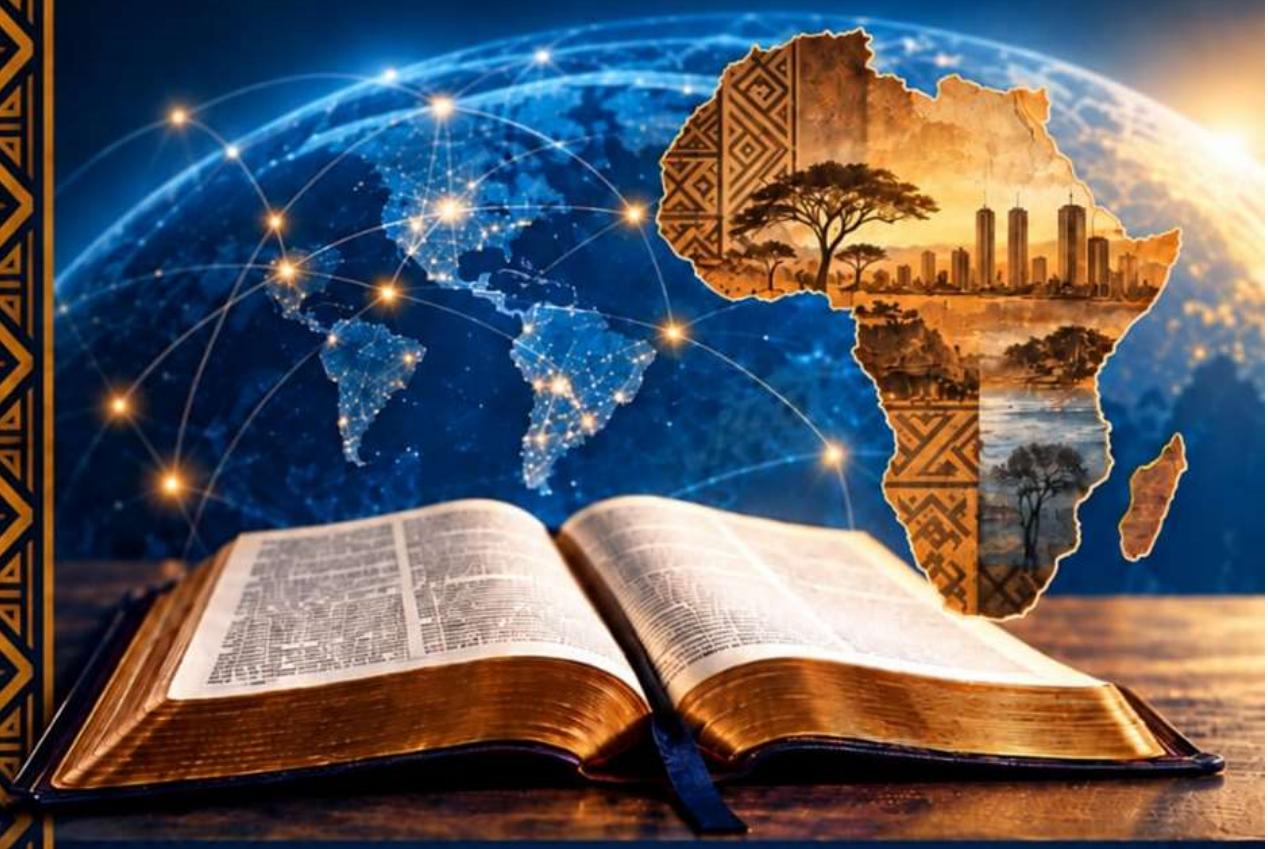
BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION, AFRICAN IDENTITY, AND EMERGING GLOBAL REALITIES



EDITED BY

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FOREWORD

The publication titled "Biblical Interpretation, African Identity, and Emerging Global Realities" with forty-two well-articulated papers marks a significant scholarly outcome of the Department of Religious Studies, Babcock University, Nigeria. Conceived as an international and interdisciplinary engagement, this volume brought together scholarly perspectives from within and outside Africa and from diverse fields across the humanities, the social sciences, and the management sciences, and how they interact with modern technology. The volume preserves intellectual encounter while extending its conversation to a wider academic community.

At the centre of this collection is a question of enduring importance: how is Scripture to be interpreted, appropriated, and lived within African contexts that are themselves negotiating rapid social, cultural, technological, political, and ethical change? The title rightly refuses to isolate biblical interpretation from the worlds in which readers actually live. It recognises that interpretation is undertaken by communities shaped by language, memory, heritage, migration, religious plurality, gender relations, economic pressures, public institutions, digital cultures, and changing patterns of belonging. The task, therefore, is neither to dissolve Scripture into culture nor to treat culture as irrelevant to interpretation, but to pursue disciplined scholarship that attends responsibly to text, context, history, faith, and lived experience.

The essays engage contextual biblical hermeneutics, African cultural worldviews, and biblical ethics, examining the interpretation and re-reading of Scripture within diverse African cultural and religious contexts. They further explore Christianity, African Traditional Religion, migration, and the politics of identity and belonging, highlighting the complex intersections of faith, culture, mobility, and the negotiation of African Christian identities. Other contributions address Scripture, ethics, human flourishing, and emerging social and digital realities, bringing biblical and theological reflection into conversation with contemporary ethical, social, economic, technological, and human well-being concerns. The volume also examines mission, ministry, African heritage, and interreligious engagement in a changing world, considering how Christian communities engage historical legacies, religious plurality, and evolving missional and ministerial contexts. Together, these trajectories demonstrate the expanding range of questions with which contemporary biblical, theological, and religious scholarship must engage in Africa and beyond.

A particular strength of this collection lies in its location of Africa not merely as an object of theological description, but as a living intellectual context and a serious interlocutor in global scholarship. African histories, social realities, cultural resources, religious encounters, and contemporary anxieties provide fertile ground for fresh questions and critical reflection. At the same time, the global horizon of the volume prevents interpretive insularity. Questions of migration, digital transformation, ecological responsibility, economic life, public justice, wellbeing, and religious coexistence are simultaneously African and global. The volume therefore embodies scholarship that is contextually rooted without being provincially confined.

The essays do not speak with one methodological voice, nor should they. Their value lies partly in the disciplined plurality of perspectives represented. Exegetical, historical, theological, ethical, cultural, and interdisciplinary approaches illuminate different dimensions of the central theme and demonstrate the productive possibilities of conversation across disciplinary boundaries. Such

plurality also places a responsibility upon every contributor and reader: claims must be argued carefully, sources handled critically, cultural assumptions examined, and conclusions presented with intellectual humility. In this sense, the volume is not merely for the presentation of finished positions, but for rigorous dialogue, contestation, refinement, and learning.

For scholars, students, ministers, educators, and researchers, these contributions should therefore be read as more than a record of academic intellectualism. They constitute a resource for continuing inquiry into the relationship between Scripture, African identity, and rapidly emerging realities. They invite further investigation into how ancient texts speak within contemporary communities, how African interpretive resources can enrich global theological discourse, and how religious scholarship can contribute responsibly to questions of justice, peace, human flourishing, technological change, ecological care, mental wellbeing, and mission.

This volume is consequently both a milestone and an invitation. It points to a continuing scholarly task. The questions gathered here are inexhaustible but rather establish a platform for sustained research, interdisciplinary engagement, and constructive dialogue. It is hoped that these forty-two perspectives will stimulate new questions, deepen existing conversations, and strengthen the contribution of African-centred biblical and religious scholarship to the academy, the church, and the wider human community.

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PREFACE

Biblical Interpretation, African Identity, and Emerging Global Realities brings together studies concerned with how Scripture is understood and lived within African societies undergoing profound change. Its point of departure is the recognition that biblical interpretation carries consequences for cultural belonging, moral judgement, communal life, and Christian witness. The volume invites readers to consider how careful engagement with the biblical text can illuminate African experiences while addressing questions arising from an increasingly interconnected world.

The opening contributions examine African hermeneutical trajectories, their place in global theological discourse, and their dialogue with Seventh-day Adventist approaches to Scripture. Through contextual readings of Pauline writings and the Gospels, they explore the relationship between interpretive method and contemporary application. The discussion extends to African proverbs, oral traditions, discipline, and moral formation, drawing attention to the ways inherited cultural resources shape the reception and transmission of biblical teaching.

Questions of identity and belonging run throughout the collection. Studies of Pauline identity and Jesus' understanding of family open a conversation about being Christian within African cultural communities. Comparative engagements with African traditional religion examine spiritual warfare, ancestral consciousness, offerings, and religious practices, raising questions about faithful contextualisation. Migration and diaspora further complicate belonging, bringing biblical narratives into dialogue with displacement, safe migration, neocolonialism, and the decolonisation of Christianity.

The volume also addresses the public and personal implications of interpretation. Its contributions examine gender, marriage, and sexual ethics; reconciliation, governance, and public trust; religious tensions, violence, and peacebuilding; and economic conduct and human flourishing. Attention to social media and indigenous cognitive orientation connects these concerns with changing digital cultures. The substantial treatment of mental health considers chaplaincy, workplace well-being, screen culture, ministerial burnout, and the relationship between faith and therapy. Together, these themes locate biblical reflection within the pressures and responsibilities of everyday life.

The concluding sections turn to the transmission of faith, interreligious dialogue, and mission in a changing world. They consider Christian memory across generations, scriptural reasoning in plural societies, and practical questions concerning membership retention, women's participation, ministerial behaviour, prophetic counsel, devotion, service, and clerical exclusivism. The prominence of Adventist perspectives gives the collection a discernible ecclesial location while sustaining engagement with wider African Christian and scholarly conversations.

As an edited collection, this book brings distinct questions and approaches into a shared field of inquiry. Its coherence lies in the continuing conversation between Scripture, African experience, and contemporary change. We offer it to scholars, students, pastors, and other readers seeking thoughtful engagement with these intersections. Our hope is that it will encourage interpretations attentive to the biblical text, discerning towards cultural assumptions, and responsive to the people and communities whom theological scholarship is called to serve.

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SECTION A

CONTEXTUAL BIBLICAL HERMENEUTICS, AFRICAN CULTURAL WORLDVIEWS, AND BIBLICAL ETHICS

CHAPTER 1

AFRICAN BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION: TRAJECTORIES, GLOBAL AND EMERGING REALITIES, AND A DIALOGUE WITH SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTIST HERMENEUTICS

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Abstract

This study examines the historical development, major trajectories, and contemporary relevance of African Biblical Interpretation (ABI), with particular attention to its dialogue with Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) hermeneutics. ABI has developed as a contextual approach that foregrounds African identity, culture, communal experience, and socio-historical realities in the interpretation of Scripture. Employing an integrative literature review, the study draws on relevant books, peer-reviewed journal articles, book chapters, theological literature, and selected Seventh-day Adventist documents and scholarship. The literature is analysed through historical, thematic, and comparative-dialogical approaches to trace ABI's development, identify its major interpretive trajectories and emerging global concerns, and examine areas of convergence, divergence, tension, and potential mutual enrichment with SDA hermeneutical principles. The study identifies inculturation and contextual hermeneutics, ordinary-reader and community-based interpretation, identity and belonging, and liberation, gender, and postcolonial readings as significant trajectories within ABI. It further demonstrates that globalisation, migration, digital technology, and ecological challenges are reshaping African biblical interpretation and raising new questions concerning interpretive authority, contextual relevance, and theological responsibility. The study argues that constructive dialogue between ABI and SDA hermeneutics can combine ABI's sensitivity to context, community, culture, and lived experience with Adventism's emphasis on the authority and unity of Scripture, the historical-grammatical method, and eschatological hope. It concludes that such dialogue can contribute to a biblically grounded, culturally responsive, ethically engaged, and globally relevant approach to biblical interpretation in Africa.

Keywords: *African Biblical Interpretation, Seventh-day Adventist hermeneutics, African identity, contextual hermeneutics, biblical interpretation, global realities.*

INTRODUCTION

African biblical interpretation (ABI) has emerged as a significant contextual approach within the broader field of biblical hermeneutics and has shifted significantly since the 1960s. Until then, biblical interpretation, especially in sub-Saharan Africa, was heavily influenced by Western historical experiences and epistemological frameworks. African biblical interpretation reflects not only geographical variation within biblical studies but also the discipline's transformation. This methodology rests not only on intellectual exercise but also on a moral and communal act of transformation, identity, and belonging, enabling African readers to encounter Scripture not as cultural outsiders but as participants in the biblical story and its interpretation.[1] In response to the danger of homogenising theology within a Westernised interpretive framework, ABI claims to offer the possibility of African participation in emerging global theological conversations. This contextual methodology argues that it addresses societal problems—poverty, gender, inequality, ethnic conflict, and other realities— that have plagued and profoundly reshaped African societies and religious life.[2]

At the same time, the hermeneutical framework of some faith communities, such as the Seventh-day Adventist Church (SDAC), has maintained a strong commitment to methodological consistency by emphasising the historical-grammatical method, which affirms the unity of Scripture and the primacy of the biblical text, among other principles.[3] However, as global and emerging realities continue to reshape the landscape of biblical interpretation, questions arise about the adequacy of these frameworks for addressing diverse cultural contexts. Thus, scholars such as Kwame Bediako have argued that African Christianity is not merely a recipient of biblical interpretation but an active contributor to

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[1] David Tuesday Adamo, *Africa and Africans in the Old Testament*, 15–18; David Tuesday Adamo, "What Is African Biblical Hermeneutics?" *Black Theology* 13, no. 1 (2015): 59–72, https://doi.org/10.1179/1476994815Z.00000000047.

[2] Justin S. Ukpong, "Developments in Biblical Interpretation in Africa: Historical and Hermeneutical Directions," in *The Bible in Africa: Transactions, Trajectories, and Trends*, ed. Gerald O. West and Musa W. Dube (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 11–28.

[3] This approach, articulated in official church documents and theological scholarship, seeks to safeguard doctrinal coherence and resist relativistic interpretations. See Biblical Research Institute, "Methods of Bible Study," General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 1986; Frank M. Hasel, ed., *Biblical Hermeneutics: An Adventist Approach* (Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute; Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Academic, 2020). Chapters 2, 3, 4, 5, 7, 8, 12 and 13 are important in this regard.

its development, bringing new insights rooted in indigenous worldviews.[4] Consequently, the interaction between African Biblical Interpretation and Seventh-day Adventist hermeneutics could offer a productive dialogue—one that could integrate theological fidelity with contextual relevance in a rapidly globalising Christian tradition.

Clarifications of Concepts

William W. Klein, Craig L. Blomberg, and Robert L. Hubbard Jr. describe hermeneutics as the discipline that provides the rules and procedures for understanding biblical texts, making it foundational for responsible exegesis and interpretation.[5] Grant R. Osborne similarly presents hermeneutics as a movement between the horizons of the biblical text and the reader. This process moves from ancient meaning to contemporary significance.[6] Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart further clarify this relationship by distinguishing between discovering what the text meant in its original setting and hearing that meaning faithfully in new contexts. Thus, biblical hermeneutics refers to the theories, principles, and methods that guide understanding of Scripture. In contrast, biblical interpretation explains what a given biblical text means. In other words, hermeneutics asks how Scripture ought to be read, while interpretation is the practical act of reading and explaining a particular passage. In this sense, hermeneutics functions as the governing discipline or framework for interpretation, while interpretation becomes the concrete expression of hermeneutical commitments.

The distinction between biblical hermeneutics and biblical interpretation matters because it prevents confusion between interpretive theory and practice: hermeneutics establishes the framework, while interpretation applies it to specific texts. Yet biblical hermeneutics and biblical interpretation are intimately and inseparably related. Interpretation does not occur in a vacuum; it is always shaped, whether consciously or unconsciously, by

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[4] Kwame Bediako, *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1995), 94–120

[5] William W. Klein, Craig L. Blomberg, and Robert L. Hubbard Jr., *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2017), 1–22.

[6] Grant R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, rev. and expanded ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 21–25.

hermeneutical assumptions about language, history, genre, theology, and the framework the reader adopts. This distinction is also particularly useful for studying African biblical interpretation in dialogue with Seventh-day Adventist thought: African biblical interpretation largely emphasises contextual and communal readings of Scripture, whereas Seventh-day Adventist hermeneutics more self-consciously emphasises the principles that regulate such readings, especially the historical-grammatical method and the unity of Scripture. The dialogue between the two, therefore, is best understood not as interpretation versus interpretation, but as a contextual interpretive practice that engages a more formal hermeneutical framework.

This paper therefore surveys the historical development and trajectories of African biblical interpretation, its role in shaping African identity in interpretation, and emerging global realities.[7] *This study used an integrative literature review approach. It draws upon relevant books, peer-reviewed journal articles, chapters, theological literature and selected Seventh-day Adventist documents and scholarship. The assembled literature was analysed through the three complementary approaches: historical analysis to trace the major trajectories in African biblical interpretation; thematic analysis to identify dominant themes and global emerging realities shaping contemporary African hermeneutics; and comparative -dialogue analysis to bring these trajectories and themes into critical and constructive dialogue and constructive conversation with Seventh-day Adventist hermeneutical principles. The analysis seeks to identify areas of convergence, divergence, tension, and potential mutual enrichment between African biblical interpretation and Adventist hermeneutics.*

Historical Development and Trajectories of African Biblical Interpretation

The historical evolution of African Biblical Interpretation[8] (ABI) dates back to Africa's encounter with Christianity during the colonial era. Early Western missionary exegesis

[7] There is a wealth of resources on the framework of African Biblical interpretation. This paper does not intend to explore its richness. Rather, it thus provides representative influential voices on the continent on this subject in Sub-Saharan Africa.

[8] This paper discusses what I consider the main trajectories. Victor Umaru "Indigenous African Methods of Biblical Interpretation: Contextualising Scripture within African Cultural and Spiritual Frameworks, *IBSA*-

occurred primarily within the European theological paradigm, which presupposed the universality of Western epistemology. This worldview frequently considers African religious worldviews as primitive or incompatible with biblical faith.[9] The Bible was often mediated through translations and interpretive traditions that reinforced colonial hierarchies of knowledge and power.[10] As a result, African Christians were considered passive recipients of meaning rather than active interpreters of Scripture.

However, history indicates that African Christians have engaged with the Bible in some creative appropriation and resistance. For instance, the African Initiated Churches (AICs) developed interpretive practices that emphasised prophecy, healing, communal discernment, and the Holy Spirit's activity in believers' lives.[11] These practices challenged missionary control of biblical meaning and demonstrated that African Christians were already interpreting Scripture in ways that addressed local experiences and lived realities.

The recognised beginning of African biblical interpretation as an academic movement was in the 1960s and 1990s. This period was marked by political liberation struggles, independence, new national identities, and a deep desire to free theology from colonial control. In that era, African theologians began to query: Could Western methods of reading the Bible truly speak to African histories, cultures, and everyday struggles? Or was it time to rethink how Scripture was interpreted so that it resonated more deeply with African lived realities and communal experiences? Accordingly, African scholars argue that interpretation must be rooted in concrete social contexts, particularly the experiences of poverty, oppression, communal life, and gender issues.[12] The Bible was increasingly read

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West Africa Journal, 2, no. 2,(2024): 85-100 gives further trajectories as Narrative and orality, interfaith conversation, ecological hermeneutics, young and digital hermeneutics. However these sub-sections except the interfaith conversation are addressed in the main trajectories discussed in this paper.

[9]Ukpong, "Developments in Biblical Interpretation in Africa: Historical and Hermeneutical Directions," 11–28.

[10] Ukpong, "Developments in Biblical Interpretation in Africa: Historical and Hermeneutical Directions," 11–28. See also Justin S. Ukpong "Reading the Bible in the Global Village: Issues and Challenges from African Readings," in *Reading the Bible in the Global Village: Cape Town*, ed. Justin S. Ukpong, Global Perspectives on Biblical Scholarship 3 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2002), 9-39.

[11] John Parratt, *Reinventing Christianity: African Theology Today* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 72–76.

[12] Gerald O. West, "Unpacking the Package That Is the Bible in African Biblical Scholarship," in *Reading the Bible in the Global Village: Cape Town*, ed. Justin S. Ukpong, Global Perspectives on Biblical Scholarship 3 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2002), 65-94.

as a resource for addressing diverse experiences rather than as a text legitimising the status quo. The remainder of this section summarises the various trajectories of African biblical interpretation.

Inculturation and Contextual Hermeneutics

Justin S. Ukpong's proposals on inculturation and contextual hermeneutics were crucial to this shift toward African biblical interpretation. He argued that African culture should not be treated merely as a backdrop to biblical interpretation but as a significant participant in the continent's hermeneutical process. He argued that culture is not passive in receiving the message; it should engage with and question it, shaping understanding in dynamic ways.[13] Thus, according to Ukpong, inculturation is a critical dialogue between text and context whereby Scripture and African culture are both interrogated and transformed.[14] By comparing biblical narratives with contemporary challenges, this approach addresses societal issues such as corruption, human rights violations, poverty, unemployment, and economic inequality.[15] This approach rejected uncritical cultural romanticism while affirming the legitimacy of African questions, symbols, and communal values in biblical interpretation.

As inculturation interpretation was promoted and practised, it became clear that ordinary Christians' ways of reading the Bible were beginning to reshape the discipline. Hans de Wit and others revealed that, for African Christians, the Bible is not a distant historical document but a living, active text. The Bible is read and interpret the Bible in ways that speak to daily life—guiding decisions, confronting injustice, and shaping community practice. In the introduction to the book, *The Bible and the African Experience*, these scholars emphasise that African biblical interpretation emerges from the interplay between Scripture and lived experience, advocating a dialogical model in which text and context

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[13] Justin S. Ukpong, "Developments in Biblical Interpretation," 11-28. See also Justin S. Ukpong, "New Testament Hermeneutics in Africa: Challenges and Possibilities," *Neotestamentica* 35, nos. 1–2 (2001): 147–167.

[14] Justin S. Ukpong, "Reading the Bible with African Eyes: Inculturation and Hermeneutics," Journal *of Theology for Southern Africa* 91 (1995):3-14.

[15] Mbengu D. Nyiawung, "Contextualising biblical exegesis: What is the African biblical hermeneutic approach?" *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 69, no. 1 (2013): 1-9.

mutually inform one another.[16] Meaning was generated not only through historical analysis but also through prayer, testimony, and communal discernment.

Ordinary Readers, Community, and Participatory Interpretation

Another supposed contribution of ABI, similar to Ukpong's inculturation and contextual hermeneutics, is ordinary readers' and community-based interpretation. This approach rejects ascribing interpretative authority to academic theologians and biblical scholars. Instead, it argues that ordinary readers and diverse local communities, such as the poor, marginalised, or socially vulnerable, can be active and legitimate interpreters of Scripture. This approach argues that because the Bible is a book of the faith community, biblical interpretation in Africa must move beyond Western dominance toward a genuinely global, multi-voiced community.[17] Its interpretation should also be accountable to the experiences of those adversely affected by social injustice. Meaning can emerge from the interaction among the text, the reader, and the context. As a result, interpretation is understood as a communal process shaped by dialogue, storytelling, prayer, and shared community discernment.

The major proponent of this approach is Gerald O. West, whose "reading with" proposal calls for collapsing the interpretative bridge between scholars and non-scholars. Based on this proposal, West seeks to create interpretive spaces where academic tools and grassroots insights are brought into conversation.[18] Thus, biblical scholars are not the final determinants of meaning but act as facilitators who listen carefully to the interpretative wisdom of communities. This could reveal hidden socio-economic dimensions that expose systems of oppression and empower communities toward critical awareness.[19] Working in

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[16] Hans de Wit, H. J. C. Pieterse, Gerald O. West, and Desmond Tutu, eds., *The Bible and the African Experience: Selected Essays* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 1998), 1–5.
[17] Ukpong et al, *Reading the Bible in the Global Village*
[18] Gerald West, *Contextual Bible Study* (Pietermaritzburg, 1993), 8-9; Gerald West, "Locating 'Contextual Bible Study' within Biblical Liberation Hermeneutics and Intercultural Biblical Hermeneutics," *HTS* 70, no. 1 (2014): Art. #2641, 1–7.
[19] West, *Contextual Bible Study*, 89–92.

and conducting Bible studies in communities marked by political violence, deep economic inequality, and social fragmentation arising from South Africa's long struggle against apartheid and the complex realities that followed, influenced West's participatory approach to ABI and shaped the development of this method. Their insights reveal that the lived experiences of marginalised communities are not secondary to interpretation but essential to it. West argues that the social struggles of apartheid profoundly influence biblical interpretation in South Africa and must therefore be understood as a contested, contextual, and political practice rather than a neutral academic activity.[20] Their interpretations, while not always methodologically formal, are marked by theological depth and contextual relevance.[21] Readers who adopt this method approach Scripture with a hermeneutic of survival, seeking resources for hope, resistance, and moral clarity.

However, intercultural and community reading approaches depart from author-centred and text-centred/authored-centred approaches. This could marginalise the reception and use of Scriptures. Some have argued that African biblical interpretation does not glamorise communal readings but instead affirms critical self-reflection. This is essential because communities could intentionally or otherwise propagate exclusion, patriarchy, or ethnic prejudice.[22] Hence, this dialogical model calls for mutual accountability, allowing academic insights to challenge harmful interpretations and permitting community experiences to reveal the limits of purely theoretical approaches. This reciprocal critique could strengthen the ethical credibility of African biblical interpretation.

African Identity and the Hermeneutics of Belonging

In African biblical interpretation, questions of identity, belonging, and historical memory also feature prominently. Many African readers have argued that pre-colonial Western biblical scholarship located Africa at the margins of the biblical narrative and, thus, at the edges of salvation history. For this Western ideology, Africa was primarily a recipient of

[20] Gerald O. West, "Reading the Bible in South Africa," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 99 (1997): 13–28.
[21] West, "Reading the Bible in South Africa, 14–18.
[22] Musa W. Dube, *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2000), 123–126.

Christianity rather than an active participant in God's redemptive purposes. In response, African biblical scholars resisted this marginalisation, and identity itself is a hermeneutical concern, since the characterisation of Africa's representation and image in Scripture directly shapes how African Christians understand themselves—their place in the biblical story, their dignity, and their role in God's ongoing work in the world. A notable voice in this defence is David Adamo, who persuasively argues that Africa and Africans appear in the Old Testament in concrete historical, geographical, and cultural ways. This recovery of Africa's biblical presence functions as a hermeneutics of affirmation, disputing centuries of denial and thus allowing African readers to locate themselves within the story of God's interaction with humanity.[23]

Additionally, ABI recognises the profoundly communal and relational nature of African identity. John S. Mbiti articulates this perspective aptly. The central thesis of his book, *The Gospel According to Africa*, is that **the Christian gospel, while universal, must be interpreted through African religious and cultural categories because African traditional religion already provides a meaningful context for understanding God and receiving Christ.** Reading Scripture through this communal lens logically challenges the highly individualistic interpretations that often shape Western theology. This approach shifts the focus from private belief and personal salvation to themes such as community, shared memory, mutual responsibility, and the collective journey of faith.[24]

In African Biblical interpretation, narrative culture also plays an important part in identity formation. John Mbiti popularised this perspective and, in this way, considered theology a story by highlighting correspondences between African oral traditions and the Bible's narrative character. He argues that the gospel must be translated not only linguistically but conceptually. That is, African traditional religion provides a **religious and conceptual framework that prepares for and shapes the reception of the Christian gospel,** thereby necessitating a contextualised African theology.[25] In this regard, storytelling, proverbs,

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[23] Adamo, *Africa and Africans in the Old Testament*, 23–28.
[24] John S. Mbiti, *The Gospel According to Africa: Theological Essays* (Nairobi: Oxford University Press, 1973), 15–18.
[25] Mbiti, *The Gospel According to Africa*, 3–7.

songs, and rituals become interpretive resources that offer biblical meaning within African communal life. Therefore, Scripture should be approached not just to gain abstract doctrine, but as a living story that responds to real experiences of suffering, offers endurance, and gives hope to people facing the challenges they confront.[26]

In the same manner, since African identity is deeply connected to memory—such as colonialism, slavery, displacement, and disruption of culture, in African biblical interpretation, memory is not just a mere historical recollection but indeed has theological reality. Thus, the past shapes the present and influences the way the Bible is interpreted. Biblical events like the exile, oppression, suffering, and restoration remind Africans of their own struggles, and they seek connections between Israel's struggles and African experiences of injustice and resilience. Thus, this narrative engagement method allows African communities to interpret the Bible through techniques that uphold identity amid historical trauma and social change. Nevertheless, this narrative approach, it is argued, does not attempt to collapse biblical history into African history, but rather offers a dialogue that places the two stories in conversation so the Bible can speak meaningfully and powerfully into the African context. In this manner, it offers insights, hope, and the possibility of transformation.[27]

However, African biblical interpretation does not accept the essentialist notion of identity, which assumes that Africa has a monolithic cultural identity. Rather, the continent is a "cultural mosaic" with immensely diverse ethnic groups, languages, cultures, histories, and social experiences. Thus, contemporary African biblical interpretation views identity as dynamic and contested rather than fixed. This candor enables biblical interpretation to critically engage with contextual challenges such as conflict, gender inequality, and religious pluralism because a "one African culture" can itself lead to exclusion or oppression.[28] Yet, rather than descending into cultural isolation, African biblical

[26] Mbiti, *The Gospel According to Africa*, 41–45.
[27] West, "Unpacking the Package That Is the Bible in African Biblical Scholarship," 65-94.
[28] Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Talitha Cum! Theologies of African Women* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2001), 62–66.

interpretation offers a vision of belonging that affirms African uniqueness while also engaging in global theological conversations.

Liberation, Gender, and Postcolonial Readings

Liberation, gender justice, and postcolonial critique are other important streams in ABI. This strand, relying on the history of Africa under colonial domination, racialised oppression, economic exploitation, and patriarchal social structures, contends that biblical interpretation must respond to the realities of suffering and injustice. Thus, liberation is a necessary hermeneutical concern in Africa. However, unlike Western forms of political ideology, liberationist biblical interpretation in Africa embraces concerns of oppression, colonialism, racism, gender inequality, and cultural domination.[29] Therefore, the Exodus narratives, prophetic denunciations of injustice, and Jesus' ministry among the marginalised serve as paradigmatic resources for resistance and social transformation, speaking to ongoing struggles for dignity and freedom in African societies.

Within this broader liberationist movement, feminist voices have been especially important in highlighting the gendered layers of both biblical texts and their interpretations. These perspectives ask difficult but necessary questions about whose experiences are centred. Whose voices are silenced? And how does power operate within both Scripture and its reception? A leading voice for this interpretation is Musa W. Dube, who creates a dialogue between postcolonial theory and feminist biblical interpretation. She argues that colonialism and patriarchy are not separate forces but deeply interconnected systems. Both forces shape how the Bible has been translated, read, interpreted, and applied in African contexts. Texts that are traditionally read as universal carry ideological assumptions of

[29] Tinyiko S. Maluleke, "The Bible in African Theology," *Scriptura* 76 (2001): 23–35; Gerald West, "African Biblical Scholarship as Post-colonial, Tri-Polar, and a Site- of-Struggle," in *Present and Future of Biblical Studies: Celebrating 25 Years of Brill's Biblical Interpretation*, Tat-siong Benny Liew, ed. (Leiden and Boston: Brill,
2018), 240–273; Gerald West, "Liberation Hermeneutics after Liberation in South Africa," in *The Bible And He Hermeneutics Of Liberation,* Alejandro F. Botta And Pablo R. Andiñach, eds.(Atlanta: Society Of Biblical Literature, 2009), 26-31.

marginalisation and lend legitimacy to the exercise of power.[30] Dube's work argues that interpreters should recognise these dynamics and endeavour to reject domination while promoting justice, dignity, and inclusion.[31]

Since, like all readers, African readers may have absorbed colonial and patriarchal assumptions of exclusion and domination, feminist African biblical interpretation offers two important movements: critique and recovery. In this way, it contests texts and traditions used to justify oppression while reclaiming biblical themes that affirm justice, hospitality, dignity, and life-giving community. This process aims not only to critique harmful readings but also to encourage interpretations that nurture wholeness and collective flourishing.[32]

Another scholar who argued for feminist African biblical interpretation is Mercy Amba Oduyoye. She opined that gender justice is inseparable from the health of the whole community. In her view, the quest for women's dignity should be a community concern, as it closely affects the well-being of families, churches, and societies. Therefore, she rejects any interpretation that justifies women's suffering as obedience, endurance, or cultural loyalty. Rather, she advocates that women's experiences of motherhood, ministry, and public life are essential to reading the Bible. Oduyoye also calls for reconstructing both church and culture so the community reflects justice, dignity, and women's equal participation. This method does not just accept Western feminist classifications, nor does it endorse patriarchal cultural norms without question. Rather, it offers a distinctly African, relational vision of liberation—one that seeks justice in ways that affirm community, mutual responsibility, and shared human dignity.[33]

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[30]Dube, *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*, 95–99. See also Gerald O. West and Musa W. Dube, eds., *Other Ways of Reading: African Women and the Bible* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2001), 1-19. The main thesis of the latter book as captured in introduction is that African women's contextual, postcolonial feminist readings of the Bible challenge dominant patriarchal and colonial interpretations and offer transformative, community-rooted hermeneutics that reshape both biblical studies and lived Christian practice.

[31] Dube, *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation*, 14–18.

[32] Dube, *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation*, 120–124.

[33] Oduyoye, *Talitha Cum! Theologies of African Women;* Mercy A. Oduyoye, "Feminist Theology in an African Perspective," in *Paths of African Theology*, ed. Rosino Gibellini (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1995), 166–81, 177.

African liberationist and feminist readings also engage critically with the legacy of biblical translation and missionary interpretation. Postcolonial scholars have shown how translation choices often reflected colonial worldviews, recasting African religious concepts in negative or demonising terms.[34] Such interpretive moves had lasting consequences for African self-understanding and theological imagination. By revisiting these translations and their interpretive assumptions, African biblical interpretation seeks to decolonise the reception of Scripture and recover suppressed meanings.[35]

Importantly, liberation and gender-oriented readings within African biblical interpretation argue that they are not anti-textual or dismissive of Scripture's authority. Rather, they represent a struggle *for* the Bible—an insistence that oppressive ideologies must not monopolise Scripture nor assume Scriptural endorsement. Therefore, liberation is understood not only in political terms but also as spiritual, relational, and ecological restoration. In this perspective, biblical interpretation thus becomes a location of ethical discernment, calling communities to embody justice, mutuality, and compassion in concrete ways.

In sum, one may infer that African feminine biblical interpreters strive to balance resisting systems of global neoliberal exploitation that extend inequality with questioning unexamined appeals to "tradition" that may reinforce injustice. This balanced approach aims to protect Scripture from being used to legitimise harm, whether in the name of progress or culture. Rather, Scripture should be a resource for justice, dignity, and sustainable community life.[36]

The historical development of African biblical interpretation indicates that it has been shaped by movement, resistance, identity, and transformation, and by the continent's political struggles, rich cultural heritage, and lived experiences. It shows a clear departure from foreign and colonial frameworks toward methods deeply rooted in local contexts,

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[34] Musa W. Dube, "Consuming a Colonial Cultural Bomb: Translating Badimo into 'Demons' in the Setswana Bible (Matthew 8:28–34; 15:21–28)," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 73 (1999): 33–59

[35] Dube, "Consuming a Colonial Cultural Bomb," 33-59.

[36] Dube, *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation*, 168–171

critical reflection, and communal life. Africa's biblical hermeneutical journey and engagement with the Bible have also not been passive or fixed. Instead, it has constantly pursued the reclamation of Scripture as a living source of identity, dignity, hope, and liberation for African communities. In sum, African biblical hermeneutical and interpretative trajectories could be illustrated as shown below:

Hermeneutical Trajectories

- From Western-dominated frameworks → to global perspectives
- From text → to increasing recognition of the interpreter's context

Interpretative Trajectories (How interpretation has/is evolving in Africa)

- From missionary readings → to indigenous readings
- From dependency → to contextual autonomy
- From purely academic → to community-centred reading

It might be fitting to end this section with the words of John Arierhi Ottuh, who cautions thus:

> The duty of African scholars is not to Africanize the Bible because it cannot be rewritten, but to draw illustrations from Africa's rich heritage. In this light, drawing illustrations from African experiences and heritages will help to explain or convey the Bible message in such a way that can help African Christians to understand the text of the Bible easily. The continuous usage of African heritage from generation to generation by biblical scholars and church leaders will further immortalise Africa's cultural heritage and make Christianity more familiar to Africans from generation to generation.[37]

[37] John Arierhi Ottuh, "Contextualization of Biblical Interpretation in Africa," *International Journal of Research in Arts and Social Sciences,* Vol. 7, no. 2 (2014): 28-44.

As in the past, the modern context of biblical interpretation in Africa is increasingly influenced by global forces reshaping social life, religious practice, and theological reflection. These current global factors include globalisation, migration, digital technology, climate change, and economic neoliberalism. These forces, which have strengthened Africa's connection to the wider world, bring both new opportunities and vulnerabilities. The next section addresses this concern.

Emerging Global Realities and African Biblical Interpretation

Globalisation has had a mixed impact on African Christianity and biblical interpretation. Transnational networks of churches, theological institutions, and digital media have amplified African voices and facilitated the wider circulation of African interpretive insights. This may align with Lamin Sanneh's view that Christianity belongs not to the West but to any culture that receives, translates, and lives out the gospel in its own language and context.[38] African biblical interpretation could explore the ideological dimensions of such global theological flows, insisting that interpretive authority remain accountable to the lived realities of inequality, marginalisation, and resistance, as shown earlier in this paper.

Migration adds yet another layer of complexity to the interpretive landscape. Patterns of internal displacement caused by conflicts, climate change, and other local dynamics, rapid urbanisation, and even international migration have given rise to African Christian communities whose identities are shaped by hybridity and transnational connections. Many African Christians now live between cultures, languages, and homelands, negotiating multiple senses of belonging at once. In response, African biblical interpretation could revisit key biblical themes—exile, pilgrimage, hospitality, and homecoming—through the lens of today's realities of migration. These motifs are no longer distant ancient stories; they resonate deeply with communities navigating displacement, border-crossing,

[38] Lamin Sanneh, *Whose Religion Is Christianity? The Gospel beyond the West* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 89–93.

adaptation, and longing for home. By rereading Scripture in this light, interpreters help ensure that the Bible continues to speak meaningfully to lives marked by movement and transition across societies and people's experiences.[39]

Digital technology has significantly reshaped how people engage with the Bible in Africa. Online sermons, Bible apps, and social media platforms have made Scripture more accessible than ever before. These digital and technological realities are also changing who holds interpretive influence. Hermeneutical, or interpretative, authority is no longer confined to academic theologians, churches, seminaries, or printed commentaries; it now circulates widely, sometimes loosely, across digital networks. In sum, the expansion of digital and technological realities has profoundly shifted how people access, interpret, and share Scripture. It has democratized access to theological resources and broadened biblical interpretation.[40]

While these platforms could create spaces for far-reaching participation and diverse hermeneutical and interpretative voices, they also carry risks. Interpretations shared online can easily become detached from context, reduced to consumable content, or shaped by rigid fundamentalist or institutional agendas. For instance, it could/has led to a loss of interpretative authority, fragmentation of interpretation, and digital dominance in faith practice.[41] Further effects include the emergence of digital and technological realities in African biblical interpretation, theological crises, and the weakening of community/communal participation.[42] In essence, these effects of digital and technological

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[39] Kwok Pui-lan, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 143–147

[40] D. Garrett, *Digital Ministry in the Church* (Lynchburg, VA: Liberty University, 2024), 45–60; Alessandro Missier, "A Qualitative Study of Digital Religious Influence," *Religions* 16, no. 1 (2025): 73. https://doi.org/10.3390/rel16010073; David Hirome and Esther Okiror, "Missions and Digitally Empowered Ministers in the Anglican Church of Uganda," *African Multidisciplinary Journal of Research* 6, no. 1 (2024): 112–130; Samuel Ndereba, "Digital Ecclesiology and Africa's Digital Natives: Prospects and Challenges," *Journal of African Christian Thought* 26, no. 2 (2023): 34–49

[41] Ngozi Ukamaka Megwas, Paschal Innocent Ihechu, Virginia Benson-Eluwa, and Gladys Amarachi Osuagwu, "Digital Christianity: Evaluating Exposure, Knowledge, and Use of Faith-Based Social Media Handles by Christians in Southeast Nigeria," *International Journal of Research and Scientific Innovation* 12, no. 6 (2025): 1188–1196, https://doi.org/10.51244/IJRSI.2025.12060095;

[42] Oluwaseun O. Afolabi and A. Babatunde, "Digitalisation of Worship: Assessing the Effectiveness of Christian Worship via Social Media Platforms during the COVID-19 Lockdown in Nigeria," *Ihafa: A Journal of African Studies* 12, no. 1 (2021).

realities on the African continent, unarguably, lead to what I may call "the commodification of biblical interpretation," in which Scripture is distorted and meaning shifts from divine revelation and ethical formation to a product for consumption. Thus, in a context plagued by socioeconomic issues, a receptive, gullible audience for promises of property or breakthroughs could be exploited for theological and spiritual manipulation. For this reason, African biblical interpretation must engage digital culture thoughtfully and critically. While treasuring and benefiting from its participatory, community-centred approach, it mustn't compromise accountability, the Bible's integrity, responsible theological reflection, or local communities' lived realities.

The ecological crisis further highlights the global importance of African biblical interpretation. Climate change continues to affect African communities in deeply unequal ways, worsening food shortages, forcing displacement, and increasing economic vulnerability. These realities make environmental questions impossible to ignore. African biblical interpretation responds with a holistic theological vision—one that refuses to separate the spiritual from the social or the ecological. Drawing from African cosmologies, which often stress the interrelatedness of all life, and from biblical texts that affirm the unity of creation, African interpreters present environmental justice as central to faith. Care for the earth is not an optional ethical add-on but a theological responsibility rooted in the understanding that humanity, community, and creation are inseparable.[43]

In sum, African Biblical Interpretation should engage current global realities critically, resisting both uncritical assimilation into dominant global theological paradigms and

[43] Ernst M. Conradie, "Towards an Ecological Biblical Hermeneutics: A Review Essay on the Earth Bible Project," *Scriptura* 85 (2004): 123–135, https://doi.org/10.7833/85-0-941.
See also Sampson M. Nwaomah, "Reflections on Biblical Principles on Environmental Sustainability and the Quest for Attaining the SDG 15 in the Niger Delta" *International Journal of Research and Innovation in Social Science,* Special *Issue on Psychology* 9, no. 17 (2025): 52-62; Sampson M. Nwaomah. "Eco-Justice and the Niger Delta Environmental Challenges: Reflections on Matt 7:12," *Philosophy Study* 3, no.4 (2013): 291-299; Sampson M. Nwaomah, "Eschatology of Environmental Bliss in Romans 8: 18-22 and the Imperative of Present Environmental Sustainability from a Nigerian Perspective," in *Placing Nature on the Borders of Religion, Philosophy, and Ethic: Transcending Boundaries in Philosophy and Theology*, eds. Forrest Clingerman and Mark Dixon (Farnham Surrey, United Kingdom: Ashgate, 2011), 79-94;

defensive cultural isolation. Instead, ABI should articulate a hermeneutic that is biblically sound, locally grounded, ethically alert, and globally dialogical.

African Biblical Interpretation and *a Dialogue Seventh-day Adventist* Hermeneutics

Seventh-day Adventist biblical hermeneutics could meaningfully engage in a reasoned, constructive, and mutually beneficial dialogue with African biblical interpretation. Key questions include: i. Can SDA hermeneutics fully accommodate the African context? 2. Does ABI challenge or enrich SDA interpretative principles and theology? 3. Where is the tension: objectivity vs conceptuality, text-centred vs community readings? 4. What is the harmony: Respect for Scripture and holistic worldview? While Seventh-day Adventist hermeneutics emphasises a historically grounded, text-centred approach, African Biblical Interpretation foregrounds context and lived experience, creating a dynamic tension and fruitful dialogue between interpretive theory and practice. This section explores some possibilities and constraints in this endeavour.

First, methodologically, Seventh-day Adventist interpreters have traditionally relied on the grammatical-historical method, viewing it as a safeguard against interpretive relativism and a way to remain anchored in the text's intended meaning.[44] This approach brings its own distinctive accents. It places strong emphasis on the authority and unity of the biblical canon, attentiveness to its historical context, and a vibrant sense of eschatological hope within the Great Controversy framework. This approach is grounded in a high view of Scripture as the inspired Word of God, interpreted within a Christ-centred framework that seeks coherence across the whole canon. Conservative African biblical scholars who support or practice the African biblical interpretation framework may share the SDA hermeneutical approach and a deep commitment to Scripture's authority.[45]

However, African biblical interpretation tends to adopt a more interdisciplinary approach, engaging anthropology, sociology, and postcolonial theory. This interpretive framework

[44] See sources in footnote 3.
[45] It seems that some proponents of ABI are influenced by the Higher Critical Method of biblical interpretation. This may depend on the tradition of each Bible scholar. However, the SDA biblical interpretation is grounded on the Historical Grammatical methods hermeneutical framework.

complements and contributes constructively to African hermeneutical discourse. Thus, this strong focus on context, community, social location, and lived experience can provide an important counterbalance to tendencies in some Adventist circles towards individualism or overly abstract doctrinal reflection. By insisting that Scripture is read within real communities facing concrete challenges, African biblical interpretation reminds interpreters that theology is never detached from life. Therefore, in the African context, a hermeneutical community approach to interpretation, while remaining faithful to the SDA biblical hermeneutical framework, could enrich Bible study by creating space for marginalised voices and strengthening communal engagement with the text. This could enhance interpretation and clarify the meaning of Bible passages by speaking directly to pressing realities such as poverty, public health crises, and suffering. Thus, Scripture study and interpretation become not only textually and doctrinally faithful but also pastorally responsive and socially aware.

A second possible critical area of dialogue between African biblical interpretation and SDA biblical hermeneutical perspective concerns the use of African cultural resources as interpretive tools. African biblical interpretation deliberately engages African proverbs, oral traditions, and communal worldview. In the view of David Adamo[46] and Musa Dube,[47] culture is not just the background to Scripture but an important medium of its meaning. However, SDA scholars such as Richard Davidson and Ekkehardt Mueller prefer a cautious stance that emphasises Scripture's primacy and warns against allowing extra-biblical cultural elements to become normative in interpretation.

Consequently, a constructive dialogue will not reject just culture but will evaluate, appropriate, and affirm African cultural resources that illuminate biblical meaning and enhance contextual relevance. Nonetheless, constructive dialogue in biblical interpretation in Africa will reject cultural elements that subordinate Scripture's authority. The focus will be on faithfulness to the biblical text within its cultural context, not on creative interpretation. In this way, African biblical interpretation can add contextual richness and

[46] Adamo, *Africa and Africans in the Old Testament, 1-15*
[47] Dube, "Consuming a Colonial Cultural Bomb, 33-59

affirm identity. At the same time, SDA's hermeneutical framework, which shapes its biblical interpretation, will safeguard theological coherence and fidelity to the biblical text, thereby creating a balanced approach that is both biblically grounded and authentically African.

Further, the Seventh-day Sabbath theology offers yet another meaningful point of connection. In many African contexts shaped by economic exploitation and constant pressures to survive, the biblical Sabbath speaks to a countercultural word. It affirms that human worth is not defined by productivity, that life cannot be reduced to economic output, and that trust in God's provision stands above relentless striving. When read through African communal perspectives, the Sabbath becomes more than a doctrinal identifier. It takes on social and ecological significance. It calls communities to resist systems that commodify people and exhaust the land, and it nurtures patterns of rest, solidarity, and shared well-being. In this way, Sabbath observance can be understood not only as obedience to a command but as a lived ethic that protects dignity, fosters community, and affirms the wholeness of creation.[48]

African feminist and postcolonial perspectives also add important depth to this conversation by urging the Seventh-day Adventist interpretative approach to engage more deliberately with questions of gender, power, and historical responsibility. Although Adventism affirms the priesthood of all believers as a theological principle, Adventist African women theologians point out gaps between this ideal and the everyday realities within church structures and practices.[49] Entering into dialogue with African feminist interpretation invites a thoughtful re-examination of biblical texts and inherited traditions that may have, even unintentionally, reinforced patriarchal patterns or muted women's voices. Such engagement is not about undermining Scripture's authority, but about reading it more honestly and faithfully—attentive to how interpretation shapes community life and

[48] Sigve K. Tonstad, *The Lost Meaning of the Seventh Day* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2009), 215–220.

[49] The "gaps between this ideal and the everyday realities within church structures and practices" should not be interpreted as an endorsement of women ordination. Rather, women could find meaningful relevance in affirmation in many aspects of ministries in the church.

committed to ensuring that the gospel's promise of dignity and participation is reflected in lived ecclesial experience.[50]

A fifth and final area of dialogue is the contribution that Seventh-day Adventist theology's distinctive eschatological dimension makes to African biblical interpretation. Adventist eschatology, grounded in the biblical narrative of the cosmic conflict between good and evil and God's promised restoration of all things,[51] speaks powerfully to African contexts marked by suffering, resilience, and hope. Its vision of ultimate justice and renewal resonates deeply with communities that endure hardship while holding on to faith. This strong eschatological horizon can also serve as a safeguard. It helps ensure that biblical interpretation is not confined entirely to present socio-political concerns—liberation, justice, and socio-political realities—important as they are. Instead, a strong eschatological horizon affirms that liberation has both historical and future dimensions—God's work unfolds within history but also points beyond it toward final restoration. When contextual sensitivity to lived realities is held together with robust eschatological hope, interpretation remains ethically engaged without losing theological depth. It addresses injustice in the present while sustaining confidence in God's ultimate redemptive purposes.

CONCLUSION

This study contends that African Biblical Interpretation (ABI) represents a significant development in contemporary biblical studies, rooted in Africa's experiences of colonialism, cultural marginalisation, socio-economic struggles, and ecclesial transformation. It emphasises that context, identity, community, and justice are not secondary aspects but integral to interpreting Scripture. In a rapidly evolving global

[50] See notes 28, 30, and 33

[51] Richard M. Davidson, "Cosmic Metanarrative for the Coming Millennium," *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 11, no. 1–2 (2000): 102–119; Elias Brasil de Souza, A. Rahel Wells, László Gallusz, and Denis Kaiser, eds., *Eschatology from an Adventist Perspective: Proceedings of the Fourth International Bible Conference, Rome, June 11–20, 2018* (Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute, 2021); Ekkehardt Mueller, "Challenges to the Adventist Interpretation of Apocalyptic Prophecy," *Journal of Asia Adventist Seminary* 13, no. 1 (2010): 49–70; Davidson Razafiarivony, "Cosmic Signs of the End as Landmarks for the Nearness of the Second Coming in Adventism," *American Journal of Biblical Theology* 24, no. 45 (2023):1-21.

landscape influenced by globalisation, migration, digitalisation, and climate challenges, ABI shows that African interpretation is neither narrow nor reactive but critically engaged and dialogical, affirming local particularity while enriching global theological discourse. As Christianity's influence shifts toward the Global South, African theologians are increasingly shaping the future of biblical scholarship, advocating for an approach that is scripturally grounded, culturally sensitive, and directed toward justice and hope. The Seventh-day Adventist hermeneutical framework, while upholding a high view of Scripture's authority, coherence, and transformative power, could incorporate certain elements of the African Biblical Interpretation (ABI) framework to improve biblical interpretation and application.

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CHAPTER 2

BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION IN A PLURAL WORLD: AFRICAN HERMENEUTICAL VOICES AND GLOBAL THEOLOGICAL DISCOURSE

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Abstract

This paper examines the development, contributions, and continuing relevance of African Contextual Biblical Hermeneutics (ACBH) within a pluralistic world and contemporary global theological discourse. It argues that although the Bible has sometimes been implicated in colonial domination and ideological oppression, it remains a significant theological and existential resource for African Christians, particularly in addressing questions of faith, identity, survival, liberation, and social transformation. The study surveys major expressions of African contextual hermeneutics, including the African comparative approach, reading with ordinary readers, liberation hermeneutics, the Bible-as-power approach, Bosadi hermeneutics, biblical inculturation, and intercultural hermeneutics. These approaches share a concern to interpret Scripture in dialogue with African socio-cultural, political, economic, and religious realities. The paper further examines the contribution of African contextual hermeneutics to global theological discourse through its emphasis on inclusivity, value-oriented interpretation, holistic worldviews, communal readings, indigenous knowledge systems, oral resources, and constructive engagement with African culture. It argues that sustaining the global relevance of African biblical interpretation requires greater attention to praxis, shared African cultural values, multidimensional hermeneutical methodologies, fidelity to the biblical text, and the democratisation of the African interpretive space. The paper concludes that African contextual biblical hermeneutics should neither romanticise African culture nor reject it uncritically; rather, biblical interpretation should pursue constructive engagement in which African cultural resources are critically evaluated in dialogue with the biblical text. Such an approach can strengthen the African voice in global theological discourse while maintaining contextual relevance and fidelity to Scripture.

Keywords: *African contextual biblical hermeneutics, biblical interpretation, African culture, global theological discourse, contextual theology, pluralism*

INTRODUCTION

The Bible, in the contemporary times, in the midst of pluralistic and global realities, remains the bestselling book and most relevant literature of all time.[1] Similarly, the Bible in Africa, in spite of the pluralistic contexts, still holds tremendous possibilities for individual and corporate transformation. References to the negative uses of the Bible, as an ideological tool of oppression and suppression, has indeed encouraged some in Africa to call for its complete expulsion. However, in spite of the claim that the Bible has outlived its social usefulness, it remains an influential piece of literature in Africa. The continuous relevance of the Bible in Africa's social religious space can be predicated on two factors. The first is that for most African Christians, the Bible remains a principal reference point in issues bordering on faith, theology and practice. Second, the Bible has become, for the ordinary readers in Africa, a resource bank that helps them cope effectively with their daily struggles for survival, liberation and life.[2]

Africa's encounter with the Bible dates back to the time of the Ethiopian Eunuch (Acts 8: 26). Africa can also be rightly referred to as the cradle of systematic biblical interpretation in Christianity. The earliest attempts can be traced to the city of Alexandria and to such names as Clement of Alexandria, Origen, and others who lived and worked there. The foundation laid by this tradition was largely allegorical and uncritical in the modern sense, lasted in the Western church till the onset of the Enlightenment[3]

It was the Western Missionaries, however, who in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries AD made the biblical text a popular document in the socio-religious space of Africans. The early Africans received the Bible with awe. They were, however, alienated from its basic teachings and message. The alienation of the people from the message of the Bible could be justified when viewed the in the light of Africa's oral culture. The Bible, a written text symbolized enormous power when the Christian missionaries introduced it to the

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[1] The Christian Bible (Guinneseworldrecords.com) accessed on 20th March 2026

[2] A.O.Dada " Repositioning Contextual Biblical Hermeneutics in Africa Towards Holistic Empowerment" *Black Theology: An International Journal 8*: 2 (2010), 161.

[3] Justin Ukpong, "Development in Biblical Interpretation in Africa: Historical and Hermeneutical Directions" in The Bible in Africa: Transactions, Trajectories, and Trends, eds. G.West and Musa Dube (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 11

continent. This was enhanced by the fact that the Christian missionaries who introduced it to the continent were very much related to those who were at the center of the colonizing process of Africa. In retrospect, it can be said that this initial contact of the Bible with the African people encouraged a greater sense of alienation from book as opposed to its acceptance.[4]

In view of this, this paper explores ways African Contextual Biblical Hermeneutics (ACBH), a conflagration of methods of reading the Bible in the African context devised by scholars over the years, contributed to enhancing the meaning of the Bible in the African context. Also, we shall also explore how Contextual biblical hermeneutical approaches has contributed to global theological discourse and how it could further be repositioned to enhance African Christian evangelical presence and impact globally.

African Hermeneutical Voices: An Overview of African Contextual Biblical Hermeneutics

Contextual biblical hermeneutics in Africa arose as a reaction to Western hegemony in the area of biblical interpretation. For many centuries, the Western hermeneutical tradition has been accorded a universal status. However, a number of biblical scholars in Africa felt that to make the message of the Bible meaningful and relevant it must be interpreted within the sociocultural and Afrocentric perspective of the reader.Contextual biblical hermeneutics in Africa makes socio-political and economic contexts a subject of interpretation. Specifically, this means that the analysis of the text is done form the perspective of African worldview and culture.[5] It is the reading of the Christian scripture from a thought-out-Afrocentric perspective.[6]

Different contextual biblical hermeneutical approached have emerged in Africa. This includes "African comparative approach". This is a hermeneutical approach that relates the

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[4] Justin Ukpong, Inculturation as Decolonisation of the Bible in Africa," in Decolonisation of Biblical Interpretation in Africa, ed. S.O. Abogunrin et.al (Ibadan: Nigerian Association for Biblical Studies, 2003), 11.

[5] David T. Adamo, *Reading and Interpreting the Bible in African Indigenous Churches* (Eugene, OR:WIPF and Stock, 2001), 46-47.

[6] David T. Adamo, *Exploration in African Biblical Studies* (Eugene, OR: WIPF and Stock,2001), 61.

biblical texts to the African context[7] by comparing the convergence and divergence in Africa alongside the culture of the biblical world. There is also "reading with the ordinary reader approach" popularized by Gerald West, a South African Bible scholar. This approach is one that seeks to mediate between critical and precritical readings of the Bible. In other words, it tries to take seriously the interpretation of the ordinary reader of the Bible, under the guidance of a trained reader or exegete.[8]

The "liberational approach" is an interpretative schema that engages the Bible in the course of socio-political liberation. The works of South African scholars such as Nolan, Mosala, Chikane and Mofekeng best represents this school of biblical interpretation.[9]Another popular contextual approach to the Bible in Africa is "The Bible as power approach". The major proponent of this approach is D.T. Adamo of Nigeria. This is an" existential" and "reflective" approach to the interpretation of the Bible. The Bible is used as a means of gaining promotion, protection, healing and success. This method is most prevalent among the African indigenous churches.[10] Another contextual hermeneutics that makes African culture a subject of interpretation is the "Bosadi woman approach". According to the chief exponent of this approach, Madipoane Masenya of South Africa, the "Bosadi" approach is not simply a comparative analysis between the biblical text and the African cultures and texts not only in terms of gender concerns, but also includes issues of class, "woman-as-strange" and "African-as-strange" in their own territory. Though Bosadi approach is also an attempt to resuscitate the African culture from the ashes, it does not idolize it.[11]

[7?] See David Adamo, "Understanding the Genesis Account in an African Background", *Caribbean Journal of Religious Studies* 10 no 2 (1989):17-25

[8] G. West, *Contextual Bible Study* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster, 2003)
[9] See for example T.A. Mofekeng "Black Christians, the Bible and Liberation" *Journal of Black Theology 2* (1998): 34-42
[10] David. T. Adamo, *Decolonizing African Biblical Studies* (Abraka, Nigeria: Delta State University,2004)24-26
[11] Madipoane Masenya, "An African Methodology for South African Biblical Sciences: Revisiting the Bosadi (Womanhood) Approach", *Old Testament Essays: Journal of Old Testament Society of South Africa, 18 no 3* (2005)741-51

In similar vein, Ukpong[12] has also proposed what he calls "biblical inculturation" This is a dynamic ongoing process by which people consciously and critically appropriate the Bible and its message from within the perspectives and with the resources of their culture. Manus's "intercultural hermeneutics" is similar in ethos to that of Ukpong. Intercultural hermeneutics is a "descriptive paradigm" that seeks to address grassroots Christians in their actual contexts and social locations in Africa.[13]

It is pertinent to state, here, that there are other emerging methods of biblical interpretation in Africa. However, one common denominator of these hermeneutical approaches is that they arose from, and aim to, address a particular or specific context. Their contextual character therefore, makes it easier for them to be classified as contextual biblical hermeneutics.

The inescapability of contextual biblical hermeneutics in Africa can be premised on the fact that reading the Bible is always done within a socio-context, whether we acknowledge it or not. Readers will always be located in their community of faith, which is a microcosm of the larger society. In spite of the influences from Western culture, some of these scholars have stated that it is difficult, if not impossible, to discard totally their innate Africaness.

Riches[14] has, however, raised an alarm on the fact contextual reading of the text poses problem of normality. The particularity of a local reading may estrange people from one another. He observes that imposition of a universal God on other communities might be oppressive and actually lead to the impoverishment of their culture. He stresses, also, that the particularity of the local reading may conclude in the denial of a common humanity. He contends that we are all caught in the same web of connected humanity and need each other's voices if we are not to deny ourselves by way of denying our very interrelatedness.

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[12] Justin Ukpong, "Development in Biblical interpretation in Africa: Historical and Hermeneutical Directions", in *The Bible in Africa: Transactions, Trajectories, and Trends,* in eds. G.West and Musa Dube (Leiden: Brill, 2001),35

[13] C.U. Manus, *Intercultural Hermeneutics: Methods and Approaches in Contemporary Biblical Studies in African Scholarship* (Nairobi: Acton Publishers, 2005).

[14] J. Riches, "Interpreting the Bible in African Contexts" in *Glasgow Consultation 'Reading With': An Exploration of the Interface Between Critical and Ordinary Readings of the Bible* (Atlanta: Scholar Press,1996),187

While Riches' concern may be entertained to some extent, it should be underscored here that it is indeed difficult, if not totally impossible, to arrive at a uniform or universal reading and interpretation of the text. This arises because our contexts to some extent influence our readings of the Bible. Our "race", culture, gender and class influence our readings of the Bible. Besides, the Bible also emanated from different socio-cultural contexts.[15]

Three factors[16] are identified as responsible for the emergence of contextual biblical hermeneutic in Africa. The first one is the need to make the messages of the Bible meaningful and relevant for the African milieux. The methodology inherited from western missionaries did not take into cognizance the worldview of the Africans. The traditional view of reality by many Africans is holistic. Traditionally, many Africans believed that there are three orders of beings that are part of the world, these are deity, spirts and human beings. These three orders are in functional contact. For example, in the traditional African cosmology, the world of spirits and their influence on humans is a living and undeniable reality. The Bible, therefore, cannot be read meaningfully, and interpreted without taking into consideration these observations.

Contextual biblical hermeneutics also arose in the process of addressing social problems in Africa. In Africa today, poverty, hunger, disease, war, HIV and AIDS are ever present and threatening realities. These debilitating conditions call for urgent solutions. This situation, therefore calls for contextual reading of the Bible, meaning a reading in which the voices of the poor and marginalized of Africa are heard. The goal of this reading is to engender change and transformation. According to Kimilike[17] it is important for the interpretative task to facilitate the uncovering of ordinary people's transforming agency. The latter has to be identified in their past experiences that are acknowledged and enhanced; which in turn, are then applied to and used as means of engaging in biblical

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[15] See Louis Jonker, "Contextuality in (South) African Exegesis: Reflection on the Community of our Exegetical Methodologies", *Old Testament Essays* 18 no 3 (2005):637-50. Where he identified five forms of contextuality that characterize the Bible.

[16] See A. O. Dada, "Repositioning Contextual Biblical Hermeneutics in Africa Towards Holistic Empowerment" *Black Theology: An International Journal* 8,no 2 (2010), 166-67.

[17] L. Kimilike, "Using African Proverbial Folklore to Understand Holistic Poverty Eradication Framework in the Book of Proverbs", *Old Testament Essays* 18, no 3 (2005): 415

interpretation of the Christian biblical messages, with a transforming goal of the existential, social, economic, political and religious life of the people.

The third and final reason for the emergence of contextual biblical hermeneutics is the search for a sense of belonging. Having gone through the harrowing experience of colonialism, in which the African cultures and persons were unwholesomely and overwhelmingly denigrated, the period following independence was one that witnessed the necessity of seeking to raise African consciousness and pride. The mentality was an all-pervasive one. The search for African pride cuts through the social, political and religious spheres. In the area of biblical studies, it is reasoned that one of the best ways to bring African perception into the reading , interpretation and understanding of the Bible is to evolve a methodology that takes into consideration their existential context. This observation is given a further formulative description by Ukpong, when he writes:

> The inculturation mode of reading the Bible uses cultural resources. It makes a specifically African contribution to global biblical scholarship…Thinking within the format of Western scholarship and seeing it as the only legitimate mode of reading the Bible, makes us prisoners of colonialism. The present and future generations of African biblical scholars must carry forward this process. The extent to which it will be sustained depends on the extent to which African scholars will be creative in the use of African cultural resources in reading the Bible, not owning to Western exegetical practices.[18]

Contributions of African Contextual Biblical Hermeneutics to Global Theological Discourse

Global theological discourse in contemporary Christian scholarship is a shift from Western-centric perspective to a polycentric, "World Christianity" approach focusing on contextualization, intercultural dialogue, and the integration of diverse voices from the

[18] Ukpong, "Development in Biblical Interpretation in Africa", 46-47

global South. Key themes include postcolonial identity, liberation, the influence of Pentecostalism, and the intersection of faith with social justice and technology.[19]The significance of this theological perspective lies not in its novelty but in its faithfulness to the enduring Gospel and changing times.[20] The main importance of the global theological discourse is that it transforms theology from a localized discipline into a dynamic conversation that reflects the diverse realities of the human experience.

In view of the submissions above, it is pertinent to ask " what is the contribution of the African voice especially in the context of contextual biblical hermeneutics to global theological discourse"? The relevance of this question can be justified on the basis that some have dismissed contextual biblical hermeneutics as mere academic exercise and contraptions with little or no value. However, the fact cannot be contested that African exegete like Augustine, clement of Alexandria and Origen have contributed immensely even in the ancient times to the evolvement and growth of Christian Theology. Also, the phenomenal growth of Christianity in Africa and the global South[21] calls for a theology that speaks to the context of the people. In the light of this, many experts today argue that it is past time for more Western biblical interpreters to begin passing the baton, to begin partnering with emerging scholars in the majority World for the sake of the global church.[22] The emergence and contributions of contextual biblical hermeneutics in Africa can be justified against this background.

On the contributions of contextual biblical hermeneutics in Africa, it brings unique perspectives to global theological discourse which globalization has aided in spreading. As Adamo observed, biblically, globalization, meaning interconnectedness, can be dated to

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[19] Hendrik Pieterse *A New Global Theology*?" Intercultural theology and the challenge of Public Discourse in a Global Church" *Missiology : An International Review* DOI: 10.1177/0091829617696461 (April 2017).
[20] Ndzi Leonard, " Contemporary Perspectives on Theology: Navigating Faith in a Modern World" *Greener Journal of Social Sciences* vol. 15:1 (2025), 213.
[21] Craig S. Keener & M. Daniel Carroll " Introduction" in Craig Keener & M. Daniel Carrol (eds.) *Global Voices" Reading the Bible in the Majority World* (Peabody, MS : Hendrickson Publishers, 2013), 1. The phenomenal growth of Christianity around the world is now common knowledge. Many estimates in 1900, just over a century ago, 16.7 percent of Christians lived in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, by 2010 it was 63.2 percent , and by 2025 it will be nearly 70 percent. For some Christian groups, this increase has proved particularly dramatic. For example, evangelicals in these regions have grown from fewer than 50 million in 1960 to nearly 600 million today- already outnumbering evangelicals in the West by four or five times their number.
[22] Keener & Carroll, 1

the beginning of creation when God created the heavens and the earth and connected the heavens and the earth and all things together. The waters, darkness and light, evening and morning, firmament, land, grass, fruit, moving creatures, bird, reptiles, human being were connected together. In fact, all the story of the primeval history (Genesis 1-11) is interconnected and the main purpose of the story is to show that no one is actually independent. [23]

One of the areas contextual biblical hermeneutics contributed to global theological discourse is its inclusivity. Today, one of the leading exponents of contextual biblical hermeneutics in Africa is a Norwegian, Prof. Knut Holter. He has done more for the development and growth of African biblical hermeneutics and also, he has at different fora in the West highlighted African contributions to biblical interpretation. Due to his influence, other Biblicists in Asia and America are showing greater interest in African contextual hermeneutics.[24] This therefore confers legitimacy on the global theological discourse and also the varieties that further enriches it.

Moreover, contextual biblical hermeneutics in Africa advocated for a value-based interpretation. In her 1988 presidential address, Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza condemned the value neutral hermeneutics of the Western biblical scholars. She advocates for a critical emancipatory approach to biblical interpretation, arguing that all biblical interpretation is inherently political, value-laden and a form of power. She rejects " value-neutral" academic , patriarchal readings. She argues that interpreters must accept responsibility for how they use the Bible, emphasizing that interpretation should serve justice and well-being of all.[25]Even before Schussler's observation, contextual hermeneutics in Africa has purposively pursued a hermeneutics that is value-laden in character. We believe that the messages of the Bible could be creatively appropriated to address the debilitating socio-political conditions in Africa. A theology that adopted this value-laden approach will

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[23] David T. Adamo, "Globalizing African Biblical Studies" *The Arts, Man and Globalization* Diane Stinton(Ed.) (Accra: Deocraft Communications, 2006), 2.
[24] A.O. Dada, " Globalizing African Biblical Hermeneutics: Matters Arising" in *The Present State and Future of Biblical Studies in Africa : Essays in Honour of Samuel Oyinloye Abogunrin* eds. J.D. Gwamna. A.O.Dada & Hope Amolo (Ibadan: Zenith Book House, 2017), 343.
[25] See Robert Hurley, " The Ethics of Biblical Interpretation: Rhetorizing the Foundations" *ARC, The Journal of the Faculty of Religious Studies, McGill, Vol. 33* (2005),385-87

definitely address the existential needs of the people. This is a major emphasis of contemporary theological discourse.

Another area contextual biblical hermeneutics contributed to global theological discourse is its recognition of the holistic / integrated worldview. The traditional worldview of the Africans is holistic. The modern compartmentalization of realities into the realms of the sacred and the profane is strange. It is in view of this that biblical exegesis in Africa have responded to " bread and butter" issues, the socio-economic and political ugliness in the African World.[26] Besides, Contextual hermeneutics also probe into some metaphysical issues like the reality of witchcraft and existence of some malevolent sprits whose activities have some physical implications. In Western Theology and interpretations, these phenomenal are rarely accepted and accommodated. The reason for this is not far-fetched. Western interpretation of is rooted in the traditional epistemology which limited reality to what can be empirically verified. However, contextual hermeneutics in Africa is rooted in what is called Ethno-epistemology, which recognizes other forms of epistemologies apart from the traditional Western epistemology. Ethno- epistemology advocates that an anthropological method can be adopted in investigating all human epistemological activities. It is in this sense, therefore. That it can be said that ethno-epistemology does not reject or repudiate traditional or Western epistemology, like every other culture's epistemology, be scrutinized anthropologically, and no longer viewed as being essentially different from other culture's epistemologies or as the only valid form of epistemology.[27]

Communality is another potential contribution of contextual biblical hermeneutics to global theological discourse. One f the main elements of African biblical interpretation is the communal reading. This has been referred to in various ways as " reading with the ordinary readers" "reading with the community" " reading with the African eyes" reading with "residual illiterate people", "real contextual readers".[28] According to Draper, these

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[26] C.U. Manus, " Towards an African Methodology for Biblical Research, *Orita: Ibadan Journal of Religious Studies* no.1 (2002): 67

[27] Abosede P. Ipadeola, " Farewell to Epistemological Tyranny of Traditional Epistemology : The Rise of Ethnoepistemology" *African Philosophical Inquiry* 3: 3 (June. 2013):158

[2828] David T. Adamo, "African Biblical Studies: Illusions, Realities and Challenges" *in die Skrifig* 50 (1) a1972.http//dx.doi.org/10.4102/ids.v50i1.1972 (2016): 6

ordinary readers are those who are working with residual oral culture who employ residual oral hermeneutics in their readings. These ordinary readers are in fact recognized as the real contextual readers.[29] The insight from these ordinary readers of the biblical text can enrich theological studies by projecting the grassroot theological enterprise.

Deployment of oral archival resources in contextual biblical hermeneutics in Africa is another way it enriches global theological discourse. Oral archival resources like songs, folktales, myths, legends, and stories are often utilized in African contextual biblical hermeneutics to elucidate the biblical text meaningfully. These archival oral resources also constitute the indigenous knowledge of the people. African indigenous knowledge systems represent the collective, experiential wisdom and practices developed by African communities over generations to manage their social, ecological, economic and spiritual environments. Unlike knowledge systems strictly confined to academic or Western scientific paradigms, African indigenous knowledge system is deeply embedded in the daily life, culture and worldviews of African societies.[30] Today, African indigenous knowledge systems have also been deployed in current global theological discourse in order to give Christian Theology some local flavours.

The African culture is central in the contextual interpretive process this has to some extent influenced its utilization in contemporary global theological discourse. In fact, African traditional culture remains a subject of interpretation. However, in Western and Eurocentric scholarship, African culture is often denigrated as fetish, devilish and evil. This perhaps prevented the early Christian exegetes from reading the Bible with the African lens, thereby stifling the African voice in the global Christianity schemes. In contextual biblical hermeneutics in Africa, concepts and ideas from the traditional culture have been utilized to engage the biblical text. [31]The importance of culture in biblical interpretation and theology can be premised on two factors. The first is that there is no individual who is

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[29] J. Draper, "Confessional Western text-centered biblical interpretation and oral residual text" *Semeia* 73, (1996):59-77

[30] Ruth T. Adedokun, African Indigenous Knowledge System and the Quest for Sustainable Development in Nigeria" *Journal of Innovation Research and Advanced Studies, 4 (2)* http:// Harvardpublications.com/hijiras/article/view/144 (2024)

[31] See for example David T. Adamo, "Culture in Biblical Interpretation: The Use of Yoruba Cultural Elements in Adamo's African Cultural Hermeneutics" *in Old Testament Essays: Journal of Old Testament Society of South Africa* (2021): 28-44

completely detached from everything in his or her environment or experience and culture so as to be able to render one hundred percent objectivity in everything done. The fact is that every interpreter is biased in some ways.[32]Second, African culture serves as *praeparatio evangelica* that is as preparing the way for the New Testament. [33]This fact is given some definitive description by Mbiti when he observes that:

> It is African Religion which has produced the religious values, insights, practices and vocabulary on which the Christian Faith has been planted and is thriving so well today. The points of continuity between Biblical Faith and culture and African Religion have been sufficiently strong for the Gospel to establish strong footing among African peoples.[34]

Repositioning Contextual Hermeneutics in Africa for Optimum Impact and Global Relevance

Contextual biblical hermeneutics in Africa is a growing enterprise in spite of its influence on global theological discourse. For its impact to be pervasive and global, and to be attentive to the pluralistic realities, there are some things to be done. It is in the light of this that I am proposing the following:

1. Contextual biblical hermeneutics must be praxis oriented. Concerted effort must be made in the course of interpreting the Bible in the African context to find ways within which the fruits of such exercise could be translated to reality. Most of the biblical hermeneutical methodologies devised have not been explored in concrete terms. In other words, they have not been applied either in the Church in particular

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[32] David T. Adamo, "Decolonizing African Biblical Studies" Seventh Inaugural Lecture of Delta State University, Abraka (2007), 1.
[33] Gerald West," African Culture as *Praeparitio Evangelica*: The Old Testament as Preparation of the African Post-Colonial" in *Postcolonialism and The Hebrew Bible: The Next Step* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2013),195-96
[34] John Mbiti, "Christianity and African Religion" in *Facing the New Challenges: The Message of PACLA (Pan African Christian Leadership Assembly)* eds. M. Cassidy & L. Verlinden (Nairobi: Evangel Publishing House, 1978), 311

or in society as a whole. This therefore has prevented the Church and the Society from benefitting from new insights derived from reading the Bible from an Africentric perspective, which may hold tremendous possibilities for social change and transformation. For example, African biblical scholars have suggested creative ways the Bible could be read to alleviate poverty and suffering. But the sad fact today is that such hermeneutical suggestions remain on book shelves in our Universities and Seminaries across Africa. This, however, must change. Biblical scholars must work in conjunction with Pastors and Christian leaders to see how such lofty insights derived from the creative reading of the Bible in the African context can be translated into reality.

2. We must emphasize the core universals in African cultures. As earlier observed, in Africa there are diversities of cultures, and this has affected the effective deployment of cultural concepts in the Africentric interpretation of the Bible. One way out of this quagmire is to emphasize aspects of our cultures that are common. One such is the communal way of life prevalent in traditional African society. The individual's existence in traditional society can only be understood in the light of the community. The inseparability of the individual from the whole that makes up society has greatly affected every spectrum of life in traditional African society. The African concept of communality can be creatively engaged to address some social challenges confronting the world today. In traditional African society, poverty, marital, and other family issues were effectively addressed because of the communal character of society.[35]
3. Multidimensional Methodologies. To further enrich and expand the scope of contextual biblical hermeneutics in Africa, it is highly expedient for us to explore other hermeneutical methodologies. Jonker's warning that a multidimensional to biblical interpretation can help us to escape the looming dangers of exclusivism in our exegetical endeavour is an important message for the African context. Biblical scholars in Africa tend to step into two metaphorical abysses. Namely, they either claim that their own methods are the only ones that could deliver meaningful

[35] A.O. Dada, "Globalizing African Biblical Hermeneutics: Matters Arising", 342

results, or that their own life interests are the only legitimate vantage point into the biblical text. A multidimensional or holistic approach would steer us away from such exclusivism.[36]

African biblical scholarship should remain open to any method, past or present, which serves its ultimate purpose. The fact should be underscored here that Western and other hermeneutical methodologies should not be swallowed wholesale, in a non-critical manner. We should critique these hermeneutical traditions and take on board the exegetical approach and strategy that best suit the African context.

4. Fidelity to the text. In the process of reading the Bible contextually in Africa, the Bible must be interpreted in a way that is faithful to its original message while also engaging with the African context. In some instances , in the name of trying to come up with a valid contextual interpretation some scholars came up with something that is neither African nor biblical in character. Care must be taken not to project African Traditional Religion in the name of contextual biblical interpretation. Any attempt to do this will be to miss the goal of reading the Bible contextually which is to make the Bible meaningful and its message effectively internalized by the people.
5. The African biblical interpretive space in Africa must be democratized. To further promote inclusivity in contextual hermeneutics in Africa, there is a need to open up the space. The fact should be underscored here that experience of the African situation should not be made a prerequisite for getting involved in African biblical hermeneutics. Also, one does not need to be a Black person to get involved in contextual biblical hermeneutics in Africa. These identified criteria have prevented many non-Africans, especially non-Blacks, from getting involved. The only criterion that should be uppermost in doing contextual biblical hermeneutics in Africa is interest. Anyone from anywhere, no matter the language, gender, or colour of skin, as long as the person is interested and has sustained empathy for African

[36] Louis Jonker, "Contextuality in (South) African Exegesis: Reflection on the Community of our Exegetical Methodologies" *Old Testament Essays* 18:3 (2005): 637-50.

culture and experience, can effectively participate in doing contextual biblical hermeneutics in Africa.[37]

CONCLUSION

Contextual biblical hermeneutics in Africa arose primarily in order to make the message of the Bible come alive for the average Christian. However, the need to keep contextual biblical hermeneutics continually relevant, in spite of the pluralistic challenges in Africa, is a task that must be accomplished if we are to sustain and validate the African voice in global theological discourse. Also, the call for the accommodation of African culture in the biblical interpretative process for effective and meaningful interpretation of the Bible is not one done to romanticize everything about African culture. Nonetheless, the use of African cultural elements in the biblical interpretative process should be done with some measured caution so that a meaning that is neither African in outlook nor biblical in character may not be generated from the text.[38] We should constantly reassess our relationship with African culture in the light of challenges posed by globalization. One of the best ways to do this is to have a defined relationship with one's culture.[39] The relationship between biblical interpretation and our African cultural heritage should not be one of uncritical acceptance or total rejection of what can be construed as its central elements. The proper relationship should be one of constructive engagement in which the task of exposition, analysis, criticism, and reconstruction works in partnership.[40]

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[37] A.O. Dada, "Globalizing African Biblical Hermeneutics", 343

[38] A.O. Dada, "Culture in Biblical Interpretation: The use of Yoruba Cultural Elements in Adamo's African Biblical Hermeneutics" *Old Testament Essays: Journal of Old Testament Society of South Africa* 34 no 2, (2021),442.

[39] A.O.Dada, "Old Wine in New Bottle: Elements of Yoruba Culture in Aladura Christianity" *Black Theology : An International Journal* 12 no 1 (2014),13

[40] Olusegun Oladipo, "Introduction: The Third Way in African Philosophy" in *The Third Way in African Philosophy: Essays in Honour of Kwesi Wiredu* (Ibadan: Hope Publications, 2002), 13.

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CHAPTER 3

PROPHETIC FAITHFULNESS AND PUBLIC THEOLOGY: AFRICAN BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION AND CONTEMPORARY GLOBAL CRISES

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Abstract

This paper examines the triadic relationship between biblical interpretation, African identity, and emerging global realities. It argues that African identity — rooted in communal philosophy, historical consciousness, and rich cultural heritage — is not antithetical to Christianity but rather a vital hermeneutical resource for authentic biblical engagement. The paper explores how colonial-era missionary Christianity imposed Western interpretations of Scripture that destabilised African self-understanding, and how contemporary African theologians and scholars are reclaiming indigenous hermeneutical lenses. It further evaluates how globalisation, digital technology, migration, urbanisation, and transnational religious movements pose both opportunities and challenges to African identity. Drawing on concepts such as Ubuntu, inculturation, and prophetic public theology, the paper proposes practical remedies for preserving African cultural identity while engaging Scripture and global realities responsibly. The paper concludes with a call for prophetic faithfulness and public theological engagement as the most appropriate Christian response to Africa's complex social, ethical, and spiritual challenges in the twenty-first century.

Keywords: *African identity, biblical interpretation, inculturation, globalisation, prophetic theology, Ubuntu, hermeneutics, Nigerian Christianity, cultural heritage*

Introduction

Religious Studies is a rigorous intellectual enterprise that interrogates how human beings construct meaning, identity, and community through religious frameworks. When this intellectual exercise is applied to the African context, it produces some of the most important scholarship of our time, addressing questions that are at once ancient and urgent.

Africa in the twenty-first century stands at a crossroads. Its people are simultaneously heirs of pre-colonial civilisations and participants in a rapidly shifting global order. From the ancient kingdoms of Benin, Mali, and Great Zimbabwe to the digital platforms that connect Lagos to London and Nairobi to New York, African people must continuously negotiate between tradition and modernity, between inherited spiritual frameworks and imported religious paradigms, and between communal identity and the relentless pressure of globalised individualism. In this negotiation, the Bible has played — and continues to play

— an ambivalent role: on the one hand, a tool of colonial subjugation, on the other, a liberating text that Africans have claimed and reinterpreted in deeply creative ways.

This paper, therefore, proposes three things. First, it will offer a substantive analysis of the concept of African identity, examining its psychological, sociological, cultural, and philosophical dimensions with specific reference to Yoruba, Igbo, and Hausa communities in Nigeria. Second, it will trace the history and trajectory of biblical interpretation in Africa, attending particularly to how colonial hermeneutics distorted African identity and to how African theological scholars have responded. Third, it will analyse the emerging global realities that currently challenge African identity — from globalisation and migration to Pentecostal theology and digital culture — and propose both theological and practical remedies. Throughout, the paper will draw on recent scholarly literature to situate its arguments within contemporary academic discourse.

Understanding African Identity: Foundations and Characteristics

Identity is among the most contested concepts in the social sciences and humanities. It refers, at its most basic level, to how individuals and groups understand and present themselves to others. However, this apparently simple definition conceals enormous complexity. Identity is simultaneously psychological, sociological, cultural, philosophical, and political. It is dynamic rather than static, relational rather than solitary, and contested rather than given.

When examined in the African context, identity takes on specific characteristics that distinguish it from Western liberal conceptions of selfhood. Erik Erikson's influential model of individual identity development, for instance, emphasises the autonomous formation of a personal sense of self across the life stages. While Erikson's framework has value, it is insufficient to explain African identity formation, which is fundamentally communal. In African societies, personhood is not self-constructed in isolation but is achieved through relationships, belonging, and social responsibility. This is captured in the widely cited Nguni philosophical concept of Ubuntu — rendered in Zulu as umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu, meaning 'a person is a person through other persons'.[1] Ubuntu holds that one's humanity is not a private possession but an achievement realised through ethical engagement with others.

Sociologically, African identity is embedded in kinship systems, lineage, age grades, and communal institutions. George Herbert Mead's theory of symbolic interactionism, which holds that the self emerges through social interaction, is productive here — but must be enriched by attention to the specific forms of social interaction prevalent in African societies. Among the Yoruba, for instance, identity is tied to lineage (idile), chieftaincy

[1] Thaddeus Metz, “Toward an African Moral Theory,” *Journal of Political Philosophy* 15, no. 3 (2007): 321–41.

titles, and communal membership. Among the Igbo, age-grade systems and community councils shape how individuals understand their roles and responsibilities. Among the Hausa, identity is structured by the emirate system, Islamic frameworks, and occupational guilds.

Culturally, African identity is expressed through language, dress, music, oral tradition, rites of passage, and religious practice. These cultural markers are not mere ornaments; they carry cosmological weight and transmit moral knowledge across generations. The Yoruba naming ceremony (Ìkómọ̀lè), the Igbo masquerade traditions, and Hausa communal storytelling practices are all, in different ways, technologies of identity transmission — mechanisms through which communities reproduce their values and ensure their continuity. As Mbiti argues, African religious and cultural practices are inseparable: 'Africans are notoriously religious,' and religion permeates every dimension of communal life.[2]

Henri Tajfel's Social Identity Theory is particularly useful in the Nigerian context, where ethnic, regional, and religious affiliations powerfully structure self-understanding and intergroup relations. Yoruba, Igbo, and Hausa identities each carry strong in-group associations, and their interactions have shaped — and continue to shape — Nigeria's political landscape. However, this does not mean that these identities are fixed or essentially antagonistic. On the contrary, as Appiah argues, African identities are constructed, multiple, and subject to revision.[3] A young Igbo Christian woman in Lagos may simultaneously identify as Igbo, Christian, Nigerian, and African — each identity activated differently in different contexts.

At least eight key features therefore characterise African identity: it is dynamic and changeable; socially constructed; multidimensional; context-dependent; relational and group-based; continuous across generations; expressed through cultural symbols; and profoundly shaped by history and power. The colonial encounter, in particular, restructured African identities in ways whose effects continue to be felt. Colonialism altered political organisation, religious practice, economic structures, and self-understanding — and any adequate account of contemporary African identity must grapple with this history.

Biblical Interpretation in Africa: From Colonial Imposition to Contextual Hermeneutics

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[2] John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (London: Heinemann, 1969).
[3] Kwame Anthony Appiah, *In My Father's House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

When Christianity arrived on the West African coast in the fifteenth century and expanded dramatically through the missionary movements of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it brought with it a particular hermeneutical tradition: a Western, Eurocentric reading of the Bible that was deeply entangled with colonial ideology. Missionaries frequently interpreted the Scriptures through a civilisational framework in which European culture was seen as the pinnacle of human development. In contrast, African culture was portrayed as primitive, superstitious, and in need of transformation. African traditional religions were labelled 'pagan' and 'demonic,' and conversion to Christianity was understood to require the abandonment of indigenous practices and worldviews.

This created what Dube terms a 'colonising' hermeneutics — a mode of biblical interpretation that served the interests of empire rather than the liberation of the colonised.[4] The Bible was used, for instance, to justify the subordination of African peoples, to validate Western forms of social organisation, and to delegitimise African spiritual traditions. Converts were often compelled to adopt Western names, Western dress, and Western modes of worship, creating a profound rupture between Christian identity and African cultural identity.

However, this is only part of the story. African Christians did not simply receive missionary Christianity passively. From the outset, they resisted, adapted, and reinterpreted the biblical message in ways that resonated with African experience. The emergence of African Independent Churches (AICs) in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries — movements like the Aladura churches in Nigeria — represents an early assertion of African agency in biblical interpretation. These churches incorporated African music, spiritual healing, prayer, and communal identity into Christian worship, refusing the separation between African spirituality and Christian faith that missionary Christianity demanded.

By the mid-twentieth century, African theologians were articulating systematic critiques of Western hermeneutics and constructing alternative frameworks for biblical interpretation. John Mbiti's groundbreaking work argued that African traditional religion constitutes a praeparatio evangelica — a preparation for the gospel — and that biblical themes such as God, creation, and community resonate deeply in African religious thought.[5] E. Bolaji Idowu similarly argued for the indigenisation of Christianity in Africa, insisting that the gospel must be translated into African cultural categories rather than imposed in foreign forms.[6] These arguments laid the foundation for what would become African Theology — a distinctive theological movement that reads Scripture from within African cultural realities.

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[4] Musa W. Dube, *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2000).
[5] Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*.
[6] E. Bolaji Idowu, *Towards an Indigenous Church* (London: Oxford University Press, 1965).

Contemporary African biblical hermeneutics has developed these insights in several directions. The concept of inculturation — reading Scripture in dialogue with African cultural symbols, metaphors, and traditions — has become central to contextual biblical interpretation in Africa. Rather than treating African culture as an obstacle to the gospel, inculturation hermeneutics treats it as a hermeneutical resource: a lens through which the depths of the biblical message can be better understood and more authentically communicated. As Ukpong argues, the goal of contextual hermeneutics is not syncretism but integration — the bringing of the full resources of African culture and Christian Scripture into creative and critical dialogue.[7]

The project of decolonising biblical interpretation has gained renewed urgency in recent years, particularly in the wake of the global Black Lives Matter movement and broader conversations about the legacies of colonialism. African biblical scholars are increasingly challenging the default Eurocentrism of academic theology and proposing alternative hermeneutical frameworks that centre African experiences, epistemologies, and social realities. The Bible, in this framework, is not a Western document imposed on Africa but a text that speaks to all humanity — and that speaks with particular power to those who have experienced oppression, displacement, and the struggle for dignity.

The Impact of Pentecostalism on African Identity

Among the most significant forces shaping both Christianity and African identity in the contemporary period is Pentecostalism. Nigeria is home to some of the largest and most influential Pentecostal churches in the world, and the Pentecostal movement has transformed the continent's religious landscape since the 1970s. Pentecostalism in Africa is not monolithic; it encompasses a wide range of theological orientations and practical approaches. However, certain tendencies within Nigerian and transnational Pentecostalism have had negative implications for African cultural identity.

Perhaps the most influential of these tendencies is the prosperity gospel — the teaching that material wealth is a sign of divine favour and that faithful Christians are entitled to financial abundance. While prosperity theology has deep roots in American Christianity, it has been powerfully amplified by Nigerian Pentecostal leaders and exported across the continent and into the diaspora. Gifford's critical analysis of African Christianity argues that prosperity theology distorts Christian ethics by reducing faith to a mechanism for personal enrichment and by elevating material success above communal responsibility.[8] In

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[7] Justin S. Ukpong, "Developments in Biblical Interpretation in Africa: Historical and Hermeneutical Directions," in *The Bible in Africa: Transactions, Trajectories, and Trends*, ed. Gerald O. West and Musa W. Dube (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 11–28.

[8] Paul Gifford, *Ghana's New Christianity: Pentecostalism in a Globalising African Economy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004).

the African context, this is particularly troubling because it undermines the communal values — sharing, hospitality, solidarity — that are central to African ethical traditions.

A second problematic tendency is what may be called the demonisation of African culture. Many Pentecostal churches, both Nigerian and foreign, teach that African traditional practices are spiritually dangerous — that ancestral veneration, masquerade festivals, and indigenous rites open believers to demonic influence. This teaching echoes the worst aspects of colonial missionary hermeneutics and compounds the cultural alienation that earlier generations of converts experienced. When African Christians are taught that their cultural heritage is evil, the result is shame, self-rejection, and the severance of intergenerational cultural transmission.

Meyer's ethnographic study of Pentecostalism in Ghana demonstrates how the movement's emphasis on a radical 'break with the past' — including the past of African tradition — produces complex psychological effects in converts, who must simultaneously embrace a new Christian identity and negotiate their continuing embeddedness in African social structures.[9] The result is often not a clean break but a conflicted double consciousness in which African Christians feel unable to be fully themselves in either their religious or their cultural identity.

However, it would be unfair to characterise all Nigerian Pentecostalism as hostile to African identity. Many Pentecostal leaders have developed contextualised theologies that integrate African cultural elements — music, storytelling, communal healing — into Christian practice. Ojo's research demonstrates that some charismatic churches have effectively Africanised Christian worship in ways that strengthen rather than undermine cultural belonging.[10] The challenge is to distinguish between those expressions of Pentecostalism that empower African identity and those that erode it, and to use the tools of contextual hermeneutics to critically evaluate Pentecostal theology in light of both Scripture and African cultural wisdom.

Emerging Global Realities and Their Effects on African Identity

The twenty-first century has brought a cluster of global forces that pose profound challenges to African identity. These forces — globalisation, digital technology, migration, urbanisation, climate change, and political transformation — are not simply external pressures impinging on a stable African identity. Rather, they interact with existing social structures, cultural practices, and religious frameworks in complex and often contradictory

[9] Birgit Meyer, "Make a Complete Break with the Past: Memory and Post-Colonial Modernity in Ghanaian Pentecostalist Discourse," *Journal of Religion in Africa* 28, no. 3 (1998): 316–49.
[10] Matthews A. Ojo, *The End-Time Army: Charismatic Movements in Modern Nigeria* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2006).

ways, producing new hybrid identities, new social conflicts, and new opportunities for cultural creativity.

Globalisation — the intensification of economic, cultural, and informational interconnection across national boundaries — exposes African societies to an unprecedented range of foreign ideas, commodities, and lifestyles. On one hand, this creates new opportunities for cultural exchange and global solidarity. African music, film, literature, and fashion have gained international recognition in the globalisation era: Nollywood films, Afrobeats music, and the work of African writers like Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie have brought African creativity to global audiences and generated new forms of cultural pride. On the other hand, globalisation exerts homogenising pressures that can erode local cultural distinctiveness, particularly among younger generations who are heavily influenced by global media and digital platforms.

Digital technology and social media have transformed the landscape of African identity formation, particularly for young people. The internet provides new spaces for cultural expression, political mobilisation, and the construction of hybrid identities that combine African heritage with global influences. The #EndSARS movement in Nigeria in 2020, which mobilised hundreds of thousands of young Nigerians against police brutality, demonstrates how digital platforms can serve as vehicles for articulating a distinctly African sense of justice, dignity, and civic responsibility. At the same time, digital media also exposes African youth to cultural content — including religious content — from across the world, not all of which is conducive to the flourishing of African values and traditions.

Migration — both within Africa and between Africa and other continents — produces what Bhabha calls a condition of cultural in-betweenness, in which migrants must negotiate between their inherited cultural identities and the demands of their new environments.[11] African diaspora communities in Europe, North America, and elsewhere have developed sophisticated strategies for preserving cultural heritage while adapting to new contexts: maintaining languages, celebrating festivals, sustaining religious communities, and transmitting values to children born outside Africa. These diaspora communities are also important interlocutors in the development of African theology, bringing perspectives shaped by experiences of racism, marginalisation, and cultural survival.

Urbanisation is transforming African societies rapidly. Cities like Lagos, Nairobi, Johannesburg, and Kinshasa are among the fastest-growing in the world, and the movement of millions of people from rural to urban environments disrupts the communal structures and cultural practices through which African identity has traditionally been transmitted. Urban environments create new possibilities for social mixing and cultural creativity. However, they also expose individuals to the pressures of anonymous, competitive, and individualistic social environments that contrast sharply with the communal ethos of rural

[11] Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994).

African life. The challenge is to find ways of sustaining communal values and cultural continuity in urbanised contexts.

Biblical Resources for the Affirmation of African Identity

Far from being incompatible with African identity, the Christian Scriptures contain rich resources for its affirmation and enrichment. A careful reading of the Bible reveals a God who celebrates cultural diversity, affirms human dignity, and calls communities to live in solidarity and justice — principles that resonate deeply with African values and worldviews.

The foundational biblical affirmation of human identity is the doctrine of the Imago Dei — the teaching that all human beings are created in the image of God.[12] This doctrine has profound implications for African identity: it establishes that African people, in all their cultural diversity, are bearers of the divine image and are therefore entitled to dignity, respect, and justice. In the context of Africa's history of colonialism, slavery, and racism — all of which denied or diminished the humanity of African people — the Imago Dei is not merely a theological abstraction but a powerful resource for identity reclamation and social transformation.

The Pentecost narrative in Acts 2 offers another biblical model for cultural diversity within the Christian community. At Pentecost, the Spirit of God is poured out on people 'from every nation under heaven',[13] and each person hears the proclamation in their own language. This is a powerful image of the Spirit's affirmation of cultural particularity within the universal community of faith. Rather than erasing cultural difference, the Spirit sanctifies it, making each culture a vehicle for the divine word. This has significant implications for African biblical hermeneutics: it suggests that the gospel is not best communicated through a single cultural form (such as Western Christianity) but must be re-expressed in each cultural context.

The prophetic tradition of the Hebrew Bible — particularly the writings of Amos, Isaiah, and Jeremiah — provides a robust framework for prophetic engagement with social injustice. These prophets spoke truth to power, condemned the oppression of people with low incomes, and called their communities to accountability. Their witness resonates powerfully with the African prophetic tradition, in which spiritually inspired leaders have historically served as custodians of communal morality and social justice. African theologians like Desmond Tutu have drawn on this tradition to articulate a distinctively African prophetic theology that combines biblical faithfulness with social engagement and cultural affirmation.

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[12] Genesis 1:27.
[13] Acts 2:5.

The Book of Daniel offers a model for maintaining cultural and spiritual integrity amid pressure to conform. Daniel and his companions refuse to abandon their distinctive practices and beliefs even in the context of a foreign empire — but they do so not through withdrawal from the world but through engaged, intelligent, and courageous participation in public life. This model is instructive for African Christians navigating the pressures of globalisation and cultural change: it is possible to be fully engaged with the world while remaining grounded in one's cultural and spiritual heritage.

Prophetic Faithfulness and Public Theology in the African Context

One of the most important frameworks for understanding the responsibilities of African Christians in the contemporary world is the interface between prophetic faithfulness and public theology. Prophetic faithfulness in the biblical tradition denotes the courage to proclaim God's truth and justice, regardless of personal cost or societal pressure. The prophets of Israel were not merely predictors of the future; they were moral critics of their societies, calling communities to accountability and pointing towards God's vision of a just social order. Public theology, on the other hand, refers to the application of theological reflection to the challenges of public life — governance, human rights, social policy, environmental stewardship, and community development.

In the African context, the interface between prophetic faithfulness and public theology is particularly urgent. Political corruption, ethnic conflict, economic inequality, gender injustice, and human rights abuses are pervasive features of many African societies, and they demand a theological response that is both courageous and constructive. When prophetic courage meets public theology, faith becomes a force for systemic transformation rather than merely personal consolation.

Kalu's monumental survey of African Pentecostalism argues that the movement's initial social conservatism — its tendency to prioritise personal salvation over social transformation — is increasingly being challenged by a new generation of African Christian leaders who are integrating prophetic faithfulness with engagement in civil society, advocacy, and political critique.[14] This is an important development, because it suggests that African Christianity has the internal resources to move beyond the privatisation of faith and to engage with the public dimensions of the gospel.

The role of theologians in this project is crucial. Theologians are not merely academic specialists; they are the intellectual custodians of the Christian tradition, responsible for ensuring that the resources of Scripture and theological reflection are brought to bear on the pressing challenges of their time and place. African theologians are called to articulate a contextualised African Christianity that affirms cultural identity while maintaining

[14] Ogbu Kalu, *African Pentecostalism: An Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

biblical fidelity; to develop public theologies that engage with governance, social justice, and human rights; and to equip church leaders and communities with the intellectual and spiritual resources to be agents of transformation in their societies.

This requires, among other things, a willingness to engage critically with the legacies of both colonialism and globalisation, and to resist the temptation to adopt either Western liberal or Western conservative theological frameworks uncritically. African theology must be genuinely African — rooted in the soil of African experience, shaped by African philosophical wisdom, and responsive to African social realities — while remaining in creative dialogue with the global theological conversation.

Practical Remedies for Preserving African Identity in a Global Context

Having analysed the challenges facing African identity in the contemporary period, the paper now proposes a series of practical remedies. These are not abstract prescriptions but concrete strategies that can be implemented at the family, church, school, community, and state levels.

The first remedy is to promote cultural education and awareness. African history, languages, oral traditions, and cultural practices must be integrated systematically into educational curricula at all levels. The aim is not the uncritical celebration of tradition but the cultivation of informed cultural literacy — the capacity to engage with one's heritage with both pride and critical discernment. When young Yoruba students understand the philosophical depth of the Egungun masquerade tradition, or young Igbo students appreciate the ethical wisdom encoded in age-grade systems, they are better equipped to navigate the pressures of globalisation without losing their cultural moorings.

The second remedy is the encouragement of contextualised biblical interpretation. Churches, seminaries, and theological institutions should foster approaches to Scripture that take African culture seriously as a hermeneutical resource. Preachers and teachers should be trained to read the Bible in dialogue with African proverbs, metaphors, communal values, and social realities. This does not mean relativising the authority of Scripture, but rather taking seriously the principle that God speaks to all people in their own languages and cultural frameworks.

The third remedy is to promote intergenerational dialogue. In African societies, the transmission of cultural knowledge has traditionally been the responsibility of elders, who served as custodians of communal memory and moral wisdom. Contemporary urbanisation and digital culture have disrupted these intergenerational channels of transmission. It is therefore important to create intentional spaces — in families, churches, schools, and community organisations — for elders and youth to engage in sustained dialogue about identity, values, and the challenges of contemporary life.

Fourth, governments and civil society organisations must invest in protecting and promoting cultural heritage. This includes funding for museums, cultural festivals, language preservation initiatives, and the documentation of oral traditions and indigenous knowledge systems. UNESCO's programmes for the protection of African intangible cultural heritage provide one model for how this can be done. However, national and local governments must also take ownership of this responsibility.

Fifth, African Christians and theologians must engage critically and constructively with the global church, bringing their distinctive perspectives on justice, community, and spirituality to the international theological conversation. African Christianity is not simply a recipient of theological insights produced elsewhere; it is a theological tradition in its own right, with wisdom to offer the global church about communal ethics, prophetic faithfulness, and the integration of spirituality with social responsibility.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that the relationship between biblical interpretation, African identity, and emerging global realities is one of profound complexity, creative tension, and urgent significance. African identity, rooted in communal philosophy, cultural heritage, and historical consciousness, is not a relic of the past to be superseded by modernity or Christianity. It is a living resource — a wellspring of wisdom, solidarity, and resilience — that has much to offer both the African church and the global Christian community.

The history of biblical interpretation in Africa is a story of both oppression and liberation. Colonial missionaries used the Bible to destabilise African identity and impose Western cultural norms; African theologians and believers have used the same Bible to reclaim their dignity, affirm their heritage, and articulate a vision of justice and community that speaks to the deepest aspirations of African society. This dual history calls for a hermeneutics of both critical awareness and creative engagement — a willingness to interrogate how Scripture has been misused and a commitment to reading the Bible in ways that liberate and empower.

Emerging global realities — globalisation, Pentecostalism, digital technology, migration, and urbanisation — pose genuine challenges to African identity, but they also create new opportunities for cultural creativity, global witness, and theological innovation. The task before African Christians and theologians is to navigate these realities with wisdom, courage, and fidelity — preserving what is life-giving in African heritage while engaging critically with the forces that threaten to erode it.

The time for this engagement is now. It begins in spaces like this conference, where scholars, theologians, and practitioners gather to think seriously about the challenges of their time. It continues in churches, schools, communities, and families, where the work of identity formation, cultural transmission, and prophetic witness goes on every day.

Moreover, it extends into the public square, where African Christians are called to bring the resources of their faith, their culture, and their intellect to bear on the great challenges of justice, peace, and human dignity that define the twenty-first century.

Africa stands at a critical crossroads. The choices made now — about how to interpret Scripture, how to understand and transmit cultural identity, and how to engage with global forces — will shape the character of African Christianity and African society for generations to come. May those choices be made with wisdom, courage, and faithfulness.

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CHAPTER 4

READING THE GALATIAN EPISTLE AS A LAWYER: A FORENSIC-RHETORICAL MODEL FOR AFRICAN BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION

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Abstract

Despite the growing body of African biblical research connected with Ukpong (2000), West and Dube (2021), and Dube, Mbuvi, and Mbuwayesango (2024), a forensic-rhetorical interpretation of Galatians based on African legal traditions is relatively untapped. This study argues that African biblical interpreters might extend their exegetical engagement with Paul's Epistle to the Galatians by using forensic rhetoric and Greco-Roman legal practice as analytical lenses; an approach that is naturally aligned with African community traditions in which conflicts are resolved by persuasive argumentation, precedent reference, and authoritative witness. Paul authored Galatians as a forensic discourse, employing legal jargon, evidential logic, and courtroom norms identifiable throughout Mediterranean and African legal cultures. Drawing on Tolmie's (2023) rhetorical analyses, this paper advances three arguments: first, that Galatians conforms to the classical forensic pattern of exordium, narratio, probatio, refutatio, and peroratio, with Paul prosecuting the case for justification by faith against the Judaizers' legalistic counter-claim; second, that Paul employs precise legal concepts; dikaiōsis, huiothesia, klēronomia, and exagorazō rooted in first-century Greco-Roman and Jewish jurisprudence; and third, that this forensic structure resonates distinctively with African audiences whose cultures have long centred oral advocacy, elder arbitration, kinship obligation, and inheritance adjudication as normative modes of conflict resolution. The study contends that African identity, formed by juridical communalism, covenantal kinship, and oral legal tradition, is not incidental to the understanding of Galatians, but rather one major interpretative context among many in the growing global theological scene.

Keywords: *Galatians; forensic rhetoric; African hermeneutics; legal interpretation; African identity; Pauline theology; African customary law; juridical hermeneutics*

INTRODUCTION

The Epistle to the Galatians is among Paul's most theologically focused and rhetorically accurate works. Its forensic nature has been acknowledged since Betz's important 1979

commentary, but its implications for African biblical interpretation is surprisingly limited.[1] As previously stated,[2][3][4] this corpus of study has not yet comprehensively addressed Galatians' forensic-rhetorical architecture as a point of resonance with African judicial culture. This omission is critical since the letter's forensic features function as both an exegetical key and a culturally appropriate framework that many African readers may find beneficial.

The conference's subject, "Biblical Interpretation, African Identity, and Emerging Global Realities," highlights this disparity. In an era of rising globalization, neocolonial economic pressures, contested land rights, and fast cultural change, African communities must navigate concerns of identity, belonging, and legal status with fresh urgency. The Epistle to the Galatians, which is essentially a debate about who legally belongs to the covenant community, who inherits the promise, and under what legal conditions freedom and full participation are allowed addresses these problems directly. A forensic-rhetorical interpretation, based on both Greco-Roman legal convention and African juridical tradition, presents the letter to African communities as a document that already argues in a legal register they are familiar with, rather than a Western theological artifact that needs to be culturally translated.

This paper contends that a forensic-rhetorical framework applied to Galatians provides African biblical interpreters with a uniquely successful model of exegesis. This is anchored not just in Western academic traditions but also in modes of legal reasoning that are familiar to indigenous African practice: oral pleading, elder-mediated arbitration, kinship-based jurisprudence, and community inheritance adjudication. The results are cultural commonalities between Greco-Roman forensic norm and African juridical tradition offer

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[1]Hans Dieter Betz, Galatians: A Commentary on Paul's Letter to the Churches in Galatia (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979), 14–25.

[2]Justin S. Ukpong, "Developments in Biblical Interpretation in Africa: Historical and Hermeneutical Directions," in The Bible in Africa: Transactions, Trajectories, and Trends, ed. Gerald O. West and Musa W. Dube (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 11–28.

[3]Gerald O. West and Musa W. Dube, eds., The Bible in Africa: Transactions, Trajectories, and Trends (Leiden: Brill, 2000; repr. 2021), 3.

[4]Musa W. Dube, Andrew M. Mbuvi, and Dora R. Mbuwayesango, eds., Postcolonial Perspectives in African Biblical Interpretations (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2012; repr. 2024), xv–xxii.

a hermeneutical arena in which Pauline theology speaks to African societies with a force and urgency that conventional Western commentary seldom unlocks.[5]

The paper pursues three objectives: to demonstrate that Galatians adheres to a classical forensic structure and portrays Paul as a legal advocate within an ongoing theological dispute; to conduct a jurisprudential analysis of the principal legal terms *dikaiōsis*, *huiothesia*, *klēronomia*, and *exagorazō*; and to map these terms onto African juridical traditions to assess the hermeneutical yield of this cross-cultural comparison. In pursuing these objectives, the paper integrates Western rhetorical-critical scholarship with African contextual hermeneutics, synthesizing them into a hybrid model that is methodologically robust and culturally productive.

The Conference Theme and the Hermeneutical Challenge

The topic "Biblical Interpretation, African Identity, and Emerging Global Realities" presents African biblical scholars with three challenges: it requires critical engagement with the ways in which Scripture is read (biblical interpretation); It contends that the problem of who is reading and from what cultural location matters tremendously (African identity); and it positions this entire endeavor inside a rapidly changing global world where factors like digital globalization, economic marginalization, political instability, and cultural hybridization change the concerns African people bring to the biblical text (emerging global realities).[6]

All three aspects of this difficulty are addressed by a forensic-rhetorical interpretation of Galatians. It provides forensic critique, a reading technique that is both culturally relevant to African legal systems and strictly scholarly. It emphasizes the interpretive potential of African communities, whose legal knowledge is sometimes dismissed as outdated or badly developed. It also demonstrates how Pauline theology remains relevant to communities. It

[5]D. Francois Tolmie, Persuading the Galatians: A Text-Centred Rhetorical Analysis of a Pauline Letter (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005), 1–12; Tolmie, "Rhetorical Analysis of Galatians Revisited," Neotestamentica 57, no. 1 (2023): 45–72.

[6]The conference theme, "Biblical Interpretation, African Identity, and Emerging Global Realities," explicitly calls for engagement with how global hermeneutical forces reshape African selfhood and biblical reading practices. This study responds directly to that call by situating the forensic-rhetorical reading of Galatians within the contested space of African theological identity formation. See also Justin S. Ukpong, "Inculturation as the Hermeneutical Framework for African Biblical Scholarship," Missionalia 24, no. 3 (1996): 338–60.

does do by dealing with questions of legal identity, inheritance rights, and covenantal participation in a world that is becoming increasingly difficult. Reading Galatians as a lawyer from an African legal system entails retrieving a feature of the text that may only be fully obvious from an African viewpoint, rather than applying a Western approach to an African context.

Background and Significance

How African societies interpret the Bible has far-reaching ramifications for both theological purity and cultural identity. Colonial research has so far routinely subjected African hermeneutical resources to Western interpretative frameworks. This is so by repressing the understanding that African traditions may serve as acceptable and enriching beginning points for biblical interpretation.[7] Since the late twentieth century, African biblical research has consistently challenged this subordination. It claims that African communal values, oral traditions, family ties, and legal practices serve as viable lenses through which to read Scripture. The field has grown to the point where it can move beyond generic advocacy for African readings. It can show, via careful textual analysis, how unique African cultural resources provide exegetical insights that Western research has not yet achieved. The legal elements of Galatians provide a convincing test case for this theory. Traditionally, African communities have handled conflicts by oral debate, elder mediation, and communally authoritative rulings. This is based on precedent, witness, and familial duty, rather than written regulations administered by distant courts. These are the legal forms Paul mobilizes in Galatians.

Recognizing this convergence simultaneously illuminates the internal logic of the letter and validates African juridical wisdom as a hermeneutical resource of the first order. African legal experience is, this paper argues, a significant and currently underexplored interpretive context for Paul's argument in Galatians. This is not because African legal culture mimics Greco-Roman law, but because, on the evidence considered in section 4.3,

[7]Max Gluckman, The Judicial Process among the Barotse of Northern Rhodesia (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1955), 1–45; Simon Roberts, Order and Dispute: An Introduction to Legal Anthropology (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979), 57–82.

both traditions share elements of a structural commitment to the social power of spoken advocacy, communal adjudication, and the binding force of covenant.

Research Questions

Three questions guide this study: (1) In what ways does Galatians conform to the forensic rhetorical conventions of classical antiquity? (2) What legal concepts does Paul deploy, and how do they function within Greco-Roman and Jewish jurisprudence? (3) In what ways do these forensic features resonate with African juridical traditions, and what hermeneutical insights does this resonance generate for African biblical interpretation, African identity formation, and engagement with emerging global realities?

LITERATURE REVIEW

African Biblical Scholarship

Since the turn of the millennium, African biblical research has progressed along multiple interwoven trajectories, each of which adds to the current paper's hermeneutical framework. Ukpong's inculturation hermeneutics, which engages African cultural resources in fruitful conversation with the biblical text, serves as the core methodological perspective.[8] Ukpong defines inculturation as a contextual reading method that permits the biblical message to be heard anew via African community life, values, and worldviews, rather than as a sort of syncretism. Crucially, inculturation hermeneutics insists that the cultural resources of African readers are not obstacles to faithful interpretation, but conditions of its possibility. This paper’s claim extends by arguing that African juridical traditions, specifically, are a resource for unlocking dimensions of Galatians that remain opaque to other reading traditions.

West and Dube's edited volume *The Bible in Africa* constitutes the most comprehensive mapping of African biblical interpretation to date.[9] The editors locate African scholarship within the global frameworks of postcolonialism, liberation theology, and feminist hermeneutics, demonstrating both its interpretive diversity and scholarly rigor. West's subsequent work on "ordinary readers" and community-based Bible study has been

[8]Ukpong, "Inculturation as the Hermeneutical Framework," 338–60.
[9]West and Dube, The Bible in Africa, 57–75.

especially significant, arguing that non-professional African readers bring legitimate hermeneutical authority derived from lived experience.[10] This argument is directly pertinent to the present paper: African community elders, legal practitioners, and ordinary litigants who participate in customary dispute resolution are, in West's sense, "ordinary readers" of social and legal life. He claimed that their expertise constitutes a valid hermeneutical resource for reading Galatians.

Dube, Mbuvi, and Mbuwayesango's 2024 collection, which explores how colonial legacies continue to influence both the texts under study and the interpretative approaches employed to them, is the most rigorous development of the postcolonial dimension of African biblical interpretation. The conference issue of African identity under global forces overlaps at key points with Dube's larger project of postcolonial feminist hermeneutics. He examines the interconnections of race, gender, and colonial power in Scripture.[11] These two orientations are not straightforwardly compatible: While Dube's postcolonial hermeneutic cautions that drawing comparisons between biblical and African categories might themselves reinforce colonial patterns of domestication if the power disparities between the two are not taken into consideration, Ukpong's inculturation model views African cultural elements, particularly legal ones, as valid positive lenses through which the text can be read afresh. Instead of seeing them as simply cumulative, the current study must explicitly maintain them in tension since it draws on both: The following forensic-cultural analogy is presented as a hermeneutical resource in Ukpong's meaning, but it is nevertheless vulnerable to Dube's warning that it may reduce African juridical particularity to an illustrative parallel for a Western-derived reading rather than functioning as a stand-alone interpretative authority. This issue is specifically addressed in sections 3.3 and 4.3 below. The most immediately applicable African commentary on the letter under consideration in this study is Ngewa's commentary on Galatians in the Africa Bible Commentary Series. There, he provides a pastoral African contextual interpretation by addressing the epistle's engagement with law, freedom, and identity within African ecclesial experience.[12]

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[10]Gerald O. West, The Academy of the Poor: Towards a Dialogical Reading of the Bible (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 33–55.

[11]Dube, Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible, 100–128.

[12]Samuel Ngewa, Galatians, Africa Bible Commentary Series (Nairobi: HippoBooks/WordAlive, 2010), 1–15.

Forensic Rhetoric and Rhetorical Criticism

The application of classical rhetorical categories to New Testament texts has a well-established and productive history. Kennedy's foundational study provided a systematic framework for identifying the species of rhetoric operative in New Testament letters and analyzing their argumentative structure. It also attempts on drawing on Aristotle's tripartite classification of rhetoric into forensic, deliberative, and epideictic; Cicero's forensic refinements; and Quintilian's comprehensive treatment of legal oratory.[1314] Kennedy's work made available to New Testament scholars a set of analytically precise tools whose application to the Pauline corpus has proven consistently fruitful.

Betz's 1979 commentary on Galatians, which identifies the letter as an apologetic composition adhering to the rules of court oratory as defined in Greco-Roman rhetorical handbooks, continues to be the seminal work in forensic-rhetorical reading of the epistle.[15] Although Longenecker's later counterargument, that the letter more closely resembles deliberative rhetoric represents a significant correction, Betz's identification of forensic features as structurally crucial to the letter remains valid.[16] Because Galatians is directed to the Galatians themselves as the party whose future conduct is at risk and because its hortatory content (5:1–6:10) sits awkwardly inside a strictly forensic structure, Longenecker's argument is based on Aristotle's own criteria that deliberative rhetoric concerns future benefit while forensic rhetoric concerns past fairness. Here, this point is addressed rather than rejected for two reasons. First, Betz's forensic categorization simply requires that the letter's argumentative core (1:6–4:31) adopt the evidence logic, precedent-citation, and verdict-oriented structure of a legal defense, as section 4.1 below explains in detail. It is not necessary that every unit of the letter operate as courtroom oratory addressed to a third-party judge.

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[13]George A. Kennedy, New Testament Interpretation through Rhetorical Criticism (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984), 144–52; David E. Aune, The Westminster Dictionary of New Testament and Early Christian Literature and Rhetoric (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003), 196–201.

[14]Aristotle, Rhetoric, trans. W. Rhys Roberts (New York: Modern Library, 1954), 1.3 (1358b); Cicero, De Inventione, trans. H. M. Hubbell, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1949), 1.5.7; Quintilian, Institutio Oratoria, trans. Donald A. Russell, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 3.4.12–16.

[15]Betz, Galatians, 14–25; Tolmie, Persuading the Galatians, 33–72.

[16]Richard N. Longenecker, Galatians, Word Biblical Commentary 41 (Dallas: Word Books, 1990), cxv–cxix.

Second, rather than being proof of a completely distinct rhetorical species, the last exhortation (5:1–6:18) might be seen as carrying out the remedy or sentencing phase that follows a decision in ancient judicial practice. This is a mixed structure that is repeated elsewhere in Paul's letters. According to this interpretation, Galatians is not only forensic in Aristotle's rigorous taxonomy but also forensic in its predominant argumentative logic, with the deliberative content relying on and subservient to the legal decision Paul has previously fought for. This distinction enhances rather than negates Longenecker's criticism. The most thorough and methodologically sound application of rhetorical critique to Galatians in contemporary research may be found in Tolmie's Persuading the Galatians (2005) and his updated rhetorical evaluations (2014, 2023).[17] The main methodological model for the analysis conducted in section four of this research is Tolmie's text-centered approach. It emphasizes analyzing the letter's rhetorical elements intra-textually rather than against generic templates.

Paul's Legal Formation and the Galatian Context

Paul's remarkable dual formation was the source of his forensic expertise. He was entrenched in the tradition of legal interpretation and precedent-based arguments that served as the foundation of Jewish jurisprudence as a Pharisee schooled in halakhic reasoning. He was equally comfortable with Greco-Roman forensic speech norms as a first-century learned Roman citizen.[18] Paul's involvement with the law displays the thinking of a trained legal thinker who understood the system he criticized from within he demonstrated that he was not just as an outsider polemicizing against legalism but as an insider who grasped the specific structural faults of the position he was deconstructing, as Sanders' seminal research showed.[19]

The Galatian crisis was itself a legal dispute of the highest stakes. The Judaizing teachers' insistence on circumcision and Torah observance for Gentile converts represented, in Paul's view, a fundamental misrepresentation of the gospel he had delivered. He saw it as a fraudulent revision of the terms of the covenant. His response mobilizes the full resources

[17]Tolmie, Persuading the Galatians, 44–58; Tolmie, "Rhetorical Analysis of Galatians Revisited," 55–68.
[18]E. P. Sanders, Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977), 431–523; Martin Hengel, The Pre-Christian Paul, trans. John Bowden (London: SCM, 1991), 18–39.
[19]Sanders, Paul and Palestinian Judaism, 441–46.

of forensic advocacy: the summoning of witnesses, the citation of legal precedents, the construction of evidential arguments, and the issuing of a formal legal verdict against the opposing position.[20] The letter is, in the most precise sense, Paul's legal brief, submitted to the community of Galatia as the adjudicating assembly.

African Juridical Traditions

African juridical traditions represent a rich yet underutilized resource for biblical hermeneutics. Gluckman's pioneering anthropological studies of the Barotse and other African peoples documented the sophisticated procedural and substantive legal reasoning operative in African dispute resolution. That is decisively challenging the colonial assumption that oral legal traditions were necessarily less developed or rigorous than written legal codes.[21] Pospisil's comparative legal anthropology further demonstrated that African customary legal systems exhibit recognizable features of all legal systems: norms, authority, obligation, and sanction, applied through oral advocacy, elder deliberation, and community adjudication.

In theological literature, Mbiti's African Religions and Philosophy offers the crucial cosmological and community foundation for African legal practice. It illustrates that law in African civilizations is inextricably linked to religion, kinship, and cosmology.[22] Bediako's Theology and Identity illustrates how African cultural identity is formed via webs of responsibility, covenant, and communal membership that are both social and religious in nature.[23] These works demonstrate that in African customary law, inheritance conflicts, covenant duties, and kinship rights are not just legal issues, but also theological considerations of the utmost importance. This makes Paul's use of inheritance, adoption, and covenant in Galatians especially relevant to African audiences.

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[20]Philip F. Esler, Galatians (London: Routledge, 1998), 62–70; James D. G. Dunn, The Epistle to the Galatians, Black's New Testament Commentary (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1993), 9–11.

[21]Gluckman, The Judicial Process among the Barotse, 19–67; Leopold Pospisil, Anthropology of Law: A Comparative Theory (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), 39–96.

[22]John S. Mbiti, African Religions and Philosophy, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Heinemann, 1990), 103–29.

[23]Kwame Bediako, Theology and Identity: The Impact of Culture upon Christian Thought in the Second Century and in Modern Africa (Oxford: Regnum Books, 1992), 225–65.

METHODOLOGY

Rhetorical-Critical Analysis

This study employs rhetorical-critical analysis as its primary method, drawing on the classical forensic framework developed by Kennedy and applied to Galatians by Betz and Tolmie.[2425] Rhetorical criticism identifies the species of rhetoric operative in a text, analyses its argumentative structure, and evaluates the effectiveness of its persuasive strategies. Applied to Galatians, this enables systematic mapping of the letter's forensic architecture: its *exordium*, *narratio*, *propositio*, *probatio*, *refutatio*, and *peroratio* and detailed analysis of the legal concepts and argumentative strategies deployed at each stage. The study prioritizes a text-centred approach that attends carefully to the actual language, structure, and rhetorical moves of the letter itself. This guards against the imposition of external frameworks on the text and ensures that the forensic reading emerges from the letter's own communicative dynamics. Tolmie's insistence on intra-textual analysis, which is a way of reading each unit in relation to the letter as a whole provides the methodological discipline that governs the analysis in section four.[26]

African Contextual Hermeneutics

African contextual hermeneutics serves as the study's second methodological pillar. Following Ukpong's inculturation model, African cultural resources, including juridical traditions, are treated not merely as illustrative parallels but as legitimate hermeneutical lenses. This is capable of illuminating dimensions of the text that Western academic readings have overlooked.[27] The method proceeds through three movements: identifying the relevant African cultural context (here, juridical traditions); bringing that context into dialogue with the biblical text; and evaluating the interpretive insights generated by that dialogue.

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[24]Kennedy, New Testament Interpretation through Rhetorical Criticism, 23–38; Duane F. Watson, "Rhetorical Criticism of the Pauline Epistles since 1975," Currents in Research: Biblical Studies 3 (1995): 219–48.
[25]Betz, Galatians, 14–25; Tolmie, Persuading the Galatians, 33–72.
[26]Tolmie, Persuading the Galatians, 44–58; Longenecker, Galatians, cxix–cxxiv.
[27]Ukpong, "Developments in Biblical Interpretation in Africa," 21–27; Ngewa, Galatians, 1–15.

West's dialogical model, which insists on genuine reciprocity between text and context, avoiding both the domestication of the text to fit African cultural norms and the subordination of African culture to alien textual frameworks, provides the methodological structure for this engagement.[28] Dube's postcolonial framework maintains critical awareness of how colonial hermeneutical legacies may have shaped both the African cultural resources and the Western readings of Galatians being brought into conversation, a critical awareness that the present paper sustains throughout its analysis.[29]

Synthesis: A Hybrid Forensic-Cultural Hermeneutic

The synthesis of rhetorical criticism and African contextual hermeneutics produces what this study terms a hybrid forensic-cultural hermeneutics. This is not a matter of applying Western rhetorical categories to Galatians and then noting their surface resemblance to African legal forms. Rather, it is a true conversation in which one tradition lights and is illuminated by the other. Galatians' forensic structure becomes more analytically clear and culturally vivid when read against the backdrop of African oral legal pleading; African juridical practices acquire fresh theological articulation when examined through the lens of Pauline soteriology.

This hybrid hermeneutic is presented as a contestable proposition that must meet three external requirements, rather than just the plausibility of the readings it generates. First, the forensic categories established in the text (*exordium, narratio, probatio, refutatio, peroratio*) must be independently verifiable against the letter's Greek grammar and argumentation markers rather than being read into the text after the fact. Also, alternative classification, such as Longenecker's deliberative interpretation engaged in section 2.2, must be demonstrated to explain less satisfactorily for particular textual aspects such as the verdict-oriented *propositio* of 2:15-16.

Second, each stated point of resonance between a forensic aspect of Galatians and an African juridical practice must be linked to a specific, specified tradition and a citable source, rather than asserting "African juridical tradition" in general; section 4.3 is crafted

[28]West, The Academy of the Poor, 78–102.

[29]Dube, Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible, 100–128; Dube, "Postcoloniality, Feminist Spaces, and Religion," in Postcolonialism, Feminism and Religious Discourse, ed. Laura Donaldson and Kwok Pui-lan (New York: Routledge, 2002), 100–120.

below to satisfy this condition. Its remaining gaps are recognized in section 5.4 as recommendations for future, more localized study rather than presented as already addressed. The pastoral payout of the hermeneutic (clarifying justification from sanctification) is falsifiable in theory. In Paul's usage, the forensic sense of *dikaiōsis* conveys an acquittal, as stated in section 4.2. Otherwise, it fails. On these limits, the hermeneutics' value is available to debate on textual, comparative, and lexical grounds, rather than being assumed just on the basis of producing readings that the author enjoys.

The conference theme, "Biblical Interpretation, African Identity, and Emerging Global Realities," asks for exactly this sort of methodological accountability. This is an approach that takes both the text and the reader's cultural location seriously, as well as an understanding of the global dynamics that influence the setting in which African readers encounter Scripture today.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Forensic Structure of Galatians

Read against the conventions of classical forensic rhetoric, Galatians exhibits a remarkably coherent and purposeful legal architecture. A sectional explanation of these legal architecture, as coined from latin below will share more light.

The ***exordium*** (Gal. 1:1–5), which is the introductory part of the letter opens with Paul's establishment of apostolic authority and framing of the central legal dispute. His self-identification as an apostle commissioned "not from men nor through man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father" (Gal. 1:1) functions as a pre-emptive legal move. This establishes the source and authority of his commission before it can be challenged by opposing counsel. The opening is not, as it might appear, merely a theological assertion; it is a juridical claim about the origin and therefore the standing of the advocate who is about to make the case.[30]

The ***narratio*** (Gal. 1:6–2:21) presents the factual background story of the case through carefully crafted autobiography. Paul describes his conversion, separation from the

[30]Betz, Galatians, 44–46; Ben Witherington III, Grace in Galatia: A Commentary on Paul's Letter to the Galatians (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 68–84.

Jerusalem apostles, encounters with Peter and James, and the ultimate confrontation at Antioch (Gal. 2:11–14). This narrative functions as firsthand testimony; the account of an eyewitness whose credibility Paul has established in the *exordium*. It also establishes the crucial legal precedent that justification by faith was operative among the Jerusalem pillars before the Judaizers arrived in Galatia to revise the terms of the covenant.[31] The Antioch incident (Gal. 2:11–14) is particularly significant as a prior legal determination: Paul presents his public opposition to Peter as a precedent-setting case that effectively pre-adjudicates the Galatian dispute.

The ***propositio,*** which is the claim or thesis of the case, is stated with lapidary precision at Gal. 2:15–16: "we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ." This is the central legal thesis of the entire letter, formulated with the economy and precision characteristic of formal juridical propositions.[32] Everything that follows in the *probatio* and *refutatio* is either evidence for this proposition or rebuttal of the counter-claim.

The ***probatio*** (Gal. 3:1-4:31), which is a section that brings in proofs for his claim presents a wide and complex set of evidential reasons. Paul draws progressively on: the experiential proof of the Galatians' personal receiving of the Spirit (3:1-5); the biblical testimony of Abraham's justification by faith (3:6-9); the curse of the law as recounted in Deuteronomy (3:10-14); the legal principle that a ratified covenant cannot be subsequently revoked (3:15-18); the temporal and educational role of the law as a preliminary guardian (3:19-4:7); and the metaphorical reading of the Sarah-Hagar tale as The diversity and complexity of these arguments represent the forensic approach of a skilled advocate, who uses various evidentiary grounds to ensure that each member of the audience hears at least one argument that is convincing on their own terms.[33]

The ***refutatio*** (Gal. 4:1–5:12), which is the section of rebuttal opposing arguments directly dismantles the opposing case. Paul refutes the Judaizers' idea that Torah adherence is

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[31]James D. G. Dunn, The Theology of Paul the Apostle (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 344–89; N. T. Wright, Paul and the Faithfulness of God (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2013), 2:836–51.
[32]Tolmie, Persuading the Galatians, 90–135.
[33]A. Andrew Das, Paul, the Law, and the Covenant (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2001), 145–88; Thomas R. Schreiner, Galatians, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 177–215.

essential for complete participation in Abraham's covenant family. He defines the law as a temporary custodian (*paidagōgos,* 3:24-25) that is rendered obsolete by the coming of faith. He then performs a particularly effective forensic maneuver by using the Judaizers' own plea to the law against them: "Tell me, you who want to be under the law, do you not listen to the law?" (4:21). This *reductio ad absurdum* (reduction to absurdity) exposes the internal inconsistency of the opposing legal position.[34]

The ***peroratio*** (Gal. 5:13–6:18) concludes the forensic argument with the emotional appeal and moral exhortation characteristic of judicial summation. The call of freedom (5:13), the ethical necessity to walk by the Spirit rather than the body (5:16-26), and Paul's passionate personal recapitulation in his own handwriting (6:11-18) create the rhetorical equivalent of a judge's closing address: an appeal to the moral conscience of the community that must now pronounce its final decision.[35]

Key Legal Concepts in Galatians: A Jurisprudential Analysis

Four legal concepts are central to Paul's forensic argument, and each rewards careful jurisprudential analysis.

Dikaiōsis (justification) carries a specifically forensic connotation in first-century Greco-Roman and Jewish legal usage. As Deissmann's landmark papyrological research demonstrated, the verb *dikaioō* consistently denotes the formal legal act of acquitting an accused party; the declaration that a defendant stands in the right before the law.[36] When Paul argues that a person is "justified" by faith rather than by works of the law (Gal. 2:16), he is deploying a precise legal term to assert that in the court of divine justice, the verdict rendered over the person of faith is "not guilty." The pastoral and theological importance of this precision for African readers is considerable: many African Christian communities have conflated justification with moral performance. This is producing a Christian legalism structurally analogous to the error Paul was combating in Galatia. The forensic reading

[34]J. Louis Martyn, Galatians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary, Anchor Yale Bible 33A (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 303–36; Dunn, The Epistle to the Galatians, 156–81.
[35]Witherington, Grace in Galatia, 320–60; Schreiner, Galatians, 290–322.
[36]Adolf Deissmann, Bible Studies: Contributions Chiefly from Papyri and Inscriptions, trans. Alexander Grieve (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1901), 97–112; Francis Lyall, Slaves, Citizens, Sons: Legal Metaphors in the Epistles (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 67–99.

clarifies that justification is a legal declaration, not a moral achievement, and that sanctification, moral transformation is a distinct and subsequent reality.

In ***Huiothesia*** (adoption, 4:5), complete heir status with all the rights and responsibilities of natural sonship was explicitly granted by adoption, drawing on the long history of Roman adoptive law.[37] The phrase in Paul refers to a formal legal transfer of status and identity. This is not only a romantic tie but a juridical shift with specific implications for rights, obligations, and succession, according to Scott's conclusive exegetical analysis.[38] The Spirit's arrival in Gal. 4:6 constitutes the divine act of adoption, establishing formerly oppressed and disinherited individuals as co-heirs of the covenant promise and legally incorporating them into Abraham's household. The resonance of this idea can be significant for many African readers, whose cultures place a great importance on official adoption procedures, kin group inclusion, and the privileges associated with acknowledged family membership. This assertion is explored in section 4.3 with regard to a particular custom.

Klēronomia (inheritance, 3:18; 4:1, 7) is grounded in Greco-Roman testamentary law, and Paul's argument in Gal. 3:15–18 is precisely the legal principle of the irrevocability of a ratified will. Just as a confirmed human testament cannot be annulled or supplemented by codicils introduced after the fact, so the Abrahamic covenant-promise cannot be annulled by the Mosaic Law introduced four hundred and thirty years later.[39] This is a rigorous piece of legal reasoning; an argument from the formal principle of contractual irrevocability that would have been immediately recognizable to anyone familiar with the conventions of Roman inheritance law. In African contexts, where inheritance disputes are among the most socially consequential of all legal proceedings and where the binding force of ancestral covenants is deeply felt, this argument acquires a cultural resonance that amplifies its theological force considerably.[40]

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[37]James M. Scott, Adoption as Sons of God: An Exegetical Investigation into the Background of ΥΙΟΘΕΣΙΑ in the Pauline Corpus, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 2/48 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1992), 3–57; Trevor J. Burke, Adopted into God's Family: Exploring a Pauline Metaphor, New Studies in Biblical Theology 22 (Downers Grove: IVP, 2006), 23–75.

[38]Scott, Adoption as Sons of God, 180–220; Burke, Adopted into God's Family, 90–130.

[39]Bruce W. Longenecker, The Triumph of Abraham's God: The Transformation of Identity in Galatians (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998), 70–98; Douglas J. Moo, Galatians, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 200–18.

[40]Elias, The Nature of African Customary Law, 161–190, on the transmission and adjudication of inheritance under African customary law.

Exagorazō (redemption, 3:13; 4:5) derives from the legal institution of manumission; the formal purchase of a slave's freedom.[41] Lyall's comprehensive study of legal metaphors in the Pauline letters establishes that *exagorazō* consistently evokes the legal transaction by which a slave is purchased out of servitude and granted a new legal status, either transferred to a new owner or, in its fullest form, liberated entirely. Paul's application of this concept to redemption from the curse of the law (3:13) and from elemental enslavement (4:5) frames salvation as a juridical act of emancipation. This comes with concrete implications for identity, obligation, and the acquisition of new legal rights. In contexts, including many contemporary African contexts where various forms of social bondage, legal exclusion, and structural marginalization remain live realities, this legal framing of salvation carries immediate social and political resonance.

Resonances with African Juridical Traditions

The forensic dimensions of Galatians resonate with African juridical traditions at multiple structurally significant levels. At the most fundamental level, Paul's letter is oral advocacy preserved in written form. As Kennedy and others have established, epistolary composition in the Greco-Roman context was deeply embedded in oral deliberative conventions; a letter functioned as a surrogate for the speaker's physical presence and oral argumentation, intended to be read aloud before an assembled community.[42] This function corresponds directly to the African practice of oral legal advocacy, in which the power of the spoken word; carefully structured, rhetorically effective, and communally delivered is the primary medium through which legal reality is constituted and contested. Paul's letter is, in this sense, already operating within a communicative mode that African legal culture recognizes.

The structural characteristics of African elder arbitration, as reported by Gluckman and Pospisil, closely match the forensic conventions Paul uses in the letter.[43] In addition to using a codified rule, the African elder-adjudicator considers evidence, believability, the relationship implications of conflicting conclusions, and the authoritative rulings of

[41]Lyall, Slaves, Citizens, Sons, 100–167; Moo, Galatians, 260–80.
[42]Kennedy, New Testament Interpretation through Rhetorical Criticism, 144–52; Richard A. Burridge, Four Gospels, One Jesus? A Symbolic Reading, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 22–30.
[43]Gluckman, The Judicial Process among the Barotse, 89–120; Pospisil, Anthropology of Law, 98–140.

respected ancestors as legally binding precedent. Paul's arguing strategy in Galatians is closely comparable to this role: he considers the Galatians' own experience testimony (Gal. 3:1–5), evaluates the societal ramifications of giving in to the Judaizers (Gal. 5:1–4), and frequently cites the Abrahamic covenant as the ultimate ancestral precedent that regulates the current situation (Gal. 3:6–18). The structural parallel reflects a shared understanding of how authoritative legal reasoning operates in communities ruled by oral tradition, elder authority, and covenantal obligation, which goes beyond the surface.

This structural analogy is sharpened by a particular example, which also tackles the danger of interpreting "African juridical tradition" as an undifferentiated totality, as mentioned in this paper's own restrictions (5.4). The ọfọ, an ancestral staff of authority held by the eldest qualified male of a lineage, served as a juridical instrument rather than just a religious item among the Igbo. Evidence sworn while holding it was considered to be bound by ancestral sanction, and a false oath sworn on it bore penalties perceived as simultaneously social and cosmological. This is a convergence of legal process and covenantal responsibility nearly akin to Paul's practice of using divine witness and ancestral precedent, the Abrahamic covenant, to confirm the veracity of his own testimony (Gal. 1:20; 3:15–18).[44]

In Yoruba culture, conflicts were often resolved by a council of elders called an ìgbìmọ̀ àgbà. This system required assessing oral testimony, character witnesses, and precedent from past rulings before a verdict was pronounced and publicly approved by the assembled community. This procedural framework is similar to the communal validation Paul asks from the Galatian assembly itself, the body to whom the letter is directed as adjudicating community.[45] In Igala kingdom, the Atta, who is the king of Igala land is the final authority on major disputes, especially those affecting the whole kingdom. The Achadu, who is the prime minister of the Igala kingdom presides over the council and settles serious cases when the Atta delegates. In most communities and families in Igala kingdom, the disputes are settled not just by proclamation, but by giving opportunities to both parties to verbally defend themselves. This is done before the Abogijo (Council of Elders) at the Atakpa

[44]Chinua Achebe, Things Fall Apart (London: Heinemann, 1958); T. Olawale Elias, The Nature of African Customary Law (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1956), 132–160. [Author to verify page references and confirm the specific passages cited.]

[45]Elias, The Nature of African Customary Law, 161–190; A. N. Allott, Essays in African Law: With Special Reference to the Law of Ghana (London: Butterworths, 1960), 60–95.

(family square, if the matter is trivial), Anuku (clan square, if the matter is more serious and escalatory between respected adults), or Ogba Onu (the village king's palace, if the matter is more grievous that the aforementioned). Everything that happens at this location are oral defenses. These three examples provide as a starting point for the source-based, tradition-specific interaction that section 5.4 specifies as essential; a thorough comparative analysis of either tradition, or more especially of Igala covenantal structures, would necessitate ongoing engagement with African legal literature that is outside the purview of this study.

The family and inheritance aspects of Paul's theory are especially relevant in African cultures, where inheritance extends beyond economic considerations to include social cohesiveness, identity formation, and cosmic order.[46] Paul's argument that faith, rather than lineage or ritual performance, is the determinative condition for Abrahamic inheritance (Gal. 3:7, 29) calls into question exclusionary conceptions of covenant membership in ways that African people, who are regularly denied land rights and ancestral heritage, find theologically and socially appealing.[47] In an developing global reality marked by increased rivalry for land, resources, and belonging, Paul's argument that the inheritance belongs to those linked to Christ by faith, regardless of ethnic or ceremonial qualification, is a message that African people are ideally suited to hear and live.

The covenant concept (*diathēkē*, 3:15) provides a further and particularly profound point of convergence. African social life is structured by networks of covenantal obligations linking the living and the dead, kin groups, and communities with their ancestral land.[48] These covenants, ratified through blood, ritual, and communal witness, are regarded as irrevocably binding; their breach constitutes a transgression against the social and spiritual order of the highest severity. Paul's insistence on the unconditional irrevocability of the divine covenant with Abraham resonates deeply in this framework: for communities who understand covenant as the most binding of all human and cosmic obligations, the claim

[46]Mbiti, African Religions and Philosophy, 141–55; Kwame Bediako, Jesus and the Gospel in Africa: History and Experience (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2004), 22–36.
[47]Ngewa, Galatians, 80–95; Tokunboh Adeyemo, ed., Africa Bible Commentary (Nairobi: WordAlive, 2006), 1395–1400.
[48]Mbiti, African Religions and Philosophy, 141–55; Bediako, Theology and Identity, 228–40.

that God's covenant promise cannot be annulled carries a moral and theological force that requires no cultural translation.

Implications for African Biblical Hermeneutics, Identity, and Emerging Global Realities

The forensic-rhetorical reading of Galatians established in this paper has ramifications that go beyond exegetical methods to the wider problems of African identity and global involvement raised by the conference subject. At the epistemological level, it illustrates that African legal traditions are not extraneous to biblical interpretation, but rather hermeneutical resources capable of revealing aspects of the text that Western academic standards have not traditionally overlooked.[49] This is both a claim about African identity and a claim about method: it contends that African societies contribute to Scripture reading materials whose validity and interpretative force stem from their own internal richness and coherence rather than Western confirmation.

For African theologians and church leaders, the forensic distinction between justification and sanctification that the legal reading clarifies carries direct pastoral significance. In numerous African Christian contexts, the conflation of these doctrines has produced a form of Christian legalism structurally analogous to the error Paul confronted in Galatia: the demand that believers demonstrate their covenant standing through ritual performance, moral achievement, or cultural conformity.[50] The forensic reading makes clear that justification is a declarative legal verdict; a determination of standing rendered by God on the basis of faith in Christ and not a reward for moral or cultural achievement. This clarity has the potential to liberate African Christian communities from performance-based spirituality and to ground their identity in the unconditional grace of divine acquittal.

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[49]The conference theme of "Emerging Global Realities" presses African biblical scholars to consider how globalization, digital culture, and neo-colonial economic structures reshape the social contexts within which African communities read Scripture. A forensic-rhetorical reading of Galatians that attends to inheritance, kinship rights, and legal status is directly relevant to African communities navigating these global pressures. See Dube, Mbuvi, and Mbuwayesango, Postcolonial Perspectives in African Biblical Interpretations, 55–80; West and Dube, The Bible in Africa, 470–510.

[50]Ngewa, Galatians, 44–78; Adeyemo, Africa Bible Commentary, 1391–1404.

The topics of inheritance and adoption, as viewed through African juridical glasses, have direct significance to modern African socio-theological concerns. In situations where access to property, ancestral succession, and communal belonging are challenged by postcolonial land policies, patriarchal inheritance systems that exclude women and orphans, or ethnic marginalization that denies full community membership to minority groups, Paul's proclamation that all who are in Christ are Abraham's seed and heirs according to promise (Gal. 3:29) forms a theological claim with tangible social and legal ramifications.[51] The gospel Paul defends is not a private spiritual transaction but a public legal declaration with communal consequences, and this is precisely the kind of declaration that African communities, formed in the social power of legal verdicts, are best positioned to hear in its full scope.

Furthermore, the Judaizers' insistence that Gentile believers submit to Mosaic law as a condition of full covenant membership is structurally analogous to colonial and neo-colonial demands that African Christians abandon their cultural identity as a condition of theological legitimacy. The history of mission in Africa is in significant part a history of precisely this kind of legal imposition: the demand that African converts divest themselves of indigenous culture, legal tradition, and social practice as the price of full membership in the body of Christ.[52] Paul's forensic rejection of such imposition, as well as his insistence that neither circumcision nor uncircumcision count for anything except faith working through love (Gal. 5:6), constitute a significant theological resource for African theologies of inculturation and liberation as they navigate the developing global realities of cultural homogeneity, neocolonial pressure, and the contentious conditions of global Christian belonging.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Summary of Findings

[51]Tolmie, "Rhetorical Analysis of Galatians Revisited," 55–68; Wright, Paul and the Faithfulness of God, 2:1023–42.

[52]Dube, Mbuvi, and Mbuwayesango, Postcolonial Perspectives in African Biblical Interpretations, 3–20; Dunn, The Theology of Paul the Apostle, 385–96.

This study presented three interrelated arguments. First, Galatians adheres to the classical forensic framework with remarkable clarity, establishing Paul as a legal attorney defending the gospel of salvation by faith against the Judaizers' counter-claim. The exordium, narratio, propositio, probatio, refutatio, and peroratio are analytically valuable categories for understanding how the letter's argument is formed and sustained.[53]

Paul's legal ideas (dikaiōsis, huiothesia, klēronomia, and exagorazō) are based on first-century Greco-Roman and Jewish law, serving as specific legal claims rather than analogies. Attending to their legal uniqueness illuminates the soteriology of the letter, notably the distinction between justification as divine legal acquittal and sanctification as moral transformation. This distinction has profound pastoral consequences in African ecclesial situations.[54]

Third, Galatians' forensic paradigm is inherently compatible with African traditions of oral advocacy, elder arbitration, precedent citation, kinship responsibility, and inheritance adjudication. This resemblance is not coincidental, but structural: it reflects a common understanding of how authoritative legal reasoning operates in societies governed by oral tradition, covenantal responsibility, and communal debate. This common structure offers a hermeneutical space in which African juridical wisdom illuminates Pauline theology, and Pauline theology, in turn, speaks with renewed vigor to African legal and social realities.[55]

Contribution to Scholarship and the Conference Theme

This work adds to African biblical hermeneutics by illustrating the interpretative potential of legal traditions as hermeneutical resources, an aspect of African cultural life that has been underused in comparison to ceremonial, cosmology, and familial studies.[56] It reveals that African legal culture is not incidental to biblical interpretation, but potentially vital to the most rigorous exegesis of books like Galatians, which are inherently legal in nature. More broadly, the paper contributes to the conference theme of "Biblical Interpretation, African Identity, and Emerging Global Realities" by showing that African identity,

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[53]Tolmie, Persuading the Galatians, 44–58; Tolmie, "Rhetorical Analysis of Galatians Revisited," 55–68.
[54]Lyall, Slaves, Citizens, Sons, 136–67; Moo, Galatians, 200–18.
[55]Gluckman, The Judicial Process among the Barotse, 89–120; Pospisil, Anthropology of Law, 98–140.
[56]Oludele Abogunrin, "African Biblical Scholarship," in Dictionary of African Christian Biography, ed. Jonathan J. Bonk (Boston: DACB, 2004), 1:1–15; Teresa Okure, "Feminist Interpretations in Africa," in Searching the Scriptures, ed. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (New York: Crossroad, 1993), 1:76–85.

constituted in part by juridical communalism, covenantal kinship, and oral legal tradition is a hermeneutical asset of the first order in the global theological conversation.

The paper also contributes to Pauline scholarship by advancing the African reception history of Galatians, demonstrating that the letter's forensic dimensions speak with contemporary theological urgency to communities where law, kinship, and covenant remain socially determinative. Western Pauline scholarship has sometimes treated forensic metaphors in Paul as culturally distant abstractions requiring historical reconstruction; African communities, whose social life is structured by many of the same legal categories Paul deploys, may in fact be better positioned than their Western counterparts to grasp the immediate force of his argument.

Recommendations

This study leads to a number of suggestions. In addition to the more well-known techniques of historical criticism and narrative analysis, African theological seminaries and bible studies departments are urged to include forensic-rhetorical analysis in their exegetical training. This is about retrieving a feature of the Pauline text that is specifically accessible from an African legal vantage point, not about adding a Western methodological layer to African biblical instruction. African biblical scholars are encouraged to study particular African legal traditions—Yoruba, Akan, Zulu, Igbo, Kikuyu, Igala, and others—in dialog with certain Pauline passages in order to provide more culturally sophisticated and hermeneutically accurate insights than the current paper's inevitably broad scope allows. The author suggests a pilot postgraduate seminar unit, tentatively dubbed "Reading Paul as Advocate: Forensic Rhetoric and African Customary Adjudication," as a first tangible step. In this unit, a single Pauline letter is read alongside a single specified African juridical tradition (such as Igala covenantal and inheritance systems) in dialog with practitioners of that tradition. This model may be tried at the author's own institution and presented as a case study in a future work.[57]

[57]Victor T. Levine, "African Traditional Legal Systems," in The Oxford Handbook of African Politics, ed. Célestin Monga and Justin Yifu Lin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 124–36; Emmanuel Kenyatta Twesigye, African Religion, Philosophy, and Christianity in Logos-Christ: God Is One (New York: Peter Lang, 2010), 45–68.

Pastors and church leaders in African contexts are encouraged to preach and teach Galatians through the forensic lens developed in this paper, attending especially to justification as divine legal acquittal and to the social and communal implications of inheritance and adoption in Christ. Such preaching has the potential to address the persistent legalism of African Christianity, to liberate communities from performance-based spirituality, and to provide theological grounding for community advocacy on land rights, inheritance justice, and social inclusion.[58] Paul's gospel that he defends is not of a personal bias, but a public legal declaration with communal consequences, and this is something that African communities, formed in the social power of spoken legal verdicts and communal covenants, are uniquely equipped to understand and to embody.

Limitations and Directions for Further Research

This study has engaged African juridical traditions at a necessarily general level, and the diversity of specific African legal systems is far greater than any single paper can adequately represent. A significant limitation is the selectivity required by the scope of the study: the specific legal traditions of particular African peoples; Igbo *ofo* symbolism, Yoruba *ẹjọ* practices, Zulu *inkundla* proceedings, or Igala covenantal structures, among many others deserve focused engagement that this paper has not been able to provide. Future research should pursue these more specific dialogues.[59]

While this paper has focused on Galatians, the forensic-rhetorical model developed here has clear application to other Pauline letters where legal terminology and forensic structures are similarly prominent; Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, and Philippians in particular. Extending this model across the Pauline corpus, and doing so in sustained dialogue with the specific juridical traditions of specific African peoples, represents a significant and generative program of research that would both enrich African biblical hermeneutics and deepen global Pauline scholarship.[60]

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[58]Ched Myers and Elaine Enns, Ambassadors of Reconciliation: New Testament Reflections on Restorative Justice and Peacemaking (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2009), 88–96.

[59]Tite Tiénou, "African Christian Theology in a New World Context," in The Bible in Africa, ed. West and Dube, 522–35; Bediako, Theology and Identity, 260–80.

[60]Ukpong, "Developments in Biblical Interpretation in Africa," 21–27; Ngewa, Galatians, 95–110.

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CHAPTER 5

PAUL'S ADVICE TO TIMOTHY REVISITED: WINE, HEALTH AND CONTEXTUAL BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION IN CONTEMPORARY NIGERIA

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Abstract

This paper examines Paul's instruction in 1 Timothy 5:23 ("use a little wine for your stomach's sake") and asks how it should be interpreted within contemporary Nigerian Christian discourse. The recurrent appeal to the verse to legitimize alcohol consumption raises an interpretive tension: how does a first-century Mediterranean medical directive migrate into a twenty-first-century African setting marked by very different infrastructural, pharmacological, and public-health realities? Drawing on the historical-grammatical method and the African contextual hermeneutic traditions of Justin Ukpong, Gerald West, and David T. Adamo, the study proceeds through a four-stage framework: historical-grammatical reconstruction, principle abstraction, contextual analogy, and ethical-pastoral application. The paper states its criteria of adjudication at the outset: lexical and grammatical evidence takes priority over theological inference, immediate contextual indicators over canonical harmonisation, and competing readings are presented in their strongest form before assessment. Lexical analysis indicates that while oinos denotes a continuum of grape preparations, fermented wine remains its ordinary referent across the New Testament; in 1 Timothy 5:23, contextual indicators specifically favor a fermented preparation used therapeutically and plausibly diluted with water. Consequently, Paul's instruction functions as a personal, context-specific medical directive rather than a general endorsement of alcohol consumption. A distinct excursus on John 2 sets out the temperance reading of the Cana wine as miraculously uncorrupted, presented explicitly as a constructive, confessional inference rather than a demonstrated exegetical result. The paper concludes that while the text's underlying principles (pastoral attentiveness, contextual particularity, the legitimacy of contextually appropriate medical intervention, and the prohibitive-register) migrate directly to contemporary Nigeria, its surface prescription cannot. Advances in modern pharmacology, water treatment, and clinical care provide far superior interventions to dilute wine, rendering the original prescription obsolete even where waterborne illness persists.

***Keywords**: oinos; New Testament wine; alcohol consumption; biblical exegesis; Nigeria; contextual hermeneutics; public health.*

INTRODUCTION

Among New Testament texts cited in contemporary Christian discourse on alcohol, 1 Timothy 5:23 – "No longer drink only water, but use a little wine for your stomach's sake and your frequent infirmities," is particularly prominent, and long contested. Its placement within a chapter concerning widows and elders has prompted some commentators to treat it as a personal aside disrupting the surrounding flow,[1] while others read it as a corrective to an ascetic tendency in Timothy's practice shaped by currents in the Ephesian milieu.[23] It has become a frequent proof text in debates about alcohol, health, morality, and pastoral practice.

In Nigeria the verse acquires particular salience against a complex alcohol landscape. Pre-colonial societies featured indigenous fermented beverages like palm wine, *ogogoro*, *burukutu*, *kai-kai*, *akpuru-achia,* and *pito,* embedded in ritual and communal practice.[4] Colonial contact altered consumption through imported spirits and commercial brewing;[5] and the Nigerian wine market in particular has expanded rapidly despite the country's lack of a viticultural base, with annual consumption hitting a record high of 33.1 million litres in 2021.[6] The World Health Organization's 2024 global status report identifies the African region as one of disproportionately high alcohol-attributable mortality, though it addresses the general alcohol burden, not wine.[7] Within this landscape, the persistent appeal to 1 Timothy 5:23 in pulpit and popular discourse raises a hermeneutical question: how does a first-century Mediterranean medical instruction map onto a twenty-first-century Nigerian

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[1]I. Howard Marshall, *The Pastoral Epistles* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999), 612–14; William D. Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, WBC 46 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2000), 318–21.
[2]Daniel G. Reid, ed., *The IVP Dictionary of the New Testament* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2004), 837; Tokunboh Adeyemo, ed., *Africa Bible Commentary* (Nairobi: WordAlive, 2006), 1475; Albert Barnes, *Notes, Explanatory and Practical on the Epistles of Paul to the Thessalonians, to Timothy, to Titus, and to Philemon* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1856), 212.
[3]Charles J. Ellicott, ed., *The Epistles to the Colossians, Thessalonians and Timothy* (London: Cassell, 1889), 256.
[4]Emeka Dumbili, "Changing Patterns of Alcohol Consumption in Nigeria: An Exploration of Responsible Factors and Consequences," *Medical Sociology Online* 7, no. 1 (2013): 20–21.
[5]Dumbili, "Changing Patterns," 21.
[6]Euromonitor International, *Wine in Nigeria: Market Research Report* (London: Euromonitor International, 2024/2025); see also Bunmi Bailey, "Nigeria's Wine Consumption Hits Record High in 2021," *BusinessDay NG*, March 18, 2022; Oluwatomisin Amokeoja, "Nigeria's Appetite for U.S. Wines Grows to $7.8 Million in One Year," *Forbes Africa*, April 5, 2025.
[7] World Health Organization, *Global Status Report on Alcohol and Health and Treatment of Substance Use Disorders* (Geneva: WHO, 2024), 24–30, https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240096745.

context shaped by very different pharmacological, infrastructural, and public-health realities?

This paper argues that 1 Timothy 5:23 functions in its original context as a personal, context-specific medical directive whose surface application to contemporary Nigerian alcohol consumption is anachronistic. That thesis is compatible with more than one view of biblical wine, and the two issues are kept distinct here. The majority position in critical commentary holds that *oinos* throughout the New Testament denotes fermented wine, that Jesus produced and shared such wine, and that Scripture accordingly regulates rather than proscribes its use. On that reading, 1 Timothy 5:23 is an unremarkable piece of ancient medical advice; the exegesis below accepts its lexical core for 1 Timothy 5:23 itself. This paper departs from mainstream consensus only in a separate, clearly marked excursus on John 2, developing the reading of the Cana wine as miraculously uncorrupted that belongs to a long temperance and conservative-evangelical tradition. That excursus functions as a constructive, confessional inference rather than a demonstrated exegetical result, and the central argument does not depend upon it. The paper's contribution is threefold: first, a four-stage contextual-hermeneutic framework applied to Nigerian preaching practice and public-health conditions, which precedent literature does not address; second, a direct engagement with the mainstream lexical case on its own terms; and third, a proposal that the New Testament's leaven-as-corruption pattern (Matt. 16:6, 11–12; Luke 12:1; 1 Cor. 5:6–8; Gal 5:9) bears on how the Isaiah 25:6 constraint should be weighed.

Methodological Framework

This paper adopts the historical-grammatical method as its primary exegetical procedure and situates it within the contextual hermeneutic tradition of African biblical scholarship. Applied to 1 Timothy 5:23, that method entails lexical analysis of *oinos*, attention to the grammatical force of the imperatives, and engagement with the ancient medical, agricultural, and sanitation realities the directive presupposes. The contextual dimension draws on a tradition matured since the 1980s: Justin Ukpong's inculturation hermeneutic, taking both the integrity of the text and the particularity of the African context with full seriousness; Gerald West's contextual Bible study, treating the African reader as co-interpreter rather than passive recipient of Western exegesis; and Knut Holter's

documentation of the field.[8] Its Nigerian voice, in David T. Adamo's Africentric hermeneutic and Samuel Waje Kunhiyop's contextual ethics, is especially attentive to how biblical texts bear on indigenous ethical and pastoral concerns.[9]

Because the argument draws on several disciplines, the criteria governing its evidence are stated explicitly here. Lexical claims rest on standard critical lexica, principally BDAG and Louw–Nida, supplemented for Hebrew terms by specialist studies; nineteenth-century temperance lexicography is cited to represent the position it advances, not as an independent authority. Claims about ancient medicine rest on primary sources: Hippocrates, Pliny the Elder, and Galen in standard translations, with secondary histories serving only for orientation. Comparative texts are selected for shared vocabulary (*oinos* and its Hebrew equivalents) or shared subject matter (drunkenness, leadership qualification), not loose thematic association. Contemporary Nigerian data come from peer-reviewed studies and dated institutional reports, each cited for the specific period it documents.

Competing interpretations are adjudicated by three ordered criteria: first, lexical and grammatical evidence is weighed before theological inference; second, contextual indicators within a passage take priority over harmonisation across the canon; and third, where a reading depends upon a theological premise not derivable from the passage itself, it is marked as a constructive inference rather than presented as an exegetical result. Where the evidence does not decide between readings, that ambiguity is acknowledged explicitly.

Two commitments follow. Historical-grammatical reconstruction is the necessary first move but not the final one; it must be followed by reflection on what principles the text instantiates and how they might travel. Furthermore, principle is distinguished from prescription: a surface prescription ("use a little wine") is the form a principle takes within

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[8] Justin S. Ukpong, "Rereading the Bible with African Eyes: Inculturation and Hermeneutics," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 91 (1995): 3–14; Gerald O. West, *The Academy of the Poor: Towards a Dialogical Reading of the Bible* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster, 2003), 12–35; Knut Holter, *Old Testament Research for Africa: A Critical Analysis and Annotated Bibliography of African Old Testament Dissertations, 1967–2000* (New York: Peter Lang, 2002), 88–95.

[9] David T. Adamo, *Reading and Interpreting the Bible in African Indigenous Churches* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2001), 35–58; Samuel Waje Kunhiyop, *African Christian Ethics* (Nairobi: Hippo Books, 2008), 354–70.

a particular cultural, medical, and infrastructural setting, whereas the principle itself may travel where the prescription cannot. The analytic proceeds in four distinct steps: (1) historical-grammatical reconstruction of what the text instructed in its original setting; (2) principle abstraction, identifying the commitments it instantiates; (3) contextual analogy, testing whether the contemporary setting shares the conditions that made the prescription appropriate; and (4) ethical-pastoral application, specifying what those principles require where the analogy holds and where it fails. Each step is executed explicitly in the contextual evaluation below.

Three limitations frame this study. First, it is textual and historical rather than empirical: its characterisations of Nigerian preaching rest on published scholarship and documented observation rather than original survey data, and are offered as claims to be tested rather than measured findings. Second, its ancient medical and sanitary material establishes background plausibility rather than direct exegetical conclusions. Third, it is bounded geographically to Nigeria; its conclusions do not transfer to other African settings without independent argument

Defining Wine: Scholarly Debates

Interpretations of biblical references to wine cluster around three positions. The moderationist view holds that Scripture permits alcoholic wine in moderation and condemns only drunkenness; mainstream commentaries on the Pastorals (Fee, Towner, Marshall, Mounce) adopt some version of it for 1 Timothy 5:23,[10] with variants in medicinal temperance,[11] a critique of asceticism permitting use when abstinence harms wellbeing,[12] and moderate social consumption.[13] The abstentionist position concedes that Scripture does not absolutely prohibit wine but holds that contemporary social and health consequences make abstinence more prudent.[14] The prohibitionist position holds that the

[10] Gordon D. Fee, *1 and 2 Timothy, Titus*, NIBC (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1988), 129; Philip H. Towner, *The Letters to Timothy and Titus*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 376–80.
[11] Marshall, *Pastoral Epistles*, 612–14.
[12] A. C. Hervey, "1 Timothy," in *The Pulpit Commentary*, ed. H. D. M. Spence and Joseph S. Exell (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, n.d.), 96.
[13] Kenneth L. Gentry Jr., "The Bible and the Question of Alcoholic Beverages," *Criswell Theological Review* 5, no. 2 (2008): 41, 51.
[14] Samuele Bacchiocchi, *Wine in the Bible: A Biblical Study on the Use of Alcoholic Beverages* (Berrien Springs, MI: Biblical Perspectives, 1989), 34; Kunhiyop, *African Christian Ethics*, 354–70.

Bible condemns alcoholic wine altogether, reading positive references as unfermented juice.[15]

Central to these debates is the lexical interpretation of *oinos*. Mainstream critical lexicography treats fully fermented wine as the standard, default referent of *oinos*. BDAG defines the term primarily as "a beverage made from the fermented juice of the grape," while acknowledging an extended semantic usage for unfermented grape juice or fresh must (*mustum*, citing Greek medical writers and Septuagint usage such as Isaiah 16:10).[16] Louw–Nida similarly classifies *oinos* under alcoholic beverages, while EDNT notes its primary association with fermented grape juice.[17]

The "two-wine theory," rooted in nineteenth-century temperance scholarship and revived in twentieth-century confessional literature, goes beyond standard lexical definitions to argue that *oinos* functions as a broad cover term equally denoting fermented wine and unfermented grape juice.[18] A precise distinction must be maintained between standard lexical possibility, wherein *oinos* occasionally denotes unfermented grape must in specific agricultural or medical contexts, and the broader "two-wine" interpretive framework. The position adopted in this study does not force standard lexica to endorse a confessional "two-wine" schema. Rather, it accepts that while fully fermented wine is the baseline lexical meaning of *oinos* across the New Testament (including 1 Timothy 5:23), the precise referent in any given pericope, whether fermented wine, diluted wine, or unfermented grape preparation, is determined by immediate syntactic, historical, and contextual indicators rather than a single invariant lexical rule.

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[15] William Patton, *Bible Wines: Or, the Laws of Fermentation and Wines of the Ancients* (New York: National Temperance Society, 1874), 41–55; Robert P. Teachout, "The Use of 'Wine' in the Old Testament" (Th.D. diss., Dallas Theological Seminary, 1979), 233–46; Francis D. Nichol, ed., *The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, vol. 7 (Hagerstown: Review and Herald, 1980), 314.

[16] Walter Bauer, F. W. Danker, W. F. Arndt, and F. W. Gingrich (BDAG), *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 701–2, s.v. "οἶνος".

[17] Johannes P. Louw and Eugene A. Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains*, 2nd ed. (New York: United Bible Societies, 1989), 1:654 (Domain 6.197); Horst Balz and Gerhard Schneider, eds., *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament* (EDNT) (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 2:502–3.

[18] Bacchiocchi, *Wine in the Bible*, 60–88; Frederic R. Lees and Dawson Burns, *The Temperance Bible-Commentary* (London: S. W. Partridge, 1868), 264–70.

A significant gap in the existing literature concerns the contextual application of these debates to African settings: while the lexical and historical questions have been treated extensively in Western scholarship, the reception of 1 Timothy 5:23 in Nigerian alcohol cultures has received insufficient attention.

Wine and the Winemaking Process

The grape (*Vitis vinifera* L.) is the common source of both fermented and unfermented preparations.[19] Viticulture is ancient: Egyptian documents record winemaking five to six millennia ago.[20] Wine production involves viticulture, vinification, and maturation. Vinification activates fermentation – the process by which yeasts, principally *Saccharomyces cerevisiae*, convert grape sugars into ethanol and carbon dioxide.[21]

Fermentation typically initiated naturally due to ambient wild yeasts on grape skins once the fruit was crushed. Under Mediterranean ambient temperatures, spontaneous fermentation generally commenced within hours and proceeded rapidly over several days, yielding a beverage of relatively low alcoholic strength, as distillation was unknown in antiquity. However, ancient viticultural practices were far from uniform; fermentation rates and outcomes varied widely depending on local ambient temperatures, sugar concentrations, vessel preparation, and microbial ecology. While Estreicher notes that ambient fermentation was a natural and persistent challenge in warm climates, ancient producers employed various techniques to retard fermentation or preserve sweet grape preparations outside the harvest season. These included boiling fresh juice down to concentrated syrups (*sapa* or *defrutum*), sealing amphorae with pitch and submerging them in cold water cellars to inhibit yeast activity, or adjusting salinity and acidity.[22]

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[19] David J. Jordan, "An Offering of Wine: An Introductory Exploration of the Role of Wine in the Hebrew Bible and Ancient Judaism through the Examination of the Semantics of Some Keywords" (PhD thesis, University of Sydney, 2002), 10.

[20] Bruce I. Reisch and Charlotte Pratt, "Grapes," in *Fruit Breeding*, vol. 2, ed. Jules Janick and James N. Moore (New York: Wiley, 1996), 297; Ronald S. Jackson, *Wine Science: Principles and Applications*, 3rd ed. (Burlington: Academic Press, 2008), 5.

[21] Jackson, *Wine Science*, 332–40.

[22] Stefan K. Estreicher, *Wine: From Neolithic Times to the 21st Century* (New York: Algora, 2006), 3–4; Carey Walsh and Jeffrey R. Zorn, "New Insights from Old Wine Presses," *Palestine Exploration Quarterly* 130, no. 2 (1998): 155. On ancient preservation practices, boiling, and cold-water submersion to retard yeast fermentation (*gleukos* / *mustum*), see Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 14.11.83–85; Columella, *De Re*

Consequently, while keeping untreated, fresh unfermented juice intact for extended periods was technically difficult under typical ambient conditions, ancient consumers had access to preserved grape concentrates and modified grape preparations alongside fully fermented wines.

Wine, particularly red wine, contains bioactive polyphenolic compounds including anthocyanins, flavonoids, and resveratrol that demonstrate documented *in-vitro* antibacterial activity against common gastrointestinal and skin pathogens such as *Staphylococcus aureus* and *Escherichia coli*.[23] However, a clear distinction must be maintained between laboratory-observed antimicrobial inhibitions and demonstrated clinical effectiveness in antiquity. While these *in-vitro* properties do not prove that ancient medicinal applications were clinically curative by modern standards, they provide a plausible pharmacological rationale for why ancient medical writers like Hippocrates and Galen recommended wine as a topical antiseptic and gastrointestinal digestive aid in environments lacking synthetic pharmacology.[24]

Historical Use of Wine and Water Systems in the Ancient World

Wine long served as food, medicine, ritual element, and trade good. Its medicinal use dates back five millennia, ancient physicians employing it as diuretic, antiseptic, and purgative.[25] Hippocrates of Cos (ca. 460–370 BCE) distinguished among types and advised when they should be diluted, Pliny treated wine's medicinal properties at length, and Galen of Pergamon (129–ca. 216 CE), writing within a century of Paul's pastoral correspondence, systematized those distinctions.[26] Jewish literature reflects the same sensibility: 2

Rustica 12.19–20; and Tim Unwin, *Wine and the Vine: An Historical Geography of Viticulture and the Wine Trade* (London: Routledge, 1991), 92–98.

[23] Marilena Carbone et al., "Antibacterial Activity of Red Wine Polyphenols Against Pathogenic Microorganisms," *Journal of Applied Microbiology* 125, no. 4 (2018): 980–89; and Radovan Golubović et al., "*In Vitro* Antimicrobial Activity of Red Wine Extracts Against Common Human Pathogens," *Frontiers in Microbiology* 11 (2020): 582103.

[24] On ancient medical applications of wine as an antiseptic and therapeutic agent, see Hippocrates, *De Ulceribus* 11–12; Galen, *De Methodo Medendi* 10.4; and Philip J. van der Eijk, *Medicine and Philosophy in Classical Antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 142–50.

[25] Salvatore P. Lucia, *A History of Wine as Therapy* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1963), 155–56.

[26] Pliny the Elder, *Natural History*, trans. H. Rackham, LCL (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1945), 14.6, 23.22–25; Galen, *On the Properties of Foodstuffs*, trans. Owen Powell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), book 3.

Maccabees 15:39 observes that "it is harmful to drink wine alone, or again, to drink water alone, while wine mixed with water is sweet and delicious." This is the therapeutic framework Paul's instruction presupposes.

Water quality was a concern everywhere. Jerusalem's wells, channels, harvesting pools, and aqueducts, some cut from soft rock with hand tools, yielded water of often questionable quality, and Masterman conveys both the rarity of running water and the public-health concerns it raised.[27] In the wider Greco-Roman world, springs and wells limited urban growth until aqueducts expanded supply, physicians associated stagnant water with disease, and isotopic analysis has confirmed elevated lead concentrations in Roman supplies.[28]

In such conditions, exclusive reliance on untreated water plausibly contributed to recurrent gastrointestinal illness. This is background plausibility, not exegesis: 1 Timothy 5:23 does not identify the cause of Timothy's ἀσθένειαι, does not mention water quality, and does not say that the wine was to disinfect what he drank. The reconstruction remains an interpretive framework rather than an explicit textual assertion.

Wine in the Old Testament

Yayin, the most common Hebrew term, is rendered almost uniformly in the Septuagint as *oinos*; intoxication narratives such as Genesis 9:21 and 1 Samuel 25:36 show that it frequently denotes fully fermented wine, though it also serves as a general category word for the produce of the vine.[29] *Tîrôš*, also translated *oinos*, refers to "new wine," spanning fresh juice to fermenting wine; Naeh and Weitzman argue that it functions metonymically, denoting the harvest produce with the beverage subsumed under it.[30] *Šēkar* (*sikera*) denotes strong fermented drink (Numbers 6:3; Isaiah 5:11), *ḥemer* fully fermented wine, and *ʿāsîs* sweet or early-stage fermenting wine. That a single Greek term (*oinos*) flattens these

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[27] E. W. G. Masterman, "The Water Supply of Jerusalem, Ancient and Modern," *The Biblical World* 19, no. 2 (1902): 87–92.
[28] A. Trevor Hodge, *Roman Aqueducts and Water Supply*, 2nd ed. (London: Duckworth, 2002), 4–10, 246–61; Hugo Delile et al., "Lead in Ancient Rome's City Waters," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 111, no. 18 (2014): 6594–99.
[29] Joseph Kelly, "Wine," in *The Lexham Bible Dictionary*, ed. John D. Barry (Bellingham: Lexham, 2016).
[30] S. Naeh and M. P. Weitzman, "Tîrôš—Wine or Grape? A Case of Metonymy," *Vetus Testamentum* 44, no. 1 (1994): 115–20; Bacchiocchi, *Wine in the Bible*, 76–80.

distinct Hebrew categories makes immediate contextual analysis decisive for any New Testament occurrence.

Wine in the New Testament

Oinos in the Gospels

In the parable of the wineskins (Matthew 9:17; Mark 2:22; Luke 5:37–38), *oinos* qualified by νέος suggests the wine in view is the unfermented grape product in the early stage of the fermentation continuum, though the lexical question there is subordinate to the metaphor's function. In John 2:1–11, the wine produced at Cana is distinguished from the wine that ran out. The feast master's verdict in verse 10, that one usually serves the better wine (καλόν) first and the inferior (τὸν ἐλάσσω) later, is read in mainstream critical commentary as a qualitative-aesthetic judgment. On this view, καλόν contrasts with ἐλάσσω rather than κακός or πονηρός, within a customary banquet setting (μεθυσθῶσιν) where *oinos* denotes standard fermented wine.[31]

A confessional counter-reading, rooted in temperance and conservative-evangelical scholarship, proposes that the miracle of Cana functions as a constructive theological sign (σημεῖον) rather than a simple validation of ordinary vinification. The structural observation framing this reading is that the *oinos* at Cana did not originate from harvested grapes. Natural wine relies on skin-borne yeasts acting upon crushed grapes over time. At Cana, water is the substrate (vv. 7–9), no yeast culture is implicated, and the product is brought into being by direct miraculous causation.[32] Within this confessional framework, three theological inferences follow. First, the Christological logic coheres with canonical symbolism: the incarnate Word, manifesting his glory, acts as the source of a substance untouched by natural fermentation, a process that elsewhere in the New Testament serves as a stock metaphor for moral corruption (the leaven pattern in Matt. 16:6; 1 Cor. 5:6–8;

[31] Ben Witherington III, *Letters and Homilies for Hellenized Christians*, vol. 1, *A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on Titus, 1–2 Timothy and 1–3 John* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2006), 113–17; Walter Grundmann and Georg Bertram, "καλός," in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), 3:536–56.
[32] Patton, *Bible Wines*, 41–55; Teachout, "Use of 'Wine,'" 233–46.

Gal. 5:9[33]). Second, this inference sidesteps the ethical difficulty of Jesus providing roughly 120 gallons of intoxicating wine to a party where guests had already drunk freely. [34] Third, καλόν aligns with the ancient valuation of extreme freshness and sweetness as hallmarks of superior grape products.[35]

Mainstream readers object that miraculous causation does not, in itself, establish chemical ethanol content, as divine power could just as easily generate a fully fermented wine. Furthermore, they note that Old Testament eschatological banquet imagery, paradigmatically Isaiah 25:6 ("wines on the lees, well refined"), characterises messianic abundance with aged, fermented wine. In response, the confessional reading argues that Isaiah 25:6 utilizes an apocalyptic metaphor for divine abundance rather than a literal chemical prescription. Just as the accompanying phrase "fat things full of marrow" is not a literal dietary requirement, the eschatological banquet imagery need not bind the Christological σημείων. Ultimately, this unfermented reading of Cana is presented not as a demonstrated exegetical necessity, but as a constructive, confessional inference. The primary argument of this study does not rest on this excursus; it is independent of whether one views the wine at Cana as miraculously uncorrupted or as standard fermented wine.

In Matthew 27:34 and Mark 15:23, the mixture offered to Jesus on the cross consisted of a wine base combined with functional additives, gall (χολῆς) and myrrh (σμυρνίζω) respectively, which ancient readers and Talmudic tradition associated with narcotic or analgesic properties intended to dull pain.[36] The Passion narratives record only the offer and Jesus' refusal upon tasting it, without explicitly specifying the rationale for his rejection. Luke 1:15 pairs *oinos* with σίκερα under an emphatic double-negative prohibition (οὐ μή), signaling total abstinence from intoxicants for John the Baptist. In Luke 7:33–34, Jesus's ordinary eating and drinking drew the accusation that he was "a glutton and a winebibber"; since fermented wine was commonly diluted, often three parts

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[33] On the leaven-as-corruption pattern, see Hans Windisch, "ζύμη," *TDNT* 2 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 902–6; Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 401–6.
[34] Patton, *Bible Wines*, 81–95; Teachout, "Use of 'Wine,'" 273–84; Robert H. Stein, "Wine-Drinking in New Testament Times," *Christianity Today* 19, no. 19 (June 20, 1975): 9–11.
[35]Pliny, *Natural History* 14.13–14; Athenaeus, *Deipnosophistae* 1.32d–33a.
[36] See b. Sanhedrin 43a; William L. Lane, *The Gospel according to Mark*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 563–65; Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 14–28*, WBC 33B (Dallas: Word, 1995), 834–35.

water to one of wine,[37] both for sanitary reasons and because undiluted consumption was associated with intoxication and widely censured, his participation in that practice reflects cultural and practical necessity rather than indulgence, and the accusation reflects Pharisaic hostility rather than a description of intoxication. Luke 10:34 records the antiseptic application of wine to wounds.

Oinos in the Apocalypse

Revelation employs *oinos* symbolically: oil and wine are spared in famine (6:6); *oinos* figures the intoxicating power of Babylon's fornication (14:8; 17:2; 18:3, 13); and it becomes a metaphor for God's wrath poured out undiluted (14:10; 16:19; 19:15)—imagery presupposing that wine was characteristically diluted in the imagination of John's audience and undiluted wine functioning as a metaphor for unmitigated divine judgement.

Oinos in the Pauline Corpus

In Romans 14:21 it is well not to drink wine if it causes a brother to stumble, and in Ephesians 5:18, drunkenness is contrasted with being filled with the Spirit; in both the referent is fermented wine, since the concern presupposes a capacity to intoxicate.

Within the Pastoral Epistles, Paul deploys careful nuance in relation to οἶνος. The qualifications for church leaders in 1 Timothy 3:2–3 and Titus 1:7 emphasise sobriety through νηφάλιος ("sober, temperate"), σώφρονα ("self-controlled"), and μὴ πάροινος ("not given to wine," "not quarrelsome/brawling through drunkenness"). The lexical force of πάροινον is well attested: it targets both excessive intake and the disruptive, aggressive conduct that accompanies intoxication, presupposing the presence of a fermented beverage whose capacity to intoxicate makes the restriction necessary.[38] Similarly, the qualification in 1 Timothy 3:8 instructs deacons not to be "given to much wine" (μὴ οἴνῳ πολλῷ προσέχοντας). Read together, these passages establish clear boundaries against habitual

[37] Norman Geisler and Thomas Howe, *When Critics Ask: A Popular Handbook on Bible Difficulties* (Wheaton: Victor, 1992), 105–6.
[38] See BDAG, 779, s.v. "πάροινος"; Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, 173–75; Towner, *Letters to Timothy and Titus*, 250–52.

drunkenness and excessive indulgence; they confirm that fermented *oinos* was in ordinary circulation and that its potential for abuse required explicit institutional regulation.

The Pericope: 1 Timothy 5:23

For the purposes of this study, the traditional attribution of 1 Timothy to the apostle Paul is maintained as the primary interpretive framework. While contemporary critical scholarship broadly debates the authorship and dating of the Pastoral Epistles, frequently categorising them as pseudepigraphical or post-Pauline compositions, the text itself functions within a Pauline canonical framework, portraying Paul instructing his younger associate Timothy in Ephesus.[39]

According to Luke's portrait in Acts and canonical traditions, Paul was a native of Tarsus, a prominent Cilician urban centre where he was exposed to Greco-Roman cultural currents alongside his Jewish Pharisaic upbringing and scriptural formation in the Septuagint.[40] His recipient, Timothy, is depicted as the son of a Jewish mother (Eunice) and a Greek father (Acts 16:1; 2 Tim 1:5). Raised in Lystra with early exposure to Jewish scriptures, Timothy joined Paul's missionary endeavours in the mid-first century, becoming a trusted co-worker, traveling companion, and representative to local churches.[41]

Within this epistolary frame, 1 Timothy 5:23 is didactic, offering practical instruction with a three-part structure: prohibition ("No longer drink only water"), prescription ("use a little wine"), and purpose ("for your stomach and your frequent infirmities"). The verb ὑδροποτέω means "to drink only water" and describes one who makes water his exclusive beverage.[42] Its imperative form, reinforced by μηκέτι ("no longer"), conveys a corrective command. This suggests that Timothy had been practising strict abstinence, likely

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[39] On the critical debate surrounding the authorship, date, and provenance of 1 Timothy, see Towner, *Letters to Timothy and Titus*, 9–88; Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, cxix–cxxix; Marshall, 57-92. This study adopts a canonical-personae methodology, employing "Paul" to denote the letter's explicit authorial persona and reconstructing the narrative setting it presupposes. Nothing in the core argument turns on this authorship debate: on either view, 1 Timothy 5:23 functions as a personal, context-bounded directive to a named individual within a first-century medical setting, leaving the hermeneutical challenge of its application to contemporary Nigeria unchanged.

[40] Martin Hengel, *The Pre-Christian Paul* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1991), 18–39; Fee, *1 and 2 Timothy*, 1–14.

[41] Towner, *Letters to Timothy and Titus*, 43–48; Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, lip–lv.

[42] BDAG, 1024, s.v. "ὑδροποτέω"; Barbara Friberg, Timothy Friberg, and Neva F. Miller, *Analytical Lexicon of the Greek New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), 389.

influenced by rigorous personal discipline or ascetic tendencies present in the Ephesian context. The plural form ἀσθενείας ("infirmities, illnesses") denotes recurrent ailments, which the text explicitly connects to gastric distress (στόμαχόν).[43]

The qualifier ὀλίγῳ ("a little") stands in deliberate contrast with the πολλῷ used by the same author to the same recipient in 1 Timothy 3:8. This calibrated contrast sits within the overall pattern as a medicinal exception pointing to controlled, functional use rather than indulgence and aligns with the common ancient practice of mixing fermented wine with water. Given that wine's antiseptic properties emerge through fermentation, the limitations of ancient medicine, and the deliberate effort required to keep juice unfermented, *oinos* here is best understood as fermented wine, mixed with water and used therapeutically. The purpose clause "for your stomach and your frequent infirmities" is decisive for that reading, while a plausible reconstruction, though not one the text states, would connect the ailments to reliance on untreated water. The imperative χρῶ (from χράομαι, "to use") underscores intentional therapeutic application.

Paul is therefore neither advocating indulgent consumption nor establishing a general principle of moderate social drinking. The directive is personal, practical, and explicitly medicinal in its immediate context, and the principle it yields is that medicinal use of a substance does not endorse its non-medicinal consumption: a distinction recognized in modern pharmacology, where controlled substances such as codeine are prescribed therapeutically without legitimizing recreational use.[44]

Nigeria, Alcoholic Beverages, and Wine: A Contextual Evaluation

Viticulture was not a traditional West African practice, and the fermented juice of the grape was not a traditional beverage; as Areola and Salawu observe, "Palm wine is the African alcohol table wine." In pre-colonial Nigeria consumption was intermittent, ritualistic, and communal embedded in marriages, enthronements, festivals, naming ceremonies, and funerals rather than daily use. Production was small-scale and local, preferred varieties distinguishing ethnic groups: *ogogoro* and other distilled palm derivatives in the Niger

[43] Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, 316–18; Towner, *Letters to Timothy and Titus*, 374–76.
[44] American Society of Health-System Pharmacists, "Codeine," MedlinePlus, last modified October 15, 2025, https://medlineplus.gov/druginfo/meds/a682065.html.

Delta, *burukutu* from guinea corn in the north, palm wine across the south, *pito* in mid-western communities.[45] Palm wine, the foundation of most variants, is a naturally fermenting sap reaching about four percent alcohol within hours of tapping.

Colonial contact altered production and consumption radically. Imported spirits and commercial brewing expanded both availability and abuse, culminating in the establishment of formal brewing industries starting with Nigerian Breweries in 1946; by 1984, each of Nigeria's nineteen states then existing hosted its own commercial brewery.[46] Alcohol consumption has since increased significantly, particularly among urban youth, with the commercial alcoholic beverage sector expanding into a multi-billion-dollar market dominated by beer (approximately fifty-five percent), spirits (thirty percent), and wine (fifteen percent).[47] Wine consumption, historically minimal due to the absence of domestic viticulture, experienced rapid growth between 2004 and the mid-2020s. Recent industry analyses indicate that market expansion from 2021 through 2025 has been sustained by rapid urbanisation, an evolving middle-class demographic, status-driven consumption, and the popular perception of wine as a healthier alternative to commercial spirits and lagers.[48]

Text–Context Evaluation: 1 Timothy 5:23 and Nigeria

The four-stage hermeneutic outlined in the methodological framework can now be deployed. Historical-grammatical reconstruction has shown that 1 Timothy 5:23 is a personal, context-specific medical directive: Paul instructs Timothy to abandon strict abstinence and to use a small quantity of fermented wine, mixed with water, for the

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[45] J. K. Areola and O. O. Salawu, "Analysis of the Sensory Attributes of Plantain Wine: An Alternative to Imported Wines in Nigeria," *European Journal of Business and Management* 5, no. 7 (2013): 238; Justin Willis, "Drinking Crisis? Change and Continuity in Cultures of Drinking in Sub-Saharan Africa," *African Journal of Drug & Alcohol Studies* 5, no. 1 (2006): 4.

[46] L. Mbuagbaw and S. Noorduyn, "The Palm Wine Trade: Occupational and Health Hazards," *International Journal of Occupational and Environmental Medicine* 3 (2012): 157–64.

[47] Victor O. Lasebikan and Bolanle A. Ola, "Prevalence and Correlates of Alcohol Use among a Sample of Nigerian Semirural Community Dwellers in Nigeria," *Journal of Addiction* 2016 (2016): 1–6; Osadebamwen A. Ogbeide and Ideba Ele, "Nigeria Wine Market: The Implications of Consumers' Socio-Demographics and Preference," *Mayfair Journal of Agriculture Development in Emerging Economies* 1, no. 1 (2015): 15.

[48] For market growth, per capita consumption trends, and demographic drivers across the 2021–2025 period, see Euromonitor International, *Wine in Nigeria: Country Report* (London: Euromonitor, 2023), 4–12; Fitch Solutions, *Nigeria Food & Drink Report: Q1 2024* (London: Fitch Solutions, 2024), 28–35; USDA Foreign Agricultural Service, *Nigeria: Wine Market Update and Import Analysis* (GAIN Report NG2023-0012, 2023), 3–8; Ogbeide and Ele, "Nigeria Wine Market," 16–20.

antiseptic treatment of recurrent gastrointestinal illness in a setting where water quality was unreliable and pharmacological alternatives were limited. The principles abstracted from this directive include pastoral attentiveness to bodily health, the legitimacy of contextually appropriate medical intervention, and the rejection of strict abstinence that compromises ministerial wellbeing. The questions of contextual analogy and ethical-pastoral application now arise: do contemporary Nigerian conditions match the conditions Paul addressed, and what therefore should follow ethically and pastorally from the underlying principles?

Several significant divergences exist between the ancient context and contemporary Nigeria. First, the natural fermentation of grape juice that Paul presupposes has a partial Nigerian analogue in palm wine, which ferments rapidly to about four percent alcohol within hours and reaches higher levels when distilled. Truly unfermented palm wine is virtually unavailable outside the point of tapping, which means that consumer claims of unfermented palm wine in market settings should be treated with caution.

Second, the public-health logic of Paul's directive that wine's antiseptic properties were employed to make unsafe water safer has lost its operative force in most of contemporary Nigeria. Significant advances in pharmacology, water treatment, and clinical care have produced superior alternatives. The argument here is not that all of Nigeria enjoys reliable potable water; UNICEF and WHO data indicate that significant portions of rural Nigeria still lack access to safely managed drinking water,[49]and waterborne illnesses including cholera and typhoid remain public-health burdens. The argument is that where water safety is compromised, modern interventions such as boiling, chlorination, filtration, oral rehydration therapy, and appropriate clinical treatment are more suitable than dilute wine for contemporary water-safety and gastrointestinal-health concerns, rendering the specific therapeutic logic of Paul's directive obsolete even where the underlying problem persists.

Third, the cultural practice of dilution that Paul's directive presupposes: wine mixed with water in ratios that reduced its strength and signaled a non-intoxicating purpose, is largely absent from contemporary Nigerian wine consumption. Palm wine is typically mixed with

[49] United Nations Children's Fund and World Health Organization, *Progress on Household Drinking Water, Sanitation and Hygiene 2000–2022* (New York: UNICEF; Geneva: WHO, 2023), 18–24.

additives rather than water; commercially available wine is consumed neat or blended with carbonated and caffeinated beverages such as energy drinks and sweetened sodas. In both cases, the cultural logic of dilution-for-sanitation has been replaced by a logic of indulgence or potentiation. Modern technology also enables year-round availability of pasteurized, non-alcoholic wine alternatives, which further weakens any direct contextual parallel.

Fourth, the ethical framework of the Pastoral Epistles, which calibrates instructions regarding wine according to office, situation, and quantity, identifying drunkenness and indulgence as failure modes (1 Tim 3:3, 8; Tit 1:7; 2:3) while bounding the legitimate use of fermented *oinos* to a narrow medicinal context, offers critical resources for contemporary Nigerian church practice. Where contemporary urban culture and social status drivers encourage the luxury consumption or commercial promotion of high-proof fermented wines, the prohibitive register of the Pastorals provides a firm counter-norm. Rather than licensing indulgence, the Pastorals construct a boundary marker that challenges contemporary trends toward the commercialisation and status-driven normalisation of alcohol within the broader Christian community.

