

The Bible in African Christianity: Reception, Context and Influence

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the polygonal relationship between the Bible and African Christianity, focusing on its reception, contextual interpretation and influence within African communities. Challenging the notion that the Bible arrived only with European missionaries, it highlights early African Christian witnesses such as Perpetua and Felicitas, martyred in 203 AD, whose writings reveal deep engagement with Scripture. Likewise, Origen of Alexandria's *Hexapla* (ca. 240 AD) reflects Africa's early scholarly contribution to Biblical translation and theology. These figures affirm that Africa was an early participant in the life of Scripture. The study applies a historical-Biblical approach, showing that Moses' upbringing in Egypt (Exodus 2-12), Jesus' refuge (Matthew 2:13-15) and the Ethiopian eunuch's encounter with Philip (Acts 8:26-39) demonstrate Africa's early connection to the Gospel. It further incorporates Gerhard West's insight that the BaTlhaping people of Southern Africa viewed the Bible as an aural object and a source of spiritual power, often requesting missionaries to read it aloud for its healing and transformative properties. This highlights the experiential reception of Scripture in African spirituality. The study concludes that language, culture and indigenous symbols such as Adinkra, proverbs and folk music serve as vital theological channels, influencing identity and fostering communal empowerment.

Keywords: African Christianity, Culture, Scriptures, Communities, Translation and Language.

INTRODUCTION

The study, "*The Bible in African Christianity: Reception, Context and Influence*", challenges the long-held notion that the Bible is a foreign text introduced by European missionaries. It argues that the Scriptures have deep historical and spiritual roots in Africa and were not unknown before /- *European contact. Long before the fifteenth century, African spirituality was already deeply rooted in the knowledge of God.¹ Many African societies recognized a Supreme Being, expressed through indigenous names such as Onyame (Akan, Ghana), Chukwu (Igbo, Nigeria), Mawu (Ewe, Togo), Nyɔnmɔ (Ga, Ghana), Nyambe (Lozi, Zambia), uNkulunkulu (Zulu, South Africa), Ngai (Kikuyu, Kenya), Leza (Bemba, Zambia), Mwari (Shona, Zimbabwe), Nambi (Buganda, Uganda), Waqqaa (Oromo, Ethiopia), Egziabher (Amharic, Ethiopia), Amon-Ra (ancient Egypt), and Allah (used in Islamic North Africa and Morocco).² The use of traditional symbols like the Adinkra in West Africa reflected profound theological insights, moral principles, and reflections on the divine nature, sovereignty, and providence of God.³ These indigenous concepts affirm that Africans possessed an existing relationship with the Creator long before the written text of the Bible arrived.

¹ John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Heinemann, 1990), 29-30.

² E. Bolaji Idowu, *Olódùmarè: God in Yoruba Belief* (London: Longman, 1962), 38-44.

³ Kwame Gyekye, *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought: The Akan Conceptual Scheme* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 115-120; J. B. Danquah, *The Akan Doctrine of God: A Fragment of Gold Coast Ethics and Religion* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1944), 7-9.

Early African Christian figures such as Perpetua and Felicitas, martyred in 203 AD, and Origen of Alexandria, who composed the *Hexapla* around 240 AD, exemplify Africa’s early engagement with Scripture.⁴ The Ethiopian tradition, with its ancient Ge’ez translation of the Bible and the establishment of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church, demonstrates Africa’s foundational role in biblical history.⁵ Similarly, Egypt’s early monastic movement, led by St. Anthony the Great and Pachomius, became the seedbed of Christian spirituality worldwide.⁶ Ancient Christian communities such as St. Mark’s Church in Alexandria and St. Andrew’s United Church in Egypt further illustrate that African Christianity was historically grounded and spiritually vibrant.

Among the BaTlhaping people of Southern Africa, as Gerhard West observes, the Bible was viewed as an *aural object* and a *source of spiritual power*; they often requested missionaries to read it aloud, believing in its healing properties and its power to bring good fortune.⁷ These examples reveal that Africa has long been an integral part of the Christian story. It is therefore historically inaccurate to claim that Europeans brought the Bible or the knowledge of God to Africa. The study affirms African ownership, reception, and interpretation of Scripture, emphasising its enduring relevance, spiritual vitality, and transformative influence across the continent.

The entrance of Christianity into Africa during the colonial and missionary era was marked by significant cultural disjunctions. Although early missionaries were zealous in spreading the Gospel, they often failed to recognise and engage with these pre-existing African religious and spiritual traditions. Instead, they approached Africa as a "spiritually dark continent" in need of salvation, disregarding the rich theological knowledge that already existed. Missionaries, largely from Western Europe, imposed foreign ecclesiastical structures and linguistic norms, privileging English, French, Portuguese, and other colonial languages over local tongues. This linguistic exclusivity distanced the Christian message from the cultural and cognitive worlds of African communities and inadvertently stifled grassroots theological development.

