

PEER REVIEWED ARTICLES

Ni-Vanuatu Nakaemas and Ephesian Cosmology: The Application of Pauline Cosmology in Ephesians to Ni-Vanuatu Fear of Black Magic

Robert A Falls, BA, MDiv, GDDiv¹

¹ Talua Theological Training Institute

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This paper examines the biblical material on the cosmos and spiritual beings within the epistle to the Ephesians which can have significant implications for gospel leaders ministering to ni-Vanuatu Christians living in fear of nakaemas. By focusing on four key passages (1:10-23, 2:1-7, 3:8-12, and 6:10-20), it is argued that a biblical cosmology affirms the reality and presence of unseen spirits at work on the earth, but guards against any fear of them by clearly articulating and applying the lordship of Christ over all creation. It concludes with three implications, two assurances and one imperative, for gospel leaders ministering to fear-driven ni-Vanuatu.

INTRODUCTION

Nakaemas is the Bislama word for dark sorcery and is a significant and multifaceted issue in Vanuatu today. Secular anthropologists have documented an intensification of sorcery and spiritual insecurity in the capital of Port Vila since 2010.¹ Significant violence has been instigated by *nakaemas*-related activity and accusations to law enforcement authorities have steadily increased in recent years.² In Vanuatu society, fear of *nakaemas* has a depth and breadth that profoundly impacts not only the psychology of the population, but also many political, social, and economic activities. Anthropologists have identified "cosmology" as one of the strongest influences on ni-Vanuatus' conception of evil and power.³

Vanuatu cosmology, and Melanesian belief more broadly, has traditionally been "animistic." "Animism" is a worldview that conceptualises the material world as populated, and controlled by, spiritual beings.⁴ In Bislama, this traditional religious belief is an aspect of *kastom*. *Kastom* encompasses the English understanding of "customs" (for example, foods, dress, holidays, music style, etc.), but also includes rituals, magic, spirits, myths, taboos, and can be considered a fully developed worldview.⁵ This worldview blurs the division

1 Annelin Eriksen and Knut Rio, "Demons, Devils, and Witches in Pentecostal Port Vila: On changing cosmologies of evil in Melanesia," in *Pentecostalism and Witchcraft: Spiritual warfare in Africa and Melanesia*, ed. Knut Rio, Michelle MacCarthy, and Ruy Blanes, *Contemporary Anthropology of Religion* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 198.

2 Knut M. Rio, "Handling Sorcery in a State System of Law: magic, violence and kastom in Vanuatu," *Oceania* 80.2 (2010).

3 Eriksen and Rio, "Demons, Devils, and Witches in Pentecostal Port Vila: On changing cosmologies of evil in Melanesia," 200.

4 Kenneth Nehrbass, *Christianity and Animism in Melanesia: Four approaches to gospel and culture* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2012), 1.

5 Nehrbass, *Christianity and Animism*, 25.

between the seen physical world, and the unseen spirit world. There is little conception of cosmological hierarchy (God, angels, humans, animals, demons, etc.), or spatial disconnection (spiritual above and below, physical on earth) as can be found in western theology. Rather, spirits move between the unseen and seen world. So too, taboo men (*nakaemas* workers, sorcerers of black magic) transcend the seen, entering the unseen in order to control it in some degree.⁶ Spirits are impersonal, unnamed beings and because they can be controlled for both good and ill, they are both essential and deeply feared.

Contemporary ni-Vanuatu cosmology is based on a complex combination of Christian and animistic belief. Regardless of faith in Jesus Christ and the Christian Bible, ni-Vanuatu have historically maintained that humans (and taboo men in particular) have the capacity to control and utilise spirits for good and evil.⁷ Taboo men were seen as mediators between the physical and spiritual realms, and because they had the power to summon or drive away spirits, they were as deeply feared as the spirits themselves.⁸ Taboo men wielded the power of *nakaemas*. *Nakaemas* “blurs the classic anthropological distinction between witchcraft and sorcery, but corresponds to the broadly agreed definition of both,”⁹ thus, the most recent Bislama dictionary defines *nakaemas* as “sorcery, witchcraft, evil force directed by humans that can be used to harm and kill people.”¹⁰ *Nakaemas* is widely understood to be practised today, despite its illegality.¹¹ The prevalence of sickness and death in the islands confirms this suspicion for many ni-Vanuatu, with accusations of *nakaemas* being a regular part of daily life in Vanuatu.¹² Despite its condemnation, fear of *nakaemas* often structures everyday activities for many in the population.¹³ With 82% of the population identifying as Christian, fear of *nakaemas* is a deep and widespread pastoral issue faced by gospel leaders.¹⁴ It can significantly impact on the vitality and effectiveness of gospel witness. Christian demonology and cosmology (particularly the recent Pentecostal versions of demonology and cosmology) have mixed with deep-seated animistic beliefs to create a syncretistic worldview that obsesses over the power of evil spirits.

