



Mother Tongue Biblical Hermeneutics within the Context of African Biblical Hermeneutics: It's Origin, Trends and Challenges

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ABSTRACT

This study delves into the intricate landscape of Mother Tongue Biblical Hermeneutics within the context of African Biblical Hermeneutics, aiming to unravel its origins, discern trends, and confront challenges. Employing a qualitative research methodology grounded in extensive literature review and critical analysis, this investigation explores the evolution and current state of Mother Tongue Biblical Hermeneutics in the African context. Findings underscore the significance of linguistic and cultural nuances in biblical interpretation, emphasizing the role of indigenous languages in shaping contextual understanding and relevance. Moreover, the study identifies persistent challenges including colonial legacies, linguistic imperialism, and theological biases that impede the full realization of Mother Tongue Biblical Hermeneutics. In light of these findings, recommendations are proposed to foster the integration of indigenous languages into biblical scholarship, advocate for linguistic diversity, and promote inclusivity in theological discourse. Ultimately, this study contributes to scholarship by illuminating the vital intersection of language, culture, and interpretation in African Biblical Hermeneutics, thereby enriching theological dialogue and advancing decolonial approaches to biblical studies.

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INTRODUCTION

Biblical interpretation has been a fundamental endeavor within theological scholarship, shaping religious discourse, and informing cultural practices across diverse contexts. In the African context, the process of biblical hermeneutics has been particularly nuanced, reflecting the intricate interplay of indigenous cultures, colonial legacies, and contemporary theological paradigms. Within this complex tapestry, one emerging area of inquiry that has garnered increasing attention is Mother Tongue Biblical Hermeneutics. This approach advocates for the utilization of indigenous languages as lenses through which to interpret and understand the biblical text, emphasizing the importance of linguistic and cultural context in the interpretation process.

Despite the growing recognition of the significance of Mother Tongue Biblical Hermeneutics within the broader framework of African Biblical Hermeneutics, there remains a notable gap in

knowledge regarding its origins, trends, and challenges. While scholars have explored various aspects of biblical interpretation in Africa, there exists a need for a comprehensive examination specifically focused on Mother Tongue Hermeneutics. Understanding the historical development, current trends, and persistent challenges associated with this approach is crucial for advancing theological scholarship, promoting cultural inclusivity, and addressing the complexities of biblical interpretation in diverse African contexts.

This study seeks to address this gap by conducting a rigorous exploration of Mother Tongue Biblical Hermeneutics within the context of African Biblical Hermeneutics. By examining its origins, tracing its historical trajectory, identifying prevailing trends, and analyzing the challenges it faces, this research aims to provide valuable insights into the evolving landscape of biblical interpretation in Africa. Through this investigation, the study endeavors to contribute to a deeper understanding of the role of indigenous languages in shaping theological discourse, elucidate the complexities inherent in cross-cultural biblical interpretation, and offer recommendations for fostering inclusivity and diversity within theological education and practice.

Mother-Tongue Biblical Hermeneutics in Recent Scholarship

Several scholars have made significant contributions to the field of Mother Tongue Biblical Hermeneutics, enriching our understanding of the intersection between language, culture, and biblical interpretation within diverse African contexts. According to Andrew Mbuvi, African biblical Hermeneutics (referred to as ABH) is a developing field, much like the discipline of Mother-Tongue Biblical Hermeneutics.¹ Amevenku and Boaheng assert that, African Biblical Hermeneutics is the scholarly analysis and interpretation of the Bible from an African standpoint, influenced by African worldviews and issues.² To develop an authentic African Christian theology, it is essential to interpret the Bible through an African lens. This approach to African biblical interpretation forms the foundation for creating genuine African Christian theologies.³ J. S. Mbiti contends that a successful theology requires a solid biblical grounding, and African theology has started to evolve based on this fundamental principle.⁴ Justin Ukpong explains that, African Biblical Hermeneutics aims to facilitate a meaningful interaction between the biblical scriptures and the diverse African environments, enabling the scriptures to engage with and be influenced by the various socio-cultural and political-economic conditions in Africa.⁵

From the perspective of Gerald West, the effort to connect biblical texts with African contexts is guided by the practical understanding of biblical interpretation in Africa, which highlights that interpreting the Bible is not merely about understanding the text, but rather about influencing change in the African context.⁶ This approach suggests that African Biblical Hermeneutics is focused on context and the reader's perspective.

West argues that, in African biblical hermeneutics, interpreting the biblical text is always seen as a means to an end rather than an end in itself. The ultimate goal of biblical interpretation is to bring about change in the African context. A progressive hermeneutic approach in an African context will be highly significant and applicable to the diverse African settings.⁷ Dogara Manomi concludes by saying that, African Biblical Hermeneutics focuses on context and the reader and this has led to various interpretative methods being used, such as inculturation biblical hermeneutics, mother-tongue biblical

¹ Andrew M Mbuvi, "African Biblical Studies: An Introduction to an Emerging Discipline," *Currents in Biblical Research* 15, no. 2 (2017): 149–78.

² Frederick Mawusi Amevenku and Isaac Boaheng, *Biblical Exegesis in African Context* (Vernon Press, 2021), 59-77.

³ Amevenku and Boaheng, *Biblical Exegesis in African Context*, 63.

⁴ John Mbiti, "The Biblical Basis for Present Trends in African Theology," *Occasional Bulletin of Missionary Research* 4, no. 3 (1980): 122.

⁵ Justin S Ukpong, "Developments in Biblical Interpretation in Africa. Historical and Hermeneutical Directions," in *The Bible in Africa* (Brill, 2000), 11.

⁶ Gerald O West, "Biblical Hermeneutics in Africa," *African Theology on the Way: Current Conversations*, 2010, 22.

