

COLOSSIANS 2:15 AND THE PRINCIPALITIES
AND AUTHORITIES

by

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of requirements
for the degree of Master of Divinity in
Grace Theological Seminary
May 1983

Title: COLOSSIANS 2:15 AND THE PRINCIPALITIES AND
AUTHORITIES
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Degree: Master of Divinity
Date: May, 1983
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Paul describes the triumph of Christ over the evil principalities and authorities in Colossians 2:15. This triumph is described metaphorically as a stripping off of the powers as one would strip off a garment. Christ exposes them to ignominy and parades them in His victory procession as a result of His triumph over them on the cross.

Since Paul does not define his terminology for the powers, it is assumed that he uses them as they were commonly understood at that time. A study of the Jewish terminology reveals that they were hierarchically high spiritual beings which were variously understood as good or evil in character. A study of the Hellenistic terms indicates that they were used of nefarious cosmic beings which directed the stars and men's fates. A survey of these terms in Paul's epistles shows that he uses both the Jewish and Hellenistic terms to describe a host of fallen spiritual beings of high rank, whom Christ defeats in 2:15.

The background of the epistle provides important information for the exegesis of 2:15. First, the heresy is probably a Jewish-Hellenistic syncretism in which the adherent seeks fullness and escape from this evil material world beyond the inimical cosmic beings through various means. Paul responds by presenting Christ as a Redeemer-figure who extricates Himself from their power by stripping off the body of flesh. Second, three concepts related to 2:15 are foundational. The stripping off of the body of flesh in 2:11 refers to Christ's crucifixion and is the means by which He strips off the powers. The chirograph in 2:14 is the book of sins nailed to the cross in association with Christ's body. The stripping off of the old man in 3:9 is the ethical result of the believer's union with Christ's removal of the powers.

In 2:15, ἀπεκδυσάμενος should be interpreted as a true middle, based upon the use of its cognates and the unanimous evidence of the extant Greek fathers. Christ is the subject of the verse and the principalities and authorities are the object of the participle. The subsequent clauses support this conclusion. Christ publicly exposes them to derision and leads them in His triumphal procession.

Accepted by the Faculty of Grace Theological Seminary
in partial fulfillment of requirements for the degree
Master of Divinity


Adviser

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<u>APOT</u>	R. H. Charles, ed., <u>Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament</u>
BAGD	W. Bauer, W. F. Arndt, and F. W. Gingrich, <u>Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament</u> , rev. and augmented by F. W. Gingrich and F. W. Danker
<u>BASOR</u>	<u>Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research</u>
BDF	F. Blass, A. Debrunner, and R. W. Funk, <u>A Greek Grammar of the New Testament</u>
<u>BSac</u>	<u>Bibliotheca Sacra</u>
<u>CBQ</u>	<u>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</u>
<u>EvQ</u>	Evangelical Quarterly
<u>ExpTim</u>	Expository Times
ICC	International Critical Commentary
<u>Int</u>	<u>Interpretation</u>
<u>JBL</u>	<u>Journal of Biblical Literature</u>
<u>JQR</u>	<u>Jewish Quarterly Review</u>
<u>JTS</u>	<u>Journal of Theological Studies</u>
LSJ	Liddell-Scott-Jones, <u>Greek-English Lexicon</u>
LXX	The Septuagint
NICNT	New International Commentary on the New Testament
<u>NovT</u>	<u>Novum Testamentum</u>
<u>NTS</u>	<u>New Testament Studies</u>
<u>SJT</u>	<u>Scottish Journal of Theology</u>
<u>TDNT</u>	G. Kittel and G. Friedrich, ed., <u>Theological Dictionary of the New Testament</u>

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The Centrality of Christ's Subjugation of the Powers

There is a vast difference between the cosmologies of the first Christian century and the scientific view of the world today. Whereas now modern man thinks of the universe as governed by fixed natural laws, the ancients viewed it as replete with sinister spiritual powers who manipulated their lives in a capricious and nefarious way. This difference in world view has evidenced itself in the amount of attention which the theme of the powers has received in the theology of the Church. Although the subject of the cosmic powers has received niggardly treatment by modern scholars, "the idea of sinister world powers and their subjugation by Christ is built into the very fabric of Paul's thought . . ."¹ Those who have stressed mainly the other aspects of the cross "have misunderstood as secondary and extraneous elements in the primitive Christian proclamation what in fact are integral and basic components of the

¹G. B. Caird, Principalities and Powers (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956), p. viii.

Gospel."¹ Because of the neglect of this central theme in Paul's thought, the modern reader rarely appreciates the implications of Christ's triumph over the powers.²

This theme of Christ's subjugation of the powers is nowhere more poignantly portrayed than in Colossians 2:15.³ But this central text is fraught with difficulties. A. T. Robertson says of this verse that "every word used here is in dispute."⁴ Harrisville describes the passage as an "aggravatingly tangled paraenesis."⁵ This obscurity has caused a proliferation of interpretation of this verse.

The Thesis

This work will defend an interpretation of Colossians 2:15 widely held among the Greek fathers, but often overlooked by modern interpreters. The thesis is that the verse describes Christ as completely stripping off the evil principalities and authorities from Himself, as one would a

¹James S. Stewart, "On a Neglected Emphasis in New Testament Theology," SJT 4 (1951):294.

²Ragnar Leivestad, Christ the Conqueror: Ideas of Conflict and Victory in the New Testament (London: SPCK, 1954), p. 92 (hereafter cited as Leivestad, Conqueror).

³Ibid., p. 100.

⁴A. T. Robertson, Paul and the Intellectuals: The Epistle to the Colossians, ed. W. C. Strickland (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1959), p. 86 (hereafter cited as Robertson, Colossians).

⁵Roy A. Harrisville, "God's Mercy--Tested, Promised, Done (An Exposition of Genesis 18:20-32; Luke 11:1-13; Colossians 2:6-15)" Int 31 (April 1977):176.

garment. This action is associated with the removal of the body of flesh at the crucifixion and resulted in an ignominious defeat of the powers, which is described in the remainder of the verse. This study will pay particular attention to the patristic evidence relating to this verse as well as to texts illustrating the character and moral nature of the powers. An exhaustive examination of Hellenistic texts has not been attempted, but a representative sample has been adduced to familiarize the modern reader with the concept of the powers.

The Plan of the Defense of the Thesis

In chapter two, the principalities and authorities are shown to be wicked cosmic beings of a high spiritual order. First the Jewish terminology for this concept is surveyed, which is most central to Pauline thought. Then the Hellenistic terminology is studied to show the cosmic and astral nature of these beings in Greek thought, to whom Paul adapted his basically apocalyptic Jewish scheme. Then the Pauline texts concerning the powers are surveyed to determine how Paul himself employed these terms. Since he does not define his terminology, he obviously depends upon a well established background which his readers shared with him. Therefore it is imperative that these Pauline texts be studied with this background in mind.

In chapter three, the epistle to the Colossians is the focus. The heresy which prompted the epistle is

seen to be a syncretism of Jewish and Gnostic elements. An attempt is made to reconstruct this heretical system, since the interpretation of Paul's response to it depends largely upon the nature of this system. Then the relevant contextual ideas are studied to lay a foundation for the exegesis of Colossians 2:15, since the ideas in the passage are very interrelated.

In chapter four, the exegesis of Colossians 2:15 is presented. First, the initial participle is seen to have a true middle significance, being supported by all the Greek fathers extant and the lexical history of its cognates. The subject of the verse is shown to be Christ, and the object to be the powers. Then the subsequent verbal clauses are shown to support this exegesis. These powers are shamefully displayed in public as defeated enemies, and they are led in triumphal procession as a result of their defeat on the cross.

All references adduced from sources extant in Hebrew and Greek are the translations of the author, unless otherwise noted. The references to the Greek fathers in footnotes will be followed in parenthesis by their location in J. Migne, Patrologia graeca. The titles of their works will follow those found in G. W. H. Lampe, Patristic Greek Lexicon.

CHAPTER II

THE PRINCIPALITIES AND AUTHORITIES

The principalities and authorities play an important role in the theology of Paul. He connects them with such major themes as reconciliation (Col 1:19-20), the believer's security (Rom 8:38-39), Christ's lordship (Col 2:10), His crucifixion (1 Cor 2:6,8), His exaltation (Eph 1:21), the believer's redemption from bondage (Gal 4:3,8,9; Col 2:20) and his present warfare (Eph 6:12). Without an understanding of the nature of these forces, one would not appreciate this central aspect of Pauline thought.

The problem faced in reading Paul is that he nowhere explains to his readers the identity or nature of these beings, but assumes that they share a common background of ideas with him. He uses a multiplicity of terms to refer to them with which the modern reader has little acquaintance. He evinces an ignorance of principalities, authorities, powers or world-rulers. The reader of today lacks the background which Paul shared with his converts, and which allowed obscure passages to communicate to them.

This chapter will explore the Jewish and Hellenistic backgrounds of Paul's terms for the cosmic powers. The terms of Jewish origin, ἀρχαί, ἐξουσίαι, δυνάμεις, κυριότητες,

θρόνοι and ἄρχοντες, will be illustrated in Jewish, Gnostic and Christian texts employing them. Then the Hellenistic terms, κοσμοκράτορες and στοιχεῖα will be illustrated in Hellenistic texts and other texts variously influenced by Hellenism. These illustrations will provide important background for a brief study of the Pauline passages referring to them. Conclusions about their moral character will be used in the exegesis of Colossians 2:15 in chapter four.

The Jewish Terminology for the Powers

Because of Paul's background as a Jew and a Pharisee, his Jewish background is the predominant factor in his understanding of the powers. His unparalleled zeal for the traditions of the fathers (Gal 1:14) saturated his mind with the body of tradition evidenced in the OT, the LXX, the Apocrypha and the Pseudepigrapha. Therefore, these sources will be examined first to see what light they might shed upon this subject.

The Hebrew OT

Israel's view of foreign gods

In the course of Israel's dealings with polytheistic nations, she adopted three basic attitudes toward their foreign gods. Some followed a path of syncretism, in which they identified Yahweh with El or Baal.¹ This was a

¹G. B. Caird, Principalities and Powers, p. 1.

prominent view which the prophets denounced. The prophets of Yahweh dismissed the gods as mere wood and stones with no reality. Their attitude was one of suppression.¹ A third view sought to combine the concept of the absolute sovereignty of Yahweh with the reality of the foreign deities by subordinating the latter to the former. The various terms such as אֱלֹהִים, אֱלֹהֵי, בְּנֵי אֱלֹהִים, בְּנֵי־קִדְמוֹת אֱלֹהִים are used of them.²

OT texts illustrating subordination

Yahweh is portrayed as being superior to the foreign gods. They are acknowledged but subordinated to His sovereignty. "Who is like you among the gods [בְּאֱלֹהִים], O Yahweh?" (Exod 15:11). "Ascribe to Yahweh, O sons of God [בְּנֵי אֱלֹהִים]. Ascribe to Yahweh glory and strength" (Ps 29:1).

Sometimes Yahweh is described as surrounded by a heavenly council.

For who in the skies can compare to Yahweh? Who is like Yahweh among the sons of God [בְּנֵי אֱלֹהִים]? In the council of the holy beings God is greatly feared. He is more awesome than all who surround Him (Ps 89:6-7).

Yahweh's heavenly council is sometimes associated with the stars and planets. In 1 Kings 22:19-23, Micaiah describes Yahweh as sitting on His throne "with all the

¹Ibid.

²Ibid., p. 2.

host of heaven standing around Him." Job 38:7 associates the morning stars with the בְּנֵי אֱלֹהִים . Although an equation is not made, the association is strong.

The other gods are associated with angelic rulers appointed by Yahweh over the other nations. These rulers are under His sovereignty. In Deuteronomy 32:8-9 according to the LXX and a Qumran fragment,¹ Yahweh established one nation for each son of God. "When the Most High God gave the nations their inheritance, when he divided the sons of Adam, He set up the boundaries of the peoples according to the number of the sons of God [LXX ἀγγέλων θεοῦ, Qumran בְּנֵי אֱלֹהִים]."² In Deuteronomy 4:19, Israel is warned not to worship "all the host of heaven" which Yahweh had appointed for all the other nations.³

In the book of Daniel, this generalized scheme takes on a more concrete form, in which some of these beings are individually named and described. In Daniel 10:13, the prince (רִשָׁף) of the kingdom of Persia resists an angel sent from God for twenty-one days, but Michael, one of the chief princes assists him. In 10:20, the prince of Greece is mentioned, and Michael is called "the prince of Israel."

¹Patrick W. Skehan, "A Fragment of the 'Song of Moses' (Deut. 32) from Qumran," BASOR 136 (December 1954):12.

