liberating Paul
& the Justice of God & the Politics of the Apostle

Neil Elliott
Liberating Paul: The Justice of God and the Politics of the Apostle, Neil Elliott, Fortress Press, 2005, 1451415117, 9781451415117, 308 pages. For centuries the apostle Paul has been invoked to justify oppression? whether on behalf of slavery, to enforce unquestioned obedience to the state, to silence women, or to legitimate anti-Semitism. To interpret Paul is thus to set foot on a terrible battleground between spiritual forces. But as Neil Elliott argues, the struggle to liberate human beings from the power of Death requires "Liberating Paul" from his enthrallment to that power. In this book, Elliott shows that what many people experience as the scandal of Paul is the unfortunate consequence of the way Paul has usually been read, or rather misread, in the churches. In the first half of the book, Elliott examines the many texts historically interpreted to support oppression or maintain the status quo. He shows how often Paul's authentic message has been interpreted in the light of later pseudo-Pauline writings. In Part Two, Elliott applies a "political key" to the interpretation of Paul. Though subsequent centuries have turned the cross into a symbol of Christian piety, Elliott forcefully reminds us that in Paul's time this was the Roman mode of executing rebellious slaves, a fact that has profound political implications.

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"conversion" in terms of "consciousness," and his exhortations as a politics of the new ....

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Dr. Elliott makes a wonderful argument for a new reading of Paul. He looks past the screen of history (especially Luther's views on Paul) and allows the context of the 1st century Mediterranean world shape the possible intentions of the Apostle. While this book presents solid arguments of history and language criticism, Elliott's conclusions are liberal and might upset people with closed minds.

This book makes many good points about how Paul has been misinterpreted in the past partly because interpreters (often starting with Luther) applied a specific theological agenda to their reading of him. However, the book itself tends to make Paul serve the author's own political agenda, which means the reader must wade through some political propaganda and strained interpretations. "Liberating Paul" here means "re-interpreting Paul as the patron saint of liberation theology." The interpretive focus is evident in these quotes from the beginning and end of the book:

"For centuries the apostle's legacy has been systematically manipulated by human structures of domination and oppression, from the conservative interpreters of Paul who found their way into the New Testament itself, down to the legitimation of the 'New World Order' or the sonorous waves of antifeminist backlash in our own time." (p.x)

Elliott offers Haiti as an example of "the continuing deadliness of my nation's global war against the poor ... U.S. policy toward Haiti seems crystal clear: to deter the threat of real democracy at any cost, and thus to guarantee ever higher profits for U.S. businessmen. ... Aware of the war waged, in our name and for our sake, against the poor, we must yield to his [Paul's] appeal for solidarity with the oppressed." (pp.228-230)

I wish someone had warned me before purchasing this book that the author is using it as a platform to push his socialistic agenda. I painfully read through the first chapter where he lambastes "right-wing Christians" for all sorts of atrocities and never once mentions the problems with the "left". He also displays a strong anti-American sentiment even though he himself lives in and enjoys the freedoms of America. He also seems to regularly quote Noam Chomsky, a man who aligns himself with anarcho-syndicalism and libertarian socialism (according to Wikipedia). As icing on the cake, he also makes references to "Israeli-occupied Palestine".

I thoroughly enjoyed the book. It is in my top ten favorites. The author makes numerous references
This is a well researched and written book on a subject that has received too little attention over the centuries. Congratulations to the author, Neil Elliott, for his scholarship, courage and insight into what the real messages of St. Paul are and more so into the machinations of those who would tamper with his writings for the sake of empire. The lessons should be well learned because the same machinations of empire has not forsaken the earth's societies and particularly the ecclesiastical organizations that should be protecting these writings and particularly so against redactions of any kind. This author is to be commended because of his treatment of the writings of St. Paul and also the manipulations of empire in all its forms. The timeliness of this book is unquestioned. How is it that little in the way of liberation has been done since the time of St. Paul, if not for the continuation of empire? One aspect of the book that did not receive sufficient coverage is that of application of the lessons of 'liberation' to present forms of empire. The reason is that readers of the Bible still need to be liberated from the disinformation and redactions that would obfuscate and manipulate the unwitting populace and congregations in the pews. Nevertheless, for this purpose alone the author has done us all a big favor. Well done!

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In Liberating Paul, Neil Elliot shows how modern interpreters have become accomplices in the ancient campaign to portray Paul as an acolyte of the prevailing order and its values. By penetrating exegesis and sharp political acumen, Elliot reinstates Paul as the agitator and martyr that he really was.

