

The Unjust God? A Christian Theology for the People of Israel (Romans 9 – 11)

By Jacques Ellul

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The standard outline of Paul's great Letter to the Romans sees chapters one through eight as a foundational "systematic theology" describing God, the problem of human sinfulness, and the solution in Jesus Christ. Then chapters nine through eleven constitute a kind of part two, an excursus answering the question: "if all this is true, how then does it relate to what God was doing in Israel before Jesus arrived?" Part three, then, chapters twelve and thirteen, builds a comprehensive account of the ethics and discipleship implications of this grand theology. The first impact of this new work from Jacques Ellul, *The Unjust God?*, is to elevate the importance of chapters nine to eleven. They are no minor excursus but a dramatic step beyond part one. Now, the "therefore" that opens chapter twelve is tightly linked to the message of chapters nine to eleven, not just to chapters one to eight.

The Unjust God? was first published in French in 1991, three years before Ellul's death, and is now appearing in English translation in 2012 for the first time. The title comes from Romans 9:14: "What shall we say, therefore? Is there some injustice in God?" And the emphatic answer: "Far from it!" Why, we might ask, would this question even come up? Perhaps it is because it appears that God has transferred his promises and affection from Israel to the Church. Perhaps because God's choices sometimes seem arbitrary (e.g., Jacob have I loved, Esau have I hated). Perhaps because the evil and faithlessness that take place among people are attributable to God's action in hardening their hearts.

Jacques Ellul's careful reading of Romans chapters nine to eleven is an astounding exercise in careful listening. Unfazed by the deeply rutted and now predictable interpretive pathways established through this material Ellul is massively open to a fresh direction in hearing what God might actually be saying. He draws on linguistic studies, and on two of his favorite biblical commentators Wilhelm Vischer (1895 – 1988) and Alphonse Maillot (1920 – 2003), along with other classic and contemporary thinkers, but Ellul is always his own man as he grapples with the text in fresh ways. It is hard not to think that Ellul's intense relationships with the Jewish people during the Nazi Occupation of France affected his views. Seeing their suffering, living alongside them, and learning from them --- the great rabbinic teachers as well as the ordinary people --- Ellul has been a staunch, lifelong advocate for the Jewish people and for the state of Israel. Still, this is not an argument based on sentiment or sympathy but on a careful study of the text of Scripture.

For Ellul, there is no question of Israel and the Jewish people losing their identity or importance, or their salvation, with the coming of Christ, despite their general failure to recognize and affirm Jesus as the Messiah. What changes is their *election* to carry the Gospel of redemption and freedom to the "pagans," to the ends of the earth. Israel had turned in on itself; the Jews attempted to build their own righteousness by their (mis-)understanding of the law, rather than fulfilling their mission to be a blessing to all the nations. With Jesus Christ, the Church – made up of Jews and pagans --- is given that election by God to proclaim and live out God's freedom, forgiveness, and welcome to the ends of the earth. Few Christian authors have ever captured the anguish over the Jewish people expressed by Paul at the beginning of Romans 9 as Ellul does in this work. And few writers have ever seen the suffering of Israel over the centuries so profoundly linked to the cross and suffering of Jesus in the way that Ellul has.

This side of the New Testament, Ellul sees a sad betrayal by the Church of its own election to be a blessing to the whole earth! Not at all unlike what Israel experienced, the church's self-justifying doctrinal legalism and exclusionary practices (not the least of which has been its anti-semitism) replaced their calling to be the heralds of freedom before God. Why haven't the Jewish people accepted Jesus as the Messiah? For Ellul the fault lies in large part at the feet of a Christian Church that has failed to be the faithful Body of Christ in continuity with the Jewish Savior of the world, Jesus.

Ellul has powerful insights into Paul's ongoing Jewishness, into the shifting role of Israel throughout history and its future End in God's purposes. His views on salvation, predestination, condemnation, and election are challenging and will not always be persuasive to all readers. No matter! In the end, as after reading any biblical meditation by Ellul, we are drawn into the scriptural text anew, with expectation and excitement. Ellul often said "You can ask any question of the biblical text --- except for the Serpent's question 'Yea, hath God said?'" Ellul also insisted that God's questions for humanity were far more important than humanity's questions for God. In Ellul's *The Unjust God?* we are treated to a veritable intellectual/spiritual feast of inviting God to question us about Israel and the Church.