AN INTERCULTURAL READING

Culture, Bible, Identity

Christian Faith and Interculturality

EDITED BY

Nicoletta Gatti
Franz Gmainer-Pranzl

Contextual Readings of the Bible

Vol. 1

Nicoletta Gatti
Franz Gmainer-Pranzl
(eds.)

Culture, Bible, Identity: Christian Faith and Interculturality

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Contextual Readings of the Bible — Volume 1

CULTURE, BIBLE, IDENTITY

Christian Faith and Interculturality

Nicoletta Gatti and Franz Gmainer-Pranzl
Editors

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Tel: +39 06 698 81694
E-mail: contact@c-b-f.org
Web: www.c-b-f.org

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FOREWORD

The General Secretariat of the Catholic Biblical Federation (CBF) is pleased to offer its members and the wider public a new publication, the first since 2008. It is the printed version of the papers presented at the conference organised online by the CBF General Secretariat and the Biblical-Pastoral Association "Verbum Domini", in cooperation with the University of Ghana and the Paris Lodron Universität Salzburg, around the theme *"Culture – Bible – Identity: Intercultural-Biblical Reflections on Christian Identity."*[1]

It is worth noting that this conference was the first event organised by the Biblical-Pastoral Association "Verbum Domini,"[2] which was created to provide a space of coordination for biblical scholars wishing to remain linked with the Catholic Biblical Federation — itself a coordination platform of Catholic institutions committed to the Biblical-Pastoral Ministry, understood today as the Biblical Animation of the whole Pastoral Care. We hope that this will mark the beginning of a fruitful trajectory of academic-pastoral reflection rooted in and grounded upon a contextualised re-reading of the Word of God contained in Sacred Scripture.

Entering the pages of this book, the reader will discover that the conference proved extraordinarily rich in content. Framed by an introduction by Nicoletta Gatti — which sets out a hermeneutic vision for inclusive community and four guiding questions on how Christian identity has been and continues to be formed across cultures — the volume unfolds in two complementary parts. Part I, "Methods and Contextual Mission," explores the intercultural potential of the biblical canon and examines how Scripture is received within African Pentecostal, Indian, and Melanesian contexts. Part II, "Intercultural Exegesis," offers close readings of Old and New Testament passages — from Hagar to the Letters of Paul, from the Synoptic Gospels to 1 Peter and Revelation —

1 "BCI Conference 2025," Catholic Biblical Federation, https://c-b-f.org/en/What-we-do/Events/BCI-Conference2025.

2 "Biblical-Pastoral Association 'Verbum Domini'," Catholic Biblical Federation, https://c-b-f.org/en/Who-we-are/Structure/Biblical-Association-Verbum-Domini

interpreted through African, Asian, European, and Latin American lenses. A concluding chapter by Wojciech Szypuła weaves these threads together, showing how the inculturation undertaken by the biblical authors continues to inspire Christian communities seeking faithful discipleship in their own cultural settings today.

We wish to thank all those who contributed to bringing this project to fruition. In a special way we express our gratitude to Prof. Nicoletta Gatti and Prof. Franz Gmainer-Pranzl for the demanding work of the final editing of this publication, and to Rev. John Szukalski SVD and Rev. Adrian Graffy for the final proofreading of the text. It is our hope that these reflections will enrich contemporary biblical-pastoral thinking and help Christian communities and individual believers to strengthen their Christian identity in dialogue with the Word of God contained in Sacred Scripture and with contemporary culture.

Fr. Jan J. Stefanów SVD
CBF Secretary General

Vatican City, May 2026

INTRODUCTION

A HERMENEUTIC VISION FOR INCLUSIVE COMMUNITY

Nicoletta Gatti[*]

In a world fractured by political and cultural tensions, economic inequalities, religious polarisation, and identity politics, the Bible remains a living text capable of both healing and dividing. Its words have shaped civilisations, inspired movements, and sparked debates across centuries. Yet today, as communities grapple with questions of belonging, exclusion, and transformation, the need to revisit Scripture through the lens of culture and identity has never been more pressing. This volume invites readers into a global conversation, one that seeks not only to understand the past but to reimagine the future of Christian identity in a pluralistic and wounded world.

This volume arises from a collaborative scholarly endeavour to explore the intricate relationship between culture, Bible, and identity. Rooted in the proceedings of an international conference that gathered experts from diverse cultural and theological backgrounds, the project seeks to illuminate how Christian identity was formed in the early centuries and how it continues to evolve in our post-colonial, post-modern, and post-pandemic world.

At the heart of this inquiry lies a series of pressing questions:

- How did the authors of the New Testament inculturate the Christian message?
- What strategies did they employ to communicate across cultural boundaries?

* Nicoletta Gatti is Associate Professor of Biblical Theology in the Department for the Study of Religions, University of Ghana.

- How did they balance adaptation with the preservation of core theological convictions?
- What constitutes Christian identity, and can it be standardised across cultures, genders, and historical contexts?

These are not merely academic queries. They speak to contemporary challenges in which identity is often constructed not through mutual recognition —"I am because you are"— but through exclusion —"I am because you are not."[1] This dynamic of isolation and fear, increasingly visible in nationalistic and xenophobic tendencies, calls for a renewed theological reflection on identity as a relational and inclusive reality—and on what it means to translate Christian identity into today's world.

Before engaging with the diverse perspectives that have shaped our reflection, it is essential to establish a working understanding of the concepts of 'culture' and 'identity,' and to consider how the Bible might serve as a meaningful partner in this dialogue.

1. Culture: Complexity, Dynamism, and Theological Relevance

Understanding culture is foundational to any serious reflection on identity and biblical interpretation. Culture is not a static entity but a dynamic, evolving system of meaning-making that shapes—and is shaped by—human experience. It encompasses symbolic, material, and relational dimensions through which individuals and communities express their values, beliefs, and aspirations.

Classic anthropological definitions, such as Tylor's, describe culture as "that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, law, morals, custom and other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society."[2] This broad view underscores culture's embeddedness in every aspect of human life.

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1 The slogan "I am because you are" is derived from the African philosophical concept of Ubuntu**.** It was popularised in the seminal work of Mbiti in which he formulated the famous phrase, "I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am." John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (London: Heinemann, 1969), 215.

2 It should be noted, however, that Tylor was an evolutionist who ranked European culture as more 'developed' than what he termed 'primitive' cultures, a perspective evident in the very title of his work. Edward B. Tylor, *Primitive Culture: Researches into the Development of* Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Language, Art, and Custom (London: John Murray, 1871), I:1.

African theologians have deepened this understanding. Mugambi defines culture as "the total manifestation of a people's self-understanding and self-expression, through politics, economics, ethics, aesthetics, kinship, and religion."[3] Gatti and Ossom-Batsa add a spiritual and existential layer, describing culture as "the spiritual vision of the universe, the sacred sense of the human, the community and solidarity-based conception of the family and society, the sense of welcome, fears, questions..."[4]

Latin American theology approaches culture through the lens of *interculturality*—a dynamic and reciprocal exchange between cultures that leads to mutual enrichment. However, it must be acknowledged that this exchange is often not truly reciprocal but asymmetrical, shaped by (neo-)colonial power dynamics and unequal relations between mainstream society and ethnic minorities or Indigenous peoples. This concept challenges colonial legacies and affirms the theological value of local expressions of faith. As theologians such as Zwetsch and Irarrázaval argue, intercultural theology is not merely coexistence but a dialogical process that reshapes both the Gospel and the receiving culture. It affirms the dignity of Indigenous and popular traditions, recognising them as valid theological sources.[5]

Asian theologians emphasise *contextual theology*, where culture is not a backdrop but a living medium through which the Christian message is interpreted. Scholars like C. S. Song and R. S. Sugirtharajah highlight how theology must emerge from the lived experiences, symbols, and stories of Asian communities.[6] In this view, culture "broadly defines who people are" and becomes the space where Christian discipleship is lived authentically. Indigenous traditions, often dismissed in colonial frameworks, are reclaimed as vital expressions of theological insight.

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3 J. N. Kanyua Mugambi, *Christian Theology and Social Reconstruction* (Nairobi: Acton, 2003), 39.

4 Nicoletta Gatti and George Ossom-Batsa, "The Drama of Infertility: Reading Isa 56:1–8 from a Krobo Perspective," *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 40 (2018): 138.

5 Roberto E. Zwetsch, "Intercultural Theology and the Challenge of the Indigenous Peoples in Latin America," *Missionalia* 43 (2015): 526–548; Diego Irarrázaval, *Inculturation: New Dawn of the Church in Latin America* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2000).

6 C. S. Song, *Theology from the Womb of Asia* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1986); Rasiah S. Sugirtharajah, *Asian Biblical Hermeneutics and Postcolonialism: Contesting the Interpretations* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1998).

Indigenous theology, particularly in Latin America and Asia, frames culture as a sacred inheritance. It includes a holistic understanding of life, land, and community, where theology is inseparable from cultural identity and ecological ethics. The spiritual worldview of Indigenous peoples—rooted in wisdom, tradition, ritual, and communal memory—offers a profound challenge to Western theological categories, which tend to prioritise written texts and individual salvation over communal practices and oral wisdom, and invites a reimagining of Christian identity through relational and cosmological lenses.

In all these perspectives, culture is both a gift and a challenge. It offers the terms, images, stories, and symbols through which the Gospel can be proclaimed and understood. Yet it also demands discernment: not all cultural elements align with the ethical and theological vision of Scripture. The task of theology is to engage culture critically and creatively — affirming what is life-giving, challenging what is oppressive, and transforming what is ambiguous.

This volume embraces culture not as a passive context but as an active partner in theological reflection. Through intercultural hermeneutics, we seek to illuminate how biblical texts interact with diverse cultural worlds, and how this interaction shapes both the message and the messenger.

2. Borders of Belonging: Identity Between Inclusivity and Exclusivity

The concept of identity lies at the heart of both biblical theology and contemporary cultural discourse. In Scripture, identity is often portrayed as a gift — rooted in divine calling, communal belonging, and ethical responsibility. Yet throughout history, identity has also been weaponised: used to exclude, divide, and dominate. This tension between inclusive and exclusive identity is not only present in the biblical texts but continues to shape our world today.

In the Hebrew Scriptures, we encounter both particularist and universalist impulses. Texts such as Deut 7:1-2 and Neh 13:25–27 emphasise separation and purity, while others — like Isa 19:25 and Amos 9:7 — extend divine recognition to foreign nations, calling Egypt “my people” and Assyria “the work

of my hands." These contrasting visions reflect a theological struggle: how to preserve covenantal identity without falling into ethnocentric isolation.[7]

The New Testament continues this dialogue, redefining identity through the lens of Christ's life and message. Paul's radical declaration in Gal 3:28 — "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" — offers a vision of identity rooted in unity and mutual belonging. Yet even within early Christian communities, tensions persisted around inclusion, gender roles, and cultural boundaries.

Today, identity remains a contested terrain. In many societies, identity is increasingly constructed as a barrier rather than a bridge. Ethnic nationalism, religious exclusivism, and cultural superiority fuel division and conflict. The rise of populist ideologies and xenophobic rhetoric has led to the marginalisation of migrants, minorities, and the poor. Social media amplifies tribalism, reinforcing echo chambers where 'we' are defined against 'the other.'

This dynamic is not limited to politics. Within ecclesial communities, identity can become a source of fragmentation. As noted in the *Instrumentum Laboris*, divisions based on ethnicity, region, or tribe often take precedence over Christian identity, undermining the ethical dimension of community.[8] Ilo warns that when the 'we' is narrowly understood as 'my ethnic group,' the church loses its capacity to embody solidarity and hospitality.[9]

Theologically, this calls for a reimagining of identity not as exclusion, but as communion. Christian identity is fundamentally relational, rooted in the

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7 Nicoletta Gatti, "Identity and Nation-Building: Intercultural Reading of Isaiah 56–66 in the Ghanaian Context," *Mission Studies* 38 (2021): 254–275. Cf. Ananda B. Geyser-Fouché and Carli Fourie, "Inclusivity in the Old Testament," *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 73 (2017): 1–9; https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v73i4.4761; E. B. Ben Zvi and D. V. Edelman, eds., *Imagining the other and Constructing Israelite Identity in the Early Second Temple Period* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2014): Dalit Rom-Shiloni, *Exclusive Inclusivity: Identity Conflicts between the Exiles and the People who Remained (6th-5th Centuries BCE)* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013).

8 II Special Assembly for Africa, *Instrumentum Laboris* (Vatican City: Vatican Press, 2009), 33.

9 Stan Chu Ilo, "A Theology of Reconciliation: A Reflection on the *Instrumentum Laboris* for the Second Synod for Africa," *African Ecclesial Review* 51 (2009–2010): 424–460.

invitation of Jesus to abide in the Trinitarian life (John 14:3; 15:9–10). This abiding is not merely spiritual intimacy but a call to embody and build human society in the "image and likeness" of the divine communion, marked by mutuality, solidarity, and love. Identity, therefore, is not self-contained but co-constructed through encounter, empathy, and shared destiny. It challenges the logic of isolation and invites a spirituality of openness.[10]

In this light, the Bible becomes a resource for transformation. Its narratives, symbols, and ethical imperatives offer tools for constructing inclusive identities that resist fear and foster fraternity. In this process, intercultural hermeneutics plays a vital role, enabling communities to reinterpret Scripture in ways that affirm dignity, diversity, and justice.

3. Interpreting the Bible: A Journey Through Culture and Meaning

It is essential to recognise that biblical interpretation is never neutral. Every biblical author writes from within a particular cultural framework—shaped by language, worldview, and historical context. Likewise, every act of interpretation is influenced by the reader's own social, theological, and cultural location. As *Dei Verbum* 21 affirms, the Bible is the Word of God expressed in human language, and language is inseparable from culture. The Bible is therefore culture-bound; it emerges from culture and speaks into culture. Consequently, interpretation is not a one-way transmission but a dynamic encounter between the generative culture of the text and the receiving culture of the interpreter. This dialogical process is the heart of intercultural hermeneutics.

Intercultural hermeneutics is not about the 'evangelisation' of culture, but about revelation and transformative dialogue. It seeks to engage and challenge the receiving culture while simultaneously deepening our understanding of the biblical text. The process is bi-polar and remains incomplete until the text is not only understood but reformulated and made relevant within the new cultural context.

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10 Godibert K. Gharbin, *The Johannine Gospel's Concept of Community: An Intercultural Reading* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2025), 65–93.

This interpretive journey unfolds in two movements:

1. Exegetic, as a dialogue with the text in its original context of utterance.
2. Interpretive, as contextualisation within the receiving culture.[11]

Such a 'double journey' allows for a richer and more nuanced construction of Christian identity, one that is informed by both the historical witness of the New Testament and the lived realities of diverse cultural communities. As Achtemeier, Green, and Thompson emphasise, identity in the New Testament is not static but constructed through narrative, theology, and community engagement.[12] Furthermore, the biblical writers do not merely describe reality — they construct narrative worlds. These worlds overlap with historical events but are shaped by theological priorities and cultural perspectives. Each writer emphasises what they regard as particularly significant, crafting a vision of reality that speaks to their community's hopes, fears, and struggles.[13]

For example, the perception of political power varies dramatically across texts. Rev 13 and 17:4–6 portray imperial authority as beastly and corrupt, while Rom 13:1–2 calls for submission to governing powers as divinely instituted. These contrasting views reflect different narrative strategies and theological concerns.

Similarly, the representation of women in the New Testament is multifaceted. Rom 16 highlights the active roles of women in ministry — Phoebe, Junia, and others — while 1 Tim 2:11–15 imposes restrictions that have sparked ongoing debate. These tensions reveal the diversity of early Christian thought and the need for careful, contextual interpretation.

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11 Gatti, "Identity and Nation-Building," 259–260; see, W. Randolph Tate, *Biblical Interpretation. An Integrated Approach* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 1–2; Jeannine Brown, *Scripture as Communication: Introducing Biblical Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 252–273.

12 Paul J. Achtemeier, Joel B. Green and Marianne M. Thompson, *Introducing the New Testament: Its Literature and Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), 15–51.

13 Godson Ahortor, Nicoletta Gatti and Alexander Salakpi, "Yōm Kippūr and Ewe Community Cleansing: Paths of Inculturation," *Urbaniana University Journal* 77 (2024): 145–168; cf. Bradley H. McLean, *The Cursed Christ: Mediterranean Expulsion Rituals and Pauline Soteriology*, JSNTSup 126, Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996.

Despite its complexities and contradictions, the New Testament is ultimately a literature of hope. It envisions a new era, a Kingdom, that breaks into the old, transforming suffering into salvation and exclusion into embrace. This eschatological vision is not abstract; it is embodied in concrete promises and ethical imperatives. Texts such as Matt 25:31–46, Rom 8:31–39, and Rev 21:1–2 articulate a future in which justice, mercy, and communion prevail. They offer a theological horizon that inspires action and sustains faith in the midst of adversity.

This volume seeks to engage these tensions critically and constructively. By examining how identity was formed in early Christianity and how it is negotiated today, we aim to contribute to a theological vision in which identity becomes a bridge—connecting cultures, healing divisions, and building a more fraternal society. Central to this vision is the intercultural potential of the Gospel, which connects different identities and enables multiple authentic expressions of Christian faith rather than imposing a single, uniform 'Christian identity.'

4. Mapping the Contributions

The volume unfolds in two distinct yet complementary sections. The first part investigates the intricate relationship between culture, biblical interpretation, and identity, employing methodological, contextual, and missiological perspectives to illuminate this dynamic interplay. The second part adopts an exegetical lens, offering intercultural readings of predominantly New Testament texts, situated within diverse cultural frameworks across Africa, Asia, and Europe. The book concludes with a synthesis of the dialogues and insights that emerged during the international conference, providing fertile ground for future scholarly inquiry and expanding the horizons of intercultural theological reflection.

4.1 Section I: Methods and Contextual Mission

The opening chapter by **Franz Gmainer-Pranzl** foregrounds the biblical canon as a paradigmatic expression of Christianity's inherently intercultural character. He contends that the canon does not prescribe a monolithic Christian identity but rather embodies a dialogical process through which theological

plurality converges into a shared narrative. Drawing on the concept of *catholicity*, Gmainer-Pranzl argues that unity in Christianity is achieved not through uniformity but through the continual reinterpretation of Scripture across cultures and epochs. Interculturality, he asserts, is not a contemporary innovation but a foundational dimension of Christian theology—essential for understanding the evolving nexus of culture, Bible, and identity in the global church.

In the second contribution, **Christian Tsekpoe** examines the dynamics of cross-cultural mission within multi-generational African Pentecostal contexts, using Luke 5:27–39 as a theological anchor. His study critiques the prevailing missiological emphasis on foreign missions, highlighting a neglected area: generational tensions within local congregations. Through a case study of the Church of Pentecost in Ghana, Tsekpoe illustrates how resistance to contextual adaptation can fracture communal unity. He proposes the metaphor of "new wineskins" to advocate for innovative theological frameworks that respond to the evolving needs of successive generations. The paper concludes that sustaining a vibrant and relevant faith community requires a delicate balance between tradition and transformation.

Sebastian M. Michael offers a comparative analysis of Hindu and Christian worldviews and their implications for identity formation and socio-economic structures in India. He contrasts the cyclical, karma-oriented Hindu cosmology—which often underpins caste hierarchies and economic disparities—with the biblical affirmation of human dignity rooted in creation. While Hindu doctrines may foster fatalism and justify inequality, the Christian narrative calls for justice, dignity, and transformative engagement.

The last contribution written by **Anna Damas** shows how Scripture helps unify Papua New Guinea's diverse society by providing a shared identity, especially through the belief in descent from the lost tribes of Israel. However, this narrative can be problematic: it risks oversimplifying complex local histories, may marginalise non-Christian or minority voices, and can be used politically to justify controversial policies or alliances, such as strong support for Israel or the constitutional declaration of Papua New Guinea as a Christian nation.

4.2 Section II: Intercultural Exegesis

Intercultural exegesis opens new horizons for understanding Christian identity by engaging biblical texts within diverse cultural contexts. This section presents a series of studies that illuminate how Scripture speaks to, and is shaped by, the lived realities of communities across Africa, Asia, and Europe.

The story of Hagar, as explored by **John Baptist Antony**, becomes a powerful lens for examining themes of marginalisation and liberation. Antony traces Hagar's transformation from object to subject in biblical narratives, showing how her experience resonates with oppressed groups, especially Dalit women in India. He also critically assesses Paul's allegorical use of Hagar in Galatians, highlighting both its impact on theological interpretation and its relevance for emancipatory readings of Scripture.

In considering the journey of the Magi in Matthew's Gospel, **Augustine Agwulonu** interprets this narrative as a symbol of cultural openness and transformation. He argues that the Magi's movement challenges static notions of identity and calls African Christianity to embrace encounter and renewal. Agwulonu's study underscores the importance of contextualisation and scholarly engagement for fostering inclusivity.

The complexities of Christian identity for women converts in post-colonial India are addressed by **Nameeta Renu**. She demonstrates that identity is relational and context-dependent, shaped by intersections of gender, culture, and community acceptance. Renu urges the Christian community to move beyond defensive consolidation of identity, advocating for transformative discipleship and deeper engagement with feminist theology, where baptism marks the beginning of a journey rather than a mere conversion.

Turning to Luke 13:10–17, **Godibert Gharbin** provides a theological analysis of Jesus' healing of the bent-over woman. Gharbin shows how Jesus' redefinition of the woman as "daughter of Abraham" challenges patriarchal traditions and affirms the dignity and inclusion of women. His study calls religious leaders to reinterpret traditions that marginalise, fostering liberation and equality within the faith community.

The leadership and identity of Peter in Acts are examined by **Daniel Nii Aboagye Aryeh**, who highlights Peter's transformation from exclusivity to radical inclusion. Aryeh emphasises Peter's role in legitimising Gentile inclusion and shaping a multi-ethnic Christian community, offering a model for transformative and inclusive church leadership.

Paul's ethical and cultural conflicts are investigated by **Ernesto Borghi**, who traces Paul's evolution from strict Torah observance to a universal message centred on Christ. Borghi emphasises conscience, freedom, and worship as key dimensions of Paul's identity, proposing a relational, love-based ethic that transcends ritual and legalism and offers a framework for solidarity and transformative engagement with contemporary culture.

Stefania De Vito analyses Paul's Epistle to the Romans as a response to fragmentation and pluralism in Christian communities. Drawing on insights from linguistics, neuroscience, and biblical criticism, De Vito demonstrates how Paul's rhetorical strategies foster empathy, reciprocity, and universalism, offering a creative model for rebuilding community and identity in today's pluralistic context.

A critical assessment of the mission and identity of Ghanaian charismatic churches is offered by **Albert Acheampong**, who uses Phil 1:27–2:8 as his lens. Acheampong challenges the prevailing focus on evangelism and growth, advocating for a holistic mission that integrates unity, humility, ethical integrity, and social transformation, and calls for churches to redefine their mission in alignment with the broader vision of the *Missio Dei*.

Mary Jerome Obiorah explores the inculturation of the Christian message in Thessalonica and southeast Nigeria, highlighting the role of conversion and adaptation to local cultures. She addresses contemporary challenges, such as youth returning to traditional religion, and recommends reviving effective missionary strategies and contextual engagement to sustain Christian faith.

Through the lens of Anlo-Ewe cosmology and 1 Peter, **Alex-Greats Worlanyo** argues that Christian identity is fundamentally communal, sacred, and missional. Worlanyo demonstrates how Petrine metaphors resonate with local

concepts of personhood and vocation, challenging Western individualism and inviting the church to become a transformative presence rooted in community.

Finally, **Nelson Mawuli Zotoo** examines the identity crisis in Ghanaian Christianity through Rev 2:12–17, focusing on tensions between faith and culture. Zotoo highlights the dangers of syncretism and moral compromise, contending that authentic Christian identity requires repentance, discernment, and a Christ-centred approach to discipleship.

Wojciech Szypuła offers a concluding synthesis that gathers and distils the key dialogues and insights explored throughout the volume. His reflections invite readers to pause and attend to the deeper currents that underlie the search for Christian identity: the longing for belonging, the experience of exclusion, and the transformative power of Scripture when it is allowed to speak across cultures and generations.

The papers remind us that the journey toward an inclusive community is not a solitary or static endeavour. It is a shared pilgrimage—a weaving together of stories, hopes, and wounds from every corner of the globe. This journey is marked by the courage to face difference, the humility to listen, and the faith to imagine a world reconciled and renewed. The promise of belonging, they suggest, is not a distant ideal reserved for the future, but a living reality that beckons us in the present moment. It is found in every act of hospitality, every gesture of solidarity, and every word of justice spoken in the name of Christ.

As you engage with the pages of this book—whether as theologian, pastoral leader, or student—you are invited to become a participant in this ongoing conversation. Let the voices and visions gathered here challenge you to reimagine what it means to build communities where all truly belong. Let them inspire you to cross boundaries, heal divisions, and cultivate spaces of welcome and dignity. For in the dialogue between cultures and the Bible, we discover not only the richness of our differences, but also the profound unity that is possible when faith and imagination join hands.

May this volume be both a mirror and a map: reflecting the complexities of our world and guiding us toward a future where the promise of belonging is realised in every community, every heart, and every generation.

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PART I:

METHODS AND CONTEXTUAL MISSION

ONE MESSAGE AND DIFFERENT CULTURES: THE INTERCULTURAL POTENTIAL OF THE BIBLICAL CANON

Franz Gmainer-Pranzl[*]

1. Introduction

It was as a representative of the field of intercultural theology that I was invited to give an introductory lecture at the international online conference 'Culture – Bible – Identity' (21-23 January 2025). I must admit that I was slightly apprehensive, knowing that I was to be the only systematic theologian present, addressing a whole room of eminent biblical scholars. How would my contribution be received? Was I about to embarrass myself in front of colleagues whose expertise far exceeded my own in the field of biblical scholarship? Or would people perceive my talk as an admonishment from a systematic theologian wanting to show his colleagues in the biblical studies department the 'right' way to understand the relationship between culture, Bible and identity?

The best way to deal with this situation, I decided, was to simply concentrate on the questions around which the conference was centred:

> How did New Testament authors manage to inculturate the Christian message? [...] How did the Biblical authors, apostles, and missionaries manage to maintain a balance between adapting to the found culture and preserving the Christian heritage? [...] Is there one standardised Christian identity for all cultures? [...] How did Christian identity develop in Early Christianity?[1]

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* Franz Gmainer-Pranzl is Professor for Intercultural Theology and Vice-Director of the Centre for Intercultural Theology and the Study of Religions, University of Salzburg. The paper was translated from German by Sophie Allen (Salzburg).

1 Cf. "BCI Conference 2025," C-B-F, https://www.c-b-f.org/en/What-we-do/Events/BCI-Conference2025.

These questions represent challenges faced by the early church as well as today's church – not only in the Global South, but all over the world. Very often, questions of inculturation, i.e. how to convey the Christian message in a cultural context, are seen as questions pertinent only to 'mission territories,' but in actual fact they are challenges that are relevant throughout the world church. Equally, questions of 'Christian identity' are constant topics of discussion in my own subject area, intercultural theology.

I therefore decided to (1) explore research areas and problems within intercultural theology and to draw attention to the subject matter of 'Christian identity' as a guiding idea within this theological discipline; furthermore, in this context I would (2) highlight an issue that is of central importance not only for biblical theology but particularly for systematic theology: the biblical canon; and finally, I would (3) use the concept of 'catholicity,' as developed at Vatican Council II to attempt to make a case for the intercultural potential of the biblical canon (and thus the Christian message). Throughout my presentation I would do my best to avoid becoming mired in specialist discussions and instead focus on the bigger picture. Most importantly, I wanted to make clear that interculturality is not a passing fad, but that it has always existed alongside the Christian faith and the life of the Church and is even a sign for the potential of the Christian message.

2. 'Christian Identity' as a Focal Point of Intercultural Theology

Even if the following section focuses on 'intercultural theology,' the objective is not to highlight the importance of a (new) area of theological study, but to outline the questions that gave rise to intercultural theology in the first place and continue to be discussed by academics in this field. For intercultural theology is principally concerned with two challenges: (1) the cultural plurality found within Christianity and (2) the religious plurality found outside of Christianity. These two areas, which are impossible to ignore in today's world and church, can be considered either (a) at the level of concrete developments and interplay or (b) at an underlying theoretical level. These two perspectives give rise to the four fields of research within intercultural theology; the four areas should not be viewed as discrete or isolated topics,

but more as foci, since relationships exist between them and some areas even overlap.

	Intercultural relationships within Christianity	**Relationships between Christianity and other religions**
Concrete interplay	(1a) *Contextual theology*	(2a) *Theology of interreligious dialogues*
Theoretical principles	(1b) *Intercultural-theological epistemology*	(2b) *Theology of religion*

If we work on the premise that many different cultural traditions exist within Christianity, intercultural theology focuses on (1a) the interplay between Christian faith and specific cultures/societies (*contextual theology*, for example: Theology in South America, Ecological Theology, etc.) and on (1b) the terminology and concepts upon which theological discussion and opinion formation rest (*intercultural-theological epistemology*, for example: culture, context, mission, universality, interculturality, religion, etc). Cognisant of the religions that play a role in today's world, intercultural theology (2a) considers the opportunities offered and the criteria that need to be met for successful dialogue to take place between Christianity and other religions (*theology of interreligious dialogues*, for example: levels of interreligious dialogue, dialogue with non-believers, comparative theology, etc.), but also (2b) looks for answers and models in the face of a world in which many, and in some ways very different, paths to salvation and truth exist (theology of religion, including the models of exclusivism, inclusivism, normative pluralism,[2] etc.).

2 In this context, pluralism indicates a normative model (religious diversity as an ideal) rather than as a de facto reality.

The discipline "intercultural theology" deals explicitly with the purpose of Christianity-giving a justification for the hope found in faith: through dialogue with fellow believers, followers of other religions and those of no faith. In doing so, intercultural theological reflection proves itself open to very different cultural traditions and social contexts and its proponents are continually learning, through these intercultural and interreligious engagements, how to understand, decode and perhaps to present in a different way the message of the Christian faith in today's world. It is unsurprising that intercultural theology developed out of theology of mission. Theology of mission[3] was always a source of inspiration for the theology practised in traditionally Christian countries, because it challenged them to engage with non-European ways of life, unfamiliar cultures and other religions, and thus to view their familiar Christian identity in a new light.[4]

Although this is not explicitly said, intercultural theologians would define their discipline as an analysis of the prerequisites, the relationships and the consequences of what "Christian identity" stands for. How was the Christian faith understood and practised in the early church, in the Middle Ages, in the turbulent times of the Early Modern and Modern periods, and in current times? What does it mean to be a Christian in a country of the Global North, which has a long history of Christianity, or in an African country with a Muslim majority, or in an Asian society in which Christians are a small minority group? What is important to Christian communities in Bolivia, Ghana, China, Bangladesh, France, and so on? To what extent can Christians be open to their social environment, and how far do they need to distance themselves from it in order to preserve their "identity"? All these questions should be considered from a theological perspective and answered with solid reasoning – intercultural theologians are keen to contribute to this discussion.

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3 *Theology of mission* can best be understood as a specifically theological response to the missionary work of the church(es), as distinct from *missiology*, which concerns itself with historical, sociological and cultural scientific reflection on Christian missionary work. The two disciplines are related but not identical; missiological research is empirical, whereas theology of mission is based on the fundamentals of Church faith.

4 Cf. Judith Gruber, *Intercultural Theology: Exploring World Christianity after the Cultural Turn*, Research in Contemporary Religion 25 (Göttingen; Bristol: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2018), 14–25.

3. The Biblical Canon and Its Intercultural Potential

In the following section, I propose that the biblical canon is an example of how Christian identity can be understood as both a result of and a response to the question of which texts form part of the identity of the church, of Christian life, and of Christian communities. Much research has been conducted and published on the origins of the biblical canon and the associated changes and challenges. I would like to briefly recap the most important points as they would be laid out in every introductory textbook on this topic:

- The *Hebrew Bible* comprises the Torah (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy), the Nevi'im (the 'Former Prophets:' Joshua, Judges, 1–2 Samuel, 1–2 Kings; the 'Latter Prophets:' Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and the twelve minor prophets) as well as the remaining texts (Psalms, Job, Proverbs, Ruth, Song of Songs, Ecclesiastes, Lamentations, Esther, Daniel, Ezra-Nehemia and Chronicles); 24 books in total.[5] This canon comprising the Hebrew Bible seems to have been established by the end of the first century CE. It is uncertain whether the definitive codification took place at the Council of Jamnia (c. 100 CE), as biblical theologians claimed for many years, or in the work of the Masoretes that from the end of the 5th to the 10th century CE added the consonants and counted the number of words, letters, etc. for each biblical book; likewise, it is unclear whether the canonisation was an attempt to express Jewish identity as distinct from Christianity. Werner Schmidt states that while the texts of the (Christian) New Testament cite many writings from the Hebrew Bible, there is no evidence to show that the authors were familiar with the concept of a definitive canonical 'Bible' (understood as 'Old Testament').[6]

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5 Books of the Christian canon which are numbered individually (e.g., 1-2 Samuel or the books of the twelve prophets etc.), were not counted separately in the Hebrew Bible, which explains why the Christian "Old Testament" comprises 39 books rather than 24.

6 Werner H. Schmidt, *Einführung in das Alte Testament*, 2nd ed. (Berlin; New York: de Gruyter, 1982), 6.

- The *Septuagint (LXX)*, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible,[7] is not only structured differently from the original but also includes several additional texts which are not found in the Hebrew canon: among them the books of Tobit, Judith, 1 and 2 Maccabees, Baruch, Wisdom and Sirach, and certain sections inserted into the books of Daniel and Esther. In the Catholic tradition, these additional books in the canon of the Septuagint are referred to as 'deuterocanonical books,' and in the Reformed Church as the 'apocrypha.'[8] The LXX, being a Greek translation, was important for early Christianity: "The LXX was soon adopted by Christians as their Bible and became incredibly important for missionary work throughout the Greek world,"[9] according to the biblical scholar Gillis Gerleman.
- Ultimately, the *Christian canon* not only expands the holy writings of Israel by adding 27 new texts but also understands the Hebrew Bible as the 'Old Testament.' Thus, while its fundamental importance for the developing faith of the young church is acknowledged, its message is relativised (not infrequently using the logic of "prophecy/fulfilment") by the message of the 'New Testament' – a hermeneutic condition that can be understood from a Christian perspective, but not from a Jewish one. Even if certain texts of the 'New Testament' were disputed until long into the 4th century CE, for the most part it had already been established by the end of the 2nd century which texts were to be included. The resolutions of the Synod of Rome (382)[10] and Hippo (393), as well

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7 Traditionally, the term Septuagint (Greek for 'seventy') was explained by the fact that 72 scholars were said to have worked for 72 days on the translation of the Bible from Hebrew into Greek. It is historically proven that the Hebrew Bible was translated into Greek bit by bit in the Greek-speaking Jewish diaspora in Alexandria in the last three centuries before the Common Era, thus making the holy texts of Israel accessible to the Hellenic world.

8 Martin Luther, whose German translation of the Bible appeared in 1534, did not include the 'apocryphal' books, which had found their way into the Bible through the Septuagint. In the Catholic tradition, only those texts are considered apocryphal which the church does not consider to be part of the biblical canon, such as the Gospels of Peter and Thomas.

9 Gillis Gerleman, "Bibelübersetzungen, I. Altgriechische Bibelübersetzungen," in *Die Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart: Handwörterbuch für Theologie und Religionswissenschaft*, 3rd ed., ed. Kurt Galling et al., vol. 1 (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1957; repr., Tübingen: Paul Siebeck, 1986), col. 1193.

10 Heinrich Denzinger, *Enchiridion symbolorum definitionum et declarationum de rebus fidei et morum*, 37th ed., ed. Peter Hünermann (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 1991), no. 179–180.

as the Councils of Carthage (397 and 419),[11] recorded for the first time,[12] officially and fully, the lists of those books which should be counted as belonging to the Christian canon. These are: 4 Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John), Acts of the Apostles, the 13 epistles of Paul (Pauline epistles: 1 Thessalonians, Galatians, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Philippians, Philemon and Romans; Deutero-Pauline epistles: Colossians, Ephesians, 2 Thessalonians, 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus), the Epistle to the Hebrews, 7 'catholic epistles' (1,2 and 3 John, 1 and 2 Peter, James and Jude) and the Revelation to John, a total of 27 texts. The formalisation of the list of canonical books by the Roman Catholic church was a gradual process that resulted from a number of councils and subsequent edicts: the Council of Florence (1442) and the bull "Cantate Domino,"[13] the Council of Trent (1546) and the decree "De canonicis Scripturis,"[14] and the First Vatican Council (1870) with the publication of the "Constitutio dogmatica de fide catholica."[15]

Today, we might not give more than a passing thought to the fact that there is a common canon of biblical books. Yet it was not always thus: even as early as the first centuries CE, a number of controversies surrounding the Christian canon were being debated, all of which carried significant theological weight. The position of Marcion (c. 85-c.160), who wanted to remove the writings of the Hebrew Bible from the (Christian) Bible altogether, as well as de-Judaise the New Testament, was rejected emphatically by the church; the Hebrew Bible (even when in the version of the Septuagint) is, and remains, part of the Christian canon. Likewise, the 'Diatessaron' published after 170 by Tatian (c. 120-185), which was used for some time in the Syrian church, was rejected by the church. This body of text, which has not survived, was "a gospel harmony that created from the four gospels a single unified representation whereby the

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11 Cf. Denzinger, *Enchiridion*, no. 186.

12 Previously, Athanasius of Alexandria (c. 296–373) had mentioned for the first time in a canonical list in his 39th Festal Letter (367) that the 27 books of the New Testament as they stand today, and these alone, should be considered canonical. See, Berthold Altaner and Alfred Stuiber, *Patrologie: Leben, Schriften und Lehre der Kirchenväter* (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 1978), 277; my translation.

13 Cf. Denzinger, *Enchiridion*, no. 1334–1335.

14 Cf. Denzinger, *Enchiridion*, no. 1501–1505.

15 Cf. Denzinger, *Enchiridion*, no. 3006.

synoptic reports were inserted into the chronological framework of the gospel of John. The prototypes are used relatively liberally, apocryphal material is also included, and the encratic, anti-Jewish and somewhat docetic tendency of Tatian has had a lasting impact."[16]

These two conflicts over the Christian canon, as well as many other discussions and confrontations, are clear evidence that the biblical canon is strongly linked to the understanding of Christian identity. Which books should and should not be included in the canon, and the way in which this should happen and what form the biblical canon should take, is related to the identity of Christian life in the church community. The interrelation of culture, Bible and identity presents interesting systematic theological implications, since the genesis of the canon, as well as the form it takes and its inner plurality, reveals much about the Christian self-image.

- First, the Bible is not merely a book, but a *library*; it is a collection of many different texts from a wide range of literary genres. In the New Testament alone can be found such diverse documents as gospels, letters and apocalyptic texts. This literary diversity does not, however, call into question the message of the Bible.
- This plurality, or indeed *heterogeny*, also applies to the cultural contexts and theological ways of thinking of the individual biblical books. The very fact that there is no single gospel, but *four* gospels, all stylistically, literarily, culturally and theologically different from each other, is worthy of note. The church does not consider any of the four gospels to be 'the one,' but recognises the exciting plurality of the testimonies of faith given in the Bible.
- The Christian canon also includes the *Holy Scripture of Israel* – even when this was adopted in the Septuagint version. Christianity seems to be the only religion which acknowledges the holy scripture of another religion as part of its own identity. Contrary to tendencies (in both historical and contemporary Christianity) to want to remove all content

16 Altaner and Stuiber, *Patrologie*, 72.

and traces of Jewish belief from the Bible, the church has given space to the Jewish faith experience – even though the Hebrew Bible (in the Septuagint version) is considered to be the 'Old Testament.'[17]

- In the case of the New Testament, the acceptance of texts into the 'canon' was based on the extent to which a given text had established itself in liturgical use, whether it represented the *faith of the congregation* and whether it contributed to further establishing this congregation. The canon of biblical books did not come about as the result of a "divinely revealed list" but through the dynamic of Christian life in the congregation which questioned in preaching, everyday life and faith practices whether particular texts (letters, gospels etc.) served the understanding of the message of Jesus Christ or not.
- Finally, the church viewed the biblical canon not only as a sacred authority, but also as *witness*. The actual 'Word of God' is not the Bible, but the person of Jesus Christ. Consequently, from a religious sciences and theological perspective, it is problematic to ask all religions the question, using the identical wording, of what their 'holy book' is, because in the case of Islam, for example, the Qur'an is 'holy scripture' in a completely different sense than the Bible is in Christianity. The Christian faith considers the Bible to be 'inspired' rather than 'revealed,' meaning that the Bible is not a sacred epiphany but a many-faceted testament of faith from the early church which has a normative meaning for us in the present day.[18]

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17 The designation 'First Testament' attempts to mitigate the pejorative character of the term 'Old Testament.' However, this new terminology still does not change the fundamental Christian hermeneutics by which the Holy Scriptures of Israel are interpreted.

18 For this reason, the Vatican Council II was able to say, without inhibition, in its Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation *Dei Verbum* (1965), that God chose individual human beings as authors of the biblical books "who, all the while he employed them in this task, made full use of their powers and faculties so that, though he acted in them and by them, it was as true authors that they consigned to writing whatever he wants written, and no more" (no. 11). The authors of the books of the Bible are not some kinds of robots who were 'programmed' by God, but human beings who formulated written testimony of their faith based upon their cultural and intellectual influences. The 'inspiration' of the books of the Bible does not come from a word-for-word dictation from the mouth of God to the author's pen, but from the fact that they "firmly, faithfully and without error, teach that truth which God, for the sake of our salvation, wished to see confided to the sacred scriptures" (ibid.). – All citations from the texts of the council are taken from: Austin Flannery, ed., *Vatican Council II: Constitutions, Decrees, Declarations: The Basic Sixteen Documents* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2014).

The conclusions emerging from this understanding of the biblical canon, as regards the relationship "Culture, Bible and Identity," are threefold: (1) There is no one single culture or single book that is representative of, or normative for, the 'Christian identity;' it is much more the new life in Jesus Christ (as multiple accounts in the Bible testify) that shapes 'Christian identity.'[19] (2) Christian life is related – in spite of all personal responsibility – to a congregation, and is not a purely individual endeavour. The authors of the gospels and epistles also belonged to congregations and wrote to congregations. (3) The fundamental interculturality of the biblical canon is not an era-specific or temporal issue, but rather an expression of the cross-border power and attractiveness of the Christian message; it speaks to people of 'all nations' and brings them together in a new, diverse congregation. Consequently, 'Christian identity' is intercultural in its approach: open for the experiences of other people and interested in foreign cultural traditions – and this not *in spite of* personal Christian confession but *because of* it. The abundance of the gospel cannot be expressed in *one* text, with *one* theological approach or in *one* culture; it moves people to share their faith in Jesus Christ with people across national borders, and in so doing to learn from each other.

4. 'Catholicity' as a Model for Communicating Culture, Bible and Identity

Critical reflections on the history of mission and preaching, the goal of which was to establish a 'Christian civilisation,' have led intercultural theologians to conclude that the key to spreading the Christian message is to continually improve the way in which the newness of life promised by Christian belief is expressed in intercultural exchange. The biblical canon is a perfect example of this kind of intercultural learning process: what is essential for a personal Christian faith is not *one* special culture or *one* particular book of the

19 This position was formulated at Vatican Council II in the Decree on the Church's Missionary Activity *Ad Gentes*: The lay faithful "must give expression to this newness of life in their own society and culture and in a manner that is in keeping with the traditions of their own land" (AG 21). The idea is not to import a particular culture through 'mission,' but to bear witness to the "newness of life" that can manifest itself as an inspirational and informative force in *all* cultures. Christian identity is not bound to any one culture but is constituted through the "newness of life" in Jesus Christ.

Bible, but the new life in Christ, which is borne witness to in culturally diverse ways across the biblical canon. This ability to convey both unity and plurality, that is to say to recognise the potential of universality in both particularity and in heterogeneity, is referred to within systematic theology as 'catholicity.' In common parlance, this term is normally understood in a *denominational* sense, meaning as a definition for a specific church ('Roman Catholic' or 'Greek Catholic,' as distinct from other churches). Here, however, the term 'catholicity' is used in a systematic theological sense: as the ability, the structure, the potential to find unity in cultural plurality and intercultural relations. 'Catholicity' perfectly describes that which the biblical canon presents to us – the ability to realise unity through plurality and create identity through new life – and this ability of 'catholicity' can be found in *all* churches which read and preach the gospel interculturally, as happened for the first time at Pentecost, described in Acts 2:1–13.

The relatively neglected 13th chapter of the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium* (LG), which emerged from Vatican Council II, developed a concept of catholicity that can be of great significance for today's global church as well as for a contemporary concept of intercultural theology. A number of important aspects of this chapter are outlined below:

- In essence, all human beings are called to be people of God, regardless of the culture to which they belong or the language they speak. The church is not an ethnic group but a multifaceted congregation of people from many different backgrounds: "This people therefore, whilst remaining one and unique, is to be spread throughout the whole world and to all ages in order that the design of God's will may be fulfilled [...]."
- "The one people of God is accordingly present in all the nations of the earth and takes its citizens from all nations [...]". Even though Christians are scattered across the globe, they are in communion with one another and experience that belonging to this new people of God "does not detract from anyone's temporal well-being. Rather it fosters and takes to itself, in so far as they are good, people's abilities, resources and customs." A Christian is not obliged to leave their cultural identity

at the church door but brings it with them into a large and diverse community. At the same time, each and every one of us must be willing to critically examine our cultural traditions in the light of faith and in the context of the mutual challenge posed by different cultures.

- The universality as lived within the church does not exclude, but integrates, with the aim "to recapitulate the whole of humanity and all its riches under Christ the Head in the unity of his Spirit." This opportunity, according to LG 13, "is a gift from the Lord himself." In light of this statement, it can, therefore, be clearly stated that catholic universality (to be understood in a systematic-theological sense, not as single characteristics of the Roman Catholic church) is a gift from God and not a product of human endeavour.
- A striking idea can be found at the heart of chapter 13: The special gifts of the individual parts (local churches) of the church community do not endanger unity, but promote to it: "In virtue of this catholicity, each part contributes its own gifts to other parts and to the entire church, so that the whole and each of the parts are strengthened by the common sharing of all things and by the common effort to achieve fullness in unity." In other words: The more different parts and regions of the church contribute their own gifts, the more the unity grows. Catholicity does not mean global uniformity, but a give and take necessitated by interculturality that brings forth a deep experience of connection – even when differences remain.
- Finally, it must be emphasised once again that "catholic unity" still both presupposes and yields different identities: "[…] there are, legitimately, in the ecclesial communion particular churches which retain their own traditions." The papacy "protects their legitimate variety while at the same time taking care that these differences do not diminish unity […]." The fact that different spiritualities, ways of life, pastoral approaches, theologies etc. exist side by side within the church is not proof of a prevailing pluralism, but an expression of catholicity.

These aspects of catholicity are marks of every Christian church which takes seriously the biblical canon and is not afraid to address the challenges of contemporary society. Catholicity constitutes a horizon towards which we are moving, and a dynamic that fulfils and drives the life, faith and acts of the church(es). It is this particular philosophy and method of preaching the gospel in a diverse church and divided world that differentiates catholicity from other ideological and political systems. In contrast to identitarian or fascist approaches which see 'unity' and 'identity' as the abolition of plurality and diversity, a 'catholic' perspective is comparable to the paradoxical (and fascinating) structure of the biblical canon: there is one message which can be translated into different languages and cultures – and the more these cultures articulate the message in a special way, the more the community of the church grows. This is the logic of catholicity and the intercultural potential of the biblical canon.

I cannot say whether my colleagues, particularly those working in the field of biblical studies, found my thoughts on intercultural theology, the biblical canon and catholicity to be helpful. I hope, however, that I was perhaps able to provide some answers to the questions considered at this conference.

- "How did New Testament authors manage to inculturate the Christian message?" – The authors of the New Testament wrote different texts to bear witness to, translate and teach about the message of newness of life in Christ. The Christian message was able to reach those in other cultures and societies right from the start; Acts 11:20 narrates how the gospel was also preached "to the Greeks."
- "How did the biblical authors, apostles and missionaries manage to maintain a balance between adapting to the found culture and preserving the Christian heritage?" – It can be assumed that the life of the community played an important role. Some questions could not be answered immediately and definitively, but the "sense of the faith" (LG 12) of the Christian community helped to connect the reality of human life and the new ideas of the gospel in a fruitful way. Even at the dawn of Christianity, the faithful were divided into more 'liberal' or more

'conservative' camps, but as long as they were willing to consider the experiences of their brothers and sisters in Christ and allow their own convictions and practices to be questioned by others, there was no danger of a schism.

- "Is there a standardised Christian identity for all cultures?" – There is no standardised identity, but there is a shared hope that brings together people of different cultures. And the Christian faith has always had intercultural potential and translated the one message to speak to people of different cultures. The canon of books that composes the New Testament is the best example of this, and the lived example of many Christians throughout the world demonstrates what is meant by 'identity' in faith.
- "How did Christian identity develop in Early Christianity?" – It developed as a result of the courage of Christians to publicly demonstrate the hope of their faith, to live and celebrate their faith as a community and to be open to embracing new cultural contexts (such as Greek philosophy in ancient times and African or Asian traditions today). The church is not a sect or esoteric faction of any kind; instead, it is a community of believers who are spoken to, united and carried by the *one* message in spite of their diverse and sometimes even conflicting ways of life.

Even today, the history of Christianity is a breathtaking story of intercultural adaptation, the struggle surrounding Christian identity and the search for a new relationship between culture, Bible and identity in a changing world. And the role of intercultural theology is to provide critical reflection to accompany this process of seeking and translating.

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CROSS-CULTURAL MISSION IN MULTI-GENERATIONAL CONTEXTS: AN AFRICAN PENTECOSTAL INTERPRETATION OF LUKE 5:27–39

Christian Tsekpoe[*]

1. Introduction

Cross-cultural mission has long been a central concern within Christianity, yet its complexities continue to unfold, especially in multi-generational contexts. From the earliest days of the church, first-century believers have grappled with the challenge of transmitting the gospel across diverse cultural landscapes, striking a balance between continuity and innovation. As the global landscape shifts, so too must the church's approaches to mission, particularly in regions such as Africa, where indigenous Pentecostal movements are experiencing rapid growth and transformation. The paper explores these dynamics through an African Pentecostal lens, focusing on Luke 5:27–39, where Jesus' metaphor of new wine and old wineskins reveals the necessity of contextual adaptation in mission. It argues that each generation, much like each geographical setting, requires fresh theological frameworks — described in this chapter as "new wineskins" — capable of containing and expressing the gospel in a relevant and effective manner.

The chapter highlights a significant gap in missiological research: the limited focus on multi-generational engagement within local contexts, as opposed to an overemphasis on foreign missions. Drawing on the biblical parable of new wine in old wineskins, historical examples, and contemporary church practices in Ghana, the chapter demonstrates how generational shifts can both challenge and enrich mission strategies. The metaphor of new wine and

* Christian Tsekpoe is an Associate Professor of Pentecostal-Charismatic Christianity and the Head of the Centre for Ministerial Formation and Training at Pentecost University, Accra (Ghana). He is the resident Minister of the A-Lang Worship Centre, Accra, Ghana (Church of Pentecost).

wineskins serves as a potent reminder that the gospel must be adaptable, respecting tradition while embracing change. Ultimately, this study advocates for a nuanced understanding of mission that recognises the fluidity of culture and the importance of developing contextually sensitive theological models. Such an approach is vital for fostering unity, relevance, and vitality within the church across generations, ensuring that the mission remains both faithful to its roots and responsive to the needs of a changing world.

2. The Problem of the Gospel's Encounter with Cultures

The problem of gospel and culture engagement is not new. From its inception within the Jewish context of the first century and throughout the Hellenistic-Roman milieu to contemporary times, the Christian church has confronted various challenges in its engagement with indigenous cultures.[1] Notably, from the mid-twentieth century onward, there has been an increasing recognition among theologians, missiologists, and mission organisations that paternalistic inclinations and the imposition of Western models of mission, as well as traditional Western theological frameworks, have significantly hindered the advancement of Christian mission within Global South contexts.[2] These challenges have consequently presented unique opportunities for innovative Christian mission and theological reflections, culminating in a transformative shift in perspective that seeks to explore new methodologies for mission and address emergent theological inquiries within diverse cultural centres.[3]

The evolution of consciousness surrounding theological discourse has increasingly incorporated terminologies such as indigenisation, localisation, accommodation, adaptation, incarnation, inculturation, and contextualisation.

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1 Kwame Bediako, "Gospel and Culture: Some Insights from the Experience of the Early Church," *Journal of African Christian Thought* 2.2 (1999): 9; Christian Tsekpoe, *Intergenerational Missiology: An African Pentecostal-Charismatic Perspective* (Oxford: Regnum), 132.

2 Robert J. Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1985); Louis J. Luzbetak, *The Church and Cultures: New Perspectives in Missiological Anthropology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1988).

3 David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission, Twentieth Anniversary Edition* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2011); Kwame Bediako, *Jesus in Africa: The Christian Gospel in African History and Experience* (Akropong-Akwapem: Regnum, 2000).

These terms represent efforts to render theological expressions more germane within specific cultural contexts.[4] Liberation theology, which emerged from the socio-political landscape of Latin America, for example, reflects a quest for a pertinent theological framework tailored to the unique circumstances of that region. Additionally, various terms, such as indigenous theology, ethno-theology, contextual theology, and local theology, have been employed, sometimes interchangeably, to describe innovative missional approaches.[5] Scholars such as Schreiter, Luzbetak, Shenk, and Bevans have sought to categorise these evolving perspectives into distinct models.[6] These attempts aim to model the extent to which the church can remain relevant in different contexts while maintaining its identity as a community of disciples of Jesus Christ.

3. The Gap in Contextual Missiology

While theologians and missiologists broadly acknowledge that the concept of mission extends beyond the gospel's interaction with geographical cultures, research within the field of missiology appears to have overlooked the church's contextual needs from a multi-generational perspective. Specifically, the discourse surrounding missions has predominantly centred on foreign missions. To clarify this gap in mission research, I employ Andrew Walls' metaphor of the *long-living scholarly space visitor* to illustrate this phenomenon. Walls describes the *professor* or *scholarly space visitor* as one who engages in comparisons of various regional contexts. Across five visits to earth, this scholarly visitor moves to various geographical locales, examining transformations that occur within different cultural contexts, while neglecting any changes that may have transpired among the populations encountered three hundred years (or more) since his prior visit.[7] This analogy reveals a preoccupation among mis-

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4 Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies*; Stephen Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, rev. and exp. ed., Faith and Cultures (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2002); David J. Hesselgrave and Edward Rommen, *Contextualization: Meanings, Methods, and Models* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey, 1989); Darrell L. Whiteman, "Contextualization: The Theory, the Gap, the Challenge," *IBMR* 21.1 (1997): 2–7.

5 Bevans, *Contextual Theologies*; Hesselgrave and Rommen, *Contextualization*.

6 Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies*; Wilbert R. Shenk, *Changing Frontiers of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1999); and Bevans, *Contextual Theologies*.

7 See Andrew Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1996), 3–7.

siologists with advancements in foreign missions, often at the expense of understanding how mission is evolving among successive generations within a particular location. Although it can be understood that Walls was interested in what was happening at new heartlands of Christian vitality, this does not negate the fact that intentional attention on studies of cross-cultural missions to generational cultures has been hugely downplayed by focusing on foreign missions.

Similarly, studies in Pentecostal mission also seem to have neglected the examination of how Pentecostals contextualise their mission among emerging generations. Cecil M. Robeck's article "Pentecostalism and Mission from Azusa Street to the Ends of the Earth" and Allan Anderson's book, "To the Ends of the Earth", rightly illustrate this gap.[8] These authors demonstrate how Pentecostals have been preoccupied with carrying out their mission, "in a hurry," to people of other geographic cultures. None of these works studied how this mission is transmitted to people of other generational cultures, which I refer to as "Mission to the End of the Age."[9] Anderson, for example, indicates that there are many reasons accounting for the amazing growth of the Pentecostal movement, but "The most important is that it is fundamentally an 'end of the earth,' missionary, polycentric, transnational religion."[10] Thus, mission has been described as from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth or from Azusa Street to the ends of the earth, depicting mission in geographical contexts, without examining mission in generational contexts.

This gap is also pronounced in the course structures and modules available for teaching missiology in seminaries and universities worldwide. Teaching of missiology concentrates on foreign lands and rural communities, but not on generations. Although some institutions offer courses on Children, Youth, and Family Ministry, these generational issues have not been addressed from a missiological perspective. It must be emphasised that the task of cross-cultural

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8 See Cecil M. Robeck "Pentecostalism and Mission: From Azusa Street to the Ends of the Earth," *Missiology* 35 (2007): 39–54; Allan Anderson, *To the Ends of the Earth: Pentecostalism and the Transformation of World Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

9 Tsekpoe, *Intergenerational Missiology*.

10 Anderson, *Ends of the Earth,* 1.

mission in multi-generational contexts is as daunting as cross-cultural mission in foreign lands. Just as cultures differ from one place to another, so also cultures differ from one generation to another, within the same geographic location. In my practice as a missiologist and pastor of a Pentecostal Church in Ghana, I have observed that each generation attempts to idealise the past and preserve established mission practices for future generations. The subsequent section of the chapter examines my interpretation of Luke 5:27–39, highlighting the methods Jesus employed in addressing this challenge.

4. Jesus' Metaphor of New Wine and Old Wineskins

A thorough re-examination of Jesus' parable regarding new wine and wineskins illustrates a longstanding paradox of the attempts of each generation to maintain established traditions in the face of changing contexts (Luke 5:27–39). Throughout His earthly ministry, Jesus confronted a range of entrenched traditions, as well as Jewish ceremonial practices and customs, that were incongruous with His proclamation of the Kingdom of God. A significant challenge for the various Jewish sects during this period was that, prior to His incarnation, the Jews had already established their own theological framework, defining an 'ideal' godly person to whom all, including Jesus, were presumed to adhere. The Lucan narrative presents two notable ideals through the metaphor of "new wine in old wineskins." First, it asserts that a devout individual ought to refrain from associating with sinners and tax collectors (Luke 5:29). Second, it posits that a genuine worshipper of God should engage in regular fasting and publicly display their prayers as a reflection of their spirituality (Luke 5:33). In light of this context, the reaction of the Pharisees and Scribes to Jesus and His disciples dining with Levi, the tax collector, alongside a significant assembly of tax collectors, was one of pronounced outrage.

It is incorrect to assume that the primary conflicts Jesus faced with the Pharisees were solely rooted in jealousy. Rather, Jesus's life and ministry did not align with the prevailing theological constructs of a religious figure within that context. He posed a significant challenge to Jewish cultural norms because he did not conform to established patterns of Jewish behaviour and conduct. This phenomenon exemplifies the engagement between the Gospel and

cultural norms at a fundamental level within Jewish society.[11] In his analysis of the conflict between Jesus and the Jewish authorities, Luke Johnson, a noted American New Testament scholar and historian of early Christianity, posits:

> The note of conflict that was sounded in the healing of the paralytic now becomes explicit in the series of controversy stories ... They reflect the disputations between the early messianists and their (largely Jewish) opponents over the identity and claims of Jesus, and the validity of their own practices with the symbolic world of Judaism. The controversies tend to fall into set forms and resemble the kind of disputes that took place all over the Hellenistic world between philosophical schools (both Jewish and Gentile).[12]

For the Pharisees, Jesus contradicts many religious regulations, yet he claimed to be the Son of God, and people followed him as the Messiah. In the biblical narrative under consideration, it is apparent that Jesus was at odds with time-tested traditions that the Pharisees, as well as John and his disciples, piously observed. That is why they confronted him: "Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners? ... John's disciples often fast and pray, and so do the disciples of the Pharisees, but yours go on eating and drinking" (5:30, 33). They could not understand why Jesus would not follow what they saw as laid down religious traditions if he was really from God. Craig Keener noted that among the Jews, "A teacher was regarded as responsible for the behaviour of his disciples."[13] By their estimation, therefore, Jesus did not qualify to be a teacher of the law, a position he seems to assume to their anger.

In response to these reactions, Jesus raised some theological issues relevant to Christian mission. Five of them have been identified as follows:

1. Those who are healthy have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. Jesus came, not because of the righteous, but to bring sinners to repentance (Matt 9:14–17; Mark 2:18–22; Luke 5:31–32).

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11 Bediako, "Gospel and Culture," 2.
12 Luke T. Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke*, Sacra Pagina 3 (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1999), 86.
13 Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1993), 370.

2. Wedding guests do not fast while the bridegroom is with them; they fast when the bridegroom is taken away from them (Luke 5:35).

3. No one tears a piece from a new garment and puts it on an old garment; if that happens, the new will be destroyed, and the piece from the old would not match (Luke 5:36).

