetoric of the city of Rome?

Elliott urges us to read Romans with an extensive knowledge of the imperial ideology that will have been familiar to and will have shaped the thought world of the Gentile addressees of Romans. He has an answer as to why so few have read Romans this way in the past: "If we do not immediately hear the counter-imperial aspects of Paul's letter, perhaps it is because we are predisposed, by the constricted privatized and domesticated contexts in which Paul's letters are most usually read to perceive in them only a narrow bandwidth of what we consider religious discourse" (9).

What is surprising about Elliott's insistence on this is that, unlike postmodern scholars who suggest that a variety of readings of a text like Romans can be equally valid and helpful, Elliott, while being postcolonial in approach, is decidedly not postmodern. He boldly says: "We should not imagine, with a post-modern sensibility, that attending to the themes of imperial ideology is simply one interpretation choice among others. I follow Fredric Johnson in regarding political interpretation of literary texts like Romans 'not as some supplementary method, not an optional auxiliary to other interpretive methods current today ... but rather as *the absolute horizon of all readings and all interpretations*'" (11). With the methodological gauntlet thus thrown down, we must consider in some particulars how well this sort of approach advocated by Elliott (and sometimes called ideological criticism) actually helps us understand Romans.

Let us ask at this juncture a pertinent question: Does Paul really enunciate an anti-imperial gospel, and even if to some extent he does (which I grant), is it enough to place Paul in a category so he is user-friendly for modern liberationist theologies of various sorts? Elliott realizes and admits, especially in light of his *bête noir* text (Rom 13:1-7), that it's very difficult, if not impossible, to see Paul as a "liberationist" in the full political sense of the term, "though I intend to show that some aspects of Paul's rhetoric in Romans were subversive of some of the claims on imperial propaganda" (15). Fair enough. Paul does at least indirectly say or suggest things that lead one to conclude that Paul is telling his converts that Christ is the reality of which the emperor is only a sick parody (as my friend N.T. Wright likes to put it). But are such overtones or implications

so dominant as to force us to change the way we read key terms in Romans, terms such as *dikaiosynē* or mercy, and the like?

Here we must say something about Elliott's historical assumptions. Elliott, following various other recent works on Romans (see B. Witherington and D. Hyatt, *Paul's Letter to the Romans* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004]), argues that we must take absolutely seriously that this document was written primarily, if not exclusively, to Gentile Christians in Rome. He takes seriously the problem of Jewish Christians in Rome, who had returned from exile in A.D. 54 once Nero had ascended to the throne and the ban of Claudius had fallen into abeyance, and who had discovered not only that they were a minority of Christians in Rome but also that the ever-present anti-Semitism of Gentile Romans had reared its ugly head within the Roman Christian community. Gentile Christians not only saw the Jewish Christians as second-class citizens; it was even suggested that God had now rejected his first chosen people in favor of Roman Gentile Christians like those to whom Paul wrote. Paul, in turn, then had to respond to this serious problem, and he does so at length, putting the Gentile Christians in their place, not least with his powerful rhetoric in Rom 9–11, where he demonstrates that God has not abandoned the Jews at all, not even the non-Christian ones. In this part of his social analysis, I find Elliott to be right on target. Texts such as Rom 14 make very apparent that there were indeed such tensions and problems within the Roman Christian community. Romans, then, is indeed a situation-specific letter, but Paul must tread carefully as he is writing to an audience that, although he may have been their apostle in one sense as the apostle of the Gentiles, was by and large not his own converts or a church that he had planted.

One of the “causes” that exercises Elliott in this book is to make clear that he is opposing “the centuries-long projection into Paul's day of subsequent Christian stereotypes regarding Jews and Judaism. I use ‘Judean’ here as a way of reminding the reader and myself that we are dealing with ancient terms, *Ioudaios*, and *Iudaeus* which were used both by those who were and by others who were not *Ioudaioi* to define what being *Ioudaioi* meant. My interest is in letting first-century Judeans, Paul above all, speak for themselves” (16). This is a noble aim, as is in general the opposition to anti-Semitic scholarship, but the redefining of terms here, using “Judean” instead of “Jew” (because the latter has certain negative resonances in some modern contexts where prejudice prevails) is not helpful on two scores. Paul, though a Diaspora-born Jew, was perfectly happy with calling himself a Jew (1 Cor 9), but he would not have self-identified as a “Judean,” nor would he have called other Diaspora Jews “Judeans.” Further, the term *Ioudaios* did not have just a geographical or even political resonance in his world; it also had an ethnic and religious resonance. Listen to what a Jewish New Testament scholar

