1 “Dominions and Authorities” in Paul: the Philology of archē and exousía and a Christological Synthesis of Dominion

Abstract The article presents a philological and theological treatment of Paul’s “Dominions and Authorities” (archaí kai exousíai). The analysis focuses on the basic semantic ranges of the terms archē and exousía, showing their flexible usage — from “beginning” to “rule” — and their function in the rhetoric of dominion and jurisdiction. In the light of key Pauline texts (Rz 8; 1 Kor 15; Kol 1–2; Ef 1; 3; 6) an image emerges of evil as an extra-individual dominion which may acquire personal, cosmic, and structural dimensions, without being reducible to any single one of them. The article strictly distinguishes philology from theological synthesis (e.g., the interpretation of structures or the “principles” of the world) and warns against projecting later angelological hierarchies back onto Paul’s language. In the synthetic part there is presented the Christological supremacy and victory over the Powers, their dethronement in the cross and the Church, and the ethical implications of the “armor of God,” criteria for legitimate application, and a correction of the thesis on the structural character of evil.

Keywords Paul the Apostle; archē; exousía; Dominions and Authorities; dýnamis; kosmokratores; rule; the cross; the Church; spiritual warfare

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1.1 Introduction: the language of dominion, not a catalogue of demons

Pauline "Dominions and Authorities" are not a simple list of individual demons. It is a language describing superhuman and supra-individual powers of rule. Philology by itself does not allow them to be wholly identified with particular social structures, systems of thought, or with later developed angelology. Theological application is legitimate so long as it grows out of Paul's whole anthropology, soteriology, and ethics, and not from the ambiguity of isolated words. A crucial distinction must be kept: what follows from philology, and what belongs to later theological synthesis. In this study that caution is maintained, while at the same time showing how the rhetoric of power and jurisdiction serves Christology and ethics in Paul.

1.2 The philology of archē

1.2.1 Verbal root and the double idea of "beginning" and "ruling"

The noun ἀρχή (archē) remains connected with the verb ἄρχω (archō), which can mean: to begin; to be first; to lead; to exercise authority; to rule. At its root two ideas meet: temporal or logical priority ("beginning") and hierarchical priority (exercise of authority). This does not mean, however, that every use of archē combines all these senses; context selects the meaning.

1.2.2 Semantic range and New Testament examples

In classical, Hellenistic, and New Testament Greek archē can mean: beginning, origin, first cause, basic principle, first place, office, rule, sphere of authority, power as institution, and also the person or being exercising authority. The ambiguity is illustrated by the contrast:

- Flp 4,15: en archē tou euangelíou — "at the beginning of the proclamation of the Gospel" (here archē means "beginning").
- 1 Kor 15,24: "every Dominion, every Authority and Power" — here archē stands in a series of terms of rule. The error to avoid is summing possible meanings and ascribing them to every occurrence (an etymological/lexical fallacy). The fact that archē can be a "principle" does not entail that "Dominions" are impersonal "principles governing the world."

1.3 The meaning of exousía

1.3.1 Right and capacity to act

ἐξουσία (exousía) embraces: freedom and capacity to act, right and authorization, jurisdiction, authority, office, and also the person/being possessing power. More often than physical force (dýnamis) it denotes right and position of exercising authority. In simplification: dýnamis asks "what can I do?", exousía — "by what right do I do it?". The distinctions should not be absolutized.

1.3.2 Apostolic freedom

In 1 Cor 9 exousía expresses Paul's apostolic right/freedom ("do we not have the right…?"). There is no talk here of demons.

1.3.3 Political authority

Rz 13,1: "let every person be subject to the governing authorities" (exousíai as political authorities/persons exercising them). The same noun can denote earthly authority and cosmic authority. It does not follow that earthly authority is a demon, nor that the exousía in Rz 13 equals the "Authority" of Ef 6.

1.3.4 Cosmic power

In Rz 8,38; 1 Kor 15,24; Kol 1,16; 2,10.15; Ef 1,21; 3,10; 6,12 exousía appears alongside names suggesting cosmic powers. In such contexts the exousíai are almost personified: they possess jurisdiction, can be subordinated, disarmed, put on public display, taught God's wisdom, can oppose believers.

