

Jean-Noël Aletti, *God's Justice in Romans: Keys for Interpreting the Epistle to the Romans* (trans. from the French by Peggy Manning Meyer) (Subsidia Biblica 37; Rome: Gregorian & Biblical Press, 2010). Pp. vii, 336. € 27.00. ISBN 978-88-7653-647-2

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Jean-Noël Aletti, author of *God's Justice in Romans* should be well known to scholars who write on Saint Paul. Prof. Aletti, a member of the Pontifical Biblical Commission and long time lecturer at the Pontifical Biblical Institute in Rome is the author of numerous articles on the *Corpus Paulinum* as well as books like *Comment Dieu est-il juste? Clefs pour interpréter l'épître aux Romains* (1991), *Israël et la loi dans la lettre aux Romains* (1998), *Saint Paul épître aux Éphésiens* (2001), *Saint Paul épître aux Philippiens* (2005) and *Essai sur l'écclésiologie des lettres de Saint-Paul* (2009). *God's Justice in Romans*, published in 2010, is actually a translation of the French original *Comment Dieu est-il juste?* which is already twenty years old. Thus one may ask whether it was necessary to translate the book, which for almost two decades has been present on the publishing market and touches upon such a popular topic as "God's justice". There are several reasons why the present publication is necessary and topical. First of all is the worthy goal of making the book accessible to English-speaking readers to whom, judging by bibliographical references, it is still little known. Secondly, the book is revised and expanded, especially chapter three. Last but not least, in the sea of contemporary literature focused on detailed readings of Romans there is a demand for a book showing the dynamics and coherence of the letter as a whole. That is precisely the author's goal (cf. *Introduction*, pp. 3-4).

Prof. Aletti addresses his book to a broad audience of both professional exegetes and non-specialists, those who study theology and the Bible and people simply interested in Saint Paul. Yet, *God's Justice in Romans* is not belletristic: it is exegesis. The 336 pages are divided into an *Introduction* and a round number of ten chapters followed then by a brief but helpful lexicon of technical terms employed by the author. One will find there the most important definitions regarding rhetorical genres and disposition of the rhetorical discourse like *partitio*, *peroratio*, *probatio*, *propositio* etc. The

lexicon also contains terms relating to Jewish and Christian Exegesis, like *gezerah shawah*, *hatima*, *midrash*, *parasha*, *pesher*, *petiha* etc. They will allow the readers not acquainted with this sort of terminology to follow the author's reasoning and understand his approach to the rhetorical categories. At the end of the book, one will also find a list of abbreviations, a solidly chosen multilingual bibliography of the subject and an index of the modern authors quoted.

The brief introduction already allows us to guess the approach Prof. Aletti uses to analyze the letters of Paul. The author employs the synchronic method, relying on the three principal models used by Paul himself: the concentric model based on parallelism of vocabulary; the rhetorical model connected with the rhetorical *dispositio*, and the midrashic model, tied to frequent scriptural quotations (pp. 5-6). A concise presentation of the author's methodology is contained in the *Introduction* (pp. 5-8) and in chapter one titled "A Brief Survey of Pauline Exegesis" (pp. 9-30). The question of method is not of purely theoretical interest for Prof. Aletti. On the contrary, it stems from the practical problems the reader of the Letter to the Romans must face. Is Paul's argument concerning the Law in Rom 1-8 coherent with his views in Rom 9-11? Is there any logic or main thread in Paul's argument that the reader could discover and what tools are necessary for doing so?

Since methodology determines the results of reading, Prof. Aletti willingly and often introduces us to his method of reading of Saint Paul (pp. 6-8; 17-21; cf. also chapter two pp. 34-42). His approach may be subsumed in a few points: 1. Attention paid to the literary meaning of the original Greek text in its present form (pp. 6-8); 2. A thorough exposition of the vocabulary distribution, and the concentric or chiasmic arrangement of literary units; 3. The insufficiency of the vocabulary distribution in disclosing Paul's rationale; 4. The crucial role of the rhetorical *dispositio*, especially the *propositiones*, in understanding the argument of Paul. From the principles expounded by the author emerges a sound literary-rhetorical approach, one which avoids putting *a priori* the grid of Graeco-Roman *dispositio* on Paul's letters. Of course *God's Justice in Romans* is not all about rhetoric. It is above all a "theological exegesis". Right at the beginning of the work the author articulates serious and challenging questions. If God is overflowing with mercy and justice, how can He feel hatred and harden the hearts of so many men (Rom 9:13-18; 11:7-25)? Why imprison all men in disobedience only to better show them mercy? Why does the Apostle feel obliged to emphasize that all, without exception, are subject to divine anger (p. 22)? The author constantly poses these and many other puzzling questions. Now

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let us have a closer look both at the problematic issues and at the answers given by Prof. Aletti.

