Contemporary Hermeneutics: An Examination of Selected Works of John D. K. Ekem on Mother Tongue Biblical Hermeneutics for the African Context

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Abstract
This essay examines the mother tongue biblical hermeneutics (MTBH) of selected works of the Ghanaian scholar, John D. K. Ekem. Contextual principles, approaches, and methods have been advanced by biblical scholars to elucidate the meaning of Scripture. However, many of the principles, approaches, and methods do not adequately address the socio-cultural context of Ghana (or Africa) since they are products developed in and for another context. Hence, Ekem’s assertion that biblical interpretation must critically engage and dialogue with local socio-cultural norms in the process of biblical interpretation in Africa. Not surprisingly, MTBH shares several principles with inductive biblical studies (IBS). Although MTBH faces numerous challenges, it has the potential to help African Christians to better apply the texts of the Bible to their existential situations. This essay honors the work of Ekem in an effort to bring awareness to MTBH and advance its growth in the African context.¹

Keywords: Contextualization, Culture, Exegesis, Worldview, Mother Tongue Biblical Hermeneutics (MTBH)

¹ This is a revised version of "History of Biblical Hermeneutics and Contemporary Hermeneutics: An Examination of Selected Works of Prof. J. D. K. Ekem on Mother Tongue Biblical Hermeneutics for the African Context" (paper presented at the Trinity Theological Seminary PhD Colloquium, Legon, Ghana, November 2016).
Introduction

In the wake of independence for many African countries, the establishment of theological seminaries and the creation of the department of the study of religions in public universities in the 1960s, there were also demands for developing African biblical hermeneutics. The reason: Western biblical hermeneutics was perceived to be “part and parcel of a broader western ideological framework and, therefore, unsuited to the African situation.” George Ossom-Batsa argues that, until the 1960s, biblical interpretation in Ghana was performed according to western conventions, which do not adequately consider the African worldview. This unique and multifaceted context requires contextual approaches, methods, and principles for interpretation because Africans interpret Scripture from within their context.

This scenario makes it difficult for the Ghanaian to apply the text to daily life and raises questions irrelevant to the Ghanaian audience. In fact, the Bible is often viewed as an element of imperialism because the tendency to associate its “proper interpretation” with western principles is regarded as a form of

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5 While I make reference to the “African context,” my focus is on the Ghanaian context since as Alan John Meenan observes, what one means by an “African context” is influenced by numerous factors such as “tribal biases, ideologically oriented, ecclesiologically oriented, missionary heritage, engagement with territorial communities, accepted communities mores and a wide variety of issues in Africa” (“Biblical Hermeneutics in an African Context” Journal of Inductive Biblical Studies 1 [2014]: 268–73 at 268).
Westernization. This impedes an African audience from making biblical principles central to life, which results in the notion that Christianity is a Western religion, when, in fact, “the Bible is the most important source for African Christian theological reflection and practice.” David R. Bauer and Robert A. Traina concur that “the Bible, as we personify it, beckons us to hear its message on its own term; it wishes to speak a new word to us, challenging our presuppositions over against conforming to them.”

In the attempt to allow the Bible speak directly to the African context, scholars have proposed various contextual hermeneutical principles, methods, and approaches. These are commonly referred to as African biblical hermeneutics. These include: Enculturation hermeneutics (Justin Ukpong), Liberation hermeneutics (Gerald O. West), and Postcolonial hermeneutics (Musa W. Dube). Enculturation hermeneutics makes the socio-cultural context of Africa the major element in the interpretive process. This ideologically theological orientation differs from the principles of Scripture interpretation inherited from Western missionaries. Liberation hermeneutics emphasizes the economic and political liberation of Africans and highlights issues of “race and class”; however, religiocultural elements are not entirely jettisoned. The Bible is viewed as an instrument of liberation rather than of oppression and oppression and oppression.

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colonization. Postcolonial hermeneutics deals with how ordinary Africans should read a Bible that was once used as a tool of colonization. In order to decolonize the Bible, it must be read against imperial influences, such as reading it against geography, universal tendencies, and suppression to mention but a few.

John D. K. Ekem adds to these approaches through MTBH. Adapting the definition by B. Y. Quarshie, Ekem defines “mother tongue” as “the language one is born into” or the first language that one is able to speak naturally. He explains that, depending on the wider coverage of a mother tongue language, it could become a vernacular language of a people, a region or a nation. He adds, “mother tongue is the language that affirms a person’s identity and self-worth.” MTBH is the engagement of “viable tools for the scientific analysis of the phonetic, phonological, morpho-syntactical and semantic component” of a mother tongue in the process of biblical interpretation.

MTBH shares some affinity to inductive biblical studies (IBS), such as: (1) making observations of the text (2) considering the context of the audience (presuppositions) and (3) studying the Bible in one’s mother tongue even if one also consults the original

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16 John D. K. Ekem, “Professorial Chair Inaugural Address” *Journal of Mother Tongue Biblical Hermeneutics* 1 (2015): 158–74, at 166. Of course, reasons such as war, disease, natural disaster, educational limitations, and work encourage one to neglect his or her mother tongue, which does not necessarily mean that his/her identity and self-worth is lost or devalued.