like A.-J. Levine says on this very matter. After admitting that sometimes a term such as *Ioudaios* could have a geographical resonance or meaning, she adds:

however, the geographical designation downplays the significant shift in Jewish thought, as least by the second century B.C.E., if not earlier, when the “ethnic-geographical self-definition [of Judean] was supplemented by religious (or ‘cultural’) and political definitions, because it was only in this period that the Judean ethnos opened itself to the incorporation of outsiders.” Such evidence includes, for example, Josephus’ use of *Ioudaios* to describe the converted members of the royal house of Adiabene (*Antiquities* 20.38–39); it includes 2 Maccabees 6.6, which states that “people could neither keep the Sabbath nor observe the festivals of their ancestors, nor so much as confess themselves to be *Ioudaioi*.” In these cases the ethnic [and geographical] designation does not apply very well whereas the “religious” one fits perfectly. (A.-J. Levine, *The Misunderstood Jew* [San Francisco, Harper, 2006], 161–62)

Herein lies one of the real problems with ideological and certain other forms of social analysis of the New Testament: it tends to be reductionistic in overreacting to the religious and theological character of the language of the Bible and trying to interpret it in a more generic or social way.

One of the great strengths of this book is that Elliott has spent a lot of time, with considerable profit, burning the midnight oil reading the classics (more the Latin ones than the Greek ones) that are of some relevance to the study of Romans: Cicero, Caesar, Dio Cassius, Virgil, Juvenal, Horace, Ovid, Livy, Suetonius, Tacitus, Philo, Josephus, Plutarch, to mention but a few that come up for regular mention and profitable discussion. It could be wished that more New Testament scholars would actually take the time to ground themselves in this corpus of literature, which is as important to understanding the New Testament (all of which is literature in Greek and written to aid an evangelistic movement in the Greco-Roman world) as early Jewish literature. It is this literature that helps one realize that there are indeed social and rhetorical nuances to Paul’s discourse.

What of Elliott’s rhetorical analysis of Romans? Here there are things both to commend and to question. He is quite right that Paul is following the rhetorical technique called *insinuatio* or indirection, not bringing up the real bone of contention Paul has with his largely Gentile audience until Rom 9–11. Paul does this not least because he has not personally or in person previously established his ethos and authority with this particular audience, mostly composed of persons not converted by Paul. He must, then, seek to establish common ground first, treading lightly, before he really gets to some of the exigencies that are primarily generating the writing of this discourse.

Elliott is equally correct that there is a strong paraenetic thrust to the letter as a whole. The materials in Rom 12–15 are not general ethics tacked on at the end as an afterthought but in fact are part of what Paul has been arguing toward and driving at from the beginning of the document: the righteous behavior of the converts who are in service of a righteous God who has set them right and saved them. Where Elliott goes wrong in his rhetorical analysis is, first, he does not divide up the arguments properly (Rom 8–9 do not go together), and, second, he is mistaken about not seeing Rom 1:16–17 as the proposition of the whole discourse. While he is right that Rom 1:16–17 are loosely connected to what follows in Rom 1:18–32, Elliott’s reading of the repeated use of *gar* in this part of Rom 1 overreads the degree of connectivity. *Gar* is often no stronger a connective than *kai* or *de* in a rhetorical discourse that is ongoing. Perhaps most problematically, Elliott fails to see the full import of seeing this as a deliberative discourse from start to finish about righteousness and salvation, not merely about justice or mercy. But to his credit he is very clear that Paul’s rhetoric is an apocalyptic rhetoric, a rhetoric that views history not as a continuum but as something punctuated by divine interruptions.

The basic way that Elliott makes his case is by taking certain key buzzwords and bouncing the Pauline usage of them off the common usage in Greco-Roman discussion of things such as justice, mercy, piety, virtue, and the like. The question arises, however, whether the use of terms such as justice, mercy, piety, and virtue in these sources have the same sorts of meaning as they do in Romans.

