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Literary Forms of African Linguistics for the Hermeneutics of the Bible in the Twenty-First Century: Okyeame Hermeneutics

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Abstract: Augustine of Hippo draws on the Hellenistic and Latin hermeneutics of Plato, Plotinus, Porphyry, and Ambrose to couch his interpretation of scripture, and Thomas Aquinas taps into Aristotle's Hellenistic tropes, thereby contributing a Hellenistic linguistic repertoire to the hermeneutics of the Bible. While the works of Augustine and Thomas Aquinas have enhanced the Western interpretation of the Bible, theological and biblical scholars of African origin have yet to contribute the distinctive richness of African linguistic and literary forms to the hermeneutics of the Bible in the twenty-first century. This article investigates works on African language, thought, and culture by Kwesi Yankah,[1] Ruth H. Finnegan,[2] and Anthonia C. Kalu,[3] to delineate the African literary scope for interpreting and understanding the depth and horizon of the Bible for theology in Africa today. Drawing on Okyeame hermeneutics, this paper argues that African epithets and criteria concerning kingship/chiefdom are just some of the tropes and literary forms that can powerfully – and on an equal level to Western tropes and forms – contribute to a broader horizon for the mainstream hermeneutics of the Bible and the threefold mission of Jesus Christ.

Keywords: Hermeneutics, Akan Okyeame, African theology, Biblical studies, Linguistics

What hermeneutics can African languages, thought, and culture[4] offer to support a more nuanced exegesis of the Bible for the twenty-first century, given that scholars working within Indo-European and other European languages have, over the past two millennia, produced many rich approaches to biblical hermeneutics? While studies on language, anthropology, literature, museums, politics, feminism, and music in the African cultural context are applied to other cultures, systematic works on the hermeneutics of Scripture and theology based on African hermeneutical models remain largely confined to African, Black, and liberation theology, and are seldom treated as resources for mainstream biblical interpretation beyond Africa. Following Gerald O. West,[5] this paper maintains that African theology and African hermeneutics are (and should remain) an integral part of the broader disciplines of

1. Kwesi Yankah, *Speaking for the Chief: Okyeame and the Politics of Akan Royal Oratory* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1995).

2. Ruth H. Finnegan, *The Oral and Beyond: Doing Things with Words in Africa* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago, 2007); Ruth H. Finnegan, *Oral literature in Africa* (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2012).

3. Anthonia C. Kalu, "African Literature and the Traditional Arts: Speaking Art, Molding Theory." *Research in African Literature* 31, no. 4 (2000): 48–62.

4. If knowledge is for all of humanity, then every effort to access, interpret, and understand it is for the benefit of all. On this basis, Kalu argues that indigenous African hermeneutics are not merely locally relevant, but are important for shaping knowledge and analysis in a way that benefits humanity as a whole. See Kalu, "African Literature and the Traditional Arts," 49.

5. Gerald O. West, "On the Eve of African Biblical Studies: Trajectories and Trends," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 99 (1997): 99–115.

theology and biblical studies, and demonstrates, through a discussion of Okyeame hermeneutics, how African biblical scholars can contribute new hermeneutical horizons to mainstream theology and biblical studies.

While works crafted within Indo-European and other European cultural models are broadly hermeneutically applied in many cultures, African hermeneutical models tend not to be applied in non-African environments, despite the distinctive richness they can add to biblical hermeneutics as a whole. To appreciate this imbalance more clearly, it is helpful to consider how influential Western hermeneutical traditions, such as those rooted in the works of St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas, were shaped by linguistic and philosophical resources rooted in Greek and Latin intellectual worlds, and in turn came to shape biblical interpretation far beyond their original cultural settings.

In the history of interpretation, Augustine draws on Latin and Hellenistic models of interpretation, as seen in the works of Plato, Plotinus, Porphyry, and Ambrose, to couch his interpretation of Scripture.[6] In his *Confessions*, Augustine acknowledges that "in the regular course of study, [he] came upon the book of a certain Cicero, whose tongue nearly all admire but not his heart. But that book of his contained exhortation to philosophy. It was called *Hortensius* […] It was not its style of speech which influenced [him], but rather what it spoke about."[7] This declaration affirms how deeply Augustine's approach to interpretation was shaped by Cicero and other Latin and Hellenistic writers, whose philosophical and literary traditions informed his reading of Scripture. It is within this context that Harmless affirms the following:

> Readers today tend to describe Augustine's method as 'spiritual.' That is inexact. 'Figurative' was Augustine's usual term for it. He not only practiced figurative methods, but also justified their place within a broader theory of interpretation, sketching core principles in his *On Christian Teaching* […]. Augustine's practice of figurative interpretation would influence how Western Christians read the Bible for the next thousand years.[8]

Like Augustine in the fourth century, Thomas Aquinas also draws on Hellenistic intellectual traditions – particularly Aristotle's philosophical framework – to shape his understanding of sacred doctrine and biblical interpretation. While Aquinas delineates four senses in which Scripture can be interpreted, including the literal, allegorical, mystical, and anagogical,[9] his theological method is also informed by Aristotelian notions of science and ordered knowledge. According to Prügl, Aquinas' articles two through seven ascribe to sacred doctrine a "scientific character […] outlined in Aristotle's Posterior Analytics […]. Aquinas views Scripture as a part – [and] indeed, a central part – of this encompassing project of

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6. See William Harmless, *Augustine in His Own Words* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2010), 9. The hermeneutic scopes of Plotinus and Porphyry also influence Augustine's literary framework of reading Scripture (see Harmless, *Augustine in His Own Words*, 158, 172; See also Carl G. Vaught, *Access to God in Augustine's Confessions* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005), 203; See as well James A. Andrews, *Hermeneutics and the Church* (Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2012), 14, and Kathy Eden, "The Rhetorical Tradition and Augustinian Hermeneutics in *De Doctrina Christiana*," *Rhetorica: Journal of the History of Rhetoric* 8, no. 1 (1990): 45–63.
7. Harmless, *Augustine in His Own Words*, 9.
8. Harmless, *Augustine in His Own Words*, 157-158.
9. See Jean-Pierre Torrell, *Christ and Spirituality in St. Thomas Aquinas*, trans. Bernhard Blankenhorn (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2011), 2; Thomas Prügl, "Thomas Aquinas as Interpreter of Scripture," In *The Theology of Thomas Aquinas* edited by Rik Van Nieuwennhove and Joseph Wawrykow (Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005), 386–406.

transmitting divine knowledge."[10] In this way, Aristotelian categories do not merely supplement Aquinas' theology, but help structure the very intellectual framework through which Scripture is interpreted. Together, these examples illustrate how particular linguistic and philosophical traditions became foundational to dominant approaches in biblical interpretation, shaping what came to be received as normative hermeneutical practice.

Against this backdrop, some pioneers of African biblical studies have provided several models of hermeneutics derived from African culture. This paper focuses on African biblical scholars that can be divided into two categories: foundational figures in African biblical studies, and scholars whose works concern Akan perspectives on the hermeneutics of the Bible. It begins with a short contextualizing literature review of the former before narrowing its focus to Akan perspectives and the theoretical framework reflected in the works of Ruth H. Finnegan,[11] Kwesi Yankah,[12] and Anthonia C. Kalu.[13] It is argued that, just as the Greek and Latin languages helped propel Hebrew Scripture, language, thought, and culture to the Hellenistic and the Roman empires, perhaps now is a favorable time for indigenous African hermeneutics to serve as a linguistic and literary bridge for further extending the hermeneutics of Scripture to the nations of Africa and beyond.[14]

Literature Review

With respect to the pioneers of African biblical studies, John S. Mbiti contributes to African theology by drawing on the models of the Akamba community of Kenya to examine eschatological topics such as the end times, the living dead (ancestors), communal meals, sacrifice, worship, spiritual abodes, and resurrection.[15] Kofi Appiah-Kubi[16] suggests some guidelines for scholars of African theology, entreating them to take a cue from Jesus' question at Caesarea Philippi about his identity, as noted in Mark 8:29, Matthew 16:15, and Luke 9:20, to develop new means of interpreting the Bible in an African context and with African content. Kwesi A. Dickson encourages scholars of African theology to reinterpret the teachings of churches in new situations, taking the mindset that "while African [t]heology cannot ignore the Scriptures, it must seek to approach them in a relevant way."[17] Charles Nyamiti[18] builds on John S. Pobee's[19] African hermeneutic model of Jesus Christ as ancestor to apply to Jesus the African epithet:

10. Thomas Prügl, "Thomas Aquinas as Interpreter of Scripture," 392.
11. Finnegan, *The Oral and Beyond; Oral literature in Africa.*
12. Yankah, *Speaking for the Chief.*
13. Kalu, "African Literature and the Traditional Arts."
14. See Matthew 28:19–20; Acts 1:8. Also, direct Bible quotations are from Zondervan Bible Publishers, *The Holy Bible: New International Version, Containing the Old Testament and the New Testament*, (MI, Grand Rapids: Zondervan Bible Publishers, 1996). This Bible version is compared with the Greek Bible version of Kurt Aland, Matthew Black, Carlos M. Martini, Bruce M. Metzger, and Allen Wikgren, 1975, *The Greek New Testament*, New York: United Bible Societies, 1975.
15. John S. Mbiti, *New Testament Eschatology in an African Background: a study of the encounter between New Testament theology and African traditional concepts* (London: Oxford University Press, 1971).
16. Kofi Appiah-Kubi, "Indigenous African Christian Theologies," in *African Theology en Route*, ed. Kofi Appiah-Kubi and Sergio Torres (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1979).
17. Kwesi A. Dickson, "Development of African Theologies," *Mission Studies* 1, no. 1 (1984): 56.
18. Charles Nyamiti, *Christ as Our Ancestor: Christology from an African Perspective* (Zimbabwe: Mambo Press, 1984), 12, 23, 35, 70, 85, and "African Christologies Today," in *Jesus in African Christianity: Experimentation and Diversity in African Christology*, ed. J. N. K Mugambi and Laurenti Magesa (Nairobi: Initiatives Ltd., 1991).
19. John S. Pobee, *Toward an African Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1979).

brother-ancestor. Teresa Okure[20] proposes the framework of African experience as a basis for African biblical hermeneutics, for example, of the mission of Jesus as portrayed in the Gospel of John. François Lumbala Kabasele[21] offers three African models of Jesus Christ as the Chief, Ancestor, and Elder Brother from the perspective of the African hermeneutic of the chief, ancestors, and elder brothers. Benezet Bujo broadens the African hermeneutic model of Jesus Christ as the ancestor by describing him in terms of the proto-ancestor or proto-life-force of African Christians because of his redemptive roles, virtues and functions.[22] Justin S. Ukpong opts for an inculturation hermeneutics that focuses on topics of contemporary concern and context in Africa.[23] Gerald O. West contends that African theology should be an integral part of the mainstream theological branches, and encourages scholars of African theology to continue to engage with the emerging topics and concerns of their local communities.[24] Zablon Nthamburi and Douglas Waruta suggest topics such as cultural practices, traditional religious beliefs, African communities, African contexts, and African cultural patterns to be explored in African biblical hermeneutics.[25] Justin S. Ukpong's study, citing Peter Mackay, delineates six significant turning points in the history of the methods for biblical hermeneutics: 1) the allegorical and typological method during the time of the Fathers of the Church, 2) the philosophical method applied in the medieval era, 3) the historical method during the reformation, 4) the historical-critical method during the eighteenth century, 5) the literary method during mid-twentieth century, and 6) the context of the reader as part of a new method during the early twentieth century, particularly in the Third World; the first five methods have appeared in churches of the West.[26] Ukpong groups the six turning points into two major milestones: the first four are referred to as the first milestone and the last two as the second one.[27] Ayodeji J. Adewuya[28] and Annie Gold[29] deploy the African notion of the communal meal as a model for interpreting the Lord's Supper and the Beatitudes, respectively. Dorothy BEA Akoto-Abutiate opts for what she calls the hermeneutics of integrating Ghanaian (Ewe) folk proverbs in the biblical hermeneutics of the Book of Proverbs.[30] Andrew M. Mbuvi indicates that any biblical study that integrates African content (context and concern) should have a prominent place in the emerging

20. Teresa Okure, *The Johannine Approach to Mission: A Contextual Study of John 4:1–42* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1988).
21. Kabasele, François Lumbala. "Christ as Chief," and "Christ as Ancestor and Elder Brother," in *Faces of Jesus in Africa* ed. R. J. Schreiter (New York: Orbis Books, 1991).
22. Bénézet Bujo, *African theology in its social context* (Nairobi: St. Paul's Publications - Africa, 1992), 80–81.
23. Justin S. Ukpong, "Rereading the Bible with African Eyes: Inculturation and Hermeneutics," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 91 (1995): 3–14.
24. Gerald O. West. "Twice Called, Thrice Rebuked: Doing African Biblical Scholarship," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 134 (2015): 850–854.
25. Zablon Nthamburi and Douglas Waruta, "Biblical Hermeneutics in African Instituted Churches," in *The Bible in African Christianity*, ed. H.W. Kinoti and J. M. Waliggo (Nairobi: Acton, 2000), 40–57.
26. Justin S. Ukpong, "New Testament Hermeneutics in Africa: Challenges and possibilities," *Neotestamentica* 35, no.1–2 (2001): 147–167, https://hdl.handle.net/10520/EJC83086; see also Peter M. Mackay, "The Coming Revolution: The New Literary Approach to New Testament Interpretation," in *A Guide to Contemporary Hermeneutics: Major Trends in Biblical Interpretation*, ed. D. K. Mckim (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 263–279.
27. Ukpong, "New Testament Hermeneutics in Africa."
28. Ayodeji J. Adewuya, "Revisiting 1 Corinthians 11: 27–34: Paul's Discussion of the Lord's Supper and African Meals." *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 30, no.1 (2007): 95–112.
29. Annie O. Gold, "The Kingdom Life in Matthew 5–7: An African Perspective," *Ogbomoso Journal of Theology* XII (2007): 136–150.
30. Dorothy BEA Akoto-Abutiate, *Proverbs and the African Tree of Life: Grafting the Biblical proverbs on to the Ghanaian Ewe Folk Proverbs* (Boston: Brill, 2014).

scholarship for African biblical hermeneutics.[31] Humphrey Chinedu Anameje (2023) surveys some recent works on African Christologies that focus on African hermeneutic models.[32] Others apply some models of African hermeneutics to biblical studies by combining historical-critical, comparative, and indigenous mother tongue biblical hermeneutical approaches to their hermeneutical modalities. This is the case for Wale Adebanwi, Seth Kissi, and Ernest van Eck; Daniel Sakitey and Ernest van Eck; Glen Paul Grant; Mawuli Nyador; and Richard Osei Akoto.[33] Still others, such as Mark Aidoo, combine the contextual Bible study method with Ghanaian societal constructs about the human body to examine young women's understanding of Song of Songs 1:5–17.[34] Some authors offer a comprehensive synthesis of works regarding African theology. These include Musa Dube's edited volume *The Bible in Africa: Transactions, Trajectories, and Trends*,[35] Knut Holter's *Old Testament Research for Africa: A Critical Analysis and Annotated Bibliography of African Old Testament Dissertations, 1967*–2000,[36] Aloo O. Mojola's "African Hermeneutics in a State of Flux – Towards Refocusing its Trajectory,"[37] Andrew Mbuvi's "African Biblical Studies: An Introduction to an Emerging Discipline," as well as his *African Biblical Studies: Unmasking Embedded Racism and Colonialism in Biblical Studies*,[38] and Lovemore Togarasei's "Conclusion: The Past and Future of African Scholars' Contribution to Biblical Interpretation."[39]

In the context of Ghana's Akan people in particular, Ghanaian biblical scholars recommend topics and models as part of African biblical hermeneutics. For example, John S. Pobee develops what he calls an Akan Christology based on the following question: why should any Akan have any kinship or affinity with Jesus of Nazareth, given that the latter has no kinship with the former's family, clan, village, tribe, or

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31. Andrew M. Mubuvi, *African Biblical Studies: Unmasking Embedded Racism and Colonialism in Biblical Studies* (New York: T&T, 2023).

32. Humphrey Chinedu Anameje, "Models of Contemporary African Christologies in African Theology," *Journal of Arts, Humanities and Development Studies* 7, no. 1 (2023): 55–63.