4. No one puts new wine into old wineskins; if that is attempted, both the wine and the skins will be destroyed. New wine must be put into fresh wineskins (Luke 5:37–38).

5. No one after drinking old wine desires the new, for he says, "The old is good" (Luke 5:39).

These are deep theological and missiological issues that require reflection. For the purpose of this chapter, however, only the last two issues will be discussed. First, "No one puts new wine into old wineskins. If he does, the new wine will burst the skins, and it will be spilled, and the skins will be destroyed. But new wine must be put into fresh wineskins" (Luke 5:37–38). In his explanation of the parable, Wilbert Shenk notes:

> Questions were soon raised about the way the disciples of Jesus, in contrast to those of John the Baptist, were departing from traditional practices regarding fasting. Jesus responded by interpreting his ministry in new terms. A new age was dawning, he said, in which the old rules no longer made sense … In effect, said Jesus, we must pay attention to what God the Holy Spirit is doing in a particular time and place. Forms and practices are not sacrosanct.[14]

As Shenk observed, careful reading of the parable reveals a sharp paradigm shift in theological understanding. Jesus suggests in this parable that new contexts, including new generations, must have fresh reflections on their theological formulations and traditions. Any attempt to force new generations into old

14 Wilbert R. Shenk "New Wineskins for New Wine: Toward a Post-Christendom Ecclesiology," *IBMR* 29 (2005): 78.

theological formulations will ultimately destroy both. The good news Jesus brought was producing a new community of believers (new wine), which requires new theological understanding (new wineskins). Old theological models and frameworks are incapable of responding adequately to new contexts. Any attempt to force such old models on new generations will jeopardise the entire mission enterprise, with devastating consequences. This position is corroborated by William MacDonald, who posits that the old wineskins represent outmoded forms, ordinances, traditions, and rituals.[15] Similarly, Shenk contends that the new wine in the parable stands for a new age, while the old wineskins represent outdated rules that have no meaning in contemporary terms. He, therefore, suggests that since forms and traditions are not sacrosanct, in each generation and place, there is the need to be sensitive to what God is doing, rather than holding on to old traditions.[16] He insists that "To carry out this witness [of the good news of Jesus] has invariably required new structures and forms appropriate to the cultural context. Old wineskins cannot handle new wine."[17] This is not to promote a substitutional model. Rather, it advocates for a responsible balance between continuity and discontinuity in the church's mission theology among the generations. Walls asserted that there has never been any society or culture,

> ...in East or West, ancient time or modern, which could absorb the word of Christ painlessly into its system. Jesus within the Jewish culture, Paul within the Hellenistic culture, take it for granted that there will be rubs and frictions – not from the adoption of a new culture, but from the transformation of the mind towards that of Christ.[18]

Walls, therefore, describes the gospel as "prisoner and liberator of culture."[19] The implication is that the gospel's encounter with any culture invariably results in certain transformations within the culture. These transformations

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15 William MacDonald, *Believer's Bible Commentary* (Nashville: Nelson, 1989), 1389.
16 Shenk, "New Wineskins," 78.
17 Shenk, "New Wineskins," 79.
18 Walls, *The Missionary Movement*, 8.
19 Walls, *The Missionary Movement*, 8.

both approve and challenge existing forms and traditions of cultures.[20] The church's ability to maintain a critical balance between continuity and discontinuity with pre-existing traditions and emerging cultures is crucial to its survival in any generation. Harvey Cox asserted:

> For any religion to grow in today's world, it must possess two capabilities: it must be able to include and transform at least certain elements of pre-existing religions, which still retain a strong grip on the cultural subconscious. It must also equip people to live in rapidly changing societies where personal responsibility and inventiveness, skills associated with democratic polity and entrepreneurial economy, are indispensable.[21]

Cox's assertion reveals how important Jesus' parable is in contemporary generations, as it was in Jesus' day. The rapidly changing societies suggest that faith communities must continually equip themselves with skills that enable them to translate their faith into contemporary terms. On his part, John Padwick contended, "There is danger in having a fixed theology, or a theology insensitive to the changes of context. It can hinder the communication of the gospel in contemporary society."[22] Theologians bear a significant responsibility to facilitate the church's engagement with each successive generation. This task involves a critical examination of the sources of theology and the development of innovative frameworks (metaphorically referred to here as "new wineskins") that are appropriate for contemporary contexts. Achieving this endeavour requires a responsible balance that remains steadfastly faithful to Scripture, church traditions, local experiences, and the dynamics of globalisation, characteristic of contemporary society.[23]

The more problematic statement in Jesus' parable is when he said, "And no one after drinking old wine wants the new, for they say, 'the old is better'" (5:39). According to Judith Lieu, this "final saying [of Jesus] may imply that: of

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20 Bediako, "Gospel and Culture," 2.

21 Harvey Cox, *Fire from Heaven: The Rise of Pentecostal Spirituality and the Reshaping of Religion in the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge: Da Capo, 1995), 218-219.

22 T. John Padwick, "'The Spirit Alone:' Writing the Oral Theology of a Kenyan Independent Church," *Transformation: An International Journal of Holistic Mission Studies* 35 (2018): 24.

23 Tsekpoe, *Intergenerational Missiology*, 167.

course, those familiar with the old will reject the untried and unfamiliar taste of the new."[24] This view is corroborated by Luke Johnson when he argued:

> The final parabolic statement–found only in Luke–reminds us again of the capacity of this message to repel as well as to attract, and the way in which the visitation of the prophet creates a division within the people. Those who are most accustomed to the old wine will not even taste the new; the old, they say, is good enough. To drink the new wine offered at Jesus' banquet, to wear the new garment for his wedding feast, one must have a new heart, go through metanoia, a change of mind, such as that shown by tax-agents and sinners.[25]

This is where all generations are at risk and will need continuous reflection on their own theological formulations. The profound statement Jesus made traverses the New Testament and is reflected throughout the history of global Christianity, persisting in contemporary Christian mission. It is obvious that people who have tasted a particular form of ecclesiology will vehemently protect what they have tried and tested. They idealise the past and reject anything new and untried. Starting from the New Testament, it is evident that Jesus had to defend the disciples severally against the imposition of outmoded traditions by the Pharisees. These include eating with sinners (Matt 9:10–17; Mark 2:13–17; Luke 5:30–32), not fasting in the manner in which the Pharisees and John's disciples do (Matt 9:14–15; Mark 2:18–22; Luke 5:33–35), and not washing hands (Matt 15:1–10; Mark 7:1–8; Luke 11:37–41). Later in their ministry, they were able to defend themselves amid persecution from the chief priests and the religious leaders (Acts 4:1–22). This illustrates the extent to which they transitioned from entanglement with religious rules and structures to grasping Jesus' mission in their own generation and context.

Regrettably, when the faith was moving to the Gentiles, the same disciples found it difficult to cope with what God was doing. Undoubtedly, Peter was following Jesus when they sat at the table with tax collectors in Levi's house,

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24 Judith M. Lieu, *The Gospel of Luke*, Epworth Commentaries (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2012), 46.
25 Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke*, 86.

yet Peter struggled with going to Cornelius' house (Acts 10). When Peter finally went and had a successful mission with these Gentiles, Luke reveals that, "The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on Gentiles (Acts 10:46). Peter himself was surprised that, "They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have" (Acts 10:47). Why were they astonished? They have also drunk their own wine, which I can now describe as the old wine of Jewish Christianity, but are finding it difficult to recognise the new wine of the Gentiles. MacDonald explained that the natural reluctance of men to abandon old forms for new ones is evident when Jesus said that one who is accustomed to old forms does not appreciate the new.[26]

Further, Peter had to face strict opposition from the Jewish believers in Jerusalem for going to the home of a Gentile and eating with them. We read in the Scriptures that, "Soon, the news reached the apostles and other believers in Judea that the Gentiles had received the word of God. However, when Peter returned to Jerusalem, the Jewish believers criticised him. 'You entered the home of Gentiles and even ate with them!' they said" (Acts 11:1–3). Admittedly, Matthew, the apostle (who is Levi, the tax collector, in whose house Jesus and the disciples were accused of eating with sinners) might have been one of the people who criticised Peter! He, together with his contemporaries, has also drunk their own wine and says it is better, so they will not give way to any other wine.

Throughout this chapter, I have argued that the dynamics of the encounter between the gospel of Jesus Christ and culture have historically been fraught with tension. In my role as a pastor of the Church of Pentecost, one of the fastest-growing Pentecostal churches in Ghana,[27] I have observed numerous generational rifts within the church. The conflicts often arise from the younger generation's demands for reform and modernisation of antiquated ecclesiastical practices, juxtaposed against the older generation's resistance to such changes. In this paper, I elaborate on two illustrative examples that demonstrate how

26 MacDonald, *Believer's Bible Commentary*, 1389.

27 Ghana Evangelism Committee, *Ghana Evangelism Committee Report National Church Survey: Facing the Unfinished Task of the Church in Ghana* (Accra: Ghana Evangelism Committee, 1993).

the tendency to idealise the past and preserve traditional practices for ensuing generations can precipitate significant generational rift within the church.

5. The Rift between Generations in the Church of Pentecost, Ghana.

The Church of Pentecost (CoP) is Ghana's largest Pentecostal denomination, with a reported membership of 4,129,412 as of December 2024, accounting for about 12.5% of the nation's population. It has branches in 190 countries worldwide.[28] The CoP is recognised as an Indigenous Pentecostal church, as emphasised by scholars like Larbi and Asamoah-Gyadu.[29] This classification aligns with James McKeown's vision of planting "local species in African soil," highlighting that an "English oak" would not thrive in the Gold Coast environment.[30] The comparatively high growth experienced by the CoP is, therefore, attributed to the indigenous mission praxis of McKeown; consequently, any attempt to introduce changes in any of the existing practices of the Church is met with opposition from a cross-section of church members, with McKeown's name as authority. The resistance to change mainly originates from the older generation of church members who, in one way or another, have experienced McKeown's ministry with its character. They insist that the church "should maintain its practices that have brought it this far." Elder S.Y. Sackey, for example, noted that "you do not change a winning team."[31] Meanwhile, members of the middle class and the younger generation, for various reasons, advocate for changes in several church practices.

In an attempt to respond to the changing needs of the emerging generations and make the CoP's praxis more relevant to their context, the leaders of the CoP have made obvious attempts over the years to transform some of the Church's long-held traditions. Two obvious examples include: First, the

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28 Ghana Evangelism Committee, *Committee Report*; Eric Nyamekye, "The State of the Church Address" (address delivered at the Pentecost Convention Centre, Kasoa, CR, 30 April 2025).

29 Kingsley Larbi, *Pentecostalism: The Eddies of Ghanaian Christianity* (Accra: Centre for Pentecostal and Charismatic Studies, 2001), 203; J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu, *African Charismatics: Current Developments within Independent Indigenous Pentecostalism in Ghana* (Leiden: Koninklijke Brill, 2005), 23.

30 James McKeown was a British Apostolic Church Missionary and the founder of the Church of Pentecost. He served as chairman from 1953 until his retirement in 1982.

31 Elder Sackey, interview granted the researcher at Abasraba, in the Central Region of Ghana on 2 May 2015.

introduction of English Assemblies in the 1980s, leading to the establishment of Pentecost International Worship Centres (PIWCs) in 1993. In the PIWCs, some of the traditional practices of the CoP, such as gender segregation and the strict head-covering for women, were not observed.[32] Additionally, make-up and hairstyles were not disparaged or reprimanded. This approach attracted divergent reactions from the Church.

Whilst the young generation applauded and embraced this transformation, the older generation deplored and decried the worldliness that had been permitted into the Church.[33] During my Focus Group Discussions in 2018, some young members of the CoP expressed their satisfaction with the PIWC model and considered it a wise initiative by the Church. They maintained that without the PIWCs, it would have been difficult for the youth, especially those from tertiary institutions, 'to fit' into some of the traditional CoP congregations.[34]

The second major transformation occurred in 2010 when the leaders of the CoP issued a communiqué to further modify the traditional practices of the Church, not only in the PIWCs, but also in all other CoP congregations, allowing women to attend church without covering their heads if they wished to do so.[35] The communiqué further indicates, "female visitors in decent trousers and Rastafarians or persons in dreadlocks be accepted in fellowship in the spirit of Christian love, while couples or families desiring to sit together at church be allowed to sit under the feet of Jesus to learn."[36] Some church members (especially those of the older generation) were resentful of these changes and openly deplored the decision of the leaders. My role as the then district pastor of the CoP in Bedeku District[37] placed me in a position where I had to

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32 Tsekpoe, *Intergenerational Missiology,* 121, 122.

33 Tsekpoe, *Intergenerational Missiology*, 123.

34 Mansa Nyonator, Ebo Gyekye, and Stella Okeke, focus group discussion with tertiary students, Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, Kumasi, Ghana, 17 August 2018. See Tsekpoe, *Intergenerational Missiology*, 121, 122 for a detailed analysis of the views of young people on the PIWC concept of the CoP.

35 The Church of Pentecost, circular letter, Accra, 2 February 2010.

36 The Church of Pentecost, circular letter.

37 Bedeku is a rural town located between Kasseh and Ada all within the Greater Accra Region. As a district pastor in Bedeku, I had the responsibility of overseeing 11 small congregations within different rural communities around Bedeku with a total membership of 889 adult and children as at June 2010.

respond to the reactions of some disenchanted church members within my district.

Apparently, a local radio station had taken the communiqué out of context and announced on air that the CoP had opened the floodgate for any dressing and relaxed its stance on moral discipline.[38] This was similar to what was communicated by some other media houses in the country, including state-owned newspapers, such as *The Daily Graphic* and *The Ghanaian Times*.[39] Conversely, the younger generation was generally very happy with the innovations and commended the leadership of the Church for listening to God and guiding the Church to move beyond narrow-mindedness and pharisaic Christianity, towards a Pentecostal Christianity that is sensitive to the leading of the Holy Spirit.

This stance of the younger generation became clearer to me when, in the midst of the uproar in 2010, I was transferred from Bedeku District to PIWC Sakumono in Accra as the resident pastor. In Sakumono, the congregation's demography included young graduates and students from various universities nationwide, as well as the middle class, comprising lawyers, medical doctors, engineers, bankers, university lecturers, and other public servants, alongside self-employed businesspeople. Personal conversations with these groups of people revealed the joy they had for what they considered 'courageous' and 'progressive' decisions by the church leaders.

Although the concept of the PIWCs and the spirit of the communiqué appear to have helped the CoP maintain a diverse membership demographic within its fold, the conflicting reactions among different generations revealed the existence of a generational rift that has been left unaddressed in the Church. The frequent reference to McKeown by those who oppose the transformations in the Church suggests that his mission model might have been absolutised and considered normative for all generations in the CoP. David Bosch asserted,

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38 Radio Ada, news broadcast, Ada, Ghana, 17 February 2010.

39 Albert K. Salia, "Pentecost New Dress Code Causes Stir," *Daily Graphic*, 17 February 2010; Lawrence Markwei, "Church of Pentecost Relaxes 'Morality' Rules," *The Ghanaian Times*, 17 February 2010.

"There have, of course, always been Christians (and theologians) who believed that their understanding of the faith was objectively accurate and, in effect, the only authentic rendering of Christianity … Such an attitude, however, rests on a dangerous illusion."[40] The reactions to the establishment of the PIWCs and the communiqué on head covering, as discussed above, are only examples of how each people group and each generation attempts to protect their cultural heritage without giving much consideration to the cultural differences experienced by others. This also does not mean that the message of the gospel should be compromised in our attempts to be relevant to different cultures. It rather illustrates the need for critical contextualisation whenever the gospel is being transmitted into different geographical or generational cultures.[41]

The metaphor of new wine and old wineskins, as discussed in this chapter, helps create awareness of the vulnerability of each generation and recommends the need for consciousness in transmitting the faith from one generation to the next. It is contended that the problem is neither the wine nor the wineskin, but the person who drinks the wine. Because after drinking a particular wine and finding it good, they do not desire the new, for they say the old is better. It must be emphasised that every culture (including emerging cultures) into which the gospel is preached must be seen as new wine, requiring a fresh wineskin (theological formulations). It must also be understood that every old wineskin was once new, and every new wineskin will become old. From Jesus' metaphor, it will not be appropriate to take old wineskins from any place or time to collect the new wine because old wineskins cannot hold new wine securely. It is therefore essential to strive to produce new wineskins in all places and at all times.[42]

A major challenge is identifying appropriate ways to develop theologies that are relevant to cultures, regardless of socio-cultural dynamics, while maintaining the church's identity and remaining relevant to the cultural context. Establishing a rigid framework or structured model for mission may not be appropriate, as no society or culture is static. Principles underlying mission

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40 Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 185.
41 Tsekpoe, *Intergenerational Missiology*, 167.
42 Shenk, "New Wineskins for New Wine", 78.

praxis can be established through models, enabling mission organisations and churches to shape mission activities that can be adapted to each context with responsible freedom. This can be achieved if missionaries and theologians are sensitive to the leading of the Holy Spirit, allowing them to identify what God is doing in a particular context. At the same time, the gospel message they carry remains a "prisoner" and "liberator" of the cultures.[43] It is essential to remember that every theology operates within a specific context, and a contextual theology should take the gospel, the context, church traditions, as well as the forces of globalisation, seriously.[44]

6. Conclusion

Exploring cross-cultural mission in multi-generational contexts highlights the need for adaptability and contextual sensitivity in the church's mission. Jesus' parable of new wine and old wineskins illustrates the necessity for fresh theological frameworks to address evolving cultural and generational contexts. The African Pentecostal experience demonstrates that each generation presents unique challenges and opportunities for engaging with the gospel, highlighting the importance of striking a balance between tradition and innovation. Currently, a significant gap exists in the literature on missiological studies that focus on intergenerational dynamics, stressing the need for more nuanced research that considers local contexts and multigenerational interactions.

The Church of Pentecost in Ghana exemplifies how intentional reforms and contextual adaptations can foster both growth and relevance, while also warning of potential generational rifts if changes are not carefully managed. Church leaders, theologians, and missionaries must prioritise developing new wineskins—flexible, culturally attuned, and Spirit-led frameworks—that can effectively contain the "new wine" of the gospel for all age groups. This holistic approach is crucial for ensuring the continuity of the church's mission, bridging the gap between tradition and transformation, and nurturing a vibrant, multi-generational faith community in a rapidly changing world.

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43 Walls, *The Missionary Movement*, 3.
44 Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, 3; Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies*, 20.

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THEOLOGICAL AND SOCIOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS OF KARMA AND REBIRTH IN INDIA

Sebastian M. Michael[*]

1. Introduction

To understand the relationship between "Culture, Bible and Identity," we need to comprehend the role of worldview in society, culture and religion. The article is divided into five parts. The first part explains the terms involved. The second explores the relationship between the worldviews of the Bible and Hindu culture in shaping identity. The third investigates the theological and sociological implications of Christian and Hindu worldviews. This is followed by a dialogue between worldviews: Bible and Hindu culture on the dignity of the human person and identity. The fifth and final part is the conclusion.

2. Society, Culture and Religion

2.1 Culture in Human Life

The culture of a society is a plan according to which that particular society adapts itself to its physical, social, and ideational environments. A plan for coping with the physical environment would include such matters as food production and all technological knowledge and skill. Political systems, kinship and family organisation, and law are examples of social adaptation, a plan according to which the individual is to interact with his fellow beings. Human beings cope with their ideational environment through knowledge, art,

* Sebastian M. Michael SVD is an emeritus Professor and Adjunct Faculty of Cultural Anthropology, University of Mumbai. He is the SVD Asia-Pacific Coordinator for Mission, Education and Research and the director of the Institute of Indian Culture, Mumbai. He is a Consultor to the Pontifical Council for Inter-Religious Dialogue and the Chairman of the Bombay Archdiocesan Commission for Inter-Religious Dialogue.

magic, science, philosophy, and religion.[1] Society and culture can be properly understood only if their constituent parts are viewed as interrelated and having very definite purposes or 'functions' as regards the whole. Through the accumulation of experiences in the course of time, society refines, transforms and modifies its culture so that it can be more and more successful in coping with the physical, social and ideational environments. Hence, culture is never static, but it is dynamic.

Normally, individuals become members of a society by means of a process known as *socialisation* (sociologists) or *enculturation* (anthropologists). Culture tells us how a society is to behave, although it is the individual who acts. Culture, it must be remembered, exists in the mind of the individual member of society. Culture can be also considered as "the fabric of meaning" in terms of which human beings interpret their experiences and guide their actions. Culture itself consists fundamentally of meaningful symbols.[2]

2.2 Worldview of a Society and Culture

The elements of society and culture are not only interlinked with each other and have functions which contribute to the smooth running of the society, but they are also being oriented or directed to achieve certain goals which the society desires. So, we can say that culture and society have a 'soul' that gives direction to the members of that society. Philosophers and historians have long emphasised the existence of such a 'soul.' This is known as 'worldview' of a society and culture. Worldview is a dominant set of underlying premises, values and goals which permeate the various aspects of a culture and give it its 'oneness.' This unifying psychological trend has been called by various names: Geist, philosophy of life, mentality, psychology, worldview, and inner logic of a culture. The motivating force of action in every culture comes from these unifying values of that culture. The values of a culture influence and control behaviour and stimulate activity. These values are the key to the character, structure and direction of every culture.[3]

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1 Louis Luzbetak, *The Church and Cultures*: *New Perspectives in Missiological Anthropology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988), 133–181.
2 Sebastian M. Michael, "Christianity and Cultures," *Indian Missiological Review* 6.2 (1983): 181–194.
3 Darrell L. Whiteman, *Crossing Cultures with the Gospel: Anthropological Wisdom for Effective Christian Witness* (Gurugram: Caleb Institute, 2024).

The values of a culture come from the worldview of that particular culture. The culture of a society influences its members to perceive the real "real world" in terms of the cultural models through which the members of that culture interpret it. Hence, "The worldview of a people is their characteristic outlook. It is the inside view, the ways in which a person of the group typically sees himself in relation to his world."[4]

A worldview represents the deepest questions one might ask about the world and life, and about the corresponding orientation that one should take toward them. More concretely, the world view provides answers to such basic questions as: Who or what am I? Why am I in the world? What is reality? What about life after death? Most world views deal with Nature, Human Beings, Supernature and Time.

Culture and religion are built on worldviews—about what is the world, what are human beings, and what is the world beyond. Every worldview has certain assumptions because of historical and other factors. While this worldview presents ideals for people to follow, it often happens that both individuals and organised religions fall short of fully embodying these ideals. So, we need to understand the practical way the worldview is organised—economically, socially, politically, and through many other factors in the course of history. The ideal of the worldview always allows for the movement to revive it and to recapture its original vision.[5]

3. Religions and Cultures: Hindu and Christian Worldviews

3.1 Hindu Worldview

As pointed out earlier, religion and culture are intimately connected with the worldview of a people. Different religions have been developed on the basis of different worldviews. The notion of transmigration and reincarnation

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4 Sebastian M. Michael, "Christianity and Cultures, Authentic in Dialogue: Beyond Ethnocentrism and Relativism," in *Faith, Culture and Mission: Anthropological Insights*, ed. Sebastian M. Michael (Mumbai: St Pauls, 2020), 18.

5 Michael Paul Gallagher, *An Introduction to Faith and Culture* (New York: Paulist Press, 2003), 13–24.

is a pivotal aspect of the general socio-religious belief system in India. In the Hindu religious tradition, the concept of transmigration is a vital aspect of the cultural milieu and has played a dominant role in shaping the actions, ethics, and ideologies of the people. Thus, the Indian subcontinent and the culture influenced by it are dominated by the notion of *samsara*, 'what turns around forever,' the wheel of birth and death. In India, rebirth is an accepted presupposition of life, and it functions at various levels of understanding and interpretation both in ordinary life and in theory, in popular mythology, as well as in philosophical thought.

Accordingly, the well-known scholar Friedrich Heiler distinguishes between prophetic or biblical religion and mysticism. The latter he defines as: "that form of intercourse with God in which the world and self are absolutely denied, in which human personality is dissolved, disappears and is absorbed in the infinite unity of the Godhead."[6] In this context, Hinduism has been called a mystical religion as contrasted with Christianity, which is said to be prophetic. The core of oriental thinking is the 'undifferentiated consciousness' of all being. This consciousness is frequently called the 'non-discriminating consciousness' because no distinction is made between subject and object and there is no reasoning or thinking or conceptualisation in the mind. It stresses the immanence of God and has a sense of God in all things. Its basic experience is that of *advaita*—the unity of all things in the Absolute. It is neither fusion nor dualistic separation.

Hindu sages and mythographers recognise a number of different causal factors at work in arranging both immediate results and ultimate destinies of life. The Hindu tradition assumes as 'real' something that precedes and antedates historical time. It is not the 'actual' condition of human existence in its historical and secular unfolding but something beyond, before and after that is postulated as absolute reality. In harmony with this metaphysical notion of absolute reality, the notions of time and duration transcend historical time and the dimension of history altogether. Time and duration are viewed not as a linear process but as repetitive and cyclical.

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6 Friedrich Heiler, *Prayer* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958).

Interpreting time, duration, history and causation in a cosmological and cyclical manner, Hindu metaphysics tends to seek the explanation of events and of whatever may befall human beings not in social institutions or human beings' own action or for that matter in the sins and virtues of parents and ancestors, but in the individual's deeds and desires in past incarnations.[7]

Karma is a key concept in ordering the events of life. It plays an important role in the numerous myths that form the heart of popular village Hinduism. These stories are reenacted in temple rituals, celebrated in village festivals, dramatised in street dramas, sung by bards in street performances and by mothers to their children, and retold on summer evenings. In this context, the meaning of karma is learned not by philosophical discourse, but by illustration from the lives of gods and demons, saints and sinners. The concept is deeply rooted in the worldview of people and is also a common theme in the village myths that are the cosmic charter for popular Hinduism. In these narratives, the central question is not how karma is accrued and transmitted, but how it works itself out in the lives of people. The answers are given in the form of stories drawn from Puranic sources and from local histories.

Most of the Hindus believe that karma is transferred from one life to the next. The sages asked Vyasa (the originator of Mahabharata): "Who is the companion of a dying man, his father or mother or son or teacher, his crowd of friends and relations? When he leaves the body that has been his house as if it were a house of wood or mud, and goes into the world beyond, who follows him?" The sage Vyasa replied: "Alone he is born, and alone he dies; alone he crosses the dangerous thresholds, without the companionship of father, mother, brother, son or teacher, without his crowd of friends and relations. When he leaves the body, dharma alone follows him. The body is burnt by fire, but the karma he has done goes with him."[8] Skin, bone, flesh, semen and blood

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7 Amaury de Riencourt, *The Soul of India* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1960); see also A. K. Coomaraswamy, *Buddha and the Gospel of Buddhism* (London: Harp and Company, 1928); Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, *Religions of India: Hinduism, Yoga, Buddhism* (New York: The Bruce Publishing Company, 1928).

8 *Garuda Purana, Uttara Khanda* 2.22–25, quoted in Wendy D. O'Flaherty, ed., *Karma and Rebirth in Classical Traditions* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1983), 16.

leave the body when it is lifeless; but the *jiva* that has dharma prospers happily in this world and the world beyond.[9] The *jiva* is the carrier of the karmic deposit.

Among the presuppositions of this doctrine is the notion that space and time are endless. The identity of the self depends on (moral) karmic determinants. Life is an unending, eternal, weary round of suffering, governed by an automatic causality of reward and punishment (*karman*) that takes the soul from one existence to another through all six spheres of being, from that of the gods to that of 'hungry spirits' and demons.

In Hindu religious sensibility, the emphasis is not on the duality 'life and death' but on 'birth and dying.' The problem with rebirth is that of necessity, it also implies 're-dying,' that is, death recurring ad infinitum, unless man succeeds in escaping from the vicious circle of *samsara* into ultimate liberation *moksha* or *nirvana*. It should be emphasised that the ultimate goal (*artha*) is release and escape; the heavens (*svarga*) are still part of the *samsaric* (rebirth) world. Doctrinal differences of opinion relate to the method of liberation as well as to the precise definition of the liberated state.[10]

Max Weber in his study, *The Religion in India*, states that "Hinduism is usually tolerant of doctrine (*matta*) while placing greatest emphasis on ritual duties (*dharma*). Nevertheless, Hinduism has certain dogmas... by dogma one means creedal truths whose denial is considered heretical and places the group if not the individual outside the Hindu community."[11] He then continues to specify the dogmas of Hinduism: "the *samsara* belief in the transmigration of souls and the related *karman* doctrine of compensation."[12] Commenting on these principles, the author concludes: "Karma doctrine transformed the

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9 *Brahma Purana* 217.1–16, quoted in O'Flaherty, *Karma*, 16.

10 Cf. O'Flaherty, *Karma*, 16; also Wendy D. O'Flaherty, ed., *The Concept of Duty in South Asia* (New Delhi: Vikas, 1977); O'Flaherty, *The Origins of Evil in Hindu Mythology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976); O'Flaherty, *Asceticism and Eroticism in the Mythology of Siva* (London: Oxford University Press, 1973); Raimundo Panikkar, *Myth, Faith, and Hermeneutics*, Cross-Cultural Studies (Bangalore: Asian Trading Corporation, 1983), 361–385.

11 Max Weber, *The Religion of India: The Sociology of Hinduism and Buddhism,* trans. and ed. Hans H. Gerth and Don Martindale (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1958), 3–4.

12 Weber, *Religion of India, 104.*

world into a strictly rational, ethically-determined cosmos; it represents the most consistent theodicy ever produced by history."[13]

3.2 Biblical Worldview

The Bible, on the other hand, stresses the transcendence and otherness of God. God stands apart from his creation, and he speaks through the prophets in history. In the first book of the Bible, we read: "God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them" (Gen 1:27). This implies that God created human beings with dignity, freedom and creativity so that they might remain eternally with Him. But according to the Hebrew Bible, from which the Christian worldview derives, human beings sinned and their dignity, freedom and creativity were tainted by their sin. Sin has contaminated all areas of human life in common, namely, family, society, culture, religious beliefs and practices, politics and economics. It is the Christian belief that Jesus came to restore this corrupted image of humanity to its original purpose.

This purpose and vision of Jesus emerge very clearly from the New Testament writings. At the beginning of his public ministry after his baptism and forty days of retreat in the wilderness, Jesus went to the synagogue at Nazareth and stood up to read: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord" (Luke 4:18). Having read this prophecy of Isaiah, he added, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing" (Luke 4:21). Therefore, from the very beginning, Jesus asserted that His mission is to restore the tainted image of human beings by restoring their dignity. Jesus said, "I have come so that they may have life and have it to the full" (John 10:10). He explained to his followers that all the commandments of God can be summarised in "Love of God and love of the neighbour" (Matt 22:36–40) and this is the only criterion by which He will judge people for the final reward in His Kingdom (Matt 25:31–44). Thus, the very life of Jesus—his teachings, miracles, suffering, and death—is directed toward restoring the dignity of human beings lost through sin. If Jesus' life

13 Weber, *Religion of India*, 121.

had ended merely with his death, history would remember him only as a good moral teacher. But his Resurrection, a unique event in history, makes him the conqueror of death. According to the Bible, his identity and the truth of his teaching are authenticated by the Resurrection. Therefore, the Resurrection of Jesus is the foundation of Christian faith, confirming his identity as the divine Son of God and validating his teachings, mission, and authority.

The gospel worldview guides the Christian behaviour. The Social teaching of the Church is based on this worldview that every human being is created in the image and likeness of God and, therefore, every person has God given dignity. From its very inception, the Church carries this vision of Jesus in transforming the world being like "salt" and "light" (Matt 5:13–16) through its various apostolates. Even today, the social teachings of the Church are based on the Biblical belief that men and women are endowed with an inborn dignity and greatness. The Christian faith affirms that human persons enjoy an intrinsic worth which cannot be taken away by colour, wealth, stature or any other considerations. The implication is that human persons can never be used as a means. All forms of exploitation and oppression of human persons diminish and destroy their intrinsic dignity and worth.[14]

4. Theological and Sociological Implications of Christian and Hindu Worldviews

Religions and cultures based on different worldviews affect the economic and cultural behaviour of people as the following sections elaborate:

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14 The social teaching of the Church is centred on the dignity of the human person, who is created in the image and likeness of God. This dignity does not depend on any external factor — such as family background, wealth, social status, ethnicity, or nationality — but belongs to every human being without distinction. Any discrimination with regard to human dignity, whether based on biological, psychological, or developmental criteria, is to be rejected. As *Evangelium Vitae* states: "At every stage of his existence, man, created in the image and likeness of God, reflects the face of his Only-begotten Son. This boundless and almost incomprehensible love of God for the human being reveals the degree to which the human person deserves to be loved in himself, independently of any other consideration — intelligence, beauty, health, youth, integrity, and so forth" (John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae*, 25 March 1995, no. 34, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_25031995_evangelium-vitae.html; cf. Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Dignitas Personae*, 8 December 2008, nos. 8, 15–16, https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20081208_dignitas-personae_en.html).

4.1 The Impact of Karma and Rebirth on Indian Culture

According to several social scientists, the concept of karma and rebirth to a great extent breeds fatalistic tendencies among the Indian population.[15] The present conditions of life have been accepted passively as the result of one's past (karma) actions. The caste system of inequality is justified by these principles of karma and rebirth. The Brahmins are said to be born as high caste because of their past karma (meritorious acts) and the Untouchables (Harijans/Dalits) are said to be born as low caste due to their past karma. To attain emancipation from this low status of life, the duty (*dharma*) of the low caste person is to accept his/her caste position without revolt and act according to the prescribed rules of the caste (*jati*). Then the low caste person may be born as a high caste or attain his/her liberation. Thus, caste inequality is justified by the principles of karma, *dharma*, and *moksha*.

In this position, poverty and richness of different *jatis* are accepted as natural, i.e., the *vaishya jati* (traders) are born to be rich and the Untouchable *jatis* are born to be poor. This is clearly seen in India. While the first five richest people in the world are from Hindu background and most of the wealth in India is in the hands of the *Vaishyas,* thousands and millions of people mainly from the lower and untouchable castes live in poverty. While people are generally kind and feel with one another (*karuna*), a disciplined way of life, apart from nepotistic motives, is substantially lacking in the lives of the people. Without much questioning, caste degradation and injustice become part of the lifestyle of the people. Thousands and millions of people in India do not have even the minimum resources for their survival. At the same time, there are people who enjoy all the privileges and comforts of life.

According to Weber, the world image and concept of salvation provided by a religious system has causal effect throughout history. The religious view of life and the resultant economic behaviour in the West have been one of the causes in the economic, scientific development of the people. Weber, in contrast, ar-

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15 This was more consistently the case in the past, when Hindu culture was relatively isolated from other cultures and religions. Today, due to various influences, people have become increasingly aware of other religious ideas, and they redefine and modify this concept in response to cultural and religious influences from non-Indic sources.

gues that the Hindu ethic reflected in such concepts as *karma, dharma*, *varna*, *ashrama* and *samsara* had become an obstacle to material development, especially of the lower and *Dalit* (untouchable) castes; for he found that the Hindu ethic adhered to the idea of an immutable world order consisting of eternal cycles of rebirths. Further, as Hinduism considers the present world as transitory and illusory, Weber feels that it depreciated the mundane.[16]

As Weber examined in minute detail the consequences of developments in the major religions of the world, he noted the importance of prophets in transforming society. He distinguishes between two types of prophets: the ethical and the exemplary prophets. The ethical prophets feel themselves as the instrument of the transcendent God. It is in the nature of the ethical prophet, that the divine will for which he speaks is displeased with some aspects of the world and wants to change the world through him. "A part of his mission is to give men ethical norms with which they are expected to conform. And by definition these norms are different from the existing traditional state of affairs."[17] The prophets of the Judeo-Christian tradition challenged the existing social order and worked for change. But the exemplary prophets of India persuaded the people to turn away from the mundane world rather than to change the given order determined by *dharma*.

4.2 Hindu World View and Economic Performance in India Today

Hindu society and culture stress the moral virtues of modesty, hospitality, respect for elders, family and kinship. Its achievement in music, dance and art is commendable. India is growing at an enviable rate as far as the annual GDP growth is concerned. The Forbes Special Report (World Billionaires) of 2010 lists six Indian billionaires among the top fifty, among them two Indians in the top ten.[18] The World Bank[19] reported that India was the 12th wealthiest nation in 2005 with its GDP touching 785.47 billion dollars. While India was way

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16 Max Weber, *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (London: Unwin Books, 1958).

17 Talcott Parsons, *The Structure of Social Action* (New York: Free Press, 1937), 568.

18 "The World's Billionaires," *Forbes*, March 2010.

19 "India the 12th Wealthiest Nation in 2005 Says the World Bank," *Times of India*, 9 July 2006, https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/business/international-business/India-12th-wealthiest-nation-in-2005-says-World-Bank/articleshow/1717334.cms

down compared to China, positioned fourth with 2.23 trillion dollars of GDP, it was wealthier than Mexico, Russia and Australia. According to the recent Forbes list of wealthiest people in the world, there are 52 billionaires in India, surpassing former Asian leader Japan's 26 billionaires.

But on the other hand, a 2007 report by the state-run National Commission for Enterprises in the Unorganized Sector (NCEUS)[20] found that 77% of Indians (that is, 836 million people) lived on less than Rs. 20 per day. The data provided by the Planning Commission of India (April 2011) indicates that poverty in the country stands at 32% (2009-10). This means that almost one in every three Indians lives below the poverty line. More than 1.5 million children are at risk of becoming malnourished because of rising global food prices. More than 27% of the world's undernourished population lives in India while 43% of children (under 5 years) in the country are underweight. The figure is among the highest in the world and is much higher than the global average of 25% and also higher than the sub-Saharan Africa's figure of 28%. More than 70% of children (under 5) suffer from anaemia and 80% of them do not receive any vitamin supplements. According to the report, the proportion of anaemic children has increased by 6% in the past six years with 11 out of 19 states having more than 80% of its children suffering from anaemia. Percentage of women with chronic energy deficiency is stagnant at 40% over six years with the proportion in fact increasing in Assam, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh and Haryana during the same period. What is said about malnutrition can be said of education, health and various other socio-economic sectors.

In recent years, there has been a significant decline in poverty in India. The World Bank recently released a Poverty & Equity Brief for over 100 developing countries. It says India has significantly reduced poverty over the past decades.[21] The government has taken many steps to make life better for the citizens of India, but despite these efforts, poverty still remains a serious problem.

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20 National Commission for Enterprises in the Unorganized Sector, *Report on Conditions of Work and Promotion of Livelihoods in the Unorganized Sector* (New Delhi: Government of India, 2007).

21 World Bank, *Poverty and Equity Brief: India* (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2024); see C. Rangarajan and S. Mahendra Dev, "Poverty Fell Significantly Last Year. Much of It Was Driven by GDP Growth," *The Indian Express*, 29 May 2025, 9.

To understand the context of poverty in India, it is necessary to define the term. Poverty refers to a situation in which a person cannot fulfil his or her basic needs such as food, shelter, clothing and drinking water. According to Niti Aayog, 25% of the population in India lives in poverty, meaning that every fourth person is affected. In the Global Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) 2021 ranking, India ranked 66th out of 109 countries. India's poverty statistics in 2025 show that the number of people living in poverty is 83,068,597 (83 million), or roughly 6% of the population. Of these, 37,767,473 are male and 45,301,124 are female, indicating that women are disproportionately affected by poverty. Therefore, poverty in India remains a major challenge despite overall reductions in recent decades as the economy grows.

Certainly, the size of the economy in India is growing. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) recently projected that India will edge past Japan to become the world's fourth largest economy in 2025.[22] Responding to this news, several commentators have argued that "India's rise to 4th largest economy belies per capita reality."[23] Comparisons based solely on absolute GDP offer limited insight into the lived realities of people. What is crucial is to examine the condition of the average Indian, rather than aggregate GDP figures.[24] Some economists are of the view that India's rise to the fourth largest economy marks a notable milestone. All the same,

> Absolute GDP figures are useful for understanding the size of an economy, but they do not capture how wealth is distributed, how developed a country is, or how its citizens are faring. They mask disparities in population size, cost of living, and income inequality. A country may have a large economy overall, but that doesn't necessarily translate into prosperity or improved living standards for its people.[25]

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22 Nitika Francis and Vignesh Radhakrishnan, "India's Rise to 4th Largest Economy Belies per Capita Reality," *The Hindu*, 2 June 2025, 7.
23 Francis and Radhakrishnan, "India's Rise," 7.
24 Francis and Radhakrishnan, "India's Rise," 7.
25 Francis and Radhakrishnan, "India's Rise."

But beneath this dazzling ascent is a paradox: India is rich as a country but poor as a society. The average Indian is not wealthier. In fact, the wealth gap is widening to historic levels. The World Inequality Database (WID) and recent economic studies tell a story that policymakers often do not: India's rise is happening for the top 10%, not the remaining 90%. "Apart from the growing inequality among the rich/uber-rich (the top 20 per cent) and the very poor (the bottom 20 per cent), there is a pervasive sense of fear and insecurity."[26] Even basic amenities like clean water, decent schooling, and healthcare are out of reach for many. India may no longer be 'poor' in GDP terms, but it remains deeply unequal in lived experience. Can a country be called successful if 90% of its citizens still struggle to achieve dignity, security, and opportunity? Dr. P. Chidambaram, the previous Finance Minister of India affirms, "... while the lives of millions have become better, the lives of many more millions are blighted by uncertainty, poverty, unemployment and fear. ... The key to a better life of the vast population is the per capita income of the people, not the size of the nominal GDP. ... India ranks 136 out of 196 countries."[27]

A recent report by the World Bank has generated significant debate with regard to the true picture of inequality in the Indian economy. "According to data from the WID, in 2022-23, the top 1% of adults in India controlled almost 40% of net personal wealth."[28] The Gini report points out that India is one of the most unequal economies in the world.[29]

A scrutiny on this contrasting economic disparity would show that most of the rich people are from *vaishya* (trading), *kshatriya* (ruling) castes and most of the poor people are from the lower and Dalit castes. Could it be related to the worldview of Hinduism? Some scholars suggest that such contrasting economic disparity has been built into the socio-cultural structure of the Hindu society. The metaphysical doctrine of karma has provided a powerful rationalisation for inequality based on birth and made it acceptable to

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26 P. Chidambaram, "Eleven Years: A Critique," *The Sunday Express*, 15 June 2025, 11.
27 Chidambaram, "Eleven Years," 11.
28 Rahul Menon, "What Is the State of Inequality in India?" *The Hindu*, 12 July 2025, 12.
29 Menon, "What Is the State," 12.

the wide masses. This metaphysical principle justifies the hierarchical caste system. The dharma doctrine justifies that it is the duty of the *vaishya* to be traders and they make money. The dharma of the Dalit and other backward castes leads them to be serving castes. The Brahmins are said to be born as high caste because of their past *karma* (meritorious acts) and the Untouchables are said to be born as low caste due to their past karma. To attain emancipation from this low status of life, the duty (*dharma*) of the low caste person is to accept his/her caste position without revolt and act according to the prescribed rules of the caste. Then the low caste person may be born as a high caste person in his/her next birth. Thus, untouchability and caste inequality are justified by the worldview (principles) of *karma*, *dharma*, *punarjanma* and moksha.[30]

5. Dialogue between Worldviews: Bible, Hindu Culture and Identity

In this context, could the biblical concept of person created in the image and likeness of God bring empowerment and just distribution of wealth across populations of all ethnic communities in India?

The Christian tradition can benefit from engaging with Hindu perspectives on the relationship between humanity and nature. While Christian theology places human beings at the apex of God's creation, Western modernity has experienced a decline in religious sensibility, accompanied by increasing materialism and secularisation. This shift has fostered an anthropocentric worldview in which human beings assume the right to control and exploit nature according to their interests. In this framework, rationality is privileged over emotion, sentiment and affective knowledge.

According to Weber,[31] Western cultural assumptions, especially the Protestant ethic enshrined in the capitalist system, tend to view emotions as immature, primitive, or even pathological. The role of culture in the experience

30 Sebastian M. Michael, ed., *Dalits in Modern India: Vision and Values* (New Delhi: Vistaar Publications, 1999).

31 Weber, *Protestant Ethic*.

of emotion is seen as secondary, even minimal.[32] The Darwinian concepts of natural selection and survival of the fittest have contributed to materialistic interpretations of the universe by some scientists. Influenced by this thought, Western scientific experimentation with life and nature, combined with social Darwinist philosophy—exemplified by Friedrich Nietzsche's concept of the Übermensch and Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic reduction of religion—has led to the "Death of God" philosophy and the characterisation of God as fantasy based on infantile need. These developments secularise religion and undermine the dignity of the human person. As a consequence, humans are reduced to mere biological mechanisms. A number of scholars[33] have linked the alienation of people from the products of their labour under modern industrial capitalism to the fragmentation of the person into a public, rational, market-oriented self and a private, expressive, intimate self. Thus, while Western tradition emphasises rational thought, the Indian tradition prioritises affective experience and relational knowing. The destructive consequences of a materialistic worldview are evident in the breakdown of families, communities and social relationships, as well as in the ecological crisis resulting from overexploitation of nature and its resources.

For many Hindus in India, the West is often equated with Christianity. Consequently, the perceived failures of Western modernity are frequently attributed to Christianity itself. The credibility of Christianity as it has developed in the West is thus viewed with suspicion by Hindus, Muslims, Buddhists and others.[34] Critics argue that the West has lost its sense of the sacred in its preoccupation with scientific rationalism.

Hinduism and its related religions, in their quest to understand the mystery of human beings, have developed various techniques of understanding the

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32 Cf. Catherine A. Lutz, *Unnatural Emotions: Everyday Sentiments on a Micronesian Atoll and Their Challenge to Western Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 4.

33 See Agnes Heller, *A Theory of Feelings* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1979); Bertell Ollman, *Alienation: Marx's Conception of Man in a Capitalist Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976).

34 Cf. Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, *East and West in Religion* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1933); Radhakrishnan, *Eastern Religions and Western Thought* (London: Oxford University Press, 1939); Mohandas K. Gandhi, *Christian Missions: Their Place in India* (Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House, 1941); Gandhi, *The Message of Jesus Christ* (Bombay: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1964).

mind. The East, in Jung's estimation, had long been aware of the reality of the unconscious and the necessity of penetrating its depths.[35] On the other hand, this interiority of the East seems to be the important factor for its poverty and its underdevelopment of certain sections of people. The West with its preoccupation with science has developed wonderful ways to control nature and make use of this knowledge for the good of human beings.[36] Nevertheless, there is growing awareness today that the very systems and strategies that have created vast technological power have set off a spiral they cannot control. Throughout the world, peoples emerging from tribalism to development are seeking and demanding the material fruits of Western technology. Is it possible for our global system to provide all these demands? In this context, both the West and the East must rediscover their true religious meaning in their lives. The values of renunciation and self-responsibility embodied in religions can be the common ground for the future of humanity. Here, both Hinduism and Christianity could play a major role in the betterment of the human person. In this process we may understand the role of Christianity as well as the real contribution of Hinduism to humankind.

6. Conclusion

Society, culture and religion are interrelated. The unity and integration of society and culture are given by their respective worldviews. Worldviews provide a vision for human action in society. Visions are like maps that guide us through a tangle of bewildering complexities; like maps, visions have to leave out many concrete features in order to enable us to focus on a few key paths to our goals.[37] Visions set the agenda for both thought and action. Believers in one vision will view themselves in a very different moral role from the followers of another. The ramifications of such conflicting visions extend to the economic, judicial, military, philosophical and political spheres.

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35 Carl G. Jung, *Modern Man in Search of a Soul* (London: Kegan Paul, 1933).

36 Augustine Pamplany and Job Kozhamthadam, *East-West Interface of Reality: A Scientific and Intuitive Inquiry into the Nature of Reality* (Pune: Association of Science, Society and Religion, 2003).

37 Thomas Sowell, *A Conflict of Visions: Ideological Origins of Political Struggles* (New York: William Morrow, 1987), 13–17.

We have seen that Hinduism is built on a particular worldview with a cyclic notion of time, with *karma, dharma, moksha and punarjanma* as the governing principles of life. The concepts of karma and rebirth to a great extent breed fatalistic tendencies among the Indian population. The present conditions of life have been accepted passively as the result of one's past karma. The caste system of inequality is justified by these principles of karma and rebirth. Brahmins are said to be born into high castes because of their past *karma* (meritorious acts), and the Untouchables (Harijans/Dalits) are said to be born into low castes due to their past karma. In this framework, the poverty and wealth of different *jatis* are accepted as natural, i.e., the *vaishya jati* (traders) are born to be wealthy and the untouchable *jatis* are born to be poor. Millions of people in India do not have even the minimum resources for their survival, while others enjoy all the privileges and comforts of life.

In recent years, there has been a significant decline in poverty in India. Nevertheless, the contrasting economic disparity still exists, which shows that most wealthy people are from *vaishya* (trading) and *kshatriya* (ruling) castes, while most poor people are from the lower and Dalit castes. This study suggests that this could be related to the worldview of Hinduism. The metaphysical doctrine of karma has provided a powerful rationalisation for inequality based on birth and made it acceptable to the masses.

Christianity, on the other hand, is organised on the basis of the biblical vision that all human beings are created in the image and likeness of God. Therefore, there is God-given dignity to the human person. Any discrimination on the basis of economic condition, colour, gender or health is contrary to the vision of God. Human sin has damaged and tainted this image. God in His love sent Jesus to restore the 'corrupted' image. Jesus articulated this vision in His mission statement as narrated in Luke 4:18–21. His life, death and resurrection are the authentication of His identity. The same mission of restoring the dignity of the human person is mandated to all His followers, as narrated in Matt 25:31–44.

This is the mission of the Church in India. The biblical vision of the good news of Jesus must penetrate and transform the caste-ridden Indian society and its discrimination against Dalits, the poor and marginalised people in In-

dia. But the Indian Church itself is caste-ridden. Therefore, self-purification is the first step in implementing the biblical vision in India. Secondly, the Indian Church, through its various ministries of education, social work, health, communication and others, must evangelise Indian cultures with the biblical vision that all human beings are created in the image and likeness of God. Through the process of evangelisation of cultures and inculturation,[38] the Indian Church could be an agent of transformation in India.

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38 Sebastian M. Michael, "Beyond Inculturation," *Vidyajyoti: Journal of Theological Reflection* 43.1 (1990): 3–18.

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WE, THE LOST TRIBE OF ISRAEL: SCRIPTURE AND IDENTITY FORMATION IN PRESENT-DAY PAPUA NEW GUINEA

Anna Damas[*]

1. Social and Historical Context

Papua New Guinea is a comparatively young nation. In the 19th century, it was colonised by the English and German empires; afterwards, in the 20th century, it was administered under Australian colonial rule. In 1975, Papua New Guinea obtained independence peacefully and continues as a Commonwealth country.[1]

Prehistorically, various waves of immigration to the island led to diverse ethnicities and a great diversity of cultures. As genetic evidence suggests, about 50,000 years ago, when Australia and Papua New Guinea still formed a single land mass, peoples from the Indo-Australian Archipelago (i.e. the islands between continental Southeast Asia and Australia) began to migrate to what is now the island of Papua New Guinea. A second major genetic lineage stems from much later, 3,500 years ago, when Austronesian people settled in the coastal regions and on the islands of Papua New Guinea. This was part of a wider migratory movement that brought the Austronesian people as far as Taiwan and Madagascar.

Linguistically, Papua New Guinea is the most diverse region in the world.[2] There are seven linguistic phyla (major language families with a common origin) in Papua New Guinea. One of the phyla consists of the ca. 200 Austronesian languages with linguistic similarities between them. The second (and

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* Anna Damas, SSpS, served in pastoral and biblical ministry in Papua New Guinea from 2006 to 2019. Since 2019, she has been engaged in scholarly research, publications and seminars on the history and spirituality of the SSpS congregation, with particular emphasis on interculturality.

1 John D. Waiko, *A Short History of Papua New Guinea* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1993).

2 William A. Foley, "The Languages of New Guinea," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 29 (2000): 357–404.

larger) language family, spoken in the interior parts of the country, is the non-Austronesian or Papuan languages. The latter term, however, describes the geographical occurrence of these languages rather than their linguistic traits. In fact, Papuan languages are very diverse and unrelated, each with its own distinct grammar and vocabulary. Even today, an estimated 800 languages are spoken in Papua New Guinea. The language groups are small, consisting mostly of just a few hundred or a few thousand people. In some regions, even neighbouring villages speak different languages. Exceptions are the Enga, Melpa and Kuman languages spoken in the Highlands of Papua New Guinea by an estimated 100,000 people each.

Today, English is the official language mainly used in education, governance and commerce. In the everyday context, however, people use the creole language *Tok Pisin* (Melanesian Pidgin). It has a very simple grammar and combines vocabulary from various local languages as well as English, thus facilitating communication across the plethora of different languages in the country.[3]

Alongside the diversity of languages, there is also a great diversity of local cultures as expressed in customs, arts, celebrations, folklore, family organisation etc. Despite the cultural groups being small, they have been preserved and survived until now. This is an indication that the cultural groups have lived in considerable isolation. The rugged terrain of the volcanic island of Papua New Guinea, blanketed by rain forests and with a high mountain range dividing it from West to East, resulted in geographical barriers, which in turn favoured social isolation. Even today, geographical barriers pose a challenge. There are few highways connecting the cities; the dirt roads between towns and villages are often impassable by car. The capital Port Moresby is probably the only capital of the world that is accessible only by sea or by air.

Geographical isolation has influenced the social fabric. The people are organised in tribes. These tribes are usually small in number, sometimes count-

3 Papua New Guinea Department of Foreign Affairs, "Papua New Guinea: People and Ethnic Groups," 2024, https://www.dfa.gov.pg/people-ethnic-groups.

ing only a few hundred persons. Relationships between neighbouring tribes are, in many cases, conflict-ridden, erupting frequently in tribal wars. Once upon a time, tribal wars were fought out with bows and arrows; nowadays, they are powered by professional firearms and mercenaries.[4] On the other hand, traditional cultures put mechanisms in place to forge relationships between the various tribes. Besides trade, tribes entered enduring relationships through marriage, child adoption, and ritualised systems of gift exchange.[5]

2. Building the Nation

Generally, people identify first and foremost with their clan (sub-tribe), and to a lesser degree with the larger tribe. Since independence in 1975, political and social efforts have been made to build the nation by transcending limited tribal identity concepts and forging the identification as Papua New Guinean people. The churches, particularly the Roman Catholic Church, have played a significant role in the process of nation-building.[6] The education system that was established by the churches created spaces of social encounter for the various tribes. So did parish life with its liturgies, celebrations, processions, parish groups, etc. Missionaries supported and spread the use of Tok Pisin as the *lingua franca* to bridge the linguistic divides. In 1969, the Divine Word Missionaries (SVD) founded a weekly newspaper in Tok Pisin, "Wantok Niuspepa."[7] Given the low literacy rate, especially in English, this newspaper is for many Papua New Guineans the only written source of political and social information.

However, nation-building and social cohesion remain a work in progress. Seeing the tribal fabric of society and its ethnic, cultural and linguistic diversity, a question emerges for the people of Papua New Guinea: "Who are we as

4 Polly Wiessner, "From Spears to M-16s: Testing the Imbalance of Power Hypothesis among the Enga," *Journal of Anthropological Research* 62 (2006): 165–91.

5 James F. Weiner, "Substance, Siblingship and Exchange: Aspects of Social Structure in New Guinea," *Social Analysis: The International Journal of Social and Cultural Practice* 11 (1982): 3–34.

6 Paul Steffen, "From a Receiving to a Sending Church: 125 Years of the Catholic Church in Mainland New Guinea, 1896–2021," *Verbum SVD* 64 (2023): 88–111.

7 Philip Cass, "Fr. Francis Mihalic and Wantok Niuspepa in Papua New Guinea," *Pacific Journalism Review: Te Koakoa* 17 (2011): 210–226, doi:10.24135/pjr.v17i1.380.

a nation? What is our common identity?" This quest for identity also extends to the wider context: "Who are we within the community of nations? What role do we play on the global stage?"

Another factor making identity formation more difficult is the fact that Papua New Guinea, as a nation, lacks a long history in terms of documented historical records spanning many centuries. Historical awareness can be broadly divided into three periods: the prehistoric era about which little is known; followed by a century of colonial rule; and finally, the history of the independent state of Papua New Guinea, which only began in 1975.

3. The Role of the Bible

Amidst all this diversity and fragmentation, the Christian faith is a uniting element. Christianity introduced a unifying frame of reference into the highly fragmented tribal society of Papua New Guinea that had not existed before: a common faith and worldview (Christian doctrine), the Bible as a common foundational document, and common rituals and celebrations of identity (liturgy). This frame of reference paved the way to envisage and create communities that exceed local tribal identity.[8] Today, around 90% of the people identify as Christians. Generally, Papua New Guineans are proud to be "a Christian nation."

However, while the Christian faith unites the people, it also divides them into many different denominations. Initially, Catholics, Lutherans, Anglicans, and Methodists were competing in the evangelisation of Papua New Guinea. They were later joined by other denominations mainly originating from the United States, most of them belonging to the Pentecostal churches.[9] Affiliation to the historic missionary churches has been continually declining while membership of the numerous new denominations and sects increases steadily.

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8 Harvey Whitehouse, "From Mission to Movement: The Impact of Christianity on Patterns of Political Association in Papua New Guinea," *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 4.1 (1998): 43–63, doi:10.2307/3034427.

9 Rufus Pech, "The Acts of the Apostles in Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands," in *An Introduction to Ministry in Melanesia*, Point Series 7, ed. Brian Schwarz (Goroka: Melanesian Institute, 1985), 17–71.

These new church groups are partly imported from overseas, and partly 'home-made,' i.e. founded by Papua New Guineans.[10]

In the climate of searching for a common identity, Papua New Guineans seek orientation in what they perceive as the most obvious place: the Bible. In the panopticon of about 100 different churches, the Bible is an important point of reference, arguably the only one that is common to all. Thanks to the efforts of the Bible Society, the Summer Institute of Linguistics, the Wycliffe Bible Translators, and other church organisations, Scripture has been translated into many of the local languages. However, since people are usually not literate in their local language, the most common translations nationwide in use are English (by people with higher education) and Tok Pisin. The latter is also used in liturgy and worship. The Tok Pisin edition of the New Testament ("Nupela Testamen") published by the Bible Society in 1969, and of the entire Bible ("Buk Baibel") in 1989 made Scripture accessible to the people of Papua New Guinea in the creole language that unites the country. This was a significant contribution to the process of identity construction of a unified (Christian) nation.[11]

God making a covenant with his people is a central biblical theme and concept, running through various books of the Bible, including the New Testament. As mentioned earlier, traditional Papua New Guinean cultures had and have customs and rituals in place that forge bonds and create kinship between the clans and tribes. The biblical covenant is understood in an analogous way: the covenant not only is a bond between God and his chosen people; it also creates a bond between all people that participate in the covenant. A view that can be found across all denominations, and is especially strong in the Evangelical and Pentecostal churches, is the belief that by baptism and by becoming a Christian nation the people of Papua New Guinea entered the covenant with God – the very covenant that God made first with Abraham and the people of

10 Manfred Ernst, "Changing Christianity in Oceania: A Regional Overview," *Archives de Sciences Sociales des Religions* 157 (2012): 29–45.

11 Frank Mihalic, "The Medium of the Message: Divine Word Missionaries in Papua New Guinea, 1896–1996," *Verbum SVD* 37.1–2 (1996): 167–176.

Israel and that was, through Christ, expanded to include all peoples on earth. And so, the people of Papua New Guinea are now part of the people of God and part of the family of all Christian peoples worldwide.

The Bible, then, is the document and documentation of this covenant. There might be no historical documents of precolonial times, but there is Scripture. Scripture contains the history of the people of God and, therefore, includes also the history of Papua New Guineans. The origins of the nation are to be found there, and this is true not only from a religious point of view but even historically. How so? Generally, people in Papua New Guinea do not distinguish between story and history, i.e., narrated truths and historically recorded, 'objective' facts. Stories are true beyond and independent of historically verifiable facts. If history as a science does not answer the question "Who are we as Papua New Guineans?," Scripture might very well offer an answer. The Bible gives the possibility to trace the origin of Papua New Guineans right back to the beginning of God's story with his people Israel.

4. The Lost Tribes of Israel

While all Christians in Papua New Guinea would agree that they have become, through Jesus Christ, part of the biblical covenantal community, some go a step further. In their view, the bond with the covenant people of Israel is not a mere spiritual one; indeed, they believe it to be a direct genealogical kinship and consider themselves as biological descendants of (one of) the so-called Lost Tribes of Israel. This belief is quite widespread in Melanesia.[12]

After the conquest of the Northern Kingdom of Israel by the Assyrians in 722/21 BCE, the ten tribes living in this territory were deported and assimilated among other peoples. Consequently, their traces are lost in history. But their fate continued to capture the imagination of Jewish and Christian believers alike. Throughout history, there have been repeated attempts to trace the remnants of the Lost Tribes and identify possible descendants. To name a few:

12 Lynda Newland and Terry M. Brown, "Introduction: Descent from Israel and Jewish Identities in the Pacific, Past and Present," *Oceania* 85.3 (2015): 251–255.

