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CChristian Life as Warfare, according to Ephesians 6, 10-20¹

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Abstract

This study starts by presenting the pervasiveness of the warfare motif throughout the New Testament. The next part sets out the general coordinates of the biblical conception of demonic powers their identity and their opposition to God, Christ, and His people. It then continues by depicting the Pauline vision of the Christian life as a struggle against the evil spirits and analyzes the Christian's panoply and the aspects of the Christian battle mentioned by St. Paul in the analyzed fragment. At the end of the study, the main ideas are recapitulated and applied shortly to the pandemic situation.

Keywords:

Holy Apostle Paul, New Testament Epistle to the Ephesians, Satan, spiritual warfare

I. Introduction: The warfare motif in the New Testament

The Bible as a whole, and the New Testament particularly, exhibits a strong warfare motif, indicating that God is fighting to take back for Himself the world had been seized by a hostile, sinister lord. Jesus' entire ministry reflects this belief by the prominence given in the Gospel to exorcisms

¹ This paper was presented by the author at the *Evil and Spiritual Combat in a Time of Pandemic* conference, organized by the *Institute for Studies in Eastern Christianity*, at Union Theological Seminary in the City of New York, on December 11, 2020.

and healings through which people were being brought out of the devil's grip into communion with God. According to the New Testament, Jesus in principle defeated Satan and established God's kingdom. Through His ministry of exorcism and healing, and especially through His death and resurrection, He destroyed the power of the devil (I Jn 3, 8; Heb 2, 14), disarmed the principalities and powers (Col 2, 14-15), and put all God's enemies under his feet (Eph 1, 22; Heb 1, 13). But the New Testament does not on this account conclude that Satan has ceased being in control of this world. This is the paradox of the *already-not yet* tension within the New Testament². While Satan has actually been defeated by Christ, God's victory has not yet been fully realized on the earth. That's because this victory must be appropriated by each single Christian who has to triumph over this enemy in himself.

“Through redemption man reconnected to God. But in order to exercise his free will he is given the possibility of remaining close to God or to depart from Him and give in voluntarily to the fallen spirits. In this indistinct state of man throughout his earthly life, the grace of God does not cease to help him until the moment of his passing into eternity, if he wills it, but neither do the fallen angels cease to work and make every effort to keep him under their power, in bondage to themselves and sin, in eternal death and perdition”³.

New Testament authors refer to Satan, demons, fallen angels and various levels of evil principalities and powers as being quite active in the world (Eph 1, 21; 3, 10; Col 1, 16). Though they believed the demonic kingdom to be mortally wounded, the early Christians never underestimated the power and craftiness of this foe⁴. The world was conceived of as still

² On the *already-not yet* tension in New Testament eschatology, see Werner G. KÜMMEL, *Promise and Fulfillment: The Eschatological Message of Jesus*, 3rd ed., SBT 1.23, SCM Press, London, 1957; George E. LADD, *Jesus and the Kingdom: The Eschatology of Biblical Realism*, 2nd ed., Word, Waco, Tex., 1964; B. WIEBE, “The Focus of Jesus' Eschatology”, in: David J. HAWKINS and Tom ROBINSON (ed.), *Self-Definition and Self-Discovery in Early Christianity: A Study in Changing Horizons*, Mellen, Lewiston, N.Y., 1990, pp. 121-46.

³ Sfântul Ignatie BRIANCANINOV, *Ofrandă monahilor contemporani*, transl. Cristea Florentina, Egumenița /Cartea Ortodoxă, Galați / Alexandria, 2011, pp. 309-310.

⁴ Gregory A. BOYD, *Satan and the Problem of Evil. Constructing a Trinitarian Warfare*

being in bondage to the evil one (Gal 1, 4; Eph 5, 16; 1 Jn 5, 19). In the thinking of the New Testament writers, Satan's influence continued to be so pervasive that putting someone outside the Church as a disciplinary measure was tantamount to turning that one over to Satan (1 Cor 5, 1-5; 1 Tim 1, 20; cf. 1 Tim 5, 15)⁵.

In short, the world of the New Testament authors was a world at war. Granted, they expressed great confidence that Jesus had in principle defeated Satan and that Satan and all who followed him would eventually be defeated when Christ is enthroned as Lord of the cosmos. But they were just as certain that in this present fallen world order God does not always get his way. He desires all to be saved, for example, but many will perish (1 Tim 2, 3-4; II Pet 3, 9). Similarly, God wants believers to be conformed to the image of Christ, but our minds and behavior are usually to some degree conformed to the pattern of the world and under demonic strongholds (Rom 12, 2; II Cor 10, 3-5). God's Spirit can be, and frequently is, resisted by our wills (Eph 4, 30; I Thess 5, 19). Clearly, the Lord and his Church continue to face strong opposition in carrying out God's will to establish His kingdom on the earth.

II. St. Paul's teaching on the opposing powers

What the Apostle Paul has to say about the powers of darkness should be formative for our thinking as Christians. For those of us who regard his letters as containing theology that is normative for belief and practice, St. Paul's teaching on the powers should shape and refine our world view. A careful assessment of his teaching on this topic is therefore essential, especially since our modern world view is often thought to be at odds with the biblical teaching on evil spirits⁶. How is St. Paul to be understood on this issue? Does he disagree with the prevailing cultural assumption that evil spirits do not exist? What does he think about the idea of evil spirits influencing the affairs of humanity and opposing God's plan of salvation? How does St. Paul instruct his Churches to respond to those forces?

Theodicy, IVP Academic, Downers Grove, Ill., 2001, p. 38.

⁵ G. BOYD, *Satan and the Problem of Evil...*, p. 38.

⁶ Clinton E. ARNOLD, *Powers of Darkness. Principalities & Powers in Paul's Letters*, InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, Ill., 1992, p. 87.

So, in what follows, I examine the various ways St. Paul, mainly, and other New Testament writers refer to Satan and demonic powers, followed by an overview of how they understand the ongoing activity of this realm in the world and against the Church. We'll also see how St. Paul instruct his Ephesians readers to oppose these evil spirits.

