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How convincing is Walter Wink's interpretation of Paul's language of the powers?

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I. Introduction

In his introduction to *Naming the Powers: The Language of Power in the New Testament*,[1] Walter Wink explains that the book was in many ways a response to a four month stay in Latin America with his wife. Together they observed the church's response to hunger and human rights abuses, and spoke to priests, nuns, human rights lawyers and a woman who had been tortured. The impact upon Wink was physical: he became weak and lost weight, and succumbed to despair in the face of the 'monolithic' nature of the tyranny which he and his wife had seen. Upon his return, unable to finish the book he had been working on, Wink began to read Carr's *Angels and Principalities: The Background Meaning and Development of the Pauline Phrase hai archai kai hai exousiai*.[2] He purposed to review it, but as his review exceeded the fifty page mark, he knew that there was a work to be done assessing Paul's language of power. This catalysed Wink's attempt to name and respond to the institutional evil which he had seen in Latin America, an attempt which largely uses the vehicle of Pauline powers language.

This article assesses the validity of Wink's interpretation of the Pauline powers language. It is proposed first, however, to offer a synopsis of other approaches to contextualise Wink's perspective within the wider interpretative continuum, before summarising the position which he has taken. An exegetical analysis of relevant passages follows,[3] reviewing and critiquing Wink's interpretation of the powers language in each passage. This is fundamental *precisely because* his view purports to be exegetically-based.[4] However, whilst exegesis must constitute the

1 Walter Wink, *Naming the Powers: The Language of Power in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984).

2 Wesley Carr, *Angels and Principalities: The Background Meaning and Development of the Pauline Phrase hai archai kai hai exousiai* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

3 Wink treats Colossians as Pauline and Ephesians as emanating from Paul's disciple and therefore 'Pauline' – Wink, Naming, 54 n.42. We follow his classification.

4 Wink, *Naming the Powers*, 35.

weight of evidence reviewed, Wink's hermeneutical/methodological approach must be considered as essential background to his interpretation.

To avoid doubt, 'powers' is used below as a *generic* term for the varied Pauline expressions for power; where a *specific* Greek word is being referenced, either its transliteration or English translation will appear.

II. Interpretative continuum

Initial work derived from Everling and Dibelius;[5] subsequent scholars including Schlier 'sought to interpret the… significance of the "powers" in terms of contemporary life'.[6] Using Ephesians 2:2, Schlier viewed the powers 'as a general spirit or attitude in a nation or locality… passed to the institutions and… propagated by (them)'.[7] Berkhof, continuing this thought, claimed that whereas 'the apocalypses (treat the)… powers as heavenly angels', Paul handles them 'as structures of earthly existence'.[8]

Others were perhaps triggered by Cullmann, who concluded that *exousiai* in Romans 13:1 denotes 'not only… civil authorities but also the angelic powers standing behind, and acting through (them)', and that 1 Corinthians 2:8 and 6:1ff supported this.[9] For these scholars, 'the powers are pre-eminently the structures, institutions and ideologies', yet nevertheless the more literal demonic sense need not be rejected.[10] Some locate Wink within this category.[11]

A third strand of scholarship, including O'Brien and Stott, does not seek to demythologise the powers but treats them as personal, supernatural beings which *use* people, structures and events.[12]

III. Summary of Wink's view

Wink describes his work as a 'pilgrimage away from a rather naïve assurance that the "principalities and powers" mentioned in the NT could be "demythologised"', commenting that 'always there was this remainder… that would not reduce to physical structures – something invisible, immaterial, spiritual, and very, very real'.[13] Arnold, however, describes it as an attempt 'to construct a more

5 Clinton Arnold, *Ephesians: Power and Magic (The Concept of Power in Ephesians in Light of Its Historical Setting)* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 42-44.
6 Arnold, *Ephesians*, 44.
7 Ibid, 44.
8 H. Berkhof, *Christ and the Powers* (Scottdale: Mennonite Publishing House, 1962), 18.
9 P. T. O'Brien, 'Principalities and Powers: Opponents of the Church' (pp.110-150) in (ed. D. A. Carson) *Biblical Interpretation and the Church* (Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1984), 117-118.
10 Ibid, 123.
11 See III.
12 O'Brien, 'Opponents', 141-143; John R. W. Stott, *God's New Society: Ephesians* (Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 1979), 274. Carr does similarly but denies the powers are evil in Paul – Carr, *Angels*, 122.
13 Wink, *Naming the Powers*, 5.

sure exegetical and historical footing to the demythologising view… presented by Schlier and Berkhof'.[14]

Some might claim Arnold does insufficient justice to Wink's recognition of the powers' inner, spiritual aspect. Yet, it is unclear how far Wink's acceptance of the powers' spiritual aspect *actually* extends. Whilst affirming the powers as 'spiritual *and* institutional',[15] Wink seems to deny that a power's spiritual aspect has any separate ontological existence:[16] both the organisation (outer aspect) and its spirituality (inner aspect) 'come into existence… and cease to exist together'.[17]

Wink, then, seems to offer only a minor variation on the classic 'demythologising position': the powers are not personal beings and are encountered only through structures.[18] Nevertheless, even then, Wink seems unsure: he writes that a power's spiritual aspect exists only in connection with its outer aspect (the associated structure), yet, only a few sentences later, avoids such an absolute claim, writing that the powers '*generally* are only encountered as corporealised in some form'[19] (italics mine). He later qualifies his assertion that these powers consist of outer and inner aspects by the word 'usually.[20] Surely all these qualifications imply confusion in Wink's mind?