⁷ Dogara Ishaya Manomi, "What Does Biblical" Exegethics" Do?: Method, Trajectories, and Reflections from an African Context," *What Does Theology Do, Actually?*, 2020, 243–58.

hermeneutics, African women or feminist hermeneutics, liberation biblical hermeneutics, postcolonial biblical hermeneutics, exegesis, and reconstruction biblical hermeneutics.⁸

One of the main proponents of mother-tongue biblical hermeneutics in Africa is John Ekem. He defines it as a field focused on interpreting and reinterpreting biblical texts in languages that speakers consider their native languages, the languages they were born into.⁹ Another influential advocate, Jonathan E. T. Kuwornu-Adjaottor, characterizes it as an academic involvement with "the translations of the Bible in indigenous languages to grasp their intended messages and significance for the readers."¹⁰ Assessing the definitions of these two leading scholars, Micheal Wandusim observes that, the terms "first languages" and "indigenous language," as mentioned by Ekem and Kuwornu-Adjaottor respectively, specifically refer to the native languages of African individuals who read the Bible. Additionally, their definitions assume the existence of the Bible translated into Ghanaian/African mother tongues, referred to as mother-tongue Bibles or scriptures. Therefore, when discussing concepts related to mother-tongue biblical hermeneutics (MTBH), such as vernacular languages and mother-tongue Bibles, it's important to provide clear explanations beforehand.¹¹

In his reply to the inquiry about the definition of a mother tongue and its distinction from a vernacular, Benhardt Y. Quarshie clarifies that a person's mother tongue is their native language — the language they are born into and develop with during childhood. This language is considered their primary language compared to other languages they may acquire later in life, such as through formal education at school.¹² Put differently, an individual's mother tongue is not just the first language they use to communicate, but also the language that connects them to a specific ethnic group.¹³ The mother tongue serves as a symbol of identity that affirms and validates a person's origins, their background, and their sense of value and self-esteem.¹⁴ That distinction should be made from a vernacular, which, as explained by Quarshie, refers to the shared language of a particular region.¹⁵ While Ekem agrees with Quarshie's explanation of mother tongue and vernacular, he introduces the idea that a mother tongue can evolve into a vernacular if it is spoken extensively across different geographical areas.¹⁶ Kuwornu-Adjaottor contributes to the conversation by clarifying that the term "mother-tongue" is a linguistic concept indicating one's initial language acquisition and primary verbal interactions.¹⁷ He notes that the idea of a mother tongue implies that a child's language abilities come from their mother, making the mother's language the main one the child learns.¹⁸ Similar to Quarshie, he recognizes the role of the mother tongue in shaping identity, both in self-identification and how others identify the speaker, even if it's not necessarily the language they are most proficient in or use the most frequently.¹⁹ These descriptions imply that in the end, a mother tongue will be a native language specific to a

⁸ Manomi, "What Does Biblical" Exegetics" Do?: Method, Trajectories, and Reflections from an African Context."

⁹ John David Kwamena Ekem, *Early Scriptures of the Gold Coast (Ghana): The Historical, Linguistic, and Theological Settings of the Gã, Twi, Mfantse, and Ewe Bibles* (Edizioni di storia e letteratura, 2011), 88.

¹⁰ Jonathan E T Kuwornu-Adjaottor, "Doing African Biblical Studies with Mother-Tongue Biblical Hermeneutics Approach," *All Nations University Journal of Applied Thought* 1, no. 1 (2012): 31.

¹¹ Michael F Wandusim, "Mother-Tongue Biblical Hermeneutics: A Critical Assessment of the History of an Emerging Approach in African Biblical Studies," *Journal of Mother-Tongue Biblical Hermeneutics & Theology (MOTBIT)* 5, no. 2 (2023).

¹² Ben Y Quarshie, "Doing Biblical Studies in the African Context: The Challenge of Mother-Tongue Scriptures," *Journal of African Christian Thought* 5, no. 1 (2002): 7; John D K Ekem, "Interpreting the Lord's Prayer in the Context of Ghanaian Mother-Tongue Hermeneutics," *Journal of African Christian Thought* 10, no. 2 (2007): 48.

¹³ Quarshie, "Doing Biblical Studies in the African Context: The Challenge of Mother-Tongue Scriptures," 7.

¹⁴ Quarshie, "Doing Biblical Studies in the African Context: The Challenge of Mother-Tongue Scriptures," 7.

¹⁵ Quarshie, "Doing Biblical Studies in the African Context: The Challenge of Mother-Tongue Scriptures," 7.

¹⁶ Ekem, "Interpreting the Lord's Prayer in the Context of Ghanaian Mother-Tongue Hermeneutics," 188-89; Daniel Nii Aboagye Aryeh, "Inductive Biblical Interpretation and Mother-Tongue Biblical Hermeneutics: A Proposal for Pentecostal/Charismatic Ministries in Ghana Today," *The Journal of Inductive Biblical Studies* 3, no. 2 (2016): 6.

¹⁷ Jonathan E T Kuwornu-Adjaottor, "Translations and Interpretations of Baptizontes (Mt 28: 19–20) in Some Ghanaian Mother Tongue Translations of the Bible," *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 77, no. 1 (2021), 2.

¹⁸ Kuwornu-Adjaottor, "Translations and Interpretations of Baptizontes (Mt 28: 19–20) in Some Ghanaian Mother Tongue Translations of the Bible," 2.

¹⁹ Kuwornu-Adjaottor, "Translations and Interpretations of Baptizontes (Mt 28: 19–20) in Some Ghanaian Mother Tongue Translations of the Bible," 2.

particular ethnic community.²⁰ Wandusim argues that languages spoken in Ghana such as Ga, Akuapem-Twi, Asante-Twi, Mfantse, Kusaal, Dagbani, Ewe, Dagaare, and others represent instances of mother tongues.²¹

The following idea pertains to mother-tongue Bibles or Scriptures. Based on the definitions and instances of mother tongues, it can be understood that mother-tongue Bible refer to the Bible translated into these specific languages. In simpler terms, mother-tongue Bibles are translations of the Bible into these languages and all languages are considered mother-tongue Scriptures.²² According to Wandusim, the Kusaal Bible, Asante Twi Bible, Dagbani Bible, Ga Bible, Dangme Bible, Likpakpaaln Bible, and others are MTBs found in Ghana. These native translations serve as focal points and subjects for academic investigation utilizing the MTBH methodology.²³

