
Introduction

Since World War I and II many scholars have argued for a recovery of the biblical concept classified under the rubric “principalities and powers.”¹ The horrors of these wars and the catastrophic events in the years surrounding the wars forced the language of “principalities and powers” upon those who were attempting to find explanations for what many deemed to be beyond modern psychological analysis.² People saw destructive forces behind these horrific events.³ Nonetheless, while scholars agree that the concept of the

1. Karl Barth’s *Rechtfertigung und Recht* (1938) was one of the pioneering works in this area (*ET Church and State*, trans. Ronald Howe [London: Student Christian Movement, 1939]). As noted by Marva J. Dawn, Barth’s work was preceded by the works of Johann Christoph Blumhardt and Christoph Friedrich Blumhardt; see Dawn, *Powers, Weakness, and the Tabernacling of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 1–5. Blumhardt’s biography is narrated by F. Zuendel, *The Awakenings: One Man’s Battle with Darkness* (Farmington, PA: Plough Publishing House, 1999). See also W. A. Visser’t Hooft, *The Kingship of Christ: An Interpretation of Recent European Theology* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1948), 15–31.

2. Among the works that issued in this period, we mention the following: Hooft, *Kingship of Christ*; O. Cullman, *Christ and Time: The Primitive Christian Conception of Time and History* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1950); J. S. Stewart, “On a Neglected Emphasis in New Testament Theology,” *SJT* 4 (1951): 292–301; G. H. C. MacGregor, “Principalities and Powers: The Cosmic Background of Paul’s Thought,” *NTS* 1 (1954): 17–28; E. G. Rupp, *Principalities and Powers: Studies in the Christian Conflict in History* (London: Epworth, 1952); H. Berkhof, *Christ and the Powers* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1977 [orig. 1953]); G. B. Caird, *Principalities and Powers: A Study in Pauline Theology* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2003 [orig. 1956]); D. E. H. Whitley, *The Theology of Saint Paul* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1964) 18–80; A. N. Wilder, *Kerygma, Eschatology and Social Ethics* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966).

3. In his lecture, “The Church is Dead,” delivered on August 29, 1932, Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote: “How can one close one’s eyes at the fact that the demons themselves have taken over the rule of the world, that it is the powers of darkness who have here made an awful conspiracy and could break out at any moment?—How could one think that these demons could be driven out, these powers annihilated with a bit of education in international understanding, with a bit of goodwill?” (*A Testament to Freedom: The Essential Writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, rev. ed., ed. G. B. Kelly and F. B. Nelson [San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1995] 104).

powers is crucial for understanding the theology of the NT, there is little agreement on how to interpret the powers. How are we to interpret Paul's language of ἐξουσίαι ("authorities";⁴ 1 Cor. 15:24; Col. 1:13, 16; 2:10, 15; cf. Eph. 1:21; 2:2; 3:10; 6:12), δυνάμεις ("powers"; Rom. 8:38; 1 Cor. 15:24; cf. Eph. 1:21), κυριότητες ("lordships"; Col 1:16; cf. Eph. 1:21), θρόνοι ("thrones"; Col. 1:16), ἄγγελοι ("angels"; Rom. 8:38; 1 Cor. 4:9; 6:3; 11:10; 13:1; 2 Cor. 11:14; 12:7; Gal. 1:8; 3:19; 4:14; Col. 2:18; 2 Thess. 1:7), δαιμόνια ("demons"; 1 Cor. 10:20-21), στοιχεῖα ("elements"; Gal. 4:3, 9; Col. 2:8, 20), ἀρχαί ("principalities"; Rom. 8:38; 1 Cor. 15:24; Col. 1:16, 18; 2:10, 15; cf. Eph. 1:21; 3:10; 6:12), ἄρχοντες ("rulers"; Rom. 13:3; 1 Cor. 2:6, 8; cf. Eph. 2:2), σατανᾶς ("Satan"; Rom. 16:20; 1 Cor. 5:5; 7:5; 2 Cor. 2:11; 11:14; 12:7; 1 Thess. 2:18; 2 Thess. 2:9), Βελιάρ ("Beliar"; 2 Cor. 6:15), ἀμαρτία ("sin"; Rom. 5-8 [e.g., 5:21, 6:6, 6:12, 7:11, 7:13, 8:2]), θάνατος ("death"; Rom 5-8 [e.g., 5:12, 5:14, 6:9, 8:2, 8:38]; 1 Cor. 15:26, 54-56), σὰρξ ("flesh"; Rom 7:5, 18, 25; 8:4-9; 8:12-13; 13:14; Gal. 3:3; 5:13, 16, 17, 19; 6:8)? Can we relegate the NT conception of the powers to primitive myths (and what are the implications of such a move)? Is there a way to bridge the hermeneutical gap between the NT and early church's conception of the powers and modern critical approaches to Scripture?

