

# Reception of Paul's eschatological teaching in Ghana: A contextual study of 1 Thess. 4:13-18

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Paul's teaching on the *Parousia* and resurrection of the dead has been a subject of contention with the culture of some Ghanaian contexts. The belief in life after death in Ghanaian culture requires the performance of certain rituals for the dead which contradicts biblical teaching because of the belief in the resurrection of the dead. These belief systems often cause disagreement and misunderstanding among surviving families, sometimes resulting in violent clashes at the instance of the death of relatives. However, the interpretation of the word of God is given for the transformation of the individual and society. The article, therefore, employs analysis of some rhetorical elements in the text and the Contextual Bible Study model of African biblical hermeneutics to investigate how Paul's teaching on death and resurrection in 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18 is received by Christians in the Ghanaian context. It contends that as Christians believe that the dead in Christ will rise on the *Parousia*, then rituals and cultural practices that have negative effects on the socio-economic and Christian beliefs of surviving families should be avoided or modified.

**Contribution:** The article concludes that the church in Ghana should advocate strongly for a transformation of such cultural practices and institute measures to ameliorate the effects of death and funeral expenses of Ghanaian families.

**Keywords:** African; biblical; contextual; eschatological; Ghanaian; interpretation; *Parousia*; Paul; 1 Thessalonians.

## Introduction

Central to the Christian theological and biblical discourse is the issue of the *Parousia*, where believers are expected to meet the Lord and spend eternity with him. The teachings of Christ, the apostolic preaching, and the work of the early missionaries on the kingdom of God emphasised the resurrection of the dead in the events of the last days. These eschatological discourses not only focus on 'expectation, hope, death and the future, but engages with the present and the past through the act of remembrance' (Mayemba 2009:1). According to Fergusson (2000:2), the study of religious culture in contemporary contexts reveals both the prevalence and power of eschatological images and the use of apocalyptic rhetoric in eschatological discourses. Consequently, the imageries of the *Parousia* and discourse thus, constitute a fundamental issue for theologising in the post-colonial era because of the current hermeneutical focus in biblical studies and theological discourse in Africa. Nsiah (2018:4) asserts that in the Ghanaian Christian landscape, the expectation of Christ's imminent *Parousia* has been a significant Christian belief since the emergence of Christianity and continues to engage other aspects of the cultural and social life of the people.

The Bible entered the shores of Ghana through the missionary ships that came with both the Christian missionaries and the slave masters with a colonial mentality which they successfully implemented. Undoubtedly, Christian missionaries entered Africa with all sorts of motives, of which some were insalubrious. The notion that commerce, civilisation, and Christianity must go hand in hand laid the foundation for colonialism, as it contained an implicit demand for legitimate government and western tutelage (Sanneh 1989:105). However, we appreciate the foundation laid for comparative studies and the translation of the Bible into vernacular languages which aided the spread of Christianity in Ghana and Africa at large (Sanneh 1989:105).

The impact of colonialism in Africa has been experienced in many ways including the presentation of African culture in some demeaning terms. The activities of the Western missionaries, among

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other things, resulted in the negative description of African culture making people turn away from their own culture to embrace that of the West. This resulted in a situation that not only impacted negatively on the culture of the African people but also their identity. Indigenous epistemology, beliefs, ideas, images, and sacred symbols of Africans were deemed heathen and thus, not helpful for the colonial project designed for global domination; hence, they were disregarded and made people reject them through the agency of the Bible.

Hence, the Bible has been described by many scholars as a tool for colonisation which requires decolonisation in the quest to let the African reader appropriate the biblical text in ways that reflect their cultural identity as a people. Africans must read the Bible as a postcolonial subject employing methods and hermeneutical approaches that seeks to liberate African readers of the impact of colonisation and Eurocentric interpretation. This article attempts to read 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18 to help the Ghanaian Christian engage Paul's teaching on the second coming of Christ with some elements in the Ghanaian culture.