6 “Ghosts” are deceased people, while “spirits” and “eternals” have never been human. Eternals are spirits with personal names found in mythology, gods that create and give customs, but they are not the centre of their religious expression and worship. Nehrbass, *Christianity and Animism*, 47-48.

7 For example, for bringing about illnesses, rainfall, drought, successful or failure of crops. Raeburn Lange, *Island Ministers: Indigenous leaders in nineteenth century Pacific Islands Christianity* (Canberra: Pandanus Books, 2005), 247.

8 Lange, *Island Ministers: Indigenous leaders in nineteenth century Pacific Islands Christianity*, 247.

9 Nehrbass, *Christianity and Animism*, 47.

10 Terry Crowley, *A New Bislama Dictionary* 2nd ed. (Port Vila: USP, 2003), 174.

11 Adorina D’Arcy, *Tanna Island kastom law* (Tasmania: D’Arcy, 2003).

12 Nehrbass, *Christianity and Animism*, 56.

13 John P. Taylor, “Sorcery and the Moral Economy of Agency: an ethnographic account,” *Oceania* 85.1 (2015).

14 United States Department of State “International Religious Freedom Report,” 1-4 [cited 15 March 2022]. Online: <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/VANUATU-2018-INTERNATIONAL-RELIGIOUS-FREEDOM-REPORT.pdf>

In recent years, however, Christian missiologists have done significant work on transforming syncretistic Christian-animistic worldviews to a biblical worldview. Biola University's Kenneth Nehrbass, after years of missionary work in Vanuatu, has identified ten key ways to transform the *kastom*-infused worldview of ni-Vanuatu Christians to a biblical worldview.¹⁵ His top priority is "the presentation of a biblical cosmology."¹⁶ He argues that clarifying the biblical structure and spheres of the seen and unseen cosmos, ni-Vanuatu can locate the place and authority of local spirits while removing the threat and fear of them.¹⁷ This is corroborated by Van Rheenen's influential thesis, which argued that in order to communicate the gospel in animistic contexts, the soteriological emphasis must focus on God's defeat of Satan, sin and death, (the greatest need felt of most animists), without neglecting justification (the primary concern for the Western Church).¹⁸

Significant biblical and theological reflection is needed by both gospel leaders and lay Christians to address the fears and behaviours ignited by *nakaemas*, and yet, scholarly work on the cosmology of the New Testament has been limited, and Reformed theological reflection on the locality and ontology of spirit beings has largely been ignored.¹⁹ It is unsurprising, therefore, that Western missionary endeavours to transform tribal worldviews have failed to address fear of evil spirits. Missiologist Paul G. Hiebert has famously argued that the mistake of Western missionaries is "the flaw of the excluded middle,"²⁰ which is the absence of any engagement or teaching on "supernatural but this-worldly beings and forces."²¹ This may or may not be an accurate assessment of western missionary endeavours in the South Pacific, but there can be little doubt that the gospel leaders in Melanesia have continued to struggle to transform syncretistic worldviews to a truly biblical worldview. It has been argued that the Church's inadequate attention to biblical cosmology and demonology that has perpetuated, and possibly even heightened, excessive fear of spirits in Melanesia.²² As C.S. Lewis observed in his introduction to *The Screwtape Letters*:

15 Nehrbass, *Christianity and Animism*, 129.

16 Nehrbass, *Christianity and Animism*, 129.

17 Nehrbass, *Christianity and Animism*, 136.

18 Gailyn Van Rheenen, *Communicating Christ in Animistic Contexts* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1991), 131.

19 The last major Reformed theological work comes from Frederick S. Leahy, *Satan Cast Out: a study in biblical demonology* (Carlisle: Banner of Truth Trust, 1990), 7.

