

## ROMANS 13:1-7: A REVIEW OF POST-1989 READINGS

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### Abstract

*Romans 13:1-7 has remained a challenge for interpreters throughout the history of the New Testament. A previous study investigated the actual readings of the passage during the political transition in South Africa. The present article is a follow-up study and examines readings in the post-1989 period. Political events and the rise of empire studies deeply influenced the reading of the passage. Certain types of reading continue, but there is also a marked increase of 'realistic' or 'pragmatic' readings. The article concludes with some future perspectives.*

**Key Words:** Romans 13, Church and State, Authority, Empire Studies, Civil Disobedience, War on Terrorism

### Introduction

*Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. Consequently, he who rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves. For rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong. Do you want to be free from fear of the one in authority? Then do what is right and he will commend you. For he is God's servant to do you good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword for nothing. He is God's servant, and agent of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer. Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also because of conscience. This is also why you pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants, who give their full time to governing. Give everyone what you owe him: If you owe taxes, pay taxes, if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor. (NIV translation.)*

Throughout the history of the interpretation of the Letter to the Romans, this enigmatic passage has been a *crux interpretationis*. How can Paul be so unqualifiedly positive in his attitude towards authority? Is he referring to the secular Roman state? Can an oppressive and destructive regime really be described as a 'servant of God'? Is rebellion against authority under all circumstances forbidden for believers? Are Paul's statements only meant for his time or do they have universal validity?

The problems associated with this passage have as much to do with the historical situation of Paul and his social location as with the experience of subsequent readers in their own dealings with governing authorities. It is one of the most pertinent examples of how the pre-disposition of the reader influences the understanding of a text. In a previous study (Lategan 1992) the reception of Romans 13 in a South African context was

investigated against the backdrop of the political transition to an open, democratic dispensation. This was a situation characterised by high levels of contestation and revealed a wide range of hermeneutical strategies employed by readers – strategies based on either positive or negative understandings of the perceived implications of Paul's argument in Romans 13. The plurality of interpretations provided a striking illustration of the role of the (real) reader in the hermeneutical process and of the need for ongoing empirical reader research.

As shown in the 1992 study, the bulk of reader research at that time remained on the theoretical level. Reflection on the meta-level of how communication takes place and more specifically, how this is achieved through the medium of written texts, of what the role of the receiver in this process is, and what other factors are involved, formed the main part of the actual analysis of texts. Because Biblical texts in themselves are the product of a communication process (which often include the responses of hearers or readers) they provide a rich field for investigation. Generally speaking, analyses of this kind deal with the questions how a text could be read or how it should be read. That is, they deal with the *possibilities* or with the perceived *prescriptions* of the text. The situation changes considerably when we start looking at how texts in actual fact *are* read. This can only be attempted when sufficient data on actual receptions is available. In the case of Biblical texts, evidence of such readings can be found in the use of the Old Testament in the New, the different versions of the gospel story by the evangelists, the formation history of the canon, commentaries on specific books or on the same text, to name just a few. However, the main source for studying the empirical reception of a particular text or passage is the record of ongoing readings of the text in different periods and in different settings.

The setting chosen for the 1992 study was that of a specific political transition in recent history where a dramatic reverse of power took place, with an accompanying change of those who exercise power and authority. The basis for the analysis was contemporary documents and individual interpretations of Romans 13. This made it possible to draw up a preliminary typology of reading strategies. This was by no means a complete categorisation, but provided a starting point to compare empirical readings in other settings and different periods. Before discussing the main features of this typology, a few general observations need to be made.

### **The Pragmatic Thrust of Romans 13**

Romans 13:1-7 is indeed a provocative text, if one is to judge from the number of readings and attempts to interpret its meaning over the centuries. Its *Wirkungsgeschichte* reflects a remarkably wide sphere of influence, including law, political philosophy, public administration, education, politics and many other fields. Often its effect has been indirect. Luttikhuizen and Havelaar (1988), for example, show how it found its way into the constitutions of political parties. But the main area where pragmatic consequences of this text remain a hotly debated issue, is the relationship between church and state. In any situation where the state exerts its power over institutions and individuals, the potential for conflict exists. How does the church interpret Romans 13 when it finds itself in disagreement with the policies and actions of the government of the day? How should the individual understand this passage when his or her conscience forbids him or her to obey a specific law? On the other hand, this is one of the most frequently quoted passages by those in authority when their own legitimacy and authority are being questioned.

