

JBTS

VOLUME 5 | ISSUE 1

JOURNAL OF
BIBLICAL AND
THEOLOGICAL
STUDIES

EPHESIANS AND THE POWERS

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Vicky Balabanski



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VICKY BALABANSKI

Vicky Balabanski (Ph.D, University of Melbourne) Rev. Dr. Vicky Balabanski is senior lecturer in New Testament at Flinders University Department of Theology and Director of Biblical Studies at the Uniting College for Leadership and Theology

Abstract: This chapter focuses on interpreting the powers in Colossians, a letter with close connections with the Letter to the Ephesians. It begins with three contemporary scenarios where the perception of the powers among indigenous Christians is contrasted with that of non-indigenous Christians. This demonstrates that any discussion of the powers is conducted in a culturally and theologically contested space. From the perspective of the positive reference to the powers in Colossians 1:16, it examines the more negative references in Colossians 1:13 and 2:15. It sets all these references against the background of Hellenistic cosmology, including the depiction of the powers in Plato’s Allegory of the Cave, 1 Enoch 64:1–2, and Jude 14–15. The reference to angelic worship in Colossians 2:18 is also discussed. The chapter concludes by comparing the portrayal of the powers in Colossians and Ephesians, arguing that Western Christianity is right to emphasize the victory of Christ over all powers, but foolish to lose belief in the reality of the powers themselves.

Keywords: Powers in Colossians, Indigenous theology, Hellenistic cosmology, Plato’s Allegory of the Cave, sinful angels in 1 Enoch, angelic worship, thrones, dominions, rulers and powers.

Introduction

One might rightly ask, “What is a chapter on Colossians and the Powers doing in a volume on Ephesians?” The initial answer lies in the close connection between the two writings, which is widely recognized. George H. Van Kooten, for example, describes Ephesians as “the twin letter” of Colossians, arguing that Ephesians is “a comprehensive and systematic commentary” on Colossians which enables their similarities and differences to be set out via a new scholarly synopsis of these two

writings.¹ So the inclusion of this chapter in a volume on Ephesians is a recognition that there is a close relationship between the two letters. Understanding the approach taken in Colossians to the powers will contribute to our understanding of the powers in Ephesians, by offering a synoptic parallel that brings both letters into clearer perspective.

First, however, I am going to locate this discussion of the powers in a contemporary setting via three scenarios that demonstrate that any discussion of the powers is conducted in a culturally and theologically contested space. This will lead to a provisional definition of the powers in Colossians and then an exegetical engagement particularly with Colossians 1:16, in dialogue with Colossians 1:13 and 2:15. I will then offer some reflections on the Hellenistic cosmology drawing on Plato's Allegory of the Cave, on the one hand, and on some Jewish apocalyptic influences on the other, as both Hellenistic and Jewish apocalyptic cosmologies provide useful contexts for interpreting Colossians. Returning to the Colossians' texts, I will conclude with a comparative consideration of the portrayal of the powers in Colossians and Ephesians.

The Powers in a Culturally and Theologically Contested Space

The first brief scenario is an autobiographical one, set in Papunya, a remote indigenous community located 149 miles north-west of Alice Springs, in the central desert of Australia. The three-hundred people of this community mostly speak Luritja, one of the central desert Aboriginal languages. They practice their traditional customs that reach back some sixty thousand years. Most of the people identify as practicing Lutheran Christians. The town itself dates back only to the 1960s, when a ration-station town was established, laid out in a shape representing four women digging for honey ants, a traditional dreaming totem. We were visiting Papunya, staying in a fibro-cement house which had a functioning 'swampie', an evaporative cooler that offered some relief from the fierce daytime heat. One morning we went outside to find a group of children pointing in an animated way at the outside wall near the swampie. Sure enough, there were dirty handprints high up on the wall. What we saw was obvious evidence that someone had done some maintenance work on the swampie. What the children saw, as they explained, were the handprints of spirits.

