

Roman Sword for the Traumatized Community: A Sociolinguistic Approach to Rom. 13:4

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Abstract: The article deals with the experience of first-century Christians traumatized by persecution, displacement, and other trials mentioned in the Epistle to Romans. Special attention is given to their expectations and the problem of justice. It is argued that the Apostle Paul's pastoral approach to this problem has a strong eschatological aspect: he encouraged the suffering Roman believers to expect some expressions of God's vengeance to be revealed during their lifetime. The Roman sword, mentioned in 13:4, can be seen as an instrument of God's righteous wrath. This perception of human agency may be applicable (with some limitations) in the 21st-century context of Ukraine's war for independence.

Keywords: Romans, persecution, displaced community, sword, vengeance, trauma.

Introduction

The Epistle to Romans, one of the foundational texts of the Protestant Reformation, is often treated as a source of doctrinal knowledge for systematic theology, and so it is. This letter sets forth crucial truths about justification by faith, salvation by grace, new life in Christ, and many others. The importance of those great doctrines, however, does not have to overshadow the pastoral, existential aspect of Paul's teaching in this Epistle. The Apostle's treatment of the tenets of the Christian faith is given in a letter written to members of house-churches in Rome – people who lived in specific, rather difficult circumstances. Some of the struggles, threats, and expectations they lived with turn out to be especially relevant now for Ukrainian Christians whose lives have already been destroyed but have not been rebuilt yet.

Paul's pastoral theology in Romans is, of course, a subject too great for the size of this article. Accepting this inevitable limitation, I will focus on only one element of the Apostle's approach to trauma and healing: his understanding of God's revenge that is about to fall on the persecutors and some specific expressions of that revenge in the context of the first-century pagan Rome.

To reach this goal, I will briefly describe the Roman Christian household churches in the early years of Nero's reign as a suffering community. Many of the believers Paul addresses in his letter have been traumatized by persecution, exile, and ongoing conflicts – both within the church and with outsiders. After that, I will introduce some of Paul's pastoral concerns (largely shaped by eschatology) and try to show his somewhat paradoxical approach to suffering and retribution. The article will be concluded with some practical observations that may be applicable to the plight of Christians in contemporary Ukraine.

Relevance for the Ukrainian Christian Community

Nearly everyone in Ukraine has been traumatized by the war. Physical injuries and emotional suffering are now part of everyday life for millions of people affected by the Russian aggression. For some Christians, there is an additional burden of persecution: Russian authorities on the occupied territories have little tolerance for what they perceive as “wrong” kinds of religion. Christians (including Eastern Orthodox, but not of Moscow Patriarchate) whose cities were invaded by the Russian military have often experienced threats, arrests, unlawful imprisonment, and torture. Those who chose to leave the war zone and the occupied territories have had their suffering diminished but not eliminated: lives of displaced persons are also marked by trauma¹ that does not heal easily.

Various kinds of counselling and psychotherapy are available to Ukrainians who seek to understand their experience of trauma. Many of the counselling techniques are influenced by largely secular, humanistic worldview. While there is no reason not to use them, it is helpful to remember that they have their limitations. One of them has to do with the concept of justice and revenge.

Traumatic experience often tends to be self-perpetuating. For example, people who have survived torture and rape (or simply had to come into close contact with the enemy) often report that those memories are painful but hard to avoid. They remember the faces of their torturers; they feel that they will never forget those voices or other ugly sounds and sensations associated with the trauma.

Memories about traumatic events can be so painful that they cause new traumas (or perhaps reinforce to the old ones). Unfortunately, not all Christian ministers and laymen are able to respond to these self-perpetuating traumas in a compassionate way. One of the reasons for such failures has to do with inadequate views of justice – justice as God's attribute and an indispensable feature of a morally structured universe. Victims may cry to God asking him to punish the evildoer – the way David cries in his Psalms – but in some contexts they only get rebuked for doing so. The idea that God is going to punish the wicked is discarded as “un-Christian” or “immature.”

¹ The word “trauma” is used here in a rather generic sense: “events or experiences that are severely damaging to an individual or society” (Julian D. Ford, *Posttraumatic Stress Disorder: Science and Practice* [Burlington, MA: Elsevier, 2009], 6). Cf. *ibid.* for clarification of related terms: “psychological stress,” “trauma-related disorders,” etc.

A suffering person may ask, “Will God ever punish the evildoers? And if so, what is the role of human agency in this punishment? What can we expect of God?” Secular counsellors cannot answer these questions and thus cannot encourage their clients to dwell on them. Christian counsellors and pastors are often uncomfortable with this theme, so they typically try to avoid them.