On the challenges associated with mother-tongue Biblical hermeneutics, Daniel Nii Aboagye Aryeh has identified and outlined four additional barriers to the advancement of MTBH in Ghana and across Africa. The initial barrier, as he describes it, is the "insufficient support and utilization of mother-tongue Bibles." Essentially, this indicates a lack of enthusiasm, particularly among young Ghanaian Christians, for the existing mother-tongue Bibles. Aryeh believes that to ensure the sustainability of MTBH, it is crucial to foster a greater interest in using mother tongues.²⁴ The second issue concerns how globalisation and urbanisation affect languages. Globalisation has encouraged the adoption of universal international languages to ease communication at international gatherings.²⁵ As a result, indigenous languages are marginalized. Conversely, urbanization leads to urban residents using English more frequently than their native languages, while rural residents continue to primarily use their native languages.^{26,27} Moreover, giving preference to English over native languages suggests that scholars who publish in native languages will have a smaller audience and consequently receive fewer citations. This discourages scholars who are interested in pursuing academic work in native languages.²⁸ Finally, Aryeh notes that the lack of a formal academic organization dedicated to developing and providing support for materials produced in native languages is a major obstacle to starting the process of mother-tongue biblical hermeneutics.²⁹ Wandusim asserts that, despite these challenges, the available mother-tongue Bibles, although fewer in number compared to the various native languages in Ghana or Africa, have significantly influenced African Christianity. This influence necessitates ongoing and future hermeneutical exploration by African biblical scholars. The connection between the impact of mother-tongue Bibles on African Christianity and the development of mother-tongue biblical hermeneutics indicates a close relationship. Therefore, the focus of discussion should shift towards examining mother-tongue Bible translations in Africa and their effects on African Christianity.³⁰

²⁰ Quarshie, "Doing Biblical Studies in the African Context: The Challenge of Mother-Tongue Scriptures"; Wandusim, "147; Mother-Tongue Biblical Hermeneutics: A Critical Assessment of the History of an Emerging Approach in African Biblical Studies," 577.

²¹ Wandusim, "Mother-Tongue Biblical Hermeneutics: A Critical Assessment of the History of an Emerging Approach in African Biblical Studies." Wandusim explains further that, the challenge presented in this conception of mother-tongue is that there is Ghanaians who brought up in the English and can hardly understand their native languages. They think and express themselves in English. For such persons English is rightly considered as their first language.

²² Quarshie, "Doing Biblical Studies in the African Context: The Challenge of Mother-Tongue Scriptures," 7.

²³ Michael Wandusim, *The Lord's Prayer in the Ghanaian Context: A Reception-Historical Study*, vol. 20 (Walter de Gruyter GmbH & Co KG, 2021).

²⁴ Aryeh, "Inductive Biblical Interpretation and Mother-Tongue Biblical Hermeneutics: A Proposal for Pentecostal/Charismatic Ministries in Ghana Today," 209.

²⁵ Daniel Nii Aboagye Aryeh, "Contemporary Hermeneutics: An Examination of Selected Works of John DK Ekem on Mother Tongue Biblical Hermeneutics for the African Context," *The Journal of Inductive Biblical Studies* 4, no. 2 (2017).

²⁶ Aryeh, 'Contemporary Hermeneutics,' 208–9

²⁷ Aryeh, "Contemporary Hermeneutics: An Examination of Selected Works of John DK Ekem on Mother Tongue Biblical Hermeneutics for the African Context," 208–9.

²⁸ Aryeh, "Contemporary Hermeneutics: An Examination of Selected Works of John DK Ekem on Mother Tongue Biblical Hermeneutics for the African Context," 209.

²⁹ Aryeh, "Contemporary Hermeneutics: An Examination of Selected Works of John DK Ekem on Mother Tongue Biblical Hermeneutics for the African Context," 209.

³⁰ Wandusim, "Mother-Tongue Biblical Hermeneutics: A Critical Assessment of the History of an Emerging Approach in African Biblical Studies."

With regards to pioneers of mother-tongue biblical hermeneutics in Ghana, Frederick M. Amevenku and Isaac Boaheng note that the late Kwesi A. Dickson was among the leading Ghanaian scholars who supported the utilization of native languages in Christian discussions.³¹ This is because, in addition to other reasons, he saw native languages as effective tools for African Christians to embrace the Judeo-Christian scriptures as their own.³² Kwame Bediako also recognized the potential of African native languages to convey the Christian message effectively. He interprets the Pentecost event in Acts 2, where people heard God's wonders in their own languages (mother tongues), as providing theological justification for the thoughtful inclusion of indigenous languages in which Christians receive God's message.³³ He emphasizes the importance of native languages in religion by stating that "The capacity to listen and respond in one's own language to the message one receives must be central to genuine religious experiences with the divine."³⁴ Wandusim suggests that it is clear from here that although Bediako doesn't explicitly mention "mother-tongue biblical hermeneutics," he strongly advocates for its necessity.³⁵ Kwame Bediako emphasizes the necessity of incorporating mother-tongue Bibles into African biblical interpretation, stating that without them, such interpretation would be lacking. He argues that for biblical exegesis to be truly comprehensive in Africa, it must take into account the influence and importance of translated scriptures in the languages used by the majority of African Christians to read, hear, and engage with the word of God.³⁶ From Dickson to Bediako, there is a clear emphasis on the critical need for African biblical scholars to actively involve themselves with mother-tongue Bibles. This necessity has been further emphasized in recent times by Ghanaian scholars like John D. K. Ekem and Jonathan E. T. Kuwornu-Adjaottor, who are now leading the way in this new approach to biblical studies in Africa.

METHODOLOGY

The methodology utilized in this article involves conducting a literature review. A comprehensive examination of available literature on mother-tongue biblical hermeneutics, particularly in African contexts, was conducted. This process entailed analyzing scholarly publications, books, articles, and pertinent theological writings that explore the interpretation of the Bible within African cultural and linguistic frameworks. The sources consulted encompass seminal works authored by African theologians, biblical scholars, and hermeneutics experts, along with historical texts that offer valuable insights into the inception and evolution of these interpretive perspectives.