In this first scenario, western educated adults looking at handprints high up on a wall saw only what we assumed to be both logical and explicable, originating from a known, visible, presumably benign human action. For the children whose worldview is shaped by their culture and language, and confirmed by their Christian

1. George H. Van Kooten, *Cosmic Christology in Paul and the Pauline School: Colossians and Ephesians in the Context of Graeco-Roman Cosmology, with a New Synopsis of the Greek Texts*. WUNT 171 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003), 148, 236. Earlier synopses of the Greek text of Ephesians and Colossians are those by Goodspeed (1933), Wagenführer (1941), Mitton (1951), Reuter (1997) and Vleugels (1997).

faith, they saw the handprints high up on the wall near a point of ingress into a house where foreigners were staying as a sign of spiritual significance. They did not assume that their origin was necessarily of human origin, nor necessarily benign. Spiritual powers were real, active, and needed to be treated with care. The Christian faith is compatible with both these views. Although the western view might call the children superstitious, one cannot say *a priori* that one view is more compatible with the Christian faith than the other.

The second scenario is also located in a remote region of the Northern Territory of Australia. In November 2018, a young indigenous couple with their three year-old child were found dead, along with a twelve-year-old boy, their relative, about 390 feet from the family. They were over 2.5 miles away from their broken-down car. The car still had some food and water in it. Northern Territory police declared that the deaths were not suspicious, but resulted from the victims experiencing exposure and dehydration after wandering away from the car.² Within a week, dozens of people connected with the deceased young family arrived at another remote community, Ali Curung, armed with weapons, and in the ensuing riot killed a twenty-five-year-old man.³ Whole indigenous communities were convinced that the deaths of the young family members were not due to exposure and dehydration, but to spiritual powers used by the men at Ali Curung in a longstanding feud that required payback.

In this second scenario, the western view of two incidents—the tragic death of the young family and the boy, on the one hand, and the riot that killed a man in Ali Curung on the other—acknowledges that in some way they are linked in peoples' minds, but sees the actual causes as resulting from: rivalry fuelled by widespread overcrowding, health issues, poverty and family violence, as well as alcohol, and lack of education and employment. Spiritual powers, their use/misuse, are not viewed in western discourse as relevant. There appears to western eyes to be no evidence to suggest any such thing. The indigenous communities, by contrast, are scornful of the notion that these young people would have died under these circumstances; these are desert people who manage heat and isolation every day, and the car still contained food and water. For indigenous people, the young family was driven from the car by “featherfoot” men.⁴ So convinced were they that this was the obvious and only explanation, the riot targeted and dealt with the man deemed to be the main perpetrator of the deaths. The community of Ali Curung feared further reprisals,

2. “Child found dead near three other bodies and broken-down vehicle in outback,” *The Guardian*, accessed 12/20/2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2018/nov/08/boy-12-feared-missing-after-three-people-found-dead-near-broken-down-vehicle-in-outback>.

3. “Northern Territory riot: one dead after armed clashes between dozens of people,” *The Guardian*, accessed 12/20/2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2018/nov/13/northern-territory-riot-one-dead-after-armed-clashes-between-dozens-of-people>.

4. Private communication from a central desert woman related to an Indigenous policeman who attended the incident in Ali Curung. Regarding “featherfoot men,” see Baldwin Spencer & F.J. Gillen, *Native Tribes of Central Australia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010 [1899]), 476-477.

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and this led many of the inhabitants to flee. The powers held and practiced by central desert tribes are absolutely real to the indigenous people of the region.⁵

The third scenario is set in Sydney, October 2018, where the Religious Freedom Reference Group of the Anglican Diocese of Sydney put forward a proposal to their Synod that “church property must not be used for purposes which contravene the doctrines, tenets and beliefs of the diocese.”⁶ Among other things, indigenous smoking ceremonies, which seek to cleanse a place from spiritual powers, including the residual spirits of those who have died, were to be banned. However, within three days, the chair of the Religious Freedom Reference Group, Bishop Michael Stead, withdrew this aspect of the ban:

“The original ban was not a ban on all smoking ceremonies, only those with a spirituality inconsistent with Christianity. However, on wider advice from Aboriginal Christians, we realised that we need to consult more widely, because the spiritual significance of smoking ceremonies differs in different places. Moreover, this discussion needs to be part of the wider conversation about reconciliation between the first peoples of this country and its later arrivals, and needs to be driven by indigenous Christians. It was clumsy to address this in a proper use policy, and I readily withdraw it, with deep apologies to the aboriginal community.”⁷