The article is structured into five sections and a conclusion. It begins with some methodological efforts in decolonising the Bible and follows with an analysis of rhetorical elements in the selected text. A contextual reading of the text using the Contextual Bible Study (CBS) Model is discussed in the next section followed by a dialogical engagement of text and context. It then concludes with a proposal for reading the Bible to transform the African context and proposes revisiting some concepts towards decolonisation of the Bible. It affirms that the eschatological motif in this epistle effectively communicates the hope of believers at the return of Christ and strengthens the belief in the resurrection.

## Methodological consideration: Decolonising the Bible

Biblical interpretation in Africa has been a subject of scholarly discussion since the early 1960s when the call for a hermeneutical paradigm that addresses the socio-cultural matrices of the African people, different from the European exegetical paradigm, was advocated for. In differentiating between colonialism and coloniality, Maldonado-Torres (2007:243) defined coloniality as 'long-standing patterns that emerged as a result of colonialism, but that define culture, labour, inter-subjective relations, and knowledge production well beyond the strict limits of colonial administration'. Through the medium of colonialism, the Western world imposed their patterns of expression, beliefs, and images with respect to the divine. The beliefs and images in the view of Quijano (2007:169) served not only to impede the cultural production of the dominated but also as a very efficient means of social and cultural control.

In this post-colonial era, though the colonial administrators are no longer present, their presence in Africa, first as settlers and now as Africans, in part serves to ensure the continuity of the colonial situation. According to Ramantswana (2016:404), this presence in some way serves as a transmission channel to

transfer Western-European biblical interpretation paradigms within the African context. The Eurocentric paradigms continue to be observed as patterns that must be replicated in our African environment. Consequently, such approaches to reading the Bible are what is accepted and published by foreign journals, which unfortunately African universities value more than African journals. However, it should be noted that the colonial situation is able to continue and survive even in the absence of colonial administration through coloniality.

Considering this, African biblical scholars need to reconstruct their hermeneutical practices using approaches that draw more from African epistemologies, philosophies, and frameworks, rather than dwelling intemperately on Euro-Western interpretative paradigms. African biblical scholars must encourage contextual studies that are relevant to the African contemporary contexts for them to benefit from such scholarship (Ramantswana 2016:404). African biblical hermeneutics must take cognisance of their contextual matrices: social location, their epistemological location, and the concerns of the African people. Biblical scholars in Africa can overcome the deployment of Westernised paradigms in biblical interpretation by appreciating the fact that hermeneutics is not foreign to the African as this has been employed in their daily lives. Africans all along have been reading, understanding, and interpreting their world as a text, for the art of interpretation is not limited to written text. African scholars must, therefore, develop indigenous ways of reading the biblical text. The reality in which Africans live and move is in effect a text.

Nonetheless, as Ramantswana (2016:406) argues 'the colonial mindset, which still weighs heavily on us, makes us continue to undermine our knowledge systems even in the current post-colonial era'. Biblical scholars in Africa can thus, contribute to the decolonisation of the Bible by gleaning from the African context forms of reading, understanding, and interpretation while in dialogue with the biblical text.

Therefore, in this article, some rhetorical elements in the selected text (1 Th 4:13–18) are analysed to help explore the rhetorical functions of the compositional structural elements of the text. It contextualises the study by reading the selected text using the CBS model of Gerald O. West (West 2000:8) in three selected churches in Ghana to elicit the views of 'ordinary readers' of the Bible which is an option for decolonial reading of the Bible. By this model, ordinary readers: the poor and marginalised as well as people with no theological formation study the Bible with a facilitator to express their views on the biblical text reflecting on their contemporary context (West 2000).

## Analysis of rhetorical elements in 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18

The first epistle of Paul to the church in Thessalonica has unique characteristics from other Pauline corpus largely because of the rhetorical situation and problem he sought to address. In this passage, Timothy reported the intense persecution of the

Christian community in Thessalonica, and the feeling of abandonment by Paul, the founder of the faith community. There was also the issue of grieving over the death of their loved ones while still awaiting the *Parousia* of Christ because of the apocalyptic knowledge they possessed. These were situations that required that Paul wrote in a more friendly and exhortative tone. He used different species of rhetoric in this letter; however, the dominant one in the pericope is deliberative rhetoric because of the persuasive motif of the letter.