Let us take as a test case the important word *dikaiosynē*. Elliott urges that we should translate this term, beginning already in Rom 1, as “justice,” because this is often its meaning in Greco-Roman literature. Paul is concerned about the injustices done to Jews by Romans, and he wants to make clear from the outset that “the justice of God” is already intervening in human history and will do so again on behalf of God’s chosen people. But does this translation *do* “justice” to the various and nuanced ways Paul uses the term in Romans? Is salvation in Romans really described as a matter of God’s justice? Actually, the answer to this question is no. Salvation is not owed by God to anyone, not even to Jews, because all have sinned and fallen short of God’s glory.

Make no mistake, from the outset of Romans Paul links salvation with *dikaiosynē*. While I am in full agreement with Elliott that the translation “justification” provides too much of a forensic fictive sense to the term, I do not think “justice” works either, especially when Paul is talking about salvation, not “giving someone what they are due.” In my view, the term “righteousness” works far better, for as an umbrella term to describe how God relates to human beings it can include both the notions of salvation and judgment. It is telling to me that when Paul wants to speak more particularly about “judgment,” as he does in Rom

1:18–32, even a judgment already transpiring in his own day, he chooses the term *orgē* “wrath” to make it clear that he is not talking about salvation in that specific part of the discussion.

Or consider Elliott’s very interesting discussion of “mercy” (*clementia*; 87–119). He carefully and convincingly demonstrates that *clementia* had the sense of what a ruler did after he had conquered a people and decided to spare them further barbarity. Of course, the conquering in the first place was an act of “injustice” and “cruelty,” but this is clearly not what Paul means by mercy. By “mercy,” for example in Rom 11–12 Paul refers to the genuine compassion and generosity of a just God who remits or omits the punishment for sin. “Clemency” for Paul is not a euphemism for a rapacious and unjust ruler calling off the dogs so he could appear to be “merciful” for public relations purposes. If the Gentile Christians in Rome heard overtones of the imperial discussion, then they would be hearing Paul offer a very different, perhaps even anti-imperial definition of mercy. But herein lies the rub: you cannot counter a definition existing in the mind of the audience unless you have spelled out previously, or on the spot, the contrary definition you are offering, so they will know you are rebutting a standard definition. My point is this: reading Romans in light of the social setting and ethos in Rome tells us a good deal about what Paul does *not* mean by justice, mercy, piety, and the like, but it does not give us the proper lexicon for saying what he does mean. That requires looking at the usage of terms such as *dikaïosynē* in Paul’s other letters. The Pauline context must be primary, the allusive Roman social context decidedly secondary, in defining the Pauline terms.

One of the most compelling segments of Elliott’s argument is his comparison and contrast of the myths and legends about Aeneas with what Paul says about Abraham (121ff.) Here he is on more solid and convincing ground. Elliott is right that the recently minted myth about descent from Aeneas was a popular tale being told and retold in Rome in the mid-first century A.D. Aeneas and Augustus had become regularly juxtaposed in the rhetoric of the emperors, especially in regard to the piety of Aeneas and the way Augustus was constantly depicted as a pious person like Aeneas. The Romans, always quick to adapt and adopt Greek legends and Romanize them, had managed to give the story of Aeneas a particular imperial twist in the first century A.D.

Elliott critiques at some length the reading by Richard Hays of Rom 4 about “Abraham our ancestor according to the flesh.” Is Paul really opposing here a more spiritual view versus a fleshly view of what it means to be a descendent of Abraham? Is he really taking Israel according to the flesh to task here? I agree with Elliott that nothing in Rom 4 suggests that Paul is laboring to rebut a criticism of his new “spiritual” view of what it means to be a Jew or to have Abraham as one’s ancestor. To his credit Elliott points out

that nothing suggests that the Jerusalem Church was opposed to Paul's attempt to include more Gentiles in the church; the question was—on what basis and with what demands?

Rather, Elliott suggests that “the target of Paul's argument is the non-Judean, who is explicitly addressed in the letter and whose boasting over a supposedly fallen Israel is Paul's principle target (11.13–25). It is their misunderstanding of Judaism to regard Abraham's ancestry as limited to the (vanquished) Judeans. Expressed more pointedly, Paul addresses an audience whom he expects is tempted to think of genealogy in a deterministic way, and of Abraham's ancestry, in particular as unworthy” (134). Imagine the Roman Gentile Christians' surprise when Paul tells them that they too are the children of Abraham and that they stand before God on the same basis as Abraham did—counted as righteous because they have trusted in the God of Abraham! Abraham suddenly goes from being seen as an also-ran in the race for finding a great founding father to passing Aeneas in the fast lane when it comes to Roman Gentile Christians and their proper paternity.

