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Recipes, Imagination, and Scripture: A Review of Romans Disarmed

Abstract

"Sylvia Keesmaat and Brian Walsh set out to read Romans in light of the socio-economic location of its author and original recipients, while also giving attention to how we might hear it faithfully in our own, today."

Posting about the book *Romans Disarmed* from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

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in things

January 16, 2020

Recipes, Imagination, and Scripture: A Review of *Romans Disarmed*

David Westfall

Title: *Romans Disarmed: Resisting Empire, Demanding Justice*

Authors: Sylvia C. Keesmaat & Brian J. Walsh

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Reading an ancient text is like trying to cook something with only half a recipe. The information you've been given is frustratingly incomplete: a name for the dish, only a partial list of ingredients and instructions. Additionally, the measurements for a few of the ingredients are in units you don't recognize. This especially problematic, given some of the ingredients: does a "covfefe" of curry powder mean that the dish should have the slightest hint of curry, or that curry should be the dominant flavor?

If (unlike me) you're a gifted culinary artist, this situation isn't so dire. Provided you simply want to enjoy a good dinner, you get creative and use your skill and imagination to whip something up that suits your tastes, whether it resembles the original dish or not. However, if your objective is to experience what the recipe's creator originally envisioned, and what the first people who ate it tasted, then you face a more difficult task. Your imaginative cookery must be constrained by someone else's intentions. You might read widely about the types of cuisine that were commonplace when it was created, what people generally considered "good food," and look for signs indicating

whether the recipe's author might have thought differently. At the end of the day, however, there is going to be a degree of guesswork involved: *disciplined* imagination, but imagination nonetheless. If your imagination is *well* disciplined, you might just get a taste of something that no one has experienced for a long time. But you also might misjudge the relative importance of certain ingredients (the curry problem), or perhaps rely too heavily on *your* definition of "good food," when in fact the original dish would disgust you.

While reading *Romans Disarmed: Resisting Empire, Demanding Justice*, I repeatedly found myself oscillating between a thrilled sense, on the one hand, that I was tasting something in Paul's letter to the Romans that hasn't been experienced for many centuries, and a frustrated suspicion, on the other, that I was in fact encountering "too much curry" in a recipe overly dominated by the predilections (however admirable) of the book's authors.

Sylvia Keesmaat and Brian Walsh set out to read *Romans* in light of the socio-economic location of its author and original recipients, while also giving attention to how we might hear it faithfully in our own, today. Their imaginative exercise relies on three primary media: first, they use *story* to explore how two fictional, but historically plausible, figures—"Iris," a female slave, and "Nereus," a Jewish potter—might have responded to Paul's letter and to the common life of the earliest Christian communities in Rome. Second, they mimic the ancient Jewish literary form of *targum* ("interpretation"), producing a highly expansive and elaborative translation of key passages in *Romans* that seeks to draw out hidden layers of signification and resonance that would be lost on modern readers, while also "updating" the text to refer directly to contemporary issues. Lastly, they engage in *dialogue* with a constructed interlocutor who approaches the letter with many of the concerns and biases characteristic of a modern, western reader.

This manifold imaginative exercise leads Keesmaat and Walsh to argue that Paul intends *Romans* as an "anti-imperial tract" that exposes and dismantles the "ideology of empire." This imperial ideology is "domicidal" in that it pursues its hegemonic aims through a self-serving construction of "home" and "belonging" that excludes (in order to exploit) anyone whose social location puts them at a disadvantage. Slaves like Iris and Jews like Nereus knew they didn't truly belong, that they were outsiders to the world that Rome was building whose only value consisted in their utility to the powerful. In this respect they stood in solidarity with the larger created and natural order, which Rome viewed and treated merely as an exploitable resource, the raw material needed to supply the machinery of their violent global ambitions.

To the ears of people like Iris and Nereus, *Romans* would have sounded less like an abstract theological treatise and more like the manifesto of an alternative community,

rooted in a different construction of “home.” The recurring notes of lament and grief throughout Romans give voice to the disillusionment Paul shared with his listeners over the Rome’s “home-wrecking” imperial ideology that resulted in the abuse and destruction of human lives and of creation itself. Precisely out of such grief, however, is born a hopeful longing for a new home, one characterized by inclusion rather than exclusion and founded on the all-reconciling cross of Jesus the Messiah. At the center of this new home stands a table: the Lord’s table, at which all members are equally welcome, regardless of their social location (and at which they share *actual meals*). The ethics of this community and its sense of social justice, centered on the law-fulfilling command to love one’s neighbor as oneself, are therefore rooted in the habitual experience and practice of God’s universal hospitality, and rule out social dynamics that impede or prevent “mutual upbuilding.” Such hospitality gives rise to an “economy of care,” rather than of exploitation, that recognizes creation as a gift to be received, protected, shared, and enjoyed with gratitude, rather than as a mere “resource” to be consumed and spent.

