

## An Exegetical Study of Joshua 1:8 and the Bible in African Christianity

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### ABSTRACT

The Bible plays a central role in African Christianity, shaping theology, ethics, worship, and values in society. Joshua 1:8 is a theological cornerstone that emphasises the significance of daily meditation on Scripture towards prosperity and success. This essay explores the socio-historical context of the Bible among African Christians and performs an exegetical study of Joshua 1:8. It examines how this verse has been interpreted and applied within the context of African Christianity, and explores its spiritual, theological, and socio-cultural implications. The article believes that Joshua 1:8, if read in its biblical and African cultural contexts, is a principle of direction for individual and collective change, spiritual training, and development.

*Keywords: Joshua 1:8, Exegesis, African Christianity, Biblical hermeneutics, Scripture interpretation*

### INTRODUCTION

The connection between the Bible and African Christianity is deep and complicated. The Bible is not only a revered book in African Christian churches but also a living scripture that shapes faith, culture, and everyday life. African Christianity, shaped by a variety of historical, cultural, and spiritual factors, interprets the Bible through a hermeneutic that blends respect for the word of God with a contextual sense of its relevance in African situations. The enduring influence of Scripture on African spirituality, worship, ethical systems, and social organisation makes it an essential area of research for scholars and theologians. The book of Joshua, and particularly Joshua 1:8, stands alone in the biblical corpus as a verse which emphasises the power and priority of continued engagement with God's word. It emphasises Bible meditation as the passport to success and prosperity, not only spiritually but also in tangible form.<sup>1</sup> The verse is greatly quoted, memorised, and preached in African churches, often as a quotation of God's words and a call for spiritual discipline. It is fascinating because it offers a clear promise of success and God's assistance, which is resonant in African socio-religious contexts where spirituality and everyday life are closely linked. African Christianity did not receive the Bible as a blank slate.<sup>2</sup>

From its initial roots in North Africa, through Church fathers like Tertullian, Cyprian, and Augustine, to the eventual spread of Christianity through missionary efforts in sub-Saharan Africa, the Bible arrived entrenched within foreign theological meanings.<sup>3</sup> And yet African Christians have always read the Scriptures in ways that affirm their cultural selves and existential

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<sup>1</sup> Osuagwu, Tochukwu, "Re-Reading Joshua 1 & 2: A Postcolonial Perspective," (South Africa: University of Pretoria, ProQuest Dissertations & Theses, 2023), 313.

<sup>2</sup> Osuagwu, Tochukwu, "Re-Reading Joshua 1 & 2: A Postcolonial Perspective," 313.

<sup>3</sup> Stephen Oluwakayode Eyeowa, "Africanizing Divine Revelation Through History-Telling: Joshua 23–24 as a Hermeneutic Template." Retrieved from: [http://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-031-54168-1\\_9](http://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-031-54168-1_9). Accessed on 11<sup>th</sup> of April, 2024.

circumstances. The colonial Christian encounter introduced the Bible along European lines of thinking, but African theologians and lay believers have increasingly reinterpreted and reappropriated it in culturally meaningful terms.<sup>4</sup> Christianity in Africa has been vigorously remade, organically related to Scripture as a source for practice and belief. From the early North African Church fathers through the missionary movements and African indigenous churches spreading of Christianity, the Bible has been central to the African Christian experience. It has been more than just doxological; it has been existentially deep. Scripture is preached, sung, danced, read, and lived.<sup>5</sup> And in this, Joshua 1:8 has become a symbolic verse for the synthesis of biblical values with African aspirations. This belief in success, wisdom, and leadership arising out of submissive study of the Bible is the foundation of the African aspiration for a morally upright and economically prosperous society.

