

When the Word Arrives but Meaning Stays Behind: Rethinking Bible Reception in African Christianity

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ABSTRACT

The translation of the Bible into African languages has played a pivotal role in the growth and expression of African Christianity. However, the reception of Scripture does not always lead to full understanding, particularly when transliteration overshadows meaningful interpretation. This paper critically examines this issue within the framework of African Christianity, using the Mfantse Bible as a case study. It focuses on the transliteration of the names of the Pentateuch, namely *Gyenesis*, *Eksodɔs*, *Lewitikɔs*, *Nkane*, and *Deuteronomi*, which, although phonetically faithful to the original languages, often lack semantic clarity for local readers. Employing a mixed method, the study combines textual analysis of the Mfantse Bible with data from semi-structured questionnaires administered to users and readers of the Mfantse Bible. These methods uncover how transliteration affects biblical comprehension, spiritual formation, and theological engagement. The paper advocates for a more contextually grounded approach to Bible translation of biblical titles, particularly regarding biblical titles, one that prioritises both fidelity to the original text and accessibility for indigenous speakers. It further proposes strategies for enhancing biblical literacy and theological understanding within African Christianity.

Keywords: *Bible translation, African Christianity, transliteration, Bible users, practitioners, scholars*

INTRODUCTION

The translation of the Bible into African languages has been instrumental in the establishment, expansion, and contextual expression of Christianity across the continent.¹ By making Scripture available in local languages such as Mfanste, communities have been empowered to access and engage with the Christian message in ways that are both linguistically familiar and culturally meaningful. Language, as a conduit of worldview and identity, serves not merely as a medium of communication but also as a vital tool for theological engagement and spiritual formation. In this light, the relationship between the language of the church and that of the surrounding culture

¹ J. K. Asamoah-Gyadu, "Reform, Renewal and Revival: Lamin O. Sanneh and the Place of Africa in World Christianity," *Exchange*, 49(1) (2020): 53-75. <https://doi.org/10.1163/1572543X-12341549>; Thomas Atta-Akosah, "The Language factor in African Christian Mission: Bible Translation and Biblical Interpretation in the Church in African Church," *Journal of African Christian Thought*, 15(2) (2012): 20-22; Abel Ndjerareou, "The contribution of Mother tongue Bible translation to the formulation of African theology," *Journal of African Christian Thought*, 15(2) (2012): 40-42.

becomes essential for effective Christian formation, with the former shaping spiritual identity and the latter informing one's worldview and engagement with natural theology.²

Atta-Akosah draws attention to the centrality of language in the missionary enterprise of African Christianity, underscoring the role of vernacular Bible translation in enhancing comprehension and deepening the impact of the Christian message.³ He contends that the global mission of God, to communicate His word to all nations, necessitates the translation of Scripture into the everyday language of the people. For him, Bible translation is not optional but essential in contexts such as Ghana and the broader African continent. The use of indigenous languages in rendering biblical texts, according to Atta-Akosah, not only facilitates evangelism but also fosters cultural identification with the gospel message by removing its perceived foreignness. This act of linguistic domestication allows the Scriptures to be internalised within local categories of thought and expression.

Scholars such as Ndjerareou support this view by highlighting the transformative impact of vernacular translations on indigenous religious consciousness.⁴ He narrates how access to Scripture in one's mother tongue has historically led to personal and communal conversions, as exemplified by his own father's embrace of Christianity through a Bible written in his native language. Similarly, Aboagye Aryeh stresses the importance of mother-tongue biblical hermeneutics in fostering deeper theological reflection and relational engagement with God among Ghanaians.⁵ His work demonstrates how Scripture, when encountered through one's own linguistic and cultural lens, resonates more profoundly and becomes more personally meaningful.

Aboagye Aryeh further notes that the biblical texts were deeply embedded in the socio-cultural settings of their original audiences—the Old Testament in the Hebrew and Aramaic milieu, and the New Testament within Jewish and Greco-Roman contexts. However, given the significant shifts in culture, language, and education over centuries, even present-day readers from the originating cultures may struggle with ancient idioms, metaphors, and theological concepts. This underscores the inherent complexity of translating sacred texts across both time and culture. For contemporary Mfantse readers, Aboagye Aryeh argues that access to a Bible in their native language opens interpretive pathways shaped by local knowledge systems, thereby enhancing both understanding and relevance. In his view, vernacular translation is not only a means of linguistic accessibility but also a tool for rooting theology in lived experience.⁶

Nevertheless, the success of vernacular Bible translations cannot be evaluated solely based on linguistic transfer or phonetic approximation. True comprehension and spiritual transformation require that the message of the Bible be conveyed with both semantic clarity and cultural resonance. Sanneh underscores this by asserting that “the translation of the Christian message into vernacular languages involves a transfer of meaning that resonates with the recipient culture, allowing the gospel to be heard in a way that evokes recognition and understanding.”⁷ Building on

² Rob Rhea, “Exploring Spiritual Formation in the Christian Academy: The Dialects of Church, Culture, and the Larger Integrative Task,” *Journal of Psychology and Theology*, 39(1) (2011): 3 [3-15].
<https://doi.org/10.1177/009164711103900101>.

