



Mother-Tongue Biblical Hermeneutics: A Critical Assessment of the History of an Emerging Approach in African Biblical Studies

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the history, proponents, constituting elements, challenges, methodology, and future directions of Mother-tongue Biblical Hermeneutics (MTBH) as an emerging hermeneutical approach in African biblical studies. It observes that the translation of the Bible into African mother -tongues has influenced the emergence of MTBH. Based on this observation it posits that MTBH will continue to dominate Ghanaian biblical studies in the years ahead as the Bible gets translated into many more Ghanaian languages. After an overview of African biblical studies, the study establishes a correlation between the production of mother-tongue Bibles and the emergence of MTBH. It charts the course of MTBH by looking at its Ghanaian pioneers. Through an analytic assessment of selected works of currently established practitioners of MTBH, the study presents the constituting elements, challenges, methodology, and future directions of the approach. Moreover, it presents some selected institutions in which MTBH is practised and its practical results. The study finds that a dominant focus of MTBH has been resolving translation-related problems using advanced exegetical and hermeneutical tools. Consequently, less has been done in the area of mother-tongue Bible commentaries and innovative and creative mother-tongue hermeneutical reflections.

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INTRODUCTION

Whereas the translation of portions of Scripture, a Testament¹ or the complete Bible into African mother tongues dates back to the colonial missionary era of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, scholarly studies of mother-tongue Bibles only started recently. An emerging discipline that has given dedicated attention to mother-tongue Bibles in Ghana is mother-tongue biblical hermeneutics (hereafter, MTBH) which is an emerging focus, especially in Ghanaian biblical studies. In the present study, an analytic attempt is made to investigate the history of this approach, its proponents, elements,

¹ Mostly the New Testament will be translated first. For instance, before the translation of the entire Bible into Kusaal published in 2015, the New Testament was first translated in 1976 as “the Kusaal New Testament.” Kusaal is the mother-tongue of the Kusaas, an ethnic group in the Upper East Region of Ghana.

challenges, methodology, and future directions. The study situates MTBH in the broader context of African biblical studies (ABS) and proceeds on the premise that the translation of the Bible into African mother tongues has influenced the emergence of MTBH. Based on this observation it argues that MTBH will continue to dominate Ghanaian biblical studies in the years ahead as the Bible gets translated into many more Ghanaian languages.

OVERVIEW OF AFRICAN BIBLICAL STUDIES

African biblical studies (hereafter, ABS), like MTBH itself, is an emerging discipline.² Various defined, ABS involves the academic critical interpretation of the Bible from an African perspective shaped by African worldviews and concerns.³ A need for biblical studies conducted from an African religio-cultural reality was strengthened by the increasing search for authentic African Christian theologies in the 1950s and 1960s. Indeed, the discussions by African theologians in this period demonstrate consensus on the Bible as a primary source for constructing African Christian theologies.⁴ Such a consensus had hermeneutical implications in the sense that for a genuine African Christian theology to be constructed, the Bible must be interpreted from an African perspective. That is because an African biblical interpretation will be the basis upon which genuine African Christian theologies could be constructed.⁵ For instance, J. S. Mbiti argues that “Any viable theology must and should have a biblical basis and African theology has begun to develop on this foundation.”⁶

Uniquely, ABS seeks to create a productive encounter between the biblical texts and the African contexts; allowing the texts to confront and be confronted by the varied socio-cultural and politico-economic realities of Africa.⁷ The quest to relate biblical texts to African contexts is informed by the hermeneutical reality surrounding biblical interpretation on the continent, namely that, interpretation of the Bible is not an end in itself but a means “to changing the African context.”⁸ Such an instrumental hermeneutical orientation implies that ABS tends to be contextual and reader-centred. For instance, in Gerald West’s assessment, three interpretative poles constitute biblical interpretation in Africa, that is, the pole of the biblical text, the pole of the African context, and the pole of appropriation.⁹ The pole of appropriation is the domain of the situated African reader who brings the biblical texts into an encounter with his or her African context.¹⁰ It is in this sense that the contextuality and reader-centricity should be understood: biblical interpretation is conducted for a chosen African context, relating the interpretative results to socio-cultural and politico-economic issues in that context. Such issues include poverty, hunger, diseases (HIV/ADS, Malaria, Ebola, Covid-19, etc.), corruption, patriarchy, political and ethnic conflicts, problems in African Christianity, etc.¹¹ Consequently, hermeneutical resources (such as cultural and religious elements and expressions) within the context

² See overviews of the discipline provided by Andrew M. Mbuvi, ‘African Biblical Studies: An Introduction to an Emerging Discipline’, *Currents in Biblical Research* 15, no. 2 (2017): 149–78; Frederick Mawusi Amevenku and Isaac Boaheng, *Biblical Exegesis in African Context* (Delaware: Vernon Press, 2022), 59–77.

³ Amevenku and Boaheng, *Biblical Exegesis in African Context*, 58–59. Cf. Mbuvi, ‘African Biblical Studies: An Introduction to an Emerging Discipline’, 150.

⁴ Cf. Tinyiko Maluleke, ‘Half a Century of African Christian Theologies: Elements of the Emerging Agenda for the Twenty-First Century’, in *African Christianity: An African Story*, ed. Ogbu U. Kalu, vol. 3, Perspectives on Christianity Series 5 (Pretoria: University of Pretoria, 2005), 481.

⁵ Amevenku and Boaheng, *Biblical Exegesis in African Context*, 63.

⁶ John S. Mbiti, “The Biblical Basis for Present Trends in African Theology,” *Occasional Bulletin of Missionary Research* 4, no. 3 (July 1980): 122.

⁷ Cf. 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. Boston. Köln: Brill, 2000), 11.

⁸ Gerald West, ‘Biblical Hermeneutics in Africa’, in *African Theology on the Way: Current Conversations*, ed. Diane B. Stinton, SPCK International Study Guide 46 (Great Britain: SPCK, 2010), 22.

⁹ West, ‘Biblical Hermeneutics in Africa’ 21. Cf. Michael Wandusim, *The Lord’s Prayer in the Ghanaian Context: A Reception-Historical Study*, 1st ed., Studies of the Bible and Its Reception 20 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2021), 141.

¹⁰ West, ‘Biblical Hermeneutics in Africa’, 21; Wandusim, *The Lord’s Prayer in the Ghanaian Context*, 141.

¹¹ Cf. West, ‘Biblical Hermeneutics in Africa’, 29–30.

are employed in the interpretative process. That in turn makes ABS reader-centred because biblical interpretation is done from the perspective and worldview of the African reader of the biblical texts and the results of the interpretative process are expected to address his/her contextual socio-cultural and politico-economic needs or interests.¹² In this regard, ABS seems not to be content only with cutting-edge exegesis of a biblical text, but also with cutting-edge hermeneutics. This is what West implies when he argues that “Interpreting the biblical text is never, in African biblical hermeneutics, an end in itself. Biblical interpretation is always about changing the African context.”¹³ A cutting-edge hermeneutic in an African setting will be critically relevant to the varied African contexts.

The foregoing characterisation of ABS is done because the Bible occupies a central place in African Christianity. It is viewed as the “Word of God” in much of African Christianity. Moreover, it is read to seek divine answers to the existential realities of Africans including marriage, childbirth, healing, socio-economic success, passing an examination, acquiring a visa to one advanced country or the other, etc.

Indeed, its contextual and reader-oriented nature has implied a multiplicity of interpretative approaches. They include inculturation biblical hermeneutics, mother-tongue biblical hermeneutics (MTBH), African women or feminist hermeneutics, liberation biblical hermeneutics, postcolonial biblical hermeneutics, exegetics,¹⁴ and reconstruction biblical hermeneutics.¹⁵ These methods have emerged for close to a century.¹⁶ In contemporary ABS, MTBH is engaging increasingly the attention of particularly Ghanaian biblical scholars. Consequently, the rest of the sections below will discuss MTBH from different angles.

Mother-tongue Biblical Hermeneutics: Definitions, Presuppositions and Challenges

Definitions

In African biblical studies, mother-tongue biblical hermeneutics is still an emerging interpretative approach. One of its foremost proponents, John Ekem, describes it as “. . . a discipline devoted to the interpretation and reinterpretation of biblical texts in languages considered by speakers as their first languages into which they were born.”¹⁷ Another key proponent, Jonathan E. T. Kuwornu-Adjaottor, defines it as a scholarly engagement with “the indigenous language translations of the Bible to understand what they say and mean to the readers.”¹⁸ An observation from these definitions is that the “first languages” and “indigenous language” of Ekem and Kuwornu-Adjaottor respectively point to the mother tongues of African readers of the Bible. Another observation is that their definitions also presuppose the availability of the Bible in Ghanaian/African mother-tongues, i.e. mother-tongue Bibles/scriptures. Hence, in discussing MTBH concepts such as mother-tongue, (vernacular), and mother-tongue Bibles/scriptures need clarifications beforehand.

