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Paul's View on Christian Suffering: Honor Discourse as a Lens

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ABSTRACT The works of John H. Elliott and David A. deSilva have demonstrated the value of reading Paul's positive utterances on the topic of Christian suffering (e.g., Phil 1:29) as embedded in an honor discourse. In his letters, Paul uses the rhetoric of "divine reversal," in which the shame of Christians—their suffering as victims of discrimination—is transformed into the opposite: honor. Continuing in this direction, this article examines Paul's honor discourse in Rom 8:12–39, where much of the suffering does not seem to occur "for Christ's sake." It argues that experiences of suffering in Romans 8 are linked to notions of mortality and sin and therefore not characterized as honorable. Comparing Romans 8 to Paul's honor discourse in Philippians leads the author to conclude that Paul's positive evaluation of the harsh reality of suffering does not apply to all kinds of suffering. Moreover, this article argues that we need to find more nuanced ways to speak about Paul's positive stance on Christian suffering.

KEYWORDS suffering, death, Romans 5–8, Philippians, honor discourse

Introduction

At times, Paul seems remarkably positive about the suffering of Christians. From a Western perspective, this is not easy to understand. Interpreting Paul's utterances against the backdrop of the honor discourse in Paul's sociohistorical context helps to enhance our understanding of his optimism.¹ The works of

1. Regarding texts on Christian suffering, only a few publications have emphasized the importance of honor and shame for interpreting them. John H. Elliott, "Disgraced Yet Graced: The Gospel according to 1 Peter in the Key of Honor and Shame," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 26 (1996): 167–78. This article was revised and republished in John H. Elliott, *Conflict, Community, and Honor: 1 Peter in Social-Scientific Perspective*, Cascade Companions (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2007), 51–86. In this publication, Elliott also offers an appendix of honor-shame vocabulary and related semantic domains (80–87). David A. deSilva, *The Hope of Glory: Honor*

John H. Elliott and David A. deSilva are illuminating in this regard. They have argued that Paul uses the rhetoric of “divine reversal,” in which the shame of Christians—their suffering from persecution as victims of discrimination—is transformed into the opposite: honor. Their social exclusion and persecution are, in fact, an honorable “badge” of belonging to Jesus Christ.

Continuing in this direction, in this article I examine Paul’s honor discourse in Romans 8, particularly in instances where the suffering does not seem to occur “for Christ’s sake.” I focus on Rom 8:12–39 and its literary and sociohistorical context.² First, I establish the nature and the cause of the suffering mentioned in this passage. Second, by analyzing honor vocabulary and imagery in the text, I read Paul’s evaluation of this suffering in terms of honor and shame. I conclude by comparing these results to the honor discourse found in other Pauline passages on suffering, such as Phil 1:27–30, which seem to focus more on persecution.

As for the term “suffering,” I favor the broad definition formulated by Brian J. Tabb in his work on suffering in the ancient world. Suffering will therefore be understood as “the individual or group experience of bearing physical, psychological, economic, and/or social pain, distress, or loss.”³

The Nature and the Cause of the Suffering in Romans 8:12–39

I want to begin with a succinct overview of the “suffering-vocabulary” in the pericope, before placing it against the background of the concept of θάνατος (“death”) in chapters 5–8 and the sociohistorical reality of the Roman Christians at the time. I conclude this section by positing the nature and cause of the suffering in Rom 8:12–39.⁴

Discourse and New Testament Interpretation (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1999). Myriam Klinker-De Klerck, “Lijden omwille van Christus,” in *Theologie van het Nieuwe Testament in twintig thema’s*, ed. Armin D. Baum and Rob van Houwelingen (Utrecht: KokBoekencentrum, 2019), 365–80; “Leiden um Christi willen: Christenverfolgung im Licht von Ehre und Schande,” in *Kernthemen neutestamentlicher Theologie*, ed. Armin D. Baum and Rob van Houwelingen (Gießen: Brunnen Verlag, 2022), 277–92.

2. Why focus on the verses 12–39? Most commentators divide the chapter in two parts (8:1–17 and 8:18–39), each of which can be further divided in two smaller pericopes: e.g., Ben Witherington III, *Paul’s Letter to the Romans: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004); Longenecker divides the text in three parts (8:1–17; 18–30; 31–39), Richard N. Longenecker, *The Epistle to the Romans*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016). In fact, the verses 12–17 function as a transition to the second part of the chapter by introducing kinship language and connecting it to the topic of suffering, which subsequently becomes an important theme in 8:18–39.
3. Brian J. Tabb, *Suffering in Ancient Worldview: Luke, Seneca, and 4 Maccabees in Dialogue*, LNTS 569 (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2017), 11.
4. If not marked otherwise, Scripture quotations are from the Revised Standard Version.

Suffering in Romans 8:12–39

The abundance and the variety of vocabulary referring to experiences of suffering are striking in Rom 8:12–39. Indeed, suffering is mentioned in some twenty-one discrete ways.⁵

In verse 13, Paul warns his Roman brothers and sisters that if they live according to the flesh they will die (ἀποθνήσκειν). He assures them, however, that if by the Spirit they can put to death (θανατοῦτε) the “deeds of the body,” they will live. The indicative θανατοῦτε is used in a figurative way to refer to a “spiritual” putting to death. At the same time, the infinitive ἀποθνήσκειν may be meant literally, not only referring to a spiritual but also to a biological death.⁶ Only two verses earlier, in fact, Paul referred to the Roman Christians’ “mortal bodies” (v. 11: τὰ θνητὰ σώματα ὑμῶν).