The article also uses historical analysis to uncover the beginnings of mother tongue biblical interpretation within the wider context of African biblical studies. This process entails investigating historical occurrences, movements, and intellectual advancements that have influenced these interpretive methods throughout history. The researcher refers to both primary and secondary historical sources to gain insight into how African societies have interacted with biblical scriptures in their native languages and cultural settings.

Regarding specific data sources, the article made reference to various types of sources such as academic journals, books, conference papers, theological theses, and potentially archival materials relevant to African biblical studies and hermeneutics.

³¹ Amevenku and Boaheng, *Biblical Exegesis in African Context*, 79.

³² Amevenku and Boaheng, *Biblical Exegesis in African Context*, 79.

³³ K Bediako, "Christianity in Africa. The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion. Trends in African Christianity" (Regnum Africa Akropong-Akwapem, 2014), 60.

³⁴ Kwame Bediako, *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1995), 60.

³⁵ Wandusim, "Mother-Tongue Biblical Hermeneutics: A Critical Assessment of the History of an Emerging Approach in African Biblical Studies," 67.

³⁶ Kwame Bediako, "Biblical Exegesis in Africa: The Significance of the Translated Scriptures," in *African Theology on the Way: Current Conversations*, ed. Diane B. Stinton (London: SPCK, 2010), 12–20.

DISCUSSION

Biblical Hermeneutics

Biblical hermeneutics constitutes the examination of interpretative principles specifically pertaining to the books comprising the Bible. Situated within the wider domain of hermeneutics, which encompasses the study of interpretative principles for both verbal and nonverbal modes of communication, biblical hermeneutics specifically delves into the principles and methodologies guiding the interpretation of the textual content within the Bible. The overarching objective of biblical hermeneutics is to furnish a framework facilitating the accurate interpretation, comprehension, and application of biblical texts.

General Principles of Biblical Hermeneutics

Principle 1

The process of interpretation should be rooted in the author's intended meaning rather than the reader's subjective understanding. This necessitates a thorough examination of the author's historical, grammatical, cultural context, as well as an understanding of the literary forms and conventions employed by the author. Given the temporal and contextual gap of over two millennia between contemporary readers and the biblical authors, the utilization of robust Bible study tools becomes imperative. A primary tool is a comprehensive study Bible featuring annotations elucidating historical and cultural background information. Additionally, indispensable tools for biblical study encompass reputable evangelical commentaries, ensuring a diverse range of perspectives by consulting multiple commentaries.

Principle 2

Interpretations necessitate consideration within the contextual framework of the passage, as the contextual milieu invariably dictates the intended meaning. The closest context, comprising the sentence, holds primary significance in interpretation, followed sequentially by the paragraph, section, and subsequently the broader context of the book and author. The interpreter is tasked with a comprehensive examination of these contextual layers to accurately ascertain the intended meaning.

Principle 3

Engage in a literal (or normative) interpretation of the Bible, accommodating the ordinary utilization of figurative language. Adhere to the straightforward understanding of the text without undue allegorical interpretations. The imperative is to comprehend the Bible according to its customary or evident meaning, unless the passage overtly indicates a symbolic intent or incorporates figures of speech.

Principle 4

Employ the Bible as an internal guide for interpretation, leveraging clear passages to elucidate challenging ones—a practice often referred to as the law of non-contradiction. Given the inherent truthfulness of God, the author of Scripture, the Bible is perceived as internally consistent and devoid of contradictions. Consequently, Scripture is considered the most reliable interpreter of itself, underscoring the necessity of cross-referencing various passages within the biblical canon to discern the intended meaning of a given text.

Principle 5

Differentiate between interpretation and application, recognizing that while there exists a singular historical interpretation, diverse applications may be extrapolated for contemporary relevance. Construct an applicative conduit that connects the historical interpretation to enduring principles and subsequently facilitates the transference to present-day application.

Principle 6

Exercise discernment in discerning disparities between Israel and the church, as well as distinctions between the Old Covenant and New Covenant epochs and their respective requisites. Cognizance must be taken that commitments articulated in the Old Testament to Israel do not inherently extend to Christians in the New Testament era. It is imperative to acknowledge that Christians are not bound by the stipulations of the Mosaic law, as articulated in Romans 6:14.

Principle 7

Exercise discernment regarding the genre of literature under consideration. The Bible encompasses diverse literary genres, including but not limited to law, narrative, wisdom, poetry, gospel, parable, epistle, and apocalyptic literature. Each genre possesses distinctive characteristics that necessitate careful consideration in the process of interpreting a given text.

Origin/ Historical Roots and Development

The roots of Mother Tongue Biblical Hermeneutics can be traced back to the early stages of biblical interpretation in Africa. As missionaries and scholars translated the Bible into various African languages, a consciousness emerged regarding the importance of preserving the linguistic and cultural integrity of the sacred texts. This section examines the historical development of Mother Tongue Biblical Hermeneutics, exploring key milestones and influential figures who shaped its trajectory.

The term "mother tongue" conventionally refers to an individual's native language, indicating the language acquired from birth. It is alternatively denoted as a first language, dominant language, home language, or native tongue, though these designations may not necessarily be interchangeable.³⁷

Modern linguists and educators frequently employ the designation L1 to denote an individual's first or native language, commonly referred to as the mother tongue. In contrast, the term L2 is utilized to signify a second language or a foreign language undergoing study. The conventional use of the term 'mother tongue' extends beyond merely denoting the language acquired from one's mother; it encompasses the speaker's dominant and home language. In this context, it not only signifies the primary language concerning the timing of acquisition but also emphasizes its significance and the speaker's proficiency in mastering its linguistic and communicative facets.³⁸

Ivan Illich posits that the term "mother tongue" was initially employed by Catholic monks to characterize a specific language employed in lieu of Latin, particularly when delivering sermons from the pulpit.³⁹ F.M. Amevenku cites George Ossom Batsa, who contends that African Biblical Hermeneutics occupied a subordinate role to Western cultural traditions until the 1960s, marking a notable shift in its status.⁴⁰

The fundamental aim of Biblical Hermeneutics is to ascertain the intended meaning of the author of a biblical text and to expound upon that text for the enlightenment of a present-day audience. This endeavor is intrinsically linked to an understanding of the cultures prevailing both in the biblical era and those of the contemporary audience. Interpretation, to be meaningful, must cater to the specific needs of its audience and offer practical relevance in various contexts. The efficacy of the Bible in influencing people's lives is contingent upon a sound and accurate interpretation. Therefore, an interpretation is deemed truly African when it addresses the everyday religio-cultural, socio-economic, and political experiences of the African people.⁴¹

This aligns with Batsa's contention that African Biblical Interpretation encompasses both scholarly and popular dimensions. Numerous scholars specializing in biblical studies in Ghana and

³⁷ N. Richard, "Get the Definition of Mother Tongue ," 2019.