What is a mother tongue and how does it differ from a vernacular? For Benhardt Y. Quarshie, the mother tongue of a person “. . . is that person’s native language; the language that one is born into (..) and grows up with. It is a person’s first language as compared to other languages one might learn

¹² Wandusim, *The Lord’s Prayer in the Ghanaian Context*, 142.

¹³ Gerald West, ‘Biblical Hermeneutics in Africa’, 22.

¹⁴ Dogara Ishaya Manomi, “What Does Biblical ‘Exegetics’ Do?” in *What Does Theology Do, Actually? Observing Theology and the Transcultural*, eds. Matthew Ryan Robinson and Inja Inderst (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2020), 244–58.

¹⁵ See Wandusim, *The Lord’s Prayer in the Ghanaian Context*, 142–56; Mbuvi, ‘African Biblical Studies’, 160–64; West, ‘Biblical Hermeneutics in Africa’, 23–28.

¹⁶ See Ukpogon, ‘Developments in Biblical Interpretation in Africa’, 12–26. Cf. Amevenku and Boaheng, *Biblical Exegesis in African Context*, 63–72.

¹⁷ John D. K. Ekem, *Early Scriptures of the Gold Coast (Ghana): The Historical, Linguistic, and Theological Settings of the Ga, Twi, Mfantse, and Ewe Bibles*, History of Bible Translation 2 (Manchester: St. Jerome Publishing, 2011), 10, 188. Jonathan Kuwornu-Adjaottor, ‘Evaluation of Translation and Interpretation of the Dangme Bible’, *Journal of Mother-Tongue Biblical Hermeneutics and Theology*, 18 December 2020, 113, <https://doi.org/10.38159/motbit.2020122>.

¹⁸ 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.

later in life, for example, in school.”¹⁹ In other words, the mother tongue of a person is not only the initial language in which the person expresses him or herself, but also the language which identifies him/her with an ethnic group.²⁰ A mothertongue then becomes an identity marker “that confirms and affirms who a person is, where they have come from and their sense of self-worth.”²¹ That, then, is to be distinguished from a vernacular which, according to Quarshie, is the common language of a region.²² Even though Ekem concurs with Quarshie’s definition of mother-tongue and vernacular, he adds the nuance that “... a mother-tongue can eventually become a person’s vernacular, depending on how widely it is spoken across geographical boundaries.”²³ Kuwornu-Adjaottor adds to the discussion by explaining that “The term ‘mother-tongue’ is a linguistics category that is used to denote origin – the language one learned firstly, in which one has established the first long-lasting verbal contacts.”²⁴ He observes that the concept of mother-tongue suggests that “the linguistic skills of a child are acquired from his or her mother; therefore, the language of the mother would be the primary language that the child would learn.”²⁵ Just like Quarshie, he sees an identity-marking function of the mother-tongue, namely that “it identifies a speaker internally and externally; that is, one identifies with it and is identified with it, even though it may not be the language one knows best and uses most.”²⁶ These definitions suggest that, ultimately, a mother-tongue will be an indigenous language of an ethnic group.²⁷ Thus Ghanaian languages such as Ga, Akuapem-Twi - & Asante-Twi, Mfantse, Kusaal, Dagbani, Ewe, Dagaare, among others. are examples of mother-tongues.²⁸

The next concept is mother-tongue Bibles (hereafter, MTBs) or Scriptures. Considering the definitions and examples of the mother-tongue, it follows that MTBs are the Bible as translated into these languages. In other words, “it is the translation of the Bible into such languages and indeed all languages (since every language is somebody’s mother-tongue) that are referred to as mother-tongue Scriptures.”²⁹ Examples of MTBs in Ghana are the Kusaal Bible, Asante Twi Bible, the Dagbani Bible, the Ga Bible, the Dangme Bible, the Likpakpaaln Bible, etc.³⁰ These indigenous translations become foci and objects of academic research using the MTBH approach.

The approach creates two levels of dialogue in its application. The first is a dialogue between African worldviews expressed in diverse African religio-cultural contexts and Christian worldviews mediated through biblical texts.³¹ Put differently, an intercultural or cross-cultural interaction takes

¹⁹ B. Y. Quarshie, ‘Doing Biblical Studies in the African Context: The Challenge of Mother-Tongue Scriptures’, *Journal of African Christian Thought* 5, no. 1 (June 2002): 7. Cf. 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 (December 2007): 48.

²⁰ Quarshie, ‘Doing Biblical Studies in the African Context’, 7.

²¹ Quarshie, ‘Doing Biblical Studies in the African Context’ 7.

²² Quarshie, ‘Doing Biblical Studies in the African Context’ 7.

²³ Ekem, ‘Interpreting the Lord’s Prayer in the Context of Ghanaian Mother-Tongue Hermeneutics’, 48; Ekem, *Early Scriptures of the Gold Coast (Ghana)*. 188–89. Cf. Daniel Nii 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 (1 January 2016): 145.

²⁴ Jonathan E. T. Kuwornu-Adjaottor, ‘Translations and Interpretations of Baptizontes (Mt 28:19–20) in Some Ghanaian Mother-tongue Translations of the Bible’, *HTS Theologese Studies / Theological Studies* 77, no. 1 (22 September 2021): 2.

²⁵ Kuwornu-Adjaottor, ‘Translations and Interpretations of Baptizontes’ 2.

²⁶ Kuwornu-Adjaottor, ‘Translations and Interpretations of Baptizontes’ 2.

²⁷ Quarshie, ‘Doing Biblical Studies in the African Context’, 7; Wandusim, *The Lord’s Prayer in the Ghanaian Context*, 147; 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): 577.

²⁸ 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.

²⁹ Quarshie, ‘Doing Biblical Studies in the African Context’, 7.

³⁰ Wandusim, *The Lord’s Prayer in the Ghanaian Context*, 147.

³¹ Benno Van den Toren, Elizabeth Mburu, and Samuel K. Bussey, ‘Biblical Hermeneutics’, in *The Bibliographical Encyclopaedia of African Theology*, 29 January 2021, <https://african.theologyworldwide.com/encyclopaedia-bible-in-africa/biblical-hermeneutics>.

place in the use of the MTBH approach.³² The second level is more of an intertextual dialogue taking place between the mother-tongue translated texts and the original Hebrew/Aramaic and Greek texts.³³

Presuppositions

Following the above, it is apparent that MTBH presupposes 1) the availability of MTBs, 2) mother-tongue Bible commentaries, 3) mother-tongue Bible reading communities, and 4) biblical scholars with trained facilities in the various African mother-tongues.³⁴

- 1) Undoubtedly, the Bible has indeed been translated into several African languages examples of which will be presented in the subsequent section.
- 2) In Ghana, the availability of mother-tongue Bible commentaries is in no way comparable to that in English! Nonetheless, a pacesetter contribution has been made by Ekem with his Greek-Mfantse Commentaries on Philemon and a Greek-Asante Twi Commentary on Colossians.
- 3) Regarding the availability of mother-tongue reading communities, it has to be admitted that in as much as many educated Ghanaians can speak, read, and write in English, not all of them can read and write in their mother-tongues even though they have an oral facility in their native languages.³⁵ This is further exacerbated by the linguistic reality that only a few African mother-tongues exist in coded forms; a lot more still exist in oral forms.³⁶ Consequently, efforts are required to advance literacy in the various mother-tongues for native speakers and to reduce existing oral mother-tongues into written ones as well.³⁷ This linguistic situation implies that for many mother-tongue speakers, the MTBs come to them in oral forms as they hear them read in the context of worship and devotions.³⁸
- 4) The availability of biblical scholars with a linguistic and cultural facility in their native languages who have an interest in MTBH and pursue the same is equally limited. However, the number of publications and theses or dissertations³⁹ in MTBH suggests that MTBH is gaining interest among, for example, Ghanaian biblical scholars.