Table 1: Presence of Colonial Languages vs Local Languages in Selected African Countries

Country	Colonial Language(s)	Status & Usage	Major Local Languages	Current Language Dynamics
Ghana	English (British)	Official language; used in education, administration, media, and law	Akan (Twi, Fante), Ewe, Ga, Dagbani, Nzema	English dominates formal domains; local languages are used in homes, churches, and local media. Limited local language use

⁴ Joyce E. Salisbury, *Perpetua’s Passion: The Death and Memory of a Young Roman Woman* (New York: Routledge, 1997): 58–61; John Anthony McGuckin, *The Westminster Handbook to Origen* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 122-125.

⁵ John Binns, *The Orthodox Church of Ethiopia: A History* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2017), 15-18; Thomas C. Oden, *How Africa Shaped the Christian Mind: Rediscovering the African Seedbed of Western Christianity* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2007), 42-45.

⁶ Derwas J. Chitty, *The Desert a City: An Introduction to the Study of Egyptian and Palestinian Monasticism under the Christian Empire* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1966), 3–6; Thomas C. Oden, *The African Memory of Mark: Reassessing Early Church Tradition* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2011), 52-55.

⁷ Gerald O. West, *The Stolen Bible: From Tool of Imperialism to African Icon* (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 173-175.

				in secondary/tertiary education.
South Africa	English (British), Afrikaans (Dutch origin)	English and Afrikaans are among 11 official languages; English is dominant in business and education.	Zulu, Xhosa, Sotho, Tswana, Venda, Tsonga, Ndebele, Swati	Multilingual policy, but English is increasingly dominant, especially in urban areas. Indigenous languages are often sidelined in higher education and professional settings.
Egypt	Arabic (was Ottoman, then British colonised, but Arabic remained dominant)	Arabic is the official and national language (not colonial); English and French are used in elite education and diplomacy	Egyptian Arabic (vernacular), Nubian, Siwi, Beja	Arabic dominates public life; English and French remain prestigious in business and academia. Local minority languages are marginalised.
Nigeria	English (British)	Official language; used in education, government, law, and national media	Hausa, Yoruba, Igbo, Kanuri, Tiv, Edo	English unifies diverse ethnic groups; however, local languages are still widely spoken. Pidgin English bridges gaps. Tensions over mother-tongue education vs English medium.
Mozambique	Portuguese (Portuguese)	Official language; used in education and governance	Makua, Tsonga, Sena, Lomwe, Ndau	Portuguese is dominant in urban areas and education. Indigenous languages are recognised but underdeveloped in policy.
Senegal	French (French)	Official language; used in administration, education	Wolof, Serer, Pulaar, Jola	French dominates education and government. Wolof is widely spoken as a lingua franca. Efforts were made to integrate local languages into schooling.
Namibia	German (historical), English (current)	English is the official language; German and Afrikaans are used regionally	Oshiwambo, Herero, Nama, Damara, Kavango languages	English is the main official language, chosen post-independence. German influence remains in some schools and towns. Local languages are prominent regionally.

Cameroon	French & English (dual colonial heritage)	Both are official languages; French is more dominant	Ewondo, Duala, Fulfulde, Bassa, Bamiléké	Bilingual policy, but tension exists between the Anglophone and Francophone regions. Local languages are often secondary in public domains.
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The linguistic landscape of contemporary Africa is profoundly shaped by the legacy of European colonialism, with English, French, Portuguese and to a lesser extent, German serving as the primary colonial languages. These languages functioned not only as administrative tools but also as instruments of power, control and cultural imposition.⁸ Their prevalence and ongoing influence are closely tied to the distinct colonial histories of various African regions.

Among these languages, English has emerged as the most widely spoken colonial language across the continent, particularly in nations that were once part of the British Empire. In countries like Ghana, Nigeria, Kenya and South Africa, English became deeply embedded in the education system, legal frameworks, and administrative structures. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o argues that the promotion of English was a strategic colonial effort aimed at distancing Africans from their indigenous languages and cultures, thereby imposing Western ideals in their place.⁹ In post-independence Africa, English continues to function not only as an official language but also as a unifying lingua franca in linguistically diverse nations. For instance, Ghana and Nigeria each boast over 70 indigenous languages, making English a practical choice for national communication in governance and international relations.¹⁰ France occupies a dominant position in much of West and Central Africa, reflecting the assimilationist policies implemented during colonial rule in territories such as Senegal, the Ivory Coast, Mali and Cameroon. The French colonial strategy sought to transform Africans into “Frenchmen in black skin”, advocating for a rigorous policy of linguistic and cultural assimilation.¹¹ Today, French remains an official language in more than 20 African countries and is supported by the Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie, which actively promotes French as a global language of diplomacy and education.¹² In Francophone African nations, French is often prioritised in public life and reinforced through state institutions, media outlets, and formal education systems.