No innocent reading of the passage is therefore possible. However, when we set ourselves the task of analysing some of these readings, it is necessary to be clear about the methodological constraints of such an undertaking. All empirical research takes place within a specific theoretical framework (cf. Groeben 1077; Schmidt 1982 and Lategan & Rosseau 1988) Basically, the actual reading of a text can be analysed from two perspectives – that of the text and that of the actual reader. Both should be kept in mind when we try to understand what happens when Romans 13 is read. From the perspective of the text, what are the instructions given to the reader? How open or closed is the text? Whose interests are served by the text? From the perspective of the reader, how are these instructions followed? What are the presuppositions of the reader? Why does (s)he actualise the text in a certain way?

The actual readings of the text can only be analysed and evaluated if we have a clear understanding of the contours of the text itself, of its structure, of the semantic options it contains, of the directions given to the reader. Inherent in all reading is the dilemma that an analysis of the text, as proposed here, is only possible on the basis of the analyst's own reading. As we cannot escape this dilemma, we shall have to live with it and be prepared to have our own reading analysed and evaluated by other readers. The following statements about reader instructions, therefore, do not claim to have 'objective' status, but are meant to serve as basis for our own reading of other readings.

### Reader Clues in Romans 13

When searching for reader clues in the sense of the previous paragraph and exploring ways in which a text could or should be read, a wide variety of possible procedures present themselves to the analyst. These techniques may be designed for analysis on the linguistic, literary or theological level of the text. Each of these procedures forms part of a wider methodological framework which provide the rationale for and purpose of the specific technique. In the context of this chapter, it will not be possible to discuss these methodological approaches in any detail, as our main purpose is the analysis of actual readings of Romans 13. We shall, therefore, restrict ourselves to three of these possible approaches and illustrate how they might be used to uncover the reading potential of our text: A discourse analysis based on syntactic units, a rhetorical analysis of the argument in the passage and a consideration of the 'gaps' inherent in the text.<sup>1</sup>

### Discourse Analysis

An analysis of the linguistic structure makes it clear that the passage consists of three sections: a) 13:1-2; b) 13:3-5 and c) 13:6-7 (for a more detailed discussion, see Lategan 1992:118-20).

The relationship between the different sections can be described as follows: *Section a* states the basic proposition of the passage: Authorities should be obeyed because they receive their authority from God. *Section b* outlines two possible attitudes to the proposition made in *section a*: Doing right and living without fear of the authorities, or doing wrong and facing the consequences. (These options rest on the assumption that authorities reward what is right and punish what is wrong.) Both prudence and conscience dictate the former

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<sup>1</sup> For the first two, extensive use was made of J Botha 1994. *Subject to whose authority? Multiple readings of Romans 13*. Atlanta: Scholars Press.

course of action. *Section c* spells out the practical implications of the conclusion reached in *b*.

### **Rhetorical Strategies**

If rhetorical argumentation implies the ‘contact of minds’ (Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca 1969:4), another way of discovering reader clues in an argumentative text like Romans 13 would be to analyse the presuppositions underlying the passage. Of special importance are the so-called ‘givens’ – those premises that the author assumes will be unquestionably shared by his or her readers. The following convictions or presuppositions undergird the paraenetic section 12:1-15:13:

- God exists, rules the universe and has the final authority
- God has established authorities, therefore they have authority. Governing authorities are servants of God
- Governing authorities carry the sword (they could punish/kill – or commend – people)
- Taxes must be paid to the governing authorities
- Everyone knows what is right/good and wrong/bad behaviour
- Everyone must submit him- or herself to the governing authorities

The intriguing question is whether we can identify the kind of context in which this set of convictions will fit. What is the socio-historical situation in which Paul wrote – both as far as his personal circumstances are concerned and that of the wider socio-political world of his time? What forms the background of these assertions which he apparently expects his readers will share?

The peculiarity of the passage is due on the one hand to the very general nature of the prepositions which apparently could be shared by a universal audience, by Romans and Christians, by ancient and modern readers alike. On the other hand, the passage is marked by a movement from conviction to persuasion, from a universal to a particular audience. The very open statement on the status of authorities is gradually qualified by the introduction of the *diakonos* (servant) theme. “Thus, we could say that Paul meets his audience on familiar ground ... and in his argument he wants to move them to a new understanding of the nature of the authorities’ authority and because of that, also a new understanding of the nature of their submission to the authorities” (Botha 1994:11). It is also important to bear in mind that the injunctions of Romans 13 are directed in the first place to those *subjected* to authority, and not addressed to *authorities*. For a re-reading in a new context, this has important consequences as will become clear in what follows.