II. 1. The New Testament's conception of the demonic realm

In most respects Acts and the Epistles follow quite closely the terminology of the apocalyptic thought of their time in referring to the demonic realm⁷. But they identify the head of this realm as Satan much more consistently than apocalyptic writings do, though St. Paul also refers to him as Belial (II Cor 6, 15)⁸. In most other respects the identification of this chief evil ruler (Eph 2, 2) is thoroughly in keeping with apocalyptic thought. So, Satan is referred to throughout these New Testament writings as “the devil” (Acts 10, 38; 13, 10; Eph 4, 27; 6, 11; I Tim 3, 6-7; II Tim 2, 26; Heb 2, 14; Jas 3, 15; 4, 7; I Jn 3, 8.10), the “god of this world” (II Cor 4, 4), the “evil one” (Eph 6, 16; II Thess 3, 3) and “the enemy” (I Tim 5, 14). He is further identified as “the tempter” and “the serpent” of Genesis 3 (II Cor 11, 3; I Thess 3, 5; Rev 12, 9; 20, 2). St. Paul also identifies him behind the mask of an “angel of light” (II Cor 11, 14), while St. John taps into the Old Testament traditions of Leviathan and identifies him as “the great dragon” (Rev 12, 9; 20, 2). None of this terminology is unique to the New Testament.

⁷ Most scholars agree that the primary background to the terminology for the angelic and demonic realm in the New Testament is Jewish pseudepigraphal literature. G. H. C. MACGREGOR, however, has argued for the primacy of astrological beliefs in the first century. See his “Principalities and Powers: The Cosmic Background of Paul’s Thought”, in: *New Testament Studies* 1 (1954-55), pp.17-28, a view anticipated by W. L. KNOX, *St. Paul and the Church of the Gentiles*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1939, esp. pp. 104-7, 220. While this approach clearly sheds the best light on some of Paul’s terminology (e.g., “height and depth”, Rom 8, 38), most scholars reject it as the principal source of Paul’s talk about principalities and powers. By contrast, Pierre BENOIT has concluded that none of this evidence - the apocalyptic texts, the seemingly parallel references in Qumran, nor the available evidence of astrological beliefs - sufficiently accounts for Paul’s terminology. See his “Pauline Angelology and Demonology: Reflexions on the Designations of the Heavenly Powers and on the Origin of Angelic Evil”, in: *Religious Studies Bulletin* 3 (1983), pp. 1-18.

⁸ Satan is explicitly named in Acts 5, 3; 26, 18; Romans 16, 20; I Corinthians 5, 5; 7, 5; II Corinthians 2, 11; 11, 14; 12, 7; I Thessalonians 2, 18; II Thessalonians 2, 9; I Timothy 1, 20; 5, 15; Revelation 2, 9.13.24; 3, 9; 12, 9; 20, 2.7.

The many references to lesser demonic figures follow the same pattern. As in the Gospels, they are often referred to simply as demons (Rom 8, 38; II Cor 10, 20-21; 1 Tim 4, 1; Jas 2, 19; Rev 9, 20; 16, 14; 18, 2). Other times they are referred to as messengers or angels (Rom 8, 38; I Cor 6, 3; II Cor 12, 7; Gal 1, 8; Col 2, 18; I Pet 3, 22; Jude 6; Rev 12, 7.9). Still other times, especially in St. Paul, we find suprahuman beings, some good and some evil, referred to in more esoteric apocalyptic terminology. Hence Paul sometimes refers to what appear to be high-level angelic beings as *archai* or *archontes* (“rulers” or “principalities” Rom 8, 38; I Cor 2, 6.8; 15, 24; Eph 1, 21; 3, 10; 6, 12; Col 1, 16; 2, 10.15). He seems to be referring to other high-level classes of beings with the terms *exousiai* and *dynameis* (“powers” or “authorities” Rom 8, 38; I Cor 15, 24; Eph 1, 21; 2, 2; 3, 10; 6, 12; Col 1, 16; 2, 10.15), and to still other classes of heavenly beings with the terms *kyriotetos* (“dominion” Eph 1, 21; Col 1, 16), *kosmokratores* (“cosmic powers” Eph 6, 12), *thronoi* (“thrones” Col 1, 16) and *pneumatika* (“spiritual forces” Eph 6, 12)⁹. Finally, he is in all probability referring to something akin to “angels of nature” with his

⁹ On the rare term *kosmokratores*, see Clinton ARNOLD, *Ephesians, Power and Magic: The Concept of Power in Ephesians in Light of Its Historical Setting*, SNTSMS 63, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1989, pp. 65-66. The issue whether *exousia* in Romans 13, 1 refers to angelic authorities, human authorities or both is hotly contested. One of the foremost defenders of the “double-reference” thesis - the notion that *exousia* refers here both to human rulers and to spiritual rulers that empower them - has been Oscar CULLMANN. See his *Christ and Time*, rev. ed., trans. F. V. Wilson, SCM Press, London, 1962, pp. 191-210; Oscar CULLMANN, *The State in the New Testament*, Scribner's, New York, 1956, pp. 95-114. M. DIBELIUS (*Die Geisterwelt im Glauben des Paulus*, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen, 1909, pp. 189, 193ff.) had preceded Cullmann in this interpretation, and it is in varying degrees supported by Cullmann's student C. D. MORRISON (*The Powers That Be: Earthly Rulers and Demonic Powers in Romans 13, 1-7*, SBT 2/29, Allenson, Naperville, Ill., 1960), as well as by P. BENOIT (“Pauline Angelology and Demonology...”, p. 12); G. MACGREGOR, “Principalities and Powers...”, pp. 24-25; B. REICKE, “The Law and the World According to Paul: Some Thoughts Concerning Gal. 4, 1-11”, in: *Journal of Biblical Literature* 70 (1951), p. 269. Others have rather argued that Paul has only human rulers in mind here. See, e.g., C. ARNOLD, *Ephesians...*, 44-45; F. F. BRUCE, “Paul and the Powers That Be”, in: *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 66 (1984), pp. 88-90; W. A. CARR, *Angels and Principalities: The Background, Meaning and Development of the Pauline Phrase “hai archai kai hai exousiai”*, SNTSMS 42, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1981; and most recently, T. PAGE, *Powers of Evil: A Biblical Study of Satan and Demons*, Baker, Grand Rapids, Mich., 1995, pp. 262-63.

phrase *stoicheia tou kosmou* (“elemental spirits of the universe” Col 2, 8, 20; Gal 4, 3.8-9)¹⁰.