Portuguese also holds a significant presence in Lusophone African countries, particularly in Angola, Mozambique, Guinea-Bissau and Cape Verde. Unlike the British and French colonial models, Portuguese colonialism was characterised by a more centralised approach that maintained a direct connection to the metropole, resulting in limited opportunities for the development of local languages. Consequently, Portuguese became deeply entrenched in urban areas and among the

⁸ Ali A. Mazrui and Alamin M. Mazrui. *The Power of Babel: Language and Governance in the African Experience* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 10.

⁹ Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o. *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (London: James Currey, 1986), 12.

¹⁰ A. Bamgbose. *Language and Exclusion: The Consequences of Language Policies in Africa* (Münster: LIT Verlag, 2000), 85.

¹¹ S. Amin. *Capitalism in the Age of Globalization: The Management of Contemporary Society* (London: Zed Books, 1997), 134.

¹² P. G. Djité, *The Sociolinguistics of Development in Africa* (Bristol: Multilingual Matters, 2008), 108

elite classes.¹³ In contemporary Angola and Mozambique, Portuguese is recognised as the official language and is widely used in administration, education and mass media. However, this dominance has led to tensions with indigenous African languages, particularly in rural regions where local languages are more prevalent.¹⁴ In contrast, German has a relatively minor influence compared to the other colonial languages but has left an enduring linguistic legacy, particularly in Namibia. This country was a German colony from 1884 to 1915. The brief period of German colonisation did not facilitate widespread linguistic imposition; however, German persists within certain communities and is taught in some schools as a heritage language.¹⁵ Even after Namibia adopted English as its sole official language following independence in 1990, German remains visible through cultural events, place names, and media representations.

However, a paradigmatic shift occurred with the later realisation that meaningful communication of the Gospel required translation into the heart languages of the people. The translation of the Bible into African languages became a watershed moment that allowed the Scriptures to take root in African soil. Local idioms, proverbs, and worldviews began to intersect with biblical narratives, fostering both individual and communal transformation. As the Bible became more accessible, African Christians actively engaged in interpreting the text, forming indigenous churches, and shaping a truly African Christian theology. This movement not only democratized access to Scripture but also empowered local leadership and inspired contextual expressions of faith that harmonised the ancient African knowledge of God with the biblical revelation.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a multidisciplinary approach that integrates insights from theological, biblical history, African indigenous knowledge systems, cultural perspective and experiential field observations. The central premise of the research is that the knowledge of God, as reflected in the Bible, existed in Africa long before the arrival of European missionaries. Therefore, the methodology seeks to examine not only how the Bible was received in Africa during the missionary era but also how African societies already possessed deep theological consciousness before Western evangelisation. The study begins with a biblical-historical framework, situating Africa within the broader narrative of salvation history. Egypt, as part of Africa, played a significant role in biblical events: Moses was raised and educated in Egypt (Exodus 2), and Egypt served as a place of refuge for Jesus during King Herod's persecution (Matthew 2:13-15). These accounts highlight Africa's early interaction with divine revelation and the preservation of God's covenant people within African soil long before the rise of Western Christianity. Furthermore, the encounter between Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:26-39) represents Africa's direct access to the Gospel during the apostolic era.

In addition to biblical narratives, the study employs African Indigenous Knowledge Systems (AIKS) to explore the theological frameworks embedded within African spirituality. Many African communities recognised the existence of a Supreme Being through indigenous

¹³ C. Stroud, 'African Mother Tongue Programmes and the Politics of Language: Linguistic Citizenship versus Linguistic Human Rights', *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development* (2001. No. 22, Vol. 4), 339-355 (343).

¹⁴ H. M. Batibo, *Language Decline and Death in Africa: Causes, Consequences, and Challenges* (Clevedon: Multilingual Matters, 2005), 71.

