

Review of Neil Elliott, *The Arrogance of Nations: Reading Romans in the Shadow of Empire*. Paul in Critical Context series. Minneapolis: Fortress Press 2008.

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Neil Elliott's study offers us a reading of Romans firmly contextualised within the Roman Empire and the social structure, power plays, and everyday life of this reality. *The Arrogance of Nations* is charged with social indignation and political commitment and is definitely worth a read.

In Elliott's reading Romans is, "Paul's attempt to counteract the effects of imperial ideology within the Roman congregations" (p. 158). In the course of his argument Elliott offers analyses of Romans 1; 2-3; 4; 8; 9-11 and 13, juxtaposing these chapters with various roughly contemporary texts including Cicero, Tacitus, and Josephus, as well as Augustus' *Res Gestae*. We also encounter figures such as "Aeneas", Nero, Claudius, Josephus, and so on. Moreover Elliott uses contemporary theory to grapple with Romans. He uses James C. Scott's elaborations on hidden and public transcripts to analyse the opening lines of the letter; Fredric Jameson's strategy of containment to unearth the unsaid and the repressed in the text; and liberation theology, in particular Sobrino, to argue for solidarity with the poor. In addition we also have multiple references to contemporary US foreign politics, which thus form the backdrop for Elliott's discussions of the practices of the Roman Empire.

Elliott's basic contention is that Paul is not talking about (or to) Jewish believers. What Paul is addressing, between the lines, is the increased imperial ideology within the Roman congregation, which is in opposition to the solidarity of the Gospel. Thus all the problematic issues within the letter, which theologians have directed against homosexuals (sinful nature) and Jews (works of law), belong, in Elliott's interpretation, to imperial ideology. For example, what protestant exegetes have seen as a Jewish theology of works, Elliott sees as an attempt by Hellenistic Judeans to align their law in correspondence with a Roman imperial ideology of works, such as that promoted by Augustus in *Res Gestae* (p. 140). And the problematic verses in 1:28-32 are not directed at homosexuals, but are allusions to the Caesars themselves:

Paul is not offering an explanation [of homosexual desire]. Nor can we tell from these lines [Romans 1:28-32], where Paul thinks homosexual acts, in general, come from, because homosexual acts, in general, simply are not in view. Instead, he refers to shameful acts, including homosexual acts among others, that are the result of a specific, terrible drama in which God has abandoned specific people – active idolaters – to degrading sexual desires. As a result of this divine action, these people have been made to 'burn' with desire for others of the same sex – desires 'beyond what is natural' – and have acted out these desires in shameful and destructive ways, on their way to ever greater wickedness. Paul is not talking about homosexuals in general any more than he is talking about 'gentiles' in general or human beings in general. His field of vision is narrowly focused on people who refused to honour God, embraced idolatry instead, and were abandoned by God to degrading sexual acts and profound wickedness (p. 78, emphasis in original).

My problem here is that Elliott does not absolve the equation between homosexual acts and "shameful" and "destructive ways" of enacting desires, "beyond what is natural". He is, in effect, saying: Paul is not saying that homosexual acts are shameful; he is saying that shameful and destructive practices include homosexual acts.

This rhetorical move of Paul's is, in Elliott's interpretation, embedded within a larger imperial framework: The "sexual offenders" are the Roman Caesars, heads of the Roman Empire against which, according to Elliott, the entire letter contesting. So, we are back at square one with the homosexual acts occupying the space of that which the whole letter argues against. In Elliott's

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analysis imperial wickedness has replaced human sinfulness. And as far as “works of law” goes, Elliott’s analysis hardly does justice to the injustices wrought by the anti-Jewish readings of the text.

This brings me to my next issue. Paul’s letter to the Romans is a highly complex text with a history of effects that is possibly more complex than the letter itself. While Elliott’s penetrating study on Paul’s letter to the Romans is a detailed and illuminating analysis of the letter, it does not proffer any engagement with the afterlives of the text. The texts on US foreign politics serve to call the reader to respond to the gospel of solidarity in light of present wretchedness and inequality – not to show how Christianity has contributed to creating these unequal power relations in the first place. In this sense *The Arrogance of Nations* belongs to what Stephen Moore calls “X and empire” studies, by which he means books with “a sustained focus on the theme of empire as an exegetical lens through which to reframe and reread selected New Testament texts” (Moore 2007: 18). As Moore also notes, this particular group of texts do not label themselves as postcolonial studies, and that empire studies might be a better label (Moore 2007: 19). Following on from this, Pamela Eisenbaum’s endorsement of the book on the back-cover refers to Elliott’s study as “making sophisticated use of post-colonial theory” is slightly misleading, and might come as a disappointment to scholars who actually *do* work within postcolonial theory. Elliott’s study is less about how the history of the text has helped shape the political reality of the West and more about looking at how we today may address that reality through the lens of the text of Romans. Unlike some of the more insipid examples of “X and empire” studies, however, this one certainly packs a punch, the main reason being, I think, Elliott’s indignation, which brings me to my final point.

Elliott seems to count Paul within the subordinate group over against the dominant class of the Roman empire (p. 21). However, I want to question to what extent that really is possible. In a couple of other places, Elliott happily relies on Acts, and Acts, as we know, claims Paul as a Roman citizen. This places Paul at a systemic level of imperial politics, not outside it. Furthermore, Paul could read and write, he had means to travel, and relative access throughout the empire, and, resorting once again to Acts, he was given a trial. As far as I am concerned, Paul’s position of privilege need not unravel Elliott’s interpretation of the Pauline message. In fact, by highlighting Paul’s status we may see that Paul mirrors Elliott’s own position as a white male within twenty-first century USA. And, just as Elliott’s Paul calls for solidarity in Elliott’s interpretation of Romans, Elliott uses his position of privilege to disseminate powerful calls for justice and structural change in *The Arrogance of Nations*.