

## Four Models for Interpreting the Powers

In this chapter, we survey the works of four major twentieth-century interpreters of the principalities and powers: Clinton Arnold, Rudolph Bultmann, Hendrik Berkhof, and Walter Wink. Each of these scholars represents a distinctive approach to the powers, and all are influential voices in different circles. We do not claim that this survey represents a comprehensive typology of approaches to the powers. All the above scholars, for example, are European and American males. Thus, at the end of our study we will put them in conversation with non-European and non-American perspectives in our cross-cultural study. Readers are invited to expand the range of possibilities. In this chapter, nonetheless, we concentrate on these four scholars, because they represent an instructive spectrum of approaches to the powers, and they help us to raise important issues.

While Clinton Arnold's work is the most recent among the scholars surveyed, we have chosen to begin our discussion with him, because he represents an attempt to recover the "traditional" view of the powers that sees the powers as personal spiritual beings. Rudolf Bultmann's approach is a reaction against this traditional understanding of the powers. Thus, we will discuss Bultmann after Arnold. We then proceed to Berkhof and, finally, to Wink, whose approach is a reformulation of the position articulated by Berkhof. After engaging the works of these scholars, we will offer some overall assessments about a way forward for the study of the NT's principalities and powers.

### CLINTON ARNOLD: PERSONAL SPIRITUAL BEINGS

"Belief in the real existence of [the] powers continued through the entire history of the church, including the Reformation,"<sup>1</sup> writes Clinton Arnold. If

Arnold is correct, then the position he defends may be labeled as the traditional understanding of the powers.<sup>2</sup> Arnold's work is a reaction against Western scholarship's tendency to demythologize the principalities and powers in the NT. Arnold's study pushes back against the approaches to the powers that do not take seriously the existence of a spiritual realm of demons ruled by a figure named Satan. He argues against the post-Enlightenment impulse to relegate the NT's portrayal of a struggle with evil spirits ("powers of darkness") to outmoded primitive myth, or that attempts to demythologize the powers. All such approaches to the powers are, for Arnold, characterized by one impulse: "A denial of the real existence of evil spirits."<sup>3</sup> Paul's conception of evil spiritual powers, in contrast, serves, for Arnold, as an important source for forming a Christian worldview in Western culture.

Arnold begins by conducting an archaeology of the worldview of the Greek, Roman, and Jewish populace, in order to situate Paul's belief within first-century Greco-Roman culture and Judaism. He contends that everyone in Paul's day agreed on one thing: "The supernatural realm exercises control over everyday life and eternal destiny."<sup>4</sup> Arnold cites evidence from papyrus texts, amulets, curse tablets (*defixiones*), and other sources to demonstrate how magic and divination, widespread practices in the Mediterranean world, were ways people manipulated good and evil spirits in order to assist or harm others. Such practices not only assumed the existence of a spiritual realm but also that these spirits were involved in the lives of humans and could be manipulated.<sup>5</sup>

Arnold argues that the Hellenistic age saw a rise in "personal religion," in which the gods were perceived as less remote and more personal, concerned with the affairs of people.<sup>6</sup> People sought relationships and union with the gods through ritual acts, such as Eleusis mystery rites and Cybele initiation rites; and the existence of dozens of gods and goddesses (Asclepius, Hekate, Dionysus, Isis, Mithras, and so on) was taken for granted, even by early Christians. The early Christians, however, attributed the activities of these gods and goddesses

1. C. E. Arnold, *Powers of Darkness: Principalities and Powers in Paul's Letters* (Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1992) 169–70. See also Arnold, *Ephesians: Power and Magic. The Concept of Power in Ephesians in Light of Its Historical Setting*, SNTSMS 63 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); Arnold, *The Colossian Syncretism: The Interface between Christianity and Folk Belief at Colossae*, WUNT 77 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1995). Our discussion in this section is mainly based on *Powers of Darkness*.

2. We remain a bit skeptical, however. Arnold's claim may be an oversimplification of history.

3. Arnold, *Powers of Darkness*, 172.

4. *Ibid.*, 19.

5. *Ibid.*, 27.

6. *Ibid.*, 37.

to the influence of Satan (cf. Acts 14:8–20; 17:16–34; 19:23–41; 28:1–11). In addition, astrological belief and practice were widespread and varied in the Greco-Roman world: some believed that the heavenly bodies represented spirits or deities, while others believed that the heavenly bodies were actual spirits, deities, or supernatural powers. The Stoics believed that the movement of the heavenly bodies determined the fate of people on earth. Most people, however, believing the heavenly bodies to be gods or spirits, prayed to, invoked, or propitiated the planets and stars to alter their fate. Arnold argues that it was this concern about fate and the influence of the stars that Paul addressed in his letters when he spoke of the astral spirits as the *stoicheia* (“elementary spirits” [Gal. 4:3, 9; Col. 2:8, 20]). Paul spoke of God’s election and predestination to combat this concern about fate.<sup>7</sup>

Having discussed what first-century pagans believed about evil spirits, Arnold turns his attention to first-century Judaism to shed light on what Paul believed about the powers of darkness. Arnold traces demonology in the Old Testament through the intertestamental period to rabbinic literature. He lists Old Testament references that link the worship of idols to demons (Deut. 32:16–17; Pss. 106:37–38; 96:5), a belief that Paul inherited (1 Cor. 10:19–21). He points to the OT references to the “Night Hag” (Isa. 34:14) and “goat spirits” (Isa. 13:21; Lev. 17:7; 2 Chron. 11:15) as references to evil spirits. He also points to the OT censuring of occult practices, divination, sorcery, magic and witchcraft (Deut. 18:10–12; Amos 5:26; Jer. 7:18; 44:17–19; Deut. 4:19; 1 Sam. 28:3–25; Lev. 19:26, 31), passages redolent of evil spirits (Judg. 9:23; 1 Sam. 16:14–23; 18:10–11; 19:9–10; 1 Kgs. 22:1–40), and the OT conception of angels of the nations (Deut. 32:8–9; Dan. 10:13–14, 20–21). He discusses Satan in the OT (Job 1–2; Zech. 3:1–2; 1 Chron. 21:1), arguing that Satan is portrayed in the OT as a supernatural enemy to both God and humanity. The intertestamental period reveals an increased preoccupation with the spirit realm, as demonstrated in Old Testament apocryphal writings, the Dead Sea Scrolls, pseudepigraphic testaments, and Jewish apocalyptic literature. These documents were interested in the origin of demons, attributing it to the fall of angels; they were also interested in the names and classes of these angelic beings (see, e.g., *Jub.* 5, 10; *1 En.* 6–36). These early Jewish writings portray the angelic beings as both influencing humans, leading them astray from God and society, and causing the propagation of pagan religions or war among the nations. Finally, Arnold takes a look at the ministry of Jesus, arguing that Jesus’ confrontation with Satan,

7. *Ibid.*, 53–54.

conflict with the powers of darkness, and teaching about evil powers greatly influenced the apostle Paul.<sup>8</sup>

An important observation from Arnold's study is the extraordinary amount of syncretism among all first-century religions and Judaism: each religion mixed together various elements of beliefs and practices from other religions. Greek, Egyptian, Persian, Phrygian, and Roman deities were all invoked in incantations, sometimes freely combined with names from the Bible. In the words of Arnold, "A very thin line separated Jewish and gentile religious belief in many quarters during the first century."<sup>9</sup> Paul's vocabulary for the principalities and powers drew on the vast reservoir of terms in first-century Jewish angelology and demonology.<sup>10</sup> But Paul's gentile audience would have clearly understood him, since different religions shared the same concepts and terminology.

Unlike the approaches to the powers that see Paul demythologizing the views of his contemporaries, Arnold argues that Paul was "a man of his times."<sup>11</sup> Like his Jewish and pagan contemporaries, Paul also assumed the existence of a realm filled with evil spirits hostile to humanity. For Paul, these personal demons were a given, not needing to be argued for. Paul never doubted the real existence of the principalities and powers. Arnold notes that belief in the real existence of the spirit realm spanned the history of Christianity until the church inherited a materialistic and rationalistic worldview from the Enlightenment. Paul saw the demonic forces as a well-organized world under the command of Satan, their head. In Paul's view, Satan and his powers worked to oppose at every point the purpose of God in Christ and in the life of believers. Satan and his demons were also manifest in non-Christian religions. The gods of the pagans were not lifeless images; rather, Satan used these lifeless images to hold humans in bondage. Paul, therefore, admonished the members of his congregation to "flee from idolatry" (1 Cor. 10:14), because involvement with pagan temples not only compromised their allegiance to the one true God but also exposed them to powerful demonic activity. Here Paul inherits from his Jewish tradition a link between idolatry and witchcraft (cf. *Jub.* 11:4-5; *T. Jud.* 23:1; *T. Naph.* 3:1).