20 Paul Hiebert, "The Flaw of the Excluded Middle," *Missiology* 10.1 (1982), 35.

21 Hiebert, "The Flaw of the Excluded Middle," 43.

22 Nils Bubandt, *The Empty Seashell* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2014).

“There are two equal and opposite errors into which our race can fall about the devils. One is to disbelieve in their existence. The other is to believe, and to feel an excessive and unhealthy interest in them. They themselves are equally pleased by both errors and hail a materialist or a magician with the same delight.”²³

Aiming to provide a small contribution to this important conversation, this paper will examine the biblical material on the cosmos and spiritual beings within the Epistle to the Ephesians to (1) define Paul’s conception of the relationship between the seen and unseen realms, and (2) ascertain what assurances were provided to Christians living in fear of the unseen realm. The book of Ephesians has more transcendent and cosmological themes than any other New Testament book.²⁴ The epistle, attributed to the Apostle Paul, is an attempt to pastorally apply the Lordship of Jesus Christ into the context of the Ephesian Church, a community of believers wrestling with questions of identity and power as they pursue Christlikeness in the midst of rampant pagan culture. This paper will work through four key passages that contribute to a biblical cosmology, namely:

- (A) 1:10, 15-23,
- (B) 2:1-7,
- (C) 3:8-12, and
- (D) 6:10-20.

These passages do not provide an exhaustive biblical cosmology, and there are additional insights to be gained from other sections of the letter. However, they are the most significant passages for understanding the epistle’s cosmology, and will be examined in depth, working chronologically from start to end. The paper will then explore the implications for gospel leaders’ pastoral response to ni-Vanuatu Christians living in fear of *nakaemas*.

COSMOLOGY

Cosmology has been widely defined as “the consciously entertained images, doctrines, and scientific views of the universe that provide a sense of its structure and significance.”²⁵ This definition, however, is broad and can cause some to confuse it as a synonym of “worldview.”²⁶ For the purposes of this essay, cosmology is understood as the origins (cosmogony) and structure (cosmography) of created reality (the cosmos). The locality of created beings (both seen and unseen) is to be understood as a subset of cosmography, and therefore, this essay will primarily focus on this aspect of the epistle’s

²³ C. S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (London, UK: G. Bles, 1942), 3.

²⁴ Andrew T. Lincoln, *Ephesians*, vol. 42, WBC (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1990), xc.

²⁵ Kees W. Bolle, “Cosmology: An Overview,” in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Lindsay Jones (Detroit: Thompson/Gale, 2005), 1992.

²⁶ See the similarities with Sire’s popular definition of worldview in James W. Sire, *The Universe Next Door* (5th ed.; Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2009), 20: “a commitment...that we hold (consciously or subconsciously, consistently or inconsistently) about the basic constitution of reality.”

cosmology, over and above cosmogony. The key question of this paper is: how does the cosmography presented in the epistle to the Ephesians give assurance to Ni-Vanuatu Christians living in fear of *nakaemas*? Therefore, the aim of this paper is to determine the reality and locality of spiritual beings in the cosmos, and the subsequent implications for the Christian community.

(A) Ephesians 1

Within the first chapter of Ephesians, there are two sections that illuminate the cosmology assumed by the epistle: verse 10, and verses 19-23.

Through his “introductory eulogy,” Paul introduces the main themes that would later be unpacked in the epistle.²⁷ In verse 10, he articulates an important theme: the telos of the created order. He states that the plan for the “fullness of time” is to “unite all things (τὰ πάντα) in him, things in heaven (ἐπὶ τοῖς οὐρανοῖς) and things on earth (ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς).” The semantic and linguistic emphasis of the verse is determined by the all-encompassing, expansive vision of the consummation of the created order under Christ’s headship. τὰ πάντα is already an expansive phrase, but it is intentionally qualified by the final clause. The final clause is functioning as a merism, stating the two extremes on the spectrum in order to encompass everything in between.²⁸ Its addition implies that Paul is intentionally emphasising the widest sense of τὰ πάντα, referring to all things and all beings. Every sphere of the cosmos, and every being in the cosmos, will find its consummation in Christ.