The tension between openness and restriction makes it necessary to look closer at the space the passage offers to its reader.

### **Open Spaces**

The concept of gaps and vacancies has been developed by Iser to account for the participation of the reader in the realisation of the text. Gaps refer to suspended connectability in the text which prompts the reader to organise the interacting textual segments as they project themselves upon another in the reading process. Vacancies refer to nonthematic segments within the referential field of the wandering viewpoint. These are not part of the text as such, but are to be implemented by the reader’s participation (Iser 1972:274-9).

Voelz (1988) has reminded us that Iser developed these concepts primarily with the reading of narrative texts in mind and that they are not necessarily useful for the analysis of argumentative texts. He shows that the 'openness' in a text such as Romans 13 is due essentially to different forms of ambiguity. He distinguishes three types of ambiguity:

- Ambiguity of breadth of semantic range of words – 'furniture' includes both 'chair' and 'table'. In the case of Romans 13, examples of these 'broad' terms would be *authority, evil, good, and servant*.
- Ambiguity of the referent of words, which can be the result of the first kind of ambiguity. Here the question is not what is included in a specific word, but to what it refers.
- Ambiguity of macro-structural arrangement. What is the central thought of a specific paragraph? What is the pivotal statement(s)? These are the type of questions procedures like discourse analysis try to answer, but a degree of ambiguity still remains.

What we are dealing with here are different forms and different degrees of indeterminacy in the text. It is this indeterminacy which activates the participation of the reader. It entices him or her to 'close' the 'openness' of the text, by supplying the missing information or realising one of the possibilities offered by the text.

When we look in which way the imaginative co-operation of the reader is required in the realisation of Romans 13, the text reveals some interesting features.

The first of these is the remarkably open or unmarked character of many of the words in our passage. *Authority, all, good, evil, servant, submit, conscience, fear*, are all open and can be 'filled' in a wide variety of ways. For example, *authority* in verse 1 is so unmarked that it is not even clear what form or what level of authority is included in this reference. Louw and Nida (1988:92) list at least eight nuances in the New Testament alone, all referring to 'authority' or 'power' in an unspecified way. The same trend is continued in verse 3 where *rulers* are also without further qualification. But also the addressees are totally open: *everyone* (verse 1). The same applies to the concepts *good* and *evil*.

There are therefore clear indicators that encourage an open reading of our passage. But this trend – remarkably enough – is countered by a movement in the opposite direction, one of narrowing down the concept of authority by a series of qualifications – it is a *servant* of God and intended to do you *good*.

The plurality in the form of marked/unmarked reference is related to a plurality of semantic possibilities, which leads to a remarkable series of bifurcations in the passage. The linking of God with the powers that be, has a double effect. Firstly, authorities are sanctioned as instituted by God and should therefore be obeyed. Secondly, this linkage not only sanctions authorities, but at the same time relativises them, by implying that they are accountable to God. This linkage provides the textual basis and stimulus for two diametrically opposed readings. The one insists on the divine right and obligation to obey authorities. The other insists on relativising the power of authorities by making them accountable to God. Examples of both these readings can be found in actual recorded readings.

### **Reader Uptake of Romans 13:1-7**

These characteristics of the text formed the background of the investigation of the actual reader uptake of the passage. Without repeating the details of the 1992 study, the results showed a basic distinction between what can be called 'affirmative' and 'resistant'

readings. Affirmative readings exhibit a positive attitude towards authority on the basis that it has its ultimate origin in God and should therefore be obeyed. Resistant readings try – in a variety of ways – to qualify, restrict or undermine the apparent generic approval of authority.

The following typology of reading strategies emerged:

### ***Affirmative readings***

The basic assumption of affirmative readings is that the passage is universal in scope and that it provides guidelines for the fundamental relationship between subject and authority, between church and state. Although the text addresses in the first place believers who are subjected to authority, inferences are drawn for the conduct, powers and responsibilities of authority in general.

It is important to note that the exponents of affirmative readings are – as could be expected – normally people in positions of power and authority.