These are very difficult questions. In order to be able to address these difficult questions and to chart a possible way forward, it is essential to look at a representative cross-section of approaches to the NT language of the powers throughout the last half-century. By critically engaging the various approaches, we can gain a sense of the strengths and pitfalls of each approach and what is at stake when we choose to embrace a particular approach. Such an analysis will in turn help us to articulate better our own view concerning the powers. Thus, we begin our study with a survey of four modern interpreters of the principalities and powers: Clinton Arnold, Rudolf Bultmann, Hendrik Berkhof, and Walter Wink. Each of these scholars represents for us a distinct model for understanding the powers. Arnold's approach to the powers attempts to recover the traditional premodern Christian belief in the existence of evil supernatural beings. This approach takes seriously the "real" existence of a spiritual realm of demons ruled by a figure named Satan. It is this first approach that Bultmann seeks to reinterpret. Bultmann argues that the biblical language of the powers belongs to a historical epoch where thought forms had not yet been shaped by scientific thinking. Thus, the only way to make the "mythical" mode of thinking relevant for the modern era is to "demythologize" it.

A third approach, exemplified in the work of Berkhof, argues that the NT writers themselves, Paul in particular, attempted to demythologize the

4. All translations in this work are our own, unless otherwise indicated.

prevailing view of the powers (that is, the view that the powers are personal spiritual beings). This third approach to the powers identifies the powers exclusively with structures of human existence. A fourth approach is proffered by Wink, who argues that the powers are the invisible interiority of inner and outer materiality. Wink argues that the physical and spiritual aspects of the powers are always simultaneously present. While these four approaches may not be exhaustive, other proposals on how to interpret the powers largely fit within one of these approaches, though with some variation and exegetical disagreements. We will note these throughout our study. In part 1 of this work, we present these models in detail and critically engage each model. We will offer some suggestions on how to best understand the principalities and powers in Paul.

The main contribution of this study is to offer “practice” as a category for understanding the powers in Paul. To a certain extent, this study hopes to move beyond modernity’s unfortunate dichotomy between theory and practice, or understanding and application. The study approaches Paul’s view of the powers through investigating the actual practices that Paul recommended to the early Christian congregations in his letters. We do not begin by asking what Paul or his contemporaries may have believed about the powers or a spirit world; rather, this study proceeds from the assumption that Paul’s conception of the powers is unintelligible without a developed account of the practices he advocated for the early believers.

Thus, we offer a definition of what we have labeled as “practices of power” that will guide our investigation: *practices of power are either activities that guard believers from the dominion of the powers, or activities that expose believers and unbelievers to the dominion of the powers.* Paul advocated certain practices for believers that will shield them from the principalities and powers. There were also certain practices that, if adopted by believers, would make them vulnerable to the powers. We will draw on two contemporary accounts of practices—in the writings of Alasdair MacIntyre and Pierre Bourdieu—to contribute to a practical understanding of Paul’s theology of the powers. In part 2 of this work, we will investigate the Pauline letters in canonical order (Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, and Colossians) to identify these practices. In part 3 of this work we hope to bring a cross-cultural perspective to this study by considering how African traditional beliefs and practices shape the interpretation of the NT language of the powers in the African context.

