

THE ALL-SURPASSING POWER OF GOD THROUGH THE HOLY SPIRIT IN THE MIDST OF OUR BROKEN EARTHLY EXISTENCE: PERSPECTIVES ON PAUL'S USE OF ΔΥΝΑΜΙΣ IN 2 CORINTHIANS

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ABSTRACT

The theme 'power' plays a very important role in 2 Corinthians. An exegetical study of the pericopes in which δύναμις occurs in 2 Corinthians has revealed that Paul uses this word in a very specific way: he relates δύναμις to two themes which, on the surface level, appear to be conflict with each other: the Holy Spirit *vis à vis* the hardships he had to endure. The triumphant note of God's pneumatological power is heard in the midst of the more sombre chords of hardship and tribulations. Paul knew sufferings and weakness, and yet the glorious power of the Spirit was a decisive reality in his life. This tension Paul interpreted in the light of the cross and resurrection of Jesus.

1 INTRODUCTION

An exegetical study of the pericopes in which δύναμις occurs in 2 Corinthians has revealed that Paul uses this word in a salient way.¹ It strikes one that he relates δύναμις to two themes which, on the surface level, appear to be in conflict with each other: the Holy Spirit² *vis à vis* the hardships he had to endure. This paper proposes to demonstrate that the real meaning of power in 2 Corinthians emerges when this tension is taken seriously.

An overview of Paul's use of δύναμις in 2 Cor 4:7, 6:7 and 12:9 will be given first. This will be followed by a discussion of power (δύναμις) within the context of the catalogues of hardships, which, in turn, will be followed by the conclusion.

¹ The theme 'power' plays a very important role in 2 Corinthians. Cf Young and Ford (1987:239): 'In 2 Corinthians...the leading concept is that of power.' Gottfried Voigt (1990) aptly named his commentary on 2 Corinthians: *Die Kraft des Schwachen*.

² Although Paul does not explicitly connect the words 'power' and 'Spirit' (δύναμις and πνεῦμα), these concepts are closely related to each other. Paul's message about power in 2 Corinthians has an important pneumatological substratum. It is interesting to note that πνεῦμα in 2 Corinthians mainly occurs in contexts in which δύναμις also functions.

2 PAUL'S USE OF ΔΥΝΑΜΙΣ IN 2 CORINTHIANS 4:7; 6:7 AND 12:9

2.1 2 Corinthians 4:7³

This verse occurs in the context of the pericope 2 Cor 4:7 to 5:10. Paul's statement in 2 Cor 4:7 can, however, only be fully understood if the context of the previous pericope, 2 Cor 3:4 to 4:6, is also taken into account.⁴ Two contrasting motifs immediately strike the reader of 2 Cor 4:7, namely that of a *treasure in jars of clay* (Ἐχομεν δὲ τὸν θησαυρὸν τοῦτον ἐν ὄστρακίνοις σκεύεσιν). An analysis of 2 Cor 4:7 to 5:10 reveals that two categories can be discerned, namely the category of what can be seen and the category of the unseen. To the category of what can be seen, may be ascribed: the outward man, the present sufferings, transitoriness, the *earthly vessel*, the veiled face, the letter that kills and finally Jesus's sufferings of death. To the category of the unseen belong: the inward man, salvation in the midst of sufferings, the eternal and lasting, the *valuable treasure*, the heart and the Spirit, as well as the life of Jesus (cf Klauck 1986:48).

It is precisely from the tension between these two categories that Paul's statement concerning the *all-surpassing power* gains its full meaning. The fact that this *treasure* (belonging to the second, eschatological category) is contained in *jars of clay* (a concept belonging to the first this-worldly category) has a specific purpose: 'to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us'.

Viewed against the background of 2 Cor 3:4 to 4:6, the 'treasure' can be described as the ministry in the New Covenant, with everything pertaining to it: the proclamation of the gospel, the knowledge of the glory of God, the being changed, the enlightenment of the heart. 'Es sind Bausteine einer *theologia gloriae*, die zusammengefaßt werden als "Übermaß der Kraft"' (Klauck 1986:44-45).

