RECONCILIATION, FORGIVENESS AND VIOLENCE IN AFRICA

BIBLICAL, PASTORAL AND ETHICAL PERSPECTIVES

EDITORS

MARIUS J. NEL, DION A. FORSTER & CHRISTO H. THESNAAR

BEYERS NAUDÉ CENTRE SERIES ON PUBLIC THEOLOGY

CONQUERING EVIL

Engaging Violence from the Perspective of Paul's Letter to the Romans

Endale Sebsebe Mekonnen¹

INTRODUCTION

The scholarly definition of violence has created conceptual complexity across disciplines. It is not possible to deal with all proposed definitions of violence in this brief chapter and therefore it will only focus on a number of interdisciplinary definitions which might contribute as a conceptual framework for understanding Paul's letter to the Romans' view of violence.

The Norwegian sociologist, John Galtung (1969:168), conceives violence in terms of influence and defines it as "*the cause of the difference between the potential and the actual, between what could have been and what is*" (italics in original). For Galtung (1969:168), violence is the cause for the increase in the distance between the actual and the potential and "impedes the decrease of this distance". Violence can either be personal (direct) or structural (indirect) and it can happen intentionally or unintentionally with or without an object either at physical or psychological level (Galtung, 1969:173). The anthropologist, David Riches (1986:8), however, defines violence differently as "an act of physical hurt deemed legitimate by the performer and illegitimate by (some) witness". Riches' definition is important because it provides room for cross-cultural studies. Symbolic interactionist, Norman Denzin (1984:488), also proposes a definition of violence as "the attempt to regain through the use of emotional and physical force, something that has been lost". For political philosophers such as Raymond Geuss (2001:21), violence is "best understood by focusing on adverbial expressions such as 'to act violently'". Hence, for Geuss, violence is to inflict pain or to injure other human beings. Willem Schinkel (2010:45), a theoretical sociologist, defines violence ontologically as a "*reduction of being*" (italics in original). He argues that violence as a reduction of being is essential to social life and denying it is due to the fear of violence. Violence is inevitable in social life, and in some cases, it is constructive. The New Testament scholar Jeremy Punt (2012:24) has comprehensively described violence as "action and everything that restricts, damages, or destroys the integrity of things, living beings or people, or of cultural or social entities through superior power, in short, the 'violation of personhood'".

1 Dr. Endale Sebsebe Mekonnen is a Research Fellow in the Department of Old and New Testament at Stellenbosch University, and the President of Shiloh Bible College, Ethiopia.

These diverse definitions indicate that there is no standard definition of violence. All these attempts at defining violence contribute to explicate different facets of violence as well as its complexity. It, however, appears as if the intricate connection between violence and power underlies all of them. Whether it is physical, psychological, ontological, verbal, personal, structural or ideological violence and its different aspects, the concept of violence can be understood as the exertion of power upon a person or an object for a specific result – usually negative – for the receiver. In this chapter, however, care will be taken not to read Romans anachronistically since the ideological and conceptual understanding of violence by the different disciplines surveyed are foreign to Paul and his audiences. For example, some of the questions that have been raised by modern literature in the area of violence were not known in the time of Paul and his readers. Therefore, a concept more or less equivalent to violence might be conveyed in Paul's terms such as wickedness, unrighteousness and evil.

Particularly, the concept of evil (κακός) in Romans presents an opportunity to understand Paul's view on violence. Although the word is usually used to refer to wrong acts in general, it is used in Romans in relation to violence.² Paul contrasts evil against good in Romans 3:8 while he later argues that no one does good (Rom-3:12). Paul describes evil as being characterised by deception, vilification, murder and rejection of the ways of peace. Evil, for example, robbing, killing, and stealing, is what the Law prohibits. The cumulative concept of evil in Romans is verbal, ideological and physical in nature which is analogous to our modern understanding of violence.

It will be argued that Paul in the Letter to the Romans speaks to the Christ-believing community in the context of the Roman Empire, and he believes that violence (evil) continues until God's redemptive work is completed. Nonetheless, in the interim, Christ-believing communities who are under the realm of the Spirit are encountering evil (violence) and are reminded to aggressively and perseveringly engage and conquer it through faith in the Messiah and obedience to the commandments of God which are holy, good and just. Hence, the discussion follows the following steps: first a discussion on the concept of violence in the Letter to the Romans will be provided, then, a discussion on the means to conquer it will be undertaken, and finally, a conclusion will be provided followed by a brief overview of the implications thereof.

THE CONCEPT OF VIOLENCE IN THE LETTER TO THE ROMANS

Violence was endemic in the Roman Empire in that "to the largest extent the history of the Roman Empire is a grim chronicle of military despotism in the name of law and order, cringing servility on the part of the senate and irresponsible opportunisms by the armies" (Africa, 1971:21). Mass killings of slaves, deserters, rebels and captured enemies along with their leaders, the execution of cowardly captains, harsh imprisonment and private revenge were deeply embedded in Roman daily life (Lintott, 1969:38, 42–44, 50). The purported *Pax Augusta* with its results, whether reform, peace, or education, was established "on violence, killing,

2 Cf. Matt 27:23, Mark 15:14, Luk 23:22, Joh 18:30, Act 9:13; 16:28; 23:9.

and preoccupation with death, sometimes repressed and sometimes bubbling in blood to the surface" (Zanker, 1988:289). Even the emperors themselves were victims of the violent systems of the empire (Ningade, 2016:616). Criminals were exposed and executed and their corpses left to be viewed by the public for the sake of imposing power and fear on them (Barry, 2008:222–246). The city of imperial Rome was rife with housebreakers, pickpockets, petty thieves, and muggers; and the common people admired the bloody and dehumanising gladiatorial games. Riots about food shortages and injustice were common (Africa, 1971:3–21). The populace also often expressed their anger against the authorities by demolishing statues (Barry, 2008:234).