- In a Jewish Talmudic tradition originating in the Second Temple period, the Lost Tribes were exiled beyond the banks of the mythical river Sambatyon.[13] Because of its strong current, this river is impassable on weekdays; it rests and flows quietly only on the Sabbath. But on this day of rest, the Tribes cannot cross the Sambatyon without trespassing God's Law. Only at the end of times, at the coming of the Messiah, the Tribes will cross the river and reappear. In medieval Germany, both in Jewish and Christian folklore, this mythical people was called the Red Jews.
- During the Spanish conquest of the New World, Spanish missionaries wondered about the nature and origin of the indigenous population. They discovered similarities of local cultural practices and Jewish customs, which led them to identify the Indians with the descendants of the Lost Tribes. "Positing a Jewish origin for New World Indians established a genealogical and historical link to the Old World that put Indians squarely within the realm of the human, while the fact that they were 'lost' accounted for why they had not heard of Jesus."[14]
- In the 18th century in North America, James Adair, who lived among Native American tribes, held the view that these were descendants of the Lost Tribes. As evidence, his book *The History of the American Indians* (1775) presented similarities in religious beliefs, customs, and especially linguistic resemblances between Hebrew and indigenous American languages. Adair's work was continued by Elias Boudinot in his publication *A Star in the West* (1816), in which he elaborated on linguistic similarities. From a modern linguistic perspective, though, the claim is untenable.[15]

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13 Cf. Aaron Rothkoff, "Ten Lost Tribes," *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, 2nd ed., ed. Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik (Detroit: Macmillan Reference; Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House, 2007), 19:639–642; Rothkoff, "Sambatyon," *Encyclopaedia Judaica* 17:746–747.

14 Courtney Handman, *Critical Christianity: Translation and Denominational Conflict in Papua New Guinea* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2015), 259.

15 James Adair, *The History of the American Indians* (London: Edward and Charles Dilly, 1775); Elias Boudinot, *A Star in the West; or, A Humble Attempt to Discover the Long Lost Ten Tribes of Israel, Preparatory to Their Return to Their Beloved City Jerusalem* (Trenton, NJ: D. Fenton, S. Hutchinson, and J. Dunham, 1816).

- In the 19th century in England, the Anglo-Israelism movement proposed that the Anglo-Saxons were descendants of the Ten Lost Tribes of Israel. The Tribes, supposedly, migrated to Western Europe and finally settled in Britain. The key proponents of the theory were John Wilson with his seminal book *Our Israelitish Origin,* published in 1840, and Edward Hine in his wake with numerous publications on the subject, including *Forty-seven Identifications of The British Nation with the Lost Ten Tribes of Israel: Founded upon Five Hundred Scripture Proofs* (1874). The theory was expounded with scientific proofs from archaeology, ethnology, and exegesis. By modern scientific standards, though, the proofs do not stand up to scrutiny.[16]

The historian Zvi Ben-Dor Benite summarises:

> [There are] numerous cases of identifications of various ethnic groups all over the world as descendants of the tribes. Already in 1903, Albert Hyamson (1875-1954), a prolific English Jewish intellectual, declared that "no race has escaped the honour, or the suspicion, of being descended from the ten tribes." Today, more than a century later, various groups around the world, from the Zebulunites in Japan, to various African-American groups in the United States, to Latin American indigenous peoples, claim that they are the descendants of one or all of the tribes. Claims of ten tribes' descent played a role in the imperial expansions of Spain, Portugal, and, chiefly, Britain. At least three royal houses – those of England, Scotland, and Japan – are said by some to be descendants of ten tribes' royals. Some have come to believe that the ten tribes are the most distinguished race among humanity – 'God's covenant race'. Political claims regarding the ten tribes' status of various groups have been made since the early modern period, attaching themselves to real and imagined peoples from, literally, A to Z. The Afghans (both Pashtuns and Phathans), Armenians, Berbers, Celts, Eskimos, Estonians, Finns, Ibos, Laps,

16 John Wilson, *Our Israelitish Origin: Lectures on Ancient Israel, and the Israelitish Origin of the Modern Nations of Europe* (London: J. Nisbet, 1840); Edward Hine, *Forty-Seven Identifications of the British Nation with the Lost Ten Tribes of Israel: Founded upon Five Hundred Scripture Proofs* (London: S. W. Partridge; W. H. Guest, 1874).

> Lembas, Mayans, Native North Americans, Scythians, Tartars, and Zulus, among many more, have been variously claimed as the descendants of the long-lost tribes. In earlier periods, such religious movements or groups as the ancient Christian Nestorians and the medieval Muslim Almohads were attached to the story of the ten tribes; their claims are replicated in modernity in the instance of the Mormons. In sum, in the words of one modern observer, "traces of the Tribes are popping up all over!"[17]

5. The Lost Tribes in Papua New Guinea

Indeed, traces of the tribes are popping up all over Papua New Guinea, too. For many Papua New Guinean Christians, it makes much sense to identify as descendants of one of the Lost Tribes. Papua New Guineans perceive significant similarities between their social and cultural world and the world of the Old Testament. First and foremost, both are societies organised in tribes. Although there are a few matrilineal tribes, the vast majority of tribes in Papua New Guinea are patrilineal and patriarchal like they were in ancient Israel. Both are societies based on agriculture and livestock with more peasants than city dwellers. Furthermore, there are similar central values of honour and shame, the same understanding of justice and law, and a strong identification with the ancestral land. Against this background, it seems obvious to trace back the cultural origin of Papua New Guinea to the biblical culture of tribal Israel.

Originally, the idea of identifying Melanesians with the descendants of the Lost Tribes might have been introduced to local people by foreign missionaries, traders and colonisers. However, the idea is very appealing to and now mainly promoted by Melanesians themselves. Like their European counterparts before, some Papua New Guineans too seek scientific proof to bolster their belief. For instance, in 2003, villagers in the Papua New Guinea Highlands invited the geneticist Tudor Parfitt, Director of the Centre for Jewish Studies, School of Oriental and African Studies at the University of London, to

17 Zvi Ben-Dor Benite, *The Ten Lost Tribes: A World History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 5–6.

collect DNA samples to prove biological kinship.[18] Why is the idea of a (genealogical) kinship with the tribes of Israel so appealing to Papua New Guineans (and other Melanesians)? The anthropologist Silverman opines: "I see these varied Melanesian movements as a plea for validation, an effort to re-position Melanesia from the periphery of the global system to the centre of the divine cosmos, and a search for a stable structure to history and society."[19]

The identification with (one of) the Lost Tribes of Israel fulfils four functions for the Christians in Papua New Guinea:

1. It provides history and origin (diachronic identity).

In the collective historical awareness of Papua New Guineans, the shared past is mainly geographical (one lives on the same island). A common documented history begins only with the colonial era. Therefore, the Lost Tribes narrative fills an important lacuna and provides "deep history" for a nation that lacks a common remembered past.

2. It provides social cohesion (synchronic identity).

In a culturally highly fragmented society, the Lost Tribes narrative provides both a sacred and a shared origin for the numerous and diverse tribes. Tracing one's origins back to a common ancestor creates a bond and sense of belonging. Thus, a shared past offers hope for a better future lived in unity among ethnically and denominationally divided communities and their often conflict-ridden relations.

3. It provides a sacred religious identity and thereby an international status.

As descendants of the Lost Tribes, Papua New Guineans are part of the Covenant people of God, taking part in the promises given them by God. They are part of a chosen, sacred people. This secures them recognition and a place of honour in the family of nations.

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18 Alison Dundon, "Babala and the Bible: Israel and a 'Messianic Church' in Papua New Guinea," *Oceania* 85 (2015): 327, doi:10.1002/ocea.5099.

19 Eric K. Silverman, "Commentary: Modernism, Jews, and Frazer," *Oceania* 85 (2015): 360, doi:10.1002/ocea.5105.

6. Bible and Politics

Papua New Guinea is not a typical post-Enlightenment secular society. In Europe, Enlightenment critiqued religion and identified it as a major obstacle of development, freedom and modernisation of society. Not so in Papua New Guinea where the missionary enterprise was a vehicle of modernity, mainly through building an education system. Even today, the majority of education facilities are run by the churches. Besides, mission settlements introduced modern technologies, including Western medicine, trades, roads, consumption goods etc., to the remotest villages.

Religion plays an important role in people's lives.[20] Constitutionally, there is the separation of church and state; but in people's minds, faith and politics cannot be separated. An event in 2015 illustrates this. On the occasion of the celebration of 40 years of Independence, a 400-year-old copy of the Bible in the King James Version was solemnly installed in the Chamber of Parliament. The Bible, a gift from a missionary originating from the United States, had been brought in from the US by a delegation headed by the Speaker of Parliament. Thousands of people and politicians welcomed the Bible at the heart of the political centre of the country.

Subsequently, in a Parliamentary motion, the Bible was recognised as a "National Treasure and the Property of the People and the Government of Papua New Guinea." The speeches accompanying the act stressed that only on the moral basis of the Bible would the country succeed in building up the identity and cohesion of the nation.[21] Recently, this conviction has translated into law: the Constitution of the Country was amended to the effect that Papua New Guinea is now declared a Christian Nation. The motion was passed in Parliament on 13 March 2025 by a two-thirds majority.[22]

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20 Garry W. Trompf, ed., *Melanesian Religion and Christianity* (Goroka: Melanesian Institute, 2008); Theo Aerts, *Christianity in Melanesia* (Port Moresby: University of Papua New Guinea Press, 1998); Michael A. Rynkiewich and Roland Seib, eds., *Politics in Papua New Guinea: Continuities, Changes and Challenges* (Goroka: Melanesian Institute, 2000).

21 Anthony J. Pickles and Priscila Santos da Costa, "It is Christ or Corruption in Papua New Guinea: Bring in the Witness!" *Oceania* 91 (2021): 349–366, doi:10.1002/ocea.5315.

22 "PNG Declared a Christian Nation, 81 MPs Support Motion," *The National*, 13 March 2025, https://www.thenational.com.pg/png-declared-a-christian-nation-81-mps-support-motion/.

While receiving support from groups within the Evangelical and Pentecostal churches, the change in the Constitution is strongly opposed by the traditional mainline churches; in their opinion, it is a potential threat to religious freedom and a misconception of the secular nature of the State. Defending the amendment, Prime Minister Marape stressed the role of Christianity for the cohesion and identity of the Nation: "One cannot dispel that the churches in our country have anchored our unity and togetherness before 1975 and when the Government is not there [sic]."[23]

Unsurprisingly, the belief that Papua New Guineans are the descendants of one of the Lost Tribes of Israel has found its way into politics. Jewish fundamentalist groups and, likewise, certain Christian circles in Israel and the United States support and encourage the belief for ideological reasons. In recent decades, a Christian Zionist movement has been on the rise in Papua New Guinea with a notable influence on national politics.[24]

> Many of those who regard themselves as Jews also identify themselves as Christians. There are many who, although not identifying themselves as Jews, identify with the modern state of Israel, and have encouraged their governments into bilateral relationships with Israel that have strong material and spiritual components. There are also some who combine these components – Jewish identity and identification with the state of Israel – to the extent that they might reasonably be called Pacific (Christian) Zionists.[25]

In the tribal fabric of the society, being related to the people of Israel entails an obligation to show fraternal solidarity with the State of Israel. It is a must if one wants to remain in the Covenant relationship: "I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Gen 12:3). In 2023, the Papua New Guinea government demonstrated its support for Israel's settlement politics in occupied

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23 Pickles and Santos da Costa, "It is Christ or Corruption," 349.

24 Philip Gibbs, "Dialogue and Modern Ecclesial Politics in Papua New Guinea," *Verbum SVD* 65.1–2 (2024): 16–26.

25 Newland and Brown, "Introduction," 251-255.

Palestinian territory. Prime Minister Marape, a Seventh-Day Adventist, along with a large party, personally opened the embassy in West Jerusalem. Papua New Guinea was one of only four countries worldwide to follow the internationally highly contested step initiated by the United States, thereby taking sides in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

In domestic politics, the Lost Tribes discourse functions as a framework that both critiques present-day society and holds out hope for future positive development. Most Papua New Guineans are acutely aware of the deficiencies of the State and society as a whole. Papua New Guinea has been listed among the failing states. Transparency International, measuring corruption, ranks Papua New Guinea 127 out of 180 countries.[26] While lamenting corrupt politicians, people identify, as the underlying reason for the desolate status quo a general moral deficiency of society. In her analysis of the Lost Tribes narrative in Papua New Guinea, anthropologist Courtney Handman elaborates on the notion of feeling 'lost':

> As is common across Papua New Guinea [...] [people] sharply feel that they are living in a modern world only in the most defective sense of the term. The constant lament about a lack of development is one expression of that feeling. The local aspirations for development and questions about what is known in Tok Pisin as *kastom* (custom) reveal a sense that, at best, they are living within the letter of modernity, but not its spirit.[27]

Kastom, i.e., the traditional, pre-modern ways of structuring life and communities, are felt to be inadequate and at odds with the requirements of a modern democracy. Hence, the speeches during the installation of the Bible in Parliament stressed time and again the urgency of a moral consolidation of the country. Precisely in this pursuit of moral development, the Lost Tribe narrative offers hope. Israel brought forth the Messiah, and it was capable of transforming into God's chosen people of the New Covenant in Jesus Christ.

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26 Transparency International, "Our Work in Papua New Guinea," Transparency International, 2024, https://www.transparency.org/en/countries/papua-new-guinea.

27 Handman, "Critical Christianity," 261.

Likewise, there is hope for the descendants of the Lost Tribes in Papua New Guinea to transform into a truly blessed people.

> It is a sacred ethnicity of future transformation: the Papua New Guinean sense of the Lost Tribes is that the connection makes one's group not only the chosen, but the chosen who can be changed through future processes of Christian critique. The Lost Tribes discourses thus seem to share quite a bit with Pauline forms of evangelism that take it as axiomatic that critique of one's own culture is an important part of the transformation into Christianity.[28]

Handman then draws attention to the political dimension of the Lost Tribes narrative:

> [T]he Lost Tribes discourse appears to be an incipient form of political organization in Papua New Guinean politics [...]. That is, taking up the mantle of being 'lost' is a sign to others of being engaged in a process of critique that has not yet produced one's desired results. Being 'lost' means living in a world of potential transformation that has not happened yet, of being divided by ethnic, cultural, and denominational schisms without having the unity of the ancient Jews or, even better, what many think of as the universal unity of Christianity. That is, the quest for modernity or development is itself understood in terms of this critical engagement with finding a moral relationship between Christianity and some form of tradition. Tribes' discourses seem to be a way that Papua New Guineans are able to recognise others who are engaged in critical projects of their own. [...] Lost Tribes discourses are thus an emerging basis for a kind of Christian public sphere in Papua New Guinea.[29]

28 Handman, "Critical Christianity," 266.
29 Handman, "Critical Christianity," 268.

7. Conclusion

The complex cultural and historical landscape of Papua New Guinea poses significant challenges for collective identity formation. In the absence of an extensive written national history and amid vast ethnic and linguistic diversity, Scripture functions as a unifying reference point for many Papua New Guineans. The identification with the Lost Tribes of Israel serves as a symbolic narrative that offers both diachronic and synchronic dimensions of identity, connecting Papua New Guineans to a sacred past and uniting them within a broader covenantal framework. This narrative facilitates the construction of social cohesion and religious legitimacy.

In the postcolonial, non-secular context of Papua New Guinea, Scripture encompasses both the realms of personal faith and national governance. Government politics make use of Scripture as a moral base and orientation. In particular, the Lost Tribes narrative becomes an instrument of nation-building, and a catalyst for collective meaning-making in the quest for national unity and identity.

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PART II:

INTERCULTURAL EXEGESIS

HAGAR IN TRIPLE READINGS: ANCIENT ISRAELITE, EARLY CHRISTIAN, AND CONTEMPORARY INDIAN

John Baptist Antony[*]

1. Introduction

The identity of Hagar in the so-called 'patriarchal narratives' is only a side story compared to the materials relating to the Abraham Cycle. She appears mainly in two passages (Gen 16:1–16; 21:8–21). But these two passages present the multiple identities of Hagar and make her a round and full-fledged character.[1] The same character is discussed by Paul in his letter in the context of 'identity conflicts' and 'identity markers' in the early Christian community of Galatia. Now Indian contemporary interpreters of these texts, especially from a reader-response perspective, interpret the character of Hagar. So, three readings of Hagar are possible: Ancient Israel, Early Christian, and contemporary Indian. This article, therefore, studies questions such as: how is her identity presented by the author of Genesis, and how does Paul use her in his context of 'identity conflicts' and 'identity markers' in early Christianity? How can she be identified in the contemporary Indian context of subaltern studies? This is done in three parts. The first one studies the character of Hagar in the Genesis narratives mainly from the point of view of her identity as a woman, slave, Egyptian, wife, and mother. The second part deals with how Paul engages her identity in his cultural and religious contexts. The final part discusses how Hagar can be identified with various subaltern groups in the contemporary Indian context.

* Dr. John Baptist Antony is the Director, National Biblical Catechetical and Liturgical Centre, Bangalore, India.

1 Cf. John Baptist Antony, *Thus Spoke the Bible: Basics of Biblical Narratives, Revised and Enlarged Edition* (Bengaluru: Theological Publications in India, 2024), 102–6.

In doing this, the first part employs narrative criticism, the second rhetorical criticism, and the final part a reader-response approach, especially from the Dalit feminist perspective. A few methodological observations are necessary before proceeding to the textual analysis.

2. Methodological Considerations

At the outset, I must admit and consciously affirm that I am doing ideological criticism, which entails the identification of social location. It asks questions of power and assesses the power relations between and among the biblical characters from different social locations as the plot develops. The questions are, therefore: "What are the values and beliefs of the different characters? What access to different kinds of power does each character and character group have? Who oppresses and who is being oppressed? Whose interests are served by the beliefs and values and the exercise of power of the different characters?"[2] Feminist critical studies, for example, have unpacked the power dynamics between females and males in the world of the story and asked whether the plot works to overcome or to reinforce patriarchy, and in what ways. The same can be applied to Dalit interpretation and Dalit feminist interpretation. Further, my approach presents the biblical texts in the positive light. This is necessitated by the accusations of the rejectionist model about the presence of patriarchy in the Bible.[3]

I employ cultural exegesis. David Rhoads holds that "the recent discipline of cultural exegesis recognises the importance of reading with people from many different cultures and social locations as a round table in which no position is privileged nor marginalised, with each participant bringing unique insights and understanding from their perspective."[4] This type of cross cultural studies

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2 David Rhoads, "Narrative Criticism: Practices and Prospects," in *Characterization in the Gospels: Reconceiving Narrative Criticism*, ed. David Rhoads and Kari Syreeni, JSNTSup 184 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 281.

3 Cf. John Baptist Antony, "Feminist Biblical Scholarship from the Dalit Women Lens," *Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflection* 85.7 (2021): 495–513; Phyllis Trible, *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984).

4 Rhoads, "Narrative Criticism," 285.

is undertaken in the third section of this article, bringing together to the round table the cultural contexts of today, in particular, African, Afro-American and Dalit women.[5]

3. Identity of Hagar in Genesis Narratives

As mentioned in the introduction, the passages related to Hagar in Genesis present her as a full-fledged character, understood as "more complex, manifesting a multitude of traits."[6] Seen from this angle we can list the identity of Hagar as slave-girl (הָהָפְשׁ) and slave woman (הָמָא), Egyptian as ethnic other (Gen 16:1; 21:9; 25:12), wife (הָשָׁא; Gen 16:3), mother, as one affirming the self, and as one whose proper name is used by the messenger of God and the narrator. In Gen 16, for example, Hagar is introduced as a foreigner (Egyptian), low in social status (maidservant), used as a surrogate, and elevated to be a wife; she affirms her subjecthood, revolts, tries to upset the existing social order, and tries to reverse it. She is oppressed all the more harshly (cf. Gen 16:6), flees from oppression, encounters God and receives His message. At the end, she shines out to be a mystic and theologian articulating her divine experience[7] and comes back to the place of oppression but as a wife and mother and not as a slave or surrogate.[8] What Adele Berlin says of Michal and Bathsheba (in 1 Kgs 1–2) as full-fledged characters applies very well to Hagar. Regarding these two female characters, she says, "They are realistically portrayed; their emotions and motivations are either made explicit or are left to be discerned by the reader from hints provided in the narrative. We feel that we know them, understand them and can, to a large extent, identify with them."[9] The last

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5 According to the 2001 Census of India, Dalit women number approximately 80.5 million, representing 48 per cent of the total Dalit population, 16 per cent of the total female population, and 8 per cent of the total Indian population (Government of India, *National Census of India 2001: Final Population Totals* [New Delhi: Government of India, 2004]).

6 Antony, *Thus Spoke the Bible*, 103.

7 Cf. John Baptist Antony, *Together as Sisters: Hagar and Dalit Women (New Delhi: ISPCK, 2012), 150–53.*

8 Cf. Antony, *Together as Sisters*, 158–60.

9 Adele Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1994), 31–32. This is also illustrated in the account of David and Michal in 1 Sam 19:11–17. According to Berlin, though David is generally the main character, Michal functions as the principal figure in this passage (cf. Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation*, 32). The same dynamic applies to Abram and Hagar; cf. Antony, *Thus Spoke the Bible*, 102–6.

statement is very much true and applicable to Hagar. Now I briefly explain the various identities of Hagar as presented in the Hagar Narratives (Gen 16 and 21).

3.1 הָשְׁפָּח (slave-girl)[10] and הָמָא (slave woman)[11]

According to Teubal, "Hagar is not an ordinary household slave, but the peculiar property of Sarai, and, therefore, not at the free disposal of her master. … Some wives have female slaves who are their own property, generally purchased for them, or presented to them, before their marriage. These cannot be the husband's concubines without their mistresses' permission, which is sometimes granted (as in the case of Hagar); but very seldom."[12] So there is a hierarchy of oppression: Abraham the patriarch at the top, Sarah the matriarch next and finally Hagar the maidservant. Moreover, "In the context of Gen 21:10, the use of 'this' slave woman, not using her proper name, Hagar, shows that Sarai (also Abraham) considered Hagar only as an object, that could be cast out easily."[13] Therefore, Hagar is the property of Sarai who had complete control over her.[14] The use of הָמָא in E (Gen 21) is a more derogatory denotation than הָחְפָּש in J (Gen 16). So הָמָא (slave woman) is more servile than הָחְפָּש (slave-girl). The words of God, "Your slave woman" (Gen 21:12) "shifts ownership of Hagar from Sarah to Abraham."[15]

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10 Cf. Gen 16:1, 2, 3, 5, 6; 29:24; Lev 19:20; Ruth 2:13; Ps 123:2. In my translation I have used 'maidservant' rather than 'slave'. For the reasons, see Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, Word Biblical Commentary 2 (Dallas: Word Books, 1994), 6.

11 Cf. Gen 21:10 [2x], 12, 13.

12 Savina J. Teubal, *Hagar the Egyptian: The Lost Tradition of the Matriarchs* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1990), 54; cf. John Skinner, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Genesis* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1969), 285: "No one else in the household, not even Abram, could make Hagar do anything without Sarai's permission"; Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (New York: Abingdon, 1993), 17.

13 John Baptist Antony, "Daughters of Hagar: Intersection of Racism and Caste System for Liberation of Dalit and Other Women" (paper presented at the Seminar in Honour of Professor Felix Wilfred, University of Madras, Chennai, Tamil Nadu, 24 February 2023), 4.

14 Cf. Antony, Together as Sisters, 93, for the explanation of the use of הָלָו (Gen 16:1) in the sense of possession.

15 Phyllis Trible, "Ominous Beginning for a Promise of Blessing," in *Hagar, Sarah, and Their Children: Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Perspectives*, ed. Phyllis Trible and Letty M. Russell (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2006), 33–69, esp. 45.

3.2 Egyptian as Ethnic Other[16]

Negative association with Egypt and Egyptians as one to be feared begins as early as Gen 12:10–20. So Hagar's identity as Egyptian is seen as one of 'foreign' and 'ethnic-other' which is enslaved by Sarai and will enslave Israel later.[17] To the question why Ishmael and Hagar are so violently expelled in Gen 21, Cheryl Exum explains, "… the greater the challenge that the self perceives to its boundaries, the stronger its reaction … As Abraham's own flesh and blood, Ishmael radically threatens the fragile boundaries of Israel's proper 'self:' 'the son of this slave woman shall not be heir with my son Isaac' (Gen 21:10)."[18]

3.3 אִשָּׁה (wife; Gen 16:3)

Though, in Gen 16:3, Sarai is the subject of the actions and Hagar is the object, it is interesting to note that both Sarai and Hagar are referred to as wife: "Sarai, *Abram's wife*, took Hagar the Egyptian, her slave-girl, and gave her to her husband Abram as *a wife*" (Gen 16:3 NRS).[19] So "Hagar from being a maidservant and bondwoman was raised to be wife with her legal rights and privileges as that of Sarah."[20] As wife of Abraham, Hagar asserted her rights and privileges, implicitly of her son. Hagar wants reordering and renegotiation, but Sarai seeks to maintain the established hierarchy. The demands of Hagar are unacceptable to Sarai. In the second narrative too, Hagar was not consulted when a decision was taken about her and her son. In Gen 21 she

16 Cf. Gen 16:1; 21:9; 25:12.

17 Cf. Antony, "Daughters of Hagar," 5.

18 J. Cheryl Exum, *Art as Biblical Commentary: Visual Criticism from Hagar the Wife of Abraham to Mary the Mother of Jesus*, Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies 676 (London: T&T Clark, 2019), 48–49. Note that the reason for expulsion is inheritance. According to the practice of the time, Ishmael as the firstborn (*primogenitura*) would have a greater share. Cf. Constance Shisanya, "A Reflection on the Hagar Narratives in Genesis through the Eyes of a Kenyan Woman," in *Interpreting the Old Testament in Africa: Papers from the International Symposium of Africa and the Old Testament in Nairobi, October 1999*, ed. Mary Getui, Knut Holter, and Victor Zinkuratire (New York: Peter Lang, 2001), 147–51. A separate study could be made of how Genesis narrates Israel's separation from surrounding peoples such as the Ishmaelites; the stories in Gen 16 and 21 serve this purpose by foregrounding Hagar's foreignness and thus her exclusion from the 'self' that is Israel.

19 Antony, *Together as Sisters*, 106–7. This constitutes a validly contracted marriage.

20 Antony, "Daughters of Hagar," 5.

was "banished by her husband at the command of his first wife and God."[21] If Gen 16 narrates the exodus of a wife, Gen 21 narrates the exile forced upon Hagar, the legal wife and mother. Israel in the Old Testament experienced both, exodus and exile.

3.4 Mother

In the first narrative of the Hagar story (Gen 16:15–16), the motherhood of Hagar is repeatedly affirmed. The fact that Hagar gave birth is mentioned three times, and the family relationship among Abraham, the physical and legal father, Hagar, the mother, and Ishmael, the son, alone remains mentioned. Moreover, the three are referred to only by their names, which stand for their personhood and subjecthood.

In the second narrative, the motherhood of Hagar is depicted as:

1. *The suffering mother*: In Gen 21:15–16, the child is at the point of death and Hagar withdraws and sits by herself. These actions indicate her helplessness and loneliness. In v. 16 she cries a cry of anguish.

2. *The assertive and responsible mother*: There are two aspects to God's revelation in Gen 21:18. First, she is commanded to lift the boy and hold him fast. In contrast to the first Hagar narrative, where she was instructed to submit under the hand of Sarai (cf. Gen 16:9), in this passage she is directed to lift the hand of the boy and hold him fast.[22] Toward the end of the second narrative involving Hagar (Gen 21:19–21), she becomes an acting and active subject of many actions. She arranges the marriage of Ishmael. Their choice to live in the wilderness indicates their refusal to live within the culture of slavery, in the house of Abraham. Hagar also obtains a wife for him from Egypt. Thus, they establish a new culture, a counter-culture, and their own identities: Ishmael as archer and Hagar as mother. The second aspect: God reiterates his

21 Trible, "Ominous Beginning," 46.

22 The second element is this: God reiterates his promise of making a nation — a promise given to Hagar in the wilderness of Shur — and extends it also to Abraham.

promise of making a nation, which he gave to Hagar in the wilderness of Shur and to Abraham.

So, the Hagar narrative ends as both having their own home, Ishmael having a profession and a family. Hagar shines as a mother and all the imposed negative identities, like slave girl and Egyptian, are forgotten.

3.5 As Affirming the Self

Though the characters Abraham and Sarai treat Hagar as an object, in the encounter with a messenger of God or God Himself, in both the narratives, Hagar is treated as a subject (Gen 16:8; 21:16). In Gen 16:8 Hagar is *addressed to* using her *proper name Hagar* which Sarai and Abraham conveniently avoided. She was *spoken to* as against spoken about. She was *asked to speak* and thus she becomes a dialoguing partner with God. She also affirms her personhood by stating "I am running away from my mistress Sarai." (Gen 16:8 NRSV)[23]

Commenting about the flight of Hagar, Cheryl Exum argues thus, "Both Hagar's flight in ch. 16 and her departure in ch. 21 are the result of rejection by Israel, Israel's refusal to accept Hagar and Ishmael as belonging to its 'self.' Away from Abraham's household, Hagar begins to emerge as a subject. Her point of view is no longer suppressed. But this is not all. *Hagar* at this point becomes a subject in process, seeking to establish *her* subjectivity."[24] Commenting about the end of the second narrative, she further affirms: "Hagar once again asserts her 'self' over against Israel. She does for Ishmael what Abraham does for Isaac: she procures a wife for her son from her own people, Egypt. Hagar's connection with Israel has been severed, and the story of Hagar the Egyptian ends, fittingly, with the word 'Egypt.'"[25]

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23 Cf. my analysis of these verses, especially the use of the first-person pronoun (יִנְנִא; Gen 16:8); Antony, *Together as Sisters*, 129–30, 133–35.

24 Exum, *Art as Biblical Commentary*, 92.

25 Exum, *Art as Biblical Commentary*, 101.

3.6 Use of the Proper Name by the Messenger of God and the Narrator

Abraham and Sarai never address Hagar and never use her proper name in their conversation but only use her social title (slave girl, slave woman and Egyptian). On the contrary, the narrator and the messenger of God use her proper name to refer to her or speak to her (cf. narrator: Gen 16:1, 3, 4, 15; 21:9, 14, 17; messenger of God: Gen 16:8; 21:17). We can conclude, "Thus, the name indicating her identity as an individual and her role as mother is to be preferred over all the other socially inflicted identities which are mostly derogatory and degrading. The name and the motherhood are signs of her dignity and subjecthood."[26]

As a conclusion one can see that Hagar undergoes multiple identities. While הָחְפִּשׁ and הָמאָ identify Hagar in her social context as one oppressed and exploited, 'Egyptian' keeps her at distance as ethnic other. The words הָשִׁא (wife), mother, and use of her proper name Hagar portray her in a positive light. In my opinion, therefore, "… as the story ends in both the Hagar narratives, the identity of Hagar with a proper name and as mother alone prevails."[27]

4. The Identity of Hagar in Gal 4:21–31

The preceding analysis has explored Hagar's multifaceted identity in the Genesis narratives. We now turn to Paul's letter to the Galatian communities to examine how Hagar's identity is reinterpreted in the early Christian era. How does Paul employ Hagar's identity in his context of 'identity conflicts' and 'identity markers' within his cultural and religious framework marked by his adherence to Christ as redeemer of the world?

4.1 Background of Galatians

The Letter to the Galatians can be understood only in the background of the two gospels proposed to the Galatians. One is that of the opponents of Paul and the other is by Paul himself.

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26 Antony, "Daughters of Hagar," 6.
27 Antony, "Daughters of Hagar," 6.

Basing his analysis on Gal 3:6–29[28] and 4:21–31 (the Sarah-Hagar allegory), Frank J. Matera[29] summarises the first set of arguments advanced by Paul's opponents as follows. First, Jesus is the Messiah of Israel.[30] One can partake of the full benefit of his presence only by becoming a descendant of Abraham. God made an eternal covenant of circumcision with Abraham (Gen 17:19) and his descendants. Therefore, if one wishes to be a descendant, he must be circumcised. Second, God gave the Law to Moses. If anyone does not follow it, he will be accursed (Deut 27:26; Gal 3:10). However, those who observe it will live (Lev 18:5; Gal 3:12). Therefore, to benefit from the Messiah, one must perform the 'works of the Law.' In other words, one must accept circumcision, abstain from unclean food, and respect the days and festivals required by the Torah. In short, the salvific work of Jesus extends to the Gentiles, and they can be fully included in the covenant only if they are circumcised and perform the works of the Law.[31] In the attempt to refute his opponents, Paul invokes the biblical figures of Hagar and Sarah.

4.2 Hagar and Sarah in the Argument of the Opponents

According to the Biblical narratives, Abraham had two sons. One is Ishmael begotten by Hagar, Abraham's Egyptian slave girl. Ishmael and Hagar lived in the desert and became a tribe or generation of their own. They can be considered as ancestors of Gentiles like the Galatians. The birth of Ishmael was "ac-

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28 Paul argues that the Galatians (Gentiles) are Abraham's descendants because they are "in Christ," and he speaks about the superiority of the promise made to Abraham over the law given through the mediation of angels (Gal 3:15–25), comparing Hagar and Sarah to Jews and Gentiles respectively.

29 Cf. Frank J. Matera, *Galatians*, Sacra Pagina 9 (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1992).

30 The other two tenets of the gospel of Paul's opponents are as follows. 1. Based on Gal 1–2 (autobiographical statements which include the commission to preach, the origin of his gospel, and his relationship with Jerusalem), we can deduce the claims of the opponents as follows: i. They have a special relationship with Jerusalem as their mother church, and therefore their gospel is authentic, rooted in the gospel preached there. ii. If the Galatians heed the opponents' gospel, they will do what the "pillar apostles" require of all Gentiles. Even in Antioch, Peter, Barnabas, and other Jewish believers refused to share table fellowship with Gentile believers until they practised the "works of the Law" — this is presented as a model. 2. Based on 5:13–6:10 (moral exhortation), we can deduce their arguments as follows: the community was in need of moral guidance to overcome the desires of the flesh. The Law provides this guidance. Paul's gospel, by contrast, does not. Therefore, whoever wishes to follow the Messiah should follow the precepts of the Law, which teaches right and wrong and enables the community to overcome fleshly desires.

31 Paul, on the other hand, is blamed for relaxing the commandments. Jesus never abrogated the Jewish observance of the Law (Matt 5:17–18); he himself was a circumcised Jew, and the apostles in Jerusalem kept the feasts and food regulations. Cf. Letty M. Russell, "Twists and Turns in Paul's Allegory," in Trible and Russell, *Hagar, Sarah, and Their Children*, 72–73.

cording to the flesh," because it took place in an ordinary way: a woman who was not barren gave birth to a child. The other son is Isaac begotten by Sarah. He became ancestor of the Jews. His birth was "through the promise" of God to Abraham (Gen 17:19; 18:10, 14). The opponents, therefore, would have argued, "The real descendants of Abraham are those who accept the covenant of circumcision that God made with Abraham. You believe in the Christ and that is commendable. But now you must complete your conversion by becoming Abraham's descendants in the line of Isaac, for true Israelites, including the Messiah, belong to this line."[32]

Therefore, the table of two births would be represented thus:

First Birth	Second birth
Hagar and Ishmael	Sarah and Isaac
Gentiles	Jews
According to the flesh	According to the promise
Gentile Christians	Jewish Christians proposing circumcision for Gentiles.

4.3 Twist and Turns in the Allegorical Interpretation of Paul

Paul gives a twist through an allegorical interpretation of these two women and their sons. According to Paul, Hagar, the slave woman, does not represent the Gentiles but the present, earthly Jerusalem and the enslaving covenant of the law given on Mount Sinai. Sarah, the free woman, represents the heavenly Jerusalem, heavenly mother and the covenant of God's promise to Abraham and of grace. She is the mother of all the Gentile Christians who have been made free in Christ. As Letty M. Russell points out, "In Paul's new truth, Sarah moves from being the Mother of Israel to the free Mother of Christians, and Hagar moves from being a cast-out Egyptian slave to the cast-out slave Mother of Israel and its Torah."[33] In this new interpretation, Gentile Christians are granted citizenship through God's intervention and they are born according to the Spirit. Therefore, these Gentiles are descendants of Abraham.

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32 Matera, *Galatians*, 174–75.
33 Russell, "Twists and Turns," 74.

Russell explains the twist thus: "Paul puts both Mount Sinai and Jerusalem in the covenant of slavery column because they both represent following the law. Hagar, the slave, fled to the wilderness of the Arabian Peninsula with her son, Ishmael. Their descendants prospered and lived in that area as Ishmaelites. Therefore, the allegory connects the slave woman with Mount Sinai and the law, and if with the law, also with Jerusalem, the centre of the practice of Jewish tradition."[34]

Therefore, the twisted argument of Paul would make the table as follows:

Covenant of the Flesh	***Covenant of Promise***
(Hagar was in the Desert), Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia, bearing children for slavery.	----------
Present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery with her children. (Israel)	Jerusalem above, she is free, she is our mother,
(Slavery law was given to enslave)	(Gentiles and Christians who need not follow specific laws of Torah)
(Enslaving Covenant)	(Covenant of Grace and Faith)
In the Context of the Letter to the Galatians	
Present, earthly Mount Jerusalem (i.e. Judaism)	Jerusalem above, heavenly mother (Christianity)
Slave children	Free children, born according to Spirit
Paul's opponents who want believers in Christ keeping the laws of the Torah	Paul who wants the Galatians to follow Christ without insisting on laws that separate Jews and non-Jews

34 Russell, "Twists and Turns," 79.

Moreover Russell notes, "Whereas Sarah refuses to call Hagar by name in Genesis 16 and 21, here Paul does not use Sarah's name and only speaks about her as the 'other woman,' the free mother of Christians (Gal 4:26). In contrast, Hagar is named as the 'slave woman' who is in slavery with her Jewish Christian or Judaizing children (Gal 4:21, 25)."[35] So Hagar is rejected doubly in the letter to the Galatians: "In his new version of Genesis 16 and 21 Paul doubles Hagar's rejection through the use of allegory. In Genesis she is a foreigner, a slave, and a threat to Sarah. In Galatians she is all of these, and also a Jewish Christian opponent, a slave to the Jewish law, and a threat to Gentile Christian freedom in Christ."[36]

Such an interpretation of Paul has had a negative impact on the history of interpretation, including anti-Jewish and anti-Islamic readings, and has also served to justify racial and gender discrimination.[37]

5. Identification with Indian Subaltern Group

This final part presents how Hagar can be identified with Dalit women in the contemporary Indian context.

5.1 Introduction

Many contemporary biblical interpreters, particularly from marginalised communities, identify themselves with Hagar in many respects: as mothers, people in bondage, the exploited, men and women used and abused, surrogate mothers, aliens without legal recourse, runaway youth, unwed mothers, expelled wives, divorced mothers with children, homeless women, the abandoned, abused, betrayed and banished, migrants, and members of blended families.[38]

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35 Russell, "Twists and Turns," 72.

36 Russell, "Twists and Turns," 72; cf. Gal 4:24–26.

37 See Elizabeth A. Clark, "Interpretative Fate amid the Church Fathers," in *Hagar, Sarah*, 127–47.

38 Cf. David J. Zucker and Moshe Reiss, "Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar as a Blended Family: Problems, Partings and Possibilities," *Women in Judaism: A Multidisciplinary Journal* 6.2 (2009). A blended family is one in which, following divorce or the death of a spouse and subsequent remarriage, at least one parent and one child are not biologically related.

There are various themes under which this identification could converge: "God's presentation of unforeseen possibilities; human agency; the goal of justice, survival and quality of life; and a challenge of the existing order."[39] We can further list the themes as ethnic religious and gender prejudice and othering, economic stratification and other social problems; victim of patriarchal culture; God's intervention, surviving even in circumstances that demand submission and surrender, God also stands by when it is time to resist and assert the independence; the themes of equality, justice, dignity and solidarity.

5.2 Dalit Women

Dalit women of post-colonial India can also identify themselves with Hagar. They converge in these respects such as being used as an object, scarcity of wealth, sexual oppression or exploitation as a right, victimhood, multiple patriarchy, hierarchy,[40] homelessness, struggling for survival, single parenting, being a divorced and deserted wife by the husband, domestic and external violence and working out their own liberation and destiny. As Hagar suffered because of three identities (woman, Egyptian and slave i.e. gender, race and class), Dalit women also suffer because they are Dalits (ethnic other), poor and women.[41]

These identifications between Hagar and Dalit women are not limited to the oppression they suffered but also extend to their efforts at liberation. Hagar stands as a model and inspiration of one who courageously confronted the situation forced upon her. The basic themes for identification in this line include survival/quality of life and seeing a way out where there was none before. Thus, Hagar and Dalit women can engage in dialogue; Hagar can inspire

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39 Monica A. Coleman, *Making a Way out of No Way: A Womanist Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2008), 34–35.

40 Abraham, male and patriarch, stands at the top of the pyramid; Sarah, woman and wife, occupies the second position; Hagar, slave and foreigner, sits at the bottom. The same hierarchy operates in the caste system: the high-caste male is at the top, the high-caste woman next, followed by the Dalit male, and finally the Dalit woman at the very bottom.

41 Elsa Tamez observes: "Because Hagar is a woman, she is a person oppressed three times over owing to her slave status, her race, and her sex" ("The Woman Who Complicated the History of Salvation," *Cross Currents* 36.2 [1986]: 132).

Dalit women to make meaning of their lives and to find life where they could not find it earlier.

Two significant parallels emerge between Dalit women and Hagar: (1) greater oppression and (2) "submit yourself" (v. 9).

1. *Greater oppression:* This concept refers to a particular dimension of the violence suffered by Dalit women. In cases where Dalits assert themselves against caste oppression, higher-caste men attack and rape Dalit women as a means of containment. I designate this as 'greater violence' and compare it with the affliction or harsh treatment inflicted by Sarah upon Hagar after the latter looked upon the former with contempt. At this stage, the oppressed becomes an enemy to be crushed or eliminated.

2. *"Submit yourself:"* In Gen 16:9, the messenger instructs Hagar to return to her mistress and submit herself under the hand of Sarah. The expression "submit yourself" is in the Hithpael form, which can be considered equivalent to the middle voice in Greek.[42] Here Hagar is called to exercise this middle agency through which, though she is returning to the oppressive system and subjecting herself to it, she will not perceive it as oppression because she subjects herself to it willingly and consciously, knowing well that it is only an interim arrangement so that the child may be born in the house of Abraham as legitimate. Similarly, Dalit women may 'subject themselves' at times to the oppressive caste system, hierarchy, and multiple patriarchy as an interim strategy to utilise available resources for the ultimate liberation for which they long and strive.

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42 Cf. Paul Joüon and T. Muraoka, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew*, vol. 2, SubBi 14/II (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 2000), 531; Thomas O. Lambdin, *Introduction to Biblical Hebrew* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1976), 249–250; Antony, *Together as Sisters*, note 220.

6. Fruit Gathering

From this triple reading of Hagar—namely, Jewish, early Christian, and Indian—we can gather the following insights for the emancipation of marginalised groups like Dalit women.

1. From a methodological point of view, I have adopted an ideological approach that unpacks the power dynamics in the text, takes a stance from the perspective of the oppressed and voiceless in the text, and demonstrates how biblical texts can be read in a positive light.

2. There are multiple identities attributed to Hagar in the narratives related to her: slave-girl (הָחְפִּשׁ) and slave woman (הָמְאָ), Egyptian, wife (הָשְׁא), mother, one who affirms the self, and one whose proper name is used. While some identities portray her as oppressed and exploited (הָחְפִּשׁ, הָמְאָ, Egyptian), other identities such as wife, mother, and her name Hagar itself portray her in a positive light.

3. However, in the New Testament, Hagar is depicted as one who is doubly rejected. In addition to the rejections in the Genesis narratives, Paul's interpretation of Hagar in Galatians portrays her as a symbol of his opponents, a slave to the Jewish Law, and a threat to Gentile Christian freedom in Christ. Consequently, Paul calls upon the Galatians to reject her.

4. Many groups in general, and Dalit women in particular, can identify, and do identify, themselves with Hagar. These identifications need not be limited to the perspective of oppression but can also extend to liberation efforts, courageously confronting negative situations, survival/quality of life, and seeing a way out where there was none before.

7. Conclusion

This study has explored the identity of Hagar within three different contexts and has shown that her character is far more complex than a simple reading might suggest. In the Genesis narratives she appears with multiple identities that both constrain and affirm her. While terms such as slave-girl,

slave woman and Egyptian place her within systems of oppression, the narrative also highlights her as wife, mother and a named individual who speaks, resists and encounters God. These elements allow Hagar to emerge not only as a victim of hierarchical structures but also as a figure with her own agency and subjecthood.

Paul's use of Hagar in the letter to the Galatians adds another dimension to her identity. His allegorical interpretation reflects the concerns of the early Christian communities regarding law, promise and the question of who belongs to the people of God. Although it functions as part of his rhetorical strategy against his opponents, it also results in a representation that places Hagar again on the side of rejection and bondage. This stands in contrast to the more nuanced portrayal in Genesis and demonstrates how biblical characters can be reinterpreted and reshaped for theological and communal purposes.

In the contemporary Indian context, particularly among Dalit and subaltern women, Hagar becomes a significant partner in reflection. Her experiences resonate with those who live under caste oppression, economic marginalisation and gendered injustices. Yet her courage, survival and divine recognition speak to the possibilities of dignity and resistance within such contexts. These three readings, taken together, show that Hagar continues to offer valuable insights for understanding identity, power and liberation, and that her story remains relevant for communities seeking justice and life in the midst of oppression.

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FROM STAR WATCHERS TO STAR-WITNESSES: A READER-RESPONSE STUDY AND CONTEXTUALISATION OF MATT 2:1–12

Augustine Agwulonu[*]

1. Introduction

The Magi story is a biblical narrative that highlights the qualities of a positive, dynamic identity and culture embodied by the witnesses to Jesus' birth from the East. They received the sign of Jesus' birth through a star, arose, moved forward, and found the newborn king, worshipped him, offered their gifts, and returned to their land. Scholarship has focused mainly on the source, nature, historicity, movement, and significance of 'the star of Bethlehem,' which revealed and guided the Magi to the newborn king of the Jews.[1] However, little attention has been given to the cultural importance of the Magi themselves, as Gentiles who learnt of the birth of Jesus, the universal king, within their practice of star watching. The Magi exemplify a noteworthy scriptural form of God's knowledge through creation, as St. Paul affirmed in Rom. 1:20. As a result, the pattern and process of the Magi's knowledge of Jesus and their encounter with him in Bethlehem illustrate the theological truth of Scripture that creation mediates God's knowledge to the Gentiles, provided they are observant enough to notice and interpret the signals. Therefore, the cultural context of the Magi contributed to their inspiration, their journey, their confrontation with the resistant and misleading force of stagnation, their following of the guiding star, their joyful discovery, and their transformative encounter with the historical figure of Jesus, the newborn king of the Jews, for eschatological salvation.

* Augustine Agwulonu, OP, is a Professor of New Testament at the Aquinas Ecclesiastical Faculty of Theology, Dominican University, Ibadan, Nigeria.

1 Cf. Benedict T. Viviano, *Matthew and His World: The Gospel of the Open Jewish Christians*, NTOA 61 (Fribourg: Academic Press; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2007), 45.

Using a reader-response approach, this study aims to investigate the cultural and religious foundations of the Magi and the symbolism of their witness to Jesus' birth, offering a theological and Christological basis for its contextualisation in Nigeria (Africa). This exegetical rereading interprets the Magi narrative within the framework of its theological truth, socio-cultural inclusivity, and the Christological significance of God's universal offer of salvation to all peoples of the world. Such an interpretation aligns with the salvific reality of the Messiah's birth, analysing the narrative of Matt 2:1–12 for its practical relevance to Christianity in Nigeria. This contemporary contextualisation is necessary because of the challenge of viewing Christianity as a colonial imposition with no actual relevance to Africa. Jesus' universal relevance was revealed right from the time of his birth, as his 'star of Bethlehem' appeared to the Magi in the East.

2. Contextual Analysis

The Magi narrative has various contextual layers, including historical, literary, cultural, political, and social. According to the text, the historical context is shown through the opening adverbial clause: "when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king" (Matt 2:1a). History involves people, time, and events. Within this context, Matthew identifies the place, period, and politics in the narrative of Jesus' birth as "Bethlehem in Judea," the period of Herod's kingship, and by implication, the king's political ambition as would be seen in the development of the episode. In this way, the evangelist highlights the environmental setting for the dramatic unfolding of our episode.

The immediate literary context of the narrative is the passage that exposes the circumstances of Jesus' conception and birth by his mother, Mary (Matt 1:18–25). The pericope follows the passage that presents the Lord's genealogy, Matt 1:1–17. Thus, the story announcing the birth of Jesus and the journey of the Magi fits within the sequence of events leading to the mention of Bethlehem as the location of the newborn king of the Jews.

Our chosen text narrates the sudden and surprising arrival of the Magi (μάγοι) from the East — which the RSV translated as "wise men" — in Je-

rusalem (Matt 2:1). This information underscores the socio-cultural context of the narrative: two cultures, Gentile and Jewish, connecting with each other through the birth of the newborn king of the Jews (2:2). The identification of the visitors in Jerusalem and their place of origin point to the cultural contextual tension which plays out in the narrative. The rest of the narrative's content exposes and advances the truth about the birth of Jesus, whose prophetic oracle resides in the Jerusalem archives, and its actualisation has just been revealed by the visiting curious Magi from the East.

Subsequently, the narrative unfolds as the continuation of the Magi movement from Herod's palace portal to the birthplace of the new king, led by the reappearance of the previously spotted star in the East (2:9). Subsequently, the Magi encountered the newborn king together with Mary, whereby there is no mention of Joseph. The Magi worshipped the infant king and presented him with their three gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh (2:11). The conclusion of the narrative points to two significant events, namely, the warning of the Magi in the dream (χρηματισθέντες κατ᾽ ὄναρ - 2:12a) and the Magi's departure "to their own country by another way" (δι᾽ ἄλλης ὁδοῦ ἀνεχώρησαν εἰς τὴν χώραν αὐτῶν - 2:12c). Between these two eventualities is the decisive severance of the agreement between the Magi and Herod to share information about the actual location of the newborn infant king (μὴ ἀνακάμψαι πρὸς Ἡρῴδην - 2:12b). Just like life, culture is a movement towards the eschatological fulfilment of the goal of human existence.

After the departure of the Magi to their country without returning to Herod, anger and frustration in the King's palace informed three remarkable events that unfold in chapter three, namely, the escape of the Holy Family to Egypt (2:13–15), the massacre of the infants (2:16–18), and the return from Egypt following Herod's death (2:19–23).

Matthew chapter two encapsulates the collective encounter of both Jews and non-Jews with Jesus Christ, the Saviour of the world. The first canonical evangelist captures this divine outreach to diverse peoples across their unique cultural, natural, and religious landscapes through his literary and artistic nar-

rative of the Magi, who have received varied positive descriptions and interpretations in the history of biblical scholarship.[2]

From the preceding contextual analysis, we conclude that the birth of Jesus does not incite a wicked conspiracy to murder due to human religious, political, social, and cultural ambition. The one and only true God and Father of the Lord Jesus Christ, who revealed Jesus' birth to the Jews, is also the God who made known Jesus' birth to the Gentile Magi through the star and within their cultural context. Consequently, we can plausibly affirm that God acts to unite Jews and Gentiles in His Son, thereby elevating all human beings and their diverse cultures to the glory of Christian salvation. Africa and its cultures should look to the Magi as a model for their encounter with Jesus Christ, seeking human and cultural transformation.

3. Structural Analysis

The structural division below illustrates the narrative flow and thematic development. Overall, this arrangement ensures a logical and thematic progression, enhances understanding, highlights key turning points, and makes the narrative more engaging for the reader.

Setting and Geographical Frame	Vv. 1–2a
Testimonial Statement	V. 2b
Reaction and Inquiry	Vv. 3–4

2 Jacques Matthey, "Pilgrims, Seekers, and Disciples: Mission and Dialogue in Matthew," *International Review of Mission* 91.360 (2002): 120–121, captures the history of interpreting the Magi narrative thus: "The magi are religious specialists of astrology and occult arts. They are people capable of interpreting visions and dreams and/or members of priestly castes in the Eastern capitals. According to New Testament scholars, the magi mentioned in Matt 2 could have come from Persia, Babylon or the Arabian/Syrian desert. In Hellenistic literature, the term is used for serious, scientific, people as well as occasionally for charlatans. In the Hebrew scriptures and Jewish tradition however, the term often describes unacceptable religious activities. It is the more relevant that Matt, here, dares give to magi a positive role. Indeed, there is not the slightest critical remark about their journey and search. Through their religiously based scientific observation and interpretation of the stars, the magi are capable of finding who exactly was born (not just 'a' king) and where they have to go. The text affirms that they realise the importance of the newborn person and are able to do so exclusively on the basis of their own scientific and religious research. Matthew, shows them ready to kneel before Jesus, in an act of humble submission and adoration."

The Confirmation	Vv. 5–6
Send Forth after Ruse-hidden Instruction	Vv. 7–8
Reappearance of Star and Leadership to Bethlehem	Vv. 9
Encounter, Worship, and Gifts' Presentation	Vv. 10–11
Return by another Road	V. 12

The structure of the Magi narrative reveals a tightly woven, episodic, and well-rounded composition. The text commences with the map of a journey from the East (ἀπὸ ἀνατολῶν), to Bethlehem, passing through Jerusalem and eventually returning to the East. Our pericope neither identifies the road by which the Magi reached Jerusalem and then Bethlehem nor the other way (δι᾽ ἄλλης ὁδοῦ), by which they returned to their home country. Thus, the evangelist might not have been overly concerned with the Magi's physical movement along the given highways but instead wanted to highlight the dynamic of a chain of events involving a decisive revelation, an inspired movement, and a consequent, responsible return journey.

The setting (vv. 1–2a) reveals two significant events at two geographical points, intertwined by the appearance of a specific star. The geographical polarities tie a knot in Jerusalem, precisely at King Herod's palace. The author appears to be primarily focused on the arrival at King Herod's court for further confirmation of the star's revelation to the Magi in the East. Thus, the birth in Bethlehem of Judea and the manifestation of the star in the East mark the starting point and the intended destination within the distance that the Magi traverse in response to the revelation provided by their star watch.

The testimonial statement of this narrative (v. 2b) justifies the Magi's presence in Jerusalem at King Herod's palace.

Vv. 3–4 report the 'seismic' effect of the magi's inquiry about the location of the newborn Jewish king, stating that king Herod and all of Jerusalem trembled. Subsequently, king Herod summoned the chief priests and scribes for an assembly. There is a significant variation to the title given to the child whom the Magi seek in v. 2, "king of the Jews" (βασιλεὺς τῶν

Ἰουδαίων), and Herod's identification of the same infant in v. 4 as "the Christ" (ὁ χριστὸς).[3]

Vv. 5–6 confirm the Magi's vision, which the star reveals to them after the chief priests and scribes review the prophetic records, as king Herod commands. Thus, the birth of Christ the King in Bethlehem, Judea, has its place within the Jewish prophetic and historical annals. Consequently, there is a sequential linguistic order in the narrative's flow. This validates the previous inquiry, lending credibility and narrative progression to the unfolding events. This confirmation highlights the Messiah's birth in Bethlehem and underscores its significance in Jerusalem, particularly within the royal court. Thus, the birth of Christ the King is manifested in Gentile territory through a star, even as it occurs empirically in the Jewish city of Bethlehem, following its prophetic preannouncement. Consequently, this part of the narrative structure demonstrates the universal value of Christ's birth.

Next is King Herod's conversation with the Magi (vv. 7–8), which completes the narrative sequence of the Magi's arrival at the palace and their question about the whereabouts of the newborn king of the Jews. Furthermore, the response to the Magi's inquiry highlights Herod's anxiety, the whole of Jerusalem, the research of the prophetic archives, and the final confirmation of Bethlehem as the birthplace of Christ.

V. 9 presents the resurfacing of the star, which the Magi saw first in the East. Until now, the narrative has remained silent about the star after its first appearance. The second manifestation describes how it moves with the Magi, leading them to where the infant Jesus lies in the manger in Bethlehem. Thus, the star's initial appearance in the East and its subsequent resting place over the birthplace of Christ in Bethlehem, Judea, establish a narrative inclusion for the Magi episode.

The narrative links the Magi's joy (χαρὰν μεγάλην) at resighting the star (ἰδόντες δὲ τὸν ἀστέρα) outside of Herod's palace, with the sight of "the child with his mother Maria" (εἶδον τὸ παιδίον μετὰ Μαρίας τῆς μητρὸς αὐτοῦ) at their

3 Cf. Curtis Mitch and Edward Sri, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2010), 12, 49.

entrance "into the house" (ἐλθόντες εἰς τὴν οἰκίαν), where their sought-after baby king of the Jews is lying (vv. 10–11). With the report of this emotional response by the Magi, the narrative attains its climax as the star-inspired and star-guided visitors' joyful expression transitions to their prostration in the act of worship (πεσόντες προσεκύνησαν αὐτῷ), even as they open their treasure and present the baby king with their significant gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh (προσήνεγκαν αὐτῷ δῶρα, χρυσὸν καὶ λίβανον καὶ σμύρναν (v. 11).

Finally, from the climactic narrative height of joy, vision, worship, and presentation of gifts, the episode slips into the sombreness of a vivid dream, where the Magi are divinely instructed not to return to king Herod. Consequently, they return to their own country by another way (δι᾽ ἄλλης ὁδοῦ ἀνεχώρησαν εἰς τὴν χώραν αὐτῶν - v. 12).

In conclusion, our structural analysis reveals that the Magi's journey narrative begins with the sighting of the star in the East (v. 2). After this initial glimpse, the Matthean narrator remains silent about the star and offers no details about the Magi's movement up to King Herod's palace in Jerusalem (v. 1). The void of distance and the omission of the physical link between the East and Jerusalem transform the plains, valleys, hills, and bridges that the Magi might have traversed to access Jerusalem into a limitless horizon of imaginative ambience.[4] We shall now explore and reflect on the linguistic and symbolic profundity of the Magi story.

4. Linguistic Symbolism

The language of movement underpins the symbolic depth of the Magi narrative. The flow of the text traces the characters' and the star's movements. In this depiction, Jesus, king Herod, and the Magi embody the narrative's dynamic mobility. Meanwhile, the star gleams and diminishes in accordance with its nature to shine and fade into obscurity. Yet, the same celestial body reappears in Jerusalem, reminiscent of the playful children's game of 'hide-and-seek,' as the linguistically crafted artistic movement of the narrative unfolds.

4 Cf. Thomas S. Eliot, "Journey of the Magi" (1927). Published in Poem-a-Day on December 24, 2023, by the Academy of American Poets: Thomas S. Eliot, "Journey of the Magi," *Poem-a-Day*, Academy of American Poets, 24 December 2023, https://poets.org/poem/journey-magi.

Firstly, the narrative sequence depicts a systematic pattern of transitions involving a birth, a star, a journey to and from Jerusalem, and Herod and his city's unsettling emotional palpitations. Herod certainly has reason to fear for his political future since he is 'Idumean,' meaning 'ethnically non-Jewish,' and it is Rome that appoints him as king.[5] The text begins with a relative clause referencing the birth of Jesus: "when Jesus was born…" (τοῦ δὲ Ἰησοῦ γεννηθέντος - v 1). This birth is linked to a significant movement of revelation, which is astronomically and symbolically captured by the appearance and movement of a star. The text highlights the dynamic Christological unfolding of Matt 1:18–25.

Secondly, the Magi represent a significant movement within the episode. The text notes that "wise men from the East came to Jerusalem" (v. 1b), indicating a transition from one location, 'the East,' to another, 'Jerusalem.' This movement is further detailed in v. 2b, where the magi inform king Herod, "For we have seen his star in the East and have come to worship him." The Magi then continue their journey, departing from King Herod's palace to reach the birthplace of the newborn king of the Jews in Bethlehem (vv. 9 and 11). Upon discovering the Holy Family, the Magi knelt in worship and presented gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh to the infant Jesus (v. 11). Ultimately, the Magi moved to return "to their own country by another way (v. 12)." In summary, the narrative reveals three significant movements of the Magi, which contribute to the dramatic structure of the episode: beginning, tension,[6] and denouement centred around the Magi's gesture of worship.[7]

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5 Mitch and Sri, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 52.