33. See: Wale Adebanwi, "Religion and Indigenous Hermeneutics," *Journal of Africana Religions* 2 no. 4 (2014): 457–464; Seth Kissi and Ernest van Eck, "Reading Hebrews through Akan ethnicity and social," *HTS Teologiese Studies / Theological Studies* 73, no.3 (2017): 44–90; Daniel Sakitey and Ernest van Eck, "Jesus and the Angels: A Comparative Reading of Hebrews 1:1–4 in Light of Ewe Cosmology," *Theological Studies* 80, no. 2 (2024):1–6, "The logos Christology in the fourth gospel (Jn 1:1–5, 14): A Soteriological Response to an Ewe Cosmic Prayer," *Theological Studies* 79, no. 4 (2023): 1–6, "Πάτερ, ημων ο εν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς (Mt 6:9a): Reading The Lord's Prayer with Insight from Ewe Cosmology," *Theological Studies* 78, no. 3 (2022): 1–6; Glen Paul Grant, *Healing and Power in Ghana: Early Indigenous expressions Christianity* (Texas: Baylor University Press, 2020); Mawuli Nyador "Ewe Christology: The Sonship of Christ in Hebrews 1:1–4 from an Ewe Perspective," *Journal of Mother-Tongue Biblical Hermeneutics and Theology* 4, no. 2 (2022): 16–29; Richard Osei Akoto, "Mother Tongue Biblical Hermeneutics within the Context of African Biblical Hermeneutics: It's [sic] Origin, Trends and Challenges," *Journal of Mother-Tongue Biblical Hermeneutics and Theology* 6, no. 3 (May 2024): 19–34, https://doi.org/10.38159/motbit.2024631.

34. Mark Aidoo, "'I Am Black and Beautiful': Body-Talk Toward Redefining the Identity of Black Girls using Contextual Bible studies on Song of Songs 1.5–17" *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 53, no. 2 (2023): 96–109.

35. Musa Dube ed., *The Bible in Africa: Transactions, Trajectories and Trends* (Leiden: Brill, 2000).

36. Knut Holter, *Old Testament Research for Africa: A Critical Analysis and Annotated Bibliography of African Old Testament Dissertations, 1967–2000*. New York: Peter Lang, 2002.

37. Aloo O. Mojolo, "African Hermeneutics in a State of Flux – Towards Refocusing Its Trajectory," *Verbum et Ecclesia* 43, no. 1 (2022): 1–8.

38. Andrew M. Mubuvi, "African Biblical Studies: An Introduction to an Emerging Discipline," *Currents in Biblical Research* 15, no. 2 (2017): 149–178; Mubuvi, *African Biblical Studies*.

39. Lovemore Togarasei, "Conclusion: The Past and Future of African Scholars' Contribution to Biblical Interpretation," in *Contemporary African Perspectives on the Bible*, ed. Tobias Marevesa, Nyasha Madzokere, Lovemore Togarasei and Billy Mayer (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2024).

nation?[40] To address this question, he argues that the Christology in the Nicene Creed is a product of the orthodoxy of Ecumenical Councils that draw on Greco-Roman languages, cultures, concepts, and categories of that era, such as substance, person, and hypostasis, which are different from what is essential in other cultures, such as that of Akan society.[41] Pobee contends that Greco-Roman models of biblical hermeneutics are likewise different from both the biblical texts and from Akan culture.[42] For him, the biblical texts provide functional forms of Christology, in contrast to the metaphysical forms of Christology that emerge during the times of the early Church and the medieval church.[43] He identifies four types of Christology from the New Testament – Judeo-Christian, Hellenistic, Cosmic, and Priestly – and suggests a Christology that rests on Akan cultural forms, functions, concreteness, events, proverbs, models, and experiences.[44] Leaning on dialogic methodology, Pobee espouses African Christian theology, by pointing out similarities between Akan traditional religion and Christianity in Africa in topics such as mythologies, proverbs, prayers, rituals, songs, healing, spirit beings, royal titles, glory, and suffering.[45] Pobee contributes to African hermeneutics with the use of an Akan model and the notion of the status of ancestors to describe Jesus' functions in terms of "the Great and Greatest Ancestor," given that, in Akan society, the ancestors administrate the ministerial authorities of the Supreme Being.[46]

Kwame Bediako expounds his views concerning African biblical hermeneutics in several scholarly works, but this paper focuses on the following three "Biblical Christologies in the Context of African Traditional Religions,"[47] *Jesus in Africa: The Christian Gospel in African History and Experience*,[48] and *Jesus and the Gospel in Africa: History and Experience*.[49] In "Biblical Christologies in the Context of African Traditional Religions," Bediako contends that the proclamation of the Christian message in Africa should integrate African heritage in making the Christian faith more at home in the African context,[50] and, moreover, that the proclamation of the Gospel in Africa should include a genuine encounter between the Christian faith and the African context to allow Jesus Christ to inhabit the spiritual universe of the African consciousness. In his book, *Jesus in Africa: The Christian Gospel in African History and Experience*, Bediako argues that, just as the Apostle Paul, in Acts 15 and in the Letter to Galatians, encourages Gentile Christians from non-Hebrew nations to employ their cultural traditions to contribute to Christian thought and life, African Christians and scholars should also contribute to the general biblical hermeneutics and Christian theology based on, in particular, 1) The African context, 2) African traditional religion as a primal religion, and 3) the encounter between the proclamation of the Bible and the African worldview.[51] Here, Bediako critiques Pobee's analogic attribute of Jesus Christ as the greatest ancestor by insisting that this attribute derives from the spiritual functions of the Akan ancestors, rather than from discursive sources such

40. Pobee, *Toward an African Theology*.
41. Pobee, *Toward an African Theology*.
42. Pobee, *Toward an African Theology*.
43. Pobee, *Toward an African Theology*.
44. Pobee, *Toward an African Theology*.
45. Pobee, *Toward an African Theology*.
46. Pobee, *Toward an African Theology*, 22, 92–97.
47. Kwame Bediako, "Biblical Christologies in the Context of African Traditional Religions," in *Sharing Jesus in the Two Thirds World*, ed. Samuel Vinay and Chris Sugden (Bangalore: Partnership in Mission Asia, 1984), 125.
48 Kwame Bediako, *Jesus in Africa: The Christian Gospel in African History and Experience* (Nairobi: Kenya Regnum Books, 2000), 20–21.
49. Kwame Bediako, *Jesus and the Gospel in Africa: History and Experience* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2004).
50. Bediako, "Biblical Christologies."
51. Bediako, *Jesus in Africa.*

as the sayings and proverbs cited by Pobee.[52] For Bediako, segments of the Bible show a connection to Akan cosmology. For example, Akan society, in a concrete way, affirms the Supreme Being's creation of the universe and of human beings; accordingly, the Bible account of creation and Adam establishes a connection between Jesus Christ's (the second Adam) kinship with Akan ancestors through creation stories.[53] Using the Akan kinship model, Bediako designates Jesus an elder brother by associating with him the mediation functions that the Akan ancestors perform.[54] Additionally, Bediako explains the resurrection and the ascension of Jesus Christ in terms of his return to the spiritual abode of the ancestors.[55] According to Bediako, in these instances Jesus Christ relates to the Akan kinship system of clan, family, tribe, and nation.[56] In *Jesus and the Gospel in Africa: History and Experience*, Bediako discusses further the mediation functions of Jesus Christ in the perspective of the Akan notion of the spiritual universe.[57] Thus, Bediako contributes Akan contextual models for biblical hermeneutics.