It is more than likely that these terms overlap with one another in some instances, but in general it seems clear that some sort of hierarchical distinction is being made¹¹. In this regard, neither Paul nor any other New Testament author is unique. These various ways of referring to different

¹⁰ So translates NRSV; cf. “elemental spirits of the world” (NEB, RSV). The question of the meaning of the phrase *stoicheia tou kosmou* in St. Paul’s writings is vigorously debated. W. WINK (“The ‘Elements of the Universe’ in Biblical and Scientific Perspective”, *Zygon* 13, no. 3 [1978], pp. 225-48) has noted no fewer than seven different interpretations (p. 227). Generally speaking, however, scholars today roughly divide into three camps: (1) Following the Reformation tradition, some take *stoicheia* here to refer to the Old Testament law. See, e.g., A. J. BANDSTRA, *The Law and the Elements of the World: An Exegetical Study in Aspects of Paul’s Teaching*, Kok, Kampen, 1964; (2) Some scholars take the term to refer to the material components of the cosmos. See, e.g., E. SCHWEIZER, “Slaves of the Elements and Worshipers of Angels: Gal 4, 3, 9 and Col 2, 8, 18, 20”, *Journal of Biblical Literature* 107 (1988), pp. 455-68. (3) Other scholars take the term to refer to personal beings, typically recognized as “astral spirits.” See, e.g., C. ARNOLD, *Ephesians...*, pp. 131, 168; P. BENOIT, “Pauline Angelology and Demonology...”, p. 13; J. J. GUNTHER, *St. Paul’s Opponents and Their Background: A Study of Apocalyptic and Jewish Sectarian Teachings*, NovTSup 35, Brill, Leiden, 1973, 172ff.; B. REICKE, “The Law and the World”. Although it is clear that there is non unambiguous usage of *stoicheia* as referring to angelic or astral spirits until after Paul (e.g., *Testament of Solomon* 8, 1-4; 18, 1-4), it can perhaps be located as early as the late first century. When one further considers just how enamored intertestamental Judaism was with angelic beings (including their relation to the physical world; see, e.g., *Jubilees* 2, 2; *1 Enoch* 60, 12-21) and how well taking *stoicheia* as referring to angelic/astral spirits fits in the Galatian context, the third interpretation of *stoicheia* seems most probable. For an argument in this direction, see C. E. ARNOLD, “Returning to the Domain of the Powers: *Stoicheia* as Evil Spirits in Galatians 4, 3, 9”, *Novum Testamentum* 38 (1996), pp. 55-76. Arnold has made a similar argument regarding *stoicheia* in Colossians; see *The Colossian Syncretism: The Interface Between Christianity and Folk Belief at Colossae*, Baker, Grand Rapids, Mich.: 1996, pp. 158-94.

¹¹ R. LEIVESTAD only slightly overstates the case when he argues that “Paul has no particular interest in angelology. He pays no attention to their interrelations, and applies the titles indiscriminately” (*Christ the Conqueror: Ideas of Conflict and Victory in the New Testament*, Macmillan, New York, 1954, p. 93). T. LING, however, certainly goes too far in arguing that Paul is taking “various contemporary conceptions of spirit powers which were thought of as ruling over the religio-cultural life of men, and is compressing them into one single conception” (*The Significance of Satan: New Testament Demonology and Its Contemporary Significance*, SPCK, London 1961, p. 65).

classes or types of good or evil divine beings were already in place in the apocalyptic thought of Paul's day. For example, *II Enoch* relates a vision in which the seer saw an exceptionally great light and all the fiery armies of the great archangels and the incorporeal forces (*dynameis*) and the dominions (*kyriotetes*) and the origins (*archai*) and the authorities (*exousiai*), the cherubim and the seraphim and the many-eyed thrones (*thronoi*). (20, 1)¹². Similarly, *I Enoch* contains a prophecy of the end times that states that God will summon all the forces (*dynameis*) of the heavens and all the holy ones above, and the forces of the Lord—the cherubim, seraphim, ophanim, all the angels of governance (*archai*), the Elect One, and the other forces (*exousiai*) on earth and over the water (61, 10)¹³. Indeed, not only were concepts circulating in Jewish culture, but as Clinton Arnold argues, they are found in Gentile texts as well¹⁴. Thus, while these terms may indeed be somewhat opaque to us, in all likelihood they were not so to St. Paul's original audience. So, he does not feel the need to expound in detail his conception about the structure of the demonic realm. We can understand that for St. Paul, just as for Savior Jesus Christ, the "world in between" was hierarchically structured¹⁵. But like Jesus, and quite unlike many apocalyptic writers of his day, St. Paul never speculates on the details of the ranks and functions of the various levels of demonic beings.

II. 2. The identity of the powers

Ephesians 6, 12 provides us with a list (incomplete, though) of these spiritual oponents: "For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and

¹² F. I. ANDERSEN, "2 (Slavonic Apocalypse of) Enoch", in: James H. CHARLESWORTH (ed.), *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, volume 1, *Apocalyptic Literature and Testaments*, Doubleday & Comp. INC, Garden City, N.Y., 1983, p. 134.

¹³ E. ISSAC, "1 (Ethiopic Apocalypse of) Enoch", in: James H. CHARLESWORTH (ed.), *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, volume 1, *Apocalyptic Literature and Testaments* p. 42.

¹⁴ C. ARNOLD, *Ephesians*..., pp. 51-69. Hence the relevance of Greek magical texts for understanding Paul's concepts cannot be minimized. MACGREGOR ("Principalities and Powers...") attempts to make the case that the Gentile astrological beliefs and writings are the primary source of Paul's terminology for the spiritual realm. Relevant here as well is T. B. CARGAL, "Seated in the Heavens: Cosmic Mediators in the Mysteries of Mithras and the Letter to the Ephesians", in: E. H. LOVERING (ed.), *Society of Biblical Literature Seminar Papers*, 1994, Scholars Press, Atlanta, 1994, pp. 804-21.

