THE CONTEXT OF THE LETTER TO THE
ROMANS: A CRITIQUE ON THE PRESENT
STATE OF RESEARCH

J N VORSTER

ABSTRACT
The assumptions on which theories concerning the context of the Romans letter are built are disputable. The article critiques these assumptions and argues that the notion of context cannot be approached without a consideration of the creative, linguistic capabilities of people. The problem of the context of the Romans letter falls within the scope of the wider problem of context as such.

1 INTRODUCTION
Anybody studying aspects of the letter to the Romans, cannot but be impressed by the innocent looking consensus on the letter’s context. Although there may be differences in nuance, studies on the situation of the letter to the Romans locate the reason for this letter either in that of Paul or in the situation of the so-called Roman Christians. The less adventurous opt for an interlocking of reasons. However, even the latter group will arrange these interlocking reasons in terms of Paul’s situation and that of the Roman Christians. Owing to the same presuppositional points of departure, these approaches have manoeuvred themselves into a deadlock situation. With the emergence of rhetorical criticism within New Testament scholarship, the rhetorical situation was suggested as an alternative route. However, except for a different terminology, the same presuppositions seem to be in place. Such a close resemblance exists between what has been termed the historical situation and the rhetorical situation, that the rhetorical situation could be regarded as a ‘renaming’ of the historical situation (Stamps 1993: 193).1

However, the hypotheses concerning the situation of the letter to the Romans, rest on shaky foundations. The problem seems to centre in a neglect to reflect on context. In this article the assumptions underlying constructions of the letter’s context will be problematised. In the first section attention will be paid

1 Stamps (1993: 193) writes: ‘In recent years as rhetorical criticism has gained popularity, the historical situation or the epistolary occasion has been renamed or reclassified as the “rhetorical situation”’.

0254-8356/94 $4,00 © NTSSA
to those studies claiming a construction of the historical situation, and in a second section attention will be paid to the way in which rhetorical situations are formulated. The main objective is therefore to provide a critique of the current state of research on this problem, thereby illustrating the invalidity of our consensus. However, the objective is also to create an awareness of the complexity of context and to argue for an alternative point of departure in the study of context. Finally, it is not my objective to construct the context of the Romans letter, whether it be historical or rhetorical. The objective is rather to locate the problem of the Romans letter’s context within the wider problem of context as such.

2 PROBLEMATIC ASSUMPTIONS IN CURRENT RESEARCH REGARDING THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF THE ROMANS LETTER

2.1 Informational versus interactional approach to language
Before we pay attention to problematic historical presuppositions pertaining specifically to the context in Rome during the time of writing, we have to pay attention to an underlying methodological problem in nearly all studies on the historical situation of the letter to the Romans. This aspect concerns the relationship between text and context.

In studies on the context of the letter to the Romans, text and context seem to be identified, that is, the text is seen as source of factual, historical information on the context. The text provides us with direct access to the historical reality whence it originated. To put it differently: linguistic elements within the text function as ‘references’ to the extratextual world. The meaning of a text is constituted by the interaction between these extratextual referents and linguistic elements. As such, the language of a text ‘mirrors’ reality.

A few examples should suffice. When Jews, as well as Gentiles are addressed in the letter, it is portrayed that the Roman community consisted of Jewish and Gentile Christians, and when the Jews are reprimanded for their high-handed racist attitude towards the Gentiles, it is stated that a rift existed between Jews and Gentiles in the Roman community. A very interesting exam-
ple is that provided by Stuhlmacher (1986). From Paul’s directive to pay taxes in Rm 13:6-7 it is inferred that the Roman audience shared in a general dissatisfaction with taxes imposed and collected during the time of Nero and that Paul is soothingly attempting to move the audience towards a more diplomatic viewpoint.

Owing to the meagre amount of information extracted, even through a ‘mirror-reading’ approach, the lacunae in our knowledge concerning the context, have to be filled with information tapped from other ancient, but often also contemporary sources. Comparison of ancient documents is, of course, a necessary procedure for the historiographer of ancient history. However, even as in the case with the letter itself, the complexity of the relationship between text and context is not taken into account. The result is firstly, that text is seen as a reflection of context; what is said in the text, reflects what happened in its context. Secondly, single phrases are extrapolated from their contexts and harmonised with other phrases to form the cornerstone of hypotheses concerning this context.

A few examples should suffice. Although a multitude of sources can be related to the environment of the letter to the Romans in a very general sense, the sources probably dealing with the concrete specific situation of the Jew-Gentile relationship in Rome during the period in which this letter must have been written, are to be restricted to remarks by Suetonius, Dio Cassius, Orosius and Luke in Acts. The specific event in respect of which these documents function as informational sources is the Edict of Claudius which ordered the expulsion of the Jews from Rome. Owing to the role this event plays in the constructions of a situation in Rome, more attention should be paid to this aspect.

