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Author(s): Beverly Roberts Gaventa

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Reading Romans 13 with Simone Weil: Toward a More Generous Hermeneutic

BEVERLY ROBERTS GAVENTA

Beverly_Gaventa@baylor.edu

Baylor University, Waco, TX 76798

Simone Weil's interpretation of the *Iliad* as a "poem of force" has resonances with Rom 1–8, reinforcing the question of how Rom 13:1–7 belongs in the larger argument of Romans. Seeking a generous reading of 13:1–7 along the lines of the generosity Weil extends to the *Iliad*, I first take Pharaoh as an example of Paul's understanding of the relationship between God and human rulers and then propose that Paul's treatment of human rulers coheres with his refusal in this letter to reify lines between "insider" and "outsider." I conclude with a reflection on the need for generosity in scholarly research and pedagogy.

Among the few works French intellectual Simone Weil published during her lifetime is a 1941 essay entitled "The *Iliad*, or The Poem of Force."¹ The title of the essay contains the thesis *in nuce*, which is that the "true hero, the true subject matter, the center of the *Iliad* is force." She goes on to define force, or perhaps we would say "power," as "that which makes a thing" of whoever is subjected to it.²

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¹The original, "L'*Ilisse*, ou le Poème de la Force," was published in *Cahiers du Sud*, December 1940 and January 1941. It was later translated by Mary McCarthy and published in English as *The Iliad, or the Poem of Force* (Wallingford, PA: Pendle Hill, 1956). More recently James P. Holoka has published a critical edition containing the French, an English translation and notes, and the Greek text of those portions of the *Iliad* quoted by Weil (*Simone Weil's The Iliad or The Poem of Force: A Critical Edition* [New York: Lang, 2003]). All references to Weil's essay and to the *Iliad* itself are to the Holoka edition. I am grateful to my colleague Jonathan Tran for introducing me to this remarkable essay and to Eric O. Springsted for corresponding with me about Simone Weil and for his own work on Weil.

²Holoka, *Simone Weil's The Iliad*, 45.

That “force” is crucial to the *Iliad* is, in one sense, so obvious a statement as to be trivial. The literal use of force runs throughout the epic and results in death time and again. Noble chariot drivers lie on the ground “much dearer to the vultures than to their wives” (*Il.* 11.162).³ As the wife of Hector orders water heated for his return from battle, the poet comments:

... She knew not that far indeed from warm baths
Achilles’ arm had beaten him down. (*Il.* 22.445–446)⁴

Death is only the first, most obvious instance of force that Weil finds in the *Iliad*. There is also force that does not kill immediately but already transforms human beings into “things.” The human being is turned “into stone,” when the warrior who is “disarmed and exposed ... becomes a corpse before being touched.” This is force “which does not kill, or rather does not kill just yet. It will kill for a certainty, or it will kill perhaps, or it may merely hang over the being it can kill at any instant.”⁵ Even when force does not kill, it paralyzes.

Force can make human beings into things off the battlefield as well. Agamemnon insists that he will not return the young woman he has taken as a prize of war:

I will not return her. Before that old age will seize her,
in my home, in Argos, far from her homeland,
moving along the loom and lying in my bed. (*Il.* 1.29–31)⁶

Later a mother anticipates her child’s future of “degrading labor, toiling under the eyes of a pitiless master” (*Il.* 24.733–734).⁷ This is, Weil comments, life “that death has frozen long before putting an end to it.”⁸ “The mind [of the victim of force] should devise a way out but has lost all ability to devise such a thing. It is occupied entirely in violating itself.” “Each morning [the soul] amputates itself of all aspiration.”⁹

Force devastates its victims without pity, but the wielder of force scarcely escapes. Force may crush the victim, but it intoxicates those who possess it, leading each side to regard the other as so alien as to belong to a different species.¹⁰ As a result, force destroys everyone: both those who use force and those who endure it are destroyed.¹¹ Yet no one actually “possesses” force in the *Iliad*, since every agent is subject to it at one time or another. Weil describes war in the *Iliad* as having the movement of a seesaw.¹² The work breathes throughout such “an extraordinary

³Ibid.

⁴Ibid., 46.

⁵Ibid.

⁶Ibid., 49.

⁷Ibid.

⁸Ibid.

⁹Ibid., 59.

¹⁰Ibid., 51, 53.

¹¹Ibid., 61.

¹²Ibid., 54.

sense of equity” between the Greeks and the Trojans that readers are scarcely aware the author is Greek, observes Weil.¹³

This remarkable essay is cast entirely as a study of the *Iliad*. Although it was published in 1941, there is not a single reference to Adolf Hitler, to Germany, or to the French occupation. At the same time, every line bears the marks of the period in which it was written. Weil might well have cited the apostle Paul, “Whatever was written earlier was written to instruct us” (Rom 15:4).

This brief summary provides a glimpse into the depths of Weil’s essay. Classicists have occasionally quibbled with it, noting its neglect of the poem’s preoccupations with glory, with heroism, with the gods.¹⁴ Nonetheless, many readers have recognized the intensity of Weil’s insight into the *Iliad*, indeed into human life.¹⁵ To read Weil’s essay is to be caught up in the destructive folly of the human quest for power.

Turning from Simone Weil’s essay on the *Iliad* to Rom 13:1–7 creates the readerly equivalent of whiplash. In that notorious passage, Paul admonishes followers of Christ in Rome to be ordered under human authority. He contends that such authority as exists does so by virtue of God’s action. The rulers, presumably both local and empirewide, are installed for the doing of good.¹⁶ They are meant to reward the good, and they bear the sword in order to punish wrongdoing. Resisting them is tantamount to resisting God.