¹⁵ K.K.Prah, *Mother Tongue Education in Africa: The Case for a Literate Democracy* (Cape Town: CASAS, 2009), 81.

names such as *Onyame* (Akan), *Chukwu* (Igbo), *Mawu* (Ewe), and *Nyambe* (Bantu). These names, which reflect attributes of God, are consistent with biblical descriptions such as Creator, Sustainer and Judge. The African worldview includes concepts of morality, covenant, sacrifice and community, which align closely with biblical teachings and demonstrate an existing awareness of God. A major component of this research involves material culture analysis as a rich source of primary data. Traditional objects such as Adinkra symbols, jewellery, adornments, textiles, pottery and architectural designs are studied for their spiritual meanings and theological implications. Adinkra symbols, for example, serve as visual theology among the Akan people. Symbols like *Gye Nyame* ("Except for God") proclaim absolute monotheism and divine sovereignty, while others represent wisdom, justice, providence and moral integrity. These material expressions demonstrate how African societies encoded their knowledge of God into daily life, rituals and art, functioning as forms of spiritual literature long before the physical Bible arrived.

To capture the contemporary implications of Bible translation and language use, the study also incorporates case studies of selected African churches. Special focus is given to English-only congregations where members with limited formal education face challenges in fully understanding sermons, participating in worship, and nurturing their faith. These cases highlight ongoing linguistic barriers that mirror earlier missionary-era language impositions. Interviews with church leaders, congregants, Bible translators, and parents provide critical insight into how language influences worship participation and the spiritual formation of children, particularly those from non-English-speaking homes. The methodology further includes a comprehensive review of scholarly literature on African Christianity, mission history, Bible translation, and indigenous theology. Works by theologians, missiologists, historians, anthropologists, and linguists are consulted to establish both the historical and theological continuity between pre-missionary African spirituality and biblical revelation. By integrating these multiple sources: biblical history, indigenous knowledge, material culture, contemporary field data and scholarly literature, this methodology provides a holistic and authentic framework for understanding how the Bible in Africa is not merely a colonial introduction but a continuation and fulfilment of God's ongoing revelation.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Passages throughout the Bible show God constantly assuring his people to hold onto hope and to trust Him for deliverance, restoration, and transformation. For instance, we see Moses speaking words of courage and hope to the Israelites, urging them not to fear as they stood before the Red Sea with Pharaoh's army behind them. God was about to do the miraculous, and he did, delivering them in the land of Egypt itself (Exodus 14:10–14). This encounter with Yahweh, the God of Israel, did not happen in some distant land, but in Africa, within Egypt, long before the birth of the modern missionary movement. It was on African soil that God's word was spoken, miracles were performed, and nations witnessed His power. The plagues, the parting of the sea and the exodus itself were all acts of divine intervention witnessed by Egyptians and others present.¹⁶ The term "mixed multitude" (Exodus 12:38), as expressed in the Bible, non-Israelites, likely including Africans and others from Egypt's diverse empire, joined the Israelites in their exodus. Why would they follow them into the wilderness, risking exile and uncertainty? Because they saw something in Yahweh, something that drew them away from their own gods. Perhaps, they witnessed a power greater than Pharaoh, and they decided to follow the living God. It is, therefore, inaccurate to

¹⁶ Peter White and Rachel Pauline Aikins. "Name It, Claim It, Grab It: African Neo-Pentecostal Faith and Hope Gospel" *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 30 (2021): 264-281 (4).

suggest that Europeans or white missionaries “introduced” God to Africa. Africa had already encountered Yahweh, not only in Egypt during the Exodus but also through numerous other biblical interactions. For instance, in 1 Kings 10, the Queen of Sheba, believed by many to be of Ethiopian or South Arabian descent, traveled to Jerusalem to seek wisdom from Solomon and left declaring praise to the God of Israel (1 Kings 10:9). While colonial encounters may have revived or reorganised aspects of Christianity on the continent, they did not introduce Africans to God. Africans were reading, interpreting, preserving and even dying for the truths of the Scriptures before the missionaries' arrival.

African Perspective on the Bible: Insights from African Voices

Origen of Alexandria (c. 185-254 AD)

Origen of Alexandria was an early Christian scholar, known for his intellectual depth and passionate devotion to Scripture. Born and active in Roman Egypt, Origen believed that the true meaning of the Bible could only be uncovered through both spiritual insight and rigorous study. Among his many contributions, one of the most extraordinary was the creation of the “Hexapla,” a monumental parallel edition of the Old Testament. The Hexapla, meaning "sixfold," presented six versions of the Hebrew Scriptures side by side: the original Hebrew text, a Greek transliteration of the Hebrew, and four Greek translations, the Septuagint and the versions of Aquila, Symmachus and Theodotion. Each version reflected different interpretive traditions, and Origen’s goal was to resolve discrepancies and preserve the integrity of Scripture through careful comparison. His work laid the foundation for biblical textual criticism and demonstrated a profound respect for both the divine message and the human languages that conveyed it. What makes Origen’s achievement even more remarkable is that it occurred in Africa, centuries before any European missionary set foot on the continent. His work stands as a testament to Africa’s early and deep engagement with Scripture and theological reflection.

