

**Reading and Understanding of Sacred Texts in Luke-Acts and The
Challenges of Communication and Contemporary Linguistics**

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Abstract

While responding to the inquisitive inquiry of the rich young ruler in the Lucan narrative, Jesus asked πῶς ἀναγινώσκεις; posanaginoskeis? "How do you read?" (Luke 10:26). Similarly, while interacting with the Ethiopian Eunuch in Acts of the Apostles, Philip asked γινώσκεις ἃ ἀναγινώσκεις; ginoskeisaanaginoskeis? "Do you understand what you read?" (Acts 8:30). In his response, the Eunuch asked πῶς γὰρ ἂν δυνάμην εἶναι μὴ τις ὁδηγήσει με; pos gar andunaimen ean me tis hodegesei me? "How could I, unless someone guides me?" (Acts 8:31). In the light of African biblical hermeneutics which emphasises on the principles and dimensions of interpretation of the Bible towards the transformation of Africa, this paper puts forth a clarion call for an objectively restructured as well as improved exegetical and hermeneutical curricular in the Bible Colleges, Theological Seminaries and Universities that offer biblical studies in Africa. It elicits the need for better understanding and application of methods of interpretation that include a wide variety of approaches in engaging biblical texts, with reference to the quest for a sustainable and relevant African biblical scholarship. It also emphasises that African biblical scholars must be well grounded in the language of the sacred texts in terms of the texts' linguistic features and technicalities such as lexis, diction, tenses, aspects, figures of speech, idiomatic expressions, sentence structures and pragmatics.

Keywords: Reading and Understanding, Sacred Texts, Exegesis, Hermeneutics, Communication, Linguistics

Introduction

The reading and understanding of sacred texts of any religion forms a great priority which, in most cases, leads to the establishment of religious academic institutions where the language and philosophy of such religions are taught.



Sacred texts are best understood with the background knowledge of the original language of the texts as well as the language to which the text has been translated. This explains why a thorough reading and understanding of the Bible has to be with sound knowledge of the Greek language as well as that of English which is the language which most churches use for their ministrations accompanied by translation to other languages for the understanding of members of the congregation who are not versed in English Language.

Methodology

This paper applies the Text-linguistics method of literary analysis, which is a branch of linguistics that deals with texts from the communication viewpoints. The major objective of this method is to describe texts within their grammatical structures and semantics. It takes into account the form and setting of a text, with regards to its lexes and the way in which it is situated, especially in its interactional communicative context. In this method, both the author of a written text, the speaker of spoken words as well as the addressees are taken into consideration in their respective roles in the specific communicative, social and institutional contexts.

Literature Review

Sacred texts are writings that transcend everyday life (Naude and Naude, 2018). Such texts convey inspiration, instils awe and respect, as well as the fear of the deities that are venerated and associated with such a religion.¹ The concept of sacred text depicts a complex phenomenon, resulting in the view that religion and its sacred writings form an inextricable part of culture which serves as part of the basis for the behaviour of its adherents. ChatGPT sees a sacred text as “a written work that holds significant religious or spiritual importance within a particular faith or belief system... considered holy, divine or inspired by a higher power...include the Bible in Christianity, the Quran in Islam and the Vedas in Hinduism.”² Kristol (2019) observes that “sacred texts often offer a moral framework, supporting justice for the “little people” and advocating mercy for the vulnerable.”³

The Hypertext Bible affirms that “the Bible is considered a sacred text by three major world religion, Judaism, Christianity and islam.”⁴ The fact that The Bible is a sacred text is also affirmed by Hotz when she indicates that it is the sacred text of Christianity which comprises the Old and New Testaments.⁵ The above views establish the fact that The Bible is a sacred text but they do not deal with

¹ Jacobus A. Nande and Cynthia L. Miller-Naude (2018:1): “sacred writings” in The routledge handbook of literacy translation, uk. Routledge

² Information obtained from *Definitions for sacred*, <<https://www.definitions.net/search-history>> accessed on 25/6/24.

³ Nicholas Kristof (2019) “What is the meaning of sacred texts?”, *New York Times* <<https://www.nytimes/2019/11/11/books/review>> accessed at 4.51pm on 25/6/24.

