

BINDING OBLIGATIONS IN ROMANS 13:7: A SEMANTIC FIELD AND SOCIAL CONTEXT

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Summary

Insufficient attention has been given to the meaning of the four distinctive terms used in Romans 13:7: 'tribute' (φόρος), 'tax' (τέλος), 'reverence' (φόβος), and 'honour' (τιμή). This article will discuss these terms in relation to the Graeco-Roman semantic field of political obligation, dividing them into the categories of 'tangible' obligations (tribute and tax) and 'intangible' obligations (reverence and honour). We will also examine Romans 13:7 in light of the social context of the Neronean era, in which there was an increasing burden of taxation and the introduction of legal penalties for failure to show due reverence and honour to those in authority.

I. Introduction

Commentators have glossed over the significance of the four terms which Paul uses in Romans 13:7—terms which describe the obligations that Christians have toward civic authorities: 'tribute' (φόρος), 'tax' (τέλος), 'reverence' (φόβος), and 'honour' (τιμή). For example, in his pre-war commentary on Romans, R.C.H. Lenski commented, in regard to Romans 13:7, that there was no unique significance in Paul's use of these terms.¹ Lenski argued that the apostle's 'great positive principles... apply to all times, to us as well as to the Romans, to our relation to our secular government as well as to their relation to theirs'.² C.E.B. Cranfield, likewise, discounted the particular relevance which Paul's words may have had for the Roman Christians, but for different reasons. Cranfield sought to find the

¹R.C.H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans* (Columbus: Lutheran Book Concern, 1936) 790.

²*Ibid.*, 789.

source of Paul's sayings and located it in Gospel tradition³ and other New Testament documents⁴; the particular significance of the apostle's words to his Roman audience receives only secondary attention.

However, an important though neglected question to ask is: What was the import of these four terms, i.e. their meaning and the social context which they implied? This article will seek to examine both these issues.

II. The Context

Romans 13:7 is a part of a greater discussion of how the Roman Christians should deal with civil authorities. In the preceding verses (13:1-6) we find traditional Graeco-Roman thought on the government's dual role in society: It should punish the evil-doer and reward those who do good. Greek and Roman writers alike—Lysias, Xenophon, Demosthenes, Diodorus Siculus, Josephus, Philo, Dio—all speak of the government's role in this way.⁵ As but one example, Philo says that the function of government is to mete out 'censure and chastisement according to law for wrong-doers (and) praise and honour for all well-doers, again, according to law'.⁶

In the immediate context of Romans 13:7, Paul places obedience to authorities in the moral realm; for the Christian, disregard of authority is a sin. This is because the authorities are God's servants (διάκονος in 13:4 and λειτουργοί in 13:6). Christians have an obligation to give obedience to civil authority.

³C.E.B. Cranfield, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1979) II, 669-70.

⁴*Ibid.*, 670-73. In his recent commentary, B. Byrne, *Romans* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1996), 389, 392, likewise commends this interpretation.

⁵See W.C. van Unnik, 'Lob und Strafe durch die Obrigkeit. Hellenistisches zu Röm 13,3-4', in E.E. Ellis (ed.), *Jesus und Paulus: Festschrift für Werner Georg Kümmel zum 70 Geburtstag* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1975) 336-40, for other Graeco-Roman authors who discuss government's role.

⁶Philo, *Mos.*, I.154.

Thus, the use of obligation language in Romans 13:7 is significant.⁷ Paul's employment of such language made his exhortation in Romans 13:7 all the stronger. The same language that was used to describe payment of literal debts (loans, rents/ leases, tribute, taxes, fines, and tithes) was also used to obligate people in their social relationships. Words such as ἀποδίδωμι and ὀφείλω, used by Paul in Romans 13:7, alert us to this obligation concept and give greater weight to Paul's exhortations. Just as Christians were to pay off material debts, so also were they to meet their obligations to the state—both tangible and intangible. We turn now to discuss these four obligations.

III. 'tribute' (φόρος)

Paul first addresses the tangible obligation of imperial subjects to pay tribute (φόρος): τῷ τὸν φόρον τὸν φόρον. Commentators have historically suggested that φόρος is a general reference to taxes of all kinds, and has nothing to do with the payment of tribute by specific subject peoples.⁸ Such φόρος, in the opinion of most exegetes, does not have overtones of subjugation, this despite the fact that the literary evidence, as we shall see, points to a strong link between tribute and its payment by conquered peoples. Instead, commentators have usually believed that φόρος is merely a different type of tax, distinguished from the τέλος which Paul speaks of subsequently in that the former is a direct tax, while the latter is an indirect tax.⁹ Although he ultimately opts for the traditional interpretation, Morris

⁷The language of obligation in the Graeco-Roman world finds its focal-point in the word ὀφείλω and its cognates. However, obligation language was certainly not limited to this; there was a whole semantic field, encompassing both synonyms and antonyms, which was used to convey the concept of obligation. (Consideration of the semantic field is a point often neglected by Biblical scholars.) In my doctoral dissertation, *Loyalties Old and New: Binding Obligations in the Graeco-Roman World, Intertestamental Judaism, and Romans 12-15*, I am seeking to explore these issues.

⁸See Lenski, *Interpretation of Romans*, 801; J. Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965) II, 156; and C.K. Barrett, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1991) 228.