Table 2: Origen’s Hexapla

Column	Content	Language	Purpose/ Notes
1. Hebrew Text	Original Hebrew text of the Old Testament	Hebrew	Preserves the traditional Hebrew Scriptures as read by Jewish communities.
2. Hebrew in Greek letters	Transliteration of the Hebrew text into Greek Characters	Greek (transliterated Hebrew)	Helps Greek readers pronounce the Hebrew sounds.
3. Aquila’s Translation	Very literal translation of the Hebrew text	Greek	Aquila was a Jewish convert; his version was rigidly literal to the Hebrew structure.
4. Symmachus’ Translation	Smooth and elegant Greek translation	Greek	More idiomatic Greek is intended for better readability and literary style
5. Septuagint (LXX)	The traditional Greek translation of the OT	Grreek	Closer to the Hebrew text, popular in the early church and often used in Revelation.

Vibia Perpetua (c. 181-203 AD)

Equally compelling is the story of Vibia Perpetua, a young noblewoman from Carthage, in present-day Tunisia, whose martyrdom has become one of the most enduring and inspirational narratives in early Christian history. Her testimony is preserved in *The Passion of Perpetua and Felicity*, a remarkable document not only because it recounts the courage of early Christian martyrs, but also because it contains what is widely considered to be one of the earliest surviving Christian texts written by a woman and a North African woman at that.¹⁷ This makes her account a significant contribution to both African Christian heritage and the global Christian literary tradition. She was arrested along with a group of catechumens during a time of Roman persecution under Emperor Septimius Severus. At the time of her arrest, she was a young mother still nursing her infant son. Her decision to remain faithful to her Christian identity, and even when urged by her father to recant to save her life, reveals a profound theological conviction. In one of the most poignant moments of her diary, she declares: “*I cannot be called anything other than what I am, a Christian.*” (Passio, 3.3). Her defiance of Roman civic religion, which required allegiance to the emperor and the traditional gods, was not out of rebellion but born of a deep-rooted spiritual and scriptural commitment.

What is especially striking about Perpetua’s writings is the visions she received while in prison. In one vision, she climbs a ladder guarded by a fierce dragon, symbolising Satan or death, only to reach a heavenly garden, a metaphor of her anticipated martyrdom and triumph in Christ (Passio, 4.6–4.10). These mystical experiences show her deep engagement with biblical imagery, echoing themes from books like Revelation and the Psalms. As Brent D. Shaw notes, her visions reflect a Christian woman’s apocalyptic worldview and her self-understanding as part of God’s victorious people.¹⁸ For women in theology and church leadership, Perpetua remains a symbol of resilience and divine calling. Her writings showcase how the Bible empowered her spiritually, giving her language and imagination to interpret her suffering, affirm her identity, and entrust her life to God. Feminist theologians, such as Elizabeth A. Clark (1983), have emphasised Perpetua’s voice as an early example of female authorship and agency within a patriarchal religious world. Today, Perpetua’s testimony speaks prophetically to Christians facing persecution, marginalisation, and the challenge of faithful witness. Her story is a call to stand firm in truth and to value spiritual integrity over social acceptance. Her life invites the African Church to reclaim its ancient Christian roots and to lift the stories of African women whose faith has shaped history.¹⁹

Felicity/Felicitas (c. 181-203 AD)

Felicity, also known as Felicitas, stands as one of the earliest known African Christian martyrs, a testament to the profound spiritual heritage of the African continent. A young, enslaved woman of North African origin, Felicity was martyred in Carthage (modern-day Tunisia) in 203 A.D. alongside her mistress and fellow Christian, Perpetua. Their story is immortalised in the *Passion of Saints Perpetua and Felicity*, one of the oldest extant Christian texts written by a woman. Felicity’s suffering and death were not in vain. She was eight months pregnant when imprisoned for her faith and gave birth shortly before being executed.²⁰ Her martyrdom is not just a tale of tragedy; it is a divine proclamation that Africans have known and worshipped the one true God from the earliest centuries of the church. Her faith in the face of Roman oppression demonstrates

¹⁷ Salisbury, *Perpetua’s Passion*, 16.

¹⁸ Brent D. Shaw, ‘The Passion of Perpetua and Felicity’ *Past & Present* (1993, No. 139): 3-45 (16).

¹⁹ Elizabeth A. Clark, *Women in the Early Church* (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 198), 13.