³ Atta-Akosah, “The Language factor in African Christian Mission: Bible Translation and Biblical Interpretation in the Church in African Church,” 20.

⁴ Ndjerareou, “The contribution of Mother tongue Bible translation to the formulation of African theology” 40-42.

⁵ Daniel N. Aboagye Aryeh, “The Relevance of Mother tongue Biblical Hermeneutics in the Ghanaian context,” *Journal of Applied Thought*, 3(2) (2014): 294-297.

⁶ Aboagye Aryeh, “The Relevance of Mother tongue Biblical Hermeneutics in the Ghanaian context,” 294-297.

⁷ Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture* (2nd ed.) (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2009), 51.

this, Bediako argues that for Scripture to effect genuine transformation, it must engage dynamically with the cultural and religious worldview of the people.⁸ These insights highlight the necessity of moving beyond surface-level translation to ensure that biblical texts are not only linguistically accessible but also theologically intelligible within local contexts.

However, a growing concern in African Christianity is that some translations, including book titles, which are phonetically faithful, fail to convey the theological depth and historical significance of the original texts. This challenge is particularly evident in transliterations⁹, where the original sound of a term is retained, yet its meaning remains obscured or disconnected from the cultural understanding of the local audience.

In some African Bibles such as Yoruba Bible,¹⁰ Sefwi Bible¹¹ and the Mfantse Bible version, transliteration has been employed for key biblical names and terms, especially those found in the Pentateuch.¹² For instance, the Mfantse Bible has names such as *Gyenesi*, (the first book of the Bible), *Eksodɔs* (the second book of the Bible), *Lewitikɔs* (the third book of the Bible), *Nkane*¹³ (the fourth book of the Bible), and *Deuteronomi* (the fifth book of the Bible) retain a superficial similarity to their originals but often do not communicate their content to the ordinary reader. Such transliterated titles obscure the theological themes and historical narratives contained within the books, limiting readers' engagement with the deeper meanings of Scripture.

This study therefore seeks to critically examine the implications of transliteration in the Mfantse Bible, particularly as it relates to the reception and comprehension of the Pentateuch and proposes alternatives. It investigates how phonological fidelity may obscure theological intent and explores more effective strategies for rendering biblical terms in ways that are both theologically faithful and culturally intelligible. Specifically, the study is guided by the following research questions:

- a. To what extent do the transliterated names of the Pentateuch in the Mfantse Bible facilitate or hinder reader comprehension of the theological and historical content of these books?
- b. How do Mfantse-speaking Christians interpret and engage with these transliterated titles in their religious practice and biblical understanding?
- c. What alternative translation strategies might better bridge the gap between phonological fidelity and semantic clarity in rendering biblical book titles into African languages, especially Mfantse?

CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATIONS AND RESEARCH APPROACH

This study is underpinned to Reception theory and Afrocentric Hermeneutics in the field of Bible interpretation and translation. Reception theory, initially developed within the field of literary criticism by scholars such as Hans Robert Jauss, offers a valuable framework for analysing how

⁸ Kwame Bediako, *Jesus and the Gospel in Africa: History and Experience* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004), 32.

⁹ However, some may argue that transliteration has merit where there is a lack of precise vernacular equivalents or when aiming for liturgical continuity across Christian traditions. While this view acknowledges the complexity of translation, it does not negate the fact that such titles, when left unexplained, become conceptually opaque to many first-time readers and even seasoned lay Christians. See John S. Mbiti, *Bible and Theology in African Christianity* (Nairobi: Oxford University Press, 1991), 54-56.

¹⁰ This Bible has *Genesisi*, *Eksodu*, *Lefitiku*, *Numeri*, and *Deuteronomi*. See *Bíbéli Mímó Yorùbá Òde Òn* (BYO), *Biblica*. Retrieved from <https://www.biblegateway.com/versions/B%C3%ADb%C3%A9l%C3%AC-M%C3%ADm%C3%A9%BB%8D%CC%81-Yor%C3%B9b%C3%A1-%C3%92de-%C3%92n-Yoruba-Contemporary-Bible-BYO/#booklist>.

¹¹ *Ahyerele Krongron* (2019), *Esahie Bible*. Bible Society of Ghana.

¹² Baebor (2019), *Revised Mfantse Bible*. Bible Society of Ghana.