This scenario illustrates the difficulty that Christian churches have in determining what aspects of traditional Aboriginal culture are compatible with Christian doctrine, and what aspects should be rejected as contravening doctrines, tenets, and beliefs of the church. In this third scenario, there was a desire in the Anglican Diocese of Sydney for clarity and consistency in the use of church property, but at the same time a lack of clarity about whether the powers that are being invoked in these ceremonies are spiritually significant to Christians—and if so, which smoking ceremonies may be spiritually inconsistent with Christianity. The controversy that arose in the light of the proposal led to the acknowledgement that reconciliation between the first peoples of this country and its later arrivals is crucial to the spiritual wellbeing of the Church, and that indigenous Christians are best equipped to lead the conversation about such policy. This scenario implies that the spiritual powers invoked in these ceremonies are real, but also acknowledges that there are different opinions as to whether the

5. The cycle of revenge continues independent of the Christian teaching of Matthew 5:38–48. The reality of these powers is compatible with the Christian faith, but the use of them for revenge is not.

6. “Sydney Anglicans to ban SSM, yoga and Indigenous smoking ceremonies on all church property,” *ABC*, accessed on 12/20/2019, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-10-19/sydney-anglicans-banning-ssm-yoga-on-all-church-property/10397748>.

7. “Church use policy ‘a shield not a stick,’” [sydneyanglicans.net](https://sydneyanglicans.net/news/church-use-policy-passes), accessed 12/20/2019, <https://sydneyanglicans.net/news/church-use-policy-passes>.

traditional practices associated with expelling evil spiritual powers contravene or are compatible with Christian teaching.

These three scenarios demonstrate that any discussion of the powers is conducted in a culturally and theologically contested space. Our understanding of such things as spiritual powers, where and under what circumstances they might be at work, whether they are uniformly malevolent or whether some are benign, and whether any ritual practices concerning spiritual powers are compatible with Christian doctrine, tenets and beliefs—all these things reflect our presuppositions, our experiences, our educational framework and, of course, our theological and denominational allegiances.

By approaching a discussion of the powers in this way, I am locating myself at the intersection of different viewpoints: those of traditional cultural groups, namely, the central desert peoples of Australia, the various denominations' missionary tradition of evangelizing these peoples, and the contemporary educated western Christian discomfort with allowing any space for spiritual powers other than those of God. This intersection affirms the reality of spiritual powers, both benign and malign.⁸ It affirms the triumph over these powers by Christ's death and resurrection. It admits that Christian doctrine and practice is often neither clear nor consistent in relation to such powers.

Towards a Definition of the Powers in Colossians 1:15–16

In Colossians 1:16, the powers—ἐξουσίαι—are the fourth and final element of a list of things that have been created through Christ and for Christ. From the immediate context of this verse we learn several things. First, the powers (which can also be translated as “authorities”⁹) are both connected with and distinguished from thrones (θρόνοι), dominions (κυριότητες), and rulers (ἄρχαι). This invites some comment about what jurisdictions these different terms imply, but I will defer this until later. At this point it is sufficient to note that the powers is one of a set of terms denoting rule and authority, implying that they are to some degree distinct from one another.

Second, the context suggests that the powers (and other authorities) are connected with things both in the heavens and on the earth (ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς καὶ ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς). A definition of these things will not be limited to political or earthly realities alone, nor will they be exclusively spiritual or heavenly realities.

Third, these authorities are correlated with things that are seen and things that are unseen (τὰ ὄρατὰ καὶ τὰ ἀόρατα). Just as Christ is the visible image or *eikon* of the invisible God (Col 1:15), the reality which is alluded to in this list is not limited

8. At the very least, the *subjective* reality of spiritual powers is clear, as is demonstrated in the example of the death of the man at Ali Curung.

9. NAS, ESV, NIV, RSV.

to what is visible to the naked eye. The cosmos being evoked here is more complex than our senses might suggest.

Finally, and most importantly to the authors¹⁰, the creation of powers, as well as thrones, dominions and rulers, is predicated on the authority of Christ. Each of these authorities has come into being through Christ's own authority. Because they were created through Christ and for Christ, they were created *good*.

Given these initial observations, a definition of the powers in Colossians will need to distinguish between the protological view of thrones, dominions, rulers, and powers as created through and for Christ, serving Christ's sovereignty—and therefore created *good*—and the specific negative phenomena of ἐξουσία referred to in Colossians 1:13 and 2:15, which indicate the need for them to be conquered and restored to right relationship with God. Colossians 1:16 gives a protological view, indicating what was true for all things, namely that they were created through Christ and for Christ—to bring Christ and the Father honor. The other references (1:13 and 2:15) indicate the need for Christ's salvific work, and hence are eschatological in scope.