Sadly, some of the avoidance techniques used in these cases are based on guilt and shame, so in the name of Christian “love” victims of violence are manipulated into “forgiving” their persecutors (in a rather superficial way) or being “reconciled” without being ready for such reconciliation. For believers who experienced such manipulation, Christ’s commandment to love our enemies becomes a heavy burden instead of a joyful, liberating expression of grace.

When suffering Christians ask whether God is going to punish the wicked, that perfectly legitimate question is often met with shaming in religious circles: somehow it is assumed that followers of Christ should always be above such concerns. This view is, in my opinion, profoundly wrong, because it reflects not only poor theology (briefly treated in this article) but also faulty anthropology. For those who became victims of war crimes, the need for justice is not optional.

Survivors of horrific² violence are often convinced that their trauma will not be healed until they see justice done to the perpetrators. This conviction is not unfounded; the Bible, both the Old and the New Testament,³ has much to say about God’s justice and wrath – the reaction of his holy nature to flagrant sin.

In the Book of Revelation, John sees “souls” of Christian martyrs in God’s heavenly temple. Even in the presence of God they are not content with the way things are: they boldly demand that God punish their persecutors: “They cried out with a loud voice, ‘O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?’” (Rev. 6:10).⁴

Human beings traumatized by extreme violence will not find healing until the issue of justice and punishment has been resolved. The themes of God’s wrath and vengeance can be difficult but it does not mean they should not be approached. A good starting point for treatment of these themes is the experience of early Christians. How did the Apostles treat traumatized followers of Christ? What role did the teaching about God’s vengeance play in their advice offered to traumatized Christian communities? What

² A non-academic term “horrific” is used here deliberately: the article deals with intense and prolonged suffering caused by war crimes. Observations related to God’s wrath and vengeance are not directly applicable to people who cause petty conflicts and minor inconveniences in the daily lives of their neighbours.

³ The idea that “the God of the Old Testament” was strict and vengeful – unlike “the New Testament God of love” – is widespread in the popular culture but has little Scriptural foundation. In the Old Testament God describes himself as “a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness” (Exod. 34:6) – a theme recurring throughout the rest of the Law and Prophets. In the New Testament, God’s vengeance is a major theme culminating in John’s vision of his wrath falling on the entire rebellious part of mankind in the Book of Revelation. The New Testament neither denies God’s severity nor introduces his kindness as something new. Both themes – God’s wrath and God’s love – develop throughout the Bible, reaching fuller, deeper expression in the New Testament.

⁴ All the Bible references in this article are from ESV.

could the first-century Christians expect God to do with their enemies? How did these expectations affect the daily lives of the persecuted?

These are promising themes to explore, although, of course, they are too large for an article of this size. Here, I will focus only on one question: how did the Epistle to Romans shape the expectations of suffering Roman Christians? Special attention will be given to a subject that has not been fully explored by commentators: the role of the Roman sword in Paul's view of God's justice.⁵ I will argue that some aspects of the situation in which the first-century Roman Christians lived were unique and there seems to be no direct parallels between them and the circumstances of the war-torn twenty-first-century Ukraine. Yet *some* of Paul's observations are quite applicable to the contemporary Ukrainian context and may eventually help to explore a missing dimension in the pastoral theology – the apostolic view of God's vengeance.

God often speaks about himself as the one who hears the cries of the oppressed⁶ and avenges the wrong done to them. He brings punishment to evildoers both directly (as in destroying the Canaanite cities of Sodom and Gomorrah⁷) and through human agency (as in destroying the Canaanite cities of Jericho and Ai⁸).

Since God is sovereign and omnipotent, humans and institutions used as tools of his vengeance do not have to be perfect. Throughout the history of the Old Testament Israel, God uses depraved pagan nations to punish his own chosen people. Idol-worshipping Chaldeans destroy Jerusalem and burn God's temple in 586 BC; idol-worshipping Romans do the same in AD 70. This connection between the holy wrath of God and human instruments of that wrath is by no means obvious: it often became a source of horror and consternation even for the prophets whose task was to announce it.⁹

In his letter to Romans (AD 57), the Apostle Paul speaks at length about God's wrath and vengeance and only briefly mentions the destructive potential of the Roman sword that can become an instrument of that vengeance. He helps his readers see that, under certain circumstances, a pagan Roman official (or perhaps soldier) can and should be seen as "God's servant" (Rom. 13:4). To understand the implications of this metaphor, it would be helpful to analyse its sociolinguistic¹⁰ aspects. What could the Roman sword mentioned by Paul mean to first-century Christians living in the imperial capital?

⁵ Wu's brief discussion of the Roman sword in his otherwise very detailed treatment of suffering in Romans arguably reflects the majority view among the commentators: Wu mentions the "oppressive Roman sword" (Siu Fung Wu, *Suffering in Romans* [Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2016], 195), but does not elaborate that in some passages, that very sword can also be understood as liberating – an instrument of justice putting an end to oppression.