1.4 The pairing archaí kai exousíai: rhetoric, not hierarchy

The expression hai archaí kai hai exousíai is often translated "Dominions and Authorities" / "Rulers and Authorities," etc. It does not have to mean two precisely distinct classes. It is possible that:

- it indicates two classes of heavenly beings;
- it creates a rhetorical accumulation of near-synonymous terms;
- it encompasses broadly understood powers of rule. The most probable is a flexible rhetoric of cosmic authority. One should not retroject here the mature angelic hierarchy known from later tradition. The accumulation primarily serves to stress the absolute supremacy of Christ over every form of authority.

1.5 Are the archai "principles governing the world"?

Archē can mean "principle/element/first cause," which theologically encourages a play of senses ("dominion" as organizing order). However in lists with exousíai, dynámeis, kyriotētes or "thrones" context shifts the meaning toward "powers/rulers." Statements about "abolition," "disarming," "being over," and about "learning wisdom" correspond rather to acting subjects than to abstract rules. A better formula: the archai are sovereign powers of dominion whose action can permeate the order of the world — also through "principles" and "systems" — which, however, already belongs to exegetical-theological synthesis, not to lexicographic definition.

1.6 Key Pauline texts

1.6.1 Rz 8,38–39: no powers will separate from God

"Neither angels, nor Dominions, nor Powers…" — the catalogue embraces the totality of reality. The "Dominions" belong to creation; they are not independent principles of evil nor rival gods. Their moral status is not here determined; the emphasis falls on the invincibility of God's love.

1.6.2 1 Kor 15,24–26: the dethroning of dominions

Christ "will abolish every Dominion, Authority and Power" (katargéō — to render ineffective, annul, abolish). The matter is the end of dominance and the capacity to enslave, not necessarily the annihilation of being. "The last enemy — death" points to evil as an extra-individual dominion, linked with sin and universal bondage.

1.6.3 Kol 1,16: created orders and ends in Christ

"Whether Thrones, whether Dominions, whether Principates, whether Authorities" — all was created "through" and "for" Christ. Authority as such is not evil; evil occurs when usurpation happens, when a relative order pretends to be absolute and exists "for itself." The language also has political resonance ("throne" as seat, symbol and institution of rule), but it does not provide grounds for a simple identification of the archai with the state, the economy, or culture.

1.6.4 Kol 2,10.15: Head of every authority and triumph through the cross

Christ — "Head of every Dominion and Authority" — "stripped the Dominions and Authorities" (apekdýomai) and "led them in triumph" (thriambeúō). The Powers are portrayed as armed adversaries, accusers, publicly humiliated defeated ones. Cosmic victory is concretized as liberation from the accusatory record, religious fear, false asceticism, worship of intermediaries and the "elemental spirits" of the world.

1.6.5 Ef 1,20–23; 3,10: the exaltation of Christ and wisdom revealed through the Church

Christ sits "above every Dominion, Authority, Power and Lordship and above every name." There is no hidden "name" or sphere outside His rule. "Through the Church" God's wisdom is made manifest "to the Dominions and Authorities." This does not decide their moral status; it shows the Church as a sign of breaking barriers (especially the Jew–Gentile division).

1.6.6 Ef 6,12: not a struggle against "blood and flesh"

"Our struggle is" against: Dominions, Authorities, kosmokratores "of this darkness," "spiritual [things/beings] of wickedness" in the heavenly places. Pálē denotes close combat, not debate. The opponent is not the human being; this is an important ethical warning against demonizing people. Kosmokratores (rulers of the world) belong to the order of darkness, and ta pneumatikà tēs ponērías can collectively denote the spiritual powers of evil. The list is rhetorical, not hierarchical.

1.7 Personal, cosmic, and structural evil

It is most apt to maintain the connection of three dimensions:

- Personal: evil has intention, strategy and the capacity to deceive (Satan, "designs").
- Cosmic: it exceeds the individual and belongs to the "present age" (Dominions, authorities, powers, "elemental spirits of the world").
- Structural: it becomes entrenched in relations, practices and systems (idolatry, divisions, the rule of sin and death). They are complemented by anthropological (sarx, desire), epistemic (blindness, "wisdom of the world"), political (earthly exousíai, imperial pressure), and religious (table of demons, ascetic prohibitions, cult of intermediaries) dimensions. Personal evil does not exclude structural evil; structural evil need not be a separate demon. Structures shape people, and human decisions solidify them.

