

POWER IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

Introduction

The interest in sociological analysis of early Christianity among New Testament scholars has brought questions of power, authority and social structure to the fore in many areas of New Testament exegesis. The definitions of power, authority and leadership often vary from one exegete to another, since the sociological base from which he/she proceeds may be quite different: Weberian typologies; sociology of knowledge following the work of Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann; neo-Marxist critique of ideology, or analyses based on the work of cultural anthropologists like Clifford Geertz, Mary Douglas or Victor Turner are among the most common. The seminar discussion centered on the following survey of scholarly approaches to the problem of power in the New Testament. The survey, itself, seeks to reflect directions being taken by contemporary scholars rather than to create a single, new approach to the topic.

Socio-political Considerations

The most pervasive category under which the issue of power in the New Testament is discussed is that of "charismatic" authority. Such authority is often exercised as a critique of other patterns of authority in society. Weber's "ethical prophet" comes closest to this type of authority, since those who exercise it claim to act as agents of a transcendent God. The existence of such leaders also supposes a group whose organization falls outside the prestige structure of the larger society. However, this type should not be confused with the modern revolutionary groups, since the aim of such revolutionary activity is overthrow or destruction of an existing order. The biblical vision, on the other hand, calls for reintegration; not revolution. Its spokespersons insist on a return to the roots of the tradition over against those who have corrupted it.¹

"Charismatic" often suggests that the authority of the leader is grounded in the miraculous exercise of power or certain spiritual gifts displayed by the individual. However, the New Testament tradition usually combines or subordinates demonstrations of power to the word.² Anthropological studies suggest the necessity to distinguish elements of "word power" in a society. Certain individuals hold their authority because they are permitted to use particular forms of speech. Further, such persons may speak with a presumption that their words can be given a coherent, reasoned explanation even when no such explanation has been offered. Such a presumption is already operative in the consequent elaboration on sayings of Jesus in the gospel tradition and on Pauline teaching in the deuterio-Pauline writings.³

¹See H. Kee, *Christian Origins in Sociological Perspective*, (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1980), pp. 54-56.

²Members of the seminar pointed out that Greek can distinguish power, as in the miraculous powers often associated with charismatic figures, *dynamis*, from the exercise of authority, *exousia*. Since *exousia* can also be translated "power" as in "the powers of this age," one cannot rely on the English translation to adequately reflect the semantic distinction.

³See B. Holmberg, *Paul and Power*, (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980), pp. 10, 135.

The political crises of Judaism in the Maccabean period shaped the forms of religious authority and political perception within which New Testament writings must orient themselves. Three types of political leader predominate. Political activism and resistance to Roman domination is embodied in the zealot leader as well as the popular tales of the heroic martyrs of Maccabean times.⁴ Rejection of the prevailing vision of the world may take quite a different form in the person of the eschatological prophet. Such an individual gathers the elite of the people. His wisdom provides them with insight into the mysteries of the divine plan which will reverse the present order, destroy the wicked enemies of God's people and exalt the righteous elect.⁵ For Judaism, the struggle of the Hellenistic period was not simply a political one. Hellenism also posed a cultural threat to the survival of the tradition. Consequently, those with a special command of the tradition come to the fore. The scribes and Pharisees provide an important class of religious experts who can tell in every situation what a "holy people" should do. They hold the key to the tradition. At the same time, the cultural challenge of Hellenism may also have led Judaism to develop a nomistic/intellectualistic ethos which was quite different from that of the earlier periods.⁶

The political struggles of this period witness the reuse of one of the most archaic myths of the relationship between cosmic and social order and the divine, that of the divine warrior. The political orientation of individuals in such a society may take on quite different coloring depending upon which variant of the adapted mythic pattern they have appropriated. The crucial issue for the different models is how the synergism between divine and human activity is understood. For some, the promise of victory for those aligned in cosmic battle with the divine warrior is a call to active resistance. The myth provides the ideology which assures the eventual success of their cause. For others, the mythic image of cosmic struggle between the divine and the monster of evil/chaos prevails. Human efforts cannot dictate the results of such a struggle. What is required as spark to the final battle is best perceived as the passive suffering of the elect. The suffering martyr provides the turning point toward the manifestation of the rule of God in the final defeat of evil.⁷

