

# PAUL AND "THE POWERS THAT BE"<sup>1</sup>

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## I

The expression "the powers that be" is found at the end of Romans 13:1 in older English versions of the Bible: "the powers that be", says Paul, "are ordained of God". It comes near the beginning of a self-contained paragraph, which may be translated freely as follows:

Let every person submit to the superior authorities. There is no authority that is not derived from God; the established authorities have been appointed by God. Therefore, whoever opposes constituted authority resists the ordinance of God, and those who resist will bring judgment on themselves. It is not when people are engaged in a good activity but in a bad one that they have any need to fear the magistrates. Do you wish to live free from the fear of whoever is in authority? Do what is good, and you will earn his commendation. He is God's servant for your good. But if you do what is bad, you may well be afraid; it is not for nothing that he bears the sword. He is God's servant, the agent of divine retribution in punishing the evildoer. Therefore you must submit, not only because he is the agent of retribution but also as a matter of conscience. This, too, is why you should pay taxes; your taxes go to the maintenance of the authorities who are God's ministers as they attend to this very business. Therefore, pay everyone his due: pay taxes to the tax-collector and duty to the customs officer; pay reverence and honour to those who are entitled to receive your reverence and honour (Romans 13:1-7).

## II

So far as textual evidence is concerned, the authenticity of this paragraph is unquestionable. It has been argued indeed that it may have been absent from Marcion's edition of the New Testament<sup>2</sup>. This is not proved, and even if it were true, the

<sup>1</sup> A lecture delivered in the John Rylands University Library on Wednesday, 7 December 1983.

<sup>2</sup> Mainly on the ground that Tertullian, in his running commentary on

absence of a passage from Marcion's edition is no argument against its genuineness. Yet several scholars have presented a case for regarding the paragraph as a non-Pauline interpolation<sup>3</sup>.

One of the most thorough statements of this case was put forward in 1965 by Professor James Kallas<sup>4</sup>. Pointing out that there is some textual doubt about other passages towards the end of Romans, he says that nowhere else does Paul discuss the state or the Christian's relation to it. More specifically, the paragraph, he says, is not only self-contained but interrupts the context, which runs on more smoothly without it. But above all, he argues, it contradicts basic Pauline ideas and forms of expression. It assumes the indefinite continuance of the present order which, according to Romans 13:11f., is on the point of disappearing. The "authorities" envisaged here are Roman rulers, whereas everywhere else in Paul the word relates to cosmic powers—"the world-rulers of this darkness", as they are called in Ephesians 6:12. Far from being appointed by God, these authorities are controlled by "the god of this age" (2 Corinthians 4:4). It is because it is subject to this demonic control that this age is called "the present evil age" (Galatians 1:4). In such an age the people of God are naturally under attack by the authorities instead of enjoying their protection.

In Romans 13:1-7, on the other hand, what Professor Kallas calls the "Pharisaic" view of retribution is expressed<sup>5</sup>: it is evildoers who are punished by the state, in discharge of its commission from God, while the good have nothing to fear. He compares 1 Peter 3:13 ("who is there to harm you if you are zealous for what is right?") and asks if the section of 1 Peter where these words appear forms the earliest commentary on Romans 13:1-7.

Nowhere else, it is further argued, does Paul in his letters suggest that the state (or its representatives) is worthy of respect

Marcion's Pauline edition (*Against Marcion*, v. 14.11-14), makes no reference to Romans 13:1-7. But there was probably no reason why he should refer to it.

<sup>3</sup> There are good bibliographical notes in C. E. B. Cranfield, *The Epistle to the Romans*, I.C.C., II (Edinburgh, 1979), pp. 651-657.

<sup>4</sup> J. Kallas, "Romans XIII.1-7: An Interpolation", *NTS*, xi (1964-65), 365-374.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. the dictum of Rabbi Hanina, deputy high priest (Paul's contemporary): "Pray for the peace of the empire, since but for the fear of it men would swallow one another alive" (*Pirqê Abôth*, iii.2). The "Pharisaic principle of retribution" is in fact Deuteronomic.

from Christians. Indeed, we are assured, there is one passage where the opposite attitude is expressed. In 1 Corinthians 6:4, where Paul deprecates the spectacle of Christians washing their dirty linen in public by prosecuting one another before pagan judges, he asks his readers why they lay their trivial disputes "before those who are least esteemed by the church"<sup>6</sup>. But this, I think, implies no disparagement of the custodians of civil law and order as such; what is meant is that pagan judges have no status whatsoever in the church, whereas a Christian who suffers an injury, real or imagined, at the hands of a fellow-Christian should (if he has not enough of the spirit of Christ to accept the injury uncomplainingly) have the matter adjudicated within the Christian fellowship.