Little imagination is required to conclude that Simone Weil would be mystified, even repulsed, by such naïve assertions about governing authorities. It does not appear that she ever commented on Rom 13; her references to Paul’s letters are infrequent. She would be mystified by Rom 13 because her own argument about the *Iliad* resonates deeply with Paul’s understanding of the human situation prior to the apocalypse of God’s saving power in Jesus Christ articulated elsewhere in Romans. Sentences in her essay read like paraphrases of sections in Romans.

To begin with, in Rom 1–8 Sin is a central character, as force is for the *Iliad*. Paul employs the noun ἀμαρτία and related words eighty-one times in the

¹³Ibid., 66. The complicated question of Homeric “authorship” does not come into Weil’s discussion.

¹⁴See Sheila Murnaghan, review of *Simone Weil’s The Iliad or The Poem of Force: A Critical Edition*, by James P. Holoka, *Bryn Mawr Classical Review* 2004.02.24, as well as John Mackinnon’s response (*Bryn Mawr Classical Review* 2004.02.37).

¹⁵See esp. Eric O. Springsted, *Simone Weil and the Suffering of Love* (Cambridge: Cowley, 1986), 17–35.

¹⁶Earlier proposals that Paul refers both to human authorities and to angelic powers behind them have been abandoned (see Martin Dibelius, *Die Geisterwelt im Glauben des Paulus* [Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1909], 200; Oscar Cullmann, *The State in the New Testament* [New York: Scribner’s Sons, 1956], 50–70, 95–114). More recently, Mark D. Nanos has argued that Paul has in mind synagogue authorities to whom gentile Christians should be subordinate (*The Mystery of Romans: The Jewish Context of Paul’s Letter* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996], 289–336), but that view also has not been widely adopted.

undisputed letters, and sixty of those instances occur in Romans.¹⁷ The role of *ἁμαρτία* is understated at the outset of the letter (1:18–32), but in 3:9 Paul discloses its power over all people, both Jew and gentile. Later, as the argument spirals down, the power known as Sin comes into view: it entered the world through Adam and made its way among all people (5:12).¹⁸ It increased in power; it ruled over all people (5:20–21). Its power was such that it could bend even God’s holy, right, and good law to its purposes, deceiving the infamous “I” of Rom 7, producing enslavement and even death.¹⁹ Here Weil’s comments about the relentless character of force seem lifted from Paul’s prose.

Less directly, Sin in Romans, like force in the *Iliad*, is also delusional. Throughout the *Iliad*, the wielder of force imagines that each conflict will be the controlling event, that their side in the conflict will prevail. In Romans also, Sin produces delusion, explicitly so in Rom 7 (“Sin deceived me,” 7:11) and implicitly earlier in the letter, where the “worthless mind” results in evil (1:28).

In addition, as force in the *Iliad* produces death, both physical death and death-within-physical life, Sin in Romans produces death of several sorts. The warrior in the *Iliad* lives with death as he waits for the final blow; the warrior’s family lives with death as it also waits for the final blow. Sin’s intertwining with Death is similarly relentless and inescapable in Rom 5. Sin and Death rule the whole of human life, producing what Paul finally terms a body possessed by Death (7:24).²⁰

When this resonance between Weil’s essay and Paul’s letter to the Romans is recognized, the challenge of Rom 13:1–7 comes into focus. The problem is not only that the text conflicts with our observations of actual governments across the ages. The text seems to conflict with the first half of the letter as regards the human being, who is subject to the power of Sin, who does not do what is right, who may desire the good but produces evil.²¹ At least as this passage is usually read, there is in

¹⁷See the discussion in my *Our Mother Saint Paul* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2007), 125–36, 198–200.

¹⁸The notion of the argument of Romans as a spiral comes from Leander E. Keck, “What Makes Romans Tick?,” in *Romans*, vol. 3 of *Pauline Theology*, ed. David M. Hay and E. Elizabeth Johnson (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 25.

¹⁹On the role of Sin in Rom 7, see esp. Paul W. Meyer, “The Worm at the Core of the Apple,” in *The Word in This World: Essays in New Testament Exegesis and Theology*, ed. John T. Carroll (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004), 57–77.

²⁰On Simone Weil and Romans, see further my “The Powers and Paul’s Letter to the Romans,” in *Life amid the Principalities: Identifying, Understanding, and Engaging Created, Fallen, and Disarmed Powers Today*, ed. Michael Root and James J. Buckley (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2016), 24–37.

²¹Neil Elliott finds a similar tension in Romans, but he restricts the tension to Paul’s comments about the “pagan world” in 1:18–32 and his more optimistic view of governing authorities in 13:1–7 (“Romans 13:1–7 in the Context of Imperial Propaganda,” in *Paul and Empire: Religion and Power in Roman Imperial Society*, ed. Richard A. Horsley [Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1997], 184–204, here 186–87).

