

ALL

By Jimmy W. Dukes

Authority

A Word Study

A bas-relief of a Roman Imperial Eagle found in Jerusalem. The eagle was the symbol of Rome and its power over the Empire.



EXOUSIA IS ONE OF SEVERAL words the Greek New Testament uses to describe “authority” or “power.” The meaning of *exousia* is varied. The word can refer to authority to do something, including the right or freedom for an action; the ability or power to act; or the authority of God, men, or governments to act. The word also has other uses in the New Testament.¹ The word from which *exousia* is derived, *exesti*, means “it is proper, permitted, lawful; it is possible.”² The origin of the word suggests *exousia* refers to derived, or even delegated power or authority. While this meaning is not always clear, it is an important concept for the word in the New Testament.

In Greek usage prior to the first century, *exousia* indicated power granted by a higher authority, thus authority or permission to act. An example would be the use of the word in wills. One had authority under the law to convey his or her property to another according to choice. Josephus, Philo, and the translators of the *Septuagint*, which is the Greek translation of the Old Testament, illustrated Jewish usage of *exousia* prior to the first century. In all three early Jewish Greek sources the word referred to freedom to act under permission of another. However, all three also used the word to describe the absolute power of God or the king, bringing the term to describe “inherent power.” That dual usage continues in the New Testament, where God is presented as the One having power and the One granting authority to others as He works out His will.³

God’s possession and delegation of ultimate authority is implied in many passages of the New Testament. Three passages in John make a clear statement of God’s role as the Giver of authority. In John 5:26-27, we are told that God, who has life in Himself, has given life to the Son. Also “He gave authority to Him to make judgment, because He is the Son of Man.”⁴ The quote from Jesus gives a strong witness to the fact God is the Source of authority. He gives authority to others, even the Son. In His prayer to the Father in John 17:1-2, Jesus said, “Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son, in order that the Son may glorify You, just as You gave Him authority over all flesh, in order that He may give eternal life to every one You have given to Him.” Again, the authority belongs to the Son, but it came from the Father. In John 19:11, after Pilate’s claim that he had authority over Jesus during His trial before the governor, Jesus replied, “You do not have one bit of authority concerning me except that which has been given to you from above.” We find in many other texts that same affirmation that God is the Source of authority.⁵

Right: One of the oldest stone temples in Greece is the Temple of Apollo at Corinth. Dated to the 6th cent. B.C., 7 of the original 38 columns still stand. Paul explained to the Corinthian believers that his power or authority was in the gospel.

Below: Used on both Greek and Roman coinage, the wreath was a symbol of power and victory. John Hyrcanus and Herod Antipas used it on all of their coins. Pilate (ruled A.D. 26-36) used the wreath on the reverse of many of his coins. Shown is a Pilate coin dated to A.D. 31.

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While the Father is the Source of the authority, the New Testament is clear that He is also the one who gave Jesus His authority. The people who heard Christ teach recognized His authority (Matt. 7:29; Mark 1:22; Luke 4:32,36). His power to heal people and to cast out demons were demonstrations of His authority (Matt. 8:9; Mark 1:27; 3:15; 6:7; Luke 9:1). The Jewish leaders recognized His authority and questioned its source (Mark 11:27-33 and parallels). Jesus put them to the test with a question of His own, but He would not give them the source of His authority. In addition, Jesus Himself spoke about the source of His authority in two passages recorded in John’s Gospel. In John 5:27, mentioned above, Jesus recognized His authority to make judgments came from the Father. In John 10:1-18, Jesus discussed His role as the Good Shepherd. He said even as He knows His sheep and they know Him, He also knows and is known by the Father. The Father loves Him because He is committed to laying down His life and taking it up again. He

LESSON REFERENCE

BSFL: Matthew 28:18-20



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Left: Column capital with bull at odeum in Ephesus. In writing to Christians at Ephesus, Paul explained that in the resurrection of Christ, God affirmed Jesus' ultimate power and authority (Eph. 1:20-22).

As the resurrected Lord, Christ was given "all authority" to fulfill God's purpose and to pass on His authority to His followers so they could finish His work.