According to Suetonius, Claudius issued an edict whereby the Jews were expelled from Rome. The cause of this edict was a riot instigated by a man called Chrestus. No date is given for this expulsion, but a date is inferred from Ac 18:2 where this expulsion is confirmed and Ac 18:11-12 where Gallio, proconsul of Achaia from July 51-July 52, is mentioned. Orosius cites Josephus that the Jews were expelled from Rome during the ninth year of Claudius’ emperorship, which would also coincide with 49 CE. When Dio Cassius deliberately denies that Claudius expelled the Jews from Rome owing to their increase in numbers which he feared might caused a riot, this is seen as a separate incident in the year 41 CE. Typically of the harmonising tendency among scholars working on the context of the Romans letter, Watson (1986:92) can therefore conclude: ‘Combining Dio with Suetonius, Luke and Orosius, we may conclude that Claudius banned Jewish meetings (i.e. synagogue worship) in 41 CE and expelled the Jews after riots “at the instigation of Chrestus” in 49 CE’ (cf also Dunn 1988:xlix). However, it is possible that Dio Cassius refers to exactly the same event; it is also possible that one of the ancient authors may have had his
data completely wrong or that this 'event' could have served an ideological objective. There is therefore no certainty about the date of the expulsion.

It is nearly unanimously assumed that *Chrestus* is an erroneous reference to Christ and that Suetonius was actually referring to a confrontation between Christians, specifically Jewish Christians and the Jews themselves. However, there is no reason why *Chrestus* should be a reference to Jewish Christians, neither to assume that the instigation occurred within the ranks of the Jews themselves. Furthermore, some scholars maintain, probably owing to Acts, that all the Jews, that is both Jewish Christians and Jews, were expelled. If Dunn’s estimation is close to the truth, there must have been an exodus of 40,000 to 50,000 people, an event which surely merits more attention from writers than the scanty information provided. Owing to the impossibility of such an exodus, others have restricted the expulsion to either the leaders of the Jews or the troublemakers. However, if this restriction is regarded as valid, both the assumptions that the Jews were in a minority after the abrogation of this edict, as well as that a conflict was caused by the arrogance and condescension of a majority Gentile Christians, are rendered invalid. Finally, if the troublemakers were indeed Jewish Christians, it can be assumed that they were more liberal than the Jews, that is, in terms of current scholarship, less committed to adherence to the law. Yet, not only is the obedience or non-obedience to the law a disputable assumption, but it is also assumed that these liberally inclined, returning Jews became entangled in a conflict with the liberally inclined Gentile Christians!

This underlying methodological problem of identifying text and context, of confusing text as interaction with text as information, has given rise to various presuppositions which have become axiomatic in research on the situation of the letter to the Romans. The axiomatic character of these presuppositions entitles Stuhlmacher (1986:185) to assert without the slightest hesitation: 'Wer die Frage nach dem Abfassungszweck des Römerbriefes beantworten will, muß seine Antwort mit den genannten Daten abstimmen'.

### 2.2 Conflict as the problem of the letter to the Romans

Owing to the so-called 'double-character' (Elliott 1990:9-43) of the letter, or a tension felt in the letter, a conflict of various degrees of intensity is posited in the Roman communities. Although the conflict is located between Jewish and Gentile Christians, neither the nature of the opposing groups, nor the cause of

---

5 The terminology used in studies on the situation of the Romans letter often portray the extent to which the text is seen as a reflection of reality. For example: Campbell (1981:34) describes 'Romans iii as Witness to the Historical Situation...' and Crafton (1990:321) finds in the names of Romans 16, the direct speech alternately addressed to Gentiles and Jews, the references to Jew and Greek, circumcised and uncircumcised, the strong and the weak 'conclusive evidence' of a mixed audience in Rome.
the conflict has received an unanimous vote. Although Kümmel (1973:274) doubts whether a polemic can be assumed within the communities of Rome, he is convinced that Paul ‘...wende sich gegen falsche Anschauungen, die in der römischen Gemeinde vertreten werden’ (1973:273). After Schmithals (1975) had dissected the letter to the Romans into two letters, an earlier and later version, a conflict was inferred within the communities of Rome and specifically between the Godfearing who still adhered to Judaism and the ‘pure’ Gentiles. This conflict was inferred from the tension between the ‘weak’ and ‘strong’ Gentile Christians encountered in the paraenetic section (especially 14:1-15). According to Bruce (1982:341), the condescending attitude of the Gentile Christians on the return of the Jews to Rome can be seen as the cause of friction. Likewise Campbell (1973:268) discovers a conflict between a liberally minded Gentile majority whose arrogance posed a problem for a conservative Jewish Christian minority. Whereas Campbell poses the probability of an even greater diversity than is reflected in the letter, Roetzel suggests ‘a troubled, but not heretical situation in which Gentile Christians with libertinistic tendencies oppose Jews’ (1983:71). Likewise Crafton (1990:325) concretises the conflict as a lack of mutual acceptance between conservative Jewish groups and liberally inclined Gentile Christians.