Pastors, prophets, and church members frequently cite this passage to encourage perseverance in reading the Bible, righteous living, and following God's directions.<sup>6</sup> Denominationally, its applicability is found in Pentecostal, Evangelical, Mainline Protestant, and African Independent Churches. Furthermore, Joshua 1:8 speaks to the African context of transition and leadership.<sup>7</sup> Just as Joshua was mandated to take over leadership after Moses and lead Israel into a new dawn, many African churches and nations undergo periods of transition in the political, spiritual, and social realms. The need for godly leadership according to divine wisdom is as essential now as it was in the time of Joshua. Therefore, a keen examination of this verse offers valuable insights into how Scripture functions not just as a religious text but also as a book of leadership and a source of national and communal renewal in African settings. This examination comes out of necessity to investigate how Joshua 1:8 is understood and applied in African Christianity, and to investigate its exegetical dimensions in light of African worldviews. It seeks to close the gap between biblical interpretation and contemporary existence, offering a scholarly yet spiritually enriching reading of a verse that is a home in the hearts of countless African Christians. By doing so, the study contributes to the broader discourse about contextual theology and biblical interpretation throughout the African continent. One of the most quoted and sermonised verses in this tradition is Joshua 1:8, the verse emphasising God's sovereignty over the world to guide and prosper lives. This article seeks to explore the socio-historical impact of the Bible on African Christianity and offers a close exegetical examination of Joshua 1:8 with a view to furthering understanding of how the verse operates as a spiritual and practical guide for African Christians.<sup>8</sup>

### **Background of the Text**

The journey of the Israelites to the Promised Land continues in the book of Joshua. God has performed numerous miracles and wonders through the ministry of His servant Moses. God did a lot to assure and comfort the Israelites of His continued presence. From the time they came out of

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<sup>4</sup> Sadler, Rodney et al, *The Africana Bible, Second Edition: Reading Israel's Scriptures from Africa and the African Diaspora*, (Augsburg: Fortress Publishers, 2024), 20.

<sup>5</sup> Jesse, Mugambi, "African Christian Theology: Past, Present, and Future", *African Christian Theology*, 2024, 1, (1): 17–27.

<sup>6</sup> Oladotun, Kolawole, "The Relevance of Joshua 1:8 For Biblical Exegetes", *The American Journal of Biblical Theology*, 2022, 23, (46): 20-22.

<sup>7</sup> Kolawole, "The Relevance of Joshua 1:8 For Biblical Exegetes," 22.

<sup>8</sup> David Platt, "Meditating on God's Word (Joshua 1:8)". Retrieved from: <https://radical.net/podcasts/pray-the-word/meditating-on-gods-word-joshua-18/>. Accessed on 11<sup>th</sup> of April, 2024.

Egypt until they reached Jericho, Moses was the go-between between God and Israel.<sup>9</sup> The presence of Moses in the Israelites' journey cannot be exaggerated. Although God is the sponsor and the leader, Moses is a great icon, a total instrument in the hands of the Lord. Thus, the death of Moses led to the calling of Joshua, the Son of Nun (1 Joshua 1:1), and God spoke directly to him from the beginning verse of the first chapter.<sup>10</sup> Although Joshua had been ministering to Moses (vs. 1), God reaffirmed that He was the source of power and strength in Moses. God also reaffirmed His promises and stated that it is still valid (Acts 3). Although the majority of Israelites know that Moses has left, they may view the journey to the Promised Land as "unattainable."<sup>11</sup> God simply repeats the periscope of His promise in the fourth verse, e.g., the area of the land God has set aside for Israel.

After God's editing and assurance of the Israelites about their extensive past (verses 2-4). Then God turned to Joshua himself, confirming to him His eternal presence:

No man shall be able to stand before you for all the days of your life; for as I was with Moses, so I will be with you; I will not fail you or leave you. Be strong and courageous. (vs. 5-6).<sup>12</sup>

It is now clear what God wishes of Joshua; he is to continue doing what Moses did, only this time he will finish "because you will inherit the land that I commanded them to give them" (verse 6). Joshua needed to lead the people to the Promised Land, even divide it. Looking at the mission before us, a sketch of Joshua, when he is represented, will depict a man perplexed, puzzled, and even stunned. Moreover, Joshua had encountered the type of people because God addressed Moses: "How long will this people provoke me? "And how long will they believe in me for all the signs I have shown them? (Numbers 14:11).<sup>13</sup> This could also affect the aspect of fear. This then led to God compelling Joshua, the successor of Moses, in Joshua 1:7:

Be strong and very courageous, be careful to obey all the law that Moses my servant commanded you to do; do not turn from it to the right or the left, so that you can have success. <sup>14</sup>

An Exegetical Study of Joshua 1:8 Keep this Book of the Law always on your lips; meditate on it both day and night, then you will be on your guard to do everything written in it. In this way, you will succeed. (Joshua 1:8, NIV)

## I. Literary and Contextual Analysis

Joshua 1:8 is part of God's commissioning of Joshua following the death of Moses. The verse is a part of a larger context in which God is commanding Joshua to lead the Israelites into the Promised

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<sup>9</sup> Jacob Peter Oluwashola, and Kolawole Oladotun Paul, "Is the Bible the Word of God? A Theo Apologetical Rethink", *Pharos Journal of Theology*, 2020, 101, (4): 20-22.

