



## THE PEDAGOGICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF BIBLICAL LANGUAGES IN AFRICAN THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION

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**ABSTRACT:** *This study discusses The Pedagogical Significance of Biblical Languages in African Theological Education, focusing on the declining proficiency in biblical languages such as Hebrew and Greek within African theological institutions, using the Baptist College of Theology, Obinze. The problem identified was the increasing marginalisation of these languages, often substituted by more practical or contemporary subjects, resulting in a weakening of biblical exegesis and diminished theological depth in academic and pastoral contexts. The study's primary objective was to assess biblical languages' role in enhancing theological education, particularly in African contexts. It investigated how mastery of Hebrew and Greek could significantly improve scriptural interpretation, homiletics, and doctrinal accuracy among African theologians and pastors. The research aimed to demonstrate that proficiency in these languages offers essential insights into the original meaning of biblical texts and a greater connection to their cultural and historical contexts. Methodologically, the study employed discourse analysis and case studies, examining curricula from various African theological institutions and surveying educators and students. It also reviewed theological literature to evaluate biblical languages' historical and contemporary significance in Christian education. The findings revealed that institutions prioritising biblical language instruction produce graduates with more vital exegetical skills, better equipped for accurate scriptural interpretation and culturally sensitive theological reflection. Based on these findings, the study recommends that African theological institutions reinstate the teaching of biblical languages as a core part of their curricula. These recommendations include creating more accessible language courses, integrating digital learning tools, and emphasising biblical language proficiency's long-term academic and pastoral benefits. The study advocates for a balanced approach to theological education incorporating biblical languages as a vital component of developing sound theological scholarship and effective ministry in Africa.*

**KEYWORDS:** Biblical Languages, Theological Education, Hebrew, Greek, Exegesis, African Theology, Pedagogy, Scriptural Interpretation.



## INTRODUCTION

In the diverse drapery of African Christianity, studying biblical languages is a cornerstone of theological education for a connection to the Faith's scriptural roots and theological heritage. The significance of biblical languages (Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek) within theological training has been acknowledged globally as pivotal for a better understanding of biblical texts (Thompson, 2020; Rodriguez & Lee, eds., 2019; Smith, 2018; Petersen, 2017). However, the extent and emphasis placed on teaching these languages in African theological institutions have varied, and in many instances, they have faced challenges that demand scholarly attention. Christianity has thrived within Africa's rich cultural and religious landscape, intertwining with indigenous belief systems and societal structures. Theological education within this context has evolved, adapting to local needs while maintaining fidelity to the core tenets of the Christian Faith. However, a critical aspect often scrutinised is the teaching and mastery of biblical languages—a fundamental pillar of interpreting and engaging with the scriptures. While global theology plays the indispensable role of biblical languages in theological training, African theological institutions' practices and pedagogical approaches exhibit various variations. Some institutions strongly emphasise teaching biblical languages, recognising their intrinsic value in theological interpretation, while others struggle to incorporate them effectively into their curricula due to numerous challenges (Plummer 2021, 198).

The need for comprehensive studies examining the pedagogical significance of biblical languages in African theological education is an evident gap in scholarly discourse. This gap necessitates a focused inquiry into biblical language instruction, its challenges, and its impact on theological formation within the African context. The lack of standardised approaches, limited resources, faculty expertise, and varying student interests are among the multifaceted challenges that impede the integration and effective teaching of biblical languages in many African theological institutions (Sutton, 2023).

This paper examines biblical languages' pedagogical significance in African theological education, explicitly referring to the Baptist College of Theology, Obinze, Owerri, Nigeria. This study elucidates these languages' role in shaping theological thought and interpretation within African theological institutions by examining the current practices, challenges, and impact of biblical language instruction. Through comprehensive analysis and empirical exploration, this study provides insights and recommendations for enhancing the teaching and significance of biblical languages in theological education across the African continent. The study assesses the current state of biblical language education in the Baptist College of Theology, Obinze and, by extension, African theological institutions, identify challenges in teaching biblical languages, and how proficiency in these languages influences theological interpretation and formation within African Christianity, and recommend strategies to enhance the pedagogical significance of biblical languages in African theological education.



## Historical Background of Theological Education in Africa

The historical background of African theological education is woven with the threads of indigenous spiritual traditions, early Christian missions, colonial influences, and the subsequent evolution of theological thought and education (Kabongo 2020, 1-8). Africa's pre-colonial era was characterised by diverse indigenous spiritual practices, including animism, ancestor worship, and polytheism, varying across regions and ethnic groups. Religious knowledge was transmitted orally, embedded in storytelling, rituals, ceremonies, and communal practices. Elders and spiritual leaders played vital roles as custodians of this knowledge, passing it down through generations.