Wink's analysis of Pauline powers language depends on various 'guidelines',[21] the principal of which is that 'the language of power in the NT is imprecise, liquid, interchangeable, and unsystematic'.[22] Following word studies of power language, Wink posits further that 'unless the context further specifies (and some do), we… take the terms for power in their most comprehensive sense, understanding them to mean both heavenly *and* earthly, divine *and* human, good *and* evil powers', arguing that his word studies 'demonstrated that every term for the Powers is used in each of these ways… (T)he original hearers… understood this language to be the comprehensive vocabulary for power in general and took… meaning from… context. Where the meaning is left ambiguous, it is just that… *ambo*, "both"'.[23]

Wink concludes that 'the Powers are simultaneously the outer and inner aspects of one and the same indivisible concretion of power'[24] and claims that they 'shall be redeemed'.[25]

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14 Arnold, *Ephesians*, 48.
15 Walter Wink, *The Powers That Be: Theology for a New Millennium* (New York: Doubleday, 1998), 24.
16 Wink, *Naming the Powers*, 105.
17 Ibid, 5.
18 Wink, *The Powers That Be*, 27-28.
19 Wink, *Naming the Powers*, 5.
20 Walter Wink, *Unmasking the Powers: The Invisible Forces that Determine Human Existence* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 4.
21 Wink, *Naming the Powers*, 7-12, 139.
22 Ibid, 9-10.
23 Ibid, 39.
24 Ibid, 107.
25 Wink, *The Powers That Be*, 32.

IV. Exegetical analysis and critique of Wink's interpretation of Pauline powers language

1. Titus

Wink contends that *archais exousiais* in Titus 3:1 denotes human authorities and government structures.[26] This seems reasonable, given the context.

2. Romans

13:1-3

According to Wink, all commentators agree that the *archontes* in Romans 13:3 are human; he suggests that the *exousiai* of 13:1 are, by analogy, also human.[27] Wink's last-mentioned hermeneutical guideline, however, requires him to consider whether the *exousiai* are also spiritual powers, since the term elsewhere in Paul denotes angelic beings. Concluding that it is possible, he notes that 'Paul would have… affirmed the existence of higher spiritual powers behind all the physical expressions of government' but that Paul is 'not concerned with that dimension of power here'.[28] This seems correct.

8:38-39

Wink treats the *archai* here as cosmic powers[29] but sees references to human powers in Romans 8:31-37. He thus regards 8:31-39 as a long list of powers – 'human, structural, or divine' – which are created by God and cannot undermine Christ's victory.[30] He does not suggest that each power here is *simultaneously* cosmic and structural, contrary to his general assertion about the powers' nature.

3. 1 Corinthians

2:6-8

Some scholars prefer to interpret *tōn archōntōn tou aiōnos toutou* ('the rulers of this age') as human agents:[31] they note that 26 of 37 NT uses of *archōn* refer to humans, draw attention to the co-text of 1 Corinthians 1-2 and further suggest

26 Wink, *Naming the Powers*, 39-40.
27 Ibid, 46.
28 Ibid, 46-47.
29 Ibid, 49-50; Page agrees because of the pairing of archai with angels – Sydney H. T. Page, *Powers of Evil: A Biblical Study of Satan and Demons* (Leicester: Apollos, 1995), 243.
30 Wink, *Naming the Powers*, 50.
31 Page, *Powers*, 262; Gene Miller, '*Archontōn tou aiōnos toutou* – A New Look at 1 Corinthians 2:6-8', *JBL* 91 (1972), 522-528 (see 526); Wesley Carr, 'The Rulers of This Age – 1 Corinthians 2:6-8', *NTS* 23 (1977), 20-35 (see 24); Chris Forbes, 'Paul's Principalities and Powers: Demythologising Apocalyptic?', *JSNT* 82 (2001) 61-88 (see 68).

that this interpretation mirrors more general NT teaching (the gospels demonstrate that the demons understood Jesus' mission whereas 1 Corinthians 2:8 declares that these rulers did not).[32]

Arnold considers that the rulers as demonic, suggesting that *archōn* elsewhere denotes Satan and was part of Jewish and Christian terminology for evil spirits, and commenting that *katargeō* (v.6) is never used of the final doom of humans but is used, outside of 1 Corinthians, in 2 Thessalonians 2:8 and Hebrews 2:14 of the 'lawless one' and Satan. Finally, he remarks that this interpretation makes more sense of the passage: the point of Paul's argument is that human wisdom cannot comprehend God's wisdom and nor *even* can angelic powers.[33]