<sup>10</sup> Jacob Peter Oluwashola, and Kolawole Oladotun Paul, "Pastoral Ministry and Theological Education in Nigeria," *International Journal of Research in Humanities and Social Studies*, 2020, 7, (11): 20-22a.

<sup>11</sup> Kolawole, Oladotun Paul, "Mirroring Corruption Epidemic in Nigeria via Biblical Lens: The Role of the Church", *Asia-Africa Journal of Mission and Ministry*, 2020, 22, (4): 22.

<sup>12</sup> Kolawole, Oladotun Paul, "Examining African Hermeneutics and How African Biblical Scholars Have Adopted Western Tools in African Context", *World Journal of Education and Humanities*, 2020, 2, (1): 20.

<sup>13</sup> Kolawole, Oladotun Paul, "Joshua's Leadership Style and Nigerian Church Leaders", John W. Carter Ed., *Light in a Once Dark World: Contemporary Issues in Nigerian Christianity*, Volume IV. Hayesville, NC: *American Journal of Biblical Theology*, 2021, 7, (2): 22a.

<sup>14</sup> Kolawole, "Joshua's Leadership Style and Nigerian Church Leaders," 22.

Land. The point of change necessitated divine reassurance, direction, and renewal of the covenant relationship between God and Israel. The verse employs imperative commands: "keep," "meditate," "be careful to do," highlighting the necessity of being saturated in the word of God. The "Book of the Law" is a reference to the Torah (specifically Deuteronomy), which contained the covenantal stipulations Israel was to observe. Success and prosperity are promised only when there is diligent obedience to this word.

ii. Important Terms and their Significance

a. "Book of the Law" (Hebrew: seferhattorah) implies a written code, a divine instruction manual for life and government.

b. "Meditates" (Hebrew: hagah) is not just quiet reflection; it involves muttering, reciting, and reflecting on the word aloud, indicating an oral culture practice.

c. "Day and night" emphasise the diligence and perseverance required in engaging the word.

d. "Prosperous" and "successful" (Hebrew: tsalach) describe God's enabling for comprehensive wellbeing, not just financial prosperity.

iii. Theological Themes

Joshua 1:8 has several theological themes:

a. Scripture as Source of Strength: God's word equips leaders for divine leadership and good decision-making.

b. Obedience and Blessing: Good fortune is not divorced from ethical and spiritual obedience.

c. Divine Presence and Human Responsibility: Though God promises to be with Joshua (v.5), human obedience remains necessary.

### **Socio-Historical Background of the Bible in African Christianity**

The past of the Bible in African Christianity is varied and nuanced, entwining over centuries of encounter among religion, culture, colonialism, liberation, and local agency. Africa has been at the forefront of Christianity since its earliest days, being crucial to the development and passing on of biblical thought.<sup>15</sup> North Africa, in particular, was a cradle of early Christian theology. Africans such as Tertullian, Origen, Athanasius, and Augustine of Hippo were not only African but also contributed to the central doctrines of the global church. The Bible was read, interpreted, and practised in African contexts from as early as the 2nd and 3rd centuries.<sup>16</sup> In the East of the continent, Christianity gained hold in Ethiopia, where it was made into the state religion in the 4th century, well before a number of European countries accepted it.<sup>17</sup> The Ethiopian Orthodox Church had a unique Christian tradition whereby biblical works were translated into Ge'ez, an old Semitic language that is still used nowadays for liturgical functions. This early African engagement with Scripture demonstrates that the Bible was not a foreign text imposed from abroad but was received and made local by native Christian communities long before the colonial era.<sup>18</sup> The arrival of European missionaries in the 15th to 19th centuries, especially with colonial expansion, was a new era in the spread of the Bible across sub-Saharan Africa. Missionaries brought with them translated

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<sup>15</sup> Rowland Van, "Africa: in the Bible, in Christianity's Roots and Branches". Retrieved from: <https://reformedjournal.com/2023/02/08/africa-in-the-bible-in-christianitys-roots-and-branches/>. Accessed on 11<sup>th</sup> of April, 2024.