²⁰ Herbet Musurillo, *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs, texts and Translation* (Oxford University Press, 1972), 5-6.

that the African soul, long before the arrival of European missionaries, had already received and embraced the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The blood of this African woman cried out, not for vengeance, but as a seed of faith that would eventually blossom across the continent. Felicity did not exist in spiritual isolation. Her faith was not imported; it was incarnated within the rich soil of African religious consciousness.²¹

To argue my point further, the Scripture is emphatic that even before Christ's earthly ministry, Africa, especially Egypt, was a place of divine encounter. The land of Egypt, a part of Africa, played a pivotal role in the divine redemption and preservation of Christ. When Herod sought to destroy the Christ child, it was to Egypt that the Holy Family fled; "Out of Egypt have I called my Son" (Matthew 2:15). This was no arbitrary location. Egypt, the ancient land of refuge, became the protector of the incarnate Word. God, in his providence, chose Africa to preserve his Son. The life of the Messiah of the world began in Africa. His life could not be preserved in Israel, Bethlehem, Judah, or even Galilee, the very centres of Jewish identity. Instead, God nominated a "Gentile" nation, Africa, as the safe harbour. This affirms not only Africa's geographical role but its spiritual significance in the divine narrative of the cradle of the Scripture, before spreading into the world. From this narrative, I can confidently assert that Africa was not an infidel in salvific history; it was a preserver of kings, nobles, such as the Patriarchs: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, extending Joseph, and the rest of his descendants for the fulfilment of the promise.

Despite this early flourishing, much of sub-Saharan Africa would later become unfamiliar with the Scriptures until the arrival of European missionaries in the fifteenth and nineteenth centuries. This raises a critical question: What went wrong? Why did a continent that once nurtured some of the greatest Christian thinkers become disconnected from its biblical heritage? Several factors likely contributed to this historical gap. The fall of the Roman Empire led to political instability, and the rise of Islam in North Africa in the seventh century resulted in the gradual decline of Christian communities and institutions in the region. Over time, Christianity became confined largely to Ethiopia and Egypt, while vast regions of the continent remained unreached or disconnected from biblical texts. Furthermore, the loss of written transmission and the absence of vernacular Bible translations meant that Scripture became inaccessible to many African communities. Unlike Europe, which experienced a resurgence of biblical literacy during the Reformation, Africa did not have a similar movement to preserve or revive its early Christian scholarship. When missionaries finally reintroduced the Bible, they often encountered cultures where the memory of earlier Christian presence had faded. Nevertheless, the success of Bible translation into African vernaculars, despite its challenges, reveals that the biblical message still resonated deeply with African cultural and spiritual frameworks, suggesting that the soil had been prepared long before. In reflecting on this, one might say that Africa did not lack its own Martin Luther, but rather lost the institutional continuity that could have preserved and spread its early Christian scholarship. Had figures like Origen, Augustine, or Perpetua been followed by generations of preserved African theological work, the story of Christianity on the continent might have unfolded quite differently.

Worship Community

St. Andrew's United Church (SAUC) - Cairo

The Bible has long been a part of Africa's spiritual and cultural landscape, serving as a profound source of comfort in times of trouble and a beacon of hope in moments of despair. Far from being a foreign text, the Bible is deeply rooted in African soil, owned, lived, and embraced by countless

²¹ Musurillo, *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs, texts and Translation*, 6.

communities across the continent. Its message continues to inspire resilience, peace, and vision, especially among those navigating life's most difficult challenges. A powerful example of this is found in the ministry of St. Andrew's United Church (SAUC) in Cairo, Egypt. Established in 1899, SAUC has been a place of worship, refuge, and hope for over a century.²² Originally founded to serve English-speaking Christians from diverse ethnic backgrounds, the church has grown into a welcoming space open to all Christian denominations. Located in an Islamic-majority country, SAUC holds its communal worship on Fridays, honouring both the cultural context and its Christian heritage. Over the decades, it has faithfully served communities before, during, and after the world wars, becoming a historic witness to God's enduring presence in Egypt. Since 1976, the church has extended its mission to include refugees from the Horn of Africa and the Middle East, including Ethiopia, Sudan, South Sudan, Somalia, Eritrea, and Syria and many of whom have fled conflict, war, and chaos. The trauma of displacement is immense, yet SAUC has become a sanctuary of healing. Through regular Bible study, prayer, and community support, these individuals find calm in their storms and strength to dream again.²³

The "Refugee Centre", established in October 1979 within the church's Guild Hall, now serves over 115 refugees, offering support, training, and stability in partnership with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Both the church and the Refugee Services operate under the Synod of the Nile and the Protestant Churches of Egypt, drawing from Presbyterian, Lutheran, and Reformed liturgical traditions. St. Andrew's United Church stands as a living testimony of how the Bible is rooted in African soil and continues to bring healing, hope, and transformation, especially among the most vulnerable.²⁴ It is a compelling reminder that the Christian faith in Africa is not new, borrowed, or imposed; it is authentically African, shaping lives, building communities, and restoring dignity as demonstrated by the St. Andrews United Church.