Rom 13 an expectation that rulers both know and serve the good, an expectation hard to reconcile with Paul's insistence in chapters 1–8 that all human beings are subject to the power of Sin. To state my question directly: how is it possible for the person who wrote Rom 1–8 also to have written Rom 13:1–7?²²

For the most part, despite the complex history of interpreting this passage, the dominant questions have concerned the relationship between the passage and the actual experience of government, and those questions have been with us almost as long as the text itself.²³ Beginning with Origen (*Comm. Rom.* 9.27), commentators have attempted to moderate Paul's words by balancing them with Acts 5:29 ("We must obey God rather than humans") and insisting that Paul does not have in mind those who persecute the church.²⁴ To be sure, Paul's remarks have also many defenders—including notably Queen Elizabeth I,²⁵ the apartheid regime in South

²²The question is heuristic, although some scholars have argued that the passage is an interpolation, including Ernst Barnikol, "Der nichtpaulinische Ursprung der absoluten Obrigkeitsbejahung von Römer 13,1–7," in *Studien zum Neuen Testament und zur Patristik: Erich Klostermann zum 90. Geburtstag dargebracht*, TUGAL 77 (Berlin: Akademie, 1961), 65–133; J. Kallas, "Romans XIII.1–7: An Interpolation," *NTS* 11 (1965): 365–74; J. C. O'Neill, *Paul's Letter to the Romans*, PNTC (Baltimore: Penguin, 1975), 207–9; Winsome Munro, "Romans 13:1–7: Apartheid's Last Biblical Refuge," *BTB* 20 (1990): 161–68; and William O. Walker Jr., *Interpolations in the Pauline Letters*, JSNTSup 213 (London: Sheffield Academic, 2001), 221–31. In the judgment of most scholars, the lack of manuscript evidence has undermined this argument.

²³For surveys of the history of interpretation, see K. H. Schelkle, "Staat und Kirche in der patristischen Auslegung von Rm 13:1–7," *ZNW* 44 (1952): 223–36; Fritzhermann Keienburg, *Die Geschichte der Auslegung von Römer 13,1–7* (Gelsenkirchen: W. Hertel, 1956); Valentin Zsifkovits, *Der Staatsgedanke nach Paulus in Röm 13, 1–7 mit Besonderer Berücksichtigung der Umwelt und der patristischen Auslegung*, WBTh 7 (Vienna: Herder, 1964); Ulrich Wilckens, *Der Brief an die Römer 12–16*, EKKNT 6.3 (Zurich: Benziger, 1982), 43–74; Bernard Lategan, "Reading Romans 13 in a South African Context," in *The Reader and Beyond: Theory and Practice in South African Reception Studies* (Pretoria: Human Sciences Research Council, 1992), 115–33; Lategan, "Romans 13:1–7: A Review of Post-1989 Readings," *Scriptura* 110 (2012): 259–72; Mitsuo Miyata, *Authority and Obedience: Romans 13:1–7 in Modern Japan*, trans. Gregory Vanderbilt, AmUSfTR 294 (New York: Lang, 2009); Ron Cassidy, "The Politicization of Paul: Romans 13:1–7 in Recent Discussion," *ExpTim* 121 (2010): 383–89; Stefan Krauter, *Studien zu Röm 13,1–7: Paulus und der politische Diskurs der ernerischen Zeit*, WUNT 243 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009), 4–54; Victor Manuel Morales Vásquez, *Contours of a Biblical Reception Theory: Studies in the Rezeptionsgeschichte of Romans 13.1–7* (Göttingen: V&R Unipress, 2012).

²⁴J. Patout Burns Jr. notes that all the early commentators tried to nuance Paul's comments on similar grounds (*Romans: Interpreted by Early Christian Commentators*, The Church's Bible [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012], 314). Interestingly, Irenaeus draws on Rom 13:1–7 as evidence that Satan lied when he claimed to control all the earth's kingdoms (in Matt 4:8–9 and Luke 4:5–7; *Haer.* 5.24).

²⁵"Sententiae," in *Elizabeth I: Translations 1544–89*, ed. Janel Mueller and Joshua Scodel (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 331–94.

Africa,²⁶ and the late Supreme Court justice Antonin Scalia²⁷—but many readers of Paul have sought to correct, to limit, to situate his comments, often by recourse to other parts of the New Testament or to some reconstruction of the historical situation.²⁸ Yet, as Leander Keck astutely observed, this passage has been “more successful in thwarting a convincing explanation than the experts” have been in finding one.²⁹

What we need is another entry point or angle of vision. I think that alternative comes if we turn my own question around. Instead of asking how it is possible for the person who wrote Rom 1–8 to write 13:1–7, what happens if we read 13:1–7 *with the assumption that it does continue Paul’s argument*? How does 13:1–7 read differently if we look for its coherence with what has preceded? That strategy

²⁶ Allan A. Boesak, “What Belongs to Caesar? Once Again Romans 13,” in *When Prayer Makes News*, ed. Allan A. Boesak and Charles Villa-Vicencio (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986), 138–57; Jan Botha, *Subject to Whose Authority? Multiple Readings of Romans 13*, ESEC 4 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1993), xv–xvi. See also Lategan, “Romans 13:1–7: A Review of Post-1989 Readings,” 259–72.

²⁷ Antonin Scalia, “God’s Justice and Ours,” *First Things* 123 (2002): 17–21; see further the discussion by Jay Twomey, “Antonin Scalia v. Jonathan Edwards: Romans 13 and the American Theology of State,” in *Sacred Tropes: Tanakh, New Testament, and Qur’an as Literature and Culture*, ed. Roberta Sterman Sabbath; *BibInt* 98 (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 493–503.