Professor Kallas's arguments are of varying weight. He is right, of course, in pointing out that there is textual doubt about some other passages in the closing chapters of Romans. There is, for example, manuscript evidence for placing the concluding doxology at the end of chapter 14, chapter 15 and chapter 16; and a closing benediction appears at Romans 15:33; 16:20 and 16:24. But the textual doubt is raised in these places by the manuscript evidence itself: no such doubt is raised by the evidence for Romans 13:1-7.

If Paul nowhere else discusses the state or the Christian's relation to it, that may simply be because in his other surviving letters he had no occasion to do so. He discusses the Eucharist in 1 Corinthians 10:16-21 and 11:20-34 only because reports from Corinth gave him occasion to discuss it: no one would base an argument on the textual genuineness of these two passages on the fact that "nowhere else in any of his epistles" does Paul discuss this subject. The subject of the Christian's relation to the civil authorities must have been one of practical concern in Paul's churches: if there is any cause for surprise, it is not that Paul discusses it once only but that he does not discuss it elsewhere.

That the paragraph is self-contained is obvious: it is not so obvious that it interrupts the flow of the argument. There is not the same kind of sustained argument in Romans 12-15 that we have in the first eight chapters of the letter. In these later chapters we find rather a sequence of ethical injunctions relating

<sup>6</sup> Gk. τοὺς ἐξουθημένους ἐν τῇ ἐκκλησίᾳ.

to Christian life within and without the believing community. Smooth transitions are not so characteristic of Paul's style that there is any need for surprise at an abrupt change of subject here. Earlier in the same letter there is another self-contained section—the discussion of Israel's place in the divine purpose in Romans 9-11. Without these three chapters, the beginning of chapter 12 would follow on quite naturally from the end of chapter 8; but this has not served as a basis for questioning the authenticity of Romans 9-11.

In fact, a discussion of the Christian's relation to the state is introduced quite appropriately at this point in the letter. The preceding paragraph deals with the Christian's attitude to non-Christians, not least to those who try to injure them, and contains the injunction: "If possible, so far as it depends upon you, live peaceably with all" (Romans 12:18). As a general injunction this would be unexceptionable; but the question might readily arise of living peaceably with the representatives of the state. Their demands on the Christian, as on any other subject, were undoubtedly backed by power; were they also backed by authority—authority of a kind which a Christian ought to recognize?

"Never avenge yourselves", Paul goes on in the preceding paragraph, but leave it to the wrath of God; for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord" (Romans 12:19)<sup>7</sup>. If evil is done, there is a principle of divine retribution at work in the universe, but Christians are ministers of God's grace, not agents of retribution. There are others whom God has entrusted with this responsibility: it is the civil magistrate who is his duly appointed agent of retribution in punishing the evildoer. The language in which the magistrate's province is described in Romans 13:4 echoes the language of Romans 12:19. The word for "wrath" or "retribution" (Gk. ὀργή) is common to both texts, and the term "vengeance" (Gk. ἐκδίκησις) in the former is caught up by "avenger" (Gk. ἔκδικος) in the latter.

Again, the aorist imperative of the verb "pay" (Gk. ἀπόδοτε) in Romans 13:7—"pay everyone his due"—echoes the present participle of the same verb (ἀποδιδόντες) in Romans 12:17, "pay no one back evil for evil". And the idea of dues or debts is caught up in the clause immediately following the controverted

<sup>7</sup> A targumic paraphrase of Deut. 32:35 (cf. Heb. 10:30).

paragraph: "Let the only debt you owe be the debt of love" (Romans 13:8). When rates and taxes have been paid, those particular debts are discharged in full; but the debt of love is continuous: no amount of loving one another can relieve the Christian of the obligation to go on paying this debt. It can be argued, then, that the controverted paragraph has links in thought both with what goes before it and with what comes after.

Professor Kallas's most serious argument against the authenticity of the paragraph, however, is its alleged contradiction of basic Pauline ideas and forms of expression. The word rendered "authorities" (Gk. ἐξουσίαι), it is said, relates everywhere else in Paul to cosmic powers, evil powers at that.

The noun itself is perfectly common and non-technical, used in the ordinary sense of authority. But in the plural it is used, both in Pauline Greek and in current English, of the bearers of authority—"the authorities", as we say. And it is probably true that, wherever else in Paul's writings the plural is used, it is cosmic powers that are meant. But if Paul ever had occasion to mention earthly authorities, the same plural form (ἐξουσίαι) was the most natural term for him to use. It is with reference to earthly authorities that the plural is used in Romans 13:1-7, but that is no argument against the Pauline authorship of the paragraph.

