




'Wo papa fie abosom no etaataa wo'- Pursued by the Elohim (gods) of your Father's house

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ABSTRACT

This paper provided a critical examination of the Masoretic Text's discourse from Genesis 20. This study investigated the meaning of *Elohim* in Genesis 20:13 and proposed a suitable Asante Twi translation for that notion. Using the narrative reading of Literary Criticism as a point of entry, the Masoretic text was read using the Mother Tongue interpretation Methodology. Genesis 20:13 revealed a reality of *Elohim* that is absent from the English and Asante Twi translations of the Bible. The truth of the impact of patron deities, particularly on Abraham's character, was clarified in light of this study. This study calls for a re-reading of the text to reflect its correct understanding and usage in Christian discourse.

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INTRODUCTION

Some Christians in Ghana have developed a renewed interest in learning about and comprehending the world of supernatural and spiritual realities, particularly as it relates to the impact these realms and realities have on people's lives. This quest has prompted some people to go to the Bible for answers about the possibility that gods have an impact on people's lives and fates. The ability to read the Bible in a language that makes sense to them has been made available by Bible translators and translations, which has helped them learn more about spiritual realms and realities. Scholars of the Bible have also closely examined the text and have shed light and realism on this issue. That which is missing, though, is their close reading of the text to provide context and clarity on gods and the impact they have on humanity.

This paper offers a close reading of the narrative of Genesis 20 in the Masoretic text using the narrative reading of Literary Criticism as a point of entry, and the Mother Tongue interpretation Methodology to investigate the meaning of *Elohim* used with a plural verb in Genesis 20:13. This paper offers to throw light on an issue which is overlooked or obscured in the reading of this narrative in the English and Twi translations of the Bible. The narrative falls within the patriarchal history unit of the book of Genesis. The reality of the world of spirits and deities is made evident in this narrative. Translators have taken it for granted that *Elohim* with the plural verb in this narrative refers to *YHWH*. Translators have sought to explain and not convey what the Hebrew text is saying in the narrative.

The biblical narrative is concise and characterised by its own distinctive qualities. The stories of the Bible are part of the foundation of culture, art and literature. Whatever the narrator of the biblical

story says must be so, implying that the narrator and God are the benchmarks of reliability and of the story's verisimilitude. The biblical authors present their stories as a meaningful history from which the readers must draw a moral. They report that certain things happened, and it is reasonable to assume that they want readers to believe them and accept them as true. The biblical author wants to be believed by the public. The narrator is omniscient but may not tell everything.¹

Omniscient as used depicts the fact that the biblical narrator knows all things even to the extent of knowing the assessments and intentions of characters in the narrative. In order to establish for the span of his tale a godlike comprehensiveness of knowledge that can cover even God Himself, the biblical narrator abstains from personal history and distinctive personal characteristics. The biblical story can be helpfully understood as a narrative experiment in the possibilities of moral, spiritual, and historical knowledge. This experiment is carried out by carefully contrasting the human characters' varying degrees of knowledge with the divine omniscience, which is subtly but firmly represented by the narrator. The biblical narrator is extremely careful about sharing his omniscience with his readers even if he is fully aware of the motivations, emotions, moral character, and spiritual state of each of his characters.²

Speech, action, and gesture are the main ways that character is shown, along with all the ambiguities that go along with it; purpose is frequently left up in the air. Frequently, readers may deduce reasonable conclusions regarding the characters and their fates, but much is still up for speculation or even hinting at several alternatives. The omniscient narrator creates the impression that certain characters and events have a steady significance, which is partially gauged by how far away the characters are from divine knowledge and how some of them are forced to go from dangerous ignorance to the knowledge that is necessary to understand oneself, others, and God's ways.³

This paper begins by providing some background information before discussing biblical storytelling and demonstrating how the selected biblical text provides a compelling framework for examining the existence of deities and their impact on humankind. It will then go over the story of Genesis 20:1–18, which describes the confrontation between Abraham and Abimelech. Next, it examines the ramifications of what Abraham said in Genesis 20:13. It studies the nature of *Elohim* and focuses the major conversation on the text's intricacies. It goes on to provide an overview of some of the reading's results as it wraps up the investigation.