Kettunen (1979:69) denies a conflict within the Roman communities, but accredits the tension in the letter to a Judaizing threat outside the Christian communities. Stuhlmacher (1986:190), as the doctoral father of Kettunen, demonstrates the way in which this threat approached the gates of Rome by linking Paul’s past confrontations with the Jews to the gradually increasing return of the Jews to Rome. Paul’s claim of non-embarrassment with his gospel (1:16) reflects the chutzpah with which he defended his gospel against these Judaizing opponents in the past. Furthermore, the dialogical nature of his defense in the letter to the Romans, also mirrors the aggressive questions posed by these past opponents who were now returning to Rome and posing a threat to the Roman community. Moiser’s (1990) concern is Rm 12-15. Following in the wake of Stuhlmacher, a conflict is visualised between the ‘synagogue’ and the ‘church’ with ramifications for the socio-political situation. Wedderburn (1988:63), in turn, locates the conflict within the communities of Rome between a Judaizing Christianity (which may have included Gentiles) and followers of Paul (who need not necessarily have been restricted to Gentiles only). Although the boundaries between Jews and Gentiles are less sharply defined in this instance, Paul still addresses a conflict in Rome. Marcus (1989) zooms in on the foreskin and situates the conflict between the ‘haves’ and the ‘have nots’! He indicates that the metonymic use of ἄκροβυστία and περιτομή representing those oriented to Judaism and a non-Jewish inclination, could be an indication of ridicule.

Although controversy in the early church can scarcely be denied, it is a moot
point whether this controversy can be situated within the Roman communities. Furthermore, if the letter to the Romans is seen as an attempt to allay an existing conflict in Rome, its effect would have been exactly the opposite. Paul very clearly identifies with the non-Jewish believers, enhancing their status, while relativising the status of the Jews. That Paul also reprimands the Gentile believer (11:17-24) is peripheral, but the diatribal elements activated, leaves the door wide open for a Gentile audience not to identify with the directly addressed. Neither can the directives in 14:1 and 15:1 be seen as an attempt to reconcile opposing groups within Rome. Not only the general character of the paraenetic section and the discourse with an implied Gentile audience, but also Paul's subtle attempt to ridicule the ascetic devotee to the law leaves no doubt that Jewish believers in conflict with Gentile believers could not have identified with the implied audience he created.

2.3 Constitution of the audience in Rome

2.3.1 Double character and audience as including both Jewish and Gentile Christians

A very rigid division between the groups constituting the communities in Rome is made. Besides the Jews themselves, Jewish and Gentile Christians can be distinguished as audience. The Gentile Christians can further be subdivided into 'Godfearers', proselytes and pure Gentiles. The Jews are seen to be a homogeneous group, bound together by physical descent and the conviction of a unique covenantal relationship concretised by certain boundary markers. Proselytes are those who were not born within this group, but whose adherence is so intense that they have been circumcised. 'Godfearers' also do not belong to the group by virtue of physical descent. Lacking the essential entrance requirement, namely circumcision, they occupy an inferior status, despite their adherence to the Judaistic value system.

However, voices are increasingly heard claiming greater diversity and fluctuation within Diaspora Judaism and therefore also in Rome. Owing to the sociological forces of their environment, adaptation became necessary. Despite the fact that Palestinian Rabbis may have tried to curb this adaptation to a Gentile environment by stringently imposing regulations on the interaction with the 'others', it is highly unlikely that the Jews in the Diaspora distanced themselves from public life. Rajak (1985:252) emphasises the role which pagan festivities must have played in everyday life and in commerce during the Graeco-Roman period. She concludes: 'To be outside all this was to be effectively outside the city.' Not only did they not exclude themselves from everyday life, but they seemed to have played a very active role in public life as can be seen from inscriptions depicting Diaspora Jews as councillors (Rajak 1985:256,261; Rey-
nolds & Tannenbaum 1987:66). It has been indicated that not even circumcision functioned as decisive truncating point between those belonging to Judaism and those outside (Collins 1985).

2.3.2 A quantitative qualification

Owing to the 'double character' of the letter the audience is seen either as a majority Gentile Christians in opposition to a minority Jewish Christians or a majority Jewish Christians in opposition to a minority Gentile Christians.

The quantitative qualification of Gentile and Jewish Christians is corroborated by Suetonius' remark on the cause of the Edict of Claudius (49 CE) and the subsequent expulsion of the Jews. Whenever the audience is seen as consisting of a majority of Gentile Christians the argument goes that with the Jews (that is, pure Jews and Jewish Christians) out of the way, the households and no longer the synagogue, became the meeting place of Gentile Christians. These household communities (usually called churches by scholars) resulted in a rapid increase in the numbers of the Gentile Christians. When the Jews returned after the Edict of Claudius had been abrogated, they were in the minority, because the Gentiles had become the majority in the mean time (cf Bruce 1982:340; Roetzel 1983:70; Stuhlmacher 1986:186). It is further assumed that this minority of Jews became acquainted with Paul's revolutionary ideas concerning the law during their period of expulsion from the other communities where conflict reigned (Stuhlmacher 1986:189).

We have already seen that various problems concerning the edict of Claudius exist. These are: the question whether this should be seen as an internal Jewish conflict, whether this conflict was in fact of a religious character, whether the edict ordered an expulsion of Jews or a prohibition of assembly, whether, if an edict of expulsion was issued, it pertained to all the Jews as Acts maintain, or only to the troublemakers. Yet, despite these problems which decisively influence the quantitative cohabitation of Jews and Gentiles in Rome during the period in which the letter was written, scholars base their assumptions regarding the numbers of Jews and Gentiles on circumstances surrounding the edict of Claudius.