In verse 17, Paul insists that, in order to be glorified with Christ, Christians must also suffer with him (συμπάσχομεν). Drawing attention to the *syn* compounds that “proliferate throughout this passage,” Ben Witherington argues that Paul is likely speaking about “suffering for the faith and for Christ, not just any sort of suffering.”⁷ Admittedly, the *peristasis* catalogue (catalogue of hardships) in 8:35 and the subsequent citation from Psalm 43:23 LXX seems to support such an interpretation. However, the many *syn* compounds as such do not irrefutably demonstrate that with συμπάσχομεν Paul is referring *specifically* to suffering “for the sake of Christ.” On the contrary, Rom 8:17–39 focuses on (human) mortality. Richard Longenecker’s interpretation seems, therefore, more probable than Witherington’s. He sees συμπάσχομεν as a general reference that includes everything that believers in Jesus suffer “whether as finite and fallible humans under the curses of sin and depravity or as Christians in their witness for God and the gospel.”⁸ In any case, in verse 18 Paul assures his readers that the sufferings (παθήματα) of this present time (τοῦ νῦν καιροῦ) cannot be compared to the future glory. It is here that the eschatological character of the suffering becomes clear.⁹

In verses 19–23, Paul shifts his focus from the suffering of his fellow Christians to the suffering of all creation. Although κτίσις often encompasses all created

5. Because of the broad definition of “suffering,” the vocabulary belongs to semantic domains 20–24 of Louw-Nida.

6. Traditions as found in, e.g., Deut 30:15–20 may have been in the background. James D. G. Dunn, *Romans*, WBC (Dallas: Word, 1988), 449.

7. Witherington, *Romans*, 219.

8. Longenecker, *Romans*, 516; See, e.g., also Siu Fung Wu, *Suffering in Romans* (Cambridge: Clarke, 2015), 119.

9. Witherington, *Romans*, 222, refers to “the present era of salvation and messianic afflictions.”

realities,¹⁰ here Paul seems to think about non-human creation in particular.¹¹ The condition of creation is a state of emptiness and futility (ματαιότης) being subject to corruption and ruin (φθορά). The whole of creation is groaning (συστενάξει) and suffering agony (συνωδίνω) while waiting to be set free from its bondage, waiting to obtain the glorious liberty of the children of God (v. 21).¹² The term φθορά can refer to corruption or decay as opposed to imperishability (in the sense of immortality),¹³ though it also seems to refer to the earth's more general state of "ruin" brought about by human sin.¹⁴ Similarly, the futility (ματαιότης) the earth is subjected to can be understood as a failure to reach the ends for which God intended creation. Again, the terminology of groaning and agony (labor pains) points to the eschatological character of the suffering.¹⁵

In verses 23–39, Paul again shifts the focus to the Christians. Just like creation, they groan (στενάζομεν), inwardly waiting for their adoption as sons, which will lead to the redemption of their bodies. This is their hope. In the meantime, they must endure their suffering with the aid of the Spirit, who helps Christians in their weakness (ἀσθενεία). Paul makes frequent use of ἀσθενής

10. See, e.g., Col 1:15; however, see Rom 8:39: "creature."

11. Paul contrasts creation to the children of God (v. 23) and the οὐχ ἔκοῦσα in verse 20 also seems to rule out humanity in general, "since at least Adam was not subject to such futility or suffering without a choice" (Witherington, *Romans*, 223–24); See also Douglas J. Moo and Jonathan A. Moo, *Creation Care: A Biblical Theology of the Natural World*, Biblical Theology for Life (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2018), 108.

12. The idea that the earth "mourns" because of human exploitation can also be found in the Jewish tradition: Isa 24:4–7; Jer 4:23–28; 12:4.10–11; Hos 4:1–3; and 4 Ezra 7:1–4. Viewed alongside the verb στενάζομεν (v. 23), the compound verbs συστενάξει and συνωδίνω are notable: *participating* in suffering because of human sin, all of creation experiences death and decay and yearns for the time when God will restore everything. See Robert Jewett, *Romans: A Commentary*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), 516–17.

13. See, e.g., 1 Cor 15:42, 50: ἀφθαρσία.

14. Moo and Moo, *Creation Care*, 108.

15. The imagery of labor pains (combined with eschatological elements) figures regularly in the Old Testament and Jewish literature—e.g., Isa 13:8; 21:3; 26:17–18; 66:7–8; Jer 4:31; 22:23; Hos 13:13; Mic 4:9–10; 1 En. 62:4—and is "frequently employed as a metaphor for the painful prospect of divine judgment" (Jewett, *Romans*, 517). Many Jews thought that sufferings would immediately precede the end (e.g., 4 Ezra 9:3; 13:31–32; 2 Bar. 27:7; 70:3; Sib. Or. 2:22–24; 3:660–61). See Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament*, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2014), 107. For the interpretation of the terminology against the background of these so-called messianic woes, see, among others, B. Byrne, *Romans*, SP (Collegeville, MN: Glazier/Liturgical, 1996), 261; Witherington, *Romans*, 222–23; Jewett, *Romans*, 517. Contra Jonathan Moo, "Romans 8.19–22 and Isaiah's Cosmic Covenant," *NTS* 54 (2008): 74–89. Moo argues that Paul is only describing the plight of the earth subjected to human evil. He sees no indication that creation's groaning is intensifying because of the approach of the end.

and its cognates, terms that signal general human weakness both mortal and moral.¹⁶ This weakness also manifests itself in an inability to pray “as we ought.”¹⁷

In the concluding passage (verses 28–39) Paul again takes up the θάνατος vocabulary (verses 34, 36, 38), in verse 34 using it to refer to the death of Jesus Christ. A *peristasis* catalogue follows in verse 35.¹⁸ Apart from being rhetorical (see, e.g., 2 Cor 11:23–29), such lists of hardships enumerate the various difficult situations Christians might face because of their belonging to Christ (see verse 36: ἔνεκεν σοῦ). In the following verse, these different forms of suffering are gathered together and summarized by the verb “to die” when Paul cites Ps 43:23 (LXX): “For thy sake we are being killed (θανατούμεθα) all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.” Finally, in verse 38 the term θάνατος is used once again, this time in a very general sense (in contrast with ζωή, “life”) to refer to physical death.