Punt (2012:28–29) rightly states "violence bred violence, and the violent setting of the first century CE influenced and contributed to the shaping of the NT documents' appropriation of violence-related issues". In short, the means to triumph in the Roman Empire whether at the authoritarian or popular levels was simple: *war*. The Letter to the Romans is also replete with the vocabulary of violence. In the next section the concept of violence and engaging, resisting and conquering it will be studied in the Letter to the Romans. First, God and the concepts and words for violence will be studied. Next, there will be a discussion on violence in relation to human beings, and then the means to engage violence will be analysed before a conclusion is offered.

VIOLENCE IN RELATION TO GOD: DISHONOURING GOD

In the first chapter of the letter, Paul presents God and God's gospel in relation to power (δύναμις) (Rom 1:4). Jesus' appointment as king by God is in δύναμις (Rom 1:3–40). It is worth noting that Paul's mention of the power of God counters the situation of νεκρός (the deceased). The word νεκρός here is connected to his humiliating death by a violent act of imperial Rome. The power of imperial Rome was established by military might that humiliated, killed and abused countless victims. Paul seems to argue that the violent power of imperial Rome is defeated through the power of God. Such a reading can also be substantiated from Romans 1:16 where Paul claims that the Gospel is the power (δύναμις) of God to bring salvation. In the cultural context of Romans, the priestly, military, and administrative powers are effective means to salvation. Augustus and Nero were, therefore, celebrated as saviours and benefactors of the entire world (Jewett & Kotansky, 2007:139). Their gospel is a dehumanising power promising peace, security, and wealth for Rome through violence that included killing, abusing, subjugating, and confiscating other nations. Paul, however, announces that he is not ashamed of the Gospel because it promises to rescue the nations from the power of unrighteousness.

Paul argues that the power of God is revealed to the whole world through creation (Rom 1:20). In Romans 1:19, Paul contends that unlike the Roman Emperors, God has shown God's glory and the honour of God's eternal power through the things God created – not through violence. God's splendour and glory is revealed by providing humanity with all the necessities of life. Roman populace used to revolt when there was a shortage of food; Paul in contrast claims that it is not the Roman Emperors who sustain life, but God.

However, this creative power of God is consciously rejected by the nations. In so doing, they have opposed God. They are God's enemies (Rom 5:10), and they oppose God by suppressing the truth (Rom 1:18). The word suppress (κατέχω) connotes "violence"; here it is suppressing the truth about God and replacing it with a lie through ἀσέβεια (impious and a prescribed crime) and ἀδικία (wrongdoing, injustice and law-breaking) (Jewett & Kotansky, 2007:152). God is dishonoured, for God's personhood is replaced by mortal human beings, animals and birds, or created beings. If our definition of violence as the violation of personhood is kept in view, God's personhood is violated; or to borrow a part of Schinkel's definition of violence, God's person is negatively affected when it is replaced by images of the emperors being honoured, worshiped and served as gods (Rom 1:23, 25).

However, God has resisted violence against God's personhood through the manifestation of God's wrath. The wrath of God did not manifest through bloody military action, murder, or dehumanising actions but by delivering God's opponents to their own desire, passions (Rom 1:24, 26) and debased mind (Rom 1:28). God freed those who rebelled from God's control and left them to experience the consequences of their own decisions. Such a godless life, argues Paul, brought dishonour to humanity and chaos to its societal life (Rom 1:24-32). Deliverance into the tyranny of desire and a debased mind is not the reason for God's wrath but the result of it (Jewett & Kotansky, 2007:167-168). The heart's desire, passion and a debased mind are personified as if they were powers to control and dominate persons to do things that violate their own personhood in terms of their bodies and conduct. Paul thus argues that freedom from the control of God's kingship results in violence either in the form of violating one's own personhood or that of others.

Paul again discusses God's power and wrath in Romans 9:17 and 22. God contested with Pharaoh to manifest God's power. Pharaoh is the symbol of obdurate and oppressive kingdoms which refuse to acknowledge God and who use their power to abuse and violate their subjects (Jewett & Kotansky, 2007:583). Paul clearly states the purpose of raising Pharaoh to power is to bring glory to God over all the earth (Rom 9:17). God's conflict with Pharaoh was to demonstrate how the power of a human kingdom is weak when compared to God's power. The analogy of the potter makes it clear (Fitzmyer, 1993:569) since the function of the clay is different based on the purpose of the potter (Rom 9:21). Hence, the kingdom of Pharaoh seems to be assigned to lead and to promote oppression and violence, which had already been installed as a system and a culture against the Jews' God. Paul's argument seems to be anchored in the traditional Jewish concept of God who can use evil leaders to serve God's purpose (Wagner, 2003:73). The victory over the power of Pharaoh is the archetypical manifestation of God's power in Jewish literature in this regard. Paul's understanding of God's power is positive because it brought deliverance to the Israelites who were suffering violence.³ The power of God is not only for