2.4 Influence of Acts

Despite the consensus on the tendentious nature of Acts, the picture of early Christianity which exists among scholars today should largely be ascribed to the effective rhetoric of Luke! Although scholars unanimously agree that Acts cannot be used as a primary source for the so-called reconstruction of early Christianity (cf for example Bornkamm 1975:xiii-xxviii), Luke nevertheless succeeded in providing the paradigm within which the Pauline letters have been interpreted. Kraabel (1985:228-229) indicates that the reliance on Acts as a historical
source for the construction of early Christianity has given rise to three misconceptions.

The first of these is, the misconception that mission began in the Diaspora synagogue. According to Acts (9:20; 13:44; 14:1; 17:2, 17; 18:8), it was Paul's missionary policy to at least start his ministry in the synagogue. Although there is no doubt a certain logic to Luke's account, the synagogue in Acts serves a salvation-historical objective and is therefore problematic for historical construction. However, Kraabel (1985:225-226) indicates that there is no mention at all of involvement with the synagogue in the letters of Paul. This is of course an argumentio e silentio, but we have to consider the fact that synagogues perhaps did not play the important role assigned to them by current scholarship.

According to Lampe (1987:367-368), the existence of 14 synagogues in Rome itself can be established, of which at least five existed in the first century. There is also the possibility of a proseuche close to the republican wall which may have been a synagogue. However, as Lampe himself indicates, a distinction must be made between synagogal communities and synagogues as separate worshipping amenities. As far as the latter is concerned, the five synagogues mentioned seem to have been synagogal communities, owing to their names which relate them to specific societies. The fact that there does not seem to be archaeological evidence, in the form of synagogal buildings in Rome during the first century, suggests that Jewish households probably became the place of assembly in Rome. If that is the case, it is pretty obvious that no central organisation would have existed, which also implies the probability of a diversity of religious social behaviour.

That no Roman synagogal buildings in the first Christian century have thus far been discovered also lends credibility to the hypothesis of Stowers (1984). According to Stowers, Paul's '...major platform for his preaching activity...' became the private home. Although Stowers does not deny the role of the synagogue, Paul's social status and the nature of his preaching render public places as loci of preaching activity unlikely. On the other hand, the household would have been more appropriate. Not only did the household often function as location of intellectual activity, but it would have provided Paul with an audience and some form of legitimation. There is therefore a probability that the exis-

---

6 Stowers (1984:61) concludes: '...the synagogue is the prototype for the church made up of the two peoples'.

As Lampe does not mention it, I suspect that the proseuche close to the republican wall, which he relegates to the first century, could probably have been some kind of worshipping amenity, depending on whether the proseuche does indeed refer to a building. However, I am not sure whether archaeological evidence, validly dated to the first century, confirming this amenity, has been discovered.

7 Lampe (1987:368) names the following: the synagogues of the Hebrews, the Vernaculi, the Augustinians, the Agrippians and the Volunensians.
tence of synagogal communities or societies should be identified with these households, rather than with a separate place of worship.

A second misconception which has to be reconsidered, according to Kraabel, is the existence of a class named the ‘Godfearers’. In the light of suspicions concerning the existence of synagogues as separate worshipping amenities, the existence of a class called ‘Godfearers’ must be questioned. According to current research based on Acts (10:2, 7, 22, 35; 13:16, 26, 43; 16:14; 17:4, 17; 18:7), a distinct class called the οἱ φοβοῦμενοι/οἱ σεβόμενοι τὸν θεόν constituted the bridge between the Jews and the Gentiles. These ‘Godfearers’ are regarded as having been Gentiles attracted to Judaism, closely associated with the synagogue, who submitted to monotheism, observed some of the Torah’s prescriptions, honoured the Sabbath and (of course) contributed to Temple tax. However, they were not subjected to circumcision. They were, therefore, familiar with the traditions of Judaism. According to various scholars, they would have been especially susceptible to Christianity, because the one requirement standing in their way to obtain full status as Jews, namely circumcision, had now been truncated (cf for example Lampe 1987:53). As such they were a target group for zealous Christian missionaries.

In the interpretation of the letter to the Romans the notion of ‘Godfearers’ constitutes a convenient category for clarifying the tension in the letter. For example: Paul’s generous use of the Old Testament, Judaistic formulas and allusions, disputes concerning the law, the role of Israel and its relationship to the nations, as well as the ascetic tendencies of the ‘weak’, all become understandable if the addressees were ‘Godfearers’ (cf also Lampe 1987:54-55). Furthermore, it usually functions in conjunction with the Edict of Claudius hypothesis. With the majority of Jews out of the way, the ‘Godfearers’ would have become fertile soil for the good news. When the Jews returned after the death of Claudius, the activities of these ‘Godfearers’ had already resulted in a majority of Gentile Christians.

As we have seen, the hypothesis of a class called ‘Godfearers’ has been contested. Besides the theological objective in Acts and the absence of any reference to ‘Godfearers’ in the letters of Paul, Kraabel also denies inscriptive evidence referring to the ‘Godfearers’. According to him, the designation θεοσεβείῳ does not have the same reference as either οἱ φοβοῦμενοι or οἱ σεβόμενοι, that is a distinct class of Gentiles attached to Judaism under certain conditions. Gager (1986), on the other hand, acknowledging the theological role of Luke’s οἱ φοβοῦμενοι/σεβόμενοι correctly criticises Kraabel for excluding Gentiles as a possible referent for the term θεοσεβείῳ. However, terminological confusion should not detract from the point which Kraabel wished to make. The question is whether a distinct class of Gentiles attached to Judaism and meeting certain prescribed requirements formed part of the make-up of the synagogue
(cf also Collins 1985:180-182).