Challenges

Beyond the implied challenges associated with the above presuppositions of MTBH, Daniel Nii Aboagye Aryeh has observed and presented four (4) other limiting factors to the promotion of MTBH in Ghana and Africa at large.⁴⁰ He describes the first as a “lack of patronage and use of mother-tongue Bibles.”⁴¹ Basically, it points to the fact that less interest, especially among Ghanaian Christian youth, has been shown in the available mother-tongue Bibles and for Aryeh, if MTBH will survive, promotion of interest in the mother-tongue is necessary.⁴² The second challenge relates to the impact of globalisation and urbanisation on languages. On the one hand, the phenomenon of globalisation has

³² Van den Toren, Mburu, and Bussey, ‘Biblical Hermeneutics’.

³³ Van den Toren, Mburu, and Bussey, ‘Biblical Hermeneutics’.

³⁴ Wandusim, *The Lord’s Prayer in the Ghanaian Context*, 148–50.

³⁵ Daniel N. A. Aryeh, ‘Contemporary Hermeneutics: An Examination of Selected Works of John D. K. Ekem on Mother-tongue Biblical Hermeneutics for the African Context’, *The Journal of Inductive Biblical Studies* 4, no. 2 (Summer 2017): 209.

³⁶ Aryeh, ‘Contemporary Hermeneutics,’ 188.

³⁷ Cf. Aryeh, ‘Contemporary Hermeneutics,’ 188; Wandusim, *The Lord’s Prayer in the Ghanaian Context*, 150.

³⁸ This is reminiscent of the ancient situation where reading itself was oral performance and many of Paul’s epistolary audience would have heard his letters read to them church and not read these documents themselves. Cf. Col 4:16; Randolph E. Richards, ‘Reading, Writing, and Manuscripts’, in *The World of the New Testament: Cultural, Social, and Historical Contexts*, ed. Joel B. Green and Lee Martin McDonald (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 345–46.

³⁹ A good list is provided by Kuwornu-Adjaottor, ‘Mother-Tongue Biblical Hermeneutics: A Current Trend in Biblical Studies in Ghana’, 577–78.

⁴⁰ Aryeh, ‘Contemporary Hermeneutics,’ 205–9.

⁴¹ Aryeh, ‘Contemporary Hermeneutics,’ 205.

⁴² Aryeh, ‘Contemporary Hermeneutics,’ 206–7.

led to the urge to adopt common international languages (e.g. Esperanto) for the facilitation of communication at international conferences of international bodies such as the UN, EU, and other regional bodies.⁴³ Consequently, local languages get side-lined. On the other hand, urbanisation creates a situation where urban dwellers tend to use more English than their native languages, leaving the latter to rural dwellers.⁴⁴ Additionally, favouring English for instance over the mother-tongues implies that scholars who publish in the mother-tongues will have a limited readership and a concomitant low citation rate. That becomes a disincentive to scholars willing to venture into academic work using mother-tongues.⁴⁵ The final challenge which Aryeh observes about MTBH is the absence of a mother-tongue academic body. According to him, “The lack of a body to develop and to offer academic support for material produced in a mother-tongue is a significant disincentive to even begin the process.”⁴⁶

Notwithstanding these challenges, the existing MTBs, even if fewer compared to the existing mother-tongues in Ghana or Africa, have had an enormous impact on African Christianity such that they require and will continue to require hermeneutical attention from African biblical scholars. Their impact on African Christianity and the need to turn the hermeneutical searchlight on them implies a correlative link between the production of MTBs and the rise of MTBH, for which reason the discussion should shift attention to mother-tongue Bible translations in Africa and their impact on African Christianity.

Production of Mother-Tongue Bibles and the Rise of MTBH

The presence of the Bible in Africa goes back to the early centuries of Christian history.⁴⁷ Indeed, on African soil—Alexandria of Egypt—the Septuagint (LXX) was produced (i.e. Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible).⁴⁸ African mother-tongue Bibles like the Coptic and Ethiopic are considered among the earliest Bible translations in Africa.⁴⁹ Two observations could therefore rightly be made in relation to the LXX, Coptic, and Ethiopic Bibles. First, they attest that Bible translation activity is not new to Africa. Indeed, R. S. Sugirtharajah relates that these translation endeavours won Africa the reputation as “the cradle for Bible translation.”⁵⁰ The second observation is that, given the Coptic and Ethiopic Bibles, a reflection on the production of mother-tongue Bibles in Africa should include these earlier versions. That said, the history of MTBs in sub-Saharan Africa is much more intertwined with western missionary activities in Africa than to the North African Bible translation endeavours. Quarshie articulates this observation as follows: “The translation of the Bible into mother-tongues in Africa, however, became the order of the day during the missionary era of the nineteenth century ...”⁵¹ During this period, European mission societies such as the Basel Missionary Society made it an official mission policy to translate regardless of the odds, the Bible into indigenous languages of the African territories in which they operated.⁵² Concretising such a policy in Ghana, for example, saw Johannes Zimmermann and his local team translating the Bible into Ga⁵³ by 1866 and five years later Johannes

⁴³ Aryeh, ‘Contemporary Hermeneutics,’ 207.

⁴⁴ Aryeh, ‘Contemporary Hermeneutics,’ 208–9.

⁴⁵ Aryeh, ‘Contemporary Hermeneutics,’ 209.

⁴⁶ Aryeh, ‘Contemporary Hermeneutics,’ 209.

⁴⁷ Indeed, by the early third century of the Christian era, portions of the New Testament were translated into such Coptic dialects as Sahidic in Egypt. See Bruce M. Metzger and Bart D. Ehrman, *The Text of the New Testament: Its Transmission, Corruption, and Restoration*, 4th ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 110.

⁴⁸ Ekem, *Early Scriptures of the Gold Coast (Ghana)*, 1.

⁴⁹ Ekem, *Early Scriptures of the Gold Coast (Ghana)*, 1.

⁵⁰ R. S. Sugirtharajah, 2001, cited in Ekem, *Early Scriptures of the Gold Coast (Ghana)*, 2.

⁵¹ Quarshie, ‘Doing Biblical Studies in the African Context’, 7.

⁵² Quarshie, ‘Doing Biblical Studies in the African Context’, 7. Cf. Wandusim, *The Lord’s Prayer in the Ghanaian Context*, 148.

⁵³ On the historical, linguistic, and theological background of the Ga Bible see Ekem, *Early Scriptures of the Gold Coast (Ghana)*, 23–48.

Gottlieb Christaller produce the Twi Bible⁵⁴ (1871).⁵⁵ Other parts of Africa saw similar concretising efforts in the production of MTBs. For instance, Robert Moffat produced the Setswana Bible, Edwin Smith the Ila New Testament (in Zambia), and John Taylor the Ibo New Testament.⁵⁶ Before the translation efforts of Zimmermann and Christaller with their local counterparts in the nineteenth century, individuals like Jacobus Elisa Joannes Capitein (1717-1737), Christian Jacob Protten (1715-1769), Major Philip Wilhelm von Wrisberg, and Rev. A. W. Hanson translated portions of the Bible into one Ghanaian mother-tongue or the other.⁵⁷ Capitein, for instance, translated the Ten Commandments (Exod 20:1–17) and the Lord’s Prayer (Matt 6:9–13//Luke 11:2–4) into Mfantse which were published in 1744 together with his translation of the Apostle’s Creed.⁵⁸ Analysis of Capitein’s translation of the Lord’s Prayer reveals a creative, dynamic, and pioneering mother-tongue hermeneutical engagement with the Bible.⁵⁹ Protten translated extracts of Martin Luther’s Small Catechism in Danish, Ga, and Mfantse.⁶⁰ This polyglot inter alia included the Decalogue and the Lord’s Prayer. Indeed, he and Capitein are considered “pioneer translators of the Scriptures” on the Gold Coast (Ghana).⁶¹ Wilhelm von Wrisberg is credited with translating “The first readily available portion of the Bible in Ga.”⁶² A final mother-tongue translator before Zimmermann and his team is Hanson who translated the Gospels of Matthew and John into Ga.⁶³

In the post-missionary period, however, the task of producing MTBs has fallen into the hands of African national Bible societies with their international partners.⁶⁴ In the case of Ghana, three translation agencies are involved in the production of MTBs: the Bible Society of Ghana (BSG), the Ghana Institute of Linguistics, Literacy and Bible Translation (GILLBT), and the International Bible Society (Biblia, IBS). The BSG understands its goal as reaching “every home with a Bible in a local language they can read and understand.”⁶⁵ It has thus translated the Bible into nine (9) major languages in Ghana: Akuapem-Twi, Asante-Twi, Ga, Ewe, Mfantse, Dangme, Dagbani, Nzema, and Esahie.⁶⁶ It has ongoing translation projects such as the Bono Bible, the Dagaare Old Testament, and Grune New Testament.⁶⁷ GILLBT on its part has translated the whole Bible (OT & NT) into fourteen (14) mother-tongues; Konkomba, Tampulma, Bimoba, Farefare, Chumburung, Sisaali, Lelemi, Deg, Kasem, Kusaal, Nafaanra, Gonja, Buli, and Vagla.⁶⁸ That aside, it has complete New Testament translations in twenty other mother-tongues.⁶⁹ The translation efforts of these two bodies alone attest to the ongoing Bible translation activities in Africa in the post-missionary era. They also draw attention to the availability of MTBs in Ghana. Yet juxtaposing the current availability with the number of mother-tongues in Ghana reveals a huge mother-tongue translation deficit. For instance, an estimated over fifty (50) Ghanaian mother-tongues currently exist. The aggregate sum of full MTBs produced by BSG

⁵⁴ On the historical, linguistic, and theological background of the Twi Bible see Ekem, *Early Scriptures of the Gold Coast (Ghana)*, 49–78.

