

PRINCIPALITIES AND POWERS

Heinrich Schlier, formerly a disciple of Bultmann but now a Roman Catholic, is best known for his extremely learned commentaries on Galatians (in the *Meyerkommentar*) and Ephesians (Düsseldorf, 1959). He is now introduced to English readers in a rendering of his essay *Mächte und Gewalten im Neuen Testament* (1958).¹ The anonymous translator has obviously found his or her task difficult and at times impossible. The resulting English is often a loose paraphrase of the German and sometimes lapses into nonsense, as will be seen from some of the quotations given below. It is to be regretted that the series is not under the control of a general editor.

No doubt by way of disarming criticism, the author says in his Introduction that "in the present state of our theological and biblical studies it is even more important to ask the right question than to provide an answer." However, in the discussion of the angelic and demonic powers there is no one question which is the right question, and the question which Schlier does ask is neither formulated correctly nor convincingly answered. The questions most debated today in the field of Pauline angelology are: Why did St. Paul feel it necessary to hold that the Law was given "through (or by) angels" (cf. Gal 3:19)? And did he think of these angels as good spirits confirmed in grace, as fallen spirits obdurate in sin, or as indifferent spirits—perhaps somewhat like the "Satan" at the beginning of Job? Schlier is, of course, aware of this last possibility, but he consigns it to a footnote (p. 14): "It is sometimes possible to have the impression that there are also 'neutral' principalities, though, theologically, it is difficult to understand what they are supposed to be" (in the German, p. 14: "Aber was sollen diese, theologisch gesehen, eigentlich sein?"). That is the end of the note. Like jesting Pilate, Schlier gives up and turns away.

The principalities and powers are referred to in the *NT* under a variety of names which appear to be interchangeable: "spirits," "lords," "angels," "thrones," and so on. Schlier's main question, which he considers more important to ask than to answer, is this: "Which phenomena are meant by these powers? . . . Or can it be that no reality at all corresponds to the terms 'principalities and powers'?" (p. 9) He adds that "only exegesis can attempt to solve the problem." The question thus stated is in principle unanswerable; it is a confusion of two distinct questions which cannot be treated simultaneously. One must first ask: What did Paul mean by "powers

¹ Heinrich Schlier, *Principalities and Powers in the New Testament (Quaestiones disputatae 3.)* New York: Herder and Herder, 1961. Pp. 89. \$1.95.

and dominations"? Or: What ontological status did he suppose them to have? Then, secondly, one must ask: What ontological status have they in fact? Exegesis can certainly attempt an answer to the first type of question, but it is not so clear that it can answer the second. It can decide, for example, whether Moses supposed that the sun goes round the earth; it cannot decide whether the sun actually does go round the earth. Theologians and exegetes must at least consider the possibility that some of the "powers" may be hypostatized abstractions (e.g., Sin, Death, Height, Depth, etc.) and that others may be "mythical" (i.e., prescientific) entities which Paul accepted uncritically from the cosmology of his contemporaries without intending to assert their objective reality as part of his apostolic message.

Among the interchangeable titles of the principalities and powers Schlier includes *stoicheia* from Col 2:8 and Gal 4:3, 9. He does not stop to offer a proof of this controversial view, nor does he give the reader sufficient warning that this is in fact a *quaestio disputata*. In Gal 4:3, 9, he says, Paul reminds the Galatians "of the form in which the demands of the Law had been proposed to them when they were Gentiles: the instruction which they received in their anxiety (*Angst*) had given them 'the weak and needy elements' (*stoicheia*). These elements are probably the stars under whose influence the Galatians had felt bound to observe certain sidereal festivals" (p. 23).² But the paragraph in Gal 4 neither says nor implies that the demands of the Law were proposed to the Gentiles in their pagan days in any form at all; nor does it mention their existential *Angst*. According to another interpretation, which is at least equally probable, Paul is simply saying that if the Galatian Christians submit to the material rites of the Jewish Law, they will be adopting a form of material worship which is on a par with the material worship of the pagan gods they have abandoned. Schlier may perhaps be right in thinking (as many others do) that when Paul uses *stoicheia* in Galatians, he is speaking not only of the material elements but also of the angels of fire, water, etc.; but he would have done well to point out that this is only a conjecture, and he should have worked out in detail a consistent answer to the obvious question arising from this conjecture, namely, whether Paul means that the same angels are operative in both pagan and Jewish worship, and, if so, whether they are good or bad.

² The German (p. 22) is: "Dabei erinnert er sie an die Form, in der sie als ehemalige Heiden die Forderung des Gesetzes erfuhren: dass sie voll Angst Weisungen entgegennahmen, die ihnen 'die schwachen und armen Elemente' (*stoicheia*) gaben. Diese Elemente sind wahrscheinlich die Gestirne, die die Galater einst in ihren Bann geschlagen und u. a. zur Einhaltung bestimmter astronomischer Termine zwangen."