8. *Ibid.*, 75-86.

9. *Ibid.*, 91.

10. Ἀρχαί ("principalities"), ἐξουσίαι ("authorities"), δυνάμεις ("powers"), κυριότητες ("lordships"), θρόνοι ("thrones"), ἄγγελοι ("angels"), κοσμοκράτορες ("world rulers"), δαιμόνια ("demons"), στοιχεῖα ("elements"), ἄρχοντες ("rulers").

11. Arnold, *Powers of Darkness*, 89.

Yet it is important to note, as Arnold argues, that Paul did not merely adopt the demonology and angelology of his Jewish and pagan world. For Arnold, Paul's views are firmly secured in the Old Testament and the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Thus, key differences emerge between Paul's approach to the powers and his Jewish and pagan contemporaries. For example, while Paul believed that the pagan gods were alive, he did not, like his pagan contemporaries, think the gods could help people in practical ways. Paul believed the pagan gods were inspired and perpetuated by Satan and his demons. Rather than being helpful resources for his gentile converts, Paul saw these evil spirits as a hindrance to the gospel he proclaimed. The only spirit that Paul favored was the Holy Spirit, whose indwelling and regular operation among believers meant ongoing spiritual progress for the body of Christ. In addition, while Jewish sources demonstrate a keen concern to elucidate the origins, names, and rank of the demonic forces, Paul shows no interest in these concerns. Furthermore, Paul was not concerned with the specific activities of specific demons or the territories ruled by evil angels. Paul, by contrast, often lumped all the demons together, pointing to Christ's lordship over all powers and Christ as the source to overcoming the evil powers.

The death and resurrection of Christ, Arnold avers, marks the pivotal point of defeat of the powers. In Christ's death, God disarmed the powers, making a public spectacle of them in the process. The believer's own defeat of the powers is, therefore, rooted in the death, resurrection, and exaltation of Christ. It is only in being "in Christ" that a person escapes the bondage of the hostile powers.<sup>12</sup> Believers, as a result of their union with Christ and bond with one another, have the strength to resist the powers of darkness. Although the powers may enjoy temporary victories in their ongoing campaign against the church, their ultimate doom is certain. Arnold, following Oscar Cullmann,<sup>13</sup> draws on a World War II analogy to shed light on the nature of the church's ongoing struggle with the powers: the church lives in the period between the D-Day invasion at Normandy and the VE-Day final victory a year later.<sup>14</sup>

Arnold argues further that Paul perceived a threefold nature of evil (Eph. 2:1-3): the world, the devil, and the flesh.<sup>15</sup> With regard to the world, Arnold notes that there is much in society that leads people away from God. In addition to the influence of the structures of society throughout a person's life, Paul

12. *Ibid.*, 112-13.

13. O. Cullman, *Christ and Time: The Primitive Christian Conception of Time and History* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1950) 84, 139-45.

14. Arnold, *Powers of Darkness*, 123.

15. *Ibid.*, 125-26. Arnold assumes Pauline authorship of Ephesians.

perceived the influence of Satan and evil spirits over the lives of individuals. Finally, Paul also discerned an internal inclination toward evil in humans. Thus, the source of evil is internal to people as well as supernatural. In the end, however, for Arnold, the “demonic explanation for evil behavior needs to be seen as the thread that ties together all the evil influences.” Arnold continues: “In practice Satan exploits the depraved tendencies of the flesh and exercises a measure of control over all levels of a social order.”<sup>16</sup> Forces of darkness intensify the cravings of the flesh, exploit sinful activity in the life of believers as a means of control over a believer’s life, inspire false teachings (and false teachers) among believers, hinder the mission of the church, and sometimes afflict believers with physical ailments. But, as Paul demonstrates in 2 Cor. 12:7 and 1 Cor. 5:1-13, God on occasion uses Satan and his forces in a positive way, either as a providential means to ensure the believer’s continued dependence on God or as a tool for discipline.

Arnold devotes an entire chapter to the subject of “spiritual warfare.”<sup>17</sup> The nature of spiritual warfare, according to Arnold, has to do primarily with Christian conduct and spreading the gospel, not exorcism or eliminating structural evil. He summarizes the essence of spiritual warfare as “resistance” and “proclamation.”<sup>18</sup> In Ephesians 6, Paul lists the weapons of truth and righteousness, stressing the need for believers to cultivate moral integrity and holiness in their lives. A lack of these qualities impedes the Christian’s ability to resist Satan’s host. Paul lists weapons of salvation and the word of God to assure believers of their secure identity in Christ and to remind believers of the importance of the study and understanding of Scripture in engaging in spiritual warfare. These measures are all defensive forms of resistance. But spiritual warfare is also offensive: Christians must wield the “sword” of the Spirit. This is a call to primary aggression through proclamation and spread of the gospel. Finally, prayer is the primary way for gaining access to the power of God in order to wage successful spiritual warfare. This warfare is waged corporately, not individually.<sup>19</sup>

So what is the relationship between the powers, as Arnold interprets them, and structures? Arnold demonstrates a deep-seated aversion to equating the powers with the structures of existence. For Arnold, the two are ontologically distinct, one being personal and the other being nonpersonal. He, therefore,

16. *Ibid.*, 126.

17. For a more detailed treatment of this subject, see Arnold, *3 Crucial Questions about Spiritual Warfare* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1997).

18. Arnold, *Powers of Darkness*, 154.

19. *Ibid.*, 159.

resists the impulse to use Paul's references to the "principalities and powers" as a tool for developing a theology of society. Paul is concerned about individuals' struggle with the powers of darkness. To the extent that Paul's theology can be applied to the structures, it has to do with the realization that it is *people* who control the structures and it is people whose ideas, affections, and activities represent the composite result of structures: "The lesson to be learned from Paul . . . is that Christians should place the primary focus of their energy on changing people. Society can change only to the extent that the hearts of the people are changed."<sup>20</sup> When the evil powers take control of key people they use these people to influence institutions. In sum, the powers influence people, who in turn influence society. Paul's theology, therefore, calls on no one to work toward reforming the social and political order.

Arnold's work stands in the tradition of studies of the powers that seek to move beyond the tendency in Western scholarship to avoid or trivialize the spirit realm.<sup>21</sup> His distance from the demythologizing tendencies of Western scholarship can be summed up under one statement: "The powers of darkness are real, we need to be conscious of their influence, and we need to respond to them appropriately."<sup>22</sup> His work makes a cogent case for the view that we cannot dismiss outright the existence of a spiritual realm inhabited by spiritual forces, at least if we are willing to take the biblical witness seriously. Arnold is also to be commended for situating Paul well within his Jewish milieu and establishing continuity between Paul and his Jewish contemporaries. We may also concur with Arnold that Paul gives Satan and the principalities and powers ontological reality, though, in our view, this does not tell the whole story. Thus, we note that in Arnold's study, the personal interpretation of the powers fails to give an adequate account of the complex view of the powers Paul presents in his letters.

The main deficiency of this approach is that it falls short of offering the church a comprehensive view of the nature and method of the powers, and arming the church with the adequate tools needed to combat the powers. In passing, one has to note that Arnold's target audience is the evangelical

20. *Ibid.*, 217.

21. For other works that view the powers as personal spiritual beings, see J. R. W. Stott, *God's New Society: The Message of Ephesians* (Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1979); P. O'Brien, "Principalities and the Relationship to Structures," *Evangelical Theological Review* 6 (1982): 50–61; R. E. Webber, *The Church in the World: Opposition, Tension, or Transformation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986); G. Williams, *The Spirit World in the Letters of Paul the Apostle: A Critical Examination of the Role of Spiritual Beings in the Authentic Pauline Epistles*, FRLANT (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2009).