The profoundly positive image of powers in Colossians 1:16 is therefore not a contradiction with the negative views of the power of darkness (Col 1:13) and the reference to Christ disarming them and leading them captive (Col 2:15). Rather, their story is—on a macro-scale—a similar one to that of human beings. The good creation (Gen 1:31), which tells of God's glory (Ps 19), had been distorted by hubris and sin, and is being made alive together with Christ (Col 2:13). The powers are also caught up in the salvation Christ achieved on the cross, in being disarmed and confidently exposed to public view (ἐδειγμάτισεν ἐν παρρησίᾳ, Col 2:15). This shows that their authority is only secondary and derivative; they have no ultimate power over the believer, and their apparent reign is passing away.

The language in Colossians 2:15 is of Christ's triumphal victory march, but we need not assume that the metaphor implies the same motive of scorn and derision as a Roman victory march. The rulers and powers are led captive to restore them to the original goodness of their creation. The public spectacle is a necessary affirmation to all that they are not ultimately sovereign. It is Christ through whom and for whom they exist.

I take the reference to the powers in Colossians 1:16 to be the foundational view. It points to their original purpose among the creation of “all things” (τὰ πάντα); namely to bring honor—through Christ and for Christ—to God. However, by becoming self-serving, these authorities have actively strayed from their purpose and have interposed themselves between humanity and the kingdom of God's beloved Son (Col 1:13). They have effectively established a “kingdom” of their own, which is referred to as the “power of darkness.” The believer must therefore be transferred

10. Paul and Timothy. For a discussion of the authorship of Colossians, please see Vicky Balabanski, *Colossians: An Eco-Stoic Reading*. An Earth Bible Commentary (London: Bloomsbury T & T Clark, 2020), 7–9, 154–166.

from their power into the kingdom of God's beloved Son. The cross was necessary, not just for the salvation of each person from their trespasses (Col 2:13), but to disarm the rulers and powers (τὰς ἀρχὰς καὶ τὰς ἐξουσίας (Col 2:15) and to make a public example of them. The cross has therefore transferred the believer from their power, so that believers currently participate as citizens of the kingdom of the Son. The cross has also effected the disarming of the rulers and authorities, with the final denouement already visible to the believer and able to be glimpsed by all.

According to these observations, the powers in Colossians refer both to heavenly and earthly beings and authority structures that were created to reflect and serve their creator, but have risen up against their creator and served their own ends. This will serve as a provisional definition of the powers in Colossians.

The Powers and Hellenistic Cosmology

For Paul and his contemporaries, it was uncontroversial that a spirit world exists and affects humanity. For a glimpse into the significance of the spirit world in Hellenistic and Greco-Roman times, we can turn to the influential writings of Plato. Plato's Allegory of the Cave in the *Republic* alludes in passing to the intermediary world between humans and God in its description of an upper level of the cave. Above the chained prisoners, depicting humanity, there is a low wall where people are carrying various objects, and these are projected by the light of the fire, which casts shadows visible to the chained prisoners:

Now imagine people carrying props of all kinds along this wall above the top of it and statues and other creatures made of wood and stone and fashioned in all kinds of ways. Some of those carrying these objects speak, others are silent as you would expect.¹¹

This depiction of intermediary beings—neither belonging to humankind, represented as chained prisoners below, nor truly divine, belonging to the world of light above—portrays them as going about their business, largely unconcerned with human affairs. Some are audible to the human ear, others not. The Allegory depicts human beings becoming adept in interpreting the shadows, not the beings themselves.

In *Timaeus* 40–41, Plato touches on the origin of divinities. In the dialogue between Socrates and Timaeus, God is depicted as giving the stars and lesser deities the role of fashioning mortals, feeding them, and receiving them to themselves upon death. The following discourse depicts the “God of gods” speaking about the creation of humanity to the gods who “revolve manifestly” (i.e. the stars) and those who manifest themselves only as far as they choose:

11. Plato, *The Republic*. Books 6–10. Loeb Classical Library 276, trans. Paul Shorey (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1935), VII 514c to 515a.