⁶ Exod. 22:23; Ps. 9:12.

⁷ Gen. 19.

⁸ Josh. 6:23; 8:2.

⁹ 1 Sam. 3:11; Jer. 19:3.

¹⁰ Sociolinguistics studies language in its social context. When it comes to semantics, sociolinguists do not ask, "What does this word mean?" Rather they ask, "What does this word [phrase, idiom, etc.] mean to this particular speaker/community in this particular social setting?"

Roman Church: A Traumatized Community

Paul's letter to Romans ends with a long list of names, and for many modern readers those are just names. Some of them remain such, but for some others it is possible to reconstruct stories behind the names. Conflict, persecution, and exile are parts of these stories that create the social and historical background for Paul's teaching about suffering and overcoming.

Roman Christians to whom Paul writes have already had some painful experience of persecution, some details of which can be gleaned both from Scripture and extrabiblical literature. The Gospel reached Rome within the apostolic generation and immediately was met with an aggressive response from unbelieving Jews. The resulting violence became so widespread that emperor Claudius (AD 41-54) ordered all the Jews to leave Rome. Describing Claudius' reforms and unpopular decisions, Suetonius mentions that "Because the Jews at Rome caused continuous disturbances at the instigation of Chrestus, he expelled them from the city."¹¹

To add insult to injury, Claudius failed to see the difference between the persecutors and the persecuted. Those Roman Jews who believed in Christ also had to share in the punishment. In Acts 18:1-2 Paul travels to Corinth where he finds "a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had commanded all the Jews to leave Rome." After the death of Claudius (AD 54) the edict was probably revoked. Paul writes his letter around AD 57;¹² Priscilla (Prisca) and Aquila are already back in the city (Rom. 16:3) but a number of details discussed in the letter indicate that it was not easy for the returning exiles to adapt to their new old life. As Keener notes, "[i]t is hard to imagine that the Jewish sections [of the city] (known from archaeology) remained deserted after their absence, yet it is even more inconceivable that Jews recovered their property after returning if it had been seized by others..."¹³

The social aspects of this adaptation were also seriously complicated. One of the main difficulties had to do with the tensions between Jewish and Gentile believers. The latter had to establish their own leadership while the former were gone. The reunited community seemed to struggle with practices that involved, among other things, food and calendar: the Gentiles probably did not place much importance on Jewish dietary laws and religious holidays anymore.¹⁴ But behind those relatively minor issues there was a far deeper conflict that stemmed from failure to understand the role of Israel and Gentiles in God's great redemptive plan.¹⁵

Paul's letter contains warnings against arrogance toward the Jews (11:18); it seems that some Gentile Christians were beginning to view Israel as a hopelessly apostate nation – little more than just a source of persecution. That unfair generalization

¹¹ Suetonius, *Divus Claudius* 25. Suetonius himself does not seem to know much about Christianity; he even misspells the name "Christ" ("Chrestos").

¹² For a helpful date summary of the discussion on dating of the Epistle, see: Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academics, 2018), 33-35.

¹³ Craig C. Keener, *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary*, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academics, 2014), 711.

¹⁴ Rom. 14:2, 5.

¹⁵ The subject of Rom. 9-11.

could not be very helpful in healing the relationships within the Christian community struggling with the trauma of exile and return.

Paul's recommended antidote to this destructive arrogance is rather surprising. According to him, pride should be replaced with fear. When a Gentile believer sees the plight of the unbelieving Israelites, his reaction is to be that of fear (11:20). How does Paul induce this healthy fear into the hearts of his readers? He changes their perception of what they see. He provides them with a new way of interpreting some key events in the history of Israel, including the upcoming destruction of Jerusalem predicted by Jesus.¹⁶ This destruction, resulting from apostasy, shows "the severity of God" (v. 23). Paul wants his readers to understand that in the long run the difference between believers and apostates has to do with God's grace, not with human efforts.

This "severity of God" that Paul speaks about is not an abstract theological concept; it has specific expressions in space and time. Later on in that Epistle Paul will mention people whom God uses as instruments of his wrath and show how to separate the fear of God from the fear of men. The Apostle wants Christians to fear God's wrath but not the human instruments of that wrath (13:4). In fact, the correct perception of those instruments may contribute to encouragement and healing for the traumatized community. To appreciate this paradox, one may need to briefly look at the circumstances typical for the non-Jewish part of the Roman Christian community as well.

Persecution and Response

The Gentile Christians in Rome had their own share of suffering to bear, even though the first wave of state-sponsored persecution (under Nero in AD 64) was still seven years away. Christians of the apostolic generation often experienced physical and psychological violence, even when they were not directly targeted by government authorities. Reconstructing possible situations in which a persecuted Christian community might find itself, Oakes uses the term "economic suffering,"¹⁷ which is related both to physical and emotional pain. For example, a craft-worker may lose some important clients who are prejudiced against Christians, and that may lead to such physical suffering as hunger pains.

