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


Daniel K. Darko1
Taylor University, IN
dan.darko@taylor.edu

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1 Dr. Daniel K. Darko has a Ph.D. in New Testament Studies from King’s College, London, and is the Dean for Global Engagement, Executive Director of the Spencer Center for Global Engagement and Professor of Biblical Studies at Taylor University, Upland, IN. He was the inaugural Wilson-Ockenga Professor of Biblical Studies, and Director of Church Relations at Gordon College, MA. A native of Ghana, Dan served in executive and pastoral roles in Ghana, Croatia, England and United States. He is the Executive Director of Africa Potential and a member of ‘Association Directors’ of Vision New England and author of *No Longer Living as the Gentiles* (T&T Clark, 2008), among other publications.