

A Biblical Response to the African View of the Spiritual Realm

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Abstract

This article explores the African Traditional Religious (ATR) worldview regarding the spiritual realm and offers a biblical response through the apostle Paul's engagement with the Ephesian context. The ATR framework presents a hierarchically ordered spiritual universe governed by the Supreme Being and mediated through divinities, spirits, ancestors, and mystical powers—often manipulated through ritual specialists. These beliefs are not dismissed but taken seriously as a framework that reveals deep spiritual concerns for power, safety, and protection. By drawing parallels between African spiritual assumptions and the Ephesian cultural context, particularly in Acts 19 and the Epistle to the Ephesians, the article demonstrates how Paul affirms the reality of spiritual powers while proclaiming Christ's supremacy and victory over them. The gospel offers not only deliverance from fear but also a new spiritual identity that empowers believers to stand firm against evil. In this way, ATR worldview is not obliterated but transformed by the redemptive power of the risen and exalted Christ.

Keywords: *African Traditional Religion (ATR), Spiritual realm, power, gospel, Paul, Ephesians*

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1. Introduction

The communication of the gospel in Africa requires a deep understanding of African Traditional Religion (ATR), which shapes the worldview of many communities. As Adrian Hastings puts it, "The way of teaching any set of ideas must depend upon the context within which they will be understood".¹ He acknowledges the fact that a message is not automatically understood in the same categories as the communicator; the one receiving the communication has different categories of thought that determine what is understood. He is making a case for the need to better understand the African worldview to better evangelize Africans. There is a need for Christianity to address and engage the traditional mind to renew and transform it.²

¹ Adrian Hastings, "Christianity and African Cultures," *New Blackfriars* 48, no. 559 (1966): 127.

² Yusufu Turaki, "The Christianization of African Traditional Religions," *International Review of Mission* 108, no. 2 (2019): 352.

Often it has been taken that African Traditional Religion (ATR) ought to be completely disregarded, with everything it represents being cast out so that the gospel can be introduced. But as Hastings argues, this is unwise and often leads to shallow faith or a twisted understanding of the gospel.³ Rather than dismiss ATR outright, Christian theology must engage its categories meaningfully. This paper examines the African view of the spiritual realm and responds through Paul's encounter with spiritual power in Ephesus (Acts 19) and his theological reflections in Ephesians. The goal is to show that the gospel does not negate the African concern for power and safety but fulfills and transforms it in Christ.

2. The African View of the Spiritual Realm

Africans are "notoriously religious". John Mbiti continues to note that this religion permeates into all departments of life. Their view of life does not see a distinct separation between the spiritual and the physical. Whatever is perceived in the material world is seen to have a spiritual cause, especially misfortunes and afflictions.⁴ This, however, does not mean that there is no distinct understanding of the spiritual realm. To use the language of Osadolor Imasogie, the African understanding of religion is understood as a "bureaucratic monotheism". In this understanding, the Supreme Being alone is understood and worshipped as God, but under him are other spiritual beings and under them, man.⁵

These spiritual beings are not self-existent but are made by the Supreme Being. They comprise divinities, ordinary spirits, and the living dead/ancestors.⁶ There are specialists within the community that act as intermediaries between man and the spirit world. These comprise medicine men, mediums, diviners, rainmakers, seers, priests, and rulers. This then reveals the hierarchy that exists within ATR: The Supreme Being is sovereign, under Him are the divinities, then ordinary spirits, under them the living dead/ancestors, then the religious specialists, and finally the ordinary man.

This understanding of the hierarchy that exists within ATR is better understood from the African understanding of the Supreme Being. He is understood to be the Eternal Creator who is transcendent and immanent. His transcendence and immanence are "paradoxically complementary", revealing at once that He is both far above man, but present with him.⁷ However, his immanence is most represented by the other spiritual beings under His rule. It is these spiritual beings who bridge the gap between the Supreme Being and man.⁸

Before looking at each spiritual being in turn, it is worth noting that within the spiritual realm, some mystical powers or forces can be manipulated for good or bad. In some communities, this

³ Hastings, "Christianity and African Cultures," 127.

⁴ John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, Text, Anchor Books. (New York: Anchor Books, 1970), 1, 252.

⁵ Osadolor Imasogie, "African Traditional Religion and Christian Faith," *Review & Expositor* 70, no. 3 (August 1, 1973): 289.

⁶ Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 97.

