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Reasoner, Mark.
The Strong and the Weak: Romans 14.1-15.13 in Context

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This monograph revises and brings up to date the author's 1990 University of Chicago dissertation completed under the supervision of H. D. Betz, Arthur Droge, and Richard Saller.

Reasoner provides a helpful outline of the various interpretations that have been offered to date of Rom 14:1-15:13 and explains the implications of each of them for interpreting this section and the overall letter. He aligns himself with those who attribute the behavioral characteristics of the weak such as vegetarianism, wine abstinence, and observance of days to Jewish practices among some of the members of the Roman churches. Yet he joins those who do not categorize simply along a Jew/Gentile line. He includes in the category of weak some Gentile Christians who may have been attracted to Jewish practices, and in the category of strong some Jewish members who may have considered themselves now free of Mosaic Law. He proposes to expand this position by arguing that some of the weak were abstaining for extra-Jewish pro-Roman reasons.

In this pursuit Reasoner provides an interesting study of the social world of the addressees according to classical sources. He examines a range of vegetarian and ascetic practices that might motivate the abstinence of the "weak," considers the background for the observance of days, the stigma of superstition, and the social value of obligation. For example, he argues that the terms "weak" and "strong" in Paul's usage correspond with "the Roman tendency to define social hierarchies within various levels of early imperial society and differentiate positions in a hierarchy on the basis of status" (p. 45). By way of this insight Reasoner seeks to penetrate the social salience of Paul's language for the addressees as Romans. He considers the primary Latin evidence that in Roman society the *potentes* (strong ones) exercised power and influence, whether a result of political strength or wealth. Thus it was considered important for *inferiores* (those socially beneath or inferior) to cultivate relationships with stronger ones and avoid offending them, to favor them even if this might require mistreating those of lesser status. These

were not fixed categories as much as relative social statuses, so that from Caesar down there is a ranking at every level of society, and a variety of criteria of ability and competence that might apply in determining people's level of social influence, their worth in society measured against those over whom they could exercise social power. Such clout did not go uncontested, and the vulnerability of the stronger reinforced the ideal of discrimination in the cultivation of relationships of advantage. Discussion includes other Roman terms of reference for relative strength and weakness.

Reasoner presses this evidence to argue that these terms were used by the Roman addressees to distinguish among themselves before Paul's letter. He does not think that Paul would count himself among the strong in 15:1 if he had invented the labels, and reasons that he would risk offending those to whom he was writing to win support. Although admitting that the letter provides no explicit evidence for social status differentiation in terms of wealth or civil position, he nevertheless argues that it implies different social estimations of honor at work within the confines of these groups. That scale is determined by whether or not one is "ashamed," and since Paul is not "ashamed of himself or his gospel," he is "strong."

Reasoner has made a good case that the terms were used to indicate one's relative social standing in Roman society, and that this dynamic should be considered in Paul's use of the language in this letter. However, his conclusions that "the 'strong' are Roman citizens or foreign-born residents who display a proclivity toward things Roman," that "their appearance may be described as healthy, if not robust, since they eat everything (14:2a) and are 'strong,'" that they "exercise their *auctoritas* over those whom Roman society has placed below or equal to them in status (14:3a)," that "they have material resources to appear more self-sufficient than others within their particular class and rank (15:1), and that "their place in the social hierarchy of Rome most likely corresponds to those freedmen who had risen in status, social influence, and property holdings above the freeborn within the lower population of Rome" (pp. 61-62), do not seem to correspond with the evidence presented from Romans. He has little on which to hang the assumption that the strong were more drawn toward things Roman as the basis for Paul's distinction, or that the description of the one diet is any more "Roman" than the other, having observed vegetarianism among the ascetic values of the early Principate. Does Reasoner mean to imply that Paul has a proclivity for things Roman greater than the weak among the addressees in Rome? Or that Paul's assumed change of diet (as though he is eating like the strong instead of the weak) is because of a proclivity for things Roman? Paul argues rather that if both diets are "in honor of the Lord" there is no basis for judging or despising the other. This suggests that Paul's diet, whether more like the strong or the weak-if implied at all-was not because of a choice to eat more Roman-like, but, like both the weak and strong in Romans, in a manner chosen to be pleasing to the Lord.

Reasoner does not demonstrate in the text of Romans that the "weak in faith" are ashamed of themselves or the gospel, or should be, so that they are thus labeled weak, or

that they would accept, much less adopt this reference to their relative honor rating from others within their own congregation; or a separate congregation (as he imagines the case to be), or from Paul. And he does not show that the strong are any more unashamed of their eating practices, or that they are "forcing the 'weak' to follow 'strong' habits of consumption." In effect, despite the many other factors considered, the strong are defined as they are in the consensus view, in primarily ethnic terms: they were "predominantly Gentiles, but included some Jews (15:1) who were not concerned about what they ate," with a possible tendency toward gluttony among some of them (p. 202). In other words, by his definition, the strong are mostly Gentiles and some Jews who are more concerned with Roman ethnicity ("pro-Roman," see pp. 210-18). Thus, although he claims otherwise, I do not see how this conclusion escapes the trap of making Paul judge the strength of Christian (and Roman) convictions over against Jewish (foreign) concerns with eating according to Mosaic injunctions, since Paul is included among those who label themselves "strong" by this standard over against the others whom they regard as living in shame, "weak." By Reasoner's definition, in order to avoid this trap it would be necessary for Paul to exclude himself from those who label their shameful behavior as "strong," or the others as "weak." But in this case should not Paul be ashamed, since both the weak and strong fail to measure up even to the Roman standards of *convivium*? If Reasoner's conclusion that the driving topos of this section and the overall letter is to a "shame-free way of living before God and humanity" (p. 233; cf. pp. 233-39), then Paul's self-identification with the strong, as well as his adoption of the label "weak," reveal Paul's own position as shameful.

This is an important work for anyone studying Romans, especially this section, and should stimulate further consideration of the possible implications of Paul's use of these labels, as well as the occasion and message of the letter. Moreover, it is very useful for anyone studying Roman culture.