17 Ekem, “Professorial Chair,” 162. Alternatively, MTBH is an enterprise that requires proficiency in a mother tongue, a good understanding of the world of the Bible, an understanding of biblical languages, and knowledge of the African worldview (166).
languages. The difference between the two hermeneutics is that IBS emphasizes the canon of Scripture while MTBH “may consult extra-biblical materials for interpretation.” Like many other hermeneutical approaches, MTBH also draws on the historical-critical method “to interpret texts in light of their sitz im leben (life setting/[situation]).” In other words, it focuses on the text as “carrier of the text’, the text’s history and its originating circumstances."

The goal of MTBH is to allow the Bible speak to/with indigenous issues such as poverty, marriage, barrenness, politics, education, etc., in Africa, thereby establishing Christianity in indigenous African life and thought. In this respect, the objective of MTBH resonates the goal of IBS to equip English speakers with effective tools to study the Bible in their mother tongue.

**Mother Tongue Biblical Hermeneutics**

In this section, I examine selected works of a leading voice and proponent of MTBH, John D. K. Ekem. In his inaugural lecture as full professor at Trinity Theological Seminary, Legon Ghana, Ekem lists eight objectives that also serve as prerequisites for effective MTBH: (1) the study of biblical languages (2) the production and

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21 In places where Christianity is perceived as foreign, it is not unusual for it to die out much more rapidly when it encounters severe trauma such as the Arab conquest of North African Churches in the 7th century. Because these churches remained Latin-speaking, known mainly by the elite, the Christian faith essentially disappeared. By contrast, the Coptic Church survived in part because they used both Coptic language and thought in the expression of faith (Ekem, *Early Scriptures*, 2).
use of commentaries and study Bibles written in local languages (3)
the study of the Septuagint (LXX) (4) the study of Targums (5) the
study of scripture translated into various African languages (6) the
dramatization of biblical passages in African contexts (7) reflection
on religio-cultural, socio-economic, and political issues in mother
tongues and (8) the equipping of local Christian communities to
understand current issues confronting the church.

Some of these eight objectives/principles share resemblances
with some Western biblical hermeneutics and will be discussed
below. Rather than discuss the eight objectives/principles
individually, I combine them into three groups of shared similarities:
(1) the study of biblical and mother tongue languages, (2) Bible
commentaries and study Bible aids in local languages, and
(3) interpretive creativity and innovation.

The Study of Biblical and
Mother Tongue Languages

Ekem identified the following key elements for MTBH: the study of
Hebrew, Aramaic, Greek, and mother tongues. In addition to
standard research languages, each student is to also study his or her
distinct mother tongue language. He states,

Pastors/Ministers in training should also be given an
opportunity to do part of their formal theological studies in
languages used by communities among whom they are going to
minister. This is particularly crucial in the area of biblical
interpretation. It is in the light of the above consideration that
the Seminary [Trinity Theological Seminary] has set up the
Centre for Mother Tongue Biblical Hermeneutics where the
Bible is interpreted in local Ghanaian (African) languages using very high standards of biblical scholarship.24

This comment underscores the fact that the English language is the medium of instruction in almost all schools and theological seminaries in Ghana. Indeed, assignments, examinations, and theses are written in English. For many urban students, English is their mother tongue because it is the main language used at home from childhood. According to MTBH, these students are expected to study their native/indigenous languages.

This mandate, while praiseworthy, is a challenge, for two reasons. First, many of the indigenous Ghanaian languages remain spoken languages only as they await literary development. Second, in Ghana, ministers are often re-assigned to other communities, which may require them to study the language of their new community. Although this policy will work to fulfill the goals of MTBH, the frequent re-assignment of ministers to new communities may not help the Ghanaian Church—it must be reexamined.

The study of indigenous languages is critical to consolidating the Christian faith in the Ghanaian life and thought. Missionaries to Ghana (formerly the Gold Coast) discovered that the receptor language is key in the communication of the gospel and its reception among indigenous groups. For example, David N. A. Kpobi notes,

The few chaplains who sought to win converts among the Africans started by teaching the African children to read the Bible in the European tongues but soon realized the futility of such efforts. The alternative was to teach the African children in their own tongues and this called for a translation of the Scripture into those languages. This exercise however had to

wait for many years until competent persons became available to work on the translations.\textsuperscript{25}

In response to this problem, Ekem and Seth Kissi co-authored *Essentials of Biblical Greek Morphology (with an Introductory Syntax)*.\textsuperscript{26} The twenty-five lesson book focuses primarily on morphology with some discussion of syntax. They attempt to simplify the study of Koine Greek, which some African biblical students find challenging. Additionally, Emmanuel A. Obeng postulates that African biblical students have three challenges: (1) lack of lecturers in biblical languages (2) limited time for studies due to Church work, and (3) limited access to reference materials.\textsuperscript{27} The work of Ekem and Kissi is directed at solving (2) and (3).

The uniqueness of this textbook lies in the exercises at the end of each lesson, because they require students to translate from Greek into their respective mother tongues.\textsuperscript{28} It is an innovation on the four main sources the authors consulted,\textsuperscript{29} wherein exercises are expected to be translated into English, which may not necessarily be the mother tongue of many African students. In this way, Ekem and Kissi encourage African students to become fluent and capable of theologizing in their mother tongues, in addition to English.