The exegetical position developed in the lexical section bears directly on the homiletical use of 1 Timothy 5:23 in Nigerian preaching, where the verse is invoked to legitimize ordinary alcohol consumption and typically paired with a generic appeal to "Jesus turned water to wine." Both anchors fail under careful reading. The directive to Timothy is medicinal-specific, addressed personally to a young pastor with recurrent stomach ailments under the conditions of ancient water sanitation; it does not authorize convivial consumption by readers who do not share its conditions, and the deliberate ὀλίγῳ of 5:23 standing against the πολλῷ of 3:8 closes off the move from medicinal exception to general endorsement. The appeal to John 2 cannot bear the weight Nigerian homiletical practice often places on it either: the οἶνος Jesus produces at Cana, on the reading developed in the lexical section, is the product of direct miraculous causation that bypasses the natural fermentation process, christologically marked as uncorrupted, and so disclosive of the messianic moment rather than prescriptive of ordinary practice. Neither passage authorizes the routine consumption practices for which they are pressed into service.

Synthesizing these observations: the Nigerian context cannot be paralleled directly with the first-century Mediterranean milieu of 1 Timothy 5:23. The surface prescription does not travel, because the conditions that made the prescription appropriate have been substantially superseded. The underlying principles, however, do travel and they generate contemporary Nigerian directives that look quite different from the ancient one.

CONCLUSION

This paper has argued that 1 Timothy 5:23 functions in its original context as a personal, context-specific medical directive whose surface application to contemporary Nigerian alcohol consumption is anachronistic. Lexical analysis of *oinos* (οἶνος) across the Septuagint and the New Testament corpus indicates that the term denotes a continuum of grape preparations rather than a single uniform substance, with the substance produced miraculously at Cana standing apart from the natural fermentation continuum as a christologically marked, uncorrupted *oinos*. In 1 Timothy 5:23, by contrast, contextual indicators favour fully fermented wine, conventionally mixed with water, used for its antiseptic and therapeutic properties under ancient sanitary conditions. The advances in pharmacology, water treatment, and clinical care that distinguish twenty-first-century Nigeria from first-century Ephesus have rendered the specific therapeutic logic of Paul's directive obsolete, even where waterborne illness persists in parts of rural Nigeria.

The interpretive responsibility this analysis places on contemporary Nigerian preachers is not to import a first-century medical practice directly into a twenty-first-century setting, but to discern the underlying principles: pastoral attentiveness to bodily health, contextual particularity, the legitimacy of contextually appropriate medical intervention, and the prohibitive ethical register that targets indulgence ($\mu \grave{\eta}\; o \acute{\iota}\nu \omega\;\pi o \lambda \lambda \tilde{\omega}$, 1 Tim 3:8) while permitting a bounded medicinal exception (ὀλίγῳ, 5:23). The proliferation of wine consumption in Nigeria, driven by commercialisation, shifting cultural values, and perceived health benefits, cannot be theologically justified either by appeal to 1 Timothy 5:23 or by appeal to the Cana sign of John 2: the first because its directive is medicinal-specific to a context whose sanitary conditions have changed, and the second because the *oinos* of Cana is

miraculous, uncorrupted, and disclosive of the messianic moment rather than prescriptive of ordinary consumption.

Three avenues for further research follow from the scope and findings of this study: first, an empirical reception study mapping how Nigerian clergy across denominations actually interpret and preach 1 Timothy 5:23; second, an interdisciplinary public-health and theological investigation examining the influence of religious teaching on population-level alcohol consumption in Southern Nigeria; and third, a fuller methodological refinement of the four-stage hermeneutic deployed here, strengthening the conceptual resources available for contemporary African biblical interpretation.

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CHAPTER 6

RE-READING 2 TIMOTHY 4:14 IN THE IGBO CONTEXT: THE CONCEPT OF REPAYING AN ENEMY

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Abstract

This study re-examines 2 Timothy 4:14 in the Igbo Christian context, focusing on the phrase "the Lord will repay" and the cultural assumption that divine repayment may be invoked as retaliation against an enemy. The problem addressed is the tendency to read Paul's statement through an indigenous framework of reciprocal justice, thereby potentially conflating the biblical appeal to divine judgment with the human desire for personal vengeance. Using a qualitative design, the study combines historical-grammatical exegesis with intercultural hermeneutics and draws on semi-structured interviews with twenty-five participants comprising practitioners and scholars of African Traditional Religion, church elders, and Bible Society of Nigeria officials. The exegetical analysis finds that Paul's statement in 2 Timothy 4:14 entrusts repayment to the Lord rather than authorizing personal retaliation, thereby distinguishing divine judgment from human vengeance. The interview findings, however, reveal that the Igbo expression Chukwu kwụọ gị ụgwọ ("God repay you") is commonly understood within a cultural framework in which divine repayment may be associated with retribution against an enemy. This demonstrates a significant tension between the textual meaning of the Pauline statement and its reception within the Igbo context. The study therefore argues for a culturally sensitive re-reading that preserves the biblical distinction between divine justice and human retaliation. In addressing the Igbo rendering of the expression, the study proposes a contextual retranslation as an original interpretive recommendation rather than an assessment of an existing official revision of the Igbo Bible. The study concludes that such a rendering should communicate divine judgment without reinforcing the cultural expectation of personal vengeance.

Keywords: *2 Timothy 4:14, African Biblical Hermeneutics, Apodidōmi, Intercultural Hermeneutics, Pauline Theology.*

INTRODUCTION

In the book of 2 Timothy 4:14, Paul warns Timothy to protect himself in his travels. He singles out one named Alexander, identifies him as "the metalworker," and alludes to the trouble he caused, "*Alexander the coppersmith showed me much evil; the Lord will repay him according to his works*."(ESV). Paul made this statement in his second letter to Timothy and urged him to be aware of Alexander. He states that the Lord will repay Alexander according to his works and identifies the works as evil. [1]Efforts have been made by scholars to determine if Paul's words in 2 Tim. 4:14 reflect a momentary outburst of personal frustration or a universal biblical principle. It is worth noting that in other passages, Paul exhorts Christians to abstain from retaliating with malevolence (Rom. 12:17; 1 Thess. 5:15). Consequently, the question arises: Is Paul's declaration in 2 Tim. 4:14 influenced by his cultural and personal circumstances, or is it a timeless and widely applicable truth?

In the Igbo Christian cosmology, "*Chineke kwuo gi ugwo olu*" (God repay you) is a frequent expression of similitude used among some communities as an imprecation against offenders. This maxim has been viewed from an expression within the biblical contexts of 2 Timothy 4:14 by the Igbo Christians as some translations present a voice of instant diktat. The context is heavily influenced by the nature and process of dealing with enemies in Igbo indigenous tradition, which stands out from the Biblical concept in various aspects. The people face unique challenges due to their distinct perceptions of the world around them. For indigenous Igbo, the existence of evil, witches, sorcerers, evil spirits, and all kinds of enemies is an undeniable reality. They believe that these entities are responsible for all the negative occurrences. In Igbo indigenous tradition, children and adults are taught to be aware of the existence and activities of enemies. The need to be protected from them is taken seriously, and they use animate and inanimate objects such as stones, sand, trees, leaves, human parts, animals, water, urine, etc., for protection and immediate scuffle against these considerable enemies.[2]

The evaluation of *apodidōmi* (repay) in the study is helpful since it is used in 2 Tim 4:14. It occurs about forty-eight times in the NT, of which eight are found in the Pauline corpus.[3] It is used eighteen times in the gospel of Matthew. Of these, seven are found

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[1]William D. Mounce, *Pastoral Epistle: World Biblical Commentary*, (Nashville: Nelson Press, 2000)
[2]David Adamo, Reading Psalm 109 in African Christianity: Reading Psalm 109, *OTE* Vol 21, Issue 3 (2008), 575-592
[3]D. A. Carson, Douglas J. Moo & Leon Morris, *An Introduction to New Testament*, (Manila, Philippines: OMF Literature Inc. 1992), 231-232

in the parable of the unforgiving servant (18:25-34). In Matt. 6:4, 6, 18, God "repays" (*apodidōmi*) good work. An account will be given on the Day of Judgment for every careless speech (Matt 12:36; 1 Pet 4:5). The Son of man will "reward" (*apodidōmi*) every person according to their deeds (Matt 16:27; cf. Rev 18:6; 22:12). In Paul's writing, the use of *apodidōmi* is insightful. In his letters to Romans and Thessalonians, he admonishes them not to "repay" (*apodidōmi*) evil with evil (Rom. 12:17; 1 Thess. 5:15; cf. 1 Pet 3:9). This admonition was to encourage unity among believers and good relationships with unbelievers (cf. 2 Cor. 3:2, 3). But God alone repays everyone according to their works (Rom 2:6; 2 Tim. 4:8, 14).[4] Regarding the use of *apodidōmi*, it implies that everyone is accountable to God on the Day of Judgment. What then does Paul mean in 2 Tim. 4:14 and what is the translation in the Igbo Bible?

Although previous studies have examined Paul's statement in 2 Timothy 4:14 from theological, pastoral, and linguistic perspectives, the literature reviewed for this study indicates that comparatively limited attention has been given to how its translation and reception in the Igbo context may shape Christian understandings of divine retribution. The literature search focused particularly on studies of 2 Timothy 4:14, Pauline concepts of divine repayment, Igbo biblical interpretation, Igbo Bible translation, and African intercultural hermeneutics. Within this scope, the study did not identify a work that brings Greek exegesis, intercultural hermeneutics, and the Igbo worldview together in a focused reassessment of the passage.[5] This article therefore addresses this underexplored intersection by examining the Greek text alongside Igbo cultural and Christian interpretations of divine retribution.

Literature Review

The statement of Paul in 2 Timothy 4:14, "Alexander the coppersmith did me much harm; the Lord will repay him according to his deeds," has generated considerable scholarly debate concerning its theological intent and ethical implications. While some scholars interpret the passage as an expression of personal indignation, the dominant view understands it as an affirmation of God's exclusive authority to execute judgment.

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[4]Daniel Berchie, Repaying the enemy in Ghanaian Context, *Valley View University Journal of Theology*, vol 2, issue 6, (October 2012), 4

[5]Justin S. Ukpong, "Developments in Biblical Interpretation in Africa: Historical and Hermeneutical Directions," in *The Bible in Africa: Transactions, Trajectories and Trends*, ed. Gerald O. West and Musa W. Dube (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 11–28; Gerald O. West, *Contextual Bible Study* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 1993), 17–36.

The debate has therefore centered on the identity of Alexander, the meaning of the verb ἀποδώσει (apodōsei), and the relationship between Paul's statement and his wider ethical teaching concerning retaliation.

William D. Mounce argues that Paul's declaration should not be understood as an emotional outburst motivated by personal revenge but rather as a confident affirmation that divine justice ultimately belongs to God. According to Mounce, the future tense of the verb apodōsei points beyond immediate punishment and reflects Paul's confidence in God's righteous judgment. Alexander's opposition is viewed primarily as resistance to the gospel rather than merely a personal offence against Paul. Consequently, the apostle entrusts judgment entirely to God instead of seeking personal vengeance.[6]

Similarly, Philip H. Towner interprets the passage within the broader eschatological framework of 2 Timothy. He observes that chapter four repeatedly anticipates the future appearing of Christ, the final judgment, and the crown of righteousness awaiting faithful believers. Within this literary context, Paul's declaration concerning Alexander is best understood as an eschatological pronouncement rather than an invocation of immediate divine punishment. Towner further notes that the parallel use of apodidōmi in verses 8 and 14 links both reward and judgment to the same future divine tribunal.[7]

Gordon D. Fee likewise rejects any interpretation that portrays Paul as vindictive. Fee suggests that Alexander may have played a significant role in Paul's legal difficulties, perhaps even serving as a hostile witness during his trial. Nevertheless, Paul's response demonstrates remarkable restraint because he refrains from seeking personal retaliation and instead leaves the matter entirely in God's hands. Fee therefore understands the statement as consistent with Paul's broader theology of divine justice and Christian forgiveness.[8]

I. Howard Marshall also argues that the passage reflects confidence in God's righteous judgment rather than a desire for revenge. Marshall emphasizes that Paul's warning to Timothy concerning Alexander serves a pastoral function by preparing Timothy for

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[6]William D. Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, Word Biblical Commentary 46 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2000), 603-605.
[7]Philip H. Towner, *The Letters to Timothy and Titus*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006), 584-586.
[8]Gordon D. Fee, *1 and 2 Timothy, Titus*, New International Biblical Commentary (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1988), 288-289.

opposition to the gospel. The statement consequently functions as encouragement to remain faithful despite persecution while affirming that ultimate justice belongs to God.[9]

George W. Knight III similarly maintains that Paul's language reflects judicial confidence rather than personal hostility. Knight observes that throughout the Pastoral Epistles, divine judgment consistently belongs to Christ at his appearing, making it inappropriate to interpret 2 Timothy 4:14 as an endorsement of present-day retaliation. Instead, the passage underscores God's sovereign prerogative to reward righteousness and punish wickedness according to His perfect justice.[10]

Although these commentators provide substantial exegetical analyses of the Greek text and its theological significance, they devote comparatively little attention to how the passage has been interpreted within African cultural settings or how vernacular Bible translations influence contemporary Christian understanding. Their discussions remain largely historical, grammatical, and theological, leaving questions of contextual reception relatively unexplored.

Within African biblical scholarship, increasing attention has been devoted to intercultural and contextual readings of Scripture. Justin S. Ukpong argues that biblical interpretation should emerge from a dialogue between the biblical world and the socio-cultural realities of African readers. Rather than merely reproducing Western exegetical conclusions, African interpretation seeks to illuminate how biblical texts address concrete African experiences.[11] Gerald O. West similarly advocates contextual biblical hermeneutics that consciously engage ordinary readers and their lived realities, arguing that meaning is enriched through dialogue between text, context, and community.[12]

The influence of indigenous African worldviews on biblical interpretation has also been explored by scholars such as David T. Adamo. His studies demonstrate that African readers frequently interpret biblical texts through existing cultural and religious

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[9]I. Howard Marshall, *The Pastoral Epistles*, International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999), 811-814.
[10]George W. Knight III, *The Pastoral Epistles: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1992), 459-462.
[11]Justin S. Ukpong, "Developments in Biblical Interpretation in Africa: Historical and Hermeneutical Directions," in *The Bible in Africa: Transactions, Trajectories and Trends*, ed. Gerald O. West and Musa W. Dube (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 11-28.
[12]Gerald O. West, *Contextual Bible Study* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 1993), 17-36.

frameworks, particularly concerning spiritual warfare, divine justice, curses, and the treatment of enemies. Adamo argues that African biblical hermeneutics should neither reject indigenous perspectives nor accept them uncritically but should instead evaluate them in conversation with the biblical text.[13]

Despite these valuable contributions, little scholarly attention has been given to the reception of 2 Timothy 4:14 within Igbo Christianity, particularly regarding the widespread expression Chukwu kwụọ gị ụgwọ ("God repay you"). Existing scholarship has not sufficiently examined how certain Igbo Bible translations may contribute to interpreting Paul's statement as endorsing immediate divine retaliation rather than future eschatological judgment. Likewise, no comprehensive study has integrated Greek lexical analysis, intercultural hermeneutics, vernacular translation, and the Igbo worldview to reassess the theological implications of the passage.

This study addresses that gap by combining exegetical analysis of the Greek text with intercultural hermeneutics and empirical data drawn from interviews among Igbo Christians and traditional religion practitioners. In doing so, it argues that Paul's statement in 2 Timothy 4:14 should be understood as an affirmation of future divine judgment rather than an authorization for immediate imprecatory expressions within the Igbo Christian context.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design that integrates historical-grammatical exegesis with intercultural hermeneutics to investigate the meaning of 2 Timothy 4:14 and its reception within the Igbo Christian context. The qualitative approach is appropriate because the study seeks to understand theological meaning, cultural interpretation, and lived religious experience rather than to establish statistical relationships. It therefore combines textual analysis with empirical evidence from selected participants whose experiences illuminate how the passage has been interpreted and appropriated within contemporary Igbo Christianity.

The research utilized both primary and secondary sources of data. Primary data were generated through semi-structured oral interviews involving twelve purposively

[13]David T. Adamo, "Reading Psalm 109 in African Christianity," *Old Testament Essays* 21, no. 3 (2008): 575-592.

selected participants. These comprised four African Traditional Religion Scholars, six elders drawn from the Seventh-day Adventist Church, the Redeemed Christian Church of God, and the Christ Apostolic Church, and two officials of the Bible Society of Nigeria who possess knowledge of the translation history of the Igbo Bible. Purposive sampling was adopted because the selected participants possess specialized knowledge relevant to the study's objectives.

The semi-structured interviews addressed four principal thematic domains: (1) Igbo understandings of enemies, punishment, and divine retribution; (2) the meaning and use of the expression Chukwu kwụọ gị ụgwọ ("God repay you"); (3) participants' interpretation of 2 Timothy 4:14; and (4) the influence of indigenous religious and cultural assumptions on the interpretation of biblical texts concerning judgment. The interview data were organized thematically. After transcription, responses were reviewed repeatedly, relevant statements were identified and grouped by recurring concepts, and themes were compared across participant categories. The analysis did not treat participants' interpretations as substitutes for the meaning of the biblical text; instead, it examined them as evidence of the text's reception within a particular cultural context.

Secondary data were obtained from biblical commentaries, peer-reviewed journal articles, books, Greek lexicons, theological dictionaries, and scholarly works on Pauline theology, African biblical hermeneutics, Bible translation, and Igbo religious thought. These sources provided the exegetical and theoretical foundation for interpreting the biblical text and situating it within broader scholarly discourse.

The Concept of Repay in the New Testament

According to Kay, the New Testament speaks of various kinds of rewards which God promises to the Christian. However, it is possible to divide these into two general types**.** One is the type of reward which the Christian will receive here on earth and the other type is the reward which he will receive in heaven.[14] However, the most common occurrence of reward or repayment in the Synoptic Gospels is of an eschatological reward for those who sincerely obey the will of God: the humble will be rewarded (Matt

[14]Wilbur Kay, *The Concept Of Reward In The New Testament*, A Thesis Presented to the Faculty of Concordia Seminary, Department of New Testament Theology, In Partial Fu1fillment of the Requirements of the Degree Bachelor of Divinity (May, l947)

5:5; 18:1-5; 19:14; Mark 10:15), the compassionate will be rewarded (Matt 10:42; 25:34-40; Luke 6:35), Jesus' followers who are persecuted will be rewarded (Matt 5:11; Mark 8:35; Luke 21:19) and so will the sinners and enemies of Christ be rewarded.[15] Paul unequivocally affirms that God will one day repay all people according to their works (Rom 2:6-10; 2 Cor. 5:10) and the unrighteous will not receive eternal life (1 Cor. 6:9; Eph. 5:5). Despite some diversity among genre-specific emphases, there seems to be significant canonical unity in the teaching on reward.

Repaying the Enemy in Traditional Igbo Cosmology

According to Adamo, the nature and process of dealing with enemies in Igbo tradition is remarkably different from that of the Western world. This is because Igbo people living on the continent face some peculiar problems due to their perception of the world around them. To indigenous Igbo, the presence of evil, witches, sorcerers, evil spirits, and all kinds of enemies is painfully real. They believe that they are responsible for all the evil things that happen all over the world. In Igbo indigenous tradition, children and adults are taught the existence and the activities of enemies. The need to be protected from them is taken seriously. They use animate and inanimate objects (e. g. stones, sand, trees, leaves, human parts, animals, water, urine, etc.) for protection.[16]

To understand the concept of repaying one's adversary in this study, it is essential to understand the notions of the enemy or offenders, their punishment, reward, and judgment in Igbo contexts. In the Igbo settings, an enemy is known as "*onye iro"* in the local dialect, it means "one's offender" or enemy.[17] There are two types of *onye iro* in Igbo settings, there are the *Onye iro chi* or *iro chi* (supernatural enemy) and the *iro nwoke* or *iro madu*. The *iro chi* is natural enemies or supernatural forces against man which cannot be fought against carnally, and sometimes it is beyond one's carnal flesh.[18] These enemies are seen in natural forces like hurricanes, drainage, unfruitful harvest, sickness, drought, and other natural negative exhibitions. Since an Igbo man cannot fight these supernatural forces, he is bent on relying more on his deity for

[15]Schreiner, Thomas R., *New Testament Theology: Magnifying God in* Christ. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 842
[16]David Adamo, Reading Psalm 109 in African Christianity, *Reading Psalm 109 OTE* Vol. 21, Issue 3 (2008), 575-592
[17]Respondent 3, Lecturer in the Department of African Religious Studies, University of Nnamdi Azikiwe, Anambra state, Interviewed on the 19th April 2022
[18]Wyk, The final judgment in African perspectives, 708

protection. On this note, various sacrifices are made to the deity to please them and enable their protection and blessings on the individual.[19]

On the other hand, the *iro madu*, is brought about by some perpetual quarrels, which come from a range of circumstances such as land disputes, property inheritance, chieftaincy title disputes, constant rivalries among wives in polygamous homes, jealousy from relatives and other individuals and lots of them.[20] At this, the offended also seeks protection and in several cases seeks to avenge or inflict the other in one way or the other. Again, there is an *Onye iro* (enemy) that is in a collective disposition, that is the community or family enemy. This is usually one who offends a family or community by displaying unethical or depraved actions; this enemy is tantamount to punishment.[21]

People in pre-modern Igbo civilizations, as well as current township communities, understand that the best way to live in harmony is to punish those who break family and community laws. Igbo accept rewards and punishment as acceptable instructional tools for their offenders. The majority of the time, Igbo utilizes physical punishment sparingly.[22] Other types of punishment, on the other hand, are seen as vital for a child's normal upbringing. They also understand that the "common law" must work to maintain public order. Isolation, excommunication, and expulsion, as well as the intimidation of persons through public opinion and public humiliation, all contribute to the enforcement of acceptable morals.[23]

The majority of Igbo communities consider their social morals to be a gift from their forefathers. They believe their forefathers instilled in them a healthy lifestyle, as well as taboos and communal laws and regulations. They also maintain this morality as the "living dead." They punish individuals who do not follow acceptable morals by inflicting various disasters and tragedies on them (some scholars believe punishment

[19]Ibid.
[20]Nelson Azubuike, An Elder in the Redeemed Christian Church of God, Awada, Anambra State, Interviewed on the 18th April 2022
[21]Respondent 6, A member of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, Awada, Anambra State, Interviewed on the 18th April 2022
[22]Respondent 12, An Elder in the Seventh-day Adventist Church, Awada, Anambra State, Interviewed on the 18th April 2022
[23]Wyk, The final judgment in African perspectives, 708

from the ancestors is never harsh and only has educational value).[24] Whatever the case may be, the culprits are punished. Punishment from the ancestors guarantees that family and tribe members respect and follow the ethical principles that they (the ancestors) established. Even in this religion of grace, the anger of the ancestors exists, and those who do not honour the ancestors and their heritage will be punished.[25]

The majority of Igbo have no qualms about equating God with punishment. The Igbo deity's polytheistic nature provides the framework for them to believe in punishing gods. *Amadioha,* the Igbo god of lightning, is a notable example of a punitive deity in Igbo territory since he punishes thieves with lightning - the "bad death." *Njoku* is also considered a punitive deity in the Igbo nation, who repays and punishes wrong conduct.[26]

Exegetical Analysis of 2 Timothy 4:14: The Syntax and Semantics of *Apodōsei*

The Greek text of 2 Timothy 4:14 (NA28) reads:

> Ἀλέξανδρος ὁ χαλκεὺς πολλά μοι κακὰ ἐνεδείξατο· ἀποδώσει αὐτῷ ὁ κύριος κατὰ τὰ ἔργα αὐτοῦ.

Literally translated, the verse reads:

> Alexander the coppersmith demonstrated many evil things against me; the Lord will repay him according to his works.

The second clause forms the theological centre of the passage. Paul's statement is neither an emotional curse nor a prayer for vengeance but a declaration concerning God's future judicial action. This understanding becomes evident through grammatical, lexical, and discourse analysis of the text.

The Syntax of the Future Indicative

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[24]T, Sundermeier,Nur gemeinsam können wir leben: Das Menschenbild schwarzafrikanischer Religionen, *Aufl. Gütersloh: Mohn.* Vol. 2 (1988)
[25]T. Obengo, The role of the ancestors as guardians of morality in African traditional religions, *Journal of Black Theology in South Africa* Vol. 11, (1997) 44-63.
[26]J. Mbiti, *Introduction to African religion,* (Oxford: Heinemann, 1975), 46

The verb ἀποδώσει (apodōsei) is the third person singular future active indicative of the verb ἀποδίδωμι (apodidōmi). The future indicative generally denotes an action expected to occur subsequent to the time of speaking.[27] Here, the future tense is significant because it postpones divine judgment to a later occasion rather than presenting it as an immediate act of retribution.

Unlike the imperative or optative moods, which could express a wish or command, the future indicative expresses certainty concerning an event that God himself will accomplish. Paul's statement therefore functions as a confident assertion rather than an imprecatory petition. He does not say, "*May the Lord repay him*," but rather, "*The Lord will repay him.*" The distinction is theologically significant because it removes the responsibility for judgment from the believer and locates it entirely within the sovereign prerogative of God.

Moreover, the subject of the clause is ὁ κύριος ("the Lord"), while Alexander functions as the indirect object (αὐτῷ). This syntactical arrangement intentionally places divine agency at the forefront of the sentence. Judgment is God's work, not Paul's.

The Semantic Range of Apodidōmi

The verb ἀποδίδωμι possesses a broad semantic range in Koine Greek. According to Bauer, Danker, Arndt, and Gingrich (BDAG), the verb may denote "to give back," "to restore," "to pay," "to recompense," "to reward," or "to repay," depending upon its literary context.[28] Likewise, Louw and Nida classify the verb within the semantic domain of reciprocal action, indicating both positive and negative recompense according to one's conduct.[29]

Throughout the New Testament the verb is employed in both favourable and unfavourable senses. It describes the payment of wages (Matt. 20:8), the restoration of property (Luke 19:8), the rewarding of righteous deeds (Matt. 6:4, 6, 18), and divine judgment upon evil (Rom. 2:6; Rev. 22:12). Consequently, the verb itself carries no

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[27]Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996), 565–69.
[28]Walter Bauer, Frederick W. Danker, William F. Arndt, and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 108–9.
[29]Johannes P. Louw and Eugene A. Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains*, 2nd ed. (New York: United Bible Societies, 1989), §§57.101, 57.116.

inherently negative meaning. Rather, the moral value of the action depends upon its object.

Within Paul's writings, ἀποδίδωμι consistently emphasizes divine justice rather than personal retaliation. Romans 2:6 affirms that God "*will repay each person according to his works*," while 2 Timothy 4:8 declares that "*the Lord will award*" the crown of righteousness to faithful believers. The same verb therefore describes both reward and judgment. The lexical parallel between verses 8 and 14 strongly suggests that Paul intentionally presents God's future recompense of both the righteous and the wicked within the same eschatological framework.

Lexical Comparison with Related Greek Verbs

Paul's choice of ἀποδίδωμι is also significant when compared with other Greek verbs that could have conveyed punishment or vengeance. The New Testament employs ἐκδικέω (ekdikeō) and ἐκδίκησις (ekdikēsis) to denote vengeance or the execution of justice (Rom. 12:19; Luke 18:7–8). Likewise, τιμωρέω (timōreō) refers to punishment or retributive justice (Acts 22:5; 26:11).

Significantly, Paul does not employ any of these explicitly punitive terms in 2 Timothy 4:14. Instead, he chooses ἀποδίδωμι, a verb that fundamentally denotes recompense according to one's actions. This lexical choice shifts attention away from vengeance itself toward the impartial administration of divine justice. The emphasis therefore rests not upon emotional retaliation but upon God's righteous evaluation of human deeds.

The expression κατὰ τὰ ἔργα αὐτοῦ ("according to his works") further reinforces this judicial sense. The preposition κατά with the accusative expresses the standard or norm according to which judgment will be rendered. God's recompense is therefore proportionate, just, and consistent with the individual's conduct rather than arbitrary or vindictive.

The Discourse Function within 2 Timothy 4

The literary context also clarifies the meaning of Paul's statement. Chapter four exhibits a strong eschatological orientation beginning with Paul's solemn charge to Timothy "before God and Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead" (4:1). The chapter repeatedly anticipates Christ's appearing, the crown of righteousness, final deliverance, and God's heavenly kingdom.

Within this discourse, verse 14 functions as part of a larger judicial motif. Paul contrasts two destinies. In verse 8, the Lord will reward faithful believers with the crown of righteousness, whereas in verse 14 the Lord will repay Alexander according to his works. The deliberate repetition of ἀποδώσει establishes an intentional rhetorical parallel between divine reward and divine judgment. Both actions belong to the same future eschatological event.

This discourse structure demonstrates that Paul's concern is not immediate vindication but the certainty of God's final justice. James D. G. Dunn observes that Paul's ethical teaching consistently transfers vengeance from the individual believer to God, thereby preserving both divine justice and Christian forgiveness.[30] Paul's declaration concerning Alexander therefore harmonizes with his earlier exhortation in Romans 12:17–21 that believers must never repay evil for evil but should instead leave judgment to God.

Textual Criticism

The textual evidence for 2 Timothy 4:14 is remarkably stable. The principal Greek witnesses, including Codex Sinaiticus (א), Codex Alexandrinus (A), Codex Ephraemi Rescriptus (C), and the Byzantine tradition, uniformly read ἀποδώσει without any significant textual variants affecting the meaning of the clause.[31] The Nestle-Aland twenty-eighth edition likewise records no meaningful variant for the future verb. Consequently, there is no textual basis for interpreting the clause as referring to present or immediate judgment.

The absence of significant textual variation strengthens the argument that any interpretation suggesting immediate divine retaliation arises not from the Greek manuscript tradition but from later translation choices or contextual theological assumptions.

Implications for the Igbo Translation

The foregoing grammatical and lexical analysis demonstrates that Paul's statement is fundamentally eschatological. The future indicative ἀποδώσει, the semantic force of

[30]James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 9–16*, Word Biblical Commentary 38B (Dallas: Word Books, 1988), 738–42.
[31]Barbara Aland et al., eds., *Novum Testamentum Graece*, 28th rev. ed. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2012), 649.

ἀποδίδωμι, the judicial expression κατὰ τὰ ἔργα αὐτοῦ, and the wider discourse of chapter four all converge in presenting God's future judgment rather than immediate retaliation.

Consequently, older Igbo renderings that may be understood as suggesting an immediate act of divine punishment do not adequately reflect the temporal force of the Greek verb. A translation that explicitly preserves the future orientation, for example, Onyenwe anyị ga-enyeghachi ya dịka ọrụ ya niile si dị ("The Lord will repay him according to his works"), more accurately represents both the grammar and the theological intention of the Pauline text. Such a rendering also prevents the passage from being employed as biblical justification for immediate imprecatory expressions directed against personal enemies, while preserving Paul's central affirmation that final judgment belongs exclusively to God.

Who is Alexander and What was his Crime?

Identifying the Alexander in 2 Timothy 4:14 with the Alexander in 1 Timothy 1:20 remains a plausible but uncertain scholarly hypothesis. The text of 2 Timothy 4:14 itself states only that Alexander the metalworker (chalkeus) caused Paul considerable harm and that the Lord would repay him according to his deeds. It does not identify him with the Alexander of 1 Timothy 1:20. Nevertheless, the proposal is understandable because "Alexander" was a common name, and the New Testament occurrences associated with Paul are connected, directly or indirectly, with Ephesus (Acts 19:33; 1 Tim. 1:20; 2 Tim. 4:14). On this basis, some scholars reconstruct the Alexander of 2 Timothy as the same individual who, together with Hymenaeus, had been subjected to disciplinary action in 1 Timothy 1:20. That reconstruction would portray him as a persistent opponent of Paul and his teaching. However, the available textual evidence cannot establish such an identification and should therefore be treated as a hypothesis rather than a conclusion. The certainty of the passage lies not in Alexander's reconstructed identity or history, but in Paul's explicit statement that Alexander had caused him harm and that ultimate retribution belongs to the Lord.[32]

[32]Philip H. Towner, *The Letters to Timothy and Titus*, (Grand Rapid: Michigan: William B.Eerdmans Publishing Company), 584

Although some scholars maintain that the specification of this Alexander as "the metalworker" is meant to distinguish him from the earlier troublemaker who is simply called "Alexander," it is perfectly plausible that the description here is meant to identify the same person in a different setting, and his expulsion from the church may have been the cause of his relocation to another place where he continued to oppose the apostle.

It could be argued that Alexander's vehement opposition to the gospel, as seen in 4:15, may have been his crime. However, why was this not severe enough to warrant judgment? It's worth noting that when Jesus sent his disciples to preach the gospel in Jerusalem, he declared doom upon any city that showed hostility towards the message (cf. Matt 10:40-42). According to Jesus, those who reject or oppose the gospel will face judgment on the Day of Judgment (Matt. 10:15). This can be interpreted to mean that Alexander the Coppersmith may face damnation on eschatological grounds.

Findings from the Interviews

The interview data were analysed thematically to identify recurring patterns in participants' understanding of divine repayment, the Igbo expression Chukwu kwụọ gị ụgwọ ("God repay you"), the interpretation of 2 Timothy 4:14, and the influence of indigenous religious concepts on biblical interpretation. The analysis proceeded by identifying recurring statements and ideas in the interview accounts, assigning initial codes to those statements, comparing related codes across participant groups, and subsequently grouping them into broader themes. Four major themes emerged: (1) perceptions of divine retribution among the Igbo; (2) the meaning and use of Chukwu kwụọ gị ụgwọ; (3) interpretations of 2 Timothy 4:14; and (4) the influence of indigenous worldview on biblical interpretation.

For purposes of anonymity, participants are identified as Respondents 1–12. The respondents represented four broad groups: practitioners and scholars of African Traditional Religion, church members and elders, and personnel associated with the Bible Society of Nigeria. This anonymisation also makes it possible to compare patterns across groups without exposing participants' identities. The findings are presented below according to the themes generated from the interview data.

1. Perceptions of Divine Retribution among the Igbo

The first theme, divine retribution, was derived from recurring references to God's, the ancestors', or the deities' response to wrongdoing. The initial codes included punishment for wrongdoing, divine intervention, immediate consequences, ancestral punishment, and restoration of moral order. These codes occurred particularly in accounts associated with African Traditional Religion, although similar expectations of divine punishment were also evident among Christian participants.

Respondents from African Traditional Religion tended to associate wrongdoing with consequences that could become visible in the present world. Respondent 1, from an African Traditional Religion background, described divine punishment as connected with the maintenance of moral order.[33] Respondent 2, also representing the traditional religious perspective, similarly associated wrongdoing with the displeasure of spiritual powers.[34] Respondent 3, a scholar of African Traditional Religion, explained the relationship between divine justice and communal morality in terms of the traditional expectation that serious wrongdoing should attract an appropriate consequence.[35] These accounts correspond with the manuscript's broader discussion of Igbo understandings of ancestors and deities as guardians of morality.

The evidence, however, was not completely uniform. While the traditional-religious respondents placed greater emphasis on visible or immediate consequences, Christian respondents tended to distinguish between God's ultimate judgment and the believer's responsibility to forgive. Respondent 4, an elder within a Christian community, acknowledged the Christian emphasis on forgiveness but indicated that believers may nevertheless expect God to punish those who deliberately harm them.[36] Respondent 5 similarly connected the desire for divine intervention with situations in which individuals feel unable to obtain justice through ordinary means.[37]

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[33]Respondent 1, An Elder in the Redeemed Christian Church of God, Awada, Anambra State, Interviewed on the 18th April 2022

[34]Respondent 2, Lecturer in the Department of African Religious Studies, University of Nnamdi Azikiwe, Anambra state, Interviewed on the 19th April 2022

[35]Respobdent 3, Lecturer in the Department of African Religious Studies, University of Nnamdi Azikiwe, Anambra state, Interviewed on the 10th March 2022

[36]Respondent 4, Chibueze John, An Elder in the Seventh-day Adventist Church, Awada, Anambra State, Interviewed on the 18th April 2022

[37]Respondent 5, Staff member of the Igbo Bible Society, Onitsha Branch, Anambra State, Interviewed on the 8th March 2022

This variation is significant because it indicates that the expectation of divine retribution cannot simply be classified as either "traditional" or "Christian." Rather, the interviews suggest an interaction between the two frameworks. The traditional worldview appears to provide a cultural framework within which divine punishment is expected to be visible, while Christian belief supplies a theological vocabulary through which that expectation may be expressed. This finding is consistent with David T. Adamo's observation that African readers frequently engage biblical texts through existing cultural and religious frameworks rather than approaching the text in complete isolation from their lived realities.[38]

2. The Meaning of Chukwu kwụọ gị ụgwọ among Igbo Christians

The second theme concerned the expression Chukwu kwụọ gị ụgwọ, literally "God repay you." The expression emerged repeatedly in the interview material as an important point of contact between Igbo cultural understandings of justice and Christian interpretations of biblical language concerning divine repayment. The principal codes associated with this theme were imprecation, divine intervention, powerlessness, revenge transferred to God, and immediate punishment.

Respondent 6, a Christian participant, explained the expression in the context of situations in which an offended person cannot or does not wish to retaliate personally.[39] Respondent 7 similarly indicated that the expression can function as a way of committing the offender to God's judgment.[40] In these accounts, the expression does not necessarily mean that the speaker intends to punish the offender personally. Instead, responsibility for punishment is transferred to God.

At the same time, the interviews revealed an important ambiguity. Respondents distinguished between the expression as a general prayer for divine blessing and its use during interpersonal conflict. In conflict situations, the expression frequently functions as an imprecation. Respondent 8 indicated that its meaning can shift according to the circumstances in which it is uttered: in a positive context it may express a desire for

[38]Adamo, *Reading Psalm 109 in African Christianity*, 588
[39]Respondent 6, A member of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, Awada, Anambra State, Interviewed on the 18th April 2022
[40]Respondent 7, Editorial Secretary of the Igbo Bible Society, Onitsha Branch, Anambra State, Interviewed on the 8th March 2022

divine blessing, whereas in a conflictual context it may communicate a desire that God punish the offender.[41]

The African Traditional Religion respondents provided an additional dimension to this finding. Respondent 2 observed that appeals to divine powers for the punishment of offenders existed within the indigenous religious environment before the Christian adoption of comparable expressions.[42] This suggests cultural continuity rather than a completely new Christian practice. The finding is important because it helps explain why 2 Timothy 4:14 may be readily associated with an expression such as Chukwu kwụọ gị ụgwọ. The expression resonates with an existing cultural expectation that divine powers should intervene against those who cause harm. The manuscript's literature review similarly observes that African biblical interpretation frequently engages questions of curses, divine justice, spiritual conflict, and the treatment of enemies through indigenous conceptual frameworks.

3. Understanding of 2 Timothy 4:14

The third theme concerned participants' interpretation of Paul's statement, “the Lord will repay him according to his works.” The coding process generated the categories immediate punishment, future judgment, biblical justification for prayer, Greek future tense, forgiveness, and divine sovereignty.

The most significant variation occurred according to participants' level of theological or biblical training. Respondents 9 and 10, who had formal theological or biblical knowledge, interpreted Paul's statement primarily within the context of future divine judgment.[43] Their interpretation corresponded with the grammatical observation that *apodōsei* is a future indicative and therefore points to an action expected to occur subsequently.[44] They understood Paul's statement as an assertion that God would ultimately judge Alexander rather than as a prayer asking God to punish him immediately.

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[41]Respondent 8, A member in the Redeemed Christian Church of God, Awada, Anambra State, Interviewed on the 19th April 2022

[42]Respondent 2, Lecturer in the Department of African Religious Studies, University of Nnamdi Azikiwe, Anambra state, Interviewed on the 19th April 2022

[43]Respondent 9, A Pastor of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, Awada, Anambra State, Interviewed on the 18th April 2022; Respondent 10, Professor of African Religious Studies, University of Nnamdi Azikiwe, Anambra state, Interviewed on the 8th February 2022

[44]Dunn, *Romans 9–16*, Word Biblical Commentary, 740

By contrast, Respondent 11 indicated that the passage can readily be understood by ordinary Christian readers as permission to ask God to punish personal enemies. This reading is significant because it shows how the passage can function differently at the level of popular reception from its interpretation within formal exegetical analysis.[45]

Respondent 12, associated with the Bible Society of Nigeria, drew attention to the relationship between the wording of the Igbo Bible and readers' understanding of the passage. The interview evidence indicates that the wording encountered by readers can contribute to an understanding of divine repayment as an immediate action.[46] This observation corresponds with the manuscript's earlier argument that some Igbo renderings may encourage a temporal understanding different from the future orientation of the Greek apodōsei.[47]

The difference between these responses is important. The interviews do not demonstrate that all Igbo Christians interpret 2 Timothy 4:14 in the same manner. Rather, they reveal at least two interpretive tendencies. The first understands Paul's statement as an affirmation of future divine judgment, while the second reads it as a practical basis for asking God to punish an offender in the present. The former is more strongly represented among participants with formal theological knowledge, while the latter is more evident at the level of popular religious interpretation.

This finding corresponds with the exegetical evidence presented earlier in the article. The use of apodidōmi in 2 Timothy 4:8 and 4:14 establishes a conceptual connection between the reward of the righteous and the recompense of the wicked. Towner therefore situates verse 14 within the eschatological framework of the chapter, while Mounce understands Paul's statement as an affirmation that divine justice ultimately belongs to God.[48] The interview data consequently provide empirical evidence for a distinction between the grammatical-theological meaning of the passage and the way in which the passage may be received within a particular cultural context.

4. Influence of Indigenous Worldview on Biblical Interpretation

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[45]Respondent 11, Professor of African Religious Studies, University of Nnamdi Azikiwe, Anambra state, Interviewed on the 8th February 2022
[46]Respondent 12, An Elder in the Seventh-day Adventist Church, Nsukka, Enugu State, Interviewed on the 18th January 2022
[47]Ukpong, *Developments in Biblical Interpretation in Africa*, 89
[48]Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, 132

The fourth theme, indigenous worldview and biblical interpretation, was generated from statements linking Christian understandings of divine justice with pre-existing Igbo concepts of enemies, punishment, spiritual powers, and communal morality. The principal codes were cultural continuity, traditional concepts, interpretive lens, spiritual warfare, enemy, and Christian reinterpretation.

Respondents 2–3, representing African Traditional Religion and its scholarly study, emphasised the continuing relevance of indigenous ideas concerning divine justice and the punishment of offenders. Their accounts suggest that Christianity did not simply erase earlier religious categories. Instead, elements of the indigenous worldview continue to provide conceptual resources through which biblical texts may be understood.[49]

The Christian respondents also recognised this interaction, although with varying degrees of explicitness. Respondent 4 acknowledged the Christian doctrine of forgiveness while simultaneously recognising the persistent expectation that God should punish deliberate wrongdoers. Respondent 5 similarly connected divine intervention with situations involving serious personal offence. These responses demonstrate that Christian interpretation may retain cultural assumptions even when participants explicitly identify themselves within a Christian theological framework

The Bible Society respondent provided a further perspective by drawing attention to the role of translation. Respondent 12's account indicates that biblical language does not operate independently of the cultural assumptions of its readers. A translation that appears to communicate immediate repayment may reinforce an already existing cultural expectation of immediate divine justice.

The findings therefore support a dialogical understanding of contextual biblical interpretation. The biblical text is received within a social and cultural environment that already possesses categories for understanding justice, punishment, enemies, and divine intervention. Ukpong argues that African biblical interpretation should engage the concrete social and cultural realities of African readers, while West similarly stresses

[49]Respondent 2, Lecturer in the Department of African Religious Studies, University of Nnamdi Azikiwe, Anambra state, Interviewed on the 19th April 2022; Respobdent 3, Lecturer in the Department of African Religious Studies, University of Nnamdi Azikiwe, Anambra state, Interviewed on the 10th March 2022

the importance of dialogue between Scripture, context, and community.[50] The present interview findings illustrate this process in a specific Igbo Christian context.

Importantly, the data do not establish that indigenous influence necessarily produces a distorted interpretation in every case. Rather, they demonstrate that cultural assumptions can shape the questions readers ask of a biblical text and the meanings they are likely to perceive. In the case of 2 Timothy 4:14, an existing expectation of immediate divine retribution appears to make Paul's statement particularly susceptible to an imprecatory reading.

5. Comparative Summary of the Interview Evidence

The four themes should not be understood as isolated findings. Rather, they form an interconnected interpretive pattern. The first theme establishes that divine punishment is an important category within Igbo understandings of moral order. The second shows how this expectation is expressed among Christians through Chukwu kwụọ gị ụgwọ. The third demonstrates that 2 Timothy 4:14 can be interpreted either as an affirmation of future divine judgment or as support for an immediate appeal for punishment. The fourth explains how indigenous religious assumptions and translation can contribute to the latter interpretation.

The interviews also reveal meaningful variation among participant groups. Participants associated with African Traditional Religion tended to emphasise visible and morally restorative divine intervention. Christian elders and members acknowledged the Christian requirement of forgiveness but also recognised the continuing desire for God to punish offenders. Participants with stronger theological or biblical training were more likely to distinguish Paul's statement from an imprecatory prayer and to emphasise the future force of apodōsei. The Bible Society perspective further drew attention to the relationship between translation and reception.

Accordingly, the empirical evidence does not support a claim that Igbo Christians uniformly understand 2 Timothy 4:14 as an immediate prayer for vengeance. Instead, it reveals a tension between the future-oriented theological meaning of Paul's statement and a culturally available interpretation of divine repayment as immediate retribution. This distinction is central to the argument of the study. The interview findings therefore

[50]Ukpong, *Developments in Biblical Interpretation in Africa,* 99

complement rather than replace the exegetical analysis: the Greek text establishes the temporal and theological force of Paul's statement, while the interviews explain why a different reception may occur within the Igbo Christian context.

Decolonisation of 2 Timothy 4:14 in the Igbo Christian Cosmology

Though Alexander's identity remains quite obscure, his opposition to Paul presents a person of some quality. 2 Tim 4:14 indicates that Alexander showed him much evil. The Greek word *endeiknumi* used here basically means 'to show,' or 'to demonstrate.' Gordon D. Fee, followed by some scholars, thinks that the verb has a legal meaning. According to him, Alexander betrayed Paul at his trial (cf. v.16).[51] However, the much evil Alexander showed Paul may have been his 'opposition' (*anthistimi*) to the gospel (v. 15). Even though Alexander resisted Paul's spread of the message, Paul succeeded in sharing the message with all Gentiles (v. 16). Timothy is warned to be careful of him, probably he has not changed. In 2 Tim 4:15, Paul says that Alexander 'vehemently' (*lian*) 'opposed' (*anthistimi*) the gospel. In 3:8, Paul uses *anthistimi* to describe the attitude of Jannes and Jambres to Moses in comparison to the false teacher's attitude to the truth (vv. 1-8; cf. Exod. 7:11, 22). The word *anthistimi* means 'to oppose' 'to show hostility'.

As 2 Tim 4:15 indicates, Alexander vehemently 'opposed' (*anthistimi*) Paul's words (*logois*). In this letter, the word logos is usually used with reference to the gospel (1:13; 2:9, 11, 15; 4:2). Paul makes clear that Alexander 'opposed' (*anthistimi*) 'our' (*hēmeterois*) 'words' (logois) not Paul as a person. Jesus' statement in Matt 10:11-15 may provide socio-religious context for 2 Tim 4:14 since Paul is concerned with the spread of the gospel message. In sending his disciples to preach the Gospel in Jerusalem, he pronounces doom against any city that will be hostile to the gospel (cf. Matt 10:40-42). According to Jesus, anyone who rejects/opposes the gospel message will be judged on the Day of Judgment (v. 15). Elymas the magician began to 'oppose' (*anthistimi*) Paul and Barnabas by turning the Proconsul from the faith, but Paul made him blind (Acts 13:8-11). In v. 8, *anthistimi* is used to depict Elymas attitude toward the gospel.

[51]Gordon D. Fee, 1 and 2 Timothy, Titus, Good News Commentary (San Francisco: Har-per & Row, 1984), 245

According to Paul, to 'oppose' (*anthistimi*) the gospel is to pervert the right ways of the Lord (v. 10). Again, Paul understands that to 'prevent' (*kōluō*) the gospel to be preached is to attract the wrath of God (1 Thess 2:14-16). *Anthistimi* is not used in this passage. *Kōluō* 'to prevent' is used in v. 16 to express Jews' hostility to the gospel and attempt to prevent Gentiles from accessing it. In a word, anyone who opposes the gospel in any form receives to him or herself damnation. Understood in this way, Alexander the coppersmith is subjected to damnation (2 Tim 4:14). Paul says, 'the Lord will repay him according to his works' in this *aeon* (v. 14b). In 4:1, an eschatological tone is set, as Paul charges Timothy before God and the Lord Jesus Christ the judge of the living and the dead. In v. 8, this righteous judge will give' (*apodidōmi*) Paul a crown of righteousness on that day. Here the tense apodōsei (future) indicates the time of giving the reward. The Lord will 'repay' (*apodōsei*) Alexander also according to his works (v. 14b). His works are evil. The repaying of Alexander points to a future event, since the tone of chapter 4 is eschatological (vv.1, 8, 18). Alexander has been shown to have pervertedthe right ways of the Lord. Hence, Paul's statement describes the fate of Alexander. James Burton Coffman rightly observes that Paul uttered no imprecations, expressed no bitterness and manifested no vindictive of any kind.[52]

Another significant factor that has contributed to the misinterpretation of 2 Timothy 4:14 in the Igbo context is the rendering found in some of the earliest Igbo Bible translations. In these versions, the phrase is presented as "*Onye-nwe-ayi nyeghachi ya ihe dika ọlu-ya nile si di*" (God pay him his wages), rather than the more contextually accurate "*Onye-nwe-ayi ga enyeghachi ya ihe dika ọlu-ya nile si di*" (God will repay him according to his works). This earlier translation introduces a theological and temporal distortion of the text. The use of "*nyeghachi*" (pay) suggests a completed or immediate action, thereby implying that divine retribution occurs instantly. In contrast, the Greek verb apodōsei in the original text is in the future tense, clearly indicating a deferred action that aligns with eschatological judgment rather than immediate recompense.[53] Since the Textus Receptus of the NT has *apodōsei* with no strong variant, the Igbo should read, '*Onye-nwe-ayi ga enyeghachi ya ihe dika ọlu-ya nile si di*' (the Lord will repay him according to his works) (v. 14b). This reading fits the context of

[52]James Burton Coffman, Commentary on 1 & 2 Thessalonians, 1 & 2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon, rev.ed. (Abilene, TX: A.U.C. Press, 1986), 288
[53]Respondent 7, (manuscript editor of the Igbo Bible Society) Interviewed on the 4th January 2022

Paul's statement. Granted, 2 Tim 4:14b should not be the basis for the use of the Igbo expression '*Chukwu kwuo gi ugwo*' (God repay you).

In African setting, especially among the Igbo speaking people, 'Chukwu kwuo gi ugwo' (God repay you) is often used as an imprecation on offenders. Analysis of the meaning of Paul's statement has shown that he describes the fate of the evil on the Day of Judgment. He entreats Christians not to repay evil with evil. This suggests that the Igbo speaking Christians should learn to forgive and refrain from using '*Chukwu kwuo gi ugwo*' (God repay you) as imprecation on their offenders. As previously seen from the previous chapters, the implication of this interpretation is seen from the socio-cultural worldview of pre-Christian Igbo traditional religionbefore the emergence of Christianity.

This worldview dictates the instant payment of an offender and the instant vindication of one's enemy Igbo land connotes justice from God. However, from the Christian perspective, the reward or repayment of the evil doers is slated for Christ's second coming, when he will repay every person according to their deeds. Also the use of this text as an instant vindication of one's enemy or offender, nullifies the biblical concept of forgiveness, hence, since all are sinners, as indicated in the Book of Romans, we are prone to instant death, which is the reward for our sin. Again, the vivid presentation of the aeon construct clarifies the issues of the instant vengeance and most other issues in the biblical saga about the righteous and sinners; as per how and when the judgement has been slated.

CONCLUSION

This study has re-examined 2 Timothy 4:14 through Greek exegesis, Igbo translation evidence, interview findings, and intercultural hermeneutics. The analysis shows that Paul presents repayment as belonging to the Lord, not as a justification for personal retaliation. The Igbo translation and interview themes further demonstrate how the idea of divine repayment is understood within Igbo religious and Christian contexts. By placing these perspectives in dialogue, the study shows how intercultural interpretation can illuminate the text's meaning and reception. The study is limited by its small, purposively selected sample, which does not permit generalization to the wider Igbo population. Its findings should therefore be understood as context-specific. Further research with broader and more diverse participants could extend these findings and

deepen understanding of divine retribution and enemy-related discourse in Igbo Christianity.

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Respondent 12, An Elder in the Seventh-day Adventist Church, Nsukka, Enugu State, Interviewed on the 18th January 2022.

CHAPTER 7

MISSION AS COMPASSION UNDER ESCHATOLOGICAL ACCOUNTABILITY: A MISSIONAL READING OF MATTHEW 25:31-46 IN AFRICAN HERMENEUTICAL CONTEXT

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Abstract

This paper seeks to contribute to the ongoing discussion on the interpretation of Matthew 25:31-46 in relation to economic disparities, urbanization, and changing cultures in the African context. Previous works have examined Matthew 25:31–46 in relation to poverty, Christian responsibility, social welfare, and the Church's responsibility to vulnerable communities in African contexts. However, comparatively limited attention has been given to bringing these concerns together with an intercultural African hermeneutical reading of mission as compassion and eschatological accountability. This study seeks to examine mission as compassion and social responsibility in Matthew 25:31-46, through the lens of African hermeneutics. The study employs intercultural approach. This study reveals that being caring is entrenched in African culture as it were in Jewish tradition. The practice of hospitality is not a mere act of generosity but as definite expression of allegiance to Christ. The analysis of text in African context indicates that moral responsibility is an essential component of Christian disciples and mission because Jesus calls his followers to assist "the least of these". Transforming mission bridges the existing disconnect between preaching and caring about the society. It puts emphasis on hospitality, shared identity, and community responsibility. The injunction in Matthew 25:31-46 thus, offers one of the important insights to perceive mission as caring work that anticipates the judgment of God. This study recommends a redefinition of mission in Africa to combine preaching with practical assistance to people, teaching more about social care, and establishing ministries

which are compatible with the current reality while remaining rooted in biblical authority. The emerging global issues such as pandemic, migration, outbreak of wars would better be handled if the injunction of Christ in Matthew 25:31-46 and African exposition of the text are given adequate attention.

Keywords: *Mission and Ministry, Matthew 25:31–46, Eschatological Accountability, African Hermeneutics, Compassion.*

INTRODUCTION

Christian mission in Africa is being reshaped by contemporary global realities such as migration, technological advancement, economic inequality, and cultural transformation. These developments present new opportunities as well as significant challenges for the Church's understanding and practice of mission. Increasingly, scholars argue that the Church's mission must extend beyond traditional evangelistic activities to include meaningful engagement with the social, cultural, economic, and ethical issues affecting African communities. Such an approach reflects a holistic understanding of mission that integrates gospel proclamation with compassionate service and social responsibility.[1] There is an increasing pressure to create a more holistic and contextually oriented perspective of mission as African Christianity keeps expanding.

In this respect, Matthew 25:31–46 provides an important biblical perspective on the reevaluation of mission and ministry. The text gives us an illustration of the judgment at the end where the Son of Man judges the people by their attitude towards the needs of "the least of these." This text connects eschatological expectation with practical responsibility, showing that care for the vulnerable is central to Christian faith. As observed by scholars, mission entails proclamation and social action, particularly where poverty and inequality continue to be burning issues.[2] Nevertheless, the relationship between eschatology, compassion, and mission has not been fully developed in contemporary African theology.

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[1] Mnyalaza T. Masuku, "Mistakes of Western Christian Missions in Africa and Related Response, Mid-19th to 20th Century," *Verbum et Ecclesia* 44, no. 1 (2023): 1-3, https://doi.org/10.4102/ve.v44i1.2746.

[2] David Wilson Mdabuko, Kevin Muriithi Ndereba, and Aloo Mojola, "The Impact of Missional Theological Education on Clergy Leadership Development: A Tanzanian Perspective within African and Global

In many African church settings, there is a growing concern that mission has become unbalanced. Mission has been heavily understood in terms of evangelistic and numeric expansion and on some occasions, the prosperity oriented interpretation of the Christian faith.[3] However, despite the fact that proclamation remains core to the mission of the church, such approaches often paid little attention to the ethical responsibility of serving the poor, the stranger, and the vulnerable. At the same time, other approaches view faith as an individual issue that does not have the potential to influence the life of the people around. This situation creates a gap between what is preached and how Christians respond to real human suffering. With the recent studies on mission and leadership in Africa, it is still necessary to establish Christian communities where theological reflection intersects with practical transformation in the society.[4]

Scholarly discussions have covered areas of mission, ethics, and African hermeneutics, but in most cases, they are addressed individually. African theological studies have emphasized the importance of community, public responsibility, and contextual interpretation of Scripture.[5] At the same time, missiological studies have raised the issue of the necessity of the church to address social realities like migration, digital revolution, and interreligious relations.[6] However, there has been little literature that has attempted to unite such understanding into a keen reading of Matthew 25:31-46 that vindicates mission in African contexts.

This study addresses this gap by reading Matthew 25:31–46 through an intercultural hermeneutical approach that brings the biblical text into dialogue with African realities. It claims that the mission as explicated in the passage can best be understood as compassion based on eschatological accountability. This is to say that caring for the needy is not an

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Contexts," *East African Journal of Arts and Social Sciences* 8, no. 3 (2025): 402 onward, https://doi.org/10.37284/eajass.8.3.3604.

[3] Agbonkhianmeghe E. Orobator, *Theology Brewed in an African Pot* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2008), 45–48.

[4] Flavian Kassala Matindi and Negussie Andre Domnic, "Mission and Leadership in Africa: Analysis of Servant Leadership in Tanzania," *African Journal of Emerging Issues* 5, no. 17 (2023): 140–163.

[5] Martin Mujinga, "A Colonial-Decolonial Critique of Theological and Religious Research in South Africa (1975–2025)," *Verbum et Ecclesia* 46, no. 3 (2025): 1–8, https://doi.org/10.4102/ve.v46i3.3346.

[6] Peter Bwire, "The Impact of the Mission of the Church on Christian-Muslim Relations in Africa," *African Multidisciplinary Journal of Research* 9, no. 1 (2024): 24–28, https://doi.org/10.71064/spu.amjr.9.1.297.

incidental but fundamental act of loyalty to Christ, who identifies himself with "the least of these." By integrating biblical exegesis with African communal values such as hospitality and shared responsibility, this study offers a more holistic understanding of mission and ministry in a changing world.

Interpreting Matthew 25:31–46: Text and Scholarly Perspectives

Literary and Theological Context

Matthew 25:31–46 is often interpreted as the culmination of the eschatological Jesus teaching in the Olivet Discourse, in which themes of judgment, readiness, and accountability are brought together. R. T. France explains that this passage serves as the final scene of the discourse, which provides an overall picture of divine judgment based on human response.[7] Luz also argues that the text is a theological conclusion that connects discipleship and ethical responsibility under the reality of final judgement[8] In a more contextual reading, Kalu and Mmesomachukwu observe that the passage highlights the seriousness of judgment in relation to practical care for the needy, especially within African settings where poverty remains a pressing concern.[9]While these perspectives affirm the eschatological weight of the passage, they seem to not fully connect this framework to a missional understanding that addresses the modern African realities.

The theological significance of the text is further augmented by the figure of the "Son of Man" in Matthew 25:31 -46. Blomberg points out that Son of Man is also a depiction of the king and judge who will have the divine authority over all nations on the final judgment day, and that like the role of the church in the present day.[10] Likewise, Luz stresses that this title shows Christ's peculiar role in revealing and executing God's justice.[11] These interpretations underscore the authority of Christ in the passage but give limited attention to how this authority calls the church to embody compassionate mission in the present.

The theme of judgment in the passage is closely connected with ethical action, especially in connection with the care of others. A closer reading of the Greek text strengthens this

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[7] R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 952–955.
[8] Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 21–28: A Commentary*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 263–265.
[9] Kalu Okechukwu Okore and Lumanze Obedben Mmesomachukwu, "Matthew 25:31–46 in the Context of the Needy and Poor in Nigeria," *Nsukka Journal of Religion and Cultural Studies* 11, no. 2 (2023): 84–98.
[10] Craig L. Blomberg, *Matthew*, New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1992), 369–371.
[11] Luz, *Matthew 21–28*, 266–267.

connection. The key term *ἐλάχιστος* which is translated "the least" in Matthew 25:40 and 25:45 is the superlative form of *μικρός*, meaning small or insignificant. The use of the word here deliberately identifies those who are lowest in social standing: the hungry, the stranger, the sick, and the imprisoned as the very ones through whom Christ makes himself present and accessible. This is not incidental language but a deliberate theological statement: Christ identifies himself with those whom society regards as least important irrespective of religious affiliation. Adasi-Bekoe supports this idea, claiming that the scene of judgment in Matthew 25:31–46 is based upon tangible show of mercy and as such, social responsibility forms the core of Christian discipleship.[12] In a similar way, Blomberg maintains that the passage has a close relation to the ethical standing on observable deeds, especially in meeting the needs of the vulnerable.[13] While these studies highlight the ethical demands of the text, they often do not integrate this insight with an intercultural approach that brings African communal values into dialogue with biblical interpretation.

The Debate on "The Least of These"

The identity of "the least of these" in Matthew 25:31–46 constitutes one of the major interpretive cruxes of the passage and has significant implications for Christian ethics and mission. The debate is principally concerned with whether the expression refers specifically to Jesus' disciples or missionaries, or whether it extends more broadly to persons who experience hunger, displacement, poverty, sickness, imprisonment, and other forms of vulnerability. R. T. France argues for the former interpretation, observing that Matthew's use of related language elsewhere, particularly Matthew 10:40–42, supports an identification of "the least of these" with Jesus' disciples or His representatives. On this reading, the nations are judged according to their response to Christ's messengers, and their treatment of these representatives becomes an indirect response to Christ Himself.[14] This interpretation deserves serious consideration because the expression "my brothers" (τῶν ἀδελφῶν μου) can refer to members of Jesus' community in Matthew, and because

[12] Joseph Adasi-Bekoe, "The Implications of the Judgement Discourse of Matthew 25:31–46 for Christian Social Welfare Provision," *International Social Sciences and Education Journal* 3, no. 1 (2025): 70–78, https://doi.org/10.61424/issej.v3i1.209.
[13] Blomberg, *Matthew*, 372–373.
[14] France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 954–960.

Matthew 10 establishes a significant relationship between receiving Jesus' representatives and receiving Jesus Himself. Nevertheless, the immediate literary context of Matthew 25:31–46 provides reasons for understanding the ethical scope of the passage more inclusively. The judgment scene forms the climax of Matthew 24–25, where Jesus repeatedly emphasizes watchfulness, faithfulness, responsible conduct, and readiness for His coming. The movement from the parables of the faithful and unfaithful servant (24:45–51), the ten virgins (25:1–13), and the talents (25:14–30) to the final judgment (25:31–46) suggests that readiness for the coming King is demonstrated through concrete expressions of faithful living. The passage therefore does not introduce compassion as an isolated ethical concern but presents practical conduct toward others as an important manifestation of kingdom allegiance.[15] The universal language of the judgment scene also deserves attention. Matthew states that "all the nations" (πάντα τὰ ἔθνη) are gathered before the Son of Man (25:32). Although this expression does not by itself settle the identity of "the least of these," it establishes a universal horizon for the judgment. The acts examined by the King are likewise presented in universal human categories: hunger, thirst, being a stranger, nakedness, sickness, and imprisonment (25:35–36, 42–43). These conditions are not described in explicitly ecclesial terms. Rather, they represent recognizable forms of human vulnerability. The narrative therefore provides a strong basis for understanding the ethical demand of the passage as extending beyond care for members of the Christian community alone.

The phrase "my brothers" must nevertheless be retained in the interpretation rather than being treated as insignificant. Matthew frequently uses "brothers" in relation to Jesus' disciples (cf. Matt. 12:48–50; 28:10), which gives France's interpretation considerable textual weight. However, the identification of Christ with "the least" creates a theological movement from the particular to the broader ethical responsibility. Even if "my brothers" initially identifies Jesus' representatives, the passage makes the treatment of vulnerable persons the concrete arena in which allegiance to the King is revealed. The final statement in verse 40 is particularly significant: "to the extent that you did it to one of these brothers

[15] Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009). 601–609.

of Mine, even the least of them, you did it to Me." The corresponding statement in verse 45 repeats the principle negatively. Thus, the narrative does not merely commend generosity within an already established community; it exposes the character of those who encounter human need.

This broader ethical dimension is consistent with Matthew's presentation of mercy and righteousness elsewhere in the Gospel. Jesus repeatedly associates righteousness with concrete conduct toward others, including mercy, reconciliation, generosity, and concern for those who are socially vulnerable. Consequently, Ulrich Luz interprets the judgment scene in a more inclusive way and stresses the universality of the judgment and the importance of practical righteousness.[16] Keener similarly emphasizes the social and ethical world of the first century, in which hospitality, almsgiving, and care for vulnerable persons were recognized as important expressions of righteousness.[17] Blomberg likewise understands the expression in relation to people in need generally, thereby emphasizing that the ethical demand of the passage reaches beyond a narrowly defined religious community.[18]

The inclusive interpretation is therefore preferable for the present study, not because the disciple-specific interpretation lacks textual support, but because it better accounts for the literary and theological movement of Matthew 25:31–46 as a whole. The universal assembly of the nations, the concrete catalogue of human needs, the repeated contrast between compassionate action and neglect, and the identification of such treatment with one's response to Christ all point toward an ethical concern that cannot be restricted exclusively to those already belonging to the Christian community. At the same time, the disciple-specific dimension should not be discarded. A responsible interpretation recognizes that Matthew's language may preserve a particular reference to Christ's representatives while simultaneously articulating a wider principle of mercy toward vulnerable human beings. This complementary reading prevents the passage from being

[16] Luz, *Matthew 21–28*, 265–272.
[17] Keener, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 605–609.
[18] Blomberg, *Matthew*, 373–375.

reduced either to an exclusively intra-Christian ethic or to a generalized humanitarian principle abstracted from its Christological context.

For Christian mission, this distinction is important. If “the least of these” is understood only as Christian missionaries or members of the Christian community, the missional application may become primarily concerned with hospitality toward fellow believers. If, however, the passage is read within its wider Matthean context, the treatment of vulnerable persons becomes an important manifestation of allegiance to Christ in the world. The latter reading therefore provides a stronger basis for a holistic understanding of mission in which proclamation of the gospel and practical compassion are held together. The Church's responsibility toward the hungry, the stranger, the sick, the imprisoned, and other vulnerable persons is consequently not an optional social programme added to mission but an ethical expression of its allegiance to the King.

The paper fits within the larger reading that sees “the least of these” to mean all the vulnerable people and further situates this reading within African communal contexts. In most African societies, the needy are not taken care of by a certain group of persons but it is driven by common identity and moral responsibility towards the extended community. An example of this is the Yoruba society of Southwest Nigeria wherein the concept of *Omoluabi*, a person of good character, has a strong communal responsibility to take care of others that fall outside the immediate family. This echoes the inclusive nature of Matthew 25: 31-46. At the same time, the interpretation assumed here goes beyond a broadly ethical reading because it makes clear that such acts of compassion are not merely humanitarian but are expressions of loyalty to Christ within the framework of eschatological accountability. Although insightful, the existing interpretations do not dwell much on how this inclusive reading can transform the mission and ministry in African settings, which are experiencing modern social and global pressures.

This paper therefore argues that the inclusive reading is better supported when the lexical evidence is considered alongside syntax, literary context, and Matthean usage. The term *ἐλάχιστος* (“the least”) in Matthew 25:40 and 25:45 is the superlative of *μικρός* (“small” or “little”) and may describe those of lowly or vulnerable status. However, the term itself does

not determine whether "the least" refers specifically to Jesus' disciples or to vulnerable people more broadly. Thus its referent is to be understood in relation to τῶν ἀδελφῶν μου ("my brothers") and the wider context of the passage.

Likewise, *ἔθνη* ("nations") in Matthew 25:32 has a broad meaning, but the word alone does not establish that the passage refers to every individual. Rather, the gathering of "all the nations" before the Son of Man contributes to the universal horizon of the judgment. This is reinforced by the concrete acts of mercy in verses 35–39, which are presented without an explicit restriction to members of the Christian community. Although the disciple-specific interpretation has significant support in Matthew, particularly in Matthew 10:40–42, the broader literary context gives greater weight to the ethical significance of caring for those experiencing human vulnerability. Thus, the inclusive reading adopted in this paper rests not on lexical meaning alone, but on the combined evidence of syntax, Matthean usage, literary context, and the wider scholarly debate.

In the African context specifically, *ἐλάχιστος* finds concrete expression in widows, orphans, internally displaced persons, ethnic minorities, the physically challenged, the urban poor, and those marginalized by poverty and political exclusion, These are the faces of *ἐλάχιστος* in Africa today, and the church is called to respond to their condition as an urgent expression of faithfulness to Christ.[19]

Ethics, Eschatology, and Mission in Scholarship

Across the board, scholars have connected eschatology and ethics in Matthew 25:31-46. Luz argues that ultimate accountability before God is inseparable from concrete acts of compassion.[20] Blomberg goes on to argue that genuine discipleship is evidenced by concrete acts of care for the needy.[21] In a more contextual approach, Adasi-Bekoe further highlights that the judgment discourse demands active social responsibility toward vulnerable populations.[22] Whereas, these views affirm the centrality of ethical action, they

[19] O. E. Ajibade, "Poverty and Christian Responsibility in Africa: A Biblical Perspective," *Verbum et Ecclesia* 41, no. 1 (2020 4–5.
[20] Luz, *Matthew 21–28*, 270–272
[21] Blomberg, *Matthew*, 374–375
[22] Adasi-Bekoe, The Implications of the Judgement Discourse of Matthew 25:31–46 for Christian Social Welfare Provision, 70-78.

do not sufficiently show how eschatological accountability motivates mission in specific cultural contexts.

It is also important to distinguish three related concepts: missiology is the academic study of mission; mission refers to the church's activity of proclamation and service; and missional theology argues that the entire life of the church must be shaped by participation in God's mission, the *missio Dei*. Matthew 25:31–46 speaks to all three levels. Wright argues that mission is the church's participation in God's own work of justice and compassion in the world.[23] Bosch similarly holds that mission must transform the social conditions of human life, not only proclaim the gospel.[24] Together, they provide the missiological framework this paper builds on.

African theological scholarship adds a further dimension. Dube stresses that African hermeneutics must address real-life issues such as poverty, marginalization, and injustice.[25] Similarly, Ajibade suggest that biblical interpretation in African contexts should result to practical responses to social suffering, especially in relation to poverty and inequality.[26] While these studies provide valuable insights, it rarely integrates eschatological themes with missional practice in reading Matthew 25:31-46, a gap this paper seeks to address.

Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative interpretive method combining historical-grammatical exegesis with intercultural hermeneutics. The historical-grammatical analysis considers the historical and literary context of Matthew 25:31–46, its structure, key terms, and major themes, particularly judgment, discipleship, and ethical responsibility.[27] This establishes the meaning of the text before contextual application. Intercultural hermeneutics then brings this exegetical reading into dialogue with African lived realities, particularly communal responsibility, hospitality, and care for vulnerable persons. Dube and Ukpong stresses the importance of engaging biblical interpretation with African lived realities while

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[23] Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2006), 62-66

[24] David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), 368–372.

[25] Musa W. Dube, "Reading for Decolonization (John 4:1–42)," *Semeia* 75 (1996): 37–59.

[26] Ajibade, Poverty and Christian Responsibility in Africa, 4–5

[27] France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 10–12.

maintaining the significance of the biblical text.[28] Yoruba categories are selected where they have clear conceptual relevance to the passage; specifically, *Omoluabi* (good character and social responsibility) and *Alaafia* (communal wellbeing) are examined as cultural categories through which the ethical implications of Matthew 25 may be explored. Thus, contemporary cultural parallels illuminate the application of the text without determining its original meaning.

The paper draws on African hermeneutical insights which prioritizes communal identity, hospitality, and shared responsibility.[29] Where appropriate, specific Yoruba values such as *Omoluabi* (good character and social responsibility) and *Alaafia* (communal wellbeing) are engaged to ground these broader African concepts in a concrete cultural setting, demonstrating how the ethical demands of Matthew 25:31–46 resonate with African worldviews and support a reading of mission as compassionate engagement. By incorporating these approaches, the paper interprets mission as compassion rooted in eschatological accountability and expressed within the communal life of African societies.

Mission as Compassion under Eschatological Accountability

Eschatological Accountability as the Ethical Foundation of Mission

Matthew 25:31-46 describes the final judgment as the ultimate paradigm of Christian mission. The image of the Son of Man judging the nations shows that human behavior, particularly toward the poor, has eternal consequences. The decision is based on tangible answers for the vulnerable.

The connection between future accountability and present responsibility is well established in theological scholarship. Jürgen Moltmann has suggested that Christian hope is not passive waiting but participatory hope in the coming of God's justice.[30] David J. Bosch identifies mission as tempered by the "eschatological proviso" meaning that all Christian work is undertaken in the awareness that the fullness of God's kingdom is still to come.[31] Within this framework, mission can no longer be reduced to proclamation alone. The

[28] Dube, Reading for Decolonization, 37–59; Ukpong, Developments in Biblical Interpretation in Africa, 17–32.
[29] Ajibade, Poverty and Christian Responsibility in Africa, 4–5.
[30] Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope: On the Ground and the Implications of a Christian Eschatology* (London: SCM Press, 1967), 329–332.
[31] Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 498–510.

judgment criteria in Matthew 25 show that faithfulness is measured through concrete acts of compassion. As the study has already shown, the passage draws a connection between eschatological judgment and ethical accountability and makes the care of the vulnerable a criterion for divine judgment.

This is consistent with African communal ideas of responsibility. Orobator notes that in many African cultures, responsibility is both personal and communal.[32] This echoes the universal nature of the judgment in Matthew 25, where "all nations are gathered before the Son of Man. Therefore, the text endorses an individual and collective understanding of mission that expects individuals and communities to live responsibly. Thus, mission in this study is understood as the faithful participation of believers (both collectively and individually) in God's redemptive mission through witness and care for the vulnerable, grounded in eschatological accountability before Christ.

Compassion as Christological Allegiance

The acts of compassion outlined in Matthew 25 are not merely ethical acts but theological ones. The phrase, "as you did it to one of the least of these… you did it to me" elevates acts of compassion to expressions of allegiance to Christ. Thus, compassion is not simply an ethical concern but a theological one. Mercy may be present in various cultures, but the passage places it within the believer's relationship with Christ. Luz observes that the identification of Christ with the vulnerable raises acts of compassion to the level of discipleship. Accordingly, compassion is not a secondary option but a core expression of Christian discipleship.

Matthew 25 does not explicitly state that the righteous perform these acts because of a deliberate plan or conscious awareness of Christ's presence. The story instead shows their compassion as a facet of their character and a response to human need. In his discussion of the passage Luz links such practical righteousness to discipleship.[33]

But the breadth and depth of human need demands more than this. Corporately, mission involves intentional acts of the church. This encompasses organization, resource management and the creation of ministries dedicated to alleviating poverty, disease and

[32] Orobator, *Theology Brewed in an African Pot*, 112–115.
[33] Luz, *Matthew 21–28*, 271–272.

marginalization. Thus, compassion must be reactive and proactive, individual and corporate, personal and communal.

Christological Identification with the Vulnerable

A key theological statement of Matthew 25:31-46 is the identification of Christ with the vulnerable. His words, "you did it to me," demonstrate that Christ is among the poor, the alien, the sick and the imprisoned. This identification supplies the passage with its rich theological meaning, because it places Christ not in the midst of the elite but in the realm of human need.

According to Blomberg, this identification redefines the nature of discipleship by linking one's relationship with Christ to one's response to others.[34] The implication is clear: neglect of the vulnerable constitutes neglect of Christ, while care for them becomes an act of receiving Him. The passage therefore removes any separation between devotion to Christ and responsibility toward others. This Christological element has significant implications for mission. It undermines any notion of ministry that does not attend to the suffering of others. If Christ is in the vulnerable, then mission must be focused on places of vulnerability. This does not rule out proclamation but widens Christian ministry to include practical acts of service.

Moreover, this identification offers a theological rationale for individual and collective mission. Personally, Christians are to see Christ in the faces of the poor. Collectively, the church is called to organize its ministry to include contexts of vulnerability. In this way, mission is both individual and corporate, and based on the understanding that serving others is serving Christ.

African Hermeneutical Engagement: Community, Identity, and Responsibility

An intercultural reading of Matthew 25:31–46 requires that the text be interpreted in dialogue with African worldviews, especially those that emphasize community, shared identity, and responsibility. Mbiti has captured this worldview in the phrase, "I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am," pointing to the deeply communal understanding

[34] Blomberg, *Matthew*, 375.

of personhood across many African societies.[35] It has been criticized as being too broad but it does reflect a view of the moral orientation that runs across many African traditions, which is, that individual identity and responsibility are inseparable from community. This perspective provides a meaningful lens for reading Matthew 25:31–46, where one's relationship with others is core to one's standing before God. When applied to Matthew 25:31–46, this communal perspective brings important interpretive clarity. The passage shows that judgment is not only in individual terms but also in relational and communal dimensions. The actions evaluated: the hungry, welcoming the stranger, caring for the sick, are inherently relational. They involve responding to the needs of others within a shared social context. Thus, African communal thought reinforces the idea that responsibility toward the vulnerable is not optional but fundamental to human existence.

Furthermore, the gathering of "all nations" before the Son of Man establishes the universal scope of the judgment, though it does not by itself mean that communities or societies are judged as corporate entities. The judgment concerns persons drawn from all nations and their response to those in need. This emphasis on responsibility toward others resonates with African ethical frameworks that stress communal responsibility. Among the Yoruba of Southwest Nigeria, the concept of *Omoluabi* describes a person of good character whose virtues include honesty, responsibility, respect, and concern for harmonious social life.[36] The concept therefore provides a useful cultural parallel to Matthew 25:31–46, particularly its emphasis on practical care for others. Similarly, *Alaafia*, understood as communal wellbeing, may illuminate the passage's concern for human flourishing, although the correspondence is analogical rather than identical. In Southern Africa, the Ubuntu philosophy likewise emphasizes human dignity and solidarity with others.[37]

The emphasis on hospitality resonates strongly with the ethical demands of Matthew 25. The call to welcome the stranger and care for the vulnerable reflects values that are already deeply embedded in African cultural traditions. Ukpong argues that African contexts allow readers to engage biblical texts in ways that highlight their practical and communal

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[35] John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (Oxford: Heinemann, 1969), 108–109.
[36] Desmond Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness* (New York: Doubleday, 1999), 34–35.
[37] Oyebade Oyewole and Godwin Azenabor, "A Discourse on the Fundamental Principles of Character in an African Moral Philosophy," *African Journal of History and Culture* 10, no. 3 (2018): 41–50, https://doi.org/10.5897/AJHC2018.0405.

dimensions.[38] In this sense, African hermeneutics does not impose foreign meanings on the text but draws out aspects that are already present within it. Hospitality, therefore, becomes a bridge between biblical teaching and African lived realities. It shows that the command to care for others is not only a theological requirement but also a cultural obligation that reinforces social cohesion. When the church embodies this value, it reflects both biblical faithfulness and cultural authenticity.

Bediako notes that the Christian theology in Africa needs to engage local cultural realities for it to be both authentic and transformative.[39] This implies that biblical interpretation should not only apply biblical text to African contexts but should also allow African categories of thought to enrich how the text is understood. It is in this regard that the African focus on communal responsibility is validated and enhanced by the emphasis of Matthew 25: 31-46 that the compassionate acts to the vulnerable is given as a defining feature of loyalty to Christ.

Meanwhile, African hermeneutics does not merely affirm culture but also offers a critical framework for evaluating it. Contemporary realities such as urbanization, migration, and economic inequality have undermined the traditional systems of communal care across Africa.[40] In many Nigerian cities, for instance, the breakdown of extended family networks means that vulnerable people who would previously have been supported within traditional community structures now face isolation and neglect. The passage, thus, does not only challenge the church in Africa to affirm their communal values but also to intentionally embody them in ways that are grounded in Christ's teaching and responsive to present realities.

This paper posits that African hermeneutics values enrich the interpretation of Matthew 25:31–46 by providing concrete cultural categories through which the communal nature of compassion can be understood and practiced. Mission, in this context, is understood as

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[38] Justin S. Ukpong, "Developments in Biblical Interpretation in Africa: Historical and Hermeneutical Directions," in *The Bible in Africa: Transactions, Trajectories and Trends*, ed. Gerald O. West and Musa W. Dube (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 11–28.
[39] Kwame Bediako, *Theology and Identity* (Oxford: Regnum Books, 1992), 225–227.
[40] Ajibade, Poverty and Christian Responsibility in Africa, 4–5.

individual and corporate responsibility expressed in concrete acts of care, where faithfulness to Christ is demonstrated in commitment to others.

Mission and Ministry in a Changing African World

When read through an African hermeneutical framework, the passage of Matthew 25:31–46 becomes particularly pertinent when applied to the rapidly changing realities of African societies today. Migration, economic inequality, urbanization and changing cultural values continue to be factors in the context in which the church carries out its mission. Masuku rightly points out that mission in Africa has to address the spiritual and material conditions of the people if it is to remain meaningful.[41] This connotes the need for a reconfiguration of mission with attention given to the lived experience of people. Wright's *missio Dei* framework is helpful here, if mission is participation in God's work of justice and compassion, the church in Africa must align its ministry with the specific forms of suffering in its context.[42] The displacement of people through rural-urban migration within Nigeria, as an example, gives fresh urgency to the call in Matthew 25:31-46 to welcome the stranger. Bosch also holds that genuine mission transforms the social conditions of people in line with kingdom values,[43] which means the church cannot separate proclamation from its responsibility to address poverty and inequality.

Poverty remains one of the pressing challenges facing many African nations. According to the *State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2025*, about 307 million people in Africa faced hunger in 2024. The report further projects that 512 million people could be chronically undernourished globally by 2030, with nearly 60 percent living in Africa.[44] These realities correspond closely to the conditions described in Matthew 25, where hunger, nakedness, and sickness form part of the basis for moral accountability.

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[41] Masuku, "Mistakes of Western Christian Missions," 2–4.
[42] Wright, *The Mission of God*, 217–220.
[43] Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 498–510.
[44] Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, International Fund for Agricultural Development, United Nations Children's Fund, World Food Programme, and World Health Organization, *The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2025* (Rome: FAO, 2025), 13, https://doi.org/10.4060/cd6008en.

In addition, global estimates reveal that more than one billion people live in situations of extreme poverty, with children comprising a considerable share of this group.[45] Such statistics highlight the scale of human suffering and reinforce the urgency of a mission that integrates proclamation with compassionate action.

This call is consistent with the Seventh-day Adventist Church's long-standing focus on holistic outreach. Practical ways to combat poverty are offered by ministries including community services, health outreach, and development projects. However, the magnitude of the task necessitates deliberate preparation, resource distribution, and ongoing dedication at the local and organizational levels.

The predicament of young people in modern-day Africa is a significant aspect of vulnerability. Youth growth is still severely hampered by social instability, unemployment, and a lack of educational possibilities. According to the International Labour Organization, the youth unemployment rate in Sub-Saharan Africa was 8.9 percent in 2023, although substantial differences exist across countries and subregions.[46] Moreover, many young people who are employed work in informal or otherwise insecure forms of employment, limiting their access to decent and stable livelihoods.[47] These circumstances highlight the necessity of the church's ministry to intentionally engage with young people who are at risk. According to the study's broader interpretation, young people who are socially marginalized and facing deprivation may be among those whose fragility necessitates practical care and Christian compassion.

In this situation, the mission must encompass activities for empowerment, skill development, and mentoring in addition to preaching. The church must develop organized initiatives that address youth vulnerability in sustainable ways, even while individual

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[45] United Nations Development Programme and Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative, *2025 Global Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI): Overlapping Hardships: Poverty and Climate Hazards* (New York: United Nations Development Programme, 2025), https://hdr.undp.org/content/2025-global-multidimensional-poverty-index-mpi.

[46] International Labour Organization, *Employment Trends for Youth in Sub-Saharan Africa* (Geneva: International Labour Organization, 2024), https://doi.org/10.54394/QJUV5544.

[47] International Labour Organization, *Global Employment Trends for Youth 2024: Decent Work, Brighter Futures* (Geneva: International Labour Office, 2024), https://doi.org/10.54394/ZUUI5430.

believers can help young people through mentoring and personal relationships. This demonstrates once more how mission is both a personal and a corporate responsibility.

In some African Pentecostal and charismatic contexts, prosperity-oriented teachings have emphasized material blessing, financial breakthrough, and personal success as prominent expressions of Christian faith.[48] When material gain takes precedence over social responsibility and caring for those in need, such emphasis runs the risk of limiting the church's purpose. A remedy is offered by Matthew 25:31–46, which portrays helping those in need as a crucial sign of discipleship and loyalty to Christ. Given this, a mission that is inclusive, sensitive, and based on the passage's ethical vision is necessary given the rising number of young people experiencing unemployment and social instability.

Beyond individual acts of compassion, Matthew 25:31–46 also speaks prophetically to systemic challenges plaguing the African continent. The culture of *might is right*, expressed through political oppression, ethnic violence, corruption, and the abuse of power that creates and sustains the very conditions of marginalization the passage condemns. When the powerful neglect the hungry, displace the stranger, and abandon the sick and imprisoned for political or ethnic reasons, the text renders a direct verdict against such conduct. The eschatological judgment of the "Son of Man" therefore stands as a counter-narrative to all systems of domination that produce and perpetuate *ἐλάχιστος*in Africa, calling the church to a prophetic mission that resists injustice and advocates for the dignity of all human beings.[49]

The challenges discussed above demonstrate that mission must be understood in two complementary ways:

1. Mission is a lifestyle expressed through daily acts of compassion by individual believers. It involves responding to human need in immediate and practical ways, reflecting the character of Christ in everyday life.

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[48] Dodeye U. Williams, "'Prosperity Theology': Poverty and Implications for Socio-Economic Development in Africa," *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 78, no. 1 (2022), https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v78i1.7818.
[49] Dube, "Reading for Decolonization," 37–59.

2. Mission is a structured responsibility that requires organized and sustained action by the church. Addressing large-scale challenges such as poverty, migration, and youth vulnerability demands careful planning, resource allocation, and institutional commitment. The church must therefore move beyond spontaneous acts of charity toward strategic and coordinated ministry.

In light of Matthew 25:31–46, mission cannot be reduced to proclamation alone, nor can it be limited to occasional acts of service. It must be a comprehensive expression of faith that combines personal devotion with corporate responsibility. Only in this way can the church faithfully respond to the demands of a changing world while remaining rooted in the teaching of Christ.

CONCLUSION

Matthew 25:31–46 presents a compelling vision of mission grounded in eschatological accountability. The passage demonstrates that compassion toward the vulnerable is not optional but a decisive expression of allegiance to Christ. Through a careful reading of the Gospel of Matthew and engagement with African hermeneutical perspectives, this study has shown that mission must integrate proclamation with practical care for "the least of these."

Within contemporary African contexts marked by poverty, migration, and youth vulnerability, this text calls for a reconfiguration of mission. Mission must be understood as both a lifestyle expressed by individual believers and a structured responsibility carried out by the church. While compassion begins at the personal level, the scale of human need requires intentional planning, resource allocation, and organized ministry.

Accordingly, churches, particularly within the Seventh-day Adventist church context, must strengthen theological formation on holistic mission, integrate compassionate service into mission strategy, and commit to sustainable planning and budgeting for ministries that address vulnerability. In doing so, the church reflects the character of Christ and bears faithful witness to the coming kingdom of God.

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CHAPTER 8

THE ROD AND THE WORD: DISCIPLINE, CHARACTER FORMATION, AND MORAL DEVELOPMENT IN YORUBA PROVERBS AND THE BIBLICAL BOOK OF PROVERBS

Opeyemi Tunbosun Oladosu and Toyin Ezekiel Olalere

Abstract

Proverbs are primary instruments of moral instruction in both the biblical wisdom tradition and Yoruba society, yet in many contemporary African Christian settings indigenous teaching on child training is treated with suspicion, as though it stood in opposition to Scripture. This paper examines whether that suspicion is warranted by placing selected Yoruba proverbs on child training in critical dialogue with key texts of the Book of Proverbs (1:7-9; 3:11-12; 13:24; 19:18; 22:6, 15; 23:13-14; 29:15-17). Methodologically, the study combines a literary-theological exegesis of the biblical texts with a thematic analysis of eight Yoruba proverbs drawn from standard published collections, and reads the two corpora through an intercultural (inculturation) hermeneutic that treats them as analogous but not equivalent: the Book of Proverbs is received as canonical Scripture, while Yoruba òwe are approached as a cultural wisdom tradition that may illuminate, and must be evaluated by, the biblical text. The comparison is organised around four axes: the purpose of discipline, its timing, its means ("the rod" and "the word"), and its grounding and limits. The analysis finds substantial convergence. Both traditions understand discipline as formative rather than merely punitive, insist on early training, subordinate physical correction to verbal instruction and parental example, and locate the child's formation within a community. It also identifies significant divergence in theological grounding, in anthropology and eschatology, and in the source of moral authority, which forbids any simple equation of the two. The paper argues that Yoruba proverbial wisdom is a legitimate resource for African biblical hermeneutics and for Christian moral formation in Africa, provided Scripture remains the norm, and it draws out implications for parents, churches and theological educators who must now read "the rod" texts amid emerging global debates on children's rights and corporal punishment.

Keywords: *Book of Proverbs; Yoruba proverbs; discipline; character formation; ọmọlúàbí; African biblical hermeneutics.*

INTRODUCTION

Proverbs have been called "the palm oil with which words are eaten," and among the Yoruba they are the "horse" of speech, the vehicle on which an elusive truth is recovered.[1] The biblical Book of Proverbs (Hebrew *mišlê*) is likewise an anthology of instruction whose stated purpose is "to give prudence to the simple, to the young man knowledge and discretion" (Prov 1:4).[2] In both settings the formation of the young proceeds by two complementary means: "the rod," the corrective face of discipline, and "the word," the proactive work of instruction and example.

Yet in many African Christian communities indigenous teaching about child training is regarded with suspicion, either as residue of a pre-Christian past or as harsh by the standards of contemporary child-rights discourse. The result is a dichotomy in which African believers are expected to choose between their cultural formation and their faith. That dichotomy is more often assumed than demonstrated. Although there is a growing literature on African proverbs as pedagogy[3] and on discipline in the Book of Proverbs,[4] sustained comparative work asking whether Yoruba proverbial wisdom and biblical wisdom converge or diverge on the ethics of child formation remains scarce. Adamo's comparison of Israelite and African proverbs is the nearest precedent, but it treats the functions of proverbs generally rather than discipline in particular.[5]

This paper therefore asks three questions. First, how do Yoruba proverbs conceive discipline and character formation? Second, how does the Book of Proverbs conceive

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[1]Benson Peter Irabor, "Proverbs and Moral Development in Africa: An Exploration of the Parallels between Culture and Education," *UNILAG Journal of Humanities* [vol.], no. [no.] (2019): 139–40. David T. Adamo, "Ancient Israelite and African Proverbs as Advice, Reproach, Warning, Encouragement and Explanation," *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 71, no. 3 (2015): a2972, 1, 3.

[2]Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from the New King James Version (NKJV).

[3]Marian Isioma Jerry and Sunday Daniel Osaat, "African Proverbs as Veritable Tools for Moral Development in Nigeria," *Port Harcourt Journal of Educational Studies* 8, no. 1 (2023): 72–75. Funmilola Kemi Megbowon and Chijioke Uwah, "African Proverbs as Pedagogical Tools in the Contemporary Education System," *South African Journal of African Languages* 41, no. 3 (2021): 235–38.

[4]Paul D. Wegner, "Discipline in the Book of Proverbs: 'To Spank or Not to Spank?'" *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 48, no. 4 (2005): 715–32. Onyekachi G. Chukwuma, "Reading Selected Biblical Proverbs in the Light of Corporal Punishment in Child Upbringing," *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 81, no. 1 (2025): a10895, 1–6. Tarsee Li, "Child Discipline in Proverbs," in *Andrews Bible Commentary: Light. Depth. Truth.*, ed. Ángel Manuel Rodríguez, Daniel Kwame Bediako, Carl P. Cosaert, and Gerald A. Klingbeil (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2020), 776–77.

[5]Adamo, "Ancient Israelite and African Proverbs," 1–7.

them? Third, where do the two converge and diverge, and what follows for African biblical hermeneutics in a context increasingly shaped by global norms on childhood? The study addresses the conference theme at each of its three points: it is an exercise in biblical interpretation (the exegesis of Proverbs), it concerns African identity (the Yoruba ideal of the *ọmọlúàbí*), and it engages emerging global realities (international children's-rights instruments and the contested status of corporal punishment).

Methodology and Hermeneutical Framework

The study is a comparative literary-theological analysis conducted within an intercultural hermeneutic. Three procedures are involved. First, the biblical texts are read exegetically in their literary and theological setting, with attention to the key terms *yirʾat YHWH* (fear of the LORD), *mûsār* (instruction, discipline), *tôkaḥat* (reproof) and *šēbeṭ* (rod), and to the rhetoric of the parental instructions of Proverbs 1–9, in conversation with the standard critical commentaries.[6] Second, Yoruba proverbs are treated as an oral-literary corpus. Eight proverbs were selected from Owomoyela's annotated collection and from published Yoruba scholarship on two criteria: explicit reference to the child (*ọmọ*), to training (*kíkọ́*) or to character (*ìwà*), and wide currency in ordinary speech.[7] They are analysed thematically for what they presuppose about the purpose, timing, means and limits of discipline. Third, the two corpora are brought into dialogue through what Ukpong calls inculturation hermeneutics and Adamo African biblical hermeneutics: an approach that makes the African context an explicit subject of interpretation and reads Scripture with, rather than against, indigenous resources.[8]

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[6]Michael V. Fox, *Proverbs 1–9: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Bible 18A (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 5–12. Bruce K. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs: Chapters 1–15*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004), 31–36. Tremper Longman III, *Proverbs*, Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006), 21–24. Roland E. Murphy, *Proverbs*, Word Biblical Commentary 22 (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1998), xix–xxiii.

[7]Oyekan Owomoyela, *Yoruba Proverbs* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2005), 1–30.

[8]Justin S. Ukpong, "Inculturation Hermeneutics: An African Approach to Biblical Interpretation," in *The Bible in a World Context: An Experiment in Contextual Hermeneutics*, ed. Walter Dietrich and Ulrich Luz (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), 17–24. David Tuesday Adamo, "What Is African Biblical Hermeneutics?" *Black Theology* 13, no. 1 (2015): 59–66.

Two methodological controls govern the entire argument and must be stated plainly. The first is that comparison is not equation. The Book of Proverbs is received here as canonical Scripture, inspired and normative; Yoruba *òwe* are received as a human wisdom tradition of great moral depth. The relationship between them is analogical. Scripture itself acknowledges that wisdom is found beyond Israel, incorporating the words of Agur and Lemuel (Prov 30:1; 31:1) and recognising a law written on Gentile hearts (Rom 2:14–15; cf. Acts 17:28), while insisting that all such wisdom is tested by the fear of the LORD. Convergence between the two traditions is therefore evidence that Yoruba culture has preserved genuine moral insight, not evidence that the two share equal authority. The second control is that where a Yoruba proverb presupposes a cosmology different from that of Scripture, notably in its view of death and the ancestors, the study distinguishes the ethical point the proverb makes from the metaphysical framework it assumes, and evaluates the latter by the biblical witness. An intercultural hermeneutic that is to be both African and biblical requires nothing less.[9]

The comparison is organised around four axes: (a) *telos*, what discipline is for; (b) timing, when it must occur; (c) means, the relation of rod to word; and (d) grounding and limits, what authorises discipline and what constrains it. Two limitations should be acknowledged. The Yoruba corpus is drawn from published collections rather than fresh fieldwork, so regional variants and living usage are represented only as the collectors recorded them; and every translation of a proverb is already an interpretation, which is why the Yoruba text is given in each case so that readers may test the gloss.

Discipline and Character in Yoruba Proverbial Wisdom

Worldview: ìwà, ọmọlúàbí and community

Yoruba moral thought is communitarian. Mbiti's dictum that "to be human is to belong to the whole community" does not mean that the individual disappears but that personhood is achieved relationally.[10] Within this framework the central moral concept is *ìwà* (character).

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[9]Kwame Bediako, *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1995), 85–91.

[10]John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1970), 2–3. Ademola Kazeem Fayemi, "Human Personality and the Yoruba Worldview: An Ethico-Sociological Interpretation," *Journal of Pan African Studies* 2, no. 9 (2009): 171.

Abimbola's study of the Ifá corpus shows *ìwà pẹ̀lẹ́* (gentle or good character) to be the highest human excellence, and Gbadegesin observes that *ìwà* is what finally distinguishes a person of worth from a mere human being.[11] The sayings *ìwà lẹwà* (character is beauty) and *ìwà rere lẹ̀ṣọ́ ènìyàn* (good character is a person's adornment) encode this conviction.[12] The product of successful formation is the *ọmọlúàbí*, the person of integrity, respect, diligence and restraint, and Olanipekun argues that contemporary moral decline in Yorubaland tracks the erosion of *ọmọlúàbí* formation.[13]

Moral authority in this worldview is plural. Olódùmarè, the Supreme Being, the divinities, the ancestors and the living community all sanction conduct; as Akin-Otiko puts it, for the Yoruba "each moral law has a legislator who enacts, enforces and punishes offenders."[14] This feature will matter for the comparison below.

Proverbs as moral pedagogy

Because traditional Yoruba education was oral, proverbs functioned as its curriculum. Elders used them to correct, to warn and to commend; Fasoro and Irabor both argue that proverb and myth remain irreplaceable instruments for inculcating character.[15] Ajila notes that no one is regarded as fully educated, or fit to lead, who cannot deploy the fitting proverb.[16] Instruction was communal. The saying that it takes a whole village to raise a child has a precise Yoruba form in *Àgbà kì í wà lọ́jà kí orí ọmọ tuntun wọ́* (An elder does not stand by in the market while a baby's head hangs crooked), which makes correction the

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[11]Wande Abimbola, "Ìwàpẹ̀lẹ́: The Concept of Good Character in Ifá Literary Corpus," in *Yoruba Oral Tradition: Poetry in Music, Dance and Drama*, ed. Wande Abimbola (Ile-Ife: Department of African Languages and Literatures, University of Ife, 1975), 389–95. Segun Gbadegesin, *African Philosophy: Traditional Yoruba Philosophy and Contemporary African Realities* (New York: Peter Lang, 1991), 79–84.
[12]Babalola Joseph Balogun, "The Consequentialist Foundations of Traditional Yoruba Ethics: An Exposition," *Thought and Practice: A Journal of the Philosophical Association of Kenya* 5, no. 2 (2013): 112. Opeyemi Oladosu, "Iwa Pele," in *Purpose: Humanities' Shared Quest*, ed. Norel Iacob (Cernica, Romania: Adventus University Press, 2025), 1.
[13]Olusola Victor Olanipekun, "Omoluabi: Re-thinking the Concept of Virtue in Yoruba Culture and Moral System," *Africology: The Journal of Pan African Studies* 10, no. 9 (2017): 220–24.
[14]Akinmayowa Akin-Otiko, "Moral Order in Yoruba Worldview and the Impact of Belief in the Divinities," *Black Theology* 18, no. 2 (2020): 2, https://doi.org/10.1080/14769948.2020.1784513. E. Bọlaji Idowu, *Olódùmarè: God in Yoruba Belief* (London: Longmans, 1962), 144–56.
[15]J. O. Fasoro, "Myth and Proverb as a Vehicle of Moral Education among Traditional Yoruba," *International Journal of Arts and Commerce* 1, no. 5 (2012): 260–61. Irabor, "Proverbs and Moral Development," 150–55.
[16]C. O. Ajila, "Hope Fostering among the Yoruba Speaking People of Nigeria: The Use of Proverbs, Cognomen, Prayers and Names," *Anthropologist* 6, no. 2 (2004): 141.

duty of any adult present.[17] A further pedagogical feature deserves notice: because a proverb speaks obliquely, it allows an elder to correct without naming the fault directly, so that the child is instructed while the face of both parties is preserved. Correction by proverb is thus already a form of "the word" that tempers "the rod."

Selected proverbs

The following eight proverbs constitute the Yoruba corpus of this study; the gloss after each states the pedagogical assumption it carries.

1. *Ọmọ tí a kò kọ́ ni yóò gbé ilé tí a kọ́ tà* (The child who is not trained will sell the house that was built). The untrained child destroys the inheritance; discipline protects the lineage's future.[18]
2. *Kékeré la ti ń pẹ́ka ìrókò; bó bá dàgbà tán, ẹbọ ló ń gbà* (The iroko is pruned while young; once grown, it demands sacrifice). Formation must begin early; later correction is costly and may be impossible.
3. *Ọwọ́ ọ̀tún la fi ń na ọmọ, ọwọ́ òsì la fi ń fà á mọ́ra* (One corrects a child with the right hand and draws him close with the left). Correction belongs inside affection; it must never become rejection or humiliation.
4. *Ilé làá ti ń kọ́ ẹ̀ṣọ́ ròde* (It is at home that one learns the adornment one wears outside). The family is the first and decisive school of character.
5. *Àgbà kì í wà lọ́jà kí orí ọmọ tuntun wọ́* (An elder does not stand by in the market while a baby's head hangs crooked). Correction is a shared communal responsibility.
6. *Tí a bá sọ òkò sọ́jà, ará ilé ẹni ní í bà* (A stone thrown into the market strikes one's own kin). Individual conduct carries consequences for the whole household.[19]
7. *Ọ̀nísùúrù ló ń fún wàrà kìnnìún* (Only the patient one milks the lioness). Patience (*sùúrù*) is among the first virtues inculcated.[20]

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[17]Owomoyela, *Yoruba Proverbs*, 17.
[18]Abdullahi Ibrahim Salahu-Deen and Hakeem Ọlawale, "Principles of Education in Yorùbá Proverbs," *Journal of African Language Teachers Association* 12 (2025): 101–3.
[19]Owomoyela, *Yoruba Proverbs*, 217.
[20]Salahu-Deen and Ọlawale, "Principles of Education," 105.

8. *Ìwà nìkan ló ń bá ni dé sàárè; owó kò jẹ́ nǹkan fúnni* (Character alone accompanies one to the grave; money avails nothing). Character, not wealth, is a person's lasting possession.[21]

A note on the eighth proverb is required, since it is the one most liable to misreading. In its Yoruba setting it presupposes the continuation of the person beyond death into the ancestral world and the judgement of Olódùmarè there.[22] This study does not adopt that cosmology. What is compared is the proverb's ethical claim, that character outlasts wealth, a claim with close biblical analogues in "a good name is to be chosen rather than great riches" (Prov 22:1) and "the memory of the righteous is blessed" (10:7). The biblical anthropology of death is different (Eccl 9:5-6, 10; Ps 146:4), and that difference , the eight proverbs display a coherent pedagogy. Discipline aims at *ìwà*; it begins early; it employs correction and word together, the rod tempered by the embrace; it is administered by family and community; and its failure is measured in social consequence.

Discipline and Moral Formation in the Book of Proverbs

The fear of the LORD as foundation (Prov 1:7)

The programmatic statement, "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and instruction" (1:7), governs the whole book.[23] *Yirʾat YHWH* denotes reverent submission to God's authority, and *rēʾšît* means both starting point and controlling principle, so that, as von Rad insisted, Israel's wisdom is theological through and through: knowledge of the world is impossible without knowledge of God.[24] Keefer has shown that the "knowledge" of 1:7 is practical and moral rather than merely cognitive.[25] Discipline (*mûsār*) is therefore not social conditioning but the process by which a person is aligned with the divine order, and refusal of *mûsār* is not a learning deficit but a moral posture: the fool "despises" it.

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[21]Balogun, "Consequentialist Foundations," 113.
[22]Idowu, *Olódùmarè*, 187–201.
[23]Fox, *Proverbs 1–9*, 67–69.
[24]Gerhard von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel*, trans. James D. Martin (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1972), 53–73.
[25]Arthur Keefer, "Revising the Modern Moral Paradigm with the Book of Proverbs," *Religions* 7, no. 6 (2016): 79, 3–6.

The parental instructions of Proverbs 1–9: the word

Proverbs 1-9 comprises ten instructions in which a father, with the mother explicitly named as co-teacher (1:8; 6:20), urges a son to hear, keep and treasure teaching.[26] The rhetoric is persuasive rather than coercive: it argues, promises life (3:2; 4:10), warns of death (5:5; 7:27), and presents the parent as mediating what God himself gives (2:6), so that, as House observes, the parent speaks as God's messenger.[27] Boloje notes that instruction is imaged as "a graceful ornament" and "chains about your neck" (1:9), wisdom as adornment, an arresting parallel to *ìwà rere lẹ̀ṣọ́ ènìyàn*.[28] Behind this domestic pedagogy stands the Shema, in which God's words are to be taught "diligently" in the ordinary rhythms of sitting, walking, lying down and rising (Deut 6:6-9).[29] Brown is right to read the book as a whole as a programme of character formation whose end is the mature, wise person.[30]

The rod (šēbeṭ)

Six sayings mention the rod in relation to a child or a fool (10:13; 13:24; 22:15; 23:13-14; 26:3; 29:15). Their exegesis requires four observations. Lexically, *šēbeṭ* is a staff of authority and correction: of the father (13:24), the magistrate (10:13), the shepherd (Ps 23:4) and God (Job 21:9); Fouts notes that in the poetic books it ordinarily denotes remedial discipline by one in authority.[31] Literarily, the rod sayings are embedded in a vocabulary dominated by speech: *mûsār* occurs some thirty times in Proverbs and *tôkaḥat* sixteen; 29:15 pairs "the rod and rebuke," and 29:17 speaks simply of correcting a son.[32] Generically, proverbs are generalised observations, not unconditional promises or statutes: 22:6 describes the normal fruit of training rather than guaranteeing it, and 13:24 states a

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[26]Fox, *Proverbs 1–9*, 44–47. Glenn D. Pemberton, "The Rhetoric of the Father in Proverbs 1–9," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 30, no. 1 (2005): 63–70.
[27]Paul R. House, *Old Testament Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 442.
[28]Blessing O. Boloje, "Parenting, Family Guidance and Spiritual Education: Proverbs 1:8–9 and Its Wisdom Ethos for Children's Moral Development," *Verbum et Ecclesia* 45, no. 1 (2024): a3285, 4–5.
[29]Philip Suciadi Chia, "Religious Education at Home: Parents as Disciple-Makers to Their Youths," *Cogent Education* 12, no. 1 (2025): 6–7.
[30]William P. Brown, *Character in Crisis: A Fresh Approach to the Wisdom Literature of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), 22–49.
[31]David M. Fouts, "שֵׁבֶט," in *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*, ed. Willem A. VanGemeren (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1997), 4:27–28.
[32]Li, "Child Discipline in Proverbs," 776.

principle, that love disciplines, rather than mandating a method.[33] Contextually, physical correction of children and adults was normal in the ancient Near East; the sayings assume it, limit it ("he will not die," 23:13, is a restraint, not an incitement) and direct it to a goal, to "deliver his soul from hell" (23:14).[34] Wegner accordingly distinguishes graduated levels of discipline in Proverbs, from encouragement and rebuke to corporal correction as a last resort, and Li concludes that the book's emphasis falls on oral instruction, its aim being that physical discipline become unnecessary.[35] Two further texts set explicit limits. Proverbs 19:18 commands, "Chasten your son while there is hope, and do not set your heart on his destruction": the second clause restrains the parent, forbidding correction that proceeds from anger or aims at the child's ruin.[36] Proverbs 22:15, "foolishness is bound up in the heart of a child; the rod of correction will drive it far from him," diagnoses the child's condition as *ʾiwwelet*, moral immaturity rather than wickedness, and makes the aim of correction the removal of folly, not the infliction of pain.[37] Discipline is, moreover, an act of love modelled on God's fatherly correction (3:11-12; cf. Heb 12:5-11), and its fruit is described relationally: the corrected son "will give you rest" and "delight to your soul" (29:17). Proverbs therefore neither prescribes nor prohibits corporal punishment. It commands formative discipline, subordinates the rod to the word, and condemns the neglect that leaves a child to "bring his mother to shame" (29:15).[38]

Comparative Analysis

Convergences

Telos. Both traditions treat discipline as formative. *Mûsār* produces the wise person; *kíkọ́ ọmọ* produces the *ọmọlúàbí*. Neither treats punishment as an end in itself.

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[33]Longman, *Proverbs*, 31–35, 404–5. Michael V. Fox, *Proverbs 10–31: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Yale Bible 18B (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), 564–65.
[34]Wegner, "Discipline in the Book of Proverbs," 719–26.
[35]Wegner, "Discipline in the Book of Proverbs," 726–31. Li, "Child Discipline in Proverbs," 776–77.
[36]Waltke, *Proverbs 1–15*, 110–12.
[37]Murphy, *Proverbs*, 165–66.
[38]Chukwuma, "Reading Selected Biblical Proverbs," 3–5.

Timing. “Train up a child in the way he should go” (22:6) and “chasten your son while there is hope” (19:18) correspond exactly to the iroko proverb: early formation is decisive and late correction costly.

Means. Both hold rod and word together and subordinate the former to the latter. The right-hand-left-hand proverb is the cultural counterpart of 3:12 and 13:24: correction is the act of one who loves and draws near. Both reject correction that humiliates, and neither treats severity as a virtue.

Agency and community. Both make the parent the primary teacher (1:8; *ilé làá ti ń kọ́ èṣọ́ ròde*) and both situate the child within a wider moral community, the city and congregation of Proverbs (11:10-11; 14:34) and the *ìlú* of the Yoruba. Both expect the parent's own conduct to teach (20:7), and both give the mother a teaching voice: Proverbs names her law beside the father's (1:8; 6:20; 31:1), and in Yoruba households the mother is ordinarily the child's first instructor in *ìwà*.

Consequence. Both bind character to communal outcome. The untrained child sells the house; the foolish son is “the grief of his mother” (10:1) and “the ruin of his father” (19:13).

Divergences

Theological grounding. In Proverbs discipline rests on the fear of the one LORD, Creator and covenant God, and the parent teaches as his messenger. In Yoruba thought moral authority is dispersed among Olódùmarè, the divinities, the ancestors and the community. The ethical convergence rests on different foundations, and the biblical foundation is the more unified.

Anthropology and eschatology. The Yoruba proverb of character accompanying one to the grave presupposes the person's continuation into the ancestral realm; biblical wisdom describes the dead as knowing nothing (Eccl 9:5-6, 10) and locates hope in God alone. This study affirms the proverb's ethical claim while declining its cosmology.

Source and authority. Yoruba wisdom is experiential and ancestral. Proverbs is experiential too, but it claims to be given by God (2:6) and stands within canonical Scripture. Yoruba proverbs may therefore be affirmed and corrected by Scripture; the reverse does not hold.

Scope of the moral community. Proverbs addresses "my son" within a household; Yoruba proverbs distribute the duty of correction to every elder. The biblical text neither forbids nor assumes this, and the Yoruba tradition has fewer explicit safeguards against communal excess.

Motive. Proverbs motivates chiefly by the individual's standing before God, who "weighs the hearts" (21:2); Yoruba proverbs motivate more often by honour and shame before the community. Both motives are legitimate; the biblical ordering places God first.

The comparison thus yields resonance without identity. To equate the two traditions would be a category mistake; to oppose them is, on the evidence, simply false.

Implications for African Biblical Hermeneutics and Emerging Global Realities

Three implications follow. First, for African identity: the Yoruba Christian need not abandon the *ọmọlúàbí* ideal in order to be biblical. Bediako's insistence that Christian identity in Africa is formed by a conversation between gospel and heritage rather than by erasure of the latter is confirmed at the level of moral formation.[39] Yoruba proverbs can serve catechetically in homes, Sabbath and Sunday schools and family-life ministry as a bridge into the Book of Proverbs, much as the book itself gathered in the wisdom of Agur and Lemuel.

Second, for hermeneutics: reading Proverbs alongside Yoruba proverbs sharpens exegesis in both directions. The right-hand-left-hand proverb protects 13:24 from misreading as a mandate for severity by foregrounding what the Hebrew text also assumes, that discipline is love's act. Conversely, the fear of the LORD supplies the unified ground that the Yoruba tradition, with its plural legislators, lacks. This is inculturation hermeneutics functioning as it should: the context illuminates the text, and the text judges the context.[40]

Third, for emerging global realities: the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (art. 19) and the Committee's General Comment No. 8 call for the elimination of

[39]Bediako, *Christianity in Africa*, xi–xv, 3–7.
[40]Ukpong, "Inculturation Hermeneutics," 24–30.

corporal punishment, and Nigeria's Child's Rights Act affirms the dignity of the child.[41] African Christians are frequently caught between the charge that both biblical and cultural discipline are abusive and a defensive insistence that "the rod" is non-negotiable. The exegesis above dissolves the dilemma. Both traditions condemn violence that injures or humiliates; both make physical correction the exception, subordinate to instruction; both aim at self-governing character. Ellen White's definition of the aim of discipline as "the training of the child for self-government" states the shared *telos* and supplies a standard by which any practice, traditional or modern, can be judged.[42] Urbanisation, migration and digital media have weakened the elder's proverb and the parent's evening instruction alike; the recovery of both is a task for churches and theological faculties, not a nostalgia.

Four recommendations arise. (1) Churches should develop family-life curricula that pair the Book of Proverbs with indigenous proverbs, teaching the convergences and naming the divergences. (2) Parents should give priority to instruction and example, reserve physical correction for the exceptional case, and never administer it in anger or in public, a standard on which Proverbs and the Yoruba elders agree. (3) Theological educators should incorporate African wisdom materials into Old Testament courses with explicit criteria of biblical norming, so that students learn both to value and to evaluate their heritage. (4) Further research should extend the comparison to Igbo, Hausa and other proverbial corpora and should study empirically how African Christian parents actually interpret the rod texts.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to test the assumption that Yoruba teaching on child training stands opposed to biblical ethics. Reading eight Yoruba proverbs against the discipline texts of the Book of Proverbs through an intercultural hermeneutic that treats the two as analogous but not equal, it found substantial convergence on the purpose, timing, means and communal setting of discipline, together with real divergence in theological grounding,

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[41]United Nations, *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, 20 November 1989, United Nations Treaty Series 1577, art. 19; UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, *General Comment No. 8: The Right of the Child to Protection from Corporal Punishment and Other Cruel or Degrading Forms of Punishment*, CRC/C/GC/8 (2 March 2007). Federal Republic of Nigeria, *Child's Rights Act, 2003*, Act No. 26 (Abuja: Federal Government Press, 2003), ss. 11, 221.

[42]Ellen G. White, *Education* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1903), 287.

anthropology and authority. The rod is, in both traditions, the servant of the word, and both are servants of character. African biblical hermeneutics is best served neither by equating the ancestors' wisdom with Scripture nor by discarding it, but by letting Scripture gather in, test and complete what the elders knew.

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CHAPTER 9

ORAL TRADITION AND BIBLICAL MORALITY: AN AFRICAN PERSPECTIVE OF DEUTERONOMY 6:4-7

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Abstract

This study seeks to examine the dynamic interplay between oral tradition and biblical morality in an African context, with a focus on Deuteronomy 6:4-7. Scholars have perceived the verse "you shall teach them diligently to your sons" (Deut 6:7 NAS) as an explicit command from God that obliges parents to teach God's command diligently, practically, and continually to their children. These scholars, however, have not paid adequate attention to the reading of the text in African biblical studies and its implications for morality and oral tradition. Thus, this study seeks to examine Deuteronomy 6:4-7 and its connection to African oral traditions and moral development. This study is conceptual research, and it employs an exegetical approach to analyze Deuteronomy 6:4-7. This study reveals the importance of the intergenerational oral tradition in transmitting faith and values. In African cultures, oral storytelling and communal transmission of values are integral to identity, morality, and peaceful co-existence. This study highlights the foundational and formative roles of parents, elders, and families in fostering communities where Godliness, honour, respect, and moral sanity are esteemed. The use of oral tradition to teach biblical morality enriches the holistic development of faith and morality of children. It thus serves as a hermeneutical and pedagogical framework for engaging and understanding Deuteronomy 6:4-7. This study therefore recommends that the integration of African oral tradition of moonlight stories, village gatherings, culture of honour and respect in teaching biblical morality can deepen faith, communal growth, and promote godly living. Christian living in African contexts.

***Keywords**: Biblical morality, Inter-generational discipleship, Oral tradition, African biblicalstudies,Community.*

BACKGROUND OF STUDY

Deuteronomy occupies a unique position in the Hebrew Bible. It is a combination of law codes (Deut 12:26), covenantal documents (Deut 1:1-5,29:1-30:20), a series of sermons (Deut 1-30), and a theological manifesto. Its name in the Greek Septuagint, Deuteronomion, meaning "second law"[1] reflects its character as Moses' extended reiteration of the covenant for the generation that was about to enter the land of Canaan. This second generation was not present at Sinai; they needed to hear the story again, to be formed again by it, to take it into their bodies and their memory so that it would not die, but rather turn their hearts to God, equipping them and shaping them for the task that lies ahead. It is within this context of memory and covenantal formation that Deuteronomy 6:4-9 must be read. The passage begins with the Shema: "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one" (v. 4). This declaration of divine unity is followed by the injunction for parents to teach their children with utmost care, "And these words, which I am commanding you today, shall be on your heart; and you shall teach them diligently to your sons and shall talk of them when you sit in your house and when you walk by the way and when you lie down and when you rise up. (Deut 6:6-7 NAS).

Commenting on the context of "teach them diligently to your sons," Childs posits that Deuteronomy is a complex document that blends legal, moral, and covenantal literary forms.[2] In the same vein, Christensen avers that Deuteronomy 1-11 provides a detailed linguistic analysis of the Shema (Deuteronomy 6:4–9), within which verse 7 is entrenched, establishing the covenantal love command as the theological centre of the entire passage.[3] The treatises of Child and Christensen underpin the literary form of the context. This is unlike African hermeneutics that takes cognizance of the socio-cultural context and oral transmission, which often links formal teaching to real-life experiences. According to Clarke, repetition in teaching will sharpen a child's memory, as repeated friction or grinding sharpens any cutting instrument. He sees the word of God as what must be taught

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[1] Christopher J. H. Wright, Deuteronomy (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1996), 15–18. The term Deuteronomion ("second law") comes from the Greek Septuagint and reflects the book's nature as a restatement of the covenant; see

[2] Childs, B.S. *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture.* Fortress, 1980.

[3] Christensen, D.L. Deuteronomy 1–11. *Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 6A.*

with the utmost diligence to make them understand it. “And shalt talk of them when thou sittest in thine house,” as having religion in the house, as well as in the sanctuary. “And when thou walkest by the way,” as being religious in diaspora as well as under the roof of the parents, and not be ashamed to stand as God’s servant wherever one is. “When thou liest down, and when thou risest up,” as beginning the day with God and making religion an important occupation of one’s life.[4] Clarke, however, acknowledges the difficulty in doing this when he posits, “This is a most difficult task; and it requires much patience, much prudence, much judgment, and much piety in the parents, to enable them to do this good, this most important work, in the best and most effectual manner.”[5]

The lacuna raises the question of how shall *shema* be understood in African biblical context? The study is motivated by a simple but important question: Is there a meaningful connection between the way African communities have traditionally passed on moral values through oral tradition and the way Deuteronomy 6:4-7 instructs ancient Israel to teach God’s commandments to their children? This gap the study seeks to address through an exegetical method with the framework of African biblical hermeneutics. The exegetical method of biblical interpretation is preferred in this study as it analyses the original meaning of the text in consonance with the author’s perspective. The approach employs textual analysis to understand the Bible text very carefully, paying attention to the exact words used, the meaning of those words in the original language, and the context in which the verse appears.[6] The essential characteristics of this approach include the study of the historical context, the grammatical composition, and the literary genre of the passage under study. The interpreters thus seek to know what message the original authors had in mind to pass to their audience and how the receivers would have understood the message. The exegetical method agrees with the notion that the Bible is an authoritative word of God and inerrant in matters of doctrine and faith (2 Timothy 3:16). The exegetical approach discards unfounded gestures but allows the text to speak for itself. African hermeneutics

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[4] Clarke, Adam. "Commentary on Deuteronomy 6:7". "The Adam Clarke Commentary". Retrieved 26 July, 2026 from https://www.studylight.org/commentaries/acc/deuteronomy-6.html. 1832.
[5] Clarke, Adam. "Commentary on Deuteronomy 6:7".
[6] For a clear introduction to textual analysis as used in biblical studies, see Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, 4th ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 27–45. They describe the goal of exegesis as “discovering the original intent of the biblical writer.”

esteems the method with allowance for cultural understanding of the reader for a comprehensive understanding of a scriptural text.

Literary Context

It is widely acknowledged that a text without context is a pretext. The neglect of the context is on point when he avers that "many misinterpretations of the Bible are due to neglect of the literary context." The immediate context of *shema* is Deuteronomy 6:4-9; the pericope gives a complete short teaching in which the divine command is given. It puts emphasis on continuous teaching and training of Hebrew children. The passage is situated in a larger context that has its main division in Deuteronomy 6:1-25. The larger context seeks the passing down of the story of deliverance and God's intervention in the Hebrew wilderness experience.

Textual Analysis

Deuteronomy 6:7 was written originally in Hebrew. When we look at the Hebrew word translated as "teach diligently," the word is shinnantam שִׁנַּנְתָּם, which comes from the root word shanan, שָׁנַן, meaning "to sharpen."[7] This is an important discovery because it tells us that the teaching referred to in this verse is not casual or occasional. It is deep, intense, and repeated teaching, like sharpening a knife over and over again until it is perfectly sharp. This means parents were not just supposed to mention commandments once in a while; they were to keep teaching and reinforcing them until those lessons were deeply embedded in the hearts of their children. Bratcher and Hatton buttress the exposition that "teach diligently" translates a Hebrew term meaning "repeat." The idea is to say the words again and again, not just once. Translations like NRSV "recite them" and NJPS "keep on telling them" capture this well. The next phrase "when you sit in your house and walk by the way" is a merism. The overall goal is total immersion in God's Word throughout daily life. [8] According to Gill, teaching means to sharpen, whet, or drill in. This shows that teaching

[7] Jeffrey H. Tigay, Deuteronomy: The JPS Torah Commentary (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1996), 77. Tigay notes that the root shanan implies intensive, penetrating instruction — the image being that of words "incised" or "sharpened" into the listener's consciousness.
[8] Robert G. Bratcher and Howard A. Hatton, *A Handbook on Deuteronomy* (New York: United Bible Societies, 2000), 108.

God's commands requires diligence, repetition, and industry. The goal is to imprint truth deeply into the minds of children, so they become sharp and ready in it. Gill says instruction should begin as soon as children can understand and speak. And parents must teach children to love, fear, and serve the Lord. Gill adds that bedtime and morning are also key seasons for instruction, tied with prayers. [9]

The verse also lists four different situations in which this teaching should happen: sitting at home, walking on the road, lying down at night, and rising up in the morning. Scholars call this a "merism," which is a literary technique where two opposite things are mentioned to mean "all the time." So, the verse is not just referring to those four specific moments — it is saying that moral teaching should always happen, everywhere, as a natural part of daily life.

Textual analysis shows that the text begins with "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one." This shows that the instruction to teach children is directly connected to the central belief about who God is. Moral teaching is not separate from faith — it flows naturally from it. The following phrase, "when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise" (Deut 6:7) extends this mandate to involve every aspect of daily life, making education both diligent, engaging, and receptive. The study of Deuteronomy 6:4–9 presupposes a holistic teaching model that integrates spiritual, intellectual, and social dimensions and involves community in the educational and developmental process. Education in the text is fundamentally linked to a covenant relationship with God, emphasizing faithful adherence to His commands.

Before examining how African scholars have applied the lens of oral tradition to biblical texts, it is necessary to understand what oral tradition constitutes within African societies. John S. Mbiti addressed the moral dimensions of African oral culture in depth. Mbiti's research interests spanned theology, philosophy, and African oral traditions, and his seminal work African Religions and Philosophy[10] was the first major scholarly work to challenge the assumption that traditional African religious ideas were "demonic and anti-

[9] John Gill, *Exposition of the Old Testament,* "Deuteronomy 6:7" repr., (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980).
[10] Mbiti, J.S. *African Religions and Philosophy. Heinemann*, 1969.

Christian," offering instead a sympathetic framework for contextualizing the gospel using drawn similarities in African religion.
Bediako further advanced this dialogue in his work *Theology and Identity*. Bediako argued that African traditional religions constitute a legitimate "praeparatio evangelica" — a cultural preparation for the Gospel — and that African oral traditions of moral formation provide a natural bridge into biblical ethics.[11]

African Hermeneutics and the Reading of Deuteronomy

The question of how African scholars have engaged Deuteronomy through the lens of oral tradition leads directly into the field of African Biblical Hermeneutics (ABH). Justin Ukpong, the Nigerian biblical scholar, has been among the most systematic thinkers in this area. Ukpong traced the history of ABH through three broad phases since the 1930s: a reactive-apologetic phase, a reactive-proactive phase, and a proactive phase. During the period between the 1970s and the 1990s, which he characterised as "the most dynamic and rewarding in biblical studies in Africa."[12] The African context becomes a resource in interpreting the Bible, giving rise to the inculturation and liberation approaches. Ukpong argues for reading Scripture with African cultural experience as an active hermeneutical subject rather than a passive recipient.[13] This is precisely the interpretive posture required when reading Deuteronomy 6:7 from an African standpoint.
Examining Deuteronomy 6:4-7 through the lens of ABH, this study identified salient findings that answer the central question of whether there is a meaningful connection between African oral tradition and the model of moral teaching in Deuteronomy 6:7. Each finding is presented and explained below.

1. Both Traditions See the Family as the Most Important Place for Moral Teaching

The first finding is that Deuteronomy 6:4-7 and African oral tradition converge in treating the family, and especially the home, as a primary environment for moral and religious

[11] K. Bediako, *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1995), 210-233.
[12] Ukpong, J.S. *"Inculturation Hermeneutics." In The Bible in a World Context.* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2002), 14.
[13] Ukpong, J.S. *"Inculturation Hermeneutics."* 14.

formation, even though the two traditions ground this conviction in different theological and cosmological frameworks. They both agree unequivocally that the home is a vital environment for raising morally good children. Oral traditions do not look only to schools, governments, or even religious institutions to do this job. Instead, it places responsibility on parents and the extended family.[14] Keil and Delitzsch opine that parents are to "teach diligently," meaning to inculcate God's words with persistence. They add that the Hebrew verb implies repetition so that the truth penetrates the mind and heart. They phrase teach them diligently likely as figurative, meaning "frequently and earnestly," not limited to one setting. Religion was not to be confined to the temple but practiced at home and abroad. The command is addressed to parents because the home is the first school of faith.[15] Instruction[16] is to happen in every ordinary situation of life, not only at set religious times. Thus, obedience begins with constant teaching that shapes thought, speech, and conduct. Coffman observes that concerning teaching the children, Deuteronomy 6:7 places upon every guardian the responsibility to teach his children in the way of the Lord. He, however, laments the parent's shortcoming when he says, "our generation has failed so shamefully…. If continued, this course of conduct on the part of Christians will eventually deliver the whole world into the power of Satan!"[17] He adds that in the place of God's word, human philosophy is taught that every child should not be guided, but that he should be left free to do as he desires in his own mind. Clarke depicts the idea as a monstrous mistake ever promoted among mankind.[18] In Deuteronomy 6:7, it is the parents who are instructed to teach the commandments to their children. The setting is the home and the surrounding daily activities of family life. There is no classroom, no priest, no formal

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[14] Tigay, Deuteronomy: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1996), 77. Tigay observes that in Deuteronomy 6:7, the household (bayit) is the assumed primary context of instruction, and the parents are addressed as the primary agents of religious socialization.

[15] C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament vol. 3. The Pentateuch,* "Deuteronomy 6:7" repr., Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1996), 323.

[16] Robert Jamieson, A. R. Faussett, and David Brown, _Commentary Critical and Explanatory on the Whole Bible, "Deut. 6:7" (1871; repr., Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1961).

[17] Coffman, James Burton. "Commentary on Deuteronomy 6:7". "Coffman's Commentaries on the Bible". https://www.studylight.org/commentaries/bcc/deuteronomy-6.html. Abilene Christian University Press, Abilene, Texas, USA. 1983-1999.

[18] Coffman, James Burton. "Commentary on Deuteronomy 6:7".

teacher, just the parent speaking to the child in the natural flow of ordinary life. This matches what is found in many African cultures.

The Yoruba people of Nigeria have a proverb that says, “Ile ni ile eko,” meaning “The home is the first school,”[19] a place of pious discourse in the home, not arguing over doubtful things, but speaking plain truth.[20] Among the Igbo responsibility for a child's moral formation is distributed across the extended family, including grandparents, aunts, uncles, and elder siblings; all play a part in a child's moral formation. Nobody leaves it to a single teacher or institution. The whole family unit takes responsibility. What the two traditions do share, and what is significant for the present study, is the underlying conviction that moral formation is not delegated wholesale to external institutions, school, temple, or, in the contemporary context, church or social media, but is treated as inseparable from the ordinary, repeated speech of family life. This is significant in today’s world, where many families have delegated the moral upbringing of their children entirely to schools, churches, or social media. Both the Bible and African tradition challenge this by insisting that the family is irreplaceable in moral formation and must actively get involved.

2. The Spoken Word is the Primary Tool for Passing Down Moral Values

The second finding is that both traditions rely primarily on the spoken word — not books, not written documents, not examinations — as the main tool for passing down moral values from one generation to the next.[21] In Deuteronomy 6:7, the key instruction is to “talk” or “speak” the commandments to children. The Hebrew word used is dibarta, דִּבַּרְתָּ, which means “to speak” or “to converse.”[22] This is not a command to hand children a scroll and tell them to read it on their own. It is a command for parents to engage their children in living, ongoing conversation about what is right and wrong.

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[19] T. A. Awoniyi, “The Yoruba Language and the Formal School System”: A Study of Colonial Language Policy in Nigeria, 1882–1952,” The International Journal of African Historical Studies 8, no. 1 (1975): 63–64.
[20] Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, "Deuteronomy 6:6-16" (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1991).
[21] Jan Vansina, ”Oral Tradition as History” (University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 55- 78
[22] Jeffrey H. Tigay, *Deuteronomy*, 77.

This is the very heart of African oral tradition. The word “oral” means “spoken,” and African oral tradition is built on the idea that wisdom is best transmitted through the living human voice.[23] African proverbs, short, memorable sayings packed with moral wisdom, are spoken in the right moments to teach children and young people how to behave. Stories told by grandparents around the fire at night or when they come visiting are not just entertainment; they carry deep moral lessons about courage, honesty, respect, and community responsibility.

3. Oral Tradition Holds the Whole Community Responsible for Moral Formation

A second finding is that African oral tradition and Deuteronomy, read in its wider covenantal setting, agree that responsibility for a child's moral formation ultimately extends beyond the household to the community. This claim cannot be established from Deuteronomy 6:7 in isolation, since that verse addresses parents directly and says nothing explicitly about communal responsibility. It becomes evident only when verse 7 is situated within the address structure of Deuteronomy as a whole. The book opens by identifying its audience as "all Israel" (Deut 1:1), and the great covenant discourse that contains Deuteronomy 6 (Deut 4:44–11:32) is consistently addressed to the assembled nation, not to isolated households. This corporate address becomes explicit at the Moab covenant renewal, where "all Israel," including children and those not yet born, is said to stand together before Yahweh to enter the covenant (Deut 29:10–15), and again in the instruction that the law be read publicly every seven years "so that... their children, who have not known it, may hear and learn" (Deut 31:12–13). The book also legislates communal, rather than purely parental, mechanisms for dealing with moral failure in the young: a "stubborn and rebellious son" is not disciplined by his parents alone but is brought by them to the elders at the gate of his city, and the community as a whole bears responsibility for purging the wrong from its midst (Deut 21:18–21).

A comparable principle of corporate accountability appears in the law of the unsolved murder, where the elders of the nearest town must formally take responsibility for a death that occurred within their jurisdiction even though they did not commit it (Deut 21:1–9).

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[23] I. Okpewho, African Oral Literature 7th ed (Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1992), 6–9.

Read together, these texts show that Deuteronomy 6:7 sits inside a book that consistently locates the household within a larger covenant community that shares responsibility for the moral condition of its members, which is the basis, and not verse 7 by itself, for comparing it to the communal orientation of African child-rearing. African oral tradition and Deuteronomy 6:4-7 operate within a household framework—the building block for the society. The entire book Deuteronomy thus, sees parents as integral part of the larger covenantal community that aids the upbringing children in the way of the Lord (c.f. Deut 29:10-15). Moral failure is never just a personal or family matter; it is a community concern.[24] In Deuteronomy, the same principle is at work. The covenant that God made was not made with individual families in isolation—it is made with the entire nation of Israel as a people. When a family fails to teach its children the commandments, it is not just a private failure; it threatens the moral and spiritual integrity of the whole community. The book of Deuteronomy repeatedly warns that if Israel forgets God's commands, the whole nation will suffer not just the individual family. This communal accountability is what is reflected in African oral tradition. The book is deeply concerned with the problem of memory and forgetting. Time and again, Moses warns the people not to forget what God has done for them, not to allow the prosperity of the promised land to make them lose their covenantal identity.[25] The danger, as Deuteronomy sees it, was not external (military conquest of other nations as well as cultural assimilation) but internal (the gradual loss of memory of who God is and the story that makes the people who they are.

Implication of African Hermeneutics of *Shema*

The foregoing shows that the above findings address themselves to three different groups: African churches and families, students and scholars of the Bible, and educators.

1. Implication for African families and churches.

First, African Christian families should reclaim their role as the primary moral educators of their children. This paper has clearly shown that both the Bible and African tradition agree that the home is the first and most important school of moral formation. Many

[24] Dube, *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (Chalice press, St. Louis, Missouri,2000) 45–50.
[25] J. Gordon McConville, *Deuteronomy* (Leicester: Apollos, 2002), 21–25. *On Deuteronomy as Moses' covenant renewal address to a new generation entering Canaan,*

African families have ceded this responsibility to Sabbath and Sunday Schools, pastors, and teachers. While these are helpful, they cannot replace what happens in the home. Parents and extended family members should deliberately and intentionally teach moral and biblical values to their children in everyday conversations, not just during church services.

Secondly, African churches should recover and use African oral tradition as a tool for Christian moral education. African proverbs, stories, and communal practices are not enemies of Christianity; many of them carry moral wisdom that resonates deeply with biblical teaching. Churches can use relevant African proverbs alongside Bible verses to make moral lessons more understandable and memorable for young people. Rather than abandoning all traditional forms of teaching, African Christians should evaluate them critically and use those that align with biblical values. For instance Proverbs 29:17, reads "Discipline your son, and he will give you peace; he will bring delight to your soul." If this admonition is ignored it may unsettle the peace of the parents. A Yoruba adage says, *Omo ti a ba ko ti a ba ko, yo gbe ile ta ko ta* (This means a child that is not trained (not built morally) will sell the house built by the parents. This act will surely destabilize the peace of the parents— if they go out only to return and find out have no place to put their heads because of an uncultured son who has sold family propert. Thus, Oral traditions that affirm biblical principle become a wedge to open the society to divine instructions that could simply be illustrated by their oral traditions and pedagogy.

Further, the elderly members of African communities and churches should take up more active roles in teaching the young. This study has shown that elders play a crucial role in African oral tradition as carriers and transmitters of moral wisdom. When elders engage actively in the formation of godly morals and values in the lives of the younger people, lives become transformed. In many modern African families and churches, older people are often sidelined and their wisdom ignored. This is a great loss. Churches should create deliberate spaces, storytelling sessions, mentorship programs, and intergenerational fellowships where elders can share their wisdom with the young.

Fourth, moral teaching should be built into the normal, daily life of the family, not just confined to special occasions. As Deuteronomy 6:7 teaches, the moments of teaching are

the ordinary moments: sitting at the dinner table, driving to school, doing chores together, going to bed. African families should use these everyday opportunities to speak about values, about God, about right and wrong. A five-minute conversation in the car can sometimes be more powerful than an hour-long Sunday School lesson.

2. Implication for Students and Scholars of the Bible

Students of biblical studies should take cognizance of African cultural traditions, as it helps to illuminate analogies, thereby help Africans to have good understanding of the Bible. This study has demonstrated that reading Deuteronomy through the lens of African oral tradition aids reception and application of *shema*. African oral character and her communal virtue aid the training and teaching of children in the way of the Lord. Thus, African students of the Bible should not feel that they need to abandon their cultural background in entirety to understand the Bible well. Their backgrounds that are answerable to the biblical injunction become a veritable means of gaining the knowledge of God's word.

3. Implication for Educators

Schools and educational institutions in Africa should incorporate elements of African oral tradition into their moral education programs. Many African schools have abandoned indigenous educational approaches in favor of Western classroom models. This study suggests that African proverbs, stories, and communal activities can be powerful tools for moral education in formal school settings as well. Teachers should be trained to use these resources effectively. The teaching of moral values should be integrated across the whole school curriculum, not treated as a separate subject. Just as Deuteronomy 6:7 envisions moral teaching woven into the whole of daily life, African schools should aim to weave moral formation into every subject and every aspect of school life, rather than confining it to a single "moral education" class once a week.

The study thus reveals the link between biblical teachings and the way people live and understand things in African culture. The difficulty in connecting what is learnt in the church with daily living is addressed with ABH of *shema*. Moral teachings are clearly presented and closely linked to real-life experiences.

Contribution to Knowledge

This study has shown the similarity and connection between Hebrew training of children and African culture. It shows that African culture and the Bible have deep common ground on moral education. One of the most significant contributions of this study is that it clearly demonstrates that African oral tradition, when critically applied, aids the reception and application of God's word, especially the biblical model of moral formation in Deuteronomy 6:4-7 that teaches the basic philosophy of how morality is taught and learned. This is an important finding because it pushes back against the ideas that, unfortunately, have been common in some circles, that African culture is incompatible with Christian values. This study shows that, at least in moral formation, there are African oral traditions that are analogous to biblical teaching, as highlighted below:

It Recovers the Oral and Communal Dimensions of Deuteronomy 6:4-7

Many people who read Deuteronomy 6:4-7 in a modern, Western context tend to focus on the content of what is being taught (the commandments) and forget the method (conversation in daily life) and the context (the whole community). This study contributes to biblical scholarship by recovering and emphasizing these seemingly overlooked dimensions of the text. African oral tradition, because it is built entirely on conversation and communal participation, acts as a mirror that reflects Deuteronomy 6:7 clearly.

It Gives African Students a Framework for Reading the Bible Through Their Own Cultural Experience

For many African students of theology and biblical studies, there is sometimes a notion that their cultural background is irrelevant or even a hindrance to proper Bible study. This study challenges that misconception by demonstrating that an African cultural background can really enrich biblical interpretation. This is an important contribution for students who are just beginning to develop their own approach to reading and interpreting religious texts. It Contributes to the Growing Field of African Biblical Hermeneutics. African biblical hermeneutics, the study of how the Bible is and should be interpreted in African contexts, is a growing academic field. This study contributes to that field by applying African hermeneutical principles specifically to Deuteronomy 6:7 and the theme of moral formation, which is an area that has not been extensively studied from this particular angle.

It provides a model that other students and scholars can follow when approaching other biblical texts from an African perspective.

It Has Practical Value for African Churches and Families

Unlike some academic papers that remain purely theoretical, this study also has direct practical value. The recommendations made are grounded in the study's findings and offer biblical guidance for how African families, churches, schools, and communities can improve the way they pass on moral and spiritual values to the next generation. The contribution to knowledge made by this study is significant in several ways. It demonstrates that African culture and the Bible have deep common ground on questions of moral education, which challenges the mistaken idea that African tradition and Christian values are incompatible. It recovers the oral and communal dimensions of Deuteronomy 6:7 that are often overlooked in Western interpretations of the text. It provides African students of the Bible with a framework for reading scripture through their own cultural experience. It contributes to the growing academic field of African biblical hermeneutics. It offers practical guidance for how African communities can strengthen their practices of moral formation in a rapidly changing world.

Summary

This paper has examined the topic of oral tradition and biblical morality from an African perspective, using Deuteronomy 6:7 as the central biblical text. The study is motivated by a simple but important question: Is there a meaningful connection between how African communities have traditionally passed on moral values through oral tradition and how Deuteronomy 6:7 instructs ancient Israel to teach God's commandments to their children? The answer arrived at through this study is affirmative. The study found three major points of connection between the two traditions. First, both identify the family and the home as the primary site of moral formation. Second, both rely primarily on spoken language, conversation, proverbs, and storytelling rather than written texts to transmit moral wisdom. Third, both operate within a communal framework in which the whole community, not just individual parents, is responsible for raising morally good children.

Recommendations

Based on the findings above, the paper made practical recommendations addressed to African families and churches, students and scholars of biblical studies, and educators. These recommendations called for the recovery of the family as the primary site of moral formation, the use of African oral tradition as a resource for Christian moral education, the greater inclusion of elders in the teaching of the young, the integration of moral teaching into everyday family life, and the development of more research on African perspectives in Old Testament studies.

In closing, it can be said that both African oral tradition and Deuteronomy 6:4-7 carry the same deep conviction that the most important moral lessons in life are not learned in classrooms from textbooks. They are learned at home, in community, through the living voices that treasure communal love and all-embracing societal formation. Whether it is a Yoruba grandmother telling a story by firelight, or an Israelite father speaking about the Exodus from Egypt as he walks to the fields with his son, the wisdom is the same: speak the truth to your children, speak it often, speak it everywhere, and make it a part of the very air they breathe.

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SECTION B

CHRISTIANITY, AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION, MIGRATION, AND THE POLITICS OF IDENTITY AND BELONGING

CHAPTER 10

IN CHRIST AND STILL AFRICAN: PAULINE THEOLOGY AND THE NEGOTIATION OF CULTURAL BELONGING IN CONTEMPORARY AFRICA

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Abstract

This study asks how African Christians may confess a primary identity "in Christ" without construing conversion as cultural self-erasure. The question remains important in communities shaped by missionary and colonial legacies and by continuing negotiations over language, dress, worship, communal obligation, and other visible forms of Christian belonging. Using a contextual biblical-theological approach, the study combines historical-literary exegesis of Galatians 3:26–29, Colossians 3:9–11, 1 Corinthians 9:19–23, and Romans 12:1–2 with critical dialogue with African contextual hermeneutics. These texts were selected because, taken together, they address incorporation into Christ, the status of inherited social identities, missionary accommodation, and moral discernment. The analysis argues that Paul neither absolutizes inherited identities nor requires their wholesale erasure. Identity in Christ becomes the governing allegiance by which cultural forms are judged, reordered, and directed toward the life of the new community. The article therefore proposes a Christ-governed grammar of cultural discernment: cultural forms may be affirmed where they serve truth and neighbor-love, transformed where they are morally mixed, and relinquished where they contradict the gospel. By bringing recent Pauline identity scholarship into direct conversation with African contextual hermeneutics and concrete ecclesial practices, the study offers a more precise account of how Christians may remain genuinely African while belonging decisively to Christ.

Keywords: *Pauline Theology, African Christian Identity, Cultural Belonging, In Christ, Contextual Biblical Hermeneutics, Cultural Discernment*

INTRODUCTION

The question of whether one can be fully Christian and still authentically African remains a significant issue in African theology and Christian practice. The problem is not simply

whether Christianity has taken root in Africa; it is also how Christian belonging relates to inherited cultural identities after long histories in which the gospel was sometimes transmitted together with European social forms. African theologians have therefore distinguished the universality of the Christian gospel from the cultural packaging that accompanied particular missionary projects, while also insisting that African cultures themselves remain subject to theological critique.[1]

The legacy is neither uniform nor reducible to a simple opposition between "Africa" and "the West." Missionary encounters varied by place, denomination, period, and African agency, and African Christians appropriated, resisted, and reconfigured imported forms in complex ways. Even so, debates over what counts as appropriately Christian continue to surface in visible matters such as language, music, preaching style, liturgical form, and dress. Historical studies of missionary clothing regimes, for example, show that clothing could become a contested sign of Christian respectability and African agency rather than a culturally neutral matter. Accordingly, this article treats such examples as context-specific illustrations rather than as universal descriptions of African Christianity.[2]

The theological problem may be stated sharply: if the gospel is universal, must its faithful expression be tied to inherited European forms? Conversely, if African cultural identity is to be affirmed, by what theological criteria are its practices to be evaluated? African biblical hermeneutics has rightly insisted that interpretation must take African histories, questions, and lived realities seriously, while recent scholarship has also cautioned that contextual relevance should not eclipse close attention to the literary claims of Scripture.

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[1] John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Heinemann, 1990), 1–15; Kwame Bediako, *Theology and Identity: The Impact of Culture upon Christian Thought in the Second Century and in Modern Africa* (Oxford: Regnum Books International, 1992), 225–240.

[2] Walima T. Kalusa, "Educated Girls, Clothes and Christianity: Subverting Mabel Shaw's Sartorial Agenda on the Colonial Zambian Copperbelt, 1925–1964," *Journal of Southern African Studies* 48, no. 1 (2022): 61–80, https://doi.org/10.1080/03057070.2022.2021750; Joel Mokhoathi, "African Christianity: Intersections between Culture and Identity among AmaXhosa," *Scriptura* 120, no. 1 (2021): 1–11, https://doi.org/10.7833/120-1-2060. Kwame Bediako, *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1995), 95–115; Teddy Chalwe Sakupapa, "Tracking the Decolonial in African Christian Theology: A Southern African Perspective on Mission from the Margins as a Decolonial Mode of Mission," *International Review of Mission* 112, no. 2 (2023): 202–217, https://doi.org/10.1111/irom.12476.

The issue, therefore, is not whether culture enters Christian interpretation and practice—it inevitably does—but how culture is placed in disciplined dialogue with the biblical text.[3]

This study argues that Pauline theology provides a constructive framework for that task. Paul's language of being "in Christ" establishes a decisive new allegiance and communal identity, yet it does not require the wholesale disappearance of every ethnic, social, or cultural distinction. Rather, inherited identities are relativized, morally tested, and reordered within a new Christ-centered community. At the same time, Paul's missionary practice demonstrates contextual flexibility bounded by fidelity to the gospel, while Romans 12:1–2 provides an explicitly transformative logic of nonconformity, renewed perception, and discernment.[4]

The article's contribution is deliberately narrower than the claim that Pauline theology and African identity have never been brought together. Recent studies by Vuyani Stanley Sindo and Daniel K. Darko have already addressed the relation between Pauline identity and Africanness with considerable directness. Building on and differentiating itself from that work, this paper brings four Pauline passages into an integrated argument and develops a practical theological grammar for evaluating concrete cultural forms. It proposes that Christian cultural belonging is best understood through three movements—affirmation, transformation, and relinquishment—governed by allegiance to Christ rather than by either Westernization or cultural romanticism.[5]

The study therefore asks: How do these selected Pauline texts construe identity, cultural difference, accommodation, and transformation, and what criteria do they provide for

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[3] Justin S. Ukpong, "Developments in Biblical Interpretation in Africa: Historical and Hermeneutical Directions," in *The Bible in Africa: Transactions, Trajectories and Trends*, ed. Gerald O. West and Musa W. Dube (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 11–28; Dustin W. Ellington, "The Promise of Attending to Literary Context for Contextual Biblical Hermeneutics in Africa," *Acta Theologica*, Supplement 32 (2021): 111–131, https://doi.org/10.18820/23099089/actat.Sup32.8.

[4] James D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 390–410; Philip La Grange Du Toit, "Ethnic Reasoning and Early Christian Identity: A Pauline Theological Perspective," *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 76, no. 1 (2020): a5800, https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v76i1.5800.

[5] Vuyani Stanley Sindo, "Third Race Theory and Paul's Theology of Identity: Toward an African Christian Identity," *Neotestamentica* 57, no. 1 (2023): 57–89, https://doi.org/10.10520/ejc-neotest_v57_n1_a3; Daniel K. Darko, "Imagining Africanness in Paul's Identity Constructs: The Challenge and Paradox for New Testament Scholars in Africa," *Neotestamentica* 58, no. 2 (2024): 249–264, https://doi.org/10.10520/ejc-neotest_v58_n2_a5.

African Christian belonging today? Its thesis is that being "in Christ" and still African is not a contradiction. It is a form of transformed belonging in which Africanness is neither erased nor enthroned, but faithfully inhabited under the lordship of Christ.

Scholarly Perspectives and Research Gap

Scholarship relevant to this study converges around four conversations: African Christian identity, African contextual hermeneutics, Pauline constructions of identity, and Christian moral discernment. Foundational African theologians such as John S. Mbiti and Kwame Bediako established the importance of community, cultural memory, and local categories for Christian self-understanding. Bediako in particular challenged the assumption that the Christian faith remains inherently foreign to Africa and argued for Christianity's translatability into African worlds without surrendering its theological center. More recent work continues this discussion through questions of identity, decoloniality, and the complex agency by which African Christians negotiate inherited religion, modernity, and Christian commitment.[6]

A second conversation concerns African biblical hermeneutics. Justin Ukpong's contextual approach emphasizes the encounter between biblical texts and African socio-cultural realities, while Mbengu Nyiawung similarly argues that the interpreter's context can contribute significantly to a viable African Christian theology. Ebele Chukwuka's account of African contextual hermeneutics continues this emphasis on the reciprocal significance of text and African context. At the same time, Dustin Ellington warns that contextual interpretation requires disciplined attention to literary context so that contemporary questions do not become louder than the text itself. These concerns are especially relevant to the present study, which seeks a method that is genuinely contextual without allowing cultural preference to control Pauline exegesis in advance.[7]

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[6] David Kirwa Tarus and Stephanie Lowery, "African Theologies of Identity and Community: The Contributions of John Mbiti, Jesse Mugambi, Vincent Mulago, and Kwame Bediako," *Open Theology* 3, no. 1 (2017): 305–320, https://doi.org/10.1515/opth-2017-0024; Mokhoathi, "African Christianity," 1–11; Sakupapa, "Tracking the Decolonial," 202–217. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 1–15; Bediako, *Theology and Identity*, 225–240; Bediako, *Christianity in Africa*, 95–115.

[7] Ebele C. Chukwuka, "African Contextual Hermeneutics," *Verbum et Ecclesia* 43, no. 1 (2022): a2406, https://doi.org/10.4102/ve.v43i1.2406; Ellington, "Promise of Attending to Literary Context," 111–131. Ukpong, "Developments in Biblical Interpretation in Africa," 11–28; Mbengu D. Nyiawung,

A third body of scholarship concerns Paul and identity. James D. G. Dunn's synthesis remains foundational for the theological significance of participation in Christ and the reconfiguration of Jewish and Gentile belonging. More recent work, however, has sharpened the question of whether "in Christ" should be construed as eliminating prior identities. Philip La Grange Du Toit challenges models that collapse the tension between new identity and continuing human or ethnic identities, while Sindo criticizes versions of "third race" theory that overstate discontinuity with previous ethnic belonging. Sindo's reconstruction model is particularly important for an African discussion because it argues that incorporation into Christ significantly transforms identity without requiring complete ethnic abandonment.[8]

Darko advances the conversation further by asking how Pauline identity constructions can inform the articulation of Africanness amid colonial legacies, competing cultural mores, and diverse ecclesial histories. His work makes clear that African New Testament scholarship no longer needs to choose between a supposedly culture-free Paul and a culturally self-protective African theology. Likewise, Lionel Windsor's reading of Colossians cautions against interpreting new-humanity language as the simple negation of all continuing social or Jewish distinctiveness. These developments require the present paper to state its research gap with precision rather than novelty inflation.[9]

The gap addressed here is therefore not the absence of scholarship on Paul, identity, or Africanness. It lies in the need for a concise, textually controlled framework that brings Pauline incorporation, new-humanity ethics, missionary accommodation, and moral discernment into one sequence and then applies that synthesis to concrete questions of African Christian cultural expression. Existing studies establish that Christian identity can transform without necessarily annihilating prior identity; this article asks more specifically how that insight becomes a criterion for judging actual cultural practices. Its distinct

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"Contextualising Biblical Exegesis: What Is the African Biblical Hermeneutic Approach?" *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 69, no. 1 (2013): a2011, https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v69i1.2011.

[8] Dunn, *Theology of Paul the Apostle*, 390–410; Du Toit, "Ethnic Reasoning"; Sindo, "Third Race Theory," 57–89.

[9] Lionel J. Windsor, "Israel and the Apostolic Mission: A Post-Supersessionist Reading of Ephesians and Colossians," *Religions* 14, no. 1 (2023): 44, https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14010044. Darko, "Imagining Africanness," 249–264.

contribution is the proposed threefold grammar of affirmation, transformation, and relinquishment, grounded in the four selected Pauline texts and placed in conversation with African contextual hermeneutics.

Methodology

This study employs a contextual biblical-theological method. By "contextual" it means that the questions of African Christian identity, cultural belonging, and ecclesial practice are taken seriously as the contemporary horizon of interpretation. By "biblical-theological" it means that contemporary questions are addressed through historically and literarily responsible reading of selected Pauline texts before those findings are placed in critical dialogue with African cultural realities. The method thus resists two opposite reductions: a supposedly context-free exegesis that ignores the interpreter's social location, and a context-dominant reading in which contemporary cultural interests determine the meaning of the text.[10]

Four passages were purposively selected because each contributes a distinct component to the research question. Galatians 3:26–29 addresses incorporation into Christ, Abrahamic inheritance, and the status of inherited social distinctions. Colossians 3:9–11 connects new identity with moral renewal and a community in which conventional status markers no longer determine belonging. First Corinthians 9:19–23 displays Paul's missionary adaptability while explicitly locating that adaptability under the "law of Christ." Romans 12:1–2 supplies the language of nonconformity, transformation, renewed understanding, and discernment of God's will. Together the texts permit a synthesis of identity, cultural difference, contextual flexibility, and moral evaluation.

The analytical procedure follows four stages. First, each passage is read within its immediate literary argument, with attention to the rhetorical problem it addresses and to significant theological terms. Second, the function of identity and difference within that argument is identified rather than inferred from isolated proof texts. Third, the findings are brought into canonical Pauline conversation, especially where other texts complicate an

[10] Ukpong, "Developments in Biblical Interpretation in Africa," 11–28; Nyiawung, "Contextualising Biblical Exegesis"; Ellington, "Promise of Attending to Literary Context," 111–131.

erasure model of identity. Fourth, the resulting theological claims are placed in critical dialogue with African scholarship on culture, community, mission, and contextual hermeneutics. The African context therefore functions as a dialogical and applicational horizon, not as a substitute for textual exegesis.

The approach is qualitative and interpretive; it does not claim empirical measurement of African Christian attitudes, nor does it assume that "African culture" is a single homogeneous entity. References to African practice are therefore framed as contextual examples and theological implications rather than continent-wide sociological findings. Colossians is treated within the canonical Pauline corpus for the purposes of this theological study; the argument does not depend on resolving the scholarly debate over its authorship.

Results and Discussion

Identity in Christ and the New Humanity: Galatians 3:26–29 and Colossians 3:9–11

Galatians 3:26–29 is frequently cited as a general statement of Christian equality, but its immediate argument is more specific. Galatians 3 has been concerned with the Abrahamic promise, the role of the law, the coming of faith, and the question of who belongs among Abraham's heirs. Verses 23–25 describe the law's custodial role "before faith came," and verse 26 turns directly to the Galatian believers: they are children of God through faith in Christ Jesus. Baptismal incorporation is then described as "putting on Christ," and verse 29 returns to the Abrahamic argument by declaring that those who belong to Christ are Abraham's seed and heirs according to promise. Accordingly, the three paired distinctions in verse 28 are not an abstract denial that Jews, Greeks, slaves, free persons, males, or females continue to exist. Their point is that such inherited statuses do not establish differentiated access to Christ or superior standing within the promised family.[11]

This contextual reading is important for cultural identity. Paul does not replace ethnic hierarchy with cultural vacancy; he relocates the ground of covenantal belonging. The phrase "you are all one in Christ Jesus" names a new solidarity whose center is Christ rather than inherited status. Sindo's critique of universalistic "third race" readings is therefore

[11] Dunn, *Theology of Paul the Apostle*, 390–410; Sindo, "Third Race Theory," 57–89.

pertinent: Paul can proclaim a decisive transformation of identity while still referring elsewhere to Jews and Gentiles as meaningful identities and social locations. The continuing presence of ethnicity is not the same as its continuing supremacy. In Christ, inherited identity can remain descriptively meaningful while becoming theologically non-ultimate.[12]

Colossians 3:9–11 develops the point through the language of moral and anthropological renewal. The passage belongs to the larger exhortation of Colossians 3:1–17: those raised with Christ are to put to death practices associated with the old life, "put off" anger, malice, abusive speech, and falsehood, and "put on" a new self that is being renewed according to the image of the Creator. The list in verse 11—Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free—is therefore embedded in an ethical transformation rather than detached from it. The new humanity is not merely a new label; it is a social existence in which identity distinctions can no longer justify hostility, deceit, contempt, or exclusion.[13]

This context guards against two opposite misreadings. The first is cultural absolutism: inherited identity cannot claim final authority because "Christ is all and in all." The second is cultural annihilation: the verse need not imply that historical or social identities become meaningless in every respect. Windsor's post-supersessionist reading of Colossians illustrates the exegetical danger of assuming that newness in Christ necessarily negates all Jewish or social distinctiveness. Read together, Galatians 3 and Colossians 3 yield the first element of a Pauline theology of cultural belonging: Christian incorporation creates a new center of identity and a new moral community, thereby relativizing but not automatically erasing inherited cultural difference.[14]

For contemporary African Christianity, the implication is significant. An African Christian need not treat Africanness as a pre-Christian residue to be discarded simply because it is

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[12] Sindo, "Third Race Theory," 57–89; Du Toit, "Ethnic Reasoning." See also 1 Cor. 7:17–24 and Rom. 11:13–24 for Pauline passages in which continuing Jewish/Gentile identities remain meaningful within the argument.

[13] Sindo, "Third Race Theory," 57–89; Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: Community, Cross, New Creation* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), 16–30.

[14] Windsor, "Israel and the Apostolic Mission," 44.

inherited. Language, dress, naming practices, music, communal habits, artistic forms, and social memory can continue as meaningful expressions of personhood and community. Yet none of them supplies the believer's ultimate status before God or an unquestionable norm for the church. Cultural belonging is retained as a real but subordinate identity within the new humanity constituted in Christ.

Paul and Cultural Adaptation: 1 Corinthians 9:19–23

First Corinthians 9:19–23 adds a missionary dimension to the question. The passage should be read within 1 Corinthians 8:1–11:1, where Paul addresses food associated with idols, knowledge, conscience, freedom, and the loving restriction of rights for the sake of others. Chapter 9 is not an unrelated autobiographical digression; Paul uses his own apostolic conduct as an example of freedom voluntarily subordinated to gospel service. The rhetorical climax comes in verse 19: though free from all, he has made himself a slave to all in order to win more. The paradox is decisive. Paul's freedom is displayed not through cultural or personal self-assertion but through self-limitation for the good of others.[15]

His repeated "I became as" statements show a remarkable willingness to inhabit different social locations: as a Jew to Jews, as one under the law to those under the law, as one outside the law to those outside it, and as weak to the weak. Yet Paul inserts a crucial qualification in verse 21. His contextual flexibility does not make him "lawless toward God"; he remains bound to the law of Christ. The passage therefore cannot legitimately be reduced either to cultural withdrawal or to unlimited accommodation. It depicts a missional adaptability disciplined by a prior theological allegiance. Recent analysis of Paul's slavery metaphor likewise highlights that the language is stronger than casual adaptation: Paul presents a deliberate self-positioning in service of gospel participation and mission.[16]

This produces the second element of the proposed framework. Cultural forms are not faithful merely because they are familiar, indigenous, or effective; nor are they unfaithful merely because they are culturally local. Paul's practice asks whether a form can be

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[15] Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 698–707.
[16] Adam G. White, "Acting the Slave: Reinterpreting Paul's Metaphorical Slavery (1 Cor 9:19–23)," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 55, no. 1 (2025): 64–76, https://doi.org/10.1177/01461079251317536. Thiselton, *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 698–707; Hays, *Moral Vision of the New Testament*, 16–30.

inhabited in a way that serves the gospel without violating the "law of Christ." The missionary may adapt language, social conventions, rhetorical patterns, and forms of association while refusing practices that would contradict the gospel's moral center. Contextualization is therefore neither mimicry nor syncretism; it is disciplined incarnation of the message within a particular social world.

Applied to African church life, this means that African languages, musical forms, modes of public address, dress, hospitality, and communal patterns may function as legitimate vehicles of Christian witness. The relevant question is not whether they resemble European church forms but whether they communicate and embody the gospel faithfully. The same criterion applies in reverse: imported Western forms possess no automatic sanctity simply because they arrived through missionary history. Both indigenous and imported forms remain accountable to Christ.

Transformation and Discernment: Romans 12:1–2

Romans 12:1–2 provides the explicitly transformative dimension required for cultural judgment. The opening "therefore" connects the exhortation to the preceding theological argument of Romans, especially the mercies of God that Paul has expounded. The ethical life that follows is a response to grace. Believers are to present their bodies as a living sacrifice and are not to be conformed to "this age," but transformed by the renewing of the mind so that they may discern the will of God. The language is comprehensive: body, mind, worship, transformation, and discernment are brought together.[17]

The immediate chapters also prevent an individualistic interpretation. Romans 12 proceeds from renewed thinking into sober self-assessment, differentiated gifts within one body, genuine love, honor, hospitality, non-retaliation, and peace; Romans 13–15 extends the ethical discussion into public obligations, disputes, and the management of difference within the community. The renewed mind therefore does not merely exchange one set of private ideas for another. It learns to perceive and practice life in ways consonant with the mercies of God and the communal ethic of Christ.

[17] Hays, *Moral Vision of the New Testament*, 16–30; Dunn, *Theology of Paul the Apostle*, 626–631.

Romans 12 supplies the third element of the framework: cultural belonging must be morally discerned, not simply inherited. Every culture forms habits of perception about honor, gender, authority, family, wealth, spirituality, strangers, and social status. Paul's summons to nonconformity means that no culture can be treated as self-authenticating. At the same time, the command is not "become culturally foreign"; it is "be transformed" and learn to discern what accords with God's will. The object of rejection is conformity to the present age, not Africanness as such.

The result is a theological criterion that is simultaneously critical and constructive. Cultural practices may be affirmed where they already embody goods compatible with the gospel; they may be transformed where they contain both life-giving and harmful elements; and they must be relinquished where their logic resists the claims of Christ. This approach avoids the assumption that conversion requires Westernization, but it also refuses a romanticized account in which indigenous origin guarantees Christian legitimacy.

African Cultural Values under Pauline Discernment

African theological reflection has often emphasized communal belonging, solidarity, hospitality, respect for elders, and responsibility toward extended kin. These themes are diverse in expression and should not be treated as a single pan-African social system, yet they remain important features within many African accounts of personhood and community. Pauline theology provides resources for affirming such values without simply baptizing them. His language of one body with many members, mutual service, hospitality, burden-bearing, and concern for the weaker member resonates with forms of relational personhood that resist radical individualism.[18]

Affirmation, however, must remain morally discriminating. Community can nurture belonging and material support, but it can also become coercive when communal honor suppresses conscience or when dissent is treated as betrayal. Respect for elders can transmit wisdom, memory, and accountability, but it becomes distorted if age or office places a person beyond moral correction. Kinship obligations can embody generosity and solidarity,

[18] Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 1–15; Tarus and Lowery, "African Theologies of Identity and Community," 305–320.

but they can also harden into exclusion, patronage, or pressure that ignores justice toward outsiders. The gospel does not reject these values because they are African; it asks what form they take when Christ rather than kinship prestige becomes the governing Lord.[19]

The same method applies to visible ecclesial expression. The historical record shows that dress and other material forms sometimes became entangled with missionary projects of Christian respectability, while African Christians also appropriated and reinterpreted such forms in their own ways. Accordingly, a suit, robe, African attire, local language, indigenous musical idiom, or Western hymn form cannot be declared holy or unholy by cultural origin alone. A Christian evaluation asks instead whether the form is consistent with modesty, truthfulness, reverence, justice, neighbor-love, and the edification of the community.[20]

This is where Ellen G. White may appropriately enter the discussion as a secondary Adventist theological-ethical conversation partner rather than as an exegetical authority over Paul. The article's biblical conclusions are established from the Pauline texts; White is introduced because the Conference context includes an Adventist readership and because her emphasis on present character transformation reinforces the distinction between outward form and inward Christian formation. In *The Adventist Home*, she insists that the work of transformation belongs to the present life and that daily character, not mere religious profession, is decisive. Her function here is therefore corroborative and pastoral: she supports the Pauline insistence that authentic religion is recognized in transformed life rather than in borrowed external conformity.[21]

Where Pauline Theology Challenges Culture

The argument that African identity can remain meaningful in Christ must not be confused with the claim that every inherited practice can be preserved. Paul's theology challenges every cultural system—including Western ones—that elevates ethnicity, status, fear, domination, or inherited privilege above the lordship of Christ. Galatians 3 denies such

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[19] Bediako, *Theology and Identity*, 225–240; Tarus and Lowery, "African Theologies of Identity and Community," 305–320.
[20] Kalusa, "Educated Girls, Clothes and Christianity," 61–80; Mokhoathi, "African Christianity," 1–11.
[21] Ellen G. White, *The Adventist Home* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1952), 16.

markers the power to determine standing within the Abrahamic family; Colossians 3 requires the abandonment of practices that sustain hostility and falsehood; 1 Corinthians 9 subordinates freedom to gospel-shaped service; Romans 12 requires transformed discernment rather than social conformity.

This means, first, that tribal or ethnic identity cannot become an ultimate source of Christian worth or a basis for excluding other believers. Recent Pauline identity scholarship is especially useful here because it distinguishes the continuing social reality of ethnicity from the theological absolutization of ethnicity. An identity may continue without functioning as the final criterion of belonging. The church therefore sins against its Pauline identity when ethnic loyalty becomes a basis for superiority, access, leadership exclusion, or contempt.[22]

Second, inherited practices rooted in coercion, fear, dehumanization, or injustice require more than cultural appreciation; they require transformation or rejection. Contextual theology loses its Christian norm if it treats cultural survival as the highest good. Conversely, decolonial critique loses credibility if it simply reverses the hierarchy and assumes that Western origin makes a practice suspect while African origin makes it innocent. Sakupapa's account of decolonial African theology is helpful precisely because it foregrounds local agency and historical realities without reducing the entire missionary encounter to one undifferentiated story.[23]

The Pauline alternative is a hierarchy of allegiance. Christ is not one cultural possession among others. In Christ, all cultural identities are displaced from ultimacy and then returned to the believer as spheres of responsible discipleship. The Christian can therefore say "I am African" without making Africanness a rival lord, just as a Christian formed by Western culture must submit that culture to the same judgment. The gospel does not create cultureless people; it creates people whose cultures are no longer beyond repentance.

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[22] Sindo, "Third Race Theory," 57–89; Darko, "Imagining Africanness," 249–264; Du Toit, "Ethnic Reasoning."
[23] Sakupapa, "Tracking the Decolonial," 202–217.

Implications for Christian Community in Contemporary Africa

Several implications follow. First, African churches should teach primary belonging in Christ without implying cultural self-rejection. The language of new humanity should be used to dismantle ethnic superiority and exclusion, not to produce believers who feel that mature Christianity requires cultural invisibility. The unity Paul imagines is deep enough to relativize cultural privilege while still allowing differentiated persons and communities to bring their histories into the body of Christ.

Second, theological education should train ministers to distinguish Scripture from the cultural forms through which they first encountered Scripture. This requires historical awareness as well as exegetical discipline. Not every inherited ecclesial convention is a biblical command, and not every local innovation is contextual faithfulness. African contextual hermeneutics is strongest when it allows real African questions to meet the text while maintaining careful attention to literary and theological context.[24]

Third, worship and mission should be evaluated through the threefold grammar developed here. **Affirmation** names cultural forms that can be received gratefully because they already serve goods consistent with the gospel. **Transformation** names forms that contain valuable social meaning but require moral reorientation. **Relinquishment** names practices whose controlling logic contradicts the gospel and therefore cannot be preserved merely for the sake of cultural continuity. This grammar places both African and imported church cultures under the same Christological judgment.

Fourth, Christian mission should cultivate contextual competence rather than cultural mimicry. Paul's example in 1 Corinthians 9 suggests that the missionary does not demonstrate faithfulness by remaining culturally distant. Faithfulness includes the willingness to enter another social world, limit one's own preferences, and communicate in forms that can genuinely be heard, while remaining accountable to the gospel. For African churches, this creates theological space for African languages, artistic forms,

[24] Chukwuka, "African Contextual Hermeneutics"; Ellington, "Promise of Attending to Literary Context," 111–131.

rhetorical conventions, patterns of hospitality, and communal participation without making any of them immune from biblical critique.[25]

Finally, this framework has implications for Christian identity beyond the church building. Believers negotiate family expectations, professional cultures, ethnic loyalties, political identities, global media, and transnational influences. The question "Can I be in Christ and still African?" therefore becomes a larger discipleship question: "How is every real identity I inhabit reordered by Christ?" Paul's answer is neither erasure nor autonomy. It is transformed belonging.

Conclusion

This study has examined Galatians 3:26–29, Colossians 3:9–11, 1 Corinthians 9:19–23, and Romans 12:1–2 as a Pauline framework for negotiating cultural belonging in contemporary Africa. Reading these texts in their immediate arguments yields a more precise conclusion than either cultural rejection or cultural celebration. Galatians locates believers within Abraham's family through Christ and denies inherited statuses the power to determine superior covenantal standing. Colossians describes a renewed humanity in which Christ becomes the center of belonging and old status divisions can no longer govern communal ethics. First Corinthians presents cultural adaptability as gospel-oriented self-giving bounded by the law of Christ. Romans makes transformation and discernment central to the Christian response to God's mercies.

Together these texts support the paper's central thesis: identity in Christ does not require the disappearance of every meaningful cultural identity, but it does displace culture from ultimacy. African identity may therefore remain genuine Christian belonging when it is lived under the lordship of Christ. The gospel neither compels an African Christian to become culturally European nor permits any African cultural form to escape moral testing.

The article's specific contribution is the proposal of a Christ-governed grammar of cultural discernment. Cultural forms may be affirmed where they embody goods consonant with the gospel, transformed where they are morally mixed, and relinquished where they contradict Christ's claims. This framework is deliberately symmetrical: imported Western

[25] Thiselton, *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 698–707; White, "Acting the Slave," 64–76.

forms and indigenous African forms are evaluated by the same theological standard. Such an approach protects African Christian identity from cultural self-rejection while also protecting contextual theology from cultural romanticism.

Being "in Christ" and still African is therefore not a compromise between two incompatible identities. It is a theological possibility grounded in the capacity of the gospel to create a new center of belonging while redeeming embodied people within real histories, languages, communities, and cultures. The task of African Christianity is not to choose between Christ and Africanness as though Christian faith required cultural emptiness. It is to inhabit Africanness faithfully, critically, and missionally under Christ.

Recommendations

First, churches and theological institutions should teach that primary identity in Christ relativizes ethnic and cultural privilege without requiring cultural self-erasure. This distinction can reduce both ethnic absolutism and the assumption that Western ecclesial forms are intrinsically more Christian.

Second, ministers should be trained to distinguish biblical norms from inherited church conventions. Decisions about dress, language, music, preaching style, architecture, and communal practice should be made through theological and pastoral discernment rather than by cultural origin alone.

Third, African churches should encourage culturally intelligible Christian expression while applying the same criteria of truth, holiness, justice, neighbor-love, human dignity, and edification to both indigenous and imported forms.

Fourth, theological education should combine close literary-historical reading of Scripture with disciplined contextual hermeneutics. Context should supply serious questions and a real field of application, but it should not silence the internal argument of the biblical text.

Fifth, further research should test the affirmation–transformation–relinquishment framework in more specific African settings and practices. Comparative studies across denominations, regions, and ethnic communities could determine how the proposed Pauline grammar functions in concrete questions of worship, leadership, family, mission, public ethics, and cultural change.

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CHAPTER 11

BEYOND BLOOD TIES: JESUS' REDEFINITION OF FAMILY IN MARK 3:31–35 THROUGH AFRICAN HERMENEUTICS AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY

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Abstract

Family remains a significant category of identity and belonging in many African societies, although kinship patterns differ considerably across regions and cultures. Mark 3:31–35 therefore raises an important theological question for African Christian communities: how should biological and cultural kinship relate to the family constituted around Jesus? This study examines Jesus' redefinition of family through historical-literary and theological exegesis followed by an African-hermeneutical contextual dialogue. It reads Mark 3:31–35 within the narrative unit of Mark 3:20–35, attends selectively to the Greek wording of verses 31–35, and then brings the exegetical findings into conversation with influential African accounts of relational personhood, kinship, and church-as-family. The study argues that Jesus neither repudiates biological family nor merely adds a spiritual metaphor to existing kinship structures. By declaring that whoever does the will of God is his brother, sister, and mother, Jesus reorders belonging around obedient discipleship and constitutes an open, non-genealogical kinship centred on himself. This vision resonates with African emphases on solidarity, mutual responsibility, and relational identity, while also challenging clan, ethnic, and family loyalties when they become exclusionary, nepotistic, or resistant to the demands of God's kingdom. The study contributes a textually controlled model of contextual appropriation in which African communal values are affirmed, reordered, or critiqued in light of Mark's criterion of doing God's will. It concludes that African churches should embody spiritual kinship through inclusive fellowship, practical care, accountable leadership, and communities that cross inherited social boundaries without denigrating biological family or cultural identity.

Keywords: *Family; Kinship; Discipleship; Mark 3:31–35; African Hermeneutics; Christian Community; Spiritual Kinship.*

INTRODUCTION

Family occupies a central place across diverse African societies, where identity and belonging are frequently negotiated through networks of kinship, lineage, marriage, and communal obligation. These patterns are not uniform across the continent, and African societies should not be reduced to a single communitarian model. Nevertheless, influential African theological and philosophical traditions have stressed the relational character of personhood and the social weight of family. John S. Mbiti's well-known formulation—"I am, because we are; and since we are, therefore I am"—captures one influential East African account of corporate identity, while Kwame Gyekye's Akan-oriented moderate communitarianism insists that communal embeddedness does not erase individual moral agency. Family, therefore, may function not only as a domestic unit but also as a network through which care, obligation, social continuity, and moral formation are negotiated.[1]

This relational setting provides an illuminating context for Mark 3:31–35. Jesus' mother and brothers arrive while he is surrounded by a crowd. When told that they are outside seeking him, Jesus asks, "Who are my mother and my brothers?" Looking at those seated around him, he answers that whoever does the will of God is his brother, sister, and mother. At first glance, the statement may sound like a rejection of natural family. Within Mark, however, Jesus also condemns religious practices that permit the neglect of parents (Mark 7:9–13). The issue in Mark 3 is therefore not the abolition of family but the reordering of ultimate belonging around God's will and the mission of Jesus.

The African Christian relevance of this reordering is substantial. In contexts where family, clan, lineage, ethnicity, and inherited obligations continue to shape social identity, the question is not whether Christians should cease to belong to natural communities, but how such loyalties are judged and transformed by discipleship. African biblical hermeneutics is useful here because it brings the social location of the reader into disciplined conversation with the biblical text. Ukpong, West, Mburu, and other African interpreters have insisted,

[1]John S. Mbiti, African Religions and Philosophy, 2nd ed. (Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers, 1990), 106; Kwame Gyekye, Tradition and Modernity: Philosophical Reflections on the African Experience (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 35–46.

in different ways, that contextual interpretation must take African realities seriously while preserving sustained attention to the literary and theological integrity of Scripture.[2]

Existing research establishes several parts of this conversation but does not yet fully integrate them. Markan scholarship has long examined the tension between discipleship and family, while Jeremy Otten's recent study of Mark 3:20–35 shows how the whole unit redraws social identity boundaries around those aligned with God's will. African interpreters such as Teresa Okure have explored the family's response to Jesus in Mark 3:19b–21, and African ecclesiologies have frequently described the church as family. Yet these conversations seldom combine close exegesis of Mark 3:31–35 with a critical assessment of how Jesus' non-genealogical kinship both resonates with and judges African patterns of family, clan, and ecclesial belonging. This study addresses that intersection.[3][4]

The purpose of the study is therefore to interpret Jesus' redefinition of family in Mark 3:31–35 within its immediate Markan context and to explore its implications for Christian community in selected African contexts. Its central argument is that Jesus neither repudiates biological family nor simply spiritualises kinship. He constitutes a new family in which doing the will of God becomes the decisive criterion of belonging. This spiritual kinship affirms solidarity and mutual responsibility but challenges family, ethnic, or clan loyalties whenever they become exclusionary, preferential, or resistant to the demands of the gospel.

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[2]Justin S. Ukpong, "Developments in Biblical Interpretation in Africa: Historical and Hermeneutical Directions," Neotestamentica 29, no. 2 (1995): 189–203; Gerald O. West, Contextual Bible Study (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 1993), 7–18; Elizabeth Mburu, African Hermeneutics (Plateau State, Nigeria: Africa Christian Textbooks / Langham Publishing, 2019).

[3]Teresa Okure, "Mark 3:19b–21: A Study on the Charge of Fanaticism Against Jesus," in The Bible in African Christianity: Essays in Biblical Theology, ed. Hannah W. Kinoti and John M. Waliggo (Nairobi: Acton Publishers, 1997), 89–104; John S. Pobee, Toward an African Theology (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1979), 49–56; Bénézet Bujo, African Theology in Its Social Context (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1992), 115–122.

[4]Stephen C. Barton, Discipleship and Family Ties in Mark and Matthew (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 57–88; Jeremy D. Otten, "The Devil in the Details: Beelzebul and Social Identity Complexity in Mark 3:20–35," Religions 14, no. 8 (2023): 1070, https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14081070.

Scholarly Perspectives (Literature Review)

Markan Family, Social Identity, and Fictive Kinship

Studies of Mark commonly recognise family as a major arena in which discipleship is tested. Stephen C. Barton argues that Mark and Matthew portray discipleship as generating a new social identity that can relativise conventional family claims. Joel Marcus, R. T. France, and Adela Yarbro Collins likewise read Mark 3:31–35 as more than a domestic episode: the scene identifies the community gathered around Jesus as a new form of belonging defined by response to God. Such readings are often described through the social-scientific category of fictive or surrogate kinship, in which non-biological members assume family-like identity, solidarity, and obligations.[5]

Recent scholarship sharpens the narrative dimension of this claim. Otten reads Mark 3:20–35 as a coherent conflict sequence in which Jesus' family and the Jerusalem scribes represent competing assessments of his identity and mission. Jesus' final identification of those who do God's will as his family consequently redraws ingroup and outgroup boundaries rather than merely offering sentimental family language. This insight is important for the present study because it links verses 31–35 to the preceding accusation of madness (3:20–21) and the Beelzebul controversy (3:22–30). The passage forms a theological statement about allegiance, identity, and the community created around Jesus.[6]

African Biblical Hermeneutics

African biblical hermeneutics emerged from the conviction that biblical interpretation is never socially disembodied. Ukpong emphasises the interaction between biblical texts and African contexts, while West foregrounds reading with communities whose social locations shape the questions brought to Scripture. Elizabeth Mburu's intercultural model adds a structured concern for historical-cultural, literary, theological, and African contextual dimensions, and Aloo Mojola's recent reassessment of African hermeneutics

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[5]Barton, Discipleship and Family Ties, 57–88; Joel Marcus, Mark 1–8: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary, Anchor Yale Bible 27 (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000), 270–286; R. T. France, The Gospel of Mark: A Commentary on the Greek Text (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), 168–180; Adela Yarbro Collins, Mark: A Commentary (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 236–240.

[6]Otten, "Devil in the Details," 1070.

calls for approaches that are transformative rather than merely backward-looking. Together, these perspectives support contextual interpretation while resisting the notion that culture may simply determine the text's meaning.[7]

For this study, African context functions as a dialogical and applicational horizon after careful attention to Mark's own literary and theological argument. The contextual question is therefore not, "How can Mark 3:31–35 be made to endorse African kinship?" but, "What does Mark's reconstituted family affirm, reorder, and critique when heard within African Christian communities shaped by strong kinship obligations?" This formulation keeps exegesis and contextual appropriation in a mutually accountable relationship.

African Kinship, Personhood, and Communal Identity

African accounts of personhood and kinship are themselves diverse. Mbiti's comparative East African work famously stresses corporate belonging; Gyekye, writing from Akan philosophical traditions, develops a moderate communitarianism that protects both communal responsibility and individual agency; Bénézet Bujo's African moral theology treats community as a crucial context of dignity and ethical formation; and John S. Pobee places kinship structures near the centre of African theological reflection. These voices cannot stand for every African society, but they represent influential intellectual traditions in which family and community are central to human identity.[8]

Such traditions reveal both a point of resonance and a potential tension with Mark 3:31–35. Strong kinship networks can sustain care, memory, hospitality, and mutual obligation. Yet when kinship becomes the ultimate criterion of loyalty or access, it can also produce exclusion, clannishness, ethnic preference, or nepotism. Jesus' criterion—doing the will of God—therefore invites neither an anti-family individualism nor an uncritical baptism of inherited kinship. It provides a theological standard by which communal bonds are affirmed, reordered, and, where necessary, challenged.

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[7]Ukpong, "Developments in Biblical Interpretation," 189–203; West, Contextual Bible Study, 7–18; Mburu, African Hermeneutics; Aloo O. Mojola, "African Biblical Hermeneutics in a State of Flux—Towards Refocusing Its Trajectory," Verbum et Ecclesia 43, no. 1 (2022): a2507, https://doi.org/10.4102/ve.v43i1.2507.

[8]Mbiti, African Religions and Philosophy, 106–108; Gyekye, Tradition and Modernity, 35–52; Bujo, African Theology in Its Social Context, 27–34; Pobee, Toward an African Theology, 49–56.

Christian Community and the Church-as-Family Model

The church-as-family model has long appealed to African ecclesiology because it resonates with relational understandings of belonging and responsibility. Recent reflection continues to retrieve the model while warning against particularism and ethnocentrism. Asifiwe Janvier, for example, presents the church as God's family as a participatory and synodal model precisely because it can resist clericalism, particularism, and ethnocentric exclusion. Nigerian research on Christian family life likewise underlines the influence of domestic relational patterns on wider church vitality and witness.[9][10]

Within Seventh-day Adventist reflection, Ellen G. White's account of the Christian home may function as a secondary denominational conversation partner rather than an exegetical authority over Mark. Her emphasis on self-giving family influence supports the practical dimension of spiritual kinship without determining the meaning of Mark 3:31–35. The methodological priority remains the Markan text; ecclesiological and denominational sources assist in constructive appropriation.[11]

Research Gap and Contribution

The literature thus supplies strong work on Markan discipleship and family, increasingly sophisticated African hermeneutical models, influential accounts of African communality, and substantial church-as-family theology. What remains underdeveloped is a textually controlled account of how Mark 3:31–35 itself may interrogate African Christian kinship. Okure's African reading engages the family's earlier response to Jesus; Otten's recent analysis illuminates identity boundaries in Mark 3:20–35 but is not an African contextual appropriation; and African church-as-family models typically begin with ecclesiology rather than sustained exegesis of Mark 3:31–35. This study brings these conversations together and proposes a threefold contextual grammar: African kinship values may be

[9]Caleb Abiodun Adeleye, Oluwasegun Peter Aluko, Oluwatoyin Dorcas Peter, and Emmanuel Olurokan Olowoyeye, "Conflict Resolution in Christian Homes and the Growth of Christianity in Contemporary Nigeria," Journal of Religious Studies 17 (2024): 77–97, esp. 90–94.
[10]Asifiwe Janvier, "The Church as God's Family: An African Model of Synodality," Hekima Review 67 (2023), https://doi.org/10.21217/wafnde84.
[11]Ellen G. White, The Adventist Home (Nashville, TN: Southern Publishing Association, 1952), 15–18.

affirmed where they embody solidarity and care, *reordered* where biological loyalty claims ultimacy, and *critiqued* where kinship produces exclusion or injustice.

Methodology: Historical-Literary Exegesis and African Contextual Dialogue

The study uses historical-literary and theological exegesis as its primary method, followed by an African-hermeneutical contextual dialogue. This sequencing is deliberate. The African context identifies the questions that make the passage urgent, but the immediate Markan narrative and wording provide the controlling basis for the central claim. The study is exegetical-theological and contextual; it is not an ethnographic description of all African societies.

The analysis proceeds in four steps. First, it reads Mark 3:31–35 within the literary arrangement of Mark 3:20–35, paying particular attention to the family's concern in 3:20–21, the scribal accusation in 3:22–30, and the return of the family in 3:31–35. Second, it examines selected Greek expressions whose syntax and lexical force affect the interpretation, especially the spatial contrast between those "outside" and those seated "around" Jesus and the indefinite relative construction in 3:35. Third, it considers the theological function of the scene within Mark's presentation of discipleship, allegiance, and community. Fourth, the exegetical findings are brought into dialogue with selected African accounts of kinship, personhood, and ecclesial family. The contextual evaluation asks whether a cultural practice is affirmed, reordered, or challenged by Mark's criterion of doing the will of God.[12]

Canonical texts outside Mark are used only as secondary dialogue partners after the Markan argument has been established. They are not allowed to replace close exegesis of Mark 3:31–35. This preserves the disciplinary focus of the study while permitting a limited theological synthesis concerning the household of faith and Christian unity.

[12]Mburu, African Hermeneutics; Ukpong, "Developments in Biblical Interpretation," 189–203.

Analysis and Discussion

Mark 3:31–35 within the Narrative of Mark 3:20–35

Mark 3:31–35 closes a carefully arranged narrative sequence. In 3:20–21, Jesus' own people hear of the crowds and attempt to restrain him, saying that he is "out of his mind." In 3:22–30, scribes from Jerusalem offer a more hostile diagnosis: Jesus casts out demons by Beelzebul. Mark then returns to Jesus' mother and brothers in 3:31–35. The effect is a narrative intercalation in which two forms of misrecognition surround Jesus' teaching about his true family. Family proximity and religious status do not guarantee understanding; the decisive issue is alignment with God's will.[13]

The scene itself intensifies this contrast spatially. Jesus' mother and brothers are *ἔξω* (outside), while a crowd is seated *περὶ αὐτὸν* and, in verse 34, *κύκλῳ* (around him). The spatial language should not be over-allegorised, but Mark uses it narratively to make visible the question of who actually belongs within the circle of Jesus. Biological kin are physically near yet outside the immediate circle; those listening to Jesus are positioned around him. The subsequent declaration interprets the scene theologically.

Jesus asks, *Τίς ἐστιν ἡ μήτηρ μου καὶ οἱ ἀδελφοί μου;*—"Who are my mother and my brothers?" (3:33). After looking at those seated around him, he identifies them as his mother and brothers and then gives the criterion in verse 35: *ὃς ἂν ποιήσῃ τὸ θέλημα τοῦ θεοῦ, οὗτος ἀδελφός μου καὶ ἀδελφὴ καὶ μήτηρ ἐστίν*—"whoever does the will of God, this one is my brother and sister and mother." The construction [14]*ὃς ἂν* with the subjunctive *ποιήσῃ* is open-ended: the kinship invitation is not limited by genealogy, ethnicity, status, or prior household membership. The defining action is doing God's will.

This grammatical openness matters. Jesus does not replace one closed kinship group with another hereditary group. The new family is constituted by obedient response to God. The terms *ἀδελφός*, *ἀδελφή*, and *μήτηρ* also move beyond the language of teacher and pupils. They describe a community of belonging with moral and relational obligations. Mark's

[13]Otten, "Devil in the Details," 1070; France, Gospel of Mark, 168–180; Collins, Mark, 236–240.
[14]Eberhard Nestle et al., eds., Novum Testamentum Graece, 28th ed. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2012), Mark 3:33–35. See also France, Gospel of Mark, 176–180.

theology of discipleship therefore has a social form: to belong to Jesus is to be incorporated into a community in which persons who were not natural kin become family.

Redefinition, Not Rejection, of Biological Family

The force of Jesus' statement should not be exaggerated into hostility toward biological family. Mark 7:9–13 explicitly condemns a religious manoeuvre that permits neglect of father and mother. The Gospel therefore does not permit Mark 3:31–35 to become a warrant for family irresponsibility. What is displaced is not the value of natural kinship but its claim to ultimate priority. Biological ties cannot define the boundaries of God's people or exempt family loyalty from obedience to God.