²Cf. the Testament of Naphtali 8:3-5, where the number of angels and nations is fixed at seventy.

³Cf. Ecclesiasticus 17:17, where God is said explicitly to appoint a ruler for every nation except Israel.

Conclusion

The writers of the OT subordinated the gods under the sovereignty of Yahweh. However, it acknowledged some reality behind them. Some of these beings were inimical to Yahweh, and were allowed to resist Him and His delegates. From these passages, Paul would know of good and evil spiritual rulers who were involved in the affairs of men.

The LXX

Paul read and often quoted from the LXX. His ideas and terminology were certainly influenced by it. The LXX provided him with some of the terminology which he employed in his description of the cosmic powers. Since the terminology of the LXX may have been deliberately chosen as a bridge between Hebrew and Greek thought,¹ this source may have had a Hellenizing influence on Paul as well.

Some of this influence may be seen in the various translations of the title "Yahweh of hosts." The translator of Isaiah merely transliterated the phrase as "the Lord of Sabaoth" whereas the translators of the Prophets usually paraphrased it as δ παντοκράτωρ. But the Psalms usually contain the translation δ Κύριος τῶν δυνάμεων "the Lord of the powers," possibly viewing them as spiritual beings or even cosmic forces.² Some examples will

¹Caird, Principalities and Powers, p. 13.

²Ibid., p. 12.

demonstrate this:

ἄνεϊτε αὐτὸν πάντες οἱ ἄγγελοι αὐτοῦ,
ἀνεϊτε αὐτὸν πᾶσαι αἱ δυνάμεις αὐτοῦ (Ps 148:2).

καὶ τὰ κησόνται πᾶσαι αἱ δυνάμεις τῶν οὐρανῶν
καὶ πάντα τὰ ἄστρα πεσεῖται (Isa 34:4).

In the first example, "angels" and "powers" are in synonomous parallelism, denoting close relationship. In the second example, "powers" and "stars" are similarly related. This shows that this term *δυνάμεις* was associated with spiritual powers as well as heavenly bodies. Paul used this term of spiritual beings in Ephesians 1:21, 1 Corinthians 15:24 and Romans 8:38.

The term *ἄρχων* is used in Theodotian to translate the references to angelic powers in Daniel mentioned above. "It denotes the celestial beings which guard and represent earthly states . . . , and on the rank and power of which in the spirit world the position of these states depends."¹ Paul uses this term of the spiritual powers which engineered the crucifixion described in 1 Corinthians 2:6,8.

Apocalyptic Judaism

Although many of the ideas concerning the principalities and authorities are found in the OT in a nascent form, it is apocalyptic Judaism of the intertestamental period which developed the concept into the form in which Paul encountered it. It provided Paul with much of his core

¹ TDNT, s.v. "*ἄρχων*," by Gerhard Delling, 1:488.

vocabulary for the powers. Therefore, this literature must be studied to see what it contributed to Paul's background on this subject.

The fall of the angels and Genesis 6

The intertestamental speculations about the fall of the angels and the origin of demons were myriad and centered largely around the miscegenation of the sons of God and the daughters of men in Genesis 6. This speculation provides an indispensable foundation for an understanding of the principalities and authorities in this body of literature. Therefore, a brief outline of its major tenets will be given.

The Watchers were angels who lusted after and cohabited with women before the flood (1 Enoch 6). They taught men to sin and corrupted the world (1 Enoch 7-8). The progeny of their miscegenation were giants (1 Enoch 7:2). These giants died in the flood but their souls became demons who vex mankind until the great judgment (1 Enoch 16:1). Some Watchers were imprisoned until the great judgment, but others are loose (1 Enoch 10:4-6). This whole evil age is dominated by the Watchers and demons and is consummated by the great judgment (1 Enoch 16:1). These fallen angels are associated with the stars of heaven (1 Enoch 21:3).

The terminology for the powers

Origin

The primary terms for the powers in Paul are ἀρχαί and ἐξουσία. These expressions are not found in Hellenism or in pagan Gnosticism before Paul in the sense he employed them.¹ They definitely have a Hebrew origin in the concepts of the angels of the nations, the host of heaven, and the sons of God.² The intertestamental writers took these concepts in their incipient forms and embellished them into hierarchies and various schemes.

Mutual relationships between terms

The various schemes are not always consistent in their use of these terms. But the ἀρχαί and ἐξουσία do not seem to be distinguishable. Foerster also thinks that the θρόνοι and κυριότητες are distinguishable from them as beings which stand in God's immediate presence, whereas the principalities and authorities might be linked with earthly matters.³ However, the principalities and authorities are to be distinguished from demons, whose region does not extend beyond the air, whereas the former beings are cosmic powers.⁴ They "possess and control not only individual

¹TDNT, s.v. "ἐξουσία," by Werner Foerster, 2:571.

²Roy Yates, "The Powers of Evil in the New Testament," EvQ 52 (1980):103.

³Foerster, "ἐξουσία," p. 573.

⁴Ibid.

human lives but the very course of the universe."¹

Textual illustrations

Several texts from apocalyptic Judaism which employ the terminology of the powers will be surveyed to see their nature and the meaning of the titles.

1 Enoch. The Book of Enoch is a composite work. Fragments from most of its sections have been found at Qumran. These various sections date from the second century B.C. through the first century A.D. The original language appears to be Aramaic, except for the Noah traditions, which were probably composed in Hebrew.² It was translated into Greek, and fragments of this translation are extant. The title "1 Enoch" is given to the Ethiopic translation of the book.

The passage in 1 Enoch 6 is describing the two hundred angels who fell in Genesis 6:

οὗτοι εἰσὶν ἀρχαὶ αὐτῶν οἱ ἐπὶ δέκα.³

These angels are their chiefs who are over groups of ten angels each (1 Enoch 6:8).

Samiazaz was the leader of them all. The twenty

¹G. H. C. MacGregor, "Principalities and Powers: The Cosmic Background of Paul's Thought," *NTS* 1 (September 1954):19 (hereafter cited as MacGregor, "Powers").

²James H. Charlesworth et al., The Pseudepigrapha and Modern Research with a Supplement, *Society of Biblical Literature Septuagint and Cognate Studies*, no. 7 (Chico, CA.: Scholars Press, 1981), p. 98 (hereafter referred to as Charlesworth, Pseudepigrapha).

³Matthew Black, ed., Apocalypsis Henochi Graece (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1970), p. 21.

chiefs were over ten angels each, which accounts for the two hundred angels. They are definitely evil in nature as is seen in chapters seven and eight. They defiled women and taught them charms and enchantments. The chief angels are called ἀρχοντες in 1 Enoch 6:7, which connects the ἀρχαί with the "rulers of this age" in 1 Corinthians 2:6,8.

1 Enoch 61:10. This chapter deals with the acknowledgment of the glory of God by all his creatures. It is not extant in Greek.

And He will summon all the hosts of heaven, and all the holy ones above, and the host of God, the Cherubin, the Seraphin, and all the angels of power, and all the angels of principalities, and the Elect One, and the other powers on the earth (and) over the water . . . and shall all say with one voice: "Blessed is He, and may the name of the Lord of Spirits be blessed for ever and ever."¹
(1 Enoch 61:10, italics mine.)

This text fills out the Pauline phrases "principalities" and "powers" to "angels of principalities" and "angels of power." They are associated with holy, heavenly beings, such as the Cherubim, the Seraphim, and the holy ones, as well as the Elect One. They seem to have a high position in this scheme, in contrast to "the other powers" which are more mundane in character. So, these beings are holy angels of a relatively high rank.

Testament of Levi 3:8. This is a section of the Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs. It was originally

¹R. H. Charles, Pseudepigrapha, APOT (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1913), pp. 226-27.

written in Hebrew or Aramaic by approximately 100 B.C.¹ In it, an angel of God shows Levi the seven heavens. The first is gloomy because it beholds the sins of men (T. Levi 3:1). The second contains fire, snow and ice ready for God to use on the day of judgment, along with the spirits who shall execute retribution and vengeance upon men (T. Levi 3:2). The third contains the hosts of the armies (αἱ δυνάμεις τῶν παρεμβολῶν²) who will punish the evil spirits on the day of judgment. The beings above these are holy (T. Levi 3:3). The fourth contains the θρόνοι and ἐξουσίαι³ who continually offer hymns to God (T. Levi 3:8). The fifth contains the angels who answer the angels of presence. The sixth contains the angels of the face of the Lord who minister bloodless sacrifices. The seventh heaven contains God in the holy of holies (T. Levi 3:4-7).

This passage associates thrones and authorities but does not distinguish between them. They are holy beings who minister to God continually. The powers in 3:3 are God's army who will execute his wrath on evil spirits on the day of judgment. By implication, they seem to be in obedience to God. It appears that the thrones and authorities are higher in this hierarchy than the powers, but are lower than

¹Charlesworth, Pseudepigrapha, pp. 212-13.

²M. DeJonge, ed., The Text of the Twelve Patriarchs: A Critical Edition of the Greek Text (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1978), p. 28.

³Ibid.

other beings.

2 Enoch 20:1. The Slavonic version of Enoch was probably written originally in Greek during the decades prior to the destruction of the Temple in 70 A.D.¹ It may be of Egyptian or Palestinian provenance² and contains Platonic, Egyptian and Zend elements.³

Enoch is being shown the ten heavens by two beings. In this chapter he reaches the seventh heaven and sees various supraterrrestrial beings.

I saw there a very great light, and fiery troops of great archangels, incorporeal forces, and dominions, orders and governments, cherubim and seraphim, thrones and many-eyed ones, nine regiments, the Ioanit stations of light, and I became afraid . . .⁴ (2 Enoch 20:1, italics mine.)

The terms "dominion" and "throne" are employed, referring to holy angelic beings of high order, being associated with cherubim, seraphim and great archangels. In the eighth heaven is the "changer of the seasons, of drought, and of wet, and of the twelve signs of the zodiac . . ." (2 Enoch 21:16). The zodiac signs themselves reside in the ninth heaven and the Lord dwells in the tenth (2 Enoch 21:6-22:1). The spiritual beings in the seventh heaven are

¹Charlesworth, Pseudepigrapha, p. 104.

²Ibid.

³Charles, Pseudepigrapha, p. 429.

⁴Ibid., p. 441.

juxtaposed with astrological phenomena in the eighth and ninth. These beings would easily assimilate a cosmic significance.

Martyrdom of Isaiah. This work is probably a second century B.C. Jewish work.¹ It is possible that Hebrews 11:37 alludes to it, but this is not certain. The original language is possibly Hebrew, but it is only extant in Ethiopic, Slavonic, Coptic, Latin and Greek.² The context is that King Hezekiah calls his son Manasseh into Isaiah's presence to deliver unto him the words of righteousness and words about other matters.

. . . and of the eternal judgments and the torments of Gehenna, and of the prince of this world, and of his angels, and his authorities and his powers.³ (Mart. Isa. 1:3, italics mine.)

This text associates the authorities and powers with Beliar, the prince of this world, and with his angels--phrases reminiscent of Matthew 25:41. No particular hierarchy is obvious, but their nefarious character is apparent. A Greek fragment of 2:2 preserves the terms:

καὶ [Μανασσῆς] ἐλάτρευσεν τῷ σατανᾷ καὶ τοῖς ἀγγέλοις αὐτοῦ καὶ ταῖς δυνάμεσιν αὐτοῦ.⁴ (Mart. Isa. 2:2)

Testament of Solomon 20:15. This is a Jewish composition of Galilean, Egyptian or Asian origin in ascending

¹Charlesworth, Pseudepigrapha, p. 126.

²Ibid., p. 125.

³Black, Apocalypsis Henochi Graece, p. 105.

⁴Ibid., p. 108.

order of probability.¹ It was written in Greek in the first century A.D. and reworked by a Christian in the early third century.² In it, Solomon the wisest man gains power over all the demons and compels them to build his temple. Throughout the book he summons evil spirits before him and commands them to reveal to him their particular type of mischief as well as the name of the angel which can subdue them. Here Solomon is interrogating a demon:

Tell me how ye can ascend into heaven, being demons, and amidst the stars and the holy angels intermingle. And he answered: 'Just as things are fulfilled in heaven, so also on earth (are fulfilled) the types of all of them. For there are principalities [ἀρχαί], authorities [ἐξουσίαι], world-rulers [κοσμοκράτορες], and we demons hear the voices of the heavenly beings [τῶν ἐπουρανίων] and survey all the powers [δυνάμεις].'³ (T. Sol. 20:15, italics mine.)