There is no reason that declensions, paradigms, vocabulary, and appendices could not also be translated into other mother tongues.\textsuperscript{30} Aloo Osotsi Mojola agrees that African biblical scholars should be
able to speak their native languages, understand its history and culture, and demonstrate competence in biblical languages.\textsuperscript{31} In spite of this, translating the vocabulary into a particular mother tongue may be interpreted as giving undue advantage or preference to a given ethnic group and result in the book’s rejection by others. Nevertheless, laying a good foundation in Hebrew, Aramaic, Greek, and mother tongue languages is a minimum requirement for the translation of the Bible into local languages (mother tongues). As Bauer notes,

\begin{quote}
Generally speaking, there should be an emphasis upon the study of the Bible in the student's own language. Harper recognized that people think in their native language and that consequently students should be saturated with the Bible in their own tongue.\textsuperscript{32}
\end{quote}

To this end, the Centre for Mother Tongue Biblical Hermeneutics (CMTBH), of which Ekem is the director, organizes short courses in Hebrew, Greek, Gã, Akan, and Ewe designed to enable with limited time to study the biblical and mother tongue languages.\textsuperscript{33} If the problem of study time (challenge 2 above) and the lack of available reference materials (challenge 3 above) is resolved, perhaps lecturers who can teach both the biblical and mother tongue languages (challenge 1 above) will naturally arise. This would also mitigate the need to use English versions for translation into Ghanaian mother tongues, since scholars would refer to Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek.\textsuperscript{34}

\begin{footnotes}
\item[33] First Kwesi Dickson Memorial Lectures, Trinity Theological Seminary, Legon Accra, 24 November 2015.
\item[34] For example, Ekem registers his dissatisfaction with the Mfantse New
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In an article titled “Early Translators and Interpreters of the Judeo-Christian Scriptures on the Gold Coast (Ghana): Two Case Studies,” Ekem discusses the legacies and significance of the works of Jacobus Elisa Johannes Capitein and Augustine William Hanson’s translation and interpretation of the Scriptures for the Mfantse and Gâ communities respectively. Both men were educated in biblical languages and acquainted with the socio-religio-cultural norms of their communities. For Ekem, these illustrious sons of West Africa, who worked for different agencies in different periods, made the interpretation of the Lord’s Prayer (Matt 6:9–13; Luke 11:2–4) very remarkable. He surmises that, although they had the “easier, superficial, option” of translating and interpreting the Lord’s prayer, they “chose the harder, yet more productive way of finding appropriate local African terms through the process of ‘re-interpretation’ and ‘re-semantization.’”

By implication, Ekem suggests that the enterprise of MTBH is a much more demanding engagement that goes beyond finding mere equivalent words for the Greek text. According to Ekem, Capitein and Hanson’s translation of Matt 6:9a, Πάτερ ἡ ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς, “Our Father in heaven,” as “Jijena Jinnadja endi owwasú” in Testament translated by Parker, saying, “it is probable that [the] Mfantse New Testament translation was, unlike the Akuapem-Twi, Ewe, and Gâ, not based on the Greek text in use at the time. It is likely that Parker did not know Greek and therefore had no choice but to fall back on the English Revised Version. This would not be surprising, since emphasis in the schools was on the English language, and the Scriptures provided by the BFBS and Christian literature provided by the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel, through the Wesleyans, was in English” (Early Scriptures, 84).

In contrast, he commended the work of J. Zimmermann and J. Nikoi, which drew on Hebrew, Greek and mother tongue in the first full Gâ Bible published in 1876 (Ekem, Early Scriptures, 25, 42.).


36 Re-interpretation refers to earlier translations by western missionaries who did not critically consider the socio-cultural context of Ghana. Re-semantization refers to the meaning of key words as used in earlier translations and how they relate to each other in meaning. See Ekem, “Early Translators and Interpreters,” 37.
Mfantse, and “Wa Tshe ni ia Nüngma mli” in Gã, and ἀµήν, “amen” in the doxology as “Ojendâm” in Mfantse and “hiao” in Gã, shows that the Scriptures cannot be translated in a vacuum.

Although Ekem did not explain the impact of the translation and interpretation of Capitein and Hanson’s work on the Lord’s Prayer on the target audience, he highlighted the competence and creativity of Capitein and Hanson as an example to emulate and improve upon. In this way, Ekem expressed his support of “dynamic equivalence or functional equivalence” over a “literal,” word-for-word approach because the latter fails to fully consider the concepts and ideologies of the Ghanaian context. The work further shows that MTBH has precedents in the early 17th and 18th centuries unexplored by contemporary scholars.