This distinction is important because the immediate context contains genuine tension between Jesus and his relatives. Mark 3:20–21 does not idealise natural family; it shows that those closest to Jesus can misunderstand his mission. Yet the response in 3:31–35 is not revenge or estrangement. Jesus transforms the question of kinship by locating family identity within the will of God. Natural family is thereby relativised without being despised.

Only after this Markan claim is established is a limited canonical dialogue useful. The New Testament later speaks of believers as members of the household of God (Eph. 2:19) and insists that inherited social distinctions cannot determine standing in Christ (Gal. 3:28). These texts do not supply the meaning of Mark 3, but they demonstrate that Mark's reconstituted family coheres with a wider early Christian tendency to describe salvation and discipleship in kinship language.[15]

4.3 African Hermeneutical Engagement: Resonance and Critique

The contextual significance of this reading becomes clearer when placed alongside influential African understandings of relational identity. Mbiti's statement on corporate identity arises from a comparative account of African religious life, while Gyekye's moderate communitarianism is rooted more specifically in Akan philosophical reflection.

[15]Andrew T. Lincoln, Ephesians, Word Biblical Commentary 42 (Dallas: Word Books, 1990), 148–150; F. F. Bruce, The Epistle to the Galatians: A Commentary on the Greek Text (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1982), 187–190.

Bujo develops a theological account of community from African moral traditions. These perspectives should not be collapsed into a single "African worldview," but they show why family and social belonging remain powerful hermeneutical categories in many African Christian settings.[16]

Mark 3:31–35 first *affirms* elements of this relational emphasis. Jesus' discipleship is not a privatised spirituality. The people around him become brothers, sisters, and mothers. Such language resonates with values of mutual care, hospitality, shared responsibility, and interdependence. An African church need not become more individualistic in order to be more biblical; the passage itself imagines discipleship communally.

Second, the passage *reorders* kinship. The criterion of belonging is not family name, clan, ancestry, ethnicity, or reciprocal obligation but doing the will of God. This means that even good natural loyalties are penultimate. The question for Christian communities is therefore whether existing kinship practices serve or obstruct the kind of obedience Jesus identifies. Where family solidarity becomes a reason to excuse wrongdoing, monopolise opportunities, or protect insiders at the expense of justice, the logic of Mark 3:35 places that solidarity under judgement.

Third, the passage *critiques* exclusionary forms of belonging. The indefinite "whoever" in verse 35 opens the family of Jesus beyond inherited descent. The church cannot therefore reproduce the boundaries of clan or ethnicity and still claim to embody Jesus' new family. Otten's social-identity reading of Mark 3:20–35 reinforces this point: Jesus redraws identity boundaries around those aligned with God's will rather than around conventional status claims. The contextual implication follows directly from the exegesis: Christian kinship must be wider than natural kinship because Jesus' own criterion is wider than descent.[17]

Implications for Christian Community in African Contexts

The first implication concerns ecclesial identity. Churches should treat spiritual kinship as a real social vocation rather than a devotional metaphor. If believers are truly brothers and

[16]Mbiti, African Religions and Philosophy, 106–108; Gyekye, Tradition and Modernity, 35–52; Bujo, African Theology in Its Social Context, 27–34.
[17]Otten, "Devil in the Details," 1070.

sisters around Christ, fellowship must include practical care, truthful accountability, hospitality, and responsibility for members who may lack strong biological support. The church-as-family model becomes credible only when its relational obligations cross inherited social boundaries.

A second implication concerns ethnic and clan preference. Many African churches minister in societies where ethnicity and extended-family networks remain legitimate sources of identity and support. Mark 3:35 does not require the erasure of such identities. It does, however, deny them the right to determine who receives Christian recognition, care, leadership opportunity, or moral consideration. The church must therefore cultivate patterns of fellowship that make visible a belonging deeper than lineage.

A third implication is constructive and institutional. Because Jesus' new family is defined by doing God's will rather than by blood, church leadership and communal practices should be examined for nepotism, favouritism, and inherited privilege. This application extends beyond the immediate household scene, but it follows from the passage's boundary-redrawing logic and is strengthened by ecclesiological accounts that present the church as God's family in opposition to particularism and ethnocentrism. Leadership criteria should therefore foreground character, calling, competence, justice, and faithfulness rather than kinship access.[18]

A fourth implication concerns cultural discernment. African languages, naming practices, family histories, communal celebrations, respect for elders, and mutual-aid networks need not be abandoned. The more precise question is whether these practices can be lived under the lordship of Christ and extended beyond the closed circle of natural kin. In this sense, Jesus' redefinition of family does not demand cultural homelessness; it demands that every cultural loyalty become accountable to the will of God.

Finally, the passage offers a public witness in divided societies. Christian communities that intentionally cross ethnic, class, generational, and family boundaries enact the new kinship they proclaim. Miroslav Volf's account of Christian identity as moving from exclusion

[18]Janvier, "Church as God's Family"; Miroslav Volf, Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 29–36.

toward embrace provides a useful theological articulation of this implication, while African church-as-family reflection adds a locally resonant ecclesiological vocabulary. The result is not the loss of difference but a form of belonging in which difference no longer controls access to fellowship.[19]

Conclusion

Mark 3:31–35 presents more than a memorable statement about Jesus' relatives. Read within Mark 3:20–35, the passage concludes a narrative in which both familial and religious proximity fail to guarantee recognition of Jesus. By identifying whoever does the will of God as his brother, sister, and mother, Jesus reconstitutes family around obedient discipleship. The Greek formulation is deliberately open-ended, and the spatial contrast between those outside and those gathered around Jesus makes the new criterion of belonging narratively visible.

For African Christian interpretation, this claim should neither be reduced to an attack on culture nor absorbed into an uncritical celebration of communality. Influential African traditions rightly highlight relational identity, solidarity, and mutual responsibility, but African societies and philosophies are diverse and cannot be treated as a single kinship system. Mark 3:35 provides a theological norm within that diversity: communal practices may be affirmed where they embody care, reordered where natural loyalty claims ultimacy, and challenged where kinship produces exclusion, favouritism, or injustice.

The study's principal contribution is therefore a model of contextual appropriation in which exegesis controls the central claim while African realities identify the questions and fields of application. The church becomes Jesus' family not simply by adopting family language but by embodying the obedience, openness, mutual responsibility, and reordered loyalties implied by that language. Biological family remains a gift and responsibility, but it is no longer the ultimate boundary of belonging. In Christ, the family of God is wider than blood ties because its membership is defined by faithful response to God's will.

[19]Volf, Exclusion and Embrace, 29–36; Janvier, "Church as God's Family."

Recommendations

1. Teach Spiritual Kinship as a Concrete Ecclesial Identity

Churches should teach Mark 3:31–35 as a vision of real communal belonging, not merely as a metaphor. Congregations should connect the language of brother, sister, and mother with practical duties of care, accountability, hospitality, and discipleship.

2. Audit Kinship-Based Exclusion and Favouritism

Church boards, institutions, and ministries should periodically examine whether family, clan, ethnic, or patronage networks shape leadership selection, access to opportunities, discipline, or distribution of care in ways that conflict with the open criterion of Mark 3:35.

3. Build Cross-Boundary Practices of Fellowship

Congregations should create intentional structures—small groups, mentoring relationships, care teams, and shared service projects—that bring believers across ethnic, linguistic, generational, and class boundaries into sustained relationships rather than occasional symbolic unity.

4. Protect the Value of Biological Family while Reordering Its Claims

Pastoral teaching should avoid presenting spiritual kinship as an excuse for neglecting parents, spouses, children, or extended-family responsibilities. The aim is not family abandonment but the subordination of every family loyalty to the will of God.

5. Extend Research into Specific African Contexts

Future studies should test the argument within particular cultural settings rather than speaking of "Africa" generically. Comparative work among Akan, Yoruba, Igbo, East African, Southern African, and other kinship traditions could show more precisely how Mark 3:31–35 affirms, reorders, or critiques distinct practices of belonging.

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CHAPTER 12

SPIRITUAL WARFARE IN 2 CORINTHIANS 10:3–5 AND YORUBA TRADITIONAL RELIGION IN SOUTHWESTERN NIGERIA: A COMPARATIVE THEOLOGICAL STUDY

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Abstract

This study examines the concept of spiritual warfare in 2 Corinthians 10:3–5 in comparison with its understanding in Yoruba traditional religion in Southwestern Nigeria. It investigates how the two religious frameworks conceptualize spiritual conflict and the means by which such conflict is addressed. Employing a comparative theological method, the study undertakes an exegetical analysis of 2 Corinthians 10:3–5 and engages relevant literature on Yoruba traditional religious beliefs and practices. The comparison is organized around four categories: the nature of spiritual conflict, the agents and forces involved, the means or practices employed in confronting spiritual opposition, and the source and purpose of spiritual authority. These categories are appropriate because they provide corresponding points through which the two religious frameworks can be compared without assuming that their theological claims or practices are identical. The study finds that both frameworks acknowledge realities beyond the merely physical and recognize their significance for human experience. However, important differences emerge in their interpretation and response to spiritual conflict. Yoruba traditional religion operates within a cosmology involving spiritual beings, metaphysical forces, ritual mediation, and practices directed toward maintaining or restoring spiritual and communal equilibrium. In contrast, Paul presents spiritual warfare in 2 Corinthians 10:3–5 as a conflict fought with divinely empowered, non-physical weapons directed particularly against arguments, pretensions, and patterns of thought opposed to the knowledge of God. The study concludes that, despite limited points of conceptual correspondence, the two frameworks differ substantially in their understanding of spiritual agency, mediation, authority, and the means of confronting spiritual opposition. These differences provide an important basis for contextual Christian theological reflection on spiritual warfare in Southwestern Nigeria.

Keywords: *Spiritual warfare; 2 Corinthians 10:3–5; Yoruba traditional religion; comparative theology; Southwestern Nigeria; spiritual authority.*

INTRODUCTION

The concept of spiritual warfare is a major theological theme in both Pauline writings and, comparatively, in African Traditional religious consciousness. In Paul's theological worldview, spiritual warfare is identified as man's struggles against principalities and powers (Rom 8:38, Eph 3:10, Col 1:16, Tit 3:1), elements of the world (Gal 4:3), schemes of the devil (Eph 6:11), demons (1 Cor 10:20), thrones (Col 1:16), flesh and blood and spiritual forces in high places (Eph 6:12), ruler of the authority in the air (Eph 2:2) lordship (Eph 1:21) and spirit that works in the children of disobedience (Eph 2:2). At the same time, especially among the Yoruba Tradition Religion of South-West Nigeria, it is often believed that man has an enemy to struggle with such as evil spirit (*emi esu),* witch (*aje*), and sorcerer (*osho*), which gave rise to the saying that 'it is only a madman who does not have an enemy.' They believe that physical combat cannot in any way solve the spiritual battles; thus, there is a need to 'go-spiritual' when dealing with those issues.[1] However, Christianity, especially among the Pentecostals, has developed a unique intersection of both the biblical and the indigenous cosmologies. Therefore, there is a hybrid of the above two theologies regarding the concepts of spiritual warfare in modern Christian dialogues, which need to be evaluated.

This paper focuses on 2 Cor 10:3–5, a key Pauline text on spiritual warfare, and compares it with the Yoruba traditional religious understanding of spiritual warfare. It seeks to respond to key concerns, such as identifying the nature and roles of the spiritual warfare concept in both Paul's 2 Cor 10:3-5 and in the Yoruba traditional religious worlds. It tends to examine the theological implications of this concept in contemporary Christianity. It is a documentary research work based on scholarly discussions of the topic, which includes the usage of primary biblical resources, a comparative theological methodology combined with the use of historical-grammatical biblical exegesis. The exegetical process consists of a close reading of biblical texts informed by historical context, grammar, semantics, syntax, historical and cultural backgrounds, genre, literary context, text structure, and the theology of warfare concepts. All of these explain the nature, function, and relationship of Paul's

[1]Oluwaseun Funmi Abilawon, "Ogun Laye: The Yoruba Response to Ontological and Cosmological Warfare and the Use of Violent Prayer." *Issues in Language and Literary Studies*, vol. 8 no. 1(2022); 361.

usage of the concepts in 2 Cor 10:3-5. The comparative approach follows the model suggested by David Tracy, emphasising both similarity and difference without collapsing distinct traditions into artificial equivalence.[2]

Understanding the Background to 2 Corinthians 10

The consensus among scholars that 2 Corinthians was written by Paul, with Timothy as a witness and co-sender of the letter, there are still pockets of scholarly debate regarding the letter's place among those suspected of having been sent earlier to the Corinthian church. However, the writings of early church Fathers such as Polycarp (ca. AD 155), Irenaeus (ca. AD 185), Clement of Alexandra (ca. AD 200), and Tertullian (ca. AD 210) affirmed Paul's authorship by using the book authoritatively.[3] According to evidence from the ancient Mediterranean, Paul's writing style aligned with the social and rhetorical conventions of correspondence in the ancient world. Therefore, the Corinthians were familiar with the art of rhetorical argumentation in all forms of social, legal, political and entertainment engagements; thus, they found Paul's letter more compelling to their understanding than the speech of his physical presence. When the rhetorical devices employed by Paul are observed and examined, a comprehensive understanding of his correspondence, especially his two letters to the Corinthians, is achieved, and the device becomes a necessary prerequisite for translating Pauline ideas.[4]

The second letter to the Corinthians has been described as an apologetic letter of self-commendation, written in response to controversies generated by certain apostolic opponents. Although in Paul's earlier letter to the Corinthian Church a non-prominent faction not aligned with his ministry was noticeable (1 Cor. 1:12; 3:4-5), in his second letter it became clear that certain Jewish Christians, possibly not originally from the Corinthian fold, were offering a competing model of apostleship, distinct from Paul's theological model, thereby leading to a major power struggle (2 Cor 10: 9-12, 18; 11:5-15, 12–15, 12:13–23). Paul addresses these opposing preachers more subtly in the first seven chapters

[2] David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination* (New York: Crossroad, 1981), 405.
[3] Angel Manuel Rodriguez, ed., "2 Corinthians" in *Andrews Bible Commentary* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2024), 1657.
[4] Craig Keener, *1-2 Corinthians – NCBC* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 4.

of this letter by presenting an apologetic defence of his ministry. He rebukes their commercialisation of the gospel (2:17) and their self-commendation rhetoric (3:1, 5:12), among other issues addressed to the Corinthian believers (3:7-11). These rivals, though Hellenistic Jews, have been variously identified as Gnostics, pneumatics, legalists, or combinations of these. It has been suggested that they possessed rhetorical or charismatic superiority over Paul, enabling them to influence followers to turn away from Paul (11:6). However, Paul believes in the superiority of his gospel, grounded in the proclamation of Christ's suffering and a theology that values God's power in brokenness (11:4).[5]

Examining 2 Corinthians 10:3-5

In 2 Cor 10:3-6, Paul highlights a spiritual power concept as he addresses the opposing apostles, "For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh. For the weapons of our warfare *are* not carnal but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ, and being ready to punish all disobedience when your obedience is fulfilled." This passage falls within a larger pericope in 2 Corinthians 10-13 and is immediately situated in 10:1-11, where he speaks about applying spiritual authority and weapons to defeat human sophistries.

A Review

Scholars analyze Paul's use of military and warfare imagery in 2 Corinthians 10:3–6 through various theological, historical, and practical lenses. Some writers examined the text through the spiritual and eschatological dimensions, while others emphasised the cultural context of ancient military strategy in Paul's defense of his apostolic authority.

Martin Kowalski argues that Paul's use of warfare imagery in 2 Corinthians 10:3–6 is rooted in Jewish apocalyptic and eschatological traditions, linking the concept of holy war to Old Testament literature. He suggests that Paul applies this motif both as a present rhetorical conflict with opponents in Corinth and as a cosmic final battle between Christ and the devil. He also sees this concept as illustrative of the present spiritual battle with

[5] Ibid., 143-146.

enemies that spans generations. Just as God allowed Israel to fight certain wars in the Old Testament without human weapons, except through the weapons of trust, faith, and prayer (c.f. 2 Chron 20:20, Judge 5:1-10).[6] Craig Keener's use of military imagery is not unique in Paul's Corinthian correspondence; it is evident in passages like 2:14, 6:7, and 1 Corinthians 9:7, and is frequently seen elsewhere (Rom 13:12; 1 Thess 5:8; cf. Phil 2:25; Phlm 2; Eph 6:10–20). Since obstacles oppose "the knowledge of God," which also features in God's (military) triumphal procession (2:14) through the gospel (4:6), Paul might be emphasizing understanding God's character through the message of the cross. The "proud" obstacles contrast with Christ's meekness (10:1), highlighting the attitude of Paul's rivals (10:2).[7] Murray Harris believes that the 2 Cor 10:3-6 passage focuses on spiritual forces battling the church at Corinth, rather than a physical struggle with conspirators. He also believes that the military metaphor was drawn from a technical vocabulary of siege warfare.[8] Paul Barnett suggests that Paul's accusers were 'lofty and super spiritual,' aiming to demean him in his ministry so that theirs could be elevated among the Corinthian believers. He points out that Paul used military imagery, a metaphor aligning logically with military processes from start to finish. That explains that the weapon of warfare Paul refers to is the disciplinary ministry from his second visit and the 'severe letter' that led to a godly sorrow in their hearts. He concludes that this passage encourages ministers to let the gospel's power make their ministry effective against any distractions.[9] Raymond Collins concurred that Paul's use of military imagery reflects the styles found in Cynic and Stoic writings of his era. He pointed out that this differs from his general use of warfare themes rather than direct military images. Collins argued that his opponents lack proper knowledge of God, making it his duty to eliminate any barriers they have created to the true understanding of God.[10] Charles Talbert suggests that Paul was likely accused of lacking spiritual power (2 Cor 10:2b) and did not address the accusation during his visit.

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[6] Martin Kowalski, "Holy War in Corinth: The Apocalyptic Background of Paul's Struggle against Opponents in 2 Cor 10:3–6.
[7] Craig Keener, *1-2 Corinthians – NCBC*, 217.
[8] Murray J. Harris, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B Eerdmans, 2005), 851.
[9] Paul Barnett, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1997), 631-632.
[10] Raymond F. Collins, *Second Corinthians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic Publisher, 2013), 199.

His defence, however, was to demonstrate divine power by addressing spiritual issues, such as demolishing strongholds, capturing every thought for Christ, and punishing resistance through church discipline for improper conduct. Talbert notes that Paul delayed implementing discipline until he observed obedience to Christ's gospel within the Corinthian community. Additionally, he points out that Paul's use of military imagery aligned with the cultural context of his time.[11] Manuel Bagalawis suggested that Paul probably did not use military metaphor in this passage for a specific reason. Instead, he emphasises that Paul often refers to himself as a soldier, while his co-workers are called fellow soldiers (Phil 2:25). For Bagalawis, understanding the origin of this term may be less important. He views the weapon Paul employed against the conspirators as the power of God, which is revealed through the proclamation of the gospel.[12] C.R. Swindoll suggests that Paul's method of freeing the Corinthian believers from the deception of the conspirators was primarily spiritual rather than physical. He reasoned that Paul aimed to win their loyalty in their minds and hearts, leading them to obey the knowledge of Christ. Through this approach, the Corinthian church could be liberated from spiritual burdens and reflect God's glorious image.[13] Victor P. Furnish suggests that Paul employed a metaphor in the pericope, depicting his "apostolate as if it were Christ's army engaged in a battle. Its weapons are so powerful that they can overcome any defenses, making it invincible in executing the divine plan for salvation." He compares the "weapon' in this context to the "weapon of righteousness' in 6:7. Furnish contends that Paul used this popular anti-Sophist imagery to undermine false reasoning, which acts as strongholds, thereby enabling the gospel's truth to reach the believers in Corinth.[14]

Finally, Frank Matera notes that Paul's use of the warfare metaphor in 2 Cor 10:3-6 parallels its earlier mention in 2:14. In this context, Paul describes it as a prisoner in a victorious procession, with Jesus depicted as the Conqueror and Paul as the prisoner

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[11] Charles H. Talbert, *Reading Corinthians: A Literary and Documentary Commentary,* (Macon, Georgia: Smyth and Helwys Publishing, 2002)
[12] Manuel A. Bagalawis, "Ministry as Warfare: An Exegesis of 2 Corinthians 10:2b-6," 11-12, 18.
[13] Charles R. Swindoll, *New Testament Commentary: 1 & 2 Corinthians* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2017), 583-584.
[14] Victor Paul Furnish, *II Corinthians: The Anchor Bible, Vol. 32A* (New York, NY: Doubleday & Co, 1984), 446

submitting to Christ's authority. He explains that the "weapon" (v.4) used against conspirators is the gospel of Christ, intended to demolish "strongholds," which he interprets as the opponents' "false and misleading reasonings or sophistries" against his gospel. Matera emphasises that three military terms—"tears down," "captures," and "stands ready to punish'—are akin to stages of Roman military operations described in 1 Macc 8:9-10, illustrating Roman strategies against the Greeks.[15]

Spiritual Warfare in 2 Cor 10:3-6

In Oluseun A. Akinpelu's exegetical work[16] on the 2 Cor 10:3-6 passage, he identified the immediate context of the text as 10:1-6, which was structurally divided into three major parts. In the first part, Paul pleaded twice (I, Paul, beseech you… [2 Cor 10:1a]; I beseech you…[10:2a]) with the Corinthian believers, drawing the church's attention to the importance of what he intended to communicate and demonstrating an emotional gesture toward the matter at hand. This includes pleading in the gentleness of Jesus and asking that they allow him to remain gentle, not to prove otherwise when he visits the church in person. Secondly, the opposing teachers of the gospel had accused him of being a weakling, especially when he faced the people in person (verse 1b), and of being a man walking in the flesh rather than in the spirit (verse 2b). Instead, he proves strong and bold in his absence through his letters, and he readily agrees with them that he walks in the flesh physically, performing his mandate (verse 3a). The third major structural part is where Paul dwells on using spiritual weaponry as the source of his strength in defeating the threat of spiritual challenge in physical form (verses 3b-6).

Therefore, military-like language appears in verses 3 to 6, using warfare metaphors to depict the spiritual struggle between believers and principalities and powers. These vocabularies include the following: in verse 4, Paul uses *ὅπλα* (siege engines), *καθαίρεσις* (demolition), *ὀχυρώματα* (strongholds, fortresses, or fortified vantage points), and *λογισμοί* (bastions of argumentation). In verse 5, he uses *ὕψωμα* (rampart, battlement), *ὕψωμα*

[15] Frank J. Matera, *II Corinthians: A Commentary*, 223-224.
[16] Oluseun A. Akinpelu, et al., "An Analytical Study of the Concept of Spiritual Warfare in 2 Corinthians 10:3-6 and Ephesians 6:12-18, *African Journal of Biblical Studies*, vol. xxxix, No. 1& 2 (April & Oct 2024), 239- 240.

ἐπαιρόμενον (raised rampart), *αἰχμαλωτίζω* (take prisoner, carry off into captivity), *νόημα* (battle-plan, project, device, opposing design), and *ὑπακοή* (subjection, submission). In verse 6, he uses *ἐν ἑτοίμῳ ἔχω* (be at the ready, like a soldier on standby), and *παρακοή* (insubordination).[17] Thus, the concept of spiritual warfare is not only actively used by Paul in 2 Cor 10:3-6, as he illustrates the controversy he encounters with apostate preachers in Corinth, but "the idea of sinister world powers and their subjugation by Christ is built into the very fabric of Paul's thought, and some mention of them is found in every epistle except Philemon."[18]

In highlighting the theological implication of the weapon of warfare (verse 4) used to deal with warfare beyond the flesh (v.3b), Akinpelu emphasised the following

> In verse 4, Paul used the same term which has same root word (οπλ); *ὅπλα* (Plural of *ὅπλιον*), translated as "weapons" in 2 Corinthians in the same way it was used in Ephesians 6:11 *πανοπλίαν*, translated "full armor" (*παν* and *οπλια*). Paul metaphorically used the term to denote the instruments of spiritual warfare for engaging the powers behind the physical confrontations with the conspirators. The implication of this is that the "whole armor" in Ephesians is the same "weapons" as described by Paul in 2 Corinthians. This implies that the weapons of warfare are the same either to defeat the principalities, rulers of the darkness of this world and spiritual wickedness, or to silence conspirators (who are agents of spiritual powers) into obedience.[19]

Therefore, the weapons in Paul's spiritual warfare discourse in his second letter to the Corinthians (10:4) were the same as he highlighted in Ephesians 6's "whole armor" weaponry against spiritual forces working against the victory of believers. These spiritual weapons include truth, righteousness (Eph 6:14), the gospel of peace (6:15), faith (6:16), salvation, the word of God (6:17) and prayer (6:18). Paul encourages believers in all

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[17] Murray J. Harris, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text,* 852.
[18] George B. Caird, Principalities and Power: A Study in Pauline Theology (Oxford: Clarendon, 1956), viii.
[19] Ibid., 240.

dispensations to take this warfare seriously, as he pleads at the beginning of the Corinthian pericope (2 Cor.10:1, 2).

Spiritual Warfare in Yoruba African Traditional Religion

Yoruba religious cosmology offers a vital African perspective on beliefs about spiritual powers, supernatural causes, ritual protection, and the ongoing conflict between forces deemed beneficial or harmful to human life. More important is the belief in the existence of invisible spiritual forces, especially malevolent powers. In this belief, as also in many African traditional religions, nothing happens by chance; there is a 'why' to whatever happens to a person, either positively or negatively.[20] Therefore, spiritual warfare, among the Yorubas, is not one single controversy but an ongoing struggle between visible and invisible forces that shape the fate of every human. It is worth noting that in Yoruba religious thought, there is an integrated cosmological order among various personalities, including humans, spirits, ancestors, divinities, and destiny. There, as well, remains the understanding that what happens in the physical realm has a spiritual face, and that events in the spiritual realm must also be reflected in the physical realm.[21] Although African traditional religious beliefs may not frame spiritual warfare in the same way as Christianity, especially in Pauline theological thought, they still encompass concepts such as good and bad spiritual entities, supernatural causes, ritual protection, spiritual vulnerability, divination, healing, witchcraft, sorcery, sacrifice, and the use of spiritual power.

The Yoruba traditional religious belief on spiritual powers is discussed here to provide a comparative framework for this study.

Cosmological Perspective of the Yoruba Religious Beliefs (The Supreme Being)

In the African Traditional religious worldview of the Yoruba of Southwestern Nigeria, there is no dichotomy between the earthly, visible realm and the spiritual, invisible realm. Therefore, aye (the earth), inhabited by humans, is not separated from the spiritual realm, which is inhabited by *Eledumare* (argued to be the Supreme God), *orisa* (divinities), ancestors, and spiritual powers. Although the Yoruba religion has been described as

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[20] Benjamin C. Ray, "Aladura Christianity: A Yoruba Religion," *Journal of Religion in Africa*, Aug., 1993, Vol. 23, Fasc. 3 (Aug., 1993), pp. 266 291 (268).
[21] E. Bọlaji Idowu, *Olódùmarè: God in Yoruba Belief* (London: Longmans, 1962), 18.

polytheistic, scholars such as Bolaji Idowu argue that the Yoruba believe in only one God; thus, they practise a monotheistic religion.[22] Therefore, *Eledumare* is both the creator God and the owner of heaven and earth, and is omnibenevolent, omnipotent, and omniscient, just as Christian theology describes God. According to this belief, while Eledumare is the supreme God, the orisas (such as Obatala, Esu, Orunmila, etc.) are the responsible ministers, empowered to exercise authority and wield power on his behalf.[23] It is believed that the Yoruba divinities wield an 'absolute authority' that is limited and subject to the supreme and absolute power of *Eledumare.*[24] This understanding helps one appreciate the Yoruba's belief in the inseparable nature of their religion from everyday life challenges such as marriage, fertility, success, sickness, prosperity, death, etc.

Hierarchy of Spiritual Powers (Divinities)

The hierarchy of spiritual powers among the Yorubas indicates that not all spiritual powers are on the same plane of power and authority. *Eledumare* (or *Olodumare*) is the Supreme Being. The Orisa occupy a subordinate role within the cosmic order relative to the Supreme Being. Among these, a plethora of divine beings and spiritual powers includes prominent examples such as *Ògún, Ṣàngó, Ọ̀ṣun, Ọ̀rúnmìlà, Èṣù, Ọ̀bàtálá,* and *Yemoja*. These deities each have specific roles in Yoruba religious beliefs. For instance, *Ogun* is closely linked to iron, technology, hunting, warfare, and occupations involving iron. *Ṣàngó* is connected with thunder, lightning, kingship, and justice. *Ọ̀ṣun* is mainly associated with fertility, femininity, water, and social harmony. *Ọ̀rúnmìlà* is deeply tied to *Ifá* divination and the understanding of destiny.[25] The concept of good and bad spiritual power is not straightforwardly linked to these divinities, as they fulfill roles according to responsibilities delegated by the Supreme Being.

The Personalities of the Ancestors

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[22] E. Bolaji Idowu, *God in Nigerian Belief* (Lagos: Federal Ministry of Information, 1963), 9
[23] Benson O. Igboin, "Is Olódùmarè, God in Yoruba Belief, God*?" Kanz Philisophia,* vol.4, no.2 (December 2014), 190.
[24] Ibid., 191.
[25] J. Ọmọṣade Awolalu and P. Adelumo Dopamu, *West African Traditional Religion* (Ibadan: Onibonoje Press & Book Industries, 1979), 71–106

In the Yoruba Religious cosmology, the ancestors constitute another important spiritual power broker. The belief and veneration of the ancestors is premised on the continual living of the dead souls of older generation loved family members, and that they have ascended to a vintage spiritual position in the afterlife thus able to provide protection for their earthly family members from malevolent powers. It is believed that ancestor-hood is conferred, not on all dead persons, but only upon those who made significant contributions to the welfare and made sacrifices to the benefit of their communities while they lived. Two requirements of ancestor-hood is that the ancestor must have descendants and must have grown to an appreciable age before death.

Since the ancestors' presence can still be felt in the community of the living, as a sign of honour and respect, libations and food items are poured at night to show their eternal connection. These ancestors are believed to act as intermediaries between the spiritual world (the deities and divinities) and the world of the living (their families and the community in which they lived). They also serve as protectors of Yoruba traditional morality, which serves as a means of cohesion in the community's social life.[26]

It is believed that ancestors can be either malevolent or benevolent, depending on the crisis affecting their living descendants. Those under an ancestor's guidance are believed to be protected from attacks by sorcerers and witches. Therefore, those who have severed their relationships with such ancestors are prone to misfortune.[27]

Belief in Malevolent Powers

In Yoruba cosmology, the two most feared "phenomena in the theocratic pantheon"[28] are sorcerers and witches. Sorcery, known as *oṣó, òògùn búburú* and *òògùn* is described as the use of evil or bad magic (use of charms, potions, or ritual items) to cause harm or misfortune, whether to avenge a wrong done or merely on purpose. Primary features of a

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[26] Oreoluwa Idris Adesanya, "Ancestral Veneration as a Metaphysical Issue in Yorùbá Culture: Exploring the Spiritual Agency of Social Reconstruction in a Glocal Context," *Agidigbo: ABUAD Journal of the Humanities,* Vol.13, No. 1 (2025); (319-415), 400-401. https://doi.org/10.53982/agidigbo.2025.1301.26-j

[27] Ige, Simeon A, "The Cult of Ancestors in African Traditional Religion," *An Encyclopedia of the Arts,* Vol. 10, 1 (2006), (26-31), 27.

[28] Abilawon Oluwaseun Funmi, "Sorcery and Witchcraft Among the Yoruba: A Philosophical Discourse," *Kwararafa Security Review,* Vol. 3, issue 4 (December 2025); 270-280), 271. ISSN: 3122-072X (Online).

sorcerer are that they act intentionally, born out of jealousy, anger, or revenge. They are often approached by others in some cases to inflict harm, and their practices are often considered destructive.

Witches, called *àjé* or *ẹlẹyẹ*, are described as having innate psychic abilities that are part of their core being, not learned or intentionally manipulated through magic. Usually, they are unaware of their actions because the power is believed to be embedded within them, and these secrets are often hidden from their own knowledge. They are frequently linked to birds and nighttime gatherings, and harming their animals can also affect the witch herself. Both sorcerers and witches are generally seen as anti-social, causing harm, unrest, or spiritual attack on their victims. However, on rare occasions, a witch might use her power to protect loved ones.[29]

The Spiritual Power and Weaponry

The Yoruba concept of spiritual power and the weapons of warfare are connected with ritual activities such as sacrifice, divination, festivals, offerings, prayer, invocation, acts of purification, and the use of religious objects. The ultimate aim of these practices is to restore harmony between these spiritual powers and human beings. So, when a person consults a healer regarding a spiritual problem, the intention is to find out where the individual has defaulted in his relationship, whether with the Supreme Being, any of the deities, ancestors or malevolent powers, and to find a restorative solution whereby the spiritual power could be appeased and a smooth relationship reignited. The essence of these practices in Yoruba cosmology is never merely combative but restorative.

A Comparative Analysis of Spiritual Warfare in Yoruba

Traditional Religion and 2 Corinthians 10:3–6

This section examines the areas of convergence and divergence between the concept of spiritual warfare in Paul's theology (2 Cor 10:3-6) and the African traditional religion of the Yoruba. The spiritual warfare concept should generally be understood to mean that certain unseen forces and powers subject humans to vulnerable situations, requiring them

[29] Ibid., 277.

to employ practices (spiritual weapons) to overcome and protect themselves against these harmful agencies.

Convergence

One area of significant agreement between Paul's concept of spiritual warfare and the Yoruba traditional religion is that both recognise the physical and spiritual spheres of human existence and struggle. Paul accepts the reality of living in the flesh - physical struggles (2 Cor 10:3)- but is unable to deal with the issue except through divine and powerful means (10:4), something beyond the potency of human solutions. The Yoruba traditional religion holds that both *aye* (the present physical world) and *orun* (the heavenly, spiritual sphere) coexist, and that humans cannot live without the interplay between the two realms.

Another is that both recognise conflicting powers and forces that go beyond human knowledge and capability. In Paul's letter, he addresses an issue concerning opponents of God's knowledge (humans), but he recognises that a power beyond human confrontation is responsible for the challenge (10:4). The Yoruba cosmology recognises supernatural powers that could bring misfortune or fortune, such as poverty, sickness, success, fertility, etc.

Also, both worldviews accept the fact that spiritual weapons or resources are needed to counter the effects of these malicious influences. Paul identifies that the weapons are not flesh or carnal but mighty through God (10:4). In essence, he believes in the potency and efficacy of God's power (divine weapons [cf. Eph 6:13-18] such as truth, righteousness, the gospel of peace, faith, salvation, the word of God and prayer) to quell the spiritual powers of darkness. Likewise, in Yoruba cosmology, they recognise the need for spiritual weapons or resources to intervene in matters beyond human capability. These weapons include divination and ritual activities, offerings of sacrifices, prayer, application of medicine, and sacred knowledge. All these serve as sources of intervention as humans seek protection and restoration.

Another area of agreement is that both believe that human actions, behaviour, and thoughts do influence conflicts. They are not necessarily connected to the acts of spiritual forces all

the time. In 2 Cor 10, Paul identifies speculations and every lofty (2 Cor. 10:5 NAS) argument that contradicts obedience to God's word. The traditional religion among the Yoruba holds that human behaviour, moral conduct, and ritual obligations all play a part in spiritual realities. Thus, spiritual conflict encompasses not just supernatural entities but also human thoughts, actions, relationships, and loyalties.

Divergence

There is a significant disagreement between the concept of spiritual warfare in Paul's second letter to the Corinthians and the Yoruba traditional religious worldview. In Paul's theology, the ultimate source of spiritual power is Godhead-centered. This spiritual victory and breakthrough are achieved through God's power and the mediation of Christ, through his sacrifice and the manifestation of the Holy Spirit in individuals' lives (10:5). The source of power in spiritual conflict is a bit complex since it involves *Eledumare* (the Supreme Being), the *orisa* (divinities), invoking the ancestors and *Babalawo* (spiritual specialist) through which layers of spiritual efficacy is achieved.

Secondly, Paul's language in 2 Corinthians 10:3–6 emphasises strongholds, arguments, pretensions, and thoughts that oppose the knowledge of God, and these are brought under Christ's authority. It does not necessarily expose demonic forces, which could be equated with deities or spiritual powers in Yoruba cosmology. While Paul describes abstract entities struggling in an individual's mind, the Yoruba religious worldview often describes concrete entities such as *aje* (witches), *oso* (sorcerers), or *orisa* (deities).

The concept of warfare described in Paul's 2 Cor 10:3-6 was more metaphorical in use, especially as he rhetorically illustrates it, using battle analogies to describe the struggle of the mind against the opponents of the gospel. In essence, he identifies the same controversy as between God and the devil, no matter the form of engagement. The concept of warfare in Yoruba cosmology has often been described through a literal worldview, though it is often expressed not as combative but as focused on restoring individuals' relationship to the spiritual order and authority.

Another important perspective on divergence is that, in Yoruba cosmology, the focus of spiritual warfare was never to identify the victor from the conquered. Rather, it was to

appease or manipulate the spiritual powers through religious practices such as ritual cleansing and the offering of sacrifices. In Paul's theology, Christians' aim is to allow God's authority and power to subdue the influence of powers, whether in abstract form or in concrete spiritual powers that wage war against individuals.

Theological Significance for Mission

There are significant theological lessons from this study for missionary work among the indigenous peoples of southwestern Nigeria. First, it is appealing to see that Paul's theological expressions in 2 Corinthians 10:3-6 regarding spiritual warfare affirm the reality, as in the traditional religion of the Yoruba, that spiritual powers exist alongside the human world. This understanding provides a level playing field for reaching out to indigenous people seeking to understand the Christian faith.

This study highlights Paul's emphasis on arguments, thoughts, and knowledge (2 Cor 10:5), as well as his portrayal of spiritual warfare and the challenges posed by different theological worldviews. It guides Christian missionaries to engage openly with indigenous religious systems that may present contrasting views of God. Paul's method demonstrates how to bring these contradictions under God's ultimate authority and power.

Conclusion

The study of spiritual warfare in both Paul's theological exposition in his second letter to the Corinthians and a comparative analysis with the traditional religious worldview of the Yorubas of Southwestern Nigeria is of missional and theological significance. This work recognises the existence of the human and spiritual realms in the spiritual warfare concept. Both recognise that human existence encompasses realities beyond the physical and that human beings can encounter opposition requiring spiritual responses. Consequently, both provide frameworks in which spiritual conflict, protection, and power have existential significance.

Nevertheless, Paul's concept of spiritual warfare is distinguished by its God-centered, Christological, epistemological, and ethical orientation. The weapons are powerful because they come from God; the objective is the destruction of resistance to the knowledge of God; and the final goal is the obedience of every thought to Christ.

Yoruba Traditional Religion, by contrast, operates within a complex cosmological network of Olódùmarè, *òrìṣà*, ancestors, destiny, spiritual forces, ritual specialists, and forms of spiritual efficacy. Its responses to spiritual danger are correspondingly embedded in divination, ritual, sacrifice, prayer, protection, and restoration.

The most defensible scholarly conclusion is that Yoruba and Pauline spiritual warfare are not identical, but they share similar views on the permeability of the boundary between the visible and invisible worlds. However, they differ significantly in their ontologies, authority frameworks, methods of engaging with the spiritual realm, and their conceptions of ultimate victory.

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CHAPTER 13

GOD OF THE LIVING: AN EXEGETICAL STUDY OF MATTHEW 22:32 AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR AFRICAN ANCESTRAL CONSCIOUSNESS

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Abstract

In selected African Christian contexts, Matthew 22:32 is sometimes cited as though Jesus' declaration that God is "not the God of the dead, but of the living" validates the continuing agency of deceased ancestors. This study argues that such a reading exceeds the purpose and logic of the text. It employs historical-literary and theological exegesis of Matthew 22:23–33, with particular attention to the Greek wording of verses 31–32, the Hebrew and Septuagint forms of Exodus 3:6, and the Synoptic parallels in Mark 12:18–27 and Luke 20:27–40. African Cultural Hermeneutics then functions as an informed contextual dialogue for addressing recurrent ancestral concerns in selected African settings. The study finds that Jesus' argument is fundamentally resurrection-centred: God's continuing covenant identification with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob means that death cannot nullify his promise to them. The text does not establish ancestral mediation, ritual consultation, or the present governance of the living by the dead. The paper distinguishes this direct exegetical conclusion from the wider Adventist canonical-theological synthesis concerning death as unconscious sleep awaiting resurrection, while also engaging interpretations that understand Luke 20:38 to imply conscious intermediate existence. It argues that neither view of the intermediate state provides warrant for ancestral mediation. The paper's constructive contribution is a fourfold distinction between remembrance, honour, mediation, and ritual consultation: Christian faith may preserve truthful remembrance and appropriate honour of forebears while rejecting religious dependence upon the dead. African concerns for kinship, bereavement, continuity, and reassurance are thereby redirected toward God's covenant faithfulness and resurrection hope in Christ.

Keywords: *Matthew 22:32; resurrection; state of the dead; African ancestral consciousness; biblical anthropology; exegesis; African Christianity.*

Introduction

Few issues create greater theological tension in African Christianity than the question of the ancestors. Many African communities do not treat the dead as socially irrelevant. Deceased forebears are often remembered as custodians of family identity, moral order, kinship continuity, and communal belonging. In some African traditional frameworks, such forebears are also believed to bless, protect, punish, mediate, or communicate with the living. These claims are not merely abstract religious ideas. They shape burial practices, naming customs, family obligations, fear of the dead, and ideas of blessing and misfortune.[1]

Christian engagement with these beliefs has not been uniform. Some approaches reject ancestral traditions as incompatible with Christian faith. Others seek points of continuity between ancestral consciousness and biblical ideas of covenant memory, the communion of God's people, and respect for forebears. A more careful approach is needed. African questions should be taken seriously, but they must not control the meaning of Scripture. The biblical text must be read first in its literary, historical, grammatical, and theological setting.

The purpose of this study is to provide an exegetical reading of Matthew 22:23–33, especially verse 32, and to assess its implications for African ancestral consciousness. Its central argument is that Matthew 22:32 establishes the certainty of resurrection rather than the active agency of the dead. The verse neither authorises deceased ancestors to mediate blessings, receive petitions, supervise descendants, nor function as alternative spiritual authorities. Instead, it witnesses to the covenant God whose promise is not defeated by death. The paper therefore distinguishes what Matthew 22:32 directly establishes from the wider canonical-theological account of death and resurrection adopted later in the study.

This study therefore seeks to correct two opposite errors. The first error is the use of Matthew 22:32 to validate ancestral mediation. The second error is the refusal to engage

[1]John S. Mbiti, African Religions and Philosophy, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Heinemann, 1990), 80–90; Laurenti Magesa, African Religion: The Moral Traditions of Abundant Life (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997), 45–53; John A. F. Adeoti, "The Impact of Seventh-day Adventism on Burial Rituals in Yorubaland," Insight Journal of Religious Studies 16 (2022): 132–150.

African ancestral consciousness and its concept. The study affirms that African concern for memory, kinship, and continuity can be discussed theologically. However, such discussion must be disciplined by biblical exegesis, especially the biblical teaching on death, human nature, and resurrection.

The expression "African ancestral consciousness" is used here with deliberate qualification. African societies do not share a single ancestral system, and this study does not make an ethnographic claim about the continent as a whole. It addresses recurrent motifs documented in selected African religious and Christian contexts—especially remembrance of forebears, kinship continuity, perceived ancestral agency, mediation, and fear of post-mortem sanction—and asks how Matthew 22:32 may be interpreted and appropriated in relation to those concerns.

Literature Review

John S. Mbiti remains one of the most influential interpreters of African religious thought. His description of the "living-dead" has shaped many discussions of African ancestor beliefs. For Mbiti, those recently dead but still remembered by name retain a social place in the community. This language has been useful for describing African consciousness of the dead, but it is problematic if it is imported directly into biblical theology. It describes an African religious category; it is not itself a biblical conclusion.[2]

Recent African scholarship has expanded the discussion. Edward Agboada explains that African traditional eschatology often sees death as transition into an ancestral order rather than the end of active relational existence. Luis Cordeiro-Rodrigues and Ada Agada show that ancestors occupy an important place in African philosophy of religion, especially in discussions of God, moral order, and the problem of evil. Titus Kirimi Kibaara also notes that African ritual practices connected with salvation, protection, and evil can influence how African Christians interpret biblical texts. These studies are useful because they show that ancestral consciousness is not only a doctrine about the dead. It is also a social and hermeneutical framework.[3]

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[2]Mbiti, African Religions and Philosophy, 25–32, 80–90.
[3]Edward Agboada, "Eschatology in African Traditional Religion and African Christianity: Implications for Biblical and Theological Scholarship in Africa," E-Journal of Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences 4, no. 5

African Cultural Hermeneutics has rightly argued that the African context matters in interpretation. D. T. Adamo defines African biblical interpretation as a rereading of Scripture from an African perspective in which African socio-cultural realities become a subject of interpretation. Peter O. O. Ottuh and Moses Idemudia also note that Adamo's contribution is important for the development of African Cultural Hermeneutics because it resists readings that ignore African presence, experience, and questions. This insight is useful for the present study. African ancestral consciousness explains why African readers may be drawn to Matthew 22:32 and why the naming of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob matters culturally. Yet African Cultural Hermeneutics must not become cultural projection. It should bring African questions to the text while allowing the text's own literary and theological argument to control the answer.[4]

One focused study that directly connects Matthew 22:32 with ancestors is Surbakti's interpretation of the verse. Surbakti highlights the importance of the Theos patros formula, the language of the God of the fathers, in Jesus' quotation of Exodus 3:6. This insight is valuable because the text names Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as ancestral figures within Israel's covenant story, and it underscores God's faithfulness to his promise to establish their descendants as a nation (Gen 12:1–3; 35:10–12). However, the phrase must be read within Jesus' controversy with the Sadducees. The issue is not whether ancestors function as spiritual agents for the living. The issue is whether the resurrection is real.[5]

Major commentators on Matthew—including France, Luz, and Hagner—read Matthew 22:23–33 as a controversy narrative in which Jesus answers the Sadducean denial of

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(2023): 585–595, https://doi.org/10.38159/ehass.20234538; Luis Cordeiro-Rodrigues and Ada Agada, "African Philosophy of Religion: Concepts of God, Ancestors, and the Problem of Evil," Philosophy Compass 17, no. 8 (2022): e12864, https://doi.org/10.1111/phc3.12864; Titus Kirimi Kibaara, "African Traditional Ritual Expressions of Salvation: Contextualised Biblical Hermeneutic(s) as an Ecclesiological Praxis," European Journal of Philosophy, Culture and Religion 6, no. 1 (2022): 19–29, https://doi.org/10.47672/ejpcr.1040.

[4]David T. Adamo, "What Is African Biblical Hermeneutics?" Black Theology 13, no. 1 (2015): 59–72, https://doi.org/10.1179/1476994815Z.00000000047; Peter O. O. Ottuh and Moses Idemudia, "Navigating Trajectories in African Biblical Studies: D. T. Adamo and the Future of African Cultural Hermeneutics," Ianna Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies 2, no. 1 (2020): 55–64.

[5]Pelita Hati Surbakti, "Menghidupkan Leluhur: Sebuah Penafsiran Terhadap Matius 22:32," GEMA TEOLOGIKA: Jurnal Teologi Kontekstual dan Filsafat Keilahian 4, no. 1 (2019): 1–18, https://doi.org/10.21460/gema.2019.41.414.

resurrection. Their readings differ in detail, but they agree that the passage concerns God's power, Scripture, and resurrection rather than a general discourse on ancestral practice.[6]

Studies on biblical anthropology also help clarify the issue. Richard M. Davidson argues that the Old Testament view of death does not support ancestor veneration or consultation with the dead. N. T. Wright's work on resurrection in Second Temple Judaism and early Christianity shows that resurrection hope is not the same as the idea of an immortal soul naturally living apart from the body. The biblical hope is bodily resurrection at God's appointed time. This framework is central for the present study.[7]

The literature also displays an important interpretive tension that this study must face directly. Some commentators understand Jesus' language—and especially Luke's addition, "for all live to him" (Luke 20:38)—as implying that the patriarchs consciously survive bodily death while awaiting resurrection. Philip du Toit surveys this trajectory, and Steven M. Bryan's recent study of Luke 20:27–40 argues more explicitly for a form of life between death and resurrection. These readings prevent the present paper from treating its Adventist anthropology as the only interpretation available. At the same time, they do not establish ancestral mediation. The specific gap addressed here is therefore narrower: how can the resurrection logic of Matthew 22:32 be brought into disciplined dialogue with African ancestral concerns while clearly distinguishing remembrance and honour from mediation and ritual consultation?[8]

Methodology

This study employs historical-literary and theological exegesis as its primary method, followed by an African Cultural Hermeneutics (ACH)-informed contextual appropriation. The first movement establishes the argument of Matthew 22:23–33 within its literary

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[6]R. T. France, The Gospel of Matthew (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007), 835–840; Ulrich Luz, Matthew 21–28: A Commentary (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2005), 85–88; Donald A. Hagner, Matthew 14–28, Word Biblical Commentary 33B (Dallas: Word, 1995), 637–639.

[7] Richard M. Davidson, "Death and Ancestors in Light of the Old Testament," Journal of Adventist Mission Studies 16, no. 1 (2020): 1–28, https://doi.org/10.32597/jams/vol16/iss1/2/; N. T. Wright, The Resurrection of the Son of God (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2003), 85–206.

[8]Philip Du Toit, "God of the Dead and the Living: Understanding Romans 14:9 in Terms of Its Intertextual Relationships," Scriptura 120, no. 1 (2021), https://doi.org/10.7833/120-1-2004; Steven M. Bryan, "What Kind of Life Is Raised? Luke's Account of the Dispute Between Jesus and the Sadducees (Luke 20:27–40)," The Journal of Theological Studies, advance article, August 4, 2026, https://doi.org/10.1093/jts/flag032.

setting in Matthew 21–23, the historical controversy over resurrection, its grammatical features, Jesus' citation of Exodus 3:6, and the Synoptic parallels. The second movement brings the exegetical result into critical dialogue with recurrent African concerns about ancestors, memory, kinship, bereavement, mediation, and hope. This sequencing is deliberate: African questions help identify the contextual problem and shape the application, but they do not predetermine the semantic claim of Matthew's text.

ACH is used after the exegetical meaning has been established. Following D. T. Adamo, it takes the African socio-cultural context seriously as the setting in which Scripture is heard and applied. It also allows African experience to enter disciplined dialogue with the biblical text. In this study, that dialogue concerns ancestral consciousness, memory, kinship, bereavement, and hope. Properly applied, this hermeneutic does not disrupt the intent of the text; it allows the text to speak clearly into African cultural concerns without allowing culture to control interpretation.[9]

This is therefore a modified use of ACH rather than a claim to reproduce every feature of Adamo's method. It preserves ACH's insistence that African socio-cultural realities matter in interpretation while giving historical-literary exegesis methodological priority in determining the passage's controlling claim. The study is exegetical-theological and contextual, not ethnographic; its conclusions concerning African ancestral consciousness are consequently framed as theological engagement with documented recurring motifs rather than descriptions of all African societies.

Matthew 22:32 in Literary and Historical Context

Matthew 22:23–33 belongs to a sequence of controversies in Jerusalem. After the triumphal entry and the cleansing of the temple, Jesus is challenged by different groups within the religious establishment. The chief priests and elders question his authority. The Pharisees and Herodians question him about tribute to Caesar. The Sadducees question him about the

[9]David T. Adamo, "What Is African Biblical Hermeneutics?" Black Theology 13, no. 1 (2015): 59–72, https://doi.org/10.1179/1476994815Z.00000000047; Peter O. O. Ottuh and Moses Idemudia, "Navigating Trajectories in African Biblical Studies: D. T. Adamo and the Future of African Cultural Hermeneutics," Ianna Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies 2, no. 1 (2020): 55–64.

resurrection. A lawyer later questions him about the greatest commandment. These scenes show escalating conflict over Jesus' authority, interpretation of Scripture, and understanding of God's kingdom.[10]

This literary setting matters. Jesus is not offering a detached lecture on death. He is responding to a hostile theological test. The Sadducees, unlike the Pharisees, denied the resurrection. Josephus presents them as a priestly and aristocratic group with a restrictive view of the afterlife, and the New Testament also identifies them with denial of resurrection. Matthew states the issue directly: "Sadducees came to him, who say that there is no resurrection" (Matt 22:23). This notice tells the reader how to understand the whole passage.[11]

The Sadducees present a case based on the levirate law in Deuteronomy 25:5–6. A woman marries seven brothers in sequence because each dies without producing offspring. Their question is, "In the resurrection, therefore, of the seven, whose wife will she be?" (Matt 22:28). The question is not asked for pastoral clarity. It is a reductio ad absurdum. The Sadducees want to make resurrection belief appear legally and socially impossible. Their argument assumes that resurrection would simply restore ordinary earthly relations, including marriage, death, inheritance, and family law.

Jesus rejects that assumption. His answer begins with a double diagnosis: "You are wrong, because you know neither the Scriptures nor the power of God" (Matt 22:29). The Sadducees misunderstand Scripture because they do not see that the Torah itself supports resurrection hope. They misunderstand God's power because they imagine resurrection as a mere extension of present mortal life. Jesus' reply corrects both errors.

The Synoptic parallels confirm the resurrection focus while adding useful nuance. Mark 12:18–27 closely parallels Matthew. Luke 20:27–40 expands the saying with πάντες γὰρ αὐτῷ ζῶσιν ("for all live to him," v. 38), a clause that has generated debate about whether Luke envisages conscious existence between death and resurrection. Whatever conclusion is reached on that separate question, Luke still frames the exchange explicitly as proof "that

[10]France, Gospel of Matthew, 814–843; Luz, Matthew 21–28, 1–99.
[11]Josephus, Jewish Antiquities 18.1.4; Josephus, Jewish War 2.8.14.

the dead are raised" (20:37). The Synoptic evidence therefore requires the paper to distinguish resurrection certainty from the more debated question of the intermediate state.[12]

Exegesis of Matthew 22:23–33

The heart of the passage is Jesus' use of Exodus 3:6. In Exodus, God speaks to Moses at the burning bush and identifies himself as the God of the patriarchs. This formula is more than a historical label. Hyatt's study of the "God of the fathers" formula shows that it carries covenantal and relational force. God is not merely saying that he was once associated with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He is identifying himself as the covenant God who bound himself to them and to the promises given through them.[13]

Matthew introduces the proof with *περὶ δὲ τῆς ἀναστάσεως τῶν νεκρῶν* ("concerning the resurrection of the dead," 22:31), making *ἀνάστασις*, the raising of the dead, the explicit issue. Verse 32 concludes: *οὐκ ἔστιν ὁ θεὸς θεὸς νεκρῶν ἀλλὰ ζώντων*—God is not God "of the dead but of the living." The citation of Exodus 3:6 corresponds closely to the Septuagint's *ἐγώ εἰμι ὁ θεὸς τοῦ πατρός σου, θεὸς Ἀβραὰμ καὶ θεὸς Ἰσαὰκ καὶ θεὸς Ἰακώβ*. The Hebrew, however, reads *אָנֹכִי אֱלֹהֵי אֲבִיךָ אֱלֹהֵי אַבְרָהָם אֱלֹהֵי יִצְחָק וֵאלֹהֵי יַעֲקֹב*, a nominal clause without an explicit present-tense copula. The argument should therefore not depend on the English contrast between "I am" and "I was." Its firmer basis is God's continuing covenant self-identification with the patriarchs and the life-giving fidelity implied by that relationship. [14]

This conclusion must be read carefully. Matthew does not discuss ancestral veneration, petitions to the dead, or post-mortem supervision of descendants. Nor does Matthew 22:32 by itself settle every question concerning the intermediate state. It establishes that the

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[12]Steven M. Bryan, "What Kind of Life Is Raised? Luke's Account of the Dispute Between Jesus and the Sadducees (Luke 20:27–40)," The Journal of Theological Studies, advance article, August 4, 2026, https://doi.org/10.1093/jts/flag032; Philip Du Toit, "God of the Dead and the Living: Understanding Romans 14:9 in Terms of Its Intertextual Relationships," Scriptura 120, no. 1 (2021), https://doi.org/10.7833/120-1-2004.

[13]J. Philip Hyatt, "Yahweh as 'The God of My Father,'" Vetus Testamentum 5, no. 2 (1955): 130–136, https://doi.org/10.1163/156853355X00117.

[14]Eberhard Nestle et al., eds., Novum Testamentum Graece, 28th rev. ed. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2012), Matt 22:31–32; Karl Elliger and Wilhelm Rudolph, eds., Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia, 5th corrected ed. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1997), Exod 3:6; Alfred Rahlfs and Robert Hanhart, eds., Septuaginta, rev. ed. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2006), Exod 3:6.

patriarchs belong to the sphere of God's life-giving covenant and therefore cannot remain finally under death. The direct exegetical conclusion is resurrection certainty; further claims about the condition of the dead between death and resurrection belong to a wider canonical-theological synthesis.

The phrase "God of the living" therefore has eschatological and covenantal force. On the reading advanced here, the patriarchs' identity, covenant standing, and promised future remain secure in God's power. Some interpreters go further and infer present conscious existence from Luke 20:38. Bryan, for example, argues that Luke depicts a form of life sustained by God between bodily death and resurrection. The present study does not dismiss that reading by assertion. It contends, more narrowly, that even if such conscious existence were granted, nothing in Matthew 22:32 or Luke 20:38 assigns the patriarchs mediatorial authority, ritual accessibility, or agency over their descendants. The ancestral-mediation claim therefore fails independently of the intermediate-state debate.[15]

The exegesis also clarifies the role of the patriarchs. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are ancestors of Israel, but Jesus does not treat them as mediators. They are witnesses to God's covenant faithfulness because God binds his name to them. Their significance lies in God's promise, not in their present power. This distinction is important for African Christian interpretation. A text that names ancestors does not automatically endorse an ancestral cult. Biblical ancestors are remembered because of God's covenant, not because they function as alternative spiritual authorities.

Biblical Anthropology, Death, and Resurrection Hope

Matthew 22:32 should be read within the broader biblical teaching on human nature, death, and resurrection. The Bible presents human beings as unified persons. Genesis 2:7 states that God formed the human being from the dust and breathed into him the breath of life, and the man became a living being. The text does not describe the soul as an independent immortal entity trapped inside the body. It describes life as the result of God's creative act

[15]Bryan, "What Kind of Life Is Raised?" Bryan argues from Luke 20:27–40 for a form of life sustained by God between death and resurrection; the present study registers this as a substantive counter-reading while disputing any inference from it to ancestral mediation.

upon the whole person. Death reverses this creaturely life. The body returns to dust, and the breath of life returns to God who gave it (Eccl 12:7).[16]

Within the Adventist canonical reading adopted here, several Old Testament texts portray death as unconsciousness awaiting resurrection. Ecclesiastes declares that "the dead know nothing" and that their love, hatred, and envy have perished (Eccl 9:5–6). Similarly, the psalmist states that "the dead do not praise the LORD" (Ps 115:17). Within this theological synthesis, the biblical metaphor of death as sleep depicts the cessation of conscious activity while anticipating an awakening through resurrection. Jesus affirms this expectation when he declares that "the hour is coming in which all who are in the graves will hear His voice and come forth—those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation" (John 5:28–29 NKJV).[17]

Ecclesiastes 9:5–6 must nevertheless be read within wisdom literature and its recurring perspective on mortal life "under the sun." It should not be made to carry a complete metaphysical doctrine by itself. In this study its depiction of the dead as no longer participating in earthly activity is read cumulatively with Psalmic descriptions of death, Daniel 12:2, John 5:28–29, 1 Corinthians 15, and 1 Thessalonians 4. The resulting anthropology is therefore a canonical synthesis rather than an inference from a single wisdom text.

The canonical synthesis adopted by this study does not locate Christian hope in a naturally immortal soul continuing in full conscious activity apart from the body. It locates the believer's decisive hope in resurrection. This claim must be distinguished from the narrower exegesis of Matthew 22:32: Matthew proves resurrection within the Sadducean controversy; the wider Adventist reading of death as sleep is constructed from the broader canonical witness. Daniel 12:2 speaks of those who sleep in the dust awakening; John 5:28–29 speaks of those in the graves hearing the Son's voice; and 1 Corinthians 15 makes resurrection indispensable to Christian hope.

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[16]Davidson, "Death and Ancestors," 4–12; Adeoti, "Impact of Seventh-day Adventism," 132–150.
[17]Davidson, "Death and Ancestors," 4–12.

The prohibitions against necromancy also fit this framework. Deuteronomy 18:10–11, Leviticus 20:27, and Isaiah 8:19–20 reject attempts to consult the dead. Within the canonical argument advanced here, these texts function as substantive theological prohibitions. They guard Israel's faith from practices that seek guidance or power outside God's revealed will. The story of Saul and the medium at Endor in 1 Samuel 28 is a warning, not a model. Saul's resort to the dead marks his spiritual collapse, not a legitimate practice for God's people.[18]

First Samuel 28 deserves separate caution because it is frequently invoked in debates about the state of the dead. Ethically, the narrative is unambiguous: Saul's consultation of a medium violates Israel's prohibition of necromancy and belongs to the story of his spiritual collapse. Ontologically, interpreters have differed over whether the figure is Samuel himself, a divinely permitted exceptional appearance, or a deceptive apparition associated with forbidden mediumship. The present study does not use the episode as a stand-alone proof of unconscious death. It adopts the view that the narrative should not be made normative evidence for ordinary post-mortem accessibility, and it places the passage under the cumulative canonical anthropology already described. Long's literary study is especially useful in showing why the episode must be read within Saul's progressive failure to seek and obey Yahweh rather than as validation of necromantic practice. [19]

African Ancestral Consciousness in Biblical Perspective

In many African societies where ancestral traditions remain socially or religiously significant, concern for deceased forebears expresses a real human issue: death does not erase the significance of those who came before. Families need memory, communities need continuity, and moral traditions are transmitted through stories of parents, grandparents, founders, and elders. These patterns vary widely across peoples and regions; they should not be collapsed into a single 'African' ancestral system.

This concern can be appreciated without accepting every religious claim attached to it. Mbiti's category of the "living-dead" may describe how many African communities

[18]V. Philips Long, "A Broken Ruaḥ: Some Historical and Literary Observations Concerning 1 Samuel 28," Bulletin for Biblical Research 20, no. 2 (2010): 229–252.
[19]Ibid

experience the recently deceased, but it cannot be treated as biblical anthropology. Agboada's study similarly helps describe African traditional eschatology, but the biblical interpreter must still ask whether its claims agree with Scripture. The fact that an idea is culturally meaningful does not make it exegetically valid.[20]

The distinction between memory and mediation is central. African Christian families may honour deceased parents and elders by preserving truthful stories, imitating virtues, correcting inherited failures, caring for graves respectfully, and maintaining family solidarity. These actions do not require belief in the active power of the dead. They are practices of memory and gratitude. They become theologically dangerous when they turn into consultation, propitiation, fear, or dependence on the dead for blessing.

Ancestor Christology has tried to address this tension by presenting Christ as the true or supreme ancestor. The model can be pastorally useful when it shows that Christ fulfils the African longing for belonging, mediation, protection, and life. However, it must be used carefully. Christ is not merely one ancestor above others. He is the risen Lord, the only mediator between God and humanity, and the firstborn from the dead. Any African Christological language must preserve his uniqueness and must not keep ancestral mediation intact beside him.[21]

Recent peer-reviewed African theological discussion also underscores the need to preserve Christ's uniqueness when ancestral categories are used. Isaac Boaheng's 2024 critique, for example, argues that ancestral analogies become theologically problematic when they blur Christ's singular salvific mediation and victory over death. Falconer's related 2024 contribution is useful as a contemporary conversation partner but is a Qeios preprint and is

[20]Mbiti, African Religions and Philosophy, 80–90; Agboada, "Eschatology in African Traditional Religion," 585–595.

[21]Cleusa Caldeira and Ikenna Paschal Okpaleke, "Ancestor Christology: Re-assessing Bénézet Bujo's Contribution to African Theology," HORIZONTE: Revista de Estudos de Teologia e Ciências da Religião 20, no. 63 (2023): e206314, https://doi.org/10.5752/p.2175-5841.2022v20n63e206314; Robert Falconer, "Christology for African Community in View of African Ancestors," Qeios, preprint, February 19, 2024, https://doi.org/10.32388/Q0X1FH.

therefore treated here as supplementary rather than equivalent in evidentiary weight to peer-reviewed research.[22]

Some African traditional systems envisage a continuing ancestral realm that interacts with the living community; others frame ancestral presence, reincorporation, or continuity differently. The biblical eschatological framework adopted here differs at the point of religious agency and final hope. Hebrews 9:27 associates death with judgment, 1 Corinthians 15 locates resurrection at Christ's coming, and Revelation moves toward final judgment and new creation. The paper therefore resists both a monolithic description of African belief and any attempt to make continuing reciprocal ancestral agency the organising category of Christian eschatology.

Implications for African Christian Theology

One implication is pastoral. Churches should not mock African concern for the dead. Ancestral consciousness often carries a deep emotional need: the need to know that loved ones are not totally lost. The Bible does not destroy this concern. It corrects and reassures it through the doctrine of resurrection. Those who die in the Lord are not abandoned to meaninglessness. Their lives remain known to God, and their future rests in God's power to raise the dead.

A related implication is missional. African Christian witness must answer the questions people actually ask. Many ask whether the dead can harm the living, whether neglected rites bring misfortune, whether ancestors bless descendants, and whether Christian conversion means rejecting family identity. Matthew 22:32 teaches that the dead are under God's authority, not autonomous spiritual powers. It also teaches that hope is located in God's covenant faithfulness and resurrection power, not in ritual control of the unseen.

A final implication concerns the study's contribution to knowledge. It offers a fourfold model for African Christian discernment: remembrance, honour, mediation, and ritual consultation. Remembrance preserves truthful family and communal memory; honour recognises legitimate gratitude and moral inheritance. Mediation assigns the deceased a

[22]Isaac Boaheng, "St. Thomas Aquinas' Doctrine of Christ's Descent into Hades and Its Implications for African Ancestor Christological Discourse," Acta Theologica 44, no. 2 (2024): 51–70, https://doi.org/10.38140/at.v44i2.7925.

spiritual role between God and the living; ritual consultation seeks information, protection, blessing, or intervention from the dead. The first two may be incorporated within Christian discipleship where they remain truthful and non-idolatrous; the latter two are rejected because Matthew 22:32 gives the patriarchs no such agency and the wider canonical witness directs prayer, mediation, and ultimate trust to God through Christ. This model allows exegesis to control the central claim while African concerns of kinship, bereavement, continuity, and reassurance receive serious contextual engagement.

Conclusion

This study concludes that Matthew 22:32 is fundamentally a resurrection text. In the Sadducean controversy, Jesus invokes Exodus 3:6 to show that God's covenant identity as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob cannot terminate in final death. The argument rests more securely on covenantal-resurrection logic than on the English tense of "I am." The Greek text foregrounds ἀνάστασις, while the Hebrew of Exodus 3:6 lacks an explicit copular verb; thus, the decisive point is the enduring divine-patriarchal relationship and God's power to raise the dead. Matthew does not establish ancestral mediation, necromancy, ritual consultation, or post-mortem governance of descendants.

This conclusion is important in African Christian contexts where ancestral concerns may express memory, kinship, grief, continuity, fear, or the desire for reassurance. The study's fourfold distinction clarifies the constructive response: remembrance and appropriate honour of forebears may be retained, while mediation and ritual consultation are rejected. The wider Adventist canonical synthesis adopted here understands death as unconscious sleep awaiting resurrection, but the paper has also acknowledged readings of Luke 20:38 that infer conscious intermediate existence. Crucially, neither interpretation provides exegetical warrant for ancestral mediation. Christian reassurance is therefore located not in ancestral agency but in the covenant faithfulness of the God of the living and the resurrection accomplished and promised in Christ.

Recommendation

African churches, pastors, theologians, and Bible teachers should teach Matthew 22:32 primarily within its resurrection controversy rather than as a proof text for ancestral activity. They should distinguish respectful remembrance and honour of deceased

forebears from prayer to the dead, ritual consultation, ancestral mediation, and fear-based dependence. Contextual interpretation should take African questions seriously while allowing the historical-literary argument of Scripture to govern doctrinal claims. Because Jesus answers the Sadducees from Exodus 3:6, the Torah provides the immediate scriptural ground of his response; Christian anthropology, however, should be formulated from the integrated canonical witness of both Testaments. Pastoral engagement should therefore redirect anxiety about deceased relatives toward resurrection hope, Christ's unique mediation, and confidence in God's covenant faithfulness.

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CHAPTER 14

ACCEPTANCE OF GIFTS/OFFERINGS IN GENESIS 4:3-7 VERSUS ACCEPTANCE OF GIFTS TO DEITIES IN AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION: FROM COMMON GROUNDS TO FAITHFUL CONTEXTUALIZATION

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Abstract

The paper seeks to determine the meaning of ytv (to do well) as it concerns the acceptance of offering in Genesis 4:3-7 and compare it with the requirements for acceptance of similar gifts in African Traditional Religion (ATR) in search for common grounds for faithful mission contextualization. A major concern in the study is the observation of a seeming gap in the narrative concerning prior information on the requirements for the acceptance of the gifts or offerings in Genesis 4:3-7. The problem viewed in this paper is the exegetical understanding of the qualification for the acceptance of the gifts or offerings in the Genesis 4 in comparison with such in African Traditional Religion. The following questions are handled: Were there regulations concerning offerings prior to the experience in Genesis 4? What does "doing well" (ytv) refer to in the context in the context of Genesis 4? What was God's interest? How do the answers dialogue with the of qualifications for acceptance of offerings in African Traditional Religion. The methodologies for the study are exegetical and intertextual within the Old and New Testaments, and comparative studies between the Bible and African Traditional Religion. The paper submits that within the context of regulations for offerings in the Old Testament, the acceptance of offerings in Genesis 4:3-7 begins with right condition of the heart and attitude toward Yahweh. For contextualization, the study shows that similar requirements for acceptance of offerings for deities are present in African Traditional Religion in connection with the approval of a deity. Doing well in relation to Yahweh in the Old Testament can be related to well in relation to the Great God in African Traditional Religion.
***Key Words**: Offering, Gifts, Acceptance, Well-Doing, God's Interest*

INTRODUCTION

This research paper is on the relevance of יטב (*ytv*) in Genesis 4:3-7. The paper looks at *ytv* in relation to the offerings brought by Cain and Abel, the acceptability of the offerings, and God's interest. The paper also seeks to establish an analogous and comparative relationship between the acceptance of gifts in Genesis 4 and the acceptance of gifts in African Traditional Religion. The paper first handles the acceptance of offering in Genesis 4:3-7. Next, it considers the acceptance of offerings given to deities in African Traditional Religion. Lastly, it seeks to establish common grounds between the two religious contexts.

The contribution of the paper to scholarship is viewed in the realization that perhaps, there has been no comparative study between the Old Testament and African Traditional Religion involving Genesis 4:3-7. In this light, the findings in the study contributes to Old Testament Theology in the exegetical study of *ytv,* African Biblical Hermeneutics in the application of the understanding of the meaning of *ytv* to the African context, Comparative Theology in establishing common grounds between the Old Testament and African Traditional Religion in highlighting theocentric and other comparable concepts, African Traditional Religion in review of the theology of gifts to deities and significance of blood, and Christian Missiology by demonstrating that meaningful theological dialogue between Genesis and ATR is possible without destroying the distinctiveness of either tradition. Contribution to Christian Missiology is viewed in this study from the perspective of Adventist[1] Missiology.

The methodology employed in this study includes exegetical and intertextual analyses in the Old Testament, and comparative studies between the Bible and African Traditional Religion. The exegetical studies involve the analysis of the meaning of the words for "doing good" within the unit and immediate context of Genesis 4:3-7. This is in relation to other grammatical, syntactical, semantic, and theological elements in the context.[2] The

[1] The word "Adventist" here is used to identify a global Protestant Christian denomination known as Seventh-day Adventist Church. See https://gc.adventist.org/

[2] Michael J. Gorman, *Elements of Biblical Exege*sis, Revised and Expanded (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2010), 234–35; Nancy Vyhmeister J. and Terry D. Robertson, *Your Guide to Writing Quality Research Papers for Students of Religion and Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 11-21

exegetical study is accompanied by intertextual studies in comparison with related texts in the Old Testament. Findings from the exegetical and intertextual studies is employed in comparative studies between the Bible and African Traditional Religion. Comparative research gains much attention in current research because of globalization and technological advances. Generally, it helps to establish how two phenomena relate and provide valid reasons for such relationship. Conventionally, comparative analysis emphasizes the explanations of differences and similarities on regional, geographical,[3] and religious boundaries. As a method, comparative research in religious studies is done by placing different religious traditions side-by-side, in order to determine their similarities, differences, and cultural contexts. The act of comparison helps in the understanding of original comparands. It reveals components of religion such as practice, belief, and artifacts. Comparative religious studies is an indispensable step towards the understanding of individual religions, and the all-embracing concept of religion.[4] In religious studies, comparative study has two goals: descriptive and classification. The descriptive goal is for a better understanding of a particular item. Comparison of items analytically helps in identifying some hidden or overlooked aspects and facets. The classification goal of comparison is to critically evaluate and apply the comparands with respect to culture and context.[5] This comparative research is in the discipline of religious studies and theology. The data used in the entire study is limited to reviews of scholarly articles and Biblical information.

Background of the Study: Genesis 4:3-7

Many scholars hold the view that Genesis 4:7 presents numerous problems for expositions with respect to the grounds for the expectation to "do well" in the context of Genesis 4:3-

[3] Michael Adiyia and William Ashton, "Comparative Research," *Rural Development Institute*, (2017): 1, accessed 6 Aug, 2026, www.brandonu.ca/rdi.
[4] Kara Roberts, "Towards a New Comparative Methodology in Religious Studies," *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* (2019):1, accessed 6 Aug, 2026, https://www.academia.edu/41014155 /Towards_a_New_Comparative_Methodology_in_Religious_Studies.
[5] Oliver Freiberger, "Elements of a Comparative Methodology in the Study of Religion," *Religions*, 38 (2018): 4, accessed 6 Aug 2026, doi:10.3390/rel9020038 www.mdpi.com/journal/religions

7.[6] The question of whether there were given requirements for resenting offering prior to the acts by Cain and Abel has been variously analyzed by scholars as exposing a gap in the narrative.[7] Some use this apparent gap to question the grounds on which Cain is judged.[8] Other scholars approach the gap as a characteristic of Biblical schematic narrative.[9] However, from a careful look at the passage of Genesis 4:3-7, more light is viewed possible when the syntactical and semantic factors are studied contextually and inter-textually. First, the paper considers scholarly views under the following sub-topics: Questions of Perceived Gap on Instructions for Offerings, Examination of the Offerings Brought by Cain and the Offerings Brought by Abel, Cain's Anger, and God's Interest.

Questions of Perceived Gap on Instructions for Offerings

Some scholars have discussed the apparent confusion about what Cain did wrong in relation to the notion that there is no indication in the text concerning expectations on the offerings. This is viewed as a gap in the narrative which in turn is taken by some as evidence that there were no written divine directives on the how and what to offer.[10] From this perspective, it is alleged that nothing in Abel's offering makes it better than the offerings of Cain.[11] From another perspective, other scholars assert that Cain and Abel

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[6] Chris Burnett, "A Sin Offering Lying in The Doorway? A Minority Interpretation of Genesis 4:6-8," *The Master's Seminary Journ*al, no. Spring (2016): 47, accessed 26 May 2022, https://web.p.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=11&sid=9b30e2b5-e5ce-4b3d-8f4f-f5073e72052e%40redis.

[7] Bruce K. Waltke, "Cain and His Offering," *Westminster Theological Journ*al 48 (1986): 363, accessed 25 May 2022, https://web.p.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=12&sid=9b30e2b5-e5ce-4b3d-8f4f-f5073e72052e%40redis.

[8] According John Byron, there is no explanation regarding why God rejected Cain's offering. He opines that this creates a breach in the narrative, and creates the impossibility of learning from Cain's deeds or mistakes as judged in the text. See John Byron, *Cain and Abel in Text and Traditi*on (Leiden. Boston: Brill NV, 2011), 39–40, accessed 26 May 2022, https://www.pdfdrive.com/cain-and-abel-in-text-and-tradition-jewish-and-christian-interpretations-of-the-first-sibling-rivalry-e161869898.html.

[9] Zechari Kallai views this as evidence of the schematic nature of Biblical narratives which are clearly stylized, representative, and expressing essential notions of interest to the Divine. See, Zecharia Kallai, "The Beginnings of Israel: A Methodological Working Hypothesis," *Israel Exploration Journ*al 59, no. 2 (2009): 194, accessed 25 May 2022, https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/27927232.pdf?refreqid=fastly-default%3A5070ad3c615195b2483eda4f912e0a6c&ab_segments=0%2FSYC-6294%2Ftest_segment_2&origin=search-results.

[10] John Byron argues that the standard for the offering of sacrifices had not been given prior to this time. See Byron, *Cain and Abel in Text and Traditi*on, 40–41; In the words of Paul R. House, many scholars believe that the text does not explain why the LORD accepted Abel's sacrifice but not Cain's. See Paul R. House, *Old Testament Theolo*gy (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 65 digital.

[11] T. A. Perry, "Cain's Sin in Gen. 4:1-7: Oracular Ambiguity and How to Avoid It," *Prooftexts*, 25, no. 3 (2005): 266.

were aware of the requirements for the offering before they presented their gifts to Yahweh.[12] This assertion is in line with the Biblical theological stand that sin is not established where there is no law. Paul would say that before the law was given, sin was in the world (Rom. 4:15; 5:13; 7:7). For instance, nowhere is it stated that Noah or Abraham was taught how to offer or what to use in offering sacrifice before they did. That these were not stated would not mean that they were not instructed. This indicates that Biblical narration is selective on what to tell and schematic on what to emphasize depending on the purpose. Further, God would not declare punishment on Cain after he murdered Abel, if there was no declared law to them against murder. Moreso, the phrase "*min qest yamim"* (at the end of time or in the course of time) in Genesis 4:3 implies other events between the time of their birth, the process of their growth, the report of their occupations and the offering of their gifts, which are not mentioned nor emphasized in the narration. This would include their knowledge of the necessity, requirements and regulations for offerings.

Examination of the Offerings Brought by Cain and Abel

Understanding the differences between the offering brought by Cain and the offerings brought by Abel is considered helpful in understanding the meaning and relevance of *ytv* (do rightly) in the text. This has led to many explanations. According to Waltke, many pre-mind-sets lead to divided opinions regarding the reason for acceptance of Abel's offering and the rejection of Cain's offering by God.[13]

Youjin Chung refutes many views that present God as arbitrarily choosing Abel over Cain. In response to Hermann Gunkel's opinion that God may have preferred the shepherd more than the tiller of the ground,[14] Youjin Chung rightly argues that the requirements are not

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[12] John Phillips assumes that Cain and Abel were undoubtedly told of the events of the fall, especially when fig leaves were replaced with skin clothes provided by God. Phillips, John. 1980. *Exploring Genesis*. Chicago, IL: Moody Press (1980), 65, quoted in Tompkins 18; Andrew Tompkins agree that is reasonable to imply that regulations for offering sacrifices were relayed from Adam and Eve to their sons (cf. Gen. 3:21).

[13] Bruce K. Waltke, "Cain and His Offering,*" Westminster Theological Journ*al 48 (1986): 363, accessed 26 May 2022, https://web.p.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer ?vid=12&sid=9b30e2b5-e5ce-4b3d-8f4f-f5073e72052e%40redis.

[14] [?] Hermann Gunkel, *Genesis*, trans. Mark E. Biddle (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, (1997), 43, quoted in Youjin Chung, "Conflicting Readings in the Narrative of Cain and Abel -- (GEN. 4:1-26),*" Asian Journal of Pentecostal Studi*es 14, no. 2 (2011): 244, accessed 25 May 2022, https://web.p.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=15&sid=9b30e2b5-e5ce

based on their occupations, but on the nature of offerings they brought. He explains that the same Hebrew word used for Adam when he was placed in the Garden of Eden to cultivate it, is the same used for Cain as a cultivator of the ground (Gen. 2:15; 4:2), though in a hostile sphere (Gen. 3:17-19). According to Chung, it was not also a case of favoritism before God.[15] He also refutes the view by some scholars that the difference between Cain and Abel depends on God's free will in electing and preferring Abel over Cain, and not in any mistake made by Cain.[16] Chug's argument is in line with Biblical fact that God does not play favoritism (Acts 10:34-35). God accepts whoever fears Him and does what is right before Him.

Among the factors discussed by scholars concerning the acceptance and rejection of the offerings is the condition that the offerings should not be bloodless.[17] This condition falls within the sanctuary requirement that the shedding of blood is indispensable for the atonement for sin (Hebrew 9:18-22; Leviticus 17:11). Bruce Waltke notes that offerings within the sanctuary requirements clearly involve blood. These are voluntary and involuntary offerings. According to him, involuntary offerings also come in the form of sin offering (*khattat*) and guilt offering (*'asam*). They involve the shedding of blood and are used in making atonement (*kpr*). Among the voluntary offerings are the burnt offering, meal offering, and fellowship offering, which include acknowledgement offering, votive offering, and free-will offering. These could be either animal offering, when it is burnt offering (Lev 1:1-3) or grain when it is meal offering (Lev 2:1-11). Animal or grain could

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[15] Youjin Chung, 244,

[16] Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1-11: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1984), 296; Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis Interpretation; A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Atlanta, Georgia: John Knox Press, 1982), 56; Ellen Van Wolde, *Words Become Worlds: Semantic Studies of Genesis 1-11* (Leiden, Netherlands: E.J. Brill, 1994), 52; Karl Rahner, "Mystery," *Encyclopedia of Theology: Sacramentum Mundi,* vol. 4 (New York: Header and Header, 1969), 133-136; all quoted in Chung, 244

[17] Bruce K. Waltke explains that the story reflected early development of Israelite religion when only animal sacrifice was accepted to Yahweh. In this line of reasoning, he notes that many scholars are of the view that Cain's offering was rejected because it was bloodless. See, Waltke, 364; According to Joann Scurlock, although cereal offerings were plainly acceptable, and in some cases even required (Lev 23:10-11, 17), they had their place but were not substitute for animal sacrifice, as the narrative of Cain and Abel (Gen 4:3-5) suggests. See Joann Scurlock, "The Techniques of the Sacrifice of Animals in Ancient Israel and Ancient Mesopotamia. New Insights Through Comparison, Part 2,*" Andrews University Seminary Studie*s 44, no. 2 (2006): 245, assessed 26 May 2022, https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2959&context=auss.

be fellowship offering (Lev 3:1-6).[18] What Cain and Abel offered differently is voluntary offering which is termed *minkha* in Genesis 4: 3-5. There is need to investigate if there are cases in the Levitical requirements where *minkha* involves the shedding of blood.

The study of various usages of *minkha* in the Old Testament will help in the understanding of its usage in the context of Genesis 4:3, 4, 5. The term mainly refers to grain offering in Leviticus 1 and 2. It also means an animal offering in some other contexts (Lev. 2; cf. Jdg 6:17-21; 1 Sam. 2:15-17; 26:19). The Arabic root meaning of *minkha* is to lend something to someone. In Hebrew, it means gift or tribute. In the Old Testament, there are non-theological usages of *minkka*. It can be a gift to a king by a subject, conveying the idea of homage. For instance, some Israelites looked down on Saul when he was made king and did not give any gift (*minkha*) to him (1Sam. 10:27). In Solomon's time, kings paid homage to him by bringing tributes (*minkha*) to him (1 Kings 4:21 [5:21 in Heb. Bible]; 10:25; cf. 2 Sam. 8:2, 6). The Old Testament also emphasizes theological usages of *minkha* (Num. 16:15; Ps. 96:8; Zeph. 3:10).[19] In these instances, they are given to Yahweh, as in Genesis 4.

In the context of Genesis 4, some differences can be observed between the offerings of Cain and Abel in the constitutions of the offerings and in the attitudes of the offerers. Within the text, both of them brought some gifts to the LORD. However, only Abel brought the fat of animals, and from the firstborn of animals. By so doing, Abel expressed recognition of God as the Owner and Giver of life. This gesture was common in ancient Near East, even as practiced by the Hebrews, that the deity has the right to the first share of every produce. This was manifested also in the account of the Exodus, when the LORD destroyed the first born in Egypt, and delivered Israel, whom He chose as His first born. Therefore, everything that opened the womb belongs to the LORD (Ex. 13:2, 12; 34:19). Gifts from the ground to the LORD must be the first fruits (Deut. 26:1-11). In this light, gift from the ground, that is grain, is acceptable before Yahweh. However, Abel's offering can be compared with offering laws in the Pentateuch (Exod 22:28–30; 34:19–20).[20]

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[18] Waltke, 366.
[19] Waltke, "Cain and His Offering," 367.
[20] Byron, *Cain and Abel in Text and Tradit*ion, 40.

According to Doukhan, the Hebrew phrase "*gam hu*" in Genesis 4:4 indicates a difference between Cain's offering and Abel's offering, because the expression is many a time used to indicate a sense of addition or saying "moreover" (Gen. 20:6; Ex. 1:10; 1 Kings 4:15). The adverbs "*gam hu*", also appears to be contrasting the two offerings. That is, Cain chose to bring only from produce of the ground (4:3); while it appears that Abel presented the firstling from of his flock as an addition to the non-animate offering.[21] Jack P. Lewis adds that in Genesis 4:4, the Hebrew account uses two key words that describe Abel's offering which are not found concerning Cain's offering. These words are firstlings *(bekorot;* cf. Exod. 34:19; Deut 12:6; 14:23) and fat *(heleb;* cf. Num 18:17). The words are joined by a conjunction that appears explanatory, denoting the significance of the words in later record of sacrificial instructions in Torah.[22] Abel's offering was in line with this; he also offered the fat which would be sweet smelling to God.[23] The characteristic smell of fat of offerings is pleasant to Yahweh when offered from a pure heart and right attitude (see Lev 3 and 4).

The spiritual condition of the heart is significant when one brings an offering to the LORD. In Hebrews 11:4, Abel is referred to by his better sacrifice. Waltke submits that basically, the acceptance of Abel and his offering and the rejection of Cain and his offering is based on character (cf. Lev. 8-9; 26). Abel offered his gift by faith. So, the issue involved was mainly the condition of the heart of the worshippers as they brought their gifts to the LORD.[24] Referring to right attitude, Rasida Antic hints on good being epitomized in the personality of Abel.[25] It can be taken that a major factor in the acceptance of Abel's gift and rejection of Cain's gift rests basically on their spiritual conditions, not just the offerings alone (cf. Mic. 6:7; Is. 1:11). Cain's offering represents an attitude of dependence on human effort to reach up to God in the light human of efforts to cover for sin (Gen. 3:7)

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[21] Byron, 62.
[22] Jack P. Lewis, "The Offering of Abel (Gen 4:4): A History of Interpretation," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Socie*ty 37, no. 4 (December 1994): 481, accessed 26 May 2022, https://web.p.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=10&sid=9b30e2b5-e5ce-4b3d-8f4f-f5073e72052e%40redis.
[23] Waltke, "Cain and His Offering," 368.
[24] Waltke, 369–70.
[25] Radisa Antic, "Cain, Abel, Seth, and the Meaning of Human Life as Portrayed in the Books of Genesis and Ecclesiastes," *Andrew University Seminary Studi*es 44, no. 2 (2006): 208, accessed 26 May 2022, https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2954&context=auss.

which is connected to death (Gen. 3:19); and Abel is presented as offering in connection with divine provision for covering, and from the perspective of life (cf. Gen. 3:21), in the light of human need of salvation from God.[26] These show marked differences in the attitudes of the hearts of the offerers towards Yahweh.

The relational attitude of the giver is evidence of the spiritual condition of the heart. Chung believes that the attitude of the giver led to the differences between the brothers.[27] God's requirement for them to do well, can be viewed as connected to personal attitude in relation to God and one's neighbor. According to Doukhan, the Hebrew verb *teytib* 'do well" comes with a strong relational connection between man and his neighbor (Jer. 7:5).[28] Sailhamer, viewing Cain's anger as against God and against his brother, supports that a pleasing offering is made in relation to the condition of the heart towards others.[29] Here, the importance of a pure heart in worship is recognized (cf. Jer. 7:5-7).

Cain's Anger and God's Interest

The text of Genesis 4:5 records that Cain became very angry and that his countenance fell because of the rejection of his offering. To put it another way, his countenance was downcast with rage and shame.[30] Cain's emotions seemed to be dominated by a sense of shame at work. He was enraged by the idea that his brother's sacrifice was accepted but his was not; it was dishonorable in his view and hard for him to bear.[31] However God had a special interest in Cain and was persuading him to alter his mind.

God's interest was not to reject Cain, but for him to do right (*ytv*) in comparison to what Abel did. The question God asked Cain about his downcast countenance was not a question of condemnation, but creating an opening for him and his offering to be accepted. The question was intended to make him change his heart (and offer the right item for sacrifice and in the right way). God's interrogative sentence *H^{a}lo' 'im teitiv s^{e}'t* can be translated "is

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[26] Doukhan, *Genes*is, 1:118.
[27] Chung, 246–48.
[28] Doukhan, 1:119.
[29] John H. Sailhamer, "Genesis," i*n The Expositor's Bible Commentary: With the New International Versio*n, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1990), 61–62.
[30] Gowan, Donald F. *From Eden to Babel*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans (1988), 68, quoted in Tompkins 17
[31] Tompkins, "Dynamics of Shame in Genesis 3 and 4: Missiological Implications for Today," 17.

it not to lift up if you do well?" (Gen 4:7). By asking the question, God shows His interest in the lifting of Cain's countenance which depends on Cain's doing well. Cain's doing well in the context should be in comparison with or imitation of what Abel did. To show His interest, God offered Cain a second chance, and warned him of the sin that lies at the door. However, his rejection of God's offer of second chance led to his murder of his brother which can be seen as a progressive development of sin.[32] Furthermore, it should be clarified that Cain's countenance was not right before the rejection of his offering. His personality as viewed by God contributed to the rejection of his offering. According to the text (Gen. 4:4, 5), what is regarded or not regarded is not only the offerings. The syntactical arrangement in the text shows that the person is mentioned before the offering as objects of the verb "*sha'ah*" (regard or gaze) either in the positive or the negative. The LORD assessed the person before the offering, and accepts the person before the offering.

In sum, this paper accepts that although instructions on what to offer and how to offer gifts to God were not mentioned in Genesis 4:3-7, they are implied in the narration about the offerings of Cain and Abel as evidence of characteristics of Biblical narration as being selective on what to tell and schematic on what to emphasize depending on the purpose. Moreover, "to do well" *ytv* in the context begins with the spiritual condition of the heart, translated in the attitude of the person towards God and man. Intertextually, in comparison with the Yahweh's dealing with His people in Isaiah 1:11-15 and Micah 6:6-8, the character and attitude of the offerers are weighed as more important than the items of their *minkha* and other offerings, even with their contents of blood and fat.

Acceptance of Gifts Offerings and the Interest of the Great God in African Traditional Religion

The paper also considers the acceptance of gift offerings in African Traditional Religion. The Great God is the central person to Whom the gift offerings are made. The offerers have to make their offerings according to certain requirements, depending on their relationships with the God or the deities. In African Traditional Religion, gift offerings can also be

[32] Antic, "Cain, Abel, Seth, and the Meaning of Human Life As Portrayed in the Books of Genesis and Ecclesiastes," 205.

accepted or rejected. This section depends on information taken from the works of various scholars in relation to gift offerings in the context of the African religion. The areas covered are offering gifts as acts of worship, the place God regarding the offerings, and the acceptance of the offerings.

Gifts Offerings as Acts of Worship

In African Traditional Religion, gifts are offered to the Great God, deities, ancestors, and spirits, as acts of worship. Sacrifices in ancient Africa were originally meant to be gifts to God and or the gods, and ancestors. These gifts are given to the Great God and the gods because in the African consciousness, humans depend on them for existence, survival, and favors. [33] The favors expected were usually in forms which are inclusive of rainfall, childbearing, and rich harvests. According to Schadrack Mvunabandi, animal sacrifices are offered to the ancestors and deities as gifts to nourish them. This is a part of African sacrificial rites where it is dutiful for the worshippers to give the gods and ancestors food to eat.[34] The significance of giving gifts to feed the gods is caught in the African theology of blood, explained later in this paper. Oyeronke Olademo states that, the offering of sacrifices is made to appease, appreciate, and make petitions from the deities. This acknowledges the continuous relevance of the deities in African Traditional religion. The gods appear to lose relevance in the absence of worship by humans[35] That is, gifts offerings are part of worship, and the gods must always be worshipped in order to maintain their relevance in the lives and consciousness of the worshippers. John S. Mbiti informs that Sacrifices and offerings are among the most common acts of worship among Africans no matter the meaning and function. The gifts offerings are given to divinities to appreciate them for success, health, and children.[36] Refusal to worship would bring the displeasure of

[33] Victoria Goldiee, "A History of African Blood Rituals," accessed 10 Mar 2026, https://www.thebloodproject.com/a-history-of-african-blood-rituals/
[34] Schadrack Mvunabandi, "The Communicative Power of Blood Sacrifices: A Predominantly South African Perspective with Special Reference to the Epistle to the Hebrews" (A Dissertation Submitted the Faulty of Theology Department of the New Testament, University of Pretoria, 2008), 67.
[35] Oyeronke Olademo, "Theology of African Traditional Religion" (Course Developed for Department of Religious Studies, Faculty of Art, National Open University of Nigeria, 2021), 77, accessed 10 Mar 2026, https://www.scribd.com/document/775705806/CRS880-Theology-of-African-Traditional-Religion
[36] John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy,* (New York, Anchor Book, 1970), 76, 78.

the ancestors, gods and the Great God upon the people in the forms of lack of rain, poor harvest, lack of fertility, and poor health.

God in the Picture

The Great God is the Supreme Being in the consciousness of the traditional African worshippers. He is supreme as their creator and sustainer. In a liturgical context, offerings and sacrifices are given to the Great God[37] for Him to eat and drink in a metaphorical sense. The offerings are also given to gods, divinities[38] - spirits, the living-dead or ancestors. However, the second and third categories of recipients, that is, the divine spirits or gods and the ancestors, are acknowledged as the intermediaries between the Great God and humanity. The gift theory is among the four main theories used to explain the meaning and function of the offerings and sacrifices. Other theories are the propitiation, the communion, and the thank-offering theory.[39] The meaning and function of the sacrifices are embedded in the theology of blood in African Traditional Religion. The offerings and sacrifices are made to the Great God through the intermediaries.[40] No one can completely accept these offerings and sacrifices, and grant the petitions of the worshippers apart from the Great God.

Acceptance of the Offerings

There are given requirements for the acceptance of the gift offerings in African Traditional Religion. Basically, for the acceptance of the offerings and sacrifices, there must be existential balance between God and human, the spirits and human, the departed and the

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[37] In many African Societies, God is referred as and prayed to as the Great One and Great God. See Mbiti, 44, 84.
[38] According to Mbiti, every African recognizes God as One. However, according to some cosmologies, there are, besides Him, other divinities and spiritual beings some of whom are closely associated with Him. In some cases, heroes are sometimes so closely associated with God that prayers, offerings and sacrifices are addressed to both God and the hero as if there was no clear distinction. Among the societies who recognize divinities are the Yoruba, Igbo, Akan, Baganda and others. Some of these divinities were once historical figures who have now been elevated to a status higher than that of ordinary spirits. See Mbiti, 46, 214.
[39] Mbiti, 76.
[40] Schadrack Mvunabandi, 326.

living to avoid the experience of misfortunes and sufferings.[41] Acceptable sacrifice before the gods, ancestors, and the Great God must be properly acquired animal or produce and offered with integrity. The efficacy of the rituals depends on right intentions and moral standing of the offerers.[42] For instance, among the Xhosa people in South Africa, when a man brings gift or blood sacrifice, his aim is to please and serve the deity to which the gift is given. If the intention of the giver stirs joyful response in the deity, he receives the favor he is seeking.[43] The beliefs of the African people about God are expressed also in attitudes and acts of worship. In line with this, the offerer must present the gift offerings with right attitude and reverence before the divinities or the Great God. A major requirement to be brought as gift or other offerings is the animal. Some offerings involve the presentations of the animal as a whole, foodstuffs, and other items. In most cases, usually, when offering sacrifices, the animal is killed and the blood is poured before the deities or their representations.[44] It is expected that blood, internal organs, and some external parts of the animals are placed before the images of the gods, for the gods to consume.[45] This information establish that there are requirements for the acceptance of gift offerings in African Traditional Religion.

Comparative Analysis between Genesis 4:3-7 and African Traditional Religion

Some similarities and contrasts can be established between the acceptance of gifts in Genesis 4:3-7 and the acceptance of gifts in African Traditional Religion. It can be seen from Genesis 4:3-7 and the works of the scholars considered above that the God factor connects the background religious philosophies of offering gifts in the two contexts. Moreover, in the light of Christian Mission, the offering of gifts in the two traditions are not adequate to satiate the needs of the offerers in the long run. Christological provisions are needed in the two contexts to satisfy the existential needs of humanity.

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[41] Mbiti, 76.
[42]Oghenechohwuko Blessing Oboh, A Comparative Analysis of the Concept of Sacrifice In Christianity And African Traditional Religion. An Original Essay Submitted to the Department of Religions, Faculty of Arts, University of Benin, Nigeria, (2025), 22, 23, assessed 10 Mar, 2026, https://repository.uniben.edu/sites/default/files/2026-06/ilovepdf_merged%20%281%29.pdf
[43] Schadrack Mvunabandi, 313.
[44] Mbiti, 76, 87.
[45]Schadrack Mvunabandi, 5, 13.

The Supremacy of Yahweh (The Great God)

The supremacy of Yahweh (the Great God) is the foundational common ground for comparisons in Genesis 4 and African Traditional Religion. Schadrack Mvunabandi believes that the practice of Africans to address their sacrifices to the Supreme Being (the Great God) can be positively exploited, since the Supreme-Being in both religious settings would serve as the common denominator.[46] In Genesis 4:3-7, the One to Whom offering is made is Yahweh, the Supreme Being. In African Traditional Religion, the greatest One to Whom offering is made is the Great God, the Supreme Being. In the African Traditional Religion context, the worship of the Great God is promoted, and gifts and offering are given to Him, alongside spirits who act as intermediaries. In the Genesis 4:3-7, the worship of Yahweh is promoted as the only God, and gifts offerings are given to Him. There is no mention of intermediary between the human and Yahweh in Genesis 4. From the above explanations, it can be observed that the Yahweh in Genesis is the same as the Great God in African Traditional Religion. Despite His description or name in both contexts, He is acknowledged as the Supreme One in their gift offerings.

The Interest of Yahweh (The Great God)

The interests of Yahweh in Genesis 4:3-7 can be compared with the interest of the Great God in African Traditional Religion. In Genesis 4:3-7, Yahweh's interest is that the offerers do right as they bring their gift offerings to Him with submissive hearts, right attitudes toward Him and others. Upon these, their offerings will be accepted. Yahweh looks first at the heart before looking at the offering (cf. Isa 1:11-15, Mic 6:6-8). Secondly, the gift offering should contain elements of recognition that Yahweh owns all things, and elements of acceptance of His prescription for the reception of His grace. This can be seen in Abel's act of also offering the fats of first-born animal, which undeniably involves the shedding of the blood of the animal.

In African Traditional Religion, the interest of the Great God is for the offerer to acknowledge that there is no existence apart from Him. This is called existential balance

[46] Schadrack Mvunabandi, 326.

by Mbiti.[47] In this concept of reality, nothing exists in isolation because everything is related to everything else. There are permanent indwelling harmony and balance in existence where everything is interrelated[48] between the physical and the spiritual. In this interrelationship, the Great God is the source and sustainer of life. The search for harmony between values and actions finds meaning in total dependence on the Great God, not just on the intermediaries. So, the offerers bring their gifts ultimately to the Great God for continued existence, sustenance, and survivals. For the gift offerings to be accepted, the offeror must come with the intention to please the deity and stir joyful responses in the divine in order to receive favor. The offerer should come with integrity, the right attitude and reverence before the divinities which are intermediaries between him and the Great God. As an acceptable attitude, the offerer must show sign of surrender, dedication, and that the sacrifice is for substitution before the victim is slain and the blood is poured out.[49] The internal organs, some inner and outer parts are placed before the images of the intermediary deities. The gift offerings must also contain blood.

In ATR, offerings are given to ancestors, divinities, gods, and the Great God. In contrast, offerings are given only to the Great God, that is Yahweh, in Genesis 4. In both traditions, the concepts of moral integrity, positive, humble, pure motive toward the God and fellow humans, and submissive attitude of the offerer come first in divine acceptance before the acceptance of the gift. This is because the worship of the Great God or Yahweh in both contexts does not begin with the offering of gifts or sacrifices. Worship begins with deep conscious positive and affective relationship between the offerer and God. Offerings of gifts is not mechanically or superficially oriented, but out of respect and inner connection with God. This can be seen in the offering presented by Abel in Genesis 4:3-7 and in John Mbiti's observation that in some ways the Africans worship God, "their creeds are within them, in their blood and in their hearts. Their beliefs about God are expressed through

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[47] Mbiti, 76.
[48] Compare with Surendra Pathak, "Relation between Existential harmony and social harmony," accessed 10 Mar 2026, https://www.academia.edu/8432064/Relation_between_Existential_harmony_and_social_harmony.
[49] Victoria Goldiee, "A History of African Blood Rituals," accessed 10 Mar 2026, https://www.thebloodproject.com/a-history-of-african-blood-rituals/

concrete concepts, attitudes and acts of worship."[50] In line with Mbiti's observations, for the Africans, what comes first are not the acts of worship, but the inner consciousness of their commitments with God.

The Theology of Blood

The theology of blood has the same symbolism in the meaning of blood as representing life in both traditions. Originally, sacrifices in Ancient Africa were performed as gifts involving blood rituals to the gods. The blood rituals are prehistoric and involve the death of a victim as an exchange. The blood of the animals serves as the gift.[51] The significance of the blood of the animals is that it symbolizes life.[52] In the words of Ataho Lauben, it is believed that blood releases the vital force that sustains life and as a powerful connection tool between the physical and spiritual realms.[53] In this regard, blood in African Traditional Religion functions as a bond link between worshippers. It also functions for the revitalization of life. Here it is a gift and a vehicle of offering life to another. In this light, it revives the life of the receivers, even the gods, and renews the life of the givers.[54] The gods need to receive blood in order to remain active for the worshippers. This vitality is renewed whenever the blood sacrifices are given to the gods. Blood sacrifices represent giving one's best to the divinity because the divinity is held in high esteem.[55] Other Reasons for the gift of blood to the divinities include the need to protect the community in times of drought, diseases, war, erosion,[56] validation of covenants,[57] blessings from the

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[50] Mbiti, 87.
[51] Victoria Goldiee, "A History of African Blood Rituals," https://www.thebloodproject.com/a-history-of-african-blood-rituals/
[52] JudeMary Ikechukwu Anyigor and Chinenye Olekaibe, "Sacrifice In African Traditional Religion: A Philosophical Overview," *Igboscholars* 15, no. 2 (2022): 4, accessed 6 Aug 2026, https://www.acjol.com/journal/igboscholars/fptun.
[53] Ataho Lauben, "Biblical Theology of Blood: Its Meaning and Significance," *ShahidiHub International Journal of Theology & Religious Studies* 6, no.1 (2026): 70, 71, accessed 6 Aug 2026, https://shahidihub.org/shahidihub/index.php/ijtrs/article/download/373/159
[54] Cornelius Olowola, Sacrifice in African Tradition and in Biblical Perspective, 4. *Theology on the Web.org.uk.*
[55] JudeMary Ikechukwu Anyigor and Chinenye Olekaibe, 4.
[56] JudeMary Ikechukwu Anyigor and Chinenye Olekaibe, 4.
[57] See Cornelius Olowola, 6. In African Traditional Religion, covenants between ethnic groups or communities are ratified with the shedding of blood. In contrast there is no mention of covenant in Genesis 4:3-7. Even in the Old Testament context, there appears to be no covenant between the Israelites and other nations where blood is used for the ratification. The clear covenant involving the use of blood for ratification in the Old Testament is the covenant between Yahweh and His people (Exo 24:5-8).

divinities, atonements, reconciliations, annulling of curses, and cleansing ceremonies,[58] and human quest for power.[59]

Blood is significant in the theology of gifts or sacrifice to Yahweh in the Old Testament. As mentioned above, one of the factors presented by some scholars that qualified the sacrifice of Abel for acceptance in Genesis 4:3-7, is that it contains blood. This is also in line with evidences in the Old Testament where gift offerings involve shedding of animal blood (Jdg 6:18; 1 Sam 2:17). More inclusively, Yahweh declared that the life of the flesh is in the blood (Lev. 17:11). This is similar to African Traditional Religion (ATR) belief that blood symbolizes life and contains the vital force of life. In contrast to the practice of giving the deities and offerers blood to eat to revitalize their lives in ATR, in the Old Testament, blood sacrifice is not for the revitalization of human or Yahweh (Lev 3:17; Ps 50:13).[60] There are strong injunctions against eating of blood by any human in the Old Testament because Yahweh declared that He gave blood to be poured upon the altar to make atonement for humanity because it blood that makes atonement (Lev 17:10-12). Blood is indispensable for the remission of sins (Heb 9:22).

In both the Old Testament and African Traditional Religion, the blood of animals even human, cannot remove any curse or bring atonement. Although the blood of animals cannot remove any sin or curse, they were used in the Old Testament as pointers to God's provision of blood sacrifice for the salvation of humanity (Heb 10:4; 1 John 1:7). The adherents of African Traditional Religion can possibly relate with this. In both contexts, the blood of the animal gift offerings is imperfect in the light of God's gift and provision for humanity's acceptance before Him. The gospel presents the worship of God for both contexts. The offering of animal blood in Abel's gift points in a sense to the sacrifice of Christ in the New Testament. The sacrifice of Jesus, the shedding of his blood is the only means of finding acceptance with God in the long run. For adherents of African Traditional Religion, rather than giving gifts and offerings through intermediaries to the Great God,

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[58] Ataho Lauben, 70, 71.
[59] Stephen Z. Yashim and Emmanuel Umar, "Towards an African Christian Theology of the Blood of Jesus Christ," E-Journal of Religious and Theological Studies 6, no. 4 (2020): 221, accessed 6 Aug 2026, https://noyam.org/journals/erats/ DOI: https://doi.org/10.38159/erats.2020071
[60] Cornelius Olowola, 4.

Jesus Christ is presented as the sacrifice who leads humanity to God. From the Biblical point of view, Jesus Christ is given as the intermediary between the African Traditional human and God, if the African believes (John 3:16; 4; cf. John 14:6). No other offering is needed to obtain favor from God, than what Jesus offered – His blood. According to Mvunabandi, to the African who believes, Jesus' blood sacrifice has automatically discontinued African traditional religious blood sacrifices, because it is superior to them as God's self-sacrifice for all mankind.[61] Humanity in the contexts of Genesis 4:3-7 and African Traditional Religion are invited to abandon their blood gifts and accept Yahweh's (The Great God's) gift of blood in order to be accepted by Him.

Missiological Implications: From Common Grounds to Faithful Contextualization

The comparison between Genesis 4:3-7 and ATR becomes most useful for mission when it is treated neither as proof that the two religious systems are identical nor as a reason to dismiss African religious categories. Instead, the comparison identifies a point of contact – the human desire to approach the divine through gifts, sacrifice, gratitude, petition, and restored relationship, while allowing Scripture to determine the theological meaning of those practices. This approach is consistent with contemporary missiological thinking that calls Christian believers to carefully understand people's worldview while evaluating it in the light of the Scripture. As argued by Paul Heibert, genuine conversion involves not merely changes in behaviour and belief but transformation at the level of worldview itself.[62]

Thus, as discussed above, this study provides a bridge for gospel communication without destroying theological differences. The language of offering, acceptance, sacrifices, and divine-human relationship is intelligible within many African religious contexts and can therefore serve as a beginning point for conversion. However, a missiologically responsible bridge must preserve the decisive distinction identified by this study: in Genesis 4 the acceptance of the worshipper and the offering is located within relationship to Yahweh,

[61] Schadrack Mvunabandi, 325.
[62] See, Paul G. Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews: An Anthropological Understanding of How People Change* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008).

while African traditions contain different understandings of God, divinities, ancestors, sacrifice, and mediation. Therefore, ATRs should not be treated as one uniform system.

Secondly, the Genesis narrative suggests that mission must address the worshipper before discussing the worship practice. Genesis 4:4-7 places the persons and their conduct within the divine evaluation of their offerings. This principle is evident in OT prophets writing that presents God who rejects worship that is separated from justice, mercy, humility, and righteous relationships (cf. Isa 1:11-17; Mic 6:6-8). Consequently, Christian engagement with African religious communities should not reduce evangelism to replacing one ritual with another, rather, people should be called into a transformed relationship with God and fellow humans. Thirdly, the theme of sacrifice creates significant Christological point of contact. In Genesis 4, the acceptance of Abel is interpreted in the NT through faith (Heb 11:4), while the broader biblical sacrificial system reaches its theological climax in Christ's self-offering (Heb 9:11-14, 24-28; 10:1-14). In an African context in which sacrifice may carry meanings of reconciliation, thanksgiving, petition, protection, or restoration, Christian witness can explain why the NT presents Christ as the decisive and sufficient sacrifice rather than condemning sacrifice as culturally unintelligible.[63]

Fourthly, the comparison calls for faithful contextualization rather than unfaithful accommodation. Adventist missiology recognizes contextualization as the intentional and discriminating communication of the gospel in culturally meaningful ways.[64] However, contextualization must remain faithful to Scripture and resist syncretism, thus, concepts such as gift, sacrifice, blood, mediation, ancestor, and divine favour require careful examination[65]. So, where an African cultural symbol communicates a biblical truth without contradicting Scripture, it may provide a valuable bridge, but where a practice presupposes a theology contrary to the gospel, it should not be retained because it is culturally familiar.

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[63] See, Y. S. Han and J. Beyers, "A Critical Evaluation of the Understanding of God in John S. Mbiti's Theology," *Acts Theologies*, vol. 37, no. 2 (2017), accessed 7 Aug 2026, https://doi.org/10.18820/23099089/actat.v37i2.2.
[64] Carlos G. Martin, "Contextualization," *Encyclopedia of Seventh-day Adventists*, November 27, 2021, accessed 7 Aug 2026, https://encyclopedia.adventist.org/article?id=6FN6.
[65] Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews*.

Fifthly, mission should move from comparison to listening and dialogue. This study calls Christian witnesses, pastors, and theologians to engage local interpreters and knowledgeable African voices in the process of contextualization. This makes mission a dialogical process in which Christians learn how a community itself understands sacrifice, gift, reconciliation, obligation, blessing, and danger before presenting the gospel in response. Sixthly, this study has implications for Adventist discipleship and teaching. In recognition that new believers from traditional religious backgrounds may understand Christian worship through categories inherited from their former worldview, a strong discipleship process that provide biblical teaching surrounding Christian worship should be established, while also allowing believers to articulate the meanings attached to their former practices.[66]

Lastly, the missiological significance of Genesis 4 lies not in finding similarities between two sacrificial systems but in identifying the deeper question behind them – what kind of relationship with God constitutes acceptable worship? This principle of contextualization is thus relevant in answering this question.[67] Therefore, in the African context the language of gift and sacrifice may open an important doorway for explaining grace, reconciliation, worship, and the sufficiency of Christ.

Conclusion

This article concludes that to "do well" in Genesis 4 does not begin with the nature of gifts offered or how the gifts are offered to Yahweh, but the submissive condition and moral purity of the heart before Him, and the right attitude towards Him and fellow humanity. The paper submits that this is the first required *ytv* (to do well) for the acceptance of gift offering by Yahweh in Genesis 4:3-7. However, the offering of blood and fat of the first born has its significant place in the text.

The article also argues that there are comparative elements in the acceptance of gifts and offerings between Genesis 4:3-7 and ATR. However, the comparison should not be

[66] See, Hiebert, Transforming Worldviews., Hiebert argued that conversion must reach the underlying worldview rather than change outward behaviour.
[67] Carlos G. Martin, "Toward a Faithful Contextualization," ," *Estrategias para el Cumplimiento de la Misión*, vol. 20, no. 1 (2022): 53–83, accessed 7 Aug 2026, https://doi.org/10.17162/recm.v20i1.1680.

understood as suggesting that the worship of Yahweh in Genesis 4:3-7 and the various expressions of ATR is theologically identical. ATR is diverse, with different African people expressing their understanding of God, divinities, ancestors, sacrifice, and religious obligation in distinctive ways. Consequently, the common grounds identified in this study should be regarded as points of contact for theological dialogue and not proof of equivalence between the two religious systems. This distinction is important for responsible Christian mission in Africa and Adventist missiological reflection of communicating the gospel in culturally meaningful ways while preserving the authority of the Bible and avoiding syncretism.

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CHAPTER 15

HERMENEUTIC SEMANTICS OF אֱלֹהִים IN 1 SAMUEL 28:13 AND SÉANCE SPIRIT FIGURES IN MAINSTREAM CULTURAL AFRICAN FUNERAL BROCHURES

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Abstract

This study examines the hermeneutic semantics of אֱלֹהִים *(ʾĕlōhîm) in 1 Samuel 28:13 and explores its theological implications for expressions concerning the deceased in contemporary African funeral brochures. The identity of the figure encountered during Saul's consultation with the medium at Endor remains contested, with interpretations ranging from the deceased Samuel and divine intervention to psychological illusion and demonic impersonation. Addressing this interpretive problem, the study employs an exegetical method incorporating grammatical-syntactical analysis, lexical-semantic investigation, textual-witness analysis, and intratextual, intertextual, and extratextual comparisons. Particular attention is given to the semantic range of ʾĕlōhîm within the necromantic context of 1 Samuel 28:13 and related biblical and ancient Near Eastern materials. The study further examines thirty-eight anonymized funeral brochures, particularly those associated with Seventh-day Adventist contexts in Nigeria, to assess expressions that imply communication with, continued consciousness of, or spiritual activity by the deceased. The exegetical analysis argues that ʾĕlōhîm in the séance setting should not be identified with Yahweh or the deceased Samuel but is best understood as a supernatural, deceptive, or malevolent spiritual entity within the broader canonical treatment of necromancy. The funeral-brochure analysis identifies recurring expressions involving second-person addresses to the deceased, prayers and goodwill messages for the dead, language of spatial transition, assertions concerning final destiny, rites implying the living-dead, post-burial rituals, and concepts of befitting or second burial. The study concludes that language implying conscious post-mortem interaction or direct communication with the deceased is inconsistent with the biblical interpretation of death advanced in the study and calls for funeral discourse that expresses grief, memory, and Christian hope without addressing the dead as active participants.*

Keywords: *ʾĕlōhîm; 1 Samuel 28:13; necromancy; séance; African funeral brochures; biblical hermeneutics; death; spiritualism.*

INTRODUCTION

> Spiritualism which is a respectable name for man's concern and endeavour to establish communication with the deceased . . . is growing strong in influence in Europe and America in spite of all that has been written to debunk it. There is the general belief . . . (anywhere, everywhere, in the world and with peoples at every level of development) that communion and communication are possible between those who are alive on earth and the deceased.[1]

In certain parts of the world, this practice is pertinent with the interaction between the deceased and the bereaved in somewhat symbiotic necessity tradition−whereby there is mutual expectation of ensuring a befitting burial of the dead thereby earning him a good place in the world of the dead "and increase his prestige."[2] Also in the church world, "during the High Middle Ages the Medieval through penance [bears upon those who are living on earth] an obligation in the outcome of the temporary purgation"[3] of those who have gone to live in the spirit world. "Today not only in Africa but around the world, a growing number of people consult mediums or witches in order to . . . contact the dead."[4] Ours is a society in whose very fabrics is fraught the belief that discussion takes place between the quick and them that sleep in the dust, as the two groups are referred to in the Scripture. Of all the scriptural passages appealed to by those who affirm as well as those who refute the concept of the dead conversing with the living, 1 Samuel 28 has received much more attention. "Ever since the application of a number of Hittite texts dealing with rituals for consulting the spirit of the dead, the details of Saul's encounter with the woman at Endor has been the focus of much attention of particular interest is that the woman describes what she sees as *ʾĕlōhîm*, which in the Old Testament is usually translated

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[1]E. Bolaji Idowu, *African Traditional Religion: A Definition* (SCM Press, 1973), 179, 182.
[2]E. Geoffrey Parrinder, *African Traditional Religion* (London: Sheldon, 1962), 62.
[3]Niels-Erik A. Andreason, "Death: Origin, Nature, and Final Eradication," in *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology, vol. 12* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2000), 338-339.
[4]Ēriks Galenieks, "When the King Himself Goes to a Witch: The Deadly Dangers of Syncretism," in *Culture, Adventist Theology, and Mission in Africa,* eds. Sampson M. Nwaomah, Ēriks Galenieks, and Davidson Razafiarivony, Adventist University of Africa Theological Seminary, Nairobi Kenya (2016:377).

'God.'"[5] Meanwhile, the passage refers to this *ʾĕlōhîm*, as "Samuel" at least four times (1 Samuel 28:12, 15, 16, 20). This has given birth to the questions of identity regarding who this *ʾĕlōhîm* that communed with the First Hebrew Monarch was. Does a demon have power over the soul of Yahweh's prophets? Which righteous after departing life would want to be at the mercy of a minor demon to be conjured up by witches and wizards at will? "It seems to undermine the omnipotence of God if a witch can cause the shade of Samuel to leave the world of the dead once God has withdrawn the life from him."[6] Does God work with Satan? The concern is: was he actually the demised last Judge of Israel or someone else? "Even a controversial text such as 1 Samuel 28 remains at best ambiguous regarding the nature of the Samuel figure and any sense of approval of this by the narrator."[7]

> First Samuel 28 presents the subject of intense debate in our modern times: can the dead communicate with the living? Was the woman actually able to raise up the righteous dead? Did the medium actually make contact with a *living spirit-being,* and, if so, was it actually the prophet Samuel? Does Satan have power over the saints? Or was her craft one of mere illusion? Was Samuel resuscitated or was this a demon? Did Samuel appear because of the necromancer's craft or did God intervene and raise Samuel himself?[8]

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[5]John H. Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament: Introducing the Conceptual World of the Hebrew Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academics, 2006), 325.
[6]Francesca Aran Murphy, "1 Samuel," *Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible,* ed. R. R. Reno (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2010), 269.
[7]Richard S. Hess, *The Old Testament: A Historical, Theological, and Critical Introduction* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2016), 256.
[8]Ēriks Galenieks, "When the King Himself Goes to a Witch," 379.

In a nutshell, all the above questions could be stated in simple terms that while existing scholarship on this narrative frequently debates the possibility and identity of the conjured spirit figure only on the framework of biblical theology, the specific identity of this *ʾĕlōhîm* remains inadequately explored within its explicit séance context. This gap is further compounded on the fact that there is "the sense of mystery within the account and the many unanswered questions are almost certainly an intentional strategy on the part of the writers [sic]."[9] Consequently, this work maintains that deciphering the true identity of the spirit who spoke with Saul requires a painstaking engagement of the term *ʾĕlōhîm* semantically but strictly within necromantic contexts. This paper proposes to conduct a study of the *ʾĕlōhîm* figure in séance settings. It also gives itself to juxtaposing its findings to the identity of spirit figures in every attempt of the living to commune with the dead. To successfully carry this out, an exegetical research method is employed, in cognizance with grammatical-syntactical analysis, lexical-semantic study, intratextual/intertextual/extratextual comparisons. The biblical findings on the séance figure are evaluated against mainstream African funeral-brochure materials to consider their theological implications.

The passage for the study is appropriate since 1 Samuel 28 has been described as a "classical example of necromancy,"[10] a "focus of much attention" on the debate of communication between the living and the dead,[11] and "excellent example of communication with the spirit of the dead."[12] The successful outcome of this study will not only be helpful in giving a contextual interpretation to the identity of the term *ʾĕlōhîm* in its séance milieu, but equally prove useful in educating on ensuring biblical appropriateness of expressions in talking about death instead of addresses directed towards the dead. The work is delimited to the identity of the spirit figure *ʾĕlōhîm* in its necromantic setting and not to the entire narrative.

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[9]Mary J. Evans, "1 and 2 Samuel," [28:11-20] *Understanding the Bible Commentary Series,* ed. W. Ward Gasque, Robert L. Hubbard Jr., and Robert K. Johnson (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books), 125.
[10]Ēriks Galenieks, "When the King Himself Goes to a Witch," 380.
[11]Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament,* 325.
[12]Ēriks Galenieks, "When the King Himself Goes to a Witch," 380.

General Section and Pericope

The macro-narrative block of reading runs from 1 Samuel 26:24-28:23 as indicated by the *sefer* paragraph marker. This narrative presents Saul's decline and David rise to power; a juxtaposition preempting Saul's alienation from Yahweh, and theologically appears to posit that God and His late prophet did not participate in the illicit transaction at Endor. The pericopes of this section are: 1 Samuel 26:25 with *petucha*; 27:1-4 with *setuma*; 5-6; 7-12; 28:1-2 with *petucha*; 3-14; 15; 16-23 with *setuma*.[13] Our pericope of study falls under 28:3-14 where Saul met a female medium to conjure up Samuel. The *crux interpretum* is in 28:13, where the being brought forth was identified as *ʾelōhîm* by the necromancer, who is the only one seeing him.

Structural Analysis and Translation of Sentences

1 Samuel 28:13 has two Hebrew sentences with six clauses in the verse, the sentence are marked by the presence of two disjunctives—the *atnaḥ* and *silluq*. The first is in 13a which reads: *וַיֹּאמֶר לָהּ הַמֶּלֶךְ אַל תִּירְאִי כִּי מָה רָאִית* (And the king said to her, "fear not, for what do you see?"). It contains the predicate, indirect objects (the complement), subject, and the object. The second sentence is in 13b and reads *וַתֹּאמֶר הָאִשָּׁה אֶל שָׁאוּל אֱלֹהִים רָאִיתִי עֲלִים מִן הָאָרֶץ* (and the woman said unto Saul, I see godlike figure ascending from below). It contains the second predicate, subject, indirect object (complement), as well as the direct object (in a clausal chain of direct object, predicate, adjectival participle, prepositional phrase functioning adverbially (locative).[14] The structure reveals that the identity of the séance figure is central to the verse:

A. And the king said to her, 13a
  B. "Fear not, for what do you see?" 13a
  B[1] I see godlike figure ascending from below 13b

[13]*Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*, ed. Karl Elliger and Wilhelm Rudolph, 5th ed. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1997), 469-499.
[14]See 1 Samuel 28:13 in https://marble.bible/text?book=1+Samuel&chapter=28&verse=1; Bill T. Arnold and John H. Choi, *A Guide to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (New York: Cambridge University, 2003), 68.

A[1] And the woman said unto Saul 13b

Thus, the translation made by the work is:

וַיֹּאמֶר לָהּ הַמֶּלֶךְ אַל תִּירְאִי כִּי מָה רָאִית וַתֹּאמֶר הָאִשָּׁה אֶל שָׁאוּל אֱלֹהִים רָאִיתִי עֹלִים מִן הָאָרֶץ׃

And the king said to her, "fear not, for what do you see?" And the woman said unto Saul, "I see a godlike figure ascending from below."[15]

Morphosyntactic Analysis and Genre

In the first sentence, *וַיֹּאמֶר לָהּ הַמֶּלֶךְ אַל תִּירְאִי כִּי מָה רָאִית,* the predicate *וַיֹּאמֶר* is a *Qal* Imperfect, 3rd person, Masculine, Singular verb prefixed with a *waw*-consecutive which is typical in narratives (now he said).[16] This is immediately followed by an inseparable preposition appended to a 3rd person feminine singular pronominal suffix *לָהּ* (to her). Following suit is its definite article prefixed to a masculine singular noun as the subject *הַמֶּלֶךְ* (the king) strictly adhering to standard biblical Hebrew word order; the subject is an absolute noun and is the subject of the predicate (verb). Put together, it reads, *Now, the king said to her*. The next is the direct object in jussive negation *אַל תִּירְאִי* in the *Qal* Imperfect, 2nd person, Feminine, Singular verb ("fear not," actually *stop being afraid*). Then a clausal conjunctive *כִּי* (for) and interrogative pronoun *מָה* (what) with *Qal* Perfect, 2nd person, Feminine, Singular verb *רָאִית* (you have seen). The line together reads, "for what have you seen?"

The second sentence *וַתֹּאמֶר הָאִשָּׁה אֶל שָׁאוּל אֱלֹהִים רָאִיתִי עֹלִים מִן הָאָרֶץ׃* begins also with the predicate *וַתֹּאמֶר,* a *Qal* Imperfect, 3rd person, Feminine, Singular verb prefixed with a *waw*-consecutive which is typical in narratives (and she responded).[17] Following after, is its feminine singular noun as the subject prefixed with a definite article *הָאִשָּׁה* (the woman) in accordance with standard Hebrew word order; this subject is absolute noun and is the subject of the predicate (verb). This put together would read, *And the woman replied*. The next is the indirect object of the verb, *אֶל שָׁאוּל* a directional preposition and an absolute masculine singular proper noun (unto Saul). The next phrase *אֱלֹהִים רָאִיתִי עֹלִים מִן הָאָרֶץ* is the direct object of the predicate. It contains a fronting the nominal element אֱלֹהִים (*'ĕlōhîm*)

[15]Saul understood as singular in the next verse.
[16]Kelly, *Biblical Hebrew*, 86.
[17]Ibid, 128.

for thematic emphasis (godlike figure), then the predicate in response in the *Qal* Perfect, 1st person common singular verb *רָאִיתִי* (I have seen).[18] Then the masculine plural *Qal* active participle absolute *עֹלִים* (ascending),[19] with the preposition *מִן* (from), and locative prepositional phrase prefixed with a definite article *הָאָרֶץ* (the ground). Together, this would be rendered, "I see a godlike figure ascending from below."

Textual Witness Analysis

For 1 Samuel 28:13, the following are ancient textual witnesses:

MT—*וַיֹּאמֶר לָהּ הַמֶּלֶךְ אַל תִּירְאִי כִּי מָה רָאִית וַתֹּאמֶר הָאִשָּׁה אֶל שָׁאוּל אֱלֹהִים רָאִיתִי עֹלִים מִן הָאָרֶץ׃*

*(*And the king said to her, "fear not, for what do you see?" And the woman said unto Saul, "I see a godlike figure ascending from below.*")*

LXX—καὶ εἶπεν αὐτῇ ὁ βασιλεύς μὴ φοβοῦ, εἰπὸν τίνα ἑόρακας. καὶ εἶπεν αὐτῷ Θεοὺς ἑόρακα ἀναβαίνοντας ἐκ τῆς γῆς.

(And the king said to her, "fear not, tell me, whom have you seen?" And she said to him, "I have seen a godlike figure ascending from the ground.")

Targum— וַאֲמַר לָהּ מַלְכָּא לָא תִדְחֲלִין אֲרֵי מָה חָזִית וַאֲמַרת אִתְּתָא לְשָׁאוּל מַלְאָכָא דַיְיָ חֲזֵיתִי דְסָלִיק מִן אַרְעָא׃

(The king said to her, "Fear not. What do you see?" And the woman said to Saul, "I see the angel of the LORD, ascending from below.")

Peshitta— ܘܐܡܪ ܠܗ ܡܠܟܐ ܠܐ ܬܕܚܠܝܢ ܐܪܡܐ ܡܐ ܚܙܝܬ ܘܐܡܪܬ ܐܬܬܐ ܠܫܐܘܠ ܐܠܗܐ ܚܙܝܬ ܕܣܠܩ ܡܢ ܐܪܥܐ ܀

(And the king said to her, "Do not fear; for what did you see?" And the woman said to Shaul, "I saw godlike figures ascending from the ground.")

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[18]See Kelly, *Biblical Hebrew*, 85,

[19]See 1 Samuel 28:13 in https://marble.bible/text?book=1+Samuel&chapter=28&verse=1; Bill T. Arnold and John H. Choi, *A Guide to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (New York: Cambridge University, 2003), 68.

The Septuagint has removed the conjunctive כִּי in the Masoretic Text of 28:13 replacing it with εἶπεν or εἶπε. This now read, "tell me, whom have you seen?" instead of "for what do you see?" Typical of the Targum, there is a commentary which reads "the angel of the LORD" for *ʾĕlōhîm*. However, this work adopts the Masoretic Text as the most reliable, as has been attested[20] and in the witnesses of other ancient versions of 1 Samuel 28:13.

EXTRA TEXTUAL PARALLELS

There are ancient Near Eastern parallels to the practice itself;[21] in Akkadian texts, the spirit of a deceased person, *etemmu* were believed to reside in the netherworld and could be coaxed or pulled up to the surface. Texts from Mesopotamia (such as ritual texts for invoking ghosts or the *Descent of Ishtar to the Netherworld*) describe the practice of *kispum* (feeding the dead) and evoking spirits through pits or openings in the earth. The imagery of a spirit "ascending" (*alāmu*/coming up)[22] parallels the medium's description of Samuel rising from the ground. In Ugaritic texts from ancient Syria/Canaan, the dead—especially royal or deified ancestors—are referred to as *rpum* (Rephaim) or associated with divine powers residing below. Canaanite mythology placed the abode of Mot and the dead deep beneath the crust of the earth, requiring a literal upward transit for any prophetic consultation, mirroring the physical description in verse 13.[23] The Gilgamesh Epic provides important evidence for Mesopotamian ideas concerning the continuing existence of something from the human person after death. The relevant episode concerns Gilgamesh and Enkidu; like Enkidu's ghost emerging from the netherworld.[24]

In these parallels, Samuel was portrayed in the scripture as an ancestor whom Saul intends to conjure and consult. But it must be noted that there is an important distinction. The narrative does not simply replicate the ancient Near East necromancy. Saul's consultation

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[20]Ernest Wurthwein, *The Text of the Old Testament: An Introduction to Biblia Hebraica*, 2nd ed. Rev. and enlarged, transl. Eroll F. Rhodes (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 29; Paul R. House, *Old Testament Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 56-57.
[21]Victor H. Matthews and Don C. Benjamin, *Old Testament Parallels: Laws and Stories from the Ancient Near East*, rev. and exp. (New York, NJ: Paulist Press, 1991), 112.
[22]James B. Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, 3rd ed. with supplements (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969), 108.
[23]S. Fischer, "1 Samuel 28: The woman of Endor who is she and what does Saul see?" Old Testament Essays, vol. 14, No. 1 (2001) 29. Accessed September 9, 2026.
[24]Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, 98.

of the medium was presented as an illicit practice which places it in tension with Israel's prohibition of consulting the dead (Deut. 18:10–12; Lev. 19:31; 20:6, 27). Chronicles 10:13 explains that "Saul died for his unfaithfulness . . . and also for consulting a medium" not consulting Yahweh or His late prophet. There are also Egyptian magical texts in which the living seek assistance from supernatural beings or the dead. So, Egypt provides an African cultural parallel for interaction between living humans and the deceased, although it is less directly parallel to the Endor episode than Mesopotamian and Ugaritic material.

SCHOLARLY PERSPECTIVES

Based on the history of scholarship on this issue, the taxonomy of opinions regarding who appeared at Endor has been classified as follows:

The fact that there are at least seven views concerning the event shows how divided the scholarly world is. They see in the passage (1) a real event of raising Samuel by means of necromancy; (2) the witch presenting a deception; (3) God causing either Samuel or a demon to appear; (4) a demon acting apart from god to deceive; (5) a vision coming as the result of hallucinatory drug; (6) a vision induced psychologically, and/or (7) Satan himself impersonating the Prophet Samuel.[25]

Philbeck states that "Samuel is portrayed as a spirit, roused out of his slumber in Shoel where existence was seen as a state of weakness and forgetfulness (Psalm 88:4, 12)."[26] To Reis, Samuel "the Lord's majesty" was actually invoked.[27] Branick calls the figure, "the

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[25] Ēriks Galenieks, "When the King Himself Goes to a Witch," 379.

[26]Ben F. Philbeck, *"1-2 Samuel,"* in 1 Samuel-Nehemiah, Broadman Bible Commentary 3, ed Clifton J. Allen (Nashville, TN:1970), 81; see also Robert D Bergen, "1, 2 Samuel," *The New American Commentary: An Exegetical and Theological Exposition of the Holy Scripture-New International Version,* ed. E. Ray Clendenen (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing, 1996), 7:268; Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology,* vol. 1 (New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1957), 276; H. H. Rowley, *The Faith of Israel* (London, UK: SCM Press, 1956), 156.

[27]Pamela Tamarkin Reis, *Reading the Lines: A Fresh Look at the Hebrew Bible* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2002), 156; See also, Robert R. Wilson, *Prophecy and Society in Ancient Israel* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1980), 182; J. Cheryl Exum and J. William Whedbee, "Isaac, Samson, and Saul: Reflections on the Comic and Tragic Visions," in *On Humour and Comic in the Hebrew Bible,* ed. Yahuda T. Radday and Athalya Brenner (Sheffield, England: Almond Press, 1990), 141; Daniel I. Block, "Deborah Among the Judges: The Perspective of the Hebrew Historian," in *Faith, Tradition and History,* ed. A. R. Millard, J. K. Hoffmeier and D. W. Baker (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1996), 250.

dead Samuel;"[28] and Merrill believed that "she conjured up the deceased Samuel. . . . It is obvious that God commanded Samuel to appear, even using the witch as a medium in this unusual circumstance, to give Saul a final revelation of his and his nation's destiny."[29] Hilderbrandt sees "Samuel's specter;"[30] and West "the shade of Samuel."[31] Motyer holds that "Samuel 'disturbed' by the mediumistic activities of the witch of Endor, was the same Samuel who had spoken to Saul in his lifetime on earth—recognizable, speaking of himself in personal terms, unchanged in sentiment from Samuel of old(1 Sa. 28:14-17)."[32] To Gordon, "the ghost of Samuel is not brought down from heaven but raised from the Underworld by a specialist (the Witch of Endor), and Samuel resents being disturbed (1 Sam 28:7-25).[33] Bandstra believes "the spirit of Samuel appeared before him [Saul]. . . . Samuel only confirmed his YHWH's earlier rejection of the benighted king."[34] To Wood, it "was apparently a resulting supernatural appearance of Samuel."[35]

MacDonald supports the idea that "God interrupted the séance unexpectedly by allowing the *real* **Samuel** to appear." This he believes because "the medium was startled by the sudden appearance of Samuel in place of the familiar spirits with whom she was used to dealing. Also, the text specifies that **it was Samuel**. Finally, the **spirit** prophesied accurately what would happen the following day."[36] This line of thought was earlier propagated among some church fathers, that God caused the real prophet to appear; even Justin Martyr believes this: "That the souls survive, I have proven to you from the fact that

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[28]Vincent P. Branick, *Understanding the Historical Books of the Old Testament* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2011), 60.

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[?]Eugene H. Merrill, *An Historical Survey of the Old Testament,* 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1991), 200

[30]Wilf Hilderbrandt, *An Old Testament Theology of the Spirit of God* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2002), 121.

[31]James King West, *Introduction to the Old Testament,* 2nd ed. (New York, NY: Macmillan Publishing Co, 1981), 231.

[32]Alec Motyer, *Look to the Rock: An Old Testament Background to Our Understanding of Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 140.

[33]Cyrus H. Gordon, "The Background of Some Distinctive Values in the Hebrew Bible,*"* in *Go to the Land I Will Show You: Studies in Honor of Dwight W. Young,* ed. Joseph Coleson and Victor Matthews (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1996), 68.

[34]Barry L. Bandstra, *Reading the Old Testament: Introduction to the Hebrew Bible,* 4th ed. (Belmont, CA, Wadsworth, 2009), 251, 252.

[35]Leon Wood, *A Survey of Israel's History* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1970), 252.

[36]William MacDonald, "1 Samuel," *Believer's Bible Commentary: A Complete Bible Commentary in One Volume,* ed. Art Farstad (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1995), 319.

the soul of Samuel itself had been called up by the witch as Saul requested."[37] Origen on his bid to set forth the full significance of Christ's redemption, held that souls even of the righteous, including Samuel and Abraham, were in hell before the resurrection of Christ. To him, Samuel actually came up from hell at the intervention of God. Augustine changing his earlier view also joined this group and even cited Moses' appearance during the Transfiguration as evidence that the real Samuel came up at the summon of God Himself.[38] To Arnold and Beyer, "the text seems to indicate Samuel actually did appear. The passage calls the figure Samuel, and he certainly spoke with Samuel's authority."[39] Michell gives detail but concurs with Philbeck's opinion:

> The story of the witch of Endor has occasioned much discussion among divines; some contend that the soul of Samuel did not actually appear to the summons of the necromancer; that the woman was merely a cunning impostor, and played on the credulity of Saul, being well acquainted with his peculiar position and the state of his affairs, while the voice of Samuel might possibly have been imitated, or have seemed to proceed from the ground through the power of ventriloquism. On the other hand, many learned commentators are of the opinion that Samuel really made himself visible to the Hebrew monarch, the woman either, through her powerful art, evoking his spirit, or the spirit being permitted by heaven to appear for an especial purpose to Saul, at once pronouncing his doom as a punishment for his crimes, and proving to the heathen world the immortality of the soul. Josephus maintains the belief that the prophet arose from hades; Dr. Hales, in his 'New Analysis of Chronology,' writes in favour of the real appearance, and is supported by the ancient Jewish Church; indeed, the

[37]Murphy, "1 Samuel," 261.
[38]Ibid, 264-265, 267.
[39]Bill T. Arnold and Bryan E. Beyer, *Encountering the Old Testament*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1999), 205; see also William Sanford Lasor, David Allan Hubbard and Frederic Wm. Bush, *Old Testament Survey: The Message, Form, and Background of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1982), 241.

> passage in Scripture seems most certainly to warrant such a view of the subject.[40]

"What about this conjuring up a ghost? The footnote here says that God may permit a departed soul to appear to the living and disclose things unknown to them. But the apparition would have been due, not to the summons of the witch, but to God's will."[41] Routledge somewhat gives in to the opinion that the Late Prophet actually *came up*:

> The appearance of Samuel to Saul at Endor (1 Sam. 28:3-19) may be seen as an exception. When Saul asks the medium to call up the dead prophet, Samuel is depicted as *coming up out of the ground* (v. 13), which may suggest he returned from Shoel. However, the term *sëĕʾôl* does not appear, and the expression may point only to Samuel coming out of the grave. The story does suggest that the dead were thought to continue to exist in some form, it may even point to an alternative of Shoel (see discussion below, but there is no explanation of the nature or quality of that existence.[42]

However, this figure was only seen as a demoniac appearance by some groups of the church fathers. Like Eustathius who later opposed Origen, holding "that the apparition of Samuel must have been a demonic delusion, would claim that his words to Saul could not be the prophet speaking" since he did not outrightly condemn the abominable idolatry of necromancy.[43] Others hold that "*Elohim* does not signify gods here, nor yet God; still less an angel or a ghost, or even a person of superior rank, but a celestial (super-terrestrial), heavenly, or spiritual being."[44] Atkinson maintains that "the dead Samuel may have been

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[40]Nicholas Michell, *Spirits of the Past: An Historical Poem in Three Books* (Cheapside, London: William Tegg and Co., 1853), 330.

[41]John F. Fink, Introducing the Old Testament: An Overview of its Contents and its Message (Staten Island, NY: St Paul, 2015), 55; See also *The KJV Parallel Bible Commentary*, ed. Edward E. Hindson and Woodrow Michael Kroll (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1994), 586; Ronald F. Youngblood, "1 and 2 Samuel," *The Expositor's Bible Commentary with the New International Version* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1992), 3:781.

[42]Robin Routledge, *Old Testament Theology: A Thematic Approach* (Downers Groove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008), 305.

[43]Ibid, 266

[44] Karl Fredreich Keil and Franz Delitzsch, "Judges 6:33 to Ezra," *Old Testament Commentaries*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Associated Publishers and Authors, n. d.), 324.

impersonated by a demon, as happens at many séances today. The woman said that she saw 'gods ascending out of the earth.' We must remember that Saul never saw anything. He only heard what the medium said to him. If she was in fact in touch with a demon, this would account for Saul's demoralization and death the next day."[45]

Walton's citation "suggests alternatively that the *ʾĕlōhîm* the woman refers to is the deity who has retrieved Samuel's spirit from the netherworld, as in necromancy the god Shamash was considered the one who would make sure that the spirit that was summoned was the one who came."[46] Hess believes that Saul "finds a woman who conjures up a form of the dead Samuel."[47] The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary gives two possible identifications of this Samuel, namely:

> 'Judges' (Ex. 21:6; 22:8, 9). It is possible that the word should be so translated here, thus making the woman say, 'I see judges ascending from the earth.' This would be in harmony with the identification of Samuel as a judge. Though the woman used the plural form, Saul seems to have understood the singular, for he questioned, 'What form is *he* of?' On the other hand, she may have used the word in its more common sense, 'gods.'[48]

Categorization of these opinions reveals that the views on the identity of this spirit figure ranges from the judge Samuel returning to life, the spirit of the dead Samuel, the deity who was requested of the witch to retrieve Samuel's ghost from the netherworld, Saul's imaginative illusion and hallucination, a spirit send by God, God Himself, Satan or demon personifying Samuel. Though there is no consensus on the actual identity of the spirit figure yet, he cannot be this as well as the other simultaneously. An evaluation of these studies reveal that there still lacks an identification of the séance figure based on an exclusive study of *ʾĕlōhîm* in the context of necromancy. As the work seeks a resolution, whatever the

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[?]Basil F. C. Atkinson, *Life and Immortality: An Examination of the Nature and Meaning of Life and Death as they are Revealed in the Scriptures* (Tauton, England: Phoenix, 1969), in Ēriks Galenieks, "When the King Himself Goes to a Witch," 392.
[46]Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament,* 325.
[47] Hess, *The Old Testament,* 244.
[48]"Gods" [1 Samuel], *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, rev. ed., ed. Francis D. Nichol, (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 1976-1980), 2:587.

outcome of the investigation, it is evident that a hermeneutic semantic discussion and exegetical interpretation of the term in its séance milieu are "essential for understanding the biblical text."[49]

HERMENEUTIC SEMANTICS OF אֱלֹהִים IN SÉANCE MILIEU

This exegetical consideration delimits itself with the study of *ʾĕlōhîm* in the context of necromancy only and not in its generality, as that would be beyond the ambience of the research's focus. Foremost, it ought to be noted that the exact Hebrew lexeme of *ʾĕlōhîm* is not attested outside of the OT, not in the ANE texts.[50] However, in its general sense, the semantic range of אֱלֹהִים includes "the true God" (more than 2500 times); frequently false gods (e.g Gen. 35:2; Exod. 12:12; 20:3; 32:4). The KJV thrice rendered it 'judges' (Exod. 21:6; 22:8, 9).[51] Apart from the general use of the divine name to refer to the true and only God, deities and gods, idols, strange or foreign gods, once for kings and sometimes for judges−a contextual study of the term in its séance setting gives particular and distinct identity of *ʾelohim*.

"***ʾElohim*** is the Heb. plural (*Elohiḿ*, אֱלֹהִים), of which the sing. form אֱלוֹהַּ , Elóäh, is also employed to designate in general any deity, but likewise the true God. . . . the plur. *Elohim* is sometimes used in its ordinary sense of *gods*, whether true or false . . . Exod. xxxii, 17; . . . or distinctly of actual deity, Isa xlv, 14, 21; once of *kings* (Psa. lxxxii, 1 . . .); . . . *judges* (Exod. xxi, 6; xxii, 7, 8)."[52] Thus, the term is used for either of the cohorts of good or evil beings in the context of the Great Controversy. Brown, Driver, and Briggs (BDB),

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[49]Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament,* 325.

[50] Terence E. Fretheim, "אֱלֹהִים," *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*, ed. Willem A. VanGameren (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1997), 1:405; W. H. Schimdt, "אֱלֹהִים," *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament*, ed. Ernest Jenni and Clause Westermann, transl. Mark E. Biddle (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1997), 1:118.

[51]*The Baker Illustrated Bible Dictionary,* ed. Tremper Longman III (2013), s. v. "Elohim;" Ēriks Galenieks, "When the King Himself Goes to a Witch," 388.

[52]Encyclopedia of biblical, Theological, and Ecclesiastical Literature, vol III (Harpers and Brothers, McClintock and Strong), 169; John I. McLaughlin, "Elohim," *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. David Noel Freeman (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2000), 401; Christopher J. H. Wright, "Names of God," *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia,* ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1982), 2:505.

after chain-references for these already mentioned semantic nuances of the term, additionally see *ʾĕlōhîm* to also refer to *idol*, Exod. 32:1, 23; and *strange or foreign gods*, 2 Chron. 32:14; Ps 96:5.[53]

"As for its linguistic support, *ʾĕlōhîm* means 'divine beings' in 1 Samuel 28:13, though the TNIV renders it 'a ghostly figure.' . . . [It could also be rendered] 'numinous figure.'"[54] In the very words of the medium: *ʾelohim raʾimthi ʿolim min-haʾarets* ('I see gods coming up out of the earth,' v. 13). But this usually plural noun employs a plural verb, '*olim,* further authenticating its number. The Monarch inquired, כִּי מָה רָאִית ("for what have you seen?"). As noted above, this is clausal conjunctive כִּי (for) and interrogative pronoun מָה (what) with *Qal* Perfect, 2nd person, Feminine, Singular verb רָאִית (you have seen). The line together reads, "for what have you seen?" She replied, אֱלֹהִים רָאִיתִי עֹלִים מִן הָאָרֶץ (I see a godlike figure ascending from below). "אֱלֹהִים is plural in form, but normally functions as a singular noun. However, it may also function as a plural noun, accompanied by plural modifiers and plural verb forms. This usually occurs when reference is being made to the 'gods' of the nation."[55] In this passage, the term is followed a plural verb form עֹלִים, and as such should have been taken as a plural noun with the implication that more than one being actually was brought up. But in the next verse, the king seems to understand it in the singular sense when he further inquired, וַיֹּאמֶר לָהּ מַה־תָּאֳרוֹ (then he asked her, "what is his form?").[56] Therefore, though cast in the plural sense, it is to be understood in the singular, it has to be noted also that in the conversation between the king and the figure, the being spoke and referred to himself in the singular sense.

ʾĕlōhîm and Cognates: "The testimony of texts throughout the ancient Near East, however, confirms that the spirits of the dead are referred to by such terms (cf. Akkadian, *ilu*).[57] In this extratextual context, the term refers to *spirits of the dead;* this is understandable since the immortality of the soul is affirmed in the world of the ancient Near East. The Scripture

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[53]Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A Briggs, *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon: Coded with Strong's Concordance Numbers* (BDB), (1906), s. v. "*ʾelohim.*"
[54]Bruce K. Waltke with Charles Yu, *An Old Testament Theology: An Exegetical, Canonical, and Thematic Approach* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2007), 213, 652.
[55] See Kelly, *Biblical Hebrew,* 85,
[56]*See Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, 2:587.
[57]Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament,* 325.

usually refers to concepts as defined in their respective cultural worldviews−Ps. 106:28 cf Num. 25:2. Besides, it has been observed that "only here in the Hebrew Scripture are the dead called *ʾelōhîm.*"[58] That is if it refers to the dead since is it still being debated; and elsewhere in the Scripture, it is not rendered so. Noteworthy is the fact that the term *sëĕʾôl* does not even occur in the passage of 1 Samuel 28 as alleged.

In its Intratextual Context: As has been noted, it is only in 1 Samuel 28:13 that séance figure is called *ʾĕlōhîm*. However, identifying the séance figures of other necromantic passages would go a long way in revealing the being that came up in 1 Samuel 28:13. Isaiah 8:19 sets God apart from the consulted spirit; Isaiah 19:3 and 29:4 also set the true God over against the mediums and their cohort. In 2 Kgs. 21:6 cf 2 Chron. 33:6, King Manasseh's dealings with these mediums was presented at part of the wrongs and abominations he committed against Yahweh; while King Josiah's destruction of the same in 2 Kings 23:24 was seen as a part of the rights and good things he did in the sight of the Lord. In intertextual necromantic contexts, Num. 25:2 referred to the event of Baal-peor wherein the Moabites sacrificed to their *ʾĕlōhîm,* which Psalm referred to as offered to the dead (106:28). In Lev. 19:31; 20:6; Deut. 18:10-11, Yahweh prohibits necromancy. Thus, both in the extratextual, intertextual and intratextual necromantic contexts, séance figures are always presented as separated from the true God. Therefore, this *ʾĕlōhîm* in 1 Samuel 28:13 should not be seen as an exception but also as not an ally of God. Demonic or malevolent entity is most appropriate rendition of אֱלֹהִים. Tsumura noted that "it means 'gods' or 'divine beings' who are far from being on par with Yahweh. Hence, *ʾĕlōhîm* in its necromantic situation/context refers to what the woman called 'god,' that is, the spirit of the dead or a 'preternatural being . . . or *ilu*"[59] shortly cited above.

THEOLOGICALs REFLECTIONS ON THE IDENTITY OF אֱלֹהִים IN 1 SAMUEL 28:13

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[58]Ibid, 387.

[59] David Toshio Tsumura, "The First Book of Samuel," *The New International Commentary on the Old Testament,* ed. R. K. Harrison and Robert L. Hubbard Jr. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2007) 624-652; Bill T. Arnold, "1 and 2 Samuel," *The NIV Application Commentary,* ed. Terry Muck (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003), 374; Claude F. Mariottini, "First and Second Chronicles," Mercer commentary on the Old Testament: Including Deuterocanonical Literatures, ed. Watson E. Mills and Richard F. Wilson (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2003), 332.

"So, the question stands: Did the medium of Endor in 1 Samuel 28:3-25, according to the request of Saul, bring Samuel from the dead and did she really communicate with Samuel?"[60] In consideration of the cohort of séance figures in necromantic passages of the Old Testament and ancient Near Eastern texts, it is implausible to have referred to this as the true God or any of His living or deceased subjects. "As many have commented, necromancy was not forbidden in Israel on the premise that it did not work, but because its efficacy was recognized and deemed illicit and contradictory to normative Yahwistic theology."[61]

During most ancient Near Eastern séance sessions, "the ghost can be both seen and heard by the participants. All of this was very dangerous in that contact with a ghost was believed to jeopardize one's own life. . . . Considerate caution is exercised lest a demonic or malevolent entity be mistakenly summoned."[62] Granted that the ritual proceedings harnessed by the witch scaled through successfully without mistakes, the tragic outcome suggests "she was in fact in touch with a demon, this would account for Saul's demoralization and death the next day."[63] The tragic outcome betrays an appearance of a demon or malevolent entity rather than the pious Samuel. This is why another opinion "suggests alternatively that the *ʾelōhîm* the woman refers to is the deity who has retrieved Samuel's spirit from the netherworld, as in necromancy the god Shamash was considered the one who would make sure that the spirit that was summoned was the one who came."[64] But though a deity was requested to summon Samuel's spirit, was Samuel actually retrieved, or the deity himself feigned as Samuel?

It is unlikely that the prophet who in his lifetime cut himself loose with the king would be thus united together with him at death. The scripture noted that even before the death of Samuel, God already withdrew from Saul, "And Samuel came no more to see Saul until the day of his death: nevertheless, Samuel mourned for Saul: and the LORD repented that he had made Saul king over Israel. And the LORD said unto Samuel, How long wilt thou

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[60]Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament*, 379.
[61]Ibid, 324.
[62]Ibid, 322.
[63]Ēriks Galenieks, "When the King Himself Goes to a Witch," 392.
[64]Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament,* 325.

mourn for Saul, seeing I have rejected him from reigning over Israel?" 1 Samuel 15:35-16:1. It is noteworthy that neither the Lord nor His sleeping servant was inquired of by Saul. "So Saul died for his transgression which he committed against the LORD, *even* against the word of the LORD, which he kept not, and also for asking *counsel* of *one that had* a familiar spirit, to enquire *of it*; And enquired not of the LORD: therefore, He slew him, and turned the kingdom unto David the son of Jesse" (1 Chron. 10:13-14). Furthermore, the Bible explained that "when Saul enquired of the LORD, the LORD answered him not, neither by dreams, nor by Urim, nor by prophets" (1 Sam 28:6). Saul had murdered the priests at Nob and therefore deserves no prophet, not even late Prophet Samuel. 1 Samuel 22.

> Saul attempted to get in touch with Yahweh through dreams, but there was no answer. He had no prophet with him, as David did (22:5), and David also had a priest with an ephod (23:6). The Urim mentioned in 1 Sam. 28:6 must refer to a new ephod that someone had made for Saul, because the ephod from the tabernacle was with David. No matter what means Saul tried, he received no answer from God.[65]

These inner-biblical interpretations explain to us that neither God nor the late Samuel was involved at Endor. "Yahweh's prophet was not present in that phantom of an evil spirits (sic)."[66] On discourse analysis,[67] there is a brief summarizing narrator introduction to the story: "Now Samuel was dead, and all Israel had lamented him, and buried him in Ramah, even in his own city. And Saul had put away those that had familiar spirits, and the wizards, out of the land" (1 Sam. 28:3). This introductory lead to the narrative sets a critical theological framework. First, it explicitly reminds the reader of the death of Samuel recently in chapter 25. Even his burial to substantiate his death, a signal that his historical, earthly role has completely ended, meaning he cannot legitimately participate in the events

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[65]Ēriks Galenieks, "When the King Himself Goes to a Witch," 385.
[66]Ibid, 389; see also Martin J. Selman, "1 Chronicles: An Introduction and Commentary," *Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries*, ed. D. J. Wiseman (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1994), 136.
[67]Daniel Kwame Bediako, "Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Text Linguistics/Discourse Analysis Part 1: A Brief Theoretical Framework," *Insight 4* (September 2008): 6-7.

at Endor. And that *familiar spirits*, *witches* and *wizards* are illegitimate according to the Pentateuchal regulations.

But at least four times, the passage explicitly and repeatedly referred to this conjured being as Samuel (28:12, 15, 16, 20). However, in the literature and historical narrative of the ancient Near East, writers routinely present events phenomenologically—portraying the scene exactly as the actors perceived it to preserve the historical integrity of the account as a literary convention. That is why the writer gave the narrator introduction as a caveat which establishes a theological boundary before the story, that the event at Endor may naturally unfold through the eyes of the characters without constantly interrupting its flow by injecting his own theological opinions.

> There is no conception of the immortality of the human soul in any scripture written before the fourth century BC: For the Israelite, the soul is not superior to the body . . . its destiny depends, not on its nature, but on the Living God' (Martin-Achard 1960:17). The word 'immortality' does not occur in scripture until Wisdom of Solomon and Sirach. For the authors of the Pentateuch and Regum, once a person is dead, he or she is gone from life. It is not Samuel's immortal soul that rises to unmask Saul.[68]

Its workability was guaranteed, for indeed, "it should be emphasized that Samuel's *coming up from the underworld* is presented as an actual event, not a dream or a vision, even though dreams are explicitly mentioned by Saul. . . . The king was deceived by the real counterfeit appearance, which demons have power to do, not pretend to do. It was not Samuel who came forth at the medium's incantation. 'Yahweh's prophet was not present in that phantom of an evil spirits[SIC]"[69] That is why the powers of evil strive to ensure that a response is given to fill in the vacuum; regardless of the fact that it is a stark demonic impersonation of the deceased.

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[68] Murphy, "1 Samuel," *F*256.
[69] Ēriks Galenieks, "When the King Himself Goes to a Witch," 389.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE IDENITITY OF אֱלֹהִים IN 1 SAMUEL 28:13 ON CONTEMPORARY AFRICAN FUNERAL BROCHURES

Judging from the exegetical study of אֱלֹהִים in 1 Samuel 28:13 and also from comparing this being with other necromantic passages of the Old Testament, it neither refers to God nor any of His living or dead subjects. Evidences show that a malevolent being was conjured up at Endor for Saul—in this case, deceptive spiritual entity (the godlike figure), who camouflages himself as the true prophet (2 Cor. 11:14). Therefore, the late prophet was not involved in the event at Endor. Since the dead know nothing (Eccl. 9:5-6); in their unconscious inertia state, they are unaware that we even desire to speak to/with them. The simple implication of the issue of dialoging with the dead is that the dead do not even know that someone is directing a speech to them or that an address is intended for them. Since the dead are inexistent, and as such cannot engage in any discussion; who then are the living addressing in the funeral brochures nowadays? Simply answer is: the same familiar spirit−Satan and his cohort. This evil group rejoices when they see that the first lie: "You shall not surely die," is still being perpetuated and that humans have finally acquiesced to the deception. "In addition, we also know that demons desire to communicate with humans and at times can possess them as their instruments (e.g., Acts 19:13-16). . . . Based on the overall teachings of the Bible, we can conclude that it was not Samuel who spoke to Saul but some other spiritual/'divine' power not from God."[70] Evil spirits are very much eager and ready to always give responses to those trying to make contact with their dead friends.

This section of the research was conducted by sampling of funeral brochures of late members of the Seventh-day Adventists across several years especially in Nigeria. This is informed by the fact that the Church has spearheaded the belief in the mortality of the soul. These deceased members include stakeholders and church and secular leaders of different capacities. Because of the sensitivity of direct reference to them as well as the difficulty of accessing the same document by readers, citation of materials was refrained from. The pastoral sensitivity of the documents and out of respect for grieving families and church

[70][Saul, the Medium, and the Spirit of Samuel], "Identifying the Spirit," *Andrews Bible Commentary*, ed. Ángel Manuel Rodríguez (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrew University Press, 2020), 1:450.

leaders, all sampled funeral brochures have been meticulously anonymized. Specific names, specific dates, and field indicators have withheld. But the analyzed phenomenon are rampant in almost any brochure. Thirty-eight (38) of these brochures were sampled from the researcher's personal shelve, the church office of the last district he pastored, as also from the shelves of some ministers of experience and good repute. This selection was regardless of urban/rural areas. Most of the biographies and tributes were written by members of the Seventh-day Adventist Church as well as non-members. The sampling reveal allusions to the immortality of the soul in diverse manners and degrees in the booklets; which are also similar to the notions encountered by the author during his ministry in his editorials of funeral booklets. These have been categorized under the following taxonomies:

1. **2nd Person Address**

   This is when you are talking to someone.[71] This category includes text where writers directly address the deceased as an active, hearing listener. This structural framing explicitly contradicts the doctrine of unconsciousness by treating the deceased as an immediate audience capable of receiving messages. In funeral orations and presentation of biographies and tributes to the dead, people often make assertions that imply that they are talking to the dead. Examples include: "We love you, but God loves you most,"[72] "I miss you." Such linguistic undertone subtly validates the continuous existence of the deceased by initiating an ongoing, active dialogue between the living and the dead.

2. **Goodwill Messages/Prayers for the Dead**

   Like "certain euphemistic words and phrases for death, such as, 'call to glory,' 'transition,' 'call to rest,' 'departure,' and so on."[73] Such pleas as "may your gracious face shine upon us." "We know that your departure shall favour us the

[71]Ray Summers, *Essentials of New Testament Greek* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1950), 12.
[72]Dimgba Dimgba Esowe, *Major Beliefs about Death in Contemporary Igbo Society* (Abia, Nigeria: Charis-L, 2015), 1-2.
[73]Ibid, 1-2.

more." This is rooted in the syncretic adoption of the African Traditional worldview by Seventh-day Adventists of African descent—that deceased relatives still plays a role in blessing his/her survivors.

3. **Captions Suggesting Spatial Relocation/Transition**

   "Transition," "Call to Glory," "Home Call" all portray that someone only continued to exist elsewhere in another capacity and has not really died. This echoes the first lie in Eden, "Thou shalt not surely die" (Gen. 3:4). "Asleep in Jesus/the Lord," which already preempts the judgement in favour of the dead relative, canonizing them as immediate residents of heaven even ahead of the literal second coming of Christ during which the saints could only receive the kingdom. When the Spirit says "Blessed are those who die in the Lord henceforth" (Rev. 13:14), no particular person was mentioned, but a group.

4. **Allusions of a Blissful State/Final Destination**

   "See you on the resurrection morning." The question is: which of the two resurrections, first or the last? The truth is that most of them that say it, refer to the first resurrection. But who can be sure of the resurrection one would partake of, except God Himself? "Asleep in Jesus" also gives a verdict on the final outcome of judgment on the deceased. This taxonomy captures textual assertions that boldly declare the final spiritual destiny of the deceased, bypassing the sovereignty of divine judgment. This idea introduces a critical theological problem: it presumptuously ignores the biblical distinction between the first and second resurrections (Rev. 20:5–6). By asserting absolute certainty regarding the deceased's participation in the resurrection of the righteous, and mourner's certainty of being part of the first resurrection, these writings usurp a verdict that belongs solely to God. Such definitive verdict on the final outcome of the judgment takes the place of God.

5. **Rites Implying a Living-Dead/A Minute Silence**

Though not discernible in the brochures, positioning the head of the corpse towards the compound of the deceased to ensure that he/she fully stays in the family. "Releases of gun-power canons traditionally meant to herald the departure of the dead from this world and his or her arrival in the spirit world."[74] In this category also, is the observance of the one-minute silence for the dead. A military practice, where silence replaces prayers which is offense to some, though not seen in the scripture but gradually creeping into the church and even often initiated by ministers.

6. After-Burial Mourning Rituals

Another ritual by the widow which confirms the full membership of the deceased husband in the spirit world after a period of one year from the burial. Death is the cessation of all activities (Eccl. 9:10; Psa. 104:29; 146:4; 115:17; Job 14:21; Isa. 38:18-19; in view of this summative meaning of death, this treatment of the dead rather proves to be out of sync with biblical notion of death.

7. Befitting Burial/Second Burial

Lavish expenditure of wealth to please the one being buried, a belief centering on the notion that the deceased both hears and sees the love being displayed. In some of the brochures, what is actually tagged celebration of life is actually a second burial. In some instances, members engage in this practice with a brochure. Unless the remotely deceased relative is well buried (although already in the grave), the one who has not been buried cannot be buried.

Conclusion

[74]Esowe, *Major Beliefs about Death in Contemporary Igbo Society*, 225.

This work not only concludes that *ʾelōhîm* in 1 Samuel 28:13 refers to a demonic being, but also reveals that since the living cannot engage the dead in a discussion, every address directed to the deceased can only receive a response from these familiar spirit and apparitions. The figure should not be identified straightforwardly with the actual deceased Samuel, particularly within the broader canonical theology of necromancy and death. אֱלֹהִים in this unusual context refers to a supernatural/divine being rather than necessarily to Yahweh. Esowe noted that in his study "copies of Christian burial programme were gathered. About ninety-eight percent of the biographical sketches and tributes written in them and read both publically and privately, contain sections where the Christian writers of those sketches were talking to the dead, not about death."[75] This work using 38 brochures also arrives at the same conclusion. Therefore, the work summarizes and concludes that any expression that suggests a continuous existence after dead or attempts to speak with the dead instead of talking about death cannot stand the test of faithful biblical hermeneutics. Ellen White's comment is self-explanatory:

> When Saul inquired of Samuel, the Lord did not cause Samuel to appear to Saul. He saw nothing. Satan was not allowed to disturb the rest of Samuel in the grave, and bring him up in reality to the witch of Endor. God does not give Satan power to resurrect the dead. But Satan's angels assume the form of dead friends, and speak and act like them, that through professed dead friends he can better carry on his work of deception. Satan knew Samuel well, and he knew how to represent him before the witch of Endor, and to utter correctly the fate of Saul and his sons.[76]

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[76]Ellen G. White, *Conflict and Courage* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1970), 173.

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CHAPTER 16

ANCESTRAL VENERATION IN ELELE TOWN: RELIGIOUS AND SOCIAL IMPLICATIONS FOR THE SPIRITUAL STABILITY OF SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTIST CHURCH MEMBERS IN OMOPO

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Abstract

Ancestral veneration remains a significant feature of African Traditional Religion and continues to shape belief and practice in many contemporary African communities. Despite the growth of Christianity, some professed Christians retain varying degrees of attachment to ancestral beliefs and practices, raising concerns about syncretism, doctrinal inconsistency, and spiritual stability among church members. This study examined ancestral veneration in Elele Town, Rivers State, Nigeria, and its religious and social implications for the spiritual stability of Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) Church members in the Omopo community. The study adopted a qualitative research design, drawing on semi-structured interviews with twenty purposively selected respondents comprising church leaders and members, analysed thematically. Findings show that ancestral veneration persists in Elele Town through libation, ancestral invocation, sacrifices, and participation in traditional rites, and that some SDA members remain indirectly influenced by these practices through family expectations and cultural obligations. Religious factors sustaining the practice include inadequate doctrinal understanding, a weak biblical foundation, fear of spiritual attack, and syncretism, while social factors include family pressure, communal expectations, cultural identity, and fear of rejection. The study found that ancestral veneration has notable implications for spiritual stability, including doctrinal inconsistency, divided loyalty, weakened faith, reduced worship commitment, impaired prayer life, diminished evangelistic effectiveness, and strain on church unity and mission. The study concludes that addressing ancestral veneration requires sustained biblical instruction, discipleship, pastoral counselling, and family-centred evangelism to help members develop firm doctrinal convictions and maintain exclusive loyalty to God.

Keywords: *Ancestral Veneration, Spiritual Stability, Seventh-day Adventist Church, Omopo, Elele Town, Syncretism, African Traditional Religion.*

INTRODUCTION

African Traditional Religion (ATR) is among the oldest forms of religious expression on the African continent, deeply rooted in the worldview, culture, and daily life of the people. Central to ATR is belief in a spiritual universe inhabited by a Supreme Being, divinities, spirits, and the ancestors, with ancestral veneration occupying a significant place as it reflects the continued relationship between the living and the dead. Ancestors are regarded as intermediaries who maintain a vital link between humanity and the spiritual realm, providing protection, guidance, and blessings to their descendants. Ancestral veneration is therefore not merely a religious act but a socio-cultural institution embedded in African life, sustained by the belief that the dead continue to exist in spiritual form and can influence the affairs of the living.[1]

In Elele Town, located in Rivers State, Nigeria, ancestral veneration has historically been integral to indigenous religious practice, tied to lineage, land, and kinship structures that reinforce belonging and continuity between generations. Within the Omopo community of Elele, ancestors continue to hold strong cultural significance; failure to honour them is widely believed to result in misfortune, illness, or social instability, compelling participation in ancestral rites even among those who profess Christianity. The introduction of Christianity brought theological perspectives that often conflicted with these traditional beliefs, producing a blending commonly referred to as syncretism.[2]

The Seventh-day Adventist Church, known for its emphasis on biblical authority and doctrinal purity, teaches that the dead are in a state of unconscious sleep and rejects any form of communication with them. Despite this clear teaching, some members in Omopo struggle with the pull of their cultural background, producing tension between biblical fidelity and inherited cultural obligation. This tension can result in spiritual instability characterised by inconsistency in belief, divided loyalty, and weakened commitment to

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[1]John S. Mbiti, African Religions and Philosophy (London: Heinemann, 1969); E. Bolaji Idowu, African Traditional Religion: A Definition (London: SCM Press, 1973).
[2]Ogbu U. Kalu, African Christianity: An African Story (Pretoria: University of Pretoria Press, 2005); Geoffrey Parrinder, African Traditional Religion (London: Sheldon Press, 1974); Kwame Bediako, Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1995).

Christian principles. This study therefore examines the religious and social implications of ancestral veneration for the spiritual stability of SDA Church members in Omopo.[3]

Statement of the Problem

Despite the growth of Christianity in Elele Town, ancestral veneration persists among some professed Christians in Omopo, producing a divided religious identity and, among SDA members specifically, a form of spiritual instability marked by double allegiance. Cultural pressures and long-standing traditions continue to influence members' choices, weakening doctrinal commitment and hindering spiritual growth. The absence of clear teaching and guidance on how to engage traditional beliefs has made it harder for members to resist cultural expectations rooted in fear of social consequence or respect for tradition. There is therefore a need to critically examine the religious and social implications of ancestral veneration in order to strengthen spiritual stability and genuine Christian commitment among SDA members in Omopo.

Purpose and Objectives of the Study

The purpose of this study is to examine the religious and social implications of ancestral veneration on the spiritual stability of Seventh-day Adventist Church members in Omopo. The specific objectives are to: (i) examine the nature of ancestral veneration practices in Elele Town; (ii) investigate their influence on SDA members in Omopo; (iii) evaluate their impact on members' spiritual stability; (iv) analyse the conflict between SDA doctrines and ancestral beliefs; and (v) suggest biblically grounded solutions.

Research Questions

The study was guided by the following questions: (1) What are the common ancestral veneration practices in Elele Town, and how prevalent are they among SDA members in Omopo? (2) What religious and social factors sustain ancestral veneration among SDA members, and what are its implications for their faith and worship practices? (3) How does

[3]General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, Seventh-day Adventists Believe: An Exposition of Fundamental Beliefs (Silver Spring, MD: Review and Herald, 2018); Paul G. Hiebert, Anthropological Insights for Missionaries (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1985).

ancestral veneration affect the spiritual stability of SDA members in Omopo, and what measures can address this? (4) Is there conflict between SDA beliefs and ancestral beliefs? (5) What biblical recommendations can address this conflict?

Significance and Scope of the Study

The study offers church leaders deeper insight into the spiritual challenges facing members in culturally influenced communities, clarifies the biblical position on ancestral veneration for doctrinal teaching, and contributes to scholarship on the interaction between Christianity and African traditional belief. It is geographically limited to the Omopo community in Elele Town, Rivers State, Nigeria, and focused on SDA members within this community, examining contemporary rather than historical practice.

Literature Review

The Concept of Ancestral Veneration

Ancestral veneration refers to honouring, remembering, and maintaining relationship with deceased family members believed to continue existing in the spiritual realm. In African Traditional Religion, ancestors are considered the "living dead" who remain alive in another form as long as they are remembered, providing protection and blessing while also punishing neglect of custom. These beliefs are embedded in rites of passage such as birth, marriage, and burial, and are transmitted across generations largely outside formal religious instruction.[4]

Idowu distinguishes veneration from outright worship, arguing that in most African systems the living-dead are honoured as mediators rather than worshipped as deities, since worship proper is reserved for the Supreme Being. Other scholars dispute this, noting that the libations and sacrifices offered to the living-dead often function as acts of worship, blurring the line between veneration and worship. Common expressions of ancestral veneration include the pouring of libation, offerings of food and sacrifice, invocation of

[4]Mbiti, African Religions and Philosophy; John Parratt, ed., A Reader in African Christian Theology, 2nd ed. (London: SPCK, 1997).

ancestral spirits during important events, and participation in commemorative rituals and festivals.[5]

African Traditional Religion and Worldview

African Traditional Religion is not a single monolithic system but a family of related belief systems sharing a structure of belief in a Supreme Being, divinities, spirits, and ancestors. Its holistic worldview integrates the physical and spiritual dimensions of life; Mbiti observes that African peoples are "notoriously religious," with religion providing an interpretive lens through which life events such as illness, misfortune, and death are understood as manifestations of spiritual reality rather than purely natural causes. Within this hierarchy, ancestors occupy a mediating position, consulted for guidance, protection, and blessing, and this worldview continues to shape how many African Christians, including Adventists, interpret crisis and misfortune, sometimes in tension with the doctrinal teaching of their churches.[6]

Syncretism in African Christianity

Syncretism describes the blending of Christian belief and practice with elements of other religious or traditional systems, occurring when converts continue to incorporate non-Christian ideas, rituals, or worldviews into their Christian faith. Scholars distinguish syncretism from inculturation, the latter being a deliberate theological process of expressing the gospel through indigenous cultural forms without compromising core doctrine, whereas syncretism is generally an uncritical or unconscious fusion that compromises doctrinal integrity. In African Christianity, syncretism is often sustained by deep-rooted cultural beliefs, fear of spiritual harm, community expectation, and inadequate discipleship, and it poses a serious challenge to doctrinal purity because it introduces conflicting beliefs that weaken faith and reduce commitment to Christian principles.[7]

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[5]Idowu, African Traditional Religion: A Definition; Kofi Asare Opoku, West African Traditional Religion (Accra: FEP International, 1978); Kalu, African Christianity: An African Story.
[6]Idowu, African Traditional Religion: A Definition; Mbiti, African Religions and Philosophy; Gehard Kwiyani, Talking Cross-Culturally about God: Different Perspectives, Same Truth (Bukuru: African Christian Textbooks, 2005).
[7]Andre Droogers, “Syncretism: The Problem of Definition, the Definition of the Problem,” in Dialogue and Syncretism: An Interdisciplinary Approach, ed. Jerald Gort, Hendrik Vroom, Rein Fernhout, and Anton

Spiritual Stability in Adventist Theology

Spiritual stability refers to a believer's firm, steady, and unshakable relationship with God, expressed through consistent faith, obedience to biblical teaching, and continued spiritual growth, and marked by doctrinal clarity and coherence between professed belief and lived practice. Within Adventist theology, spiritual stability is tied to sanctification as a progressive, Spirit-enabled process, and to the biblical injunction against divided loyalty, including entanglement with the occult or communication with the dead. Seventh-day Adventist fundamental beliefs affirm that death is a state of unconscious sleep until the resurrection, a doctrine that directly precludes veneration of the living-dead; theological instability arises when members retain ancestral practices that presuppose the ongoing consciousness and agency of the dead. Indicators of spiritual stability include faithfulness, consistency, and commitment, while cultural pressure, weak doctrinal foundations, and fear are recurrent factors that undermine it.[8]

Theoretical Framework

This study draws on three complementary theories. Religious Syncretism Theory explains the blending of different religious systems into a single system of faith, helping to account for the dual belief system observed among some Omopo SDA members. Social Identity Theory explains how a person's sense of identity is shaped by group membership—family, community, culture, or religion—and how individuals may adopt group behaviours to maintain belonging even where these conflict with personal conviction; it accounts for why cultural and communal pressure sustains ancestral rites among professing Christians. Functionalism Theory views religion as a social institution that regulates behaviour and

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Wessels (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 7–25; Justin S. Ukpong, "Christology and Inculturation: A New Testament Perspective," Journal of Inculturation Theology 1, no. 1 (1994): 3–15; Aylward Shorter, African Christian Theology: Adaptation or Incarnation? (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1975); Hiebert, Anthropological Insights for Missionaries; Andrew F. Walls, The Missionary Movement in Christian History (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996).

[8]John Stott, The Radical Disciple (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2010); J. I. Packer, Concise Theology: A Guide to Historic Christian Beliefs (Wheaton: Tyndale House, 1993); Ellen G. White, The Great Controversy (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1911); Seventh-day Adventist Church, Seventh-day Adventists Believe: A Biblical Exposition of Fundamental Doctrines, 2nd ed. (Silver Spring, MD: Ministerial Association, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 2005); Hiebert, Transforming Worldviews.

sustains cohesion; from this lens, ancestral veneration functions to maintain moral order and communal identity, which creates tension when such obligations conflict with the exclusive doctrinal demands of the church.[9]

Empirical Review and Research Gap

Comparative studies in Nigeria, Kenya, and Zimbabwe show that despite denominational teaching against communication with the dead, some members privately consult traditional healers and diviners or participate in funerary ritual, often concealing this from church leadership to avoid censure. Research on syncretism among African Christians attributes this dual practice to strong cultural attachment, fear of spiritual consequence, and inadequate biblical teaching. While these studies establish that ancestral influence persists across denominational lines, few have examined the specific experience of Seventh-day Adventist members in a defined local community. This study addresses that gap by focusing on the religious and social implications of ancestral veneration for SDA members in Omopo, Elele Town.[10]

Biblical Foundation of the Study

The study is grounded in Scripture as the final authority for evaluating ancestral veneration. The Bible presents God as the sole legitimate object of worship: "You shall have no other gods before Me" (Exodus 20:3, NKJV), and Christ reaffirmed this exclusivity, declaring that people should "worship the LORD your God, and Him only" (Matthew 4:10, NKJV). Scripture consistently condemns divided loyalty; Elijah's challenge to Israel—"How long will you falter between two opinions?" (1 Kings 18:21, NKJV) and Jesus' teaching that "no

[9]Kwame Bediako, Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion; Henri Tajfel and John C. Turner, "The Social Identity Theory of Intergroup Behavior," in Psychology of Intergroup Relations, ed. Stephen Worchel and John C. Austin (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1986), 7–24; Michael A. Hogg and Dominic Abrams, Social Identifications: Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations and Group Processes (London: Routledge, 1988); Émile Durkheim, The Elementary Forms of Religious Life (New York: Free Press, 1995).

[10]Kwabena Donkor, ed., Deceptive Serenity: Understanding the Nature of the Human Soul (Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 2012); Yusufu Turaki, Christianity and African Gods: A Method in Theology (Potchefstroom: Potchefstroom University for Christian Higher Education, 1999); Bediako, Christianity in Africa.

one can serve two masters" (Matthew 6:24, NKJV) together establish that worship cannot be shared between God and any competing spiritual system.[11]

On the state of the dead, Scripture teaches that death is a state of unconscious rest awaiting resurrection: "the dead know nothing" (Ecclesiastes 9:5, NKJV), a condition Scripture likens to sleep (John 11:11, NKJV) and from which believers will be raised at Christ's return (1 Thessalonians 4:16, NKJV). Correspondingly, communication with the dead is explicitly prohibited—"Do not turn to mediums or familiar spirits" (Leviticus 19:31, NKJV)—a command reinforced by the cautionary narrative of Saul's consultation of the medium of Endor. Ellen G. White frames such consultation as spiritual deception, in which evil agencies impersonate the dead to mislead the living.[12]

The Bible further presents Christ as the sole mediator between God and humanity—"there is one God and one Mediator between God and men, the Man Christ Jesus" (1 Timothy 2:5, NKJV) leaving no room for ancestral or spiritual intermediaries. Idolatry, defined broadly as reverence or trust placed in anything other than God, is repeatedly condemned (Romans 1:25; 1 John 5:21, NKJV), and believers are called to spiritual stability characterised by steadfastness, obedience, and continual growth (James 1:8; 2 Peter 3:18, NKJV). Biblical exemplars such as Daniel and the three Hebrew captives (Daniel 1:8; 3:16–18) illustrate faithful resistance to cultural pressure, while Israel's repeated lapses into the customs of neighbouring nations (Psalm 106:35–36) and Solomon's decline (1 Kings 11:4) illustrate the dangers of syncretistic compromise. Taken together, these teachings establish a clear scriptural standard against which ancestral veneration among SDA members in Omopo may be evaluated.[13]

Methodology

[11]The Holy Bible, New King James Version (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1982), Exod. 20:3; Matt. 4:10; 1 Kgs. 18:21; Matt. 6:24.
[12]The Holy Bible, New King James Version, Eccles. 9:5; John 11:11; 1 Thess. 4:16; Lev. 19:31; Ellen G. White, The Great Controversy (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1911).
[13]The Holy Bible, New King James Version, 1 Tim. 2:5; Rom. 1:25; 1 John 5:21; Jas. 1:8; 2 Pet. 3:18; Dan. 1:8; 3:16–18; Ps. 106:35–36; 1 Kgs. 11:4.

The study adopted a qualitative research design suited to an in-depth exploration of participants' experiences, beliefs, and perceptions of ancestral practices and their influence on faith and church commitment. The study population comprised 216 Seventh-day Adventist Church members in Omopo, including 1 pastor, 31 adult older men, 71 adult older women, 76 members of the adult youth ministry (AYM), 10 ordained elders, 8 deacons, and 19 deaconesses.

S/N	**Category**	**Number**
1	Pastor	1
2	Adult older men	31
3	Adult older women	71
4	AYM	76
5	Ordained elders	10
6	Deacons	8
7	Deaconess	19
Total		216

A purposive sampling technique was used to select twenty participants with adequate knowledge of both church doctrine and traditional ancestral practice: 1 pastor, 4 elders, 3 deacons, 2 deaconesses, 4 female departmental leaders, 2 female active members, and 4 male active members.

S/N	**Category**	**Number**	**%**
1	Pastor	1	5
2	Elders	4	20
3	Deacons	3	15

4	Deaconess	2	10
5	AWM	1	5
6	Health Ministries	1	5
7	Church Clerk	1	5
8	S.S. Superintendent	1	5
9	Active members	6	30
Total		20	100

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews using an open-ended interview guide, conducted face-to-face, by telephone, and via WhatsApp between May and July 2026. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, who were assured of confidentiality and anonymity; pseudonymised identifiers (e.g., Weyi01, Umporo02, Samem) are used throughout this article to protect participant identity. Data were analysed using thematic analysis: transcripts were read repeatedly, significant statements were coded, and codes were grouped into broader themes—ancestral veneration practices, sustaining factors, religious implications, social influences, and effects on spiritual stability—which were then reviewed, refined, and interpreted against the study's objectives and research questions.[14]

Findings

Demographic Profile of Respondents

Of the twenty respondents, 60% were male and 40% female. Age distribution skewed toward middle adulthood, with 30% aged 41–50, 25% aged 31–40, 20% aged 51–60, 15% aged 18–30, and 10% above 60. The majority (65%) were married, with smaller

[14]Author's field research, semi-structured interviews with twenty purposively selected respondents in Omopo, Elele Town, May–July 2026. Respondent identifiers are pseudonyms used to protect confidentiality.

proportions single (20%), widowed (10%), and divorced (5%). Educational attainment was mixed: 35% held a bachelor's degree, 25% secondary education, 20% a diploma/NCE, 10% postgraduate qualifications, and 10% primary education only. In terms of church responsibility, 30% were ordinary members, 25% deacons/deaconesses, 20% elders, 20% departmental leaders, and 5% the resident pastor. Length of church membership was fairly evenly spread, with 25% having belonged for 11–15 years and another 25% for more than 20 years.

Ancestral Veneration Practices in Elele Town

Respondents consistently identified libation, sacrifice during family ceremonies, invocation of deceased ancestors for protection, and participation in funeral and festival rites as the dominant expressions of ancestral veneration in Elele Town. One respondent described the underlying belief that "the dead ones are usually deemed as those who interfere with the living," prompting living relatives to offer sacrifices in the hope of ancestral intercession and protection. Another respondent detailed installation rites tied to chieftaincy, noting that aspiring community title-holders are expected to participate in rites connected to the ancestors as a condition of eligibility. A further respondent described family consultation of the dead during crises, including the initiation of male children and the practice of engaging native diviners to determine a deceased father's wishes regarding burial. These practices were described as intergenerational obligations administered chiefly by family elders rather than as deliberate rejections of Christian faith.[15]

Prevalence among SDA Members in Omopo

Respondents agreed that while the Seventh-day Adventist Church explicitly teaches against ancestral veneration, its influence remains discernible among some members, typically through indirect participation in family events, burial ceremonies, and traditional gatherings rather than open ritual practice. One respondent observed that the practice "is common among members of the Seventh-day Adventist church in Omopo, although not all members are involved," adding that some members do not regard the practice as sinful but

[15]Weyi01, interview by author, Omopo, Elele Town, 2026; Umporo02, interview by author, Omopo, Elele Town, 2026; Parob, interview by author, Omopo, Elele Town, 2026.

as a necessary family obligation. Another respondent qualified this, noting that while Adventists "generally do not participate in ancestral veneration," those without complete doctrinal commitment periodically "go back to participating in such things" under family pressure.[16]

Factors Sustaining Ancestral Veneration

Religious factors identified included fear of death and misfortune believed to follow neglect of ancestral honour, inadequate understanding of biblical teaching on the state of the dead, and a general weak doctrinal foundation that makes it difficult for some members to distinguish biblical faith from inherited tradition. Social factors centred on family pressure and communal sanction: respondents described social ridicule, denial of communal privileges such as farmland access, and even summons before a council of chiefs for family heads who refuse to perform expected rites. Belonging to the community was described as conditioned on ritual participation, such that even elderly SDA members are sometimes compelled to pour libation during land-sharing ceremonies despite their church membership.[17]

Religious and Social Implications for Spiritual Stability

Respondents described ancestral veneration as producing doctrinal inconsistency and divided loyalty, whereby members profess biblical teaching while retaining traditional views of ancestral agency, dividing their allegiance "to God and other allegiance to the idol". This divided allegiance was reported to affect worship patterns and church commitment directly, including absence from Sabbath services when ancestral consultations coincide with the Sabbath. Respondents further linked ancestral involvement to weakened personal faith development, describing a faith that becomes "shaky" when confidence is divided between God and ancestral powers, and to a broader weakening of

[16]Gaem, interview by author, Omopo, Elele Town, 2026; Samem, interview by author, Omopo, Elele Town, 2026.
[17]Weyi01, interview by author, Omopo, Elele Town, 2026; Chimdi, interview by author, Omopo, Elele Town, 2026; Umporo02, interview by author, Omopo, Elele Town, 2026.

doctrinal commitment, particularly where members of social standing who engage in ancestral practice also hold visible leadership roles in the church.[18]

Effects on prayer life and evangelism were also reported: members occupied with consulting ancestral powers were described as losing the desire and confidence to pray, with their faith "usually shaken", while divided conviction was said to reduce boldness and credibility in evangelistic witness. At the congregational level, respondents linked ancestral veneration to strain on church unity and mission, citing disagreement, disfellowship, and member attrition connected to funeral practices requiring ancestral consultation. Finally, respondents broadly agreed that sustained ancestral involvement hinders spiritual growth and stability, since believers divided between two belief systems struggle to reach consistent spiritual maturity.[19]

Discussion

The findings affirm that ancestral veneration in Omopo functions less as an act of deliberate apostasy and more as an inherited socio-cultural obligation that intersects uneasily with Adventist doctrine consistent with the broader African Christianity literature on syncretism as a largely unconscious or socially compelled fusion of belief systems. The persistence of the practice among a minority of members, despite clear denominational teaching on the unconscious state of the dead, illustrates the explanatory power of Social Identity Theory: cultural belonging, family standing, and access to communal resources such as farmland are bound to ritual participation in ways that make doctrinal compliance socially costly.[20]

At the same time, the data support Religious Syncretism Theory's account of dual religious expression: respondents did not describe members abandoning Christian identity but rather layering ancestral obligation alongside church participation, producing the doctrinal

[18]Samem, interview by author, Omopo, Elele Town, 2026; Gaem, interview by author, Omopo, Elele Town, 2026; Umporo02, interview by author, Omopo, Elele Town, 2026; Weyi01, interview by author, Omopo, Elele Town, 2026.
[19]Dimk, interview by author, Omopo, Elele Town, 2026; Umporo02, interview by author, Omopo, Elele Town, 2026; Samem, interview by author, Omopo, Elele Town, 2026; Elam, interview by author, Omopo, Elele Town, 2026.
[20]Droogers, "Syncretism"; Hiebert, Anthropological Insights for Missionaries; Tajfel and Turner, "The Social Identity Theory of Intergroup Behavior."

inconsistency, divided worship commitment, and weakened evangelistic confidence documented above. Functionalism Theory helps explain why this tension persists rather than resolving quickly in either direction ancestral veneration continues to perform genuine social functions of cohesion, moral regulation, and intergenerational continuity within the wider Omopo community, functions the local church has not yet fully replaced with alternative structures of belonging for members under cultural pressure.[21]

These findings extend the existing empirical literature, which has largely examined ancestral influence and syncretism at a general African Christian level, by grounding the analysis in the specific experience of Seventh-day Adventist members in a defined local setting. The consistency between respondents' accounts and Adventist doctrinal teaching on Christ's sole mediatorship and the state of the dead suggests that the challenge in Omopo is less a matter of doctrinal knowledge than of doctrinal application under sustained social pressure—pointing toward interventions that combine catechetical instruction with pastoral and social support rather than doctrinal teaching alone.[22]

Conclusion

This study has shown that ancestral veneration continues to influence some Seventh-day Adventist Church members in Omopo despite the church's clear biblical teaching on worship, the state of the dead, and exclusive loyalty to God, reflecting the enduring strength of culture and family tradition within the community. The practice is not merely cultural but constitutes a genuine spiritual challenge: where members attempt to combine biblical Christianity with ancestral obligation, the result is divided loyalty, weakened doctrinal commitment, and reduced spiritual stability, with consequences for the church's collective mission and witness. Addressing the phenomenon requires more than doctrinal condemnation; it calls for pastoral sensitivity to the cultural realities members face, combined with sustained biblical instruction and discipleship that ground believers firmly

[21]Bediako, Christianity in Africa; Durkheim, The Elementary Forms of Religious Life.
[22]Bediako, Christianity in Africa; Turaki, Christianity and African Gods; General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, Seventh-day Adventists Believe.

enough in Scripture to withstand cultural pressure without severing them from legitimate family and community bonds.

Recommendations

1. Church leaders should provide regular, sustained teaching on the state of the dead, exclusive worship of God, and the sole mediatorship of Christ.

2. Seminars, workshops, Bible classes, and revival programmes should be organised to deepen members' doctrinal understanding and reduce confusion.

3. Intentional discipleship and mentoring programmes should be established to help members develop strong, durable biblical convictions.

4. Pastors and elders should offer targeted counselling and support to members navigating family pressure and cultural obligation.

