

Author's Response: Against Principalities and Powers: Spiritual Beings in Relation to Communal Identity and the Moral Discourse of Ephesians.

Against Principalities and Powers endeavors to fill a lacuna in modern scholarship and augment modern contributions in the study of Ephesians by drawing attention to a prominent but neglected feature in the letter, namely spirit cosmology. It critiques 1) negative posturing towards spirit beings in the European post-enlightenment framework and 2) isolating (a) theological constructs about God, the Holy Spirit, and Jesus Christ on the one hand, and (b) discourses on principalities and powers, on the other, from one another. Apart from treating God, the Holy Spirit, and Jesus Christ as separate theological categories, prevailing scholarship on the *powers* usually utilizes lexical and source-critical approaches in a quest to understand their origins, usage, and nature in Greek, Roman, and Jewish antiquity as the backdrop for studies on Ephesians. It becomes apparent that post-enlightenment sensibilities and post-World War II existentialist pursuits underlie portraits of the powers as socio-political structures, religious institutions/structures, hypostasized or personified abstractions, angels, even as institutions inhabited and steered by evil spirits. The author

argues in favor of and concurs with, *inter alia*, Clint E. Arnold (1989) that in Ephesians the *powers* refers to personal evil spiritual beings and builds on that.

Against Principalities and Powers sets the agenda to move from isolated treatments of spirit cosmology to explore the wider function of spirit beings (God, Holy Spirit, Jesus Christ, and the powers) in the identity constructs and moral framework of Ephesians. The book surveys and reconstructs Greco-Roman and Second Temple Jewish spirit cosmology with particular attention to Asia Minor and sheds light on how certain parlance or argot in Ephesians may have been understood in its *milieu*. Two chapters demonstrate how the spirit cosmology in Asia Minor may aid our understanding of the division between the so-called (a) doctrinal/theological (chs. 1–3) and (b) paraenetic (chs. 4–6) sections of the letter. The findings lead to a better grasp and deeper appreciation of God's salvific work through Jesus Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit in the church. The essence of salvation—deliverance from the powers and their influence—becomes apparent. It is established that spiritual activity in human affairs was assumed in the cosmological and epistemological framework of Ephesians. Believers are blessed to have God, the Holy Spirit, and Jesus Christ on their side, even as the devil and his cohort employ various stratagems to oppose God's work in and through them. Christ's followers are not portrayed as victims, defenseless, or powerless against principalities and powers. Conversely, they are delivered, divinely enabled, and secure in an exalted position with Christ—as victors.

The book makes no claim to being an exact description of the reconstruction of the conceptualization of the world in antiquity but provides a proximate account that enables readers to imagine the worldview of Christ's followers as portrayed in Ephesians and in Asia Minor. Moreover, no claim is made to the effect that sub-Saharan African

worldviews, religious traditions, or cultures today are the same as that of the ancient world. Conversely, the chapter entitled “Parallels and Particulars” endeavors to concretize the Greco-Roman worldview with parallel concepts in Africa in the quest to make that which is otherwise abstract more relatable. The chapter also teases out features that need to be acknowledged to mitigate anachronistic assumptions or projections. As noted, the modern reader, African or Euro-American, “can only surmise, imagine and assume” how the early Christians received or implemented the contents of the letter since all we have is the letter (p. 208). Moreover, it is indicated that “the post-colonial quest to reimagine Jesus Christ or the Holy Spirit analogously as ancestors and fetish priests is absent in early Christianity” (p. 211). In other words, African beliefs in spirit beings such as ancestors were known in the ancient world, but early Christ-followers did not equate their perceived presence to the work of the Holy Spirit or left traces of anything resembling what is designated as *ancestral Christology* in some quarters in our time.

African philosophy and religious traditions are intertwined. Chapter six presents the African epistemological framework in which spirit beings are perceived to be active in every sphere of life. If the reviewer finds the treatment insufficient, then the author concedes and regrets any additional evidence that was not accessible to him or adduced in the discussion. However, it is doubtful that such material on African philosophy (realizing regional differences) would contradict any of the findings in chapter six. Moreover, the work appeals to Mediterranean honor and shame sensibilities only where relative lexemes are employed in Ephesians, specifically in the kinship framework. It should come as a surprise if the Context Group on honor and shame have gathered any evidence to belie the findings and usage in this book—literal, material, numismatic, or archaeological evidence.

Finally, an African hermeneutical approach that attends to the historical, cultural, and religious backgrounds (looking behind the text) is likely to lead to an appreciation of what we *find* in the sacred text of the early Christians. As shown in this book, such a methodology would enrich the African church today and allow for reasonable collaboration with non-African interlocutors. This author does not, however, object to post-colonial readings (looking in front of the text) in academic discourse. Such methods often remind scholars about deliberate assumptions and inadvertent presuppositions that scholars bring into the interpretative task, though their shortfalls cannot be overlooked. Sometimes, the distance between the popular quest to study the Bible from one’s social location and apply the Bible to Christian living—at least in West Africa—and what some post-colonial readers claim to be doing subjectively to aid Africans as the grassroots, is rather wide. A new form of colonialism ensues where African scholars evoke grassroots sentiments, generate unrelatable ideologies to Africans in the mainstream and cloth them in reader-response oppositional and nationalistic frames to align with certain ideological readers in the interpretive discourse. Post-colonial hermeneutics in Africa may still read from *in front of* the text to identify, highlight, and address Africa’s ecclesial and socio-political needs for the edification of Africans. The book under review does not however employ a post-colonial ideological framework.

In sum, “the study aims to augment prevailing scholarship by arguing that we should acknowledge post-enlightenment anachronism and endeavor to bring spirit cosmology to where it belongs in the study of Ephesians” (p. 5). That was the aim—hopefully the book met its goal.

Works Cited

Arnold, Clinton E. 1989. *Power and Magic: The Concept of Power in Ephesians in Light of Its Historical Context*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

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