6 Cf. Pierre Benoît and Marie-Émile Boismard, *Synopse des Quatre Évangiles en Français* (Paris: Cerf, 1972), 15, where the authors describe Matthew's magi narrative as comprising "anecdotal episodes" [*épisodes anecdotiques*] conveying the same message that Luke passes through the mouth of Simeon, with particular reference to "crisis and contradiction in Israel." Benedict T. Viviano, "The Adoration of the Magi: Matt 2:1–23 and Theological Aesthetics," *Revue biblique* 115.4 (2008): 548, captures the tension in the magi narrative when he writes: "In Matthew 2 we see the same tension between the beauty of the bright, splendid, shining star as it appears in the open sky, the great joy of the magi at it, on the one hand, and the royal estate of Herod as a mask for his abuse of power, his paranoid fear of rivals to the throne, his secret inquiry (Matt 2:7), his lie (2:8), his intent to murder (2:16–18), on the other hand."

7 Cf. Frank Mobbs, "The Meaning of the Magi," *New Blackfriars* 87.1012 (2006): 595. Mobbs highlights the central importance of the magi's act of adoration: "For the denouement is the 'adoration' of, or 'rendering homage' to, the infant Jesus. Remove it and the story is pointless."

Thirdly, there is the movement of the star: its appearance, disappearance, and reappearance. According to the narrative, the star's reappearance involves moving from outside Herod's palace until it stands above the house where baby Jesus lies in a manger (v. 9).

Fourthly, a notable psychological disturbance befell both Herod and Jerusalem, portraying both the King and his subjects as troubled or frightened. This anxiety leads to the move to convoke "the chief priests and scribes of the people" for inquiry (vv. 3–4). The literal interpretation of the Greek term ἐταράχθη is "to shake together."[8] In this sense, even though Herod and the leaders in his court did not leave the palace, they experienced profound emotional turmoil. This represents the only negative and unintentional movement within the episode: positive and intentional actions, rich in theological, Christological, cosmic, and salvific significance, characterise the others.

We see how the movement of God's Son in the incarnation aligns the heavenly bodies and humanity on earth, leading to the witness of the newborn King of the Jews and the subsequent experience of salvation. In this way, the movement concept captures the profound linguistic symbolism of the Magi narrative. Two statements justify the Magi's appearance in Jerusalem: "We saw his star in the East" (εἴδομεν γὰρ αὐτοῦ τὸν ἀστέρα ἐν τῇ ἀνατολῇ), "and came to worship him" (καὶ ἤλθομεν προσκυνῆσαι αὐτῷ - v. 2b).

Vv. 3–4: linguistic detail and sense of the seismic effect of the Magi's question. Notably, Matthew transitions from the Magi's reference to "the King of the Jews" (v. 2) to Herod's inquiry about "the Christ" (v. 4).[9] This shift suggests a shared understanding between the Magi and king Herod, highlighting the unity of identity between the King of the Jews and the Christ. The Magi and Herod refer to the exact significant figure, Jesus of Nazareth.[10] This detail in-

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8 Cleon L. Rogers Jr. and Cleon L. Rogers III, *The New Linguistic and Exegetical Key to the Greek New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1998), 3. The authors also explain the meaning of ἐταράχθη as "to stir up, to disturb, to unsettle, to throw into confusion."

9 Mitch and Sri, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 49.

10 Cf. Raymond E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1977), 175, for a Matthean literary pattern (26:33 and 27:37) supporting the affirmation that the Magi and Herod were referring to the same personality; see also Mobbs, "The Meaning of the Magi," 597.

dicates that Herod comprehends the implications of the Magi's announcement of the newborn Jewish king.

Vv. 7–8 highlight a striking contrast between the 'kings' from the East and Herod in Jerusalem. While the Magi temporarily set aside their stargazing to seek out the newborn king of the Jews, Herod delegates the task to them, asking them to find the infant king and report back to him. At this point, king Herod pretended to be favourably inclined toward the newborn Christ King. In keeping with the narrative's unity, Matthew connects the Magi with the symbolically eastern 'rising' star, which serves as the agent of revelation, awakening, and motivation for their journey (v 2). One could argue that the author of the first gospel portrays the stopover at King Herod's palace as ultimately futile. While it may have delayed the magi's arrival in Bethlehem of Judea, the cumulative significance of this event can be as profound as the star's symbolic appearance in the East, signalling the birth of the newborn king of the Jews.

5. The Magi as a Model of Renewed Culture and Identity Through Christ

Who were the Magi? Were they kings, wise men, and precisely three in number? Notably, the Matthean text does not provide unequivocal details regarding these specific aspects. The ongoing quest to understand their true identity and number has sparked lively discussions, leading to various interpretations.[11] This paper refers to the Magi as stellar witnesses to Jesus' birth in Bethlehem (v. 1). Their witnessing accounts for their Christian rebirth, transforming their identity and culture. The Magi receive revelation within their cultural, religious, and astrological practices. Consequently, they observe the special star heralding the birth of the newborn king of the Jews, Jesus the Christ (v. 4).

11 Cf. Mark Allan Powell, "The Magi as Kings: An Adventure in Reader-Response Criticism," *CBQ* 62 (2000): 459–480: the magi might not be genuine kings. See also Powell, "The Magi as Wise Men: Re-examining a Basic Supposition," *New Testament Studies* 46 (2000): 1–20 — the description of the magi as "wise men" results from "an ideological bias" (1). David Sim, "The Magi: Gentiles or Jews?" *HTS Theological Studies* 55.4 (1999): 980–1000 — the magi might not be Gentiles, since "Matthew did not stipulate the racial origins of the magi" (Sim, "The Magi," 980).

Matthew's portrayal of the Magi presents them as dedicated and fearless seekers of truth and passionate lovers of knowledge. Their pragmatic approach is evident in their prompt and effective response to the extraordinary star of Bethlehem. Jews and Gentiles have different ways of accessing knowledge and truth. Paul notes that while the Jews are granted access to truth through God's choosing, the Gentiles rely on the natural world to convey knowledge and truth about God to them (see Rom 1:18–20).

The identification of Jesus as the newborn king of the Jews emphasises the Lord's Christological importance and universal significance, as the Magi narrative highlights and brings to life. William Barclay explained this theological and Christological sense of the Magi's identification of Jesus from the perspective of the implications of their association with the practice of star watching in the east and the denouement of their arrival at Jesus' birthplace.[12]

6. Theological Meaning and Sense

What pragmatic, didactic, or theological motif should move Matthew, a Jew, to compose a legend that places the Jewish King and his court elites opposite a few pagan astrologers?[13] A Matthean emphasis on the various patterns of God's revelation of the Messiah King's birth stands out through the textual structure, narrative movement, and the strategic employment of the star of wonder. Frankemölle documented three aspects of the star's manifestation and significance: its appearance, which signals the presence of the salvific figure; the star as the signpost leading to the salvific figure; and the star as the identifier of the salvific figure, standing atop the place where he was born.[14] This Matthean theological pragmatics of the Magi narrative exposes the cynicism of Herod disguised as a desire to worship the newborn king of the Jews,

12 Cf. William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew*, vol. 1, rev. ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975), 27, where the author sums up his commentary on what he titled "the homage of the east" thus: "It was to a waiting world that Jesus came; and, when he came, the ends of the earth were gathered at his cradle. It was the first sign and symbol of the world conquest of Christ". In other words, Barclay uses military language to describe a theological and Christological implication of the birth of the new king of the Jews.

13 Frankemölle has observed that "the text itself thrives on oppositions;" Hubert Frankemölle, *Matthäus Kommentar*, 2nd ed. (Düsseldorf: Patmos Verlag, 1999), I:161.

14 Cf. Frankemölle, *Matthäus Kommentar*, I:163.

but this quickly turned to the massacre of innocent children and the projected participation of all the chief priests and scribes of the people (v. 4) in Jesus' passion and death.[15]

Therefore, the Matthean account highlights God's direct communication of the newborn king's birth to the Magi through the star. The theological implication of this pattern of the narrative is that God himself variously revealed his son Jesus Christ to the Jews and other peoples of the world in anticipation of the missionary proclamation of Jesus as king and Messiah to the nations outside Israel (cf. Matt 28:20). This point is significant as it highlights the foundation of Christ's reception among the nations, which the narrative involving the Magi dramatically presents.[16] The Matthean choice of the Magi from the East is pragmatic and practical because of their mode of gaining knowledge, which was by watching the stars, which might not necessarily mean a lack of faith in God or worship of these heavenly bodies. It also reveals the interconnectivity of the manifold elements of the universe and their ontological phenomenon of working together harmoniously in obedience to the natural law that God has imposed upon them (see Ps 104).

God chose a consonant and pragmatic mode to announce his son's birth to the Magi, who were conversant with the stars' nature, singularities, movement, and communication. The Magi were vigilant, unlike king Herod and his court elites, who appeared to have archived the prophecy about the birth of the king of the Jews to oblivion until the Magi came and their question sent them back to their dusty documents of prophetic archives.

Furthermore, the history of interpreting the Magi narrative[17] reveals high adaptability to various aspects of human earthly existence, including geography, culture, theological and Christological studies, ethnic groups, and political organisations. The episode is a free-floating event that various individuals

15 Cf. Frankemölle, *Matthäus Kommentar*, I:162.

16 Cf. Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 27: "There is not the slightest need to think that the story of the coming of the Magi to the cradle of Christ is only a lovely legend."

17 Cf. Ulrich Luz, *Das Evangelium nach Matthäus*, EKK I/1 (Zürich: Benziger; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1997), 122–123.

and groups have tailored to their interests in a given area of human life. In sum, God reveals His Son to the whole world through a wide range of means.

The phenomenon of the star's appearance belongs to the miraculous aura surrounding the Messiah's birth. God, the creator of nature and the universe, knows how to employ them in accordance with his divine will to accomplish his design for time and history.

Matthew's narrative of the Magi reveals God's purposeful design and benevolent will for all peoples of the world to be saved. Thus, the narrative turns star watchers from the East into star witnesses to the birth of the universal Saviour. The narrative begins by linking two geographical locations: Bethlehem in Judea, the land of the Jews, and the East in the region of the Gentiles (Matt 2:1). The linguistic symbolism of the text points to a deeper dimension beneath the twinkling light of the Bethlehem star, which appears in the East. Thus, three men, who are used to staring at the stars, gazing into the depths of their profundity, and discovering their hidden messages, recognise the star that announces the birth of the new King, Messiah, and Saviour of the world that has just appeared.

The journey of the Magi encompasses a movement of faith and liturgical expression. It reflects a prompt response to divine revelation, to which every seeker of the truth must be disposed. The Magi contrast with Herod and his court cabinet of learned elites. However, these intellectuals had become immobile, lethargic, and stagnant. Their knowledge had merely become a matter of historical archives of prophetic utterances, which they fail to understand in terms of their Christological value and historical fulfilment in their hearing (see Luke 4:21). It neither affects nor influences their actual lives and existence.

7. A Nigerian (African) Contextualisation: A Christian Response to the Magi Narrative

From star watchers to star witnesses, the Magi reflect the salvific journey of every Christian disciple. These historically revered "wise men from the East," as described by the Matthean author (v. 1), whose depiction as 'kings' has

sparked a lively scholarly conversation,[18] hold pragmatic, didactic, and missionary value for a lasting Christian consciousness, cultural renewal, transformation of identity, and salvific liturgical practices in Nigeria and Africa.

Christianity in Nigeria, especially Catholicism in the eastern part of the country, appears to be thriving; the liturgy is lively, and participation is commendable. However, a significantly more critical response to Christianity has begun to emerge in Nigeria and across Africa. The youths are starting to view Christianity with suspicion, associating it with colonial imposition or as an instrument of the corrosion of traditional religious expressions and values. In the wake of the agitation for self-determination in the east of Nigeria, some of the youths have recourse to archived traditional practices, which they believe produce visible protective results in the face of domination, marginalisation, poverty, and political discrimination. The youths are particularly concerned about implicit and overt threats of losing their ancestral Igbo land to marauding intruders, whose activities of kidnapping, raping, and killing have shaken a region once Christian, shaped by a deep Catholic heritage, and long regarded as one of the most peaceful in Nigeria.

Consequently, many of the Igbo youth have embraced 'Judaism,'[19] and others are returning to traditional worship, patronising the native medicine men, and resorting to their fetish charms for what they consider a reliable source of protection and strength in the fight against their enemies. They view Christianity as weak and blame it for failing to adequately protect them, especially against external incursion by those they perceive to be after their land. For instance, during the Easter events in 2022, when I visited my hometown, I found the Churches I attended very sparse, with mostly elderly people and younger children. However, after the Easter Sunday Mass, as I was going home, there was a long line of able-bodied, vibrant youths, dressed in flowing white garments and matching caps, imitating, as someone explained to me, a form of neo-Jewish art of religious dress. I was also told that they call their places of worship synagogues. The leader of the youths was actively preaching against

18 Cf. Powell, "The Magi as Kings," 459–480.
19 The concept of 'Igbo Jews' has become a recurrent slogan among the Igbo people of Nigeria today.

Christianity with a megaphone. He repeatedly asked a rhetorical question, "What development has Christianity brought to us since our people started practising it long ago?" The preacher condemned Christianity as an instrument of oppression, which colonialism and neo-colonialism employ to keep the people perpetually impoverished and to ensure that development is stalled in the future.

The youth speaker talked about the corrosion of the traditional culture by foreign incursions into the land: the slave-trade, colonialism, Christianity, and the contemporary Islamic herders' systematic infiltration of their land with the ulterior motive of driving away the native owners and taking it over. The eloquent criticism and condemnation of Christianity, based on its perceived instrumentality to colonialism and in association with other evils plaguing the region, hit me hard! It has also sent me searching, which is the reason for this article. This procession of youths sympathetic to Judaism caused a long traffic jam along the road. It was terrific and curious to me, to say the least.

Now, therefore, it is in view of this challenge to Christianity by the youths in Eastern Nigeria that I am engaging in the reader-response examination of Matt 2:1–12. This passage, as we have observed, highlights remarkable elements of two cultures, respectively, along a Jewish-Gentile character and geographical divide.[20] Given this Jewish-Gentile cultural variation, we can make some observations about the cultural nostalgia of Eastern Nigerian youths. With the Magi star watchers, to whom God announced the birth of his Son by the natural means of a heavenly body, the star, and within their Gentile cultural context, captured by the phrase "wise men from the east (v. 1)" and the declaration "we have seen his star at its rising and have come to worship him (v. 2)," there is an implicit demonstration of God's active presence in all Gentile cultures. It shows that people of ancient times were close to and lived in harmony with their natural environment. They not only received practical guidance and drew support from nature, but they also encountered God through it. Let me give an example with my childhood experience of my father. He was a palm-wine

20 Cf. Frankemölle, *Matthäus Kommentar*: 162.

tapper who had no western education. Notably, he could not read the clock. He climbed and attended to his palm trees three times a day, according to the art of raffia-palm wine tapping. My father used natural cues to determine the best time of day to attend to his palm trees: cockcrow in the mornings, the sun's position in the afternoons, and sunsets in the evening.[21]

According to the youths, it seems that with the missionary establishment of Christianity in Nigeria, God no longer answers from his hiding place in the storm of their traditional culture, as was the case before. Hence, there is a clamour to try something new, such as practising Judaism or reverting to a traditional form of religious self-expression.

My counterargument, which flows from the reader-response analysis of Matt 2:1–12, is that the missionary-established Christianity in Nigeria is the fruitful actualisation of God's announcement of the birth of his son to the Magi and their audacious journey to meet and encounter the newborn king. One of the remarkable actions of the Magi is their movement from the east to Bethlehem with a stopover in Jerusalem. We have already highlighted the implications of the Magi's response to the star's signal, its guidance, and its destination identification for their successful discovery of the newborn king of the Jews. Our thesis is that every culture involves a movement that should lead to finding fulfilment in the encounter with Jesus Christ. As the proverbial pebble dropped into still water, creating ripples that extend to the riverbanks, Nigerians and Africans should embrace the challenge of this ripple effect, either by following the Magi's model or by imitating king Herod. Nevertheless, the urgency of the present moment presents Nigerian and African Christians with the opportunity to appreciate Christianity as a means of cultural transformation and spiritual perfection.[22]

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21 Cf. Augustine Agwulonu, *The Cockcrow: A Memoir* (Owerri, Nigeria: Christian Press, 2011), in which the author explores his father's traditional practice of palm-wine tapping within its cultural context.

22 Cf. Jennifer Hockenberg, "The Gift of the Magi: Intercultural Conversation and Understanding: A Philosophical Meditation on Epiphany," *Currents in Theology and Mission* 35 (2008): 441: "Epiphany celebrates the fact that Christianity from the beginning, when Christ was still at the breast, is not about one culture, one custom, or one tradition. Christ is the Truth which all cultures seek. As importantly, Epiphany says that through Christ, the Truth becomes accessible across culture lines and barriers."

We reflect on how much is said and done regarding the Magi in preparation for the Holy Family's flight to Egypt to escape Herod's murderous sword. However, little is mentioned about where and how the Holy Family found refuge on the African continent. It is time to delve deeper into the flight to Egypt and the reception of the Holy Family in Africa. The inclusive history of salvation must broaden to encompass both the truth that Jesus was born in Bethlehem and, on the other hand, that he was protected in Egypt until he could safely return to accomplish the work of salvation in the designated land. It is part of the Good News that the saviour of the world, who was born in Bethlehem of Judea and manifested to the Gentiles by means of a star, also protected his biological life in Africa.

Interpreting the Magi narrative in terms of the pagan mission and the notion of anti-Jewish narrative elements in the text does not refer to the Magi themselves.[23] The star watchers became star witnesses of the Messiah's birth without any friction with the Jews or condemnation of God's people. Africa can practice Christianity without prejudice to its cultural arts, trade, and its closeness to its natural environment. This is the implication of Paul's message in his letter to the Romans: that both Jews and Gentiles have their dates with God for salvation (see Rom 11).

The narrative about the Magi is like a dramatic literary exposition of the Christian sense of generosity, justice, piety, sacrifice, liturgical worship, and obedience.[24] These Christian values should be cultivated and practised in Africa. None of these positive responses to Jesus can conflict with African culture, and a true inculturation of Christianity in Africa must begin by ensuring that they flow like living water across the continent.

The melting of the Eastern Magi culture into the glorious ambience of Jesus' salvific birthplace in Bethlehem and his divine presence is embellished by the Magi's act of worship and gift presentation to the newborn King of the Jews. The gesture of worship and the elements of the gifts represent the cultural and

23 Cf. Luz, *Das Evangelium nach Matthäus*, 117.
24 Cf. Luz, *Das Evangelium nach Matthäus*, 117.

material wealth of the Magi.[25] The gifts of frankincense, myrrh, and gold are from the natural vegetation and resources of the eastern regions where the Magi were domiciled, outside the land of Israel. The Matthean episode of the Magi has such a harmonising and uniting effect, characterising the advent of Jesus and the establishment of Christianity. This implies that Christianity is not anti-culture but pro-culture, since the protection of a culture does not involve murdering innocent children as king Herod did.

Contemporary African culture, beginning with the return of the Magi to the East and the Ethiopian Eunuch to Ethiopia, must demonstrate the effects of the transformation of culture and identity through the encounter with and experience of salvation in Christ at Bethlehem and Jerusalem (see Acts 8:26–39).

8. Conclusion

The clause "Magi from the East" (μάγοι ἀπὸ ἀνατολῶν) linguistically encompasses all that can be speculated concerning the Matthean Magi's cultural identity. Furthermore, the concluding statement of the Magi narrative (δι᾽ ἄλλης ὁδοῦ ἀνεχώρησαν εἰς τὴν χώραν αὐτῶν – Matt 2:12), excites the imagination to explore the unknown possible life of the Magi after they return from Bethlehem to their land. Thus, what role do the culture and identity of the Magi play in their lives before and after their witness of the newborn King of the Jews? What was Matthew's intention in presenting the Magi in such a restricted manner? Why did he not describe the Magi and their cultural environment in more detail? Could this lack of substantial information about the Magi's biography be responsible for their subsequent characterisation as 'kings,' 'wise men,' and 'three' in number?

While Matthean scholarship has concentrated on the historical accuracy and purpose of the Magi's synthetic extra-biblical characterisation, their given biblical cultural and salvific significance based on their movement to Bethle-

25 Cf. Luz, *Das Evangelium nach Matthäus*, 120–121.

hem and encounter with Jesus appears to be overlooked.[26] If popular piety and intellectual elitism could create kingship, wisdom, the significant numerical quality of three, and horse riders from the Magi, then the African nations ought to explore the culture, identity, and value of the Magi before, during, and after their discovery and encounter with the newborn King of the Jews. For one thing, many of the extra-biblical characterisations and qualifications of the Magi are speculative matters. Therefore, it is high time Africa reflected on and identified with the Magi to promote her culture, identity, and values in alignment with Christ and Christianity. In this manner, the durability of a Christianised African culture and enduring African Christian identity can be sustained.

Furthermore, what new star of wonder is appearing to contemporary Nigerian (African) youths, which acts as the stimulus, guide, and indicator for a personal discovery and encounter with Jesus Christ, the saviour? The answer to this question will be available to the attentive, conscientious, and observant youth who neither take to flight nor resort to violence in any form. The impetus, movement, and discovery of the saviour shall remain the triptych pattern of the journey to salvation, even amid challenging cultural, religious, and economic crises and violence.

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26 Viviano, "The Adoration of the Magi," 547.

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SALT, LIGHT AND LEAVEN: THREE GOSPEL MOTIFS UNDERSCORING THE IDENTITY-VOCATION OF CHRIST'S FOLLOWERS IN POST-COLONIAL INDIA

Nameeta Renu[*]

1. Introduction

India has long been a tapestry of religious and cultural diversity, fostering unity despite differences. However, according to the Social Hostilities Index (SHI) released by the US-based Pew Research Centre on a regular basis, the country is notoriously ranked among the top three since 2020.[1] Discrimination and communal violence against the followers of minority religions are increasing day by day.[2] We see mounting intolerance and animosity over Christian symbols, such as crosses, statues of saints, and the religious garb of priests and sisters in educational and other institutions which, until recently, represented the identity and face of the Church in the country.[3]

This situation has prompted debates in Christian circles whether introspection on missionary ideologies, interreligious dialogue, and negotiation with such forces would be more appropriate than a defensive stance implying greater consolidation and assertion of this facet of religious identity. The latter approach is seen especially among women in the Muslim community.[4] Similarly, the need for religious women to wear habits is being

* Nameeta Renu, OCV, is a feminist scholar and holds a Doctorate in Theology.

1 Pew Research Center, *Globally, Government Restrictions on Religion Reached Peak Levels in 2021, While Social Hostilities Went Down* (Washington, DC: Pew Research Center, 2024), 35–37.

2 Amy Balog, "Persecution of Christians Has Worsened round the Globe, according to New Study," *Zenit*, 22 October 2024.

3 UCA News, "Church-run Schools in India Told to Remove Christian Symbols," *UCA News*, 9 February 2024, Church-run schools in India told to remove Christian symbols - UCA News.

4 Religious identity is becoming increasingly important in this post-colonial era of fundamentalism and radicalisation. Hence, many Muslim women have begun wearing the burqa and/or hijab. Cf. Gursimran K. Bakshi, "Has the Karnataka Hijab Ban, Which Began with a Bang, Ended in a Whimper?" *The Leaflet*, 23 December 2023, Has the Karnataka hijab ban, which began with a bang, ended in a whimper?.

discussed and debated in the country both within the Church and by Hindutva elements.[5]

The rising tensions stir profound reflections: Does Jesus found a distinct religion or an *ekklēsia,* an *ad-hoc* assembly of his disciples, called mainly from Galilee, to come follow him and proclaim the Kingdom of God, especially to the Jews (Matt 4:18–25; 27:55–56; 28:7, 10, 16, 20)? Should the paschal mystery, rather than institutional Christian identity, anchor our faith today? Anyway, is it identity or imitation of Christ and his mission that serves the culture/context in which each one lives? Should baptism continue to imply not only initiation into discipleship and membership in the mystical Body of Christ but also explicitly joining the Church as an institution and having a (distinct) religious identity?

Through heuristic[6] and feminist lenses, I reflect on women converts' experiences in post-colonial India, comparing biblical and contemporary identity-vocation dynamics. The gospel motifs of salt, light, and leaven rooted in the paschal mystery guide this exploration.

2. Identity Challenges Faced by Converts

I was born and bred in a so-called Hindu family. During an emotionally charged and life-changing personal experience of Jesus, several decades ago, I fell in love with him. My immediate decision to follow him had no direct relation to the nature of the religion in which I had grown up.[7] Church leaders suggested I present myself as a Hindu-Christian to ease tensions within my family, but this idea puzzled me, as religious identity was not central to my

5 Rachel John, "Jhansi Train Incident with Nuns Shows Christian Habits Are the New Skullcaps in India," *The Print*, 28 March 2021, Jhansi train incident with nuns shows Christian habits are the new skullcaps in India.

6 Clark E. Moustakas, *Heuristic Research: Design, Methodology, and Applications* (London: Sage Publications, 1990).

7 However, there have been converts known to embrace Christianity out of complete dissatisfaction with their previous religion, attributing it to the devil and thereby hurting the sentiments of its followers. Such attitudes may be among the 'root causes' of the rise of Hindutva, although political and other motivations cannot be denied and have complicated its ideology.

upbringing. While it helped me respect the faith of my family members, I did not resume participating in their worship because it could mean I had given up following Christ.

Today, after having spent decades studying the two religions, I do not see them as opposing. I believe my experience as God's beloved daughter has come from one and the same God throughout my life. I also wonder if my journey mirrors that of Jews belonging to "the Way" (Acts 9:2). They do not reject their faith and relationship with YHWH; rather, their fellow Jews do not accept Jesus as their long-awaited Messiah. His followers are also treated as corrupting leaven in their own households. As the mission expands its horizons to include Gentiles in Antioch, they are 'othered' by mockingly labelling them "christians" (Acts 11:26),[8] till they become a separate category. Likewise, over the decades, a few Indian theologians have been debating whether it is necessary or not for the new followers of Christ (e.g., *Khrist-Bhaktas*) to have and assert a new or specific religious identity.[9]

My 25 years of research and outreach to urban converts[10] reveal identity as relational. It is shaped by questions like "Who am I (to …)?" "To which community do I belong?" and "What is my work?" Identity gives a direction to vocation and vocation, in turn, consolidates identity. Conversion intersects with age, gender,[11] ethnicity, relationships, caste, economic class, education, profession, etc., complicating assimilation. Motivations for baptism in contrast to losses due to conversion, missiological paradigms and faith formation of converts as well as the local host community, social categorisation and stereotyp-

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8 They are seen as followers of 'the Way' even while the Jewish disciples of Christ among them may have continued to worship in the synagogue. They have a Judaic identity, if 'Jew' indicates a religious rather than purely ethnic identity and is not a term their ancestors internalised pejoratively. On the ambiguity of religious identities in the ancient world, including insider and outsider perspectives, cf. Judith M. Lieu, *Christian Identity in the Jewish and Greco-Roman World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 1–5, 142, 239, 241–249, 268.

9 Ciril J. Kuttiyanikkal, *Khrist Bhakta Movement: A Model for an Indian Church?* Inculturation in the Area of Community Building (Berlin: LIT Verlag, 2014).

10 Nameeta Renu, "When Being Christian Means Losing Everything You Love—for Jesus' Sake," *Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflection* 67.6 (2003): 427–41.

11 The term 'gender' in this paper refers to the sex assigned and registered at birth.

ing of converts, psychological personalities, expectations, needs, and socialization also play important roles in shaping identity transitions.[12]

Rising polarisation fuels discrimination, with converts facing rejection from both their original communities and cradle Catholics. Many feel accepted prior to baptism but later face exploitation or exclusion. Many single converts are frequently on the move due to persecution.[13] They are confused[14] on encountering communities with varying and shifting missiological paradigms.[15] They are denied rights, opportunities, services, and pastoral care available to cradle Catholics due to a concern that people of other faiths will think they have been converted through enticement.

I have come across cradle Catholics who sincerely believe their Christian identity is inherited through their biological family and not through baptism.[16] Hence, they look at converts as sharers in the faith but not belonging to the Catholic community and make statements like, "You should have continued staying with your own community … why are you creating problems for us? Our neighbours will think we are promoting religious conversions." Hence, those who have been through the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA) believe the process was meaningless as they move from place to place and encounter rejection instead of a welcoming community.[17]

Sooner or later, many converts feel they have not tangibly experienced the Church as their own community, and their identity is not strongly tied to the institution even though they love Christ. The feeling of being 'othered' by cradle Catholics leads them to, in turn, view them as the 'other.' On a wide spec-

12 Although this study focuses on individual identity, these findings are corroborated by perspectives in social psychology. Cf. Henri Tajfel, *Human Groups and Social Categories* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981); Edward L. Queen, "The Formation and Reformation of Religious Identity," *Religious Education* 91.4 (1996): 489–95.

13 Renu, "When Being Christian," 435–37.

14 Renu, "When Being Christian," 432–34.

15 John Singarayar, "Rediscovering Christian Mission in India," *Matters India*, 26 March 2024, Rediscovering Christian mission in India – Matters India.

16 That is why Christians in India tend to form ghettos based on the region they come from and the language they speak.

17 Renu, "When Being Christian," 433.

trum of reactions, the majority have given up their faith in Christ and returned to their former religion within two years of their baptism.[18] Almost everyone has experienced disillusionment[19] and periods of giving up active participation in the faith life of the Church. Few have turned into atheists. Many have joined other Churches or Sects.[20]

Similarly, following up with many women converts over the decades shows that some have stayed but tend to lose the sense of being human and created in the image and likeness of God[21] due to their increased vulnerability to injustice, financial exploitation, various forms of abuse, etc.[22] They seem stuck in painfully permanent liminality, in an incomplete process of assimilation, like 'hanging on the cross without death and resurrection.' This is despite, paradoxically, being immersed in the paschal mystery through the sacraments of initiation.[23] Those who marry cradle Catholics or join religious communities find better assimilation but still face discrimination.[24] Their identity is consolidated because of a strong and permanent sense of belonging to a family and/or community and participating in its mission.

These wide-ranging reactions seem to emerge from tension created by several currents as follows:

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18 Most single women converts prefer to turn back rather than face homelessness or be forced into undignified work for their survival. I have known an educated professional who eventually ended up living on the streets of Mumbai.

19 They feel that cradle Catholics have not paid a price for their faith and are nominal Christians who tend to take their faith for granted.

20 Renu, "When Being Christian," 439.

21 The deepest human identity that is expected to be solid and unchangeable.

22 This seems to be a universal phenomenon as I have encountered converts in various countries experiencing alienation, disillusionment, and identity crises that are not resolved even for decades. Their human rights are violated within and outside the Church.

23 In the scenario of being estranged from her family after conversion, or not owning property, a single woman experiences extreme isolation and may be unable to gain access to basic government documents, schemes, and benefits necessary for survival, such as an independent ration card or hostel accommodation even in Church-run institutions. As Kalia notes, "for women, their identity relies on their relationship status" — a single woman is not considered an independent legal entity in most contexts. See Saumya Kalia, "How the Indian System Keeps 'Single' Women Dependent on Others," *The Swaddle*, 19 November 2021, How the Indian System Keeps 'Single' Women Dependent on Others | The Swaddle.

24 Hence, their identity concerns are outside the scope of this study. Some, however, could not adjust to institutional structures and remain in a state of permanent liminality.

1. Gendered expectations: Negotiating and challenging the traditional gender roles and expectations within communities of their former and newly embraced religions.

2. Cultural dissonance: Balancing one's cultural heritage with the demands of the new religious identity (both of which are in a flux in today's digital world).

3. Loss and reconciliation: Coping with the loss of former identities and integrating new religious beliefs and practices.

4. Community acceptance: Dealing with indifference or rejection within Catholic communities, particularly in casteist, patriarchal, misogynist, and sexist contexts.

These challenges—gender, culture, and rejection—necessitate biblical reflection.

3. Identity-Vocation Dynamics in the Bible and the Church Today

Scripture reveals God and humanity with multiple and dynamic identities. Being created in God's image and likeness, human identities bear a seed of the Word (Gen 1:26–27; John 1:1–3) who incarnates, suffers, dies, and rises again in the fields of human hearts, communities, and nations which, in turn, are characterised by diverse ethnicities, cultures, philosophies, religions, and more. They also reveal personality traits or vocation and mission in each context and community (Gen 32:28; Hos 1:6–8; Matt 16:15–19).

In the OT, the nature of God is revealed to Moses through various names, both substantive[25] and relational, for instance "I Am Who I Am (Exod 3:14)" and "The Lord, the God of your ancestors (Exod 3:15)." Further, the NT reveals many divine and human identities of Jesus, such as "The Word" (John 1:1), "Son of God" (Matt 2:15), and "Emmanuel" (Matt 1:23). Similarly, the Holy

25 Philosophically referring to substance as the primary ontological category, which is an independent entity.

Spirit is called "Paraclete" (John 14:26), "Spirit of God" (Matt 12:28), "Spirit of Christ" (1 Pet 1:11), and the like.

From a mystical perspective, God is also mystery and contemplated through the apophatic *via negativa* in terms of who and what God is not.[26] Hence, it is pertinent to note that God does not give themselves most of these names and titles mentioned in the Bible, but humanity attributes them to God! All these names, titles, and metaphors help us to know God better and enter a deeper relationship with Christ, often stirring within us a desire to reciprocate his love by imitating him and participating in his mission. It is only since the Word is emptied of the identity of God and becomes incarnate to assume humble human identities out of love (Phil 2:6–8) that he is experienced as "God-With-Us" (Matt 1:23). Whenever individuals and communities respond to Jesus' question, "Who do you say I am?" (Mark 8:27–29), they discover their own relational identity,[27] a taste of salvation and abundant life. Spontaneous praises may spring from their hearts with divine titles considered high Christology, too.

Thus, most of these identities and titles are not substantive but relational and descriptive, as they are given according to subjective God-experience in different communities. So too, in my opinion, there cannot be a standard religious identity of Christ's followers across all cultures and contexts.[28] Rather, identities are given to us by people who encounter us in various parts of the world and reveal their reactions to our witnessing to Christ. The only substantive identity we have is as human beings created in "the image and likeness of God" (Gen 1:26), which does not depend on any religion.

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26 Clifton Wolters, trans. and ed., *The Cloud of Unknowing and Other Works* (London: Penguin, 2001), a foundational text of apophatic mysticism.

27 For example, if a follower sees Jesus as their Guru, they discover their own identity as disciple.

28 If Judaism had accepted Jesus as the Messiah, his followers would have either embraced a double identity as Jewish Christians or activated one of the two identities according to the context. This would have depended on their answer to the question, "Who am I?" as well as "Who do others say I am?" Perhaps some would have observed discretion about their faith in Christ and come out gradually. Jesus too reveals his identity step by step in the gospel of Mark. Cf. William Wrede, *The Messianic Secret* (Cambridge: James Clarke, 1971). On the other hand, the more mature Johannine community seems to have an explicit identity as it uses the motif of 'light' more often (John 1:9; 8:12).

When Jesus calls the twelve and the seventy-two, he wants to send them out to proclaim the coming of the Kingdom of God (Luke 6:12–16; 10:1–9) and not to assert rigid identities. However, after his death and resurrection, they begin proclaiming Jesus as their Lord and centre of their missionary endeavours, as if to counter his rejection by the Jews. Clericalism, patriarchy, sexism, and misogyny often become the causes of disempowerment of women leaders and followers of Christ.

Both similar and different developments are seen in the history of the Church in some parts of India where it focuses on hierarchical and honorific titles or forms of address, such as 'Eminence,' 'Grace,' and 'Lordship,' which risk mirroring Pharisaic hypocrisy (Matt 23:1–36). This behaviour is either a remnant of medieval European feudalism or the effect of caste and class-based stratification in Indian cultures and societies or simply bureaucracy and clericalism. After Jesus is baptised, a voice from heaven announces, "This is my beloved Son," and he is led into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil (3:13–17; 4:11). So how can his disciples be spared of similar temptations?

Thus, identity as a subject has gathered interest and stimulated reflections in various contexts. Are these titles and identities inspired by the Word? What happened to the identity-vocation of believers as *ekklēsia*, a gathering constituted by a call to proclaim the gospel, the *kerygma* with their lives? Should not the calling of those in ordained and consecrated life always be in sync with that of the rest of the *ekklēsia*? I am sure the teaching of Jesus Christ through the motifs of salt, light, and leaven can show us a simple and practical way forward to resolve these concerns.

4. Salt, Light, and Leaven: Gospel Motifs Symbolising the Paschal Mystery and the Core of the Kerygma

Over the decades, Indian society has stereotyped Christians and the Church as a foreign institution having no other intention than to 'convert' people to Christianity. This has led to persecution in post-colonial India. Several States in our country are planning or have already developed new anti-conversion

laws.[29] With this increasing religious fundamentalism and communal disharmony, some people belonging to the Hindu majority have reduced availing themselves of Catholic institutions even as Hindutva elements are trying to interfere with their administration so that anything connected to the Christian faith may not be visible.[30] Thus, theologians are compelled to reevaluate the 'how' of evangelisation.[31] The following part of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount seems relevant in this scenario:

> Blessed are you when men revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so men persecuted the prophets who were before you. You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trodden under foot by men. You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hid. Nor do men light a lamp and put it under a bushel, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven (Matt 5:11–16).

According to one of the missiological paradigms, when people are touched by our lives and works, they ask who and what inspires us. This gives us an opportunity to share about our faith. Perhaps that is why Jesus first speaks about being salt, which symbolises discreet presence as well as action and, only subsequently, about being a visibly shining light. However, we need an even deeper understanding of this call. Christians are united with Christ through baptism and together called to be "the salt of the earth" (Matt 5:13), "light of the world" (Matt 5:14), and "leaven in the dough" (Matt 13:33) of their surroundings. Through these gospel motifs, is not Jesus referring to the Kingdom of God and identity-vocation dynamics of his followers amid the world?

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29 Bijay K. Minj, "Christians Slam Move to Enact Anti-conversion Law in Indian State," *UCA News*, 3 December 2024, Christians slam move to enact anti-conversion law in Indian state - UCA News.

30 Minj, "Indian Christians, Muslims Slam."

31 Felix Wilfred, "Re-Envisioning the Christian Mission," *UCA News*, 5 October 2023, Re-envisioning the Christian mission - UCA News.

Every chef knows that not one grain, but many grains of salt must dissolve completely to pass on their 'saltiness' to food and drink, and they should be in the right proportion while not becoming a lump. Otherwise, they would be unpalatable. So also, Christians are called to die to themselves and spread their Christlikeness within their broader human families, which are already created in the image and likeness of God and bear seeds of the Word (1 John 3:9) awaiting transformation and growth. Moreover, just as salt gives as well as brings out the flavour of food while acting as a preservative, this call implies bringing out the good in others, sustaining it, and encouraging its growth in solidarity. Thus, the end of proclamation is the coming of the Kingdom of God, the Reign of God, in people's lives. It cannot be conversion to Christianity; if all humanity became salt, where would it dissolve and spread? Jesus also says salt that loses its saltiness is good for nothing. So, it is meaningless to be Christians without Christlikeness.[32]

By neither highlighting their Christian identity nor seeking the limelight (Matt 6:1–4), the followers of Christ could be countercultural and, paradoxically, enlighten the world about the values of the Kingdom of God.[33] However, when a locality does not accept Christians in its midst and 'others' them, they are called to shine brightly with their goodness even from a distance, like a lighthouse along the path of humanity's common pilgrim journey. This implies witnessing to the paschal mystery of Christ, who is the Light of the World (John 1:9; 8:12). The martyrs are brilliant examples of responding to this call, to the point of giving up their lives in union with Christ crucified and risen. That is how Saul, the persecutor, is converted to Paul, the apostle, after his encounter with the Light (Acts 9:1–7)! According to Indian philosophies, light is

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32 According to some commentators, salt plates were used in the ancient world as a catalyst to sustain fire for burning dung used as fuel for earthen ovens, with light as the outcome of this process. Cf. John J. Pilch, "Salt for the Earthen Oven Revisited," *Theological Studies* 67.1 (2006): 1–5. This interpretation, however, may not be universally applicable, given that the gospel is addressed to all times and places. Jesus' words could hold multiple meanings applicable to different contexts.

33 The Parsi community offers a good example of this in India. According to folklore, when the Zoroastrians sought asylum in India, their priests promised to contribute to the land by dissolving like sugar in milk. Cf. "Like Sugar in Milk: How Parsis Arrived in India, and Founded a New Culture and Cuisine," *Slurrp*, 24 November 2022, https://www.slurrp.com/article/like-sugar-in-milk-how-parsis-arrived-in-india-1669299525063.

a multifaceted symbol of the ultimate Reality, Truth, and Wisdom, which dispels the darkness of ignorance in the world and transforms it.[34] Jesus reveals himself as the Way to this Truth and Life (John 14:6).

Besides the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus also reveals identity-vocation dynamics through a parable. It is so short that every word is thought-provoking: "The kingdom of heaven is like leaven, which a woman took and hid in three measures of flour, till it was all leavened" (Matt 13:33). She stretches the dough and rolls the edges inward, kneading it to spread the leaven evenly. A small quantity of leaven has potential to invisibly transform a large quantity of dough by lightening, softening, and raising it, till it begins overflowing from the edges of the container, especially in a warm environment.[35] Too much leaven, heat, or duration of fermentation will cause souring and weakening of dough structure, making it difficult to handle for baking. It may also make it tough and resistant instead. Such over-fermented dough has an alcoholic aroma. Thus, the quality of bread will not meet expectations. Under-fermentation poses a challenge, too. A bit of fermented dough can be used as starter or leaven for preparing the next batch of dough. Similarly, the already contextualised identity-vocation of Christ's followers is continually re-contextualised, supposedly without relativising the *kerygma*.

Leaven also signifies the purpose of evangelisation to raise the consciousness of people towards the common destination of humanity, "the Omega" (Rev 22:13), by uplifting the quality of various cultures with the values of the Kingdom of God. However, since leaven refers to evil and corruption in other parts of the Bible (Matt 16:6–12; Luke 12:1; 1 Cor 5:7–8), and Jesus' Jewish followers are considered corrupting leaven in their own households, he changes the traditionally negative symbol by giving it a good connotation. Therefore, if evil could corrupt its surroundings, the Kingdom of God too could spread and

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34 B. S. Achutha and P. Vinay, "Concept of Light in Classical Shastras of India with Comparative Review with Modern Science," *Hitaya* 14.4 (2022), Concept of Light in classical Shastras of India with comparative review with modern science – Hitaya – ISSN 2581-7787.

35 Yuval, "Under and Over-fermentation in Pizza Dough: Causes, Effects, and How to Avoid Them," *Pizzablab*, 23 July 2024, https://www.pizzablab.com/learning-and-resources/fermentation/under-and-over-fermentation/.

gradually enhance a context. With a similar tactic, elsewhere, Jesus asks his disciples to be as shrewd as serpents (Matt 10:16). Consequently, persecution of Christ's followers by slanderers (Matt 5:11) and evildoers will not destroy the mission of Christ.

Three measures of flour are a large quantity and could feed a hundred people. That is possibly the amount used for holy shewbread,[36] which is strictly baked by men from the priestly Levites (1 Chr 9:32) and always present on the table in the Jerusalem temple; it may be leavened or unleavened, though (Lev 24:5).[37] Does this not resemble the Eucharistic table?[38] Since Jesus also compares the teaching and hypocrisy of the Pharisees and Sadducees to the leaven of corruption, asking his disciples to beware of it (Matt 16:12; Luke 12:1), he could be calling women to antidote it with the good leaven of preaching the gospel and teaching the Eucharistic *ekklēsia* as well as the multitudes, after his death and resurrection. After all, Christianity spread because of men as well as women followers of Christ in the ancient world.[39] So Jesus points to the equal potential of both to evangelise and build up communities with Kingdom values for all generations to come.

This reflection on the three biblical motifs symbolising the paschal mystery sheds light on what Jesus says about the path we are called to take in response to the challenges we face in the post-colonial contexts of India, especially from a feminist perspective.

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36 Menahem Haran, "Shewbread or Showbread," in *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, ed. Cecil Roth (Jerusalem: Keter, 1971), 14:1320–1323.

37 Translators have varied interpretations of Haran, "Shewbread or Showbread." Translators differ widely in how they render biblical weights and measures, especially when equating Hebrew, Greek, and contemporary terms for solids and liquids. The ESV mentions "three measures," the NIV gives "sixty pounds," the NASB retains "three *sata*," and the CSB translates it as "fifty pounds," among others. The Fathers of the Church also spiritualised the parable.

38 Nameeta Renu, "The Novelty of the Kingdom: Jesus Reverses Roles of Men and Women in His Church," *Global Sisters Report*, 22 May 2025, The novelty of the kin_dom: Jesus reverses roles of men and women in his church | Global Sisters Report.

39 Catherine Kroeger, "The Neglected History of Women in the Early Church," *Christian History* 17 (1988): 6–11.

5. Conclusion and Directions for Future Reflection

When Jesus preaches, he calls all his followers to be salt, leaven, and light in their social milieux. These motifs do not explicitly suggest discretion regarding their discipleship and their belonging to his movement. Critically, neither Jesus nor his early followers ceased to call themselves Jews. This historical context raises a crucial contemporary question for the Universal Church: "Why have the three gospel motifs of salt, light, and leaven often been reduced to the 'secular character' of the Laity and Secular Institutes?"[40] These concepts were fundamentally a call for 'all' followers of Christ, as they inherently do away with the sacred-profane binary and do not necessarily imply silent or hidden witness.

Ancient worlds, including ancient India, likely lacked a universal, fixed concept of religious identity as understood today. Amid the current shifting religious landscape of India, characterised by increasing hostility toward Christian symbols and practices, the Church faces a critical juncture. It can choose the path of defensive consolidation—erecting higher boundary walls for the clergy as well as religious to live in ghettoised institutions. Alternatively, it can choose to listen to the Spirit, introspect seriously about its life and mission, and engage in the complexities of its context. The decision will have far-reaching consequences and selecting the first option risks turning the Church into a lump of salt that has lost its saltiness.

This introspection must seriously address the painful realities within the community. In today's Indian context, what is the identity-vocation of individual women converts who are stuck in agonising permanent liminality, often rejected and exploited by both cradle Catholics and their biological families and society? When they lose their inherent sense of being human and created in the image and likeness of God, forced to live alone to fend for themselves without belonging to any concrete community, how and for whom can they too exercise the call to be salt and leaven? As martyrs for the faith within Church and society, are they not called to be lighthouses to both communities, mirroring the trajectory of Jesus Christ himself?

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40 John Paul II, *Christifideles Laici* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1988), no. 15.

Thus, for some converts, the *ekklēsia* is practically only an *ad-hoc* assembly in which they may or may not be able to participate. Furthermore, the external pressures from Hindu nationalists who are not only formulating anti-conversion laws but also redefining conversion itself (stating that participation in the prayer services or rituals of another religion implies conversion), challenge foundational theological understandings. It is now more critical than ever to reclaim the understanding that baptism implies initiation into discipleship and membership in the mystical Body of Christ, rather than merely conversion to a 'religion' in the contemporary, rigid sense.

Jesus proclaimed the coming of the Kingdom or Reign of God through his paschal mystery; he did not set out to found a religion. A critical re-evaluation of current missionary paradigms is desperately needed. This requires a deeper engagement with feminist theology to achieve a better understanding of the true identity-vocation of Christ's followers in post-colonial India.

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REIMAGINING WOMEN'S RELIGIO-CULTURAL IDENTITY: A THEOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF LUKE 13:10–17

Godibert K. Gharbin[*]

1. Introduction

Among the four documented Sabbath healings that transpired in the presence of the religious authorities in Luke, only the legitimacy of the healing of the bent-over woman was publicly questioned and elicited a theological debate (13:10–17). No authority spoke against the first Sabbath healing: the healing of a man. Furthermore, the leaders remained reticent in the healing of two other men despite Jesus' question about the permissibility of healing on the Sabbath (6:6–11 and 14:1–6). In the woman's case—the only person with a protracted condition (eighteen years; v. 11)—however, the synagogue ruler questioned the legitimacy of the act. Since they were all people of low social status,[1] it is legitimate to argue, based on Luke's characterisation of the woman, the religious elites, and Jesus, that her gender contributed to the indignant posture of the synagogue ruler. Consequently, the ruler's vehement condemnation of the healing exposes the treatment of women by the religious elites. Therefore, it is possible to interpret Jesus' approach to this challenge as a theological response to this malady, making it indispensable for scholarly examination of the ways in which Jesus redefines women's religio-cultural identity in the gospel tradition.

The study employs Osborne's theological analysis to examine the reaction of Jesus and its implications for women's religio-cultural identity. The choice of this method was based on its examination of how the theological and dy-

* Godibert Kelly Gharbin is a Research Fellow at the Department of Biblical and Ancient Studies, University of South Africa (Pretoria), and a Lecturer in Biblical Studies at Maranatha University College, Ghana.

1 Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, NICNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), 525.

namic aspects of narratives communicate theological concepts,[2] thus allowing the reader to reconstruct how Jesus reimagines women's religio-cultural identity. Consequently, the subsequent section is organised into four parts, with the first three concentrating on analysing how the narrative functions of the three characters elucidate and address the issue. The initial section examines the bent-over woman as a narrative prosthesis, followed by an investigation of the characterisation of the synagogue ruler and Jesus in the subsequent divisions. The fourth part constitutes a theological synthesis of the analyses. In the final section of the chapter, conclusions and recommendations are presented.

2. The Narrative Functions of the Woman, the Synagogue Ruler, and Jesus

2.1 The Bent-Over Woman as a Narrative Prosthesis

The woman's introduction aims to fulfil a rhetorical function. The goal is the rationale for announcing her gender and sickness in her presentation. The relationship between her disability and gender is ascribed to Luke's employment of the woman's condition as a narrative prosthesis.[3] A narrative prosthesis occurs when disabilities function as opportunistic metaphorical devices for social ills in narratives.[4] Consequently, it is legitimate to enquire which sociocultural ailment the metaphor aims to remedy. While Houghtby-Haddon and like-minded scholars posit that Luke uses the woman metaphorically for the whole community,[5] this study contends that Luke employs her story figuratively to challenge the cultural perceptions of women's religio-cultural identity and its concomitant problems.

The premise that the character is a sick woman underpins this position since narrative prosthesis implies depicting disability as a metaphor for socio-

2 Grant R. Osborne, *Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2006), 201–202.

3 Natalie K. Houghtby-Haddon, *Changed Imagination, Changed Obedience: Social Imagination and the Bent-Over Woman in the Gospel of Luke* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2011), 93.

4 David T. Mitchell and Sharon Snyder, "Narrative Prosthesis," in *The Disability Studies Reader*, 4th ed., ed. Lennard J. Davis (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2013), 222–224, 227.

5 See Houghtby-Haddon, *Changed Imagination*, 93.

cultural maladies. Moreover, Jesus' classification of Zacchaeus as Abraham's son (19:9) and this woman as Abraham's daughter implies that the author's attention is on the sociocultural challenges of women, not on the 'sons of Abraham' (13:16). Furthermore, the setting, the Sabbath theme, the gender of the sufferer, and the honorific bestowed upon the woman (θυγατέρα Ἀβραὰμ) all underscore the narrative's connection to women and religio-cultural identity crisis.

The religio-cultural ramifications of her gender and sickness elucidate the intent of the metaphor. Luke designates her as γυνή three times (vv. 11–12, 16), thereby prognosticating gender-based concerns in the narrative, including the community's perception of a woman's religio-cultural identity. One example of such concerns is the perception that women are viewed as objects of marginalisation. Portraying the character as a sick woman classifies her as belonging to a marginalised group.[6] In the first-century Mediterranean world, sickness frequently resulted in socioreligious marginalisation.[7] Similarly, her gender also classifies her as part of a disenfranchised cultural group.[8] Moreover, the linkage between her gender and her unambiguous background serves the same function: it indicates that she is a woman of low social standing and hence part of a marginalised population.[9] These conglomerates of factors suggest that by combining the grounds of socioreligious marginalisation in the characterisation of the woman, Luke is employing the narrative symbolically to address sociocultural ills associated with the concept of women's identity, particularly their depiction as a marginalised group.

Additionally, Luke portrays the woman as an emblem of enslavement. The evident factor is the Satanic bondage, which Jesus identifies as the source of her disability (v. 16). The eighteen years of spinal curvature, a physical

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6 Kim Paffenroth, *The Story of Jesus According to L*, JSNTSup 147 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1997), 135.

7 Jacobus Kok, "The Healing of the Blind Man in John," *JECH* 2 (2012): 41.

8 Paffenroth, *The Story of Jesus*, 135; Kok, "The Healing of the Blind Man," 41.

9 Bruce J. Malina, *The New Testament World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology*, rev. ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1993), 107; cf. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, 525; Paffenroth, *The Story of Jesus*, 135.

manifestation of the spiritual oppression, also represents a form of servitude because it rendered her incapable of lifting herself up (v. 11).[10] The episode also uncovers a more covert dimension of servitude, evident in the way the religious leaders' exegesis of the Deuteronomic law perpetuates oppression rather than fostering covenantal freedom. By arguing that her liberation contradicts God's purpose for the Sabbath, because of the day on which the event transpired, the religious elites' actions sought to resist her right to freedom and perpetuate her bondage by their erroneous understanding of the law (cf. v. 14).[11]

Another aspect of the community's construction of her socioreligious identity is apparent in the narrative's linkage of the term γυνή with indignity. The woman is depicted as an individual whose dignity has been repeatedly violated, leading to a total loss of dignity.[12] The malevolent constraint that resulted in her spinal curvature violated the dignity and beauty of her humanity.[13] These circumstances resulted in her devalued state, diminished social ranking, and marginalisation—conditions that infringed upon her social dignity.[14] It is also instructive to note that she remained a passive figure, indicating that her condition rendered her voiceless and confirming her deprivation of human and social dignity.[15]

Finally, the religious elites undermined her religio-cultural identity and the rights that came with it. Paffenroth rightly observes that the designation "daughter of Abraham" is an honorific that entitles one to benefits.[16] Yet, the religious authorities denied her the privileges afforded to animals—such as rest or freedom on the Sabbath—despite her deserving treatment and rights

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10 Anselm Grün, *Jesus, the Image of Humanity: Luke's Account*, trans. John Bowden (New York: Continuum, 2003), 39.

11 This is the communicative force of δεῖ; see Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, 524; Greg W. Forbes and Scott D. Harrower, *Raised from Obscurity: A Narratival and Theological Study of the Characterization of Women in Luke-Acts* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2015), 116.

12 Grün, *Jesus*, 39–40; David Lyle Jeffrey, *Luke*, BTCB (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2012), 178.

13 Jeffrey, *Luke*, 198.

14 Forbes and Harrower, *Raised from Obscurity*, 116.

15 Forbes and Harrower, *Raised from Obscurity*, 116; Dorota Hartman, "The 'Children of Abraham' in Luke-Acts," *Henoch* 39 (2017): 354.

16 Paffenroth, *The Story of Jesus*, 134.

as a full member of God's community (vv. 15–16; cf. 14:5; Exod 20:9–10; Deut 5:13–14).[17]

In summation, the term γυνή is emblematic of marginalisation, enslavement, indignity and subversion of identity. Therefore, the subsequent section examines the factors that culminated in this religio-cultural identity through an analysis of the Lukan characterisation of the ruler of the Synagogue.

2.2 The Characterisation of the Synagogue Ruler

The depiction of the synagogue ruler reveals that the religious authorities' worldview and stance towards women impede the realisation of their true identities. The reason is that the lone indignant posture and vehement response to a Sabbath healing by a religious leader in Luke is the "straightening" of the woman's bent-over body—the cause of her devalued state (v. 14). Furthermore, the leaders remained reticent on two occasions when Jesus healed two men on the Sabbath and even preceded it with an inquiry regarding the propriety of performing charitable deeds or healing on the Sabbath (6:9 and 14:3). Therefore, the ruler's response reflects the unanimous opposition of the elites to the restoration of the woman's dignity, for it employs δεῖ—the marker of divine necessity or will—previously used by Jesus in his question to the leaders. By invoking this term, the ruler implicitly presents the healing as contrary to God's intended purpose for the Sabbath (v. 14).[18] Furthermore, Jesus employed the vocative masculine plural (ὑποκριταί) in his reply to the ruler of the synagogue, indicating that this was the perlocutionary effect of the ruler's locutionary act (v. 15).[19] Moreover, the ruler belonged to a group identified as Jesus' adversaries (v. 17), corroborating the position that he spoke as the representative of the religious class.[20]

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17 Paffenroth, *The Story of Jesus*, 134; note that the expression employed here for the freedom that the animals enjoy during the Sabbath (λύω) and the previous one referring to Jesus' act of removing the woman from her infirmity (ἀπολέλυσαι, v. 12) indicate that what Jesus offered her was what the religious elites had deprived her of.

18 Luke uses δεῖ as a marker of divine necessity, signalling events that must occur in accordance with God's salvific plan; cf. Green, *Luke*, 524.

19 Cf. Robert H. Stein, *Luke: An Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Holy Scripture*, NAC 24 (Nashville: B&H, 1992), 374.

20 Forbes and Harrower, *Raised from Obscurity*, 115–116; Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, 524.

Additionally, their interpretation of the Deuteronomic law (cf. Exod 20:9–10; Deut 5:13–14) and its concomitant practices characterise the Sabbath and synagogue as mechanisms for the segregation and subjugation of women.[21] Based on their understanding and hypocritical application of the Scriptures, the authorities prioritised the needs of animals over those of the woman and denied her privileges given to animals, indicating how their worldview stripped the woman of her dignity as a human being and contributed to her marginalisation (vv. 15–16).[22] This striking disposition toward women explains why, in this episode, Jesus uniquely juxtaposes the religious leaders' concern for animals with their disregard for a woman's well–being on the Sabbath, according to their interpretation of the law.

Another problem is that this interpretation, which underpins the woman's marginalisation, was based on flawed exegesis. Jesus labelled the leaders as hypocrites due to their erroneous assertion of understanding the divine will when their actions and inaccurate interpretation of the Scriptures proved otherwise.[23] These factors portray them as people who perpetrated unjust and unscriptural traditions against women under the guise of divine authority.

Moreover, the religious elites prioritised their honour over the dignity of the woman. Some NT scholars affirm that there is an exchange of honour and shame at play in the interaction between Jesus and the ruler, a perspective corroborated by the internal evidence in Luke.[24] In the worldview of this culture, a person's honour is his or her publicly acknowledged worth.[25] Prior to this encounter, Luke acknowledged the growing acceptance of the graciousness and authoritative nature of Jesus' words because of what he did in the community, especially in the synagogue (4:22, 32, 36). The heal-

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21 Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, 524–525.

22 Joel B. Green, *Luke as Narrative Theologian: Texts and Topics*, WUNT 446 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2020), 82.

23 Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, 524; cf. John 5:39–40.

24 David A. deSilva, *Honor, Patronage, Kinship and Purity: Unlocking New Testament Culture* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2000), 30.

25 deSilva, *Honor, Patronage, Kinship and Purity*, 25.

ing also resulted in some congregants rejoicing over what he had done and the shame of the religious authorities (v. 17). Therefore, the cultural implication is that the decrease in the leaders' honour corresponded directly to the increase in Jesus' honour, for in the Mediterranean world, honour was a limited good that could only be gained at another person's expense.[26] Given that honour functioned as a form of social capital and was esteemed as highly as life itself among the elites of antiquity, it is possible that the ruler's actions were motivated by the perceived threat posed by this redistribution of honour.[27]

From the above-enumerated issues, it is obvious that the ἀρχισυνάγωγος as a character reflects the religious elites' and institution's participation in the devaluation of women's identity. The subsequent section discusses how Jesus functions in the narrative as the cure to this malady.

2.3 The Characterisation of Jesus

The narrative reveals Jesus' response to this religio-cultural malady through his dual functions as a teacher and liberator. Luke introduces the narrative by indicating that Jesus was teaching in the synagogue on the Sabbath day (13:10). From this introductory comment, we can surmise, based on the verb διδάσκω, the setting, and the general Lukan portrayal of Jesus, that he is depicting him as a Rabbi, as the use of the term διδάσκαλος suggests (cf. 4:15; 5:17; 6:6; 8:24; 9:49). Consequently, although Luke does not explicitly designate Jesus as a Rabbi,[28] the narrative suggests this interpretation because the term διδάσκαλος is synonymous with it.[29] The purpose of characterising Jesus as a διδάσκαλος is to accord due weightage to his teachings, considering both his narrative function and the religious context of the narrative, and to high-

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26 deSilva, *Honor, Patronage, Kinship and Purity*, 30; Richard L. Rohrbaugh, "Honour: Core Value in the Biblical World," in *Understanding the Social World of the New Testament*, ed. Dietmar Neufeld and Richard E. DeMaris (London: Routledge, 2010), 112.

27 Rohrbaugh, "Honour," 109.

28 He uses διδάσκαλε (3:12; 7:40; 9:38; 10:25; 11:45; 12:13; 18:18; 19:39; 20:21, 28, 39; 21:7) and ἐπιστάτα (5:5; 8:24, 45; 9:33, 49; 17:13).