Does the paragraph envisage the indefinite continuance of the present world order? If it does, then indeed it contradicts the sense of a later passage in the same chapter: "Recognize what hour it is: it is high time now for you to wake up from sleep. Our salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed; the night is far spent, the day is at hand" (Romans 13:11f.). The point of this eschatological urgency is that Christians must live as Christians should: this is no time to idle or engage in unworthy practices. Elsewhere Paul sounds the same note of urgency by way of warning his converts in Corinth not to become excessively involved in earthly attachments, whether domestic or mercantile, but to maintain the measure of detachment proper to those who are heirs of the new and impending age (1 Corinthians 7:29-31).

But I can find nothing in Romans 13:1-7 inconsistent with this outlook. Paul expected the new age, the kingdom of Christ, to break in quite soon, but he made no attempt to say how soon.

Until that day dawned, the civil authorities occupied their divinely appointed sphere of power, and should therefore receive the respect and obedience due to them.

### III

To what extent the powers that be, who are ordained by God, could also be regarded as controlled by cosmic powers is a question to which we shall return. First, however, mention must be made of a further argument against the authenticity of Romans 13:1-7 that has been presented recently. In a monograph entitled *Authority in Paul and Peter*, published this year, Professor Winsome Munro identifies a "pastoral stratum" in the Pauline letters (excluding the Pastorals) and 1 Peter. This stratum she calls "pastoral" because it has the same origin as the Pastoral Letters; it is characterized by the note of subjection to authority. "The subjection material of the New Testament", she says, "does not belong with the more primitive, eschatological strata of tradition, but ... was introduced later, it is suggested in the first half of the second century"<sup>8</sup>.

This "subjection material" contains, first and foremost, the sections commonly called the household codes, in which the mutual responsibilities of husbands and wives, parents and children, masters and slaves are laid down. These codes prescribe the duty of subjection for wives to their husbands, children to their parents, slaves to their masters. The New Testament household code appears to be the christianization of a Stoic literary form. When Paul speaks spontaneously the subjection he enjoins is reciprocal; thus the household code in Ephesians 5:22-6:9 is introduced by his own direction: "Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ". This is in line with his words elsewhere: "outdo one another in showing honour" (Romans 12:10); "in humility count others better than yourselves" (Philippians 2:3). But this does not imply that the household codes were later additions to the Pauline letters in which they occur: they seem to have circulated among the Gentile churches as elements in a primitive Christian catechesis, and like other such elements

<sup>8</sup> W. Munro, *Authority in Paul and Peter*, SNTS Monograph Series 45 (Cambridge, 1983), p. 3.

were incorporated from the first in the letters in which they appear.

To the allegedly later "pastoral stratum" Professor Munro assigns Romans 13:1-7, in which certainly the note of subjection is struck—subjection to the "higher authorities". She is not impressed by Kallas's argument that the paragraph is isolated from the context in which it is now placed: she recognizes its links both with what precedes and with what follows. But these links lead her to assign part of what precedes and what follows to the "pastoral stratum"—specifically, Romans 12:9-11a, 12c-21, and 13:8-10. This really weakens her case against the genuineness of Romans 13:1-7. But, leaving her treatment of the adjacent passages aside, we note her argument that the subjection to the ruling powers inculcated in the paragraph under discussion is in line with the attitude to the Roman state found in Acts, but inconsistent with Paul's own teaching, as expressed in 1 Corinthians 2:8, where the "rulers of this age" are hostile to the cause of God rather than ordained by him<sup>9</sup>.

While scholars like Professor Kallas and Professor Munro are led to their conclusions by literary-critical reasoning, it must be acknowledged that some people welcome such conclusions on other grounds. The call for submission to the powers that be has often been made the basis for an insistence that Christians are bound to render uncritical obedience to the existing government in all situations. Those who find this insistence unacceptable are sometimes relieved to be told that Romans 13:1-7 is probably not the work of Paul. If it is not, then (they feel) they need pay no further attention to the passage or to the corollaries drawn from it. They may be told that, whether it is by Paul or not, it is still canonical scripture; but that has not the same weight with them as Pauline authorship has.

The exegete's task is to ascertain the meaning which the text had in its historical setting, whoever the author might be. The task of discovering what guidance, if any, can be derived from the text for the practical life of readers today is not to be overlooked, but it is not the task of exegesis and should not be allowed to influence exegesis.

Professor Munro speaks of some friends of hers who found themselves in prison in her native South Africa with nothing

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 56-67.

to read but the Bible, "one of whom wanted to know how Paul the prisoner could have written Rom 13:1-7"<sup>10</sup>. She does not say if her friend was relieved to learn that, in Professor Munro's judgment, it was not Paul who wrote those verses. Paul was not a prisoner when he sent this letter to the Christians in Rome, but when, a few years later, he found himself a prisoner in Rome, it was because he had sufficient respect for the superior authorities to appeal to Caesar—to submit to the judgment of the supreme tribunal of the Roman Empire. This, at least, is the account given in Acts; how far it should be given a hearing in the discussion of Romans 13:1-7 will be considered anon.