In short, in Rom 8:12–39 Paul uses a variety of words to refer to different experiences of suffering. The vocabulary of θάνατος and its cognates in 8:13 and 8:36–38 forms an *inclusio* that brings the varied other vocabulary under a general heading in terms of content.

Suffering and Death

The θάνατος vocabulary forms a link with the preceding chapters: throughout Romans 5–8, θάνατος κτλ. is abundantly present (some 43 times!).¹⁹ For now, I want to consider two questions. First, what “realm of reality” is covered by this vocabulary? Second, how exactly does the suffering of Rom 8:12–39 fit in?

When it comes to the first question, Paul's use of θάνατος κτλ. in Romans 5–8 reflects the variety of different perspectives on death that were present in Paul's Jewish and Hellenistic context.²⁰ In keeping with what can be found in

16. Longenecker, *Romans*, 423. In Rom 5:6, e.g., moral weakness is in view, whereas in 1 Cor 15:43, e.g., mortal weakness seems to be foregrounded.

17. Discussing whether a special kind of prayer (or prayer in general) is in view would go too far. See Witherington, *Romans*, 225.

18. For the literary form of the *peristasis* catalogue, see the study of John T. Fitzgerald, *Cracks in an Earthen Vessel: An Examination of the Catalogues of Hardships in the Corinthian Correspondence*, SBLDS (Atlanta: Scholars, 1988). For a critique of Fitzgerald's thesis that Paul presents himself as the model sage, see Brian J. Tabb, “Paul and Seneca on Suffering,” in *Paul and Seneca in Dialogue*, ed. David E. Briones and Joseph Dodson, *Ancient Philosophical Commentary on the Pauline Writings* (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 88–108.

19. θάνατος (see, e.g., 5:10, 12, 14, 17); ἀποθνῆσκω (see, e.g., 5:6, 7, 8, 15; 6:2, 7, 8, 9, 10); θανατώω (see 7:4); θνητός (see 6:12; 8:11).

20. C. Clifton Black II, “Pauline Perspectives on Death in Romans 5–8,” *JBL* 103 (1984): 413–33. Italics are mine.

the Old Testament, Paul seems to understand death in at least three different senses: “*biologically*, as life’s cessation (see Gen 35:18; Ps 90:3; Job 34:14–15); *mythologically*, as a demonic agent or power (Isa 25:6–8; Job 18:13); and *metaphorically*, as the loss of that rich existence intended by Yahweh for his creatures (Deut 30:15,19; Ps 13:3–4; Ezek 37:3–12).”²¹

In Romans 5–8, the *biological* sense is obviously present when Paul refers to the death of Jesus,²² though it is also apparent when Christians (or humans in general) are under discussion.²³ In general, however, when it concerns Christians the focus seems to be on the *metaphorical* sense,²⁴ though even a quick glance reveals that in many cases a clear distinction between the metaphorical and the biological sense is not necessarily useful.²⁵ In fact, both senses seem inextricably connected to one another. That connection becomes only clearer when tracing the origin of death: sin.

The Adam typology in Rom 5:12–21 shows that, according to Paul, humanity’s original sin (ἁμαρτία) allowed the reign of Death to enter into this world (5:12). Here is the *mythological* sense of θάνατος: Death understood as a power, “sin’s partner in crime,”²⁶ reigning in the lives of people and in creation as a whole.²⁷ Humans’ loss of biological life, their perishability, was a clear symptom of their total loss of glory. By his dying on the cross, Christ, as the second Adam, broke the ultimate power of Sin and Death and opened new prospects for life.

However, while humans await the return of Christ, their biological death is still present as “a ‘dark’ residue of suffering and death in God’s created order that will be resolved only by the final resurrection of the dead in the glory of God.”²⁸ This dark residue of suffering is indicative of the overlap of the ages. The eschatological tension creates a space where humans may choose to live

21. Black, “Death,” 414.

22. Four times in 5:6–10; three times in 6:3–5; twice in 6:9; and in 8:34.

23. Rom 6:12; 7:2, 3; 8:11, 36.

24. Rom 6:16, 21, 23; 7:4, 6; 8:6 and twice in 8:13. So Martinus C. de Boer, *Paul, Theologian of God’s Apocalypse: Essays on Paul and Apocalyptic* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2020), 91 (Kindle ed.), contrasting Romans 5–8 in that respect to 1 Corinthians 15. See also Victor P. Furnish, *Theology and Ethics in Paul* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009), 136. Contra John M. G. Barclay, *Paul and the Gift* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 501–2, who emphasizes the biological aspect of mortality in Romans 5–8.

25. Rom 5:15, 21; 6:7, 8; 7:10, 13 (twice), 24.

26. Joseph R. Dodson, *The “Powers” of Personification: Rhetorical Purpose in the Book of Wisdom and the Letter to the Romans*, BZNW 161 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2008), 123.