⁹H. Lietzmann, *An die Römer* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1933) 113.

does note that the φόρος cited in Romans 13:7, with its connotations of vanquishment, is ‘interesting’.¹⁰ As we shall seek to show in this section, we believe that Paul’s use of φόρος is much more than interesting. It has great significance, for it sheds light on the social context of the Roman Christians.

The φόρος to which Paul refers in Romans 13:7 was indeed a direct tax—an obligation (τοὺς ὀφειλομένους)¹¹ of the inhabitants of those lands which Rome had made part of its empire, either voluntarily or by force. In the form of land tax (*tributum soli*) and poll-tax (*tributum capitis*), this tribute was levied on those living in Roman provinces, be they Roman citizens or not,¹² for the imperial government ‘neglected [no] source of provincial revenue which might have relieved the purses of Italians’.¹³ Exemption from this and all taxes Augustus considered the ‘greatest privilege of all’; hence, it was very much sought after by cities, though seldom granted.¹⁴ Only those who lived in municipalities which were, firstly, Roman colonies, and, secondly, had been awarded the *ius Italicum*, were free of this obligation.¹⁵

But the significance of φόρος does not lie merely in the fact that it was a direct tax. As noted above, its import—the overtones of subjugation—is also an important, but sorely neglected, point. That φόρος did involve an aspect of subjugation is clearly witnessed in the writings of many Graeco-Roman authors. Though later, φόρος came to denote rent paid for the lease of land,¹⁶ literary evidence from the

¹⁰L. Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans* (3rd. ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988) 466.

¹¹Diodorus Siculus, *Hist.*, 27.15.2, 34/35.1.5; see also Philo, *Spec.* III.159.

¹²G.P. Burton, s.v. ‘tributum’, in S. Hornblower and A. Spawforth (eds.), *The Oxford Classical Dictionary* (Oxford: OUP, 1996) 1551.

¹³P.A. Brunt, ‘The Revenues of Rome’, in his *Roman Imperial Themes* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1990) 327.

¹⁴See J. Reynolds, *Aphrodisias and Rome* (Journal of Roman Studies Monographs 1; London: Society for the Promotion of Roman Studies, 1982) no. 13 l. 4.

¹⁵A.N. Sherwin-White, *The Roman Citizenship* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1973) 276, 320-22.

¹⁶See *P.Tebt.* 325 l. 15; 342 ll. 20, 21, 24; 368 l. 3; 377 ll. 14, 23, 27; 424 ll. 6-7; *P.Oxy.* 2712 l. 8; 3268 l. 12.

New Testament era shows that, at this time, its meaning was much more restricted, even having a formulaic quality about it. Here, time and again in both Jewish and non-Jewish authors, we read of nations and cities that were conquered and forced to pay, quite begrudgingly, φόρος.¹⁷

Of significance in regard to Romans 13:6-7 is the fact that, in numerous instances, Graeco-Roman authors use φόρος in conjunction with τελέω, employing, in an almost formulaic way, a form of the latter to indicate the payment of tribute by subject peoples. For instance, Diodorus, in his *History*, writes of Ninus, king of the Assyrians and conqueror of Babylonia.

(A)fter easily subduing the inhabitants of that region [Babylonia], because of their inexperience in the dangers of war, he laid upon them the payment of fixed yearly tributes (τελεῖν κατ' ἐνιαυτὸν ὄρισμένους φόρους).¹⁸

Josephus, as well, records how Agrippa, king of Judaea, urged the Jewish people to pay (τελέω) their tribute (φόρος/εἰσφορά) to Caesar, thereby freeing themselves of the charge of insurrection. This the Jews did, paying this direct (communal) tax to the magistrates and the members of the council (ἄρχοντες καὶ βουλευταί).¹⁹

Because it was a tax aimed at subject peoples, the φόρος was resented. Philo provides evidence of this when he compares the offering of tithes to Jewish priests, and the tribute paid by cities to conquering potentates. He explains that the former is

¹⁷Josephus, *BJ.*, 2.402-406; Philo, *Spec.*, I.142-43; 1 Macc. (LXX) 10.29; Diodorus Siculus, *Hist.*, 1.18.5-6, 10.25.4, 11.47.1; Strabo, *Geog.*, 4.5.3. On the basis of an extensive survey of the use of the term, only in Diodorus' *Hist.*, 31.36.1, do we find reference to 'voluntary tribute', ἐκούσιου φόρους. However, here τινὰς precedes this, serving to indicate the irregularity of this occurrence. It was 'a sort of' tribute, paid by conquering kings to their subjects, the people of Rhodes. It was, in this instance, self-serving 'tribute', granted to the Rhodians because of their great willingness to flatter these rulers with public honours. In no way was this type of 'tribute' typical; φόρος almost always denoted a direct tax which subject people were forced to pay to their conquerors.

¹⁸Diodorus Siculus, *Hist.* 2.1.7; see also 4.10.3, 13.114.1.

¹⁹Josephus, *BJ.*, 2.403-405.

a complete contrast to the spirit in which the cities make their payments (εἰσφέρειν) to their potentates. The cities pay under compulsion and reluctantly and groan under their burden. They look askance at the tax-collectors as general agents of destruction.²⁰

It would seem that these collectors were indeed ‘agents of destruction’, for, as we read elsewhere, they were willing to torture and even kill family and immediate kin of those who failed to pay what was owed.²¹

Thus, we see that an important aspect of φόρος was that it connoted subjugation. But, one might ask, how does this relate to the Roman Christians, since the inhabitants of the city of Rome were not liable for direct taxation? In answer to this question, we propose that Paul is dealing with, at least in part, a situation during the reign of Nero in which Jews have returned from the provinces after having been expelled from the city by Nero’s predecessor, Claudius. During Nero’s reign, there was introduced in Roman Egypt the concept of *idia*, which sought to prevent flight from the burden of taxation by creating a stronger bond between the individual and the community in which he fulfilled his obligations to the state. If Egypt was typical of the eastern provinces²² and the *idia* introduced into the administration of all eastern lands, the Jews returning to Rome would have been liable for the payment of direct tax in the provinces in which they had resided during the previous census, taken in A.D. 54/5.²³

²⁰Philo, *Spec.*, I.143.

