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Review

'Submitting to' and 'subjecting to' authority: A comparative study of Romans 13:1 and 1Peter 2:13

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A cursory reading of Romans 13:1 and 1Peter 2:13 shows that they are talking about the same issue – recognizing, showing honour and respect for people in authority. However, a deeper study of the texts shows that even though they talk about the same issue, the contexts in which they were written differ, thus a study of the contexts gives deeper insights that help to understand the texts. The study is limited in the sense that the chosen texts are not full pericopies (full units of discussion) – Romans 13:1-7 and 1Peter 2:13-17. The study which focuses on the initial verses of the pericopies aims at studying the phrases “submission to” and “subjecting to” authority, to find out whether they are the same. The study found that in the case of Romans 13:1, the grammar shows that the people were to submit to authority voluntarily, but in 1Peter 2:13 the people were forced by circumstances to submit to authority. This study is significant in that it has inescapable implication for political education, especially Christian state-relations.

Keywords: Ambiguities in the bible, biblical studies, biblical interpretation, submission to authority, subjecting to authority, Romans 13:1, 1Peter 2:13.

INTRODUCTION

Ambiguity, the uncertainty or inexactness of meaning in language, is an essential part of language. When we say something is ambiguous it means it can be understood in two or more possible senses of ways. Ancient texts are ambiguous, and the Bible is no exception. David H. Aaron (2001) applies a linguistic model to systematically examine inherent ambiguity in order to understand God-related idioms in the Hebrew Bible to find out whether a particular idiom is meant to be understood metaphorically. Aaron examines the original intent of the writers of biblical literature and suggests that one can conceptualize texts as metonyms for their authors and their historical contexts.

Roland T. Hyman (2001) says translators perform a significant and necessary role in making the Tanakh (the

Jewish scriptures which consist of three divisions – the Torah, the Prophets and the Writings) personally accessible, since most people read and know it only in their native languages. Therefore, people who read the Tanakh in translation are most likely not aware of the myriad linguistic decisions the translator of a given version has made on their behalf in coping with the meanings of certain words, idioms, or ambiguous passages.

Raimo Hakola (2009) studies Nicodemus in the Gospel of John as an enigmatic literary character who is wavering in no man's land in John's narrative between Jesus' opponents and his true disciples. He says that some scholars have taken Nicodemus as an example of someone of inadequate faith who remains an outsider

throughout the narrative, while others have traced his development from initial and tentative faith open to public commitment to Jesus. He sides with those who acknowledge that no single trait determines Nicodemus' portrait, hence his portrait remains ambiguous.

In the interpretation of Luke 23:43, scholars have always asked the question, "Did Jesus Christ tell the thief on the cross that they would be together in paradise that very day, or did he say on that day, that they would be together in paradise?" It has been argued that the Greek text is ambiguous on this point, and that the position of the comma (before or after the word "today") determines the sense of Christ's statement (www.gci.org/bible/luke/comma, accessed 9/11/12).

The review of the articles cited above shows that there are ambiguities in the Bible. This paper focuses on yet another ambiguity: "Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities" (Romans 13:1, NIV) and "Subject yourselves...to every authority" (1Peter 2:13, ESV). Do the two texts from these two versions of the Bible – *New International Version* and *English Standard Version* - talk about the same thing? What do the statements "submit to" and "subject to" mean? What lessons can be learned from the background studies and exegesis of the two texts?

METHODOLOGY

The methodologies for this study are historical criticism and exegesis. Historical criticism is the art of distinguishing the true from the false concerning facts of the past (*Catholic Encyclopedia* online, www.newadvent.org/cathen/04503a.htm, accessed 12/11/12). Historical criticism applied to biblical studies has to do with tracing the background of a particular biblical text in order to understand and interpret it properly. It finds answers to the question, what were the political, social and political and cultural circumstances surrounding the text? Exegesis means finding the meaning of a text within the context of that text. It demands an examination of the elements of grammar for the understanding of a biblical text (Enns, 1997:21). It calls for an analysis of a biblical text in order to understand what an author sought to communicate.