5. Family-centred evangelism and nurture programmes should be developed, given the central role of family influence in sustaining ancestral practice.

6. Members should be encouraged toward a strong personal prayer life, regular Bible study, and total dependence on God.

7. Evangelistic efforts should engage ancestral veneration directly, presenting biblical truth in ways relevant to members' cultural realities.

8. Congregations should cultivate mutual spiritual support for members facing cultural and social pressure related to ancestral practice.

9. Members should be reminded consistently that spiritual stability rests on complete trust and obedience to God without divided allegiance.

10. Further research should examine ancestral veneration across other communities and denominations to broaden understanding of its impact on African Christianity.

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Note on Interview Sources

Field data cited above derive from semi-structured interviews (face-to-face, telephone, and WhatsApp) conducted by the author with twenty purposively selected respondents in Omopo, Elele Town, between May and July 2026. Respondents are cited under pseudonymised identifiers (e.g., Weyi01, Umporo02, Parob, Gaem, Samem, Chimdi, Dimk, Elam) to preserve the confidentiality and anonymity assured to participants during data collection

CHAPTER 17

BIBLICAL PATRIARCHAL MIGRATION AND THE NOMADIC FULANI OF NORTHERN NIGERIA: PROBLEM AND PROSPECTS

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Abstract

Migration, which is a voluntary and involuntary movement of people from one region to another, has adverse effects on society. This paper examined the problems associated with the biblical Patriarchal migration and the Nomadic Fulani of Northern Nigeria with a view to showcasing the problems and effects of migration, its prospects and with a hope of mitigating the ugly aspects of the narratives. The problems of insecurity, internal displacement, farmer – herders' conflict, and inter- tribal crisis, could be traced to migration, due to overpopulation, scarcity of economic/ Eco-resources, and class struggle over limited resources. The biblical Patriarchs faced such problems. For instance, Abraham and Isaac engaged King Abimelech in a violent argument over water right, Abimelech's servants confiscated the well of water dug by the Patriarchs (Genesis 21:25 and 26:18-25). However, they were able to manage this contact without a pronounced conflict, probably because their migration was tied to the response to divine call (Gen.12:1); whereas, the Nomadic Fulani of Nigeria and peasant farmers are equally facing the same problem with a pronounced conflict which has put the country in chaos. Existing studies by scholars on Migration have focused more on its positive effects without looking at the negative side of it which usually poses threat to the society. This paper therefore, filled this lacuna. This study adopted narrative criticism and historical critical Methods in relating the experience of Patriarchal migration to the Fulani of Nigeria. The research finding revealed that migration, though has some side benefits, has served as one of the fundamental factors that cause high population rate, land scarcity and grabbing, insecurity, internal displacement, dispute and violence, and therefore recommends tolerant behaviours and peaceful coexistence by the migrants and the host communities by taking a lift from biblical Patriarchal experience.

Keywords: *Patriarchal Migration, Nomadic Fulani, problem, prospect*

INTRODUCTION

In antiquity, Migration has been posing a great challenge on the peace and wellbeing of many nations of the world. Nigerian society is also experiencing such challenge due to

influx migration of nomadic Fulani from Nijee to northern Nigeria and to other parts of the country. This challenge is manifested in many facades such as insecurity and rural crisis between the Herders and the local dwellers. The problem emanated from migration has caught the attention of many scholars in the debate over the causes, the effects, purpose and the nature of pastoral nomadism and migration in antiquity. For instance, Norman K. Gottwald[1] attempts to distinguish between pastoral nomads and migrants and to ascertain whether they are sedentary in nature or not. He uses the patriarchal mode of production as a basis for his argument. He asserts that people are nomadic when they move about in the normal and regular exercise of their mode of production. This movement is sometimes reinforced by a cultural tradition which necessitates their margin (sedentary margin) in relation to settled people. Conversely, people are migratory when wars or political unrest and oppression, or when changes in climate or disease force them to leave their region and go to another, quite different from what their mode of production or cultural tradition may be. As a result of migration, people may make adaptations from nomadic to sedentary or from sedentary to nomadic socio-economic and cultural existence which might come with adverse effects.

Gottwald further examines the symbiotic relationship between pastoral nomads and farmers. According to him, given his needs for grazing and water rights, the herder is connected to a sedentary region. In this case, nomads must reach agreement with the farmers as to grazing and water rights during summer and the dry season, in particular. As a common practice, the nomads graze their flocks on the stubble of harvested fields, and the farmers also benefit from the system in the sense that the animals fertilize their fields for the coming season. There is also exchange of pastoral and agricultural products. The pastoral nomad must acquire agricultural products, which he may do by barter, by exacting through tribute, by himself engaging in agriculture, or by raiding[2]. This system seems helpful to both farmers and pastoralists. Gottwald, however, does not establish whether this system is working today or not.

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[1]Gottwald, N.K, *Were the early Israelites pastoral nomads?* World Union of Jewish Studies, vol.1 Stable URL:http://wwwjstor.org/stable/23515563 (91973),. Accessed: 18-05-2017, 11:13UTC165 – 183.
[2]Gottwald, N.K 1973.

In analyzing the features of herdsmen from Ancient Near Eastern perspective, John Van Seters[3] asserts that the belligerence behaviors of nomads towards settled regions evidently dominated the sources of both the second and first millennia. Such hostility accorded them the nomenclature of robbers and fugitives that engaged in constantly marauding of towns and agricultural land. However, such hostility was as a result of struggle for survival, particularly when food was not available. While Gottwald sees belligerent nature of herdsmen as an offensive counter measure against government, Seters views their attack as directly against the settled peoples and communities.

The account of Ur III revealed the unpleasant expressions of some rulers against non-urban people who were grabbing lands that were previously under the control of urban dwellers. Scholars have suggested that one of the principal factors in urban collapse was a massive migration of pastoralists from the borders of the arid region.[4] It is likely that during the period of Abraham's migration from Ur to Haran, there was massive migration of nomadic people in Mesopotamia. It is also clear that land claim was common at that time, which might be due to land scarcity, landlessness, overpopulation and class struggle. In the Mesopotamian sources, this people were called Amorites or Amuru, which means Westerners. They progressively attained dominance in the settled spaces of both Syria-Palestine and Mesopotamia, so that in the early second millennium, which most scholars believe for the Patriarchal Narratives, they took the lead in re-establishing urban centres. This theory is known as Amorite hypothesis.[5] The outcome of such proposition presents the biblical Patriarchs as Amorites. In this case, Albright associates Abraham's migration with the Amorite's movement and dates the Abraham phase as of the patriarchal period as spanned from second millennium through the end of third millennium as evident in Mari text.[6]

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[3]Seters J.V, *.Abraham in history and tradition*, (New Haren and London: Yale University Press, 1975), 13 – 16.
[4]Anderson B.W, *The Living world of the the Old Testament*, (London: Lonman Group Limited, 1966), 23
[5]http://www.basarchive.org/bswbPrintpage.asp?pubID=BSBKAI&Vol.....8/19/20081:PM. P 3
[6]Albright, From the Stone Age to Christianity, (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1957), 2nded, p241.

It clear from the above review generally that the migration of Herders poses a challenge to their host community in antiquity, the practice which is still exhibiting today. This factor necessitates this study.

The Biblical Patriarchal Migration

There is a textual phrase that clarifies the migration of the Patriarchs beginning with Abraham, which is, "when I was caused to wander…… כַּאֲשֶׁר וַיְהִי הִתְעוּ אֹתִי (*wayehi ba,aser ,oti hite'u* Genesis 20:13)". This looks somewhat like a displaced migrant.

The word הִתְעוּ is from the qal root תָּעָה and verb *hiphil* perfect 3rd person common plural, meaning to wander and (*hiph*) to cause to err. Abraham consciously expressed his psychological state of being landless migrant before King Abimelek when facing the challenges of a vulnerable sojourner. It was indeed a psychological expression. This very text clarifies the fact that Abraham was truly a migrant which was orchestrated by Yahweh. The term "wander" here implies unstable way of life, of someone without a permanent inhabitation and who has been cut off from his root. This also echoes the nature of his name in Hebrew.

The alien motif comes to play here. God himself recognized Abraham and Isaac as aliens in the land of Canaan as demonstrated in Gen.17:8b, (the land of your sojourning) and" Gen. 26:3a" ("Reside in this land as an alien). And Abraham specifically identified himself to the Hittites as aגר residing in their midst (Gen. 23:4). He also resided in Gera, (Gen. 20:1) the land of the Philistines as a) גר21:34(. The Land of Canaan was therefore, specifically designated as the immigrant land for Abraham and his seeds (17:8). Abraham, though in the land of promise, was not yet in control of the land, but neither was he threatened with domination or eviction by the rulers in the land; hence, he anticipated the occupancy.[7]

It will be argued here that the migrants always sought for identity. In many cases, they want to belong at all courses to their host region which might not come easily, in this case, crisis often set in, particularly when there is no more room for intake. In the final word of

[7]Norman C.H, *The land is mine: six Biblical land ideologies*, (Minneapolis: Library Congress in Cataloging-in Publication Data, 1995), 118-119

Jacob in Egypt, he warned his children (Joseph) never to bury him in Egypt because they had been tied to the land of Canaan as their gifted land (Gen. 47:29) `~yIr")c.miB. ynIrEßB.q.ti an"ï-la;…." *El-na tiqebereni bemiseraim* - Do not bury me in Egypt I pray you." This is repeated in Gen. 49:30 "bury me with my ancestors in the cave that is in the field of Ephron the Hittite, in the land of Canaan" - qiberu *'oti el-abotay el-hame'arah aser bisedehu 'eperon hahiti*. Joseph, in his final speech, also made the same statement in Gen. 50:24-25.

> I will soon die but God will surely visit you and deliver you out of this land of bondage to the land that he prepared for Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob (50:24).

Thus, all the patriarchs were migrants. Howbeit, it is imperative to clarify that they were peaceful migrants to a large extent. They usually negotiated for grazing and water right with the host communities; though with the agenda of taken over the land some days according to acclaimed divine promise, which later had a lasting effects on the first settlers.

The Migration of Nomadic Fulani of Northern Nigeria

It imperative to examine the identity of this set of people called Fulani for clarification. There are two major classes of this Fulani by which they identify themselves. The Fulbe *Siire* is the first one, which is the "town Fulani"; this is called in Hausa *Fulani ngidah*; they are also spoken of as *Toroodbe* or *Toronkawa* in some texts; the category of Muslim clergy who were at the forefront of the religious transformation of the 18th to 19th centuries in Wes Africa.[8]As the name implies, the Fulani in this category are city settlers; many of them are business tycoons and are relatively educated, with administrative skills. The most enduring contribution of the activities of the associates of this class of Fulani was the formation of Fulani states in most of the West African regions at about the19th century.

The *Fulbenaii* or *Fulbeladde* is another group of Fulani, which are the nomadic Fulani. The name for this class of Fulani in Hausa was probably derived from *Bororoen,* a *Fulde*

[8]Adebayo, A. G, *Of man and cattle: a reconsideration of the tradition of origin of pastoral Fulani of Nigeria*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), http://www.org/stable/ 3172050, Access; 11-05-2017 11:26 UTC. p1

name for a different class of *Fulbeladde* who have a fundamental belief in animism, extremely nomadic, and who uphold a close organization.[9]While the *Fubbeladde* may not exactly be nomadic despite the fact that they settle in the bush, the *Bororoen* are essentially nomadic. They can be found in many parts with favourable pastures but, at times, they are sedentary. This class of nomadic Fulani often maintains her identity by segregating themselves from their host community or country.[10]In line with the above historical assessment and reality about the origin of the Fulani and particularly the existence of different groups, our focus in this study will be centred more on Fulbe naii or nomadic Fulani, because of their experience with the indigenous people and their dire need of land resources for grazing which often necessitate their migration.

There is a need to discuss factors often responsible for the migration of the pastoral Fulani apart from the nature of their profession.

i. Population density over limited land resources

The fact is that those who embark on migration do so in order to improve and better their socio-economic life. And most often, the goal of such migration is to a better and sustainable economic community where easy access to sources of livelihood is sure. In other words, they migrate from socio-economically poor areas to better areas. Since everyone wants a better economic environment, such community (ies) will definitely be the goal of many migrants like the land of Canaan. And by implication, it will come to a time when such community (ies) will no longer accommodate new people owing to population density and conflict.[11] In this case, the nomadic Fulani often migrate to communities where they feel there are land resources for grazing, to improve their economic production.

ii. C*limate change*

The Sahel and rise in ocean level: Climate change affects mainly farmers and the pastoralists. It occurs mostly in the form of drought and desertification and rising sea level

[9]Adebayo, A. G. 1991 p. 1
[10]A.G.Adebayo, 1991.1
[11]Luke Martell, 2010, *The sociology of globalization*.(UK: Policy Press, 2010), p. 1, 4, & 5

in Nigeria. The Sahara arid region has already taken up 35% of the landmass of the country and it is moving towards the South at a rate of 0.6 kilometres annually.[12] The Sudano-Sahelian region of Nigeria has witnessed a 3-4 percent reduction of rainfall per decade since the beginning of the nineteenth century; the number of rainy days in the northern part of the country has reduced from 150 to 120 in the last three decades, affecting 20% of crop production. In the same vein, the threatening increase of 4-5% in the extent of sand dunes and Aeolian deposits between 1976 and 1995 is a strong signal of involuntary migration by the Pastoralist due to climate change.[13]

It was estimated that, more than half of Sokoto, Yobe, Bauchi, Borono, Gombe, Jigawa, Kano, Kaduna, Katsina, Kebbi, and Zamfara States will reduce to arid or semi-arid regions in the twenty-first century. The Sahel is already creeping towards the south by roughly 1,400 square miles yearly, absorbing entire villages.[14] In the above-mentioned states, about 35 percent of the agricultural land that was tilled five decades ago is now no longer suitable for cultivation, which has affected the survival of almost fifteen million pastoralists.[15] With this reality, pastoralists have no option that to migrate based on their nomadic ideology.

These points are summarized in a study carried out by Ayodele and Akinyemi on the pastoral livelihood of the Fulani on the Jos Plateau, showed the reasons some nomadic Fulani embark on seasonal migration as shown in the chart below:

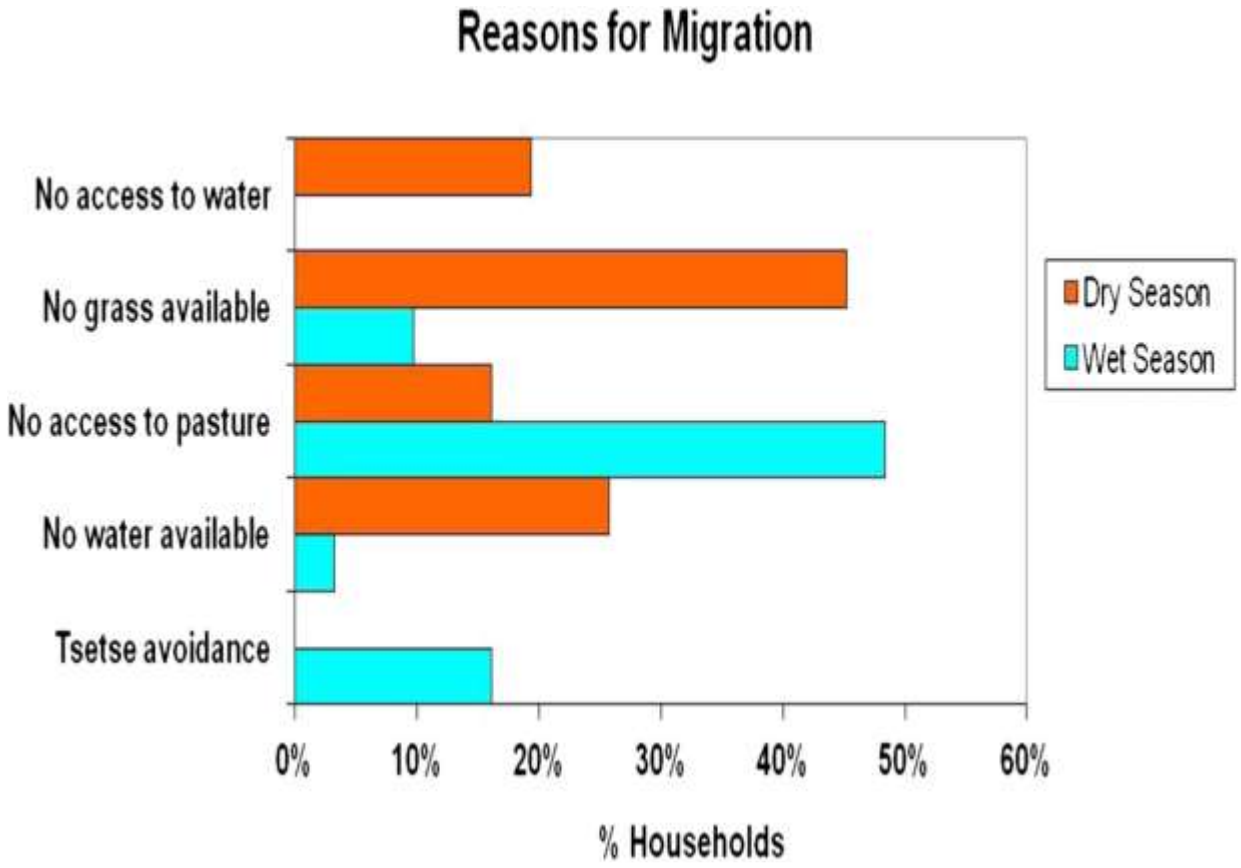
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[12]African Technology Policy Studies Network, "Farmers' perceptions of climate change and adaptation strategies in northern Nigeria: an empirical assessment. RESEARCH PAPER/No. 15

[13]Roma, L., "Climate change, population drift and violent conflict over land resources in northeastern Nigeria (2008), in: Stone Conoy, 2017.p.23.

[14]Odoh, S.I.; and Chilaka Francis Chigozie, Climate change and conflict in Nigeria: a theoretical and empirical examination of the worsening incidence of conflict between Fulani Herdsmen and Farmers in Northern Nigeria",(2012), *Arabian Journal of Business and Management Review at 117*

[15]Odoh S.I. &Chilaka F.C.2 2012



From the chart above, it is shown that during dry season, non-access to water takes (20%) and non-availability of grass takes 49%. And during wet season non access to pasture for grazing takes 50% and avoidance of Tsetse flies takes 18%. With this reality, migration is the next option in other to sustain their economic production and livelihood. Now, if there is no room for intake in a new migratory target, conflict will arise as they struggle for space.

This study therefore argues that migration breeds problem evidence in overpopulation, class struggle and conflict. When a particular environment can no longer support life due to lack of basic and indispensable resources, such as land, migration may be the next option. The nomadic Fulani of northern Nigeria often find themselves in such a situation. Their profession defines their constant movement. Lack of access to land and grazing resources often push them to migration. Since Pastoral nomadism has to do with a socio-economic mode of life based on intensive domestication of livestock which requires a regular movement of the animals and their breeder in a seasonal cycle dictated by the need for

pasturage and water.[16] It is obvious that lack of access to land or grazing resources is a threat to the economic production and growth of these nomads which may affect their livelihood and survival.

All these causes of conflict between farmers and herdsmen as discussed above, which centre on socio-economic effects of landlessness, could be summarized with the Eco-Violence Theory developed by Homer-Dixon. It seeks to explicate the connection between ecological factors and violent behaviour. Its ground proposition is that of reduction in the value and amount of land resources, increase in population, resource access, that might result in scarcity, for any population of living organisms, and the fact that the victims may be forced to migrate to new lands. This instigates ethnic conflicts, when they move to new areas, with decrease in wealth causing deprivation conflict.[17] This theory agrees with the argument that landlessness and land scarcity contribute immensely, if not the principal cause, to conflict between farmers and herders. Farmers and herdsmen would have lived peacefully relatively as "usual" if not for the limited land resources and other related factors.

Patriarchal Migration and Nomadic Fulani

There are some groups of people called *Habiru* or *Hapiru* in Ancient Near East who were nomad or semi-nomad. Scholars have made attempted to link the meaning of Hebrew with these people when tracing the patriarchal nomadic origin, based on linguistic rendering; such as *epru,* dusty ones; *eperu,* transferred without a stable habitant, and one who crosses territory, *eberu*. Oduyoye observes that the word *Apiru* is to *pullo* (singular) phonologically, as Hebrew *'apar,'*Akkadian *eperu* "dust" is to Acholi *apulu* "dust."[18]*Apiru, Abiru,*or *Hapiru* were found everywhere in ANE: in upper and lower Mosepotamia, in Syria, in Palestine and in Egypt.[19] Hence, the Bororo/Fulaniare successors or descendants of the *beney Eber*; the Pula is the relics of the "*Apiru"*. They have been

[16]N.K Gottwald, 1973. 160
[17] Akinjobi, C.T. 2016. p41
[18] Posener. G., *Texts Egyptians*, In Le problem des Habiru, Ed. J.(Botlero Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1956) , 129
[19] Oduyoye M., *The sons of the gods and the daughters of men: an Afro-Asiatic Interpretation of Genesis 1:11*,(Ibadan: Daystar Press 1984), p. 67

traversing Hamito-Semitic terrain since Abrahamic times. The *iber-iym* was '*ober-iym*, "passers-by". Thus, what the Hebrew were in the land of Egypt and (Ham) before and after migration, the Fulani have been all over the West African Savannah (*Sefelah* in Hebrews) the country of the Sonike, the Mandingo, and the Hausa.[20]

As *gerim* in their host country, most often, the nomadic Fulani's settlement is not legal. They settle in the regions they do not have any legal entitlement to, just like the Patriarchs. The Patriarchs, purchased some pieces of land legally, but those lands were not for grazing or large areas of farm land; they were mere burial sites.[21] In the same way, the literature has not clearly shown that the nomadic Fulani acquire expanses of land for grazing or agricultural purposes; rather, they rely on government largess and their host communities to accommodate them.[22] This is particularly so because the indigenous host communities of theirs always see them as strangers; hence, they prefer leasing lands and grazing areas to them, which they can reclaim at wish, rather than selling large areas of land to them permanently. This was why the Hittites, the people of the land, refused to sell the burial site to Abraham but insisted on giving him a burial site (grave) freely (Genesis 23:6). Also, like it was with the Patriarchs, violence often occurs between the nomadic Fulani and their host communities or countries over grazing and land resources, such as water rights.[23]

Problems of Nomadic Migration

This study argues that migration breeds problem evidence in overpopulation, class struggle and conflict. When a particular environment can no longer support life due to lack of basic and indispensable resources, such as land, migration may be the next option. The nomadic Fulani of northern Nigeria often find themselves in such a situation. Their profession defines their constant movement. Lack of access to land and grazing resources often push them to migration.[24] It is obvious that lack of access to land or grazing resources is a threat to the economic production and growth of these nomads which may affect their livelihood

[20]Oduyoye. M., 1984. p. 76
[21]G. Rad V. G., *Old Testament library.Genesis.(* London*:* SCM Press Ltd. 1991),
[22]Chimah Ezeomah, (1985). 10
[23]Adebayo., A.G (1991), 15
[24]Gottwald N.K, *Were the early Israelites pastoral nomads?* World Union of Jewish Studies, vol. 1 Stable URL:http://wwwjstor.org/stable/23515563 1973. Accessed: 18-05-2017, 11:13UTC. 160

and survival. A study carried out by Ayodele and Akinyemi on the pastoral livelihood of the Fulani on the Jos Plateau, showed the reasons some nomadic Fulani embark on seasonal migration which major findings focus on grazing resources such as land and water right.

Porosity of Nigerian borders: The Porosity of Nigerian borders is another way by which migration poses a challenge or problem to the inhabitant of Nigeria. Studies have shown that most nomads that navigate into Nigeria migrated from Niger, Chad and Mali. These find it difficult to communicate in English or Hausa to the local communities which often result in conflict.[25] The former Inspector General of Police (IGP) of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, Solomon Arase, while addressing the issue of insecurity in Nigeria, attested to this assertion and added that, "these people pose problem to Nigeria".[26] Most often, like the *Abiru* of the Bible, they are hired machineries that trigger the conflict between Fulani and farmers. This has metamorphosed into an agenda of displacement of local communities as it is happening majorly in Benue State and other parts of the country. This they do in order to take over the indigenous land for settlement and grazing as this is lacking in their region.

In summary, four effects of migration are evidence which include violence, class struggle, physical displacement and poverty. As regards violence, as landless migrants the Patriarchs faced some socio-political challenges in the new land, which involved grazing and water rights. Abraham's life was dominated by the search for forage and water for the sheep and goats and by the attempt to draw little hostile attention to their group as possible (Gen. 21:25). The text reads that Abraham complained to Abimelech about the well of water which Abimelech's servants had seized[27].The word complained above is rendered in Hebrew as argument which connotes probably that Abraham engaged Abimelech in an argument; it was not a peaceful conversation. However, it appears that he was able to manage the situation without a pronounced crisis as it is in the case with his herdsmen and Lot's. It is, therefore, clear that migrant herdsmen could live in harmony with the host

[25]Barkindo A., Nigerian: Benue State under the shadow of herdsmen terrorism (2014-2016). Open Door International/ World Water Research (2017), retrieved at www.opendooranalytical.org/research@od.org p4
[26]Barkindo A (2017), p.4
[27] Matthews V. H,. *The Cultural Work of the Bible*, (USA: Baker Academic. 2015), 23

community (ies) if they so wish. It could also be noted that Abraham's living in peace with the people of the land means that he never trespassed on the livelihood of the community; that is, his herdsmen did not graze on the un-harvested farmland of the people, which has been the point of conflict between farmers and herdsmen.

The second aspect of Abraham's encounter of violence as a landless migrant was the intervention of Lot's captivity (Gen.14:1ff). Here the effect of landlessness and migration is connected to political sortie. Abraham is portrayed as a warrior; this makes the narratives different from other Patriarchal Narratives. It takes us into world history, tells of a coalition of empires, war against another coalition, and involves Abraham in this international incident, war that must have rendered many people landless and homeless.[28]

Prospects for Nomadic Fulani Migration

We talk of prospect to mean solution to conspicuous problem of nomadic migration, seen from three different perspectives which include: (1) Embracing current grazing method by Fulani. (2) Identification of the actual nomadic Fulani of Nigeria. (3) Peaceful negotiation and understanding between farmers and the Fulani herders.

(1) Embracing current grazing method

There is a new method of grazing in the twenty first century to adapt to social change in the nations of the world. Herders in most parts of the country are no longer engaging in an open grazing like before, rather, confined grazing is being practiced. If nomadic Fulani could realize the reality of land scarcity in the country and try to modernize and adjust their grazing method, it will mitigate this problem of migration. Grazing was easier in the past, when land resources were available and there was cordial relationship between the herders and their host communities. But now, with increase in population and limited land resources, there are cases of land encroachment and pronounced conflict between them. To curb this upheaval, the nomadic Fulani should re-strategize their economic production by private land acquisition and domestication of their cattle. A study claims that Fulani pastoralists are the pride of the Nigerian economy in terms of taxation by the colonial and

[28]Rad G. V., *Old Testament library. Genesis*.(London: SCM Press Ltd. 1961), 171 175

post-colonial government, provision of protein and dairy products, such as milk, sour or fresh milk, cheese, butter, butterfat and cooking fat, among others.[29] However, lack of grazing land will definitely affect the internal revenue because production will be reduced and, when this is the case, the victim will fight for survival, which often leads to conflict.

(2) Identifying the actual nomadic Fulani of Nigeria

As earlier noted, most nomads that navigate into Nigeria migrated from Niger, Chad and Mali. Though, they do not just migrate in vacuum but have a tie with their already settled and identified brothers in the country which has made migration easy for them. The Nigerians find it difficult to identify and differentiate these set of people from the already settled Fulani. Most of these people are involved in the kidnapping and displacement of the innocent communities. Worse of all is the fact that they find it difficult to communicate in English or Hausa to the local communities which often triggers conflict.[30] Therefore, identification of real existing Fulani of Nigeria with National Identity Cards, test in language communication and proper protection of Nigerian borders will serve as medium for mitigating these upheavals in the country meted by those herders.

(3) Peaceful negotiation and understanding between farmers and the Fulani herders.

The nomadic Fulani and famers used to live in peace, as the famers were able to tolerate them due to unlimited land resources, until recently when such resources are scares. Therefore, the problem poses by migration are conflict, violence displacement of local communities, land grabbing, and class struggle among others. The modern herdsmen, particularly the nomadic Fulani of northern Nigeria, should then emulate Abraham's peaceful disposition in relating with their host communities, who was able to manage every crisis he encountered with the host country as a nomadic migrant. If all these aforementioned points are put into practice, there is prospect for peaceful coexistence between the host and indigenous communities and the pastoral Fulani in Nigeria.

Recommendations

[29]A.G Adebayo,1991.16
[30]Barkindo. A., and Alupsen, (2017).4

The following recommendations are imperative for the relevant of this study.

1. The government should, encourage the nomadic Fulani, through media and radio education, to negotiate individually with their host communities on legal purchase of grazing land. Also to adopt a new method of grazing due to limited land resources as this will minimize the upheavals caused by migration.

2. Entrance into other countries of the world has never been an easy task for anyone, but Nigeria borders are so porous that Nomadic Fulani from Chad and other rout could enter freely without any means of identification. This has given them audacity to trouble the peace of the country. Therefore, the Nigerian Government should prioritize the National Identification Number for every individual and ensure international pass sport as a yardstick for entering into the country.

3. The nomadic Fulani should take a lift from the experiences of the Patriarchs on how to relate with their host communities by respecting boundary, particularly the un-harvested farmland, negotiating with the local communities on grazing right, and ready to get land of their own on the level of peaceful negotiation.

Conclusion

By way of concluding, it is not superfluous to say that we are all migrants, it is only depends on who settled first. In this case, the second settler has to respect the boundary of the first settler and seek for a space amicably this will give room for peaceful coexistence. But a situation whereby force is employed, it will definitely lead to violence as seen in the case of herders' and farmers' conflict.

The research he demonstrated that the migrations of the nomadic Fulani are due to push and pull factors. As world system model posits, two elements are responsible for the push and pull factors that underlie incessant migration of the Fulani in their regular settled place and their focused destination; these include centrifugal and centripetal elements. One of the major push factors of nomadic migration is lack of grazing land, with limited available

resources. Thus, they move in search of where there are abundant grazing land resources.[31] Therefore, until this obvious and major push factor is tackled, the narrative might not changed. Migration occurs as a response to economic development as well as social, cultural, environmental and political factors or effect on areas of origin and destination.[32] Such migration could be voluntary or involuntary, temporary or permanent; this is based on the pressing factor such as landlessness.

This study therefore argues that migration is one of the effects of landlessness which is further accompanied by a cluster of adverse effects, such as overpopulation, class struggle and conflict. When a particular environment can no longer support life due to lack of basic and indispensable resources, such as land, migration may be the next option. The nomadic Fulani of northern Nigeria often find themselves in such a situation. Their profession defines their constant movement. Lack of access to land and grazing resources often push them to migration. Pastoral nomadism has to do with a socio-economic mode of life based on intensive domestication of livestock which requires a regular movement of the animals and their breeder in a seasonal cycle dictated by the need for pasturage and water.[33] It is obvious that lack of access to land or grazing resources is a threat to the economic production and growth of these nomads which may affect their livelihood and survival.

The experiences of the patriarchs and that of the nomadic Fulani of northern Nigeria, as landless migrants, are inseparable. They are both nomads, they share nomadic or semi-nomadic features, such as living in tents and huts, respectively, and seasonal migration based on climate change. They both experience the psychological and cultural issues of being migrants, evident in the belligerent reception from their host countries and communities, respectively.[34] By way of defensive mechanism, the modern Fulani are now violent with the host communities. In the same way, they are usually armed for the purpose of defending themselves against wild animals while grazing. However, such weapons are

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[31]Bukola A. O., International migration: a positive contribution to human development. ACPOBs/PUBOI.p. (2013), 21.
[32]Adewole., Socio-economic factors associated with urban-rural migration in Nigeria: A case study of Oyo State Nigeria. *Journal of Human Ecology,(*12 1) 2005: 13-16
[33]N.K Gottwald, (1973), 160
[34] Matthew V.H., *The cultural world of the Bible*. (U.S.A: Baker Academic, 2015), 22-23

now being used to face the indigenous farmers as they move about with animals.[35] This has resulted in constant conflict with the indigenous communities and have created avenue for others forms of social vices to set in. Hence, if the above recommendations are translated into action, they will help in redefining the ordeals and menaces being recorded through migration in Nigeria.

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[35] M. Oduyoye,. *The sons of the gods and the daughters of men: an Afro-Asiatic Interpretation of Genesis 1:11*,(Ibadan: Daystar Press, 1984), 67

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CHAPTER 18

FROM EXODUS TO EXODUS: BIBLICAL NARRATIVES, AFRICAN IDENTITY, AND COUNSELLING FRAMEWORKS FOR SAFE MIGRATION IN A GLOBALIZED WORLD

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Abstract

This paper examines contemporary African migration through the lens of biblical narratives, with particular attention to the Exodus motif as a symbolic and theological resource for interpreting movement, displacement and identity. Drawing on selected Old Testament and New Testament migration accounts, the study argues that biblical texts offer enduring moral and pastoral resources for understanding migration not merely as economic mobility but as a complex human experience shaped by hope, loss, faith and survival. The notion of "Exodus to Exodus" is employed to describe the recurring pattern of departure and resettlement in African histories, where migration is both a response to structural pressures and a search for dignity and security. Using African identity as a guiding concept, the paper situates present-day mobility within indigenous worldviews that emphasize communal belonging, spiritual meaning and relational ethics. It further explores how counselling approaches informed by biblical theology and African cultural values can support safer migration practices, particularly among young people facing social and economic uncertainty. Attention is given to psychosocial risks such as identity disruption, cultural alienation, exploitation and family dislocation, which often accompany transnational movement. The paper proposes counselling-oriented strategies rooted in narrative therapy, faith-based support systems and community-centred guidance as practical tools for preparing prospective migrants and assisting returnees. By integrating scriptural interpretation with counselling principles, the study contributes to religious and social discourse on migration, offering a model that links theology, identity and human well-being. It concludes that religious scholarship and counselling practice can jointly promote ethical migration choices and foster resilient African identities within global mobility.

Keywords: *Migration, African identity, Biblical narratives, Counselling, Diaspora.*

INTRODUCTION

Migration has become one of the most consequential global dynamics of the twenty-first century, influencing demographic patterns, socio-economic development, cultural

transformation, and religious thought across diverse societies. Within the African context, both internal and international migration have become important livelihood strategies through which individuals and families respond to persistent challenges such as poverty, armed conflict, environmental degradation, unemployment, and the pursuit of improved living conditions. [1]Access to economic opportunities, quality education, improved healthcare services, and other socio-economic considerations constitute some of the principal drivers of internal migration .[2] Beyond its economic and political dimensions, migration is also deeply embedded in the religious and spiritual lives of migrants, with faith traditions providing interpretive frameworks through which individuals understand their experiences, negotiate uncertainty, and construct personal and collective identities.[3]

Among Christian communities in Africa, biblical narratives frequently shape theological understandings of migration and human mobility. The Exodus account, which recounts the Israelites' liberation from slavery in Egypt and their journey toward the Promised Land, continues to serve as a powerful theological metaphor for hope, deliverance, resilience, and the pursuit of a better future. This narrative is reflected not only in Christian preaching and theological reflection but also in the ways many African migrants perceive their own migration journeys, aspirations, and sense of belonging within new social and cultural environments.[4]

Scholarly engagement with biblical texts indicates that Scripture has long been used to understand human mobility and to cultivate meaning amid dislocation.[5] Within Old Testament narratives, migration is closely associated with the human quest for liberation, survival, and identity formation, themes that continue to resonate among African diaspora communities. [6]Biblical texts do not merely recount historical movements but also serve as

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[1] Klöpf, T., C. Scheven, P. Vorhold, and C. Ungruhe. "Researching Migration in West Africa: A Systematic and Reflexive Review." *Comparative Migration Studies* 13 (2025): 52
[2] Onyema, C. E. *The Japa Conundrum: Socio-Economic & Psychological Considerations*. Lagos: FN Prints, 2024.
[3] Trinka, Eric M. "Interdisciplinary Mutuality: Migration, the Bible, and Reciprocal Contributions." *Religions* 16, no. 5 (2025): 608.
[4] Trinka, Eric M. *Religions* 16, no. 5 (2025): 608.
[5]Trinka, Eric M (2025): 608
[6] Opade, O. F. "Old Testament Perspective on Migration and Its Implications for Africans in Diaspora." *Global Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences* 12, no. 2 (2024): 65–80.

interpretive resources through which contemporary migrants frame hope, vulnerability, and ethical commitments.[7] Moreover, within African Christianity, the appropriation of biblical migration narratives, including the account of Abraham's departure, sojourns, and divine guidance through unfamiliar terrain, frequently informs spiritual understandings of transnational mobility and destiny fulfillment.[8]

Recent scholarship on African migration identifies economic inequality, labour market instability, environmental stress, and armed conflict as major influences on population movement within West Africa and across international borders.[9] Empirical evidence from Nigeria further indicates that unemployment, declining real incomes, insecurity, and perceptions of limited social mobility remain major motivations for outward migration, particularly among young adults and skilled workers.[10]

Alongside these material explanations, scholars of religion and African Christianity argue that religious narratives continue to shape how migrants interpret both the decision to leave and the moral meaning attached to departure, displacement, and resettlement.[11] Within African Christian communities, migration is frequently framed through scriptural categories of pilgrimage, exile, promise, and return, in which mobility is understood not only as a response to economic hardship but also as a spiritual journey informed by faith commitments and ethical obligations.[12]

The Exodus motif remains especially influential within this religious imagination, serving as a symbolic reference point for interpreting contemporary experiences of suffering, hope, and the search for dignity beyond national borders.[13] Studies of Nigerian Pentecostal and mainline churches show that biblical metaphors are regularly employed in sermons,

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[7] Trinka, 2025
[8] Onanuga, A. O., and P. A. Onanuga. "Transnational Mobilities in Search of Refuge." *African Diaspora* 15, no. 2 (2023): 77–89.
[9] International Organization for Migration, 2022
[10] African Development Bank, 2023; National Bureau of Statistics, 2022
[11] Adogame, Afe, and James V. Spickard. *Religion Crossing Boundaries: Transnational Religious and Social Dynamics in Africa and the New African Diaspora*. Leiden: Brill, 2022
[12] Phiri, Isabel Apa, and Collium Banda. *African Theology in the Twenty-First Century: The Contribution of Women and Youth*. Carlisle: Langham, 2023.
[13] Adogame, Afe, and James V. Spickard., 2022.

pastoral counselling, and popular religious discourse to legitimize migration aspirations and to provide moral language for coping with uncertainty, separation, and loss.[14] The continued relevance of these narratives indicates that migration cannot be adequately explained solely through economic or political analysis without attending to how migrants construct identity and guide personal decisions in relation to religious belief systems.

At the same time, migrants confront psychosocial risks that accompany displacement, including identity disruption, cultural alienation, exploitation, and family separation. International organizations and health bodies affirm the need for mental health and psychosocial support as core components of humanitarian and migration responses, citing evidence that such support systems, which include counselling, community networks, and faith-based assistance, are crucial for well-being during and after migration journeys.[15] Research from Kenya shows how formal and informal psychosocial networks, including churches and NGOs, are vital in helping refugees maintain social contact, emotional support, and psychological resilience in host cities. [16]Frameworks that combine spiritual resources with structured counselling approaches therefore have the potential to improve outcomes for prospective migrants preparing for departure as well as returnees seeking reintegration.

This paper builds on both theological scholarship and counselling science to propose a model that bridges biblical interpretation, identity formation, and psychosocial support for safe migration. By bringing together scriptural narratives such as the Exodus motif with contemporary counselling theories and African cultural values, the study argues that religious scholarship and counselling practice can collectively promote ethical decision making and resilient identities within global mobility. In doing so, it contributes to

[14] Marshall, Ruth. *Political Spiritualities: The Pentecostal Revolution in Nigeria*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2023.
[15] International Organization for Migration, 2024
[16] Nkoma, C., S. Asatsa, and E. Macharia. "Migrants' Challenges and Psycho-Social Support Among Urban Refugees in Nairobi County, Kenya." *International Journal of Research and Innovation in Social Science* 10, no. 2 (2025): 208–219.

academic conversations on migration by foregrounding religion, identity, and human well-being as integral to understanding why and how Africans move in a globalized world.

Literature Review

Migration and African Identity

Migration occupies a central position in African social thought, where mobility is historically embedded within cultural systems of trade, kinship, labour, and spiritual meaning. Contemporary African migration reflects both structural pressures and value-driven motivations rooted in collective aspirations for dignity, security, and social recognition.[17] Studies on African identity consistently emphasize communal belonging and relational ethics as defining features of selfhood, contrasting with individualistic models dominant in Western migration theory.[18] Within this tradition, identity is not solely personal but is constructed through networks of family, ancestry, faith, and moral obligation.

Recent theological research argues that African identity remains closely tied to religious narratives that provide moral coherence amid displacement. Ilunga demonstrates that biblical metaphors of exile, pilgrimage, and hospitality continue to shape how African Christians interpret belonging in diaspora spaces.[19] Such interpretations reinforce collective identity even in host societies where migrants encounter marginalization and cultural dissonance. Similarly, Opade notes that Old Testament migration narratives resonate strongly within African churches because they affirm divine guidance in movement while addressing emotional vulnerability associated with separation and resettlement.[20]

Biblical Narratives and Migration Discourse

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[17] Klöpf, T., C. Scheven, P. Vorhold, and C. Ungruhe. "Researching Migration in West Africa: A Systematic and Reflexive Review." *Comparative Migration Studies* 13 (2025): 52.
[18] Klöpf, T., C. Scheven, P. Vorhold, and C. Ungruhe. (2025): 52.
[19] Ilunga, I. *Strangers and Citizens: A Biblical Lens on Migration and Identity*. Johannesburg: The Gospel Coalition Afrique, 2025
[20] Opade, O. F. "Old Testament Perspective on Migration and Its Implications for Africans in Diaspora." *Global Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences* 12, no. 2 (2024): 65–80.

The use of biblical texts in migration studies has received renewed scholarly attention as researchers increasingly recognize religion as an important influence on migrant decision making and identity formation. Studies in religious sociology and theology argue that scriptural traditions provide moral language through which migrants interpret suffering, hope, responsibility, and belonging. Biblical narratives, including the Exodus, the Babylonian exile, and the itinerant ministry of Jesus, function as symbolic resources that legitimize mobility while also offering ethical critique of oppression, marginalization, and social injustice.[21]

Within African scholarship, the Exodus motif has been widely employed to interpret historical and contemporary experiences of displacement and movement. Scholars of African Christianity describe the Exodus story as a theological metaphor for liberation from socio-economic hardship and political vulnerability, often understood by believers as divine sanction for migration in search of dignity and survival.[22] At the same time, critical voices caution that unreflective theological readings may idealize migration and obscure associated psychological strain, family dislocation, moral uncertainty, and exposure to exploitation. This tension indicates the need for interpretive approaches that retain theological meaning while addressing ethical responsibility and psychosocial vulnerability.

Psychosocial Risks and Counselling in Migration

Empirical research across developed and developing regions consistently shows that migration exposes individuals to heightened psychological vulnerability, including anxiety, depression, identity confusion, and trauma associated with loss and uncertainty.[23] The International Organization for Migration identifies psychosocial support and counselling as essential components of sustainable migration governance, particularly for young migrants navigating unfamiliar cultural environments.[24]

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[21] Adogame, Afe, and James V. Spickard. *Religion Crossing Boundaries: Transnational Religious and Social Dynamics in Africa and the New African Diaspora*. Leiden: Brill, 2022.
[22] Kalu, Ogbu. *African Christianity: An African Story*. Pretoria: University of Pretoria Press, 2022
[23] World Health Organization, 2023
[24] The International Organization for Migration (2024)

African-focused studies reinforce these findings. Nkoma et al, in a study of urban refugees in Nairobi, demonstrate that migrants who lack structured psychosocial support are significantly more likely to experience emotional distress and social isolation.[25] Faith-based institutions, especially churches, emerge as primary support systems where formal mental health services are limited. These institutions provide emotional guidance, communal belonging, and moral orientation, often functioning as informal counselling centres.

Narrative therapy has been widely recognized as particularly relevant for migrant populations because it enables individuals to reinterpret lived experiences through structured storytelling that affirms personal meaning, identity, and psychological resilience.[26] In therapeutic settings, narrative practices allow migrants to externalize distress, reconstruct disrupted life stories, and integrate spiritual and cultural values into coping processes. When combined with culturally grounded counselling approaches, narrative methods provide practical tools for preparing prospective migrants, supporting families affected by separation, and assisting returnees who face difficulties related to reintegration, identity reconstruction, and social belonging.

Integrating Theology and Counselling

Recent interdisciplinary scholarship supports closer engagement between theological interpretation and counselling science, particularly in areas where religious belief remains influential in everyday meaning-making. Scholars in the sociology of religion and pastoral studies argue that religious narratives offer ethical language and emotional resources that can complement professional mental health practices, especially in addressing experiences of uncertainty, displacement, and moral decision making.

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[25] Nkoma, C., S. Asatsa, and E. Macharia. "Migrants' Challenges and Psycho-Social Support Among Urban Refugees in Nairobi County, Kenya." *International Journal of Research and Innovation in Social Science* 10, no. 2 (2025): 208–219.
[26] White, Michael, and David Epston. *Narrative Means to Therapeutic Ends*. 30th anniversary ed. New York: W. W. Norton, 2022.

Within African settings, this form of integration has been found to be especially effective because religious institutions often command high levels of social trust and moral authority, positioning faith leaders as significant actors in counselling, guidance, and psychosocial support.[27] By linking biblical narratives with counselling strategies, scholars propose models that emphasize responsibility, emotional readiness, and community accountability rather than migration decisions driven solely by risk-taking or survival imperatives.[28] This integrative approach enables migrants to reflect on spiritual aspirations alongside psychosocial realities before embarking on transnational journeys.

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopts a **qualitative interpretive design** grounded in theological analysis and counselling theory. The research is conceptual and analytical rather than empirical, drawing on textual interpretation of biblical narratives alongside secondary data from migration and psychosocial literature. This design is suitable for examining meaning-making processes, identity construction, and ethical reasoning within religious migration discourse.

Data Sources

Primary sources consist of selected Old Testament and New Testament migration narratives, including the Exodus account (Exodus 1-15), Abraham's departure (Genesis 12), Israelite exile traditions, and New Testament depictions of displacement and hospitality. Secondary sources include peer-reviewed journal articles, policy reports from international organizations, and recent African scholarship published mostly between 2022 and 2025.

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[27] Marshall, Ruth. *Political Spiritualities: The Pentecostal Revolution in Nigeria*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2023.
[28] Adogame, Afe. *Religion and Migration: Mobility, Transnationalism and the Transformation of Religious Traditions*. Leiden: Brill, 2022.

Analytical Approach

The study employs **thematic content analysis**, identifying key motifs related to movement, identity, suffering, hope, and ethical responsibility within biblical texts and counselling literature. These themes are interpreted through African cultural values such as communal belonging, relational ethics, and spiritual meaning, allowing for culturally grounded interpretation. Narrative analysis is further applied to examine how migration stories function as psychological tools for meaning-making and emotional regulation. This approach aligns with narrative therapy principles that emphasize storytelling as a means of coping with trauma, uncertainty, and identity disruption.[29]

Ethical Considerations

Although the study does not involve human participants, ethical responsibility is maintained through accurate representation of theological sources and critical engagement with migration realities. The analysis avoids romanticizing migration or portraying biblical narratives as unconditional endorsements of mobility. Instead, interpretive caution is applied to highlight psychosocial risk, moral accountability, and the necessity of counselling support.[30]

Biblical Analysis: Migration Narratives and the Exodus Motif

Biblical literature contains extensive accounts of human movement, displacement, and resettlement, presenting migration as a recurring feature of religious history rather than an exceptional event. Within the Old Testament, migration is closely associated with divine promise, moral obligation, and communal identity. The Exodus narrative (Exodus 1-15) presents migration as collective escape from oppression, structured around suffering, divine intervention, and the search for a life defined by dignity and justice. Scholars of

[29] World Health Organization, 2025
[30] International Organization for Migration, 2024

religion argue that the Exodus functions not only as historical memory but also as a moral story that shapes how communities interpret hardship, hope, and responsibility.[31]

Other biblical migration accounts reinforce similar themes. Abraham's departure from Haran (Genesis 12) portrays migration as obedience grounded in trust and uncertainty, where movement requires emotional readiness and ethical restraint rather than blind pursuit of material gain. The exile traditions of Israel in Babylon further depict forced migration as a period of identity crisis, cultural loss, and moral reflection, accompanied by communal strategies for survival and spiritual renewal. These texts show that migration is consistently linked to identity formation, social obligation, and moral evaluation rather than simple economic improvement.[32]

In the New Testament, Jesus' itinerant ministry and experiences of displacement reinforce the idea that movement is associated with vulnerability and social marginality. The Holy Family's flight into Egypt (Matthew 2:13-15) mirrors earlier Exodus themes, highlighting fear, uncertainty, and reliance on hospitality within foreign spaces. Religious scholars argue that these narratives function as ethical reminders that migrants should not be idealized but recognized as persons exposed to emotional strain, insecurity, and moral risk.

Within African Christianity, these biblical stories are frequently reinterpreted as symbolic resources for explaining present-day migration experiences. The Exodus motif, in particular, is used in sermons, counselling sessions, and religious education to describe migration as both a test of faith and a search for meaningful existence beyond structural hardship.[33] At the same time, critical scholarship warns that scriptural narratives should not be treated as unconditional approval of mobility, since biblical texts also emphasize accountability, restraint, and concern for communal well-being.[34]

African Identity and Contemporary Migration

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[31] Adogame, Afe, and James V. Spickard. *Religion Crossing Boundaries: Transnational Religious and Social Dynamics in Africa and the New African Diaspora*. Leiden: Brill, 2022.
[32] Kalu, Ogbu. *African Christianity: An African Story*. Pretoria: University of Pretoria Press, 2022
[33] Ukah, Asonzeh. "Prosperity Gospel, Migration and the Religious Imagination in Nigeria." *Journal of Religion in Africa* 52, no. 3 (2022): 215–233.
[34] Adogame, Afe, and James V. Spickard. *Religion Crossing Boundaries: Transnational Religious and Social Dynamics in Africa and the New African Diaspora*. Leiden: Brill, 2022.

African identity is deeply shaped by communal belonging, kinship networks, and spiritual meaning, which continue to influence how migration is understood and experienced. Unlike individualistic models of mobility, African social thought often frames migration as a collective project involving extended family expectations, moral obligations, and social reputation. Studies of African Christianity show that migrants frequently interpret movement through religious language that links personal decisions to divine guidance, destiny, and moral responsibility.

Empirical evidence from Nigeria confirms that migration decisions are rarely made in isolation. National data indicate that unemployment, insecurity, and declining living standards motivate outward movement, particularly among young adults, yet these decisions are shaped by family pressure, religious counsel, and social narratives of success abroad.[35] In this sense, migration becomes part of identity construction, where success or failure reflects not only personal outcomes but collective expectations.

Religious institutions play a central role in shaping this process. Nigerian Pentecostal and mainline churches regularly present migration as a spiritual undertaking that requires prayer, moral discipline, and faith-based preparation. Pastors and counsellors often frame migration within biblical language of calling, sacrifice, and perseverance, reinforcing the belief that movement should align with ethical standards and communal welfare rather than desperation alone.[36]

Scholars argue that this religious framing provides emotional reassurance and moral guidance but also carries risks. When migration is presented solely as divine opportunity, psychological strain, family separation, and social vulnerability may be overlooked. International agencies therefore emphasize the importance of psychosocial support systems that integrate counselling, community networks, and faith-based care to address identity disruption and emotional distress associated with displacement[37].

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[35] National Bureau of Statistics, 2022
[36] Ukah, Asonzeh. "Prosperity Gospel, Migration and the Religious Imagination in Nigeria." 2022
[37] International Organization for Migration, 2022

By linking African identity with biblical narratives and counselling principles, migration can be interpreted as a moral and psychological process rather than a purely economic strategy. This approach encourages emotional preparedness, ethical decision making, and community accountability, allowing migrants to assess both spiritual aspirations and psychosocial realities before and after transnational movement.

Counselling Implications for Safe Migration

Counselling practice has become increasingly relevant in addressing the psychosocial challenges associated with migration. Migrants often experience emotional strain arising from uncertainty, family separation, cultural displacement, and exposure to exploitation. International health and migration agencies affirm that structured psychosocial support, including counselling services, community networks, and faith-based assistance, contributes significantly to emotional stability and psychological well-being before, during, and after migration journeys.[38]

Within African societies, counselling for migration cannot be restricted to individual adjustment alone, as identity is closely tied to family and communal expectations. Nigerian studies indicate that many migrants carry collective responsibilities, including financial obligations, family reputation, and moral accountability, which heighten emotional pressure and risk of distress when migration outcomes fall short of expectations. Counselling interventions therefore need to address relational concerns, helping prospective migrants negotiate family expectations, assess personal readiness, and develop realistic plans that consider both opportunities and risks.

Narrative therapy offers a particularly useful approach in this regard, as it allows individuals to organize experiences into meaningful stories that affirm personal agency and emotional resilience. Through guided storytelling, migrants are able to externalize fear, reinterpret disappointment, and reconstruct identity in ways that integrate spiritual values and cultural meaning.[39] Such methods are valuable for prospective migrants preparing for

[38] World Health Organization, 2023
[39] Denborough, David. *Retelling the Stories of Our Lives: Everyday Narrative Therapy to Draw Inspiration and Transform Experience*. 2nd ed. New York: W. W. Norton, 2023.

departure, families coping with prolonged separation, and returnees struggling with reintegration.

Faith-based counselling further strengthens this process by drawing on religious language familiar to many African communities. Pastoral counselling practices grounded in biblical narratives provide moral reference points that encourage responsibility, emotional readiness, and ethical decision making. However, scholars caution that counselling should avoid reinforcing unrealistic expectations or spiritualizing structural hardship, as this may increase vulnerability to exploitation and psychological harm. Effective counselling for migration therefore requires balanced guidance that combines emotional support, moral reflection, and practical planning.

Toward an Integrated Model: Theology, Identity, and Counselling

An integrated approach linking theology, identity, and counselling offers a structured basis for addressing migration as a moral and psychological process rather than a purely economic response. Religious narratives supply moral language that shapes how individuals interpret suffering, hope, and responsibility, while counselling science provides tools for emotional regulation, identity reconstruction, and decision making under uncertainty.[40]

Within African Christian communities, theological interpretation remains influential in shaping life choices, particularly when migration is framed as part of divine purpose or destiny. This moral authority positions religious leaders as important actors in counselling and social guidance, often mediating between personal aspirations and communal expectations. Integrating counselling principles into such religious spaces enables faith leaders to provide emotional support while also encouraging realistic planning, ethical responsibility, and awareness of psychosocial risk.

International migration research supports this integrative orientation. Policy reports emphasize that psychosocial interventions are most effective when aligned with cultural

[40] White, Michael, and David Epston. *Narrative Means to Therapeutic Ends*. 30th anniversary ed. New York: W. W. Norton, 2022.

belief systems and local institutions that migrants already trust.[41] In African settings, churches, mosques, and community groups therefore serve as strategic sites for delivering counselling-oriented support that combines spiritual meaning with emotional preparedness.

By linking biblical narratives with counselling practices and African social values, this integrated model encourages migrants to reflect on motives, responsibilities, and emotional readiness before undertaking transnational journeys. It also supports returnees by addressing identity disruption, social reintegration, and unresolved emotional strain. Such an approach promotes ethical decision making, psychological stability, and communal accountability, positioning migration not merely as physical movement but as a process requiring sustained moral and emotional guidance.

Discussion

This study affirms that migration among Africans cannot be adequately interpreted through economic or political variables alone, since religious narratives and communal identity remain powerful influences on how mobility is understood, justified, and experienced. The findings support earlier scholarship which shows that African migration is closely tied to collective identity, moral obligation, and spiritual meaning rather than individual choice alone.[42] Migration appears as a shared social project in which decisions are shaped by family expectations, church teachings, and culturally embedded ideas of success, responsibility, and dignity. This aligns with Ilunga's argument that religious language continues to provide moral coherence for African migrants who face dislocation and cultural disruption in host societies.

The study also reinforces claims that biblical narratives function as interpretive tools for migrants. The continued relevance of the Exodus motif confirms findings by Adogame and Opade who observe that African Christians frequently interpret mobility through scriptural categories of liberation, promise, and divine guidance. The present analysis shows that

[41] International Organization for Migration, 2022
[42] Onanuga, A. O., and P. A. Onanuga. "Transnational Mobilities in Search of Refuge." *African Diaspora* 15, no. 2 (2023): 77–89.

such narratives not only inspire migration aspirations but also influence how emotional strain, uncertainty, and vulnerability are managed. In this sense, scripture does not operate merely as symbolic reference but actively shapes ethical reasoning, identity formation, and expectations about suffering and reward. This supports Levitt's position that religious texts provide moral language for interpreting displacement, hope, and belonging.[43]

At the same time, the discussion highlights tensions within religious interpretations of migration. While biblical narratives offer emotional reassurance and legitimacy for mobility, earlier studies warn against theological readings that idealize migration and minimize psychosocial risk. The present findings confirm this concern by showing that religious encouragement often coexists with limited attention to mental health, family disruption, and exposure to exploitation. This reinforces the argument by Adogame and Spickard that migration theology must include ethical caution, emotional preparedness, and communal responsibility rather than presenting movement as guaranteed fulfilment.

The psychosocial dimension of migration emerges as a central issue in this study. Consistent with international evidence in World Health Organization, and International Organization for Migration, the study affirms that displacement exposes migrants to heightened emotional vulnerability, including anxiety, identity strain, and social isolation. African-focused research similarly confirms that migrants lacking structured support systems face greater psychological distress. The findings support the claim that churches often function as primary support institutions where professional services are limited, offering emotional guidance, social belonging, and moral orientation. This role aligns with earlier observations that religious institutions remain trusted sources of counselling and social care in African societies.

Narrative-based counselling emerges as particularly relevant for addressing migration-related distress. This finding supports White and Epston's argument that narrative practices enable individuals to reorganize life stories disrupted by displacement, loss, and uncertainty. Migrants who are encouraged to reinterpret their journeys through structured

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[43] Levitt, Peggy. *God Needs No Passport: Immigrants and the Changing American Religious Landscape*. 2nd ed. New York: The New Press, 2022.

storytelling appear better able to integrate cultural values, spiritual beliefs, and emotional experiences into coherent identities. Denborough's work similarly shows that narrative therapy strengthens psychological resilience by allowing migrants to externalize distress and reassert personal meaning. The present analysis extends these findings by suggesting that narrative counselling becomes even more effective when linked to biblical storytelling familiar within African Christianity.

The integration of theology and counselling emerges as one of the major contributions of this study. Interdisciplinary research has already shown that religious narratives can complement mental health practices in addressing moral decision making and emotional vulnerability. The findings here confirm that such integration is especially appropriate in African settings, where faith leaders possess social authority and moral influence. Linking scriptural interpretation with counselling strategies promotes responsibility, emotional readiness, and community accountability, supporting earlier proposals by Adogame and Spickard as well as the International Organization for Migration.

Conclusion

This study has argued that African migration cannot be explained only through economic or political factors, since religious belief, identity, and emotional well-being strongly shape how mobility is understood and experienced. Biblical narratives, especially the Exodus motif, provide moral language for interpreting movement, while counselling practices address psychological strain and ethical decision making. Integrating theology with counselling therefore supports safer migration by promoting emotional readiness, communal responsibility, and sustained psychosocial support.

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CHAPTER 19

AFRICAN MIGRATION, NEOCOLONIALISM, AND THE DECOLONIZATION OF CHRISTIANITY: THE NIGERIAN CONTEXT

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Abstract

This article examines the relationship between African migration, neo-colonial structures, and the ongoing effort to decolonize Christianity in contemporary Africa. Despite political independence across much of the continent, neo-colonial dynamics continue to influence African societies through economic systems, educational institutions, financial networks, and global political relations. Migration particularly educational and professional mobility to Western contexts both reflects and sustains these structural patterns. While migration is often framed in terms of economic "brain drain," its theological and socio-cultural consequences require deeper scholarly engagement. This study argues that transnational theological education, academic partnerships, and institutional affiliations with Western centers of scholarship contribute to enduring forms of theological dependency that complicate the quest for ecclesial and intellectual autonomy. Simultaneously, internal factors including governance challenges, ecclesiastical leadership structures, and socio-political instability significantly shape migration flows and Christian identity formation in Africa. Using document analysis and theological reflection, the article evaluates how migration and neo-colonial influence affect doctrinal formation and ecclesial self-understanding. It contends that authentic decolonization does not require disengagement from global Christianity, but rather the cultivation of indigenous theological agency grounded in contextual realities and sustained by responsible global interaction. The study concludes that the vitality of African Christianity depends upon balancing global interconnectedness with theological self-determination.

Keywords: *African Migration, Neo-colonialism, Decolonization of Christianity, Theological Dependency, Ecclesial Identity, Contextual Theology.*

INTRODUCTION

Migration is a persistent feature of human societies, involving movement within states and across international borders. Although no single definition captures every form of mobility,

international migration is commonly understood as a change in a person's country of usual residence. This study is concerned particularly with skilled international migration from Nigeria and its implications for human capital, theological formation, and the decolonization of Christianity.[1]

People migrate for multiple and often overlapping reasons, including employment, education, healthcare, insecurity, conflict, environmental pressures, family considerations, and the search for political or religious freedom. These drivers are frequently discussed in terms of economic, social, environmental, and political factors.[2]

In recent decades, the movement of highly trained workers from African countries to Europe and North America has intensified concern about 'brain drain.' Brain drain describes the sustained emigration of educated and skilled persons in ways that may reduce the stock of expertise available to institutions in countries of origin. Its effects are not exclusively economic. For African Christianity, the migration of clergy, theologians, teachers, and students may also affect theological education, institutional capacity, and the location from which Christian knowledge is produced. This phenomenon can be examined through interacting push and pull factors. The push factors include economic and political instability, poor infrastructure, unemployment, and low wages, while the pull factors involve better pay, advanced facilities, and improved quality of life in destination countries.

In Nigeria, the contemporary 'Japa' phenomenon has made skilled emigration especially visible among young professionals and students. Although public discussion often emphasizes health, education, and technology, religious institutions are also implicated when clergy, theological educators, and students relocate abroad. The concern of this article is not that exposure to Western scholarship is inherently harmful, but that unequal institutional relationships may reproduce dependence when African theological institutions lack the resources and confidence to set their own research, curricular, and ecclesial priorities.

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[1] International Organization for Migration, *Fundamentals of Migration*, accessed October 6, 2025, https://share.google/DwuiGGILXl033fTCc.
[2] Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) Education, "What Is Migration?" *CFR Education*, accessed October 6, 2025.

Accordingly, this study examines how skilled migration intersects with neocolonial structures and the decolonization of Christianity in Nigeria. It asks how migration affects theological human capital, how external and internal forms of dependency shape ecclesial identity, and what forms of global engagement can strengthen rather than weaken African theological agency.

Nigeria's recent wave of skilled migration provides an important context for this inquiry. The period 2016–2025 includes economic recession, high unemployment, insecurity, currency instability, and expanding educational and professional mobility. These conditions have intensified public concern about the loss of skilled personnel and the capacity of Nigerian institutions to retain and reproduce expertise.

Existing studies have examined migration, brain drain, and human-capital loss in Nigeria and Africa, while African theologians have separately examined questions of contextualization, dependency, and theological decolonization. Less attention has been given to the intersection of these conversations: how contemporary skilled migration may reshape theological formation and ecclesial self-understanding. This article addresses that intersection rather than treating migration only as a labour-market problem.

The main objective of the study is to examine the relationship among skilled migration, neocolonial dependency, and the decolonization of Christianity in Nigeria during 2016–2025. The period is used as a contemporary analytical frame rather than as a claim that migration began within this decade. Particular attention is given to theological education and ecclesial formation, while evidence from health, education, and other skilled sectors is used to illuminate the wider structural environment in which religious migration occurs.

To achieve this aim, the study pursued the following objectives:

1. To investigate the key factors driving skilled migration and brain drain in Nigeria, particularly within the healthcare, education, and technology sectors.
2. To examine migration's impact and brain drain on Nigeria's theological formation.
3. To analyze neocolonial influences on church identity and doctrine.
4. To propose pathways for theological decolonization.

The significance of the study lies in connecting migration studies with African theological reflection. Skilled emigration can weaken institutions through the loss of personnel, but migration can also generate diaspora networks, remittances, transnational partnerships, and new forms of knowledge exchange. The theological question is therefore not simply how to stop migration, but how African churches and theological institutions can retain agency within increasingly transnational Christian networks.

Previous studies have often treated brain drain primarily in economic or professional terms. This study contributes by examining how contemporary migration can affect the production, transmission, and authority of theological knowledge. It therefore places the Nigerian experience within the wider discussion of African Christianity, contextual theology, and decolonial agency.

The findings from this research are expected to provide valuable guidance for government and policymakers in designing effective strategies to retain skilled workers. It seeks to assist ministries such as, Labour, and Education, and Ecclesial Institutions in formulating more responsive workforce policies.

Furthermore, this study hopes to benefit citizens and institutions by deepening understanding of the causes and long-term consequences of continuous skilled migration. Such understanding may encourage improved working conditions and career incentives capable of reducing the push factors driving brain drain and migration.

Finally, this research intends to lay a foundation for future investigations on migration, labour mobility, and decolonization of Christianity both in Nigeria and across Africa. The significance of the study therefore lies in its potential contribution to knowledge, policy formulation, and the pursuit of sustainable national development.

The study focuses geographically on Nigeria while locating the discussion within broader African debates about Christianity and decolonization. Its temporal emphasis is 2016–2025, a period of heightened public attention to skilled emigration. The analysis concentrates on migration as it bears on theological education, ecclesial leadership, and

institutional capacity; evidence from other professional sectors is used comparatively to clarify the structural pressures that also affect religious institutions.[3]

Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, library-based design combining document analysis and theological reflection. The documentary corpus consists of peer-reviewed migration scholarship, books on African Christianity and decolonization, and reports from relevant national and international institutions. Sources were selected for their relevance to Nigerian skilled migration, human-capital development, theological education, ecclesial dependency, and African Christian agency, with particular attention to materials addressing the 2016–2025 period. The analysis proceeds in three stages: first, identifying major push and pull factors shaping skilled migration; second, examining how migration and institutional dependency affect theological formation and ecclesial autonomy; and third, interpreting these findings through African theological discussions of contextualization and decolonization. The study is interpretive rather than statistical and does not claim to measure the total number of migrating clergy or theologians.

Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

Everett S. Lee's push–pull approach provides the principal migration framework for the study. Lee explains migration in relation to positive and negative factors associated with places of origin and destination, together with intervening obstacles and personal factors. In the Nigerian context, the framework helps organize the economic, political, educational, security, and professional conditions that encourage skilled workers to leave, as well as the opportunities that attract them to destination countries.[4][5]

Push factors may include unemployment, low remuneration, insecurity, weak infrastructure, and unstable institutions, while pull factors may include better employment,

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[3] National Bureau of Statistics, *Nigerian Gross Domestic Product Report:* Q2 2016 (Abuja: NBS, 2016), 5–6; World Bank, *Nigeria Economic Report*, No. 5: The Challenges of Job Creation (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2016), 12–15.
[4] Everett S. Lee, "A Theory of Migration," *Demography 3*, no. 1 (1966): 47–57.
[5] Stephen Castles and Mark J. Miller, *The Age of Migration: International Population Movements in the Modern World*, 5th ed. (New York: Guilford Press, 2009), 21–23

higher wages, professional development, institutional stability, and improved living conditions. The framework is useful descriptively, but migration should not be reduced to a purely economic calculation because social networks, historical relationships, professional cultures, and personal agency also shape mobility.[6]

In the Nigerian context, the Push–Pull Theory helps explain why professionals in sectors such as healthcare, education, and technology are increasingly leaving the country. Poor working conditions, low remuneration, and weak institutional support serve as major push factors, while attractive job offers, better pay, and improved living standards in countries like the United Kingdom, Canada, and the United States act as pull factors.[7] This theoretical lens thus provides a useful foundation for analyzing how economic and political dynamics influence skilled migration and brain drain between 2016 and 2025.

The push–pull model has been criticized for oversimplifying migration when it treats mobility mainly as an individual response to advantages and disadvantages. Structural approaches draw attention to inequalities in the global political economy, while migration systems and network perspectives emphasize historical ties, institutions, and social relationships. These criticisms are especially important for this study because neocolonialism concerns unequal structures of knowledge, finance, and institutional authority that cannot be explained by individual choice alone.[8][9][10]

For this reason, the study uses push–pull theory as an organizing framework rather than a complete explanation. It is supplemented by a decolonial theological lens that asks who controls theological resources, whose knowledge receives institutional authority, and whether transnational relationships enable African churches to define their own theological priorities.

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[6] International Organization for Migration (IOM), *World Migration Report 2022* (Geneva: IOM, 2022), 99–101.
[7] Adebayo, A., "The Dynamics of Skilled Labour Migration in Nigeria," *African Journal of Economic Policy* 26, no. 2 (2019): 45–62.
[8] Douglas S. Massey et al., *Worlds in Motion: Understanding International Migration at the End of the Millennium* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 24–27.
[9] Hein de Haas, "Migration and Development: A Theoretical Perspective," *International Migration Review* 44, no. 1 (2010): 227–264.
[10] Joaquin Arango, "Explaining Migration: A Critical View," *International Social Science Journal* 52, no. 165 (2000): 283–296.

Historical and Contemporary Context

Migration includes both internal and international forms of mobility and may be voluntary, constrained, or forced. In the territory that became Nigeria, mobility long predated colonial rule and was associated with trade, agriculture, warfare, political expansion, kinship, religion, and environmental conditions. Colonialism altered these patterns through new administrative centres, labour regimes, transport networks, and economic structures. This historical perspective is important because contemporary migration should not be presented as an entirely new phenomenon, even though its scale, destinations, and professional composition have changed.[11,12]

This section reviews the patterns, forms, and evolution of migration in Nigeria from the pre-colonial period up to the last decade of 2016-2025. Historically, migration among the people of present-day Nigeria began long before colonialism. Migration during the pre-colonial period was motivated by multiple factors, including trade, agriculture, religion, security, warfare, and territorial expansion.

According to Toyin Falola and Matthew Heaton, before the emergence of British rule, "migration patterns were largely influenced by trade routes, wars, and the search for fertile lands,"[13] demonstrating that human mobility was an integral feature of Nigerian societies long before colonial intrusion. The Yoruba, Hausa-Fulani, and Igbo peoples, among others, migrated periodically within their regions for agricultural and commercial purposes. The Yoruba, for example, moved between towns and villages in search of more productive farmland and safer settlements due to inter-tribal wars such as the Owu and Ibadan wars of the nineteenth century. In the north, long-distance trade encouraged population shifts, as Hausa traders moved between Kano, Katsina, Zaria, and beyond, forming trans-Saharan links that contributed to the spread of Islam and cultural exchange.[14] Among the Igbo,

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[11] International Organization for Migration, Glossary on Migration (Geneva: IOM, 2019), 132
[12] International Organization for Migration, *Glossary on Migration, 3rd ed*. (Geneva: IOM, 2019), 67
[13] Toyin Falola and Matthew M. Heaton, *A History of Nigeria* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 24–28
[14] Toyin Falola, *The History of Nigeria* (Greenwood Press, 1999), 43–45.

internal migration occurred through kinship expansion, inter-village marriage, and trade, leading to the founding of new settlements in regions such as Nsukka and Arochukwu.[15]

Akin Mabogunje further explains that the structure of pre-colonial Nigerian societies allowed for both seasonal and permanent migration, particularly among farming communities who relocated after exhausting soil fertility in one area. There was frequent movement of people and communities long before colonial mapping and urban planning. Falola emphasizes that the formation of political entities such as the Oyo Empire, the Sokoto Caliphate, and the Benin Kingdom also prompted population movements, as people were sometimes resettled for military or administrative reasons.[16] Internal migration during this period was not only economic but also strategic and social. The emergence of trade networks such as the trans-Saharan and coastal routes connected northern and southern economies, enabling communities to move for trade in salt, kolanut, leather, and slaves.[17] These interactions contributed to the cultural diversity that became characteristic of Nigeria. In essence, early internal migration in pre-colonial Nigeria laid the foundation for later rural–urban migration and regional integration that continued under colonial and post-colonial rule.[18]

During the colonial period, migration in Nigeria assumed new patterns as a result of British administrative, economic, and infrastructural policies. The creation of new administrative centres such as Lagos, Ibadan, Enugu, and Kaduna encouraged rural–urban migration, as people moved in search of wage employment in government service, railways, and colonial industries.[19] The introduction of cash crops like cocoa in the west, groundnut in the north, and palm produce in the east also stimulated seasonal and circular migration, as farmers and labourers moved to areas of higher economic opportunity. The construction of railways and roads by the colonial government facilitated mobility, linking distant regions that were previously isolated. Large numbers of Nigerians were also conscripted or recruited as

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[15] Elizabeth Isichei, *A History of the Igbo People* (London: Macmillan, 1976), 55–59.
[16] Toyin Falola, Yoruba Gurus: *Indigenous Production of Knowledge in Africa* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1999), 18–21.
[17] Akin L. Mabogunje, *Urbanization in Nigeria* (London: University of London Press, 1968), 33–35.
[18] Adepoju, A., "Migration in Sub-Saharan Africa," *International Social Science Journal,* Vol. 49, No. 3 (1997).
[19] Falola, T., & Heaton, M. M., *A History of Nigeria* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

porters and soldiers during the World Wars, representing one of the earliest forms of organized interregional migration under colonial rule.[20]

International Migration and Brain Drain (1980s – 2000s)

Due to the economic decline that followed the collapse of global oil prices and the introduction of the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) in 1986, Nigeria experienced deep fiscal strain. Cuts in public expenditure, removal of subsidies, and the devaluation of the naira significantly worsened living conditions, pushing professionals and the middle class to seek opportunities abroad. [21] Consequently, Nigeria entered a new phase of migration characterized by the outward movement of people to various countries. Adepoju notes that "the 1980s marked a turning point in Nigeria's migration history, as economic downturn and structural adjustment measures prompted the emigration of skilled professionals in search of better employment and living conditions abroad."[22]

This period witnessed substantial outward migration, including the emigration of skilled professionals.The large-scale outflow of skilled labour especially doctors, academics, and engineers led to what has since been described as the Nigerian "brain drain."[23] Several factors contributed to this trend. The deteriorating economic and political conditions in Nigeria during the 1980s provided the strongest push factors for the exodus of the country's skilled and educated population. The rate of tertiary-educated Nigerians migrating to OECD countries rose sharply after 1980, reflecting both domestic economic decline and expanding opportunities abroad.[24]

As economic hardship deepened, external migration flows intensified, with the United Kingdom, the United States, and Saudi Arabia emerging as principal destinations. [25] This

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[20] Walker, Ezekiel Ayodele. "Structural Change, the Oil Boom and the Cocoa Economy of Southwestern Nigeria, 1973–1980s." *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 38, no. 1 (2000): 265–266. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022278X99003250.
[21] Aderanti Adepoju, "Issues and Recent Trends in International Migration in Sub-Saharan Africa," *International Social Science Journal* 52, no. 165 (2000): 387.
[22] Ibid, 389
[23] Adepoju, *Migration in Sub-Saharan Africa* (Uppsala: Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, 2005), 44
[24] Frédéric Docquier and Hillel Rapoport, "Globalization, Brain Drain, and Development," *Journal of Economic Literature* 50, no. 3 (2012): 703
[25] Mariama Awumbila et al., "Drivers of Migration and Urbanization in Africa," *African Population Studies* 30, no. 2 (2016): 2412

skilled outflow contributed to concerns about the capacity of the domestic workforce.[26] Nevertheless, persistent outflows of doctors, engineers, academics, and other professionals since the SAP era continue to weaken the human resource base necessary for national development.[27]

Contemporary Migration and the 'Japa' Phenomenon

Migration in Nigeria since 2015 has assumed new dimensions driven by persistent economic hardship, insecurity, and globalization. The period marks a significant transformation in migration patterns, characterized by increased emigration of skilled professionals, growing diaspora engagement, and the rise of new forms of mobility facilitated by technology.[28]

The "Japa" phenomenon a Yoruba term meaning "to flee" or "to escape" has become a defining feature of contemporary Nigerian migration.[29] It reflects the large-scale outflow of skilled and educated Nigerians, especially young professionals, students, health workers, and clerics, to countries such as the United Kingdom, Canada, and the United States. This trend is largely motivated by economic instability, insecurity, religious conflicts and dissatisfaction with governance.

Recent data indicate that Nigerian educational migration to the United Kingdom rose sharply during this period. HESA reports that 72,355 students from Nigeria were enrolled in UK higher education in the 2022/23 academic year, a 66 percent increase over 2021/22.[30] Educational migration has also expanded to other major destination countries, reflecting the wider role of study as a pathway in Nigerian mobility.[31] Health professionals are

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[26] Abi. A. Afolayan, *Migration in Nigeria: A Country Profile* (Geneva: International Organization for Migration, 2009), 14.
[27] International Organization for Migration (IOM). *Migration in Nigeria: A Country Profile 2020.* Geneva: International Organization for Migration, 2020, 45–47.
[28] Olutayo, A. O., and Bankole, A. O., "The Japa Syndrome and the Political Economy of Migration among Nigerian Youths," *African Journal of Migration Studies* 12, no. 2 (2023): 5–8.
[29] Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA), *Where Do HE Students Come From? 2023 Release* (Cheltenham: HESA, 2023), 4.
[30] Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA), "Higher Education Student Statistics: UK 2022/23 Released," August 8, 2024; HESA reports 72,355 students from Nigeria in 2022/23, a 66 percent annual increase.
[31] International Labour Organization (ILO), Labour Migration Highlights: Nigeria 2023 (Geneva: ILO, 2023), 9.

prominent within the wider skilled-emigration trend.[32] Rather than assigning a single migration total to WHO data, it is more accurate to note that Nigeria appears on the WHO Health Workforce Support and Safeguards List, reflecting significant health-workforce vulnerabilities.[33]

Another defining feature of this period is the strengthening of Nigeria's diaspora networks. Nigeria has a large and diverse diaspora, but estimates vary according to whether they count citizens abroad, persons of Nigerian origin, or formally measured migrant stock; these categories should therefore not be treated as interchangeable.[34] Remittance inflows nevertheless demonstrate the economic significance of transnational Nigerian networks. The World Bank reported that remittances to Nigeria increased to about USD 20.1 billion in 2022, accounting for roughly 38 percent of remittance inflows to Sub-Saharan Africa.[35, 36]

Digital connectivity and the rise of remote work have also reshaped migration dynamics.[37] Many Nigerian professionals now engage in virtual migration, working remotely for international companies without physically relocating. This can create new economic opportunities and may offset some effects associated with physical emigration.[38] Similarly, migration entrepreneurship has expanded, with returnees and diaspora investors contributing to local innovation, technology startups, and education initiatives.[39]

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[32] Ibid, 9–11.
[33] World Health Organization (WHO), Health Workforce Support and Safeguards List 2023 (Geneva: WHO, 2023).
[34] Nigerians in Diaspora Commission (NiDCOM), Nigeria Diaspora Policy 2021 (Abuja: NiDCOM, 2021), 2–3.
[35] World Bank, Migration and Development Brief 38: Remittances Remain Resilient (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2023), 27–28.
[36] Ibid, 27-28, (Remittances remain an important source of foreign exchange and household support, even though their developmental effects vary across households and sectors)
[37] International Organization for Migration (IOM), *Diaspora Engagement and Development in Nigeria: Policy Brief* (Abuja: IOM, 2022), 4–5.
[38] International Labour Organization (ILO), *Labour Migration Highlights: Nigeria 2023* (Geneva: ILO, 2023), 11.
[39] World Health Organization (WHO), *Health Workforce Support and Safeguards List 2023* (Geneva: WHO, 2023), 15.

Despite these positive outcomes, the growing outflow of skilled labour continues to pose challenges for Nigeria's human capital development.[40] Critical sectors particularly health, education, and information technology, and religion are increasingly understaffed.[41] In response, the federal government has introduced policies such as the National Migration Policy (revised 2021) and the Nigeria Diaspora Investment Summit to promote safe, orderly, and productive migration while harnessing the potential of its diaspora population.[42]

Contemporary migration in Nigeria thus presents a paradox: while it drains domestic skills, it simultaneously strengthens transnational linkages that can promote development if effectively managed. The challenge for policymakers lies in transforming migration from a symptom of socio-economic distress into a driver of national transformation.[43]

Internal Factors Shaping Dependency

The preceding discussion identifies the scale and changing forms of skilled migration. The next question concerns the domestic conditions that make emigration attractive or necessary. In Nigeria, economic pressure, insecurity, instability in education, and weaknesses in healthcare and other public institutions interact as significant push factors. These pressures also affect theological institutions indirectly through funding constraints, staff mobility, student migration, and declining institutional confidence.[44]

Economic recession and unemployment

In the 1980s, Nigeria experienced an economic crisis following the crash in global oil prices, which led to significant skilled migration. Similarly, in 2016, Nigeria faced another economic recession due to a decline in oil prices and poor fiscal management by the

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[40] Federal Government of Nigeria, *National Migration Policy (Revised Edition)* (Abuja: Federal Ministry of Interior and IOM, 2021), 9–10.
[41] International Organization for Migration (IOM), *World Migration Report 2022* (Geneva: IOM, 2022), 184–186.
[42] Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), *International Migration Outlook 2023* (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2023), 102–104.
[43] World Bank, *Migration and Development Brief 38: Remittances Remain Resilient* (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2023), 28.
[44] National Bureau of Statistics (NBS), *Labour Force Statistics: Unemployment and Underemployment Report (Q4 2021)* (Abuja: NBS, 2022), 3.

government. The economy slipped into recession for the first time in more than two decades, shrinking by 1.6 percent. The shock pushed unemployment to record highs and reduced household income.[45] This downturn resulted in massive job losses, high inflation, and severe currency devaluation.

In 2020, the economy suffered another major setback, this time due to the global COVID-19 pandemic, which brought widespread economic disruption. Under the labour-force methodology then in use, the National Bureau of Statistics reported a headline unemployment rate of 33.3 percent and an underemployment rate of 22.8 percent for Q4 2020.[46,47]

The naira also suffered significant depreciation, falling from ₦197 to $1 in 2015 to about ₦1,450 to $1 in 2024.[48] Inflation also rose sharply over the period.[49] These economic shocks, combined with structural inefficiencies, intensified household vulnerability. The 2022 Nigeria Multidimensional Poverty Index reported that 63 percent of people in Nigeria—about 133 million persons were multidimensionally poor.[50,51]

Insecurity and Political Instability

The past decade in Nigeria has been marked by widespread insecurity and political instability, both of which have become critical push factors driving migration within and outside the country. Terrorism, armed banditry, communal clashes, kidnapping, and political violence have generated large-scale internal displacement and weakened

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[45] World Bank, *Nigeria Development Update: Seizing the Opportunity* (Washington, DC: World Bank, June 2022), 12–14.
[46] National Bureau of Statistics (NBS), Labor Force Statistics: Unemployment and Underemployment Report (Q4 2020) (Abuja: NBS, 2021).
[47] National Bureau of Statistics (NBS), *Consumer Price Index (CPI) and Inflation Report, May 2024* (Abuja: NBS, 2024). Unemployment and underemployment remain important push factors associated with outward migration among Nigerian youth.
[48] Central Bank of Nigeria (CBN), Statistical Bulletin: Exchange Rate Data (2015–2024) (Abuja: CBN, 2024).
[49] National Bureau of Statistics (NBS), Consumer Price Index (CPI) and Inflation Report, May 2024 (Abuja: NBS, 2024).
[50] National Bureau of Statistics (NBS), 2022 Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) Survey Report (Abuja: NBS, 2022), 4.
[51] World Bank, Nigeria Development Update: Turning the Corner? Time to Move from Reforms to Results (Washington, DC: World Bank, June 2023), 8. World Bank assessments likewise document the continuing pressure of inflation and economic reforms on poverty and household welfare.

confidence in affected communities. IDMC reported that about 3.6 million people were living in internal displacement in Nigeria at the end of 2022, including approximately 1.9 million in protracted displacement in Borno State.[52] The scale of displacement underscores how conflict and insecurity shape mobility alongside economic pressures.[53]

The dimensions of insecurity are diverse and far-reaching. In the North-East, the Boko Haram insurgency and its affiliate, the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), have decimated local economies and displaced millions. In the North-West, banditry, cattle rustling, and kidnapping for ransom have become rampant, while the Middle Belt and South-East regions continue to experience ethno religious conflicts and separatist agitations. The *Global Terrorism Index 2023* ranked Nigeria among the top ten most terror-affected nations in the world, noting that insecurity has "shifted from the North-East to the North-West, where banditry now constitutes the largest source of civilian casualties."[54]

Faleye explains that "as security collapses, mobility becomes not just a choice but a survival mechanism."[55] The failure of government to provide protection and basic services has eroded citizens' trust in the state, compelling many to view migration as a rational response to insecurity. Adepoju describes this process as the "externalization of insecurity," arguing that contemporary Nigerian migration cannot be detached from the collapse of internal security mechanisms.[56] Falola and Heaton similarly note that "insecurity has become the defining context of mobility in post-2015 Nigeria," suggesting that migration is no longer solely an economic pursuit but a reaction to the breakdown of social order and trust in the political system.[57]

Education System Crisis

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[52] Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC), Global Report on Internal Displacement 2023 (Geneva: IDMC, 2023), 25–26.
[53] Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC), Global Report on Internal Displacement 2023 (Geneva: IDMC, 2023), 25–26.
[54] Chijioke Eze and Cletus Odo, "Governance Failure and the Logic of Migration in Nigeria: Understanding Youth Exodus," *Journal of African Political Economy & Development* 8, no. 1 (2021): 45–47.
[55] Aderanti Adepoju, "Migration and Insecurity in West Africa: The Externalization of Domestic Crises," *African Population Studies* 33, no. 2 (2019): 112–115.
[56] Kelechi A. Onah, "Migration, Governance Failure, and the Crisis of Survival in Nigeria," *African Journal of Governance and Development* 9, no. 2 (2020): 58–60.
[57] International Organization for Migration (IOM), *Migration in Nigeria: A Country Profile 2020* (Geneva: International Organization for Migration, 2020), 22–24.

Education plays a central role in national development and human capital formation. In Nigeria, however, the system has long been characterized by instability, chronic underfunding, and infrastructural decay. Over the period 2015–2025, these weaknesses intensified, generating dissatisfaction among students and academics and contributing to both internal and external migration as individuals sought more stable academic environments abroad.[58]

The structural fragility of the education sector became particularly evident during this period. The Education 2030 Framework for Action uses a benchmark of allocating at least 15–20 percent of public expenditure, or 4–6 percent of GDP, to education. Nigeria's recurrent difficulties in financing and stabilizing the sector illustrate the gap between these international benchmarks and the resources required for a large and expanding education system.[59]

A defining feature of the crisis has been the persistent strike actions by the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU). Between 2015 and 2022, repeated industrial actions disrupted public universities for well over a year cumulatively; contemporary strike timelines place the total at about 630 days during the period, including the prolonged strikes of 2020 and 2022.[60]

The cumulative effect of prolonged strikes and declining institutional quality has reinforced the broader "Japa" phenomenon among educators. The United Kingdom's Home Office reported in 2022 that Nigeria had become the third-largest source of international students in the UK.[61]

In sum, the education crisis represents one of the most significant non-economic push factors in Nigeria's recent migration patterns. The erosion of academic standards and

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[58] Aderanti Adepoju, *Contemporary Migration in West Africa: Human Capital and Mobility* (Lagos: Malthouse Press, 2021), 94.
[59] UNESCO, Education 2030: Incheon Declaration and Framework for Action (Paris: UNESCO, 2016), financing benchmarks; see also UNESCO Institute for Statistics, education expenditure framework.
[60] TheCable, "Buhari's Last Chance to Prove His Love for Nigerian Students," October 6, 2022; the report places cumulative ASUU strike time between 2015 and 2022 at about 630 days.
[61] World Health Organization (WHO), *Health Workforce Support and Safeguards Report 2023: Nigeria Country Profile* (Geneva: WHO, 2023), 4.

institutional reliability has weakened human capital development and deepened the cycle of outward migration.

Healthcare System Challenges

The Nigerian healthcare system has, over the past decade, been plagued by chronic underfunding, inadequate infrastructure, and the continuous outflow of medical professionals. Between 2015 and 2025, these weaknesses became more apparent as health sector crises increasingly drove skilled migration especially among doctors, nurses, and pharmacists who sought better remuneration and working conditions abroad.[62] Nigeria's fragile healthcare structure, coupled with declining public investment and deteriorating work environments, has positioned the health sector as one of the leading contributors to the country's contemporary "brain drain."

Nigeria's health financing has persistently fallen short of the 15 percent budgetary commitment adopted by African Union member states in the Abuja Declaration of 2001. The Federal Government's 2023 appropriation documents confirm substantial allocations to the health sector, but the allocation remained below the Abuja benchmark when considered as a share of the overall federal budget.[63]

This study finds a reciprocal relationship between skilled migration and forms of neocolonial dependency in African Christianity. External dependence on funding, accreditation, publishing networks, curricula, and scholarly recognition can privilege Western institutions as centres of theological authority. At the same time, domestic economic hardship, insecurity, weak educational systems, and institutional dysfunction encourage the migration of skilled personnel, including clergy, theological educators, and students. Migration may therefore both reflect existing dependency and, where local capacity is not replenished, deepen it.[64]

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[62] World Health Organization (WHO), *Global Health Observatory Data Repository: Health Workforce Density, Nigeria 2023* (Geneva: WHO, 2023), accessed October 2025.
[63] Federal Government of Nigeria, Budget Office of the Federation, 2023 Appropriation Act by Sector: Federal Ministry of Health (Abuja: Budget Office, 2023); African Union, Abuja Declaration on HIV/AIDS, Tuberculosis and Other Related Infectious Diseases (2001).
[64] Development Research and Projects Centre (DRPC), *Health Worker Migration and Systemic Risk in Nigeria* (Abuja: DRPC, 2022), 5.

The ‘Japa’ phenomenon illustrates this tension, but the argument requires qualification. Nigerian theologians and clergy who study or work abroad do not simply become passive carriers of Western theology. Diaspora experience can also produce critical, hybrid, and transnational forms of African Christian thought. The problem arises when unequal institutional resources make external validation, curricula, funding, or credentials function as substitutes for locally grounded theological agency.

Discussion and Implications

Migration and neocolonial influence can affect ecclesial autonomy when African churches or theological institutions become excessively dependent on externally produced curricula, funding, accreditation, or scholarly recognition. Such dependence may marginalize local languages, histories, and intellectual traditions. Yet global theological exchange is not itself neocolonial. The decisive issue is whether partnerships are reciprocal and whether African institutions retain meaningful authority to define their theological, educational, and missional priorities.

This study shows a deeply interconnected relationship between migration and neocolonialism in shaping African Christian identity. External factors such as reliance on Western funding, accreditation standards, and global theological media establish structural conditions that favor Western epistemologies in African churches. At the same time, internal issues economic hardship, insecurity, declining education, and church dysfunction drive talented individuals to emigrate, often challenging these dependencies. This creates a cycle: neocolonial systems drain Africa’s theological capacity via brain drain, and brain drain sustains dependence on neocolonial structures.

The "Japa" phenomenon exemplifies this dynamic clearly. When Nigerian theologians and clergy emigrate to Europe and North America, they enter academic environments shaped by Western theological traditions. Their subsequent work and pastoral practices often reflect these influences, even when maintaining ties to African contexts. Meanwhile, the

institutions they leave behind weaken as they rely more on imported curricula, textbooks, and visiting faculty from the West.

Effects on Ecclesial Autonomy

Migration and neocolonial influences can affect the autonomy of some African churches and theological institutions.Many continue to depend on Western-developed doctrines, catechisms, and liturgical practices, which are often inadequately adapted to African cultural settings.[65] In leadership, Western credentials tend to be valued over local theological training, marginalizing indigenous scholarship.[66] In moral and social ethics, Western frameworks particularly regarding family, sexuality, and community are often uncritically adopted, leading to tensions within congregations.[67] Financial dependence is especially restrictive; reliance on Western funding can skew research priorities, faculty appointments, and degree programs to align more with donor interests than local needs.[68]

Opportunities for Decolonization

The analysis nevertheless identifies important opportunities for decolonization. The numerical and institutional growth of African Christianity provides a substantial base for theological creativity, while African-initiated churches demonstrate the capacity of local communities to develop forms of worship, leadership, and interpretation responsive to African contexts. Decolonization should therefore be understood as the strengthening of theological agency rather than the rejection of all external influence.[69],[70]

Digital communication also expands possibilities for locally rooted theological education, publishing, collaboration, and diaspora engagement. African scholars abroad can contribute through joint research, mentoring, visiting appointments, digital teaching, and

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[65] Faleye, Oluwakemi A. "Insecurity and Migration in Contemporary Nigeria: Dynamics, Drivers, and Consequences." (African Security Review 31, no. 2 2022), 118–120.
[66] International Organization for Migration (IOM). Fundamentals of Migration. Geneva: IOM, 2019. Accessed October 6, 2025. https://share.google/DwuiGGILXl033fTCc.
[67] International Organization for Migration (IOM). World Migration Report 2022. Geneva: IOM, 2022.
[68] Bonk, Jonathan. Missions and Money: Affluence as a Western Missionary Problem. Rev. ed. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2006.
[69] Nyamiti, Charles. Christ as Our Ancestor: Christology from an African Perspective. Gweru: Mambo Press, 1984.
[70] Mugambi, Jesse N. K. From Liberation to Reconstruction: African Christian Theology after the Cold War. Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers, 1995.

institutional partnerships. These possibilities are most constructive when knowledge flows in multiple directions and when continental institutions participate as agenda-setting partners rather than merely recipients.[71]

Summary of Findings

The study finds that contemporary skilled migration complicates the decolonization of Christianity in Nigeria in at least three ways. First, the loss of skilled personnel can weaken theological education and ecclesial institutions. Second, unequal transnational structures of funding, accreditation, publishing, and scholarly recognition may reinforce external dependency. Third, domestic governance, economic, security, and educational weaknesses intensify migration and thereby reduce local institutional capacity. At the same time, migration creates diaspora networks and transnational resources that can support African theological development when relationships are reciprocal and locally directed.

Recommendations

Based on these findings, the study recommends the following:

i. African governments, churches, and theological institutions should strengthen local theological education through sustainable funding, research infrastructure, competitive conditions of service, and deliberate investment in early-career scholars.

ii. African theological institutions should expand locally governed publishing programmes, journals, monographs, digital archives, and research networks that prioritize African questions, languages, histories, and methodologies while maintaining rigorous scholarly standards.

iii. Partnerships with institutions outside Africa should be structured around reciprocity, transparency, and shared agenda-setting. Funding and accreditation arrangements should strengthen local capacity rather than make African institutions permanently dependent on external priorities.

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[71] Mugambi, Jesse N. K. From Liberation to Reconstruction: African Christian Theology after the Cold War. Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers, 1995.

iv. Churches and universities should create formal channels for diaspora participation, including visiting lectureships, joint research, mentorship, digital teaching, and collaborative supervision, so that migration can contribute to knowledge circulation rather than only human-capital loss.

v. Theological curricula should form scholars who are deeply grounded in African histories, cultures, languages, and intellectual traditions while remaining capable of critical participation in global Christianity. Decolonization requires both contextual rootedness and responsible international engagement.

Final Reflection

The future of African Christianity depends partly on the ability of its churches and theological institutions to combine contextual rootedness with meaningful global engagement. Decolonization is not isolation; it is the recovery and exercise of theological agency the capacity to articulate Christian faith from African histories, experiences, intellectual traditions, and encounters with God while participating critically in the worldwide church. Migration makes this task more complex, but it also creates transnational networks through which African theological voices can travel, return, and reshape global Christianity.[72]

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SECTION C

SCRIPTURE, ETHICS, HUMAN FLOURISHING, AND EMERGING SOCIAL AND DIGITAL REALITIES

CHAPTER 20

GENDER IDENTITY, SEXUALITY, AND HOMOSEXUALITY: EXAMINING GOD'S DESIGN IN GENESIS 1:27 FROM A SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTIST PERSPECTIVE IN THE NIGERIAN CONTEXT

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Abstract

Questions of gender identity, sexuality, and homosexuality reach Nigerian congregations in a setting in which same-sex conduct is criminalised and public hostility toward sexual minorities is intense. This study examines Genesis 1:27 as the foundational text for a biblical theology of gender and sexuality and asks what the verse, read canonically and within Seventh-day Adventist theology, implies for the church's response to gender identity and homosexuality in Nigeria. The problem addressed is the absence of an Adventist treatment that unites rigorous exegesis of the creation text, the denomination's official teaching, and the African contextual realities within which that teaching must be lived. The study employs a confessional biblical-theological method: historical-grammatical and literary analysis of Genesis 1:27 in its Hebrew text and ancient Near Eastern setting; canonical synthesis with Genesis 2:24, the teaching of Jesus (Matt 19:4-6), the Levitical prohibitions, Romans 1, and the Pauline vice lists; and contextual application informed by African inculturation hermeneutics and by Nigerian law and pastoral practice. It finds that Genesis 1:27 binds creation, image-bearing, and sexual differentiation in a single poetic unit and presents the male-female duality as a created gift; that the wider canon evaluates same-sex sexual practice negatively while offering grace to all on equal terms; and that official Adventist statements hold creation design and human dignity together. It argues that in Nigeria the Adventist Church's distinctive witness lies not in reinforcing societal

condemnation but in combining doctrinal clarity with visible protection of the dignity and safety of persons who experience same-sex attraction or gender incongruence.

Keywords: *Genesis 1:27; image of God; gender identity; homosexuality; Seventh-day Adventist theology; African biblical hermeneutics; Nigeria*

Introduction

Few questions press more urgently upon the contemporary church than those concerning gender identity, sexuality, and homosexuality. For the Seventh-day Adventist Church, whose theological method is grounded in the whole of Scripture, they must be answered exegetically and theologically, within the narrative of creation, fall, redemption, and restoration that frames Adventist doctrine. The church's position statement on homosexuality (1999, revised 2012) affirms both that sexual intimacy belongs only within the marriage of a man and a woman and that every person is of infinite value in God's sight and is to be treated with the compassion of Christ;[1] its Statement on Transgenderism (2017) extends the same dual affirmation to gender identity.[2]

Problem, gap, and question. Adventist scholars have produced substantial exegetical work on the relevant texts, but largely from North American and European vantage points.[3] Nigerian Adventists minister where the Same Sex Marriage (Prohibition) Act 2013 criminalises same-sex unions and where social acceptance of homosexuality is among the lowest in the world.[4] No study has yet united the exegesis of Genesis 1:27, the denomination's official teaching, and the African hermeneutical and Nigerian contextual realities in which that teaching is received. The guiding question is therefore: What does Genesis 1:27, read canonically and within Adventist theology, imply for the church's

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[1]General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, "Seventh-day Adventist Position Statement on Homosexuality," voted 3 October 1999, revised 17 October 2012, https://gc.adventist.org/official-statements/homosexuality/.

[2]General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, "Statement on Transgenderism," voted by the General Conference Executive Committee, 11 April 2017.

[3]Ekkehardt Mueller and Elias Brasil de Souza, eds., *Sexuality: Contemporary Issues from a Biblical Perspective* (Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute, 2022); Roy E. Gane, Nicholas P. Miller, and H. Peter Swanson, eds., *Homosexuality, Marriage, and the Church* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2012).

[4]*Same Sex Marriage (Prohibition) Act, 2013*; Pew Research Center, "The Global Divide on Homosexuality Persists," 25 June 2020.

understanding of gender identity and homosexuality in the Nigerian context? The objectives are to analyse Genesis 1:27 in its Hebrew text, literary setting, and ancient Near Eastern environment; to trace the canonical development of its design; to set out the Adventist theological and pastoral response; and to propose implications for pastoral care and public witness in Nigeria.

Method and Scope

The study is a confessional biblical-theological analysis proceeding by historical-grammatical and literary exegesis of Genesis 1:27; canonical synthesis with the texts named above; engagement with competing interpretations; and contextual application drawing on African inculturation hermeneutics, which reads Scripture with deliberate attention to the interpreter's cultural location.[5] Denominational documents are distinguished by ecclesial status: the Fundamental Beliefs and the *Church Manual*, voted by the General Conference in session, carry the highest authority; statements and guidelines voted by the Executive Committee are official but subordinate; Biblical Research Institute (BRI) and Seminary publications are scholarly rather than legislative; and Ellen G. White's writings are authoritative counsel subordinate to Scripture. The study undertakes no empirical research; Scripture quotations are from the New King James Version.

Understanding Gender Identity, Sexuality, and Homosexuality

Clarity of definition must precede clarity of judgement, and the terminology is contested. *Sex* denotes biological classification on the basis of chromosomes, gonads, hormones, and reproductive anatomy; a small proportion of persons are born with variations of sex development (intersex conditions) that complicate binary classification.[6] *Gender identity* denotes a person's internal sense of gender; *gender expression*, how gender is communicated socially; *gender dysphoria*, the clinically significant distress that may accompany incongruence between experienced gender and biological sex; and *sexual*

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[5]Justin S. Ukpong, "Developments in Biblical Interpretation in Africa: Historical and Hermeneutical Directions," in *The Bible in Africa: Transactions, Trajectories, and Trends*, ed. Gerald O. West and Musa W. Dube (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 11-28.

[6]Megan K. DeFranza, *Sex Difference in Christian Theology: Male, Female, and Intersex in the Image of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 23-67.

orientation, the enduring pattern of a person's sexual and romantic attractions.[7] Mark Yarhouse observes that sex, gender, and orientation, once treated as a unity, have been progressively separated in late modern thought.[8] These definitions are descriptive and do not settle normative questions.

Homosexuality may refer to same-sex attraction as an orientation, to same-sex sexual behaviour, or to an identity constructed around them. Christian ethics distinguishes them, since moral responsibility attaches differently to unbidden attraction than to chosen conduct;[9] the BRI holds that the biblical texts address homosexual practice, and the cultivation of desire, rather than the bare fact of temptation.[10] Sexuality, moreover, is a gift, not a problem; Richard Davidson demonstrates that the Old Testament presents it as an original, holy dimension of embodied existence, established before the fall.[11] The question is not whether sexuality is good, but what shape the gift was given at creation.

Genesis 1:27 and God's Design for Humanity

The verse stands at the rhetorical summit of the first creation account: *wayyiḇrāʾ ʾĕlōhîm ʾeṯ-hāʾāḏām bĕṣalmô, bĕṣelem ʾĕlōhîm bārāʾ ʾōṯô, zāḵār ûnĕqēḇâ bārāʾ ʾōṯām*, "So God created man in His own image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them." Its three cola form a parallelism that is synonymous in its first two members and progressive in its third. The first two repeat the creation of *hāʾāḏām*, with the article the collective "humankind," in God's image; the third shifts from the singular object suffix (*ʾōṯô*) to the plural (*ʾōṯām*) and specifies *zāḵār ûnĕqēḇâ*, "male and female." The verb *bārāʾ*, which in the Qal takes God alone as subject, occurs three times, and Gordon Wenham observes that the narrative slows into elevated, quasi-poetic diction precisely

[7]Mark A. Yarhouse and Julia Sadusky, *Emerging Gender Identities: Understanding the Diverse Experiences of Today's Youth* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2020), 1-24.
[8]Mark A. Yarhouse, *Understanding Gender Dysphoria: Navigating Transgender Issues in a Changing Culture* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2015), 16-20.
[9]Stanley J. Grenz, *Welcoming but Not Affirming: An Evangelical Response to Homosexuality* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1998), 13-15.
[10]Ekkehardt Mueller, "Homosexuality, Scripture, and the Church" (Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute, 2010), 1-3.
[11]Richard M. Davidson, *Flame of Yahweh: Sexuality in the Old Testament* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2007), 3-14.

here, marking the creation of humanity as the climax of the chapter.[12] In verse 26 two terms describe humanity's likeness to God: *ṣelem*, "image," used elsewhere of statues (Num 33:52; 2 Kgs 11:18), and *dĕmûṯ*, "likeness," an abstract noun of resemblance that qualifies the first and guards against any notion of a physical replica.[13]

What the syntax establishes directly is that three affirmations occupy a single poetic unit: humanity is created by God, in the image of God, and as male and female. Sexual differentiation is named within the climactic statement itself, and the shift from *ʾōṯô* to *ʾōṯām* indicates that the image belongs to both sexes without gradation; Kenneth Mathews rightly stresses that the woman is a full co-bearer of the image and co-regent of creation.[14] What the syntax does not establish is the precise theological relationship between image-bearing and sexual differentiation; that requires argument beyond the grammar.

The Image of God and the Duality of the Sexes

Interpretations of the *imago Dei* fall into four families. The *substantive* view locates the image in a capacity such as reason. The *functional* or *royal* view, now dominant, reads *ṣelem* against ancient Near Eastern royal ideology, in which the king was the image of the god; Genesis democratises the concept so that humanity as a whole is installed as God's representative ruler over creation (Gen 1:26b, 28).[15] The *relational* view finds the image in the capacity for relationship; Claus Westermann reads the text as concerned with the creature whom God has made his counterpart.[16] Karl Barth pressed the relational reading furthest, identifying the image with the differentiated relationship of male and female itself.[17] Barth's proposal cannot govern the exegesis, however: God is not a sexual being, the animals too are sexually differentiated (Gen 1:22), and the royal reading better fits the context of dominion. Davidson states the more defensible conclusion: Genesis 1:27 establishes at least that differentiation into male and female belongs to the original created

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[12]Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, Word Biblical Commentary 1 (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1987), 27-33.
[13]Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, 29-32.
[14]Kenneth A. Mathews, *Genesis 1-11:26*, New American Commentary 1A (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1996), 172-175.
[15]J. Richard Middleton, *The Liberating Image: The Imago Dei in Genesis 1* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2005), 24-29, 93-145.
[16]Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1-11: A Commentary*, trans. John J. Scullion (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984), 155-158.
[17]Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* III/1 (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1958), 184-187.

order pronounced "very good" (Gen 1:31), grounded in the Creator's will rather than in human self-definition.[18]

From Duality to Union: Genesis 1:27 and Genesis 2:24

Genesis 2:4b-25 returns to the sixth day at closer range. The man's aloneness is "not good" (2:18); the woman is built as *ʿēzer kĕnegdô*, "a helper corresponding to him" (a phrase without connotation of inferiority, since *ʿēzer* is used of God himself, Ps 121:1-2); and the narrative culminates in marriage (2:24). Four realities that the text relates must nevertheless be distinguished: sexual differentiation (1:27), the blessing of procreation (1:28), companionship (2:18), and the covenant of marriage (2:24). Differentiation is universal; marriage is the covenantal form in which sexual union is sanctioned; procreation is its blessing but not its sole purpose; and companionship is a good that marriage embodies but does not exhaust, since Scripture honours the unmarried life (Matt 19:12; 1 Cor 7). Unmarried persons are therefore not incomplete image-bearers. Davidson shows that "one flesh" presupposes the differentiation of 1:27, and Robert Gagnon argues that the creation narratives present that differentiation as integral to the one-flesh bond, so that a canonical reading finds here a major horizon for later sexual ethics.[19]

The design is pre-fall: marriage is a creation ordinance instituted in Eden alongside the Sabbath. Ellen White states it economically: "God celebrated the first marriage. Thus the institution has for its originator the Creator of the universe."[20] And it is normative: when questioned about divorce, Jesus cited Genesis 1:27 and 2:24 together (Matt 19:4-5), and "from the beginning" (19:8) functioned as an ethical criterion. Strictly, Jesus appealed to the creation pattern for the divorce question; extending it to other questions of sexual ethics requires the canonical argument offered below.

Genesis 1:27 in Its Ancient Near Eastern Setting

The creation traditions of Israel's neighbours share a feature Genesis lacks. In the Babylonian *Enuma Elish* the cosmos emerges from the mingling of the primordial waters

[18]Davidson, *Flame of Yahweh*, 17-35.
[19]Davidson, *Flame of Yahweh*, 42-48.
[20]Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1890), 46.

Apsu and Tiamat and from violence between divine generations; in *Atrahasis* humanity is fashioned from clay and the blood of a slain god to relieve the gods of labour; in the Egyptian Heliopolitan cosmogony Atum generates Shu and Tefnut by his own sexual act.[21] Creation is theogonic and sexual. Genesis stands apart: God has no consort; sexuality is not divinised but created, placed wholly on the creaturely side of the Creator-creature distinction, and thereby both demythologised and dignified.[22] The polemic cuts two ways: against every sacralising of sex, sexuality is not ultimate; against every degrading of it, the male-female duality is the Creator's blessed handiwork.

Implications for Gender Identity

Genesis 1:27 thus speaks to gender identity before it speaks to homosexuality. It grounds human identity in a givenness that precedes self-perception: to be created is to receive one's being, including one's embodied, sexed existence, from God. Some contemporary accounts assign substantial normative weight to self-perceived gender identity independently of biological sex; the creational claim that embodiment is integral to the person, reinforced by the Adventist doctrine that the human being is an indivisible unity of body, mind, and spirit (Gen 2:7), stands in evident tension with such accounts.[23]

Three qualifications are required. First, the church's official word is the Statement on Transgenderism (2017), which affirms creation as male and female; interprets gender dysphoria within the effects of the fall while acknowledging that its causes are not fully understood; distinguishes the experience of dysphoria from transgender ideology; declines to endorse surgical or hormonal sex-reassignment as a solution; and requires that transgender persons be treated with dignity and compassion and welcomed into fellowship.[24] Second, persons born with variations of sex development are not the product of choice or ideology; Scripture's "male and female" describes creation's design without denying that the fall affects bodies, and theologians differ on whether intersex persons

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[21]Stephanie Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia*, rev. ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 9-18, 233-238.
[22]Davidson, *Flame of Yahweh*, 85-132.
[23]Yarhouse, *Understanding Gender Dysphoria*, 30-45; Preston M. Sprinkle, *Embodied: Transgender Identities, the Church, and What the Bible Has to Say* (Colorado Springs: David C Cook, 2021), 63-92.
[24]General Conference, "Statement on Transgenderism."

challenge the binary or presuppose it.[25] Third, the aetiology of gender dysphoria, the trajectories of childhood-onset dysphoria, and the outcomes of clinical interventions remain contested in the professional literature, and pastors should not claim a certainty the evidence does not supply.[26] Male and female remain gifts to be inhabited rather than constraints to be escaped; but that conviction does not tell a pastor what to say to a nineteen-year-old in acute distress, which requires the safeguards set out below.

The Seventh-day Adventist Understanding of Gender and Sexuality

Adventist teaching on sexuality is embedded in the church's doctrinal architecture. Fundamental Belief 6 receives the Genesis account as historical; Fundamental Belief 7 confesses humanity as made in God's image, male and female, an indivisible unity of body, mind, and spirit; and Fundamental Belief 23 draws the consequence: "Marriage was divinely established in Eden and affirmed by Jesus to be a lifelong union between a man and a woman in loving companionship."[27] Two features distinguish the Adventist account: a *wholistic anthropology*, in which the sexed body can be neither dismissed as a container for a differently gendered soul nor indulged as though irrelevant to the spirit (1 Cor 6:20), and a *great controversy framework*, within which the distortion of sexuality is one theatre of a larger assault on the created order.

The corporate documents differ in status but not in substance. The statements on homosexuality and on same-sex unions, voted by the Executive Committee, reaffirm that marriage is the union of one man and one woman while insisting that all people, whatever their orientation, are loved by God and must not be singled out for scorn, derision, or abuse.[28] The *Church Manual* (21st ed., 2025) reserves sexual intimacy for heterosexual

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[25]DeFranza, *Sex Difference*, 175-208; Sprinkle, *Embodied*, 111-132.
[26]Yarhouse and Sadusky, *Emerging Gender Identities*, 25-58.
[27]Ministerial Association, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, *Seventh-day Adventists Believe*, 2nd ed. (Silver Spring, MD: Ministerial Association, 2005), 335-352.
[28]General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, "Same-Sex Unions," voted 17 October 2012, https://gc.adventist.org/documents/same-sex-unions/; General Conference, "Position Statement on Homosexuality."

marriage and treats violations, homosexual practice among them and not above them, as matters for redemptive discipline.[29]

Same-Sex Practice in the Broader Biblical Witness

The passages central to Christian debate are of different kinds and must not be read as though each addressed the modern category "homosexuality" directly: two narratives of sexual violence (Gen 19:1-11; Judg 19:22-25), two legal prohibitions (Lev 18:22; 20:13), one sustained theological argument (Rom 1:24-27), and two vice lists (1 Cor 6:9-11; 1 Tim 1:9-10). Adventist exegesis nevertheless reads them as a trajectory that presupposes the creation design.

Sodom and Gibeah

The narratives of Sodom (Gen 19) and Gibeah (Judg 19) describe attempted male-on-male gang rape, domination, and violated hospitality; their relevance to consensual same-sex relationships is indirect and contested. Revisionist readings appeal to Ezekiel 16:49, where Sodom's sin is pride, excess, and neglect of the poor, and the indictment should indeed be read as a broad moral portrait; Ezekiel 16:50 adds that Sodom "committed abomination" (*tôʿēḇâ*), a term of wide semantic range in Ezekiel that should not be equated automatically with Leviticus 18:22. Davidson rightly cautions against building the biblical ethic primarily on these texts, while noting that Israel would have heard them in the light of the creation pattern and the Levitical legislation.[30]

The Levitical Prohibitions

Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 belong to the Holiness Code (Lev 17-26). The former reads *wĕʾeṯ-zāḵār lōʾ ṯiškaḇ miškĕḇê ʾiššâ tôʿēḇâ hîʾ*, "You shall not lie with a male as with a woman. It is an abomination"; the latter attaches the sanction. The chapter is framed by warnings against Egypt and Canaan and binds native and resident alien alike (18:3, 24-30, 26). Two revisionist strategies seek to limit these texts, confinement to cultic prostitution and consignment to abrogated ritual law; Jacob Milgrom, more carefully, argues that the

[29]General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, *Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual*, 21st ed. (Silver Spring, MD: Secretariat, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 2025), chaps. 7 and 13.
[30]Davidson, *Flame of Yahweh*, 145-149.

prohibitions concern the loss of procreative seed and apply only to Israelites and residents of the holy land.[31] Against these, the prohibitions appear within a catalogue of sexual offences, incest, adultery, bestiality, that historic Christian traditions continue to regard as morally binding; the wording is absolute, unqualified by consent, age, or role;[32] and *zāḵār* is the very word for "male" in Genesis 1:27. That observation is lexical; the inference that the prohibition protects the created order of sexuality is theological, and Wenham draws it by locating the Levitical stance within the Old Testament's conviction that sexual relations serve the created purposes of marriage and family.[33] On the criteria by which Adventist interpreters distinguish enduring moral norms from ritual provisions, canonical context, creational grounding, and New Testament reaffirmation, the case for continuity is strong; but it must be argued rather than presumed.

Romans 1 and the Reversal of Creation

Romans 1:24-27 is the fullest New Testament statement and is saturated with creational echoes. Paul narrates a triple exchange culminating in "natural use" exchanged for "what is against nature" (*para physin*, 1:26-27). The vocabulary of verses 23-27, "image," "birds, four-footed animals, and creeping things," and "female" and "male" (*thēlys* and *arsēn*, the Septuagint's terms in Gen 1:27), evokes the creation account: idolatry is the vertical rejection of the Creator, and same-sex passion its horizontal analogue.[34] The meaning of *physis* is disputed: Paul uses *para physin* non-pejoratively of God's grafting of Gentiles into Israel (11:24), and revisionist scholars argue that "nature" denotes social convention, or that Paul has in view only exploitative pederasty or acts contrary to a person's own orientation.[35] Three features resist these proposals: Paul speaks of mutual desire, "burning in their lust for one another" (1:27); he includes female relations (1:26), for which pederastic patterns cannot account; and he grounds the judgement in creation rather than in individual psychology. William Loader, who does not share the traditional ethic,

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[31]Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 17-22*, Anchor Bible 3A (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 1565-1570, 1786-1790.
[32]Davidson, *Flame of Yahweh*, 149-159.
[33]Gordon J. Wenham, "The Old Testament Attitude to Homosexuality," *Expository Times* 102, no. 12 (1991): 359-363.
[34]Robert A. J. Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Texts and Hermeneutics* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2001), 254-297.
[35]James V. Brownson, *Bible, Gender, Sexuality: Reframing the Church's Debate on Same-Sex Relationships* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013), 223-256.

concludes on historical grounds that Paul regarded same-sex relations as such as contrary to the created order.[36] Ekkehardt Mueller adds: Romans 1 evaluates same-sex practice negatively while turning the indictment upon every reader in 2:1, forbidding at once the approval of the conduct and the self-righteousness of the judge.[37]

The Vice Lists and the Word of Hope

First Corinthians 6:9-11 and 1 Timothy 1:9-10 employ the rare compound *arsenokoitai*, widely held to be formed from the Septuagint of Leviticus 20:13 (*arsenos koitēn*), together, in Corinthians, with *malakoi*, literally "soft," whose sexual referent is debated. Dale Martin argues that the meaning of *arsenokoitēs* cannot be fixed by etymology and that later usage points toward economic exploitation; Gagnon replies that the Levitical formation, the pairing with *malakoi*, and the context of sexual sins make male same-sex intercourse the most probable referent.[38] Since etymology alone does not settle the term's range, this study rests on Genesis and Romans rather than on the vice lists. Yet the Corinthian text refuses to close on condemnation: "And such were some of you. But you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God" (1 Cor 6:11). Scholars across differing ethical positions broadly agree that the biblical texts nowhere present an approved same-sex union; what is disputed is that observation's contemporary force.[39]

A Seventh-day Adventist Theological and Pastoral Response

The exegesis above yields four theses. First, *the design is good*: because Genesis 1:27 and 2:24 present sexuality within the marriage of a man and a woman as an Edenic gift, Adventist teaching begins with the gift rather than with prohibition. Second, *the distortion is universal*: because Romans 1 turns upon every reader in 2:1, the disordering of desire, heterosexual and homosexual alike, marks a race in rebellion, not one class of sinners; the 2012 statement locates homosexuality within "the disturbance and brokenness in human

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[36]William Loader, *The New Testament on Sexuality* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 293-326.
[37]Mueller, "Homosexuality, Scripture, and the Church," 8-11.
[38]Dale B. Martin, *Sex and the Single Savior: Gender and Sexuality in Biblical Interpretation* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2006), 37-50; Gagnon, *Bible and Homosexual Practice*, 303-336.
[39]Gane, Miller, and Swanson, *Homosexuality, Marriage, and the Church*, 3-52.

inclinations and relations" occasioned by sin.[40] Third, *the distinction is essential*: between orientation and practice Scripture and the church draw a line, so that same-sex attraction is an occasion for compassion, while same-sex sexual practice is inconsistent with the standard binding on all members.[41] Fourth, *the door of grace stands open*: persons of homosexual orientation who commit themselves to Christ and to the biblical ethic are welcomed into membership, fellowship, and service. The 2014 guidelines apply these theses institutionally, conjoining opposition to homosexual practice with equally firm opposition to hatred and mistreatment, and governing membership by behaviour rather than orientation;[42] the Seminary's 2015 position paper adds the congregational posture of humility, confidentiality, patience, and refusal of any double standard.[43] Adventists do not hold this position because they voted it; they voted it because they hold Scripture to teach it, and it remains open to correction by better exegesis.

Three affirmations about grace follow. *Sin is a condition before it is a catalogue*: "all have sinned" (Rom 3:23), and the person of same-sex orientation stands at no greater distance from grace than the proud church officer or the covetous entrepreneur. *Grace is transforming, not merely forgiving*, but the shape of transformation must be stated carefully: the church should not promise the eradication of same-sex attraction as an expected pastoral outcome, and pastoral care must avoid coercive practices and orientation-change guarantees. What grace guarantees is not the absence of temptation but sufficiency within it (1 Cor 10:13; 2 Cor 12:9), a discipleship whose identity is found in Christ rather than in desire. And *redemption is eschatological* (1 Cor 15:49): no one is finally defined by unmet longing.

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[40]General Conference, "Same-Sex Unions."
[41]Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary, "An Understanding of the Biblical View on Homosexual Practice and Pastoral Care: Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary Position Paper" (Berrien Springs, MI: Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary, 2015).
[42]General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, "Responding to Changing Cultural Attitudes Regarding Homosexual and Other Alternative Sexual Practices," guidelines voted by the General Conference Executive Committee, 2014.
[43]Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary, "Biblical View on Homosexual Practice and Pastoral Care."

Pastoral Care and Christian Community

Ellen White's summary of Christ's ministry supplies the method: "Christ's method alone will give true success in reaching the people. The Saviour mingled with men as one who desired their good. He showed His sympathy for them, ministered to their needs, and won their confidence. Then He bade them, 'Follow Me.'"[44] Sympathy, ministry, and confidence precede the call, and the call is never omitted. Concretely, this entails *truthful welcome*, so that every person, whatever his or her orientation or identity, finds the congregation a safe place to attend and to hear the Word; *honest accompaniment* over years rather than conversations, since premature demands for resolution and glib promises of change are both forms of abandonment;[45] *a single standard*, since a church that tolerates heterosexual cohabitation while disciplining homosexual conduct has exchanged its ethic for prejudice; *redemptive discipline*, which the *Church Manual* frames as restorative and which must be conducted with confidentiality and grief;[46] and *clinical referral*: where distress, suicidal ideation, trauma, or family violence is present, pastors and families must seek appropriately qualified, licensed mental-health care alongside biblically informed counsel, for pastoral care complements competent clinical care and does not replace it.

African Identity, Nigerian Realities, and Missional Implications

The foregoing must be tested in Nigerian context, and the first requirement is to refuse the assumption that "Africa" is culturally uniform. Nigeria alone comprises more than 250 ethnic groups, a largely Christian south, and a largely Muslim north. Its legal regime is layered: the Criminal and Penal Codes punish "carnal knowledge against the order of nature" with up to fourteen years' imprisonment, twelve northern states have since 2000 adopted Sharia penal codes prescribing capital punishment for male same-sex intercourse, and the Same Sex Marriage (Prohibition) Act, signed in January 2014, adds fourteen years for entering a same-sex union and ten for supporting "gay clubs, societies and organisations."[47] Human Rights Watch has documented arrests, extortion, mob violence,

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[44]Ellen G. White, *The Ministry of Healing* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1905), 143.
[45]Yarhouse, *Understanding Gender Dysphoria*, 125-160.
[46]General Conference, *Church Manual*, 21st ed., chap. 7.
[47]*Criminal Code Act*, Laws of the Federation of Nigeria 2004, sec. 214; *Same Sex Marriage (Prohibition) Act, 2013*, secs. 1-5.

and evictions following the Act, and Pew's 2019 survey found that only seven per cent of Nigerians say homosexuality should be accepted by society.[48]

African hermeneutics explains both the affinity of African churches for the biblical ethic and the dangers that attend it. Inculturation hermeneutics reads Scripture in dialogue with the African worldview, and that worldview, with its communal anthropology and its high valuation of marriage, lineage, and procreation, resonates deeply with the relational and generative anthropology of Genesis 1-2.[49] Yet African scholars sound warnings the church must hear. Kapya Kaoma shows how "protective homophobia," the mobilisation of anti-gay sentiment as a defence of African identity, has been exploited by political actors and inflamed by external funding on both sides of the Western culture war,[50] and van Klinken and Chitando document how controversies over homosexuality have served to consolidate religious authority rather than the good of persons.[51] An African Adventist theology must therefore be biblically rather than merely culturally grounded, so that it can critique culture, including its own, where culture departs from the character of Christ.

Five implications follow. First, ecclesial moral teaching must be sharply distinguished from criminal sanction: the conviction that same-sex practice falls short of the creation design does not entail support for imprisonment, mob action, extortion, or denial of housing and health care, and a church that pleads liberty of conscience for itself cannot be silent when others are brutalised.[52] Second, the temptation facing Nigerian Adventism is not compromise but cruelty; where societal condemnation is already vehement, the church's distinctive witness is not louder condemnation but visible grace, a community in which the standard is kept and the struggler is safe. Third, the communal shame that attends disclosure in Nigerian families demands that congregations protect families from gossip and make clear that a parent's continuing love for a gay or transgender child is obedience

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[48]Human Rights Watch, *"Tell Me Where I Can Be Safe": The Impact of Nigeria's Same Sex Marriage (Prohibition) Act* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2016), 19-58; Pew Research Center, "Global Divide on Homosexuality."
[49]Ukpong, "Developments in Biblical Interpretation in Africa," 11-28.
[50]Kapya J. Kaoma, *Christianity, Globalization, and Protective Homophobia: Democratic Contestation of Sexuality in Sub-Saharan Africa* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 1-30.
[51]Adriaan van Klinken and Ezra Chitando, eds., *Christianity and Controversies over Homosexuality in Contemporary Africa* (London: Routledge, 2016), 1-18.
[52]Nicholas P. Miller, "Civil Liberties, Same-Sex Unions, and the Church," in Gane, Miller, and Swanson, *Homosexuality, Marriage, and the Church*, 263-282.

to the church's teaching, not disloyalty to it. Fourth, Adventist universities, hospitals, and media in Nigeria should embed the church's position within codes of conduct that also guarantee the dignity and safety of every student, patient, and employee. Fifth, for young Adventists who meet these questions through digital culture and friendships, the answer to implausibility is depth rather than volume: patient biblical instruction joined to congregational practice that demonstrates the teaching is not hatred. Missionally, the first angel's summons to "worship Him who made heaven and earth" (Rev 14:7) is a call back to the Creator: a people bearing "the everlasting gospel" (Rev 14:6) cannot proclaim the creation design without the grace that restores it.

Conclusion

This study asked what Genesis 1:27, read canonically and within Adventist theology, implies for the church's understanding of gender identity and homosexuality in the Nigerian context. Exegetically, it found that the verse binds creation, image-bearing, and sexual differentiation in a single poetic unit, that the image belongs equally to male and female, and that the male-female duality is a created gift set apart from the sexualised cosmogonies of Israel's neighbours, to which the later canonical texts supply commentary with differing degrees of directness. Theologically, it found that official Adventist documents hold creation design and human dignity together and that grace must be articulated without promising orientation change. Contextually, it argued that Nigeria's criminalising legal regime and intense public hostility make the church's chief temptation cruelty rather than compromise, and that African inculturation hermeneutics both grounds the church's ethic and warns against its political abuse.

The study's contribution is to relate Adventist creation theology, sexual ethics, human dignity, and pastoral responsibility within a single canonical framework and to test it in an African setting. Its limitations are those of its method: it offers no empirical data on Nigerian Adventist attitudes and treats clinical questions only at the level of pastoral implication. Further research should survey Nigerian Adventist pastors and members and evaluate institutional codes of conduct. Holding creation design and human dignity together is not a compromise between truth and love; it is the refusal to choose between them, because in the character of God they were never apart.

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CHAPTER 21

GENDER COMPLEMENTARITY AND MUTUALITY IN GENESIS 1–2: REFRAMING AFRICAN MARITAL IDENTITY IN A POSTMODERN WORLD

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Abstract

African Christian marriage is increasingly negotiated at the intersection of biblical authority, communal tradition, gender justice, and global debates about identity and embodiment. Responses are often polarized between uncritical traditionalism and uncritical appropriation of contemporary gender discourse, while Genesis 1–2 is invoked without sufficient attention to its syntax, literary movement, and theological anthropology. This paper offers a historical-grammatical, literary-canonical, lexical-theological, and contextually dialogical reading of Genesis 1:26–28 and 2:18–25. It argues that Genesis 1 grounds male and female equally in the imago Dei and a shared human vocation, whereas Genesis 2 narrates sexual differentiation as relational correspondence ordered toward covenantal unity. The contribution of the study is to integrate that literary-exegetical sequence with a bounded African contextual dialogue rather than to treat complementarity and mutuality as rival systems. Within the whole narrative, ʿēzer kĕnegdô identifies the woman as the adequate counterpart who resolves human aloneness; the formation from the ṣēlāʿ establishes shared substance and kinship; and Genesis 2:24 reorders kinship around a durable one-flesh union. Read canonically with Genesis 3, domination and alienation belong to the distortion of creation rather than its normative grammar. The paper th

erefore proposes complementary mutuality—equal dignity, differentiated embodiment, reciprocal responsibility, covenantal fidelity, and shared vocation—as a constructive model for the African Christian contexts represented in the study, without claiming that the selected corpus represents all African societies.

Keywords: *Genesis 1–2; gender complementarity; mutuality; African marriage; imago Dei; covenant; theological anthropology*

INTRODUCTION

Marriage is a primary covenant and social location in which identity, embodiment, authority, kinship, sexuality, and moral responsibility are negotiated. In contemporary African Christian communities, these questions are intensified by the encounter between inherited communal patterns and transnational discourses on equality, autonomy, gender, sexuality, and family. The resulting tension should not be reduced to a contest between "Africa" and "the West." It is a hermeneutical and theological problem: by what norm should Christian communities distinguish creational goods from cultural accretions, and legitimate differentiation from relations of domination?

Genesis 1–2 is foundational to this inquiry because the canonical creation narratives locate human identity, sexual differentiation, vocation, relationality, and marital union within the divine ordering of creation. Genesis 1:26–28 presents humanity as created in God's image and likeness, explicitly "male and female," and addresses the blessing and mandate to the pair. Genesis 2 narrows the focus from the cosmos to the relational condition of the human, declares aloneness "not good," and resolves it through the creation of an *ʿēzer kĕnegdô*—a corresponding helper—followed by the movement of leaving, clinging, and becoming one flesh.[1]

The central interpretive difficulty is not simply that "complementarity" and "mutuality" are treated as rival theological projects; it is that several strands of scholarship often address only one part of the problem. Some studies foreground creation order or sexual differentiation, others emphasize the *imago Dei* and equality, others concentrate on translation and the semantics of Genesis 2, and still others contextualize gender relations in particular African settings. What remains insufficiently integrated is the literary sequence from shared image and vocation in Genesis 1 to correspondence and one-flesh kinship in Genesis 2, read together with Genesis 3 as distortion, and then brought into a methodologically bounded African dialogue. This paper addresses that gap through the

[1]Richard M. Davidson, "The Theology of Sexuality in the Beginning: Genesis 1–2," *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 26, no. 1 (1988): 5–24; Akwasi Asirifi, Emmanuel Kojo Ennin Antwi, and Joseph Williams Acheampong, "Creation of Humankind and the Gender Debate: Re-Reading Genesis 1:26–28 and 2:18–24 and Its Implications for Christians in Kumasi Society," *Global Journal of Human-Social Science* 24, no. H2 (2024): 51–59.

expression complementary mutuality. Unlike hierarchical forms of complementarianism, the model does not infer unilateral male rule from narrative sequence or from the word "helper"; unlike egalitarian constructions in which embodied differentiation can become theologically incidental, it treats male–female differentiation and one-flesh union as positive features of the creation narrative. Its claim is therefore narrower than a complete theory of gender roles: it is an exegetical synthesis that holds equal dignity, embodied differentiation, reciprocal dependence, covenantal fidelity, and shared vocation together.[2]

The diverse African contexts considered in this study make such a synthesis especially important. Influential African theological accounts of personhood and marriage preserve dimensions often weakened by modern individualism: marriage creates bonds beyond the couple; kinship and community matter; procreation and intergenerational continuity carry moral weight; and personhood is constituted relationally.[3]

Yet African women theologians have also shown that appeals to family cohesion, culture, and "complementarity" may legitimize male dominance, silence women's agency, or protect abusive arrangements. Theologically responsible contextualization must therefore be both receptive and critical: it should affirm communal resources that cohere with creation while refusing to baptize fallen power relations as divine design.[4]

The study asks: How do Genesis 1:26–28 and 2:18–25, read in their literary and canonical relation, construct a theology of sexual differentiation and relational mutuality capable of

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[2]Representative strands include Davidson, "Theology of Sexuality," 5–24; J. Richard Middleton, *The Liberating Image: The Imago Dei in Genesis 1* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2005), 25–29, 88–90; Aleksander Gomola, "The Myth of the Creation of Woman in Genesis 2:18–23 and Its Possible Translations—The Consequences for Christian Anthropology," *Studia Religiologica* 47, no. 2 (2014): 77–88, https://doi.org/10.4467/20844077SR.14.006.2379; Uzoma A. Dike and Paulinus O. Agbo, "Is God Partial in Creation? A Feminist Re-Examination of Gender in the Yahwist's Narrative," *Verbum et Ecclesia* 46, no. 1 (2025): a3274, https://doi.org/10.4102/ve.v46i1.3274; Asirifi, Antwi, and Acheampong, "Creation of Humankind," 51–59; and Ali Mati, "The Ontology of Men and Women's Relationships in Contemporary African Ecclesiology: Towards a Theology of Authority-Submission in the Church," *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 78, no. 1 (2022): a7920, https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v78i1.7920.

[3]John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 2nd ed. (London: Heinemann, 1990), 102–6, 130–44; Bénézet Bujo, *African Theology in Its Social Context*, trans. John O'Donohue (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1992), 115–21; Laurenti Magesa, *African Religion: The Moral Traditions of Abundant Life* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997), 115–22.

[4]Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Introducing African Women's Theology* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 10–13; Musimbi R. A. Kanyoro, *Introducing Feminist Cultural Hermeneutics: An African Perspective* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), 13–15.

critically reframing African Christian marital identity? Four subsidiary questions guide the analysis: (1) How do syntax and literary structure distribute human identity and vocation? (2) What do the key Hebrew expressions contribute to the anthropology of the text? (3) How does Genesis 3 distinguish creational relationality from post-fall distortion? and (4) How may this exegetical synthesis affirm and correct African marital patterns while engaging contemporary gender discourse? The argument proceeds from method and scholarship to close exegesis, then to contextual dialogue, constructive theology, and practical implications.

Methodology and Hermeneutical Control

The study combines historical-grammatical exegesis, literary-canonical analysis, lexical-theological inquiry, and contextual dialogue. The Hebrew base text is the fifth revised edition of the *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* (BHS). The procedure is sequential: first, the pericopes are delimited and their clause relations, pronouns, verbal forms, and syntactical patterns are examined; second, key lexemes are tested within their immediate clauses and semantic ranges; third, the lexical observations are integrated with repetition, poetic parallelism, narrative sequence, characterization, and the movement between Genesis 1 and 2; fourth, Genesis 3 is read canonically as the narrative disruption of the relational world established in Genesis 1–2; only after those steps are the exegetical findings brought into contextual dialogue. This order of operations is intended to prevent either lexical data or contextual concerns from controlling the interpretation prematurely.[5]

Lexical analysis is disciplined by context rather than by word-study maximalism. The terms *ṣelem* and *dĕmût* (Gen 1:26–27) are read within the vocation of divine representation; *ʿēzer kĕnegdô* (Gen 2:18, 20) within the narrative problem of aloneness; *ṣēlāʿ* (2:21–22) within the sequence of divine formation and human recognition; and *dābaq* together with *bāśār ʾeḥād* (2:24) within the reconstitution of kinship. Standard lexical resources establish

[5]Karl Elliger and Wilhelm Rudolph, eds., *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*, 5th rev. ed., prepared by Adrian Schenker (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1997); David M. Carr, *The Formation of Genesis 1–11: Biblical and Other Precursors* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 7–29; Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis, Chapters 1–17*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990), 126–82.

semantic possibilities, but theological conclusions are drawn from the interaction of lexeme, syntax, narrative, and canonical setting rather than from etymology or dictionary glosses alone.[6]

Contextualization is secondary and dialogical rather than controlling. The contextual corpus is purposive, not exhaustive. Sources were selected because they are influential in African Christian or theological discussions of relational personhood, marriage, gender, authority, or cultural hermeneutics; because they offer either a broad theological synthesis or a clearly located African case; and because their publication data are verifiable. Mbiti, Bujo, and Magesa supply influential but non-exhaustive communitarian syntheses; Oduyoye and Kanyoro provide critical African women's theological perspectives; Asirifi, Antwi, and Acheampong offer a specifically Kumasi/Asante study; Mati addresses contemporary African ecclesiological debates; and Cezula contributes a Southern African gender analysis. These works illustrate recurring tensions and resources but cannot stand for every African society, ethnic tradition, denomination, or marriage system. The governing norm in this paper therefore remains the theological grammar derived from Genesis 1–2, while the African corpus functions as a bounded field of dialogue and critique.

Scholarly Conversation: Beyond a False Binary

Interpretation of Genesis 1–2 has often been organized around complementarian and egalitarian traditions, although both traditions are internally diverse. Complementarian readings generally give greater theological weight to differentiation, sequence, and role asymmetry; egalitarian readings generally emphasize equal image-bearing, mutuality, and resistance to hierarchy. The binary becomes exegetically distorting when either system supplies conclusions before the text's own literary movement is heard. The present proposal does not pretend that Genesis 1–2 settles every later canonical debate about

[6]Ludwig Koehler, Walter Baumgartner, and Johann Jakob Stamm, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, trans. and ed. M. E. J. Richardson, 2 vols. (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 811–12 (*ʿēzer*), 1030 (*ṣēlāʿ*), and 209 (*dābaq*) (hereafter HALOT); Lena Christina Simbolon, "Ezer in the Context of Men Creation in Genesis 2:4b–25," *International Journal of Education, Theology, and Humanities* 3, no. 1 (2023): 45–57, https://doi.org/10.46965/ijeth.v3i1.62.

marital or ecclesial authority. It argues more modestly that the final form places shared image-bearing, sexual differentiation, corresponding partnership, and one-flesh union in a single theological sequence and that any subsequent role theology must remain accountable to that sequence.[7]

The imago Dei is decisive because Genesis 1:27 does not distribute divine image according to sex. The verse moves from collective humanity to differentiated plurality, while the divine image remains the defining predicate of both. Middleton's representational reading clarifies the vocational dimension: image-bearing concerns humanity's commissioned relation to God and creation, and Genesis 1:28 addresses that vocation to the male–female pair. The verse therefore creates a strong textual presumption against any anthropology that grounds lesser dignity, lesser image-bearing, or lesser participation in the human mandate in the woman's sex.[8]

The phrase *ʿēzer kĕnegdô* remains a lexical center of the debate in Genesis 2. Popular English connotations of "helper" may suggest a subordinate assistant, but the noun *ʿēzer* does not itself encode inferiority, while *kĕnegdô* specifies correspondence or adequacy in relation to the human. That lexical observation is deliberately limited: the absence of an inferiority marker in *ʿēzer* does not by itself establish a complete non-hierarchical marital structure. The stronger theological conclusion arises from the phrase as it functions within the whole narrative—the stated problem of aloneness, the failure of the animals to correspond, God's agency in forming the woman, the kinship recognition of "bone" and "flesh," and the movement to one flesh. Within that larger syntax and narrative, the woman is presented as the counterpart adequate to the human's relational lack, not merely as a servant attached to an otherwise complete male vocation.[9]

Translation and narrative analysis further complicate hierarchical appeals to derivation. God, not the human, initiates and executes the woman's formation: the human sleeps, God takes the *ṣēlāʿ*, God builds the woman, and God brings her to the human. The human

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[7]Middleton, *Liberating Image*, 25–29, 88–90; Hulisani Ramantswana, "Humanity Not Pronounced Good: A Re-Reading of Genesis 1:26–31 in Dialogue with Genesis 2–3," *Old Testament Essays* 26, no. 2 (2013): 425–44.
[8]Middleton, *Liberating Image*, 25–29, 88–90; Davidson, "Theology of Sexuality," 8–13.
[9]Simbolon, "Ezer," 45–57; Dike and Agbo, "Is God Partial in Creation?," 3–4.

response is recognition—"bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh"—before the wordplay *ʾîš/ʾiššâ* marks differentiation. Gomola has shown how translation choices in this passage shape Christian anthropology, especially when "human/man," "helper," and the material of formation are rendered in ways that predetermine hierarchy.[10]

A second crucial conversation concerns Genesis 2–3. Structural studies observe that the transparency, intimacy, and ordered relationality of Genesis 2 are reversed by shame, hiding, accusation, contested desire, toil, and expulsion. Ouro's chiastic analysis and Stefanovic's "great reversal" make the narrative contrast explicit. This distinction matters for marital theology: if domination is located within the grammar of judgment and rupture, it cannot simply be read backward as the creational ideal.[11]

Recent treatments of Genesis 3:16 likewise emphasize that the verse belongs to a post-transgression context and should not be isolated from the narrative movement from creation to fracture. Doukhan offers a redemptive rereading of the verse, while Meyers's close contextual analysis cautions against inherited assumptions about the woman's punishment and the semantic value of the verse's key terms.[12]

The contemporary discussion has also widened from role theory to embodiment, masculinity, sex difference, and intersex realities. Such work is useful because it exposes the inadequacy of simplistic binaries between "biology" and "social construction." The present study does not claim that Genesis 1–2 adjudicates the full range of modern gender-identity questions, intersex conditions, or philosophical accounts of embodiment. Its narrower claim is textual: Genesis 1:27 positively names humanity as "male and female," locates both within shared image-bearing, and Genesis 2 narrates their relation through

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[10]Gomola, "Myth of the Creation of Woman," 77–88.
[11]Roberto Ouro, "The Garden of Eden Account: The Chiastic Structure of Genesis 2–3," *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 40, no. 2 (2002): 219–43; Zdravko Stefanovic, "The Great Reversal: Thematic Links Between Genesis 2 and 3," *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 32, nos. 1–2 (1994): 47–56.
[12]Abi Doukhan, "The Woman's Curse: A Redemptive Reading of Genesis 3:16," *Religions* 11, no. 11 (2020): article 600, 1–2, https://doi.org/10.3390/rel11110600; Carol Meyers, "Genesis 3:16—Text and Context," *Religions* 15, no. 8 (2024): article 948, 6–7, https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15080948.

correspondence and one-flesh union. That pattern supplies a theological datum for marital anthropology, not a complete modern gender theory.[13]

African scholarship adds a necessary contextual check. Within the traditions represented in this study, relationality should not be equated with patriarchy, and patriarchal practices cannot be justified merely by describing them as African. Oduyoye and Kanyoro distinguish communal values from cultural mechanisms that subordinate women; Mati seeks a theological account of male–female relations that preserves human worth while addressing authority; and Cezula's use of "heterarchy" offers a conceptual way to imagine differentiated social functions without presuming rigid rank.[14]

Exegetical Argument: The Grammar of Complementary Mutuality

Genesis 1:26–28: Shared Image, Shared Blessing, Shared Vocation

Genesis 1:26–28 joins identity and vocation in a tightly ordered sequence. The divine deliberation, "Let us make humanity in our image, according to our likeness," is followed immediately by the commission to rule. The syntax does not present dominion as an autonomous capacity added to human nature; it connects representation and vocation. Humanity rules as God's creaturely image, so authority is derivative and accountable. The ethical implication is already significant: power in creation is stewardship under God, not self-authorizing domination.[15]

Verse 27 sharpens the anthropology through poetic parallelism: God creates *hāʾādām* in the divine image; the singular reference is then expanded to the plural "them"; and the final colon names זָכָר וּנְקֵבָה (*zākār ûněqēbâ*, "male and female"). The literary movement is from common humanity to differentiated plurality. Sexual distinction is therefore neither denied nor made the basis of a hierarchy of being. It belongs within the prior reality of shared

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[13]Kathleen Cavender-McCoy, "An Analogical Anthropology of Sex Difference: Erich Przywara, William Desmond, and the Imago Dei in Intersex Persons," *Irish Theological Quarterly* 88, no. 1 (2023): 22–38, https://doi.org/10.1177/00211400221144749; Mathias Winkler, "The Ancestors' Masculinities in Genesis," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 46, no. 2 (2021): 269–88, https://doi.org/10.1177/03090892211001390.
[14]Mati, "Ontology of Men and Women's Relationships," 1–2; Ntozakhe S. Cezula, "Gender Parity in Patriarchy? Heterarchy and Reclaiming Women's Rights in Judg 4:4 and an African Context," *Old Testament Essays* 38, no. 2 (2025): 1–23, esp. 1–2, 7–9, https://doi.org/10.17159/2312-3621/2025/v38n2a4.
[15]Hamilton, *Genesis 1–17*, 133–38; Middleton, *Liberating Image*, 88–90.

image-bearing. The woman is not an image-bearer through the man, nor is the man a more complete instance of humanity.

Verse 28 then uses plural objects, pronouns, and imperatives: God blesses "them" and commands "them" to be fruitful, multiply, fill, subdue, and rule. The grammar distributes blessing and vocation to the pair. Any later theology of marital differentiation must therefore operate within this primary equality of standing and mission. The text may permit differentiated expressions of vocation, but it does not authorize the reduction of the woman's vocation to participation by male mediation.[16]

Genesis 2:18: "Not Good" and the Semantics of Correspondence

Genesis 2 changes scale. The concern is no longer the place of humanity in the ordered cosmos but the relational condition of the solitary human. The evaluative clause לֹא־טוֹב הֱיוֹת הָאָדָם לְבַדּוֹ (*lōʾ-ṭôb hĕyôt hāʾādām lĕbaddô*, "it is not good for the human to be alone") identifies aloneness as the deficiency. This is the first explicit "not good" in the creation narratives. The problem is not that the human lacks a servant; the problem is that a being made for relational life lacks an adequate counterpart.

The divine response—"I will make for him עֵזֶר כְּנֶגְדּוֹ (*ʿēzer kĕnegdô*)"—must be interpreted in relation to that problem. *ʿĒzer* denotes help or aid and carries no semantic marker of inferiority; *kĕnegdô* constrains the kind of help in view by adding correspondence, one who is appropriately "over against" the human. The phrase thus communicates adequacy-in-relation: the helper is precisely the counterpart the animals fail to be. The syntax and narrative context are more decisive here than the English social connotations of "helper."[17]

This is the conceptual center of complementary mutuality. The woman is not a duplicate, because the narrative culminates in differentiated recognition; neither is she a lesser human, because she alone corresponds to the human as "bone" and "flesh." Equality and difference are not two independent propositions awkwardly held together. They are generated by the

[16]Davidson, "Theology of Sexuality," 8–13; Asirifi, Antwi, and Acheampong, "Creation of Humankind," 51–59.
[17]Koehler, Baumgartner, and Stamm, *HALOT*, 811–12; Simbolon, "Ezer," 45–57.

same narrative logic: the very difference that makes correspondence possible exists within a shared order of being.

Genesis 2:21–23: Shared Substance, Divine Agency, Human Recognition

The woman's formation is narrated so that divine agency is unmistakable. God causes the deep sleep, takes from the human, closes the place, builds the woman, and brings her to the human. The human contributes no creative agency to her existence. This matters because derivation is often made to bear more theological weight than the narrative itself assigns to it. The sequence emphasizes God as creator and the human as recipient and recognizer.

The noun צֵלָע (*ṣēlāʿ*) can denote a "side" as well as an anatomical "rib." The lexical issue should not be exaggerated into a proof of equality, yet the narrative use clearly functions to establish shared substance and kinship: what is taken from the human is fashioned into the one whom the human can finally recognize as counterpart. The exclamation "bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh" is a kinship formula; it answers the preceding failure to find a corresponding creature.[18]

The wordplay *ʾîš/ʾiššâ* then articulates differentiation within recognized sameness. The point is not that the woman becomes human because the man names her; she has already been fully fashioned and presented by God. The speech is a recognition of relation. This observation also cautions against equating temporal sequence with ontological rank. Genesis 2 gives theological significance to sequence, but the explicit emphases are aloneness, correspondence, divine formation, shared substance, and delighted recognition—not superior image-bearing or unilateral authority.

Genesis 2:24–25: Leaving, Clinging, One Flesh

Genesis 2:24 shifts from the immediate scene to a generalized pattern: "Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh." The sequence—leave, cling, become—reorders kinship. The verb דָּבַק (*dābaq*) denotes firm attachment or clinging; in covenantal and loyalty contexts it can carry the force of durable

[18]Koehler, Baumgartner, and Stamm, *HALOT*, 1030; Gomola, "Myth of the Creation of Woman," 77–88; Dike and Agbo, "Is God Partial in Creation?," 3–4.

fidelity. The result, בָּשָׂר אֶחָד (*bāśār ʾeḥād*, "one flesh"), is more than sexual union because it creates a new social and embodied identity.[19]

The kinship logic has particular contextual force in African settings where extended family remains socially significant. Genesis 2:24 neither privatizes marriage nor dissolves wider family obligations. The text explicitly describes leaving, clinging, and becoming one flesh; the further claim that the marital union should function as a newly primary covenantal bond is a constructive theological inference from that sequence, not a lexical statement that families of origin possess no authority or continuing obligations. Applied contextually, the inference means that the couple remains socially embedded while family loyalties are reordered so that neither lineage treats the marriage as an appendage of its own interests. "Leaving" establishes a differentiated boundary, "clinging" signifies durable attachment, and "one flesh" names a new embodied and social solidarity.

Verse 25 closes the scene with nakedness without shame. The verse itself explicitly describes bodily exposure and the absence of shame; it does not directly use the later ethical vocabulary of exploitation, coercion, or domination. A constructive ethical reading may nevertheless infer an interpersonal horizon of unthreatened communion when verse 25 is read with the preceding movement toward correspondence and one flesh and with Genesis 3's reversal into shame and accusation. On that basis, the passage can responsibly inform an ethic of truthful vulnerability, sexual respect, and non-coercive intimacy, provided those claims are identified as theological implications rather than as the lexical meaning of "naked and not ashamed."

Genesis 2–3: Norm and Distortion

Genesis 3 must be read as reversal rather than as a second description of the same relational order. The narrative shifts from openness to hiding, from recognition to accusation, from gift to suspicion, and from shared vocation to fractured desire and contested power. Ouro

[19]Koehler, Baumgartner, and Stamm, *HALOT*, 209; Hamilton, *Genesis 1–17*, 179–82.

and Stefanovic demonstrate the density of the structural and thematic correspondences that bind the two chapters together as order and reversal.[20]

The distinction has a controlling theological implication: domination is not a datum of Genesis 1–2. Genesis 3:16 belongs to the description of life under rupture. Whether one understands its final clause descriptively, predictively, or in another nuance, the canonical movement will not permit the effects of the fall to redefine the goodness of creation. Later biblical discussions of order and authority must therefore be interpreted in a way that does not contradict the prior grammar of shared image, corresponding partnership, covenantal union, and unashamed communion.[21]

[20]Ouro, "Garden of Eden Account," 219–43; Stefanovic, "Great Reversal," 47–56.
[21]Doukhan, "Woman's Curse," 1–2; Meyers, "Genesis 3:16—Text and Context," 6–7.

Table 1. Standardized Hebrew Terms and Their Exegetical Function

Hebrew	Transliteration / Sense	Textual Function	Theological Weight
צֶלֶם / דְּמוּת	ṣelem / dĕmût — image / likeness	Defines humanity before God (Gen 1:26–27)	Shared dignity and representational vocation
זָכָר וּנְקֵבָה	zākār ûnĕqēbâ — male and female	Names sexual differentiation (Gen 1:27)	Difference within common humanity
עֵזֶר כְּנֶגְדּוֹ	ʿēzer kĕnegdô — corresponding helper	Resolves aloneness (Gen 2:18, 20)	Adequate counterpart; non-servile help
צֵלָע	ṣēlāʿ — side / rib	Material of the woman's formation (Gen 2:21–22)	Shared substance and kinship
דָּבַק	dābaq — cling / hold fast	Marital attachment (Gen 2:24)	Durable fidelity and reordered kinship
בָּשָׂר אֶחָד	bāśār ʾeḥād — one flesh	Climax of leaving and clinging (Gen 2:24)	Embodied, social, and covenantal unity

Read together, Genesis 1–2 yields a coherent sequence: shared image establishes equal human standing; sexual differentiation specifies embodied plurality; *ʿēzer kĕnegdô* interprets difference as correspondence; the *ṣēlāʿ* narrative establishes shared substance; and *dābaq*/one flesh converts correspondence into a new kinship. The synthesis is therefore not "equality plus roles" but a relational anthropology: equality in dignity, differentiation in embodiment, reciprocity in relation, unity in covenant, and partnership in vocation.

African Marital Identity: Affinity, Tension, and Theological Discernment

Communal Personhood and the Social Density of Marriage

Influential theological accounts from East and Central Africa represented in this study understand marriage as more than a private contract between autonomous individuals. In different ways, Mbiti, Bujo, and Magesa describe personhood, kinship, continuity, and moral obligation relationally; marriage joins persons to wider networks of family and community and is often connected with procreation, inheritance, hospitality, and care. These syntheses are valuable interlocutors, but they should be read as theological interpretations of recurring African communal patterns rather than as ethnographic descriptions of every African society.[22]

These relational resources offer a genuine point of contact with Genesis. The one-flesh union is socially thick: it creates a household, reorders prior bonds, and locates human fruitfulness within a wider vocation. In the contexts for which such communitarian accounts are illuminating, they provide a useful critique of marital individualism. Marriage is not exhausted by emotional satisfaction; it bears consequences for children, kin, congregation, property, care, memory, and social continuity.

Yet communal density is not identical with covenantal health. In some settings, extended-family authority can become intrusive, lineage interests can override the couple's integrity, and reproductive expectations can reduce a spouse—especially a woman—to a function of fertility. Genesis 2:24 offers a theological resource for evaluating such pressures. The contextual claim is constructive: because the text narrates a reordering of kinship around leaving, clinging, and one flesh, African Christian pastoral practice may affirm community as support while resisting forms of communal control that erode the integrity, safety, or moral agency of the covenant household.

Complementarity and Patriarchal Capture

[22]Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 102–6, 130–44; Bujo, *African Theology*, 115–21; Magesa, *African Religion*, 115–22.

Some African cultural contexts describe male and female contributions through differentiated but interdependent responsibilities. At their best, such arrangements can approximate the Genesis logic of relational adequacy: spouses contribute differently to a common household and shared good. The problem arises when complementarity is converted from differentiated contribution into a ranking of persons—when provision becomes entitlement to domination, care work becomes invisibility, economic dependence becomes moral inferiority, or "headship" becomes immunity from accountability. The argument here therefore evaluates specific practices by the creation grammar rather than treating either patriarchy or egalitarianism as an automatic synonym for African culture.

African women's theology is indispensable at this point because it exposes the difference between relationality and patriarchal control. Oduyoye and Kanyoro insist that cultural practices be evaluated by their capacity to sustain life, dignity, agency, and justice rather than protected merely because they are inherited. Cezula's heterarchical proposal is suggestive precisely because it separates differentiation from fixed rank, while Mati's work shows the ongoing effort within African ecclesiology to articulate authority without negating equal human worth.[23]

The proposed Genesis-based criterion is therefore this: complementarity is legitimate when it serves correspondence, mutual flourishing, covenantal fidelity, and shared vocation; it is illegitimate when it contradicts shared image-bearing or renders one spouse a derivative moral subject. This permits contextual role differentiation without canonizing a universal social script. Roles may be distributed by gifting, calling, economics, health, season of life, and practical competence, provided the distribution remains reciprocal, accountable, and open to shared discernment.

Contemporary Gender Discourse: Critical Reception without Cultural Panic

Contemporary marital change in sub-Saharan Africa is real but uneven. Multi-country demographic research documents changing patterns of union formation, educational

[23]Oduyoye, *Introducing African Women's Theology*, 10–13; Kanyoro, *Introducing Feminist Cultural Hermeneutics*, 13–15; Cezula, "Gender Parity in Patriarchy?," 1–2, 7–9; Mati, "Ontology of Men and Women's Relationships," 1–2.

pairing, women's schooling, labor-force participation, and urbanization, while also emphasizing substantial variation by country, subregion, cohort, and rural–urban location. A 39-country analysis of Demographic and Health Survey data, for example, describes rapid transformations in union formation alongside educational expansion and rising labor-force participation, yet warns against masking subregional differences; a 32-country study similarly finds that educational expansion is altering intramarital status patterns and the conventions surrounding who marries whom. The Kumasi study used in this paper provides a more localized illustration in which education and wider economic roles for women interact with Christian and Asante gender expectations. These findings justify speaking of changing conditions, but not of a single trajectory called "African marriage" or "postmodernity."[24]

A creation-based anthropology helps distinguish principle from custom. Genesis requires shared dignity, fidelity, corresponding partnership, and common vocation; it does not prescribe one culturally fixed or preindustrial division of labor. A household in which the wife earns more income, the husband carries more daily care work, or both spouses exercise public leadership should therefore be assessed not by nostalgia but by whether the arrangement embodies fidelity, justice, stewardship, mutual responsibility, and respect for the moral agency of both spouses.

The same discipline should govern Christian engagement with contemporary gender theory. Modern critiques rightly call attention to coercion, abusive authority, restrictive stereotypes, and socially produced inequalities, and Christian theology should receive those questions rather than dismiss them by association. At the same time, this study should not make Genesis 1–2 carry more than it says. The text portrays male–female differentiation as part of its created narrative world and places both within the *imago Dei*; it does not, by itself, settle the full contemporary debate about gender identity, intersex embodiment, or the relation between biological and social accounts of gender. For the

[24]Luca Maria Pesando, "Educational Assortative Mating in Sub-Saharan Africa: Compositional Changes and Implications for Household Wealth Inequality," *Demography* 58, no. 2 (2021): 571–602, https://doi.org/10.1215/00703370-9000609; Sara Lopus and Margaret Frye, "Intramarital Status Differences across Africa's Educational Expansion," *Journal of Marriage and Family* 82, no. 2 (2020): 733–50, https://doi.org/10.1111/jomf.12632; Asirifi, Antwi, and Acheampong, "Creation of Humankind," 51–59.

narrower question of marriage addressed here, Genesis contributes a covenantal and relational anthropology in which embodied difference and shared dignity are held together. The appropriate posture is therefore neither uncritical accommodation nor reactive cultural anxiety, but critical dialogue under scriptural norm.

Constructive Theology of Complementary Mutuality

Covenant Partnership

The first element of the proposed model is covenant partnership. Genesis 2:24 forms a new bond through leaving, clinging, and becoming one flesh. To describe that bond as "primary" in relation to families of origin is a constructive theological application of the text's kinship movement rather than a denial of wider family obligations. In African Christian practice, this helps resist two reductions of marriage: private romance detached from community and an alliance controlled by extended families. The spouses form a covenant household accountable to God, while church and community are called to support rather than absorb its integrity.

Covenant must also be distinguished from mere endurance. Biblical fidelity is not the preservation of a public marital status at any cost; it is the sustained enactment of truthfulness, sexual faithfulness, protection, shared responsibility, just use of resources, and accountable power. Covenant language becomes abusive when it is used to pressure a harmed spouse to tolerate violence, exploitation, abandonment, or coercion while the covenant-breaking behavior itself is left unchallenged.

Complementarity as Correspondence, Not Rank

The second element is complementarity defined by *ʿēzer kĕnegdô* rather than by inherited role catalogues. The woman corresponds to the man as the genuine other of the same human order. The concept therefore protects two claims at once: embodied difference matters, and difference is not a scale of human worth. Complementarity names relational adequacy, not a hierarchy of being.

This approach permits contextual role differentiation while requiring that roles remain accountable to shared image-bearing. Decisions about earning, care, property, ministry, fertility, residence, and extended-family obligations should be negotiated through gifts,

circumstances, and shared discernment, not through an a priori assumption that one spouse's preferences possess divine priority. Theologically, neither spouse is the whole to which the other is an accessory; each is a covenantal counterpart within the one-flesh union.

Mutuality as the Ethics of Shared Image-Bearing

The third element is mutuality. If both spouses bear the divine image and share the human vocation, then marital ethics must be reciprocal. Mutuality includes truthful speech, listening, empathy, sexual respect, financial transparency, shared discernment, freedom from intimidation, willingness to bear burdens, and refusal to weaponize Scripture or culture. It does not mean that every decision must be mathematically symmetrical or that spouses possess identical gifts. It means that neither person is treated as a means to the other's flourishing.

Mutuality is therefore the ethical form of complementarity. It prevents difference from degenerating into domination and unity from becoming absorption. It also creates a genuine bridge to African communal ethics: the goal is not the isolated autonomous self but a relational life in which the flourishing of each spouse is bound to the flourishing of the other and to the good of the household.

Shared Vocation and Missional Household

The fourth element is shared vocation. Genesis 1:28 places male and female together within humanity's commission. Marriage therefore has a horizon beyond the satisfaction of the couple. A Christian household is called to stewardship, nurture, hospitality, service, intergenerational formation, and witness. Biological fruitfulness is a significant biblical good, but the missional meaning of a household is not exhausted by fertility; marriages without children remain capable of profound generativity through care, service, mentoring, hospitality, work, and ecclesial vocation.

This missional dimension resonates with African communal sensibilities because a marriage affects children, kin, congregation, neighborhood, and society. Yet mission also disciplines community involvement: the couple serves the wider community most

faithfully when its internal life embodies truth, justice, fidelity, safety, hospitality, and mutual care. Public usefulness cannot compensate for private domination.

Table 2. Constructive Framework for African Christian Marital Identity

Dimension	Genesis Ground	African Resource	Critical Corrective	Practice
Covenant partnership	Gen 2:24	Kinship, continuity, communal support	Extended-family intrusion; endurance without justice	Protect couple boundaries; cultivate fidelity and accountability
Complementary correspondence	Gen 2:18–23	Interdependence and differentiated contribution	Patriarchal ranking; rigid role stereotypes	Distribute roles by gifts, context, and shared discernment
Mutuality	Gen 1:27–28; 2:23	Reciprocity and relational personhood	Unilateral authority; silencing of agency	Shared decisions, empathy, financial and sexual responsibility
Shared vocation	Gen 1:28; 2:24	Intergenerational and communal orientation	Privatized marriage or communal control	Stewardship, nurture, hospitality, service, witness

Theological and Practical Implications

Premarital Formation and Christian Teaching

Church teaching should define complementarity from Genesis before defining it from inherited gender scripts. Premarital formation can therefore begin with five creation principles: shared image-bearing, corresponding partnership, covenantal boundary formation, mutual responsibility, and shared vocation. Couples should learn to distinguish biblical convictions from family customs and should discuss, before marriage, how they

intend to negotiate work, finances, care, decision-making, sexuality, fertility, ministry, and relationships with extended family.

Leadership, Authority, and Decision-Making

Genesis 1–2 does not support a model in which one spouse's humanity is derivative or one spouse's participation in the human vocation is secondary. Complementarian and egalitarian traditions may still reach different conclusions when later biblical texts on headship, submission, ministry, or authority are brought into the discussion; this paper does not claim to settle that larger canonical debate. Its proposal functions instead as an exegetical boundary. Compared with hierarchical complementarianism, complementary mutuality refuses to infer unilateral authority from temporal sequence, derivation, or the lexical meaning of *ʿēzer*. Compared with egalitarian formulations in which sex difference can become structurally incidental, it treats embodied male–female differentiation, correspondence, and one flesh as positive creation data. Whatever account a Christian tradition gives of marital leadership must therefore operate within shared image-bearing, accountable power, reciprocal responsibility, and the moral agency of both spouses. In practice, couples need transparent processes for major decisions, shared access to financial information, freedom to raise concerns without intimidation, and agreed mechanisms for resolving disagreement.[25]

Extended Family and Covenant Boundaries

African Christian communities may fruitfully teach Genesis 2:24 as a theology of new kinship, provided the application is stated as constructive rather than as though the verse directly legislated modern family governance. Parents and relatives remain honored, but the leaving–clinging–one-flesh movement warrants treating the marital covenant as a distinct relational center. Pastoral care should help couples establish respectful boundaries around residence, finances, fertility decisions, conflict, privacy, and care obligations.

[25]For an African ecclesiological treatment that explicitly presents complementarian and egalitarian positions before advancing its own account, see Mati, "Ontology of Men and Women's Relationships," 1–2.

Community should strengthen the covenant rather than function as a parallel authority mobilized by one spouse against the other.

Gender Justice, Safeguarding, and Abuse

Because both spouses share the *imago Dei*, coercion, violence, sexual exploitation, economic deprivation, humiliation, and spiritual manipulation should be treated as serious theological and ethical violations, not merely as failures of marital technique. This safeguarding conclusion is a constructive ethical implication of the paper's creation theology rather than the lexical meaning of any single verse. Appeals to submission, culture, family honor, or covenant permanence must not be used to protect abuse. The distinction between creation and fall is crucial: domination belongs to relational distortion, not to the paper's account of the divine intention for shared dignity and covenantal communion. Christian communities should therefore join marital theology to safeguarding, accountability, and competent referral pathways for persons at risk.

Public Theology and Contemporary Gender Questions

The proposal also supplies a posture for public theology. African Christianity need not choose between uncritical cultural conservatism and wholesale adoption of contemporary theories of identity. It can affirm the dignity concerns that motivate critiques of gendered injustice, receive empirical insight about changing family realities, and remain self-critical about patriarchal misuse of Scripture. At the same time, it can articulate a positive anthropology grounded in creation, embodiment, relationality, and covenant. Such engagement is strongest when it argues from a constructive biblical vision rather than from cultural fear.

Conclusion

Genesis 1–2 presents a coherent theological anthropology in which shared humanity and sexual differentiation belong together. Genesis 1 places male and female equally within the imago Dei, blessing, and human vocation. Genesis 2 interprets human flourishing relationally through the divine remedy of *ʿēzer kĕnegdô*, the shared-substance logic of the *ṣēlāʿ* narrative, and the covenantal movement of leaving, clinging, and one flesh. Genesis

3 then narrates the distortion of this order through shame, accusation, fractured desire, alienation, and domination. The canonical movement therefore resists both hierarchy as an intrinsic feature of human worth and an account of equality that requires the erasure of embodied difference.

For the African Christian contexts represented in the study's bounded corpus, this reading is simultaneously affirming and reforming. It affirms relational personhood, kinship, interdependence, continuity, and marriage's public vocation wherever those communal goods are present. It also subjects them to a creational test, rejecting practices that convert complementarity into rank, communal belonging into intrusion, covenant into coerced endurance, or authority into immunity from accountability. The constructive alternative is complementary mutuality: equal dignity, differentiated embodiment, corresponding partnership, reciprocal ethics, covenantal fidelity, and shared vocation.

This model enables African Christian theology to engage contemporary gender discourse without reducing the discussion to a culture war. Its strength lies in recovering the theological grammar of creation while acknowledging the limits of what Genesis 1–2 alone can adjudicate. Mutuality is not simply a concession to modernity, and complementarity need not be a euphemism for patriarchy. Properly grounded in Genesis 1–2, complementary mutuality names the form of relational life appropriate to two image-bearers who are sexually differentiated within the creation narrative, receive one another as corresponding partners, become one flesh, and share the human vocation before God.

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CHAPTER 22

RECONCILIATION IN PAULINE THEOLOGY IN 2CORINTHIANS 5:18-21 AND ITS SOCIO-POLITICAL SIGNIFICANCE FOR NIGERIA YOUTH'S TRUST IN GOVERNANCE

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Abstract

This study examines reconciliation in Pauline theology as presented in 2 Corinthians 5:18-21 and its socio-political significance for rebuilding Nigerian youth's trust in governance. Amidst growing distrust and disillusionment toward government by Nigerian youth, understanding Paul's concept of reconciliation where God initiates the restoration of broken relationships and transforms enemies into ambassadors offers a profound framework for addressing socio-political divisions and fostering active youth engagement. The objective is to analyze how this theological notion can be a catalyst for renewing youth confidence in governance structures and promoting inclusive participation. The study adopted contextual biblical exploratory method to explore reconciliation in 2 Corinthians 5:18-21 and its practical implications for contemporary governance challenges. Findings suggest that applying Paul's concept of reconciliation encourages restoration and rebuilding of mutual trust between authorities and youth, thereby facilitating healing of mistrust and social fragmentation. By embodying reconciliation, Nigerian youth can be empowered as ambassadors who meaningfully contribute to governance and national development. The study concludes that Pauline theology provides a valuable lens to inspire transformative governance that rebuilds trust, bridges divides, and nurtures sustainable democratic participation among Nigerian youth.

Keywords: *Reconciliation, Paul, Youth, Nigerian Government, Pauline Theology, Governance*

Introduction

Youth participation in Nigerian politics continues to be a subject of interest across different spheres of intellectual discourse in Nigeria. Youth withdrawal and apathy in socio-political development have been traced to many factors such as lack of political education, party

policies and distrust in government structure and policies. Globally, the world today consists of a large number of young people in history with over 50% of the world population under the age of 30.[1] This underscores the beaming fact that world socio-political and economic development and the role of youth is an intersect area in sustainable development. Nigeria's youth constitute a substantial proportion of the nation's population.[2] Despite their critical role as agents of socio-political change, young Nigerians face daunting challenges such as widespread unemployment, insecurity, poverty, and infrastructural deficits, which collectively undermine their prospects and foster a pervasive distrust in governance.

Nigerian youth exhibit a complex disposition toward government, characterized by a mixture of mistrust, frustration, and occasional bitterness. This attitude largely stems from persistent challenges such as high unemployment, corruption, inefficient public services, and perceived neglect of youth needs in policymaking.[3] Many young Nigerians feel disenfranchised and skeptical about the government's commitment to addressing their grievances, fostering a widespread sense of alienation from political institutions. These sentiments are compounded by historical experiences of unfulfilled promises, electoral malpractices, and systemic governance failures that have undermined youth confidence. The resulting distrust manifests in apathy, political disengagement, or vocal criticism of government actions. However, this bitterness coexists with a resilient hope among youth for change, as evidenced by their increasing involvement in social movements, digital activism, and calls for transparency and accountability

Social inclusion of youth in governance is instrumental in avoiding societal costs that come with the exclusion of youth, such as lower voter turnout rates, loss in several percentages

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[1]T. S. Akinyetun, Youth political participation, good governance and social inclusion in Nigeria. *UNISA*, 18(2), (2020). 1–15.; UNDP. Youth and Civic Engagement: Youth participation in politics and governance. *United Nations Development Programme*, (UNDP,2012), 8; T. I., Vaughan-Johnston, et al. "Youth Engagement in Nigerian Politics: Age and Gender Implications." *RUDN Journal of Political Science*, vol. 23, no. 3, 2021, pp. 67

[2] H. Sewakpo, Paul's proclamation of reconciliation for peace building in Nigeria. *Religions: Journal of the Nigerian Association for the Study of Religions*, 25(1), 2015, pp. 168–185.

[3]Chimezie Modestus Nnubia, and Adekunle Saheed Ajisebiyawo, "Limiting Factors for Youth Political Participation and the Challenges of Leadership and Governance in Nigeria: An Appraisal," *IRE Journals* 7, no. 12 (June 2024): 260.

of gross domestic product (GDP), violence, extremism, crime, and instability.[4] Most youth efforts, rather than treating youth as partners or agents of governance, regard them as mere recipients of the dividends of governance.

Against this backdrop, the theological concept of reconciliation as presented in Pauline theology offers a profound framework for addressing social fragmentation and mistrust. Paul's teachings emphasize reconciliation with God and among community members as essential for peace, healing, and social transformation. The idea of reconciliation extends beyond the spiritual realm to encompass ethical governance and mutual trust, both of which are critical in a pluralistic society like Nigeria. The youth, as pivotal actors in the nation's future, stand to benefit significantly from such a theological lens, which can inspire principles of forgiveness, justice, and collective responsibility crucial for rebuilding trust in governance structures.

For Nigeria, reconciliation is critical given the complex socio-political challenges, including conflicts, mistrust in governance, ethno-religious tensions, and youth disenfranchisement. Pauline theology's message of peace, forgiveness, and transformation can provide ethical resources for reflecting on leadership, social cohesion, active citizenship, and the rebuilding of public trust.

Concept of Reconciliation

Reconciliation is a socio-religious concept with broader implication for relationship building and social harmony. The word "reconciliation" derives from the Latin term *reconciliare* and the expression *conciliatus*, both of which imply the act of coming together or uniting. The term *conciliatus* is closely related to "conciliate," which primarily refers to the restoration of friendship or the promotion of unity for a constructive purpose. Louw and Nida posit that the meanings of reconciliation have a presuppositional component of opposition and hostility, and it is the process of reconciliation which reserves these presuppositional factors.[5]

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[4] Tope Shola Akinyetun, "Youth Political Participation, Good Governance and Social Inclusion in Nigeria: Evidence from Nairaland," *Canadian Journal of Family and Youth* 13, no. 2 (2021): 1–13; S. Zohdy, Youth and inclusive governance. (Accra: Illustrates, 2007), 87.

[5] J. P., Louw, & E. A. Nida, *Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament: Based on semantic domains* (1st ed., p. 83). (United Bible Societies, 1988), 81.

As Kriesberg aptly states, "Reconciliation refers to the processes by which parties that have experienced an oppressive relationship or a destructive conflict with each other move to attain or to restore a relationship that they believe to be minimally acceptable." [6] Similarly, Galtung[7] views reconciliation as the healing of traumas experienced by both victims and perpetrators following violence, thereby providing closure to a broken relationship. However, Galtung's perspective is criticized for overlooking a crucial aspect of reconciliation that is, building a positive relationship. Molenaar contends that reconciliation aims at constructing some form of positive relationship rather than simply ending conflict.[8] Achieving reconciliation is not incidental but follows a deliberate, step-by-step process toward restoring harmony, peace, and lasting restoration after conflict or injustice.

Macdonald offers a sociological understanding of reconciliation as 'to restore or bring back to friendship or union, to bring to agreement or contentment. Reconciliation can also mean the process involved in bring two warring parties together so that they will regain original friendship and love existing between them'[9]. It involves the restoration of emotions like love, trust, openness and mutual agreement between group, communities, institutions, leaders and followers. Reconciliation can also be restoration or bring together of two or more ideas, situation to agree with each other when actually they seem to be in opposite.[10]

Huyse underscores the socio-political importance of reconciliation in democratic society:

> Reconciliation ideally aims to prevent the past from triggering renewed conflict, thereby solidifying peace, breaking cycles of violence, and strengthening democratic institutions. It facilitates personal healing for survivors, addresses historical injustices, and promotes the creation of non-violent relationships among individuals

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[6] L. Kriesberg, Reconciliation: Aspects, growth, and sequences. *International Journal of Peace Studies*, 6(1), (2001), pp. 48.

[7] J. Galtung, After violence, reconstruction, reconciliation, and resolution. In M. Abu-Nimer (Ed.), *Reconciliation, justice, and coexistence*. (Lexington Books, 2001), 27.

[8] F Molenaar. "Meaningful Inclusion of Youth in Peace Processes." *African Knowledges and Sciences: Understanding and Supporting the Ways of Knowing in Sub-Saharan Africa*, edited by David Millar et al., COMPAS/UDS/UCC, (2006), 16.

[9] M. Macdonald, "Reconciliation: A Concept and Its Application." *Beyond Retribution and Utility: The Promise of Traditional Dispute Resolution Mechanisms for Transitional Justice*, edited by Tim Allen and Anna Macdonald, James Currey, 2011, 13-30.

[10] S. Wehmeier, (Ed.). *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* (7th ed.). (Oxford University Press 2006), 78.

> and communities. Additionally, it encourages former adversaries to develop a shared understanding of their history. Looking forward, reconciliation empowers both victims and perpetrators to move on with their lives while fostering civilized political dialogue and equitable power sharing in society.[11]

This understanding of reconciliation highlights its dual nature as both a process and an outcome. It is not merely about resolving conflict but about fostering conditions where relationships can be rebuilt on a foundation of mutual respect and understanding.

Reconciliation is a core aspect of the Christian faith, often described alongside terms like redemption, justification, and sanctification, each highlighting different yet interconnected facets of the Christian life. Keener[12] emphasizes that no single term fully encapsulates the mystery of the faith, as sanctification cannot exist without redemption, nor justification without both redemption and sanctification. These concepts are inseparable in Christian theology, illustrating the comprehensive nature of reconciliation. Together, they reflect the transformative process through which believers are restored to a right relationship with God and one another. Porter asserts that reconciliation is a treaty language in which parties at enmity, including God and humanity, has their hostility overcome and peaceful relations restored.[13] In the thought of Calvin, reconciliation is 'the peace between humanity and God that results from the expiation of religious sin and the propitiation of God's wrath'.[14] Reconciliation is integral aspect of the Christian message. Ryken, avers 'it is part of the message of salvation that brings us back together with God. God is the author, Christ is the agent and we are the ambassador of reconciliation' [15]

Aridas[16] explored the idea of reconciliation and forgiveness from the Old Testament. He posited that God's healing forgiveness span through the Old Testament associated with

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[11] L. Huyse, The process of reconciliation. In D. Bloomfield, T. Barnes, & L. Huyse (Eds.), *Reconciliation after violent conflict: A handbook* (International IDEA 2003), p. 19.
[12] Craig S. Keener, *New Testament Theology*. Vol. 1, (Lexham Academic, 2017),76.
[13] S. E. Porter, The Apostle Paul: His life, thought and letters (Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2016), p.121.
[14] I. Howard. Marshall, "The Meaning of Reconciliation." *Unity and Diversity in New Testament Theology: Essays in Honor of George E. Ladd*, edited by Robert A. Guelich, Eerdmans, 1978, pp. 117-32.
[15] Ryken, Philip Graham *The Message of Salvation* (Inter-Varsity Press, 2001), 118–19.
[16] Chris Aridas, *Reconciliation: Celebrating God's Healing Forgiveness* (Image Books, 2016), 118–19.

covenanted fellowship with God as the source of life. He averred that reconciliation and forgiveness is keenly associated with restoration of life and fellowship as offense and broken harmony with God is considered of a matter of death and life. In the word of Deuteronomy "I am offering your life or death, blessing or curse. Choose life, then, so that you and your descendants may live, in the love of Yahweh your God, obeying his voice, holding fast to him; for this your life consists (Dt 30: 19-20).[17]" The proposition of Aridas was aptly corroborated in another study by Burghardt who inferred that "in term of communion reconciliation is re-entering into communion between God and ourselves between ourselves and others, between ourselves and nature"[18]. Reconciliation is therefore an interventional process for restoration and healing.

Reconciliation in Pauline Theology

The use of the term reconciliation in the New Testament is profoundly a writing and thinking directly used by Paul in describing the holistic work and benefit of Christ death within the frame of God and human relationship. The concept of reconciliation is deeply in the heart of Paul's letters aimed to move his audience to strive for unity and peace (Colossians 1:20-21; Romans 5:10; 2 Corinthians 5:18), between themselves and primarily to embrace the idea that God through Christ's death on the Cross has done everything perfectly for God to be reconciled to Humanity and therefore to be active participant in the process of reconciling the world to God (2nd Corinthians 5:18-21).

Paul's origin of the concept remains a major contest in the study of Pauline theology. Scholars like Porter have highlighted that katallege was standard terminology for treaty-making, political diplomacy and the restoration of harmony between warring indviduals. Others suggested that the term has an Hellenistic Jewish origin that acted as a conceptual bridge to describe God becoming reconciled to his people after a period of anger. Other position maintained the concept has prophetic tradition that suggest that Paul's background is anchored in the Hebrew tradition of 'shalom' peace and restoration motifs of deuteron Isaiah Hofius posits that:

[17] Walter J. Burghardt, *Reconciliation: The Continuing Agenda*, ed. Robert J. Kennedy (Liturgical Press, 2017), 190.
[18] Walter J. Burghardt, *Reconciliation: The Continuing Agenda*, 193.

> The Pauline idea of "reconciliation" is ... shaped decisively by the message of [Deutero-Isaiah]. Its foundation, however, lies elsewhere: in [Paul's] encounter with the Risen One, in which God disclosed to the persecutor the cross as his act of reconciliation and called him to be the envoy of the word of reconciliation. What had been revealed to Paul in this event, he then found confirmed and interpreted through the prophetic witness of Scripture. Thus, he obtained from the OT the language by which he was able to express the saving act of God in Jesus Christ.[19]

Paul usage of the term reconciliation comes under three core Greek words which are associated with the concept of reconciliation are ἀποκαταλλάσσω (Eph 2:16; Col 1:20, 22), καταλλαγὴ (Rom 5:11; 11:15; 2 Cor 5:19), and καταλλάσσω (Rom 5:10; 2 Cor 5:18, 19, 20).[20] The crux of Paul usage of the term implies that Paul never says that God is reconciled (or, that God reconciles himself) to human beings, but always that God reconciles human beings to himself or that human beings are reconciled to God. Paul states that God must not be reconciled to human beings, but human beings need to be reconciled to God; and that reconciliation between God and human beings is not accomplished by people's repentance, prayers, or other good works, but rather by God's grace alone.

John T. Fitzgerald annotates Paul's use of the term reconciliation as "The Paradigm of Reconciliation".[21] So, when Paul uses this word καταλλάξαντος, we are able to understand why the exchange was necessary. John T. Fitzgerald adds that the term καταλλάξαντος found its usage in the ancient world, where it was used to refer to ending hostilities between warring or estranged parties.[22] He further points out that καταλλάξαντος was used "widely in regard to the repairing various interpersonal relationships (especially those involving the household and friends)".[23] Because of this reconciliation, the difference between the Gentiles and the Jews is non-existent. Paul says in Ephesians 2:19 we are no more

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[19] Hofius, "Reconciliation," in *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament,* ed. Horst Balz and Gerhard Schneider (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 131.
[20] U., Borse, H. Balz & G. Schneider (Eds.), *Exegetical dictionary of the New Testament* (Vol. 3). William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1993), 161.
[21] J. T. Fitzgerald, 'Paul and paradigm shifts: Reconciliation and its linkage group'. In T. E. Pedersen (Ed.), *Paul Beyond The Judaism/Hellenism Divide* (1st ed.). (Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 81
[22] Ibid., 85.
[23] Fitzgerald, J. T. 'Paul and paradigm shifts: Reconciliation and its linkage group', 87.

sojourners and pilgrims, but fellow citizens with the saints and of the household of God. Unlike in the Greco-Roman world, now men, women, children, foreigners and slaves have a status of citizens in the economy of God. The contextual audience of Paul's letter to the Corinthians reinforces the socio-religious import of the Paul καταλλάξαντος. The church of the Corithians was full of brokenness and severance in relationship, class division, (1Coritnthians 11:17-22); lawsuits (1corinthians 1:6-11); factional rivalries (1st Corinthians 1:10-17) and sexual immorality (1st Corinthians 5:1-5). In this, context, reconciliation of this brokenness necessitate initiative. Fitzgerald (2001) opines that 'it is the offending party's responsibility to seek reconciliation and the offended party's duty to show goodwill by accepting the offer of reconciliation. In Paul's reconciliation concept reconciliation process was reversed engineered, God who is the offended party is the one who takes the initiative to repair humanity broken relationship. The offended taking responsibility to reconcile his enemies to being his friends. Therefore, Paul's reconciliation is not a mere pronouncement of forgiveness but an event of conversion an act of new creation.[24]

In 2 Cor. 5:18 Paul construct God as the subject of reconciliation and not the object. Humanity needs to be reconciled to God and not God being reconciled to humanity. [25]Louw and Nida note that Paul's reconciliation 'has a presuppositional component of opposition and hostility and it is the process of reconciliation which reverses this presuppositional factor. Paul extended the hostility and opposition within humanity and God to the hostility and opposition between the Jews and the Gentiles which is now overcome by the death of Christ breaking the socio-cultural 'middle wall of partition' between them (Ephesians 2:14). Reconciliation in the Corinthians letters carried the import of not counting trespasses which is denoted in the phrase phrase μὴ λογιζόμενος in 2Cor. 5:19 which makes it a progressive work of God. The idea here is that God is not seen as one who is posting our sins into our accounts, though debts are legally ours, rather, now he is cancelling them because they are in Christ, clothed by him and are in Him, they are being transformed into the righteousness of God and thus participating in God's reconciling mission as ambassadors. Hughes summited that what Jesus did here as express by Paul is

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[24] Gorman, M. J. *Becoming the Gospel: Paul, Participation and Mission* (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2015), 158.

[25] Burke, T. J., & Rosner, B. S. (Eds.). *Paul As A Missionary: Identity, Activity, Theology, And Practice* (T & T Clark International, 2011), 173.

'substitutionary: the trespasses of others being credited to him and he died in their place, paying the penalty for their sins'.[26] The importance of this substitution is that reconciled people are to become peaceable people, who practice peace. This is the reason Paul calls us ambassador for Christ. Christopher W Stenchke concludes that that "those who have reconciled themselves becomes agents of reconciliation"[27].

Belleville makes a very good observation here in regard to the accomplished work of reconciliation, to which Christians who have been made ambassadors are called to do in verses 20 of 2nd Corinthians 5, "…two things need to be noted, first the verb is passive. It is not that we must reconcile ourselves to God- as would be the case with the Greeks and the Romans vis-à-vis their gods. Rather we are to be reconciled, that is to accept what God has already achieved. Second, the minister's job is not to bring about reconciliation is but to announce what has already occurred.[28]

In 2 Corinthians 5:18-21, Paul explains that through Christ's death and resurrection, God has reconciled us to Himself, breaking down the barriers of estrangement caused by sin. Our sins have been legally taken on by Christ, restoring us from enemies to God's trusted friends. This new status transforms us into ambassadors of God, entrusted with the mission to share His message of reconciliation. When we speak, it is as though God Himself is appealing to others to be reconciled.

Reconciliation, Youth and Nigerian Government

Democracy is the government of the people by the people and for the people, in such democratic society mutual trust between citizens translate to truth in democracy and the practices of democracy. In democratic governance, youth participation is vital to the survive and sustainable governance. Youth political participation refers to the depth of youth involvement in political process, acceptance of political activities like policies

[26] P. E. Hughes, *Paul's Second Epistle To The Corinthians* (New International Commentary on the New Testament, Vol. 8). (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962), 187.
[27] C. W. Stenschke, Reconciliation in the New Testament. *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*,3 (1), (2000), 160-178.
[28] L. L. Belleville, *2 Corinthians* (InterVarsity Press, 1996), 156.

making and political institutions. This include taking leadership roles in political and civic organization, governance, policy making and compliance with implementation[29].

Youth participation in politics in Nigeria context is sabotage by fractured trust between citizen and government and other social economic factors. Akinyetan posited that leadership gap between the political leaders and youth plays crucial role in the existing gap between leaders and youth.[30] Ajodo-Adebanjoko corroborate this when he averred that leadership deficit draws attention to the discrepancy between young people's high level of political awareness and engagement and their underrepresentation in positions of leadership.[31] Apathy to government and governance among Nigeria youth has plethora systemic factors that contributed to it. Akinyetan noted that the young Nigerians are faced with multiple obstacles that limit their effective political participation and state distance.[32] Economic hardships such as unemployment and increase poverty rate that widen the divide between the have not and the have much reduce time and financial resources and political resources available to the young people. Ojibara and Omede noted that educational disparities contribute to the diminishing political awareness and skill that hinder youth to participate meaningfully. Cultural factors such as marginalization, tribal sentiment and discrimination favours older leaders.[33] Moreover, the Nigerian political system itself creates mirage of challenges for youth involvement and trust, high cost of political engagement, age restrictions for candidacy, and limited access to political network and forces translate to theoretical inclusion and pragmatic ostracization of the youth in governance. These barriers create a significant gap between Nigerian youth and formal politics, despite their numerical majority in the population.[34] Youth distrust in governance in Nigeria has had significant and far-reaching consequences.

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[29] UNDP. Youth and civic engagement: Youth participation in politics and governance. *United Nations Development Programme,* (UNDP,2012), 8.

[30] O. O. Akinyetan, "Democracy and Youth Governance in Nigeria." *Nigerian Journal of Social Psychology*, vol. 1, 2024, pp

[31] A. Ajodo-Adebanjoko, "Youth and Leadership Deficit in Nigeria," *Journal of African Studies* 5, no. 1 (2019): 16.

[32] O. O. Akinyetan, "Obstacles to Youth Political Participation in Nigeria," *Journal of African Studies* 5, no. 1 (2021), 47

[33] , I. I., Ojibara, & I. Omede, Youth and political participation in Kwara State, Nigeria. *Afro Asian Journal of Social Sciences,* 8(3), (2017). 1–39.

[34] T. I., Vaughan-Johnston, et al. "Youth Engagement in Nigerian Politics: Age and Gender Implications." *RUDN Journal of Political Science*, vol. 23, no. 3, 2021, pp. 67

Political distrust in government and governance among youth is fueled by consistent and persistent corruption, power dividend of democracy delivery, unfulfilled promises, politics of self-profiting by political leaders ultimately leading to widespread apathy and disengagement among youth. This distrust has always found it outburst in social and political campaign by Youth across different regime. For instance, EndSARS protest of 2020 where youths called for justice for police brutality. It later translates into End-Bad-Governances form of dissatisfaction in government and governance by the youth. Revolution Now protest by Sowore which expressed grievances on the current governance structure to the reawakening of youthful political activism in the Obident movement.[35]This protest highlighted the depth of youth dissension and call for justice against the government. Prolong distrust in government lack of accountability and righteous governance has not only bring call for reforms but in some cases bread violent group (militia) and violence responses from youth either on media or on sites creating political and militarized clash, youth restiveness and socio-political instability all which contribute to national cohesion, inclusive statecraft and effective transition of democracy from generation to generation.