On a later page (p. 27) he speaks of the misuse of the Law by bad angels—which leaves open the possibility that the Law may have been given by good angels and misused by bad ones: “According to Paul,³ the influence of the wicked angels is asserted even in the Jewish Law, that had ceased to be understood in the original sense of God’s appeal to it. [This last clause is, of course, nonsense; the translator has misunderstood the cumbersome German phrase on p. 25: “in dem nicht mehr im ursprünglichen Sinn als Weisung Gottes zu sich hin verstandenen jüdischen Gesetz,” where the phrase translated “God’s appeal to the Law” surely means “God’s guidance leading man to Himself.”] In the hands of fallen men even the ‘holy, just and good’ commandment (Rom 7:12) becomes a Law which fosters self-seeking and self-advancement. To this extent the fallen angels speak through the Law, and it conveys the words of the Evil One who tries to master men by secretly and subtly exploiting their self-seeking and self-righteousness.” At this point a footnote refers the reader to a fuller development in H. Schlier, *Der Brief an die Galater* (1953) pp. 104 ff. Unfortunately, the 1953 edition is not available in any of the libraries accessible to the present reviewer. The 1951 edition, however, is available. It does not develop the view that bad angels have misused a holy Law given by good angels, but maintains what is practically the view of Marcion, that according to Gal 3:19 “the Law does not belong to the revelation of the good God . . . it is not in any sense a gift of God . . . it is a curse-bringing addition to the promises, which was made by the angelic powers and not by God”—a view with which no Catholic or Jew can possibly agree. For one thing, it puts an impossible interpretation on *diatageis di’ aggelōn* in Gal 3:19. It may be, however, that Schlier changed his interpretation in the 1953 edition.

The “heavenly places” (*epourania*) where the principalities and powers have their abode are described by the translator (pp. 17–18) as follows: “By the heavens we mean the supreme form of material life [This piece of nonsense is not in the German, which at this point (p. 17) has “es sind . . . das ‘Jenseits des Diesseits.’”]; it is the Unseen which we nevertheless perceive, and which passes into infinity. [This last phrase represents “das sich in das Unverfügbare verliert.”] It is the human heavens from which man and his world live, by which he is menaced, seduced and determined.” [This is for “aus denen er und seine Welt leben, aus denen seine Bedrohungen und Verlockungen aufsteigen, von denen her er bestimmt wird.”] Then, as if everything were now perfectly plain to the meanest intelligence, he adds: “That is the essential abode of the principalities”! Between them,

* No reference is given; no doubt, Gal 3:19 is meant.

the author and his translator have produced a paragraph which, if put into Greek, would be quite incomprehensible to St. Paul.

The second chapter, entitled "Jesus Christ and the Principalities," collects together the evidence from the Gospels about Christ's conflict with the demonic powers, and attempts to explain how on the one hand "the power of the principalities was shattered" by Christ on the cross, and on the other hand they have been even more active in the world after their defeat than they were before. The translator here makes Schlier contradict himself twice within two pages. On p. 46 he says that the death of Christ "destroyed them totally," and on p. 47 he describes them as merely "weakened" by the death and resurrection of Christ (the German here, p. 43, has "entmächtet"). On p. 46 he says that "the overthrow of the principalities and of their master . . . will be revealed finally for mankind at the Second Coming of Jesus Christ"; but on p. 47 he adds: "It is not to be supposed that the power of the principalities has been broken only provisionally by Jesus Christ and that this will not be made manifest until his Second Coming." The translation completely misrepresents the German here (p. 44). What Schlier says is: "It is not the case, as one might suppose on hearing that the powers have been *entmächtigt* (disarmed?) only provisionally and that this *Entmächtigung* (disarming?) will be made manifest only at the Second Coming, that therefore nothing has really been changed for the present and for future time." The translator has therefore made it impossible for the reader to follow Schlier's thought in this chapter. But this is perhaps no great loss; for all he has to say in the end is that the devil is now in a fury of activity because he knows that his time is short. He has no explanation of how a power becomes more effective by being deprived of its power (*entmächtigt*).

In the third chapter Schlier discusses how the victory of Christ is continued in the Church. He expresses himself in a philosophical jargon which does not pass easily into English and often seems designed deliberately to obscure the matter under discussion. After declaring that man is released from subjection to the powers by baptism, he adds: "Baptism transfers the life of the Christian into a dimension that is still within the grasp of the principalities, exposed to their attacks, indeed, more so than ever. . . . Baptism exposes, as it were, the conditions of our existence, it places us in an exposed situation. But it is a situation that is open towards God" (p. 54). After our baptism, the principalities try to make us abandon our faith, which Schlier defines as holding firmly "that the gods and lords, the principalities and powers, are really nothing, even when they dominate mankind and the world with great power, indeed with the power of death" (p. 56).

This might well be taken to mean that the principalities are figments of a frightened imagination and that if we cease to believe in them they cease to exist. But such is not Schlier's view, since he adds on the next page, in a melodramatic style much affected by German Protestants, that "Christ's message . . . drags these principalities from their hiding places, tears away their mask of exaggerated importance and pretended harmlessness, and reveals them stripped of their pretences in their undisguised reality" (p. 57).

