

Principalities and Powers

in Ephesians

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The plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things; that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the principalities and powers in the heavenly places. (Eph. 3: 10)

One of St. Paul's contributions to our understanding of the powers of evil is to sum them up in the phrase 'principalities and powers'. For him they represent the sum-total of evil powers that threaten men both heavenly and earthly. The author of Ephesians takes over the concept in his emphasis of Christ's exaltation and victory over evil. For him Christ's victory and redemption is cosmic in scope, yet peculiarly practical in that its effects are to be worked out in the Church and in the lives of believers.

In 1:21 the ascended Christ is described as sitting at the right hand of the Father above, 'all rule and authority and power and dominion'. This list represents the cosmic totality; everything that in any way is in a position of power and influence in the universe. The all-inclusive nature of the phrase is underlined by the addition of, 'and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in that which is to come'. There is no attempt made to set the powers in any order of preference, or to define any of their individual characteristics. 'The Writer is concerned not to give us information about the denizens of the unseen world but to help our imagination to picture the exalted glory of Christ.'¹ Are the powers referred to good or bad? The need for them to be put in subjection under his feet points at least to the inclusion of subversive heavenly powers. By his exaltation Christ is not only supreme over the whole universe, but also head of the Church.

...the working of his great might which he accomplished in Christ when he raised him from the dead and made him sit at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named,

not only in this age but also in that which is to come; and he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head of all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all. (Ephes. 1: 20-23)

¹ J. A. Allan *The Epistle to the Ephesians* (London, S.C.M. 1959) p. 67.

This gives the impression that Christ is the head over two concentric realms, of the Church and the cosmos; and that as the divine plan unfolds the Church is to extend to embrace all things. He has always been superior to the principalities and powers but his exaltation is offered as proof of that superiority. The Church is the place where the Lordship of Christ is realised, and where Christians know that they have been liberated from the cosmic totalitarianism and the fear of unknown powers that dominated so much of the ancient world.

In 3: 10 it is asserted that the mystery of Christ has been made known not only to the Apostle, and through him to the Gentiles, but that it is now also to be revealed to the principalities and powers in the heavenly places² through the instrumentality of the Church. The unity of the two sections of mankind in Christ holds instructions for the principalities and powers. Does this denote a special relationship between the angelic powers and the Gentiles? Possibly the suggestion is that the discord and ill-feeling between Jew and Gentile was the work of the evil celestial powers, and that the vision of unity presented through the proclamation of the Church provides the powers with tangible evidence that their authority has been broken and that all things are to be subject to Christ. This would indicate that the principalities and powers of 3: 10 includes evil powers. It is not clear whether the author thinks of these spiritual beings as capable of redemption, or as destined to benefit from the revelation communicated to them from the Church, but the point is that they have nothing to contribute to the Christian's life, and certainly no power to frustrate his ascent to God.

Put on the whole armour of God, that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For we are not contending against flesh and blood, but against the principalities, against the powers, against the world rulers of this present darkness, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places. (6: 11-13)

It is here that the hostile aspect of the principalities and powers receives its greatest emphasis. Their demonic and sinister character is revealed by their unambiguous association with the devil, with 'the spiritual hosts of wickedness', and with 'the world rulers of this present darkness'. The suggestion is that the struggle is not merely against human adversaries, 'against flesh and blood', but against the spiritual powers of darkness. It is in this passage that we find the idea of the powers of darkness being at large and able to engage in combat with the Christians. Elsewhere they are spoken of as being superseded in their authority by Christ,³ and therefore no longer to be feared. They are exposed as counter-

² Cf. I Pet. 3:19f.

³ Rom. 8:38f; I Cor. 15:24; Col. 1:16.

feit.⁴ It is from 1: 21 and 3: 10 that we gather that Christ has established his rule over them, although according to 6: 12 it is not yet fully realised. In this situation of tension between the 'now' and the 'not yet' those who join themselves to Christ in the Church share in the assurance of that victory and all its implications as they engage in the struggle against the principalities and powers by putting on the full armour of God.

In Ephesians the powers of evil are regarded as being defeated on a three-fold basis:

- a) by the exaltation of Christ,
- b) through spiritual warfare, and
- c) by the ethical endeavour of Christians to live the morally blameless life.

a) *The Exaltation of Christ*

Therefore it is said:

"When he ascended on high he led a host of captives, and he gave gifts to men."