22. Arnold, *Powers of Darkness*, 182.

community.<sup>23</sup> And to this extent, his work comes across as a bit idiosyncratic. There are assumed positions in his work not argued for that will be readily accepted only among those who inhabit his symbolic world.<sup>24</sup> For example, Arnold writes that by an extension of Paul's thought, all non-Christian religions of today, including Judaism, are manifestations of the demonic powers.<sup>25</sup> It is questionable, however, whether Paul would have included Judaism under the demonic powers (as in pagan worship). On the one hand, Paul's critique of pagan idolatry is typically Jewish.<sup>26</sup> On the other hand, Paul does on occasion find a point of contact between certain Jewish practices *demanded of gentile converts* and the practices of their pagan past (cf. Gal. 4:1-11; Col. 2:8-23).<sup>27</sup> But this relationship is extremely complex and does not easily translate into Paul saying that Judaism is under the influence of demons. We will not take up here the complex topic of Paul's relationship to Judaism. We note only in passing that increasingly scholars have sensed a more nuanced and extremely complex relationship between Paul and Judaism. Krister Stendahl, for example, has argued that Paul never converted from Judaism,<sup>28</sup> and J. Louis Martyn has argued that in instances where Paul expresses negative views toward Judaism, his statements are neither directed at Jews nor the Jewish cult; rather, Paul was addressing the Jewish-Christians of his congregations.<sup>29</sup> Such findings should cause Arnold to argue for a more nuanced position.

More importantly, however, when it comes to dealing with the varied and complex nature of the work of the powers in the world as Paul sees it—from the bondage of creation to the disintegration of personal lives—Arnold's approach is deeply deficient. Take, for example, Arnold's call for the church to focus on individuals as a means to deal with the powers; he contends that the church's

23. The work contains numerous references to the "evangelical community," "evangelical works," "evangelical thinkers," "evangelical perspective," "evangelical ministers," and so on.

24. In addition to the ensuing discussion, we note Arnold's claim that Jesus' temptation scenes in the Gospels influenced Paul's words on spiritual warfare (Arnold, *Powers of Darkness*, 77); his inclusion of 1 & 2 Timothy and Titus as authentic letters of Paul for his study; and that Paul confirms John's account of Satan's role in Jesus' crucifixion (Arnold, *Powers of Darkness*, 101). These are all claims that require extended treatment.

25. See Arnold, *Powers of Darkness*, 97-98, 131. Arnold is not as cautious here as he is in his article, "Returning to the Domain of the Powers: *Stoicheia* as Evil Spirits in Galatians 4:3, 9," *NovT* 38 (1996): 55-76.

26. See our chapter on Galatians.

27. We discuss this in detail in our chapters on Galatians and Colossians.

28. See K. Stendahl, *Paul among Jews and Gentiles: And Other Essays* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1976); Stendahl, *Final Account: Paul's Letter to the Romans* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995).

29. See J. L. Martyn, *Theological Issues in the Letters of Paul* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1997).



focus should be the individual, because the way to change society is to change one person at a time.<sup>30</sup> Contrary to Arnold's view, Paul has something to say about how structures of human existence can be co-opted by higher powers. And in our view, this helps to account for certain modern phenomena in a way that Arnold's approach does not. We will pick an example from American history to illustrate this point.

In his fine study of the American church's complicity, and inability to deal, with the institution of slavery, Clarence C. Goen points to the church's obsession with converting souls, rather than finding ways to confront the social system (and institutional bondage) of slavery.<sup>31</sup> The church condemned slaveholders as sinners, viewing the conversion of individuals as the surest route to change the social order. Speaking of antislavery evangelicals, Goen writes: "For the most part, they were content to emphasize individual conversion as the most direct way to reach their goal of Christianizing the social order."<sup>32</sup> As more individuals are changed for Christ, so the church thought, society would improve. Yet this approach rarely did much to shake the foundation of slavery.

Goen's study is very instructive for an approach to the powers that views them in purely personal spiritual terms. The only solution for a world wrenched by complex social demonic institutions, in this approach, is "spiritual warfare," and its accompanying attempts at trying to convert one person at a time. But how many people can the church exorcise or convert, and how long will this take? One can only weep for those who are suffering under oppressive structures, who have to wait for desirable structural changes through the conversion of individuals. The truth is that such changes may never come about. The church needs to come to terms with the complex and myriad schemes and methods of the powers. In the end, one wonders if the purely personal interpretation of the powers has not itself succumbed to the "powers" of modern individualism and Romanticism.

As we shall argue below, Paul's account of the powers presents us with comprehensive features of reality, and a purely personal interpretation of the powers is too simplistic to capture adequately Paul's complex presentation of the powers.<sup>33</sup> One, for example, struggles to find a place in this scheme for Paul's

30. See Arnold, *Powers of Darkness*, 217. Cf. O'Brien, "Principalities and the Relationship to Structures," 61: "The Biblical emphasis is that the powers of evil work in and through people, rather than impersonal structures. In speaking of the latter we are inclined to remove any responsibility for action from those who are responsible human agents."

31. C. C. Goen, *Broken Churches, Broken Nation: Denominational Schisms and the Coming of the American Civil War* (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 1985), 141–90.

32. *Ibid.*, 155.

personification of abstract concepts as powers, such as Sin, Death, and the Flesh. We cannot do justice to Paul's presentation of the powers without accounting for personified nouns as powers in Paul.<sup>34</sup> We will take this up in detail in our chapter on Romans. Suffice it to say for now that when the full spectrum of Paul's presentation of the powers is taken into account, we cannot help but acknowledge the all-pervasiveness of the powers and the difficulty involved in categorizing them—a crucial point that the purely personal interpretation fails to bring out. And personification may be a way of acknowledging not only how pervasive and complex the powers are, but also a way to give language to that which defies language and categorization. Personification is very much a part of Paul's theology of the powers, and overlooking this runs the risk of distorting Paul's complex presentation of the powers.

#### RUDOLF BULTMANN: DEMYTHOLOGIZING AND EXISTENTIALIST INTERPRETATION

Rudolf Bultmann's approach to the powers is a reaction against the traditional understanding of the powers embodied in much of Christian history and in such approaches as Clinton Arnold's. Bultmann begins from the assumption that every author can only think and write through the thought forms of his or her time and culture.<sup>35</sup> Consequently, for the gospel to have any meaning in its Hellenistic world, the NT authors had to find terms and concepts with which to make their message intelligible to their world. This they found in Gnosticism, which provided the NT writers with a stock of terminologies and concepts with which to convey their message.<sup>36</sup> Thus, the biblical language of the powers,

33. So also J. M. G. Barclay, "Why the Roman Empire Was Insignificant to Paul," in *Pauline Churches and Diaspora Jews*, WUNT 275 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011), 363–87.

34. Occasional glimpses are found in Arnold's work on Ephesians (*Ephesians: Power and Magic*), but not a developed treatment. Arnold, for example, notes that the Ephesian "dimensional terms" may have parallels in the magical tradition (*Ephesians: Power and Magic*, 90–94): "The dimensional terms seem to appear as spiritual hypostases, but this is uncertain. It is difficult to determine in the magical papyri when an expression for power actually fades into a personalized power."

35. See R. Bultmann, "Is Exegesis without Presuppositions Possible?" in *New Testament and Mythology: And Other Basic Writings*, ed. and trans. Schubert M. Ogden (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 145–53; also Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, 2 vols (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2007 [orig. 1951–55]), 1:164–65; 1:228–32; 1:257–58.

36. See Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, 1:164–83. While Bultmann argues that Christianity and Gnosticism at times combined concepts, he also does note that some differences remained between the two. See *Theology of the New Testament*, 1:168–72.

for Bultmann, is best situated within ancient Jewish apocalypticism and Gnostic redemption myths.<sup>37</sup> Bultmann writes:

It is Gnostic language when Satan is called “the god of this world” (αἰὼνος) (II Cor. 4:4), the “ruler of this world” (Jn. 12:31; 14:30; 16:11), “the prince of the power of the air” (Eph. 2:2), or “the ruler of this Aeon” (Ign. Eph. 19:1). Both in name and meaning “the rulers of this age” who brought “the Lord of glory” to the cross (I Cor. 2:6, 8) are figures of Gnostic mythology—viz. those demonic world-rulers who are also meant by the terms “angels,” “principalities,” “authorities,” “powers” (Rom. 8:38f.; I Cor. 15:24, 26; Col. 1:16; 2:10, 15; Eph. 1:21; 3:10; 6:12; I Pet. 3:22) and are at least included in the “many gods and many lords” of I Cor. 8:4. As in Gnosticism, they are conceived to be in essence star-spirits; as such they are called “elemental spirits of the universe” (Gal. 4:3, 9; cf. Col 2:8, 20) who govern the elapse and division of time (Gal. 4:10). Also Gnostic are the “world rulers of this present darkness” and the “spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places” (i.e. in the region of air, the lower sphere of the firmament, Eph. 6:12).<sup>38</sup>

According to Bultmann, it is gnostic belief that human life in this world is ruled by demonic powers and as such destined for destruction, and the NT authors appropriated this concept and its language. Yet these concepts and terminologies belong to a historical epoch where thought forms had not yet been formed by scientific thinking. The worldview of the biblical writers is best described as “mythical.” Bultmann defines “myth” as “the report of an occurrence or an event in which supernatural, superhuman forces or persons are at work.”<sup>39</sup> Mythical thinking is “the opposite of scientific thinking. It refers certain phenomena and events to supernatural, ‘divine’ powers, whether these are thought of dynamistically or animistically or are represented as personal spirits or gods.”<sup>40</sup> For Bultmann, the advances of science and technology have rendered the biblical world picture obsolete, and no one in the modern era can take seriously the mythological biblical world picture.