²¹*Ibid.*, III.159-60.

²²This point is admittedly debatable. Though some scholars hold that the situation in Egypt was almost entirely unique, others believe this not to be the case. N. Lewis, for instance, argues ‘that the more our studies bring to the fore the Roman elements in the organisation of Roman Egypt (including the law), the less unique Egypt appears and the more it represents other eastern provinces of the Roman Empire’ (cited in B. Winter, ‘The Importance of the *Captatio Benevolentiae* in the Speeches of Tertullus and Paul in Acts 24:1-21’, *JTS* 42.3 [1991] 507, n. 11).

²³S.L. Llewelyn, *New Documents Illustrating Early Christianity* (Macquarie: The Ancient History Documentary Research Centre, 1992) VI, 113, 125-26. The *idia* required that a person pay tax in the community in which he was registered at the taking of the previous census.

Thus, Jews moving to Rome from the provinces, such as Priscilla and Aquilla, may have resented the fact that they, though inhabitants of the capital city, were still treated as subject people, having to pay tribute just as all provincials did. Likewise, sojourning Gentiles would have been liable for provincial taxes, and, assuming, as is surely the case, that they made up a significant part of the Roman Christian population, may also have been discontent over this situation. Only those who were Roman citizens would have been free from this burden. To the others, Paul urges obedience. Using the formula common in literature of the period (τελεῖτε φόρους in v. 6), he commands that they fulfil their obligation to the state, paying tribute to whom tribute is due.

IV. 'tax' (τέλος)

The second tangible obligation to which Paul exhorts the Roman Christians involves τέλος, or indirect tax. This type of tax was levied on goods and services.²⁴ Everything that was traded, whether nails,²⁵ grain,²⁶ animals,²⁷ or even sex,²⁸ was liable to be taxed, no matter where the business took place; unlike tribute, Roman citizens enjoyed no privileged exemption from payment of τέλος.

Papyri are most helpful in discovering information about the Roman system of indirect taxation. These show that the Roman population paid τέλος on sales of: land,²⁹ houses,³⁰ oil,³¹ and grass,³² among other things. Also subject to τέλος was the right to participate

²⁴Murray, *Romans*, 156; Barrett, *Romans*, 228.

²⁵Brunt, *Revenues of Rome*, 329.

²⁶Llewelyn, *New Docs.*, VI, 113.

²⁷Llewelyn, *New Docs.*, VI, 113.

²⁸Brunt, *Revenues of Rome*, 329.

²⁹*P.Tebt.* 280 l. 5-6.

³⁰*P.Tebt.* 350 l. 9; 351 l. 3, 7.

³¹*P.Tebt.* 38 l. 10.

³²*P.Tebt.* 379 l. 17.

in various trades, such as the dyer's trade³³ and the weaver's trade.³⁴ One sees the extent to which the Roman taxation system intruded in the lives of the populace in the case of the individual who was even taxed on the right to collect (a fishery) tax!³⁵

Just how lucrative this taxation scheme was is revealed in Strabo's discussion of Roman Britain. Here the historian suggests that τέλος on Britain's trade brought in much more revenue than φόρος could.

(N)o corresponding advantage was to be gained by taking and holding their country [Britain]. For it seems that at present more revenue is derived from tax (τέλος) on their trade than the tribute (φόρος) could bring in, if we deduct the expense involved in the maintenance of an army for the purpose of guarding the island and collecting the tribute.³⁶

Here Strabo provides a helpful contrast between τέλος and φόρος. Not only does he show that tribute suggests subjugation, but he also reveals that indirect taxation could be as, if not more, lucrative for the empire than direct taxation.

It should come as no surprise, then, that Paul chose to address both types of taxation, direct and indirect, for the Roman system of taxation reached into every facet of the lives of the citizens of the Empire, whether they resided in the provinces, in Italy, or even in the capital city itself. Moreover, Byrne has noted how civil unrest

had come to a head in the late 50's centering upon abuses in the collection of taxes. Things came to such a pitch in 58 C.E. that Nero seriously considered abolishing indirect taxes altogether but was persuaded by advisers to institute reforms designed to curb abuses.³⁷

³³*P. Tebt.* 287 ll. 3-4, 10.

³⁴*P. Tebt.* 384 l. 20.

³⁵*P. Tebt.* 329.

³⁶Strabo, *Geog.*, 2.5.8.

³⁷Byrne, *Romans*, 386. We will discuss the significance of this occurrence in the final section of this article.

Paul exhorts the Roman Christians not to contribute to this civil upheaval, but be good citizens, showing their obedience to the authorities by paying tax to whom tax is due.

V. ‘reverence’ (φόβος)

Just as the first two terms were linked, both being tangible obligations due to the state, so the latter two terms are related in that they are both intangible obligations. Scholarly consensus has held that the ‘the former (φόβος) has in view the respect paid to those on the highest level of authority and the latter (τιμὴ) that paid to those of lower rank.’³⁸ However, evidence cannot be cited to support this contention.