In his book, Early Scriptures of the Gold Coast (Ghana), Ekem surveys the history of Bible translations into Gã, Twi, Mfantse, and Ewe. The rationale for choosing these four languages was due to the fact that they were the earliest translations completed in the Gold Coast and Togoland. The work describes the impact of these translations documents the history of Bible translation into Ghanaian languages. Solomon S. Sule-Saa also documents Bible translations into Dagomba and Konkomba. Sule-Saa observes that these translations resulted in the full integration of Christianity, which the indigenes originally viewed as foreign. Many missionaries to the Gold Coast were knowledgeable in Hebrew and Greek. Some of them even studied the mother tongue so that they could translate and communicate the gospel in the local Ghanaian languages. Those who could not achieve this proficiency employed indigenous linguists to assist in translating the Bible into

37 Ekem, “Professorial Chair,” 171.
38 Ekem, Early Scriptures, xvii.
39 Ekem, Early Scriptures, xvii.
mother tongues. For Ekem, Samuel Quist is an example of someone whose expertise of a mother tongue enabled the Ewe bible translation.

It is probable that Ekem’s insistence on studying mother tongues in addition to biblical languages was based on his research showing the difficulty of finding local mother tongue experts to assist in translation. For this reason, it is better for biblical scholars to also understand the mother tongues. This helps fast-track the process of translating the Bible into all the languages of Ghana. In addition, it facilitates the retranslation of the Bible completed by missionaries centuries ago, which do not appear to follow proper indigenous linguistic rules.  

**Bible Commentaries and Study Bibles in Local Languages**

For Ekem, once a Bible translation in a local language is complete “efforts should also be made to help the communities interact effectively with the translated Scriptures through the provision of local language Bible commentaries, local language Bible dictionaries and other study aids.” According to him, the purpose for having commentaries and study Bibles in local languages is to encourage dialogue between the local African religious, cultural, and social norms and the Bible without having to go through a foreign language and worldview.  

Ekem states that the creation of Bible commentaries and study Bibles in local languages should include …


42 Ekem, *Interpretation of Scripture*, 19.

43 This does not require the devaluing of foreign reference works such as English theological dictionaries and commentaries, but it highlights their inherent limitations for African contexts.
re-packaging the thought embedded in an “original revelation/message” for speakers of other languages, taking cognizance of relevant theological, linguistic and cultural factors …. [H]ere we see the crucial importance of mother tongue theologies derived from solidly grounded Bible translations as well as context-sensitive Bible study aids in local African languages.44

Complementing the views of Ekem, A. M. Howell argues that the enterprise of writing local language resources is not intended to ignore commentaries in English because they serve as a resource for Africans who want to undertake commentaries in local languages. He further explains that the lack of local language commentaries and study Bibles is due to the widespread preference for globally or regionally spoken languages.45 This tendency, while understandable, renders less popular languages less influential in theological discourse.

As a scriptural and historical precedent, Ekem points to the fact that although Jesus likely used Aramaic as his mother tongue, and that (in Ekem’s view) the Gospels were initially written in the minority language of Aramaic, these were later translated into Koine Greek, the lingua franca of the time.46 While the Gospels could have gone to other Aramaic speaking territories, the Gospels had to be translated into the mother tongue of the receptor audience, which for many was Greek. As Kwame Bediako notes, God does not have a sacred language; rather, He speaks all languages so that the gospel is


46 Ekem, Interpretation of “Scripture”, 21. Actually, scholarly consensus holds that the Gospels were written in Greek, though there is evidence that Matthew was originally written in Hebrew.
not limited to a selected few based on language. The “gospel is about us and that we have been invited to join.”

In an article titled “A Dialogical Exegesis of Romans 3:25a” Ekem explains that the writing of local language commentaries and study Bibles involves dialogical exegesis, which is comprised of (1) cross-cultural hermeneutics, which brings the “biblical and other worldviews face to face on the principle of reciprocity” (2) intercultural dialogue, which seeks to have discourse between the translated text and the “original” text to establish their points of “convergence and divergence” as well as their influence on the community of Christians, and (3) applied hermeneutics, which combines (1) and (2) for mother tongue study Bibles and commentaries for local communities.

As his example, Ekem explores how to best express the meaning of ἱλαστήριον in the Ghanaian context. He first observes that Paul's use of ἱλαστήριον was influenced by his Jewish background via the τρόπαιο or lid of the ark of the covenant (also referred to as the mercy seat). Then, he considers Paul’s statement that God “put forward” Jesus, the Messiah, “as a sacrifice of atonement [ἱλαστήριον] by his blood” suggesting that since ἱλαστήριον is both the “place and means of atonement,” it is appropriated through faith in Jesus and not his blood as some versions imply.

Third, he examines a few Ghanaian translations. Ekem criticized the 1861 Akwapim-Twi translation of ἱλαστήριον as mpata (the pacifying event) but supported the revised Akwapim-Twi 1964 rendering, mpatade (pacifying sacrifice), as well as the equivalent

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49 Ekem, “Dialogical Exegesis,” 77.
50 In fact, ἱλαστήριον is the LXX translation for τρόπαιο.
51 NRSV.
52 Ekem, “Dialogical Exegesis,” 81.
renderings *npatadze* (1896 Mfantse NT), *npatadet* (1948 Mfantse Bible), *kpatamɔnɔ* (1907 Gâ Bible and 1977 Gâ NT), or *avulénü* (sacrifice of reconciliation) (1877 Ewe NT and 1898 Ewe NT).53

Appealing to the legendary example of Agya Ahor who offered himself to be sacrificed to avert calamity in the community, Ekem further explains that in the context of Abura-Mfantse, ἱλαστήριον comes close to *ahy nanmuadze* (representative revelatory sacrifice) as the suffering servant in Isa. 53:10.54 He adds:

> It … underscores the open-ended nature of translation and exegesis, reminding us that “any translation is ‘selective’ in the sense that it cannot re-produce all aspects of form, content, and/or function of the original text; therefore, an evaluation and a selection in terms of priority has to be made.”55

However, the criteria and reasons for a selection must be clearly stated, and the original meaning of biblical words and concepts must not be distorted.