Beginning with chapter two, the book splits in four parts: the first one titled "Arrangement and Meaning" (Ch. 2-3), the second "Faith and Law in the Epistle to the Romans" (Ch. 4-5), the third "Israel and the Nations Rom 9-11" (Ch. 6-8) and the fourth "From Exegesis to Theology" (Ch. 9-10). In the first part, the author puts into practice the methodology presented beforehand to show how a proper reading of literary and rhetorical models present in the text influences our understanding of Romans. In chapter two, "The Rhetorical Model and Divine Justice," Prof. Aletti, by analyzing Rom 1-11, gives more hints on how to delineate the rhetorical *dispositio* with its *propositiones* (pp. 35-40) and consequently separates three larger argumentative blocks: Rom 1-4 (*propositio* in 1:16-17 and 3:21-22a); 5-8 (*propositio* in 5:20-21) and 9-11. The theme that binds together the so delineated rhetorical units is divine justice. The coherence of Paul's thought in Rom 1-11 stressed by the author from the very beginning will have to be proved in the course of the subsequent analyses.

The rhetorical *dispositio* from chapter two constitutes a point of departure for chapter three, "Divine Anger and Divine Justice," where the author examines the argument in Rom 1:18-4:25. The question underlying Prof. Aletti's reading of the above mentioned passage is: why does the Apostle begin by showing that all, without exception, are subject to divine anger? The answer is that it gives Paul common ground for the discussion with a Jew from whose point of view the Apostle describes the human world. God's anger (whose targets are not explicitly mentioned in Rom 1:18-32) and the criteria of divine judgment (Rom 2: according to works [2:6]; impartiality [2:11]; God's knowledge of the human heart [2:16]) almost nullify the Jewish exception and bring the pious Jew to the point that he cannot feel safe unless he is a faithful observer of the Law. Yet, in Rom 3:9-18 Paul, drawing on the proof coming from the Scripture, shows the corruption and sinfulness of the entire human race, including Jews. Thus, the Jewish exception is cancelled and Paul can state that divine justice reaches all humans in the same way, by faith in Christ, without the Works of Law. In chapter three Prof. Aletti, with great mastery and clarity, introduces the reader to the meanderings of Paul's argument in Rom 1:18-3:20 and dismisses accusations that it is inconsistent. Rhetoric proves a valuable instrument in accomplishing this operation.

With the next chapter we pass to the second part of the book, "Faith and Law in the Epistle to the Romans," where the author examines the argument of the epistle and verifies the coherence of the affirmations on faith and Law and their connection. Chapter four ("The Economy of Faith and

Divine Justice”) touches on the theological issue of justification by faith. Prof. Aletti first starts with the vocabulary of faith (the root *pist-*). In polemic with Bultmann (faith as obedience) the author stresses a number of characteristics of faith as presented in Rom: 1) It is an act which defines the Christian; 2) It has a universal dimension; 3) Faith is necessary (and sufficient) to be justified; 4) It gives rise to proclamation; 5) Faith involves God (as an active agent who puts his trust in man) (p. 109).

The author also discusses the expression *pistis Iesoū* in 3:22a and 3:26 which may be understood either as faith in Christ or as Christ’s faithfulness. Examining different exegetical positions, Prof. Aletti points to the context of 3:22a and 3:26, which clearly underscores human, not divine, behavior and response. Thus the expression should be taken as qualitative genitive and translated “faith in God who is definitively revealed in Jesus,” or even “faith in God who has pardoned by/through Jesus Christ”. Its ambiguity or openness results from the thoroughly *theological* (not *Christological*) perspective that permeates the argument in Rom 1:18–4:25. Chapter four finishes with a description by the author of the act of believing in Rom 4. The first part is an analysis of the Pauline use of *gezerah shawah* according to which the Apostle combines Gen 15:6 and Ps 31:1-2 (LXX). This exegetical technique permits him to separate the act of believing from the implied divine retribution. The dimensions of the act of believing touch upon obedience but, going more in depth, ultimately guide Abraham to receive the gift of the true identity of father (Abraham becomes what he is by faith) (pp. 120-121). This is probably one the most beautiful and theologically fecund passages of the book.