The first term, φόβος, has troubled exegetes. Typical is Lenski, who argues for what amounts to no more than a contradiction in Paul’s thought.³⁹ Though Paul speaks of φόβος as an obligation which is to be acknowledged and met by Christians, Lenski believes that this is not a necessary φόβος, but one which manifests itself only in those Christians who insist on doing ‘the evil deed’ (to; kakovn of Rom. 13:4).⁴⁰ But is this an ‘optional’ φόβος? Romans 13:7 suggests it is not, given the binding nature of obligation in the Graeco-Roman world—obligation which Paul refers to through his use of the actual word ὀφείλω in this verse. Just as it was clear that the Christians had an obligation to pay tribute and taxes, so it was their obligation to give φόβος to whom φόβος is due.

But who or what was the object of this φόβος? Given the immediate context, where we find numerous occurrences of both φόβος and its verbal cognate φοβέω, it seems quite natural to assume

³⁸Murray (*Romans*, 156) does believe, however, that there is not sufficient evidence to make this an indisputable conclusion. Cranfield (*Romans*, 670) notes also that it is the general opinion of scholars that φόβος denotes a greater, and τιμὴ, a lesser, degree of respect.

³⁹Lenski, *Interpretation of Romans*, 801.

⁴⁰Byrne (*Romans*, 392) as well, arguing that God rather than men should be seen as the object of φόβος, reasons that ‘such a positive commendation of “fear” [as found in v. 7] would clash with the way in which “fear” of earthly rulers is presented in vv 3-4; as something negative, applicable only to wrongdoers.’

that Paul has in mind the same parties throughout, namely civil authorities (ἐξουσία in Rom. 13:1 and 2; οἱ ἄρχοντες in 13:3). It is true, as most exegetes of this passage note, that in the New Testament, with the exception of Ephesians 5.33,⁴¹ God or Christ is always the object of φόβος, and not humans. However, in Romans 13:1-7 we are not dealing with worship, but with obligation to civic authorities.⁴² Therefore the meaning should be sought in the semantic field of politics and not religion.

An obvious but oddly neglected lexical point is that, according to Liddell and Scott, φόβος can also denote 'reverence', particularly to civil authorities. Balz, writing in the *TDNT*, notes many papyri, dated from the third century to the sixth century A.D., where φόβος refers to the respect which should be shown to civil authorities.⁴³ We should also note the very important example found in an early fourth-century A.D. official court proceeding, concerning a property dispute brought before a civil magistrate in Oxyrhynchus. This local official had been sent an order by the prefect of Egypt to resolve this matter. He readily complies with the wishes of the prefect, 'keeping in my heart the φόβος of the nobility of so great an official'.⁴⁴ Relevant too is the Pseudo-Aristotelian document, of uncertain date and now only existing in Latin translation, which speaks of two kinds of *timor*:

the *timor* which virtuous and honourable sons feel towards their fathers, and loyal citizens towards right-minded rulers... the other kind, felt by slaves for masters and by subjects for despots who treat them with injustice and wrong⁴⁵

⁴¹This refers to a wife's φόβος, *i.e.*, reverencing of her husband. For an epigraphic example of the same, see *SEG* 35.1427, *l.* 5 (3rd cent. A.D.), cited in Liddell and Scott, *Revised Supplement* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1996).

⁴²*Contra* Cranfield (*Romans*, 671-72) who believes, as mentioned prior, that φοβο" in Rom. 13:7 is in reference to God.

⁴³H. Balz, *s.v.* 'φοβέω', in G. Friedrich (ed.), *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974) 194.

⁴⁴*P.Oxy.* 3757, *l.* 9.

⁴⁵Pseudo-Aristotle, *Oec.* III, 3. In his introduction on pp. 324-25, G. Cyril Armstrong states that this third book of *Oeconomica* was translated from Greek into Latin in 1295 by Guillaume Durand, a Bishop of Mende who died in Rome in 1296.

Thus, φόβος, and its Latin equivalent *timor*, can connote ‘reverence’ or ‘respect’.

There are other documents, as well, in this case Jewish, in which φόβος connotes respect of human authority. In the LXX version of Leviticus 19.3, which reflects third-century B.C. Greek usage of this term, the command is given to the people of Israel: ‘Each of you respect (φοβέω) your father and mother.’⁴⁶

More importantly, in the LXX version of Numbers 12.8 (a passage interesting especially because of its relevance to Rom. 13:7) Yahweh is said to have spoken of Moses as his ‘servant’ (θεράπων) who should be respected (φοβέω). Here, as in the immediate context of Romans 13:7, a human authority, Moses, is described as God’s servant (θεράπων). Likewise, twice in Romans 13:4 the civil authorities in Rome are said to be, collectively, διάκονος. God’s representative is, in both cases, to be held in respect, for he is an authority appointed by God.⁴⁷

There is therefore no conflict in Paul’s thought in regard to the φόβος spoken of throughout Romans 13:1-7. He is rather emphasising two different aspects of civil authority: For the one who would do κακία civil authority was an object of fear (φόβος), for it was there to punish. As we noted in a previous section, this is the traditional Graeco-Roman belief about the role of government. But all were to give the civil authorities ‘respect’ (φόβος).