In chapter two of *Priesthood in Context*,56 Ekem indicates that the difference between ṣkomfo (priest) and ḥfo (attendant) is that an ḥfo is instructed by the ṣkomfo to perform only certain rituals. Additionally, he or she is not possessed in the same manner as the ṣkomfo. By contrast, some missionaries believed that both ṣkomfo and ḥfo were synonymous words meaning “priest.”57 For Ekem,

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54 This is debatable since the socio-historical contexts of Isaiah, Romans, and that of Agya Ahor are different. There may be similarity across them, but these connections must be made cautiously.
55 Ekem, “Dialogical Exegesis,” 91.
The old order would realize how inappropriate it is to approach the institution of traditional priesthood with a prejudiced mind, full of negative foregone conclusions. In view of its profound implications for the concept of Christian priesthood or Christian ministry, it is legitimate to ask whether European Christian Mission-founded Churches in Ghana have taken serious note of important values within Akan traditional priesthood that could help to enrich their own understanding of priesthood/ministry.58

Therefore, Bible commentaries and study Bibles written in local languages are designed to engage the indigenous worldview of Africans to appropriate the gospel in a way foreign works do not. The priesthood as found in traditional African religions is an institution in which aspiring priests were critically trained as the custodians of spirituality in the community. This is one example of a socio-religious concept that could be adapted to explain Christian ministers. Ekem finds Immanuel Quist’s commentary worth emulating when he says, “it goes to the credit of Quist that, in addition to his translations, he was able to produce an impressive commentary on Matthew’s gospel in the Ewe language. This commentary is a real masterpiece, reflecting the standard biblical scholarship and hermeneutical application of the time.”59

Yet, one must be cautious in engaging the African context in translation or interpretation. For example, Ekem claimed that ἐπιούσιος (daily bread) in Matt 6:11/ Luke 11:3 should not be translated as “daily bread” because Africans do not need mere survival “but a leap from mediocrity to economic and moral excellence … optimal use of resources, trust in God for wisdom to develop modest but dignified lifestyles that will not make us perpetually dependent on other people’s benevolence.”60

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60 Ekem, “Interpreting the Lord’s Prayer,” 51.
latter point may be true, it does not justify allowing contextualization to dictate interpretation to the point that the original meaning of ἐπιούσιος is ignored. In the context of Matt 6:11/Luke 11:3, and in keeping with normal Koine usage, the term indisputably refers to what is necessary for daily existence or survival. Thus, its use with ἀρτος (bread) requires a translation of “daily” whether or not Africans need more than survival.

In a seminal work, Krataa a Pɔɔl Kyerewee dze Kemaa Faelimɔn ne Nkyerɛnkyɛrmu fi Griik Kasa mu ko Mfantse Kasa mu, Ekem provides a commentary of on the Greek text of Philemon in Mfantse. Additionally, Greek expressions used in Philemon are listed at the end of the book and translated into Mfantse. This work shows how a Mfantse biblical scholar is not limited to theologizing in English language but could also theologize in his mother tongue—Mfantse. In the words of J. O. Y. Mante, this is “a Scholar [Ekem] who knows his subject and is able to bring it home to African (Ghanaian) context. From Greek to Hebrew to Mfantse to English, Prof. Ekem demonstrates in this work exceptional versatility.”

In his chapter, “Developing Akan Study Bible Material on 1 Corinthians 11:2–16,” Ekem engaged an “open-minded” approach regarding the issue of “head coverings” and its implications for the preparation of study Bibles in the Akan context. He argues that Paul was addressing the issue of “propriety in worship.” In view of the heterogeneous nature of the Corinthian congregation, Paul was not likely enforcing one cultural norm over others; rather he was

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63 Ekem, Krataa a Pɔɔl, 32–35.
64 Ekem, Interpretation of “Scripture,” v, emphasis original.
66 In the Second Temple Period, Jewish, Greek, and Roman women covered
addressing the problem of the loose and undressed hair of women associated with Greco-Roman mystery cults. On this reading, Paul neither wanted “pneumatic women worshippers” to emulate this practice nor Christian men to copy the hairstyles of Corinthian homosexuals. While Ekem’s explanation is plausible, hair and head coverings in antiquity communicated diverse messages in various contexts among different people groups, so determining the exact meaning of Paul is both challenging and highly debated.

Regardless, the uniqueness of this work is that, in addition to explaining the complex socio-religious worldview of first-century Corinth, Ekem’s commentary on the passage is written in both Akan and English. He took advantage of the availability of Akan Bible and Greek to exegete the passage. It is a prime example of mother tongue commentary in Akan for both clergy and lay people.