27. Twice in 5:12, 14, 17; 7:5. For the personification of death as a power in this world, see de Boer, *Paul, Theologian of God’s Apocalypse*; Dodson, *Powers*.

28. J. Christiaan Beker, *Paul the Apostle. The Triumph of God in Life and Thought* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1980), 233.

in Christ and thus become heirs of eternal life. Then they are “dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus” (6:11). However, humans can also choose to lead lives that result in death (6:13). In the overlap of the ages, biological and metaphorical layers of death thus also continue to be deeply connected. In short, “fundamental to Paul’s understanding of death is his linking of mortality to morality.”²⁹

The second question asks how the varied suffering vocabulary of Rom 8:12–39 is related to this multilayered interpretation of death. Although the three layers of death are inextricably connected, in Romans 5–7, with regard to the Christians the *metaphorical* sense of death (with an accent on morality) seems to be more strongly foregrounded. In Rom 8:12–39, on the contrary, the *biological* sense of death, mortality, seems to be brought to the foreground. First, Paul turns the attention of his audience toward their glorious future (v. 18). Indeed, even the whole of creation awaits the revealing of the sons of God. For creation, that moment will involve the ultimate relief from futility and decay; for God’s children, it will be the final redemption of their bodies in the resurrection (v. 23). Mortality will be no more. Second, the notions of suffering and inheriting *together with* Christ (two *syn* compounds) bring the biological sense even more to the foreground. This sense is always in view when Paul refers to the suffering of Christ, more specifically his dying on the cross (see also in verse 34).

So while the metaphorical sense of death was highlighted in the previous chapters, in Rom 8:12–39 the “lack of glory” is now cast as perishability and mortality, the more biological sense of the human (and creational) condition. At the same time, sin in this passage is treated as the causal core of the problem. Whether it is God or humankind who subjected the earth to futility against her will, it was a result of the original sin—as verse 20 suggests, probably referring to the curse of the land in Gen 3:17–19.³⁰ Here again Paul’s “linking of mortality to morality” is clear.

Suffering in First-Century Rome

It is beyond the scope of this article to discuss all questions related to the historical setting of Paul’s letter to the Romans. I will therefore touch only briefly on the general historical reality of the suffering Christians faced in first-century Rome. How did Paul’s letter, and especially what he writes about suffering, resonate with their lived experiences? What did “death” look like in daily life?

29. Black, “Death,” 432.

30. On the possibilities for the identity of τὸν ὑποτάξαντα, see, e.g., C. E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on The Epistle to the Romans*, ICC (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1975), 414.

Using the well-preserved archaeological material in Pompeii, Peter Oakes has reconstructed the plausible conditions of the non-elite social strata in Christian house churches in Rome, vividly illustrating what the existence of, for example, a slave may have been like at the time.³¹ There is, for example, the case of Iris, a bar owner's servant girl, a role that involved slavery and sexual exploitation. How would she have listened to Paul? What he says about bodily matters in Romans 6–8, for instance, must have heightened a sense of inner tension and lack of final control over her body. Oakes discusses various ways slaves might have handled this problem and highlights the comforting effect Paul's words in Romans (e.g., 8:17–18) must have had. Paul's emphasis on the idea of "endurance" (ὑπομονή)—which Oakes calls "a surprisingly persistent minor motif in Romans"—must have been especially encouraging to many Christians. However, in Romans 8, Paul offers more than validation (8:17) and hope. He also promises protection and internal help by the Holy Spirit.³²

Siu Fung Wu has also focused more particularly on the question of suffering in Romans from an audience-focused approach.³³ His study shows how complex the phenomenon of suffering was and how the social, economic, religious, and political dimensions were often interconnected. "Within the first-century house churches," he concludes, "the majority of the members would be familiar with socioeconomic hardship and religio-political injustice, or at least they regularly interacted with people who experienced hardship. In light of this, we can say that the 'audience' consisted of those who understood what it meant to live at or below subsistence level."³⁴ Wu refers to poor living conditions, high infant mortality rates, involuntarily relocation, enslavement, homelessness, chronic illness, etc.

Conclusion: Nature and Cause

As for the *nature* of the suffering in Rom 8:12–39, the variety of vocabulary is remarkable. Paul uses terms with a rather general meaning, such as πάθημα, alongside more specific terms such as ματαιότης or different kinds of hardships (*peristaseis*). He arranges all these different kinds of suffering under the heading of "death" (θάνατος). The concept of θάνατος becomes an important link when embedding the pericope in the context of Romans 5–8. Unlike the previous chapters, in Rom 8:12–39 the biological sense of death (mortality and

31. Peter Oakes, *Reading Romans in Pompeii. Paul's Letter at Ground Level* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2009). See, on Pompeii and slavery, also Bruce W. Longenecker, *In Stone and Story: Early Christianity in the Roman World* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2020), 183–97.

32. Oakes, *Romans*, 140.

33. Wu, *Suffering*.

34. Wu, *Suffering*, 42.

perishability) seems to be more strongly foregrounded. However, it also remains connected to the more metaphorical sense (spiritual death)—sin is still portrayed as the core cause of the problem.