<sup>16</sup> Gerald West, "Reception of the Bible: the Bible in Africa from Part III - Reception of the Bible Geographically". Retrieved from: <https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/abs/new-cambridge-history-of-the-bible/reception-of-the-bible-the-bible-in>. Accessed on 11<sup>th</sup> of April, 2024.

<sup>17</sup> Kwabena Opuni-Frimpong, "The Bible and Public Theology in African Christianity", *Journal of Mother-Tongue Biblical Hermeneutics and Theology (MOTBIT)*, 20223, 5, (5): 74-84.

<sup>18</sup> Opuni-Frimpong, "The Bible and Public Theology in African Christianity," 84.

versions of the Bible and often encouraged literacy as a path to Christianity. While the missionary activities helped spread the Bible far and wide, they were also entrenched in colonial endeavours that sometimes undermined African religious and cultural traditions.<sup>19</sup>

Even so, African converts were quick to reclaim the Bible for themselves, finding within its stories of liberty, justice, and religious empowerment those that addressed them most directly. By the early 20th century, African Independent Churches (AICs) became movements to read and reclaim the Bible on their terms, apart from Western missionary dominance.<sup>20</sup> These churches exploited visions, dreams, and subjective experiences of divine encounters, interpreting the Bible through African worldviews and socio-political aspirations. The Bible was not only employed for spiritual growth but also for resistance, identity formation, and social glue.<sup>21</sup> The Bible's function in post-colonial Africa is now even more pivotal. With African scholars critically interpreting the Scriptures, with sermons which bear African readers' history and culture, it came to be known as African Biblical Hermeneutics. African Biblical Hermeneutics is a new pastoral and academic movement professing to interpret the Bible in terms of Africa while remaining faithful to its initial message.<sup>22</sup>

The Bible is extremely precious to the religious and public life of present-day Africa. It moulds moral standards, gives form to government, inspires art and music, and provides comfort in times of crises. Scripture is quoted in political speeches, plastered on the sides of public buses, sung in worship choruses, and proclaimed in spiritual warfare. Churches ranging from rural villages to urban metropolises across the continent consider the Bible as the living word of God, His word of guidance, hope, and truth. The socio-historical context of the Bible in African Christianity, then, is less where the book arrived on the continent than how it has arrived to be heard, interpreted, lived, and reinterpreted in such a way that it does mirror Africa's spiritual journey. It is a history of both continuity and change, testimony to the ongoing effectiveness of Scripture to speak across cultures and across generations. Relevance in African Christianity, Joshua 1:8 resonates with African cultural values that prioritise oral tradition, communal intelligence, and wholistic success. Recitation of the word orally aligns with the African culture of oral storytelling. Joshua 1:8 is quoted by most African pastors and teachers as a way of calling people to spiritual discipline and ethical uprightness, usually relating it to God's favour and breakthrough.

Besides, in a continent that is faced with socio-economic challenges, the verse is an indication of hope and a model for individual and collective development with divine guidance. African Christians define "success" not only in terms of material progress but also in terms of spiritual growth, unity of society, and moral guidance. Joshua 1:8 is very significant in African Christianity owing to its rich spiritual, ethical, and practical aspects. African Christianity is defined by an interwoven worldview where the sacred and the secular are inseparable. The verse speaks to such an interwoven perspective by asserting God's word as the cornerstone of both spiritual maturity and temporal prosperity. It is congruent with the African conviction that divine instruction should permeate all areas of life, family, work, leadership, and society. The call to meditate on

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<sup>19</sup> Ukachukwu Chris Manus, "The Bible in African Christianity". Retrieved from:[doi.org/10.1515/9781474412049-040](https://doi.org/10.1515/9781474412049-040). Accessed on 11<sup>th</sup> of April, 2024.

<sup>20</sup> David, Wells, "The Bible and African Christianity". Retrieved from:<https://www.modernreformation.org/resources/articles/the-bible-and-african-christianity>. Accessed on 11<sup>th</sup> of April, 2024.

<sup>21</sup> Gerald West, *Contextual Bible Study as a Form of Contextual Theology: An Early Conceptual History*, (South Africa: University of KwaZulu-Natal, 2022), 27-30.

<sup>22</sup> West, *Contextual Bible Study as a Form of Contextual Theology: An Early Conceptual History*, 30.