Pashington J. Obeng provides ethnographic theological work, discussing some of the ways that the Kumasi Diocese, within the Akan territory of Ghana, applies what he calls "Asante ontological hermeneutic" models, such as epithets, music, art forms, idioms, and rituals, to the Catholicism of the Kumasi Diocese.[58] Robert Owusu Agyarko offers reflections concerning the Holy Spirit, with reference to the Akan concept of *sunsum* (spirit).[59] Based on dialogic hermeneutics, Nicoletta Gatti compares topics in Genesis 4:1–16, such as God's justice, God's gratuitous election, relationship, response to God's election, and protection of diversity, to topics in Akan proverbs to illustrate a call to rediscover relationships, both human and divine, in the African context.[60] Emmanuel Kojo Ennin Antwi, Isaac Adjei Forson, and Joseph Kwadwo Asuming compare sources of wisdom in the Old Testament – such as divine gifts, family, clans, royal courts, schools of instruction, and discipline – with those in Akan society – such as gifts from deities, respected elders, traditional sayings, proverbs, folktales, stories, myths, and arts and crafts – to illustrate the reader-centered method of biblical hermeneutics.[61] Isaac Boateng compares the content of the Bono-Twi libation prayer (*apae*) with that of the Lord's Prayer of the Gospel of Matthew to illustrate the practices of syncretism among some Akan Christian communities regarding the content of their prayers.[62] Drawing on the mother tongue biblical hermeneutics method, Felix Cornelius Agyei and Jonathan Edwards Tetteh

52. Bediako, *Jesus in Africa.*
53. Bediako, *Jesus in Africa*, 24.
54. Bediako, *Jesus in Africa*.
55. Bediako, *Jesus in Africa*.
56. Bediako, *Jesus in Africa*, 26–28.
57. Bediako, *Jesus and the Gospel*, 20.
58. Pashington J. Obeng, *Asante Catholicism: Religious and Culture Reproduction Among the Akan of Ghana* (Leiden: Bill, 1996).
59. Robert Owusu Agyarko, "The Sunsum of Onyame: Akan Perspective on an Ecological Pneumatology," *Journal of Reformed Theology* 6 (2012): 251–226.
60. Nicoletta Gatti, "Toward A Dialogic Hermeneutics: Reading Genesis 4:1–16 With Akan Eyes," *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 39 (2017): 46–67.
61. Emmanuel Kojo Ennin Antwi, Isaac Adjei Forson, and Joseph Kwadwo Asuming, "Understanding Wisdom in the Old Testament through its Akan (Ghana) Parallels: Linkages and Disconnections," *Old Testament Essays* 33, no. 3 (2020): 408–427.
62. Isaac Boateng, "An Akan Reading of Matthew's Version of the Lord's Prayer (Bono-Twi Translation) in Dialogue with Akan Libation Prayers," *African Journal of Religion, Philosophy and Culture* 2 (2021): 41–64.

Kuwornu-Adjaotto compares the notion of sin in 1 John with that in Akan culture to emphasize the single sacrifice of Christ in contrast to the annual sacrifice of Akan society.[63]

As Mbuvi notes, African theology is evolving, but significant work remains to be done, namely: 1) to develop distinctly African biblical hermeneutics, 2) to provide interpretive models grounded in African contexts, and 3) to expound methodologies that move beyond the dominance of Euro-American biblical studies.[64] It is within this broader effort to articulate contextually grounded African interpretive frameworks that Okyeame hermeneutics emerges as a particularly fruitful model.

Conceptual Perspective

This section provides a synthesis of the conceptual perspective that is guiding this paper's presentation of Okyeame hermeneutics as a model of African biblical hermeneutics. This perspective draws on the works of Kwesi Yankah,[65] Ruth H. Finnegan,[66] and Anthonia C. Kalu.[67] Yankah's conception of the rhetoric of interpreting the Akan king and his interlocutors is significant for this study, as his work relies on the linguistic forms of the Akan people,[68] whose language is part of the Kwa language group[69] and a member of the Niger-Congo language family.[70] What is most insightful in the work of Yankah is its description of the whole Okyeame[71] rhetoric of the Akan people, which African biblical scholars can apply to their works.

This paper relies on the theoretical scope put forward by Yankah for the performance of Okyeame royal discourse in Akan society in Ghana. According to Yankah, the Okyeame rhetoric of the Akan people comprises linguistic forms for communication with Akan dignitaries such as a chief[72] (henceforth a *king*), the king's spokesperson (known in Akan as Okyeame), the elders, the priests, and the medium.[73] Among the Akan people, the Okyeame has several functions. He mediates between the speeches or discourses of a king and the king's interlocutors using various rhetorical forms (such as metaphors, innuendo, proverbs, panegyrics, etc.). For Yankah, the Okyeame is an orator for the king: "[he carries out] the art of public display or performance for or on behalf of another."[74] The Okyeame thus functions as a mediator and forms

63. Felix Cornelius Agyei and Jonathan Edwards Tetteh Kuwornu-Adjaotto, "An Examination of ἁμαρτια (sin) in 1 John and the Akan Concept of Bɔne (sin)." *Journal of Mother-Tongue Biblical Hermeneutics and Theology* 5, no.6 (2023): 95–105.
64. Mbuvi, "African Biblical Studies."
65. Yankah, *Speaking for the Chief.*
66. Finnegan, *The Oral and Beyond; Oral literature in Africa.*
67. Kalu, "African Literature and the Traditional Arts."
68. For more on the Akan people, see Kwame Gyekye, *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought: the Akan Conceptual Scheme* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).
69. For more on Kwa languages, see Enoch Oladé Aboh, *Morphosyntax of Complement-Head Sequences: Clause Structure and Word Order Patterns in Kwa* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).
70. About the Niger-Congo language family, see Bernd Heine and Derek Nurse eds., *African Languages: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Konstantin Pozdniakov, *The Numeral System of Proto-Niger-Congo: A Step-by-Step Reconstruction* (Berlin: Language Science, 2018).
71. For details about the kinship and chiefdom of the Akan people, see Roslyn A. Walke, *The Power of Gold: Asante Royal Regalia from Ghana* (Dallas Museum of Art, 2018).
72. Yankah, *Speaking for the Chief.* In the Akan language, there are distinctive words for king (*Ohene*) and chief (*Nana*).
73. For discussion about Akan traditional priests, mediums, and linguists, see Anthony Ephirim-Donkor, "The Ultimate Mediumship Experience among the Akan," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 76, no. 1 (2008): 54–81.
74. Yankah, *Speaking for the Chief*, 4.

an indirect triad in communication with the king and his interlocutors. In terms of social status in Akan society, the Okyeame occupies a privileged position within the political hierarchy. Besides his role as a spokesperson, the Okyeame provides the following services for the king: diplomat, envoy, prosecutor, protocol officer, prayer officiant sometimes, confidant, and counselor.[75]

Significant criteria must be met for a person to be an Okyeame. First, a potential Okyeame must possess "an uncommon familiarity with traditional lore, custom, history, as well as wisdom, experience, and skills in the forensic arts, oratory, logic, diplomacy, and public relations."[76] Second, he must be "the quintessence of moral virtue," that is, a credible representative and metaphoric [surrogate] 'wife' of the [king]."[77] Yankah contends that the Okyeame's role is crucial for two reasons: "One, it minimizes the hazards of face-to-face communication between king and subject, thus preserving the king's sacred authority; and two, it provides the opportunity for the display of embellished oratory."[78]

Drawing on the work of Yankah and secondary ethnographic fieldwork, this study identifies a broader Akan hermeneutical framework in which the Okyeame interpretive role operates. Okyeame interpretation is not limited to communication between the king and his interlocutors; it also extends to the mediation of social, political, and spiritual relationships involving the king, the community, and supernatural beings. In this article, *Okyeame hermeneutics* refers to the framework through which the Okyeame mediates meaning, authority, and social order. It is structured around five key elements that make effective interpretation possible within Akan society: function, criteria, status, participants, and representation. Together, these elements constitute the conceptual scope of Okyeame hermeneutics summarized in Table 1.

Table 1: The Scope of Okyeame Hermeneutics

Functions:	Roles
Criteria:	Mastery of rhetoric
Status:	Mediation
People:	Public
Representation:	Surrogate

This conceptual scope of Okyeame hermeneutics within the Akan cultural repertoire provides a significant framework for adding nuance to the hermeneutics of the three functions of Christ in the Bible.

Because Okyeame hermeneutics operates within the broader literary and rhetorical forms of the Akan tradition, its interpretive framework must also be understood as a performative practice. For this reason, this article extends Yankah's theoretical account of Okyeame discourse by adding Finnegan's notion of the nature and significance of performing a literary form. In her book, *The Oral and Beyond: Doing Things with Words in Africa*, Finnegan holds the following:

75. Yankah, *Speaking for the Chief*, 85.
76. Yankah, *Speaking for the Chief*, 85.
77. Yankah, *Speaking for the Chief*, 85. Anthonia C. Kalu corroborates the fact that indigenous public speakers carry out their public communications within indigenous norms of communication and public discourse. See Kalu, "African Literature and the Traditional Arts: Speaking Art, Molding Theory," 58.
78. Yankah, *Speaking for the Chief*, 107.