¹⁵ So concludes P. O'BRIEN in his excellent article "Principalities and Powers: Opponents of the Church", *Evangelical Review of Theology* 16, no. 4 (1992), pp 353-84, esp. 378.

flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places”. The identity of these powers has been the subject of a great deal of scholarly attention¹⁶. Frequently they have been interpreted exclusively as hostile heavenly or astrological powers¹⁷, sometimes in gnostic terms¹⁸. Implied is a cosmology that locates these hostile powers “in the heavenlies”¹⁹ interposing themselves between the believer and God. Salvation thus requires the successful struggle with these powers. There is no question that this teaching of St. Paul lived on within this strand of interpretation²⁰. Wesley Carr reads the text very much in this light, but suggests that as such it represents an anachronism in Ephesians, and must be seen as a Valentinian interpolation²¹. Carr’s reading of Eph 6, 12 is necessitated chiefly by his thesis that in the New Testament “the powers” are always benign; Eph 6, 12 represents a clear counter-example and must therefore be an interpolation²².

An influent study on the identity of these “powers” was published by Walter Wink in 1984. Wink’s comprehensive treatment of the vocabulary

¹⁶ See the studies by H. BERKHOF, *Christ and the Powers*, trans. J.H. Yoder, Herald Press, Kitchener, ON, 1977, J.H. YODER, *The Politics of Jesus*, Herald Press, Kitchener, ON, 1972, pp. 135-62; G.B. CAIRD, *Principalities and Powers: A Study in Pauline Theology*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1956; W. CARR, *Angels and Principalities: The Background, Meaning, and Development of the Pauline Phrase *hai archai kai hai exousiai**, SNTSMS 42, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1981; Heinrich SCHLIER, *Principalities and Powers in the New Testament*, ET, Herder, Freiburg / Nelson, Edinburgh/London, 1961; C. ARNOLD, *Ephesians...*

¹⁷ C. ARNOLD’s study (*Ephesians...*, pp. 14-69) identifies the chief concern behind the preoccupation with power and powers in Ephesians as the pervasive practice of magic as means of manipulation of “heavenly” powers.

¹⁸ See relevant literature in Heinrich SCHLIER, *Der Brief an die Epheser. Ein Kommentar*, Patmos-Verlag, Düsseldorf, 1957, pp. 290-91.

¹⁹ See A.T. LINCOLN, *Paradise Now and Not Yet: Studies in the Role of the Heavenly Dimension in Paul’s Thought with Special Reference to his Eschatology*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1981; A.T. LINCOLN, “A Reexamination of ‘the Heavenlies’ in Ephesians”, in: *New Testament Studies* 19 (1973), pp. 468-83.

²⁰ E.g. CLEMENT OF ALEXANDRIA, *Excerpta ex Theodoto* 73.1-85.3; the gnostic writing *The Teachings of Silvanus* 84.15-85.1; 91.18-20; 114.2-15.

²¹ W. CARR, *Angels and Principalities...*, pp. 104-10.

²² See C.E. ARNOLD, “The ‘Exorcism’ of Ephesians 6.12 in Recent Research: A Critique of Wesley Carr’s View of the Role of Evil Powers in First-Century AD Belief”, *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 30 (1987), pp. 71-87.

of the “powers” indicates that in the majority of cases the nomenclature for “powers” refers to human institutions or the persons inhabiting those positions or offices²³. Nevertheless, the line between human and divine or demonic realms is not a clear one, most especially in the case of the “powers.” The specific pairing of *archai kai exousiai* which heads up the list of powers in Eph 6, 12 appears ten times in the New Testament. In only three instances does the pair clearly refer to human authorities or institutions (Lk 12, 11; 20, 20; Tit 3, 1). The other instances appear in the Pauline corpus: I Cor 15, 24; Eph 1, 21; 3, 10; 6, 12; Col 1, 16; 2, 10, 15. In I Cor 15, 24, the earliest of the texts, Christ exercises his *basileia* by destroying (*katargeo*) the powers, including finally *thanatos* itself. Ephesians 6, 12 draws its allusive power, then, not only from the common currency of its terminology within the larger biblical and socio-political contexts, but specifically also from the way it recalls Paul’s use of the phrase within one of his most striking characterizations of cosmic battle²⁴. There can thus be no doubt that Eph 6, 12 goes beyond human potencies and institutions, evoking the full range of demonic forces, with which the saints have to do battle. The inclusion in the list of powers in v. 12 of *kosmokratores tou kosmou toutou* and *ta pneumatika tes ponerias en tois ouraniois* moves the imagination, first, back to v. 11 and thus to identify the powers with the hostile machinations of the *diabolos*. Second, readers will recall 2, 2, where *ho aion tou kosmou toutou* is governed by the *archon tes exousias tou aeros*, a *pneuma* presently shaping the behaviour of the sons of disobedience. The author’s objective in 6, 12 is then to pit the community against all the powers, human, supra- and sub-human, the height and depth, width and breadth of opposition to God. Wink’s summary characterization in contemporary categories is insufficient when he identifies the powers as “legitimations, seats of authority, hierarchical systems, ideological justifications, and punitive sanctions which their human incumbents exercise and which transcend these incumbents in both time and power”²⁵. It is important to note that St. Paul explicitly distinguishes between “powers” in heaven and “powers” on the earth.

²³ W. WINK, *Naming the Powers: The Language of Power in the New Testament*, Fortress Press, Philadelphia, 1984, pp. 23-26.

²⁴ Thomas R. YODER NEUFELD, “Put on the Armour of God”: *The Divine Warrior from Isaiah to Ephesians*, JSNTSS 140, Sheffield Academic, Sheffield, 1997, p. 122.

²⁵ W. WINK, *Naming the Powers...*, p. 85.

