

Book Review: *Against Principalities and Powers: Spiritual Beings in Relation to Communal Identity and the Moral Discourse of Ephesians.*

Darko, Daniel K. 2020. *Against Principalities and Powers: Spiritual Beings in Relation to Communal Identity and the Moral Discourse of Ephesians*. Carlisle: HippoBooks. xvii, 279 pp. ISBN: 9781783687671. Approx. 380 ZAR (17,99 GBP). Paperback.

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In *Against Principalities and Powers*, Daniel Darko spotlights spiritual beings, which is a neglected subject in the interpretation of Ephesians. Three agendas characterize his central thesis: 1) using cosmology as a heuristic

tool of interpretation, 2) underscoring the *function* of spiritual beings instead of *describing* their ontology, and 3) underlining believers' ethical formation while being cognizant of the role played by spirit beings. Overall, this is a timely text offering a new reading of Ephesians—one characterized by respect for ancient cosmological worldviews, their role in hermeneutics, and their critical appropriation into contemporary contexts.

Far from the recycled arguments around authorship and provenance, Darko charts a new course in which he contests the Enlightenment's negative appraisal of the supernatural. Various Western interpretations are categorized as "cynical about the notion of transcendent realities and ambivalent to the idea of personal evil spirits" (p. 1). Essentially, Darko uses a trident-shaped argument, complementing his primary claim with two statements: 1) "the letter would espouse no cogent message, and its readers would find it incomprehensible if its spirit cosmology was fashioned in the framework of post-enlightenment artisans" (p. 2), and 2) "we should acknowledge post-enlightenment anachronism and endeavor to bring spirit cosmology to where it belongs in the study of Ephesians" (p. 5). While the philosophical and naturalistic distinctives of the *Aufklärung* are given some attention, Darko traces the traditions of interpretation that emanated from the Enlightenment project from its onset.

The introduction foregrounds a central argument sustained across the monograph's breadth. Key to this chapter is the identification of the state of scholarship on Ephesians as it relates to powers, spiritual beings, and cosmology. Here, readers like Berkhof (1962), Carr (1981), Forbes (2002), and Wink (1984) are identified as proponents of the demythologization agenda, wherein ambiguity, *vis-à-vis* powers and spiritual beings, is arbitrarily interpolated into their hermeneutical premise (pp. 7–10). Others like Arnold (1989) are given a favorable review as those who acknowledge the socio-ethical influence of reading *powers* from the personal plane and

their subsequent impression on the interpretation of the Pauline text (pp. 11–13). In mapping these two poles, Darko also identifies a nuanced position as propagated by Gombis (2010), who sees warfare language as a marker of Yahweh's *divine warrior* taxonomy. Furthermore, the author underlines Gombis's socio-political reading of powers in the cosmic realm—in contrast to the personal—deeming it inadequate in the believer's ethical formation (pp. 10–11). In all, this chapter identifies a gap in Ephesians research, one that signals the indispensable contribution of Greek, Roman, and Jewish cosmologies in excavating the author-intended meaning.

In chapter 2, entitled “Towards Greco-Roman Spirit Cosmology,” Darko frames the nexus between Greco-Roman cosmology, the collective moral tapestry, and human behavior. In contrast to post-enlightenment interpretive tendencies, the continuum between spiritual beings' activities and human behavior is accented, delimiting a different worldview than the naturalistic ideology that dominates the modern world. On this, he writes,

The decline of Christianity in the western hemisphere where members possess, produce, and control most of its resources and the growth of Christianity in the non-western world, where most of the worldviews of its adherents seem rather closer to those of the early Christians, begs answers to the legitimacy of post-enlightenment assumptions in biblical interpretation. (p. 20)

A curated survey of philosophy in antiquity follows where moral philosophy is neither relegated to a branch of a discipline nor treated piecemeal to proof-text narrow proclivities on the researcher's part—absent broad and nuanced engagement with the ancient texts. Instead, he proffers a robust description of the function of a cosmology tied to philosophy in antiquity.

