

Biblical Understanding of the Petrine Concept of Submission to Civil Authority in *1 Peter 2:13-17* and its Relevance for the Contemporary Christians

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Abstract

‘Submission to civil authority’, is the hallmark of Petrine teaching on ‘good Christian conduct’ as duty in agreement with God’s will for Christians to obey people in authority. Existing studies and day to day experiences revealed instances of disobedience such as: civil unrest, avoiding payment of taxes, use of incorrect vehicle particulars, avoiding payment of utility bill, violation of traffic rules and many more. The paper is an attempt to study Peter’s teaching on submission by doing textual analysis of *1 Peter 2:13-17* to arrive at the correct meaning of the Biblical understanding of the Petrine concept of submission to civil authority and its relevance to the contemporary Christians. In doing this, the study looks at the literary analysis, exegesis of some key words, and textual problems. This is done in order to arrive at a clearer understanding of the teaching of Apostle Peter. The paper recommends submission of Christians to constituted authority and the Church habitual teaching of this principle.

Keywords: *Submission, Civil authority, 1 Peter 2:13-17, Contemporary Christians and Petrine.*

Introduction

Submission is a practical way of living out Christianity particularly when one operates under a non-Christian leader. The epistle of First Peter was written to believers who were under intense persecution in Asia Minor as an instruction to submit to authorities and to live good and holy lives despite their unpleasant experiences.¹ Although, its nature is less obvious and has been frequently debated over the years, it is an undisputed fact that persecution is a dominant theme of the first epistle of Peter.² Peter makes it clear that the virtue of submission places Christians in opposition to the roles that pride and rebellion have played in the history of humanity. The purpose of the epistle was to help his audience to see their sufferings as

temporary in the full light of the eternal glory that would come.

In Nigeria, there are instances of lack of submission. This manifests itself in different ways such as failure to pay taxes, failure to obtain correct vehicle particulars, failure to pay utility bill, violation of traffic rules, lukewarm attitudes to periodic sanitation exercises, to name but a few. These and many other examples abound in the Nigerian society particularly, among Christians. Some refuse to submit to leaders because those leaders do not share the same religious faith with them. This might be true in Peter's world as it is in this present-day society. It is not consistent with the teaching of the Bible not to submit to legitimate authority. In this epistle, Peter emphasized the need for the Christians to be submissive to all civil authorities, irrespective of their religious backgrounds. By doing this, they are also fulfilling their duties to God who appoints leader. The instruction to submit to authority (*1 Peter 2:13-17*) is very relevant in the context of the prevailing civil disobedience, breaking of law and order, unrest and unlawful protests in Nigeria today. Using exegetical method, this paper examines the text of *1 Peter 2:13-17*, where Peter instructs his readers how they may live in relation to their governing rulers and surrounding society. It is believed that if Christians in Nigeria would follow the instruction to be models of good ambassadors and obedience to all constituted authorities, this will be emulated by their neighbours and the Nigerian society will be better and secured.

Historical Background of the Book of *1 Peter*

Authorship

Although, the authorship of *1 Peter* has been a matter of dispute since the beginning of critical scholarship, many commentators have argued forcefully for it.³ The unanimous view of the tradition of Peter's martyrdom in Rome readily supports this argument, so also the traditions of the early Christian period and the acceptance of the epistle by *1 Clement* by the late first century.⁴ While some scholars conclude for various reasons that *1 Peter* is a pseudonymous writing, some however, affirm its Petrine authorship with reasonable evidence that Peter wrote it. The author claimed he wrote his epistle with the help of Silas, a faithful brother (*1 Peter 5:12*), who is undoubtedly the same person as the one mentioned in *Acts 15:22-33; 15:40-18:5; 1 Thess. 1:1; 2 Thess. 1:1*. Likewise, he mentioned Mark in *5:13* which appears to be the same "Mark" mentioned in *Acts 12:12*. These

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and many other reasons form the basis for its universal acceptance as a letter from Apostle Peter.⁵

Date

Scholars differ in their opinions when it comes to the question of time when *1 Peter* was written. But even with these different opinions, majority of scholars agree that it was written in the early AD. 60s. Sicily Mburu Muriithi argues that if the letter was written by Peter and that the tradition regarding his martyrdom by Nero in AD. 63-64 was correct, it was probably written in the early AD. 60s. This submission was based on the fact that the writer seems to be familiar with Paul's prison epistles such as *Colossians* and *Ephesians*.⁶ This was further buttressed by J. D. Douglas and Merrill C. Tenney when they said that the book bears traces of the influence of Paul's letter to the Romans and to the Ephesians in its structure and thought when comparing *1 Peter 2:13* with *Romans 13:1-4*; *1 Peter 2:18*: with *Eph. 6:5*; *1 Pet. 3:9* with *Rom. 12:17*; and *1 Pet. 5:5* with *Eph. 5:21*. Probably *1 Peter* was written about the year 64, when the status of Christians in the empire was very uncertain and when persecution had already begun in Rome.⁷ Although, Selwyn might probably be right in placing the writing of the letter between the deaths of James, the Lord's brother, in AD. 62 and the outbreak of Nero's persecution in AD 64,⁸ it is difficult to fix a definite date for the writing of this book since it is expressly stated in the content. Hence, scholars have been different in their views on the subject.

The traditional view is that Peter wrote this epistle apparently just before or shortly after the beginning of Nero's persecution of the church in AD. 64.⁹ This position was based on the fact that the writer referred to an existing government as an institution that commended and punished those who did right and those who did wrong respectively (*2 Pet. 2:13-14*). Perhaps, Christians were not yet experiencing any form of organized persecution by the Romans, and so it was not difficult for them to honour the king (*2:17*). Therefore, Peter may be referring primarily to social and religious suffering rather than a legal persecution.