Abraham and Abimelech's Encounter

In the narrative of Genesis 20:1-18, the narrator narrates the story of Abraham's move to Gerar, and what ensued. Sarah is Abraham's wife, but he referred to her as his sister. This led to Sarah being sought after and taken by Abimelech King of Gerar, though he did not go near her. The story goes that one night, Abimelech had a dream in which God told him, "You are as good as dead because of the woman you have taken; she is a married woman." God revealed in the dialogue between him and Abimelech that Sarah was married but Abimelech had a clear conscience. Thus, God protected him from sinning. As a result, God protected Abraham and his wife Sarah. Abimelech asked Abraham his reason for saying that Rebecca his wife was his sister. It was in answering, that, Abraham remarked that the *Elohim* of his father's house had made him to wander. From this narrative, there are several things one can learn. The God who came to Abraham when he was in Ur of the Chaldees was the same God who came to Abimelech.

This goes to show that God can reveal and does reveal himself to anyone or any people at his own will. The narrator revealed the motive of Abraham for his self-preservation in saying that Sarah, his wife was his sister. Abraham's feelings that the people of Gerar were not God-fearing were not completely justified. When God revealed himself to Abimelech, he returned Sarah to Abraham with gifts to compensate them. The spiritual condition of Abraham was of one who did not fully know and

¹ Yairah Amit, *Reading Biblical Narratives: Literary Criticism and the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 97.

² Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry, Revised and Updated* (New York: Basic Books, 2011), 195-196.

³ Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry, Revised and Updated*, 197-198.

thus, did not trust his safekeeping into the hands of the God with whom he had come to know. Abraham was on a journey of faith, and he had to dare to walk with God and be flawless. In Abraham's response to Abimelech, the narrator reveals a tension between the *Elohim* of Abraham's father's household and his desire to heed God's instruction to leave it and travel to a region He would show him. The details of how *Elohim* of his father's house made him wander are not revealed. The reader is left to conjecture with the little information given in the biblical narrative.

The use of *Elohim* in preference to *YHWH* is recognised as a distinguishing feature of the texts that share this propensity. The designation for the deity in the E texts of Genesis is *Elohim*, used clearly as a singular. In the comments of the narrator, *Elohim* is used with singular grammatical forms. The only exception is Genesis 20:13 (BHS), where *Elohim* takes a plural verb in Abraham's speech to Abimelech, a foreigner:⁴

וַיְהִי כִּאֲשֶׁר הִתְעוּ אֹתִי אֱלֹהִים מִבֵּית אָבִי וְאָמַר לֵה זֶה חֲסֻדְךָ אֲשֶׁר תַּעֲשִׂי עִמָּדִי אֵל כָּל־הַמְּקוֹם אֲשֶׁר נָבֹא שָׁמָּה
אֲמַר־לִי אָחִי הוּא

...when *Elohim* from my father's house caused me to wander ...

The narrator uses a dramatic description to illustrate the impact that the gods from Abraham's father's house had on his sojourning. The narrator wants the reader to understand how difficult his journey was because of the gods. The words אֱלֹהִים מִבֵּית אָבִי are closely bound expressing the close relationship these gods had with the people of Abraham's father's house. Is it this closeness *YHWH* seeks to draw Abraham away from? Abraham is no longer in his father's house yet the gods are in pursuit of him, causing him to wander. Buried in this one verse is a whole meaning of the workings of deities on humans. This verse makes clear the meaning the Hebrew conveys. It is a Hebraic picture of the concept of deities influencing humans. The narrator consciously uses words that give a factual description of the experience of Abraham by stating the reality of the cause of his wandering.