(In saying "he ascended", what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower parts of the earth? He who descended is he who also ascended far above the heavens that he might fill all things). And his gifts were that some should be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers ... (4: 8-11)

In a context dealing with Christ's gifts, especially the gifts of ministry, in 4: 8 the author quotes from Ps. 68: 18. He then gives a brief exposition of the quotation in vv. 9-10 in terms of the exaltation of Christ, before returning to his theme of the gifts of the ministry. For our purpose the most important question to be raised in connection with these verses is what the author meant by the descent of Christ? Two long-standing theories held respectively that the descent was the incarnation, or that it refers to a descent of Christ into Hades. G. B. Caird⁵ argues that neither of these two theories can be logically deduced from the Psalmist's statement, 'He ascended into the heights'; nor do they explain why the author was at pains to identify the ascender with the descender. Consequently Caird revives a third theory⁶ that the descent in question is to be understood as Christ's return at Pentecost, when he bestowed spiritual gifts on the Church. The author relates Ps.68: 18 to the ascension of Christ, which must have been followed by a descent if he was to give gifts to men. The Spirit of Jesus who descended at Pentecost is identified with the Jesus, who in human form had so lately taken leave of them.⁷ Ps. 68 was associated in

⁴ Col. 2:14f.

⁵ 'The Descent of Christ in Eph. 4:7-11.' *Studia Evangelica* II (1964) pp. 535-45.

⁶ *Op. Cit.* pp. 537ff. Propounded by H. Von Soden.

⁷ Cf. Acts 2:33; Jn. 14:15-18; Rom. 8:9-10; II Cor. 3:17; Eph. 2:17.

the synagogue calendar with the Feast of Pentecost, which by the time of Jesus had become not only a harvest thanksgiving, but also the feast when they celebrated the giving of the Law. The Targum on Ps. 68:18 understood the ascent to be that of Moses up Mount Sinai, and his subsequent giving of the Law to Israel.⁸

The genitive of *Τα Κατωτερα(μερη) της γης* can be taken either as a partitive genitive meaning 'the region below the earth, i.e. the underworld,'⁹ or as a genitive of apposition referring to 'the earth' itself.¹⁰ Although the possibility of a descent to Hades cannot be excluded, it seems to run counter to the theology of the Epistle. Wherever else it occurs in Christian literature the descent to Hades is connected with Christ's overthrow of the demonic powers of evil, but in Ephesians the principalities and powers are not located in 'the regions under the earth', but 'in the heavenly places'.¹¹ Thus according to the Ephesian cosmology what would be required to overthrow the powers of darkness would be an ascent into heaven rather than a descent to Hades, and this is precisely what the quotation from Ps. 68 implies. Although the author draws no direct inferences from the reference to the taking of captives, as the demonic powers, according to 2:2 and 6:12 are situated in the heavenly regions, their defeat may well be combined with the ascension.

This view is supported by 1:20ff where one result of Christ's exaltation, spoken of in terms of his resurrection and heavenly session, is his supremacy over 'all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in that which is to come'. Christ is not only head of the Church, but also head of the macrocosm.¹²

Thus the exaltation of Christ emphasises his supremacy over all the powers of the universe, good and evil alike. Although, according to Ephesians, these powers are still at large, the exaltation shows that they are no more to be feared because God has put all things in subjection under the Lord's feet. Those who come under the headship of Christ in the Church, which is his Body, are subject to no other power. In fact their call is to extend the influence

⁸ 'Thou ascendest up to the firmament, O Prophet Moses, thou tookest captives captive, thou didst teach the words of the law, thou gavest them as gifts to the children of men.' S. R. Driver's translation of the Targum quoted by B. Lindars *New Testament Apologetic*. (London, S.C.M., 1961) p. 52. In the M.T. and LXX it is God who receives gifts from men, whereas in the Targum Moses gives the gift of the Law.

⁹ F. Blass and A. Debrunner *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and other early Christian Literature*. (Cambridge, C.U.P., 1961)

¹⁰ T. K. Abbott *Epistles to the Ephesians and to the Colossians*. (Edinburgh, T. and T. Clark, 1897) p. 115.

¹¹ Eph. 1:20, 3:10, 6:12.