1.8 "Internality" and "externality" of structures in Paul

Paul does not sharply separate "interior" and "exterior." Sin simultaneously dwells in a person, rules over the body, creates collective practices, acts through the Law misused against its purpose, belongs to the "present age" and leads to death. Similarly the Gospel works in heart, mind, body, community and in the

whole creation that waits for liberation. The "structurality" of evil thus denotes a multi-level dominion transcending dichotomies spirit–matter, individual–institution.

1.9 Walter Wink and the modern interpretation of the "Powers": intuition, value, limits

- Basic intuition: institutions and systems have an "inner spirituality" (ethos, legitimating myth, self-preserving mechanisms, shaping of consciousness). The "Power" is the spiritual dimension of the state, corporation, army, ideology, market, the Church as institution, the culture of domination. Wink does not reduce demons to sociology; he connects personal and structural dimensions of evil.
- Value: he explains how ordinary people participate in evil systems; how institutions compel actions contrary to conscience; how evil reproduces itself through language, ritual and roles; how a system becomes a quasi-personal power of loyalty.
- Limits: criticism (e.g., Chloe Lynch) points to too fast an equation of Pauline Powers with contemporary institutions. That is a theological application, not a lexicon entry. Ef 6,12 does not mean: "we fight against political and economic systems," but contemporary systems can become spaces of operation for the dominion which Paul describes in the language of the Powers.

1.10 The struggle for liberation of thinking

- 2 Kor 4,4: "God of this age" blinds minds — the action of the opponent is epistemic: a person looks but does not perceive; the cross is regarded as folly; power is confused with violence.
- 1 Cor 1–2: "the wisdom of God" versus "the wisdom of the world" and "rulers of this age": a value system glorifying force, domination and status is unmasked by the cross.
- Rz 12,2: "do not be conformed to this age, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind" — a change in the scheme of perceiving, evaluating, desiring and acting.
- 2 Kor 10,4–5: "demolishing strongholds" of reasoning, bringing "every thought" into obedience to Christ — a siege metaphor concerning mental fortifications; the weapon is not bodily.

1.11 The struggle for liberation of action

- Rz 5–7: sin as "lord" — it enters, reigns, deceives, kills, dwells in a person, uses the commandment, enslaves. The personal language does not require hypostatizing sin as an individual demon; the point is an extra-individual power acting through the body, desire and environment.
- Sarx ("the flesh") as a mode of existence closed to God — "works of the flesh" include individual and social transgressions (fornication, idolatry, sorcery, hatred, strife, jealousy, anger, rivalry, dissensions, envy).
- New action as the dethroning of power: the community forgives, refuses revenge, accepts the weak, crosses ethnic divisions, renounces domination, shares goods, protects conscience, uses freedom to serve, responds to evil with good, does not yield the body to sin. Ethics is the historical form of cosmic victory.

1.12 The "armor of God" as the counter-logic of the cross

Ef 6,13–18 displays real fields of contest:

- Belt of truth — against falsehood and ideological falsification.
- Breastplate of righteousness — against injustice, corruption and unjust practice.
- Feet fitted with the readiness of the Gospel of peace — against violence, hostility and the logic of domination.

- Shield of faith — against fear, despair and the absolutization of visible powers.
- Helmet of salvation — against accusation and hopeless bondage.
- Sword of the Spirit (the word of God) — against false narratives about God and humanity.
- Persistent prayer — against self-sufficiency and dependence on earthly strength. "Fighting against structures" does not consist in taking over political power. A Christian may externally defeat a "structure" yet internally adopt its logic of domination. True victory requires a form consistent with the cross.

1.13 Organized evil — but hierarchical?

It is correct to speak of the organized character of evil, by which is meant: enduring patterns, repeatable mechanisms, mutual reinforcement of falsehood, desires and institutions, multi-level action, strategies of deception, subordination of a person to a given order. However there are insufficient grounds for constructing from Paul's lists a strict administration of demons. "Organized" does not mean "bureaucratically hierarchized"; what is meant is an ordered anti-order with its own logic, language, practices and survival mechanisms.

1.14 Criteria for legitimate application

- Not every structure is evil: Kol 1,16 indicates that order, office and authority belong primordially to creation. Evil appears when a structure absolutizes itself, demands unconditional obedience, instrumentalizes persons, conceals responsibility, punishes truth, rewards injustice, creates a quasi-religious narrative and defends its existence at the expense of its end.
- Not every opponent is an instrument of a demon: Ef 6,12 protects against demonizing people.
- Structure does not remove responsibility: Paul combines real enslavement, personal responsibility and the possibility of liberation in Christ.
- One must not reduce evil to psychology or sociology: the talk about the Powers transcends the sum of human decisions.
- One must not ignore structures: if, after prayer, violence, injustice, falsehood, exploitation, contempt, covering up of guilt, religious manipulation remain, the dominion of evil has not been challenged.