Several social groups within the Roman church seemed to be especially vulnerable. Slaves could become objects of their masters' anger and receive various forms of punishment, including beating.¹⁸ Oakes describes in great detail the suffering

¹⁶ When Paul writes his letter, that destruction is still in the future for him, but in his theology God's wrath has some proleptic features: God gives sinners over to their sins so that they may sin more and make themselves liable to an even more severe judgment. When that happens (1:18ff.) it is more than just indication of future wrath: it is also display of his wrath "here and now."

¹⁷ Peter Oakes, *Philippians: From People to Letter* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 11. Oakes' helpful and detailed reconstructions are modelled for the Philippian church, but, since Philippi was a Roman colony, much of that material would be relevant for Rome as well.

¹⁸ "These could range from restriction of movement to beating or, ultimately, to the selling of the slave. Such a sale could well leave the slave in a less favourable situation, especially if it was known that the sale had come about because the slave had become a troublemaker. Should we describe the suffering of Christian slaves as having a strong economic component? I think that most slaves would say, yes" (Ibid. 95).

of a Christian slave who had his hopes of manumission destroyed.¹⁹ Christian women married to pagans could be seen as bringing shame to the family – something that could provoke domestic violence and/or an “economically disastrous” divorce.²⁰ In a world where children were expected to be fully obedient to their parents, sons and daughters who embraced Christianity without their parents’ approval could also expect severe punishment and eventual disinheritance.

Oakes’ model of “economic suffering” may also help to appreciate the extent of damage caused by slander – something Christians had to live with on a practically regular basis. Paul’s persecutors in Acts are portrayed as always ready to make a special effort accusing him of grave crimes.²¹ It would be unrealistic to assume that they would be above spreading false rumours about other Christians. Damage to one’s reputation could result in intense and prolonged suffering, both physical and psychological.²²

The Apostle Paul is aware of this suffering that first-century Christians (including his Roman addressees) had to deal with. His approach is pastoral, sensitive, and empathetic. When he quotes Ps. 44 he echoes the cry of grieving Old Testament saints who were trying to make sense of their brokenness: “For your sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered” (Rom. 8:36). He assures them that their persecutors will be punished (12:19). God himself will take revenge on those evildoers (with or without human agency), but it is important that the suffering Christians refrain from attempts to take that revenge in their own hands: “Repay no one evil for evil... Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, ‘Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord’” (Rom. 12:17, 19).

These apostolic instructions can be greatly abused when taken out of the context. “Repay no one evil for evil,” “never avenge yourselves,” is the advice Ukrainian Christians hear quite often. This advice, well-meaning as it is, may sometimes lose its value if separated from the rest of the quote. Christians are to refrain from revenge – but not because God is not interested in it. According to Paul, the opposite is true: Christians are to refrain from revenge on their enemies because God himself is deeply involved in this revenge and he promised to bring it to fulfilment.

A believer who refuses to avenge himself/herself makes room²³ for God’s wrath. For example, when David, persecuted by Saul, chooses not to kill his enemy he allows God to deal with the persecutor: “And David said, ‘As the LORD lives, the LORD will strike him, or his day will come to die, or he will go down into battle and perish’” (1 Sam. 26:10). Saul did go into battle and perish (31:2-3); in an act of symbolic justice God caused him to die from his own sword. David’s part was to wait making room for God’s wrath.

¹⁹ Ibid. 95.

²⁰ Ibid. 93.

²¹ I.e. Acts 24:5.

²² For a technical discussion on shame-honour dynamics within families and larger communities influenced by Christianity, see David A. deSilva, “Paul, Honor, and Shame” in *Paul in the Graeco-Roman World: A Handbook*, vol. II (London: T&T Clark, 2003), esp. 37-42.

²³ That would be a more literal transliteration of the Greek “δότε τόπον τῇ ὀργῇ”.

Unlike Adam who stretched out his hand and took the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden, David does not yield to this temptation. He refuses to stretch out his hand and seize what God wants to give to him. The outpouring of God's wrath on Saul – an event that marked the beginning of David's reign – can only be accepted as God's gift for David (and the rest of Israel).