²⁸ Some commentators limit the effect of Rom 13 by pairing it with Acts 5:29, as Origen did (e.g., Albert Barnes, *Notes on the New Testament, Explanatory and Practical: Romans* [1834; repr., Grand Rapids: Baker, 1949], 290–91); others connect Rom 13 with Matt 22:21 (e.g., the anonymous commentator known as Ambrosiaster, *Comm. Rom.* 13.1–7 [CSEL 81.1:417.23–423.14]; Augustine, *Commentary on Statements in the Letter to the Romans*, 64–66 [CSEL 84:44.12–47.3]). Karl Barth declared the importance for Christians of reading both Rom 13 and Rev 13 (“The Christian Community in the Midst of Political Change,” in *Against the Stream: Shorter Post-War Writings, 1946–52*, ed. Ronald Gregor Smith [New York: Philosophical Library, 1954], 51–124, here 97). At least as early as Erasmus, interpreters also appeal to some element in the historical setting (Erasmus, *Annotations on Romans*, ed. Robert D. Sider, trans. John B. Payne et al., vol. 56 of *Collected Works of Erasmus* [Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994], 347). Calvin opines that this passages seems “to have been forced on [Paul] by some great necessity,” involving those “restless spirits” who identify Christ’s kingdom with the abolition of “earthly powers” (*The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Romans and to the Thessalonians*, trans. Ross Mackenzie [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1960], 280). A more recent strategy for muting Rom 13 is to find in it the use of either irony (as in T. L. Carter, “The Irony of Romans 13,” *NovT* 46 [2004]: 209–28) or a “hidden transcript” (as in James R. Harrison, *Paul and the Imperial Authorities at Thessalonica and Rome: A Study in the Conflict of Ideology*, WUNT 273 [Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 2011], 313).

²⁹ Leander E. Keck, *Romans*, ANTC (Nashville: Abingdon, 2005), 325. Also of note is Ernst Käsemann’s comment regarding the discussion of Rom 13: “It is becoming continually more difficult to know what is really happening in the guerilla warfare of the specialists, in which there are so many shots fired and so few targets hit, so many issues confused and so few decided” (“Principles of the Interpretation of Romans 13,” in *New Testament Questions of Today* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1969], 196–216, here 207).

produces a more generous reading of Rom 13, one that shares some of Weil's generosity toward the *Iliad*.

I. ROMANS 13:1–7: PRELIMINARY OBSERVATIONS

Two preliminary observations about Rom 13 are in order. First, Paul writes Rom 13—indeed Paul writes this entire section of the letter (12:1–15:13)—to strengthen what he perceives to be fragile communities in Rome. I take that statement to be uncontroversial. Regardless of whether Paul knows of particular difficulties in Rome, he hopes to promote the corporate good, as is evident as early as his introduction of the “body of Christ” image in chapter 12 and as late as his admonitions about welcoming one another in chapter 15. We can reasonably assume, then, that 13:1–7 also intends to protect believing communities from harm of some sort. The specific warnings in vv. 3–4 about the consequences of wrongdoing reinforce that observation.³⁰ In addition, the repeated commands related to the paying of taxes, located at the end of the passage, may suggest, as a number of scholars have argued, that Paul fears specifically the involvement of Roman believers in some form of tax revolt. Concerned about the potentially harmful result of such behavior, Paul urges the communities to respect the authorities and pay their taxes.³¹

A second preliminary observation follows: Paul is not addressing the authorities themselves, whether those authorities are thought to be the local magistrates or the emperor. Paul is addressing communities of believers about their own attitudes and conduct, which means that treating this passage under headings such as “Paul's doctrine of the state” misleads from the outset. Paul is not instructing authorities regarding their roles; neither is he licensing their activities.³² This is not

³⁰So also Botha, *Subject to Whose Authority?*, 210. At just this point, commentators sometimes affirm the need for “order” in human relations, as when Erasmus claims that, even if rulers are evil, “order is still good” (*Romans*, 347), or when James D. G. Dunn comments on the “normal circumstances of social order” (*Romans 9–16*, WBC 38B [Dallas: Word, 1988], 771–72). Such endorsements of order as a social good overlook the fact that what one group regards as “order” may well be experienced by others as repression. See the impassioned discussion of William Stringfellow in *Conscience and Obedience: The Politics of Romans 13 and Revelation 13 in Light of the Second Coming* (Waco, TX: Word, 1978), 35–63.

³¹Among others, see Johannes Friedrich, Wolfgang Pöhlmann, and Peter Stuhlmacher, “Zur historischen Situation und Intention von Röm 13,1–7,” *ZTK* 73 (1976): 131–66.

³²This is a point that Dietrich Bonhoeffer made several times in his discussion of Rom 13:1–7 in his *Discipleship*, vol. 4 of *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, ed. Wayne Whitson Floyd Jr., trans. Martin Kuske and Ilse Tödt (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 240–42. Here I differ with Robert Jewett, who contends that Paul is appealing to officials or their workers in the congregations in Rome because he needs their support for the Spanish mission (*Romans: A Commentary*, Hermeneia [Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007], 788, 790, 792, 794).

an essay on rulership, which means that it differs substantially from *De Clementia*, the roughly contemporaneous treatise by Seneca.³³ Queen Elizabeth I implicitly recognizes this point when she begins her “sentences” on rulers by quoting from Rom 13 but immediately follows Rom 13 with quotations from a variety of sources warning about unwise and unjust rulers. She takes our passage as directed to her subjects, yet for her own instruction and formation as a ruler she looks elsewhere.³⁴

Those observations about the audience and the goal of Rom 13 are reasonable; they keep us safe at the shallow end of the interpretive pool. They may convince, but they scarcely satisfy. Is there something more to be learned from Romans that may prove instructive?