> The actual enactment of the [literary form] also involves the emotional situation […] the singer's beauty of voice, her sobs, facial expression, vocal expressiveness and […] all the variegated aspects we think of as contributing to the effectiveness of performance in the case of more familiar literary forms […] [as well as] expressiveness of tone, gesture, dramatic use of pause and rhythm, the interplay of passion, dignity, or humor, receptivity to the reactions of the audience.[79]

Finnegan contends that the literary forms in African culture serve as a conceptual scope for hermeneutics[80] in many disciplines and contexts in Africa. In her book *Oral Literature in Africa*, Finnegan specifies the stylistics of performing a literary genre:[81]

> Among Akan-speaking peoples of Ghana, for instance, a large number of different poetic forms have been distinguished by [Joseph Hanson Kwabena] Nketia (in his classic article in Black Orpheus 3, 1958 (Nketia 1958b)). In terms of the mode of delivery, there are four broad classes of Akan poetry, each including many different types in detail: (1) spoken poetry, which covers many of the poems to do with chiefship, like the praises delivered at state functions; (2) recitative poetry half spoken, half sung, like funeral dirges, elegies by court musicians, and hunters' poetry; (3) lyric (i.e. sung) poetry, a large category comprising many different types of song each with its own conventions—among them songs of insult, heroic songs, sung interludes in stories, maiden songs, love songs, songs of prayer, exhilaration and incitement, cradle songs, and warrior songs; and finally (4) poetry expressed through the medium of horns or drums, in lyric, eulogistic, or proverbial vein.

The scope of Ruth H. Finnegan's discussion of the nature, significance, and stylistics of performing literary forms complements Yankah's analysis of the Okyeame rhetoric and helps clarify how Okyeame hermeneutics functions as an interpretive model. While Yankah provides the structural framework of the Okyeame's role – its functions, status, criteria, and mediating authority – Finnegan explains the performative dimensions through which that role becomes effective in practice. Her work shows that interpretation in Akan contexts is not merely the transmission of words, but the embodied performance of meaning through voice, gesture, rhythm, emotional expression, audience, reception, and literary form. This is particularly important for understanding the Okyeame, whose authority depends not only on what is said, but how it is said. Finnegan's account of Akan oral literary forms therefore provides the conceptual basis for understanding Okyeame hermeneutics as a performative and rhetorical act, rather than as a purely linguistic or textual exercise. Together, Finnegan and Yankah establish the theoretical foundation for this paper's discussion of Okyeame hermeneutics as a model of African biblical hermeneutics.

This emphasis on performance and literary form also resonates with Anthonia C. Kalu, who writes that the development of African hermeneutics requires sustained engagement with African traditions. As Kalu observes, the formulation of African hermeneutics depends on African scholars drawing from indigenous traditions in order to craft distinctly African "theories of aesthetics, criticism, and performance."[82] Although Kalu makes this contention for contemporary African literature, this assertion holds for contemporary African biblical hermeneutics as well. In her article, "African Literature and the Traditional Arts: Speaking Art, Molding Theory," Kalu notes the hermeneutic scope and schemas of African contemporary literature as follows:

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79. Finnegan, *The Oral and Beyond*, 5–6.
80. Clifford Geertz describes interpretation as a process of analyzing information over the shoulders of the informants (*The Interpretation of Cultures* [New Yok: Basic Books, Inc. P., 1973], 25).
81. Finnegan, *Oral Literature in Africa*, 79.
82. Kalu, "African Literature and the Traditional Arts," 48.

> Ancestral African thought may not have been written in great books, but they were written in African traditions and minds. Like the worldviews explicated in the great books of the scriptocentric traditions, African thought within African traditions also remains open to interpretation for the purposes of initiating and implementing change.[83]

Kalu thus advocates deploying rhetorical models embedded within African cultural traditions to formulate broader hermeneutical frameworks for literature and, by extension, biblical studies.[84] Her argument is that African traditions contain their own interpretive resources, aesthetic principles, and performative structures that can serve as the basis for African theories of criticism and interpretation. In this respect, Kalu's work contributes to the conceptual framework of this paper by supporting the use of African interpretive models and literary forms to develop new theories and methods of interpretation. Specifically, this paper takes cues from Kalu's work in two ways: first, by deploying as a conceptual model the rules, techniques, structures, literary forms, indigenous models, and intentions embedded in Okyeame discourse; and second, by suggesting the Okyeame model of Akan discourse as a framework for carrying out African biblical hermeneutics.

In this article, Akan hermeneutics refers to the analytical modalities for evaluating, expounding, and carrying out systematic public discourse and communication within indigenous Akan society. Having established the conceptual foundations of Okyeame hermeneutics through the work of Yankah, Finnegan, and Kalu, the next section will focus on its analytical structure, identify the key constituent elements that organize Okyeame hermeneutics, and examine how these elements function as a framework for interpreting biblical texts.

Analytical Modality

This section covers the constituents of the analytical modality of Okyeame hermeneutics. The following key elements – 1) functions, 2) criteria, 3) status, 4) people, and 5) representation – constitute the systematic framework that this paper proposes for analyzing scriptural texts. These five elements form the foundation upon which the Akan in Ghana have built Okyeame hermeneutics. First is "functions." The Okyeame plays seven roles within the communicational organization of the Akan kingdom: communication with the supreme being, communication with deities, communication with the cosmos/universe, communication with the ancestors, communication with the King, communication with the elders, and communication with the interlocutors. Each of these seven Okyeame roles (henceforth stakeholders) consolidates the validity of the functions of Okyeame hermeneutics in the indigenous performance of discourse. These functions require proximity for all those involved in communication.

Next are seven "criteria," which are the cornerstone of Okyeame hermeneutics. In other words, within this system, interpreters must possess: 1) mastery of Akan rhetoric/customs/history, 2) wisdom, 3) experience, 4) communicatory eloquence, 5) moral virtue not only in terms of character, but also in terms of words, 6) the ability to preserve sacred authority, and 7) the capacity to listen attentively to all involved in each communication.

Following this is the element of "status," of which there are, again, seven categories. Put differently, within this system, the Okyeame occupies the role of 1) diplomat, 2) envoy, 3) prosecutor, 4) protocol

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83. Kalu, "African Literature and the Traditional Arts," 54, 57.
85. Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 1–13*, World Biblical Commentary 33A, (Texas: Word Books, Publisher, (1993), 22–32.

officer, 5) prayer officiant, 6) confidant, and 7) counselor. Next is the element of "people," which refers to the seven categories of persons or beings with whom the Okyeame interacts in his hermeneutic roles: 1) the Supreme Being, 2) a deity, 3) the cosmos/universe, 4) the ancestors, 5) the King, 6) the elders, and 7) the interlocutors. Each of these Okyeame stakeholders consolidates the validity of the functions of Okyeame hermeneutics in the indigenous performance of discourse.

Finally is "representation." The Okyeame serves as a representative of the seven categories of people involved in the hermeneutical activity: the Supreme Being, a deity, the cosmos/universe, the ancestors, the King, the elders, and the interlocuters. Although Yankah describes the Okyeame as a surrogate or metaphorical wife of the King, the Okyeame is equally a surrogate or metaphorical wife within the communicational order of all seven categories of people involved in the indigenous hermeneutics.

Given the detailed modalities that guide Okyeame hermeneutics, these five analytical modalities can be applied to scriptural texts and theological statements to add nuance to their meaning in ongoing biblical and theological studies. In the next section, these five modalities will guide the hermeneutics of the threefold functions of Jesus Christ: king, priest, and prophet. The next section presents biblical texts concerning the threefold functions of Jesus Christ.