Citing Epictetus, who considers philosophy and religious piety inextricable (p. 21), Darko supports the philosopher by engaging Plato, Xenocrates, Middle Platonism, Socrates, Plutarch, Dio Chrysostom, and Seneca (pp. 21–30). This section cascades into a depiction of cultic expressions in the broader context. In this depiction, overlapping matrices of politics, magic, and astrology etch a polytheistic image that affirms a universal assumption of spirit beings in all domains of existence. The chapter culminates in a discussion about Ephesus, Mediterranean deities, and clients of magical machinery. Darko's treatment of the *Ephesia Grammata*—a magic formula that individuals frequently invoked in Asia Minor—is pertinent to the central argument. Concerning the supplication of spirit beings for protection and malicious motivations, the author writes: “The notion that spiritual powers could be deployed to cause harm and/or alter fate by a second party's look of envy made sense within the prevailing worldview. The need to protect oneself from such malevolent acts was not tantamount to naïveté” (p. 51). Owing to the author's thick description, the reader anticipates fluid continuity between Asia Minor in Paul's day and the present African context(s)—on the continent and in the diaspora—allowing the text to be appropriately applied in contexts with a similar cosmology.

In chapter 3, entitled “Spiritual Beings in Judaism and Early Christianity,” the author surveys Judaism and Christianity's respective cosmologies. Beginning with monotheism as depicted in the Pentateuch, Darko reaches to Genesis 12 to demonstrate how “Hebrew identity has always been linked to the divine initiative and covenant relationship with Yahweh” (p. 56). Linked to this mode of divine initiative, the author surveys spirit cosmology across the Hebrew Bible, appealing to passages such as Job 1; 1 Samuel 16:14–23; 22:21–23, 28; 2 Kings 21:6; and Daniel 1.

Darko then focuses on the Second Temple period, tracing spiritual cosmology in post-exilic literature such as *the Martyrdom and Ascension of Isaiah*, *The Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs*, and Josephus. The author explains how Jewish mysticism thrived during the exile and the post-exilic period. He cites *Sefer HaRazim* and *Sefer Yetzira*, two mystic texts that capture the diasporic cultic *mélange*, dispelling any monolithic and reductionistic view of Judaism during this period. He writes, “This does not, however, suggest that all Jews dabbled in magic, but it points to shared spirit cosmology and fear of evil spiritual forces in the milieu” (p. 60).

Since early Christianity could be categorized as a subset of Judaism, Darko presents Christ and the church as stakeholders of a cosmology that coursed every crevice of the context from Jesus to Josephus and from Paul to Philo. The author presents a worldview predicated on the existence and influence of spirit beings. It is this worldview that he deems a crucial key to unlocking the meaning of Ephesians.

In chapter 4, Darko tackles the theme “Spirit Cosmology of Ephesians 1–3.” Where classic biblical commentary is governed by set questions that follow a familiar sequence, Darko’s commentary is a refrain that harkens back to his three-pronged central thesis of cosmology, the function of spirit beings, and the socio-ethical formation of believers through a cosmologically sensitive analysis. Although social identity inquiry has become a staple in biblical studies, the author underscores how most Ephesians scholars have neglected “the role of spiritual beings in the identity construction of Christ-followers in Ephesians.” Regarding the categories of cosmological studies, Darko provides three dimensions, “physical, social, and spatial,” and limits this chapter to the last element. In treating the *berakah* of Ephesians 1:3–14, emphasis is placed on the locative and spatial themes flowing from a shared understanding of how the world was envisioned. Terms such as

ἐπουράνιος¹ (heavenly places; 1:3, 20; 2:6; 3:10; 6:12), ἐν τοῖς ἐπουρανίοις ἐν Χριστῷ (in the heavenly places in Christ; 1:3, AT) and ἐν Χριστῷ (in Christ) are foregrounded to underline the letter’s cosmology. The author further underscores this point in his treatment of 1:21a, which reads, ὑπεράνω πάσης ἀρχῆς ἐξουσίας καὶ δυνάμεως καὶ κυριότητος καὶ παντὸς ὀνόματος (far above all rule and authority and power and dominion and above every name). From this, one notes how Darko underlines the universality of Christ’s triumph within a paradigm of ancient cosmology.

Writing about Ephesians 2:1–10, Darko says, “It takes divine intervention to deal with the spiritual entanglements, liberate and accord believers a new life in Christ” (p. 93). This premise makes plain the synonymy between sin and death within a locative frame. Here, moral deviancy and evil are presented as outflows of a malevolent reservoir located in τὸν ἄρχοντα τῆς ἐξουσίας τοῦ ἀέρος (the ruler of the power of the air; 2:2). Furthermore, the pre-conversion state is universalized for Jews and Gentiles before their inclusion in God’s family and is emphasized through a discussion of 2:5.