⁴ *Internet sacred Text Archive* <<https://sacred-texts.com>> accessed on 26/6/24.

⁵ Kendra Hotz, Christianity: *what is the religious sacred text?* <sacred texts- Christianity- explore faith (1). Niht> accessed on 25/6/24.

reading and understanding of sacred texts which is the focus of this paper and the gap it fills.

While alluding to the issues of reading sacred texts, Fales is of the opinion that the claim of Levi-Strauss the structure of religious narratives is to understand them through the use of certain analytic techniques.⁶ Nicole (2019) suggests that it is important to develop a sacred reading practice that has five advantages which include raising vibrational energy that aligns human spirit with the Divine, sharpening the intuition, developing a spirit of discernment and bringing about spiritual development and transformation.⁷ Among the various scholars who have worked on the art of reading sacred text is Singh (n.d.) who indicated that the best way to read “a holy spiritual book is to keep the spirit or essence” of it as one reads it due to the fact without good understanding of the text’s spirit, there may never be full satisfaction.⁸ Fergusson (2019) advanced methods through which sacred texts should be read and that the task of interpreting them is the “unavoidable responsibility” of the community of the concerned faith.⁹ In emphasising the sacred role of linguistics and communication in the writing, reading and understanding of sacred texts, Sawyer (1999) “explores bilingualism, language learning, literacy... and translation” and sheds “new light on the role of the power of words, spoken and written in religion.”¹⁰ Also working on the reading of sacred texts, Racky (2020) affirms that “religious literacy is a complex and fluid construct that... emphasises different aspects” of the development and growth of faith. It sees the process as part of “meaning-making that involves religious texts.”¹¹

Of importance in the art of reading is the work of Green (2010) which explains that understanding a language is complex because of the components of language which include phonology, morphology, grammar, semantics and pragmatics.¹² Along the issue of linguistic reading, understanding and knowledge, Longworth (2008) proposed three types of understanding and indicated that understanding “an utterance is to know what the utterance means.”¹³ The implication of this to the present paper is that for a person to correctly understand a sacred text, s/he should know its import and purpose. Similarly, Grodniewicz (2021), while working on “the process of linguistic

⁶ Fales Evan (2023), *Reading Sacred texts*, GCRR< <https://www.gcrr.org>> accessed on 26/6/24.

⁷ Aneka Nicole (n.d), *How to develop a sacred reading practices*<<https://asoulfulrebellion.com>> accessed on 26/6/24.

⁸ Madhu Singhm, “What is the best way of reading spiritual books” in<<https://www.quora.com>> accessed on 25/6/24.

⁹ David Fergusson (2009) 6 sacred texts: How should we read them?<<https://academic.oup.com>> accessed on 24/6/24.

¹⁰ John Sawyer (1999), *Sacred Languages and Sacred texts*, 1st Edition, Routledge,<<https://.co//kg>> accessed on 25/6/24.

¹¹ Eric D. Rackley (2020). “Reading sacred texts: a qualitative study of religious educators literacy processes” in *Journal of research on christian education*, <DOI:10.1080/10656219.2020.1838366> accessed on 26/6/24.

¹² Mitchell Green (2010): “Language, understanding and knowledge of meaning” in *Meaning, understanding and Knowledge*, October 20 Vol 5, pages 1-17
DOI:10.4148/biyclc.v5i0.281< www.researchgate.net> accessed on 24/6/24.

¹³ Guy Longworth (2008): “Linguistic Understanding and knowledge”, in *NOUS* 42:1 (2008), pp 50-59 < warwick.ac.uk> accessed on 26/6/24.

understanding”, though, not directly on sacred texts, affirms that there are three senses in which one grasps linguistic understanding. The first one sees it as a mental state; the second as a “disposition of... ability to decode sentences”; the third is to think of it as an “event”.¹⁴ An age-long work that provides insights on reading as a process is Wardhaugh (1968) which indicates some of the different views of linguists on the reading process and some of the limitations of the knowledge of linguistics in solving reading problems.¹⁵

Some recent works in the academic landscape of studies on sacred texts include that of Ennin (2023) which deals with the intent and purpose of reconstructing the African religious imaginary for a new renaissance.¹⁶ It however does not deal with the issues of reading and understanding of Luke and Acts together with the challenges of communication in contemporary linguistics which is the gap that this paper fills. Similarly, Torsu (2023) focuses on how sacred texts can be more understandable in order to extend the Christian faith by making it easy to read and understand, using translation.¹⁷ Though it deals with reading and understanding, its emphasis is on the use of translation rather than understanding the texts as they are presently in English and other languages.