3 Since the interest of this study is on the concept of violence, I will not enter into the traditional debate over predestination and exegetical discussion related to it. However, Wagner's reading of 9:22 and 11:28 is adopted, i.e. if God endures Pharaoh with much patience, then he will be much more patient with Israel until they repent; however, they are enemies at present (Wagner, 2002:77).

deliverance. It also punishes and destroys the evil-doers. However, according to Romans 9:22, God is patient with the vessels of wrath, which echoes Romans 2:4-9. If Paul is thinking of what he wrote in Romans 2:4-11 then those who disobey the truth, but obey wickedness because of the hardness of their heart, will be destroyed. Hence, they determine their own destiny.

Paul makes the point very clear in Romans 2:5 that the wrath of God is the righteous and impartial judgment of God against those who do evil and that such evil is defined by the Law of God (Rom 2:12). The judgement against those who do evil is tribulation, distress, destruction and wrath and fury (Rom 2:8-9). Such judgement is based on one's actions and is not done arbitrarily, but with patience after giving ample room for the possibility of change on the side of the evil-doer. Doing good results in peace, honour and glory (Rom 2:9). However, Paul argues that such judgement is not the prerogative of fellow human beings; rather, it belongs solely to God.

Nonetheless, in relation to imperial Rome, Paul seems to argue that God in God's sovereignty appointed the Roman Empire as an instrument to execute God's wrath according to Romans 13:4, as opposed to Pharaoh, who was the object of God's wrath. Romans 13:1-7 has been considered as an anomaly in the letter, generating a variety of speculation ranging from its authenticity to its historical situation. There is no question that Paul had a specific situation in mind while writing this exhortation, although it is impossible to reconstruct it accurately. Elliott (1997:195) has observed that Paul's use of subjection in Romans 8:20, 11:25-32 and 13:1-2 is not positive. The subjection in Romans 8:50, according to Jewett (2010:91-105), is the result of Adam's disobedience. Hence, it can be related to the wrath of God. The Christ-believing community shares the particular suffering due to their allegiance to Christ and as part of the universal family of creation. If Elliott's understanding of subjection as being negative could be maintained, then subjection to the Roman Empire's system could also be interpreted as a Christ-believing community sharing in the suffering of creation. However, unlike the subjection in Romans 8:17-23 where creation is subjected to futility which cannot be avoided, the Christ-believing community could avoid the brutal imperial system by doing good (Rom 13:3). The brutal system of the Roman Empire is part of God's wrath that will be executed against wrong-doers (Rom 13:5), for the Christ-believing community is not allowed to take revenge, instead they should leave it to God (Rom 12:19-20). The Roman Empire is the servant of God for the benefit of the Christ-believing community for it punishes the evil-doers (Rom 13:4a). The paradox, however, is that they suffered and were also persecuted by the empire itself like Jesus did (Rom 8:17, 31-39).

In Romans 5:6 and 10, Christ-believing communities were also enemies before their reconciliation to God. The word *καταλλάσσω* basically means exchanging one thing for another and is used in the sphere of conflict. For example, Dio Cassius refers to Antony's desire to be reconciled to Caesar, similarly Caesar desires to be reconciled to Fulvius and Lucius, and Otto's wish to be reconciled to Vitellius (Dio Cassius *Hist.* Rom 39.6; 55:21; 64.9.3.15). Thucydides also speaks about the reconciliation of common people with each other and a city with another (Thucydides *Hist.* 4.61.2).

The reconciliation of alienated marital partners is also referred to by Josephus (*Ant* 7.185, 196, 1.195). The language of reconciliation is imported from the political sphere of creating peace between warring parties (Jewett & Kotansky, 2007:366). Hence, the word reconciliation is used in the context of violence. The initiative as well as the necessary prerequisite for the creation of peace is not taken by the enemies who violated the being of God, but by God, who is being violated. The paradox is that the means of reconciliation and the creation of peace is violence – the death of the Messiah at the hands of imperial Rome (Rom 5:6-11). Furthermore, the rejection of the one is the cause of the reconciliation of others (Rom 11:13).

Paul presents the death of the Messiah from two viewpoints. One viewpoint is from the symbolic world of Jewish sacred cults – atonement (Rom 3:25-26) and the other from the context of imperial violence (Rom 8:31-39). Romans 8:32 is particularly revealing regarding violence. Paul says God delivers up the Messiah for “us all”. Paul does not explicitly say to whom the Messiah was given up. The verb *παράδιδωμι* can be translated as “to deliver up to custody”, “to be judged”, “condemned”, “tormented”, and “to be put to death” (Mark 9:31; 10:33; 15:1). The context of Romans 8:31-39 seems to be the encounter between the Messiah and the enemies of God and later between the Christ-believing community and the enemies of God. Gaventa (2013:65), in her analysis of the word *παράδιδωμι*, has concluded that it is used in a military context for surrendering to the enemy. It appears that the Messiah, being on the side of God, is engaging evil, but as a soldier of righteousness he is captured, defeated, and put to death by the power and violence of imperial Rome. God’s act of delivering up the Messiah is expressed in terms of not being willing to spare him until imperial Rome exhausts its power of violence and know its limit in order that God may manifest God’s supreme power and glory by raising the Messiah from death, the result of violence, and thus not just sparing him from the act of violence. Schinkel (2010:56) argues that violence also has a positive aspect. Punt’s (2012:23–42) analysis of violence in the New Testament concludes that at times violence is “necessary to effect positive change.” From God’s side, the violent suffering and death of the Messiah is positive enough to create peace between God and God’s enemies.