Different rhetorical structures are used by commentators of the text to study the pericope. However, for the purpose of this study, the four-stepped structure discussed further will guide the rhetorical analysis of the text:

- V. 13: Death and grief among Christians
- Vv. 14–15: Assurance for the dead at the *Parousia*
- V. 16: The dead at the event of the *Parousia*
- Vv. 17–18: Eschatological hope for believers

From chapter 4:1–12, Paul exhorts the church in Thessalonica to live in order to please God. He emphasises holy living and abstinence from immorality as the will of God for them. This call underscores the importance of good moral living by members of the faith community. In view of that, he encouraged them in their grief (v. 13) over the deceased members of the church with the hope that they died in Christ. In vv. 14–15, he assures them that those members of the community who died before Christ's return were not hopeless because they believed in the resurrection of Christ. He offers the basis of this assurance in v. 16 which is the central verse of the pericope. Paul adduces evidence to prove to them that the dead are not lost because Christ has not come, but they will rise first on the return of Christ because they died in him. This should be a comforting message to them and so asks that they should use these words to encourage each other in vv. 17–18.

### Death and grief among Christians (V. 13)

One key component of Paul's eschatological discourse is the place of the dead at the event of Christ's second coming. Judging from the situation at the time he wrote and the problem he sought to address, death and its aftermath effects could not be glossed over. Among the issues reported to him by Timothy is the issue of *λυπη* (grief) caused by death. Paul, thus, begins the section with the subjunctive present passive *λυπήσθε* to express the sad, sorrowful, and distressed state of the Christian community resulting from the persecution but more importantly, the death of some members of the community. He combines the vocative *ἀδελφοί* [brothers] with the disclosure formula as an epistolary convention in this verse with the rhetorical function of signaling a transition in the pericope. Hence, to make the address direct and elicit the full attention of the Thessalonians, Paul used a rhetorical style of placing the pronoun *ὑμᾶς* between the two verbs *θέλομεν*<sup>1</sup> and *ἀγνοεῖν* making the pronoun the subject of the infinitive *ἀγνοεῖν*.

1. In Paul's usage of the verb *θέλω* in other writings, it takes a complementary infinitive making the construction *Οὐ θέλομεν δὲ ὑμᾶς ἀγνοεῖν, ἀδελφοί* a unique one in this verse.

With the aim of persuading them not to grieve any further because of their hope in the resurrection of Christ, Paul positions *ἀγνοεῖν* before the vocative *ἀδελφοί* to introduce to them the fate of the members of the community who died in Christ before the *Parousia*. *Αγνοεῖν*, therefore, intensifies the call to the Thessalonians and emphasises the fact that they are the subject matter of the discussion as they were those grieving over the deaths of members of the Christian community. This implies that the propensity of grief occurring because of death is indispensable; however, hope in Christ and his resurrection mitigates the degree of grieving.

### Assurance for the dead at the *Parousia* (vv. 14–15)

Paul used the kerygmatic formula of Christ's resurrection as a basis to persuade the Thessalonian church regarding the fate of those who died in Christ. The expression *εἰ γὰρ πιστεύομεν* forms the basis of Paul's justification of the privileged fate of the dead in Christ because the belief in Christ's resurrection constitutes a foundational faith of all Christians which the Thessalonians share in that faith. This position made him use the euphemism for death with the present passive participle *κοιμηθέντας*. The expression *διὰ τοῦ Ἰησοῦ* functions in ameliorating the grief of the community arising from the death that occurred in the community with the hope that their belief in Christ's resurrection should assure them that the people they are grieving about are not 'dead', but like Christ said about Lazarus in John 11:11 are asleep waiting to be resurrected at the second coming of Christ. For the presence of Christ or the Spirit in the Christian guarantees that when they indeed die *ἐν Χριστῷ* they will continue *ἐν Χριστῷ* (v. 16) during the interval between death and resurrection and will be raised at the *Parousia* by God through the power of the same indwelling Christ or Spirit as in Romans 8:11 (Frame 1985:169).