Others' interpretations are less clear: Pobee thinks it unnecessary to choose between the two interpretations, although his key argument for the human interpretation that *estaurōsan* is aorist, 'throwing the emphasis on the historical facts',[34] seems weak; Berkhof denies the rulers are human but also cannot ascertain whether these 'superearthly realities'[35] are 'real beings or… figurative personification'.[36]

Wink, however, interprets the phrase's referent as *simultaneously* human and demonic agents.[37] First, he notes that *archōn* is used in the gospels and Acts of religious and military leaders at Jesus' death and argues that Paul's use here must incorporate a human sense.[38] It is unclear why the semantic sense of *archōn* elsewhere in the NT should automatically be incorporated here; however, Wink's comment that this fits the wider co-text is more compelling (contra Arnold),[39] given Paul's earlier mention of humans including the 'scribe' and the 'powerful': 'the antithesis in 1 Corinthians 1-2 is not between saved humans and lost angels but between two groups of humans'.[40]

Having suggested persuasive reasons why the rulers here are human, Wink then claims that the text also refers to them as demonic. His justifications are less convincing. He explains how it could be *possible* (based on 1 Enoch and a potential allusion in Colossians 1:26) for Paul to view the heavenly *archontes* as ignorant of the secret of redemption and comments that the first century church favoured the demonic interpretation.[41] Further, to support this reading, he *expressly* approves Dibelius' claim that the 'rulers of this age' is, as a statement, 'extravagant applied to humans, but sensible if it refers to… immortal' powers.[42]

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32 Page, *Powers*, 261-262.
33 Clinton Arnold, *Powers of Darkness* (Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 102-103.
34 John S. Pobee, *Persecution and Martyrdom in Paul* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1985), 66.
35 Berkhof, *Powers*, 14.
36 Ibid, 17.
37 Wink, *Naming the Powers*, 106.
38 Ibid, 40-41.
39 See above.
40 Wink, *Naming the Powers*, 41.
41 Ibid, 43-44.
42 Ibid, 42.

If Wink truly believes this, how then can he defend a human element in his interpretation?

Even if we do not force this point, the question remains, nevertheless, why Wink believes that the text points to both senses *simultaneously*. He has only explained how *either* interpretation is possible,[43] and later makes only a passing, unsubstantiated comment that Paul's language here is 'so ambiguous because he is probably thinking of both human and demonic agents'.[44] Either interpretation being possible is not identical to both statements being simultaneously true, and Wink needs to substantiate this claim further.[45] Yet this seems to escape him: he expressly states this erroneous assumption as one of his hermeneutical guidelines, saying that 'where the meaning is left ambiguous, it is just that… "both"'.[46] We cannot concur: without more evidence, one can only say that either interpretation seems possible.

15:24-27a

At issue here is the translation of *katargeō* in 15:24,26. Wink denies that it should properly be translated 'destroy' because this would put the passage in contradiction with Colossians 1:20 and 2 Corinthians 5:19[47] and prevent him from maintaining that the powers, having fallen, will be redeemed.

Lee concurs,[48] as does Sider, although he prefers to rely on Revelation 21:23-26: since kings bring glory into New Jerusalem, he says, these powers cannot have been destroyed.[49] Wink employs this same argument.[50] This argument seems weak: one could respond that the surviving kings are not powers, but rather individuals who were controlled by demonic powers until those powers' destruction. Thus, this argument cannot itself justify refusing to translate *katargeō* as 'destroy' unless, of course, one *presupposes* that the powers are both human and spiritual!

Wink's other argument is that *katargeō* cannot mean 'destroy' in 15:24 because the powers' continuing existence is presupposed in 15:27-28; thus in 15:24, it must be translated 'subject' or 'neutralise'.[51] Death in 15:26 also, he claims, need not be destroyed; it also may be 'neutralised', allowing for 'a cosmic restitution of all things at the end'.[52] There is no doubt that death will be neutralised but what,

43 Ibid, 40-44.
44 Ibid, 106.
45 We cannot agree with Thiselton's reference to Wink's 'careful exegetical argument' – Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2000), 239.
46 Wink, *Naming the Powers*, 39.
47 Ibid, 51.
48 Jung Young Lee, 'Interpreting the Demonic Powers in Pauline Thought', *NT* 12 (1970), 54-69 (see 66).
49 Ronald J. Sider, 'Christ and Power', *IRM* 69 (1980), 8-20 (see 15).
50 Wink, *Naming the Powers*, 54.
51 Ibid, 51.
52 Ibid, 52.

in practice, does Wink think this means but its destruction? Death will hardly be rehabilitated![53]

Of note are Matthew 25:41 and Revelation 20:10, evidencing that 'the belief that fallen spiritual agencies will one day be punished is found elsewhere' in the NT[54] and thus suggesting that 1 Corinthians 15 may also describe destruction of spiritual powers. Wink deals with these verses, albeit unconvincingly, suggesting that they 'simply reflect the tension between… love… and the unredeemed "shadow" side which thirsts for revenge'.[55] With respect, this is weak; further, if other NT passages seem to allow for destruction of spiritual powers, then it is not impossible that Paul was also doing so in 1 Corinthians. Spiritual powers at least, it seems, may be destroyed (even if earthly powers might be redeemed).