Having seen how φόβος can denote ‘respect’ in the semantic field of *politeia*, we now need to address the issue of exactly who were these authorities whom Paul commands the Roman Christians to respect. As we have seen in the evidence cited in this section, kings

⁴⁶Pr. 24.21 states that God and the king should be feared (φοβέω). However, the following verse speaks of the destruction which each of these can wreak, thus implying that the φόβος to which the readers are exhorted is fear of wrath, and not respect for authority. A. Strobel (‘Furcht, wem Furcht gebührt: Zum profangriechischen Hindergrund von Rm. 13.7’, *ZNW* 55 [1964], 5) sees Pr. 24:21 (mistakenly cited as Pr. 24.17) as reflecting the same idea as Rom. 13:7.

⁴⁷In Nu. 12:7-8, Moses, who alone is allowed to see the glory of the Lord and with whom God speaks mouth to mouth, is also described as faithful (πιστός) in God’s whole house.

and prefects were spoken of as deserving reverence. By way of analogy, in Rome the emperor and his vicegerents merited reverence, as well as those who undertook honorary liturgies (λειτουργίαι), serving as civil magistrates, etc.⁴⁸ In his counsel to respect those deserving of respect in Romans 13:7, the apostle exhorts all Christians to recognise their binding obligation to acknowledge these authorities—the emperor, his officials, civil magistrates/ liturgists, etc.

VI. ‘honour’ (τιμή)

Regarding the fourth term, τιμή we have here Paul’s reference to a second intangible obligation, ‘honour’. Traditionally, commentators have viewed this as encouraging something very much akin, though less than, the φόβος in the prior phrase, the object of this honour being those in authority. Alternatively, Stulmacher argues that this honour might be directed toward God (harking back to the logion of Jesus found in Lk. 20:25) or that it could be honour which Christians owe to all people (echoing 1 Pet. 2:17), not just those in authority.⁴⁹ However, we shall argue in this section that this term carried different and quite distinctive import, thus far unexplored in connection with this verse.

The great social significance of timhv is emphasised in J.E. Lendon’s observation that honour

was a filter through which the whole world was viewed, a deep structure of the Graeco-Roman mind, perhaps the ruling metaphor of ancient society... Every thing, every person, could be valued in terms of honour, and every group of persons.⁵⁰

⁴⁸J.E. Lendon, *Empire of Honour: The Art of Government in the Roman World* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1997) 34.

⁴⁹P. Stulmacher, *Paul’s Letter to the Romans: A Commentary* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1994) 204.

⁵⁰Lendon, *Empire of Honour*, 73.

For example, honour was what great men expected to receive from their inferiors. It was the appropriate response not only to esteemed civic qualities,⁵¹ summarised in virtue (ἀρετή), but also to civic actions, very often, public benefactions.⁵² Because they already possessed honour, good men (οἱ ἀγαθοί)—another way of designating civic benefactors—did deeds which augmented their honour.⁵³ Thus does Saller note that ‘[t]he most basic premise from which the Romans started was that honor and prestige derived from the power to give what others needed or wanted’.⁵⁴

Linked closely with the giving of benefactions is the idea of reciprocity, i.e., an appropriate response. In *De Beneficiis*, Seneca acknowledges the need for reciprocity, even viewing it as an obligation—a debt which must never be forgotten, but repaid.⁵⁵ He explains that his readers

need to be taught to give willingly, to receive willingly, to return willingly, and to set before us the high aim of striving, not merely to equal, but to surpass in deed and spirit those who have placed us under obligation, for he who has a debt of gratitude (*gratia*) to pay never catches up with the favour unless he outstrips it.⁵⁶

On the Jewish side, Philo instructs his readers likewise:

⁵¹*Ibid.*, 44.

⁵²Within this category of ‘benefactions’ we include liturgies.

⁵³A civic benefactor was often called a ‘good man’ (*bonus vir*) who does ‘good’—in Greek, ἀγαθοποιός, and in Latin, *beneficium*. Thus, patronage was, in both Latin and Greek, linked with the ‘good’ (ἀγαθος, *bene, bonus*). See A.D. Clarke, ‘The Good and the Just in Romans 5:7’, *TynB* 41 (1990) 128-42.

⁵⁴R.P. Saller, *Personal Patronage under the Roman Empire* (CUP, 1982) 126. See also A.D. Clarke, *Secular and Christian Leadership in Corinth: A Socio-historical and Exegetical Study of 1 Corinthians 1-6* (Leiden: Brill, 1993) 30-31.

⁵⁵The language of obligation is very common throughout *De Beneficiis*; see especially 4.40.5.

⁵⁶Seneca, *Bene.*, 1.4.3. Elsewhere Seneca states that ‘I am able to place a man under obligation only if he accepts; I am able to be freed from obligation only if I make return’ (7.18.2). And again, ‘[A]lthough we say that he who receives a benefit gladly has repaid it, we, nevertheless, also bid him return some gift similar to the one he received’. (2.35.1) Pliny, *Letters*, 7.31, called reciprocity the code of friendship.

it is necessary that we learn to pay heed to benefactors (εὐεργεταί), for he who is grateful to God, who needs nothing and is in his own fullness, will thus become accustomed to be grateful to men, who have a myriad of needs.⁵⁷

The recipient of a benefaction was obliged to make a return.⁵⁸ Failure to do so was considered an even greater sin than an unwillingness to give in the first place.⁵⁹

The reality was, however, that very often no tangible return could be made.⁶⁰ Especially with humble people, when in the public sphere true (tangible) reciprocity was not an option, intangible timhv was the way to meet the demand for a return.⁶¹ Such people had to do whatever they could, no matter how insignificant, to show honour to those who benefited them.⁶²

Thus, Seneca, in *De Beneficiis*, discusses the two classes of grateful beneficiaries.⁶³ For one, reciprocity involved tangible returns⁶⁴—public acknowledgement or ‘praise’, with ‘the Council and the People’ awarding inscriptions, statues, crowns of gold, and seats of honour in the theatre. It was these that constituted the ‘culminating feature of grateful response in the Graeco-Roman world’.⁶⁵ For the

⁵⁷Philo, *Spec.*, II.174.