Recently the discovery of the Aphrodisias stone (1976) and its subsequent publication by Reynolds & Tannenbaum (1987) has been hailed as a final nail in the coffin of the deniers of the Godfearers theory. Among the names listed on this stone a line appears referring to those who are θεοσεβείς. This increase in the numbers of people called θεοσεβείς, now functions, within New Testament scholarship to confirm, the existence of a class. However, although Reynolds & Tannenbaum (1987) attempt to maintain the existence of such a class, their cautious manner of expression, already deters from absolute certainty. They conclude as follows:

What then is a God-fearer? He is someone who is attracted to what he has heard of Judaism to come to the synagogue to learn more; who is, after a time, willing, as a result, to imitate the Jewish way of life in whatever way and to whatever degree he wishes (up to and including membership in community associations, where that includes legal study and prayer; who may have held out to him various short codes of moral behaviour to follow, but does not seem to have required to follow any one; who may follow the exclusive monotheism of the Jews and give up his ancestral gods, but need not do so; who can, if he wishes, take the ultimate step and convert, but need not do so, and is, whether he does or not, promised as share in the resurrection for his pains. Such men make up a significant proportion of the population of the only synagogue community where we have quantitative evidence of their existence; whether this would commonly be true elsewhere is anyone’s guess [italics mine] (1987:65).

That they still subscribes to the idea of a distinct class of Godfearers in early Christianity, seems to be yet another example of Luke’s effective rhetoric, since their conclusion is a far cry from the earlier description of a ‘Godfearer’. A class of people is usually defined by their mutual behaviour, but the behaviour seems to be so ‘open’ in this case as to defy any kind of demarcation. They seem to delineate the boundaries of this ‘class’ as any kind of adherence to Judaism, and an adherence to Judaism is not what Kraabel denied.

References to Roman people as θεοσεβείς also occur. Josephus refers to Poppaea in this manner. However, out of over five hundred Jewish funerary inscriptions found in Rome, only five use the adjectival θεοσεβείς (Reynolds & Tannenbaum 1987:88). The hypothesis of a class of ‘Godfearers’ in Rome as a means of resolving the tension in the letter, seems to be an unfounded and invalid assumption.

A third misconception entails what might be termed the ‘progression-hypothesis’. According to this hypothesis, the growth of early Christianity can

---

9 Gager (1986:98) interprets this line as a heading.
clearly be depicted as a progression from Jerusalem to the synagogues in the Diaspora, to the 'Godfearers' and from them to the Gentiles. However, the salvation-historical goal of Acts is again very clearly discernible. Paul's so-called missionary strategies are then also aligned with this salvation-historical progression. For example: in an attempt to solve the tension between the *exordium* in which Paul expresses his desire to achieve 'some kind of fruit' among the Roman audience and 15:20 where the non-interference policy is stated, Klein postulates a defect in the Roman communities. They had as yet not received an apostolic foundation, something which Paul had set out to do. The apostolic foundation as a seal of approval on the on-going missionary enterprise can again be found in Acts (cf 8:14-17; 16:4; Wilckens 1978:80). Presupposed is the notion of an expanding church which has to be officially validated.

If the Jewish society was more diverse than is usually accepted, and if synagogues in the first century were more or less the same as households, and if no intermediate class can be distinguished within the synagogue, the notion of a progression, that is, a growing church, as a third force, becomes disputable.

2.5 The omniscient Paul

The co-existence of Jewish and Gentile Christians in Rome, the quantitative qualifications of these groups, the growing or threatening conflict between them or alternatively the threat from 'opponents' outside the communities, the addressees as 'Godfearers' presuppose a substantial knowledge of Rome on Paul's side. Scholars then also hasten to confirm that he must have had a very good knowledge of what was happening in Rome (Bruce 1982: 337; Marcus 1989:68; Campbell 1990:4; Crafton 1990:321; Moiser 1990:574). The assumption that Paul must have had a very good knowledge of the communities in Rome, is usually substantiated by the list of greetings in Rm 16.11

However, there is no evidence whatsoever to substantiate the omniscience of Paul. What happens is that the letter itself is seen as a source of information. Consequently, whatever knowledge is given in the letter is simply seen as Paul's correct view on the historical situation in Rome. If a threatening conflict between the 'weak' and the 'strong' is posited in the letter, such a conflict obtains ontological status; if Paul was vaguely addressing the relationship between Roman authorities and those who believed in Christ, he must have known about the tax problems present in Rome during the time of Nero (Stuhlmacher 1986:158-10) That both the lexemes, καρπός and εὐαγγελίασθαι, are immediately equated with missionary work again illustrates the way in which the function of the text is restricted to the informational. Extrapolated from its interactional context, Acts becomes the context in which the meaning of these lexemes is concretised.

Some also find support for his knowledge in his address to the 'strong' about the 'weak'. In a comparison with the Corinthians letter Paul's knowledge about the concrete situation in Rome is confirmed in his reference to the 'weak' as vegetarians.
138; cf more recently also Haacker 1990:33, 34, 40). The irony is that Paul's knowledge of the Roman situation comes from his own letter! The interactional context in which this letter functioned is thus again left out of consideration.