37. Bultmann attributes to Jewish apocalypticism the concept of the imminent turn of the ages that puts an end to the old age and ushers in a new age. See Bultmann, “New Testament and Mythology,” in *New Testament and Mythology*, 14–15.

38. Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, 1:173.

39. Bultmann, “On the Problem of Demythologizing,” in *New Testament and Mythology*, 95.

40. Ibid.

Bultmann contends that mythical thinking is opposite to scientific thinking, because mythical thinking proceeds from the assumption that the world is an “open” system, that is, occurrences in the world and personal life of humans can be influenced by the intervention of otherworldly powers. Scientific thinking, on the contrary, views the world and its occurrences as a “closed” continuum of cause and effects; the forces that govern natural processes are embedded within them, and this causal continuum of the world process cannot be disrupted by supernatural powers. Also, scientific thinking has taught us that everything that happens to humans can be attributed to ourselves, and that our existence is a unity not open to the intervention of transcendent powers.<sup>41</sup> All decisions and acts have their motive or cause and consequences, which the historical method seeks to uncover, thereby establishing the entire historical process as a closed unity.

Bultmann notes that myth can have an etiological function, for it may seek to explain extraordinary natural phenomena.<sup>42</sup> Myth also speaks about reality, though in an inadequate way; and it is an objectifying kind of thinking: “Myth objectifies the transcendent into the immanent, and thus also into the disposable.”<sup>43</sup> Myth allows transcendent powers to fit within the human plane and endows these powers with the ability to break through the course of natural occurrences. But the real intention of myth is to give expression to an understanding of human existence. Myths do not aim at presenting an objective world picture; on the contrary, the point of myth is to relate an understanding of humans in existential terms:

What is expressed in myth is the faith that the familiar and disposable world in which we live does not have its ground and aim in itself but that its ground and limit lie beyond all that is familiar and disposable and that this is all constantly threatened and controlled by uncanny powers that are its ground and limit. In unity with this myth also gives expression to the knowledge that we are not lords of ourselves, that we are not only dependent within the familiar world but that we are especially dependent on the powers that hold sway beyond all that is familiar, and that it is precisely in dependence on them that we can become free from the familiar powers.<sup>44</sup>

41. *Ibid.*, 97.

42. *Ibid.*

43. *Ibid.*, 99.

44. Bultmann, “New Testament and Mythology,” 10.

This is the truth that the NT wishes to express using cosmological mythology; and this truth is not bound with, rather is independent of, the NT's mythical worldview. Therefore, in keeping with the real intention of myth, and in light of the fact that modern scientific thinking has "destroyed" the mythical world picture of the Bible, the only way the NT witness can retain its validity in the modern world is for us to "demythologize" it.<sup>45</sup>

Demythologizing not only criticizes the mythical world picture but it also seeks to reveal the real intention of the myth, which is to express a certain understanding of human existence. Thus, demythologizing is "existential interpretation." The NT proclamation that has been presented in mythical terms must be demythologized to disclose the truth of the kerygma that stands behind the myths: "The proclamation of the church refers me to scripture as the place where I will hear something decisive about my existence."<sup>46</sup> The demythologizing interpretation, which strips Scripture of its outmoded world picture, discloses the NT understanding of human existence relevant for our modern era. Thus, for example, when Paul speaks of creation's bondage to the powers in Rom. 8:20-39, Paul is using gnostic cosmological mythology to enable him to convey the truth that perishable creation becomes a "destructive power" whenever humans choose to base their lives on creation rather than God.<sup>47</sup> Paul's relating of the cosmic powers to creation is dependent upon what it means for human existence. The mythological presentation of the powers is not meant to speculate about cosmology. Rather, the mythological language of the powers seeks to articulate a certain understanding of existence:

The spirit powers represent the reality into which man is placed as one full of conflicts and struggle, a reality which threatens and tempts. Thus, through these mythological conceptions the insight is indirectly expressed that man does not have his life in his hand as if he were his own Lord but that he is constantly confronted with the decision of choosing his lord. Beyond this, they also contain the conviction that natural man has always already decided against God, his true Lord, and has let the threatening and tempting world become lord over him.<sup>48</sup>

45. Ibid., 9; "On the Problem of Demythologizing," 99.

46. Bultmann, "On the Problem of Demythologizing," 106.

47. Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, 1:230-31.

48. Ibid., 1:259.

According to Bultmann's demythologizing, the unmythological meanings of the powers are the dangers, tribulations, distresses, and temptations that ultimately threaten the Christian's existence.

Bultmann's work has greatly influenced subsequent scholarship on, and modern understanding of, the powers.<sup>49</sup> While many have sought to dispose of the NT passages dealing with the powers or the entire NT altogether, Bultmann is to be commended for taking the NT message seriously. Bultmann sought to translate the references to the powers and the message of the NT to his modern milieu. His genius lies in the clarity with which he sees the problem. We are all products of our time and culture, and new ways of thinking may require discarding old beliefs and modes of thought. An important implication of Bultmann's insight may be, for example, that our use of modern devices (such as cars, airplanes, microwaves, and so on) means that we all invest scientific materialism and predictability with a certain measure of authority. Thus, if one were suffering from meningitis, for example, one would have to go see a doctor and not first attempt an exorcism.<sup>50</sup>

But Bultmann's approach and solution raise a number of issues. We shall pass over quickly Bultmann's anachronistic appeal to Gnosticism as the appropriate matrix within which to situate the NT conception of the powers. This view hails from mid-twentieth-century German scholarship's fascination with Gnosticism's relation to the NT. The approach has since been largely discredited. There is no evidence of a gnostic Redeemer figure prior to or contemporary with the NT.<sup>51</sup> Thus, appeal to Gnosticism as background for the NT powers runs the risk of imposing thought forms from later centuries onto the NT's message. As we shall see throughout this study, Paul's presentation of the powers is very much at home in Jewish apocalyptic thought.

49. Other scholars who agree that the NT powers must be demythologized are E. Käsemann, "The Eschatological Royal Reign of God," in *Your Kingdom Come: Mission Perspectives. Report on the World Conference on Mission and Evangelism, Melbourne, Australia, 12–25 May, 1980* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1980), 65; G. H. C. MacGregor "Principalities and Powers: The Cosmic Background of Paul's Thought," *NTS* 1 (1954): 17–28; and A. Wilder *Kerygma, Eschatology and Social Ethics* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966). MacGregor and Wilder, while themselves exhibiting a demythologizing tendency, reject Bultmann's mode of demythologizing.

50. We will see how such insight becomes especially salient in our treatment of the powers in the African context in part 3 of this study.

51. See Carsten Colpe's paradigm shifting work, *Die religionsgeschichtliche Schule: Darstellung und Kritik ihres Bildes vom gnostischen Erlösermythus*, FRLANT 78 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1961). Also, E. M. Yamauchi, *Pre-Christian Gnosticism: A Survey of the Proposed Evidences* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973).

We should also raise an objection to Bultmann's dubious claim that scientific theories have rendered belief in supernatural forces and demons incredible for the modern person. One merely has to travel around the world to such continents as Africa, Asia, and Latin America, where indigenous religions and practices take for granted the existence and operation of supernatural forces.<sup>52</sup> And if by "modern man" Bultmann means the modern Westerner, even here his claim cannot be sustained. We only have to point to Hollywood's obsession and success with horror and fantasy films: as of 2012, the Harry Potter film series ranks number one on the highest-grossing film series of all time.<sup>53</sup> A 2008 extensive survey of the U.S. religious landscape by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life found that close to seven in ten Americans (68 percent) believe that angels and demons are active in the world and nearly eight in ten American adults (79 percent) agree that miracles still occur today as in ancient times.<sup>54</sup> It is fair to say that Bultmann's claim is palpably false, and the survey results may suggest to us that reliance on scientific theories does not necessarily rule out belief in the agency of invisible powers.