Using his own form of the *insinuatio* procedure, Elliott saves for last his analysis of Rom 13:1–7, realizing that here is a section of Romans that could provide a very thorough derailing of the thesis that Paul is engaging in anti-imperial rhetoric on some sort of large scale. Is Paul really, in a very subtle way, critiquing Nero's rhetoric about how he became a ruler without the use of the sword? This is doubtful, since Paul says the governing authorities in question have a right to bear small arms, in this case the short sword that was used for personal protection by tax collectors and others, not the larger weapons of soldiers. Like W. Wink and others, Elliott jumbles together the “powers and principalities,” which Paul certainly does critique in various places (although not particularly in Romans, not even in Rom 8), with the political rulers. But in fact, “principalities and powers” in Paul's letters refer to angels, in some cases fallen angels. This is not the terminology Paul uses in Rom 13:1–7 for human governing officials. Paul's view of them is that they rule by God's permission; indeed, God has “ordered” them in a particular way. Elliott has a case for arguing that Paul means “order” rather than “ordain” when he speaks of the establishment or authorization of governing officials by God, and he is right that the emphasis in this passage is about the voluntary submission of Christians to such authorities, including to the tax police. Paul believes that the form of this world and its institutions are indeed passing away, and the eschatological order is and will be established by God's intervention. In the meanwhile, Paul's counsel is to be a good citizen, to pay one's taxes, to return good for evil, even if the rulers are wicked. This sort of quietism or pacifism may not suit modern liberation theology's agenda, but it is the social agenda Paul pursued, as is perfectly clear from the rest of Rom 13. Vengeance was to be left in God's hands, and Christians, even Roman ones, were to practice nonresistance when abused and good citizenship when there was time and opportunity to

do so. The former part of this strategy Paul owed to the teaching of Jesus; the latter is hardly surprising in light of the fact that Paul was a Roman citizen, however seldom he availed himself of his rights (usually only *in extremis*, to judge from Acts).

As I draw this review to a close, I must add a caveat emptor. Unfortunately, many readers will find off-putting Elliott's own political rhetoric as he strains throughout the book to draw close analogies between the Roman rhetoric and praxis of empire and modern American political rhetoric and praxis, even though he knows perfectly well that the analogy breaks down at various crucial points (not the least of which is that the Roman economy truly was based on real slave labor and the actual political and military power and influence of the U.S. president is a far cry from the power Nero had over the ancient Mediterranean crescent). I find it bewildering why so many good New Testament scholars somehow think that Marxist analysis of society and economy and a Marxist approach to politics somehow better comports with the biblical witness about such matters than other options, particularly options that stress freedom of choice about the means and manner of production, and democracy, including freedom of religion.

What I find especially exasperating about this modern rhetoric is that I have spent time teaching in various countries that have been laid waste by communism, countries in which the poor were certainly not better served by any form of Marxist government than by capitalism or democracy, countries in which, in fact, Christianity was banned, oppressed, persecuted, and martyred by Marxist governments. How exactly a bankrupt and sometimes even anti-Christian Marxist analysis of our social world or the Roman world better and more accurately helps our analysis of the New Testament than other sorts of readings is as much of a *mysterion* as the one Paul discusses in Rom 9–11.

In short, this book is certainly postcolonial enough, but it is a pity it is not also post-Marxist enough. The great tragedy is that many people, frustrated by the just-mentioned political orientation of the author, will not give this book the time of day or the careful reading that it deserves, as it has many fresh insights about the social and rhetorical world into which Paul is discoursing. These insights deserve a fair hearing, and indeed they can help us better understand the ever-elusive rhetoric of Romans and the towering figure who wrote it.

It is the mark of a good and carefully argued book that it forces us to reexamine our paradigms and fundamental assumptions. Elliott's *The Arrogance of Nations* is most certainly a good book in that and other senses, for while Romans is the most analyzed (some would say overanalyzed) document from all of antiquity, we can always use more help, more light shed on a document once described by John Donne as thunder, thunder and lightning. Let us hope that Elliott's analysis is *not* ignored or merely treated as more

“sturm und drang” from the liberation theologians, seen as “full of sound and fury” but signifying precious little.