

## Chapter 4 - Powers and Principalities

*'Where were you when I laid the earth's foundation?  
Tell me, if you understand.  
Who marked off its dimensions? Surely you know!  
Who stretched a measuring line across it?  
On what were its footings set,  
or who laid its cornerstone –  
while the morning stars sang together  
and all the angels shouted for joy?*

**Job 38.4-7**

To complete the biblical picture of the non-human Creation in the world since the Fall, I want to make a brief examination of the “powers and principalities” that are mentioned at various points, almost exclusively in the New Testament. The only reason I consider them relevant here is because, in my view, they are not simply to be equated with personal angelic or demonic beings, although many of their attributes appear to indicate this. Various references make them appear to be more akin to what we might call natural forces in the world, and so potentially part of the brief of this book.

The existence of Satan and corrupt angels, rational agents having malign influences within the world of men, does not affect our subject, the supposed corruption of the natural world itself. As we saw in Chapter 1, there is just one direct reference to Satan's involvement in natural events in Job 1, but Satan as pictured there is a servant of Yahweh, if an ambivalent one, and the resources he uses to plague Job are God's, not his own.

Yet one notes with some surprise that Paul, when talking about the Creation, habitually says far more about apparently angelic powers and principalities than he does about what we would call the natural world. For example, in rejoicing in the impossibility that anything in all Creation can separate believers from Christ, he says:

*For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.<sup>1</sup>*

It is interesting that not one of these created things is mentioned in the Genesis creation account. Similarly, in expressing Christ's lordship over Creation he writes:

*The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him.<sup>2</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> Rom. 8.38-39.

It would appear to be the same created authorities who are represented as Christ's enemies in 1 Cor. 15:

*Then the end will come, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father after he has destroyed all dominion, authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet.<sup>3</sup>*

Now, it's common to conceptualise the Cross as a victory over Satan. In fact the earliest popular atonement theory of Patristic times was the "ransom theory", in which the life of Christ was paid to Satan as a ransom for souls he kept imprisoned by sin and death, only for Christ to outwit him by his resurrection. Yet there must be more to powers and authorities than the devil himself. There must even be more to them than ontologically evil powers, or we would be opening the door to theological dualism. Whether or not they are involved now in moral evil, these are "powers" and "authorities" created by God and therefore, presumably, with some intended ongoing role in Creation. Our task is to identify what those roles are.

In fact, Paul uses the same word "authorities" to commend Christian respect for earthly political authorities, and it is not obvious that he is referring to something entirely different from the powers in the previous passages:

*Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. Consequently, whoever rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves.<sup>4</sup>*

So it would appear that, in the political sphere, all God-given authority operates through these powers: if so, their created purpose is somehow to enable human government, even oppressive or unbelieving government, to function.

Belief in personal angels with a significant role in the affairs of the world is less common than it once was. The Enlightenment, of course, was suspicious of all things supernatural. But in academic interpretation of the Bible things have changed too. Since influential books by Hendrik Berkhof<sup>5</sup> and G B Caird<sup>6</sup> after World War II (years which concentrated a lot of minds on the nature of evil) a prominent and actually quite useful stream of interpretation has viewed these powers not as "bad angels" but in terms exclusively of the political and other power structures of the world. In this view, to quote John Stott (who prefers to see them in personal terms):

*...it has been suggested that Paul himself had begun to "demythologize" the concept of angels and demons, and that he sees them rather as structures of earthly existence and power, especially the state, but also tradition, law, economics and even religion.<sup>7</sup>*

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<sup>2</sup> Col. 1.15-16.

<sup>3</sup> 1 Cor. 15.24-25.

<sup>4</sup> Rom.13.1-2.

<sup>5</sup> Berkhof, Hendrick, *Christ and the Powers* (Scottsdale, Herald Press, 1962).

<sup>6</sup> Caird, G B, *Principalities and Powers: Study in Pauline Theology* (Oxford, 1956).

<sup>7</sup> Stott, John, *The Cross of Christ* (Leicester, IVP, 1986), p.233 (footnote).

In other words, this view sees the “authorities” as the effects of “collective psyche” beyond the power or control of the individual. What induces mildly disgruntled citizens to end up in a mob committing atrocities? Why do some really bad ideas dominate cultures like a meme<sup>8</sup> pandemic? What is it about charismatic politicians from Adolf Hitler to John F Kennedy that enables them to bend millions of ordinary people to their agendas? It surely doesn't happen to the rest of us. I think it is quite a useful concept to see power and authority as something more than simply good or bad men fortuitously gaining rational assent from others.

But Stott points out, and I think he is right, that this impersonal interpretation doesn't do justice to the specific mention Paul makes of some of these powers being in “heavenly realms”, eg Eph. 6.12:

*For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.*

Neither does it do justice to the language of punishment associated with them that we saw above in 1 Cor 15.24. What is clear is that Paul is not simply tossing apocalyptic ideas about in the wind – that is not his style – but has developed some biblical ideas in a way that is coherent to him, though perhaps largely unfamiliar to us.