A synthesis of the reviewed works shows that there exists the gap of challenges posed by issues of reading, understanding and overall communication in the context of contemporary linguistics which this paper focuses on.

The Problem of Communication in English in Nigerian Christian Religious Setting

Communication exists within a particular setting even as language (studied under linguistics) is culture-specific. This accounts for why language is perceived as expressive culture. In present-day Nigerian socio-linguistic setting, there are problems associated with communication which hamper effective communication in English. The problems are multi-dimensional and originate from different sources and due to different causes. Irrespective of the mode of language (spoken, written or visual), there are interferences. Some of the problems of communication in the present linguistic landscape include those emanating from differences in gender and culture, emotional problems, social status dislocation, inability to understand jargon and registers, low ability to internalise the content read, emotional problems and low level of knowledge of the working of English language. The multilingual setting of Nigeria calls for a fairly neutral language as the language of religion. The Christian religious

¹⁴ J.P Grodniewicz (2021): “The process of linguistic understanding” in *Synthese*, 198(12), 11463-11481 <<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11229-020-02807-9>> <philarchive.org> accessed on 26/6/24.

¹⁵ Ronald Wardhaugh (1968), “Linguistic insights into the reading process” in *Language and Learning*, Vol.xviii, Nos 3 & 4, <deepblue.lib.uinich.edu> accessed on 25/6/24.

¹⁶ Paul Saa-Dade Ennin (2023), “Sacred texts and the Africa we want: reconstructing the African religious imaginary for a new renaissance”, in some, et al (eds): *Interpreting sacred texts within changing contexts in Africa*, Abidjan, presses de L’ITCJ, part 1 chapter 4, pp 67-82.

¹⁷ LivingStone Yao Torsu (2023): “The translation of sacred text: an essential device for Christian mission in africa”, in some, et al (eds): *Interpreting sacred texts within changing contexts in Africa*, Abidjan, presses de L’ITCJ, part 2 chapter 3, pp 173-192.

setting in Nigeria has English as its major language of interaction with translations into other languages taking place simultaneously, most times to reach and communicate with those who do not understand English very well. It needs be said that in most urban settings, English is the language of worship. The question that is apt to ask is what is the level of linguistic understanding of The Bible by majority of Christian worshippers? It is to be noted that the understanding of The Bible by the majority is hampered by their low level of knowledge of the lexis, diction, grammar, semantics and pragmatics of the content of The Bible.

The Place of Reading in Luke-Acts

The author of Luke-Acts seems to have possessed a great wealth of literary knowledge of his time, hence the issues of writing, reading and documents are obvious in both the first and second volumes. The striking introduction in the two books presents the author as being very knowledgeable in research and writing. In the first volume (the Gospel of Luke), the introduction clearly states the literary ability of the author:

Many have undertaken to draw up an account διηγησιν (diegesin) of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word.³ With this in mind, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, I too decided to write γραψαι (grapsai) an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught (Luke 1:1-4).

The use of διηγησιν (diegesin) which means to give an account and γραψαι (grapsai) "to write" which is the infinitive form of the verb γράφω (grapho) which is translated "I write" in the first-person singular, occurring about 195 times in the New Testament, shows the author's passion in proper literary skills. In the second volume of the Lucan narrative which is the Acts of the Apostles, this emphasis is also repeated. In this historical document, the author, in a way of introduction stated, "in my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach" (Acts 1:1). Luke, the author of Luke-Acts seems to pay attention and lay emphasis of proper reading of religious books, manuscripts and texts. In the fourth chapter of the first volume (the Gospel of Luke), Jesus was presented as one who knows how to read. "And he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up: and, as his custom was, he went into the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and stood up for to read" (Luke 4:16). The Greek term, ἀναγνῶναι (anagnonai) which is translated "to read" in Luke 4:16 is the infinitive form of the present active indicative verb γινώσκω (ginosko) which means "I know". This implies that the ancient Greco-Roman world, especially as exemplified in Greek language, made no obvious dichotomy between the ability to read and being knowledgeable. In Luke 10:26, while addressing the case of an expert in law who came to test him, regarding the requirements that usher someone into everlasting life, Jesus asked πῶς ἀναγινώσκεις; posanaginoskeis? "How do you read?" The issue of reading in