¹³ This is not a transliteration of the fourth book of the Bible but looks like a translation.

biblical texts are interpreted by readers within specific cultural, historical, and linguistic contexts.¹⁴ Tate refers to this approach as Reader-centred methodology, based on the presupposition that “once the text leaves the hands of the author, the author’s intention and entire matrix of originating circumstances lose any claim of being constitutive of meaning.”¹⁵ Thus, it shifts attention from the author and text to the reader, recognising that meaning is not static but actively constructed by audiences who bring their own presuppositions, experiences, and interpretive traditions to the text. In the African context, this theory is particularly relevant, as the reception of the Bible is shaped by a rich array of traditional worldviews, oral storytelling practices, and the enduring influences of colonial-era missionary translations.

Complementing Reception theory is what Yorke describes as “Afrocentric Hermeneutics” in Bible translation.¹⁶ This approach aims to translate Scripture through a deliberately Africa-centred lens. In doing so, it challenges the dominance and, for some, the perceived racially driven ideological grip that Western versions of the Bible have long held.¹⁷ It emerges from and speaks to the actual experiences and cultural realities of local communities. Bediako supports these interpretations and asserts that African Christianity cannot thrive on borrowed theological frameworks alone; it must develop interpretive approaches that reflect indigenous identities and socio-religious histories.¹⁸ Ukpong likewise contends that biblical interpretation in Africa must involve one that reads the Bible through the lens of African life and thought to foster genuine appropriation and transformation.¹⁹ These ideas align with Nida’s theory of Dynamic Equivalence,²⁰ Newmark’s Communicative Approach,²¹ and what Ekem and Kuwornu-Adjaottor describe as Mother Tongue Biblical Hermeneutics,²² all of which aim to make Scripture accessible and meaningful to local readers through culturally resonant translation methods.

Together, these theories underscore the limitations of translations that prioritise formal or phonetic equivalence at the expense of cultural resonance and semantic clarity. They call for translation strategies that make Scripture not only linguistically accessible but also theologically meaningful within the specific cultural and spiritual contexts of African readers. This perspective is particularly vital in examining the transliteration of biblical terms in indigenous languages,

¹⁴ Hans Robert Jauss, *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*, translated by Timothy Bahti (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982).

¹⁵ W. R. Tate, *Biblical Interpretation: An integrated Approach*, 3rd edition (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 2008), 228.

¹⁶ Gosnell L. Yorke, “Biblical Hermeneutics An Afrocentric Perspective,” *Journal of Religion and Theology*, 2(2) (1995): 145-158; Gosnell Yorke, “Bible Translation in Africa,” *The Bible Translator*, 51(1) (2000): 114-115.

¹⁷ Yorke, “Bible Translation in Africa,” 114.

¹⁸ Kwame Bediako, *Theology and Identity: The Impact of Culture upon Christian Thought in the Second Century and in Modern Africa* (Oxford: Regnum Books, 2000).

¹⁹ Justin S. Ukpong, “Developments in Biblical Interpretation in Africa: Historical and Hermeneutical Directions,” In *The Bible in African Christianity: Essays in Biblical Theology*, edited by H. W. Kinoti and J. M. Waliggo, (Nairobi: Acton Publishers, 2001), 11-28.

²⁰ Eugene A. Nida, “The paradoxes of translation,” *The Bible Translator*, 42, (2a): 5-25.

²¹ Peter Newmark, *Approaches to Translation* (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1981), 38-48.

²² John D. K. Ekem, *New Testament concepts of Atonement in an African pluralistic setting* (Accra, Ghana: SonLife Press, 2005); J. D. K. Ekem, *A Commentary on Paul’s Letter to Philemon Based on Greek Text* (Accra, GH: SonLife Press, 2009), 174-203; J.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 (JETERAPS)*, 3(4) (2012): 575-579; J.E.T. Kuwornu-Adjaottor, “Translations and interpretations of baptizontes (Mt 28:19–20) in some Ghanaian mother tongue translations of the Bible,” *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies*, 77(1) (2021), a6859. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v77i1.6859> on June 8, 2024.

where surface familiarity may mask deeper incomprehension, thus impeding spiritual formation and theological engagement.

In addition, the study employs a mixed method approach to explore how transliterated book titles in the Mfantse Bible influence biblical understanding among Mfantse-speaking Christians.

The research combines textual analysis with semi-structured questionnaires. The textual analysis focused on the Pentateuch, which includes *Gyenesis*, *Eksod̄s*, *Lewitik̄s*, *Nkanee*, and *Deuteronomi*, and examined how these transliterated titles aligned with or obscured the original Hebrew and Greek meanings. This helped to assess their semantic clarity and theological significance. To complement the textual analysis, semi-structured questionnaires were administered through Google form to forty-four respondents, purposively selected users of the Mfantse Bible, including church members, Bible readers, Bible study leaders, and pastors, who constituted the majority of the respondents. These participants provided insights into how they interpreted and responded to the transliterated titles in practice. The responses were thematically analysed using ChatGPT software to identify patterns related to comprehension and theological engagement.