The Hebrew word *Elohim* is translated as gods or God. Though *Elohim* in Hebrew is a plural word, it is used for both the singular being of the One God as well as for a plurality of other beings with no reference to the singular One God.⁵ *Elohim*, the most common Hebrew word for God, is famous for having a plural ending but being treated as a singular in grammar, either because it is something like a plural of majesty (if that actually existed in Biblical Hebrew) or because it is a linguistic fossil dating back to a time when everyone spoke of the gods. Biblical scholars all know that when a noun is technically regarded as plural, it alludes to the gods, as in Aaron's statement on the golden calf. *O Israel, these are the gods that rescued you from the land of Egypt* (Ex. 32:4). However, in Genesis 20:13, when Abraham tells Abimelech how he became a nomad, all English translations attribute this fate to God, even though in this instance *Elohim* is clearly the subject of a plural verb, necessitating the rendering, when the gods... made me a wanderer. This is a striking example of how lively the conversation is in the Bible.⁶ Why is it that the translators of the English versions have it so? If this translation is in the colonizers' language versions of the Bible, how was this translated into Asante Twi? Na Onyankop4n maa mefirii m'agya fie meb1kyinii1 no, ... (Genesis 20: 13, Asante Twi Bible). *Elohim* is translated in the Asante Twi Bible as *Onyankop4n*, although it should have been interpreted as plural in Asante Twi, that is not done. A reading of *Elohim* as *Onyankop4n* does not reflect what is written in the Masoretic Text. It appears that it is rather mirroring the English translations.

⁴ J. S. Burnett, *A Reassessment of Biblical Elohim* (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2001).

⁵ B. Godawa, *Psalm 82: The Divine Council of the Gods, the Judgment of the Watchers and the Inheritance of the Nations* (Embedded Pictures Publishing: St. Peters, MO, 2018).

⁶ Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry, Revised and Updated*, 50.

Implications of Abraham's Remarks

In Genesis 20:13 (BHS), *Elohim* takes a plural verb in Abraham's speech to Abimelech, a foreigner, as the only exception where the use of *Elohim* indicates therefore that it is referring to gods. Abraham makes mention of the patron deities who had made him wander as he sought to obey *YHWH Elohim* in leaving the land of his fathers. The narrative shows that the gods of his father's house would not let him go that easily. Was Abraham dedicated to the *Elohim* of his father's? The gods would not want to lose a devotee. One can adduce from the narrative that it is in trying to keep Abraham that the *Elohim* caused him to wander. If indeed it is his father's *Elohim* who caused him to wander then the translations should make this clear. This would mean that: *Abraham papa fie abosom taa taa no maa no kyiniie*¹.

Genesis 20:1ff depicts a spiritual reality that is veiled by the remark of Abraham. The *Elohim* pursue Abraham and actively cause him to wander. These patron deities have been entrusted with the care of the people in the family, which includes Abraham. The narrative it appears suggests that the *Elohim* of his father's home have the ability to cause certain actions, for instance, making Abraham wander. This influence of the deities of his father's house causes Abraham to wander off. The consequences are as long as these deities are able to influence or cause Abraham to wander, he is being delayed and distracted from fully following the instructions given by God in Genesis 12: 1; that he should leave his country and his house, and go where he would direct him. These patron deities can be translated as *abosom* in Asante Twi. Afriyie posits that Christians in Ghana have made severe attacks on the Akan idea of *abosom*. This claim is supported by the observation that the Twi translation of the Bible occasionally uses the word *abosom* to translate gods and idols.⁷

Abraham said to Abimelech, I thought that because there are no *Elohim*-fearing people in this place, I would be killed because of my wife. In Genesis 20:13 Abraham stated further that *Elohim* of his father's home made him wander around. Thus, *Elohim* of the fathers, the patron deities are mentioned.

Mother Tongue Biblical Hermeneutics in Theological Discourse

Mother Tongue Biblical Hermeneutics is a discipline in Biblical Studies that provides biblical scholars with the proper reading of the text through the mother tongue. In line with this, Kuwornu-Adjaottor citing Collins and Kerneman posits that a linguistic category called "mother tongue" conveys function, competency, and place of origin.⁸ Drawing from Bediako's writings, he argues that the profoundly ingrained mother language origins of a significant percentage of African Christianity present a chance to influence Christian theological discourse in the continent. The Bible's cultural effects, according to Sanneh, result from its translation into several mother tongues and vernaculars, the transmission of ideas from one language to another, and the adoption of local idioms, phrases, and practices during the translation process.⁹ Ansre observes that the mother-tongue is the language spoken from childhood or the language that is spoken most fluently and easily.¹⁰ The Mother Tongue Biblical approach is an academic field that focuses on interpreting bible texts in languages that speakers identify as their mother tongue, the language they were born into in contrast to languages learned later in life.¹¹ Relating

⁷ Ernestina Afriyie, "Abosom (Onyame Mma – Children of God) and Jesus Christ (the Son of God): An Engagement of the Intermediary Role of Abosom in Akan Religion with That of Jesus Christ in the Christian Faith," in *Seeing New Facets of the Diamond*, ed. G. M. Bediako, B. Y. Quarshie, and J. K. Asamoah-Gyadu (Accra: Regnum Africa, 2014), 261–68.