the passage stemmed from the first question thrown to the lawyer by Jesus, “what is written in the law?” ἐν τῷ νόμῳ

τι γεγραπται; en to nomo ti gegraptai? (Luke 10:26a). In Luke-Acts literary discourse, the questions of ‘what’ and ‘how’ play key roles.

The Question of “How do you read?” πῶς ἀναγινώσκεις; (Pos Anaginoskeis?) in Luke 10:26

The enquiry made by the young rich ruler in Luke paved the way for the existence of reading of sacred text and its better understanding. The background to the issue in Luke 10:26 is depicted in the explanation of the personality of the one asking, “And behold, a certain lawyer stood up and put Him to the test, saying, “Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?” Καὶ ἰδοὺ νομικός τις ἀνέστη ἐκπειράζων αὐτὸν λέγων· διδάσκαλε, τί ποιήσας ζωὴν αἰώνιον κληρονομήσω; (Luke 10:25). The man here is known as νομικός, nomiskos (a lawyer), a jurist, an expert in matters pertaining to the law. A better understanding of the position of the man can be derived from the Greek term νομός nomos (law). The usage here shows that the man was a legal person by profession. His question to Jesus was τί ποιήσας; Ti poiesas? “What shall I do?”, which connotes eligibility of the knowledge of the duties of law. In response, Jesus put it back to him, “What is written in the Law?” Ἐν τῷ νόμῳ τί γέγραπται; En toi nomoi, gegraptai? (Luke 10:26). The text could be literally rendered, “in the law, what is written?”. The next question followed by Jesus, Πῶς ἀναγινώσκεις; Pos anaginoskeis? How do you understand? So, the art of reading and understanding is all about “what and “how”.

Reading and Understanding Contrasted (Acts 8:30-31)

The narrative in Acts 8:30-31 supplies a kind of linguistic dramatic scenario between Philip and the Ethiopian which requires a closer investigation.

Then Philip ran up to the chariot and heard the man reading Isaiah the prophet. "Do you understand what you are reading?" Philip asked. And he said, "Well, how could I, unless someone guides me?" And he invited Philip to come up and sit with him. (Act 8:30-31)

προσδραμών δὲ ὁ Φίλιππος ἤκουσεν αὐτοῦ ἀναγινώσκοντος Ἡσαΐαν τὸν προφήτην καὶ εἶπεν· ἄρα γε γινώσκεις ὃ ἀναγινώσκεις; ὁ δὲ εἶπεν· πῶς γὰρ ἂν δυναίμην ἔάν μή τις ὁδηγήσει με; παρεκάλεσέν τε τὸν Φίλιππον ἀναβάντα καθίσαι σὺν αὐτῷ.

Scene 1. Philip ran up to the chariot: The term translated “ran” is προσδραμών (prosdramon) a verb participle aorist, active nominative singular, from the verb, προστρέχω (prostrecho) “to run up to” “to hasten up in order to catch up with”. What orchestrated Philip’s fast movement to the chariot was that he heard ἤκουσεν (ekousen) the man reading. The author used the Greek term ἤκουσεν (ekousen) which is from the verb present active indicative ἀκούω (akouo) “I hear” the root for acoustics (the theory and science of sound) to

capture the man's sound of reading as perceived by Philip. This was in line with the reading customs of the ancient times, which permits the reader to read aloud, even while reading for himself (Guzik, 2016). This implies that Philip heard the man's sound and voice of reading and he was hasting to meet him. Johannes Louw et al (1989) observed that the use of ἀκούω akouo is one of the functions of senses (sense of hearing) for active communication.