Ekem’s motivation to have commentaries and study Bibles in local languages is to (1) maintain the status of Africa as “the cradle of Bible translation” (2) encourage communities adhere to Christian principles contextually since “language as vehicle of culture is intricately intertwined with beliefs, values, and the worldview of its speakers” and (3) produce African biblical scholars capable of theologizing in their mother tongues in addition to the other languages they know.

This effort will hopefully prevent future generations from following the historical examples of some African Early Church fathers such as Clement (ca. 150–220), Origen (ca. 185–254), Athanasius (ca. 295–373), Tertullian (ca. 160–225), Cyprian (ca. 200–258) and Augustine (354–430). Although some of them spoke Berber, Coptic, and Punic, they wrote primarily in Greek and Latin.

their heads for a variety of reasons, one of which was to communicate their married status.

68 Ekem, Early Scriptures, 2.
An obvious reason for this is that they desired to have maximum impact, but this was to the detriment to these other important languages.71

Writing commentaries and study Bibles in mother tongue will promote the academic study of the Bible in mother tongues. On this note, Ekem cautioned,

[T]his should not be misconstrued as a deviation from the core message of Scripture, but rather as an attempt to re-package the latter in such a way as to make it relevant to receptor audiences. This point can be illustrated by means of the techniques employed by some New Testament writers to interpret a variety of texts to their first century CE audiences.72

In “Biblical Exegesis in an African Pluralistic Context: Some Reflections,”73 Ekem deliberates on the chance connections between Christianity, traditional African religion, and African worldviews in biblical exegesis. He observes that, in view of the influence of traditional worldviews and Christianity on African communities, there is the need for dialogical exegesis “whereby traditional African worldviews are brought face to face with Judeo-Christian biblical thought”74 without neglecting the original meaning of the text. Ekem argues that it is not enough to establish the sitz im leben of a passage without also examining the world-views of the contemporary audience.


72 Ekem, Interpretation of Scripture, 20.


For example, in answering the question of the concept of priesthood in traditional religion, one must also ask, how should the atoning and reconciliatory role of priests in the book of Hebrew be understood in the Roman Catholic Church in Africa? Can the God who revealed Himself in Jesus be equated to the “Supreme Being” who manifests in African deities? Using מַשׁא (offering for sin) in Isa 53:10b as a case study, Ekem postulates that, in view of the fact that Jews could offer their lives as ransom to save their nation, and taking account of the popular legend among the Abura Mfantse concerning Egya Ahor who offered his life to avert calamity to attain reconciliation between the community and the gods, Isa 53:10b should be better translated as “Edze no bo abyanamnade afor wia a [When you have offered him as a representative atoning pledge].”

Ekem also acknowledged the difficulties surrounding the translation and interpretation of πρωτότοκος (first born) in Col 1:15. He suggests that since Paul was responding to the religiously pluralistic situation in Colossae, πρωτότοκος means something like the “ontological superiority” of Christ over all creation. In Mfantse, Jesus can better be described as abdzegy nyina farbaa, therefore ṭkandziffo (pioneer).

In this work, Ekem clearly illustrates the need for and how to do dialogical exegesis between the biblical text and African traditional worldviews. These two case studies from the Old and New Testaments also show how one can do dialogical exegesis without being syncretistic. That said, Ekem again seems to privilege the contemporary Ghanaian concept in the way he understands πρωτότοκος (first born), which appears to distort the meaning of Scripture. Dialogical exegesis must begin with the original meaning of Scripture in its context and only then move to contextualizing it in a contemporary context.

Interpretive Creativity and Innovation

In an article titled “Jacobus Capitein’s Translation of ‘The Lord’s Prayer’ into Mfantse: An Example of Creative Mother Tongue Hermeneutics,” Ekem argues that Capitein’s translation and interpretation of the Lord’s Prayer is a creative pioneering work in MTBH. Capitein translated and interpreted the Lord’s Prayer (cf. Matt 6:9–13; Luke 11:2–4; Did 8:2) from Dutch into the local 18th century Mfantse language (Elmina) using concepts school children could understand. Ekem built upon this by translating the Greek of Matthew and Luke into both modern Mfantse and English. Although Capitein was criticized for not being faithful to the Greek text because he did not provide a word-for-word translation, Capitein appealed to the “open-ended nature of cross-cultural communication” in which God is a universally ontological, majestic, and provident Being who deserves the reverence of His creation. It is a complex exercise that requires the interpreter to understand the needs of the community and the significance of cross-cultural hermeneutics as it varies from one community to another.

In an article titled “The Use of Archiereus ‘High Priest’ as a Christological Title: A Ghanaian Case Study,” Ekem discusses how the priestly Christology in Hebrews can best be interpreted and translated into Akwapim Twi, Asante Twi, and Mfantse, while underscoring interpretive issues that may arise. He asserts that the author of Hebrews might have been a Hellenistic Christian who used the Jewish concept of priesthood to creatively communicate

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76 Ekem, “Jacobus Capitein’s Translation,” 66–79.
77 Ekem, “Jacobus Capitein’s Translation,” 68.
78 Ekem, “Jacobus Capitein’s Translation,” 68.
Christology to diverse audiences of his community. According to Ekem, in the OT, the high priest was referred to as bakkohen haggadol (the great priest; cf. Lev. 21:10), hammashiah (the anointed priest; cf. Lev. 4:3) or kohen harosh (or head priest). The use of the title ἀρχιερεύς (the Greek translation of bakkohen) was not at term unique to Israel as many religious intermediaries in the ANE carried this title. For example, Herodotus uses the term to describe the high priest in ancient Egyptian and Tyrian religions. On this reading, the author of Hebrews uses this concept, which transcends not only Hebrew and Greek, but also diverse religious contexts, to communicate something about Jesus.