4. Stoicheia *in Galatians and Colossians*

There are seven NT references to *stoicheia*,[56] of which four are deemed Pauline: Galatians 4:3,9; Colossians 2:8,20. The meaning of *stoicheia* is context-dependent:[57] the word denotes merely 'an irreducible component'.[58] The concept is explicitly linked with the powers by the context of Colossians 2:8-10.[59]

Wink sees no evidence that the *stoicheia* were identified as astral spirits prior to the third-century.[60] His reading of *stoicheia* in Galatians is that they are 'those basic practices… fundamental to the religious existence of all peoples, Jew and Gentile alike', noting that 'in 4:3 the term is used to sweep Gentiles into a discussion of Judaism which would otherwise' seem to exclude them and that '4:9 develops the same thought… Having been in bondage… to such elementary… practices, they are in danger of… (returning to) slavery by… (adopting) the Jewish law'.[61]

In Colossians 2:8, Wink interprets an emphasis on *stoicheia* as a 'syncretistic emphasis on the elements as the first principles of reality' and in 2:20 sees them as 'the whole bundle of practices and beliefs… (establishing) one's basic orientation to life'.[62] For Wink, then, these powers are inanimate, practices and beliefs which can enslave humans. Yates'[63] and Page's[64] interpretations are similar.

Nevertheless, not all commentators accept Wink's characterisation of these powers as impersonal. Arnold believes that traditions relating *stoicheia* to per-

53 Page, *Powers*, 241.
54 Ibid, 241.
55 Wink, *Naming the Powers*, 53.
56 Ibid, 67.
57 Peter T. O'Brien, *Word Biblical Commentary: Colossians, Philemon* (Waco: Word, 1982), 129.
58 Wink, *Naming the Powers*, 68.
59 Forbes, 'Principalities', 70.
60 Wink, *Naming the Powers*, 67.
61 Ibid, 72.
62 Ibid, 76-77.
63 Roy Yates, 'The Powers of Evil in the New Testament', *EQ* 52 (1980) 97-111 (see 104).
64 Page, *Powers*, 265.

sonal spiritual forces in Testament of Solomon date to the first century and earlier, thus suggesting that Paul could have perceived *stoicheia* as personal cosmic beings,[65] and considers that this 'personal' interpretation makes sense of the references in Galatians and Colossians.[66]

Whilst Wink's non-personal interpretation may make better sense of the cotextual evidence,[67] fundamentally he has not demonstrated that the term simultaneously represents spiritual and earthly realities:[68] to say that when 'people abandon themselves to religious practices… or ideological principles… the *stoicheia* become functional gods'[69] (implicitly, acquiring a spiritual element alongside their 'outer structural' reality) is supposition and textually unsubstantiated.

5. Other texts in Colossians

Analysing Colossians 1:16-17, 20, Wink seems to *assume* that structural powers are being described[70] on the basis that all the terms used in Colossians 1:16 were 'used of social structures' elsewhere in the NT.[71] He admits that 'whether the author intended such an analysis of social structures… is an open question'.[72] Essentially, Wink is engaging in something suspiciously like reader-response hermeneutics: powers language would have been 'a neat sociological instrument… had the ancients chosen to use it',[73] and (implicitly), we may therefore use it in this way!

First, such a hermeneutic must be employed with extreme care! Secondly, Wink has not demonstrated from the text that each power is *simultaneously* earthly and heavenly, contrary to earlier assertions to this effect:[74] one can say only that of these four classes of powers, some may be earthly, others heavenly, some visible, others invisible, but not that they are simultaneously so.[75]

Colossians 1:20 is significant for Wink, who uses it as the key for understanding *katargeō* in 1 Corinthians 15.[76] The powers will, he says, be reconciled, precluding their destruction and pointing to their redemption.[77] If, as he claims, the powers are simultaneously spiritual and structural, this suggests that the fallen *spiritual* reality of these powers can be redeemed, something directly contra-

65 Clinton Arnold, *The Colossian Syncretism* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1995), 182.
66 Ibid, 184-193.
67 Page, *Powers*, 264.
68 contra Wink, *Naming the Powers*, 11.
69 Wink, *Naming the Powers*, 77.
70 Ibid, 54-55, 65-66.
71 Ibid, 66.
72 Ibid, 66.
73 Ibid, 66.
74 Ibid, 11.
75 N.B. O'Brien considers that treating all four classes of powers as supernatural *only* makes most sense ('Opponents', 135); so does Forbes ('Principalities', 70).
76 Wink, *Naming the Powers*, 51.
77 Or 'restitution' – Wink, *Naming the Powers*, 55.

dicting Matthew 25:41 and Revelation 20:10. Revelation 21:23-26 (oft-used to show that the powers will be reconciled and redeemed rather than being destroyed)[78] relates actually only to earthly powers, not spiritual ones. Reconciliation in Colossians 1:20 must then, as far as it relates to spiritual powers, include 'the notion of "pacification"',[79] rather than the redemption of the whole 'concretion of power' for which Wink argues.