Arguing for structural continuity between 2:1–10 and 2:11–22, the author underlines the phrase ἄθεοι ἐν τῷ κόσμῳ (without God in the world; 2:12), distinguishing it from modern forms of atheism by citing a particularized aversion to specific deities—a point that must be set against the polytheistic context from whence Paul wrote. Darko argues that the apostle’s words are not a question of belief or non-belief but rather a qualitative interrogation of the very deities worshipped in context. For him, “the cause of social divisions is a lack of relationship with the true God”

¹ For this review, the Greek text is taken from the NA²⁸. Unless otherwise stated, English translations come from the NRSV. At times the designation AT (author’s translation) is provided to foreground my preferred English rendering of the Greek text.

(p. 103). Thus, the reconciliation of Jew and Gentile and the existence of the Christian community “heralds to the powers God’s power to overcome their efforts to engineer interethnic [*sic*] divisions” (p. 108).

The sovereignty of God captured in the prayer in 3:14–21 is framed in cosmic dimensions, demonstrating the necessity of a compatible worldview to accurately apprehend authorial intent. The chapter closes on a note of honor to explicate who God is in the Graeco-Roman context, in the ecclesial community, and in the cosmos.

In chapter 5, “Spiritual Beings in the Moral Discourse of Ephesians 4–6,” the author presents believers as products of “divine initiative and agenda of the cosmos” (p. 115). In keeping with his tripartite thesis, he blunts the goads of established interpretation by saying, “the notion of theology as a distinct category from ethics is anachronistic and informed by post-enlightenment categories of reasoning” (p. 116). Furthermore, he contests the puritanical tendency to separate 1–3 from 4–6 and advocates for “the interwoven nature of doctrine and praxis” in the two halves of Ephesians (p. 116). The author enumerates three views related to Christ’s actions in 4:7–16 and its appropriation of Psalm 68:18 (pp. 119–121). Despite one’s preferred interpretation, he resolves that the meaning can only be illumined by a premise that embraces a cosmology in which a divine actor “breaks into the realm of humanity to empower devotees for productive service” (p. 120). Darko anchors a Christocentric argument whereby identity and identification with Christ are products of *μανθάνω* (to learn) and *διδάσκω* (to teach). Here, both the substance and instruments of pedagogy are ascribed to the divine actor who is Christ. Because of Christ, the believer is empowered to shed vice and be clothed in godly virtue that is fashioned after the “likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness” (4:24b).

Darko then treats anger and falsehood from Greek and Jewish frames (pp. 124–128). He highlights the limits placed on emotion in the new society and how a lapse in checks can open a gangway to diabolic activity—one that is detrimental to the integrity of the individual and community. The focus then shifts to another member of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit, whom he observes through a pneumatocentric appraisal of moral decency (pp. 129–130). He also mentions the *virtue-vice* antithesis in 4:28–30, highlighting the shift to the first person singular. This he considers a grammatical marker that stresses deterrence in the discourse. Darko discusses the meaning and implications of belonging to the new community and what *ὡς τέκνα ἀγαπητὰ* (as beloved children; 5:1b) entails—a theme he links back to the paraenetic injunction in 4:1–3 (pp. 130–140). The author writes,

Ethical living is a natural outcome in a community whose members submit to the filling by/with the Spirit (5:18–21)... The Spirit’s empowerment should not be equated with ecstatic experiences such as speaking in tongues or prophecy, but an infilling that ultimately engenders suitable demeanor and good conduct. (p. 140)

Darko details the Ephesian *Haustafel* and Spiritual Warfare, respectively (pp. 140–159). Regarding the former, Darko appeals to Christology to ground the validity and coherence of 5:22–6:9. In discussing the term *κύριος* (lord) and the phrase *ὡς τῷ κυρίῳ* (as to the Lord; 5:22b), Darko says it “may be read as urging wives to submit to their husbands ‘as lords’ or referring to the lordship of Jesus Christ” (p. 142). He submits that his leanings are to the latter, owing to the universality of Christ’s authority in the new society’s worldview. Discussing the peroratio (6:10–20), Darko notes how the military metaphor “encapsulates the current standing of the readership with God relative to cosmic powers from whose dominion they are saved”

(p. 147). The armor rebuffs the agency and influence of διάβολος (the devil), and it proceeds from God. Paul calls it τὴν πανοπλίαν τοῦ θεοῦ (the whole armor of God, 6:11), underlining God's invested posture in believers' spiritual formation. Darko considers prayer in the Spirit a vehicle that transmits cosmic influence into the material, even to the point of protecting believers from malevolent spiritual forces, forming believers after the image of God, and establishing believers in the new society. In this mode, believers are to function by continuing in Spirit-empowered prayer that causes them to stand faithfully while simultaneously broadcasting the efficacy and effect of the gospel in all domains.

