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0521018757 - Angels and Principalities: The Background, Meaning and Development of the Pauline Phrase *hai archai kai hai exousiai*

Wesley Carr

Excerpt

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GENERAL INTRODUCTION

One of the most influential books for the study of the New Testament in the twentieth century has undoubtedly been *Die Geisterwelt im Glauben des Paulus*, which Martin Dibelius published in 1909. He himself owed much to a slimmer volume from Otto Everling, *Die paulinische Angelologie und Dämonologie* (1888). Both authors attempted to establish that a world dominated by supernatural forces was central to Paul's thought; that these forces were hostile to mankind; and that this was the context within which Paul worked out his thinking on man's existence and the work of Christ. Although not the first to deal with this subject, Everling and Dibelius are mainly responsible for the centrality of these notions in the study of Pauline theology today.¹

In Britain there was less interest in the subject. J. S. Stewart in 1951 described it as 'a neglected emphasis' and G. H. C. Macgregor developed the idea in his stimulating address to the Studiorum Novi Testamenti Societas in 1954.² The books of Everling and Dibelius were never translated into English. Those of Oscar Cullmann, however, were, and they exercised a wide influence in the world of scholarship. Both in *The State in the New Testament* (1957) and *Christ and Time* (ET 1951, revised 1962) these principalities and powers were given a central place in his dogmatic scheme. By the time that G. B. Caird published his small collection of lectures in 1956 - *Principalities and Powers: A Study in Pauline Theology* - it was almost universally accepted that Christ's victory over cosmic forces was for Paul a fundamental concept. In particular it was suggested that this vision constituted a major and direct link between the world of the first century and that of the twentieth, especially in Europe and the United States. The problem of the state, which had been experienced acutely by the Germans under Hitler, coupled with the powerfully Christocentric theology that prevailed at the time, sought resolution in the concept of *Christus Victor*, especially as described in Col. 2: 15f. Indeed after the Second World War it appeared for a time that celebration of Christ's triumph enabled Christians respectably on the one hand to urge

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triumphalist courses of action, whilst publicly on the other hand to reject the apparent triumphalism of the western Church.

Whatever the detail, however, the concept of the victory of Christ over evil powers has been regarded as central to Pauline thought. Certainly there remained the problem of the continued activity of these powers, which Christ was supposed to have conquered once and for all on the cross, but this was only the old problem of theodicy in a distinctively Christian guise. Generally, Cullmann's analogy of the pause between D-day and VE-day received assent, thus allowing the Church to affirm the reign of Christ as Lord and to involve itself in programmes of social and political action. It would appear now, however, that there is less confidence in this assumption. This attitude once again allows us to examine those passages in the writing of Paul in the light of contemporary knowledge and evaluate the significance of the powers in Paul's mind.

The aim of this present study is to carry out such a re-examination. It falls into three parts. In the first place, the environment in which Paul worked and wrote is of fundamental importance. In recent study emphasis has been given to the Jewish background of Paul's thought. Important as this is, it is worth recalling that he lived and worked in the main in Asia Minor, where even the Jews had to a large extent forgotten their past. The letters that we possess were written to churches that occupied an environment that repays careful study in its own right. There is also the matter of chronology. It is rarely noticed how isolated and peculiar a period of history was that in which Paul lived. The Augustan peace in Greece and Asia Minor was a distinctive experience, which can only be understood by a carefully examined chronology of the material that relates to that area.

The central section of this work is given to detailed exegesis of the passages in Paul that deal with the powers. This is done at some length, since it has been necessary not only to suggest a new exegesis of some well-known verses, but also to justify it by outlining the consequences for the particular epistle and for Pauline thought in general.

The final section attempts in short compass to trace the major developments of the idea of the powers in Christian thinking during the first two centuries. This enables us more clearly to see Paul within the Christian tradition as a whole. It is interesting to observe how his understanding is also that of his near contemporaries and immediate successors. When, however, Pauline texts begin to be quoted freely, they seem to be used in somewhat different senses from those that Paul intended. This study ends with Origen, since he appears to represent a turning point in the understanding of Paul's thought.

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Finally, it should be noted that two major allied topics are on the whole excluded from this study. The demons, which are prominent in the Gospels, hardly feature in Paul. Thus, although there are inevitably references to demons in the course of the work, no detailed attention is paid to demons and exorcism. Secondly, no separate treatment of Satan or the Devil is offered. This figure looms larger and larger in the course of Christian history, but whilst he is mentioned and discussed on many of the following pages, the temptation to deal with him has been resisted, for that would require another complete study.

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PART 1

The background to Paul's thought on the powers

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A major difficulty in the study of the language of the powers in the NT is that there is no immediately obvious source from which it derives or background into which it fits. Evidence that is adduced in various lexicons and word studies is often taken from the second century A.D. or later.