In addition to the above, we also have to observe the problematic nature—and inconsistency use—of Bultmann's definition of "myth."<sup>55</sup> To define myth as "the report of an occurrence or an event in which supernatural, superhuman forces or persons are at work"<sup>56</sup> is to imply that any talk of the supernatural—which would include symbolical or analogical talk of God—is mythical. To be sure, Bultmann sees God's action in the world as distinct from "wonders." This is because while myths represent divine action as "wonders" disrupting the closed continuum of occurrences in the natural world, God's action, according to Bultmann, takes place "between" occurrences in the world. God's action, therefore, does not disrupt the world's closed continuum since it takes place "in" them.<sup>57</sup> Is Bultmann trying to eat his cake and have it too? Bultmann cannot escape the charge that, by his own definition, any talk of God is mythical; and since Bultmann would not accept the latter claim, a serious tension runs through his work.

52. See our cross-cultural discussion in part 3.

53. See CNBC's "The Highest Grossing Movie Franchises of All Time." Online: [http://www.cnbc.com/id/40259653/The\\_Highest\\_Grossing\\_Movie\\_Franchises\\_of\\_All\\_Time](http://www.cnbc.com/id/40259653/The_Highest_Grossing_Movie_Franchises_of_All_Time).

54. Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, *U.S. Religious Landscape Survey* (2008). Online: <http://religions.pewforum.org/pdf/report2religious-landscape-study-key-findings.pdf>.

55. Cf. R. H. Ayers, "Myth' in Theological Discourse: A Profusion of Confusion," *ATHR* 48 (1966): 200–17, on 206.

56. Bultmann, "On the Problem of Demythologizing," 95.

57. See *ibid.*, 110–12.

In his appropriation of Bultmann's program, Robin Attfield suggests that Bultmann's demythologizing is best applied when "myth involves *notions once symbolic but now obsolete*."<sup>58</sup> To this end, Attfield notes that the concept of God cannot be subjected to demythologization, since "the concept of God . . . is neither obsolete nor reducible into notions of human powers or qualities."<sup>59</sup> It is not clear, however, what criteria should be used to determine which concepts were once symbolic but are now obsolete and which are reducible to human powers or qualities. As our detailed treatment of the powers in subsequent chapters will demonstrate, the language of the powers cannot be reduced to mere symbols for the NT authors. Moreover, some contemporary atheists have argued that science has (or at least should) make belief in God obsolete.<sup>60</sup> Herein lies the challenge of binding the NT message too closely to any worldview. Bultmann is correct in his astute recognition that every author can only think and write through the thought forms inherited from his or her time and culture. Our thoughts, language, and habits are socially constructed; we moderns have been formed by the language and habits of our times and place. Yet one wonders if demythologizing is not too closely bound to a modern scientific worldview and if this does not set up Bultmann's own demythologizing interpretation as a "myth"—albeit a twentieth-century myth, a perspective only possible within his twentieth-century matrix.<sup>61</sup>

The force of the NT proclamation lies in the claim that its message demands an epistemological transformation, and is, therefore, a scandal to all who have not experienced this epistemological transformation. Indeed, Paul's gospel is predicated on the fact that God's apocalyptic invasion of the world has ushered in a new epistemology that is in keeping with the turn of the ages. Paul writes, "From now on, we know no one according to the flesh [κατὰ σάρκα]" (2 Cor. 5:16). Thus, to call the powers "mythical" is to continue to see the world, in Paul's complex theology, κατὰ σάρκα. To attempt to demythologize the powers, then, may be an epistemological failure that fails to come to grips

58. R. Attfield, "On Translating Myth," *The International Journal for the Philosophy of Religion* 2 (1971): 228–45, at 239. Emphasis in the original.

59. Attfield, "On Translating Myth," 240–41.

60. See, for example, V. J. Stenger, *God: The Failed Hypothesis—How Science Shows That God Does Not Exist* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2007); C. Hitchens, *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (New York: Warner 12, 2007); S. Pinker, *The Language Instinct* (New York: W. Morrow and Co., 1994).

61. See Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd rev. ed. (New York: Continuum, 2004 [orig. 1975]).



with the test the powers present to our modern (scientific, common sense) modes of perceiving the world, which could itself be immensely deceiving.<sup>62</sup>

Here Karl Barth's treatment of the powers may be helpful, for while Barth accepts the superiority of modern cosmology over ancient cosmology, Barth detects that the NT writers were less determined by their inherited cosmology than we are by our contemporary worldview.<sup>63</sup> Barth asseverates:

In this matter [i.e. on the subject of the powers] we have one of the not infrequent cases in which it has to be said that not all people, but some to whom a so-called magical view of the world is now ascribed, have in fact, apart from occasional hocuspocus, seen more, seen more clearly, and come much closer to the reality in their thought and speech, than those of us who are happy possessors of a rational and scientific view of things, for whom the resultant clear (but perhaps not wholly clear) distinction between truth and illusion has become almost unconsciously the criterion of all that is possible and real.<sup>64</sup>

For Barth, even if we may label the world picture of the NT authors as "magical," this "magical" world picture did not prevent the NT authors from taking seriously the efficacy of the powers:

It would be better for us if we were to learn again with the same fearlessness and freedom to see and to reckon with the fact that even today we still live in a world that has been basically dedemonized already in Jesus Christ, and will be so fully one day. But in the meantime it still needs a good deal of dedemonizing, because even up to our own time it is largely demon-possessed, possessed, that is, by the existence and lordship of similar or, at times, obviously the same lordless forces which the people of the New Testament knew and which have plainly not been broken or even affected, but in many ways intensified and strengthened, by the fact that our view of the world has since those days become a rational and scientific one.<sup>65</sup>

Thus, for Barth, if we are to undertake a demythologizing, it should not be a demythologizing of the concept of the principalities and powers in the NT, but

62. See Barclay, "Why the Roman Empire Was Insignificant to Paul," 384.

63. See K. Barth, *The Christian Life (Fragment): Church Dogmatics 4.4*, trans. G. W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981) 213–33.

64. *Ibid.*, 216.

65. *Ibid.*, 218.

rather the myths of modern powers. What is needed, according to Barth, is for Scripture to demythologize our modern world picture, not the reverse.

Paul would certainly agree with the latter claim: rather than allowing our worldview to serve as a corrective to the NT, the NT proclamation presents a challenge to every worldview it encounters.<sup>66</sup> The modern scientific worldview has given us the tools to read Scripture critically—and for this we ought to be grateful. But does our critique of Scripture—using modern tools—not drown out Scripture’s critique of us and our world picture? Do we not remain largely oblivious to Scripture’s timeless message to us? In the words of Richard Hays, “We should indeed be suspicious when we read scripture—suspicious of ourselves, whose minds need to be transformed.”<sup>67</sup> For Paul and the NT authors, the power of the Christian proclamation lies in its ability to challenge and provide a corrective to any and every worldview it encounters, including ours.

#### HENDRIK BERKHOF: STRUCTURAL INTERPRETATION OF THE POWERS

If Bultmann’s approach seeks to demythologize the concept of principalities and powers in the NT for our day, there is another approach to the powers that posits that Paul himself attempted to demythologize the concept of the powers of his day. This approach to the principalities and powers identifies the principalities and powers exclusively with structures of human existence. As representative of this approach, we take a look at the work of Hendrik Berkhof.<sup>68</sup> Berkhof formulated his thesis during the period following the devastation of World War II and the nascent years of the Cold War that divided Germany into East and West. These two events profoundly influenced his work, as he and others found strong resonances of the NT’s principalities and powers in the turmoil of those years. The thesis of Berkhof’s work, simply put, is that “the powers *are* the structures.”<sup>69</sup>

To defend his thesis, Berkhof first enumerates passages in the Pauline corpus dealing with the powers. For Berkhof, the various names of the powers suggest their variety of expressions, “the number and diversity of the powers.”<sup>70</sup> Having noted that Paul’s language of the powers must be situated within

66. See E. Acolatse, *Cosmology and Pastoral Diagnoses: A Psycho-Theological Anthropology for Pastoral Counseling in Ghana*, Ph.D. dissertation, Princeton Theological Seminary, 2002 (Ann Arbor, MI: University Microfilms, #3061046), 44–45.

67. R. B. Hays, “A Hermeneutic of Trust,” in *The Conversion of the Imagination: Paul as Interpreter of Israel’s Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 190–201.

68. Hendrik Berkhof, *Christ and the Powers* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1977 [orig. 1953]).

69. *Ibid.*, 21.