Audience

The epistle was addressed to members of the Dispersion located in the five northern Roman Provinces of Asia Minor, which Paul did not visit and

which may have been evangelized by Peter between the Council of Jerusalem (AD. 48) and the Neronian persecution of Rome (AD. 64)¹⁰ but whose basic problem was to live for God in the midst of a society ignorant of the true God.¹¹ Today, those five Roman provinces of the peninsula in Asia Minor is northern Turkey. The churches in those provinces were made up of both Jews and Gentiles.¹² *First Peter* was not addressed to specific group of believers but was a general letter that would have been circulated among a large number of churches (*1:1*).¹³ These churches were located in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia (*1:1*); all designations for Roman provinces.

Purpose

A careful study of the epistle indicates that the author wrote it to encourage his readers who were scattered all over Asia Minor and to rekindle their hope in Jesus (*5:12*). The epistle abounds with words of comfort and encouragement fitted to sustain a “lively hope.” It was for this reason the epistle has been called “the apostle of hope”. Being a disciple of Jesus and a member of the closest three among them, and having witnessed the ministry, suffering, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus, the author’s experience definitely gave him assurance that every follower of Jesus who endured the present hardship would surely enjoy an eternal home when this life is over.

Occasion

The situation presupposed by *2:11, 12; 2:13-17* and indeed *3:8-4:19* appears to be the general slander of non-Christians against Christians. The fact that Peter says that the non-Christians (*ethnesin*, Gentiles in *2:12; agnosian*, ignorance in *2:15*) slander the Christians’ good behavior, and that they think it strange (*xenizontai*) or wonder that the Christians do not run with them any longer into their abominable lifestyles (*4:4*), demonstrates that what we have for background to *2:13-17* is not Christians rebelling against the authorities *per se*, but non-Christians inciting the authorities to action against the Christians on charges of being a threat to society. In *4:15* Peter refers to a list of crimes for which the Christians were probably accused, including murder, theft, doing evil and meddling in other’s affairs. Those who commit such acts would be considered evil doers. Earlier, they had also been accused of such things as disloyalty to Caesar (*John 19:12*), disturbing those who made their living from certain

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trades which were connected to false religion (*Acts 16:16; 19:23*), “hatred toward mankind” (*Col. 2:16*) and following a “new and mischievous superstition”. As a matter of fact, Christians were also accused at this time of such things as cannibalism and incest. However, this may be difficult to establish because it is particularly a second century phenomenon which should not be drawn out of the words of Peter. This is a vivid description of the perilous situation in which first century Christians were liable to find themselves. While their faith as such may not have been legally a crime, they were the object of blind suspicion and detestation, and so exposed to all sorts of victimization, possibly even police charges arising out of public disorders. This then is the situation in which Peter’s readers would have found themselves and as such forms the background to his injunctions in *2:13-15*.

Textual Analysis

1 Peter 2:13-17 are generally grouped within a larger segment that extends from *2:11-3:12*.¹⁴ However, under this sub-unit, problems related to literary analysis, exegesis of some key words as well as textual problems are discussed.

Literary analysis

The epistle of *1 Peter* was written to believers who were victims of persecution at the hands of the society in which they lived.¹⁵ It was a difficult situation in which they found themselves because they became victims of unfriendly circumstance. Although, its nature is less obvious, persecution forms a dominant theme in the epistle. This view stems from the common belief that certain persecution was officially sponsored by Rome, although, Elliott argues that the first worldwide persecution of Christians officially undertaken by Rome did not occur until the persecution initiated by Decius (249-251 CE) in 250 CE as against the view of scholars who try to date *1 Peter* sometime during the reign of Nero, Domitian, or Trajan.¹⁶ Furthermore, there is no specific reference to state sponsored persecution in *1 Peter*,¹⁷ and what seems to be described instead are widespread persecutions that were “...sporadic, generally mob-incited, locally restricted, and unsystematic in nature.”¹⁸

Christians throughout the world experienced similar suffering, thereby making the persecution described in *1 Peter* ‘no local aberration.’¹⁹

According to Jobes, ‘the specific persecution generally referred to throughout the book seems limited to verbal slander, malicious talk, and false accusations (*1:6; 2:12, 15; 3:9, 16; 4:12, 16*).’²⁰ Kuwornu-Adjaottor agrees with this opinion when he says that the situation presupposed by the context (cf. *2:11, 12; 2:13-17; 3:8-4:19*) appears to be the general slander of non-Christians against Christians.²¹ He argues that it can be said that the background of this text (*1 Peter 2:13-17*) is not about Christians rebelling against the authorities *per se*, but non-Christians inciting the authorities to action against the Christians on charges of being a threat to society. This conclusion was based on the fact that the writer of this letter mentions that the good behaviour of the Christians was being slandered (*4:4*) and they (the non-Christians) were surprised that the Christians did not practice any longer into their abominable lifestyles. However, it has been argued that this was particularly a second-century practice, and should not be applied to *1 Peter*;²² in *4:15* Peter refers to a list of crimes for which the Christians were probably accused, including murder, theft, doing evil and meddling in other people’s affairs. Those who committed such acts were to be considered criminals. For instance, Christians were also accused at this time of such things as cannibalism and incest.²³ The instruction of Peter to the Christians attest to the fact that the apostle lived and worked in a particular social-cultural milieu. It can therefore be said that generally, the background of *1 Peter 2:13-17* and even the entire epistle, is that readers of the epistle living in Diaspora were accused of disloyalty to Caesar. Peter therefore, writes to encourage his readers to stand firm in the face of this persecution, and to instruct them on how they should simultaneously live as members of society and faithful members in the community of God.