The meaning of this obscure passage seems to be that the demons on earth are the types of the heavenly beings, the principalities, authorities and world-rulers. The demons ascend into heaven and hear the sentences they pronounce on men. Then they descend to execute these sentences. This text has very important implications for this study. The two principal Greek terms appear juxtaposed with

¹Charlesworth, Pseudepigrapha, p. 198.

²Ibid.

³F. C. Conybeare, "The Testament of Solomon," JQR 11 (October 1898):40. The Greek text is found in C. C. McCown, The Testament of Solomon (Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1922), p. 62.

"world-rulers" as in Ephesians 6:12. These beings are of a much higher rank than the demons, and are cosmic beings associated with the heavenly places, as in Ephesians 6:12. They appear to be inimical to man and evil in nature, since they cooperate with demons. The "powers" are closely associated with the other terms, as well. The "world-rulers" introduce an astrological element into the passage, along with the "stars," and will be discussed more fully below. Since this work was written by a Jew in Greek, probably in the first century, this may be precisely the background familiar to Paul.

Conclusions

In this survey of apocalyptic Judaism, the Pauline terms ἀρχαί, ἐξουσίαι, δυνάμεις, dominions (i.e. κυριότητες), θρόνοι and ἄρχοντες have been found. Since these terms were probably not employed outside Judaism in reference to spiritual beings, this suggests that Paul's vocabulary for the cosmic powers was derived mainly from his experiences in Judaism. Since Judaism had been Hellenized, it introduced him to some Greek concepts as well. These terms were used of both good and evil beings. 1 Enoch 61:10, 2 Enoch, and the Testament of Levi employed them in reference to benevolent beings, whereas 1 Enoch 6:8, the Martyrdom of Isaiah and the Testament of Solomon used them of malevolent ones. They are generally used of beings of high rank and are contrasted to demons, who are sublunary. Therefore, although

there was a general consensus concerning their rank, there was little agreement concerning their moral nature.

Orthodox and Gnostic Christianity

Orthodox and Gnostic Christianity also use the Jewish terminology for the powers. Sometimes they evidence a familiarity with the NT, which would make them secondary evidence. However, they also draw upon the same sources which Paul used. Therefore, they are valuable in recovering the background of the powers familiar to him and his readers.

Acts of John

The date of this Gnostic writing is uncertain but may be a third century work.¹ Its theology has affinities to Valentinian Gnosticism.²

(But) there are (places) on the right and on the left [of the cross], powers [δυνάμεις], authorities [ἐξουσία], principalities [ἀρχαί], and demons, activities, threatenings, passions, devils, Satan and the inferior root from which the nature of transient things proceeded.³ (Acts John 98, italics mine.)

Earlier in the passage, Jesus tells John that He is not really suffering on the cross, but that it is an illusion.

¹Edgar Hennecke, New Testament Apocrypha, ed. Wilhelm Schneemelcher, trans. R. McL. Wilson et al. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1963), 2:214-15.

²Ibid., p. 212-14.

³Ibid., p. 233. The Greek text is found in Maximilianus Bonnet, ed., Acta Apostolorum Apocrypha (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1959), 2:200.

The appearance is demonic but only his true followers, the Gnostics, truly understand that. The Cross of Light separates the transient from the permanent. This passage lists those transient things among which are the powers, authorities and principalities. They are evil here in association with other malign spirits. The order is exactly opposite that found in Ephesians 1:21 and 1 Corinthians 15:24.

Acts of Philip

This is a Christian work which is not necessarily unorthodox. It is dated at the end of the fourth or beginning of the fifth century.¹ In this passage, Philip is speaking as he is hanging upside down on a cross:

Now give to me the eternal crown of victory against every opposing principality and authority [ἀρχῆς καὶ ἐξουσίας], and do not let their dark air cover me, in order that I might pass through the waters of fire and the whole abyss. My Lord Jesus Christ, do not let the enemy have an opportunity to accuse me before your judgment seat, but clothe me with your glorious robe, and your radiant seal which always shines, so I might pass by all the world-rulers [κοσμοκράτορας] and the evil dragon which opposes us² (Acts Phil. 144).

Gnostic cosmology has influenced this work. Philip must pass through regions controlled by evil beings in order to ascend to God. He associates the principalities and authorities with the air, possibly indicating their sublunary

¹Hennecke, New Testament Apocrypha, p. 577.

²Greek text from Bonnet, Acta Apostolorum Apocrypha, p. 86.

nature. They might be a subset of the larger category called world-rulers, but this is uncertain. They are of relatively high rank and are evil in nature.

Cave of Treasures

This Christian work is a history of the world from creation to Christ. It is attributed to Ephraim the Syrian of the fourth century and was edited in the sixth century. It was written and is extant in Syriac.¹

[In the beginning, on the first day of the week] God created the heavens, and the earth, and the water, and the air, and the fire [i.e. the four elements], and the host which are invisible (that is to say, the Angels, Archangels, Thrones, Lords, Principalities, Powers, Cherubim and Seraphim), and all the ranks and companies of spiritual beings . . . (Cave of Treasures 1:3, italics mine.)²

The thrones, lords, principalities and powers are associated with holy beings, at least at the time of their creation. Whether the author considers them to be unfallen at present is a moot point. This passage may depend on Colossians 1:16, where the same order of terms is found.³

The Gnostic literature surveyed has portrayed the powers as evil in nature, and the Christian work is ambiguous. The value of the Gnostic testimony is that it draws upon backgrounds concurrent with but independent of Paul.

¹Ernest Alfred Budge, The Book of the Cave of Treasures (London: Religious Tract Society, 1927), p. xi.

²Ibid., pp. 43-44.

³See Foerster, "ἔξουσία," p. 572 for examples of Paul's terminology in Gnostic writers preserved in the Greek fathers.

This background indicates an evil nature for the powers.

The Hellenistic Terminology for the Powers

As Paul took the gospel to the Gentiles, he adapted it to the world view of his hearers. He was introduced to this background within Judaism itself, and being a Hellenistic Jew, he also encountered Greek categories directly. The two main Hellenistic concepts regarding the powers were the ideas of world-rulers and elemental spirits. These were astrological categories which captivated the Greek world. Paul used these concepts to adapt his apocalyptic scheme of powers to his Gentile audience.

The World-Rulers

Introduction

Astrology invaded from the east and conquered the Greek mind.¹ Stoicism spread the astrological religion rapidly due to the failure of the anthropomorphic religion.² Following the Babylonians, the Greeks identified the planets with the five principal gods in their pantheon.³ These five planets along with the sun and moon were called κοσμοκράτορες.⁴ This terminology is common in the

¹ Caird, Principalities and Powers, p. 14.

² Jung Young Lee, "Interpreting the Demonic Powers in Pauline Thought," NovT 12. (January 1970):59 (hereafter cited as Lee, "Powers").

³ Caird, Principalities and Powers, p. 14.

⁴ Lee, "Powers," p. 60.

astrological writings.¹ They were sources of evil to those who refused to recognize the power of the stars to control one's fate. Man's destiny came to depend upon what star was prominent at his birth.² Later the gods associated with the planets were called *κοσμοκράτορες*.³ It was transliterated as a loan word in Rabbinic Judaism.⁴ Men greatly feared these powers. Bevan has expressed this well:

When men looked up to the stars, they shuddered to see there the Powers whose mysterious influence held them in the mechanism of an iron necessity. These were the World-rulers (*κοσμοκράτορες*) who fixed men's destiny without any regard to human will and human tears.⁵ We have never been thoroughly frightened; the ancient world was frightened; there is a great difference.⁶

The religious man became absorbed in devising an escape from the prison-house of the stars. He looked to the saviors of the Mystery cults to deliver him from his fate and to magic to manipulate the powers.⁷ This was the background of many of Paul's converts.

¹TDNT, s.v. "*κοσμοκράτωρ*," by Wilhelm Michaelis, 3:913.

²Lee, "Powers," p. 60.

³Michaelis, "*κοσμοκράτωρ*," p. 913.

⁴Cf. the Testament of Solomon 8:2, 18:2.

⁵Edwyn Bevan, Hellenism and Christianity (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1921), p. 77.

⁶*Ibid.*, p. 79.

⁷MacGregor, "Powers," pp. 20-21.

Textual illustrations

Testament of Solomon

The Testament of Solomon discussed above is a first century A.D. Jewish work edited in the early third. It is heavily influenced by Hellenistic and astrological thought and provides a background very similar to that which Paul shared with his converts. World-rulers are referred to several times. These world-rulers are *decani*, i.e. lords of the ten degrees of the zodiacal circle referred to by Celsus in A.D. 170.¹ He says that one must propitiate these thirty-six unseen powers if he wants health. The Testament advocates knowing the names of the angels who are able to subdue these powers, as well as the use of amulets and incantations. The phrase *κοσμοκράτορες τοῦ σκότους* is used, as in Ephesians 6:12, but cannot be regarded as imported from Paul. Paul merely alludes to a system into which the Testament enters in great detail. They both were familiar with the same stock of common demonological beliefs.²

Testament of Solomon 8:2. Solomon commands seven female spirits to identify themselves. They reply by saying:

*ἡμεῖς ἐσμεν στοιχεῖα κοσμοκράτορες τοῦ σκότους.*³
We are elemental spirits, world-rulers of the darkness.

¹Origen, contra Celsum, 6.33; 8.58-59.

²Conybeare, "The Testament of Solomon," pp. 6-8.

³McCown, The Testament of Solomon, p. 31.

They continue:

Our stars are in heaven, seven stars humble in sheen,
and all together. And we are called as it were
goddesses [ὡς θεοὶ καλούμεθα].¹

Testament of Solomon 18:2. Solomon commands some
spirits to identify themselves. They also reply by saying:

ἡμεῖς ἔσμεν τὰ τριάκοντα ἕξ στοιχεῖα,
We are the thirty-six elemental spirits,
οἱ κοσμοκράτορες τοῦ σκότους τοῦ αἰῶνος τούτου.
the world-rulers of the darkness of this age.

The first world-ruler continues:

I am the first decanus of the zodiacal circle, and I am
called the ram . . .³

These two passages, along with the Testament of
Solomon 20:15 cited above, provide crucial background
information for the Pauline concept of the powers. In 8:2,
the world-rulers are associated with stars and are called
gods. In 18:2, they are identified with this age in apoc-
alyptic fashion and are associated with the darkness which
characterizes this age. The first one identifies himself
with the zodiacal circle. These beings cause physical mal-
adies and cause men to sin, and they are subdued by calling
on the name of a particular angel. So they are definitely
evil, cosmic, astrological beings called gods, who vex
mankind. In 20:15, they are ranked much higher than the

¹Ibid. English text from Conybeare, "The Testament
of Solomon," p. 24.

²McCown, The Testament of Solomon, p. 51.

³Conybeare, "The Testament of Solomon," p. 34.

demons, and are associated with the principalities and authorities, and here, with the elemental spirits. The latter connection will be explored below.

The Gnostic Acts

Acts of John 23. This work was introduced above as a third century A.D. work with affinities to Valentinian Gnosticism. In this passage the apostle John is speaking to Cleopatra, a Christian woman, at Ephesus in an attempt to raise her from the dead.

Cleopatra, He [Jesus] speaks, whom every ruler fears, and every creature, power [δύναμις], abyss, and all darkness, and unsmiling death, . . . the whole power of the prince of this world [τοῦ κοσμοκράτορος] and the pride of its ruler: Arise . . .¹ (Act. John 23, italics mine.)

Here, Satan is called the world-ruler. Nowhere in the NT is he given this title, but by implication he is certainly their chief. He is definitely of evil character.

Acts of Philip 144. See the text cited above. Philip prays that at death, he may pass safely by all the world-rulers, which are viewed as enemies, and ascend to God. They are evil beings who dwell in the heavens, and are of high rank. They are associated with the principalities and authorities.

Conclusions about the world-rulers

The world-rulers are evil beings associated with the

¹Hennecke, New Testament Apocrypha, p. 218. For Greek text, see Bonnet, Acta Apostolorum Apocrypha, p. 163.

stars, the zodiac signs, and the darkness of this age. They vex mankind and cause them to sin. They are called gods and dwell in the heavens, thwarting man's ascent to God. They are closely associated with principalities and powers (T. Sol. 20:15) and with elemental spirits (T. Sol. 8:2; 18:2).

The Elemental Spirits

The elemental spirits (στοιχεῖα) are the second category which Paul employed to adapt his concept of powers to the Gentile world. This concept will now be explored.