According to Ayegboyin and Ogunewu (2022, 117-134), the advent of Christianity in Africa began with early contacts by Portuguese explorers in the late 15th century, followed by substantial missionary efforts in subsequent centuries. Christian missionaries established schools and seminaries across the continent to evangelise and educate indigenous populations. The curriculum often included basic literacy and biblical teachings from European theological perspectives. As Christianity took root, indigenous African leaders emerged within the church, contributing to the formation of indigenous theological perspectives. African Initiated Churches (AICs), indigenous-led Christian movements, often independent of Western missionary influence, began to form, blending Christian teachings with local cultural expressions and theological interpretations (Ositelu 2002, 27-36).

The colonial period (Late 19th Century - Mid-20th Century) they have impacted theological education (zu Selhausen 2019, 1-10). European colonial powers established formal educational systems that often marginalised indigenous languages and cultures, favouring European languages and curricula. Theological education became more Westernised, with European theology dominating curricula in many institutions. Meanwhile, the post-colonial era (Mid-20th century - present) brought diversification and growth of indigenous theological institutions (zu Selhausen 2019, 11-13). With African nations gaining independence, there was a rise in the establishment of indigenous theological institutions aiming to contextualise theological education within African contexts. Efforts to integrate African theology into theological education, emphasising the relevance of African cultural and spiritual experiences within Christian discourse.

Theological education in Africa is facing challenges due to globalisation and technological advancements. Globalisation has influenced the education landscape, with African institutions increasingly engaging with global theological dialogues (Njoroge 2013, 64-69). Technological integration has also facilitated innovative educational approaches, such as online platforms and digital resources. Furthermore, many African institutions need more resources, such as funding, infrastructure, and access to updated academic resources, which hampers the quality of education. Faculty development remains challenging, with continuous professional development and recruitment needed to maintain high academic standards. Balancing tradition and modernity is challenging, as it often influences curriculum development and pedagogical methods. Diverse theological perspectives are also challenging, as Africa's religious landscape encompasses various denominations, theological viewpoints, and indigenous beliefs. Strategies to address these challenges include resource mobilisation, faculty capacity building, curriculum review and contextualisation (Mugambi 2013, 117-125). These strategies help address Africa's diverse religious landscape while maintaining academic rigour.



African theological education has developed due to the intricate interactions between colonialism, indigenous spiritual traditions, Christian missions, and modern adaptations. This has moulded the varied terrain of theological education, setting the stage for difficulties in the current day. This means acknowledging and bringing African theological concepts into the more significant Christian discourse. Some innovative approaches to improvement include evaluating and contextualising curricula to reflect Africa's diverse religious and cultural contexts, enhancing partnerships between African theological institutions and international partners, and using technology to close educational gaps and increase access to high-quality theological education, particularly in underserved areas. The future of African theological education rests on resolving historical conflicts, confronting contemporary issues, and grasping chances for development and inclusivity. Integrating regional theological perspectives, diversity, and multidisciplinary approaches helps African theological education develop into a lively, contemporary, and welcoming environment for theological conversation and scholarly exchange. This comprehensive overview charts the evolution of theological education in Africa, acknowledging the continent's diverse origins, colonial influences and indigenous contributions.

### **Biblical Languages and Formation of Theological Thought in Africa**

While writing about the significance of biblical languages in general, Robertson (1977, 17) states that:

The real New Testament is the Greek New Testament. The English is simply a translation of the New Testament, not the actual New Testament. It is good that the New Testament has been translated into so many languages. The fact that it was written in the koiné, the universal language of the time, rather than in one of the earlier Greek dialects, makes it easier to render into modern tongues. But there is much that cannot be translated. It is not possible to reproduce the delicate turns of thought, the nuances of language, in translation. The freshness of the strawberry cannot be preserved in any extract.

The significance of biblical languages in African theological education is not different; it is, especially concerning the formation of theological thought. Proficiency in biblical languages grants direct access to the original texts of the Bible. This access allows scholars to engage with the scriptures in their linguistic and cultural contexts, forming a foundational basis for theological inquiry. This understanding is crucial for African theologians as it enables the contextualisation of biblical teachings within diverse African cultural contexts. Biblical language proficiency facilitates the integration of African theology into theological education. It enables scholars to develop African theology based on a solid understanding of biblical texts, enhancing the legitimacy and authenticity of African theological thought (Yorke and Nsiku 2013, 64-69).