⁵⁵ Quarshie, ‘Doing Biblical Studies in the African Context’, 7; Wandusim, *The Lord’s Prayer in the Ghanaian Context*, 148–49.

⁵⁶ Quarshie, ‘Doing Biblical Studies in the African Context’, 7; Wandusim, *The Lord’s Prayer in the Ghanaian Context*, 149.

⁵⁷ Ekem, *Early Scriptures of the Gold Coast (Ghana)*, 7–29.

⁵⁸ Ekem, *Early Scriptures of the Gold Coast (Ghana)*, 9.

⁵⁹ For this analysis see, Ekem, 10–16; John D. K. Ekem, ‘Jacobus Capitein’s Translation of “The Lord’s Prayer” into Mfantse: An Example of Creative Mother-tongue Hermeneutics’, *The Ghana Bulletin of Theology* 2 (2007): 66–79.

⁶⁰ Ekem, *Early Scriptures of the Gold Coast (Ghana)*, 19.

⁶¹ Ekem, *Early Scriptures of the Gold Coast (Ghana)*, 19.

⁶² Ekem, *Early Scriptures of the Gold Coast (Ghana)*, 25.

⁶³ Ekem, *Early Scriptures of the Gold Coast (Ghana)*, 25.

⁶⁴ Quarshie, ‘Doing Biblical Studies in the African Context’, 7; Wandusim, *The Lord’s Prayer in the Ghanaian Context*, 149.

⁶⁵ Bible Society of Ghana. <https://biblesociety-ghana.org/about-us/>. Accessed online on 6th June 2022.

⁶⁶ Bible Society of Ghana. <https://biblesociety-ghana.org/about-us/>. Accessed online on 6th June 2022.

⁶⁷ Bible Society of Ghana. <https://biblesociety-ghana.org/about-us/>. Accessed on 6th June 2022.

⁶⁸ GILLBT. <https://www.gillbt.org/who-we-are/what-we-do/>. Accessed online on 6th June 2022.

⁶⁹ GILLBT. <https://www.gillbt.org/who-we-are/what-we-do/>. Accessed online on 6th June 2022.

and GILLBT as provided earlier is twenty-three (23). Comparatively, more than half of the total number of Ghanaian mother-tongues still need complete MTBs.

Notwithstanding this translation deficit, it is worth noting that the existing MTBs have played a crucial role in indigenising Christianity in Africa. It has well been noted that the rise of African independent Christianity represented by the so-called African Instituted Churches (AICs)⁷⁰ was greatly influenced by the availability of African mother-tongue Bibles.⁷¹ For instance, Werner Kahl argued that “Somit stellten die Bibelübersetzungen—unintendiert—die notwendige Bedingung für das Aufkommen eines einheimischen Christentums in Afrika in Form der AICs dar.”⁷² In other words, Bible translations [mother-tongue Bibles] presented the necessary condition for the rise of an indigenised Christianity in Africa in the form of the AICs. Kwame Bediako recognised this stimulating relationship between MTBs and African Christianity when he asserted that “There is probably no more important single explanation for the massive presence of Christianity on the African continent than the availability of the scriptures in many African languages.”⁷³ This is because MTBs make the “Word of God” contained in Scripture accessible to many people who otherwise could not have access but depended on others with a linguistic facility in English. Thus hermeneutical access is gained by Africans (especially the untrained) with the possibility of interpreting the Bible by themselves in light of their African worldviews and existential realities.⁷⁴ A further implication of the availability of MTBs is that the African biblical scholar no longer enjoys the exegetical and hermeneutical hegemony but shares that with non-trained/popular readers⁷⁵ who seem, in big Ghanaian cities like Accra, Kumasi, etc., to enjoy wider audiences than those in the academy. The available MTBs are used in churches in liturgical contexts and private homes. It is, certainly, to be argued that for some mother-tongue speakers, the MTBs come to them in oral forms because they do not possess reading facilities in their mother-tongue. Furthermore, it is commonplace in Ghana to see Bible verses and para-biblical quotations in a mother-tongue written on private properties such as vehicles, houses, shops, etc.

Given the influence of MTBs on Ghanaian Christianity, which clearly expresses the crucial place of the Bible in Ghanaian Christianity, it has become necessary to give scholarly attention to these translations. Stated differently, this study observes that the rise of MTBH in biblical studies in Ghana is informed not only by the existence of MTBs but also because of their impact on Christianity in the country. This point becomes evident as attention is turned to tracing the roots of MTBH in Ghana, looking at its major proponents and their respective foci. This is the task of the next two sections.

Pioneers of MTBH in Ghana

Frederick M. Amevenku and Isaac Boaheng observe that the late Kwesi A. Dickson qualifies as “one of the foremost Ghanaian scholars who advocated [for] the use of mother-tongue in Christian discourse.”⁷⁶ That is because, among other things, he viewed the mother-tongues as viable means through which African Christians could own the Judeo-Christian scriptures.⁷⁷ That African mother-tongues are viable receptacles for the Christian message was equally appreciated by Kwame Bediako. He sees the event of Pentecost in Acts 2, in which people heard the wonders of God (τὰ μεγαλεῖα τοῦ θεοῦ; Acts 2:11) in their languages (mother-tongues), as providing the “theological warrant” for

⁷⁰ They are also called African Initiated Churches, African Independent Churches. An important early study on these churches in Ghana is offered by Christian Gonçalves Baëta, *Prophetism in Ghana: A Study of Some 'spiritual' Churches*, World Mission Studies (London: SCM Press, 1962).

⁷¹ Werner Kahl, *Jesus Als Lebensretter: Westafrikanische Bibelinterpretationen Und Ihre Relevanz Für Die Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft*, New Testament Studies in Contextual Exegesis 2 (Frankfurt am Main: Lang, 2007), 212, 214. Kwame Bediako, *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion*, Trends in African Christianity (Akropong-Akuapem: Regnum Africa, 2014), 62.

⁷² Kahl, *Jesus Als Lebensretter*, 214.

⁷³ Bediako, *Christianity in Africa*, 62.

⁷⁴ Cf. Bediako, *Christianity in Africa*, 62–63.

⁷⁵ Cf. Kahl, *Jesus Als Lebensretter*, 212.

⁷⁶ Amevenku and Boaheng, *Biblical Exegesis in African Context*, 79.

⁷⁷ Amevenku and Boaheng, *Biblical Exegesis in African Context*, 79.

serious consideration of indigenous languages in which Christians receive the message of God.⁷⁸ He underscores the religious value of mother-tongues by asserting that “The ability to hear in one’s language and to express in one’s language one’s response to the message which one receives, must lie at the heart of all authentic religious encounter with the divine realm.”⁷⁹ Rightly connected to mother-tongue biblical hermeneutics is Bediako’s assessment of the significance of mother-tongue scriptures for biblical exegesis in Africa.⁸⁰

Following Andrew Walls and Lamin Sanneh, he observes the translatability of the Christian faith itself and the Christian Scriptures and argues that Scripture is “essentially vernacular, or mother-tongue.”⁸¹ The Judeo-Christian Scriptures as essentially mother-tongue Scriptures have implications for how one conceives their nature. Bediako sees the mother-tongue Bibles as not just texts, but much more also as contexts into which “persons of varied cultural backgrounds can enter and participate in them, bringing their cultural worlds of meaning with them.”⁸² Consequently, biblical exegesis must go beyond establishing meaning in the original languages of Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek to consider “all possible languages in which biblical faith is received, mediated and expressed.”⁸³ Undoubtedly, one observes here that Bediako, even though does not use the term mother-tongue biblical hermeneutics, expresses strongly the need for it as the concluding section of his article cited here attests.⁸⁴ He locates the significance of the mother-tongue Bibles precisely in their potential in providing new hermeneutical dimensions to Scripture. This is because, for Bediako, the mother-tongues of Africa provide the facility to express better, for example, “the absolute uniqueness of God.”⁸⁵ Potentially, African mother-tongues could show “new dimensions of biblical exegesis.”⁸⁶ He concludes the need for African biblical exegesis to include the mother-tongue Bibles (without which it will be incomplete) by asserting that “biblical exegesis in the African continent cannot be considered adequate if it bypasses the factor and impact of the translated scriptures in the actual languages in which the majority of Christians in Africa read, hear and experience the word of God.”⁸⁷ Thus from Dickson to Bediako, one observes the urgent call for the African biblical scholar to scholarly engage mother-tongue Bibles.