The Context of *1 Peter 2:13-17*

Although, *Romans 13:1-7* is widely recognized as the standard Biblical text for an exposition of the Christian view of the state, this is not to suggest that it is the only one. *1 Peter 2:13-17* as well as *Titus 3:1* represent parallel views. This is apart from such material as *Mark 12:13-17* which also plays a vital role in the discussion.²⁴ The First Epistle of Peter has been a significant document for the church.²⁵ Like the second epistle, it opens with salutation (*1:1-2*). The writer begins, in the most common New Testament form, by using an identification of himself: “Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, to the exiles of the Dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappado’cia, Asia, and

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Bithyn'ia," (1:1, RSV). The phrase "an apostle of Jesus Christ" indicates the dignity and authority of someone selected by Jesus and given unique responsibilities of ministry in the establishment of the Christian church (*Matthew 16:18-19; Mark 1:16-17; 3:16; John 1:42; 21:15-19*). In *1 Peter 1:3-2:10*, the author proceeds further to provide an outline of the nature of the salvation which God made available for his audience and calls them to a certain standard of living. This message primarily centres on the relationships in the church.²⁶ *1 Peter 2:11-3:12* begins a new section in the book where the author charges his readers concerning certain ethical injunctions about the state, family, and relationships in general. Drawing from the section above, *2:11, 12* stands as a general statement from which applications to the family, state, and others are to be made. Therefore, it can be said that *1 Peter 2:13-17* is a concrete example of how Peter envisioned his readers living their good lives among pagans and bringing glory to God – thus standing fast in the grace of God.²⁷

The Text of 1 Peter 2:13-17

NIV Translation

2:13 Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every authority instituted among men: whether to the king, as the supreme authority.

2: 14 or to governors, who are sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right.

2:15 For it is God's will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish men.

2:16 Live as free men, but do not use your freedom as a cover-up for evil; live as servants of God

2:17 Show proper respect to everyone: love the brotherhood of believers, fear God, honour the king.

Exegetical Analysis of Some Key Words

2:13 Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every human authority: whether to the king, as the supreme authority (*Hupotagete pase anthrōpine ktisei dia ton kurion, eite basilei hos huperechonti*).

Drawing his basis from the preceding verse, Peter begins this section in an abrupt manner to introduce what can be termed 'good deeds.' From *1 Peter 2:11*, the writer admonishes his readers to abstain from fleshly lusts (*sarkikon epithumion*) because such desires war against their soul

(*strateuontai kata tes psuches*). They are charged also not to return evil for evil (*kakon anti kakou*); insult for insult (*loidorian anti loidorias*) (3:9). This is important because Christian conduct should never betray the high moral standards of the gospel; otherwise, it will provoke the disdain of unbelievers and bring the gospel into disrepute. Rather, they must live such good lives among the pagans (*ten anastrophen humon en tois enthnesin echontes kalen*) that they (pagans) may see their good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation.²⁸ ‘Living such good lives’ is seen in the text under discussion that is, believers’ submission to governing authorities (2:13-17); servants’ submission to their masters (2:18-25); and wives’ submission to their husbands (3:1-7). The text 1 Peter 2:13-17 has within it many interpretative issues to be considered. However, for the purposes of this paper, not all of them can be addressed in due detail.

The Greek word *hupotagete* (submit) is an imperative verb which indicates a command that must be obeyed. It is primarily a military term meaning ‘to rank under,’ and it denotes ‘putting in subjection.’ (*Luke 2:51; 10:17, 20; Romans 8:7, 20; 10:3; 1 Corinthians 15:27, 28; Ephesians 1:22; Philippians 3:21; Hebrews 2:8*). The Greek word *hupotagete* which means ‘to be subject,’ or ‘to submit’ is a hierarchical term which stresses the relation of a person to his or her superiors; in Classical Greek it means “to place under.”²⁹ It appears from the context of *1 Peter 2:13-17* that the mark of a Christian is voluntary submission to every human institution.

In this case the readers are commanded to submit themselves to every human institution (*pase anthropine ktisei*),³⁰ denoting “either everything created for mankind”, “every institution ordained for human beings” or “every creature who is human.” The imperative verb ‘submit’ and the following context agrees with the rendering adopted in the text. To submit (to be subject) means “to show respect toward,” or “to defer to” the governing authorities, in contradistinction to the meaning when we say we must be subject to the will of God.³¹ Herrick observes that ‘though the term functions semantically as a comprehensive aorist, with undefined action, the command indicates a posture that is to permanently remain among the Christians insofar as their relations to the civil authorities (and the rest of society as well) are concerned.’³² According to him, the use of the Greek word “*agathopoiountas*” (by doing good) in verse 15 indicates an ongoing relationship, and as such, there must be submission to civil authorities as

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long as one exists. There is no indication that the word addresses a particular problem at that time, but it represents the global view of the attitude Peter wants his readers to have. He does not want his readers to take law into their hands by ways of rebellion and retaliation. Hence, his warning to them, even though they were not guilty of such retaliation (see also 3:8, 9, 17 and 4:15).