70. *Ibid.*, 15.

Jewish apocalyptic writings as the clear background to Paul's doctrine on the powers, Berkhof discerns that Paul on occasion classifies the angelic names of the powers with other nouns that do not designate spiritual beings (Rom. 8:38-39).<sup>71</sup> On other occasions, Berkhof avers, in discussion of the powers, Paul drops out the angelic names, opting instead for the names of experienced realities. Citing 1 Cor. 3:22, he writes: "It is clear that these entities [world, life, death, present, future] are not at all thought of as persons, much less as angels."<sup>72</sup> Paul, according to Berkhof, also relates the powers to human history (1 Cor. 2:8); in and behind "the rulers of this age"—the visible, human authorities—Paul sees invisible powers at work. And, finally, in Colossians 2 and Gal. 4:1-11, Berkhof argues that Paul's mention of the *stoicheia* locates the manifestation of the powers within human traditions. All these prove, for Berkhof, that the powers are the structures of human existence that rule over human life: the state, politics, class, social struggle, national interest, public opinion, accepted morality, the ideas of decency, humanity, democracy.<sup>73</sup> By his cross, Christ has exposed and disarmed the quasi-divine authorities of the structures; and apart from Christ humans are at the mercy of these powers.<sup>74</sup>

Paul, then, adopted Jewish apocalyptic terminology for the powers, but gave this terminology a content different from what it normally meant in his context. Paul, in essence, unlike the apocalypticists who thought of the powers as angelic heavenly beings, demythologized the powers: "In comparison to the apocalypses a certain 'demythologising' has taken place in Paul's thought. In short, the apocalypses think primarily of the principalities and powers as heavenly angels; Paul sees them as structures of earthly existence."<sup>75</sup> Paul discovered various ways in which people are held in bondage. Paul appropriates familiar names for superterrestrial powers only to give expression to the myriad forms and weight of such bondage.

Citing Col. 1:15-17, Berkhof argues that the powers are not evil in themselves: "From their very creation, by their very nature, they were 'made to measure' to serve as instruments of [God's] love."<sup>76</sup> The powers, for Berkhof, were initially created to be the link between God's love and visible human experience; the structures were intended to give order to human life. Diverse human traditions (ethics, religious rules, the state) are not evil in themselves;

71. *Ibid.*, 18-19.

72. *Ibid.*, 19.

73. *Ibid.*, 32.

74. *Ibid.*, 21-22.

75. *Ibid.*, 23.

76. *Ibid.*, 28.

they protect human life and creation from chaos. But the powers have fallen; bound by sin, the powers now act in diametric opposition to God. While the powers fulfill half their divinely fixed function (that is, give order to human life and society), they also in the process prevent people from serving God. The task of the Christian is not to strive against the powers, but to work for their God-intended purpose to be realized. Christ has disarmed the powers in the cross, yet the battle with the powers continues; the church battles to make the powers instruments of God's purpose. "Christianizing" the powers would make the powers fulfill their God-intended functions: provide aid, give direction to human life as children of God and neighbor, spread resources to serve mankind, pass legislation that serves God's purpose, and so on.<sup>77</sup>

It was in the cross that Christ disarmed the powers; and whenever the cross is proclaimed the unmasking and disarming of the powers takes place. In the end, God's plan includes the redemption of the powers; God intends to reconcile the powers to himself under the lordship of Christ (Col. 1:19). Until that time when the powers are reconciled to God, the church is caught between the "already and not yet,"<sup>78</sup> that place where a limitation is placed on the powers. Whenever the church proclaims Christ she sets a limit on the work of the powers, a limitation that is a portent of their ultimate defeat.

Berkhof's study and other structural interpretations of the powers are helpful for a church that needs to come to grips with the social and structural nature of sin and evil.<sup>79</sup> Locating the powers within the structures that determine human life cautions the church to evaluate how much its own way of life has been shaped by, and sometimes even constitutes a perpetuation of, oppressive structures. There are problems, however, with this approach. We may note the greatest flaw in this approach with a reverse formulation of Berkhof's thesis: the powers are *not* the structures for Paul. To equate the powers with structures of human existence is to fundamentally misread Paul. In a critique of the recent rise of scholarly interests in imperial readings of Paul, John Barclay correctly notes that, for Paul, the powers operate simultaneously

77. *Ibid.*, 53–70.

78. *Ibid.*, 43.

79. For other structural interpretations of the powers see E. G. Rupp, *Principalities and Powers: Studies in the Christian Conflict in History* (London: Epworth, 1952); G. B. Caird, *The Language and Imagery of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1980), 242; Caird, *Principalities and Powers: A Study in Pauline Theology* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2003 [orig. 1956]); M. Barth, *The Broken Wall: A Study of Ephesians* (Valley Forge: Judson, 1959); W. Stringfellow, *Free in Obedience* (New York: Seabury, 1964); R. J. Sider, "Christ and Power," *IRM* 69 (1980): 8–20; J. H. Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 134–62.

across all levels—individual, social, political, and cosmic.<sup>80</sup> Thus, the structures of human existence do not themselves constitute the powers, neither are they even one of the powers; but they may be co-opted by higher powers—divine or demonic. Take, for example, Paul’s own treatment of the political structures in his letters—and here we cannot be deaf to the cacophony of research on the political dimensions of Paul’s theology.<sup>81</sup> We do not think that Paul’s theology is apolitical; on the contrary, Paul’s theology has serious political implications. Nonetheless, we cannot include the political structures in our study of the principalities and powers, since Paul’s complex theology on the powers denies the political authorities any significance in what Barclay has termed the cosmic drama of history.<sup>82</sup>

Barclay, in his critique of the “Paul and Empire” coalition, is correct to point out that Paul does not name any of the Roman emperors or governors in his letters;<sup>83</sup> nor does he make any special references to the imperial cult.<sup>84</sup> And while it was common knowledge that crucifixion was a Roman punishment, Paul does not attribute the crucifixion of Jesus to Rome; rather, he attributes it to “the rulers of this age” (1 Cor. 2:6–8). We should note that Barclay almost undermines his own position by interpreting “the rulers of this age” as nameless and generalized human authorities. Indeed, it seems to us almost impossible to posit that the Roman Empire “was insignificant to Paul” if Paul had attributed to human rulers the full weight of the title “the rulers of *this age*.”

80. Barclay, “Why the Roman Empire Was Insignificant to Paul,” 383–84. Barclay, however, does not deal fully with the concept of principalities and powers in Paul. His arguments are also mainly directed toward N. T. Wright.

81. The literature is immense. See, for example, R. A. Horsley, ed., *Paul and Empire: Religion and Power in Roman Imperial Society* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1997); Horsley, ed., *Paul and Politics: Ekklēsia, Israel, Imperium, Interpretatio: Essays in Honor of Krister Stendahl* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2000); Horsley, ed., *Paul and the Roman Imperial Order* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2004); N. Elliot, *Liberating Paul: The Justice of God and the Politics of the Apostle* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1994); Elliot, *The Arrogance of Nations: Reading Romans in the Shadow of Empire* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008); J. D. Crossan and J. L. Reed, *In Search of Paul: How Jesus’ Apostle Opposed Rome’s Empire with God’s Kingdom* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2004); B. J. Walsh and S. C. Keesmaat, *Colossians Remixed: Subverting the Empire* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004); N. T. Wright, “Paul and Caesar: A New Reading of Romans,” in *A Royal Priesthood? The Use of the Bible Ethically and Politically*, ed. C. Bartholomew et al. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 173–93; Wright, *Paul: in Fresh Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 59–79.

82. Our analysis here is in large part in agreement with Barclay’s argument against the Paul and Empire coalition (“Why the Roman Empire Was Insignificant to Paul,” 363–87).

83. Paul makes reference to the “governor under King Aretas” of Damascus in 2 Cor. 11:32; but this mention is part of an autobiographical sketch.

84. Barclay, “Why the Roman Empire Was Insignificant to Paul,” 374–75.

Nonetheless, Barclay's main contention is correct; and, in our view, nowhere is this more apparent than Paul's attribution of Christ's crucifixion to "the rulers of this age"—more pervasive, more powerful, spiritual forces operating on the cosmic scene.<sup>85</sup> The rulers of this age, Paul contends, crucified the Lord of glory (1 Cor. 2:8). This is a profound theological claim—one that perceives the religio-political context through an interpretive framework in which the political authorities are not the main actors in the cosmic drama of history. The political structures can be co-opted by higher powers—divine or demonic. Thus, to the extent that the work of the political authorities is discerned as aligning with God's purposes, then the political rulers can be identified as functioning as servants of God in those instances (Rom. 13:1-7). But when their work is discerned as lining up against God's will, then the political authorities must be unmasked as operating within the ranks of the powers of darkness. Paul's theology cautions us to desist from viewing the political structures as inherently evil, for they can at times serve as God's messengers. What is important to recognize is that Paul refuses to name the political structures among the classes of the principalities and powers, because their agency is subordinate and derived. As such, to equate the powers with the political structures would be to assign these human structures too much significance—far more than their due.

