

An Outline of a Biblical Theology of Power: Reflections on Conceptions of Power in the Ancient World and the Scriptures

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I. Power in the ANE and Hellenistic World

The idea of power in these cultures was connected with the natural world and its phenomena. Instead of conceiving power abstractly, one could speak of powers which ruled over the natural world. These powers were seen as greater and more enduring than humanity. As a result, the powers were often seen as supernatural beings, personal like humanity, yet endowed with great strength and immortality. The powers were often anthropomorphized or theriopomorphized (recall Egyptian religious imagery) into gods and goddesses.¹ Mythologies, cultic rituals, and magic were developed to satisfy or win the favor of the gods. Even Greek philosophy did not break completely with the theurge (worker of magic) or the mystic (the practitioner of mystery religions/cults). Rather, working from the starting point of reason, Greek philosophy elevated μ to a “cosmic principle”; this was easily harmonized then with viewing the μ , the gods and goddesses of pagan religion, as individual expressions of this cosmic principle. Whereas philosophy was concerned with theoretical knowledge and the principles of right conduct, popular pagan religion sought to influence the μ through magic or initiation into their mysteries. This worldview has been described as follows: “The world is a manifestation of the forces working in and by and on it. All occurrence is comprised of these forces. To do anything, one must participate in them and know them. In view of this conception and basic understanding of the world, which is found both in the philosophical work of Hellenism and also in the popular thinking expressed in magic, one can readily understand the application of the concept.”² Through philosophy, magic, or mystery, one must seek to align oneself with the powers in order to achieve one’s goals.

II. Power in the OT

In place of the cosmic principle of μ or the various emanations of the μ in the natural world as found in pagan religions or Greek philosophical speculation, in the OT we find a personal God whose power stands above and outside His creation, and who directs His power according to His will in nature and over history. “The difference between the OT and the surrounding world is grounded in the distinctive relationship of the Godhead to history. As contrasted with the surrounding

¹ Jack Finegan, *Myth and Mystery*, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1989, pp. 14-15.

² Grundmann, Walter, “ μ / μ ”, *TDNT*, p. 288.

deities, which are essentially nature gods, the God of the OT is the God of history. The result is that the personalistic character of the idea of God is decisive, and that it absorbs the underlying naturalistic elements. This gives us the further result that the important and predominant feature is not force or power but the will which this power must execute and therefore serve.”³ The basis for this view was the fundamental demonstration of God’s power in the life of Israel, the Exodus (Ex. 15:6; 32:11). Like the nature gods of pagan religion, Yahweh demonstrates his power in nature, but there is a difference. Israel’s faith rested in a God for which “nature is essentially the theatre of history and in which it derives from the will and power of the Creator” (cf. Jer. 10:12; 27:5ff.).⁴

III. Power in Rabbinical and Hellenistic Judaism

There is a fundamental continuity here with the OT view of power, yet with two developments which will be very important for the NT.

First, there is an emphasis upon the eschatological deployment of the power of God. This is particularly true of the Jewish apocalyptic literature which developed in response to the national trials the Jews experienced from the Maccabean period onward. As Grundmann pictured this development, “The experience and insight that many things take place in this world that God does not will, and that by His will He has subjected the world to other powers which are hostile to His purposes, give rise to the hope and longing that God will demonstrate His power in a last great conflict, destroying His opponents and saving those who belong to Him. Thus the righteous wait for God to reveal Himself in His power and definitively to establish His dominion” (cf. 1 Enoch 1:1-9).⁵

Secondly, there emerged more clearly an essential belief in demons and in Satan as God’s great adversary; and concomitant to that the view that the eschatological power of God was to be exercised to overthrow the demonic powers (cf. 1 Enoch 19:1).

IV. Power in the NT

Power is pictured very concretely in the OT. It is exercised by men, often rulers or warriors, for either good or evil. But power is evidenced supremely by Yahweh, who exercises His power according to His holiness and for His glory (cf. Ps. 63:2). In the NT by contrast, power can be more abstract, with frequent reference to “principalities” and “powers” (cf. Rom. 8:38f.). Power is most frequently expressed by cognates of the word μ , which refers to the ability to do something, or by cognates of the word ϵ , which carries the idea of the authority or right to do something. With these semantic ranges in mind, we can better address both the fundamental unity of NT conceptions of power with the OT, and the significant

³ Grundmann, p. 291.