#### IV

But first it is proper to consider other passages in the Pauline writings which may have a bearing on our subject. According to Professor Munro and others, the teaching of Romans 13:1-7 is inconsistent with 1 Corinthians 2:6-8, where "the rulers of this age" are said to be on their way out because, through ignorance of God's eternal wisdom, they "crucified the Lord of glory". But Paul is not referring there to such minor characters as Caiaphas the high priest and Pontius Pilate the Roman prefect, who share the responsibility for Jesus' death in the passion narratives of the Gospels; he is referring to cosmic powers, to whom Caiaphas and Pilate were merely instruments for the execution of their plan to thwart the divine purpose. In fact, they overreached themselves; it was their own plan that was thwarted. In vivid words in Colossians 2:15 Paul describes how Jesus on the cross disarmed them, turning the cross (so to speak) into his triumphal car before which they were driven as his vanquished foes. They maintain their malignant opposition to the cause of God, those "world-rulers of this darkness", but they have no more power over the followers of Christ, who are

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. viii. In the correspondence columns of the *British Weekly* for 9 September 1983, a letter-writer remarked, as if it were something which hardly needed stating, that Paul would not have said that "the powers that be are ordained of God" had Nero been emperor at the time but of course Nero was emperor. (Admittedly we know facts about Nero which Paul could not have known in A.D. 57.)



sharers in his victory; to them they are now “weak and beggarly elemental forces” (Galatians 4:9).

Granted, however, that “the rulers of this age” in 1 Corinthians 2:6-8 are cosmic powers, it is implied that they use human authorities as their instruments. Is not this as true of the highest human authorities, such as the Roman emperor, as it is of minor functionaries like Caiaphas and Pilate?

The idea that the nations of the world have angelic rulers, who operate above and behind their earthly rulers, goes far back in Hebrew thought. Its earliest attestation probably comes in the “Song of Moses” (Deuteronomy 32:8):

When the Most High gave the nations their inheritance,  
 when he separated the children of men,  
 he fixed the bounds of the peoples  
 according to the number of the sons of God<sup>11</sup>.

That the “sons of God” are angels is the interpretation of the Septuagint. In early Hebrew thought they are members of the “council of Yahweh”, the “gods” among whom, according to Psalm 82, the Most High executes judgment when he “stands in the heavenly court”. If he finds injustice on earth, that is ultimately their responsibility; unless they mend their ways, they will “die like men, and fall like any prince”<sup>12</sup>.

This idea was further developed in apocalyptic literature. In the book of Daniel, the first and chief of the Jewish apocalypses, the angel Gabriel comes from heaven to acquaint Daniel with what is destined to happen to his nation (it is already written in the heavenly book), but he is held up for three weeks by the “prince of Persia” and has to thank the archangel Michael for help in getting away from him. On his way back from delivering his message to Daniel he expects to have an encounter with the “prince of Greece” also (Daniel 10:13, 20). These “princes”, who are powerful enough to impede an angel of the divine presence in the execution of his commission, are plainly not the human rulers of the empires mentioned; they are superior angel-princes. Israel is in the fortunate position of having Michael as her angel-prince; he ensures her final victory (Daniel 12:1).

<sup>11</sup> This is the reading of one manuscript from Qumran, which exhibits the Hebrew text presumably followed in LXX ἀγγέλων θεοῦ. MT reads “sons (children) of Israel”.

<sup>12</sup> Psalm 82:7.

When, however, the present age gives way to the coming age, world sovereignty will pass to "the saints of the Most High" (Daniel 7:18, 22, 28). Exegetes today are divided on the identity of those "saints": it is debated whether they are holy angels or human beings<sup>13</sup>. But it is clear how Paul understood them: when he reminds the Corinthian Christians that "the saints will judge the world", it is before his readers that he holds out this prospect. "Do you not know", he goes on, "that we are to judge *angels*?" (1 Corinthians 6:2f.). If such judicial authority is to be exercised by them in the age to come, surely they are able here and now to adjudicate on their own internal disputes.

From this it appears that Paul did accept the apocalyptic outlook. Does it not follow, then, that in his eyes the Roman emperor and other rulers were but the instruments of discredited angel-princes, and therefore not entitled to the obedience of Christians, who were heirs of the age to come? Not necessarily. In the visions of the book of Daniel angel-princes have their part to play, but elsewhere in the book it is God who bestows imperial authority directly on human rulers, and they are directly responsible to God for the way they govern. It is "the God of heaven" who has given Nebuchadnezzar the kingdom, the power and the glory, and calls him to account for his actions, teaching him through painful experiences that "the Most High God rules the kingdom of men and gives it to whom he will" (Daniel 4:17, 25, 32). The affirmation of Romans 13:1, that "the established authorities have been appointed by God", is completely in agreement with this, and can well be the language of Paul, who in that case follows this apocalyptic line rather than that which envisages the Gentile powers as controlled by angel-princes.