That brings us to the *causes* of suffering. On a sociohistorical level, Christians probably faced socioeconomic hardship connected to religio-political injustice. Thus, an important, however in the pericope not very foregrounded, cause of their suffering seems to be their belonging to the minority group of Christ-followers (8:36 ἔνεκεν σοῦ θανατούμεθα). The literary context of the pericope (chapters 5–7) points to the deeper “theological cause” underneath their suffering existence: Sin, first understood as a power together with Death as its “partner in crime.”³⁵ Because of Sin, Death reigned in the lives of people and in creation as a whole. Humans’ loss of biological life is a clear symptom of their total loss of glory. And, still, after the glorious victory of the second Adam, there remains a dark residue of suffering and death indicative of the overlap of the ages. According to some, the eschatological character of the suffering points to the “Messianic woes” as yet another theological cause of the suffering in Rom 8:12–39.³⁶

The Evaluation of the Suffering in Romans 8:12–39 through the Lens of Honor and Shame

Ancient views on suffering show varying, even contradictory valuations of the phenomenon of suffering and death.³⁷ After discussing some Jewish and Greco-Roman views on death, Clifton Black concludes that in some instances death is considered a “completion” (e.g., the incentive for ethical behavior and the fulfillment of a righteous life), while in other traditions it is rather seen as a “depletion” (e.g., the loss of the richness of life).³⁸

Studying Romans 5–8, Black notes that “the imagery of depletion tends to characterize the death of creation and humankind, whereas the imagery of completion tends to characterize the death of Christ.”³⁹ Thus, referring to death using the negative terms of lack, oppression, or estrangement is Paul’s “anthropological” way of speaking, while in his christological discourse, death is depicted positively as an occasion for hope, as atonement for sin, and thus as a positive fulfillment. The following statement of Black, however, lacks nuance: “Ultimately, of course, the two perspectives converge in the apostle’s

35. Dodson, *Powers*, 123.

36. See above footnote 14.

37. See, for Jewish and Greco-Roman views, Black, “Death,” 414–19; Wu, *Suffering*, 42–49.

38. Black, “Death,” 418–19.

39. Black, “Death,” 431.

understanding of the church's corporate fellowship in Christ: it is precisely because the believer has died in Christ, participating in Christ's complete death, *that his or her own demise has been radically transmuted from loss to gain* (cf. Rom 6:1–11).⁴⁰ According to Paul, all kinds of suffering converge for a believer in the *communio* (κοινωνία) with the crucified and risen Christ. However, it is another thing entirely to state that, as a consequence, all forms of suffering are characterized by Paul as a “gain.”

I would like to argue that sensitivity to Paul's honor discourse helps to distinguish between Paul's valuations of different kinds of suffering. In Mediterranean societies, honor discourse has an evaluative character: it *evaluates* a state of affairs, rather than “purely” describing it.⁴¹ Since numerous cultures coexisted in the Greco-Roman world and competed for the loyalty of their members, honor discourse consists of “strategies developed by groups to insulate their own members from the opinion of outsiders and maintain their commitment to the group's definition of honorable behavior.”⁴² Through studying such strategies, deSilva has developed a heuristic tool to discover honor discourse in New Testament texts.⁴³ His model is useful for examining suffering, especially when it is situated at the center of an agonistic setting as described above. In Romans 5–8, however, most of the suffering Paul addresses is not explicitly inflicted on an in-group of Christians by an out-group of unbelievers. The perspective of honor discourse is nevertheless relevant, and I will revisit Rom 8:12–39 in this light by focusing upon two questions: (1) Is the suffering in the text *evaluated* in a positive, negative, or neutral way? (2) Does Paul use any *vocabulary or imagery* of honor (or shame) to this end?⁴⁴

The Evaluation of Suffering in Romans 8:12–39

Most of the suffering mentioned in Rom 8:12–39 seems—directly or indirectly—valued negatively.

When it comes to the suffering of creation, Paul mentions, first, the futility (μταιότης) creation has been subjected to (ὑπετάγη; διὰ τὸν ὑποτάξαντα). Obviously, this has not happened of its own accord (οὐχ ἐκούσα). Such factors lend the term a negative color, only reinforced by the mention of hope (ἐλπίς).

40. Black, “Death,” 431–32. Italics mine.

41. For an introduction to the study and character of honor discourse and how it functioned as a way of social engineering, see David A. deSilva, *The Hope of Glory: Honor Discourse and New Testament Interpretation* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1999), 1–33.

42. deSilva, *Hope of Glory*, 1.

43. deSilva, *Hope of Glory*, 26–28.

44. For vocabulary and imagery related to honor, see the relevant domains in Louw-Nida; see also Elliott, *Conflict*, 80–86; David A. deSilva, *Despising Shame. Honor Discourse and Community Maintenance in the Epistle to the Hebrews*, 2nd ed. (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2008), 27–35.

Second, there is the experienced reality of decay (φθορά), described as a state of slavery (δουλεία). This negative characterization is contrasted with the “glorious liberty (τὴν ἐλευθερίαν τῆς δόξης) of the children of God,” a reality creation awaits with eager longing. Third, there are the verbs “groan together” (συστενάζω) and “suffer agony together” (συνωδίνω), which are not explicitly depicted as negative. However, they are indirectly colored by ματαιότης and φθορά.