⁴ Grundmann, p. 293.

⁵ Grundmann, p. 295.

developments which put the question of power in a whole new light. Two aspects are fundamental to understanding the rich topic of the NT's teaching on power. **First**, power must be reinterpreted in the light of the Christ event. **Secondly**, power must be understood in eschatological terms; and the eschatological framework of power in the NT is that of the inbreaking of the Kingdom of God through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, and through this the defeat of the demonic powers.

The Christ Event and Power

In the OT the Messiah was to be endowed with power from God (cf. Isa. 11:12; Ps. 110:2). Yet the fulfillment of the promise is even greater than expected in the NT. We find that Jesus was conceived by the power (μ) of God (Lk. 1:35). He was endowed with power (μ) by the Holy Spirit to carry out His mission (Lk. 4:14). He exercised power (μ) and authority () to cast out demons (Lk. 4:36). He healed the sick with divine power, "the power (μ) of the Lord was present for Him to perform healing" (Lk. 5:17). And He had authority () to forgive sins, something reserved for Yahweh alone (cf. Matt. 9:6; Mk. 2:10; Lk. 5:24). Finally, as Paul proclaims, He was "declared the Son of God with **power** by the resurrection from the dead, according to the Spirit of Holiness (Rom. 1:4). From this it is evident that the power of Yahweh, of Jesus, and of the Holy Spirit are used interchangeably and refer to the same ultimate divine reality.

The Eschatological Framework of Power

The Inbreaking of the Kingdom of God.

The core of the *kerygma* proclaimed by Jesus and His apostles was that the Kingdom of God had come; this was the , the good news that signaled a radical new work of God in human history. The evidence of this was the power and character of Jesus' ministry. Thus Jesus told the Pharisees, who accused Him of working wonders by demonic power, "But if I cast out demons by the Spirit of God, then the Kingdom of God has come upon you" (Matt. 12:28). This message of the kingdom was proclaimed by Jesus "in the power of the Spirit" (Lk. 4:14ff.). This demonstration of miraculous power (μ) by Jesus will serve as the basis of condemnation for the unrepentant in Galilee at the judgement, because the people ignored the signs of the kingdom, "And you, Capernaum, will not be exalted to heaven, will you? You shall descend to Hades; for if the *miracles* had occurred in Sodom which occurred in you, it would have remained to this day. Nevertheless I say to you that it shall be more tolerable for the land of Sodom in the day of judgement, than for you" (Matt. 11:23-24). Jesus told His disciples, "Truly I say to you, there are some of those who are standing here who shall not taste death until they see the kingdom of God come with power" (Mk. 9:1). Right after this Jesus went up to a high mountain and was transfigured before Peter, James, and John, so that as Moses saw the glory of the Lord in great power on Mount Sinai, so the disciples could see Jesus in His glory. The connection between the kingdom of God and power was summarized by Paul, who said, "For the kingdom of God does not consist in words, but in power" (I Cor. 4:20).

The defeat of the demonic powers.

The inbreaking of the kingdom marked the turning of the ages, the fullness of time, when God revealed His saving power for His people and decisively defeated the demonic powers. A complex picture is painted of this victory.

This victory provided salvation and deliverance for the elect. “For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the **power** of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek” (Rom. 1:16; cf. Acts 26:18). To the world the cross seemed a defeat, but to the elect it is salvation. “For the word of the cross is to those who are perishing foolishness, but to us who are being saved it is the **power** of God” (I Cor. 1:18). This victory delivered the elect from the dominion of the demonic powers to the kingdom of God, “For He delivered us from the domain of darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son”; this victory was accomplished so that the elect would “be strengthened with all **power**, according to His glorious **might**” (Col. 1:13, 11). The elect have confidence because their risen Lord has said, “All **power** () has been given to me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore...” (Matt. 28:18ff).