A comparative study of Romans 13:1 and 1Peter 2:13

Romans 13:1

"Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established..." (NIV).

The context of 1Peter 2:13

Romans 13:1-7 has a background which helps us to understand the command, "Everyone must submit to the governing authorities..." (v.1). The letter to the Romans was written in A.D.57 when Nero was in power. There appears to be no indication that at this time he was in power and a brutal ruler (Sanday and Headlam, 1902:370). The Jews had been expelled in A. D. 49 under Claudius but things had become different in A. D. 57. There was a problem with "tax protest" under Nero in A. D. 58 but this does not appear to be relevant at the time of the writing of Romans. Therefore we may assume that political condition was fairly stable, and that the Christian church which was undoubtedly born in the synagogues at Rome enjoyed the status of *religio licita* as they were still largely seen to be within Judaism's fold (www.bible.org, accessed 1/11/12).

Marcus Borg (1972) suggests the possibility that Jewish nationalism had reached violent levels in Rome and for that reason the Jews were expelled and that such a situation forms the background to Romans 13:1-7. This appears to be cautious speculation. The expulsion occurred some eight years prior and there seems to be no concrete evidence to demonstrate that such was the case in A. D. 57. Käsemann suggests another possibility for the background to the passage. He says certain Christian enthusiasts had thrown off all restraint in the light of their heavenly calling and regarded "earthly authorities with indifference or contempt" (Käsemann, 1972: 351). This may be true but it is difficult to defend from within or outside the passage. There have also been other suggestions concerning the background of the passage. It would appear however that, we simply cannot be as precise as Borg or Käsemann suggest. But one thing we are sure of is that in Romans 13:1-7, Paul exhorts the Romans in right conduct towards the state; however, it will be very difficult to say what prompted such a discussion.

Pasa psuchē, *hypotassesthō* and *exousias* in the Greek text are the key words one needs to understand in order to interpret Romans 13:1-7 properly. There have been scholarly debates as to what they mean. Wink (1984:10) says *pasa psuchē*, literally meaning "all souls" could be translated "all persons," Christian or not, Jews or Gentiles. In that sense, the command to submit to the governing authorities was not just for the recipients of the letter and their subsequent readers, but to all people.

Hypotassesthō is the most important term in this passage. It means "submit". Earlier in Romans, Paul used *hypotassesthō* to discuss submission to God's law (8:7) and his righteousness (10:3), and the divine decree to subject the creation to fruitfulness (8:20). From these, we can say that *hypotassesthō* can refer to voluntary

obedience or to forced control. Delling summarizes that “In the New Testament, the term has a wide range of meaning centering on the idea of enforced or voluntary subordination (1985:1159). Thus the meaning is flexible.

Hutchison analyzing *hypotassesthō* says:

[The verb] occurs twenty one times in the LXX [Septuagint], and in only one passage is the idea of obedience clearly prominent...In the New Testament it occurs thirty times but it cannot be said that the idea of obedience is dominant there either. The term is employed to indicate the proper attitude of the Christian to his superiors...[In Rom 13:1-7 in denotes] recognition of the civil authority as part of God’s plan for the world but not blind uncritical obedience to that authority’s every command....

While [*hypotassesthō*] does not simply mean “obey” it will in all ordinary circumstances involve continued and scrupulous submission on the part of the Christian towards his lawful rulers....To refuse obedience to the civil authorities is a decision that the Christian will take only after the fullest and most careful consideration (1971: 49-59, 54-55).

Exousias means civil powers, not specific persons, but the offices of authority, or the general principle of civil rule. Earle comments: “The primary emphasis is on the authority of governments to rule. It should not be inferred from this passage that all rulers are chosen by God, but rather that all rule is divinely ordained....God has ordained that there should be ruling authorities to keep law and order” (1988:204).