Here, however, a fundamental question arises: “are there not two possible ways in the economy of faith: one for the circumcised, the Jews, and another for the uncircumcised? The first would consist of living the faith by observing the divine will expressed in the Law transmitted by Moses, and the second by believing in Jesus Christ and becoming His disciple” (p. 123). The story of Abraham, to be complete, must be read in the light of Rom 10. It is there, according to Prof. Aletti, that Paul gives a negative response to the above question. Whoever wants to be saved – Jew or pagan – must from now on confess Jesus Christ. The author compares Rom 10:5 and Rom 10:6-9 to bring an important difference to the fore: while 10:5 speaks of the Law that provides a man with a blessing in this life, 10:6-9 says that faith in Christ gives life in the world to come; that is, it grants salvation. Ultimately, in Rom 10:5, which is a quotation from Lev 18:5, the Law once again betrays its inability to give salvation, since it relies on the strict relation between “doing” and “living”. Since nobody is able to practice faithfully the

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commandments, the Law is not a second way, parallel to what Paul defines as faith in Christ (p. 125).

In chapter five, "Law and Justice," the author reflects on the issue of whether "God who revealed His will and His judgments in the Law always intended to justify without the Law" (p. 132). What was then the sense of the gift of Law in the history of salvation? At the heart of the problem we have the text of Rom 10:4 speaking of Christ as *telos*; that is, the *end* or *fulfillment* of the Law. Was the Law incapable of procuring salvation from the beginning, or was it a legitimate way of salvation rendered obsolete by the coming of Christ? After presenting different exegetical options, the author draws on the argumentative models present in Rom 9:30–10:21 (concentric and rhetorical) to arrive at the conclusion that Christ is the *end* not the *goal* of the Law. Prof. Aletti once again points to Rom 10:5 and Lev 18:5 to underscore Christ's role in rendering the economy of the Law obsolete, that is, no longer necessary for finding and obtaining justice (p. 144). Yet, here another question arises: "how then is Jesus Christ to bring an end to the Law, if the Law has never constituted an economy of salvation?" (p. 146). Once again, according to the author, the parallelisms of Rom 10:5-9 gives us a clear response: what is brought to an end is *the domination* of the Law over the believer.

In his judgment on the Law Paul is not totally mistaken, as some would claim. In agreement with E. P. Sanders, the author stresses the knowledge of Christ and the role it played in changing Paul's perception: it is from his "being-in Christ" that Paul now perceives the Mosaic legislation (p. 149). Besides, in Romans the Apostle describes Law only in connection with the economy of faith. Since God has always justified graciously, without the Law, the Law can only give knowledge of sin (7:13). The resolution with which Paul removes the Law from its pedestal in Rom 1–8 and 9–11, according to the author, also confirms the coherence of the Apostle's thought in Rom 1–11 and paves the way for the analysis of the last argumentative unit, Rom 9–11.

Thus we move to the third part of the book, "Israel and the Nations Rom 9–11". Prof. Aletti perceives this section as the climax of Paul's argument in Rom 1–11. In chapter six, "The Arrangement of Rom 9–11 and the Question of Divine Justice," the author, by showing the concentric composition of the chapters in question, draws conclusions concerning the strongly theological meaning of the unit. Though discussing the fate of Israel, Rom 9–11 actually focuses on God's Word, justice and mercy. Merciful wisdom is the true core of Paul's thought, which is indicated by the rhetorical *dispositio* with the *exordium* in 9:1-5; three major units each with its own *propositio* (9:6-29 [9:6a]; 9:30–10:21 [10:4]; 11:1-32 [11:1a]) and *peroratio* in 11:33-36. According

to Prof. Aletti, Rom 9–11 constitutes a “completely logical conclusion” to the argument of the epistle’s first eleven chapters. Having shown the status of Christians (Rom 5–8) the Apostle must answer the question of whether it renders meaningless all the titles that glorify the Jews.