The meaning of the word

First, στοιχος described a member of a series or a list of things.¹ στοιχεῖα were letters of the alphabet as they follow one another in order.² Third, they were fundamental principles which provide the basis for everything that is to be built upon it.³ Fourth, they were the matter or elements out of which everything was formed. These were earth, fire, water and air.⁴ Fifth, they were the stars which consist of elements.⁵ Of this Caird writes:

¹Eduard Lohse, Colossians and Philemon, trans. William R. Poehlmann and Robert J. Karris, Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971), p. 96.

²Ibid.

³Ibid.

⁴Ibid.

⁵Ibid.

In astrology the heavenly bodies were regarded as divine beings and known as τὰ στοιχεῖα. Under the influence of their regular motions the whole of human life was controlled by bonds of inexorable necessity.¹

Sixth, they were used of the twelve signs of the zodiac.²

Seventh, they were associated with the gods themselves.³

MacGregor writes: "Every element was thought to have its god, so that the word comes to be used of these 'elemental' deities or demons."⁴

Textual illustrations

The Testament of Solomon

The Testament of Solomon 8:2 and 18:2 equate the world-rulers with the elemental spirits. This equation suggests that the στοιχεῖα were considered to be personal astrological beings in the first century A.D.⁵ They are called gods in 8:2, are associated with the stars, and are connected with the zodiacal circle in 18:2. This background provides important information for the exegesis of Galatians 4:1-11 and Colossians 2:8,20.

Hellenistic texts

In the Orphic hymns, Hephaestus is called the

¹Caird, Principalities and Powers, p. 50.

²Lohse, Colossians and Philemon, p. 96.

³Ibid.

⁴MacGregor, "Powers," p. 21.

⁵See TDNT, "στοιχεῖον," by Gerhard Delling, 7:670-87 for a contrary opinion.

στοιχείον ἀμεμφές , the "perfect element," and the moon-goddess is called the στοιχείον ἄφθαρτον in the great Paris magical papyrus. In the Hermes Trismegistus, compiled about A.D. 300 but incorporating much earlier materials, the στοιχεῖα come as gods before the supreme God.¹ These texts clearly demonstrate that this term was understood as elemental spirits and referred to deities.

The Book of the Laws of the Countries

This Syriac work was written in the late second or early third century A.D. In it, there are four passages in which the Syriac equivalent of στοιχεῖα is used of personal cosmic powers.² They show that the inhabitants of Mesopotamia at that time understood the term to refer to personal powers, just as Paul's original readers would have.³

The passages are as follows:

On this account, let it be manifest to you, that the goodness of God has been great towards Man, and that there has been given to him free-will more than to all these Elements of which we have been speaking.⁴

¹MacGregor, "Powers," p. 21.

²William H. P. Hatch, "τὰ στοιχεῖα in Paul and Bardaisan," *JTS* 28 (January 1927):181 (hereafter cited as Hatch, "Bardaisan").

³Ibid., p. 182

⁴Ibid., p. 181.

I say to him (i.e. Bardaisan), 'And how will those things which are fixed be judged?' He said to me, 'Not in so far as they are fixed, O Philip, will the Elements be judged, but in so far as they have power.'¹

But I (i.e. Bardaisan) say that God and the Angels and the Powers and the Governors and the Elements and men and animals have this power; but to all these orders of which I have spoken power is not given in everything.²

But let us therefore speak and shew concerning Fate, that it has not power over everything; because this very thing itself which is called Fate is an order of procession which is given to the Powers and to the Elements by God.³

The elements here are portrayed as personal or semi-personal. Man has more free will than they do. But they are ranked above man in reference to power and control over fate. These elements will be judged according to their portion of power. Although the text is obscure, it shows the direction in which the personification of the elements traveled and their control over fate.

Conclusions about the elemental spirits

The elements seem to be employed in these passages as personal spirits which are associated with deities and astral powers. The Testament of Solomon is the most important text for the background of Paul, since it employs many of Paul's most important terms in a pellucid manner, and because it originated in the first century A.D. in a

¹Ibid., pp. 181-82.

²Ibid., p. 182.

³Ibid.

Jewish-Hellenistic setting. The other texts provide confirmation of the results found in the Testament. Therefore, this meaning sheds light on Paul's general concept of the powers, since he uses this term in close association with the principalities and authorities (Col 2:8, 10, 20).

Paul's Concept of the Powers

In this section, a brief survey of Pauline texts which deal with the powers will be given. From this survey, conclusions will be drawn concerning the meaning of the terms, their interrelationships, and the moral character of the beings described.

Sources of Concepts

"Paul seems . . . to be at the point where Jewish ideas concerning 'angels' and Hellenistic ideas concerning astral and cosmic powers intersect."¹ He held OT ideas of angelic rulers of nations, who were in rebellion against God. He borrowed most of his terms from apocalyptic Judaism.² Through the close association of angels with the elements and the heavenly bodies, it was not difficult for Paul to adapt that scheme to the Hellenistic concepts of world-rulers and elemental spirits, which comprised the background of his converts, without himself subscribing to all the details. Being a monotheist, Paul always

¹C. H. Powell, The Biblical Concept of Power (London: Epworth Press, 1963), p. 168.

²Cf. Hendrick Berkhof, Christ and the Powers, trans. John H. Yoder (Scottsdale, PA.: Herald Press, 1977), pp. 16-17.

viewed these beings as under the sovereignty of God.

Pauline Texts

First, the texts in which the evil nature of the powers is not emphasized will be surveyed. Then the remaining texts will follow.

Neutral texts

Ephesians 1:21

In this passage, Paul is describing the power of God which He exercised in raising Christ from the dead and elevating Him to His right hand. The height to which He is raised is an indication of His superiority over lower beings. He is raised ὑπεράνω πάσης ἀρχῆς καὶ ἐξουσίας καὶ δυνάμεως καὶ κυριότητος and any other being which anyone can name. The order of the terms does not suggest a hierarchy, since the order is reversed in Colossians 1:16. This text does not emphasize their moral character, therefore it is indecisive in that regard.

Ephesians 3:10

Paul is describing the stewardship with which God entrusted him, to reveal the mystery of the gospel so that the powers might come to understand the incredible wisdom of God. This wisdom is revealed ταῖς ἀρχαῖς καὶ ταῖς ἐξουσίαις in the heavenlies through the church. Some conclude from this passage that the principalities and

authorities must be morally good, since God is trying to teach them about Himself. However, this conclusion does not necessarily follow. In the OT, God was interested in displaying His strength to the nations which were Israel's enemies so that they would know that He was the Lord. Certainly there could be various reasons that God would have revealed His wisdom to these beings. Paul only mentions two categories, but all these terms seem to point to only one actual phenomenon.

Colossians 1:16

Paul describes Christ as the agent of all creation because he wishes to emphasize His superiority over all creatures. He created all visible and invisible things *εἴτε θρόνοι εἴτε κυριότητες εἴτε ἀρχαὶ εἴτε ἐξουσίαι*. They were created through Him and for Him. Their moral nature is not emphasized. Obviously they were created in an unfallen state. Whether they have remained in that state is not within the purview of this passage. Their order is arbitrary.

Colossians 2:10

Paul describes Christ as the fullness of deity in a body. He is *ἡ κεφαλὴ πάσης ἀρχῆς καὶ ἐξουσίας* and the believer has full salvation in Him. This headship does not imply anything about their moral nature. He is head because of creation and redemption. God has exalted Him

to that position at His right hand. He is the head of all creation (Col 1:15).

Negative texts

Ephesians 6:12

Paul is exhorting the Ephesians to arm themselves with the panoply of God so that they will be able to do battle with the devil and the powers. The believer's fight is *πρὸς τὰς ἀρχάς, πρὸς τὰς ἐξουσίας, πρὸς τοὺς κοσμοκράτορας τοῦ σκότους τούτου, πρὸς τὰ πνευματικὰ τῆς πονηρίας* in the heavenlies. Here Paul closely associates the world-rulers with the principalities and authorities as in the Testament of Solomon 20:15 and the Acts of Philip 144. They are all clearly malevolent beings here. It must be noted that Paul does not explicitly include the astrological and Gnostic superstitions which were seen in the extra-biblical texts.

1 Corinthians 15:24

Christ, as the Last Adam, secures resurrection for all those in Him, each in his own order. Christ is raised first, then His people at His coming. The consummation of the age follows at which time He subdues *πᾶσαν ἀρχὴν καὶ πᾶσαν ἐξουσίαν καὶ δύναμιν*. These powers are clearly evil and oppose Christ until the very end. Only the coming of Christ will finally defeat them. Until then they are inimical foes (Eph 6:12).

Romans 8:38-39

Paul is assuring the Roman Christians that nothing can separate them from God's love. He lists adverse circumstances in 8:35 and hostile forces which are unable to do so. These forces were probably sources of great fear for Paul's converts. He lists among them ἄγγελοι, ἀρχαί, ἐνεστῶτα, μέλλοντα, δυνάμεις, ὑψωμα and βάθος. In Paul's day, the impersonal words were used as technical astrological terms. Paul is probably reflecting this meaning without full cognizance of them.¹ ἐνεστῶτα is the present position of the stars in their courses by which the future is determined.² μέλλοντα is the future position by which all the future thereafter is determined.³ ὑψωμα is the exaltation of the planets in the heavens, the moment at which the hostile planets are most potent for harm.⁴ βάθος is their declension when the friendly planets are least powerful to save.⁵ This collection of technical terms is no accident. Paul chose them as representing the most ominous forces which petrified the ancient world. He intermingles the terminology for the powers in this list, since they also came to have astrological connotations by their associations with

¹Wilfred L. Knox, Paul and the Church of the Gentiles (Cambridge: University Press, 1939), p. 106.

²Ibid.

³Ibid.

⁴Ibid.

⁵Ibid.

world-rulers. They are clearly evil beings here.

1 Corinthians 2:6,8

Paul preached Christ crucified without embellishing the message with Greek wisdom. However, he was willing to discuss hidden mysteries with the mature. The ἄρχοντες τοῦ αἰῶνος τούτου did not know these mysteries, and therefore crucified the Lord of glory. These are not earthly rulers but evil cosmic beings. 1 Enoch 6:8 calls the angels who were ἀρχαί by the title ἄρχοντες. This association would be apposite here also.

Galatians 4:3,8,9

Paul describes the bondage of the Jews under the Law as an enslavement under the elemental spirits of the world (Gal 4:3). The Gentiles were also enslaved under these elemental spirits (Gal 4:9). The elemental spirits are referred to as τοῖς φύσει μὴ οὖσιν θεοῖς in 4:8. They are personal beings, but they do not have the nature of true deity. He also likens them to guardians and stewards in 4:2. They are somehow connected with legal systems like the Mosaic Law and the astrological laws of the Gentiles¹ (Gal 4:5,9,10). The specific mention of the festival calendar governed by the movement of heavenly bodies in

¹Berkhof, Christ and the Powers, p. 20.

4:10 points to their astral character.¹ Paul might tacitly connect them with the angels who ordained the Law.² These beings are not friendly to man but hold them in bondage from which Christ sets men free.

Colossians 2:8,20

Paul describes the heresy as a philosophy of human tradition and as connected with the elemental spirits of the world. They are associated with the principalities and authorities in 2:10,15. Those who died with Christ are out from under these elemental spirits in 2:20 and are no longer bound to obey ascetic ordinances which are designed to placate these cosmic beings as described in 2:20-23. They are of essentially the same character as in Galatians.

The Moral Nature of the Powers in Paul

The negative texts clearly show the inimical character of these beings. Although created by Christ, they are now fallen creatures hostile to God and man. They are rulers of this evil age and will continue to oppose until the end of the age. The neutral texts are fully compatible with this conclusion. They simply emphasize other aspects of their character than their moral nature. These results will have important implications for the exegesis of Colossians 2:15.

¹Leivestad, Conqueror, p. 94.

²Bo Reicke. "The Law and This World according to Paul: Some Thoughts concerning Gal 4:1-11," JBL 70 (1951):262.

CHAPTER III

THE EPISTLE TO THE COLOSSIANS

The nature of the heretical teaching at Colossae will be explored in this chapter, since the nature of Paul's polemic in 2:15 is directly related to it. The surrounding context will also be examined to determine the meaning of phrases crucial to the exegesis of 2:15.

The Heresy

A knowledge of the nature of the heresy is indispensable to a correct understanding of the epistle. Most of Paul's statements are directly or indirectly related to refuting it. Without some knowledge of it, one is left groping in the dark without essential contextual information, and his exegesis is bound to be inaccurate.

The Complexity of the Problem

Determining the nature of the heresy is a difficult problem because Paul nowhere directly states the tenets of the error. Directly negative statements give some indication of their teachings, and positive statements in the epistle may point to doctrines which the heretics had perverted and which needed clarification.