In addition, Berkhof's position, which requires Paul to demythologize the conception of the powers he had inherited from his Jewish tradition, raises the issue of continuity and discontinuity between Paul and early Judaism and early Christianity. Not many scholars, to my knowledge, would argue against the view that Jewish literature before Paul was characterized by a worldview that believed in an evil figure (Satan, Mastema, Belial, Beliar) and his demons in opposition to God's work and his angels.<sup>86</sup> Berkhof himself acknowledges this much: "[Paul's] terminology [of the powers] points us most clearly to . . . Jewish apocalyptic writings . . . Two things were always true of the Powers [found in the apocalyptic and rabbinic writings]: (1) they are personal, spiritual beings and (2) they influence events on earth, especially events within nature."<sup>87</sup> It is also the case that the NT authors—writing after Paul—often speak of the devil (or Satan), and evil spirits, with a will and intellect, actively opposing God's work and God's people.<sup>88</sup> In addition, later Christians (writing

85. See our chapter on 1 & 2 Corinthians for a detailed treatment of 1 Cor. 2:6-8.

86. For a study of Jewish literature in the period before and after Paul, see George W. E. Nickelsburg, *Jewish Literature between the Bible and the Mishnah: A Historical and Literary Introduction*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005).

87. Berkhof, *Christ and the Powers*, 17.

in the patristic period) were no different in viewing the devil and his minions as actively opposed to Christ's work.<sup>89</sup> Thus, the evidence unambiguously indicates that Paul inherited a tradition that viewed Satan and his evil cohorts as spiritual beings with will, intellect, and power to harm humans and oppose God's work. As a result, any view that makes Paul the only NT author to "demythologize" the powers, while it may highlight the distinctiveness of Paul, overstates the discontinuity between Paul and the Jewish tradition within which he stood and the Christian movement that came before and after him. Such deep discontinuity is unwarranted. At the root of this misconception is the anachronistic use of the term "demythologizing." This is a defective category that should not be applied to Paul. What Berkhof may be trying to characterize by his use of "demythologizing" may be the literary personifications in Paul's letters.<sup>90</sup> As we shall see later in this study, even in this move Paul is not unique but has Jewish predecessors.

#### WALTER WINK: INVISIBLE INTERIORITY OF MATERIAL AND OUTER MATERIALITY

Walter Wink, with his *Powers* trilogy, offers the most extensive investigation of the powers vocabulary and concept in the NT.<sup>91</sup> Wink sees his work as a "pilgrimage away" from the demythologizing perspectives on the powers that preceded his work. *Naming the Powers* develops the thesis that the powers consist of an outer manifestation and inner spirituality or interiority. Wink lays out some preliminary hypotheses about the powers:

1. The language of power pervades the whole New Testament.
2. The language of power in the New Testament is imprecise, liquid,

88. See, for example, the Gospel accounts of the temptation (Matt. 4:1-11 par.); also Matt. 12:26; 25:41; Mark 1:13; 3:26; 5:2; 7:25; Luke 8:12; John 13:2; James 4:7; 1 Pet. 5:8; 1 John 3:8; Rev. 12:9, etc. See J. B. Russell, *The Devil: Perceptions of Evil from Antiquity to Primitive Christianity* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1977); G. Twelftree, *Christ Triumphant: Exorcism Then and Now* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1985).

89. See J. B. Russell, *Satan: The Early Christian Tradition* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1981).

90. Cf. Berkhof, *Christ and the Powers*, 24: "One can even doubt whether Paul conceived of the powers as personal beings. In any case this aspect is so secondary that it makes little difference whether he did or not. He may be using personifications." Cf. 1 Cor. 5:5; 7:5; 2 Cor. 2:11; 11:14; 1 Thess. 2:18.

91. W. Wink, *Naming the Powers: The Language of the Powers in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984); Wink, *Unmasking the Powers: The Invisible Forces That Determine Human Existence* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986); Wink, *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992). See also Wink, *When the Powers Fall* (Minneapolis: Augsburg-Fortress Press, 1998); *The Powers That Be* (New York: Doubleday, 1999).

interchangeable, and unsystematic.

3. Despite all this imprecision and interchangeability, clear patterns of usage emerge.
4. Because these terms are to a degree interchangeable, one or a pair or a series can be made to represent them all.
5. These powers are both heavenly and earthly, divine and human, spiritual and political, invisible and structural.
6. These powers are also both good and evil.<sup>92</sup>

Wink, then, provides a very helpful analysis of the vocabulary of the powers in the NT: ἀρχή and ἄρχων; ἐξουσία; δύναμις; θρόνος; κυριότης; ὄνομα; angels; fallen angels, evil spirits, and demons; angels of the nations. This analysis arms Wink with the clues needed to add a further observation about the powers to the six preliminary hypotheses above:

7. Unless the context further specifies . . . we are to take the terms for power in their most comprehensive sense, understanding them to mean both heavenly and earthly, divine and human, good and evil powers.<sup>93</sup>

For Wink, the above observation serves as the key to unravel the puzzle of “disputed” NT passages on the powers (1 Cor. 2:6–8; Rom. 13:1–3; Rom. 8:38–39; 1 Cor. 15:24–27a; Col. 2:13–15; Eph. 1:20–23; Col. 1:16; Col. 2:9–10; Eph. 2:1–2; Eph. 6:12; Eph. 3:10). The powers, according to Wink, must be viewed as having a dual aspect: an outer, visible form *and* an inner, invisible spirit. Any other conclusion about the powers is inconsistent with their comprehensive portrayal in Scripture. Thus he rejects studies like that of Oscar Cullman’s,<sup>94</sup> which views the powers as both earthly and heavenly, as too imprecise. For Wink, the powers cannot represent two distinct agents, human or institutional and divine or demonic: “*The Powers are simultaneously the outer and inner aspects of one and the same indivisible concretion of power.*”<sup>95</sup> The powers have no separate spiritual existence apart from reference to the material or earthly reality. The powers are like a mob spirit, which comes into being in the moment a crowd gathers and vanishes when the crowd disperses. Similarly, no spiritual reality exists at any moment in time without a material embodiment.

92. Wink, *Naming the Powers*, 7–12.

93. *Ibid.*, 39.

94. See Cullman, *Christ and Time*.

95. Wink, *Naming the Powers*, 107; emphasis in the original.



The second book in the *Powers* trilogy, *Unmasking the Powers*, builds on the thesis argued in *Naming the Powers* through a detailed investigation of seven of the powers mentioned in the first volume:

1. Satan—the actual power that coagulates around injustice, idolatry, or inhumanity. This power increases or decreases depending on collective choices.<sup>96</sup>
2. Demons—the psychic or spiritual power emanated by subspects of individuals or organizations. The energy of these powers seeks to subdue others.<sup>97</sup>
3. Angels of churches—the actual inner spirituality of a congregation as an entity, existing in, with, and under the material expressions of the church’s life.<sup>98</sup>
4. Angels of nations—the actual invisible spirituality of a social entity or state that guides, sustains, and animates a nation.<sup>99</sup>
5. Gods—the very real archetype or ideological structures that govern or determine reality and the human brain.<sup>100</sup>
6. Elements of the universe—the invariances (or “laws”) which, though many a time idolized by humans, preserve the self-consistency of each level of reality in its harmonious interrelationship with every other level and the Whole.<sup>101</sup>
7. Angels of nature—the patterning of physical things, the whole God-glorifying, visible universe.<sup>102</sup>

All these “powers” represent the invisible interiority of reality, and are forces that determine physical, psychic, and social existence.<sup>103</sup> In this respect, Wink proceeds with a functionalist approach. The functionalist approach identifies the “experiences” that the NT cosmology names. When these experiences named in the NT are recovered (the personal and social phenomena that transcend conscious grasp yet determine human existence), they give us the language to name our own experiences in our modern scientific milieu—experiences that materialism renders inexpressible.

96. Wink, *Unmasking the Powers*, 9–40.

97. *Ibid.*, 41–68.