This urgent call has been concretely headed to in recent years by subsequent Ghanaian exegetes such as John D. K. Ekem and Jonathan E. T. Kuwornu-Adjaottor whose works the next section of the study will assess to bring to view the current face of this emerging approach to biblical studies in Africa. Shortly before that, however, one should comment that the background to the rise of mother-tongue biblical hermeneutics itself starts with the Judeo-Christian Scriptures of the two religious communities involved, the Jewish and Christian communities. The Jewish Diaspora, for instance, saw the need to translate its Hebrew Scriptures into Greek (i.e. the Septuagint) which had become more or less a first language for the Diaspora communities.

The Septuagint became the Bible of the early Christians⁸⁸ with which they theologised as they interpreted the Christ event in letter and gospel formats. That the NT writers found it necessary to articulate the Christian faith in the above-mentioned forms in Greek and not Aramaic or Latin is a statement of the significance of the mother-tongue for biblical interpretation and theology. For instance, behind Paul’s recourse to Scripture in 1 Cor 15:3–5 in defending Jesus’s resurrection would

⁷⁸ Bediako, *Christianity in Africa*, 60.

⁷⁹ Bediako, *Christianity in Africa*, 60.

⁸⁰ Kwame Bediako, ‘Biblical Exegesis in Africa: The Significance of the Translated Scriptures’, in *African Theology on the Way: Current Conversations*, ed. Diane B. Stinton, SPCK International Study Guide 46 (London: SPCK, 2010), 12–20.

⁸¹ Bediako, ‘Biblical Exegesis in Africa.’ 14.

⁸² Bediako, ‘Biblical Exegesis in Africa.’16.

⁸³ Bediako, ‘Biblical Exegesis in Africa.’16.

⁸⁴ Bediako, ‘Biblical Exegesis in Africa.’16–20.

⁸⁵ Bediako, ‘Biblical Exegesis in Africa.’18.

⁸⁶ Bediako, ‘Biblical Exegesis in Africa.’18.

⁸⁷ Bediako, ‘Biblical Exegesis in Africa.’19.

⁸⁸ John D. K. Ekem, *Interpretation of ‘scripture’ in Some New Testament Documents: Lessons for the Ghanaian Context* (Accra: African Christian Press, 2015), 52.

have stood the Septuagint as the Scripture of the early Christians. When he recounts the exodus narrative from the Scripture earlier in the letter (i.e. 1 Cor 10:1–13) and argued that the divine displeasure and punishments of disobedience (v. 5) were examples/warning (τύποι, τυπικῶς; vv. 5, 11) and were written (ἔγραψεν) for the instruction of the eschatological people of God (v. 11), he was engaging in mother-tongue hermeneutical reflection on the narratives found in Exodus. In v. 7b he quotes Exod 32:6 explicitly from the LXX. Moreover, related to the Ghanaian context, studies affirm earlier missionary figures like Capitein (who was earlier mentioned) as pioneers in mother-tongue biblical hermeneutics. Regarding Capitein, Ekem submits that “He [i.e. Capitein] can ... be described as a forerunner in the interpretation and re-interpretation of biblical texts in local African languages, a discipline that is likely to shape the future of biblical studies in Africa. ... this discipline is ... referred to as mother-tongue biblical hermeneutics ... an important branch of mother-tongue theology ...”⁸⁹ Ekem, therefore, implies that before key contributors like Dickson and Bediako to the rise of mother-tongue biblical hermeneutics on the Ghanaian soil, Capitein had pre-empted the need for it and set the tone in his eighteenth-century Gold Coast context. The point to be made in all this is that, that later Ghanaian biblical scholars found the need to engage in MTBH is a recapture in the Ghanaian context of hermeneutical convictions and efforts which began many years and centuries back and thus underline the significance of this hermeneutical endeavour.

Selected Contributors to MTBH in Ghana

Ekem and the elements of MTBH

As Dickson and Bediako’s⁹⁰ advocacy for the need to use the mother-tongue in theological reflection comes under mother-tongue theology broadly, Ekem could rightly be considered, given his publications⁹¹ and academic positions,⁹² as a key proponent of MTBH. He recounts his interest in and contribution to MTBH as being shaped by his many years of involvement in Bible translation work in Ghana as a translation consultant as well as his study abroad in Germany where he obtained his doctoral degree in theology.⁹³ He relates the influence of his experience in Bible translation as follows: “... I handled several Bible translation projects in Ghanaian and non-Ghanaian languages and met with people from all walks of life. It dawned on me that when the Bible translations have been provided for communities in their local languages, efforts should be made to help these communities interact effectively with the translated scriptures through the provision of local language Bible commentaries, local language Bible dictionaries and other Study Aids.”⁹⁴ Regarding his study abroad and its impact on him in respect of MTBH he relates, “Migration from an English-speaking environment to a German-speaking territory helped me to better appreciate the importance of mother-tongue in theological

⁸⁹ Ekem, *Early Scriptures of the Gold Coast (Ghana)*, 149.

⁹⁰ Mention should equally be made of the late John S. Pobee and his John S. Pobee, *Toward an African Theology* (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon, 1979). And outside Ghana, the late Lamin Sanneh and his Lamin O. Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture*, 2nd ed., American Society of Missiology Series / American Society of Missiology 42 (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2009).

⁹¹ Ekem, ‘Interpreting the Lord’s Prayer in the Context of Ghanaian Mother-Tongue Hermeneutics’; Ekem, ‘Jacobus Capitein’s Translation of “The Lord’s Prayer” into Mfantse’; Ekem, *Interpretation of ‘scripture’ in Some New Testament Documents*; John D. K. Ekem, ‘Early Translators and Interpreters of the Judeo-Christian Scriptures on the Gold Coast: Two Case Studies’, *Journal of African Christian Thought* 13, no. 2 (December 2010): 34–37; John D. K. Ekem, ‘A Dialogical Exegesis of Romans 3.25a’, *Journal for the Study of the New Testament: JSNT* 30, no. 1 (2007): 75–94; John D. K. Ekem, *Priesthood in Context: A Study of Priesthood in Some Christian and Primal Communities of Ghana and Its Relevance for Mother-Tongue Biblical Hermeneutics* (Accra: SonLife Press, 2009); John D. Kwabena Ekem, *New Testament Concepts of Atonement in an African Pluralistic Setting* (Accra: SonLife Press, 2005).

⁹² Before his current appointment as Vice President of the Methodist University College, a private university of the Methodist Church, Ghana, he was Director of the Centre for Mother-Tongue Biblical Hermeneutics at the Trinity Theological Seminary, Legon as well as occupant of the Kwesi Dickson-Gilbert Ansre Distinguished Professorial Chair in Biblical Exegesis and Mother-tongue Hermeneutics.

⁹³ Ekem, *Interpretation of ‘scripture’ in Some New Testament Documents*, 19.