Biblical Texts Concerning the Threefold Functions of Jesus Christ

This section presents some of the epithets used for Jesus Christ in Scripture in relation to his roles as king, priest, and prophet. First, regarding Christ's kingly function, many biblical texts are relevant, such as: "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him" (Matthew 2:2). According to Donald A. Hagner, the title "king" in the text of Matthew 2:1–12 occurs within the context of multiple and conflicting notions of kingship: the magi have their own understanding, King Herod has his own political concerns, Jesus later reveals his own understanding of kingship in his public ministry, the disciples hold particular messianic expectations, and the people likewise anticipate specific functions and features of the king/Messiah.[85] The conflicting interpretations about the identity of Jesus as a king/Messiah set the stage for examining the nature and function of his kingship.

Other texts about Jesus as king include "And Jesus came and said to them, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me'" (Matthew 28:18); "Jesus answered, 'My kingship is not of this world; if my kingship were of this world, my servants would fight, that I might not be handed over to the Jews; but my kingship is not from the world.' Pilate said to him, 'So you are a king?' Jesus answered, 'You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I have come into the world, to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears my voice'" (John 18:36–37). The Greek phrase for Jesus' kingly epithet in John 19:19 and Matthew 27:37 is Ἰησοῦς ὁ Ναζωραῖος ὁ βασιλεύς.[86] Within Okyeame hermeneutics, the epithet Ἰησοῦς ὁ Ναζωραῖος ὁ βασιλεύς thus invites reflection on the multiple functions of Christ's kingship within the communicational organization of the kingdom of God.

Having considered Christ's kingly function and the interpretive possibilities of his kingship with Okyeame hermeneutics, the discussion now turns to his priestly function. Scriptural texts also corroborate Christ's priestly function: "Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we have not a high priest who is unable to

85. Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 1–13*, World Biblical Commentary 33A, (Texas: Word Books, Publisher, (1993), 22–32.

86. See Kurt Aland, Matthew Black, Carlo M. Martini, Bruce M. Metzger, and Allen Wikgren, *The Greek New Testament* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1975).

sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need" (Hebrews 4:14–16). Likewise, "For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus"; in Greek, this is rendered as εἷς θεὸς εἷς μεσίτης καὶ θεοῦ ἀνθρώπων ἄνθρωπος Χριστὸς Ἰησοῦς (1 Timothy 2:5). These texts present Jesus not only as high priest, but also as mediator between God and humanity, thereby emphasizing his priestly role within the communicational order of salvation.

Other scriptural texts confirm Christ's prophetic function. In Matthew 21:11, the Greek phrase for Jesus as prophet is ὁ προφήτης Ἰησοῦς ὁ ἀπὸ Ναζαρὲθ τῆς Γαλιλαίας: "This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth of Galilee." Other relevant texts include: "Moses said, 'The Lord God will raise up for you a prophet from your brethren as he raised me up. You shall listen to him in whatever he tells you'" (Acts 3:22); "Then he told them, 'These are the words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms had to be fulfilled'" (Luke 24:44); "When the people saw the sign which he had done, they said, 'This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world!'" (John 6:14); "And Jesus went on with his disciples, to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, 'Who do men say that I am?' And they told him, 'John the Baptist; and others say, Elijah; and others one of the prophets'" (Mark 8:27–28); "When they heard these words, some of the people said, 'This is really the prophet'" (John 7:40); "Fear seized them all; and they glorified God, saying, 'A great prophet has arisen among us!' and 'God has visited his people!'" (Luke 7:16); and "For I have not spoken on my own authority; the Father who sent me has himself given me commandment what to say and what to speak" (John 12:49). These texts present Jesus as prophet, teacher, and divine spokesperson, thereby emphasizing his prophetic role within the communicational order of revelation. The next section focuses on Okyeame hermeneutics as an analytical modality for interpreting these threefold epithets – king, priest, and prophet (henceforth *mission*) – of Jesus Christ.

Discussion of the Three-fold Function of Jesus Christ in Relation to Okyeame Hermeneutics

The first function of Ἰησοῦς ὁ Ναζωραῖος ὁ βασιλεύς is his role as an interpreter for God. Within Okyeame hermeneutics, the Okyeame is always in communication with the Supreme Being (*Nyankopɔn* in Akan),[87] and serves as a mediator of divine intention within the communicational order of the community. In a similar way, Ἰησοῦς ὁ Ναζωραῖος ὁ βασιλεύς is presented in Scripture as being in continual communication with Almighty God.

In his interpretive role, Jesus listens to the Almighty God, receives the divine word, and communicates God's intentions, purposes, and will to his interlocutors. His task is not only to transmit the words of the Supreme Being, but also to make the presence and person of God known in his relational proximity to humanity. This function is reflected in texts such as: "I can do nothing on my own. As I hear, I judge; and my judgment is just, because I seek to do not my own will but the will of him who sent me" (John 5:30); "whoever is from God hears the words of God" (John 8:47); and "But I do know him, and I keep his word" (John 8:55). These passages show that Jesus' kingship is inseparable from his interpretive and mediating role. Like the Okyeame, Jesus must remain in proximity to the Supreme Being in order to carry out his hermeneutical function faithfully. The New Testament therefore presents Ἰησοῦς ὁ Ναζωραῖος ὁ βασιλεύς not merely as a ruler, but as the divine interpreter who communicates God's will to the world.

87. For discussions about the Supreme Being, see Boaheng, "An Akan Reading of Matthew's Version of the Lord's Prayer," 41.

The second function of Okyeame hermeneutics focuses on communication with deities (*abosom* in Akan). In Akan society, communication with deities includes mediation with natural realities that are understood to be endowed with supernatural characteristics, such as rivers, lakes, brooks, thunder, mountains, hills, rocks, earth, and forests.[88] Communication is therefore not limited to verbal exchange between human persons, but includes authoritative speech directed towards forces of nature that participate in the moral and spiritual order of the community. While Marcus contends that no one can claim complete mastery of knowledge concerning *abosom*,[89] the Okyeame must possess a thorough knowledge of *abosom* in order to mediate effectively between the deity and its interlocuters.

In his hermeneutic role as Ἰησοῦς ὁ Ναζωραῖος ὁ βασιλεύς, Jesus likewise communicates with aquatic bodies, such as the sea of Galilee/Lake Gennesaret. This communication is not merely miraculous intervention, but an instance of authoritative mediation in which Jesus addresses forces of nature as participants within a broader communicational order. According to Donald A. Hagner, Jesus communicates with the elements and forces of nature with authority and sovereign power.[90]

For example, in Matthew 8:25, Hagner notes that the disciples use the expression, Κύριε (Lord or Master) to illustrate Jesus' authority in communicating with aquatic bodies, but in Mark 4:38, the disciples use the expression Διδάσκαλε (Teacher) to illustrate Jesus' teaching role concerning his sovereignty in his communication with forces of nature and with aquatic bodies.[91] In Mark 4:39, the verb ἐπετίμησεν (rebuked) describes Jesus' imperative communication with the wind, but in Matthew 8:26, the verb ἐπετίμησεν applies to both the wind and the sea, within the sentence ἐπετίμησεν τοῖς ἀνέμοις καὶ τῇ θαλάσσῃ (he rebuked the winds and the sea).

Similarly, in Mark 4:39–40, ἐπετίμησεν refers to the wind, while the verb εἶπεν (said) is used for Jesus' communication with both the sea (Mark 4:39) and the disciples (Mark 4:40). Whereas Matthew 8:24–27 does not preserve Jesus' exact words to the sea, Mark 4:35–41 records them explicitly: ἐπετίμησεν τῷ ἀνέμῳ καὶ εἶπεν τῇ θαλάσσῃ, Σιώπα, πεφίμωσο (He rebuked the winds, and he said to the sea: Silence! Be still!). Relating to Okyeame hermeneutics, Jesus therefore communicates with the aquatic bodies in the imperative mood, exercising authoritative speech that demands response and obedience. In Matthew 8:27, this is expressed in the sentence καὶ οἱ ἄνεμοι καὶ ἡ θάλασσα αὐτῷ ὑπακούουσιν (the winds and the sea obey him). From the perspective of Okyeame hermeneutics, this scene reveals a dyadic communication structure among Jesus, the sea, and the disciples. Jesus speaks through words and gestures – sleeping, rising, rebuking, and calming. The wind and the sea "respond" with natural signs – storm, waves, and calm. The disciples respond with fear, disbelief, and awe. Communication therefore occurs on multiple levels at once.