Although Colossians 2:15 is significant regarding Christ's victory over the powers, Wink uses it neither to support his thesis regarding the powers' dual nature nor to evidence their 'redemption'.[80] His consideration is limited to an assessment of the *timing* of 'a cosmic reconciliation in which all the Powers are subdued'.[81] Although O'Brien designates the powers in Colossians 2:15 as 'demonic personal forces',[82] and is supported by both Arnold and Moo,[83] it is in fact difficult to determine confidently whether they are structural or spiritual; however, we can say that this verse offers no compelling evidence that reference is intended to both simultaneously.

As to Colossians 2:10, Wink makes only an assumption regarding the identity of the powers, suggesting that *archōs* denotes 'rules, rituals and belief systems' and that *exousias* represents 'the spiritual power that adheres to them'.[84] An assumption, however, is not a proof. This, unfortunately, seems to escape other commentators too: Dunn,[85] O'Brien[86] and Moo[87] all assume that the verse in question is describing spiritual beings. Arnold comes to the same conclusion as these commentators, but on the basis that *archai* and *exousiai* are a 'firm part of Jewish vocabulary for angelic beings', are equivalent to the *stoicheia* and are 'evil spiritual "powers"'.[88] It thus seems that Wink's assumption is unlikely to be correct and is, in any event, certainly not proven by him.

Colossians 1:13, which receives no exegetical discussion by Wink, describes *tōs exousias tou skotous*. In this context, Arnold assumes that it refers to a 'supernatural power',[89] although Moo denies that there is sufficient 'evidence to suggest that Paul sees a personal reference here'.[90] It is probably a locative reference,

78 Ronald Sider, *Christ and Violence* (Tring: Lion Publishing, 1980), 49-50.
79 O'Brien, *Colossians*, 56.
80 His concern here is only the *timing* of the powers' 'reconciliation'; he does not expressly refer to 'redemption' (Wink, *Naming the Powers*, 55-60).
81 Ibid, 60.
82 O'Brien, *Colossians*, 133.
83 Arnold, *Colossian*, 229; Moo, *Pillar New Testament Commentary: The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon* (Nottingham: Apollos, 2008), 196.
84 Wink, *Naming*, 79.
85 Dunn, *The New International Greek Testament Commentary: The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1996), 153.
86 O'Brien, *Colossians*, 114.
87 Moo, *Colossians*, 196.
88 Arnold, *Colossian*, 254, 193.
89 Arnold, *Colossian*, 158.
90 Moo, *Colossians*, 104 n.98.

describing a 'realm of darkness',[91] given its juxtaposition with the reference to the 'kingdom of the Son'. It thus does not support Wink's thesis regarding a dual nature to the powers.

6. Ephesians

We deal with Wink's main texts in Ephesians, excepting 3:10 because Wink does not use this to inform his *interpretation of the powers* but rather to design an *appropriate response* from the church. It is thus outside this paper's scope; it suffices to say that his interpretation that the church should preach to the powers is not widely accepted and one might therefore question the *exegetical* basis of his proposal for responding to the powers (albeit perhaps not the proposals for socio-political engagement themselves).

1:20-23

Wink considers that 'it would be tempting to take these Powers as heavenly only' but that this 'would be nonsensical in terms of the first century worldview': heaven and earth are interconnected, thus spiritual and structural powers are in view, emphasised by 'the use of "all"… "every"… "all"'.[92]

Wink appears to be prioritising worldview concerns over textual evidence: it is clear that the realm in which Christ is exalted in 'the heavenlies' and some would argue that this naturally implies that the powers in question are heavenly, not 'earthly rulers and institutions'.[93]

Admittedly, whilst Wink's appeal to heaven and earth's interconnection is not compelling, his reference to 'all' and 'every' is valuable: it is possible that both spiritual and structural powers might be in view here.[94] However, even if this is true, Wink offers no secure basis for treating these powers as *simultaneously* spiritual and structural.

2:1-2

Wink rejects interpretations of *exousia* as 'the spiritual powers whose dwelling place is the air', arguing that had the author intended this, he would have used the plural of *exousia* and, further, that it is unlikely he would have had a concept of evil spirits in the air. Thus, Ephesians 2:1-2 cannot 'refer to hosts of demons in the sky' but 'to an atmosphere that envelops people and seals their fate' (imposed by the *archōn*).[95] He describes this atmosphere as including 'ideologies… customs… institutional expectations… mob psychology… propaganda… prejudices'.[96] Arnold, conversely, admits that here exousia refers to 'the realm… of the

91 O'Brien, *Colossians*, 28.
92 Wink, *Naming the Powers*, 60.
93 Stott, *Society*, 272; O'Brien, 'Opponents', 133-134.
94 Arnold rejects this (*Ephesians*, 54) as does Lincoln – Andrew T. Lincoln, *Word Biblical Commentary: Ephesians* (Dallas: Word Books Publisher, 1990), 64.
95 Wink, *Naming the Powers*, 83. This is consistent with Heinrich Schlier, *Principalities and Powers in the New Testament* (Freiburg: Herder, 1961), 31.
96 Wink, *Naming the Powers*, 84.