⁷ Emeka Ekeke and Chike Ekeopara, "God, Divinities and Spirits in African Traditional Religious Ontology," *American Journal of Social and Management Sciences* 1 (December 1, 2010): 211–213.

⁸ Hastings, "Christianity and African Cultures," 132–133; Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 105.

is seen within the context of the spirits, while in others, these are outside such categories but belong within a part of the spiritual realm.

Divinities

These are those spiritual beings that hierarchically come under the Supreme Being. They are also known as “gods”, “demigods” or “nature spirits”. They are said to be “personifications of God’s activities and manifestations, of natural phenomena and objects”.⁹ They are those spiritual beings created by the Supreme Being and are given functions to perform to execute His will, often associated with natural phenomena. This means that they are not independent beings, but derive their existence and power from the Supreme Being. They act as intermediaries between man and the Supreme Being, becoming “channels” through which worship is offered to the Supreme Being.¹⁰

There tend to be as many divinities as there are human needs, activities, and experiences, for example, divinities for wealth, fertility, iron, medicine/health, and death.¹¹ These divinities are found especially among West African tribes like the Yoruba and Ashanti. The Yoruba are said to have one thousand seven hundred divinities who also follow a hierarchy, with some like *Orisa-nula* being a “supreme divinity”, while *Sango* is simply the divinity of thunder and lightning.¹²

Spirits

Spirits are those spiritual beings considered the “common populace” of spiritual beings, under the divinities but above man in the hierarchy. Their origin comprises both creation as a “race” of their own and as “what remains of human beings after they die”.¹³ They tend to be abstract, immaterial, and incorporeal, though they can “assume different dimensions whenever they wish to be seen”.¹⁴

They are the next stage up from the living dead and have therefore lost their personhood – personality, name, and identity. They have moved from being known and remembered as a person, to becoming a thing, an “it”, a spirit. Because of this, they are considered strangers and are therefore feared. They are said to dwell in the same geographical area as the living but are invisible. They are considered as being powerful and can be manipulated by the right kind of human specialists.

Since spirits are invisible and unknown, the best course of action is to keep away from them. Frequent encounters with spirits are taken as a bad omen. Spirits are also known to possess people and are linked with evil, misfortune, and illness. Whilst some specialists can solicit to be possessed (like mediums), unsolicited possession often leads to bad effects, both on the possessed and those around them. Where spirits are seen to endanger society, there is often a

⁹ Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 98.

¹⁰ Ekeke and Ekeopara, “God, Divinities and Spirits in African Traditional Religious Ontology,” 213–215.

¹¹ Ibid., 213.

¹² Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 99.

¹³ Ibid., 102.

¹⁴ Ekeke and Ekeopara, “God, Divinities and Spirits in African Traditional Religious Ontology,” 215–216.

ceremony to drive them away.¹⁵ Harmful spirits are often associated with magic and witchcraft, but we will look at that as a category on its own. Some tribes however, like the Ankore, have guardian spirits that are benevolent and helpful to those of their lineage groups¹⁶, guiding one's destiny in life.¹⁷

The Living Dead

These are also referred to as “ancestors” or “ancestral spirits”. They are those who have recently died – moving from being men to being spirits.¹⁸ They are those going back about five generations back from the living generation and are still remembered by the living. They are man's closest link to the spirit world since they are still known to man and taken to still be invested in the goings on of their families. This makes them the best intermediaries between man and the Supreme Being and are therefore consulted for the everyday needs men have. It is therefore important to remain in the good graces of these ancestors. This happens by following the “proper” burial rites, pouring libations, and making food offerings when appropriate. Failure to do this would invite the wrath of the ancestors, experienced through misfortune and affliction.

Mbiti also notes that when the last living person who remembers a living dead also dies, the process of death is complete for that particular living dead. He moves from the living dead to the spirits; he stops being a “he” and becomes an “it”.¹⁹

Mystical Power, Magic, Witchcraft and Sorcery²⁰

In this category is the belief in powers or forces that are often attributed to the spirits, under the manipulation of certain specialists, through the use of magic, witchcraft, and sorcery. Mbiti emphasizes that this is not fiction, but reality that is experienced by many, especially those who live in rural villages.²¹ Lugira adds that these forces/powers do not necessarily lie in the spiritual realm or the human, but somewhere in between.²²

Whatever these powers are, the aim is to manipulate them for practical purposes. This manipulation is what takes the form of magic, witchcraft, or sorcery. While magic can be perceived as “good” or “bad”, often witchcraft and sorcery are taken to be bad. Witches/wizards are the specialists of witchcraft and are taken to be involved in using mystical power to harm others.²³ Sorcerers are said to be the most feared and hated members of the community because they are said to employ mystical power and poison to harm others. Wherever misfortune,

¹⁵ Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 102–107.