In the following chapter, “Rom 9 Election and Divine Justice”, the author examines Rom 9, which speaks of God’s election and its theological implications (how it coexists with divine justice, which is impartial). As usual, the analyses start with the problem of the arrangement of Rom 9:6-29 in which the three models can be individuated: midrashic, rhetorical and chiasmic. The two last models actually overlap, indicating what is at stake in the chapter: God’s apparent injustice towards those whom he has not called. The author shows how God’s non-call and hardening (Esau and pharaoh) has always been provisory, favoring patience, not destruction, and ultimately working for God’s salvific plan. Thus, Paul insists, the Word of God has not failed (Rom 10:6a) in the history of Israel that rejected the Gospel. The distinction between the elected by grace and the carnal descendants of Abraham “has been valid *since the beginning*” (p. 206). God’s choice does not depend on the human response. This allows Paul to apply the categories of choice and call also to the pagans, towards whom the graciousness of God has been shown by the Gospel (p. 207). The massive scriptural quotation in 9:25-29 explains that the divine Word acted toward them on the same principles known from the history of Israel. By calling the pagans (9:25-26) and preserving the Remnant of Israel, the Judeo-Christians (9:27-29), God proves to be faithful to his Word. We also learn that non-election, being a part of the merciful design of God, is always temporal.

That brings us to the next chapter, the eighth, “The salvation of Israel”. At its heart stands Rom 11 with the baffling statement: “all Israel will be saved” in v. 26. The author asks at the very beginning: what is meant by all Israel and is Jesus going to be the mediator of the salvation accorded to God’s people? The answers will be given, as usual, only upon a thorough examination of the arrangement and the rhetoric of the passage in question. The vocabulary connections show that section 11:25-32, where we find the statement quoted at the beginning, is parallel to Rom 11:1-15. On the rhetorical level it forms the last, climactic argument on the issue of God’s mercy. The author explains the term “all Israel” as embracing two groups: the holy Remnant from Rom 9 (Judeo-Christians) and the Jews faithful to the Torah and thus recalcitrant to the Gospel. Their salvation, especially of the latter group, will be through Christ, even if he is not explicitly named here. At his point the parallels and concentric structures come to our aid. Prof. Aletti points to the context of 9:30–10:21, which stresses Israel’s rejection of Jesus

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and their being cut off from salvation. If they want to be re-grafted onto the holy root they must not “remain in unbelief” (11:23). This faith can only be, according to Rom 10, the faith in Jesus Christ.

One more crucial question posed by the author in this chapter is: why does the Apostle come to mix the final fate of Israel more and more with that of the Nations? (p. 224) Here the interpretation of the famous allegory of the two olive trees (11:17-24) is at stake. Prof. Aletti explains first an apparent incoherence, which might even be taken as a sign of Paul's ignorance about the techniques of arboriculture. Has anyone ever seen a graft in which “the wild” is grafted into “the noble”? According to the author, this is a diversion and a *fortiori* reasoning whose function is to highlight the positive aspect of the future situation of hardened Israel. If, indeed, God is powerful enough to accomplish the impossible, namely grafting the pagans, the wild branch, onto the noble and fecund root of the Patriarchs, He will be able to re-graft the original branch. He is powerful enough to do the impossible (pp. 225-226). Ultimately the purpose of Rom 11:17-24 is not to censure “the Pagan-Christians” (“you” in this passage is diatribic, not referring to the Christians in Rome) but to show the possibility of Israel's re-integration. In no way did the wild branch take the place of the noble one.

Rom 11:17-24, though depicting two distinct entities, the Jews and the Pagan-Christians, shows also their mutual dependence. On the one hand, the Christians who come from paganism can only understand and live the gracious gift of God “by returning to the figure of Abraham and to the long history of the elected people” (p. 230). On the other hand, Rom 11 favors the mission of the Church toward the Jews. The conversion of the pagans to the true God and their ardor in serving him should stimulate the chosen nation and foment their jealousy, resulting in their recognition of divine mercy and return to God. Thus Rom 9–11 constitutes the true climax of Rom 1–11 envisaging the greatness of God's merciful design. The occasion to write the epistle, adds the author at the end of chapter eight, is not to censure the latent anti-Judaism in the Church of Rome, but to expose the identity of Christians, the hope promised to them and the fate of Israel related to God's design. The letter to the Romans then fully deserves the name of “Treatise on the Gospel”.