¹² Cf. Col. 1:15-20.

of Christ, through his Church, until it becomes synonymous with the cosmos. (1:23)

b) *Spiritual Warfare*

Therefore take the whole armour of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand. Stand therefore, having girded your loins with truth, and having put on the breastplate of righteousness, and having shod your feet with the equipment of the gospel of peace; above all taking the shield of faith, with which you can quench all the flaming darts of the evil one. And take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

(Ephes. 6: 13-17)

The Christians are to engage in a spiritual warfare with the principalities and powers, and with the devil and all his hosts, who have been superseded by Christ and shown to be inferior, but who still retain some vestige of their former power. To combat them, believers are to fight in the power of Christ and with the whole armour of God. Although it is emphasised that the struggle is not 'against flesh and blood, but against the principalities, against the powers, against the world rulers of this present darkness, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places' (6:12). The weapons to be employed in this warfare are not mystical Gnostic ideas available only to an inner group of initiates, but the ordinary Christian virtues of truth, righteousness, peace, faith, and prayer. This list could almost be compared with the catalogue of the fruits of the Spirit in Gal. 5:22, which are to be manifested by every Christian. The very presence of these weapons of spiritual warfare is proof of the extension of Christ's sphere of influence, for these virtues can only grow in those who own Jesus as Lord. As the Gospel is spread through the missionary outreach of the Church, the sphere in which the powers of evil can operate is diminished and the time of their final obliteration is brought nearer. The gap between the 'now' and the 'not yet' of Christ's victory is closed.

c) *Ethical Endeavour*

The whole emphasis in the hortatory section of the Epistle is on leading 'a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called', (4:1) and *pressing on towards true maturity in Christ.* (4:14ff) The old pagan ways and the new way of life are totally incompatible. (4:17-5:20) The readers are exhorted to overcome their former vices¹³ by becoming imitators of God and walking in the love of Christ (6:1), by refusing to associate with evil men (5:8ff), and by constantly worshipping God (5:19). The new way of life is to find expression in a new moral order that bases Christian

¹³ Evil talk (4:29), anger (4:26f), stealing (4:28), immorality and covetousness (5:2), filthiness, silly talk and levity (5:4), drunkenness and debauchery (5:18).

marriage on the relationship between Christ and his Church (5: 21-33), and that finds reciprocal responsibilities between the various members of the Christian household (5:21-6:9). All this points to a model of the new society which is present in embryo in the Church, but which it is hoped will grow to embrace the whole cosmos. Such a society gives no place to evil influences, either from the devil, the principalities and powers, or from individual sin. Where Christ reigns supreme evil cannot exist.

The references to principalities and powers in Ephesians help to illustrate the author's concern to outline the cosmic scope of Christ's redemption. The object of Christ's reconciling work is, 'to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth' (1:10). On the earthly scene the primary concern is that the reconciliation of individual men and women to God in Christ should be seen to have social consequences. The heavenly counterpart of this work is that the spiritual powers, good and evil, are to be brought into subjection under Christ's feet, and to offer to him that allegiance as head of the cosmos which is already a realised fact in his Body the Church.

Meanwhile the question remains as to whether the principalities and powers correspond to any objective reality outside the fears and frustrations of our own minds when confronted with the various social, religious and political collectives in which our lives are involved. To the writer of Ephesians, and the men and women of the first century in general, the forces of tyranny that held sway over them were felt to be particularly strong. They were overshadowed by a sense of fate and a cosmic totalitarianism in which evil in individuals and institutions seemed to assume personal proportions. The proclamation of Christ's exaltation and victory over the principalities and powers helped Christians to see that they had been freed from such fears, and that the very powers themselves had been brought within the scope of the work of reconciliation. Thus the principalities and powers are symbols of those aspects of creation that seem to have got out of control and threaten the lives of men and women. Today we have to face such problems as world poverty, violence and the preservation of a sense of identity for the individual in an age that has become too complicated far too quickly and in which ordinary people feel that they are being swept along by great institutions. The message that Christ is Lord of the cosmos helps us to see that although these forces may get out of hand from time to time, they can be controlled and are no longer to be feared. The evidence that this is so is that Christ is also Lord of the Church, and it is in the Church where all the implications of Christ's Lordship are to be realised, so as to provide a microcosm of the new creation that is ultimately to embrace the whole cosmos.