As for the suffering of the Christians, Paul also mentions their groaning (ἡμεῖς καὶ αὐτοὶ ἐν ἑαυτοῖς στενάζομεν), lent a negative color because of the parallel with the groaning of creation. The term is, moreover, contrasted with the high position of being adopted sons, which will entail the redemption of the bodies (υἰοθεσίαν ἀπεκδεχόμενοι, τὴν ἀπολύτρωσιν τοῦ σώματος ἡμῶν). The suffering of the Christians is also mentioned in verses 17 and 18 through the vocabulary of πάσχω and its cognates. Paul's use of a conditional formula in verse 17 seems to give this suffering a positive connotation: “provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him” (εἴπερ συμπάσχομεν ἵνα καὶ συνδοξασθῶμεν).⁴⁵ Suffering with Christ becomes the condition (εἴπερ) for attaining the goal (ἵνα) of glorification. However, the conditional character does not define Paul's evaluation of the suffering in and of itself. Here also, the intended purpose, which has not been reached, is future glory (δόξα). By contrast, a negative evaluation of the suffering seems plausible. The same holds for τὰ παθήματα (the sufferings) in verse 18, which are mentioned neutrally, though far inferior (οὐκ ἄξια . . . πρὸς) to the awaited glory (δόξα). Next, there is the *peristasis* catalogue in verse 35 followed by the θανατούμεθα (we are being killed) of Ps 43:23 LXX in verse 36. The addition of “for thy sake” might give the suffering some positive value. However, the image of the sheep to be slaughtered and the sharp contrast with the conquerors in verse 37 colors the verb θανατούμεθα, and in its wake also the many hardships, negatively.

Some of the suffering language in Rom 8:12–39 is mentioned in a more neutral way, which means that no explicit or implicit appreciation can be found in the surrounding verses. This applies to ἀποθνήσκειν (die) in verse 13 and also to θάνατος in verse 38. It also applies to ἀσθενεία (weakness) in verse 26, though a sense of imperfection is clear from the context.

Evaluation of the Suffering in Terms of Honor and Shame

Vocabulary and imagery of honor and shame cooperate to bring about this predominantly negative appreciation of the suffering.

45. For the conditional interpretation of this construction, see, e.g., Dunn, *Romans*, 456; Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 428; Beker, *Paul*, 364–65. Contra, e.g., Cranfield, *Romans*, 407; Jewett, *Romans*, 502.

There is the notion of slavery, for example, which clearly implies low status. “Slave” was the lowest legal rank in the Roman world; it was a term of extreme debasement. Paul connects the shame of slavery to the suffering of creation. The antithesis of slavery is freedom, which is characterized as “glorious”: δόξα is an important term in the semantic field of honor, and it occurs throughout the passage as an explicit future counterpart of suffering (8:17, 18, 21, 30). It is the honor of freedom and glory that awaits both the Christians and creation. For now, however, glory remains the opposite of the dark residue of shameful suffering in this world.⁴⁶

Finally, that eagerly longed-for glory is firmly connected to the status of being (adopted) children of God, which implies an inheritance: see the climax in verse 17 (heirs, heirs of God, fellow heirs with Christ) preceded, starting in verse 12, by a crescendo of kinship imagery connected to the reality of the Spirit;⁴⁷ see also verses 18–19: the glory (δόξα) is connected to the moment when the sons of God are revealed; see also verse 21: the glorious (τῆς δόξης) freedom is the freedom of God’s children, it is the inheritance that awaits God’s family, in Christ.⁴⁸ The amount and variety of kinship vocabulary is striking, the most touching instance of which is found in verse 15b: “When we cry: ‘Abba! Father!’” Such language and imagery point to the exalted status of the believers, and the promised glory is intrinsically connected to this category of belonging. However, even if this kinship is already a reality in the believers’ lives, their glorious future is still to come. The suffering might therefore be *endured* (v. 25b: ὑπομονή) in the community with Jesus Christ, but the suffering itself is not characterized by honorable predicates. The same applies to Psalm 43, which Paul cites. Here the imagery of kinship is the very reason for the dark complaint about the deep shame of suffering that is experienced, nevertheless.

In sum, there seems to be no positive or honorable characterization of any form of suffering in this pericope. Either experiences of suffering are portrayed neutrally or they are negatively contrasted with honor; in any case, suffering is never *characterized* by honor. Rather, the prospect of future glory contrasted with suffering (verses 17, 18, 21) serves to highlight the *loss* of glory that resulted from the fall.⁴⁹ Indeed, suffering, as the face of the power of Death, can be

46. As mentioned above, if interpreted against the background of the concept of the “messianic woes,” the suffering may be a marker of the final breakthrough of the eagerly anticipated future. Regardless, the sharp contrast between this suffering and the glorious future remains clear.

47. For a list of kinship vocabulary, see, e.g., Zeba A. Crook, *The Ancient Mediterranean Social World: A Sourcebook* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2020), 105–7 (Kindle ed.).

48. Jewett, *Romans*, 501; Wu, *Suffering*, 115–16.

49. See Ernst Käsemann, *An die Römer*, HNT (Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 1974), 239–41; Witherington, *Romans*, 223–24.

characterized as the *absence* of δόξα. Even after Jesus broke the ultimate power of Death and Sin, the dark residue of brokenness that is indicative for the overlap of the ages retains its bitter edge.

Only one passage in the broader context of Romans 5–8 seems to evaluate suffering in a positive way: the “catena passage” at the beginning of chapter 5 (vv. 3–4). “More than that, *we rejoice in our sufferings* (καυχώμεθα ἐν ταῖς θλίψεσιν), knowing that suffering produces endurance (ὑπομονήν) and endurance produces character (δοκιμήν) and character produces hope (ἐλπίδα).” As in all other Pauline cases where the preposition ἐν follows the verb καυχάομαι (boast), it may indicate the object of the boasting.⁵⁰ Thus, the suffering gives Paul occasion to boast, in which he characterizes it as honorable.⁵¹ On the other hand, the preposition ἐν can also refer to the circumstances.⁵² In view of what I have discussed already, such an interpretation is plausible. The fact that Paul uses the construction with the preposition ἐπί in the preceding verse might support precisely this “circumstantial” interpretation for the construction with ἐν in verse 3.