### ***Resistant Readings***

Conversely, the exponents of resistant readings are either victims of the abuse of power or uneasy with its unqualified call to obedience. The following strategies were found:

1. *The intertextual move*: Romans 13 is relativised by placing it in the wider context of the letter (the different nature of the paraenetic sections in Romans 12 and 13:8ff), the relativisation of his apostolic authority by Paul himself, of other sections of the New Testament such as Acts which expects obedience to God rather than to man and Revelations 13 which show the demonic side of the state, or of the message of the Bible as a whole.
2. *The evaluative move*. The hegemony of ‘the state’ is broken by introducing criteria to distinguish between good and bad government.
  - The first criterion is drawn from 13:4, that is, whether the authority in question acts as a servant or promotes the common good. Only those authorities which meet these criteria are worthy of obedience. The reference to the conscience in 13:5 is of great significance, because it carries with it the potential for criticism and resistance to the state.
  - The second criterion is based on the fact that all authority is instituted by God and, by implication, accountable to Him. Those who do not fulfill this responsibility themselves cannot claim obedience.
3. *The interpolation move*. A drastic measure is to declare the passage as so un-Pauline in spirit or so incompatible with the rest of his theology that it could only be a *Fremdkörper* which was inserted into the text at a later stage.
4. *Relativisation by restricting the universal scope of Romans 13*. This is in a certain sense the opposite of the intertextual move. Instead of widening the scope of the passage, it is restricted to a specific situation (the circumstances of the Christian community in Rome) or a specific problem (revolutionaries contemplating the overthrow of the regime or enthusiasts disregarding worldly authorities).
5. *Reading Romans 13 under different presuppositions*. A novel way to escape the restrictions of the passage is to emphasise the horizon of the contemporary reader and to read ‘under democratic presuppositions’ (Jüngel 1986). This enables the reader to bring different questions to the text and to draw different conclusions regarding its contemporary implications.



6. *Redefining the authorities.* Taking the reading under democratic presuppositions even further, Nürnberger (1987:40-47) comes to the conclusion that the sword of authority ultimately belongs to the ruled. They are the ones who have to judge whether the government of the day really rules for the common good. By redefining the authorities of Romans 13 in this way, Nürnberger is in fact affirming the call to obedience. But that also leads him to accept the possibility of a just revolution.

### Post-1989 Readings

What has happened to the reading of Romans 13 in the twenty years since the previous study?<sup>2</sup> The passage continued to generate both affirmative and resistant readings – in secular as well as religious contexts. To give just two examples: In September 2011, Chief Justice Mogoeng quoted Romans 13 in his testimony before the Judicial Service Commission of South Africa to justify his statement that the Bible tells him that he must obey the government (*Rapport* 3/09/2011). At the same time, the Embassy of Heaven insists that it is a fallacy that Paul was commanding Christians to submit to secular powers. Romans 13:1-7 refers to “the spiritual leaders of the Body of Christ, not the civil authorities of this world” (Embassy of Heaven 23/08/2011).

More importantly, a series of political events influenced the interpretation of the passage, which in scholarly circles coincided with the advent of empire studies.

The experience with the South African transition should have prepared us to expect that changes on the political front and accompanying power shifts would have a strong effect on the reading of Romans 13.

The end of the cold war (epitomised by the collapse of the Soviet Union and the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989) radically changed the global balance of power. In the place of the two major power blocs, the United States emerged as the only remaining superpower. This shift brought with it unforeseen consequences. Among these was a rift along power fault lines that was neither anticipated nor visible at the time. The *de facto* supremacy of the United States and the apparently unstoppable rise of Western capitalist consumerism triggered reactions in many parts of the world. What was experienced as the undermining of traditional values and the political powerlessness to resist repressive regimes backed by the United States led to radical responses such as the rise of Islamic fundamentalism. The events of 9/11 were a devastating demonstration of the destructive nature and intensity of this opposition. The reaction of the Bush administration was to interpret the attacks as a ‘declaration of war’ which in turn triggered the ‘war against global terrorism’ and gave rise to unprecedented demonstrations of American patriotism (cf. Horsley 2003:1-4).