UNDERSTANDING THE TITLES OF BIBLICAL BOOKS

Book titles serve as a vital entry point for readers and significantly influence a book's reach. It is no wonder that Rakusan argues that "it is the most important part of any publication."²³ They serve as the first point of contact between the work and potential readers, capturing attention and sparking curiosity. A good title gives readers an immediate sense of what to expect, guiding their interest and framing their engagement with the content. Strong titles also enhance discoverability in searches and databases, making a book more accessible, memorable, and likely to have a lasting impact. Additionally, a well-chosen title reflects the core theme or focus of the book.

This significance of titles is not limited to modern publications alone but extends to sacred texts as well, including the Bible. The Bible contains 66 books,²⁴ each bearing its own title, which is an indication of the value placed on naming even in ancient times. According to Markham, ancient Hebrew and Greek manuscripts typically include titles for biblical books, though there are exceptions, such as the Isaiah scroll from Qumran, which lacks one.²⁵ Hebrew manuscripts show minimal variation in titles, whereas Greek manuscripts tend to vary more, though mostly in length rather than content. These biblical book titles generally fall into eight categories: those based on opening words, topics or events, literary type, prominent figures, recipients, unclear meanings, content descriptions, and authorship.²⁶ Among these, this study focuses specifically on the Pentateuch which is based on opening words and/or topics or events, exploring the origins and patterns behind the titles of its five foundational books.

²³ Karel Rakusan, "Editorial: The importance of titles," *Current Research Cardiology*, 3(3) (2016): 58.

²⁴ The number of books in the Bible varies across Christian traditions. The Protestant Bible contains 66 books; 73 for the Catholic Bible, incorporating additional texts known as the Deuterocanonical books in the OT; and 80 books for the Eastern Orthodox Bible, which typically depends on the specific tradition. See F. F. Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2010), 67-70, 90-95; B. M. Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament: Its Origin, Development, and Significance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 191-200; Scott Hahn (ed.), *The Catholic Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 2009), 100-105.

²⁵ Robert P. Markham, *Ancient and Modern Titles of Books of the Bible* (1982), 86. Retrieved from <https://translation.bible/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/markham-1967-ancient-and-modern-titles-of-books-of-the-bible.pdf> on June 15, 2025.

²⁶ Markham, *Ancient and Modern Titles of Books of the Bible*, 86-94.

The Origin of the Titles of the Pentateuch: Hebrew Context

Pentateuch, which comes from two Greek terms “*pente*” and “*teukhos*,” literally means “the work comprising five scrolls.”²⁷ These scrolls are named to reflect both their theological themes and historical content, each rooted in the unfolding journey of the Israelites. The Israelites, descendants of the patriarch Jacob, who was renamed Israel, trace their origins to the covenantal promises made by God to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Gen. 32:28; Exo. 1:1-7). Over time, they developed into a distinct people group, especially during their enslavement in Egypt, and were later shaped into a covenant nation through divine intervention. The naming of these five scrolls, therefore, is not arbitrary but closely tied to the identity and narrative of the Israelites.

In his exploration of the origins of the titles of the Pentateuch, Robert P. Markham explains that Hebrew manuscripts generally named books by their opening words, a practice deeply rooted in rabbinic tradition and reflected in many ancient documents, including papal encyclicals.²⁸ For example, the first book of the Bible is known as *בְּרֵאשִׁית* (*Bere'shit*) (“In the beginning”),²⁹ a phrase that not only opens the book but encapsulates its cosmic scope.³⁰ The second book follows with *שְׁמוֹת* (*Shemot*) (“And these are the names” or “Names”), reflecting the narrative’s focus on the Israelites and their identity.³¹ Similarly, the third book is titled *וַיַּקְרָא* (*Wayyiqra'*) (“And He called”), highlighting the book’s opening scene and priestly content. The fourth book receives the title *בְּמִדְבָּר* (*Bemidbar*) (“In the wilderness”), a description of the Israelites’ journey, while the fifth book is known as *דְּבָרֵי מֹשֶׁה* (*Devarim*)³² (“These are the words”), derived from its first verse.³³ This makes the titling textual and descriptive, as they were drawn from the opening words of the texts.