The divine warrior myth takes on its most extensive Christian form in the book of Revelation, where imperial Rome becomes the monster of chaos and the lamb with the faithful Christian martyrs stand in the place of the loyal righteous of Maccabean times. However, for non-Jewish converts, the critique of Roman imperial power may have taken on a less dramatic shape in the development of the Christian "household" imagery. The Christian "household" stands in competition with/superiority to the "imperial household" (cf. Mk 10:42f) and to the various collegia and guilds, which formed the basic structure of the society around them.⁸ The combination of household terminology with

⁴See M. Hengel, *The Charismatic Leader and his Followers*, (New York: Crossroad, 1980), pp. 57-58.

⁵Kee, *Christian Origins*, p. 59. Paul has a similar use of "mysterious plan" in which he instructs the reader in 1 Cor 15:51.

⁶See B. Gerhardsson, *The Ethos of the Bible*, (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981), pp. 23-28.

⁷See A.Y. Collins, "The Political Perspective in the Revelation to John," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 96 (1977), 241-56.

⁸See J. Elliott, *A Home for the Homeless*, (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981), p. 199.

the love commands provided New Testament Christians with a perspective on social obligation that was deliberately opposed to the large scale political images. Relationship with God is not regulated by the statutes, concerns and customs of the state.⁹

The War for the Imagination

Both the divine warrior mythology and the images derived from the "household codes" of antiquity remind us that the enduring shifts in human affairs require a wholesale reordering of the way in which we imagine the world. Avery Dulles has recently called our attention to the question of appropriated images in ecclesiology. He has suggested that much of the strain in our church life might stem from a failure to find an appropriate image of our community.¹⁰ Indeed, the very theme of our convention evidences a certain malaise in the religious and social images of power.

Amos Wilder has reminded us that the victory of early Christianity was not primarily due to a superior socio-political or religious organization. Rather, he suggests, the New Testament is witness to a process of "subversion from within." It carries on a war of images against the powers of its age.¹¹ That war deprived the dominant images of power of their compelling force. However, such changes in imagination are not quickly come by.

Indeed, the subtlety of such a shift in metaphor and image may even render it vulnerable to corruption; to a shift into its opposite. Northrup Frye's study of the royal metaphor in the Bible provides a case in point. The essence of the royal metaphor is to present the individual as integrated into the larger social body. That integration absorbs individuals and assigns them their identities, roles and value in relation to the larger whole. "Loyalty" often appears as the key word for a life which is based on some version of that metaphor. But New Testament images do not support that type of integration. Rather, one finds a reversal of direction toward total decentralization. The head, the total body, can be concentrated in each believer. Such decentralization is evidenced in the "not I, but Christ in me" formulae of the New Testament. In short, the individual is not submerged because the community with which he/she identifies is another aspect of the self. On the other hand, we are all familiar with the perversion of the very same language toward the traditional forms of loyalty demanded by the royal metaphor. Images do not function *ex opere operato*. Frye suggests that the embarrassment of religion before totalitarianism may also be found in its adoption of the perverted form of the royal metaphor. Religion can-

⁹Gerhardsson, *Ethos*, pp. 122-24. Members of the seminar emphasized the fact that refusal to adopt the "political messiah" role still had political consequences. It cannot be used to sponsor the claim that the Gospel and politics have nothing to do with each other. Indeed, subversion of the imagery by which "the powers that be" maintain their status/authority among others in the community may be the most radical political activity.