³⁸ Richard, "Get the Definition of Mother Tongue ."

³⁹ Ivan Illich, *Mother Tongue Syndrome: From Breast to Bottle* (Pattanayak: Wayback Machine., 2017).

⁴⁰ Frederick Mawusi Amevenku, "Mother-Tongue Biblical Interpretation and the Future of African Instituted Christianity in Ghana," *Trinity Journal of Church and Theology* 18, no. 1 (2014): 132–48.

⁴¹ Jonathan E T Kuwornu-Adjaottor, "Mother-Tongue Biblical Hermeneutics: A Current Trend in Biblical Studies in Ghana," *Journal of Emerging Trends in Educational Research and Policy Studies* 3, no. 4 (2012): 575–79.

across Africa have embraced the utilization of mother tongue as a methodological approach in the pursuit of biblical studies and interpretation within the African context.⁴²

David Ekem posits that the diverse array of mother tongues across Africa presents significant potential for biblical interpretation in Ghanaian/African languages, serving as valuable resources for interpretative endeavors, study Bibles, and commentaries.⁴³ R.F Amonoo asserts that the mother tongue serves as the conduit for expressing our deepest emotions and thoughts.⁴⁴ It is the indigenous language in which an individual is born and undergoes the process of maturation.⁴⁵

A mother tongue diverges from a vernacular, which denotes the prevalent language within a specific region or community, irrespective of an individual's proficiency and familiarity with it. Instead, the mother tongue is characterized as an individual's inherent and autochthonous language, intricately interwoven with one's identity. It serves to authenticate and reaffirm an individual's sense of self, origins, and identity.⁴⁶ A mother tongue serves as a repository for indigenous wisdom, knowledge, insights, scientific principles, theological tenets, and philosophical foundations. It is within the confines of the mother tongue that an individual engages in cognitive processes, contemplating and envisioning, prior to articulating thoughts in another language.⁴⁷

Trends in Mother-Tongue Biblical Hermeneutics

Contemporary Mother Tongue Biblical Hermeneutics has witnessed various trends, ranging from linguistic analyses of biblical texts to cultural exegesis. This section explores the prevailing trends in Mother Tongue Biblical Hermeneutics, highlighting the methodologies employed by scholars and practitioners. Additionally, it investigates the impact of these trends on the interpretation of the Bible within the African context.

According to Mbiti a consultation of African Theologians conference was held in 1996 at Ibadan in Nigeria. At that conference African Biblical studies/ hermeneutics was outdoored. The interest in African Biblical Studies has since evolved in three principal trends.⁴⁸ Firstly, we see Afro-centric hermeneutics, which has given rise to four predominant methods of exegesis: liberation hermeneutics (comprising feminist hermeneutic and deliverance hermeneutic), white South African hermeneutic, missiological hermeneutic and neo-traditional hermeneutic.⁴⁹

Secondly, the integration of Biblical hermeneutics into cultural context, as propounded by Ukpong, which has further been refined by Loba-Mkole as intercultural biblical exegesis.⁵⁰ It pertains to a fresh interpretation of texts in light of the contemporary reader's cultural context.⁵¹

Thirdly, emphasis is placed on the audience's contextual understanding. This approach originated from 'the comparative method' in which the reader mediates dialogue between the African context and biblical texts to facilitate appropriation.⁵² This method along with inculturation, forms the cornerstone of African biblical studies today.

Over the last forty years, numerous scholars have increasingly sought an effective approach to contextualizing Scripture within the African milieu. This endeavor led to the release of the "Bible in Africa" in 2000 and the "African Bible Commentary" in 2006. In addition, several scholars have

⁴² George Ossom-Batsa, "African Interpretation of the Bible in Communicative Perspective," *Ghana Bulletin of Theology* 2, no. 2007 (2007): 91–104.

⁴³ Ekem, "Interpreting the Lord's Prayer in the Context of Ghanaian Mother-Tongue Hermeneutics."

⁴⁴ Reginald Fraser Amonoo, *Language and Nationhood: Reflections on Language Situations with Particular Reference to Ghana* (Ghana Academy of Arts and Sciences, 1989).

⁴⁵ Quarshie, "Doing Biblical Studies in the African Context: The Challenge of Mother-Tongue Scriptures."

⁴⁶ Kuwornu-Adjaottor, "Mother-Tongue Biblical Hermeneutics: A Current Trend in Biblical Studies in Ghana."

⁴⁷ Kwame Bediako, *Religion, Culture, and Language: An Appreciation of the Intellectual Legacy of Dr. JB Danquah* (Ghana Academy of Arts and Sciences, 2006).

⁴⁸ John S Mbiti, *Bible and Theology in African Christianity* (Oxford Univ. Press, 1986).

⁴⁹ Louis Krog, "African Hermeneutics: The Current State," *Johannesburg: The South African Theological Seminary*, 2005.

⁵⁰ Jean-Claude Loba-Mkole, "Rise of Intercultural Biblical Exegesis in Africa," *HTS: Theological Studies* 64, no. 3 (2008): 1347–64; Justin S Ukpong, "The Emergence of African Theologies," *Theological Studies* 45, no. 3 (1984): 501–36.

⁵¹ Loba-Mkole, "Rise of Intercultural Biblical Exegesis in Africa."