The task that faces the church today, according to Keesmaat and Walsh, is to answer Paul’s summons to resist the forces of empire in a new context by embracing the same communal ethic of subversive homemaking. Paul’s critique of empire exposes the same domicidal, exploitative impulses at the heart of modern society—particularly the globe-spanning complex of consumer-driven socioeconomic forces that enshrine “the Market” as their deity and infinite economic growth as their eschatology. The worldview of this modern capitalist empire represents authentic humanity as the self-interested individual who finds fulfillment in the ability to satisfy his or her ever-growing desires, regardless of the cost to the environment and to others in it. Romans invites the church to lament the violence and destruction that these structures have wrought, and to find imaginative ways of “seceding” from them as an act of economic and ecological repentance. Fostering communities that exemplify an “economy of care” in the name of Jesus and his kingdom, the church becomes a subversive alternative to the imperial systems of this age.

There is much to commend in Keesmaat and Walsh’s re-reading of Romans. The stories of Iris and Nereus, in my view, are where the authors’ exercise of “disciplined imagination” most clearly succeeds. These stories compellingly invite the reader to imagine (for instance) how Paul’s letter might have sounded to a handful of slaves huddled together in the middle of the night in their master’s kitchen, rather than to well-dressed churchgoers in pews. The stories force one to reckon with the profound role that social, economic, and cultural location play in any communicative act, and invite us to reflect upon how our own location may deafen us to much of what Paul intended. These stories also exhibit the authors’ most careful and thorough use of the relevant historical evidence available to us. On the contemporary side of things,

Keesmaat and Walsh's analysis and critique of consumerism and the idolatries to which modern capitalism is prone are incisive as well as personally challenging. Whatever one makes of their many ideas for resisting these idolatries (and policy proposals are not the main goal of their argument), their evaluation of this worldview draws the reader's attention to his or her own complicity in a system that benefits self at great cost to others.

These and other factors make *Romans Disarmed* a highly stimulating and even transformative exercise of imagination. However, here too one also encounters the pitfalls of such an exercise. I believe that the book repeatedly falls prey to the dangers noted above, overestimating the prominence of a certain ingredient in the recipe (namely, empire), while also changing the recipe in ways that really reflect the authors' own predilections, rather than Paul's.

The degree to which Paul directly concerned himself with the Roman empire is, of course, heavily debated in biblical scholarship. But one would hardly suspect as much reading Keesmaat and Walsh, who more than once describe the anti-imperial connotations of what Paul is saying as "obvious," "clear," "self-evident," and so forth. But even if one acknowledges the *presence* of this concern (and there are good reasons for doing this), I find it highly implausible that it would express itself so intensively within the realm of *connotation* in Paul's argument, yet so mildly within the realm of *denotation*. From top to bottom, virtually *everything* in Romans apparently connotes "empire" or the gospel's relation to it; yet Paul nowhere discusses the matter directly. Even Romans 13, where one might expect this, is taken as a moment of heavily ironic, sarcastic play-acting, understood precisely for what it connotes (subversion of imperial authority) *rather* than what it ostensibly denotes (submission to it).

This brings me to the second point. The amplifications of the text provided in the book's "targums"—the term can only loosely describe these sections—do not simply elucidate, but actually alter the substance of Paul's argument. This is particularly evident where the text's details (the ones that don't suit the authors' argument) quietly disappear in translation. Though Keesmaat and Walsh rightly perceive that Paul drastically relativizes Roman authority by emphasizing its subservience to God, their "targum" screens out the fact that the state fulfills this subservient role precisely in its sword-bearing capacity (Rom. 13:4). Instead, they portray the sword *only* as a symbol of the injustice with which the state idolatrously guards its own ultimacy. Similarly, their rendering of Romans 1:26-27 ignores the elements of sameness and mutuality in Paul's description of aberrant sexual behavior that undermine their revisionist reading of the text's implications for modern sexual ethics.

Encountering omissions of this sort on the one hand and the authors' vast amplifications on the other, I found myself frequently reminded of a rather pointed response they received when sharing early drafts from the book at the University of St. Andrews several years ago: "Is what Paul *doesn't* say more important than what he *does* say?" One could note other such examples.

On the whole, I suspect that a great deal of what "Paul" has to say in this book is really what Keesmaat and Walsh have to say and could very well have done without trying to make Paul their chief spokesman. That said, while *Romans Disarmed* does appear repeatedly to fall prey to the dangers inherent in the imaginative and reconstructive task in which its authors are engaged, it also exhibits much of this task's potential. I remain grateful that Keesmaat and Walsh have undertaken it. They invite us to a "thick" reading of scripture, one that stays doggedly "on the ground" in its attentiveness to the social and economic realities of the world in which it was written, and those of the world in which we now listen to it afresh. Most of all, their book leaves me hungry for that home-making table where God reconciles us through Israel's messiah, both to himself and to one another.