One of the important consequences of this whole chain of events from 1989 onwards was the rise of what became known as ‘empire studies’ – a sub-discipline that became a field of investigation in its own right with specialised publications such as the *Journal of Empire Studies*. This new development also found resonance in the circles of biblical scholarship. The role of religion in society, the relationship between state and church/mosque and especially the use of unbridled political power and military force led to a new assessment of state power and of empire building in a post-1989 world – through the lens of the Roman Empire of the first century which seemed to be a clear parallel to these

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<sup>2</sup> This follow-up review takes 1989 as point of departure, despite the fact that the previous study was published in 1992. The dramatic chain of events, which started in 1989, provides the real impetus for the renewed interest in Romans 13 as will be explained below. For the sake of continuity, brief reference is also made to some pre-1989 readings of the passage.

contemporary events. As Cassidy shows, this led American scholars such as Horsley and Elliot to depict Paul as a critic of the Roman Empire. On the other side of the Atlantic Wright drew on Old Testament themes and the belief that Yahweh is lord of all to insist on the supremacy of God over political power. From this he concludes that the Gospel is by definition critical of any instance or power that rivals the claims of Christ (Cassidy 2010; see also Kim 2008; Nanos 1996).

Consequently, the large majority of post-1989 readings of the passage are variations of resistant readings. The few affirmative readings are inevitable from readers who are in a position of power or who have an interest in maintaining the status quo. The most prominent example – in deed if not in word – of an affirmative understanding of the passage is the ‘war or terror’ waged by the Bush administration and supported by the Blair government. Although Bush based his justification primarily on the ‘just war’ theory, there is little doubt that many understood it as linked to Romans 13 and intended to punish evildoers through the power of the sword (O’Connor 2007:105; O’Driscoll 2008:100). According to this view, Bush is exercising a divinely given right because “Romans 13:4-6 affirm that rulers have the right to ‘bear the sword’ against evildoers” (Collins 2012:34).

Those opposing an affirmative reading interpret the Bush/Blair response as epitomising the abuse of (state) power and of behaviour that mirrors the excesses of the Roman Empire. In scholarly circles this led to a flood of studies on Romans 13. Apart from monographs and commentaries, more than thirty journal articles deal with various aspects of the passage. These readings confirm the preliminary typology of strategies discussed above, with a number of interesting new developments. (See also the overview by Cassidy 2010).

Bielecki (1987:47-56) provides an example of the *intertextual move* by insisting that the pericope should be read in the light of other biblical texts such as Gen 11, Wis 6:1-11 and Mt 22:15-22. Du Toit (1995:328) similarly refers to Rev 13 as an example of the perverse state which no longer can expect obedience from its subjects.

Quite a number of interpreters make an *evaluative move* in order to soften the uncompromising tone of Paul’s statements. Believers should subject themselves to the civil powers that God allows to rule, but on condition that they do not contradict divine commandments (Monera 2007). For Porter (1990) the passage only calls for obedience to that which is right and this qualifies the demand for unconditional subjection. Contemporary thinking on the role of the state should inform the interpretation of the pericope (Mathew 2005). Martinez (2007) maintains that to use Romans 13 as an argument to submit to the laws – especially contemporary immigration laws – of earthly rulers reflects superficial and uncritical thinking. Lohse (2008) claims that even if a society is not Christian but guided by humanitarian ethics, Christians should fulfill their social responsibility. In a similar vein, Orlee (2005) asserts that God’s reign is not depended on the enactment of laws.

No examples of the *interpolation move* were found which consider the passage to be a *Fremdkörper* in Romans. Kroger (1993) and Du Toit (1995) explicitly reject such a move (see also Denova (1992)). However, there were some attempts at what could be called a *reversal move* (see below).

Neufeld’s position (1994) has elements of a *relativisation move*. He argues that Paul was not attempting a definite treatise on church-state relations. He had a much more modest aim, namely to give guidance and encouragement to the local Christian community in a difficult situation. He warns against pro-Roman and pro-Palestinian sentiments. The Roman authorities should be obeyed as their authority comes from God. Artz (1993) also sees the text as giving guidance to believers who face wickedness and persecution. They should overcome evil by doing good and submitting to an antagonistic state that does have a



divinely-ordained corrective role to play. Iwasa (2010) makes a different move. The passage does not propose unconditional obedience. A distinction should be made between the ethics expected from the state and from subjects. This dual ethics makes it possible for individuals to obey the state without acquiring moral blame.

Some interpretations tend towards readings *under different presuppositions*. Botha (1992) gives examples of how new situations and new presuppositions inevitably create new meaning. Mathew (2005) likewise takes his cue from modern developments regarding the role of the state while Cuvillier's (1992) focus is on the eventual appropriation of the passage in the context of today.