Comparison to the Evaluation of Suffering from Persecution

This article focuses on Rom 8:12–39 because it is the only text in the Pauline corpus that so clearly portrays suffering as the “human condition,” in contrast to other passages on suffering that focus more on persecution or the social discrimination that results from belonging to Christ. I conclude my article with a short comparison between my findings above and the honor discourse in another Pauline passage on suffering, Phil 1:27–30, which seems to focus more on persecution.⁵³ First, I briefly sketch how Paul evaluates the suffering of the Philippians in these verses in terms of honor and shame. Second, I compare this evaluation to Romans 8.

50. Rom 2:17; 5:11; 1 Cor 1:31; 3:21; 2 Cor 5:12; 10:15, 17; 12:5, 9; Gal 6:14; Phil 3:3. See also Simon J. Gathercole, *Where Is Boasting? Early Jewish Soteriology and Paul's Response in Romans 1–5* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 257. More specifically, 2 Cor 12:5, 9, where Paul boasts about his weaknesses, might be interesting as a parallel.

51. Judaism, too, has a tradition of boasting about difficulties, in part because they involved a form of discipline. See Otto Michel, *Der Brief an der Römer*, KEK 14 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1955), 115, referring to a.o. Prov 3:11; PsSal 3:4; 8:34; 10:1–3; 1QH 9:10.

52. See, e.g., Zahn, Dodd, Michel, Dunn.

53. Tabb defines persecution as a sub-category of suffering as follows: “suffering that is (1) deliberately inflicted by another person or group (2) because of one’s distinctive beliefs, ethnicity, or practices.” Tabb, *Suffering in Ancient Worldview*, 12.

Suffering and Honor Discourse in Philippians 1:27–30

Paul discusses the suffering of the Philippians mostly clearly in 1:27–30.⁵⁴ He mentions those who may frighten the Philippians, and their suffering is referred to using the terms πάσχω (suffer; 1:29) and ἀγών (struggle, race; 1:30).

Most scholars assume the Philippians were suffering from some form of discrimination from the surrounding pagan society (shunning, public embarrassment, discrimination in the patronage system, punishment by magistrates).⁵⁵ Adherence to the Christian faith was at odds with the societal demands of piety, especially when it came to pledging allegiance to Caesar.⁵⁶ Oakes differentiates between short-term suffering and long-term suffering. He describes how discrimination after conversion to Christianity initially led to violence and later to severe economic hardship for Christians in different levels of society.⁵⁷ Next to that there was the sense of shame as a form of suffering in and of itself. Oakes does describe the process of shaming as an important cause of the suffering, though the resulting sense of shame might be more acute as a form of suffering than it appears at first glance. “Shame causes someone ‘to lose face,’ taking away their identity and value.”⁵⁸

I want to examine 1:29–30, where the suffering of the Philippians is most clearly associated with honor.

In verse 29, the infinitive construction τὸ ὑπὲρ αὐτοῦ πάσχειν (“suffer for his sake”) forms a direct object of the verb ἐχαρίσθη, a passive aorist form of χαρίζομαι, “to give graciously.” The agent of the verb must be God (*passivum divinum*), who is also mentioned just before in verse 28.⁵⁹ The suffering of the

54. Parts of the argument below originated in Myriam Klinker-De Klerck, “For He Has Graciously Granted You the Privilege (. . .) of Suffering for Him. Honour Discourse as a Lens for Studying the Relationship Between God’s Love and the Suffering of Christians.” Short paper at the Conference of BEST on The Nature and Logic of God’s Love, Theological University Apeldoorn (The Netherlands, June 10–11, 2021).

55. E.g., Gordon D. Fee, *Paul’s Letter to the Philippians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 167; Morna D. Hooker, *The Letter to the Philippians*, NIB 11 (Nashville: Abington, 2000), 496–97; Peter Oakes, *Philippians: From People to Letter*, SNTSMS 110 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 89–96; Joseph H. Hellerman, *Philippians*, EGGNT (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2015), 81–82. Other scholars contend that the opposition stems from Jewish-Christian preachers within the church. They interpret the suffering in 1:27–30 as an anticipation of Paul’s warnings at the beginning of Philippians 3 (e.g., Moisés Silva, *Philippians*, BECNT [Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005], 82–83). See, for further argumentation, Oakes, *Philippians*, 84–89.

56. E.g., Lukas Bormann, *Philippi. Stadt & Christengemeinde zur Zeit des Paulus*, NovTSup 78 (Leiden: Brill, 1995).

57. Oakes, *Philippians*, 91.

58. Jayson Georges and Mark D. Baker, *Ministering in Honor-Shame Cultures* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2016), 43 (Kindle ed.).

59. See also Bonnie B. Thurston and Judith M. Ryan, *Philippians and Philemon*, SP 10 (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2005), 70; Hellerman, *Philippians*, 84; For the *passivum divinum* as a

Philippians is thus characterized as a gracious gift of God, which indicates God's favor towards the Philippians. Through the gift of their hardships they are honored.