He then uses a divine formula to describe the privileged position of those who have died before the *Parousia*. The phrase *τοῦτο γὰρ ὑμῖν λέγομεν ἐν λόγῳ κυρίου* suggests that the message has been communicated that those who are asleep in Christ are worthy of trust because it has a divine origin or backing. It is asserted on the strength of the Lord's utterance that the living at the *Parousia* will by no means take temporal precedence over the dead. In effect, they should be motivated to come out of their grieving because the dead will be better placed at the *Parousia* of Christ as expressed by the phrase *οἱ περιλειπόμενοι εἰς τὴν παρουσίαν τοῦ κυρίου οὐ μὴ φθάσωμεν*. This accounts for the reason why they should not grieve like those without hope (v. 13).

### The dead at the event of the *Parousia* (v. 16)

Building on the hope in the resurrection of Christ which the Thessalonians believed, Paul now presents the enigmatic cosmic event of Christ's return in a phenomenal manner. He begins with the phrase *ὅτι αὐτός ὁ κύριος* to mark the appearance of Christ where he will be revealed as the glorified one to all. This phrase affirms that for Paul, the very Jesus,

under whose control the believers stand in life, at death (v. 14), and from death to resurrection, οἱ νεκροὶ ἐν Χριστῷ., and who's indwelling spiritually guarantees their resurrection, is the Lord who will descend at the *Parousia*. As Lord or Master, his descent from heaven is characterized by three clauses with ἐν and the second and third are linked by the conjunction καὶ (ἐν κελεύσματι, ἐν φωνῇ ἀρχαγγέλου καὶ ἐν σάλπιγγι θεοῦ) will come down from heaven with a shout of command, with the archangel's call and with the sound of God's trumpet. Then the dead in Christ will ἀναστήσονται πρῶτον [rise first]. The event of the *Parousia* as presented by Paul in this letter indicates how significant those who have died in Christ are to this event.

The account offers hope for the living and drives away their fears as they will also not be disadvantaged should they die like the others before Christ returns. In offering this assurance, he now uses οἱ νεκροὶ ἐν Χριστῷ together with the indicative future middle ἀναστήσονται [because at this point the community is aware of the relationship between death and resurrection drawing from the example of Christ]. With the purpose of encouraging the community with their grief in mind, the use of the two expressions, namely, τοὺς κοιμηθέντας διὰ τοῦ Ἰησοῦ ἀπὸ οἱ νεκροὶ ἐν Χριστῷ helped in communicating effectively to the church without intensifying their grief, rather offering them assurance that the living can also be motivated in their faith with anticipation of the *Parousia*.

## Eschatological hope for believers (vv. 17–18)

Invariably, from the conviction drawn from the religious experience in Christ (v. 14), the summarised word of the Lord Paul alluded to (v. 15), and from the confirmatory description of the *Parousia* (vv. 16–17), they should not grieve because these should serve as a source of hope for them. Rather, they should παρακαλεῖτε ἀλλήλους ἐν τοῖς λόγοις τούτοις. Ωστε signals to the reader that v. 18 is a resultant clause of what Paul spoke about in vv. 16 and 17. With the understanding that the dead will rise and join the living at the *Parousia*, there was no need for them to grieve because their own fate is secured just as those who have died in Christ.

This implies that 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18 satisfies Paul's intentions of offering consolation to the grieving Thessalonian Christian community and the pastoral concern expressed in the opening verse of the pericope (v. 13) describing Paul's purpose of writing (Wanamaker 1998:175; Weima 2014:337). It aptly concludes on the fate of the deceased members of the Christian community with the hope of seeing them again at the return of Christ, and they will be together with the Lord. He grounds the exhortation to comfort one another by contrasting it with the helplessness that humanity experiences in the face of death as the Thessalonians were exhibiting. He also employs the authoritative confession of the church about Christ's own resurrection, which guarantees the resurrection of the members who have died to be alive

and be with Jesus at the *Parousia* expressed in verse 14. Again, he used the authoritative word of the Lord summarised in the divine formula that guarantees that the deceased members will by no means be disadvantaged when Christ returns but will equally be present at the event of the *Parousia*, to form the basis for which they must comfort each other.