The ability to conduct thorough exegesis and interpret biblical texts in their original languages empowers African theologians to unearth layers of meaning and theological insights overlooked in translated texts. Linguistic competence in biblical languages provides a solid foundation for theologians to formulate theological reflections grounded in a comprehensive understanding of the original texts (Maluleke 2004, 161-176). This strengthens the theological depth and authenticity of their discourse. It empowers African theologians to engage confidently in global theological dialogues, contributing perspectives to broader theological discussions. Academic rigour is enhanced as African theologians with proficiency in biblical



languages contribute to scholarly research and publications, enriching theological scholarship both within and outside Africa.

### **Role of Biblical Languages in Interpreting Scripture within African Cultural Contexts**

Petronio M. Genebago (2018, 27) states, “Biblical languages are essential to interpret Scripture. A working knowledge of biblical languages (Hebrew, Greek, and Aramaic) helps the student of Scripture understand the biblical text.” The significance of biblical languages in African theological education, particularly in interpreting Scripture within African cultural contexts, is that it allows theologians to get deeper into Scripture, uncovering meanings and cultural contexts embedded within the texts that concur with African cultural values, traditions and worldviews (Amevenkuand and Boaheng, 2021). Biblical languages aid in deciphering symbolic language and metaphors used in Scripture, enabling a richer understanding of biblical narratives that often align with or parallel African oral traditions and storytelling methods. It enables African theologians to identify areas where biblical teachings align with or diverge from indigenous values, facilitating a harmonious integration of Christian Faith with cultural heritage. Interpreting scriptures in biblical languages encourages respect for diverse African cultural expressions, an inclusive theological discourse that acknowledges and celebrates cultural diversity.

Competence in biblical languages empowers African theologians to challenge and rectify Eurocentric interpretations of Scripture that might overlook or misinterpret cultural and indigenous wisdom embedded in biblical texts. It enables African theologians to reclaim agency in theological discourse by offering authentic interpretations rooted in linguistic and cultural contexts, countering historical imbalances in theological thought.

A grasp of biblical languages equips preachers to deliver sermons with deeper insights grounded in an enriched understanding of Scripture, making sermons more contextually relevant and impactful within African congregations. Luther (1524) spoke of this experience when he wrote, “Although preachers may proclaim the Faith and the Gospel without the knowledge of languages, the preaching will be feeble and ineffective. However, where the languages are studied, the proclamation will be fresh and powerful, the Scriptures will be searched, and the Faith will be constantly rediscovered through new words and deeds.” Integrating biblical languages into theological curricula enhances the academic rigour of African theological education understanding of Scripture that resonates with African contexts. Biblical language proficiency enables theologians to engage critically with Scripture in contemporary societal issues such as social justice, human rights, and ethics, a relevant and contextualised theological response (Umaru 2023, 23-29). Proficiency in biblical languages within African theological education is pivotal for interpreting Scripture within African cultural contexts. It facilitates a holistic and contextual understanding of the Bible, enabling theologians to bridge the gap between biblical teachings and African cultural heritage, enriching theological discourse and nurturing a more inclusive Christian practice in Africa.



## Current Practices and Challenges

The current practices regarding teaching biblical languages in African theological schools are challenging, so it is essential to consider various aspects. The challenges are the extent to which biblical languages are incorporated into the curriculum, which includes the number of courses dedicated to these languages and their sequencing throughout the program and how biblical languages are integrated with other theological subjects, such as biblical studies, hermeneutics, or systematic theology, to provide a holistic theological education (Lodewyk 2023, 7; Plummer 2021, 197-199). Plummer (2021, 200) lamented that:

I confess I find it embarrassing that evangelical seminaries are reducing languages to an optional part of the MDiv curriculum. When I see a CV or resume with the words “with languages” added after the letters MDiv, I cringe. I cringe because I think of the many hundreds or thousands of graduates who graduated “without languages.” We’re sending soldiers into battle with muskets and powder horns rather than with the most powerful and accurate weaponry.