Applying Okyeame hermeneutics to Mark 4:37–40 and Matthew 8:24–27 shows that, in these two textual contexts, Jesus exercises interpretive authority not only over human interlocutors, but also over the forces of nature. Like the Okyeame, he restores order through authoritative speech directed toward powers beyond ordinary human exchange. His command to the sea therefore functions as a hermeneutical mediation, culminating in the "great calm" (Mark 4:39).

The third function of Okyeame hermeneutics centers on communication with the cosmos or the universe. In Akan society, the cosmos includes the wind, storms, the wilderness, the sky, heaven, the abode of the dead, the dwelling of those yet to be born, and the dwelling place of supernatural beings. The

88. For a discussion about deities, see Marcus Harvey, "Medial Deities and Relational Meanings: Tracing Elements of an Akan Grammar of Knowing," *Journal of Africana Religions* 3, no. 4 (2015): 397–441.
89. Harvey, "Medial Deities and Relational Meanings," 407.
90. Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 1–13*.
91. Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 1–13*.

Okyeame interprets communication with the cosmos by remaining in proximity to these realities and discerning their place within the moral and spiritual order of the community. Jesus is likewise presented as one who communicates with the cosmos. He calms the wind,[92] speaks to the waves,[93] saves Peter from drowning,[94] remains in the wilderness,[95] enters the abode of the dead,[96] undergoes transfiguration,[97] hears a voice[98] from the open heavens,[99] and ascends into heaven.[100] In each of these instances, Jesus carries out the hermeneutics of God's mission by mediating between the human and cosmic order, demonstrating authority over creation while remaining in communicative proximity to it.

The fourth function of Okyeame hermeneutics concerns communication with the ancestors (*nsamanfoɔ*). In Akan society, the ancestors are exemplars of good communication, incorporating both the supernatural and human community while they are on earth. The Okyeame continues the good work of the ancestors by carrying out hermeneutics in proximity to them and by preserving the continuity of communal and spiritual order.[101] Like the Okyeame, Jesus carries out the hermeneutics of God in communication with the tradition of the law, represented by Moses;[102] with the lineage of prophets, represented by Elijah;[103] and with the heavenly hosts, represented by the angels.[104] Moses, Elijah, and the angels are analogous to the Akan ancestors in terms of three criteria: 1) mediation functions, 2) communication functions, and 3) mobility functions.

In other words, just as Akan ancestors mediate between the living and supernatural beings, Moses, Elijah, and the angels mediate between human beings and God.[105]Akan ancestors perform communication functions in prayers of libation, expiation rites, royal coronations, birth rites, mortuary rites, and healing rituals. In a similar vein, Moses, Elijah and the angels perform communication roles in Scripture. For example, Moses and Elijah communicate with Jesus during his transfiguration (Matthew 17:3); the angel Gabriel communicates the incarnation to Mary (Luke 1:26–38); and angels attend to Jesus following the temptation in the wilderness (Matthew 4:11). Likewise, just as Akan ancestors possess mobility functions that allow movement across the spiritual and material worlds, so too do Moses, Elijah, and the angels in biblical narratives (Matthew 17:3–4; Mark 9:4–5; Luke 9:30, 33; Acts 3:22; Hebrews 3:2–5; Luke 2:9–15). Okyeame hermeneutics therefore provides a framework for analyzing the modalities through which Jesus carries out the mission for God in proximity to the biblical prophets, the Pentateuch,[106] and the heavenly hosts.

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92. See Mathiew 8:26.
93. See Mark 4:39.
94. See Matthiew 14:29-31.
95. See Matthiew 4:1–4; Mark 1:12; and Luke 4:1–3.
96. See 1 Peter 3:19; 1 Peter 4:6; and Ephesians 4:9.
97. See Matthiew 17:1–3.
98. See Matthiew 3:17; Matthiew 17:5.
99. See Luke 3:21.
100. See Luke 24:51.
101. See Kwesi A. Dickson, *Akan Religion and the Christian Faith: a comparative study of the impact of the two religions* (Accra, Ghana Universities Press, 1965), 121,127.
102. See Mathew 17:3.
103. See Matthew 17:3, 11–12.
104. See Mark 1:13; Mathew 4:11.
105. See Jude 1:9; Exodus 32:9–14, 1 Kings 17:17–21, and 1 Kings 18:41–46.
106. For a detailed discussion of the competing stakeholders of Deuteronomy, for example, see Amanda Rosini. 2023. Thesis: Revisiting the Role and Influence of the Northern Kingdom of Israel in the Conception and Development of the Core Legal Code of Deuteronomy, McGill University, Montreal.

The fifth function of Okyeame hermeneutics involves communication with the king. The Okyeame interprets the king by attending to the dynamics of the king's communication with other interlocutors, such as the Supreme Being, deities, the cosmos, ancestors, elders, and the people within Akan society. Because the king stands at the center of this communicational order, the Okyeame has little margin for error in his hermeneutics. His interpretive tasks require accuracy, discretion, and proximity to the king's intentions. In a similar vein, Jesus carries out the hermeneutics of God's mission with the awareness that there is no margin for error in his communication with the stakeholders of God's kingdom. This includes not only divine communication with God, but also his engagement with specific groups,[107] such as the apostles, disciples, the crowd, Pharisees, chief priests, elders, Sadducees, scribes, and Herod during his public ministry.[108] Jesus shapes his hermeneutics in constant proximity to these stakeholders, while recognizing that God is the ultimate king.

The sixth function of Okyeame hermeneutics concerns communication with the elders of the Akan society. The elders serve as collaborators and advisors to the Akan king, and the Okyeame carries out hermeneutics in proximate, balanced, and reverential communication with them. Their counsel helps preserve social order and ensures that public discourse remains accountable to communal wisdom. Jesus is likewise attentive to the elders and their council in the New Testament as he carries out his hermeneutics on behalf of God. He engages both the inherited tradition of the elders and the new demands of God's mission, often affirming, challenging, and reinterpreting these traditions within his public teaching. In this way, Jesus nuances his hermeneutics with the old tradition of the elders and the new tradition of the mission of God.[109]

The seventh function of Okyeame hermeneutics includes communication with the public. The people are central to Akan public hermeneutics, as they form an integral part of the seven categories of the communicational life. Any error in Akan hermeneutics directly impacts the lives of the people, and, for this reason, the Okyeame must remain in close proximity to the public and to their lived realities. Likewise, Jesus remains in proximity to the public[110] while performing the hermeneutics of God's mission. His priestly, kingly, and prophetic functions are enacted not in isolation, but within the life of the people. The seven functions of Okyeame hermeneutics therefore provide an important framework for adding nuance to the hermeneutics of Scripture and theology for the whole of humanity, since divine self-revelation is a gift given to all humanity.

The criteria for Okyeame hermeneutics provide important modalities for interpreting the mission of Jesus Christ. Just as an Okyeame must be endowed with seven particular qualities to carry out hermeneutics within Akan society, so too Jesus, in his humanity, demonstrates corresponding qualities in the fulfillment of God's mission. These include a mastery of Hebrew and Aramaic rhetoric,[111] customs, history; wisdom;[112] panegyrics; experience; communicative eloquence; moral virtue, not only in character but also in speech; the preservation of sacred authority; and attentiveness to all stakeholders within a given communicational context. Jesus himself recognizes the importance of eloquence and wisdom for divine mission, promising his disciples: "For I will give you words and wisdom that none of your adversaries will

107. See Matthew 19:1–8.
108. See Luke 20:20–25
109. See Matthew 5:38–48.
110. See John 18:20; Matthew 9:10–12.
111. See Matthew 13:10–13.
112. See Mark 12:34 and Luke 11:27.

be able to resist or contradict" (Luke 21:15). This suggests that effective communication is not incidental, but central to the hermeneutics of God's mission.

The seven features of status in Okyeame hermeneutics provide important categories for interpreting the mission of Jesus, as illustrated in his communication with aquatic bodies, the wind, proximity, and tradition. Jesus carries out the hermeneutics of God's mission in roles analogous to those of the Okyeame: diplomat,[113] envoy,[114] prosecutor,[115] protocol officer,[116] sometimes a prayer officiant,[117] confidant,[118] and counselor.[119] These roles are reflected throughout his public ministry. Jesus acts as an envoy in communicating the will of the Father, as a counselor in teaching his disciples, and as a prosecutor in his confrontations with religious authorities. He also functions as a confidant, as seen in his private conversation with Nicodemus, where he shares the deeper dimensions of his mission and the meaning of being "born again" (John 3:1–21). Through these functions, Jesus performs the interpretive and mediating status associated with Okyeame hermeneutics.