The word ‘submit’ is a common term in the *New Testament*.³³ Peter uses it at least 6 times: in the context of believers’ relation to the state (2:13), in family members’ relationship (2:18; 3:1, 5), in the context of the *subjection* of angelic powers to Christ (3:22) and in the context of the relationship between youths and elders in the church (5:5). Eighteen (18) times it is used by Apostle Paul and 14 other times by other writers in the *New Testament*, e.g., *Luke* 2: 51; 10:17, 20; *Romans* 8:7; 8:20; *Romans* 13:1, 5; *1 Corinthians* 14:32, 34; 15:27, 28; 16:16; *Ephesians* 1:22; 5:24; *Philippians* 3:21; *Colossians* 3:18; *Hebrews* 2:5, 8; 12:9; *Titus* 2:5, 9; 3:1; *James* 4:7. Jesus also submitted to his earthly parents. There is the idea of voluntary act in the process of submission to the governing authority. It must not be forced, but rather intentional. It is only in *Luke* 10:17, 20 that the word ‘submit’ carries the idea of “forced submission.” Coming from their mission trip, the disciples returned with joy and reported to Jesus that ‘even the demons submit to us in your name.’ The idea here is that the demons were “forced” to submit to the disciples in the name of Jesus. This submission is not deliberate. The choice of the term *hupotagete* in *1 Peter* 2:13 could probably suggest that the kind of obedience that the writer had in mind was the willing and intelligent submission to the governing authorities that is devoid of compulsion.³⁴ Being God’s will (2:15), Peter did not use the stronger terms for ‘obedience’ such as *peithô*, *hupakoç*, and *peitharcheô*.³⁵

Having seen the nature of the submission to which Peter calls his readers, there is the need to further investigate the meaning of the Greek words *pase anthrōpine*. This phrase could also be rendered “every human being,” “every human creation,” denoting “either everything created for mankind” or “every creature who is human” (*Mark* 10:6; *Romans* 1:26). The noun *ktisei* occurs 26 times in the *New Testament* and always used among the Greeks to mean the founding of a place, a city or colony. It signifies in Scripture “to create,” always of the act of God, whether in the

natural creation (*Mark 13:19; Romans 1:25*) or in the spiritual creation (*2 Corinthians 5:17; Ephesians 2:10, 15; 4:24; Colossians 3:10*).³⁶ In *1 Peter 2:13*, the noun *ktisei* is once used of human actions (ordinance). The word *anthrōpine* (human) is an adjective qualifying the noun *ktisei*. Thus, if the noun *ktisei*, refers to an act of God, either in the natural creation or in the spiritual creation, and *pase anthrōpine ktisei* is rendered “every human creation”, then there seems to be a problem arising from its qualifier, *anthrōpine*. This is because *pase anthrōpine ktisei* can be rendered “every creation of man” or “every divine creation of man.”

Scholars differ in their opinions on the actual meaning of the phrase, *pase anthrōpine ktisei*. For instance, Herrick while quoting Hort³⁷ opined that the phrase is to be rendered “every (divine) institution among men.” According to him, there is no example in Classical Greek that provides an analogy to rulers or their offices being the creation of men. In the same way, based upon Classical usage, Bigg, as also quoted in Herrick, argued that *pase anthrōpine ktisei* refers to ‘institution among men.’ However, Beare, buttressing the argument of Bigg, maintains that *pase anthrōpine ktisei* can simply be rendered nothing else than a governmental institution in human society.³⁸ However, Herrick maintains that while governing authorities might be included in such a phrase, they are not its meaning.³⁹ This is problematic though for the term simply does not refer to human creations or institutions in the *New Testament* or the *LXX*.⁴⁰ Rather, in the *New Testament*, the noun *ktisei* is always used to refer to the creation of God.⁴¹ It is obvious, there is nothing in the words to suggest or imply a divine origin for human institutions.⁴² There is no example where *ktisei* ever refers to a human institution of some kind.⁴³ These interpretations suffer from misreading of *ktisei* because it seems they take no account of the Biblical use of the term which refers consistently to God’s creation as a whole or some aspect of it. Therefore, based on the above, it can be said that *anthrōpine ktisei* is referring to that which is created, that is, human creatures.⁴⁴ Perhaps the best understanding here is that given by Goppelt as cited in Herrick. According to him, several commentators take this as the most preferred reading.⁴⁵

For the Lord’s sake.

The command to submit to the governing authority is not absolute, as the preceding phrase indicates: *dia ton kurion* (for the Lord’s sake). It must be

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remembered that at a point, Peter himself convincingly argued before the Jewish leaders for the need to obey God rather than men (*Acts 5:29*). “The Lord” in this phrase means Jesus in his divine lordship order as manifested in his creative activity (cf. *John 1:1-4; Colossians 1:16; Hebrews 1:2*).⁴⁶ The word *kurion* which is translated “lord” is consistently employed as a reference to Jesus (*Ephesians 6:7, 8, 9; Colossians 3:20, 22, 23, 24; 4:1*) and so, the reference here is not an exception.⁴⁷ This view is supported by Goppelt.⁴⁸ More so, apart from *3:12* which is a quotation from *Psalms 34:15, 16*, the Apostle scarcely uses *kurion* in his epistles to refer to God (see *1:3, 25; 2:3, 13; 3:6, 12, 15*). ‘For the Lord’s sake’ (*dia ton kurion*) is the driving motivation for Peter’s audience to submit to the civil authorities, and doing what is right.⁴⁹ This is also important in order not to bring disrepute to the name of Jesus they claim to follow. He himself demonstrated this by submitting to the authorities in his days.⁵⁰ Although, it does not appear to be the driving motivation for Peter’s readers, these human authorities have power to punish evil doers and praise those who do good (*2:14*), they should therefore, submit because it is the will of God (*2:15*). Submission to the ruler is not dependent on the goodness of the one in the position of authority, but on the office he occupies—as it is there to keep harmony in society, i.e. punish the wrong and praise the good.⁵¹ Therefore, in so doing, the readers are serving Jesus (*2 Peter 3:18*).

A King.