⁵⁸Saller, *Personal Patronage*, 14.

⁵⁹Seneca, *Bene.*, 1.1.13.

⁶⁰Lendon, *Empire of Honour*, 67.

⁶¹For an excellent short summary of the reciprocity involved in beneficiary relations, see S.C. Mott, ‘The Power of Giving and Receiving: Reciprocity in Hellenistic Benevolence’, in G.F. Hawthorne (ed.), *Current Issues in Biblical and Patristic Interpretation*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975) 60-72.

⁶²Lendon, *Empire of Honour*, 68.

⁶³Seneca, *Bene.*, 4.21.1-2.

⁶⁴*Ibid.*, 4.21.1-2; see also Plutarch, *Moralia*, 95E.

⁶⁵F.W. Danker, *Benefactor: Epigraphic Study of a Graeco-Roman and New Testament Semantic Field* (St. Louis: Clayton Publishing House, 1982) 467. Danker (467-68) cites 13 such returns ordinarily given to civic benefactors: a crown or wreath, a statue, a shield with a portrait engraved thereon, chief seating at public events, equality in taxation, exemption from taxation, the right to wear the purple robe of honour for life, inviolability of person or property, public maintenance, citizenship, immunity from the expense of public services (liturgies), the status of *proxenos* (public friend of a foreign political entity), and annual honours.

other, reciprocity meant accepting a benefit in good spirit: gratefully acknowledging that it had been received, proclaiming it, and admitting to others one's inability to repay it.⁶⁶ One who had such an attitude of *gratia* knew how to express his indebtedness. Though he may not have been able to repay, he had the proper state of mind—that which desired to repay—and this gave evidence of his grateful heart.⁶⁷ Hence an attitude of *gratia* constituted acceptable repayment.

Throughout the literature and inscriptions of the day, we find evidence of the obligation to give honour to the great and powerful, in the form of tangible or intangible returns. In the Roman world, the one who wielded the greatest power was, of course, the emperor. Philo encourages the giving of appropriate honour to this, the greatest of all benefactors, arguing that 'the emperors are superior to the Ptolemies in prestige and fortune and ought (ὀφείλω) to gain superior honours (τιμῆ)'.⁶⁸ Elsewhere in the same discourse, Philo notes that Caesar is owed (ὀφείλω) 'marks of reverence' (σεβασμόν).⁶⁹ Also, Dio Chrysostom speaks of the obligation owed to the emperor by the people of Tarsus:

what you obtained from that one (Caesar) formerly through your goodwill (εὐνοία) and friendship (φιλία), this you are obligated (ὀφείλω) to safeguard for the future through discipline (εὐταξία) and through giving no occasion for criticism.⁷⁰

Having received benefactions through their 'friendship' with Caesar, they were, consequently, bound to safeguard their good standing with the emperor through (1) 'discipline', which certainly entailed giving appropriate honour, and (2) 'giving no occasion for criticism'. By doing so, the people of this Cilician city would merit additional benefactions and enjoy high regard in the eyes of Caesar and the

⁶⁶Seneca, *Bene.*, 1.1.3; 2.24.4; 2.30.2; 2.33.1; 2.35.5; 4.21.2.

⁶⁷*Ibid.*, 5.4.1-2.

⁶⁸Philo, *Legat.*, 10.140.

⁶⁹*Ibid.*, 10.152

⁷⁰Dio Chrysostom, *Or.*, 34.25.

Roman authorities. In the words of the Emperor Claudius, addressed to the Alexandrians, the goodwill of the emperor, which was witnessed in his bestowing benefactions upon a city, inspired the goodwill (εὐνοία) of the city, which was witnessed in its giving appropriate honours (τιμαί). This in turn inspired the continued goodwill of the emperor.⁷¹

Just as there was an obligation to honour the emperor, so also was there an obligation to honour lesser officials for their beneficent rule. Plutarch explains that honour comes because of ‘authority’ (ἀρχή), as well as ‘virtue’ (ἀρετή), thus highlighting the close relationship between civic leadership and the giving of benefactions.⁷² He also assumes elsewhere that an official (ἄρχωντος) has ‘name and honour’ (ὄνομα καὶ τιμήν),⁷³ and he gives his assent to the belief that

those who do good should always benefit from their beneficiaries, through recompense and a debt of gratitude (μιστὸς καὶ χάρις), owing (ὀφείλω) good men (τοῖς ἀγαθοῖς) honour (τιμή) (and) always esteeming according to the good (they do).⁷⁴

The turn-of-the-era historian and geographer Strabo enumerates some of these honours: a front seat (προεδρία) at public events, a purple robe, and superintendance at religious sacrifices.⁷⁵

Turning to inscriptions, we find some of these same ideas about τιμή, as well as the belief that honours beget honours. In an inscription set up by the city council of Dionysopolis, the city’s benefactors receive τιμή, ‘so that it may be seen that the people [of

⁷¹*P.Lond.* 1912 ll. 21-2.