The next insight into Ephesian cosmology is 1:19-23. In the flow of the letter, Paul now prays for the Ephesian Christians, asking that they might receive divine wisdom (v.17), knowledge of their spiritual inheritance (v.18), and knowledge of the divine power at work through Christ (vv.19-21). The key cosmological insights are gained in verses 20-22. Paul states that God’s power was at work in Christ at his resurrection (v.20a) and his ascension (v.20b). At Christ’s ascension, he was “seated at [God’s] right hand in the heavenlies (ἐν τοῖς ἐπουρανίοις).” ἐν τοῖς ἐπουρανίοις is closely related to the phrase ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς, and although Paul is speaking predominantly to a Gentile audience, the phrase is best understood against an Old Testament and Jewish conception of heaven, not the framework of Hellenistic cosmology.²⁹ The Hebrew for heaven מַעְמַלָּא is always plural, and this is reflected in the Greek terminology used here. Therefore, there is no need to assume the phrase implies a certain number of “heavens” as indicated in other apocalyptic and rabbinic works.³⁰ Rather, the phrase refers to the section of the cosmos above the earth, concealed by

27 J.H. Barkhuizen, “The strophic structure of the eulogy of Ephesians 1:3-14,” *HTS Teologiese Studies* 46.3 (1990).

28 Lincoln, *Ephesians*, 42, 35.

29 Contra Bultmann and Käsemann who believe the author was influenced or interacting with Gnostic thought. See Christopher C. Rowland and Christopher R. A. Morray-Jones, *The Mystery of God: Early Jewish Mysticism and the New Testament* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 583, n.17.

30 Lincoln, *Ephesians*, 21.

the firmament.³¹ Therefore, the “heavenlies” must be understood to be celestial unseen regions of the cosmos, inhabited by God as well as evil and righteous beings.³² It is not only a “spiritual” place, as opposed to the “physical” earth, for this verse also identifies that the bodily Lord Jesus is located in the heavenlies, implying that the physical can inhabit the heavenlies.

Having clarified the “heavenlies,” it is important to note that the emphasis of Paul’s prayer is not the locality of Christ in the heavenlies, but rather the locality (and subsequent inherent authority) of Christ at the *right hand of God*. “Right hand” is the position of vice-regency, a place of honour and power (cf. 1 Ki 2:19, Pss 45:9; Heb 1:3).³³ Moreover, ὑπεράνω (far above) is a preposition that is followed by the genitive of the nouns it is qualifying. When stating that Christ has been raised and seated in the heavenlies, we might be anticipating a statement such as “far above... the earth,” but in this instance, Paul’s surprising turn of phrase states Christ is far above the rulers, authorities, powers and dominions. It can be concluded that Paul is much more interested in the *authority* structures of the cosmos, not the *cosmographical* structures of the cosmos. That is to say Christ may certainly be spatially far above the earth now that he is in the heavenlies, but why that locality is important for Paul is because it demonstrates the authority Christ now has. Christ’s authority is “far above,” meaning far greater than that of every other ruler, authority, power, dominion and name.³⁴ This is further reinforced in verse 22, where the phrase ὑπέταξεν ὑπὸ τοὺς πόδας, “put all things under his feet” is a clear reference to gaining supremacy and authority over “all things,” ὑπέταξεν meaning not simply “put” as translated by the ESV, but more specifically “subject,” or “submit.” Additionally, the temporal aspect of the cosmos is also presented, and expansively so. In verse 21b, the “οὐ μόνον...ἀλλὰ και” (not only...but also) is included for further emphasis, which both supplies a realised eschatological framework for the epistle and clarifies the temporal axis to Christ’s all-encompassing authority. In summary, the cosmology is intended to strengthen Paul’s argument that Christ has authority and power over all of creation; things seen and unseen, earthly and heavenly, whether righteous or evil, both present and future. The cosmology in Ephesians 1 is expansive in every axis and facet, emphasising Christ’s authority and power over everything, everyone and for all time.

31 Though there may be levels in the heavens, this cannot be implied by the plural form. For extensive discussion of the phrase, see Andrew T. Lincoln, “A Re-examination of ‘The Heavenlies’ in Ephesians,” *NTS* 19.3 (1973).

32 There is consistent evidence throughout the epistle that affirms the presence of evil powers in the heavenlies (cf. 3:10; 6:12).

33 William W. Klein, “Ephesians,” in *Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, Philemon The Expositor’s Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006).

34 See to Barth’s discussion on ‘Principalities, Powers and All Things’ which reinforces this point in discussing the terms “ἀρχῆς,” “ἐξουσίας,” “δυναμείας,” and “κυριοτήτος,” in Markus Barth, *Ephesians 1-3: Introduction, translation and commentary on chapters 1-3*, Anchor (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), 170-172.