Below: Marble panel decorated with Roman and Dacian armor. The panel was probably part of the base of the column honoring Trajan (ruled A.D. 98-117); erected in Rome to commemorate his victorious campaigns against the Dacians. Military might allowed the Romans to maintain their hold over their growing Empire.

alone has the authority to do that. He said, "No one takes it [My life] from Me, but I Myself put it from Me. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority again to take it; I received this commandment from My Father" (v. 18).

Jesus, who received authority from the Father, also gave authority to men. Because He was preparing His disciples to carry on His ministry in the world, He gave them authority to heal and to cast out demons (Matt. 10:1; Mark 3:15; 6:7). In Luke 9:1, the text says Jesus gave to His disciples both *dunamis* (inherent power that came from their relationship to Him) and *exousia* (His authority transmitted to them) to equip them for the work of healing the sick and casting out demons. In Luke 10:19, Jesus again used both *dunamis* and *exousia*, but this time giving authority to the disciples to equip them to face the "power of the enemy." Equipping His disciples in this way illustrated that Jesus' authority was over even the power of the enemy.

Paul received authority from the chief priests in Jerusalem to persecute the believers in Damascus, according to the prayer of Ananias in Acts 9:14 and Paul's own testimony in Acts 26:10-12. He also had authority as an apostle. As the chief priests had delegated his earlier authority, Paul's authority as an apostle was from Jesus (2 Cor. 10:8; 13:10). As he dealt with the problems of the church in Corinth, he cited his authority on numerous occasions. In defense of his apostleship, Paul used the word



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"authority" several times in 1 Corinthians 9:1-18.⁶

Many other passages offer examples of authority received or exercised.⁷ However, four passages affirm Jesus received "all" authority from God, equipping Him to give authority to others. First, in 1 Corinthians 15:20-28, Paul described the resurrected Christ who won the victory. Christ's victory will be ultimately demonstrated when "He hands over the kingdom to the God and Father, when He has abolished all rule and all authority and power." Paul went on to say that the consummation of Christ's work will occur when at His



Jesus' ability to cast out demons demonstrated His authority. Shown, the slope of the hill from Gergesa into the Sea of Galilee where Jesus cast the demons into the pigs.

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second coming, Christ, the Son of God, subjects Himself to God the Father, the One giving Him His authority. Second, in Ephesians 1:18-23, Paul prayed that the Ephesian believers would understand the power and authority given to the resurrected Christ. In a strong statement, Paul used about every word he could use to describe power and authority, including *exousia*. He said all authority and power had been granted to Jesus, whom God “gave as head over all the church.” Then third, in 1 Peter 3:21-22, Peter spoke of the saving power of the resurrected Jesus, who now has had “angels and authorities and powers” subjected to Him. Finally, in Matthew 28:16-20, Jesus came to meet His eleven disciples who had come to the mountain in Galilee as He had instructed. He commissioned them to carry out His work of making disciples. Jesus made clear His authority to commission them and to equip them with His assertion that “all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Me.” That claim by Jesus is consistent with the understanding of the writers of the New Testament who believed and understood Jesus was (and is) God who came near to people

to make it possible for them to know and have a relationship with God.

As the incarnate Son of God, Jesus received authority from God to accomplish the work for which He had been sent. As the resurrected Lord, Christ was given “all authority” to fulfill God’s purpose and to pass on His authority to His followers so they could finish His work. **B**

1. Barclay Newman, Jr., “ἐξουσία, ας” in *A Concise Greek-English Dictionary of the New Testament* (Stuttgart: German Bible Societies, 1993), 65; “ἐξουσία, ας, ἡ” in Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, trans. William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, 2nd ed., rev. F. Wilbur Gingrich and Frederick W. Danker (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 277-79.

2. “ἔξεστί” in Newman, 64.

3. Werner Foerster, “ἔξεστιν, ἐξουσία, ἐξουσιάζω, κατεξουσιάζω” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel, trans. and ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 564-66.

4. All Scripture quotations are the writer’s translations.

5. See John 1:12; Romans 13:1-3; Luke 12:5; Acts 1:7; 1 Corinthians 15:24; Jude 25.

6. Of the six uses of the Greek term in these verses, the HCSB translates three as “right” (vv. 4,5,6) and three as “authority” (vv. 12,18).

7. See the examples in Matthew 8:9; Mark 13:34; Luke 12:11; 19:17; 20:20; 22:53; Acts 5:4.

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