When Paul teaches the Roman Christians not to repay evil for evil (Rom. 12:7) he assumes that they do have power to bring at least some evil on their persecutors. Of course, slaves, wives, and children would have practically no opportunity to react with physical violence, but most of the time they would be tempted to resort to various passive-aggressive techniques, such as slander or gossip. Paul's approach to this problem is not moralistic but very pragmatic: he is aware that such petty revenge does not bring much satisfaction. This is why he teaches his readers to make room for God's wrath instead.²⁴ The Old Testament quote Paul uses is meant to bring about a radical change in their perspective. The Deuteronomy passage he refers to may help them see God and their persecutors in a different light. Saying "Vengeance is mine," he refers to the entire passage in Deuteronomy that speaks about God's wrath restoring justice:

Is not this laid up in store with me,
sealed up in my treasures?
Vengeance is mine, and recompense,
for the time when their foot shall slip;
for the day of their calamity is at hand,
and their doom comes swiftly
For the LORD will vindicate his people
and have compassion on his servants (Deut. 32:34-36).

Paul's application of this passage is eschatological: he speaks about God's wrath to be revealed in future; but Paul's eschatology has a "realized" aspect – "already but not yet."²⁵ A metaphor used in the passage itself may help the reader accept this paradox. When we look at the evildoers who prosper we are also reminded that "their foot shall slip."

Later on, this detail becomes especially powerful for Asaph who sees a vision in the temple. The unnamed "wicked" people whose prosperity made him doubt God's goodness still prosper but somehow God made him able to see that they are on their way to destruction:

Truly you set them in slippery places;
you make them fall to ruin.

²⁴ According to Oakes, "Paul takes vengeance out of the hands of the Christians, placing it firmly in the hands of God. God will [take revenge], so they do not need to. In fact, if they do, they will get in the way of God's fuller vengeance" (Peter Oakes, *Reading Romans in Pompeii: Paul's Letter at a Ground Level* [Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2009], 208).

²⁵ See Anthony A. Hoekema (*The Bible and the Future* [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994], 134) for an insightful discussion of this concept: "... already we bask in the light of Christ's victory, enjoy the firstfruits of the Spirit, are new creatures in Christ – but we are not yet what we shall be, and therefore look forward eagerly to the glorious return of our Lord."

How they are destroyed in a moment,
swept away utterly by terrors! (Ps. 73:18-19).

When the unexpected destruction comes to the wicked (“in a moment”), the rest of evildoers may see it as a sudden and tragic interruption of a promising career. In other words, they would see discontinuity between the previous prosperity of the wicked and this sudden calamity. Asaph, however, sees continuity: this destruction is their destination; they have been walking on their slippery paths all along.

For Paul it is important that his readers see the same kind of continuity in the lives of their persecutors. God had already set his enemies on the slippery paths; sooner or later they will come to a complete destruction. The Christian’s task is to see them this way and not to interfere with God’s punishment. The Apostle suggests some practical ways in which this continuity may be strengthened: “... if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head” (Rom. 12:20). Christian slaves, wives, children could easily find themselves in situations where this instruction was to be followed literally: abusive masters, husbands, fathers did need to be fed and served in other ways. Passive-aggressive techniques, such as boycotting them or neglecting one’s responsibilities in the household, would not be helpful at all.

Accepting food, drink, and other expressions of God’s goodness from the persecuted (such as obedience and respect), the persecutors only increase their own guilt. They keep moving toward their end on the slippery paths; they fill up the measure of their sins. God’s “kindness is meant to lead [them] to repentance” (2:4); when they ignore that kindness shown to them through God’s servants, they “are storing up wrath for [themselves] on the day of wrath when God’s righteous judgment will be revealed” (2:5). The more kindness they have been shown (and rejected), the more severe their punishment is going to be in the eschaton.

This practical advice helps the persecuted strengthen the perceived continuity between God’s wrath that is to be revealed in the future and God’s wrath that is being revealed “here and now.” But Paul also has another metaphor that helps him develop his realized eschatology. That metaphor is crucial, so I will discuss it in some detail. It has to do with the impending destruction of Jerusalem.

God’s Wrath and the Destruction of Jerusalem

In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus cries over Jerusalem (Luke 19:41-44) that is going to be destroyed within the lifetime of the apostolic generation (21:32). In his predictions he mentions some specific, technical details of a siege (19:43) that do not leave much room for doubt: Jesus speaks about destruction that is about to come with the Roman army.²⁶ He warned his contemporaries that some of them would even see this catastrophe,

²⁶ Also, Luke is the only Evangelist who mentions Pilate’s cruelty against (suspected) Zealots (Luke 13:1-5). When Jesus hears that report about people who were killed by the Roman sword or by debris of a fallen fortification, he warns his contemporaries that, unless they repent, they will also “likewise perish.”

which he interpreted as God's vengeance: "But when you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then know that its desolation has come near... for these are days of vengeance, to fulfill all that is written" (21:20, 22).

Luke was Paul's traveling companion, so it is hard to imagine that Paul would not know about these warnings or consider them unimportant. The Apostle had good reasons to expect that a Jewish rebellion against Rome would begin soon, within the lifetime of some of Jesus' contemporaries (although not necessarily within his own lifetime). He also knew that this rebellion would eventually fail and that consequences of that failure would be disastrous.