⁹⁴ Ekem, *Interpretation of ‘scripture’ in Some New Testament Documents*, 19.

discourse ...”⁹⁵ His contribution to MTBH can be seen in two ways. First his research-based call for the need for African biblical scholars to engage in MTBH⁹⁶ and second, following that with an outline of what should constitute MTBH.⁹⁷

He proposes the following agenda for MTBH: 1) intensive study of ancient biblical Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek; 2) preparation of context-sensitive mother-tongue study Bibles; 3) introduction and development of Septuagintal studies; 4) related to Septuagintal studies is Targum studies; 5) promotion of the quality academic study of mother-tongue biblical texts; 6) dramatisation of biblical messages; 7) reflecting on societal issues from a biblical perspective using the mother-tongues, and 8) equipping popular mother-tongue readers of the Bible to arrive at an informed understanding of key theological issues confronting the contemporary church.⁹⁸

Amevenku and Boaheng⁹⁹ as well as Daniel N. B. Aryeh¹⁰⁰ have in their respective studies analysed these eight agenda points and categorised them into three points describing them as elements of MTBH.¹⁰¹ Accordingly, the first element of MTBH is the study of African mother-tongues and ancient biblical languages (i.e. Hebrew, Aramaic, & Greek) and translations (e.g. LXX). These issues from Ekem’s conviction that MTBH will require proficiency in one’s mother-tongue as well as the biblical world and its languages.¹⁰² The second element, building on the first, involves the development of mother-tongue Bible study aids. In other words, there is a need to go beyond the production of MTBs to provide study aids that will help mother-tongue reading communities to engage with the translated Scriptures.¹⁰³ This is what Ekem meant in an earlier quote “... when the Bible translations have been provided for communities in their local languages, efforts should be made to help these communities interact effectively with the translated scriptures through the provision of local language Bible commentaries, local language Bible dictionaries and other Study Aids.”¹⁰⁴ The third element, according to Amevenku and Boaheng, is interpretive creativity, innovation, and relevance.¹⁰⁵ This requires biblical interpretation in Africa to be context-sensitive by producing hermeneutical results that address the myriad socio-economic and cultural issues of Africa. The earlier quotation of Gerald West probably captures this aptly: “Interpreting the biblical text is never, in African biblical hermeneutics, an end in itself. Biblical interpretation is always about changing the African context.”¹⁰⁶

By implication, African biblical hermeneutics must gear towards contextual development and changes. Moreover, for Amevenku and Boaheng “Creativity and innovation can also be in the form of dramatization of scripture texts, especially narratives” which address the illiterate constituency of mother-tongue communities.¹⁰⁷ In sum, interpretative creativity and innovation will require that MTBH strives at being socially relevant by providing “practical steps to solve relevant socioeconomic, religio-cultural and political issues confronting the communities of today.”¹⁰⁸

⁹⁵ Ekem, *Interpretation of ‘scripture’ in Some New Testament Documents*, 19.

⁹⁶ This is evident in especially in the following publications: Ekem, *Interpretation of ‘scripture’ in Some New Testament Documents*; Ekem, ‘Jacobus Capitein’s Translation of “The Lord’s Prayer” into Mfantse’; Ekem, *Early Scriptures of the Gold Coast (Ghana)*, 149–51.

⁹⁷ John D. K. Ekem, ‘Professorial Chair Inaugural Address’, *Journal of Mother-tongue Biblical Hermeneutics* 1, no. 1 (May 2015): 164–65. Cf. Amevenku and Boaheng, *Biblical Exegesis in African Context*, 82; Aryeh, ‘Contemporary Hermeneutics’, 186–87.

⁹⁸ See Amevenku and Boaheng, *Biblical Exegesis in African Context*, 82; Aryeh, ‘Contemporary Hermeneutics’, 186–87.

⁹⁹ Amevenku and Boaheng, *Biblical Exegesis in African Context*, 83–89.

¹⁰⁰ Aryeh, ‘Contemporary Hermeneutics’, 187–204.

¹⁰¹ Amevenku and Boaheng, *Biblical Exegesis in African Context*, 83; Aryeh, ‘Contemporary Hermeneutics’, 187.

¹⁰² Amevenku and Boaheng, *Biblical Exegesis in African Context*, 83.

¹⁰³ Amevenku and Boaheng, *Biblical Exegesis in African Context*, 86.

¹⁰⁴ Ekem, *Interpretation of ‘scripture’ in Some New Testament Documents*, 19.

¹⁰⁵ Amevenku and Boaheng, *Biblical Exegesis in African Context*, 87.

¹⁰⁶ Gerald West, ‘Biblical Hermeneutics in Africa’, 22.

¹⁰⁷ Amevenku and Boaheng, *Biblical Exegesis in African Context*, 89.

¹⁰⁸ Amevenku and Boaheng, *Biblical Exegesis in African Context*, 89.

Being not only an ardent proponent of MTBH but also a practitioner, Ekem has published using MTBH.¹⁰⁹ Nonetheless, from Dickson to Ekem, one observes a call to mother-tongue theology and hermeneutics without a clearly stated methodology¹¹⁰ as to how for instance students and emerging African biblical scholars can engage in MTBH. This methodological gap in MTBH was to be filled by the Kuwornu-Adjaottor methodology.

Kuwornu-Adjaottor and the Methodology of MTBH

J. E. T. Kuwornu-Adjaottor contributes to the development of mother-tongue biblical hermeneutics by proposing a methodology with which MTBH research can be conducted.¹¹¹ In his study cited here, he situates MTBH in what he describes as “mother-tongue biblical studies” which he defines as “the scholarly engagement of the indigenous language translations of the Bible to understand what they say and mean to the readers.”¹¹² He explains further that “Mother-tongue biblical studies use the mother-tongue Bible ... Mother-tongue Bibles give Ghanaians/Africans the opportunity to interpret Scripture from their world-view.”¹¹³ What one observes from his submissions is that MTBH is a methodological approach in the discipline of mother-tongue biblical studies. Relating this category to the earlier discussion on African biblical studies, it is clear that given its focus, namely research on mother-tongue Bibles, mother-tongue biblical studies is rightly a disciplinary focus in African biblical studies. Moreover, the relationship between this category and that of mother-tongue theology as used by Ekem above should be clarified. Ekem indicated that MTBH is “a branch of the broader discipline of mother-tongue theology.”¹¹⁴ Mother-tongue theology— theological reflection in the mother-tongue—should be situated in African Christian theology which seeks to “contextualise, indigenize or incarnate Christian theologies in Africa”¹¹⁵ by expressing the Christian faith and its biblical teachings in relevant African thoughts and categories. Thus, situating MTBH in mother-tongue theology is perhaps another way of explaining that MTBH is the approach with which one generates exegetical and hermeneutical data to engage in mother-tongue theological reflections just as it is the approach with which one pursues mother-tongue biblical studies.

Thus clarified, Kuwornu-Adjaottor explains that MTBH is eclectic in nature because it picks and chooses hermeneutical resources from fields such as translation studies, linguistics (ancient biblical languages and African mother-tongues inclusive), and biblical studies.¹¹⁶ Consequently, he presents nine methodological steps in conducting mother-tongue biblical research. These involve;

1. Identifying a biblical text which has been wrongly translated into a mother-tongue.
2. Discussing why the translation is problematic in the culture of the mother-tongue.
3. Stating and explaining the methodology one will adopt and its proponents.
4. Doing an exegesis of that text, using Bible study resources – dictionaries, commentaries, encyclopedias, word study helps, etc.
5. Finding out what scholars have said about the text, how they interpret it, and the reasons for their interpretations.

¹⁰⁹ Here one thinks of for e.g. Ekem, ‘Interpreting the Lord’s Prayer in the Context of Ghanaian Mother-Tongue Hermeneutics’.

¹¹⁰ Jonathan E. T. Kuwornu-Adjaottor, ‘African Biblical Hermeneutics: A Methodology for Mother-tongue Biblical Hermeneutics’, *E-Journal of Religion and Theological Studies* 1, no. 2 (September 2015): 16.

¹¹¹ Kuwornu-Adjaottor, ‘Mother-Tongue Biblical Hermeneutics: A Current Trend in Biblical Studies in Ghana’, 577. See also Kuwornu-Adjaottor, ‘African Biblical Hermeneutics’, 16–18.

¹¹² Kuwornu-Adjaottor, ‘Mother-Tongue Biblical Hermeneutics’, 577.

¹¹³ Kuwornu-Adjaottor, ‘Mother-Tongue Biblical Hermeneutics’, 577.

¹¹⁴ Ekem, ‘Early Translators and Interpreters of the Judeo-Christian Scriptures on the Gold Coast: Two Case Studies’, 149.

¹¹⁵ Edward W. Fasholé-Luke, “Footpaths and Signposts to African Christian Theologies,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 34, no. 5 (October 1981): 388, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930600055277>.

¹¹⁶ Kuwornu-Adjaottor, ‘Mother-Tongue Biblical Hermeneutics’, 577; Kuwornu-Adjaottor, ‘African Biblical Hermeneutics’, 17. Cf. Amevenku and Boaheng, *Biblical Exegesis in African Context*, 89–90.