The Retitling of the Pentateuch: Greek Context

The translation of the Bible into the Greek language, known as the Septuagint (LXX), introduced a new set of titles for the Pentateuch. According to Markham, the titling was thematic or conceptual, based on topics or events. For example, *בְּרֵאשִׁית* (*Bere'shit*) was retitled *Γένεσις* (*Genesis*), meaning “origin” or “source”. However, Markham argues for *κόσμου* (*kosmou*) meaning “creation of the world” which,³⁴ according to Tov, outlines the creation of the world, humanity’s fall, and God’s early dealings with the patriarchs, laying the foundation for the Israelite identity.³⁵ It’s usage is possibly inspired by Genesis 2:4.³⁶ Both titles refer to the same concept of beginnings or creation, though expressed through different linguistic and cultural lenses. This narrative continues as *שְׁמוֹת* (*Shemot*) is retitled as *Ἔξοδος* (*Exodos*) meaning “Departure,” drawn from Exodus 19:1, where the Israelites are delivered from Egyptian bondage and formally established as God’s chosen people through the giving of the Law at Sinai.³⁷ The third book of the Bible which is referred to as *וַיַּקְרָא* (*Wayyiqra'*) in Hebrew is retitled as *Λευιτικόν* (*Leviticon*), meaning “pertaining to the Levites,” providing the priestly instructions that define Israel’s worship

²⁷ G. I. Davies, “Introduction to the Pentateuch,” In *The Oxford Bible Commentary*, edited by John Barton and John Muddiman (Oxford University Press, 2013). Retrieved from <https://www.edsd.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/SFM-HB1-Torah-Documentary-Hypothesis-Detailed.pdf> on June 16, 2025.

²⁸ Markham, *Ancient and Modern Titles of Books of the Bible*, 86-89.

²⁹ This comes from the first bible verse of the book.

³⁰ Markham, *Ancient and Modern Titles of Books of the Bible*, 86.

³¹ Markham, *Ancient and Modern Titles of Books of the Bible*, 86.

³² This is at times written as *Elleh had-d'bdrim*. See Markham, *Ancient and Modern Titles of Books of the Bible*, 86.

³³ Markham, *Ancient and Modern Titles of Books of the Bible*, 87.

³⁴ Markham, *Ancient and Modern Titles of Books of the Bible*, 87.

³⁵ Emmanuel Tov, *Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible*, 3rd rev. ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012), 9.

³⁶ Markham, *Ancient and Modern Titles of Books of the Bible*, 88.

³⁷ Karen H. Jobes and Moisés Silva, *Invitation to the Septuagint* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2000), 71-72.

and communal holiness.³⁸ This is followed by *בְּמִדְבָּר* (*Bemidbar*) which is retitled as *Ἀριθμοί* (*Arithmoi*), meaning “Numbers” which documents Israel’s journey through the wilderness, marked by census records, leadership challenges, and divine testing.³⁹ Markham explains that this type of retitling shifts away from the Hebrew’s geographic imagery to one focused on structure and enumeration.⁴⁰ Finally, *עֲלֵה אֶלֶּה* (*Elleh ha-devarim*) is retitled as *Δευτερονόμιον* (*Deuteronomion*), “Second Law”⁴¹ which captures Moses’ final speeches, reiterating the Law and urging the new generation to remain faithful as they prepare to enter the Promised Land.⁴²

The Evolution of Pentateuchal Titles in Post-Biblical Traditions

Beyond the Greek context, biblical titles continued to be given to the books as Bible translation continued to help target readers understand the sacred text in their mother tongue. Bible titles are adapted to possibly conform to their culture. An example is *Exodos* which was Latinized and later adopted into English as “Exodus”.⁴³ Markham adds that authorship was added to book titles in the Medieval Europe and beyond which expanded earlier naming of the Pentateuch by adding references to Moses. Thus, titles such as “The First Book of Moses, called Genesis,” became widespread, especially in European Bibles and versions influenced by the Latin Vulgate.⁴⁴ While these attributions reflect theological tradition more than authorial intent, they show how titles evolved not only from linguistic cues but also from doctrinal and pedagogical needs.

From the discussion done so far, it becomes obvious that the titling of the biblical books, especially the Pentateuch, shows an evolving tradition which occurs within each context to help target readers appreciate the content of the books. Early naming of the Pentateuch in the Hebrew context shows that first words of the text are used as names for the books, which prioritised textual fidelity and thematic clarity. In the Greek context, it is realised that themes, topics, and concepts are prioritised. This is an approach that continued through to the post-biblical traditions, where titles were adopted and names of authors added to the books. Importantly, each evolving tradition likely adapted the titles to suit its own cultural, theological, and linguistic context, reflecting the broader historical and religious priorities of the books.

This raises a vital question: how have the titles of the Pentateuch been received in Africa, particularly among the Mfantse?

The Reception of the Pentateuch in Mfantse Bible

According to history, the reception of the first mother tongue Bible in Africa dates as far back as the 5th or 6th century AD, when the full Bible was translated into Ge‘ez⁴⁵ for the Ethiopian

³⁸ Lee Martin McDonald and James A. Sanders, (eds.), *The Canon Debate* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2002), 89-91.