According to Wright,

Jesus consistently and continually warned his contemporaries that unless Israel repented – ... i.e. gave up her militant confrontation with Rome and followed his radical alternative vision of the kingdom – then her time was up. Wrath would come upon her, in the form not so much of fire and brimstone from heaven as of Roman swords and falling stonework. In particular, Jerusalem herself, and especially the Temple and its hierarchy, had become hopelessly corrupt, and was as ripe for judgment as it had been in the days of Jeremiah. In this coming judgment the true people of YHWH – that is, Jesus' followers – would be vindicated.²⁷

When Paul writes his letter to Romans, all the Palestinian Jews live with this sword of Damocles (or, as it turned out, of Titus) hanging over them, whether they are aware of it or not. He also seeks to prepare his readers for the coming catastrophe that will affect all the Jews (and to some extent Christians) scattered throughout the empire. One of the ways in which he does it is through helping his readers see the connection between the Roman sword and God's vengeance. That connection was by no means obvious: many of the persecutors who caused suffering of Roman Christians would not be affected by that sword, and among those killed by it there would be some innocent victims (when Jesus predicts the destruction of Jerusalem he weeps, Luke 19:41). Still, there is a connection between God's vengeance promised in Luke 21:22 and the Roman sword.²⁸ This connection may be quite useful for some of the situations in which Ukrainian Christians find themselves today.

Practical Application

The Apostle helps the readers see the connections between crime and punishment and between punishment and God's wrath (the latter connection arguably

²⁷ N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1996), 421.

²⁸ Haddad is one of the few commentators who emphasize "the link between God's divine wrath in Rom. 12:19 and in 13:4. In 12:19, it is God's wrath which will be wrought against evildoers both in the present and in the future... Yet, in Rom. 13:4 it is the civil authority that embody and imitate God's prerogative to reward the good and punish the evil" (Najeeb T. Haddad, *Paul, Politics, and New Creation: Reconsidering Paul and Empire* [Lanham, MD: Lexington Books/Fortress Academic, 2021], 66-67). That link would imply, in turn, that there is a connection between Rom. 13:4 and a number of other passages throughout the Epistle, beginning with 1:18.

being less obvious). The Bible demands capital punishment for murder (Gen. 9:6), but does not always specify who has to carry out the death penalty. When Israel was more like a loose confederation of tribes, putting the murderer to death was the responsibility of “the avenger of blood” (Deut. 19:6), usually a close relative, whose rights and obligation were recognized and regulated by the law.

In the period of monarchy, capital punishment becomes the prerogative of the king. When the monarchy is destroyed, pagan kings of Babylon and Persia rule over Israel. What is rather unexpected, however, is that God seems to endorse this transfer of power. In the Book of Isaiah, a non-Jewish king Cyrus is called “Messiah” (Isa. 45:1),²⁹ and other books of Scripture written in the post-exilic period also indicate that this new order, in which Gentiles rule over Jews (but also protect them), is a part of God’s plan. Thus, when a pagan ruler condemns a murderer to death, this sentence can be seen as an expression of God’s justice and, even more, God’s wrath (Ps. 5:5b).

This idea has not always been easy for Jews to accept. Isaiah’s famous passage that emphasizes that creature has no right to criticize the Creator (Isa. 45:9ff.) comes immediately after the proclamation of Cyrus as the new Messiah (“anointed”, 45:1-4). Those who want to argue with God probably felt like they had a good cause for complaint: how can God use a pagan ruler to fulfill the redemptive plan for Israel? Yet it was Cyrus and other Persians whose task was to punish the wicked Babylon (who, in turn, had also been an instrument of God’s wrath against Israel). God Himself becomes Israel’s “avenger of blood,” and he is not limited in his use of instruments for vengeance.

The principle of God’s sovereign reign over all the kings of the earth (Ps. 22:28; 47:7-8) implies that God uses human institutions, however flawed they are, for reaching his purposes. “If Rome rules, it is because God has authorized it. If it bears the sword, it is because God has allowed it. Jesus’ disciples are, therefore, called upon to be subject to the governing authorities who restrain the flood waters of evil behavior and reward good behavior.”³⁰

This principle may be illustrated with a hypothetical example. A Roman who does not believe in the God of Israel may kill another Roman pagan. The murderer has to stand before a judge who does not believe in the True God either, and that judge passes a death sentence. When a hangman (who also worships idols and does not believe in God the Creator) wields his sword to cut off the murderer’s head, this action may seem to have nothing to do with the God of Israel. Yet, according to the Apostle Paul, the Roman official here represents God the Avenger (Rom. 13:4). Pagans are also created in the image of God; thus murdering a pagan constitutes an offense against God, and God steps in to act in a rather personal way.³¹

²⁹ Or, perhaps, a “messiah,” although in Hebrew there is usually no difference between lower- and upper-case letters.