## V

It has been assumed thus far that the authorities of Romans 13:1-7 are human authorities. But attempts have been made to interpret them as angelic powers. Of all the arguments put

<sup>13</sup> For the view that they are angels see M. Noth, "The Holy Ones of the Most High", E.T. in *The Laws of the Pentateuch and Other Studies* (Edinburgh, 1966), pp. 215-228; L. Dequeker, "'The Saints of the Most High' in Qumran and Daniel", *Oudtestamentische Studiën*, xviii (1973), 108-187; for a conclusive statement of the view that they are faithful Jews see M. Casey, *Son of Man* (London, 1979), pp. 7-70.

forward for understanding them in this way the most influential have been those of Oscar Cullmann<sup>14</sup>. Starting from 1 Corinthians 2:8, where it is invisible world rulers who are ultimately responsible for the crucifixion of "the Lord of glory", Professor Cullmann concludes that in Romans 13:1 "it is by far the most natural thing to give to the plural ἐξουσίαι no other sense than that which it always has for Paul, that is, the meaning of 'angelic powers'"<sup>15</sup>. True, the context makes it plain that Paul is referring to the state, but the "authorities" are the "*invisible angelic powers that stand behind the State government*"<sup>16</sup>. Cullmann knows that in the second century this interpretation was maintained by some gnostic teachers and opposed by Irenaeus<sup>17</sup>, but he thinks that Irenaeus was mistaken in holding, with the gnostics, "a false dualistic conception of the angelic powers"<sup>18</sup> which would imply that the state, if controlled by them, was essentially evil instead of being, in the words of Romans 13:4, God's servant for the good of its subjects.

But Professor Cullmann's view is unacceptable. The authorities in Romans 13:1-7 are authorities to whom taxes are paid, and it is unnecessary to import angelic powers into the picture. If angelic powers did figure here, that would indeed be inconsistent with Paul's general emphasis. He nowhere suggests that Christians should be submissive to angelic powers, but rather that they should resist them (Ephesians 6:12-17), confident of victory over them through Christ, who defeated and disarmed them when they assailed him on the cross (Colossians 2:15).

True, the picture of Christ's victory over these principalities and powers has been seen by some interpreters as having a bearing on our present subject. Human beings, and especially Christians, it is said, are called upon to be subject to the cosmic powers because those powers, having been overcome by Christ, are now subject to him. But this christological perspective on

<sup>14</sup> O. Cullmann, *Christ and Time*, E.T. (London, 1951), pp. 191-210; cf. *The State in the New Testament*, E.T. (London, 1957), pp. 50-70 (on p. 64 of the latter work Cullmann finds that "Romans 13:1ff., I Cor. 6:1ff., and I Cor. 2:8, taken together, furnish a uniform picture, which coincides astonishingly with Jesus' conception of the State").

<sup>15</sup> *Christ and Time*, p. 194.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 195 (Cullmann's italics).

<sup>17</sup> Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, v. 24.1.

<sup>18</sup> *Christ and Time*, p. 196.

the "superior authorities" of our text, although it can claim the distinguished sponsorship of Karl Barth<sup>19</sup>, consorts ill with the pragmatic and even pedestrian note which is struck in these seven verses. Moreover, the powers defeated by Christ have lost whatever potency they once had; even if they are supposed to have changed their character for the better, there is no point in submitting to them.

## VI

The earliest commentaries on Romans 13:1-7 are found in some of the later New Testament letters—notably the Pastoral Epistles and 1 Peter<sup>20</sup>—and in them the "authorities" are clearly understood to be human rulers. In 1 Timothy 2:1f. it is directed that prayers and thanksgivings should be offered by Christians "for all human beings" and specifically "for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a quiet and peaceful life". Rulers, wisely guided, are able to ensure tranquil lives for their Christian subjects; this indeed contributes, under God, to the working out of his saving purpose for the human race. In Titus 3:1 Titus is told to remind the naturally insubordinate Christians of Crete "to be submissive to principalities and powers, to be obedient, to be ready for any honest work". Here again the principalities and powers are human, not angelic. In 1 Peter 2:13f. the Roman imperial hierarchy is in view when the readers are urged to "be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do good and to commend those who do right"<sup>21</sup>. This exhortation, which closely follows the thought of Romans 13:1-7, is summed up in the fourfold admonition: "Honour all; love the brotherhood; fear God; honour the emperor" (1 Peter 2:17).