ruler's authority', not evil spirits, but claims that Judaism, and therefore Paul, did know of evil spirits dwelling in the air. Thus, it is reasonable to see the *archōn* as 'the "arch-power" among a host of "powers"'.[97]

If Wink is correct, he seems essentially to say that the world atmosphere is now a power, although what constitutes its inner, spiritual aspect is unclear as he does not equate the *archōn* with the atmosphere.[98] If Wink is wrong, this passage describes a chief spiritual power (and perhaps, implicitly, other spirits) impacting earthly structures and people – without that power simultaneously *being* the structures and ideologies. The latter interpretation sounds somewhat more credible.

6:12

Wink assumes that, because of its 'heaping up of terms', Ephesians 6:12 includes all the powers – 'not only divine but human, not only personified but structural, not only demons and kings but the world atmosphere and power invested in institutions, laws, traditions and rituals'.[99] Ellul may be agreeing when he says that 'a text like this is not distinguishing between spiritual and material factors'.[100]

Yet Stott considers that the two references to the devil in 6:11,16 and the addition in 6:12 of 'in the heavenly places' make the text 'fit supernatural powers much more naturally'.[101] O'Brien agrees, citing these arguments, and adding that the armour specified implies the powers are spiritual, not structural, and that it would be strange for Paul to deny explicitly that Christians fight humans but affirm implicitly that they fight human structures.[102]

Even if it is possible that both spiritual and structural powers are in view here (and one might argue that 'in the heavenly places' modifies the 'spiritual forces of evil', not 'rulers', 'authorities' and 'powers' which may then be earthly),[103] the text certainly does not explicitly support Wink's attempt to treat them as aspects of one another by describing them as 'the suprahuman dimension of power in institutions and the cosmos'.[104]

7. Summary critique

Purporting to be exegetically-based, Wink's interpretation is that these powers are 'simultaneously the outer and inner aspects of one and the same indivisible

97 Arnold, *Ephesians*, 60-62; Lincoln, *Ephesians*, 95.
98 Wink, *Naming the Powers*, 84.
99 Ibid, 85.
100 Jacques Ellul, *The Ethics of Freedom* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1976), 153 – although he maintains at p.160 that 'the powers have objective reality and… act… apart from the force… man gives them'.
101 Stott, *Society*, 273.
102 O'Brien, 'Opponents', 134.
103 although Lincoln suggests that *kosmokratores* is an astrological term used in Testament of Solomon for demons and that *ta pneumatika… en tois epouraniois* is generic (not a separate class of power), encompassing and defining the preceding powers (*Ephesians*, 444).
104 Wink, *Naming the Powers*, 85-86.

concretion of power'.[105] He expressly rejects the idea that these powers can be earthly or heavenly: for him, 'nothing less than insistence on this unity (of the two) makes sense of the unexplained ambiguity' in NT powers language.[106]

Having already denied that semantic ambiguity means that a word carries all of its senses simultaneously, we also cannot accept that 'nothing less' makes sense of Scripture. Without doubt, sometimes Pauline powers language denotes earthly power structures,[107] sometimes spiritual powers,[108] and is sometimes opaque, but for none of these passages has Wink adduced evidence that human/institutional powers and spiritual powers are simultaneously aspects of one 'concretion of power'; furthermore, sometimes he appears simply to be *assuming* that structural powers are referenced (Colossians 1:16).[109]

Wink also champions the powers' coming redemption yet fails to demonstrate that 1 Corinthians 15 and Colossians 1:20 indubitably describe the 'neutralisation' rather than 'destruction' of spiritual powers. He has also not evidenced that upon dissolution of an earthly structure, its inner spiritual aspect also ceases to exist. This assertion depends entirely on his characterisation of the interconnectedness of heaven and earth in the first century worldview. Given that he is keen to dispense with this worldview at other times,[110] one must question its relevance here!

Whilst agreeing with Wink that powers terminology is interchangeable and ambiguous, it can only, depending on context, refer to *either* spiritual *or* earthly powers (or possibly both can be in view, but not as aspects of the *same* 'concretion of power'). Where the powers indicated are spiritual, they may influence people/institutions/ideologies (that is, earthly powers) but are ontologically distinct.