However, distrust towards government by the youth has grievous implication on governance and statecraft, nation building, development and sustainable governance. Ibukunoluwa[36] noted that when a major demographic such as youth feels excluded or alienated from governance and statecraft, it generates political apathy, social unrest and weakening of democratic institutions. The aftermath of such disposition includes political and citizenship tsunami that breed youth restiveness, militancy, fractional governance, and participation in anti-governance behaviour that undermines state stability, legitimate government, cohesion and responsible citizenship.

Distrust in governance leads to youth political distancing in policy making and development programs, resulting in poorly designed policies that do not address the real

[35] S. O., Suleiman, & E. Oghator, Youth in political participation and development. *Journal of Sustainable Development in Africa*, 15(4), (2006). 242–253.; Akinyetan, O. O. "Democracy and Youth Governance in Nigeria." *Nigerian Journal of Social Psychology*, vol. 1, 2024, 6.

[36] B. O. Ibukunoluwa, Social exclusion of the Nigerian youth in governance. *AKSU Journal of Administration and Corporate Governance* (AKSUJACOG), 1(3), (2021), 39–46.

needs and aspiration of the young people.[37] Youth political distancing implies that the voice of the young mind in governance is silence and governmental policies is policies of the *oldies by the oldies and for the oldies* This implies social and economic metrics like unemployment, education and health will be mismanage and ineffective. Anikeze noted that youth distrust results in waste of human capital and potential which translate to stunt growth in innovation, national productivity and development.[38] Thus, promoting and recycling the existing narrative of corruption, ineffective leadership, political process dominates by corrupt leaders and limited political innovative mind in statecraft.

Paul's concept of reconciliation, as articulated in 2 Corinthians 5:18–21, offers an ethical-theological framework for considering the restoration of relationships and youth trust in governance in Nigeria. Pauline extension of reconciliation between God and man offers ethical motif for reconciliation between to man to man. It offers an analogous interpersonal relationship between government and citizens, the lesser and the higher personality. This implies that there is vertical and horizontal dimension to reconciliation. Horizontal reconciliation between government and the youth is necessary for rebuilding trust and hope in the state. This including, reconciliation on policies and the effect on the masses and presenting fair opportunity for the citizen. If the youth will be reconciled with the government, accountability and responsibility must be pillar through which public officers are measure. Youth trust in the government is damaged by incessant corruption without significant punishment for embezzler of public fund.

Reconciliation demands peacebuilding between youth and government. The process of peacebuilding requires equitable distribution of natural wealth and resources, justice in governance. Trust in judiciary system is critical to developing cording and rebuild of social trust between government and citizen, such that the judiciary remains the hope of the common people. Peacebuilding as postulated by Lederach belongs to the field of restorative justice, the center virtue of which is reconciliation and mercy.[39] In this wise, six essential

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[37] H. Anikeze, *Fundamental issues in Nigerian politics, government and development administration*. (Academic Publishing Company, 2011), 35.

[38]H. Anikeze, Fundamental issues in Nigerian politics, government and development administration: Amulti-dimensional approach, 38.

[39] J. P. Lederach, Civil Society and Reconciliation. In C. A. Crocker, F. O. Hampson, & P. Aall (Eds.), *Turbulent peace: The challenges of managing international conflict*. (United States Institute of Peace, 2001), 62.

practices give restorative justice meaning, they are; building of just institutions, acknowledgement, reparations, accountability, apology and forgiveness.[40] Fairness in political dealings. Reconciliatory process in the present Nigeria will promote fairness in the political system of the nation. Over the years politics is seen as a 'do or die' affair which has defaced the nature of what politics is all about. With the knowledge of the concept of reconciliation from Pauline standpoint, politicians and citizens of the country will appreciate and embrace political dealings with the spirit of sportsmanship for the development of our country. However, restorative justice is different from reconciliation as conceived by Paul as restorative justice demands that the victim get justice for the wrong done to him and mercy. Paul's reconciliation 'has a presuppositional component of opposition and hostility and it is the process of reconciliation which reverses this presuppositional factor. Paul extended the hostility and opposition within humanity and God to the hostility and opposition between the Jews and the Gentiles which is now overcome by the death of Christ breaking the socio-cultural 'middle wall of partition' between them (Ephesians 2:14). Reconciliation in the Corinthians letters carried the import of not counting trespasses which is denoted in the phrase μὴ λογιζόμενος in 2Cor. 5:19 which makes it a progressive work of God.

Reconciliation involves the transformation of relationships and leadership through forgiveness and the restoration of dignity. Governance systems and leaders must create inclusive platforms empowering young people to participate genuinely in decision-making processes. This means not only providing voice but also sharing power and responsibility with youth. Just as Paul describes believers as ambassadors of reconciliation, Nigerian youth should be recognized and entrusted as agents of positive change within political structures, fostering a sense of ownership and commitment to national development.

Sustained reconciliation is a continuous journey requiring patience and perseverance. Nigerian governance must institutionalize youth engagement through policies that guarantee long-term inclusion, capacity-building, and support networks. Collaborative

[40] D. Philpott, Reconciliation: An Ethic for Peacebuilding. In R. Millar (Ed.), *Peacebuilding: A Caritas Training Manual.* (Caritas Internationalis, 2010), 6; Perry, J. *Restorative Justice, Reconciliation, and Peacebuilding.* (Oxford University Press, 2017), 76.

partnerships between government, religious bodies, civil society, and the private sector can amplify reconciliation efforts and provide holistic support. By embedding the Pauline principles of reconciliation restoration, justice, and peace into governance structures, Nigeria can develop a resilient, youth-inclusive democracy founded on mutual trust and collective progress.

Conclusion

Reconciliation can serve as an ethical framework for rebuilding trust, openness, participation, and commitment to citizenship among Nigerian youth. The long-standing political corruption, leadership incompetencies, elite centered policies in Nigerian political space continues to widen the gap between Youth and faith in governmental institutions and policies. Reconciliation as espoused in the teaching of Paul provides a framework for political reconciliation between Nigerian youth and government. Reconciliation breaks citizenry apathy to politics and statecraft that characterized the Nigerian youth demographics by breaking the dichotomy of power, class, tribalism, and political disparity. Paul's principles of righteousness and justice in reconciliation are necessary seed that must be incarnated into Nigerian reconciliation framework where justice and righteousness are two arms of the law, governance and governmental policies. Youth perceived political dishonesty of the political class must be appeased through ruthless and indiscriminate justice to state offenders and pejorative justice when logical. Therefore, robust reconciliation process that heal the social emotion of distrust, citizenship of suspicion among youth must be dialogue and pacifying to Nigerian youth through effective dialogue between generations (older and younger citizens), groups, tribes and social classes.

Pauline reconciliation is primarily theological, but its relational and ethical dimensions can be brought into dialogue with questions of governance, citizenship, and political participation in Nigeria. Reconciliation facilitation trust, opening, restoration, sense of justice and unity for nation building and sustenance. Reconciliation breaks the dichotomy of power, class, superiority and inferiority, tribalism and political disparity among citizens and leaders. Pauline emphasis on righteousness and justice, fostering reconciliation necessitates the pursuit of ethical governance marked by transparency, accountability, and fairness. Youth distrust often stems from perceptions of corruption and injustice. By

implementing robust anti-corruption mechanisms, ensuring equitable distribution of resources, and enforcing laws impartially, the government can demonstrate its commitment to justice, which is essential for rebuilding confidence among youth. Righteous leadership, guided by integrity and the common good, models the heart of reconciliation. Pauline reconciliation is not only relational but also involves proclaiming the message of peace and restoration. Civic education programs rooted in the values of reconciliation can cultivate moral consciousness, encourage political literacy, and strengthen civic responsibility among youth. Facilitating dialogue between generations and diverse groups can break down stereotypes, reduce social divisions, and reinforce the shared identity of Nigerians, aligned with the reconciled community Paul envisions.

Recommendations

Based on the study's theological analysis and its implications for relations between Nigerian youth and government, the following recommendations are proposed:

i. Reconciliation should be youth driven and youth centered. This implies that Government reconciliation programs designed should be tailored towards the Nigerian youth to foster truth in government and governmental structure again.

ii. Government should create effective bridges between government and the youth. This should include transparent and honest communication channels between Government and youths. This will create a structure of check and balance, openness, integrity and truthfulness that builds healthy reconciliation in citizenship.

iii. Reconciliation policies and study should be factored into Nigerian civic education. This will help Nigerian youngster to learn about reconciliation early in life.

iv. Nigerian youth must champion reconciliation and peacebuilding across political, cultural and economic spheres. This will reinforce ethical leadership and restoring public confidence in political institutions and policies.

v. Government should collaborate with NGOs, Religious, cultural and Youth initiatives to implement national reconciliation orientation programs that rebuild the fabric of social and political trust in governmental institution.

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CHAPTER 23

NEGOTIATING RELIGIOUS TENSIONS IN NIGERIA: A PAULINE PERSPECTIVE ON *Εἰρήνη*

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Abstract

Religious tensions in Nigeria are shaped by the interaction of religious identities with political competition, socioeconomic inequalities, historical grievances, governance challenges, and strained intergroup relationships. While Nigerian scholarship has examined the causes of religious conflict and the role of religious actors in peacebuilding, and Pauline scholarship has explored peace, reconciliation, and communal ethics, these conversations have not been sufficiently integrated around the Pauline concept of εἰρήνη (eirēnē) as a theological-ethical resource for negotiating Nigeria's interreligious tensions. This study addresses this gap by examining Paul's understanding of peace in Romans 14–15, Galatians 5:22–23, and 2 Corinthians 13:11. Using exegetical and contextual analysis, the study reads these texts in dialogue with Nigerian scholarship on religious conflict and peacebuilding and John Paul Lederach's conflict-transformation framework. Rather than reducing Nigerian religious tensions to structural causes, the study approaches conflict as multidimensional, involving personal, relational, cultural, and structural processes. The analysis demonstrates that Pauline εἰρήνη entails more than the absence of hostility. It involves active peace-seeking, mutual acceptance, communal edification, reconciliation, and Spirit-formed character. The study argues that these dimensions provide theological and ethical resources for addressing the personal and relational dynamics of religious tension while also encouraging critical engagement with the wider conditions in which conflict is sustained. It concludes that Pauline εἰρήνη can contribute to contextual theological reflection on interreligious dialogue, reconciliation, mutual respect, and communal flourishing in Nigeria, while recognizing that theological resources must operate alongside broader political, social, and institutional peacebuilding efforts.

Keywords: *Eirene, inter-religious conflict, Pauline theology, peacebuilding, religious ethics.*

INTRODUCTION

Nigeria's religious landscape is marked by considerable diversity, with Christianity, Islam, and African Indigenous Religions constituting important dimensions of the country's social and cultural life. Yet religious diversity has also intersected with political competition, ethnic identities, socioeconomic inequalities, and historical grievances to produce recurrent tensions and episodes of violence. Studies of Nigerian religious conflict have consequently examined the politicization of religion, the historical construction of Christian-Muslim divisions, religious exclusivism, political manipulation, and the structural conditions that sustain violence.[1] Such scholarship cautions against reducing Nigerian conflicts to theological differences alone. Rather, religious identities frequently operate within wider political, economic, ethnic and social structures.

The Nigerian literature, however, has not treated religion exclusively as a source of conflict. Scholars have also examined the capacity of religious actors and institutions to contribute to conflict prevention, interfaith dialogue, reconciliation, and peacebuilding. R. Scott Appleby's broader analysis of religion's ambivalence provides an important conceptual basis for understanding how religious traditions can be mobilized for both violence and reconciliation, while David Smock's work demonstrates the potential of interfaith dialogue as an instrument of peacebuilding.[2] In the Nigerian context, scholarship on Christian-Muslim relations has similarly identified dialogue, religious leadership, grassroots cooperation, and community-level engagement as important mechanisms for reducing tensions.[3] More recent studies have shifted attention from conflict alone toward peaceful Christian-Muslim relations, showing that cooperation, inclusive governance, and civilian agency can sustain coexistence even in contexts marked by previous violence.[4]

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[1]Toyin Falola, Violence in Nigeria: The Crisis of Religious Politics and Secular Ideologies (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 1998), 43–66; Jibrin Ibrahim, "Religion and Political Turbulence in Nigeria," Journal of Modern African Studies 29, no. 1 (1991): 115–36; Matthew Hassan Kukah, Religion, Politics and Power in Northern Nigeria (Ibadan: Spectrum Books, 1993), 110.

[2]R. Scott Appleby, *The Ambivalence of the Sacred: Religion, Violence, and Reconciliation* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000), 58–86; David R. Smock, *Interfaith Dialogue and Peacebuilding* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2002).

[3]Smock, *Interfaith Dialogue and Peacebuilding, 66*

[4]Emmanuel Chiwetalu Ossai, "The Social Dynamics of Peaceful Christian–Muslim Relations in Nigeria," *Religion Compass* 18, no. 9 (2024)

Recent work has further proposed culturally embedded and religiously informed approaches to peacebuilding in Nigeria, demonstrating the continuing development of this field.[5]

This scholarship therefore establishes an important foundation: Nigerian religion-and-conflict studies have identified the causes and dynamics of religious tension and explored practical mechanisms for managing or transforming such tensions. Conflict transformation scholarship has particularly emphasized the relational, structural, personal, and cultural dimensions of conflict.[6] Similarly, studies of Nigerian religious leadership have demonstrated that Christian and Muslim leaders can either reinforce antagonism or contribute to de-escalation and reconciliation.[7] What remains less developed in this literature is the sustained theological interrogation of the biblical resources that could provide an internal normative framework for Christian participation in such peacebuilding. In other words, considerable attention has focused on what religious communities can do to manage conflict, but comparatively less attention has been given to how a specific New Testament theological conception of peace might provide the ethical grammar for such engagement.

Pauline scholarship provides a second important strand of literature. The concept of εἰρήνη (Eirene) in Paul has received substantial theological and exegetical attention. Pauline peace is not simply the absence of hostility. It is associated with reconciliation with God, life in the Spirit, restored relationships, communal integrity, and ethical responsibility.[8] Romans 14–15 is particularly important because Paul addresses a divided Christian community and calls believers to pursue "what makes for peace and mutual upbuilding" (Rom. 14:19). The

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[5]Adeolu Ojedokun, "From Tension to Tolerance: A Peacebuilding Approach for Yoruba Religious Conflicts in Nigeria," *Peace & Change* 51, no. 3 (2026): 172–82.

[6]H. Miall, *Conflict Transformation: A Multi-Dimensional Task* (Berlin: Berghof Research Center for Constructive Conflict Management, 2004), 67; Ayuba Mavalla, *Conflict Transformation: Churches in the Face of Structural Violence in Northern Nigeria* (Oxford: Regnum Books International, 2014), 33, 66.

[7]Israel Temitope Oyebanji and Taiwo Olayinka Oyunwola, "Religious Leaders as Peacebuilders: Assessing the Role of Christian and Muslim Clergy in Conflict Prevention in Southwest Nigeria," *MAHABBAH: Journal of Religion and Education* 5, no. 1 (2024): 16–31.

[8]Gordon D. Fee, *God's Empowering Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Letters of Paul* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 20, 113; James D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 88; Pieter G. R. de Villiers, "Peace in the Pauline Letters: A Perspective on Biblical Spirituality," *Neotestamentica* 43, no. 1 (2009): 1–26.

emphasis is therefore not merely on avoiding conflict but on actively constructing relationships capable of sustaining communal life. Recent scholarship on Romans 14:17–19 likewise interprets peace within Paul's wider concern for communal relationships, arguing that righteousness, peace, and joy constitute values that should shape the community rather than merely private religious experience.[9] Pauline scholarship has consequently demonstrated that peace is integral to Paul's theological and ethical vision.

The Pauline peace tradition has also begun to receive explicit attention in relation to the Nigerian context. Honore Sewakpo, for example, connects Paul's theology of reconciliation with peacebuilding in Nigeria and argues for the importance of vertical and horizontal reconciliation in pursuing lasting peace.[10] More recently, Chidinma P. Ukeachusim has examined Pauline perspectives on peace and security in Nigeria through 1 Thessalonians 5:3, demonstrating that Pauline theology can be brought into conversation with Nigeria's contemporary quest for peace and security.[11] Such studies are important because they challenge any claim that Pauline theology has been entirely absent from Nigerian peace scholarship. At the same time, their primary emphases differ from the present study. Sewakpo focuses principally on Pauline reconciliation, while Ukeachusim examines peace and security through an eschatological reading of 1 Thessalonians 5:3. Neither study centers its analysis specifically on the Pauline concept of εἰρήνη as articulated through Romans 14–15, Galatians 5:22–23, and 2 Corinthians 13:11 as a theological-ethical framework for negotiating Nigeria's inter-religious tensions.

A third body of scholarship concerns theology and peacebuilding more broadly. Contemporary theological peacebuilding literature has argued that peacebuilding cannot be adequately understood through political or secular mechanisms alone because religious beliefs shape how communities understand justice, reconciliation, forgiveness,

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[9]Seo-Jun Kim, "A Study on the Meaning and Function of the Kingdom of God Statement in Romans 14:17," *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 82, no. 1 (2026): 77-98

[10]Honore Sewakpo, "Paul's Proclamation of Reconciliation for Peace Building in Nigeria," *Religions: Journal of the Nigerian Association for the Study of Religions* 25, no. 1 (2015): 168–85.

[11]Chidinma P. Ukeachusim, "Assessing the Sociological and Pauline Insights to the Quests for Peace and Security in Nigeria," *In die Skriflig* 58, no. 1 (2024): 30-81

responsibility, and human relationships.[12] Christian theological approaches have therefore explored reconciliation, restorative justice, forgiveness, communal transformation, and the church's vocation as an agent of peace.[13] John Paul Lederach's conflict-transformation framework is particularly useful in this regard because it conceives peacebuilding as a long-term process involving the transformation of relationships, structures, and social patterns rather than merely the termination of violence.[14] Theological peacebuilding scholarship has increasingly sought to place such approaches into conversation with specifically Christian theological convictions concerning reconciliation and human flourishing.[15]

The existing scholarship thus reveals three substantial but insufficiently integrated conversations. First, Nigerian religion-and-conflict scholarship has generated considerable knowledge about the historical, political, social, structural, and relational dimensions of religious tensions and has examined interfaith dialogue and religious actors as resources for peacebuilding.[16] Second, Pauline scholarship has established that εἰρήνη is a central dimension of Paul's theological and ethical vision, particularly in relation to reconciliation, communal responsibility, mutual acceptance, and Spirit-shaped conduct.[17] Third,

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[12]Heather M. DuBois and Janna Hunter-Bowman, "The Intersection of Christian Theology and Peacebuilding," in *The Oxford Handbook of Religion, Conflict, and Peacebuilding*, ed. Atalia Omer et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 569–96.

[13]Samuel Wells, "Theology and Peacebuilding," in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Religion and Peace*, 307–18 (2022)

[14]John Paul Lederach, *Building Peace: Sustainable Reconciliation in Divided Societies* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, 1997), 65.

[15]DuBois and Hunter-Bowman, "Intersection of Christian Theology and Peacebuilding," 569–96

[16]Toyin Falola, *Violence in Nigeria: The Crisis of Religious Politics and Secular Ideologies* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 1998), 43–66; Jibrin Ibrahim, "Religion and Political Turbulence in Nigeria," *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 29, no. 1 (1991): 115–136; David R. Smock, *Interfaith Dialogue and Peacebuilding* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2002); Darren Kew and Chris M. A. Kwaja, "Religion and Peacebuilding in Nigeria," in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Religion and Peace*, ed. Atalia Omer, R. Scott Appleby, and David Little (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley Blackwell, 2015), 251–68; Israel Temitope Oyebanji and Taiwo Olayinka Oyunwola, "Religious Leaders as Peacebuilders: Assessing the Role of Christian and Muslim Clergy in Conflict Prevention in Southwest Nigeria," *MAHABBAH: Journal of Religion and Education* 5, no. 1 (2024): 16–31.

[17]James D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 88; Gordon D. Fee, *God's Empowering Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Letters of Paul* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 20, 113; Pieter G. R. de Villiers, "Peace in the Pauline Letters: A Perspective on Biblical Spirituality," *Neotestamentica* 43, no. 1 (2009): 1–26; Seo-Jun Kim, "A Study on the Meaning and Function of the Kingdom of God Statement in Romans 14:17," *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 82, no. 1 (2026): a11404; Honore Sewakpo, "Paul's Proclamation of Reconciliation for Peace Building in Nigeria," *Religions: Journal of the Nigerian Association for the Study of Religions* 25, no. 1 (2015): 168–85; Chidinma P. Ukeachusim, "Assessing the Sociological and Pauline Insights to the Quests for Peace and Security in Nigeria," *In die Skriflig* 58, no. 1 (2024)

theological peacebuilding scholarship has demonstrated the importance of bringing theological convictions into conversation with contemporary theories and practices of conflict transformation.[18] Yet these three conversations have rarely been brought together in a sustained examination of how Pauline εἰρήνη might function as a contextual theological framework for negotiating inter-religious tensions in Nigeria.[19]

The gap, therefore, is not an absence of scholarship on religion and conflict in Nigeria, nor an absence of Pauline studies on peace, nor an absence of theological reflection on peacebuilding. Rather, the unresolved question concerns the integration and contextual application of these bodies of scholarship: how can Paul's understanding of εἰρήνη, particularly its emphasis on active peace-seeking, mutual acceptance, self-restraint, communal edification, reconciliation, and Spirit-formed character, be critically appropriated within Nigeria's religiously plural and conflict-prone environment? Addressing this question requires moving beyond a general assertion that Christianity promotes peace. It requires demonstrating exegetically what Pauline εἰρήνη entails and then critically examining its possible contribution to the negotiation and transformation of inter-religious tensions.

This study therefore examines the Pauline concept of εἰρήνη as a theological and ethical resource for negotiating religious tensions in Nigeria. It focuses particularly on Romans 14–15, Galatians 5:22–23, and 2 Corinthians 13:11, reading these texts in conversation with Nigerian scholarship on religious conflict and peacebuilding and with contemporary conflict-transformation and theological peacebuilding approaches. The study does not

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[18]R. Scott Appleby, *The Ambivalence of the Sacred: Religion, Violence, and Reconciliation* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000), 58–86; John Paul Lederach, *Building Peace: Sustainable Reconciliation in Divided Societies* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, 1997), 65; Heather M. DuBois and Janna Hunter-Bowman, "The Intersection of Christian Theology and Peacebuilding," in *The Oxford Handbook of Religion, Conflict, and Peacebuilding*, ed. Atalia Omer, R. Scott Appleby, and David Little (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 569–96; Samuel Wells, "Theology and Peacebuilding," in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Religion and Peace*, ed. Atalia Omer, R. Scott Appleby, and David Little (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley Blackwell, 2015), 307–18; Christine Schliesser, "The Road to Reconciliation: Insights from Christian Public Theology," *Religions* 13, no. 3 (2022): 230.

[19]Honore Sewakpo, "Paul's Proclamation of Reconciliation for Peace Building in Nigeria," 168–85; Chidinma P. Ukeachusim, "Assessing the Sociological and Pauline Insights to the Quests for Peace and Security in Nigeria," a3081; Darren Kew and Chris M. A. Kwaja, "Religion and Peacebuilding in Nigeria," 251–68.

assume that a first-century Pauline concept can be transferred uncritically to a modern pluralistic nation-state. Rather, it asks what theological and ethical principles can responsibly be derived from Paul's understanding of peace and how these principles may contribute to contemporary discussions of interreligious reconciliation, dialogue, mutual respect, and communal flourishing in Nigeria. In this way, the study seeks to make a more precise contribution at the intersection of Pauline theology, Nigerian religion-and-conflict scholarship, and theological peacebuilding.

Historical Context of Inter-Religious Relations in Nigeria

The history of inter-religious relations in Nigeria cannot be adequately explained through a single national trajectory because religious practices, political institutions, and patterns of interaction differed considerably across precolonial societies and regions. Before the consolidation of colonial rule, the territories that constitute contemporary Nigeria contained diverse religious systems, including indigenous traditions, Islam, and, in some coastal areas, early Christian influences. Indigenous religious practices were embedded in particular social and political communities and commonly involved relationships among deities, ancestors, communities, and the natural environment. However, these traditions should not be characterised uniformly as either tolerant or conflictual. Recent historical scholarship emphasises the heterogeneity of precolonial Nigerian religious life and the ways in which religious difference was negotiated across communities and historical periods. Shobana Shankar, for example, argues that religion in precolonial Nigeria functioned as an important sphere through which communities negotiated difference and diversity, while also noting the presence of changing religious identities, reform movements, and competing conceptions of religious authority.[20] Thus, although evidence of coexistence and religious interconnection can be identified in several precolonial settings, this should not be transformed into a general claim that precolonial Nigerian societies were characterised by religious harmony. Relations between communities were

[20]Shobana Shankar, "Religion in Precolonial Nigeria," in *The Oxford Handbook of Nigerian History*, ed. Toyin Falola and Matthew M. Heaton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), 191–206.

shaped by local political authority, trade, migration, warfare, kinship, and competition for resources, and the significance of religion varied according to context.[21]

Islam likewise has a much longer and more regionally differentiated history in Nigeria than a simple Christian-Muslim binary suggests. Islam became established in parts of the western and central Sudan through trans-Saharan commercial, scholarly, and political networks before the nineteenth century. In northern Nigeria, Islamic institutions became deeply connected with political authority, particularly through the emergence and consolidation of the Sokoto Caliphate following the jihad of Usman dan Fodio in the early nineteenth century.[22] Yet Islam did not simply replace indigenous religious systems. Religious practices and identities developed through processes of interaction, adaptation, contestation, and accommodation. The precolonial religious history of Nigeria therefore involved significant interconnections among Islam, indigenous traditions, and later Christianity rather than the emergence of two completely separate religious blocs.[23]

Christianity's development followed a different historical trajectory. Portuguese contacts introduced Christianity to parts of the southern Nigerian coast from the fifteenth century, but sustained Christian expansion occurred principally through nineteenth-century missionary activity. Different missionary societies operated in different regions and pursued evangelisation through varied institutional strategies, including schools, medical work, translation, and the establishment of churches.[24] Missionary activity consequently had effects that extended beyond religious conversion, particularly through education and the formation of new social and intellectual elites. Recent historical research demonstrates that the long-term effects of missionary activity varied geographically and were closely connected to the colonial administration's differing policies toward missionary education in southern Nigeria and the Muslim emirates of the north. Dozie Okoye and Roland Pongou, for example, show that British restrictions on missionary activity in the northern

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[21]Toyin Falola, *Violence in Nigeria: The Crisis of Religious Politics and Secular Ideologies* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 1998), 43–66

[22]Murray Last, *The Sokoto Caliphate* (London: Longman, 1967), 55–78.

[23]Shankar, "Religion in Precolonial Nigeria," 191–206.

[24]J. F. Ade Ajayi, *Christian Missions in Nigeria, 1841–1891: The Making of a New Elite* (London: Longman, 1965).

emirates produced substantial regional differences in access to schooling and contributed to long-term differences in educational and socioeconomic outcomes.[25]

The relationship between Christian missions and British colonial administration was therefore neither uniformly cooperative nor adequately described as a simple alliance between Christianity and colonialism. In some contexts, missionary and colonial interests overlapped, particularly where education and social transformation intersected with colonial administration; in other contexts, colonial officials restricted missionary activity because they regarded the existing Muslim political order as important to administrative stability. In Northern Nigeria, Lord Lugard's policy of indirect rule relied heavily on existing emirate structures and included a policy of non-interference in Muslim religious affairs, which limited the expansion of Christian missionary activity in many emirates.[26] At the same time, missionary societies played a much more extensive role in education and Christian expansion in many parts of southern Nigeria.[27] The resulting regional differences in education, religious institutions, political authority, and social organisation contributed to patterns that later shaped inter-religious relations, but these developments should be understood as the outcome of several interacting historical processes rather than as the simple institutionalisation of a Christian-Muslim divide.

The postcolonial history of religious tension further demonstrates the danger of treating Nigeria as a single conflict setting. Religious identities have intersected with ethnicity, indigene-settler relations, political competition, access to land and other resources, state authority, and socioeconomic inequalities. The intensity and form of religious conflict have varied significantly between regions and even between neighbouring communities. Adam Higazi and Jimam Lar, for instance, demonstrate that Bauchi and Gombe states, despite comparable levels of religious pluralism, have experienced different degrees of collective

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[25]Dozie Okoye and Roland Pongou, "Missions and Heterogeneous Social Change: Evidence from Border Discontinuities in the Emirates of Nigeria," University of Ottawa Working Paper 2112E (2021).
[26] Umar Abdurrahman, "Religion and Language in the Transformation of Education in Northern Nigeria during British Colonial Rule, 1900–1960," *Intellectual Discourse* 20, no. 2 (2012); Sonia F. Graham, *A History of Education in Relation to the Development of the Protectorate of Northern Nigeria, 1900–1919* (PhD diss., University of London, 1955).
[27] Okoye and Pongou, "Missions and Heterogeneous Social Change." 76

violence because local historical and political contexts mediate the relationship between religious and ethnic identities.[28] Similarly, recent scholarship on peaceful Christian-Muslim relations in Nigeria shows that coexistence is not exceptional but takes different forms across communities, with civilian agency, inclusive political arrangements, and local leadership contributing to peaceful relations in some settings.[29] This regional variation suggests that Nigerian inter-religious relations should be approached contextually rather than through a uniform model of religious conflict.

In the northeastern region, the emergence of Boko Haram and the subsequent activities of Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) have added another dimension to Nigeria's religious-security landscape. Boko Haram should, however, be distinguished from Nigerian Muslim communities generally. The insurgency represents an extremist movement whose violence has affected Muslims as well as Christians and has targeted civilians, religious institutions, state institutions, and communities. Recent assessments similarly note that violence perpetrated by Boko Haram/JAS, ISWAP, and other extremist groups has affected both Christians and Muslims in several Nigerian states.[30] Consequently, the insurgency should not be presented simply as an expression of Muslim-Christian conflict. Rather, it has contributed to insecurity, displacement, retaliatory violence, and heightened mistrust within an already complex religious and political environment. This distinction is important because conflating extremist organisations with Muslim communities risks reproducing precisely the religious stereotyping that peacebuilding seeks to overcome.

Contemporary inter-religious relations in Nigeria therefore display both conflict and cooperation. Religious identity remains relevant to political mobilisation, communal belonging, and perceptions of security, but religious difference does not inevitably produce violence. Recent research indicates that peaceful Christian-Muslim relations occur through a variety of mechanisms, including cooperation among ordinary citizens, community-level

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[28] Adam Higazi and Jimam Lar, "Articulations of Belonging: The Politics of Ethnic and Religious Pluralism in Bauchi and Gombe States, North-East Nigeria," *Africa* 85, no. 1 (2015): 103–25.
[29] Emmanuel Chiwetalu Ossai, "The Social Dynamics of Peaceful Christian–Muslim Relations in Nigeria," *Religion Compass* 18, no. 9 (2024): 56-98
[30] United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, "Nigeria Country Update," August 9, 2024.

intervention, inclusive political arrangements, and the work of religious and civic leaders.[31] In southwestern Nigeria, for example, recent research on Christian-Muslim dialogue identifies religious leaders as important actors in building trust and reducing tensions, while Ossai's broader review demonstrates that the dynamics of peaceful Christian-Muslim relations differ according to local political and social circumstances.[32] These findings reinforce the need for an analytical framework capable of accounting simultaneously for individual attitudes, relationships between communities, institutional arrangements, and the cultural meanings through which religious difference is interpreted.

Conflict Transformation as the Analytical Framework

This study employs John Paul Lederach's conflict transformation approach as an analytical framework for examining the relationship between Nigerian religious tensions and the Pauline concept of εἰρήνη (eirēnē). Conflict transformation is appropriate because it does not understand conflict simply as a dispute requiring settlement or as violence requiring cessation. Rather, it examines the relationships, structures, cultural patterns, and personal experiences through which conflict is produced, sustained, and potentially transformed. John Paul Lederach argues that sustainable peace requires attention to the wider relational and social context in which conflict occurs, while Hugh Miall emphasizes that transformation involves changes in the personal, relational, structural, and cultural dimensions of conflict.[33]

This multidimensional understanding is particularly relevant to Nigeria. Religious tensions cannot adequately be explained by religious doctrine alone, but neither can they be reduced to political or economic structures. Nigerian conflict scholarship has demonstrated the interaction of religious identity with political competition, unequal access to resources,

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[31] Ossai, "The Social Dynamics of Peaceful Christian–Muslim Relations in Nigeria," 89

[32] Israel Temitope Oyebanji and Taiwo Olayinka Oyunwola, "Religious Leaders as Peacebuilders: Assessing the Role of Christian and Muslim Clergy in Conflict Prevention in Southwest Nigeria," *MAHABBAH: Journal of Religion and Education* 5, no. 1 (2024): 16–31

[33] John Paul Lederach, *Building Peace: Sustainable Reconciliation in Divided Societies* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, 1997), 14–17, 20–22; Hugh Miall, *Conflict Transformation: A Multi-Dimensional Task* (Berlin: Berghof Research Center for Constructive Conflict Management, 2004), 3–5, 67–73.

ethnic interests, governance failures, insecurity, historical grievances, and patterns of social exclusion.[34] At the same time, conflict is experienced relationally through mistrust, stereotyping, hostile communication, and the deterioration of relationships between communities. It also has personal consequences, including fear, trauma, displacement, and changes in individual perceptions of members of other religious groups. Cultural patterns further influence how communities interpret difference, remember previous violence, and construct narratives about religious "others."[35]

Accordingly, this study does not characterize Nigerian religious tension as exclusively structural. It is better understood as multidimensional, with structural conditions interacting with relational, personal, and cultural processes. Structural factors are nevertheless significant because they can create or intensify conditions in which religious identities become politically and socially mobilized. In particular, questions concerning access to resources, political representation, security, governance, identity, and perceived marginalization may provide conditions within which religious differences become conflictual. Mavalla's study of conflict transformation in Northern Nigeria demonstrates this interaction by identifying structural concerns such as access, identity, security, governance, and political arrangements while also emphasizing the relational, personal, and cultural dimensions through which conflict develops and is experienced.[36] His analysis of Christian responses to structural violence in Kaduna and Jos further demonstrates that religious actors operate within conflicts that cannot be understood apart from their wider social and institutional environments.[37]

The multidimensional character of the framework is important for the present study because it prevents an overly narrow interpretation of Pauline peace. If Nigerian religious

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[34] Toyin Falola, *Violence in Nigeria: The Crisis of Religious Politics and Secular Ideologies* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 1998), 43–66; Jibrin Ibrahim, "Religion and Political Turbulence in Nigeria," *Journal of Modern African Studies* 29, no. 1 (1991): 115–36; Matthew Hassan Kukah, *Religion, Politics and Power in Northern Nigeria* (Ibadan: Spectrum Books, 1993), 110.
[35] Hugh Miall, *Conflict Transformation*, 67–73; Ayuba Gimba Mavalla, *Conflict Transformation: Churches in the Face of Structural Violence in Northern Nigeria* (Oxford: Regnum Books International, 2014), 33–38, 66–72.
[36] Mavalla, *Conflict Transformation*, 66–72.
[37] Mavalla, *Conflict Transformation*, 1–30.

tension were understood only as a structural problem, the contribution of eirēnē could be reduced to questions of justice, governance, or institutional reform. Conversely, if conflict were understood only as a matter of interpersonal hostility, the analysis could overlook the political and socioeconomic conditions that reproduce insecurity and exclusion. Conflict transformation provides a middle position: it allows peace to be examined simultaneously as a transformation of relationships, persons, structures, and cultural patterns.

This is where the framework intersects with Paul's understanding of εἰρήνη. Pauline peace is not presented merely as the termination of hostility. In Romans 14:19, Paul commands believers to "pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding," thereby presenting peace as an active communal practice. In Galatians 5:22–23, peace is included among the fruit of the Spirit, linking it to transformed character and conduct. In 2 Corinthians 13:11, Paul connects peace with restoration, exhorting the community to "agree with one another" and "live in peace."[38] These texts suggest that Pauline peace operates across several levels: it concerns the transformation of persons, the restoration of relationships, the creation of healthy communities, and the ethical practices through which communities negotiate difference.

The conflict-transformation framework therefore supplies the analytical categories, while Pauline eirēnē supplies the theological-ethical content through which those categories are interpreted. The personal dimension of conflict can be examined in relation to Paul's emphasis on Spirit-formed character, including peace, patience, self-control, and love (Gal. 5:22–23). The relational dimension can be read alongside Paul's call for mutual acceptance, mutual edification, and the pursuit of peace in Romans 14–15. The cultural dimension can be considered in relation to Paul's challenge to practices and attitudes that produce hostility, division, and exclusion. The structural dimension, finally, raises the question of whether

[38] James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 9–16*, Word Biblical Commentary 38B (Dallas: Word Books, 1988), 806–8; Gordon D. Fee, *God's Empowering Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Letters of Paul* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 113; Margaret E. Thrall, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, 2 vols. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994–2000), 2:899–900.

the Pauline pursuit of peace has implications for the conditions that prevent communities from experiencing justice, security, and meaningful participation in communal life.

This analytical relationship does not mean that Paul provides a direct political theory for the Nigerian state. Nor does it imply that first-century Christian communities and contemporary Nigerian religious communities are historically or socially equivalent. Rather, the framework enables a contextual theological reading in which Pauline principles are brought into critical dialogue with the multiple dimensions of contemporary conflict. Such an approach is consistent with the broader logic of conflict transformation, which seeks constructive change rather than merely the suppression of visible conflict.[39] It also responds to recent Nigerian theological scholarship that has begun to combine Lederach's conflict-transformation approach with explicitly theological resources in developing contextually grounded models of peacebuilding.[40]

The analytical framework can therefore be summarized as follows: conflict transformation identifies where and how conflict operates; Pauline εἰρήνη provides theological resources for asking what transformed relationships, persons, communities, and social practices might look like. The purpose is not to make eirēnē a substitute for political, economic, or institutional peacebuilding, but to examine how Pauline theological ethics can contribute to the moral and relational dimensions of a broader peacebuilding process. This integration provides the basis for the subsequent exegetical analysis of Romans 14–15, Galatians 5:22–23, and 2 Corinthians 13:11.

[39] Miall, *Conflict Transformation*, 3–5, 67–73; Lederach, *Building Peace*, 29–36.

[40] Oladele P. Adehanloye and Teddy C. Sakupapa, "Understanding the Ecclesial Model of Conflict Transformation from a Study of the Nigerian Baptist Convention in Northern Nigeria," *Verbum et Ecclesia* 47, no. 1 (2026): 1–8.

Analytical Dimensions of Conflict Transformation and Pauline εἰρήνη

Dimension	Conflict-transformation concern	Pauline *eirēnē*	Relevance to Nigerian religious tension
Personal	Fear, trauma, attitudes, perceptions, and individual capacity for constructive engagement	Spirit-formed character, self-control, patience, love, and peace (Gal. 5:22–23)	Transformation of attitudes and dispositions that sustain religious hostility
Relational	Broken relationships, mistrust, communication, and social interaction	Mutual acceptance, mutual edification, reconciliation, and pursuit of peace (Rom. 14:19; 15:7)	Rebuilding Christian-Muslim and wider interreligious relationships
Cultural	Narratives, identities, beliefs, and patterns through which communities interpret conflict	A communal ethic that challenges division and promotes practices conducive to peace	Reconsideration of narratives and practices that reinforce religious exclusion
Structural	Inequality, exclusion, governance, security, access to resources, and institutional arrangements	Ethical concern for communal well-being, reconciliation, and justice	Addressing conditions within which religious identities become instruments of conflict

Source: Author's reconstruction based on Ayuba Mavalla, *Conflict Transformation: Churches in the Face of Structural Violence in Northern Nigeria* (Oxford: Regnum Books International, 2014).

The framework consequently treats Nigerian religious tension as multidimensional rather than exclusively structural. Structural conditions may drive particular conflicts, but their effects are mediated through personal perceptions, relationships, and cultural narratives. This study therefore examines how Pauline eirēnē speaks across these dimensions and

whether its theological-ethical resources can transform religious tensions rather than merely manage them temporarily.

Exegetical Analysis of Pauline *Eirene*

Pauline eirēnē (εἰρήνη) must be interpreted within the linguistic, scriptural, theological, and social worlds in which Paul wrote. It would therefore be misleading to describe Paul simply as "reconfiguring the Greco-Roman notion of peace (pax)." Pax is a Latin term and belongs primarily to the Roman conceptual and political vocabulary, whereas Paul wrote in Greek and employed the term εἰρήνη. More importantly, Pauline eirēnē cannot be explained adequately through Greco-Roman categories alone. Its conceptual background is deeply connected with the Hebrew šālôm as mediated through the Septuagint, where εἰρήνη regularly translates šālôm.[41] At the same time, Paul employed language intelligible within the wider Greco-Roman world and addressed communities whose social relations were shaped by the political realities of the Roman Empire. Pauline peace should therefore be understood as a theological concept situated at the intersection of Jewish scriptural tradition, the Greek language, the Greco-Roman social world, and Paul's Christological and eschatological convictions.

This background is important because eirēnē in Paul is more substantial than the cessation of hostility. Its meaning is shaped by God's reconciling action in Christ, the restoration of relationships, and the formation of communities capable of living together in mutual responsibility. In Romans 5:1, for example, Paul declares that believers, having been justified by faith, "have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ." Here peace has a distinctly theological and Christological foundation: it describes a reconciled relationship between God and humanity made possible through Christ.[42] Pauline peace therefore begins with God's reconciling initiative rather than with human attempts to negotiate conflict. This

[41] Gordon D. Fee, *God's Empowering Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Letters of Paul* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 20, 113; Pieter G. R. de Villiers, "Peace in the Pauline Letters: A Perspective on Biblical Spirituality," *Neotestamentica* 43, no. 1 (2009): 1–26; James D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 88.
[42] Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*, 223–25.

theological foundation is important for interpreting the ethical dimensions of eirēnē elsewhere in the Pauline corpus.

1. Eirēnē in Romans 14–15: Peace, Difference and Communal Responsibility

Romans 14–15 provides the most direct textual basis for understanding Pauline peace as an ethical practice within a divided Christian community. The immediate issue is not interreligious conflict but disagreement among believers concerning food, sacred days, and matters of conscience. Paul does not attempt to eliminate all differences of conviction. Instead, he seeks to prevent those differences from becoming destructive to the community. The "strong" and the "weak" are instructed not to despise or condemn one another because God has welcomed both (Rom. 14:1–4, 10). The argument therefore moves from theological conviction to communal responsibility: individual freedom must be exercised with regard for the spiritual and relational wellbeing of others.[43]

It is within this context that Paul declares, "So then, let us pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding" (Rom. 14:19). The verb διώκω (diōkō, "pursue") is significant because peace is presented not as a passive condition but as an object of deliberate communal action. Moreover, eirēnē is joined with οἰκοδομή (oikodomē, "building up"), indicating that the peace Paul seeks is constructive. It involves practices that enable the community to remain intact despite differences. The following argument reinforces this point. In Romans 15:1–2, those who are strong are instructed to bear with the weaknesses of others and to seek their neighbor's good "to build them up." Paul consequently understands peace in relational and communal terms: the responsible use of freedom, restraint for the sake of others, mutual acceptance, and the preservation of fellowship.[44]

The passage, however, must not be transferred uncritically to interreligious relations in Nigeria. Romans 14–15 concerns disagreement within a Christ-confessing community whose members share a common faith in Christ. Christianity and another religious tradition

[43] James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 9–16*, Word Biblical Commentary 38B (Dallas: Word Books, 1988), 797–809.
[44] Dunn, *Romans 9–16*, 811–27; Seo-Jun Kim, "A Study on the Meaning and Function of the Kingdom of God Statement in Romans 14:17," *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 82, no. 1 (2026): 66-87

are not the immediate social categories of Paul's argument. The passage's relevance to contemporary interreligious peacebuilding is therefore analogical rather than direct. The analogy proceeds in three steps. First, Paul demonstrates that religiously significant differences can threaten communal relationships when convictions become occasions for contempt, judgment, or exclusion. Second, he provides an ethical response in which self-restraint, mutual acceptance, and the pursuit of communal wellbeing take priority over the aggressive assertion of individual rights. Third, these principles may be brought into critical dialogue with contemporary interreligious contexts in which religious differences similarly become occasions for hostility and social fragmentation.[45]

The analogy nevertheless has limits. Paul does not advocate theological relativism, nor does Romans 14–15 establish that all religious convictions are equally true or that theological differences should simply be ignored. His concern is how members of a Christian community should conduct themselves amid disputed matters. Consequently, this study does not use Romans 14–15 to argue that Christianity and Islam, or Christianity and African Indigenous Religions, are theologically interchangeable. Rather, the passage offers a transferable ethical principle for managing difference: convictions should not be exercised in ways that destroy communal relationships or deny others' dignity. The movement from Pauline intra-community ethics to Nigerian interreligious engagement is therefore a contextual theological appropriation, not a claim that Paul directly addressed modern religious pluralism.

2. Eirēnē as Fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22–23

Galatians 5:22–23 develops another dimension of Pauline eirēnē. The statement occurs within Paul's larger argument concerning Christian freedom and the conflict between "the flesh" and the Spirit (Gal. 5:13–25). The immediate literary context is therefore essential. Paul first warns the Galatians not to use their freedom "as an opportunity for self-

[45] On Romans 14–15 as a framework for negotiating disagreement within Christian communities, see Andrew Errington, "On the Endurance and Limits of Disagreement: Romans 14–15 and Contemporary Moral Conflicts" (2025); see also Loba Mkole, "Interculturality in Peace-Building and Mutual Edification (Rm 14:19)," *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* (2019).

indulgence" but to "through love become slaves to one another" (5:13). He then identifies love as the fulfillment of the law: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (5:14). This is followed by the warning that mutual hostility and destructive interpersonal behavior will consume the community (5:15). The contrast between the "works of the flesh" (5:19–21) and the "fruit of the Spirit" (5:22–23) should consequently be read as a contrast between two modes of communal existence.[46]

Paul describes the latter not as several independent "fruits" but as one καρπὸς (karpos, "fruit") of the Spirit, manifested through a series of qualities: "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control" (5:22–23). Eirēnē is therefore not an isolated inner emotion. It belongs to a Spirit-generated pattern of life. Gordon Fee rightly emphasises that the fruit of the Spirit describes the character the Spirit produces within the community of believers, while James Dunn likewise reads the passage in relation to Paul's wider theology of life shaped by the Spirit.[47]

This context also corrects an overly individualistic interpretation of eirēnē as merely "inward transformation." Although transformation begins with the person, Paul's concern is visibly relational. The "works of the flesh" immediately preceding the list include enmity, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, and envy (Gal. 5:20–21). These are not merely private psychological states. They damage relationships and fragment communities. The fruit of the Spirit consequently represents an alternative mode of communal existence in which love, patience, gentleness, self-control, and peace displace behaviours that generate division.[48]

The position of eirēnē within this list is therefore significant for the present study. Pauline peace is neither simply an external political arrangement nor merely an internal feeling of tranquillity. It is a Spirit-formed disposition that becomes visible through the way persons treat others. Peace requires patience rather than provocation, gentleness rather than

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[46] Gordon D. Fee, *God's Empowering Presence*, 423–38; J. Louis Martyn, *Galatians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Bible 33A (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 482–92.
[47] Fee, *God's Empowering Presence*, 423–38; Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*, 687–90.
[48] Fee, *God's Empowering Presence*, 438–39.

aggression, self-control rather than retaliation, and love rather than hostility. In this sense, Galatians 5:22–23 provides the personal and relational foundation for Pauline peace. It explains the character necessary to pursue peaceful relationships and communities.

3. Eirēnē and Restoration in 2 Corinthians 13:11

A third dimension appears in Paul's closing exhortation to the Corinthians: "Finally, brothers and sisters, rejoice. Put things in order, encourage one another, agree with one another, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you" (2 Cor. 13:11). The verse should be interpreted within the immediate context of Paul's troubled relationship with the Corinthian community. Throughout 2 Corinthians, Paul has confronted divisions, misconduct, challenges to his apostolic authority, and the possibility of a painful encounter with the church (12:20–21; 13:1–10). His final exhortations therefore seek restoration of a fractured community.[49]

The first imperative, καταρτίζεσθε (katartizesthe), may be rendered "put things in order," "restore yourselves," or "be restored." The term conveys the idea of repairing or bringing something into proper condition. It is followed by exhortations to encouragement, common purpose, and peaceful living. The sequence is important: eirēnē is not detached from restoration but belongs to a process of repairing damaged communal relationships. The following command, εἰρηνεύετε (eirēne-uete), "live in peace" or "be at peace," is therefore a practical exhortation directed toward the community.[50]

The final clause, "and the God of love and peace will be with you," should also be interpreted carefully. The text does not establish a general doctrine that God's presence depends on human commitment to peace. Rather, Paul's characterisation of God as the "God of love and peace" grounds and reinforces his exhortation to the Corinthians. The language identifies the character of the God whom the community is called to reflect and

[49] Murray J. Harris, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005), 917–21.
[50] Harris, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, 921–23.

invokes God's gracious presence as part of the restoration Paul desires for them.[51] Thus, the verse should be understood as a theological affirmation accompanying the ethical summons to restoration and peace, rather than as a conditional formula in which human peacefulness earns divine presence.

Taken together, the imperatives in 2 Corinthians 13:11 demonstrate that Pauline peace has a distinctly communal character. Peace involves repairing damaged relationships, encouraging others, pursuing common purpose, and cultivating an environment in which reconciliation becomes possible. The verse therefore strengthens the relational and ecclesial dimension already evident in Romans 14–15 and Galatians 5:22–23.

4. Toward a Theological-Ethical Synthesis of Pauline Eirēnē

The three passages considered above do not provide an exhaustive Pauline theology of peace, but together they establish a coherent theological-ethical pattern. First, eirēnē is theological, because it is grounded in God's reconciling action through Christ. Romans 5:1 most clearly expresses this vertical dimension: peace with God is received through Christ rather than produced by human negotiation. Second, eirēnē is ethical, because it demands concrete patterns of conduct, including self-restraint, patience, love, mutual acceptance, and the pursuit of what builds others up. Romans 14–15 and Galatians 5:13–23 make clear that peace becomes visible in how believers exercise freedom and respond to difference. Third, eirēnē is communal, because its purpose is not simply the tranquillity of isolated individuals but the preservation, restoration, and edification of relationships and communities.[52]

The place of justice within this synthesis requires particular precision. Justice should not be presented as though it were a direct lexical component of εἰρήνη in each of these passages. None of the selected texts defines eirēnē simply as "justice." Rather, justice here functions as a contextual ethical implication of the Pauline concern for equitable and non-

[51] Paul Barnett, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), 623–24.
[52] De Villiers, "Peace in the Pauline Letters," 1–26.

destructive relationships. Romans 14 is especially significant because Paul refuses to permit stronger members of the community to exercise their freedom in ways that cause others to stumble, while Romans 15:1–2 requires the strong to bear the weaknesses of others and seek their good.[53] In this context, justice can be understood as the ethical ordering of communal relationships in which persons are not despised, marginalised, or sacrificed for the unrestricted exercise of another's freedom. This understanding does not turn eirēnē into a synonym for justice; rather, it identifies justice as one of the ethical questions that arises when Pauline peace is applied to contexts characterised by unequal power, exclusion, and vulnerability.

This distinction is important for the Nigerian context. The present study does not claim that Paul provides a comprehensive theory of structural justice, state governance, or modern human rights. Instead, Pauline eirēnē offers theological and ethical resources for examining how persons and communities respond to difference, how power is exercised in relationships, how weaker or vulnerable members are treated, and how damaged relationships may be restored. These concerns can then be placed in dialogue with the structural and institutional dimensions identified by conflict-transformation scholarship.

The resulting synthesis can therefore be expressed in four interconnected propositions. Theologically, peace originates in God's reconciling work through Christ. Personally, it is embodied in Spirit-formed character. Relationally, it requires mutual acceptance, restraint, restoration, and the active pursuit of communal wellbeing. Communally, it seeks forms of life in which differences do not become occasions for contempt, exclusion, or destruction. Justice enters this framework not as a definition of eirēnē itself but as a contextual ethical question concerning whether relationships and communal arrangements permit persons and communities to flourish without domination or exclusion.

Such a synthesis also clarifies the hermeneutical movement of this study. Romans 14–15, Galatians 5:22–23, and 2 Corinthians 13:11 are first interpreted according to their own literary and historical contexts. Their meanings are not reconstructed to answer a modern

[53] Dunn, *Romans 9–16*, 803–27.

Nigerian problem. Only after establishing their Pauline theological and ethical claims are their principles brought into critical dialogue with Nigeria's religiously plural context. The result is therefore neither a direct application nor an assumption of historical equivalence. It is a contextual and analogical appropriation in which Pauline eirēnē provides theological resources for thinking about transforming attitudes, relationships, and communal practices amid religious difference.

In this sense, Pauline eirēnē contributes to the present study not as a ready-made political programme but as a theological ethic of reconciliation, restraint, mutual responsibility, restoration, and communal flourishing. Its significance for Nigerian interreligious relations lies precisely in this combination of theological grounding and practical ethical orientation. The challenge is not merely to prevent violence but to cultivate dispositions and relationships in which religious difference can be negotiated without contempt, exclusion, or the destruction of communal bonds.

Pauline *Eirene* and Conflict Resolution

Within this framework, Pauline eirēnē can be correlated with each dimension without equating Paul’s first-century context with contemporary Nigeria. At the personal level, Paul's emphasis on Spirit-formed character provides resources for addressing dispositions that sustain hostility, particularly through peace, patience, love, and self-control (Gal. 5:22–23). At the relational level, the pursuit of peace and mutual edification in Romans 14:19 provides a basis for understanding peace as an active practice of sustaining relationships amid difference. At the cultural level, Paul's concern with communal unity and the rejection of practices that produce division offers resources for challenging narratives and behaviours that reinforce religious exclusion. At the structural level, Pauline peace does not constitute a political programme, but it raises ethical questions concerning the social conditions that enable communities to experience reconciliation, security, participation, and communal flourishing.

The relationship between the two frameworks is therefore complementary rather than identical. Conflict transformation provides the analytical categories for identifying the

levels at which religious conflict operates, while Pauline eirēnē provides the theological-ethical resources for considering how persons and relationships might be transformed within those contexts.[54] This prevents the study from treating eirēnē merely as an abstract theological ideal and also prevents conflict transformation from becoming a detached theoretical description. Instead, the Pauline material is examined for its potential contribution to the personal and relational practices, communal attitudes, and broader ethical commitments necessary for sustainable peace.

This approach also avoids reducing Nigerian religious conflict to a single explanatory category. As Mavalla's work on Northern Nigeria demonstrates, structural concerns such as governance, identity, security, and access to resources are intertwined with relational and community dynamics.[55] Recent Nigerian scholarship similarly demonstrates the value of combining conflict-transformation approaches with explicitly theological resources in developing contextually grounded peacebuilding models.[56] Accordingly, the subsequent discussion considers Pauline eirēnē not as a substitute for political or structural peacebuilding, but as a theological resource that can contribute to the transformation of attitudes, relationships, and communal practices through which religious tensions are negotiated.

Application to Nigeria's Inter-Religious Context

The Pauline understanding of εἰρήνη (eirēnē) can contribute to reflection on Nigeria's inter-religious tensions, but its application requires careful contextual translation. Romans 14–15 addresses disagreements among Christians concerning practices such as food and observance of special days; therefore, Paul is not directly prescribing a model of Christian-Muslim or Christian-indigenous religious dialogue.[57] Nevertheless, his emphasis on

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[54] Heather M. DuBois and Janna Hunter-Bowman, "The Intersection of Christian Theology and Peacebuilding," in *The Oxford Handbook of Religion, Conflict, and Peacebuilding*, ed. Atalia Omer, R. Scott Appleby, and David Little (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 569

[55] Mavalla, *Conflict Transformation*, 33, 66–72.

[56] Oladele P. Adehanloye and Teddy C. Sakupapa, "Understanding the Ecclesial Model of Conflict Transformation from a Study of the Nigerian Baptist Convention in Northern Nigeria," *Verbum et Ecclesia* 47, no. 1 (2026): 66- 98

[57] Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle, 88*

pursuing "what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding" (Rom. 14:19), avoiding actions that unnecessarily harm others (Rom. 14:20–21), and welcoming those with whom one disagrees (Rom. 15:7) provides transferable ethical principles. In an inter-religious context, these principles should be understood as encouraging respectful coexistence, mutual dignity, restraint, and constructive engagement without requiring the abandonment or relativization of substantive theological convictions. Thus, Pauline peace does not require Christians to regard different religions as doctrinally equivalent; rather, it provides an ethic for engaging religious difference without allowing disagreement to become hostility or violence.

This application also requires a mediating argument between Christian theology and public policy. Nigeria is constitutionally religiously plural, and a Pauline ethic cannot legitimately be presented as a normative framework to be imposed upon non-Christian citizens.[58] Its contribution is better understood through public reason and faith-based peacebuilding: Christian communities may draw upon their own theological convictions to cultivate civic practices that are publicly defensible, including respect for human dignity, nonviolence, restraint, reconciliation, cooperation, and peaceful coexistence. This approach is consistent with scholarship on religious peacebuilding, which recognizes that religious actors can contribute to peace while operating within broader civic and interreligious frameworks.[59] Pauline εἰρήνη therefore functions in this study primarily as a confessional resource for Christian ethical participation in a plural public sphere, rather than as a proposed religious basis for state policy.

The practical implications should likewise be stated cautiously. Existing Nigerian scholarship documents the contribution of religious leaders, interfaith dialogue, and community-level cooperation to peacebuilding, but such evidence does not by itself

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[58] Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999 (as amended), sec. 42.
[59] R. Scott Appleby, *The Ambivalence of the Sacred: Religion, Violence, and Reconciliation* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000), 58–86; David R. Smock, *Interfaith Dialogue and Peacebuilding* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2002); Heather M. DuBois and Janna Hunter-Bowman, "The Intersection of Christian Theology and Peacebuilding," in *The Oxford Handbook of Religion, Conflict, and Peacebuilding*, ed. Atalia Omer, R. Scott Appleby, and David Little (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 569–96.

establish that these approaches are universally or comparatively more effective than other interventions.[60] Accordingly, this study does not make a general empirical claim about effectiveness. Rather, it identifies community-level dialogue, religious-leader engagement, cooperative relationships, reconciliation initiatives, and practices that reduce stereotyping and hostility as contexts in which the Pauline ethic of peace may offer a constructive theological resource. The significance of εἰρήνη lies therefore not in providing a stand-alone policy solution, but in supplying Christian participants in peacebuilding with a theological rationale for pursuing relationships characterized by restraint, mutual respect, reconciliation, and the common good.

Pauline εἰρήνη can consequently be appropriated in Nigeria through a threefold movement: maintaining theological conviction, respecting religious difference, and pursuing peaceful communal relationships. Such an approach avoids both religious relativism and religious antagonism. It also recognizes the limits of theological transfer: Pauline texts cannot simply be treated as direct prescriptions for a modern pluralistic state. Their value lies in providing theological-ethical principles that Christian communities can critically translate into forms of interreligious engagement compatible with constitutional pluralism and shared civic responsibility.

Challenges and Limitations

Applying the Pauline concept of *eirēnē* to Nigeria's interreligious conflicts faces several challenges, including forms of religious exclusivism that become dehumanising, coercive, or politically weaponised. Strong Christian or Muslim truth claims do not in themselves produce conflict, since religious communities may maintain firm theological convictions while supporting dialogue and peaceful coexistence. The concern arises when such convictions are mobilised to stigmatise, exclude, or justify hostility toward religious others. Miroslav Volf's distinction between exclusion and embrace is useful here, as it highlights how religious identities can either reinforce boundaries of hostility or support recognition

[60] Darren Kew and Chris M. A. Kwaja, "Religion and Peacebuilding in Nigeria," in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Religion and Peace*, ed. Atalia Omer, R. Scott Appleby, and David Little (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley Blackwell, 2015), 251–68

and reconciliation.[61] In the Nigerian context, therefore, Pauline eirēnē must be applied critically alongside Christian and Muslim peacebuilding resources that affirm religious conviction while resisting coercion, dehumanisation, and violence..[62]

Closely related is the politicisation of religion in Nigeria. Religion is frequently instrumentalised by political elites to mobilise support or deepen divisions for electoral advantage. This reality complicates any purely theological intervention, as conflicts are often driven more by political economy than doctrinal differences. Matthew Hassan Kukah notes that religious identities in Nigeria are deeply entangled with power structures, making peacebuilding efforts vulnerable to manipulation.[63]

Another limitation is the contextual gap between Pauline communities and contemporary Nigeria. The socio-historical setting of Paul the Apostle differs significantly from modern nation-states characterised by complex governance systems, ethnic plurality, and institutionalised religion. While *Eirene* in the Pauline corpus emphasises communal harmony within early Christian communities, translating this into large-scale societal frameworks requires careful contextualization.[64]

Furthermore, there are practical and institutional constraints. Weak governance structures, inadequate enforcement of laws, and limited capacity for sustained interfaith dialogue hinder the application of theological peace models. In addition, poverty, unemployment, and social inequality continue to fuel grievances that cannot be resolved by theological ethics alone.[65]

Finally, the study acknowledges its own methodological limitations, particularly the reliance on biblical exegesis and existing studies, which may not fully capture the complexity of conflict dynamics across all regions of Nigeria. Despite these challenges,

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[61] Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 67–126.
[62] Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation*. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 34
[63] Matthew Hassan Kukah, *Religion, Politics and Power in Northern Nigeria*. (Ibadan: Spectrum Books, 1993), 110
[64] James D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle.* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 88
[65] Falola, *Violence in Nigeria: The Crisis of Religious Politics and Secular Ideologies,* 66

the Pauline vision of *Eirene* remains a valuable ethical resource, though its effectiveness depends on interdisciplinary integration with political, economic, and social strategies.

Conclusion

The contribution of this study, however, should be understood normatively and conceptually rather than empirically. The study does not provide empirical evidence that Pauline eirēnē has independently reduced religious violence, changed the behaviour of conflicting communities, or produced measurable improvements in Nigerian peacebuilding or public policy. Rather, it demonstrates the theological resources within Paul's understanding of peace that may inform Christian approaches to dialogue, reconciliation, mutual respect, and constructive engagement across religious differences. Such application requires contextual discernment and cannot be assumed to produce particular outcomes without further empirical investigation. Consequently, Pauline eirēnē should not be presented as a substitute for political, institutional, economic, or security measures addressing religious conflict. Its potential contribution lies principally in shaping the moral dispositions, relationships, and communal practices through which Christians participate in wider peacebuilding processes. This proposal therefore invites further interdisciplinary and empirical research to examine how Pauline peace ethics might be translated into concrete peacebuilding practices and whether such practices can produce observable effects in particular Nigerian contexts. In this sense, the study contributes to the intersection of Pauline theology, Nigerian religion-and-conflict scholarship, and theological peacebuilding by offering a contextually grounded theological framework for reflection and practice, while recognizing that its practical effectiveness remains a question for future empirical research.

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CHAPTER 24

NEW TESTAMENT ESCHATOLOGY AND CHRISTIAN RESPONSES TO VIOLENCE AND INSECURITY IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

In the face of Nigeria's persistent insecurity marked by terrorism, ethnic violence, and socio-political upheaval, Christian eschatological beliefs offer both a theological anchor and a practical challenge. This study explores how New Testament eschatology informs Nigerian Christians' responses to violence, balancing the tension between hopeful anticipation of divine justice and the imperative for ethical engagement in the present. By examining key eschatological themes such as the "already and not yet" kingdom, non-retaliation, and the cosmic renewal of creation, the research uncovers how these doctrines inspire resilience, pacifism, and peacebuilding efforts amid pervasive threats. Yet, it also critically assesses the theological pitfalls of passivity and disengagement, arguing for a contextualised eschatology that empowers proactive peace advocacy without forfeiting spiritual hope. Ultimately, this study reframes New Testament eschatology not as a retreat from conflict but as a dynamic resource for transformative action, fostering a nuanced Christian witness in Nigeria's volatile landscape.

Keywords: *New Testament, Eschatology, Religious Violence, Ethnic Conflicts, Peacebuilding, Political and Social Engagement, Cosmic Renewal, Christian Ethics.*

INTRODUCTION

The term eschatology emerged in seventeenth-century Lutheran dogmatics as a technical designation for theological reflection on the last things. Jörg Frey identifies an early occurrence in Philipp Heinrich Friedlieb's theological work of 1644,[1] while Gerhard Sauter

[1] Jörg Frey, "*Eschatology*." In The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Bible and Theology. (Oxford University Press, 2015).

discusses Abraham Calov's use of *ΕΣΧΑΤΟΛΟΓΙΑ* Sacra in 1677.[2] These developments, however, concern the term's history rather than the origin of eschatological thought, which is deeply rooted in Jewish and Christian Scripture.

Derived from the Greek eschatos ("last") and logos ("discourse" or "study"), eschatology refers broadly to theological reflection on ultimate realities, including death, resurrection, divine judgment, the destiny of humanity, and the consummation of creation. In Christian theology, it therefore encompasses both personal and cosmic dimensions of the future, as well as the relationship between God's promised future and the present life of faith.[3]

Within New Testament studies, eschatology is not restricted to speculation about the "end times." It also concerns the ways in which the kingdom of God, inaugurated through Jesus Christ, shapes Christian existence in the present while awaiting its final consummation. This relationship between present fulfilment and future expectation is commonly expressed through the categories of realised and inaugurated eschatology.

An eschatological orientation is likewise significant in the study of religion and public life. Weaver argues that eschatological perspectives are central to the worldviews of Christians, Muslims, and Jews, and that responsible eschatological reflection is particularly important in an age marked by terror and inter-religious violence.[4]

Nigeria has, in recent decades, become synonymous with widespread insecurity manifesting in diverse forms such as terrorism, banditry, kidnapping, communal conflicts, and political violence.[5] The persistent nature of these security challenges has not only undermined governance but also disrupted socio-economic stability and eroded public trust in state institutions. Within this fragile context, religion, particularly Christianity, plays a

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[2] Gerhard Sauter, Concept and Task of Eschatology: Theological and Philosophical Reflections. *Scottish Journal of Theology 41*, no. 4 (1988): 499–515.

[3] M. U. Chukwuedo, The Eschatological Implications of Global Terrorism: Nigeria as a Case Study, *Trinitarian International Journal of Arts and Humanities, vol. 1,* Issue 1, (2021). 1-9

[4] N.K. Weaver, *Violence and End-Time Theologies: The Search for a Responsible Eschatology*. (USA: The Forum on Public Policy, 2006), 66.

[5] A. S. Adeodu, E. I. Ademola, & B. C. Babafemi, Insecurity in Nigeria: Causes, Consequences and Solutions. *Wukari International Studies Journal*, vol. *8*, no 2, 1–10. (2024). Retrieved from https://wissjournals.com.ng/index.php/wiss/article/view/312

significant role in shaping public consciousness and influencing societal responses to insecurity.[6]

The New Testament, central to Christian theology, contains eschatological teachings that emphasise both hope in the coming reign of God and ethical responsibility in the present.[7] Eschatology, broadly understood as the theological reflection on last things, future hope, and ultimate realities, is not merely speculative but deeply practical, shaping ethical conduct and community life.[8] In the Nigerian context, eschatological beliefs have had ambivalent effects: on one hand, they inspire resilience, patience, and hope amid violence; on the other, they sometimes foster political apathy, fatalism, or withdrawal from societal responsibilities.[9]

Existing Nigerian scholarship has examined violence and insecurity through Christian ethics, public theology, and peacebuilding. For example, Akerele and Dasaolu propose Christian ethics as a framework for peacebuilding in Nigeria, while Kajom evaluates the theological and ethical contribution of the World Council of Churches' peace initiatives.[10] Uchenna Anyanwu likewise develops a staurocentric theology of peacebuilding grounded in the cross of Christ, and Isuwa Atsen explores the ethical legitimacy and limits of self-defence in the context of violent attacks in northern Nigeria.[11] These studies demonstrate the relevance of Christian theology to questions of violence, reconciliation, and public responsibility. Nevertheless, they do not sufficiently examine how the New Testament's

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[6] H. Onapajo, Politics for God: Religion, politics and conflict in democratic Nigeria. *The Journal of Pan African Studies, vol. 4*, no 9, (2012). 42–66

[7] G. E. Ladd, *The presence of the future: The eschatology of biblical realism.* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 89

[8] Nicholas T. Wright, *Surprised by hope: Rethinking heaven, the resurrection, and the mission of the church.* (New York: HarperOne, 2008), 142

[9] M. H. Kukah, *Religion, politics and power in Northern Nigeria.* (Ibadan: Spectrum Books, 2011), 77

[10] Victor B. Akerele and Babajide O. Dasaolu, "Christian Ethics as a Model for Peace Building Mechanism in Nigeria," in *Islam's Response to the Quest for Peace, Orderliness and Well-being in Nigeria: A Festschrift in Honour of Professor Kamaldeen Abdu* (Ogun State: Department of Religious Studies, Olabisi Onabanjo University, 2020), 354–71; David Haji Kajom, *The "Decade to Overcome Violence" Programme of the World Council of Churches and Peace in Nigeria: A Theological Assessment* (PhD diss., Stellenbosch University, 2012).

[11] Uchenna D. Anyanwu, *Pathways to Peacebuilding: Staurocentric Theology in Nigeria's Context of Acute Violence* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2022); Isuwa Y. Atsen, "Self-Defence and a Phronetic Use of Violence: A Christian Response to Muslim-Mob Attacks in Northern Nigeria," *International Journal of Public Theology* 15, no. 4 (2021): 496–515.

eschatological vision, particularly its themes of inaugurated divine reign, final judgment, hope, non-retaliation, and the renewal of creation, can provide an integrated theological resource for shaping practical Christian responses to contemporary violence and insecurity in Nigeria. This study addresses that gap by bringing New Testament eschatology into direct conversation with Christian ethics, public theology, and peacebuilding This study addresses that gap. Thus, the study seeks to:

i. examine major themes in New Testament eschatology;

ii. investigate the nature of violence and insecurity in Nigeria;

iii. evaluate theological responses informed by New Testament eschatology;

iv. propose practical implications for Christian engagement in Nigeria.

By critically engaging these objectives, the paper argues that eschatology, far from being a doctrine of passivity, can be repositioned as a theological resource for peacebuilding, governance, and social transformation. The central question guiding this study is whether eschatological beliefs among Nigerian Christians contribute to withdrawal from active engagement with governance or provide motivation for ethical responsibility and constructive responses to insecurity.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, documentary approach, using selected New Testament passages as primary textual data and Nigerian experiences of violence and insecurity as contextual evidence. The biblical passages are selected purposively on the basis of their direct relevance to New Testament eschatology, particularly teachings on the kingdom of God, final judgment, resurrection, peace, suffering, and Christian responses to violence. The selected texts include Matthew 24:4–14; Mark 13:7–13; Luke 21:9–19; Romans 12:17–21; 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18; and Revelation 21:1–5. The analysis follows a historical-contextual hermeneutic involving four steps: examining the literary context of each passage, considering its historical and socio-religious setting, identifying its theological and ethical claims, and interpreting its implications for contemporary Christian

life. Nigerian evidence on insecurity and violence is drawn from relevant scholarly studies, reports, and documented cases. These materials are not treated as direct equivalents of the biblical texts but are brought into critical dialogue with them to assess how New Testament eschatological convictions may inform Christian responses to Nigeria's present realities.

Literature Review

1. The Context of Violence and Insecurity in Nigeria

The context of violence and insecurity in Nigeria is marked by multifaceted challenges, which have significantly impacted the nation's socio-economic development and social cohesion. Nigeria faces an alarming scale and diversity of violent incidents, including terrorism, ethnic and religious violence, armed robbery, kidnapping, and banditry. These manifestations of violence vary regionally: Boko Haram insurgency, banditry, and herder-farmer conflicts predominantly affect the northern region, while southern Nigeria experiences armed robbery, cultism, and kidnapping.[12] These violent dynamics have been exacerbated by underlying socio-economic factors such as poverty, unemployment, corruption, and political marginalisation, which create fertile grounds for criminal activity and insecurity.[13]

Ethnic, communal, and religious dimensions intersect in Nigeria's contemporary insecurity. Data compiled by the Observatory for Religious Freedom in Africa (ORFA) for October 2019 to September 2023 recorded 55,910 deaths in 9,970 deadly attacks and 21,621 abductions in 2,705 attacks. The reported fatalities included civilians, members of terrorist groups, and Nigerian Armed Forces personnel. Of the 30,880 civilian deaths, at least 16,769 were Christians, 6,235 were Muslims, and 154 were adherents of traditional African religions, while the religion of 7,722 victims was unknown. ORFA further reported that, after accounting for the religious composition of states in which attacks occurred, Christians were 6.5 times more likely than Muslims to be killed and 5.1 times more likely to be abducted. These figures indicate a disproportionate impact on Christian communities

[12] P. U. Ibekwe, Crime, Insecurity and Violence in Nigeria. *International Journal of Strategic Research in Education, Technology and Humanities*, vol. *13*, no 1, (2025), 110-123. https://internationalpolicybrief.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/ARTICLE-7-1.pdf
[13] Ibid

within the geographical areas covered by the dataset, but they should not by themselves be interpreted as demonstrating that all violence in Nigeria is religiously motivated.[14]

The character of the violence is complex. Some attacks occur within longstanding conflicts involving farmers, pastoralists, land, resources, ethnicity, and local political competition, where religious identity may overlap with other sources of communal division.[15] In other cases, however, religious ideology is an explicit component of the violence. Boko Haram/Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati wal-Jihad (JAS) and the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), for example, have carried out attacks against civilians and religious communities, including attacks on churches and mosques.[16] It is therefore more analytically appropriate to distinguish between violence in which religious identity is a significant dimension and violence that can be demonstrated to have been directly motivated by religious ideology. This distinction is important when assessing the implications of Nigerian insecurity for Christian theology and eschatological responses.

This protracted violence and insecurity have severe consequences not only on the safety of individuals but also on Nigeria's national unity, governance effectiveness, and economic progress. The persistence of insecurity arises from a combination of factors, including porous borders facilitating arms proliferation, inadequate judicial and security systems, socio-political neglect, and weak government interventions.[17] Despite multiple military and policy measures, these security threats remain entrenched, highlighting the complexity of the problem that necessitates both immediate and long-term socio-economic and governance reforms focused on trust-building and inclusive development.[18]

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[14] Observatory for Religious Freedom in Africa (ORFA), *Countering the Myth of Religious Indifference in Nigerian Terror: 10/2019–9/2023* (2024). The underlying ORFA findings are accurately summarized in the contemporary reporting, including the distinction between total deaths and civilian deaths.

[15] U.S. Department of State, *2023 Report on International Religious Freedom: Nigeria*. The report specifically observes that religion, ethnicity, land and resource competition, and criminality are often closely linked, making it difficult to classify many incidents as solely or primarily religious.

[16] United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), *Nigeria Country Update* (August 2024). USCIRF identifies JAS/Boko Haram, ISWAP, and other extremist groups as perpetrators of serious violence affecting both Christians and Muslims and targeting religious sites and individuals.

[17] Ibekwe, *Crime, Insecurity and Violence in Nigeria*, 115

[18] Ibekwe, *Crime, Insecurity and Violence in Nigeria*, 120

The evidence reviewed indicates that Nigeria's context of violence and insecurity is deeply rooted in ethnic, religious, and socio-economic divergences, with disproportionate impacts on vulnerable populations, especially Christian communities. These realities frame the urgent backdrop against which theological reflections, such as those inspired by New Testament eschatology, seek to shape responses to violence and insecurity in the country.

2. The Concept of Eschatology and its Classifications

The word Eschatology is derived from the Greek terms *eschatos* (last) and *logos* (study or discourse); it refers to the theological reflection on 'last things,' encompassing ideas about the end of history, divine judgment, the afterlife and the ultimate destiny of humanity and the cosmos.[19]In this sense, eschatology concerns the study of the last things. Eschatology is, for many, the most exciting topic in the Bible because it deals with future events, future judgments and the conclusion of life on earth, as we know it. However, one massive word of caution must be given concerning the study of eschatology: the events prophesied have not yet come to pass and the imagery shown to the prophets of old concerned a future time, which has led to the interpretation of some scriptures concerning end-time events.[20] To understand how eschatology shapes political attitudes, various classifications within Christian eschatological thought must be recognised:

i. Apocalyptic Eschatology

Apocalyptic eschatology refers to a distinct theological worldview characterised by revelatory visions, symbolic imagery, cosmic conflict, and a conviction that God will soon intervene decisively in human history to judge evil and vindicate the righteous. It emerged most prominently within late Second Temple Judaism and became deeply embedded in early Christian thought. Scholars such as John J. Collins describe apocalypticism as a literary and theological movement grounded in "revelatory experiences mediated through angels or visions, conveying divine mysteries about the end of the present age and the inauguration of a new, divinely ordered reality."[21] This worldview is therefore not merely

[19] Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction*, 6th ed. (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2017), 23
[20] McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction*, 67
[21] John J. Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination: An Introduction to Jewish Apocalyptic Literature*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016), 5.

speculative but shapes ethical behaviour, communal identity, and expectations concerning the future.

ii. Prophetic/Messianic Eschatology

Prophetic/Messianic eschatology refers to the cluster of future-oriented hopes expressed particularly within the prophetic literature of the Old Testament, centring on divine intervention, restoration, judgment, and the anticipated arrival of a divinely appointed deliverer, the Messiah. This form of eschatology is foundational for understanding later Jewish and Christian expectations about the end times, social transformation, and the establishment of God's kingdom.[22] Unlike apocalyptic eschatology, which emphasises cosmic destruction and dramatic divine overthrow of evil powers, prophetic/messianic eschatology typically focuses on historical renewal, moral transformation, and national restoration within the context of God's covenant with Israel.[23]

iii. Realised Eschatology

Realised eschatology is a theological framework that interprets the major eschatological promises of the New Testament, such as the kingdom of God, eternal life, judgment, and salvation, as already fulfilled in the ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The term is most closely associated with the work of Charles Harold Dodd, whose mid-twentieth-century scholarship challenged traditional futurist interpretations by asserting that "the eschaton has moved from the future into the present."[24] In contrast to expectations of a yet-to-come apocalyptic climax, realised eschatology emphasises the *here-and-now* manifestation of God's reign.

iv. Inaugurated Eschatology

Inaugurated eschatology is a theological framework that emphasizes the *"already"* and *"not yet"* dimensions of God's Kingdom, asserting that the eschatological age began with the ministry of Jesus but awaits its full consummation at His return. This concept, most clearly articulated in the twentieth century through the work of George Eldon Ladd, posits that Jesus' incarnation, teachings, miracles, death, and resurrection inaugurated the

[22] Paul D. Hanson, *The Dawn of Apocalyptic* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 23
[23] Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination: An Introduction to Jewish Apocalyptic Literature*, 67.
[24] Charles Harold Dodd, *The Meaning of Paul for Today* (London: Nisbet, 1936), 28–29

Kingdom of God in history, yet its complete fulfillment remains a future reality.[25] The framework therefore resists simplistic dichotomies between present spiritual experience and future eschatological hope. Instead, it sees both realities as intertwined dimensions of a single divine narrative.

v. Futurist Eschatology

Futurist eschatology refers to the interpretive framework within Christian theology that locates the majority of eschatological prophecies, especially those found in the Gospels, Pauline epistles, and apocalyptic texts such as Daniel and Revelation, as events that remain unfulfilled and are expected to occur in the future. Unlike realized or inaugurated eschatology, which argue that the Kingdom of God is already present in some form, futurist eschatology emphasizes a strong distinction between the present world and the divine future that will be inaugurated through a dramatic, supernatural intervention of God. This perspective typically includes beliefs about the literal Second Coming of Jesus Christ, a future resurrection of the dead, the final judgment, and the establishment of a new world order under divine authority.[26]

Key Themes in the New Testament Eschatology

New Testament eschatology is the theological study of "last things," focusing on the final acts of God in history concerning creation, salvation, judgment, and the consummation of all things. Key themes within New Testament eschatology have significant implications for Christian hope, new creation and restoration, suffering and future glory, and ethical living.

a. Hope, Resurrection, and Comfort (1 Thessalonians 4:13–18)

The keywords in this text are: ***ἐλπίς*** (elpis, "hope")/ "***κοιμῶνται***" (koimōntai, "fall asleep," a euphemism for death)/ ***ἀνάστασις*** (anastasis, "resurrection")/ "παρακαλεῖτε" (parakaleite, "encourage one another")

[25] George Eldon Ladd, *The Gospel of the Kingdom* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1959), 21–29.
[26] Michael Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 1172–1184

Paul contrasts Christian hope with hopeless grief using the word *ἐλπίς* (elpis, "hope"). He assures believers that those who "*κοιμῶνται*" (koimōntai, "fall asleep," a euphemism for death) will rise again through Christ's return, described as ἀνάστασις (anastasis, "resurrection"). The event of believers being "caught up" is expressed by the verb ἁρπαγησόμεθα (harpagēsometha, "we will be snatched away"), emphasising the sudden and transformative nature of Christ's coming. This theological vocabulary points believers to comfort (παρακαλεῖτε, parakaleite, "encourage one another") rooted in eschatological assurance of reunion and victory over death.

b. New Creation and Restoration (Revelation 21:1–5)

"οὐρανὸν καινὸν καὶ γῆν καινήν" (ouranon kainon kai gēn kainēn, "a new heaven and a new earth")

Another central theme is the new creation motif. John's vision opens with "οὐρανὸν καινὸν καὶ γῆν καινήν" (ouranon kainon kai gēn kainēn, "a new heaven and a new earth"). The adjective καινός (kainos, "new") signals qualitative transformation rather than mere replacement. The passage highlights God's restoration: "*ὁ θάνατος οὐκ ἔσται ἔτι*" ("death shall be no more"), and "*ἀπελθόντα τὰ πρῶτα*" ("the former things have passed away"), expressing final victory over suffering as intrinsic to God's eschatological promise. According to Gallusz, the resurrection of Christ is understood as the "first fruits" of a new creation, marking the initiation of God's renewal of all things.[27] The New Testament authors link eschatology closely with creation theology, emphasising that God's final act will be a cosmic renewal where God's will is done fully on earth as in heaven (Matt 6:10). This includes the final judgment and the destruction of the old order of sin and death, replaced by a new heaven and new earth as described in Revelation.[28]

c. Suffering, Glory, and Patient Hope (Romans 8:18–25)

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[27] L. Gallusz, Radically New Beginning, Radically New End: Creation and Eschatology in the New Testament. *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society*, vol. 29, no 1. (2018). 250-275. . https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/jats/vol29/iss1/3/

[28] Gallusz, RadicallyNew Beginning, 264

Paul writes “τὰ παθήματα τοῦ νῦν καιροῦ” (ta pathēmata tou nyn kairou, “the sufferings of the present time”) are incomparable to “τὴν δόξαν τὴν μέλλουσαν” (tēn doxan tēn mellousan, “the glory to be revealed”). The expectation is expressed by ἀποκαραδοκία (apokaradokia, “eager longing”). Hope is reinforced by the verb ἀπεκδεχόμεθα (apekdechometha, “we eagerly await”), indicating patient anticipation (ὑπομονή, hypomonē) for God’s ultimate redemption.

Romans 8:18–25 presents one of Paul's most comprehensive discussions of suffering within an eschatological framework. Writing to believers living under Roman authority, Paul acknowledges present affliction while directing attention toward God's future redemption.

The literary context of Romans 8 emphasizes life in the Spirit. Paul contrasts "the sufferings of this present time" with "the glory that is to be revealed." Particularly striking is his use of the noun *apokaradokia*, describing creation's eager expectation for its liberation. Rather than depicting salvation solely as individual redemption, Paul portrays the entire created order as awaiting renewal through God's final act of redemption.

Douglas Moo observes that Paul's eschatology integrates personal salvation with cosmic restoration, affirming that redemption encompasses both humanity and creation itself.[29] Consequently, suffering is interpreted neither as divine abandonment nor as meaningless tragedy but as participation in God's redemptive purposes.

This perspective offers profound theological resources for Nigerian Christians confronting violence, displacement, and insecurity. Rather than encouraging passive resignation, Paul's theology nurtures resilient hope while motivating believers to participate in healing fractured communities. Hope becomes an active force that sustains faithful witness amid suffering.

d. Ethical Living

[29] Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, New International Commentary on the New Testament, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2018), 524–37

A fourth key aspect is the ethical and communal implications of eschatological hope. Eschatology shapes how believers understand suffering, persecution, and violence in the present age. The New Testament calls for perseverance and faithfulness amid trials, seeing them as part of the Christian witness until the return of Christ (Paul's letters, e.g., 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18). It also teaches non-retaliation, love of enemies, and peace-making as reflections of the kingdom's ethic (Matt 5:44; Romans 12:17-21). The eschatological vision thus drives ethical behaviour that anticipates God's final justice and peace.[30]

Finally, New Testament eschatology integrates personal and corporate dimensions: It deals both with the believer's individual destiny after death ("fallen asleep" awaiting resurrection) and the communal hope of the church as the people of God in the world (1 Cor 15:18; Eph 2:22). This collective eschatological hope encourages the community to embody kingdom values in a broken world, shaping responses to social realities including violence and insecurity.[31]

The Theological Responses to Violence Based on New Testament Eschatology

New Testament eschatology offers a theological framework through which Christians interpret violence, persecution, and insecurity in anticipation of God's final victory over evil. However, its practical implications have generated considerable debate within biblical scholarship and among Christian communities confronting violent conflict. While the New Testament consistently calls believers to embody forgiveness, reconciliation, and hope, the application of these principles within contexts of persistent violence, such as Nigeria, requires careful theological discernment rather than simplistic idealism.

1. Non-retaliation and the Ethics of Peace

The most distinctive ethical implication of New Testament eschatology is Jesus' command to reject retaliation and love one's enemies (Matt. 5:38–48; Rom. 12:17–21). This ethic is grounded not in political weakness but in confidence that ultimate justice belongs to God. Since God's kingdom will ultimately defeat evil, Christians are liberated from the need to

[30] Gallusz, Radically New Beginning, 265

[31] The Gospel Coalition. *What Is Eschatology? 4 Views, Why There's Disagreement & More*. Retrieved from https://www.logos.com/grow/what-is-eschatology/ (Accessed on 3rd September 2025).

secure justice through personal vengeance. Stanley Hauerwas argues that the church's refusal to retaliate is itself an eschatological witness because it demonstrates confidence in God's future reign rather than human violence.[32]

Nevertheless, applying this ethic within Nigeria presents significant challenges. Christian communities in Plateau, Benue, Kaduna, and parts of the North-East have experienced repeated attacks from insurgents, armed bandits, and militant groups. In such settings, the call to forgive enemies is often interpreted as encouraging passivity in the face of continued aggression. Critics argue that an unqualified emphasis on non-retaliation may unintentionally expose vulnerable communities to further violence while discouraging legitimate efforts to protect innocent lives.[33]

The tension therefore lies not between peace and justice but between revenge and responsible protection. New Testament eschatology does not endorse vengeance; neither does it require Christians to ignore the moral responsibility of preserving life. A contextual reading therefore suggests that while revenge remains incompatible with Christian discipleship, lawful measures aimed at protecting vulnerable communities may be consistent with the biblical mandate to love one's neighbour. Such an approach preserves Jesus' ethic of peace without reducing it to political passivity.

2. Suffering, Hope, and Christian Witness

The New Testament repeatedly presents suffering as an inevitable dimension of Christian discipleship (Rom. 8:18–25; 2 Cor. 4:16–18; 1 Pet. 4:12–19). Eschatological hope enables believers to endure persecution because present suffering is interpreted in light of God's future redemption. Douglas Moo observes that Paul's theology never glorifies suffering itself but locates its meaning within God's redemptive purposes and the certainty of resurrection.[34] This perspective has encouraged remarkable resilience among many

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[32] Stanley Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), 99–120; John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 38–51.

[33] Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1996), 297–308; Emmanuel Katongole, *The Sacrifice of Africa: A Political Theology for Africa* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011), 169–89.

[34] Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 524–37; George Eldon Ladd, *The Presence of the Future: The Eschatology of Biblical Realism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1974), 218–32.

Nigerian Christian communities. Churches affected by Boko Haram insurgency have continued to worship, rebuild destroyed congregations and provide humanitarian assistance despite repeated attacks.[35] Such responses demonstrate how eschatological hope can sustain faith under extreme circumstances. Yet this theology may also be misunderstood. When suffering is interpreted exclusively as something to be endured until Christ's return, believers may become reluctant to challenge the structural causes of violence. Such an interpretation risks transforming biblical hope into religious fatalism. The New Testament, however, consistently combines endurance with active participation in God's mission. Hope therefore empowers resistance against injustice rather than passive acceptance of oppression.

3. Self-defence and the Pursuit of Justice

One of the most debated issues in contemporary Nigerian Christianity concerns whether New Testament eschatology permits self-defence. While Jesus commands His followers to love their enemies, the New Testament also recognizes the state's responsibility to restrain evil (Rom. 13:1–7). This creates a theological tension between Christian non-violence and the ethical obligation to protect innocent life. Some Nigerian theologians maintain that absolute pacifism inadequately addresses the realities of terrorism and communal violence. Others warn that embracing violent self-defence risks undermining the distinctive witness of the gospel. Rather than adopting either extreme, a contextual eschatology should distinguish revenge from protection. Christians are called to reject hatred and retaliation while supporting lawful efforts that preserve life, defend vulnerable communities, and promote justice.[36] Such a position reflects the inaugurated nature of God's kingdom, in which believers anticipate God's final justice while participating responsibly in the preservation of social order.

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[35] Kaine D. Nwashili, 2025. "Vulnerability and Responses of the Church of Nigeria Anglican Communion to Islamic Insurgency Threat in Northern Nigeria Missions." *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 81 (1): a10360. https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v81i1.10360

[36] Isuwa Y. Atsen, "Self-Defence and a Phronetic Use of Violence: A Christian Response to Muslim-Mob Attacks in Northern Nigeria." *International Journal of Public Theology* 15, no. 4 (2021): 496–518; Joshua Bagudu Boyi, "The Response of Christians to Islamic Violence in Northern Nigeria." *African Theological Journal for Church and Society* 1, no. 1 (2020).

4. Prayer as Eschatological Resistance

Prayer occupies a central place within New Testament eschatology because it expresses confidence in God's sovereign rule over history. However, prayer should not be interpreted as a substitute for responsible action. Instead, it functions as a form of spiritual resistance that sustains Christian engagement amid conflict. Throughout Nigeria's security crisis, churches have organized national prayer movements alongside humanitarian interventions, trauma counselling, advocacy, and peacebuilding initiatives.[37] These examples demonstrate that prayer and social action are not competing responses but complementary expressions of Christian discipleship. As N. T. Wright argues, authentic eschatological hope always generates participation in God's restorative work rather than withdrawal from it.[38] Prayer therefore becomes both an act of dependence upon God and a source of moral courage for confronting violence through practical service.

5. Toward a Contextual Nigerian Eschatology

The foregoing discussion demonstrates that New Testament eschatology should neither be interpreted as a justification for passive endurance nor appropriated to legitimize violent retaliation. Rather, it provides a theological vision in which hope, justice, forgiveness, and responsible civic engagement exist in creative tension. Such an approach moves beyond abstract doctrinal reflection by addressing the ethical realities confronting Nigerian Christians.[39] A contextual Nigerian eschatology must therefore affirm four complementary principles: hope without escapism, peace without passivity, justice without revenge, and faith without political disengagement. In doing so, it preserves the integrity of the New Testament witness while offering a credible theological response to contemporary violence and insecurity.

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[37] Vincent A. Olusakin and Clifford Meesua Sibani, "The Christian Association of Nigeria, Violence and Insecurity: Responses from the Christian Council of Nigeria," *Bulletin of Ecumenical Theology* 35 (2023): 53–79. Their study is particularly useful because it is based on interviews and secondary sources and specifically examines the CCN's responses to violence and insecurity.

[38] N. T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* (New York: HarperOne, 2008), 192–208.

[39] David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, 20th anniversary ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011), 390–405.

Practical Application of the New Testament Eschatology in Shaping Responses to Violence and Insecurity in Nigeria

The practical significance of New Testament eschatology in Nigeria's context of violence and insecurity lies in translating its theological insights into concrete ethical action, social engagement, and community transformation.Rather than remaining a speculative doctrine about the future, eschatology becomes a lived reality that informs how Christians respond to conflict, injustice, and instability in their immediate environment.

First, New Testament eschatology fosters **active peacebuilding and reconciliation**. The eschatological vision of the Kingdom of God as a realm of peace, justice, and restored relationships (Isaiah 2:4; Matthew 5:9) calls Nigerian Christians to become agents of reconciliation in divided communities. In practical terms, this involves mediating conflicts, promoting inter-ethnic and inter-religious dialogue, and supporting initiatives that reduce tensions between conflicting groups. Churches can serve as neutral grounds for dialogue, fostering trust and understanding among hostile communities. This reflects the "already" dimension of the Kingdom, where believers embody divine peace even in a violent society.

Second, eschatology inspires **non-violent resistance and ethical conduct**. The New Testament's emphasis on non-retaliation (Romans 12:17–21) and love for enemies (Matthew 5:44) challenges cycles of revenge that often escalate violence in Nigeria. Practically, this means that Christians are called to reject mob justice, retaliatory killings, and ethnic vengeance, choosing instead forgiveness and restorative justice. This does not imply weakness but reflects a deep trust in God's ultimate justice. Such a posture can gradually disrupt entrenched patterns of violence and model alternative ways of responding to conflict.

Third, New Testament eschatology encourages **resilience and hope amid suffering**. In regions heavily affected by insurgency, banditry, and communal clashes, the promise of future glory (Romans 8:18) provides psychological and spiritual strength for victims. This hope is not passive endurance but empowers communities to rebuild, support one another, and refuse despair. Churches, therefore, play a crucial role in trauma healing, counselling,

and humanitarian support, helping victims of violence to recover and reintegrate into society.

Another important application is **responsible civic and political engagement**. A balanced understanding of eschatology counters the tendency toward political apathy. Instead of withdrawing from governance due to an overemphasis on the "end times," Christians are encouraged to participate actively in promoting justice, accountability, and good governance. This includes voting responsibly, advocating for policies that address insecurity, and holding leaders accountable. The expectation of God's future kingdom becomes a motivation to reflect its values in present political structures.

Furthermore, eschatology promotes **social justice and advocacy for the vulnerable**. The anticipation of divine judgment (Matthew 25:31–46) reminds believers of their responsibility toward the oppressed, displaced, and victims of violence. In Nigeria, this translates into advocacy for internally displaced persons (IDPs), support for victims of terrorism, and efforts to address structural causes of insecurity such as poverty, unemployment, and corruption. Churches and Christian organizations can partner with civil society to provide relief and push for systemic reforms.

Additionally, the doctrine supports **balanced approaches to security and self-defence**. While upholding non-violence as an ideal, a contextual application recognises the necessity of protecting life. Christians can collaborate with lawful security structures, support community vigilance initiatives, and promote policies that ensure safety without compromising ethical standards. This reflects a realistic engagement with Nigeria's security challenges while maintaining fidelity to Christian moral principles.

Finally, New Testament eschatology encourages **spiritual practices as tools of transformation**. Prayer, fasting, and communal worship become forms of resistance against violence and injustice. These practices reinforce dependence on God, nurture moral discipline, and inspire collective action. Prayer, in particular, functions not as escapism but as a means of seeking divine intervention while mobilising believers toward practical solutions.

The practical application of New Testament eschatology in Nigeria requires a careful balance between hope for the future and responsibility in the present. When properly understood, it does not lead to passivity but to active engagement in peacebuilding, justice, and societal transformation. It equips Nigerian Christians to confront violence not with fear or retaliation, but with faith-driven action that reflects the coming reality of God's kingdom.

Critiques and Challenges of New Testament Eschatology in Shaping Responses to Violence and Insecurity in Nigeria

New Testament eschatology, while providing a theological framework of hope, perseverance, and ultimate divine justice, faces significant critiques and challenges when applied to the complex realities of violence and insecurity in Nigeria. One major critique centres on the tension between the call for Christian pacifism and the need for self-defence in the face of imminent threats. Traditionally, New Testament teachings emphasise non-violence, love for enemies, and endurance through suffering (Matthew 5:44; Romans 12:19). However, this stance has been challenged by the violent context in Nigeria, where Christians face religious persecution and violent attacks, particularly from extremist groups such as Boko Haram. As noted by scholars, the docility of many Nigerian Christians, derived from a pacifistic interpretation of eschatology, is problematic because it leaves them vulnerable to attacks and undermines the church's role in robust self-defence and conflict management.[40]

Furthermore, the dynamic and divisive aspects of eschatological anticipation, as reflected in Jesus' teachings in Luke 12:49-53, show that eschatology can bring social strife and division even among close communities.[41] This presents a challenge for contemporary

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[40] E. A. Ituma and P. E. Peters The approach of conflict in Luke 12:49-59 through Form Criticism and its application in Nigerian churches. *Verbum et Ecclesia, vol. 42*, no 1, (2021). 1-6. https://doi.org/10.4102/ve.v42i1.2208; Victor B. Akerele and Babajide O. Dasaolu, "Christian Ethics as a Model for Peace Building Mechanism in Nigeria," in *Islam's Response to the Quest for Peace, Orderliness and Well-being in Nigeria: A Festschrift in Honour of Professor Kamaldeen Abdu* (Ogun State: Department of Religious Studies, Olabisi Onabanjo University, 2020), 354–71; David Haji Kajom, *The "Decade to Overcome Violence" Programme of the World Council of Churches and Peace in Nigeria: A Theological Assessment* (PhD diss., Stellenbosch University, 2012)

[41] Ibid

Nigerian Christians who must navigate the tension between witnessing to peace and enduring unavoidable conflicts that divide families and communities. The application of New Testament eschatology is thus not a simple call to passivity but requires nuanced discernment about when and how to respond to violence, all while maintaining faith in ultimate divine justice.

Another significant critique is that eschatological hope may inadvertently promote complacency or disengagement from socio-political efforts to address systemic causes of violence and insecurity. When the focus is predominantly on the "end times" and divine intervention, there is a risk that believers might minimise the urgency of proactive peacebuilding, social justice, and political engagement. This spiritualization of violence can limit practical responses necessary to address ethnic, religious, and political violence in Nigeria.[42]

Furthermore, the New Testament's eschatological vision, while offering comfort, does not provide detailed prescriptions for handling the multifaceted challenges of endemic religious intolerance and violent extremism in Nigeria. The complex interplay of political, ethnic, and religious factors in Nigerian violence demands multifaceted approaches that include but transcend theological frameworks, incorporating good governance, interfaith dialogue, and socio-economic development.[43]

Toward a Contextual New Testament Eschatology for Addressing Violence and Insecurity in Nigeria

This study's principal contribution is a contextual reading of New Testament eschatology for a society experiencing prolonged violence and insecurity. Rather than treating eschatology primarily as an expectation of future events, the study demonstrates how the New Testament's tension between present participation in God's kingdom and its future consummation can provide an ethical orientation for Christian responses to violence. Its distinctive contribution lies in bringing this eschatological framework into direct

[42] C. M. Umeanwe, Religious Crisis and Management in Nigeria, *IGWEBUIKE: An African Journal of Arts and Humanities. Vol. 6,* issue 5, (2020), 93-115

[43] M. U. Chukwuedo, The Eschatological Implications of Global Terrorism: Nigeria as a Case Study, *Trinitarian International Journal of Arts and Humanities, vol. 1,* issue 1, (2021). 1-9

conversation with the Nigerian context, where Christians must negotiate the tension between hope, non-retaliation, protection of life, and responsible public engagement.

The study therefore proposes that eschatological hope should neither produce withdrawal from present realities nor justify revenge. Properly contextualised, it can function as a theological basis for resilient, peace-oriented, and socially responsible Christian action. In this respect, the study extends discussions of New Testament eschatology by demonstrating its potential as a resource for constructive Christian engagement with contemporary insecurity in Nigeria.

This contribution is particularly significant for African public theology because it connects biblical eschatological convictions with the concrete ethical demands of life in a conflict-affected society. The study thus offers a framework in which hope for God's future is understood not as an escape from present suffering but as a theological motivation for responsible action now.

Conclusion

New Testament eschatology can significantly shape Christian responses to the pervasive violence and insecurity in Nigeria by offering a resilient hope anchored in the promise of Christ's return and ultimate divine justice. This eschatological vision encourages believers to endure suffering with patience and to embody principles of peace, love, and forgiveness amidst turmoil, thus fostering non-violent responses to persecution and insecurity. However, the practical application of these teachings is complex, as Nigerian Christians navigate the challenges of maintaining faith-based non-violence while confronting real threats to their safety and community well-being. Moreover, while eschatological hope sustains resilience, it must be tempered by active engagement in peacebuilding, justice advocacy, and social reconciliation to effectively address the multifaceted causes of violence. The church's role extends beyond spiritual encouragement to include proactive efforts in conflict resolution and societal transformation, thereby embodying both the hope and the ethical demands of the New Testament. Therefore, a contextualised interpretation of eschatology that acknowledges Nigeria's socio-political realities is vital for empowering Christians to act justly and peacefully without succumbing to passivity or disengagement. Ultimately, New Testament eschatology in Nigeria offers both a theological anchor and a

call to responsible action, inspiring a delicate balance between hopeful anticipation of God's kingdom and committed participation in the pursuit of peace and security in the present world.

Recommendations

The analysis of this study indicates that New Testament eschatology, properly understood, provides not only hope for God's future kingdom but also a compelling ethical mandate for Christian engagement in the present. Consequently, the following recommendations are proposed.

i. Churches

Churches in Nigeria should intentionally teach a balanced understanding of New Testament eschatology that avoids both escapism and fatalism. Eschatological preaching should emphasize the "already and not yet" nature of God's Kingdom, encouraging believers to combine hope in Christ's return with active participation in peacebuilding, social justice, and community development. Churches should also establish ministries dedicated to trauma healing, conflict mediation, and reconciliation for victims of terrorism, communal violence, and displacement. By embodying the values of God's coming Kingdom, local congregations can become visible agents of peace within conflict-affected communities.

ii. Theological Seminaries

Theological institutions should revise their curricula to integrate contextual studies on violence, peacebuilding, public theology, and Christian ethics alongside traditional courses on biblical eschatology. Future pastors and theologians must be equipped to interpret Scripture within the realities of contemporary Nigeria while developing practical responses to insecurity. Seminaries should further encourage interdisciplinary research involving biblical studies, theology, conflict resolution, sociology, and political science to produce contextually relevant scholarship capable of addressing Nigeria's evolving security challenges.

iii. Christian Leaders

Christian leaders should demonstrate prophetic leadership by promoting reconciliation rather than deepening ethnic, political, or religious divisions. Their public ministries should consistently affirm justice, forgiveness, and peaceful coexistence while condemning every form of violence regardless of its source. In addition, church leaders should collaborate across denominational boundaries to develop unified Christian responses to humanitarian crises, internally displaced persons, and victims of religious persecution. Such leadership reflects the Kingdom ethic of servant leadership exemplified by Jesus Christ.

iv. Government

Although the responsibility for maintaining security rests primarily with the state, government agencies should strengthen collaboration with faith-based organizations in designing peacebuilding initiatives and community-based conflict prevention programmes. Beyond military responses, sustainable peace requires addressing structural causes of insecurity, including corruption, unemployment, poverty, weak governance, and social exclusion. Policies that promote justice, accountability, equitable resource distribution, and protection of religious freedom are essential for reducing the conditions that perpetuate violence.

v. Christian Non-Governmental Organizations

Christian NGOs should expand their involvement beyond humanitarian relief by investing in long-term peacebuilding initiatives, trauma counselling, reconciliation programmes, and economic empowerment for vulnerable communities. Partnerships between churches, humanitarian organizations, and civil society can significantly improve rehabilitation efforts for internally displaced persons and victims of terrorism. Furthermore, Christian organizations should advocate policies that promote restorative justice, human dignity, and sustainable community development consistent with biblical principles.

vi. Interfaith Organizations

Given Nigeria's religious diversity, interfaith organizations should intensify dialogue and cooperative peacebuilding initiatives among Christian and Muslim communities. Such engagement should extend beyond symbolic meetings to include collaborative community development projects, youth empowerment programmes, early-warning mechanisms

against religious violence, and joint public condemnation of extremism. Building trust across religious communities contributes significantly to preventing conflict and promoting national cohesion while reflecting the biblical commitment to peacemaking.

Ultimately, these recommendations affirm that New Testament eschatology should not be interpreted merely as a doctrine concerning future events but as a transformative theological framework that inspires faithful Christian witness within contemporary society. Hope in God's future reign should empower believers to participate actively in promoting justice, reconciliation, peace, and human flourishing in Nigeria's present context.

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CHAPTER 25

A BIBLICAL APPRAISAL OF GAMBLING AS A MEANS OF WEALTH CREATION AND SUSTAINABLE ECONOMIC STRATEGY

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Abstract

This study examines whether gambling can function as a legitimate means of wealth creation and as a sustainable economic strategy when assessed through the combined lenses of economic analysis and biblical theology. The question is pressing in economically vulnerable societies such as Nigeria, where the rapid expansion of sports betting and online wagering has encouraged the perception that betting is a viable route to financial advancement. The study adopts a theoretical-analytical methodology, employing library-based document analysis to bring economic theory, probability theory, behavioural economics and biblical-theological reflection into structured dialogue. Four criteria of sustainability are applied to gambling as a wealth strategy: economic, behavioural, social and theological. The study finds that gambling fails on each count. It redistributes rather than creates value; it operates through negative expected value secured by a structural house edge; it sustains participation through reinforcement mechanisms that obscure statistical disadvantage; and it conflicts with the biblical framework of stewardship, diligent labour, moral accountability, contentment and trust in divine providence. Gambling is therefore more accurately described as an economic illusion than as a strategy of wealth creation. Three implications follow. For Christian ethics, the study supplies a working criterion for distinguishing productive risk from speculative acquisition. For pastoral, chaplaincy and educational ministry, it grounds a positive case

for wage-earning labour and productive enterprise as the ordinary biblical means of provision, rather than a merely prohibitive stance toward betting. For public policy in emerging gambling markets, it strengthens the case for regulatory attention to advertising, youth exposure and consumer protection.

Keywords: *Gambling, wealth creation, stewardship, Christian economic ethics, sustainability.*

INTRODUCTION

Gambling has become one of the fastest-growing consumer industries in the world, driven principally by online platforms and sports betting applications. The global sports betting market alone was valued at more than eighty-seven billion United States dollars in 2025, with online betting accounting for over half of that revenue.[1] When all forms of commercial gambling are considered together, the scale is far larger: the Lancet Public Health Commission on gambling estimates that net consumer losses will approach seven hundred billion United States dollars annually by 2028.[2] These are not the figures of a marginal leisure activity. They describe a global system of financial transfer operating at the scale of a major economic sector.

The expansion is most pronounced in low- and middle-income countries, where regulatory infrastructure is often weakest.[3] Nigeria is a representative case. Sports betting has become so deeply embedded in Nigerian social and economic life that a substantial proportion of the adult population participates in it, with participation concentrated among young men between eighteen and forty years of age.[4] Betting shops occupy the same commercial streets as provision stores and business centres; betting applications sit alongside banking applications on the same mobile telephones; and betting advertisements are carried by the same broadcasting platforms that transmit the football matches on which the wagers are

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[1]Jose Sanchez, "Sports Betting and Gambling Market/Industry: Statistics & Facts," Statista, 2026, https://www.statista.com/topics/1740/sports-betting/. The figure refers to the sports betting segment specifically, not to the whole of commercial gambling.
[2]Heather Wardle et al., "The Lancet Public Health Commission on Gambling," *The Lancet Public Health* 9, no. 11 (2024): e950.
[3]Wardle et al., "Lancet Public Health Commission," e950.
[4]Olowu Olagunju Folorunso, "The Socio-Economic Implications of Sport Bet in Nigeria," *South-South Journal of Humanities and International Studies* 8 (2025): 173. See also NOIPolls, "Betting and Gambling in Nigeria," 2019, https://www.noi-polls.com/post/betting-and-gambling-in-nigeria.

placed. In a national context marked by high youth unemployment, currency depreciation and constrained access to capital, betting is frequently presented, and frequently received, not as recreation but as an economic strategy.

This normalisation represents a significant shift in economic culture. Gambling that was formerly confined to specific social settings has become a digitally interconnected sector propelled by financial innovation and continuous market growth. Betting platforms, wagering applications and casino-style systems are increasingly marketed not as recreational products but as pathways to financial progress. The appeal is strongest precisely where alternative avenues to capital accumulation are least available.

Statement of the Problem

The normalisation of gambling as a means of making money rests upon a long-standing confusion between wealth acquisition and wealth creation. Gambling can undoubtedly produce financial gain for particular individuals. The normative question is whether such gain constitutes the creation of real value or merely the redistribution of existing funds within a probabilistic framework designed for aggregate participant loss. Economic theory consistently defines wealth creation as productive activity yielding goods, services or capital that enlarge overall economic capacity.[5] A system that generates no such output therefore poses a serious difficulty for any claim to sustainable wealth creation.

The problem is intensified by the behavioural dynamics embedded within contemporary gambling environments. Modern gambling systems are not neutral arenas of chance; they are deliberately engineered to sustain engagement through reinforcement mechanisms that obscure statistical disadvantage and amplify perceived opportunity.[6] Gambling is consequently experienced by many participants not as a high-risk activity but as a rational financial strategy. This dimension complicates any evaluation conducted solely in terms of individual choice or isolated outcomes.

[5]Rajiv Gandhi University, *Economic Theory* (New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House, 2016), 3.
[6]Natasha Dow Schüll, *Addiction by Design: Machine Gambling in Las Vegas* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012), 104, 108.

Beyond economics and behaviour, the question carries theological weight within the Christian tradition. Scripture consistently frames wealth within the categories of stewardship, diligence, moral accountability and trust in divine providence, and its warnings against hasty riches and disordered desire supply a normative framework for evaluating practices that promise rapid gain without corresponding productive engagement.[7] Any claim that gambling constitutes legitimate wealth creation must therefore be assessed theologically as well as economically. The problem this study addresses is the absence of a sustained, integrated appraisal that holds these two forms of analysis together and applies them to the specific claim that gambling is a sustainable economic strategy.

Purpose and Objectives of the Study

The purpose of this study is to determine whether gambling can legitimately function as a means of wealth creation and as a sustainable economic strategy within a Christian ethical framework. Four objectives serve this purpose. The first is to clarify the operative concepts, distinguishing wealth acquisition from wealth creation, gambling from investment, and establishing working definitions of sustainable economic strategy and of biblical appraisal. The second is to analyse the economic structure of gambling with attention to probability, expected value, capital recovery and behavioural reinforcement. The third is to articulate the biblical-theological framework governing wealth and to apply it evaluatively to gambling. The fourth is to assess gambling against explicit criteria of sustainability and to derive recommendations for individuals, ecclesial communities, educators and policy makers.

Methodology

This study adopts a theoretical-analytical methodology executed through library-based document analysis. It is a conceptual and normative inquiry rather than an empirical one: it does not generate primary data through survey, interview or fieldwork, but analyses and

[7]Craig L. Blomberg, *Neither Poverty nor Riches: A Biblical Theology of Possessions* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 33–56.

synthesises existing scholarship and primary biblical texts in order to evaluate a normative claim.

Three categories of source material are employed. The first comprises economic and mathematical literature on the structure of gambling markets, including work on probability, expected value and casino economics. The second comprises behavioural and public-health scholarship, including peer-reviewed studies and the Lancet Public Health Commission on gambling, which supply evidence concerning reinforcement mechanisms and population-level harm. The third comprises the biblical text itself, read with the assistance of works in biblical theology and Christian economic ethics. Scriptural citations follow the English Standard Version unless otherwise indicated.

The analytical procedure has three movements. Concepts are first clarified so that the terms of the question are stable. Economic and theological analyses are then conducted separately, so that neither is permitted to pre-empt the findings of the other. These are finally brought into structured dialogue and tested against four explicit criteria of sustainability, from which the conclusion and recommendations are derived.

The study is delimited in three respects. It addresses commercial gambling, principally sports betting, lotteries and casino-style games, and does not treat every activity that involves uncertainty. It engages the Nigerian and wider African context as its primary field of application while drawing on international scholarship. It also acknowledges its principal limitation: because the study is conceptual rather than empirical, its claims about participant behaviour rest upon existing published evidence rather than upon data gathered by the researcher. Empirical verification within specific Nigerian populations remains a task for subsequent research.

Thesis and Organisation of the Study

This article argues that gambling cannot properly be classified as wealth creation, because it lacks productive output and depends structurally upon the probability of participant loss; and that when assessed against the biblical themes of stewardship, diligent labour, accountability and providence, it cannot be affirmed as a sustainable or morally coherent

economic strategy. This is the claim the study sets out to establish; the evidence for it is presented in the sections that follow.

The argument proceeds in five stages. The section following this introduction undertakes the conceptual clarifications on which the analysis depends, defining gambling, wealth creation, sustainable economic strategy and biblical appraisal, and distinguishing gambling from investment. The third section provides an economic analysis of gambling, examining its probability structure, its redistributive character, the question of capital recovery, its behavioural mechanisms and its socio-economic consequences. The fourth section develops the biblical and theological-ethical evaluation, setting out the scriptural framework for wealth and applying it to gambling while considering the principal objections to the argument advanced here. The fifth section assesses gambling against four criteria of sustainability. The sixth section offers recommendations, and the study closes with a conclusion that summarises the findings and identifies avenues for further research.

CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATIONS

A meaningful evaluation of gambling as a potential means of wealth creation requires conceptual precision. Much of the contemporary confusion surrounding gambling arises from the failure to distinguish between wealth acquisition and wealth creation, and between speculative gaming and productive investment. Without such distinctions, isolated financial gains may readily be mistaken for genuine economic productivity. Four terms therefore require definition before the analysis proper can begin, after which the relation between gambling and investment can be specified.

Defining Gambling

The Committee on the Social and Economic Impact of Pathological Gambling observes that the word “gambling” historically referred to playing unfairly or cheating at play, and that in modern usage it denotes the wagering of money or other belongings on activities or events with random or uncertain outcomes. On this account, gambling implies an act by

which the participant pursues monetary gain without the exercise of skill.[8] William N. Thompson similarly describes gambling as the staking of money or material value on an event whose outcome is determined wholly or substantially by chance, with the expectation of obtaining a greater return.[9]

Three elements are central to these definitions and will be used throughout this study: consideration, meaning the stake placed at risk; chance, meaning an outcome determined substantially by factors outside the participant's control; and prize, meaning the anticipated reward. Where all three are present, the activity is gambling in the sense examined here. Where one is absent, the analysis that follows does not directly apply.

Contemporary scholarship emphasises that gambling is not merely entertainment but a structured industry designed to generate profit through consumer losses.[10] Newall and Weiss-Cohen state the point precisely: gambling does not create new wealth but redistributes the money wagered, and is therefore properly described as a zero-sum activity.[11] This structural feature is decisive for the present inquiry. In mathematical terms, most gambling systems carry a negative expected value for the participant, which means that over repeated play the average player is statistically positioned to lose more than is gained. Individual wins are entirely possible, but they are episodic and exceptional rather than normative. The system is designed to secure long-term profitability for the operator rather than for the participant, and participation therefore constitutes the voluntary and deliberate assumption of a risk carrying a negative expected value.[12]

Defining Wealth Creation

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[8]Committee on the Social and Economic Impact of Pathological Gambling, "Gambling Concepts and Nomenclature," in *Pathological Gambling: A Critical Review* (Washington, DC: National Academy Press, 1999), 16.
[9]William N. Thompson, *Gambling in America: An Encyclopedia of History, Issues, and Society*, 2nd ed. (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2015), 141–42.
[10]Wardle et al., "Lancet Public Health Commission," e950.
[11]P. W. S. Newall and L. Weiss-Cohen, "The Gamblification of Investing: How a New Generation of Investors Is Being Born to Lose," *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 19, no. 9 (2022): 2.
[12]Committee on the Social and Economic Impact of Pathological Gambling, "Gambling Concepts and Nomenclature," 16.

Wealth creation refers to the generation of new economic value through productive activities. It occurs when labour, capital, innovation or enterprise produces goods, delivers services or enhances the value of existing resources.[13] Wealth in this sense is not merely transferred from one party to another; it is enlarged through processes that increase overall economic capacity.

From an economic standpoint, authentic wealth creation is marked by three features: productivity, value addition and durability. Investment in agriculture, manufacturing, technology, education or entrepreneurship enlarges the stock of societal resources. Such activity generates employment, fosters innovation and produces benefits extending beyond the immediate gains of individual actors.[14] Wealth creation is therefore both personal and social in its implications, and any account of it that attends only to individual balances has already missed something essential.

This is the criterion against which gambling must be measured. The question is not whether a participant's account balance can rise, but whether the activity that raised it added anything to the stock of goods, services or capital available to the community.

Defining Sustainable Economic Strategy

The term sustainable is used in this study in a sense continuous with its established meaning in development literature, where sustainability denotes the capacity to meet present needs without compromising the ability to meet future needs.[15] Applied to an economic strategy at the level of the individual and household, sustainability requires more than the possibility of occasional gain.

A sustainable economic strategy, as the term is employed here, satisfies four conditions. It must be *repeatable*, in that continued application over time produces cumulative rather than diminishing returns. It must be *productive*, in that it contributes to the generation of

[13]Zhikang Rong, "Wealth Creation and Its Externalities: Evaluating Economic Growth and Corporate Social Responsibility," *International Journal of Economics, Business and Management Research* 8 (2024): 44.
[14]Deirdre Nansen McCloskey, *Bourgeois Dignity: Why Economics Can't Explain the Modern World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 24.
[15]World Commission on Environment and Development, *Our Common Future* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 43.

goods, services or capital rather than merely relocating existing resources. It must be *socially bearable*, in that its generalisation across a population would not systematically impoverish that population. And it must be *morally coherent*, in that it can be sustained without contradiction of the ethical commitments of the one who practises it.

These four conditions correspond to the four criteria of assessment applied in the fifth section of this study: economic, behavioural, social and theological sustainability. Defining the term at this point rather than assuming it ensures that the later assessment tests a specified standard rather than an intuition.

Defining Biblical Appraisal

Biblical appraisal, as employed in this study, denotes the evaluation of a contemporary practice by the normative patterns and principles disclosed in the canonical Scriptures, read as a coherent theological witness. It is neither the citation of isolated verses in support of a position already held, nor the demand that Scripture address a modern practice in modern terms.

Three commitments govern the appraisal offered here. The first is canonical breadth: the argument draws upon the creation mandate, the wisdom literature, the prophetic tradition, the teaching of Jesus and the apostolic letters, rather than upon a single text or genre. The second is attention to normative pattern rather than proof-text: because gambling in its modern commercial form is not named in Scripture, the appraisal proceeds by identifying the consistent scriptural pattern governing the acquisition and management of wealth and asking whether gambling coheres with it. The third is theological rather than merely moralistic reasoning: the question is not simply whether gambling is permitted or forbidden, but how it relates to the doctrines of creation, providence, stewardship and vocation, within which Scripture situates economic life.

This method carries a corresponding responsibility. Where a plausible scriptural objection can be raised against the argument, as in the case of the casting of lots, it must be addressed directly rather than passed over. That objection is treated in the fourth section below.

Gambling and Investment: A Necessary Distinction

Because both gambling and investment involve risk, the two are frequently equated. The comparison is superficially plausible and fundamentally misleading. Although investment entails uncertainty, it is ordinarily directed toward productive enterprise: capital committed to businesses, infrastructure or financial markets supports economic activity capable of generating real value over time.[16] Gambling, by contrast, involves risk detached from productive output, and its returns depend not upon value creation but upon probabilistic transfer.

Sound investment commits capital to assets possessing underlying economic value, informed by fundamental analysis, market conditions and long-term growth prospects. Gambling commits capital to uncertain events whose outcomes are governed primarily by chance, even where skill plays a secondary role in particular forms.[17] The distinction may be stated succinctly: investment participates in the creation of wealth, whereas gambling reallocates wealth that already exists.

Three further differences reinforce the distinction. Investment ordinarily retains a recoverable underlying asset, whereas a lost stake is simply extinguished. Investment operates within a positive-sum framework in which aggregate returns can exceed aggregate inputs, whereas commercial gambling operates within a framework in which aggregate participant returns are structurally less than aggregate stakes. And investment rewards analysis and information, whereas gambling systems are designed so that no accessible quantity of information overturns the operator's built-in advantage.

This distinction matters especially in an era when speculative activities are marketed in the vocabulary of investment. The language of financial empowerment can obscure the underlying reality that gambling lacks the productive foundation necessary for sustainable wealth generation, and the growing convergence of betting platforms with trading applications makes the confusion easier to sustain.

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[16]Chima Pantaleon Odom and Sebastian O. Uremadu, "Capital Markets Financing and Economic Growth of Nigeria," *AKSU Journal of Administration and Corporate Governance* 5 (2025): 120.
[17]Jennifer N. Arthur, Robert J. Williams and Paul H. Delfabbro, "The Conceptual and Empirical Relationship Between Gambling, Investing, and Speculation," *Journal of Behavioral Addictions* 5, no. 4 (2016): 580.

The Analytical Framework Emerging from These Clarifications

These definitions establish the framework within which the remainder of the study proceeds. If wealth creation necessarily involves productive value generation, then the question to be put to gambling is whether it enlarges economic capacity or merely redistributes existing resources. If a sustainable economic strategy must be repeatable, productive, socially bearable and morally coherent, then these four conditions supply the criteria against which gambling is to be tested. And if biblical appraisal proceeds by normative pattern rather than proof-text, then the theological task is to identify the scriptural pattern governing wealth and to ask how gambling stands in relation to it.

The central issue is accordingly not whether gambling can produce occasional winners, which is not in dispute, but whether its underlying structure is capable of generating sustainable, productive and ethically defensible wealth. The sections that follow examine that structure. Judgment on the question is deferred until the evidence has been presented.

ECONOMIC ANALYSIS OF GAMBLING

A proper evaluation of gambling as a potential means of wealth creation must rest upon its economic structure. If gambling is to be considered a viable strategy for financial advancement, it must demonstrate the capacity to generate value in a manner that is productive, repeatable and beneficial to participants over time. This section examines the mathematical foundations, structural dynamics, capital implications, behavioural mechanisms and socio-economic consequences of gambling in order to determine whether it satisfies these requirements.

Probability, Chance and Expected Value

At the foundation of every gambling system lies probability theory. Unlike productive economic activity, in which outcomes are influenced by labour, innovation and managerial decision, gambling outcomes are governed by mathematically structured uncertainty. A

defining feature of most gambling systems is a built-in statistical advantage in favour of the operator, commonly termed the house edge.[18]

It is important to distinguish chance from risk, since the two are frequently conflated in popular discussion. Risk, in productive enterprise, attaches to an outcome that human effort, skill, information and management can materially influence: the farmer's harvest, the manufacturer's product line, the trader's inventory. Chance, in a properly constructed gambling system, attaches to an outcome deliberately insulated from such influence. The roulette wheel, the lottery draw and the randomised digital reel are engineered so that no accumulation of skill or information alters the underlying distribution. Where limited skill does operate, as in certain forms of sports wagering, the operator adjusts the odds so that the structural margin is preserved. The participant does not therefore manage risk in the productive sense; the participant purchases exposure to chance on terms fixed by another party.

Expected value provides the framework for evaluating this structure. In probabilistic terms, expected value represents the average outcome of repeated participation in a given system. In gambling environments this value is consistently negative for participants, because total expected returns are systematically lower than total stakes placed. Consequently, while individual players may experience occasional gains, long-term participation produces predictable aggregate loss. The mathematics is not concealed; it is simply not intuitive, and the gap between the two is precisely where the perception of gambling as a wealth strategy takes root.

This structural imbalance is not incidental but essential to the viability of the gambling industry. Without a persistent advantage over participants, gambling enterprises could not remain solvent. The system is thus designed so that profitability is secured for the operator rather than for the participants collectively. Any claim that gambling constitutes a wealth-creation strategy must therefore explain how a strategy can be sound when its expected return is negative by design.

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[18]Edward W. Packel, *The Mathematics of Games and Gambling*, 2nd ed. (Washington, DC: Mathematical Association of America, 2006), 24–25.

Redistribution Rather than Production

A central criterion for wealth creation is the generation of new value. Productive economic activity expands the stock of goods, services or capital within an economy. Gambling produces no such value. Financial gains realised by one participant are derived directly from the losses of others or from the probabilistic structure controlled by the operator.[19]

Gambling therefore functions as a redistributive system rather than a productive one. Unlike market exchanges capable of generating mutual benefit through value creation, gambling operates within a closed framework in which total gains and losses are bounded by probability and operational cost. The economic outcome is not the expansion of wealth but its reallocation, with a net transfer toward the operator.

The point may be sharpened by a thought experiment. If an entire community were to adopt farming as its economic strategy, the community would end the season with more food than it began with. If an entire community were to adopt betting as its economic strategy, the community would end the season with less money than it began with, the difference having been transferred to operators located, in many cases, outside the community altogether. A strategy that cannot be generalised without impoverishing those who generalise it is not a wealth-creation strategy in any meaningful sense. From this perspective, the claim that gambling constitutes a means of wealth creation is fundamentally problematic: it may facilitate wealth transfer for particular individuals, but it contributes nothing to the growth of economic capacity.

Payback Period and the Question of Recoverable Capital

Standard investment appraisal evaluates a proposed commitment of capital by, among other measures, its payback period: the length of time required for the cash inflows generated by an investment to recover the initial outlay. The measure is elementary, widely used by small enterprises precisely because it is intuitive, and instructive when applied to gambling.

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[19]Douglas M. Walker, *The Economics of Casino Gambling* (New York: Springer, 2007), 87, 94.

A trader who commits capital to stock, a farmer who purchases seed and fertiliser, and an artisan who acquires tools can each estimate a payback period, because each outlay is attached to an asset or process that generates a determinate stream of returns. The estimate may prove optimistic, and the enterprise may fail, but the calculation is meaningful because a mechanism of recovery exists. Applied to gambling, the calculation cannot be performed at all. A stake is not capital committed to a productive asset; it is consideration exchanged for exposure to an outcome. Where the wager loses, the outlay is not depreciated, amortised or written down against a residual asset. It is extinguished at the moment of settlement, and no stream of future inflows attaches to it.

The consequence is that gambling has, strictly speaking, no payback period. Because expected value is negative, the aggregate payback ratio across repeated participation tends below unity: the longer the participant continues, the further the recovery of outlay recedes rather than approaches. This inverts the logic of investment, in which time ordinarily works in favour of the committed capital. In gambling, time works against it, and does so with mathematical reliability.[20]

The point bears directly on the practical decisions of low-income participants, for whom the sums wagered are not surplus but working capital. A daily stake represents capital withdrawn from a trading enterprise, an apprenticeship fee, a school levy or a savings contribution, each of which possesses a calculable payback horizon. The wager possesses none. The opportunity cost of gambling is therefore not merely the money lost but the payback period foregone, and that is a cost the winning participant incurs no less than the losing one.[21]

Behavioural Reinforcement and Economic Decision-Making

The economic structure of gambling is reinforced by behavioural mechanisms that shape participant decision-making. Modern gambling environments are deliberately designed to sustain engagement through psychological reinforcement.[22] Features such as intermittent

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[20]Packel, *Mathematics of Games and Gambling*, 24–25; Walker, *Economics of Casino Gambling*, 87.
[21]Earl L. Grinols, *Gambling in America: Costs and Benefits* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 23.
[22]Schüll, *Addiction by Design*, 77.

rewards, rapid play cycles and near-miss outcomes contribute to the persistence of participation despite ongoing loss.[23]

Behavioural research indicates that such mechanisms exploit identifiable cognitive biases, including the overestimation of winning probabilities and the illusion of control.[24] These distortions lead participants to interpret random outcomes as evidence of skill or of impending success, thereby encouraging continued commitment of resources. Financial decisions within gambling contexts are consequently shaped less by rational evaluation of expected value than by psychologically induced perceptions of opportunity. The gambler who has narrowly missed a multi-leg accumulator does not experience a loss; the experience is closer to that of an almost-success, and it is engineered to be so.

This behavioural dimension carries an important economic implication. A system that depends upon misperception to sustain participation cannot be described as a rational strategy for wealth accumulation. Its persistence is evidence not of its viability but of the effectiveness of its design. The relevant question for economic appraisal is not why participants continue, which behavioural science answers adequately, but whether continuation serves their financial interest, which the mathematics answers in the negative.

Socio-Economic Implications

Beyond individual participation, gambling produces broader socio-economic consequences that further illuminate its economic character. Empirical research consistently associates gambling with financial instability, debt accumulation and the erosion of household resources.[25] These effects are disproportionately concentrated among economically vulnerable populations, thereby intensifying existing inequalities.

At the household level, gambling expenditure competes directly with essential financial obligations, reducing the capacity for savings, investment and long-term planning. At the societal level, resources allocated to gambling represent opportunity costs, being funds that

[23]Schüll, *Addiction by Design*, 95.
[24]Mark D. Griffiths, "The Cognitive Psychology of Gambling," *Journal of Gambling Studies* 6, no. 1 (1990): 31–42.
[25]Matthew Browne, Nerilee Greer, Vijay Rawat and Matthew Rockloff, "A Population-Level Metric for Gambling-Related Harm," *International Gambling Studies* 17, no. 2 (2017): 163–75.

might otherwise support productive economic activity such as education, entrepreneurship or capital formation.[26]

The Nigerian case illustrates the pattern with particular clarity. Betting participation in Nigeria is concentrated among young adults in precisely the demographic band that constitutes the country's productive labour force and its pool of prospective small-enterprise founders.[27] Daily stakes that appear individually modest aggregate, across millions of participants, into very substantial sums withdrawn from household consumption, informal savings associations and micro-enterprise capital. Two features of the Nigerian context deepen the concern. The first is that a significant proportion of operator revenue leaves the local economy, so that the redistribution is not merely from participant to participant within a community but from community to external operator. The second is that betting is widely framed, in advertising and in ordinary conversation, as a response to unemployment rather than as a leisure expenditure, which places it in direct competition with the very forms of enterprise that could address unemployment.

The normalisation of gambling as a financial strategy may also shape economic behaviour more broadly, encouraging short-term risk-taking over long-term value creation. Where a generation learns to associate financial advancement with the fortunate outcome rather than with accumulated productive effort, the consequences extend well beyond the balance sheets of individual households.

Interim Economic Assessment

Taken together, the mathematical structure, redistributive character, absence of recoverable capital, behavioural reinforcement mechanisms and socio-economic consequences of gambling converge upon a consistent finding. Gambling does not satisfy the criteria of wealth creation as defined by economic theory. It produces no goods or services, operates within probability structures that ensure aggregate loss, admits to no meaningful payback calculation, and is sustained through mechanisms that obscure its inherent disadvantage.

[26]Grinols, *Gambling in America*, 23.
[27]Folorunso, "Socio-Economic Implications of Sport Bet in Nigeria," 175.

While individual gains are possible, they occur within a system whose overall operation depends upon loss. On economic grounds alone, therefore, gambling is more accurately understood as a mechanism of wealth redistribution than as a means of wealth creation. Whether this economic finding is matched by a corresponding theological judgment is the question to which the study now turns.

BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL–ETHICAL EVALUATION OF GAMBLING

The evaluation of gambling cannot rest on economic analysis alone. Within the Christian tradition, wealth is not merely an economic reality but a theological one, shaped by divine ownership, human responsibility and moral accountability. Scripture consistently presents wealth within a framework integrating labour, stewardship, ethical formation and trust in divine providence. This section proceeds in two movements. It first sets out the biblical themes that constitute the normative framework, and then applies that framework evaluatively to gambling, addressing along the way the principal objections that may be raised against the argument.

Wealth and Diligent Labour

A foundational principle of biblical teaching is the connection between wealth and productive labour. From the creation mandate, human beings are entrusted with the responsibility of cultivating and managing the earth (Gen. 1:28; 2:15). Economic activity is therefore not incidental to human existence but integral to human vocation, and wealth is ordinarily mediated through disciplined engagement with productive work.

The wisdom literature reinforces this principle, associating diligence with provision and condemning idleness and hasty gain. Proverbs 10:4 affirms that a slack hand causes poverty while the hand of the diligent makes rich, and 2 Thessalonians 3:10 establishes the ethical expectation that the one unwilling to work should not eat. These texts do not merely commend labour as a practical necessity; they present it as the normative means through which material provision is realised.

The New Testament makes the point with particular force in Ephesians 4:28, where the thief is instructed to steal no longer but rather to labour, working with his own hands, so that he may have something to share with anyone in need. The text is instructive for the

present argument because it does not merely prohibit an illegitimate means of acquisition; it prescribes a legitimate one and identifies its purpose. Honest labour is commended not only because it is lawful but because it generates a surplus available for the good of others. Paul reasons similarly in 1 Thessalonians 4:11–12, urging believers to work with their hands so as to walk properly before outsiders and to be dependent on no one, and in Colossians 3:23–24, where ordinary work is framed as service rendered to the Lord. The implication is that wealth, within the biblical framework, is ordinarily the fruit of sustained and purposeful effort rather than of chance-based acquisition, and that practices promising gain detached from productive engagement stand in tension with this pattern.

Stewardship and Accountability

Closely related to the theme of labour is the doctrine of stewardship. Scripture consistently affirms that material resources belong ultimately to God and are entrusted to human beings for responsible management. The declaration that the earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof (Ps. 24:1) establishes divine ownership, while the Parable of the Talents (Matt. 25:14–30) emphasises accountability in the use of entrusted resources.

The parable repays closer attention, since it is sometimes invoked in defence of financial risk-taking. The servants who are commended did not wager the sums entrusted to them; they traded with them, which is to say they deployed capital in productive exchange and returned both the principal and a gain. The servant who is censured is censured precisely for taking no productive action at all. The parable therefore commends enterprise and condemns unproductive passivity; it says nothing in favour of committing entrusted resources to systems structured for the loss of the principal. Read carefully, it tells against the gambling analogy rather than for it.

Stewardship thus introduces a moral dimension into economic activity. Wealth is not merely possessed but managed under obligation to divine authority, and faithfulness rather than accumulation becomes the primary criterion of evaluation.[28] This framework requires that economic decisions be governed by prudence, intentionality and responsibility. Within

[28]David W. Jones and Russell S. Woodbridge, *Health, Wealth, and Happiness: How the Prosperity Gospel Overshadows the Gospel of Christ*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2017), 93–117.

it, the exposure of entrusted resources to systems characterised by structural and predictable loss raises significant ethical concern. If resources are entrusted for responsible use, participation in activities that lack productive purpose and carry a designed disadvantage must be scrutinised with particular care.

The Warning Against Hasty Riches

A recurring theme in biblical teaching is the warning against the pursuit of rapid or unearned wealth. Proverbs 13:11 states that wealth gained hastily will dwindle while the one who gathers little by little will increase it. Comparable cautions appear in Proverbs 20:21 and 28:20, where the desire for quick riches is associated with instability and moral compromise, and in Proverbs 28:22, where the one hastening after wealth does not know that poverty will come upon him.

These warnings reflect more than economic prudence; they address the moral and spiritual dangers of disordered acquisition. Wealth pursued without diligence or process is portrayed as inherently unstable and potentially corrupting. The biblical concern is therefore not only with the outcome of wealth accumulation but with the manner of its obtaining, and the two are treated as inseparable.

Gambling, as a system that promises significant gain without corresponding productive effort, corresponds closely to the pattern Scripture repeatedly cautions against. The appeal of rapid acquisition detached from disciplined labour stands in direct contrast to the biblical vision of gradual and responsible wealth formation. The contrast is not incidental to the marketing of betting products, which trade explicitly on the promise of transformation through a single fortunate outcome.

Contentment and Divine Providence

A further dimension of biblical teaching on wealth concerns the relation between material provision and divine providence. Scripture affirms that provision originates ultimately with God rather than with human manipulation of uncertain outcomes (Deut. 8:18; Matt. 6:25–34), and trust in divine care is presented as the proper foundation of economic security.

The New Testament further emphasises contentment as the governing disposition toward wealth. Philippians 4:11–13 portrays contentment as a learned posture independent of

material circumstance, while Hebrews 13:5 exhorts believers to be free from the love of money and to rest in God's abiding presence. This orientation does not negate responsible economic activity; it reorders its motivation, shifting the centre of gravity from anxious acquisition to faithful stewardship.

Reliance upon chance-based systems for financial advancement may accordingly be understood as a displacement of this trust. Rather than grounding provision in divine faithfulness and responsible effort, it locates security in probabilistic outcomes. This raises theological questions concerning the nature of faith, dependence and economic agency that the language of harmless recreation does not adequately address.

The Casting of Lots: A Necessary Distinction

An objection must be faced at this point, since Scripture itself records the use of lots. The land of Canaan was apportioned among the tribes by lot (Josh. 18:6–10), duties in the temple service were assigned by lot (1 Chron. 24:5), Proverbs affirms that the lot is cast into the lap but its every decision is from the Lord (Prov. 16:33), and the apostles cast lots in the selection of Matthias (Acts 1:26). If Scripture employs the lot, it may be asked, on what basis can chance-based practice be criticised?

The objection dissolves once the three constitutive elements of gambling identified earlier are applied. In none of these passages is consideration staked: no participant places property at risk of forfeiture. In none is a prize won: the outcome allocates responsibility, inheritance or office rather than transferring wealth from a loser to a winner. And in none is there a house: no third party structures the procedure so as to extract a margin from repeated use. The biblical lot is not a wager but a mode of discernment, employed in matters where human judgment was held to be insufficient and the decision was referred to divine determination.

The theological orientation of the practice runs, moreover, in precisely the opposite direction to that of gambling. The lot in Scripture is an act of submission to divine sovereignty in the allocation of duty; the wager is an attempt to secure private advantage through an outcome deliberately withheld from divine or human ordering and priced by a commercial operator. It is also worth noting that the practice recedes in the New Testament

after Pentecost, the selection of Matthias being the final instance recorded, as the church comes to be guided by the Spirit and by deliberative discernment. Whatever else may be concluded from these texts, they do not supply a warrant for commercial wagering.

Risk, Prudence and Faithful Stewardship

With the framework established, the evaluative application may proceed. The stewardship framework requires prudence and responsibility in the assumption of risk, but it does not require the avoidance of risk as such. Scripture does not condemn economic risk-taking; productive enterprise ordinarily involves uncertainty, and the merchant of Proverbs 31 and the trading servants of Matthew 25 both accept it. Productive risk, however, differs fundamentally from gambling risk. In productive investment, uncertainty is bound to value creation, innovation or service provision, and the resources committed remain attached to an enterprise capable of yielding return. Gambling exposes resources to systems structured for aggregate participant loss without corresponding productive contribution.[29]

The ethical concern is therefore not that gambling involves risk but that it involves risk severed from constructive economic purpose. If stewardship demands the faithful and prudent management of resources held in trust, then participation in systems that are statistically disadvantageous by design raises serious questions about responsible economic agency. The steward is not forbidden to venture; the steward is required to venture toward something.

Justice, Redistribution and the Love of Neighbour

Biblical ethics consistently evaluates economic behaviour in the light of justice and communal responsibility. Wealth acquisition is never treated as a purely private matter; it carries social implications affecting the well-being of others (Mic. 6:8; Jas. 5:1–5). Christian moral teaching therefore requires that economic practices be examined not only for profitability but for their effect upon persons and communities.

[29]Paul Bickley, Madeleine Pennington and George Lapshynov, *A Theology of Investment* (London: Theos, 2026), 34–35.

Gambling systems operate through redistribution rather than production. Gains enjoyed by some participants depend upon the losses of others, while institutional operators secure profit through structural advantage.[30] This dynamic acquires ethical significance when set alongside evidence that gambling disproportionately affects economically vulnerable populations.[31] In many contexts, those least able to sustain financial loss are the most heavily targeted participants within gambling markets, a pattern visible in the concentration of betting outlets in low-income urban districts and in the marketing of betting products through channels with the widest youth reach.

Such realities raise pointed questions concerning justice and neighbour-love. The prophetic tradition reserves particular severity for economic arrangements that transfer resources from the poor to the powerful under forms that are technically lawful (Amos 5:11; Mic. 2:1–2). Economic systems that derive profit from patterns of financial vulnerability stand in tension with the biblical mandate to protect rather than exploit the vulnerable. While participation in gambling is formally voluntary, the structural dependence of the industry upon participant loss complicates any attempt to characterise it as ethically neutral.

Desire, Character and Moral Formation

Christian ethics attends not only to external conduct but to the formation of character and desire. Scripture repeatedly warns against disordered attachment to wealth and the pursuit of riches as an end in itself (1 Tim. 6:6–10; Luke 12:15). Economic practices are therefore evaluated in part by the dispositions they cultivate in individuals and communities.

Schüll's analysis of machine gambling demonstrates how rapid and repetitive wagering systems cultivate compulsive behavioural patterns and dependency-forming reward cycles within technologically engineered environments.[32] Rather than fostering disciplined stewardship and contentment, gambling reinforces the expectation of sudden wealth through minimal labour, and in a significant proportion of cases issues in addiction.

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[30]Walker, *Economics of Casino Gambling*, 20.
[31]Heather Wardle et al., "Gambling and Public Health: We Need Policy Action to Prevent Harm," *BMJ* 365 (2019): l1807, 2.
[32]Schüll, *Addiction by Design*, 15–21.

This concern is especially pressing within contemporary gambling culture, where advertising and digital gaming environments present betting as a pathway to success, freedom or economic escape. The issue is thus not merely financial but formative. Practices that cultivate an excessive desire for rapid gain shape the moral imagination in ways inconsistent with the biblical vision of diligence, restraint and faithful stewardship. What is at stake is not only what a person possesses but what a person becomes.

Faith, Providence and Moral Agency

A further ethical concern involves the relation between human effort and trust in divine providence. Biblical teaching affirms that material provision derives ultimately from God even as human beings are called to responsible labour and wise management (Deut. 8:18; Matt. 6:25–34). Christian faith neither rejects economic effort nor endorses passive dependence; it situates economic activity within trust in God's sustaining care.

Within this framework, reliance upon gambling for financial advancement may be interpreted as a form of economic presumption. Instead of grounding provision in disciplined labour, stewardship and providential trust, it places hope in uncertain probabilistic outcomes.[33] This is not to claim that every participant consciously rejects divine providence, which would be both uncharitable and unverifiable. It is to observe that gambling embodies a model of acquisition detached from the ordinary biblical pattern of productive effort and responsible management.

The question, therefore, is not merely whether gambling can produce occasional gain but whether its structure and orientation cohere with a theological vision of faithful economic life. The evidence indicates considerable tension between the two.

Anticipated Objections

Three further objections merit direct response. The first holds that gambling is harmless recreation, comparable to any other discretionary expenditure, and that moderate participation with predetermined limits is ethically unproblematic. The response is twofold. A distinction must indeed be granted between the person who purchases an evening's

[33]Arthur, Williams and Delfabbro, "Conceptual and Empirical Relationship," 580–81.

entertainment with a fixed and affordable sum and the person who wagers rent money in pursuit of income; the former is not the subject of this study, which examines gambling as a claimed strategy of wealth creation. Yet even the recreational framing is complicated by the fact that industry revenue is disproportionately derived from heavily engaged participants, which means that recreational play is subsidised by, and helps sustain the market for, harmful play.

The second objection observes that gambling generates tax revenue, employment and sponsorship for sport, and that these public goods offset private losses. The response is that such benefits are real but are financed entirely by participant losses, and that the incidence of those losses falls disproportionately on lower-income households. A revenue stream drawn regressively from the vulnerable and returned selectively as public expenditure is difficult to defend as a model of just economic organisation, and the employment created must be weighed against the productive employment displaced by the diversion of household capital.

The third objection contends that all economic activity involves chance, that farming depends upon rainfall and trade upon market conditions, and that the distinction drawn in this study is therefore arbitrary. The response returns to the analysis offered earlier. The farmer's exposure to weather is incidental to an activity that produces food; the gambler's exposure to chance is constitutive of an activity that produces nothing. The distinction is not between certainty and uncertainty but between uncertainty attached to production and uncertainty manufactured for transfer.

Integrative Theological–Ethical Assessment

When economic analysis and biblical theology are brought into conversation, a consistent ethical judgment emerges. Economically, gambling operates as a redistributive system characterised by structural participant disadvantage rather than productive value generation. Theologically, it stands in tension with the principles of stewardship, disciplined labour, moral accountability and trust in divine providence, and the objections commonly raised against this judgment do not, on examination, overturn it.

This assessment does not depend upon isolated instances of success or failure but upon the character of the system itself. The possibility of individual gain does not alter the structural reality that gambling depends upon aggregate loss and non-productive transfer. Consequently, gambling cannot readily be reconciled with a Christian ethical framework grounded in responsible stewardship and sustainable economic practice.

Rather than functioning as a legitimate strategy for wealth creation, gambling appears more accurately as a system that promises financial advancement while structurally undermining the conditions necessary for sustainable and ethically grounded economic flourishing.

SUSTAINABILITY ASSESSMENT AND VIABLE STRATEGY

The central question guiding this study is whether gambling can function as a sustainable means of wealth creation. Sustainability, as defined in the second section, requires that a strategy be repeatable, productive, socially bearable and morally coherent. These conditions are tested here under four corresponding headings: economic, behavioural, social and theological sustainability.

Economic Sustainability

A sustainable economic practice must possess the capacity to generate value consistently over time. Productive enterprise achieves this by creating goods, services or capital that expand economic capacity. Gambling operates instead within a structure of negative expected value in which participant loss is mathematically embedded.[34]

While some individuals experience temporary gains, such outcomes do not alter the structure of the system, which depends upon aggregate participant loss for institutional profitability. A practice organised around redistributive transfer rather than productive output cannot function as a stable mechanism for long-term wealth creation. The absence of any meaningful payback period reinforces the conclusion: capital committed to gambling is not deployed but expended, and repetition compounds the deficit rather than recovering it. Gambling therefore fails the tests of repeatability and productivity.

[34]Packel, *Mathematics of Games and Gambling*, 24–25.

Behavioural Sustainability

The sustainability of gambling participation is further weakened by the behavioural mechanisms upon which it depends. Contemporary gambling systems employ reinforcement structures that encourage repeated participation despite recurring loss. Near-miss effects, intermittent rewards and the illusion of control sustain engagement even where rational economic calculation would counsel withdrawal.[35]

These mechanisms sustain not economic viability but the perception of attainable financial success. Gambling thus operates through behavioural reinforcement rather than productive capacity. A financial strategy dependent upon cognitive distortion and probabilistic misunderstanding cannot reasonably be regarded as stable or rational, since its continuation requires that the participant not accurately perceive its terms.

Social Sustainability

The broader social implications of gambling further challenge its legitimacy as a sustainable practice. Empirical studies consistently associate excessive gambling with indebtedness, financial instability, family disruption and psychological distress.[36] These effects are concentrated among economically vulnerable populations, intensifying existing social inequalities.

Resources directed toward gambling also represent opportunity costs that might otherwise support productive investment, savings, education or entrepreneurship. In contexts such as Nigeria, where access to formal capital is limited and informal savings associations perform a critical developmental function, the diversion of household resources into wagering carries a developmental cost that extends well beyond the individual participant.

The decisive test of social sustainability is generalisability. A practice qualifies as socially sustainable only if its adoption across a population leaves that population no worse off. Because commercial gambling is structurally negative-sum for participants as a class, universal adoption would necessarily impoverish the participating population while

[35]Schüll, *Addiction by Design*, 95, 104, 108.
[36]Browne et al., "Population-Level Metric," 163–75.

enriching operators. Gambling therefore fails the test of social bearability by construction rather than by accident.

Theological Sustainability

From a theological standpoint, sustainability involves alignment with the moral and spiritual purposes of economic life. Biblical teaching presents wealth as bound to stewardship, disciplined labour, contentment and trust in divine providence.[37] Gambling stands in tension with these principles because it seeks financial gain through chance-based acquisition rather than productive participation and responsible management.

The issue is not merely whether gambling produces occasional winners but whether it reflects a morally coherent approach to economic life. A practice rooted in probabilistic loss, rapid acquisition and speculative dependence does not harmonise with the biblical vision of faithful stewardship and sustainable provision. Gambling accordingly fails the test of moral coherence, completing the assessment.

Summary of Assessment

Evaluated economically, behaviourally, socially and theologically, gambling does not satisfy the criteria of a sustainable wealth-creation strategy. Its economic structure is redistributive rather than productive; its persistence is sustained through reinforcement mechanisms rather than rational viability; its social effects undermine financial stability and cannot be generalised without aggregate loss; and its underlying orientation conflicts with biblical principles of stewardship and responsible economic life.

Gambling is therefore best understood not as a viable means of wealth creation but as an economic illusion sustained by probabilistic misunderstanding and behavioural reinforcement. The remaining question is practical: if gambling is not the answer to the economic aspiration it exploits, what is? The recommendations that follow address that question.

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[37]Blomberg, *Neither Poverty nor Riches*, 33–56.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The argument of this study is not merely prohibitive. A critique of gambling that offers nothing in its place addresses the symptom while ignoring the aspiration that gambling exploits, which is the entirely legitimate desire of ordinary people to improve their material condition. The recommendations that follow are therefore framed positively, around the alternative that Scripture and economic analysis jointly commend: productive labour that yields wages, salaries and enterprise income.

For Individuals and Households

Participants should be encouraged to compare, in concrete terms, the return profile of wagering with that of wage-earning labour, vocational skill acquisition and small enterprise. A daily stake of a modest amount, redirected over a year into a savings association, a vocational apprenticeship or trading stock, produces a determinate and calculable outcome; the same amount wagered produces, by mathematical expectation, a net loss. The comparison should be made in the household's own figures rather than in the abstract, since abstraction is precisely what allows the disadvantage to remain invisible.

Households should further be encouraged to recognise that wages and salaries, though often modest and frequently disparaged in a culture that celebrates sudden acquisition, possess three properties that winnings lack: they are predictable, they are repeatable, and they accumulate. These properties, and not the size of any single payment, are what make wealth formation possible over a working life.

For the Church and for Pastoral and Chaplaincy Ministry

Congregational teaching should address wealth, labour and contentment systematically rather than only reactively when a case of gambling harm becomes visible. A theology of vocation that dignifies ordinary work, and a theology of contentment that resists the equation of worth with wealth, together remove much of the ground in which the appeal of betting takes root.

Pastoral and chaplaincy practice should also distinguish carefully between moral instruction and pastoral care of those already experiencing gambling harm. Persons presenting with betting-related debt, family disruption or compulsive participation require

the same pastoral care extended to other forms of dependency, including referral to competent professional support where indicated. Condemnation without care will drive the problem out of sight rather than out of existence. Churches with the necessary capacity might also consider practical alternatives within their own communities, such as vocational training, cooperative savings schemes and small-enterprise mentoring, which address the economic conditions that make betting attractive.

For Christian Educators and Institutions

Christian schools, colleges and universities should incorporate financial literacy, including the elementary mathematics of probability and expected value, into curricula and student-life programmes. Much of the appeal of betting rests upon a misunderstanding that a single well-taught lesson can correct, and institutions serving young adults are positioned to deliver it at exactly the point of greatest exposure. Where institutions maintain chaplaincy structures, these should be integrated with student financial counselling rather than operating separately from it.

For Policy Makers and Regulators

Regulatory attention should be directed to advertising volume and content, particularly advertising that presents betting as a route out of unemployment; to the enforcement of minimum-age requirements and identity verification; and to the availability of treatment and support services for gambling harm. Given the concentration of participation among the young and the economically vulnerable, regulation framed primarily around revenue generation is inadequate to the public-health dimension of the activity. Faith communities have a legitimate contribution to make to this policy conversation and should make it on evidential as well as theological grounds.

For Further Research

Three lines of further inquiry are commended. The first is empirical study of betting participation and its household effects within specific Nigerian and West African populations, which would supply the local evidential base this conceptual study has drawn from international literature. The second is theological engagement with the convergence of betting, gamified investment platforms and speculative trading, where the boundary

between wagering and investing is increasingly indistinct. The third is evaluation of church-based interventions, so that the pastoral recommendations offered here may be tested rather than merely proposed.

CONCLUSION

This study has examined whether gambling can legitimately function as a means of wealth creation and as a sustainable economic strategy within the combined framework of economic analysis and biblical theology. The findings indicate that it cannot. Economically, gambling operates as a system of probabilistic loss characterised by negative expected value and redistributive transfer rather than genuine value creation. While isolated participants experience temporary gain, the structure of gambling depends upon aggregate participant loss and institutional advantage, and the absence of any recoverable capital or determinate payback period distinguishes it decisively from investment.

The study has further shown that modern gambling systems are reinforced through behavioural mechanisms that obscure statistical disadvantage and encourage continued participation despite recurring loss. Such mechanisms sustain the perception of attainable prosperity while masking the structural realities of the system. Gambling therefore functions less as a rational economic strategy than as an economic illusion sustained by probabilistic misunderstanding and psychological reinforcement.

From a biblical perspective, wealth is consistently framed within the categories of stewardship, diligence, accountability and trust in divine providence. Scripture presents productive labour and responsible management as the normative means through which material provision is ordinarily realised, and warnings against hasty riches and disordered desire challenge systems promising rapid gain without corresponding productive contribution. The scriptural use of the lot, examined above, offers no warrant to the contrary, since it involves neither stake, nor prize, nor operator margin. Within this theological framework, gambling stands in significant tension with the ethical principles governing Christian economic life.

The integrative analysis therefore leads to a clear conclusion: gambling cannot be affirmed as a morally coherent or economically sustainable strategy for wealth creation within a Christian ethical framework. Its dependence on probability and chance, its redistributive structure, its behavioural reinforcement mechanisms and its speculative orientation together undermine the conditions necessary for responsible stewardship and long-term economic flourishing.

The implications extend beyond individual participation. For Christian ethics, the study supplies a criterion for distinguishing productive risk from speculative acquisition that is applicable well beyond gambling itself. For ecclesial and educational practice, it grounds a positive case for the dignity of wage-earning labour and productive enterprise, which is the constructive counterpart to any critique of betting. For public policy in rapidly expanding gambling markets, it supports regulatory attention to advertising, youth exposure and consumer protection. Future research may usefully explore emerging forms of digital gambling, speculative financial systems and gamified investment platforms that increasingly blur the boundary between entertainment, risk and economic participation.

Ultimately, sustainable wealth within the biblical vision is grounded not in chance-based acquisition but in disciplined stewardship, productive engagement and trust in divine providence.

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CHAPTER 26

BUSINESS LEADERSHIP, BIBLE PRINCIPLES AND SELECTED ECONOMIC EQUATIONS

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Abstract
The interplay among business leadership, principles of the Bible and selected economic equations focuses on the consonance between ethical governance and organizational performance. Many employers of labor lean on their religious practices to streamline their leadership behavior. However, business literature is scarce in this area of study. This study develops a conceptual relationship integrating faith in the word of God, the functional expressions of selected economic equations, and Christian leadership in the pursuit of value-driven business. Stewardship theory presents leaders as stewards entrusted with organizational resources and responsible for managing them toward the goals of the firm. The study adopts a theoretical-analytical method that integrates biblical principles, selected economic equations, and stewardship theory. Biblical texts dealing with stewardship, justice, contentment, honest measures, service, and accountability are read thematically alongside economic relationships concerning demand, supply, production, profit, cost-benefit analysis, and resource allocation. Stewardship theory provides the leadership categories through which the two bodies of material are brought into dialogue. The conceptual synthesis suggests that the Bible affirms diligence and legitimate profit, but places them within the moral boundaries of ethics, justice, accountability, and stewardship. It therefore challenges an economic survival-of-the-fittest approach in which the stronger can exploit the weak. The study argues that business leadership should not become a mere manipulation of economic relationships for the enrichment of the well-to-do at the expense of the less privileged.

***Keywords**: Business leadership; Biblical principles; Stewardship; Economic equations.*

INTRODUCTION

Business leadership has evolved from a focus on profit maximization toward an emphasis on value creation and stewardship in response to ethical responsibility and globalization

pressures. [1,2,3] Contemporary scholarship finds business leadership as a process involving technological change, strategic vision and enabling organizations to achieve human capital development and organizational performance outcomes.[4] In their work, Oyedotun & Makoni found that many organizations are subsuming leadership under stewardship theory.[5] This assertion finds the tension that exists between selfishness and selflessness within an organization. Consequently, in organizations where people are not financially excluded and there is fair development, empirical literature affirms that stewardship leadership behaviors in such organizations encourage sustainable organizational performance, allows creativity and increases organizational standard. [6,7] It is therefore extremely critical that business leadership ensures that the organization experiences effectiveness and efficiency. This will not only lead to the progress of the organization but ensure that there is sustainable economic inclusion. [8,9]

Anciently, religion and economics reveal functional relationships. [10] In contemporary times, the distance between religion and the economy has widened. This study is an attempt

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[1] Jennifer Joseph, John E. Katsos, and Harry J. Van Buren III, "Entrepreneurship and Peacebuilding: A Review and Synthesis," *Business & Society* 62, no. 2 (2023): 322–362, https://doi.org/10.1177/00076503221084638.

[2] Chafifa Aulia Keleng, Andi Indriani Ibrahim, Syahbudin Adam, Nadya Mulia Supu, Nina Pamoras, Fadilah, and Sri Ferni Rahmawati, "A Literature Review: Entrepreneurial Leadership in Indonesia," *International Journal of Health, Economics, and Social Sciences* 7, no. 4 (2025): 2021–2033, https://doi.org/10.56338/ijhess.v7i4.7025

[3] Siti Nur Khikmah, Abdul Rohman, and Indira Januarti, "The Role of Internal Audit and Leadership Style in Increase of Fraud Prevention: A Stewardship Theory Perspective," *Corporate & Business Strategy Review* 4, no. 4 (2023): 271–278, https://doi.org/10.22495/cbsrv4i4siart8.

[4] Siti Nur Khikmah, Abdul Rohman, and Indira Januarti, "The Role of Internal Audit and Leadership Style in Increase of Fraud Prevention: A Stewardship Theory Perspective," 271–278.

[5] Isaac Kayode Oyedotun and Patricia L. Makoni, "Nexus between Financial Technology and Financial Inclusion in Sub-Saharan Africa: A Dynamic Panel Technique," *SAGE Open* 16, no. 1 (2026): 1–17, https://doi.org/10.1177/21582440251407742.

[6] Ahmed Tajer, Omar Araban, Hassan Essabbar, and Said Mohamed Rigar, "The Governance of the Family Business from the Perspective of Agency and Stewardship Theory," *Revue du Contrôle de la Comptabilité et de l'Audit* 6, no. 2 (2022): 178–204.

[7] Jamal Bake, Arifin Utha, Nurwati, Bakti, and Jopang, "Towards Rural Economic Growth: The Role of Human Resources in Promoting Knowledge Acquisition and Innovation in Village-Owned Enterprises," *SAGE Open* 16, no. 1 (2026): 1–13, https://doi.org/10.1177/21582440251414455.

[8] Sarah Daly and Mohamed Belkhamsa, "Unveiling the Path to Sustainability in Africa: Insights from Education, Resource Management, and Economic Complexity," *SAGE Open* 16, no. 1 (2026): 1–22, https://doi.org/10.1177/21582440251409119.

[9] *Proceedings of the 20th Annual International & Interdisciplinary Conference: Development in Turbulent Times* (Shkodër, Albania: University Luigj Gurakuqi Shkodër, 2025).

[10] Shalini Raghavan, "Goal Setting for Family Firm Owners: An Agency–Stewardship Perspective," *Corporate Ownership & Control* 21, no. 2 (2024): 8–16, https://doi.org/10.22495/cocv21i2art1.

to close the gap, by conjecturing functional relationships between biblical principles and economic equations, mediated by business leadership. Conceptualizing economics from the point of view of Bible doctrines, values such as accountability, equity, welfare, stewardship, appear. These values ground the business leaders' blueprint for making moral business decisions.[11] Economic models that focus only on gain and profit, do not gain ascendancy on demand, and supply driven market. Rather, it overlooks the dignity of human beings.[12] The market may consider human beings as wares to be bought by the highest bidder. The outlook of this study is normative. That is what should be. Hence, Bible doctrines constrain profit motives, supply war, and scale preference to reflect values that can be sustainable. [13,14] This is an interdisciplinary study that allows business leaders to scale morality first and before the business balance sheets. This is possible by holding economic activities, Bible principles, and business leadership in alignment.[15]

The concentration of contemporary business leadership on ethics is noticeable. But biblical values embedded in stewardship behaviors, are more sustainable and long-term in aid to appreciable organizational performance. [16,17] The growing separation between economic decision-making and stewardship principles has contributed to moral economy challenges such as institutional failures inequity, governance failures, and the inability to sustain profits. [18,19] Existing economic models and equations tend to prioritize the optimization of economic efficiency, without sufficient consideration of morality, stewardship, honest

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[11] Philippe Guillaume, "Bible Economics: A Review Article," *Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament* 38, no. 1 (2024): 194–214, https://doi.org/10.1080/09018328.2024.2322256.

[12] Chafifa Aulia Keleng, Andi Indriani Ibrahim, Syahbudin Adam, Nadya Mulia Supu, Nina Pamoras, Fadilah, and Sri Ferni Rahmawati, "A Literature Review: Entrepreneurial Leadership in Indonesia," 2021–2033,

[13] Isaac Kayode Oyedotun and Patricia L. Makoni, "Nexus between Financial Technology and Financial Inclusion in Sub-Saharan Africa: A Dynamic Panel Technique," *SAGE Open* 16, no. 1 (2026): 1–17, https://doi.org/10.1177/21582440251407742.

[14] Ahmed Tajer, Omar Araban, Hassan Essabbar, and Said Mohamed Rigar, "The Governance of the Family Business from the Perspective of Agency and Stewardship Theory," 178–204.

[15] Jamal Bake, Arifin Utha, Nurwati, Bakti, and Jopang, "Towards Rural Economic Growth: The Role of Human Resources in Promoting Knowledge Acquisition and Innovation in Village-Owned Enterprises," 1–13,

[16] Shalini Raghavan, "Goal Setting for Family Firm Owners: An Agency–Stewardship Perspective," 8–16.

[17] Siti Nur Khikmah, Abdul Rohman, and Indira Januarti, "The Role of Internal Audit and Leadership Style in Increase of Fraud Prevention: A Stewardship Theory Perspective," 271–278.

[18] Shalini Raghavan, "Goal Setting for Family Firm Owners: An Agency–Stewardship Perspective."

[19] Jamal Bake, Arifin Utha, Nurwati, Bakti, and Jopang, "Towards Rural Economic Growth: The Role of Human Resources in Promoting Knowledge Acquisition and Innovation in Village-Owned Enterprises."

accountability, and moral constraints emphasized in biblical doctrines.[20] Empirical studies on leadership, Economics, and governance reveal large gaps in integrating Christian values with functional economic frameworks. [21,22]

This study examines the relationship between business leadership practices and biblical principles within the context of economic decision-making. Specifically, it analyzes selected economic equations in relation to stewardship and other ethical governance concepts, assesses relevant leadership literature on moral accountability and value-based governance, and proposes an integrative framework linking business leadership, biblical ethics, and economic decision-making. The central problem is the persistent separation of descriptive economic relationships from the moral principles that guide how business leaders apply them.

The study investigated the combination of business leadership practices within the direct relationship of Bible values and economic equations. Evidence from literature identifying faith, and economics, focused on demand, supply, productivity, economic growth, and fair resource allocation. As a result, gaps were found in contribution to scholarship due to the tension between biblical principles and economic equations. This has implications for business leadership, prices of products, demand, supply, economic policies, and organizations in their quest to sustain and increase their bottom line.

METHODOLOGY

This is a conceptual and interdisciplinary study using theoretical-analytical integration. The biblical material was selected because it addresses stewardship, work, justice, honest measures, contentment, service, accountability, and the treatment of the vulnerable, themes directly related to leadership and economic conduct. The economic material was limited to selected introductory relationships concerning production, cost-benefit analysis, profit, demand, supply, and resource allocation because these are common decision tools in business leadership. Stewardship theory was selected as the mediating leadership

[20] Shalini Raghavan, "Goal Setting for Family Firm Owners: An Agency–Stewardship Perspective."
[21] Ahmed Tajer, Omar Araban, Hassan Essabbar, and Said Mohamed Rigar, "The Governance of the Family Business from the Perspective of Agency and Stewardship Theory."
[22] Chafifa Aulia Keleng, Andi Indriani Ibrahim, Syahbudin Adam, Nadya Mulia Supu, Nina Pamoras, Fadilah, and Sri Ferni Rahmawati, "A Literature Review: Entrepreneurial Leadership in Indonesia."

framework because it emphasizes responsibility for resources, accountability, trust, and the alignment of personal and organizational interests. The biblical texts were interpreted contextually and thematically, with attention to the ethical principle expressed in each passage rather than treating the texts as economic formulas. The analysis then compared three categories across the materials: responsibility for resources, treatment of stakeholders, and the moral limits of profit-oriented decisions. The economic equations remain descriptive relationships; the biblical and stewardship categories are used to evaluate how leaders apply those relationships. The outcome is therefore a conceptual synthesis rather than an empirically tested causal model.

THEORETICAL AND BIBLICAL FOUNDATIONS

In the aim to effectively run the organization, and make profits, Business Leadership concentrates on casting visions and strategically directing the operations of the organization. [23,24] In this attempt, Stewardship theories create constructive collaboration between personal interests and organizational interests. This increases citizenship behavior in the firm and encourages productivity and the growth of the organization. In their work, Aliahmadi; Feldermann & Hiebl associated Stewardship leadership with trustworthiness, and fairness. [25,26] These encouraged adaptive motivation and innovation in the pricing of products and services. [27,28]

Leadership is a calling and a gift. Consequently, business leadership brings with it the requirement for service to God and to humanity, meekness, and obedience. These are

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[23] Julius Suka Kasuni, Evans Nyamboga Mandere, and Phelista W. Njeru, "Investigating Influence of Strategic Leadership on Financial Performance of Commercial Banks in Kenya," *International Academic Journal of Human Resource and Business Administration* 3, no. 10 (2022): 313–328.

[24] Rungnapa Intesarach and Preecha Ueasangkomsate, "Authentic Leadership and Service Recovery Performance through Organizational Citizenship Behavior in Thai Food and Beverage SMEs," *SAGE Open* (2026): 1–12, https://doi.org/10.1177/21582440261415799.

[25] Saeid Aliahmadi, "Does CEO Power Moderate the Link between Labor Productivity and Financial Performance: Agency Theory or Stewardship Theory," *Asian Journal of Accounting Research* 9, no. 1 (2024): 47–56, https://doi.org/10.1108/AJAR-04-2022-0111.

[26] Sven K. Feldermann and Martin R. W. Hiebl, "Psychological Ownership and Stewardship Behavior: The Moderating Role of Agency Culture," *Scandinavian Journal of Management* 38 (2022): Article 101209, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.scaman.2022.101209.

[27] Mohammad Nur Nabi, Zhibin Liu, and Nazmul Hasan, "Investigating the Effects of Leaders' Stewardship Behavior on Radical Innovation," *Management Research Review* (2022), https://doi.org/10.1108/MRR-04-2021-0276.

[28] Paul S. Hills, *The Effectiveness of Steward Leadership in Christian Nonprofit Organizations* (doctoral dissertation, Columbia International University, 2022).

significant for moral authority, accountability, and responsibility.[29] This context excludes pride in position, manipulation, and coercion.[30] Instead, the decisions of a leader may connote righteousness, faith, and empathy. [31,32]

Work understood as a calling reflects divine intention and moral purpose.[33] Wealth portrayed as a gift to be managed with humility, generosity, and restraint, rather than as an end to a means of enjoyment and pleasure.[34] Accountability emphasized through feedback, judgment and responsibility reinforcing answerability at the judgement seat of God and society. [35,36] In the Bible, Stewardship consists of the management of resources, which belongs to someone else, with care and responsibility.[37] Scriptural stewardship linked to faithfulness service and accountability shaping leadership attitudes toward people and resources.[38] Biblical stewardship reinforces alignment between ethics, leadership, and economics, which contributes to a sustainable value chain of the society. [39,40]

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Recent empirical studies on business leadership emphasize Transformation, and entrepreneurship as core drivers of organizational outcomes. [41,42,43] Leadership styles

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[29] Paul S. Hills, *The Effectiveness of Steward Leadership in Christian Nonprofit Organizations* (doctoral dissertation, Columbia International University, 2022).
[30] Rika M. Napitupulu, Raditya Sukmana, Puji Sucia Sukmaningrum, and Rizki Khaliq, "A New Framework of Islamic Entrepreneurship: Fostering Inclusivity, Sustainability—Policy Implications," *SAGE Open* (2026): 1–31, https://doi.org/10.1177/21582440261417027.
[31] Rika M. Napitupulu, Raditya Sukmana, Puji Sucia Sukmaningrum, and Rizki Khaliq, "A New Framework of Islamic Entrepreneurship: Fostering Inclusivity, Sustainability—Policy Implications," 1–31.
[32] Paul S. Hills, *The Effectiveness of Steward Leadership in Christian Nonprofit Organizations*.
[33] Rika M. Napitupulu, Raditya Sukmana, Puji Sucia Sukmaningrum, and Rizki Khaliq, "A New Framework of Islamic Entrepreneurship: Fostering Inclusivity, Sustainability—Policy Implications."
[34] Paul S. Hills, *The Effectiveness of Steward Leadership in Christian Nonprofit Organizations*.
[35] Philippe Guillaume, "Bible Economics: A Review Article," 194–214.
[36] Paul S. Hills, *The Effectiveness of Steward Leadership in Christian Nonprofit Organizations*.
[37] Ibid.
[38] Mohammad Nur Nabi, Zhibin Liu, and Nazmul Hasan, "Investigating the Effects of Leaders' Stewardship Behavior on Radical Innovation."
[39] Paul S. Hills, *The Effectiveness of Steward Leadership in Christian Nonprofit Organizations*.
[40] Benjamin F. M. Schemmel, *The Impact of Alterocentric Business Ethics on the Financial Performance of European Firms* (doctoral dissertation, European Institute of Management, 2026), SSRN, https://ssrn.com/abstract=5450754.
[41] Shalini Raghavan, "Goal Setting for Family Firm Owners: An Agency–Stewardship Perspective."
[42] Siti Nur Khikmah, Abdul Rohman, and Indira Januarti, "The Role of Internal Audit and Leadership Style in Increase of Fraud Prevention: A Stewardship Theory Perspective.
[43] Ahmed Tajer, Omar Araban, Hassan Essabbar, and Said Mohamed Rigar, "The Governance of the Family Business from the Perspective of Agency and Stewardship Theory."

such as stewardship are linked to good governance performance indicators, such as innovation, participation, transparency, and justice.[44] Evidence from organizational leadership and stewardship studies indicates that such leadership orientations can influence governance practices and organizational behavior.[45] Empirical models based on theoretical postulations highlight the role of leaders in balancing personal goals with organizational objectives.[46]

When Economic thought is integrated with Bible doctrines, the general economy is affected positively. This requires that leadership be just and fair, such that governance becomes people soft.[47] This calls for free market economy, regulated by ethical Supply and demand, with little government interventions. Thus, fair resources allocation and profit maximization opportunities are sustained.[48] The combination of Bible doctrines and economic interpretations consider the dignity of humanity, fair distribution, and welfare economics. In a typical economic system, these values entrench long-term effects of growth and development.[49] The implication is that the creation of value system is more important than profit records. As a result, the economic players become morally responsible and accountable.[50] The problem is that literature finds a dichotomy between economic efficiency and social equity.[51] This means that they are mutually exclusive. Hence, to reach a long-term outcome, it is important to recognize in the system the influences of determinants such as human behavior, faith organizations, and business leadership grounded on stewardship.[52]

Literature Gaps in Existing Studies

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[44] Shalini Raghavan, "Goal Setting for Family Firm Owners: An Agency–Stewardship Perspective."
[45] Siti Nur Khikmah, Abdul Rohman, and Indira Januarti, "The Role of Internal Audit and Leadership Style in Increase of Fraud Prevention: A Stewardship Theory Perspective.
[46] Shalini Raghavan, "Goal Setting for Family Firm Owners: An Agency–Stewardship Perspective."
[47] Philippe Guillaume, "Bible Economics: A Review Article."
[48] Isaac Kayode Oyedotun and Patricia L. Makoni, "Nexus between Financial Technology and Financial Inclusion in Sub-Saharan Africa: A Dynamic Panel Technique."1–17.
[49] Jennifer Joseph, John E. Katsos, and Harry J. Van Buren III, "Entrepreneurship and Peacebuilding: A Review and Synthesis." 322–362.
[50] Isaac Kayode Oyedotun and Patricia L. Makoni, "Nexus between Financial Technology and Financial Inclusion in Sub-Saharan Africa: A Dynamic Panel Technique."
[51] Sarah Daly and Mohamed Belkhamsa, "Unveiling the Path to Sustainability in Africa: Insights from Education, Resource Management, and Economic Complexity." 1–22.
[52] Sarah Daly and Mohamed Belkhamsa, "Unveiling the Path to Sustainability in Africa: Insights from Education, Resource Management, and Economic Complexity."

Literature has relied on transformation and a few other styles of leadership. As a result, there has been limited integration of stewardship and biblical perspectives in leadership frameworks. [53,54] The implication is the requirement for the integration of biblical doctrines with economic analysis and practice, which is lacking.[55] Consequently, the literature reviewed in this study provides limited empirical evidence directly connecting biblical principles with financial decision-making.[56] The current economic analyses scales profit maximization above morality, stewardship, and accountability. The regulation of economic framework, trumps obedience to ethics, distinction between right or wrong and Bible-based worldview. [57,58] Values such as integrity and character are discarded as mediators between moral leadership and organizational performance. [59,60] Studies reviewed here also show limited movement of explicitly biblical leadership principles from faith-based organizations into secular workplace frameworks. [61,62] No unified framework was identified within the literature reviewed that explicitly integrates business leadership, biblical principles, and the selected economic equations. [63,64]

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[53] Shalini Raghavan, "Goal Setting for Family Firm Owners: An Agency–Stewardship Perspective."
[54] Joshua Sunday Kolawole, Olawale Emmanuel Igbekoyi, and Adebayo Wasiu Alabi, "Unveiling Stewardship Theory: Emerging Trends and Future Direction," *Journal of Business and African Economy* 11, no. 2 (2025): 95–112, https://doi.org/10.56201/jbae.v11.no2.2025.pg95.112.
[55] Sylvestre Sangwa and Patrick L. Mutabazi, "Standing Firm in Truth: African Business Ethics in an Age of ESG and Surveillance Capitalism," *Journal of Business Theology* 3, no. 2 (2025): 1–25, https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15756875.
[56] Isaac Kayode Oyedotun and Patricia L. Makoni, "Nexus between Financial Technology and Financial Inclusion in Sub-Saharan Africa: A Dynamic Panel Technique," *SAGE Open* 16, no. 1 (2026): 1–17, https://doi.org/10.1177/21582440251407742.
[57] Sylvestre Sangwa and Patrick L. Mutabazi, "Standing Firm in Truth: African Business Ethics in an Age of ESG and Surveillance Capitalism, 1–25
[58] Sarah Daly and Mohamed Belkhamsa, "Unveiling the Path to Sustainability in Africa: Insights from Education, Resource Management, and Economic Complexity."
[59] Jennifer Joseph, John E. Katsos, and Harry J. Van Buren III, "Entrepreneurship and Peacebuilding: A Review and Synthesis."
[60] Jamal Bake, Arifin Utha, Nurwati, Bakti, and Jopang, "Towards Rural Economic Growth: The Role of Human Resources in Promoting Knowledge Acquisition and Innovation in Village-Owned Enterprises."
[61] Michael R. Keys, *Developing the Importance of Integrity to Consistently Display Biblical Principles and Characteristics in Ministry Leadership Roles* (doctoral dissertation, Liberty University, 2025).
[62] Philippe Guillaume, "Bible Economics: A Review Article."
[63] Jillian Conduit, Ingo O. Karpen, and Timo Willmott, "User Circularity Practices: Adopting a User Stewardship Perspective for a Circular Economy," 211–231.
[64] Sylvestre Sangwa and Patrick L. Mutabazi, "Standing Firm in Truth: African Business Ethics in an Age of ESG and Surveillance Capitalism.

CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATIONS AND DEFINITIONS

Business leadership is an influence in an organization which incorporates organizational decision-making with its goals and aims. [65,66] An effective business leader will ensure that the expectations of the stakeholder are met, despite the presence of uncertainties and complexities. [67,68] The leader must be adaptive to innovations and technical changes. Biblical principles grounds the idea of 'what ought to be.' Such values are derivatives of Bible doctrines and Christian ethics. In the economic world, they influence leadership and are concerned about leadership, wages, and service.[69] Hence, the economic environment projected promotes values of justice, service, and equity. Business leadership that is framed around Biblical principles concentrate on faithfulness, stewardship, and welfare. This means that the leader understands his or her moral responsibility and accountability to both God and humanity.[70] Economic equations are conjectured to present human economic behavior, such as those of price, demand and supply, production functions, and the allocation of resources. These equations explain the difference between input and output, between costs and profits.[71]

Economic equations are neither moral nor Christian in themselves. They describe relationships among economic variables. The ethical question arises in how business leaders interpret and apply those relationships in decisions affecting employees, consumers, owners, and communities. Biblical principles such as stewardship, integrity, justice, and transparency therefore do not change the mathematics of an equation; they provide normative constraints for the decisions made with its results. The following economic equations are specifically relevant:

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[65] Chafifa Aulia Keleng, Andi Indriani Ibrahim, Syahbudin Adam, Nadya Mulia Supu, Nina Pamoras, Fadilah, and Sri Ferni Rahmawati, "A Literature Review: Entrepreneurial Leadership in Indonesia."
[66] Siti Nur Khikmah, Abdul Rohman, and Indira Januarti, "The Role of Internal Audit and Leadership Style in Increase of Fraud Prevention: A Stewardship Theory Perspective."
[67] Chafifa Aulia Keleng, Andi Indriani Ibrahim, Syahbudin Adam, Nadya Mulia Supu, Nina Pamoras, Fadilah, and Sri Ferni Rahmawati, "A Literature Review: Entrepreneurial Leadership in Indonesia."
[68] Jennifer Joseph, John E. Katsos, and Harry J. Van Buren III, "Entrepreneurship and Peacebuilding: A Review and Synthesis."
[69] Philippe Guillaume, "Bible Economics: A Review Article."
[70] Philippe Guillaume, "Bible Economics: A Review Article."
[71] Isaac Kayode Oyedotun and Patricia L. Makoni, "Nexus between Financial Technology and Financial Inclusion in Sub-Saharan Africa: A Dynamic Panel Technique."

$\text{Productiviity} = \frac{\text{Ouyput}}{\text{Input}}$. This production relationship combines inputs with output; the equation describes production, while stewardship concerns the responsible use of the inputs and the treatment of persons affected by production decisions.

$\text{CBA} = \frac{\text{Total Benefits}}{\text{Total Costs}}$, where CBA means Cost-Benefit Analysis. It compares the benefits of an enterprise or decision with its costs. The calculation itself is descriptive; stewardship requires the leader also to consider who bears the costs and who receives the benefits.[72] $\text{Profit} = \text{TR} - \text{TC}$ or the difference between total revenue (TR) and total cost (TC). [73,74] Where TR stands for Total Revenue and TC is Total Cost. Under the standard marginal condition, profit is maximized at the output where $\text{MR} = \text{MC}$, where MR is marginal revenue, the additional revenue from one more unit, and MC is marginal cost, the additional cost of one more unit. [75,76]

The demand equation is given by $\text{Qd} = \text{a} - \text{dP}$, quantity demanded is negatively related to price, other things being equal. [77,78] Qd is quantity demanded; P is price; a = Intercept or total demand when price of the commodity is zero; b = coefficient, to measure changes in demand when price changes. The supply equation is $\text{Qs} = \text{c} + \text{dP}$, quantity supplied is positively related to price, other things being equal.[79] Qs is quantity supplied; P is price; c = Intercept or total supply when price of the commodity is zero; d = coefficient, to measure changes in supply when price changes.

Ethics in business leadership is associated with integrity, accountability, and responsibility. These factors shape decisions related to governance and resource usage.[80] Stewardship theory emphasizing collective interest over self-interest highlighting leaders' responsibility

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[72] Anthony E. Boardman, David H. Greenberg, Aidan R. Vining, and David L. Weimer, *Cost–Benefit Analysis: Concepts and Practice*, 5th ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).
[73] Robert S. Pindyck and Daniel L. Rubinfeld, *Microeconomics*, 9th ed. (Boston: Pearson, 2018).
[74] N. Gregory Mankiw, *Principles of Economics*, 9th ed. (Boston: Cengage Learning, 2021).
[75] Hal R. Varian, *Intermediate Microeconomics: A Modern Approach*, 9th ed. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2019).
[76] Robert S. Pindyck and Daniel L. Rubinfeld, *Microeconomics*.
[77] N. Gregory Mankiw, *Principles of Economics*.
[78] Robert S. Pindyck and Daniel L. Rubinfeld, *Microeconomics*.
[79] Robert S. Pindyck and Daniel L. Rubinfeld, *Microeconomics*.
[80] Shalini Raghavan, "Goal Setting for Family Firm Owners: An Agency–Stewardship Perspective."

toward the assets of the organization and the welfare of the stakeholder performance. [81,82] Value creation defined beyond profit maximization, incorporating social value, sustainability and innovation, aligned with long-term economic growth and community development. [83,84]

Stewardship-oriented leadership, associated with innovation, human capital and productivity, supports outcomes related to sustainability and environmental uncertainty under conditions of financial inclusion. [85,86] Economic models and policy frameworks emphasize digitization and economic transformation, particularly in contexts marked by fair inclusion and organizational transformation. [87,88]

Faith-based organizational leadership grounded in biblical principles, moral accountability and spiritual values, lead on to decision-making related to organizational mission and stakeholder responsibilities.[89] Stewardship leadership practices emphasize service and humility. These values contribute to the existing trust and effectiveness in the organization, particularly in faith-based, nonprofit, and religious outfits. [90,91] Entrepreneurial efforts in a faith-based organization should give evidence of the combination of cultural values with ethical expectations. This format needs sustainable economic inclusion.[92]

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[81] Shalini Raghavan, "Goal Setting for Family Firm Owners: An Agency–Stewardship Perspective."
[82] Ahmed Tajer, Omar Araban, Hassan Essabbar, and Said Mohamed Rigar, "The Governance of the Family Business from the Perspective of Agency and Stewardship Theory."
[83] Jennifer Joseph, John E. Katsos, and Harry J. Van Buren III, "Entrepreneurship and Peacebuilding: A Review and Synthesis."
[84] Jamal Bake, Arifin Utha, Nurwati, Bakti, and Jopang, "Towards Rural Economic Growth: The Role of Human Resources in Promoting Knowledge Acquisition and Innovation in Village-Owned Enterprises."
[85] Saeid Aliahmadi, "Does CEO Power Moderate the Link between Labor Productivity and Financial Performance: Agency Theory or Stewardship. 47–56.
[86] Sven K. Feldermann and Martin R. W. Hiebl, "Psychological Ownership and Stewardship Behavior: The Moderating Role of Agency Culture."
[87] Isaac Kayode Oyedotun and Patricia L. Makoni, "Nexus between Financial Technology and Financial Inclusion in Sub-Saharan Africa: A Dynamic Panel Technique."
[88] Sarah Daly and Mohamed Belkhamsa, "Unveiling the Path to Sustainability in Africa: Insights from Education, Resource Management, and Economic Complexity."
[89] Paul S. Hills, *The Effectiveness of Steward Leadership in Christian Nonprofit Organizations.*
[90] Paul S. Hills, *The Effectiveness of Steward Leadership in Christian Nonprofit Organizations.*
[91] Rika M. Napitupulu, Raditya Sukmana, Puji Sucia Sukmaningrum, and Rizki Khaliq, "A New Framework of Islamic Entrepreneurship: Fostering Inclusivity, Sustainability—Policy Implications."
[92] Rika M. Napitupulu, Raditya Sukmana, Puji Sucia Sukmaningrum, and Rizki Khaliq, "A New Framework of Islamic Entrepreneurship: Fostering Inclusivity, Sustainability—Policy Implications."

To direct organization strategy towards adequate financial performance, business leadership must show vision, manage the resources well and provide good governance.[93] Business leadership thrives on innovation, can take risks and adapt to changes. Thus, it becomes possible to provide competitive services and outcomes.[94] When ethics and stewardship frameworks have been entrenched in an organization, they will create an environment of trust, responsibility, and accountability. Thes will further reinforce sustainable values in the organization. [95,96]

INTEGRATION OF BIBLICAL PRINCIPLES AND ECONOMIC EQUATIONS

This study combines leadership, theology, and economics. In the combination, the business leader adopts biblical doctrines to influence economic applications, to streamline organizational performance towards the moral path. It has become necessary to integrate biblical principles with functional economic relationships. This is because, it has been found that Bible doctrines influence business leadership and hence, the economic outcomes. The framework is that Bible values become the basis for economic decision-making. Thus, organizations are much more effectively and efficiently managed. The link is that economic equations measure cost and amount of production. This implies that the growth of any typical organization is dependent on the combination of factors of production that the business leader includes in the production equation, or in the production line. The faith-based combination will produce an outcome of a good balance between Bible doctrines and business performance.

The relationship between economic equations and the way they are applied in decision-making in an organization is instructive in the selected functions. In the functional expression of a production equation, the inputs do not have to continue to increase to keep

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[93] Julius Suka Kasuni, Evans Nyamboga Mandere, and Phelista W. Njeru, "Investigating Influence of Strategic Leadership on Financial Performance of Commercial Banks in Kenya." 313–328.
[94] Rungnapa Intesarach and Preecha Ueasangkomsate, "Authentic Leadership and Service Recovery Performance through Organizational Citizenship Behavior in Thai Food and Beverage SMEs."
[95] Benjamin F. M. Schemmel, *The Impact of Alterocentric Business Ethics on the Financial Performance of European Firms.*
[96] Sven K. Feldermann and Martin R. W. Hiebl, "Psychological Ownership and Stewardship Behavior: The Moderating Role of Agency Culture."

the output on the increase. In advanced production efficiency or technological innovation, inputs can remain unchanged, while output increases.[97]

An increase in output from unchanged inputs indicates a gain in productivity, but its effects on cost, price, demand, supply, and profit depend on further assumptions. If the productivity gain lowers average or marginal cost, the firm may have room to reduce price; whether it does so depends on market structure, competition, demand elasticity, and the firm's pricing decision. A lower price may increase quantity demanded, while the effect on profit depends on the size of the cost reduction and the response of sales. Likewise, an increase in quantity supplied is not an automatic consequence of higher demand; it depends on production capacity, expected returns, and the firm's supply decision. Output has increased due to improved productivity[98]. The important point for this study is therefore not that one economic outcome follows automatically from another, but that productivity gains create choices for business leadership. Those choices may be directed solely toward higher margins or may also consider consumers, workers, reinvestment, and long-term organizational sustainability.

The tension can be addressed by stewardship, contentment, justice, accountability etc. The recognition of God as the owner and giver of every good gift, being satisfied with one has, realizing that it is not just to make an extra profit which cannot be calculated into the production equation and the fact that we are answerable to God in our economics are factors that are important for consideration. Since cost of production has fallen. It means that reduced prices will still yield profit to the producer. This means that supply can be made at a reduced price to address the increase in demand and still make marginal profit on each product.[99] With time, the rate of turnover caused by high demand outstrips the cost of technological advancement. At the end, the integration of bible principles in economic equations by business leadership, yields a long-term profit generation, in which the producer and the buyer are mutually satisfied.

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[97] Hal R. Varian, Intermediate Microeconomics: A Modern Approach, 9th ed. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2019).
[98] Hal R. Varian, Intermediate Microeconomics: A Modern Approach.
[99] Adebayo Ademola, "Economics: A simplified approach Volume 1" (Lagos: African International Publishing LTD, 1991), 168-186.

The Bible did not specify the prices of goods and services. Neither does it support prices that shape and encourage the survival of the fittest.[100] In our financial world, it is difficult to conceptualize that all that humanity has is free. While we may not advance any argument to introduce the antediluvian experience in our current world, but we can accept that contentment (1 Timothy 6:6-8; Hebrews 13:5) is in agreement with principles of the Bible such as using correct weights (Proverbs 20: 23; 11:1 and Deuteronomy 25:13-16) and using correct measures of length and volume (Leviticus 19: 35-36). This means that greed and business manipulation are unbiblical.[101] These texts directly condemn dishonest measures and deceptive exchange; they do not, by themselves, establish a particular permissible profit margin. The ethical bridge to pricing therefore requires a distinction between fraud and lawful pricing. A high profit is not automatically equivalent to a false weight, but Christian stewardship raises further questions about greed, contentment, justice, vulnerability, and whether market power is being used to exploit others.