This is, perhaps, an early example of MTBH as translation of “high priest” in Hebrews involved both its meaning in a prior text and in various contexts of contemporary society. It is precisely at this complex intersection, however, that caution is required because the meaning and significance of parallel narratives, phenomena, or religious titles may vary from community to community. Ekem suggests that in view of the mediatory role of ṣkomfo in Akan religion, archiereus is better interpreted and translated as ntamugyinafopanyin (most senior or chief mediator or intercessor) rather than ṣfo panyn in Akwapim Twi, ṣfo panin in Asante Twi, or ṣfopanyin in Mfantse.

In chapter four of Ekem’s book, New Testament Concepts of Atonement in an African Pluralistic Setting, he discusses the concept of πλήρωμα (fullness) in a community where there were competing understandings of how to procure salvation. One alternative was that salvation could be achieved through Gnosticism. Ekem suggests that πλήρωμα, a Jewish and Hellenistic concept was creatively re-interpreted Christologically to mean ἀπολύτρωσις (redemption) and καταλλαγή (reconciliation) for a cosmos affected by sin. However, Ekem neither indicates the process

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81 Ekem, “Use of Archiereus,” 58.
84 Verbrugge, ed., NIDNTT, abr. ed., 469.
nor the theological principles underpinning the creative interpretation and translation of πλήρωμα to mean ἀπολύτρωσις and καταλλαγή. Nevertheless, according to him, Gustav Aulen’s notion of Christus Victor speaks to the African worldview where belief in the presence of evil spirits necessitates the need for protection and victory over evil spirits through the works of Jesus.  

In chapter five, Ekem again considers the priestly Christology of Hebrews. Although the author presents Jesus’s ministry in terms of the Levitical priesthood, his priestly authority derives from the order of Melchizedek. In the Greco-Roman context, a hereditary priesthood was not the norm as it was for the Israelite cult. The example of Melchizedek, thus, offered a bridge to contemporary society. Ekem further argues that since the author of Hebrews creatively used Jewish cultic imagery, concepts, and language to address and dialogue with other religious persuasions in his community, this should serve as biblical motivation for African interpreters to dialogue between Scripture and the modern African context.

In the final analysis, Ekem’s hermeneutical principles appear to be an amalgamation of reformation exegesis, which emphasized the study of the Scriptures in their original languages, and a midrashic form of interpretation, which seeks to show the relevance of Scripture to the contemporary audience and in a way easily understandable to them. Although Ekem is not the first to promote such an approach—for example, compare the earlier attempts by Kwesi A. Dickson for MTBH in Ghana and proponents of IBS—he has advanced the discussion in the many ways expressed above.
Nevertheless, significant challenges exist for MTBH, which we will consider next.

**Challenges of Mother Tongue Biblical Hermeneutics**

Like any other human accomplishment, MTBH faces significant challenges: (1) a lack of or use of mother tongue Bibles (2) the continual draw towards employing a common language (3) limited readership and citation rate, and (4) a lack of a mother tongue academic body.

**Lack of Patronage and Use of Mother Tongue Bibles**

Although new languages are still discovered in Africa, Mojola observes that Africa, the “Babel of languages” and dialects, has around 2,000 languages.\(^89\) He adds,

> as of 31 December 2005, 159 of Africa’s languages had a Bible, 301 had the New Testament (NT) and 223 had a portion or a book of the Bible. This makes a total of 683 African languages into which the Scriptures have been translated to varying extent.\(^90\)

This deficit of about 1,317 mother tongues awaiting translation may be reduced to 881 if we use the most current figure of 2,144 known languages and take into account translation work after 2005 until the present.\(^91\)

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\(^89\) Mojola, “Outstanding Challenges,” 31. The Wycliffe Global Alliance specifies that the most current figure is 2,144 known languages (https://www.ethnologue.com/guides/how-many-languages). The variation in these figures depends in part on the period in which the research/counting took place and the research agent(s) used.


Ghana alone has around 50 languages and numerous dialects. Allison M. Howell remarks that as of February 2010, the Bible had been translated into thirteen Ghanaian languages and the New Testament into twenty-six. According to the Ghana Institute of Linguistics, Literacy, and Bible Translation (GILLBT), as of 2014 the Bible has been translated into seven languages, and the New Testament and other books of the Bible into twenty-three. Despite this progress, much work remains to be done.

Research evaluating use of mother tongue Scriptures in Kumasi conducted in December 2009 revealed that Ghanaian Christians under 40 exhibit very low usage of mother tongue Bibles compared to those older than 40. Unfortunately, this research did not indicate the reasons why those under 40 prefer English over the translations of the Bible in the local languages. Similarly, Jonathan E. T. Kuwornu-Adjaottor observes that only “old people read the mother tongue Bibles in the Kumasi Metropolis.” Not surprisingly, literacy trends offer some insight into why most prefer English. The 2010 Population and Housing Census shows that 67.1% of the population of Ghana could read and write in English, and the majority of them are youth. Only 53.7% of the population could read and write a Ghanaian language, and the majority who could were aged 40 or older.