³⁰ Charles H. Talbert, *Romans* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2002), 294.

³¹ Thus one can generally discern wrath behind capital punishment but it is not always the wrath of God. When a godless state executes a Bonhoeffer or a Jägerstätter, it expresses (in theological terms) the wrath of sinful men against God. Since man is created in the image of God, sinners’ hatred toward God often results in hatred toward their fellowmen.

This two-fold connection – between crime and punishment and between punishment and God’s wrath – helps explain the warning in Rom. 13:4: “... for he [Roman official] is God’s servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God’s wrath on the wrongdoer.”

Why would Paul want his readers (or at least some of them) to be afraid of the Roman sword? Of course, it is possible that some of them were abused in such horrific ways that they began to think about murdering the persecutors. But that is not a very likely explanation; execution by the sword was usually reserved for Roman citizens only. Slaves would have to be afraid of other instruments of torture and death.

Kim argues that the warning was meant for Christians who were entertaining dangerous ideas of rebellion against the empire: “Further, Paul may have been worried that the rising revolutionary fervor among the Jews in Palestine might affect the church as well as the Jewish community in Rome.”³² This suggestion also seems unlikely: there is very little evidence that Zealot ideas were widespread among the Roman Christians. The context of the entire Epistle suggests that the reason why Paul wants the Roman Christians to fear the Roman sword has to do with the connection between this sword and God’s “severity” against apostates (as discussed above).

The concept of God’s wrath makes Paul (and his readers) able to see the continuity in the lives of unrepentant sinners: they are moving toward their destiny. This motion is under God’s complete control and it results in fulfilment of his redemptive plan. God’s wrath, soon to be revealed in history, has an eschatological dimension: it points forward to the final revelation of God’s justice when all evil will be repaid – “on that day when, according to my gospel, God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus” (2:16).

Some commentators, for example Schreiner, tend to draw the difference between the eschatological and non-eschatological kinds of wrath. Yet Schreiner himself admits that this difference is often hard to sustain.

The reference to ὀργή [in Rom. 13:5] does not refer to God’s eschatological wrath, contrary to its usual meaning in Paul. It connects instead to verses 3-4 and refers to the wrath of the civil authorities in meting out punishment. This is confirmed by verse 4, which spells out the government’s function as “an avenger for wrath” ... the wrath in view is the judgment in history inflicted by civil rulers... The distinction between the two should not be pressed too far, however, since the judgment and wrath of the government on evildoers *anticipates and foreshadows* God’s judgment and wrath on the day of the Lord.³³

When we try to help those who mourn, can we speak about God’s wrath as a source of consolation? Many evangelical preachers and theologians would be very uncomfortable with this possibility. When Moo suggests that one should separate God’s wrath from the Gospel, he describes a tendency rather typical for contemporary Protestant thought: “... although Paul clearly considers warning about judgement to come to be

³² Seyoon Kim, *Christ and Caesar: The Gospel and the Roman Empire in the Writings of Paul and Luke* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 37.

³³ Schreiner, 129; italics added.

related to his preaching of the gospel... his generally positive use of 'gospel' language forbids us from considering God's wrath and judgment to be *part of* the gospel."³⁴

This tendency is not new. An author who wrote in the middle of the 20th century complained: "Most preachers and most composers of prayers today treat the biblical doctrine of the wrath of God very much as the Victorians treated sex. It is there, but it must never be alluded to because it is in an undefined way shameful."³⁵ According to Hanson, the reason for this avoidance of the theme of God's wrath has to do with a faulty view of "love":

...God is love; therefore we must not associate him with wrath. God is love; therefore he is indefinitely tolerant. Presumably it is for such reasons that the Christian churches of the twentieth century have in practice turned their backs upon the biblical doctrine of the wrath of God.³⁶

In those rare cases when evangelicals do talk about the wrath of God in Paul's writings, it is usually presented as some kind of "bad news" that forms the background for the "good news," "the gospel proper." This distinction seems to be rather artificial and arbitrary. One may argue that the message of God's vengeance was an integral part of the original apostolic Gospel. The idea of God's wrath, properly understood and responsibly applied, may become a valuable element of pastoral theology, especially in the present circumstances when much evil done against Ukrainians seems to go unpunished.