II. ROMANS 13:1–7 READ GENEROUSLY

The Authority Known as Pharaoh

To address the preceding question, we first need to linger over Paul’s statements about the authorities. Although he does not address the authorities themselves, he does write to the Romans *regarding* them. Following the initial call for submission comes the crucial assertion: “There is no authority except the authority that comes from God, and those that exist have been set up by God” (13:1). Paul reinforces this introductory remark when he goes on to assert that resisting authority amounts to resisting God (13:2) and later still that the authority is the *διάκονος* (agent) of God, God’s *λειτουργός* (servant, 13:4).

This text has no parallels elsewhere in the Pauline corpus. To the contrary, the hardship catalogue of 2 Cor 11 indicates that Paul’s own encounters with some authorities have scarcely provided evidence of their goodwill: imprisonment, beatings, and stonings are not tokens of goodwill.³⁵ Indeed, when Paul identifies the “rulers of this age” in 1 Cor 2:8 as those who unwittingly put to death the Lord of glory, he is far from associating them with the doing of good and the prevention of evil.³⁶

Although 13:1–7 has no parallel elsewhere in Paul’s letters, there is nonetheless a specific human authority standing close by in Romans, namely, the Egyptian ruler Pharaoh, who makes a brief appearance in Rom 9.³⁷ As Paul recasts the

³³ See the discussion in Harrison, *Paul and the Imperial Authorities*, 292–99; as well as *De Clementia*, ed. and trans. Susanna Braund (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009). Her discussion of the genre of *De Clementia* is particularly instructive (17–23).

³⁴ Note the shift in the *Sententiae* at sentence 10.

³⁵ As Steve Friesen observed, “When [Paul] composed these lines he had scars on his body from unjust floggings by rulers and authorities” (“Government, NT,” *NIDB* 2:641).

³⁶ The “rulers of this age” may well refer to those suprahuman powers who are in conflict with God, but they make use of earthly “rulers” to accomplish the death of Jesus.

³⁷ Studies of Rom 13 neglect the connection to Pharaoh, apart from passing references by

history of Israel, he first narrates God's creation of Israel through the birth of Isaac, then God's unilateral choice of Jacob over Esau, a choice God makes before the twins are born and on the basis of nothing whatever except God's will.³⁸ In response to the possible claim that God acts unjustly, Paul cites Exod 33:19: God has mercy on whom God pleases.

Paul next turns not to yet another of Israel's ancestors brought into being by God but to the quintessential outsider, the "ruler" Pharaoh. Drawing again from Exodus, Paul cites selectively from God's words to Pharaoh:

I have raised you up for this reason—so that I might demonstrate in you my power and so that my name might be spread throughout the whole earth. (Rom 9:17; Exod 9:16 LXX)

In keeping with the peculiar history he has been tracing, Paul emphasizes God's role in putting this particular authority in place. Where the LXX reads "you have been kept" (διετηρήθης), Paul reads "I raised you up" (ἐξήγειρά σε).³⁹ The Exodus account suggests that Pharaoh exists already and God preserves him, but that is not how Paul reads the story. In Paul's presentation, God brings Pharaoh into existence. Further, by contrast with the Exodus account, which says both that God hardened Pharaoh's heart (4:21; 7:3; 10:1, 27; 14:4, 8) and that Pharaoh hardened his own heart (9:34–35, 13:15; see also 1 Sam 6:6),⁴⁰ here the action is entirely one-sided. Paul observes: "[God] has mercy on whom he wills to have mercy, and God hardens the one whom he hardens."

In addition, God puts Pharaoh in place for a reason: "that I might make my power known through you and that my name might be spread through the whole earth." Instead of the LXX's *ἰσχύς*, or "strength," Paul uses *δύναμις*, or "power." That minor change may be unintentional, although the use of *δύναμις* coheres nicely with Paul's emphasis from the beginning of the letter on God's power, which is reflected in the resurrection of Jesus from the dead *ἐν δυνάμει* (1:3) as well as in Paul's identification of the gospel with God's salvific *δύναμις* (1:16). Pharaoh is an

Keck (*Romans*, 316) and Frank J. Matera (*Romans*, Paideia [Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010], 303).

³⁸On the divine initiative in this passage, see John M. G. Barclay, "Unnerving Grace: Approaching Romans 9–11 from the Wisdom of Solomon," in *Between Gospel and Election: Explorations in the Interpretation of Romans 9–11*, ed. Florian Wilk and J. Ross Wagner, WUNT 257 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010), 91–109; and, in the same volume, Gaventa, "On the Calling-into-Being of Israel: Romans 9:6–29," 255–69.

³⁹For careful explication of these differences, see J. Ross Wagner, *Heralds of the Good News: Isaiah and Paul "In Concert" in the Letter to the Romans*, NovTSup 101 (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 55–56.

⁴⁰As Dennis Olson observes, "The plague stories suggest a complex interplay of divine sovereignty and human responsibility, not entirely reducible to either divine determinism or human freedom" ("Exodus," in *Theological Bible Commentary*, ed. Gail R. O'Day and David L. Petersen [Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2010], 27–40, here 30).

implement of God's power, which Paul would clearly identify with the "good." Paul treats Pharaoh as an agent of God for the good.

None of this has anything to do with Pharaoh's capacity or disposition or intention to do what is good. Paul pays no attention whatever to Pharaoh's own inclinations, or to his actions. They are not important.