Christ, St. Paul says, created all things “in heaven and on earth, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers” (Col 1, 16). Through His victory on the cross, He shall reconcile to Himself all these things, “whether on earth or in heaven” (Col 1, 20; cf. Phil 2, 9-11; Eph 1, 10). St. Paul is clearly differentiating between powers on earth and powers in heaven, and hence the latter “powers” cannot be exhaustively reduced to the former. To be sure, earthly structures of power can exercise much destructive influence over God’s creation, but these are not what the Christian’s struggle is primarily against. These earthly “powers” are, for St. Paul, simply tools used by far more significant powers “in the heavenly places”. It is, therefore, against these that we must principally struggle. The point is, as much as St. Paul might see demonic activity in structural societal evil, he clearly does not equate the demonic powers with structural societal evil.

In sum, Paul viewed the various cosmic “powers” as transcendent personal beings, created by God and ordered in a hierarchical fashion. At least some of these powers have now become evil and thus have to be fought against by the Church and overthrown by Christ.

II. 3. The activity of the demonic realm

As we have seen, Satan, demons and the hostile cosmic powers were understood in the New Testament to be in principle defeated through Christ’s ministry, death and resurrection. It was, however, further understood that Christ’s victory had not yet been fully applied to the world at large, and for this reason the New Testament epistles and the Acts do not suggest that the demonic activity has diminished since the time of Christ²⁶. This “in-between time” is the time in which we live, and hence understanding this literature’s teaching on the ongoing activity of the Satanic kingdom during this time is important for our assessment of the problem of evil, at both an intellectual and a spiritual level. Thus, it is useful to see what do Acts and the Epistles say about the demonic activity in the post-Easter age.

The “god of this world.” Though it was understood that Jesus stroke a fatal blow to the Satanic kingdom, the authors of Acts and the Epistles affirm the rule and influence of this kingdom no less strongly than did Jesus. Satan is still viewed as “the god of this world” (II Cor 4, 4), “the

²⁶ C. ARNOLD, *Powers of Darkness...*, p. 104-107.

ruler of the power of the air” (Eph 2, 2) who heads up a rebel kingdom (Rev 9, 7-11) and through whom he still controls “the whole world” (I Jn 5, 19). He is the “adversary” who “like a roaring lion . . . prowls around, looking for someone to devour” (I Pet 5, 8). Thus, as in Jesus’ view, this literature continues to see the world as being fundamentally evil (Gal 1, 4; Eph 5, 16). Indeed, because the world is yet saturated with a diabolical influence, putting people outside the church as a form of chastisement is seen as turning them over to Satan (I Cor 5, 1-5; I Tim 1, 20; cf. I Tim 5, 15).

As in the Gospels, and as in apocalyptic thought generally, Acts and the Epistles portray this demonic kingdom as being directly or indirectly behind much of the evil in the world. In Romans 8, 34-39, for example, St. Paul implies that demonic powers can bring about “hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword”, though he insists that none of these things, and none of the demonic powers, “will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (8, 39). Further, St. Paul identifies a certain tormenting “thorn in the flesh” as resulting from “a messenger of Satan” (II Cor 12, 7), and he encourages the Corinthians to turn an unrepentant person “over to Satan for the destruction of the flesh” (I Cor 5, 5)²⁷. Clearly, for St. Paul, Satan is an ever-present reality ready to inflict physical suffering whenever able to do so.

Finally, in the apocalyptic vision of Revelation, Satan is named “Abaddon” and “Apollyon” (Rev 9, 11) - the “destroyer” - who in the last days is permitted to head up a vicious attack of demonic forces (symbolized as locusts) upon the earth, using plagues, fire, “natural” catastrophes and death as their weapons (Rev 9; 6.12-17). Hence the “loud voice in heaven” proclaims, “woe to the earth and the sea, because the devil has come down to you with great wrath, because he knows that his time is short” (Rev 12, 10.12)²⁸.

Further, the “god of this world” is understood to be a primary influence behind all sin. He is portrayed as “the tempter” (I Thess 3, 5; II Cor 11, 3; I Cor 7, 5), and all who surrender themselves to his influence are “children of the devil” (I Jn 3, 8, 10; cf. Acts 13, 20). Hence St. Peter asks Ananias, “why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit?” (Acts 5, 3).

²⁷ See the discussion in T. LING, *Significance of Satan...*, p. 40

²⁸ We can see from these passages in the Revelation that the demonic kingdom can cause physical afflictions.

Satan is also the master deceiver according to this literature. According to Paul, Satan blinds the minds of all unbelievers so they cannot receive the truth (II Cor 4, 4). He, along with his lesser cohorts, is ultimately behind all false teaching (I Jn 4, 1-4; II Jn 7), enslaving people in legalism, astrological superstitions, false doctrines and false philosophies (Gal 4, 8-10; Col 2, 8; I Tim 4, 1-5). So too, according to St. Paul, sacrifices offered to idols are really “offered to demons”, and those who offer such sacrifices are “partners with demons” (I Cor 10, 20). Demons seem to be the driving force behind idolatrous religious practices.

Satan’s power to deceive is further illustrated by the fact that he, or his messengers, can appear as “an angel of light” or “an angel from heaven” teaching false doctrine (II Cor 11, 13; Gal 1, 8). He and his legions can, and will, perform “counterfeit miracles, signs and wonders” as a means of deceiving “those who are perishing” (II Thess 2, 9; cf. Rev 13, 2). Indeed, so powerful is Satan’s ability to deceive that he is even portrayed as deceiving entire nations (Rev 20, 3.8.10) and is called “the deceiver of the whole world” (Rev 12, 9).

Satan’s war against the Church. The demonic kingdom is still prevalent in the world according to the New Testament. But following its pattern with Jesus in the Gospels, this kingdom focuses most of its activity on hindering the ministry of the Church. Where the kingdom of God is being spread, there the kingdom of darkness will be most at work. Hence St. Paul tells the Thessalonians that he and his companions wanted to come to them “again and again - but Satan blocked our way” (I Thess 2, 18). Just as St. Paul understood the “rulers of this world” to be at work provoking the crowds and authorities to crucify Jesus (I Cor 2, 8), so too, it seems, he saw the activity of Satan behind the crowds who prevented him from fellowship with the Thessalonians (cf. Acts 17, 1-9). The contrasting of Paul’s earnest desire with Satan’s obstruction also says something about St. Paul’s view of just how powerful and successful Satan could be in his opposition to the ministry²⁹.

