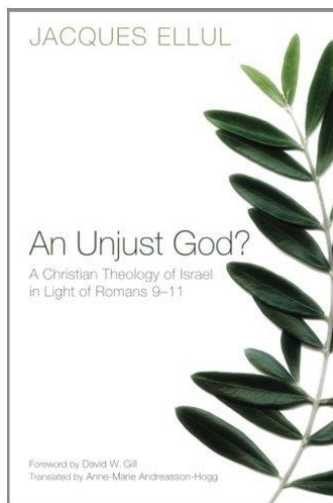


## Jacques Ellul, *An Unjust God? A Christian Theology of Israel in the Light of Romans 9-11*, trans. Anne-Marie Andreasson-Hogg (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2012).

Recently, I spent many hours reading and re-reading Paul's Letter to the Romans. It took months. I became stunned with what seemed to be a book I hadn't read before, although I have been reading it through for, I guess, 50 years. I may disclose the results from this marination some day, for what I would now call "Paul's Roman Letter and Curriculum". But here I am happy to review this little book by Jacques Ellul (1912-1994) which, among other things, confirms my prejudice that the so-called "new perspective on Paul" (Sanders, Wright, Dunn et al), for all its benefits, can do with a dose of Ellul's iconoclastic refreshment. He has often brought that kind of breeze to discussions whenever a great temptation takes hold to become wise in one's own (academic) conceits (Romans 12:16). That, after all, is his signature tune.



This treatise not only attempts to bring a fresh understanding to a passage of scripture that has regularly proven difficult for those reading Paul's letter as dogmatic theology, it also has the potential of throwing a sharp light upon Ellul's own contribution to scholarship in general.

The first point I would make about *An Unjust God?* is Ellul's self-critical approach. It is based upon his Christian understanding of himself in solidarity not only with Christians, and all other pagans (his term for "gentiles"), but also with the children of Israel. There is, I sense, an implicit self-chastisement in his reading of Romans 9-11. By identifying himself as a follower of Jesus, he has to own up to the fallacies, failures and abominations of his own Christian, spiritual heritage which has aided and abetted some rather nasty dogmatic appeals to this Pauline treatise, and to these very chapters in particular.

In certain respects, the argument is uneven and incomplete. But, nevertheless, what he finds in these chapters is of great significance for our understanding of Paul. It indicates further work to reassess what this letter is telling us. Such a reassessment must surely extend to the entire New Testament. But, as we are told, it was written in 1991, three years before Ellul's death. He has left behind a pertinent provocation and now it is available in well-crafted English.

There are a few typos and infelicities, suggesting this was rushed into print. But that is quite different from the "unfinished" character of this publication's main narrative which I have suggested invites us to undertake further reflective work. Ellul seems to have been certain that further insights into the inner coherence of Paul's "book" would come from following through on what is outlined in this brief study. Many taken-for-granted assumptions that cling to the legacy of Pauline studies have been so very hard to shake off, he says. And not least among these is the completely unbiblical and unchristian attitude adopted by the "church" to Jewish people.

Ellul can be read as adopting an "attitude" to his own people (i.e. fellow Christians over 2000 years) similar to the way Heinz Cassirer (1903-1979) reads Paul. Cassirer was the converted son of the famous Jewish philosopher (see Heinz W. Cassirer, "Further reflections on St Paul's Relationship to His fellow Jews" in *Grace and Law: St Paul, Kant and the Hebrew Prophets*, Eerdmans, 1988, pp. 170-173). God doesn't make mistakes in giving us created solidarity with our fellows, whoever they, or we, may be. And so, Paul may have been given a special brief by Jesus that sent him to preach to the pagans (Acts 22:22), but just as Jesus had not finished with Israel, so Paul was simply getting in step with the ways of Him who we will never catch, however far we may go with Him.

Paul's task had everything to do with provoking his fellow Jews to jealousy and the way he did that was to encourage his (Christian) readers to maintain a mercy-filled way of life, particularly in their dealings with the children of Israel. As a "good reformed preacher", Ellul acknowledges his solidarity with his own French reformed tradition, but this does not stop him from the radical renovation that is needed for understanding Romans 12:1-2 which, rightly understood, would enhance such a Christian way of life in France as well.

By the time he wrote this (1991), Ellul had already drawn attention to what he considered to be serious misrepresentations about Islam among religious scholars, particularly of Christianity's relationship to Islam. And there are places in his discussion in this book where that same attitude will jar many who think some kind of political concordat can be found between what are regularly referred to as "Abrahamic religions", or "religions of the book". This is only to say that he dissents very strongly from the way in which Islam is defined to avoid mention of its heretical characteristics, the idolatrous and pagan nature of its faith (86).

That being said, Ellul's stated attitude to the existence of the State of Israel as "a sign of the action of God in history, a sign announced in the prophecies on the restoration of Israel" (99), is somewhat bizarre. That footnote raises my concern that such statements might find their way into ongoing attempts to justify America's relationship with Israel and the Middle-East and in a way that distracts attention from the true value of Ellul's discussion. Still, Ellul was never one to avoid controversy and he admits his view will evoke "violent reactions". For our part, we should keep in mind that he is writing as a Frenchman who has lived through the Shoah and who knows the culture of anti-Semitism that has remained a blight upon French and European life for centuries. He writes as someone who has lived through the 20<sup>th</sup> century and who, as a mature adult, affirmed the setting up of a Jewish homeland, what we know as the State of Israel. Such asides probably need editorial comment which can direct readers to other writings by Ellul that have a bearing upon Middle-Eastern politics. He doesn't address English-speaking Christian Zionism or American views of its own "exceptional character" as a "new Israel". (If he had done so, it might shed fresh light on how he understood that aside but that would have been to wander off the biblical exegesis track.)