A comprehensive political analysis of Paul from the point of view of the oppressed. As the ambiguous title suggests, he is liberating Paul from centuries of misinterpretation by offering a fresh analysis that shows how liberating Paul really was. . . Liberating Paul is an impressive rethinking of Paul.

Neil Elliott received his doctorate from Princeton Theological Seminary and has taught New Testament for more than fifteen years, chiefly at the College of St. Catherine and United Theological Seminary of the Twin Cities. He is biblical studies editor at Fortress Press and author of The Rhetoric of Romans. An Episcopal priest, he is also a frequent contributor to The Witness, the online social-justice journal.
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The interpreter of the story Jesusâ€™ life, death, and resurrection who has most powerfully shaped the generations since has been the Apostle Paul. Christian theology has, for better and for worse, tended to be Pauline salvation theology. When we focus on Paulâ€™s thought in relation to the biblical salvation story that we have been addressing, we will see (I will argue) that Paul understands salvation in ways fully compatible with the Old Testament and the story of Jesus.

Like his predecessors, Paul understands salvation in terms of Godâ€™s merciful intention to bring healing to a broken world. Paul does not present salvation in terms of retributive justice or a mechanistic view of Godâ€™s holiness and honor. Salvation, for Paul, is a gift of a relational God who seeks to free humanity from its self-destructive bondage to the powers of sin and death.

Paulâ€™s most extended argument related to salvation comes in the first three chapters of his letter to the Romans. So we will focus our attention on that argument. I do not assume that Paul has a perfectly coherent view of these matters in his various writings. But this Romans text is indeed an extended argument that does seem compatible with what he writes elsewhere. So I will treat it not as a full statement of Paulâ€™s views but as instead a reliable statement about the core of his thought.

After various introductory comments, Paul begins his longest and most theologically complex letter with an extended discussion of salvation and justice (complementary motifs for him, not in tension in any way). This discussion, which runs from 1:16 through 3:31, begins and ends with affirmations that justice and salvation go together and their meaning has been revealed to humanity through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

In 1:16-17, Paul offers a thesis statement, both for the argument that concludes in 3:31 and for his letter as a whole. For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith [i.e., to everyone who is faithful],[1] to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness [or justice][2] of God is revealed through faith for faith [i.e., from God's faithfulness to human faithfulness]; as it is written, 'the one who is righteous [just] will live by faith [faithfulness]â€”(Romans 1:16-17).

But now, apart from [works of the] law,[3] the righteousness [justice] of God has been disclosed and is attested by the law and the prophets, the righteousness [justice] through faith in Jesus Christ [i.e., the faithfulness of Jesus Christ[4]] for all who believe [i.e., are faithful]. For in it the righteousness [or justice][2] of God is revealed through faith for faith [i.e., from Godâ€™s faithfulness to human faithfulness]; as it is written, â€˜the one who is righteous [just] will live by faith [faithfulness]â€”(Romans 1:16-17).

So, precisely what problem does Paul believe humanity needs to be saved from? The term he
uses most often in our passage is “sin.” From a careful reading of Romans 1:18–3:20, we may find at the heart of the sin problem for Paul the dynamic of idolatry, people giving ultimate loyalty to entities other than God. Paul describes two distinct kinds of idolatry here.

These may be characterized as the idolatry of the nations and the idolatry of the covenant people—or, we could say using Paul’s language here, the idolatry of the Greeks and the idolatry of the Jews (recognizing that by “Jews” here Paul most likely has in mind Jewish members of the Roman assembly of followers of Jesus). Both types of idolatry put something in the place of the merciful God Paul has learned to serve through his linking his life with the faithfulness of Jesus. This idolatry, in both cases, produces injustice and violence.

After his introduction to his argument in 1:16-17, Paul turns to the big problem. He analyzes how people move from the rejection of truth to lack of gratitude to trust in created things to out of control lust to injustice and violence. This dynamic itself manifests “wrath”—not direct intervention by God but God “giving them up” to a self-selected spiral of death.

As Paul will make clear in Romans 5:1-11 and 11:32, God’s intentions toward humanity are salvific. Hence, we make a mistake if we interpret “wrath” as God’s punitive anger aimed at people God has rejected. We should understand “wrath” in relation to the gospel. “Wrath” refers to how God works in indirect ways to hold human beings accountable, “giving them up” to the consequences of their giving their loyalty to realities other than life and the giver of life.

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In 1:17 we have the salvific “revelation” of God’s justice. In the next verse, we have the suppression of truth that leads to the “revelation” of God’s wrath. With “justice,” people see created things for what they are (pointers to the creator), not as false gods worthy of ultimate loyalty. With “wrath,” the act of giving loyalty to created things results in truth being suppressed and a spiral of lifelessness.