It may well be that both the personal and the structural aspects are true, and that Paul is deliberately ambiguous in how he uses the term. Such “compound” views are propounded by D E H Whiteley<sup>9</sup>, Michael Green<sup>10</sup>, Walter Wink<sup>11</sup> and Markus Barth<sup>12</sup>. Nigel Goring Wright writes:

*We are not obliged to agree with John Stott that the New Testament has nothing to say about social structures, or that the position outlined [in these writers] represents an “uneasy compromise.” The point is precisely that the power structures of human life are vulnerable and open to invasion by the powers of darkness, or, indeed, that it is out of the powers of darkness and the fallen human beings from whom they operate that a spiritual dynamic is generated.<sup>13</sup>*

In other words, then, it may even be, that it is human sin that in some way makes the powers, which God created for good, evil. One such idea is the theme found in Isaiah 24, where God's judgement on the earth (24.1) involves punishing “*the powers in heavens above and the kings on the earth below.*”<sup>14</sup> This linkage clearly implies that whatever these powers are up to, it's not some separate celestial rebellion but is intimately associated with what's gone wrong in the world of men. That's why, whether you accept them as personal angelic agencies or “demythologized” human phenomena they're important theologically, and are not to be quietly sidelined or left to the Charismatics busily “binding territorial demons” to no obvious effect.

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<sup>8</sup> “Meme” – a fanciful unit of ideas, equivalent to the gene, and popularised by Richard Dawkins largely as a way to discredit religion (but strangely, not atheism or science) as a dangerous contagion.

<sup>9</sup> Whiteley, D E H, *The Theology of Paul* (Oxford, Blackwell, 1972).

<sup>10</sup> Green, M, *I Believe in Satan's Downfall* (London, Hodder & Stoughton, 1981).

<sup>11</sup> Wink, W, *Naming the Powers: the Language of Power in the New Testament* (Philadelphia, Fortress, 1984).

<sup>12</sup> Barth, M, *Ephesians 4-6: The Anchor Bible* (New Yprk, Doubleday, 1976).

<sup>13</sup> Wright, Nigel Goring, *A Theology of the Dark Side* (Downers Grove, IVP, 2003) p.144.

<sup>14</sup> Isa. 24.21.

A good way of understanding how our familiar political and social “powers” might relate to angelic agencies “in the heavens” is by employing the concept of “participation”, or what we might call “correspondence”, that is found in the work of Owen Barfield<sup>15</sup>. In some way, under this view, there is a spiritual correlation between power exerted by these supra-human forces, and the power exerted by, and the accountability of humans for, their own treatment of others. Pilate has power, but only because it is given from above<sup>16</sup>, and yet he is its accountable wielder, not merely its victim.

What convinces me of the importance of “the powers” is that they underpin a good part of Paul’s theology of atonement, namely that associated with the concept of *Christus Victor*, which in the slightly garbled form as the “ransom theory” was the main Patristic theory of salvation, and which is increasingly popular today. In Colossians 2.9ff Paul writes:

*For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form, and in Christ you have been brought to fullness. He is the head over every power and authority... When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, having cancelled the charge of our legal indebtedness, which stood against us and condemned us; he has taken it away, nailing it to the cross. And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.*<sup>17</sup>

I would suggest that both key elements of the Cross are here – by it Christ disarms and triumphs over these mysterious powers, but the means by which he does it is substitutionary atonement for human sins. It would appear that, whatever they are, they’ve “got something over us” which the selfless and sacrificial death of Christ “disarms”. Other Scriptures, referring to Satan as the accuser as well as the tempter, hint that the vicious circle is because our sin is justly accused by him, resulting in our death. Since Satan is referred to as “the Prince of this world”, offering Jesus in the wilderness its power structures in return for worship, one supposes that he speaks on behalf of the authorities that Paul means here. Remove sin, and they no longer have us in their power.

But why do they exist in the first place? It seems to me the popular assumption rests on some Miltonian idea of a primordial rebellion in heaven leading to a bunch of wicked angels muscling in on human affairs by sheer main force, starting with a bit of agitprop in Eden involving a commandeered snake. But here, to me, is where it gets more interesting than that. In Colossians, Paul’s first mention of the powers, as we saw above, is in 1.15ff:

*The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him.*

Paul is clearly conflating, as he habitually does, every source of authority that matters to us, whether “the rulers, the authorities, the powers of this dark world” or “the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.” It would appear that the same phenomenological realities are involved, seen both from earthly and spiritual perspectives. And these authorities, all, were created as authorities under

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<sup>15</sup> Barfield, Owen, *Saving the Appearances* (Middletown, Wesleyan University Press 1988).

<sup>16</sup> Jn. 19.11.

<sup>17</sup> Col. 2.9-15.

and for Christ – and presumably, since from ch.2 we see they have a say in our affairs, they were created for the benefit of mankind, but have somehow gone wrong.