Delling says, “At issue...is the attitude to government as such rather than specifically the Roman state” (1985:1159). Thus, Romans 13:1-7 does not teach the ordination of specific persons, neither does it mandate a particular type of government. Similarly, Yoder observes that, “Romans makes no affirmative moral judgment on the existence of a particular government and says nothing particular about who happens to be Caesar or what his policies happen to be” (1972:201).

1Peter 2:13

“Be subject for the Lord’s sake to every human institution, whether it be the emperor as supreme, or to governors as sent” (ESV).

The context of 1Peter 2:13

In 1 Peter 1:3-2:10, Peter has outlined the nature of the salvation God has wrought for his readers and has summarily called them to a certain standard of living. This exhortation has primarily to do with the relationships in the church. A new section begins in 2:11-3:12 where the author directs his audience’s concerning certain ethical injunctions concerning the state, family, and relationships

in general. In this regard 2:11, 12, - “Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul. Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation” – forms a general statement from which applications to the state, family, and others will be drawn. Therefore, we may say that 1 Peter 2:13-17 is a concrete example of how Peter envisioned his readers living their good lives among pagans and bringing glory to God – thus standing fast in the grace of God (Kelly, 1969:107; Baere, 1970:139; Best, 1971:112-113; Davids, 1990:94-98; Gropelt, 1993:153).

The situation presupposed by 2:11, 12; 2:13-17 and also 3:8-4:19 appears to be the general slander of non-Christians against Christians. The fact that Peter says that the non-Christians (cf. *tois ethnesin*, the pagans, [2:12]; *teen agnosian*, the ignorant [2:15]) slander the Christians’ good behaviour, and they are *xenzontai*, surprised (4:4) that the Christians do not run with them any longer into their abominable lifestyles, demonstrate that the background of 1 Peter 2:13-17 is not about Christians rebelling against the authorities per se, but non-Christians inciting the authorities to action against the Christians on charges of being a threat to society. In 4:15 Peter refers to a list of crimes for which the Christians were probably accused, including murder, theft, doing evil and meddling in other people’s affairs. Those who commit such acts would be considered criminals. Beare (1970:137-138) argues that Christians were also accused at this time of such things as cannibalism and incest. Biggs (1902:137) however, is of the view that this is particularly a second century phenomenon, and should not be applied to 1 Peter.

The background of 1Peter in general and 2:13-17 specifically is that the Christians Peter wrote his epistle to in the *diasporas*, (various places in the then Roman Empire, see 1:1) were accused of disloyalty to Caesar (John 19:12). It is against this background that one can do an interpretation of 1 Peter 2:13 “Be subject for the Lord’s sake to every human institution, whether it be the emperor as supreme, or to governors as sent” (ESV).

What does “Be subject...to” means in this context? The Greek word *hypotageete*, translated “be subject” is a verb; in terms of tense it is an aorist meaning the action of being subject is an undefined one to be performed without regard to past, present or future time; *hypotageete* is in the passive voice meaning, something or somebody is making them to take the action of being subject; it is in the imperative mood and is in the second person plural meaning the action of being subject is a command to all the readers of the letter to perform. *hypotageete* therefore means to recognize and respect the authority and order imposed by one’s superior, namely God and humans in positions of recognized authority (Elliot, 2007:487).

In regard to the civil realm, urging subordination is hardly a call to “loyalty” to the state....The verb *hypotassō* [in the first person singular] involves only a recognition of and respect for order and assuming one’s subordinate position vis-à-vis figures in authority. This is by no means equivalent to the emotional attachment that “loyalty” involves. In this context being subordinate to the emperor and his governors is to respect his authority and show him the honour due all persons (v.17) – nothing more and nothing less. Loyalty (*pistis, pisteuō*), on the other hand, is reserved for Christ and God alone (1:5, 7, 8, 9, 21; 2:6, 7; 5:9). Accordingly, it is reference to the latter (“because of the Lord,” v. 13; “God’s will,” v. 15; “as slaves of God,” v.16) that serve here to motivate subordination and doing what is right (Elliot, 2007:498).

