

“... Beareth Not The Sword In Vain ...”

“... *But if thou do that which is evil, be afraid; for he beareth not the sword in vain: for he is the minister of God, a revenger to execute wrath ...*”

Romans 13:4

God, in His infinite wisdom, provided the scriptures for mankind written in a language perfectly suited for the message of redemption. It is certainly worth the Bible student's time to carefully investigate key Greek phrases in the scriptures. Although it is not necessary for one to be a student of the languages of the Bible in order to understand it, a cursory examination can instill within us a vividness and appreciation for the Holy Spirit-inspired words.

The Greek Interlinear reveals that the word for “sword” is *machairan* and the word for “he bears” is *pharei*. It is also interesting to note that word order of the phrase is subject-verb. The word for “sword” appears in the clause before the word for “he bears.” This could represent that Paul wanted to emphasize “sword,” perhaps to show the extreme power of governing authorities.

The verb *pharei* is a present-active-indicative. This verb tense represents contemporaneous action in the present. The ministers of God, in this case the representatives of governments, continually or repeatedly bear the “sword.”

Vine defines *pharei* as the “civil authority in bearing the sword as symbolic of execution” (p. 103). Vine also mentions that *pharei* is not the simple act of bearing, but a continuous or habitual condition. The word occurs only one more time in the New Testament in 1 Corinthians 15:49. The vividness of the word can easily be seen in the fact that humans bear the likeness of the earthly man and in the resurrection, man will bear the likeness of the man from heaven.

Vine defines *machairan* as a “short sword or dagger” (p. 1123). He goes further to say that it represents the “instrument of a magistrate or judge” (p. 1123). This word occurs 27 times in the New Testament. For the most part, it means a literal sword. However, in Matthew 10:34, Jesus uses it metaphorically for dissension -- the opposite of peace. In Ephesians 6:17 and Hebrews 4:12, “sword” is used to represent the word of God.

Paul also uses the same word again in Romans 8:35 when he discusses the sword of rulers which may try to separate Christians from the love of Christ. In the context of Romans 13:4, “sword” refers to rulers who have power by

means of the death penalty. This comparison shows that Paul consistently uses "sword" as an earthly power which Christians must yield to but also as a power which can try to pull us away from God.

Concerning the definition of *machairan*, Rienecker adds, "The sword is the symbol of the executive and criminal jurisdiction of a magistrate and is therefore used of the power of punishing inherent in the government" (p. 378). Thayer states that *machairan* is "used of him to whom the sword has been committed, viz. to use when a malefactor is to be punished; hence i. q. to have the power of life and death" (p. 393). Its related words include *mache*, which means "a fight, combat, battle, strike, contention or quarrel" and *machomai*, which is the verb form, means "to fight, quarrel, wrangle or dispute."

Although most scholars are agree that the meaning of "*beareth not the sword in vain*" refers to the ability of a government to exercise capital punishment, the International Critical Commentary suggests another alternative. It says, "At first sight the context (vv. 3-4) seems to support the assumption that the reference must be to the power of capital punishment. But a reminder that the government is possessed of military power and so is in a position to quell resistance would surely be equally important" (p. 667). The ICC further states that the expression *ten machairan phorei* is an idiomatic phrase which "should be understood either as a general statement concerning the authority's possession of military power ('wears the sword', i.e. is armed, is able to employ force), or else -- less probably -- as a particular reference to the dagger worn by the Emperor as Imperator."

But this comment does not fully explain the need for military power. What need would there be absent of punishment? And if it were merely for punishment without death, why use the term for "sword"? "Sword" is used because civil governments yield the power to punish by death. God commanded Noah, "*Whoso sheddeth man's blood, by man shall his blood be shed ...*" (Genesis 9:6). This must be carried out in a legal way; otherwise, it would be murder. No person should take their own vengeance (Romans 12:19; Hebrews 10:30). The purpose of government is to punish (sometimes by death) those who do evil.

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