

NAIROBI EVANGELICAL GRADUATE
SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY

LEAVING VENGEANCE TO GOD:
EXAMINATION OF ROMANS 12:19 WITHIN CONTEXT

BY

PONTIEN NDAGIJIMANA BATIBUKA

A Thesis submitted to the Graduate
School in partial fulfilment of the requirements for
the degree of Master of Theology in Biblical Studies
(New Testament)

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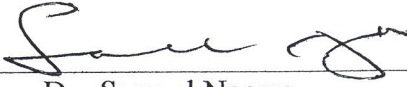
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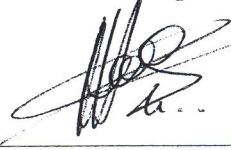
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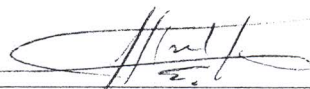
STUDENT'S DECLARATION

LEAVING VENGEANCE TO GOD:
EXAMINATION OF ROMANS 12:19 WITHIN CONTEXT

I declare that this is my original work and has not been submitted to
any other College or University for academic credit.

The views presented herein are not necessarily those of the Nairobi Evangelical
Graduate School of Theology or the examiners.

(Signed)



Pontien Ndagijimana Batibuka

June, 2003

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to understand the concept of ‘leaving vengeance to God’ as stipulated by Paul in Rom. 12:19. This purpose consisted in a threefold endeavor: (1) to examine why vengeance--which is in fact a negative act--stands prohibited for the believer but accepted if God is the one who executes it; (2) due to the fact that Paul infers his words from Deut. 32:35, it has been necessary to examine the concept of ‘leaving vengeance to God’ in the Old Testament, but also in other contexts that are deemed to have had a certain influence on Paul, i.e., the Near Eastern culture, Judaism, and the Greco-Roman culture; (3) to draw the theological teaching that Paul is making in commanding the believer to leave vengeance to God.

The approach used in the study comprised syntactical analysis, relative word study, and socio-historical use of the concept. The study was a literary research. Thus the method adopted has fostered an interaction of the writer and library resources, i.e., books and articles of journals.

The study has revealed that all the contexts examined have a tendency to take for granted the punishing of evil deeds, and that God (god) is the primary avenger. This fact that vengeance is the prerogative of God is especially emphasized in the biblical account. In the Old Testament, the God of Israel is a personality who avenges himself, avenges his people and mandates his servants to exercise vengeance. God appears as the source of any legitimate vengeance. As a God approved practice, vengeance in the Hebrew Bible had a noble purpose. Education was its primary aim. Because of this educational aim, vengeance was then enacted publicly. Private vengeance was strongly prohibited. It was the civil organs that had God’s mandate to punish those who had wronged the right and dignity of other people. It is noted that the Old Testament shares most of these traits on vengeance with other cultures that had a historical connection with the Bible. Therefore, in Rom. 12:19 Paul perpetuated a concept of divine vengeance that was already rooted in the cultures that influenced his life. But a joint study of Deut. 32:35 and Rom. 12:19 showed that the apostle draws a specific theological teaching. His point is that God stands as the avenger of the believer because all evil is primarily against God, even if it is done against the believer. He perceives an identification between the believer and God: persecuting a believer equals persecuting his/her Lord (Acts 9:4). But beyond this identification, the context of Rom. 12:19 gives to non-vengeance a kerygmatic importance. Paul places abstinence from vengeance at the heart of the fight between good and evil. Non-vengeance stands as a weapon for overcoming evil and bringing evildoers to God. In Paul’s thought, repaying good for evil is a powerful act that can stir in the evildoer a painful feeling of shame that can bring him/her to repentance. But abstaining from avenging one’s right is not an easy attitude. From the context of Rom. 12 and Romans in general, the apostle gives the foundation on which non-vengeance stands: The power of repaying good for evil resides in the fact that it is a self-giving act (Rom. 12:1) done to one’s enemy, which exemplifies the self-giving love of Jesus (Rom. 5:8, 10). So it requires a special relationship with God. For, only a person transformed by God (Rom. 12:2) and endowed with his strength can put in action Paul’s injunction of leaving vengeance to God.

To

my distinguished companion in life, Bernadette

our daughter Rose and

our sons Innocent, Julius, Vincent and Daniel

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Problem Statement

In Rom. 12:19 Paul writes, “Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God’s wrath, for it is written: ‘It is mine to avenge; I will repay,’ says the Lord” (New International Version). This passage conveys an exhortation against vengeance. Since the passage contains an ethical idea, at first sight the assertion appears to be clear. Yet it raises a number of questions worthy of investigation.

First, the passage seems to present a contradictory view concerning vengeance. On the one hand, vengeance is presented as wrong. God prohibits it from his people (v. 19a). Yet on the other hand, the verse holds that He, God, will exert it (v. 19c). Such a dichotomous view on vengeance needs to be examined. In fact it is puzzling that the same aspect of conduct stands unaccepted for men and yet accepted if God is the one to do it. If vengeance means the same thing for men and God, then the text of Rom. 12:19 carries contradictory ideas. In a more specific way, the problem to investigate can be expressed as follows, “Is there a different connotation between human vengeance (v. 19a) and God’s way of doing it (v. 19c)?”

This question constitutes the central problem in the passage. But it entails some associated questions. Paul supports his idea from the background of the Old Testament by quoting Deut. 32:35. This requires special attention. The intelligibility of Rom. 12:19 depends greatly on a good grasp of the sense of the term ‘*vengeance is mine*’ in Deut. 32:35. The problem to investigate at this stage may be stated in the form of the following question, “What connotation does God’s declaration ‘*vengeance*