<sup>19</sup> K. Barth, *Church and State*, E.T. (London, 1939); *Church Dogmatics*, E.T., II 2 (Edinburgh, 1957), pp. 721-724. See also C.D. Morrison, *The Powers That Be*, Studies in Biblical Theology 29 (London, 1960), which includes a useful account of the state of the question up to the time when it was written.

<sup>20</sup> In Winsome Munro's eyes, the relevant passages in the Pastorals and 1 Peter belong themselves to the later "pastoral stratum".

<sup>21</sup> These rulers, then, are not the same as the "angels, authorities and powers" which, according to 1 Peter 3:22, have been subjected to the risen and exalted Christ.

If we move into the post-apostolic period, we find the same very positive attitude to the state expressed in the letter of Clement of Rome and, later, in the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*. Clement reproduces a prayer for the rulers who have received "glory and honour and power" over earthly things from God, the eternal king, "that they may administer with piety, in peace and gentleness, the authority given to them"<sup>22</sup>. Polycarp is said to have told the proconsul of Asia that "we [Christians] have been taught to render honour, as is meet, to rulers and authorities appointed by God, if it does not harm us"<sup>23</sup>. The saving clause, "if it does not harm us", implies that the only honour withheld by Christians from the secular authorities is that which would compromise their faith.

The New Testament does indeed present another attitude to the state. In Revelation 13:1-10 the Roman empire, instead of subserving the divine purpose, is energized by the devil and sets itself with deadly hostility against Christ and his people. This, to be sure, is the persecuting empire, with Caesar demanding not only the things that are rightfully his but those that belong to God also. The empire had not yet manifested itself as a persecuting power when the letter to the Romans was composed. But even after it had so manifested itself, the same positive attitude to it as appears in Romans 13:1-7 is maintained (as we have seen) in 1 Peter, Clement of Rome, and the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*. The reaction seen in Revelation is by no means the only Christian response to the persecuting empire; there were Christians who persisted in regarding its persecuting activity as an aberration from its true nature and role.

## VII

There is an apocalyptic passage in the Pauline corpus where the Roman empire probably figures: 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12<sup>24</sup>. Here, as in the Revelation, the rise of Antichrist is foreseen. But, whereas in Revelation Antichrist is embodied in the last Roman emperor, in 2 Thessalonians the Roman emperor imposes a

<sup>22</sup> 1 Clement 60.2-61.2.

<sup>23</sup> *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, 10.3.

<sup>24</sup> In my "Christianity under Claudius", *Bulletin*, xliv (1961-62), 322-325, an attempt was made to set this passage in its historical context.

temporary check on the emergence of Antichrist. In my opinion the attitude to the empire in 2 Thessalonians agrees rather well with that expressed in Romans 13:1-7; but this cannot be used as an argument for the genuineness of the latter passage because there are too many uncertainties about the interpretation of 2 Thessalonians. The Pauline authenticity of 2 Thessalonians is disputed, and it is by no means agreed that the restraining power which prevents the immediate revelation of the "mystery of lawlessness" is to be identified with the Roman Empire. Let me say briefly that I take 2 Thessalonians to be what it claims to be—the joint composition of Paul, Silvanus and Timothy (2 Thessalonians 1:1)—and that at one point in the apocalyptic passage Paul takes personal responsibility for what is said about the coming rise of Antichrist (2 Thessalonians 2:5). As for the identification of the restraining power with the forces of law and order, represented by the empire (or embodied in the emperor), holding the spirit of anarchy in check, this is at least as early as Tertullian. "What is this", Tertullian asks of the restraining power, "but the Roman state, whose removal, when it has been dispersed among ten kings, will bring on Antichrist?"<sup>25</sup> Chrysostom, two centuries later, reviews various interpretations but expresses his preference for that which identifies the restrainer with the Roman empire: if Paul had meant something else, he says, "he would have said so plainly and not obscurely, ... but because he meant the Roman empire, he naturally glanced at it, speaking covertly and darkly"<sup>26</sup>. Tertullian wrote under the persecuting empire and Chrysostom under the Christian empire, but this distinction was irrelevant to their exegesis.

If this exegesis of 2 Thessalonians 2:6, 8, is correct (as I believe it to be), then the empire plays the same part there as it does in our text, acting for the encouragement of good and the coercion of evil.

It was, of course, conceivable that the imperial power itself might abandon its proper function in the divine economy and take on the role of Antichrist: something like this had happened in the principate of Gaius, with his insane insistence on being worshipped as a god. It was to happen again, in the view of

<sup>25</sup> Tertullian, *On the Resurrection of the Flesh*, 24.

