

## Ellul's Biblical Theology of Israel: Key Ideas and Main Themes

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### Introduction

- A. Ellul's 1991 book, *An Unjust God? A Christian Theology of Israel in Light of Romans 9-11*; French title, *Ce Dieu injuste? Theologie chrétienne pour le peuple d'Israel*. Translated by Anne-Marie Andreasson-Hogg, published by Cascade, 2012. Written just three years before he died.
- B. As a late work, familiar themes appear developed in previous major writings—e.g., from *The Humiliation of the Word*, *Ethics of Freedom*, *Subversion of Christianity*
- C. Title is drawn from Rom. 9:14, "What shall we say, therefore? Is there some injustice in God?" – however, main focus of book is not on the question of divine justice *per se*, but on the Christian theology of the Jewish people
- D. Short book (approx. 100 pages) of biblical theology or biblical exposition; it is not a detailed work of biblical exegesis, nor careful systematic theology; Ellul is a *theological* interpreter of Scripture (cf. Greenman presentation at 2012 Wheaton conference)
- E. Main influences: biblical scholars Wilhelm Vischer (Swiss, d. 1988) and Alphonse Maillot (French, d. 2003). Not much reference to Karl Barth's interpretation, just the criticism that Barth is more interested in the church than in the question of the Jewish people, which Ellul thinks is *the* question of Rom 9-11. He is aware of Calvin's reading but does not engage it. He also refers to Jewish scholar Franz Rosenzweig's *Star of Redemption* but does not develop it.
- F. Immediate context: prepared material for his church Bible study group; he's provoked by John Paul II's three sessions in August 1989 about the Christian estimate of the Jewish people—understand the Pope saying that the old covenant has been "cancelled" by the new covenant (p. 2).
  - 1. I have not yet located these "audiences" by the Pope.
- G. Stylistically: There are the usual charming (or irritating) and typical features.
  - 1. Lots and lots of exclamation points!!
  - 2. Over-statement: Ellul seems to think no one has ever taken Rom. 9-11 seriously at all; "for almost two thousand years these three chapters have either been completely ignored or else their meaning has been distorted" (p. 3).
  - 3. Contrarian and contentious claims, bold, innovative, provocative—all of what we'd expect.
  - 4. Says what he is proposing will be seen as "both scandalous and unacceptable" (p. 11).
- H. Theological context: He is aware of the church's long history of anti-Semitism, and also wants to fend off the "replacement" theology of some Christians whereby the Jews and even OT itself is superseded by Christ and Christianity, so that there is only left a very negative assessment of the Jewish people.

1. He doesn't go into the details of these histories or theologies, but clearly they are in mind—he's posing an alternative.
- I. General context: Ellul's strong affirmation of the importance of the State of Israel; it's not a political book but this is a context for his interest and provides a theological rationale for his political view, though he does not explicitly connect the politics and the theology at this point.
    1. He did not travel much outside France, but did make one trip to Israel at some date; I'm not sure of the exact date.
    2. Recall his other writings on the State of Israel—including some important untranslated works.
    3. Recall that he assisted Jews during the Nazi occupation of France in WW2; is honoured in Yad Vashem in Jerusalem as "Righteous Among the Nations" – he has a deep commitment to the Jewish people.
    4. State of Israel is a theological entity, an act of God: "For me, the existence of the State of Israel is more than a profane fact. It is a sign of the action of God in history, a sign announced in the prophecies on the restoration of Israel." (p. 99, n.1)
    5. Sometimes provocative statements: "When I see Christians being passionate for the Arabs and Islam but relentlessly rejecting and accusing Israel, is there even a fragment of Christian truth left?" (p. 76)
  - J. Focus: it really is, as the sub-title says, a "Christian theology of Israel" and deals with the proper way to understand the relationship between Christianity and the Jews in contemporary times.
  - K. Scope: he has some very important things to say about Rom. 12:1-2, despite what the English subtitle says (i.e., there more than Rom. 9-11 that matters to Ellul in this book). Expresses key theme in Ellul's theology: the importance of a distinctively Christian *way of life*, the moral-social witness of faithful Christians