⁸ Jonathan E T Kuwornu-Adjaottor, "The Practice of Mother Tongue Biblical Hermeneutics in Some Ghanaian Communities: A Case Study of the Phrase Bny Ysr'1 (Deut. 32: 8)," *Journal of Mother Tongue Biblical Hermeneutics* 1, no. 1 (2015): 134–57.

⁹ Lamin Sanneh, "Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture," *American Society of Missiology Series, No. 13* (Maryknoll, N. Y.: Orbis Books, 1990).

¹⁰ G. Ansre, "The Role of Mother Tongue Theologising in Church Growth," in *Paper Presented at Bible Translation Seminar - Bible Translation and Its Usage*, Peyer Presbyterian Church, Bantama – Kumasi, 2012.

¹¹ 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).

the concept of Mother Tongue hermeneutics to the issue at stake it becomes clear that the *Elohim* Abraham is referring to are plural and therefore are the deities (*abosom*) of his fathers.

Mother Tongue hermeneutics could be seen as a liberation transformation hermeneutic within Africa that seeks to use the indigenous language of the African to scrutinize, interpret, and articulate the biblical text for better understanding, involving the translation from the original languages into target African indigenous languages.¹²

Understanding of *Elohim*

Heiser maintains that the term *Elohim* (אלהים) is frequently used by the biblical writers to allude to several distinct entities.¹³ For instance, *Yahweh* (hwhy), the deity of Israel. In context, Deuteronomy 32:17 the *Elohim* (~yhlah) the Israelites perversely worshipped are called *shedim* from *shedu*, which is a neutral term. Therefore, Heiser argues that looking at the list of beings and entities referred to as *Elohim* one would notice that in the spiritual realm, there is a hierarchy. Livni says that the Hebrew Bible contains more than two dozen names for deities which many Africans have heard before: *YHWH*, *Elohim*, and others. *Elohim* transcends space and he is accessible to all people in all places.¹⁴

DISCUSSION

In the narrative, when Abraham said that “the gods of his father’s house ...” in his submission to Abimelech it appears to suggest that possibly every house from the land beyond the Euphrates he had originated had their own gods. Joshua addressed all the tribes of Israel in Joshua 24 and goes on to tell them specifically in Joshua 24:2, that their ancestors including Terah the father of Abraham and Nahor, lived beyond the Euphrates and worshipped other gods. Were these the gods that made Abraham wander? What are the theological implications of this? In what context did the gods cause Abraham to wander?

The Bible's translations frequently give rise to particular unique issues. This would apply to any document with a lengthy history, a great deal of personal significance for a large number of people, and a wide range of institutional interests. One can examine the disagreements that have developed over methods and principles in Bible translation from a variety of angles. Disagreements have emerged on matters concerning grammar versus inspiration, tradition versus modern authority, and inspiration versus philology. It would be challenging to make a stronger case for translators' heavenly inspiration. Translations have been impacted by the issues surrounding traditional versus modern authority more so in the areas of textual analysis and exegesis than style. The conflict of theology vs grammar is a little more nuanced.¹⁵

Instead of reinforcing the text's meaning, modern translators have tended to trust it more as is. Put another way, the authors of the Bible are allowed to speak more for themselves rather than to serve a particular theological agenda that the translator may personally represent. Complete objectivity in translation is impossible, for the translator is part of the very cultural context in which and for which he or she is translating.¹⁶

Due to new scientific discoveries, the practical factor of ongoing linguistic and sociocultural change, as well as the religious necessity of each generation and speech community taking on the challenge of thoroughly researching and clearly communicating the Scriptures for themselves in their local circumstances, Bible translation in any language is an endless task.¹⁷

¹² David Tuesday Adamo, “The Task and Distinctiveness of African Biblical Hermeneutic (S),” *Old Testament Essays* 28, no. 1 (2015): 31–52.