The seven modalities of the status of Okyeame hermeneutics provide an important analytical framework for interpreting the reputation and status of Jesus in the mission of God. Through these seven features of the status, biblical scholars can understand Jesus, among other roles, as a confidant whose communication depends upon proximity to both God and his interlocutors. Proximity is a central feature in Okyeame hermeneutics because it allows interlocutors to assess whether the Okyeame's performance is authentic, accurate, significant, and effective with respect to the people he represents. For this reason, the Okyeame maintains the closest possible proximity with those who participate in his hermeneutics within Akan society. For example, he leans toward the king for verbal consultation prior to, during, and after acts such as libation, arbitration, expiation, public announcements, and the narration of historical events in Akan society. He likewise turns toward the elders and the people when they hold priority within the communicational dynamics of Akan society.

This Akan notion of proximity provides a useful framework for examining the dynamics of Jesus' relationship with his interlocutors. Jesus calls on the twelve Apostles to remain in close proximity to him as companions (Mark 3:13–19; Matthew 10:1–4; Luke 6:12–16). He selects Peter, James, and John to accompany him prior to his transfiguration (Matthew 17:1), and in Gethsemane (Matthew 26:36). John reclines next to Jesus during the Last Supper. This feature also sheds light on the significance of Jesus' insistence on his own proximity to God, as expressed in his prayers and public teaching (John 10:30; John 14:9; John 17:5, 13). When the Akan notion of proximity is used as a lens for the examination of these biblical instances, Jesus emerges as the authentic, significant, efficient, and accurate interpreter – the true Okyeame – for all people in the New Testament.

The seven categories of people with whom the Okyeame interacts in Akan society provide another important analytical perspective for examining the hermeneutics of Jesus. Biblical scholars may analyze Jesus' hermeneutics through this Akan framework by considering the dynamics, nature, significance, efficiency, and accuracy of his communication with corresponding categories in the New Testament, such as: God (the Supreme Being), earthly domains (associated with deities), elements of nature (the Cosmos or universe), biblical personages such as Moses and Elijah (ancestors), the Trinity and divine kingship (the

113. See John 14:9.
114. See John 20:21.
115. See Luke 12:14.
116. See John 2:3–8; Matthew 17:24–27. Hagner, "Matthew 1–13," 145–152.
117. See Luke 11:1–4; John 11:41–44.
118. See John 4:1–42 and John 3:1–21.
119. See Matthew 10:16.

King), key stakeholders such as elders and religious authorities (the elders), and the crowd or wider public (the public).

These categories are not intended as a rigid hierarchy, but as an intercommunicational structure of relationships within Akan society. Each category participates in the broader moral, social, and spiritual order that the Okyeame must interpret and mediate. This offers a useful parallel between the seven categories of the Okyeame and the communicational relationships of Jesus in Scripture. Table 2 summarizes these seven categories in Akan hermeneutics, as well as their analogical correspondences in the Bible.

Table 2: Parallel Between Okyeame and Jesus Concerning the Categories of People

Categories of people:	
Okyeame	Jesus Christ
Supreme Being	God
Deity	Earthly domain
cosmos/universe	Elements of nature
Ancestors	Biblical personages
King	The Trinity
Elders	Stakeholders in the Bible
Public	Crowd

Okyeame hermeneutics offers an analytical modality for adding new nuance to the interpretation of Jesus' mission by drawing on categories similar to those that shape the Okyeame's eloquent communication with God and the community. In this respect, Jesus can be understood as the eloquence of God's presence on earth, the eloquence of prayers offered to God, the eloquence of true humanity, the eloquence of proximity to both God and humanity, the eloquence of communicating divine self-revelation, and the eloquence of the panegyrics of God's mission. With regard to panegyrics, several epithets in the New Testament articulate Jesus' mission in his kingly, priestly, and prophetic functions. As king, he is identified through titles such as son of David,[120] Lord,[121] and Good Master.[122] As priest, he is described as the Lamb of God,[123] the Messiah,[124] Rabbi,[125] Son of Man,[126] and the Holy One of God.[127] As prophet, he is recognized through titles such as Teacher.[128] These epithets function as rhetorical forms that proclaim, interpret, and preserve the significance of Jesus' mission within the communicational order of salvation.

120.See Mark 10:47.
121. See Luke 19:8; Mark 7:28, Luke 10:1; John 13:14.
122. See Matthew 19:16.
123. See John 1:29.
124. Luke 2:11; Matthew 16:16.
125. See Mark 10:51.
126. See Luke 19:10.
127. See Luke 4:34.
128. See Mark 5:35 and John 13:13.

Conclusion

From the analytical modalities of Okyeame hermeneutics within Akan society in Ghana, and in continuity with scholars such as John S. Pobee,[129] Kwame Bediako,[130] Charles Nyamiti,[131] François Kabasele,[132] Bénézet Bujo,[133] Antonia C. Kalu,[134] Kwesi Yankah,[135] and Ruth H. Finnegan,[136] this paper contends that African – specifically Akan – models, theories, and stylistics of hermeneutics can make significant contributions to the interpretation of biblical texts.

This paper further argues that some earlier methodologies and approaches in African theology and African hermeneutics have reached their explanatory limits and are becoming obsolete. For example, certain strands of postcolonial studies often repeat familiar critiques of colonial administration, European paradigms, translators, missionary endeavors, and pre-independence infrastructure without generating sufficiently new constructive models for biblical interpretation. Likewise, some approaches based on the Areopagus and the Council of Jerusalem risk taking extreme stances that isolate African theological and biblical studies from mainstream Christian theological discourse. In response, this paper suggests an *ad gentes* (to the nations) approach to hermeneutics, following the pattern suggested in Acts 13:46, in which the models, infrastructure, and contexts of other nations are brought into dialogue with Hebraic and Indo-European achievements in biblical studies. The goal is not separation, but expansion: African hermeneutics should contribute to and reshape the wider field of biblical interpretation.

The conceptual perspective of this paper relies primarily on Yankah's account of the requirements for the efficient performance of Okyeame royal discourse, supplemented by Finnegan's analysis of the performance, and Kalu's framework for developing new theories and methods of hermeneutics in the contemporary period. Yankah's conception of the rhetoric of interpreting the Akan king provides the primary foundation for this study, as his work draws directly on the linguistic and communicational forms of Akan society in Ghana.[137]

The analytical modality of this paper highlights the elements of Okyeame hermeneutics that biblical scholars can apply to the interpretation of Scripture. The five main elements that guide this hermeneutical framework are: 1) functions, 2) criteria, 3) status, 4) people, and 5) representation. Because these five elements form the foundation upon which the Akan in Ghana structure Okyeame hermeneutics, they can also serve as a model for biblical scholars in discussing Jesus' mission.

Using analogous frameworks from other African societies, additional analytical modalities can likewise contribute to biblical hermeneutics more broadly. Such African models may include the hermeneutics of Ogotemmêli among the Dogon of Mali, the Griot tradition in West Africa, the Gelede of the Yoruba, and the Mbari among the Igbo. Other African literary and rhetorical forms – such as Ewe rhetoric, Igbo rhetoric, Yoruba rhetoric, Gulu rhetoric, Swahili rhetoric, Kikuyu rhetoric, Maasai rhetoric, and Serer rhetoric – may also provide important models for ongoing biblical studies.

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129. Pobee, *Toward an African Theology*.
130. Kwame. "Biblical Christologies."
131. Nyamiti, *Christ as our Ancestor*; "African Christologies Today."
132. Kabasele, "Christ as Chief."
133. Bujo, *African Theology*.
134. Kalu, "African Literature and the Traditional Arts."
135. Yankah, *Speakin for the Chief*.
136. Finnegan, *The Oral and Beyond*; *Oral Literature in Africa*.
137. See Yankah, *Speakin for the Chief;* Finnegan, *The Oral and Beyond*; *Oral Literature in Africa*; Kalu, "African Literature and the Traditional Arts."

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