## Contextual Bible Study of 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18 with selected churches

To contextualise the reading of the text in an African context, three churches from different Christian traditions (Historic Mission church, Pentecostal, and Charismatic) were selected for the study. Official permission was sought from the leadership of the churches, and members were fully informed of this study before the days for the reading of the text. They were made to read the text in a church setting and discuss their understanding of the text being guided by the scholarly reader as the facilitator. The reading of the text was conducted in three languages. English in the Charismatic church, Ga in the Pentecostal church, and Asante Twi in the historic mission church. Their views as expressed in the reading process were analysed and integrated into the article.

Some major views expressed by the readers centred on the place of the dead as expressed in the text and what pertains in their cultural contexts. Comparing the context of the text with their own context, they observed there is hope for those who die in Christ; hence, the extent of mourning in the community should be reduced because of their hope in Christ and understanding that death is an inevitable phenomenon that can come at any time. This brought up a debate among the readers as the views expressed by the readers in different churches were diverse. However, it was established that the dead leave the physical world into a world beyond. Therefore, they were encouraged to live a prepared life as death could visit any time, or the *Parousia* could occur.

It was clearly expressed by the readers that their belief in the afterlife informs most of the practices and rituals that are performed during funerals. Notable among them are the burial of dead family members with money, clothes, blankets, pomade, and perfume etc. Because they still believe that death is a journey (Sarpong 1974:21–22). Some readers indicated that the kind of funerals they organise is associated with this belief because, for the person to be regarded as an ancestor, he or she must be given a befitting burial. Some readers alluded to the fact that even though they believe their dead family members are Christians, these practices cannot be ignored because of the society in which they live and belong. That is to say, even though they have an understanding of the eschatological teaching concerning the place of the dead, their belief in the hereafter, cultural setting and societal norms influence their reception of this Christian teaching.

It is instructive to indicate that some readers maintained that some of the practices observed during funerals and at other rites of passages cannot be considered cultural, because they have developed as a result of modernisation and preferences of the surviving families of the deceased as they were not part of their funeral rituals and celebrations in the past. For instance, they mentioned taking out a procession from the mortuary to the house of the deceased amid brass band music, changing the dress of the corpse twice or thrice before burial, serving food and drinks before the burial, and undertakers who carry the casket dancing around with it. They noted that if the deceased family member is a prominent person, it must reflect in everything they do at the funeral: the casket for burial, undertakers, arrangement at the funeral grounds, decorations, food and drinks served, among others. In some cases, people are hired to sing dirges and mourn the dead and their fees can be very high. This makes funerals in some parts of the country, especially among the Akans of Ghana very expensive. This notwithstanding, they concluded that from the context of the text all such practices must not be continued as Christians with the understanding of the position of the dead in Christ.

## Contextual Bible Study and biblical interpretation in decolonial era

Using the CBS model in biblical interpretation brought to light the significant role of language in the interpretation process. Reading the text with ordinary people in their preferred language revealed cultural diversity in the process of interpretation. This suggests that decolonial reading of the Bible must pay attention to the language of the reader as a way of upholding the culture and identity of Africans reading the Bible in their context.

The dynamic nature of the text was also evident to people giving credence to the reader-centred approach to reading the Bible in the attempt to decolonise the Bible's message. Contrary to Western exegesis and hermeneutical paradigms that focus mainly on the author or text, African Christians can approach the Bible from a perspective that takes the reader (African) into consideration and examine the various matrices in their contexts that have the tendency of influencing their perspective of the biblical text. I propose this because the reading of the text (1 Th 4:13–18) took place in three churches in different regions in Ghana. The demographics of the reading community revealed how the influence of modern social life can impact the Christian life of people in their contexts.

## Death and afterlife from the Ghanaian perspective

The colonial influence of the Western missionaries impacted some aspects of the African culture. That notwithstanding, their belief in life after death is still unwavering (Okeke 2015:4). In Ghana, the arrival of Christianity modernised the beliefs of the people to some extent. However, it did not

radically or fundamentally change their basic beliefs. Ghanaians believe that death is a transition from the physical world into the spiritual world. Sarpong describes it as “a fundamental modality of living, concrete existence” (Sarpong 1974:20). They express this belief by the rituals they perform for the dead before and during burial (Sarpong 1974). In some communities, they bury people with gifts of money, clothing, personal items, and some tools they used to work.