In sum, God’s wrath is directed at those who reject the truth about God and God’s commandments and have therein committed violence against God’s personhood and God’s Messiah. This includes Israel, who was once the vessel of mercy. The wrath of God can be understood as God’s righteous and impartial judgement against evil and evil-doers. Human beings are not entitled to such a prerogative, as it is solely God’s prerogative to pass such judgement. Although God’s power is constructive in some respect as God positively uses God’s power to create nature to sustain humanity and to bring salvation, God also uses it to destroy and punish the wicked. Such a violent use of power is understood positively in the letter to the Romans because it destroys evil. Hence, for Paul, God’s power not only creates and provides but also crushes and destroys God’s enemies unless otherwise, they reconcile and do good, which is the basis for peace, honour and glory.

VIOLENCE IN RELATION TO HUMAN BEINGS: UNDER A VIOLENT KING AND KINGDOM

In the Letter to the Romans, Paul categorises humanity into at least two groups, namely: Those outside of the community of Christ and those who are of the community of Christ. The outsiders are enemies of God but are also potential friends. Galtung's (1969:168) definition of violence as the distance between actualised violence and the potential for it, while the necessary condition is at one's disposal for actualising the potential, could be applied to the outsiders. The outsiders have all the necessary reasons and conditions to realise their potential of being God's reconciled friends. If this is not the case, then they exercise self-imposed violence against themselves.

Such self-imposed violence is the result of being under the power of one's own evil passions and desires, which is the result of God's wrath. These evil passions result in (1) Violating one's own personhood: dishonouring (ἀτιμάζω) one's own body (Rom 1:24), exercising dishonourable (ἀτιμία) passion (Rom 1:26) and shameless acts (ἀσχημοσύνη); (2) Violating another's personhood: this involves both physical and verbal violation, such as envy, murder, strife, deceit, malignity, gossip, slander, insolence, being haughty, boastful, inventing evil, disobedience to parents, and ruthlessness. Although such a violent way of life was ubiquitous in imperial Rome, Paul exposes the violent life of the Jews as well in his discussion of the Jews' unfaithfulness in Romans 2:17-24 and 3:9-20. The Jewish teacher steals, commits adultery, robs temples and therefore dishonours (ἀτιμάζω) God by breaking the Law. This is elaborated on in Romans 3:13-17, which deals with verbal and physical violence. Verbal violence includes deception and cursing, whereas physical violence refers to the shedding of blood.

Paul argues that such a violent way of life is the result of humanity being slaves of violent kings, namely Sin and Death. In Romans 5:12-21, Sin and Death (θάνατος) are two cosmic ruling forces. Jewett and Kotansky (2007:377) find no parallel concept either in Greek or biblical literature (i.e. Death exercising kingly power). Therefore, it is Paul's distinct conception of Death. If Sin and Death are understood in the light of aggression or invasion and domination of another nation by power, Paul is making an analogy between the violent dominion of the Roman Empire and the power and dominance of Sin and Death in the world of humanity. Sin and Death invaded the human world and exerted their power over humanity to execute their desire. Paul provides a specific example from the life of the Jews under the Law regarding how powerful these kings are (Mekonnen, 2017:63-64). Paul portrays Sin as a violent force because it kills (Rom 7:11). Such killing might be understood ontologically. However, Paul uses terms that explicitly describe violent action. Sin not only kills. It also makes one a slave. In the Roman Empire, slavery was a violent system and business (Gaventa, 2013:67). Paul, however, used slavery in a positive sense in Romans 1:1-2 and Romans 6:12-23 despite the Roman Empire's killing of masses of slaves. Others died of diseases and maltreatment (Gaventa, 2013:67). Paul is not ignorant of this in that he describes slavery as a life of fear (Rom 8:15). Hence, Sin and Death are violent powers (Gaventa, 2013:66) from which enslaved persons would desperately need someone who might free them of their grip.

The kind of slavery Paul is speaking about is that of being a prisoner of war. In Romans 7:11 and 23, Paul uses three important words that illuminate the nature of the slavery: ἀφορμή, ἀντιστρατεύομα, and αἰχμαλωτίζω. The noun ἀφορμή means a place from which a movement or attack is made, i.e. a base of operations. It could generally mean “opportunity” but it is often used with its military meaning (Gaventa, 2013:64). The verb ἀντιστρατεύομα is to undertake a military expedition, or take the field, against anyone. It means to oppose, and to war against. The verb αἰχμαλωτίζω means to lead away the captive. In light of these words, Romans 7 indicates that there was conflict between the Jews and the Sin that the commandments of the Law revealed to them (Mekonnen, 2017:63-64). Paul uses violent military language to explain the power of Sin. The power of Sin not only defeats its opponent, but also kills or destroys them.