The proficiency of faculty members in teaching biblical languages and their pedagogical approaches is also challenging because of the need for faculty training and qualifications in linguistic studies. The availability of resources such as textbooks, reference materials, libraries, and access to original language texts for students’ study and research, enrollment in biblical language courses, and the level of interest among students in learning these languages calls for attention (Okode 2010: 91-106). It is essential to identify these challenges students face, such as linguistic barriers, lack of resources, or curriculum demands, that hinder their engagement and proficiency in biblical languages. Despite that, according to Okode (2010, 91), “knowing biblical languages is essential for exegetical accuracy and theological depth.” These call for examining institutions regarding the importance of biblical language instruction within the theological curriculum and assessing the level of institutional support, financial investment, and prioritisation given to biblical language programs and faculty development initiatives.

Therefore, evaluating how the teaching of biblical languages considers the cultural context of African students, ensuring relevance and applicability to their lived experiences and theological inquiries, gives room for analysing the current practices and challenges in teaching biblical languages in African theological institutions. It involves an assessment of curriculum structure, pedagogical approaches, faculty expertise, student engagement, institutional support, and the contextual relevance of language instruction. Identifying strengths and weaknesses in these areas is crucial for enhancing the effectiveness and relevance of biblical language education in African theological institutions.

## Impact on Theological Formation

Proficiency in biblical languages significantly impacts theological interpretation, enabling scholars to understand Scripture more precisely. It allows for a deeper understanding of Scripture, enabling a more comprehension of its linguistic nuances, idioms, and cultural contexts. It also allows for more precise interpretations, reducing the risk of misinterpretation due to translation discrepancies. According to J. Gresham Machen (2004, 188-89), “If you are to tell what the Bible does say, you must be able to read the Bible for yourself. And you cannot read the Bible for yourself unless you know the languages in which it was written... in his mysterious wisdom [God] gave [his Word] to us in Hebrew and Greek. Hence if we want to know the Scriptures, to the study of Greek and Hebrew we must go.”



Linguistic mastery also enhances exegesis and hermeneutics, allowing for a comprehensive analysis of individual verses and passages. It supports the application of sound hermeneutical principles, guiding the interpretation of Scripture within its historical, cultural, and literary context. It also allows for direct engagement with original texts, enhancing theological insight and accuracy (Okode, 98-100). It aids in understanding cultural contexts within texts, facilitating contextual interpretations relevant to diverse cultural contexts, including African perspectives. Also, it informs theological interpretation that addresses contemporary issues by deriving timeless principles from the original texts (Huxley, 1962, 4). It also influences the development of theology, shaping theological discourse and integrating diverse perspectives. Linguistic mastery also contributes to scholarly rigour and dialogue, allowing theologians to engage critically in academic dialogue and contribute meaningfully to global theological discussions. Therefore, proficiency in biblical languages is a cornerstone for theological formation, influencing theological interpretation's depth, accuracy, and relevance. It empowers theologians to engage deeply with Scripture, rigorous analysis, contextual relevance, and theological development within diverse cultural and global contexts.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study uses a mixed-method research approach to the Baptist College of Theology, Obinze, Nigeria. The Baptist College of Theology, Obinze, is the focal institution for this study due to its significance in theological education within the Southeast region of Nigeria. The methodology provides a way to study the pedagogical importance of biblical languages in this specific context.

The research used qualitative data through secondary data such as discussions and observations to explore the perceptions, experiences, and challenges related to biblical language instruction. It also used quantitative methods to provide statistical data on factors like student enrollment, course preferences, and the perceived importance of biblical languages. Data collection methods include semi-structured questionnaires with faculty members, administrators, and students at the College. Surveys were conducted among students and faculty to gather quantitative data on the importance of biblical languages, satisfaction with the current curriculum, curriculum structures, teaching methodologies, resources allocated for biblical language education and areas for improvement.

The sample population for this study includes experienced faculty members teaching biblical languages or involved in curriculum development, students across various theological programs, and administrators. Interviews involved a purposive sampling technique, selecting participants based on their direct involvement or experience with biblical language instruction at the College. This approach ensures a diverse range of perspectives from faculty, students, and administrators, allowing for a comprehensive analysis of the pedagogical significance of biblical languages at this specific institution.