(B) Ephesians 2:1-7

The next occurrence of cosmological language is the opening of chapter 2. Paul states that the Ephesian Christians were once followers of the “Ruler of the Power of the Air,” a “spirit” working in “sons of disobedience.” For the first time in the epistle, evil is given a personality. This “ruler” is behind both the hostile supernatural powers of 1:21, and is presently at work in both the body and mind of humanity. The “ruler” receives no further development in this chapter, but elsewhere in Ephesians, he is designated διαβολος (devil) and του πονηρου (the evil one). This wider context makes it clear that Paul is referring to Satan. Satan’s domain is the τοῦ ἀέρος (the air), and it is important to ascertain which sphere of the cosmos this refers to. One option is that “the air” refers to the heavenlies, which is supported by the fact that later in Ephesians, evil spirits are said to inhabit the heavenly places (cf. 3:10; 6:12). Additionally, it was a common notion in Old Testament and Jewish thought that angels and spiritual powers inhabited the heavens.³⁵ There are several reasons, however, to support the alternative option, namely “the air” refers to the earth. First, Paul elsewhere speaks of this earth/world being the realm of Satan (cf. 2 Cor 4:4; Col 1:13). Second, to call the devil the “ruler” of heaven is to contradict the emphasis within Pauline (and other biblical) literature that affirms the Lord is the ruler of the heavenlies.³⁶ Third, the cosmology of later Judaism continually affirms that “the air” is *under* the firmament/sky.³⁷ Therefore, it is most accurate to read 2:2 as referring to the devil, an unseen evil spirit whose domain is the earth. His work is to lead humanity into disobedience and the fulfilment of their evil passions and desires (2:3).³⁸

The clarification of the person and domain of evil enriches the salvation in Christ outlined in 2:4ff. Salvation in Christ is not simply propitiation of the wrath of God (though this is central and must not be denied, see 2:1 and 3b), it is also the defeat of Satan and freedom from his power. Salvation is the resurrection from spiritual death to spiritual life in Christ, and this imagery of death strongly implies an inability to change. To use another Pauline metaphor for the same reality, salvation is the release from captivity. Paul’s imagery is purposeful in demonstrating that living for Satan and self is inevitable and inescapable without Christ. But now in Christ, Christians are saved from the power of the evil spirit(s), and moreover, are now raised and seated “in the heavenlies in Christ” (2:6).³⁹ What is Christ’s, and where is Christ, is true

35 See Job 1:6; Dan 10:13; 2 Macc 5:2; 1 Enoch 61:10. Also Philo DeSpecLeg 1:66, De Gig. 6, 7.

36 Rev 12:7-10; Also see Mark 3:22-30 where Jesus speaks of entering the “Strong Man’s” kingdom to bound him.

37 See 2 Enoch 29:4,5; T Benj. 3:4; Targum of Job 5:7; Asc. Isa. 7:9; 10:29; 11:23.

38 Note that a third, yet largely unsupported, option is that the “air” refers to a separate area again, between both the earth and the heaven. This position is not supported by the wider cosmographical evidence in Ephesians. See Cohick who argues it is the “area between the earthly and heavenly realms where stars, angels and demons exist.” Lynn H. Cohick *The Letter to the Ephesians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2020), 146.

39 The limitations of this paper preclude the ability to explore the significance of “union with Christ” as a theological pillar of cosmology and soteriology. For further discussion, see Constantine R. Campbell, *Paul and Union with Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012).

of believers as well. Furthermore, the main indicative verbs in verses 5 and 6 (συνέζωοποίησεν, συνέγειρεν and συνεκάθισεν), are aorist rather than future or subjunctive, implying a current and/or past reality. The implication is that Paul is clearly articulating a present lived reality of spiritual resurrection and freedom from Satan for the Ephesian Christians. In summary, the earth is the spiritual domain of evil, but Christians need not fear, for their spiritual resurrection and ascension locates them now in the heavenlies in union with Christ.

(C) Ephesians 3:8-12

These verses are one single sentence in the Greek text and come towards the end of Paul's explanation of the plan of God to unite Jewish and Gentile people in Christ. His conclusion is that the Church is at the very centre of God's purposes to manifest his wisdom and glory to the cosmos.⁴⁰ There are several important cosmological truths evident in this passage.

First, in a brief appositional gloss in verse 9, God is stated as the creator of all things. Paul's reference to God as Creator is usually to demonstrate God's sovereign authority.⁴¹ So too Ephesians 3:9b reinforces the authority of God over the created cosmos.⁴² Material or immaterial, seen or unseen, physical or spiritual, in the earth or the heavenlies, God is its creator, and consequently, sovereign ruler.