Paul’s analysis of human violence is that it is the result of opposing God, suppressing God’s truth and rejecting God’s commandments and therefore human beings are handed over to a tyranny that powerfully enslaved them under its grip. Paul thus argues that humanity is living under a cruel tyrannical kingdom that violated human freedom and reduced their personhood to that of being a prisoner to Sin. Thus, Paul’s analysis of human violence is that it is the result of opposing God, suppressing God’s truth, and rejecting God’s commandments, which resulted in obtaining freedom to serve unrighteousness and wickedness.

ENGAGING EVIL: CONQUERING THE VIOLENT KING

Unlike the traditional interpretation, the Letter to Romans has received a different characterisation from the perspective of reading it within the context of the Roman Empire. For example, it can in this context be understood as a political declaration of war on Caesar and as an “ideological intifada” against Roman imperial ideology (Elliott, 2010:61). The opposition that God declares through the Messiah, although it is implicitly against the thought and ideology of imperial Rome as Elliott claims, is against all ἀσέβεια (ungodliness) and wickedness (ἀδικία) of human beings outside of the community of Christ (which includes the Caesars) (Rom 1:18). Paul seems to be looking at this warfare in different stages. First the Messiah was defeated, victimised by the power of the Caesars, but God triumphs over the violent power of the Roman Empire by raising the Messiah and appointing him as King to bring about the obedience of the nations through faith in him. For God, this is good news. Second, God freed those who believe in the Messiah from evil and established them as a Christ-believing community in order to engage the same foe.

Paul argues that for such a community not only faith and reconciliation with God is needed (Rom 5:1-11) to resolve the enmity between God and the wicked, but also participation in the death and resurrection of the Messiah through baptism (Rom-6:4). Participation in the violent death of Jesus and the defeat of Death through the resurrection of Christ consists of the sacramental submission to the kingship of Jesus and the declaration of freedom from the tyranny of ungodliness and wickedness. Paul declares that for those who united with the death and resurrection of the Messiah their old self (the enemy) is killed (crucified) in order to: (1) Destroy

the sinful body of those who believe (Rom 6:6). Paul used the verb καταργέω which could mean to disarm (Jewett & Kotansky, 2007:404) or to deprive of force, influence and power or to destroy; (2) Prevent the believers from becoming slaves again to wickedness and ungodliness. Baptism as union with the violent death of Christ is used as a means of killing the wicked personhood in order to free the believer from the slavery of sin (Rom 6:1-11). Paul declares that the violent death of the Messiah at the hands of the empire of Rome, in which the believers must participate through baptism, is God's mysterious strategy of engaging all the power of ungodliness and wickedness. It is the method of destroying the violent king through his own violent act by breaking and disarming his power in the life of those who believe in the Messiah.

However, those who are freed should maintain their freedom and should not succumb again to the enemy – i.e. wickedness (Rom 6:13). Placing oneself under the dominion of Sin is understood in terms of military domination. Particularly, yielding one's limbs and organs to the desires of wickedness is to participate willingly in the opposition against God and the Messiah. The limbs and organs are ὄπλον, which can be translated as "weapons". The bodies of the believers must thus not be made available to oppose and engage righteousness but must be presented to God as weapons of engaging wickedness.

Not only limbs and organs are important but also the mind of the Christ community is as important as the members of the body (Rom 12:1-3). In Romans 8:7, Paul warns that setting one's mind on the things of the flesh (wickedness) can be seen as hostility to God. The mental life of the community should be influenced by the things of the Spirit. Such exercises are a matter of life and death. It is saving oneself from death. One has to kill in order to live! Kill the works of the flesh by the Spirit; otherwise death is the only option (Rom 8:13). Paul uses the metaphor of war and violence and seems to affirm that violent power is a necessary measure to stop not only evil action but also evil thought. Unlike imperial Rome, Paul declares a spiritual combat that positively affects one's moral behaviour. Paul believes that peace is the result of the destruction of one's enemies. These enemies, however, are not physical but cosmic, namely: Sin, Death and Satan (Rom 16:20). Nevertheless, Paul uses the analogy of war in imperial Rome to help him drive his point home to his audience about the kingdom of God, which is righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit (Rom 14:17).

However, Paul understands that opposing evil involves physical suffering similar to that of the Messiah and the killing of the flesh attracts physical violence towards the believing community (Rom 8:17). The enemy is aiming at separating the community from the Messiah by releasing a physical and psychological assault against the believing community such as tribulation, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, peril, and the sword. The encounter against the community is carried out by an allied army of imperial Rome and cosmic forces. Paul describes this assault of the enemy against the believing community as unceasing killing (cf. "we are being killed daily" – Rom 8:37). It is a paradox that the community is daily assaulted and killed by the system of imperial Rome but never dies – instead conquers through

the Messiah with whom the community shares his resurrection life. Since the people are loved by him, every evil thing will be thwarted, to work out for the good of the community. Paul also describes the cosmic forces that allied with the Roman Empire, such as death, life, angels (evil angels), principalities, and powers. Yet, even all these creations cannot separate the community from their Messiah and God. Instead, the believing community are “super victors” (ὑπερνικάω). Jewett and Kotansky (2007:549) observe that the word ὑπερνικάω “brings Paul’s discourse within the scope of divinely inspired warriors and kings who win total victories over their foes... [It is not just] “prevailing but supervictor.” Hence, the community along with its Messiah crushes its enemy completely.