⁵² Gerald O West, "After the Missionaries: Historical and Hermeneutical Dimensions of African Appropriations of the Bible in Sub-Saharan Africa," *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* 38, no. 1 (2012): 111–30.

continuously posed methodological inquiries, shifting exegetical inquiries from the text's author, content, recipient, and cultural underpinnings to the audience for practical application. Therefore, whilst Fashole-Luke expressed concern about the limited contribution of Africans to the field of Biblical exegesis, Green expressed a desire democratizing theology.⁵³ Schüssler Fiorenza, on the other hand, is focused on the endeavor to transform graduate biblical education into a space that is both radical and democratic, facilitating critical inquiry, socio-political ethical exploration, and creative religious re-visioning.⁵⁴ Similarly, Appiah-Kubi, Stinton and Nyiauwung, have engaged with the question of Jesus' identity from an African perspective, pondering the significance of the inquiry 'Who do you say I am' (Lk 9:20).⁵⁵

It is evident, therefore to deduce that scholars in African biblical studies are primarily concerned with contextualisation, which encompasses the utilization of mother-tongue among other methods. This approach involves applying biblical insights to matters pertaining to politics, economics, social justice, and the environmental concerns within African society. It signifies a shift from the past where Europeans and North American scholars conceived of the Bible as the source text, Western and North American theologians shaped the hermeneutics, and the rest of the world simply read, consumed and reproduced the texts. Indeed, the current period recognizes all contexts as potential platforms for the study, interpretation and application of biblical texts. Consequently, these developments have prompted a reevaluation of an all-encompassing African exegetical approach, that is both hermeneutically sound and contextually appropriate: the African biblical hermeneutic approach (ABHA).

African Biblical Hermeneutics

African biblical hermeneutics denotes the foundational methodology employed for the interpretative transformation of the Bible within the African context. This interpretive approach may also be referred to as African cultural hermeneutics, African biblical transformational hermeneutics, or within the broader context, as African Biblical studies.⁵⁶

African biblical hermeneutics assumes a critical role in the societal welfare of Africa, serving as a methodological instrument that positions African socio-cultural contexts as the focal point of interpretative inquiry. This methodology entails a reevaluation of both ancient biblical traditions and African worldviews, cultures, and life experiences, with the explicit objective of rectifying the impact of cultural and ideological conditioning to which Africa and its populace have been subjected in the realm of biblical interpretation.⁵⁷

African Biblical Hermeneutics places emphasis on the incorporation of inculturation methods and various contextual approaches. Within the framework of African Biblical hermeneutics, one such contextual method is African Biblical interpretation. The inception of African biblical studies can be attributed to perceived deficiencies in conventional approaches, particularly when viewed through the lens of African perspectives. Consequently, there has been a shift towards an audience-centered approach, encapsulated in the concept of African Biblical Hermeneutics. This interpretative paradigm prioritizes the contextual realities of the audience, integrating findings from diverse exegetical methods into the African milieu. Furthermore, African Biblical Hermeneutics positions biblical texts as

⁵³ Edward W Fasholé-Luke, "The Quest for African Christian Theology.," *Journal of Religious Thought* 32, no. 2 (1975); Laurie Green, *Let's Do Theology: Resources for Contextual Theology; Completely Updated and Revised* (A&C Black, 2010); T. A. Aben, *African Christian Theology: Illusion & Reality* (Bukuru: African Christian Textbooks, 2008), 130.

⁵⁴ Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Democratizing Biblical Studies: Toward an Emancipatory Educational Space* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2009).

⁵⁵ K. Appiah-Kubi, "Christology," in *A Reader in African Theology*, ed. J. Parratt (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1997), 65–74; Diane B Stinton, *Jesus of Africa: Voices of Contemporary African Christology* (Univ. Press, 2000); Mbengu David Nyiauwung, "Who Is the Christ? Leadership and Conflict in Luke 9: 18-22: A Social Scientific-and Narratological Analysis from an African Perspective" (University of Pretoria, 2010).

⁵⁶ David Tuesday Adamo, "The Task and Distinctiveness of African Biblical Hermeneutic(S)," *Old Testament Essays* 28, no. 1 (2015): 31–52, <https://doi.org/10.17159/2312-3621/2015/v28n1a4>.

⁵⁷ David Tuesday Adamo, "What Is African Biblical Hermeneutics?," *Black Theology* 13, no. 1 (2015): 59–72.

challenges for African theologians, constituting a critique of both the theologians themselves and the prevailing nature of theological education in many sub-Saharan African institutions.⁵⁸

Moreover, the process of appropriation in African Biblical Hermeneutics is designed to establish a reciprocal dialogue between the biblical text and the African context. This approach entails the act of appropriating texts prior to their interpretation and application within the African milieu. Scholars such as Gerald West posit that effective biblical interpretation in Africa necessitates a harmonious consideration of the Biblical text, the African context, and the act of appropriation.

Consequently, African Biblical Hermeneutics manifests as a form of contextualized biblical exegesis, endeavoring to position the existential realities of Africa as the focal point of interpretative inquiry. Notably, the African context shares discernible social systems with the context of biblical texts. Therefore, African Biblical Hermeneutics operates on the premise that certain African social values, institutions, societal arrangements, and cultural dynamics offer valuable insights for comprehending and interpreting biblical texts.⁵⁹

According to Nyiawung, it is imperative to recognize and substantiate pertinent and culturally acceptable African models and theories that can enhance comprehension and practical application.⁶⁰

Challenges

A significant challenge encountered by contemporary biblical interpreters, if not universally, is that ancient texts, including those within the New and Old Testaments, by anthropologists as ‘high context’ documents. These texts are composed within the framework of the ancient Mediterranean world, resulting in a necessity for the authors to presume a “high” level of contextual knowledge on the part of their readers.⁶¹ As a consequence, minimal or no contextual information is provided in these texts to elucidate the reasons behind depicted events. Rather, they rely heavily on the reader or listener’s imagination and common knowledge to fill in the gaps.⁶² This is due to the fact that authors biblical texts and their original readers belong to the same social system and experiences. Naturally, biblical authors did not have contemporary readers from the 21st century readers and their various contexts including the African context on mind.