Second, the "rulers and authorities" are "in the heavenlies." As was identified above in 1:21, the rulers and authorities are non-human evil spiritual powers, but the significant piece of information gained in 3:9b is that they are located in the heavenlies. While the opening of chapter 2 describes Satan's power over humans here on earth, his hostile forces also inhabit the heavenly realm. Though their powers are limited by the Creator God, it is accurate to affirm that evil spirits are present in both spheres of the cosmos.

Yet there is no need for Christians to fear, for the third cosmological truth, and the main point of Paul's sentence, is that *despite* the presence of evil forces in the cosmos, nothing is able, nor ever will be able, to thwart the mission of the Church for it is at the centre of God's purposes.⁴³ In fact, God's purposes and wisdom are manifested *in and through* the Church itself, and these spiritual powers can do nothing but marvel at the wisdom of God.⁴⁴

⁴⁰ And the evils powers in the cosmos in particular. For scholarly evidence of this emphasis, see Frank Thielman *Ephesians*, BECNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2010). 216-7.

⁴¹ See for example Rom 9:19-29.

⁴² Cohick, *Ephesians*, 218.

⁴³ Timothy Gombis, "Ephesians 3:2-13: pointless digression, or epitome of the triumph of God in Christ?," *WTJ* 66 (2004).

⁴⁴ Klein, "Ephesians," Loc. 3174 of 11110.

(D) Ephesians 6:10-20

Likely the most famous passage on spiritual warfare in the Bible, this section of the epistle seeks to apply the theology taught earlier to the issue of spiritual attack from evil spirits. There are no significantly new cosmological insights in this section, but there are several important clarifications and applications. The clarifications will be examined first, followed by the applications.

Ephesians 6:10-20 is about withstanding spiritual attack. Verse 12 labours to specify that it is *not* physical opponents that are being struggled against, but that the nature of the true enemy is spiritual. There are five designations of the opponents, namely the devil (6:11), the rulers (6:12), the authorities (6:12), the cosmic powers over this present darkness (6:12), and the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenlies (6:12). The first three have already been identified in the epistle, and their addition here strengthens the argument that they are in reference to evil spiritual powers, but the designation of the final two are new phrases. The term *κοσμοκράτορες* (cosmic/world powers), is only found here in the New Testament, but in other literature, it almost exclusively refers to gods and spirits that rule over the earth.⁴⁵ Paul clarifies that they are rulers over the “present darkness,” which has already been identified in Eph 2:2 as this world-age.⁴⁶ Therefore, this term refers to *earthly* cosmic powers. The final phrase to describe the opponents are explicitly identified as “evil spirits,” but in contrast to the previous term, they are explicitly identified as inhabiting “the heavenlies.” Taking all these terms for the opponents together, therefore, Paul is reinforcing the variety and comprehensiveness of the powers at Satan’s disposal. Rather than providing a schematic classification of evil spiritual forces, he is clarifying their spiritual nature, their offensive stature, and their broad scope of locality.⁴⁷

While this section clarifies the variety, scope, and intentions of the evil spiritual powers in the cosmos, Paul’s primary intent is to articulate his central application: stand firm in God’s strength and sovereignty.⁴⁸ The section opens with this imperative, “be strong in the Lord and in his strength.” The central point of the epistle has been God’s sovereignty and power over all things, and it is therefore unsurprising that this section emphasises God himself as the means and source of the Christian’s strength and perseverance. Paul is repetitive in order to emphasise this application. The three aorist infinitives in verses 11-13 are all purpose statements, repeating three times the same goal to which Paul is calling the Ephesian Christians: stand firm against evil. The first is in reference to Satan, the second to the “evil day,” and the third is

⁴⁵ *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, ed. Frederick William Danker, 3rd ed. (Chicago/London: Chicago University Press, 2000), 561.

⁴⁶ See also Col 1:13 “the dominion of darkness.” Arnold, *Ephesians, Power and Magic*, 63-65.

⁴⁷ Lincoln, *Ephesians*, 446.