¹⁰A. Dulles, *A Church to Believe In*, (New York: Crossroad, 1982), pp. 3-9. Members of the seminar suggested that we might do well to recover the sense of discipleship as a special calling for the rule of God. The understanding that such calling does not make those called "super-Christians" and the perception of different positions in relationship to the Kingdom might alleviate the tendency to extol a particular style of discipleship as the only Christian way. Such tendencies clearly fragment our church life.

¹¹See A. Wilder, *Theopoetic*, (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976), pp.3-7.

not effectively distinguish itself from totalitarianism as long as it is founded on the same metaphoric base.¹²

Jesus, Discipleship and Serving the Kingdom

Though discipleship among Jesus' followers shows patterns typical of followers of a charismatic leader, subsequent development of authority within the community was limited by the fact that he had no acknowledged successor.¹³ The Jesus traditions present us with a division between the larger group of followers and sympathizers who continued with their ordinary way of life and an inner group attached to Jesus who stood outside the social order.¹⁴ Unlike the teacher of eschatological wisdom, however, Jesus does not call upon his followers to create a new sect. But unlike the wisdom teacher or the "religious expert" who might teach people at large, Jesus' sayings embody paradoxical violations of custom and traditional piety. Those called to be disciples,¹⁵ are enjoined to adopt a way of life which requires detachment from all those obligations that made up the fabric of their social lives.¹⁶

However radical, the call to discipleship is always subordinate to the announcement of the rule of God. Jesus himself does not adopt one of the established patterns of leadership. Despite attempts to turn him into a zealot, the rejection of a role as a political activist seems clear.¹⁷ Unlike the founder of an eschatological sect, Jesus does not withdraw from the people. He and his followers continue to be active among them. At the same time, Jesus' healings are presented as signs of the eschatological destruction of the powers of evil. That destruction signals the impending rule of God.

Similarly, discipleship does not represent the key to salvation. Salvation lies in repentance in the face of the rule of God. Rather, discipleship reflects a specific call to certain individuals to serve that coming rule of God as Jesus himself does. Nor should discipleship be construed as a "more perfect way." Discipleship only appears as a general description for all Christians in Acts. Paul, on the other hand, finds the *imitatio Christi* in suffering; not discipleship. Only a collapse of the rule of God into following Jesus makes discipleship a general description for the call to salvation that is sounded in Jesus' ministry.¹⁸ Though memory of Jesus' way of acting and their fellowship with him did serve to structure the earliest Christian communities,¹⁹ Jesus' disciples are not trained to carry on the teaching of a master. Rather, they are called to serve the rule of

¹²N. Frye, *The Great Code*, (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1982), pp. 99–101.

¹³For example, B. Woll, *Johannine Christianity in Conflict*, (Chico: Scholars, 1981), has suggested that some members of the Johannine community (cf. Jn 14:12) claimed superiority to Jesus. The emphasis on the subordination of the disciples to Jesus/paraclete in Jn 13:31–14:31 is, Woll suggests, a corrective to that false claim. Thus, the fact that Jesus had no successor would not automatically guarantee relationships of equality among his followers, though such equality seems to have been the primary emphasis of Johannine ecclesiology.

¹⁴Holmberg, *Power*, pp. 150–51.

¹⁵Hengel, *Leader*, p. 59. Jesus does not call all Israel to become "mathētai." Rather, the summons to discipleship is addressed to specific individuals.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 3–14; see Mt 8:19f//Lk 9:57f; Mt 8:21f//Lk 9:59f; Lk 9:61f; Mt 10:37//Lk 14:26; Mk 3:21; Mt 10:34//Lk 12:51.

¹⁷As in the story of the temptation, which is separately attested in the Markan tradition (Mk 1:12f); Q (Mt 4:1–11//Lk 4:1–13) and the pre-Johannine tradition (Jn 6:14f).

¹⁸Hengel, *Leader*, pp. 58–62.

¹⁹So Holmberg, *Power*, p. 179.

God.²⁰ This call to service sets the disciples outside the established patterns of disciple/successor(s) just as much as Jesus himself stood apart from a clearly defined social role.