Consequently, a manufacturer who raises prices while production costs remain constant should not automatically be accused of using false weights, since prices may also reflect demand, risk, scarcity, investment, and other legitimate factors. The biblical prohibition applies directly where a seller deceives the buyer about quantity, quality, measurement, or the terms of exchange. Beyond fraud, however, the principles of justice, contentment, love of neighbour, and stewardship provide a normative basis for asking whether pricing practices take unfair advantage of consumers or distribute the benefits of productivity gains responsibly.

African identities are plural and cannot be reduced to a single communal or spiritual pattern. In this study, Ubuntu is used as one influential Southern African ethical tradition whose emphasis on relational personhood, human dignity, reciprocity, and communal

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[100] Isaac Armah, Peter Agyekum Boateng, Jeanette Owusu, Beatrice Atta Mensah, Kojo Polley-Kwofie, and Michael Ofosu Antwi, "Greed, Deception and Organizational Collapse: Theological Insights into Business Ethics," *International Journal of Research and Innovation in Social Science* 10, no. 1 (2026): 3783–3793, https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2026.10100295.

[101] Isaac Armah, Peter Agyekum Boateng, Jeanette Owusu, Beatrice Atta Mensah, Kojo Polley-Kwofie, and Michael Ofosu Antwi, "Greed, Deception and Organizational Collapse: Theological Insights into Business Ethics." 3783–3793,

responsibility offers a useful conversation partner for biblical stewardship; it is not presented as a uniform description of every African society. Within this limited use, the manufacturer is in business not singularly to make money, but also within relationships in which goods and services affect sellers, buyers, workers, and communities. Communal traditions in many African contexts likewise emphasize obligations that extend beyond the isolated individual. When a citizen uses dishonest weights, deceptive measures, or exploitative practices in the marketplace, such conduct damages the social cohesion that Ubuntu-oriented ethics seeks to sustain. This relational emphasis allows the business to be considered not only as a private economic unit but also as an activity with consequences for the wider community, which aligns with concerns for social justice and human dignity. Therefore, Ubuntu is employed here as an ethical lens for communal responsibility rather than as a totalizing definition of African identity.[102] The manufacturer is in business, notsingularly to make money, but because of his or her fellows, the services provided and the goods sold are beneficial to both the seller and the buyer. African identity typifies the continent as a big family, where the parents train their children for the community.[103] When one citizen uses wrong weights, lengths and uncompetitive prices in the marketplace, such practices become divisive of the cohesion intended in the Ubuntu philosophy.[104] This means that these practices are destructive to the African communal life. Further, the African community is like the marketplace. The business is the home, and the home is the business. This type of integrated cohesion means that the African person sees the business as to the advantage of the community,[105] which aligns with social justice and humanism.[106] Therefore, it should be alien to the typical African to receive inordinate profits to the

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[102] Bongani June Mwale and Mfanelo Ntsobi, "Reframing Knowledge Production through Ubuntu: An African Paradigm for Research and Governance," *ISRG Journal of Economics, Business & Management* 4, no. 1 (2026): 33–45, https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18205884.

[103] Kenanile Olivia Marie-France Bigba, *Ethnic Identity, Parental Involvement, and Academic Outcomes: A Qualitative Study of African International Students' Experiences* (master's thesis, University of Nebraska–Lincoln, 2025), https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/cehsdiss/449.

[104] Meinrad Haule Lembuka, "Embracement of Social Work Values in the African Ubuntu Dimensions: Lessons from Dr. Julius Nyerere of Tanzania," *International Journal of Research and Innovation in Social Science* 9, no. 8 (2025): 1734–1749, https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2025.908000145.

[105] Justine Burns, George Hull, Kate Lefko-Everett, and Lindokuhle Njozela, Defining Social Cohesion, SALDRU Working Paper No. 216 (Cape Town: Southern Africa Labour and Development Research Unit, University of Cape Town, 2018), https://opensaldru.uct.ac.za/handle/11090/887.

[106] Meinrad Haule Lembuka, "Embracement of Social Work Values in the African Ubuntu Dimensions: Lessons from Dr. Julius Nyerere of Tanzania."

disadvantage of fellow Africans, because that is anti-Ubuntu. It does not encourage social unity and communal development.[107]

Biblical teachings on honest measures, justice, and responsible gain can enter constructive dialogue with African ethical traditions that emphasize communal responsibility. At the same time, African economies participate in global markets shaped by capital, competition, technology, and cross-border exchange. The ethical task is not to reject global economic relations or to assume a single African response, but to ask how cultural values and moral commitments can inform participation in them.[108] International business partners need not share identical cultural backgrounds. Rather, ethical economic relations can recognize cultural difference while maintaining transparent terms of exchange, mutual benefit, respect for human dignity, and responsible use of comparative advantage. In this sense, cultural mutuality complements rather than replaces the economic factors that shape trade and specialization.

CHALLENGES AND CRITICISMS

There are tensions between Faith and Economics. Because of sin and disobedience, there will always be. The main reason for their dissonance is the differing assumptions between human economic behavior and the inadequate moral motivations of biblical principles. [109,110] Economic frameworks cannot naturally fit into moral models. For instance, Bible doctrines advise on care for others, stewardship, and life in keeping with the word of God. On the contrary, economic equations focus on the maximization of profit, making rational choices and efficiency of the market.[111] Often, business leadership has difficulties when

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[107] Samuel Ébalé and Benson A. Mulemi, "The Ubuntu and African Identity in the 21st Century," *The International Journal of Humanities & Social Studies* 11, no. 7 (2023): 84–90, https://doi.org/10.24940/theijhss/2023/v11/i7/HS2307-006.

[108] Ngozi Ezema-Kalu, "Exploring the Impact of Traditional African versus Modern Socialisation Patterns on the Preservation of Core Values: The Role of the School," *Scholarly Journal of Social Sciences Research* 3, no. 6 (2024): 1–10, https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.13149245.

[109] Philippe Guillaume, "Bible Economics: A Review Article."

[110] Benjamin F. M. Schemmel, *The Impact of Alterocentric Business Ethics on the Financial Performance of European Firms*

[111] Philippe Guillaume, "Bible Economics: A Review Article."

justice and equity conflict with competitive pressures based on the desire for profits to keep bottom lines. [112,113]

RECOMMENDATIONS

Business leadership, Policy, and scholarship Recommendations

Among business leadership, biblical principles and economic equations, leadership is the active agent of integration. The functional relationship between biblical principles and economic equations depends on the business leader. To achieve a moral economy, the leader should apply moral values in every step of decision-making. There must be the application of stewardship type of governance, in which the leadership remunerates equitably and evaluates everyone with the same standards. Finally, the leader should strike a positive balance between the buyer and the seller on account of price. This can be made possible by a guided regulation of the market forces, such that no will influence price by manipulating either side of the invisible hands.

Most organizational policies may mention moral values and the Bible in their introduction, but the real practice of it is dotted with coercion and intimidation. While offenders must be punished, the implementation of the policies must be based on respect for human dignity and life. Every participant in business should find a good footing in the policy framework, to thrive and succeed. This calls for justice, fairness, openness, and accountability.

Research is an ongoing process. There is a need for further empirical investigation into relationships among faith, leadership, financial decision-making, and organizational performance. Mixed-method studies may test the conceptual relationships proposed here and compare results across organizational types, cultures, and geographical locations. Such work would provide an empirical basis for assessing the transferability and practical effects of the framework developed in this study.

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112 Paul S. Hills, *The Effectiveness of Steward Leadership in Christian Nonprofit Organizations.*

113 Julius Suka Kasuni, Evans Nyamboga Mandere, and Phelista W. Njeru, "Investigating Influence of Strategic Leadership on Financial Performance of Commercial Banks in Kenya."

CONCLUSION

The main goal of this study was to investigate the integration of biblical principles with economic equations by business leadership. This implies that the combination of the two variables was based on intentional motive of business leader. This means that the leader would have been influenced by Bible doctrines.

Biblical doctrines provide a normative basis for business leaders to act as stewards by emphasizing responsibility, equity, honesty, justice, and accountability. When leaders bring these principles into economic management, the framework proposed in this study directs attention to economic inclusion, fair treatment of stakeholders, responsible resource allocation, and efficiency without treating profit maximization as the only criterion of business success.

The conceptual analysis suggests that stewardship-oriented, Bible-based leadership can provide moral constraints for economic decision-making. Rather than claiming that the present study empirically demonstrates higher employee commitment, lower costs, or superior financial outcomes, it proposes that stewardship can guide leaders in evaluating how profit, employee welfare, consumer interests, and organizational responsibility should be balanced. In this sense, stewardship leadership is presented as a suitable mediating framework between biblical principles and the application of economic equations.

The application of biblical principles to economic decision-making may contribute to sustainable economic outcomes by strengthening trust, cooperation, accountability, and responsible relationships within organizations. Economic equations remain descriptive representations of factors that combine in production, pricing, resource allocation, and profit decisions. The contribution of biblical principles is therefore not to replace these equations, but to provide ethical direction for how their results are interpreted and applied. Mediated by faith-values, profit can remain a legitimate business objective while its pursuit is constrained by justice, integrity, stewardship, and concern for stakeholders.

The extent at which a Christian leader can reach the integration of Bible values into economic equations is a real measure of the ability of the leadership. When a leader combines beliefs and economics, the cost-benefit should be in favor of Bible doctrines and values. If this is not the case, then either the integration was not well implemented, or it was not well received. It then means that the influence of leadership is likely to be in doubt,

not in competence, but in character. Hence, this study concludes that success in organizational performance is meeting with profit expectation is as important as integrating biblical principles into the economic process.

Economic equations are practical expressions. Also, biblical principles transcend faith, to actions. Therefore, the business leader requires intentional actions to cause economics process to reflect biblical principles. When this is tried and achieved, the direct implication is that economic profit is not just be left to the invisible hands of demand and supply. Rather, profit and competition are mediated by moral values, which look beyond the bottom-line, to Pareto Optimality, such that everybody is better off at various levels of operations.

The literature reviewed in this study gives substantial attention to leadership styles associated with performance, governance, and profit, but provides more limited integration of biblical doctrines with economic equations. The study contributes an interdisciplinary framework that brings business leadership, theology, and economics into one analytical conversation. It proposes that stewardship behavior, accountability, integrity, justice, and equity can function as normative criteria when leaders apply economic relationships to organizational decisions. These are conceptual propositions that require empirical testing rather than empirical outcomes generated by the present study.

The model offers an interdisciplinary approach to reading functional economic equations alongside biblical principles. Economic equations continue to perform their quantitative and descriptive functions; the proposed framework adds a faith-informed ethical lens to the leadership decisions made from those relationships.

The material analyzed in this study is textual and conceptual. It supports the argument that profit maximization need not be treated as the only consideration in economic management, but it does not constitute new empirical evidence. The framework therefore provides propositions for subsequent empirical research on how biblical stewardship may shape business decisions and organizational outcomes.

It is challenging to implement biblical principles in an organization depending on institutional framework, financial and human resources available. In situations where implementation has been achieved, there are few ethical measurement tools to assess the outcomes of business leadership in such organizations. Other barriers are regulations,

culture and economic differences in different sectors and regions of a typical country. There is also the attendant challenge of selective inattention concerning the adoption of biblical principles to allow manipulations and exploitations, without any adjoining ethical responsibility. In addition, there is evidence of stewardship terms being used to cover self-interest, manipulation, or coercive leadership behaviors. Finally, this study is limited to the overgeneralization of faith-based principles across organizational and cultural contexts without adequate contextual sensitivity and understanding.

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CHAPTER 27

TIKTOK, INSTAGRAM, AND INDIGENOUS COGNITIVE ORIENTATION: PERCEPTIONS OF UNDERGRADUATES AT BABCOCK UNIVERSITY

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Abstract

This study examined how undergraduates at Babcock University perceive the relationship between TikTok and Instagram use, African cultural identity, and Indigenous Cognitive Orientation. The study was prompted by the growing use of social media among university students and concerns about its relationship with cultural identity, ways of thinking, and engagement with indigenous knowledge. A qualitative research design was adopted, using semi-structured interviews with 20 undergraduates selected through purposive sampling. The interview data were analysed thematically. The interviews explored participants' social-media use, perceptions of African cultural values, Indigenous Cognitive Orientation, and the place of TikTok and Instagram in their everyday reasoning and decision-making. The findings showed regular use of TikTok and Instagram, with TikTok more frequently identified as the preferred platform. Most participants did not perceive the platforms as directly changing their African identity or cultural values. However, their responses pointed to differences in indigenous language use, dressing, lifestyle preferences, cultural knowledge, and sources of information. Participants also reported using information obtained through social media when considering issues such as fashion, relationships, and everyday choices, although many continued to consider family and cultural values. The study concludes that social media provides an additional cultural environment in which indigenous knowledge and wider digital influences interact. It recommends digital-literacy programmes, greater attention to indigenous knowledge and cultural education in universities, stronger family involvement in cultural transmission, and the use of social-media platforms to promote Nigerian languages and cultural practices.

Keywords: *TikTok; Instagram; Indigenous Cognitive Orientation; Cultivation Theory; undergraduates; social media*

INTRODUCTION

TikTok and Instagram have become an important part of everyday life, particularly among undergraduates. Their rapid growth and wide accessibility have enabled these platforms to become common spaces for communication, entertainment, information

sharing, and learning. In Nigeria, studies among university students indicate that social media platforms, including TikTok and Instagram, are increasingly used for social interaction as well as educational and informational purposes. Recent evidence also shows that TikTok and Instagram are prominent platforms through which Nigerian undergraduates encounter and engage with contemporary youth culture.[1,2]

Consequently, the widespread use of TikTok and Instagram among Nigerian students has generated scholarly concern about how content shared on these platforms may shape cultural perceptions, identity formation, and patterns of thinking and behaviour. Of particular concern is the possibility that sustained exposure may weaken some indigenous cognitive orientations when global digital values are privileged over indigenous heritage. Previous studies have largely examined broader effects of social media on undergraduates, including academic, psychological, social, behavioural, and cultural outcomes. However, empirical research specifically examining the perceived relationship between TikTok and Instagram exposure and Indigenous Cognitive Orientation among Nigerian undergraduates remains limited. Existing Nigerian studies have considered social media in relation to youth culture, cultural values, identity, and indigenous language, but relatively little attention has been given to how these platforms relate to students' cultural beliefs, language, dressing, sources of knowledge, reasoning, and decision-making. This gap provides the basis for the present study.

Literature Review

Indigenous Cognitive Orientation

Indigenous Cognitive Orientation (ICO) refers to culturally grounded ways of perceiving, understanding, interpreting, reasoning, and responding to everyday experiences. It is shaped by the language, values, beliefs, social relationships, knowledge systems, and practices of a person's cultural community. In the African context, understanding cognition requires attention to the cultural and social conditions

[1]Ngozi Stella Udechukwu, Chimdimma Nneoma Udengwu, and Peace Nwamaka Ojonta, "Social Media Exposure, Youth Culture, and Get-Rich-Quick Syndrome among Nigerian Undergraduates," Nsukka Journal of Religion and Cultural Studies 14, no. 1 (2026), https://doi.org/10.4314/njrcs.v14i1.8.
[2]Aminat Aderonke Agoro and Sabainah Oyebola Akinoso, "Undergraduate Science Education Students' Social Media Usage in Lagos State," Nigerian Online Journal of Educational Sciences and Technology 4, no. 1 (2022).

within which people develop and use knowledge. Nsamenang therefore argues that African psychology should be sensitive to African cultural realities rather than relying excessively on psychological models developed in Western settings.[3]

Mpofu, Ntinda, and Oakland similarly show that African communities understand and value human abilities within their particular cultural and social environments. Their review indicates that indigenous African communities place considerable value on abilities that promote social responsibility, interpersonal relationships, practical competence, and the welfare of the community. These perspectives suggest that cognition in an indigenous context extends beyond academic or individual intellectual ability to include culturally valued ways of knowing, relating to others, solving everyday problems, and responding to community expectations.[4]

In this study, Indigenous Cognitive Orientation refers to students' culturally grounded ways of understanding and responding to their social world, particularly as reflected in indigenous language, cultural beliefs, traditional knowledge, dressing, proverbs, sources of knowledge, and everyday reasoning and decision-making.

TikTok and Instagram Exposure and Indigenous Cognitive Orientation

The growing use of social media among Nigerian youths has created another avenue through which cultural knowledge, values, language, and ways of life are encountered and discussed. TikTok and Instagram are particularly relevant because their visual and interactive features allow users to produce and circulate short videos, photographs, music, language, fashion, and other cultural materials. For university students, these platforms have become part of everyday communication and may therefore form part of the social environment through which cultural ideas are learned and interpreted.

Studies in Nigeria present both opportunities and concerns. Ajayi-Ayodele examined TikTok use among 376 undergraduates of Adekunle Ajasin University, Ondo State, and found that TikTok content exposed students to both Nigerian cultural materials and

[3]Bame A. Nsamenang, "Psychology in Sub-Saharan Africa," Psychology and Developing Societies 5, no. 2 (1993): 171–184, https://doi.org/10.1177/097133369300500205.
[4]Elias Mpofu, Kayi Ntinda, and Thomas Oakland, "Understanding Human Abilities in Sub-Saharan African Settings," Online Readings in Psychology and Culture 4, no. 3 (2012), https://doi.org/10.9707/2307-0919.1036.

Western cultural practices. The study reported the promotion of Nigerian language and music alongside the imitation of some Western patterns of dressing, food, and religious practices. The finding is important because it shows that exposure to TikTok does not necessarily move young people in one cultural direction. The platform can make indigenous culture more visible while simultaneously bringing other cultural practices into students' daily experience.[5]

Ademakinwa provides further evidence from the South-West Nigerian university environment. Her study involved 441 university students and examined indigenous identity, social integration, and digital content creation across Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and X. The study found a significant influence of indigenous identity on students' digital content creation. Its qualitative findings also pointed to limited meaningful engagement with indigenous identity and a degree of disconnection between students and their wider indigenous communities. This finding raises an important distinction between exposure to cultural material online and meaningful connection with indigenous knowledge.[6]

Language provides a clearer example of this tension. Hunpegan and Adetokun examined the use of social media for teaching Yorùbá in Nigerian higher institutions and found that platforms such as Instagram could support the teaching and display of Yorùbá language and oral cultural materials. Their study shows that social media is not necessarily a threat to indigenous language; when used deliberately, it can provide an additional space for cultural learning and communication.[7]

Similarly, Ọnadipe-Shalom examined the relationship between social media and the revitalisation of Yorùbá language and culture. Although English dominates much online communication, the study notes that social media also provides opportunities for Yorùbá to remain visible among younger users. This suggests that the cultural

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[5]Tolulope Ayobami Ajayi-Ayodele, "Nigerian Culture and Globalisation: Influence of TikTok Video Contents on the Promotion of Nigerian Cultural Values among Nigerian Students," Journal of African History, Culture and Arts 5, no. 1 (2025): 1–14.

[6]Agnes Ogheneochuko Ademakinwa, Indigenous Identity, Social Integration and Digital Content Creation among University Students in South-West, Nigeria (PhD diss., Lead City University, Ibadan, 2024).

[7]Hendeweh Dorcas Hunpegan and Rauf Babafemi Adetokun, "Usage of Social-Media for Teaching Yorùbá Language in Nigerian Higher Institutions," Al-Hikmah Journal of Arts and Social Sciences Education 4, no. 2 (2022).

significance of digital media depends partly on what users and content creators choose to produce and consume.[8]

Omotayo and Dairo investigated the use of digital media in preserving and revitalising indigenous languages among youths and content creators in Lagos, Oyo, and Osun States. Their study included TikTok and found that digital media increased the visibility, intergenerational communication, and creative use of indigenous languages, although digital literacy and platform bias remained challenges. The finding is particularly relevant because language carries cultural meanings, values, history, and ways of understanding the world.[9]

Conversely, TikTok and Instagram can provide Nigerian youths with opportunities to encounter indigenous language, music, dress, and other cultural expressions. On the other hand, the same platforms expose them to cultural practices that may differ from those learned through parents, community, school, and other traditional sources. Ajayi-Ayodele's findings illustrate this dual possibility, while Ademakinwa's findings suggest that digital participation does not automatically produce deep engagement with indigenous identity. The issue, therefore, is not simply whether students use TikTok and Instagram, but what they encounter on these platforms and how such exposure relates to the knowledge and values they already possess.

Perceived Relationship between TikTok and Instagram Exposure and Indicators of Indigenous Cognitive Orientation

TikTok and Instagram have changed the way young people encounter information, culture, and social values. Students can now come across ideas from their families and communities alongside content produced by people from different cultural backgrounds. This makes social media relevant to Indigenous Cognitive Orientation, particularly in relation to cultural beliefs, language, dressing, knowledge, reasoning, and decision-making. Existing studies show that this influence is not entirely negative

[8]Titilayọ Ọnadipe-Shalom, "The Social Media and the Revitalisation of Yorùbá Language and Culture," NIU Journal of Humanities 9, no. 4 (2024): 69–77, https://doi.org/10.58709/niujhu.v9i4.2051.
[9]Abidemi Opeyemi Omotayo and Nureni Abolanle Dairo, "Preservation and Revitalisation of Nigerian Indigenous Languages Through Digital Media in South-West Nigeria," Nigerian Affairs 1, no. 1 (2025).

or positive; it depends largely on the content students encounter and the way they respond to it.

Cultural Beliefs and Values

Social media platforms expose students to cultural practices and values that may differ from those learned at home or within their communities. Ajayi-Ayodele found among Nigerian university students that TikTok exposure was associated with the adoption of some Western cultural practices, including aspects of dressing, food, and religious practice. At the same time, TikTok also provided opportunities for promoting Nigerian language and music. This suggests that exposure to foreign content does not necessarily entail complete rejection of indigenous values.[10]

Nnawuihe et al. reported that social media connects Nigerian youths with global ideas and provides opportunities for self-expression, but may also contribute to the weakening of some traditional values and the growth of consumer-oriented lifestyles. The implication is that TikTok and Instagram may place indigenous and global cultural values side by side, giving students additional alternatives from which to form views and opinions.[11]

Indigenous Language

Language is a major part of cultural identity because it carries beliefs, history, proverbs, and knowledge from one generation to another. The strong presence of English-language content online may create pressure on indigenous languages, but social media can also give these languages a wider audience. Ọnadipe-Shalom maintains that social media platforms, including Instagram, are being used to promote Yorùbá language and culture through language teaching, proverbs, traditional values, music, and other forms of cultural knowledge. Similarly, Adeyeye and Ngcobo's study of Nigerian TikTok content found substantial use of indigenous languages, with Yorùbá accounting for 52.3

[10]Ajayi-Ayodele, "Nigerian Culture and Globalisation," 1–14.
[11]Onyedikachi Damaris Nnawuihe et al., "Exploring Social Media as a Net Positive or Negative Influence on Nigerian Youth Culture and Identity," West African Journal of Industrial and Academic Research 27, no. 2 (2026): 153–160.

percent of the indigenous-language content in their sample. These findings challenge the assumption that digital media necessarily weakens indigenous languages.[12,13]

Indigenous Dressing

Dressing is one of the most visible ways through which young people express cultural identity. TikTok and Instagram expose students to international fashion, celebrities, influencers, and changing ideas about appearance. Ajayi-Ayodele found evidence that Nigerian students exposed to TikTok content adopted some Western dressing patterns. This influence is also connected with the growing role of social media influencers. Ayodele and Isameel found that influencers on platforms such as TikTok and Instagram shape youth fashion, values, aspirations, and behaviour. However, this does not mean that indigenous dressing has lost its relevance.[14,15]

Decision-Making

Social media content may also enter into students' everyday decisions. Fashion, relationships, lifestyle, consumption, and social behaviour are among the areas in which young people may look to social media for ideas and examples. Ayodele and Isameel found that social media influencers affect aspects of youth culture, including fashion, aspirations, and behaviour. Dunmade likewise found that TikTok content can influence students' understanding of ethical and civic matters.[16,17]

The evidence, however, does not justify claiming that TikTok or Instagram controls students' decisions. Rather, these platforms provide additional information and social models that students may consider alongside family expectations, personal experience,

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[12]Babatunde Adeyeye and Sandiso Ngcobo, "From Hashtags to Heritage: Appraising the Use of Indigenous Languages on TikTok and Its Implications for Preserving Nigeria's Linguistic Heritage," Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Science 3, no. 2 (2026): 82–91, https://doi.org/10.69739/jahss.v3i2.1771.
[13]Ọnadipe-Shalom, "Social Media and the Revitalisation of Yorùbá Language and Culture," 69–77.
[14]Ayodele and Isameel, "Influence of Social Media Influencers."
[15]Ajayi-Ayodele, "Nigerian Culture and Globalisation," 1–14.
[16]Aderinola Ololade Dunmade, "TikTok's Silent Curriculum: How Algorithmic Content Shapes Ethical and Civic Understanding among Nigerian Undergraduates," Journal of Cyberspace Studies 10, no. 2 (2026): 615–636, https://doi.org/10.22059/jcss.2026.407271.1209.
[17]Ayodeji Kayode Ayodele and Uthman Olakorede Isameel, "Influence of Social Media Influencers on Youth Culture and Identity," Journal of Communication and Media Technology (2025).

education, religion, and cultural beliefs. The influence of social media is therefore likely to vary from one student to another.

Theoretical Framework

Cultivation Theory was developed by George Gerbner and his colleagues and refined through the Cultural Indicators Project. The theory maintains that prolonged and repeated exposure to media can gradually shape how individuals perceive social reality by cultivating recurring beliefs, attitudes, and worldviews. Gerbner later summarised cultivation analysis as an approach to the cumulative consequences of sustained exposure to recurrent media patterns. Although originally developed in relation to television, the framework can be used cautiously to interpret digital environments in which algorithmic systems repeatedly expose users to particular narratives and lifestyles. Couldry and Mejias' account of data colonialism further situates digital platforms within wider structures of data extraction and power.[18,19,20]

Within the context of this study, Cultivation Theory helps explain how repeated exposure to TikTok and Instagram may relate to undergraduates' understandings of indigenous ways of thinking. Because these platforms circulate content within global digital ecosystems, sustained exposure may normalize some non-indigenous cultural values. Conversely, when African cultural content is actively represented, the same platforms may strengthen cultural awareness and reinforce indigenous identity.[21]

The relevance of Cultivation Theory to this study lies in its emphasis on the cumulative effects of media exposure. Rather than assuming immediate behavioural change, the theory provides a framework for examining how repeated interaction with TikTok and Instagram may relate to students' cultural perceptions, identity formation, and Indigenous Cognitive Orientation.

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[18]Nick Couldry and Ulises A. Mejias, The Costs of Connection: How Data Is Colonizing Human Life and Appropriating It for Capitalism (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2019).
[19]George Gerbner, "Cultivation Analysis: An Overview," Mass Communication and Society 1, nos. 3–4 (1998): 175–194.
[20]George Gerbner, Larry Gross, Michael Morgan, and Nancy Signorielli, "Living with Television: The Dynamics of the Cultivation Process," in Perspectives on Media Effects, ed. Jennings Bryant and Dolf Zillmann (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1986), 17–40.
[21]Manuel Castells, The Rise of the Network Society, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2010).

Objectives of the Study

The general objective of the study is to examine the perceptions of Babcock University undergraduates regarding TikTok and Instagram exposure and Indigenous Cognitive Orientation. The specific objectives are to:

1. examine the demographic characteristics of the undergraduate participants
2. explore the patterns and levels of TikTok and Instagram exposure among the participants
3. examine participants' perceptions of the relationship between TikTok and Instagram exposure and Indigenous Cognitive Orientation; and
4. explore participants' perceptions of the relationship between TikTok and Instagram exposure and indicators of Indigenous Cognitive Orientation, including cultural beliefs, language, dressing, sources of knowledge, reasoning, and decision-making.

Research Questions

The study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the demographic characteristics of the undergraduate participants?
2. What are the patterns and levels of TikTok and Instagram exposure among the participants?
3. What is the perceived relationship between TikTok and Instagram exposure and Indigenous Cognitive Orientation?
4. How do participants perceive the relationship between TikTok and Instagram exposure and indicators of Indigenous Cognitive Orientation, including cultural beliefs, language, dressing, sources of knowledge, reasoning, and decision-making?

Methods

The study adopted a qualitative research design based on semi-structured interviews. The design was considered appropriate because the study sought to understand participants' views and experiences concerning TikTok, Instagram, and Indigenous

Cognitive Orientation. Semi-structured interviews provided a consistent set of questions while allowing participants to explain their experiences and opinions in detail. The participants comprised 20 undergraduate students of Babcock University drawn from three Nigerian ethnic groups: Yoruba, Igbo, and Hausa. Eleven participants (55%) were female, while nine (45%) were male. In terms of ethnic affiliation, nine participants (45%) were Yoruba, seven (35%) were Igbo, and four (20%) were Hausa.

Table 1

Demographic Characteristics of Participants

Variable	**Category**	**Category**	**Frequency**
Gender	Female	Female	11
	Male	Male	9
Ethnic affiliation	Yoruba	Yoruba	9
	Igbo	Igbo	7
	Hausa	Hausa	4
Total			**20**

Source: Field data, 2026.

Purposive sampling was used to select participants who had experience using TikTok or Instagram and were able to discuss issues relating to social media exposure and Indigenous Cognitive Orientation. Data were collected using a semi-structured interview guide developed in line with the objectives and research questions of the study. The interview questions addressed participants' demographic characteristics, patterns of TikTok and Instagram use, platform preference, frequency and duration of exposure, cultural identity, indigenous language, dressing, cultural knowledge, sources of information, reasoning, decision-making, and cultural values.

The interview questions were primarily open-ended, with follow-up questions used to obtain clarification and further explanation where necessary. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study and the voluntary nature of their participation.

Informed consent was obtained before the interviews were conducted. Confidentiality was maintained throughout the study, and participants' names were not used in the presentation of the findings. The information obtained was used solely for the purpose of the study. The interview data were analysed thematically.

Presentation of Results

This section presents the findings obtained from the interviews. The data were analysed thematically and are presented according to the study objectives and research questions.

Theme 1: Demographic Characteristics of Participants

The study involved 20 undergraduate students of Babcock University. Eleven participants (55%) were female, while nine (45%) were male. In terms of ethnic affiliation, nine participants (45%) were Yoruba, seven (35%) were Igbo, and four (20%) were Hausa. The participants therefore represented both male and female students and three major Nigerian ethnic groups. The inclusion of participants from Yoruba, Igbo, and Hausa backgrounds provided different perspectives on TikTok and Instagram exposure and Indigenous Cognitive Orientation.

Theme 2: Level and Pattern of Exposure to TikTok and Instagram

Research Question 2

What are the patterns and levels of TikTok and Instagram exposure among the participants?

Participants were asked about their preferred social media platforms, frequency of use, and the amount of time they spent on the platforms. Their responses indicated differences in platform preference and frequency of exposure.

Sub-theme 2.1: Preference for TikTok and Instagram

Ten participants identified TikTok as their preferred platform, while six preferred Instagram. Four participants reported that they rarely used either platform. The responses therefore indicated a higher preference for TikTok among the participants, although the level of exposure varied across individuals. Participants' reasons for

preferring one platform over the other were associated with the type of content available, personal interests, entertainment, and the purposes for which they used the platforms. Those who preferred TikTok generally described the platform as providing a wider range of short-form videos and entertainment content, while participants who preferred Instagram referred to its visual content and social networking functions.

Sub-theme 2.2: Frequency and Duration of Exposure

The interview responses indicated that TikTok and Instagram were regularly accessed by many of the participants. Twelve participants reported daily use of TikTok, while six reported daily use of Instagram. Some participants indicated that they spent more than five hours a day on social media, whereas two participants described their use as occasional.

The responses indicate variation in the intensity of exposure among the participants. Those who accessed the platforms regularly had more frequent opportunities to encounter information relating to lifestyles, language, dressing, relationships, cultural practices, and other social issues. Participants with lower levels of use had comparatively less frequent exposure to such content. Frank et al. found that social media use among youths was associated with changes in areas such as traditional dressing and local language, while also providing opportunities for the promotion and sharing of indigenous cultural activities. Similarly, Ajayi-Ayodele reported that TikTok exposure among Nigerian university students was associated with the adoption of some Western cultural patterns while also providing opportunities for the promotion of Nigerian language, music, and cultural values. The present findings therefore indicate considerable variation in participants' levels of exposure to TikTok and Instagram.[22,23]

Theme 3: Perceived Relationship Between TikTok and Instagram Exposure and Indigenous Cognitive Orientation

Research Question 3

[22]Ajayi-Ayodele, "Nigerian Culture and Globalisation," 1–14.
[23]Obonoh F. Frank, Fenson Emem-Obong Uko, Nsikanabasi U. Wilson, and Dorothy N. Ononokpono, "Impact of Social Media on Cultural Identity among Youths in Uyo Metropolis," International Journal of Social Sciences 16, no. 2 (2025): 33–44.

What is the perceived relationship between TikTok and Instagram exposure and Indigenous Cognitive Orientation?

The interviews indicated that most participants did not perceive TikTok and Instagram exposure as having displaced their African or ethnic identity. Participants generally continued to identify with their respective cultural backgrounds despite regular engagement with social media. However, participants described relationships between social media exposure and several aspects of their everyday cultural experiences, including language, dressing, lifestyle, relationships, access to information, and exposure to new ideas. Their responses suggest coexistence between established cultural values and ideas or practices encountered through social media.

One participant explained:

> "I did not think TikTok has changed who I am culturally, but it has exposed me to many things I did not know before."

Participants' responses therefore point to a distinction between cultural identity and particular elements of cultural orientation. While their sense of ethnic or African identity remained relatively strong, some participants described weaker connections with indigenous language, traditional knowledge, and certain cultural practices.

Theme 4: TikTok and Instagram Exposure and Indicators of Indigenous Cognitive Orientation

Research Question 4

How do participants perceive the relationship between TikTok and Instagram exposure and indicators of Indigenous Cognitive Orientation, including cultural beliefs, language, dressing, sources of knowledge, reasoning, and decision-making?

Participants expressed different views concerning the relationship between TikTok and Instagram exposure and Indigenous Cognitive Orientation. Their responses did not indicate a complete rejection of indigenous cultural values. However, they identified areas in which social media exposure was associated, in their perceptions, with changes

in language, cultural knowledge, sources of information, reasoning, and decision-making.

Sub-theme 4.1: Indigenous Language and Dressing

Participants reported different experiences regarding indigenous language and dressing. Eleven participants stated that they continued to identify strongly with African culture, particularly in relation to their mode of dressing. Their responses indicated that cultural identity remained important despite exposure to social media. Participants nevertheless reported weaker connections with indigenous languages. Only a few participants reported confidence in speaking their indigenous languages, while five stated that they had limited knowledge of aspects of their cultural background, including indigenous language and traditional dressing. Some attributed this to limited exposure to cultural teaching within their families. Four participants described themselves as identifying strongly with what they called “digital culture.”

One participant observed:

> “I can dress traditionally when there is an occasion, but I don't speak my language very well.”

Another maintained:

> “Social media has made some styles look normal because you see them every day.”

These responses indicate familiarity with lifestyles, forms of expression, and social practices encountered through TikTok and Instagram. The findings suggest that digital cultural influences may coexist with participants’ existing cultural identities rather than completely replace them.

Sub-theme 4.2: Sources of Knowledge, Reasoning, and Decision-Making

Participants also described changes in the sources of information they considered when forming opinions and making decisions. Twelve participants indicated that they no longer relied strongly on indigenous knowledge alone when considering issues or

making decisions. Instead, they considered information obtained from social media and other contemporary sources. Four participants questioned the relevance of some traditional beliefs in contemporary society. Another four participants expressed interest in values, lifestyles, and ideas encountered through TikTok and Instagram.

Several participants explained this interaction in their own words:

Participant 1:

> "I listen to what people say online, but I still think about what my parents would say before I make some decisions."

Participant 2:

"There are things you learn online that are useful, but not everything on TikTok should be accepted."

Participant 3:

> "You see different ways people live on Instagram, and sometimes you begin to compare them with what you were taught at home."

These responses indicate that social media has become one of the sources through which some participants obtain information and encounter alternative perspectives. The findings do not suggest that participants completely abandoned indigenous knowledge. Rather, their responses indicate that indigenous knowledge increasingly exists alongside information obtained from digital and other contemporary sources.

Sub-theme 4.3: Cultural Continuity and Cultural Change

The findings across the interviews indicate the coexistence of cultural continuity and cultural change. Participants continued to identify with important aspects of their cultural backgrounds, particularly their broader sense of African identity and, for some, their preferred styles of dressing. At the same time, weaker connections were reported in relation to indigenous language and some forms of traditional knowledge. The

participants also described social media as a source of information about lifestyles, values, and contemporary practices. This exposure appears to provide additional perspectives that participants may consider alongside the cultural values acquired from their families and communities.

The findings therefore suggest that Indigenous Cognitive Orientation among the participants is not static. Participants' responses indicate an ongoing interaction between inherited cultural knowledge and ideas obtained through digital media. This interaction is reflected in areas such as language, cultural knowledge, reasoning, information-seeking, and decision-making.

Summary of Findings

The major findings of the study were as follows:

1. **TikTok and Instagram were regularly used by the participants**, with TikTok receiving greater preference among the participants.
2. Most participants did not perceive social media as directly changing their African identity. Nonetheless, they reported changes or differences in dressing, cultural knowledge, sources of information, and indigenous-language use; several participants described limited competence or use of their indigenous languages.

3. **Social media was perceived as both a source of cultural exposure and a possible avenue for cultural learning**, rather than simply as a threat to indigenous culture.

Conclusion

The study examined the perceptions of Babcock University undergraduates regarding TikTok and Instagram exposure and Indigenous Cognitive Orientation. The findings indicate that TikTok and Instagram form part of the everyday social media activities of many participants and provide access to information, lifestyles, cultural expressions, and alternative perspectives. Despite their regular exposure to social media, most participants did not perceive themselves as having lost their African or ethnic identity. They continued to identify with their cultural backgrounds. However, the interviews revealed weaker connections with some aspects of indigenous culture, particularly indigenous language and traditional sources of knowledge.

The findings further indicate that participants consider information obtained through social media alongside knowledge acquired from their families, communities, and cultural backgrounds. TikTok and Instagram were therefore perceived not simply as replacing existing cultural orientations but as providing additional ideas and perspectives that may influence how participants understand contemporary lifestyles, evaluate information, reason about issues, and make decisions.

The study concludes that the relationship between TikTok and Instagram exposure and Indigenous Cognitive Orientation is characterised by both cultural continuity and cultural change. Participants retain important aspects of their indigenous and African identities while engaging with ideas and practices obtained through digital media. The findings suggest that the influence of social media is more evident in particular areas of cultural orientation, such as language, sources of knowledge, reasoning, and decision-making, than in the complete abandonment of cultural identity.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made:

1. Universities and other tertiary institutions should develop and implement digital awareness programmes that educate undergraduates about the potential influence of social media platforms, particularly TikTok, on their cultural values, beliefs, and identity.
2. Schools, colleges, and universities should promote and integrate indigenous knowledge systems and cultural studies into their curricula. By so doing, educational institutions may preserve and enhance students' understanding of their historic and cultural heritage, and reduce the erosion of indigenous cultural practices in an increasingly globalised and digital society.
3. **Parents and families should strengthen inter-generational cultural transmission.** The finding that some participants had limited knowledge of indigenous language and cultural practices indicates the importance of sustained interaction between younger people and older members of their communities.
4. School counsellors, university administrators, lecturers, parents, cultural organisations, and relevant government agencies should collaborate to develop and implement culturally responsive counselling, digital literacy, and cultural

awareness programmes for undergraduates. Such programmes should help students understand and critically evaluate the psychological and cultural influence of TikTok and Instagram on their indigenous cognitive orientation. Given that exposure to these platforms may contribute to changes in thinking patterns, reduced reliance on indigenous knowledge, and an increasing preference for digital cultural values, school counsellors and other stakeholders should guide students in making conscious and informed choices about the digital content they consume. They should also promote initiatives that encourage the preservation and appreciation of indigenous knowledge, languages, values, traditions, and cultural practices. Through collaborative efforts, stakeholders can help undergraduates navigate the influence of social media while maintaining a balanced cognitive orientation and a strong connection to their indigenous cultural heritage.

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CHAPTER 28

CULTIVATING SCRIPTURAL RESILIENCE: THE ROLE OF CHAPLAINS IN MINISTERING TO THE MENTALLY CHALLENGED IN CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES

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Abstract

Mental illness is among society's greatest challenges. Hundreds of millions of people globally suffer from mental illness(es), and it cuts across every ethnic group, culture, and religious tradition. Unfortunately, Christian approaches to mental illness have too often been influenced by harmful theological stories. Chaplains stand in the clinical/theological overlap; therefore, they could guide Christian communities into a unique way of reading and practising scripture together. This practice (what will be referred to as scriptural resilience) can be communal rites of reading that let suffering speak, end shame, and build authentic mental health resilience. Grounded in theory from trauma studies, pastoral theology, and community psychology, this article offers a picture of chaplains as wounded healers/public theologians who can stand as creative bridge builders, offering translations of clinical concepts about mental illness into theologies communities can hear and theologies into frameworks clinicians can learn from. By reading Seventh-day Adventist scholars in conversation with pastoral theology at large, Chaplains are needed to transform Christian approaches to mental illness. The Christian faith is deep enough to embrace all of humanity's pain and wide enough to redeem every cage that can trap a suffering soul. Lives, dignity, and the gospel are all at stake when churches learn to read the Bible with and for sufferers.

Keywords: *Lament, Scriptural Resilience, Shame, Wounded Healer, Trauma-Informed Congregation*

INTRODUCTION

The Mental Health Crisis in Christian Communities

The world is living through a global mental health crisis. The World Health Organization estimates that depression is the leading cause of disability worldwide. Nearly a billion

people around the world live with a diagnosable mental disorder.[1] These numbers are staggering, but they become comprehensible when it is that behind each statistic is a living, breathing human being. Mental illness can so invisibly consume people because it wreaks its havoc in the internal realm of human emotions and thoughts. To bring light to this darkness, it must be discussed. But in too many Christian communities, the theological conversation about mental illness often participates in the problem: just as churches have been complicit in perpetuating the silence that stigmatizes mental illness, theological interpretations of suffering have all too frequently invalidated rather than soothed the pain of those who suffer.

Christian communities have been around for two millennia, but only just begun to bring the silent suffering caused by mental illness into the light of day. Declarations that the Christian life "covers all God's children in victory"[2] over illness and diagnoses, moralistic frameworks that cast suffering as the result of personal sinfulness, and prosperity theology paradigms that equate spiritual wellness with physical health and psychological prosperity have all-too-often served together to create contexts where sufferers are silenced into secrecy, shamed for their illness, and then thrown back into the sea of suffering– spiritually bereft. For too many Christians, the church has been a place that insists we can and should pray away our vulnerabilities and private struggles. Pastoral theologian John Swinton writes, "Christian traditions towards mental health challenges have tended toward convenient and lightweight theodicy protection of the reasons for God's allowance of suffering at any and all costs."[3]

This article argues that chaplains have a unique role to play in response. Chaplains live on the threshold between the clinical and theological worlds. Trained as both clinicians and pastors, chaplains can guide wounded Christian communities toward what is termed scriptural resilience: together reading and preaching the Bible in a way that truly honors

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[1] World Health Organization 2022, *World Health Report: Transfrming Mental Health for All* Geneva: World Health Organization, 5.

[2] John Swinton, *Finding Jesus in the Storm: The Spiritual Lives of Christians with Mental Health Challenges*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2020), 45.

[3] _____ , Interview on Regent College Podcast, "Understanding Mental Health, Theodicy, and Unresolved Suffering," Season 6, Episode 12, May 2025. https://podcast.regent-college.edu/1627978/episodes/17003569-professor-john-swinton-understanding-mental-health-theodicy-and-unresolved-suffering

suffering, dismantles shame, and cultivates genuine mental health resilience. Chaplains bring to bear a rich interdisciplinary toolkit that can guide communities toward better responses to mental illness. This article draws from trauma theory, pastoral theology, and community psychology to argue that chaplains, as public theologians, bring theological imagination to bridging the chasm between clinical and theological worlds. Chaplains can speak the language of mental health clinicians fluently enough that communities can hear them, and they can speak the truth about God to the clinical world in ways that will garner its respect.

Life and death hang in the balance. Souls, livelihoods, and the credibility of the church depend on whether she can learn to read scripture with and for sufferers. But the tools for transformation are already at the church's disposal. The tradition that has been inherited is rich enough to hold every human grief the church will face, and expansive enough to imaginatively incorporate every shade and shape of suffering into its redemption.

Trauma Theory

The past forty years have given birth to what is one of the most revolutionary ways of understanding pain, suffering, human distress, and healing trauma theory. Grounded in the clinical experience of survivors of war, assault, natural disaster, and systemic violence, trauma theory seeks to account for the unique and traumatic way that the minds and bodies respond to intense danger or threat. Recently trauma theorists have expanded the definition of trauma to include complex trauma, relational trauma, and developmental trauma or complex and cumulative experiences of pain and distress over time. The work of clinicians such as Bessel van der Kolk, M.D., author of *The Body Keeps the Score*, along with the work of Judith Herman, Peter Levine, and Gabor Maté has shown that trauma is not simply psychological, but somatic, relational, and neurobiological as well.[4] Van der Kolk writes, "Trauma is not just an event that took place sometime in the past; it is also the imprint left by that experience on mind, brain, and body."[5]

Judith Herman's clinical framework for healing from trauma which occurs in three stages: establishing safety, mourning and grieving the traumatic experience, and reconnecting with

[4] Bessel van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma.* (New York: Penguin, 2014), 45.
[5] Van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score*, 51.

ordinary life is strikingly pastoral/theological in its implications.[6] To be sure, safety, lament, and community are completely biblical categories. The Psalms are awash with lament. They speak the language of deep abandonment, physical distress, God-forsakenness of God's seeming absence in the face of intense suffering. Psalm 22 begins, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Jesus quotes this Psalm—this meditation on divine and total abandonment from the cross! If there is a text that captures trauma victims' unvarnished suffering, it is Psalm 22.

And yet there has been a strange prohibition on lament in many circles of Christianity. No wonder so many Christians do not know what to do with their pain. When no room is given to lament then humanity is cut off from what the Bible has to say about pain. The failure to lament may be the greatest failure of pastoral theology in recent memory; the witness of the Psalms challenges this silence the Bible itself complains.

Trauma and Spiritual Formation

The implications of trauma theory become even more significant when paired with recent breakthroughs in neurobiology. Trauma profoundly impacts the amygdala, hippocampus, and prefrontal cortex the areas of the brain involved in storing memory. This is why many trauma victims are unable to actually remember their trauma; the body "remembers" trauma in physiological and emotional cues, but the brain fails to encode traumatic memories as it would typical memories.[7] This may be why van der Kolk claims "for real change to take place, the body needs to learn that the danger has passed and to live in the reality of the present."[8]

If the brains and bodies remember trauma differently than typical memories, this reality has powerful implications for spiritual care. The perceived safety or danger of a person's body has everything to do with his or her spiritual experience. If someone's nervous system is still in fight, flight, or freeze mode due to unresolved trauma, sitting in prayer or reading scripture may be more damaging than good. Chaplaincy pedagogy needs to be informed

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[6] Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence—From Domestic Abuse to Political Terro*r. (New York: Basic Books, 1992), 155-156.

[7] Van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score*, 67-69.

[8] . Ibid., 73.

by this knowledge, and chaplains should be trained to help create safe spaces and encourage spiritual practices that promote healing and restoration.

On an explicitly theological level, Shelly Rambo's book *Spirit and Trauma: A Theology of Remaining* offers a helpful foundation for thinking theologically about trauma. Rambo develops what she terms "a theology of remaining,"[9] turning surprisingly to trauma theory as she seeks to understand Christian theological obligation to victims/survivors of trauma. Rambo draws on testimonies from survivors of Hurricane Katrina as she constructs her theology. She describes trauma as "an ever-present and persistent past, where time is fractured for those who have endured it."[10] Trauma "disturbs", she goes on to say that theology "needs to find its voice in this disturbance."[11] Rambo's chief theological analogy is Holy Saturday. Developing a full-on "theology of Holy Saturday" would be an exciting project in its own right; suffice it to say that for Rambo, Holy Saturday names both the time of trauma and our responsibility to remain with those who suffer. On Holy Saturday, says Rambo, "we linger beside the pain, touch the bruises of history, and resist the rush to victory."[12] Trauma theology insists on remaining on Saturday. (This is the Saturday in between Good Friday and Easter Sunday)

Rambo's theology of remaining resists the kind of triumphalism that has typified much recent Christianity. Trauma theology allows us to learn from the Christian story itself that there is room for the open-endedness of suffering in our faith. Christ's resurrection does not undo the violence of the cross, John's Gospel is careful to note that the risen Christ showed his disciples his wounds. Those wounds remain, even in glory. The trauma remains even in Christ's triumphant resurrection.

Trauma-Informed Theology

Theologians have just begun to consider the ramifications of trauma theory for theological construction. Trauma-informed theologians like Serene Jones have described how trauma theory can and should inform the language, practice, and communal structures that

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[9] Shelly Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma: A Theology of Remaining* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2010), 15.

[10] Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma*, 17.

[11] Ibid., 22-23.

[12] Serene Jones . Trauma and Grace: Theology in a Ruptured World. (KY, Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009), 11-13.

comprise theology in ways that address how religious communities either perpetuate cycles of harm or interrupt them.[13] Jones came to these conclusions teaching theology to women recovering from addiction and domestic abuse. She noticed that none of the language and categories she learned in seminary resonated with their experience until she reframed them. For instance, the doctrine of justification had to be applied considering their feelings that they were constantly judged and condemned rather than sinful before a holy God.

David Sedlacek and Rene Drumm have done extensive research interviewing pastors about trauma. They found that "most pastors had adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) and unresolved trauma."[14] Pastors who experienced childhood trauma reported perfectionism, performance orientation, codependency, work addiction, and negative impacts on others-care as negative results of their trauma.[15]

"One focus group respondent stated, "When I took the ACEs [Adverse Childhood Experiences test], I think I scored a nine out of ten."[16] Traumas experienced by pastors include abandonment by fathers; experiencing or witnessing verbal, emotional, physical and sexual abuse by family members; spiritual abuse by church leaders who grew up thinking their family was the perfect family that didn't experience trauma. Drumm and Sedlacek's study shows how common trauma is among pastors. It also points toward how chaplains can do better at supporting pastors if they are trained to recognize the signs of trauma and take steps to promote healthier church leadership.

Roberto Vizcaino's research also studies pastors, specifically Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE) as an avenue for healing pastors emotionally.[17] He interviewed seven pastors who participated in a six-month-long CPE training with research questions focused on trauma healing. Vizcaino discovered, "All seven pastors reported having experienced trauma prior to their CPE training that negatively affected their ministry and relationships with others.

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[13] Jones.
[14] David Sedlacek and René Drumm, "A Wounded Healer: Childhood Trauma's Effects on Pastoral Ministry," *Ministry Magazine*, 2025. https://www.ministrymagazine.org/archive/2025/03/A-wounded-healer.
[15] ibid.
[16] ibid.
[17] Roberto Vizcaino, "Self-Care Through Clinical Pastoral Education for Emotional Healing of Pastoral Staff in the United States: A Case Study For Exploring Relationships," DMin diss., Andrews University, 2024 abstract. https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1859&context=dmin

After six months of CPE training, 85% (n=6) stated that CPE training helped them grow emotionally…"[18] What is significant about this study is how it sheds light on the importance of chaplains being wounded healers themselves.

If chaplains have done the inner healing work themselves, they will be better able to facilitate that healing in others. Citing Vizcaino's work, "If chaplains who function as counselors have experienced their own healing (and the CPE training promotes this), they can be wounded healers with those they counsel."[19] This is an idea that will be developed at greater length below. Vizcaino concludes that, "the CPE experience allowed for continuous processes of self-reflection and self-exploration that emerged during the six months of training that provided a space for emotional relief for the participants."[29]

The Chaplain as Wounded Healer and Public Theologian

"The wounded healer is one who must look after his own wounds but at the same time be prepared to heal the wounds of others."[20] So wrote Henri Nouwen on the identity and vocation of the chaplain as wounded healer. The tension Nouwen identifies in these two sentences is at the heart of the chaplaincy identity. Chaplains must be able to tend to their own wounds without becoming so consumed by them that they cannot help others. Chaplains must refuse the illusion of invulnerability even as they resist the temptation to use their ministry to others as a distraction from their own pain.

Taking a cue about the importance of woundedness from Nouwen's incarnational theology - the chaplain who has been there, who knows dark nights of the soul, who recognizes what it feels like to believe that God has utterly abandoned him and that life is not worth living from personal experience has the foundation for offering pastoral presence to others. This kind of chaplain can let hurting people know at the deepest levels of their being that they are in a safe place. Nouwen understands this capacity not as a technique that can be learned but as a gift born of vulnerability embraced.

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[18] Vizcaino, "Self-Care Through Clinical Pastoral Education," 45.
[19] Vizcaino, "Self-Care Through Clinical Pastoral Education," 52.
[20] Henri Nouwen, *The Wounded Healer: Ministry in Contemporary Society*, (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1972), 82.

Sedlacek and Drumm's study provides evidence that pastors are wounded and shows that pastors can heal. "One pastor said: 'In my trauma, I cried out to God, and He showed up. It has strengthened my relationship with Him.'"[21] Another pastor reported, "Initially I viewed God as judgmental and exacting. But after being totally broken, I saw Him as the loving and compassionate God He truly is."[22] These quotes give voice to the journey from woundedness to wholeness that pastors as wounded healers embody. The pastor who has walked this journey does not minister from a posture of ableist authority; he ministers from the truth that he has been wounded too and that grace is always sufficient. Serene Jones' observation about theology applies to chaplaincy as well. Because chaplains have had their wounds touched by grace, they can help the communities they serve cultivate scriptural resilience.

Chaplains as Public Theologians

Chaplains operate not only in individual pastoral encounters, but as public theologians they contribute to theological analysis of the public discussion about mental health in ways that can transform the culture of a community, challenge prevailing narratives, and promote practices that are more truthful and compassionate. For Emmanuel Lartey, who is widely credited with developing intercultural pastoral care and counseling as a distinct model of pastoral theology, chaplaincy must always attend to systemic realities and cultural contexts, not simply interpersonal counseling situations.[23] Lartey's intercultural approach "engages diverse traditions of pastoral care and counseling while arguing for and modeling respectful engagement across racial, gender, class, cultural and religious boundaries."[24] In Lartey's framework, genuine pastoral care understands persons as shaped within webs of relationship and social location, and attends to healing at both individual and social levels.

Bonnie Miller-McLemore has also advocated for an approach to pastoral theology she terms "living web," which seeks to account for the many contexts (family, community,

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[21] Sedlacek and Drumm, "A Wounded Healer."
[22] Ibid
[23] Emmanuel Lartey, *In Living Color: An Intercultural Approach to Pastoral Care and Counseling,* 2nd ed. (London: Jessica Kingsley, 2003), 34.
[24] Candler School of Theology, "Emmanuel Y. Lartey," faculty profile, Emory University.

cultural, structural) that human lives are immersed within.[25] Miller-McLemore's book Christian Theology in Practice traces the history and development of pastoral and practical theology towards new subject matter, ways of knowing, and terminology for analysis.[25] Urging the academy and Christian congregations to embrace breadth, she writes, "may we disrupt conventional theological boundaries and to acknowledge the multiplicity of shapes and places in which the 'wisdom of God' appears."[26]

Clinical Pastoral Education as Formation for Wounded Healers

For a century, Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE) has been at the centre of chaplaincy and spiritual care educational models across a variety of settings. CPE was founded in 1925 by Anton Boisen, who is widely considered the grandfather of modern pastoral care. Boisen was a psychiatric survivor, hospitalized three times for psychosis[27] before launching the innovations in clinical supervision and reflection that became CPE.

Boisen's biography is well-known within pastoral care circles and speaks powerfully to wounded healing. Once dismissed from ministry after his hospitalization, Boisen became chaplain at Worchester State Hospital where he previously had been a psychiatric patient. Boisen used his own experience to revolutionize spiritual care. He demanded dignity for patients and insisted that even his own mental health crisis was partially true, that he had experienced a mystical encounter and undergone powerful spiritual transformation.[28] "As an experience which profoundly tested his mental and spiritual stability," Boisen once wrote of his mental illness, "it was the price we had to pay for being [human] and having the choice and the capacity for growth."[29]

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[25] Bonnie Miller-McLemore, *Christian Theology in Practice: Discovering a Discipline*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012), 12-15.
[26] Miller-McLemore, *Christian Theology in Practice*, 2-3.
[27] Anton Boisen, *The Exploration of the Inner World: A Study of Mental Disorder and Religious Experience* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press,1936), .3. Consistency should be maintained. The p. for page should be removed from the footnotes.
[28] Angelika A. Zillfrank, Caroline C. Kaufman, and David H. Rosmarin, "Mental Health Clinical Pastoral Education—A Specialized CPE Program" in *Religions* 16, 886, 2025, .3.
[29] Anton T. Boisen, Boisen: "The Present Status of William James' Psychology of Religion. *Journal of Pastoral Care* 7, 1953, 155–62 cited in Zillfrank et at., "Mental Health Clinical Pastoral Education", 3.

Boisen's approach aimed not only at individual transformation. By immersing future religious leaders into encounters with suffering individuals, Boisen sought "to avoid the error of religiously conservative colleagues who offered treatment without diagnosis, while also preventing clergy from the mistake of his liberal friends (who) supplied neither treatment nor diagnosis."[30] In the words of one pastor who worked closely with Boisen, he sought "breaking an opening in the wall which separated medicine and religion."[31]

CPE programs today carry forward this diverse legacy while responding to current contexts. Mental health-specific CPE programs, like those developed at McLean Hospital (affiliated with Harvard Medical School), train chaplains in mental health assessment, spiritual care in multidisciplinary teams, as well as positive and negative religious coping.[32] Mental health-specific CPE addresses the gap in mental health training that current research documents among religious leaders[33] and prepares chaplains to bring that expertise into psychiatric contexts and back into their faith communities.

Students in the McLean CPE program complete traditional elements of CPE including clinical pastoral care, group and individual supervision, didactics, and verbatim case presentations. In addition to traditional CPE training, students on this track also develop specialized skills in leading groups and provide spiritual assessment in mental health settings.[34] Alumni from the program report utilizing their skills as leaders not only in chaplaincy but also in their broader religious communities, citing mental health competencies as a transformative part of their training.[35]

For chaplains, CPE can be a mechanism for integration between clinical and theological competencies. According to the research of Vizcaino, chaplains who have completed CPE found it beneficial in identifying past traumas and understanding their impact on one's life and ministry as well as "gain more emotional intelligence through the processes of

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[30] Anton T. Boisen 1924. "In Defense of Mr. Bryan: A Personal Confession by a Liberal Clergyman" *American Review* 5: 323–328 cited in Zillfrank et at., "Mental Health Clinical Pastoral Education, 3.
[31]Peter Powell, "Academic Excellence and Diversity in CPE Supervision", In *Beyond Boundaries: Embracing Diversity in Pastoral Education and Supervision*. (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, year?) p. 65, cited in Zillfrank et at., "Mental Health Clinical Pastoral Education, 3.
[32]Ibid., 4.
[33]Ibid.
[34]Ibid., 8.
[35] Powell, 9.

confrontation, affirmation, and constructive criticism that emerged in the group meetings."[36] This sort of outcome addresses both clinical formation and personal healing, combining elements that contribute to the wounded healer.

Scriptural Resilience — Developing Practice

Scriptural resilience could be seen as a practice of engaging scripture together as a community that cultivates the capacity to honestly suffer, resist shame, and endure without denial. Scriptural resilience is not private Bible reading, though that is still helpful and good. It is not right teaching about suffering though doctrine does matter. Scriptural resilience is a practice thing that communities do together repeatedly that forms character, shapes imagination, and builds capacity.

Scriptural resilience is thus informed by multiple streams of thought—the ancient practice of lectio divina, trauma theory's understanding of narrative integration, community psychology's focus on shared meaning-making, and pastoral theology's longstanding care for wounded healers and communities of care. It is an attempt to move beyond mere theodicy—to resist the conceited effort to explain suffering and instead make space within the body of faith for suffering to be named, lamented, and endured.

John Swinton is helpful here. As a mental health nurse as well as theologian, Swinton frequently centers his writing on the importance of churches "sitting with the unresolved."[37] When pastors feel compelled to explain suffering, Swinton points out, they often protect themselves more than they comfort sufferers. The book of Job provides no answer to suffering; God breaks into Job's life and offers only Godself.[38] Job needs nothing from his friends except compassionate companionship.

Swinton writes, "The church does not have to fix people or life; it merely needs to be there, staying with, accompanying people in their pain. This is what church should look like."[39]

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[36] Roberto Vizcaino, "Self-Care Through Clinical Pastoral Education for Emotional Healing of Pastoral Staff in the United States: A Case Study For Exploring Relationships." DMin diss., (Andrews University, 2024), 52.
[37] John Swinton, *Finding Jesus in the Storm, 47.*
[38] John Swinton, Interview on Regent College Podcast. "Understanding Mental Health, Theodicy, and Unresolved Suffering." Season 6, Episode 12. May 2025.
[39] Swinton, Regent College Podcast.

The theology of remaining echoes through Swinton's pastoral sensibilities. For people suffering trauma, churches would do well to resist the temptation to answer and instead remain with sufferers through the Holy Saturday of life.

Reading Scripture Together as Trauma-Informed Practice

What might scriptural resilience look like in practice? One example would be the regular communal reading of scripture with a trauma-informed orientation. When chaplains prioritize space for congregants to encounter the bible together in small groups or worship gatherings, three related dynamics go into play.

First, sufferers find their experience named. Their experience is within scripture's purview. The Bible speaks their language. When Psalm 88—which concludes, "darkness is my closest friend"—is read aloud in worship, the depressed congregant learns that their experience is not foreign to Christian faith and practice. When 1 Kings 19 is read and the church hears that even "Elijah's experience of depresstion, anxiety, and fear" .[40] they realize they are not alone.

Second, congregants are taught about the reality of mental and emotional suffering. Bible reading that intentionally highlights scriptures of suffering, doubt, lament, and divine accompaniment opens possibilities for mental illness to be named within the life of the church. For those who have never experienced prolonged depression, reading difficult passages like Psalm 88 gives a window into what that feels like. Silence around mental illness and trauma is broken.

Third, shame can be confronted at the root. Where sufferers are silenced by the lie that "you are the only one who feels this way" or "if people really knew you, they would reject you," communal reading practices which name suffering honestly and locate it within the broader narrative of God's redemptive interaction with humanity can inoculate against shame. Hearing Lamentations read during morning worship, preaching through a series on the Psalms of lament, or consistently offering prayers for those who struggle with mental

[40] Vizcaino, "Self-Care Through Clinical Pastoral Education," 19.

illness in the congregational prayers all communicate this happens. You are not alone, and it belongs here.

Trauma-Informed Practice: A School of Lament

The book of Psalms, more specifically, offers significant potential as a practice of scriptural resilience. Far from being a catalogue of "happy songs for happy people" as one youth pastor memorably put it, the Psalter intentionally and deliberately represents the full range of human emotion and experience in prayerful encounter with God. About one third of the Psalms are cries of lament. These are not prayers that God discarded or buried in the appendix as incongruous with his overall character. Israel prayed them. They were woven intentionally and centrally into the fabric of Israel's communal worship life.

Job's Critique of Moralistic Interpretation

Finally, the whole book of Job is worthy of recovery as a practice of scriptural resilience. Job exposes the insanity of the theological framework his friends attempt to impose: if you suffer, you must be evil; if you are righteous, you cannot suffer. God comes to dismantle that framework utterly and whispers to us through the text that honest lament is better than false cheer.

Job refuses their explanation and demands a reckoning before God. God comes to Job in the whirlwind, not to explain away suffering but to inundate Job with the sheer reality of divine presence. And after God speaks, God turns first to rebuke Job's friends—not even one of you has spoken rightly about me—but to praise Job. Our traumatized world needs churches that prioritize making space for lament over making explanations. Job leaves us with that radically hopeful possibility.

Pastors suffering trauma wrestle with simplistic answers to the question of suffering just as Job did with his friends. Sedlacek's interviews with Seventh-day Adventist Church pastors reveal this tension. One pastor shared that immediately following his father's death he struggled to promote God to others while struggling with grief himself. "I prayed to God, and he let my dad die," the pastor remembered. "He took my daddy away from me."

Later in ministry, when the same pastor would preach or teach about prayer, "I would claim the promises, like…call the elders and raise them up," but they did not recover.[41]

Another pastor in Sedlacek's study described his evolving relationship with God through suffering: "Initially I viewed God as judgmental and exacting. However, after I became totally broken, I was able to see Him as the loving and compassionate God He truly is."[42] Job rejected the expectations of his friends until he finally encountered God face to face. Traumatized pastors may need churches who can sit with them in the unresolved long enough for God to break in.

Transforming Christian Communities

Christian communities need serious transformation so that they reliably nurture mental health rather than reliably causing harm. Toxic theological frameworks like prosperity teaching, simplistic ideas about sin and suffering, and narratives of triumphal Christian living need to be confronted. Decades of mental health research have established that congregants who believe their mental illness is their fault suffer greater shame, engage professional care less often, and have worse mental health outcomes.[43]

One important task of pastoral care is to help these interpretive shifts take root in communities. This requires more than saying "mental illness is not your fault" chaplains must seek to change the way an entire community talks about God, suffering, and human beings. It requires listening to the story a community narrate about mental illness implicitly and explicitly and offering theological resources that provide something richer. Job's friends provide a ready example of toxic theological framework: they listen to Job's tale of suffering, and in response tell Job what the Bible says about pain and disease. Job 38-41 shows us how badly that goes.

Theology like Job's friends' theology must answer to the stories of the lives people are living. Does your church tell stories of blessing and judgment, insiders and outsiders?

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[41] Sedlacek and Drumm, "A Wounded Healer."
[42]ibid.
[43] Glen Milstein, Joseph M. Currier, Charles Dent, Melissa McKnight, David Eckert, and Amy Manierre, "COPE: Community Outreach & Professional Engagement – a Framework to Bridge Public Mental Health Services with Religious Organizations" in *Frontiers in Psychiatry* 16:1461804 doi: 10.3389/fpsyt.2025.1461804, 2025, 1-15.

Shame and perfectionism? Fake joy? Urge your community toward the challenging work of telling healthier stories. Preach through the Psalms of lament and teach the church how to cry out to God from the honest places of our souls. Underscore Jesus' own betrayed endurance of the cross. Expose toxic theologies with the help of Job's friends.

Trauma-Informed Congregations

Beyond teaching and preaching a counter-narrative to toxic theologies, chaplains must collaborate with Christian communities to become trauma-informed. Churches must make structural changes to how they operate: offering trauma-informed care training for clergy and lay leaders, setting policies and creating systems to report abuse and harassment safely and transparently, weaving trauma-aware language and metaphor into worship and preaching, and partnering with clinicians to provide expertise and referral options.

Trauma-informed congregations pay attention to how people experience their physical spaces as well. Is the environment of congregational life predictable and safe? Is there a quiet space where someone who is feeling overstimulated can go to regroup? Are greeters trained to recognize and appropriately respond to someone having a panic attack? Doing trauma-informed care pastorally will involve attention to all these details and more.

Mental health CPE is becoming increasingly available, giving chaplains a valuable resource to offer traumatized communities. McLean Hospital's program helps chaplains learn "specialized skills in individual and group mental health spiritual assessment and spiritual care" so they can become "effective members of a multiprofessional team."[44] Chaplains trained in MHCPE will be better equipped to serve both Christian communities and mental health systems.

Developing Christian communities as trauma-informed will look slightly different in each tradition. Seventh-day Adventist communities have a significant advantage in that her theology of health is built on the foundation of whole-person health: physical, mental, social, and spiritual. Adventist theology and history hold a strong awareness of mind-body-spirit connection that can readily include understandings of trauma. Ellen White was not a

[44] Zillfrank et at., "Mental Health Clinical Pastoral Education, 13.

trauma-informed healer by any means, but neither did she believe the parts of our being exist in isolation from each other.[45]

Chaplains as Agents of Transformation

Chaplains want congregations to change. They see things pastors and church leaders may overlook. They have theological resources to name realities that others might ignore or avoid. Through preaching and teaching, chaplains can confront toxic theology. Through coaching and offering counterexamples, chaplains can catalyze congregations toward healthier practices. Because chaplains have dual training in theology and mental health, they can assess congregants' needs for professional mental health care and refer them when necessary. Chaplains can help clients navigate the mental health system, provide spiritual care that works in tandem with clinical care, and deal with spiritual and existential wounds that clinicians are not trained to treat.

Change is slow - Vizcaino's study of pastors who participated in CPE found that chaplains experienced lasting transformation in their own lives, but that they were also able to leverage that transformation into ministering more effectively to others.[46] These pastors were more self-aware and emotionally intelligent. They took better care of themselves, which enabled them to care better for others. Through participating in CPE, chaplains can experience healing themselves and then bring that healing to congregations.

Conclusion

The diagnosis has been bleak: Christian communities suffer from a mental health crisis, and it is getting worse. The church has built systems of belief, moral judgments, and prosperity gospel teachings that unfortunately contribute to the silencing, shaming, and spiritual isolation of those battling mental distress. By ignoring the laments, misinterpreting Job, and ignoring the wounds of the resurrected Christ, we have painted a picture of a constantly smiling God, incapable of sharing our suffering.

There is a tradition that is deep enough to embrace every human anguish and wide enough to include every mode of suffering in its eschatological vision. A tradition, then, is needed

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[45] Vizcaino, "Self-Care Through Clinical Pastoral Education," 22.
[46] ibid.,52.

to reshape churches into sanctuaries that actively combat mental illness instead of exacerbating it, one capable of holding all human pain and imaginatively embracing every kind of suffering within its redemptive scope. There is a wealth of knowledge in trauma theory, community psychology, and pastoral theology about approaching mental illness with both humility and love. Clinical Pastoral Education, a program stemming from Anton Boisen's ideas, trains ministers to face real-world challenges, helping them build scriptural resilience. Chaplains can transform Christian communities into spaces of healing and acceptance by leading them in communal scripture readings that highlight lament and challenge the shame often associated with mental health struggles.

But for that transformation to happen, chaplains need courage. Theological courage: the courage to say that harm has been done by triumphalism, moralism, and the gospel of prosperity, and the courage to offer something more compelling and beautiful in its place. Clinical courage: the humility to learn from trauma theory and community psychology, to acknowledge the expertise of mental health professionals, and to translate the clinical conversation into pastoral embodiments that can be heard by communities of faith. And personal courage: The ability to connect with people on their level, shaped by your own experiences, and leading with your authentic self, crucified and risen with Christ, is crucial. In an essay on her theology of remaining, Shelly Rambo says this: "To remain is to refuse premature solutions to problems and distressing situations, and instead to bear witness to wounds that may never heal in this life."[47] It is important to be wary of the tempting offer of easy solutions when things are truly complex.

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[47] Shelly Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma,* xiii.

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CHAPTER 29

ENHANCING WORKPLACE WELL-BEING THROUGH POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY: A FAITH-BASED APPROACH BEYOND STRESS MANAGEMENT

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Abstract

Workplace well-being is increasingly recognised as central to productivity, employee retention, and organisational culture, yet the dominant organisational response to distress remains the stress management programme, which operates within a deficit logic that targets anxiety and burnout while leaving the roles of purpose, meaning, and spiritual identity largely unexamined. This gap is especially consequential in Nigeria, where faith shapes working life in open, daily, and collective ways. Drawing on biblical understandings of work, vocation, and human dignity, and on African theological perspectives on communal identity and labour, this paper argues that a faith-based positive psychology approach offers a more adequate framework for workplace flourishing than either secular positive psychology or reactive stress management alone. Methodologically, the paper employs an integrative interdisciplinary literature review that synthesises scholarship from positive psychology, management, biblical theology, and African religious studies around four domains of practice: vocational meaning, gratitude and relational practice, compassionate servant leadership, and communal resilience and hope. The synthesis indicates that employees in spiritually attentive organisations tend to report higher engagement, purpose, and moral clarity, and that biblical and Ubuntu resources supply forms of meaning, hope, and resilience that secular frameworks render invisible. The resulting Integrated Positive Psychology–Faith Model is presented with illustrative applications, an explicit account of the theological and cultural tensions it must hold, and a discussion of implementation barriers and adaptation for religiously plural workplaces. Because the model rests on literature synthesis rather than field data, the paper closes with testable propositions and a research agenda for empirical validation in African organisational settings. The contribution is a contextually grounded framework that moves beyond stress management toward the deliberate nurture of the mental, emotional, and spiritual dimensions of employee well-being.

Keywords: *Positive psychology, workplace well-being, faith-based approach, Ubuntu ethics, spiritual practices, employee flourishing, organisational culture.*

INTRODUCTION

The modern workplace faces pressures it was not designed to handle. Escalating workloads, technological disruption, restructuring, and the lingering aftermath of a global health crisis have left many employees in a state of chronic depletion that standard interventions have not resolved. Despite sustained investment in stress management programmes and employee assistance schemes, burnout rates continue to climb, and disengagement remains high. This persistence raises a diagnostic question: is the difficulty that interventions have been poorly executed, or that they have been aimed at too narrow a target?

This paper addresses that diagnostic question in the Nigerian context, where the stakes are particularly visible. Nigeria is home to more than eighty million Christians, among the largest Christian populations in the world, and its workplaces, spanning government ministries, teaching hospitals, secondary schools, and trading floors, are shaped by faith in ways that are open, daily, and collective rather than merely private or occasional.[1] The productive question is not whether faith belongs in the Nigerian workplace; it already does. The question is whether organisations have the frameworks to understand what faith contributes to workplace flourishing and to build on it deliberately rather than leaving it without a scholarly account.

Traditional approaches to workplace well-being have operated within a deficit logic: identify the stressor, reduce its impact, and restore baseline function. The occupational stress models that shaped this logic diagnosed depletion with precision but had far less to say about what constitutes a flourishing working life. Positive psychology redirected research energy toward what enables people to live and work well,[2] yet it remains largely secular and individualistic. For workers whose identity and vocation are shaped by

[1]Pew Research Center, *Global Christianity: A Report on the Size and Distribution of the World's Christian Population* (Washington, DC: Pew Research Center, 2011), 15.
[2]Martin E. P. Seligman and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, "Positive Psychology: An Introduction," *American Psychologist* 55, no. 1 (2000): 5–14.

religious conviction, this leaves something of practical significance unaddressed, a gap that shows up not in philosophical debate but in the working day itself.[3]

The paper's contribution lies at the intersection of four literatures rarely brought into conversation. Workplace spirituality research has established that employees' inner lives matter at work, but it defines spirituality generically and draws its evidence overwhelmingly from North American organisations.[4] Positive psychology has produced rigorous, evidence-based interventions but treats meaning as self-constructed. The theology of work offers a rich account of vocation but has seldom engaged organisational psychology or African contexts.[5] African theology and philosophy have articulated a relational anthropology that has yet to be applied systematically to employee well-being.[6] By synthesising these literatures, the paper offers an integrative, empirically informed, theologically grounded, and contextually rooted model of African working life.

Section 2 reviews the relevant literature and presents the Integrated Positive Psychology–Faith Model. Section 3 describes the methodology. Section 4 develops the model's four domains, illustrates their application, and examines the tensions and barriers it must confront, including adaptation to religiously plural workplaces. Section 5 sets out the model's scope, assumptions, and limitations together with a research agenda, and Section 6 concludes with recommendations.

LITERATURE REVIEW

From Stress Management to Positive Psychology: A Conceptual Shift

The shift from stress management to positive psychology marks a reorientation of the field's priorities from what depletes workers to what sustains them. For much of the twentieth century, workplace well-being research was organised around occupational

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[3]Ian I. Mitroff and Elizabeth A. Denton, *A Spiritual Audit of Corporate America: A Hard Look at Spirituality, Religion, and Values in the Workplace* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1999), 7.
[4]Donde P. Ashmos and Dennis Duchon, "Spirituality at Work: A Conceptualization and Measure," *Journal of Management Inquiry* 9, no. 2 (2000): 134–35.
[5]Miroslav Volf, *Work in the Spirit: Toward a Theology of Work* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2001), 3–5.
[6]Thaddeus Metz, "Ubuntu as a Moral Theory and Human Rights in South Africa," *African Human Rights Law Journal* 11, no. 2 (2011): 532–33.

stress. Selye's foundational theory established the physiological model,[7] and subsequent researchers developed it into accounts of how organisational conditions generate psychological harm. Karasek's demand-control model identified the damage wrought by high job demands combined with constrained decision latitude,[8] and Siegrist's effort-reward imbalance model showed that chronic discrepancy between effort and reward produces measurable harm even where workloads are moderate.[9]

The problem was not that these frameworks were wrong about stress. They left flourishing largely untheorised. Maslach's burnout research deepened the picture of workplace depletion without altering the field's orientation.[10] Researchers grew skilled at describing how workers broke down. They had much less to say about what enabled them to thrive, or about the inner resources that sustained engagement even under demanding conditions.

Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi's manifesto directly challenged this orientation.[11] Luthans and colleagues applied the resulting framework through psychological capital, demonstrating that hope, efficacy, resilience, and optimism are trainable and predictive of better outcomes.[12] The framework's limitation, however, is its secular individualism. When meaning is treated as self-constructed and resilience as a personal resource, the framework excludes meaning and resilience derived from transcendent sources. For workers whose lives are ordered by faith, this renders some of their most durable sources of well-being invisible.[13]

Workplace Spirituality and Faith-Based Perspectives

The literature on workplace spirituality addresses the dimension that positive psychology tends to overlook. Ashmos and Duchon define workplace spirituality as the recognition

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[7]Hans Selye, *The Stress of Life*, rev. ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1976), 1.
[8]Robert Karasek, "Job Demands, Job Decision Latitude, and Mental Strain: Implications for Job Redesign," *Administrative Science Quarterly* 24, no. 2 (1979): 285–308.
[9]Johannes Siegrist, "Adverse Health Effects of High-Effort/Low-Reward Conditions," *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology* 1, no. 1 (1996): 27–41.
[10]Christina Maslach, *Burnout: The Cost of Caring* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1982), 3.
[11]Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi, "Positive Psychology," 5.
[12]Fred Luthans, Carolyn M. Youssef, and Bruce J. Avolio, *Psychological Capital: Developing the Human Competitive Edge* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 3.
[13]Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi, "Positive Psychology," 8–9.

that employees have an inner life that nourishes and is nourished by meaningful work, experienced in community.[14] The definition is deliberately inclusive of religious and non-religious experience, which creates interpretive challenges in faith-based contexts where spirituality is inseparable from doctrine and communal practice.

Mitroff and Denton's empirical study found that spirituality was, for many participants, among the most important dimensions of their lives and simultaneously the most systematically marginalised by their employers.[15] Notably, their respondents distinguished sharply between spirituality, which they welcomed at work, and religion, which many feared as potentially divisive, a distinction to which Section 4.6 returns.[16]

Petchsawang and Duchon identify compassion, mindfulness, meaningful work, and transcendence as the core dimensions of workplace spirituality,[17] each with a counterpart in positive psychology and grounding in biblical and African traditions. Pawar argues that organisations can facilitate workplace spirituality through deliberate practices: creating space for reflection, modelling compassionate leadership, and affirming the dignity of each worker's inner life.[18] Taken together, this literature indicates that employees who draw on faith as a workplace resource tend to report greater resilience, ethical clarity, and a stronger sense of purpose.

Biblical Interpretation of Work and Human Flourishing

The biblical narrative offers a rich and consistently under-utilised resource for a theology of workplace well-being. Beginning with the creation accounts of Genesis, work is presented not as a consequence of the human fall but as a fundamental dimension of human existence from the outset. Hamilton states that "manual labour is a God-given privilege, not a sentence or penalty."[19] In addition, the creation of humanity in the image of God, the

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[14]Ashmos and Duchon, "Spirituality at Work," 137–38.
[15]Mitroff and Denton, *Spiritual Audit*, 6.
[16]Mitroff and Denton, *Spiritual Audit*, 7.
[17]Pawinee Petchsawang and Dennis Duchon, "Workplace Spirituality, Meditation, and Work Performance," *Journal of Management, Spirituality and Religion* 9, no. 2 (2012): 189–208.
[18]Badrinarayan Shankar Pawar, "Workplace Spirituality Facilitation: A Comprehensive Model," *Journal of Business Ethics* 90, no. 3 (2009): 375–86.
[19]Victor P. Hamilton, *Handbook on the Pentateuch*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005), 28.

imago Dei (Gen. 1:26–27), carries significant implications for a theology of work.[20] As image-bearers, human beings are created to co-create and to exercise stewardship, finding in their labour a form of participation in God's own creative activity. Volf argues that human work is not merely economically functional but theologically significant, mediating between the present age and the eschatological new creation.[21]

The concept of vocation further enriches this framework. In the biblical tradition, work is not simply an occupation but a calling. Stevens has argued that the Protestant recovery of this concept democratised the sacred, insisting that the farmer, the teacher, and the merchant exercise a vocation as holy as that of the priest or the theologian.[22] When labour is understood as vocation rather than mere employment, fatigue and failure take on a different character, and ordinary days acquire a dignity that no performance review can confer.

The Old Testament concept of *shalom* adds a further dimension. Brueggemann describes it as the animating vision of the biblical narrative, encompassing not merely peace but wholeness, just relationships, and the communal flourishing of all creation.[23] The New Testament deepens these themes in ways directly relevant to workplace leadership. Greenleaf's servant leadership model[24] finds its most searching theological grounding in Mark 10:45, where Jesus presents self-giving service as the definitive exercise of divine authority, overturning the logic by which conventional power justifies itself.[25] Paul's account of the body of Christ in 1 Corinthians 12 adds a theology of collaborative work in which every contribution is honoured and the flourishing of each member serves the flourishing of all. Together, these texts sketch an organisational culture in which every

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[20] Scripture references in this paper follow the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).
[21] Volf, *Work in the Spirit*, 79.
[22] R. Paul Stevens, *The Other Six Days: Vocation, Work, and Ministry in Biblical Perspective* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 73–75.
[23] Walter Brueggemann, *Peace* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2001), 14.
[24] Robert K. Greenleaf, *Servant Leadership: A Journey into the Nature of Legitimate Power and Greatness* (New York: Paulist Press, 1977), 27.
[25] James R. Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), 328–29.

person's full humanity is a theological given rather than a management aspiration.

African Theological Perspectives on Work and Well-Being

Western frameworks for workplace well-being tend to carry the imprint of Enlightenment individualism. The African theological tradition offers a necessary corrective. At the heart of this tradition is Ubuntu, a Nguni Bantu concept whose relational ontology Mbiti renders as "I am, because we are; and since we are, therefore I am."[26] Tutu gives this principle its most powerful theological voice: "My humanity is caught up, is inextricably bound up, in yours."[27] Ubuntu is a lived orientation toward personhood, community, and labour: to work well is to contribute to the flourishing of the community, with worth derived from belonging rather than personal achievement.

Mbiti's analysis of the individual as simultaneously part of the whole and the whole in part provides a useful entry point into this relational anthropology.[28] African traditional religion integrates the sacred and the secular in ways that Western modernity has tended to separate: work is conducted in the continuous presence of God and in the living fellowship of the community, so that spiritual practices are constitutive of healthy, meaningful work rather than appendages to professional life.

In Nigeria this integration is an observable daily reality. Teams in offices, government departments, schools, and hospitals routinely begin the working day with communal prayer, committing their labour to divine guidance.[29] Obadare has documented how deeply this pattern has penetrated Nigerian public institutions, where the boundary between religious practice and professional life is far more porous than secular Western frameworks assume.[30] The model proposed here introduces nothing foreign to African workers; it

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[26]John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Heinemann, 1990), 106.
[27]Desmond Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness* (New York: Doubleday, 1999), 31.
[28]Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 108. Communal existence is understood here as constitutive of, rather than merely surrounding, individual identity.
[29]J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu, *Contemporary Pentecostal Christianity: Interpretations from an African Context* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2013), 45–46.
[30]Ebenezer Obadare, *Pentecostal Republic: Religion and the Struggle for State Power in Nigeria* (London: Zed Books, 2018), 3.

provides scholarly language for what millions of African Christians already practise every working day.

Metz has argued that Ubuntu ethics, understood as an emphasis on relationships of communion and care, offers a more adequate account of human flourishing than liberal individualist frameworks can provide,[31] a claim that translates in workplace contexts into a leadership ethic characterised by attentiveness, communal accountability, and a willingness to bear one another's burdens. Kalu's work on African Pentecostalism adds a further layer, showing how African Christian communities have articulated theologies of vocation and Spirit-empowered purpose that refuse the separation of spiritual from working life.[32]

Theoretical Framework: The Integrated Positive Psychology–Faith Model

The framework proposed here brings positive psychology, biblical theology, and African theological wisdom into a coherent integrative model, since none alone offers a complete account of workplace flourishing. Positive psychology provides empirical rigour and evidence-based interventions.[33] Biblical theology provides transcendent meaning and moral grounding; Volf argues that the deepest resources for sustaining human work are ultimately theological.[34] Tutu's Ubuntu framework insists that any account of flourishing that neglects the relational dimensions of personhood describes something less than fully human.[35]

The second ground for integration is contextual. In African workplaces these traditions are not neatly separable in practice. A Nigerian Christian manager who leads through servant principles, opens the day in communal prayer, and holds her vocation within Ubuntu obligation is not moving between distinct intellectual traditions; she is living an integrated

[31]Metz, "Ubuntu as a Moral Theory," 538.
[32]Ogbu U. Kalu, *African Pentecostalism: An Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 18.
[33]Martin E. P. Seligman, *Flourish: A Visionary New Understanding of Happiness and Well-Being* (New York: Free Press, 2011), 16–17.
[34]Volf, *Work in the Spirit*, 79.
[35]Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness*, 31.

anthropology, and the model gives theoretical expression to what many African workers already embody.

The convergences between positive psychology and faith traditions are substantial: both identify gratitude, hope, resilience, meaning, compassion, and community as central to human flourishing, and both understand virtue as cultivated through practice and communal formation. Their differences are equally instructive. Biblical hope is categorically different from Snyder's motivational construct, as Section 4.4 will argue, and the model holds such tensions open rather than resolving them prematurely. The three traditions are assigned distinct roles: positive psychology supplies descriptive evidence about the mechanisms of flourishing, while biblical and African theology supply the normative account of its ends (Section 4.6).

The model comprises four mutually reinforcing domains of practice, each developed in Section 4: vocational meaning, in which work is understood as purposeful calling; gratitude and relational practice, in which prayer and thanksgiving cultivate the relational dimensions of well-being; compassionate servant leadership, in which authority is exercised through service and Ubuntu-informed accountability; and communal resilience and hope, in which adversity is borne collectively within a narrative of biblical hope and African solidarity. Figure 1 presents the model diagrammatically.

Figure 1: The Integrated Positive Psychology–Faith Model

THE INTEGRATED POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY–FAITH MODEL		
POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY Empirical rigour | PERMA | Psychological Capital	**BIBLICAL THEOLOGY** Vocation | Imago Dei | Shalom | Servant Leadership	**AFRICAN THEOLOGY** Ubuntu | Communal Identity | Integrated Spirituality
↓ Convergence and Integration ↓		
FOUR INTEGRATED DOMAINS OF PRACTICE		

1. VOCATIONAL MEANING Work as purposeful calling: personal significance, biblical vocation, Ubuntu communal contribution	**2. GRATITUDE & RELATIONAL PRACTICE** Prayer, thanksgiving, and communal spiritual disciplines cultivating relational well-being and trust
3. COMPASSIONATE SERVANT LEADERSHIP Authority exercised through service, care, and Ubuntu relational accountability modelled on Christ	**4. COMMUNAL RESILIENCE & HOPE** Adversity borne collectively within a narrative of biblical hope and African communal solidarity
↓ Held within an explicit account of tensions, barriers, and plural-workplace adaptation (Section 4.6) ↓	
HOLISTIC WORKPLACE FLOURISHING	

Source: Authors' construction (2026)

METHODOLOGY

This study employs an integrative interdisciplinary literature review as its primary research design. Following Petticrew and Roberts, and consistent with Torraco's guidelines for integrative literature reviews, this methodology is appropriate for conceptual and theological papers whose purpose is to synthesise and generate theoretical contributions from existing scholarship rather than to collect primary data.[36]

The review does not follow a PRISMA protocol; it offers instead a defined scope, explicit search terms and databases, stated inclusion criteria, and a thematic synthesis anchored in

[36]Mark Petticrew and Helen Roberts, *Systematic Reviews in the Social Sciences: A Practical Guide* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), 2–5. See also Richard J. Torraco, "Writing Integrative Literature Reviews: Guidelines and Examples," *Human Resource Development Review* 4, no. 3 (2005): 356–67.

the paper's theoretical framework. In Torraco's terms, it is an integrative rather than a strictly systematic review.

A word about standpoint is in order. The authors engage the biblical and African theological traditions as normative resources whose claims about human nature, work, and flourishing are treated as intellectually serious, not merely as cultural data to be analysed at a distance. The Nigerian context accordingly functions not as a geographical backdrop but as the living setting the argument seeks to interpret.

The scope of the review was defined by three disciplinary domains: positive psychology and occupational well-being; theology of work, encompassing biblical studies and African theological perspectives; and workplace spirituality and faith-based organisational research. Databases consulted included PsycINFO, JSTOR, Google Scholar, and EBSCO. Search terms combined "workplace well-being," "positive psychology," "psychological capital," "workplace spirituality," "theology of work," "vocation," "servant leadership," "gratitude," "hope," "resilience," "Ubuntu," and "African theology" with "employee," "organisation," "Nigeria," and "Africa." A publication date threshold of 2000 was applied to psychological and management sources, with seminal earlier texts included where their influence warranted it. Sources were required to be directly relevant to at least one domain, peer-reviewed or published by a recognised academic press, and substantively relevant to the central argument.

The analytical approach draws on thematic synthesis, organising findings around the four domains of the Integrated Positive Psychology–Faith Model. Two hypothetical vignettes (Section 4.5) were constructed from the reviewed literature as heuristic illustrations, not empirical cases. Scope, assumptions, and limitations are discussed in Section 5.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Vocation, Meaning, and Purpose in Work

Steger and colleagues demonstrated that the experience of life and work as meaningful strongly predicts engagement, satisfaction, and psychological flourishing.[37] Meaning buffers against burnout: workers who understand their labour as purposeful are more likely to persist through adversity, whereas meaninglessness generates an existential fatigue that no workload adjustment can straightforwardly address.

The biblical theology of vocation reframes this finding. Where positive psychology treats meaning as self-constructed, vocation frames work as a response to a prior call. A worker who generates their own meaning depends on finite psychological resources; a worker who understands their labour as a response to God's purposes is anchored in something no organisational disappointment can fully dissolve. Volf's argument that human work mediates between the present age and the coming new creation gives ordinary work a dignity that no organisation can confer or revoke.[38]

African theological anthropology deepens this picture by insisting that meaning is not individually achieved but communally constituted. The Ubuntu principle reframes work's purpose away from self-realisation toward collective contribution. Mbiti's relational ontology suggests that the worker who understands their labour as sustaining the community is animated by a purpose that transcends personal ambition and survives personal frustration.[39]

Gratitude, Prayer, and Relational Flourishing

Emmons and McCullough's foundational experimental work demonstrated that a systematic gratitude practice produces significantly higher subjective well-being, lower levels of negative affect, and stronger relational bonds than those observed in control

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[37]Michael F. Steger et al., "The Meaning in Life Questionnaire: Assessing the Presence of and Search for Meaning in Life," *Journal of Counseling Psychology* 53, no. 1 (2006): 80.
[38]Volf, *Work in the Spirit*, 82.
[39]Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 109.

groups.[40] Gratitude expressed between colleagues strengthens trust and reduces interpersonal conflict, and gratitude interventions are among the most accessible and cost-effective positive psychology tools available to organisations.

Faith traditions understand gratitude not as a psychological technique but as a spiritual orientation toward reality itself. In the biblical tradition, thanksgiving is an act of worship acknowledging that all good things are received as gift; Paul's instruction in Philippians 4:6 to bring every anxiety to God with thanksgiving is a claim about the nature of reality, not simply a coping strategy. Gratitude tethered to a transcendent giver rather than to favourable conditions tends to survive adversity more consistently, because it does not depend on outcomes remaining favourable.

Prayer functions in the workplace as a discipline of attentiveness, humility, and interpersonal care. Ladd and Spilka found that petitionary, meditative, and intercessory prayer each contribute to distinct dimensions of well-being, including stress reduction, reflective clarity, and compassion for others.[41] In African Christian contexts, this resonates in ways the research did not anticipate. The brief devotion that opens the school morning, the staff prayer before ward rounds begin in a teaching hospital, the trader's prayer at the opening of the market: these are the ordinary texture of working life for millions of Nigerian Christians, representing a naturally occurring integration of spiritual practice and professional responsibility that positive psychology has largely failed to theorise.[42]

Communal prayer in the African workplace is, in Ubuntu terms, simultaneously a spiritual discipline and an act of solidarity: an acknowledgement that those gathered to work are also gathered before God.[43] Organisations hospitable to gratitude and reflective practice,

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[40]Robert A. Emmons and Michael E. McCullough, "Counting Blessings Versus Burdens: An Experimental Investigation of Gratitude and Subjective Well-Being in Daily Life," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 84, no. 2 (2003): 377–89.
[41]Kevin L. Ladd and Bernard Spilka, "Inward, Outward, and Upward: Cognitive Aspects of Prayer," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 41, no. 3 (2002): 475–84.
[42]This absence from the mainstream positive psychology literature is itself a finding worth noting. Asamoah-Gyadu observes that the integration of devotional practice and professional routine is so pervasive across Sub-Saharan Africa that Western organisational psychologists working in these contexts frequently encounter it as anomalous, a sign of how deeply the field's default assumptions are calibrated to secular Northern settings. See Asamoah-Gyadu, *Contemporary Pentecostal Christianity*, 45–47.
[43]Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness*, 35.

without coercion, build relational environments marked by psychological safety and the interpersonal resilience that sustains teams through difficulty.

Compassion and Servant Leadership

Compassionate leadership has emerged as one of the more significant themes in contemporary organisational research. Dutton and colleagues have demonstrated that compassion in the workplace, understood as the capacity to notice others' suffering and respond with practical care, is associated with higher levels of employee trust, psychological safety, and organisational commitment.[44] Leaders who model compassion create environments where employees feel safe to acknowledge their struggles and seek help.

Greenleaf's servant leadership model integrates compassion, empowerment, and ethical accountability into a coherent philosophy.[45] As Section 2.3 argued, its secular formulation finds its sharpest grounding not in management theory but in Mark 10:45, where self-giving service is presented as the definitive exercise of authority. This theological depth gives faith-based servant leadership a moral authority to challenge entrenched power structures that management theory alone cannot sustain.

Ubuntu reinforces this model through its relational ethic. In the Ubuntu tradition, the leader derives authority not from positional power but from relational accountability, and Metz argues that this demands a particular moral attentiveness: the willingness to be genuinely affected by the conditions of those for whom one is responsible.[46] Its convergence with biblical servant leadership and the empirical findings on compassion yields a framework that is psychologically grounded, theologically anchored, and culturally resonant for African workplaces.

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[44]Jane E. Dutton et al., "Explaining Compassion Organizing," *Administrative Science Quarterly* 51, no. 1 (2006): 59–96.
[45]Greenleaf, *Servant Leadership*, 27.
[46]Metz, "Ubuntu as a Moral Theory," 540.

Resilience, Hope, and Communal Flourishing

Luthans and colleagues identify hope and resilience as trainable capacities that buffer against workplace adversity.[47] Hope, in Snyder's motivational model, is not passive optimism but an active cognitive-motivational state characterised by both the will to pursue a goal and the capacity to find multiple pathways toward it when initial routes are blocked.[48] Resilience is the capacity to bounce back from and grow through adversity. Both have been empirically linked to higher performance, lower absenteeism, and stronger psychological well-being under sustained organisational pressure.[49]

The biblical understanding of hope is not a stronger version of Snyder's motivational construct; it is categorically different. In Romans 5:3–5, Paul argues that hope is a theological virtue generated through a specific process: suffering produces endurance, endurance produces character, and character produces a hope that does not ultimately disappoint. Grounded in the character of God rather than in favourable circumstances, this hope survives hardship because it is rooted in a narrative larger than any individual's experience or any organisation's performance cycle.

African communal theology adds the recognition that resilience is not primarily an individual capacity but a communal achievement. Suffering is carried collectively by family and faith community within the network of mutual obligation that Ubuntu ethics both describes and demands. The worker embedded in a genuine Ubuntu community faces adversity as a member of a body constituted by its willingness to carry one another.

Organisations that build communal resilience infrastructure, including chaplaincy, structured mentoring, and peer support networks, develop workforces capable of sustained flourishing under pressure. The investment is primarily cultural and relational, though not costless, and the resilience it generates is more robust than any single-tradition account can produce.

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[47]Fred Luthans, Carolyn M. Youssef-Morgan, and Bruce J. Avolio, *Psychological Capital and Beyond* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 2.
[48]C. R. Snyder, *The Psychology of Hope: You Can Get There from Here* (New York: Free Press, 1994), 5.
[49]Luthans, Youssef, and Avolio, *Psychological Capital*, 198.

Illustrative Applications of the Model

The two vignettes that follow are hypothetical composites constructed from the literature reviewed; they make the model's domains tangible but are not evidence of its effectiveness, which remains to be established (Section 5).

A mission teaching hospital in south-west Nigeria. A church-owned hospital confronts high nurse turnover and burnout on its surgical wards. Under vocational meaning, orientation frames nursing explicitly as a calling and as service to the community the hospital exists for, and each ward adopts a short charter naming whose flourishing its work serves. Under gratitude and relational practice, a voluntary five-minute devotion opens each shift, and handover closes with a "gratitude round" in which staff name one colleague's contribution. Under compassionate servant leadership, matrons complete a programme grounded in Mark 10:45 and Ubuntu accountability, visibly take the least popular festive-season shifts, and convene a monthly circle in which grievances can be raised without penalty. Under communal resilience and hope, chaplains and trained peer supporters debrief staff after patient deaths, and a welfare fund modelled on communal mutual aid supports colleagues in bereavement or illness. Success would be assessed through engagement, burnout, and turnover-intention measures taken before and after implementation.

A financial technology firm in Lagos. A firm of some 120 staff is roughly half Christian, one-third Muslim, and otherwise of traditional or no religious affiliation. It cannot adopt the model in confessional form, so it applies what Section 4.6 calls the model's convergent core. Vocational meaning is cultivated through a purpose narrative of service to customers and community, an expression of Ubuntu contribution requiring no doctrinal commitment, while a Christian fellowship and a Muslim prayer room receive equal, opt-in accommodation. Gratitude takes an inclusive form in a weekly appreciation round, with faith-specific thanksgiving reserved for voluntary affinity groups. Leaders undertake servant leadership formation built on the shared ethic of service, Christian leaders drawing explicitly on the example of Christ and Muslim leaders on their own tradition. Communal resilience is supported through peer networks, bereavement leave that honours diverse mourning practices, and multi-faith counselling. The vignette shows that the model's faith-

specific content is modular: its four domains can be expressed in inclusive terms, with confessional practices retained where staff freely choose them.

Tensions, Barriers, and Religiously Plural Workplaces

The model does not assume that biblical, African, and psychological frameworks integrate seamlessly; three tensions must be named. The first is anthropological. Positive psychology treats meaning as self-constructed and well-being as largely hedonic, whereas the theological traditions treat meaning as received and flourishing as *shalom*, which includes justice and right relationship. The model treats psychological findings as descriptive evidence about mechanisms and the theological traditions as the normative account of ends; where they conflict, the normative account governs the model's aims, but every claim about outcomes remains open to empirical scrutiny.

The second tension is theological and cultural. Ubuntu and biblical theology are allies, not identical. Ubuntu's communal priority can shade into conformity, suppression of dissent, and the extension of communal obligation into patronage and nepotism, objections Metz acknowledges must be answered.[50] Biblical theology, with its insistence on individual conscience and prophetic critique of the community, functions as a corrective; conversely, Ubuntu corrects individualist readings of Scripture. Within Nigerian Christianity, moreover, prosperity theology can convert workplace prayer into an instrument of personal advancement and organisational quietism, the reverse of the vocational theology advanced here.[51] The model therefore depends on a particular theological formation, not on religious expression of any kind.

The third tension concerns power. When an employer sponsors spiritual practice, "voluntary" becomes contested, and Mitroff and Denton's finding that employees welcome spirituality but fear religion as divisive is a warning the model must heed.[52] Nigeria's

[50]Metz, "Ubuntu as a Moral Theory," 533–36.
[51]Kalu, *African Pentecostalism*, 18. Obadare, *Pentecostal Republic*, 3.
[52]Mitroff and Denton, *Spiritual Audit*, 7.

constitution prohibits the adoption of a state religion and guarantees freedom of religion,[53] and public institutions in particular must honour that settlement.

Beyond these tensions lie practical barriers. Organisational resistance may come from managers trained in secular managerialism who regard faith as outside the organisation's remit or as a liability. Resource constraints are real: chaplaincy, mentoring, and leadership formation cost time and money, a nontrivial consideration for Nigerian public institutions and small enterprises. Religious diversity raises the risk of exclusion. Measurement is difficult because benefits are diffuse and long-term while costs are immediate. Most corrosive is leadership hypocrisy: servant leadership rhetoric unaccompanied by practice erodes trust faster than no programme at all. These barriers argue for phased adoption, beginning with low-cost practices such as meaning framing and gratitude, secured by credible senior sponsorship, and evaluated before expansion.

For religiously plural workplaces, five principles follow: a convergent core with a confessional periphery, in which the four domains take inclusive expressions while faith-specific practices are opt-in; parity of accommodation, so that where one tradition's practice is hosted others receive equivalent provision; opt-in and never opt-out, with participation bearing no relation to appraisal or advancement; leadership formation modelled on the shared ethic of service; and multi-faith or non-denominational pastoral care. Confessional institutions, such as mission hospitals and church-owned universities, may legitimately adopt the model in its fully Christian form, provided that staff of other faiths are treated with dignity and not disadvantaged.

SCOPE, ASSUMPTIONS, AND LIMITATIONS

The model is scoped to contexts in which faith is a lived, public dimension of working life, above all Nigeria and much of Sub-Saharan Africa, and is articulated primarily for Christian workers in organisations of any sector. No claim is made for its transfer to secular Western settings.

[53]Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (1999), secs. 10 and 38.

Four assumptions underlie the model. First, that meaning, gratitude, compassion, and hope are causally related to well-being outcomes; the evidence is substantial but largely correlational and Northern. Second, that religiously grounded forms of these goods function at least as durably as secular forms; this is plausible but untested comparatively. Third, that Ubuntu remains a living ethic in urban Nigerian workplaces rather than a nostalgic ideal; this is contestable, and the model draws on Southern African formulations whose mapping onto Nigerian ethical traditions remains to be established. Fourth, that organisations can host faith without coercion, an assumption Section 4.6 shows to be demanding.

The limitations follow from the design. The model rests on literature synthesis rather than field data, so its effectiveness as an integrated programme is unvalidated; integrative reviews carry selection bias, and the sources are Anglophone and largely cross-sectional. The model is Christian-centred and does not engage the Islamic frameworks that shape working life across northern Nigeria.

These limitations define the research agenda, for which four testable propositions are advanced. First, employees who construe their work as vocation will report higher engagement and lower burnout than employees with equivalent psychological capital who do not. Second, gratitude practices anchored in theological thanksgiving will show more durable effects under adversity than secular gratitude exercises. Third, servant leadership grounded in Ubuntu accountability will predict psychological safety beyond generic servant leadership. Fourth, communal resilience infrastructure will moderate the relationship between job demands and burnout. Mixed-methods designs combining the Psychological Capital Questionnaire, the Ashmos and Duchon spirituality-at-work measure, and the Meaning in Life Questionnaire with case studies in teaching hospitals, schools, and ministries would allow these propositions to be tested; longitudinal and comparative designs across confessional and plural organisations, and across Christian, Islamic, and African traditional religious frameworks, would address the remaining gaps.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The argument developed across these pages is that no single tradition, whether positive psychology, biblical theology, or African theological thought, can provide an adequate account of workplace well-being for workers whose lives are shaped by faith. The Integrated Positive Psychology–Faith Model holds the three together in a framework richer than any of them working alone. Vocation transforms how workers understand their labour. Gratitude anchored in theological conviction promises greater durability than its secular counterpart. Servant leadership grounded in the example of Christ and the demands of Ubuntu creates cultures of dignity and trust. Communal resilience sustained by biblical hope and African solidarity enables workforces to grow through adversity rather than merely managing its symptoms.

Because the model rests on literature synthesis rather than field research, the recommendations that follow are informed proposals rather than proven outcomes, to be read alongside the barriers identified in Section 4.6.

For organisational leadership. Embed vocation and communal purpose into onboarding, leadership development, and strategic planning, so that work is consistently connected to larger narratives of meaning and contribution. Create voluntary space for gratitude and communal reflection, with senior sponsorship but never coercion, and adopt the plural-workplace principles of Section 4.6 wherever staff are religiously diverse.

For human resource practitioners. Invest in servant leadership formation grounded in both biblical ethics and Ubuntu principles. Build communal resilience infrastructure, including chaplaincy and peer support networks, to complement rather than replace professional mental health provision, phasing the investment so that low-cost practices are established and evaluated first.

For faith leaders and theological educators. Form workplace Christians in a theology of vocation that resists prosperity distortions, and prepare chaplains for service in religiously plural institutions.

For future research. Pursue the propositions and designs set out in Section 5, moving the model from theoretical proposal to evidence-based practice.

A workplace that attends to the spiritual, relational, and vocational dimensions of its members does not merely manage stress. It cultivates what the oldest traditions of wisdom have long understood: human beings flourish most fully not when distress is minimised, but when they are known, called, and held within a community of meaning, mutual care, and abiding hope.

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CHAPTER 30

DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY AND MENTAL HEALTH: BIBLICAL RESOURCES FOR NAVIGATING SCREEN CULTURE IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

This study adopts an interdisciplinary conceptual-theological approach, combining contextual and theological-exegetical interpretation of selected biblical texts with a critical synthesis of literature from psychology, computer science, media studies, and African studies. Focusing specifically on Nigeria, it examines the relationship between digital technology and mental health, with particular attention to problematic digital use, social comparison, anxiety, emotional well-being, and the influence of algorithm-driven platforms and artificial intelligence. The study interprets Romans 12:2, Philippians 4:8, Galatians 5:22–23, and biblical teachings on Sabbath rest and embodied community as resources for evaluating digital engagement. These texts are examined in relation to Nigerian social and communal contexts to develop a theological framework for responsible technology use. The study argues that biblical principles of mental renewal, self-control, rest, discernment, and communal accountability can inform Christian responses to the psychological and relational challenges associated with screen culture. It proposes a contextual theology of digital stewardship that integrates biblical ethics, technological awareness, and interdisciplinary approaches to mental health. The study further identifies

complementary roles for individuals, families, churches, mental health professionals, and policymakers in promoting responsible digital practices and holistic well-being in Nigeria.

Keywords: *Digital Technology, Mental Health, Biblical Ethics, African Christianity, Screen Culture, Digital Stewardship.*

Introduction

The rapid proliferation of digital technology across Africa has significantly reshaped patterns of communication, social interaction, education, and even religious engagement. Over the past decade, the widespread adoption of smartphones, increased internet penetration, and the growing influence of social media platforms have ushered African societies into a new era of digital interconnectedness. In countries such as Nigeria, young people in particular are at the forefront of this transformation, engaging daily with platforms that mediate identity formation, relationships, and access to information. While these developments have created new opportunities for innovation, economic participation, and global engagement, they have also introduced complex challenges, especially in the area of mental health.

Emerging evidence suggests associations between problematic patterns of digital media use and several psychological concerns, including anxiety, depression, loneliness, sleep disruption, and reduced attention span. Scholars have argued that the architecture of many digital platforms, designed around algorithmic engagement and persuasive technologies, encourages compulsive usage patterns that may undermine emotional well-being.[1] In African contexts, where communal life and face-to-face interactions have historically been central to social cohesion, the increasing dominance of screen-mediated communication raises important questions about the long-term implications for psychological and relational health.[2]

Despite the growing body of research on digital technology and mental health, much of the existing literature remains largely empirical and, in many cases, developed in Western

[1] Adam Alter, *Irresistible: The Rise of Addictive Technology and the Business of Keeping Us Hooked* (New York: Penguin Press, 2017), 12–15
[2] Ibid

settings, often neglecting the potential contributions of theological perspectives, particularly within Nigerian Christian contexts. Yet, biblical teachings offer rich resources for understanding the human mind, emotional balance, self-control, and the importance of rest and community. Texts such as Romans 12:2 and Philippians 4:8 emphasise cognitive transformation and disciplined thought, while broader biblical traditions highlight rhythms of rest (Sabbath) and the necessity of embodied fellowship. These insights are particularly relevant in addressing the fragmented attention and overstimulation associated with contemporary screen culture.

This study, therefore, seeks to bridge the gap between digital technology studies and biblical theology by examining how scriptural principles can inform healthier patterns of digital engagement. It argues that while technology itself is not inherently detrimental, its unregulated use can distort human flourishing when detached from ethical and spiritual guidance. By integrating insights from computer science, psychology, and biblical studies, this paper proposes a framework for "digital stewardship" that encourages responsible technology use grounded in moral discipline, communal accountability, and spiritual awareness. In doing so, it contributes to ongoing conversations about mental health, technological ethics, and the role of faith in navigating the complexities of contemporary African life.

Although scholarship on digital technology and mental health has developed across psychology, media studies, computer science, and related disciplines, the present study identifies a need for a more explicit integration of these discussions with biblical theology in the Nigerian context. Rather than assuming that such integration is absent from all existing African scholarship, this study focuses on the specific intersection of digital technology, mental health, biblical anthropology, and Nigerian communal life. The research question is: How can biblical resources inform a contextual theological response to the mental health and relational challenges associated with digital technology use in Nigeria? The study's thesis is that biblical principles of mental renewal (Rom. 12:2), disciplined thought (Phil. 4:8), self-control (Gal. 5:22–23), rest, and embodied community provide resources for developing a theology of responsible digital engagement, while remaining complementary to professional mental health care. Its contribution is a

contextual conceptual framework of digital stewardship that brings biblical ethics into critical dialogue with interdisciplinary research on digital technology and mental health, identifying implications for individuals, families, churches, and other relevant institutions in Nigeria. Central to this contribution is the heuristic concept of 'algorithmic anthropology,' developed later in the study to describe how data-driven platforms implicitly construe persons through measurable behaviour, attention, and predicted preference; the concept becomes the bridge between the interdisciplinary evidence, biblical anthropology, and the proposed theology of digital stewardship.

Methodology

This study adopts an interdisciplinary conceptual-theological approach and critical narrative synthesis rather than an empirical qualitative design. It addresses three questions: (1) What mental health challenges are associated with digital technology use? (2) How do selected biblical teachings inform responsible digital engagement? (3) How can these teachings be contextualised within Nigeria? The study draws on published literature in psychology, computer science, media studies, and biblical and African studies, prioritising scholarly books, peer-reviewed articles, and relevant institutional reports. The literature is selected thematically for its relevance to digital technology, mental health, and Nigerian social contexts; no formal database search, fixed date range, or reproducible keyword protocol is claimed. The biblical texts, Romans 12:2, Philippians 4:8, Galatians 5:22–23, and passages concerning Sabbath rest and Christian community, are selected for their explicit engagement with mental renewal, disciplined thought, self-control, rest, and relational responsibility. Each text is examined in its literary and theological context, followed by a contextual hermeneutic that considers its relevance and limits within Nigerian communal life and contemporary digital culture. Findings from the literature and biblical interpretation are integrated thematically to construct a framework of digital stewardship. The study is limited by its reliance on secondary literature and theological interpretation; it does not establish causal relationships between technology use and mental health or empirically test the proposed framework.

Conceptual Clarifications

1. Digital Technology and Screen Culture

Digital technology refers to electronic tools, systems, devices, and resources that generate, store, or process data. These include smartphones, computers, internet infrastructure, and digital platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and X. Screen culture, on the other hand, denotes a social environment where human interaction, communication, and identity formation are increasingly mediated through screens. In Nigeria, the proliferation of affordable smartphones and mobile internet has intensified participation in digital culture, particularly among youths. This shift has redefined social engagement, creating both opportunities for connection and risks of overexposure and dependency.[3]

2. Mental Health

Mental health is a state of mental well-being that enables people to cope with the stresses of life, realise their abilities, learn and work well, and contribute to their communities. In this study, mental well-being refers to positive functioning and the capacity to cope; psychological distress and symptoms refer to experiences such as anxiety, low mood, loneliness, or sleep disruption that may occur without a clinical diagnosis; clinically diagnosed mental disorders are conditions established through appropriate professional assessment; and problematic digital use refers to patterns of technology use marked by impaired control or significant interference with daily functioning. These categories overlap, but they are not interchangeable. The distinction is important because evidence linking digital engagement with well-being or distress does not by itself establish a diagnosed mental disorder or a causal relationship.[4][5]

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[3] Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other* (New York: Basic Books, 2011), 1–20.
[4] World Health Organization, "*Mental Health," World Health Organization*, accessed September 28, 2026, who.int. World Health Organization, “Mental Health,” October 8, 2025.
[5] Jean M. Twenge, *iGen: Why Today’s Super-Connected Kids Are Growing Up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy* (New York: Atria Books, 2017), 45–70.

3. Biblical Stewardship and Ethics of Technology Use

Biblical stewardship is rooted in the understanding that humans are caretakers of God's creation. Drawing from Genesis 2:15, stewardship implies responsible management of resources, including time, attention, and technological tools. This concept extends to ethical technology use, emphasising moderation, accountability, and purposeful engagement. As Craig Groeschel notes, unchecked digital consumption can shape spiritual and mental life in profound ways, necessitating intentional discipline.[6] Thus, technology must be approached not merely as a neutral tool but as a moral space requiring discernment and self-control.

4. African Communal Worldview and Identity

African societies are characterised by diverse philosophical, religious, ethnic, and social traditions, and no single account adequately represents the continent's many understandings of personhood and community. Within this diversity, however, relational conceptions of human identity are evident in a number of African contexts. John S. Mbiti's well-known formulation, "I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am," provides a useful classical expression of this relational orientation, particularly in discussions of communal personhood in African philosophy.[7] Mbiti should not, however, be taken as a comprehensive representation of all African or Nigerian traditions. Nigerian societies themselves contain significant cultural and religious differences, and communal values are expressed in varying ways across ethnic and regional contexts.

For the purposes of this study, the significance of this perspective is not to establish a uniform "African worldview," but to identify a relational dimension of personhood that provides a useful contextual lens for examining digital technology and mental health in Nigeria. Within many Nigerian communities, interpersonal relationships, kinship, religious participation, and communal responsibility remain important sources of social identity and support. The increasing mediation of social interaction through digital platforms therefore

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[6] Craig Groeschel, *Winning the War in Your Mind* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2021), 23–35.
[7] John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (Oxford: Heinemann, 1969), 108.

raises questions about how online forms of connection interact with, complement, or potentially displace embodied relationships and communal accountability.

Digital Landscape in Nigeria

Nigeria has experienced a rapid transformation in its digital ecosystem over the past two decades, driven largely by mobile technology, expanding internet infrastructure, and a youthful population eager to adopt new media. Current national digital estimates illustrate the scale of this transformation: by late 2025, Nigeria had about 109 million internet users, representing 45.5 per cent internet penetration, about 47.8 million social-media user identities, and approximately 165 million cellular mobile connections. These figures should not be treated as equivalent measures of unique individual users, but they show the extent to which digital infrastructures now shape communication, education, commerce, religious practice, and everyday social life in Nigeria.[8]

Mobile connectivity remains the backbone of Nigeria's digital growth. The widespread use of affordable smartphones has enabled citizens to access online platforms for communication, commerce, education, and entertainment. Social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and X have become central to everyday interaction, particularly among young people. These platforms are not only used for social engagement but also for political discourse, digital activism, religious expression, and business promotion.[9]

In addition, Nigeria's digital space has been shaped by the growth of fintech, e-learning, and digital media industries. Platforms for mobile banking, online education, and digital content creation have expanded opportunities for economic participation and knowledge dissemination. Churches and religious organisations have also embraced digital tools,

[8] Nigerian Communications Commission, *Subscriber Statistics Report* (Abuja: NCC, 2023). See also DataReportal, Digital 2026: Nigeria (2026), reporting 109 million internet users, 47.8 million social-media user identities, and 165 million cellular connections in late 2025.
[9] DataReportal, *Digital 2023: Nigeria* (2023).

offering livestreamed services, online counselling, and social media evangelism, thereby extending their reach beyond physical congregations.[10]

Despite these advancements, significant challenges persist. Issues such as uneven internet access between urban and rural areas, high data costs, digital illiteracy, and regulatory tensions continue to shape the Nigerian digital environment. Moreover, the pervasive use of digital technologies has introduced new social and psychological pressures, particularly among youth navigating identity formation, social comparison, and constant connectivity in these spaces.[11]

Digital Technology and Mental Health Challenges

The rapid diffusion of digital technologies in Nigeria has significantly reshaped patterns of social interaction, information consumption, and identity formation. While these technologies have created new opportunities for connectivity and innovation, they have also introduced complex mental health challenges that demand critical attention.

One of the most prominent concerns is problematic rather than merely frequent digital use. Recent evidence cautions against treating all screen time or social-media use as uniformly harmful: general social-media use shows weak and inconsistent associations with mental-health outcomes, whereas problematic patterns of use are more consistently associated with ill-being. The relevant questions therefore concern the time, type, content, context, and degree of impaired control involved in digital engagement. Nigerian evidence points in the same direction. A 2024 cross-sectional study of 410 undergraduate pharmacy students in a Nigerian public university found smartphone addiction correlated with the severity of depression and anxiety symptoms, although it did not correlate with sleep quality. Such findings identify associations in a specific student population and should not be interpreted as proof that smartphone use causes mental disorder.[12]

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[10] Ibid.
[11] International Telecommunication Union, *Measuring Digital Development: Facts and Figures 2022* (Geneva: ITU, 2022).
[12] Jean M. Twenge, *iGen: Why Today's Super-Connected Kids Are Growing Up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy and Completely Unprepared for Adulthood* (New York: Atria Books, 2017), 98–102.

Closely related is the issue of cyberbullying and online harassment, which has become increasingly prevalent in digital environments. Social media platforms provide anonymity and distance, enabling harmful behaviours such as trolling, body shaming, and verbal abuse. Victims of cyberbullying often experience anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, and, in severe cases, suicidal ideation.[13] The Nigerian context reflects these global patterns, particularly among adolescents and university students who are active participants in online communities.

Another critical challenge is social comparison and identity strain. Digital platforms frequently present curated and idealised versions of life, leading users to compare themselves unfavourably with others. This phenomenon contributes to feelings of inadequacy, low self-worth, and identity confusion, especially among young people navigating formative stages of self-development.[14] The pressure to conform to online standards of success, beauty, and lifestyle further intensifies emotional strain.

Additionally, anxiety, depression, and loneliness have been increasingly associated with excessive digital engagement. Despite the promise of connectivity, many users report feelings of isolation and emotional disconnection. The paradox of "connected loneliness" is evident in Nigerian urban centres, where individuals maintain extensive online networks but lack meaningful offline relationships.[15] Constant exposure to negative news, online conflicts, and information overload also exacerbates stress and emotional fatigue.

Finally, digital technology has implications for academic performance and productivity. Frequent notifications, multitasking, and digital distractions undermine sustained attention and deep work. Students often struggle with concentration, time management, and

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See also Chibueze Anosike et al., "Effect of Smartphone Addiction on Mental Health and Sleep Quality among Undergraduate Pharmacy Students in a Nigerian Public University," The Journal of Mental Health Training, Education and Practice 19, no. 4 (2024): 201–212; Katrine B. Tølbøll, "Social Media Use and Adolescent Mental Health—An Umbrella Review and Power Analysis," Child and Adolescent Mental Health (2026).

[13] Sameer Hinduja and Justin W. Patchin, *Bullying Beyond the Schoolyard: Preventing and Responding to Cyberbullying* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2015), 45–60.

[14] Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other* (New York: Basic Books, 2011), 152–160.

[15] John T. Cacioppo and William Patrick, *Loneliness: Human Nature and the Need for Social Connection* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2008), 219–225.

academic discipline, resulting in lower academic outcomes.[16] In Nigeria's educational environment, where digital tools are increasingly integrated into learning, the challenge lies in balancing their benefits with mindful usage.

Artificial Intelligence, Human Agency, and Mental Health

The rapid advancement of Artificial Intelligence (AI) has significantly expanded the scope of digital technology beyond traditional social media platforms and search engines. AI-powered applications, including conversational chatbots, recommendation systems, virtual assistants, generative AI, and algorithmic decision-making tools, increasingly shape how individuals obtain information, form relationships, make decisions, and perceive reality. While these technologies offer remarkable opportunities for education, healthcare, productivity, and innovation, they also introduce new ethical and psychological concerns that warrant theological reflection.

One emerging concern is the increasing emotional dependence on AI companions and conversational chatbots. These systems may provide users with perceived companionship, responsiveness, or short-term emotional support, and their value should not be dismissed simply because the interaction is technologically mediated. At the same time, emerging research raises concerns about overreliance, attachment, manipulation, and the displacement of human support. Recent evidence that users can experience significant distress when established AI-companion relationships are disrupted illustrates that these systems may become psychologically consequential. The appropriate theological concern is therefore not to assume that every AI-mediated relationship is harmful, but to ask when such interaction begins to weaken human agency, embodied relationships, accountability, or access to appropriate professional and communal care.[17]

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[16] Nicholas Carr, *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2010), 115–120.

[17] Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other* (New York: Basic Books, 2011), 279–295; Kate Darling, *The New Breed: What Our History with Animals Reveals about Our Future with Robots* (New York: Henry Holt, 2021), 143–165. See also Julian De Freitas et al., "Mourning the Loss of AI Companions," Nature Human Behaviour (2026).

Another challenge concerns AI-generated misinformation and deepfakes. Advances in generative AI now enable the production of realistic images, videos, voices, and written content that are difficult to distinguish from authentic material. Such technologies have increased the spread of misinformation, identity manipulation, online fraud, and political deception, thereby contributing to public distrust and psychological anxiety.[18] Within the Nigerian context, where digital literacy remains uneven, AI-generated misinformation presents significant ethical challenges for civic engagement, religious discourse, and social cohesion.

AI also intensifies concerns regarding algorithmic dependency and cognitive autonomy. Recommendation algorithms increasingly determine the information individuals consume, the news they encounter, and even the religious content they access. Over time, these personalised systems may reduce critical thinking by reinforcing existing preferences and limiting exposure to alternative perspectives.[19] Consequently, users risk surrendering significant aspects of personal agency to computational systems designed primarily to maximise engagement rather than promote truth or human well-being.

From a biblical perspective, these developments raise important theological questions concerning human agency, discernment, and moral responsibility. Scripture consistently portrays wisdom as the capacity to exercise sound judgement under God's guidance (Prov. 2:6; Jas. 1:5). The theological claim advanced here is normative rather than empirical: AI may assist human reasoning, but Christian theology does not locate moral agency merely in computational performance. The imago Dei (Gen. 1:26–27), together with the biblical portrayal of persons as responsible before God and accountable within covenantal relationships, grounds human dignity and responsibility in a theological vocation that cannot be reduced to data processing. Accordingly, AI should be governed as a human-made tool whose outputs remain subject to discernment, accountability, and moral

[18] Ibid, 41–69.
[19] Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2019), 291–330; Luciano Floridi, *The Ethics of Artificial Intelligence: Principles, Challenges, and Opportunities* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023), 88–110.

judgement rather than treated as a substitute for responsible human agency or authentic community.

The emergence of Artificial Intelligence therefore reinforces the need for a theology of digital stewardship that extends beyond responsible smartphone use to encompass the ethical governance of intelligent technologies. Such stewardship requires Christians to evaluate AI not merely in terms of efficiency and convenience but also according to its impact on truth, human dignity, relational integrity, and mental well-being.

Biblical Perspectives on Mental Health and Technology Use

The Bible does not address digital technology directly, yet its teachings on the mind, discipline, rest, and community provide a rich framework for evaluating contemporary patterns of technology use and their impact on mental health. Within the Nigerian context, where digital engagement is rapidly reshaping identity and social interaction, these biblical principles offer both ethical direction and psychological insight.

A central biblical concern is the formation and renewal of the human mind. Romans 12:2 occurs within Paul's paraenetic appeal following the theological exposition of Romans 1–11 and addresses a community called to resist conformity to the present age, undergo transformation through the renewal of the mind, and discern the will of God. Digital technology is therefore not the direct subject of the text. Its relevance here is analogical: in an environment where algorithmically selected content repeatedly competes for attention and shapes habits of perception, Paul's concern for transformed discernment provides a theological basis for asking what forms the Christian mind and whether patterns of digital consumption assist or hinder faithful judgement.

Similarly, Philippians 4:8 belongs to Paul's closing exhortations to a Christian community and directs believers toward what is true, honourable, just, pure, pleasing, commendable, excellent, and worthy of praise. The verse is not a clinical technique for treating anxiety or other mental-health conditions. Rather, it supplies an ethical vocabulary for disciplined attention and moral imagination. Applied to screen culture, it encourages critical

discernment about the material to which believers repeatedly give attention, while leaving questions of diagnosis and clinical treatment to appropriate mental-health practice.

The concept of self-control, emphasised in Galatians 5:22–23 as fruit of the Spirit, is particularly relevant to compulsive digital habits. In its Pauline context, however, self-control is not generic willpower. It belongs to the contrast between life according to the flesh and life directed by the Spirit (Gal. 5:16–26) and is expressed within the ethical life of the Christian community. Applied to digital engagement, Spirit-formed self-control supports moderation and resistance to compulsive patterns, but it should be understood as part of Christian formation, communal accountability, and responsible habit rather than as an isolated technique for reducing screen time.

Equally important is the biblical theology of Sabbath. Genesis 2:2–3 presents divine rest and the sanctification of the seventh day; Exodus 20:8–11 grounds Sabbath in creation, while Deuteronomy 5:12–15 connects it with liberation from bondage and the extension of rest to the household and the vulnerable. Jesus' Sabbath teaching further resists interpretations that turn the day into a burden rather than a gift ordered toward life and mercy. A contemporary 'digital Sabbath' is therefore not the meaning or purpose of biblical Sabbath itself. It is, at most, an application of Sabbath theology to an always-connected environment: a deliberate refusal to allow non-essential digital demands to colonise sacred time, embodied relationships, worship, rest, and attention.

Furthermore, the Bible emphasises the importance of community and embodied relationships. Acts 2:42–47 portrays Christian life through teaching, fellowship, shared meals, prayer, generosity, and concrete mutual care. Digital communication can meaningfully supplement such relationships, especially across distance, and online relationships should not be dismissed as inherently inauthentic. Yet mediated connection cannot fully reproduce every dimension of embodied presence, shared practice, pastoral observation, and communal accountability. The theological priority is therefore not a simple opposition between online and offline life, but the preservation of forms of Christian community in which persons remain genuinely known, supported, accountable, and present to one another.

Nigerian Socio-Cultural Context

The socio-cultural environment of Nigeria provides an important framework for understanding the interaction between digital technology and mental health, but Nigerian communality should not be treated as culturally uniform. Nigeria is ethnically, religiously, economically, geographically, and generationally diverse, and patterns of kinship and communal obligation vary considerably. Nevertheless, extended-family networks, religious participation, kinship ties, and community-based support remain significant in many Nigerian settings. These relational structures provide a useful, though not universal, context for asking how screen-mediated interaction may complement or displace embodied support and accountability.[20]

However, the rapid diffusion of digital technologies has begun to reshape these long-standing cultural patterns. The increasing use of smartphones and social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok has introduced new forms of interaction that often prioritise individual expression over communal engagement. While these platforms enable connection across distances, they can also foster a form of "digital individualism," where virtual interactions gradually replace face-to-face relationships. This shift has implications for mental health, as the erosion of physical community support may contribute to loneliness, anxiety, and emotional isolation.[21]

In addition, young Nigerians, who are prominent users of digital technologies, are particularly exposed to these changes. Curated online lifestyles and social-comparison dynamics can contribute to identity strain and reduced self-esteem for some users. The pressure to maintain an idealised digital persona may also interact with wider socio-economic pressures, including employment insecurity and unequal access to opportunity.

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[20] Daniel Jordan Smith, *A Culture of Corruption: Everyday Deception and Popular Discontent in Nigeria* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 45–47.
[21] Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other* (New York: Basic Books, 2011), 155–160.

These factors should be understood as interacting contextual pressures rather than as a single causal explanation of mental-health outcomes.[22]

Religious institutions remain central to Nigerian social life and continue to shape moral values and coping mechanisms. Churches, in particular, serve as spaces for community cohesion, spiritual guidance, and informal counselling. Yet, even these institutions are undergoing digital transformation through online services and social media engagement. While this shift expands access to religious content, it also risks weakening embodied fellowship and personal pastoral care, which are crucial for mental health support.[23]

Cultural attitudes toward mental health in Nigeria also play a significant role. Mental health issues are often stigmatised or interpreted through spiritual or moral lenses, leading to underreporting and limited access to professional care.[24] In this context, digital spaces can become both a refuge and a risk, offering anonymity for expression while simultaneously exposing individuals to harmful content and interactions.

Role of Churches and Faith-Based Institutions

In Nigeria, churches and faith-based institutions occupy a central position in societal moral guidance, education, and community well-being. These institutions are uniquely positioned to address the mental health challenges arising from pervasive digital technology use, particularly among youth. With the proliferation of smartphones, social media, and streaming platforms, many young Nigerians increasingly experience anxiety, depression, digital addiction, and social isolation. Churches, as trusted moral authorities, can play a proactive role in mitigating these challenges.

Firstly, churches can leverage digital platforms for pastoral care and counselling. Online sermons, WhatsApp support groups, and church-managed social media accounts allow religious leaders to reach congregants who may struggle with digital overuse or related

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[22] Kenneth J. Gergen, *The Saturated Self: Dilemmas of Identity in Contemporary Life* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), 72–75.
[23] Manuel Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2010), 403–410.
[24] Jibril Abdulmalik et al., *Mental Health System in Nigeria: Challenges and Opportunities* (Abuja: Federal Ministry of Health, 2016), 12–15.

mental health issues. By providing guidance grounded in biblical principles, churches can teach congregants about moderation, self-control, and spiritual discipline in their engagement with technology.[25]

Secondly, churches can incorporate mental-health awareness into their teaching programmes. Workshops, seminars, and discussion forums can help members recognise problematic digital habits and signs of psychological distress. Pastoral care should, however, operate within clear professional boundaries. Churches can provide spiritual support, psychoeducation, community care, and referral, while suspected clinical depression, anxiety disorders, trauma, behavioural addictions, or crisis situations should be directed to appropriately qualified mental-health professionals. Faith communities should also establish safeguarding procedures, protect confidentiality, and maintain clear emergency referral pathways where suicide or self-harm risk is disclosed. In this way, pastoral care complements rather than substitutes for professional assessment and treatment.[26]

Thirdly, faith-based institutions can model healthy digital habits through community initiatives. For instance, organising "digital Sabbath" activities or promoting offline fellowship encourages communal interaction and counterbalances excessive online engagement. Churches can also partner with schools, NGOs, and government programmes to promote digital literacy and responsible technology use, aligning with the biblical principles of stewardship and care for the mind and community.[27]

Limits and Complementarity of Biblical Ethics in Digital Mental Health

Although biblical ethics offers profound theological resources for understanding human flourishing, it is important to acknowledge that contemporary digital mental health challenges cannot be addressed through spiritual reflection alone. A growing body of scholarship argues that digital technologies are not morally neutral instruments but

[25] Ibid, 45.
[26] Ibid.
[27] Ibid.

environments intentionally designed to shape users' behaviour, attention, and emotional responses. Social media platforms employ persuasive algorithms, variable reward systems, and personalised content delivery to maximise user engagement, often encouraging compulsive patterns of use that contribute to anxiety, depression, sleep disruption, and diminished psychological well-being.[28] Consequently, ethical responsibility lies not only with individual users but also with technology companies whose design choices influence human behaviour.

Furthermore, mental health disorders should not be reduced to purely spiritual problems requiring only prayer or biblical instruction. While Scripture provides indispensable moral and spiritual guidance, conditions such as clinical depression, anxiety disorders, trauma-related illnesses, and behavioural addictions involve biological, psychological, and social dimensions that frequently require professional intervention.[29] The tendency within some Christian communities to spiritualise all forms of psychological distress risks discouraging individuals from seeking appropriate clinical care and may inadvertently reinforce the stigma surrounding mental illness. A holistic Christian understanding of healing should therefore recognise the complementary roles of pastoral care, psychological counselling, psychiatry, and community support.

Similarly, contemporary advocacy for "digital detox" or temporary withdrawal from digital devices, although beneficial in reducing screen fatigue, cannot by itself resolve the structural causes of unhealthy digital engagement. Excessive technology use is often reinforced by occupational demands, educational requirements, economic pressures, and platform architectures that reward continuous connectivity.[30] Consequently, sustainable digital well-being requires more than periodic abstinence; it demands the cultivation of

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[28] Adam Alter, *Irresistible: The Rise of Addictive Technology and the Business of Keeping Us Hooked* (New York: Penguin Press, 2017), 17–45.
[29] Harold G. Koenig, *Religion and Mental Health: Research and Clinical Applications* (San Diego: Academic Press, 2018), 35–58.
[30] Cal Newport, *Digital Minimalism: Choosing a Focused Life in a Noisy World* (New York: Portfolio, 2019), 95–126.

enduring virtues such as self-control, discernment, moderation, and responsible stewardship, all of which are deeply rooted in biblical teaching.

These considerations suggest that an adequate Christian response to digital mental health must be interdisciplinary rather than exclusively theological. Churches should collaborate with psychologists, psychiatrists, educators, public health practitioners, and technology experts to develop comprehensive strategies for promoting digital well-being. Such collaboration is consistent with a Christian commitment to receive diverse forms of expertise and care without setting pastoral and professional responses against one another. Rather than viewing science and theology as competing explanations, both should be understood as complementary resources for promoting holistic human flourishing. This integrated approach provides the conceptual foundation for the theology of digital stewardship proposed in this study.

Biblical Anthropology versus Algorithmic Anthropology

The rapid expansion of digital technologies has given rise to what this study terms 'algorithmic anthropology.' The expression is used here as a heuristic construct: it names the implicit account of the human person produced when platform systems translate identity, preference, attention, and social value into measurable data and computational predictions. Unlike classical theological anthropology, which understands humanity in relation to God, neighbour, and creation, algorithmic anthropology constructs a legible digital subject through clicks, likes, shares, viewing duration, profiles, and inferred preferences. The concept does not claim that algorithms literally possess a theology of the human person; rather, it draws attention to the anthropological assumptions embedded in datafication and platform design, where visibility, engagement, prediction, and monetisable attention can become practical measures of value.[31]

Algorithmic systems are intentionally designed to maximise user attention because attention has become one of the most valuable commodities in the contemporary digital

[31] Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2019), 8–25.

economy. Persuasive technologies utilise behavioural prediction, personalised recommendations, and intermittent reward mechanisms to encourage prolonged engagement.[32] While these innovations enhance user experience and commercial efficiency, they also reshape human desires, habits, and patterns of social interaction. Individuals gradually become consumers of algorithmically curated realities rather than active interpreters of truth, often resulting in comparison, anxiety, fear of missing out (FOMO), and diminished psychological resilience.

In contrast, biblical anthropology presents a fundamentally different understanding of the human person. Scripture affirms that human beings possess inherent worth because they are created in the image and likeness of God (imago Dei) (Gen. 1:26–27). Human dignity is therefore neither earned through public recognition nor determined by social approval but is received as a divine gift.[33] Unlike digital cultures that encourage individuals to manufacture idealised online identities, biblical theology understands identity as something grounded in God's creative purpose and redeemed through relationship with Christ. The believer's value is determined by divine grace rather than digital performance.

This distinction also extends to the understanding of community. Algorithmic anthropology frequently privileges virtual connectivity, individual self-expression, and personalised digital experiences. Although these platforms facilitate communication, they may simultaneously weaken some forms of embodied relationship and communal accountability. Biblical anthropology, however, conceives personhood as inherently relational. The New Testament consistently portrays Christian life as participation in an embodied covenant community characterised by mutual care, fellowship, and accountability (Acts 2:42–47). This relational emphasis can enter constructive dialogue with African accounts of communal personhood. Mbiti's well-known formulation, 'I am because we are,' is retained here as a classical relational voice rather than as a comprehensive description of Nigerian cultures; Ubuntu, more closely associated with

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[32] Tristan Harris, "How Technology Is Hijacking Your Mind," *Medium*, May 18, 2016; Adam Alter, *Irresistible: The Rise of Addictive Technology and the Business of Keeping Us Hooked* (New York: Penguin Press, 2017), 35–67.
[33] John F. Kilner, *Dignity and Destiny: Humanity in the Image of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 19–48.

Southern African philosophical traditions, may serve comparatively but should not be treated as self-evidently Nigerian.[34]

The contrast between these two anthropological paradigms demonstrates that contemporary digital culture is not merely a technological phenomenon but also an anthropological and theological one. Digital technologies increasingly answer fundamental questions concerning identity, value, belonging, and purpose. Consequently, Christian engagement with technology cannot be limited to ethical regulations governing device usage; it must involve a recovery of a distinctly biblical understanding of the human person. It is from this theological foundation that a robust theology of digital stewardship emerges, enabling believers to engage technological innovations responsibly while preserving human dignity, mental well-being, and authentic community.

Toward a Theology of Digital Stewardship

The concept of digital stewardship is the constructive theological synthesis of this study. It draws on biblical stewardship but extends beyond the management of devices or screen time. Digital stewardship asks how Christians may inhabit technological environments in ways that preserve human dignity, truth, disciplined attention, Spirit-formed self-control, Sabbath, embodied relationality, accountability, justice, and care. Because digital platforms shape attention and behaviour as well as serve human purposes, stewardship requires both personal discipline and critical awareness of the systems within which choices are made. It therefore joins biblical anthropology to practical responsibility: technology may serve education, communication, ministry, creativity, and community building, but its use should remain answerable to God's purposes for human flourishing rather than to engagement, convenience, or efficiency alone.[35]

A theology of digital stewardship in the Nigerian context emphasises intentionality in online engagement. Romans 12:2 instructs believers to “be transformed by the renewing of your mind,” which may be applied, by analogy, to critical reflection on digital content

[34] John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Heinemann, 1990), 106–109.
[35] Wendell Berry, *The Art of the Commonplace: The Agrarian Essays* (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2002), 45.

consumption.[36] Philippians 4:8 further directs attention to things that are true, noble, and praiseworthy, guiding users to select online content that uplifts rather than harms mental and spiritual well-being.[37] Similarly, Galatians 5:22–23 encourages self-control, a key virtue in moderating screen time and resisting compulsive digital behaviours.[38]

Churches and faith-based organisations play a central role in promoting digital stewardship. They can provide frameworks for responsible technology use, digital literacy programmes, and pastoral guidance on balancing online and offline life. Furthermore, incorporating communal accountability mechanisms, such as peer mentoring or family-based accountability and age-appropriate boundaries for screen habits, aligns digital engagement with African relational norms.[39]

Practical Recommendations

1. **For Individuals**

Individuals are encouraged to manage digital engagement intentionally in ways appropriate to age, platform, purpose, and personal circumstances. Practical measures may include monitoring patterns of use, limiting notifications or high-risk applications, protecting sleep and study periods, scheduling device-free intervals, and sustaining offline exercise, reading, worship, service, and relationships. Evidence does not support a universal screen-time threshold for every person or platform; the more useful concern is whether a pattern of use is compulsive, displaces necessary activities, or is associated with distress or impaired functioning. Where significant symptoms persist, self-management should not replace professional assessment.

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[36] Robert H. Mounce, *Romans* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1995), 220.
[37] John Stott, *Guard the Gospel: Principles for Christian Living* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2010), 78.
[38] Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 667.
[39] Ibid, 102.

2. For Families

Families play a critical role in guiding young people's digital habits. Parents and guardians should model responsible digital behaviour, establish age-appropriate screen-use boundaries, and encourage shared activities that foster relational cohesion. Implementing digital check-ins or family tech agreements can provide a structured approach to technology use, reinforcing accountability while maintaining a sense of community. In Nigerian families, where communal interaction is traditionally valued, these strategies help preserve family bonds and mitigate the isolating effects of excessive device use.

3. For Churches and Faith-Based Institutions

Churches can serve as platforms for promoting mental health awareness and responsible digital use. Pastoral counselling, workshops, and sermons can integrate biblical teachings on self-control (Galatians 5:22–23), renewal of the mind (Romans 12:2), and Sabbath rest, providing a theological framework for navigating screen culture responsibly. Churches may also establish online support groups and digital mentorship programmes that encourage healthy technology engagement while fostering spiritual growth.

4. For Policymakers

Policymakers in Nigeria should pursue a broader digital well-being agenda rather than placing responsibility only on individual users. Priorities include digital and media literacy in schools and communities; child and adolescent safeguarding; stronger platform accountability for manipulative design and harmful content; enforcement of privacy and data-protection standards; accessible mental-health and referral services; and support for independent Nigerian research on digital behaviour and well-being. Public programmes should include transparent objectives and evaluation measures so that interventions can be assessed for effectiveness across different age groups, regions, platforms, and patterns of use.

Conclusion

Digital technology has become an inseparable part of contemporary life in Nigeria, shaping how people communicate, learn, work, worship, and understand themselves. The evidence reviewed in this study does not justify a simple claim that digital technology causes mental disorder. Rather, risks vary according to the type, content, context, and pattern of use, with problematic and compulsive forms of engagement presenting particular concerns. Against this background, the study has argued that biblical resources such as mental renewal, disciplined attention, Spirit-formed self-control, Sabbath, and embodied community can contribute to a Christian ethic of digital engagement without being treated as substitutes for clinical mental-health care. Its distinctive contribution lies in bringing the heuristic of 'algorithmic anthropology' into dialogue with biblical anthropology and developing from that encounter a contextual theology of 'digital stewardship' for Nigeria. Such stewardship joins personal responsibility to communal, pastoral, professional, technological, and policy responsibility. As a conceptual-theological study based on secondary literature, however, it cannot establish causal relationships or demonstrate the empirical effectiveness of the proposed framework. Future Nigerian research should therefore test how particular platforms and patterns of use relate to mental-health outcomes across different populations and examine how churches, families, schools, clinicians, and policymakers can implement and evaluate context-sensitive forms of digital stewardship.

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CHAPTER 31

SPIRITUALITY AS A PANACEA FOR MENTAL HEALTH AND COMMUNAL WELL-BEING

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Abstract

*Spirituality, sacred texts, mental health, and community well-being have a complex relationship. There is a long-standing relationship between spirituality, human comprehension and interpretation of pain. Actions that are today recognized and confirmed as signs of mental health illnesses are often medically diagnosed and interpreted from a medical perspective and medication prescribed but not so much of spiritual diagnosis is carried out. On the other hand, spiritual interpretation and understanding of mental health issues can sometimes be arbitrarily alluded to "spiritual attacks, demonic possession and such kind of meaning making that are sometimes over exaggerated or undermine. While spirituality should be careful of misrepresentation, clinicians and physicians should be careful of marginalization of spirituality as a care plan for mental health. A growing corpus of research demonstrates that Scriptural practices such as prayers, medication and attending worship have a positive impact on mental health and community well-being, promoting healthier relationships and emotional fortitude in distressing times. The study adopts the descriptive research method and describes how spiritual care providers can serve in the capacity of providing care in case of mental health challenges. The objective of this study is to explore the role of spirituality in mental health management and the need of spiritual care providers in health institutions. Findings reveals that every individual has a coping capacity and abilities to heal self and pushing spirituality away from the care plan renders the care as incomplete. The study recommends that mental health cases should be medically investigated and patients to be spiritually accessed by trained spiritual care giver via spiritual assessment tools and models such as FICA, 7*7, HOPE and FACT. While the clinicians and physicians may diagnose chronic depression using clinicians' apparatus, it, it is required to note that the whole person health is not complete without the spiritual dimension.*

Keywords: *Spirituality, Panacea, Mental health, Community well-being.*

INTRODUCTION

The relationship between scripture, spirituality and mental health has increasingly gained attention in research, particularly in the context of management and community well-being.

According to Pargament[1] and Koenig[2], Spiritual practices, such as meditation, prayer, and other forms of contemplative activities, have been associated with various mental health outcomes positively, including reduction in anxiety, enhanced resilience, and a greater sense of meaning to life. Mental illnesses occur throughout all cultures and societies although very often the stage, severity and nature of presenting symptoms can vary tremendously. The help-seeking patterns also differ according to a number of factors. When, where and how help is sought is heavily influenced by a number of socio-economic and cultural factors.

Mental health is a concept that sometimes has not received the necessary attention or often misinterpreted however, it affects us significantly and, in several ways, impact the society at large. Emotions such as joy, sadness, surprise, or fear, are integrated into our daily life and moments. To many people, day-to-day life can be challenging, gripped by fears that escape all reasoning, thoughts or acts that one cannot control, physical sensations that cause suffering, feelings of apathy, emptiness, even runaway euphoria or biased conceptions of self, others or the world around. All of this, over time, can severely limit one's functionalities or even be a risk to mental health or physical health and threat of life.

The interpretation of mental illness by different people and from different perspective poses some negativity on care to be administered. While some take mental illness as spiritual attack and seek for spiritual care such as fasting and prayer. The right diagnosis and interpretation of mental health will help to administer proper care to the patient.

The denial that mental health is associated with certain people and is not everyday challenge is a misconception. Also that mental health is a spiritual attack and should be handled spiritually is misleading and that mental health has no cure or management is also fallacious. This work have some clinical reports of some cases and care administered. The role of faith, scripture and community in the interpretation of mental health and care will

[1]Pargament I. Kenneth, Spiritually integrated psychotherapy: Understanding and addressing the sacred. (Guilford Press, 2007).
[2]Koenig, Religion, spirituality, and health: A review and update. Advances in Mind-Body Medicine, 29(3), 19-26.(2015)

be explored. While scripture alone is not enough for the solving of mental health issues, we will see how mental health patients can be administer care spiritually and clinically.

WHAT IS MENTAL HEALTH? DEFINITION AND PREVALENCE

There is no generally accepted definition of mental health which could give a clear and precise answer to the question however, Brlas defines mental health as general health characterized by the absence of psycho-pathological symptoms, prosocial behavior, absence of anxiety (especially chronic), self-control capability, personal competence feeling, self-criticism and self-realization capability, openness to new information and experiences, adaptability as well as positively integrated personality[3]".

Some of the most common mental health problems associated with individuals are: Anxiety, depression, stress, addictions, phobias, eating issues, seizure and many neurological issues . These are just a few examples, and maybe you do not have to go very far to find someone who suffers from one of these problems: maybe a partner, parent, brother or sibling, a friend, or even ourselves may be experiencing anyone of such or developing a mental health issue. Many of these cases may not detected or evaluated properly, and therefore sometimes do not receive adequate attention and assistance.

According to a recent United Nations Report[45], addressing mental health problems has been considered one of the greatest challenges that our society faced.especially after the psychological consequences, still unpredictable, of the global pandemic COVID-19. This challenge is mainly due to the high prevalence of high economic burden on health systems, and the widespread impact of mental health problems on the population.

In the United States, between 12% and 47% of its population will develop a mental health disorder during their lifetime[6]. Other projections derived from another study, also conducted in the United States, suggest that one in two people, 50% of its population, may

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[3]Brlas Sinasa: Sociology of mental health, p23 (2016)
[4]Kessler, R., Akiskal, H. et al, & Wang, P. Prevalence and effects of mood disorders on work performance in a nationally representative sample of US workers, P163(9), 1561-1568.
[5]Wang et al., Use of mental health services for anxiety, mood, and substance disorders in 17 countries in the WHO world mental health surveys.
[6]

develop a mental health disorder during their lifetime. In Europe, the situation is not much more encouraging since according to a European study from 2010 which included thirty countries: European Union; Switzerland, Norway, and Iceland, and showed that 38.2% of its 514 million inhabitants, approximately 164.8 million, suffer from some type of mental disorder[7].

Furthermore, according to the WHO, mental disorders are the most common cause of illness in Europe, ahead of cardiovascular diseases and cancer.[8] The same WHO reports very alarming rates of suicide worldwide, over 800,000 suicides per year, the second leading cause of death among young people aged 15-29 worldwide.

In Spain, the situation is not much better. Numerous studies before the pandemic have indicated high prevalence rates of people with some mental disorder diagnosed throughout their lives. For example, the WHO estimates that 9% of the Spanish population currently suffers from at least one mental disorder, and more than 15% will suffer from it during their lifetime.[9] In Nigeria, it is estimated that over 40 million Nigerians are suffering from mental health disorder and with almost 85% of them having no access to proper care and health facilities[10]

Therefore, this study conclude that the prevalence rates of mental health-related problems are very alarming, both in adult and child populations. It may be difficult to assume that mental disorders can affect more than a third of the European population, and it is particularly worrying that, in all countries, these problems affect the most disadvantaged groups to a greater extent.

[7]WHO Regional Office for Europe, Mental health: facing the challenges, building solutions, retrieved (2026)
[8]WHO Regional Office for Europe, Mental health: facing the challenges, building solutions, retrieved (2026)
[9]MSSSI (Ministry of Health, Social Services and Equality. (2007).
[10]https://healthnika.com/2025/10/10/world-mental-health-day-85-unreached-as-nigeria-buckles-under-massive-care-gap/

SPIRITUALITY, MENTAL HEALTH AND COMMUNITY WELL-BEING

Spirituality and scripture plays a significant role in shaping mental health outcomes by influencing how individuals interpret, cope with, and respond to psychological distress. Religious beliefs provide a framework through which suffering can be understood, often transforming experiences of anxiety, depression, or severe mental illness into opportunities for meaning-making and personal growth and this reduce feelings of despair and promote emotional resilience for an individual going through such struggles. Scriptural and spiritual practices such as prayer, worship, and participation in religious communities foster positive emotions, including hope, peace, and connectedness. The example of David in Psalms 18:6 "In my distress I called upon the LORD, and cried unto my God: he heard my voice out of his temple, and my cry came before him, even into his ear" and Psalms 118:5 "I called upon the Lord in distress: the Lord answered me, and set me in a large place".The case and experience of Elijah in 1King 19 of his despair and distress with Jezebel is a reminder that individuals passing through difficult moments especially that which look like mental disturbances can tape into the scripture and find hope and assurance.These practices not only enhance individual well-being but also create supportive environments where individuals can share their struggles without isolation. The communal aspect of faith is particularly important, as it offers social support systems that are critical in managing mental health challenges.

However, the relationship between spirituality and mental health is complex. While scripture and spirituality can promote healing, and stability, misinterpretations, misrepresentation, and viewing or assuming mental illness as punishment or spiritual failure can worsen the distress and discourage individuals from seeking professional help. Therefore, scripture and spirituality serves as both a resource and a responsibility, requiring informed and compassionate application for effective support for mental well-being.

Mental disorder is not madness as popularly opined by some persons. The global reality is that mental health challenges is on the increase even in Africa, many are suffering from disorders associated with mental health and attention seems to focus on self medication or assumptions that predisposes the patient to risks that endangers the life of the patient. Africans and its community need to understand the dynamics of mental disorder, symptoms

and adequate care plans. Due to the religiocentric nature of Africans, it is sometimes very difficult to detach belief from them therefore slowing down the treatment plans. Investigation is another major obstacle for the Africa man, sometimes using spiritual discernment to diagnose mental disorder and concluding that it is either wizardry, witchcraft or demonic possession also leading to improper care plan for the patient. Another issue with Africa and global reality of mental disorder is the treatment and care plan, due to the meaning attached to mental health disorder, interpretation and "poor" diagnoses, the Africa man may resolve in using a one way approach of care best known to him, the "spiritual care". Even in the spiritual care, rituals like fasting, praying, casting out the "demon", organizing vigils and flogging the patient may be the best spiritual care that he may provide the patient, but global reality demands that there be medically proven evidence, facts and results to know the kind of disorder and care plan to be given.

In essence, spirituality acts as a bridge between emotional suffering and psychological healing, demonstrating its potential as a vital component in holistic mental health care. A good doctor connects medical and spiritual therapy. However, mistakes of many so called spiritual therapist is that a couple of well presented individuals prays thinking or believing that prayer can easily replace or substitute fundamental psychological education and care. They completely misinterpret what is meant by God instruction, express will and medical diagnoses. Somebody can become God's instrument only by improving his vocation and professional knowledge and connecting it with deep faith. Salvation, recovery and healing make an inseparable whole. Unfortunately, salvation has often been discussed through theological history in the abstract way. Human health is not seen as spiritual task. Spirituality must primarily be liberating and not restrictive in order to become therapy and contribute to complete healing and consecration of the person. Many Christians live their Christianity in the wrong way. Jesus never spoke about suppression of one's feelings and needs, slavish demeanor that one can lose his health, suffer mentally, destroy interpersonal relations because of devotion to God. Humanity that Jesus lived as the role model for us does not make people ill. If the image of God or spirituality does that, it is then distorted

of spirituality, it is crucial to see what influence it makes on the psyche of the individual, interpersonal relationships, work and commitment every day[11].

The role of the community in the well-being of patients with mental disorder can never be underestimated, the interpretation given to mental illness, the meaning attached to mental disorder and the treatment suggested or given at times may lead to more harm to the patient. Errors from understanding what mental disorder is to diagnostic errors and interpretation errors and treatments errors are sometimes human defaults that communal usually fall into and when not quickly checked can hinder adequate care and leading to more danger for patient.

Aside from these errors is the meaning that community make out of every mentally disordered patient, Africans sees and view or interpret mental health crises and terminal illnesses as punishment from God[12]. Community in Africa context is theocentric and religious in nature and so therefore can assumed wrongly or give a different interpretation to mental disorder. Some even see it as a punishment for sin or consequences for ones actions all this interpretation may lead to delays in seeking professional help or medical advice that can help the patient. Down to care administered to mental disorder patient is sometimes traditional, from moving the patient from traditional homes, to prayer center or miracle centers, to self prescription and so on which may endanger the patient's life. As much as community plays a significant role in the care of mental disorder, it is important to know where to draw the line, where to seek medical attention and where to apply spirituality as a care plan. The cases below give a detailed information of a mental disorder and the care plans. As much as mental disorder should be medically diagnosed, medical prescription adhered to, spiritual care plans must be put in place for thw whole person care.

Case study scenerio 1

Substance Use Disorder (Cannabis and Alcohol)

[11]Joelle M & Coelho AM: The impact of spirituality at work On workers attitudes and individual performance. The International Journal of Human Resource Management, 2017; 1-25

[12]R. Uwakwe, The view of selected Nigerians about mental disorder, journal of medicine, Niger Postgrad, Dec. 14 (4) 319-24 (2007)

A 17 years old Mr G, male and senior secondary school student was admitted in the psychiatric unit of the clinic with complaints of aggressive behaviour, poor academic performance, red eyes and unusual laughter, loss of appetite, poor sleep and staying out late at night. When questioned he did not satisfactory response.

History of Present Illness

Patient began using cannabis at age 15 due to peer pressure. Initially used occasionally but progressed to daily use. Also he started drinking alcohol on weekends. Overtime, patient became a drug addict and withdrawn from home, he frequently demanded money, skipped school, became verbally aggressive, before parents brought him to hospital after he became physically violent and confused. When the past history of patient checked, no history of past psychiatric admission, no chronic medical illness, no history of seizures, though the father occasionally consume alcohol. On admission, patient appeared untidy, restless and pressured speech and subconscious, fully oriented and denied problem. Patient was on admission for three weeks before discharge with follow-up plans.

Management and care During Admission

The patient was admitted for supervised withdrawal and detoxification. During this phase, diazepam was administered on a short-term basis to manage agitation and withdrawal symptoms. A multivitamin preparation, including B-complex vitamins, was also provided to support nutritional recovery. Intravenous fluids were administered during the first 24 hours as clinically indicated. Throughout the detoxification period, the patient was closely monitored for signs and symptoms of withdrawal, including anxiety, sweating, tremors, and restlessness. The purpose of supervised detoxification was to ensure patient safety, reduce withdrawal-related complications, and provide appropriate medical support during the initial stage of recovery.

Psychological Management and care

Psychological management formed an important component of the patient's treatment. Individual counseling was provided to help the patient explore the factors contributing to

substance use, identify emotional difficulties, and develop healthier coping mechanisms. Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) was incorporated to help the patient recognize and modify negative thought patterns and behaviors associated with substance use. Motivational interviewing was also used to explore the patient's readiness to change, strengthen motivation for recovery, and encourage commitment to treatment. In addition, group therapy was organized with other recovering patients to promote mutual support, shared experiences, accountability, and the development of healthy interpersonal relationships.

Family Therapy and care

Family therapy was included in the treatment plan to strengthen the patient's support system and improve communication among family members. Family members were educated about substance use disorder, its causes, symptoms, and possible effects on individual and family functioning. They were encouraged to communicate supportively and avoid judgmental attitudes that could discourage the patient's recovery. The family was also educated about enabling behaviors, such as providing money for substance use or shielding the patient from the consequences of harmful behavior. The goal was to promote a supportive home environment that would encourage treatment adherence and reduce the risk of relapse.

Nursing Interventions and care

Nursing care focused on maintaining patient safety, monitoring withdrawal symptoms, and supporting physical and psychological recovery. The patient was closely observed for signs of aggression, agitation, and other behavioral changes that could place the patient or others at risk. A safe and structured environment was maintained throughout the treatment period. Sleep patterns were monitored because withdrawal and psychological distress may interfere with sleep. The patient was encouraged to maintain personal hygiene and was assisted when necessary. Nutritional intake was also supervised to address reduced appetite, possible nutritional deficiencies, and the physical effects of substance use.

Occupational Therapy and care

Occupational therapy was introduced to help the patient develop healthier routines and improve social and functional wellbeing. Participation in sports and other appropriate physical activities was encouraged to promote physical health, reduce stress, and provide constructive alternatives to substance use. Skill acquisition sessions were organized to help the patient develop useful abilities that could support future educational, vocational, and personal goals. A time-structured daily routine was also established to promote discipline, reduce idle periods, and encourage engagement in meaningful activities during recovery.

Follow-Up Plan

Following discharge, the patient was scheduled for weekly outpatient clinic visits during the first month to assess progress, monitor withdrawal-related concerns, and identify early signs of relapse. Psychotherapy was continued to support long-term behavioral change, emotional regulation, and relapse prevention. Random drug screening was incorporated into the follow-up plan, where clinically appropriate and with due regard for confidentiality and the therapeutic relationship. The patient was also encouraged to enroll in a youth support program to strengthen social support, develop healthy peer relationships, and participate in recovery-oriented activities. Continued family involvement and regular clinical review were recommended to promote sustained recovery and reduce the likelihood of relapse.

A Case Study Scenario of (Depression)2

A 21-year-old female university student presents to the clinic with complaints of persistent sadness lasting approximately two months. She reports a significant loss of interest and pleasure in activities she previously enjoyed, including attending fellowship meetings, spending time with friends, and engaging in personal hobbies. She also experiences difficulty concentrating on her studies, persistent tiredness, and disturbed sleep. Her appetite has reduced, resulting in unintentional weight loss. Furthermore, she expresses feelings of worthlessness and occasionally thinks, “It would be better if I wasn’t here,” although she denies having a specific suicide plan.

The patient's friends, who accompany her to the clinic, confirm that she has become increasingly withdrawn and disengaged from activities that previously brought her joy. They also report that she frequently expresses negative thoughts about her life and worth. During clinical observation, the patient appears withdrawn, speaks softly, and avoids eye contact. She explains that her symptoms began gradually following academic stress and relationship difficulties. Her academic performance has declined, and she has increasingly isolated herself from her social network. There is no reported history of substance abuse or major medical illness.

The patient's symptoms are consistent with Major Depressive Disorder (MDD), a mental health condition characterized by persistent depressed mood and loss of interest or pleasure, accompanied by cognitive, physical, emotional, and behavioral changes. According to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition, Text Revision (DSM-5-TR), a major depressive episode requires at least five symptoms during the same two-week period, representing a change from previous functioning. At least one symptom must be depressed mood or diminished interest or pleasure in activities.

In this case, the patient presents with depressed mood, anhedonia, fatigue, insomnia, reduced appetite, unintentional weight loss, poor concentration, feelings of worthlessness, and recurrent thoughts of death. These symptoms have persisted for two months and have significantly affected her academic performance, relationships, and daily functioning.

Possible Causes

Major Depressive Disorder is a multifactorial condition that develops through the interaction of biological, psychological, social, environmental, and medical factors. Biological factors may include genetic vulnerability, alterations in neurotransmitter systems, and changes in brain processes involved in mood regulation. A family history of depression may increase an individual's susceptibility, although the presence of genetic risk does not necessarily mean that a person will develop the disorder.

Psychological factors also contribute to the development and persistence of depression. These include low self-esteem, persistent negative thinking, feelings of inadequacy, and

ineffective coping mechanisms. Individuals who interpret stressful experiences through negative or self-critical thought patterns may be more vulnerable to depressive symptoms. In the present case, the patient's academic difficulties and relationship problems may have contributed to feelings of failure, worthlessness, and hopelessness.

Social and environmental factors are equally important. Academic pressure, financial difficulties, relationship conflicts, social isolation, and bereavement may increase the risk of depression. For university students, the demands of academic life, changes in relationships, and separation from familiar support systems can create significant emotional stress. Medical conditions, including chronic illnesses and thyroid disorders, may also produce symptoms that resemble depression or contribute to its development. Consequently, a comprehensive assessment should consider both psychological and physical health.

Interpretation:

Although depression is a recognized mental health condition, it may be misunderstood in some spiritual, cultural, and traditional communities. Some individuals may interpret persistent sadness, withdrawal, hopelessness, or suicidal thoughts as evidence of spiritual attack, demonic possession, punishment from God, witchcraft, or a lack of faith. Others may believe that prayer alone is sufficient to resolve the condition. Such interpretations can contribute to stigma and delay access to appropriate medical and psychological care. A person experiencing depression may be blamed for their symptoms or encouraged to conceal their struggles rather than seek professional help. These misconceptions may also prevent family members and religious leaders from recognizing the seriousness of suicidal thoughts.

However, spiritual beliefs and religious practices may be important sources of meaning, hope, comfort, and social support for individuals experiencing depression. The appropriate approach is not to dismiss the patient's faith but to distinguish supportive spiritual care from explanations or practices that discourage necessary treatment. Spiritual care should therefore complement, rather than replace, evidence-based mental health treatment.

Diagnostic Assessment

Major Depressive Disorder is primarily diagnosed through a comprehensive clinical assessment. The clinician conduct a detailed interview to establish the duration, severity, frequency, and impact of the patient's symptoms. The assessment explores mood, interest in activities, sleep, appetite, energy, concentration, feelings of guilt or worthlessness, and thoughts of death or suicide. It should also examine previous episodes of depression, family history, substance use, medical conditions, and possible symptoms of mania or hypomania, which are important in distinguishing depression from bipolar disorder. Her protective factors, including supportive relationships, personal values, and willingness to accept help, was also be explored. The absence of a specific plan does not eliminate the need for careful assessment and ongoing monitoring.

The clinical findings of this case include persistent depressed mood, loss of interest or pleasure in previously enjoyable activities, fatigue, insomnia, reduced appetite, unintentional weight loss, poor concentration, feelings of worthlessness, and passive suicidal thoughts. The patient also demonstrates social withdrawal, reduced academic functioning, soft speech, and limited eye contact.

The symptoms have persisted for more than two weeks and significantly interfere with her academic, social, and personal functioning. These findings support a provisional diagnosis of Major Depressive Disorder. The severity should be determined through clinical assessment, taking into account the intensity of symptoms, functional impairment, and suicide risk.

The management of depression should be individualized and holistic, addressing the patient's physical, psychological, emotional, social, and spiritual needs. Treatment should be based on the severity of the condition, the patient's preferences, the availability of professional support, and the presence of suicide risk. Psychotherapy, medication when indicated, supportive care, and appropriate follow-up may be combined to promote recovery.

The care provided are: Psychotherapy, an important treatment option, particularly for mild to moderate depression. Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) which helps patients identify negative thought patterns and develop more realistic and constructive ways of interpreting their experiences. In this case, the patient's thoughts, such as “I am a failure” or “Nothing will ever get better,” was explored and evaluated. The therapist assisted her in challenging distorted beliefs, developing coping strategies, improving problem-solving skills, and gradually re-engaging in meaningful activities.

Also Interpersonal Therapy (IPT) is another useful approach that focuses on the relationship between depressive symptoms and interpersonal difficulties. It helps the patient address relationship problems, social isolation, grief, and role transitions associated with university life.

Antidepressant medication was considered when symptoms are moderate to severe, persistent, significantly impairing, or when psychotherapy alone is insufficient. Selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors, such as fluoxetine or sertraline, are examples of medications that may be prescribed by a qualified clinician. The choice of medication should be based on an individualized assessment of benefits, possible adverse effects, interactions, and patient preferences. Medication should be monitored regularly, particularly during the early stages of treatment and when there are concerns about suicidal thoughts.

Supportive care is also essential. The patient may benefit from encouragement to maintain a regular sleep schedule, engage in appropriate physical activity, eat adequately, and gradually resume meaningful daily activities. Academic counseling may help her manage educational pressures and explore reasonable adjustments to her academic workload. Support from trusted friends, family members, and university personnel can reduce isolation and promote recovery.

There was a regular follow-up plan arranged to monitor symptoms, treatment response, and changes in suicidal thoughts

The care plan described above addresses important physical, psychological, emotional, and social dimensions of health. However, for patients who consider spirituality an important

part of their identity and wellbeing, spiritual concerns may also influence their experience of illness, their understanding of suffering, their sources of hope, and their willingness to seek help. A comprehensive approach to care should therefore consider the patient's spiritual needs alongside other dimensions of health.

The World Health Organization's 1948 Constitution defines health as a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being, rather than merely the absence of disease or infirmity. The definition does not explicitly include a separate spiritual dimension. Nevertheless, the absence of an explicit spiritual category does not mean that spiritual care is irrelevant to mental health. Contemporary holistic and person-centered approaches recognize that spiritual beliefs, values, meaning, and sources of hope may be important aspects of a patient's overall wellbeing.

Spiritual care in depression should be patient-centered, respectful, and clinically appropriate. It should begin with an assessment of the patient's spiritual beliefs, practices, sources of meaning, and spiritual concerns. The clinician may explore questions such as whether the patient has experienced changes in her relationship with God, whether she feels abandoned or punished, whether she finds comfort in prayer or Scripture, and whether her religious community provides supportive relationships. Such questions should be asked with sensitivity and without imposing the clinician's personal beliefs.

One established approach to spiritual assessment is the FICA spiritual history, which explores Faith or beliefs, Importance and influence, Community, and Address in care. Through this approach, the clinician can identify whether spirituality is a source of strength, a source of distress, or both. For example, a patient may find comfort in prayer and fellowship while simultaneously experiencing guilt or fear that her depression reflects a lack of faith. These concerns can be explored respectfully and, where appropriate, addressed through collaboration with a qualified spiritual care provider.

Spiritual care may include supportive listening, facilitating access to a trusted chaplain or religious leader, supporting personally meaningful religious practices, and helping the patient reconnect with sources of hope and purpose. For a Christian university student, this

might involve voluntary prayer, Scripture reflection, fellowship, or pastoral counseling, provided these activities are acceptable to the patient and do not replace professional mental health treatment. The purpose of spiritual care is not to guarantee a cure or attribute depression to spiritual failure, but to support the patient's coping, dignity, meaning, and overall wellbeing.

An effective holistic care plan should integrate spiritual care with psychotherapy, medication when indicated, social support, academic counseling, and suicide prevention. The spiritual dimension should not be viewed as a substitute for clinical treatment or as a guaranteed panacea for depression. Rather, it may serve as an additional source of support within a coordinated treatment plan.

For this patient, a collaborative care approach could involve a mental health professional, the primary clinician, academic support personnel, trusted friends or family members, and a chaplain or other qualified spiritual care provider, according to the patient's preferences. Each professional should understand their role and maintain appropriate confidentiality. The patient's consent should guide the involvement of others, except where immediate safety concerns require action.

The patient may be encouraged to identify spiritual practices that promote comfort and connection, such as prayer, meditation, worship, or fellowship. At the same time, she should be supported in addressing negative beliefs about herself, managing academic stress, rebuilding social connections, and receiving appropriate treatment for depressive symptoms. This integrated approach recognizes that recovery may involve not only symptom reduction but also restoration of hope, meaningful relationships, personal identity, and a sense of purpose.

A spiritually sensitive approach recognizes that depression is not evidence of spiritual failure or a punishment from God. Instead, it seeks to provide compassionate care that respects the patient's faith while ensuring access to appropriate mental health services. By integrating physical, psychological, emotional, social, and spiritual considerations,

healthcare professionals can provide more person-centered care that supports the patient's recovery and overall wellbeing.

In the cases presented above, the care plans, and treatments administered excluded a spiritual dimension, the care provided are physical care plans, mental care plans, emotional care plans and social care plans. This care and treatment plans follows the health definition of world health organization definition of health of 1948 excluding spiritual dimension therefore rendering the care incomplete. The spiritual health care plan can be seen from the following perspective and verified studied methods and can be used as a panacea for whole care plan.

This case illustrates the presentation of Major Depressive Disorder in a young university student experiencing persistent sadness, anhedonia, impaired concentration, fatigue, sleep disturbance, reduced appetite, weight loss, worthlessness, and passive suicidal thoughts. The symptoms have significantly affected her academic performance and social functioning, supporting a provisional diagnosis of Major Depressive Disorder.

The management of depression requires a comprehensive approach that includes clinical assessment, psychotherapy, medication when indicated, supportive care, suicide risk monitoring, and attention to the patient's social and academic circumstances. In addition, spiritual care may be an important component of holistic treatment when it reflects the patient's beliefs and preferences.

SPIRITUALITY AS PANACEA FOR MENTAL HEALTH MANAGEMENT

The HOPE spiritual assessment model is a structured communication tool designed to help spiritual care providers manage a patient's mental and emotional well-being by identifying their spiritual resources and needs. In mental health management, it serves as a "toolbox" to facilitate patient-centered discussions that can uncover sources of resilience or identify spiritual distress, struggles or pains that may impact a patient's recovery.

The HOPE Model: in Mental Health Management

The acronym **HOPE** represents four key domains that guide spiritual care provider through a spiritual history and assessment:

- **H –** Sources of Hope, Meaning, Comfort, Strength, Peace, Love, and Connection. This is an open-ended exploration of what sustains a person during difficult times. Focus: In mental health, this domain identifies the internal "spiritual resources" such as hope, peace, trust and resilience that provide a patient with resilience. It is particularly effective for diverse or secular populations because it focuses on general themes rather than specific religious terms.
- **O – Organized Religion:** This domain explores the patient's relationship with a formal religious or spiritual community. Focus: It assesses whether a patient's religious affiliation acts as a supportive community or if they have experienced "spiritual pain" through past or present estrangement from their faith.
- **P – Personal Spiritual Practices:** This focuses on the specific, individual activities a person finds meaningful, independent of an organized group. Focus: spiritual care provider look for practices such as meditation, prayer, reading scripture, or communing with nature. These can be integrated into a psychiatric or therapeutic treatment plan as positive coping mechanisms.
- **E – Effects on Medical Care and End-of-Life Issues:** This addresses how a patient's beliefs specifically influence their medical decisions and treatment needs. Focus: It identifies potential conflicts between a patient's spiritual beliefs and their healthcare. For mental health management, it allows clinicians to determine if a referral to a spiritual care specialist (like a clinical chaplain) is necessary to resolve spiritual distress.

Application in Mental Health

The model is valued in mental health settings (such as psychiatry and psychology) because it is brief, easy to use, and allows for a broad interpretation of spirituality. It has been shown to reduce burnout in medical professionals by highlighting the link between spiritual well-being and professional efficacy. Ultimately, using HOPE helps transition mental health care toward a "biopsychosocial-spiritual" approach that treats the whole person[13]

[13]Sleeth, G., Gottlieb, P., Srinivasan, A., Thaddeus, U., Mennillo, M., & Anandarajah, G. (2025). Evaluation of the HOPE spiritual assessment model: A scoping review of international interest, applications and studies over 20+ years. BMC Palliative Care, 24(191), 1–40. https://doi.org/10.1186/s12904-025-01809-z

The FACT Model: A Hybrid Tool for Spiritual care and Health Management

In the landscape of holistic mental health management, the distinction between a patient's spiritual history and their current clinical needs is vital. While spiritual "histories" are common in medical settings, they often lack a direct path to behavioral intervention. The **FACT** tool (Faith, Active, Coping, Treatment plan) addresses this gap by functioning as a hybrid assessment that moves beyond data collection into active clinical management.

1. Addressing the "Acute Care" Challenge in Mental Health

Mental health clinicians in acute settings often face the "depth and complexity" problem of traditional spiritual assessments, which are frequently too time-consuming for crisis stabilization or short-term stays.

FACT is designed to be "short and easy," allowing a clinician to assess a patient's spiritual resources within a five-to-ten-minute window. It prioritizes how a patient's beliefs function to help them cope with an immediate crisis rather than focusing on the theological nuances of what they believe. The tool utilizes a four-part inquiry to evaluate the intersection of a patient's belief system and their psychological resilience:

- **Faith (or Beliefs):** The spiritual care giver identifies the patient's source of meaning and purpose. In mental health management, this identifies the internal "anchors" that may prevent despair or provide a reason for recovery.
- **Active (or Available):** This evaluates the patient's social capital and "access" to a supportive community. For patients struggling with isolation, identifying available spiritual support systems is a critical component of a discharge or safety plan.
- **Coping (or Conflict):** This is the core psychological assessment. The clinician determines if faith is providing "comfort" or if there is a "conflict" between religious beliefs and medical/psychiatric treatment.
- **Treatment Plan:** Distinct from other spiritual tools, FACT concludes with a professional judgment. The clinician must decide on an intervention based on whether the patient is "coping well" or "coping poorly"[14].

[14]LaRocca-Pitts, M. (2012). FACT, a chaplain's tool for assessing spiritual needs in an acute care setting. Chaplaincy Today, 28(1), 25–32. https://doi.org/10.1080/10999183.2012.10767446

The "7x7 Initiative" (or approach) is an evidence-based framework designed to help military chaplains and religious program specialists measure and improve Spiritual Fitness. It centers on the use of the SOCOM Spiritual Fitness Scale (SSFS) to reliably assess spiritual growth and demonstrate its impact on total readiness.[15]

The 7x7 approach assesses spiritual performance through three scientifically developed core attributes, or subscales:

- Personal Connection to a Higher Power (PCHP): Measures commitment to and connection with God or a higher power.
- Pursuing Meaning, Purpose, and Values (PMPV): Focuses on an individual's sense of life meaning and core belief systems.
- Service and Sacrifice for the Greater Good (SSGG): Evaluates commitment to social values, humanity, and serving others.

The 7x7 initiative aligns spiritual fitness with the Human Performance Optimization paradigm, treating it as one of the "5 Pillars of Performance" alongside physical, psychological, social, and family domains. This allows spiritual health to be quantified and visualized for leadership to demonstrate a "return-on-investment" in readiness.

THE ROLE OF THE COMMUNITY IN MENTAL HEALTH CARE

Communities play several vital roles in mental health care, ranging from serving as a bridge for the patient and the family to increasing service accessibility for psychological support and rehabilitation.

Facilitating Family Involvement: Since families are often the primary source of care, community-based programs actively engage family members in treatment and group workshops to improve clinical outcomes and patient quality of life. Acceptance that mental health is not totally diabolical and the avoidance of stigmatization is the first cure and care for mental health patients knowing fully well that anyone can have mental disorder and

[15]Alexander, D. W., & Deuster, P. Aligning and assessing core attributes of spiritual fitness for optimizing human performance. P21(1), 101-104.

mental disorder is not same as madness or entirely madness because wrong assessment will lead to wrong interpretation and wrong care.

Enhancing Reach and Accessibility: Communities serve as an alternative to primary care facilities, especially where transportation is poor, costs are prohibitive, or cultural norms make facility-based care difficult to access.

Case Management and Crisis Intervention: Programs for severe conditions like psychosis often include community-based case management and crisis intervention components, which are activated if a person becomes suicidal or aggressive.

FINDINGS.

1. Spiritual care is not about is not about "ritualistic activities" such as prayer, studying the bible, going against physicians prescription, it is using spiritual care resources to help patient heal holistically.
2. Community plays a vital role in mental health cases, from interpretation to meaning that make of it. From marginalization to exaggeration
3. Even though, the world health organization does not recognize spiritual dimension of health but to the Africa man, it is real and the Africa man interpret mental heath differently.

CONCLUSION

Mental health challenges is becoming an alarming health issues worldwide and the world situation is not getting better, the deteriorating and debilitating economic challenges, the souring increase in population and the quest to make it at all cost is daily increasing the risk of mental breakdown and disorders. Our joy expressed differently, our sadness and grieve expressed can put ones health on stake. Spirituality is a coping mechanism that when grounded in the scripture can help one adequately cope with life threatening situations that jeopardizes the health. Health care should be whole, the spiritual dimension of health care should be integrated into care provision by so doing the man is helped not only to focus on caring for the symptoms but addressing the root of the problem. Spiritual care provides an avenue where the patient is linked to the source of existence and helping patient to become meaning making individual. Health and spirituality are two components that are interrelated and can not be separated from each other. Health care management is about

adopting all necessary and relevant approaches to have wholistic health, prevent health related crises and treat health crises. Adoption of spiritual care into health care management provide patient with whole-person care. Mental health disorder must be treated from every aspect to give the patient meaning and purpose of existence. Spiritual care givers are not necessarily "pastors" "cleric" or a "theologians", they could be specially trained person with sense of calling into spiritual care ministries, they can be chaplain specially trained on how to provide spiritual care even to mental disordered patients. Africa and global reality of mental disorder is the treatment and care plan, due to the meaning attached to mental health disorder, interpretation and "poor" diagnoses, the Africa man may resolve in using a one way approach of care best known to him, the "spiritual care". even in the spiritual care, rituals like fasting, praying, casting out the "demon", organizing vigils and flogging the patient may be the best spiritual care that he may provide the patient, but global reality demands that there be medically proven evidence, facts and results to know the kind of disorder and care plan to be given.

RECOMMENDATION

The following recommendations are made

1. Health institutions should have trained and special spiritual care givers
2. Spiritual care givers should be specially trained on how to handle mental health patients.
3. Everyone has something they are dealing with, organizations both private and public should have a meditation section where people can air their pains.
4. The drive to have it all is destroying the bonds that family and the community share, there should be sensitization and public campaigns on the quest for wealth and pressure to have it all.
5. Community togetherness should be promoted, peace and unity should be taking as a priority by the government, a community that does not have peace is already in a mental state confusion.

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CHAPTER 32

ELIJAH, DEPRESSION, AND PROPHETIC BURNOUT: BIBLICAL NARRATIVES AND AFRICAN PASTORAL RESPONSES TO MINISTERIAL MENTAL HEALTH

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Abstract

Ministerial burnout and mental-health distress are increasingly visible within Christian leadership in African settings, where pastoral vocation may combine spiritual care, administration, conflict mediation, financial responsibility, and intensive communal expectations. Yet two relevant bodies of scholarship have largely developed alongside rather than through one another: exegetical and psychological readings of 1 Kings 19 often focus on Elijah's distress, while empirical studies of clergy in African settings examine burnout, family strain, help-seeking, and referral without sustained text-led engagement with the Elijah narrative. This study addresses that gap by reading 1 Kings 19 as a theological resource for ministerial mental health without retrospectively diagnosing Elijah with a modern psychiatric disorder, and by placing the exegetical results in dialogue with peer-reviewed evidence from Kenya, South Africa, Nigeria, and Ghana; one African-diaspora study is used only as comparative evidence. Through historical-narrative, literary, lexical, canonical, and contextual analysis, the study traces the prophet's movement from the public confrontation at Carmel to threat, flight, bodily depletion, a death wish, perceived isolation, divine encounter, and renewed vocation. The text portrays Elijah's crisis as embodied, relational, theological, and vocational. YHWH's response is correspondingly integrated: sleep and nourishment precede extended theological speech; the Horeb encounter disrupts expectations of spectacular divine action; the repeated complaint exposes the persistence of Elijah's constricted perception; the remnant corrects his claim of absolute isolation; and the commissioning of Hazael, Jehu, and Elisha relocates prophetic mission beyond a solitary heroic figure. The article's specific contribution is a geographically bounded, text-led synthesis that proposes a constructive pastoral framework centred on embodied rest, mental-health literacy and referral, peer support, lament, family boundaries, shared leadership, and institutional responsibility. The framework is offered for contextual adaptation rather than as an empirically validated intervention. First Kings 19 neither romanticizes collapse nor stigmatizes vulnerability; it

presents divine care as compassionate, embodied, truth-telling, and vocationally restorative.

Keywords: *1 Kings 19; Elijah; clergy burnout; ministerial mental health; African pastoral theology; pastoral care; prophetic vocation*

INTRODUCTION

Burnout is an occupational phenomenon rather than a synonym for every form of sadness, fatigue, or depression. It is classically associated with exhaustion, cynicism or depersonalization, and diminished professional efficacy; clergy research further shows that high role expectations, weak boundaries, isolation, and insufficient peer support can intensify vulnerability.[1] This distinction matters for biblical interpretation. The language of "depression" and "prophetic burnout" in the title of this paper is therefore heuristic: it names contemporary concerns brought into dialogue with 1 Kings 19, not a retrospective clinical diagnosis of Elijah.

The pastoral setting in parts of Africa gives this dialogue particular urgency. Empirical work from Kenya documents emotional exhaustion and burnout among clergy, while studies of pastoral work in South Africa show how care responsibilities can consume family time and personal resources. The evidence base used in this article is deliberately narrower than the continent: the contextual discussion draws principally on peer-reviewed studies from Kenya, South Africa, Nigeria, and Ghana, with an African-diaspora study used comparatively. These settings differ substantially in denomination, economy, culture, and health-service infrastructure; their findings therefore document particular contexts rather than "Africa" as a single pastoral environment. Broader pastoral implications offered below are constructive proposals for local testing and adaptation, not continent-wide empirical generalizations. In many of the settings represented by the literature, pastors

[1] Christina Maslach and Michael P. Leiter, "Understanding the Burnout Experience: Recent Research and Its Implications for Psychiatry," *World Psychiatry* 15, no. 2 (2016): 103–11, https://doi.org/10.1002/wps.20311; Elizabeth Ann Jackson-Jordan, "Clergy Burnout and Resilience: A Review of the Literature," *Journal of Pastoral Care & Counseling* 67, no. 1 (2013): 1–5, https://doi.org/10.1177/154230501306700103.

function as counsellors, mediators, administrators, welfare coordinators, public theologians, and first points of contact in crisis. The communal density that makes ministry relationally rich can therefore intensify role overload when institutional structures do not distribute responsibility.[2]

First Kings 19 is especially useful because the narrative refuses a triumphalist account of prophetic vocation. Immediately after the Carmel confrontation, Elijah encounters a death threat, flees, withdraws into the wilderness, asks to die, sleeps, eats, travels to Horeb, repeats a complaint of isolation, encounters YHWH, and receives a new commission. Psychological readings have fruitfully noticed fear, exhaustion, death ideation, narrowed perception, and vocational despair in the episode, yet responsible scholarship also warns against forcing modern psychopathology onto an ancient literary character.[3] The interpretive task is therefore double: to take Elijah's distress seriously and to let the narrative's own theological grammar govern the conclusions drawn from it.

The research gap addressed here is the limited integration of these two conversations. Recent Elijah studies have illuminated fear, exhaustion, death ideation, cognitive narrowing, literary characterization, and the dangers of retrospective diagnosis, while African clergy studies have documented burnout, family strain, help-seeking, collaboration, and social support. What remains comparatively underdeveloped is a text-led synthesis in which the narrative and theological grammar of 1 Kings 19 governs a geographically bounded dialogue with those empirical findings. This paper therefore argues that 1 Kings 19 offers a narrative theology of ministerial limitation and divine restoration: Elijah's crisis is not reduced to deficient faith or to physiology, and YHWH's

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[2] Wambua Pius Muasa, Sahaya G. Selvam, and Elijah Macharia Ndung'u, "Prevalence of Burnout among Catholic Religious Men and Women Working in Rural Areas: A Case of Lodwar Diocese in Turkana County, Kenya," *International Journal of Research and Innovation in Social Science* 5, no. 7 (2021): 517–28, https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2021.5727; Andrew Spaumer, Azwihangwisi Helen Mavhandu-Mudzusi, and Rembuluwani Paul Mbedzi, "Psychosocial Impacts on Pentecostal Church Pastors of Providing Support to Children in Need of Care and Protection: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis Design," *Pastoral Psychology* 74, no. 6 (2025): 917–35, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11089-025-01246-y.

[3] Dariusz Iwański and Thomas G. Plante, "Potential Mental Disorder Symptoms in the Prophet Elijah: An Exegetical and Psychological Analysis of Selected Episodes from 1 Kings 18–19," *Journal of Religion and Health* 64, no. 3 (2025): 1856–75, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10943-025-02274-x; J. Dwayne Howell and Susan H. Howell, "Journey to Mount Horeb: Cognitive Theory and 1 Kings 19:1–18," *Mental Health, Religion & Culture* 11, no. 7 (2008): 655–60, https://doi.org/10.1080/13674670801930445.

response addresses body, perception, relationship, theological imagination, and vocation. Its contribution is to translate those exegetical insights cautiously into a constructive pastoral framework for selected African church contexts while keeping biblical interpretation, modern psychological description, and clinical recommendation methodologically distinct.

The argument proceeds in four stages. First, the study clarifies its method and exegetical controls. Second, it reads 1 Kings 19 in its narrative and historical context, with attention to key Hebrew expressions and the movement from Carmel to Horeb. Third, it draws theological themes from the narrative while distinguishing those themes from modern diagnostic categories. Finally, it places those themes in dialogue with African clergy research and proposes a constructive pastoral response for contemporary churches.

Method and Hermeneutical Controls

The study uses an integrative but text-led method. Historical-narrative analysis situates 1 Kings 19 within the Elijah cycle and the Omride conflict; literary analysis attends to repetition, journey, dialogue, contrast, and characterization; lexical attention focuses on a small set of Hebrew expressions that carry the emotional and theological movement of the chapter; canonical reading observes echoes of wilderness and Horeb without allowing those echoes to erase the immediate narrative; and contextual theology brings the exegetical results into dialogue with selected African ministerial realities. This sequence is deliberate: contextual application follows rather than controls the reading of the text.

The contextual literature was assembled through structured, targeted searches of DOI registries and publisher or journal platforms using combinations of the terms “clergy burnout,” “pastoral burnout,” “ministerial mental health,” “occupational stress clergy,” “pastor family strain,” “religious leader mental health referral,” “clergy collaboration mental health,” “clergy resilience,” and country identifiers for Kenya, South Africa, Nigeria, and Ghana. Searches and bibliographic verification were updated through 12 September 2026. Inclusion required peer-reviewed empirical research, or directly relevant scholarly analysis, focused on clergy or religious leaders in an African setting and addressing at least one contextual domain examined in this study: burnout or role stress,

family strain, mental-health beliefs or help-seeking, referral or professional collaboration, or peer and social support. One study of African immigrant pastors in the United States is retained only as comparative diaspora evidence; foundational non-African clergy studies are used only for general constructs such as burnout and resilience. Popular commentary, unverifiable items, and studies without material relevance to these domains were excluded. The selected literature is adequate for a focused contextual dialogue because it directly represents each major pastoral domain analysed, but it is purposive rather than systematic and is geographically and denominationally uneven; it cannot establish continent-wide prevalence or causal effects.

The paper also adopts a hermeneutic of psychological restraint. Biblical characters are literary and theological figures presented through ancient narrative conventions, not clinical case files. Modern categories such as burnout, depression, cognitive narrowing, or suicidal ideation may illuminate features of the text, but they cannot function as diagnoses unless the narrative itself supplies equivalent evidence. Roi's literary analysis of 1 Kings 19 as a departure-and-journey story and Hadjiev's warning against overloading every narrative irregularity with psychological significance are particularly important methodological correctives.[4] Accordingly, this study speaks of depressive features, a death wish, exhaustion, and burnout-like dynamics rather than declaring that Elijah met modern diagnostic criteria.

A second control concerns theology. The chapter is not read as a simple five-step treatment protocol in which food, sleep, a quiet voice, and a successor automatically cure distress. The narrative is less mechanical. Elijah's complaint remains essentially unchanged after the theophany (19:10, 14); YHWH's answer includes both compassion and correction; and the commissioning of Elisha can be read as continuity of mission but also, in some scholarship, as part of Elijah's displacement from central prophetic agency. The paper therefore resists converting a complex narrative into therapeutic slogans.