Moulton and Milligan (*The Vocabulary of the Greek Testament* (London, 1929)) offer no examples of *ἀρχή*, *ἄρχων*, *ἐξουσία* or *δύναμις* prior to the second century A.D. in any other meaning than the recognised classical uses, among which a supernatural sense, when the words are used absolutely, is not found. There is a similar lack of evidence in the LXX, where the words all occur, but not necessarily in an explicitly angelic sense. One exception may be noted: in Dan. 10 there are references to *οἱ ἄρχοντες*, ‘the princes of the nations’, and in 7: 27 the *ἀρχαί* are mentioned. But immediately to relate the two words here, as does Delling, does not take account of the different provenance of these two sections of the book.¹ In the absence of further evidence it is doubtful whether such an association may validly be made, as will be demonstrated. *ἄρχοντες* also appear in Ecclus. 10: 14 and elsewhere in that book. Again, however, there is no obvious reason why in any passage they should necessarily be interpreted in an angelological sense.

When we turn to the evidence of inscriptions from the Greek East in the first century A.D. we find no use of these terms other than in the recognised political senses. In the Jewish communities too there is plentiful use of *ἄρχων*, but not in connection with angels.² In addition the plural terms *ἀρχαί καὶ ἐξουσία*, whether singly or as a couplet, appear not to be used in Jewish or pagan sources. The language appears to be peculiar to the NT and is not found in hellenistic religion.³ Yet, subsequent to the time of the writing of the NT, we find this type of language proliferating. It is therefore the period of the first century A.D. that requires investigation.

The culture into which Christianity spread and in which Judaism itself shared was an amalgam that had developed since the time of Alexander the

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Great. Nowhere was this clearer than in the fields of language and of religion.⁴ Greek became the language of the known world. This was not solely a matter of convenient communication. It was itself evidence of the dominance of Greek ideas and attitudes throughout the Mediterranean area. For example, the characteristics of Theophrastus' *Deisidaemon* are also typical of the devout Jew.⁵ It is also notable that in the Maccabean wars it was only the extremely pious who reacted strongly against any syncretism. When emissaries were sent into the countryside to introduce the new cult, they went unarmed. This seems to suggest that they expected no opposition.⁶ The ordinary people were not noted for their resistance to foreign ideas. Even the community at Qumran, which has sometimes been used to support the notion of a Judaism that stood over against the hellenism of the Graeco-Roman world, has clear parallels with the Pythagorean brotherhoods. The similarities may not be too strongly pressed, and it seems likely that there was no direct link between the communities. Nevertheless, the similarity does show that even when some Jews were being self-consciously Jewish they were not at this time behaving in a manner so very different from other peoples in the contemporary world.⁷

There is a more deeply rooted assumption that needs questioning. This is the claim that by the first century A.D. men had lost their ties with the old gods and were looking for a vital personal religion that would rescue them from despair. Yet not only was personal religion an aspect of much ancient Greek belief, but even an apparently political act, such as the Augustan religious settlement, could not have succeeded in its restoration of religion unless it also matched up to some sort of real belief. The recovery and augmentation of the *lares compitales* evidences this.⁸

For the study of the language of the powers in Paul's writing, therefore, an awareness of the complex religious and social background of the time is vital. Certainly there is ample evidence for the significance of Paul's Jewish antecedents in his thinking. However, three questions immediately come to mind. First, his use of language and concepts that are derived from recognisably Jewish sources does not necessarily mean that he took them in the traditional sense. The impact of his conversion can easily be underestimated. Secondly, much recent study has emphasised Paul's use of early Christian material. Clearly, therefore, Paul entered upon a Christian tradition that was already advanced in its process of formulation. And thirdly, it is known that his public ministry took place in the main in Asia and Greece. Thus, whatever his own background, the day to day world against which Paul worked out his faith was the ordinary Graeco-Roman world of the first century. In this connection we must also work on the

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assumption that what he wrote made sense to his readers, who also lived in Greece, Asia or Rome. The question is not only why Paul spoke of the powers, but also what he succeeded in communicating to the recipients of his epistles in the mid-first century A.D.

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THE ENVIRONMENT IN WHICH PAUL WORKED

1 Asia Minor in the first century A.D.

The letters of Paul may be placed somewhere between *c.* 50 and *c.* 60 A.D. It is not really possible to be more precise, and therefore we should be wary of drawing direct connections between particular historical events and specific episodes in the epistles. The letters were addressed to people living in the world of Graeco-Roman thought, politics and religion. Even where he addressed himself to Jews, as is reported in the Acts of the Apostles, his audience was by no means isolated from the pagan world. There was a common culture with its own attitudes, fears and hopes. The period may be defined, as Tacitus noted, by reference to two main events: the battle of Actium in 31 B.C. and the year of the four emperors in A.D. 68.¹ Both events were of significance in affecting the world of Asia and Greece. The battle of Actium was the culmination of a series of events, each of which had involved the inhabitants of Asia Minor in an exaction. Caesar, Brutus and Cassius, and Antony all made their demands. As for the year 68, not only was there the well-known devotion of the eastern provinces to Nero, which issued in the persistent myth of Nero Redivivus, but the inhabitants also had to stand the cost of Vespasian's army as it moved through the provinces under C. Licinius Mucianus.² Between these two events, however, there was a genuine Augustan peace. It is this period that requires careful examination, since it is the background to Paul's work and thought.