98. *Ibid.*, 69–86.

99. *Ibid.*, 87–107.

100. *Ibid.*, 108–27.

101. *Ibid.*, 128–52.

102. *Ibid.*, 153–71.

103. The third book in the trilogy, *Engaging the Powers*, focuses on the more visible, institutionalized forms of the powers.

Wink's analysis of the "powers" terminology and passages in the NT is extremely valuable. Wink makes a convincing case that we cannot completely ignore or reject the spiritual dimension of existence. Of course, Wink's view, like Berkhof's interpretation of the powers, proceeds with the assumption that Paul took steps to "demythologize" the powers. Yet Wink brings a certain level of sophistication to an understanding of the powers as structures (or outer materialities) of human existence. He seeks to be both faithful to the ancient context of these texts and accessible and relevant to a modern context shaped by a worldview of scientific materialism. Wink is also to be commended for challenging our modern obsession with materiality. Henceforth, every work that addresses the biblical concept of the powers must grapple with Wink's provocative thesis.

Nonetheless, some of Wink's views are questionable. First, Wink does not give sufficient attention to or refutation of the view that the authors of the NT viewed the powers as spiritual forces with intellect and will, whose actions affect human life on earth.<sup>104</sup> To be sure, Wink sees himself as following the lead of Paul, who, for Wink, makes an important leap toward "depersonalizing"<sup>105</sup> the powers.<sup>106</sup> Yet is Wink's detection of Paul's attempt to "depersonalize" the powers not at the same time an implicit acknowledgement that Paul's contemporaries and predecessors viewed the powers as personal spiritual beings? If so, then how do Paul and the NT authors continue or discontinue this tradition? Wink's study has not armed us with the tools necessary to understand why and how the NT authors conceived of the powers differently from the commonly held belief of their contemporaries.

Second, in his treatment of the language of the powers, Wink's fourth hypothesis that the names of the powers are to a degree interchangeable,<sup>107</sup> so that one or a pair or a series can be made to represent them all, seems untenable. There are some differences between the NT's usage of terms such as ἐξουσία,

104. See, for example, John R. W. Stott, *God's New Society: The Message of Ephesians* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1979), 263–67.

105. Wink, *Naming the Powers*, 104.

106. This seems to us a confusion about personification. See our chapter on Romans for detailed discussion.

107. To my knowledge, this point was first made by H. Schlier. Cf. Schlier, *Principalities and Powers in the New Testament* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1961), 14–15: "Examination shows that the names given to the powers of evil are, to a large extent, interchangeable. Naturally, certain New Testament writers favour one name rather than another: we all know that the Synoptic Gospels usually speak of Satan, the devil, demons or spirits; St. Paul often uses the names principalities, powers, or virtues, while the Gospel of St. John prefers to speak of the prince of this world. But these names are not mutually exclusive; they are freely interchangeable."

θρόνοι, σατανᾶς, δαιμόνιον, and ἄγγελος.<sup>108</sup> Ἄγγελος, for example, receives an ambiguous treatment in the letters of Paul. On the one hand, Paul knows of good angels; he can, therefore, speak of an angel of light (2 Cor. 11:14), an angel of God (Gal. 4:14; cf. 3:19),<sup>109</sup> and mighty angels of heaven with Christ (2 Thess. 1:7; cf. Gal. 1:8).<sup>110</sup> But, on the other hand, Paul knows of an angel of Satan (ἄγγελος σατανᾶ; 2 Cor. 12:7)<sup>111</sup> and he includes angels in the list of “powers” attempting to separate believers from the love of God (Rom. 8:38). On other occasions, angels seem to be morally neutral in Paul; for example, in 1 Cor. 4:9, 6:3, 11:10 it is not clear whether the angels are good or evil. Paul’s usage of terms like σατανᾶς and δαιμόνιον, however, contains no such ambiguity; Satan and demons are always evil entities in Paul—even if God can on occasion use them to serve his purposes (Rom. 16:20; 1 Cor. 5:5; 7:5; 10:20, 21; 2 Cor. 2:11; 11:14; 12:7; 1 Thess. 2:18; 2 Thess. 2:9). Thus, Wink’s suggestion that all the terms for the powers can be used interchangeably cannot be correct.

Finally, can the view that the spiritual and physical aspects of the powers are always *simultaneously* present and indivisible survive scrutiny? Is Wink correct in his assertion that when ancient writers employed the language of the powers they always meant this indivisible unity between matter and spirit? Evidence from the early period seems to suggest otherwise. Early Jewish literature, for example, took for granted the existence of a spiritual realm that is independent of the natural. These writings perceived a natural order in the universe that demanded a certain pattern of life, one of the chief tenets of which was the preservation of the sexual boundaries between heavenly and earthly beings. An example of this view is found in a passage in the *Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs*:

Sun, moon and stars do not alter their order; thus you should not alter the Law of God by the disorder of your actions. The gentiles, because they wandered astray and forsook the Lord, have changed the order, and have devoted themselves to stones and sticks, patterning themselves after wandering spirits. But you, my children, shall not be like that: in the firmament, in the earth, and in the sea, in all the products of his workmanship discern the Lord who made all

108. So also Marva J. Dawn, *Powers, Weakness, and the Tabernacling of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans), 14.

109. We devote adequate attention to Gal. 3:19 in our chapter on Galatians.

110. Cf. 1 Cor. 13:1; 2 Thess. 1:7.

111. It is also possible that this verse should be rendered as “messenger of Satan.”

things, so that you do not become like Sodom, which departed from the order of nature. Likewise the *Watchers departed from nature's order*; the Lord pronounced a curse on them at the Flood. On their account he ordered that the earth be without dweller or produce. (*T. Naph.* 3:2-5; emphasis mine)<sup>112</sup>

The sin of the Watchers was that they transgressed the natural boundaries between earth and heaven by having unnatural intercourse with women.<sup>113</sup> In traditions about this story, the result of this unnatural union was the release of a host of evil demons who plagued humanity (*Jub.* 7:20-28; 10:1-6; *1 En.* 6-15). That the origins of a devastated world should be attributed to a transgression of the boundaries between the heavenly and the earthly speaks to the fact that ancient writers held to a worldview that distinguished a spiritual, heavenly realm beyond the earthly realm. It also shows that they held this distinction to be sacred. We cannot exaggerate this distinction for the ancients; but we cannot obliterate the distinction either.

In the end, despite his constant castigation of the modern materialistic worldview, Wink's conflation of the spiritual with the material evinces an attempt to accommodate the ancient and biblical worldview to modern ideological assumptions. One wonders whether Wink has offered us exegesis of the biblical and ancient texts or a concession to the "powers" of modern materialism and psychology.

To summarize our discussion thus far, we have looked at four distinct approaches to the powers embodied in the works of Arnold, Bultmann, Berkhof, and Wink. The strength of Arnold's approach is that it takes seriously the existence of the reality of spiritual entities for Paul and early Jewish and Christian writers. But this purely personal interpretation of the powers cannot account for the complex presentation of the powers in Paul; and it offers very few resources for dealing with the structural nature of evil. Bultmann also accepts the fact that the early Christian writers believed in the existence of spiritual entities; but he dismisses this belief as "mythical." Bultmann is wrong exegetically to posit a gnostic background for the NT language of the powers; and his own demythologizing interpretation is too closely bound to his own worldview, thereby making him oblivious to the challenge the powers pose to our modern myths. Berkhof's structural interpretation of the powers may help us to wrestle with the nature of structural evil, but whereas Bultmann clearly recognizes the difference between Paul's worldview and his own, Berkhof

112. Translation by H. C. Kee in *OTP* 1\*812.

113. Cf. *T. Ren.* 5:6; 2 Pet. 2:4; Jude 6.

anachronistically projects his own worldview back onto Paul. Thus, Berkhof introduces a confusion between exegesis and hermeneutics.<sup>114</sup> Finally, Wink's approach is a more nuanced formulation of the structural interpretation of the powers, attributing to the structures an inner spirituality. But Wink's position is fundamentally damaged by his misguided assumption that ancient writers could not conceive of a spiritual realm that is independent of the physical realm.

In the next chapter we propose "practice" as an important category with which to understand Paul's principalities and powers. It is our contention that Paul's conception of the principalities and powers is unintelligible without a developed account of the practices of the Pauline congregations. Thus, in part 2 of this work we will give a detailed study of the practices Paul recommends for engaging the principalities and powers in the early believing communities.

114. I am grateful to Richard Hays for this formulation.