The present tense of *πάσχειν* and the dependent participle construction *τὸν αὐτὸν ἀγῶνα ἔχοντες* (“engaged in the same conflict”; v. 30) indicate that the suffering is current and also continuous. Joseph H. Hellerman calls it “the Christian condition,”⁶⁰ and Paul characterizes the suffering metaphorically in terms of *ἀγών*—“athletic competition.”⁶¹ He connects the difficulties of the Philippians to his own struggle (*τὸν αὐτὸν ἀγῶνα*), also comparing the time he first visited Philippi (Acts 16; 1 Thess 2:2) to his current condition in prison. Paul's use of the singular *ἀγών* indicates that all those instances of suffering—the Philippians' suffering included—are aspects of one and the same struggle.

Paul suggests a reason for the suffering of the Philippians: they are suffering *ὑπὲρ Χριστοῦ*, “for the sake of Christ.”⁶² As argued above, they suffer because they are Christian; their environment is hostile and shames them for their Christian identity and way of life. This is their and Paul's *ἀγών* for the faith of the gospel (v. 27). They suffer from the consequences of being shamed as Christians, and they suffer from the sense of shame that accompanies this disfavor. But they must not be mistaken: their suffering is, in fact, “a gracious gift of the highest God.”

The theme of suffering is linked to the presence of opposition in the community. In 1:28, Paul uses the term *ἀντικειμένοι* (opponents), designating the out-group while God (verse 28), Jesus Christ (verses 27, 29), and Paul himself (verses 27, 30) all function as important persons for the in-group of Christians. Paul exhorts the Philippian Christians with the authority of their apostle (v. 27). At the same time, he also emphasizes his fellowship with them in suffering.

Apparently, the goal of the opponents is to frighten the Philippians. If they do not succeed—if the Philippians persevere—this will be a clear omen to them of their destruction and the Philippians' salvation. By emphasizing their salvation in contrast to the fate of the opponents, Paul affirms the honor that the Philippian Christians receive, precisely in enduring the opposition. He states it even more explicitly by characterizing their suffering for Christ as a gracious gift, as argued above.

The overall honor discourse in the letter is also meant to strengthen the in-group in the face of that opposition. Stand firm. Hold fast to your identity

distinct expression of the passive voice, see, e.g., Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 437–38.

60. Hellerman, *Philippians*, 85.

61. The term *συναθλοῦντες* (1:27) favors an interpretation of *ἀγών* as an athletic rather than a military metaphor.

62. BAGD, 1031a.

as Christians. The honor is yours. Using the lens of honor discourse, the actual problem, namely the profound sense of shame that arises from social marginalization and oppression, is brought to the foreground. At the same time, the radical message of the apostle becomes clearer: the Philippians' shame that results from being Christians leads to honor. To put it in even stronger terms, their shame *is* honor. It is a specific form of grace (1:7), an honorable offering (2:17–18), a “graciously granted privilege” (1:29). The honor discourse shows a “divine reversal” that is not just a matter of the future. God's promise of future honor also transforms the present suffering: suffering for Christ *is* already an honorable sign of future glorification, “a badge of future glory.”⁶³

Comparison with Romans 8:12–39

Both Pauline letters strongly emphasize the “Christian” identity. Honor and a close relationship with Jesus Christ belong together. In Philippians 1, therefore, suffering *for the sake of* Christ can be characterized as honorable. In Romans 8, the Christian identity is emphasized through an abundance of kinship vocabulary. However, that honorable reality is *contrasted* with the negative connotations of the experienced suffering. Thus, the suffering is not characterized as honorable. It is, rather, to be endured “together with Christ” in anticipation of future glorification. The positivity accorded to suffering in Phil 1:29 is lacking in Romans 8.

The strong connection (κοινωνία) with Jesus Christ, especially the idea of suffering and being glorified together with him (see, for Philippians, esp. 3:10–11) is an important feature of both letters. The overarching feeling is one of “endurance” (ὑπομονή Rom 8:28; στήκετε Phil 1:27; 4,1). However, in Romans, the κοινωνία with Christ is important as the way out for Christians enduring mortality; it is the “solution” that brings them closer to glory and comforts them in the pain and shame of perishability. In Philippians, the κοινωνία with Christ also operates at the level of social interaction, turning the shame of their being discriminated into actual honor.

Such a “divine reversal” is not part of the appreciation of suffering in Romans 8, because perishability—as a residue of Death, associated with Sin—can never be honorable. It can only be endured while longing eagerly for the glorious future. It is significant, then, that in precisely this context Paul does not emphasize the honorable character of the hardships that result from belonging to Christ (verse 35–36). He easily could have done so, in the same way as he

63. Jayson Georges, <http://honorshame.com/ethics-honor-shame-culture>, last accessed February 20, 2018. On the idea of a “divine reversal” in the rhetoric of minority cultures, see also deSilva *Despising Shame*, 86–155.

elevates the experiences of suffering in Philippians. He chooses rather to quote Psalm 43, thereby evoking the wretchedness and shame of the situation and contrasting it with the assurance of Christ's love.

Conclusion

Which facet of human suffering is emphasized in this or that particular letter appears to determine the extent to which suffering is evaluated as positive (in the sense of being honorable) by Paul. The sociohistorical reality of daily life in the first century makes matters even more complex, as different kinds of suffering are interconnected: being shamed by the out-group can exacerbate poverty, for example, making people more susceptible to disease. Suffering has many different faces. Distinguishing between these aspects is necessary in order to arrive at a nuanced interpretation of Paul's statements on suffering and to avoid using them unsubtly in preaching or in a setting of pastoral care. Indeed, Paul insists that all kinds of suffering converge for a believer in the *communio* with the crucified and risen Christ. However, to argue that Paul characterizes suffering "in general" as a "gain" lacks nuance. I suggest that we find more nuanced ways to speak about Paul's positive stance on Christian suffering.