Scene 2. Philip asked him, "Do you understand what you are reading?"

ἄρα γε γινώσκεις ἃ ἀναγινώσκεις; (ara ge ginoskeis a anaginoskeis?): The Greek word 'ara' is usually referred to by scholars as "interrogative particle indicating anxiety or impatience, introducing direct questions only, usually incapable of direct translation" (Johannes Louw et al, 1989). Hence, since Philip was acquainted with the Old Testament text, perhaps both the Hebrew and the LXX, his question to the Ethiopian was a result of the curiosity of saving both the text of the scroll of the Isaiah's prophecy and the reader himself. The man's answer, "how could I, unless someone guides me?", after Philip asked him whether he understood what he was reading, is a sign for the need of linguistic teaching the art of linguistic reading and understanding. The Greek phrase in the text, πῶς γὰρ ἂν δυνάμην ἔάν μή τις ὁδηγήσῃ με; Pos gar an dunaimen ean me tis hodegesei (Acts 8:31) indicates the Ethiopian reader's openness to be guided, not pretending to know, when he did not know. That the eunuch could possess and was able to read the copy of Isaiah does not only show his wealth and education, but the willingness to know more (Martens, 2015). The use of δυνάμην dunaimen which is a verb optative presents the middle 1st person singular "wishing to be empowered or enabled" from δύναμαι or dunamis (power) is another indication of the zeal for linguistic understanding on the part of the eunuch. Another strong term in the narrative is ὁδηγήσῃ, hodegesei which is a verb indicative of future active 3rd person singular from ὁδηγέω (hodegeo) which means "lead, guide, instruct". This shows that the reading and understanding of sacred text or any other text requires the involvement of hodegos "an instructor".

Scene 3. Philip sat with the Ethiopian eunuch in his chariot: "So he invited Philip to come up and sit with him" (Acts 8:31). Three Greek terms play fascinating roles in this aspect of the text. The first is παρακαλέω parakaleo, which means "to call to one's side, summon, invite, summon to one's aid, call upon for help appeal to, urge, exhort, encourage, request, implore, appeal to, entreat, comfort, encourage, cheer up". It was the eunuch who beckoned and invited Philip. Serious and zealous inquirers do not waste golden opportunities, to have a thorough linguistic understanding of what was being said.

The second is ἀναβάντα (anabanta), a verb participle aorist, active accusative masculine singular from ἀναβαίνω (anabaino) "I go up". The Ethiopian invited Philip to come up the ἄρματι harmati (chariot). He saw in him the needed teacher and guide into a proper linguistic understanding of the knowledge he sought for. The last among the three is καθίσαι (kathisai), a verb infinitive aorist, active from καθίζω (kathizo) "to sit on a seat". This opened door for a closer conversation between the Ethiopian eunuch and his new teacher, Philip. Opportunities for new and better linguistic understanding is never limited to a place and should be grabbed when found.

The Connection between Linguistic Reading, Understanding and Interpretation of Sacred Texts

The term, “exegesis” is derived from the Greek first person singular deponent verb *exegeomai* which means “I lead” or “I show the way”. However, in its modern usage, exegesis is used in a greater and far-reaching specification to distinguish it from any other broader critical textual explanation. Hence, biblical exegesis could be defined as the “careful and systematic study of the Scripture to discover its originally intended meaning”. It is the attempt to hear the Word as the original recipients were to have heard it, to find out what was “the original intent of the words of the Bible”¹⁸. Bolinger (2020) summarises the definition of exegesis by saying that, “Exegesis means using the words of the text in Scripture, through the lens of their original context, to determine their intent”.¹⁹ An expert in exegesis is called an exegete. Thus, a Greek exegete is a New Testament scholar (theologian) who is well rooted in the understanding of the usage and interpretation of Greek words, and able to linguistically analyse Greek grammar. In essence, the study of exegesis involves a wide range of critical disciplines, such as textual criticism which investigates the historical origin of the text, the study of the historical and cultural backgrounds of the author of the biblical book, date and original audience, syntactical and grammatical structure and types of literary genres, even the variant readings in the text. Asaju (2005) argues that one of the clear missiological challenges facing the African contemporary Christianity include the outbreak and widespread of prosperity gospel. While establishing that the prosperity of God’s people is never a forbidden phenomenon in the Bible, he referred to the brand of popular prosperity messages that saturate African new Christian religious movements as “a heavy dose of North American materialism” which does not only promote wealth amassment through missionary activities, but also lacks proper grasp of the vagaries of human existence, the sovereignty of God, and the sacrificial endurance in Christian service.²⁰ Therefore, a correct understanding of certain