¹³ M. S. Heiser, *The Unseen Realm* (Lexham Press: Bellingham, WA, 2015).

¹⁴ D. Livni, *Is God a Place? The Place of Revelation*. (Israel: Israel Institute of Biblical Studies, 2021).

¹⁵ E. A. Nida, *Toward a Science of Translating: With Special Reference to Principles and Procedures Involved in Bible Translating* (Netherlands: E. J. Brill: Leiden, 1964).

¹⁶ Nida, *Toward a Science of Translating: With Special Reference to Principles and Procedures Involved in Bible Translating*.

¹⁷ E. R. Wendland and P. Noss, *The Encyclopaedia of Applied Linguistics – Wiley Online Library* (Blackwell Publishing, 2013).

Any communication event, whether verbal or nonverbal, has a meaning that is influenced by the context of the individual. Words and symbols have a semantic significance that is defined by culture. Every interpretation of a text captures the reality of a specific people group located in a specific place and period. The hermeneutics of a text is greatly influenced by the culture in which it is written or read. Biblical scholars and translators work hard to offer interpretations that are thought to be true to the original languages' meanings of those writings. The Bible is interpreted based on cultural context. African Christian communities are firmly based on the interplay between scripture and culturally-derived life experiences. In fact, our cultural legacy is the foundation of our shared knowledge of who we are and what that implies.¹⁸

In the theological world of biblical literature, it is however true throughout the biblical stories that God typically operates in the background and only makes direct interventions through the prophets or through dreams. The stories where God is a background character express the yearning for an undefinable deity and, to the greatest extent feasible, steer clear of giving Him human characteristics. Two different conceptions of God's role in the world—as someone who intervenes or observes, lives among or above humans, and acts or merely supervises—have an impact on God's role in these stories. The more human and tangible the idea, the more God is perceived as acting, interfering, and being among us.¹⁹

According to Waltke, a confessional position that regards the Old Testament as revelation must logically come to the conclusion that it is fundamentally a collection of theological writings. It portrays itself as a representation of God's thoughts and purposes, who have spoken of himself and his creations through its multidimensional witness, regardless of other critical and literary assessments. The Old Testament consistently presents itself as the source of transcendent truth, and even those who hold different beliefs about the nature of the Bible have to admit this. It is a statement from and concerning God, either literally or as understood by ancient Israel.²⁰

CONCLUSION

The study has shown that the translators have sought to explain and not convey what the Hebrew text is saying in the narrative. They have assumed that the deity who caused Abraham to wander is *YHWH*. This is a suggestive explanation drawn from the fact that *YHWH* made the children of Israel wander in the wilderness. However, it needs to be said that *YHWH* made Israel wander because of their sin of hardness of heart and unbelief. This cannot be said of Abraham's wandering. The translators have taken it for granted that *Elohim* with the plural verb discussed in the narrative refers to *YHWH*, therefore missing the reality of the characterisation of the *Elohim* with the plural verb. The Hebraic picture of the concept of deities compressed in the narrative is obscured by the translators. The narrator makes it vividly clear that the world of deities can influence humans. This insight is overlooked or obscured in the reading of the narrative in the English and Twi translations of the Bible. This study has drawn attention to this and its significance in the narrative. There is therefore the need for the re-reading of the text to reflect its correct understanding and usage in Christian discourse. Based upon the study of Genesis 20, it provides the impetus for solving the problem of the English rendering and Asante Twi rendering of the text. This discussion posits that the narrative is understood when appropriated in the light of what Abraham told Abimelech. Indeed, the *Elohim* of his father's house actively caused him to wander off. This is not new or unusual in the African setting. It is commonplace to hear people saying that the gods of their father's house are pursuing them and as such they are facing difficulties or delays in their ventures.

¹⁸ Musimbi Kanyoro, "Reading the Bible from an African Perspective," *The Ecumenical Review* 51, no. 1 (1999): 18.

¹⁹ Amit, *Reading Biblical Narratives: Literary Criticism and the Hebrew Bible*.

²⁰ B. K. Waltke, "Textual Criticism of the Old Testament and Its Relation to Exegesis and Theology," in *A Guide to Old Testament Theology & Exegesis*, ed. W. A. VanGemeren (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1997), 48–64.

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