But if by my doing these creatures came into existence and partook of life, they would be made equal unto gods; in order, therefore, that they may be mortal and that this World-all may be truly All, do ye turn yourselves, as Nature directs, to the work of fashioning these living creatures, imitating the power showed by me in my generating of you. Now so much of them as it is proper to designate ‘immortal,’ the part we call divine which rules supreme in those who are fain to follow justice always and yourselves, that part I will deliver unto you when I have sown it and given it origin. For the rest, do ye weave together the mortal with the immortal, and thereby fashion and generate living creatures, and give them food that they may grow, and when they waste away receive them to yourselves again.¹²

In this cosmogony, humans are dependent on these divinities for birth, sustenance, and at their death. These lesser gods are accorded primary responsibility for key issues in human existence—fertility and conception, the productivity of the seasons, and issues of mortality. Here we glimpse the sorts of issues for which people sought favor through cultic practices in the ancient world, and indeed in all traditional societies.

Plato’s cosmos is populated with various lesser gods and intermediary beings. Plato writes in a context where the existence of powers is altogether uncontroversial. *Timaeus* distinguishes the Highest God, “the Maker and Father of this Universe”¹³ from other causes (*aitiai*) and artificers (*dēmiourgoi*)¹⁴ at various points, but at other points draws them into close relationship.¹⁵ In doing so, he offers an orderly but unsystematized account of the universe.¹⁶ Later systematizations led in different directions, including Stoicism, Neo-Platonism, and Marcionism.¹⁷ It is beyond the scope of this chapter to trace these trajectories. Nevertheless we can note that while Plato’s Demiurge is good,¹⁸ and the lesser demiurges are to model themselves upon the Maker (*ho poiētēs*), the universe includes those things that are disorderly, discordant, and irrational.¹⁹ The tendency to revert to disorder is given scope among mortals by transitory impulses:

12. Plato, *Timaeus* 41c–d. See Plato, *Timaeus. Critias. Cleitophon. Menexenus. Epistles*. Loeb Classical Library 234, trans. R. G. Bury (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1929).

13. Plato, *Timaeus* 28c, τὸν ποιητὴν καὶ πατέρα τοῦδε τοῦ παντός (“the Maker and Father of everything”).

14. Plato, *Timaeus* 46e.

15. Plato, *Timaeus* 68e.

16. *Timaeus* 68e leaves open the possibility of distinguishing between the Highest God and the Demiurge, which later shaped Gnostic thought.

17. For the reception and interpretation of the *Timaeus*, see J. Dillon, “The *Timaeus* in the Old Academy,” in *Plato’s Timaeus as Cultural Icon*, ed. G. Reydam-Schils (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2003), 80–94; Nathan Powers, “Plato’s Demiurge and the Providential Stoic God,” *Classical Quarterly* 63.2 (2013): 713–722.

18. The goodness of the Demiurge is first mentioned at 29a and is elaborated upon at 30a.

19. Plato, *Timaeus* 30a, b.

pleasure, a most mighty lure to evil; next, pains, which put good to rout; and besides these, rashness and fear, foolish counsellors both; and anger, hard to dissuade; and hope, ready to seduce. And blending these with irrational sensation and with all-daring lust, they thus compounded in necessary fashion the mortal kind of soul.²⁰

Plato's *Timaeus* thus attributes evil to impulses and passions of human beings.²¹ This view of the world has profoundly resonated with and influenced Christian theology, which also attributes evil largely to human hubris and sin.²² Nevertheless, in apocryphal and pseudepigraphical writings of the intertestamental and early Christian periods, intermediary beings were held to be swayed by comparable sinful impulses, leading them to sin and to prompt humans to sin as well. So, for example, in 1 Enoch we read:

And I heard the voice of an angel saying, "These are the angels who descended upon the earth and revealed what was hidden to the children of the people, and led the children of the people astray to commit sin." (1 Enoch 64:1–2).²³

The names and misdeeds of the fallen angels are a substantial focus of 1 Enoch, and of many of the other apocalyptic writings of the intertestamental period, and these teachings have influenced the hamartiology of various New Testament writings. We see this most clearly in the Letter of Jude, a Jewish Christian writing with a strong apocalyptic outlook,²⁴ which alludes in verse 6 to the story from 1 Enoch 6–19 of the angels "who did not keep their own position, but left their proper dwelling." In Jude 14–15, the prophecy of Enoch is cited, in which the future judgement of all by the Lord and ten thousand angels is invoked (1 Enoch 1:9). In the text of Enoch, the "holy ones" will execute judgment on the "wicked ones" and on all flesh, suggesting that—along with the judgment of humanity (all flesh)—angels were envisaged as both executing and receiving judgment. The visible and invisible world were held to be mutually permeable, and the powers were divided into those that serve God (i.e. the holy ones) and those that have turned to serving evil (i.e. the wicked ones).