What Elliot is saying here is that, being subject means, the recognition that there is an authority, respecting and accepting to come under that authority, and giving it the honour it deserves. This recognition, respect and honour to the one in authority does not mean loyalty to person, but rather subordination to the office for the promotion of the common good of society. Subordinates do not have to be forced into recognizing, respecting, and honouring people in authority.

Similarities and differences between Romans 13:1 and 1Peter 2:13

1. Both texts have historico-political backgrounds. Even though it is difficult to ascertain that exact background of Romans 13:1, we can say that it has to do with the payment of taxes to the state. It can also be said that Paul foresaw that the Christians in Rome and the state would one day have some clashes with the state, and for this reason he instructs the church on the right relationship it must maintain with the state. First Peter on the hand deals with false accusations arising from the populace and directed at Christians (2:11, 12). Thus he instructs Christians scattered in the Roman Empire on how to relate to the Emperor and his governors to silence the slander.

2. Grammatically, both Romans 13:1 and 1Peter 2:13 employ a verb as the controlling idea in terms of the Christian’s relationship to the state. *Hypotassesthō* (Rom 13:1) means “submit”. *hypotageete* (1Pet 2:13) means “obey,” “be obedient,” “bring under control,” “put to subjection.” *Hypotassō* the root verb of *hypotassesthō* and *hypotageete* is a military term meaning “to arrange [troop divisions] in a military fashion under the command of a leader” (Enhanced Strong’s Lexicon CD Rom).

3. *Hypotassesthō* (Rom 13:1) is a verb the present tense; it is an imperative in the middle voice. This means that the Christians in Rome were to do the submission to the governing authorities by themselves. They were not to be forced to submit. They were to do it voluntarily. The fact that it is in the present tense means that those who

read the letter must continue to submit to the governing authorities.

4. Similarly, *hypotageete* (1Pet 2:13) is also a verb. In terms of tense, it is a second aorist, that is, it is an undefined action in relation to time. The verb is in the imperative mood, meaning it is a command. It is in the passive voice meaning that unlike the submission in Romans 13:1 which is voluntary, the subjecting to authority in 1Peter 2:13 is forced one; it is being forced on the Christians by somebody or a circumstance.

What lessons can we learn from the study of these two texts?

The findings from the study of Romans 13:1 and 1Peter 2:13 above have inescapable implications for political education, and more especially when we are just a few days away from the Presidential and Parliamentary elections in Ghana. I have made some of these known elsewhere (See Kuwornu-Adjaottor, 2012).

1. Governance is divinely ordained. But not every government is chosen by God. Therefore Romans 13:1 does not teach the ordination of specific persons, neither does it mandate a particular type of government.

2. People must of necessity recognize, honour and respect those in authority. However, the recognition, honour and respect should not be forced on people by those in authority. These acts of submission must be done voluntarily.

3. Recognizing, showing respect and honour to those in authority does not mean people respect them. It is the office that is respected. However, if people in authority want to be respected, they must behave well before God and the people they oversee.

4. People should support those in authority but be ready to criticize them when the occasion demands.

5. Criticizing people in authority is not necessarily rebellion. It is a way of people saying they are not pleased with the way people in authority are leading. As such those in authority should take such criticisms in good faith. They are meant to help them sit up and do the right thing for the common good of society.

CONCLUSION

In this paper I have said that there seems to be ambiguities in the Bible. But these come about as a result of the various communities in which certain texts were written. Romans 13:1 and 1Peter 2:13 which are about people submitting to those in authority were written in different contexts that demanded that the authors of such texts use different terminologies to show how people should relate to the state. A study of the two texts and their backgrounds shows that the terminologies used for Christian state-relations are significant. In one text the

study reveals that submission to authority was to be done voluntarily; in another it reveals that people were forced to obey orders from the state. The study has lessons for political education. People in authority should treat those under them in such a way that they will recognize, honour and show respect to them and their offices; people should not be forced to submit to, and obey their leaders.

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