V. Further critique

1. Hermeneutics/methodology

Concerns have been expressed previously regarding Wink's methodological assumption that power language always carries its most comprehensive sense (save where co-textual concerns render this impossible). Arnold considers that this 'methodological error' 'sidesteps the concerns of modern linguistic theory'.[111] As noted, Wink's exegesis provides no textual evidence that specific

105 Ibid, 107.
106 Ibid, 107.
107 See IV.1 and IV.2.
108 E.g. Ephesians 6:12.
109 Wink actually treats this text as 'the standard for all discussions of the Powers' (*Naming the Powers*, 11)!
110 Walter Wink, *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 7.
111 Arnold, *Powers*, 200.

power language was used simultaneously to represent spiritual and structural elements. Even Jewish intertestamental literature and the Hellenistic magical tradition 'seem plainly either-or… never both-and'.[112]

Indeed, Wink's failure to engage with the Hellenistic magical tradition is a methodological omission: this tradition 'implies a vibrant… belief in evil spiritual forces… in no way identified with humans or institutions', 'blatantly contradict(ing)' Wink's perceived first century 'demythologising trend'; Judaism seemed to share many of these beliefs and terminology about the powers.[113] Daniel 7 may further be relevant background,[114] demonstrating Jewish belief in the powers as personal spiritual beings. Wink's summary rejection of evidence for widespread belief in astral spirits is thus a failing.[115]

Paul, then, might be assumed to perceive powers as personal spiritual beings;[116] the onus is on Wink to demonstrate the contrary from Paul's writings.[117] Wink fails to do this *exegetically* but has a fallback argument regarding *worldview*, which he attempts to use as a justification for 'demythologisation' by *today's* interpreter. He suggests that the first century understanding is only a projection of truth 'onto the screen of the universe', perceiving the powers 'as cosmic forces reigning from the sky'. This, he argues, made sense in the ancient worldview 'where earthly and heavenly reality were inextricably linked' but cannot work in modernism.[118] There is nothing uniquely biblical, he says, about the first century worldview![119] Its understanding must be demythologised, completing 'the projection process by withdrawing the projections and recognising that the real spiritual force… is emanating from an actual institution.'[120] But why *must* we?

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112 Ibid, 200.

113 Arnold, *Ephesians*, 50-51; also Lee, 'Interpreting', 63.

114 Stephen E. Noll, *Angels of Light, Powers of Darkness: Thinking Biblically about Angels, Satan and Principalities* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2003), 137.

115 Arnold, *Ephesians*, 50-51.

116 Gregory A. Boyd, *God At War: The Bible and Spiritual Conflict* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 274.

117 Wink, following Beker, also points to Paul's use of non-apocalyptic language associated with the powers (including categories of law, death, flesh and sin) and suggests that Paul only uses apocalyptic powers terminology when his context is apocalyptic (*Naming the Powers*, 61-63, 104). This, he argues, demonstrates Paul's 'demythologising trend'.

Whilst Paul speaks both of 'personalised forces of evil' and these anthropological categories, Wink has not shown that they are one and the same entity and does not prove that the apocalyptic powers language is therefore only 'mythological personification' to be interpreted anthropologically (Arnold, *Ephesians*, 130-132). In fact, 'the majority of Paul's references to the powers appear in ethical contexts' or related to the atonement, rather than apocalyptic contexts (Arnold, *Powers*, 171).

118 Wink, *Engaging*, 7.

119 Walter Wink, 'The New Worldview: Spirit at the Core of Everything' (pp.17-28) in (eds. Ray Gingerich and Ted Grimsrud) *Transforming the Powers: Peace, Justice, and the Domination System* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006), 19.

120 Wink, *Engaging*, 7.

Because 'modern Westerners are… incapable of maintaining that worldview'[121] – Wink especially![122] Yet is this reason sufficient, especially when Wink admits that he cannot insist that his hypothesis is 'truer', but only 'more intelligible'?[123]

Essentially, Wink's hypothesis sounds more Bultmannian[124] and Jungian[125] than biblical. Wink freely admits that the new 'integral' worldview 'is emerging from a confluence of sources:… Jung… de Chardin… process philosophy and the new physics',[126] 'Celtic spirituality… Buddhism… many Native American religions'.[127] This worldview, which he uses as his basic presupposition in reading Scripture, tells him that people 'may not believe in God… may not engage in any… spiritual readings, or even prayers. But they will have absorbed… the "Integral worldview" and… will be willy-nilly spiritual'.[128]

But what about Scripture? Wink does not describe a way in which Scripture can interpret this worldview: indeed the name Jesus appears only twice in eight pages of Wink's discussion of this worldview;[129] essentially, one feels that Wink's worldview is more inviolable to him than Scripture. Osborn remarks that in tempting us 'to interpret the relationship between heaven and earth on the analogy of the relationship of mind… and body', Wink 'opens up the possibility of treating heaven as the world soul', a theologically dangerous proposition which suggests the world has 'a wholeness that does not need God'.[130]

One must therefore question Grimsrud's approval[131] of this new worldview over the first century worldview as an interpretative framework. Whilst *every* reader is admittedly influenced by their own worldview's hermeneutical presuppositions, the onus must be on Wink to explain why one should move from a modern to an 'integral' worldview for interpretation, rather than from a modern to first century worldview, where at least one seeks to read texts in their socio-historical context. Further, whilst one should allow Scripture to question and