With the metaphor of the *treasure in jars of clay* Paul focuses on the real value of the one and the trifling value of the other. The frailty and vulnerability to breakage and destruction must be equally in view, because it is precisely the mortality of this earthly existence that is emphasised in the ensuing verses. Lambrecht (1986:125) correctly points out that the idea expressed by ἐν ὄστρακίνοις σκεύεσιν ['in jars of clay'] (4:7) seems to be taken up in a number of expressions: ἐν τῷ σώματι ἡμῶν ['in our body'] (v10), ἐν τῇ θνητῇ σαρκί

³ In 2 Cor 4:7 we read: Ἐχομεν δὲ τὸν θησαυρὸν τοῦτον ἐν ὄστρακίνοις σκεύεσιν ἵνα ἡ ὑπερβολὴ τῆς δυνάμεως ἢ τοῦ θεοῦ καὶ μὴ ἐξ ἡμῶν ('But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us' [NIV].)

⁴ A very close relation exists between 2 Cor 4:7-5:10 and the preceding pericope, 3:4-4:6 (cf Gräbe 1990:135-136).

ἡμῶν ['in our mortal body'] (v11) and ἐν ἡμῖν ['in us'] (v12).

The main point Paul wants to make in 2 Cor 4:7 is that the frailty of the Apostles is a demonstration of the essential point *that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us*. The catalogue of hardships in 4:8 and 9 is formulated in a series of antitheses, and these serve to illustrate not just the weakness of the Apostles, but the way in which this weakness discloses the incomparable power of God. In 2 Cor 4:7 Paul emphasises that power comes from God alone and may only be expected from Him. The power (δύναμις) and life (ζωή) bestowed on those who suffer is nothing else than the 'life of Jesus' (2 Cor 4:10) (cf Schrage 1974:152-153).

Although the Spirit is not often mentioned explicitly in 2 Cor 4:7 to 5:10.⁵ Paul's affirmation in 2 Cor 5:5 is of crucial importance as far as the interpretation of this pericope is concerned: 'Now it is God who has prepared us for this very purpose' (for the life which shall engulf our mortality [v 4]), 'by giving us the Spirit as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come'. It is the Spirit who guarantees that what belongs to the eschatological sphere will not be overwhelmed by this world or by the sufferings the Apostles have to endure in it.

In the midst of the brokenness of his present earthly existence Paul experiences the all-surpassing power of God through the activity of the Holy Spirit.

2.2 2 Corinthians 6:7⁶

In stressing the hardships accompanying the apostolic ministry (2 Cor 6:4b-5), Paul makes it very clear that his ministry is solely dependent on the power of God. Among the hardships Paul enumerates, the reader suddenly encounters a short list of virtues (related to ἐν ὑπομονῇ πολλῇ ['in great endurance'] in v4). Of these eight expressions (connected with ἐν ['in']), the last, ἐν δυνάμει θεοῦ ['in the power of God'] (v17), provides an apt summary. The structure of 2 Cor 6:3 to 10 reveals that ἐν πνεύματι ἀγίῳ ['in the Holy Spirit'] (v6), ἐν ἀγάπῃ ἀνυποκρίτῳ ['in sincere love'] (v6), ἐν λόγῳ ἀληθείας ['in truthful speech'] (v7) receive special emphasis. The climax is then expressed by ἐν δυνάμει θεοῦ ['in the power of God'] (v7).⁷ The Pauline apostolate is commended as an agency through which God's power is made manifest and in which the Holy Spirit is at work.

Apart from the explicit reference to the Holy Spirit ('in the Holy Spirit' v6), ἐν γνώσει ['in understanding'] (v6) points to a gift of the Holy Spirit and the

⁵ In 2 Cor 3:4-4:6 the Spirit is, however, often mentioned explicitly: 3:6(2x); 3:8; 3:17(2x); 3:18.

⁶ In 2 Cor 6:7 we encounter the phrase ἐν δυνάμει θεοῦ ('in the power of God').