African Christian Identity through Translation

Kwame Bediako - Theology and Identity

In his seminal work, *Theology and Identity: The Impact of Culture upon Christian Thought in the Second Century and in Modern Africa*, Bediako draws a compelling parallel between the early Gentile Church's engagement with Greco-Roman culture and the contemporary African Church's encounter with Christianity. He argues that just as early Christians articulated the Gospel using the intellectual categories of their cultural milieu without relinquishing their identity, so too can African Christians faithfully express their faith through the lens of their own cultural frameworks. For Bediako, translation is not merely a linguistic enterprise; it is a profoundly theological act. It enables African believers to interpret and embody Scripture in ways that resonate deeply with their worldview. The vernacular Bible, in this sense, does more than communicate the Gospel. It validates African religious experience and serves as a foundation for the development of contextual theologies rooted in indigenous concepts such as community, morality, spirituality, and ancestral reverence.²⁵

²² Rachel Pauline Aikins, "An Exploratory Study into Historical Developments and Significance of Inter/Nondenominational Churches in Ghanaian Christianity with Special Reference to Accra Ridge Church (ARC) and Legon Interdenominational Church (LIC)" Akrofi-Christaller Institute of Theology, Mission and Culture, 2022, 18-277 (86).

²³ Aikins, "An Exploratory Study into Historical Developments, 86.

²⁴ Aikins, "An Exploratory Study into Historical Developments, 86.

²⁵ Kwame Bediako, *Theology and identity: The impact of culture upon Christian thought in the second century and in modern Africa* Kwame Bediako. (Oxford: Regnum, 2011).

This engagement with Scripture in local languages empowers African Christians to see themselves within the biblical narrative and participate in the global Church not as passive recipients of Western theological constructs, but as active and equal contributors to Christian thought. Central to Bediako's vision is the issue of identity. He challenges the notion that authentic Christian faith requires the abandonment of African traditional heritage. Rather, he sees translation as a means of theological continuity, where African values and spiritual insights are transformed, not discarded, by the Gospel. In this way, Bible translation fosters more than evangelistic outreach; it cultivates theological depth and ecclesial self-determination. For Bediako, it is through this process that African Christianity gains a mature and distinct voice, one that is both rooted in Scripture and intimately connected to the lived realities of African communities.

Andrew F. Walls - The Missionary Movement in Christian History

In his work, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith*, Walls views Acts 2, the Pentecost event, as a pivotal moment that affirms the incarnational character of the Gospel through its embrace of linguistic diversity. The descent of the Holy Spirit upon the disciples results not in the proclamation of a singular, celestial language, but in the miraculous articulation of the Good News in the mother tongues of the gathered nations: "Each one heard them speaking in his own language" (Acts 2:6). For Walls, this episode functions as a theological reversal of Babel. Whereas Babel introduced confusion and fragmentation through linguistic division (Genesis 11:1-11), Pentecost inaugurates a new unity rooted in linguistic multiplicity. The Gospel does not demand the adoption of a single "sacred" language, as is the case in some religious traditions; rather, it affirms that every language is a valid medium for divine communication. Walls interprets this moment as a profound divine endorsement of vernacular theology.²⁶ The Holy Spirit's intentional use of diverse languages underscores a theological principle: God not only speaks through many languages but deliberately chooses to do so. Each hearer's native tongue becomes the vessel through which the Gospel is received, thereby validating every culture, people, and linguistic identity. The Gospel, in Walls's view, is not confined to one civilisation or language; it is inherently translatable and thus universally accessible. Accordingly, Bible translation and cultural contextualization are not merely pragmatic tools of mission; they are theological imperatives. The act of translation is, for Walls, a continuation of both the Incarnation and the miracle of Pentecost. He articulates this conviction succinctly: "The gospel must be translated, not only into new languages, but into new lives²⁷ and new settings, which is part of the incarnational process."

This insight carries significant implications for African Christianity. When Scripture is rendered in African languages and theology is expressed through African conceptual frameworks and symbols, it is not a dilution of Christian faith, but rather its authentic embodiment. The Christian message, by its very nature, demands a linguistic, cultural and existential approach to honour the contexts into which it enters. Walls frequently pointed to Africa as a compelling case study in the "translation principle." While early Western missionaries often failed to engage deeply with African worldviews, the eventual translation of the Bible into indigenous languages catalysed the emergence of vibrant, locally grounded forms of Christianity. Africans ceased to be mere recipients of an imported message; they became interpreters, theologians, and active agents of the Gospel in their own right. Through vernacular Scripture, the Gospel penetrated African hearts,

²⁶ Andrew F. Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith* (Marynkoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1996), 26-27.