Having noted some aspects of Hellenistic cosmology, drawing on Plato's *Timaeus* and on the influence of 1 Enoch on Christian apocalyptic thought, we return to the cosmology of Colossians. Paul's theology occupies a mediating space between the Greek cosmology of Plato and the Jewish apocalyptic thought articulated in the

20. Plato, *Timaeus* 69d.

21. These are given a biological aetiology in *Timaeus* 86d, e.

22. See Romans 1:18–32.

23. James H. Charlesworth, ed., *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha Vol. 1, Apocalyptic Literature & Testaments* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1983), 44.

24. Duane F. Watson, *The Letter of Jude*. The New Interpreter's Bible Vol. XII (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1998), 476.

Letter of Jude. While Paul is clearly shaped by apocalyptic thought, he does not emphasize the role of angels or other powers, except occasionally in passing:

For such boasters are false apostles, deceitful workers, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ. And no wonder! Even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light (2 Cor 11:13–14).

In order to gain further insight into the role of the powers in Colossians, we now return to that letter.

The Cosmology of Colossians

The problem of the powers (and other authorities) in Colossians is connected with the fact that the believer may suppose that these powers have ongoing authority over them, requiring certain practices related to food and drink, festivals, and calendrical observances (Col 2:16).²⁵ Paul and Timothy emphasize that the rulers and powers have been disarmed, and the believer need not—indeed *must* not—live as though they were subject to these authorities. Instead, the believer has, through baptism (Col 2:12), been raised through the same power of God that raised Christ from the dead and is therefore free from any such requirements. The Colossians are to embrace this confidence, without the need to humble themselves to these authorities (Col 2:18). The notion that the believer should avoid handling, tasting, or touching anything (Col 2:21) for fear of the powers is ridiculous! All indebtedness that they once may have had has been nailed to the cross (Col 2:14).

The reference to angelic worship (Col 2:18) invites further comment in relation to the powers. The phrase is ambiguous, as it can be understood as an objective genitive—with angels as the objects of worship, or as a subjective genitive, with the angels modeling the sort of worship that is required, namely of a superb angelic quality. I consider it unlikely that the Colossians were thought by the authors to be worshipping angels, as this passing comment would not suffice to correct such a substantial error. I argue elsewhere for the subjective genitive as the more plausible meaning in the letter itself.²⁶ However, this is not to say that in a cultural context influenced by Plato's *Timaeus*, readers could not have associated angels and the powers, and that reverence for these powers was an ongoing issue as the believers transitioned from their pagan worldview and practices to their new life in Christ. But the tone of Colossians is one of confidence that the believers are not subject to the powers, and that what is needed is for them to continue to be built up and established in the faith that they already are living in (Col 2:6–7). The powers

25. I have set out a longer exposition of my understanding of the so-called “Colossian problem” in Balabanski, *Colossians: An Eco-Stoic Reading*, 9–14. I do not take the problem to be the introduction of a specific heresy or the arrival of a specific group of false teachers, but rather the attraction to certain Jewish and pagan practices for added security.

26. Balabanski, *Colossians*, 115.

have been conquered; the believers are free to live in Christ, having all the riches of assured understanding and knowledge of God's mystery, that is, Christ himself (Col 2:2). Having noted the attitude to the powers in Colossians, we now turn to make a comparison with the powers in Ephesians 6:12.

The Powers in Ephesians in Dialogue with Colossians

Ephesians 3:10 speaks of the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places coming to know the wisdom of God through the church. This endows the church with cosmic significance and shows a similar confidence to that expressed in Colossians that the believers currently participate in the purposes of God.²⁷ However, Ephesians 6:12 presents a contrasting picture:

For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.