⁷ The first four phrases of verse 6 are constructed in the following way: ἐν ('in') + noun. The last two phrases and the first of verse 7 are extended by the addition of an adjective, while the last consists of two nouns (cf Gräbe 1991:208).

phrases ἐν μακροθυμίᾳ ['in patience'], ἐν χρηστότητι ['in kindness'] and ἐν ἀγάπῃ ἀνυποκρίτῳ ['in sincere love'] refer to the fruit of the Holy Spirit present in Paul's ministry (cf 1 Cor 12:8; Gal 5:22). The Apostles are tools in the hand of God and they are aware of the fact that they are being borne by the power and Spirit of God in the midst of the hardships and distress accompanying their ministry (cf Gräbe 1990:187-197, 230-232). The way in which God's power is realised in Paul's apostolic ministry is explained *pneumatologically*.

2.3 2 Corinthians 12:9⁸

2 Cor 12:9 is to be interpreted in the context of the pericope 2 Cor 11:16 to 12:10 (cf Gräbe 1990:199-204).

The Lord's answer to Paul's pleading, 'My grace is sufficient for you'⁹ is motivated in a significant way: 'for my power is made perfect in weakness'. This word of the Lord, the only so-called 'Herrenwort' (cf Klauck 1986:94-95) in 2 Corinthians, can be traced back directly to the exalted Lord and constitutes the centre of 2 Cor 10 to 13, around which other concepts are grouped in a concentric way: grace (χάρις), power (δύναμις) and weakness (ἀσθένεια).

The statement that 'power is made perfect in weakness' constitutes the *Magna Charta* of Christian existence (cf Klauck 1986:95). The power of Christ wants to make its dwelling in Paul's broken existence. This is why Paul refrains from boasting of anything except his 'weakness', his humiliations and sufferings.¹⁰ They are to him the surest marks of his commendation by the suffering Messiah (Forbes 1986:21).¹¹ From Paul's point of view, the decisive demon-

⁸ 2 Cor 12:9: 'But he said to me: "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."'

Bultmann (1976:228) comments: 'Das Sich-Begnügen ist wirklich ein Genug-Haben. Es liegt also keine Resignation vor wie Dtn 32:3ff' (God's answer to Moses's request to enter the promised land). He also points to the great difference between this passage and Stoic parallels: 'Der Unterschied liegt in der verschiedenen Auffassung der menschlichen ἀσθένεια und der göttlichen δύναμις.' Paul does not share Stoic ideals of training oneself to look upon afflictions as insignificant and inconsequential. Paul does not speak of 'happiness' in the midst of adversity (Epictetus) or of remaining 'invincible' in the face of hardships (Plutarch), but rather of being comforted in his afflictions (1:4-7; 7:6-7,13) and rescued from them (1:10). For Epictetus, 'It is difficulties that show what men are' (1.xxiv.1), because difficulties must be met and overcome with the disciplined power of reason and with courage. For Paul, however, difficulties must be met and borne with faith. When there is faith, hardships and difficulties become an occasion for the disclosure of God. Difficulties disclose not 'what men are', but 'that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us' (2 Cor 4:7).

¹⁰ Paul's boasting of his weaknesses is a quite extraordinary paradox. Forbes (1986:22) mentions that in Philo, for example, it is human weakness that most effectively reduces boasting by reminding man of his proper place in relation to God. In this paradox Paul is, however, saying fundamental things about the nature of his understanding of both apostolic authority and life 'in Christ' generally.

¹¹ McCant (1988:570) also points to the Christological level of meaning of this passage: 'The catchwords ἀσθένεια and δύναμις in 12:9-10 and 13:4 assure a Christological un-

stration of the truth of this oracular pronouncement is Christ himself, 'crucified in weakness, yet He lives by God's power' (2 Cor 13:4a; cf 1 Cor 1:18, 22-24).

It is important to bear in mind that the understanding of the crucifixion as the event in which Christ proved radically 'weak', forms the background to Paul's whole discussion. O'Collins (1971:532-533) correctly pointed out that in the case of the crucifixion and resurrection, weakness and power constitute an inseparable unity. By raising Christ, God's power proved effective and was manifested in the face of that ultimate 'weakness', namely the crucifixion. The apostolic ministry undertaken on Christ's behalf also involves participation in this weakness and power of Calvary and Easter.