Other interpreters of Pharaoh read the story differently. The author of 3 Maccabees faults Pharaoh for his arrogant treatment of Israel, making no reference to God's hardening (2:6, 6:4). In his *Life of Moses*, Philo introduces Pharaoh as one "whose soul from his earliest years was weighed down with the pride of many generations" (*Mos.* 1.88 [Colson, LCL]); later Philo suggests that God only wanted to instruct Pharaoh and his people, not to destroy them (*Mos.* 1.110, 134). Similarly, Josephus's retelling in the *Antiquities* consistently faults Pharaoh for his unwillingness to yield to God's demand for the Israelites' release (*Ant.* 2.293–310). None of these texts remembers God's hardening of Pharaoh's heart. Paul flips the script at this point, making Pharaoh into God's passive instrument.

Paul's use of one authority, Pharaoh, helps us see Rom 13 more clearly. First, to say that authority is established by God is to make a statement about God rather than about any authority or ruler. Pharaoh is of no interest to Paul apart from God's action in him, and the same would be said of the authorities in Rom 13. Taking Pharaoh into account confirms that, when Paul identifies the authorities as established by God, Paul is not exalting the authorities—he is instead putting them in their place, their subordinate place.⁴¹

Second, informed by Paul's remarks about Pharaoh, we see that asserting the role of the authorities "for the good" need not mean either that they themselves will the good or that they will do the good.⁴² To be sure, they are said to reward the good and to punish evil, but they do so *as* God's servants.

Further, Paul's identification of the human ruler as God's *διάκονος* or God's *λειτουργός* says nothing of the rightness of their own intentions or actions. The designations set them out only in relation to God. This point does not pertain only to rulers; it pertains also to Paul himself. Paul has a *διακονία* (11:13) and calls himself a *λειτουργός* of Jesus Christ (15:16), but that says nothing about his qualifications for the position. Elsewhere he makes clear that his curriculum vitae is more liability than asset, when he reports in 1 Cor 15 that he was unfit to be an apostle because he resisted the gospel itself. Neither does being a *διάκονος* or a *λειτουργός* mean that the governing authorities will do what is right.⁴³ It is most unfortunate

⁴¹ As N. T. Wright observes, 13:1–7 "constitutes a severe demotion of arrogant and self-divinizing rulers" ("Romans," *NIB* 10:395–770, here 719).

⁴² On different grounds, Dorothea H. Bertschmann draws a similar conclusion in *Bowing before Christ—Nodding to the State? Reading Paul Politically with Oliver O'Donovan and John Howard Yoder*, *LNTS* 502 (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2014), 161.

⁴³ In 2 Cor 11:23, Paul refers to the "superapostles" with whom he is in conflict as Christ's *διάκονοι*.

if we bring to these terms an expectation that puts the persons so identified out of the way of wrongdoing or divine judgment, whether the terms are used in reference to Christian leaders or to those outside the community of believers.⁴⁴ These designations indicate not character but relationship.

The Authorities, the Powers, and the Community

Although Pharaoh is the only human being in Romans who might be identified as a ruler or an authority, other powers are at work in the letter, powers that turn out to be far more dangerous. Most obviously, the powers are those of Sin and Death, mentioned above by way of noting the resonance between Simone Weil's reading of the *Iliad* and the early chapters of Romans. While Paul does not refer to Sin and Death as ἐξουσίαι or as ἄρχοντες, the terms found in Rom 13, he does speak of them in kingly terms. In 5:17, he announces that Death "ruled as a king" (ἐβασίλευσεν) and in 5:21 that Sin ruled as a king through Death (again ἐβασίλευσεν). They even ruled over Jesus, as is implied when Paul declares in 6:9–10 that Death no longer "lords it over" him (κυριεύει). The language of ruling and lording it over continues in 6:12–14, where Paul warns the Romans against submitting again to Sin. Sin and Death have been defeated in the case of Jesus Christ, but their destruction is not yet complete.

Sin and Death are not the only powers at work in the world. The end of Rom 8 acknowledges that suprahuman powers continue to assault the "us," that they attempt to separate the "us" from the love of God. They manifest themselves in tribulation, hardship, persecution, famine, nakedness, peril, and the sword, experiences brought on by the powers named in 8:38–39. They persist in their attack, but they will not prove able to separate humanity from its lord.⁴⁵ Paul's highly rhetorical list of the powers is matched by his words of assurance: Who will separate "us"? "We" are "supervictors."⁴⁶ Paul returns to this assurance at the close of the letter: "God will quickly put Satan under your feet" (16:20). In other words, God has real enemies, even "rival rulers," as Dorothea Bertschmann ably puts it,⁴⁷ but they are not human authorities or powers.⁴⁸ The enemies of God may use human rulers,

⁴⁴In one of his several treatments of this passage, Karl Barth commented that the work of the state "can be perverted just as the divine service of the Church itself is not exempt from the possibility of perversion" ("The Christian Community and the Civil Community," in *Community, State, and Church: Three Essays* [Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1960], 149–89, here 157).

⁴⁵On the powers, see further my "Neither Height nor Depth: Discerning the Cosmology of Romans," *SJT* 64 (2011): 265–78.

⁴⁶Jewett, *Romans*, 531.

⁴⁷Bertschmann, *Bowing before Christ*, 140.

⁴⁸This conclusion seems consistent with John M. G. Barclay's observation that Paul "does not assign [the Roman empire] to one side or the other of the battle lines created by the Christ-event" ("Why the Roman Empire Was Insignificant to Paul," in *Pauline Churches and Diaspora Jews*, WUNT 275 [Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011], 363–87, here 385).

especially in the case of the reference to the “sword” in 8:35 (see also 1 Cor 2:8), but the human rulers are not identified as God’s enemies.