There are also attempts at *redefining the authorities*. According to Porter (1990) the implication of Paul's rhetoric is that unjust authorities are not authorities at all and therefore do not merit obedience by believers. The 'Embassy of Heaven' (2011) makes a drastic move: Paul is not referring to secular authorities at all. He is addressing the "beloved of God, called to be saints" (Rom 1:7). He is concerned about the spiritual wellbeing of the believers in Rome and instructs them to submit to those in authority who look after their souls. These rulers are the leaders of the *church*, who are truly "ministers of God to thee for good". Translations such as the Living Bible and the Good News Bible are not to be trusted because they paraphrase 'power' as 'government' and 'laws of the land', unlike the King James translation.

### Expanding the Typology

The readings discussed so far can be accommodated – in broad terms – under the categories of the typology developed from the 1992 study. However, there are three new strategies:

Firstly, the acceptance that Romans 13 cannot be harmonised in any meaningful way with other Pauline passages or with the rest of the Bible. According to Singgih (2009), we must face up to the stark (if unpleasant) reality that all the divergent and conflicting interpretations of the passage can be traced to one simple root cause: The text itself (and for that matter, Paul) is ambiguous. Any attempt to gloss this over and deny the inherent ambiguity is bound to fail (cf. also Cassidy 2010:389).

Secondly, some readings try what may be called a *reversal move*. Hurley (2006) suggests that the passage should not be taken at face value at all. Using the rhetorical tools developed by Booth and following the internal clues of the text it becomes possible to construct an *ironic* reading which intends the opposite of the surface text and brings a new dimension to the relationship between the emerging church in Rome with the oppressive regime it faces. Herzog goes further and sees Romans 13 as an example where the ambiguous and coded political speech of the weak appears to support the dominant power but in actual fact is subverting it. The Jews of the Diaspora have a long tradition living under domination and developed ways how to survive under such circumstances. Paul uses what Herzog calls 'dissembling', that is, the technique of masking the hidden transcript of resistance to Roman rule by couching it in language of submission. He sounds like an obedient and loyal Roman citizen, but in actual fact he signals to his readers the limits of state power and how to deal with this (cf. also Forman 2011).

But thirdly, by far the most prominent during the period under discussion is a series of interpretations that can best be described as *pragmatic* or *realistic*. Despite internal variations, these readings all assume that Paul accepts the reality of the Roman state and its power and that he is giving pragmatic advice to his readers on how to cope with this reality – for a variety of reasons. According to Bailey (2004), the passage advocates political

realism for early Christians – an interpretation echoed by Légasse (1994). For both Guerra (1995) and Coleman (1997) the payment of taxes to the Roman state is at the heart of the matter. This issue has the potential to cause civil unrest, also by Christians. Paul is trying to find a way out of the dilemma and urges his readers to conform to avoid drawing attention to themselves. Kroger (1993) and Røsaeg (1993) follow the same line of argumentation. George (2006) also asserts that Paul recognises the realities of Roman rule. His concern is the smooth integration of Christians into society, and he therefore advises them to act within the constraints of political reality. Bielecki (1987) also stresses the desirable practical consequences of such a strategy. According to Racine (1993) Paul is encouraging the preservation of the social order. He urges his readers to adopt an intelligent and critical respect for the social order for the sake of promoting the faith, rather than opting for blind obedience of the authorities. Similarly, Debergé (2007) talks in this regard of a submission in all honesty, that is, according to one's conscience, rather than mere submissiveness or passivity. For Wolmarans (1994) Paul is advocating a strategy of maximal conformation to his readers to ensure their long-term survival of believers. In the view of Pfitzmann (2004), Paul's ethics of obedience implies a dialectic between attachment and detachment – it calls for obedience to the authorities while at the same time maintaining a critical detachment from earthly power (cf. also Cassidy 2010:384). (Isaak (2003) talks in this regard of 'nonaligned' submission to the governing authorities.)