The Christian's struggle is, then, a real conflict with an objective power. It "begins with and in myself." The explanation of this is expressed incautiously in terms which a Lutheran would not disown: "The principalities always have an ally within us, the sin derived from Adam, which, even in those who have received Baptism, is always manifest as a constant tendency towards the self and away from God" (p. 60). The inner spiritual conflict "begins in faith, progress [*sic*, for "progresses"] through good works, and reaches its consummation in suffering with Christ" (p. 63). At this point Schlier seems to be working towards the conclusion arrived at by Clinton D. Morrison in his monograph *The Powers That Be* (London, 1960), that the powers *in themselves* were unaffected by Christ's victory on the cross, but that the individual Christian is now able to resist their tyranny through the power of the Holy Spirit which he receives through faith in Christ's cross—or, as Morrison puts it, the locus of Christ's victory is not in the powers themselves but in the life of the believers who make up the Church. Such, however, is not Schlier's position. He holds that the power of the principalities has been broken by Christ "in so far as their proud autonomy has been drawn into the love of the obedient Son of God which embraces even them, and has been undone in his death" (p. 68). This only increases the mystery, for Christ has not overcome the principalities by converting them.

As an appendix, under the title "Antichrist," there is added an essay which was not part of the German original. It summarizes the contents of the Apocalypse in a few pages, and then examines chapter 13 in some detail. The Dragon is identified as Antichrist, a spiritual force working through the Roman Empire. Schlier quotes Rom 13:2, but does not enter into the controversy started by Cullmann and Barth as to whether "the powers that be" referred to by St. Paul are human or spiritual, and, if spiritual, whether they are angelic or demonic. Here, again, this little book reads like a voice from the past, unaware of the present state of the question.

Publishers must publish, and librarians must buy. This unhelpful book will doubtless be read, and will leave many minds puzzled, especially over the relationship between the powers and the Jewish Law. So, it will not

be out of place to offer here a few considerations which may help towards a solution.

In the Epistle to the Galatians, after rejecting the view of the Judaizers that the Law was given to Israel as a source of justification and as an addition to the covenant made with Abraham, Paul has to give an alternative account of the purpose of the Law. He proposes three theses: first, that the Law was an interim measure; secondly, that it was given to provoke sin; and thirdly, that it was given not directly by God but by angels (cf. 3:19). The third of these theses is supported in 3:19b-20 by an argument which is none too perspicuous: "It was added by angels, for there was an intermediary, and an intermediary acts for more than one, whereas God is one." As the principle that "an intermediary acts for more than one" is not universally true (a single individual can conduct his business through an agent), Paul probably means that when God Himself makes a covenant with man, for example with Abraham, He needs no intermediary, and, as the *OT* shows, He uses none. Since, then, there was an intermediary at Sinai, it was not God who gave the Law, but a plurality who needed to use an intermediary, namely, the angels. Probably this is nothing more than an expository argument, thrown in hurriedly, and not the argument by which Paul himself arrived at the conclusion that the Law was given by angels.

How, then, did he arrive at this view? It is generally agreed that his doctrine of freedom from the Law was the most characteristic part of what he calls "my gospel." Now he says in Gal 1:12 that he received this gospel "by a revelation of Jesus Christ," i.e., in his conversion experience. It seems quite possible that Paul arrived at the three theses mentioned above by reflection on his own conversion.

1) He recognized that the Law was an interim measure, when Christ taught him that his own zeal for the Law was a mistake and that Stephen had been right.

2) Reflecting on his own life history, Paul probably felt that all the Law had done in his own life was to provoke sin. It had seemed to show the way to great holiness and familiarity with God, but all his efforts to observe it had been misdirected. Looking back from his later vantage point, he probably felt that the effect of the Law had been to force him into the wretched state from which Christ had delivered him.

3) Paul may have arrived at the view that angels gave the Law, simply by continuing along the same line of reflection: "If the effect of the Law had been to push him into a condition of slavery, must he admit that God had *wanted* him to fall into that condition, that He had *predestined* him to

fall into sin, and that he had set before him this specious Law as a trap? If the Law was the tool of a will bent on enslaving man, could it be a direct expression of the divine will?" May it not be that in order to avoid adopting a doctrine of predestination which would attribute such sinister designs to God, Paul fell back on an idea which was already current in Judaism (for reverential reasons, but not the same ones), namely, that the Law was given by angels?

Paul does not say that the Law was given by demons. He recognizes that its commandments are holy and just and good (cf. Rom 7:12; Gal 3:21); and it would be blasphemy to suggest that God would consign His growing son and heir to the tutelage of demons. On the other hand, Paul does not seem to regard the angels of the Law as being entirely friendly to man, since they bring him into slavery and apparently wish to keep him in slavery. If the angels are introduced in order to avoid ascribing ill will to God Himself, some measure of ill will, or at least excessive zeal, must be attributed to them. Thus Paul seems driven by reflection on his own conversion to envisage the existence of good angels who are not perfect in their obedience to God's will. A confirmation of this is perhaps to be found in 1 Cor 6:3, where Paul says that one day Christians will judge angels. He probably regarded his controversy with the Judaizers as a campaign against heavenly powers (cf. Eph 6:12).

West Baden College

JOHN BLIGH, S.J.