Like other African societies, Ghanaians believe in the inevitability of death. The Akans of Ghana, for instance, express this notion in some sacred texts through proverbs and Adinkra symbols. The Akan proverb *Owuo atwedee obaako nfo* [One person does not climb the ladder of death] and its corresponding Adinkra symbol *Owuo Atwedee* [the ladder of death] is a case in mention. Traditional epistemology derived from these symbols and text affirms the belief that human beings are bound to tread the path of death (Amoateng 2022:xxvii–xxviii).

The notion of life after death is prevalent in all African societies. Mbiti (1969:158) asserts that ‘death is a departure and not a complete annihilation of a person’. This is demonstrated by the belief in the ancestors, and according to Sarpong (1974:33), the belief and veneration of ancestors is not peculiar to any age, religion, or society. In his view, when Christians call their dead saints and refer to those of indigenous religions as ancestors, they are in fact expressing the same idea with different words. They hold the belief that to ensure a good life after death, the moral ethos of the community, including religious and societal rules must be observed. Most ethnic groups in Ghana like the Akans, Gas, Ewes, believe that for one to become an ancestor, the person must live an exemplary life, die a natural death, and be given a befitting burial (Opoku 1978:36–38). Death, as expressed by Sarpong (1974:34), is a necessary condition for ancestorship, for there is no living ancestor and there cannot be one. There can be an ancestor to a particular lineage, clan, town, or chiefdom, and not a whole ethnic group. They exert influence over the lives of the living members of the family and community. They are known to exercise positive influence like blessing couples with children, good harvest, and protection. At the same time, if they are not happy with some behaviours of people in the community, they can inflict them with the punishment of misfortune or sickness (Okeke 2015:6; Opoku 1978:51–52).

The belief by Ghanaians that the soul of an individual lives on after bodily death is expressed in the Akan maxim ‘when a person dies, he is not [really] dead’ (Gyekye 1996:13). Impliedly, a part of the human survives bodily death and continues to exist in the ‘world of spirits’. The Adinkra symbol *Nyame nnwuu na ma wu* literally meaning ‘could God die, I will [also] die’ strengthens this traditional concept of life after death. For in their worldview, as God will not die, anybody whose soul is conceived as an indwelling part of God will neither die (Gyekye 1996:14). The eternal nature of God has implications for the immortality of the human soul and constitutes a part of

the divine essence. Many Africans believe that their loved ones who are dead do not actually leave them but hover around and protect them (Mbiti 1969:158). Gyekye (1996:14) corroborates this view by the Akans of Ghana when he notes that the reality of the world of the spirits that dead members of the community inhabit is built on the assumptions of the human soul and individual survival in an afterlife.

## Dialogical engagement of text and context

According to Anum (2008:144), 'There is the need for an effective dialogue between ordinary readers and scholarly or trained readers of the Bible in order to arrive at a representative and meaningful interpretation'. Such an engagement helps to strengthen the relationship between scientific exegesis and context. Similarly, Ukpog (2000:24) submits that: 'the actualization of the theological meaning of a text in today's context is so as to forge integration between faith and life and engender commitment to personal and societal transformation'. And Anum (2009:54) affirms that 'Africans most of the time would like to see biblical interpretation as a living exercise which must come into actual operation in their day-to-day experiences in their lives'. In this way, the Bible, as indicated by Gatti (2017:47), will not be 'dumb to the present', and not be able to respond to contemporary societal problems.

Thus, in the quest to decolonise the reading of the Bible, engaging the findings of the text in dialogue with the concrete realities in the African context can help in engaging African traditional knowledge systems and heritage with the Bible for mutual transformation. Undoubtedly, these are great resources in the African context that can help the understanding of a biblical text.

The emergence of Christianity with its eschatological teaching impacted the understanding of life after death among Ghanaians and Africans as a whole. The traditional understanding of death as a transition is similar to the Christian eschatological teaching where believers in Christ who leave the physical world would be with Christ at the *Parousia* (1 Th 4:15). The analysis of 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18 highlights the destiny of the soul of those who die in Christ where Paul indicates that they will be in a privileged position of rising first from the dead and meeting the Lord with the living members of the Christian community in the clouds to be with the Lord.