This treatment of the powers of Sin and Death, as well as the other powers invoked at the end of Rom 8, puts 13:1–7 into perspective. The human rulers are not God’s enemies; instead, they are God’s agents (however good or bad they may be). Their role is limited to God’s intent, as we saw in the case of Pharaoh.

What does this conclusion about human rulers suggest about their relationship to the assemblies of believers? The context of Paul’s remark, especially in chapter 12, could suggest that human powers are both outside of and even at enmity with the community. Paul opens that chapter by reprising the analogy of the body from 1 Cor 12 to urge that members of the community employ their charismatic gifts in service of one another. At some length he itemizes desirable features of the community and warns against arrogance. Then he admonishes against repaying evil for evil and urges the members of the community to seek peace with all people (vv. 17–18). They are not to seek revenge, even in the case of an enemy.

In the middle of chapter 12, it *appears* that Paul turns from addressing concerns about life in the congregations to addressing relationships between believers and outsiders. It is by no means clear, however, where—or even whether—such a shift between inside and outside occurs. Does the warning against returning evil for evil refer to evildoers outside the community or inside? Are the ones who persecute the community believers or unbelievers? Perhaps Paul has in mind those human rulers who work evil against believers, but he may be anticipating chapter 14 and the conflict over dietary practices, so that all of chapter 12 addresses matters internal to the congregations.

My aim is not to propose a solution to this thicket of exegetical dilemmas just now. My aim is simply to notice the difficulty of discerning the lines between inside and outside in Rom 12; they are less clear than is often assumed. In fact, the firm drawing of such lines between the inside and the outside is inimical to the letter.⁴⁹ That observation returns us to the human rulers: Paul does not present them as members of the community, but he also does not treat them as enemies.⁵⁰ This refusal to reify the human authorities—even the authorities—as “others,” to classify them as “enemies,” is not an incidental point; it goes to the muscle and bone of this letter.

At crucial moments in the letter, Paul introduces “othering” discourse only to undermine it. One of those moments comes at the beginning of chapter 2. The second half of Rom 1 notoriously attacks “those people,”⁵¹ the ones who refused to

⁴⁹As Paul W. Meyer astutely observed, “The whole of [Romans] is but a single massive argument against the conventional uses of this distinction [between ‘godly’ and ‘ungodly’]” (“Worm at the Core of the Apple,” 65).

⁵⁰On different grounds, Karl Barth comes to similar conclusions regarding Rom 13:1–7 in *The Doctrine of God*, vol. 2.2 of *Church Dogmatics* (London: T&T Clark, 1957), 720–21.

⁵¹So also Bernadette J. Brooten, *Love between Women: Early Christian Responses to Female*

acknowledge God and who were, in turn, handed over. Paul invites his Roman auditors to join in the castigation of those “others,” the gentiles who rejected God, who participated in idolatry, and whose rebellion produced a laundry list of misconduct, sexual and otherwise. In 2:1 he pivots sharply, calling out the “you” who dares to judge that “other person” while engaging in the same deeds. Paul deliberately generalizes on gentile conduct in order to entice the auditors to imagine themselves as separate from, indeed above, the “they,” only to reveal that “you” and “they” are both liable to judgment. (Recall Weil’s observation about the way in which force invites its temporary possessor and its victim to regard themselves as so different from one another as to be part of another species.)

A similar move takes place in Rom 11. In his lengthy argument about God’s faithfulness to Israel, Paul encourages his Roman auditors to conclude that the subject matter of his discourse is the “problem” of “Israel’s unbelief.” This is especially the case in Rom 10: Israel has tripped on a stumbling stone that God put in place. Israel has acted out of ignorance: they have zeal for God, but they lack knowledge. They should know better, as there have been divinely commissioned preachers. They do not know, however, despite the fact that God has continually stretched out God’s hands to receive them. Throughout chapter 10, Paul speaks of Israel as a whole, as a single unit.

Paul glances at gentiles from time to time, yet Rom 9–11 generally has to do with Israel, and with Israel *in the third person*. Paul speaks of himself at several crucial junctures, when he makes himself both a brother to Israel and a supplicant on “their” behalf. The audience is led to understand Israel—*some* or perhaps *most* of Israel—as the problem. Then comes 11:13, “I am speaking to you gentiles.” With verse 18 he becomes more emphatic. To paraphrase: “Do not boast! God has brought you in, and God can take you out again.” “I am speaking to you gentiles.” In 11:26–28, Paul announces the conclusion of this long consideration of God’s dealings with Israel: “all Israel will be saved.” The point is extended in 11:32: “God has confined all to disobedience that God might have mercy on all.” Many questions plague any reading of Rom 9–11; my point at present is a simple one: what appears to be a discourse “othering” Israel becomes a discourse confronting gentiles with their arrogance.

Romans 13 differs from both 2:1 and 11:13. Paul does not treat the authorities as part and parcel of the “we” of faith. Paul also declines to make them into enemies. Making the powers that be into enemies, understanding them as enemies, risks exactly the problems so well articulated by Simone Weil. Even to warn about them is to build them up as “other,” which undermines the letter’s persistent claim that God has acted for all people.

Homoeroticism, Chicago Series on Sexuality, History, and Society (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 230.