The two subsequent chapters, nine and ten, form the last part of the book, “From Exegesis to Theology”. We shall dedicate less space to this part, which basically sums up what has been told so far. Chapter nine “Paul's Exegesis and Divine Justice” once again puts examines texts like Rom 4:2, 5; 9:25-28; 10:5-8, where Paul makes use of the Old Testament passages (Gen 15:6; Deut 30:11-14; Lev 18:5). The author, by referring to Talmudic literature, shows

the similarities and differences between Paul and his contemporary Jewish exegesis. In Paul's reading of the Scripture one can spot both faithfulness to the goal of the original biblical texts, and a strongly personal, Christological point of view (cf. especially Deut 30:11-14) (pp. 264, 265-266). Eventually, the argument and Paul's exegesis in Romans is not so much Christological as theological: "it opens up to the mystery of God" (p. 269).

Chapter ten, "The Just God," once again points to the coherence of the image of God as depicted in Romans. His justice, operating without Law, reveals itself in anger toward sin, in axiomatic impartiality, and in the fact that God provides one way of justification for everybody. Here also Prof. Aletti adds a long awaited implication on the deficiency of the Old Testament cult. It cannot be taken as the last resort for those who fail to fulfill the obligations of the Law. The cult is also incapable of purifying man's hearts and that is why God establishes Jesus as an "instrument of expiation" (Rom 3:25). This statement raises a lot of questions which could not be answered or accented by the author in the small amount of space he gave to the issue. What we learn is that Paul does not declare that God has granted nothing by the cultic institution. The use of the term "propitiatory" in itself, according to Prof. Aletti, points to his typological reading of the ancient economy. If Paul connects justification to redemption in Jesus Christ (3:24), he also permits the understanding that the preceding economy was that of divine patience (3:25), thanks to which transgressions and sins remained unpunished. Yet patience is not true absolution.

Chapter ten continues with the paradoxical image of the just God who hates and hardens hearts and with the Gospel in which justice and mercy are strictly combined; we shall stop at this point to take a final look at *God's Justice in Romans*. Is it a work for a broader audience, as the author wanted it to be? Reading this book will be a delight for exegetes, especially for those who apply the rhetorical approach to the letters of Paul. Even if they will not find here a huge amount of bibliographical references they will be more than satisfied with the methodological rigor, precision and originality of the author's thought. Prof. Aletti truly reads Paul in a new way. What about other, non-professional readers? They may be pleased with the author's approach, which avoids encyclopedic notes, indeed "proceeding by selection not accumulation". Yet, we have to warn them: this book is not an easy read, especially because of the exegesis and rhetorical analyses which the author often uses to give his thought a scientific foundation. Yet, the effort put into absorbing this work really pays off. The patient reader will accomplish an intellectual and spiritual journey in which he will master to some extent the basic rules of rhetoric and, above all, will see the richness

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and profundity of Paul's thought. In the course of this journey he will also find many wonderfully accessible and beautifully written passages in which exegesis blends with theology, philosophy and a sort of poetic imagination, for example in the reflections on Abraham's faith (pp. 114-122) Israel and the Church's common destiny (pp. 226-234), or on the just God (ch. 10). Prof. Aletti, employing the diatribe Paul was so fond of, often questions his own logic, placing before himself an imaginary interlocutor with all his doubts and problems. We often proceed from question to question, or better from solution to another question, which makes the reading all the more interesting.

Ultimately, the author successfully accomplishes his task of showing us that, contrary to the opinion of contemporary critics, Paul's thought in Romans is coherent but to read it one must be properly equipped. Even if not everybody will agree that rhetoric is absolutely necessary to understand Paul, Prof. Aletti shows that it helps enormously in following the Apostle's argument. All in all, even if some of the things stated in this book can be found in modern commentaries and monographs (understandable for such a popular letter as Romans) the author gives us a unique opportunity to look at the internal logic of Paul's rationale in Rom 1–11. Books like *God's Justice in Romans*, confronting rich Pauline texts and touching upon the greatest theological problems, will be always in demand and truly worth reading.