Peter now mentions that submission begins first with the ultimate political power, namely, the emperor, and this will be followed by those whom he sends out to administer the provinces, i.e. the governors. In verse *1 Peter 2:13b*, the “king” (*basilei*) is the title used in the East for the emperor who had the “supreme authority” among people,⁵² who have been installed by the Roman authority to rule in provinces like Syria, Egypt, Palestine, etc.⁵³ The designation was used for Alexander the Great (336-323) in *Daniel 11:3* and as title for king like Pharaoh (*Acts 7:10*). This title is used of the Roman emperor (*1 Peter 2:13, 17*), Herod the Tetrarch (*Matthew 14:9*), Christ as the “king” of the Jews (*Matthew 2:2; 27:11, 29, 37*), “King” of Israel (*Mark 15:32; John 1:49; 12:13*), and as “King” of kings (*Revelation 17:14; 19:16*), etc. It is on this basis that Peter here refers to emperor as *basilei* (king) ‘as being in authority’ (*hos uperechonti*). This phrase, ‘*hos uperechonti*’ is translated ‘as the supreme authority’ which is a reference to

“king” earlier discussed. Because it carries the idea of “superior” of “highest,” the word is used ‘in a literal sense to refer to the fact that the water during the Flood was 15 cubits *higher* than the earth.’⁵⁴ This idea helps to apply it to ruler or someone in the position of authority. Perhaps, it is on this basis that the reference is to the emperor as the highest in the state and ruler over the Roman Empire.

2: 14 or to governors, who are sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right (*eite hēgemosin hōw dia autou pempomenois eis ekdikēsīn*).

***Hēgemosin* (governors)**

The second category on Peter’s list of those in authority is the *hēgemosin*, the governors. He commands that his readers must submit to *hēgemosin*. It seems the Apostle intends to make it clear to those who might be thinking that the first category (emperor) might not be applicable to them. Even anyone who did not have contact with the emperor would have with the governor. Therefore, he commands them to submit to the governors, *hēgemosin*. The word “governor” was used of the procurators and prefects in Judea. Although, the Greek word *hēgemosin* used in *1 Peter 2: 14* is a term used for rulers generally (*Mark 13:9*), it is translated as “princes” or “provincial governors.”⁵⁵ A governor was a person of high social standing (*Matthew 2:6*). It could also be used for any Roman procurators like Pontius Pilate (*Matthew 27:2; Luke 20:20*), Felix (*Acts 23: 24*), and Festus (*Acts 26:30*). According to Goppelt, ‘These governors could be referred to as ‘proconsuls’ if they resided in a senatorial province, legates, if they acted as military commanders in imperial provinces or procurators who administered taxation and judged important cases.’⁵⁶

The phrase *dia autou pempomenois* (who are sent by him) in *2:14* is a reference to God who commissioned these king and governors. This is because there is no authority, except that which God has established (*Romans 13:1*). God is the ultimate source of the authority of both the emperor and the governors. As at the time Peter wrote this letter, the reigning emperor was Nero (A. D. 54-68). Therefore, by implication, Peter is saying his readers must be obedient to Nero and other kings even if they were brutal. They have been installed and charged with carrying out the imperial will of punishing those who do wrong and commending those who do right.⁵⁷ The preposition *di’* following the genitive, *autou pempomenois*

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is a phrase expressing the channel by which divine authority is conveyed to the governor.⁵⁸ Although, it seems the emperor could appoint governors and the senate could also do, Peter's message focused on submission to governing authorities and not necessarily on who appointed them.⁵⁹

Having talked about those in authority, Peter goes further to give their distinctive responsibilities. That is, 'to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right' (*kakopoion epainon de agathopoion*). This is a statement of responsibility of the state towards the people they govern. In this verse 14, Peter has simply outlined the role of the state in respect to two different kinds of people, namely those who do wrong and those who do right.

The Greek word *ekdikesin* is a common term in the *Septuagint*. For instance, the killing of the first born of the Egyptians was seen as punishment (*ekdikesin*) from God (*Exodus 12:12*), Israelites' vengeance upon the Midianites in Numbers 31:3 was also seen as a divine justice. In the record of their journey, the Lord brought judgment upon the Egyptians (*Numbers 33:3-4*); The Lord avenged Jephthah of the Ammonites (*Judges 11:36*), Samson promised to get revenge on the Philistines (*15:7*); Samson prayed to God that he would get revenge on the Philistines after losing his two eyes (*16:28*). In the *New Testament*, the term *ekdikesin* is from the verb *ekdikeō*, which means that which proceeds from justice with the idea of vindicating a person's right (*Luke 18:3, 5*) or to avenge a thing (*2 Corinthians 10:6; Revelation 6:10; 19:2*).⁶⁰ According to Vine, Unger and White, the word is most frequently used of divine vengeance (*Romans 12:19; Hebrews 10:30*) and it is translated 'to take vengeance' in *Acts 28:4* and *Jude 7 (KJV)*. Therefore, the term *ekdikesin* or *ekdikesis* literally means that which proceeds out of justice, not as often with human vengeance, out of a sense of injury or merely out of a feeling of indignation.⁶¹ Just in the same way it is used in *1 Peter 2:14* of civil governors as those who are sent of God for vengeance on evil doers, the term is also seen in *Luke 21:22*, being used of the days of vengeance upon the Jewish people; and in *2 Corinthians 7:11*, it is used of the self-avenging of believers, in their godly sorrow for wrong doing. Peter portrays the king (emperor) and governor as agents sent by God to maintain justice in the society. This is the proper and ideal functions of any civil authority and it is similar to Paul's expression in *Romans 13: 3*. Maintenance of justice

includes punishing those who do wrong and commending those who do right. Peter describes that these rulers exist to punish evildoers, and to praise anyone that does good (*1 Peter 2:14*). ‘In this light’, according to Marlowe, ‘Peter may be understood as saying that civil authority, though a human institution, is to be obeyed because the protection and order it provides is God’s will.’⁶²

Thus, it is the will of God that king and governor are put in place to maintain law and order in the society. It is a common knowledge that without government to check people’s actions, the society would become confused and chaotic. As a matter of fact, there will be violation of human and property rights, increase in crime rate, uncontrolled use of physical harm etc. Marlowe goes further to say that though the institution may appear imperfect and often deficient, the absence of institutional order is almost always worse. Though, it may be termed ‘a state of freedom’, but rather it is a state of anarchy and oppression. Almost any form of government is preferable to such system. Jesus had earlier inferred in his statement in *Luke 6:9* that doing good implies saving life and doing wrong is to save life.