With Ellul, there is always a sense of the provocative provisionality of academic discussion. In that context he willingly "goes for the jugular". It seems he reveled in the role of iconoclast. Let me give another example of why I think this book is "unfinished", and draw attention to what he leaves unsaid in his introduction and in the opening discussion of the ninth chapter:

...Paul strongly and clearly affirms his solidarity with [his] people. It is very important to emphasize this fact ... because Paul has traditionally been declared an enemy of the Jews, and his whole theology has been seen to condemn the Jews (p. 15).

What is unsaid there is what Paul leaves unsaid, namely reference to his former life as a murderous persecutor of Jews and proselytes who, now believing in Jesus' resurrection, confessed that Israel's Messiah had come. Ellul will refer to this later when discussing "the grafted olive tree" (i.e. 11:1-10, Chapter 4, pages 61-67), but my point is that if it is relevant for our reading of Romans 11, it should also be part of our reading of Romans 9 and earlier on in the "letter" as well. With respect to Paul's admonition to his readers about their in-grafting, as wild olive branches, into a root which supports them, Ellul notes that

... [Paul] has a considerable additional argument for choosing himself as a witness: he was a persecutor of Christians, an ardent zealot for the destruction of this heresy; and here he is now a convert (p. 63).

But we know from Luke that Paul was told in no uncertain terms, and by Jesus Himself, that it was Israel's Messiah who had been persecuted by Paul's "threats and murder" (Acts 9:1). Why then should an appeal to Paul's knowledge about his own former life be made here if it is not assumed to be implicit for our interpretation of the *entire* contents of this letter? Did not Paul's persecution of Israel's Messiah include Jewish believers? Is it not part of what Paul assumes he must keep in mind as he writes this letter? Is it not through this "fragile witness" (63) that his readers are presented with his advice that they should be living expressions of God's mercy? And, indeed, that is the connection Ellul most aptly makes with Romans 12:1.

So, I would suggest that Paul's personal background as a murderer of those who are "true Israel" should be kept in mind as we read through the letter from the beginning, and of course as we come to Paul's own account of that (repentant) struggle leading him to exclaim: "O wretched man that I am?" (7:24). In that other well-known passage about Paul's struggle against the law of sin that dominates him, may he not be facing up to who he was as he penned these words, in contrast to the man he was before God's mercy sent him first into a deep trauma and then out to take the message to the pagans?

Or to put it another way: By any standard, we should seek a "reading" of Romans 9-11 that is entirely congruent with our reading of the book *en toto*. The subtitle of the book should actually be amended to read: "in the light of Romans 9-12:2" since the author actually concludes his exegetical reflections with commentary upon those famous verses. That is a call to those who believe in Israel's Messiah to live as "living sacrifices". Since Chapters 9 to 11 are also about the "merciful compassion of God" (12:1) whose ways are past finding out (11:33), Ellul is quite right that this should not be taken out of its literary context to turn it into the prelude to the "moral" part of the letter (89-97). Ellul suggests that the Christian's response (12:1 and following) is all about the way Christians are to demonstrate a mercy-filled life. He addresses his readers as one who has met Jesus, the Messiah. He has learned from the One who did not retaliate in kind to the hate directed at Him! This was precisely what Paul has made his own business with his trip up to Jerusalem with the "collection" for the *Jewish* poor.

In various places, Ellul-the-exegete suggests that a truly *Christian* interpretation of this passage now must not avoid the Shoah, the evil culmination of centuries of anti-Semitism that can only truly find its meaning in the sufferings of Israel's Messiah. "Both the Shoah committed by the Nazis and the one prepared by Muslims ... must lead us to rethink all of Christian theology" (85-86). He is obviously deeply aware that such a statement is going to cause consternation and anger but, nevertheless, he is clearly willing to "have the book thrown at him" if that is what a true profession of faith in Christ will evoke. Why? Well, his willingness to unashamedly identify with the sons and daughters of Israel has got everything to do with the manner in which he reads Paul to be commending a life that demonstrates God's mercy to the pagans converted to Jesus Christ. To say it again, Paul's emphasis is that it will be by the mercy-filled life of the pagans to whom the mercy of Israel's Messiah has been shown; that in God's time the Jews, "provoked to jealousy", will find God's grace and mercy!

So it simply comes down to Ellul's own solidarity with Jesus Christ. And if this late-in-life treatise *An Unjust God?* cannot fully express solidarity with the trauma of Jewish suffering under the Nazis, then what is written is penned with the intention of saying, plainly and simply, that this should be so, that this should henceforth be the characteristic of a truly Christian way of life. This kind of solidarity should have long since been the Christian attitude to the children of Israel.

This is indeed a lovely exposition, and it is likely to trouble those who assume that the "new perspective on Paul" provides enough for them to chew on. The perspective Ellul places before readers is indeed fresh, and it is certainly an encouragement to all who may read it to then re-read this New Testament book. It should provoke many. Yes, scholars like Tom Wright, James Dunn, John Piper and Pope Benedict should take a long look at what the French iconoclastic Christian sociologist has written here

in this humble book. It retains its French connections but that should not deter any readers. My guess is that your 75-year-old Auntie Nancy who has been reading the Bible with the help of Scripture Union Notes since she was a little girl will also benefit. Get her a copy for her next birthday and it might stimulate a discussion that blows away more cobwebs from our reading of the Bible.

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