In contemporary times, most readers come from ‘low context’ societies, requiring supplemental knowledge to grasp the attitudes characters in biblical texts where information may be missing. Rohrbaugh (also referencing Ps 137:4) characterizes this eager but sometimes challenging endeavor as akin to ‘sing the Lord’s song in a strange land’.⁶³ Such situations illustrates the challenges that may arise in the African Biblical Hermeneutic approach due to the diversity in African cultural contexts.⁶⁴

Africa, a continent of vast dimensions, is distinguished by its rich tapestry of peoples, beliefs, and languages. Reverend Professor Kwesi Dickson Pobee of Ghana has concurred that Africa is not merely polyracial and polyethnic, but also characterized by a rich array of cultural expressions. This multiplicity presents a significant challenge for scholars engaged in African biblical studies, as they must grapple with the complexities of appropriation, interpretation, and re-interpretation.⁶⁵

In light of hermeneutics' role in transferring meaning from one cultural context to another, the African Bible Interpretation (ABI) initiative focuses on interpreting biblical texts within the African

⁵⁸ Mbengu D. Nyiawung, “The Prophetic Witness of the Church as an Appropriate Mode of Public Discourse in African Societies,” *HTS Theologese Studies / Theological Studies* 66, no. 1 (February 19, 2010), <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v66i1.791>.

⁵⁹ West, “After the Missionaries: Historical and Hermeneutical Dimensions of African Appropriations of the Bible in Sub-Saharan Africa.”

⁶⁰ Mbengu D. Nyiawung and Ernest Van Eck, “An African Hermeneutic Reading of Luke 9:18–22 in Relation to Conflict and Leadership in Pastoral Ministry: The Cameroonian Context,” *HTS Theologese Studies / Theological Studies* 69, no. 1 (January 14, 2013), <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v69i1.1201>.

⁶¹ R.L. Rohrbaugh, “Introduction,” in *The Social Scientific and New Testament Interpretation*, ed. R.L. Rohrbaugh (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1996), 1–15; Nyiawung and Van Eck, “An African Hermeneutic Reading of Luke 9:18–22 in Relation to Conflict and Leadership in Pastoral Ministry: The Cameroonian Context.”

⁶² Bruce J Malina, *The Social Gospel of Jesus: The Kingdom of God in Mediterranean Perspective* (Fortress Press, 2001).

⁶³ Rohrbaugh, “Introduction.”

⁶⁴ Rohrbaugh, “Introduction.”

⁶⁵ John S. Pobee, *Skenosis: Christian Faith in an African Context* (Gweru: Mambo Press, 1992).

setting. However, translating and applying a biblical text from one context to another, particularly across different historical periods, is a challenging process that necessitates a form of re-interpretation. This re-interpretation presupposes that exegetes possess foundational cultural knowledge from their respective backgrounds, which enables them to elucidate and explore the diverse potentialities inherent within the text being interpreted.⁶⁶

Despite the cultural heterogeneity inherent in African traditional societies, certain esteemed principles such as honor, integrity, and an emphasis on ethical standards transcend these differences and are universal across these societies. It is this fundamental belief that permits the exegetical endeavor within the African milieu to be both feasible and meaningful. Nevertheless, the exegete must be mindful of the twin dangers of ethnocentrism and anachronism.

In the scholarly discourse initiated by Sumner, ethnocentrism is a concept denoting a perspective that revolves around one's own ethnic group as the focal point, with other groups being assessed and ranked in relation to it, as expounded by Nyiawung.⁶⁷ Alternatively expressed, ethnocentrism manifests as an outlook where the standards originating from a particular cultural milieu are imposed onto another cultural setting characterized by disparate values.⁶⁸ Consequently, there is a tendency within an in-group culture or attitude to regard its norms as universally human, while viewing out-group behavior as deviating from this standard.⁶⁹

This evaluative disposition serves to diminish the status of one culture while upholding cultural superiority of the other.⁷⁰ Individuals across time and place demonstrate variations in thought processes and behaviors, suggesting that uniformity is not a universal characteristic among human beings.⁷¹

In terms of its origin, the term anachronism is derived from the fusion of two Greek words, *ana* and *chronos*, signifying a chronological mistake in regard to events. The exegete, acknowledging that a text is a manifestation of its own contemporary social environment even though it reflects a different historical period, approaches the text with this awareness. Anachronism, therefore, denotes the introduction of an external social milieu into the interpretation of a text, whereby the patterns and dynamics of the modern era are projected onto the ancient world.⁷² It is an endeavor to manipulate historical figures or occurrences in order to promote a contemporary 21st-century objective.⁷³

It is widely recognized that in any given society, individuals tend to assert their identity whenever an opportunity arises. This phenomenon also extends to biblical interpretation, where personal identity and cultural orientation inevitably play a role. Consequently, exegetes may be tempted to supplement the gaps in a text with information that resonates with their personal worldview or aligns with the identity of their social group. According to Rohrbaugh, this inclination can lead readers to dismiss or stereotype individuals from other cultural backgrounds, or to project the characteristics of their own identity as the norm, thereby giving the erroneous impression that their context is inherently superior.⁷⁴

According to Nyiawung, this might have been the mistake made by early missionaries to Africa, who initiated the evangelization process by perceiving the African context as devoid of elements that could enrich the comprehension and interpretation of Scripture.⁷⁵ As per Ehioghae,

⁶⁶ Fiorenza, *Democratizing Biblical Studies: Toward an Emancipatory Educational Space*.

⁶⁷ Ernest Van Eck, *Galilee and Jerusalem in Mark's Story of Jesus: A Narratological and Social Scientific Reading* (Periodicle Section of the Nederduitsch Hervormde Kerk van Afrika, 1995).

⁶⁸ Robert Alan LeVine, "Ethnocentrism: Theories of Conflict, Ethnic Attitudes and Group Behavior," (*No Title*), 1972.

⁶⁹ B.J. Malina, "Social-Scientific Methods in Historical Jesus Research," in *The Social Setting of Jesus and the Gospels*, ed. W. Stegemann, B.J. Malina, and G. Theissen (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 3–6.

⁷⁰ C. Strecker, "Jesus and the Demoniac," in *The Social Setting of Jesus and the Gospels*, ed. W. Stegemann, B.J. Malina, and G. Theissen (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 117–33.