The strong opposition of the kingdom of darkness against the Church is also seen in that Satan is portrayed as continually at work to bring trials to Christians in order to discourage them (I Thess 3, 5; cf. Rom 8, 35-39). He is also at work to entrap Church leaders, apparently by slandering their reputations, according to Paul (1 Tim 3, 7). For this reason, St. Paul,

²⁹ So T. LING notes, *Significance of Satan...*, p. 40.

following the instruction of Jesus, prays that leaders would be protected “from the evil one” (II Thess 3, 2-3; cf. Mt 6, 13). What is more, in St. Paul’s understanding, Satan is prowling to devour young Christian widows (I Tim 5, 11-15) as well as young Churches by inciting divisions among them. Hence as he encourages them to preserve unity in the body (Rom 16, 17-19), St. Paul reassures the Roman Christians that “the God of peace will shortly crush Satan under your feet” (Rom 16, 20).

The Satanic kingdom is also heavily at work in trying to deceive believers (I Tim 4, 1-7) and to pollute their minds with falsehood. Indeed, one of the primary areas of spiritual warfare, according to St. Paul, is the believer’s mind: “We live as human beings, but we do not wage war according to human standards; for the weapons of our warfare are not merely human, but they have divine power to destroy strongholds. We destroy arguments and every proud obstacle raised up against the knowledge of God, and we take every thought captive to obey Christ” (II Cor 10, 3-5). Elsewhere St. Paul urges believers: “Do not be conformed to this world” - the world governed by Satan’s regime - “but be transformed by the renewing of your minds” (Rom 12, 2). The Christian’s mind, for Paul, is a battlefield between the evil one who blinds and the Saviour who brings light (II Cor 4, 4-6).

The heart of the believer, the place from where forgiveness must proceed (Matt 18, 35), is a battlefield as well, according to St. Paul. Hence, he encourages Ephesian believers: “do not let the sun go down on your anger”, and do not “make room for the devil” (Eph 4, 26-27). The proximity of these verses may suggest that unforgiveness is one of the ways people give the devil a region in their life (“room”, *topos*) out of which he can operate to further pollute their heart. The same idea lies behind Paul’s encouragement to the Corinthians to follow his example in forgiving others “so that we may not be outwitted by Satan; for we are not ignorant of his designs” (II Cor 2, 10-11). In any event, the teaching presupposes that the enemy is constantly present, seeking to gain an entrance into the believer’s life.

This conception is also presupposed in Paul’s instruction to young widows “to give the adversary no occasion to revile us” (I Tim 5, 14), as well as in his instruction to all believers to “put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil” (Eph 6, 11). Regarding Satan waging war against the Christians through “wiles” St. John Chrysostom explains:

“For this enemy is at war with us, not simply, nor openly, but by «wiles.» What is meant by wiles? To use wiles, is to deceive and to take by artifice or contrivance. (...) The devil never proposes to us sins in their proper colors; he does not speak of idolatry, but he sets it off in another dress, using wiles that is, making his discourse plausible, employing disguises”³⁰.

In Paul’s view, the devil and his kingdom are as pervasive in this fallen world as the air we breath (cf. Eph 2, 2; I Pet 5, 8). The atmosphere of the world is diabolical, with the enemy persistently seeking to find an entrance into the believer’s heart.

III. Christian life as warfare

In the light of all this, it comes as no surprise that one of the most frequent ways the Christian life is portrayed throughout the New Testament is that it is the life of a soldier. While many contemporary Western readers of the Bible instinctively take this to be nothing more than a catchy metaphor for the Christian life, in the context of the New Testament it is meant quite literally³¹. To follow Jesus is to do battle with the ever-present prince of darkness.

III.1. Victory through Christ

In Eph 6, 10-20 Paul uses the picture of a soldier who puts on the appropriate pieces of armor to heighten this idea. In this case the soldier puts on a belt, a breastplate, footgear, a shield and a helmet, and then takes

³⁰ “Homily XXII on Ephesians”, in: *The Commentary and Homilies of St. John Chrysostom Archbishop of Constantinople, on the Epistles of St. Paul the Apostle to the Galatians and Ephesians*, transl. Gross Alexander, in: Philip SCHAFF (ed.), *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, series 1, vol. 13, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, Mich., 2002, pp. 159-160.

³¹ This is the conception of every spiritual father of the Church. Thus, for St. Ignatius Brinachaninov “This fight is terrible! It is for life and death. The consequences of this struggle must be either our eternal salvation or our eternal destruction. The spirits of wickedness driven by a terrible hatred against the human race lead this struggle with the greatest perseverance and infernal skill (*Ofrandă monahilor contemporani*, p. 307).

up a sword. The main point of this imagery is that Christianity should be understood as warfare and believers should prepare for this warfare just as any soldier would prepare for battle. It is really unimportant to decide whether Paul has a Roman, Greek, Jewish or Persian soldier in mind. Most of the imagery comes straight from the book of Isaiah (see Is 11, 5; 52, 7; 59, 17). Furthermore, as Blessed Jerome argues, the armor of God is Christ Himself:

“There is no difference between saying, «Put on the whole armour of God» and, «Put on the Lord Jesus Christ». If the «girdle» is «truth» and the «breastplate» is «justice» (Eph 6, 14), and our Saviour is called «truth» and «justice» (John 14, 6; 1 Cor 1, 30), there can be no doubt that he himself is both the «girdle» and the «breastplate». He will also, accordingly, be «the preparation of the gospel of peace, and the shield of faith, and the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the spirit which is the word of God» (Eph 6, 15-17), «a living and effectual word and sharper than any two-edged sword» (Heb 4, 12)”³².