While extremes have been taken on the nature of the heresy, the consensus of scholarship is that the heresy represented at Colossae is a mixture of Jewish and Greek elements.¹ This is the most probable solution² as the following discussion will show.

A survey of the heretical doctrines will demonstrate the mixture. The ceremonialism found in the epistle has definite Jewish affinities. Circumcision is mentioned in 2:11. Paul teaches that the believer has been circumcised with a real circumcision when he was united with Christ, of which the Jewish ceremony is a mere token. The false teachers must have been teaching the necessity for a ceremonial circumcision, which Paul deprecates in 2:11 as being merely physical. Dietary laws are mentioned in 2:16 in terms of what to eat and drink. These are probably references to the Mosaic Law, as in Romans 14:17 and Hebrews 9:10, which might have been expanded beyond its purview as in the oral tradition of the Pharisees. The sacred calendar is also mentioned. The keeping of festivals and new moon festivals and the sabbath day was advocated, as in Galatians 4:10,

1

Cf. Edwin Yamauchi, "Qumran and Colosse," BSac 121 (April 1964):152. He sees it as a syncretistic Judaism with elements of nascent Gnosticism in transition toward the type found at Chenoboskion.

2

See J. B. Lightfoot, Saint Paul's Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon (reprint, Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1959), pp. 73-113. (hereafter cited as Lightfoot, Colossians) for an excellent discussion of this syncretism.

where there certainly is a Jewish connection. These exact terms are used in 2 Chronicles 23:31 (LXX) of the Mosaic Law. However it is not clear what meaning was attached to these Jewish festivals, ceremonies and laws. But there was a definite Jewish connection. Paul's Jewish terminology for the powers, θρόνοι, κυριότητες, ἀρχαί and ἐξουσίαι, confirms this.

But all cannot be explained as elements of Judaism. Its classification as a philosophy in 2:8 probably points toward a Greek character.¹ Its emphasis on asceticism in 2:20-23 would probably be Greek. Its connection with astrology through the στοιχεῖα in 2:8,20 also points in that direction. They may be the same beings as the angels in 2:18 who receive worship in this system. Bultmann considers the elemental spirits to be Gnostic.² The intermediary beings mentioned in 1:15-17 along with their worship in 2:18 would point to an incipient form of Gnosticism.³ Terms later connected with Gnosticism are used, such as πλήρωμα, μυστήριον and γνῶσις.⁴ Possibly these intermediary beings

¹Eduard Lohse, "Pauline Theology in the Letter to the Colossians," NTS 15 (January 1969):212 (hereafter cited as Lohse, "Pauline Theology").

²Rudolf Bultmann, Theology of the New Testament, 2 vols., trans. Kendrick Grobel (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1951), 1:173.

³H. A. Kennedy, "Two Exegetical Notes on St. Paul," ExpTim 28 (May 1917):363.

⁴Ibid.

promised the Colossians fullness, which, they were told, could not be obtained from Christ. These components of the heresy strongly hint at a Hellenistic influence.

A Reconstruction of the System

Based on the heretical teachings in the epistle itself, along with the background of these tenets in Judaism and Hellenism, a tentative reconstruction of the heretical system will be made which reflects a consensus of scholars. Since salvation and cosmology were closely linked in the ancient world,¹ the cosmology associated with the elemental spirits should have important implications.

The goal of this system was to achieve fullness, escape this evil material world beyond the powers of the seven spheres, and ascend to God.² However, the problem was that the capricious elemental spirits controlled them through fate and blocked their escape. They were trapped in this evil material world far from their heavenly home. The solution was in manipulating and placating these intermediary cosmic powers who were also sources of revealed knowledge.³ By observing certain Jewish-syncretistic

¹R. S. Barbour, "Salvation and Cosmology: The Setting of the Epistle to the Colossians," SJT 20 (September 1967):262.

²Allan Douglas Galloway, The Cosmic Christ (London: Nisbet and Company, 1951), p. 49.

³Leivestad, Conqueror, p. 96.

rituals, abstaining from foods and abasing themselves before angels to receive secret revelations and knowledge essential for passing through the heavenly spheres, they could prepare themselves for their escape.¹ The result of this teaching was that Christ was demoted to a mere intermediary among many. Knox believes that He was viewed as a messenger from God who could deliver men from the sphere of the lower air and Satan and could raise them to the moon, but the realms beyond could only be ascended by those with additional knowledge, which He had not revealed. Mystery religion was the answer.²

Paul's Response

Paul's world view was basically apocalyptic. He believed in two ages or periods of time. This present age is evil (Gal 1:4), and is ruled by the evil rulers of this age (1 Cor 2:6,8), the world-rulers (Eph 6:12), the principalities and authorities (1 Cor 15:24). He believed in the age to come (Eph 1:21), in which the powers will be subdued and the kingdom of God will reign (1 Cor 15:24).

Paul was not interested in the details of Hellenistic cosmologies. He ignored the mutual relationships and used their titles indiscriminantly. They represented

¹Ibid. See Knox, Paul and the Church of the Gentiles, pp. 154-55 for the best treatment of this subject.

²Ibid., p. 151.

essentially one cosmic metaphysical totality (cf. Eph 1:21). Instead he presented Christ as preeminent over all principalities and authorities and the source of the πλήρωμα. He argues in this manner: Christ created the powers. This makes them creatures (Col 1:15-17). He potentially reconciled them by His death. So, they are fallen creatures (Col 1:20). He defeated them on the cross. So they must be defeated, hostile creatures (Col 2:15).¹

What is the background of Paul's response to this heresy? Knox believes that Paul utilized the Gnostic Redeemer Myth and portrayed Christ as the Redeemer figure in 2:15. He writes:

[Christ] descended secretly through the spheres of the rulers, and assumed a body that was subject to them in so far as it was of a material character, but exempt from them in so far that He was free from sin; thus Jesus reversed the fall of Adam Having allowed Himself to be subject to them, He put aside His material body on the cross, nailing it to the cross.²

He considers it an obvious approximation to the typical redemption-myth of Hellenistic theology.³ Danielou, on the other hand, considers the background to be Jewish Christianity, in which the abode of the demons is the lower air. Christ does battle with these powers of the

¹Ibid., p. 97.

²Knox, Paul and the Church of the Gentiles, p. 169.

³Ibid., p. 109.

air (Eph 2:2) when He is raised up on the cross in 2:15.¹ Although Schweizer objects to the Gnostic-myth interpretation on the basis that the powers were defeated instantly on the cross instead of gradually in His ascent,² it seems likely that Paul did adapt his gospel to this nascent Gnostic milieu by presenting Christ's work as generally parallel to his reader's expectations of a redeemer figure.³ This is why later Gnostics could find points of affinity with Paul.⁴

The Context of Colossians 2:15

The context of 2:15 is crucial to the exegesis of the passage. The ideas of flesh, law, and principalities and authorities are central to this context. Therefore this context will be summarized and the important concepts will be examined.

A Summary of Colossians 2:6-23

Paul begins this paragraph exhorting the Colossians

¹Jean Danielou, The Theology of Jewish Christianity, 3 vols., trans. John A. Baker (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1964), 1:192.

²Eduard Schweizer, The Letter to the Colossians, trans. Andrew Chester (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1982), p. 152.

³Cf. Knox, Paul and the Church of the Gentiles, p. 25.

⁴Wilhelm Bousset, Kyrios Christos: A History of the Belief in Christ from the Beginning of Christianity to Irenaeus, trans. John F. Steely (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1970), pp. 254-58.

to continue in the doctrine about Christ which they were taught (2:6-7). He warns them in 2:8 not to let anyone make booty of them through a heretical philosophy having to do with astral spirits, because (2:9) all the fullness of deity bodily dwells in Christ, not in these astral beings. The believer has complete salvation in Him, who is the head of every cosmic power (2:10). In Him the believer was circumcised, buried, raised, made alive, and forgiven all transgressions (2:11-13). God removed the book of sins and the Law, and Christ utterly defeated and humiliated the cosmic powers who enslaved them through the Law (2:14-15).

This polemic forms the basis for the exhortation in 2:16-23. They should not let others coerce them into observing food taboos and sacred calendars, or into seeking angelic revelations of mysteries, or involvement in asceticism as a means of stripping off the body of flesh. With Christ they have died out from under the power of the elemental spirits. They no longer are in bondage to these things. The powers are defeated! The Law is removed! The flesh is crucified!

An Examination of Concepts

The stripping of the body of flesh

The phrase in 2:11 ἀπέκδυσις τοῦ σώματος τῆς σαρκός is pivotal in the exegesis of 2:15 because ἀπέκδυσις is the noun form of a crucial verb in 2:15, ἀπεκδύω. They occur close together in the same context. Since the noun and

verb are first found in Paul, and only in Colossians, there is a very strong reason to believe that their meanings are closely related.

Some think ἀπέκδυσις refers to the removal of the sensual nature.¹ They take flesh in the ethical sense, as the carnal affections. It refers to the change of the nature of the convert. In this case, the περιτομή τοῦ Χριστοῦ could either be Christian baptism, or the crucifixion, when Christ's flesh was totally removed.² Others take ἀπέκδυσις of Christ's stripping off His physical flesh in the crucifixion, in which case the circumcision would be another description of His crucifixion, as above.³

Both ideas fit the passage well, but the latter commends itself for good reasons. Colossians 1:22 uses the phrase ἐν τῷ σώματι τῆς σαρκὸς αὐτοῦ διὰ τοῦ θανάτου to refer to the means by which men were reconciled. This doubtless teaches that salvation was obtained through the death of Christ's physical body of flesh. This theme seems to be very important in this epistle, and argues for an identity between these phrases. Gregory of Nyssa uses this phrase ἐν τῇ ἀπεκδύσει τοῦ σώματός μου to refer to his

¹E.g. C. F. D. Moule, The Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Colossians and to Philemon (Cambridge: University Press, 1968), p. 95 (hereafter cited as Moule, Colossians).

²Ibid.

³Ibid., pp. 95-96.

death.¹ The term σῶμα is used in contrast to the small portion of skin involved in ritual circumcision, which would fit the crucifixion. However, the passage is elusive. Paul blends the ideas of physical flesh and flesh as a metaphor for carnal nature in Romans 7:4,5. He says that the believer was removed from being ἐν τῇ σαρκί through the σῶμα τοῦ Χριστοῦ. The evil nature is associated with the physical flesh in Romans 7:18 which he calls "this body of death" in 7:24. Therefore, it is probably best to allow it to stand in its pregnant sense, which can encompass both ideas within the single phrase. It points to the physical stripping off of Christ's flesh which allows us to strip off the old nature in baptism.

The chirograph against us

The removal of the chirograph is the subject of the metaphor in 2:14. The removal of it is directly related to the defeat of the principalities and authorities. Therefore the meaning of the metaphor will be examined.

The removal of τὸ καθ' ἡμῶν χειρόγραφον is a further explanation of the forgiveness of trespasses in 2:13. It is associated with the Mosaic Law τοῖς δόγμασιν, as in the parallel passage in Ephesians 2:15, where the Law is nullified by Christ's flesh. Its removal is associated with the defeat of the powers in 2:15. They oppress and vex men by

¹Gregory of Nyssa, vita macrinae (M.46.985A).

accusing them on the basis of the Law¹ (Rom 4:15, Rev 12:10, Gal 3:19). Therefore, removing the Law would disarm them.

The chirograph has been interpreted in various ways.² Typically it is understood as a document of debt signed by man. This is a well attested meaning in the papyri.³ However attempts to show that the sinner has signed or agreed to obey the law are not convincing. *Χειρόγραφον* has been found in an anonymous Jewish Apocalypse of the first century B.C. referring to a book held by an accusing angel, in which the seer's sins are recorded. He requests that his sins be blotted out.⁴ The advantage of this interpretation is that it does not require the believer's signature. It is presented by a denizen of the spirit world, as in 2:14-15.

While retaining the reference to the book of sins, Blanchette sees the book as referring to Christ.⁵ He took our sins upon Himself on the cross and was identified with them

¹Caird, Principalities and Powers, p. 43.

²Elaine Hiesey Pagels, The Gnostic Paul: Gnostic Exegesis of the Pauline Letters (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), p. 139.

³See James Hope Moulton and George Milligan, The Vocabulary of the Greek Testament Illustrated from the Papyri and Other Non-Literary Sources (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1930), p. 687 (hereafter cited as Moulton, Vocabulary).

⁴Andrew John Bandstra, The Law and the Elements of The World (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1964), p. 159.

⁵See O. A. Blanchette, "Does the Cheirographon of Col 2:14 Represent Christ Himself?" CBQ 23 (July 1961): 306-12.