Unfortunately, while scholars are convinced of the need for mother tongue Bibles, younger generations are unaware or
unpersuaded by this need. This suggests that if MTBH is to survive, promoting mother tongue Scriptures and educating the youth in Ghana may be necessary.

**Promotion of a Common Language**

Globalization is a second area of challenge for MTBH. For example, the desire to establish a common *lingua franca* to facilitate communication at international conferences of the UN, European Union (EU), and other Regional Organizations after World War II, discouraged the use of local languages. Esperanto\(^{98}\) drew from many European languages and was created to offer easy pronunciation and grammatical structure, making translation from Esperanto to other languages relatively painless.\(^ {99}\) This choice made sense in light of the cost of translating into all the mother tongues of participants.

Despite these laudable reasons, the unintended consequence is the discouragement of using other languages at international fora. Lawrence Kwadwo A. Boadi states,

> Today, Esperanto is used at international conferences and in several newspapers and journals. It has been the medium of translation of important pieces of world literature including the Bible and the Koran. Several countries continue to transit radio broadcast in the language. In the seventies it was reported to be

\(^{98}\) Esperanto was invented for international use by a Polish ophthalmologist, Ludwig Lazarus Zamenhof. It was published under a pseudo name Docktoro Esperanto. For further discussion see, Pia Vanting Christiansen, “Language Policy in the European Union European/English/Elite/Equal/Esperanto Union?” *Language Problems and Language Planning* 30 (2006): 21–44; Esperanto as a Starter Language for Child Second-Language Learners in the Primary School (Barlaston, UK: Esperanto UK, 2013); Lawrence Kwadwo A. Boadi, *Linguistic Barriers to Communication in the Modern World* (Accra: Ghana Academic of Arts and Sciences, 1994).

taught in over 600 schools and 31 universities. In 1970 the World Esperanto Association had around 31,000 members.\textsuperscript{100}

In confirmation of these observations, Angela Tellier showed that as recently in 2011 many European children prefer the study of Esperanto to their national language.\textsuperscript{101} Sadly, this is antithetical to mother tongue promotion and makes other languages appear to be second class languages. In principle, all languages ought to be given equal attention and importance in biblical hermeneutics because every language is a mother tongue of a particular people.

Globalization and urbanization have permanently affected languages worldwide. English is not only a second language for people all over the globe,\textsuperscript{102} it is even the official language for instruction in Ghanaian schools. In fact, program proposals must be written in English when submitted to the National Accreditation Board (NAB). This is understandable, however, because Ghana does not have any mother tongues as an official, national language, and choosing one mother tongue over others would unintentionally result in ethnic tension. Yet, if course curricula required the study of mother tongues in addition to biblical languages, this might boost the level of recognition and use of mother tongues. However, because most students employ a variety of different mother tongues in the same classes, this makes implementation extremely challenging, not to mention expensive since it would require the engagement of additional lecturers to teach in the mother tongues.

On the other hand, urban dwellers who often do not speak or understand Ghanaian mother tongues would be at a disadvantage,

\textsuperscript{100} Boadi, \textit{Linguistic Barriers}, 17.


thereby relegating the study of mother tongues to rural dwellers who are more prone to speaking a Ghanaian language. Nonetheless, the recent requirement of the Ghana Education Service (GES) offers hope for MTBH in that it requires teachers to use the local language of the community in which a given school is located for instruction during the first three years of education.

**Limited Readership and Citation Rate**

Since mother tongues are spoken by members of mostly rural communities, materials published in mother tongues will remain limited compared to those in English. The 2010 Population and Housing Census indicates that 7% of Ghanaians aged 11 and above only speak a Ghanaian mother tongue, while 45.8% speak English and a mother tongue. While the majority of people who speak English also read it, the same is not the case with persons who only speak mother tongue languages. This situation will certainly affect the promotion of scholars who would consider using mother tongues because there is little incentive to do so.

**Lack of a Mother Tongue Academic Body**

The lack of a body to develop and to offer academic support for material produced in a mother tongue is a significant disincentive to even begin the process. Establishing such a body would provide the much-needed impetus to publish in and use mother tongues in education.

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Conclusion

An educational policy that encourages foreign students to undertake studies in the local language of the area where their school is located is very helpful. On this note, Ekem was encouraged by the educational policy in Germany, which encourages research to be conducted in German. The main elements of MTBH for African Christians that Ekem advocates includes: (1) the study of biblical and mother tongue languages, (2) the writing of commentaries and Bible studies aids in local languages, and (3) creativity and innovation in guiding Africans to understand the Bible in their own context through the engagement of Scripture. Using a second language to theologize in the African context is an inadequacy that MTBH seeks to rectify. In this way, MTBH shares a close resemblance to IBS. Although MTBH faces serious challenges, it will go a long way in helping Africans to make the Bible their daily rule for life and nurture.