1.15 Correction of the thesis under review

- "An analysis of Greek terms shows that Paul sees evil as an organized and structural phenomenon" — partially accurate. Philology discloses primarily a language of dominion and jurisdiction. The structural character of evil results from joining that vocabulary with Paul's whole teaching about the "present evil age," the reign of sin, the dominion of death, the scheme of the world, the body of Adam, blinded minds, social divisions and the victory of Christ.
- "The archai are not merely individual demons" — correct. They are sovereign powers related to the order of rule; their ontological status is not unambiguously defined.
- "They are the principles governing the fallen world" — possible as a theological interpretation, insufficient as a philological translation. In the texts "dominions/rulers" is preferable.
- "The struggle against them is the struggle to liberate human thinking and action" — essentially correct as a synthesis of Paul's thought. It is not limited to consciousness; it embraces the body, relationships, community, economy, exercise of power, care for the weak, overcoming fear of death and the hope of the transformation of creation.

1.16 Theological synthesis: a change of dominion and the shape of victory

The philology of archē and exousía does not allow a simple identification of "Dominions and Authorities" with contemporary institutions or with abstract principles. It reveals, however, Paul's fundamental intuition: evil should be described in the language of dominion. Evil is not merely a private fault, an incidental temptation or a single demon. It is also a reality that acquires jurisdiction, imposes a way of seeing, creates norms, organizes desires, entrenches itself in practices, exploits institutions, justifies itself and causes a person to consider slavery the natural order of the world.

The work of Christ is not reduced to the forgiveness of individual sins. It is a radical change of dominion: the transfer from the rule of sin, death and the "present age" under the rule of Christ. The Church's response cannot be the establishment of a competitive domination. Christ's victory is accomplished through the cross; the Church would betray it if it fought by the methods of Power: violence, falsehood, contempt, coercion and cult of force.

The deepest struggle with the "Dominions and Authorities" takes place where:

- falsehood yields to truth;
- domination — to service;
- violence — to peace;
- exclusion — to reconciliation;
- fear — to filial trust;
- idolatry — to exclusive faithfulness to God;
- "the scheme of this age" — to a renewed mind;
- the dominion of death — to the hope of resurrection.

Such a shape of victory is Christocentric and ecclesial: the Church as a reconciled community becomes the visible sign that the dominion of the Powers has been judged and dethroned.

Endnotes

1. Archē — noun related to ἄρχω; it joins ideas of "beginning" and "ruling." Context determines meaning.
2. Example of semantic flexibility: Flp 4,15 ("beginning") vs 1 Kor 15,24 ("Dominion" alongside "Authority" and "Power").
3. The etymological fallacy consists in summing possible meanings and assigning them to every use.
4. Exousía — right/authorization/jurisdiction; not identical with dýnamis (strength/effectiveness).
5. Rz 13,1: exousíai as political authorities; the same term can also denote cosmic powers — without simple identifications between them.
6. In cosmic catalogues exousíai and archai function as almost personified powers of dominion (Rz 8,38; 1 Kor 15,24; Kol 1,16; 2,10.15; Ef 1,21; 3,10; 6,12).
7. Later angelological hierarchies (e.g., Pseudo-Dionysius) cannot be mechanically projected onto Paul's language.
8. Katargéō ("to render ineffective"), apekdýomai ("to strip/disarm"), thriambeúō ("to lead in triumph") — key verbs in the description of victory over the Powers.
9. Ef 6,12: pálē — hand-to-hand struggle; kosmokratores — "rulers of the world of this darkness"; ta pneumatikà tēs ponērías — "spiritual [things/beings] of wickedness."

10. Walter Wink: a proposal to unite personal and structural dimensions of evil as the “spirituality” of institutions; value and limits in light of exegesis (cf. evaluation by Chloe Lynch).
11. Rz 12,2; 2 Kor 10,4–5: spiritual struggle includes “renewal of the mind” and “demolishing strongholds” of reasoning.
12. The ethics of the community (forgiveness, reconciliation, service, care for the weak) is the historical form of the dethroning of the Powers.

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