(1 Cor 5:21). Hippolytus preserves an early Docetic interpretation of Colossians 2:14, wherein the soul of Christ strips off the body and nails it to the tree.¹ This second century interpreter obviously identified the chirograph with Christ's body. The fact that only Christ's body was actually nailed to the cross provides additional support. Christ's body of flesh through death is the means by which believers are reconciled in Colossians 1:22. Therefore, it seems politic to interpret the chirograph as the book of sins which is nailed to the cross through Christ's identification with it.

Stripping off the old man

This concept of stripping off the old man, ἀπεκδυσάμενοι τὸν παλαιὸν ἄνθρωπον (Col 3:9), has direct connections to the concept of stripping off the body of flesh in 2:11 and to the exegesis of 2:15. Besides 2:15, this is the only occurrence of this compound verb in the NT or anywhere in Greek literature up to this time period. Its use was highly deliberate, since Paul used a more common word for this same concept in a directly parallel passage (Eph 4:22). Therefore, it is highly probable that these cognates are employed with a similar meaning.

This metaphor is rare. Only one parallel has been found, in Pyrrho of Elis of the third century B.C., the

¹Hippolytus, contra haereses, 8.3 (M.16.3355B).

founder of the Sceptic school.¹ About the difficulties involved in making the transition from the unenlightened state to the enlightened one, he said, χαλεπὸν ἔστιν τὸν ἄνθρωπον ἐκδύναι. "It is difficult to put off the man."² This expression in Paul has reference to the putting off of the sinful passions and carnal mindset in baptism, when one puts on Christ (Gal 3:27).³ It has essentially the same meaning as the concept of stripping off the body of flesh in 2:11, where the connection with baptism is explicit.⁴

There is a close relationship between this concept and the experience of Christ in 2:15. The stripping off of the body of flesh or the old man is directly related to the act of Christ on the cross, when He stripped off the cosmic powers in the stripping off of His physical body of flesh, identified as it was with the sins of men (Col 2:14). This connection will be important in the exegesis of 2:15.

Conclusions

The heresy probably is a Jewish-Gnostic syncretism involving astrological and cosmological elements. Cosmic powers play an important role, and have eclipsed the pre-eminence of Christ. Ceremonialism, asceticism and angelic

¹P. W. van der Horst, "Observations on a Pauline Expression," NTS 19 (January 1973):185.

²Ibid., pp. 185-86.

³Ibid., p. 182.

⁴Ernst Kasemann, Essays on New Testament Themes, trans. W. J. Montague (London: SCM Press, 1964), p. 163.

worship are the means of obtaining full salvation and escape from this material world. Paul's polemic is to prove the superiority of Christ over these astral beings and the futility of ritual and ascetic practices to obtain fullness, since this fullness can only be found in Christ.

In his argument, Paul uses important phrases. He uses ἀπεκδύω and its cognate noun to refer to the stripping off of physical and ethical flesh, concepts closely related in Paul. He refers to the inimical chirograph which is the book of sins associated with the body of Christ and removed by nailing to the cross. The background of the heresy and these important concepts will be major factors in the exegesis of Colossians 2:15.

CHAPTER IV

THE EXEGESIS OF COLOSSIANS 2:15

Colossians 2:15 is an obscure, convoluted passage. The difficulty of its exegesis is evidenced by the variety and multiplicity of interpretations proffered.¹ An old and often neglected interpretation will be defended in this chapter by adducing evidence from the Greek fathers which is usually evaluated by most commentaries in an inadequate manner through a brief summary of it contained in Lightfoot's commentary on Colossians.² Since ἀπεκδύω is first found in Paul, the interpretation of it by native Greek speakers will be pivotal.

Stripping off the Principalities and Authorities

Lack of Evidence before Paul

One of the main problems associated with the study of this verse is that a key word ἀπεκδύω is not found before Paul.³ He also used another unattested word ἀπεκδέχομαι

¹For an excellent summary of views, see Robert G. Bratcher and Eugene A. Nida, A Translators Handbook on Paul's Letter to the Colossians and to Philemon, Helps for Translators (Stuttgart: United Bible Societies, 1977), p. 62.

²For summary, see Lightfoot, Colossians, pp. 189-91.

³Moulton, Vocabulary, p. 56.

which is similarly compounded.¹ It is not known whether he was first to use this word, but Proclus, a non-Christian author after Paul also used it.² Since these authors have no obvious connection, it is assumed that either the word was in use before Paul, or that this is an instance of two authors independently coining the same word. The result of the addition of the prepositional prefix is to perfectivize the meaning of ἐκδύω.³ It emphasizes the completeness of the stripping action.⁴

Significance of the Voice

This is the watershed for the exegesis of this passage. Admittedly, this is a difficult issue. Abbott agrees: "It is very difficult to decide in what sense the word is to be used here."⁵ First, the arguments for understanding the middle voice as active will be given.

Active meaning

Many modern scholars understand the middle voice

¹Ibid.

²Horst, "Observations on a Pauline Expression," p. 184.

³Moulton, Vocabulary, p. 56.

⁴Lightfoot, Colossians, p. 189.

⁵T. K. Abbott, A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistles to the Ephesians and to the Colossians, ICC (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1979), p. 258 (hereafter cited as Abbott, Colossians).

here to be employed with an active meaning. However the problem is that they can adduce no examples of ἐκδύομαι or its compounded forms that are used as actives. It is purely a supposition based on the middle of a few other verbs which are employed this way. The supporters of this view will be surveyed.

The lexicons and grammars generally support this view. According to Thayer, ἀπεκδύομαι in Colossians 2:15 means "wholly to put off for one's self (for one's own advantage), despoil, disarm."¹ He gives it an indirect middle meaning which is tantamount to the active. According to Robinson, it means "to strip (anyone) for oneself, to despoil"² in 2:15. He adduces as proof an example of the active of ἐκδύω used by Plutarch of stripping kings.³ According to LSJ, it means "to strip off for oneself, despoil" in 2:15.⁴ They adduce no other texts as proof.⁵ For 2:15, BAGD cites the meaning "disarm" with no proof.⁶ TDNT agrees with the others and simply labels attempts to

¹Joseph Henry Thayer, comp., A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament (New York: American Book Company, 1889), p. 56.

²Edward Robinson, comp., Greek and English Lexicon of the New Testament (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1850), p. 70.

³Ibid.

⁴LSJ, p. 184.

⁵Ibid.

⁶BAGD, p. 83.

see a middle significance as "unsatisfactory."¹ BDF cites 2:15 as an example of the active sense without any parallels given.² From this survey, it is seen that many modern interpreters favor the active sense, but that none of them is able to demonstrate it by citing other examples as proof.

However other arguments are used. Westcott notes that "the directly reflexive middle is very rare" and takes it as an indirect middle³ as Robinson did above. Although the direct middle may be very rare in general, it is a very common use of this verb. Lohse believes that the verb may be used either way based on BDF, and settles the exegetical question in favor of the active sense by deciding that God is the subject of 2:15.⁴ For him the question of the voice significance is secondary to the question of the subject.⁵ Some base their decision on the general principle that the middle can be used for the active.⁶ Dibelius quotes the Acts of Pilate 23 to show that the active of

¹TDNT, s.v. "ἀπεκδύω," by Albrecht Oepke, 2:319.

²BDF, p. 165.

³Frederick Brooke Westcott, Colossians: A Letter to Asia, with a forward by Cyril J. Barber (reprint, Minneapolis: Klock and Klock Christian Publishers, 1981), p. 115.

⁴Lohse, Colossians and Philemon, pp. 111-12.

⁵Ibid.

⁶Oepke, "ἀπεκδύω," p. 319.

ἐκδύω can mean "to spoil."¹ Others simply go along with "the greater number of modern scholars."²

Much of modern scholarship on this question reduces to the application of a general principle concerning the Greek voices. This principle is used only when sense cannot be made of the text by employing the normal meaning of the voice. It will be shown that native Greek-speaking commentators did not feel a need to call upon this general principle in their interpretations of this text.

Middle meaning

Some modern interpreters do support the direct middle significance of this term. Lightfoot dismisses the active meaning because it "disregards the middle voice."³ C. F. D. Moule agrees when he writes that "it is questionable whether this verb could be so used [i.e. as despoiling] in the middle voice."⁴ Robertson explicitly states that in 2:15 this phrase does not mean to undress the powers, but to throw them off from one's self.⁵ Carr notes that Paul

¹Martin Dibelius, Die Geisterwelt in Glauben des Paulus (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1909), p. 138 n.4.

²Leivestad, Conqueror, p. 103.

³Lightfoot, Colossians, p. 189.

⁴Moule, Colossians, p. 101.

⁵A. T. Robertson, A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1934), p. 805.

is very careful about the middle voice. "Certainly the translation 'having disarmed' . . . is quite impossible."¹

Since authorities disagree, the word itself must be studied to determine its use. Since ἀπεκδύομαι is first attested in Paul, ἐκδύομαι, which is its unperfectivized form, will be studied as it was used before him.

Outside the NT, ἐκδύω was used in the active "to strip off" and in certain tenses "to get out, escape or shun."² Sometimes the active was used for the middle "to put off."³ The middle was used with an accusative of thing to mean "to strip oneself of, put off," and absolutely to mean "to put off one's clothes" or as a metaphor for death.⁴ In the NT, it is used four times in the Gospels in the active of stripping Jesus of His clothes, and once in the middle absolutely to refer to putting off one's body at death (1 Cor 5:4). But nowhere is the middle used in an active sense. Findlay strongly comments that the meaning "'to strip from another, to spoil,' is never, from Homer downwards--one doubtful instance excepted--expressed by the

¹Wesley Carr, Angels and Principalities: The Background, Meaning and Development of the Pauline Phrase hai archai kai hai exousiai (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p. 59 (hereafter cited as Carr, Angels).

²LSJ, p. 505.

³Ibid.

⁴Ibid.

middle, but always, and with numerous examples, by the active voice of ἀπό and ἐκδύω."¹

The use of the same verb in 3:9 and the noun in 2:11 in a direct middle sense strongly argue for the middle sense in 2:15, especially in light of the interrelatedness of the ideas involved, and the infrequency of the words.² Romans 6:6 ties all these ideas together in one verse. The old man, the body of sin (i.e. the body of flesh), the crucifixion of Christ, and baptism (Rom 6:4-6) are closely related in Pauline thought. Therefore the uses of ἀπεκδύω and ἀπέκδυσις support the middle sense in 2:15.

Since ἀπεκδύω is first found in Paul, it is necessary to study how this word was used by Greeks immediately after Paul and also how they interpreted his uses of it. This is where most interpreters of Colossians fail in their exegetical task. The majority have only a cursory knowledge of the use by the Greek fathers through the brief summary of Lightfoot. Therefore, these texts will be cited and examined for their relevance to 2:15.

Only one instance of the active is found in Ammonius Alexandrus. He is describing what the baptizing pastor accomplishes for the one whom he baptizes. He writes:

¹George G. Findlay, "St. Paul's Use of ΘΡΙΑΜΒΕΥΩ," The Expositor 10 (1879):406 (hereafter cited as Findlay, "Paul's Use").

²Ibid., p. 405

καὶ ἀποπλύνων καὶ ἀπεκδύων αὐτὸν ἀπὸ τῆς προῦπούσας
 And he washes away and strips him completely of his former
 αὐτῷ θρησκείας καὶ μετενδύων αὐτὸν εἰς Χριστόν.¹
 religion and clothes him with Christ.

He did not use the middle to express the stripping of another but employed the active. The preposition is used with the thing stripped.

Using the middle voice metaphorically, Clement of Alexandria, of the late second century, writes that the believer must put off the passions ἀπεκδυσάμενος τὰ πάθη² which he equates with ἀποθέσθαι τὰ πάθη as Paul does (Col 3:8,9).

Hippolytus preserves a Docetic interpretation of Colossians 2:14-15. He writes in the third century:

. . . in order that, when the Archon condemned his own form of flesh to death, i.e. to the cross, that Soul which had been nourished in the body, having stripped off the body [ἀπεκδυσάμενη τὸ σῶμα] and having nailed it to the tree, and having triumphed over the principalities and authorities through this body, he might not be found naked, but might put on the other body . . .³

This Docetic interpreter understands the verb in Colossians 2:15 in a middle sense, though he takes it as absolute and supplies the missing object. It is interesting that he interprets the chirograph as a reference to Christ's body

¹Ammonius Alexandrinus, fragmenta in Ac., 19.5 (M.85.1573B).

²Clement of Alexandria, stromateis, 6.14 (M.9.332A).

³Hippolytus, refutio omnium haeresium, 8.10 (M.16.3355B).

nailed to the tree.