Paul himself boasts of this 'weakness' which, by aligning him with Christ's death, brings him to experience the power of the resurrection. The 'thorn in the flesh' and further 'weakness' fail, therefore, to serve as evidence that Paul does not count as a true Apostle.

In the same way it may be said that apostolic authority is the authority of the gospel itself. The gospel is the message of the 'foolishness' and 'weakness' of God Himself (1 Cor 1:18-25) and the true Apostle embodies this foolishness and weakness. His life and work bear the marks of the death of Christ: the physical sufferings and the social stigmata enumerated in the 'catalogues of hardships'. The pattern is not confined to the Apostle, but it is pre-eminently exemplified in him (contra O'Collins 1971:533-535).

The members of his congregation are to imitate him in his 'weakness' as he imitates Christ. The power of the gospel in the person of the Apostle is the eschatological power of God, revealed 'in weakness' (Forbes 1986:22).

The words of the Lord which Paul quotes in 2 Cor 12:9 are a special formulation of the gospel itself: *salvation, one's only true sufficiency, is by God's grace and in God's power* (cf 3:5; 8:9; Rm 1:16) [Furnish 1984:550-551].

Weakness belongs to the earthly sphere (cf Zmijewski 1978:383: 'Wie die unbestimmte Singularform anzeigt, bezeichnet ἀσθένεια hier generell die ganze irdisch-menschliche Existenz in ihrer "Schwachheit"'). Δύναμις refers to God's power with the nuance, in this context, of the resurrection power of Christ.¹² Weakness is a precondition for power in the same way in which, in

understanding of his [i.e. Paul's] apostolate. He so identifies with Christ that the "sufferings of Christ are ours" (2 Cor 1.18). In Corinth Paul's message was the foolishness of "the word of the Cross" (1 Cor 1.18) and "Christ crucified" (1 Cor 1.23; 2.2) in a context of weakness. Paul carries "in the body the dying of Jesus" and this earthen vessel is "delivered over to the death of Jesus" (2 Cor 4.10-11).' (Cf also Martin 1988:45-46.)

¹² Cf Zmijewski (1978:383-384): 'Es wurde bereits herausgestellt, daß die δύναμις Gottes wesentlich "Auferstehungskraft" bedeutet. Diese nähere Kennzeichnung der δύναμις ergibt sich aber für Paulus (wie überhaupt für das Neue Testament) nicht auf Grund von theoretischen Überlegungen, sondern auf Grund des göttlichen Heilshandelns, d.h. konkret: des Christuseschehens. Die Gültigkeit des paradoxen Gesetzes wird in

Pauline theology, salvation can only be obtained by man if he acknowledges his complete incompetence and just accepts in faith what Christ has done for him. But weakness and power also occur simultaneously when man, in his weakness, finds himself 'lost in the grace, protection, and power of Christ' (Black 1984: 156-157). Therefore, the Lord can say that his power is made perfect (τελειται; Cf Louw & Nida 1988:747) in weakness. 'Weakness' evokes the condition of being without anything that in the eyes of the world would make his mission feasible, together with the concomitant mental and physical suffering. Paul accepted this suffering as a necessary consequence of his fundamental decision to follow Christ as an Apostle. In this way he carried in his body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus might also be revealed in his body (2 Cor 4:10) (Murphy-O'Connor 1991:120-121).

The catalogues of hardships fulfil a very important function in Paul's development of the leading motifs in this pericope: boasting, weakness and power. The longer catalogue of hardships (11:23-28) leads to the conclusion: 'If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness' (2 Cor 11:30). The shorter catalogue (2 Cor 12:9b-10) leads to the same conclusion (expressed by the ἵνα- phrase: 'so that Christ's power may rest on me'), interpreted now in the light of the Lord's answer in 12:9. The key to understanding of the relationship between δύναμις and ἀσθένεια, which seems paradoxical at first glance, is to be found in the motif χάρις. Χάρις is a central concept in Pauline theology that most clearly expresses his understanding of the salvation event as an act of wholly unmerited generosity on God's part. Dunn (1975:202-203) correctly affirms that, for Paul, grace means power, a power at work in and through the believer's life, the experience of God's Spirit.¹³ Grace does not manifest itself only in particular compartments of the believer's life. There is a dimension to the believer's existence which determines all (Rm 5:2; 1 Cor 10:26), there is an energizing of his existence, the source of which is God (cf 2 Cor 12:9). 'Grace gives the believer's life both its source, its power and its direction' (Dunn 1975: 205).