29 Hayim Lapin, "Rabbi," *Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 5:600–602.

light the tensions between his teachings and the established religious culture of the synagogue.[30]

One of the areas where such tensions exist is the religio-cultural identity of women. The different reactions that the incident elicited reflect the divergent opinions of the interlocutors: whereas the leaders represented a patriarchal worldview in which women's place was ambiguous, Jesus understood women's religio-cultural identity. Malina rightly affirms that the first-century "Judean people consisted primarily of male ethnics, 'the sons of Israel,' 'the sons of Abraham,' and 'the house of Israel,' with the woman's position quite ambiguous."[31] Additionally, rabbinic Judaism reveals that only free, unblemished Jewish males participated fully in God's covenant with Israel.[32] However, Jesus' identification of the woman and its associated teachings challenges these prevailing norms: it reconceptualises women's religio-cultural identity. Evidence of this is reflected in how he identifies the woman by transitioning from γυνή to θυγατέρα Ἀβραὰμ: it signifies the recognition that the woman transcends the identity imposed on her by her patriarchal and stratified society; she is also Abraham's daughter. The novel and idiosyncratic characterisation of this poor 'bondwoman' clarifies the hitherto ambiguous position of women and redefines their identity, as it points to their full inclusion in the community of God, thereby challenging the rabbinic view that only free Jewish males constitute members of God's community.[33] It also underscores their worth[34] and reinstates their dignity.[35]

Another source of tension that Jesus' teachings confront is the religious authorities' theological stance on the Sabbath, particularly about the relationship between God's will and the healing. The correlation is apparent in two Greek terms employed by the interlocutors: ἀπεκρίνατο and δεῖ (13:14–15). Whereas

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30 Jeffrey, *Luke*, 86.

31 Bruce J. Malina, *The Social World of Jesus and the Gospels* (London: Routledge, 1996), 53.

32 Judith R. Baskin, *Midrashic Women: Formulations of the Feminine in Rabbinic Literature* (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2002), 13.

33 Stein, *Luke*, 374; Baskin, *Midrashic Women*, 13; Forbes and Harrower, *Raised from Obscurity*, 115–116.

34 Forbes and Harrower, *Raised from Obscurity*, 116; cf. deSilva, *Honor, Patronage, Kinship and Purity*, 30.

35 Grün, *Jesus*, 39–40; Paffenroth, *The Story of Jesus*, 135.

the word ἀπεκρίνατο has a legal undertone,[36] δεῖ suggests a divine will concerning something.[37] Thus, the use of the same words in the argument for or against what happened in the synagogue shows the theological tension in the interlocutors' teachings. As the Lord of the Sabbath (13:15; cf. 6:5) and, therefore, its authoritative expositor, Jesus' argument that the act aligns with God's will for the Sabbath rather than contradicting it portrays him as one whose teachings challenge the theological worldview that underpins women's marginalisation.[38]

The narrative additionally depicts Jesus as the liberator of bound and marginalised women. His liberating function is apparent in both the process that culminated in emancipating the woman and the act of healing itself. The process begins with Jesus 'seeing' the woman (13:12). In the Gospel traditions, this moment serves as an introduction to action.[39] The action is triggered by compassion or pity: a quality of God that inheres in a person's eyes or heart and provokes honourable acts towards people in need.[40] Thus, compassion served as the basis for Jesus' invitation to the woman (13:12).[41]

The call and the interactions it occasioned are part of the emancipatory process due to its religious and cultural implications for women's identity. For instance, rabbinic precepts forbade men from public conversations with all women, including their spouses, due to moral objections. Furthermore, it was considered a reproach for Rabbis to break this precept.[42] The rabbinic view re-

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36 Frederick D. Bruner, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012), 321; Alison A. Trites, *The New Testament Concept of Witness* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 187.

37 Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, 524; Forbes and Harrower, *Raised from Obscurity*, 116.

38 The Sabbath was intended to provide liberation from work and any form of servitude within one's society, irrespective of one's social classification. Therefore, Jesus is fulfilling its principles because he used it to provide emancipation for a bond woman of low social status. See Richard Nelson, *Deuteronomy: A Commentary*, OTL (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004), 83.

39 Herman Ridderbos, *The Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), 185.

40 Bruce J. Malina, "Pity," in *Biblical Social Values and their Meaning: A Handbook*, ed. J. J. Pilch and Bruce J. Malina (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1993), 139.

41 Forbes and Harrower, *Raised from Obscurity*, 115–116.

42 Herman Ridderbos, *The Gospel of John*, 166; Al Garza, *John: A Rabbinic Source Commentary and Language Study Bible*, NT 4 (Hesperia, CA: Sefer, 2015), 96; Forbes and Harrower, *Raised from Obscurity*, 115.

veals how the religio-cultural construction of femininity had devalued women. Thus, by addressing the marginalised woman publicly in the synagogue and in the presence of the religious authorities as a διδάσκαλος, Jesus challenges the *status quo* and reconfigures societal perceptions of women.

Furthermore, the act constitutes a moment of liberation. Though it culminated in healing, the slavery and emancipation lexicon corroborates the idea that the woman's liberation is the focus.[43] For example, Jesus identified Satanic bondage as the cause of the spinal curvature (v. 16). Thus, Christ set the woman free (ἀπολέλυσαι) from the dominion of her enslaver—Satan—rather than restoring her health (v. 16).[44] Finally, he juxtaposes the event to the untying of donkeys from their stalls on the Sabbath, thereby making the liberation motif the focus of the narrative and highlighting Christ's liberating function in reimagining women's religio-cultural identity.

3. Theological Synthesis

The analysis reveals that Luke employs this narrative as an opportunistic figurative mechanism to depict gender-based marginalisation of women as a result of their ambiguous religio-cultural identity and the requisite response that such challenges must elicit. Thus, the characters have idiosyncratic rhetorical functions. For instance, the Lukan portrayal of the γυνή symbolises systemic, gender-based marginalisation of women with ambiguous religious and cultural identity. The system depicts her gender and condition as a person with no human and social dignity, an ambiguous identity, and a slave. Such characterisation obscures her identity as a θυγατέρα Ἀβραὰμ who deserves all the privileges of membership in the community of God and instead assigns her a socially constructed identity that positions her among the marginalised in society.

Moreover, the ruler's response signifies the role of the religious class and institutions in the perpetration of this religious-cultural malady. The conduct of

43 For example, ἀπολέλυσαι (to be free), λύει (untie), ἔδησεν (bound), δεσμοῦ (bond); see also Houghtby-Haddon, *Changed Imagination*, 95.

44 Houghtby-Haddon, *Changed Imagination*, 95.

these leaders creates an enabling environment for marginalising women. Their faulty interpretation of scripture, promotion of unscriptural traditions against women under the guise of divine authority, hypocritical application of religious laws, and prioritisation of their publicly acknowledged worth over the dignity of the woman expose their involvement in women's marginalisation.

On the other hand, Jesus' didactic and emancipatory roles are presented as the biblical remedy for these deeply ingrained societal issues because they offer a counter-narrative to the prevailing norms that seek to suppress women's identity. The reason is that his teachings critique the religious authorities' interpretation of the Torah, demonstrate unambiguous understanding of women's identity, and reconceptualise the marred identity of the woman. Additionally, his emancipatory function focuses on taking the necessary steps towards the woman's liberation—a practical demonstration of his teachings—beginning with viewing the woman with the eyes of compassion. His compassionate disposition draws her out of the margins and allows him to stand with her publicly, despite her lost human and social dignity and despite the rabbinic precepts that should have kept him at a distance. That same compassion frees her from bondage and restores her identity and dignity.

4. Conclusions and Recommendations

From the analysis of the depiction of the three characters, it is conspicuous that the religio-cultural worldview is one of the precipitating and necessitating factors of marginalisation against women. The reason is that it is upheld by religious leaders who utilise religious organisations to enforce stringent compliance with these beliefs, adversely affecting women and rendering deviation from the norm challenging or even unfeasible.

Consequently, the study proposes, based on Jesus' compassionate response, that addressing these challenges requires religious leaders, institutions and worldviews to reflect Christ's humanity. Such an approach allows marginalised women to be perceived through a lens of compassion rather than traditions rooted in patriarchal interpretations of the scriptures, which exacerbate the problem. It also allows religious authorities and the community to see

the plight of women as a marginalised group and strive to address it. Compassionate perspectives further enable leaders and the community to re-examine religio-cultural perceptions that obscure women's identities, allowing them to treat women as God's children.

Furthermore, since biblical interpretation influences worldview—and culture can perpetuate interpretations that subjugate women—the believing community, particularly its leaders, must exemplify Christ's role as a διδάσκαλος (teacher) by confronting religious worldviews and practices that contribute to women's marginalisation, arising from erroneous scriptural interpretations, and reinterpreting them to align with women's divinely ordained identities. Performing the teaching role provides a biblical response to the problem by simultaneously addressing the oppressor, the oppressed, and the oppressive culture. Any responsible interpretation of a woman's identity informed by the scriptures, akin to Jesus' approach, shakes the foundations of worldviews, structures or institutions that serve as mechanisms for the marginalisation of women because it serves as a discernible evaluation of religious and cultural traditions and challenges the *status quo*. Secondly, it helps the victims—women—to have an informed understanding of their place in the community of God by reimagining their identity. It also empowers women to oppose any form of marginalisation aimed at them. Further, a responsible biblical hermeneutics fosters an informed understanding of women's intrinsic value as humans and children of God, thereby facilitating their recognition as members of the community of God, along with the corresponding privileges.

Moreover, the men and women of the community of faith have a critical participatory emancipatory role towards marginalised women as agents of liberation. Men must emulate Christ by publicly identifying with marginalised women, regardless of their community's cultural and religious view of a woman's identity. They must also speak up against patriarchal voices and systems that permit or promote the subjugation of women. By publicly aligning with women and advocating for their liberation, men demonstrate to them that they are not alone in their fight against marginalisation. Since marginalisation of women flourishes in a patriarchal environment, men's participation in the campaign against women's marginalisation can also contribute to curbing the problem.

Conversely, women have a responsibility to recognise their inclusion in God's family and embrace Christ's invitation, like the bent-over woman, to emerge from the fringes of socially constructed identities that undermine their human, sociocultural, and religious dignity and pursue emancipation.

The performance of these roles intersects with the hypothesised liberating function of Jesus in the narrative. In this narrative, Jesus dealt with the situation theologically and practically: he taught and acted. Similarly, by performing the teaching and emancipatory roles, Christian communities are adopting a Christological approach to the problem. Whereas the teaching role deals with the ideological or theological foundations of these practices, the liberation function deals with the practical steps that the community of faith must take to address the issue. Such an approach can serve as the basis for women's liberation because it acknowledges the correlation between orthodoxy and orthopraxy or that changes in beliefs influence behaviour. Consequently, transforming the societal worldview of women will redefine both societal attitudes towards them and their self-perception and break the cycle of marginalisation.

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THE LEADERSHIP CHARACTER AND IDENTITY OF PETER: SOCIO-RHETORICAL REINTERPRETATION OF ACTS 1:12–26

Daniel Nii Aboagye Aryeh[*]

1. Introduction

This study undertakes a socio-rhetorical reinterpretation of Acts 1:12–26 to argue that the leadership character and identity of Peter combine innovation—setting a criterion for the selection of Matthias, and tradition—reference to Scripture. The concepts of leadership character and identity are profoundly interconnected with the latter serving an essential function in determining both the efficacy and the progressive evolution of leadership practices and theories. A comprehensive examination of the intricate relationship between character and identity can utilise multiple theoretical perspectives. These perspectives include analysing how self-perception influences leadership dynamics and exploring the sociocultural frameworks that shape leadership identities. They also encompass the dual-identity model, which seeks to harmonise individual and collective identity perspectives within leadership contexts. These diverse analytical lenses serve to illuminate the complex and multifaceted characteristics of leadership character and identity, thereby underscoring its significant ramifications for both the practical applications of leadership and the theoretical constructs that underpin it. This intricate interplay between character and identity not only enriches the understanding of effective leadership but also emphasises the importance of considering identity as a preliminary element in the discourse surrounding leadership development and practice in the context of Acts and the early church.

Leadership character and identity remain critical issues in both religious and non-religious organisations. In the early church, as depicted in Acts, leadership was primarily charismatic rather than institutional. Although Jesus did

* Daniel Nii Aboagye Aryeh is an Associate Professor and President of Alpha University College, Ghana.

not explicitly designate a successor to lead the community after his ascension, Peter emerged as the natural leader, as evidenced by his protagonist role in Acts 1:12–26. This prominence aligns with his position as one of Jesus's closest disciples and his characteristically vocal and active presence during Jesus's public ministry (cf. Luke 5:8; 8:45; 9:20). Notably, Peter's leadership appears to have been accepted without opposition from the other disciples, nor did it require the formal election process used for Matthias (Acts 1:12–26).

This study engages the narrative sub-texture of inner texture, and the utopian sub-texture of social textures of the socio-rhetorical interpretation[1] to analyse Acts 1:12–26 and uncover Peter's leadership character and identity. The aim is to examine how the implied narrator portrays Peter as a leader of both the apostles and the early church. Acts 1:12–26 was selected because of Peter's protagonist role in this passage, which offers a focused opportunity to elucidate his leadership characteristics through socio-rhetorical analysis. The study argues that the process Peter initiated for electing Matthias exemplifies innovative leadership during a moment of crisis and trauma, while his appeal to the Psalter for support and justification demonstrates a commitment to tradition—a key dimension of identity.

2. A Survey of Scholarship on Peter's Leadership Character and Identity in Acts

The figure of Peter as portrayed in Acts has attracted scholarly attention from various analytical perspectives, particularly regarding his leadership role. Eric Stewart highlights several attributes that epitomise effective leadership, arguing that Peter exhibited self-restraint in the face of adversaries and captivated his audience through skilled oratory. Stewart identifies this as a Roman archetype of masculinity, contrasting with Peter's portrayal in the Gospels and certain epistles.[2] Although his analysis does not focus primarily on leadership,

1 Vernon K. Robbins, *Exploring the Texture of Texts: A Guide to Socio-Rhetorical Interpretation* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1996), 71–94.

2 Eric Stewart, "'We'll Make a Man out of You Yet': The Masculinity of Peter in the Book of Acts," *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 72.4 (2016): a3433, doi:10.4102/hts.v72i4.3433.

the demonstration of Peter's self-control during public confrontations reveals an inherent quality of effective leadership. This self-regulation aligns with Roman conceptions of masculine virtue, illustrating that masculinity in a leadership role is less a matter of gender than of maintaining composure under challenging public circumstances.[3] Stewart's research, however, is confined to Peter's public discourses in Acts; his interactions with the disciples fall outside the scope of the inquiry.

Carl Johan Berglund examines the miracles of Peter in Acts and the *Acts of Peter* to illuminate the theological concerns of ancient authors. Berglund posits that in the Gospels, Peter served as an apprentice who observed Jesus's miracles and walked on water at his command. In Acts, he graduated to healing the sick and raising the dead, while in the *Acts of Peter*, he caused a dog to speak and raised multiple people to life. Peter thus progressed from observer to performer to master miracle-worker—though this remains a narratorial construction.[4] Nevertheless, this trajectory portrays Peter as someone who underwent formation and acquired the capacity to lead. Berglund's work highlights the importance of charisma for leadership in ancient Mediterranean religions: the ability to perform miracles was often understood as divine approval, marking the miracle-worker as a chosen leader. Peter's thaumaturgical abilities thus reflect his role as mediator of divine power. By extending his analysis beyond Acts, Berglund emphasises that miraculous activity exhibits a key leadership characteristic—the capacity to engage with the supernatural to meet the existential needs of followers.

Caldwell, McConkie, and Licona identify a transformative leadership model derived from Peter's moral and ethical commitments. They argue that Peter's leadership represents an amalgamation of Charismatic, Transformational, Level Five, Covenantal, Servant, and Principle-Centred Leadership. This broad identification is possible because their study encompasses the Petrine epistles, not only Acts. They conclude:

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3 Stewart, "'We'll Make a Man,'" a3433.

4 Carl Johan Berglund, "The Innovation of a Master Wonder-worker in the Character of Simon Peter," *Approaching Religion* 14.1 (2024): 99–114.

> As modern practitioners and scholars study the life of Peter and seek to learn from his example, they have the opportunity to affirm Peter's transformative commitment to creating a better world… Peter's example can enable today's leaders to achieve "moments of greatness" that endure and that add value to their organisations and the stakeholders that they serve.[5]

Charles Cleworth focuses on how the narrator of Acts develops Peter's character to advance the book's message. He argues that Peter's multifaceted character propelled the Gospel to the ends of the earth. Analysing Peter's activities in Jerusalem, Samaria, and Gentile territories, Cleworth demonstrates that Peter exhibits both transformation and constancy in fulfilling the commission of Jesus.[6] This reveals a leadership marked by vision-keeping, monitoring, and fulfilment—characteristics aligned with reformist social ideals. Although Cleworth's discussion is succinct, his findings are significant.

The contributions of Stewart, Berglund, Caldwell, McConkie and Licona, and Cleworth reflect growing scholarly attention to Peter's leadership in Acts, the Gospels, and the epistles, both canonical and non-canonical. In discussions of New Testament leadership, Peter consistently emerges as a primary figure warranting close examination. Building on these valuable contributions, the present study enhances the discourse by analysing Acts 1:12–26 through the lens of innovation—Peter's establishment of criteria for selecting Matthias—and identity—his appeal to Scripture and authority.

3. Acts 1:12–26 in Scholarly Discourse

The narrative of Acts 1:12–26 serves as a crucial bridge between the ascension of Jesus and the descent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. It details the apostles' return to Jerusalem, their prayerful waiting in the upper room, Peter's speech regarding the vacancy left by Judas Iscariot, and the subsequent

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5 Cam Caldwell, Mark McConkie, and Bryan Licona, "Simon Peter and Transformative Leadership: Leadership Insights for Today's Leaders," *Journal of Management and Strategy* 5.1 (2014): 22.

6 Charles Cleworth, "The Characterization of Peter and the Message of Acts," *Themelios* 48.2 (2023): 306–316.

selection of Matthias. Scholars have approached this passage from various angles, focusing on its theological, literary, historical, and ecclesiological dimensions.

A primary interpretive lens views the passage as demonstrating that the events surrounding Judas were not a disruption of God's plan but its fulfilment, as foretold in Scripture. Peter's speech is central to this interpretation, as he cites Psalms 69:25 and 109:8 to justify the need to replace Judas.

Luke Timothy Johnson offers a theological interpretation of Acts 1:12–26, arguing that the event's significance lies not in Matthias as an individual but in the symbolic restoration of the Twelve.[7] Johnson contends that this restoration signifies the establishment of eschatological Israel—the renewed people of God who will receive the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. He emphasises divine providence, confirmed through scriptural interpretation of Judas's betrayal and the casting of lots to ensure God's choice in completing the group. For Johnson, this event is a necessary precondition for the birth of the church, ensuring its leadership structure reflects Jesus's original intention. Although Johnson's focus on corporate identity is insightful, his interpretation invites complementary analysis of Peter's leadership role. Peter's initiative in guiding the community, his scriptural authority in interpreting events through the Psalms, and his establishment of clear criteria for apostleship all reveal strategic thinking aimed at preserving the integrity of the gospel witness. This portrait presents Peter not merely as a speaker but as the definitive leader who structures, grounds, and shepherds the nascent community through a crisis of leadership.

In his socio-rhetorical commentary, Ben Witherington III interprets Acts 1:12–26 through the lens of eschatological fulfilment. He argues that the selection of Matthias is fundamentally about reinstating the symbolic number twelve, which "serves as a clear signal that the community of Jesus sees itself as the true Israel, the beginning of the eschatological people of God."[8] For the

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7 Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, Sacra Pagina 5 (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1992), 35–36.

8 Ben Witherington III, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 122.

Pentecost event to inaugurate the renewal of God's people, Witherington contends, its leadership must constitute a restored Israel. This action, framed by Peter's use of Scripture, is a necessary precondition for the coming Kingdom. While Witherington highlights the communal and symbolic significance of the event, his analysis invites further examination of Peter's distinct leadership role (Acts 1:15–22). Peter's rhetorical skill, his use of deliberative speech to guide a critical decision, and his application of Scripture to frame the crisis all reveal a defining leadership identity—a central, authoritative figure who structures the community according to scriptural pattern and clear criteria.

Craig S. Keener similarly interprets Acts 1:12–26 by situating it within Jewish restoration theology and Greco-Roman communal practices. Keener emphasises that selecting Matthias served primarily to re-establish the Twelve, a number symbolising "the true, eschatological Israel," thus continuing the ministry structure Jesus had established. He provides comprehensive background on the practice of casting lots, viewing it as a biblically sanctioned method for discerning divine will that would resonate with both Jewish and Gentile readers, thereby validating Matthias's apostolic status.[9] Keener's historical and cultural analysis clarifies the why and how of the event, while highlighting the need for corresponding investigation of Peter's leadership. Peter's initiative in convening the community, his authoritative interpretation of Scripture, and his establishment of apostolic criteria together paint a portrait of a strategic leader. Analysing this narrative through the lens of character formation reveals how Peter begins to structure the church, blending scriptural authority with pragmatic innovation.

The selection of Matthias is a deceptively simple story rich with theological significance. Scholarly interpretations converge on its central purpose: to show that the community, guided by Scripture and prayer, took deliberate action to restore the symbolic core of the Twelve, thereby presenting itself as the authentic, Spirit-prepared people of God at the dawn of a new era. The debates surrounding Judas's death and the lot-casting underscore the multifaceted interplay of history, theology, and literary artistry in Acts. Yet Peter

9 Craig S. Keener, *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary: Introduction and 1:1–2:47*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2012), 753.

remains the principal figure who led these activities of the early community. This study offers an inner-textural and social-textural interpretation of Acts 1:12–26 from the perspective of socio-rhetorical criticism, arguing that Peter demonstrated leadership qualities that identify him as the new leader of the Jesus movement.[10] The findings complement the work of Johnson, Witherington, and Keener, who have emphasised other aspects of the narrative, and contribute to the broader examination of leadership in Acts.

4. The Innovative Leadership of Peter: Social Texture Exegesis of Acts 1:12–26

The narrational texture, a subsection of inner texture, provides space for examining characters. Acts 1:12–26 features five characters: the Jesus movement community, Peter, Judas, Joseph called Barsabbas, and Matthias. These characters intermingle, as individuals simultaneously belong to and represent the community.

Acts 1:12–26 occupies a pivotal liminal space in the formation of the early Christian community. An analysis of its inner texture—the internal rhetorical and narrative dynamics of the text—discloses a profound exploration of leadership, trauma, and communal identity through the figures of Peter, Judas, and Matthias. Within this transitional moment, Peter emerges not as an autocrat but as a leader distinguished by hermeneutical authority, pastoral inventiveness, and confidence in restorative process.

The inner texture establishes a setting of unified, expectant prayer (1:14)—a community awaiting direction. It is Peter who "stood up among the believers" (ἀνέστη Πέτρος ἐν μέσῳ τῶν ἀδελφῶν, 1:15), a phrase that physically and rhetorically positions him at the centre of the community.[11] In Lukan narrative,

10 Vernon K. Robbins, "Sociorhetorical Criticism: Mary, Elizabeth, and the Magnificat as a Case Study," in *Foundations for Sociorhetorical Exploration: A Rhetoric of Religious Antiquity Reader*, ed. Vernon K. Robbins, Robert H. von Thaden Jr., and Bart B. Bruehler (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2016), 55–63; Robbins, *Exploring the Texture*, 71–94; Vernon K. Robbins, *The Tapestry of Early Christian Discourse: Rhetoric, Society and Ideology* (London: Routledge, 1996), 144–190.

11 Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 34.

"standing up" represents a posture for teaching and leadership, signifying Peter's initiative to guide the community in Jesus's absence and in anticipation of the Spirit's descent.

Peter's leadership is first demonstrated through the hermeneutical act of reframing trauma. He addresses the community as "brothers and sisters" (ἀδελφοί), establishing a familial rather than hierarchical tone, and immediately interprets Judas's betrayal through Scripture. Peter asserts that the Holy Spirit "spoke beforehand by the mouth of David concerning Judas" (1:16), weaving together citations from Pss 69:25 and 109:8.[12] This is not mere prooftexting but a theodicy that integrates a chaotic, traumatic event into the coherent narrative of God's plan. By making Scripture the primary lens for understanding the crisis, Peter provides meaning and order, guiding the community from disorientation toward purposeful action. Questions may be raised, however: does the appeal to the Psalter concerning Judas's actions suggest he bore no responsibility? Did the original recipients of these psalms understand them as Peter did? Such questions notwithstanding, Peter's application of the Psalms as prophecy concerning Judas represents an early Christian pesher-style interpretation, where ancient texts are understood as directly prophesying contemporary events. This legitimises the apostolic action as continuous with God's will as revealed in the Hebrew Scriptures.

Peter's leadership is further characterised by reasoned, procedural acumen. A successor to Judas was not simply declared; rather, clear theological criteria were established. The candidate must have been a companion from John's baptism through the ascension—a witness to Jesus's entire ministry and resurrection (1:21–22).[13] These criteria root apostolic authority in personal, historical experience with Jesus, distinguishing it from later charismatic or ecclesiastical offices and ensuring both historical continuity and the integrity of apostolic eyewitness testimony.

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12 Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Acts of the Apostles: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Yale Bible 31 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 225.

13 Witherington III, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 122.

Peter's model is collaborative and divinely dependent. He leads the process, but the community nominates two candidates: Joseph called Barsabbas and Matthias. The final selection is entrusted to God through prayer and the casting of lots (1:23–26), demonstrating that ultimate authority resides neither with Peter nor with the community but with the κύριε καρδιογνῶστα πάντων—the Lord who "knows the hearts of all" (1:24).[14] This description suggests that the Jesus community understood God as omniscient, consistent with Hebrew Bible theology. The use of lots, a practice with Old Testament precedent (Prov 16:33), reflects the community's reliance on divine sovereignty for a decision of this magnitude, with Peter acting as facilitator. Notably, Jesus had prayed and selected the Twelve without consultation (Luke 6:12–16), as no community yet existed to consult. Peter, by contrast, consults the community and employs lot-casting—a form of Hebrew Bible discernment—to ascertain God's will. This "pre-Christian" method of discernment would disappear after Pentecost, replaced by the direct guidance of the Holy Spirit and communal deliberation.[15]

The character of Judas, as presented in Peter's speech, functions as a negative exemplum. The inner texture contrasts his former position as one "numbered among us" (1:17) with his grievous end, graphically detailed in the "field of blood" narrative (1:18–19). This parenthetical explanation, likely from the implied narrator, permanently establishes Judas's identity as the betrayer whose office has been forfeited.[16] It defines the boundaries of apostolic faithfulness and the severe consequences of its violation, thereby establishing the necessity of Peter's action. The passage serves a theological function in Acts: underscoring the fulfilment of Scripture and the conclusive nature of Judas's apostasy.

The inner texture of Acts 1:12–26 thus presents a nuanced portrait of leadership embodied by Peter. His authority derives from his ability to interpret Scripture pastorally, to guide a community through crisis with coherent pro-

14 Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, BECNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 87.

15 Hans Conzelmann, *Acts of the Apostles: A Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles*, trans. James Limburg, A. Thomas Kraabel, and Donald H. Juel, Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 10.

16 C. K. Barrett, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles*, vol. 1, ICC (London: T&T Clark, 1994), 98–99.

cedure, and to facilitate a decision that is both communally engaged and divinely directed. The restoration of the Twelve through Matthias is not a mere administrative act but a theologically significant event that prepares the reconstituted Israel for its pending mission under Peter's emerging leadership.

The characters of Judas, Joseph Barsabbas, and Matthias present a contrast between apostolic failure, faithful readiness, and divine selection.[17] Judas's betrayal and subsequent death frame the narrative, creating a vacancy among the Twelve. His fate is presented not merely as tragic but as the fulfilment of Scripture, underscoring the theological gravity of his actions. In response, the community proposes two men who had been constant companions from Jesus's baptism to his ascension: Joseph called Barsabbas and Matthias. Both are presented as equally qualified, embodying the necessary eyewitness credentials for apostleship. Their silent acquiescence to the lot demonstrates humble submission to God's will. Matthias is chosen not for any stated superiority but through the divine mechanism of casting lots, emphasising that appointment to ministry is ultimately God's decision.

Peter is a character who transcends the *exordium, narratio, propositio, and peroratio* of the narrative, demonstrating his critical role in its composition. Peter is a "textually round" religious character—that is, one who gains a rich and elaborate appearance over the course of the text.[18] In narrative terms, a round character possesses significant depth and complexity, established by four main criteria: the character is named; the audience accesses their internal thoughts and emotions; they appear across different events in the narrative; and the text depicts them as having multiple, sometimes contradictory, personality traits. Peter's character is constructed by the implied narrator and through statements attributed to him. He is the protagonist whose desire is to ensure the human resources are in place to prosecute Jesus's mandate.[19]

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17 Frederick F. Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, NICNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1988), 42.
18 David Fishelov, "Types of Character, Characteristics of Types," *Style* 24.3 (1990): 422–439.
19 Fishelov, "Types of Character," 426.

5. Peter's Utopian Leadership and Identity in Acts 1:12–26

The narrative of Acts 1:12–26 is not merely a procedural account of replacing Judas but a strategic construction of "utopian" identity for the nascent community and for Peter. This identity is framed around restored wholeness, divine guidance through Scripture, and collective participation in the apostolic mission. Peter exemplifies leadership characterised by utopian social textures as a means for transforming the Jesus movement community, ensuring the Twelve have the human resources to fulfil divinely ordained assignments.

The narrator observes that Peter instigated the selection of a successor to Judas, grounding his initiative in the Psalter: καί τὴν ἐπισκοπὴν αὐτοῦ λαβέτω ἕτερος ("And let another take his position of oversight," Acts 1:20). Despite the intertextual complexities that have attracted scholarly attention,[20] it is evident that Peter is portrayed as a leader well-versed in the Hebrew Bible, particularly the Psalms. He adeptly employs the Psalter to address a contemporary dilemma. The argument for replacing Judas posits that substituting the current social order with a new paradigm—one free of treachery—would create a more favourable environment for the community. Judas's absence had created a void hindering the effective operation of the Jesus movement; consequently, his replacement was necessary for the apostles to function properly. Judas's actions, which culminated in Jesus's arrest and crucifixion, were perceived as malevolent, adversely affecting the disciples' shared identity. Thus arose the imperative for a replacement.

Peter's leadership in this succession serves as a paradigmatic illustration of the utopian social dynamics within the early Jerusalem community, distinguished by restored order, divine guidance, covenantal symbolism, and communal discernment. Peter's identity, delineated in Acts 1:13–14, is that of *primus inter pares*—restorer and unifier. He asserts that replacing Judas is imperative to fulfil scriptural mandates (Ps 69:25; 109:8) and to reconstitute the Twelve

20 Pawel Podeszwa, "God's 'Inspired and Inspiring' Word in Acts 1:15–26," *Biblica et Patristica Thoruniensia* 16 (2023): 369–386, doi:10.12775/bpth.2023.017; Kenneth Duncan Litwak, *Echoes of Scripture in Luke-Acts: Telling the History of God's People Intertextually* (New York: T&T Clark International, 2005).

(Acts 1:20–22). The Twelve represent the restored tribes of Israel (Luke 22:30), symbolising the community's identity as the eschatological people of God. Peter's actions uphold this theological ideal, ensuring covenantal continuity.

Peter subordinates symbolic integrity to pragmatic considerations through a decision-making process that encompasses the entire community (1:23–26), reflecting the egalitarian ethos later expressed as "all things in common" (Acts 2:44–45). The selection procedure harmonises human nomination ("they proposed two") with divine guidance ("the lot fell on Matthias"). This communal identity and egalitarian posture are evident in the address to the 120 as ἀδελφοί (brethren), a group including women, Jesus's family, and apostles (Acts 1:14–16). Peter's leadership thus exemplifies participatory polity, contrasting with the hierarchical structures dominant in Roman society. The notice that Judas ἀπῆλθεν εἰς τὸν τόπον τὸν ἴδιον ("went to his own place," 1:25) emphasises moral accountability, while Matthias's selection restores sanctity to the apostolic office.[21] Peter combines divine vision with community life, embodying Luke's ideal of a Spirit-driven, covenantal people. This defining utopian trait stems directly from Peter's identity as a restored, prayerful, unifying leader rooted in the disciples' fellowship (Acts 1:13–14).

6. Conclusion

A sociorhetorical interpretation of Acts 1:12–26 reveals that Peter's leadership is fundamentally that of a founder and identity architect for the post-ascension community. Far from a mere administrator, he employs sophisticated rhetorical strategies to navigate a crisis of succession and betrayal. By renarrating the trauma of Judas's defection through the lens of scriptural fulfilment (Pss 69 and 109), Peter reasserts God's ultimate control over history and redefines the community's suffering as part of a divine, purposive plan. His leadership is rooted not in personal charisma alone but in skilful interpretation of sacred texts to shape a new, cohesive Jesus movement community in preparation for Pentecost.

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21 Keener, *Acts,* 1:100.

The selection of Matthias is a masterstroke of socio-rhetorical performance. By insisting on a witness to Jesus's entire ministry and employing the lot, Peter establishes a leadership model grounded in shared memory and divine sanction rather than human meritocracy. This act forges a collective identity centred on restored wholeness and direct divine guidance. Acts 1:12–26 presents Peter not as a simple fisherman but as a strategic leader who, through rhetorical skill and innovative action, successfully transitions the community from following a physical Jesus to becoming a Spirit-led movement—establishing the core identity of the nascent church.

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THE ETHICAL AND CULTURAL CONFLICTS OF PAUL OF TARSUS: TEXTUAL ANALYSIS AND REFLECTIONS FOR TODAY'S CULTURE

Ernesto Borghi *

Throughout his existence, Paul of Tarsus experienced the 'conflict of life,' within himself and with others, as an essential feature of his identity and human experience. We see, in this regard, a series of passages that start from the apostle's personal condition and arrive at the relationships with the different recipients of some of his fundamental writings.

1. Paul's Initial Identity

He was born outside the Palestinian territory, in Tarsus, a Hellenised city of significant cultural, religious and economic importance, in a Jewish context attached to a strict obedience to the Torah and the principles derived from it. In Phil 3:5–6 Paul affirms the following about himself: "… of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law a Pharisee, as to zeal a persecutor of the church, as to righteousness under the law blameless."

As in other passages of his writings, the statement suggests that, prior to the Damascus event, he was committed to practising and defending a precise religious and cultural perspective: a path towards the fullness of life, that is, salvation founded on the most complete obedience to the principles and norms contained in the Torah, following the spirit which leads, in the rabbinic traditions, to the 613 principles.

After the encounter on the road to Damascus, narrated first in chapters 9, 22 and 26 of the Acts of the Apostles, there was not conversion in the strict

* Ernesto Borghi is an adjunct lecturer of New Testament studies at the Pontificia Facoltà Teologica dell'Italia Meridionale (PFTIM, Naples) and the Istituto Superiore di Scienze Religiose Guardini (Trento). He is President of the Associazione Biblica della Svizzera Italiana (Lugano, Switzerland), Coordinator of Biblical Education for the Diocese of Lugano, and Coordinator of the CBF for Western Europe.

sense of the word, a radical change that denies the past, but there was a significant reorientation, certainly not without difficulties and suffering. The renewal of his position can be summarised as follows: fullness of life can be pursued by human beings, not through obedience to the Torah, but through daily adherence to the God manifested by Jesus Christ crucified and resurrected.

Paul in none of his writings denies the Torah, which was his essential formative and, for at least half of his life, his existential reference point. On the other hand, precisely from the conviction that he is for this reason more than ever a Jew, he seeks to live in his own person, and to propose to all those he encounters, a perspective of life that he has followed in particular from the Damascus event onwards.

As is well known, he is not interested in speaking of the Nazarene in a biographical or historical context. The heart of the *kerygma*, the proclamation of Jesus Christ who died and rose again in the logic of an intense and universal love, is spread by him in every practicable direction, with overwhelming enthusiasm and unceasing determination, and is the fundamental reason for his life until its conclusion in Rome.

This man of three cultures proposes an interpretation of the message of Jesus of Nazareth crucified and resurrected in which his personal transition from the preceptive Judaism of the Torah to the universal liberation of Jesus Christ has great relevance. This personal tension knows various moments of expression according to the different cultural and religious terrains in which he proposes the kerygma and the individual and collective, personal and communitarian, existential consequences of adhering to the message of Jesus Christ.[1]

Three environments — Corinth, the region of Galatia, Rome — and three dimensions — conscience, freedom, worship/sacrifice — constitute important phases in the development of Paul's inner and social conflicts.

1 On Paul's cultural background, see Piotr Zygulski, Federico Adinolfi, and Giulio Mariotti, eds., *Riattivare Paolo di Tarso* (Cantalupa: Effatà, 2025); Gabriele Boccaccini and Giulio Mariotti, *Paolo di Tarso: Un ebreo del suo tempo* (Roma: Carocci, 2025).

Let us consider them, albeit briefly, with reference to 1 Corinthians, the letter to the Galatians and the letter to the Romans and then try to ask ourselves about their relevance for the life and culture of our time, from one end of our planet to the other, precisely in the interweaving of two of the three keywords of our conference, namely identity and culture.

2. Conscience/Consciousness

The First Epistle to the Corinthians is the New Testament text with the highest number of occurrences of the word συνείδησις ('consciousness').[2] They are concentrated in two chapters, 8 and 10, which are interconnected and whose common thematic denominator is the relationship between the freedom of those who wish to follow Jesus Christ and the community contribution of their actions. In this community, which has created cultural and pastoral difficulties like perhaps no other for Paul, the overall heterogeneity of its members[3] was probably at the root of the problematic situations dealt with since the first chapter.

The structure of chapters 8 to 10 of this letter is as evident as it is interesting: the theme of meat sacrificed to idols (chapters 8 and 10) is the 'frame' for Paul's ministerial role and his freedom (chapter 9).

There are, therefore, two principles at work, which are in contrast to each other: a form of 'orthodoxy,' i.e. the total renunciation of these meats; and a kind of 'permissiveness,' which allowed them to be eaten. Paul, attentive as usual to the overall growth of all members of the communities he founded and visited, eschews this alternative. He reaffirms first of all this: those who follow Jesus Christ are completely independent of anything that does not descend from the Lord God and, in particular, of the nothingness that is any kind of idol. Any food has no meaning in itself with respect to drawing near or far from God.

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2 There are eight recurrences: 1 Cor 8:7, 10, 12; 10:25, 27, 28, 29 (2x).

3 On the characteristics of the Corinthian community, see Romano Penna, *Le prime comunità cristiane* (Roma: Carocci, 2010), 141–150.

On the other hand, there are different levels of faith awareness and ethical steadfastness in the community, as well as economic possibilities. And the criticality of the situation Paul faces follows from some specific facts. If someone buys and consumes meat sacrificed to idols, this may be for different reasons:

1. His more advanced level of education tells him that there is no religious impediment to consuming it.

2. It is sold at a lower price, and quite a few of the community members are of low economic status, and usually for this reason cannot consume meat.

However, there may be religious misunderstandings within the community itself. For example, among the poorer members of the community, who are at once attracted by economic convenience and troubled by the 'religious' origin of the meat. The exercise of freedom in eating food has nothing illicit about it, while steadfastness in the faith leads those who eat such food to consider the good of less confident members of the community, with serious responsibility in the sight of Jesus Christ the crucified one (cf. vv. 7, 9–12). The legitimate freedom of those who are stronger in faith in Jesus Christ should be contrasted with the weakness of those who have not yet effectively freed themselves from a mentality of subservience to idolatry. The comparison between these two attitudes is made with the overall good of the community in mind, that is, the harmony in the relations between its members.

Conscience, then, is, at one and the same time, the place, condition and motor of the individual's ethical choices. Paul does not ask whether conscience is free, but assumes that it is, and, precisely because of this, it is open to the other and connected to him. This last use of the term, therefore, also encompasses the previous one: συνείδησις comes into play whenever the existential equilibrium of any member of the Corinthian community or, more generally, of any human being, is at risk. Indeed, human life is based, always and in any case, on an intersection of relationships: the bond with God is realised in the responsible daily attention to one's fellow human beings. A firm and dynamic conscience, ethically founded on ἀγάπη, is indispensable.

It is love, and not an exclusively analytical-rational exercise, that considers the conscience in relation to the other, and that offers the right orientation, on the basis of which action must be taken. The content and moral quality of the imperatives of conscience that each person feels within himself certainly depend on each person's personal history, his position, his training, his temperament. And Paul, who grew up in a Judaism hyper-attentive to the most minute prescriptions of the Torah, is clearly no exception to this.

However, whatever the individual's conscience, whether enlightened and secure or uncertain and weak, the Pauline text is unequivocal: in a truly Christian perspective, no one can feel entitled to force another individual to act against his or her personal conscience, whether he or she is 'strong' in the faith or 'weak' in the matter. On the other hand, the believer's intelligence of love must evaluate the different situations experienced: a spirit of conviviality and gratitude at banquets based on meat sacrificed to idols with those who were not believers, and abstention from exercising this objective freedom in the presence of those whose conscience was troubled by such a choice.

To sum up: in 1 Cor 8 and 10, Paul gives proof of a great pastoral realism and a remarkable relational generosity: he, who is a 'strong man' in faith in the God of Jesus Christ, proposes to the other Corinthians of similar religious temperament not to renounce their own freedom, but to put it at the service of love towards those who are weaker.

The fundamental objective is that, avoiding the difficulties that might turn someone away from listening existentially to the Gospel of Jesus Christ, they should attain the life of full love (= salvation) that he proclaims.

Those who are stronger evangelically speaking, that is, those who are more authentic disciples of the crucified and resurrected Nazarene, are asked to bear witness to this adherence in solidarity and love towards Christians who are not so advanced in the image and likeness of what Jesus Christ did. This discourse is brought to completion in 10:32–11:1: "Give no offence to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God, just as I try to please everyone in everything I do, not seeking my own advantage, but that of many, so that they may be saved. Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ."

3. Freedom

Galatians 5 is one of the most significant Pauline texts on the subject of freedom, between regular Judaism and Jesus' Judaism.

> [1]In view of freedom Christ set us free; therefore, endure steadfastly and do not allow yourselves to be subjected again to the yoke of slavery. [2]Behold, I Paul say to you, if you are circumcised, Christ will profit you nothing. [3]And I testify again to anyone who becomes circumcised that he must observe the whole Torah. [4]You who make yourselves justified in the Torah have nothing more to do with Christ; you have fallen outside the reach of grace.

The condition evoked is that of freedom itself (v. 1a): the discourse begins by declaring freedom as the core intention of the Messiah's historical mission and culminates in the affirmation that this intention has already taken shape in liberation. Between these two limits Paul first places the object of this action (us, that is, the totality of human beings without divisions of a social or cultural order) and, immediately afterwards, the subject agent (Christ).

Freedom from evil and death is an acquired fact as far as divine responsibility is concerned: in this verse Paul summarises in one sentence what he had already said repeatedly, in various forms, in the course of the letter, but essentially in the negative (cf. 1:4; 3:1; 4:4–5): "'to liberate' has a positive sense, it expresses the attainment of an excellent situation, the conferring of a most desirable good, freedom, which corresponds to full human dignity."[4]

And, if God has made an obvious choice in favour of human beings, the choice is now with them: a decision for freedom, which is equal to the situation, implies (v. 1b) a tenacious and constant determination to oppose the possibility of remaining subject to the logic of evil.[5] Suffocating egocentrism,

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4 Albert Vanhoye, *Lettera ai Galati* (Milano: Paoline, 1999), 123.

5 On v. 1b, Barbaglio observes: "Freedom received by grace is neither an inalienable possession nor an irreversible condition of existence, but rather a threatened possession, exposed to the temptation to return to the servile past. . . . Hence the exhortation to persist in freedom, silencing the call of the forest and resisting the song of the sirens. Note that he does not exhort to free oneself — and in this he is antimodern — but to remain in the freedom he has received as a gift, a creative and maturing permanence: its implementation in everyday choices and actions deepens and enriches it" (Giuseppe Barbaglio, *Gesù di Nazaret e Paolo di Tarso: Confronto storico* [Bologna: EDB, 2006], 255; my translation).

which is exactly the opposite of the option of love manifested by Jesus on the cross, is the evil to be overcome. Paul uses in v. 1b two imperatives (στήκετε οὖν καὶ μὴ πάλιν ζυγῷ δουλείας ἐνέχεσθε) to emphasise how the resistance in question must be rooted in a choice made long ago but that requires daily confirmation.[6] The risk of returning to the subjection prior to the cross and resurrection of Christ is always present.

In fact, the Galatians, here as in 4:8–9, with their choices of turning away from the Pauline brand of the gospel of Jesus, are literally contemplating a return to the state of slavery: Paul's language still echoes that of the early exodus of the First Testament, but the intensity of what he says is even greater, as is evident in a veritable climax in vv. 2–4.

In this 'unrelenting struggle' for the freedom of life, Jewish practices *per se* are of no support. No one is forced by the gospel to be circumcised, but if this were to happen, there would be no benefit on the road to freedom, a path that, instead, Christ has potentially paved for all (v. 2).

Not only would there be no progress in this basic direction, but even the 'newly' surmountable slavery could be strengthened. For to accept circumcision is to enter the path of total Torah observance, to be constantly indebted to the fulfilment of every precept contained therein (v. 3). Everything would be founded on the persuasion that one could attain, from obedience based on one's own human energies, the fullness of one's relationship with God, and one's condition of justice before him.[7]

In the face of this free choice, Paul, at the end of a reflection articulated from chapter 2 of the letter onwards, is categorical: there is no possible compatibility between justification through obedience to the Torah and the relationship with the God of Jesus Christ, founded on the benevolent favour of the divine subject towards human beings.

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6 στήκετε is a present, ἐνέχεσθε also a present: the former is an order to be carried out instantaneously, the latter is a command to be followed with continuity in time and with a particular involvement of the subject (the middle voice of the verb in question demonstrates this).

7 As to whether Paul explicitly denied the human possibility of fully obeying the precepts contained in the Torah, see Michael Cranford, "The Possibility of Perfect Obedience: Paul and an Implied Premise in Galatians 3:10 and 5:3," *Novum Testamentum* 36.3 (1994): 242–258.

The merely human path of justification, in fact, distances one from the logic of the God of Jesus Christ, and radically weakens the possible relationship with him, which is founded not on the claim of human merits, but on the acceptance of his love in one's own life of relationship with other individuals.

The relationship with Christ can be inactive, hence fruitless, if the heart of human action is the pursuit of justice only according to one's own interpretations of the divine will and one's own exclusive striving towards God. Then human self-exclusion from the divine dynamism of good for humanity is an incontrovertible fact, and the inevitable conclusion of the relationship with God (v. 4).

Paul, we must always remember, was first and foremost the son of a preceptive Judaism, but then he divulged, from the Damascus event onwards, a Judaism rooted in the message of the Galilean Jew Jesus. The Apostle was probably aware of the fact that his Galatian addressees, largely of pagan extraction, who had succumbed to the legal perspective of the Judaising preachers who came after Paul, would experience renewed tensions in returning to the heart of the gospel as he had proposed it in the founding stages of these communities.

On the other hand, the root and basis of an effective relationship with the God of Sinai and Jesus Christ can only be a freedom of adherence that confronts everyday life, without imposing anything on the people one meets, but aiming to overcome all forms of existential selfishness.

4. Worship/Sacrifice

The opening of Rom 12 is a formidable cultural synthesis, in which the 'Judaism' of which Paul was an interpreter throughout his life is portrayed:[8]

> I exhort you therefore, brothers, in the name of the passionately merciful tenderness of God, to offer (daily) your whole person as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God: this is the reasonable and logical worship that is your due.

8 For an introduction to Romans, cf. Alberto Sacchi, *Un progetto globale di liberazione: Paolo di Tarso interpella la chiesa di Roma* (San Pietro in Cariano: Gabrielli, 2025).

The tone of the discourse is immediately elevated. Paul chooses more than an exhortation. The initial word (παρακαλῶ) is in fact a verb repeatedly used in the NT according to a spectrum of meanings in which five semantic values, contiguous and distinct at the same time, are contextual: appeal, warning, invocation, prayer and exhortation.

In the passage in question, the most 'faithful' translation should probably be "I exhort you, I warn you, I beg you, and I encourage you," the only form to render the poignancy of a term, which clearly exposes the intense quality of the relationship that the man from Tarsus aimed to establish with the disciples of Rome.

These interlocutors are considered as persons to be loved ('you, o brothers') rather than an indistinct multitude. And Paul makes the motive for his action explicit: it is the merciful tenderness of God (διὰ τῶν οἰκτιρμῶν τοῦ θεοῦ) in which he, like every creature, finds himself enveloped and immersed.

The members of the community of Rome are invited to make a precise ethical choice. The first element is the verb to offer (παραστῆσαι). That word demonstrates, with visual effectiveness, the kind of existential impulse to which Paul exhorts his addressees. Precisely because it is a transitive aorist infinitive, the verb does not confer any nuance of temporal quality to the action, so that it conveys all the attention to the syntagma of the object complement, τὰ σώματα ὑμῶν precisely. Σῶμα has, in this case, a notable poignancy: it indicates the whole of the person with all its potentialities.

When Paul urges his interlocutors in Rome to offer themselves, he is thinking of their wholeness, intellectual and bodily, spiritual and emotional, without watertight compartments or preconceived limitations.

Paul's invitation, admonition, exhortation, prayer and self-sacrifice, the object of this Pauline appeal to the Roman Christians, are only possible on the condition that they spring from the deeply merciful tenderness of God that has made its way into his own person.

Gamaliel's pupil does not, however, limit himself to intensely stimulating everyone to self-dedication as such. He outlines the characteristics of this action with respect to the essential relationship of each human being: the cov-

enant with the Lord God. This dedicatory relationship is configured, according to Paul, as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God: it is the reasonable and logical worship he suggests to them.

θυσία (sacrifice) can indicate, since the time of Greek classicism, both the sacrificial action and the sacrificed object. Sacrifice, in this semantic pair, therefore means that the whole human being can come into play, in the knowledge that this self-giving has nothing coldly ritualistic about it. Indeed,

1. The participle ζῶσαν (living) is a present tense, expressing the contemporary and sometimes even future duration of the action expressed.

2. The adjective ἁγίαν (holy) does not refer to a purist and immobile concept of holiness, but implies a continuous process of relational perfection, in dynamic and daily existential faithfulness to God.

3. Εὐάρεστον (pleasing) is used, as almost everywhere in the NT,[9] with the dative of the term referring to the Lord, reiterating, in a culminating synthesis, what the two previous attributes state.

It remains unquestionable, however, that the true synthesis of what has been expressed thus far is constituted by the locution τὴν λογικὴν λατρείαν ὑμῶν (the reasonable and logical worship that is yours). From an exegetical-hermeneutical point of view, the real stumbling block of this description is the adjective λογικός.

There are essentially two strands of interpretation, which are not necessarily exclusive to each other. I repeat that the sacrificial dimension enucleated in this verse involves the human being in its entirety. I therefore believe it almost essential to understand the adjective under consideration and, consequently, the entire locution in this way:

> Although λογικός here certainly excludes all outward ritual worship in which the heart, mind and will of the worshipper are not

9 The other NT passages in which the adjective is attested are Rom 12:2; 14:18; 2 Cor 5:9; Eph 5:10; Phil 4:18; Col 3:20; Titus 2:9; Heb 13:21. Among them, the only occurrence from the letter to Titus shows a construction that is completely alien to the reference to God; the others are essentially unambiguous in the direction envisaged: dative of a term, simple or, sometimes, prepositional, which concludes the action on the Divine. Cf. 1 Pet 2:5.

> involved, the term also excludes equally clearly all worship that consists only of inner emotions and feelings, however elevated, that are not accompanied by manifest obedience. Authentic, genuinely inner worship certainly exists, but it is inseparable from an authentic outer dimension, which is no less important. Truly intelligent worship, that is, worship that is in tune with the truth of the gospel, is certainly not worth less than the integral self-offering that a person makes in the course of his or her concrete life, in his or her inner thoughts, feelings and aspirations, but also in his or her words and actions.[10]

The idea expressed in v. 1 is very important: the concrete programme of the life of relationship with the God of Jesus Christ is envisaged, and it is inescapably understood as a daily dedication to him of each person's existence, a true attempt to replicate the divine choice of love in favour of the human being.[11] Regarding comparisons and conflicts on a cultural and religious level, Paul uses in v. 1 a language proper to the Judaism in which he had been educated from the beginning of his life.

On the other hand, in a logic that can also be found in scriptural passages such as, for example, Hos 6:6, he emphasises an existential dimension that goes beyond any ritualistic-cultural conception and perspective. In fact, affirming the need to offer one's whole being and the actions of one's life to God every day is certainly important. One remains, however, almost at the level of pure wishful thinking, if one does not make explicit at least some concrete examples of such a self-giving. Our author does not escape this requirement. On the contrary, he points to different paths, purposes and characteristics. Let us consider this in greater detail.

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10 Charles E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1979), 2:605; cf. Romano Penna, *Lettera ai Romani* (Bologna: EDB, 2008), 3:26. Even at Qumran the discourse was not substantially different: "without the meat of holocausts or the fat of sacrifices, the verbal offering, in accordance with the law, will be like a pleasant odour of justice and the perfection of life will be like the voluntary gift of a pleasant oblation" (1QS 9:3–5).

11 As Légasse observes: "They will be all the more obedient the more their conduct will be seen by themselves as a response to a God who is full of mercy for human weakness" (Simon Légasse, *L'épître de Paul aux Romains* [Paris: Cerf, 2002], 759).

> [2]And do not be conformist to the parameters of the present world. Instead, let yourselves be transformed in depth, through the continuous and radical renewal of your mentality so that you may discern practically what God's will is, that is, what is good, pleasing and perfect to him.

Offering one's existential individuality implies, according to Paul, a change and transformation that is anything but superficial: this is how the first part of the text (2ab) can be summarised.

The two verbs of the sentence, συσχηματίζω and μεταμορφόω, present undoubted analogies of the morphological order (there is identity of tense, mood and diathesis), broad semantic similarity (they indicate - as has already been said - the necessity of a change) and the same syntactic position (they both introduce the dative case). The differences, however, are not insignificant: just as there is a clear distinction between the words σχῆμα and μορφή, equally such a distinction occurs in the two words presented here, which are based on these two nouns.

Paul exhorts the recipients of his proclamation not to allow themselves to be conformed to worldly logic and style, not even in their personal outward attitudes (this is the fundamental meaning of the expression σχῆμα). They must undertake a radical renewal[12] of their substantial structure (their μορφή).[13] And why speak of a radical renewal? Because genuine structural transformation begins with the νοῦς of the individual. This Greek term, whose core meaning refers to the "mind," unfolds into at least five semantic strands: mind; sensibility as the capacity to perceive; heart; decision—whether abstract or concrete;

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12 This invitation to change has, however, a limit: "Paul, with perfect tact, asks Christians not to assume absolutely the tastes, manners, and ways of acting of the present century. . . . It would be to demand of them a perfection they cannot attain in this world; it is already a lot to strive for by ceaselessly renewing their spirit so that it takes on a new form" (Marie-Joseph Lagrange, *Saint Paul*, 3rd ed. [Paris: Gabalda, 1922], 294; my translation).

13 I find it interesting to note that the only further New Testament attestations of the verb μεταμορφόω (Matt 17:2; Mark 9:2; 2 Cor 3:18) refer to Jesus' transfiguration, i.e. to an evident and profound transformation as a manifestation of divinity, without escaping from his earthly "responsibilities" — one spontaneously wonders whether the quality of the ethical change required of Christians in Rome is so far from this.

and intellect or reason. The most relevant meaning is probably that of 'mentality.' This word refers to the rational component of the individual, but it is also rooted in the other spheres of human interiority, first and foremost, the emotional one.

The transformation invoked by Paul is, therefore, very profound, constant, progressive and, hopefully, unceasing. "At the end of this transformation, the final outcome is that each person has the individual possibility of knowing what is good. It is not a matter of conforming to an external law, which is imposed from outside, but of an individual, personal conscience, which no one imposes from outside."[14]

What is the purpose of this process? It is that of discerning practically what the will of God is (2c). Discerning (δοκιμάζειν) expresses here the commitment to achieve the renewal of human interiority by discerning the divine will. This action is expressed by an infinitive that is certainly substantive, but of a durative nature. It is carried out according to the stages of progression proper to existential experience. Each individual Roman Christian is called, first of all, to understand the immediate will of God. Not by chance the term used here is θέλημα.[15]

It makes sense therefore to affirm that "the freedom of the Christian condition is preserved in the situation of the decision. With the ascertainment of God's will Paul connects the new obedience and adherence of the believer, without expressly naming it. He assumes that recognising, willing and doing are mutually interrelated."[16]

The will of God is "what is good, pleasing and perfect to him" (τὸ ἀγαθὸν καὶ εὐάρεστον καὶ τέλειον). Each of these qualities has extreme poignancy.

1. τὸ ἀγαθόν is the moral good and, against all mysticism or amoral esotericism, expresses ethical indications free from connivance with any form of evil.

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14 M. Pesce, Un culto senza luogo: il pensiero di Paolo, in *Il luogo sacro*, ed. Alberto Bigarelli (Reggio Emilia: San Lorenzo, 2009), 126.

15 Cf. the comparison between our text and, for example, Eph 4:22–24 and Col 1:9–10.

16 Otto Michel, *Der Brief an die Römer*, 5th ed. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1977), 372.

2. τὸ εὐάρεστον is the conviction that the good in question is not anthropocentric, but rather in obedience to God's commandments, giving the human being the clear sense as they contemplate God's will of something that is a synthesis of the beautiful and the good.

3. τὸ τέλειον "the wholeness of the completed, that which does not stand still at the beginning nor is harmed by a change, but achieves the goal and remains stable,"[17] is nothing other than the realised compendium of goodness and beauty, an end to be pursued uninterruptedly, in the conviction that this is only possible in love.[18]

In short, it is a perfection that is the integral observance of the divine will, in the line drawn by the Old Testament,[19] but with a criterion of judgement different from the Mosaic law: "the new condition that governs the life of those who have been regenerated, the 'law of Christ' (Gal 6:2), that which he makes public and prescribes by conferring the power to fulfil it completely."[20]

Now, precisely in order to summarise the fundamental results of the analysis conducted, it seems appropriate to propose a global translation of v. 2, which is particularly effective in this sense: "Do not conform in your behaviour to the present world, but continually transform yourselves in the progressive renewal of your conscience, so that you may discern practically what it is that God wants of you, what is good, particularly pleasing to him, perfect."[21]

Ultimately, the impassioned and vehement exhortation with which chapter 12 of the letter opens finds its climax precisely in everyday existence: "the

17 Michel, *An die Römer*, 372, n. 24.

18 With regard to the concept of perfection expressed here, it must always be borne in mind that τέλειος (perfect) relates to the mentality of praxis and not to moral perfection. Not perfection but holiness is the path on which the Christian must walk, according to Paul (Rom 6:19, 21). 'Holiness' means that the Christian measures himself not to a standard but to a person, the Lord, to whom he belongs through baptism (cf. Rom 6; 13:14; 14:7–9).

19 Cf. among LXX: Judg 20:26b; 21:4b; 3 Kgdms 8:61; 11:4; 15:3, 14; 1 Chr 28:9; Jer 13:9.

20 Légasse, *L'épître de Paul*, 762.

21 Ugo Vanni, *Lettere ai Galati e ai Romani* (Roma: Paoline, 1967), 188. 'Conscience' is to be understood, of course, in a broad sense; cf. Ernesto Borghi, "La nozione di coscienza nella Bibbia," in *Coscienza, riconoscenza e azione: per cercare di essere umani*, ed. Ernesto Borghi and Franco Buzzi (Reggio Emilia: San Lorenzo, 2021), 29–89.

good, which must be done, cannot be grasped and measured according to well-defined norms, but my doing, my action will be good only insofar as in the 'renewal' of my mind I understand, at this time and in this place, the will of God and in obedience I correspond to it."[22]

All this is to be achieved in a perspective that certainly matches the universalistic Judaism proposed by Paul in fidelity to his Lord, but in such a way that it is grafted onto even broader ethical presuppositions, which are also ennobled by it.

5. Towards a Humanity that Positively Cultivates Human Life

To live and grow as true human beings: his is a perspective that is proposed by the intense and complex figure and work of Paul of Tarsus. He experienced cultural and religious conflicts within himself in order to live them positively outside himself.

All this can take place within the framework of the very rich proposition that comes from the whole of biblical revelation. It is necessary, however, to be endowed with a place for evaluating one's own life which is removed from the prerogative of a single cultural matrix. It is something universal, to which any person can reply by the mere fact of being human.

Secondly, those who open themselves, without religious sectarianism and cultural entrenchment, to this relationship between themselves and the God of Jesus Christ, must insert themselves into the discourse of salvation history, referring to its central core, the Christ who died and rose again, which is the true hermeneutical setting in which to understand God's plan and its constant logic.