¹⁶ Ibid., 113.

¹⁷ Ekeke and Ekeopara, “God, Divinities and Spirits in African Traditional Religious Ontology,” 217.

¹⁸ Aloysius Muzzanganda Lugira, *African Traditional Religion*, 3rd ed., World religions (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 2009), 50.

¹⁹ Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 109.

²⁰ Ibid., 253; This is the title of chapter 16.

²¹ Ibid., 258.

²² Lugira, *African Traditional Religion*, 96.

²³ Ekeke and Ekeopara, “God, Divinities and Spirits in African Traditional Religious Ontology,” 216–217; Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, act 261.

disease, tragedy, or any unhappy mystery occurs, the typical African understanding is that it is “caused” by someone directly or through the use of mystical power. This is what results in fear and a sense of not being completely “safe”.²⁴

This is where good magic comes in. Often, it is brokered by specialists like medicine men, diviners, mediums, and rainmakers. They are called upon to manipulate mystical powers for the well-being of their community in cases like the treatment of diseases, counteracting misfortunes, and warding off or destroying evil “power” or witchcraft. This can also be done for individuals. It is symbolized by certain physical articles worn or kept by people or by visible signs or rituals. For example, in some communities, babies are protected by having coils on their necks or wrists or by having their hair shaved by a certain person (like their grandmother) or in a particular style.²⁵

Magic “makes the unknown less threatening and provides psychological reassurances for potentially difficult or dangerous situations.”²⁶ This points out the great issue within the African mindset when it comes to thought about the spiritual realm: the desire for power to keep one safe from evil. ATR has a dominant “spirit-power worldview”. It is the pursuit of power that defines life and this is what magic and good relations with the spirits and the Supreme Being amount to.²⁷ This is the crux of what the gospel must answer. The Christian message must seek to interact with the African worldview on the issue of the reality of the spiritual realm and how power is acquired for protection, safety, and assurance.

3. A Christian Response: Paul and the Ephesians

The reality is that the gospel has an answer to the African worldview on the spiritual realm, especially the desire for power for protection, safety, and assurance. While there may be many avenues to investigate this answer, this author will focus on Paul and his interactions with the Ephesian Christians. We will begin by looking at the similarities between the Ephesian and African worldviews and then consider Paul’s response to this worldview through his initial mission as recorded in Acts 19, followed by his letter to the Ephesian church.

Response #1: Acts 19:11-20

Let’s begin by considering Paul’s missionary activity in Ephesus as recorded by Luke in Acts 19:11-20. From the happenings within these verses, we can draw out certain pointers to the worldview held by the Ephesians. We also gain insight into the interaction of the Christian message with this worldview and get some preliminary answers to it.

Firstly, we see that there were evil spirits that possessed people. Among the miracles that Paul was performing was the exorcising of evil spirits (19:12). Secondly, exorcisms existed within the Ephesian community, especially among the Jews, such that there were “itinerant Jewish exorcists” (19:13)²⁸. Thirdly, we see that there was the clear pursuit of the magic arts and that this was lucrative business (19:19). It is not difficult to see the similarities with the African

²⁴ Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 262.

²⁵ Ibid., 258–259.

²⁶ Lugira, *African Traditional Religion*, 98.

²⁷ Turaki, “The Christianization of African Traditional Religions,” 357–359.

²⁸ Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture references are from the English Standard Version (ESV)

worldview already. Spirit possession and the need to drive away such spirits as well as the pursuit of magic arts are indications that interaction with the spiritual realm was likely ordinary to the Ephesians.²⁹

However, the encounter between this worldview and the Christian message is clear. Paul as a proclaimer of the gospel (see 19:8-10), demonstrates the power of this message and the Christian God, through the miracles that he does (19:11). There is so much power in the gospel that items that the proclaimer has touched can be used to perform miracles far away (19:13). This power gets the attention of those involved in the exorcising of spirits so that they “invoke” the name of Jesus Christ in exorcisms, “I adjure you by the Jesus whom Paul proclaims.” (19:13). The formula points to their confidence being in Paul’s Jesus!