3 ΔΥΝΑΜΙΣ WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF THE CATALOGUES OF HARDSHIPS

It is noteworthy that in all three of the above-mentioned pericopes in which Paul reflects on *power* (2 Cor 4:7-5:10; 6:3-10; 11:16-12:10), he also mentions the *hardships* which beset his ministry.

Kreuz und Auferstehung Christi faßbar (vgl. 2 Kor 13,4; Röm 1,4; Phil 3,10 u ö.)' [emphasis: PJG].

¹³ The pneumatological dimension of 2 Cor 12:7-9 must not be neglected or forgotten. Schnackenburg (1978:185) correctly affirms that Paul's call to the Lord 'war doch gewiß ein Gebet im Heiligen Geist, dem Geist der Sohnschaft'.

Peristasis (hardship) catalogues were a traditional means of demonstrating virtue in Hellenistic times (cf the extensive study by Fitzgerald [1988]). Since the *peristasis* catalogue was an established device for distinguishing true philosophers from false ones, it provided Paul with a tool in his task of establishing himself as a true Apostle.

His use of these catalogues shows that he is familiar with the traditions about the sage and the means used to depict him. Paul's own use of *peristasis* catalogues is, however, highly creative. It is influenced by Old Testament traditions about the afflicted righteous man and suffering prophet. The most important aspect of Paul's *peristasis* catalogues is, however, the fact that they are transformed by his fixation on the *cross of Christ*. These catalogues present the convergence of several traditions and reflect Paul's own personal experiences of *suffering and divine power*. They take us to the centre of Paul's understanding of God, as well as his own self-understanding, yet anchor him in the culture and conventions of his time (Fitzgerald 1988:206-207).

Within the context of the catalogues of hardships, Paul emphasises a very important (critical) aspect of his understanding of *δύναμις*. All power and all confidence entirely belong to God and may in no way be ascribed to human achievement. The catalogues of hardships are aimed at the same crucial insight as Paul's message about justification and the 'word of the cross', namely to exclude all human self-confidence and boasting. While the message about justification and that about the cross focus on the *iustitia aliena* and *sapientia aliena* (Rm 1:16-17; 1 Cor 1:18-2:5), in the context of Paul's sufferings the emphasis falls on the *vis aliena*, the *virtus aliena*, the *vita aliena* (cf Schrage 1974:152).

4 CONCLUSION

This *δύναμις* of God, which is such an important aspect of Paul's ministry and which is portrayed in 2 Corinthians, is realised by the Holy Spirit. It is the glorious all-surpassing power of God through the Spirit in the midst of a broken earthly existence.

It is noteworthy that in all three above-mentioned pericopes the *triumphant note of God's pneumatological power* is heard in the midst of the more *sombre chords of hardship and tribulations*.

Paul does not, however, say that power reveals itself *as weakness* (as maintained by Gütgemanns 1966:168-169), but rather that it reveals itself *in the midst of human weakness*. Weakness (*ἀσθένεια*) is not identical with *δύναμις*, but it is the place where God's power through the Holy Spirit is revealed.¹⁴

Paul knew suffering and weakness, and yet the glorious power of the Spirit

¹⁴ Weakness is the place where God's power is revealed ("Ort" der Kraftoffenbarung' [Jervell 1976:197 note 13], cf also Nielsen 1980:145).

was a decisive reality in his life. This tension Paul interpreted in the light of the *cross* and *resurrection* of Jesus: 'He was crucified in weakness, yet he lives by God's power. Likewise we are weak in him, yet by God's power we will live with him....' (2 Cor 13:4).

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