All this—reasoning and speaking from a Christian perspective—flows from the conviction that conscience is a *way of being*: the place where the individual is personally called each day to the responsibility of recognising the full freedom contained in the faith of the gospel, a faith rooted in Judaism, and of exercising

22 Karl Kertelge, *Lettera ai Romani* (Roma: Città Nuova, 1973), 178.

that freedom without emotive or esoteric exaggerations. Living the cultic dimension, the sacramental practice, becomes a renewed impetus to offer what one is and what one has to all whom one encounters, beginning with those in need.

Paul of Tarsus experienced the need to redirect his own Jewish cultural and religious identity as he interacted with other cultural contributions that the society of his time offered him. He did not feel he had to diminish the heart of his faith in the God of Sinai and Jesus Christ, but he did everything, within the limits of his humanity and the circumstances of his rich and variously tormented age, to make the *agape* lived to the full by his Lord become culture, a criterion and reason for living.

This, it seems to me, is the objective that Christians, from one end of the world to the other, must set themselves today: to dialogue with all those who share the aim of fostering a passionate inter-human coexistence, marked by solidarity and open to the beauty of relations with other human beings and with Creation in its entirety. Such coexistence can be achieved first and foremost when each person overcomes the temptation to put only himself at the centre and gains the awareness that the freedom to give oneself to others is the essential way to be truly human.

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REBUILDING CHRISTIAN AND HUMAN IDENTITY IN A FRAGMENTED COMMUNITY: PAUL'S CHALLENGE IN THE EPISTLE TO THE ROMANS

Stefania De Vito[*]

1. Introduction

The contemporary civil and religious world is characterised by a distinctive pluralism, inconceivable just a century ago. It is indicative of a profound richness, as it manifests the concrete uniqueness of every human being. However, it is acknowledged that historically, divergent opinions and experiences have resulted in significant fragmentation, manifested as mutual indifference or exclusion, and at times, violence.[1] It is evident that the issue, frequently encountered at the theological and pastoral levels, does not originate from pluralism or the legitimate aspiration to reject the absolutisation of a singular perspective at the cost of others. The crux of the issue lies in the dissolution of long-standing beliefs concerning ancestral matters, and the subsequent attempt to address this dissolution through the utilisation of historical narratives that, by their very nature, fail to acknowledge contemporary cultural shifts. Indeed, the somewhat unpolished recuperation of bygone experiences adopts the tenor of vintage monochrome films, which, upon being rendered in colour, endeavour to emulate modernity and adapt to it, albeit unsuccessfully.

The underlying challenge appears to be the task of embracing modernity and its pluralism, which often leads to a subtle rejection of reality, a withdrawal into the self, and an atmosphere of mistrust and suspicion toward differing perspectives. This dynamic also fosters an ideological relationship with the

* Stefania De Vito is currently a lecturer in Biblical Culture at LUMSA University, Rome. Her research focuses on the dynamics of abuse, with particular attention to forms of spiritual abuse within ecclesial contexts.

1 See Christoph Theobald, *I racconti di Dio: Pensare la teologia narrativa* (Bologna: EDB, 2015), 5–7.

past, as though the recovery of ancient content and practices could automatically equip one to navigate the complexities of the present. Even the Christian faith is not immune to becoming insular, anchored in a bygone era. It continues to wrestle with the demanding work of integrating the pursuit of truth with discipleship and with the formation of human and Christian communities.[2]

The epistle to the Romans is particularly relevant to the contemporary cultural climate. Indeed, it was composed for a 'plural' and fragmented Christian community. The doxological pedagogy employed by the Apostle Paul can, therefore, assist us in our process of rebuilding the Christian and human community in a pluralistic and fragmented world. It is, however, necessary to rethink our approach to a letter that has received singular attention over the centuries.[3] A brilliant synthesis of the gospel of Jesus runs through the epistle.[4] Now, our aim is to identify its *Sitz im Leben* and historical recipients.[5]

My academic interests have been focused on epistles, integrating authoritative findings from rhetoric, epistolography and historical criticism into the broader context of pragmatics. Consequently, my research has evolved from an examination of the structural elements of the epistle to a more comprehensive analysis of the communicative processes employed by Paul to engage the historical recipient of his epistles on a doxological, cognitive and ethical level.

The epistle, recognised as a celebrated exemplar of spirituality and oratory art,[6] possesses the capacity to facilitate a more profound comprehension and

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2 See Theobald, *I racconti*, 15–18.

3 See Stephen Curkpatrick, "Paul's Epistle to the Romans: A Dialogue," *The Expository Times* 114.1 (2001): 11–17; Joelson E. Martins, Vitor H. Schell, and Wilhelm Wachholz, "A Carta aos Romanos e a sua Relevância para o Testemunho da Igreja Contemporânea," *Revista Pistis & Praxis* 16.3 (2024): 550–563.

4 See Samuel Byrskog, "Epistolography, Rhetoric and Letter Prescript: Romans 1.1-7 as a Test Case," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 19.65 (1997): 27–46; Lutz Doering, *Ancient Jewish Letters and the Beginnings of Christian Epistolography* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000); Johannes N. Vorster, "Aspects of Rhetoric of the Body and the Letter to the Romans," *Scriptura* 108 (2011): 294–313.

5 See Paulo Bazaglia, "Carta aos Romanos: Destinatários e Propósitos," *Revista Pistis & Praxis* 16.3 (2024): 534–549.

6 See Michael R. Cosby, "Paul's Persuasive Language in Romans 5," in *Persuasive Artistry: Studies in New Testament Rhetoric in Honor of George A. Kennedy*, ed. Duane F. Watson (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1991), 209–226.

a more rigorous articulation of the fragmentation presently manifest at both ecclesial and anthropological levels. Moreover, it enables the formulation of an innovative approach to the embodiment of faith, one marked by a distinctive creative dynamism.

To facilitate the transition from Bible to culture, it is essential that pastoral practices are rethought, attuning themselves once again to the biblical text. Indeed, in order to ensure that Sacred Scripture remains the soul of theology and the life of the faithful (DV 24), it is essential that the hermeneutical problem emerges from epistemological disquisition and is influenced by the daily lives of believers, allowing itself to be questioned by it, in order to rethink the way in which the encounter between God and the modern reader is celebrated.[7]

Within this horizon, a more precise methodological clarification becomes necessary. It is imperative to elucidate the methodology that will be employed to review specific sections of the Letter to the Romans, in which the apostle delineates the fragmentation of the community and its deviations. This will facilitate an understanding of the principles upon which a way of life that values plurality of positions in the contemporary era can be recovered, and the creation of a Christian identity that is inclusive and truly human.

2. Method

What is a "text"? What is entailed in the act of reading the Bible? These questions evoke a series of longstanding epistemological and hermeneutical issues that continue to challenge the contemporary theological and scriptural horizon. Addressing them requires drawing upon recent developments in neuroscience and neurolinguistics, which can fruitfully complement the reflections on general linguistics and the philosophy of language that have matured over the past century. It should be noted, however, that this initial methodological section does not claim to be exhaustive. Rather, it seeks to establish the conceptual framework necessary for the exegetical analysis that follows,

7 See Luca Mazzinghi, "La rivelazione biblica: coraggiose aperture," *Missione Oggi*, 1 May 2015, https://www.saveriani.it/missioneoggi/item/la-rivelazione-divina-coraggiose-aperture.

particularly the examination of selected passages from the Letter to the Romans, which offer a valuable lens through which to consider the dynamics of fragmentation and the challenges faced by the community.

2.1 What is a Text?

Since the early 20th century, scholars in the fields of linguistics and the philosophy of language have demonstrated a keen interest in textual fabrics. This has led to the emergence of pragmatics, a distinct field of linguistics focused on language in its practical, real-world application. It explores how contextual factors, cultural norms, and cognitive processes influence the complex processes involved in the creation and understanding of meanings. The discipline has found profound applicability in both secular and biblical interpretation.[8]

This prompted Grilli to state: "In the technical sense, the text is defined as a fabric (*textus*, via *texere*) characterised by cohesion (formal connections), coherence (semantic relationships) and a pragmatic intention (active purpose)."[9] The text is conceived as a patient craftsmanship built according to a design, in the interweaving of multiple threads, whose aim is to reproduce a given aesthetic motif. The description raises hermeneutical, epistemological and anthropological questions. Indeed, it can be argued that, beyond the tapestry itself, woven with greater or lesser skill by a craftsman who lived in a particular era and in a specific geographical and cultural context, there is a man who risks personal exposure in the creation of something which is imbued with both his personal history and culture.

In the context of a biblical text, the narrative is intricately interwoven with the personal faith of the hagiographer, who, through their own experiential encounters with God, endeavours to convey this experience through their written work.[10] The God of the Judeo-Christian tradition manifests himself within

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8 See Ayupova L. Murotovna, "Exploring Socio-Cultural and Cognitive Dimensions in Language Use," *The Lingua Spectrum* 2 (2025): 198–207.

9 Massimo Grilli, "Parola di Dio e linguaggio umano: Verso una pragmatica della comunicazione nei testi biblici," *Gregorianum* 94.3 (2013): 534.

10 See Christoph Theobald, *Seguendo le orme... della Dei Verbum: Bibbia, teologia e pratiche di lettura* (Bologna: EDB, 2011), 25–28.

the historical realm and endows humanity with the capacity to 'narrate' his divine presence through contingent instruments that ultimately converge within the framework of the Bible.[11]

2.2 A Text Challenging the Modern Reader

The contemporary hermeneutical sensibility should recognise the knots in this web, evaluate the skill of the craftsman, glimpse the person present in these knots and her experience of faith. The relationship to the text is not confined to grammatical, semantic and syntactic constructs: it extends beyond the confines of conventional theoretical manuals. In the case of a biblical text, this relationship becomes also one with God and discipleship. Indeed, the historical and cultural context of a biblical text becomes secondary to its ability to resonate in new contexts, as evidenced by the semantic and syntactic interweaving that enables contemporary readers to access the core of the revealed truth. The personal and historical following of the contemporary believing hearer is built around the preservation of the data contained within the Bible. So, the relational dimension counterbalances a literalist or fundamentalist interpretation of biblical data, which prioritises the generative context over the receptive one.

The historical hearer is thus disclosed through the textual choices, lexical patterns, and verbal and nominal mechanisms that constitute the text. The text itself already anticipates the simultaneous presence of author and hearer, fashioned to be "received"; a dialogical interpretative model therefore recognises the equal dignity of both.[12] Within this implicit moral pact between the two protagonists of the hermeneutical process, the exegete discerns the textual network. Yet, while this is indispensable, it remains insufficient for celebrating the encounter between author, hearer, and God.[13]

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11 See Theobald, *I racconti*, 7–8.

12 Massimo Grilli, "Importancia de la lingüística pragmática en la hermenéutica bíblica," *Revista Bíblica* 82 (2020): 143–166.

13 See Grilli, "Importancia," 153–155.

The capacity to grasp the intricacies of others' perspectives and to assimilate them into one's own existence has garnered significant attention within the domain of neuroscience, particularly through the lens of the embodied language approach.[14] Indeed, we refer to the "psychopathology of language" not for grammatical or syntactic inaccuracies, but rather when an author fails to adapt the text in a manner that ensures experience by others.[15] The 'natural' intersubjectivity, inscribed in the neural structure of the human brain, has been demonstrated to be capable of shaping and transforming itself whenever there is a tuning between the right hemisphere of the speaker and the right hemisphere of the receiver.[16] Furthermore, the presence of mirror neurons[17] guarantees human intersubjectivity, relational empathy and the possibility of understanding and emotional connection.[18] The latter fosters attunement between author and hearer, enabling the former's experiences to engage in a dialogic exchange with the experiences and meanings of the latter.[19] This process engenders a transformation of ideas, feelings, emotions and affective responses to the ever-evolving reality.[20]

The authorial act of self-disclosure involves revealing intimate thoughts and beliefs to an external audience. The hearer is charged with the responsibility of interpreting and further developing these thoughts and beliefs. Indeed, the hearers can accept meanings that are not their own, assimilate them into their cultural and existential baggage, generate new values, and take responsibility for them in their own lives.

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14 See Ivan Colagé and Giovanni Buccino, "Il linguaggio e l'esperienza: dalle neuroscienze all'ambiente naturale e culturale," Antonianum 91.4 (2016): 1047–61.

15 Cf. Antonino Pennisi, "Psychopathology of Language, DMN and Embodied Neuroscience: A Unifying Perspective," *Reti, saperi, linguaggi* 1 (2022): 20–22.

16 See Stefano Masci, *Counselling affettivo relazionale: il counselling alla luce delle neuroscienze: dall'empatia alla mentalizzazione* (Milano: FrancoAngeli, 2021), 18–21.

17 Cf. David Hogue, "Sensing the Other in Worship: Mirror Neurons and the Empathizing Brain," *Liturgy* 21.3 (2006): 31–39.

18 See Jean Decety and Philip L. Jackson, "The Functional Architecture of Human Empathy: Behavioral and Cognitive," *Neuroscience Reviews* 3.2 (2004): 71–100.

19 See Colagé and Buccino, "Il linguaggio," 1053–55.

20 Cf. Masci, *Counselling*, 27–29.

2.3 Believing Readings of the Bible

Scripture asks to be interpreted in a relational *dynamis*, which connects the original community with today's Christian community.[21] Consequently, the exegete should transcend the boundaries of his own personal comfort zone to encounter the 'you' of the author in the text. The tools of exegesis, criticism and rhetoric allow us to 'walk in' the text, to break it down and even to cross its 'narrow' spaces, unclear textual folds, unexpected words and grammatical choices.[22] Exegetical practice becomes a search for and acceptance of otherness.[23]

The exegete is culturally and existentially related to the text, exhibiting an inherent sense of kenotic openness. It does not serve to erase the identity of the exegete, nor does it claim to erase the identity of the text and its author. The cognitive processing of data serves to traverse a personal experiential domain, intricately interwoven with faith, thereby facilitating the transition into a state of discipleship. "[…] Christianity […] accepts, and accepts statutorily, to allow itself to be grasped and made fragile by history, to the point of only accessing its own identity in an act of continuous reinterpretation."[24]

This kenotic openness and relational dynamism that characterises believing readings of Scripture finds particular expression in Paul's Letter to the Romans. The apostle's approach to a divided community exemplifies the very interpretive posture discussed above: Paul must transcend his own boundaries to encounter the 'you' of both ethnic and Jewish Christian groups, navigating the "unclear textual folds" of their conflicting identities while maintaining his own apostolic voice. His letter becomes a concrete demonstration of how exegetical practice serves as "a search for and accep-

21 See Theobald, *Seguendo le orme*, 35–49.

22 See Michael Spezio, "Reframing Paul's Anthropology in Light of the Cognitive Sciences: Exercising Care in Interdisciplinary New Testament Scholarship," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 40.4 (2018): 494–502.

23 Cf. Jack Brownfield, "'I Do Believe the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments to Be the Word of God': Holy Scripture, John Webster, and the Prayer Book Tradition," *Anglican Theological Review* 106.4 (2024): 415–29.

24 Theobald, *Seguendo le orme*, 42–46.

tance of otherness"—not erasing the distinct identities of either community but rather calling them into a continuous reinterpretation of their own self-understanding in light of God's call to holiness (1:7). The fragmentation evident in Romans 14–15, where Paul urges mutual welcome without judgment, reveals precisely the kind of relational challenge that Scripture itself embodies: the difficult work of building communion across difference. Thus, examining Romans' material form and historical context illuminates how the very structure of biblical texts demands the interpretive stance outlined above—one that embraces vulnerability, honours otherness, and persists in the hope of reconciliation.

3. The Letter to the Romans

The second stage of this reflection focuses on the Letter to the Romans, with a particular emphasis on its material form. The preponderance of 20th-century scholars concurs that the Church of Rome, not established by Paul, was a heterogeneous community comprising ethnic Christians and Jewish Christians. As demonstrated in chapter 14 of the letter, the two groups were in conflict with each other.[25] In the final chapters, the invitation to welcome one another and not to judge one another (15:7; 14:1) speaks of a fragmented community that had been loved by God and called to holiness (1:7), welcoming each one individually (14:3). Indeed, this called community struggled to build communional relationships and to make itself visibly a church. It is possible to deduce the fragmentation from the opening of the letter itself.

3.1 The Praescriptum and the Indications of Fragmentation

The epistolary *praescriptum* has a pivotal position in the Letter to the Romans. As with all Pauline *praescripta*, its purpose is to introduce both the recipients and the salient contents of the letter itself.[26] In this case, the letter is

25 See Philip F. Esler, *Conflict and Identity in Romans: The Social Setting of Paul's Letter* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), 109–35.

26 John L. White, "Introductory Formulae in the Body of the Pauline Letter," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 90 (1971): 91–7; Stefania De Vito, *La schiavitù via di pace: una prospettiva pragmalinguistica di Rm 6,15-23* (Roma: G&B Press, 2016), 105–110.

of a particularly lengthy nature, with the section separating the sender's name from that of the recipient being both extensive and deeply theological. It is this section that creates the "relational climate" that sustains the entire letter. It is noteworthy that, despite the evident dissonance between the sender and recipient, Paul employs the expression "our Father." By utilising the possessive adjective in the first-person plural, he establishes a symmetrical relationship between himself and the Romans.[27] This relational purpose[28] is further emphasised by the inclusion of the adjective κλητός (1:1,6–7), which, when predicated of Paul and the community in Rome, does not signify equality but parity. The apostle and the multi-ethnic community of Rome maintain their past identities in the one God who called them, starting from their individual histories, to be loved by God, to become saints (1:7) and proclaimers of the gospel of God (1:1). It is Christ Jesus who defines the identity of the apostle, who presents himself as his "slave" (1:1), and a slave of the Roman believers (1:6).

Within this relational harmony, other linguistic indications emerge with which Paul suggests the fragmentation of the community.[29] It is sufficient to pay attention to v. 7 of the prescript, in which the recipients are mentioned. In a significant number of Pauline prescripts, the recipient community is indicated by the term ἐκκλησία (cf. 1 Cor 1:1; 2 Cor 1:1; 1 Thess 1:1 and the letter to Philemon 2). The term is not present in the epistle addressed to the Romans,[30] and is supplanted by the expression "all who are in Rome, beloved of God and saints by calling."[31]

The first half of the expression ("all who are in Rome") is an alternative, but not synonymous, formulation to the term ἐκκλησία. Paul's lexical choice here is significant: by avoiding ἐκκλησία, he acknowledges the fragmented reality

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27 See Beverly R. Gaventa, "We, They, and All in Paul's Letter to the Romans," *Word & World* 39.3 (2019): 263–273; Rúnar Már Þorsteinsson, "Who Are 'We' in Romans?: Analysis of Paul's Use of the First-Person Plural, with Special Focus on Ἐλάβομεν (1:5), Προεχόμεθα (3:9a), and Προῃτιασάμεθα (3:9b)," *Novum Testamentum* 66.1 (2024): 38–57.

28 Cf. William S. Campbell, *Romans: A Social Identity Commentary* (London: T&T Clark, 2023), 54.

29 See De Vito, *La schiavitù*, 126–27.

30 Cf. De Vito, *La schiavitù*, 258–59.

31 See Esler, *Conflict*, 135–37.

of the Roman community—a congregation that had not yet fully embodied what the term implies. The text instead delineates a nebulous gathering of individuals who inhabit the same geographical area and have been 'called' by God, predicated on His benevolence. The term ἐκκλησία is derived from ἐκ-καλέω, a compound of the verb καλέω (to call) and the prefix ἐκ (from), with the literal meaning "to call someone out from somewhere." An ἐκκλησία is, therefore, not merely a random gathering but a community constituted by divine summons and the collaborative response of individuals who 'depart' from their geographical origins, cultural milieu and established spiritual practices. Paul's reluctance to use this term suggests that the Roman believers, despite being individually called (κλητοί, 1:6–7), had not yet collectively achieved the communional transformation that would warrant the designation ἐκκλησία. The struggle of individual members to convert this divine call into a shared, transformed identity—to become truly 'called out' together—is explored in greater depth in chapter 6 of the epistle.

This latter hypothesis is further substantiated by additional evidence, also present in the praescriptum the utilisation of the term ἔθνεσιν (1:5), often translated as 'pagans.' Nevertheless, in ancient literature the term was not usually employed in an ethnic sense. The term falls within the semantic field of exclusion, denoting a label affixed to those perceived as 'foreign.' It can be hypothesised that Roman ethno-Christians used this expression to denote the foreignness of Judeo-Christians in relation to a presumed superior Greek culture from which they originated. The term, when employed by Judeo-Christians, functioned as a declaration of the foreignness of Roman ethno-Christians with respect to their prior religious experience. The utilisation of the term, in any case, disclosed a sense of superiority of one group over the other, overlooking the new and common Christian identity, in which there is no longer Jew or Greek, erudite or illiterate (1:14–16). Indeed, those who are divinely chosen should, in fact, alienate themselves from their former identities.[32] It is also noteworthy to consider that within the context of ancient biblical litera-

32 See De Vito, *La schiavitù*, 252–55.

ture, the term is employed to denote a manner of self-aggrandisement that is deemed idolatry.[33]

Consequently, the reader is left with the impression that there is a profound distance between the inclusive attitude of God's call and a self-idolatrous and exclusive believing life. In fact, self-idolising behaviour becomes elitist and tends to exclude others. Those who adopt it deny their Christian identity and exclude themselves from their relationship with God in Christ Jesus.

3.2 How Does Paul Manage Fragmentation

The theme of fragmentation is introduced in an impartial manner, without any accusatory tone. On the contrary, Paul's opening gratitude (1:8) establishes the foundation from which he will methodically build a framework of shared identity. His objective does not merely entail the establishment of doctrinal substitutes or the imposition of pragmatic behavioural norms. Rather, the concept of a 'new' evangelisation, as outlined in Rom 1:15 through Rom 6:11, establishes a connection between the epistolary opening (Rom. 1:1–7) and the baptismal discourse (Rom 6:1–11) through the sustained use of the second person plural 'you' (ὑμεῖς). This consistent address to 'you' as a collective body defines the argumentative trajectory of the letter's theological core, wherein Paul invites the fragmented Roman believers to recognise themselves as a unified 'you'—a community constituted not by their current reality but by God's call and the transformative event of baptism.

The *incipit* is located in Rom 1:15, where Paul employs the verb εὐαγγελίσασθαι. It literally means "to declare good news." In this passage, Paul seeks to broaden the audience's comprehension of the Gospel by recounting a narrative of salvation that is universally applicable, addressing "all sinners" (3:22, 23). The alienation from Christ has been interpreted as a common sinful attitude, which has the potential to simultaneously damage one's relationship with God and with others (1:26–32; 2:21–24). According to this interpretation, sinners

33 Cf. Paul Trebilco, "Creativity at the Boundary: Features of the Linguistic and Conceptual Construction of Outsiders in the Pauline Corpus," *New Testament Studies* 60 (2014): 185–201.

transform wisdom into foolishness (1:21–23) and set themselves up as judges and lights for those who are enveloped in darkness (2:17–18). Consequently, both Jews and Greeks were "storing up" God's wrath against themselves (1:18; 2:5). The pivotal moment in this universal history is a 'now,' inaugurated by Christ, who died and rose from the dead (3:21) and by his redemption (3:24). The resurrection of the Risen One, along with faith in the God who is able to render the impossible possible in history (4:21–31), enables believers to attain peace and to act in accordance with the will of God as expressed through the actions of the faithful (5:5). "At the heart of the paragraph (vv. 25–26a) lies the Christological basis for God's righteousness and his justification of sinners: God put Christ forth as 'the place of atonement,' the true 'mercy seat,' through whose blood God won the redemption (or ransom) of helpless sinners (v. 24)."[34]

It is noteworthy that within the Greco-Roman world the concept of redemption was closely associated with the practice of purchasing (or redeeming) the freedom of a slave. This concept of atonement has been a fundamental tenet throughout antiquity, dating back to the Exodus era, when God liberated (redeemed and ransomed) the Israelites from Egyptian bondage (Exod 12–24). For Paul and his audience, the motif of redemption would have evoked recollections of the narratives of the exodus from slavery, the crossing of the Red Sea, the sojourn in the desert, the Passover, the promised land and exile:[35] "Through the death of Christ, God removes sin and, through faith in him, frees us from the condemnation of the law. By doing so, he also sets aside his wrath against us, reconciles us to himself, and opens the way for us to eternal life with him."[36]

The concept of the sinful human being liberated from a false image of God, as well as from distorted relationships with God and self, is fundamental to Paul's argument. Accordingly, the new identity is described in Rom 6:1–11 as an immersion in Christ Jesus. Significantly, the particle ἐν, which would have

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34 See Stephen Hultgren, "Text in Context: Romans 3:19–28," *Word & World* 37.4 (2017): 406.
35 See Nicholas T. Wright, *The Contemporary Quest for Jesus* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002), 470–71.
36 Hultgren, "Text in Context," 408.

been expected to denote location or sphere, is replaced by εἰς, which designates movement into a bond of belonging between the baptised and Christ. The act does not entail a renunciation of former identities; rather, it is an invitation to embrace full participation in the dynamic of baptism. In this passage, Paul demonstrates profound lexical creativity. He employs verbs compounded with the particle σύν (v. 4: συνετάφημεν; v. 6: συνεσταυρώθη; v. 8: συζήσομεν, ἀπεθάνομεν σὺν Χριστῷ), several of which are absent elsewhere in the New Testament and in the rest of the Pauline corpus. The verb συσταυρόω is an exception, appearing also in the gospels (cf. Matt 27:44; Mark 15:32; John 19:32). In Rom 6:6 and Gal 2:20, however, the verb transcends its material referent and describes the baptised person's participation in the experience of the cross. This linguistic innovation has led many scholars to conclude that Paul is not referring here primarily to the sacramental ritual of baptism, but rather to a baptismal identity that fundamentally transforms the life of the believer.[37] This new identity in faith does not entail the crucifixion of the Greek or Jewish identity, but rather the renunciation of the 'old man,' inclined to sin, who has placed his limbs at the service of iniquity and death, thereby excluding himself from the Kingdom and from eternal life.[38]

It is noteworthy that the concept of redemption, prominent throughout the letter, extends in chapter 8 to encompass all of creation, not merely humanity. The section 1:15—6:11 is characterised by the prevalence of the second person plural, thereby rendering its contents universally applicable and not exclusively designated for a specific ethnic category. This universalism is confirmed and expanded in Rom 8:22: "We know that all creation is groaning in labour pains until now." Paul employs two additional compound verbs, συστενάζω and συνωδίνω, which, in conjunction with the Greek adjective πᾶς (all), serve to broaden the redemptive horizon beyond the human community. The assertion

37 See Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge: Eerdmans, 1996), 355–56; John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge: Eerdmans, 1997), 1103–4.

38 See Stefania De Vito, "Comprendere bene per comunicare meglio: dal modello biblico alla comunicazione della sinodalità secondo la lettera ai Romani," in *Lonergan e il rinnovamento sinodale nel fare teologia*, ed. Francesco Asti, Edoardo Cibelli, and Stefania De Vito (Napoli: Luciano Editore, 2023), 20–34.

posits that all creation is in a state of anticipation for emancipation, participating (σύν) in the same dynamic of death and resurrection introduced in the baptismal discourse of chapter 6.[39]

The link of reciprocity manifests in numerous ways, culminating in an existential transformation characterised by spiritual awakening and ethical metamorphosis that entails a new way of life. Paul establishes a radical egalitarianism with his addressees: the Christian brotherhood is predicated on a shared (re)generation in Christ. By his identity as Son and through his resurrection, Christ has become "the firstborn among many brothers" (8:29), thereby establishing the paradigm for a community of siblings rather than hierarchical dependents.

The church that is yet to be fully realised in Rome is founded on this principle of inclusion and fraternal equality, generated by divine fatherhood and filial adoption (8:15). This familial identity, rooted in shared sonship, is meant to silence the attitude of mutual condemnation (14:13) and promote mutual edification (14:19). Paul's theological architecture thus moves from baptismal participation (chapter 6), through cosmic redemption (chapter 8), to the practical implications of sibling identity within a fragmented community (chapters 14–15).

4. Conclusion: Towards Rebuilding Community

After an initial interpretation, it becomes possible to allow the text to anchor itself in a new cultural and social context that interprets it. In this way, the Letter to the Romans can be re-read and re-understood in the twenty-first century. From the proposed exegesis, following a relational approach, we can draw several insights from the Apostle Paul to address contemporary fragmentation.

Fragmentation can be traced back to a profound sense of self-adoration, often characterised as a 'narcissistic' or 'idolatrous' attitude. It is striking that the

39 See Romano Penna, "La casa/famiglia sullo sfondo della Lettera ai Romani," *Estudios bíblicos* 65.1–2 (2007): 159–75.

apostle does not accuse his interlocutors of idolatry or sinfulness, for he has experienced the 'otherness' of the divine logic of justification. In his encounter with the resurrected Lord, who loved him as a sinner, the lens through which he viewed his own reality, that of others, and that of creation was transformed. Paul's personal experience of an 'inclusive' encounter with the risen Christ—who does not condemn him forever to be a 'stranger' to faith and justification by faith—enables him to recognise that the attitude of both social groups present in Rome is neither welcoming nor inclusive. Yet the apostle does not resort to accusation and judgment; instead, he prepares for his interlocutors a path of faith and growth that challenges them personally.

Paul's example remains inspiring today. He demonstrates a non-judgmental attitude towards a fragmentation that he clearly recognises. Most likely his hearers were unaware of the fragmentation they were experiencing, its origins, and its consequences. We can assume that they lacked a clear perception of themselves and of the fact that the social fragmentation they experienced was a sign of a faith not integrated into their own humanity. Faced with this reality, the apostle Paul does not offer directives but brings the problem to light, allowing his listeners to formulate solutions based not on coercion but on the experience of faith. This process of integration is further facilitated by the relational fabric that Paul creates, beginning with the letter's preface. He does not assume an air of superiority, emphasising this through his continued use of the first-person plural in pronouns and possessive adjectives.

Perhaps modern social and religious communities are similarly unaware of the fragmentation they experience, recognising it only as a problem to be solved through external forces or strategies. Paul shows us how fragmentation can have an anthropological root which, as such, must be addressed at its source rather than by merely treating its symptoms. As was the case for the Christian community in Rome, contemporary Christians can take up the challenge of fragmentation and consider it not a competition to be won but a way to develop a style of life. This approach is not imposing and does not demand the renunciation of identity or origins. It sets as its goal a "we" that already exists in Christ and needs to be embodied and protected.

In the Letter to the Romans, the pivotal moment is identified as the kenosis of Christ (5:5–6): His death "in favour" of people "without faith" (literal translation) describes a free offering that does not evaluate people's origins (Jewish or Greek), their identities (man or woman), or their lifestyles (wise or foolish). It is a gratuitous gift that includes all sinners in both the gift and in love. All of this inspires a paradigm of inclusive living, implicitly affirming the equality of all recipients of this gratuitous love, with no particular condition—personal or communal—that facilitates, favours, or hinders such sharing. In contemporary discourse, kenosis is defined as the space allotted for the process of self-reflection and discernment to be undertaken by others. It means experiencing emptiness, placing at the centre of one's existence a love that, received freely, must be given freely. Thus, the newness of life connected to baptism in Christ becomes a participation in his sentiments and his capacity to love. Resurrection, in today's faith, is precisely that laying down on the cross the reasons for fragmentation to make room for that kenotic love which becomes mutual acceptance and care for the other.

Pauline creativity stimulates new forms of creativity today, rooted in the present day of faith, which celebrates the risen Christ and recognises the contingency of history and the world. It is a present that acknowledges a fragmented world as a 'theological' place. The perception of reality and its challenges allow us to grasp the nuances of its complexity. Thus, fragmentation can be experienced not merely as a problem to be solved but as an opportunity to rediscover Christian identity and to reflect on non-invasive ways of proclaiming the gospel, with the aim of promoting the integral growth of both individual and community.

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MISSION AND IDENTITY: PHIL 1:27–2:8 AND GHANAIAN CHARISMATIC CHURCHES

Albert Acheampong[*]

1. Introduction

The understanding and interpretation of the Great Commission in Matt 28:19–20 serves as the biblical framework from which charismatic churches in Ghana have modelled their mission. Over time, charismatic churches in Ghana have focused on active evangelism and missions, which entail travelling into the community, people's homes, and on the streets to propagate the gospel and 'win people to Christ.' This emphasis, as Kpobi observes, reflects an explicit and resolute dedication to literally fulfil the Great Commission as recorded in Matt 28:19–20.[1]

Nevertheless, this focus on mission raises several critical questions. Does an increase in church membership necessarily indicate a successful mission? In what ways does numerical expansion influence societal transformation? Can the church's mission be considered complete when, despite over 70% of Ghanaians identifying as Christians,[2] there remains little observable impact on the nation's moral fabric or evidence of discipleship values in public life?

According to Ham, the aim of mission extends beyond merely increasing church membership or constructing buildings as a testament to God's salvation in the world.[3] Hence, there is a need for critical reflection within the Ghanaian Christian context on how mission is defined and what its primary purpose ought to be.[4]

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* Albert Acheampong is an associate pastor at Trinity Baptist Church, Accra.

1 David N. A. Kpobi, "The Pentecostal-Charismatic Impact in Ghanaian Christianity" (paper presented at Legon Theological Seminary, Accra, December 2012).

2 Ghana Statistical Service, *Ghana 2021 Population and Housing Census: General Report 3C* (Accra: Ghana Statistical Service, November 2021), https://www.statsghana.gov.gh.

3 Adolf Ham, "Toward a Cosmic and Holistic Mission: A Biblical Reflection on Romans 8:14–24a," *International Review of Mission* 106.1 (2017): 116–120.

4 Bernhard Ott, "Mission and Theological Education," *Transformation* 18.2 (2001): 87–98.

Against this background, the paper explores the model of early church mission in Phil 1:27–2:8 and how it challenges the Christian identity of charismatic churches in Ghana by employing the Communicative approach to African Biblical Hermeneutics proposed by Ossom-Batsa.[5] Gatti further develops this approach by outlining three key components: the exegesis of the text, reality, and the engagement between the text and the reader's context.[6]

2. Biblical Foundation of Mission

For Christians, Scripture has always provided the primary foundation for discussions on mission, with particular emphasis on the New Testament since it records the practices of the early church. Within this framework, the Apostle Paul emerges as a central figure. His presence in the Acts of the Apostles and in the thirteen letters attributed to him highlights a remarkable missional consciousness that continues to shape the ongoing debate about mission.[7]

The narratives in Acts (chapters 13–27), alongside Paul's epistles, portray his extensive travels and deep missiological reflection. Scholars stress that Paul's contribution lies not only in defining mission as 'proclamation'[8] but also in embodying what has been described as 'becoming the gospel.'[9] His letters represent "conversations in context,"[10] offering insight into his theological positions on a variety of issues, mission included. Holladay describes this dynamic as 'dialogical theology,'[11] whereby Paul reflects on his missionary experiences and interprets them for the communities he established. In this way, his letters served as a vital tool for sustaining his apostolic ministry, even

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5 George Ossom-Batsa, "African Interpretation of the Bible in Communicative Perspectives," *Ghana Bulletin of Theology* 2 (2007): 91–104.

6 Nicoletta Gatti, "Toward a 'Dialogic' Hermeneutic: Reading Gen 4:1-16 with Akan Eyes," *Horizons of Biblical Theology* 39.1 (2017): 46–67.

7 Carl R. Holladay, *A Critical Introduction to the New Testament: Interpreting the Message and Meaning of Jesus Christ* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2005), 365.

8 David Thang Moe, "Paul's Theology of Mission and Missionary Methods," *Witness: Journal of the Academy for Evangelism in Theological Education* 30 (2016): 1–25.

9 Michael J. Gorman, *Becoming the Gospel: Paul, Participation and Mission* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2015).

10 Holladay, *A Critical Introduction,* 367.

11 Holladay, *A Critical Introduction,* 366.

in places where he was physically absent.[12] Paul thus broadened the scope of mission, demonstrating that it involves both active engagement and reflective theological articulation within community life.

For Paul, mission primarily meant proclaiming Christ in new frontiers, geographical as well as ethnic, where the gospel had not yet been heard, drawing people into faith.[13] This endeavour not only expanded the Christian movement across the Greco-Roman world but also contextualised the gospel in ways intelligible to Hellenistic culture.[14] Peterson notes that Paul's preference for targeting cities was strategic, since urban centres served as hubs for spreading the gospel into surrounding regions.[15] Yet, while Paul was deeply committed to proclaiming Christ, his understanding of mission did not equate success with numerical growth in church membership—a contrast to the assumptions of many contemporary evangelism committees.[16]

Paul's major letters—including Romans, 1–2 Corinthians, and Galatians—have long been at the forefront of scholarly debate on mission.[17] By contrast, the epistle to the Philippians has received comparatively little attention and is often forgotten in discussions on early Christian mission, even though it also provides rich material for understanding Paul's missional vision. It is "fundamental to our understanding of the mission of the church in Paul's thought."[18] His reflections in the letter focus on the mission of the community as a collective goal, as opposed to mission centred on him.[19] Peterson suggests that this

12 Holladay, *A Critical Introduction,* 365.

13 Brian K. Peterson, "Being the Church in Philippi," *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 30.2 (2008): 163–178, doi:10.1163/187122008x340879.

14 George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1993), 398.

15 Peterson, "Being the Church in Philippi," 164.

16 Peterson, "Being the Church in Philippi," 165.

17 Some scholarly publications on Pauline mission include: Paul Everette Pierson, *The Dynamics of Christian Mission: History Through a Missiological Perspective* (Pasadena: WCIU Press, 2009); Michael D. Barram, *Mission and Moral Reflection in Paul* (New York: Peter Lang, 2006); Christopher R. Little, "What Makes Mission Christian?" *Mission Studies* 22.2 (2005): 207–226; Robert L. Plummer, *Paul's Understanding of the Church's Mission: Did the Apostle Paul Expect the Early Christian Communities to Evangelize?* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2006); Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Paul the Missionary: Realities, Strategies and Methods* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2010).

18 James P. Ware, *The Mission of the Church in Paul's Letter to the Philippians in the Context of Ancient Judaism* (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 287.

19 Peterson, "Being the Church in Philippi," 163.

letter is a valuable point of entry into Paul's missional thought, as it highlights the church's communal life as a witness in the world.[20]

For Paul, therefore, the essence of mission in Philippians is not confined to verbal proclamation but is embodied in the community's shared life. His exhortation to "do all things without murmuring and arguing" (Phil 2:14) underscores the significance of unity and conduct as part of their witness. Similarly, his call to live "in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ" (Phil 1:27) reflects his conviction that the gospel is both the story and the person of Christ. As Holladay observes, this gospel becomes the standard by which Christian behaviour is judged and the pattern into which believers are shaped.[21]

3. Missional Identity

Mission, in the broadest sense, concerns participation in the mission of God (*Missio Dei*) to save and restore His entire creation.[22] When viewed in this regard, the focus of mission is transitioned from a human-centred initiative to a divine movement in which the church is welcomed to partake. As Ham explains, mission is essentially a testimony of God's redemption in the world – a proclamation not only in words but also through the life of the Christian community.[23] In this sense, mission expresses the saving work of God as embodied in the life of the body of Christ, the church, whose vocation is to be a visible sign of the presence of the kingdom of God in the world.

The debate on the nature of mission has significantly evolved over time. Earlier conceptions often emphasised evangelism or church growth as the sole task of mission, but contemporary perspectives embrace a more comprehensive approach that addresses the social, economic, and spiritual needs of hu-

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20 Peterson, "Being the Church in Philippi," 168.
21 Holladay, *A Critical Introduction*, 525.
22 David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), 368–510.
23 Ham, "Cosmic and Holistic Mission," 116–120.

manity.[24] This shift highlights the growing recognition that mission cannot be limited to verbal proclamation alone; rather, it involves engaging the whole of life in response to God's saving activity.

Within this framework, the concept of holistic mission has gained prominence. According to Little, it entails the recognition of social responsibility and evangelism as indivisible, each equally informing and strengthening the other.[25] McConnell also expands this perspective by arguing that holistic mission seeks to integrate the building of the church with the transformation of society, drawing profoundly from the biblical idea of the kingdom of God.[26] The mission of the church is not simply about gathering converts but about embodying God's reign in ways that touch every dimension of human existence.

Moreover, holistic mission encompasses a call to faith that is not solely dependent on proclamation but also on attraction. As Peterson notes, the life of the faith community itself becomes a witness, drawing others through its authenticity, compassion, and transformative impact on the immediate and extended community.[27] In this way, mission becomes a lived demonstration of God's salvation, where the message is validated by the messenger.

Together, these perspectives underline that Christian mission is both participation in God's redemptive initiative and a holistic practice that integrates proclamation, service, and community transformation. In this regard, the definition of holistic mission offered by Walls and Ross is particularly instructive. They describe it as encompassing the "proclamation of the gospel; teaching, baptism, and nurturing; responding to human needs through loving service; seeking to transform unjust social structures; and striving to safeguard the integrity of creation and sustain and renew the life of the earth."[28] Although

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24 Sherron George, "God's Holistic Mission: Fullness of Parts, Participants and Places," *Missiology* 41.3 (2013): 286–299, doi:10.1177/0091829613480625.

25 Little, "What Makes Mission Christian?" 207–226.

26 Douglas McConnell, "Holistic Mission," in *Evangelical Dictionary of World Missions*, ed. Scott A. Moreau (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2000), 448–449.

27 Peterson, "Being the Church in Philippi," 177–178.

28 Cathy Ross, "Introduction: Taonga," in *Mission in the Twenty-first Century: Exploring the Five Marks of Global Mission,* ed. Andrew Walls and Cathy Ross (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2008), xiii–xvi.

Walls and Ross acknowledge that their definition is not exhaustive, it provides an adequate framework for articulating a Christian missional identity that integrates spiritual, social, and ecological dimensions and, therefore, serves as a useful starting point for this discussion.

4. Exegesis of the Text

The interpretation of Phil 1:27–2:8 benefits from rhetorical criticism, which studies how biblical authors employed rhetorical forms to persuade their audiences.[29] This approach is especially useful for the Pauline letters, where argument, exhortation, and theology are interwoven. In Philippians, Paul's exhortations are not random but crafted to address the church's concrete situation, highlighting steadfastness, unity, and humility. As Fee notes, proper interpretation must also consider the historical and relational context of Paul's communication.[30] Thus, rhetorical and socio-historical perspectives together enable a holistic reading of the passage.

4.1 The Historical and Social Context of Philippi

Philippi, a Roman colony in Macedonia re-founded by Augustus after the battle of 42 BCE, enjoyed the privileges of Roman citizenship, law, and prestige, with many of its settlers being military veterans.[31] This strong civic identity gives Paul's use of πολιτεύεσθαι ("live as citizens," Phil 1:27) particular force, evoking both civic duty and gospel allegiance.[32] The church was largely Gentile, as shown in Acts 16, where Paul's first convert was Lydia at a riverside prayer gathering rather than in a synagogue (Acts 16:13–15). His imprisonment in Philippi (Acts 16:16–40) underscored the cost of discipleship and forged a bond between Paul and the community, who later supported his ministry (Phil 4:15–16).

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29 George A. Kennedy, *New Testament Interpretation through Rhetorical Criticism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984), 3–9.

30 Gordon D. Fee, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 22–24.

31 Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1993), 556.

32 Moisés Silva, *Philippians*, 2nd ed., BECNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005), 82–83.

Understanding this historical and relational context is crucial for interpreting Phil 1:27–2:8. The Philippians were not only facing external opposition but also internal challenges of disunity and rivalry. Paul's exhortations to steadfastness, communal life, and Christlike humility should, therefore, be read in light of this socio-historical setting. Fee observes that Paul's appeals are deeply pastoral, aiming to foster a community identity that reflects the gospel in both adversity and daily conduct.[33] The call to perseverance in suffering and to unity in Christ was not abstract but grounded in the lived realities of a marginalised yet vibrant congregation within a Roman colony.

A striking feature of the epistle to the Philippian community is Paul's unease with disunity within the congregation. While the Philippians were faithful partners in the gospel (Phil 1:5), the letter reveals tensions that threatened the community's witness. In 1:15–18, Paul identifies rival preachers whose motives were driven by φθόνος (envy), ἔρις (rivalry), and ἐριθεία (selfish ambition). Although Paul expresses confidence that Christ is proclaimed regardless of motive, his acknowledgement of such attitudes suggests that competitive preaching had the potential to sow discord in the church.[34] Later, in 4:2–3, he directly appeals to Euodia and Syntyche to reconcile, further evidencing internal strife.

4.2 Appeal to Steadfastness and Unity in the Face of Opposition (1:27–30)

These indications of conflict are critical for understanding Paul's exhortations in 1:27–30 where he admonishes the Philippian community to "stand firm in one spirit, striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel" (v. 27). The military and athletic imagery employed conveys the urgency of cooperative struggle rather than individual rivalry.[35] The call is not merely to perseverance against external opposition, but also to cultivate internal cohesion. For Paul, unity is inseparable from the mission of the gospel because division within the community compromises its capacity to exemplify Christ and proclaim the gospel faithfully.

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33 Fee, *Philippians*, 35.
34 Fee, *Philippians*, 86–87.
35 Lynn H. Cohick, *Philippians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2013), 92–93.

The motif of suffering also intersects with the problem of disunity. Paul frames the Philippians' hardships as participation in the same struggle he endured (1:30). Their perseverance in the face of persecution is tied to their willingness to set aside envy and rivalry for the sake of a common witness. Gorman observes that Paul's vision of participation in Christ extends not only to sharing in his sufferings but also to embodying his cruciform pattern of self-giving love within the community.[36] Thus, overcoming disunity was not simply a matter of maintaining harmony but was central to embodying the gospel itself.

4.3 Appeal to Unity Based on Common Life in Christ (2:1–4)

Paul deepens his exhortation in 2:1–4, appealing to the Philippians' common life in Christ. He grounds his appeal in a series of conditional clauses: "if there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation of love, any participation in the Spirit, any sympathy and compassion" (v. 1). The phrase κοινωνία πνεύματος ("participation in the Spirit") emphasises the Spirit's role in creating and sustaining communal life. Unity, therefore, is not merely a social arrangement but a spiritual reality rooted in divine gift.[37]

The exhortation culminates in the call to be "of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind" (v. 2). The repeated emphasis on "mind" signals that unity requires a shared orientation of thought and disposition. Paul contrasts this with the destructive attitudes of selfish ambition (ἐριθεία) and conceit (κενοδοξία), urging instead humility and regard for the interests of others (vv. 3–4). In so doing, Paul shifts the focus from rivalry to mutual service, from self-promotion to communal responsibility.

The rhetorical force of this passage is heightened by Paul's use of imperatives. In 1:27, he commands the Philippians to πολιτεύεσθε – "live as citizens worthy of the gospel of Christ."[38] This verb, drawn from the language of civic

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36 Michael J. Gorman, *Apostle of the Crucified Lord: A Theological Introduction to Paul and His Letters*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2017), 524–26.
37 Markus Bockmuehl, *The Epistle to the Philippians* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1998), 115–16.
38 Silva, *Philippians*, 82.

identity, would resonate deeply with a community in a Roman colony proud of its status. Paul reframes citizenship, however, not in terms of Roman privilege but in terms of gospel conduct. As Silva notes, πολιτεύεσθαι functions as a powerful metaphor: just as Roman citizens were expected to live in a manner worthy of Rome, so believers are to dwell and conduct themselves in a way worthy of Christ.[39]

By invoking both κοινωνία πνεύματος and πολιτεύεσθαι, Paul connects spiritual communion with civic responsibility, portraying the church as an alternative polis whose unity and conduct are themselves missional. The Philippians are called to demonstrate through their communal life the reality of the gospel, embodying a visible contrast to the rivalry and ambition that characterised the surrounding culture.

4.4 Appeal to Christ's Example of Humility (2:5–8)

The exhortation of Paul in Phil 2:5–11 is grounded in the Christological hymn, which presents Jesus as the supreme model of humility and obedience. The call to "have the same mind as Christ Jesus" (v. 5) establishes a paradigm in which ethical conduct flows directly from Christological reflection. As Fee notes, the hymn operates simultaneously as theology and ethics: it is 'indicative' in its description of God's saving work in Christ and 'imperative' in its demand for the community's response.[40] This rhetorical movement from description to exhortation typifies Paul's strategy, ensuring that doctrinal insight is not abstract but translated into lived practice.

Central to the hymn is Christ's self-emptying or kenosis: "emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men" (v. 7). The verb ἐκένωσεν signifies not a loss of divinity but a voluntary renunciation of privilege and status. Gorman emphasises that this act was an existential posture of humility enacted in obedience to God's salvific purpose, rather than an onto-

39 Silva, *Philippians*, 83.
40 Fee, *Philippians*, 87–88.

logical diminution of Christ's divine nature.[41] For the Philippians, the ethical implication is unambiguous: just as Christ subordinated his own advantage for the sake of others, so the community is to reject rivalry and ambition in favour of humility and mutual service.

The hymn further highlights the paradox of exaltation through humility. Christ's obedience "unto death, even death on a cross" (v. 8) is followed by divine vindication, as God exalts him and bestows on him "the name that is above every name" (vv. 9–11). This exaltation, echoing Isa 45:23 (LXX), demonstrates that true honour in God's economy is granted not through self-promotion but through obedience and sacrificial love.[42] The implication for the Philippians is radical: leadership and influence within the community are redefined in terms of service, and greatness is measured by self-giving rather than by status or privilege.

Finally, the rhetorical function of the hymn is to reinforce Paul's appeal for unity and communal responsibility. The imperative to "have the same mind" (v. 5) is grounded in the indicatives of Christ's humility and exaltation, thereby linking Christology to community formation. As Silva argues, the hymn provides "a template for community formation," shaping both the internal relations of believers and their outward witness.[43] Participation in Christ's humility entails not only harmony within the church but also a readiness to endure suffering for the sake of the gospel (Phil 1:29; 2:17). Thus, the hymn undergirds Paul's vision of the church as a living reflection of Christ's own life, in which theological confession, ethical practice, and communal identity converge in missional purpose.[44]

5. Missiological Implications and Closing Reflections

The study of Phil 1:27–2:8 offers profound insights for mission practice in Ghanaian charismatic churches. Paul's sustained emphasis on Christ as the model of humility, obedience, and self-giving love directly challenges ten-

41 Gorman, *Apostle*, 531–533.
42 Bockmuehl, *Philippians*, 123–124.
43 Silva, *Philippians*, 89.
44 Gorman, *Apostle*, 535.

dencies within some contemporary contexts where numerical expansion and performance are prioritised over ethical integrity and communal depth. The Christ hymn (2:5–8) in particular foregrounds a kenotic pattern of leadership, calling missionaries and church leaders to renounce personal ambition in favour of communal welfare and the advancement of the gospel.[45] This reorientation places relational authenticity and ethical consistency at the heart of Christian mission.

A further dimension of the passage is its linkage of suffering with witness. Participation in Christ's kenosis (2:6–8) is not merely an ethical ideal but entails a readiness to endure opposition, criticism, and hardship for the sake of the gospel (Phil 1:29; 2:17). For Ghanaian churches negotiating social pressures, economic instability, and occasional hostility, Paul's theology of suffering offers both encouragement and interpretive resources. Such a paradigm reframes adversity not as failure or divine disfavour, but as partaking in the redemptive blueprint of Christ, thereby equipping communities for resilience in mission.[46]

Closely related is Paul's redefinition of leadership in terms of service. The Christ hymn positions humility and obedience as the foundation of authentic authority, thereby commending servant leadership as a missiological principle. Leaders are called not to self-promotion but to the fostering of environments where mentorship, collaboration, and mutual respect shape governance, pastoral care, and ministry coordination.[47] In this light, church leadership becomes an extension of Christ's self-emptying love, orienting authority toward the flourishing of the community rather than individual acclaim.

Finally, Paul situates mission within the relational and communal life of the church. His appeal to unity, mutual care, and participation in the Spirit (κοινωνία πνεύματος) underscores that mission is not an individualistic enterprise but a shared responsibility. As Hansen observes, letters such as Philip-

45 Gorman, *Apostle*, 536–537.
46 Fee, *Philippians*, 102–103.
47 Bockmuehl, *Philippians*, 128.

pians can be read as "letters of friendship," wherein the attractiveness of the gospel arises not only from proclamation but also from the quality of communal life and ethical coherence.[48] Such a vision compels a holistic approach to mission: evangelism and growth remain vital, yet they must be integrated with ethical formation, relational health, and social engagement. By embodying humility, unity, and participatory suffering, Ghanaian charismatic churches can move beyond a narrow focus on numbers to become credible witnesses to the *Missio Dei*, shaping both the internal being of the church and its transformative presence in society.[49]

6. Cultural Context

To ground this study in the lived realities of Ghanaian charismatic Christianity, this section draws on insights from semi-structured interviews and a focus group discussion.[50] These qualitative methods highlight the experiences and communal dynamics that shape charismatic understandings of mission identity. They offer an approach to biblical interpretation that privileges the voices of individual perspectives and captures the social dynamics and collective understanding. In this case, the study of Phil 1:27–2:8 exposed how the churches' understanding of mission – focused on proclamation and numerical expansion – was both confirmed in its zeal for the gospel and simultaneously challenged by Paul's broader vision which integrates unity, humility and holistic witness. Thus, the focus group discussion makes visible both the continuities and discontinuities between grassroots perception of mission and the theological emphasis of the Pauline text. Through this process, the cultural context of mission at the grassroots level is brought to light.

The focus group discussion revealed that the dominant perception of mission is rooted in the Great Commission of Matt 28:18–20.[51] Within this framework, mission is largely equated with evangelism, 'winning souls' in

48 Craig A. Hansen, *Philippians: Letters of Friendship and Mission* (London: T&T Clark, 2009), 57–59.
49 Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 390–392.
50 Interviews were conducted with some pastors from UD-OLGC, complemented by a focus group discussion involving church members and leaders across different levels of responsibility.
51 The focus group discussion was conducted online via Zoom due to proximity of participants.

order to increase church membership, and the planting of new congregations. Both the pastor and the focus group participants consistently reiterated this perspective, indicating a strong emphasis on numerical growth as the primary expression of mission. While this demonstrates a commendable commitment to evangelistic zeal, it also reveals a lack of development in the broader idea of mission. Issues such as social transformation, justice, and ecological responsibility were notably absent from participants' articulation of mission.[52]

The rhetorical analysis of Phil 1:27–2:8 broadens the scope of mission in important ways. Paul's call to "live in a manner worthy of the gospel" (1:27) reframes mission as a holistic witness expressed through ethical integrity and consistent Christian living. His exhortation to "stand firm in one spirit" emphasises unity as central to missional identity, expanding mission beyond winning converts to nurturing communal solidarity.[53] Furthermore, Paul interprets suffering for Christ not as failure but as participation in mission (1:29–30), challenging triumphalist views of ministry and affirming endurance in hardship as missional. The appeal to humility and service (2:1–4) points to mission as caring for others and prioritising communal well-being, while the Christ hymn (2:5–8) provides the ultimate paradigm of self-emptying love and sacrificial service as the true shape of Christian mission.[54]

Thus, while the community articulated mission in narrowly evangelistic terms, Philippians enabled a more holistic reading of Scripture that integrates proclamation with unity, service, humility, and sacrificial witness. This demonstrates how cultural context shapes perceptions of mission and how dialogical engagement with Scripture can open pathways toward a richer, transformative missional identity.

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52 Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 394.

53 Stephen B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, rev. and exp. ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002).

54 Andrew F. Walls and Cathy Ross, eds., *Mission in the Twenty-first Century: Exploring the Five Marks of Global Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2008).

7. Engagement

A contextual engagement with Phil 1:27–2:8 offers important insights for rethinking the concept of mission within Ghanaian charismatic churches. The prevailing perception of mission in many of these churches tends to be narrowly defined by the Great Commission of Matt 28:18–20, equating mission almost exclusively with evangelism, soul-winning, and numerical expansion through church planting. While this reflects a genuine zeal for proclamation and outreach, it risks reducing mission to a unidimensional activity that overlooks the breadth of biblical teaching. A holistic reading of Philippians challenges these limitations and opens space for a broader and more inclusive understanding of mission that aligns with the contemporary missiological consensus.

7.1 Mission Beyond Evangelism: Rethinking Growth

The first challenge that the text poses to Ghanaian charismatic churches is the narrow identification of mission with evangelism and numerical increase. Paul's exhortation that the Philippian believers should "live in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ" (Phil 1:27) does not point primarily to expansion in numbers but to the quality of communal life. According to Paul, growth is measured by integrity, perseverance, and unity in faith rather than statistical size of the community. Bosch reminds us that mission has undergone a paradigm shift from a conquest model of expansion to one of holistic witness that embraces proclamation, service, justice, and ecological concern.[55] In this light, numerical growth alone cannot be equated with missional faithfulness. Rather, Philippians suggests that the life of the community itself which is related to its mutual care, humility, and solidarity, serves as a witness to the gospel.

Yet, in the Ghanaian charismatic context, mission is frequently understood in narrow terms of evangelism and church planting. Evangelistic rallies, media ministries and itinerant crusades dominate the missional perspective with success measured by the number of individuals "won to Christ" and the speed with

55 Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 411–419.

which new congregations are established.[56] While such practices reveal commendable zeal for evangelism, they risk reducing mission to numerical expansion alone. As Wright notes, mission is *Missio Dei* and not merely the church's agenda to expand in numbers and build mega structures.[57] Numerical increase may be a fruit of mission, but it cannot be the sole criterion. A holistic approach to mission requires that spiritual vitality, ethical integrity, and social transformation be recognised as equally vital markers of missional faithfulness.

7.2 Perseverance and Integrity in Adversity

Another dimension of Phil 1:27-30 that challenges Ghanaian charismatic perceptions of mission is the call to perseverance amid suffering. Paul emphasises that opposition and hardship are not signs of failure but integral to sharing in Christ's mission. For charismatic communities where prosperity preaching has sometimes overshadowed the theology of suffering, this is a critical corrective. Mission is not only about visible success, healing, and breakthroughs, but also about faithfully bearing witness in contexts of difficulty and resistance.

Walls and Ross argue that mission must be understood as encompassing both proclamation and the costly embodiment of the gospel in adverse circumstances.[58] In this sense, the integrity of the community in facing trials becomes itself a missional act. Ghanaian charismatics are thus invited by Philippians to embrace a theology of resilience and suffering that enriches their missional identity and grounds their evangelistic zeal in deeper faithfulness to Christ's example.

7.3 Community-Centred Mission

Phil 2:1–4 shifts the focus from individual spirituality to the life of the community. Paul exhorts believers to live in unity, humility, and mutual ser-

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56 J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu, *Contemporary Pentecostal Christianity: Interpretations from an African Context* (Oxford: Regnum, 2013), 45–47.

57 Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2006), 62.

58 Walls and Ross, *Mission in the Twenty-first Century*, 5.

vice, reflecting the mind of Christ. Mission, therefore, is not limited to outward proclamation but is embodied in the quality of relationships within the church. Bevans and Schroeder highlight this communal dimension in their articulation of "prophetic dialogue," where the church's life together becomes a testimony of God's reconciling mission.[59]

For Ghanaian charismatic churches, this presents both a challenge and an opportunity. The emphasis on individual testimonies of conversion and blessing can sometimes overshadow the communal witness of the church. Philippians reminds us that mission is as much about creating a community of mutual love and care as it is about preaching to outsiders. In fact, the attractiveness of such a community – rooted in humility and service – can itself be evangelistic, offering an alternative to individualism and consumerism prevalent in contemporary Ghanaian society.

7.4 Mission as Attraction: Beyond Soul-Winning

One striking insight from the focus group discussion was the contrast between evangelism as verbal proclamation and mission as a life that attracts others through its quality. While charismatic participants emphasised evangelistic zeal, Paul's Christ hymn (Phil 2:6–11) reframes mission as self-giving humility. The life of the community, patterned after Christ's kenosis, becomes its most compelling testimony and witness to the gospel.

This insight speaks directly to practices in Ghana where 'soul-winning' campaigns are sometimes undertaken with little regard for long-term discipleship or holistic care of converts. Large evangelistic crusades may draw impressive crowds, yet many drift away afterward due to the absence of intentional follow-up or supportive communal structures. J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu observes that the strength of the Ghanaian charismatic movement lies in its evangelistic energy and ability to attract the masses, yet this strength often

59 Stephen B. Bevans and Roger P. Schroeder, *Constants in Context: A Theology of Mission for Today* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004), 348.

masks a weak culture of discipleship and social engagement.[60] Similarly, Onyinah has cautioned that while crusades and healing campaigns create numerical expansion, mission cannot be reduced to dramatic encounters alone but must translate into ethical transformation and communal faithfulness.[61] The Pauline model critiques such short-term triumphs by redefining mission as sustained communal witness rooted in humility, mutual care, and service.

As Walls and Ross note, holistic mission integrates proclamation with service, justice, and care for creation.[62] Likewise, Bediako argues that authentic Christian mission in Africa must address the cultural, social, and moral fabric of life, not simply the increase of congregational size.[63] Thus, the true attractiveness of the church lies not merely in its preaching but in the authenticity of its life together. Ghanaian charismatic churches, therefore, must balance their strength in evangelistic passion with the deeper witness of communities embodying humility, compassion, and justice.