⁴⁸ For an extended defence that this is Paul’s primary intent in chapter 6, see Peter T. O’Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians*, PNTC (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 460-490.

the summative goal, “stand firm.” Furthermore, the imagery used throughout the section is predominantly language of defence, not offence. The Christians are to put on τὴν πανοπλίαν τοῦ θεοῦ. πανοπλία is a soldier’s defensive body armour,⁴⁹ and all pieces described are defensive items.⁵⁰ Moreover, πανοπλία is always qualified by the genitive τοῦ θεοῦ, most likely a genitive of possession. Paul is careful to emphasise that it is God’s armour (6:11, 13), that Christians stand firm in God’s strength and might (6:10), not their own. In Pagan Ephesus, many attempted to deal with spiritual powers through magical practices, utilised amulets, tokens, and other magical objects, all of which has striking similarities to ni-Vanuatu totems and *nakaemas*.⁵¹ Paul’s primary application to the Church was to stand in God’s power and work.⁵² God has already defeated these powers through Christ’s death, resurrection and ascension, and although they still attempt to thwart the advance of the gospel, their final destruction is assured - believers need simply to stand firm and persevere in Christ’s victory until its consummation.

Conclusions on Biblical Cosmology

After careful and comprehensive exegesis, several cosmological conclusions can be drawn from the evidence in the epistle to the Ephesians:

1. There are two primary spheres of the cosmos: the earth below and the heavenlies above.
2. Spirit beings who have a level of rule and authority are located in both the heavenly places (1:21; 3:9b; 6:12) and on earth (2:2; 6:12). It is reductionistic to state that spiritual beings are only present in one or the other.
3. The earth, and its human inhabitants, are affected by the power of the evil spiritual force(s), yet God as Creator (3:9), and the Lord Jesus Christ as the vice-regent (1:20), have ultimate authority over both cosmological spheres, and over all material and immaterial entities.
4. Christians in particular are ultimately free from the power of the evil spirits because of the work of Christ, and their subsequent union with him in the heavenlies (2:4-7).
5. The Church is at the centre of God’s purposes as it manifests his wisdom to the spiritual beings (3:8-12).

⁴⁹ BDAG, 754.

⁵⁰ The exception being τὴν μάχαιραν “the sword” which is both defensive and offensive.

⁵¹ See Guy MacLean Rogers, *The Mysteries of Artemis of Ephesos: Cult, polis, and change in the Graeco-Roman world*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012).

⁵² Lincoln, *Ephesians*, 446.

6. The primary Pauline application of these truths is to stand in God's strength by refuging in his spiritual armour/blessings (1:3; 6:10-20).

The creeds and confessions of the Western Church have not clearly articulated the biblical view of the cosmos, and the relationships between the material and immaterial. Yet many of the conclusions identified above can be clearly deduced from teaching of the Church across the millennia.

IMPLICATIONS FOR NI-VANUATU CHRISTIANS

Our key question has been what assurances gospel leaders can give from the biblical cosmology of Ephesians to ni-Vanuatu Christians living in fear of *nakaemas*. Having articulated the epistle's biblical cosmology there are two key assurances and one main imperative that can be ascertained to help mitigate fear of *nakaemas*: (1) a teleo-eschatological assurance, (2) a soteriological assurance, and (3) a faith imperative.

1. *Teleo-Eschatalogical Assurance*

It has been established that the epistle opens with deep and rich theology which finds its climax in the presentation of the *telos* of the cosmos. The goal of all things is the all-encompassing, expansive vision of the consummation of the created order under Christ's headship (1:10). It was demonstrated that Paul's intention was to remind the Ephesians that Christ's power and authority is comprehensive on every axis; he is Lord over both spheres of the cosmos and has authority over everything and everyone in the cosmos, both now and for all eternity. There is both a teleological assurance, that the purposes of God for the cosmos is the consummation of all things under the Lordship of Jesus Christ, and an inaugurated eschatological assurance that this Lordship is a present reality, and yet still to be fully realised at the imminent return of Christ.⁵³

In Vanuatu, *nakaemas* is all about power and control of the unseen spirits for either good (divination), or ill (sorcery). Ni-Vanuatu turn to taboo men to work dark magic in order to gain some form of control over their world, for they believe that the immaterial impacts the material. Consequently, the Lordship of Christ is the fundamental and pivotal correction that mitigates against any fear of evil spirits. The power of the spirits pale in comparison to the power of Christ. Authority to heal, authority to judge, and authority to save is Christ's and Christ's alone. When the powerlessness of spirits is comprehended in light of Christ's lordship, ni-Vanuatu can turn to the source of true power and hope, and stand in fierce resistance to any spiritual or physical attempt to undermine Christ's lordship.