6. Discussing the usage of the concept in the mother-tongue and its culture. This involves interviewing indigenous speakers for deeper insights into the concept under study. Moreover, this step requires using local terminologies in one's writing and explaining them in English.
7. Comparing the text in one's mother-tongue with other Ghanaian translations that one can read and understand.
8. Analyzing the mother-tongue-translations. This involves asking questions such as; what does the text mean? How are the meanings of the text similar to the Hebrew/Greek original? Are there discrepancies? What might have accounted for the differences in translation?
9. Coming out with a new translation of the text that fits into the culture of the mother-tongue.¹¹⁷

A close analysis of these methods suggests that in terms of practical application, Kuwornu-Adjaottor's methodology can be seen in two broad parts. The first part is an exegesis of a chosen "problematic" text (i.e. a wrongly translated text). This involves employing historical-critical exegetical methods to arrive at an appropriate intended meaning of the text. The second part is a contextual field study. It requires a researcher (both scholar and student alike) to go out into a chosen research field to collect empirical data for analysis. Indeed, the outlines of his research publications using this methodology confirm this analysis. For instance, in his "A Critical Study of the Translation of Mark 1:12 in the Dangme Translation of the Bible,"¹¹⁸ he discusses the problematic nature of the translation of Mark 1:12 (Καὶ εὐθὺς τὸ πνεῦμα αὐτὸν ἐκβάλλει εἰς τὴν ἔρημον) in the Dagme Bible. He precedes his discussion with an exegetical study of the text¹¹⁹ with the heading "1.1 Exegesis of Mark 1:12."¹²⁰ Then the study transitions from exegesis to a contextual empirical focus with a section titled, "3. Mark 1:12 in Dangme Bible."¹²¹

Aside from the two parts emerging from the analysis of the methodology above, another point is that the methodology focuses on dealing with "problematic" texts. Stated differently, it finds application when a researcher observes a discrepancy between the original biblical texts and their corresponding mother-tongue translations. Would that imply that MTBH is only about addressing problematic texts? Would a positive response subsequently imply that MTBH would then find no use when mother-tongue translators produce quality mother-tongue translations devoid of problematic texts? Kuwornu-Adjaottor's definition of MTBH and mother-tongue biblical studies above coupled with Ekem's proposed elements of MTBH indicate that MTBH goes beyond solving problematic translations to include producing context-sensitive interpretations of Scripture as well as producing mother-tongue Bible study aids that will assist mother-tongue readers to effectively engage MTBs. Granted this analysis, it means that the methodological gap in MTBH is not yet completely filled. It remains to be clarified methodologically how the innovative, creative, and relevant interpretations are to be done. Equally to be clarified methodologically, is how the study aids are to be produced. A brief discussion on this methodological gap is apt.

Before that however, attention should be given to a recent contribution to the methodology of MTBH as proposed by Kuwornu-Adjaottor. Frederick M. Amevenku and Isaac Boaheng have reflected on the works of Ekem and Kuwornu-Adjaottor and proposed "a five-fold methodology" instead of Kuwornu-Adjaottor's nine-fold.¹²² They thus submit, "Standing on the shoulders of both Ekem and

¹¹⁷ Kuwornu-Adjaottor, 'Mother-Tongue Biblical Hermeneutics', 577. Cf. Kuwornu-Adjaottor, 'African Biblical Hermeneutics', 17–18.

¹¹⁸ Jonathan Kuwornu-Adjaottor, 'A Critical Study of the Translation of Mark 1:12 in the Dangme Translation of the Bible' 5 (1 December 2019): 97–109.

¹¹⁹ Kuwornu-Adjaottor, 'A Critical Study of the Translation of Mark 1:12 in the Dangme Translation of the Bible'. 99–103.

¹²⁰ Kuwornu-Adjaottor, 'A Critical Study of the Translation of Mark 1:12 in the Dangme Translation of the Bible'. 99.

¹²¹ Kuwornu-Adjaottor, 'A Critical Study of the Translation of Mark 1:12 in the Dangme Translation of the Bible'. 103.

¹²² Amevenku and Boaheng, *Biblical Exegesis in African Context*, 90.

Kuwornu-Adjaottor, we propose a five-fold methodology comprising: identification of the problem; exegetical study of text (or word study); comparative study of the mother-tongue translation of the text/word; the search for a culturally appropriate rendition and a proposal for appropriate mother-tongue translation.”¹²³ A close look at their proposal indicates that Amevenku and Boaheng are essentially simplifying and condensing the methodology of Kuwornu-Adjaottor without a new methodological nuance.

Ekem & Isaac Boaheng and the methodology for mother-tongue Bible commentaries

Returning to the methodological gap identified above, it should be noted that Ekem, as previously indicated, has pioneered the production of mother-tongue commentaries with his mother-tongue commentaries on Philemon and Colossians.¹²⁴ Equally, Isaac Boaheng has recently published a mother-tongue commentary on 2 John.¹²⁵ Even though both Ekem and Boaheng do not provide a clearly stated methodology on the subject, a close analysis of their studies reveals an implicit methodology. For instance, in the concluding chapter of his “Priesthood in Context,” Ekem undertakes a mother-tongue hermeneutical commentary on Heb 9:11–12.¹²⁶ An observation of his presentation suggests the following methodology.

1. A survey of translations of the study text in European and other Ghanaian languages. According to Ekem, this will shed light on “pertinent hermeneutical issues within a broader Ghanaian context.”¹²⁷ This is achieved by commenting on issues arising from the different mother-tongue translations.¹²⁸
2. Transliteration of the Greek text using characters of the mother-tongue or their closest equivalents.¹²⁹ The text so transliterated becomes “vernacularised-transliterated text” which helps mother-tongue speakers without linguistic facility in Greek to have a reading feel of the original text.¹³⁰
3. Translation of the Greek text into the mother-tongue under study. The mother-tongue translation is followed by an English gloss for the sake of non-speakers of the mother-tongue.¹³¹
4. A commentary on the translated text using the mother-tongue with an English gloss at the end.¹³²

Essentially, this methodology has two parts. The first part presents related mother-tongue translations (including international ones) and the second is the mother-tongue commentary on the text. The commentary requires first a transliteration of the Greek text and a translation into a mother-tongue. The approach is slightly different in Ekem’s Mfantse commentary on Philemon.¹³³ There he precedes each commentary section with the corresponding Greek text, follows that with a

¹²³ Amevenku and Boaheng, *Biblical Exegesis in African Context*, 90.

¹²⁴ Krataa a Pɔɔl kyerewee dze kɛmaa Faelimɔn: Ne Nkyerekyeremu Fi Griik Kasa mu kɔ Mfantse Kasa mu; Krataa a Wɔkyerewee dze kɛmaa Kolossae Asɔr: Ne Nkyerekyeremu Fi Griik Kasa Mu kɔ Mfantse Kasa mu; Nwoma a wɔtwere de kɔmaa Kolose Asafo: Ne Nkyerekyeremu Firi Hela Kasa mu kɔ Asante-Twi Kasa mu.

¹²⁵ Isaac Boaheng, ‘An Akan (Bono-Twi) Mother-Tongue Commentary on the Second Letter of John’, *Journal of Mother-tongue Biblical Hermeneutics and Theology* 3, no. 3 (October 2021): 42–56.

¹²⁶ Ekem, *Early Scriptures of the Gold Coast (Ghana)*, 188–203.

¹²⁷ Ekem, *Early Scriptures of the Gold Coast (Ghana)*, 189.

¹²⁸ Ekem, *Early Scriptures of the Gold Coast (Ghana)*, 194–98.

¹²⁹ Ekem, *Early Scriptures of the Gold Coast (Ghana)*, 198.

¹³⁰ Ekem, *Early Scriptures of the Gold Coast (Ghana)*, 189.

¹³¹ Ekem, *Early Scriptures of the Gold Coast (Ghana)*, 189, 198.

¹³² Ekem, *Early Scriptures of the Gold Coast (Ghana)*, 199–203.

¹³³ Kwabena Ekem, *Krataa a Pɔɔl Kyerewee Dze Kɛmaa Faelimɔn: Ne Nkyerekyeremu Fi Griik Kasa Mu Kɔ Mfantse Kasa Mu* (Accra: SonLife Press, 2009).

vernacularised transliteration, then a translation into Mfantse, and finally a commentary using the mother-tongue.¹³⁴

Boaheng's commentary differs slightly from Ekem's. He proceeds as follows.