In chapter 6, the author pushes against “Western intellectual prowess ... the yardstick for deciphering NT texts or determining what qualifies as good scholarship” (pp. 163–164). This he does by drawing parallels between Asia Minor in Paul's day and the contemporary African context. Darko profiles the indissoluble link between religion and culture in Sub-Saharan Africa. He then ventures to elucidate how Africa's cosmological lucidity assumes the nomenclature for Supreme Divine Beings in the various beliefs south of the Sahara. Common to all cultures is the interpolation of terminology from traditional African belief systems into a Christian paradigm. This evinces itself in Bible translation, hymnody, and liturgy. The plurality of deities, the mediators that marshal exchange between the spiritual beings, and the identification of the Supreme Being as the ultimate paternal figure are discussed—underlining the continuity between cosmology in Asia Minor in Paul's day and contemporary Africa (pp. 169–172). Sections 6.4 and 6.5 imitate the thick descriptive work of the second and third chapters. The sole difference is the centrality of African cosmology. Darko treats conversion to Christ, ethical transformation, and paradigm shifts in the conceptualization of worldviews for believers in Africa (pp. 189–200). From the discussion of “Jesus Christ as Ancestor” to

“Christ as Priest” to “The Holy Spirit and the ‘spirits’ of Africa,” it is apparent that Darko identifies Christology and Pneumatology as salient themes in current scholarly discourse from Africa. The chapter ends with a statistical analysis of Spirit cosmology among Christians in Ghana, grounding the thesis of continuity between Asia Minor and Accra.

The concluding chapter ties together themes covered in the preceding sections. Here, Darko reiterates the imbalanced readings of Ephesians flowing from Occidental scholarship, the inextricable link between cosmology and religious belief, and Ephesians's moral injunctions born of “the moral qualities of God/Christ in kinship framework.” So, what shall we say about this monograph? I put it to the reader that Daniel Darko's *Against Principalities and Powers* is a monumental triumph; a herald to a new frontier in Ephesians research that invites the Global North and South to gaze into the sacred text tempered by frames that hail from an ancient world.

A critique of such an exceptional study may seem anticlimactic. Nevertheless, it is the nature of the academic enterprise to engender mutual advancement through dialectical engagement. So, one ventures gingerly into the next phase of the review to make minor observations of otherwise exceptional scholarship.

First, the framing of the monograph—beginning with the Greco-Roman and Second Temple periods—could be considered ill-disposed to the culmination and appropriation of the central argument in the African context. If sub-Saharan cosmology is positioned on a hermeneutical continuum with Asia Minor, then perhaps an epistemological reflection of African cosmology should meaningfully course the breadth of the monograph—albeit in a suspended state to allow the biblical text to speak on its own terms. While some may argue that this distorts the hermeneutical principle, it is undeniable that an exegete comes to the

text with questions. It is the weighting of these questions *vis-à-vis* the hermeneutical principle that should be evaluated if such an approach were to be adopted.

Second, the primary consideration of this work inevitably opens new reflections on methodologies from the Global South. In a context that is grappling with the biblical text—asking it various questions about historical injustices—the modes of reading are ever prone to competing and dissonant agendas that may or may not accord with authorial intent. A cosmologically attentive inquiry may afford exegetes the ability to treat and connect the worlds behind the text, the world of the text, and the contemporary world in a responsible way. Put plainly, Darko’s monograph could lay the foundations for methodological formulations that connect the Global South with the first century, even in the hermeneutical premise.

Third, the use of honor and shame in chapters 3 and 5 was somewhat disconnected from the work done by the Context Group (e.g., Barton 1993, Elliot 1993, Malina 1993, Steinberg 1998, Crook 2009) and proponents of social history. It goes without question that honor and shame are not monolithic across time and context, and qualifying the mode of their use delimits boundaries of meaning and form. This is particularly crucial to Darko’s appropriation point. Ghanaian honor conceptualization does not wholly translate into the Mediterranean context, and vice versa. Thus, to safeguard the reader from uncritical parallels, a nuanced articulation could have been motivated.

Finally, the uncritical use of *Jews* while referencing the pre-exilic period in chapter 3 may mildly taint the reconstruction of cosmology in antiquity. It may also blur the taxonomy of Israel’s identity before and after the exile.

While the observations proffered are worthy of consideration, the reader should by no means shift their attention from the quality of Darko’s

book. This is a *tour de force*—a harbinger of African biblical scholarship in the wings. I salute the author and heartily recommend the monograph.

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