Neither can the list of greetings in Rm 16 function as an indication of his knowledge of the Roman situation. Kaye (1981:45) has correctly indicated that 'it is because he knows so little about the details of the situation that he includes in his greetings everyone he knows under whatever heading, or from whatever contact'. Rm 16 clearly has the function to obfuscate his ignorance about the situation in Rome, but also to facilitate future cooperation.

Finally the kind of detailed knowledge assumed, presupposes a continuous flow of information. Bear in mind that the situation in Rome, according to these same adherents of an omniscient Paul, was anything but static. Groups of people were leaving, staying, growing, returning, and causing problems. On the other hand, neither was Paul staying in one place only. If we take into consideration that the situation in Rome, as postulated by current scholarship, spans a period from approximately 49 to 55/56 CE, quite a lot of movement took place in a relatively short time. Yet Paul managed to keep up to date with his information! Besides the dynamics of the situation, one has to bear in mind that the flow of information in a *predominantly oral culture* does not occur in the same way as in a culture used to written texts.

3 ASSUMPTIONS UNDERLYING THE DETERMINATION OF A RHETORICAL SITUATION

Various scholars have correctly recognized the notion of rhetorical situation as a way out of the contextual problem of the Romans letter. Although the notion of the rhetorical situation can indeed prove to be helpful in answering the question ‘why Paul wrote the letter in this particular way’, it is not as uncomplicated as it appears at first. Unfortunately Bitzer’s (1968) view and later Kennedy’s (1984) confirmation of his viewpoint on rhetorical situation have been followed somewhat slavishly (cf also Stamps 1993: 197). The debate following Bitzer’s article on rhetorical situation within rhetorical circles has been largely ignored by New Testament scholars.12

12 Crafton (1990) approaches the rhetorical situation of the Romans letter from a Bur­kean angle. However, although Crafton does not refer to Bitzer, the same underlying realistic assumptions are in operation in his view on what situation entails. Rhetorical texts are seen as ‘responses’ and the traditional historical hypotheses are offered as the situation of the Romans letter (cf 1990:320-328). This is unfortunate, since Burke’s notion of the ‘context of situation’ (cf especially 1966:359-379) could have opened the possibility to explore linguistic power in the formation of social context and its subsequent influence on non-verbal reality.

13 Since the notion of rhetorical situation has become widespread within New Testament studies, I will restrict my argument to that dealing specifically with the letter to the Romans. It stands to reason that the notion of rhetorical situation demands a more compre-
The problem with Bitzer’s rhetorical situation is the optimistic assumption of an ontological existence of situation as a factual entity which can indeed be known, that is, a situation which can exist objectively and independently from observation. Factual properties are assigned to a situation and regarded as reality itself. The events and objects of a situation are seen as discrete entities which can be analysed and known. Brinton (1981:234) correctly formulates the problem as follows: ‘To what extent is the rhetorical situation a matter of objective facts?’. This is the kind of theoretical question which should be very important to New Testament rhetorical critics. The impression is often given that the rhetorical situation of a letter provides us with objective, historical facts. Brinton’s remarks should therefore be borne in mind.

Leaving the other constituent of a rhetorical situation aside, he concentrates on the notion of exigence. He indicates that the earlier Bitzer adhered to a ‘true exigence’ as ‘a genuine objective defect in the world’ (1981:242). What he finds more useful, however, is Bitzer’s later distinction of exigence into a factual and an interest component. The factual component enables him to retain objective phenomena as constitutive of exigence, while the interest component accounts for the rhetor’s viewpoint, that which accords with his/her interest (1981:245). While Bitzer locates both the factual and the interest component as constituents of exigence, Brinton excludes the interest component from the notion of exigence (:246). Exigence then becomes equivalent to the factual circumstances. However, it becomes exigent only relative to the interest of the rhetor. He formulates: ‘So the exigence is a constituent of the situation, but it is exigent only relative to an external term’ (:246).

The advantage of Brinton’s modification of Bitzer is his insistence on the relational nature of exigence, that is, the necessity of an interest component which can be related to the factual circumstances. However, if exigency comes into being relative to an external term, in this instance, the interest component, can we still speak of factuality? If an imperfection is only imperfect according to the interest of the rhetor, we surely cannot regard that imperfection as an objective matter of fact. Factuality seems to exist by virtue of meaning assigned by humans.

Vatz (1973) penetrates to the heart of the problem. Although he concerns himself with the earlier Bitzer (1968), his critique exposes what has largely been ignored by Bitzer. According to Vatz, Bitzer adheres to a realistic philosophy of
meaning (1973:154). In such a philosophy meaning is not assigned to things, but resides in things. It is as if meaning emanates from the things occurring in reality. The objects and events of reality have intrinsic meaning, can exist on their own, independent of observation.

The main problem with such a realistic philosophy of meaning is its underestimation of linguistic power in the creation of social realities or contexts. The things of nature do not have meaning in themselves, but acquire their meaning through symbolisation. To narrow it down a bit: human beings have the ability to create their own social realities through symbolisation, specifically by means of language. If reality acquires its meaning through the use of symbols, the existence of objective facts becomes disputable, because human beings do not create and use symbols in a similar manner. Factuality as such is therefore something that has already been constructed. It falls within the realm of a person's creative potential. For this reason Vatz (1973:157) can also claim: 'No theory of the relationship between situations and rhetoric can neglect to take account of the initial linguistic depiction of the situation.'