Methodius Olympus in the late third century paraphrases 2 Corinthians 5:4, in which Paul used ἐκδύσασθαι, with the phrase τὸ σῶμα ἀπεκδύσασθαι.¹ This shows that these two forms of the verb were closely related and had similar meanings. This also shows that the middle of this verb used absolutely carried the idea of putting off the body.

Constantinus Diaconus, in a strange passage about martyrdom, refers to stripping off the body at death τὸ σῶμα . . . ἀπεκδυσάμενοι.²

Pseudo-Chrysostom paraphrases Colossians 2:11 with the command Περιτέμνου δὴ καὶ ἀπεκδύου τὸ σῶμα μετὰ Χριστόν.³ The believer is able to strip off his evil nature because of his association with Christ's act of stripping off the body.

These general uses of the verb will now be supplemented with uses of it in direct connection with Colossians 2:15. These will show how these interpreters understood Paul's statement itself and the significance of the middle voice.

Origen, writing about the fact that Jesus changed his appearance on occasion, wrote:

¹Methodius Olympus, de resurrectione mortuorum, 2.15 (M.18.312B).

²Constantinus Diaconus, laudatio omnium martyrum, 40 (M.88.525B).

³Pseudo-Chrysostom, in pascha, 5.2 (M.59.736).

We say that, before Jesus had stripped off the principalities and authorities, and not yet having died to sin, all men were capable of seeing Him. But after He had stripped off the principalities and authorities [τὸν δὲ ἀπεκδυσάμενον τὰς ἀρχὰς καὶ τὰς ἐξουσίας], and no longer having anything capable of being seen by the multitudes, all who had formerly seen Him were not able to behold Him.¹

Origen understood the verb as a middle with the powers as the object stripped off and Christ as the subject. Stripping the powers off was tantamount to stripping off the body, since He had nothing by which the people could see Him. This association is important to the exegesis of 2:15.

Basiliius Caesariensis comments on Christ's victory over the powers:

Having stripped them [the principalities and authorities] off [ἀπεκδυσάμενος αὐτάς], even as if having thrown away from them that which we had as our woven outer covering, He stripped off the principalities and authorities, and He exposed them boldly, leading them in a victory procession through the cross.²

Christ is the subject of the verb, which is taken as a middle. The object is the powers, and this act of stripping is equated with the stripping off of our physical constitution by Christ on the cross as though it were a woven garment.

Maximus Confessor of the seventh century uses the verb in the middle three times in reference to 2:15:

¹Origen, contra Celsum, 2.64 (M.11897B).

²Basiliius Caesariensis, commentarius in Is., 249 (M.30.557C).

. . .that, having completely made void in Himself the destructive poison of their wickedness, as fire He might consume it, having utterly destroyed the outward form, having stripped off the principalities and authorities [ἀπεκδυσάμενος . . . τὰς Ἀρχὰς καὶ τὰς Ἐξουσίας] at the time of His death on the cross . . .¹

He uses the verb as a middle and closely associates the stripping off of the powers with the destruction of the outward form, which is probably the body. Later in this passage, he uses the same phrase "stripping off the powers" and applies it to Christ when He successfully resisted Satan in the desert.

Origen writes of the believer:

Each of those who are crucified with Christ strips off the principalities and authorities [ἀπεκδύεται τὰς ἀρχὰς καὶ τὰς ἐξουσίας], and displays them, and leads them in triumphal procession through the tree. But rather Christ does these things in them.²

Origen understands it here as a middle and the believer as the subject, but only in association with Christ. The believer dies to sin in this way.³

Chrysostom comments on Colossians 2:15 and paraphrases the verb with another:

¹Maximus Confessor, quaestiones ad Thalassium de scriptura, 21 (M.90.316A).

²Origen, commentariorum in Mt. libri 10-17, 12.25 (M.13.1040B).

³For another example, see Origen, commentarii in Jo., 20.36 (M.14.657C).

Because human nature had put on these [i.e. the powers], or because they had, as it were, a hold, when He became a man, He stripped away [ἀπεδύσατο] their grip.¹

He uses the middle of ἀποδύω as an equivalent of ἀπεκδύομαι. Christ is the subject and the object is the grip which the powers held upon fallen human nature. He associates the powers and the flesh as the other commentators have.²

Theodoret comments on Colossians 2:15 and closely connects the body of Christ with His victory over the powers. He clearly understood the verb to have a middle sense. After citing 2:15 he writes:

For since through the passions of the body the demons had dominion over us, He Himself, while wearing the body, became superior to sin. He destroyed the dominion of the enemies, . . . through His own body having freely given to us all the victory over them.³

John of Damascus, commenting on Colossians 2:15, combines Christ's stripping off the powers with His stripping off the body.

For the One who put life to death put to death the chirograph against life, and the wicked authorities who produced the fleshy wickedness, even as if covering and cloaking over man, He stripped [i.e. them] off along with the body [συναπεκδύσατο τῷ σώματι], hung them together, while on the one hand He bore the shame in the eyes of men, yet on the other hand He turned it around unto the ones who crucified Him, being the rulers of this age.⁴

¹Chrysostom, homiliae in Col., 6.3 (M.62.341).

²See Theodorus of Mopsuestia, commentarii in Gal.-Col., Col 2.15 (M.66.612B) for a similar paraphrase.

³Theodoret, interpretationes in Pauli epistulas, Col. 2.15 (M.82.612B).

⁴John of Damascus, ex interpretatione Chrysostomi loci selecti in epistulas Pauli, Col 2.15 (M.95.896A).

Severianus Gabalensis, of the late fourth century A.D., understood ἀπεκδύομαι in Colossians 2:15 as a middle,¹ but made the admission that others understood ἀπεκδυσόμενος as the active ἐκδύσας.² The identity or number of those who understood it in this way is not known.

It is significant that all the Greek fathers extant understood this verb as a middle. Ammonius employed it in the active voice when he desired the active sense. The others all used it in the middle voice and understood it either as stripping off the body or stripping off the powers in association with the body. All understood Christ as the subject of 2:15, the preponderance of commentators who were native Greek-speakers felt no apparent difficulty in taking it in its normal sense. Therefore, it seems more prudent to follow their opinion in this matter rather than to apply a general principle concerning the middle voice which is only used when the middle sense itself cannot provide a suitable meaning.

The Subject of the Verse

God

Many commentators make the issue of subject the primary consideration in this verse. Lohse believes that

¹For the Greek text, see G. W. H. Lampe, comp., A Patristic Greek Lexicon (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1961), p. 181.

²Ibid.

God is the only possible subject of 2:15, since He clearly is the subject in 2:13.¹ He sees 2:13-15 as a unit and therefore sees only one subject, since no other person is explicitly introduced. The meaning of ἐν αὐτῷ at the end of the verse is often used to support this decision. Since this phrase means "in Christ" earlier in the paragraph, it should carry that force here also.

The consequence of this decision to take God as the subject is that the middle voice is understood as an active, even though there is no firm precedent for it. This results in severing the meaning of ἀπεκδύω in 2:15 with the meaning it carries in 3:9 and the meaning of the noun in the same context in 2:11.

Christ

Others feel that Christ is a more appropriate subject. If the normal meaning of the middle is sustained, which has excellent precedent, then God can hardly be the subject.² Carr believes that the ascension motif present in 2:15 demands that Christ be the subject, since the NT normally applies this theme to Him.³ Hanson sees Ephesians 2:14-16 as a commentary on Colossians 2:13-15. Since the

¹Lohse, Colossians and Philemon, p. 112.

²For an attempt at this, see Findlay, "St. Paul's Use of ΘΡΙΑΜΒΕΥΩ," pp. 403-21.

³Carr, Angels, p. 59.

former passage takes Christ as the subject, the latter should be understood the same way.¹ This thought has some merit, especially in light of the remarkable affinities. Bruce sees a possibility of a change in subject due to the unity of the work of God in Christ.² Bandstra sees the explicative καί and the change in verb tense in 2:14 as indicators of a subject change.³ The semi-doxological nature of these verses raises the possibility that the subject will be ambiguous. The same is true in Romans 9:5 and in 1 John 5:20. Paul does change subjects between God and Christ in subtle ways at times. In Colossians 1:18-19, a passage with close ties to 2:9-15, Paul changes subjects from Christ to God without any explicit marking. In fact, one would assume that the subject changed to τὸ πλῆρωμα until the masculine participle is encountered later in the verse, which indicates God as subject. ἦρκεν is probably the best place to see the change of subject because the introduction of καί breaks the parallelism with 2:13 and

¹Anthony Tyrell Hanson, "The Conquest of the Powers," in Studies in Paul's Technique and Theology (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1974), p. 10. His connection of this passage with Num 25:1-5 is less than convincing.

²F. F. Bruce and E. K. Simpson, Commentary on the Epistles to the Ephesians and to the Colossians, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1957), p. 239 n.68.

³Bandstra, The Law and the Elements of the World, p. 163.

2:15,¹ although some take all of 2:14 as applying to Christ.²

The Object

Once the significance of the voice and the subject is decided, there still remains the issue of the object of ἀπεκδυσάμενος. The issue is whether to take the verb as absolute, in which case "the body" would be understood, or to take the following accusative words, "the principalities and authorities," as the object.³

The body

Some have understood the verb to be used absolutely. Robinson, a strong supporter, writes that "the dying Jesus, like a king, divests Himself of that flesh, the tool and medium of their power, and thereby exposes them to ridicule for their Pyrrhic victory."⁴ This view has considerable support.

¹Ibid.

²Robertson, Colossians, p. 84.

³For other, aberrant interpretations, see Lee, "Interpreting the Demonic Powers in Pauline Thought," p. 64, who believes that Christ stripped Himself off from the flesh, and Kennedy, "Two Exegetical Notes on St. Paul," p. 366, who supplies the word "us", so that God stripped the powers off us.

⁴J. A. T. Robinson, The Body: A Study in Pauline Theology (London: SCM Press, 1952), p. 41.

Usage of the verb

This view can claim precedent for this meaning of the verb in the middle voice in Paul himself. He uses ἐκδύσασθαι absolutely to refer to the putting off of the body at death (2 Cor 5:4), which is his only usage outside Colossians. The LXX employs it unambiguously as ἐκδύσασθε, γυμναὶ γένησθε (Isa 32:11). But sometimes the understood object is supplied. Colossians 2:11 would be an example in a noun clause. Origen uses ἀποδύομαι τὰ σώματα.¹ Some early Greek fathers, such as Hippolytus, Methodius and Constantinus, supply the same object in the passages by them quoted above. The Latin fathers commonly interpreted the phrase this way.² Even some early versions paraphrased it this way.³

Contextual support

This view can claim the parallel wording of Colossians 2:11 as support. If the circumcision of Christ in 2:11 is understood as His crucifixion, this also can be mustered. The close association between the chirograph and Christ's body is claimed as supporting evidence.⁴

¹Origen, contra Celsum, 8.44.

²Lightfoot, Colossians, p. 190.

³Ibid.

⁴Bandstra, The Law and the Elements of the World, pp. 158,162.

O'Neill has suggested a repunctuation of 2:14, whereby the neuter relative pronoun would begin a new thought, referring to the body, which He took out of the way.¹ Thus the topic of the body is in the immediate context. Carr sees the motif of triumph in 2:15 as determinative. He sees the stripping as a reference to the putting off of the battle dress of the victor, which he equates with Christ's flesh, which preceded the donning of the ceremonial dress of the triumphator.²

Although there are many attractive reasons for adopting this view, there are some problems. The places where the verb is used absolutely have no possible accusative juxtaposed which could possibly be taken as the object.³ In this passage, there is an accusative phrase. Also, although some Latin fathers understood the object to be the body, the native Greek-speaking fathers all understood the principalities to be the object. If Paul wished to convey the absolute idea unambiguously, he could have placed the accusative phrase on the other side of the second verb. But since he did not, he probably meant the reader to connect the accusatives with the first verb.

¹J. C. O'Neill, "The Source of the Christology in Colossians," NTS 26 (October 1979):95-96.

²Carr, Angels, p. 61.

³John Rutherford, "Note on Colossians 2:15," ExpTim 18 (September 1907):565.

The principalities and powers

The unanimous interpretation of the Greek fathers was that the principalities and powers were the object of the verb. Lightfoot claims Chrysostom, Severianus, Theodore of Mopsuestia and Theodoret as supporters of this view.¹ Above, it has been shown that Origen, Basilus Caesariensis, Maximus Confessor and John of Damscus were also supporters. These tacitly or explicitly understood the powers to be the ones whom Christ stripped off. Lightfoot expresses the viewpoint well:

The powers of evil, which had clung like a Nessus robe about His humanity, were torn off and cast aside for ever. In His cross we too are divested of the poisonous clinging garments of temptation and sin and death.²

This strong support by these fathers is particularly significant since this is more a point of word usage than a matter of theology. Their agreement on this point suggests, not dependence, but the clarity of the expression to a Greek. It is noteworthy that the Latin fathers, whose Greek was either a second language or who did not know it, were the ones who interpreted it differently.