Finally, we should mention upfront our decision to include Colossians and 2 Thessalonians in the Pauline evidence presented in this work. While we remain open to the possibility that these letters might be pseudonymous,

the evidence for pseudonymity of these two letters remains, in our view, inconclusive.⁵ Any treatment of Paul's conception of the powers that excludes these letters will be deficient. While we do not devote an entire chapter to 2 Thessalonians, we should note that the 2 Thess. 2:1-12 presents an apocalyptic worldview that is consistent with what we encounter in the undisputed letters of Paul. This letter presents a conflict that is cosmic in scope: Satan and his minion line up on the other side of the battlefield against God. The conflict involves a rebellion and the revelation (ἀποκάλυψις) of "the lawless one," who is destined for destruction (2 Thess. 2:3). The lawless one is an ambassador for Satan (2:9). Satan (σατανᾶς) uses all power (δύναμις), signs, false wonders (τέρασιν ψεύδους), and wicked deception (ἀπάτη ἀδικίας) on those who are perishing (τοῖς ἀπολλυμένοις), because they refused to love the truth (ἀλήθεια) (2 Thess. 2:9-10).

Satan's deceptive work will be noted throughout this study. For now, we observe that the apocalyptic concept presented in 2 Thessalonians 2 is analogous to Paul's arguments in 2 Corinthians 4 and 11.⁶ In 2 Corinthians 4, Paul asserts that the gospel is veiled to those who are perishing (τοῖς ἀπολλυμένοις), because the "god of this age" has blinded the minds of unbelievers to the light (truth [ἀλήθεια; 2 Cor. 4:2]) of the gospel of glory (2 Cor 4:4). In 2 Corinthians 11, just as Satan (σατανᾶς) masquerades as an angel of light (2 Cor. 11:14), so also Satan's servants—the false apostles (ψευδαπόστολοι) and deceitful workers—are masquerading as apostles of Christ (2 Cor. 11:13). And just as the serpent deceived (ἐξαπατάω) Eve in the garden, so also these false apostles are leading believers astray (2 Cor. 11:3).

According to 2 Thessalonians, at the manifestation of his coming the Lord Jesus will destroy the lawless one with the breath of his mouth (2 Thess. 2:8). The ultimate destruction of the powers and the works of the powers is an apocalyptic theme that we encounter in Paul (1 Cor. 15:24-28; Rom. 16:20). In this regard, to exclude Colossians from a treatment of Paul's powers would lead to imprecise results, since Colossians introduces a significant discrepancy: Colossians does not envision the ultimate destruction of the powers; but rather, Colossians envisions the ultimate reconciliation of the powers to God through Christ (Col. 1:15-20). We give adequate attention to Colossians in this study;

5. For careful discussion on the authorship of Colossians, see J. M. G. Barclay, *Colossians and Philemon*, NTG (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1997), 18-36. On the authorship of 2 Thessalonians, see A. Malherbe, *The Letters to the Thessalonians*, AB 32B (New York: Doubleday, 2000) 364-70.

6. An author who has noted the convergences between 2 Thessalonians 2 and 2 Corinthians 4 & 11 is Sigve K. Tonstad, "The Restraint Removed: A Truly Alarming Thought (2 Thess 2:1-12)," *HBT* 29 (2007): 133-51, esp. 147-50.

suffice it to say for now that the concept of the ultimate reconciliation of the powers represents an important development and tension in the presentation of the powers in the Pauline corpus; and, as such, it cannot be ignored. The concept of reconciliation of the powers may suggest either that Colossians is pseudonymous or that the letter represents a significant shift in Paul's view concerning the powers. Both of these possibilities will be weighed in our detailed discussion of Colossians in chapter 7.