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# Apostle to the conquered: reimagining Paul's mission

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*Canonical Context* (1985); and *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testament* (1992).

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### **The Arrogance of Nations: Reading Romans in the Shadow of Empire**

Neil Elliott  
 Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008  
 xv + 223 pages, \$33.00 hardcover

### **Apostle to the Conquered: Reimagining Paul's Mission**

Davina C. Lopez  
 Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008  
 xix + 248 pages, \$33.00 hardcover

Taking centre stage after an explosion of Historical Jesus works we find now a plethora of studies on what I might call the “Quest for the Historical Paul.” Perhaps the leading pioneers in what some might see as the rescue of Paul from his Lutheran “bondage” (as represented by the school of Rudolf Bultmann and his disciples) remain E. P. Sanders and Krister Stendahl. A more recent excellent study on this development is Stephen Westerholm’s excellent *Perspectives Old and New on Paul: The “Lutheran Paul and His Critics*. Such prominent scholars as John Dominic Crossan, Daniel Boyarin, Bruce Winter and Philip Esler, among others, have joined the rush to research and publish about the so-called “Apostle to the Gentiles.” Commentaries on Pauline letters abound as do specialized studies in such matters as slavery, gender, ethnicity, eschatology and the famous collection for “the poor” in Jerusalem. Indeed, in the Society of Biblical Literature there has been a “Paul and Politics” consultation which has published an excellent *Festschrift* in honour of Krister Stendahl, edited by Richard Horsley and titled *Paul and Politics*. With all this one might be tempted to cry “Enough!”

*But no!* Fortress Press has commenced yet a new collection on Paul called *The Paul in Critical Context Series*, to which the two books named above belong, and I think it most appropriate to review them together. Of the two authors, Neil Elliott is the more senior scholar. He has published out of the “Paul and Politics” group and has earned a solid scholarly reputation with his book *Liberating Paul*. This latest work focussed on Romans continues his previous work and in my opinion shows an increasingly scholarly maturity in his analysis of Paul without losing his obvious passion for the Gospel as confrontation against and liberation from empire. Neil Elliott is no detached scholar, as is shown poignantly in his description of a visit to Port-au-Prince, Haiti. Although his *Arrogance of Nations* remains appropriately a scholarly work and not special pleading, to this reviewer Elliott remains gloriously a scholar *engagé*. Elliott demonstrates in great detail how the epistle to the Romans clashed with the dominant imperial culture and might of Rome and how the imperial control of rhetoric shaped and dominated the culture by its “gospel” of power and success through multi-form myth-making. In terms of my own taste and desire I felt awash in details and examples, yet this does not diminish the quality and scholarship of the book. It is a must read for those scholars steeped in rhetorical studies. Happily, I also found that Elliott managed to criticize Paul to an extent that he seemed unable to undertake in earlier works.

Davina Lopez, a new author to the field, has published her revised dissertation in this Fortress series. Allow me to register my one criticism of this otherwise fine work: I sense that it suffered from “dissertation syndrome.” It seems to this reader that Lopez has not met a piece of evidence on which she did not seek to publish. Having made that “snarky” remark, I go on to say that *Apostle to the Conquered* strikes me as one of the most chilling and powerful studies of imperial violence I have ever read. She cuts to the core of the lethal mix of militarism and gendered violence overflowing as a veritable pandemic in a patriarchal/hierarchical society that re-creates itself as divinely ordained. Her use of images as the key mass medium of this oppression is ingenious. Her re-gendering of Paul was most creative (Paul as mother). Am I convinced? Well ... I don’t know, but I remain open to the idea. Many early Christian studies and liberation theologies have fed me over the years, but few have wrenched my whole being. Lopez’s *Apostle to the Conquered* is one of those.