### **Ellul's key ideas, main themes**

#### **A. Key building block is Ellul's view of election**

1. The wrong ideas of election and covenant have led to poor theology.
2. "God chooses a person, a group of individuals, a people, not for the purpose of saving them, but so that they may fulfill a certain role on earth, that they may accomplish a certain task, that they might serve God. The elect of God are not those who after being saved are singing hymns but those who have been given responsibility by God to represent him on earth in order to do his work. That is the meaning of 'chosen people': not 'saved people,' but people entrusted with a mission." (p. 12)
  - i. Comment: Very helpful, as far as it goes—a reminder of the centrality of mission in the concept of election.
  - ii. However, God's purpose is saving a people, in the sense of drawing them into communion with himself, so that God can be their God, and

they can be God's people; this is a gift of grace, and it calls for hymns and praises, as well as active service.

- iii. Ellul tends a bit here toward a false dichotomy—a false either/or, either “service in mission or saving with hymns”—it's better theology to think in terms of “both/and”
- iv. He's reacting against a narrow view of salvation in Jesus Christ as rescue from sins, which somehow has been disconnected from witness, service, and mission.

**B. Ellul emphasizes the people of Israel as “the unique people” (ch. 1), who have been adopted by God as God's people, entirely by divine grace.**

1. “Grace makes them sons of God” (p. 17)
2. “Paul means that the only son Jesus did not cancel this divine filial adoption of Israel.” (p. 17)
3. Even with the coming of Christ, none of these privileges has been passed from Israel to the church (p. 19).
  - Israel has not been “replaced” at all (p. 58-59)
4. No, the point is that Christians now share in these privileges.
5. After all, Jesus comes from these people; he's a Jew (something Ellul emphasizes strongly)
  - “One can never repeat enough that Jesus is Jewish, that he never denied it...On the contrary, he fulfilled and fortified the promises and he lifts the first covenant higher.” (p. 20)
6. Greenman interpretive point: there is a Christological fulfillment of the covenant, in Ellul's thought—certainly Barth is in the background, but mostly he's following Vischer.
  - “All the gifts belonging to the Jews are more understandable, more luminous, more assured in Jesus, so that Jesus appears as the one who brings all Israel to its culmination.” (p. 20)

**C. The failure of Israel?** They “interpreted these privileges as belonging to them, as being their unique relationship with God, which neither needs to be confirmed nor brought to a culmination point.” (p. 21)

1. Summation: “All these gifts, these privileges, were the action of Grace and Jesus is the last gift of grace for Israel.” (p. 21)
2. Failure: “God chose the bearer of the promise so that the promise might be carried to the universe and so that the covenant might be announced to all. Because the bearer *disobeyed*, God chose a remnant...” (p. 39, Greenman emphasis)
3. Failure, vaguely defined: “...since the beloved and chosen people of God *did not do what God expected of it*, then none other than God himself, in the person of his Son, came to accomplish the work” (p. 43, Greenman emphasis).

4. Key passages for seeing Ellul's view of the failure: p. 44-45
  - "Having received the Torah from God, Israel interpreted it as being in itself, the righteousness of God. That is, Israel claimed to seal righteousness and, in a sense, lock God within the revelation of his justice." (p. 44)
  - "...Israel's first mistake was to confuse the revealed Torah with a text that could be appropriated by scrupulously executing what it said. This would be all there was to righteousness, and consequently a righteousness coming from works, a righteousness of strict obedience..." (p. 44)
  - Most important passage for JE's interpretation: "Israel wanted to obtain righteousness through the Law, through strict obedience, through works. In spite of the Prophets, Israel no longer received the Torah as a living Word always in movement, always *new*." (p. 45, Ellul's emphasis)
5. Refers to the "error" of Israel – the church's presentation of the Gospel as a doctrine or a law repeats the "error" of Israel (p. 60).
6. They misunderstood that Torah as divine revelation was a way of obedience, trust and faith, and turned it into a detailed behavioural code, a text, that could then become the focus of righteousness
7. The core problem = legalism, as if the text "sealed" righteousness, and following it in every detail made one righteous.
8. This generates a "works righteousness" that is not the Bible's teaching (44)
9. Clearly Ellul did not know about the New Perspective on Paul!