³⁹ Emmanuel Tov, *Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible*. 3rd rev. ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012).

⁴⁰ Markham, *Ancient and Modern Titles of Books of the Bible*, 88.

⁴¹ Markham however argues that this originated from a misreading of Deuteronomy 17:18 by the Septuagint translators, who interpreted the phrase “a copy of this law” as “a second law”. See Markham, *Ancient and Modern Titles of Books of the Bible*, 88-89.

⁴² Karen H. Jobes and Moisés Silva, *Invitation to the Septuagint*, 71-72.

⁴³ Markham, *Ancient and Modern Titles of Books of the Bible*, 88.

⁴⁴ Markham, *Ancient and Modern Titles of Books of the Bible*, 90.

⁴⁵ This language is a liturgical language of the Ethiopian church. As a Semitic language of the Southern Peripheral group, to which also belong the South Arabic dialects and Amharic, Ge‘ez language is one of the principal languages of Ethiopia. Both Ge‘ez and the related languages of Ethiopia are written and read from left to right, in contrast to the other Semitic languages. See Emilie T. Sanda and J. Coert Rylaarsdam, “Ge‘ez language,” in

Church.⁴⁶ This early tradition of vernacular Scripture continued across the continent until the Mfantse people of Ghana received theirs. According to Ekem, the full Mfantse Bible was first published 1948 under the Chairmanship of Rev. C. W. Armstrong.⁴⁷ Before then, the Pentateuch was published in 1919 by the BFBS.⁴⁸ The current version of the Mfantse Bible is 2019 version, published Bible Society of Ghana (BSG)⁴⁹ *Baebor* or Mfantse Bible.

The recent Mfantse Bible shows the titles of the books in the Pentateuch *Gyenesis, Eksodɔs, Lewitikɔs, Nkanee, and Deuteronomi*. These are direct transliterations of the Greek Septuagint forms, rather than meaningful renderings based on the Hebrew originals or Greek meanings—making understanding the theme or concept challenging for those unfamiliar with Greek. These titles neither carry the textual, thematic, nor theological significance that would orient the reader to the content and purpose of the text.⁵⁰

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

A. Findings

i. Demographic Summary

The demographic summary reveals that the majority of respondents were male (37 out of 40) and held tertiary level education. The dominant age groups were 35-45 years and 45-55 years, each with 14 male respondents possessing tertiary education. Younger males aged 20-35 years also featured prominently with 7 individuals at the tertiary level. Female representation was limited, comprising only 3 respondents made up of 2 aged 45-55 years and 1 aged 20-35 years, all with tertiary education. A few respondents reported higher educational qualifications, with one male indicating a graduate degree and another an MPhil (which could be considered as tertiary), both within the 35-45 age bracket. This indicates that the data suggests a relatively educated, middle-aged male majority among Mfantse Bible readers and users.

This is presented in the table below:

Table 1: Demographic Summary and Key Responses

1. Age	2. Gender	3. Educational Level	Frequency
35 - 45 years	Male	Tertiary	14
45 - 55 years	Male	Tertiary	14
20 - 35 years	Male	Tertiary	7
45 - 55 years	Female	Tertiary	2
20 - 35 years	Female	Tertiary	1
35 - 45 years	Male	Graduate	1

Britannica, edited by Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica. Retrieved from <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Geez-language> on June 17, 2025.

⁴⁶ E. Ullendorff, *Ethiopia and the Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968), 32-35, 64-67, 82-83.

⁴⁷ The other committee members were Rev. G. Acquah, I. K. Horn, Rev. A. B. Dickson, Rev. F. C. F. Grant, C. H. Bartels, H. C. Neill, and Irene C. Mason. See John David K. Ekem, *Early Scriptures of the Gold Coast (Ghana): The Historical, Linguistic and Theological Settings of the Ga, Twi, Mfantse and Ewe Bibles* (Manchester: St. Jerome Publishing, 2011), 102.

⁴⁸ This was done by Hammon's Mfantse Pentateuch Committee consisting of the following: Revs E. A. Sackey and F. E. Ekuban, Messrs F. E. Jones, J. P. Brown and J. E. Abraham. See Ekem, *Early Scriptures of the Gold Coast (Ghana): The Historical, Linguistic and Theological Settings of the Ga, Twi, Mfantse and Ewe Bibles*, 92.

⁴⁹ The Bible Society of Ghana (BSG) is the primary publisher of all the Mfantse Bible.

⁵⁰ Emmanuel Tov, *Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible*. 3rd rev. ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012), 8-11.