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[4] Micha Roi, "1 Kings 19: A 'Departure on a Journey' Story," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 37, no. 1 (2012): 25–44, https://doi.org/10.1177/0309089212455569; Tchavdar S. Hadjiev, "Elijah's Alleged Megalomania: Reading Strategies for Composite Texts, with 1 Kings 19 as an Example," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 39, no. 4 (2015): 433–49, https://doi.org/10.1177/0309089215590357.

A third control concerns contextualization. African Christianity is neither monolithic nor uniquely stigmatizing toward mental illness, and the evidence assembled here does not authorize pan-African claims. Religious leaders can delay professional help when distress is interpreted only through spiritual causation, but they can also serve as trusted gatekeepers and collaborators in care. The constructive task is therefore not to oppose "African spirituality" and "clinical psychology," but to build practices of discernment in defined local contexts in which prayer, Scripture, community, counselling, psychiatry, and medical care can be appropriately related.

Narrative-Historical Context: Carmel, Jezebel, and Prophetic Strain

The Elijah cycle presents prophetic ministry within a sustained conflict over covenantal allegiance. Ahab's reign is narrated as religiously compromised, while Jezebel's support of Baal worship intensifies the confrontation between royal power and prophetic witness. Elijah's zeal therefore develops within a setting where theological conflict is inseparable from political risk. Olley's study of Elijah's presentation in Kings emphasizes the prophet's intense zeal for YHWH, while Hens-Piazza shows how the Horeb episode unsettles Elijah's prior expectations and self-understanding.[5] First Kings 19 cannot be detached from this history of confrontation.

Chapter 18 ends with a dramatic public vindication of YHWH at Carmel. Yet the narrative immediately refuses the assumption that visible victory resolves the conflict. Ahab reports Elijah's actions to Jezebel, and Jezebel answers not with repentance but with a death threat (19:1–2). The movement from Carmel to flight is therefore not simply a change in Elijah's mood; it is the collapse of an anticipated outcome. The public demonstration of divine power has not converted royal authority or eliminated danger. The prophet who has confronted hundreds of cultic opponents now confronts the persistence of the political system that sustains them.

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[5] John W. Olley, "YHWH and His Zealous Prophet: The Presentation of Elijah in 1 and 2 Kings," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 23, no. 80 (1998): 25–51, https://doi.org/10.1177/030908929802308002; Gina Hens-Piazza, "Dreams Can Delude, Visions Can Deceive: Elijah's Sojourn in the Wilderness of Horeb (I Kings 19:1–21)," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 48, no. 1 (2018): 10–17, https://doi.org/10.1177/0146107917746577.

This reversal is crucial for a theology of ministry. Spiritual success can intensify vulnerability when a leader expects a decisive event to produce lasting transformation. Ministers may endure extraordinary exertion during crisis, revival, conflict, evangelistic campaigns, institutional emergencies, or public controversy, only to discover that the underlying system remains unchanged. The text does not say that this pattern caused a psychiatric disorder in Elijah. It does show a prophet whose expectations, body, safety, and sense of vocation converge in a crisis after intense exertion.

Elijah's later statement, *qannōʾ qinnēʾtî* ("I have been very zealous"), repeated in 19:10 and 19:14, reveals how closely his self-understanding is tied to covenantal advocacy. Yet zeal can become dangerous when vocation is experienced as solitary indispensability. His complaint moves quickly from Israel's covenant breach to the destruction of altars and prophets and finally to "I, I alone, am left." The repetition does not make the complaint insincere; it makes visible a constricted vocational world in which the prophet can no longer imagine faithful agency beyond himself.

Close Reading of 1 Kings 19

Threat, Perception, and Flight (19:1–4)

The textual form of 1 Kings 19:3 requires care. The consonantal form וירא can be vocalized as *wayyarʾ* ("and he saw," from ראה) or as *wayyiraʾ* ("and he was afraid," from ירא). The Masoretic vocalization and most Hebrew manuscripts support "and he saw," whereas "and he was afraid" is reflected in the Septuagint, Vulgate, Syriac and Syro-Hexapla, one manuscript of the Targum, and some Hebrew manuscripts. The critical apparatus and textual discussion therefore confirm that a genuine textual issue lies behind the divergent translations. Either reading leaves the narrative's basic fact intact: Elijah perceives Jezebel's threat as credible and acts to preserve his life. The chapter begins not with irrational fear in a vacuum but with a prophet responding to a ruler already associated with

lethal hostility toward YHWH's prophets. Psychological interpretations that begin by condemning Elijah for cowardice risk ignoring the political realism of the story.[6]

The Hebrew also creates a striking life/death link. Elijah goes *ʿal-napšô*, "for his life" or "for himself," and soon asks YHWH to take *napšî*, "my life" (19:3–4). The one who runs to preserve life reaches a point at which continued life feels unbearable. That reversal is more precise than the vague claim that Elijah "became depressed." The narrator gives readers an abrupt shift in life orientation: self-preservation becomes a death wish.

Under the broom tree Elijah says, in effect, "Enough now, YHWH; take my life, for I am no better than my ancestors." The petition is addressed to God; Elijah does not attempt to kill himself. Nevertheless, the death wish should not be softened into ordinary discouragement. Iwański and Plante rightly identify clinically resonant features in the episode, while Howell and Howell show how cognitive approaches can illuminate Elijah's narrowed interpretation of his situation.[7] Theological reading and pastoral care should preserve both truths: the text does not establish a modern diagnosis, but language about wanting life to end is serious and must never be romanticized when it appears in contemporary ministers.

The phrase "I am no better than my ancestors" adds another dimension. Elijah's crisis includes failed exceptionalism. The prophet who has functioned as a singular agent of divine confrontation now places himself within ordinary mortality and perceived inadequacy. The statement is not merely low self-esteem; it signals collapse of a heroic self-understanding. The narrative begins to dismantle any theology in which prophetic legitimacy depends on invulnerability.

Sleep, Food, and the Refusal to Disembody Care (19:5–8)

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[6] Karl Elliger and Wilhelm Rudolph, eds., *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*, 5th rev. ed., prepared by Adrian Schenker (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1997), apparatus at 1 Kgs 19:3; Ronald Barclay Allen, "Elijah the Broken Prophet," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 22, no. 3 (1979): 198; Hens-Piazza, "Dreams Can Delude," 10–17; Iwański and Plante, "Potential Mental Disorder Symptoms," 1856–75.

[7] Iwański and Plante, "Potential Mental Disorder Symptoms," 1856–75; Howell and Howell, "Journey to Mount Horeb," 655–60.

The first divine response to Elijah's death wish is remarkably embodied. He sleeps. A messenger touches him and instructs him to eat. Bread and water are provided. He sleeps again. The messenger returns, and a second meal prepares him for the journey. The text contains no rebuke at this stage and no demand that Elijah produce a more faithful emotional state before receiving care. Divine compassion meets depletion at the level of the body.

This sequence is theologically significant without becoming a medical formula. Sleep and nutrition are not presented as a complete treatment for despair. Rather, the narrative refuses the separation of spiritual vocation from creaturely embodiment. Elijah cannot be reduced to "the prophet" as if prophetic calling cancelled the needs of a human body. Hens-Piazza's reading of the wilderness journey and contemporary psychological analyses of the episode both underscore the narrative importance of embodied vulnerability.[8]

Some African pastoral settings may find a needed corrective here. Ministry rhetoric sometimes celebrates sleepless prayer, constant availability, prolonged fasting, travel, and sacrificial service without adequately distinguishing chosen spiritual discipline from chronic depletion. First Kings 19 does not oppose discipline; it denies that bodily limits are spiritually irrelevant. Rest is not the enemy of vocation. In the narrative, bodily restoration becomes part of God's preparation for renewed encounter and responsibility.

Horeb, Repeated Complaint, and Qôl Dĕmāmâ Daqqâ (19:8–14)

Strengthened by food, Elijah travels forty days and forty nights to Horeb. The journey evokes Israel's wilderness memory and the Mosaic mountain tradition, but the narrator's central concern remains Elijah's prophetic crisis. At Horeb, YHWH asks, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" (19:9). Elijah's response is densely theological: he has been zealous for YHWH; Israel has abandoned the covenant, destroyed altars, and killed prophets; he alone remains; and his life is sought. The complaint blends accurate covenantal concern with a distorted conclusion about absolute isolation.

[8] Hens-Piazza, "Dreams Can Delude," 10–17; Howell and Howell, "Journey to Mount Horeb," 655–60.

The theophanic sequence—wind, earthquake, fire, then *qôl dĕmāmâ daqqâ*—is often domesticated into the slogan that God is found only in a "still small voice." The Hebrew phrase is more elusive. *Qôl* can denote a voice or sound; *dĕmāmâ* belongs to the semantic field of stillness, calm, or silence; and *daqqâ* denotes what is thin, fine, or delicate. The juxtaposition is therefore deliberately difficult to flatten into a single English equivalent. Cogan regards "a sound of sheer silence" as an effective approximation of the Hebrew tension, while renderings such as "a thin silence" or "a gentle quiet" likewise preserve its paradox better than a sentimentalized whisper. Kozlova's recent analysis places the expression within the emotional repertoire of the Horeb scene and emphasizes the compassionate adaptation of divine self-disclosure to Elijah's condition.[9]

The theological contrast with Carmel is important. Elijah has just participated in a spectacular fire-theophany that publicly displayed YHWH's power. Horeb does not repeat Carmel. The narrative teaches neither that dramatic manifestations are false nor that silence is always superior. It shows that divine presence is not controlled by the prophet's previous experience of how God "ought" to act. The exhausted prophet must encounter a God whose agency exceeds the register of public spectacle.

Even more strikingly, the theophany does not immediately alter Elijah's verbal account. When YHWH asks again, Elijah repeats essentially the same complaint (19:13–14). This repetition guards against simplistic spiritual therapeutics. A profound encounter with God does not necessarily erase despair, cognitive narrowing, or vocational confusion in a single moment. The narrative moves instead toward correction through renewed commission, a remnant, and other agents.

Recommissioning, Remnant, and the End of Solitary Indispensability (19:15–21)

YHWH's answer to Elijah is neither mere reassurance nor dismissal. Elijah is sent back into history. He is instructed regarding Hazael, Jehu, and Elisha, and he is told that seven

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[9] Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, trans. and ed. under the supervision of M. E. J. Richardson, 2 vols. (Leiden: Brill, 2001), s.vv. "דְּמָמָה" ,"קוֹל," and "דַּק"; Mordechai Cogan, *I Kings: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Bible 10 (New York: Doubleday, 2001), 453; Ekaterina E. Kozlova, "1 Kings 19 and Its Emotional Repertoires: The Horeb Theophany Revisited," *Vetus Testamentum* 75, nos. 4–5 (2025): 640–65, https://doi.org/10.1163/15685330-bja10192.

thousand remain in Israel who have not bowed to Baal. The remnant directly contests the propositional claim "I alone am left." Elijah's experience of isolation is narratively real, but his conclusion about absolute isolation is factually incomplete within the story. That is a literary-theological correction, not a clinical diagnosis. Modern language such as "cognitive narrowing" may describe an analogous pattern in distressed persons, but it is used here only heuristically; the narrator is not applying a modern cognitive category to Elijah. Divine care in the narrative therefore includes both hearing the complaint and correcting a claim the subsequent revelation shows to be incomplete.

The appointment of Elisha deserves similar nuance. It is common in pastoral application to treat Elisha simply as a mentor, colleague, or assistant supplied to cure Elijah's loneliness. The narrative is more complicated. Elisha is a successor, and Fetherolf argues that the mantle tradition participates in Elijah's decline or decommissioning rather than merely extending his authority.[10] Even if one does not accept that reading in full, the text clearly relocates prophetic mission beyond Elijah's solitary agency. YHWH's work will continue through multiple historical actors and beyond the lifespan or stamina of one prophet.

For ministerial theology this is decisive. A sustainable response to burnout is not simply the production of a stronger individual. Sustainable vocation requires a theology in which no pastor is the church, no founder is the mission, and no prophetic personality is indispensable to God's purposes. Succession, delegation, collegiality, and institutional memory are not administrative concessions to weakness; they are practices consistent with the narrative's displacement of solitary heroism.

Theological Synthesis: Limits, Compassion, Truth, and Vocation

First Kings 19 yields a theology of creaturely limits. Elijah's prophetic identity does not exempt him from fatigue, fear, hunger, sleep, or despair. The chapter thereby challenges accounts of spiritual maturity that equate faithfulness with emotional invulnerability.

[10] Christina Marie Fetherolf, "Elijah's Mantle: A Sign of Prophecy Gone Awry," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 42, no. 2 (2017): 199–212, https://doi.org/10.1177/0309089216670548; Roi, "1 Kings 19," 25–44.

Scripture can honor courageous ministry while still narrating the collapse of a courageous minister. Vulnerability is not presented as the opposite of calling; it becomes one of the conditions within which divine care is disclosed.

Second, divine care is embodied before it is argumentative. YHWH's messenger touches, feeds, and allows sleep before the narrative moves to Horeb's interpretive encounter. This ordering resists forms of pastoral care that answer every distress with immediate exhortation. The narrative itself warrants the theological claim that care does not bypass embodiment; it does not, by itself, establish a contemporary clinical treatment sequence. In present-day practice, medical assessment, attention to safety, reduction of harmful workload, and referral for counselling or other professional care are contemporary recommendations grounded in professional guidance and must be selected according to the person's needs by appropriately qualified practitioners. The World Health Organization's mhGAP guideline provides evidence-based guidance for mental, neurological, and substance-use care in non-specialist settings, including pathways for assessment and referral.[11]

Third, divine care is compassionate without becoming confirmatory. Elijah's complaint is heard twice, yet the answer corrects his conclusion that he is the sole surviving faithful Israelite. Pastoral care therefore requires the difficult conjunction of attentive listening and careful correction. To hear a distressed minister is not to endorse every interpretation produced under distress; to correct an inaccurate conclusion is not to deny the person's suffering. Any comparison with contemporary cognitive approaches remains analogical rather than diagnostic. The narrative's pastoral wisdom lies in holding presence and truth together.

Fourth, lament-like speech is permitted before God. Elijah voices exhaustion, failure, isolation, and the desire for death. Scripture does not censor the speech in order to protect divine honor. Contemporary research on Christian lament likewise describes lament as a

[11] World Health Organization, *Mental Health Gap Action Programme (mhGAP) Guideline for Mental, Neurological and Substance Use Disorders*, 3rd ed. (Geneva: World Health Organization, 2023), https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240084278.

meaning-making practice that can hold complaint and trust in the same religious act.[12] Churches that permit only victorious testimony can therefore deprive ministers of a biblical grammar for suffering. Lament does not celebrate despair; it makes despair speakable before God and community.

Fifth, vocation is redistributed. The remnant, geopolitical agents, and Elisha all relativize Elijah's sense of singular responsibility. God's mission is larger than the prophet's capacity. This is not simply a leadership technique but a theological claim about divine sovereignty. Ministers serve the mission; they do not sustain it by personal omnipresence. The pastoral implication is that delegation, succession, peer accountability, and sabbatical rhythms should be taught as expressions of ecclesiology rather than as signs that a leader has failed.

Ministerial Mental Health in Selected African Contexts: Contextual Pressures and Pastoral Risks

Burnout, Role Density, and the Cost of Unlimited Availability

The contextual evidence should be described with specificity rather than stereotype. Clergy experience varies across denominations, regions, economies, and institutional structures. The empirical evidence used here is concentrated in East, Southern, and West African settings rather than the continent as a whole. Studies from rural Kenya and Kiambu County document burnout-related concerns among Catholic religious workers and clergy, while South African research on Pentecostal pastors shows how intensive care responsibilities can encroach on family time and finances. These studies establish contextual pressures in the settings examined; they do not establish a uniform "African" pastoral profile.[13]

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[12] M. Elizabeth Lewis Hall et al., "Lament: Measuring a Christian Meaning-Making Coping Practice," *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 53, no. 1 (2025): 36–54, https://doi.org/10.1177/00916471241281889.
[13] Muasa, Selvam, and Ndung'u, "Prevalence of Burnout," 517–28; Geoffrey Polycarp Nganga, Elijah Macharia Ndung'u, and Wambua Pius Muasa, "Pastoral Burnout and Psychosocial Wellbeing among the Clergy in Kiambu County at the Catholic Archdiocese of Nairobi, Kenya," *International Journal of Research and Innovation in Social Science* 8, no. 12 (2024): 2593–2606, published January 13, 2025, https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2024.8120219; Spaumer, Mavhandu-Mudzusi, and Mbedzi, "Psychosocial Impacts," 917–35.

These pressures are intensified where congregations expect the pastor to be continuously reachable and to function simultaneously as preacher, administrator, counsellor, financial helper, mediator, hospital visitor, prayer specialist, community representative, and crisis responder. Such role density is not inherently pathological; it often expresses the communal vocation of ministry. The problem emerges when churches treat limitless availability as the measure of faithfulness while providing little structural recovery, delegation, or confidential support.

Family life can become a hidden casualty. Kenyan research on occupational stress among clergy has linked pastoral stress with strain in family relationships, while the South African study noted above documents the use of family time and resources in pastoral caregiving.[14] An African theology of pastoral sacrifice must therefore distinguish costly service from chronic boundary violation. A minister's spouse and children are not an inexhaustible subsidy for congregational expectations.

Spiritual Explanations, Stigma, and Delayed Help-Seeking

A second challenge concerns explanatory models of mental distress. In many African Christian settings, emotional and behavioral symptoms may be interpreted through spiritual warfare, demonic oppression, moral failure, ancestral causation, biomedical categories, social stress, or some combination of these. The problem is not that religious explanations exist; pastoral care is necessarily theological. The danger arises when one explanatory model becomes exclusive and prevents appropriate assessment or treatment.

Research from Benin City shows that clergy already occupy an important place in pathways to mental-health care and can collaborate with formal services. Work from Ghana likewise argues for structured collaboration between religious leaders and mental-health professionals rather than mutual exclusion.[15] A study of African immigrant pastors in the

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[14] Veronica Kaari Makena, Anne G. Wambugu, and Nathan H. Chiroma, "Influence of Occupational Stress on Quality Family Relationship among Clergy: A Case of Christ Is the Answer Ministries, Kenya," *European Scientific Journal* 19, no. 16 (2023): 135, https://doi.org/10.19044/esj.2023.v19n16p135; Spaumer, Mavhandu-Mudzusi, and Mbedzi, "Psychosocial Impacts," 917–35.

[15] Bawo O. James, Nosa G. Igbinomwanhia, and Joyce O. Omoaregba, "Clergy as Collaborators in the Delivery of Mental Health Care: An Exploratory Survey from Benin City, Nigeria," *Transcultural Psychiatry* 51, no. 4 (2014): 569–80, https://doi.org/10.1177/1363461514525219; Joseph Osafo, "Seeking

United States similarly found that many pastors combined spiritual support with referral and collaboration, illustrating that faith-based and clinical responses need not be rivals.[16] These findings support a contextual model in which clergy are trained to discern when spiritual care is sufficient, when professional referral is indicated, and when both should occur together.

This is particularly important when a minister expresses a wish to die, increasing suicidal intent, persistent hopelessness, marked inability to function, psychotic symptoms, severe substance-related problems, or danger to self or others. Such signs are not equivalent to Elijah's literary portrayal, and pastors should not attempt to convert the biblical narrative into a diagnostic instrument or to substitute informal risk labels for professional assessment. Current guidance emphasizes immediate attention to safety and timely psychosocial or clinical assessment; where distress is high or sustained, suicidal intent is increasing, or the helper is concerned, referral to qualified mental-health services should be prioritized. First Kings 19 should never be used to normalize acute warning signs as merely the price of anointing. Elijah's death wish is received within divine care; contemporary pastoral responsibility should likewise receive death-related speech with seriousness, compassionate accompaniment, and prompt professional escalation rather than secrecy or shame.[17]

Triumphalist Expectations and the Silencing of Vulnerability

A third contextual risk is theological performance. In some ministerial cultures, authority is associated with certainty, strength, public victory, and constant spiritual availability. Leaders may fear that acknowledging depression, panic, exhaustion, or counselling will reduce confidence in their calling. Congregations may also interpret treatment as evidence

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Paths for Collaboration between Religious Leaders and Mental Health Professionals in Ghana," *Pastoral Psychology* 65, no. 4 (2016): 493–508, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11089-016-0703-7.

[16] Neely Myers, Robert Meeker, and Valerie Odeng, "Pastors as Partners in Care: African Immigrant Pastors' on Mental Health Care Referral Processes for Young Congregants Experiencing Symptoms of Psychosis in the US," *Community Mental Health Journal* 61, no. 1 (2025): 138–46, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10597-024-01335-x.

[17] World Health Organization, *Mental Health Gap Action Programme (mhGAP) Guideline*; National Institute for Health and Care Excellence, *Self-harm: Assessment, Management and Preventing Recurrence*, NICE Guideline NG225 (London: NICE, 2022), secs. 1.5–1.7, last reviewed August 16, 2024, https://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/ng225.

that prayer has failed. The Elijah narrative interrupts this imagination precisely because it refuses to protect the prophet's reputation by deleting his collapse.

The text also critiques the assumption that public spiritual success proves private invulnerability. Carmel precedes the broom tree. Dramatic divine action and human depletion coexist within the same prophetic life. This conjunction is pastorally liberating because it permits churches to distinguish the truth of a calling from the fluctuating health of the person who carries it. A minister can require professional care, leave, supervision, medication where clinically indicated, or reduced responsibility without thereby invalidating the reality of vocation.

A Constructive Pastoral Response for Selected African Church Contexts

Embodied Rest as Ministerial Stewardship

The first constructive practice is the institutionalization of embodied rest. The broom-tree scene does not authorize a simplistic prescription that sleep cures depression, but it establishes the theological legitimacy of bodily care. Empirical clergy research has also associated rest-taking, spiritual renewal, and support practices with lower burnout risk. Churches applying this framework should therefore move beyond advising individual pastors to "rest more" while preserving systems that reward overwork. Days off, annual leave, sabbatical structures, workload review, and reasonable limits on after-hours availability are institutional proposals that require adaptation to denominational polity, staffing, and resources.[18]

As a broader canonical-theological application rather than an exegetical conclusion from 1 Kings 19, Sabbath provides a biblical grammar for creaturely limits. Genesis 2:2–3 and the Decalogue (Exod 20:8–11; Deut 5:12–15) locate rest in creation, divine sovereignty, and liberation, while Mark 2:27 presents Sabbath as given for human good. Tonstad's biblical theology of the seventh day similarly treats Sabbath as a recurring witness to God's

[18] Diane J. Chandler, "Pastoral Burnout and the Impact of Personal Spiritual Renewal, Rest-Taking, and Support System Practices," *Pastoral Psychology* 58, no. 3 (2009): 273–87, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11089-008-0184-4.

character and sustaining action. In ministerial practice, therefore, rest can be framed not as inactivity or vocational retreat but as acknowledgement that God remains God when the minister stops. A leader who cannot disengage may be carrying not only heavy work but an ecclesiology of indispensability.[19]

Mental-Health Literacy, Referral, and Collaborative Care

The second constructive practice is mental-health literacy. Seminaries, denominations, and ministerial associations should equip clergy to recognize the difference between spiritual struggle, ordinary sadness, occupational burnout, persistent mental-health symptoms, substance-related problems, and acute safety concerns. Such training does not turn pastors into clinicians; it clarifies the limits of pastoral competence, strengthens compassionate first response, and improves timely referral.

A practical implication for the church settings represented by this evidence is to build named relationships with counsellors, psychologists, psychiatrists, physicians, and social workers who can work respectfully with religious commitments. Evidence from Nigeria and Ghana supports collaboration between clergy and mental-health professionals, while African-diaspora research shows comparatively that pastors can accompany families spiritually while also encouraging clinical care. Referral should therefore be presented not as abandonment of pastoral care but as one expression of it. The pastor may continue to pray, listen, support family, and sustain community while an appropriate professional addresses needs beyond pastoral scope.[20]

Peer Support, Supervision, Shared Leadership, and Succession

[19] Sigve K. Tonstad, *The Lost Meaning of the Seventh Day* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2009).
[20] James, Igbinomwanhia, and Omoaregba, "Clergy as Collaborators," 569–80; Osafo, "Seeking Paths," 493–508; Myers, Meeker, and Odeng, "Pastors as Partners in Care," 138–46.

As a constructive pastoral proposal, the third practice is reducing ministerial isolation through structured relationships. Elijah's "I alone" is answered by a remnant and by a mission that will continue through others. Contemporary clergy research similarly identifies peer networks, mentorship, professional development, and differentiated sources of social support as resources associated with resilience. Church structures applying this framework should therefore consider confidential peer groups, mentoring relationships, pastoral supervision, and access to trusted colleagues outside the immediate chain of command, while testing the feasibility of these practices within their own denominational systems.[21]

Shared leadership is a further constructive proposal. Congregations built around one dominant leadership personality may become vulnerable both to leader exhaustion and to institutional paralysis. The Elijah–Elisha transition does not provide a modern governance manual, but it establishes a theological principle: prophetic work outlives the prophet. Succession planning, delegation, team ministry, and the formation of younger leaders can therefore be treated as normal practices of sustainable ministry rather than emergency measures introduced only after collapse. The precise structures should be determined and evaluated within local ecclesial governance rather than universalized from the narrative.

Lament, Worship, and a Non-Triumphalist Spirituality

The fourth practice is the recovery of lament. If churches lack liturgical language for grief, fear, fatigue, disappointment, and unanswered prayer, ministers will learn to conceal experiences that do not fit public victory. Elijah's complaint and the wider biblical lament tradition authorize truthful speech before God. Empirical work on Christian lament further suggests that lament can function as a meaning-making coping practice in which complaint and praise remain in dynamic relation.[22]

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[21] Margaret Allison Clarke, Keith D. Walker, Shelley Spurr, and Vicki Squires, "Clergy Resilience: Accessing Supportive Resources to Balance the Impact of Role-Related Stress and Adversity," *Journal of Pastoral Care & Counseling* 76, no. 3 (2022): 210–23, https://doi.org/10.1177/15423050221090864; Erin F. Johnston, Jennifer Headley, and David E. Eagle, "Pastoring in a Pandemic: Sources and Types of Social Support Used by United Methodist Clergy in the Early Period of the COVID-19 Pandemic," *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 51, no. 4 (2023): 459–76, https://doi.org/10.1177/00916471231182737.
[22] Hall et al., "Lament," 36–54.

Public worship can therefore include prayers of lament, intercession for distressed leaders, testimony that does not require tidy resolution, and preaching that names human limits. Such practices do not weaken faith. They broaden the church's emotional theology so that suffering does not have to masquerade as triumph before it can enter the sanctuary.

Family Boundaries and Institutional Responsibility

The fifth constructive practice is the protection of family boundaries and the strengthening of institutional responsibility. Pastoral systems that rely on a leader's spouse, children, or personal income to absorb ministry demands can create hidden forms of exploitation. Research from Kenya and South Africa makes these costs visible. Churches adapting this framework should consider clear policies for emergency assistance, reimbursement, counselling support, vacation, accommodation, child protection, and delegation so that generosity is not dependent on private depletion; the form of such policies should reflect local resources and denominational structures.[23]

Institutional responsibility also means that burnout cannot be framed only as an individual failure of self-care. Organizations shape workload, expectations, conflict, supervision, mobility, financial security, and access to help. A church may teach resilience while structurally producing exhaustion. Theologically serious pastoral care must therefore ask not only, "How can the pastor cope?" but also, "What features of our ecclesial system are making sustainable ministry unnecessarily difficult?" These organizational recommendations are constructive hypotheses derived from the theological synthesis and supported by clergy-stress literature; they require empirical evaluation rather than being treated as effects demonstrated by this study.

Conclusion

First Kings 19 is a rich theological narrative for ministerial mental health precisely because it cannot be reduced to a clinical case history. Elijah is a threatened prophet whose life-preserving flight turns into a death wish; a zealous servant whose body requires sleep and

[23] Makena, Wambugu, and Chiroma, "Influence of Occupational Stress," 135; Spaumer, Mavhandu-Mudzusi, and Mbedzi, "Psychosocial Impacts," 917–35; Clarke et al., "Clergy Resilience," 210–23.

food; a covenant advocate whose perception narrows into “I alone”; a man who encounters YHWH but repeats his complaint; and a prophet whose vocation is renewed within a mission that no longer depends on solitary agency. These features are compatible with modern descriptions of exhaustion, despair, cognitive constriction, and burnout-like dynamics, but the narrative’s own categories remain primary.

The theological pattern developed in this study is correspondingly clear. Divine care is embodied, patient, revelatory, corrective, and vocational. YHWH neither shames Elijah for vulnerability nor leaves him inside the finality of his own interpretation. Rest precedes renewed journey; encounter unsettles expectations of spectacular presence; truth corrects isolation; remnant and succession relativize indispensability; and mission continues beyond one exhausted prophet.

For churches in the selected African contexts represented by the evidence—and, cautiously, for other settings through local adaptation—the implications are constructive rather than prescriptive. Clergy need rhythms of protected rest, mental-health literacy, confidential referral networks, peer companionship, shared leadership, family boundaries, lament, and institutional policies that distribute responsibility. Spiritual care and professional mental-health care should be related rather than opposed. Most importantly, the church must reject the idea that anointed leadership is invulnerable leadership. First Kings 19 offers a more biblical vision: faithful ministers remain creatures, and divine faithfulness is not threatened when those creatures reach their limits. A church that receives this theology can become both spiritually serious and psychologically safer for those who carry its ministries.

This study has two principal limitations. First, it is a biblical-theological and contextual synthesis, not an empirical evaluation of a pastoral intervention, a diagnostic study of Elijah, or a continent-wide prevalence study. Second, the contextual evidence is geographically and denominationally uneven, drawing chiefly from Kenya, South Africa, Nigeria, and Ghana. Future research should therefore pilot and evaluate the proposed framework within clearly defined denominational and institutional settings, using qualitative and quantitative measures of burnout, help-seeking and referral uptake, family

strain, peer support, workload, and vocational sustainability, and should compare urban and rural as well as denominational contexts.

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CHAPTER 33

THE CONFLUENCE OF FAITH AND THERAPY: BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION, AFRICAN CONTEXT, AND EMERGING GLOBAL MENTAL HEALTH PARADIGMS.

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Abstract

The relationship between faith and psychotherapy continues to generate debate, particularly within contexts where Biblical interpretation, African identity, and contemporary global mental health paradigms intersect. Misconceptions often obscure the systematic processes underlying spiritual caregiving and pastoral counselling. This study examines how faith-based interventions are conceptualized, structured, and implemented within therapeutic frameworks in southwestern Nigeria, situating the inquiry within Biblical hermeneutics and African socio-cultural realities. Adopting a mixed-methods design, the study engaged spiritual caregivers drawn from three Christian traditions: Pentecostal, Protestant, and White Garment Churches in Ile-Ife, Nigeria. Structured interviews explored their preparedness, theological orientation, intervention models, and approaches to psycho-socio-spiritual care. Findings reveal a high demand for spiritually grounded therapeutic services, reflecting the centrality of faith in African identity formation and communal life. However, significant variability exists in intervention design, assessment procedures, and outcome evaluation, with limited use of standardized therapeutic frameworks. The results suggest that integrating Biblically grounded practices such as prayer, meditation, confession, communal support, and pastoral guidance within culturally responsive therapeutic models can enhance resilience, strengthen communal belonging, and promote wholistic well-being across physical, psychological, social, and spiritual dimensions. The study further underscores the need for hermeneutically informed Biblical interpretation, ethical safeguards, and structured training in spiritual assessment to align faith-based practices with contemporary professional standards. In light of emerging global realities, including increasing mental health awareness and intercultural clinical practice, this study advocates for a contextually grounded yet globally informed

model of spiritual-based interventions that honors African worldview assumptions while maintaining clinical integrity. Such integration offers a pathway toward wholistic healing that respects both theological convictions and evidence-informed therapeutic practice.
Keywords: *Faith–Therapy Integration; Biblical Hermeneutics; African Identity; Spiritual-Based Interventions; Wholistic Mental Health*

INTRODUCTION

The relationship between faith and therapeutic practice has increasingly attracted scholarly attention within psychology, theology, and intercultural studies. Historically, modern psychotherapy emerged within Western secular frameworks shaped by Enlightenment rationalism, often distancing itself from religious epistemologies.[1] Yet religion and spirituality remain central to human identity and coping mechanisms across cultures, particularly in African societies where spirituality permeates social, psychological, and communal life.[2]

Within Christian traditions, healing has never been dichotomized into sacred and secular categories. The ministry of Jesus Christ reflects a wholistic model of care encompassing physical healing, emotional restoration, social reintegration, and spiritual transformation (Luke 4:18–19). Biblical anthropology presents the human person as an integrated being—body, soul, and spirit (1 Thess. 5:23)—challenging reductionist psychological models that isolate mental health from spiritual realities.[3]

However, contemporary therapeutic disciplines shaped significantly by figures such as Sigmund Freud and later humanistic and cognitive theorists have often approached religion ambivalently, sometimes viewing it as pathological or secondary to psychological processes.[4] In recent decades, this position has shifted. Empirical research increasingly demonstrates positive correlations between spirituality, resilience, coping, and mental

[1]Eric L. Johnson, *Foundations for Soul Care: A Christian Psychology Proposal* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2007), 45.
[2]John S. Mbiti, African Religions and Philosophy, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Heinemann, 1990), 1–5.
[3]Joel B. Green, Body, Soul, and Human Life (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 52.
[4]Sigmund Freud, The Future of an Illusion (New York: Norton, 1961), 43.

health outcomes.[5] Pargament argue that religion functions as a vital meaning-making system that shapes how individuals interpret stress, trauma, and suffering.[6]

In African contexts, spirituality is inseparable from communal identity, cosmology, and moral order. African worldviews do not typically distinguish sharply between the spiritual and material realms; instead, reality is understood as interwoven across visible and invisible dimensions.[7] Consequently, pastoral caregivers and spiritual leaders often function as frontline mental health providers, especially where access to clinical services is limited. Despite this integrative worldview, significant gaps remain.

First, many spiritual caregivers operate without structured psychological training or standardized assessment frameworks.

Second, Western therapeutic imports may inadequately account for African communal identity, biblical hermeneutics, and indigenous spiritual epistemologies.

Third, emerging global realities—migration, digital globalization, interfaith pluralism, and rising mental health awareness—require models that are both contextually grounded and globally relevant. Therefore, exploring the confluence of faith and therapy within a Biblically informed and African-centered framework is not merely an academic exercise but a contextual necessity. Such inquiry seeks to bridge theology and psychotherapy in ways that maintain doctrinal integrity, respect African identity, and align with evolving global clinical standards.

Strengthened Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored in a Tripartite Integrative Framework combining: The Biblical-theological anthropology Dimension that provides theological and moral foundations. Biblical anthropology affirms the unity and multidimensionality of the human person. Unlike dualistic Greek paradigms, Scripture presents a wholistic view of humanity in relational covenant with God and community. Healing narratives in the Gospels demonstrate restoration at spiritual, psychological, physical, and social levels.

[5]Harold G. Koenig, Religion and Mental Health (San Diego: Academic Press, 2012), 89–112.
[6]Kenneth I. Pargament, Spiritually Integrated Psychotherapy (New York: Guilford Press, 2007), 32–48.
[7]Kwame Gyekye, African Cultural Values (Accra: Sankofa Publishing, 1996), 25.

Theologically, suffering is interpreted within redemptive and communal frameworks rather than purely intrapsychic pathology[8]. This dimension provides: A hermeneutical lens for interpreting distress, a moral-ethical foundation for intervention, and spiritual ontology of healing

The African Communal-Relational Dimension ensures cultural embodiment and communal legitimacy. African philosophy emphasizes *ubuntu meaning* "I am because we are."[9] Identity is communal, relational, and spiritually embedded. Illness is often understood relationally (broken harmony with self, others, ancestors, or God). Thus, therapeutic models must: Incorporate community support systems, recognize spiritual causality frameworks, and validate indigenous epistemologies, this framework resists hyper-individualistic Western psychology and centers relational belonging as therapeutic.

The Global Integrative Psychology Dimension safeguards professional rigor and ethical accountability. Contemporary integration models (e.g., Pargament's religious coping theory; biopsychosocial-spiritual models) affirm that spirituality contributes to resilience, meaning-making, and post-traumatic growth.[10] Globally emerging paradigms emphasize: Evidence-based spiritual assessment, Ethical guidelines for integration, cultural competence, and Interdisciplinary collaboration. This dimension ensures clinical rigor and international relevance.

Integrated Theoretical Proposition states that wholistic healing occurs at the intersection of: biblical ontology (Spiritual Truth & Redemption), African Relational Identity (Communal Meaning & Belonging), and Global Clinical Standards (Evidence & Ethical Practice). Where these three converge, spiritual-based interventions become: theologically grounded, culturally resonant, and clinically responsible. Their convergence produces structured spiritual-based interventions that promote wholistic well-being.

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[8] S. E. McCoy, "Theological Perspectives on Suffering and Healing: Implications for Pastoral Care," Pastoral Psychology 66, no. 1 (2017): 1-21, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11089-016-0671-x. also see M. R. McMinn and C. D. Campbell, Integrative Approaches to Psychology and Christianity: An Introduction to Worldview Issues, Ethics, and Concepts in Integration (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2012).
[9]Desmond Tutu, No Future Without Forgiveness (New York: Doubleday, 1999), 31.
[10]Kenneth I. Pargament, Julie J. Exline, and James W. Jones, eds., APA Handbook of Psychology, Religion, and Spirituality (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2013), 3–15.

Thus, the need to review relevant literature on the integration of faith and therapy within Biblical, African, and global psychological frameworks cannot be overstated. The literature review situates the present study within ongoing scholarly debates concerning theological anthropology, culturally embedded psychotherapy, and professional ethical standards.

Biblical Foundations for Wholistic Healing

Biblical theology presents the human person as an integrated unity rather than a fragmented dualism. Scripture affirms that human beings are created in the image of God (Gen. 1:27), possessing spiritual, relational, psychological, and physical dimensions. Joel Green argues that biblical anthropology resists Greek dualism and instead presents embodied wholeness.[11] This integrated perspective forms the theological basis for wholistic healing. The ministry of Christ demonstrates a multidimensional approach to restoration physical healing (Mark 5:25–34), emotional restoration (John 8:1–11), spiritual deliverance (Luke 4:18), and social reintegration (Luke 17:11–19). Such narratives reveal that healing in Scripture addresses relational alienation from God, self, and community.

Early Christian pastoral care further embodied this integration. The church historically served as a community of soul care or cure, emphasizing confession, spiritual direction, prayer, and communal accountability.[12] However, during the Enlightenment period, theological and medical disciplines gradually diverged, leading to the professionalization of psychology as a secular science.[13] Despite this historical separation, contemporary Christian psychology seeks reintegration.

Eric Johnson proposes that psychology should be reconstructed upon Christian theological foundations rather than merely supplemented with spiritual techniques.[14] Similarly, McMinn emphasizes the ethical and responsible inclusion of prayer and Scripture within

[11]Joel B. Green, Body, Soul, and Human Life (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 45–60.
[12]Gregory the Great, Pastoral Care, trans. Henry Davis (Westminster, MD: Newman Press, 1950), 12–18.
[13]David G. Myers, Psychology, 10th ed. (New York: Worth Publishers, 2013), 12–14.
[14]Eric L. Johnson, Foundations for Soul Care (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2007), 97.

clinical settings.[15] Thus, Biblical theology provides: an ontological basis for spiritual reality, a moral-ethical framework for intervention, and a redemptive understanding of suffering

African Worldview and Communal Identity

African cosmology understands reality as an interconnected web of visible and invisible forces. Mbiti observed that Africans are "notoriously religious," meaning that spirituality permeates daily existence.[16] Religion is not compartmentalized but integrated into social, political, and psychological domains. Identity in African philosophy is fundamentally relational. The concept of *ubuntu* "I am because we are" captures this communal ontology.[17] Psychological distress is therefore interpreted relationally, often involving disharmony between individual, community, ancestors, and God. Kwame argues that Western individualistic psychotherapy may inadequately address communal dimensions of suffering within African societies.[18]

Healing frequently involves reconciliation rituals, communal prayer, pastoral mediation, and collective participation. This explains why clergy and spiritual leaders often serve as primary mental health providers in African context and Nigeria is not can exempt. However, challenges persist. Some spiritual caregiving practices lack structured assessment, documentation, or standardized evaluation. Without systematic frameworks, interventions may vary widely in effectiveness and ethical consistency.[19] Consequently, contextual models must balance indigenous spiritual epistemologies with professional competence.

Global Developments in Spiritually Integrated Psychotherapy

In recent decades, global psychology has increasingly recognized the role of religion and spirituality in mental health outcomes. Harold Koenig's empirical research demonstrates

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[15]Mark R. McMinn, Psychology, Theology, and Spirituality in Christian Counseling (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale, 2011), 67–89.
[16] John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Heinemann, 1990), 1.
[17] Desmond Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness* (New York: Doubleday, 1999), 31.
[18] Kwame Gyekye, *African Cultural Values* (Accra: Sankofa Publishing, 1996), 25–40.
[19] Harold G. Koenig, *Religion and Mental Health* (San Diego: Academic Press, 2012), 101–115.

consistent associations between religious involvement and lower rates of depression, substance abuse, and suicide.[20] Pargament's theory of religious coping provides a framework for understanding how individuals use spiritual beliefs to interpret and respond to stress.[21] Positive religious coping system such as seeking spiritual support correlates with resilience, whereas negative coping such as spiritual discontent predicts distress. The biopsychosocial-spiritual model has emerged as a comprehensive paradigm that includes spirituality as a core dimension of assessment.[22] The model explanation is that the biblical dimension provides theological legitimacy and interpretive authority. The African dimension ensures cultural embodiment and communal resonance. And the Global dimension guarantees methodological integrity and ethical accountability. Their convergence produces structured spiritual-based interventions leading to wholistic well-being.

Accordingly, professional bodies now encourage culturally competent spiritual assessment while maintaining ethical safeguards, informed consent, and client autonomy. For instance, America Psychology Association (APA) and The Joint Commission on Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations (JCAHO) mandate the use of spiritual assessments (collecting, analyzing, and synthesizing spiritual struggles and religious information into a structured framework that guides subsequent practice decisions) in various healthcare settings, and providing guidelines for their proper implementations[23].

The American Psychological Association's (APA) Ethical Principles and Code of Conduct (2010) underscore the importance of respecting individual and cultural differences, including religious beliefs. APA Principal ethic 'section E' emphasizes respect for people's rights and dignity, while Standard 3.01 states that health-care givers, including psychologists should avoid unfair discrimination based on religion or any other legally

[20] Harold., 89–112.
[21] Kenneth I. Pargament, *Spiritually Integrated Psychotherapy* (New York: Guilford Press, 2007), 32–48.
[22] Kenneth I. Pargament, Julie Exline, and James W. Jones, eds., *APA Handbook of Psychology, Religion, and Spirituality* (Washington, DC: APA, 2013), 3–15.
[23] Joint Commission on Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations (JCAHO). Spiritual Assessment Standards for Health Care. Oakbrook Terrace, IL: JCAHO, 2003.

proscribed basis. Hence, the pertinent concern is no longer whether to integrate faith in therapy, but rather when and how to do so.

Globally, three major integrative models have been developed: Levels-of-Explanation Model where Theology and psychology address different explanatory domains. Integration Model – Faith and psychology interact dialogically. And Biblical Counseling Model – Scripture functions as primary interpretive authority. Each model presents strengths and limitations, particularly within African contexts where communal identity and spiritual causality are prominent.

Ethical and Hermeneutical Considerations

Integrating faith and therapy requires careful hermeneutics and ethical vigilance. Misapplication of Scripture can result in spiritual abuse, victim-blaming, or psychological harm.[24] Therefore, spiritual-based interventions must be: Hermeneutically sound, clinically informed, culturally sensitive, and professionally accountable. Training in systematic spiritual assessment is essential to prevent conflating theological conviction with clinical diagnosis. Ethical and hermeneutical considerations is imperative in a multicultural religious setting of the global south.

Synthesis and Research Gap

The literature reveals three converging realities:

1. Biblical theology affirms wholistic healing.
2. African identity necessitates communal and spiritual integration.
3. Global psychology increasingly validates spiritually integrated models. However, few empirical studies examine how Nigerian spiritual caregivers operationalize spiritual-based interventions within structured therapeutic frameworks. There

[24] McMinn, *Psychology, Theology, and Spirituality*, 105–112.

remains a need for models that are: theologically grounded, culturally resonant, and clinically standardized. This study addresses this gap.

Methodology

This study adopts an interdisciplinary qualitative-dominant mixed-methods design, situated at the intersection of biblical hermeneutics, African contextual theology, and global mental health discourse. The methodological approach is informed by the need to critically examine how faith-based therapeutic practices emerge from scriptural interpretation while responding to culturally embedded understandings of psychological distress within the African context.

Research Design and Theoretical Orientation

The study is grounded in a contextual theological framework that integrates biblical interpretation with lived religious experience, alongside insights from global mental health paradigms that advocate culturally sensitive and community-based interventions. This triangulation enables a nuanced exploration of how spiritual caregivers function as de facto mental health practitioners within resource-constrained settings.

Sampling Strategy and Participants

A purposive sampling technique was employed to select twenty-five (25) consenting spiritual caregivers across three major Christian traditions in the Ile-Ife metropolis of Osun State, Nigeria: Protestant, Pentecostal, and White Garment churches. This sampling strategy was deemed appropriate for identifying participants with specialized experiential knowledge in faith-based therapeutic practices. Participants were selected based on the following criteria: Active involvement in pastoral or prophetic care, Demonstrable experience in counseling or spiritual intervention, and Willingness to engage in reflective discourse on therapeutic practices. This approach ensured depth rather than breadth, consistent with qualitative inquiry and the study's emphasis on interpretive richness.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical integrity was rigorously maintained throughout the study. Participation was voluntary, with informed consent obtained from all respondents. Confidentiality and anonymity were assured to create a safe environment for candid disclosure, particularly given the sensitive nature of psychological and spiritual experiences.

Data Collection Methods

Data were collected through structured and semi-structured interviews, allowing for both consistency across participants and flexibility to explore emergent themes. The interview protocol was designed to engage six interrelated domains that reflect the study's interdisciplinary focus:

Demographic Profiles of Spiritual Caregivers

This section contextualized participants' socio-religious backgrounds, recognizing that theological orientation and cultural identity significantly shape therapeutic practices.

Nature of Cases Encountered

Participants provided accounts of cases handled, including spiritual afflictions, emotional distress, and psychosocial challenges, thereby illuminating the scope of faith-based care within the African setting.

Presenting Complaints of Care Seekers

This domain explored the phenomenology of distress as articulated by clients, highlighting the convergence of spiritual, psychological, and socio-cultural dimensions.

Hermeneutical and Procedural Frameworks

Particular attention was given to how biblical texts are interpreted and operationalized within therapeutic encounters, revealing the implicit theology guiding intervention strategies.

Intervention Strategies and Practices

The study examined practical modalities such as prayer, prophecy, deliverance, scriptural counseling, and ritual practices, evaluating their perceived efficacy and alignment with emerging mental health paradigms.

Perceived Outcomes and Challenges

Participants reflected on the effectiveness of their interventions and the challenges encountered, including limitations in training, stigma, and interface with formal mental health systems.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis, with coding procedures guided by both inductive (emergent themes) and deductive (theory-driven) approaches. Themes were organized around three analytical axes: Biblical interpretation and theological assumptions, African cultural and religious context, and Global mental health frameworks. This integrative analytic strategy enabled the identification of convergences and tensions between faith-based practices and contemporary therapeutic models.

Methodological Significance

By situating spiritual caregiving within a broader interdisciplinary framework, this methodology contributes to ongoing scholarly conversations on the decolonization of mental health, the legitimacy of faith-based interventions, and the role of religious epistemologies in therapeutic contexts. It underscores the necessity of engaging indigenous knowledge systems in shaping globally relevant mental health paradigms.

Result

Table 1. Results of interview of Spiritual-Based interventions of Protestant Pastors

CLERGY	**CASES/ COMPLAINTS**	**DESIGN/ PROCEDURE**	**INTERVENTIONS**	**RESULTS/ OUTCOMES**
Pastor 1.	19-year-old student with history of Masturbation	Weekly counselling sessions for 4	Incorporated exorcism and special	Testimony of wellness

		months and prayer service	deliverance/anointing service	
Pastor 2	30-year-old man with Anger problem that is said to had impacted his relationship and obstructed his social activity and career	Prayer and casting out of demon.	Prayer and fasting and biblical based anger management/ exorcism	Peace restored at work place as well as at home
Pastor 3	A 35 year old bank worker with history of Gambling addiction believed to have demonic under tone	Pastoral counselling, anointing and prayer for three months sessions	Prayer and exorcism, counselling and anointing service	Deliverance
Pastor 4	2 Barren women, 32 and 35 years, married for about 7 and 9 years respectively	Weekly sessions and prayer/fasting with visit to hospital for check up	Fasting and prayer with confessional prayer, faith on the power of God	Testimony of Babies
Pastor 5	6 years old young boy experiencing demonic attack	Exorcism, deliverance and prayer	Deliverance session Rebuke and casting out of demons	Delivered
Pastor 6	Business failure of 3 young men, they believed their efforts among others are fruitless	Pastoral weekly counselling and anointing service at the	Prayer and fasting, Rituals and cleansing, reading and claims of bible promises	Deliverance and breakthrough

		end of the month		
Pastor 7	Friends and members of the same denomination Fighting over money	Reconciliation and counselling	Counselling with the word of God	Positive result
Pastor 8	Grief as a result of loss of dearly father in accident.	Encouragement, Visitation and support	Counselling, pastoral grief intervention	Comforted
Pastor 9	Father of 3 children and wife loss of job, doubt and anxiety	Prayer, counselling and support	Human capital training, motivation with the word of God as the great provider	Started personal business and was at peace
Pastor 10	Misunderstanding among choir	Reconciliation and counselling	Counselling and reconciliation	Restoration of harmony

Table 2 Data of interview of Spiritual-Based interventions of Pentecostal Pastors

CLERGY	**CASES/ COMPLAINTS**	**DESIGN/ PROCEDURE**	**INTERVENTIONS**	**RESULTS/ OUTCOMES**
Pastor 1.	Mental health challenges Male and female of age 20 and 25 respectively	Fasting and prayer and to staying within church premises	Confession and exorcism	Separation
Pastor 2	Several members of the church Member	30 days prayer network and sowing of seed	Faith workshop counselling through the power of the	Testimonies and

	in search of miracle and breakthrough		word including fasting	breakthrough, successes
Pastor 3	Family disruption and physical abuse	Reconciliation process	Counselling on the need of forgive and to accept individual differences and prayer of unity	Partial Resolution
Pastor 4	Several members Health challenges	Anointing, fasting and prayer	Fasting and prayer and anointing service	Healed
Pastor 5	Family separation due to partner neglect	Marriage counselling	Prayer of forgiveness, reconciliation process with the word of God	Reunion
Pastor 6	Several mood disorders including Depression	Intercessory prayer and faith in the power of God	Motivations with the word of God, counselling on the need to be actively involved in worship	Back to norm
Pastor 7	A young of about 20 years Mental illness	Fasting and prayer	Anointing and exorcism,	Improvement
Pastor 8	Church workers Mis-understanding	Reconciliation and counselling	Counselling on the need for love and selfless service	Positive result
Pastor 9	3 pregnant women Safe child delivery	Prayer and counselling	Songs of praise, prayer of thanks and of faith in the power of God's word/promises	Successful delivery

Pastor 10	A member, and his family Care for daily needs “Poverty”	Fasting and prayer	Claiming the promises- speak the word and skill acquisition	Financial breakthrough

Table 3. Data of interview of Spiritual-Based interventions by White garment Prophets

CLERGY	**CASES/ COMPLAINTS**	**DESIGN/ PROCEDURE**	**INTERVENTIONS**	**RESULTS/ OUTCOMES**
Prophetess 1	Illness	Rituals and prayers	Prayer, exorcism and rituals	Healed
Prophetess 2	Financial breakthrough	Fasting and prayer	Advice on the use of local soap for spiritual cleansing	Healed
Prophetess 3	Evil attack	Fasting and prayer	Kolanuts and salt as part of the ritual and fasting and prayer.	Improvement
Prophet 4	35- and 28-years ladies respectively They want of their Life Partners from God in other word they believe they are due for marriage	prayer and fasting	Local soap and spiritual bath	Married
Prophet 5	Mental illness	Fasting and prayer	Rituals, fasting and prayer	Improvement

Discussion of Findings: Overview of Participants and Approach

This study engaged 25 purposively selected spiritual caregivers: 20 males and 5 females from Protestant, Pentecostal, and White Garment denominations within Ile-Ife, Osun State. The high male representation (80%) reflects the gender imbalance typical of religious leadership in Nigeria, consistent with previous findings that highlight male dominance in clergy and spiritual leadership roles.[25] All participants provided structured interview responses covering their intervention methods and outcomes across various psychosocial and spiritual cases. The findings indicate that faith-based interventions remain a primary coping and healing mechanism among Christian communities in Ile-Ife, particularly where formal psychological and medical services are limited.

Nature of Cases Presented

Across all denominations, the cases presented were predominantly moral, emotional, and socio-economic. Protestant pastors handled cases such as masturbation, anger, gambling, barrenness, demonic attacks, grief, and unemployment. Pentecostal pastors encountered issues including mental illness, depression, marital conflict, and poverty. White Garment prophets attended to complaints involving spiritual afflictions, evil attacks, infertility, illness, and financial hardship. These findings confirm that clergy members serve as first-line responders to a wide range of psychosocial and health-related issues, reflecting the continuing trust communities place in religious institutions for holistic well-being. This pattern aligns with prior research that African societies often interpret social and psychological problems through spiritual or demonic frameworks.[26]

Intervention Designs and Procedures

The study revealed that the dominant intervention methods included prayer, fasting, and anointing services across all denominations. Counselling and reconciliation were particularly emphasized among Protestant and Pentecostal pastors, while the use of ritual objects such as kolanut, salt, and soap was most common among White Garment clergy. Although all three traditions share a commitment to divine intervention, their procedures

[25] M. A. Ojo, *The Nigerian Church and the Gender Question: A Theological Reflection* (Ibadan: Daystar Press, 2020).

[26] Idowu, S. O. (2021). Religion and the interpretation of misfortune in African societies. International Review of Mission Studies, 110(2), 215–228.

differ in approach and emphasis. Protestant pastors often employ a structured pastoral counselling model, integrating scriptural references, empathy, and follow-up visits. Pentecostal pastors emphasize deliverance theology, fasting, prophetic declarations, and seed sowing, reflecting a charismatic worldview that prioritizes spiritual warfare and faith encounters.[27] In contrast, White Garment leaders combine Christian prayer with traditional ritual practices, a hallmark of syncretic spirituality where Christian and indigenous religious worldviews intersect.[28]

Spiritual-Based Interventions

Across denominations, the interventions combined spiritual and psychosocial elements. Prayer and fasting were universal components, while counselling and scriptural motivation were prominent among Protestant and Pentecostal pastors. Faith-based rituals and exorcisms were particularly common in Pentecostal and White Garment circles. This blend demonstrates that Christian spiritual care in the Nigerian context is inherently wholistic, addressing body, mind, and spirit—a reflection of the biblical view that health encompasses both physical and spiritual wholeness (3 John 1:2). Nevertheless, the reliance on spiritual diagnosis and ritual remedies, especially among White Garment leaders, suggests limited integration with biomedical or psychological models of therapy, a concern noted by scholars.[29]

Outcomes and Effectiveness

All denominations reported positive outcomes including healing, deliverance, restoration, and peace. For example, Protestant pastors recorded success in cases of moral struggles, family reconciliation, and business recovery. Pentecostal pastors cited testimonies of physical healing, marital reunion, and financial breakthrough. White Garment prophets similarly reported improvement following ritual cleansing, prayers, and fasting. However, these outcomes were primarily self-reported and based on client testimonies rather than

[27]Omenka, F. N. (2020). Charismatic Christianity and the dynamics of deliverance in Africa. Journal of Contemporary Religion and Society, 15(4), 120–138.
[28] Ukah, A. (2016). A new paradigm of religious syncretism: The case of African Independent Churches. Berlin: LIT Verlag.
[29]Omoniyi, T. (2021). Faith healing and health-seeking behavior in Nigeria. African Studies Review, 64(1), 59–78. Also see Nwankwo, C. I. (2020). Integrating Christian counselling and psychology in Nigerian pastoral practice. Nigerian Journal of Pastoral Studies, 5(3), 66–81.

independent verification. While this underscores the strong faith-based attribution to divine power, it also raises questions about empirical measurement and placebo effects.[30] Thus, while participants perceive high efficacy in spiritual interventions, objective evaluation remains limited.

Table 4: Comparative Insights among Denominations

Aspect	Protestant	Pentecostal	White Garment
Orientation	Pastoral counselling	Charismatic deliverance	Prophetic rituals
Primary Tools	Scripture, prayer, counselling	Prayer, fasting, sowing seed of faith	Rituals, prophetic objects
Focus	Moral and social reform	Power encounter and faith-based healing	Spiritual cleansing and protection
Outcome Basis	Testimonies, moral change	Miracles, deliverance	Physical/spiritual improvement

The above table illustrates a continuum of spirituality from the rational and structured Protestant model, through the experiential Pentecostal framework, to the symbolic and ritualistic White Garment expression. Despite these differences, all three traditions affirm divine power as the ultimate source of healing, reflecting a shared theological foundation in the sovereignty of God over human afflictions.

Implications for Pastoral Care and Mental Health

These findings carry important implications for pastoral care and community health:

1. **Integration Potential:** Faith-based interventions can complement professional mental health care, especially if clergy are trained in basic counselling, referral, and ethical boundaries.[31]

[30] Adekoya, Oluwatobi, and Adeniyi Fatile. "Outcomes and Effectiveness of Spiritual Interventions." (2017).
[31] Oladipo, G. S., & Akande, A. (2019). Bridging faith and therapy: Training clergy for effective mental health referral. African Journal of Pastoral Counselling, 4(1), 88–102.

2. **Cultural Relevance:** The results underscore those pastoral interventions are contextually grounded, providing culturally acceptable and spiritually meaningful alternatives to Western psychotherapy.
3. **Ethical Considerations:** Practices such as exorcism or ritual cleansing raise ethical issues around consent, potential harm, and alignment with biomedical ethics, requiring clearer pastoral guidelines.[32]

Limitations of the Study

The study's findings must be interpreted with caution. The sample size (n = 25) and geographically limited to Ile-Ife, reducing generalizability. Finally, theological and procedural diversity across denominations complicates comparative evaluation of intervention efficacy.

Conclusion

The study affirms that Christian spiritual caregivers in Ile-Ife play a significant and multifaceted role in addressing moral, emotional, and psychosocial challenges. Through prayer, counselling, fasting, and faith-based rituals, these caregivers act as both spiritual and psychosocial support systems. Despite denominational variations, they share a unified conviction in divine power as the ultimate agent of healing. The findings highlight the potential for collaboration between faith-based and mental health professionals, promoting culturally sensitive, ethically sound, and spiritually grounded care for individuals and communities.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are proposed for policy, practice, and future research:

1. Ongoing Education and Training**:** Spiritual leaders and psychotherapists should pursue continuous education on the intersection of religion, spirituality, and psychotherapy to

[32] Aina, Temitope. "Ethical Considerations in Pastoral Care." (2019).

enhance their competence in addressing mental health issues within faith contexts.
2. Integration and Collaboration: A formalized partnership should be established between spiritual caregivers and professional therapists to facilitate cross-referral, holistic assessment, and culturally sensitive treatment planning.
3. Ethical and Professional Boundaries: Both spiritual and psychological practitioners must maintain clear ethical boundaries, ensuring they operate within their scope of competence while respecting clients' beliefs and autonomy.
4. Development of Assessment Tools: The creation of standardized spiritual assessment instruments is essential to help practitioners evaluate clients' spiritual needs systematically and align interventions appropriately.
5. Public Awareness and Advocacy: Efforts should be made to educate congregants and the wider community on the complementary roles of spiritual care and psychotherapy, reducing stigma around mental health and promoting balanced care.
6. Further Research: Future studies should employ larger samples and mixed methodologies across different cultural and denominational contexts to investigate the measurable impact of faith-based therapy on clinical and psychosocial outcomes.
7. Policy Implementation: Religious institutions and theological seminaries should integrate pastoral mental health education into their training curricula, ensuring clergy understand when to refer clients for professional care.

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SECTION D

MISSION, MINISTRY, AFRICA HERITAGE, AND INTERRELIGIOUS ENGAGEMENT IN A CHANGING WORLD

CHAPTER 34

CULTURE, TRANSGENERATIONAL FAITH AND GLOBAL CONTEXT: A SOCIO-THEOLOGICAL STUDY OF 2 TIMOTHY 1:3-5; 2:1-2 FOR CHRISTIANITY IN AFRICA

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Abstract

Despite the centrality of family and community in African societies, Christianity in contemporary Africa faces a growing crisis of faith discontinuity across generations. Rapid globalisation, secularisation, urbanization, and the reconfiguration of family systems have weakened traditional mechanisms through which Christian faith, values, and identity were transmitted. While the New Testament affirms intergenerational faith formation, many African Christian households increasingly delegate spiritual formation to churches, schools, or media, resulting in fragmented personal spirituality and fragile family life. Existing scholarship has extensively examined Pauline theology and African contextual theology independently. However, a significant research gap remains in integrating transgenerational faith in the Pastoral Epistles, particularly 2 Timothy 1:3-5 and 2:1-5, with African socio-cultural realities and contemporary family dynamics. The study adopts a qualitative research methodology, using literature-based approach with historical-grammatical and contextual hermeneutics, combining exegetical analysis of Pauline to examine African Culture, transgenerational faith and global realities with its implications for Christianity in Africa. The study finds that "owned-faith" functions as a stabilising mechanism for transgenerational faith transmission, thereby sustaining Christian identity,

moral formation, and relational resilience. It further demonstrates that faith transmitted within family relationships fosters spiritual discipline and reinforces communal responsibility. This study will benefit African biblical scholars, theologians, pastors, church leaders, Christian educators, families, and theological institutions by providing a socio-theological framework for strengthening transgenerational faith transmission and sustaining the continuity of Christianity in Africa. The study recommends intentional faith formation within households, intergenerational mentoring in churches, and theological education that integrates biblical exegesis with African family life could sustain Christianity in Africa amid global change.

***Keywords**: Christian Identity, Intergenerational discipleship, Owned-faith, Spiritual formation, Transgenerational faith.*

Introduction

Historically, the formation and transmission of religious faith across generations have been integrated into the social and communal fabric of African societies, where religious identity, moral values, and spiritual practices were transmitted through family relationships, kinship networks, storytelling, mentorship, ritual participation, and communal responsibility. However, contemporary processes of globalization, urbanization, migration, changing family structures, religious pluralism, and digitalization have transformed these traditional mechanisms of religious socialization. African Christian scholarship suggests that the expression, negotiation, and transmission of Christian beliefs and practices are increasingly formed within evolving sociocultural contexts characterized by transnational migration, rapidly evolving media technologies, and changing configurations of religious identity.[1]

The central problem is therefore not simply a decline in religious commitment but the weakening and transformation of the relational structures through which faith has historically been embodied and transmitted across generations. This situation creates an urgent theological and pastoral need for African Christian families and communities to develop intentional approaches to sustaining Christian identity and discipleship among

[1]Adogame, A (2013). The African Christian Diaspora: New currents and emerging trends in world Christianity. Asamoah-Gyadu, J.K. (2015). Migration, Diaspora mission, and religious others in World Christianity: An African perspective. Asamoah-Gyadu, J.K (2015). Of faith and visual alertness: The message of "mediatized" religion in an African Pentecostal context. Kalu, O.U. (2008). African Pentecostalism: An introduction.

younger generations. Although considerable scholarship has examined African Christianity, globalization, migration, Pentecostalism, communal identity, and religious transformation, insufficient attention has been given to the intersection of these developments with the Pauline theology of intergenerational faith transmission. Taken together, 2 Timothy 1:3-5 and 2:1-2[2] articulate a coherent Pauline paradigm in which Christian faith is formed within relational contexts, embodied through practice, and intentionally cultivated, and transmitted across generations.

The reference to Timothy's "sincere faith," associated with his grandmother Lois and mother Eunice, demonstrates familial modelling and intergenerational formation, while Paul's instruction in 2 Timothy 2:1-2 establishes a wider pattern of intentional discipleship in which received faith is entrusted to others capable of teaching subsequent generations. The research gap, therefore, lies in the limited integration of this Pauline model with contemporary African realities, particularly kinship, communal responsibility, mentorship, elder authority, migration, globalization, and digital culture. This study addresses the gap by arguing that Pauline intergenerational discipleship provides a constructive theological framework for strengthening Christian faith transmission while critically engaging the changing social conditions of African families and communities.

This study adopts a socio-biblical and African contextual hermeneutical approach. Methodologically, it combines exegetical analysis with socio-cultural interpretation. The exegetical analysis focuses on 2 Timothy 1:3-5 and 2:1-2, examining their literary, historical, linguistic, rhetorical, and theological dimensions with emphasis on familial formation, sincere faith, mentorship, discipleship, and multigenerational transmission. The contextual analysis engages these biblical themes alongside African concepts of kinship, communal responsibility, elder authority, and relational identity, and considers contemporary realities such as globalization, urbanization, migration, and digitalization. By placing the biblical text in dialogue with African Christian experience, the study proposes a relational ecosystem involving families, churches, elders, mentors, and communities as the context for intentional faith formation, and thus contributes a biblically

[2] 2 Timothy 1:3-5; 1 Timothy 2:1-2.

grounded and contextually responsive framework for resilient transgenerational Christian identity in Africa.

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts an interdisciplinary theoretical framework such as Transgenerational Faith Transmission Theory, Contextual African Biblical Hermeneutics, and Globalization Theory to interpret 2 Timothy 1:3-5 and 2:1-2 within African cultural and contemporary global contexts. Social Constructivism and Transgenerational Faith Transmission Theory illuminate faith as socially constructed and sustained through relational learning, family structures, mentorship, and intentional intergenerational engagement, as exemplified by Lois, Eunice, Timothy, and Paul. African Communalism and Contextual African Biblical Hermeneutics further emphasize relational personhood, communal responsibility, and culturally situated biblical interpretation, while Globalization Theory accounts for the ways migration, digital media, and global cultural flows reshape traditional mechanisms of religious formation. Collectively, these perspectives establish that Pauline faith transmission is relational, communal, intentional, and contextually responsive, providing a theoretically grounded framework for strengthening transgenerational Christian discipleship within contemporary African Christianity.

1. Transgenerational Faith Transmission Theory

Transgenerational Faith Transmission Theory, rooted in early scholarship on religious socialization and further developed through studies of intergenerational religious continuity, conceptualizes faith formation as a relational process shaped by family relationships, parental modelling, and intentional engagement (White, 1968; Bengtson et al., 2013; Dollahite & Marks). Applied to 2 Timothy 1:5 and 2:2, the theory illuminates a progressive pattern of familial inheritance and intentional discipleship, represented in the transmission of faith from Lois to Eunice, Eunice to Timothy, and Timothy to subsequent generations. This framework is particularly relevant to contemporary African Christianity, where families and churches negotiate the continuity of Christian identity amid secularization, globalization, changing family structures, intergenerational tensions, and rapidly transforming socio-cultural environments.

2. **Contextual African Biblical Hermeneutics**

Contextual African Biblical Hermeneutics, advanced particularly by Justin S. Ukpong, provides a methodological framework for interpreting Scripture through critical engagement with the lived historical, cultural, socioeconomic, and religious realities of African communities. Applied to 2 Timothy 1:3-5 and 2:1-5, this approach facilitates an examination of intergenerational faith transmission, family-based religious formation, mentorship, and communal identity amid contemporary challenges such as migration, family fragmentation, digitalization, secularization, and changing youth identities. It therefore establishes a constructive interpretive dialogue between Pauline theology and African Christian experience, enabling the biblical text to inform contextually relevant approaches to sustaining Christian faith across generations.

3. **Globalization Theory**

Globalization Theory, developed prominently in the work of Anthony Giddens (1990), conceptualizes globalization as the intensification of social relations across geographical distance, whereby global processes increasingly influence local experiences. This framework is relevant to African Christian faith formation because digital technologies, migration, social media, international education, and transnational religious networks have diversified the sources through which young people acquire religious beliefs, values, and identities. In relation to 2 Timothy 2:2, globalization complicates traditional patterns of intergenerational discipleship by expanding faith transmission beyond parents, elders, pastors, and congregations to include digital platforms, online communities, and global Christian networks. Consequently, the theory offers a critical framework for examining how contemporary African Christianity can engage global cultural transformations while preserving intentional discipleship and sustaining the intergenerational continuity of Christian faith.

The Abrahamic Covenant as a Framework for Intergenerational Faith Formation and Transmission

The Old Testament presents a theological framework for faith. In this framework, faith is not viewed as an isolated or individual experience. It is understood as a covenantal and transgenerational responsibility. This understanding is evident in the Abrahamic narrative,

and describes Abraham's election as a call to teach righteousness and justice to future generations (Genesis 18:19). The text presents divine calling as future-oriented. Its focus is on the formation of a faithful lineage, not only on the life of one individual. Tokunboh Adeyemo notes that Abraham's vocation reflects a covenantal vision directed toward coming generations. In this view, faith commitment is extended beyond one person. It establishes a pattern of intentional transmission within the household. This pattern is also reflected in Israel's covenant identity. Israel was defined not only by ethnicity or politics. It was defined as a community in relationship with Yahweh. This relationship was sustained through instruction, remembrance, and obedience (Deuteronomy 6:4-9)[3].

This covenantal identity is reinforced throughout Israel's narrative tradition, where continuity of faith is portrayed as both a theological imperative and a communal responsibility. The warning in Judges 2:10 illustrates the consequences of disrupted transmission, as the emergence of a generation unfamiliar with Yahweh signals spiritual decline and covenantal rupture[4]. In this context, John S. Mbiti draws a parallel between the biblical worldview and African communal ontology, both of which situate identity within an intergenerational continuum that binds past, present, and future communities together.[5] Similarly, Kwame Bediako emphasizes that religious vitality is sustained only when faith is embedded within the cultural and social structures of a people and transmitted across generations.[6] The wisdom literature further reinforces this dynamic by locating moral and spiritual formation within parental instruction (Proverbs 1-9)[7], while Mercy Amba Oduyoye highlights the lived, experiential nature of faith formation in everyday contexts.[8] Collectively, these strands present faith transmission in the Old Testament as a holistic process integrating doctrine, ethics, and communal life, ensuring continuity through deliberate intergenerational engagement.

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[3] Deuteronomy 6:4-9
[4] Judges 2:10
[5] Ibid 1
[6] Kwame Bediako, *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1995), 225-300.
[7] Proverbs 1-9
[8] Mercy Amba Oduyoye, Introducing African Women's Theology (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 45-47.

Intergenerational Faith Transmission and Contemporary Challenges to Christianity in Africa

Intergenerational faith transmission has historically occupied a central position within African societies, where moral, cultural, and spiritual values were preserved through communal structures involving elders, parents, kinship systems, and community leaders. Through storytelling, rites of passage, mentorship, oral traditions, and ritual participation, African communities integrated spiritual formation into everyday social life. African scholars emphasize that identity within African worldviews is fundamentally communal rather than individualistic. John S. Mbiti famously explains this relational worldview through the expression, "I am because we are," highlighting the inseparability of personhood, morality, and communal belonging.[9]

Christianity was introduced to Africa by many early missionaries who often presented Christianity through Western cultural frameworks. Andrew F. Walls observes that the gospel frequently arrived "wrapped" in Western cultural forms. This presentation created challenges for integrating African identity with Christian faith[10]. The task of transmitting faith across generations is complex in contemporary African and diasporic contexts. Globalization, migration, urbanization, secularization, and digital transformation are present in these contexts. Traditional communal structures once supported moral and spiritual continuity, where among second- and third-generation Africans in the diaspora, inherited cultural and religious identities exist alongside dominant secular and globalized value systems.Afe Adogame observes that African Christianity in diaspora contexts experiences tensions arising from cultural displacement, identity negotiation, and generational discontinuity, all of which threaten the preservation of both African heritage and Christian commitment.[11] Similarly, the rise of individualized religiosity, consumerism, and declining communal accountability has contributed to weakened

[9] Ibid 3

[10]

[11] Afe Adogame, *The African Christian Diaspora: New Currents and Emerging Trends in World Christianity* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 75-78.

mentorship structures, diminished elder authority, and growing gaps in discipleship and leadership formation within many African Christian communities.

African theologians therefore argue for a contextualized and relational approach to Christian formation that integrates biblical principles with African cultural frameworks. E. Bolaji Idowu maintains that authentic Christianity in Africa must engage indigenous categories of meaning rather than merely reproducing imported ecclesiastical traditions.[12] This perspective resonates with the biblical model of relational faith transmission reflected in 2 Timothy 1:5[13], where the Apostle Paul commends the sincere faith passed from Lois to Eunice and subsequently to Timothy. Sustainable Christianity in Africa consequently depends on reclaiming the family and community as primary spaces for spiritual formation through intentional mentorship, communal discipleship, and culturally grounded theological engagement capable of sustaining authentic, transgenerational Christian identity in a rapidly changing global context.

Socio-Cultural and Institutional Factors Influencing Transgenerational Religious Formation

Transgenerational religious formation is fundamental to the continuity of religious communities, yet contemporary socio-cultural transformations increasingly disrupt established mechanisms of faith transmission. Globalization, secularization, urbanization, migration, technological advancement, and changing cultural values expose younger generations to diverse worldviews that challenge inherited religious traditions and communal patterns of socialization. Modernity and urbanization can reconfigure traditional communal structures and weaken the relational networks through which intergenerational values and religious practices are transmitted, while individualism and pluralism encourage increasingly selective and personalized forms of religious identity.[14]

Within African contexts, these transformations are particularly significant because traditional systems of religious formation have historically relied on Family-based social

[12] E. Bolaji Idowu, African Traditional Religion: A Definition (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1973), 187-190.
[13] 2 Timothy 1:5
[14] Roof, W.C (1993). Spiritual Marketplace: Baby boomers and the remaking of American religion.

networks, communal participation, ritual continuity, elder authority, and shared moral frameworks.

Consequently, the weakening of extended-family structures, migration-induced separation, changing patterns of work and family life, and increased exposure to global cultural flows have diminished opportunities for sustained intergenerational interaction and religious mentorship.[15] Faith transmission is therefore increasingly characterized by negotiation and adaptation rather than automatic cultural inheritance. The family, educational system, peer network, religious institution, and digital environment constitute interconnected sites of contemporary religious socialization.

Historically, families served as primary contexts for spiritual formation through parental modelling, storytelling, moral instruction, domestic worship, and communal participation; however, economic pressures, migration, demanding work schedules, and changing family structures can constrain sustained parental involvement. At the same time, schools, peers, and media provide alternative sources of moral and religious socialization, particularly among adolescents and young adults. Digital technologies intensify this process by expanding access to religious resources while simultaneously exposing young people to competing secular and religious narratives. Campbell H.A(Ed) (2013)[16] demonstrate that digital religion can both extend religious engagement and transform traditional patterns of authority, belonging, and participation.

Similarly, African Christian scholarship shows that transnational migration and media technologies are reshaping Christian identities and communities across geographical boundaries (Adogame, 2013; Asamoah-Gyadu, 2015)[17]. Religious institutions consequently face the challenge of developing youth-oriented, contextually relevant, and technologically responsive forms of discipleship capable of engaging younger generations without abandoning theological continuity. These developments reveal a significant shift from inherited religiosity to negotiated religious identity, in which younger generations

[15] Adogame, A. (2013). The African Christian Diaspora: New Currents and emerging trends in World Christianity. Bloomsbury Academic. Asaoah-Gyadu, J.K (2015). Migration, diaspora missio, and religious others in world Christianity: An African perspective.
[16] Campbell, H.A. (Ed.) (2021). Digital religion: Understanding religion practice in new media worlds.
[17] Ibid 1

actively interpret, appropriate, modify, or reject elements of received traditions. Migration, urbanization, multiculturalism, religious pluralism, and digital connectivity have therefore transformed the social ecology within which transgenerational faith is sustained.

The challenge for contemporary Christianity is not merely to preserve doctrinal content but to reconstruct relational and institutional environments in which faith can be credibly embodied, meaningfully interpreted, and intentionally transmitted. For African Christianity, this requires a collaborative approach involving families, churches, elders, mentors, educational institutions, and digital communities, while drawing critically upon the relational strengths of African communal traditions. Effective transgenerational formation consequently depends on contextualized theological education, intergenerational mentorship, family discipleship, adaptive institutional practices, and meaningful engagement with contemporary media and culture. Such an approach can enable Christian communities to maintain theological continuity while equipping younger generations to inhabit and articulate their faith responsibly within rapidly changing socio-cultural environments.

Socio-Religious Effects of Inadequate Transgenerational Faith Transmission and Continuity

In African societies, religion has historically functioned not merely as a private system of belief but as the foundation of communal identity, moral order, social cohesion, and cultural continuity. Spiritual values were traditionally transmitted through family structures, oral traditions, rituals, communal participation, and mentorship, ensuring continuity between generations. John S. Mbiti emphasizes that African religion is deeply communal, shaping both personal identity and collective social existence.[18] Consequently, the weakening of intergenerational faith transmission produces profound socio-religious consequences that extend beyond individual spirituality to affect the stability of communities, institutions, and cultural systems. Wade Clark Roof observes that disruptions

[18] John S. Mbiti. African Religions and Philosophy, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Heinemann, 1990), 106-110

in religious continuity often result in declining religious commitment and increasing secularization among younger generations, particularly in rapidly modernizing societies.[19]

Within African contexts, where religion historically structured social life and communal ethics, inadequate faith transmission therefore contributes to spiritual discontinuity, weakened communal solidarity, and the erosion of collective identity. One of the most visible consequences of inadequate transgenerational faith transmission is the decline in religious participation and communal cohesion. Younger generations increasingly disengage from worship, ritual observance, doctrinal instruction, and communal religious activities that traditionally reinforced social belonging and spiritual formation.

This decline weakens the vitality of religious institutions and reduces participation in culturally significant practices such as festivals, rites of passage, and family devotions. John S. Mbiti argues that communal religious participation is indispensable to African social cohesion because religion functions as a unifying force within the community.[20] Biblical teachings similarly stress the importance of communal continuity in faith, as reflected in Hebrews 10:25[21] and Acts 2:42[22], which encourage believers to remain steadfast in fellowship, teaching, and communal worship. The erosion of such practices consequently fragments religious communities, weakens intergenerational solidarity, and diminishes the shared moral vision necessary for sustaining communal life. Inadequate faith transmission also contributes significantly to moral diffusion, marriage instability, and the erosion of cultural identity.

African moral systems have traditionally been reinforced through religious instruction embedded within family and communal structures. E. Bolaji Idowu maintains that religion in African societies serves as a principal vehicle for transmitting ethical values, communal responsibilities, and cultural identity across generations.[23] When this process weakens, younger generations become increasingly susceptible to ethical relativism, individualistic

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[19] Wade Clarke Roof, A Generation of Seekers: The Spiritual Journeys of the Baby Boom Generation (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1993), 45-50.
[20] John S. Mbiti, Introduction to African Religion, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Heinemann, 1991), 83-87.
[21] Hebrews 10:25
[22] Acts 2:42
[23] E. Bolaji Idowu, African Traditional Religion: A Definition (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1973), 187-190.

moral reasoning, and diminished communal accountability. Biblical teachings such as Deuteronomy 6:6-7[24] and Proverbs 22:6[25] emphasize intentional spiritual and moral formation within the family as essential for sustaining righteous communities. Lamin Sanneh warns that Christianity detached from its cultural foundations may survive institutionally while losing its transformative relevance within society.[26]

Another critical consequence of weakened transgenerational faith continuity is increased vulnerability to secularization, ideological pluralism, and external cultural pressures. Globalization, urbanization, migration, and digital media increasingly expose younger generations to competing value systems that often challenge inherited religious traditions. Therefore, without strong spiritual formation and effective mentorship, many youths may develop individualized religious identities disconnected from shared and doctrinal foundations.

This situation contributes to growing religious disaffiliation and the rise of individualized "spiritual-but-not-religious" identities. Kwame Bediako argues that African Christianity must remain deeply rooted within African cultural consciousness if it is to resist the fragmenting effects of secular modernity and preserve its transformative social role.[27] Weak faith transmission threatens leadership succession and cultural continuity in Africa, thereby necessitating intentional intergenerational discipleship, contextualized theological formation, and the restoration of family and community as centers of spiritual development.

Owned Faith and Personal Appropriation: A Framework for Transgenerational Faith Formation

[24] Deuteronomy 6:6-7
[25] Provers 22:6
[26] Lamin Sanneh, Whose Religion is Christianity? The Gospel Beyond the West (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 98-103.
[27] Kwame Bediako, Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1995), 225 -230.

The concept of owned faith offers a critical framework for understanding the distinction between the transmission and appropriation of Christian faith across generations. The construct "owned faith" is not a biblical term per se, but it is widely employed in theology and the sociology of religion to denote faith that is personally appropriated rather than passively inherited. It describes a faith that individuals have consciously embraced for themselves, as opposed to faith assumed by default from family, culture, or church. This distinguishes it from inherited faith. Although 2 Timothy 1:5 locates Timothy's faith within the intergenerational formation provided by Lois and Eunice, the text suggests that faith continuity cannot be reduced to biological descent or cultural inheritance; rather, received faith must be personally internalized, embodied, and enacted through responsible discipleship.

Transgenerational faith transmission therefore entails a dynamic interplay between relational inheritance, individual agency, and intentional reproduction of Christian commitment. This conceptualization is particularly significant for contemporary African Christianity, where family and communal structures remain central to religious socialization, while globalization, cultural transformation, migration, and transnational religious networks increasingly shape how younger generations appropriate, reinterpret, and reproduce inherited Christian identities.[28] Owned faith describes the process through which Christian convictions received through family, church, and community become personally appropriated, critically interpreted, consciously affirmed, and consistently embodied.

It acknowledges that religious identity is socially inherited while emphasizing the agency of individuals to internalize, enact, and reproduce the traditions that shape their faith. This perspective is particularly pertinent to contemporary African Christianity, where generational shifts and changing social realities are reshaping the ways younger Christians

[28] Allison L. Norton and Caleb Opoku Nyanni: New Generations, New Mission: Intergenerational Faith Transmission and the Missionary Function of African Immigrant

engage inherited forms of Christian identity.[29] Accordingly, owned faith is best understood as a critical and contextual process through which inherited Christianity acquires personal significance without losing its communal and historical foundations. The significance of owned faith is particularly evident in 2 Timothy 1:5[30], where Paul connects Timothy's faith with the "sincere faith" (***pistis anupokritos***) embodied by Lois and Eunice, thereby affirming both intergenerational continuity and personal authenticity.

The text therefore presents transgenerational continuity as a relational and formative process rather than an automatic consequence of family or cultural affiliation. This dynamic is reinforced in 2 Timothy 2:1-2[31], where Timothy is entrusted with the responsibility of transmitting received teaching to faithful persons capable of teaching others, demonstrating the transition from recipient to responsible agent of faith. Therefore, the Pauline model conceptualizes transgenerational continuity as a movement from relational inheritance through personal appropriation to intentional reproduction, with particular relevance for contemporary African Christianity and its engagement with generational transformation.[32] The African context makes owned faith particularly significant because Christian formation occurs within interconnected networks of family, church, community, culture, and increasingly transnational relationships.

Migration, digital communication, globalization, and transnational religious networks have expanded the contexts within which younger generations encounter, interpret, and negotiate Christianity, producing dynamic interactions between inherited traditions and emerging forms of Christian identity.[33] Consequently, transgenerational faith cannot be equated with the automatic reproduction of inherited religious identity; rather, it requires the personal appropriation and embodied enactment of Christian convictions. This distinction enables African Christianity to differentiate institutional or numerical continuity from deeper continuity in theological commitment, discipleship, ethical

[29] Afe Adogame. (2025). Looking Back to the Future: Live Christianities and the Politics of Tradition and Innovation
[30] 2 Timothy 1:5
[31] 2 Timothy 2:1-2
[32] Norton and Nyanni: New Generations, New Mission.
[33] Ibid.

practice, and spiritual identity, particularly amid generational change and cultural transformation.

Owned faith, therefore, should not be construed as individualistic Christianity detached from African communal identity but as personal agency exercised within relational belonging. Timothy's faith in 2 Timothy 1:5 is formed through his relationships with Lois and Eunice and subsequently becomes the basis for his responsibility to form others, demonstrating that authentic faith is simultaneously relationally received, personally appropriated, communally embodied, and intentionally transmitted. The Pauline paradigm thus integrates communal formation with personal commitment, challenging contemporary African Christianity to cultivate believers who can critically discern, articulate, and embody Christian convictions while remaining rooted in their familial and communal contexts. In this sense, owned faith provides a constructive framework for sustaining transgenerational Christian discipleship amid the plural, fluid, and rapidly changing realities of contemporary Africa.

Christian parenting and discipleship in Africa should therefore move beyond church attendance, catechetical instruction, Scripture memorization, and conformity to inherited practices toward authentic modelling, intergenerational dialogue, mentoring, critical biblical engagement, and active participation by younger Christians. Such an approach reflects the Pauline pattern of credible exemplification, intentional instruction, personal appropriation, and responsible transmission, while recognizing that numerical or institutional Christian expansion does not necessarily signify substantive discipleship. The critical concern for transgenerational continuity is whether younger generations develop the theological conviction, ethical commitment, and spiritual agency necessary to inhabit, interpret, embody, and responsibly transmit the Christian faith within changing contexts.[34]

The concern is particularly significant within African contexts, where youth migration and transnational mobility increasingly expose younger generations to alternative cultural and religious frameworks that may reshape their relationship with inherited traditions. In this context, owned faith functions as a mediating category between transgenerational

[34] Norton and Nyanni (2023). New Generations, New Mission.

transmission and enduring Christian continuity, integrating social inheritance, cultural interpretation, biblical grounding, personal appropriation, and communal reproduction. The Pauline trajectory in 2 Timothy 1:3-5 and 2:1-2 moves from inherited faith, exemplified by Lois and Eunice, to Timothy's personal appropriation and embodiment of that faith, followed by intentional discipleship and transmission to subsequent generations.

This framework suggests that Christian faith is received relationally but sustained through personal conviction and responsible participation, enabling contemporary African Christianity to integrate inheritance with agency, communal belonging with personal conviction, and cultural continuity with intentional discipleship toward a biblically grounded, contextually meaningful, and globally resilient Christian identity.

Pauline Theology of Transgenerational Faith Transmission in 2 Timothy 1:3-5 and 2:1-2

The New Testament Pastoral Epistles, especially 2 Timothy, exemplify the intergenerational transmission of faith, addressing leadership, perseverance, and the faithful preservation of Christian teaching. Timothy's own faith was nurtured within a multi-generational family context, Paul highlights Timothy's "sincere faith" as one first nurtured in his grandmother Lois and mother Eunice, demonstrating that authentic Christian commitment develops within multigenerational relationships rather than through isolated individual experience (2 Timothy. 1:5).[35] This transgenerational dimension is clearly reflected in 2 Timothy 1:3-5, where Paul emphasizes the spiritual heritage imparted to Timothy, modeling the relational and communal nature of faith formation. Paul further instructs Timothy to entrust Christian teaching to "faithful people" who will teach others also, thereby establishing a model of structured and continuous discipleship across generations (2 Timothy. 2:1-2).[36]

This Pauline understanding closely parallels African communal conceptions of identity and moral formation. John S. Mbiti argues that African life is fundamentally communal and relational, while E. Bolaji Idowu emphasizes that religious and moral values are

[35] The Holy Bible (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2001), 2 Timothy 1:5
[36] The Holy Bible, 2 Timothy 2:1-2

traditionally transmitted through family structures, oral traditions, and communal participation.[37] Consequently, the theological vision of 2 Timothy underscores the necessity of intentional mentorship, household-centered spiritual formation, and intergenerational discipleship for preserving authentic Christian faith and moral continuity within contemporary society.

Exegetical and Socio-Theological Analysis of 2 Timothy 1:3-5 and 2:1-2

English Translation of 2 Timothy 1:3-5 and 2:1-2

2 Timothy 1:3-5:

Verse 3: "I give thanks to God, whom I serve from my ancestors with a pure conscience, as I constantly remember you in my prayers night and day."

Verse 4: "Longing to see you, remembering your tears, so that I may be filled with joy."

Verse 5: "I am reminded of the sincere faith that is in you, which first dwelt in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice, and I am convinced that it is also in you" (2 Tim. 1:3-5).

2 Timothy 2:1-2:

Verse 1: "You therefore, my child, be strengthened by the grace that is in Christ Jesus."

Verse 2: "And the things that you have heard from me through many witnesses, entrust these things to faithful people who will be competent to teach others also" (2 Tim. 2:1-2).

Greek Text: NA28/UBS5

2 Timothy 1:3-5

1:3

Χάριν ἔχω τῷ θεῷ, ᾧ λατρεύω ἀπὸ προγόνων ἐν καθαρᾷ συνειδήσει, ὡς ἀδιάλειπτον ἔχω τὴν περὶ σοῦ μνείαν ἐν ταῖς δεήσεσίν μου νυκτὸς καὶ ἡμέρας,

[37] John S. Mbiti. (1967). African Religions and Philosophy, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Heinemann, 1990), 106-108.

1:4

ἐπιποθῶν σε ἰδεῖν, μεμνημένος σου τῶν δακρύων, ἵνα χαρᾶς πληρωθῶ,

1:5

ὑπόμνησιν λαβὼν τῆς ἐν σοὶ ἀνυποκρίτου πίστεως, ἥτις ἐνῴκησεν πρῶτον ἐν τῇ μάμμῃ σου Λωΐδι καὶ τῇ μητρί σου Εὐνίκῃ, πέπεισμαι δὲ ὅτι καὶ ἐν σοί.

2 Timothy 2:1-2

2:1

Σὺ οὖν, τέκνον μου, ἐνδυναμοῦ ἐν τῇ χάριτι τῇ ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ,

2:2

καὶ ἃ ἤκουσας παρ’ ἐμοῦ διὰ πολλῶν μαρτύρων, ταῦτα παράθου πιστοῖς ἀνθρώποις, οἵτινες ἱκανοὶ ἔσονται καὶ ἑτέρους διδάξαι.

Exegetical Discussion of 2 Timothy 1:3-5 and 2:1-2 and Implications for Christianity in Africa

1. Covenant Continuity and the Foundation of Transgenerational Faith: 2 Timothy 1:3-5

Second Timothy 1:3-5 establishes the foundation of transgenerational faith through ancestral continuity, personal integrity, familial formation, remembrance, and spiritual responsibility. Paul begins with **Χάριν ἔχω (*charin echō*)**, “I give thanks,” expressing gratitude to God, and then declares **ᾧ λατρεύω ἀπὸ προγόνων (*hō latreuō apo progonōn*)**, “whom I serve from my ancestors.” The verb **λατρεύω (*latreuō*)** denotes service or worship rendered to God, while **πρόγονοι (*progonoi*)** refers to ancestors or forefathers. Paul therefore presents his service to God as having historical and ancestral continuity rather than arising in isolation. However, this inherited religious tradition is qualified by **ἐν**

καθαρᾷ συνειδήσει (*en kathara syneidēsei*), "with a pure conscience," indicating that ancestral tradition must be accompanied by personal integrity and authentic devotion.[38]

The theological significance is that Christian faith can possess a historical dimension without being reduced to hereditary religion. Paul subsequently describes his relationship with Timothy through **ἀδιάλειπτον (*adialeipton*)**, "unceasing" or "constant," remembrance in prayer "night and day," followed by **ἐπιποθῶν (*epipothōn*)**, "longing" to see Timothy and remembering his tears (2 Tim. 1:3-4). These expressions demonstrate that transgenerational faith is sustained through relational investment, prayer, affection, and spiritual responsibility rather than through the mechanical transfer of religious information. The theological centre appears in **ἀνυπόκριτος πίστις (*anypókritos pistis*)**, "sincere/genuine faith," and **ἐνῴκησεν (*enōkēsen*)**, "dwelt" or "inhabited," which describes faith as an abiding reality in Lois and Eunice (2 Tim. 1:5).

The nouns **μάμμη (*mammē*)** and **μήτηρ (*mētēr*)**, "grandmother" and "mother," explicitly identify the family as a formative environment for faith. Paul's statement **πέπεισμαι (*pepeismai*)**, "I am convinced," that this faith is "also in you" demonstrates that Timothy has personally appropriated what he received. Thus, the sequence from Lois to Eunice, and Eunice to Timothy illustrates faith that is received, embodied, personally appropriated, and continued across generations rather than automatically inherited through biological descent.[39]

2. The Apostolic Model of Intentional Faith Transmission: 2 Timothy 2:1-2

Second Timothy 2:1-2 extends the familial formation of 1:3-5 into a broader model of intentional discipleship and ecclesial reproduction. Paul begins with **Σὺ οὖν (*sy oun*)**, "you therefore," linking Timothy's previous spiritual formation with his new responsibility. The expression **τέκνον μου (*teknon mou*)**, "my child," communicates a close spiritual and

[38] Towner. Philip (2006). The Letters to Timothy and Titus. New International Commentary on the New Testament. Grand Rapids: Erdmans.
Knight, George W. III. 1992. The Patoral Epistles: A commentary on the Greek Text. New International Greek Testament Commentary. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
[39] Mounce, William D. 2000. Pastoral Epistles. Word Biblical Commentary 46. Nashville: Thomas Nelson.
Towner, Philip H. 2006. The Letters to Timothy and Titus. New International Commentary on the New Testament. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.

mentoring relationship rather than biological parenthood. Timothy has received formation from Paul and is now expected to participate in the formation of others. Paul commands **ἐνδυναμοῦ (*endynamou*)**, "be strengthened" or "be empowered," **ἐν τῇ χάριτι (*en tē chariti*)**, "by/in the grace," that is found **ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ (*en Christō Iēsou*)**. The theological significance is that Christian continuity depends ultimately upon divine grace, even though it requires intentional human participation. Timothy's ability to sustain ministry and transmit the apostolic faith is therefore grounded in Christ's empowering grace rather than human ability alone.[40]

Verse 2 presents the central command of intentional transmission. Paul refers to **ἃ ἤκουσας παρ' ἐμοῦ (*ha ēkousas par' emou*)**, "the things that you heard from me," indicating that Timothy is a recipient of apostolic instruction. He is then commanded **ταῦτα παράθου (*tauta parathou*)**, "entrust these things," to **πιστοῖς ἀνθρώποις (*pistois anthrōpois*)**, "faithful people." The imperative **παράθου (*parathou*)**, from *παρατίθημι* (*paratithēmi*), signifies deliberate entrusting or committing something to another person's care. The recipients must also be **ἱκανοί (*hikanoi*)**, "competent," "capable," or "qualified," so that they can **ἑτέρους διδάξαι (*heterous didaxai*)**, "teach others." The combination of **πιστοί** and **ἱκανοί** indicates that transgenerational discipleship requires both trustworthy character and teaching competence. The final verb **διδάξαι (*didaxai*)** makes the process reproductive rather than merely preservative. The resulting chain is therefore from Paul to Timothy, from Timothy to faithful and from competent persons to others, demonstrating that every generation is called not only to receive the Christian faith but also to transmit and reproduce it.[41] (Towner 2006, 490-95; Mounce 2000, 497-98).

3. From Inherited Faith to Personally Appropriated Faith

A central theological contribution of these passages is the distinction between inherited religious identity and personally appropriated faith. Timothy's faith possesses a transgenerational history, but Paul identifies it as **ἀνυπόκριτος (*anypókritos*)**, meaning "sincere," "genuine," or "without hypocrisy" (2 Tim. 1:5). The term is significant because

[40] Mounce.
[41] Ibid.

it moves faith beyond external religious affiliation toward authentic personal conviction and practice. Likewise, the verb **ἐνοικέω (*enoikeō*)**, from which **ἐνῴκησεν (*enōkēsen*)** derives, means "to dwell in," "inhabit," or "reside." Faith therefore appears not simply as information transmitted by Lois and Eunice but as an abiding reality embodied in their lives. Timothy receives this heritage within a relational environment, but the phrase **καὶ ἐν σοί (*kai en soi*)**, "also in you," establishes the necessity of personal appropriation. Faith has a history, but it must become an authentic reality within each succeeding believer.[42] (Mounce 2000, 470-71; Towner 2006, 450-53).

The theological progression can consequently be expressed as from inheritance to appropriation, to embodiment, to transmission and to reproduction. Lois and Eunice represent generations in whom faith was embodied and communicated, while Timothy represents the succeeding generation that receives and personally appropriates that faith. In 2 Timothy 2:1-2, Timothy then becomes an active transmitter through the commands **ἐνδυναμοῦ** ("be strengthened") and **παράθου** ("entrust"). The movement demonstrates that transgenerational faith is not simply the preservation of religious tradition but the reproduction of a lived Christian identity. This challenges passive understandings of Christian heritage, since churches may possess established traditions, institutions, doctrine, and numerical strength while experiencing generational discontinuity if younger believers are not intentionally formed to embody and reproduce the gospel. Christian continuity therefore depends on preserving apostolic truth while ensuring its authentic appropriation and embodiment in succeeding generations.[43]

4. Socio-Theological Significance within African Christianity

The Pauline model has particular significance for African Christianity because family, kinship, elders, communal identity, storytelling, apprenticeship, communal worship, and intergenerational responsibility have historically functioned as important mechanisms of transmitting values and identity. These structures correspond closely with the relational character of Paul's language in 2 Timothy. The familial progression represented by **μάμμη** ("grandmother") to **μήτηρ** ("mother") and to Timothy demonstrates how faith can be

[42] Ibid.
[43] Ibid

nurtured through close interpersonal relationships. The significance of this pattern for African Christianity lies in its recognition that Christian formation is not restricted to formal ecclesiastical institutions but can occur within households and wider communal networks. In this respect, African relational structures can provide contextual resources for cultivating transgenerational Christian discipleship.[44]

The role of Lois and Eunice is particularly important for understanding women's contribution to transgenerational faith formation. Their explicit identification as the grandmother and mother of Timothy demonstrates that women can function as custodians of theological memory, spiritual nurture, moral formation, and Christian practice. Nevertheless, the Pauline model should not be employed to idealize African culture or assume that every traditional practice is automatically compatible with Christianity. The appropriate approach is critical appropriation: culturally familiar mechanisms such as elder mentorship, storytelling, family instruction, apprenticeship, and communal participation may be employed for Christian formation while remaining subject to biblical and theological evaluation. Thus, the significance of the Pauline model lies not in reproducing culture uncritically but in transforming relational cultural resources around Christ and the apostolic gospel.[45]

5. Transgenerational Faith amid Contemporary African Transformations

The significance of 2 Timothy 1:3-5 and 2:1-2 becomes more pronounced amid contemporary African transformations, including urbanisation, migration, globalisation, technological development, digital media, secular educational environments, religious pluralism, economic pressures, and changing family structures.

These transformations can disrupt established patterns of intergenerational formation by producing geographical, relational, and cultural distance between generations. Migration, for example, may separate children from parents and grandparents, while urbanisation can weaken extended-family structures. Digital media simultaneously provides unprecedented opportunities for Christian instruction and exposes younger generations to competing

[44] Mbiti, John S. 1990. African Religions and Philosophy. 2nd ed. Oxford: Heinemann
[45]Kwame Bediako, 1995, *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

religious, ideological, and cultural influences. Consequently, the continuity of Christian faith can no longer be assumed simply on the basis of family or church affiliation. The Pauline emphasis on intentionality offers a theological response to these transformations.

The command **παράθου (*parathou*)**, "entrust," demonstrates that Christian faith requires deliberate transmission rather than passive inheritance. Contemporary African churches must therefore develop intentional structures through which parents disciple children, older Christians mentor younger believers, mature leaders equip emerging leaders, and congregations provide sustained theological instruction. The criteria **πιστοί (*pistoi*)**, "faithful," and **ἱκανοί (*hikanoi*)**, "competent," further indicate that such transmission requires both character and capacity. Christian formation should therefore incorporate teaching, prayer, modelling, mentoring, accountability, and meaningful participation in ministry. The changing African social environment makes intentional transgenerational discipleship not merely desirable but increasingly necessary for sustaining Christian identity.

6. Theological Implications for the Sustainability of Christianity in Africa

The combined witness of 2 Timothy 1:3-5 and 2:1-2 yields several theological implications for the sustainability of Christianity in Africa. First, the family emerges as a significant context for faith formation, illustrated by the faith that **ἐνῴκησεν (*enōkēsen*)**, "dwelt," in Lois and Eunice. Second, intergenerational discipleship is essential, as Paul's relationship with Timothy demonstrates the formative significance of spiritual mentorship. Third, personal appropriation remains indispensable because Timothy's faith is described as **ἀνυπόκριτος (*anypókritos*)**, "genuine." Fourth, Christian leadership must be reproductive, as expressed in **παράθου (*parathou*)**, "entrust," and **ἑτέρους διδάξαι (*heterous didaxai*)**, "teach others." These expressions demonstrate that sustainable Christianity requires not merely preservation of institutions but the development of faithful persons capable of transmitting the faith to succeeding generations. [46]

The passages also emphasise theological memory and continuity. Paul's remembrance of his ancestors, Timothy's tears, and the faith of Lois and Eunice show that memory can

[46] Bediako

connect the past with present Christian responsibility. African churches can therefore preserve and transmit the testimonies, teachings, sacrifices, ministries, and spiritual experiences of previous generations as resources for contemporary formation. Ultimately, sustainability should not be measured solely by numerical expansion, church attendance, or institutional growth. The Pauline model points instead toward faithful reproduction, in which Christian faith is received, personally appropriated, embodied, intentionally entrusted, and reproduced. The combination of **πιστοί** ("faithful") and **ἱκανοί** ("competent") is especially important because it suggests that the future of Christianity depends on forming successors who possess both spiritual character and theological capacity.

7. Synthesis: A Pauline Framework of Transgenerational Faith

Taken together, 2 Timothy 1:3-5 and 2:1-2 present a coherent Pauline framework of transgenerational faith. The first passage establishes historical and familial continuity through Paul's reference to **ἀπὸ προγόνων (*apo progonōn*)**, "from ancestors," and through the faith that **ἐνῴκησεν (*enōkēsen*)**, "dwelt," in Lois and Eunice and was recognised **ἐν σοί (*en soi*)**, "in you," Timothy. The second passage moves from reception to responsibility through **ἐνδυναμοῦ (*endynamou*)**, "be strengthened," and **παράθου (*parathou*)**, "entrust." The recipients are to be **πιστοί (*pistoi*)**, "faithful," and **ἱκανοί (*hikanoi*)**, "competent," so that they may **ἑτέρους διδάξαι (*heterous didaxai*)**, "teach others." The two passages therefore present faith as simultaneously historical, familial, personal, relational, intentional, and reproductive.

The theological pattern can consequently be summarised as from inherited faith to personal appropriation, then to embodied faith, to intentional discipleship, to faithful entrustment, to reproduction and to transgenerational continuity. Transgenerational faith is therefore neither merely hereditary religion nor simple generational succession; it is a dynamic process in which Christian faith is received from previous generations, personally appropriated, relationally embodied, intentionally entrusted, and reproduced among others. For African Christianity, this Pauline framework integrates household formation, communal responsibility, intergenerational mentorship, theological education, and ecclesial discipleship while responding to the pressures of globalisation, urbanisation,

migration, secularisation, and digital transformation. Its central theological proposition is that Christian faith must be received from the past, authentically lived in the present, and intentionally entrusted to the future.

Conclusion

This study conceptualizes transgenerational Christian faith as a dynamic process involving inheritance, personal appropriation, embodiment, and intentional transmission. A socio-biblical analysis of 2 Timothy 1:3-5 and 2:1-2 demonstrates that Timothy's faith was nurtured through the familial influence of Lois and Eunice but was not limited to inherited religious identity; rather, relationally transmitted faith became personally owned conviction and was subsequently reproduced through intentional discipleship. This trajectory resonates with Norton E. (2013) emphasis on creating intergenerational spaces in which younger Christians actively participate in shaping Christian identity and mission. Thus, enduring Christian continuity requires inherited faith to move beyond passive reception toward personal appropriation, embodied commitment, and responsible participation.

In contemporary African Christianity, this process occurs amid globalization, migration, digitalization, urbanization, and transnational religious networks that increasingly influence how younger generations interpret and negotiate inherited Christianity. Although family and communal structures remain important contexts for Christian formation, Adogame (2025) underscores the need to negotiate tradition and innovation within changing African Christian realities, while Norton and Nyanni (2023) demonstrate that intergenerational transmission can coexist with emerging forms of participation and Christian expression. Accordingly, this study proposes owned faith as a mediating category between transgenerational transmission and enduring Christian continuity, integrating communal inheritance with personal agency and contextual adaptation while maintaining biblical fidelity. Christian continuity should therefore be understood not as the static preservation of inherited forms but as the faithful reproduction of Christian conviction through successive generations, in which each generation receives, appropriates, embodies, contextualizes, and intentionally transmits the faith within the changing realities of Africa and the global Christian community.

Recommendations

1. Re-centering the Family as the Core Site of Faith Formation: African Christian households should intentionally restore the family as a primary context for spiritual formation by integrating prayer, Scripture engagement, worship, and moral instruction into everyday life to cultivate and transmit faith across generations in accordance with 2 Timothy 1:3-5.

2. Promoting Intergenerational Mentorship in Churches: Churches should establish structured mentorship systems that connect elders, parents, and younger Christians to facilitate the intentional transmission of faith, values, spiritual practices, and Christian identity across generations.

3. Integrating Faith Formation into Marriage Preparation: Christian marriage preparation should equip couples to function as co-leaders of spiritual formation within the home, fostering intentional discipleship and sustainable transmission of Christian faith to their children.

4. Building Parental Capacity for Intergenerational Discipleship: Churches should equip parents with practical, contextually relevant resources to sustain family discipleship amid digital, socioeconomic, and familial challenges while developing faith-informed media literacy among younger generations.

5. Reforming Theological Education Curricula: Seminaries and theological institutions should integrate family-centered discipleship, African Christian identity, and intergenerational faith transmission into ministerial education to prepare church leaders for contextually grounded and generationally responsive ministry.

6. Expanding Youth Participation in Christian Mission and Leadership: Churches should recognize younger Christians as active agents of Christian continuity by providing meaningful opportunities for theological reflection, worship, ministry, leadership, and mission through which they can critically appropriate and responsibly reinterpret inherited faith within contemporary contexts.

7. Strengthening Contextualized Biblical Interpretation and Empirical Research: Church leaders and theological educators should employ African contextual hermeneutics that engage communal identity, oral traditions, and lived cultural realities, while future interdisciplinary research should integrate biblical studies with sociology, psychology, and anthropology to empirically examine how intergenerational faith influences family cohesion and community resilience in Africa.

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CHAPTER 35

INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE AND SCRIPTURAL REASONING: THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS, METHODOLOGICAL DYNAMICS, AND CONTEMPORARY RELEVANCE IN A RELIGIOUSLY PLURAL WORLD

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Abstract

The growing religious diversity that characterizes contemporary societies has intensified both opportunities for cooperation and the potential for misunderstanding among religious communities. Consequently, interreligious dialogue has emerged as an indispensable theological, ethical, and social enterprise for fostering peaceful coexistence, mutual understanding, and collaborative engagement. Among the diverse approaches to interfaith interaction, Scriptural Reasoning (SR) has gained increasing scholarly attention as a distinctive dialogical methodology that enables Jews, Christians, and Muslims to study their sacred scriptures collectively while preserving their respective theological identities. Unlike approaches that seek doctrinal synthesis or religious homogenization, Scriptural Reasoning encourages participants to engage sacred texts through attentive listening, interpretive humility, and constructive disagreement. This article critically examines the theological foundations, methodological dynamics, and contemporary relevance of Scriptural Reasoning within the broader discourse of interreligious dialogue. Employing a qualitative analytical methodology based on theological, hermeneutical, and comparative literature, the study explores the historical development of Scriptural Reasoning, its theoretical assumptions, and its contribution to religious literacy, peacebuilding, and intercultural understanding. Drawing upon the works of Peter Ochs, David F. Ford, George Lindbeck, Martin Buber, Hans-Georg Gadamer, and other contemporary scholars, the article demonstrates that Scriptural Reasoning provides a robust framework for engaging religious diversity without sacrificing confessional commitment. The study further evaluates the applicability of Scriptural Reasoning within African contexts, particularly Nigeria, where Christianity, Islam, and African Traditional Religion coexist amid significant social and religious tensions. It argues that contextual adaptation of Scriptural Reasoning offers promising opportunities for reconciliation, ethical collaboration, and sustainable peacebuilding. The article concludes that Scriptural Reasoning represents one of the most innovative and constructive models of contemporary interreligious engagement and recommends broader integration of Scriptural Reasoning into theological education, religious leadership formation, and community-based peace initiatives.

Keywords: *Interreligious Dialogue; Scriptural Reasoning; Comparative Theology; Hermeneutics; Religious Pluralism; Peacebuilding; African Theology.*

INTRODUCTION

Religious misunderstanding, intolerance, extremism, and sectarian violence continue to threaten peaceful coexistence in many parts of the world, particularly in regions where religious identity intersects with ethnic, political, and economic tensions. Against this backdrop, interreligious dialogue has assumed renewed importance as both a theological discipline and a practical strategy for promoting peaceful coexistence among diverse religious communities.

Contemporary interreligious dialogue extends beyond polite conversation or diplomatic engagement; it has evolved into a rigorous academic field that explores how religious traditions may encounter one another with intellectual honesty, theological integrity, and ethical responsibility. Rather than encouraging religious relativism or doctrinal compromise, modern approaches to interreligious dialogue seek to cultivate mutual understanding while respecting genuine theological differences. The significance of interreligious dialogue has become particularly evident in societies experiencing increasing religious polarization.

The persistence of religious conflicts demonstrates that political solutions alone cannot adequately address tensions rooted in theological misunderstanding, historical grievances, and competing religious identities. Sustainable peace requires educational, theological, and relational approaches capable of transforming perceptions and fostering genuine respect among religious communities. Consequently, scholars increasingly recognize that effective interreligious engagement must involve not only institutional cooperation but also meaningful encounters with the sacred texts, beliefs, and lived experiences that shape religious identities.

One of the most innovative developments within contemporary interreligious studies is Scriptural Reasoning.[1] Emerging during the early 1990s through the collaborative efforts of Jewish, Christian, and Muslim scholars, Scriptural Reasoning represents a distinctive approach to theological dialogue centered on the communal reading of sacred texts. Unlike

[1]Rocío Cortés Rodríguez, "Scriptural Reasoning: A Method for Interreligious Dialogue after Nostra Aetate," Cuestiones Teológicas 49, no. 111 (2022): 1–19.

traditional comparative theology, apologetics, or ecumenical dialogue, Scriptural Reasoning does not attempt to resolve doctrinal differences or establish theological consensus. Instead, it encourages participants to read the Torah, the Bible, and the Qur'an together while remaining firmly rooted within their respective religious traditions. The objective is not theological agreement but the cultivation of deeper understanding through shared interpretation, respectful disagreement, and intellectual hospitality.[2]

Scriptural Reasoning is grounded in the conviction that sacred scriptures remain living sources of wisdom capable of shaping ethical relationships among religious communities. Participants engage one another's interpretations not as detached observers but as committed believers whose understanding is enriched through dialogue. This distinctive methodological orientation reflects broader developments within postliberal theology, philosophical hermeneutics, and dialogical philosophy, all of which challenge Enlightenment assumptions regarding objective neutrality and universal rationality. Instead, Scriptural Reasoning affirms that understanding emerges through conversation among communities shaped by particular traditions, languages, and interpretive practices.

The theological significance of Scriptural Reasoning extends beyond academic discourse. In increasingly polarized societies, it offers practical mechanisms for reducing prejudice, correcting misconceptions, and fostering collaborative responses to shared social challenges. By emphasizing attentive listening rather than argumentative persuasion, Scriptural Reasoning encourages participants to appreciate both the similarities and the irreducible differences among religious traditions. Such engagement contributes not only to religious literacy but also to the cultivation of empathy, humility, and moral responsibility[3].

The African context provides a particularly compelling environment for evaluating the relevance of Scriptural Reasoning. Africa represents one of the world's most religiously vibrant continents, where Christianity, Islam, and African Traditional Religions interact continuously within shared social, political, and cultural spaces. In countries such as

[2] Ibid
[3] Ibid

Nigeria, Ghana, and Cameroon, religious diversity has generated remarkable opportunities for cooperation and religious interaction while simultaneously producing episodes of violent conflict, mistrust, and social fragmentation in vulnerable communities. These realities underscore the urgent need for dialogical methodologies capable of promoting sustainable coexistence without eroding religious convictions.

In African societies, religion permeates virtually every dimension of communal life, influencing political participation, educational systems, moral formation, conflict resolution, and national identity. Consequently, interreligious dialogue cannot remain an abstract theological exercise confined to academic institutions. Rather, it must engage the lived realities of ordinary communities where religious identities shape everyday interactions. Scriptural Reasoning possesses considerable potential in this regard because its emphasis on communal reading, storytelling, hospitality, and shared moral reflection resonates with indigenous African emphases on oral interpretation, communal wisdom, and relational identity. Nevertheless, Scriptural Reasoning is not without criticism. The principal concerns examined in this article are its capacity to engage profound doctrinal disagreements concerning revelation, salvation, prophecy, and scriptural authority; its frequent location within universities and theological seminaries; unequal power relations among participants; the dominance of Abrahamic traditions; and the limited integration of indigenous religious worldviews, particularly within African contexts. These concerns raise important questions regarding the adaptability, inclusiveness, and practical effectiveness of Scriptural Reasoning across diverse cultural environments.

Conceptualizing Interreligious Dialogue

The concept of Interreligious Dialogue extends beyond courteous conversation among members of different faith traditions to encompass a disciplined process of mutual learning, theological reflection, ethical cooperation, and social transformation. It represents an intentional encounter in which participants seek understanding rather than conversion, cooperation rather than competition, and mutual enrichment rather than religious compromise. In the twenty-first century, interreligious dialogue has evolved into an

indispensable component of peacebuilding, comparative theology, religious education, and international diplomacy.

Theologically, interreligious dialogue is grounded in the recognition that religious communities share responsibility for addressing humanity's common challenges while remaining faithful to their distinctive convictions.[4] The modern development of interreligious dialogue is commonly traced to the twentieth century, particularly the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965). The declaration Nostra Aetate transformed Catholic engagement with non-Christian religions by acknowledging the presence of truth and holiness within other religious traditions while encouraging cooperation in promoting justice, peace, and human dignity.[5]

Although the document emerged from Roman Catholic theology, its influence extended well beyond Catholicism, inspiring Protestant, Orthodox, Muslim, Jewish, Hindu, and Buddhist scholars to explore new forms of constructive engagement. Subsequent theological developments further expanded the theoretical foundations of dialogue. Scholars increasingly rejected simplistic dichotomies between exclusivism and relativism, proposing instead more nuanced understandings of religious diversity. The dialogue movement gradually shifted from institutional encounters among religious leaders toward grassroots engagement involving educators, local communities, peace practitioners, and ordinary believers. Consequently, interreligious dialogue became both an academic discipline and a practical methodology for social transformation.

Contemporary scholarship recognizes that dialogue operates simultaneously on multiple levels. It includes theological discussion, ethical collaboration, cultural exchange, educational engagement, spiritual encounter, and political reconciliation. These dimensions demonstrate that dialogue cannot be reduced to doctrinal debate alone but must address the broader realities shaping human relationships within plural societies.[6]

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[4]Tom Greggs, "Legitimizing and Necessitating Inter-faith Dialogue: The Dynamics of Inter-faith for Individual Faith Communities," International Journal of Public Theology 4, no. 2 (2010): 194–211.
[5]Vatican Council II, Nostra Aetate, in Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents (Northport, NY: Costello Publishing, 1996).
[6] Ibid

Models of Interreligious Dialogue

One of the earliest and most influential attempts to classify Christian responses to religious diversity was Alan Race's threefold typology of exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism.[7] Exclusivism maintains that salvation is found exclusively within one's own religious tradition. Inclusivism acknowledges the possibility of divine grace operating beyond explicit membership in one's own faith while preserving the normative status of that tradition. Pluralism argues that multiple religious traditions may constitute authentic responses to the same transcendent reality.[8]

Although Race's framework significantly shaped theological discussion during the late twentieth century, later scholars criticized its limitations. Paul Knitter argued that religious diversity requires dialogical rather than purely doctrinal responses.[9] Jacques Dupuis similarly proposed an inclusive theology of religions that recognizes God's universal salvific activity without abandoning Christian particularity.[10] These developments redirected theological attention from abstract theories of salvation to practical relationships among religious communities.

Within contemporary scholarship, three principal forms of interreligious dialogue are widely recognized:

1. The dialogue of life occurs through everyday relationships in which people of different religions share ordinary experiences, celebrate cultural events, and support one another within local communities. This form emphasizes friendship and neighborliness rather than formal theological discussion.

2. The dialogue of action involves cooperation in addressing shared social concerns such as poverty, environmental degradation, healthcare, education, migration, and

[7]Alan Race, Christians and Religious Pluralism (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1983).
[8]John Hick, An Interpretation of Religion, 2nd ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004).
[9]Paul F. Knitter, Introducing Theologies of Religions (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002).
[10]Jacques Dupuis, Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997).

conflict resolution. Here, religious differences become secondary to common ethical responsibilities.

3. The dialogue of theological exchange consists of scholarly discussion among theologians and religious leaders who seek deeper understanding of doctrinal beliefs, sacred texts, and religious practices. Scriptural Reasoning belongs primarily within this category while simultaneously extending beyond traditional academic debate.

Historical Development of Scriptural Reasoning

Scriptural Reasoning emerged during the early 1990s as one of the most innovative developments within contemporary interreligious dialogue.[11] Originating at the University of Virginia and later institutionalized through the Society for Scriptural Reasoning, the movement initially involved Jewish scholars exploring rabbinic methods of communal textual interpretation. Under the leadership of Peter Ochs, Scriptural Reasoning sought to recover classical Jewish patterns of interpretive reasoning capable of addressing contemporary religious fragmentation.[12]

The movement soon expanded beyond Jewish scholarship through collaboration with Christian theologians, particularly David F. Ford at the University of Cambridge. Ford recognized that shared reading of scripture could create spaces for theological friendship without requiring participants to abandon confessional commitments. His work emphasized "scriptural hospitality," whereby participants welcome one another's interpretations while remaining faithful to their own traditions.[13]

The inclusion of Muslim scholars further transformed Scriptural Reasoning into a genuinely Abrahamic enterprise. The Qur'an entered alongside the Torah and Bible as participants explored common themes such as creation, covenant, prophecy, justice,

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[11] Marianne Moyaert, “Scriptural Reasoning as Inter-Religious Dialogue,” in The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Inter-Religious Dialogue, ed. Catherine Cornille (Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 64–86.
[12]Peter Ochs, Peirce, Pragmatism, and the Logic of Scripture (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).
[13]David F. Ford, Christian Wisdom: Desiring God and Learning in Love (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

hospitality, suffering, forgiveness, and hope. Importantly, these conversations did not seek to harmonize doctrinal differences. Instead, they cultivated what Ford describes as "wisdom in dialogue," encouraging participants to appreciate both convergences and divergences.[14]

Over the past three decades, Scriptural Reasoning has been used in universities, seminaries, community organizations, peacebuilding initiatives, and international conferences across Europe, North America, Africa, Asia, and the Middle East.[15] Although its primary focus remains Jewish-Christian-Muslim engagement, scholars increasingly explore whether its principles may be adapted for dialogue involving Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism, and African Traditional Religions.[16]

Comparative Theology and Scriptural Reasoning

Comparative Theology has emerged as one of the closest intellectual realities of Scriptural Reasoning. Unlike the theology of religions, which asks whether other religions are true, Comparative Theology investigates what theologians may learn through disciplined study of another religious tradition while remaining rooted within their own faith.

Francis X. Clooney has been one of the foremost advocates of this approach.[17] He argues that comparative theological inquiry requires careful textual reading, intellectual humility, and openness to transformation. Rather than treating other religions as abstract systems, Comparative Theology invites sustained engagement with sacred texts, theological commentaries, liturgical practices, and spiritual disciplines.

Despite important similarities, significant differences distinguish Comparative Theology from Scriptural Reasoning. Comparative Theology generally involves individual scholars

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[14]David F. Ford, "An Interfaith Wisdom: Scriptural Reasoning between Jews, Christians and Muslims," Modern Theology 22, no. 3 (2006): 345–366.
[15]David Cheetham, Oddbjørn Leirvik, Ulrich Winkler, and Judith Gruber, eds., "Scriptural Reasoning and Inter-faith Hermeneutics," in Interreligious Hermeneutics in Pluralistic Europe (2011).
[16]Miikka M. Ruokanen and Huawei Li, "Scriptural Reasoning as a Method of Interreligious Dialogue in China," Journal of Comparative Scripture 8 (2017): 1–21; Huawei Li, Miikka Ruokanen, and David F. Ford, "Scriptural Reasoning as a Method of Interreligious Dialogue in China," International Review of Mission 108, no. 2 (2019): 415–429.
[17]Francis X. Clooney, Comparative Theology: Deep Learning Across Religious Borders (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010).

undertaking prolonged study of another tradition before returning to reinterpret their own beliefs. Scriptural Reasoning, by contrast, is inherently communal. Interpretation occurs through conversation among participants representing different traditions who read their scriptures together. Knowledge therefore emerges dialogically rather than individually.[18]

Hermeneutical Foundations

The success of Scriptural Reasoning depends fundamentally upon its distinctive understanding of interpretation. Rather than assuming that scriptures possess single objective meanings accessible through detached historical analysis, Scriptural Reasoning recognizes interpretation as a communal activity shaped by tradition, language, memory, worship, and lived experience.

This hermeneutical orientation draws extensively upon Hans-Georg Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics. Gadamer rejected Enlightenment notions of objective neutrality, arguing instead that understanding always occurs through a "fusion of horizons" in which interpreters engage texts from within historically conditioned traditions. Meaning emerges through dialogue rather than methodological certainty.[19]

Scriptural Reasoning similarly assumes that participants inevitably approach sacred texts through the interpretive lenses of their respective communities. Jewish readers engage Torah through rabbinic tradition and Midrash; Christians interpret Scripture through ecclesial traditions shaped by Christological convictions; Muslims read the Qur'an through classical and contemporary traditions of tafsir. These distinct interpretive frameworks are not obstacles to dialogue but essential resources that enrich communal understanding.[20]

Equally influential is Martin Buber's philosophy of dialogue. His distinction between "I-It" and "I-Thou" relationships provides a profound theological rationale for Scriptural Reasoning. Genuine dialogue requires participants to encounter one another as persons

[18] Clooney, 2010.
[19]Hans-Georg Gadamer, Truth and Method, 2nd rev. ed. (London: Continuum, 2004).
[20]Susannah Ticciati, "The Castration of Signs: Conversing with Augustine on Creation, Language and Truth," Modern Theology 23, no. 2 (2007): 161–179.

rather than objects of persuasion or conversion.[21] Through this dialogical posture, sacred texts become catalysts for relationship rather than instruments of theological domination.[22]

George Lindbeck's postliberal theology further shapes Scriptural Reasoning by describing religions as cultural-linguistic systems that form communal identities.[23] According to Lindbeck, religious doctrines function less as universal propositions than as grammatical rules governing faithful participation within religious communities. Scriptural Reasoning adopts this perspective by encouraging participants to inhabit their own traditions more deeply while learning respectfully from others.

Theoretical Framework

The present study is informed by three complementary theoretical perspectives that provide the conceptual foundation for understanding Scriptural Reasoning as both a theological methodology and a practical model of interreligious engagement.

The first is Martin Buber's Dialogical Philosophy, particularly his distinction between I–Thou and I–It relationships.[24] Buber argues that authentic human existence is constituted through genuine dialogue in which persons encounter one another as subjects rather than objects. Applied to Scriptural Reasoning, this perspective emphasizes that participants approach one another not as opponents in theological debate but as partners in the shared search for wisdom. Sacred texts become mediators of relationship rather than weapons of apologetics. Consequently, dialogue is understood as an ethical encounter grounded in reciprocity, openness, and mutual respect.

The second theoretical foundation is Hans-Georg Gadamer's Philosophical Hermeneutics. Gadamer's concept of the fusion of horizons provides an important explanation for how Scriptural Reasoning facilitates understanding across religious boundaries.[25] Every interpreter approaches scripture with historically shaped assumptions and communal

[21]Martin Buber, I and Thou (New York: Scribner, 1970).
[22]Daniel H. Weiss, "A Dialogue between Philosophy and Scripture: Rereading Hermann Cohen through Bakhtin," The Journal of Religion 90, no. 1 (2010): 15–32.
[23]George A. Lindbeck, The Nature of Doctrine (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1984).
[24]Buber, I and Thou.
[25]Gadamer, Truth and Method.

traditions. Dialogue does not eliminate these differences but enables horizons to interact creatively, generating richer interpretations than isolated reading could produce. This hermeneutical perspective legitimizes diversity of interpretation while rejecting both relativism and absolutism.

The third theoretical framework is George Lindbeck's Postliberal Theology, further developed within Scriptural Reasoning by Peter Ochs and David Ford.[26] Lindbeck's cultural-linguistic model understands religious traditions as interpretive communities whose identities are shaped by their sacred texts. Ochs expands this insight through his concept of reparative reasoning, arguing that Scriptural Reasoning seeks to repair fractured relationships through disciplined scriptural conversation.[27] David Ford complements this approach by emphasizing scriptural hospitality, which encourages participants to receive one another's interpretations with generosity while remaining faithful to their own theological commitments.[28]

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative analytical research design, which is particularly appropriate for theological and religious studies where the objective is to examine concepts, interpret texts, evaluate theories, and synthesize scholarly perspectives rather than generate statistical findings. Qualitative inquiry enables the researcher to investigate the theological assumptions, hermeneutical principles, and dialogical practices that underpin Scriptural Reasoning (SR) within the broader field of interreligious dialogue. Because Scriptural Reasoning is fundamentally a textual and interpretive enterprise, a qualitative approach offers the flexibility required for exploring its conceptual development, methodological characteristics, and contemporary applications.

The study is interdisciplinary, integrating insights from systematic theology, comparative theology, biblical hermeneutics, philosophy of religion, religious studies, peace and conflict studies, and African theology. This interdisciplinary approach reflects the

[26]Lindbeck, The Nature of Doctrine.
[27]Peter Ochs, "Reparative Reasoning: From Peirce's Pragmatism to Augustine's Scriptural Semiotic," Modern Theology 25, no. 2 (2009): 187–215.
[28]Ford, Christian Wisdom.

multifaceted nature of Scriptural Reasoning itself, which transcends traditional disciplinary boundaries by bringing together theological reflection, philosophical reasoning, ethical inquiry, and practical peacebuilding.

Sources of Data

The research relies primarily on documentary sources comprising both primary and secondary materials. Primary sources include seminal writings by Peter Ochs, David F. Ford, George Lindbeck, Martin Buber, Hans-Georg Gadamer, and Francis X. Clooney, together with official documents on interreligious dialogue such as Nostra Aetate. These foundational works provide the conceptual and theological basis for understanding the emergence and development of Scriptural Reasoning. Secondary sources consist of contemporary peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly monographs, edited volumes, conference proceedings, and research reports published within the fields of interreligious dialogue, comparative theology, hermeneutics, African theology, and peace studies.

Methods of Analysis

Three complementary analytical approaches guide the investigation. First, theological analysis examines the doctrinal assumptions underlying Scriptural Reasoning, particularly its understanding of revelation, scripture, community, and religious identity. Second, comparative analysis evaluates Scriptural Reasoning alongside other models of interreligious engagement, highlighting both shared characteristics and distinctive methodological contributions. Third, critical hermeneutical analysis explores the interpretive principles governing Scriptural Reasoning, paying particular attention to questions of textual authority, communal interpretation, dialogical ethics, and epistemological humility.

Theological Foundations of Scriptural Reasoning

The theological foundations of Scriptural Reasoning are rooted in the conviction that sacred scriptures continue to function as living sources of divine wisdom within religious communities. Unlike secular approaches that treat scripture merely as historical literature,

Scriptural Reasoning assumes that believers encounter God through ongoing engagement with their sacred texts. Consequently, scriptural interpretation is understood not simply as an academic exercise but as a communal act of worship, learning, and moral formation.[29] This theological orientation distinguishes Scriptural Reasoning from many contemporary approaches to comparative religion. Rather than requiring participants to suspend confessional commitments in pursuit of religious neutrality, Scriptural Reasoning encourages participants to remain deeply rooted within their respective traditions. Jewish participants read Torah as Jews; Christians interpret Scripture through Christological lenses; Muslims approach the Qur'an according to Islamic traditions of tafsir. Authentic dialogue therefore depends upon strong religious identity rather than theological ambiguity.[30]

This understanding reflects George Lindbeck's postliberal theology, which describes religious traditions as communities whose beliefs, practices, and identities are formed through shared narratives and sacred texts.[31] Scriptural Reasoning assumes that theological integrity is not threatened by dialogue but strengthened through respectful engagement with others. Participants become more deeply aware of their own traditions precisely because they encounter alternative perspectives. David Ford extends this theological vision through the concept of scriptural hospitality.[32] Hospitality, within Scriptural Reasoning, is more than social courtesy; it is a theological virtue rooted in God's welcoming relationship with humanity. Participants welcome one another's interpretations without surrendering their convictions. Such hospitality transforms disagreement from a source of hostility into an opportunity for deeper understanding.

Similarly, Peter Ochs' concept of reparative reasoning emphasizes that Scriptural Reasoning seeks to repair fractured relationships rather than resolve doctrinal disputes.[33]

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[29]David F. Ford, "Reading Scripture with Intensity: Academic, Ecclesial, Inter-faith and Divine," Princeton Seminary Bulletin 26, no. 1 (2005): 22–35.
[30] Ibid
[31]Lindbeck, The Nature of Doctrine.
[32]Ford, Christian Wisdom.
[33]Ochs, "Reparative Reasoning."

Dialogue becomes an instrument of reconciliation capable of addressing historical misunderstandings, prejudice, and religious hostility.

Epistemological Foundations

Scriptural Reasoning challenges classical Enlightenment assumptions concerning objective and universal rationality. Modern philosophy frequently assumed that genuine knowledge requires detached neutrality independent of cultural or religious traditions. Scriptural Reasoning rejects this premise. Instead, it adopts what philosophers describe as tradition-dependent rationality. Human understanding is always shaped by language, history, culture, worship, and communal memory. No interpreter approaches scripture without prior assumptions. Consequently, theological dialogue does not require participants to abandon their traditions but to acknowledge them honestly.

Hans-Georg Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics provides the principal epistemological framework.[34] Gadamer argues that understanding emerges through dialogue between the interpreter's horizon and the horizon of the text. Scriptural Reasoning expands this insight by recognizing multiple interacting horizons represented by different religious communities. Through sustained conversation, participants experience what Gadamer describes as a "fusion of horizons," generating richer understanding without erasing difference. This epistemological humility encourages participants to recognize the limitations of their own perspectives while remaining open to learning from others. Such openness neither relativizes truth nor denies doctrinal commitment. Instead, it affirms that theological understanding is deepened through respectful encounter.

Methodological Dynamics of Scriptural Reasoning

One of the distinguishing features of Scriptural Reasoning is its carefully structured yet flexible methodology. Although individual sessions vary according to context, several methodological principles consistently characterize the practice.

1. **Shared Textual Engagement**

[34]Gadamer, Truth and Method.

The central activity involves the collective reading of selected passages from the Torah, Bible, and Qur'an addressing common themes such as creation, justice, mercy, covenant, forgiveness, hospitality, suffering, peace, or human dignity. Participants read each text within its own theological context before exploring similarities, differences, and emerging insights. Unlike comparative theology, which often seeks systematic comparison of doctrines, Scriptural Reasoning prioritizes close textual reading. Interpretation remains grounded in scripture rather than abstract theological speculation.[35]

2. Confessional Integrity

Participants remain faithful to their own religious traditions throughout the dialogue. There is no expectation that anyone minimize theological convictions or seek doctrinal compromise. Instead, diversity becomes the very condition enabling meaningful conversation.[36]

This principle distinguishes Scriptural Reasoning from forms of religious pluralism that attempt to dissolve theological differences into generalized spirituality.

3. Dialogical Humility

Dialogue requires intellectual humility rather than argumentative victory. Participants listen carefully before responding, recognizing that understanding precedes evaluation.

Humility also involves acknowledging the complexity of one's own tradition. Religious communities possess multiple interpretive voices rather than singular perspectives. Consequently, participants often discover diversity within their own traditions while encountering diversity in others.

4. Constructive Disagreement

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[35] Rachel Muers, “Reading Texts between Generations: A Proposal Concerning Theological Engagement with Genetic Research,” Scottish Journal of Theology 57, no. 4 (2004): 466–478; Rachel Muers, “Setting Free the Mother Bird: On Reading a Strange Text,” Modern Theology 22, no. 4 (2006): 555–576; Randi Rashkover, Ayesha Chaudhry, and Rachel Muers, “Women Reading Texts on Marriage,” Feminist Theology 17, no. 2 (2009): 287–294.

[36]Daniel H. Weiss, "Reasoning from out of Particularity: Possibilities for Conversation in Theological Ethics," Studies in Christian Ethics 25, no. 2 (2012): 236–243.

Scriptural Reasoning intentionally rejects consensus as its primary objective. Instead, it encourages what David Ford describes as "better disagreement."[37] Participants openly discuss theological differences while preserving friendship and mutual respect.

Constructive disagreement represents one of Scriptural Reasoning's most significant innovations. Rather than viewing disagreement as failure, it recognizes difference as an enduring feature of authentic religious diversity.

5. **Relational Continuity**

Scriptural Reasoning emphasizes ongoing relationships rather than isolated meetings. Trust develops gradually through repeated encounters over time. Consequently, dialogue becomes a continuing practice rather than a single event. Long-term participation often transforms perceptions of religious "others," replacing stereotypes with personal relationships grounded in shared learning.

Contributions of Scriptural Reasoning

Scriptural Reasoning used as a method of interreligious dialogue and community coherence has become a source of community peace and growth through the following:

1. **Promoting Religious Literacy**

One of Scriptural Reasoning's greatest strengths lies in enhancing religious literacy. Participants gain a deeper understanding of both their own scriptures and those of other traditions. Misconceptions are corrected through direct engagement rather than second-hand representations. This educational dimension is increasingly important in multicultural societies where ignorance frequently contributes to religious prejudice.

2. **Building Interfaith Relationships**

Scriptural Reasoning cultivates friendships across religious boundaries. Shared textual engagement creates environments characterized by trust, empathy, and mutual respect.

[37]Ford, Christian Wisdom.

These relationships frequently extend beyond formal dialogue into collaborative social initiatives. Friendship itself becomes a theological achievement, demonstrating that profound religious differences need not prevent meaningful human relationships.

3. Peacebuilding and Conflict Transformation

Religious conflicts often arise not merely from doctrinal disagreement but from distorted perceptions of other communities. Through sustained dialogue, participants develop greater appreciation for the humanity, sincerity, and complexity of those belonging to different faith traditions. Such transformation contributes to conflict prevention, reconciliation, and community resilience. In societies experiencing religious violence—including Nigeria, Sudan, Ethiopia, and parts of the Middle East—Scriptural Reasoning offers valuable mechanisms for rebuilding trust.

4. Ethical Collaboration

Although Scriptural Reasoning focuses primarily upon scriptural interpretation, it frequently generates ethical cooperation addressing common social concerns. Participants discover shared commitments regarding justice, poverty alleviation, environmental stewardship, human dignity, education, healthcare, and humanitarian assistance. Thus, theological dialogue naturally extends into collaborative social action.

5. Academic Contributions

Within higher education, Scriptural Reasoning has enriched Comparative Theology, Religious Studies, Biblical Studies, Islamic Studies, Jewish Studies, and Peace Studies. Universities increasingly incorporate Scriptural Reasoning into curricula because it develops critical thinking, interpretive competence, intercultural communication, and ethical reflection.[38] Students learn not only about religious diversity but through respectful interaction with members of different traditions.

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[38]Tom Greggs, "Inter-faith Pedagogy for Muslims and Christians: Scriptural Reasoning and Christian and Muslim Youth Work," Discourse 9, no. 2 (2010): 201–226.

Challenges and Critiques

Despite its significant contributions, Scriptural Reasoning remains subject to important criticisms.

1. Theological Exclusivism

Some conservative theologians argue that Scriptural Reasoning risks weakening exclusive truth claims concerning revelation and salvation. They fear prolonged dialogue may encourage theological relativism or religious indifferentism. While these concerns deserve serious consideration, proponents respond that Scriptural Reasoning strengthens rather than weakens confessional identity by encouraging participants to understand their own traditions more deeply.

2. Academic Elitism

Another criticism concerns accessibility. Many Scriptural Reasoning initiatives occur within universities and theological seminaries where participants possess advanced educational backgrounds. .[39]

3. Power Asymmetries

Dialogue participants rarely enter conversations as equals. Differences in educational background, social status, institutional authority, language proficiency, and political influence may shape discussions in subtle ways. Effective facilitation is therefore essential to ensure equitable participation.

4. Limited Engagement with Indigenous Religions

Classical Scriptural Reasoning focuses primarily upon Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. This Abrahamic orientation has generated criticism, particularly from African and Asian scholars who argue that indigenous religious traditions deserve equal consideration.[40] Contextual adaptations incorporating African Traditional Religion, oral traditions,

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[39]Peter Ochs, "Grassroots Scriptural Reasoning on Campus," Journal of Inter-Religious Dialogue 4 (2010): 38–45 (with Homayra Ziad).
[40]R. S. Sugirtharajah, The Bible and the Third World (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

proverbs, ritual narratives, and communal wisdom may significantly enrich Scriptural Reasoning while increasing its relevance within African societies.

Scriptural Reasoning in African Contexts

Africa represents one of the world's most vibrant religious landscapes. Christianity, Islam, and African Traditional Religion (ATR) coexist within the same geographical, political, and cultural spaces, often interacting in complex and dynamic ways. Unlike many Western societies where secularization has reduced the public influence of religion, African societies continue to view religion as an integral dimension of personal identity, community life, governance, and moral formation. Consequently, religious dialogue in Africa is not merely an academic exercise but a practical necessity for peaceful coexistence and sustainable development.

Nigeria exemplifies this complexity. As Africa's most populous nation, Nigeria is characterized by profound religious diversity. Christianity predominates in the southern regions, Islam in the northern regions, while African Traditional Religion continues to influence social values, rituals, and communal identities across the country. Although these traditions have coexisted for centuries, political manipulation of religious identities, socio-economic inequalities, ethnic competition, and extremist ideologies have periodically generated violent conflicts. Such realities underscore the urgent need for dialogical approaches capable of fostering trust, reconciliation, and collaborative problem-solving.

Scriptural Reasoning offers a promising framework within this context because it encourages participants to encounter one another through sacred texts rather than political rhetoric or ideological stereotypes. Shared scriptural reflection provides opportunities for discovering common ethical concerns while acknowledging genuine theological differences.

Contextualizing Scriptural Reasoning in Africa

Although Scriptural Reasoning was originally developed within Jewish-Christian-Muslim dialogue, its underlying principles are sufficiently flexible to permit contextual adaptation. African religious traditions possess rich resources for dialogical engagement, including

oral traditions, communal storytelling, proverbs, myths, ritual performances, songs, and indigenous systems of moral instruction. These traditions function as repositories of theological wisdom analogous to written scriptures within Abrahamic religions.[41]

A contextualized African model of Scriptural Reasoning should therefore move beyond exclusive reliance upon written canonical texts. Sacred narratives, oral histories, ancestral wisdom, and symbolic rituals may be incorporated alongside biblical and Qur'anic texts to create a more inclusive framework for theological conversation. Such adaptation would recognize that revelation and religious memory are transmitted through diverse cultural forms.

Furthermore, African concepts such as Ubuntu ("I am because we are"), communal solidarity, reconciliation, respect for elders, and restorative justice resonate strongly with the dialogical ethos of Scriptural Reasoning.[42] These indigenous values provide fertile ground for developing culturally relevant approaches to interreligious engagement.

Scriptural Reasoning and Peacebuilding in Nigeria

Nigeria continues to experience recurrent religious violence involving extremist movements, communal conflicts, political tensions, and competition over resources. While many conflicts possess complex socio-economic causes, religious narratives frequently shape public perceptions and collective identities. Consequently, peacebuilding initiatives must address theological misunderstanding alongside political and economic grievances. Scriptural Reasoning contributes to peacebuilding in several important ways which includes:

1, Religious Liberty: It promotes religious literacy, enabling participants to understand the beliefs, values, and sacred texts of neighboring religious communities more accurately. Misunderstanding often fuels prejudice, whereas informed engagement reduces suspicion.

[41]Kwame Bediako, Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995).
[42]Kwame Bediako, Theology and Identity (Oxford: Regnum Books, 1992).

2. Interpersonal Trust: Scriptural Reasoning cultivates interpersonal trust through sustained dialogue. Participants gradually replace abstract stereotypes with genuine human relationships rooted in shared learning and mutual respect.

3. Ethical Collaboration and Understanding: Scriptural Reasoning encourages ethical collaboration by identifying common scriptural commitments concerning justice, compassion, honesty, forgiveness, hospitality, environmental stewardship, and care for vulnerable populations. Such shared ethical commitments provide foundations for joint community initiatives addressing poverty, corruption, healthcare, education, and social reconciliation.[43]

4. Control of Religious Extremism: Scriptural Reasoning offers constructive alternatives to religious extremism. Exposure to multiple interpretive traditions challenges simplistic or absolutist readings of sacred texts, which are frequently employed by extremist movements. Participants learn that faithful interpretation often requires humility, historical awareness, and communal accountability.

Contemporary Relevance of Scriptural Reasoning

The significance of Scriptural Reasoning extends well beyond theological scholarship. Its interdisciplinary character enables meaningful contributions across numerous sectors of contemporary society. Within theological education, Scriptural Reasoning enriches ministerial formation by preparing future religious leaders to engage constructively with religious diversity. Seminarians and theological students develop greater interpretive competence, intercultural sensitivity, and pastoral wisdom necessary for ministry within pluralistic contexts.

Within higher education, Scriptural Reasoning supports interdisciplinary learning across Religious Studies, Philosophy, Peace and Conflict Studies, Political Science, International Relations, and African Studies. Students cultivate critical thinking while learning to appreciate complexity rather than simplistic polarization.

[43] Bediako, 1992.

Within public policy, Scriptural Reasoning offers valuable insights for governments seeking to strengthen social cohesion. Dialogue-based approaches complement legal and security measures by addressing underlying attitudes that contribute to communal conflict.[44]

Within civil society, faith-based organizations increasingly recognize Scriptural Reasoning as an effective instrument for promoting reconciliation, community development, humanitarian cooperation, and civic responsibility. Finally, within global peacebuilding, Scriptural Reasoning demonstrates that religious diversity need not constitute an obstacle to peaceful coexistence. Instead, religious traditions may become valuable partners in addressing shared human challenges, including climate change, migration, public health, economic inequality, and human rights.[45]

Conclusion and Recommendations

The world today presents unprecedented opportunities and challenges arising from increasing religious diversity. While globalization has intensified interaction among religious communities, it has also exposed persistent tensions rooted in theological misunderstanding, historical grievances, and ideological polarization. Under these circumstances, interreligious dialogue has become indispensable for promoting peaceful coexistence, mutual understanding, and collaborative responses to shared human concerns.

This study demonstrated that Scriptural Reasoning represents one of the most innovative and intellectually robust models of contemporary interreligious engagement. Unlike approaches seeking doctrinal consensus or religious homogenization, Scriptural Reasoning enables participants to remain faithful to their own traditions while engaging others through disciplined, respectful, and hospitable interpretation of sacred texts.

[44] Mike Higton, "Rowan Williams and Sharia: Defending the Secular," International Journal of Public Theology 2, no. 4 (2008): 400–417; Nicholas Adams, "Making Deep Reasonings Public," Modern Theology 22 (2006): 385–401.
[45] Ibid

Its foundations in postliberal theology, philosophical hermeneutics, and dialogical philosophy provide a coherent theoretical framework capable of sustaining meaningful theological conversation without sacrificing confessional integrity.

The study further shows that Scriptural Reasoning contributes significantly to religious literacy, peacebuilding, ethical collaboration, theological education, and intercultural understanding. By encouraging attentive listening, interpretive humility, and constructive disagreement, it transforms religious difference from a source of hostility into an opportunity for shared learning. These strengths are particularly relevant within African societies such as Nigeria, where religious plurality simultaneously enriches social life and presents complex challenges for national cohesion.

Nevertheless, Scriptural Reasoning is not without limitations. Concerns regarding theological exclusivism, academic elitism, unequal participation, and limited engagement with indigenous religious traditions require continued scholarly attention. Contextual adaptation remains essential if Scriptural Reasoning is to realize its full potential within non-Western settings.

Integrating African Traditional Religion, oral hermeneutics, indigenous philosophies, and communal models of reconciliation would significantly broaden both its theological scope and practical effectiveness.

Ultimately, the future of interreligious dialogue depends less upon achieving doctrinal uniformity than upon cultivating communities capable of living faithfully amid enduring religious diversity.[46] Scriptural Reasoning offers a compelling vision of such coexistence by demonstrating that respectful disagreement, shared interpretation, and theological hospitality can become enduring foundations for peace, justice, and human flourishing.

As religious pluralism continues to shape the twenty-first century, Scriptural Reasoning deserves sustained attention as a transformative methodology for both academic scholarship and practical peacebuilding.[47]

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[46]David F. Ford, The Future of Christian Theology (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011).
[47] Ibid

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CHAPTER 36

THE FUTURE OF CHRISTIAN MISSION IN NIGERIA: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

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Abstract

Nigeria is home to one of the largest Christian populations in the world, making it a pivotal nation in the global Christian mission landscape. This paper examines the future of Christian mission in Nigeria by exploring the complex interplay of historical foundations, contemporary challenges, and emerging opportunities. The challenges examined include religious pluralism and Muslim-Christian tensions, corruption and poor governance, poverty and inequality, the proliferation of prosperity theology, digital disruption, and the brain drain of trained Christian leaders. Conversely, the paper identifies significant opportunities such as the demographic youth bulge, digital and media evangelism, the growth of the Pentecostal movement, diaspora missions, and interdenominational cooperation. Drawing on recent scholarship (2010-2026), the paper argues that the future of Christian mission in Nigeria demands a missiology that is contextually grounded, socially engaged, theologically robust, and digitally adaptive.

Keywords: *Christian mission, Nigeria, evangelism, Pentecostalism, Islam, diaspora, digital mission, missiology*

INTRODUCTION

Nigeria occupies a unique and strategic position in the story of global Christianity. With an estimated Christian population of over 90 million people, roughly 46 to 50 percent of its total population, Nigeria is not only the most populous country in Africa but also one of the most religiously dynamic nations on earth.[1] The country is a theatre where the fortunes of global Christianity are being negotiated, contested, and reshaped in real time. Mission historians and missiologists increasingly acknowledge that the future of world Christianity

[1]Pew Research Center, Global Christianity: A Report on the Size and Distribution of the World's Christian Population (Washington, DC: Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, 2011), [page].

will, to a significant extent, be written in Africa, and Nigeria stands at the very centre of that narrative.[2]

The history of Christian mission in Nigeria can be traced to the early 19th century, when missionaries from the Church Missionary Society (CMS), the Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society, and later the Roman Catholic mission arrived on Nigerian shores.[3] These early missionaries established schools, hospitals, and churches that became the foundation of modern Nigerian society. However, the postcolonial era brought with it both the indigenisation of Christianity and a series of profound theological, social, and political challenges that continue to shape the mission landscape.

Today, the Nigerian church faces a paradox: it is large in size but often shallow in depth; it is vibrant in worship but sometimes weak in social transformation; it is globally connected but locally disengaged from the structural problems afflicting Nigerian society.[4] This paper therefore seeks to critically assess the future of Christian mission in Nigeria by examining key challenges and identifying concrete opportunities for a renewed missional engagement.

The paper is structured as follows: Section 2 provides a brief historical overview of Christian mission in Nigeria. Section 3 examines contemporary challenges facing Christian mission. Section 4 identifies opportunities for missional renewal. Section 5 offers recommendations, and Section 6 draws conclusions.

Historical Overview of Christian Mission in Nigeria

The story of Christianity in Nigeria is one of remarkable growth and adaptation. The earliest sustained missionary activity began in the 1840s with the work of Henry Townsend, Samuel Ajayi Crowther, the first African Anglican bishop, and their colleagues in Yorubaland and the Niger Delta.[5] By the late 19th century, missions had expanded

[2]Lamin Sanneh, Summoned from the Margin: Homecoming of an African (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), [page].
[3]Ogbu Kalu, African Pentecostalism: An Introduction (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), [page].
[4]Paul Gifford, Christianity, Development, and Modernity in Africa (London: Hurst & Company, 2015), [page].
[5]Kalu, African Pentecostalism, [page].

inland, following trade routes and colonial administrative networks. The Basel Mission, the Sudan Interior Mission (SIM), and the Sudan United Mission (SUM) planted Christianity among the peoples of the Middle Belt and the North.

The 20th century witnessed the explosive growth of African Initiated Churches (AICs), which contextualised Christianity in African cultural and spiritual idioms.[6] These movements, sometimes called 'Aladura' (praying people) in Yoruba contexts, challenged the Euro-American missionary paradigm and established an authentically African expression of Christian faith. By independence in 1960, Christianity was firmly rooted across southern Nigeria and making inroads into the Middle Belt.

The late 20th century saw the emergence of Neo-Pentecostalism as perhaps the most transformative development in Nigerian Christianity. Figures such as Benson Idahosa, David Oyedepo, Enoch Adeboye of the Redeemed Christian Church of God, and William Kumuyi of the Deeper Christian Life Ministry built megachurches and para-church organisations with global reach.[7] This Pentecostal wave reshaped Nigerian Christianity's theology, worship, and social engagement in ways that continue to reverberate today.

Kalu rightly observes that the history of Christianity in Nigeria is inseparable from the social, political, and cultural history of the nation itself.[8] Understanding this history is essential for any serious engagement with the future of Christian mission in the country.

Challenges Facing Christian Mission in Nigeria

Religious Pluralism and Muslim-Christian Tensions

Nigeria is one of the world's most religiously divided nations, with Christians concentrated largely in the South and Middle Belt, and Muslims predominating in the North. The country has witnessed recurring episodes of religious violence, particularly in states such as Kaduna, Plateau, Borno, and Zamfara.[9] The Boko Haram insurgency, which intensified after 2009, targeted churches, Christian communities, and mission workers with

[6]Kalu, African Pentecostalism, [page].
[7]Kalu, African Pentecostalism, [page].
[8]Ibid., [page].
[9]Gifford, Christianity, Development, and Modernity, [page].

devastating effect, displacing thousands and forcing many mission organisations to suspend operations in the North.[10]

Beyond outright violence, Nigerian Christians face the challenge of conducting mission in a pluralistic environment where proselytisation is politically sensitive and social cohesion requires inter-religious dialogue. Turaki (2012) argues that effective Christian mission in Northern Nigeria must be pursued through what he calls 'prophetic dialogue,' a missional posture that combines faithful witness with respectful engagement with Islam.[11] The challenge, however, is that many Nigerian churches lack the theological training and institutional frameworks for such nuanced missional approaches.

Corruption, Poor Governance, and Socio-Political Instability

Nigeria has consistently ranked among the most corrupt nations in the world on global indices. The Transparency International Corruption Perceptions Index regularly places Nigeria in the bottom quartile of nations assessed.[12] For Christian mission, corruption poses a twofold challenge. First, the church itself has not been immune to financial impropriety; high-profile cases of pastoral fraud and financial mismanagement have eroded public trust in Christian institutions.[13] Second, the structural dysfunction of the Nigerian state, manifest in poor infrastructure, inadequate healthcare, and failing educational systems, creates conditions of chronic poverty that make holistic mission extremely difficult.

Achebe, in his seminal postcolonial analysis, identified the problem of leadership failure as central to Nigeria's underdevelopment.[14] Christian mission in Nigeria must grapple with this reality by developing a public theology that speaks prophetically to power, advocates for the poor, and models institutional integrity. Without this, the church risks being seen as complicit in, rather than transformative of, Nigeria's governance crisis.

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[10]Gifford, Christianity, Development, and Modernity, [page].
[11]Yusufu Turaki, Islam and Christianity in Africa (Jos: WordAlive Publishers, 2012), [page].
[12]Transparency International, "Corruption Perceptions Index 2023" (Berlin: Transparency International, 2023), [page].
[13]Gifford, Christianity, Development, and Modernity, [page].
[14]Chinua Achebe, There Was a Country: A Personal History of Biafra (New York: Penguin Press, 2012), [page].

Prosperity Theology and Its Distortion of Mission

One of the most significant internal challenges to Christian mission in Nigeria is the dominance of prosperity theology, the teaching that material wealth, physical health, and worldly success are the guaranteed right of faithful Christians. This theological framework, sometimes called the 'health and wealth gospel,' has become hegemonic in Nigerian Pentecostalism and exerts enormous influence on how many Nigerian Christians understand the purpose of the church and mission.[15]

Asamoah-Gyadu (2015) contends that while Pentecostal spirituality has genuine strengths, including its emphasis on the immediate presence and power of the Holy Spirit, prosperity theology has in many cases reduced Christian mission to a transactional enterprise where God is petitioned for personal advancement rather than engaged for the transformation of society.[16] This has distorted the missio Dei, the mission of God, by prioritising individual material blessing over communal justice, and ecclesial growth over ethical witness. The challenge for the future is to recover a holistic missiology that takes both spiritual and socio-economic transformation seriously.

The Proliferation and Fragmentation of Churches

Nigeria has one of the highest concentrations of churches per capita in the world. While this reflects the vitality of Nigerian Christianity, it also presents a significant missional challenge. The proliferation of churches, many of them small, personality-driven, and theologically shallow, has led to duplication of effort, competition for members, and doctrinal confusion.[17] Ukah (2016) describes this phenomenon as the 'ecclesiastical marketplace,' in which churches compete for social legitimacy, financial resources, and numerical growth rather than collaborating for missional impact.[18]

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[15]J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu, Sighs and Signs of the Spirit: Ghanaian Perspectives on Pentecostalism and Renewal in Africa (Oxford: Regnum Books International, 2015), [page].
[16]Asamoah-Gyadu, Sighs and Signs of the Spirit, [page].
[17]Asonzeh Ukah, "God, Wealth, and the Spirit of Investment: The Prosperity Gospel and Development in Nigeria," in Pentecostalism and Development: Churches, Values, and Development in Sub-Saharan Africa, ed. Birgit Meyer (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), [page].
[18]Ukah, "God, Wealth, and the Spirit of Investment," [page].

Furthermore, the fragmentation of the Nigerian church along denominational, ethnic, and regional lines undermines its capacity for united missional witness. Ethnic Christianity, where churches function primarily as the spiritual extension of an ethnic community, is particularly prevalent in Nigeria and weakens the church's prophetic voice and its ability to minister across cultural boundaries.

Brain Drain and the Migration of Christian Leaders

Nigeria has experienced significant emigration of educated professionals, a phenomenon popularly known as the 'Japa syndrome,' from the Yoruba word meaning to flee or escape.[19] This brain drain is acutely felt in the church, as trained pastors, theologians, and mission workers relocate to Europe, North America, and other parts of the world in search of better economic opportunities and security. The loss of trained leadership weakens local congregations, depletes theological institutions of faculty, and reduces the human capital available for mission work within Nigeria.

Adedibu notes, however, that the Nigerian Christian diaspora has itself become a significant missional force, establishing churches and evangelising communities in the global North.[20] The challenge is to leverage this diaspora for reverse mission, channelling resources, skills, and spiritual renewal back into Nigeria, rather than allowing migration to simply drain the domestic church of its most gifted people.

Digital Disruption and Secularising Influences

The rapid spread of digital technology and social media in Nigeria, particularly among youth, is creating new challenges for Christian mission. While Nigeria's internet penetration has grown dramatically from under 10% in 2010 to over 55% by 2024, the digital environment also exposes Nigerian youth to secularising influences, alternative worldviews, and anti-Christian ideologies that were previously inaccessible.[21] The growing

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[19]Segun Odunfa, "Nigeria's Japa Syndrome: Understanding the Mass Emigration Crisis," African Affairs 122, no. 487 (2023): [page].
[20]Babatunde A. Adedibu, Coat of Many Colours: The Origin, Growth, Distinctiveness and Contributions of Black Majority Churches to British Christianity (London: Wisdom Summit, 2013), [page].
[21]World Bank, "Nigeria Overview: Development News, Research, Data" (Washington, DC: World Bank Group, 2023).

influence of secular humanism, atheism, and new religious movements in online spaces represents a challenge that the Nigerian church has been slow to address strategically.

Opportunities for Christian Mission in Nigeria

The Youth Demographic Bulge

Nigeria is one of the world's youngest nations, with a median age of approximately 18 years and over 60% of the population under 25.[22] This demographic reality presents an extraordinary opportunity for Christian mission. Young Nigerians are spiritually open, culturally creative, and digitally connected. Churches and mission agencies that invest in contextually relevant youth ministry, leadership development, and theological education for young people stand to shape the trajectory of Nigerian Christianity for generations to come.

Bowen argues that the future of Christianity globally lies in the Global South, and Nigeria's youth bulge makes it a critical site for this demographic shift.[23] Mission strategies that engage young Nigerians not merely as targets of evangelism but as agents of mission will be essential to the church's future vitality.

Digital and Media Evangelism

The same digital revolution that poses challenges to Nigerian Christianity also opens unprecedented opportunities for mission. Nigerian churches have been among the most creative and prolific producers of Christian content in the Global South, with preachers, musicians, and theologians amassing millions of followers on YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, and other platforms.[24] Gospel music from Nigeria, particularly the Afro-Gospel and contemporary worship genres pioneered by artists such as Sinach and Nathaniel Bassey, has achieved truly global reach.

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[22]National Bureau of Statistics Nigeria, Demographic and Population Statistics Report (Abuja: National Bureau of Statistics, 2023), [page].
[23]Roger Bowen, "Youth, Faith, and the Future of Christianity in the Global South," Missiology: An International Review 50, no. 2 (2022): [page].
[24]Rosalind I. J. Hackett, "Radical Christian Missionizing in Africa: The New 'Natives,'" in The Bible in Africa: Transactions, Trajectories, and Trends, ed. Cephas Omenyo and Wilhelmina Arthur (Leiden: Brill, 2011), [page].

Hackett observed that Nigerian Pentecostalism has always been a media-savvy movement, quick to adopt new communication technologies for evangelistic purposes.[25] The internet and social media take this tendency to an entirely new level, enabling Nigerian churches to conduct real-time evangelism, discipleship, and pastoral care beyond the walls of physical church buildings. The COVID-19 pandemic (2020-2021) accelerated this shift dramatically, and many Nigerian churches have sustained and expanded their digital ministries in its wake.

Diaspora Mission and Reverse Mission

The Nigerian Christian diaspora, estimated at several million people spread across Europe, North America, Asia, and Australia, represents one of the most dynamic and underutilised missional assets of the Nigerian church.[26] Nigerian diaspora churches have established vibrant congregations in cities such as London, Houston, Toronto, and Amsterdam, effectively reversing the historic missionary flow from the Global North to the Global South.

Ojo describes this phenomenon as 'reverse mission,' the re-evangelisation of post-Christian societies in the West by African Christians.[27] For the future of Christian mission in Nigeria, the key opportunity lies in harnessing the diaspora's financial resources, professional expertise, and cross-cultural missional experience for ministry within Nigeria. Structured partnerships between diaspora churches and domestic Nigerian congregations could significantly enhance the missional capacity of the Nigerian church.

Growth of Pentecostalism and Charismatic Movements

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[25]Hackett, "Radical Christian Missionizing in Africa," [page].
[26]Pew Research Center, The Future of World Religions: Population Growth Projections, 2010–2050 (Washington, DC: Pew Research Center, 2015), [page].
[27]Matthews A. Ojo, "Reverse Mission and the Reconfiguration of Christian Identities in Africa," in Religion on the Move: New Dynamics of Religious Expansion in a Globalizing World, ed. Afe Adogame and Shobana Shankar (Leiden: Brill, 2013), [page].

Nigerian Pentecostalism continues to grow at remarkable rates, both in terms of numerical membership and institutional infrastructure. The Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG), for instance, now operates parishes in over 190 countries and organises the annual Holy Ghost Congress, one of the largest Christian gatherings in the world.[28] This institutional strength gives Nigerian Pentecostal churches significant capacity for both domestic and global mission.

Moreover, the charismatic movement's emphasis on spiritual gifts, healing, deliverance, and the direct encounter with God addresses the felt needs of ordinary Nigerians in ways that have historically made it extraordinarily effective at evangelism and church planting.[29] Anderson (2013) notes that African Pentecostalism's pneumatological richness, its deep engagement with the Holy Spirit, gives it a missiological vitality that mainline denominations often lack.[30]

Theological Education and Contextual Missiology

Nigeria has a growing network of theological institutions, including seminaries, Bible colleges, and university theology departments, that are increasingly producing indigenous scholars capable of developing a contextually grounded Nigerian missiology.[31] Institutions such as the Nigerian Baptist Theological Seminary in Ogbomoso, UMCA Theological Seminary Ilorin,Trinity Theological College in Umuahia, and the Theological College of Northern Nigeria in Bukuru have long traditions of academic excellence. More recently, university-based theology programmes at the University of Ibadan and Ahmadu Bello University have expanded the space for rigorous theological reflection.

The opportunity here is to develop a missiology that takes seriously both the biblical mandate and the Nigerian context, one that engages honestly with issues of poverty, ethnic

[28]Allan H. Anderson, To the Ends of the Earth: Pentecostalism and the Transformation of World Christianity (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), [page].
[29]Ibid.,
[30]Ibid.,
[31]Isabel Apawo Phiri and Dietrich Werner, eds., Handbook of Theological Education in Africa (Oxford: Regnum Books International, 2013), [page].

conflict, gender justice, ecology, and political corruption.[32] Such a missiology would equip Nigerian Christians not merely to plant churches but to transform communities.

Interdenominational Cooperation and Ecumenical Action

Despite the fragmentation noted earlier, there are significant and growing efforts at interdenominational cooperation in Nigeria. Bodies such as the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) and the Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria (PFN) provide platforms for joint missional action, advocacy, and public witness.[33] The potential of these bodies to coordinate united evangelistic campaigns, social intervention projects, and prophetic advocacy is enormous, even if it has not always been fully realised.

Fubara-Manuel (2020) argues that genuine ecumenism, rooted not in doctrinal uniformity but in shared missional commitment, is one of the most powerful tools available to the Nigerian church for social transformation.[34] Where Nigerian churches have cooperated across denominational lines, for instance in responses to the Boko Haram crisis, in HIV/AIDS ministry, and in electoral integrity advocacy, the results have been significantly more impactful than what individual denominations could achieve alone.

Recommendations

On the basis of the foregoing analysis, the following recommendations are offered to churches, mission agencies, and theological institutions in Nigeria:

First, Nigerian churches must recover a holistic missiology that holds together evangelism and social action. The false dichotomy between the so-called 'spiritual gospel' and 'social gospel' must be overcome. Mission must address the whole person and the whole community, encompassing its spiritual, social, economic, and political dimensions.[35]

Second, theological institutions must prioritise the development of contextual Nigerian missiologies. This requires investment in research, scholarship, and curriculum

[32]Phiri and Werner, Handbook of Theological Education in Africa, [page].
[33]Benebo Fubara-Manuel, "The Ecumenical Imperative: Towards a Theology of Christian Unity for Mission in Nigeria," Journal of African Christian Thought 23, no. 1 (2020): [page].
[34]Fubara-Manuel, "The Ecumenical Imperative," [page].
[35]Sanneh, Summoned from the Margin, [page].

development that takes seriously both the Scriptures and the Nigerian context, including its history of colonialism, its ethnic diversity, its religious pluralism, and its contemporary socio-political challenges.

Third, Nigerian churches must develop intentional strategies for engaging the digital space. This includes not merely broadcasting sermons online but creating digital communities, engaging respectfully but confidently with secular and anti-Christian voices, and using digital platforms for discipleship, theological education, and cross-cultural mission.

Fourth, denominational leaders and mission organisations must prioritise interdenominational collaboration, particularly in areas of social intervention, advocacy, and reaching unreached people groups in Northern Nigeria. Competition between churches must give way to cooperation for the common missional good.

Fifth, the Nigerian church must develop intentional diaspora mission strategies that channel the resources, expertise, and missional energy of Nigerian Christians abroad back into domestic mission, church planting, and social transformation.

Sixth, churches must take prophetic stands against corruption and injustice, modelling institutional integrity and speaking truth to power. The credibility of Christian witness in Nigeria depends in no small measure on the church's own moral and financial integrity.

Conclusion

The future of Christian mission in Nigeria is simultaneously challenging and full of promise. The challenges, including religious tension, poverty, governance failure, prosperity theology, church fragmentation, and brain drain, are real and must not be minimised. Yet the opportunities, including a youthful population, digital connectivity, diaspora resources, Pentecostal vitality, and growing theological scholarship, are equally real and must not be squandered.

What is required is not pessimism or triumphalism but a clear-eyed, Spirit-empowered, and contextually informed missional engagement. The Nigerian church has extraordinary human, spiritual, and cultural resources at its disposal. The question is whether it will

deploy those resources in the service of the missio Dei, the transforming mission of God in the world, or in the service of institutional self-preservation and personal enrichment.

Nigeria's position at the crossroads of Africa's religious and cultural life means that what happens in Nigerian Christianity will have consequences far beyond its borders. A church in Nigeria that is missionally renewed, theologically robust, and socially engaged will not only transform Nigeria; it has the potential to strengthen and inspire the church across the African continent and beyond. The future of Christian mission in Nigeria is not merely a Nigerian concern; it is a matter of global missional significance.

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CHAPTER 37

SMALL GROUPS MINISTRY AND MEMBERSHIP RETENTION IN THE SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTIST CHURCH IN NIGERIA: A PRACTICAL-THEOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

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Abstract

Membership attrition presents a persistent discipleship challenge for the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Global Adventist data indicate that more than four in ten persons who joined the Church since 1965 subsequently left, demonstrating that numerical accessions must be accompanied by intentional nurture and retention. This paper examines how family-oriented small groups may contribute to membership retention in the Nigerian Adventist context. Its purpose is to integrate the biblical theology of Christian community with the practical problem of attrition and to develop a contextually responsive ministry framework. Methodologically, the study adopts a qualitative practical-theological approach, using thematic analysis of selected biblical texts, Adventist literature and policy documents, relevant small-group literature, and two contextual key-informant interviews conducted in 2013. The analysis identifies five retention functions of small groups: belonging and relational attachment, spiritual nurture, shared care, participatory ministry, and early identification of members at risk of disengagement. The study also finds that Nigerian communal and family structures can provide useful contextual resources when critically adapted to biblical and Adventist principles. On this basis, the paper proposes a fourteen-day Family Bible-Based Small Groups programme as a ministry intervention linking spiritual formation, family support, health, stewardship, mission, and congregational belonging. The programme is presented as a practical framework requiring subsequent empirical evaluation rather than as proof that small groups alone eliminate attrition. The paper recommends trained small-group coordinators, contextualised materials, systematic monitoring, pastoral support, and institutional investment in nurture and retention. It concludes that small groups can strengthen retention when they function not merely as meetings but as accountable communities of discipleship, care, participation, and mission.

Keywords: *small groups; membership attrition; membership retention; discipleship; Seventh-day Adventist Church; Nigeria*

INTRODUCTION

The Great Commission calls the church not merely to secure decisions but to make disciples through baptism and continuing instruction (Matt. 28:18–20). For the Seventh-day Adventist Church, therefore, evangelistic growth and membership retention belong to the same missional task. The problem addressed in this paper is the gap that can emerge

between successful accession and sustained participation in the life, fellowship, and mission of the church. The concern is global rather than uniquely Nigerian: recent Adventist research reports that 43,652,857 people joined the world church between 1965 and 2023, while 18,555,581 subsequently left, a net loss rate of 42.5 percent.[1]

This global pattern makes retention a serious theological and pastoral concern. It also corrects an important limitation in earlier formulations of this study: a global loss rate cannot simply be transferred to Nigeria without Nigeria-specific longitudinal evidence. The present argument therefore does not claim that Nigeria itself has a verified 40-percent attrition rate. Rather, it asks how a ministry strategy rooted in community, discipleship, and contextual care might help Nigerian Adventist congregations reduce preventable disengagement and strengthen belonging.

The purpose of the study is to develop an integrated account of small-group ministry and membership retention and to propose a Family Bible-Based Small Groups framework for Nigerian Adventist congregations. The paper proceeds in six stages. It first clarifies its concepts and methodology; second, it develops biblical and Adventist foundations for small-group community; third, it identifies mechanisms through which small groups may address attrition; fourth, it considers Nigerian communal structures as contextual resources; fifth, it presents a fourteen-day intervention and explains its retention logic; and finally, it offers recommendations and a conclusion.

Conceptual Framework

The study uses four related concepts. A small group is a deliberately organised, face-to-face community of a manageable number of persons who meet regularly for spiritual formation, mutual care, participation, accountability, and mission. The precise numerical size may vary according to context; the defining issue is whether meaningful interaction and shared responsibility are possible. Small-group scholarship within Adventism has

[1]Adventist Research, "State of the Adventist Church Membership 2025," 2025. The reported 42.5 percent figure is a global long-term loss rate and should not be represented as a Nigeria-specific attrition statistic.

consistently connected such communities with nurture, discipleship, hospitality, and member engagement.[2]

Ministry strategy refers here to an intentional pattern of practices designed to achieve a ministry objective. Retention refers to the sustained connection of members to Christ and to the worship, fellowship, discipleship, service, and mission of the local church. It is therefore more than keeping a name on a membership roll. Membership attrition refers to the loss or disengagement of members from active church life and, where formally recorded, from denominational membership. Attrition may have multiple causes; this paper does not reduce it to one factor. Instead, it examines whether relationally organised small groups can address some of the social, spiritual, and pastoral conditions associated with disengagement.

The conceptual relationship guiding the paper is therefore: Small-Group Community → Belonging, Nurture, Care, Participation, and Early Support → Stronger Member Engagement → Reduced Risk of Preventable Attrition. This is a ministry logic rather than a claim of automatic causation. Small groups can contribute to retention only when they are well led, safe, contextually responsive, and integrated into the wider discipleship life of the congregation.

Methodology and Scholarly Approach

This is a qualitative practical-theological study. It does not present a statistically representative survey of Adventists in Nigeria. Instead, it brings four bodies of material into dialogue: selected biblical texts concerning community, discipleship, shared care, and house-based Christian fellowship; Adventist writings and denominational documents on small groups, discipleship, nurture, and retention; relevant literature on small-group ministry; and two contextual key-informant interviews conducted in Ekiti State in March 2013 with Funke Ogunsami and Daniel Aina. The interviews are used as contextual voices rather than as a representative sample of Nigerian Adventists.

[2]General Conference Nurture and Retention Committee, ed., Discipling, Nurturing, and Reclaiming: Nurture and Retention Summit (Silver Spring, MD: General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 2020).

The materials were read thematically around recurring retention-related categories: belonging, spiritual nurture, shared care, distributed leadership, contextual responsiveness, participation in mission, and support for members experiencing difficulty. Biblical texts were interpreted within their literary contexts before ministry principles were drawn from them. Documentary and interview material was then synthesised around the same themes. The fourteen-day Family Bible-Based Small Groups programme was developed from this synthesis as a practical ministry intervention. Since the manuscript does not contain pre- and post-intervention data, control-group evidence, or longitudinal follow-up, the programme is not presented as empirically proven to reduce attrition; its effectiveness should be tested in subsequent congregational research.

Biblical and Adventist Foundations for Small-Group Ministry

Community, Shared Care, and Distributed Responsibility in the Old Testament

The Old Testament does not provide a modern small-group programme, but it repeatedly portrays covenant life through households, clans, assemblies, and distributed structures of responsibility. Israel understood itself as a people constituted by covenant and organised through families and tribes (Deut. 7:6–8; Gen. 49). These structures created identity, obligation, memory, and mutual responsibility. Their relevance for retention lies not in reproducing ancient social arrangements but in recognising that durable religious identity is ordinarily sustained through communities smaller than the nation or mass assembly.

Exodus 18:17–26 offers a particularly useful ministry principle. Jethro advises Moses to distribute responsibility among capable leaders rather than attempting to carry every case personally. The passage concerns governance and adjudication, not church small groups in the modern sense; nevertheless, it supports a principle of decentralised care and shared leadership. Applied cautiously, this principle challenges pastor-centred models in which one minister is expected to provide all nurture and care. Small groups can extend pastoral attention by enabling members to notice needs, share burdens, and respond before disengagement becomes withdrawal.[3]

[3]Julie A. Gorman, Community That Is Christian: A Handbook on Small Groups (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1993), 29–30.

The Sabbath also reinforces the relational dimension of covenant life. Genesis 2:1–3 and the Sabbath commandment in Exodus 20:8–11 place worship, rest, and creaturely dependence within recurring sacred time. The texts should not be used to claim that Sabbath was instituted specifically as a small-group strategy. Rather, Sabbath provides a recurring context in which worship, fellowship, family life, and community can be intentionally strengthened.

Jesus, the Early Church, and Relational Discipleship

Jesus ministered publicly to crowds but invested intensively in a smaller circle of disciples whom he taught, corrected, commissioned, and formed for mission (Mark 3:13–19). This pattern demonstrates the formative value of sustained relational discipleship. Matthew 18:15–20 is especially relevant because its immediate context concerns accountability, reconciliation, and communal discernment. The promise of Christ's presence where two or three gather should therefore not be reduced to a numerical formula for small groups; it belongs to a passage about restoring relationships and exercising responsible community.

Acts provides clearer evidence of large-gathering and house-based Christian life operating together. Acts 2:42–47 describes believers devoted to apostolic teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread, prayer, generosity, worship, and shared life. Acts 20:20 later refers to ministry conducted publicly and from house to house. The retention significance is direct: Christian belonging was sustained through teaching, relationships, material care, worship, and participation. Small groups are valuable insofar as they embody these functions rather than merely reproducing another church meeting.

This emphasis is consistent with contemporary Adventist nurture-and-retention thinking. The 2019 General Conference Nurture and Retention Summit called local churches to create caring environments for spiritual growth and specifically recognised networks and small groups as possible structures for nurturing and training disciples.[4]

[4]General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, "Nurture and Retention Summit Report," Annual Council Agenda, 2019, recommendations on discipling, nurture, retention, and reclamation.

The General Conference strategic plan for 2020–2025 likewise identified spiritual growth in discipling, nurture, and retention as a strategic priority, including local nurture-and-retention coordination and widespread implementation of discipleship programmes.[5]

Small Groups and Membership Attrition: An Integrated Retention Logic

The central contribution of this paper is to connect small-group practice explicitly with the problem of attrition. Small groups are not a panacea, because members leave churches for diverse theological, relational, institutional, mobility-related, and personal reasons. They can, however, address several conditions that make disengagement more likely or make struggling members less visible.

Belonging and relational attachment: A member who is known by name, expected at a gathering, and connected to a network of relationships is less socially invisible than one whose only contact with church is a large weekly service. Regular interaction can strengthen a sense of belonging and make absence noticeable.

Spiritual nurture and discipleship: Small groups create repeated opportunities for Bible study, prayer, testimony, mentoring, and discussion. These practices can move discipleship from occasional information transfer to sustained formation.

Mutual care and felt needs: Members often experience illness, bereavement, financial pressure, family conflict, loneliness, or spiritual discouragement before they disengage. A functioning group can identify such needs early, offer appropriate support, and refer serious matters to pastors or qualified professionals.

Participation and distributed ministry: People are more likely to experience ownership when they contribute rather than remain spectators. Small groups can distribute leadership, service, hospitality, teaching, visitation, and mission according to gifts and capacity.

Early support, reconciliation, and reclamation: As group members interact regularly, withdrawal, conflict, or prolonged absence can be noticed earlier. This allows respectful contact, listening, reconciliation where appropriate, and pastoral follow-up before separation becomes permanent.

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[5]General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, I Will Go: Strategic Focus 2020–2025 (Silver Spring, MD: General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 2019), 5.

Recent Adventist evidence strengthens the urgency of this integrated approach. The denomination's 2025 membership analysis reports a long-term global net loss rate of 42.5 percent, while the 2022–2023 Global Church Member Survey continues to examine commitment, belonging, and discipleship as central dimensions of church life. In the West-Central Africa Division, the 2020–2025 strategic plan explicitly included family evangelism, home Bible studies, small-group study, church attendance, and improved retention among youth and young adults among its strategic actions and indicators.[6]

Nigerian Communal Structures as Contextual Resources

Nigerian societies are culturally diverse, so no single communal structure should be treated as representative of the whole country. Nevertheless, many communities organise social life through extended families, age associations, occupational networks, women's and youth groups, traditional leadership structures, and neighbourhood relationships. The value of these patterns for Christian ministry lies in their capacity to create identity, mutual obligation, communication, and care. The church should neither romanticise nor reproduce every traditional structure. Instead, it should critically adapt relational strengths that are compatible with Christian discipleship, dignity, inclusion, and accountable leadership.

The two contextual interviews used in this study support this emphasis. Ogunsami stressed the importance of shared responsibility and community support, while Aina linked family-based organisation with the possibility of more sustained care. These interviews are not treated as proof of national patterns; they function as contextual observations that complement the documentary and theological analysis.[7,8]

Figure 1. Contextual Family-Based Small-Group Ministry Framework

Family/kinship networks + youth and women's fellowships + neighbourhood/community relationships → biblically guided small groups → prayer and Scripture + mutual care +

[6]West-Central Africa Division of Seventh-day Adventists, WAD Quinquennial Strategic Plan 2020–2025 (Abidjan: West-Central Africa Division, 2020).
[7]Funke Ogunsami, Head, Guidance and Counseling Department, Ekiti State University, interview by author, Ado-Ekiti, Nigeria, March 21, 2013.
[8]Daniel Aina, Permanent Secretary, Ekiti State Ministry of Education, interview by author, Ado-Ekiti, Nigeria, March 24, 2013.

participation + mission + early follow-up → stronger belonging and discipleship → reduced risk of preventable attrition

Source: Author's conceptual framework, developed for this study.

Figure 1 does not equate traditional Nigerian groups with church small groups. It identifies relational resources that may be critically contextualised. The model assumes that biblical norms, safeguarding, voluntary participation, and responsible church leadership govern the adaptation process.

A Fourteen-Day Family Bible-Based Small Groups Intervention

The fourteen-day programme is not an appendix unrelated to attrition; it operationalises the retention mechanisms identified above. Each day addresses a dimension of belonging, spiritual formation, family support, health, stewardship, mission, or hope that can strengthen members' connection to Christ and to the faith community. Groups should ideally meet in manageable units, record attendance, identify pastoral needs with consent, and follow up respectfully with absent or struggling members. Leaders should be trained to recognise the limits of their role and to refer medical, mental-health, safeguarding, legal, or serious family matters to appropriate professionals.

Day 1: God, prayer, and family identity. Biblical focus: Ps. 62:8; 1 Thess. 5:17; Gen. 1:27; 2:18–24. Retention connection: Establishes spiritual identity and a safe relational starting point; members identify prayer needs and learn one another's circumstances.

Day 2: Identifying family and personal needs. Biblical focus: Ps. 127:1–5; Phil. 4:19. Retention connection: Creates structured listening so practical or spiritual pressures that could contribute to disengagement are not ignored.

Day 3: Responsible family leadership. Biblical focus: Eph. 5:21–33; 6:1–4; 1 Tim. 5:8. Retention connection: Frames leadership through mutual Christian responsibility, care, and service rather than domination.

Day 4: Women, mothers, and participation in mission. Biblical focus: Exod. 20:12; Judg. 4:4–7; Luke 8:1–3. Retention connection: Affirms women's dignity and contribution to family, church, and mission, strengthening participation and belonging.

Day 5: Children and young people. Biblical focus: Ps. 127:3–5; Eph. 6:1–4; 1 Tim. 4:12. Retention connection: Encourages intergenerational inclusion and gives younger members meaningful roles in the faith community.

Day 6: Extended family and neighbour relationships. Biblical focus: Lev. 19:18; Rom. 13:8–10; Matt. 5:43–48. Retention connection: Extends care beyond the nuclear 12family and helps groups map relational support networks.

Day 7: Worship and family togetherness. Biblical focus: Gen. 2:1–3; Exod. 20:8–11; Ps. 133:1. Retention connection: Connects Sabbath worship with relational presence, reconciliation, and family/community fellowship.

Day 8: The church as a spiritual family. Biblical focus: Acts 2:42–47; Matt. 5:13–16. Retention connection: Links members to congregational fellowship, teaching, care, and service rather than isolated attendance.

Day 9: Mission and outward service. Biblical focus: Matt. 28:18–20; John 3:16. Retention connection: Moves the group from inward fellowship to shared mission; participation can strengthen ownership and purpose.

Day 10: Health and bodily stewardship. Biblical focus: Gen. 2:7; 1 Cor. 10:31. Retention connection: Integrates whole-person care while avoiding unsupported medical claims; encourages responsible health practices.

Day 11: Food, gratitude, and responsible choices. Biblical focus: Gen. 1:29; Dan. 1:8–16; 1 Cor. 10:31. Retention connection: Uses shared reflection on lifestyle and gratitude to strengthen mutual encouragement and accountability.

Day 12: Stewardship and temperance. Biblical focus: Mal. 3:8–12; 1 Cor. 10:31. Retention connection: Connects discipleship with responsible stewardship and self-government rather than treating faith as purely private.

Day 13: Family resilience and Christian hope. Biblical focus: John 16:33; Phil. 4:6–7; Rev. 21:1–4. Retention connection: Provides a setting for members facing crisis to receive prayer, support, and appropriate referral.

Day 14: Hope, commitment, and continuing community. Biblical focus: John 14:1–3; Rev. 21:1–4. Retention connection: Ends with commitment to ongoing discipleship, follow-up, group participation, and mutual care beyond the two-week intervention.

For evaluation, each group should establish simple indicators before and after the programme: attendance consistency, participation in Bible study and prayer, number of members receiving follow-up, identified care needs addressed or referred, willingness to continue in a small group, and subsequent participation in congregational worship and ministry. Longer-term assessment at three and six months would be necessary before making claims about actual attrition reduction.

Discussion

The analysis undertaken in this study suggests that the relationship between small-group ministry and membership retention is best understood through the quality of Christian community that small groups are capable of creating. The significance of a small group does not lie merely in its numerical size or in the act of dividing a congregation into smaller units. Rather, its potential contribution to retention lies in the relational and discipleship functions it performs. When members experience meaningful belonging, spiritual nurture, mutual care, opportunities for participation, and timely support during periods of difficulty, the local congregation becomes more than a place of periodic worship; it becomes a community in which members are known, supported, and encouraged to mature in faith. In this sense, small groups may address some of the relational conditions associated with disengagement by creating spaces where members' spiritual, social, and practical concerns can be recognised before withdrawal from congregational life becomes established.

This interpretation is consistent with the biblical-theological material examined in the study. The patterns considered from Exodus 18, the ministry of Jesus, and the communal life of the early Christian church point toward shared responsibility, relational discipleship, mutual care, and participatory ministry. Exodus 18, for example, should not be read as establishing the modern small-group system directly; nevertheless, its principle of distributed responsibility challenges excessively centralised models of congregational care. The implication for membership retention is important. Where responsibility for nurture rests almost exclusively upon the pastor or a few church officers, members' needs can easily

remain unnoticed. A relational ministry structure distributes responsibility so that members become participants in one another's spiritual wellbeing rather than passive recipients of pastoral services.

The ministry of Jesus provides a further theological basis for this relational understanding. Although Jesus ministered publicly to large crowds, He devoted sustained attention to a smaller community of disciples whom He taught, corrected, mentored, and prepared for ministry. Similarly, the New Testament church demonstrates patterns of fellowship, shared meals, prayer, teaching, material support, and mutual responsibility. These biblical patterns suggest that Christian discipleship develops within relationships and not solely through attendance at large congregational services. Applied to the problem of attrition, the implication is that evangelistic accession should be followed by structures capable of sustaining relationships and spiritual formation. Baptism or formal membership represents an important stage of incorporation into the church, but retention requires continuing nurture and participation in the life and mission of the Christian community.

The analysis therefore supports an important distinction between **membership retention and mere membership preservation.** Retention should not mean keeping names on church records or preventing individuals from leaving at all costs. Christian retention is more appropriately understood as sustained discipleship in which members continue to grow spiritually, participate meaningfully in the community of faith, exercise their gifts, and develop deeper commitment to Christ and His mission. This distinction is particularly important because a congregation may record relatively stable membership while members become functionally disengaged. Small-group ministry is potentially valuable because it creates a setting in which such disengagement may become visible earlier than it would within a large worshipping congregation.

The Nigerian context adds another dimension to this argument. The study has drawn attention to family networks, communal relationships, age groups, leadership structures, and other traditional patterns through which communities historically organised belonging, responsibility, protection, and mutual assistance. These patterns provide useful contextual resources for thinking about Christian small-group ministry because relational belonging

is already culturally intelligible within many Nigerian communities. A family-based small-group strategy may therefore resonate with social patterns through which people understand mutual responsibility and community.

Nevertheless, contextualisation must remain critical rather than romantic. Nigerian culture is neither uniform nor static, and traditional communal systems should not automatically be equated with biblical models of Christian community. Ethnic, denominational, generational, socioeconomic, educational, and gender differences shape how contemporary Nigerians experience community. Some inherited structures may also reproduce hierarchy, exclusion, coercion, or unequal access to authority. Consequently, contextual small-group ministry should appropriate the relational strengths of communal culture while evaluating every practice through Christian principles of service, dignity, accountability, inclusion, and mutual responsibility. The objective is not to reproduce traditional authority structures within the church but to develop culturally intelligible forms of Christian community consistent with the gospel.

This consideration also strengthens the rationale for the proposed family-based small-group intervention. The fourteen-day programme moves progressively from the immediate family to the church and wider society while addressing prayer, family relationships, health, stewardship, mission, community, and Christian hope. Its potential contribution to retention lies not simply in completing fourteen Bible-study sessions but in creating repeated opportunities for interaction, spiritual reflection, identification of needs, mutual support, and participation. The intervention should therefore be understood as a structured ministry framework rather than as a guaranteed solution to attrition. Its effectiveness would depend upon the quality of facilitation, regularity of participation, follow-up after the programme, leadership competence, and the extent to which identified needs receive appropriate pastoral or practical responses.

The analysis further indicates that small groups should not be presented as a **panacea** for membership attrition. Members may disengage from churches for multiple and sometimes overlapping reasons, including relational conflict, unmet spiritual expectations, doctrinal disagreement, mobility, family circumstances, leadership problems, generational tensions,

or dissatisfaction with congregational life. A small-group programme cannot independently resolve all such factors. Moreover, poorly structured groups may themselves become sources of exclusion, excessive control, interpersonal conflict, confidentiality breaches, or spiritual dependency. Effective small-group ministry therefore requires trained leadership, accountability, safeguarding, clear connection with the local congregation, and mechanisms for referring problems that exceed the competence of group leaders.

This qualification does not diminish the potential contribution of small groups; rather, it locates that contribution more realistically. Small groups can function as an important **relational infrastructure for discipleship and retention**. They provide settings in which members can be known personally, questions can be raised, spiritual struggles can be addressed, gifts can be exercised, and signs of disengagement can be recognised. Their effectiveness, however, depends on whether they genuinely perform these functions. The critical question is therefore not simply whether a church has small groups, but whether those groups cultivate belonging, discipleship, participation, care, accountability, and mission.

The study also highlights the need to reconsider the relationship between **evangelism and retention.** Retention should not be treated as an administrative concern that begins only after evangelistic programmes have concluded. If the Great Commission involves both making disciples and teaching them to observe Christ's commands, then nurture and discipleship belong within the missionary task itself. A ministry model that concentrates heavily on numerical accession without comparable attention to incorporation, spiritual formation, and continuing relationships risks producing repeated cycles of recruitment and disengagement. Small groups may help bridge this gap by connecting public evangelism with the ordinary relational processes through which new and existing members become integrated into congregational life.

Within the Seventh-day Adventist context, this integrated understanding is especially relevant because contemporary Adventist mission discourse increasingly places discipleship, nurture, retention, and reclamation alongside evangelistic growth. The

implication is that the success of mission should not be evaluated exclusively by the number of persons baptised or added to membership. Attention should also be given to whether those members become integrated into worship, fellowship, service, spiritual formation, and mission. Small-group ministry offers one practical mechanism through which this broader conception of church growth may be pursued.