III. CONCLUSION

Anyone who tackles Rom 13:1–7 should drink deeply from the bottle labeled “modesty,” yet I think I have made a contribution here. Paul writes Rom 13 to protect fragile Roman communities from the harm that might ensue should they reject or rebel against human authority, but his argument is not simply pragmatic. These authorities do not belong to themselves. They are meant for good, and they should be treated as such. To say that the rulers are set up by God is no more than what Paul says of Pharaoh in Rom 9, and to say that they are God’s “servants” does not mean that they always do the good (any more than God’s servants in the congregations always do the good).

Paul is not concerned only to protect these fragile communities from human rulers. He may also fear the harm they do to themselves, if they make the “rulers” into the enemy. They are not the “us” of the letter, but they are also not other than “us.” I think that reading coheres with chapter 12. In common with the rhetorical turns we find in 2:1 and 11:13, Rom 13 prevents (or hopes to prevent) believers from misunderstanding the relationship between “we” and “they.” Paul’s protection of the community from outsiders—from the human rulers—is also protection from themselves, from their own proclivity to hubris, to making more of their own judgments than is appropriate. He will go on at the end of the chapter to characterize this as the obligation to love, an obligation made more urgent by the gospel with its declaration that God’s saving action is at hand (13:11–14).⁵²

This is admittedly a generous reading of Rom 13. For me as for many others, the words and especially the reception history of the chapter make such generosity difficult to come by, and I chose the passage for tonight to test the possibility of a generous reading. It is the kind of reading Simone Weil undertakes when she reads the *Iliad*.⁵³ She lingers over the vast, sprawling *poiēsis* that is the *Iliad* and finds in it something other than an epic account of honor, something other than a story of the gods’ dealings with humanity, something other than a glorification of warfare.

⁵²On the relationship between 13:1–7 and 13:11–14, see esp. Luise Schottroff, “Give to Caesar What Belongs to Caesar and to God What Belongs to God: A Theological Response of the Early Christian Church to Its Social and Political Environment,” in *The Love of Enemy and Nonretaliation in the New Testament*, ed. Willard M. Swartley, Studies in Peace and Scripture 3 (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1992), 223–57.

⁵³Weil was not always a generous reader of texts. Her comments about the Hebrew Bible in particular and ancient Judaism in general have generated considerable criticism. For a judicious and illuminating review of Weil’s life in its historical context, see Maud S. Mandel, “Simone Weil (1909–1943),” in *Makers of Jewish Modernity: Thinkers, Artists, Leaders, and the World They Made*, ed. Jacques Picard et al. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 466–79. On the idiosyncrasy of Weil’s thought, see David Tracy, “Simone Weil: The Impossible,” in *The Christian Platonism of Simone Weil*, ed. E. Jane Doering and Eric O. Springsted (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2004), 229–41.

Reading generously, she probes the *Iliad* on the assumption that there is a unified angle of vision, that the text has integrity, even that she has something to learn from it. Elsewhere she writes that giving genuine attention to something or someone begins with the question, “What are you going through?”⁵⁴ That is to say, it begins with a patient attempt to hear the other person or, in this case, the other text. Her work on the *Iliad* exemplifies that engagement, and my reading of Rom 13 hopes to follow her lead.

AFTERWORD

Romans 13:1–7 will continue to be difficult, especially for those of us who have responsibilities to communities of faith. I think the interpretation I have offered has some traction for Christians, and I will explore that possibility elsewhere. For our guild, my conclusion moves in another direction.

I offer this reading of a single text by way of suggesting that we need to make room for a more generous hermeneutic in our scholarly discourse, one that reads both the primary texts and the work of other scholars as we ourselves wish to be read. This is a deeply unfashionable proposal, that we should approach the texts we study with generosity. It is also susceptible of misunderstanding, as if addressed only to certain scholars and certain approaches. That is in no way my intent.

This risky plea is needed for the flourishing of our discipline, our students, even our larger society. We have become exceedingly good at what some refer to as “interrogating” our texts. Our hermeneutic of suspicion works very well indeed. Much instructive work has emerged in recent decades as a result of those reading strategies. They are not the only strategies we need, however. We also need to ask, to borrow from Weil, “What is this text going through?” What does this text wish to say? What might it contribute to our understanding of the world and its workings?

This is the argument of a committed reader. I have skin in the game. As a scholarly community, we all have something at stake, whatever our religious commitments may or may not be. To be highly pragmatic and self-interested, if the only words our students hear from us about our texts are words of distrust and suspicion, it is hard to see a long-term future for our enterprise.

My concern extends beyond the hermeneutic we use for ancient texts. I am even more concerned by the way in which we characterize and too often caricature one another’s work. When we find ourselves dismissing out of hand approaches that are different from our own, what are we contributing to our discipline? If we denigrate those scholars who participate in a particular faith tradition, or if we

⁵⁴ Simone Weil, *Waiting for God*, trans. Emma Craufurd (New York: Harper & Row, 1951), 115.

denigrate those who participate in no faith tradition, what has become of our own generosity? When a scholar's character is impugned in print or in social media, and when we in turn find such blood sport amusing, we offer an example to our students that none of us wants to set. Nothing good comes from these practices, as our public life is making achingly clear.

Simone Weil's reading of the *Iliad* may offer one starting point in the direction of a more generous hermeneutic. She leaves to others questions of sources, critiques of the characters, warnings of the dangers of warfare; instead, she asks this vast text what it is "going through." It is a simple question, naïve really, yet it has the potential to draw us into a constructive, generous listening and learning, both of our texts and of one another. That is what I have treasured about this Society for decades, and what I hope will obtain for decades to come.