Probably Peter is making a point from the exhortation of Jesus when he encourages his readers in this way in order to silence the ignorant talk of foolish men (*2:15*). In the statement *epainon de agathopoion* (to commend those who do right), the word *epainon* is an intensive form of *aineō* which means a tale or narration which came to denote ‘approbation’, ‘commendation’ or ‘praise.’⁶³ In the *New Testament*, the word is used in a number of ways. It is used in this sense for God in respect of his glory (*Matthew 21:16; Luke 18:43; Ephesians 1:12*).⁶⁴ The word is also used of those on account of praise bestowed by God upon both Jews (*Romans 2:29*), Christians (*1 Corinthians 4:5*) and of whatsoever is praise worthy (*Philippians 4:8*); Paul also uses the word for a brother who had been used for the gospel (*2 Corinthians 8:18*). This same word is employed by Peter (and Paul, *Romans 13:3*) for those who do right. This was common for the governing authorities to recognize those who were exemplary people in Roman society.⁶⁵

2:15 For it is God’s will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish men (*hoti outos estin to thelema tou theou agathopoiountas phimoun ten ton aphronon anthropon agnōsian*).

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This verse opens with the word *hoti* which only functions casually in the sentence.⁶⁶ Peter introduces the word in order to provide a reason he is advocating for submission (*hupotagete*) in verse 13. Whereas, *outōs* is a reference to *hupotagete*, the noun *thelema*, signifies objectively that which is willed, or of the will of God (*Matthew 18:14; Mark 3:35*). Literally, it means the ‘good’, ‘perfect’ and ‘acceptable.’⁶⁷ Silencing the ignorant talk of foolish men is the will of God and this is dependent on doing good (*agathopoiountas*). It is the means through which the will of God is done. It is not by silencing the foolish men.⁶⁸ It seems there were certain people going about circulating some ignorant talks about Christianity or about God at the time of writing this letter. Peter admonishes his readers that by doing good, these foolish men and their ignorant talks will be silenced (2:12). When he speaks about governors commending those who do right, Peter was not speaking of ordinary situations and not of persecutions.⁶⁹

2:15 For it is God’s will (*hoti outos estin to thelema tou theou*)

In this case it is God’s will that they should submit and that by doing good deeds they should silence the talk of foolish men. This is the first time Peter uses this expression, ‘God’s will’. Other places include 3:17; 4:2, 19. You should silence the ignorant talk of foolish men. Living as good citizens is a further proof that the charges against Christians were false. This will further commend the gospel to unbelievers and thereby silencing the ignorant talk of foolish men. This is what Peter describes as the will of God.

The participle ‘Doing good’ and the prepositional phrase ‘to silence the ignorant talk ...’ are connected together. The only means by which the ignorant talk of foolish men could be brought under control is for Peter’s readers to be doing all kinds of good deeds. The word *phimoun* is from the root *phimoō* which means ‘to muzzle.’⁷⁰ In *Matthew 22:34; Mark 1:25; 4:39; Luke 4:35; 1 Timothy 5:18* the Greek verb *phimoun* is also used the way as it is in *1 Peter 2:15*, and it is rendered ‘to put to silence’ or to ‘muzzle.’ Therefore, the intention of the writer is to ‘silence’ or to muzzle the mouth of the ignorant people. The Greek word *agnōsian* which is rendered ‘ignorance’ connotes the idea of someone who do not have the knowledge of God, his way or being oblivious to something specific God has done.⁷¹ It is used in *1 Peter* to describe what befell those who slander the Christians and the Christ and the reason they were doing it (2:12; 3:16). These were the one he referred to as *ton aphronōn anthropōn*. It is a description of a fool whose

lifestyle is morally bankrupt because he is religiously ‘ignorant’ or ‘uninformed’ as regard the basic knowledge about God (*Luke 11:40; 12:20*).⁷² This is why Peter hit hard on such people in his letter to his readers.

2:16 Live as free men, but do not use your freedom as a cover-up for evil; live as servants of God (*hos eleutheroi kai me hos epikalumma echontes tes kakias ten eleutherian all’ hos theou douloi*)

This exhortation is not a license for rebellion against constituted authority. Instead it is an encouragement for readers to freely submit to God and to civil authorities. They should not use their liberty as cover-up for evil. Instead, it must be exercised under law. Freedom is not license to do as one pleases, but as servants of God. Peter wants his readers to live as servants of God and not to use their freedom as a cover-up for evil. This verse begins with a connected phrase *hos eleutheroi* but rendered ‘live as free men.’ The Greek word “*hos*” is an adverb which qualifies the word *eleutheroi* and does not seem to refer to the ‘ignorant men’ mentioned in verse 15. It has been suggested that the phrase is a reference to either the command ‘submit to all human authorities’ (v. 13) or ‘honour all men’ (v. 17).⁷³