If people create their own social realities by means of symbols, rhetorical situations are not 'found' or 'discovered'—they are created. The defects, imperfections or problems that are deemed the exigences of rhetorical situations, are not something rushing upon people from reality itself, but rather the result of people's creative activities. The chaotic interaction of the objects and events of reality are infused with the verbal actions of people, creating multiple networks of meaning. The contexts in which we find ourselves, determine what we deem imperfections or defects, and these contexts have been created and shaped linguistically. What a social group regards as factual, is factuality by agreement. Rhetorical situations, therefore, do not dictate responses; rhetorical acts, that is, the creation and use of symbols, initiate rhetorical situations.

15 Brinton's modification of Bitzer's interest component is an attempt to address this problem by shifting the locus of meaning to the interaction between fact and observation. However, meaning, in his case, also seems to reside in the objects and events of reality. Brinton's concern is to exclude the interest component from exigency and to locate that in the rhetor, thereby safeguarding objectivity within the rhetorical situation. According to Brinton '(I)t is the facts which the rhetor aims to change' (1981:246) and again '(T)he speaker “finds” the situation; it is a set of “givens”...' (:247).

16 It is in this respect that Burke's notion of the 'context of situation' requires our attention. The context of situation applies to the problem of the verbal versus the non-verbal. Whereas the traditional common sense view claims that the verbal functions as signs for the non-verbal, the point is argued that the verbal has so infused the non-verbal that things have become signs for words. Things refer us to words, they exude a spirit that compels words to be assigned to them. What is meant is that it is only within a context of 'words', the tribal idiom, the social world created by means of language/ symbols, that things become meaningful. Although the existence of events and objects can not be denied, these situations have no meaning whatsoever without the social context created by human linguistic ability (cf Burke 1973:103-116; 1966:359-379).
Vatz (1973:159) radicalises the position as follows: 'I would not say “rhetoric is situational,” but situations are rhetorical; not “exigence...strongly invites utterance,” but utterance strongly invites exigence; not “the situation controls the rhetorical response...” but the rhetoric controls the situational response; not “...rhetorical discourse...does obtain its character-as-rhetorical from the situation which generates it,” but situations obtain their character from the rhetoric which surrounds them or creates them.’

What are the implications for the rhetorical situations of New Testament writings?

Firstly, cognizance should be taken of the problematic nature of Bitzer and Kennedy’s notion of rhetorical situation. Their rhetorical situations are situations constituted by ‘objective matters of fact’; a ‘real’ problem exists and the rhetorical act is only a response to this problem—a direct correspondence exists between rhetorical situation and rhetorical act. The assumption is, of course, that a rhetorical act can incorporate the inexhaustible and chaotic possibilities of reality. However, a rhetorical situation as an objectively given, does not exist. A consequence of a Bitzerian rhetorical situation is its identification with Sitz-im-Leben. If rhetorical situation is to be identified with Sitz-im-Leben, as is explicitly stated by Kennedy (1984:33), the question is whether New Testament rhetorical scholarship has really escaped the confines of historical criticism (cf also Stamps 1993:193,195,197). That rhetoric then also merely becomes a synonymous terminology is borne out by the treatment of the traditional historical problems and statements following expositions of the notion of rhetorical situation. As such the notion of rhetorical situation becomes an obfuscating disguise for our embarassment about having very little information on the specific situation itself.

Secondly, if rhetorical situation is not to be identified with ‘objective matters of fact’, no single rhetorical situation exists at any given moment in time. On the contrary, every moment in time offers the possibility of an inexhaustible number of rhetorical situations. What we can infer from the letter to the Romans, is consequently only one of a possible multitude of rhetorical situations. The rhetorical situation may have been completely different from the perspective of the households in Rome. What Paul experienced as an ‘imperfection’, may not have been a problem from the perspective of the Roman audiences. As a matter of fact, the arrival of his letter in Rome, may have created the very problem he visualised.

17 A case in point is for example Reid’s study on the rhetorical function of Romans 5:1-21 in which Bitzer and Kennedy are followed. After representing their views on rhetorical situation (.258-259), the audience is divided into the traditional ‘strong’ and ‘weak’ on the basis of 14:1-15:7, a conflict is suggested and a historical construct is made on the basis of the Suetonian remark (cf 2.2, 2.3.1, 2.3.2 of this article).
Thirdly, if the rhetorical situation does not consist of objective matters of fact, but is something created by human beings through the symbolisation process, the notion of the 'entextualisation of the rhetorical situation' should receive prominence. According to Stamps (1993), the rhetorical situation should be seen as a literary-rhetorical figure. The rhetorical situation is the situation embedded or inscripturated into the text. He writes (1993:200): '...the sender constructs and presents his or her view of the situation in the epistolary text which the audience consents to for the sake of the argument.' Although it might sound like a circular argument that we construct a context (rhetorical situation) from the very text which we attempt to locate within a context, the circularity exists only when our point of departure is that of a realism oriented philosophy. Where a rhetorical situation is regarded as constructed, it functions as a symbolising act in the process of persuasion. The point of departure for the determination of the rhetorical situation of a writing need not be the historical circumstances, but should rather be the 'entextualised' situation.