Ephesians 6:12 is “the most explicit reference to the believers’ struggle against spiritual powers” in Pauline literature.²⁸ While it does not appear to be an interpolation,²⁹ it does stand in contrast to the earlier, more positive reference to the rulers and authorities in Ephesians 3:10, and so raises questions that have provoked considerable scholarly discussion. The key terms that are shared between Colossians 1:16 and Ephesians 6:12 are rulers (ἄρχαι) and powers/authorities (ἐξουσία). They are the final two terms in the Colossians’ list, whereas in Ephesians they are the first two terms in a list articulating the struggle of the church against powers in the heavenly places. Ephesians goes on to name, not thrones and dominions, but more explicitly negative forces: literally the world rulers of this darkness (τοὺς κοσμοκράτορας τοῦ σκότους τούτου) and the spiritual forces of evil. They are said to be in places that one would not expect, namely in the heavenly places. This is a move towards a more explicitly apocalyptic and pessimistic view of the forces aligned against the church when compared with Colossians. It emphasizes the current need for spiritual armor and weapons, showing that the battle is still raging. Nevertheless, the vivid metaphor of God’s armor that follows should not obscure the fact that it is there to remind the believer of the power and protection afforded by God’s truth and righteousness (6:14), the gospel of peace (6:15), faith (6:16), and salvation and the Spirit, namely the Word of God (6:17). The

27. Note that the phrase ἐν τοῖς ἐπουρανίοις—in the heavenly places— does not occur in Colossians.

28. Harold W. Hoehner, *Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2002), 825.

29. Contra Wesley Carr, *Angels and Principalities. The Background, Meaning and Development of the Pauline Phrase Hai Archai Kai Hai Exousiai*, SNTSMS 42 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 104–10.

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point is ultimately not the battle itself, but the fact that the believer is fully equipped by God to withstand any opposing force.

At the opening of the discussion of Colossians 1:16, I raised the issue of what jurisdictions the different terms “thrones, dominions, rulers and powers” imply. Van Kooten tentatively assigns the rulers and powers to the visible things, with reference to 1 Corinthians 15:23–28, and the thrones and dominions to the invisible, namely the astronomical influence of the heavenly bodies.³⁰ However, the closest external comparison is to be found in the Testament of Levi, which sets out a three-tiered orderly heaven and offers several parallels to Colossians 1:16 and Ephesians 6:12–13.³¹ In Testament of Levi 3:8 the “thrones and authorities/powers (ἐξουσίαι)” are part of the heavenly host in God’s presence. Given the further similarities between this second century BCE writing and Paul’s language and ideas,³² it seems best to assume that the list in Colossians 1:16 should not be subdivided into heavenly and earthly, but should be understood as comprehensive of both heavenly and earthly authorities and authority structures, without specifying their jurisdictions.

Conclusion

The significant similarities between the Letters to the Colossians and to the Ephesians should not lead us to overlook some important differences, particularly in relation to the powers. Colossians states that all things—including thrones, dominions, rulers, and powers, whether heavenly or earthly—have been created through Christ and for Christ. The subduing and restoration of the powers is already effected by Christ’s death, known by believers and also visible to those who do not yet believe. The point of Ephesians 6:12 is a different one. The serious danger of the powers urges the believer not to become complacent in the face of very real and continuing evil, but instead to call on all the armor at their disposal. The contexts and timing of the letters were different, and the hortatory strategy used is also different.

We westerners are at a much greater distance from the worldview and cosmology of Paul and his co-workers than are the indigenous Christians of the central deserts of Australia. Aboriginal Christians have no difficulty in perceiving spiritual powers, whether benevolent or malevolent, and angelic beings; neither conceptualizing that they may be aligned with God, or may be serving evil purposes. Western Christianity is right to emphasize the victory of Christ over all powers, but foolish to lose belief in the reality of the powers themselves. Without a robust sense of the ongoing power of evil in this present age, we can lose sight of the cosmic role

30. Van Kooten, *Cosmic Christology in Paul and the Pauline School*, 122–22.

31. Testament of Levi 3: 8-9, 8:2-3. These parallels are noted by Charlesworth in the margins of his edition of the Testament of Levi, in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, 789–791.

32. Testament of Levi 3:6, 8–9, 6:11, 8:2–3. There are further parallels with Pauline concepts in the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs. In particular, see the Testament of Judah 14:1, 19:1, 25:3.

that we as the church are called to play in making known “the wisdom of God in its rich variety . . . to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places” (Ephesians 3:10). May God grant us the humility to reconceive what “things invisible” may mean (Colossians 1:16).