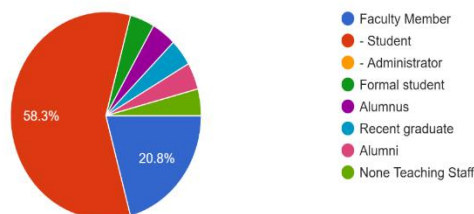
### Status of Biblical Language Teaching In the Baptist College of Theology, Obinze

The Baptist College of Theology, Obinze, founded in 1960 by Russell and Veda Locke, is a Nigerian institution that began as the Baptist Pastors School in Owerri. It later became the Baptist Bible College, Owerri, and became a mobile school during the Civil War. In 1971, it resumed at Owerri under Rev. R.L. Locke. In 1986, the College moved to its permanent site in Obinze. In 1999, the Ministerial Training Board approved the start of Diploma programs, leading to the name change to Baptist College of Theology, Obinze. 2003, the Bachelor’s Degree program was approved for affiliation with the Nigerian Baptist Theological Seminary, Ogbomoso. The College was affiliated with the University of Port Harcourt in 2006 for the Bachelor of Arts in Religious and Cultural Studies, accredited in 2009 by the National Universities Commission. The College operates under the proprietorship of the Nigerian Baptist Convention, but students from other churches attend under their own denominations’ sponsorship.

Although the data presented below does not represent the average number of both the students and the lecturers, it is the average number of their opinions, the reason being that the questionnaire was restricted to the few numbers of persons who must have learned those courses as students or thought them as instructors.

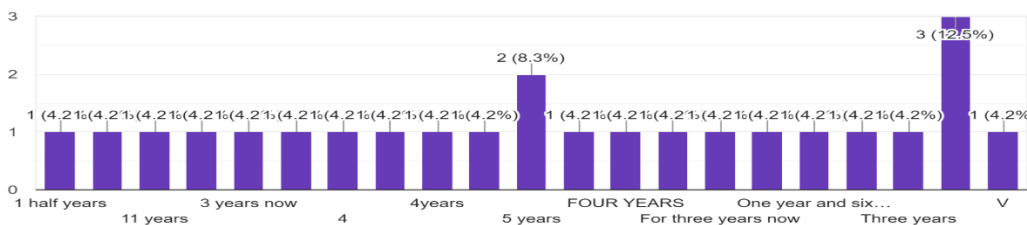
**Table Fig. 1 Presents the percentage of the respondents.**

What is your role at the Baptist College of Theology in Obinze? (Please select one)  
24 responses



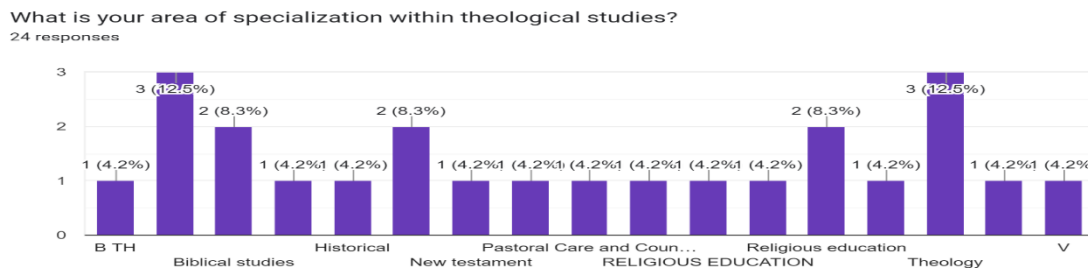
**Table Fig. 2: Presents the level of association of the respondents to theological education**

How long have you been associated with theological education?  
24 responses





**Table Fig. 3: Presents the area of specialisation of the respondents**



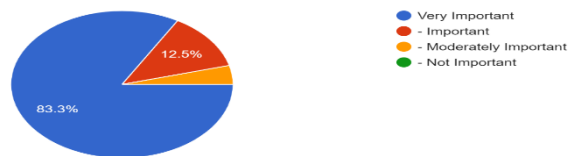
**Table Fig. 4: Presents the preferred methodology of the respondents**

What teaching methodologies do you find most effective for biblical language instruction? (Select all that apply)  
24 responses



**Table Fig. 5: Presents the respondents' opinions on how they perceive biblical languages**

How important do you perceive the study of biblical languages (Hebrew, Aramaic, Greek) in theological education?  
24 responses



**Table Fig. 6 Presents the respondents' perceived challenges with biblical languages.**

What challenges do you perceive in teaching or learning biblical languages? (Select all that apply)  
24 responses



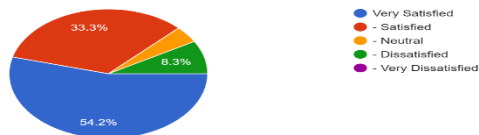
**Table Fig. 7: Presents the level of integrating biblical languages into the college curriculum**

Are biblical language courses integrated into the theological curriculum at your institution?  
24 responses