⁷²Plutarch, *Moralia*, 617C. Plutarch also comments that ties of kinship (συγγένεια) precipitate honour. However, this does not seem applicable to what Paul says in Rom. 13, dealing as he does with the powers that be in Rome.

⁷³Plutarch, *Cat.*, 16.7.3. Philo, *Spec.*, I.142, also speaks of the honours owed to royalty, as does Strabo, *Geog.*, 13.1.52.

⁷⁴Plutarch, *Phil.*, 21.12.6.

⁷⁵Strabo, *Geog.*, 14.1.3.

Dionysopolis] honour “good and noble” (καλὸς καὶ ἀγαθός) people who are their benefactors’.⁷⁶ So too did the city council of Julia Gordos, in a first-century C.E. inscription, command that Theopholis be honoured ‘so that all may know that such people who exercise their life on behalf of their country gain a testimony’.⁷⁷ Likewise, it was the concern of the city council of Sestos that its benefactors, whether actual or potential, know that their city had been faithful in giving honour to philanthropic ‘good men’ (ἀγαθοὺς ἄνδρας).⁷⁸ By advertising its giving of honours, a city expected to acquire more benefits, as this same inscription from Sestos indicates, honouring Menas

in order that all might know that Sestos is hospitable to men of exceptional character and ability... and that the people might not appear remiss in their gratitude, and that also all others, as they see the people bestowing honour (τιμὴ) on exceptional men, might emulate the noblest qualities and be moved to virtue, to the end that the common good might be advanced as all aim ever to win a reputation for doing something beneficial for our home city.⁷⁹

Benefactions given and gratefully received were expected to compel the giving of more benefits.⁸⁰

Though honour, in whatever form it took, was the expectation of beneficiaries and the obligation of beneficiaries, it is obvious that in some cases it was not the reality. Dio himself experienced trouble in regard to benefactions which he intended to bestow on his native city, his opponents persuading those who

⁷⁶For the Greek text, see no. 662, ll. 42-44, in R. Cagnate (ed.), *Inscriptiones Graecae ad res Romanas pertinentes* (Paris: Leroux, 1911) I, 220.

⁷⁷No. 18 in G.H.R. Horsley (ed.), *New Documents Illustrating Early Christianity* (Sydney: Macquarie University Ancient History Documentary Research Centre, 1982) II, 58-59.

⁷⁸See l. 60 of the Greek text published in C. Curtius, ‘Inscription aus Sestos’, *Hermes* 7 (1873) 114-21.

⁷⁹No. 17 in Danker, *Benefactor*, 92-97. (See ll. 86-93. The translation is largely Danker’s, but slightly modified.) This same advertisement motif is found in an inscription in which the city of Lasos praised Herokrates. See no. 16 in Danker, *Benefactor*, 89-91, and, for the Greek text, F. Frhr. Hiller von Gærtringen (ed.), *Inscriptionen von Priene* (Berlin: Reimer, 1906) no. 53.

⁸⁰See also Seneca, *Bene.*, 4.15.3.

promised to provide additional support for his project to withdraw it.⁸¹

Also a problem was the failure to honour one's beneficiary, which constituted gross ingratitude, and this the whole world counted a disgrace.⁸² It could even be regarded as criminal.⁸³ Dio speaks of the gravity of this offence:

there is nothing more weighty, no debt owing (ὀφείλω) greater interest (τόκος), than a debt of gratitude (χάρις). Also, this is a shameful and bitter loan (ἀναίσχυτον δάνειον καὶ πικρόν), when, as I might say, due to delay, the debt of gratitude (χάρις) is replaced by a debt of duty (χρέος), the settlement of which those who keep silent demand all the more harshly than those who cry out. For nothing has such power to remind those owing (ὀφείλω) you something as to forget you.⁸⁴

Important in this passage is the fact that here, as in Romans 13:6-7, obligation language is used to refer to both literal and metaphorical debts. Dio elaborates and strengthens the idea that a benefactor is 'owed (ὀφείλω) thanks',⁸⁵ contending that a metaphorical debt to show gratitude to one's benefactor (and thus honour him) accrues even greater interest than a financial debt.⁸⁶ However, unlike the financial debt, those who are owed a metaphorical debt of gratitude do not 'cry out', demanding repayment as money lenders so often did. All the same, if this obligation to show gratitude was not met, it

⁸¹See Dio Chrysostom, *Or.*, 40.6 and 45.13. For a discussion of this, see B.F. Harris, 'Bythina: Roman Sovereignty and the Survival of Hellenism', *ANRW* II.7.1 (1980) 892; as well as C.P. Jones, 'Benefactions', *The Roman World of Dio Chrysostom* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1978) ch. 12.

⁸²Seneca, *Bene.*, 3.1.1.

⁸³*Ibid.*, 3.6.2.

⁸⁴Dio Chrysostom, *Or.*, 40.3-4.

⁸⁵At 44.4 and 45.10, Dio mentions this. In the former of these, Dio, in typical rhetorical style, speaks of himself, a benefactor, owing thanks to his native city of Prusa for the honours given to his ancestors. He states that he hopes 'to repay' (ἀποτίνω) them for this—probably an acknowledgement that he too, as his ancestors before him, would reward them with more benefactions.