The term *eleutheroi* is from the noun *eleutheria* and it is translated ‘liberty.’ The word which primarily connotes freedom to go wherever one likes, is used in a number of ways in the *New Testament*. First, it is used of freedom from restraint and obligation in general (*Matthew 17:26; Romans 7:3; 1 Corinthians 7:39*); and second, of freedom from second marriage of a woman (*1 Corinthians 9:1, 19; 1 Peter 2:16*); from the Law (*Galatians 4:26*); from sin (*John 8:36*); and third, it is used in a civil sense to mean ‘free’ from bondage or slavery (*John 8:33; 1 Corinthians 7:21, 22*).⁷⁴ Therefore, the combination of the noun with the verb as in *1 Peter 2:16* stresses the completeness of the act. Christians are called to freedom, but it is not the political freedom of the Palestinian Zealots who ‘recognized God alone as their Lord and King’ . . . nor that of the Stoics who struggled for sovereign detachment from the pains and pleasures of life, nor the freedom of the antinomian who flouts social and moral rules to gratify his or her own impulses.⁷⁵ This conclusion is based on the imperative verse 13. Peter states that this command to live as free people should not be as a cover-up for evil (*kai me hos epikalumma echontes tes kakias*). Apart from *1 Peter 2:16*, where it is used in a figurative sense in reference to freedom (when such

freedom is used to hide a real evil behind), the term *epikalumma* does not appear again in the *New Testament*. It seems that when Peter uses such broad references as the lusts which were in their former lives (1:14), we are to understand his reference here to *kakias* in an equally broad sense—including any evil done under the guise of being free.⁷⁶

2:17 Show proper respect to everyone: love the brotherhood of believers, fear God, honour the king (*pantas timesate, ten adelphoteta agapate, ton theon phobeisthe, ton basilea timate*).

This verse contains four succinct commands namely, (i) show proper respect to everyone; (ii) love the brotherhood of believers; (iii) Fear God; (iv) Honour king. The fourfold injunction follows immediately after *hos theou douloi* in verse 16. Peter wants his readers, as servants of God (*hos theou douloi*), to honor all men. Peter's readers must not be selective in this duty. That is, they are to say and do things concomitant with the respect *all* men are to be shown. By giving these imperatives, Peter summarizes the social obligation of Christians. He gives this exposition naming specific institutions to which Christians are to submit themselves. These institutions include, servant-master relationship (2:18-25); wife-husband relationship (3:1-7); right relationship with others (3:8-12). Thus, *1 Peter 2:17* (Show proper respect to everyone: Love the brotherhood of believers, fear God, honour the king) is a summary of Peter's message to his readers. Christians must show proper respect to everyone because every human being bears the image of God.

Show proper respect to everyone (*pantas timēsate*)

The verb *timēsate*, an aorist verb, is from the root *timaō* which means 'to honour' or 'esteem' a person and it is used of valuing Christ at a price (*Matthew 27:9*). It was suggested the possibility that the aorist is due to euphony.⁷⁷ *Timaō* is used 21 times in the *New Testament* and is commonly associated in the Synoptic Gospels with the proper attitude a child is to demonstrate to their parents (e.g. *Matthew 15:4; Ephesians 6:2*).⁷⁸

The same word is used to describe the honour done by Christ to the father (*John 5:23; 8:49*), honour bestowed by the father upon him who serves Christ (*John 12:26*), the duty of children to honour their parents (*Matthew 15:4; 19:19; Mark 7:10; 10:19; Luke 18: 20; Ephesians 6:2*) as well as the honoring of Paul (*Acts 28:10*) and widows (*1 Timothy 5:3*). It is also used to refer to money (*Matthew 27:9*).⁷⁹

In the letter of Peter, the same word is used to describe the duty of Christians to ‘show proper respect to everyone (without exception) because they are creation of God (verse 13).⁸⁰

Love the brotherhood of believers (*ten adelphoteta agapate*)

Special love is due to others within the family of believers because they are brothers and sisters.⁸¹ The second command is *ten adelphoteta agapate* (love the brotherhood of believers). The word *agapate*, a present tense and translated you (plural) love, is the second person plural of *agapaō* which means ‘I love.’ The plural number of the verb *agapate* indicates that the writer is addressing more than one person. The Greek word *agapaō* or *agapē* ‘is used in the *New Testament* to describe the attitude of God toward Jesus and human race generally (*John 3:16; 14:21; Romans 5:8*).⁸² It expresses the deep and constant ‘love’ and interest of a perfect creator towards unworthy creatures. The word *ten* (the), a definite article, indicates that the command is for a specific group of people. The term *adelphoteta* (brotherhood) is an associated word with *adelphos* which is rendered ‘a brother.’ Therefore, *adelphoteta* means primarily ‘a brotherly relation,’ and so, the community (of believers) possessed of this relation is implied in the sentence (cf. *1 Peter 3:8; Romans 12:10; 1 Thessalonians 4:9; Hebrews 13:1*). It is a fellowship of faith and suffering (*5:9*).