1. Providing historical background to the biblical text/book.¹³⁵
2. A mother-tongue translation of the Greek text, section by section, with a corresponding English translation of the mother-tongue text.¹³⁶
3. A commentary on each section so translated using the mother-tongue with a corresponding English translation.¹³⁷

Held together, one observes some differences between the two approaches. Ekem's reference to European and other African mother-tongue translations in the case of the commentary on Heb 9:11–12 is missing in Boaheng's approach. Equally, Boaheng does not provide an initial transliteration of the Greek. That notwithstanding, the differences can be explained by observing that whereas Boaheng deals with a complete biblical book, Ekem comments on a pericope of a book. Compared to the commentary on Philemon, the differences between the approaches of the two scholars are observable. The English translation that Boaheng provides in his commentary is missing in Ekem's commentary on Philemon. At the same time, Ekem's vernacularised transliteration of the Greek text before commentary is missing in Boaheng's.¹³⁸

Notwithstanding Ekem and Boaheng's implicit methodologies for engaging in mother-tongue commentary on biblical texts, it is obvious from the foregoing analyses that there is a need for its further development and clarification.¹³⁹

Academic Institutional Contexts of MTBH in Ghana

That MTBH is gaining currency in biblical studies in Ghana is confirmed not only by the proponents and practitioners mentioned above but more evidently also by the existence of academic institutions within which MTBH finds application. A further attestation is the availability of theses or dissertations of students who used the approach and peer-reviewed journals publishing studies in MTBH.

The Trinity Theological Seminary, Legon, Accra Ghana, has set up the Centre for Mother-tongue Biblical Hermeneutics (CMTBH), led by John Ekem as its Director. Ekem reflects that the need to offer an opportunity for students in pastoral or ministerial training "... to do part of their formal theological studies in languages used by the communities among whom they are going to minister" was a reason for setting up the CMTBH.¹⁴⁰ He relates that the CMTBH is a place where "the Bible is interpreted in local Ghanaian (African) languages using very high standards of biblical scholarship."¹⁴¹ In other words, the CMTBH, as its name suggests, is a place for the pursuit of mother-tongue biblical hermeneutics. The CMTBH runs short courses in biblical languages—Hebrew & Greek—and some Ghanaian languages like Ga, Akan languages, and Ewe targeted at students with limited time yet with interest in these subjects.¹⁴² The Centre also issued the Journal of Mother-Tongue Biblical

¹³⁴ See for instance, Ekem, *Krataa a Pɔɔl Kyerɛwee Dze Kemaa Faelimɔn*, 10–14.

¹³⁵ Boaheng, 'An Akan (Bono-Twi) Mother-Tongue Commentary on the Second Letter of John', 42–44.

¹³⁶ Boaheng, 'An Akan (Bono-Twi) Mother-Tongue Commentary on the Second Letter of John', 45–55.

¹³⁷ Boaheng, 'An Akan (Bono-Twi) Mother-Tongue Commentary on the Second Letter of John', 45–55.

¹³⁸ One should note that the differences in publication format also account for the above observations. For instance, whereas Boaheng publishes his commentary as a journal article which obviously presents space limitations, Ekem publishes his commentary as a monograph which provide him with more space to present more details.

¹³⁹ It should be noted that the preparation of mother-tongue commentaries is just one aspect of the element of preparation of context-sensitive mother-tongue Bible aids. It includes study Bibles and Bible study materials. Ekem gives an example how an indigenous study material could be prepared in his John David Kwabena Ekem, 'Developing Akan Study Bible Material on 1 Corinthians 11.2–16', in *Interacting with Scriptures in Africa* (Nairobi: Acton Publishers, 2005), 102–22.

¹⁴⁰ Ekem, *Interpretation of 'scripture' in Some New Testament Documents*, 20.

¹⁴¹ Ekem, *Interpretation of 'scripture' in Some New Testament Documents*, 20.

¹⁴² Aryeh, 'Contemporary Hermeneutics', 190.

Hermeneutics. Moreover, Ekem has supervised theses in MTBH at TTS and beyond.¹⁴³

Besides TTS, the Department of Religious Studies of the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology¹⁴⁴ has one of its research foci as mother-tongue biblical hermeneutical research and runs courses in MTBH at the post-graduate level. Undoubtedly, at KNUST, Kuwornu-Adjaottor is the initiator and lead researcher in mother-tongue biblical hermeneutics. As a glance at his list of publications reveals, he has used the MTBH approach to publish numerous articles. Additionally, just like Ekem, he has also supervised several undergraduate and postgraduate theses or dissertations in MTBH. In connection with Kuwornu-Adjaottor, mention should be made of the *Journal of Mother-Tongue Biblical Hermeneutics and Theology (MOBIT)*¹⁴⁵ which he founded in 2019. Focusing on mother-tongue biblical hermeneutics, MOBIT publishes research work in the areas of “biblical interpretation, Bible translation, mother-tongue theology, linguistics, and biblical theology.”¹⁴⁶

Importantly, the results of MTBH have been useful to Ghanaian mother-tongue Bible translation agencies such as the Bible Society of Ghana and GILLBT. They have access to research results that aid them in the revision of existing mother-tongue Bibles which have translation-related problems. Moreover, if the aspect of mother-tongue commentaries is developed, these agencies will also benefit because they will not only provide the Bible in the mother-tongues but also accompany that with mother-tongue commentaries with which mother-tongue readers can effectively engage the holy Scriptures. Herein then clearly lies the societal impact or rather relevance of mother-tongue biblical hermeneutics. Moreover, at this interface, one equally observes 1) the connection between exegesis and hermeneutics where African biblical studies do not end at exegesis but press forward to relevant, context-sensitive hermeneutics that aims at contextual transformations; and 2) the facilitating link between trained African biblical interpreters and their popular interpreter counterparts.

CONCLUSION: Current face and future direction(s) of MTBH

The study set out to investigate the history of mother-tongue biblical hermeneutics, its proponents, its constituting elements, challenges, methodology, and future directions. Mother-tongue biblical hermeneutics is a disciplinary approach in African biblical studies largely advanced and practised by Ghanaian biblical scholars. Its research object is mainly African mother-tongue Bibles, i.e., the Bible as translated into various African indigenous languages. On the one hand, it aims at facilitating the reception of MTBs by indigenous Bible-reading communities through identifying translation-related problems and solving them with exegetical and contextual hermeneutical methods. On the other hand, it strives at providing mother-tongue Bible commentaries and context-sensitive interpretations of biblical texts in Africa.

Some key concluding observations from the study are as follows. First, a case for mother-tongue biblical hermeneutical reflections can be argued from the New Testament itself especially with its authors' usage of the Septuagint (LXX) to interpret and reinterpret the Christ event in Greek to their Hellenised and Hellenistic first-century CE audience. Second, in Ghana, the history of mother-tongue biblical hermeneutics stretches back to the eighteenth century with key figures like Jacobus Elisa Joannes Capitein who pre-empted the discipline in his efforts to translate and interpret portions of the Judeo-Christian scriptures in relevant Ghanaian categories. Additionally, the current methodological framework for the practice of MTBH advanced by J. E. T. Kuwornu-Ajaottor fixes the focus on addressing problematic texts in Ghanaian mother-tongue Bibles. Consequently, not much, as yet, has

¹⁴³ Kuwornu-Adjaottor, 'Mother-Tongue Biblical Hermeneutics', 578.

¹⁴⁴ Other institutions such as the Akrofi-Christaller Institute of Theology, Mission and Culture (ACI) at Akropong, Ghana could be mentioned in connection with MTBH. It is the academic home Kwame Bediako (was its founding director), B. Y. Quarshie whose study on mother-tongue scriptures has been referenced above as well as Philip Laryea who has done some study in mother-tongue theology; see his Philip T. Laryea, 'Mother-Tongue Theology: Reflections on Images of Jesus in the Poetry of Afua Kuma', *Journal of African Christian Thought* 3, no. 1 (June 2000): 50–60.

¹⁴⁵ It is an open-access journal published by Noyam Publishers, Accra. See, <https://noyam.org/>.

¹⁴⁶ See the journal homepage at: <https://noyam.org/journals/motbit/>.

been done in the area of mother-tongue Bible commentaries and study Bibles. Hence it is an area that emerging scholars in MTBH should look at. Similarly, the dominance of the translation-related-problem-solving-focus of MTBH has given less attention to the conduct of innovative and context-relevant mother-tongue hermeneutical reflections on the MTBs. Thus, it also becomes an area that emerging scholars and future research should focus on.

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