<sup>26</sup> Chrysostom, *Homilies on 2 Thessalonians*, 4.

many Christians, when later emperors claimed divine honours for political purposes, not (like Gaius) on personal grounds. Did Paul foresee this possibility? No doubt he did: he was no starry-eyed optimist. He would have agreed with Peter and his companions when they were called to account before the Sanhedrin for preaching the gospel in defiance of a court order to desist: "We must obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:32). When it came to a stark choice between the two, no Christian of the first three centuries would have answered differently<sup>27</sup>. But, so long as the secular authorities continued to discharge their divinely-appointed functions, they were to receive the obedience of Christians, not only because of the painful consequences of disobedience but (much more) because proper obedience to rulers was part of their obedience to God. They should render obedience to them and pay the taxes due to them "for conscience' sake". A moment's reflexion will show that disobedience for conscience' sake on the part of people who are normally obedient and law-abiding should make a greater impression than disobedience on the part of people who are habitually unruly and against the government.

## VIII

The direction to "pay everyone his due" probably echoes Jesus' concise reply when he was confronted with a question about the pious Judaeans' obligation to the Roman state: "Is it lawful to pay tribute to Caesar?" When, at his request, a sample of the coinage acceptable for the paying of Caesar's tribute was produced, he pointed out that what bore Caesar's name and likeness was self-evidently Caesar's property. Therefore, he said, "give Caesar back<sup>28</sup> what belongs to him; give God what belongs to *him*" (Mark 12:17). The political context in which that question was put to Jesus was an exceedingly delicate one<sup>29</sup>: his questioners, it is suggested, hoped to impale him on one horn or the other of a dilemma. By his answer he not only avoided being trapped; he reminded his questioners of

<sup>27</sup> Not even the supposed interpolator of Romans 13:1-7.

<sup>28</sup> Gk. ἀπόδοτε, the same word as is used in Romans 13:7.

<sup>29</sup> The adherents of the "fourth philosophy", followers of Judas the Galilaean, maintained that it was contrary to divine law for the people of God in the land which he gave them to acknowledge the sovereignty of a pagan ruler.

their higher duty. God was not impoverished if Caesar was paid back, literally, in his own coin; but it was all too easy to withhold from God the tribute which was of real importance—justice, mercy and faith.

For Paul, addressing Christians in Rome, no such dilemma presented itself. In Rome above all, in Caesar's own city, the propriety of paying him his dues could scarcely be questioned. Indeed, throughout Caesar's empire, it might be argued, those who benefited from the *pax Romana* could reasonably be called upon to share the cost of maintaining it.

Was it necessary, then, for Paul to direct the Christians of Rome to be subject to Caesar and his officers of state? For one thing, "one might say" with C. E. B. Cranfield "that it would have been surprising, if in such a relatively full section of exhortation as [Romans] 12.1-15.13 he had nothing to say on a subject which must have been of great importance to Christians of the first century just as it is to Christians today"<sup>30</sup>. In addition, there were probably some idealists in the Christian movement who argued that citizens of the kingdom of heaven had no responsibility to any earthly authority. And the spirit of insubordination was widespread. At Thessalonica in A.D. 50 Paul was accused of being one of those who went about subverting ordered society and urging defiance of imperial decrees<sup>31</sup>. The terms of the accusation suggest that such characters were known to be active in Jewish communities throughout the empire at that time. There was insurgency in Judaea itself in those years; there had recently been unrest in the Jewish communities of Alexandria and even of Rome<sup>32</sup>. It was necessary that Christians everywhere, and not least in Rome, should live in such a way as to dissociate themselves from this spirit of unruliness. The gospel which they proclaimed was subversive enough; indulgence in other forms of subversiveness would not advance its cause.

The secular ruler is God's servant, responsible to carry out the service entrusted to him. If the servant is not content to remain within his sphere of service and begins to usurp his master's authority, he cannot rightly command obedience. If rightful disobedience to him, when his orders clash with God's,

<sup>30</sup> C. E. B. Cranfield, *The Epistle to the Romans*, II, p. 653.

<sup>31</sup> Acts 17:5-7.

<sup>32</sup> See my "Christianity under Claudius", 310-321.



lands the Christian in trouble, the Christian will accept such trouble as God's will for him. When Paul was deprived of liberty because of his apostolic activity, he was Caesar's prisoner in the eyes of Roman law, but in his own eyes he was the "prisoner of Christ" (Ephesians 3:1). His place of custody was the place where he was currently "posted for the defence of the gospel" (Philippians 1:16). "Sometimes", as Ernst Käsemann has put it, "the Lord of the world speaks more audibly out of prison cells and graves than out of the life of churches which congratulate themselves on their concordat with the State"<sup>33</sup>. He speaks against the background of German church-state relations in the period 1933-45. But the idea of a concordat with the Roman state was not even on the church's horizon in A.D. 57. When, a few years later, Paul looked forward to making his defence before Caesar, the most he could have hoped for from the state might be a readiness to recognize Christian congregations as *collegia licita*—a recognition already extended to Jewish synagogues. If he did cherish such a hope, it was not to be realized.