Paul, thus, sees violent power as part of daily life in the Christ-community. The enemies are both spiritual (i.e. Sin, Death, and spiritual beings) and physical, which comes through the imperial system of Rome. The community is expected to endure and engage violence until the peace that comes through the destruction of their foes is realised.

THE WEAPONS FOR ENGAGING EVIL: DOING GOOD

Paul’s vocabulary for violence could be stated as ἀσέβεια and ἀδικία. The Messiah comes to remove ἀσέβεια (Rom 11:20), which is impurity that might relate to worshipping idols. The word ἀδικία includes all kinds of sins (Rom 1:28) and is not limited to injustice. Rather, it is disobedience to the revealed truth of God, therefore it is the opposite of truth (Rom 2:8); it is to be unfaithful by breaking the commandments of the law (Rom 3:5) and it is a way of life or system opposing and engaging the ways of God (Rom 6:3). Paul, however, uses one key word that represents ἀσέβεια and ἀδικία, namely: κακός. The catalogue of ἀσέβεια and ἀδικία in Romans 1:18-32 and the ones in Romans 13:11-14 are stated as κακός in Romans 2:9. Paul in Romans 12:17 and 21 explicitly prohibits using evil (κακός) as a means to defeat evil (κακός). He also opposes the concept of using evil to bring good (Rom 3:8). But κακός is so powerful that one cannot resist doing it (Rom 7:19) because it dwells inside of a person (Rom 7:21) and it is the source of fearing authority (Rom 13:3).

The preferred weapon for engaging κακός is doing ἀγαθός. For Paul, doing ἀγαθός results in glory, honour and peace (Rom 2:7-10). However, ἀγαθός must be done by persevering (Rom 2:7). Perseverance is the language of war that refers to not losing one’s ground in a battle. Doing ἀγαθός is an instrument for engaging wickedness and unrighteousness which is a comprehensive term for evil. However, who or what defines ἀγαθός? Paul argues that the commandments of the Law is ἀγαθός and opposes κακός and by nature it is holy and righteous (Rom 7:12-13). Violence against the personhood of God is the result of breaking the commandments of God. God’s wrath against ἀσέβεια and ἀδικία of human beings is because it is breaking the very first commandments of the Decalogue, the worship of idols and suppressing the truth which is dishonouring God (Rom 1:21-23). Malina and Pilch (2006:227-232) have also observed that Paul is evaluating the acts and behaviour of the Gentiles in accordance with the Ten Commandments.

Paul declares that the Law is the embodiment of knowledge and truth which makes the will of God known and it is a way of honouring God (Rom 2:17-24) (Mekonnen, 2017:65). The commandments of the Law are against all *κακός* that exists inside a person (Rom 7:7-20). The Christ-believing community must have a transformed mind that discerns the will of God, which is acceptable, perfect, and good (*ἀγαθός*) (Rom 12:2). The will of God is embodied in the Law. The hallmark of those who walk according to the Spirit is obedience to the commandment of the Law (Rom 2:25-29 and 8:1-8). Thinking about the flesh is hostility to God because it results in disobedience to the Law and displeases God (Rom 8:7). If walking in the Spirit and not walking according to the flesh means fulfilling the Law (Rom 8:4), then walking in the Spirit does ultimately mean obeying commandments of the Law after the freedom from Sin and its condemnation is experienced in Christ. If this is granted, the commandments of the Law in the realm of the Spirit area means to kill the flesh (Rom 8:13).

In Romans 7, Paul depicts a Jewish community engaging Sin but, by being in the realm of the flesh, was defeated and killed through the commandments of God, and enslaved by an undesired king, whereas in Romans 8:1-16, he depicts a community which is in the Spirit and strong, alive, a killer of the flesh and obedient to the commandments of the Law which is an expression of friendship with God and honouring God. Once the commandments of the Law was an instrument in the hands of Sin to kill the one who desires to keep it, but now in Christ, it is reversed, those who are free and are walking in the Spirit (which implicitly means obedience to the commandment of God) use it to kill the enemy – Sin.

Paul calls the Christ-believing community to put on the weapons of light (Rom 13:12), as opposed to the physical weapon sworn by the Roman Empire, which attempt to bring order through fear (Rom 13:1-7). In Romans 13:1-7, Paul is not speaking about being simply subservient to the violent imperial system, rather Paul insists that a Christ-believing community should do good (*ἀγαθός*). The good Paul is speaking of in Romans 13:1-7 is not the civil laws of the imperial system because “good” (*ἀγαθός*) should be understood in terms of Paul’s usage of the word in the letter. The commandments of God are the weapons of light which defeat evil through the Spirit. Furthermore, the Roman Empire’s army is the servant of the God of the Christ-believing community (Rom 13:4). The Christ-believing community is not the servant of the Roman Empire; rather the community is the slave of righteousness or of God (Rom 6:19, 22). The ways in which the community submits to the empire are indirect, i.e. through obeying the commandment of the Law and the teaching of Paul (i.e. doing good and avoiding evil). However, Paul argues that the empire channels the wrath of God upon those who do evil (Rom 1:18-32). Disobeying the commandments of God and the teaching of Paul exposes one to the brutal and violent system of the empire. However, Paul argues that life and peace are not in the hands of Roman Empire and cannot be attained through its system since it is the result of obeying God through the Spirit (Rom 8:6-7).