**Table Fig. 8 Presents The Respondents' Level of Satisfaction.**

How satisfied are you with the integration and depth of biblical language courses in the theological curriculum?  
24 responses



## DISCUSSIONS OF THE FINDINGS

The Baptist College of Theology, Obinze,<sup>1</sup> is one of the African theological institutions undergoing a comparative analysis of its current practices and challenges in biblical language education. However, because of the status of the College, she does not offer biblical languages as a course of specialisation; instead, they are offered as general courses, preparing the students for their choices; this foundation prepares the students to follow the path or repels them. The teaching of biblical languages varies widely among African theological institutions. Some strongly emphasise biblical language instruction, integrating it extensively into their curriculum, while others offer limited or sporadic courses. The extent of biblical language teaching often varies based on institutional resources, theological traditions, faculty expertise, and the overall focus of the theological program. These languages are usually part of the core curriculum in many theological institutions, especially BCT Obinze, for those in theological studies, while those in religious studies do them as electives.

### Importance of Biblical Languages in Theological Training

The biblical languages in theological training are significant due to their role in understanding and interpreting scriptures. 83.3 % of the respondents perceived that the mastery of Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek provides direct access to the original language of the Bible, enabling scholars to engage with them in their authentic linguistic contexts. Proficiency in these languages facilitates critical textual analysis, allowing scholars to evaluate different manuscript traditions and variations for accurate renditions of biblical passages. This provides a depth of interpretation which allows for a deeper understanding of linguistic gradations, idiomatic expressions, and cultural contexts embedded within the scriptures, enriching theological

<sup>1</sup> Henceforth, BCT, Obinze except otherwise



interpretation and unravelling layers of meaning, uncovering theological implications, and discerning the intended message of biblical texts (Okode 2010, 91-96).

Understanding biblical languages aids in contextualising biblical teachings within diverse cultural contexts, allowing for relevant and applicable interpretations for various communities (Umaru 2023, 23-28). Pastors with biblical language proficiency deliver better sermons rooted in a comprehensive understanding of Scripture. John Piper (2013, 100) states, “Secondhand food will not sustain and deepen our people’s Faith and holiness... What is more important and more deeply practical for the pastoral office than advancing in Greek and Hebrew exegesis by which we mine God’s treasures?” As Thomas Lyon (2003, 4) cited, this agrees with Spurgeon’s opinion that “a man to comment well should be able to read the Bible in the original.” Biblical languages safeguard the scriptures’ historical and literary integrity, ensuring accurate transmission and interpretation across generations. It also contributes to comparative religious studies, facilitating dialogue and understanding between Christianity and other faith traditions by examining original texts.

### **Challenges and Barriers to Teaching Biblical Languages in African Contexts**

Teaching biblical languages in African contexts presents unique challenges that stem from various factors, including historical, linguistic, and educational considerations. More qualified instructors in biblical languages must be proficient in many African theological institutions, impacting the quality of language instruction. 45.5 % of the respondents believe that limited funding and institutional resources often hinder the recruitment and retention of qualified faculty members. Hence, teaching such languages requires expertise and resources, often creating barriers to accessing original language materials for teaching purposes (Yorke, 2012).

Concerning the methods, 54.2% prefer traditional pedagogical methods because they provide access to face-to-face avenues of teaching, which effectively engage students in learning biblical languages. However, incorporating innovative and contextually relevant teaching methodologies is essential. In this advanced world, traditional teaching methods may be overused without integrating innovative and interactive approaches, hindering student engagement and understanding. Teaching methodologies and resources, such as textbooks, linguistic tools, and digital resources, are essential. BCT Obinze has to explore innovative teaching methodologies, such as immersive language programs, technology use, and faculty training programs that enhance language instruction. Although BCT Obinze employs traditional teaching methods, such as lectures, grammar-focused instruction, and translation exercises, the respondents preferred such. Innovative teaching strategies, such as interactive language laboratories, internet resources, and learning platforms, are becoming increasingly popular. Although the emphasis is on language learning, educational institutions work to combine biblical language study with theological interpretation, and the importance of language ability for theological contemplation is high. It is necessary to make an effort to contextualise the teaching of biblical languages by connecting linguistic studies to African theological and cultural settings via the prism of global basic practices.