4 THE NEED TO DIFFERENTIATE CONTEXTS

From the preceding arguments it should be clear that the current approach to the construction of the context of the letter to the Romans has been built on disputable assumptions. The question is whether an alternative context for the letter can be suggested. To my mind the notion of the rhetorical situation is still the best option, since it provides us with categories appropriate to the need for the construction of a context for the letter to the Romans. The notion of an entextualised rhetorical situation can be further refined by incorporating Fowler's (1986:85-102) observations on the relationship between text and context.

Fowler distinguishes three kinds of contexts, namely the context of utterance, the cultural context and the context of reference. These distinctions should not be seen as watertight compartments, since they are in continuous interaction with one another.

The designation context of utterance seems to overlap with the historical situation, since context of utterance refers to the physical surroundings. However, these physical surroundings do not refer to bruta facta, that is to the specific historical circumstances, but to the components of a communicative situation. The context of utterance is the context in which the utterances are anchored. It includes the locations of the participants in their relationship to one another, that is, the inscripturation or entextualisation of time, persons and space. In the case of a letter, the context of utterance would be a 'split' context influencing the indexicalisation of persons, time and space. An analysis of the

18 The 'entextualised' rhetorical situation can be determined in different ways. The possibilities will not be dealt with in this article. Beginnings to this effect have already been made (Vorster 1990; 1991; Stamps 1993:199-203).
context of utterance will focus on the way in which the author has encoded himself (the encoded author), his audience (the implied audience), the time of writing, as well as the way in which space has been encoded. With regard to the letter to the Romans, this would entail an analysis of the way in which Paul positions himself in terms of time and space, his relationships to his co-author, letter bearer, his portrayal of his audience and acquaintances and the politeness strategies he activated to minimise distance and increase presence.

The cultural context influences the context of utterance decisively, or to put it differently, the context of utterance functions against the broader background of a context of culture. As such, the cultural context can function as generator of various contexts of utterance. The context of culture is the whole network of social and economic conventions and institutions as they bear upon the context of utterance. The cultural context manifests in the context of utterance by means of shared knowledge, that is, a mutual frame of reference, mutual value systems, a mutual code of behaviour. This cultural context, just like the context of utterance, should not be equated with the specific historical situation. Not only should it once again be seen from a communicative perspective, but it is that context which could generate multiple historical situations. To a certain extent Fowler's context of culture overlaps with Burke's context of situation. Burke's context of situation seems to be constituted by the 'tribal idiom', that is, by language as culture creating activity. It is in this respect that the various sociological and anthropological studies benefit the rhetorical critic. To make it more concrete: one needs to ask what kind of social role Paul occupied; what kind of culture allowed a relatively strange person to exercise his authority over them; what the criteria for status or power were; which were the social powers that order in society; what the politeness strategies of antiquity, and literary conventions were. Social matrixes, such as the role of 'shame' and 'honour' in the ancient Mediterranean world, prove to be extremely valuable in the construction of a rhetorical situation.

Finally, the context of reference. According to Fowler (:89), this context is concerned with the topic or subject-matter of a text. Although it can overlap with the context of utterance, it often does not, because it is usually concerned with reference outside the here-and-now, that is the immediate context. It stands to reason that this context is also generated and influenced by the context of culture. Communication would not have been successful if it were not for the context of culture. An example would again be appropriate. When Paul tells his audience in 1:9-10 of his past frustrated desires to visit them, he removes them and himself from the context of utterance to a period in the past, thereby creating a context of reference. This context of reference cannot inform us historically; to do so would be to extrapolate it from its context. However, the influence of the context of culture is clearly visible. To create 'presence', distance
must be removed. In letters of antiquity the removal of distance and creation of presence was a literary-social convention. It functioned as a politeness strategy intended to effect identification.\footnote{That it cannot possibly be a reflection of a historical situation can already be seen by the hyperbolic language Paul uses. Yet despite these ‘clues’ that another kind of context might be at stake, scholars still incline to construct a historical situation for these utterances.}

5 CONCLUSION

The same picture concerning the context of the Romans letter is painted over and over again, whether from a so-called historical or from a rhetorical approach. The impression created is that of a consensus on the context of the letter to the Romans. It has been indicated that the same kind of assumptions underlie studies intent on constructing either a historical or a rhetorical situation, and these assumptions have been shown to be problematic. While these assumptions persist, a deadlock will prevail on the context of the Romans letter. Since context concretises meaning, this deadlock will also inhibit interpretation. The notion of a rhetorical situation provides us with new categories and prompt us into new areas of research. However, rhetorical situation should not be seen as consisting of objective matters of fact, but should be located within a wider context, that of culture, formed by the linguistic power of people.

WORKS CONSULTED

Bruce, F F 1982. The Romans debate—continued. JRLB 64, 334-359.
Kaye, B N 1981. 'To the Romans and others' revisited. *NT* 18, 37-77.
Neusner, J & Frerichs, E S 1985. 'To see ourselves as others see us': Christians, Jews, 'Others' in late Antiquity. Chico: Scholars Press.

Dr J N Vorster, Department of New Testament, University of South Africa, P O Box 392, PRETORIA, 0001 Republic of South Africa.