

An Unjust God? A Christian Theology of Israel in Light of Romans 9-11.

by Jacques Ellul

Trans. by Anne-Marie Andreasson-Hogg. Forward by David W. Gill.

Eugene, OR: Cascade Books. 2012, xxi + 111 pp, ISBN 13: 978-1-62032-361-8

Reviewed by Andrew Trotter

PhD (New Testament), Cambridge University; Director of the Consortium of Christian Study Centers

Jacques Ellul was many things—law professor, sociologist, philosopher, et al.—but he was not a formally-trained biblical studies expert. So why does he write a book based in a particular biblical text? We will discuss his reasons to some degree below, but let me say now: I am glad he did.

An Unjust God? is simply structured. After a brief preface outlining the argument of the book in good Barthian fashion by stating a number of apparent contradictions Paul solves in the selected text, in five chapters Ellul divides the text of Romans 9-11 into five sections: “The Unique People,” “This Unjust God,” “How Will They Believe?,” “The Grafted Olive Tree,” and “Mystery and Renewal.” The book then concludes with an Epilogue, an appendix on the suffering servant surveying the work of Armand Abécassis and a brief bibliography.

An Unjust God? makes no claims to precise biblical exegesis; it is a work of biblical theology, not of historical/grammatical criticism. New Testament exegesis, for example, is generally filled with discussion of words and phrases, how they are used in the grammatical and literary context of the passage, and how they are used in other relevant contexts in other ancient writings. Ellul rarely refers to the underlying Greek text; even when he does, he discusses it in general terms that are secondary to his more theological concerns.

When he does refer to a term, he depends on the exegesis of others and can get himself in trouble. So, for instance, when apparently referring to the phrase “zwh\ e`k nekrw\`n” (zoe ek nekron) in Romans 11:15 he states “This word ‘vivification’ (which Maillot translates as ‘life surging out of death’) is not quite identical with resurrection” (p. 71), he betrays the fact that he is unaware the underlying Greek is actually in a phrase, not a word. More importantly, he goes on to build a case for the meaning of the phrase, as if its interpretation is relatively stable, when in fact it is one of the most controversial phrases in the whole of the exegesis of Romans 9-11.

Deeper problems result from his lack of insight into the processes of biblical interpretation at the level he seeks with this book. For instance he castigates other interpreters of the role of the Jewish people in Christian thought for eschewing what he calls “the only indisputable and *comprehensive* [italics his] source” for “what a Christian theology of the people of Israel should be,” going on to ignore the Gospels because they give us “indications, but only concerning individuals or certain groups belonging to the Jewish people, not anything about the people as a whole... we have an exact and precise answer to that question [‘understanding where the Jewish people are to be situated in a Christian perspective or what is

continued existence means’] in these three chapters of the Epistle to the Romans—there, and nowhere else in the new Testament” (pp. 2-3).

Yet every Gospels researcher knows that the crowds serve just that function in Matthew’s and John’s Gospels particularly and that the whole Old Testament is filled with prophetic and other material important to the theologian for understanding the Jews in the present day. This is not to argue with the centrality of Romans 9-11 for this question; it is only to say that Ellul should not have looked exclusively to this text in such an absolute fashion.

No, this little book is not a study in the detailed exegesis of Romans 9-11. So has Ellul gotten into waters over his head and given us a book of little worth? And does Ellul’s lack of exegetical training mean that he has regularly misused the biblical text for his own purposes? Paul himself might say, “By no means!” What he has done is enter into the world of biblical theology, and there his legal experience and skills serve him in good stead. Biblical theology, or surmising from the text what it has to say to a question relevant both to the text and the reader, is much more an exercise in logic and argument than it is one of translation.

In what Ellul has attempted to do, he shines. I should point out that he claims no creative stance in this book. From the start Ellul makes it quite clear that he is attempting to get people to take seriously work from the past that he believes has gotten the question right, particularly some articles by Wilhelm Vischer, and, to a lesser extent, the famous *The Epistle to the Romans* by Karl Barth. He refers often to Vischer and his work, but differs from Barth on his focus on the church in his interpretation of Romans 9-11, when Ellul firmly believes the chapters have much more to do with the Jews.

So what is the great accomplishment of *An Unjust God*? Simply put, Ellul puts forth a case for the continued importance of the Jews in God’s salvation history of humankind that is rigorously argued, clearly enough written, and presented with a passion. At the same time, he proclaims a word of judgment upon the largely Gentile church for not living and acting in accord with the place and privilege bestowed upon it since the “temporary” rejection of the Jews. One could argue with his lack of reference to the history of these chapters, a source rich and replete with both counters to, and support for, many of his positions, but he has given us a simple, straightforward argument for a Christian rapprochement with the Jews, and that is a welcome text to have in these angry, adversative times.