⁷¹ B.J. Malina, "Reading Theory Perspective: Reading Luke-Acts," in *The Social World of Luke-Acts: Models for Interpretation*, ed. J.H. Neyrey (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1991).

⁷² Rohrbaugh, "Introduction."

⁷³ Malina, "Social-Scientific Methods in Historical Jesus Research," vii.

⁷⁴ Rohrbaugh, "Introduction."

⁷⁵ Nyiawung, "Who Is the Christ? Leadership and Conflict in Luke 9: 18-22: A Social Scientific-and Narratological Analysis from an African Perspective."

missionaries not only endeavored to Christianize the African continent but also introduced elements of their European culture during this process.⁷⁶ According to Aben, missionaries enforced their strict socio-political, cultural, and religious beliefs upon Africans, thereby compelling them to adopt European cultural customs.⁷⁷ Consequently, the concept of evangelization was primarily developed from a paternalistic viewpoint, which ultimately gave rise to ethnocentrism, culminating in prejudice, biased judgment, and hostility.⁷⁸

In response to the aforementioned issue, Nyiawung suggests that a number of African scholars have emphasized the importance of pursuing an authentic African theology. This approach involves identifying similarities between the current cultural context and that of the Bible, a practice that Rohrbaugh describes as anachronistic. Rohrbaugh also points out that comprehending a different culture is inherently challenging. Therefore, contemporary exegetes should exercise caution when biblical narratives appear familiar and reassuring, as the Bible was not crafted with African readers of the 21st century in mind.⁷⁹

Engaging in biblical interpretation often involves a significant degree of creativity. However, succumbing to the pitfalls of ethnocentrism and/or anachronism represents a form of misguided theological creativity, known as eisegesis. This occurs when the exegete imposes their own words or ideas into the narrative of the biblical writer.⁸⁰

In summary, there are several challenges that African scholars face in their pursuit of mother-tongue Biblical Hermeneutics. One of the most significant challenges is linguistic diversity. Africa is home to over 2,000 languages, making it difficult to translate the Bible into every local language. Additionally, many African languages lack standardized writing systems, which further complicates the translation process.

Another challenge is the dominance of Western theological perspectives. Despite efforts to develop indigenous hermeneutical methods, Western theological frameworks still influence African biblical interpretation. This can lead to a loss of cultural authenticity and relevance in biblical interpretation.

Finally, there is a lack of resources and institutional support for mother-tongue Biblical Hermeneutics in Africa. Many African theologians and scholars face limited access to funding, academic journals, and publishing opportunities, which hinders the development of indigenous hermeneutical methods.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of the study on "Mother Tongue Biblical Hermeneutics within the Context of African Biblical Hermeneutics: Its Origin, Trends, and Challenges," several recommendations can be made:

- **Promotion of linguistic diversity:** Encourage the promotion and preservation of linguistic diversity within African biblical hermeneutics. This includes supporting initiatives that prioritize the use of indigenous languages in biblical interpretation and theological discourse.
- **Development resources:** Invest in the development of comprehensive theological resources in local languages. This can include translating key theological texts, commentaries, and study materials into mother tongues to facilitate deeper understanding and engagement with biblical texts.
- **Capacity building and training:** Provide training and capacity-building programs for clergy, scholars, and community leaders on mother tongue biblical hermeneutics. These programs can

⁷⁶ Ehioghae, "Decolonizing Jesus in Africa: A Critical Evaluation of the Missionary Influence," 308.

⁷⁷ Aben, *African Christian Theology: Illusion & Reality*.

⁷⁸ Karina V. Korostelina, *Social Identity and Conflict* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2007), <https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230605671>.

⁷⁹ Rohrbaugh, "Introduction."

⁸⁰ Malina, "Reading Theory Perspective: Reading Luke-Acts."

enhance skills in biblical interpretation, linguistic analysis, and cultural contextualization, fostering a more informed approach to studying and teaching the Bible.

- **Collaboration and networking:** Encourage collaboration and networking among scholars, theologians, linguists, and community stakeholders working on mother tongue biblical hermeneutics. Collaborative efforts can lead to shared resources, best practices, and innovative approaches to addressing challenges.
- **Integration into educational curricula:** Advocate for the integration of mother tongue biblical hermeneutics into theological education curricula. This involves incorporating courses, seminars, and workshops that specifically focus on interpreting the Bible in indigenous languages and cultural contexts.
- **Engagement with communities:** Foster greater engagement with local communities to understand their perspectives, needs, and preferences regarding biblical interpretation in mother tongues. This can be achieved through community outreach programs, participatory research methods, and dialogues that prioritize community voices.
- **Awareness and advocacy:** Raise awareness among policymakers, religious institutions, and the general public about the importance of mother tongue biblical hermeneutics. Advocate for policies and initiatives that support linguistic diversity, cultural inclusivity, and the empowerment of marginalized language groups in biblical studies.
- **Continued research and evaluation:** Encourage continued research, evaluation, and assessment of mother tongue biblical hermeneutics initiatives. This includes monitoring trends, evaluating impact, and identifying areas for improvement or further exploration within the field.

CONCLUSION

Mother-tongue Biblical Hermeneutics has a rich history in Africa, rooted in the missionary work of the 19th century. In recent decades, there has been a renewed interest in indigenous hermeneutical methods, as scholars seek to interpret the Bible within the socio-cultural context of its readers. However, several challenges remain, including linguistic diversity, the dominance of Western theological perspectives, and a lack of resources and institutional support. Overcoming these challenges will require a concerted effort from African theologians, scholars, and institutions to develop and promote mother-tongue Biblical Hermeneutics in Africa.

The focus of this article was to look at the origin, trends and challenges of mother-tongue within the context of African Biblical Hermeneutics. In the first place the writer looked at the general meaning of Biblical hermeneutics and principles governing Biblical hermeneutics. Then narrowed it down to African Biblical hermeneutics. The article has also given credence and endorsed Mother-tongue as an approach or methodology of African Biblical hermeneutics thereby contributing to the store of knowledge in academia and Biblical studies scholarship. Origin, new trends and threats of mother-tongue Biblical studies was also discussed.

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