If 1 Peter provides a commentary on Romans 13:1-7, it is relevant to note that Christians are there encouraged not to take it amiss if they are penalized for the profession and practice of their faith; but they are warned not to put themselves in a position to be charged with any other offence against the law. The situation in 1 Peter is later than that of Romans. When Romans was written, the question of state persecution of Christians for Christ's sake had not yet risen, and so it was not dealt with. In 1 Peter the situation is changing before the reader's eyes. In the third chapter it is unlikely that harm will befall those who pursue what is good; the possibility of suffering for righteousness' sake is mentioned, but as a remote contingency—although, even in this remote contingency, Christians are recommended to take courage from the example of Christ<sup>34</sup>. But in the fourth chapter the suffering of disrepute, and worse, specifically "as a Christian" is no remote contingency, but an imminent certainty; "the time has come" (1 Peter 4:17). The Christian apologists, following the instructions of Romans and

<sup>33</sup> E. Käsemann, *New Testament Questions of Today*, E.T. (London, 1969), p. 215.

<sup>34</sup> 1 Peter 3:13-18 (cf. 2:12).

I Peter, argued from a position of strength when they insisted on their innocence in relation to imperial law: the one charge against them was that they were Christians (and this did not become a statutory crime until the beginning of the third century).

## IX

One final question: is the evidence of Acts relevant to the interpretation of Romans 13:1-7? Some of those who see a post-Pauline interpolation in Romans 13:1-7 would acknowledge that the evidence of Acts is relevant to its interpretation in the sense that both documents reflect the shift in perspective resulting from the failure of the end to come when Paul and his first-generation fellow-Christians had expected it<sup>35</sup>. This view of a shift in perspective calls for critical scrutiny<sup>36</sup>: for the present, however, as one persuaded of the high historical value of the evidence of Acts for the course of Paul's ministry in the fifties of the first century I consider its evidence for Paul's relation to the Roman state.

According to Acts, Paul was a Roman citizen by birth. On more than one occasion he claimed the privileges to which his citizenship legally entitled him, and outstandingly so when he appealed to have his case transferred from the jurisdiction of the Roman governor of Judaea to the imperial tribunal in Rome. I can find no reason in the data of Paul's own writings to doubt this representation of his status.

When he sent his letter to the Roman Christians, he planned to visit Rome, but he did not foresee that his plan would be carried out by his being taken there under armed guard for his appeal to be heard by Caesar. He was encouraged to make his appeal (in my reading of the situation) by the favourable impression he had received of Roman judicial impartiality during his apostolic activity. In the very city of Corinth where the letter to the Romans was written he had experienced this impartiality when he was charged before Gallio, proconsul of Achaia, with propagating an illegal religion. Gallio refused to take up the charge, and his refusal meant that Paul was free to

<sup>35</sup> J. Kallas, "Romans XIII.1-7: An Interpolation", 370f.

<sup>36</sup> Cf. S.S. Smalley, "The Delay of the Parousia", *JBL*, lxxxiii (1964), 41-64.

continue his preaching of the Christian message<sup>37</sup>. If the emperor's representative had given a ruling which effectively promoted the advance of the gospel, the emperor himself might reasonably be expected to do no less.

However, when this letter was written, the occasion for appealing to Caesar had not yet arisen. But Gallio's precedent was still valid, and Paul had good cause to appreciate it. This situation depicted in Acts provides a background against which the positive attitude to the state expressed in Romans 13:1-7 can be accepted as Paul's attitude. At the same time, there is nothing elsewhere in Paul's letters which conflicts with this attitude.

The emotional response which some readers make to this paragraph arises very often from attempts made by themselves or others to apply its teaching without qualification to Christians living under a wide variety of political regimes today. How far its teaching is applicable to post-apostolic times is an important question of Christian ethics<sup>38</sup>, but it is not our present concern. Paul was not writing with future generations in mind; he was writing for the Christians in Rome (and no doubt for Christians in other cities of the empire) in the earlier part of Nero's principate. He knew that the empire would not last for ever: the state is to wither away; "the city of God remaineth". He knew, too, that when the state encroaches on the sphere that belongs to God, disobedience to its commands may be not only a Christian right but a Christian duty. But while the empire lasted, and while it discharged the ministry divinely committed to it, it should receive submission, not rebellion, from its Christian subjects. This is not only the teaching of Romans 13:1-7; it is, I believe, the teaching of Paul himself.

<sup>37</sup> Acts 18:12-17.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. C. E. B. Cranfield, "The Christian's Political Responsibility according to the New Testament", *SJT*, xv (1962), 176-192.