Another challenge is the student interest in studying biblical languages, which might be influenced by sociocultural factors, with practical concerns often taking precedence over linguistic studies. Some students perceived biblical languages as less immediately relevant than more practical subjects, affecting enrollment and commitment. Sutton (2023, 2) believes that “One of the main reasons why students in Africa do not enrol in the ancient languages is that



many students depend on biblical translations and therefore do not see the need for learning the original language.” Challenges related to resources and depth of instruction might hinder the full impact of biblical language studies on theological formation. Where biblical language instruction is robust, students often exhibit deeper engagement with Scripture, enhanced exegetical skills, and a deeper theological understanding. Some institutions leverage technological advancements to supplement biblical language instruction, offering online courses, digital resources, and interactive tools to overcome resource limitations and enhance learning experiences (King 2022, 1-17). The current status of biblical language teaching in African theological institutions varies widely, reflecting challenges and opportunities. Resource constraints, enhancing faculty expertise, and innovating pedagogical approaches are crucial to furthering the impact of biblical language instruction on theological education in Africa.

The BCT Obinze faces challenges in teaching biblical languages due to limited resources, varying faculty expertise, and a lack of continuous training. These factors hinder effective teaching, as students perceive them as challenging and need help understanding their relevance in their future ministry or theological studies. The study compares these challenges with successful approaches from top-tier institutions. Insufficient institutional support and a lack of institutional or vision lead to marginalisation within the curriculum. In order to create solutions to overcome resource constraints, strengthen staff competence, improve pedagogical techniques, pique students’ interests, and include languages in the curriculum, these problems must be identified. Long-term dedication is necessary to establish sustainable programs for biblical language instruction, which may be hampered by shifting institutional goals and financial resources. Teaching biblical languages in African contexts presents several obstacles that must be overcome. These include developing faculty, mobilising resources, using creative pedagogies, being sensitive to cultural differences, and strategically re-evaluating education priorities within theological institutions.

### **Significance of Biblical Languages in African Theological Education**

Jerod Gilcher (2019), while commenting on Martin Luther, states the importance of learning the original languages of the Bible, such as Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek. He believed these languages contained the sword of the Spirit and that God revealed Himself in human history through these historic languages. Sutton (2021, 199) complements this when he states, “Because we value the breathed-out, inerrant Word of God as the final authority for our Christian beliefs and practices, we must be students of the original languages.” Learning these languages is crucial for future seminarians and congregation members, as it helps preserve doctrinal purity and the gospel’s purity. While English Bibles are trustworthy, pastors must apply the meaning to their lives and congregations. Total dependence on English translations hinders careful sermon preparation exegesis, leading to a lack of precision and clarity. The issue is not superiority over those who do not know the languages but specificity on their behalf. Knowing the languages allows for freshness and force in discourse, renewing Faith through various words. Preaching aims not to impress people but to win souls, and the languages provide a means to preach with power, clarity, and authority. Pleasure in the soul is another essential aspect of knowing the languages (Gilcher, 2019). Scott Hafemann (1999, 88) notes that “One hour in the text [of the original language] is worth more than ten hours in the secondary literature.” Citing a Jewish poet, Sutton states, “To read the Scripture only in translation is like kissing your bride through a veil” (2021, 202). Therefore, “A working



knowledge of Greek and Hebrew saves time by connecting the pastor directly with the text and directly with the best resources” (203).

In African theological education, biblical languages are significant and contribute significantly to understanding the Bible. Mastery of Hebrew and Aramaic provides direct access to the original texts of the Old Testament scriptures. Understanding these languages enables scholars and theologians to engage directly with the vocabulary, syntax, and idiomatic expressions of the Hebrew Bible (Tanakh) and Aramaic sections (e.g., portions of Daniel and Ezra). Proficiency in Greek is pivotal for studying the New Testament scriptures. The original manuscripts of the New Testament were primarily written in Koine Greek, and a grasp of this language allows for a deeper exploration of the theological nuances, literary styles, and contextual meanings within the Gospels, Epistles, and other New Testament writings. According to Sutton (2021, 203-204):

If we are going to respond to an ever-shifting ethical landscape, we need Greek and Hebrew. If we are going to be effective in sharing about the true identity of Jesus Christ with Jehovah’s Witnesses, we need Greek for evangelism. If we are going to reflect the structure and emphasis of the inspired authors in our proclamation, we need Greek and Hebrew for preaching. If we are going to rightly understand the doctrine of sanctification and submit our articulation of that doctrine to the contours of Scripture, we need Greek and Hebrew for Systematic Theology. Ethics, Counseling, Evangelism, Missions, Preaching, Music & Worship, Systematic Theology—these and other important theological disciplines are undergirded and informed by knowledge of and submission to the Hebrew OT and Greek NT.