Paul, The Apostle and the Gospel

Just as Jesus/disciple—rule of God form an indissoluble combination in the synoptic tradition, so apostle—gospel form a fixed metaphoric complex in the Pauline tradition. Both traditions legitimate the “charismatic” authority of the individual in his/her subordination to the dominant metaphor for the in-breaking of God’s eschatological salvation.²¹ Paul may well have been subordinate to the Jerusalem church in the sociological structure of the early Church as Holmberg insists.²² However, he does not ground apostolic authority in a mandate received from those who had been “apostles before me” (Gal 1:17).²³ Rather, he insists that the apostle’s connection with the Gospel is the foundation of apostolic authority.²⁴ At the same time, this authority seems to be limited to those churches which Paul serves as apostle. He enjoys an “immediate relationship” to the Gospel different from that of his converts.²⁵

Further distinctions appear between tradition, gospel and apostolic authority. They are not collapsed into each other. 1 Cor 15 shows that what Paul hands on as tradition is not identical with “his Gospel.” Nor does acknowledgement of the Gospel imply that it has been heard correctly. Indeed, part of Paul’s authority to speak as apostle is his authority to assess the hearing of the Gospel by his churches.²⁶ The apostle does not present himself as guarantor of the tradition which he has passed on. Rather, both his word and his person manifest the truth of the Gospel.²⁷

The Pauline letters evidence a further paradox in the apostolic presentation of the power of the Gospel. Paul insists that it is to be seen in the life of apostolic service; not in demonstrations of spiritual power. The catalogues of apostolic sufferings are not merely rhetorical devices to score points against opponents. They are intended to restructure the imagination of the community around the apostolic vision of power. They are called to imitate the apostolic example (Phil 3:10), even as it implies a limitation of power/authority within the community. When Paul looks for a language in which to describe the obli-

²⁰Hengel, *Leader*, pp. 72–81.

²¹J. Schütz, *Paul and the Anatomy of Apostolic Authority*, (London: Cambridge University, 1975), pp. 1–19, argues that the Pauline context demands a redefinition of our understanding of legitimacy.

²²Holmberg, *Power*, pp. 160–61.

²³This is not to deny that Paul’s opponents may have used subordination to Jerusalem in their arguments against him.

²⁴Rom 1:1; Gal 1:15f; Schütz, *Anatomy*, 35f. Paul’s critique of Peter in Gal 2:11–21 is based on the latter’s failure to be subordinate to the truth of the Gospel. This failure is equivalent to failure to be subordinate to Jesus.

²⁵Holmberg, *Power*, pp. 152–55. Holmberg observes that Paul’s special relationship to the Gospel makes him “savior of the Gentiles” who are converted through his preaching.

²⁶Schütz, *Anatomy*, pp. 11; 250.

²⁷*Ibid.*, p. 112. The Gospel does not come solely in word. It also comes in power (1 Thess 1:4ff; 2:8–14). This experience of the Gospel’s coming in power forms an important part of the experience of new identity and empowerment, which members of the seminar emphasized as a necessary element in the imagery of power/authority in the Pauline setting. Schütz points out that the apostle not only shares the Gospel but himself as manifestation of that power (1 Thess 2:8).

gation to the community, he uses the language of "building up" and of the love commands, a language shaped in the experiences of the hellenistic mission. He does not employ any of the technical language of power/authority within a community.²⁸ Holmberg thus describes the distinctive character of Pauline authority as a restriction both of the apostle's own authority and that of those who would be leaders within the community.²⁹

However, an important element in the language of weakness is overlooked if we do not also consider the "empowerment" of Christians to whom the Gospel comes.³⁰ "Power in weakness" formed a bond in the experience of calling for both Paul and his converts (cf. 1 Cor 1:26ff; 4:13ff). That original experience of calling provided the setting in which the truth of the apostolic vision of power was displayed.³¹ We may well wonder how much remains of the apostolic vision for Christians who have lost that experience of an empowering call.