God's word "day and night" necessarily comes within the African rhythm of spirituality, wherein, time and again, prayer, singing, and communal narration are emphasised. Recitation and oral engagement with Scripture mirror old African modes of learning and wisdom transfer. Consequently, the tradition of going over and over saying and thinking about Scripture is not foreign but is in line with the African practice of repeated statements, proverbs, and oral tradition. Joshua 1:8 also underscores obedience and discipline, virtues highly valued in most African cultures.

The teaching that prosperity hinges on compliance with divine commands supports the common conviction that blessings are the fruit of righteousness and compliance with God's order. At times of economic, political, and social upheaval, the scripture is most often cited to remind the believers to base their existence on God's word for long-term stability and progress. Moreover, the verse is widely applied in teaching, sermons, and prophetic proclamation by denominations. Joshua 1:8 is particularly highlighted by Pentecostal and charismatic churches as a cornerstone for spiritual empowerment and breakthrough. Prosperity in this case is not just limited to financial success but encompasses health, peace, spiritual growth, and harmony in relationships as well. Leadership in both church and society is another realm where Joshua 1:8 can be used.

Just as Joshua was led by God to lead Israel into the Promised Land, African leaders are asked to tap into Scripture for wisdom and courage. The verse is thus both a personal directive and an invitation to change by way of divine guidance. Indeed, the verse encapsulates important themes that are central to African Christian theology: the authority of Scripture, the power of the word, the necessity of discipline, and God's promise of favour. Its enduring popularity lies in its simplicity, clarity, and guarantee of divine assurance that success and prosperity will follow if God's word is followed. This message continues to propel men, women, families, churches, and nations across the continent.

## **CONCLUSION**

Joshua 1:8 is a watershed verse in grasping how Scripture functions within African Christianity. It articulates the essence of African religious consciousness of appreciating spiritual as well as practical sides of faith with its focus on meditation, obedience, and prosperity from God. The socio-historical dialogue of African Christians with the Bible, through translation, appropriation, and contextualisation, bears witness to a living and active faith nurtured by Scripture.

During an era in which many are looking for guidance, success, and identity, Joshua 1:8 continues to be an ever-relevant, life-transforming message.

The exposition of Joshua 1:8, as it happens within the process of African Christianity, is a testament to the unparalleled impact of Scripture on the spiritual, moral, and socio-cultural existence of African believers. The verse is centred on meditation on God's word, obedience to divine commands, and guarantees of success and prosperity, all of which are deeply resonant with African religious consciousness. Scripture in African Christianity is not a book of history or theology; it is a living manual, a source of power, and a ground of personal and communal transformation. Joshua 1:8 is the theological point of reference for the divine instruction in triumph, leadership, and remaining faithful. The African Christian faith, with its heritage of word-of-mouth transmission, communal values, and spiritual empowerment, is easily symbiotic with the verse's theme of meditating and abiding by God's word. This writing continues to inspire purpose, discipline, and hope in African Christians, either in the home, church, or public life. The socio-historical development of the Bible in Africa from indigenous translation and early church fathers

to post-colonial re-appropriation further attests to the longstanding presence of Scripture in the African spiritual imagination.

Joshua 1:8 is not only a verse but a call to action, a divine strategy, and a metaphor of God's word power of transformation in African society.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

In light of the central role of Joshua 1:8 and the Bible in African Christianity, the following suggestions emerge out of this study:

- i. Theological institutions and Churches need to continue developing contextual ways of reading the Bible grounded in African worldview, languages, and experiences.
- ii. Since African cultures have traditionally valued oral expression and storytelling, engagement with the Bible has to go beyond written texts. Dramatisations, music, visual arts, and public reading of Scripture, e.g., Joshua 1:8, need to be made available in order to make Scripture more accessible and effective.
- iii. The churches can make Joshua 1:8 the foundation for the instruction of the practice of daily Scripture meditation. This can be done through guided bible reading schemes, fellowships in small groups, and mentoring programs that encourage believers to apply scripture to everyday life.
- iv. The leadership lessons of Joshua 1:8 apply not only to Church leadership but also to governance and public service in African nations. Christian political, educational, and business leaders ought to take cues from the integration of Scripture into their decision-making and leadership ethics.
- v. For people to still understand verses like Joshua 1:8 in their heart languages, there is a need to finance Bible translation projects, especially where people still lack access to Scripture in their languages.

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