In this light, mission may be reframed not only as proclamation but also as attraction through the quality of communal life. The contrast between evangelism as 'soul-winning' and mission as 'communal life' is not a matter of opposition but of complementarity. Paul's Christological hymn in Phil 2:5–11 presents Christ's humbleness and self-sacrificing love as the model for the people. Such a community becomes a living gospel, drawing others by its integrity, compassion, and justice. Mission, therefore, is not abandoned but broadened, embracing proclamation while situating it within the wider witness of a transformed society that embodies God's justice and love.

7.5 The Identity of the Charismatic Church: From Exclusivity to Inclusivity

Perhaps the most profound implication of the text lies in its challenge to the church's identity. The focus group discussion revealed that Ghanaian charis-

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60 J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu, *African Charismatics: Current Developments within Independent Indigenous Pentecostalism in Ghana* (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 145–50.

61 Opoku Onyinah, "Pentecostalism and the Transformation of the Ghanaian Religious Landscape," *Journal of African Christian Thought* 10.2 (2007): 55–63.

62 Walls and Ross, *Mission in the Twenty-first Century*, 7–10.

63 Kwame Bediako, *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1995), 103–108.

matic churches often construct an exclusive self-understanding defined primarily by proclamation, where salvation is implicitly reduced to evangelistic success and church membership. Paul's broader vision disrupts this reductionism. In the Christ hymn (Phil 2:6–11), salvation, though centred on the community's life, radiates outward by embracing society, creation, and the whole of life. The church's identity, therefore, is not exhausted by verbal proclamation but is constituted by a communal life that embodies Christ's humility and participates in God's renewing mission.

This insight exposes a tension within the Ghanaian charismatic context. While significant resources are devoted to constructing large auditoriums, investing in sophisticated media technologies, or branding leaders as global apostles and prophets, urgent social concerns often remain neglected. Issues such as youth unemployment, systemic corruption, environmental degradation through illegal mining (*galamsey*), and inadequate healthcare continue to challenge Ghanaian society. Although such investments in visibility and expansion may have strategic value, they risk sidelining the church's vocation to social transformation. Holistic mission calls the church not only to proclaim Christ but also to embody his reign through practical responses – promoting job creation, modelling integrity in governance, and safeguarding creation.

Ghanaian scholarship has consistently pointed to these concerns. Asamoah-Gyadu critiques the dominance of "media evangelism" and the pursuit of numerical expansion at the expense of depth and discipleship, warning that "growth without grounding" leaves converts vulnerable.[64] Similarly, Onyinah highlights the lack of structures for sustained discipleship in charismatic churches, arguing that true evangelistic fruitfulness requires nurture and holistic care.[65] Bediako adds that Christianity in Africa must demonstrate its public relevance by engaging the moral, social, and cultural realities of the continent.[66] These voices echo Philippians' challenge, reminding the church that its witness is credible not merely in its size but in the authenticity of its communal life and engagement with society.

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64 Asamoah-Gyadu, *African Charismatics,* 115–120.

65 Opoku Onyinah, "Akan Witchcraft and the Concept of Exorcism in the Church of Pentecost," *Asian Journal of Pentecostal Studies* 5.1 (2002): 107–34.

66 Bediako, *Christianity in Africa,* 108–112.

As articulated in *Mission in the 21st Century*, the Five Marks of Mission, widely received across global Christianity, provide a constructive framework: "proclamation of the gospel; teaching, baptism, and nurturing; responding to human needs through loving service; seeking to transform unjust social structures; and striving to safeguard the integrity of creation and sustain and renew the life of the earth."[67] These marks reflect the breadth of God's mission and resonate with the vision of Philippians. By contrast, the dominant charismatic definition of mission as evangelism and growth corresponds to only one dimension of this broader calling. As Bosch and Wright argue, the church does not possess a mission of its own but participates in the *Missio Dei*, which encompasses the totality of creation.[68] A faithful identity for the Ghanaian charismatic church should, therefore, move beyond an exclusive self-definition rooted in numbers, toward a holistic witness that integrates proclamation with justice, compassion, and ecological stewardship.

In a nutshell, engaging Ghanaian charismatic communities with Phil 1:27–2:8 highlights the dissonance between the grassroots perception of mission and the broader biblical vision of holistic mission. While evangelism and church growth remain important, they should be complemented by perseverance in suffering, integrity in witness, communal life, social justice, and care for creation. A holistic understanding of mission not only deepens the identity of the church but also aligns it more faithfully with the *Missio Dei*. For Ghanaian charismatic churches, embracing this vision offers the opportunity to redefine their mission beyond numerical expansion towards transformative engagement with society and creation.

8. Summary and Conclusion

The study of Phil 1:27–2:8 demonstrates that the identity of the church is inseparable from its mission. Paul's call for believers to "conduct themselves in a manner worthy of the gospel" (Phil 1:27) resonates with the mission Christ gave his disciples, namely, "to disciple all nations" (Matt 28:19–20). Mission,

67 Walls and Ross, *Mission in the Twenty-first Century*, xiii.
68 Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 389–393; Wright, *The Mission of God*, 62–65.

therefore, is not merely an external activity but the lived expression of a community embodying the life of Christ. The church offers the experience of Christ which includes his humility, obedience, and sacrificial love, in a way that transforms both its internal life and the wider society in which it is situated.

For Ghanaian charismatic churches, this insight underscores the need to frame mission as more than numerical expansion or programmatic success. The authentic witness of the church arises when its life reflects the presence of Christ, shaping relationships, ethics, and community practices in ways that embody the gospel. The call to unity, humility, and participatory suffering becomes central to this reflection, providing a counter-narrative to individualistic ambition and performance-driven ministry models.

A truly missional focus must also be attentive to contemporary issues facing society. This includes addressing economic inequalities, cultural tensions, youth challenges, and social fragmentation with the holistic resources of the gospel. In this way, mission integrates proclamation with social transformation, healing divisions, and offering hope to marginalised communities.

Finally, the holistic approach to mission envisioned in Philippians and the Great Commission demands that Ghanaian charismatic churches embrace an integrated vision that combines evangelism, ethical formation, and social engagement. Such a vision not only strengthens the identity of the church but also embodies the *Missio Dei*, where the community of faith participates in God's redemptive work for all creation.

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THE TRUE AND LIVING GOD (1 THESS 1:9) EARLY CHRISTIAN MESSAGE IN THESSALONICA AND IN SOUTHEAST NIGERIA

Mary Jerome Obiorah[*]

1. Introduction

The choice of 1 Thessalonians for this paper is due to its pride of place in the NT. Being the first document of the NT, 1 Thess is an important witness of the life and the belief of the post-Paschal Christians. In this letter one sees some of the creedal formulae (cf. 1 Thess 1:9-10; 4:14; 5:10). Thessalonica at the time of Paul was religiously pluralistic with people from different parts of the world.

The context of southeast Nigeria (Igboland) for the setting of this paper is inspired by its strong presence of Christians. Early missionaries worked hard to evangelise the people and indeed, they succeeded, despite untold difficulties which claimed their lives. They entered a very religious culture that has its specific characteristics. It was not pluralistic like Thessalonica, for the people believed in one Supreme God who has many agents that were recognised as divine and accorded veneration. Igbo culture, which has many positive and negative elements, was closely linked to their religious beliefs. Early missionaries used some strategies in bringing the Gospel to this culture. The phrase "the true and living God" is important in Paul's mission in Thessalonica and early missionary work in Igboland, because it was the starting point of both missions.[1]

The strong Christian presence in Igboland, however, is experiencing a serious challenge which might affect its future, because some youths are return-

* Mary Jerome Obiorah, IHM, is a Professor of Biblical Studies at the Department of Religion and Cultural Studies, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, Nigeria, and Blessed Iwene Tansi Major Seminary, Onitsha, Nigeria. She is the editor of Nsukka Journal of Religion and Cultural Studies and the president of the Catholic Biblical Association of Nigeria.

1 A. O. Makozi and G. J. Afolabi Ojo, *The History of the Catholic Church in Nigeria* (Ibadan: Macmillan Nigeria, 1982).

ing to traditional religion for many reasons which might be attributed to the present pastoral strategies. This paper, therefore, studies Paul's strategies in Thessalonica and those employed by early missionaries in Igboland. The aim is to offer some recommendations for effective pastoral work.

2. Pre-Pauline Religious Background of Thessalonica

2.1 Prominence of Thessalonica

Thessalonica was the capital of the Province of Macedonia. It took its name from Thessalonikē, the wife of Cassander who was a general of Alexander the Great and the founder of the city. This port city was founded about 315 BCE in the Roman province of Macedonia, north of modern Greece when Cassander was in charge of Macedonia.[2] Paul spent part of his missionary activities in this city. Paul went to Macedonia in response to an invitation he received in a vision (Acts 16:6–10).

Thessalonica at the time of Paul was a commercial city as well as a political centre, being the capital of the Roman province of Macedonia. It had its own judicial centre since Octavius declared it a 'free city' when the Thessalonians supported him in his battle at Philippi about 42 BCE. Paul preached at Thessalonica but was met with opposition from the Jews (Acts 17). This resistance followed him to Beroea where he left his companions, Timothy and Silas/Silvanus, and proceeded to Athens; they later joined him. He longed to visit Thessalonica but was unable to do so; therefore, he sent Timothy to find out how they were faring. When Timothy went to Thessalonica, Paul moved on to Corinth, and he was there when Timothy brought him news about the Thessalonians. It was Timothy's report that gave rise to Paul's letter to the Thessalonians about 51 CE. Timothy's news was positive, but he mentioned some misunderstanding among the faithful especially with regard to the fate of those who had died.[3]

Situated on the thoroughfares of the Roman empire, precisely on Via Egnatia, Thessalonica was filled with people from all walks of life and from different

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2 Gordon D. Fee, *The First and Second Letters to the Thessalonians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), 5.

3 Leon Morris, *The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991), 6–11.

places like Greece, Italy, Palestine, Egypt, and Asia Minor. It was politically, culturally, and economically important.[4] This social setting explains the diversity of its religious cult. Reading closely 1 Thess, one perceives genuine conversion, its religious background and influence on the social life of the inhabitants.

2.2 Religious Background of Thessalonica

In 1 Thess, one can see the religious background of this city before and after Paul's mission among them. At the beginning of this letter and in a section (1:2–20) that appears to be the usual Thanksgiving, he praises the faith of his addressees, who, following his mission among them, have acquired the three pillars of the Christian virtues. He describes these as follows: "… your work of *faith* and labour of *love* and steadfastness of *hope* in our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Thess 1:3). This is the first time that this triad appears in the Christian writings and in this order (faith-love-hope), which reflects the history of God's saving programme (past-present-future).[5] The Thessalonians persevered in their Christian faith. In 1 Thess 1:9, the foundation of this radical change is stated thus: "… you turned to God from idols (ἀπὸ τῶν εἰδώλων), to serve a living and true God (θεῷ ζῶντι καὶ ἀληθινῷ). It is generally believed that 1 Thess 1:9–10 was an outline of Paul's preaching in Thessalonica:

9 αὐτοὶ γὰρ περὶ ἡμῶν ἀπαγγέλλουσιν ὁποίαν εἴσοδον ἔσχομεν πρὸς ὑμᾶς, καὶ πῶς ἐπεστρέψατε πρὸς τὸν θεὸν ἀπὸ τῶν εἰδώλων δουλεύειν θεῷ ζῶντι καὶ ἀληθινῷ	9 For the people of those regions report about us what kind of welcome we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God,
10 καὶ ἀναμένειν τὸν υἱὸν αὐτοῦ ἐκ τῶν οὐρανῶν, ὃν ἤγειρεν ἐκ [τῶν] νεκρῶν, Ἰησοῦν τὸν ῥυόμενον ἡμᾶς ἐκ τῆς ὀργῆς τῆς ἐρχομένης.	10 and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath that is coming.

4 Néstor O. Míguez, *The Practice of Hope: Ideology and Intention in 1 Thessalonians* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2012), 52.

5 M. Eugene Boring, *1 and 2 Thessalonians: A Commentary*, New Testament Library (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2015), 60.

The sequence of the key points in this outline is: (i) belief in one true and living God, which is Paul's OT monotheistic background; (ii) hope in the second coming of Christ, a prevalent teaching at the time of his writing; (iii) Jesus the Son of God and his Incarnation; (iv) Christ's resurrection; (v) his salvific work. Faith in one true and living God comes first in an emphatic position because of its importance in believing other points. Moreover, the religious situation in Thessalonica might have inspired its place in this outline. An explanation of the OT background of the title 'living God' might shed light on the understanding of the religious setting of the Thessalonians.

The phrase "living God," (אֱלֹהִים חַיִּים) is used in some significant texts in the OT; twice in the Psalter (Pss 42:3; 84:3), and both are in the context of an intense longing for God's presence.[6] In addition to these two texts, אֱלֹהִים חַיִּים is found in Deut 5:26; Josh 3:10; 1 Sam 17:26, 36; 2 Kgs 19:4, 16 // Isa 37:4,17; Jer 10:10; 23:36; Hos 2:1, as well as in the Aramaic,*ʾĕlāhāʾ ḥayyāʾ* of Dan 6:21,27.[7] Besides the two passages of the Psalter (Pss 42:3 and 84:3) that are directed to YHWH, most of the texts in which אֱלֹהִים חַיִּים occurs have to do with a polemic against foreign opponents.[8] For instance, the living God, in the words of Joshua, would drive out before the Israelites all the nations that hindered their entry into the Promised Land (Josh 3:10). David, speaking of the haughtiness and insolence of the Philistine champion Goliath, describes him as one who defies the armies of the living God (1 Sam 17:36). The envoy of the king of Assyria likewise mocks the living God (2 Kgs 19:4 // Isa 37:4), and in his prayers Hezekiah earnestly implores YHWH to hear the words of Sennacherib, sent precisely to mock the "living God" (2 Kgs 19:16 // Isa 37:17). The Lord is not like other gods, "the work of the artisan and of the hands of the goldsmith" (Jer 10:9); "but the Lord is the true God; he is the living God and the everlasting

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6 For a study of the divine title in Ps 42–43 and other passages in the OT, cf. Germana Strola, *Il desiderio di Dio: Studio dei Salmi 42–43* (Estratto della Tesi di Dottorato della Facoltà Biblica del PIB; Roma: PIB, 2002), 48–65. Its occurrence in Ps 42:9 in some Syriac MSS is likely a harmonisation with v. 3.

7 Besides the Hebrew texts translated in the LXX, the OT passages found solely in the Greek text also record the same title. Thus, the phrase "the Living God" occurs in the LXX of Dan 4:22; 5:23; Tob 12:2; Esth 6:13; 3 Macc 6:28.

8 Cf. Tryggve N. D. Mettinger, *In Search of God: The Meaning and Message of the Everlasting Names* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988), 86; A.-M. Besnard, *Le mystère du nom: quiconque invoquera le nom du Seigneur sera sauvé. Joël 3,5*, LD 35 (Paris: Cerf, 1962), 70–74.

King" (Jer 10:10). The living God delivered his servant Daniel from the lions and from the threat of the foreign nation (Dan 6:21, 27). It is therefore possible that polemical statements against foreign nations and their gods prefer to invoke the title "living God."[9]

Studies have shown that at the time of Paul's mission in Thessalonica, there were many pagan cults whose gods were ἐλπίδα (cf. 1 Thess 1:3), and from which the converts have turned to follow the living God.[10] Cabirus, for instance, was the chief and the tutelage deity of Thessalonica; it promoted fertility and protected sailors. It is believed that the origin of the cult was traced to the murder of a young man called Cabirus by his two brothers. They placed a crown on his head, wrapped it in a purple cloth, and buried it at the foot of Mount Olympos. Unlike in Samothrace Island where the plural form Cabiri (father and son)[11] was used, in Thessalonica there was only one Cabirus, despite a close religious relationship between the two places.

Prominent in this city was also the cult of *Dionysus* which was the god of wine and joy. Its worshippers looked forward to a joyous afterlife symbolised by the phallus, which represented the male sex organ and life giving power.[12] Some tombs had this symbol which could incite sexual provocation and practice; it could be a background of Paul's admonitions in 1 Thess 4:3–8. Furthermore, in Homer's hymn to Dionysus, the nymphs of Nysa, who became divine women in the cult of Dionysus, attended to and nursed the young Dionysus;[13] they established a loving relationship with this god.

Okeanos was the father of all rivers, brooks, and streams. He and his spouse, Tethys, were the primordial source of life. Tethys was called "the kindly nurse

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9 Gillis Gerleman, "hyh: To live," *TLOT* 1:411. However, Frank Moore Cross, "'El," *TDOT* 1:242, thinks that it was originally a Baal epithet, a god who dies and rises.

10 Edward Pillar, *Resurrection as Anti-Imperial Gospel: 1 Thessalonians 1:9b–10 in Context* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2013), 78–80; Gene L. Green, *The Letters to the Thessalonians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), 31–47.

11 Green, *Thessalonians*, 43.

12 Abraham J. Malherbe, *Paul and the Thessalonians: The Philosophic Tradition of Pastoral Care* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 6.

13 Apostolos N. Athanassakis, *The Homeric Hymns* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), no. 26.

and provider of all things." Paul uses this appellation, especially 'nurse', in 1 Thess 2:7. There were also the cults of Egyptian divinities like Serapis, Isis, Osiris, Aphrodite, Zeus, Asclepius, in addition to the goddess Roma, and Roman benefactors, the emperors.[14]

Conversion from the worship of these deities by those who became Christians was, indeed, good news for Paul (1 Thess 3:9) as he received it from Timothy. Their faith and love, which became an example for all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia (1 Thess 1:8), were also a source of encouragement for Paul and his companions, for they did not labour in vain (1 Thess 2:1). He must have used effective strategies to gain converts in this pagan context that had a variety of gods and beliefs.

3. Paul's Missionary Strategies in Thessalonica

Reading closely 1 Thess, one sees Paul's strengths that engendered the reception of the Gospel in this city and made his addressees exemplars for other believers, imitators of Paul and his companions, and of the Lord (1 Thess 1:6). In 1 Thess 2:1–8, one reads his missionary rule, or what characterises his mission among the Thessalonians.[15] Paul, using some antithetic parallelisms delineated what helped him and his companions achieve their aim in Thessalonica. Usually, an antithesis is the direct opposite, contrast or opposition between two things, ideas expressed by parallelism of strongly contrasted words. The aim is to emphasise the point that the speaker wants to make. In this text, Paul highlights four aspects of his mission: their entrance into the city was not empty-handed but marked by the proclamation of the Gospel (vv. 1–2); their appeal did not arise from impure motives but sought to please God (vv. 3–4); their preaching was neither flattery nor self-promotion but carried the simplicity of children (vv. 5–7); and finally, they offered not only the Gospel but their very lives (v. 8). Together, these elements underscore

14 Karl P. Donfried, *Paul, Thessalonica, and Early Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), 22–38.

15 Richard S. Ascough, *1 and 2 Thessalonians: Encountering the Group at Thessalonike*, Phoenix Guide to the New Testament 13 (Sheffield: Phoenix Press, 2014), 35.

the unique role Paul and his companions played in shaping the Christian life of the recipients.[16] The antitheses in these verses expose "common errors that have destroyed the credibility and effectiveness of many ministers."[17]

However, the *modus operandi* of Paul and his companions was different from many itinerant teachers who interfered with the life of people through undue demands.[18] Paul and his companions shared their life by "forming a relationship that allowed seed sown in the fertile ground of friendship to take root and bear fruit."[19]

In addition to these practical rules of life adapted by Paul and his companions for the sake of the Gospel, they also endeavoured to be self-reliant, working to earn their living so that they would not be a burden to the Thessalonians (1 Thess 2:9). He uses a word pair - κόπος (labour) and μόχθος (toil) - seen also in 2 Thess 3:8 and 2 Cor 11:27 to emphasise the difficult work they did to sustain themselves.[20] In fact, as teachers, they had the right to make demands on their addressees, but they preferred to be selfless.

Living in accordance with the content of one's own words, especially for teachers of faith, is a more effective means of evangelisation than words only. In 1 Thess 2:10, Paul describes his conduct among the Thessalonians as pure, upright and blameless. He affirms that the recipients and God were witnesses of these qualities in him and his companions. This is the second time that he invokes God as a witness (cf. 1 Thess 2:5).

Furthermore, Paul's relationship with the Thessalonians was filial; he and his companions were like fathers to them (1 Thess 2:11). They urged and encouraged them to abide by the tenets of the Gospel (1 Thess 2:12). It was

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16 Karl P. Donfried, "The Theology of 1 Thessalonians," in *The Theology of the Shorter Pauline Letters*, ed. Karl P. Donfried and I. Howard Marshall (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 67–68.

17 Nathan Eubank, *First and Second Thessalonians*, Catholic Commentary on Sacred Scripture (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2019), 58.

18 Ben Witherington III, *1 and 2 Thessalonians: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006), 78.

19 Molly T. Marshall, *1–2 Thessalonians*, Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2022), 37.

20 Jeffrey A. D. Weima, *1–2 Thessalonians*, BECNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014), 149.

a nurturing role typical of fathers, which Paul did among the Thessalonian Christians.[21] Similar paternal care made them solicitous about the faith of the addressees, for he longed to see them again when persecution made him leave the region. His ardent love for them was evident; when he could not go in person to know their condition, he sent Timothy (1 Thess 3:5). The image of a father nurturing the faith of his children is reminiscent of the metaphor of a nurse (1 Thess 2:7) that evokes someone who is beloved, kind, and generous.[22]

4. Religious Background of Southeast Nigeria

A highly enterprising, hardworking, and religious people called Igbo in the southern part of Nigeria are also found today in many parts of the world, where they continue with their outstanding traits. They speak Igbo language which has many dialects. This tribe is one of the major tribes in the country and has the greatest number of Christians with varied denominations.

Before the arrival of Christian missionaries in the 19th century, the Igbo believed in one supreme deity called Chukwu, a name which means the Great God, and it also depicts their understanding of God, who is also called Chineke, that is, the Creator God. According to their understanding, Chukwu does not work alone, he has many agents that work for him, and these agents in the form of deities and spirits are revered. Notable among these is the earth goddess called Ala or Ana; this name also means earth or land. Many of the deities are connected to some localities, towns and villages that honour them. The Igbo also have strong connections with their ancestors, particularly those that lived good lives and left outstanding legacies. They believe that these good forebears are still alive and active in the society. The Igbo invoke them in their prayers and offer libations to them.

Religion permeates every aspect of Igbo culture. Sometimes, it is not easy to see a difference between the people's religion and their way of life. An example

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21 Weima, *1–2 Thessalonians*, 154.

22 Andy Johnson, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, Two Horizons New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2016), 66.

can be cited from their personal names which are predominantly theophoric. Every Igbo name has a meaning connected with the circumstances of the birth of the person, and many of these names express the parents' belief in Chukwu or in some rare cases, their belief in the lesser deities which are agents of this Great Creator God.[23] A newborn child is a gift from God, thus many male and female personal names express gratitude to God who gives the child. Thus, there are Chukwuemeka (God has done it), Chukwudalu (Thanks be to God), and many others. These names are like professions of faith in God.[24] Every aspect of the people's life is about God and expression of faith in the Deity.

Among numerous elements of this religion is reincarnation. The Igbo believe that ancestors can come back to life in members of their immediate or extended families.[25] Signs of this include similar physical features, behaviour and birthmarks. A person who reincarnates an ancestor may be given his/her name, or any other name that is related to the person. Every human being has a personal god, which they call Chi; this guides and determines personal behaviour, strength and weakness.[26] Prayers have an important place in Igbo religion. They pray on various occasions in their lives, and offer kola-nuts and palm-wine to gods and ancestors.[27] They also seek the will of deities through divination, and believe that there are certain trees, rivers and mountains that are sacred because they are the temples of deities.

There are aspects of this religion and culture that are inimical to human rights and dignity. Before the arrival of missionaries, the Igbo considered twins as extraordinary and supernatural, because it was believed that human beings are born single, and each has a personal god. Twins, therefore, are a bad omen

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23 Ifeka J. Onyeocha and Chikelu I. Ezenwafor-Afuecheta, "The Dynamics of Name-Taking in Igbo Society," *Ochendo: An African Journal of Innovative Studies* 2.1 (2021): 319.

24 Scholastica A. Cookey and Patricia N. Anyanwu, "A Panoramic Study of Names in Igbo Society," in *Politics and Identity Formation in Southeastern Nigeria: The Igbo in Perspective*, ed. Apollos O. Nwauwa and Ogechi E. Anyanwu (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2019), 23.

25 Ian Stevenson, "The Belief in Reincarnation among the Igbo of Nigeria," *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 20.1–2 (1985): 13–30.

26 Marcel I. S. Onyibor, "The Role of Chi in Self-Actualization in Traditional Igbo Cosmology," *Nnamdi Azikiwe Journal of Philosophy* 11.1 (2019): 87.

27 Benedict N. Igbokwe, "Prayer in Igbo Cosmology: The Case of Mbieri, Mbaitoli L. G. A., Imo State, Nigeria," *International Journal of Development and Management Review* 7 (2012): 129–144.

and could bring misfortune to their family and society. They are abandoned or eliminated at birth to forestall possible harm. Another human rights challenge is the *osu* caste system whereby an individual is consecrated to a god and he and his descendants have no social contacts again with others who are free-born. They interact, especially in marriage, with persons of the same status.[28]

Igboland proved a particularly receptive context for Christianity when early missionaries arrived, owing to religious beliefs that resonated with Christian faith and practice. The Igbo belief in a Supreme God, a sense of the sacred as the foundation of moral behaviour, and the veneration of ancestors all prepared the people for the reception of the Gospel. Nevertheless, several practices posed considerable challenges to the missionaries. Chief among these was the belief in and worship of deities other than the supreme God, *Chukwu*, alongside the veneration of sacred trees, mountains, and rivers.

5. Early Missionary Strategies

Early Catholic missionaries in Igboland succeeded in their mission, perceptible in the teeming population of Christians and the vibrant expressions of this faith by believers. The present situation of Christianity in Igboland can be attributed to the tenacity of these missionaries who came from very far places of Europe to sow the seed of the Gospel. They left their homeland willingly to respond to the missionary mandate of Christ (cf. Matt 28:19).[29] Many of them arrived in Igboland as very young priests and religious who were inspired by the courage of other missionaries. Usually, missionaries shared their experiences with those in formation to inspire young ones to join in the mission. Their zeal was not deterred by the dangers involved in living in poor and underdeveloped places. They suffered from diseases, especially malaria and related illnesses, hostility from the natives who initially did not receive them, and above all from the challenge of some aspects of traditional religion of the people.[30]

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28 Paulinus C. Ejeh and Patrick Ujah, "The Ethico-Religious Implications of Osu Caste System in Igboland," *Journal of General Studies* 3.2 (2021): 26–34.

29 Valerian M. Okeke, *Our Glorious Heritage: Pastoral Letter* (Onitsha: Trinitas, 2005), 11.

30 Deirdre Bryan, "Joseph Shanahan," *Dictionary of Irish Biography*, https://www.dib.ie/biography/shanahan-joseph-a7992.

The missionaries suffered greatly from language barriers, since they could rarely find someone who spoke their language. They had to use signs at the initial stage of their mission until they were able to learn the local languages and to teach the natives how to read, write and speak English. Local leaders associated them with colonial masters and their exploits; therefore, they approached them with suspicion and aversion. On their own part, the missionaries found it difficult to grasp the culture and social systems of the natives. All these notwithstanding, they were determined to achieve their aim of planting the seed of Christianity, and their missionary strategies were beneficial to all, both the converts and those who decided to continue with their traditional religion.

Conspicuous in their strategies is education which was offered gratuitously to anyone who wanted.[31] They employed all available means to convince parents of the need to allow their children to attend school.[32] For Bishop Shanahan, for instance, "His method was to speak to the chief of each village telling him the advantages of having a school in the village. If the chief were in agreement he would sell the idea to his people, give a piece of land for a school, and labourers to clear the bush and help with the building."[33] Missionaries established schools of various categories. From those educated, they were able to get catechists who would use the local language to convey the faith. Their interpreters came mostly from the beneficiaries of education. Many of the schools they established are still thriving today. A compulsory core subject in schools at that time was Christian doctrine.

The missionaries also planned for the furtherance of their mission. Thus, they established seminaries for the training of future indigenous priests. Some of them also founded religious institutes of both male and female. The aim was to get as many labourers as possible for the mission. When eventually their

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31 Charles Achunike Ebelebe, "Stalwarts of Spiritan African Mission – Bishop Joseph Shanahan, C.S.Sp. (1871–1943)," *Spiritan Horizons* 20 (2023): 63–65, https://dsc.duq.edu/spiritan-horizons/vol20/iss20/8.

32 Joseph O. Okafor, "The Spiritan Contribution to Education in Igboland," *Spiritan Horizons* 9 (2014): 87-97.

33 Brendan Comerford, "Bishop Joseph Shanahan," *The Messenger* (2022), 14, https://www.messenger.ie/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Bishop-Joseph-Shanahan.pdf.

presence came to an end because of government policy, these priests and religious prepared by the missionaries continued the work of evangelisation in Igboland and beyond.

Another strategy they used was to learn the local language, to which they gave a structure for reading and writing.[34] Missionaries contributed immensely to formal development of this language with the help of educated natives. They codified the language and provided Igbo people with a standardised written form of the language.[35] This helped the missionaries in the translation of the Bible and religious books.

Missionaries worked assiduously to abolish practices that are against human rights and dignity. They succeeded in many places to convince the people that twins are a blessing to the family and not a bad omen.[36] The *osu* caste system is minimised in many places, even though traces of it can still be found among the people.

The missionaries gave more than the Good News to the Igbo; they sought means of abating diseases that beset the people. Hence, they taught them how to take care of themselves and invited doctors and nurses from their place to join in their missionary endeavours. Western medicine and public health were made available. Leper colonies, for instance, were established to keep in check the spread of the disease.[37] Clinics and maternity homes were built and equipped. The fruit of their work is evident in many parts of Igboland. However, the recent return to traditional religion, especially by some youth, and syncretism are of great concern to many and calls into question the credibility and effectiveness of current pastoral workers.

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34 Herbert Igboanusi, "Agents of Progress or Problem-Makers? Missionary Activities in the Development of the Igbo Language," *African Study Monographs* 27.4 (2006): 157–168.

35 Chris U. Agbedo, "Linguistic Labours of the Christian Missionaries on the Niger: Implications for Igbo Studies," *Nsukka Journal of the Humanities* 13 (2003): 64–73.

36 Augustine O. Onah, "Mary Mitchell Slessor (1848–1915) and Her Impact on the Missionary Enterprise in the Cross River Region, Nigeria," *Journal / Annals of Humanities and Development Studies* 7.1 (2016): 1–8.

37 Ochiai Takehiko, "Leprosy Control in Colonial Nigeria: A Historical Overview," *Sophia Journal of Asia, Africa, and Middle Eastern Studies* 40 (2022): 1–31.

6. The Present Religious Crises and Lessons from Paul's and Missionaries' Strategies

Passing through Igboland, one perceives some strange edifices surging from long abandoned shrines of gods and goddesses which many have forgotten. Riverbanks and many streams are also littered with strange objects like cloths of various colours. Notably, it is the youth that spearhead these new waves of religiosity.[38] They claim that they want to return to their religious roots and call this new way of religion Neo-Traditionalism.[39] Some of them no longer have interest in Christianity and their absence in some parishes is conspicuous. The Church has been reflecting on this and asking questions; some pastoral workers have re-strategised their method of evangelisation.

Reasons given for Neo-Traditionalism include the quest to reclaim Igbo cultural heritage. Adherents believe that their heritage has been displaced by Christianity. Others no longer find meaning in the Christian faith and they seek another means of satisfying their desire for God. There is a decline in ongoing formation of the youth after their Sacraments of initiation. Some pastoral agents are engaged in other non-pastoral works such that they no longer devote time to teach the Christian faith.[40] Sunday evening instructions, for instance, no longer exist in some parishes. Some youths who have had negative experiences from pastors tend to leave the Church for another denomination or traditional religion. There are others who feel that there are many restrictions in Christianity which do not exist in traditional religion; thus, they opt for a more comfortable place. Pressure from peers contributes to this new movement; youth who are not strong in their faith are easily influenced by others.[41]

Challenges of Neo-Traditionalism emanate mainly from ignorance of the tenets of Igbo Traditional Religion on the part of its current adherents. Many

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38 Chinedu Nwadike, "On the Resurgence of African Traditional Religion," Forum 808 (25 February 2024), 13.

39 Ifeanyi A. Chukwudebelu et al., "Faith and Friction: Christianity and Neo-Traditionalism in Igboland," *Journal of Media Culture and Communication* 4.46 (2024): 9–21.

40 Peter O. Okafor, "Editorial: The Church and the Challenge of Neo-Paganism in South-Eastern Nigeria," *Ministerium* 6 (2020): iii.

41 Data for this information were taken from structured interviews of the youth, their teachers, and parents.

of them understand neither the rudiments of the Christian faith nor of the traditional religion. The results are seen in many crimes being committed against human dignity, evil and unethical rituals, double allegiance, and syncretism.[42]

Strategies employed by Paul and his companions in Thessalonica and by early missionaries in Igboland can be revived to address the current surge of Neo-Traditionalism. It is a task that pastoral agents should take seriously as they carry out their mission in the midst of the people. Paul and his companions, and the early missionaries were focused on their work of evangelisation. Their sole aim was to participate fully in the mission mandate entrusted to the Church. The current shift in the emphasis of pastoral works affects the work of evangelisation today.[43] There is a need to focus more on communicating and strengthening the faith of the faithful.

Paul's missionary rules as delineated in 1 Thess 2:1–8 and other parts of this letter manifest his selflessness. His intention was to communicate the Good News and make sure that it was solidified among his hearers. Early Christian missionaries in Igboland were not different in this zeal for the Gospel. This should be vital in the life of pastoral agents at this time in Igboland. When the self is projected, pastoral work suffers and its consequences are seen in the shallowness of the faith of the faithful. Exemplary life that moved Paul to affirm that the Thessalonians imitated him and his companions is a quality that should guide pastoral agents today. They ought to teach by example of their own faith and life. Witnessing by one's own life has proved more effective than preaching.

Awareness of the signs of the times manifests interest in the people and their context. It is meeting the people where they are and speaking to them in the language of their time. Paul knew the situation in Thessalonica and employed this in his writing; and one would also guess that he adopted the same in his preaching. Early missionaries in Igboland penetrated the interior places of the people, despite the risks involved. Today, the young people have their language and aspirations; there is a need for pastoral agents to be aware of this so as to assist them in the confusion which they are experiencing in their faith.

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42 Chukwudebelu et al., "Faith and Friction," 9–21.
43 Okafor, "Editorial," iv.

7. Conclusion

Cultures are God's gift to humanity, and they are closely linked to the nature of human beings as *homo religiosus* (religious being), who from creation were made in God's image and endowed with the capacity to enter into dialogue with God. The Word of God meets human cultures with the message of salvation. Conversion to the true and living God which is at the heart of the missionary mandate entrusted to the Church is invariably the conversion of negative aspects of cultures. Early Christians proclaimed the Good News in various cultural contexts and endeavoured to re-direct human cultures to God.

Paul and his companions encountered a pluralistic religious culture in Thessalonica and preached the Word of God that bore fruit in the addressees. In southeast Nigeria, early missionaries devotedly encouraged the people to receive the Word. The sustainability of this faith among the people ought to revive the strategies of these missionaries according to the signs of the times.

Therefore, it is recommended that the present pastoral agents in Igboland discover, according to the signs of the times, how to continue the work of evangelisation and re-evangelisation among the people, particularly the youth who are drifting from the Christian faith. The prevalence of the new media in our time has its many advantages and setbacks. Many pastoral agents are already making good use of these innovations. More can be done in meeting the youth where they are with regards to the new media and make it a means of evangelisation.

Furthermore, pastoral agents of our time are encouraged to emulate Paul's selflessness in their mission. Paul gave all he had for the work of evangelisation which he was convinced that he received from God. Early missionaries followed Paul's footsteps in their work. They did not fear the difficulties which they encountered in foreign lands. It is believed that if pastoral agents in our time can work unreservedly for God and humanity, they will make a great impact in addressing the current challenges facing the Christian faith in Igboland.

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TOWARDS HOLISTIC CHRISTIAN IDENTITY: A MISSIONAL READING OF 1 PET 2:4–10 FROM THE ANLO-EWE PERSPECTIVE

Alex-Greats Worlanyo[*]

1. Introduction

Christian identity is an important element in the New Testament (NT) theology of mission, which is often employed by NT writers as a tool for engaging in mission. For example, the first letter of Peter specifically discusses the problem of identity of its original readers as elect of God and its ramification for mission. According to the author, his recipients by virtue of their faith and loyalty to Jesus Christ, have become aliens and foreigners in their contemporary society, and as a result have become subjects of discrimination, marginalisation, suspicion and slander. This is evident in the use of the expression "strangers of the Diaspora" by the writer (1:1, 17; 2:11).[1] In an effort to prevent the situation from triggering disenchantment, discouragement or defection among recipients, this epistle was written to persuade them to remain steadfast and firm in their faith and dedication to "God, Jesus Christ, and one another."[2]

The persuasive argument of the epistle is anchored on the introductory verses of the letter, "becoming a foreigner with respect to society is a consequence of being chosen to participate in the new covenant in Christ."[3] Thus,

* Alex-Greats Worlanyo is a Baptist pastor and an adjunct lecturer of New Testament Studies and Biblical Languages at Southshore University College, Accra (Ghana), and Guidance and Counselling at University of Education, Winneba (Ghana).

1 Frank J. Matera, *New Testament Theology: Exploring Diversity and Unity* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2007), 372; L. D. Thomas and David Alan Black, *The New Testament: Its Background and Message* (Nashville: B&G Publishing Group, 2003), 534.

2 John H. Elliott, *1 Peter,* AB 37 (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 103.

3 Karen H. Jobes, *1 Peter,* BECNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005), 74.

the recipients' estrangement and marginalisation is not a result of sociological or socio-political accident, but a direct consequence of God's eternal election. Therefore, despite their predicament with the society, their election is certain because it is grounded on the unchallengeable and everlasting purpose of the triune God (1:2). The aim is to assist the readers to overcome difficulties that persecution posed to their new identity by redefining the challenges of Christian oppression. To the author, human rejection of his recipients means election in the sight of God.[4]

The researcher, concurring with Gadamer's hermeneutics, believes that the interpretative cycle is not complete until the call to action of a text is contextualised in specific contexts.[5] Against this backdrop, the paper studies how 1 Peter specifically addresses the problem of identity of its audiences as God's elect in light of the Anlo-Ewe Christianity. The choice of the context is suggested by the alleged strong spiritual identity of the people called Anlo-Ewes. As part of the larger African society, the Anlo-Ewes are highly religious and see religion as the very essence of society.[6] The question then is, in what ways can the Anlo-Ewe Christian rightly integrate these 'distinct' identities in his/her existence?

The paper employs the Communicative Approach to African Biblical hermeneutics as its interpretative framework. It consists of three steps: exegesis of the text; exegesis of the reality and engagement of the text and the reality.[7]

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4 Martin Williams, *The Doctrine of Salvation in the First Letter of Peter* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 61.

5 Gadamer's theory of hermeneutics suggests that the construction of textual meaning is the result of dialogue between the text and the reader that transforms both. See Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd ed. (New York: Crossroad, 1990), 101–121, 293–326.

6 Ted Nelson-Adjakpey, *The Faith of Our Fathers: From Tradition to Christ* (Roma: Tipografia Olimpia, 2008), 69–70; John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Heinemann Educational Publishers, 1989), 106.

7 George Ossom-Batsa, "African Interpretation of the Bible in Communicative Perspectives," *Ghana Bulletin of Theology* 2 (2007): 91–104; Nicoletta Gatti, "Toward a 'Dialogic' Hermeneutic: Reading Gen 4:1–16 with Akan Eyes," *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 39.1 (2017): 46–67.

2. Exegesis of the Text: 1 Pet 2:4–10

To understand 1 Pet 2:4–10, the paper briefly examines the literary unit 1 Pet 1:1–12 considered as the overture of the letter.[8] It basically discusses the identity of a minority community and its ramifications for mission. As such, the missionary community is the Petrine recipients designated as people of God dispersed across Asia Minor. The author assures his recipients of their divine election to partake in the new covenant in Christ though the society treats them as foreigners (1:1). According to the writer, the new identity emanates from the rebirth of the addressees (1:3), through the gracious action of the triune God (1:2–3).[9]

Verses 3–5 discuss the salvation of his audience with three-fold benefits that they enjoy as a result of God's abundant mercy and renewing action.[10] The benefits include living hope (v. 3), imperishable inheritance (v. 4), and a salvation ready to be revealed in the time to come (v. 5). Being the recipients of this divine action, the audience have become a community of elect of God called to partake in the mission of God by proclaiming the gospel and 'becoming' the gospel they preached (1:12).[11] Reminding them of who they are, the writer employed some metaphors and honorific labels. The attempt to understand these metaphors and honorific titles from the author's perspective forms the basis for the rhetorical analysis of 1 Pet 2:4–10.

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8 The literary unit is described as the overture of 1 Peter because it introduces themes that form the basis of the entire discourse contained in the letter. See Alex-Greats Worlanyo, "Holistic Mission in the Petrine Letters and Its Implication to the Ghana Baptist Convention" (PhD thesis, University of Ghana, Legon, 2024), 70.

9 Williams, *The Doctrine of Salvation*, 149; Duane F. Watson and Terrance Callan, *First and Second Peter*, ed. Mikeal C. Parsons and Charles H. Talbert (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2012), 11; Reinhard Feldmeier, *The First Letter of Peter: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, trans. Peter H. Davids (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2008), 30; Craig S. Keener, *1 Peter: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2021), 95.

10 Williams, *The Doctrine of Salvation*, 149; Watson and Callan, *First and Second Peter*, 23.

11 Wayne A. Grudem, *The First Epistle of Peter*, TNTC (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1988), 101; Peter H. Davids, *The First Epistle of Peter*, NICNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990), 88; Leonhard Goppelt, *Commentary on 1 Peter*, ed. Ferdinand Hahn, trans. John E. Alsup (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1993, 142; Bertil Gärtner, *The Temple and the Community in Qumran and the New Testament: A Comparative Study in the Temple Symbolism of the Qumran Texts and the New Testament*, Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965), 47, 49.

2.1 A Description of the People of God (1 Pet 2:4–10)

The idea of believers' election that emerges in the preliminary verses (1:1–2) is now expatiated in 2:4–10 as divine election of Christians (2:5, 9–10) linked with the prior election of Christ by God (2:4, 6; cf. 1:20). Furthermore, titles previously applied to ancient Israel as chosen people of God are now used to describe believers in Asia Minor. Therefore, it is appropriate to assume that the segment asserts the character of Christians as the new covenant people of God.[12]

Starting with a plea, "Come to him, a living stone" (2:4a), the writer transforms the metaphor of Christ as nursing mother (2:2–3) into Christ as a stone.[13] The verse is deemed as a reference to OT passages that used the term stone understood not as the natural stone, but the one dressed for building (cf. Isa 28:16; 8:14; Ps 118:22). It is significant to note that in early Christology the stone metaphor was used in allusion to the Messiah (cf. Acts 4:8–12; Rom 9:30–33; Eph 2:19–2).[14] Petrine usage, however, is considered distinct from all the OT texts because of the use of the adjective ζῶντα (1 Pet 1:3; living). According to Keener, it not only distinguishes this stone from the literal, lifeless type, but also relates it with the *living* hope (ἐλπίδα ζῶσαν; 1:3), God's *living* message (λόγου ζῶντος; 1:23), and in particular the resurrection of Christ (2:24; cf. 4:6).[15]

Intriguingly, Christ the true God and the living Messiah is rejected by humans (2:4b). Making inference from Ps 118:22, the verb ἀποδοκιμάζω (rejected) is not employed in relation to the Jewish nation or their religious leaders as construed by the writers of the synoptic gospels and Acts (cf. Mark 12:10–12// Matt 21:42–46// Luke 20:17–19; Acts 4:8–12), but to humanity. Using the perfect tense shows that the rejection of Christ did not end at the crucifixion but continued to the time of persecution of his community.[16]

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12 Keener, *1 Peter*, 291.

13 Watson and Callan, *First and Second Peter*, 47.

14 Williams, *The Doctrine of Salvation*, 62; Watson and Callan, *First and Second Peter*, 47.

15 Keener, *1 Peter*, 291. The word λίθος is used elsewhere in the NT to denote a lifeless thing in comparison with God (Acts 17:29), Abraham's descendants (Matt 3:9 = Luke 3:8), or humans who praise God (Luke 19:40). Also, in the OT the phrase is used in reference to "gods of wood and stone" made by humans contrary to the living God who is the Creator of all (Deut 4:28; 28:36, 64; 29:17; 2 Kgs 19:18; Isa 37:19; Jer 3:9; Ezek 20:32). See also Watson and Callan, *First and Second Peter*, 47.

16 Williams, *The Doctrine of Salvation*, 64; Watson and Callan, *First and Second Peter*, 47.

Again, the Christ who is rejected by humans is chosen and precious in the sight of God (2:4c; cf. Isa 28:16).[17] The portrayal of the stone in vv. 6–7 relative to the cornerstone implies that it is dressed and valued for building. Hence, before the foundation of the world, Christ was chosen (1:20) as the prepared stone valuable in the 'redemptive building' (2:4–10).[18]

The building metaphor in v. 5 elucidates the place of the addressees: "you yourselves like living stones are being built up" (2:5a). Here, the audience are addressed as living stones due to the new life they now share, as a consequence of the gift of Christ's resurrection from the dead (1:3, 21; 3:7, 18).[19] While the verb οἰκοδομεῖσθε could be construed as middle imperative ('build yourselves'), the present passive indicative ('being built') is preferred; the builder is God who chooses Jesus Christ as the cornerstone (v. 6), and forms a holy priesthood that functions as this spiritual house (vv. 5, 9).[20] This reading compares 'spiritual house' to 'living stones,' not as the object of building, as it is, for instance, implied by the New Revised Standard Version, which has "built into a spiritual house." Rather, the understanding "reflects the case of spiritual house (nominative, not accusative). In any case, a spiritual house (οἶκος πνευματικὸς) is a community of believers where the Spirit of God dwells. It is the Spirit who sanctifies the believers (1:2) and rests upon them (4:14)."[21]

Comparing verses 2:9 and 4:17, οἶκος πνευματικὸς has recently been interpreted as God's household.[22] However, the linguistic background of this verse alludes to a sacrificial system, suggesting that 'spiritual house' indicates the

17 J. Ramsey Michaels, *1 Peter*, WBC (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1988), 99. The two adjectives chosen (ἐκλεκτός) and precious (ἔντιμος) allude to Isa 28:16.

18 Elliot, *1 Peter*, 410–11.

19 Keener, *1 Peter*, 292.

20 Watson and Callan, *First and Second Peter*, 48.

21 Watson and Callan, *First and Second Peter*, 48.

22 John H. Elliott, *A Home for the Homeless: A Social-Scientific Criticism of 1 Peter, Its Situation and Strategy, with a New Introduction* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), 167–70, 200–237; Elliott, *1 Peter*, 415–18. In the OT, house is sometimes used in reference to the Jerusalem temple (2 Chr 36:23; Ps 69:9; Isa 56:7), and the verb "build" (οἰκοδομέω) relates to the building of the temple (2 Sam 7:5–6; 1 Kgs 8:27; Isa 66:1). Likewise, house in the NT can refer to the temple of God (John 2:16; Acts 7:47–50), and believers are often designated as the new temple (1 Cor 3:16–17; 6:19; 2 Cor 6:16; Eph 2:19–22; Rev 3:12; 11:1).

temple,[23] as the reference to priesthood and sacrifices and the designation of the community as a priestly people (v. 9) suggest.[24]

In the course of being built into a spiritual house, the Petrine addressees have become a holy priesthood called to offer acceptable spiritual sacrifices to God (2:5c). In Exod 19:6, God made a covenant with Israel on Mount Sinai to be "a priestly kingdom and a holy nation." This was restated in Isa 61:6, where Israel was designated as "holy priesthood" because the entire nation was to serve as priests of God towards the nations, and in 1 Peter where its audience are chosen to offer spiritual sacrifices (πνευματικὰς θυσίας, cf. 2:9).[25]

It is important to note, nevertheless, that the form of spiritual sacrifice remains unspecified.[26] The metaphor of sacrifice in the OT has many nuances such as prayer, thanksgiving and a remorseful heart (Pss 50:13–14, 23; 51:17; 141:2; cf. 69:30–31; Isa 1:11–17). In the context of Jewish thought, sacrifice can also imply pure hearts, love, and good works (Hos 6:6; Sir 35:1–5; 2). Likewise, the word sacrifice is employed by some NT writers to describe some spiritual offerings. Some examples include:

> Rom 12:1 (offer your bodies as 'living sacrifices'), Rom 15:16 (Paul's priestly service of the gospel and the offering of Gentiles sanctified to be acceptable to God), Phil 2:17 (Paul's life as a libation on their faith), Phil. 4:18 (a monetary gift described as a fragrant offering), 2 Tim 4:6 (possible martyrdom described as a drink offering), Heb 13:15–16 (a sacrifice of praise, pictured as worship, doing good, and the sharing of possessions), Rev 8:3, 4 (the prayers of the saints as incense), Acts 10:4 (prayers and alms as a memorial before God), and Eph 5:2 (Christ's self-sacrifice as a fragrant offering).[27]

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23 Paul J. Achtemeier, *1 Peter*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 158–59; Ernest Best, *1 Peter*, NCB (London: Oliphants; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1971), 282.

24 Watson and Callan, *First and Second Peter*, 49.

25 Watson and Callan, *First and Second Peter*, 49.

26 Peter H. Davids, *1 Peter*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990), 88-89; John H. Elliott, *The Elect and the Holy: An Exegetical Examination of 1 Peter 2:4–10 and the Phrase 'Basileion Hierateuma,'* NovTSup 12 (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2006), 153–54, 175; Elliott, *1 Peter*, 422.

27 Achtemeier, *1 Peter*, 157.

This shows that the portrayal of Christian service and self-giving as a sacrifice is not unique to Pauline writing but a widely known tradition in the NT.[28] It affirms the view that the community addressed in 1 Peter might be aware of the tradition, and that "any offering of prayer or self-giving, or a general disposition of self-offering, could be counted as spiritual sacrifice."[29] In 1 Peter's perspective, spiritual sacrifices relate to the communal actions of the real readers, and they include holy behaviour (1:15–16), good deeds (3:6, 10–13), brotherly affection (1:22), and uprightness (2:24). These spiritual offerings are "acceptable to God through Jesus Christ" (2:5d), the only mediator between God and humankind (1:3, 21; 3:21; 4:11) and the pivotal part of God's redemptive work (2:4, 6–8).[30]

The allusion to Isa 28:16 in v. 6 explicates the purpose behind the call to come to the living stone and share in the building of the spiritual house as living stones: "Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious, and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame." The verse aims to establish that the change the recipients underwent is true and grounded on God's promise. The addition of the dative αὐτῷ (in him) positions Christ as the object of the recipients' faith (living stones) and Christ (the living stone) is in a relationship, where the promise of honour is based on the believers' union with Christ, the chosen and precious cornerstone in the sight of God.[31]

In verses 7–8, persons who have no trusting relationship with Christ—the rejected stone—are fated to shame, but individuals who believe in him are honoured: "So the honour is for you who believe, but for those who do not believe, 'the stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone,' and 'A stone of stumbling, and a rock of offence.' They stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do" (vv. 7–8).[32]

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28 NT books such as Revelation, Acts and Hebrews contain examples of Christian service and self-giving as sacrifice.

29 Charles Bigg, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on The Epistles of St. Peter and St. Jude*, International Critical Commentary, 2ed. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1902), 129.

30 Watson and Callan, *First and Second Peter*, 49.

31 Karen H. Jobes, *1 Peter*, BECNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005), 152–153; Watson and Callan, *First and Second Peter*, 49–50; Francis W. Beare, *The First Epistle of Peter: The Greek Text with Introduction and Notes*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1970), 99; Feldmeier, *1 Peter*, 132.

32 Keener, *1 Peter*, 297.

Again, Christ is seen as the dressed stone as well as the stumbling stone (vv. 4–7). In Isaiah, the verse alludes to God becoming a rock of offence to Israel but in 1 Peter, Christ is this stone of stumbling to all who do not believe. The reading of the quotation in vv. 7–8a is now employed in that, "They stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do" (2:8b). The ἀπειθοῦντες (disobey), interpreted as 'not believing' (v. 7), refers to τῷ λόγῳ (word) that is, the gospel proclaimed to them (1:25).[33] Here, the 'word' is perceived as the object of the verb 'disobey.' This interpretation is considered apposite because it mirrors how the verb 'disobey' is used in 1 Peter as "disobey the word" (3:1); "disobey the good news" (4:17), wherein the use of the complementary topic of obedience with an object, "obey Jesus Christ" (1:2) and obedience to the truth (1:22) are similar.[34]

The challenge is not disobedience itself but disobedience of the word (v. 4, 7). Because they disobeyed (rejected) the gospel preached to them, the non-believers have not been born again (1:23–25) and have not come to the living stone to be built into a spiritual house. As a result, the cornerstone has become a stumbling block, because of which they tripped for not obeying the word, as they are expected to do (2:8c).[35] Those who trust in the stone by recognising its matchless value, will be honoured when the Lord exalts it. Likewise, those who reject the cornerstone as valueless will be shamed when it is exalted.[36]

The new community of believers created through the union with Christ, the living stone, is now described in 2:9f with honorific titles that emphasise the new status as a God-chosen community. These designations are derived from two OT texts: Exod 19:6, the background of the covenant at Mount Sinai, and Isa 43:20–21, the renewal of this covenant.[37] The appellation thus starts with "But you are a chosen people" (γένος ἐκλεκτόν, 2:9a), where the phrase, chosen people or race, drawn from Isa 43:20, is positioned first in the

33 Feldmeier, *1 Peter*, 138; Watson and Callan, *First and Second Peter*, 49.
34 Watson and Callan, *First and Second Peter*, 51.
35 Watson and Callan, *First and Second Peter*, 51.
36 Keener, *1 Peter*, 297.
37 Albert Vanhoye, *Old Testament Priests and the New Priest: According to the New Testament* (Paris: Nouvelle Alliance, 2002), 250; Feldmeier, *1 Peter*, 132; Watson and Callan, *First and Second Peter*, 51.

list of the honorific titles that underscores the importance the author places on God's election of the Christian community (vv. 7b–8).[38] The Greek term γένος ("descendant, family, nation, people") evokes the idea of individuals sharing a common lineage, specifically the progeny of Abraham. However, in contrast to the interpretation of *Isaiah 43*, common ancestry is not what determines one's inclusion in the "chosen race" of God. Rather, it is election (1:1–3; 2:5, 9; 5:13), new birth (1:3, 23), and faith (1:5, 7, 9, 21; 2:6, 7) that define membership in this community.[39]

In the list of the honorific epithets after "chosen people" are the pairs βασίλειον ἱεράτευμα ("a royal priesthood") and ἔθνος ἅγιον ("a holy nation") taken from Exod 19:6, where they were originally applied to ancient Israel.[40] Relating Exod 19:6 to 1 Pet 2:9, Vanhoye notes that the promise contained in Exodus was conditional and its fulfilment is subject to the obedience and faithfulness of the people to the covenant. Because they were unable to obey the terms of the covenant, God offered another promise in Hos 2:23 which is a converse of the one in Exod 19:6: "And I will sow her for myself in the land. And I will have mercy on No Mercy, and I will say to Not My People, 'You are my people'; and he shall say, 'You are my God.'" 1 Peter 2:9 announces the fulfilment of this prophecy: the new condition that enables previously inadequate persons to undertake the hallowed duty of priestly service to God in faith. This change in condition also entails a change in the beneficiaries of the promise. While in Exodus the promise is restricted to ancient Israel, it is later, in 1 Peter, extended to all who believe in Christ. Similarly, most interpreters understand the function of ἱεράτευμα in a collective or communal sense, thereby implying the entire Christian community.[41] The expression βασίλειον ἱεράτευμα (a royal priesthood) signifies "the Christian community as a body of priests in the service of God their 'king' to whom they now owe their allegiance as his people."[42]

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38 Gerald Bray, ed., *James, 1–2 Peter, 1–3 John, Jude*, ACCSNT 11 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000), 87–88.

39 Williams, *The Doctrine of Salvation*, 73; Watson and Callan, *First and Second Peter*, 51.

40 Vanhoye, *Old Testament Priests*, 253; Williams, *The Doctrine of Salvation*, 73; Watson and Callan, *First and Second Peter*, 51.

41 Vanhoye, *Old Testament Priests*, 254–255.

42 Achtemeier, *1 Peter*, 165.

The third syntagm ἔθνος ἅγιον ("a holy nation") is analogous to what preceded, relative to the background of Exodus and 1 Peter. The word ἅγιον insinuates the covenant community sanctification unto God as holy people and their parting away from everything unholy (1:14–15).[43] There is a blend of the idea of election and holiness in this verse (ἐκλεκτόν [v. 9a], ἅγιον [v. 9c]) in 1:1–2, where the real readers are addressed as ἐκλεκτοῖς… κατὰ πρόγνωσιν θεοῦ πατρὸς ἐν ἁγιασμῷ πνεύματος.[44]

The final syntagm employed in describing the Christian community is λαὸς εἰς περιποίησιν ("a people for God's own possession"). The description could be construed as "a people for saving" referring to the futuristic concept of salvation contained in 1 Peter 1:5; 2:2.[45] This understanding, however, is not in conformity with the other three titles employed for Israel and in describing the new status of Christians in the sight of God.[46]Another view sees the word περιποίησιν (2:9) in the passive sense and hence translates it as "having been acquired, possessed," in which God is the inferred subject (cf. Eph 1:14). Therefore, the expression λαὸς εἰς περιποίησιν ("a people for God's special possession") has a strong relation with Exod 19:5, Isa 43:21 (both texts are already quoted in this verse) and perhaps Mal 3:17 where it refers to the OT notion that people saved by God are his possession.[47]

The paper, more so, is of the view that the latter interpretation of the syntagm λαὸς εἰς περιποίησιν is in harmony with the reading of the other three honorific titles employed in the verse. For instance, the expression 'royal priesthood' is understood as reference to God's elect community as priests of God. Thus, this last designation is used to describe the chosen community as God's special possession.

In v. 9e, the addressees are told the essence of their new identity: "that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his

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43 Keener, *1 Peter*, 300.
44 Williams, *The Doctrine of Salvation*, 74; Watson and Callan, *First and Second Peter*, 51.
45 Michaels, *1 Peter*, 109–110.
46 Watson and Callan, *First and Second Peter*, 51.
47 Harold W. Hoehner, *Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2002), 244.

marvellous light." This purpose partly resonates with Isa 43:21, where Israel's purpose as God's chosen people is to proclaim his greatness or praise.[48] This suggests that worship constitutes "a partial explanation of the 'spiritual sacrifices' mentioned in 2:5 and that 'declaring His Praise' is equivalent to 'glorifying God' (2:12; 4:11, 14, 16)."[49]

One of the proofs of God's power is the calling of the addressees from darkness into light. The calling depicts a different dimension of being chosen (1:15; 5:10); it can either refer to final salvation, as in this context, or to a certain holy conduct that must accompany God's calling (2:21; 3:9).[50] Though testimony of God's power is basically construed in terms of word and worship, it should also be understood in the context of conduct or works that glorify God (2:12) and positively impact the larger community (2:11–5:11).[51]

The final allusion to God's mercy is aimed at explaining how those who hitherto were not a people of God have now become God's chosen people. The statement is targeted at the recipients who are predominantly of pagan origin and whose admission into the community of the elect is credited to God's great mercy (1:3).[52] First Peter 2:10 makes reference to the names of the second and third children of Hosea—'Not-shown-mercy' and 'Not-my-people'—that represent the relationship between God and Israel (Hos 1:6, 9).[53] Subsequently, Israel obtained mercy and became "Children of the living God" (Hos 2:1) and "My People" (2:25); likewise, the addressees hitherto were not a people and without mercy but now they are the people of God, God's special possession (v. 9) with mercy.[54]

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48 Keener, *1 Peter*, 303. The Greek term ἐξαγγέλλω (declare) is employed in the LXX for declaring the works and praises of God in worship (e.g., Ps 70:15; 72:28; 106:22).
49 Watson and Callan, *First and Second Peter*, 51–52.
50 Feldmeier, *1 Peter*, 141
51 Feldmeier, *1 Peter*, 142.
52 Feldmeier, *1 Peter*, 142.
53 Keener, *1 Peter*, 304.
54 Watson and Callan, *First and Second Peter*, 52.