Paul's presentation of freedom and the Gospel falls under similar patterns of self-limitation. Against the formlessness of the spirit-endowed experiences of some in Corinth, Paul insists that spiritual gifts are regulated by concerns for "building up" the community (1 Cor 12). The norm of service to the community does not permit one to make a distinction between sacred and profane gifts.³² A further example of the diffusion of apostolic authority into the local community appears in Paul's consistent assumption that his converts can learn to live by the same "ratio" as the apostle (Rom 12:2; Phil 1:9-11). They are to regulate their own lives by the same voluntary limitation as the apostle.³³ Paul's exhortations to "walk by the Spirit" (Gal 5:16, 25)³⁴ represent a deliberate refusal to regulate their affairs by "law." Instead, exhortation, appeal to the example of Christ, to love and sacrifice must suffice. In some instances, the good of a weaker Christian may require another to limit his/her freedom (1 Cor 8-10; Rom 15:1-3).³⁵ However, this freely chosen self-limitation does not mean that the weak are permitted to prevail. Paul protects the conscience of the "strong" against the weak whose conscience is not yet shaped by the freedom of the Gospel.³⁶ Thus, relationships between Christians are subject to the same dialectic of power/weakness in service of the Gospel as is the life of the apostle—who often presents the apostolic model as one to be imitated. Paul's difficulties in putting this vision across are evident enough in the conflicts which provoked so many of his letters. Yet, that same image has a compelling similarity to the presentation of discipleship and the rule of God in the Jesus tradition. This structural similarity may also remind us that the Gospel is not necessarily best heard by repeating earlier formulae. Rather, the spirit and pattern of

²⁸*Ibid.*, pp. 205-45.

²⁹Holmberg, *Power*, p. 160.

³⁰Members of the seminar emphasized the experience of "empowerment" associated with the coming of the Gospel. Without that sense of "empowering new identity" (see our comments earlier on the reversal of the royal metaphor in the experience of Christians) the Christian rhetoric of power in weakness, love and service can be perverted into support for an oppressive status quo.

³¹Schütz, *Anatomy*, pp. 277-80.

³²*Ibid.*, pp. 259-60.

³³Holmberg, *Power*, pp. 186-88.

³⁴See the discussion of this section of Gal in my *Love Commands in the New Testament*, (Ramsey, N.J.: Paulist, 1982), pp. 78-84.

³⁵*Ibid.*, pp. 66-76.

³⁶Gerhardsson, *Ethos*, pp. 69-82.

Christian life have to be captured in new metaphors; in formulations which clarify present obedience to the Gospel.³⁷

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³⁷The original plan called for further discussion of the problems that emerged from the earlier vision of power/authority at the end of the first century. Paul already faced a situation in which some Christians failed to appropriate the radical limitation of power in 2 Cor 10-13, see Holmberg, *Power*, pp. 187-88. Similarly, the "weakness/power" images depend upon the autobiographical disjunction of a radical reversal in one's life which Paul shared with his converts. Its significance is lost when that disjunction no longer speaks to the experience of every Christian, so Schütz, *Anatomy*, p. 283.

One can understand the diffusion of apostolic authority into the community as the foundation for the developments that we find in the Pastoral epistles. Apostolic authority comes to ground a theological tradition and finally issues in a canon. Apostolic authority as accessible to the local community provides the foundation for the development of church offices, see Holmberg, *Power*, pp. 186f. The Pastorals seek to use the Pauline letter form to present Paul (1 Tim 1:12-17) as the model for the coming generation of believers. Paul is not presented as defending his apostolic authority. Instead, the "gospel—apostle" link is tied to the credal formulae of the hellenistic mission. In this new context, Paul is given the title of *didaskalos*. See P. Trummer, *Die Paulustradition der Pastoralbriefe*, (Las Vegas: Peter Lang, 1978), pp. 116-130.

Lack of time prevented the group from discussing these issues.