From the CBS conducted, people still hold beliefs about life after death which are contrary to the findings of the text. The perception of the fate of the dead and reincarnation contradicts the Pauline thought of the bodily resurrection of the dead in Christ espoused in the text. The study of the text with the selected churches revealed the fact that generally death is not seen to be the end of life, but a transmutation from this physical life to a different one in the world beyond.

It is described as embarking on a long journey to reach the land of the spirits and continuing to live as an ancestor.

Notwithstanding the difference in the conception of life after death in the traditional context and the eschatological teaching in the text, there are common beliefs that can motivate dialogue between the contexts for mutual transformation and adaptation. In the Akan worldview, for instance, the dead do not continue to be in the grave after burial but are turned into spirits to move to the spiritual world. Similarly in the eschatological teaching of the church, the dead in Christ will rise at the *Parousia* to be with the Lord. The common ground for both contexts is that the individual must live a good moral life in the society in order to be able to participate in the *Parousia*, proceed to the world of the spirits, and continue to live as an ancestor. Impliedly, just as the Christians must live a desirable life (1 Th 4:1–12) before they can be with Christ, traditional Akans require good moral living on earth to join the ancestors after death. Those who die before this day will rise first and be with the Lord if they die in Christ. This has implications for ethical behaviour while alive and walking in obedience to the words of Christ. The imperative of salvation is what guarantees the ability of the deceased member to access the privileged position ordained for the dead in the hereafter.

The concept of life after death is premised on the conception of life in the traditional worldview of Ghanaians. In apposition to the Christian notion of life that human existence is in linear form, most ethnic groups in Africa and Ghana are of the view that the world will not end, as all events of life are in a cyclical order (Rahner 1982:431). Like every African, they view life as timeless infinity (Mayemba 2009:1) and expect human history to continue forever (Mbiti 1969:24). The difficulty of some contemporary Ghanaian Christians in annexing Paul's eschatological message to the church thus, stems from the fact that they hold dual religious beliefs (Nsiah 2018:192). This occurrence corroborates the assertion that the 'majority of Africans are namely traditionalists and Christians at the same time' (Van Wyk 2006:706). Even though they have Christian affiliations, their traditional worldview about life after death is characteristic in their eschatological thinking.

## Conclusion

To conclude, the future for African biblical hermeneutics in the decolonial project does not lie with the adaptation (or adoption) of Western exegetical and hermeneutical paradigms as they are applied in the African context. Preferably, the future lies in Africans excavating thoroughly and comprehensively the heritage of African people to create indigenous approaches to reading the Bible in their socio-cultural and economic contexts. As an epistemological project of delinking the African reading of the Bible from the structure and knowledge imposed by the West, and then to 'reconstitute' (Tsang 2021) an African way of reading, analysing and interpreting the biblical message for the benefit of the African continent, calls for a rethinking of a conceptual and

methodological framework rooted in indigenous epistemology that resonates with the African people.

Paul's use of the eschatological motif, together with the outlining of the *Parousia* event helps in understanding that the text is about the imminent return of Christ. The text effectively communicates the hope of believers in the *Parousia* using the eschatological motif. The belief in Christ's resurrection as the model for the resurrection of those who die in Christ strengthens the faith of Christians by assuring them of the privileged position of those who have died in Christ. The study indicates that the concept of life after death is prevalent in all Ghanaian societies and informs most of their practices during funeral celebrations. The belief in the ancestors and the qualifications required underscores its significance for the community. Both Christians and practitioners of African indigenous religion believe that in order to enjoy a good life after death, there is the need for good moral living while alive. The imperative of salvation must therefore be upheld to ensure believers live to please God and qualify to be with the Lord eternally upon his return.

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### Author's contributions

The full article was conceptualised, investigated, analysed and the draft written by G.N. who also provided resources for the research, reviewed, and edited the article.

### Ethical considerations

This article followed all ethical standards for research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

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### Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, G.N., upon reasonable request.

### Disclaimer

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