2.2 Theological Synthesis

This segment examines the Petrine writer's understanding of the word ψυχή (soul) in the syntagm "salvation of souls" (1:9, 22; 2:11, 25; 3:20; 4:19), the axiom employed to describe the Christian experience of his audience. There are two main scholarly thoughts about how the word 'soul' in 1 Peter could be interpreted, and these are Hellenistic dualism and Hebrew thought of personal unity.[55]

Some biblical scholars like Feldmeier[56] and Jacob[57] believe that the syntagm σωτηρίαν ψυχῶν is drawn from the Hellenistic philosophy where the word 'soul' is understood as the spiritual part distinct from the body. Arguing from this angle, the scholars strongly disagree with those who reject any correlation between 1 Peter and the Hellenistic tradition. They contend that 1 Peter is likely to have been influenced by Hellenistic Judaism—a tradition that is historically closer to the writer than the OT tradition, that conceptualises "soul as the innermost centre and 'higher self' of the human being, perhaps similar to 'the hidden person of the heart' (3:4)."[58]

The second view of humankind relies on the OT understanding of soul, and thus rendered the word ψυχή not as the essential 'component' of a person but a person's essence or self-identity.[59] In contrast to the Hellenistic dichotomic view of personhood that promotes social disengagement, the OT sees the human person as one unit whose identity is defined by society.[60] According to Vito, Gen 2:7 serves as the starting point for discourse on Hebrew psychology, especially on the matter of personal unity: "The Lord God fashioned the man out of the dust of the ground and blew into his nostrils the breath of life, and so the man became a living being (הָיְתָה נֶפֶשׁ)." So, if נֶפֶשׁ is translated as 'soul' then

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55 Hans Walter Wolff and F. Press, *Anthropology of the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1974), 11. The word ψυχή occurs 755 times in the OT and in some 600 instances the Septuagint translates it as *psyche*.

56 Feldmeier, *1 Peter*, 87.

57 Edmond Jacob, "ψυχή," *TDNT* 9:611.

58 Feldmeier, *1 Peter*, 87; Edmond Jacob, "ψυχή," *TDNT* 9:611.

59 Watson and Callan, *First and Second Peter*, 27.

60 Robert A. Di Vito, "Old Testament Anthropology and the Construction of Personal Identity," *CBQ* 61 (1999): 225.

the word cannot be construed along the traditional lines, as a soul infusing a body. In Hebrew thought, there is no dichotomy between soul and body; God brings into existence a complete human being as a living creature.[61]

In 1 Peter, the soul is portrayed as saved from suffering and death by a rebirth experience in Christ for an imperishable inheritance (1:3–4; cf. 5:4).[62] In order to establish a relationship between the use of the word in 1 Peter and the OT, Stone relates 1 Peter's σωτηρίαν ψυχῶν ("salvation of your souls") to ψυχὴν ζῶσαν ("living soul"— הָיָה שָׁפָנְל) in Gen 2:7. He asserts that the concept of soul employed by the Petrine author is drawn from the OT and not from the Hellenistic tradition. He, therefore, perceives soul in the context of 1 Peter as in reference to the entire human being consisting of the soul and body.[63]

This paper concurs with his view; 1 Peter's usage of the expression should be construed as the salvation of the entire human being and not a reference to the spiritual part distinct from the body. This conviction is based on two reasons. The first is that 1 Peter constantly quotes or alludes to OT texts and employs several words, syntagms, clauses and concepts drawn from the OT tradition to describe its recipients. Some of these expressions include elect strangers and visiting foreigners (1:1); chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own possession (2:9), people of God, people of mercy (2:10). On the basis that the syntagm 'salvation of souls' was used in the same literary context, the paper believes it is better construed in the context of the OT tradition than the Greek thought.

Secondly, the allusion to ψυχὴν ζῶσαν (living being - Gen 2:7; 1 Pet 1:9) as the background to 'salvation of souls' supports the interpretation of 'soul' as 'entire person' and not the 'spiritual part' of a person. From this perspective, humans share the life of God. Εἰς ψυχὴν ζῶσαν (Gen 2:7) is the translation of

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61 Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1–11* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984), 206–7; James Barr, *The Garden of Eden and the Hope of Immortality* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 38–40; Wolff and Press, *Anthropology of the Old Testament*, 11.

62 Watson and Callan, *First and Second Peter*, 27.

63 Lawson G. Stone, "The Soul: Possession, Part, or Person? The Genesis of Human Nature in Genesis 2:7," in *What About the Soul? Neuroscience and Christian Anthropology*, ed. Joel B. Green (Nashville: Abingdon, 2004), 47–61.

נֶפֶשׁ and נָפַשׁ means 'person.' In the first creation narrative, this 'person' is described as an image of God (Gen 1:26) capable of representing God as steward of his creation (1:27–28). Interpreting the two creation accounts together, the 'soul' is construed as the complete person whose life is defined in four-dimensional relationship: relationship with God, self, others and non-human creation. In view of this, mission in the context of 1 Peter is considered holistic because it positively impacts these four ontological relationships. But to what extent does the reading of the text relate to the identity of the human person and the mission of the contemporary Church? The study of reality explores this issue.

3. Exegesis of the Reality: The Concept of Personhood in Anlo-Ewe Cosmology

In the awareness that the interpretative process is incomplete until the text is contextualised in a definite context,[64] the Anlo-Ewe context is selected as the dialogical partner for appropriation of the text.

Prior to the nineteenth century, the peoples called Ewes in West Africa were united as one of the powerful pre-colonial African states. They were later divided into smaller units due to compartmentalisation of Africa into multi-ethnic modern nation-states by their colonisers. Presently, Ewe-speaking people in West Africa are located along the River Volta in modern Ghana and the River Mono on the western borders of the ancient kingdom of Dahomey (now Benin). The Ewes, therefore, occupy south-eastern Ghana, southern Togo and Benin, and south-western Nigeria in the fishing communities of Gbadagri (Badagri). Ghanaian Ewes occupying two of Ghana's administrative regions, called the Volta and Oti Regions respectively, settled at their present location around the 16th century after their escape from Notsie.[65] The Anlo-Ewe is one of the divisions of Ewe people of the Volta Region.[66]

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64 Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 101–121, 293–326.

65 Gordwin Kwaku Nukunya, "The Land and the People," in *A Handbook of Eweland*, ed. Francis Agbodeka (Accra: Woeli Publishing Services, 1997), 1:8.

66 Nukunya, "The Land and the People," 8–9; see also the "Scramble for Africa" and European territorial claims and their impact on the Ewe people at the Berlin Conference (1884).

Review of scholarly literature on traditional African worldview reveals that Africans, including Ewes in general, conceive God as a Supreme Being who created the entire universe out of nothing, and is the source of all beings. [67] Besides, Ewes envision God as being immanent because He is "manifested in natural objects and phenomena, and they can turn to Him in acts of worship, at any place and any time."[68] From this view, the Ewe conception of God can neither be described as monotheistic nor pluralistic but rather manifests the characteristics of both.[69]

The Anlo-Ewe perception of personhood focuses on the metaphysical-ontological evaluation of constituents of the individual. This metaphysical-ontological examination stipulates a combination of both physical and non-physical (spiritual) elements at the basis of human nature. Anlo-Ewes have comprehensive but often conflicting concepts about the constituents of the human person.[70] According to Gbolonyo, human, *ame*/*agbagbetɔ* (living one/thing) consists of three components, soul (*luwɔ̄*), spirit-breath (*gbɔgbɔ* or *ameaŋutɔ*), and body (*ŋutilã*) composing the triality of a person. Every human being (agbagbetɔ) "is believed to have been sent by *Mawu*/*Se*/*Bomenɔ* (God/Law-giver/Mother of Bome, the place or origin of life) into the world of the living (*kodzogbe*) for a particular purpose. Gbolonyo maintains that after fulfilling his or her mission in this world, a person rejoins the ancestors in eternity, *tsiefe*."[71]

The soul (*luwɔ̄*) forms the being or the essence of an individual person and constitutes the personality of an individual. This accounts for the reasons why

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67 Justice S. K. Gbolonyo, "Indigenous Knowledge and Cultural Values in Ewe Musical Practice: Their Traditional Roles and Places in Modern Society" (PhD diss., University of Pittsburgh, 2009), 70.

68 Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 43.

69 Kwame Gyekye, *An Essay on African Philosophical Thoughts: The Akan Conceptual Scheme*, rev. ed. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995), 197.

70 Gbolonyo, "Indigenous Knowledge," 229.

71 Komi Ahiatroga Hiagbe, *Reconciled to Reconcile: An African View of John Calvin's Doctrine of Salvation* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2008), 117. It is important to note that *ame* does not only refer to a living being but also to a deceased. During burial and funeral rites, the deceased is variously referred to as *miafe ame* (our person); *wokɔ amea gbɔnae* (the person is being brought); *wo le amea dim* (the person is being buried).

researchers such as Hiagbe refer to it as the "personality-soul."[72] Gbolonyo, on the other hand, sees *luwɔ̄* as the embodiment and transmitter of the person's destiny/fate (*dzɔgbese*), whose presence together with *gbɔgbɔ* (spirit) in the body means life (*agbe*). Likewise, the departure of both the soul and the spirit-breath from the body constitutes the death of the person. Therefore, the Anlo-Ewe expressions such as *gbɔgbɔ tsí* ("the breath has stopped"), *gbɔgbɔ dzó* ("the spirit is gone"), and *luwɔ̄ dzó* ("the soul is gone") are all construed as "the person is dead." Again, *luwɔ̄ dzó* can also be translated as the final departure of the *luwɔ̄* forty days after the death of a person.[73]

The spirit-breath (*gbɔgbɔ*) in the Anlo-Ewe philosophical perception of the human person represents the activating principle needed for a person to be alive. From this view, the soul and spirit form the two essential metaphysical realities in an individual person. Furthermore, the spirit-breath "causes the soul to breathe and is the divine bit or the spark of the Supreme Being in every human being."[74] The spirit-breath is also referred to as the perceptible expression of the presence of the soul.[75]

The body (*ŋutilã*) constitutes the material component of the human person. In Anlo-Ewe cosmology, it is believed that neither the soul nor the spirit-breath perishes with the body when a person dies. Unlike the body that decays into the earth, the soul and spirit-breath, perceived as metaphysical entities, desert the physical body at death; and the spirit-breath returns to *Mawu* and the soul to other ancestors in *tsiefe*. It is important to note that while the soul and the spirit-breath can exist without the body in *tsiefe*, the body cannot exist without the two metaphysical entities.[76]

From this view, the Anlo-Ewe perceive the soul as the actual human person (*ameaŋutɔ*) and the spirit world as the ultimate home of every human person. It is believed that every human being, prior to their birth into this material

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72 Hiagbe, *Reconciled to Reconcile*, 118.
73 Gbolonyo, "Indigenous Knowledge," 231.
74 Gbolonyo, "Indigenous Knowledge," 231.
75 Gbolonyo, "Indigenous Knowledge," 231.
76 Gbolonyo "Indigenous Knowledge," 231

world, lived a life in a pre-earthly spirit world. According to Hiagbe, an individual's successful material existence is a measure of how much one's earthly life reflects his or her pre-earthly existence. At death, the soul returns to the spirit world where it originates from; and may come back to the material world time and again through reincarnation. From this view, a person's material existence is perceived as occasional visits from the spirit world, his or her true home, to the physical world generally deemed as his or her temporary home. This explains why the expression *afee wò yi* ('he/she has gone home') is used when a person dies at old age.[77]

While Gbolonyo describes the composition of the human person as a triality of being—soul, spirit-breath and body,[78] Hiagbe, on the other hand, subscribes to the Platonic dualism of the human person as body and soul. In this view, it is reasonable to contend that though Hiagbe sees soul and spirit as distinct, they are fundamentally one because together they form the immaterial or metaphysical constituent of the human person. In his view, the soul (luw̃ɔ) determines the quality of life of a person on earth. For him, in times of intense emotional upheavals—sorrow or joy—it is the soul that is at the receiving end, and the material component of the person only mirrors the moods of the soul. Even at death, the soul continues to exist in the spirit world where it continues to play an active part in the activities of the living and is capable of being reborn as a child into a family. Hiagbe further adds that Anlo-Ewes believe that the soul has a physical component which only becomes apparent after a person dies.[79]

On the other hand, the triality of the human person is parallel to the three levels of existence in the life journey or cycle of every person. In this light, life for the Anlo-Ewes begins at *amedzɔfe* or *bome* (human origin), literally construed as place of human creation and continues through *kodzogbe* (earth) into *tsiefe* (eternity).[80]

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77 Hiagbe, *Reconciled to Reconcile*, 119.
78 Gbolonyo, "Indigenous Knowledge," 233.
79 Hiagbe, *Reconciled to Reconcile*, 119.
80 Gbolonyo, "Indigenous Knowledge," 232.

In the Anlo-Ewe cosmology, personhood (*ame*) is not defined by individual autonomy but by relationships. A common adage, *ame le ame me* ('a person is a person through others'), captures the notion that personhood is attained in community.[81] Birth, thus, initiates one into a web of kinship (tɔxome), lineage, and communal obligations. To be a person is to belong, participate, and contribute to the life of the community.[82]

Anlo-Ewe personhood also has a spiritual dimension. Each person is assumed to have a divine purpose or calling (*dzodzedze*) that must be discovered and accomplished. The scope of this vocation is not limited to religious roles but covers all aspects of life, including leadership, artistry, and service. As expected, society plays a major role in assisting individuals to discern and nurture this calling, reinforcing the idea that identity is both given and developed.

Furthermore, Anlo-Ewe culture integrates sacred mediation and leadership. For instance, *fia* (king) exemplifies communal identity and mediates divine blessings, whereas *hunɔ* (priest) facilitates communication between the divine and human realms.[83] These functions epitomise the communal nature of identity: leaders and priests exist for the people, and their identities are inextricable from their communal roles.

4. Engagement of the Text and the Reality

This section discusses how the face-to-face encounter between the text and culture discloses parallels, contrasts and challenges[84] the Anlo-Ewe Christian faces with regard to their identity.

Firstly, Peter's metaphor of Christians as "living stones" built into a "spiritual house" (vv. 4–5) resonates with the Anlo-Ewe notion of personhood as relational and communal. Just as a single stone cannot form a building, no

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81 D. E. K. Amenumey, *The Ewe in Pre-Colonial Times: A Political History with Special Emphasis on Anlo, Ge and Krepi* (Accra: Woeli Publishing Services, 1997), 14.
82 Amenumey, *Ewe*, 14.
83 Amenumey, *Ewe*, 35.
84 Gatti, "Dialogic Hermeneutics," 46–67.

individual can exist without the community (*tɔxome*). The Christian community is an interactive organisation, each member contributing to the whole and finding fulfilment within the collective.[85]

Secondly, the idea of a "royal priesthood" (v. 9) finds natural resemblance with the Anlo-Ewe amalgamation of kingship (*fiawo*) and priesthood (*hunɔwo*). Just as these leaders mediate divine favour and symbolise communal identity, so the church mediates God's presence and exemplifies God's reign in the world. Christian identity, therefore, includes representing God's justice, mercy, and peace in society.[86]

Thirdly, Peter's portrayal of the church as a "holy nation" mirrors the Anlo-Ewe comprehension of *dzodzedze* — a sacred vocation. Holiness connotes uniqueness and purposefulness. Christians are consecrated not for privilege but for mission: to proclaim God's mighty acts and personify God's character in the world.[87]

Fourthly, the missional import of v. 9 — "that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him…" —is greatly compatible with the Anlo-Ewe emphasis on communal responsibility. Personhood is achieved not only in belonging but in service. A Christian identity moulded by Anlo-Ewe personhood invites believers to serve their communities, uphold social justice, care for creation, and bear witness to the transforming grace of God in all aspects of life.[88]

Lastly, reality's communal vision of a person challenges Western individualistic understandings of identity and invites the church to adopt a holistic, embodied, and missional identity that resonates profoundly with African contexts such as the Anlo-Ewe.

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85 Joel B. Green, *1 Peter*, Two Horizons New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007), 119.

86 Kwame Bediako, *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1995), 112.

87 Kevin J. Vanhoozer et al., eds., *Theological Interpretation of the New Testament: A Book-by-Book Survey* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005), 309.

88 John S. Pobee, *Toward an African Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1979), 84.

5. Conclusion

First Peter 2:4–10 presents a rich vision of Christian identity as communal, sacred, and missional. Read from the Anlo-Ewe perspective of personhood, this identity becomes clearer and contextual. Anlo-Ewe concepts like *ame* (personhood), *tɔxome* (communal belonging), *fiawo* and *hunɔwo* (royal-priestly roles), and *dzodzedze* (sacred vocation) illuminate the text's vision of a people called by God to embody and proclaim God's redemptive work.

This holistic approach reorientates Christian identity from a theoretical theological realm to a lived reality—grounded in community, shaped by vocation, and driven by mission. In a fragmented world, this vision invites the church to become a transformative presence, embodying God's purposes and bearing witness to God's redemptive light.

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FAITH AND CULTURE IN CONFLICT: IDENTITY CRISIS IN REV 2:12–17 AND IN CONTEMPORARY GHANAIAN CHRISTIANITY

Nelson Mawuli Zotoo[*]

1. Introduction

The tension between faith and culture has been a central issue in Christian theology, ecclesiology and discipleship from the earliest days of the church to the present.[1] Accordingly, the disciples of Jesus have often faced competing allegiances: on one hand, fidelity to Christ, and on the other, conformity to societal norms.[2] Such conflicts have historically led to identity crisis within Christian communities. This phenomenon is clearly depicted in the book of Revelation, and the messages to the seven churches in chapters two and three are instructive examples, revealing both the internal conflicts within early Christian communities and the external pressures that shaped their witness.[3] They demonstrate the struggles the Christian communities faced while navigating the complex demands of imperial religion and civic loyalty.[4] Specifically, the message to the church in Pergamum (2:12–17) places believers within a context described as the dwelling place of Satan, a metaphor for a city where imperial cults, pagan rituals, and social expectations demanded loyalty that often contradicted Christian confession and practice.[5] While the believers in Pergamum are commended for remaining faithful to Christ's name, even

* Nelson Mawuli Zotoo resides in Richmond, Virginia (USA). He is currently pursuing a Master of Divinity at Reformed Theological Seminary in Washington, DC, and serves as a Seminary Fellow at City Church of Richmond (PCA).

1 Soegianto, "The Relationship between the Gospel and Culture: A Theological Analysis and Social Perspective in a Contemporary Context," *Theological Journal Kerugma* 7.2 (2024): 84, doi:10.33856/kerugma.v7i2.428.

2 Soegianto, "The Relationship," 85.

3 Elaine Pagels, *Revelations: Visions, Prophecy, and Politics in the Book of Revelation* (New York: Penguin Books, 2013), 47.

4 Michael Naylor, "The Roman Imperial Cult and Revelation," *Currents in Biblical Research* 8.2 (2010): 207–239.

5 Colin J. Hemer, *Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia in their Local Setting* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1987), 85–99.

in the face of martyrdom, they are also reproved for tolerating teachings and practices that compromised the exclusivity of Christian identity.[6] This passage highlights the tension between cultural adaptation and theological fidelity, between conforming to societal norms and remaining faithful to the Risen Lord.

This theme resonates deeply with the Ghanaian church, which continues to search for a balance between cultural identity and Christian distinctiveness. Ghanaian Christians grapple with the challenging demands of their cultural heritage, new expressions of the Christian faith, and the pressures of globalisation, all of which compete with their commitment to unwavering faith in Jesus Christ.[7] Although Ghanaian Christianity has integrated cultural expressions into worship, theology, and social life,[8] there are ongoing areas of divergence between Christian perspectives and some indigenous beliefs and practices, demonstrating that such traditions do not fall outside the purview of critical theological scrutiny.[9] For example, should a Christian participate in pouring libations to the gods and ancestors during festivals and funerals? Therefore, Ghanaian Christians often find themselves at a crossroads, torn between affirming their faith in Christ and maintaining cultural ties that sometimes conflict with biblical principles. The spread of the prosperity gospel in Ghana has also influenced Christian identity by introducing a transactional faith and encouraging greed.[10] Further, the influence of Western perspectives such as individualism, moral relativism, and liberal attitudes on sexuality, gender, and family presents new challenges, reshaping the understanding of what it means to be Christian in Ghana today.

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6 Adela Yarbro Collins, *Crisis and Catharsis: The Power of the Apocalypse* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1984), 81–83.

7 Kwame Bediako, *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1995), 97–100.

8 Bediako, *Christianity in Africa*, 110–115, 221–224.

9 Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2009), 33–36, 200–205.

10 Isaac Boaheng, Clement Amoako, and Samuel Boahen, "A Critique of Prosperity Theology in the Context of Ghanaian Christianity," *E-Journal of Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences* 4.11 (2023): 1356–1367.

The issue of identity crisis in Ghana is important because 71.3% of Ghanaians identify themselves as Christians.[11] The churches in Ghana have played a vital role in nation-building by supporting education, healthcare, moral growth, and fostering peace and stability in the country.[12] Despite these positive contributions, Ghana faces social and environmental problems such as bribery and corruption,[13] "galamsey,"[14] teenage pregnancy,[15] and apathy toward work[16] which create the impression that there is a disconnect between the massive penetration of Christianity and its actual impact on Ghanaian society. The impact a church has on society depends on a clear understanding of its identity, which invariably affects mission.[17] Therefore, for the Ghanaian church to make a meaningful positive impact on the Ghanaian society, it must develop a strong biblical identity.

This paper examines the identity crisis in the Pergamum church through an exegetical and theological analysis of Rev 2:12–17, highlighting its relevance for contemporary Christianity in Ghana. It posits that this text presents a crucial paradigm for understanding the dynamics between faith and culture amidst conflict, revealing how compromised identities emerge when Christian communities accommodate socio-religious pressures. The study demonstrates that the church's encounter with syncretism in Pergamum mirrors the identity struggles faced by Ghanaian Christianity, where traditional

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11 Ghana Statistical Service, *General Report 3C: Background Characteristics. Ghana 2021 Population and Housing Census* (Accra: Ghana Statistical Service, November 2021), https://www.statsghana.gov.gh/.

12 John Kwaku Opoku, Eric Manu, and Frimpong Wiafe, "Religion and Development in Ghana: A Historical Perspective," *Global Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences* 3.12 (December 2015): 6.

13 Anthony Q. Q. Aboagye, "Corruption in Ghana: Evidence, Analysis of Corporate Procedures and Suggestions to Minimise its Incidence," *Review of Human Factor Studies* 11.1 (2005): 35.

14 Kwame Ameyaw Domfeh, Albert Ahenkan, and Justice Nyigmah Bawole, "Is Sustainable Development Achievable in Ghana? An Analysis of Ghana's Development Policy Achievements and Challenges," *International Journal of Environment and Sustainable Development* 11.3 (2012): 306.

15 Bright O. Ahinkorah et al., "Linking Female Adolescents' Knowledge, Attitudes and Use of Contraceptives to Adolescent Pregnancy in Ghana: A Baseline Data for Developing Sexuality Education Programmes," *Healthcare* 9.3 (2021): 2, doi:10.3390/healthcare9030272.

16 Anthony Sumnaya Kumasey, Justice Nyigmah Bawole, and Farhad Hossain, "Organizational Commitment of Public Service Employees in Ghana: Do Codes of Ethics Matter?" *International Review of Administrative Sciences* 83.1 (2017): 60.

17 Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, "The Church's Religious Identity and its Social and Political Mission," *Theological Studies* 43.2 (1982): 197.

beliefs, modern influences, and biblical faith often lead to divided loyalties. As a result, the church must focus on raising committed and convinced followers of Jesus through Christ-centred preaching and discipleship. The research employs the Communicative Approach to African Biblical Hermeneutics, which underscores adherence to the biblical text, the call to action within the Scripture, and the interpretative context of the reader.[18]

The paper is divided into three primary sections: (1) exegesis of the biblical text, (2) exegesis of reality (Ghanaian Christianity), and (3) interaction between the text and reality. The text was analysed using rhetorical criticism to determine the perlocutionary effect of the passage on the original audience. Two key informants from various Christian traditions (Mainline Church, Charismatic Church, Classical Pentecostal Church, and an Interdenominational Church) were interviewed to explore the struggles they face in reconciling their faith with culture. Finally, there was an engagement between the text and reality, aiming for mutual transformation by analysing how Rev 2:12–17 challenges and empowers Ghanaian Christians to embody their faith amidst conflicting worldviews.

2. Exegesis of Revelation 2:12–17

2.1 Introduction

This section presents the exegetical analysis of the text following the six steps outlined by Kennedy: the Rhetorical Situation, the determination of the Rhetorical Unit, the Rhetorical Problem, the Rhetorical Species, the Rhetorical Structure of the text, and an analysis of the different structural elements of the text.[19] The exegetical analysis is summarised theologically.

18 George Ossom-Batsa, "African Interpretation of the Bible in Communicative Perspectives," *Ghana Bulletin of Theology* 2 (2007): 91–104; Nicoletta Gatti, "Toward a 'Dialogic' Hermeneutic: Reading Gen 4:1–16 with Akan Eyes," *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 39.1 (2017): 46–67.

19 Gonzalo Rojas-Flores, "The Book of Revelation and the First Years of Nero's Reign," *Biblica* 85.3 (2004): 375, https://www.jstor.org/stable/42614530.

2.2 Historical Situation

Although the book of Revelation identifies explicitly its author as "John" (cf. 1:1, 4, 9), different scholars hold unique perspectives on his identity. While some scholars assert that he was the apostle of Jesus Christ and the author of the fourth gospel,[20] others hold that he was an elder in the early church.[21] Furthermore, some others still think 'John' is a pseudonym for an unknown figure because of the literary genre of the book.[22]

These hypotheses notwithstanding, there is a fourth view that maintains that the identity of the author must be ascertained mainly from the book itself: the author introduced himself as John (1:1, 4, 9); he was a Christian prophet (1:3; 22:18–19) who was active among the prophets in Asia Minor (22:9–10). He is also acquainted with the Jewish Scriptures because he quotes or alludes to them 500 times in 440 verses and has knowledge of Hebrew (9:11; 16:16). Furthermore, he does not compromise regarding eating food sacrificed to Greco-Roman deities (2:14, 20).

The book of Revelation was written to specific Christian communities located in Asia Minor (cf. 1:4; 2:1, 8, 12). Internal evidence suggests that the Christian communities were constituted by people from different ethnicities (5:9; 7:9), both Jews and Gentiles even though the Gentiles were the majority.[23] Although Koester argues that the book is best situated between 80-100 CE,[24] several commentators date it more precisely to the latter years of the reign of the Roman Emperor Domitian (81-96 CE).[25] In this period, Asia Minor was colonised by Rome and thus marked by imperial rule,[26] and emperor worship.[27]

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20 Hugo Méndez, "Did the Johannine Community Exist?" *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 42.3 (2020): 360–366, doi:10.1177/0142064X19890490.

21 Méndez, "Did the Johannine Community Exist?" 360–366.

22 Paul J. Achtemeier, Joel B. Green, and Marianne Meye Thompson, *Introducing the New Testament: Its Literature and Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), 585.

23 Craig R. Koester, *Revelation: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Yale Bible 38A (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 87.

24 Koester, *Revelation*, 79.

25 Achtemeier, Green, and Thompson, *Introducing the New Testament*, 572.

26 Simon R. F. Price, *Rituals and Power: The Roman Imperial Cult in Asia Minor* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 250–65.

27 Mark Allan Powell, *Introducing the New Testament: A Historical, Literary and Theological Survey* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), 532.

2.3 Rhetorical Unit

The literary unit is part of a larger section, Rev 2:1–3:22, which consists of messages written to seven churches in Asia Minor. Many scholars agree that this section forms a single literary unit because of the numerous literary features that make it unique. The messages include stereotypical elements that distinguish it from other sections of the book.[28] These elements include an address, a self-presentation of the Risen Lord, a judgment section, an exhortation, an appeal to listen to the Spirit, and a promise.[29] The author distinguishes the messages to the churches in different communities: Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea. In the address section, the author repeats the phrase "to the angel of the church in Ephesus write" in all seven messages (2:8a, 12a, 18a; 3:1a, 7a, 14a). The only variation is the name of the city where each Christian community is located. Additionally, the author inserts an 'and' at the beginning of the second message through the last one, indicating a continuation of the messages, with the final one being the message to the church in Laodicea (3:14a). The reference to the specific community in the address section of each message distinguishes it from the others, confirming that the message to Pergamum is a separate literary unit within the larger section.

2.4 Rhetorical Problem

The message to the church in Pergamum was written to address two main issues. The first is the problem of persecution and suffering resulting from the presence of the imperial cult.[30] Thus, the author writes to offer comfort, assurance, and consolation for the Christian communities. Second, the author writes to elicit faithfulness to God in a Hellenistic-Roman world that is characterised by false teaching, laxness, and syncretism.[31] Accordingly, he calls them to a life of witness devoid of the accommodation of Roman culture.

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28 David E. Aune, "The Form and Function of the Proclamations to the Seven Churches," *New Testament Studies* 36.2 (1990): 184.

29 Aune, "The Form and Function," 184.

30 Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 279.

31 Achtemeier, Green, and Thompson, *Introducing the New Testament*, 565.

2.5 Rhetorical Species

The message to Pergamum is deliberative in nature. The use of deliberative rhetoric seeks to guide the congregations addressed to take courses of action in their immediate or near-immediate futures.[32] The writing style of the messages to Pergamum also shows significant similarities with epideictic rhetoric. When a speaker or writer aims to persuade their audience to adopt or reaffirm a particular point of view, such as when they praise or criticise a person or quality, epideictic rhetoric is employed.[33]

2.6 The Rhetorical Structure of the Text

Scholars have argued that the seven messages, including the one to the church in Pergamum, follow a similar structural pattern. Aune posits that they have eight stereotypical features.[34] They are "the *adscriptio*, the command to write, the τάδε λέγει (thus says) formula, the Christological predications, the οἶδα (I know) clause, the *dispositio,* the proclamation formula, and the promise of victory."[35] Muse, however, proposed that the messages have five main parts which he identified as stylistic features. They are "addressee greeting, *graphon* (write) imperative, message formula, body of the message (including knowledge formular, statement of praise and or blame, encouragement and or warning) and conclusion (including exhortation to listen and a promise)."[36] Biguzzi proposed that the messages have six main parts: address, self-presentation of the Risen Lord, judgment, exhortation, appeal to listen to the Spirit, and promise.[37] The paper follows the structure suggested by Biguzzi because it is based on literary evidence. As a result, the text will be analysed using a six-part structure.

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32 John T. Kirby, "The Rhetorical Situations of Revelation 1–3," *New Testament Studies* 34.2 (1988): 200.
33 George A. Kennedy, *New Testament Interpretation through Rhetorical Criticism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984), 20.
34 Aune, "The Form and Function," 184.
35 Aune, "The Form and Function," 184.
36 Robert L. Muse, "Revelation 2–3: A Critical Analysis of the Seven Prophetic Messages," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 29.2 (1986): 149.
37 Giancarlo Biguzzi, *Apocalisse: nuova versione, introduzione e commento*, I libri biblici: Nuovo Testamento 20 (Milano: Paoline, 2005), 91–92.

2.7 Analysis of Revelation 2:12–17

Address (2:12a)

The address to the church in Pergamum opens with reference to its "angel." Augustine identified the term as *res obscurissima*, underscoring its interpretive difficulty.[38] Traditional readings have understood the angel as a celestial being, noting that elsewhere in Revelation the word consistently designates spiritual agents (cf. 4:11; 8:2; 12:7, 9).[39] Others suggest the angel symbolises the heavenly counterpart of the earthly church, reflecting a Hellenistic view where terrestrial realities mirror the divine realm.[40] A further line of interpretation regards the angel as the human leader of the community.[41] More recent scholarship, however, views the term as a rhetorical strategy. The author rebukes the 'angel' by using the second-person singular, while shifting to plural forms when commending the congregation, thus reproving the church without direct humiliation.

Situated about seventy miles north of Smyrna, Pergamum rose to prominence in the third century BCE as a military fortress and later developed into a leading political, intellectual, and religious centre of the Roman province of Asia.[42] Renowned for its vast library and temples, the city was dedicated to deities such as Zeus, Athena, Dionysus, and Asclepius.[43] Significantly, Pergamum was the first city to establish a temple for the living emperor Augustus in 29 CE,[44] earning the title *neōkoros* as guardian of the imperial cult.[45] Because emperor worship was tied to civic loyalty and patriotism, Christians who refused to participate were often labelled as rebellious and faced persecution.[46]

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38 Biguzzi, *Apocalisse*, 95.
39 Koester, *Revelation*, 249; Osborne, *Revelation*, 99–100.
40 Charles Homer Giblin, *The Book of Revelation: The Open Book of Prophecy* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1991), 49–50.
41 Robert L. Thomas, *Revelation 1–7: An Exegetical Commentary* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1992), 116–118; Everett Ferguson, "Angels of the Churches in Revelation 1–3: Status Quaestionis and Another Proposal," *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 21.3 (2011): 385.
42 Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation*, BECNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2002), 118.
43 Osborne, *Revelation,* 118.
44 Osborne, *Revelation,* 118.
45 Gerhard A. Krodel, *Revelation*, Augsburg Commentary on the New Testament (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1989), 114.
46 Krodel, *Revelation*, 114.

The Risen Lord instructed John to write to the community in Pergamum. The use of the aorist imperative, coupled with its emphatic position, makes the order urgent,[47] authoritative, and emphatic.[48] Moreover, the command to write presents the church as an entity under the authority of the Risen Lord.

Self-Presentation of the Risen Lord (2:12b)

The Risen Lord is introduced as the one "who has the sharp two-edged sword" (cf. 2:16), an image signifying absolute authority. Ramsay interprets this as a deliberate contrast with the Roman officials stationed in Pergamum, whose authority derived from imperial power.[49] Others, such as Moyise, link the imagery to Isa 11:4, emphasising its judicial function and portraying Christ as the bearer of universal judgment.[50] Swete similarly highlights both its judicial and martial dimensions, suggesting a figure who defeats enemies and pronounces judgment.[51] Thus, Christ presents himself as the divine judge whose authority supersedes all earthly powers. For the Pergamum church, this meant accountability to Christ alone, whose judgment would expose compromises such as adherence to the teaching of Balaam. At the same time, the imagery assured the persecuted community that ultimate authority rests not with imperial Rome but with the Risen Lord.

Judgement (2:13–15)

The speaker proceeds to pronounce judgement on the church. The judgement includes both praise and indictment, a rhetorical strategy designed to encourage perseverance and warn against compromise. The message begins with affirmation, expressed through the knowledge formula: "I know where you live." The verb οἶδα (to know) conveys intuitive and complete knowledge,[52]

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47 David Alan Black, *Learn to Read New Testament Greek* (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2009), 219.
48 Osborne, *Revelation*, 99.
49 William M. Ramsay, *The Letters to the Seven Churches* (Minneapolis: James Family, 1978), 157.
50 Steve Moyise, *The Old Testament in the Book of Revelation*, JSNTSup 115 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 31.
51 Henry Barclay Swete, *The Apocalypse of St. John* 3rd ed. (London: Macmillan, 1911), 18.
52 F. Wilbur Gingrich, *Shorter Lexicon of the Greek New Testament*, 2nd ed. (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 136.

distinct from γινώσκω (to know), which denotes progressive understanding.[53] It translates the Hebrew עָנָי, often used to describe intimate or covenantal knowledge (Jer 1:5; Exod 3:7). Thus, the Risen Lord's knowledge of the community is not fragmentary; he knows their overall manner of life.[54] Consequently, the Lord demonstrates not only awareness but also compassionate knowledge of the church's context.

The speaker acknowledges their faithfulness amid a hostile environment, described as the dwelling place of Satan and the location of his "throne" (2:13).[55] While some scholars suggest this phrase refers broadly to the idolatrous shrines of Pergamum,[56] a more persuasive interpretation identifies it with the imperial cult,[57] which was responsible for persecuting the believers under Domitian and Trajan (cf. 13, 17).[58] The martyrdom of Antipas illustrates the deadly consequences of resisting such demands for political and religious conformity. Despite this, the community is commended for holding fast to Christ's name and refusing to renounce their faith.

The rebuke, however, highlights their tolerance of false teaching. The phrase "I have a few things against you" (2:14) introduces the charge that some adhere to the teachings of Balaam and the Nicolaitans.[59] The use of κρατέω (to hold firmly) underscores the seriousness of their commitment to these practices.[60] The relationship between the 'Balaamites' and the Nicolaitans has been debated. Thomas views them as related but distinct groups,[61] while Osborne maintains that the text equates the Nicolaitans with the Balaam tradition, drawing on the biblical narrative in which Balaam led Israel into idolatry

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53 Thomas, *Revelation 1–7*, 133.

54 Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, NICNT, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 75.

55 The verb κατοικέω means to inhabit, live, reside, or settle and hence indicates that the place is not transitory but their home. As a result, both the church in Pergamum and Satan permanently inhabited the same place. The text further notes that the throne of Satan is located in Pergamum. Thrones signify special authority and royal governance in the ancient world, and hence Pergamum is portrayed as the seat of satanic power. Cf. Gingrich, *Shorter Lexicon*, 160; Osborne, *Revelation*, 120.

56 Osborne, *Revelation*, 120.

57 Osborne, *Revelation*, 120.

58 Osborne, *Revelation*, 120.

59 Osborne, *Revelation*, 122.

60 Gingrich, *Shorter Lexicon*, 113.

61 Thomas, *Revelation 1–7*, 193.

and immorality (Num 25:1–2; 31:16).[62] Osborne's view is more convincing because in v. 14, the text focuses primarily on the teaching of Balaam as a historical event; it identifies Balaam, Balak, the Sons of Israel, and the teaching of Balaam. Therefore, the most coherent reading is that the Nicolaitan group represents a contemporary manifestation whose practices the author intentionally parallels with the historical teaching of Balaam in the Torah.

The text reveals that Balaam taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel; the language connotes leading a person into sin.[63] The sins identified, eating food sacrificed to idols and engaging in sexual immorality, reflect both cultic and ethical compromise. The parallel with the message to Thyatira (2:20) indicates that these practices were widespread but locally nuanced: in Pergamum, the imperial cult magnified the problem of idolatry, whereas in Thyatira the economic guilds exacerbated sexual immorality.[64] The verb πορνεύω denotes either literal immorality or metaphorical unfaithfulness, echoing the prophetic imagery of Israel's spiritual adultery (Hos 2; Isa 57).[65] However, in this context as in 2:20, its mention with 'idolatry' stresses literal promiscuity; the false teachers taught their followers to practice both idolatry and immorality. The church is, therefore, called to distinctiveness in both worship and conduct. To compromise with the imperial cult and its attendant practices may have offered social and economic security, but it threatened spiritual integrity and faithfulness to Christ. The choice was stark: faithfulness, even unto martyrdom, or apostasy masked as cultural accommodation.

Exhortation (2:16)

The speaker exhorts the church to repent, employing an aorist imperative that conveys both urgency and decisiveness, specifically commanding the cessation of the Nicolaitan practices.[66] The exhortation is introduced by the conjunction 'therefore,' linking it directly to the preceding judgment (vv. 14–15).

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62 Osborne, *Revelation*, 122.
63 Osborne, *Revelation*, 122.
64 Hemer, *The Letters*, 91.
65 Osborne, *Revelation*, 122.
66 Black, *Learn to Read*, 38.

Failure to repent will provoke the Risen Lord to come against the community with "the sword of his mouth," a metaphorical expression of divine judgment.[67] The use of the futuristic present tense, combined with 'soon,' emphasises the imminence of this intervention. The verb πολεμέω evokes the Old Testament motif of the divine warrior (Ps 136:2; Isa 11:4; 49:2; 62:2–3; Dan 2:17; Joel 3:13), while the phrases "the sword of my mouth" (v. 16) and "the two-edged sword" (v. 12) convey the same theme of authoritative judgment.[68] Implicit in this exhortation is hope: the text assumes that those who have erred can turn and embrace steadfastness, reflecting a prophetic confidence in the church's capacity for renewal.

Promise (2:17b)

The message concludes with the promise that the one who conquers will receive "some of the hidden manna" and a "white stone." Manna is the miraculous food provided to Israel in the wilderness (Exod 16:4; Neh 9:15), which ceased upon entering the Promised Land (Josh 5:12), though a portion was preserved in the tabernacle (Exod 16:32–34). In this context, it alludes to a legend which states that manna was hidden at Mount Horeb by Jeremiah after the destruction of Solomon's temple, awaiting the eschaton when the Messiah would restore it in the new temple.[69] It symbolises participation in the Messianic feast and the eternal enjoyment promised in heaven.[70]

The "white stone" likely derives from Greco-Roman practice, where stones granted access to guild feasts, athletic games, or privileges.[71] The stone in Revelation bears a new name known only to its recipient, suggesting a private designation rather than God's name, which would be universally known. In biblical tradition, names convey character and mission: Emmanuel signifies God's presence amid crisis (Isa 7:14), Abraham denotes "father of a multitude"

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67 Gingrich, *Shorter Lexicon*, 133.
68 Gingrich, *Shorter Lexicon*, 133.
69 Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 84.
70 David E. Aune, *Revelation 1–5*, WBC 52A (Dallas: Word Books, 1997), 185.
71 Osborne, *Revelation*, 124.

(Gen 17:4–6), and Samson signifies strength (Judg 13:24).[72] Similarly, the new name in Pergamum symbolises a transformed identity and a divine calling, inviting the faithful to embody the character and mission of the Risen Lord.

2.8 Theological Synthesis: Identity Crisis in Rev 2:12–17

Jesus Christ is Sovereign over Rival Cultures

In Rev 2:12, the Risen Lord is described as the one "who has the sharp two-edged sword," an image symbolising ultimate authority. This creates a clear contrast between Christ's sovereignty and the authority of local imperial powers, emphasising that the church is ultimately answerable to God rather than human institutions. The imagery illustrates that Christian faithfulness is judged not by conforming to cultural norms but by steadfast allegiance to divine authority, providing a model for Christian conduct in environments influenced by cultural pressure.

Christ's Relational Awareness of the Church

Christ's intimate and complete knowledge of the church is expressed in the use of the verb οἶδα. This divine insight situates the church within its cultural and social context, affirming the faithful while recognising its faults. It highlights the pastoral nature of divine judgment: rebuke is not arbitrary but based on deep understanding, providing correction without damaging community morale.

Cultural Accommodation and the Christian Faith

The warning against the teachings of Balaam and the Nicolaitans (vv. 14–15) reveals the dangers of syncretism, where cultural practices such as idolatry and sexual immorality threaten the integrity of faith. The teachings represent ethical and religious compromises made for social or economic advantage, illustrating the tension between cultural conformity and Christian distinctive-

72 Blaženka Scheuer, "Animal Names for Hebrew Bible Female Prophets," *Literature & Theology* 31.4 (2017): 457, doi:10.1093/litthe/frx032.

ness. This affirms that the church's identity is maintained through deliberate rejection of values that contradict the Christian worldview.

The Call to Repentance and Hope for Renewal

The exhortation to "repent" (v. 16) demonstrates the tension between divine judgment and grace. The imperative is urgent, yet it presumes the possibility of transformation, emphasising that the unfaithful can return to God. This underscores the fact that repentance and renewal are always possible, reflecting God's commitment to restoration and the restoration of ecclesial identity.

Eschatological Blessings for Perseverance

The promise of hidden manna and a white stone (v. 17) serves as dual symbols of divine provision and future identity. Together, these images demonstrate that perseverance under cultural pressure is not just about moral discipline but carries future significance, connecting present faithfulness to future rewards and God's renewal of Christian identity.

3. Identity Crises in Contemporary Ghanaian Christianity

3.1 Introduction

To explore the conflict between faith and culture in contemporary Ghanaian Christianity, eight participants were interviewed, with two each drawn from four church traditions: Mainline, Charismatic, Classical Pentecostal, and Interdenominational. Participants were purposely selected for their insider positions within their respective churches, enabling them to provide contextually grounded perspectives on how culture and Christianity intersect in practice. Although the number of participants was limited, their diversity ensured sufficient breadth to illuminate the study's focus. Data were collected using a semi-structured interview guide and analysed through qualitative content analysis, which identified and summarised the main issues raised, supported by excerpts from participants. The findings are presented thematically across key areas of conflict and convergence identified in the interviews.

3.2 Convergence and Tensions between Christianity and African Traditional Religion

The relationship between contemporary Ghanaian Christianity and African Traditional Religion (ATR) reflects both areas of convergence and deep tensions that often generate identity struggles for Christians. A notable area of alignment concerned the communal consciousness shared by both traditions. Participants observed that Christianity in Ghana has retained a sense of togetherness and collective responsibility that resonates with ATR's emphasis on community. As one respondent explained, "We have always lived as a community. Everyone shares in the joys and struggles of others, and the church continues this same spirit."

In contrast, significant contradictions emerged around rituals and sacrifices. ATR relies heavily on sacrificial practices to appease spirits, which participants described as difficult to reconcile with biblical teachings on the sufficiency of Christ's sacrifice. As one participant reflected, "When I go home for festivals and funerals, my family expects me to take part in the libation, but I feel I am betraying my faith if I do." These overlapping alignments and contradictions illustrate how contemporary Ghanaian Christianity is lived out in constant negotiation with ATR, producing complex identity tensions that require theological and pastoral reflection.

3.3 The Issue of Morality

Another area of tension is the issue of morality, particularly bribery, corruption, and sexual immorality. Although Christianity emphasises holiness and integrity, participants acknowledged the pervasive culture of corruption as a continuing challenge. One informant remarked, "When you go to some offices and if you do not pay something small, you will not get anything done. But in church, we are told it is a sin. It is hard to live honestly." This illustrates the dissonance between the Christian call to righteousness and the systemic entrenchment of bribery in public life. Similar concerns were raised about sexual immorality, which participants described as shaped by modern influences such as social media. One participant noted, "Our pastors preach purity, but

everywhere you go, there is pressure to compromise; friends, social media, even in some relationships in the church." These accounts highlight the ongoing moral conflict faced by Christians, who seek to live by biblical standards while navigating cultural and structural pressures.

3.4 Prosperity Gospel

Although most participants emphasised that their own congregations do not explicitly preach the Prosperity Gospel, they acknowledged its pervasive influence within Ghanaian Christianity. Some noted that they had visited churches where prosperity messages were central, while others described friends who strongly embraced such teachings. This suggests that even when individuals or churches reject prosperity doctrines, they remain influenced by their wider cultural and theological presence. Participants observed that the Prosperity Gospel often promotes greed, individualism, and a transactional view of God, subtly shaping the expectations of believers and communities. As one respondent explained, "My church does not preach prosperity, but when I visit other churches, everything is about sowing seeds to get blessings." Another added, "I know friends who believe that if you are poor, you are not a real Christian. This teaching is still a big problem in Ghana."

These reflections demonstrate that the Prosperity Gospel contributes to Christian immaturity and a weakened sense of eternal perspective, as it redefines faith around material acquisition rather than spiritual transformation. Even when resisted within congregations, its broader presence fosters identity confusion and undermines the integrity of Christian witness in Ghana.

3.5 Global Culture and Ghanaian Christianity

Participants expressed concern about the growing influence of global cultural trends on Ghanaian Christianity, particularly in areas of dress, fashion, and sexuality. A common issue raised was indecent dressing within the church. One respondent mentioned, "The problem is not the beads or the clothes themselves, but how they are now used to draw attention to the body in ways that promote sensuality." Some participants described how young women in-

tentionally wore stomach beads with short dresses so that the beads would remain visible, thereby accentuating parts of the body considered provocative. Such practices were interpreted as reflecting the influence of global cultural ideals that equate self-expression with bodily exposure. Another participant explained, "Fashion today pushes our youth to see exposure as confidence, but for us it conflicts with the Christian call to modesty and self-control."

Beyond clothing and fashion, participants also expressed concerns about LGBTQ+ identities and discourses surrounding sexuality. For some, the increasing visibility of global narratives was seen as a direct challenge to biblical teachings. One interviewee stated, "It is not just about dressing; the world now tells us that alternative sexual lifestyles are normal, and some Christians have believed it." Another added, "What we see on social media influences the youth. They are pressured to accept what the Bible clearly warns against."

These reflections show how global cultural influences, whether in fashion or sexual identity, are perceived by participants as destabilising forces. For them, these influences require both theological discernment and ethical clarity for the church to respond faithfully to the pressures of a globalised culture.

4. Engagement Between Text and Reality

Rev 2:12–17 provides a compelling framework for engaging the problem of identity crises in Ghanaian Christianity, especially as believers negotiate the tension between faith and cultural forces. The church in Pergamum lived "where Satan's throne is" (v. 13), a context where pervasive pagan practices, imperial cults, and social pressures constantly tested loyalty to Christ. This mirrors the situation in Ghana, where Christians often struggle to reconcile their faith commitments with elements of traditional religion, global cultural influences, and socio-economic pressures that threaten authentic Christian identity.

First, the text highlights faithfulness in hostile contexts. The believers in Pergamum are commended for holding fast to Christ's name despite their hostile environment. For Ghanaian Christians, this emphasises the importance of having a rooted identity in Christ that does not compromise with corrupt prac-

tices like bribery, immorality, or the transactional logic of prosperity preaching. Christian identity should be shaped more by allegiance to Christ than by cultural expectations.

Second, the passage warns against syncretism and compromise by referencing Balaam and the Nicolaitans (vv. 14–15). These groups represent the danger of blending cultural and religious practices that weaken Christian distinctiveness. In Ghana, the temptation to merge Christianity with traditional rituals or other syncretistic practices reflects a similar identity crisis. The text urges the church to discern, encouraging believers to avoid cultural compromises that distort the gospel.

The exhortation to repent (v. 16) underscores both the seriousness of compromise and the enduring possibility of restoration. Identity crises are not definitive; the risen Christ calls his church back to authentic discipleship. This call to repentance is inseparably linked with the promise of hidden manna and a white stone with a new name (v. 17), symbols of divine provision and new identity. For Ghanaian Christians, such imagery emphasises the fact that pastors and church leaders must not only confront cultural compromise but also ground believers in the assurance that their ultimate identity and belonging are conferred by Christ himself. The new name thus signifies transformation and acceptance that transcend cultural pressures, providing a stable foundation for Christian faithfulness in contexts of competing allegiances.

Finally, the divine warrior imagery (vv. 12, 16) reminds the church that Christ himself defends the faithful and judges compromise. For Ghanaian Christians facing pressures from both traditional and global cultures, this imagery reinforces the conviction that true security lies not in conforming to culture but in allegiance to the Risen Lord who vindicates his people.

5. Conclusion

Rev 2:12–17 provides a lasting framework for understanding the dynamics of faith and culture, highlighting the struggles of both the first-century church in Pergamum and modern Ghanaian Christianity. The passage shows that identity crises often occur when believers face cultural, social, or eco-

nomic pressures that conflict with their loyalty to Christ. For Ghanaian Christians, parallels exist in struggles with syncretism, compromise, and cultural influences. Issues such as African traditional religion, prosperity theology, moral concerns, and global trends pose challenges to Christian identity in Ghana.

At the same time, the passage invites reflection on the broader question of how Christian communities navigate cultural engagement. While the Book of Revelation exhibits an uncompromising, intransigent posture toward the surrounding imperial culture, reflecting John's firm resistance to idolatry and moral corruption, this stands in contrast to the more dialogical approach evident in Pauline texts, where cultural interaction often involved strategic accommodation without theological compromise. This distinction provides a helpful framework for Ghanaian Christianity today. The church must remain resolute and non-negotiable in confronting systemic issues such as corruption, the exploitation of the poor, and environmental degradation, while fostering a dialogic posture in its engagement with other Christian traditions, other religions, and the wider cultural environment. Such a balanced model, combining principled intransigence with discerning dialogue, reflects the diversity of approaches within the New Testament.

However, Revelation ultimately offers hope through repentance and promises divine provision and a secure identity in Christ. Ghanaian pastors and church leaders must therefore focus on building a strong biblical identity rooted in holiness and faithfulness through intentional discipleship, enabling believers to resist compromise and serve as positive influences in society. The church's mission depends on embracing her true identity in Christ; only then can she effectively embody the gospel amidst competing worldviews and contribute meaningfully to the shaping of Ghanaian culture.

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CONCLUSION

WEAVING TOGETHER CULTURE, BIBLE, AND IDENTITY

Wojciech Szypuła[*]

The contributions in this volume come from the CBF-organised conference on Culture, Bible and Identity. They address a broad range of topics spanning continents, cultures, and centuries as they explore how culture, Bible, and Christian identity relate to one another. Reading these diverse essays together, several interconnected themes come into focus that shed light on both the challenges and possibilities facing Christian communities seeking faithful discipleship in varied cultural settings. This concluding summary engages reflectively with the four questions Nicoletta Gatti posed in her introduction to this volume.

How did the authors of the New Testament inculturate the Christian message?

The contributions show that New Testament authors engaged in deliberate and creative inculturation from the very beginning of the Christian movement. The biblical canon itself bears witness to this—the fact that we have four distinct gospels rather than one unified account reveals that the early church valued multiple cultural and theological perspectives in bearing witness to Christ. These authors did not simply translate words; they transposed meaning, drawing on imagery, concepts, and narrative forms familiar to their audiences while at the same time challenging and transforming them.

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* *Wojciech Szypuła, SVD, holds a Doctorate in Biblical Theology from the Gregorian Pontifical University in Rome. A Divine Word Missionary, he has lectured on Scripture across Africa and internationally. He currently serves in Rome as General Biblical Apostolate Coordinator for the Society of the Divine Word.*

Paul of Tarsus emerges as a key figure in this process. His navigation between Jewish heritage and mission to Gentile communities led him to develop theological vocabulary around conscience, freedom, and worship that could speak meaningfully across cultural divides. The letter to the Romans shows how he addressed a fragmented community by creating what might be called a "relational fabric" through his rhetorical strategies, using shared scriptural traditions while adapting his message to the specific tensions between Jewish and Gentile believers.

Contributors also highlight how New Testament authors employed cultural symbols and transformed their meaning. The Magi narrative in Matthew draws on widespread ancient associations with 'star-watching' and wisdom traditions to communicate that God's revelation in Christ extends Israel's election to all people. In a similar way, the Petrine metaphors of living stones, royal priesthood, and holy nation took Jewish self-understanding and applied it to predominantly Gentile communities, creating new identity markers that honoured the tradition while opening it to new participants.

What strategies did they employ to communicate across cultural boundaries?

The essays reveal several overlapping strategies that New Testament authors and early Christian missionaries employed.

First, they consistently used existing cultural and religious frameworks as points of contact. Paul's preaching outline in 1 Thess 1:9-10 began with what his hearers could recognise—the contrast between dead idols and a living God—before introducing specifically Christian content about Jesus and resurrection. This pattern of building on familiar ground appears again and again: the Johannine prologue's use of Logos, Paul's citation of Greek poets, and the apocalyptic imagery of Revelation all show how culturally resonant language and concepts were put to strategic use.

Second, the contributors point to the crucial role of community formation as a communicative strategy. The church itself became the subject of the message. The letter to the Philippians presents the community's shared life of humility, unity, and mutual service as a form of witness in its own right—what

has been called "becoming the gospel." The quality of relationships within Christian communities served as a visible demonstration of the gospel's transforming power, communicating across cultural boundaries through embodied practice rather than words alone.

Third, several contributions highlight the strategic use of Scripture. The early church grounded its decisions in scriptural interpretation, using the Psalms to make sense of traumatic events, like Judas's betrayal, and to establish criteria for community leadership. This appeal to shared authoritative texts provided stability while allowing creative application to new circumstances. Biblical narratives could be reinterpreted across different cultural contexts—the story of Hagar, for instance, has generated fresh meaning from ancient Israel through Paul's allegory in Galatians to contemporary readings among marginalised communities. Scripture proved capable of speaking anew while maintaining connection to tradition.

Fourth, the essays point to hospitality and personal relationship as essential strategies. Paul's self-description in 1 Thess 2:1–8 emphasises that he and his companions shared not only the gospel but their very selves, forming relationships that allowed the message to take root in the fertile ground of friendship. Early missionaries in various contexts similarly succeeded through sustained presence, learning local languages, and addressing practical needs through education and healthcare.

How did they balance adaptation with the preservation of core theological convictions?

This question touches the heart of the volume's concern, and the contributors offer nuanced responses that resist both rigid uniformity and uncritical accommodation. Several key principles emerge.

The contributions consistently identify Christ himself as the non-negotiable centre around which legitimate adaptation occurs. Paul's willingness to become "all things to all people" operated within clear Christological boundaries—the message of Christ crucified and risen remained constant even as its presentation varied. Jesus' parable of new wine and old wineskins suggests

that each generation requires fresh theological frameworks capable of containing the gospel, but the wine itself—the gospel message—remains unaltered. This distinction between the unchanging content of faith and its culturally variable expression runs throughout the volume.

Several contributors identify the worshipping community as the context where this balance is maintained. The discussion of catholicity emphasises that unity in Christianity is achieved not through uniformity but through the "give and take necessitated by interculturality." The church's liturgical and sacramental life provides continuity across cultures while allowing for local expression. The tension is held corporately rather than resolved in the abstract.

The contributions also acknowledge that discernment is required and that not all cultural elements can simply be baptised. Comparative analysis of different worldviews shows that certain foundational convictions—such as the dignity of every person created in God's image—stand in tension with cultural frameworks that justify inequality or oppression. The letter to the church at Pergamum shows the Risen Christ commending faithfulness while rebuking tolerance of teachings that compromised Christian distinctiveness. The balance, then, is not a static equilibrium but an ongoing process of engagement, critique, and transformation.

The healing of the bent-over woman in Luke 13 offers a helpful model: Jesus neither simply accepted nor entirely rejected traditional interpretations of Sabbath law but reframed them through the lens of human dignity and liberation. Preserving core convictions sometimes requires challenging traditional interpretations that have obscured the gospel's liberating intent. Adaptation and preservation work together when both are oriented toward faithful witness to Christ.

What constitutes Christian identity, and can it be standardised across cultures, genders, and historical contexts?

The volume's collective answer to this final question is complex but clear: Christian identity is constituted by relationship with Christ and participation in his community, and it cannot be reduced to a single standardised form across all contexts—yet neither is it infinitely fluid.

First, the contributions consistently present Christian identity as relational rather than primarily propositional or ethnic. Identity is shaped by questions like "Who am I?" "To which community do I belong?" and "What is my calling?" The Petrine designations—chosen people, royal priesthood, holy nation, God's special possession—describe a community constituted by divine calling and mutual belonging rather than by standardised characteristics. Christian identity is received as gift before it is achieved as task.

Second, several contributors show that Christian identity formation involves transformation rather than mere addition. Paul's language of dying and rising with Christ in baptism indicates that becoming Christian entails genuine change—not the erasure of prior identity but its reorientation around a new centre. The Magi return home "by another way," symbolising the transformed perspective that encounter with Christ produces. Christian identity cannot be standardised because it always emerges from the transformation of particular persons in particular contexts.

Third, the contributions affirm that gender, culture, and historical location genuinely shape how Christian identity is expressed without determining its essence. Engagement with marginalised communities' readings of Scripture shows how the same biblical text speaks differently to different groups facing different forms of oppression, yet the liberating trajectory remains consistent. Jesus' treatment of the bent-over woman demonstrates that authentic Christian identity requires challenging cultural constructions that diminish human dignity—whether based on gender, caste, or any other category. Contributions from African contexts repeatedly emphasise the communal dimensions of personhood that Western individualism has obscured, suggesting that certain cultural perspectives may actually illuminate aspects of Christian identity that others have neglected.

Fourth, the volume points toward what one might term a "family resemblance" understanding of Christian identity. Just as members of a family may look quite different from one another while sharing recognisable traits, Christian communities across cultures display genuine diversity while bearing witness to the same Lord. The eschatological imagery in Revelation—the

"white stone with a new name" promised to the faithful—suggests that ultimate Christian identity remains partially hidden, known fully only to God and to be fully revealed in the future. This eschatological reserve cautions against any premature closure on what Christian identity must look like.

Toward a Shared Pilgrimage

The essays gathered in this volume do not offer a single definitive answer to the questions posed but rather model the ongoing work of faithful reflection that each generation must undertake. They show that the dialogue between culture, Bible, and identity is not a problem to be solved once for all but a conversation to be sustained across time and space. The contributors have demonstrated that this conversation requires both scholarly rigour and pastoral sensitivity, both fidelity to Scripture and attentiveness to context, both confidence in the gospel's transforming power and humility about the limitations of any single cultural expression of Christian faith.

What emerges from this collective effort is not a blueprint for standardised Christian identity but an invitation to participate in the same creative, faithful, discerning work that has characterised the church from its earliest days. It is worth noting that the biblical perspective on Christian identity stands in stark contrast to contemporary identitarian politics: catholicity, as understood in Scripture and tradition, represents the opposite of an exclusivist or nationalist conception of identity. The promise of belonging that the gospel offers is realised not through uniformity but through the mutual recognition of sisters and brothers who, despite their differences, confess the same Lord and share in the same Spirit. While this volume does not exhaust the topic, it opens avenues for further inquiry into how churches might navigate the tensions between fidelity and flexibility in an increasingly interconnected world. May this volume serve those who continue this pilgrimage—seeking to be faithful to Christ, attentive to culture, and open to the transformations that genuine encounter with Scripture and community always brings.

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