121 Ibid, 7.
122 Wink, *Naming the Powers*, 4.
123 Walter Wink, 'Demons and DMins: The Church's Response to the Demonic', *Review and Expositor* 89 (1992), 503-513 (see 507).
124 O'Brien, 'Opponents', 112-117.
125 Robert Cook, 'Devils and Manticores: Plundering Jung for a Plausible Demonology' (pp.165-184) in (ed. A. N. S. Lane) *The Unseen World: Christian Reflections on Angels, Demons and the Heavenly Realm* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1996), 175.
126 Wink, *Engaging*, 5.
127 Wink, 'Worldview', 21.
128 Ibid, 26.
129 Ibid, 21-28.
130 Lawrence Osborn, 'Angels: Barth and Beyond' (pp.29-48) in (ed. A.N.S. Lane) *The Unseen World: Christian Reflections on Angels, Demons and the Heavenly Realm* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1996), 44.
131 Ted Grimsrud, 'Engaging Walter Wink' (pp.1-13) in (eds. Ray Gingerich and Ted Grimsrud) *Transforming the Powers: Peace, Justice, and the Domination System* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006), 5.

reshape hermeneutical presuppositions,[132] Wink seems determined to read with this 'integral' framework of the inner/outer aspect of reality, despite the questions responsible exegesis must raise regarding his characterisation of the dual aspect of powers.

Indeed, one cannot help feeling that Wink is overly-reliant upon the 'integral' worldview for his hypothesis[133] and too affected by Western thinking to perceive that the powers as personal spiritual beings makes sense to many non-Western worldviews.[134]

2. Practical concerns

The powers may have influence through structures but Pauline writings also evidence individuals being influenced by powers of evil.[135] Wink's work, however, is 'reductionistic',[136] overlooking such influences: he 'unjustifiably restrict(s)… understanding of the malevolent activity of Satan', whose influence is actually broader than the structural.[137] A related risk of espousing this interpretation of the powers as impersonal structures is that, whilst surely not Wink's intention, there may be a temptation 'to remove any responsibility for action from those who are responsible human agents'.[138]

There are further concerns: although treating the powers as fallen, Wink provides no explanation concerning why structures are not always tyrannical; also his interpretation promotes an inappropriate degree of negativity towards society's structures, whereas 'some structures may be changed for good' even before Christ's return.[139]

VI. Conclusion

Wink's interpretation of Pauline powers language is not convincing, despite the many scholars[140] who are impressed by his work. It is submitted that he has failed to demonstrate his hypothesis exegetically; further, his worldview arguments in favour of his hypothesis are more influenced by other traditions than Christianity. Wink seems determined to read powers language through the 'inte-

132 Anthony C. Thiselton, *The Two Horizons: New Testament Hermeneutics and Philosophical Description with Special Reference to Heidegger, Bultmann, Gadamer, and Wittgenstein* (Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1980), 439.

133 David Smith, 'Review of "The Powers That Be – Theology for a New Millennium"', *Themelios* 25:2 (February 2000), 112-114 (see 113).

134 Arnold, *Powers*, 179.

135 2 Corinthians 2:10-11 suggests that Satan (often referred to by Paul as the *archōn*) influences *individuals* against forgiving others.

136 Arnold, *Powers*, 196.

137 P. T. O'Brien, 'Principalities and Powers and Their Relationship to Structures', *ERT* 6.1 (1982), 50-62 (see 62).

138 Ibid, 61.

139 Ibid, 62.

140 See Grimsrud, 'Engaging', and other articles in this book.

gral' lens and nothing the Pauline texts say seems to deter him from his course. Such a hermeneutic is concerning.

However, Wink's motivation must also be considered. Others who propound structural interpretations express concern for social theology: Bradshaw believes that this interpretation is vital for holistic development 'because structures account for much of the underdevelopment and oppression' experienced;[141] Yoder, similarly motivated, describes powers theology as a 'very refined analysis of… society';[142] Green comments that the attraction of demythologisation 'enables us to find… more in the NT about our very modern preoccupation with social structures'.[143]

Wink freely admits that a harrowing trip to Latin America, alongside a contemporaneous review of Carr's work, is his motivator.[144] Such an emotive experience rightly drives him to articulate a theology in response and we can learn much from his proposals concerning Christian *responses to evil* (which, sadly, exceeds this article's remit); nevertheless, questions remain regarding whether powers language is the right vehicle for expressing a social theology.

Abstract

This article assesses Walter Wink's interpretation of Paul's language of the powers. Whilst Wink's approach, which seems to issue from a concern to articulate a social theology, has been favourably received by many scholars, it is submitted that the interpretation is deeply flawed.

This analysis begins by recognising the interpretative continuum within which Wink is writing, before summarising his view and seeking to place it within its wider interpretative context. An exegesis of the main Pauline powers texts follows, alongside critique of Wink's interpretation of each of these texts.

After this exegetical critique, we also review Wink's methodological and hermeneutical assumptions, giving special consideration to the worldview which serves as his interpretative framework. There is, furthermore, some brief reference to practical concerns with his hypothesis.

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141 Bruce Bradshaw, *Bridging the Gap: Evangelism, Development and Shalom* (Monrovia: MARC, 1993), 142.

142 John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus: Behold the Man! Our Victorious Lamb* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1994), 144.

143 Michael Green, *I Believe in Satan's Downfall* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1995), 84.

144 Wink, *Naming the Powers*, ix-xi.