**D. Ellul discusses the question of the "justice of God" with reference to two theological principles and one philosophical move.**

1. Comes in Rom 9:14, context = Jacob and Esau
2. The two principles, to be held together: the "absolute freedom of God in his sovereignty" and "the total inability and powerlessness of man 'to bring about his own salvation.'" (p. 23)
3. The philosophical move: "we cannot judge God on the basis of *our* criteria and *our* values" (p. 22)
  - There cannot be criteria or values that are above God
  - "If there are values above God, then we must relentlessly affirm that God is not God!" (22)
  - "If God is God, then there is nothing above him, nothing that enables us to judge him." (22)
4. The sovereignty of God is beyond human understanding—that's very clear, in Ellul's mind.
  - "The principle of election is God's pleasure (in the sense of joy). So God is arbitrary then? Yes, just as love is arbitrary." (27)

5. Ellul emphasizes God's sovereign strategy – that's my phrase, not Ellul's own phrase; this means that God works through a remnant
  - "All of Abraham's descendants are not necessarily Israel" (25)
  - He's working with Romans 9:6-9
  - Some who are Abraham's posterity are not all his children, in the deeper sense of being people who are chosen to carry forward the covenant
  - Jacob is loved; what does it mean to say Esau was "hated"?
    - Ellul says, "God does not know hatred! There is no place for it in God's immense love." (27)
    - Rather, it simply means: Jacob is chosen to continue the covenant, and Esau is not chosen.
    - Chosen for what?
    - "God chooses whom he wants...but that choice is not about eternal salvation; it is not about the promise of life, no. God chooses whom he wants for his service and to fulfil the role he wants men to take up." (28)
    - There is no basis (or grounds) for this choice made by God, other than God's will (28).
    - This is about God's freedom in his sovereign decision, rooted in his grace, not in any kind of human merit—that's a constant theme in Ellul's interpretation.
    - "Israel is not chosen for its distinguished virtues but for its weakness." (30)
6. Christians are constantly trying to prove that God is just. That's a mistake. (p. 35)
  - Apologetics focuses on this—he rejects it
  - Why? It forgets who God is: "sovereignly free love" (p. 35)
  - His mercy is always shown to people who do not deserve it, so where is the injustice, exactly? That's Ellul's point

#### **E. God's strategy is to work through a remnant—key idea for Ellul**

1. God is always narrowing down the remnant of Israel to be the people who will carry the covenant forward to the world, "carry the promise to the world"
  - Some are faithful, some are disobedient to the covenant and fail in their representation of God in the world
  - The faithful are narrowed and narrowed over time
2. The "rejection" of Israel is not their exclusion from salvation (38) and not an exclusion from God's love (39).
3. The covenant is narrowed to Jesus Christ.

4. And through the universal call of Jesus to the nations, to the foreigners, to Gentiles, who become part of the chosen people of Israel and then take up their part of carrying the promise of the covenant to the entire world.
5. This is all about “election to service” (not salvation).
6. He uses a chart on p. 39 to show that movement, a narrowing to Christ and then a broadening or opening up to the world.
7. Result: “Israel is not condemned by God, but it is no longer the instrument to carry forth this revelation, this gospel.” (45)
  - For Ellul, this means that Israel has been “temporarily set aside” (p. 45) *in their role*

#### **F. Does the church replace Israel? No, Jesus does**

1. Ellul says NO, quite emphatically (49).
2. Rather, “the one who takes the place of Israel is Jesus, the true servant” (49).
3. Jesus becomes the singular focus of the remnant theology.
4. He is “the representative of all Israel” (49).
5. He is the “end of the Torah” – it has been completely fulfilled in Jesus.
6. The covenant is carried forward by Jesus and his followers through the proclaimed word—not by images (54)
  - God acts by his Word, in creation and redemption—that’s God’s characteristic way
7. Israel remains the people of God, he says (58)
  - Israel is not “replaced” by the church as God’s people
  - Rom 11 is all about the grafted olive tree
  - “Christianity is a branch of the Jewish people” (71)
  - The church is the grafted branches—“added pieces” that have been “implanted into the holy people—which remains such in spite of everything” (75).
  - “Israel remains the fruit-bearing olive tree. Paganism is the wild olive tree” (by which E means not ‘paganism’ per se, but the Gentiles, or pagans).
  - “God does not ennoble tis wild tree by grafting in it branches from the cultivated olive tree—it is the other way around!” (75)
  - Thus, he concludes: “The sole people of God is made up of Israel *and* the church. Israel and the church are not juxtaposed as two heights independent of each other. No, the church, coming out of pagans, is grated onto the trunk of Israel. Both are linked to each other in the history of salvation. Israel has not been replaced by the church, and God has not planted another natural olive tree next to the first natural olive tree; quite the contrary, there is only one olive tree!” (76)