Finally, the study's proposed framework should be regarded as a **practical-theological model requiring further empirical evaluation.** The present analysis provides biblical, theological, contextual, and ministerial reasons for expecting well-designed small groups to contribute positively to retention, but it does not establish that the fourteen-day programme will necessarily reduce attrition across Seventh-day Adventist congregations in Nigeria. Future implementation should therefore assess participation, members' experiences of belonging and spiritual nurture, continuity of group involvement, pastoral follow-up, and longer-term membership engagement. Such evaluation would enable subsequent research to determine more precisely which dimensions of small-group ministry contribute most effectively to retention and under what congregational and cultural conditions.

Recommendations

1. Integrate retention into evangelistic planning: Every evangelistic initiative should include a post-baptismal nurture pathway that connects new and existing members to trained small groups rather than treating baptism as the endpoint.

2. Develop contextualised materials: Unions and conferences in Nigeria should adapt small-group materials to local languages, family realities, age groups, urban/rural settings, and congregational needs while maintaining biblical and Adventist theological coherence.

3. Train and supervise small-group leaders: Leaders need preparation in Bible facilitation, listening, visitation, conflict management, safeguarding, referral, and member follow-up. Small-group ministry should complement rather than bypass pastoral oversight.

4. Create nurture-and-retention coordination: Local churches should designate responsibility for monitoring participation, coordinating groups, and ensuring that absent

or struggling members receive respectful follow-up. This aligns with denominational nurture-and-retention priorities.

5. Use evidence rather than assumption: Churches should keep ethical, non-intrusive records of attendance and follow-up and evaluate whether small-group participation is associated with improved engagement over time. The fourteen-day programme should be piloted and assessed at three- and six-month intervals.

6. Provide institutional resources: Conferences and local churches should budget for leader training, contextualised materials, communication, and evaluation. Funding levels should be determined locally rather than prescribing an unsupported fixed percentage.

7. Strengthen intergenerational and family ministry: Groups should intentionally include children, youth, adults, older persons, singles, and families in ways appropriate to their needs so that retention does not become limited to one demographic.

8. Connect care with mission: Groups should combine inward nurture with outward service and witness. Shared mission can deepen purpose, participation, and ownership while preventing small groups from becoming closed social circles.

Conclusion

This study began with the problem that church growth cannot be assessed adequately by accessions alone when substantial numbers of members later disengage. Its purpose was therefore to examine how small-group ministry could be integrated with membership retention in the Nigerian Seventh-day Adventist context. Using a qualitative practical-theological approach, the study synthesised selected biblical texts, Adventist nurture-and-retention documents, small-group literature, and two contextual interviews around themes of belonging, spiritual nurture, shared care, participation, and early support.

The synthesis indicates that small groups can contribute to retention when they make members visible to one another, deepen discipleship, mobilise mutual care, distribute ministry, and enable timely follow-up. Nigerian communal and family structures can strengthen this approach when they are critically adapted rather than uncritically reproduced. The proposed fourteen-day Family Bible-Based Small Groups programme translates these principles into a practical sequence that connects family life, prayer, worship, health, stewardship, mission, and Christian hope with the retention task.

The study's contribution is therefore not the claim that small groups are an automatic cure for attrition. It is an integrated practical-theological framework showing how small-group community may address identifiable pathways of disengagement and how that relationship can be evaluated. The next scholarly step is empirical testing of the intervention across diverse Nigerian Adventist congregations, with follow-up data capable of establishing whether and under what conditions the programme measurably improves long-term retention.

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CHAPTER 38

ADVENTIST WOMEN IN NIGERIA: MISSIONAL PLACEMENT IN A CHANGING WORLD

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Abstract

The Seventh-day Adventist Church affirms women's active participation in mission. Their commitment is traced to biblical teachings and the ministerial legacy of Ellen G. White. Despite their evolving significant role, the question remains: how can women who demonstrate their gifts for mission be responsibly recognized and strategically placed within Adventist structures in Nigeria? This article revisits the question through a historical-theological and contextual-conceptual analysis rather than an empirical field study, as it addresses rapidly emerging global realities. The sources engaged include biblical texts, Adventist denominational and historical records, Ellen White's published writings, Nigerian Adventist scholarship, and selected studies of Nigerian women's social and cultural contexts. This paper examines the biblical, theological, and cultural foundations supporting the missional placement of Adventist women in Nigeria, emphasizing the impact of global realities such as urbanization, technological advancement, socio-cultural transformation, economic pressures, expanding professional mission fields, and shifting gender expectations. This study argues that missional placement should be understood as the intentional alignment of a woman's spiritual gifts, preparation, contextual competence, mission opportunity, and accountability with an appropriate ministry role. Biblical narratives and Pauline material provide substantial evidence that women participated in learning, witness, teaching, service, and mission, while 1 Timothy 2:11–15 and 1 Corinthians 14:34–35 require careful contextual interpretation rather than selective proof-texting. Nigerian history also shows that women's mission has long extended beyond a single department. The article further argues

that African identity should neither be sentimentalized as inherently supportive of women nor treated as uniformly restrictive, as Nigerian traditions contain both resources for female public agency and structures that can limit it. Hence, the article proposes a five-stage missional-placement structure – Identify, equip, mentor, appoint, and review. The proposal preserves the church's biblical and policy commitments while expanding the discussion from the question of women's presence to the question of how their gifts can be responsibly deployed for mission. Therefore, the Adventist Church in Nigeria should strengthen theological education, leadership training programmes, and develop clear missional placement pathways to maximize the contributions of Adventist women to mission in the face of global realities.

Keywords: *Adventist Women, Missional Placement, Leadership Training, Global Realities, Nigeria. Theological Education.*

INTRODUCTION

The participation of women in the Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) Church in Nigeria is not a peripheral issue. It concerns the church's capacity to recognize spiritual gifts, cultivate theological competence, and deploy available human resources for mission. The worldwide SDA Church recognizes Women's Ministries as an organized ministry concerned with nurturing, empowering, and involving women in the life and mission of the church.[1] The General Conference's historical account traces the development of a specialized ministry for women from Sarepta M. I. Henry's work in the late nineteenth century, through the establishment of the Office of Women's Ministries in 1990, to its recognition as a full department in 1995.[2] This institutional history is important because women's participation is not an innovation imposed on African Adventism; it is part of the church's wider organizational development.

In the Nigerian context, Adventism entered the country in 1914 through the work associated with David C. Babcock, and the subsequent history of the church included educational, health, welfare, and evangelistic initiatives.[3] Within this history, women were

[1] Omobonike Adeola Alabi-Sessou, "Women's Ministries in West-Central Africa," in *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (2010), accessed 6 June 2025, https://www.adventistyearbook.org/entity?EntityID=20743.
[2] General Conference of Seventh-day Adventist Church, *Department of Women Ministries*, accessed 10 March 2025, https://women-adventist.org.
[3] David Toyebi Agboola, *Seventh-day Adventist History in West Africa* (1888-1988): *A Mustard Seed* (Ibadan, Nigeria: LASOB, 2001), 64.

not merely passive recipients of mission. The West-Central Africa Division's historical account identifies Mary McClement's contribution to the formation of the Dorcas Welfare Society in Nigeria in 1926 and traces the development of women's organized ministry through later national and union structures.[4] These histories demonstrate that Nigerian Adventist women have long occupied mission spaces, even when those spaces have not always been described in the language of formal leadership or professional ministry.

The problem is not whether women can contribute to Adventist mission, but rather the problem is how the church should identify, prepare, assign, support, and evaluate women for mission roles in ways that are biblically responsible, culturally intelligent, institutionally accountable, and responsive to contemporary realities. Thus, three questions guide the analysis of this study: (1) What biblical and theological foundations support the missional placement of women? (2) How have Adventist women in Nigeria historically participated in mission, and what contextual factors complicate their placement? (3) What practical framework for missional placement is warranted by Nigeria's changing social, cultural, educational, economic, and digital environment?

Methodological and Conceptual Approach

This article uses a historical-theological and contextual-conceptual approach. The documentary corpus consists of four overlapping categories: biblical texts; official and historical Adventist sources, including the Encyclopedia of Seventh-day Adventists and Women's Ministries records; Ellen G. White's published writings; and scholarly literature on women, theology, mission, and Nigerian social and cultural contexts. The sources are read comparatively rather than statistically; hence, the study is documentary and conceptual.

The historical component reconstructs significant developments in the organized participation of Adventist women in Nigeria. The theological component examines biblical passages that affirm women's participation as well as the principal texts used in arguments against women's public ministry. The contextual component asks how Nigerian cultural institutions and contemporary social changes affect the possibilities and constraints of

[4] Omobonike Adeola Alabi-Sessou, "Women's Ministries in West-Central Africa," in *Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia* (2021), accessed 6 Sept 2026, https://www.adventistyearbook.org/entity?EntityID=20743.

women's mission. Finally, the conceptual component develops "missional placement" as an authorial framework for connecting gifts, preparation, role, accountability, and mission need.

The central construct, "missional placement," is used here as an original analytical term. It means the intentional process by which a church identifies a woman's demonstrated spiritual gifts, character, preparation, contextual competence, and mission opportunity, and aligns them with an appropriate ministry responsibility under a clear line of accountability. The concept, "missional placement," is broader than credentialing and does not itself settle the separate theological question of ordination. It rather concerns deployment for mission within roles and policies available to the church, thus moving the discussion from whether women should participate to the question of how the church should responsibly place prepared women where their gifts and the mission context intersect.

Historical Context of Women in the Nigerian Adventist Church

The history of Adventism in Nigeria begins with the arrival of David C. Babcock in 1914. David Babalola in *The Encyclopedia of Seventh-day Adventists* records the arrival of David Babcock in Lagos in March 1914 and his subsequent establishment of the first Adventist mission station at Erunmu in southwestern Nigeria.[5] Education was one of the major means through which the early mission engaged local communities,[6] however, Adventist mission in Nigeria developed through a combination of evangelization of the world with the Three Angels' message (Rev 14:6-12), education, health, community relationships, and practical service.[7]

Additionally, the history of organized women's ministry is especially significant. The West-Central Africa Division of SDA Church's account identifies Mary McClement as a major contributor to the formation of the Dorcas Welfare Society in Nigeria in 1926. McClement and Madam L. A. Ogunrombi taught women practical skills such as sewing and food preparation, and the society developed through local, district, conference, and

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[5] David O. Babalola, "Nigeria," *Encyclopedia of Seventh-day Adventists* (2020), accessed 7 Sept 2026, https://encyclopedia.adventist.org/assets/pdf/article-CC2R.pdf.
[6] Agboola, 64.
[7] Olugbenga Adetokunbo Efuntade and Ignatius Swart, "The Seventh-day Adventist Church and the Quest for Transformational Development in Contemporary Nigeria: Perspectives from an Empirical Study," *Missionalia,* vol. 49 (2021): 248, accessed 6 June 2025, https://doi.org/10.7832/49-405.

national structures.[8] The same historical account reports a national convention in Aba in 1978 and identifies the establishment of the General Conference Office of Women's Ministries in 1990 as a turning point in the transition toward Adventist Women's Ministries in Nigeria.[9]

The development of women's ministries demonstrates women's agency, but it also reveals how women's work has sometimes been categorized primarily as welfare, support, or departmental activity. Such categories are not insignificant as the gospel includes service to the vulnerable, but they can become restrictive when treated as the natural ceiling of women's mission. The story of Jeciliah Wawuru Audu written by Gambo Daniel offers a useful counterexample. She served as a nurse, hospital leader, Dorcas leader, church treasurer, and member of a mission executive committee at a time when church leadership was overwhelmingly male. Her story shows that Nigerian Adventist women have historically exercised leadership across professional, congregational, and organizational boundaries.[10]

This historical context of women in Nigeria revealed that women's mission in Nigeria has deep roots and should not be reduced to a recent response to gender discourse. Also, the forms of women's participation have developed unevenly; thus, the contemporary question is how to preserve the strengths of established women's ministries while creating additional accountable structures for women whose gifts and training equip them for education, health, chaplaincy, evangelism, communication, administration, community development, Bible instruction, and digital mission.

African Identity: Resources and Constraints

The notion of "African identity" cannot responsibly be treated as a single cultural system. Nigeria contains numerous ethnic, linguistic, religious, and regional communities, and expectations concerning women vary across them. A contextual argument must therefore resist the tendency of portraying African culture as inherently patriarchal and hostile to

[8] Alabi-Sessou, "Women's Ministries in West-Central Africa," in *Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia*.
[9] Ibid.
[10] Gambo Dauda Daniel, "Audu, Jeciliah Wawuru (1924-2025)," *Encyclopedia of Seventh-day Adventists* (2026) accessed 7 Sept 2026, https://encyclopedia.adventist.org/article?id=FJS5.

women, or exaggerating African communal life as automatically supportive of female leadership.

Historical and ethnographic evidence provides examples of women's institutional agency. For instance, in Yoruba political organization, the Iyalode represented women in political affairs and provided a recognized female voice within a predominantly male political structure.[11] In Igbo and neighboring communities, the Umuada institution has provided women with organized mechanisms for collective action, conflict resolution, security, development, and social transformation.[12] These examples do not prove that all Nigerian cultures are egalitarian. They do, however, challenge the assumption that public leadership by women is foreign to African social imagination.

Concomitantly, scholarship on African churches documents persistent gender inequalities and how male dominance can limit women's participation in religious and social leadership.[13] The contextual issue is therefore not whether "African culture" supports or opposes women but rather which cultural resources can be affirmed, which practices require critical evaluation in light of Christian ethics, and how the church can work with communities without baptizing either patriarchy or cultural romanticism.

This leads to a contextual hermeneutic of critical affirmation as the church can affirm communal responsibility, respect for elders, social solidarity, care for families, and women's traditions of service while rejecting the assumption that these values require women to remain permanently outside decision-making or mission leadership. Conversely, women's participation should not be framed as imported Western individualism. The strongest Nigerian case is contextual: women's mission can be understood as Christian discipleship that also resonates with indigenous histories of female agency and communal service.

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[11] Bolanle Awe, "The Iyalode in the Traditional Yoruba Political System," (1977), Smithsonian Libraries and Archives, accessed 7 Sept 2026, https://www.si.edu/object/iyalode-traditional-yoruba-political-system-bolanle-awe:siris_sil_685263.

[12] Danladi Abah and Kwame Adum-Kyeremeh, "Umu-Ada (Ama'oma-Ada) Women Institution in Igala and Igbo Nsukka Communities: A Comparative Socio-Cultural Analysis," *African Identities*, vol. 24, no. 2 (2024): 267, accessed 7 Sept 2026, https://doi.org/10.1080/14725843.2024.2365656.

[13] Daniel Kasomo, "The Role of Women in the Church in Africa," *International Journal of Sociology and Anthropology*, vol. 2, no. 6 (2010): 132, accessed 7 Sept 2026, https://doi.org/10.5897/IJSA.9000090.

Socio-Cultural Dynamics and Changing World Realities

The socio-cultural landscape of Nigeria has been influenced by rapid urbanization, globalization, and increased educational,[14] entrepreneurial,[15] and professional[16] opportunities for women. These global realities present both challenges and opportunities for women's ministry. For instance, research on women's entrepreneurship in Nigeria shows substantial participation in micro and informal business while also identifying structural constraints on women's economic performance.[17] Such realities matter to mission because professional experience, entrepreneurship, education, and community networks can become legitimate sites of Christian service rather than being separated from church mission.

Daniel Kasomo also recognized the deep-rooted gender roles and social inequality in African contexts. To him, these disparities result in a lack of recognition and underutilization of African women – while men received priority in religious roles and dominated social and religious spheres, women were marginalized in these spheres.[18]
Similarly, digitalization is particularly important. Simon Kemp, presenting the state of digital in Nigeria in 2024, reported 103 million internet users in Nigeria at the beginning

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[14] Toby Tomlinson Baker, "Educational Attainment Statistics in Nigeria," paper presented at Pepperdine University (2019): 4, accessed 5 October 2023, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/338332087_Educational_Attainment_Statistics_in_Nigeria. Toby Baker sees that the number of educated women is not proportionate to their involvement in the labour sector as such, he identifies this problem as under-utilization. Similarly, the number of women in the church is not proportionate to their level of receiving the right/adequate training to fully participate in fulfilling the Great Commission Mandate, and as such, there may be an under-utilization of their God-given potential for mission. This under-utilization could still be a result of the feelings/attitudes and prejudice against women – this indicates that there are not many perceived changes of the traditional biases even though there is an increase in women in education.
[15] Safiyyah Muhammad Aliyu, "An Assessment of Women Entrepreneurship Performance in Nigeria," *Malaysian Management Journal*, vol. 17 (2013): 2, accessed 5 October 2023, file:///C:/Users/MYPC/Downloads/An_Assessment_of_Women_Entrepreneurship_Performanc.pdf.
[16] Ezra Gayawan and Samson B. Adebayo, "Spatial Analysis of Women Employment Status in Nigeria," *CBN Journal of Applied Statistics*, vol. 6, no. 2 (2015): 2, accessed 5 October 2023, https://cbn.gov.ng/out/2016/sd/spatial%20analysis%20of%20women%20employment%20status%20in%20nigeria.pdf.
[17] Aliyu, 2
[18] Kasomo, 138.

of 2024, with internet penetration at 45.5 percent, while social-media user identities stood at 36.75 million.[19] These figures, however, establish a changing communication environment in which the SDA Church can reasonably consider digital Bible studies, health education, family ministries, youth engagement, professional networking, and online evangelism as mission spaces. Women who possess theological competence and digital skills should be considered for such assignments alongside men.

The changing environment also makes professional mission more important as health workers, teachers, counselors, administrators, entrepreneurs, communicators, lawyers, technology professionals, and social-service practitioners often have forms of access and credibility that traditional church structures do not automatically provide. Benjamin Akano's study of cross-cultural mission in Nigeria argues that women can provide direct access to female populations that male-centered mission strategies may not reach effectively.[20] The missional-placement framework developed here therefore treats professional competence as a mission asset rather than as a separate secular identity.

Biblical Foundations for Missional Placement of Adventist Women in Nigeria

There are several biblical foundations for missional placement of women. The Bible provides us with women who played significant roles in fulfilling God's mission. For example, Miriam was identified as a prophet in Exodus 15:20 and was associated with Moses and Aaron in Micah 6:4.[21] She was among the most frequently mentioned and most prominent biblical women in ancient Jewish Scriptures.[22]

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[19] Simon Kemp, "Digital 2024: Nigeria," in *DataReportal*, accessed 7 Sept 2026, https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2024-nigeria.

[20] Benjamin Isola Akano, "Importance of Women's Leadership Roles in Contemporary Cross-Cultural Missions in Nigeria," *Asia-Africa Journal of Mission and Ministry*, vol. 25 (2022): 181–194, accessed 7 Sept 2026, https://doi.org/10.21806/aamm.2022.25.08.

[21] Sidnie White Crawford, "Traditions about Miriam in the Qumran Scrolls," *Faculty Publications, Classics and Religious Studies Department*, vol. 97 (203): 33, accessed 22 May 2025, https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1096&context=classicsfacpub.

[22] Agnethe Siquans, "She Dared to Reprove Her Father," Miriam's Image as a Female Prophet in Rabbinic Interpretation," *Journal of Ancient Judaism*, vol. 6 (2016): 336, accessed 22 May 2025, file:///C:/Users/MYPC/Downloads/She_Dared_to_Reprove_Her_Father_Miriams_Image_as_.pdf.

Speaking of her leadership qualities, Richard Davidson explained that Miriam was the one who motivated Moses, and she was there for him right from when he was a baby. Miriam displayed great intelligence, tact, and courage when she spoke with the Egyptian princess and intelligently suggested Moses' mother to be the nurse of baby Moses in Pharaoh's court.[23] In the Egyptian court, Miriam presented God indirectly to the princess and her maids because she was able to enter the princess' chamber, a place where a man naturally cannot enter.

Similarly, Deborah was called and gifted by God as both a judge and prophet (Judges 4:4-5), exercising public judicial authority with men coming to her for judgment, within a patriarchal society. Mieke Bal thus considered Deborah as the only one who combines religious, military, juridical, and poetical forms of leadership.[24] These narratives do not create a one-to-one model for contemporary church offices, but they demonstrate that God's mission in Scripture is not narrated exclusively through male agents.

Furthermore, the New Testament presents women like Mary Magdalene, who appeared among the women, followed and supported Jesus (Luke 8:1-3),[25] and became a principal witness to the resurrection (John 20:17–18).[26] Raymond Collins commented that with Mary's Paschal proclamation, she simply typifies adequate faith in the resurrection of Jesus.[27]

Additionally, Lydia received the gospel preached by Paul; she became baptized with her household, and she served as the link through which the gospel reached her whole community.[28] After Paul and Silas were released from the authorities in Philippi, they also went to Lydia's house and encouraged the brethren there afterward; Lydia became associated with the Christian community in Philippi (Acts 16:14–15, 40). Furthermore,

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[23] Richard M. Davidson, *Flame of Yahweh: Sexuality in the Old Testament* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2007), 237.
[24] Mieke Bal, Death and Dissymmetry: *The politics of coherence in the Book of Judges* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago.1988), 209.
[25] Bonnie Thurston, *Women in the New Testament* (NY: Crossroad Publishing, 1998), 103.
[26] Larry W. Hurtado, "The Women, the Tomb, and the Climax of Mark," in *A Wandering Galilean: Essays in Honour of Seàn Freyne*, eds. Zuleika Rodgers, Margaret Daly-Denton and Anne Fitzpatrick McKinley (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 428.
[27] Raymond F. Collins, Witherington Ben and Lampe Peter, "Mary (Person)," *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 4. 580 (NY: Doubleday, 1992).
[28] Akano, 184.

Priscilla and Aquila were described as Paul's coworkers (Rom. 16:3–4). Priscilla participated with Aquila in instructing Apollos more accurately in the way of God (Acts 18:24–26). The mentioning of Priscilla's name before the name of her husband indicates her prominent role in the ministry of the gospel (cf. Acts 18:18, 26; 2 Tim 4:19). [29]
Again, Phoebe was commended as a *diakonos* of the church at Cenchreae and a benefactor or patron of many, including Paul (Rom. 16:1-2). Junia was also named among those described by Paul as outstanding among the apostles (Rom. 16:7). This is the most significant Pauline reference for a woman in mission leadership. Karen Elliott's study of Paul similarly highlights women as fellow missionaries and active contributors to early Christian communities.[30]

The Great Commission (Matthew 28:18-20) then commissions disciples to make disciples, baptize, and teach. The text does not provide a gendered list of which believers are permitted to participate in the commission. Likewise, 1 Corinthians 12 presents spiritual gifts as distributed by the Holy Spirit for the common good. The missional implication is not that every person must occupy every office, but that the church should not ignore demonstrated gifts when assigning mission responsibilities.

The difficult texts must also be faced. For example, 1 Timothy 2:11-12 instructs a woman to learn in quietness and says that Paul does not permit a woman to teach or exercise authority over a man. Also, 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 instructs women to keep silent in the churches. These texts cannot simply be ignored but at the same time, their interpretation must be considered alongside texts in which women pray and prophesy (cf. 1 Cor. 11:5), Priscilla instructs Apollos (Acts 18:26), and women are publicly commended as coworkers and ministers (Rom. 16:1-16).

In this vein, Ángel Rodríguez's comment on 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 argues that an absolute prohibition would conflict with the wider biblical evidence; hence, the passage is read in

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[29] Rekha M. Chennattu, "Paul's Understanding of Women's Place in the Church," *Journal of Religious Studies*, vol. 2, no. 1-2 (2009): 266, accessed 28 May 2025, file:///C:/Users/MYPC/Downloads/12%20Chennattu%20Women.pdf.Chennattu, 266.
[30] See, Karen M. Elliott, Women in Ministry and the Writings of Paul (Winona, MN: Anselm Academic Press, 2010).

relation to order and disruptive questioning.[31] Sampson Nwaomah and Harriet Ikhane likewise argue that 1 Timothy 2:11 positively commands women to learn and that the Nigerian Adventist Church should promote women's biblical and theological education.[32] Abiola Mbamalu's study further demonstrates why the passage remains exegetically contested and should be interpreted within its literary and theological context.[33]

The biblical evidence therefore supports a measured conclusion: the Bible does not justify an assumption that women are inherently unsuitable for mission. Scripture does not also authorize the church to ignore questions of order, competence, character, accountability, or its own ecclesial policies. Thus, missional placement operates in that space: it recognizes gifts and calling while requiring preparation, discernment, and institutional accountability.

Ellen G. White and Adventist Missionary Practice

Ellen G. White's writings are especially relevant to an Adventist discussion because they address women's practical participation in gospel work. In "The Laborer Is Worthy of His Hire," White argued that women who devote themselves to visiting families, opening Scripture, educating new believers, and seeking souls are doing work that is "in the line of ministry."[34] She also urged the church to provide an "open door" for consecrated women to enter the field.[35] The significance is not to use Ellen White's statements to bypass denominational policy, but to recognize that Adventist practice has historically included substantial forms of women's gospel labor beyond a narrow definition of office.

Ellen White's emphasis on education is also important; her writings repeatedly connect effective Christian service with preparation, balanced judgment, and practical competence.

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[31] Ángel Manuel Rodríguez, "1 Corinthians 14:34–35," Seventh-day Adventist Biblical Research Institute, accessed 6 June 2025, https://adventistbiblicalresearch.org/articles/1-corinthians-14-34-35.

[32] Sampson M. Nwaomah and Harriet Ikhane, "Learning in Quietness and Submission in 1 Timothy 2:11: Relevance for Seventh-day Adventist Women in Nigeria," in *Light in a Once-Dark World: Contemporary Issues in Nigerian Christianity*, vol. 4 (2021), 61-70, accessed 6 June 2025, https://irepository.aua.ac.ke/handle/123456789/545.

[33] Abiola I. Mbamalu, "'The Woman Was Deceived and Became a Sinner': A Literary-Theological Investigation of 1 Timothy 2:11–15," *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies*, vol. 70, no. 3 (2014): 1-7, accessed 7 Sept 2026, https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v70i3.2062.

[34] Ellen G. White, Manuscript 43a, March 22, 1898, published in Manuscript Releases, vol. 5 (Silver Spring, MD: Ellen G. White Estate, 1990), 323–27, accessed 7 Sept 2026., https://m.egwwritings.org/en/book/56.126.

[35] Ellen G. White, Manuscript Releases, vol. 5 (1990), 162, accessed 7 Sept 2026, https://text.egwwritings.org/read/56.741.

This supports a placement model in which women are not merely invited to participate but deliberately equipped for particular responsibilities. The issue is therefore not simply inclusion; it is competent inclusion. A woman placed in a ministry role should receive the theological, professional, mentoring, and contextual preparation necessary for that responsibility.[36] Ellen White therefore provided a substantial theological and practical rationale for women's active mission, while the church's later history shows that institutional realization has been partial and context-dependent.

The Missional Placement Framework

The article proposes a five-stage framework for missional placement: identify, equip, mentor, appoint, and review. The framework does not create new church offices, overturn denominational policy, or settle the ordination debate. Instead, it provides a decision process for using existing opportunities more intentionally and transparently.

Stage one is to identify: Local churches and higher organizations should identify women whose gifts, character, experience, and sense of calling indicate potential for mission. The identification should be based on evidence rather than gender quotas alone. Relevant indicators for identification may include spiritual maturity, demonstrated ministry effectiveness, theological competence, professional skills, communication ability, cultural intelligence, and willingness to work collaboratively.

Stage two is to equip: Identified women should receive the preparation required by the proposed assignment. Theological education is central, especially because Nigerian Adventist scholarship has already identified limited biblical literacy and access to theological education as concerns.[37] Training should also include safeguarding, leadership ethics, conflict management, digital communication, intercultural competence, and relevant professional skills.

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[36] General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, "Literacy," Official Statements, July 29, 1995, accessed 7 Sept 2026, https://gc.adventist.org/official-statements/literacy/.
[37] Harriet O. Ikhane, "Theological Education of Seventh-day Adventist Women in Nigeria," *Journal of Adventist Mission Studies*, vol. 16, no. 1 (2020): 193–204, accessed 6 June 2025, https://doi.org/10.32597/jams/vol16/iss1/14.

Stage three is to mentor: Preparation should be accompanied by supervised experience. A mentor may be a pastor, departmental director, experienced lay leader, chaplain, educator, health professional, or other competent worker. Mentoring prevents placement from becoming a one-time appointment and creates a feedback mechanism for both the individual and the church.

Stage four is to appoint: The church body should place the woman in a clearly defined role with a written description, measurable responsibilities, reporting line, and appropriate support. Appointment should be made by the body authorized under the church's current policy and organizational structure.[38] A woman may be placed in many meaningful mission responsibilities while engaging in a changing global world.

Stage five is to review: The missional placement given to a woman should be evaluated periodically. The review should ask whether the role is producing mission benefit, whether the worker has adequate support, whether additional training is required, and whether the role should be expanded, modified, or concluded. This makes missional placement accountable rather than symbolic.

Contextual Strategies for Nigerian Context

The article highlights six contextual strategies for the Nigerian context on women's missional placement. They are presented as follows:

The first contextual strategy is contextual biblical education. Local churches and conferences should expand accessible Bible and theological education for women without making formal seminary enrollment the only route. Structured Bible-study cohorts, lay ministry training, certificate programs, mentoring, and partnerships with Adventist educational institutions can increase biblical competence. This recommendation is consistent with Nwaomah and Ikhane's argument that 1 Timothy 2:11 should motivate the church to support women's theological education.[39]

The second is a broader ministry-role ecology. Women's Ministries should remain an important platform, but women should not be confined to it. Depending on competence

[38] General Conference Secretariat, "Resources," Seventh-day Adventist Church, accessed 7 Sept 2026, https://secretariat.adventist.org/resources.
[39] Nwaomah and Ikhane, "Learning in Quietness and Submission," 73–76.

and current policy, possible placements include Bible instruction, chaplaincy, health ministries, education, communication, community development, family ministries, youth ministry, evangelistic coordination, administrative service, and digital mission. The principle is not that every woman should seek a formal leadership title; rather, the church should avoid making departmental affiliation the only recognized gateway to meaningful mission responsibility.

The third is professional and digital mission. Nigerian Adventist institutions can deliberately identify women whose professional skills create mission opportunities. A medical professional may lead health education; an educator may coordinate literacy and discipleship; a counselor may support family ministries; a communicator may develop digital Bible content; an entrepreneur may mentor women in livelihood and stewardship; and a technology professional may support digital evangelism. Such assignments should remain accountable to the church and should not be confused with merely commercial activity.[40]

The fourth is culturally intelligent engagement. Nigerian church leaders should work with the positive resources of local communities while naming harmful practices honestly. The Iyalode and Umuada examples demonstrate that female agency has indigenous precedents, but they should not be used to claim that all Nigerian cultures have historically treated women equally. Contextual mission requires listening to local communities, recognizing differences among ethnic groups, and distinguishing culture as a resource from culture as an absolute authority.

The fifth is transparent placement criteria. Decisions about mission roles should be based on documented competencies and mission needs rather than informal assumptions about gender. Transparency does not require the church to eliminate every distinction among roles; it requires the church to explain what qualifications are required and why.

The last is institutional partnership. Babcock University and other Adventist educational institutions can support leadership and theological training; local churches can identify

[40] See General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, "Literacy," and Simon Kemp, "Digital 2024: Nigeria."

gifts and provide supervised opportunities; conferences and unions can create and fund training and placement processes; and the West-Central Africa Division (WAD) can provide regional resources, standards, and accountability. The WAD historical record already documents leadership certification, literacy, skill-acquisition, and community-oriented programs as components of women's ministry.[41]

Conclusion

The study shows that the Bible presents women like Miriam, Deborah, Mary Magdalene, Lydia, Priscilla, Phoebe, and Junia as demonstrating different forms of participation such as prophets, witnesses, teachers, coworkers, patrons, and servants of the church. The contended difficult texts, 1 Timothy 2 and 1 Corinthians 14, require contextual interpretation as they should neither be omitted nor be isolated from the broader New Testament evidence. This is necessary because women's participation in mission is biblically grounded; however, specific assignments require attention to competence, character, accountability, and denominational policy.

The Nigerian Adventist history also demonstrates that women's mission is longstanding, as seen in the Dorcas Welfare Society, Mary McClement's work, later Women's Ministries structures, and the documented service of women such as Jeciliah Audu. Nigerian Adventism has benefited from women's leadership and service; nevertheless, Nigerian cultural contexts are diverse and can function both as resources for female agency and as constraints. A critical engagement with these cultural contexts is thus necessary, rather than rejection or sentimentalization.

Furthermore, the study reveals that the Nigerian context is expanding in educational, professional, entrepreneurial, and digital environments, creating mission spaces that older categories alone cannot fully address. This study therefore connects biblical interpretation, Nigerian cultural analysis, Adventist institutional history, and contemporary mission realities, and proposes a missional placement structure for Adventist women in Nigeria – identify, equip, mentor, appoint, and review- that offers a practical way to connect

[41] Alabi-Sessou, "Women's Ministries in West-Central Africa."

women's gifts to mission opportunities while preserving accountability and respecting existing church structures.

Therefore, this study argues that churches committed to mission should develop transparent, accountable ways of recognizing and deploying the gifts already present among their women. In that sense, missional placement becomes not simply a gender question but a question of stewardship, discipleship, competence, and mission effectiveness.

Recommendations

From the study, six recommendations are made, and they are as follows:

One, the local church should establish a simple annual process for identifying women with demonstrated gifts and providing supervised opportunities for service. Pastors and elders should ensure that women's ministry is not treated as a substitute for broader congregational mission but as one component of it.

Two, conferences and unions should develop documented competency pathways for mission roles that are available under current church policy. These pathways should state qualifications, training expectations, appointing authority, reporting relationships, and opportunities for development. Where reliable statistics on women's current placement are unavailable, the relevant organization should begin collecting sex-disaggregated information on ministry assignments.

Three, Adventist educational institutions, including Babcock University, should strengthen accessible theological and leadership training for women. The aim should not be only to produce certificates but to connect training with supervised ministry experience and realistic placement opportunities.

Four, the West-Central Africa Division should encourage unions and conferences to share successful models of women's mission placement, particularly in literacy, community development, chaplaincy, evangelism, health, and digital ministry. Regional learning would reduce duplication and allow Nigerian Adventist organizations to adapt tested practices rather than importing models without contextual assessment.

Five, church leaders should treat the ordination debate with theological seriousness while distinguishing it from the wider question of mission participation. The 2015 General Conference Session decision on women's ordination remains part of the denominational context. A constructive Nigerian strategy can therefore expand women's mission opportunities within existing policy while continuing respectful biblical and theological study where questions remain contested.

Finally, this study, in its documentary and conceptual study, does not provide original field data on the current number, distribution, experiences, or perceptions of Adventist women across Nigeria's unions. Hence, future research should conduct a national mixed-methods study using union and conference records, surveys, interviews, and case studies to test the proposed placement framework. Such research could produce a national map of women's current ministry roles and identify where training, policy, or cultural factors most strongly influence missional placement.

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CHAPTER 39

A CRITICAL INQUIRY INTO BEHAVIORAL PATTERNS IN MISSION AND MINISTRY CONTEXTS

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Abstract

Behavior in mission and ministry settings shapes the credibility, effectiveness, and sustainability of Christian witness. Despite professing shared theological beliefs, adult Christians in ministry display markedly divergent conduct, ranging from sacrificial service and moral integrity to conflict, apathy, and ethical inconsistency. Existing scholarship offers substantial but largely separate accounts of this divergence: psychological and sociological literature explains it through group belonging and identity processes, while theological literature explains it through the depth of conversion and spiritual formation. These accounts are rarely brought into sustained analytical conversation with one another, and this gap is even less examined with specific attention to African ecclesial settings, where multiple ethnic, denominational, and national identities intersect with a professed "in-Christ" identity. This article addresses that integrative and contextual gap through a conceptual, critical, literature-based study that develops an explicit synthesis of Social Identity Theory and a Christian theological anthropology of identity, sin, and transformation, and applies this synthesis to interpret behavioral patterns documented in the reviewed literature on mission and ministry, with particular reference to African contexts represented in that literature. Drawing on theological, psychological, sociological, and missiological scholarship, the analysis indicates that behavioral consistency or inconsistency among professing Christians is best explained not by doctrinal assent alone but by the degree to which an "in-Christ" identity is internalized relative to competing social identities, and by whether the group dynamics documented in the Social Identity Theory literature are engaged theologically as sites of ongoing

conversion rather than treated as morally neutral. The African scholarship reviewed indicates that this dynamic takes contextually specific forms—for example, in the negotiation of ethnic and denominational belonging within Reformed and Adventist ecclesial settings in South Africa, and in ministry to marginalized or incarcerated populations—rather than constituting a single, homogeneous "African" pattern. The article's principal contribution is an integrative conceptual framework linking social-psychological and theological explanations of ministry behavior, offered as a resource for discipleship, leadership formation, and organizational reflection in mission and ministry practice.

Keywords: *Behavioral Patterns, Social Identity Theory, Theological Anthropology, Mission and Ministry, Christian Identity, African Christianity, Conversion*

INTRODUCTION

Scholarship on religion and identity has established, with considerable empirical support, that religious affiliation functions as a social identity: it supplies believers with self-concept, moral norms, and a sense of belonging, and it shapes behavior toward both fellow believers and outsiders.[1] A parallel and largely separate body of theological literature, much of it engaging Ellen G. White's writings on Christian character, has long observed that professed belief does not reliably predict consistent conduct, attributing the gap to incomplete conversion and unformed character rather than to social-psychological process.[2] Missiological scholarship has documented how discipleship and identity negotiation occur specifically under conditions of social conflict and competing organizational motives,[3] and African theologians have begun to theorize how a

[1] Jieyi Hu and Chau-kiu Cheung, "Social Identity and Social Integration: A Meta-Analysis Exploring the Relationship between Social Identity and Social Integration," Frontiers in Psychology (Frontiers Media, April 4, 2024), accessed October 2025, https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2024.1361163; Renate Ysseldyk, Kimberly Matheson, and Hymie Anisman, "Religiosity as Identity: Toward an Understanding of Religion From a Social Identity Perspective," Personality and Social Psychology Review 14, no. 1 (January 19, 2010): 60, accessed March 2026, https://doi.org/10.1177/1088868309349693; Emily A. Greenfield and Nadine F. Marks, "Religious Social Identity as an Explanatory Factor for Associations Between More Frequent Formal Religious Participation and Psychological Well-Being," International Journal for the Psychology of Religion 17, no. 3 (July 20, 2007): 245, accessed November 2025, https://doi.org/10.1080/10508610701402309.

[2] Ellen Gold White, Christ's Object Lessons (U.S.A.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1941), 99-100; Ellen Gold White, Steps to Christ (Mountain View, California: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1969), 23.

[3] Kenneth Nehrbass and David Robert Dunaetz, "A Multiple Motives Theory of Church and Missionary Relationships," Missiology An International Review 46, no. 4 (October 1, 2018): 388, accessed September

superordinate "in-Christ" identity interacts with the ethnic, denominational, and national identities that structure much of African ecclesial life.[4]

What remains inadequately understood is how these three bodies of literature—social-psychological, theological, and missiological—relate to one another analytically. Social Identity Theory offers a well-developed account of the mechanisms by which group belonging shapes behavior, but it is largely silent on the moral and spiritual content of that behavior: it can explain why identity threat provokes defensiveness, but not why a professing Christian's defensiveness constitutes a failure of Christian character. Theological anthropology, conversely, supplies a normative account of sin, conversion, and transformation but has rarely been brought into sustained conversation with the conceptual apparatus of social identity research in a way that specifies how the two levels of explanation interact. This absence of integration is compounded, in the literature reviewed for this study, by uneven engagement with African mission and ministry contexts: African theological scholarship on identity and Christian community exists and is substantial,[5] but it is not yet systematically connected to the Social Identity Theory literature that dominates the psychological study of religious group behavior.

This article therefore investigates the following problem: how can Social Identity Theory and a Christian theological anthropology of identity, sin, and transformation be integrated into a single interpretive framework capable of explaining the persistent gap between professed Christian belief and observed conduct among adult Christians in mission and ministry contexts, and what does the application of this framework to the reviewed

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2025, https://doi.org/10.1177/0091829618798335; Craig Ott, "From Conformity to Transformation: Discipleship and Identity in the Context of Social Conflict," Missiology An International Review 51, no. 4 (August 8, 2023): 361, accessed November 2025, https://doi.org/10.1177/00918296231194372.

[4] Philip La Grange Du Toit, "Rethinking Identity Theory in Light of the In-Christ Identity in the African Context," HTS Teologiese Studies / Theological Studies 80, no. 1 (February 16, 2024), accessed October 2025, https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v80i1.8914.

[5] Philip La Grange Du Toit, "Rethinking Identity Theory in Light of the In-Christ Identity in the African Context," HTS Teologiese Studies / Theological Studies 80, no. 1 (February 16, 2024), accessed October 2025, https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v80i1.8914; Louise Kretzschmar, "African and Western Approaches to the Moral Formation of Christian Leaders: The Role of Spiritual Disciplines in Counteracting Moral Deficiencies," HTS Teologiese Studies / Theological Studies 76, no. 2 (May 10, 2020), accessed October 2025, https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v76i2.5913; Christopher Magezi, "Migration of God's People as an Opportunity to Learn and Understand God within the Migrant Context: A Perspective from the Books of Leviticus and Acts," in Reformed Theology in Africa Series, 2021, 47, accessed October 2025, https://doi.org/10.4102/aosis.2020.bk219.02.

literature suggest about the specific, non-uniform ways this dynamic is expressed in the African ecclesial settings represented in that literature?

Several distinctions organize the inquiry that follows. The claim that professed belief does not guarantee consistent conduct is treated here as an assumption with which the study begins, supported both by long-standing theological observation and by findings reported in the psychology-of-religion literature. The proposition that religious group belonging shapes behavior through identifiable social-psychological mechanisms is treated as an established finding of prior scholarship on which this article relies rather than which it tests. What remains genuinely open, and what this article investigates through critical synthesis rather than new data collection, is how these established findings relate to one another across disciplinary boundaries, and what interpretive framework can hold them together without collapsing theological claims into empirical ones, or the reverse.

Accordingly, the study pursues five objectives: (1) to define Social Identity Theory and a Christian theological anthropology of identity precisely enough to compare them; (2) to develop an explicit integrative framework linking the two; (3) to synthesize interdisciplinary literature on the determinants of behavioral consistency and inconsistency among professing Christians in mission and ministry; (4) to examine how this integrative framework illuminates the African mission and ministry literature reviewed; and (5) to identify implications for discipleship, leadership formation, and organizational practice. The article's contribution lies in an integrative conceptual framework not previously articulated in this combination in the literature reviewed, together with a contextually disciplined application of that framework to African ministry settings that does not treat "the African context" as a single undifferentiated reality.

Theoretical Framework

Two frameworks anchor the analysis that follows: Social Identity Theory, drawn from social psychology, and a Christian theological anthropology of identity, drawn primarily from Seventh-day Adventist theological sources and supplemented by broader evangelical and African theological scholarship. Each is defined below, followed by an account of how the two are integrated in this study and where their explanatory reach diverges.

Social Identity Theory. As applied in the literature reviewed here, Social Identity Theory holds that individuals derive part of their self-concept from perceived membership in social groups, through self-categorization into a group, identification with that group's values and emotional significance, and comparison between one's own group and relevant out-groups.[6] Applied to religious affiliation, this framework explains how belonging to a faith community supplies believers with moral norms, existential meaning, and a basis for self-esteem,[7] while also accounting for in-group favoritism and out-group differentiation, including forms of religious ethnocentrism documented in the literature.[8] An individual's religious identity is further reported to moderate the expression of behavior, reinforcing shared moral norms and internalized religious values.[9] A central implication for this study is that most adult Christians hold multiple social identities simultaneously—denominational, ethnic, national, familial, and professional—of which a professed "in-Christ" identity is one, and that behavior is shaped by which identity is salient in a given context and by the degree of integration or conflict among them.[10]

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[6] Peng Ren and Wei Ying Chong, "Shared Social Identities, Collaboration and Social Identity Theory: A Literature Review," Journal of Business and Social Sciences 2023, no. 1 (September 1, 2023), accessed November 2025, https://doi.org/10.61453/jobss.v2023no08; Emily A. Greenfield and Nadine F. Marks, "Religious Social Identity as an Explanatory Factor for Associations Between More Frequent Formal Religious Participation and Psychological Well-Being," International Journal for the Psychology of Religion 17, no. 3 (July 20, 2007): 245, accessed November 2025, https://doi.org/10.1080/10508610701402309.

[7] Bekir EMİROĞLU, "Construction of Social Identity and Religion," International Journal Of Eurasia Social Sciences 11, no. 39 (January 1, 2020): 92, accessed November 2025, https://doi.org/10.35826/ijoess.2699; Pamela Ebstyne King, "Religion and Identity: The Role of Ideological, Social, and Spiritual Contexts," Applied Developmental Science 7, no. 3 (July 1, 2003): 197, accessed November 2025, https://doi.org/10.1207/s1532480xads0703_11.

[8] Paul Vermeer, "Religion, Ethnocentrism and Islamophobia: The Case of Dutch Evangelicals," Ethnic and Racial Studies (December 11, 2024): 1, accessed November 2025, https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2024.2437118; Daniëlle Leder, W. van der Vaart, and Anja Machielse, "The Impact of Religious Identity on Intergroup Encounters," Archive for the Psychology of Religion (April 3, 2025), accessed March 2026, https://doi.org/10.1177/00846724251329350.

[9] Homer J. Yabut et al., "Faith in Action: The Moderating Role of Religious Identity in the Link Between Prayer and Prosocial Behavior," Religions 17, no. 3 (February 27, 2026): 298, accessed February 2026, https://doi.org/10.3390/rel17030298.

[10] Philip La Grange Du Toit, "Rethinking Identity Theory in Light of the In-Christ Identity in the African Context," HTS Teologiese Studies / Theological Studies 80, no. 1 (February 16, 2024), accessed October 2025, https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v80i1.8914; Brett R. Smith et al., "Trying to Serve Two Masters Is Easy, Compared to Three: Identity Multiplicity Work by Christian Impact Investors," Journal of Business Ethics 179, no. 4 (June 3, 2022): 1053, accessed October 2025, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-022-05156-4.

Theological Anthropology. This study draws its theological anthropology primarily from Seventh-day Adventist theological sources, chiefly the writings of Ellen G. White, read alongside contemporary African and evangelical theological scholarship on identity and conversion. On this account, human identity is created for relationship with God and community but is marred in its actual expression by a self-orientation that White describes as "the same love of self, the same selfish indulgence" observable even among those who profess belief.[11] Genuine conversion, in this framework, is not primarily intellectual assent to doctrine but a decisive turning from self-orientation, effected by the Holy Spirit, that reorders the convert's identity around Christ and issues in changed conduct.[12] This transformed identity is corporate rather than merely individual: it incorporates the believer into a community—the body of Christ—whose belonging relativizes, without erasing, prior ethnic, national, and social identities.[13] Character, on this view, is formed deliberately and continuously through spiritual practice rather than acquired automatically at conversion, and is properly understood as the outworking, in daily conduct, of the extent to which this new identity has actually displaced the believer's prior self-orientation.[14] Theological-psychological integration of this kind has itself become an object of scholarly reflection specifically in relation to church-based practice, which supports treating theological

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[11] Ellen Gold White, Christ's Object Lessons (U.S.A.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1941), 99-100.

[12] Ellen Gold White, Steps to Christ (Mountain View, California: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1969), 23; Ellen Gold White, Evangelism (U.S.A.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1946), 286-289.

[13] Philip La Grange Du Toit, "Rethinking Identity Theory in Light of the In-Christ Identity in the African Context," HTS Teologiese Studies / Theological Studies 80, no. 1 (February 16, 2024), accessed October 2025, https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v80i1.8914; Albert J. Coetsee, "'Love Thy Sojourner (by Integrating Them)': Ethical Perspectives from the Pentateuch," in Reformed Theology in Africa Series, 2021, 15, accessed October 2025, https://doi.org/10.4102/aosis.2020.bk219.01; Christopher Magezi, "Migration of God's People as an Opportunity to Learn and Understand God within the Migrant Context: A Perspective from the Books of Leviticus and Acts," in Reformed Theology in Africa Series, 2021, 47, accessed October 2025, https://doi.org/10.4102/aosis.2020.bk219.02.

[14] Victoria Martinez Tejada, "La Formación del Carácter en el Pensamiento de Elena G. de White: Una Perspectiva de Educación Integral," Apuntes Universitarios 9, no. 2 (March 29, 2019), accessed January 2025, https://doi.org/10.17162/au.v9i2.359; Ellen Gold White, Counsels to Parents, Teachers, and Students Regarding Christian Education, 514, accessed February 1926, https://m.egwwritings.org/en/book/23.2514.

anthropology as a framework amenable to this kind of interdisciplinary application rather than as a self-contained doctrinal system.[15]

Integration. Social Identity Theory and this theological anthropology operate at different explanatory levels, and the framework developed here treats them as complementary rather than competing. Social Identity Theory supplies a descriptive account of the mechanism by which group belonging becomes behaviorally consequential: categorization into a group, identification with its norms, and comparison with out-groups. Theological anthropology supplies a normative and diagnostic account of why that mechanism so often produces conduct inconsistent with professed belief—namely, that the self-orientation Social Identity Theory does not evaluate morally is, on the theological account, precisely what conversion addresses—together with a transformative resource, regeneration and ongoing sanctification, that a social-psychological theory does not purport to supply. Read together, the two frameworks suggest an interpretive sequence in which group belonging and categorization (the social-psychological layer) intersect with the depth of an internalized "in-Christ" identity relative to competing social identities (the point at which the two layers meet) to produce observable behavior that a purely doctrinal account cannot adequately explain, and that a purely social-psychological account cannot adequately evaluate.

This integration has limits that the analysis below observes throughout. Social Identity Theory cannot account for regeneration, nor can it normatively distinguish sin from mere deviation from group norms; its explanatory reach is descriptive and mechanistic. Theological anthropology, in turn, is not well-suited to explaining the specific empirical patterns documented in the social-psychological literature—for instance, why identity threat reliably provokes defensive out-group derogation across widely different group contexts[16]—since it operates at the level of ultimate rather than proximate causation. The

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[15] Gideon Ngi Nganyu, "Theological and Psychological Integration in Christian Psychotherapy: A Critical Review of the Literature and Implications for Church-Based Practice," Greener Journal of Social Sciences 15, no. 1 (January 31, 2025): 75, accessed March 2026, https://doi.org/10.15580/gjss.2025.1.022525031.
[16] Daniëlle Leder, W. van der Vaart, and Anja Machielse, "The Impact of Religious Identity on Intergroup Encounters," Archive for the Psychology of Religion (April 3, 2025), accessed March 2026, https://doi.org/10.1177/00846724251329350; Chetan Khadka, "Social Identity Theory and Group Behavior," TUTA Journal (November 30, 2024): 105, accessed November 2025, https://doi.org/10.3126/tutaj.v12i1.74063.

framework therefore does not claim to reduce one account to the other; it claims only that reading them together illuminates behavioral patterns that neither, taken alone, fully explains.

Literature Review

Building on the framework outlined above, this section synthesizes literature bearing on why professing Christians who share doctrinal commitments nonetheless behave differently, and on what is currently known about this question in African mission and ministry settings.

Group membership shapes how individuals perceive themselves and others, fostering behavior aligned with group norms and doctrinal commitments, but also in-group favoritism and, at times, out-group derogation, such that religiously motivated behavior can manifest as compassionate outreach in one context and exclusionary practice in another.[17] A mature Christian's behavior—exemplary or problematic—depends substantially on how far an internalized "in-Christ" identity harmonizes or conflicts with other social identities, a dynamic that affects ethical decision-making and spiritual discipline.[18] Allport's classic description of psychologically mature religion as cognitively open and able to integrate feedback into one's belief system remains a useful heuristic for how such integration occurs.[19]

This robust sense of social identity, amplified by religious affiliation, shapes self-perception and governs engagement with believers and outsiders alike, and is further

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[17] Daniëlle Leder, W. van der Vaart, and Anja Machielse, "The Impact of Religious Identity on Intergroup Encounters," Archive for the Psychology of Religion (April 3, 2025), accessed March 2026, https://doi.org/10.1177/00846724251329350; Paul Vermeer, "Religion, Ethnocentrism and Islamophobia: The Case of Dutch Evangelicals," Ethnic and Racial Studies (December 11, 2024): 1, accessed November 2025, https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2024.2437118.

[18] Albert J. Coetsee, "'Love Thy Sojourner (by Integrating Them)': Ethical Perspectives from the Pentateuch," in Reformed Theology in Africa Series, 2021, 15, accessed October 2025, https://doi.org/10.4102/aosis.2020.bk219.01; Brett R. Smith et al., "Trying to Serve Two Masters Is Easy, Compared to Three: Identity Multiplicity Work by Christian Impact Investors," Journal of Business Ethics 179, no. 4 (June 3, 2022): 1053, accessed October 2025, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-022-05156-4.

[19] Angela Watson, Emily Goodwin, and C. Lambert Michael, "Subjective Well-Being and Religious Ego Identity Development in Conservative Christian University Students," Journal of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning for Christians in Higher Education (May 17, 2021): 64, accessed October 2025, https://doi.org/10.31380/sotlched.11.1.64.

shaped by an individual's internal representation of God—their "God image" and "God concept."[20] Alignment or misalignment between an individual's God image and their observed conduct and faith teaching bears directly on spiritual identity development, so that actions either reflect divine attributes or manifest as conflict.[21] Internalizing group norms and goals is reported to correlate with greater loyalty and cooperation, yet can also intensify intergroup conflict when group identity is threatened.[22]

Ellen G. White scholarship engaged in this study's literature search does not converge on a single interpretive emphasis, and broad claims about the field's overall focus should be read with caution given the limited corpus reviewed here. Within the sources examined, one identifiable strand applies White's theological framework to institutional and organizational questions, such as total quality management in Adventist educational administration,[23] while another examines her account of character formation as a resource for integral education.[24] Read alongside her own devotional and pastoral writings on conversion and spiritual discipline,[25] this literature suggests that White's corpus offers more sustained resources for character formation and behavioral consistency than the organizational and educational applications so far explored in the secondary literature reviewed here have drawn out—a gap this article's theoretical framework seeks partly to

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[20] Edward B. Davis, Glendon L. Moriarty, and Joseph C. Mauch, "God Images and God Concepts: Definitions, Development, and Dynamics," Psychology of Religion and Spirituality 5, no. 1 (August 6, 2012): 51, accessed November 2025, https://doi.org/10.1037/a0029289; Xiaoyan Fan, "Interaction, Mindset, and Order: A Qualitative Study on Christian Fellowship," Heliyon 10, no. 5 (March 1, 2024), accessed February 2026, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2024.e27670.

[21] Justin Poll and Timothy B. Smith, "The Spiritual Self: Toward a Conceptualization of Spiritual Identity Development," Journal of Psychology and Theology 31, no. 2 (June 1, 2003): 129, accessed October 2025, https://doi.org/10.1177/009164710303100204.

[22] Chetan Khadka, "Social Identity Theory and Group Behavior," TUTA Journal (November 30, 2024): 105, accessed November 2025, https://doi.org/10.3126/tutaj.v12i1.74063.

[23] Christar Arstilo Rumbay et al., "A Holistic Approach of Ellen White in Christian Education Organization Concerning Total Quality Management," Polyglot Jurnal Ilmiah 17, no. 2 (July 30, 2021): 174, accessed March 2025, https://doi.org/10.19166/pji.v17i2.3391.

[24] Victoria Martinez Tejada, "La Formación del Carácter en el Pensamiento de Elena G. de White: Una Perspectiva de Educación Integral," Apuntes Universitarios 9, no. 2 (March 29, 2019), accessed January 2025, https://doi.org/10.17162/au.v9i2.359.

[25] Ellen Gold White, Steps to Christ (Mountain View, California: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1969), 23; Ellen Gold White, Evangelism (U.S.A.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1946), 286-289; Ellen Gold White, Counsels to Parents, Teachers, and Students Regarding Christian Education, 514, accessed February 1926, https://m.egwwritings.org/en/book/23.2514.

address. White's own diagnosis of behavioral inconsistency among professed believers is direct:

> Often the question arises, Why, then, are there so many, claiming to believe God's Word, in whom there is not seen a reformation in words, in spirit, and in character? Why are there so many who cannot bear opposition to their purposes and plans, who manifest an unholy temper, and whose words are harsh, overbearing, and passionate? There is seen in their lives the same love of self, the same selfish indulgence, the same temper and hasty speech, that is seen in the life of the worldling. There is the same sensitive pride, the same yielding to natural inclination, the same perversity of character, as if the truth were wholly unknown to them. The reason is that they are not converted. They have not hidden the leaven of truth in the heart. It has not had opportunity to do its work. Their natural and cultivated tendencies to evil have not been submitted to its transforming power. Their lives reveal the absence of the grace of Christ, an unbelief in His power to transform the character.

She attributes such inconsistency not to doctrinal ignorance but to incomplete conversion, a theological diagnosis that anticipates, in different terms, the identity-integration mechanism developed in the framework above. Her perspectives inform pedagogical approaches addressing the disjunction between belief and action.[26] White argues that uneducated, unrefined individuals are ill-equipped to confront sophisticated error, underscoring the need for holistic education integrating scientific and scriptural truth,[27] including character transformation through the indwelling Holy Spirit as essential for overcoming temptation and developing self-control.[28] Character formation, she stresses, is deliberate and continuous rather than automatic, requiring active pursuit of spiritual growth

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[26] Fernando García, "Theological Reflection in Adolescent Faith Formation," Journal of Youth and Theology 22, no. 2 (April 7, 2023): 303, accessed November 2025, https://doi.org/10.1163/24055093-bja10048.

[27] Ellen Gold White, Counsels to Parents, Teachers, and Students Regarding Christian Education, 514, accessed February 1926, https://m.egwwritings.org/en/book/23.2514.

[28] Geoffrey P. Lantos, "How Christian Character Education Can Help Overcome the Failure of Secular Ethics Education," The Journal of Biblical Integration in Business 8, no. 1 (December 31, 1969), accessed September 2025, https://doi.org/10.69492/jbib.v8i1.361.

manifest in practical morality.[29] What transforms individuals and equips them for complex moral challenges, on her account, is experiential faith marked by joy and love rather than rigid legalism,[30] and a pedagogical framework informed by this integration of spiritual and intellectual development may prove instrumental in cultivating ethical maturity among adult Christians.[31]

Social Learning, Vocational Formation, and Identity Integration. Beyond intergroup dynamics, the literature reviewed identifies social learning and vocational processes as further mechanisms shaping the internalization this study treats as central. Reinforcement processes within intentional church communities are reported to contribute to shared narratives and internalized group norms, solidified through socialization and social reinforcement,[32] a pattern of observational modeling within authoritative community structures reported to shape spiritual identity development and the expression of Christian faith more broadly.[33] Comparable identity-formation patterns are reported outside Christian contexts, for instance in studies of Islamic religious identification, suggesting that the underlying social-identification mechanism is not specific to Christianity even where its theological content is.[34]

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[29] Victoria Martinez Tejada, "La Formación del Carácter en el Pensamiento de Elena G. de White: Una Perspectiva de Educación Integral," Apuntes Universitarios 9, no. 2 (March 29, 2019), accessed January 2025, https://doi.org/10.17162/au.v9i2.359.

[30] Arndt Büssing, Lorethy Starck, and Klaus van Treeck, "Experience of Spiritual Dryness and Acedia Symptoms in Seventh-Day Adventists," Journal of Religion and Health 60, no. 2 (November 2, 2020): 1261, accessed October 2025, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10943-020-01092-7.

[31] Alan Parker, "Discipleship as Means to Reinvent Higher Education" 2, no. 1 (January 1, 2017): 10, accessed November 2025, https://knowledge.e.southern.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1079&context=jbffl; Christar Arstilo Rumbay et al., "A Holistic Approach of Ellen White in Christian Education Organization Concerning Total Quality Management," Polyglot Jurnal Ilmiah 17, no. 2 (July 30, 2021): 174, accessed March 2025, https://doi.org/10.19166/pji.v17i2.3391.

[32] Nikolitsa Grigoropoulou, "Discussing God: The Effect of (Ir)Religious Identities on Topic-Sentiment Polarization in Online Debates," Review of Religious Research 62, no. 4 (August 30, 2020): 533, accessed October 2025, https://doi.org/10.1007/s13644-020-00425-y; Janet B. Dean, Stephen P. Stratton, and Mark A. Yarhouse, "Becoming an Intentional Church Community: Relationships, Security, and Discipleship in Sexual Identity and Faith Development," Christian Education Journal Research on Educational Ministry 18, no. 2 (August 31, 2020): 232, accessed November 2025, https://doi.org/10.1177/0739891320948882.

[33] Kathleen Beagles, "The Validity of the Growing Disciples in Community Model Among Adolescents in Seventh-Day Adventist Schools in North America," 2009, accessed October 2025, https://doi.org/10.32597/dissertations/220/.

[34] Nor Faridah Mat Nong et al., "Relationship between Islamic Identity, Spirituality and Religiosity in Social Identification," International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences 12, no. 6 (June 13, 2022), accessed November 2025, https://doi.org/10.6007/ijarbss/v12-i6/13915.

Vocational and developmental transitions constitute a further site where identity integration is reported to occur. Feenstra and Brouwer report associations between Christian vocational identity status, college adjustment, and spirituality among emerging adults, indicating that vocational coherence—the alignment of personal calling with religious identity—is itself a developmental achievement rather than a fixed doctrinal given.[35] This maturational process, often described in the literature as involving deepening faith through intentional spiritual practice during the transition to adulthood, is reported to distinguish those who internalize their beliefs from those whose participation remains largely superficial or externally motivated,[36] a distinction this study treats as central to understanding the sustainability of behavioral patterns among adult Christians in ministry.

African Mission and Ministry Contexts. The literature reviewed for this study includes a body of African theological scholarship directly relevant to the integrative framework developed above, though this scholarship should not be read as describing a single, homogeneous African experience of Christian identity and behavior. Writing from a South African Reformed theological context, Du Toit argues that the "in-Christ" identity described in Pauline theology must be rethought in light of the ethnic and social plurality of African congregations, where a superordinate Christian identity coexists with, rather than replaces, strong ethnic and national identities—a formulation that anticipates directly the identity-integration mechanism proposed in this article's theoretical framework.[37] Writing from the same South African academic context, Kretzschmar identifies spiritual disciplines as a corrective to recurring moral deficiencies among Christian leaders, comparing African and Western approaches to moral formation and cautioning against treating either as self-sufficient;[38] elsewhere she engages a secular "global ethic" proposal

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[35] Jennifer S. Feenstra and Amanda M. Brouwer, "Christian Vocation: Defining Relations with Identity Status, College Adjustment, and Spirituality," Journal of Psychology and Theology 36, no. 2 (June 1, 2008): 83, accessed November 2025, https://doi.org/10.1177/009164710803600201.
[36] Roger C. S. Erdvig, "A Model for Biblical Worldview Development in Evangelical Christian Emerging Adults," Journal of Research on Christian Education 29, no. 3 (September 1, 2020): 285, accessed January 2025, https://doi.org/10.1080/10656219.2020.1816517.
[37] Philip La Grange Du Toit, "Rethinking Identity Theory in Light of the In-Christ Identity in the African Context," HTS Teologiese Studies / Theological Studies 80, no. 1 (February 16, 2024), accessed October 2025, https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v80i1.8914.
[38] Louise Kretzschmar, "African and Western Approaches to the Moral Formation of Christian Leaders: The Role of Spiritual Disciplines in Counteracting Moral Deficiencies," HTS Teologiese Studies /

from a specifically Christian theological standpoint, illustrating the kind of critical, comparative engagement this study's framework calls for.[39] Magezi, drawing on the Pentateuch and Acts, theorizes migrant identity as a site where belonging to God's people is negotiated across cultural boundaries, a theme with direct relevance to African ministry contexts shaped by internal and cross-border migration;[40] Coetsee's related reading of Pentateuchal ethics regarding the sojourner reinforces the theological priority of integrating rather than excluding the socially marginal.[41]

Beyond this South African academic literature, the reviewed corpus includes contextual studies from other African settings that resist generalization into a single pattern. Landman, Ncongwane, and Pieterse's study of religious identity and behavioral change among incarcerated men at South Africa's Zonderwater Correctional Centre indicates that identity-transformation dynamics operate distinctly under conditions of confinement and social marginalization, a context markedly different from the congregational and denominational settings addressed by Du Toit and Kretzschmar.[42] Joyan's study of religious upbringing and moral development among adolescents in Malawi and Khalil's analysis of religion, secularism, and social identity in Egypt further indicate that the relationship between religious identity and behavior takes different forms across African national and religious contexts, shaped by distinct social structures, denominational traditions, and, in Khalil's case, a religiously plural society in which Christian identity is negotiated alongside a large Muslim population.[43] Within specifically Adventist ministry settings, reflections on the

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Theological Studies 76, no. 2 (May 10, 2020), accessed October 2025, https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v76i2.5913.

[39] Louise Kretzschmar, "Convergence and Divergence: A Christian Response to Prozesky's 'Global Ethic' and Secular Spirituality," Journal for the Study of Religion 31, no. 1 (January 1, 2018): 112, accessed June 2025, https://doi.org/10.17159/2413-3027/2018/v31n1a7.

[40] Christopher Magezi, "Migration of God's People as an Opportunity to Learn and Understand God within the Migrant Context: A Perspective from the Books of Leviticus and Acts," in Reformed Theology in Africa Series, 2021, 47, accessed October 2025, https://doi.org/10.4102/aosis.2020.bk219.02.

[41] Albert J. Coetsee, "'Love Thy Sojourner (by Integrating Them)': Ethical Perspectives from the Pentateuch," in Reformed Theology in Africa Series, 2021, 15, accessed October 2025, https://doi.org/10.4102/aosis.2020.bk219.01.

[42] Christina Landman, Harold J. Ncongwane, and Tanya Pieterse, "Men Serving Long-Term Sentences in Zonderwater Correctional Centre, South Africa: Religious Identity and Behavioural Change," HTS Teologiese Studies / Theological Studies 75, no. 3 (February 27, 2019), accessed October 2025, https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v75i3.5274.

[43] Steve Joyan, "Effect of Religious Upbringing on Moral Development in Adolescents in Malawi," RePEc: Research Papers in Economics (n.d.), accessed February 2026,

career youth pastor and on the relationship between science, faith, and youth ministry—both published in the same South African theological journal that carries Du Toit's and Kretzschmar's work—indicate a developing, denominationally specific literature on ministry practice in African contexts that engages identity and formation questions without positioning itself as representative of African Christianity as a whole.[44] Taken together, this literature supports treating African mission and ministry contexts as internally diverse along denominational, national, and social lines, even as several of its central theological contributions—particularly Du Toit's account of in-Christ identity—align closely with the integrative framework this article develops.

Methodology

This study is a conceptual, critical, and interdisciplinary literature-based inquiry. It does not collect or analyze primary empirical data; rather, it synthesizes existing theological, psychological, sociological, and missiological scholarship to develop and apply the integrative interpretive framework set out above. This design is appropriate to the research problem because the problem is one of theoretical integration—bringing separate bodies of scholarship into analytical relationship with one another—rather than one requiring new measurement of behavior, attitudes, or outcomes.

Source selection. Sources examined for this study fall into five overlapping categories: (a) peer-reviewed literature on Social Identity Theory and its application to religious groups; (b) theological literature on Christian identity, conversion, and character formation, including the writings of Ellen G. White and secondary scholarship engaging them; (c) missiological literature on discipleship, identity, and conflict in ministry contexts; (d) African theological and social-scientific scholarship on Christian identity, ministry, and

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https://ajpojournals.org/journals/EJPCR/article/view/2291/2953; Hossam Khalil, "Role of Religion and Secularism in Shaping Social Values, Norms and Identities in Various Societies and Communities in Egypt," International Journal of Sociology 8, no. 1 (February 21, 2024): 40, accessed October 2025, https://doi.org/10.47604/ijs.2332.

[44] Garth Aziz, Malan Nel, and Ronnie H. Davis, "The Career Youth Pastor: A Contemporary Reflection," HTS Teologiese Studies / Theological Studies 73, no. 2 (February 16, 2017), accessed October 2025, https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v73i2.3856; Shantelle Weber and Brandon Weber, "'In the Beginning God Created the Heavens and the Earth': What Do Science and Faith Have to Do with Youth Ministry?," HTS Teologiese Studies / Theological Studies 76, no. 2 (October 8, 2021), accessed October 2025, https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v76i2.6834.

behavior; and (e) broader psychology-of-religion literature on the relationship between religious identity, internalization, and behavioral or ethical outcomes.

Inclusion and exclusion criteria. Sources were included where they directly addressed the relationship between religious or social identity and behavior, character, or ethical conduct in a Christian or comparable religious context, and where they appeared in peer-reviewed journals, university presses, or comparable scholarly venues. Sources were excluded, or their use in the article reconsidered, where their subject matter did not directly bear on the specific claim they were cited to support—the revision process undertaken for this article identified and corrected one such case, discussed in the Revision Audit below—and where bibliographic details could not be independently verified, in which case the relevant claim was qualified rather than the source silently retained. Priority was given, within the theological and African-contextual categories, to sources appearing in identifiable, indexed theological and social-science journals over dissertations and unpublished repository material, though several dissertations are retained where they supply otherwise unavailable denominational or contextual detail.

Corpus boundaries. The corpus is disciplinarily bounded to theology (chiefly Seventh-day Adventist and broader evangelical and Reformed sources), the psychology of religion, the sociology of religion, and missiology; it does not draw on developmental or clinical psychology beyond its application to religious identity. Geographically, the corpus is global in the psychological and sociological literature reviewed but is explicitly bounded, for its African contextual claims, to the specific studies identified in the Literature Review—South Africa, Malawi, and Egypt—and the article restricts its African claims to what these specific sources support rather than extending them to the continent as a whole. Theologically, the corpus centers on Ellen G. White's writings as the primary theological source, read alongside secondary literature engaging them and supplemented by non-Adventist evangelical and Reformed African theological scholarship where it bears directly on identity and conversion. Historically, the corpus is bounded to contemporary scholarship, predominantly the last two decades, with White's primary writings—originally published in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—as the principal historical exception.

Analytical procedure. The literature was analyzed through an iterative process of thematic identification and cross-disciplinary comparison. Recurring themes—identity multiplicity, internalization versus superficial adherence, in-group and out-group dynamics, conversion and character formation, and contextual variation in African settings—were first identified within each disciplinary body of literature independently. These themes were then compared across disciplines to identify points of convergence (for example, both the psychological internalization literature and White's account of conversion treat depth of internalization, rather than mere doctrinal assent, as the operative variable in behavioral consistency) and points where one discipline addressed a question the other did not (for example, the mechanism of identity threat and out-group derogation, addressed in the Social Identity Theory literature but not directly theorized in the theological sources reviewed). The integrative framework presented above was developed from this comparative process; the findings and discussion that follow apply that framework to interpret, rather than statistically test, the literature synthesized.

Findings

The literature reviewed indicates that the depth of religious internalization—the extent to which doctrinal content has been integrated into personal conviction rather than merely professed—functions across the psychological, sociological, and theological sources reviewed as a central variable in behavioral consistency. Several of the studies reviewed report empirical associations between the stage or depth of an individual's religious development and reported behavioral or ethical outcomes: a community-based measure of spiritual development reports associations between advancing faith maturity and more consistent, ethically aligned conduct,[45] and identity commitment and identity style are reported to predict religiosity, indicating that cognitive and emotional investment in religious identity sustains engagement with spiritual practice.[46] Where such associations are reported in the cited empirical literature, they are attributed here to that literature rather

[45] Dennis K. Orthner, "Assessing Spiritual Development: Reflections on Building a Community Measure," Journal of Spiritual Formation and Soul Care 14, no. 2 (August 12, 2021): 198, accessed October 2025, https://doi.org/10.1177/19397909211036138.
[46] Tevni Grajales and Brittany Sommers, "Identity Styles and Religiosity: Examining the Role of Identity Commitment," Journal of Research on Christian Education 25, no. 2 (May 3, 2016): 188, accessed February 2026, https://doi.org/10.1080/10656219.2016.1191394.

than presented as findings generated by the present study, which conducted no independent measurement or statistical analysis.

Read together with the theoretical framework developed above, the literature synthesized here suggests that internalized faith commitment, as distinct from unresolved religious questioning, functions as a stronger predictor of spiritual well-being and resilience than external religious practice alone.[47] Individuals who report having internalized their beliefs are also reported, in the sources reviewed, to draw on faith as a guiding principle for daily ethical decisions and to exhibit closer alignment between religious orientation and reported behavior.[48] This intrinsic orientation is associated in the reviewed literature with higher psychosocial adjustment and interpersonal satisfaction.[49] The literature synthesis further indicates—consistent with the theological anthropology developed above, in which internalization is not intellectual assent but a transformation reordering the whole person—that a well-integrated moral identity, where reported as fostered through structured formation programs, is associated in the reviewed studies with more consistent ethical conduct.[50]

Discussion

The literature synthesized in this study points to a complex interaction among individual psychological development, theological understanding, and socio-religious context in

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[47] Steven J. Sandage et al., "Student Spiritual Formation Assessment in Theological Education: An Overview of Approaches," Journal of Spiritual Formation and Soul Care (December 18, 2025), accessed March 2026, https://doi.org/10.1177/19397909251400405.
[48] Martinus Parnawa Putranta, "The Attitudes toward Codes of Ethics: Do Cynicism and Religiosity Matters?," Media Ekonomi dan Manajemen 35, no. 1 (January 10, 2020): 128, accessed October 2025, https://doi.org/10.24856/mem.v35i1.1335.
[49] Angela Watson, Emily Goodwin, and C. Lambert Michael, "Subjective Well-Being and Religious Ego Identity Development in Conservative Christian University Students," Journal of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning for Christians in Higher Education (May 17, 2021): 64, accessed October 2025, https://doi.org/10.31380/sotlched.11.1.64.
[50] Seth Kimani, "The Influence of Religious Beliefs on Social Behavior and Community Cohesion," International Journal of Humanity and Social Sciences 3, no. 3 (July 12, 2024): 60, accessed January 2026, https://doi.org/10.47941/ijhss.2085; Sam A. Hardy and Gustavo Carlo, "Identity as a Source of Moral Motivation," Human Development 48, no. 4 (January 1, 2005): 232, accessed October 2025, https://doi.org/10.1159/000086859.

shaping the behavioral patterns of professing Christians. Several of the studies reviewed treat spiritual maturity not as an abstract theological category but as a construct with reportedly observable behavioral correlates, with more mature individuals in these studies showing closer alignment between stated belief and reported conduct.[51] How individuals reflectively process religious content, several of these studies suggest, may be a more consistent predictor of empathetic and ethical behavior than religious practice alone.[52] The depth of religious internalization functions in the literature reviewed as a moderating variable between professed belief and reported conduct,[53] a relationship reported as deepening through reflection and communal sharing rather than disengagement.[54] This pattern of intrinsic religious motivation contrasts, across the sources reviewed, with extrinsic religiosity, in which faith is reported to serve social or personal utility rather than being fully internalized.[55] Several studies indicate that an extrinsic religious orientation is associated with ethnocentric or prejudiced attitudes absent deeper spiritual commitment,[56] a pattern directly relevant to the in-group and out-group dynamics addressed by Social Identity Theory in the framework above.

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[51] Dennis K. Orthner, "Assessing Spiritual Development: Reflections on Building a Community Measure," Journal of Spiritual Formation and Soul Care 14, no. 2 (August 12, 2021): 198, accessed October 2025, https://doi.org/10.1177/19397909211036138.

[52] Nicolò Maria Iannello et al., "Spirituality and Ethnocultural Empathy among Italian Adolescents: The Mediating Role of Religious Identity Formation Processes," Psychology of Religion and Spirituality 11, no. 1 (November 27, 2017): 32, accessed September 2025, https://doi.org/10.1037/rel0000155.

[53] Daliman Daliman, "Ethical Conduct-Do and General Well-Being among University Students, Moderated by Religious Internalization: An Islamic Perspective," Indigenous Jurnal Ilmiah Psikologi 6, no. 2 (July 31, 2021): 14, accessed October 2025, https://doi.org/10.23917/indigenous.v6i2.14886.

[54] Daniela Villani et al., "The Role of Spirituality and Religiosity in Subjective Well-Being of Individuals With Different Religious Status," Frontiers in Psychology 10 (July 9, 2019): 1525, accessed January 2026, https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2019.01525.

[55] Grace Lew, "A Faith-Integrated Perspective on Academic Motivation," Christian Higher Education 24, no. 5 (October 14, 2025): 415, accessed December 2025, https://doi.org/10.1080/15363759.2025.2562060; Jia Hong-xia, Shahid Iqbal, and Arslan Ayub, "'Entrepreneurship' from the Lens of Enlightenment: Impacts of Religiosity and Spiritual Intelligence on Social Entrepreneurial Intentions," PLoS ONE 18, no. 10 (October 10, 2023), accessed August 2025, https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0285140.

[56] Paul Vermeer, "Religion, Ethnocentrism and Islamophobia: The Case of Dutch Evangelicals," Ethnic and Racial Studies (December 11, 2024): 1, accessed November 2025, https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2024.2437118; Denni Arli, Patrick van Esch, and Yuanyuan Cui, "Who Cares More About the Environment, Those with an Intrinsic, an Extrinsic, a Quest, or an Atheistic Religious Orientation?: Investigating the Effect of Religious Ad Appeals on Attitudes Toward the Environment," Journal of Business Ethics 185, no. 2 (June 18, 2022): 427, accessed October 2025, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-022-05164-4.

Read through the integrative framework developed in this article, these associations suggest—though the literature reviewed does not establish this as a settled causal claim—that maladaptive behavior among professing Christians often reflects a misalignment between an internalized "in-Christ" identity and social identities that remain, in Social Identity Theory's terms, unintegrated or in competition, a misalignment the theological literature attributes to incomplete conversion. Several studies point to the value of moral education and spiritual-formation approaches that prioritize internalization over conformity to external religious norms—though one frequently cited source in this vein addresses the internalization of ethnic cultural heritage rather than religious or spiritual formation specifically, and its applicability to this claim is accordingly flagged for author verification below[57]—and to the cultivation of moral cognition, sensitivity, and a robust, well-integrated moral identity as conditions for consistent ethical practice.[58] An insufficient grasp of moral principles can impede consistent ethical practice even among those claiming spiritual dedication.[59] Organizational and role-related factors compound these dynamics: role differentiation among clergy, and its documented association with pastoral burnout and job satisfaction, indicates that institutional structure itself shapes the behavioral consistency this study's framework addresses, independent of an individual's depth of internalization.[60] Approaches to conflict management within mission organizations—whether oriented toward hierarchical submission or collaborative cooperation—represent a further organizational variable reported to affect ministry behavior and relational outcomes.[61]

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[57] Rusman Rusman et al., "Cultural Heritage and Social Adaptation: The Internalization of Paddisengeng Values by the Bugis-Bone Ethnicity in Masamba Village," SIGn Journal of Social Science 4, no. 1 (November 20, 2023): 52, accessed October 2025, https://doi.org/10.37276/sjss.v4i1.334.
[58] Sara Taravian, Fariborz Nikdel, and Ali Taghvaee nia, "Relationship Between Moral Identity and Effortful Control with Antisocial Behaviors in Adolescence: Examining the Mediating Role of Empathy," Research Square (July 30, 2024), accessed September 2025, https://doi.org/10.21203/rs.3.rs-4813592/v1.
[59] Miftachul Huda and Sultan Salem, "Understanding Human Behavior Development with Spirituality: Critical Insights into Moral Flourishing," ULUMUNA 26, no. 2 (December 28, 2022): 238, accessed October 2025, https://doi.org/10.20414/ujis.v26i2.535.
[60] Thomas V. Frederick et al., "The Effects of Role Differentiation Among Clergy: Impact on Pastoral Burnout and Job Satisfaction," Pastoral Psychology 72, no. 1 (January 6, 2023): 121, accessed October 2025, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11089-022-01052-w.
[61] David Robert Dunaetz, "Submission or Cooperation? Two Competing Approaches to Conflict Management in Mission Organizations" (February 23, 2020), accessed October 2025, https://doi.org/10.31219/osf.io/c5s7y; Craig Ott, "From Conformity to Transformation: Discipleship and

The African literature reviewed above suggests that these dynamics are not context-independent. Kretzschmar's comparative treatment of African and Western approaches to moral formation indicates that spiritual disciplines function as a corrective to moral deficiency in ways shaped by, rather than separable from, the cultural and ecclesial context in which they are practiced,[62] and the diversity documented across the South African, Malawian, and Egyptian sources reviewed here cautions against treating any single formation strategy as uniformly applicable across African ministry settings.

Conclusion

This literature-based inquiry set out to integrate Social Identity Theory and a Christian theological anthropology of identity into a single interpretive framework for understanding behavioral inconsistency among professing Christians in mission and ministry contexts, and to examine what this framework suggests about the specific, non-uniform expressions of this dynamic documented in the African literature reviewed. The synthesis indicates that behavioral consistency is best explained neither by doctrinal content alone nor by social-psychological group dynamics alone, but by the degree to which a professed "in-Christ" identity has been internalized relative to the other social identities—denominational, ethnic, national, and organizational—that adult Christians in ministry inevitably hold simultaneously.

This conclusion converges with, without simply restating, Ellen G. White's own theological diagnosis. Writing specifically of professed believers whose conduct betrays "the same love of self, the same selfish indulgence" observable outside the Christian community, White attributes such inconsistency to incomplete conversion—a theological claim about the spiritual condition of the individuals she describes, made within her own doctrinal and pastoral framework, rather than an empirically established finding of the literature

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Identity in the Context of Social Conflict," Missiology An International Review 51, no. 4 (August 8, 2023): 361, accessed November 2025, https://doi.org/10.1177/00918296231194372.

[62] Louise Kretzschmar, "African and Western Approaches to the Moral Formation of Christian Leaders: The Role of Spiritual Disciplines in Counteracting Moral Deficiencies," HTS Teologiese Studies / Theological Studies 76, no. 2 (May 10, 2020), accessed October 2025, https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v76i2.5913.

reviewed in this study.[63] This article treats White's diagnosis as a theological proposition that the integrative framework developed here renders analytically compatible with, though not reducible to, the social-psychological account of identity multiplicity and integration documented in the Social Identity Theory literature; it does not present her claim as an empirical conclusion this study has independently established.

On this basis, the literature reviewed supports the general proposition that behavioral patterns in mission and ministry contexts are not determined by doctrinal frameworks alone but emerge from an interaction of psychosocial dynamics, cultural and organizational context, and the depth of identity internalization—a proposition that, in the African settings represented in the literature reviewed, takes contextually specific forms shaped by denominational tradition, national setting, and social circumstance rather than a single continental pattern. The principal contribution of this study is the integrative framework itself: an explicit account of how Social Identity Theory and theological anthropology can be read together, with their respective limits acknowledged, to interpret behavioral patterns that neither framework alone adequately explains, together with a disciplined application of that framework to the specific African mission and ministry literature this study was able to identify and review.

This study is conceptual and literature-based, and its conclusions are correspondingly interpretive rather than empirically demonstrated by original data. Further research—including a primary empirical study designed specifically to test the identity-integration mechanism proposed here, broader engagement with African ministry contexts beyond those represented in the literature reviewed, and attention to the psychological and spiritual assessment of mission and ministry candidates during formation[64]—would be needed to place these interpretive claims on an empirical footing. Such research holds the potential to inform more intentional strategies for discipleship, leadership development, and

[63] Ellen Gold White, Christ's Object Lessons (U.S.A.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1941), 99-100.

[64] Katherine N. Thompson et al., "A Scoping Review of Psychological Assessment in Mission and Ministry Candidates," Journal of Psychology and Theology 51, no. 1 (September 10, 2022): 19, accessed November 2025, https://doi.org/10.1177/00916471221122074.

organizational health in mission and ministry practice, particularly within the specific African ecclesial contexts represented in this review.

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CHAPTER 40

THE INQUISITIVENESS OF PRYING INTO THE UNKNOWN: A PROPHETIC GUIDANCE FROM ELLEN G. WHITE

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Abstract

The inquisitiveness of prying into the unknown, or into that which remains deliberately hidden from humanity, is as old as the world itself. It can be traced to the Garden of Eden, where Eve's disobedience in eating the forbidden fruit (Gen 3:1–7) inaugurated a pattern of illegitimate inquiry whose consequences confront humanity daily, from ancient divination to contemporary prophetic exploitation. Within the literature reviewed for this study, scholarship on prophetic inspiration, on Ellen G. White's ministry, and on African divinatory practice rarely engages across these areas, leaving underexamined how White's prophetic counsel and African divinatory epistemology compare in their treatment of the boundary between legitimate revelation and unauthorized inquiry into the future. This paper addresses that gap through a historical-grammatical exegesis of Genesis 3:4–6 and Deuteronomy 29:29, attentive to the Hebrew lexical and grammatical detail and literary context of both texts, whose resulting theological principles a

re then read comparatively against Ellen G. White's primary writings and against documented African divinatory practice, particularly Ifa. It asks whether inquisitiveness about the unknown is intrinsically illegitimate, what benefits, if any, such inquiry yields, and what prophetic guidance offers as a corrective. Three findings emerge from this textual and comparative analysis: the Fall resulted from illegitimate inquiry rather than innocent curiosity, since the serpent first planted doubt about God's word before offering forbidden knowledge; prying into hidden things promises autonomy but produces alienation, a pattern recurring in both ancient divination and modern prophetic exploitation; and White's counsel, read alongside Daniel 2:28 and Isaiah 41:22–23, restates Scripture's

consistent claim that God alone discloses the future with precision, making revealed Scripture the safer register for engaging the unknown than speculative inquiry.

Keywords: Unknown, Prophetic Guidance, Deception, Divination, Ellen G. White, Hermeneutics.

INTRODUCTION

This paper examines the tension between humanity's innate curiosity about the unseen and the caution that prophetic guidance imposes on unauthorized inquiry. Human inquisitiveness toward hidden things carries both the promise of discovery and the risk of exploitation by those who claim privileged access to esoteric knowledge.[1] The analysis centers on the counsel of Ellen G. White, a prophetic voice within Seventh-day Adventism, regarding the proper limits of inquiry into the future and unseen realities. It distinguishes divine revelation, which discloses God's purposes on His own initiative, from speculative practices such as occultism, astrology, and divination, which attempt to force or manipulate knowledge from the spiritual realm.[2] This distinction matters because Scripture draws it too: legitimate prophetic insight edifies the community of faith, while unauthorized attempts to penetrate hidden truths invite spiritual peril and deception.[3]

Unauthorized inquiry is typically driven by what Ferreira calls "unnecessary knowledge," a mistaken notion of wisdom that substitutes self-serving curiosity for reliance on what God has already revealed.[4] In an era of unprecedented scientific discovery, this raises a

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[1]Hasan Hüseyin İslam, "Kur'ân Bağlamında Cin Gayb İlişkisi ve Cinlerin Gaybı Bilmelerinin İmkânı," *DergiPark* (Istanbul University) (April 17, 2023), accessed August 2025, https://dergipark.org.tr/tr/pub/kuifd/issue/79851/1284104.
[2]Carol B. Shilubane, "Unusual Liturgical Ritual Practices by Present-Day Prophets in South Africa: A Practical Theological Analysis," *Yearbook for Ritual and Liturgical Studies* 37 (December 31, 2021): 51, accessed July 2025, https://doi.org/10.21827/yrls.37.51-60; Ekawahyu Kasih, John Josep Manoppo, and Erwin Ernetus Kadar Slamet, "The Intersection of Occultism, Ancestral Customs, Astrology, and Divination Practices: A Qualitative Literature Review on Christian Perspectives," *SSRN Electronic Journal* (January 1, 2024), accessed December 2025, https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4823805.
[3]Boubakar Sanou, "Social Dynamics and Occultic Practices," *Journal of Adventist Mission Studies* 11, no. 2 (January 1, 2015): 78, accessed January 2026, https://doi.org/10.32597/jams/vol11/iss2/7/.
[4]Ignatius W. Ferreira, "The 'Anatomy' of the Temptation: How to Address the Occult among Non-Christians and Persons Who Profess Christianity in Congregations," *In die Skriflig/In Luce Verbi* 53, no. 4 (August 27, 2019), accessed May 2025, https://doi.org/10.4102/ids.v53i4.2422.

genuine question: what distinguishes necessary knowledge, the kind that serves human flourishing and honors God, from unnecessary knowledge, the kind that oversteps the boundary Deuteronomy 29:29 sets between "the secret things" that belong to the Lord and "the things which are revealed" that belong to us? This paper's working criterion is straightforward: knowledge becomes unnecessary, in the biblical sense, when its pursuit requires bypassing revealed Scripture to force disclosure from the spiritual realm through divination, spiritism, or speculative prediction, rather than pursuing it through worship, obedience, and revealed truth.

Genuine prophetic guidance, as White articulates it, functions to clarify God's will and ethical demands. It does not exist to satisfy curiosity about predictive eschatology, nor to justify practices Scripture prohibits.[5]White's own account of revelation and inspiration holds that God communicates through chosen human instruments after the Fall, a dual authorship in which God supplies the message and the prophet supplies the language, with the Bible remaining the final guide for faith and practice.[6] Her writings return repeatedly to one theme: the peril of straying from biblical principle and the deceptive character of spiritualism, insisting that steadfast faith in God's revealed word protects believers from malevolent spiritual influence.[7] She counsels discernment above credulity, urging believers to distinguish authentic spiritual manifestation from deceptive imitation.

This discernment is not a matter of private judgment. Paul's instruction that prophecy spoken in the assembly be weighed by other prophets, and that all things be done decently and in order, sets a scriptural standard for testing prophetic utterance (1 Cor 14:29, 40). Prophecy, on this standard, is intelligible and answerable to the corroborating witness of Scripture, not a private oracle exempt from evaluation. This paper argues that White's

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[5]Asep Awaludin and Elzya Husana Anik, "Ellen G. White's Prophecy According to Catholic Church View," *Journal of Comparative Study of Religions* 1, no. 1 (November 1, 2020), accessed January 2025, https://doi.org/10.21111/jcsr.v1i1.4977.

[6]Emmanuel Forkpa Zayzay Jr, "Ellen G. White's Perspective on the Revelation-Inspiration and Interpretation of Scripture as Reflected in Selected Chapters of *The Great Controversy*," *International Journal of Research and Scientific Innovation* (January 1, 2025): 333, accessed December 2025, https://doi.org/10.51244/ijrsi.2025.12020029.

[7]Vladimir Yakovlevich Laluev, "How the Visions Genre Correlates in the Protestant and Orthodox Christian Culture of the Nineteenth Century: A Theological and Philosophical Analysis," *Bulletin of Kemerovo State University: Series Humanities and Social Sciences* 2020, no. 4 (January 18, 2021): 330, accessed March 2025, https://doi.org/10.21603/2542-1840-2020-4-4-330-337.

prophetic ministry, understood within Adventism as an expression of the biblical gift of prophecy,[8] consistently cautions against unauthorized inquiry into the unknown and calls believers back to revealed Scripture and providence as the proper resources for navigating existential uncertainty.[9] Her admonitions safeguard against speculative spiritual practice, insisting on ethical living and fidelity to biblical principle rather than an unhealthy fixation on predictive eschatology or occult exploration.[10] Deuteronomy 29:29 states the underlying principle plainly: "The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but those things which are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law" (NKJV). This paper examines the risks of prying into the unknown and argues for the necessity of prophetic guidance in navigating them.

Deuteronomy 29:29 closes Moses's covenant-renewal address to Israel on the plains of Moab (Deut 29:1), delivered immediately after warnings against apostasy phrased in language reminiscent of ancient Near Eastern treaty curses; read in that setting, the verse functions as the address's hermeneutical key, instructing Israel how to hold together disclosed law and an undisclosed future. The Hebrew text repays attention here. The verse pairs two niphal participles built on contrasting roots: הַנִּסְתָּרֹת (hannistarot, "the hidden things," from סתר, "to hide, conceal") and הַנִּגְלֹת (hanniglot, "the revealed things," from גלה, "to uncover, reveal").[11] BDB records the niphal of סתר as carrying a passive, often theological sense, "to be hidden, concealed," frequently used of what is deliberately withheld from notice; its entry for גלה records the converse sense, "to be uncovered, disclosed."[12] The verse sets these two participles in explicit opposition, and the grammar performs the argument as much as the vocabulary does: both are stative participles,

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[8]Carlyle Boynton Haynes, *The Gift of Prophecy* (1998), accessed March 2026, https://openlibrary.org/books/OL12148514M/The_Gift_of_Prophecy.
[9]D. J. B. Trim, "Ellen G. White and Adventist Mission," in *The Gift of Prophecy in Scripture and History*, ed. Alberto R. Timm and Dwain N. Esmond (Silver Spring, MD: Review and Herald, 2015), 337–357; Michael Cauley, "A Movement of Authentic Christianity: An Embrace and Integration of Biblical Fundamentals in a Seventh-day Adventist Church Plant among the Echo Boomer Culture of the Twenty-First Century in Keller, Texas" (DMin diss., 2010), accessed July 2025, https://doi.org/10.32597/dmin/30/.
[10]Joseph Kitur, "Ellen G. White's Visions and Doctrinal Authority in Seventh-day Adventism," *Journal of Philosophy and Religion* 5, no. 1 (December 17, 2025): 82, accessed March 2026, https://doi.org/10.51317/ecjprts.v5i1.664.
[11]. Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1996), s.v. "סתר."
[12]. Brown, Driver, and Briggs, s.v. "גלה."

marking fixed conditions rather than actions in progress, so that what God has hidden remains His, and what he has revealed belongs to Israel "forever" (עַד־עוֹלָם). Read this way, Deuteronomy 29:29 does not merely counsel modesty about the future; it draws a line, in the grammar of the text itself, between two fixed categories of knowledge and assigns legitimate human inquiry to only one of them.

Because White's authority is unfamiliar to readers outside Seventh-day Adventism, it is worth establishing at the outset that her counsel does not stand apart from Scripture but restates a claim Scripture itself makes: God alone discloses the future with precision. Daniel told Nebuchadnezzar, "There is a God in heaven who reveals secrets, and He has made known … what will be in the latter days" (Dan 2:28, NKJV), locating true foreknowledge in God rather than in human or occult technique. Isaiah presses the same claim as a test of deity, challenging false gods to "show the things that are to come hereafter, that we may know that you are gods" (Isa 41:22–23, NKJV), a challenge no idol, diviner, or human speculation has ever met. White's insistence that the future belongs to God, and that unauthorized inquiry into it courts deception, is therefore not a sectarian peculiarity but a restatement of a consistent biblical pattern.

The narrative of the Fall illustrates this pattern concretely. Adam and Eve held the unprecedented privilege of bearing God's image and likeness (Gen 1:26–27). White describes the perfection of the first man: "As man came forth from the hand of his Creator, he was of lofty stature and perfect symmetry. His countenance bore the ruddy tint of health and glowed with the light of life and joy."[13] Genesis introduces the serpent as עָרוּם (ʿarum), "more crafty" than any other creature (Gen 3:1); the term plays on עֵירֻמִּים (ʿarummim), "naked," used one verse earlier of the unashamed man and woman (Gen 2:25), and BDB records its dominant sense as morally negative shrewdness or deceptive cunning, though the same root elsewhere denotes commendable prudence.[14] The narrator signals, before the serpent speaks a word, that its "craftiness" is what the innocent "nakedness" of Eden is about to meet. Yet the serpent's strategy did not begin with an offer of forbidden knowledge; it began with doubt. "You will not surely die," the serpent told Eve, directly

[13]Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 2005), 45.
[14]Brown, Driver, and Briggs, s.v. "ערום."

contradicting God's explicit warning (Gen 3:4; cf. Gen 2:17). The grammar of this denial is itself significant. God's warning in Gen 2:17 uses the Hebrew infinitive absolute with a finite verb of the same root, מוֹת תָּמוּת (mot tamut, literally "dying you shall die"), a construction BDB identifies as emphatic, underscoring the certainty of the outcome.[15] The serpent's reply in Gen 3:4, לֹא־מוֹת תְּמֻתוּן (lo-mot temutun), borrows God's own emphatic construction and simply negates it: it does not offer a competing account of death but inverts, word for word, the certainty God had declared. The doubt the serpent plants is thus lexically and grammatically parasitic on God's own speech, before it becomes, in the next verse, an offer of hidden knowledge. Only after undermining Eve's confidence in God's word did the serpent make its offer: God, it claimed, "knows that in the day you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God" (Gen 3:5). The sequence matters: illegitimate inquiry into the unknown begins not with curiosity but with doubt about what God has already said. Once that doubt took hold, Eve's perception changed. She "saw" the forbidden tree as "good for food," "pleasant to the eyes," and "desirable to make one wise," and she ate (Gen 3:6).

The Hebrew verb translated "saw" in Genesis 3:6, רָאָה (ra'ah), carries a wide semantic range in BDB's entry, from ordinary physical sight to "perceive," "consider," and "look upon with favor or desire"; the same root supplies the ordinary Hebrew word for a prophetic "seer" (ro'eh) elsewhere in the Old Testament, underscoring that in Hebrew, seeing and discerning are not sharply separated.[16] Eve's perception, not merely her physical sight, had already been corrupted by doubt; she "considered" the fruit desirable, נֶחְמָד (nechmad, a niphal participle of the same root, חמד, that supplies the Decalogue's prohibition on "coveting" in Exod 20:17), because she no longer trusted what God had revealed.[17] She did not yet know that "the thief does not come except to steal, and to kill, and to destroy" (John 10:10); Satan's offer of hidden knowledge concealed a plan to sever the relationship between God and the beings made in His image. Commenting on Eve's choice to believe the tempter over God, Matthew Henry observes that "the woman, being

[15]Brown, Driver, and Briggs, s.v. "מות."
[16]Brown, Driver, and Briggs, s.v. "ראה."
[17]Donald C. Fleming, *Bridgeway Bible Commentary*, s.v. "Genesis 3:6" (2005), accessed July 29, 2026, https://www.studylight.org/commentaries/bbc/genesis-3.html.

deceived by the tempter's artful management, was ringleader in the transgression," led into error by an immoderate desire to have her senses gratified.[18] Adam and Eve did acquire a knowledge of good and evil, but as guilty transgressors rather than as beings sharing the Creator's perspective. Their new knowledge of the unknown brought shame, not satisfaction (Gen 3:8–13).

Literature Review

Scholarly engagement with Ellen G. White and with Seventh-day Adventist theology is extensive; the review that follows does not claim to be exhaustive but draws on peer-reviewed and Adventist-institutional scholarship in three converging areas: theological treatments of prophetic inspiration and authority, critical assessment of White's ministry, and ethnographic and theological accounts of African divinatory practice.[19] Read together, this literature exposes a gap the present study addresses directly.

Within Adventist theology, Hasel argues that the integrity of the prophetic gift rests on its internal consistency with Scripture and its practical fruit in the believer's life, a criterion that usefully shifts verification away from charismatic display toward testable, textual standards.[20] His treatment is strong on criteria but stops short of applying them comparatively to non-Christian divinatory systems, leaving open how such standards might illuminate, or indict, practices outside the Judeo-Christian tradition. Canale extends the inquiry by distinguishing revelation, God's self-disclosure, from inspiration, the process by which that disclosure is committed to human language; his model clarifies why White's writings can be authoritative without being co-equal with Scripture.[21] Yet Canale's analysis remains internal to Adventist hermeneutics and does not engage the comparative question this paper raises: how a revelation-inspiration model fares against traditions, such as Ifa

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[18]Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible*, s.v. "Genesis 3:6," BibleWorks 8.0 (Norfolk, VA: BibleWorks, 2008).
[19].Jón Hjörleifur Stefánsson and Terry Dwain Robertson, *Seventh-day Adventist Dissertations and Theses in Religion* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University, 2015), accessed March 2026, https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/library-pubs/3.
[20].Gerhard F. Hasel, "The Integrity of the Prophetic Gift," *Adventist Review* 159, no. 41 (October 14, 1982): 8–10, accessed November 2025, https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/pubs/3643.
[21].Fernando L. Canale, "Revelation and Inspiration: Method for a New Approach," *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 31, no. 3 (1993): 171-194, accessed March 2026, https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/auss/vol31/iss3/2.

divination, that ground authority in a wholly different epistemology. Bauckham, writing from a broader Christian tradition, locates the "spirit of prophecy" in the New Testament's own testimony to Jesus, arguing that prophecy after the apostolic age must be measured against a Christological center.[22] His work supplies a check that White's own writings share: testing spiritual claims against a fixed textual and Christological standard. Yet, like Hasel and Canale, his work does not extend the analysis into African religious practice, where prophetic and divinatory functions overlap in ways the Adventist framework does not directly anticipate.

Scholarship on White herself divides along similar lines. Knight and Timm both defend a hierarchical model in which White's writings offer significant spiritual guidance while remaining subordinate to scriptural authority, a position that guards against elevating extra-biblical revelation to canonical status.[23] Iparraguirre reaches a comparable conclusion from a Latin American Adventist context, confirming that this hierarchy is a broadly shared confessional position rather than a parochial North American reading.[24] The strength of this literature lies in its careful articulation of authority; its limitation is that it rarely asks why believers are drawn to seek from prophetic figures the very predictive certainty the tradition itself discourages: the psychological and cultural pull toward prying into the unknown that this paper investigates.

A separate and substantial literature documents African traditional systems of divination and spiritual consultation. Onongha analyzes the worldview transformation required when adherents of African traditional religion in Yorubaland encounter Adventist mission, describing systems of divination embedded in indigenous religious practice.[25] Niemandt

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[22].Richard Bauckham, "The Spirit of Prophecy," in *The Theology of the Book of Revelation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 109, accessed November 2025, https://doi.org/10.1017/cbo9780511819858.007.

[23].George R. Knight, "Elena de White, la Escritura, y la cuestión de la autoridad: Un vistazo histórico" [Ellen White, the Scripture, and the Issue of Authority: A Historical Overview], *Apuntes Universitarios* 6, no. 1 (April 4, 2016), accessed January 2025, https://doi.org/10.17162/au.v6i1.233; Alberto R. Timm, "Adventist Views on Inspiration," *Perspective Digest* 13, no. 3 (2008), 4-15, accessed March 2026, https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/pd/vol13/iss3/2.

[24]Joel Iparraguirre, "La Autoridad de los Escritos de Elena de White," *Revista Berit Olam* 12, no. 1 (August 5, 2015), accessed November 2025, https://doi.org/10.17162/rbo.v12i1.802.

[25]Kelvin Onongha, "Towards a Missiological Model for Worldview Transformation among Adherents to African Traditional Religion in Yorubaland," *Journal of Adventist Mission Studies* 10, no. 1 (January 1, 2014): 150, accessed September 2025, https://doi.org/10.32597/jams/vol10/iss1/13/.

and Beyers situate these systems within a broader missiological framework, while Dosunmu documents the persistence of dual allegiance among Yoruba Seventh-day Adventists who continue consulting traditional diviners alongside their Christian profession.[26] These practices (geomancy, spirit mediumship, the interpretation of omens) reflect a long-standing societal engagement with predictive inquiry that contrasts sharply with White's cautionary stance. Such traditions embrace diverse forms of prognostication as legitimate epistemology, unlike the more restrictive paradigms of the Abrahamic traditions, a divergence that itself calls for comparative analysis rather than mere description.[27]

These systems are not incidental to community life. Diviners, frequently addressed as "chief priests," employ elaborate interpretive frameworks to decode the configurations produced by their instruments of divination, offering not merely predictions but prescribed rituals or sacrifices intended to avert misfortune or secure favorable outcomes.[28] This intervention-oriented posture stands opposed to monotheistic traditions that locate sovereignty over the future in God alone rather than in ritual technique, precisely the point of contrast this paper's comparative method is designed to examine.

The literature reviewed here has not adequately brought these two bodies of scholarship into direct conversation. Within the sources surveyed above, existing studies appear to give limited attention to placing White's prophetic counsel, and its underlying hermeneutic of revelation and inspiration, alongside African divinatory epistemology, and to asking, comparatively, what each tradition risks when its adherents pry into the unknown outside the boundaries their own systems set. This paper undertakes that comparison; the claim is

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[26]Nelus Niemandt and Jaco Beyers, "Science of Religion and Missiology at the Faculty of Theology, University of Pretoria: Historical Overview, Theological Discourses and Future Possibilities," *Verbum et Ecclesia* 38, no. 4 (December 20, 2017): 157, accessed October 2025, https://doi.org/10.4102/ve.v38i4.1663; Paul Dosunmu, "A Missiological Study of the Phenomenon of Dual Allegiance in the Seventh-day Adventist Church among the Yoruba People of Nigeria," *Journal of Adventist Mission Studies* 6, no. 2 (January 1, 2010): 128, accessed October 2025, https://doi.org/10.32597/jams/vol6/iss2/12/.

[27]Eucharia Chinwe Igbafe, "Researching African Indigenous Population in Contemporary Times: What Scholars and Practitioners Need to Know," in *IntechOpen eBooks* (IntechOpen, 2023), accessed October 2025, https://doi.org/10.5772/intechopen.107591.

[28]M. D. Enaikele and Adeniyi Taofeeq Adeleke, "Yorubas' Ifa System and Human Destiny: An Oral Narrative Account," *Fourth World Journal* 16, no. 2 (August 14, 2025): 5, accessed December 2025, https://doi.org/10.63428/82wtbz44.

limited to the literature examined here rather than to the field as a whole, and the gap it addresses is correspondingly modest in scope.

Methodology

This is a literature-based, text-centered study that combines two methods suited to its two kinds of primary material. For Genesis 3:4–6 and Deuteronomy 29:29, the study employs historical-grammatical exegesis: each text is read within its immediate literary context and canonical setting, with attention to relevant Hebrew vocabulary and grammatical form, using the Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon (BDB) as the primary lexical resource, before the exegetical results are stated as theological principles. For Ellen G. White's writings and for the African Christian and Ifa material, the study then proceeds by comparative theological analysis, reading the theological principles drawn from the two biblical texts alongside White's own primary exposition of the same narrative and alongside documented African material, to identify convergence, divergence, and theological tension. No survey, interview, or fieldwork was conducted for this study; all evidence is textual, and the results reported in the Findings section below are findings of textual and comparative analysis rather than empirical findings in the social-scientific sense.

The study's principal primary source for Ellen G. White is Patriarchs and Prophets, cited here in the 2005 Review and Herald reprint. This work was selected, rather than White's corpus generally, because it is her extended, direct prophetic commentary on the Genesis narrative this paper exegetes, and it therefore stands as the primary text properly comparable to the biblical passages under analysis. The paper's broader claims about White's teaching on spiritualism, discernment, and prophetic authority, claims that range beyond her comment on Genesis 3, rest not on additional primary quotation but on secondary scholarship that has already synthesized her wider corpus on these themes (among others, Laluev on the genre of her visions; Zayzay on revelation-inspiration in The Great Controversy; and Kitur, Knight, and Timm on the authority of her writings). This is a deliberate scope decision rather than an oversight: it keeps the paper's primary-source claims limited to what is directly exegeted here, while relying on clearly identified secondary literature for claims about the remainder of White's corpus.

The African Christian material examined in this study is drawn from peer-reviewed scholarship published between 2013 and 2025 on prophetic-divinatory practice within neo-Pentecostal and "new prophetic church" movements, together with Seventh-day Adventist missiological literature addressing dual allegiance to Christian and indigenous religious practice. Geographically and ecclesially, these sources concentrate in four settings: South African neo-Pentecostal and "new prophetic" churches (Banda; Kgatle; Matshobane; Mofokeng; Resane; Shilubane; Kubeka on Zulu ancestral calling); Ghanaian neo-prophetic and mainline Presbyterian contexts (Aryeh; Adasi, Fusheini, and Amuzu; Nkrumah-Pobi); Zimbabwean Christianity, including Seventh-day Adventist engagement (Wasosa and Sanyanga; Mlambo; Chitando, Gunda, and Kügler); and Seventh-day Adventist mission among Yoruba-speaking communities in southwestern Nigeria (Onongha; Dosunmu). These sources were selected because they directly address the overlap between prophetic ministry and divinatory consultation that this paper's comparison requires; they were not selected, and should not be read, as a representative sample of Christianity across the African continent. Accordingly, this paper does not use the term "African Christianity" to denote a single or continent-wide phenomenon. Where the analysis below describes syncretism, prophetic exploitation, or the blurring of biblical prophecy and traditional divination, the claim is delimited to the neo-Pentecostal, new prophetic, and Adventist missiological contexts documented in the sources just named, and is not extended to Catholic, mainline Protestant, Orthodox, or African-Instituted Church traditions, on which this study draws no evidence.

For African traditional religion, and for Ifa divination specifically, the study distinguishes ethnographic from interpretive-theological sources. Its principal source for Ifa cosmology is Enaikele and Adeleke's account of Yoruba oral narrative on the Ifa system and human destiny, selected because it documents indigenous oral tradition directly rather than through a further layer of theological interpretation. This ethnographic material is read alongside secondary anthropological and theological scholarship on African traditional religion more broadly (Igbafe; Moscicke), which supplies interpretive and comparative context but is not treated as equivalent evidence for Yoruba Ifa practice specifically. The study's direct engagement with African traditional religion is accordingly restricted to Yoruba Ifa divination as documented in these sources; it does not claim to describe African

traditional religion, or divinatory practice elsewhere on the continent, as a single or undifferentiated system.

Four analytical categories, drawn from what the biblical, Adventist, and African sources examined actually sustain, organize the comparison: the source and legitimacy of knowledge about the unknown (who or what may rightly disclose it); human agency in seeking such knowledge, as against divine or spiritual initiative in disclosing it; the consequences, for the individual and the community, of seeking knowledge outside the boundary each tradition sets; and the place of discernment and authority in testing a claim to hidden knowledge. Other categories the wider literature sometimes uses (for example, a fully developed theological anthropology, or an independent psychological or sociological assessment of divinatory practice) are not treated as separate analytical categories here because the sources reviewed do not sustain them as such. Where the sources describe psychological or social effects, such as anxiety, dependency, exploitation, or communal cohesion and fracture, those descriptions are reported as the literature's own characterization of such effects, not as findings independently verified by this study; this paper conducted no survey, interview, or psychological assessment of its own.

The comparative procedure follows a fixed sequence. The study first establishes the historical-literary context of Genesis 3:4–6 and Deuteronomy 29:29, then conducts the historical-grammatical exegesis of both texts reported in the Introduction above, and states the theological principles that exegesis yields. It then examines Patriarchs and Prophets for White's own treatment of the same Genesis narrative, and draws on the secondary literature identified above for her wider counsel on spiritualism and discernment. It next examines the African Christian and Ifa sources identified above according to the selection criteria just stated. Textual evidence from all three bodies of material is then organized under the four analytical categories, compared category by category, and interpreted for convergence, divergence, and theological tension, without assuming in advance that the traditions compared are equivalent. The Findings section below reports the results of this procedure; the Discussion section interprets their theological significance for the paper's guiding questions.

Findings

The textual and comparative analysis conducted here yields several convergent and divergent patterns concerning the interpretation of prophecy, the role of prophetic figures, and the ethics of pursuing hidden knowledge across the sources examined. It synthesizes White's cautionary perspective on prying into the unknown with the pragmatic, interventionist character of the African prophetic and divinatory material surveyed above, revealing distinct epistemological and practical orientations, organized here under the four analytical categories set out in the Methodology.[29] These sources converge in treating the future as significant and contestable territory, yet diverge sharply on what each considers a legitimate method of access: revealed disclosure in White's model, ritual technique and consultation in the African model.[30] Table 1 summarizes these patterns; the distinction carries real implications for pastoral care and theological education, particularly where syncretic practice blurs the line between biblical prophecy and traditional divination, as the Discussion below interprets further.[31]

Table 1. Comparative summary of textual and comparative-analytical findings across the four analytical categories.

Category	**Genesis 3:4–6 / Deut 29:29**	**Ellen G. White (Patriarchs and Prophets)**	**Selected African neo-Pentecostal / Adventist-missiological sources**	**Yoruba Ifa (Enaikele and Adeleke)**
Source/legitimacy of	God alone discloses the future (Deut 29:29); the	Affirms the same boundary; genuine	Legitimacy contested; some "new prophetic church" leaders claim	Legitimacy located in the diviner's ritual

[29]Mookgo Solomon Kgatle, "Reimagining the Practice of Pentecostal Prophecy in Southern Africa: A Critical Engagement," *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 75, no. 4 (September 25, 2019), accessed March 2026, https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v75i4.5183.
[30]Collium Banda, "Is Africa Godforsaken? Neo-Pentecostal Prophetism on African Human Agency and Transcendence," *Verbum et Ecclesia* 44, no. 1 (February 13, 2023), accessed October 2025, https://doi.org/10.4102/ve.v44i1.2696; Samuel Kofi Boateng Nkrumah-Pobi, "Neo-Prophetism: A New Strand of Charismatic Renewal Movement in the Presbyterian Church of Ghana," *African Journal of Religion, Ethics and Theology* 1, no. 2 (November 26, 2025), accessed November 2025, https://doi.org/10.63811/bbs5w922.
[31]Mangaliso Matshobane, "New Prophetic Churches and Syncretism: A Critical View," *Religions* 14, no. 11 (November 3, 2023): 1383, accessed December 2025, https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14111383.

hidden knowledge	serpent's offer is illegitimate because it bypasses God's own word.	revelation comes through God's prophetic word, not from probing the unseen.	direct, unmediated access, which the literature treats as theologically unstable.	mastery of the Ifa corpus; an internally coherent, ritually mediated epistemology.
Human agency in seeking hidden knowledge	Eve exercises agency, but only after the serpent first undermines her trust in God's word; agency is compromised by doubt, not innocent curiosity.	Emphasizes human responsibility to resist the impulse to pry, coupled with reliance on God's provision.	Client-seeking (consultation) is proactive and socially normal; the literature frames it as a response to existential uncertainty.	Agency operative through the diviner-client relationship and ritual initiative to secure or avert an outcome.
Consequences of seeking hidden knowledge	Shame and alienation from God (Gen 3:8–13), not the promised autonomy.	Warns that spiritualism severs believers from God and exposes them to deception.	Literature documents both reported spiritual benefit and documented exploitation, financial and psychological, within some prophetic ministries.	Consequences framed within the tradition's own terms as favorable or unfavorable destiny outcomes; the ethnographic sources do not present these as exploitation.
Discernment/ authority in testing claims	Prophetic utterance tested against the corroborating witness of	Same standard urged for testing spiritual manifestations against Scripture.	Scholars call for theological discernment where prophetic and	Authority tested internally, by the diviner's competence within the

	Scripture (1 Cor 14:29).		divinatory functions blur.	tradition's own interpretive framework.

This blurring is acute within the neo-Pentecostal and "new prophetic church" settings examined in this study, concentrated in South Africa, Ghana, and Zimbabwe, where the rapid growth of Pentecostalism has, according to the literature surveyed, sometimes eroded the distinction between legitimate biblical prophecy and traditional divinatory practice rooted in indigenous spirituality.[32] This phenomenon, as scholars working in these specific contexts describe it, demands rigorous theological discernment to separate authentic prophetic guidance from syncretistic accommodation.[33] Such syncretism marks what these scholars term the "fourth wave of Pentecostalism" within the settings they study, where ethical concerns arise from practices perceived as false, abusive, or financially exploitative, and where Christological challenges emerge as some prophets inadvertently assume Christ's mediatory role.[34] Understanding how these movements reconcile African spiritual worldviews with Christian theological commitment, especially regarding the supernatural, requires close hermeneutical attention.[35] The ethical stakes the literature reports are considerable: some prophetic leaders are documented exploiting followers economically and psychologically, even as others report genuine spiritual fulfillment within these

[32]Kgatle, "Reimagining the Practice of Pentecostal Prophecy"; Frederick J. de Beer and Marius Nel, "Prof. Marius Nel: Leading Pentecostal Scholar and Key Contributor to African Pentecostal Studies," *African Journal of Pentecostal Studies* 2, no. 1 (September 18, 2025), accessed September 2025, https://doi.org/10.4102/ajops.v2i1.80.

[33]Mookgo Solomon Kgatle, "Consultations in New Prophetic Churches and African Traditional Religions: A Case Study of Divine Healing in Assessing Syncretistic Practices in the South African Context," *Religions* 14, no. 3 (March 16, 2023): 400, accessed December 2025, https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14030400; Kelebogile T. Resane, "Resurgence of African Spiritualities in the New Prophetic Churches," *Pharos Journal of Theology* (February 23, 2024), accessed March 2026, https://doi.org/10.46222/pharosjot.105.219.

[34]Thabang Richard Mofokeng, "Reconsidering Syncretism and Contextualization: The Sangoma-Prophet Phenomenon in South African Neo-Prophetic Pentecostalism," *Religions* 15, no. 1 (January 10, 2024): 84, accessed March 2026, https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15010084.

[35]Hans M. Moscicke, "Toward an African-Christian Demonology: The Demonologies of African Traditional Religion, African Christianity, and Early Christianity in Dialogue," *Missionalia* 45, no. 2 (November 1, 2017), accessed September 2025, https://doi.org/10.7832/45-2-162.

ministries.[36] Both patterns, on the reading offered here, trace to the same underlying dynamic: adherents anxious to know an unknown future, the same anxiety that made Eve vulnerable to the serpent's offer of forbidden knowledge, an act whose consequences plunged humanity into an enduring moral and existential crisis.

Discussion

The relationship between prophetic guidance, discernment, and the potential for both spiritual transformation and exploitation runs through every case this study examines. Scriptural interpretation and cultural context together shape how divine messages are understood and applied, and nowhere is this clearer than in the hermeneutics of prophetic ministries whose leaders often lack formal theological training. Such leaders tend to re-enact biblical narratives to address contemporary problems rather than working within systematic theological frameworks, producing a pragmatic, sometimes sensationalist approach to spiritual phenomena that departs significantly from established theological method.[37] This divergence raises real concern about spiritual abuse and doctrinal compromise, particularly where charismatic authority outruns theological reflection and accountability.[38]

Some neo-Pentecostal movements compound the problem by privileging experience over ethics, prioritizing dramatic spiritual experiences over demonstrable moral conduct. This tendency toward sacralizing prophets risks personalizing the church around a human figure

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[36]Grace Sintim Adasi, Sanatu Fusheini, and Frank Amuzu, "Digital Dissemination of Neo-Prophetic Theologies in Ghana: Societal Impact and Challenges in the Age of Social Media," *E-Journal of Religious and Theological Studies* (June 19, 2025): 279, accessed March 2026, https://doi.org/10.38159/erats.20251164; Élodie Apard et al., "Religious, Social and Criminal Groups in Trafficking of Nigerian Girls and Women: The Case of Shrines, 'Ladies' Clubs,' and 'Cultist Groups'" (research report, Paris: ECPAT France, 2019).

[37]Daniel Nii Aboagye Aryeh, "Hermeneutics of Re-Enacting Biblical Text(s) and Concept(s) in the History of Prophetism in Ghana's Christianity: A Case Study of the Ministry of Agabus and Prophet Bernard Opoku Nsiah," *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* 43, no. 1 (January 1, 2017), accessed September 2025, https://doi.org/10.17159/2412-4265/2016/1972; Chitando, Gunda, and Kügler, *Prophets, Profits and the Bible in Zimbabwe.*

[38]Collium Banda, "Doctrine as Security? A Systematic Theological Critique of the Operational Theological Framework of the Controversial South African Neo-Pentecostal Prophets," *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 77, no. 4 (July 13, 2021), accessed October 2025, https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v77i4.6579.

and diminishing the centrality of Christ's redemptive work; the same displacement, in different form, occurred when Eve substituted the serpent's promise for God's word.[39]

Against this backdrop, White's consistent warning against spiritualism, divination, and every form of prying into the unknown outside God's revealed word supplies a clear corrective. Her writings distinguish authentic divine communication from human conjecture or malevolent spiritual influence, insisting on testing every spiritual claim against the fixed standard of Scripture.[40] This position aligns with the broader Adventist tradition, which treats White's writings as inspired counsel subordinate to Scripture's supreme authority.[41] Her extended discourse on spiritual life, though often eclipsed within Adventist scholarship by doctrinal and lifestyle debates, offers a more substantial resource than is generally acknowledged: it grounds discernment between genuine and spurious spiritual manifestation in communion with God rather than in sensational experience.[42] This corrective finds institutional confirmation within Seventh-day Adventism, which recognizes White as having exercised the biblical gift of prophecy and consistently draws on her writings for guidance, including on questions as specific as ordination, while maintaining the Bible's primacy as the foundational source of truth.[43] This stance offers a workable model for evaluating modern prophetic claims generally: acknowledging their potential validity while subjecting them to established theological and ethical scrutiny, precisely the discernment this paper's comparison shows to be absent where prophetic and divinatory functions blur.[44] Within White's own writings, prophetic guidance functions to

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[39]Collium Banda, "Rejecting Christ's Freedom? Sacralisation and Personalisation in African Neo-Pentecostal Prophetism," *Religions* 15, no. 9 (September 13, 2024): 1107, accessed March 2026, https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15091107.
[40]Laluev, "How the Visions Genre Correlates"; Jarrett M. Charmain, "Prophetic Theology: The Essence of Prophecy," *Scholars Crossing* (Liberty University) (August 29, 2024), accessed February 2026, https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=7039&context=doctoral.
[41]Peter Rhea Jones, "Biblical Hermeneutics," *Review & Expositor* 72, no. 2 (May 1, 1975): 139, accessed November 2025, https://doi.org/10.1177/003463737507200202.
[42]Cauley, "A Movement of Authentic Christianity."
[43]Beni Chandra Purba et al., "Pentingnya Memahami Roh Nubuat di Kalangan Orang Muda Gereja Masehi Advent Hari Ketujuh (GMAHK)," *JUITAK: Jurnal Ilmiah Teologi dan Pendidikan Kristen* 1, no. 1 (January 31, 2023): 34, accessed January 2026, https://doi.org/10.61404/juitak.v1i1.27; Melak Alemayehu Tsegaw, "Ordination in the Writings of Ellen G. White," *Revista Estrategias para el Cumplimiento de la Misión* 20, no. 1 (November 30, 2022): 5, accessed November 2025, https://doi.org/10.17162/recm.v20i1.1679.
[44]Knight, "Elena de White, la Escritura"; Timm, "Adventist Views on Inspiration."

illuminate and reinforce biblical truth, consistently directing believers back to Scripture as the final authority;[45] genuine prophetic utterance, on her own account, will always align with established biblical doctrine, functioning as a supplement rather than a replacement.[46] Her prophetic insight, so understood, does not introduce new doctrine; it clarifies and deepens the application of doctrine Scripture has already established, an interpretive task that itself integrates grammatical-historical analysis with spiritual discernment, the same combination this paper has attempted to model in its own reading of Genesis 3:4–6 and Deuteronomy 29:29.[47]

Conclusion

This comparative study set out to ask whether inquisitiveness about the unknown is intrinsically illegitimate, what benefits, if any, such inquiry yields, and what prophetic guidance offers as a corrective. Three conclusions follow, each answering one of these questions from the textual and comparative analysis conducted above. First, in answer to the question of legitimacy, the exegesis of Genesis 3:4–6 shows that the Fall resulted from illegitimate inquiry rather than innocent curiosity: the serpent first planted doubt about God's revealed word, negating God's own emphatic grammar, before offering forbidden knowledge, so that inquisitiveness becomes illegitimate specifically when it requires discrediting what God has already said. Second, in answer to the question of benefit, both the biblical narrative and the African neo-Pentecostal material examined here show that prying into hidden things promises autonomy but produces alienation and, in the cases the literature documents, exploitation; the textual and comparative evidence therefore does not support inquisitiveness about the unknown as a source of the benefit it promises. Third, in

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[45]Jirí Moskala, "The Phenomenon of Prophecy and Role of Prophets in the Old Testament Compared with the Ministry of Ellen G. White," in *Ellen White and Current Issues Symposium* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University, 2011), 6–38, accessed December 2025, https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1029&context=ewcis.
[46]Awaludin and Anik, "Ellen G. White's Prophecy According to Catholic Church View."
[47]Evan A. Luebbehusen, "The Divine Inspiration of Scripture," *Scholars Crossing* (Liberty University) 8, no. 1 (January 1, 2021): 5, accessed November 2025, https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/djrc/vol8/iss1/5; Jun Wang, "Fides, Dialogus and Virtus: Re-Examining the Theological Hermeneutics of the Reformation Period," *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 81, no. 1 (March 31, 2025), accessed September 2025, https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v81i1.10364; Warren A. Shipton, Youssry Guirguis, and Nola Tudu, "Humanism and Christianity: Shared Values?," *Journal of Adventist Mission Studies* 16, no. 2 (January 1, 2020), accessed October 2025, https://doi.org/10.32597/jams/vol16/iss2/14/.

answer to the question of corrective, White's counsel, read alongside Daniel 2:28 and Isaiah 41:22–23 and compared against Ifa's internally coherent but differently grounded epistemology, restates Scripture's consistent claim that God alone discloses the future with precision; the comparison suggests, as an implication rather than a further finding, that cultivating this discernment carries a modest institutional dimension, since believers are better equipped to test prophetic claims where the church itself models fidelity to Scripture over charismatic appeal.

This study's scope is limited to the texts, and to the primary and secondary sources, identified in the Methodology. It leaves open why humanity persists in wanting to pry into the unknown even where prophetic guidance counsels against it, and what practical disciplines best equip believers to remain within the boundary Deuteronomy 29:29 sets. Both are questions for further research beyond the textual and comparative analysis undertaken here.

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CHAPTER 41

MARTHA'S BURDEN, MARY'S CHOICE: RETHINKING DEVOTION AND SERVICE IN THE ADVENTIST CHURCH

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Abstract

Authentic Christian ministry finds its most genuine manifestation not in the dichotomy between contemplation and action but in their sacrosanct harmony. This study asserts that devotion and service, as exemplified in Luke 10:38–42, should not be regarded as conflicting virtues but rather as complementary aspects of discipleship essential to the spiritual well-being of the Adventist Church. Employing a grammatical-historical and exegetical analysis of the Greek texts, particularly the distinction between diakonia (service) and akouō (to listen); the study reveals the theological significance of Jesus' praise for Mary's posture of attentive devotion. It contends that the vitality of Adventist ministry relies on reorienting ecclesial life around the primacy of communion with Christ, from which all faithful service derives. The paper further examines the implications of this synthesis for gender dynamics, leadership development, and spirituality within Adventist contexts, proposing a model of ministry grounded in both spiritual intimacy and active mission engagement. In this manner, it calls upon the Church to re-examine a discipleship that prioritises listening before action, thereby restoring harmony, profundity, and transformative influence to its witness in a restless world.

Keywords: *Mary and Martha, Adventist, devotion, service, discipleship, gender, spiritual formation.*

INTRODUCTION

The tension between devotion and service has remained a defining spiritual dilemma within Christianity, especially in communities where activism and piety coexist uneasily. The story of Martha and Mary in *Luke 10:38–42* captures this enduring

paradox: Martha's busyness in serving contrasts with Mary's posture of listening at the feet of Jesus. For the Adventist Church, which places great emphasis on active service, missionary zeal, and institutional efficiency, this narrative invites profound theological reflection on the balance between doing for Christ and being with Christ.[1] The episode transcends domestic imagery; it symbolises a deeper issue of spiritual orientation; a contest between activism and contemplation, between faith expressed in works and faith nourished in worship.[2]

Within Adventism, where stewardship, evangelism, and education have long defined the denominational ethos,[3] the "Martha spirit" often manifests in the drive for excellence in ministry, health reform, and organisational success.[4] Yet, beneath this industrious energy lies a risk ; that devotion may become displaced by duty.[5] Mary's choice, interpreted through the lens of discipleship, calls attention to the primacy of personal communion with Christ as the wellspring of genuine service.[6] Thus, this paper re-examines the theological and ecclesiological implications of the Martha-Mary narrative for Adventist spirituality, seeking to balance the tension between contemplative devotion and active ministry.[7]

Theologically, the Martha-Mary pericope is not a critique of work but an invitation to reorder priorities.[8] In the Gospel context, Jesus' commendation of Mary does not invalidate Martha's service; rather, it redefines what is "necessary" in the hierarchy of discipleship.[9] Adventist theology, with its emphasis on the holistic gospel ; the gospel that heals, educates, and redeems ; provides fertile ground for this exploration.[10]

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[1] Luke 10:38–42 (NRSV).
[2] Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 432.
[3] Denis Fortin and Jerry Moon, *The Ellen G. White Encyclopedia* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2013), 901.
[4] Douglas Morgan, *Adventism and the American Republic: The Public Involvement of a Major Apocalyptic Movement* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2001), 88–90.
[5] Ellen G. White, *The Ministry of Healing* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1905), 58.
[6] John Nolland, *Luke 9:21–18:34*, *Word Biblical Commentary*, vol. 35B (Dallas: Word Books, 1993), 605.
[7] Roy Adams, *The Nature of Christ: Help for a Church Divided over Perfection* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 1994), 21.
[8] I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1978), 448–49.
[9] N. T. Wright, *Luke for Everyone* (London: SPCK, 2004), 133.
[10] Jon Dybdahl, *Hunger: Satisfying the Longing of Your Soul* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2008), 44.

Scholars such as Fernando Canale[11] and Miroslav Kiš[12] have argued that Adventist identity is rooted in a "sanctuary model" of integrated faith and life, where worship fuels mission. Therefore, this study asks: how can the Adventist Church cultivate a spirituality that harmonises Martha's service and Mary's devotion without compromising either?

Furthermore, the present ecclesial climate within global Adventism reveals growing concerns about burnout, programme-driven spirituality, and declining personal devotional habits among members.[13] The emphasis on visible productivity ; in evangelistic statistics, academic pursuits, or institutional output ; sometimes eclipses inner transformation.[14] So, Mary's stance in front of Jesus is not a passive withdrawal, but a paradigm for service that lasts spiritually.[15] Jon Paulien says that modern Adventists need to learn to live "in the rhythm of grace," which means finding a balance between their purpose and their relationship with God.[16]

This study adds to the continuing theological conversation by looking at the Martha-Mary text in a new way as a spiritual correction inside the Adventist movement. It posits that authentic Adventist service must originate from enduring relationship with Christ – a premise already implicit in Ellen G. White's teachings, which state that "true service for Christ springs from love and devotion."[17] The research integrates grammatical-historical and exegetical analysis, theological contemplation, and contextual application to examine the disparity between institutional service and personal spirituality within Adventism.[18]

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[11] Fernando Canale, *Vision and Mission: How a Biblical Perspective Can Impact Mission* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2012), 13–14.
[12] Miroslav Kiš, *Moral and Ethical Issues in the Church* (Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute, 2013), 27.
[13] David Trim, "Mission and Identity in the Seventh-day Adventist Church," *Journal of Adventist Mission Studies* 13, no. 2 (2017): 45.
[14] Kendra Haloviak Valentine, *Signs to Life: Reading and Responding to John's Gospel* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 2013), 105.
[15] Henri J. M. Nouwen, *The Way of the Heart* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1981), 26.
[16] Jon Paulien, *Everlasting Gospel, Ever-Changing World: Introducing Jesus to a Skeptical Generation* (Boise, ID: Pacific Press, 2008), 73.
[17] Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1898), 94.
[18] Denis Fortin, "Spiritual Formation and Mission in Adventism," *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 48, no. 1 (2010): 39–52.

This study aims to re-examine the relationship between devotion and service in Luke 10:38–42 and its implications for Adventist spirituality. To achieve this, the study undertakes an exegetical analysis of the Martha–Mary narrative, explores its theological implications for discipleship, evaluates its relevance within Adventist ecclesial life, and ultimately proposes an integrated model in which devotion and service function as complementary dimensions of authentic Christian ministry.

Exegetical Framework: Re-reading Luke 10:38–42

The pericope of *Luke 10:38–42* stands as one of the most delicate narrative portraits in Luke's Gospel, intertwining theology, discipleship, and social expectation. The passage reads:

> *"Now as they went on their way, he entered a village; and a woman named Martha welcomed him into her house. She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to his teaching. But Martha was distracted with much serving; and she went up to him and said, 'Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her then to help me.' But the Lord answered her, 'Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things; but one thing is needful. Mary has chosen the good portion, which shall not be taken away from her.'"*[19]

The Lukan text introduces *Martha* (Μάρθα, *Mártha*) as the householder who receives Jesus, positioning her in a traditional role of hospitality expected of first-century Jewish women.[20] The key verbs in this narrative mark contrasting modes of discipleship. Martha is described as *περιεσπάτο περὶ πολλὴν διακονίαν* (*periespato peri pollēn diakonian*), meaning "she was distracted by much serving."[21] The verb *περιεσπάτο* (from *περισπάω, perispáō*) literally denotes being "pulled around" or "dragged away" suggesting inner agitation rather than mere diligence.[22] In contrast, Mary *παρακαθεσθεῖσα παρὰ τοὺς πόδας τοῦ Κυρίου ἤκουεν τοῦ λόγου αὐτοῦ* (*parakathestheisa para tous podas tou Kyriou ēkouen tou logou autou*) ; "having sat

[19] Luke 10:38–42 (NRSV).
[20] Ben Witherington III, *Women in the Ministry of Jesus: A Study of Jesus' Attitudes to Women and Their Roles as Reflected in His Earthly Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 87.
[21] Luke 10:40 (NA28).
[22] Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed., rev. and ed. Frederick W. Danker (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 803.

down beside the Lord's feet, she was listening to his word."[23] The imperfect *ἤκουεν* (*ēkouen*) indicates continuous action, implying sustained attentiveness.[24]

This juxtaposition of verbs; περιεσπάτο versus *ἤκουεν*; creates a deliberate literary tension between restless service and receptive listening.[25] Luke's narrative artistry presents not a moral dichotomy between work and worship, but an invitation to discernment. The phrase *μία δέ ἐστιν χρεία* (*mia de estin chreia*, "but one thing is needful")[26] becomes a theological key. Scholars differ on whether *χρεία* (*chreia*) refers to a "single dish" (culinary context) or the "one essential thing" spiritually.[27] Modern exegetes generally agree that Luke's theological intent points to the latter; the necessity of undivided devotion to the Lord's word.[28]

In *BibleWorks* and *NA28* textual apparatus, minor variants appear at verse 42, where some manuscripts read *ὀλίγων δέ ἐστιν χρεία ἢ ἑνός* (*oligōn de estin chreia ē henos*), "few things are needed, indeed only one."[29] This variant, supported by א (Sinaiticus) and B (Vaticanus), likely reflects a scribal attempt to harmonise the phrase with pragmatic hospitality concerns.[30] But Luke's theological focus; "one thing is necessary"; fits with the idea of putting spiritual awareness ahead of social performance. This is similar to previous passages like Luke 8:15 and 8:21, where "hearing the word" is what makes someone truly close to Jesus.[31]

Exegetically, Luke 10:38–42 is positioned within Luke's comprehensive discourse on discipleship, succeeding the tale of the Good Samaritan (10:25–37).[32] These two stories show two sides of love: the Samaritan shows aggressive compassion, and Mary shows thoughtful devotion.[33] Luke therefore balances action and thought, encouraging

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[23] Luke 10:39 (NA28).
[24] Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, 448.
[25] Darrell L. Bock, *Luke 9:51–24:53, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1996), 1040.
[26] Luke 10:42a (NA28).
[27] François Bovon, *Luke 2: A Commentary on the Gospel of Luke 9:51–19:27*, trans. Donald S. Deer (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013), 66.
[28] Joel B.Green, *The Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 434.
[29] Nestle-Aland, *Novum Testamentum Graece*, 28th ed. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2012), apparatus note on Luke 10:42.
[30] Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, 2nd ed. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1994), 153.
[31] Luke 8:15, 21 (NRSV).
[32] Wright, *Luke for Everyone*, 132.
[33] John T. Carroll, *Luke: A Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2012), 255.

followers to combine the two. The verbs *διακονία* (*diakonia*, "service") and *ἀκούειν* (*akouein*, "to listen") are not mutually exclusive but sequential; genuine service arises from prior listening.[34]

In Greek syntax, Jesus' tender repetition; *Μάρθα, Μάρθα*; expresses empathy rather than rebuke.[35] The subsequent words, *μεριμνᾷς καὶ θορυβάζῃ περὶ πολλὰ (merimnás kai thorybázei peri polla)*, denote psychological unrest: *μεριμνάω (merimnáō)* means "to be anxious, divided in mind," while *θορυβάζω (thorybázō)* connotes "being troubled, in a state of commotion."[36] The language choice evokes both internal division and outward agitation ; a vivid metaphor for unbalanced minister.[37]

From an interpretive view, Jesus' praise; *Μαρία δὲ ἐξελέξατο τὴν ἀγαθὴν μερίδα (Maria de exelexato tēn agathēn merida,* "Mary has chosen the good portion")[38] ; uses the idea of property.[39] The term *μερίς (meris)* often denotes a "share" or "portion" given by divine allotment (cf. Ps. 16:5 LXX, *Κύριε, ἡ μερὶς τῆς κληρονομίας μου)*.[40] In this sense, Mary's "portion" is not an inactive part but a choice legacy of closeness with the Lord.[41] The phrase *ἥτις οὐκ ἀφαιρεθήσεται ἀπ' αὐτῆς (hētis ouk afairethēsetai ap' autēs,* "which shall not be taken away from her") reinforces eschatological continuity ; echoing Luke's theme of permanent reward for those who hear and keep the word (cf. Luke 11:28).[42]

Hence, the pericope's grammatical, syntactical, and religious layers combine to claim that obedience is mainly a matter of connection before duty.[43] In the setting of Adventist doctrine, this question the active impulses of church culture. The "good portion" calls Christians to rethink what is most important, with a focus on building a close relationship with God as the basis for their purpose.[44] Based on this idea, the

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[34] Klyne Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent: A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 439.
[35] Richard J. Dillon, *From Eye-Witnesses to Ministers of the Word: Tradition and Composition in Luke 24* (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1978), 99.
[36] Bauer, *Greek-English Lexicon*, 632, 456.
[37] Robert H. Stein, *Luke* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1992), 319.
[38] Luke 10:42b (NA28).
[39] Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel according to Luke (X–XXIV)*, *Anchor Bible*, vol. 28A (New York: Doubleday, 1985), 890.
[40] Psalm 16:5 (LXX).
[41] Bock, *Luke 1:1–9:50*, 234.
[42] Bock, *Luke 1:1–9:50*, 234.
[43] Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 233.
[44] Dybdahl, *Hunger: Satisfying the Longing of Your Soul*, 49.

interpretive analysis of Luke 10:38–42 offers the rationale for the re-evaluation of service success and personal devotion in Adventism. This is a topic that the next part will discuss in depth and in a philosophical way.[45]

Theological Reflection: Devotion, Service, and Spiritual Identity in Adventism

The exegetical findings from *Luke 10:38–42* elucidate the reflective theological processes that reverberate within Adventist spirituality. The conflict between Martha's *διακονία* (*diakonia*, "service") and Mary's *ἀκοή* (*akoē*, "listening") reflects a persistent dilemma within the Seventh-day Adventist tradition – the equilibrium between mission and meditation, proclamation and presence.[46] Adventist theology, grounded in eschatological urgency and practical holiness, has always emphasised action as a manifestation of preparedness for Christ's coming.[47] However, the narrative of Martha and Mary contests this inclination, demonstrating that the efficacy of mission is contingent upon the profundity of communion.[48]

Adventism emerged in the 19th-century context of revivalism and reform, when action, evangelism, and institutional advancement were perceived as indicators of spiritual fidelity.[49] This tradition has cultivated a unique culture of production, seen in the church's worldwide education system, hospital facilities, and social advocacy.[50] Nonetheless, this commendable enthusiasm has also resulted in an excessive focus on outward performance instead of internal reform.[51] Martha's "many things" serve as a metaphor for a church engrossed in activity yet frequently disconnected from contemplative communion with God.[52]

Theologically, *Mary's choice* points to the foundational principle of discipleship: authentic service must spring from a prior encounter with the Word.[53] The Adventist

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[45] Fortin, "Spiritual Formation and Mission in Adventism," 46–48.
[46] Luke 10:38–42 (NRSV).
[47] George R. Knight, *The Fat Lady and the Kingdom: Adventist Mission Confronts the Challenges of Institutionalism and Secularization* (Boise, ID: Pacific Press, 1995), 13–14.
[48] Richard Rice, *Believing, Behaving, Belonging: Finding New Love for the Church* (Roseville, CA: Association of Adventist Forums, 2002), 74.
[49] Morgan, *Adventism and the American Republic:*, 21.
[50] Fortin and Moon, *The Ellen G. White Encyclopedia*, 896.
[51] Knight, *The Apocalyptic Vision and the Neutering of Adventism*, 18.
[52] Canale, *Vision and Mission: How a Biblical Perspective Can Impact Mission*, 23.
[53] Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, 436.

understanding of sanctification as "a work of a lifetime"[54] implies an ongoing relationship with Christ that integrates action and adoration. This dynamic relationship reflects Ellen G. White's insistence that "all true obedience comes from the heart," and that "if we consent, He will so identify Himself with our thoughts and aims that obedience will become joy."[55] Devotion, then, is not a passive withdrawal from service but the sacred root from which ministry grows.[56]

Martha's *διακονία* is not condemned in itself; indeed, service (*diakonia*) is central to New Testament ecclesiology.[57] In *Acts 6:1–7*, the early church appoints deacons to ensure that practical ministry supports the Word, not replaces it.[58] Luke, therefore, does not juxtapose two rival virtues but reorders them: listening must precede doing.[59] For Adventists, this reordering has theological implications for worship, mission, and ecclesial life. The *sanctuary doctrine*, long understood as a metaphor for God's presence among His people, becomes a framework for integrating contemplation and service.[60] In the Most Holy Place, intercession precedes proclamation; prayer fuels mission.[61]

Furthermore, the Adventist emphasis on *Present Truth* necessitates a spirituality that listens before it speaks.[62] The prophetic task requires discernment rooted in communion with the divine.[63] Ellen White consistently warned that excessive busyness could "crowd out the quiet hour" with God, thereby weakening spiritual vitality.[64] Her reflections mirror Jesus' rebuke to Martha: not to cease serving, but to rediscover the centre of service.[65]

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[54] Ellen G. White, *The Sanctified Life* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1937), 85.
[55] White, *The Desire of Ages*, 668.
[56] Adams, *The Nature of Christ: Help for a Church Divided over Perfection*, 46.
[57] Nolland, *Luke 9:21–18:34*, *Word Biblical Commentary*, 607.
[58] Acts 6:1–7 (NRSV).
[59] Bock, *Luke 1:1–9:50*, 234.
[60] Alberto R. Timm, *The Sanctuary and the Three Angels' Messages: Integrating Adventist Theology* (Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute, 2016), 62.
[61] Leviticus 16:17–19 (NRSV).
[62] Ekkehardt Mueller, "Present Truth and Adventist Identity," *Journal of Adventist Mission Studies* 14, no. 1 (2018): 9.
[63] Ángel Manuel Rodríguez, *Message, Mission, and Unity of the Church* (Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute, 2013), 57.
[64] Ellen G. White, *Christian Service* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 1947), 96.
[65] Luke 10:41–42 (NA28).

In practical theology, the "Martha–Mary tension" exposes the underlying anthropology of Adventist spirituality. Humanity, as viewed through the Adventist lens, is holistic; physical, mental, and spiritual dimensions are inseparable.[66] When ministry is divorced from spiritual nurture, fragmentation ensues.[67] The *rest motif* in the Sabbath doctrine provides a theological corrective: true rest (*κατάπαυσις*, *katapausis*) symbolises the cessation of anxiety-driven labour and the restoration of divine fellowship (Heb. 4:9–10).[68] Sabbath, like Mary's listening, is not inactivity but relational presence.[69]

This theological paradigm redefines *mission* not as frantic activity but as participation in the life and purpose of God.[70] Jon Dybdahl argues that the church's most urgent need is to recover a "missional spirituality" that joins prayer and praxis, allowing the inner life to shape outward witness.[71] Similarly, Denis Fortin calls for "spiritual formation as the heart of Adventist identity," where devotion, study, and service are organically interdependent.[72] When Adventist members and leaders alike embrace this rhythm, Martha's burden becomes lighter because it is shared with Christ, who invites His followers to find rest in Him (Matt. 11:28–30).[73]

Thus, the theological thrust of Luke's narrative calls the Adventist Church to re-examine its understanding of success and sanctity.[74] It urges a movement from anxiety to attentiveness, from overactivity to intimacy, and from religious duty to relational discipleship.[75] Mary's chosen portion; the "good part" (*ἀγαθὴ μερίς*, *agathē meris*) ; remains the measure of all authentic ministry.[76]

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[66] Kiš, *Moral and Ethical Issues in the Church*, 14.
[67] Richard W. Coffen, *Streams of Light: Discovering the Joys of Experiencing God's Grace* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2007), 35.
[68] Hebrews 4:9–10 (NA28).
[69] Sigve K. Tonstad, *The Lost Meaning of the Seventh Day* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2009), 313.
[70] Jon Paulien, *Present Truth in the Real World: The Adventist Struggle to Keep and Share Faith in a Secular Society* (Boise, ID: Pacific Press, 1993), 102.
[71] Dybdahl, *Hunger: Satisfying the Longing of Your Soul*, 55.
[72] Fortin, "Spiritual Formation and Mission in Adventism," 45.
[73] Matthew 11:28–30 (NRSV).
[74] Knight, *Apocalyptic Vision*, 29.
[75] Dybdahl, *Hunger*, 61.
[76] Luke 10:42b (NA28).

Contextual Application; The Mary Paradigm for Contemporary Adventist Ministry

The story of Mary and Martha in Luke 10:38–42 is a good way for the Adventist Church to take a new look at how it sees the difference between love and service. In many Adventist communities, the church's day-to-day life is often marked by a heightened focus on outward acts of service; like evangelistic campaigns, community outreach, Sabbath School leadership, and institutional upkeep. This can come at the cost of deep spiritual connection and thoughtful teaching. This mismatch is a quiet reflection of Martha's state of mind, which Luke describes as περιεσπᾶτο (periespato; "was distracted") in verse 40, a word that means "pulled in various directions."[77] The way the text is written shows not only that it is busy, but also that it is broken up, which is a condition in which service replaces closeness with Christ.

The Mary model, on the other hand, is based on the word *παρακαθεσθεῖσα* (parakathestheisa; "having sat beside") in verse 39, which shows a position of intentional closeness to the Word.[78] Luke's participial construction makes it seem like he is doing something on purpose, not something that is happening to him. Mary's action is not giving up her job but changing how she shows her love. So, the story changes the meaning of faith from action to being open to God's revelations.[79] In an Adventist religious context, this becomes very important because the church has historically seen itself as a minority people, which has often led to an identity of mission urgency over quiet development.[80]

Ellen G. White's own commentary on this passage in *The Desire of Ages* underscores the primacy of listening before labouring: "Christ does not censure the work of Martha, but He corrects her spirit of worry which robs her of peace."[81] Thus, devotion (*ἀκούειν τὸν λόγον*; *akouein ton logon*, "to hear the word") precedes service (*διακονία*; *diakonia*, "ministry"), shaping the theological rhythm of discipleship.[82] Adventism, therefore,

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[77] Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, 436.
[78] Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, 449.
[79] Bovon, *Luke 2: A Commentary on the Gospel of Luke 9:51–19:27*, 68.
[80] Knight, *The Apocalyptic Vision and the Neutering of Adventism*, 24.
[81] White, *The Desire of Ages*, 525.
[82] Robert C. Tannehill, *Luke*, Abingdon New Testament Commentaries (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 182.

must rediscover the balance of the contemplative and the active; the listening ear and the serving hand.

These days, many Adventist ministers care more about quantifiable output than about inward development. In today's world, church growth figures, social media participation, and the growth of institutions are similar to Martha's table.[83] But the Mary model says that we should change our way of thinking from doing for God to being with God.[84] As digital preaching grows and service is more and more done through technology, the reflective model tells Christians that they cannot get close to Christ through computers or formulas.[85] This is important for pastoral practice because service must come from unity instead of just following church programs.[86]

In re-reading Luke's narrative through the Adventist lens, one finds that Mary's posture represents the very essence of the first angel's message; to proclaim the "everlasting gospel" (Revelation 14:6) in a posture of reverent awe. Her stillness mirrors the apocalyptic summons to "fear God and give Him glory" (Revelation 14:7), suggesting that genuine proclamation emerges from divine encounter.[87] Thus, the Mary paradigm is not antithetical to mission; it is its theological foundation.

Theologically, this paradigm challenges Adventists to confront their underlying anthropology of grace and works. The Greek term *μερὶς ἀγαθὴ* (*meris agathē*; "good portion") in verse 42 conveys a covenantal inheritance motif, recalling Old Testament imagery of the Lord as "my portion" (Psalm 16:5).[88] This intertextual resonance reframes Mary's act as covenant participation, not personal preference. By choosing the *agathē meris*, she anticipates eschatological communion with God; a foretaste of

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[83] Miroslav M. Kiš, "Adventist Identity and the Challenge of Postmodern Culture," *Journal of Adventist Theological Society* 11, no. 1–2 (2000): 195–209.
[84] Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1988), 26.
[85] John C. Peckham, *Divine Attributes: Knowing the Covenantal God of Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2021), 102.
[86] Pedro Iglesias, "The Ministry of Presence in a Digital Age," *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 58, no. 1 (2020): 65–82.
[87] Ranko Stefanović, *Revelation of Jesus Christ: Commentary on the Book of Revelation* (Berrien Springs: Andrews University Press, 2002), 441.
[88] Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke X–XXIV*, AB 28A (New York: Doubleday, 1985), 892.

Sabbath rest.[89] Adventism's Sabbath theology finds in Mary's stillness a hermeneutical key: rest is not withdrawal from mission but its sanctification.[90]

Moreover, the Mary paradigm critiques the gendered assumptions that have historically shaped ministry roles. Mary's act of sitting "at the Lord's feet" symbolises a rabbinic disciple's position, a role typically reserved for men.[91] Luke's inclusion of this detail is radical, signifying that spiritual intimacy and theological learning are not gender-exclusive.[92] Within Adventism, where leadership debates persist, Mary's example legitimises the spiritual authority of women who choose theological formation over mere functional service.[93] Her discipleship affirms that divine vocation transcends gendered ecclesiology.

In practical application, Adventist churches could reorient worship structures to allow for contemplative liturgies, *lectio divina*, and spaces for silence, which nurture the Mary posture.[94] Pastoral training should include spiritual direction and formation, not only administrative efficiency.[95] Furthermore, the Mary paradigm invites Adventists to integrate holistic ministry that values being before doing; an antidote to burnout in contemporary service.[96]

Ultimately, this exegetical reflection points to the theological heart of Adventism: to serve is sacred, but to sit and listen is salvific. The *Mary paradigm* thus restores to Adventist mission the forgotten grace of contemplation, without which all service becomes mere noise in the courts of heaven.[97]

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[89] Craig L. Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2012), 133
[90] John Baldwin, "Sabbath and Eschatological Rest," *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 8, no. 2 (1997): 115–132.
[91] Kenneth E. Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes: Cultural Studies in the Gospels* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2008), 216.
[92] Witherington III, *Women in the Ministry of Jesus:*, 91.
[93] Gillian M. Bediako, "Women and Theological Leadership in Contemporary Africa," *Africa Journal of Evangelical Theology* 38, no. 1 (2019): 27–44.
[94] Niels-Erik Andreasen, *Rest and Redemption: The Sabbath in the Old and New Testaments* (Berrien Springs: Andrews University Press, 2015), 72.
[95] Barry D. Oliver, "Spiritual Formation in Adventist Education," *Journal of Adventist Education* 69, no. 1 (2007): 12–18.
[96] Elizabeth Talbot, *Matthew: Prophecy Fulfilled* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 2019), 77.
[97] Norman R. Gulley, *Systematic Theology, Vol. 4: The Church and the Last Things* (Berrien Springs: Andrews University Press, 2016), 203.

Toward an Integrated Model of Devotion and Service in Adventist Theology

The dialectic between Mary's contemplation and Martha's service in Luke 10:38–42 unveils a foundational principle for constructing an integrated Adventist theology of devotion and ministry. In the narrative, both sisters embody legitimate expressions of discipleship; *διακονία* (*diakonia*; "service") and *μαθητεία* (*mathēteia* ; "discipleship"); yet Jesus' affirmation of Mary's choice, "she has chosen the good portion"[98] reveals that true service must proceed from relational devotion.[99] This exegetical insight challenges Adventism to balance its historical activism with spiritual intimacy, thereby recovering a theology that is both missional and contemplative.

Integrating Devotion as the Foundation of Mission

Adventist theology has historically emphasised eschatological proclamation and social witness, rooted in the Three Angels' Messages of Revelation 14:6–12.[100] However, the *Mary paradigm* suggests that proclamation without contemplation risks devolving into spiritual fatigue or institutional formalism.[101] Ellen G. White warned against this danger, asserting that "activity in Christ's service will be productive only when united with deep love for Him."[102] The integration of devotion and mission, therefore, is not optional but constitutive of authentic discipleship. The *ἀγαθὴ μερίς* (*agathē meris* ; "good portion") chosen by Mary symbolises the necessary primacy of presence over productivity.[103]

Theologically, this synthesis echoes the Johannine vision of abiding in Christ: "Without Me you can do nothing" (John 15:5). The Greek *μένω* (*menō* ; "to remain, abide") conveys permanence rather than momentary spirituality.[104] Adventist ministry, when shaped by this *menō* theology, becomes a continuous outflow of divine indwelling

[98] Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, 438.
[99] Bovon, *Luke 2: A Commentary on the Gospel of Luke 9:51–19:27*, 68.
[100] Stefanović, *Revelation of Jesus Christ: Commentary on the Book of Revelation*, 441.
[101] Kiš, "Adventist Identity and the Challenge of Postmodern Culture," 195–209.
[102] Ellen G. White, *Christ's Object Lessons* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1900), 102.
[103] Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, 449.
[104] D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 1991), 517.

rather than a succession of human initiatives.[105] Consequently, service (*διακονία*) must be understood as a service of communion; a visible manifestation of an invisible fellowship with God.[106]

Service as an Expression of Devotion

While Mary represents attentiveness, Martha personifies the external expression of faith. Adventist theology must resist dichotomising these roles, recognising instead their complementarity. Service is not the antithesis of devotion but its embodiment. The Apostle James captures this synthesis: "Faith without works is dead" (James 2:26). The Greek *ἔργον* (*ergon* ; "work") here signifies not mere activity but divinely inspired action.[107] Thus, when rooted in *ἀγάπη* (*agapē* ; "self-giving love"), service becomes the liturgy of devotion.[108]

Ellen White articulates this harmony in her classic line: "The strongest argument in favour of the gospel is a loving and lovable Christian."[109] The statement bridges contemplation and compassion, suggesting that character transformation precedes social transformation. The Adventist Church, therefore, must cultivate ministries that integrate *listening spirituality* with *loving service*.[110] In practical terms, this integration may involve embedding prayer retreats, mentorship programmes, and Sabbath reflection into evangelistic planning, ensuring that mission arises from divine encounter rather than obligation.[111]

The Sabbath as Theological Bridge

A uniquely Adventist contribution to this synthesis lies in its Sabbath theology. The Sabbath functions as a divinely instituted rhythm of contemplation and compassion;

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[105] Richard Rice, *The Reign of God: An Introduction to Christian Theology from a Seventh-day Adventist Perspective* (Berrien Springs: Andrews University Press, 2018), 228.
[106] Gulley, *Systematic Theology, Vol. 4: The Church and the Last Things*, 198.
[107] Peter H. Davids, *The Epistle of James: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 129.
[108] Dallas Willard, *The Great Omission: Reclaiming Jesus' Essential Teachings on Discipleship* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2006), 74.
[109] White, *Ministry of Healing*, 470.
[110] Oliver, "Spiritual Formation in Adventist Education," 12–18.
[111] Ruth Haley Barton, *Strengthening the Soul of Your Leadership* (Downers Grove: IVP Books, 2008), 53.

rest that restores readiness for service.[112] In Genesis 2:2–3, the verb שָׁבַת (*shābat* ; "to cease, rest") indicates not idleness but sanctified completion.[113] Similarly, in Luke's narrative, Mary's stillness reflects a Sabbath posture; a participation in God's rest amidst the chaos of daily ministry.[114]

Adventist theologians such as Niels-Erik Andreasen have stressed that the Sabbath is both "memorial of creation and rehearsal for redemption."[115] It embodies a theological rhythm wherein humanity learns to serve out of rest and to rest in service. The *Mary–Martha synthesis* thus becomes a lived Sabbath discipline: contemplation fuels service, and service culminates in renewed communion.[116] In this sense, Sabbath observance extends beyond liturgical compliance to become the template for balanced Christian existence.[117]

Ecclesiological Implications

The integrated model also bears ecclesiological significance. The Adventist Church, as *ekklesia* (ἐκκλησία ; "called-out assembly"), is called not merely to preach doctrine but to embody divine presence.[118] An overemphasis on doctrinal proclamation without spiritual formation risks producing a mechanistic faith.[119] Conversely, an inward piety detached from mission contradicts the incarnational nature of the Gospel.[120] The *Mary–Martha integration* provides a corrective, envisioning the church as both contemplative and missional, a community that listens and serves in harmonious rhythm.[121]

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[112] Niels-Erik Andreasen, *Rest and Redemption: The Sabbath in the Old and New Testaments* (Berrien Springs: Andrews University Press, 2015), 72.
[113] Gerhard F. Hasel, *The Sabbath in Scripture and History* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1982), 23.
[114] Baldwin, "Sabbath and Eschatological Rest," 115–132.
[115] Niels-Erik Andreasen, *Rest and Redemption*, 84.
[116] Richard M. Davidson, "Sabbath, Rest, and Holiness in the Old Testament," *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 32, no. 1–2 (1994): 17–26.
[117] Ángel Manuel Rodríguez, *Spiritual Gifts and Ministries in the Church* (Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute, 2013), 31.
[118] John C. Peckham, *Canonical Theology: The Biblical Canon, Sola Scriptura, and Theological Method* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016), 211.
[119] Raoul Dederen, *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology* (Hagerstown: Review and Herald, 2000), 681.
[120] Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, Vol. IV.3, 870.
[121] Richard N. Chowning, "Egalitarian Ecclesiology in Adventist Missiology," *Journal of Adventist Mission Studies* 14, no. 2 (2018): 55–70.

This ecclesial balance is seen in Acts 6:1–4, where the apostles appointed deacons to serve tables (*διακονεῖν τραπέζαις* ; *diakonein trapezais*, "to serve tables"), so they might "devote themselves to prayer and the ministry of the word".[122] The text embodies the dual call: both forms of service; physical and spiritual; are essential to the health of the community.[123] The Adventist Church must therefore cultivate leadership models that honour both the Marthas who serve and the Marys who sit, recognising each as indispensable to ecclesial vitality.[124]

Towards a Spiritual Ethic of Wholeness

Finally, this integrated model converges upon a spiritual ethic of wholeness. Wholeness (*shalom*) is not the absence of activity but the ordered harmony of being and doing.[125] In Adventist soteriology, sanctification is both relational and practical; the life of Christ reproduced in the believer's daily conduct.[126] As Paul writes, "The life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God" (Galatians 2:20). The Greek *ζῶ δὲ οὐκέτι ἐγώ* (*zō de ouketi egō* ; "I no longer live") conveys a total identification with divine life.[127]

Thus, Adventist spirituality must transcend mere behavioural orthodoxy to embrace transformative intimacy.[128] A theology of integrated devotion and service invites believers to experience the divine life not as dualistic tension but as holistic union; *contemplata aliis tradere* ("to hand on to others what has been contemplated"), in the Dominican sense.[129] This balance, embodied in the lives of both Mary and Martha, reflects the Trinitarian pattern of life itself: the Father's love expressed through the Son's service, sustained by the Spirit's indwelling presence.[130]

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[122] C. K. Barrett, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994), 311.
[123] John Stott, *The Spirit, the Church and the World: The Message of Acts* (Leicester: IVP, 1990), 121.
[124] Talbot, *Matthew: Prophecy Fulfilled* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 2019), 77.
[125] Cornelius Plantinga Jr., *Not the Way It's Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 10.
[126] Richard Rice, *The Reign of God*, 294.
[127] F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Galatians* (Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1982), 140.
[128] Norman Gulley, *Systematic Theology, Vol. 4*, 211.
[129] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, Q.188, Art.6.
[130] Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 215.

Through such synthesis, Adventism can recover its prophetic edge; proclaiming the soon return of Christ not merely through sermons and systems, but through lives that harmonise prayer and purpose, presence and proclamation.[131]

Conclusion

The narrative of Mary and Martha in Luke 10:38–42 emerges as a profound theological metaphor for the Adventist journey toward balanced discipleship. At its core lies the divine invitation to integrate listening and labour, contemplation and commission, presence and proclamation. Mary's posture of devotion represents the heart's anchorage in divine fellowship, while Martha's service reflects the hands engaged in the mission of compassion. Together, they form a composite portrait of authentic discipleship in which devotion fuels service and service embodies devotion. This balance, when properly understood, redefines ministry not as mere ecclesial duty but as the overflow of a Christ-centred life.

In the broader Adventist context, such synthesis challenges the Church to transcend both the extremes of religious activism and passive piety. The eschatological urgency of Adventism must therefore be sustained by the intimacy of daily communion with Christ. The Sabbath, as a theological bridge between rest and mission, becomes the rhythmic reminder that God's work in us precedes and empowers God's work through us. When believers abide in divine presence, their service acquires spiritual depth and enduring impact. Hence, the Church's evangelistic task is not to choose between Mary's stillness and Martha's service, but to embody both within a single spiritual rhythm of rest and readiness.

Ultimately, the integration of devotion and service restores wholeness to Christian experience and fidelity to the Adventist witness. It calls every believer to live from the inner sanctuary of communion, allowing that sacred fellowship to animate acts of mercy, justice, and proclamation. The Church that learns to listen before it labours, to rest before it runs, and to worship before it works becomes a living expression of the everlasting gospel. In that synthesis, the Adventist community finds not only its

[131] Ellen G. White, *Acts of the Apostles* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1911), 9.

theological centre but also its spiritual identity; a people who serve because they love, and love because they have first listened at the Master's feet.

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CHAPTER 42

A THEOLOGICAL EXAMINATION OF CLERICAL EXCLUSIVISM AND ITS IMPACT ON THE MISSION OF THE CONTEMPORARY CHURCH

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Abstract

Clerical exclusivism describes a pattern in which ministerial authority, responsibility, and spiritual agency become concentrated in a distinct clerical class, while lay believers function mainly as recipients of ministry. This study examines the theological and historical foundations of that pattern and its implications for the mission of the contemporary Church. Using a theological and historical-analytical approach, it interprets Ephesians 4:11–16, 1 Peter 2:9, and Acts 6:1–7 alongside scholarship on pastoral leadership, ecclesiology, clericalism, and the priesthood of all believers. The analysis distinguishes legitimate differentiated leadership from clerical monopoly. It argues that historical processes contributed to increasingly formal clergy-laity distinctions, but historical development alone does not determine theological legitimacy; ecclesial structures must be evaluated against biblical criteria of shared priestly identity, differentiated gifts and offices, equipping, service, accountability, and participation in mission. The study further finds that clerical exclusivism can restrict lay participation and may weaken the Church's missional capacity when believers are treated primarily as recipients rather than participants. Pastoral leadership is therefore better understood as an equipping and enabling ministry that forms and mobilizes the whole body of Christ for service. The study recommends leadership models that preserve responsible oversight while widening meaningful participation in discipleship, witness, and ministry.

***Keywords**: Clerical exclusivism, Pastoral ministry, Hierarchical priesthood, clergy and laity, Mission*

INTRODUCTION

The understanding of pastoral ministry in the contemporary church appears to be shaped by a persistent tension between two competing theological visions. On the one hand, the New Testament presents ministry as a shared responsibility of the whole body of Christ, where all believers participate in the mission of God. On the other hand, many church structures function in a way that places ministry almost entirely in the hands of ordained clergy. This second pattern is often described as clerical exclusivism, a system in which authority, responsibility, and spiritual agency are largely restricted to a distinct clerical class. It may be observed that this hierarchical distinction between clergy and the laity did not emerge in a vacuum. Historical developments within the early and medieval Church appear to have contributed to the gradual elevation of the clergy as the primary bearers of spiritual authority, while the laity became increasingly passive in the life of the Church.[1] At the same time, the Protestant Reformation sought to challenge this imbalance by recovering the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers, emphasizing that all Christians have direct access to God and share in the mission of the Church.[2]

However, despite this theological correction, forms of clericalism continue to appear in a range of contemporary church settings. This raises a critical question: Why does clerical exclusivism persist even in traditions that affirm the priesthood of all believers? A simplistic answer that blames only church structures is insufficient. The literature suggests that clerical exclusivism may be reinforced by institutional arrangements, theological misunderstandings, and, in some contexts, socio-cultural patterns of authority.[3] More importantly, the literature reveals an unresolved theological question. Although substantial scholarship has examined pastoral office, ecclesial authority, the

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[1] Carl A. Volz, *The Pastoral Office in the Early Church* (St. Paul, MN: Luther Northwestern Theological Seminary, 1989); Christine Trevett, *Montanism: Gender, Authority and the New Prophecy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).
[2] W. A. Dreyer, "The Priesthood of Believers: The Forgotten Legacy of the Reformation," *HTS Teologiese Studies* 76, no. 4 (2020); Timothy Wengert, *The Priesthood of All Believers and Other Pious Myths* (Valparaiso, IN: Valparaiso University, 2005).
[3] Vincent Kundukulam, "Authority of the Clergy: Socio-Theological Reflections," *Asian Horizons* 15, no. 1 (2021); George Therukattil, "Clericalism in the Church," *Asian Horizons* 15, no. 1 (2021).

priesthood of all believers, and lay participation, these discussions do not always focus specifically on when differentiated ministry becomes clerical exclusivism.[4] The issue, therefore, is not the mere existence of differentiated offices, but whether authority and ministry are configured in ways consistent with the New Testament's corporate priestly identity, differentiated gifts, equipping functions, and shared participation in mission. Where ministry is effectively restricted to clergy, the Church's capacity for witness, discipleship, and community engagement may be reduced.[5] This raises an important missiological concern: under what conditions does clerical exclusivism stand in tension with the Church's participation in the missio Dei?

In response to this problem, this paper seeks to examine the theological foundations and historical development of clerical exclusivism and to evaluate its impact on the mission of the contemporary Church. The study will engage key biblical texts, including Ephesians 4:11–16, 1 Peter 2:9, and Acts 6:1–7, while also interacting with relevant theological scholarship on pastoral ministry, ecclesiology, and lay participation. The central argument advanced in this paper is that pastoral ministry, when understood biblically, may be better described as an equipping function rather than an exclusive office of ministry performance. Such a perspective challenges clerical exclusivism and calls for a reconfiguration of church leadership that enables the active participation of all believers in the mission of God.

Scholarship on pastoral ministry, clericalism, ecclesial office, and the priesthood of all believers spans several theological traditions and does not speak with one voice. Some studies defend differentiated ordained leadership, others stress congregational or corporate priestly participation, and still others criticize clericalism as a distortion of legitimate office. Rather than claiming that scholarship has ignored the clergy-laity question, this review identifies a more specific problem: the need to distinguish the theological legitimacy of differentiated leadership from forms of clerical exclusivism that monopolize ministry and weaken the vocation of the whole body. The literature is

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[4] Christopher W. Goff, *Measuring the Clergy/Laity Gap and Its Effect on Church Health and Outreach* (Wilmore, KY: Asbury Theological Seminary, 2008); Alan Parker, *The Ecclesiological Implications of the Priesthood of All Believers* (Collegedale, TN: Southern Adventist University, 2017).
[5] G. Lotter and T. van Aarde, "A Rediscovery of the Priesthood of Believers in Ephesians 4:1–16," *In die Skriflig* 51, no. 2 (2017); S. Joseph Kidder, *The Big Four: Secrets to a Thriving Church Family* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2009).

therefore evaluated in three related areas: historical development, theological interpretation, and missional implications.

Historical Development of Clericalism

Several scholars trace the development of clerical structures to early church arrangements that gradually distinguished recognized leaders from other believers. Volz suggests that the pastoral office in the early Church evolved in response to practical needs for order and leadership rather than from a single, fixed institutional blueprint.[6] Trevett's study of Montanism provides evidence that early Christianity contained competing claims to authority and diverse leadership patterns. This diversity is historically significant, but it does not by itself establish that alternative movements were normatively preferable to emerging ecclesial offices.[7] Historical development must therefore be distinguished from theological evaluation. The fact that an office or structure developed over time neither proves nor disproves its legitimacy. Stitzinger, for example, describes the historical development of pastoral ministry; the theological question that remains is whether particular later forms of authority accord with New Testament criteria for leadership, service, equipping, accountability, and the participation of the whole Church.[8] The historical evidence is thus used here to identify development and diversity, while theological legitimacy is assessed separately through biblical and ecclesiological criteria.

The Priesthood of All Believers: Recovery and Misinterpretation.

A major stream of scholarship emphasizes the recovery of the priesthood of all believers, especially within Reformation theology. Dreyer argues that this doctrine was central to the Reformation but has been largely forgotten in modern church practice.[9] Similarly, Wengert challenges common misunderstandings of the doctrine, noting that it does not eliminate leadership but rather redefines it in terms of shared participation in Christ's priesthood.[10] However, not all scholars agree on how this doctrine should function. Leeman, from a Baptist perspective, maintains a distinction between the

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[6] Carl A. Volz, *The Pastoral Office in the Early Church* (St. Paul, MN: Luther Northwestern Theological Seminary, 1989).
[7] Christine Trevett, *Montanism: Gender, Authority and the New Prophecy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).
[8] F. James Stitzinger, "Pastoral Ministry in History," *The Master's Seminary Journal* 6, no. 2 (1995).
[9] W. A. Dreyer, "The Priesthood of Believers," *HTS Teologiese Studies* 76, no. 4 (2020).
[10] Timothy Wengert, *The Priesthood of All Believers and Other Pious Myths* (Valparaiso, IN: Valparaiso University, 2005).

authority of the congregation and the role of church leaders, suggesting that some level of structured leadership remains necessary.[11] In the same way, Razafiarivony argues that Luther did not reject ordained ministry but sought to correct its misuse.[12] This creates a tension in the literature. On the one side, the priesthood of all believers is used to challenge clerical dominance. On the other side, it is interpreted in ways that still preserve strong clerical structures. As Ali points out, the doctrine itself has often been misunderstood, leading to both exaggeration and the limitation of its implications.[13] The result is that the concept is widely affirmed but rarely applied in a way that transforms church practice.

Clergy-Laity Divide and Church Practice

A number of contemporary studies focus on the practical effects of the clergy-laity divide. Goff identifies a measurable gap between the clergy and the laity and argues that this divide negatively affects church health and outreach.[14] In a similar vein, Clinton and Doucette describe clericalism as a systemic dysfunction that limits participation and creates unhealthy dependence on the clergy.[15] Yet, even here, a critical weakness appears. Many of these studies focus on the effects rather than the causes. They highlight the problems created by clericalism but do not sufficiently examine the deeper theological assumptions that sustain it. Kundukulam, for instance, explores the authority of the clergy in socio-theological terms but does not fully challenge whether such authority should remain centralized.[16] This raises an important concern: if the root theological assumptions are not addressed, then practical reforms may only produce surface-level changes.

Pastoral Ministry as Equipping: A Biblical Reorientation

Another important body of literature seeks to redefine pastoral ministry in more biblical terms. Lotter and van Aarde argue from Ephesians 4:11-16 that church leaders are given to equip believers for ministry, not to replace them.[17] Similarly, Fosu's hermeneutical

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[11] Jonathan Leeman, "A Baptist View of the Royal Priesthood of All Believers," *SBJT* 23, no. 1 (2019).
[12] Davidson Razafiarivony, "A Biblical Assessment of Luther's View," *American Journal of Biblical Theology* 22, no. 22 (2021).
[13] Aweis A. Ali, "Dispelling the Myth of Martin Luther's Priesthood," *ARJESS* 6, no. 2 (2019).
[14] Christopher W. Goff, *Measuring the Clergy/Laity Gap* (Wilmore, KY: Asbury Theological Seminary, 2008).
[15] Kevin Clinton and Donna B. Doucette, *Confronting the Systemic Dysfunction of Clericalism* (2019).
[16] Vincent Kundukulam, "Authority of the Clergy," *Asian Horizons* 15, no. 1 (2021).
[17] G. Lotter and T. van Aarde, "A Rediscovery of the Priesthood of Believers," *In die Skriflig* 51, no. 2 (2017).

reflections on Pauline theology emphasize that pastoral roles are functional and missional rather than hierarchical.[18] Oloyede also highlights the biblical image of shepherding, suggesting that pastoral leadership involves guidance and care rather than domination.[19] These perspectives are further supported by Kidder, who links shared ministry to church growth and vitality.[20] However, even these constructive approaches often assume that churches will naturally adopt equipping models once they are taught. This assumption may be overly optimistic. It overlooks the strong cultural, institutional, and psychological factors that continue to reinforce clerical exclusivism, especially in contexts where authority is highly valued.

The Research Gap

This review therefore identifies a focused research gap rather than an absence of scholarship. Historical, Protestant, congregational, and contemporary ecclesiological studies have addressed pastoral office, ordained leadership, the priesthood of all believers, and clergy-laity relations from different perspectives. What requires further synthesis is the boundary between legitimate differentiated leadership and clerical exclusivism: at what point does an office intended to order and equip the Church become a structure that monopolizes ministry and diminishes the vocation of other believers? This paper addresses that question by bringing historical development, biblical theology, ecclesiology, and missional implications into a single analytical framework.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative theological and historical-analytical methodology to examine clerical exclusivism and its implications for the mission of the contemporary Church. The documentary corpus consists of the three focal New Testament passages named in the study (Ephesians 4:11–16, 1 Peter 2:9, and Acts 6:1–7) and published theological and historical works cited in the literature review on pastoral office, clericalism, ecclesial authority, lay ministry, and the priesthood of all believers. Sources were selected purposively for direct relevance to at least one of these analytical categories. Historically, the analysis moves from New Testament patterns of ministry

[18] John Kwasi Fosu, "Theological Hermeneutical Reflections," *ERATS* 11, no. 9 (2025).
[19] Sunday Akinwale Oloyede, "Biblical Concept of Shepherding," *African Theological Journal*.
[20] S. Joseph Kidder, *The Big Four* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2009).

through early-church institutional development and Reformation recovery of the priesthood of believers to contemporary discussions of clericalism and mission. The procedure has three stages: first, the focal biblical texts are interpreted canonically and theologically to establish criteria concerning corporate priestly identity, differentiated gifts and offices, equipping, service, and participation; second, historical sources are examined to trace how clergy-laity distinctions developed; third, contemporary theological studies are compared with those criteria to assess when differentiated leadership becomes clerical exclusivism. Because the study is documentary rather than empirical, claims about contemporary practice are presented as arguments or implications supported by the selected literature, not as statistically representative findings about all churches.

Theological Approach

The theological dimension of this study evaluates clerical exclusivism in light of biblical teaching and doctrinal reflection. Ephesians 4:11–16, 1 Peter 2:9, and Acts 6:1–7 are examined together to explore the nature and purpose of ministry within the Church. These texts are not treated as isolated proof-texts but interpreted within their broader canonical and theological contexts.[21] Ephesians 4 emphasizes differentiated gifts and leadership functions directed toward equipping the saints and building up the body; 1 Peter 2:9 identifies the believing community corporately as a royal priesthood; and Acts 6:1–7 portrays an ordered distribution of responsibilities in response to a concrete ministerial need. Hence, these passages support neither an undifferentiated church without recognized leadership nor a clerical monopoly of ministry. As Lotter and van Aarde suggest, ministry should be understood within the biblical vision of the Church as a body in which all members have a role to play.[22] Similarly, Fosu's reflections on Pauline theology indicate that ministry roles are functional and oriented toward building up the community rather than establishing self-serving hierarchies.[23] This approach therefore distinguishes corporate priestly identity from differentiated ecclesial office. The priesthood of all believers does not, by itself, abolish recognized leadership; rather, the relevant question is whether leadership equips the whole body

[21] G. Lotter and T. van Aarde, "A Rediscovery of the Priesthood of Believers," *In die Skriflig* 51, no. 2 (2017); John Kwasi Fosu, "Theological Hermeneutical Reflections," *ERATS* 11, no. 9 (2025).
[22] Lotter and van Aarde, "Priesthood of Believers."
[23] Fosu, "Hermeneutical Reflections."

for service or absorbs the ministry of the body into a clerical class. Different traditions may answer questions of office differently, so the study engages multiple perspectives rather than treating one ecclesial polity as self-evidently normative.

Historical-Analytical Approach

The historical dimension examines the development of clerical structures across the periods represented in the documentary corpus: New Testament patterns of ministry, early-church institutional development, Reformation debates over the priesthood of believers, and contemporary discussions of clericalism. The analysis asks how recognized offices developed, what problems they were intended to address, and how their functions changed over time. Volz, for example, argues that early church leadership structures developed gradually in response to practical needs rather than fixed institutional commands.[24] Jibiliza likewise shows that pastoral care and ministerial practice have been shaped by changing historical contexts.[25] These observations establish historical contingency, not theological illegitimacy. Accordingly, the study does not infer that a structure is invalid merely because it developed historically. Instead, historical findings are tested against the biblical and ecclesiological criteria established in the theological analysis: service, equipping, accountability, corporate priestly identity, differentiated gifts, and meaningful participation of the whole Church in mission.

Analytical and Critical Framework

Beyond description, this study employs a critical analytical framework to evaluate the assumptions underlying clerical exclusivism. This includes examining:

- how authority is defined and distributed within the Church;
- how ministry roles are interpreted theologically; and
- how these interpretations affect the Church's mission.

This framework is necessary because, as Goff notes, the clergy-laity divide is not only structural but also conceptual, shaping how believers understand their identity and role

[24] Carl A. Volz, *The Pastoral Office in the Early Church* (St. Paul, MN: Luther Northwestern Theological Seminary, 1989).
[25] Xolisa Jibiliza, "The Evolution of Pastoral Care Ministry," *Pharos Journal of Theology* 102 (2021).

in the Church.[26] Clinton and Doucette further suggest that clericalism can become a systemic problem that affects the entire life of the Church.[27] By integrating theological reflection with historical analysis and critical evaluation, this study seeks to move beyond mere description toward a deeper understanding of the problem.

Scope and Delimitation

This study focuses primarily on:

- New Testament theological perspectives on ministry;
- historical developments of clerical structures; and
- contemporary implications, particularly within the African context.

It does not attempt to provide a full sociological analysis of church systems, nor does it examine every denominational structure in detail. Instead, it aims to offer a theologically grounded analysis that can be applied across different church traditions.

Results and Discussion

The Historical Emergence of Clerical Exclusivism

The documentary analysis suggests that clerical exclusivism should not be equated with the mere existence of recognized leaders. Early Christian communities display both differentiated functions and broad participation in ministry.[28] As the Church expanded, leadership structures became more formalized. Volz notes that the pastoral office developed in response to needs for order and doctrinal stability.[29] Such development could serve legitimate ecclesial purposes while also creating conditions in which clergy-laity distinctions became more pronounced. Trevett's work on Montanism is best read here as evidence of contested and diverse authority patterns in early Christianity, not as proof that non-hierarchical alternatives were necessarily normatively superior.In light of these historical developments, past experience should be critically examined so that problematic patterns are not reproduced uncritically[30] The theological issue is

[26] Christopher W. Goff, *Measuring the Clergy/Laity Gap* (Wilmore, KY: Asbury Theological Seminary, 2008).
[27] Kevin Clinton and Donna B. Doucette, *Confronting the Systemic Dysfunction of Clericalism* (2019).
[28] G. Lotter and T. van Aarde, "A Rediscovery of the Priesthood of Believers," *In die Skriflig* 51, no. 2 (2017).
[29] Carl A. Volz, *The Pastoral Office in the Early Church* (St. Paul, MN: Luther Northwestern Theological Seminary, 1989).
[30] Emmanuel O. Eregare, "A Historical Analysis of Church Politics and Politicking in the 21st Century" in Emmanuel O. Eregare ed *A Survey of Church Politics in the Twenty-first Century: Re-examining*

therefore not whether a structure developed historically, but how a developed structure functions when tested against the study's biblical criteria. Historical contingency leaves the question of legitimacy open; legitimacy depends on whether authority serves the building up of the body, preserves accountability, and equips rather than displaces the ministry of other believers.

Theological Tension: Priesthood of All Believers vs. Clerical Authority

A central tension identified in this study lies between the corporate priestly identity of believers and differentiated ecclesial authority. First Peter 2:9 addresses believers collectively as a 'royal priesthood,' grounding shared access to God and a common vocation of witness. That corporate identity, however, does not by itself settle the question of differentiated offices. Ephesians 4:11–16 explicitly names differentiated ministerial gifts while directing them toward the equipping and maturation of the whole body. Dreyer argues that the Reformation sought to recover the active role of all believers, yet this vision has often remained unrealized in practice.[31] Wengert likewise cautions against interpretations of the priesthood of believers that either reduce it to a slogan or use it to erase legitimate ministerial order.[32]

Some scholars, such as Leeman, argue that distinctions between leaders and members can serve order and accountability.[33] This concern need not conflict with the priesthood of all believers. Acts 6:1–7 is instructive because the Jerusalem community responds to a neglected distribution by differentiating responsibilities: the Twelve identify a ministry problem, the wider community participates in selecting seven persons, and specific responsibilities are entrusted to them. The passage therefore combines recognized leadership, communal participation, delegation, and differentiated service. It neither depicts ministry as the exclusive possession of a clerical class nor presents an undifferentiated community without offices. Read alongside Ephesians 4 and 1 Peter 2, Acts 6 supports the study's central distinction: differentiated leadership can be legitimate when it enables the community's ministry, whereas clerical exclusivism

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Religion-State Governance Leadership and Laities (Nigeria: Babcock University Press, 2018), 65; cf Christine Trevett, *Montanism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

[31] W. A. Dreyer, "The Priesthood of Believers," *HTS Teologiese Studies* 76, no. 4 (2020).

[32] Timothy Wengert, *The Priesthood of All Believers* (Valparaiso, IN: Valparaiso University, 2005).

[33] Jonathan Leeman, "A Baptist View," *SBJT* 23, no. 1 (2019).

arises when authority becomes a monopoly that renders the wider body functionally passive.

Why Clerical Exclusivism Persists

The literature considered in this study identifies several factors that may help explain the persistence of clerical exclusivism, including in African church contexts.The literature considered in this study suggests several possible factors in the persistence of clerical exclusivism. Because the documentary corpus does not provide a representative empirical sample of African churches, these factors should be treated as analytical possibilities rather than generalizations about African authority cultures. Kundukulam's socio-theological discussion, for example, indicates that cultural understandings of status and authority can interact with ecclesial authority in particular settings.[34] Institutional convenience may also contribute: concentrating decisions and ministerial performance in a small leadership group can appear administratively efficient, although it may reduce broader participation. This is an analytical inference from the clericalism literature rather than an empirically demonstrated pattern across all churches. A further factor is theological misunderstanding. As Ali argues, the priesthood of all believers has often been misinterpreted or underdeveloped in church teaching.This may create administrative efficiency, but it can also reduce broader participation in ministry.[35] The evidence therefore supports a cautious conclusion: clerical exclusivism may be sustained by interacting theological, institutional, and socio-cultural factors, but the relative importance of those factors must be established within specific denominations and local contexts through further empirical research.

Impact on the Mission of the Church

The documentary evidence indicates that clerical exclusivism can have significant implications for the mission of the Church. Where ministry is concentrated in the hands of clergy and lay participation is correspondingly restricted, outreach, discipleship, and community engagement may be weakened. Goff's research associates a strong clergy-laity gap with problems in church health and outreach.[36] Kidder likewise links active

[34] Vincent Kundukulam, "Authority of the Clergy," *Asian Horizons* 15, no. 1 (2021).
[35] Aweis A. Ali, "Dispelling the Myth," *ARJESS* 6, no. 2 (2019).
[36] Christopher W. Goff, *Measuring the Clergy/Laity Gap* (2008).

member involvement with church vitality.[37] These studies support a missiological concern rather than a universal causal claim. One potential ecclesiological consequence of clerical exclusivism is that believers may come to understand themselves primarily as recipients rather than participants in mission. In such circumstances, the Church risks functioning more like a religious service provider than a missionary body. This inference coheres with the concept of missio Dei insofar as God's mission calls the whole people of God into witness and service. Lotter and van Aarde therefore argue that recovering the priesthood of believers is important for a missional understanding of the Church.[38] Yet removing or weakening leadership structures would not automatically resolve the problem. The evidence instead points toward redefining leadership so that responsible oversight, theological formation, accountability, and broad participation reinforce rather than displace one another.

Toward a Theological Reconfiguration of Pastoral Ministry

The study points toward a necessary reconfiguration of pastoral ministry. Rather than viewing pastors as the primary performers of ministry, the New Testament appears to present them as equippers of the community. Ephesians 4:12, in particular, suggests that the role of church leaders is to prepare believers for works of service. Fosu's interpretation of Pauline theology supports this functional understanding of ministry roles.[39] In a similar way, Oloyede's study of shepherding emphasizes guidance and care rather than control.[40] However, this redefinition requires more than theoretical agreement. It demands a shift in:

- how authority is understood;
- how ministry is practiced; and
- how believers are trained.

Without such changes, the language of the priesthood of all believers may continue to exist without having a real impact.

Conclusion

[37] S. Joseph Kidder, *The Big Four* (2009).
[38] Lotter and van Aarde, "Priesthood of Believers."
[39] John Kwasi Fosu, "Hermeneutical Reflections," *ERATS* 11, no. 9 (2025).
[40] Sunday Akinwale Oloyede, "Biblical Concept of Shepherding."

This study has examined clerical exclusivism as a theological and historical phenomenon and evaluated its implications for the mission of the contemporary Church. The analysis does not reject differentiated ecclesial office. Rather, it argues that historical development must be distinguished from theological legitimacy and that recognized leadership should be tested by biblical criteria of service, equipping, accountability, corporate priestly identity, differentiated gifts, and participation in mission.[41] The doctrine of the priesthood of all believers therefore need not abolish ordained or recognized leadership; it challenges forms of leadership that absorb the ministry of the whole body into a clerical class.[42] The study further suggests that clerical exclusivism may be reinforced by theological misunderstanding, institutional habits, and context-specific patterns of authority.[43] Because the study is documentary and not an empirical survey of African or West African churches, these contextual factors should not be generalized beyond the evidence considered.

In light of these findings, it may be concluded that clerical exclusivism has the potential to limit the missional capacity of the Church. When ministry is concentrated in the hands of a few, the broader body of Christ may not be fully engaged in the work of discipleship, evangelism, and community transformation. However, this conclusion does not suggest that leadership structures should be removed. Rather, it points to the need for a theological reorientation of pastoral ministry, one that understands leadership as equipping and enabling the whole Church to participate in the mission of God.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, several recommendations may be proposed.

First, churches may need to rethink the theology of pastoral ministry. Instead of viewing pastors primarily as performers of ministry, greater emphasis could be placed on their role as equippers of believers, in line with the New Testament vision reflected in

[41] Carl A. Volz, *The Pastoral Office in the Early Church* (St. Paul, MN: Luther Northwestern Theological Seminary, 1989); Xolisa Jibiliza, "The Evolution of Pastoral Care Ministry," *Pharos Journal of Theology* 102 (2021).

[42] W. A. Dreyer, "The Priesthood of Believers," *HTS Teologiese Studies* 76, no. 4 (2020); Timothy Wengert, *The Priesthood of All Believers and Other Pious Myths* (Valparaiso, IN: Valparaiso University, 2005).

[43] Vincent Kundukulam, "Authority of the Clergy," *Asian Horizons* 15, no. 1 (2021); Kevin Clinton and Donna B. Doucette, *Confronting the Systemic Dysfunction of Clericalism* (2019).

Ephesians 4:11–16.[44] Second, intentional theological education at the congregational level should clarify both the priestly vocation of all believers and the legitimate functions of differentiated leadership. Third, church structures may be re-examined to encourage shared responsibility without abandoning order or accountability. Fourth, churches working in particular African contexts should assess their own local patterns of authority rather than assuming a single African leadership culture. Context-specific empirical research should determine where cultural expectations reinforce healthy service-oriented leadership and where they contribute to clerical monopoly.

Suggestions for Further Research

This study has focused primarily on theological and historical analysis. Further research may explore practical models for implementing the priesthood of all believers within specific church contexts. In addition, empirical studies could be conducted to examine how different leadership structures affect church growth, participation, and mission in various cultural settings. Such research may provide valuable insights into how theological principles can be translated into effective practice. Finally, future studies may also investigate the relationship between clericalism and other dimensions of church life, such as gender roles, power dynamics, and institutional accountability. These areas may reveal additional factors that contribute to the persistence of clerical exclusivism.

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[44] G. Lotter and T. van Aarde, "A Rediscovery of the Priesthood of Believers," *In die Skriflig* 51, no. 2 (2017).

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