²⁷ Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History*, 28.

minds, and communities. African Christianity thus emerges as a profound expression of the translation model, reflecting both the incarnational ethos of Christ and the multilingual, inclusive vision of the experience at Pentecost.

Challenges

The presence of the Bible in Africa has deep and ancient roots. From Moses' upbringing in Egypt to the preservation of the Christ-child there during Herod's massacre, these accounts serve as undeniable evidence of Africa's vital role in the Biblical narrative. The early Church in North Africa produced theological giants such as Origen and Augustine of Hippo, while martyrs like Perpetua and Felicity testify to a vibrant Christian witness on African soil. The Ethiopian eunuch's encounter with Philip in Acts 8 is yet another example of Africa's early engagement with Scripture. These accounts reveal that Africa was never peripheral to the story of the Bible; it has been central from the beginning. In light of this history, the reintroduction of the Bible to Africa through translated vernaculars was not a foreign intrusion but, in many ways, a return. However, while Bible translation has undeniably advanced the spread of the Gospel and promoted literacy, it has also presented significant challenges. In multilingual regions, translators often choose a dominant or widely understood language for practicality. This sometimes marginalised speakers of smaller languages, who felt excluded or misrepresented. As a result, some communities grew distant from the translated Bible, and in some cases, it remained unused, creating an emotional and linguistic barrier instead of bridging cultures. Moreover, Africa never experienced a reformative movement akin to Martin Luther's translation of the Bible into German, which democratized Scripture and transformed European Christianity. During the Roman Empire's presence in Christian centres like Carthage, no comparable movement emerged to preserve or develop indigenous African theological traditions. This absence may have hindered the sustained growth and influence of African biblical scholarship. Had such a movement taken root, the trajectory of Christianity in Africa might have unfolded quite differently.

Key Findings

This section presents key observations derived from the historical, theological, and cultural analysis of Scripture's place within the African context.

1. Historical evidence confirms that Christianity existed in Africa long before European missionary movements, as seen in the lives and legacies of early African Church figures such as Augustine, Origen, Perpetua, and Felicity.
2. Scripture has been effectively translated into numerous African languages, enabling the Gospel to be embraced and contextualised by diverse communities across the continent.
3. Africans now perceive the Bible as their own, not as a foreign text, but as sacred Scripture that directs, comforts, and shields through faith in God.
4. The translation principle is crucial to African Christianity, showing that theological expression must arise from within cultural and linguistic contexts.
5. Initial resistance to the Gospel in certain parts of Africa was largely due to translation and cultural barriers, not theological incompatibility or spiritual opposition.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The study offers the following recommendations to support the continued growth and contextual integrity of African Christianity.

1. Promote deeper investment in vernacular theology, encouraging theological reflection and education in local languages and idioms.
2. Preserve and teach the history of early African Christianity to reclaim Africa's rightful place in the Christian tradition and strengthen theological identity.
3. Support African-led biblical scholarship and translation projects, ensuring that Africans remain active agents in interpreting and transmitting Scripture.
4. Develop contextual liturgies and worship practices that reflect African cultural symbols, stories, and aesthetics within biblical frameworks.
5. Educate Christian communities to challenge lingering colonial narratives, affirming that the Bible is not a Western import but a global and inclusive revelation of God.

CONCLUSION

Africans now rightfully claim ownership of the Scriptures, viewing them as sacred texts that offer guidance, comfort, and spiritual strength. The Bible is no longer seen as foreign but as a divine revelation that speaks directly to African realities. Its presence in Africa predates European missionary activity, as seen in the lives of historical figures like Perpetua and Felicity, Augustine of Hippo, and Origen of Alexandria, and in early churches such as St. Andrew in Egypt. It is historically inaccurate to suggest that Europeans introduced the Bible to Africa or brought Africans to the knowledge of God. Africa has always been part of the Christian story. The Scriptures were not rejected but embraced, showing deep resonance with African worldviews. While some regions initially struggled with linguistic and cultural barriers, faithful translation made the Gospel accessible and deeply rooted in African life. The presence of the Bible in Africa is not a result of colonial imposition, but of divine encounter and spiritual relevance. African Christianity stands as a testimony to the universal nature of the Gospel and the truth that God speaks in every language and inhabits every culture. Today, African believers are not passive recipients but active interpreters and proclaimers of the Word, living witnesses to a faith that is fully their own.

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