35 - 45 years	Male	MPhil	1
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Field Data: Asamoah and Acheampong (2025)

ii. Familiarity with Biblical Content

The findings demonstrate a strong familiarity with biblical content among respondents, as reflected in their extensive engagement with the Mfantse Bible. “Years of Usage of Mfantse Bible” indicate that the majority (34 respondents) have used it for more than 10 years, while a smaller proportion have used it for 6-10 years (4), 1-5 years (3), and less than 1 year (3). This long-term use is further supported by high engagement levels, with most respondents (38) indicating they frequently read the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Bible. Only 6 respondents stated they do not read it frequently. In terms of “Familiarity with Transliterated Names,” a large number (37) reported that they are familiar with names such as *Gyenesis*, *Eksodos*, *Lewitikos*, *Nkane*, and *Deuteronomi*, while 7 respondents indicated unfamiliarity. When asked about their “Confidence in Explaining Transliterated Names,” most responses were concentrated at moderate levels: 11 respondents chose level 3 and 16 selected level 4, on a scale of 1 to 5 rating. A smaller number expressed low confidence, with 5 at level 1 and 4 at level 2, while 8 respondents indicated very high confidence by choosing level 5. Collectively, these patterns suggest that the sample consists of individuals who are not only exposed to the Mfantse Bible but are also reasonably equipped to interpret and engage with its content, including its transliterated elements.

iii. Understanding and Comprehension

The demographic characteristics of the respondents provide useful context for interpreting their reactions to transliterated names in the Mfantse Bible. The data shows that most participants were middle-aged males with tertiary education, indicating a relatively literate and experienced Bible-reading group. This background shaped their emotional and cognitive engagement with transliterated names such as *Gyenesis* and *Eksodos*. Under the theme “Feelings about Transliterated Names,” participants expressed varied responses. Some described a sense of confusion or disconnection when encountering these names. As one respondent stated, “*It sounds confused and on relational*” (Respondent 3), while another simply noted, “*Confused*” (Respondent 5). Conversely, others viewed the names more favourably, interpreting them with ease and familiarity. One respondent remarked, “*I feel good and able to understand very well*” (Respondent 2). Another offered a varied perspective, recognising the effort to connect with the original text but highlighting the limitation in comprehension: “*I see transliteration of names as an attempt to help us relate to the original, but I still think it is not the best way to name a book meant for understanding.*” These responses reflect the complex interplay between educational background and perceived accessibility of the biblical text in translation.

b. Research Questions Analysis and Response

i. To what extent do the transliterated names of the Pentateuch in the Mfantse Bible facilitate or hinder reader comprehension of the theological and historical content of these books?

The findings indicate that transliterated names such as *Gyenesis*, *Eksodos*, *Lewitikos*, *Nkane*, and *Deuteronomi* present a significant barrier to comprehension for many readers. Although a large number of respondents (37 out of 44) reported familiarity with these names, this familiarity does not necessarily translate into theological or historical understanding. In fact, only 19 respondents felt that these names made it easy to grasp the meaning of the biblical

books, while a notable 25 disagreed. Similarly, 24 respondents indicated that the transliterated titles did not give them a clear idea of the books' content upon first reading. These findings suggest that transliteration, while preserving phonological resemblance to Greek or Latin sources, fails to offer semantic transparency to the average Mfantse reader. Verbatim responses reinforce this conclusion. One respondent stated, *"It sounds confused and not relational,"* reflecting disorientation in meaning. Another noted, *"Confused,"* while a more detailed critique observed, *"I see transliteration of names as an attempt to help us relate to the original, but I still think it is not the best way to name a book meant for understanding."* Thus, while transliteration maintains scriptural reverence and tradition, it hinders contextual comprehension among vernacular speakers.

ii. *How do Mfantse-speaking Christians interpret and engage with these transliterated titles in their religious practice and biblical understanding?*

The study reveals a complex engagement with transliterated titles among Mfantse-speaking Christians. Despite the linguistic barrier, many respondents still read and study the Pentateuch frequently (38 out of 44), and 34 have used the Mfantse Bible for more than a decade. This longstanding engagement suggests that readers often rely on familiarity, group study, or external explanation to navigate the linguistic challenges posed by transliterated names. Respondents expressed a mix of adaptation and limitation in their interpretation. Some interpreted the transliterations through the lens of their spiritual routine: *"I feel good and able to understand very well,"* indicating a sense of comfort born from repetition. However, others felt disconnected: *"You will not feel involved,"* or *"It's not understandable."* Group study experiences occasionally bridged this gap, as one respondent shared, *"Yes please, and the experience was good because we were guided to understand what it meant."* This suggests that community-driven exegesis may compensate for individual interpretive limitations. Overall, while transliteration does not always foster intuitive understanding, many readers remain resiliently engaged through habit, church-based interpretation, or theological instruction.