Paul explicitly commands the Christ-believing community to overcome evil (κακός) with good (ἀγαθός) (Rom 12:21). Doing good (ἀγαθός) is a weapon against all violence that they experienced. It is obvious that the community experienced evil (κακός), which can be called violence, from the imperial system (Rom 12:14, 17), but they are called to do good (ἀγαθός) in return and not to retaliate, but instead to strive to foster peace through obedience to God (Rom 12:17-19). The good that Paul enumerated in Romans 12:9-21 is inclusive in the sense that it is the opposite of evil which also includes all aspects of evil. It is described in the language of love in Romans 12:9 as hating evil and holding fast to good. A more elaborate description of love is given in Romans 13:8-10. Loving one's neighbour means not doing wrong to one's neighbour (Rom 13:10). What is wrong is defined by the commandments of the Law, which embodies the knowledge, truth and will of God (Rom 13:9; 2:17-20). Similarly, what is good is also defined by the commandments of the Law (Rom 7:12-13, 18-19). Doing ἀγαθός to one's enemy is not only Jesus' teaching but it is also one of the commandments of the Law (Exod 23:4-5; Prov 17:13; 20:22). For example, Deuteronomy insists that retaliation and judgement belong to God alone (Deut 32:35). The Law discourages taking revenge by one's own hand (Deut 32:35). Therefore, ultimately loving one's neighbour is obeying the commandments of the Law (Mekonnen, 2017:ii-iii). The Christ community is called to conquer evil (ἀγαθός) with good (ἀγαθός), but what is evil and what is good cannot be arbitrarily defined. It needs to be defined by God through God's commandments. Hence, for the community of Christ, the weapon against violence is the commandments of God.⁴

For Paul, Christ believing communities are the righteous army of God who are engaging wickedness (Rom 6:12-23). All opposition against the proclamation of the reign of the Messiah of God must be resisted and repelled by doing good (Rom 2:7 and 8:31-39) until the salvation of God fully comes (13:11-14 and 8:18-26). All of the cosmos will experience violence until God's final redemption of the world is manifested. Till then engaging evil continues. The ways of life of the Christ-community is as an imitation of the Messiah, their King who suffered under the imperial system. They are destined to share in his suffering and glory (Rom 8:17), and to be formed in his image (Rom 8:29). The Christ-community is denied the right to judge others and retaliate against their enemies, as this is the sole prerogative of God. However, the Christ-believing community conquers the evil they encounter through the proclamation of the good news and actively engaging themselves in doing good as defined and prescribed in the commandments of God.

CONCLUSION

In the Letter to the Romans, Paul presented God as a wrathful God (Rom 1:18-32), an impartial judge (Rom 2:5-16), rejecter of the disobedient (Rom 11:14), stern (Rom 11:22), and as an avenger (Rom 12:17-20), warrior (Rom 16:20), as well as saviour (Rom 1:16-17), kind, forbearing, patient (Rom 2:4), loving (Rom 5:1-11),

4 Whether such commandments are the Ten Commandments or Paul's elaborated teachings on them which traditionally called exhortation does not make significant difference – they are all commandments of God.

deliverer (Rom 8:1-39), initiator and performer of the reconciliation of the world to himself (Rom 11:15), as well as merciful (Rom 12:1). If Schinkel's theory of violence as the reduction of being is taken into consideration, Paul seems to be very careful not to reduce God to just a loving and merciful God. Further, considering violence in terms of exerting power and in light of God's character presented in the Letter to the Romans, violence is an inevitable phenomenon in the realm of the created world. But the question is who is using the power and for what purpose? Paul argues that the power of God is for deliverance by crushing ungodliness, wickedness, corruption and the spiritual foe – Satan – to bring freedom to those willing to believe the Messiah, and to the whole creation in order to restore honour to God's name and God's community. Power used for dehumanising, humiliating and fabricating social chaos is understood as being the result of God's wrath upon those who reject and break the commandments of God. But the wrath of God is God handing them over to the freedom of exercising their own desire and ways of life. However, such persons or communities are not free but under the kingship of Sin and Death.

On the other hand, the Christ-believing community is called and destined to share the suffering and mission of its Messiah and is devoid of the right to judge others and retaliate against its enemies, despite experiencing violence either from the system they live in, or from individuals who do evil against them. Instead, these people are called to live in the realm of God's Spirit in Christ, although insignificant in number, they engage perseveringly and engage evil by doing good through obedience to the commandments of God. This is how they live until the redemption of the whole creation, which is now subjected in hope, is completed by the God of peace by crushing Satan under their feet and making them super victors.