It was the ironically the cross that was the instrument of God’s victory over the demonic powers. Thus Paul spoke of the cross as Jesus’ public victory and humiliation of the demonic powers, “When He had disarmed the principalities and the **powers**, He made a public display of them, having triumphed over them through Him” (Col. 2:15).

The irony of the weakness and power of the cross is that Satan’s apparent victory was turned to defeat by the power of God. Thus Paul tells the Corinthians, “For indeed He was crucified because of weakness, yet He lives because of the **power** of God. For we also are weak in Him, yet we shall live with Him because of the **power** of God directed toward you” (II Cor. 13:4; cf. 12:9). This irony is lost on those still under the sway of the demonic powers, “For indeed Jews ask for signs and Greeks search for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, to Jews a stumbling block, and to Gentiles foolishness, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the **power** of God and the wisdom of God. Because the foolishness of God is wiser than any man, and the weakness of God is stronger than men” (I Cor. 1:22-25).

This same power in weakness is at work in the elect to stand against the demonic powers. Therefore, Paul wants believers to know “what is the passing greatness of His **power** toward us who believe. These are in accordance with the working of the strength of His might which He brought about in Christ, when He raised Him from the dead, and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly places, **far above all rule and authority and power and dominion**, and every name that is named, not only in this age, but also in the one to come” (Eph. 1:19-21). Because Jesus has already won the victory and has ascended in power and glory to the right hand of the Father, where He rules over all creation, Paul desires for believers to be armed to press on in victory over the powers: “Finally, be strong in the Lord, and in the strength of His might. Put on the full armor of God, that you may be able to stand firm against the schemes of the devil. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the **powers**, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places” (Eph. 6:10-12). These demonic powers

are at work in the world in manifest forms and seek to oppress and overcome the Church, the body of Christ. But the body is to stand against the dark forces wherever and however they manifest themselves (whether through persecution of believers, oppression of the poor, racial and ethnic hatreds), and be the agents of reconciliation, justice, and hope. Believers must realize, however, that this path of discipleship and victory leads through suffering, as the Christian conforms to the sufferings of Christ. Thus Paul's intense desire is "that I may know Him, and the **power** of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death; in order that I may attain to the resurrection from the dead" (Phil. 4:10-11).

The tension of God's strength in weakness comes from the already and not yet of His kingdom. Jesus inaugurated the kingdom with His first advent, and triumphed over the demonic powers through His death on the cross and His resurrection in power, yet the kingdom is not yet consummated in all its glory. Therefore, the elect wait in hope for Christ's second advent in power and glory when He will consummate His kingdom rule over all creation. Thus Paul explains to the Corinthians that Christ is the first fruits of victory over the demonic forces, and will surely subject all the demonic powers until His victory over them is complete, "But each in his own order, Christ the first fruits, after that those who are Christ's at His coming, then comes the end, when He delivers up the kingdom to the God and Father, when He has abolished all rule and all authority and **power**. For He must reign until He has put all His enemies under His feet" (I Cor. 15:23-25). Yet believers are energized by hope because the same power by which Jesus was raised from the dead shall be experienced by the elect, "Now God has not only raised the Lord, but will also raise us up through his **power**" (I Cor. 6:14).

The promise is that Christ will come again in power and glory. Jesus assured His disciples that He would come again, but this time not in weakness and humility, but in power and glory to consummate His kingly rule, "But immediately after the tribulation of those days **THE SUN WILL BE DARKENED, AND THE MOON WILL NOT GIVE ITS LIGHT, AND THE STARS WILL FALL** from the sky, and the **powers** of the heavens will be shaken, and then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the **SON OF MAN COMING ON THE CLOUDS OF THE SKY with power and great glory**" (Matt. 24:29-30). At that time a heavenly voice shall proclaim: "Now the salvation, and the **power** (μ), and the kingdom of our God and the **authority** () of His Christ have come, for the accuser of our brethren has been thrown down..." (Rev. 12:10). Then the anti-trinity of sin, the devil, and death will be cast down forever, and there will be no more contending powers of darkness, but God will be all in all.