⁸⁶τοῦκο" denotes interest on an actual monetary debt.

became a debt of duty which demanded to be repaid, as shameful and bitter a loan as any financial debt ever was.⁸⁷

Paul teaches that the Christians were to respect not only the office of those in leadership (φόβος), but they were also to honour these individuals for their actions (τιμή), namely the giving of liturgies (λειτουργίαι), which was so often a part of Roman civil service. They were to do this because these officials were God's servants (λειτουργιοὶ θεοῦ) (Rom. 13:6).

VII. *Sitz im Leben*

It is our contention that Paul's letter to the Romans was written during a time of increasing dissatisfaction over the burden of taxation in the Neronean Principate (A.D. 54-68), contrary to the general consensus among scholars that the background of Romans 13:1-7 has its genesis primarily in the reign of Claudius (A.D. 41-54). For example, Friedrich, Pöhlmann, and Stulmacher saw a nexus between the tax protests of A.D. 58, and the disturbances over 'Chrestus' in A.D. 49 which resulted in the eviction of Jews from Rome. This, they contended, was the reason that Paul wrote as he did in Romans 13:1-7, encouraging all Christians, in light of the former Jewish exile from Rome, to avoid drawing attention to themselves and to fulfil their obligations to pay taxes.⁸⁸

Strobel, on the other hand, finds the historical background for Romans in Claudius' decree of A.D. 53, in which procurators were granted special powers. He suggests that these powers perhaps even included those of levelling taxes, though in the quotation which he cites, Tacitus makes no mention of the matter of taxation.⁸⁹ We find no evidence during Claudius' reign of dissatisfaction over the burden

⁸⁷δάνειον also signifies a literal debt—money lent, often at usurious rates of interest.

⁸⁸J. Friedrich, W. Pöhlmann, P. Stulmacher, 'Zur historischen Situation und Intention von Röm 13,1-7', *ZTK* 73 (1976) 131-66.

⁸⁹Tacitus, *Ann.*, 12.60. See Strobel's discussion of this in 'Furcht, wem Furcht gebührt', 61-62.

of taxation, for, as B. Levick has noted, the taxes imposed by Gaius were abolished by Claudius early in his reign.⁹⁰

Contrary to the views expressed in these two articles, we believe it to be more probable that Romans 13:1-7 reflects popular dissatisfaction over taxation during Nero's reign. At this time, and not earlier, did the monetary demands of indirect taxes become particularly oppressive, as Tacitus affirms. He records that the emperor Nero almost capitulated to the 'repeated demands from the public' for relief from the burden of *τελός*. However, he writes that

Nero hesitated whether he ought not to decree the abolition of all indirect taxation and present the reform as the noblest of gifts to the human race. His impulse, however, was checked by his older advisers, who pointed out that the dissolution of the empire was certain if the revenues on which the state subsisted were to be curtailed: 'For, the moment the duties on imports were removed, the logical sequel would be a demand for the abrogation of the direct taxes.'⁹¹

Nero not only increased indirect taxes, but also direct ones. Suetonius notes that, even towards the end of his life, Nero continued to increase the tax burden. At that time, in order to raise badly needed funds for a war effort, he required all tenants to pay a *de facto* tax of a year's rent to the imperial purse. He also mandated that all classes pay a direct (income) tax.⁹² It seems that at this time not even Roman citizens escaped the burden of direct tax. Those who attempted to do so were punished, for tax evasion was a criminal offence.⁹³

Besides tangible obligations, intangible obligations, as well, were of concern to the Julio-Claudian emperors. Failure to give due reverence and honour for benefactions attracted legal penalties. Claudius, for instance, 'reduced to slavery again any such (freedmen)

⁹⁰B. Levick, *Claudius* (London: Batsford, 1990) 132, and Dio Cassius, *Roman History*, 60.4.1.

⁹¹Tacitus, *Ann.*, 13.50. See also Suetonius, *Nero*, 44.1

⁹²Suetonius, *Nero*, 44.2.

⁹³O.F. Robinson, *The Criminal Law of Ancient Rome* (London: Duckworth, 1995) 90-91.

as were ungrateful and a cause of complaint to their patrons (*i.e.*, their former masters).⁹⁴ Nero went even further, making into law a practice which Gaius had initiated and Claudius had continued: punishment of the ungrateful.⁹⁵ Nero legislated that the estates of the ‘ungrateful’—those who failed to make monetary provision for him in their wills—would be confiscated.⁹⁶

In light of the above discussion, it is no surprise that Paul would write to the Christians in Rome, exhorting them, for ‘for conscience sake’ (v. 5, in regard to a breach of the law, which is ‘the evil deed’, v. 4), to fulfil both their tangible obligations to the state in regard to tribute and taxes, as well as their intangible obligations to give reverence and honour to those in authority. The exhortation in Romans 13:7 provides a summary for Paul’s discussion of Christian and secular authorities,⁹⁷ stressing four obligations—which are but one part of a wider sphere of binding commitments discussed by Paul in Romans 12-15—that bound the Roman Christians to obedience in the social/political realm of their existence.⁹⁸

⁹⁴Suetonius, *Claudius*, 25.1; see also A. Watson, *Roman Slave Law* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1987) 39-40.

⁹⁵M.T. Griffin, *Nero: The End of a Dynasty* (London: Batsford, 1984) 204-05.

⁹⁶Suetonius, *Nero*, 32.2.

⁹⁷Stulmacher, *Romans*, 199.

⁹⁸I would like to thank Dr. Bruce W. Winter for his advice on several aspects of this article.