theological mishaps as being advanced in prosperity gospel within the African Pentecostal setting is very key in the needed retracing approach to the glorious riches of proper biblical exegesis. Biblical exegesis became a cherished practice when scholars saw it fit that The Bible is capable of speaking for itself rather than ecclesiastical dogma and rules that are devoid of sound Biblical text. Since then, the scientific approach to Biblical interpretation gained the purview of the church. Closely related to exegesis is the term “hermeneutics”. Hermeneutics means the study of the art of interpretation, from the Greek term, *hermeneo* to interpret (the Greek deity that interpreted the word of the gods was called *hermes*). Both exegesis and hermeneutics work hand in hand for the proper

¹⁸ Petronio Genebago (2018), “It’s All Greek to me.” Why Should I Study Biblical Languages? Ministry International Journal for Pastors

¹⁹ Hope Bolinger, What Are Exegesis and Eisegesis? 2 Ways to Read the Bible. <https://www.christianity.com/wiki/christian-terms/what-are-exegesis-and-eisegesis.html> (Retrieved 22/5/2023)

²⁰ Dapo Folorunsho Asaju (2005), *Re-Enthroning Theology as Queen of Sciences: GlobalMissiological Challenges of African Biblical Hermeneutics*. The 18th Inaugural Lecture of the Lagos State University.

linguistic understanding and interpretation of ancient writings. In reading, studying, or researching any literature, there is always an advantage in going back to the original text and language in which it was written, and this applies so much when it comes to the study of God's Word²¹. Doukhan (2002) points out that intimacy with God can be enhanced by understanding the context of ancient Israel, whose authors have reported their experiences in two thousand years of the Hebrew language.²² This is also a very true case with Greek language, since it was the language spoken during the period that gave birth to the New Testament Bible. Studying the Bible in these languages helps the reader and the researcher to understand better the points raised and the problems solved as well as their relevance to the modern society which is separated by time and culture.

Concerning the inexhaustible power of Greek language in the understanding and interpretation of the Bible, Mounce in Genebago (2018) asserts that learning Greek can help the person "effectively make known the grace of God to all people". Long before this, Martin Luther testified, "Although the gospel came and still comes to us through the Holy Spirit alone, we cannot deny that it came through the medium of languages. For just when God wanted to spread the gospel throughout the world by means of the apostles, he gave the tongues for that purpose." (Genebago, 2018). Walker in Genebago (2018) argues that translation can replace the original languages of the Bible in primary importance for conveying and perpetuating divine revelation.

Thus, studying the Bible in its original languages deepens one's understanding of God and helps the pastor to share the gospel effectively. In essence, the study of Greek language is important, making the preacher to delve into the scripture from the original literary understanding thereby avoiding hearsay presentations.²³

Conclusion

From the foregoing, it is evident that much work exists on the issues of reading and understanding of sacred texts. The paper has brought into the fore, the fact that there is problem of communication in English among some Christian faithfuls who read The Bible which is their own sacred text because of their low level of proficiency in English. The paper has also re-established the important position of Greek in the proper understanding of the two books (Luke and Acts) through Greco-exegetical analysis of some verses of the two books. The strong connection between linguistic reading and understanding with the interpretation of the two sacred texts is also established.

²¹ Petronio Genebago (2018), "It's All Greek to me." Why Should I Study Biblical Languages? Ministry International Journal for Pastors

²² Doukhan Jacques (2002), *Israel and the Church: Two Voices for the Same God*. Hendrickson Publishers.

²³ Atere, Martina (2006). *Greeks Influence*. Lagos, Bolaji & Associates

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