Implications for the Ethiopian evangelical church

My understanding of violence comes from first-hand experience and witness of the persecution of evangelical churches in Ethiopia under the Marxist-Leninist ideology junta, which confiscated church properties, and tortured and imprisoned Christians and their leaders. In addition to the communist cruelty towards Christians in the country as a whole, before and after the fall of the communist regime, evangelical Christians, in particular, are ridiculed, vilified, insulted, ostracised, and persecuted by communities who are adherents of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church as well by Muslims, animists, and their close relatives. However, the Churches' response to such violence has been non-violent in nature. The paradox is furthermore that the evangelical churches came out stronger in faith and unity after the period of official persecution and today they have increased in number and influence.

From the churches' experience of persecution, I can deduce that the persecutor's understanding of 'good' is to protect and defend one's own country, religion, culture, honour, ideology and influence from a rival. To date, on the popular level the evangelical churches are considered to be the enemy – a Western religion invading and weakening the established religion, culture, ideology and values of the country. Their members are labelled as weak, timid and enemies of the country

because of their non-violent ideology. They are thus considered as unfit for military and political responsibilities.

The concept of 'good' and 'evil', for the evangelical churches, while it is biblically understood is not clearly defined and articulated. However, at the practical level, doing good is seen as obedience to the Word of God and doing evil is equivalent to transgressing the Word of God, therefore engaging evil through the means of evil is abhorred and denounced. Hence, for Ethiopian evangelical Christians, the biblical concept of doing good to overcome evil is a challenge given that the normative practice has been to use violence to defend one's honour, country, religion, culture, and ideology. My reading of Romans articulates the cause of violence, and identifies the ways in which the evangelical churches in Ethiopia can overcome violence, and it explicates God's role as a righteous judge of evil and a vindicator of the victims of violence which gives them hope and a reason for continuing to do good. It also underscores the reason for the non-violent feature of the Ethiopian evangelical churches' response to violence and the means used by its members who were able to conquer it through non-retaliation, non-judgmental persuasion and actively and perseveringly doing good as defined in my reading of the Letter to the Romans.

References

- Africa, T.W. (1971). Urban Violence in Imperial Rome. *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 2(1):3–21. <https://doi.org/10.2307/202441>
- Barry, W.D. (2008). Exposure, Mutilation and Riot: Violence at the "Scalae Gemoniae" in Early Imperial Rome. *Greece & Rome*, 55(2):222–246. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017383508000545>
- Denzin, N.K. (1984). Toward a Phenomenology of Domestic, Family Violence. *American Journal of Sociology*, 90(3):483–513. <https://doi.org/10.1086/228114>
- Elliott, N.(1997). 'Romans 13:1–7 in the Context of Imperial Propaganda,' in Horsley, R.A. (ed.) *Paul and Empire: Religion and Power in Roman Imperial Society*. Harrisburg, PA: Trinity, pp.184–204.
- Elliott, N. (2010). *The Arrogance of Nations*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press.
- Fitzmyer, J.A. (1993). *Romans*. New York, NY: Bantman Doubleday Dell Publishing Group.
- Galtung, J. (1969). Violence, Peace, and Peace Research. *Journal of Peace Research*, 6(3):167–191. <https://doi.org/10.1177/002234336900600301>
- Gaventa, B.R. and Krans, J.(2013). 'The Rhetoric of Violence and The God of Peace in Paul's letter to the Romans,' in Mitchell, M. and Moessner, D.P. (eds.) *Paul, John, and Apocalyptic Eschatology: Studies in Honour of Martinus C. de Boer*. Leiden: Brill, pp.61–75. https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004250369_006
- Geuss, R. (2001). *History and Illusion in Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Jewett, R. (2010). Interpreting Romans 8:18–23 within Imperial Context. *Biblica et Patristica Thoruniensia*, 3:91–105. <https://doi.org/10.12775/BPTh.2010.004>
- Jewett, R. and Kotansky, R.D. (2007). *Romans: A Commentary*. Second Impression edition. Epp, E. J. (ed.) Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press.
- Lintott, A.W. (1969). *Violence in Republican Rome*. London: Oxford University Press.
- Malina, B.J. and Pilch, J.J. (2006). *Social-science Commentary on the Letters of Paul*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press.
- Mekonnen, E.S. (2017). *The Torah and Community Formation: A Comparative Study of Romans 13:8–14 and Matthew 22:34–40*. Viewed from <http://scholar.sun.ac.za/handle/10019.1/101181> [Accessed 3 May 2017].
- Nimgade, A. (2016). Instability and violence in Imperial Rome: A "laboratory" for studying social contagion? *Complexity*, 21(S2):613–622. <https://doi.org/10.1002/cplx.21839>
- Punt, J. (2012). 'Violence in the NT and The Roman Empire: Ambivalence, Othering, Agency,' in de Villiers, P.G.R. (ed.) *Coping with Violence in the New Testament*. Leiden: Brill, pp.23–42. https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004221055_003

Riches, D. (1986). 'The Phenomenon of Violence,' in Riches, D. (ed.) *The Anthropology of Violence*. Oxford and New York: Blackwell Pub, pp.1–27.

Schinkel, W. (2010). *Aspects of Violence: A Critical Theory*. New York, NY: Springer.
<https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230251342>

Wagner, J.R. (2003). *Heralds of the Good News: Isaiah and Paul "In Concert" in the Letter to the Romans*. Leiden: Brill. https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004268197_007

Zanker, P. (1988). *The Power of Images in the Age of Augustus*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press. <https://doi.org/10.3998/mpub.12362>