#### **G. When Israel “stumbled” – what caused it? This is Ellul’s most striking section of the whole book**

1. “The Jews are still rejecting Jesus Christ because when they see what Christians are, they are not moved to jealousy.” (69)
2. “The total responsibility for the rejection of Jesus by the Jews is *exclusively* caused by what Christians and Christian churches are.” (69, his emphasis)
3. This reflects Ellul’s blistering critique of the church—a familiar theme; he just unloads on the church’s failure!
4. Listen to this: “If Christians had evidenced before the Jews a higher virtue than that which can come from the observance of the Law, a holiness, a purity of behaviour (customs) *before which one could only bow*, a purity in the worship of the Lord, without mixing in pagan rites, childish beliefs, and confusions (which I would call idolatrous); if they had evidenced a complete love of neighbour, and if they had lived according to the royal law of liberty acquired in Christ; if Christian societies had been models of personal, social, or political justice for all to see—then without any doubt Paul’s prophecy, which is God’s plan, would have been fulfilled. Convinced by this kind of life, the Jews would have recognized in Jesus the Messiah who changes men’s hearts and from this transformation of the heart transforms the world.” (69-70)
5. Thus, “the delay in being Jews and Jesus the Messiah together is caused by Christians and our churches.” (70)
6. Is it the fault of the Jews? No, says Ellul: “No, for they can only convert is the church and Christians present the kingdom of heaven already here on earth, if they can clearly see that faith in Christ...fulfills the complete change in man.” (73)
7. Key point for Ellul is moral: the church’s moral failure is the cause of Jewish non-belief.

#### **H. Final theme: Ethical witness -- is very important to notice the concluding argument of the book**

1. He ends by including Rom 12:1-2 in the discussion, does not simply end with Chapter 11
2. He circles back to the “church’s failure theme” (e.g., p. 70 material)
3. Focus is on moral action, ethical witness – typically Ellul’s penchant is to move toward an emphasis on moral reflection and practical action
4. The word “Therefore” in Rom 12:1 is his clue
5. “The ‘therefore’ is not connected to the first eight chapters—on the contrary, it is precisely connected to these three preceding chapters.” (p. 89)
  - Again, not sure that’s defensible; Ellul often tends toward an “either/or” mentality, sometimes needlessly.
  - Surely it also refers to chapters 1-8, plus 9-11, to the *whole* of what has preceded 12:1.
6. “So Paul addresses these Christians and says: What do we need to be (much more than do) so that the Jews might recognize a work of God in our

- communities? What should we manifest as an action of God's grace to cause the Jews to ask such a question?" (p. 90)
7. So, this section is speaking to "our life before and with the Jews!" (p. 90)
  8. Key moves: his emphasis on resisting or rejecting "the form of the world" – which is the "game of the will to power" and the idea that "covetousness is a motive for all our actions." – which is a way of death (p. 92)
  9. Thus, Rom 12-15 is understood in a particular way: "All that will follow in chapters 12-15 is not a moral code or a condition for acquiring salvation, but an explanation of how to become an instrument in the hands of God so that the world might be transformed as well, how we in particular can be that instrument for the expression of God's faithfulness towards his people!" (p. 95) --- meaning, the Jews.
  10. Call to be transformed (Rom 12:2) – changed; "instead of the shape given by the world, receive another shape!" (p. 93).
  11. By "offering yourself as a sacrifice to God" says Ellul, "you will enter into God's design! This design is to bring the pagans to perfection and to convince the Jews of the love of Jesus the Messiah!" (p. 96)