Suffering Christians may learn to view war criminals as "vessels of wrath prepared for destruction" (Rom. 9:22). We may be confident that we will see God's vengeance in the eschaton, but we can also see some expressions of that future wrath "here and now" – especially in the destruction brought to (some of) these war criminals by the Ukrainian military. While the Ukrainian army includes people from various religious backgrounds (and those who reject faith in God altogether), we can still learn to see Ukrainian soldiers as God's servants (in the sense explained in this article). Finally, we can learn to view our own situation as a trial – with a possibility of overcoming that may contribute to our healing from the war-induced traumas.

We can be confident that God will avenge those who were killed in the course of this war but we also accept that we cannot control the timing and the manner of this punishment. When we recognize these limitations we make room for God's wrath, as the Apostle Paul taught.

Conclusion

Revenge and judgment are difficult themes, but they were not a taboo for the Apostle Paul and other first-century followers of Christ; nor should they be for the Ukrainian church in the context of our current war for independence. Paul taught his readers to

³⁴ Douglas J. Moo, *The Letter to the Romans* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), 92; italics in the original.

³⁵ R. P. C. Hanson, *God: Creator, Saviour, Spirit* (London: SCM Press, 1960), 37.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

expect that God would punish their persecutors, and contemporary Christian leaders should not discourage such expectations in their churches. Their task is rather to help believers shape correct expectations and reject false ones.

For the Apostle Paul God's wrath is primarily an eschatological category: it will be fully satisfied on the Last Day. But since Paul's eschatology is to some extent "realized," he confidently expected that some expressions of God's wrath would be visible in what for him was the near future. He also taught that God would use human institutions (even deeply flawed ones, such as the Roman Empire) as instruments of judgment. He emphasized a strong connection between the Roman sword and God's wrath, and that connection would later help his readers to understand the defeat of the Jewish rebellion (AD 70) as part of God's plan.

God's wrath that was to be poured on Jerusalem (and the persecutors of the Apostolic Church) had an eschatological dimension: it anticipated the final judgment over all the wicked (including those who persecuted Christians throughout the church age). This anticipation of the final act of God's vengeance can strengthen believers "here and now," but it also presents them with a trial: waiting patiently for God to move they have to refuse taking vengeance in their own hands. This trial may be very difficult but it is a necessary part of the journey toward spiritual maturity.

Can Ukrainian Christians see some expressions of God's eschatological wrath "here and now"? How relevant is the connection that Paul draws between God's wrath and Roman sword? After all, the Roman Empire is long gone. Soldiers do not wear swords anymore, and many of the events of the first-century Jewish war were unique; it would be pointless to draw any parallels with our times.

In my opinion, the connection between the Roman sword and God's wrath is not directly applicable to our 21-century situations. What is relevant, however, is the theological foundation on which Paul drew that connection. God's sovereignty over human history means, among other things, that God uses flawed human institutions as instruments of vengeance. When an army defends its country against an unprovoked aggression and the weapons of that army kill the aggressors it may be seen as an expression of God's wrath. When aggressors kill each other or commit suicide, it may also be seen as an expression of God's vengeance: in his wrath God gives sinners over "to a debased mind" (Rom. 1:28) so that they plot what eventually leads to their own ruin.

Since the Ukrainian army can be used as an instrument of God's vengeance, it is, of course, important to support this army in any way we can. But it is also important to remember that the expressions of God's vengeance that we see now are limited in scope; the fullness of that vengeance will be revealed only in the eschaton.

As we refuse the petty "compensation techniques" associated with attempts to take the vengeance in our own hands, we make room for God's wrath. The expectation of this wrath to come is an integral part of the apostolic Christian message. It is my contention that without coming to grips with this aspect of the Gospel we are likely to be hindered in our recovery from the trauma caused by the war.

The Ukrainian church is a traumatized community within a traumatized community (that is the Ukrainian society as a whole). Healing and hope are a part of our Christian witness to the world; our hope includes confident expectation of justice – of God’s vengeance eventually coming to all the war criminals and their likes. Anticipation is a part of experience: as we wait in this joyful hope we are being transformed – from victims to conquerors.

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Римський меч для травмованої спільноти: Соціолінгвістичний підхід до Рим 13:4

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Анотація: У статті розглядається досвід християн першого століття, які були травмовані через гоніння, депортацію та інші випробування, що згадуються у Посланні до римлян. Особливу увагу звернено на їх очікування і проблему справедливості. Стверджується, що пасторський підхід Апостола Павла до цієї проблеми має яскраво виражений есхатологічний аспект: він заохочував страждаючих римських віруючих очікувати, що деякі прояви Божої помсти можна буде спостерігати ще за їхнього життя. Римський меч, який згадується в 13:4, можна розглядати як інструмент праведного Божого гніву. Таке розуміння інструментальної ролі людини може бути актуальним (з деякими обмеженнями) й у XXI столітті, у контексті сучасної війни України за незалежність.

Ключові слова: Римлянам, гоніння, переміщена спільнота, меч, помста, травма.

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