Under Augustus and the Julio-Claudians both Rome and the Eastern provinces recognised there was a mutuality of interest.³ Asia was important within the imperial strategy. Through the heart of the provinces ran the geographical boundary of the Anatolian highlands. The essentially Greek cities of the coast looked westwards and the cities of the hills faced to the East. Thus the cities of the Aegean tended to relate to Greece, whilst the area of Pisidia, which was significant in the life of Paul, was colonised by Roman veterans. This binding together of Asia and the West

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had a twofold effect. Certainly there was the ever-increasing influence of Greek and Asiatic culture upon Rome, which was at the end of the first century to call forth Juvenal's condemnation.⁴ Yet there was also significant Roman influence upon Asia, which was felt in a way not discernible elsewhere in the empire. At the beginning of the principate there was total economic distress. The earthquake of 12 B.C. added to this, but Augustus stepped in and paid the tribute of Asia from his personal funds. In return he soon received the genuine devotion of the people. From this moment Asia flourished impressively, primarily because of the personal interest of Augustus.⁵ As a result the Romans looked to 'mollis Ionia' for relaxation and many made the journey.⁶ The presence of these tourists coupled with the permanent settlements of Roman veterans had considerable influence. Whilst there was no systematic colonisation of Asia, some colonies were founded in order to extend Roman influence in the area. In time they were absorbed into their environment, but at the time of their founding they were aggressively Roman, and, with the trading posts, greatly affected the surrounding area.⁷

This influence of Rome upon Asia extended beyond the political and commercial. In matters of religion the marks may also be seen. Augustus took singular pride in his re-establishment of traditional Roman religion in the capital itself. In part it was a means of justifying the new by appeal to the old.⁸ Yet, although it is not always noticed, he also did something similar in Asia. Here he inherited the *koina*, which flourished in the cult of the famous dead and, on occasion, of living benefactors. As a result of his success at Actium, Augustus was inevitably caught up in this aspect of indigenous religion.⁹ In A.D. 11 he banned the practice of voting cults to Roman governors during their period of office, although the custom had in fact ceased.¹⁰ Taking this tradition, however, he invigorated it and reclaimed it to his own advantage. What is most worthy of note is the way in which Augustus was able to manipulate and monopolise a religious custom, even though it was deeply ingrained in Asian religious life. He here exemplified the general influence of Rome in modifying and directing Asian religion in this period. This would suggest, therefore, that the age was less one of new awareness and religious insight than one in which the old was being revitalised in a quiet hope that it would suffice.

Asia recognised and accepted her dependence upon Rome, and in her social and religious life looked in that direction, not always for ideas, but certainly for inspiration in the application of these ideas.¹¹ This attitude was not confined to the reign of Augustus. In most matters Tiberius was concerned to implement the Augustan ideal; if Gaius proved erratic, his time was short. Claudius succeeded with his own brand of conscious

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archaism: roads were built, colonisation recommenced, and towns recognised their devotion to him.¹² Throughout the period of Paul's activity in Asia, then, the area was feeling and adjusting to the renewed impact of Roman life and attitudes. The attraction between Rome and Asia was mutual, but while Rome perhaps failed to perceive the influence that Asian thought, life and culture was having upon its own *gravitas*, it is equally clear that the Asian cities and towns had not fully grasped their own rate of change, as what sometimes seemed to be merely administrative decisions also affected at root their cultural and religious heritage. The recovery of Asia after the depredations of war was accomplished through energies being channelled mainly into administration and economic endeavour. This, in its acknowledged and grateful dependence upon the West, meant that religious and cultural life tended towards a *polis*-oriented conservatism, almost archaism, which mirrored life at Rome itself. The flowering of religious belief and inquiry in Asia occurred in the main from the end of the first century onwards. Paul moved about an Asia that was characterised by religious quiet and acceptance of the past. We may test this general thesis by examining two specific areas, each of which has at times been adduced as part of the background to Paul's work and both of which are of direct relevance to the question of the powers in his thought. These are the question of personal religion in the mysteries and the rise of astrology. Final evidence will be sought in the Acts of the Apostles, itself a valuable source for knowledge of Asia in the mid-first century.

2 Personal religion and the mysteries

Since the work of Reitzenstein the significance of mystery religion for early Christianity has been a matter of intense debate. In a most important article, B. M. Metzger has clarified the conditions within which the discussion must be held. In particular he has emphasised that we must distinguish the faith and practice of the earliest Christians from that of those in subsequent centuries.¹³ This position is also fundamental to the present study. It may easily be shown, for example, that the cult of Asclepius or the syncretistic religion of Sabazius or the universal appeal of Isis all greatly influenced the Mediterranean world. The question is, however, to what extent they were active in the mid-first century and, if they were active, to what extent they demonstrably affected Christian faith and practice.¹⁴ Such detailed evidence as we have for the mystery religions is mainly late and dates from the third century or later. This naturally does not imply that they began then. Although for centuries they had been part of Greek life, under the Roman Empire they revived in Asia, and the evidence that we have suggests a particularly strong revival in the second