In verse 12, the use of the word “struggle” (*pale*) describes a scene of conflict. In the first century this word was commonly used as the typical term for the sport of wrestling. It even occurs on inscriptions in Western Asia Minor in reference to the wrestling event of the various games held in the regional cities³³. As such, Paul probably used it to heighten the closeness of the struggle with the powers of evil. The use of the words “evil” and “darkness” also indicate the character of spiritual warfare. The world rulers (*kosmokratores*) are depicted as ruling over “this darkness” and as being “evil.” The whole setting is cast “on the evil day”, which probably refers both to the fact that “the days are evil” (Eph 5, 16) and that there will be intense times of demonic attack. Finally, the devil is depicted in extremely vivid terms as launching flaming arrows at the Church (Eph 6, 16). The whole tenor of the passage is designed to convey the feeling of extreme danger.

³² Ronald E. HEINE, *The Commentaries of Origen and Jerome on St. Paul's Epistle to the Ephesians*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2002, p. 252.

³³ Clinton E. ARNOLD, *3 Crucial Questions about Spiritual Warfare*, Baker Books, Grand Rapids 1997, pp. 37-38.

The danger posed to Christians by these organized powers of darkness can be overwhelming if left on our own³⁴. Christians, however, are not alone. They are united to the exalted Lord who defeated the forces of evil and now imparts His power and authority to the Church. Throughout the letter the apostle has emphasized God's power and its availability to believers. This emphasis now reaches a climax when Paul says "be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power" (Eph 6, 10). He strung together three power-denoting terms (*endynamo*, *kratos* and *ischys*) that have a combined effect of bringing the almighty power of God into bold relief especially in contrast to the weaker powers of darkness.

St. Paul further defined and clarified God's power by specifying various ways God bestows His power on the Church and by relating the means through which God's enabling might is imparted. St. Paul enumerated seven spiritual weapons: truth, righteousness, the gospel, faith, salvation, the Spirit/the word of God, prayer. While this list of spiritual resources ("weapons") does not exhaust all divine bestowments available to Christians, it represents the essence of all that is vital to waging successful warfare against the powers of darkness.

The nature of spiritual warfare, as Paul portrayed it here, is primarily concerned with Christian conduct and spreading the gospel, not with exorcism or eradicating structural evil. The heart of spiritual warfare could best be summarized as resistance or steadfastness.

III.2. Resisting the evil attacks

Four times in the passage Paul used the word stand/withstand (same root in the Greek: Eph 6, 11, 13, 14). In the larger context of Ephesians it is clear Paul did not want believers to "give a place to the devil" with excessive anger, lying, stealing or succumbing to any other temptation to moral impurity (Eph 4, 27). Paul described the devil and his powers as working in concert with the flesh and the world (Eph 2, 2-3) to promote

³⁴ "Not to rely on oneself is so necessary in our struggle, my beloved brother, that without this, be assured, not only will you fail to gain the desired victory, but you will be unable to resist the smallest attack of the enemy. Engrave this deeply in your mind and heart"; *Unseen Warfare: The Spiritual Combat & Path to Paradise* of Lorenzo Scupoli edited by Nicodemus of the Holy Mountain & revised by Theophan the Recluse, transl. E. Kadloubovsky & G. E. H. Palmer, St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, Crestwood, N.Y., 1987, p. 81.

sin among Christians and hinder the progress of the gospel. For this reason the Christian needs to appropriate God's enabling power in order to live with moral integrity.

Spiritual warfare is therefore resistance. It is a defensive posture. It involves recognizing the supernatural nature of temptation and being prepared to face it. It also implies appropriating God's power to progress in eradicating moral vices that already have a place in one's life.

The first two spiritual weapons Paul named are "truth" and "righteousness." There appears to be two sides to these weapons. On the one hand, they need to be understood as divine endowments for the task of spiritual warfare. On the other hand, they are to be regarded as virtues that need to be cultivated in the lives of believers. This understanding is quite natural in that the gospel brings with it implications for Christian conduct. Paul saw the gospel as "truth" (Eph 1, 13) and as the power of God for salvation (Rom 1, 16). In contrast, the devil is the archadversary who uses many schemes designed to misrepresent, deceive and trick. Believers need to have a thorough knowledge of the revealed truth about God and the salvation He offers through Jesus Christ. St. John Chrysostom says that as the loins are "the basis or groundwork of the whole body" so the truth has a foundational role for the spiritual life: "He who seeks the doctrine of truth, shall never fall down to the earth"³⁵. By implication, believers need to conduct their lives in a manner consistent with the truth of the gospel. Lying and deceit can have no place in a believer's life; they are an affront to the God of truth. Consequently, in Ephesians, St. Paul told each Christian that he or she "must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to his neighbor" (Eph 4, 25; see also 5, 9).

The breastplate of righteousness, according to the same godly Father, is a "life of universal virtue"³⁶. The apostle admonished his readers to strip off the old self and put on the new self, which is "created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness" (Eph 4, 24). The development of personal holiness and integrity is part of the preparation for engaging in victorious spiritual warfare. Conversely, a lack of integrity and personal holiness will certainly hinder a believer's ability to resist the onslaught of Satan's minions successfully.

³⁵ "Homily XXII on Ephesians", p. 164.

³⁶ "Homily XXIV on Ephesians", p. 167.

Next, the apostle urges the Ephesians to have their feet “shod with the preparation of the gospel of peace” (Eph 6, 15). Blessed Jerome, following Origen, considers that “feet” suggest the idea of walking on the Way which is Christ (Jn 14, 6). “Preparation for the gospel of peace” means having peace and advancing towards perfection:

“One, therefore, who has peace has been shod with the gospel of Christ and when one has been shod one has been prepared. And when one has been prepared one does not consider oneself to be perfect but one is prepared to proceed and, proceeding, one arrives at the goal”³⁷.

The fourth weapon is the “shield of faith with which you will be able to extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one” (v. 16). The flaming arrows are “evil thoughts”, according to Jerome³⁸, or “temptations and perverse desires”, according to Chrysostom, who considers that flaming is the nature of desire³⁹. St. Ignatius Brianchaninov explains that “He who has living faith in God and surrenders himself to his will with self-sacrifice remains undisturbed in all the temptations brought by the spirits of wickedness, for he sees in spirits only blind tools of God’s Providence”⁴⁰.