Some recent commentators also support a pragmatic interpretation. Dunn underlines Paul's 'political realism'. The apostle does not idealise the situation and is well aware of the fickleness of political power. His advice is not dependant on Roman benevolence. "It is simply a restatement of the long-established Jewish recognition of the reality and character of political power" (1988:773). This 'policy of political prudence' (1988:772) was not confined to Rome, but widespread among Christian congregations of the time. Christians should not seek to subvert the state, but accept the reality of political power and find practical ways how to deal with it. Wright (2005) adds further nuances to this 'realistic' reading. Earthly rulers are not themselves divine but answerable to God. This is an inherently critical position towards worldly authorities, but that does not mean that the believers in Rome are expected to commit civil disobedience. The ruling authorities do have a measure of divine authority to maintain law and order and should therefore be obeyed for this purpose.

Like Wright, Jewett traces the idea that governmental authority has a divine origin back to its roots in the Old Testament. In Romans 13 Paul is not referring to the god(s) of the Roman civic cult, but to the God embodied in the crucified Christ. "Thus, no matter what Roman officials may claim as their authority, it really comes from the God of the Jewish and Christian faith" (Jewett 2007:789) For Jewett, this is nothing but a "massive act of political co-optation" (2007:790), which, if they understood what he meant, the Roman authorities would have viewed as thoroughly subversive. Paul's advice of submission to the authorities is not an expression of respect for the authorities themselves, but for the God who stands behind them. Towner (1999) likewise emphasises the subversive implications of Paul's position. However, his pragmatic advice of submission has the strategic purpose to aid the spread of the gospel.

According to Du Toit (1995:323), the church in Rome was still in a very vulnerable position at the time Paul was writing to them. They were still associated with the Jewish community who already was in disfavour with Rome. Christians should therefore do nothing that can discredit the gospel. They should rather excel by doing good; including paying taxes to those God has placed in authority. But the apparently positive attitude of

Paul towards the Roman authorities should not be interpreted as proof that he is writing at a time when his experience of the *pax romana* was still largely positive – that is, before 64 CE and the start of Nero’s persecutions. Paul’s formulations in Romans 13:1-7 are generic and not aimed at a specific situation. The apostle is describing how the ideal state should be, namely a servant of God, and not what it in actual fact is (Du Toit 1995:328).

An interesting feature of the pragmatic approach is the basic motivation given for such a reading. For some it is purely a strategy for survival – Christians should not cause ripples nor draw the attention of the authorities to themselves and thereby risk a Roman backlash (Coleman 1997:325; cf. also Cassidy 2010:386). Bammel (1984) understands Romans 13 as the beginning of Christian apologetics: Obedience as Paul recommends here will provide the church with a proof of innocence and an escape from Roman retribution. Others see a more long-term strategy as the real motivation for Paul’s pragmatic approach: Avoiding attention from Roman authorities for the wrong reasons (such as civil disobedience) will enable the church to concentrate on its real mission, that of spreading the gospel (Du Toit 1995:323-4). Towner (1999) claims that our passage forms part of a wider body of ethical teachings aimed at encouraging Christians to participate more fully in the world. This will open new possibilities for the church to transform the world. But that can only be achieved by participating in the structures of the world and by actively engaging with the world. In the words of Cassidy (2010:387): “Paul’s encouragement to submission, therefore, is not an end in itself, but is meant to further the work of the Gospel”. What this ‘further work’ could be is also of concern to present-day readers of Romans 13 and opens a window to the future.

### **Conclusion**

Coming generations in different social contexts with different power configurations will continue to tussle with this passage. The enduring interest in Romans 13 emanates from the uncompromising way in which (state) power and the individual human response to this power is juxtaposed. On a deeper level it lays bare the tension between the reality of what authority is and the ideal of what it should be. In other words, it poses the enduring triad of all ethical reflection: What is, what could/should be and what to do.

We should also take up Jüngel’s challenge to read Romans 13 under new pre-suppositions (Jüngel 1986:35-7). If anything is clear from this brief overview it is that the situation in which the reader finds him- or herself and the experiences (s)he has had with authorities and the exercise of power are the real shapers of our engagement with this passage. Dominant as the empire perspective is at the moment, we should also remind ourselves that this is not the only possible scenario. Not only did 1989 mark the end of the cold war and a restructuring of global power, but also witnessed the emergence of a new generation of young democracies (cf. Van Beek 2005), where the constitutional protection of freedom and human rights in a democratic dispensation became the preferred model for the state (cf. Lategan 2010). Our reading of Romans 13 cannot live from empire critique alone (however important that might be), but must also take up the even more difficult challenge to open constructive ways to enhance human freedom and dignity – if humans are indeed created in the image of God.

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