Fear God (*ton theon phobeisthe*)

The third command is for Peter’s readers ‘to fear God.’ The Greek word used is *ton theon phobeisthe*, where the term *phobeisthe* is in the present active sense as a command. The command to ‘fear God’ in *1 Peter 2:17* probably came from *Proverb 24:21* which says, ‘Fear the Lord and the king, my son, and do not join with rebellious officials.’ Although, the term has several meanings such as ‘fear,’ ‘dread,’ ‘terror’ (*Acts 2:43; 19:17; 1 Corinthians 1:2, 3; 1 Timothy 5:20*), according to Vine, Unger and White, it carries the idea of ‘reverential fear,’ of God (as a controlling motive of the life), in matters spiritual and moral, not a mere ‘fear’ of his power and righteous retribution, but as a wholesome dread of displeasing him. Therefore, it can be said that the idea of fearing God is a positive rather than a negative thing in the Bible. For instance, Joseph feared God (*Genesis 42:18*), the midwives feared God (*Exodus 1:17*), the leaders that Moses chose feared God (*Exodus 18:21*). Jesus also exhorts his audience to fear only God (*Matthew 10:28*), and Paul also speaks about his fear for God (2

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Corinthians 7:1).⁸³ This is ‘fear’ that banishes the terror that shrinks from his presence (*Romans 8:15*), and which influences the disposition and attitude of one whose circumstances are guided by trust in God through the indwelling Spirit of God (*Acts 9:31; Romans 3:18; 2 Corinthians 7:1; Ephesians 5:21; Philippians 2:12; 1 Peter 1:17*).⁸⁴ The kind of fear that Peter seems to have in mind can be described as a healthy appreciation for God’s impartial judgments and the greatness of his salvation (*1:17-19*). It is the wholesome dread of displeasing him (*5:10*). Therefore, Peter rightly assumed if his readers feared God, who has ultimate power and authority (*5:11*), they are more likely to keep their word and treat others with kindness.

Honour the king (*ton basilea timate*)

The fourth command is to honour the king (*ton basilea timate*). This verb (honour) too is in the present tense. Peter is using it to tell his readers to honour the king. It must be said that the last three commands are not sub-commands under the first one, though it sounds so. The change in tense to the present after the aorist, suggests that Peter was attempting to emphasize the first command according to his special purpose in the paragraph.⁸⁵ He commands his readers to give due respect (honour) to the kings (by submitting to them) as political leaders.

It is interesting to note that *1 Peter 2:17* begins with the word *pantas timēsate* and concludes with *ton basilea timēsate*. The first Greek words (*pantas timēsate*) are rendered ‘show proper respect to everyone’ (*NIV*), ‘honour all men’ (*KJV*), and ‘honour all people’ (*NET*). The other words are *ton basilea timesate* and they are rendered “honour the king” in *NIV*, *KJV* and *NET*. While commenting on this unique feature, Michaels observed that the double use of this respectful word (honour) in the *NIV*, *KJV*, *NET* and probably many other English Bible translations at the beginning and end of the sequence, and the placement of the “brotherhood” and “God” side by side in the center gives the whole maxim a chiasmic (a-b-b-a) quality, with the obligations of Christian believers to God and each other framed by their secondary obligations to fellow citizens (including enemies), and to civil rulers. It is the secondary obligations that Peter emphasizes by this arrangement but precisely with the reminder that they *are* secondary.⁸⁶

Textual problems

NA26 lists in total 9 textual problems. None of these problems are of any consequence;⁸⁷ with the result that Metzger does not bother to list any of them in his Textual Commentary.⁸⁸ This, notwithstanding, Wilson suggests a textual emendation in *2:17: panta poiesate* for the NA26 reading *panta poiesate*.⁸⁹ In the *New Testament*, it has been observed that *poiesate* is found with *panta*; that none of the apostolic fathers who knew our epistle ever referred to *2:17* as it stands and that a likely emendation can easily be reconstructed. However, this perhaps is not without its own problem. The approach is *totally* lacking in manuscript evidence. For this reason, it is to be rejected in favour of the strongly attested reading *panta timē̄sate*.

Conclusion

The text of *1 Peter 2:13-17* occurs with the larger context of the new behavior before the world (*2:11-25*). Its immediate narrative began with Christian conduct as witnesses (*2:11-12*) and ended with Christian conduct as slaves (*2:18-25*). Historically, Peter the author of this epistle had a specific group of Christians who, following their persecution by Emperor Nero, have been scattered and thus become members of the Dispersion throughout the five northern Roman Provinces of Asia Minor. The epistle was written around early 60s to encourage this group of believers and to rekindle their hope of future glory. An exegetical analysis of some key words which feature in the text led to the discovery that submission to civil authority is an important part of the Christian duty in this world now as it was then. Contemporary African readers need to consider the impact of patriarchy and oppressive tendencies. Therefore, Peter's word should not be used to justify oppression or to permit the continuation of situation where the human rights of others are undermined. The message of Peter speaks to Christians in Nigeria and Africa at large who are experiencing security challenges, unemployment, famine, ravages of COVID-19 and other crises related pandemic, telling them to continue to endure and be submissive because there is hope at the end.

Endnotes :

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- ⁶ Sicily M. Muriithi, '1 Peter', in *African Bible Commentary: A One-Volume Commentary*, ed. Tokunboh Adeyemo (Nairobi: Word Alive Publishers, 2006), p. 1543.
- ⁷ J. D. Douglas and M. C. Tenney, *New International Bible Dictionary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987), p. 774.
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- ¹⁹ David G. Horrell, *1 Peter* (New York: T & T Clark Ltd, 2008), p. 53.
- ²⁰ Karen H. Jobes, *1 Peter* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005), p. 9.
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³⁰ Ramsay J. Michaels, '1 Peter', *Word Biblical Commentary*, ed. Ralph P. Martin, vol. 49. (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1988), p. 124. <https://www.amazon.com/Word-Biblical-Commentary-Vol-Peter/dp/0849902487>. Accessed: 04.05.22.

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- ⁷⁸ Michaels, *1 Peter, Word Biblical Commentary*, p. 124.
- ⁷⁹ Herrick, *The Apostle Peter on Civil Obedience*.
- ⁸⁰ Herrick, *The Apostle Peter on Civil Obedience*.
- ⁸¹ Herrick, *The Apostle Peter on Civil Obedience*.