iii. *What alternative translation strategies might better bridge the gap between phonological fidelity and semantic clarity in rendering biblical book titles into African languages, especially Mfantse?*

The responses strongly point to a preference for translation strategies that prioritise semantic clarity over phonological fidelity. Many respondents advocated for the use of locally meaningful names or explanatory phrases that communicate the core message of each biblical book. A recurring suggestion was direct translation into Mfantse. One participant proposed, *"They should translate them into Mfantse,"* while another recommended a combined strategy: *"I suggest the original names are kept, with explanations provided in footnotes or preface to guide the reader."* In line with translation theory, these responses suggest a functional equivalence approach, which prioritises the communicative intent of the source over phonetic preservation. Adding explanatory footnotes or thematic subtitles to transliterated titles was also widely supported. For example, one respondent explained, *"Yes. It gives additional information to the content and brings readers closer to understanding."* However, not every Bible reader, especially during church services or personal study, engage with footnotes, which complicates their full comprehension of the scriptural message. Therefore, a model of translation for the books titles to suit its own cultural, theological, and linguistic context, reflecting the broader historical and religious priorities of the books must be employed. This

affirms Ukpong assertion for the importance of Inculturation Hermeneutics, which is reading the Bible through the lived realities and cultural logic of African communities.⁵¹ Wendland supports this argument by emphasising that clarity in translation is crucial for spiritual formation and theological understanding.⁵² He notes that readers in oral cultures especially rely on linguistic cues to navigate biblical content.

CONCLUSION

This study has examined the challenges and limitations posed by the transliteration of Pentateuchal book titles in the Mfantse Bible, revealing a significant gap between phonological familiarity and semantic or theological understanding. While many readers recognise titles such as *Gyenesis*, *Eksodɔs*, *Lewitikɔs*, *Nkaneɛ*, and *Deuteronomi*, the findings show that these transliterations often obscure the core messages of the biblical texts and fail to guide readers into deeper theological engagement. This is particularly problematic in a context where faith is not only read but lived out within communal, oral, and highly contextual frameworks.

Several issues emerge from this analysis. First, the use of transliteration in vernacular Bibles raises important concerns about accessibility, especially for readers who lack formal theological training or exposure to biblical languages. Second, it highlights the broader challenge in African Christianity of reconciling inherited textual traditions with the need for culturally rooted expressions of faith. Third, the absence of explanatory tools such as thematic subtitles, footnotes, or reader aids further compounds the interpretive gap between Scripture and its readers. These findings underscore the urgency of rethinking Bible translation methodology especially for Bible titles, particularly in African contexts. There is a clear need to move beyond traditional formal or phonetic equivalence toward models that prioritise meaning, cultural resonance, and theological clarity.

RECOMMENDATION

In light of this, the study points to the necessity of adopting a Contextualised Functional-Equivalence Approach (CFEA), a methodology that balances fidelity to the original text with sensitivity to the linguistic, cultural, and theological frameworks of the target community. This approach blends principles of dynamic equivalence with cultural adaptation and theological fidelity in the translation of Bible titles such as those of the Pentateuch and other biblical books to a new environment other than the original hearers, more especially, in African settings such as the Mfantse reading community.

The CFEA involves several key steps.

- a. First, a semantic-theological analysis of the original book titles is undertaken to identify not only their literal meaning but also their core message and doctrinal intent. For instance, Genesis (from the Hebrew *Bereshith*, “In the beginning” and Septuagint *Γένεσις* “origin” or “source” conveys themes of creation, beginnings, and divine-human relationship.
- b. Second, a religio-cultural-linguistic mapping identifies Mfantse terms that best express the intended meanings in a way that aligns with their religion, cultural metaphors, language,

⁵¹ Justin S. Ukpong, “Developments in Biblical Interpretation in Africa: Historical and Hermeneutical Directions,” In *The Bible in African Christianity: Essays in Biblical Theology*, edited by H. W. Kinoti and J. M. Waliggo, 11-28 (Nairobi: Acton Publishers, 2001), 17-22.

⁵² Ernst R. Wendland, *Contextualizing the Word: The Bible in African Cultural Expression* (Nairobi: Acton Publishers, 2004), 86-90.

and theological understanding. For example, rendering Genesis as *Mfitiase* or *Ahyease* instead of *Gyenesis*.

- c. Third, community-based validation is employed by involving Bible readers, theologians, linguists, and cultural leaders in assessing proposed titles to ensure relevance, clarity, and acceptance.
- d. This is followed by a theological review to maintain doctrinal fidelity and ensure the titles reflect the biblical narrative accurately within the Mfantse Christian worldview. Where necessary, footnotes or marginal glosses are added to explain culturally rich terms with no exact equivalents.
- e. Finally, iterative refinement through community feedback allows for continuous improvement in the acceptability and clarity of the translated titles.

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