This explains what, otherwise, seems Paul's (together with Peter's, actually) apparently odd attitude to governments. Both commend obedience to Caesar, and to any other authorities whatever, as being created by God for man's good, even though both Jewish and Gentile power structures were clearly antagonistic to the Gospel and led to the death of both apostles. Paul is seeing authority itself as an actual "thing", an element of creation made for us, involving angelic powers with God-given dignity and hence worthy of respect, just like their human counterparts. In both Peter's<sup>18</sup> and Jude's<sup>19</sup> letters, concerning angelic powers, one finds the same sense of respect for what God has ordained, even though they have fallen into evil and although God – who alone has the right – will punish them in time<sup>20</sup>.

At this point, then, let me suggest (somewhat speculatively), the place of these powers in the business of the original Creation, and how what God intended for good might have been perverted, not through a pre-creation war in heaven, but through the failure of mankind – the only creature (angels not excepted) made in God's image.

I suggest that in the original economy of Creation the "powers and principalities" were created, like the other angelic beings, as servants for the people created in the image of God, that is in the image of the Son. *"Are not all angels ministering spirits sent to serve those who will inherit salvation?"*<sup>21</sup> That means that however personal their power, it was intended to be under the control of sinless humanity to assist in the government of the world, under God.

The image of God in mankind was intended to be shown partly in the social structures – perhaps we may even say political structures – built up as the population of the earth increased. It seems that arrangements for communal power and authority were built into that plan. What happens to that, then, in the eventuality of the reality of sin? Those heavenly/earthly powers were not withdrawn, any more than the ability to make fire or to throw rocks was withdrawn. They remained as invisible, but very powerful, forces. Imagine that bronze-age man had possessed the power of nuclear fission – the power of authority structures are on that kind of level of potency. Such an idea is consistent with the oldest mythologies of man – it is notable that in Mesopotamia, it was believed to be the descent of kingship (not kings) from heaven that began civilization<sup>22</sup>.

Only, with sinful men taking the reins of power, one has what Nigel Goring Wright calls a "Sorcerer's Apprentice" situation. Give the powers distorted instructions, and it's the equivalent of a madman pressing the nuclear red button. Forget the need to give them guidance altogether, and like robots in a science fiction tale they are in danger of becoming autonomous and dangerous. And so in this scenario, our oppression by the powers – a very real theme in Scripture – is the direct result of our

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<sup>18</sup> 1 Pet. 2.10-12.

<sup>19</sup> Jude 8-10.

<sup>20</sup> The link between political and spiritual "powers" as instituted by God is worthy of much more study. The moral ambivalence of both seems to be related to the inscrutability of God, for Scripture enjoins the same kind of respect for even harmful celestial beings as it does for corrupt human authorities as God's agents. See 2 Pet. 2.10-12; Jude 8-10, where it may seem surprising that slandering devils is seen as a sin, rather than a virtue.

<sup>21</sup> Heb. 1.14.

<sup>22</sup> "After the kingship descended from heaven, the kingship was in Eridu" begins the Sumerian king list.

misuse of them. The angelic Fall, if such it can be termed, might even then be the result, rather than the cause, of our own, if one allows that perhaps even Satan's original role as tempter was to be something like a divine agent provocateur to stiffen Adam's obedience.

I have included this chapter on "the powers" because they are a genuine part of Creation, and clearly of more importance, particularly in Paul's theology, than is often considered now. And yet the texts we have seen referring to them seem to relate their effects exclusively to the world of human beings, and particularly to the political realm. Do they also have any influence over the natural Creation?

If we consider mankind's commission in Genesis 1, to rule and subdue the world, there would need to be political power structures in place for humanity to function in such a role. If we also consider the implicit theme in Genesis 2 (echoed through the Bible in New Creation teaching) that Adam's race would be involved in the ultimate transformation of the cosmos which, in the event, is performed through Christ, then one might expect "powers and authorities" to be involved at the natural level too, and so subject to the same perversion as in the political realm.

After all, when Christ comes as King to rule by the Spirit, it is at the expense of the failed and discredited heavenly powers. Since Christ also comes to transform the cosmos by the same Spirit, is it not similarly by overthrowing corrupted powers within nature?

Although this seems logical enough, the fact is that it does not appear that any role in the running of the natural world is attributed directly to such powers and authorities, either in New Testament in the Old. It does seem that Paul's treatment of them, by far the most developed, views them as involved only in the human, and especially the political, sphere.

In the wilderness temptation, Satan promised Jesus the kingdoms of the world – but not the kingdoms of nature. This only tends to confirm what we discovered in Chapter 1 – that God remains solely in charge of the non-rational Creation, and that there is therefore no justification for regarding it as fallen. The conclusion appears to be that neither the sin of man, nor the corruption of the angelic powers, is associated in Scripture with any major changes in nature.

This concludes our consideration of the biblical material.