Other arguments in favor of this interpretation are that the position of the accusatives naturally suggest this interpretation. The absence of τὰ σῶμα also supports

¹Lightfoot, Colossians, p. 190.

²Ibid.

this interpretation.¹ The tacit connection between the body of flesh and the powers in 2:10-11 supports a connection in 2:15.² It is clear that most of the fathers quoted above saw a connection between the stripping off of the powers and Christ's removal of the body. While maintaining the proper grammatical object, they associated this extrication of Christ with 2:11. Therefore it is very probable that the stripping off of the powers was accomplished by the removal of the flesh,³ as John of Damascus expressed with his own compound verb *συναπεκδύσατο αὐτὰς τῷ σώματι*. In this case many of the arguments for the absolute position above actually support this view. Then the idea is that Christ completely stripped off from Himself the principalities and powers by stripping off the body of flesh on the cross, the only foothold which the powers had with Him.

Abbott objects that it is difficult to think of the powers as Christ's clothing.⁴ However, because of the close connection between the body and the powers, to strip one is to strip both. One certainly can think of the body as a garment, as Paul does in 2 Corinthians 5:4. He

¹Moule, Colossians, p. 101.

²Kaseman, Essays on New Testament Themes, p. 162.

³MacGregor, Caird, Hanson and Kaseman support this view.

⁴Abbott, Colossians, p. 259.

also calls this a retreat and not a victory.¹ But the point is that the crucifixion transmuted a defeat and death into a victory. This is the theme of 1 Corinthians 2:6-8 and John of Damascus' passage quoted above. These "serious if not fatal objections"² are nugatory.

Making a Show of Them Openly

The Verb

Some interpreters see δειγματίζω as a neutral verb meaning "to publicize."³ Often these interpreters view the powers as good or neutral beings. Carr says that the term is a colorless word.⁴ O'Brien believes that it is not an equivalent of the negative compound παραδειγματίζω,⁵ which is supported by Lightfoot.⁶ But he does connect the display with that of a victor and his captives.⁷

Others believe it is a negative term basically equivalent to the negative compound.⁸ The compound is

¹Ibid.

²Ibid.

³E.g. Carr, Angels, p.63.

⁴Ibid.

⁵P. T. O'Brien, "Principalities and Powers and Their Relation to Structures," Reformation Theological Review 40 (January 1981):128.

⁶Lightfoot, Colossians, p. 191.

⁷Ibid.

⁸E.g. TDNT. s.v. "δειγματίζω," by Heinrich Schlier, 2:31.

found as a variant reading for δειγματίζω in Matthew 1:19, where it connotes a negative idea. Theophylact supports this connection.¹ The Ascension of Isaiah 3:13 exemplifies this meaning:

Τοῦ δειγματισμοῦ ὅτι ἐδειγματίσεν τὸν Σαμαήλ.²
 the exposure with which he (Isaiah) exposed Samael.

This example shows that the meaning can be negative. Samael is exposed to shame. This meaning is confirmed by its association with the triumph motif.³ These beings are publicly exposed to ridicule by Christ.

The Prepositional Phrase

Lightfoot believes that ἐν παρρησίᾳ must mean "boldly" and not "publicly."⁴ However, the meaning "openly, publicly" seems to fit better here. This is supported by John 7:4, where it is used as an opposite of ἐν κρυπτῷ, and synonymous with φανερώω. Theophylact's comment on this phrase is "δημοσίᾳ, πάντων ὀρώωντων, openly, in the eyes of all."⁵ Westcott notes that even Lightfoot

¹John Eadie, Commentary on the Epistle of Paul to the Colossians, with a Forward by Cyril J. Barber (reprint, Minneapolis: James and Klock Christian Publishing Company, 1977), p. 172 (hereafter cited as Eadie, Colossians).

²Schlier, "δειγματίζω," p. 31.

³Rory B. Egan, "Lexical Evidence on Two Pauline Passages," NovT 19 (January 1977):53.

⁴Lightfoot, Colossians, p. 191.

⁵Eadie, Colossians, p. 172.

acknowledges this secondary meaning.¹ Their exposure is open to all, in contrast to their clandestine operations.

The Triumphal Procession

The Verb

Although some have interpreted *θριαμβεύω* as "to triumph over,"² the two serious alternatives are the Greek and Roman meanings.³ The word is not found earlier than Paul.⁴ Findlay, a supporter of the Greek meaning, claims that the Roman military meaning rests on three texts, Plutarch (A.D. 80), Appian (A.D. 140) and Herodian (A.D. 238). These writers employed it in reference to Roman affairs.⁵ Findlay believes that the Latin assimilation of the Greek word among Greeks had not taken place yet.⁶ The later Byzantine lexicographers gave the word a non-military meaning along with ecclesiastical and later Greek authors.

¹Westcott, Colossians: A Letter to Asia, p. 115-16.

²A. S. Peake, "The Epistle to the Colossians," in vol. 3 of Expositor's Greek Testament, ed. W. Robertson Nicoll (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1976), p. 530.

³For a detailed discussion of these meanings, see H. S. Versnel, Triumphus: An Inquiry into the Origin, Development and Meaning of the Roman Triumph (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1970), pp. 11-55.

⁴Findlay, "Paul's Use," p. 414.

⁵Ibid., pp. 412-13.

⁶Ibid.

This meaning was "to make public, to disgrace."¹ Findlay traces the meaning of the verb on the basis of an earlier noun *Θρίαμβος* as follows:²

1. to sing a dithyramb, to go in dithyrambic procession.
2. to make one so sing, to lead in dithyrambic or festal procession.
3. to lead about, to show in public, to publish, to divulge.
4. to lead in mock procession, to disgrace.

He believes that Colossae belonged to the same region in which the enthusiastic worship of Dionysus flourished.³

However, Findlay has won almost no adherents among scholars.

But recently Egan has attempted to defend this view.⁴ He sees no battle in Colossians 2:15. The powers were created for Christ and He is their head. He adduces an example of a cognate verb found in a 14 B.C. papyri as proof for the non-Roman meaning. In this text ἐκθρίαμβίζω means "to noise abroad."⁵ He also adduces examples of *θρίαμβεύω* later than Paul which support this meaning, as well as examples of early versions of the NT which

¹Ibid.

²Ibid., p. 416.

³Ibid., p. 418.

⁴Egan, "Lexical Evidence on Two Pauline Passages," p. 35.

⁵Ibid., p. 41.

understood the word this way.¹

The Roman military meaning has been supported by the majority of scholars. Absolutely, it means "to enjoy a triumphal procession, or celebrate a victory."² With direct personal object, it means "to lead as a conquered enemy in a victory parade."³ As noted above, it has been attested in the first century A.D. author, Plutarch (A.D. 80), which is the earliest example of the verb itself outside Paul. Supporters of this view sometimes overstate their case. Williamson, after examining the texts cited in LSJ and Bauer, concludes that the Roman meaning is the only supportable one.⁴ O'Brien does not believe that the Greek meaning was widespread or early enough for the Corinthians or Colossians to understand it that way.⁵ In reality, it appears that both these meanings have early attestations and are both lexically possible.

Ultimately the context must be determinative. Most

¹Ibid., pp. 42-44, 54.

²O'Brien, "Principalities and Powers and Their Relation to Structures," p. 128.

³Ibid. See also TDNT, s.v. "θριαμβεύω," by Gerhard Delling, 3:160.

⁴L. Williamson, "Led in Triumph: Paul's Use of thriambeuo," Int 22 (July 1968):317-22.

⁵O'Brien, "Principalities and Powers and Their Relation to Structures," p. 128.

of the supporters of the Greek view also believe that the powers in Colossians are good beings.¹ They must seek for a neutral meaning of this verb, since a shameful displaying of good beings in a victory procession would be inconsistent. Since in Paul the principalities and powers are inimical beings, the Roman military meaning seems to fit this context of battle and triumph. The negative meaning of δειγματίζω and the nexus between Christ and the powers suggested by ἀπεκδύω support this meaning.

The Prepositional Phrase

The phrase ἐν αὐτῷ has been interpreted either of Christ or the cross. The choice is based primarily upon the decision concerning the subject of the verse. If God is the subject, then the phrase may be understood of Christ, as the phrase is understood in Colossians 2:6-12. God is often the subject in this book with Christ as the agent (cf. Col. 1:19). This view has evidence to commend it. However, the verb ἀπεκδυσάμενος precludes the subject being God. The phrase can be interpreted as a reference to the cross. It is understood that way in the parallel passage in Ephesians 2:16. This is highly significant, especially when it is noted that the passage in Ephesians is replete with the phrase ἐν αὐτῷ. Obviously the frequency of the phrase employed in another sense does not obviate

¹Cf. Findlay, "Paul's Use," p. 410, and Egan, "Lexical Evidence on Two Pauline Passages," pp. 55-56.

the possibility that it might have another meaning. This meaning fits well with Christ being the subject. It is through the cross that Christ put off the powers and was able to display them to public ridicule. It is appropriate to end this verse with an allusion to the instrument by which He won the victory.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

The subject of the powers has been surveyed. This survey has shown that Paul most probably derived most of his terminology for the powers from Judaism. The terminology was employed of good and of evil beings, but these beings were always of high rank. However, there was no uniform hierarchy among the terms employed. In addition to the Jewish terms, Paul also used some Hellenistic terms for the powers. These terms, *κοσμοκράτορες* and *στοιχεῖα*, were used of personal astrological beings which controlled men's fates. Paul associated the principalities and authorities with these astrological beings, thus blending the Jewish and Hellenistic concepts. By surveying the Pauline passages where terminology for the powers was employed, it was seen that Paul himself viewed them as hierarchically high beings of inimical nature. These are the beings which Christ defeats in Colossians 2:15.

The context of the epistle to the Colossians has been examined. The heresy attacked by the epistle was probably a Jewish-Hellenistic syncretism, in which nascent Gnostic elements and astrological ideas were present. In this heresy, the principalities and authorities were viewed as

cosmic beings whom men feared because of their power over them. A worship of these beings along with asceticism and angelic revelations was also present. Christ was viewed as merely an intermediary being among many others. Paul responded to this error by presenting Christ as the head over all cosmic beings and as the ideal Redeemer-figure, which was a concept familiar to them. He descended through the sphere of the powers and defeated them by stripping them off on the cross.

Some important concepts were examined in the epistle. The stripping off of the body of flesh in 2:11 referred elusively to Christ's crucifixion and to the associated putting off of the old nature by the believer in baptism described in 3:9. The inimical chirograph in 2:14 was shown to be primarily the book of sins with the associated ordinances of the Mosaic Law. This book was linked with the body of Christ nailed to the cross, which prepares the reader for its association with the stripping off of the hostile powers in the next verse.

The exegesis of Colossians 2:15 was presented. It was seen that the verb ἀπεκδύομαι should be understood as a middle and not as an active. The use of it by Paul elsewhere, the use of it by all the extant Greek fathers, and the use of its cognates strongly support this conclusion. The patristic evidence was seen to be of particular value in determining the question of the voice significance. Christ was seen to

be the subject of the verse, since He is the one who, in His incarnation, could strip off the powers in the crucifixion. The proper object of the verb was shown to be the principalities and authorities. The subsequent verbal clauses support this conclusion. Christ shamefully displayed these evil powers in public, and led them in His victory procession through His work on the cross. This interpretation was demonstrated to be consistent with the context and the grammar of the verse.

Further work remains to be done on Paul's practice of changing subjects between clauses. A thorough study would reveal whether he always clearly signals the change or not. This would help to decide whether the positing of the subject change based on the sense of the passage is a reasonable one. The use of ἀπεκδύομαι or its cognates in the middle voice have not been found with a personal object in a passage not dependent on Colossians 2:15. It was assumed that this combination basically parallels the meaning of the verb with an impersonal object. If examples of its use with the personal object can be adduced, it could clarify the meaning of this verse.

This passage presents the work of Christ on behalf of the believer wherein He is described in a metaphorical manner to remove the book of sins with the Mosaic Law and nail it to the cross in association with His body. He thereby completely stripped off of Himself the hostile

principalities and authorities and gained a victory over them for every believer. Then He displayed them to open shame and paraded them as his captives of war for all to see their helplessness and utter defeat. All who are in Him participate in this victory through their association with Him in baptism. They are more than conquerors through Him that loved them (Rom 8:37).

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