More to this, when the spirit of the possessed speaks it acknowledges the reality of Jesus’ power and by extension of Jesus’ servant, but not of the powerless ‘exorcists’, “Jesus I know, and Paul I recognize, but who are you?” (19:15). This encounter, as well as the beating these seven men receive, serve to create “fear” among the people and to cause Jesus’ name to be “extolled” (19:16-17). It was clear to the people that Jesus’ name was to be highly regarded because it was powerful. Those who believed the gospel message went ahead to confess and reveal what they were doing before: pursuing the magic arts. In response to the gospel, they went ahead to forsake these previous ways by burning the books associated with magic though they were highly priced (19:18-19). They had found real power and could therefore forsake what was not.

In this first response, we see that in a context involving a very similar worldview to the African view of the spiritual realm with spirit possession and magic, the gospel is proclaimed and demonstrated in power over evil spirits and magic. It is the Lord Jesus Christ who is seen and who acts supremely defeating evil spirits and giving the security and assurance magic cannot. The Christian message acknowledges and answers the questions of their worldview by showing Christ as the Supreme Ruler over this spiritual realm, whose name and power overcome evil mightily. Luke’s sectional break is appropriate, “So the word of the Lord continued to increase and prevail mightily.” (19:20, emphasis mine).

Response #2: Ephesians 1:19-23; 2:6; 6:10-12

But this is not Paul’s only interaction with the Ephesians. He later writes the church in Ephesus a letter.³⁰ In it, he returns to their understanding of the spiritual realm and reveals the gospel realities that ought to transform their mindset and worldview. He starts in 1:19-23. This section is part of his prayer for the church starting from 1:15. Paul prays that they would understand the gospel realities concerning the hope, riches, and power they have in Christ. This power is worth knowing because it is “immeasurably great”, it is “towards us who believe” and according to the working of God’s “great might”. To those with a clear understanding of the powers within the spiritual realm, this is sure to get their attention.

²⁹ John R. W. Stott, *God’s New Society: The Message of Ephesians*, The Bible Speaks Today (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 1979), 263.

³⁰ Charles H. Talbert, *Ephesians and Colossians*, ed. Mikeal Parsons and Charles Talbert, Illustrated edition. (Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Academic, 2007), 7–11; Authorship of the letter is disputed, but this author credits Paul as the author of the letter since it starts, “Paul, an apostle of Christ by the will of God” (1:1).

Where has God ‘decisively demonstrated’ divine power?³¹ Not in natural phenomena like thunder and lightning or mighty waterfalls, but in the seemingly ‘quiet’ resurrection and exaltation of His Son, Jesus Christ (1:20). It is the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, triumphant and eternal that represents God’s mightiest act; the showing of His ‘muscle’. In the resurrection, God defeats evil and death, the things man fears most, and gives victory to His Son. His Son not only rises from the dead but is also exalted – “seated” at God’s right hand “in the heavenly places”.

His “seating” gives the picture of his ruling as a king on a throne. The throne is not of an earthly kingdom but of the whole realm of existence over which God rules. Note the place of his enthronement: “the heavenly places”, the spiritual realm – the locality of the spiritual beings. Stott notes that Christ is here “promoted to the place of supreme honour [sic] and executive authority” as underlined by the expression of his exaltation “far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come” (1:21). Stott adds that this use of ‘rule and authority and power and dominion’ points to all “spiritual hosts of wickedness” – principalities and powers as well as all that exists in creation. It covers the “material universe but also and especially all intelligent beings good and evil, angelic and demonic, who people it”. Christ “reigns in absolute supremacy” over all intelligent beings and creation; everything is in subjection to him.³²

How is this power “towards” believers? As Christ is risen and exalted with “all things under his feet”, God gives him as “head over all things to the church, which is his body” (1:22-23a). The Ruler of the universe is given as the Ruler of the Church. The Church, Christians, are therefore ruled by him who rules overall and they, therefore, need not fear any threats as they are under the feet of the One who rules them.

This picture is however deepened in the next chapter where Paul reveals that dead sinners are saved by being “made alive together with Christ”, raised with him, and “seated with him in the heavenly realms” (2:5-6). The picture in these two verses is that of a “Christian’s spiritual position”. Salvation entails being joined to Christ, sharing in his resurrection and enthronement, and reigning with him over all evil powers. Talbert continues to note that this points to the believers’ “two-dimensional” life, living on this earth but participating in the heavenlies in dependence on the Supreme Christ, being able then to resist evil powers. Believers can live now in Christ’s resurrection power.³³

This view is solidified at the end of the letter in 6:10-13, “Finally, be strong in the Lord and the strength of his might. Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil. For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. Therefore, take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand firm.”