⁵³ See Heiser for more discussion on this teleo-eschatological realities at play in Paul's cosmography in Michael S. Heiser *The Unseen Realm: Recovering the supernatural worldview of the Bible*. (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2015), 322-334.

2. *Soteriological Assurance*

It was evident from the opening of chapter 2 that salvation is cosmological, which has important implications for ni-Vanuatu living in fear of *nakaemas*. Ephesians 2:2 clarified that Satan is an unseen evil spirit whose primary domain is the earth, and his work is to lead humanity into disobedience and the fulfilment of their evil passions and desires (2:3). However, an important aspect of salvation in Christ is the inaugurated defeat of Satan and the Christian's freedom from his power. Moreover, Christians are not only saved from the power of the evil spirit(s) but are presently raised and seated "in the heavenlies in Christ" (2:6).

These truths both support and challenge the ni-Vanuatu concern for evil spirits. First, there is an important affirmation in this epistle of the presence and power of evil supernatural beings on the earth. In contrast to influence on secularism in the Western Church, ni-Vanautu Christians can play a significant role in modelling to the global Church a biblical concern for Satan and his demons.

However, a thoroughly biblical and holistic soteriology challenges a fear-driven response to *nakaemas*, and Satan and his demons more broadly. Satan and the evil spirits have been bound and are destined for destruction.⁵⁴ Christians are free from their rule, and even though there is a spiritual battle still occurring in the hearts of all believers, there is assurance of the Christian's perseverance and Christ's consummated victory. The work of the evil spirits may still seek to deceive the believer and lead them into sin, but there is no need to fear their power, for Christ has delivered them already, and will ensure their perseverance to glory.

Additionally, the cosmological soteriology on display in the epistle to the Ephesians reveals a misunderstanding of the powers of the evil spirits in ni-Vanuatu culture. The purpose behind *nakaemas* is to control the spirits in order to bring about physical realities, for example, sickness, disaster or misfortune. However, the cosmology of Ephesians indicates that Satan and the evil spirits are primarily concerned with leading humanity into the gratification of their sinful natures. In fact, the lordship of Christ, and the emphasis on God as creator undermines any notion that evil spirits can physically harm humanity. Cosmological insights from other portions of Scripture may allow for such conclusions, but so too the providence of God over all the spiritual beings is similarly evident.

⁵⁴ Heiser, *The Unseen Realm*, 358-375.

3. *The Imperative*

Having developed these cosmological assurances, Paul's primary imperative in relation to the cosmological powers is simple yet profound: faith. Depending on the strength of God, and trusting him for defence, is the heart of true faith, and should be the fundamental response to evil spirits.

Again, because *nakaemas* is about control, leaning into God's sovereignty and strength over the cosmic powers is significant for what it is *not*. Christians should *not* take matters into their own hands, seeking to ward off or attack spirits. Faith is *not* seeking to appease the spirits, *nor* utilising the spirits, *nor* communing with the spirits, and it is certainly *not* controlling the spirits. Rather it is trusting all the key cosmological assurances established earlier in the letter: Christ's current power and rule over all things seen and unseen, earthly and heavenly, present and future; the freedom from Satan already experienced in Christ; the spiritual location of believers in the heavenlies with Christ; the manifestation of God's sovereign power and wisdom through the Church - all of these truths present the supremacy of God and his work in and through Christ in subjecting all spiritual powers for the benefit of his people. The only good and proper response to this is to stand firm in the *Lord's* strength and might, finding comfort in both his victory at Calvary, and the imminent consummation of his kingdom.

CONCLUSION

The epistle to the Ephesians provides important data for developing a biblical cosmology, which in turn challenges the ni-Vanuatu worldview and provides significant assurance to those living in fear of *nakaemas*. Ephesians affirms the reality and presence of unseen spirits in our world, but guards against any fear of them, or offensive engagement with them, by clearly articulating and applying the lordship of Christ to biblical cosmology. It has been demonstrated that Paul assumes a cosmology that prioritises the lordship of Jesus Christ over all of creation, and that this lordship is the basis for living without fear of other spiritual and physical powers, authorities, and beings. The implications were articulated, and though there is significant scope for deeper and broader exploration, ni-Vanuatu who take these truths to heart will find solace and freedom from fear of *nakaemas*. They will be able to sing, with the generations before them, Martin Luther's most famous hymn:

And though this world, with devils filled,
Should threaten to undo us,
We will not fear, for God hath willed
His truth to triumph through us.

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