Another very important aspect of a believer’s resistance is “salvation”, which is linked to the helmet as the fifth piece of armor (Eph 6, 17). St. Paul clarified what he meant by salvation in three powerful thoughts: (1) believers have been made alive with Christ, (2) they have been raised up with Christ, and (3) they have been seated with him in the heavenly realms (Eph 2, 4-6). St. John Chrysostom insists that the apostle speaks of “**your** salvation” suggesting that the protecting helmet is obtained by the Christians’ effort to keep themselves oriented towards heaven⁴¹.

Finally, the believer is given a “sword” to fend off the attacks of the evil one. The sword is linked with the Spirit and the Word of God. Just as Jesus used Scripture to resist Satan’s temptations while he was in the wilderness (Matt 4, 1-11), St. Paul called on believers to use God’s Word to resist the devil in their own situations. Speaking of the help the Scriptures

³⁷ R. HEINE, *The Commentaries of Origen and Jerome*, pp. 264-265.

³⁸ R. HEINE, *The Commentaries of Origen and Jerome*, p. 265.

³⁹ “Homily XXIV on Ephesians”, p. 167.

⁴⁰ *Ofrandă monahilor contemporani*, p. 323

⁴¹ “Homily XXIV on Ephesians”, p. 167.

bring us in struggling against the evil spirits, St. Ignatius Brianchaninov says that they “prevent us from being overwhelmed with fear and sorrow, convincing and showing us by its divine promise that to God the very hairs of our heads are numbered and that nothing can happen to us without God’s providence and permission”⁴².

If Paul were to indicate the primary way of gaining access to the power of God for waging successful spiritual warfare, he would unwaveringly affirm that it is through prayer. And this is the line followed by all the spiritual fathers along the history. Thus, for example, St. Ignatius, to whose teachings we have previously looked, says:

“As soon as you feel the enemy coming, put yourself in place for prayer, bow down your knees and lift your hands to heaven or lie down on the ground. Pierce the face of the enemy with this lightning and he won’t be able to stand against you but will hastily run away”⁴³.

The spiritual warfare passage is often viewed in individual terms; that is, each individual Christian should pray and ask God for strength to do battle. St. Paul actually depicted the arming in corporate terms. The whole Church is involved in the process of arming. In fact, each believer is responsible for arming other believers. All of St. Paul’s admonitions in this passage are in the plural. More important, however, is the fact that St. Paul urged believers to pray “for all the saints” (Eph 6, 18). Since this exhortation is part of St. Paul’s explanation of prayer as the final piece of armor, it is most natural to understand it as his recommendation as to the prerequisite and means of acquiring divine enablement. This fact is supported when he requested prayer for himself in the verses immediately following. In essence, he is asking his readers to arm him for spiritual warfare, particularly in his offensive act of proclaiming the Gospel. Certainly, the two prayers of Ephesians 1 and 3 model this fact. Through those two prayers, St. Paul deployed God’s armor for the protection and use of his readers. By leaving aside the metaphorical language of spiritual warfare and putting it into the simplest terms, one could say St. Paul prayed that God would endow them with His power so they could successfully

⁴² *Ofrandă monahilor contemporani*, p. 331.

⁴³ *Ofrandă monahilor contemporani*, 326.

resist Satan's temptations and be divinely enabled to spread the gospel fearlessly in spite of demonic hindrance and hostility.

IV. Conclusion

This short survey of some New Testament data has clearly showed the prevalence of the warfare motif in the Christian life. The believer is like a soldier who must be continuously on guard against a tireless and cunning foe. We saw that Satan and his army fiercely oppose God's plans for the salvation of man and the Church as the instrument of His Kingdom on earth. In doing so the fallen powers bring temptations, spread falsity and confusion, deceive, stir persecutions, inflict diseases, manipulate human institutions. The demons' victory over the Christians is possible only because of their negligence, insufficient attachment to God or failure to put on the whole armor of God, which is Christ Himself. It is true that Christ suppressed sin as a necessity, put an end to the tyranny of the devil, made death harmless, but He did not suppress sin, nor the action of demons, nor physical death, nor the consequences of sin in general, so as to force or deny the human free will⁴⁴. Man is expected to adhere freely to God and His purposes, and until he has not completely done this he is vulnerable to Satan's "wiles."

The current COVID 19 pandemic may be understood as a large scale demonic attack against the whole humanity⁴⁵. A wide range of evil stratagems is being deployed even in the so-called Christian societies: confusion, fear, disbelief, division, untruth, unrighteousness, manipulation, attacks on the Sacraments of the Church, prohibition of participation in holy services. In light of St. Paul's teaching expounded above, all these should not come as a surprise. It's just one of those "evil days" which we are supposed to be expectant of. Now the soldier of Christ is under siege and must rely completely on the power of his Master in order to withstand. He must perceive the demonic dimension of these tribulations and assess

⁴⁴ Jean Claude LARCHET, *Originea, natura și sensul pandemiei actuale*, <https://www.cbrom.de/index.php/spiritualitate/ortodoxia-traita-azi/1205-jean-claude-larchet-originea-natura-si-sensul-pandemiei-actuale> (accessed on 20.07.2021).

⁴⁵ Jean Claude LARCHET, *Originea, natura și sensul pandemiei actuale*, <https://www.cbrom.de/index.php/spiritualitate/ortodoxia-traita-azi/1205-jean-claude-larchet-originea-natura-si-sensul-pandemiei-actuale> (accessed on 20.07.2021).

the whole situation in light of the revealed truth. He needs to keep pursuing “the universal virtue”, guard the peace of his heart, trust himself to God through faith, detach his mind from earthly things, feed himself with the Word of God. Above all he must remain watchful and persist in prayer

“for prayer can become a powerful weapon in unseen warfare only when it becomes real, that is, when it takes root in the heart and starts to work there unceasingly. From that moment it becomes an impenetrable, unconquerable and insuperable barrier, protecting the soul from the arrows of the enemy, the passionate assaults of the flesh and the enticements of the world with its prelest. Its presence in the heart cuts off the unseen warfare”⁴⁶.

⁴⁶ *Unseen Warfare*..., 220.