These verses take us back to the reality of God’s demonstration of power detailed in 1:19-23 and how we are to apply it: to strengthen ourselves in God’s strength to overcome evil powers.

³¹ Stott, *God’s New Society*, 60.

³² *Ibid.*, 59–61.

³³ Talbert, *Ephesians and Colossians*, 61–63.

Paul explicitly points to the realities of the spiritual realm that the Ephesians would know: there are evil powers out to fight against believers. The response is not to be fear but resistance³⁴, enabled by the working of God's great power.

Believers face real spiritual enemies, which are “demonic . . . cosmic intelligence”.³⁵ Stott adds that they are powerful, wicked, and cunning, and we are inadequate in ourselves to face them. Instead, the believer's hope lies in God:

Only the power of God can defend and deliver us from the might, the evil, and the craft of the devil. True, the principalities and powers are strong, but the power of God is stronger. It is his power that raised Jesus Christ from the dead and enthroned him in the heavenly places, and which has raised us from the death of sin and enthroned us with Christ. True, it is in those same heavenly places, in the same unseen world, that the principalities and powers were working (verse 12). But they were defeated at the cross and are now under Christ's feet and ours.³⁶

Believers need not fear the realization of demonic, cosmic enemies. There is God-given power available to guarantee their victory. Confidence should not be in ourselves but in God. Yet, the directive is that we are to take on this power – believe it and actively live it out. Armor is available, but we must put it on. The components of the armor detailed in 6:14-18, detail the different components of the gospel centered on Christ that we are to believe and be “empowered”³⁷ by in everyday life. When we have done this, we will “stand”, firm and unyielding to the enemies and their schemes.³⁸

In this way, Paul gives a solid response to the Ephesians view of the spiritual realm. Though spiritual powers were real and malevolent, God has worked mightily in the resurrection and exaltation of His Son, defeating evil and death and putting them and their agents under Jesus' feet. Believers are joined to Christ and enjoy the safety and power of his resurrection and exaltation through putting on, by faith, the gospel armor.

4. Implications for African Christianity and Conclusion

How can we apply this understanding to everyday life? The African believer is called to think differently about the spiritual realm. This renewal of worldview means rejecting syncretism and reframing old assumptions in light of the gospel's truth about Christ's cosmic lordship. This will mean spiritual confidence and freedom. Believers are no longer under the fear of evil spirits, ancestral wrath, or mystical forces. They are spiritually seated with Christ (Eph. 2:6) and share in His authority, which brings confidence, peace, and assurance in the face of spiritual threats. The source of power and protection will no longer be in traditional rituals, charms, or diviners, but trust in the power of Christ's resurrection and the armor of God (Eph. 6:10–18). Spiritual safety is found in a relationship with Christ, not religious manipulation.³⁹

³⁴ Ibid., 158.

³⁵ Stott, *God's New Society*, 263.

³⁶ Ibid., 266.

³⁷ Talbert, *Ephesians and Colossians*, 162–163.

³⁸ Ibid., 161, 166.

³⁹ Imasogie, “African Traditional Religion and Christian Faith,” 284.

A renewed worldview will also impact how African Christians engage in worship and mission. Worship becomes centered on Christ, not intermediaries. There is no need for mediators, believers can go directly to God through Jesus Christ. Believers are also equipped to engage others respectfully and persuasively, showing that the gospel doesn't ignore African concerns—it answers them fully.

Christianity doesn't dismiss the spiritual realm as imaginary. It affirms that unseen powers exist—but insists that Christ is Lord over all of them. This provides a bridge for gospel witness to those who fear or venerate spirits. The gospel offers liberation from this fear through the power and love of Christ, who has triumphed over every spiritual force; real power lies in Christ alone, who conquered death itself. The unbeliever is invited into a new spiritual position—no longer under oppression or uncertainty, but united with Christ, ruling with Him in the heavenly realms (Eph. 2:6). It is an invitation to a new way of life marked by dignity, confidence, and hope.

In conclusion, we have seen that ATR affirms many spiritual realities found in Scripture, but leaves the human heart vulnerable to fear and uncertainty. In Christ, these realities are reinterpreted through the lens of victory, authority, and union with the risen Lord. The gospel offers what ATR seeks: lasting protection, assured power, and peace through a relationship with the sovereign Christ. This is not a denial of the African worldview but its renewal in light of God's ultimate revelation.

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