Biblical languages enable scholars to contextualise passages within the historical, cultural, and linguistic milieu in which they were written. This contextual understanding is crucial for accurate interpretation and avoids misinterpretation due to cultural differences. Linguistic proficiency in biblical languages facilitates rigorous exegesis, allowing theologians to get deeper into the intended meanings of biblical texts. It aids in discerning nuances in the original language that might not be fully captured in translations. Biblical languages serve as a foundation for doctrinal studies, enabling scholars to explore theological concepts and doctrines directly from the original texts. This promotes a greater comprehension of theological principles rooted in the scriptures. Mastery of biblical languages enhances interpretative accuracy, minimising errors and promoting a more faithful understanding of the intended message, theological themes, and theological implications embedded in the texts (Doriani 1993, 103-15).

Biblical language education has a significant impact on theological perspectives within African contexts. For instance, a theological student or faculty member at the Baptist College of Theology in Obinze integrated African perspectives into their theological reflections through rigorous biblical language education. This integration enabled them to incorporate African cultural and linguistic insights into theological interpretations, contributing to a contextually relevant theological discourse. Therefore, a graduate or faculty member engaged in biblical language studies utilised their expertise to advocate for social justice issues within an African context. Their understanding of biblical languages informed their interpretation of scriptures related to social justice, leading to impactful advocacy and action in societal challenges.



A pastor or theologian who underwent extensive biblical language training applied this knowledge in their pastoral ministry, providing deeper insights and richer connections between biblical texts and congregational life (Ellis 1971, 162-163). These provide concrete examples of how biblical language education influences theological perspectives and applications within African contexts, showcasing its impact on theological thought, pastoral practice, social engagement, and scholarly contributions. According to Robertson (1977, 16), sometimes writes, “The chief reason why preachers do not get and do not keep up a fair and needful knowledge of the Greek New Testament is nothing less than carelessness, and even laziness in many cases.” The impact of biblical languages on theological formation at the BCT Obinze focuses on the students’ perceptions of the importance of learning Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek, their motivations for studying these languages, and their anticipated impact on their ministry or academic pursuits. The students’ experiences, challenges and the perceived value of biblical language education in shaping their theological understanding also seek feedback on teaching methodologies, resources, and suggestions for improving language instruction effectiveness.

Faculty members teaching biblical languages are also interviewed to understand their perspectives on the importance of linguistic proficiency in theological training. The impact of biblical languages on theological interpretation, academic rigour, and the overall theological formation of students is not without challenges in teaching biblical languages. To enhance the pedagogical significance of these languages in theological education, faculty development needs, resources required, and strategies to improve language instruction at the institutional level are needed.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Faculty development programs should focus on enhancing the linguistic proficiency of instructors in biblical languages through workshops, seminars, and initiatives with experts in linguistic studies. Pedagogical training should provide training in effective teaching methodologies for biblical languages, emphasising interactive and immersive approaches to language instruction. Also, curriculum enhancement should integrate biblical languages throughout the theological education journey, ensuring a well-structured and sequenced approach that reinforces language learning at various academic levels.

The pedagogical world has advanced; therefore, technological integration should involve investing in digital resources and technology, such as language software, online resources, and interactive platforms, to supplement language instruction. Online learning platforms should be developed to expand access and flexibility for students, particularly those in remote or underserved areas. Innovative teaching methods, such as language immersion programs, digital tools, and interactive learning approaches, should be adopted to enhance understanding of biblical studies (Mishra and Koehler 2006, 1017-1054). Faculty development should provide resources and training for faculty members to enhance their teaching methods. Enriching resources and support should be provided, including increased access to linguistic resources, library materials, software, and digital tools that aid biblical language instruction. Support mechanisms should be established to facilitate students’ language acquisition outside formal classroom settings. Students should receive tutoring and support services, incentives, and recognition for their proficiency in biblical languages. Research and resource mobilisation



should encourage research initiatives focused on the pedagogical aspects of teaching biblical languages in African contexts, advocating for increased funding and resource allocation specifically dedicated to biblical language education within theological institutions.

The emphasis should be on practical application in outreach, ministry, biblical exegesis, and cross-cultural interaction. It is essential to support fieldwork opportunities for students so they may use their language abilities in various settings. It should be suggested that continuous assessment and adaptation be performed to determine the efficacy of language integration and implement any required modifications. It is essential to support a flexible strategy that enables incremental changes based on input from stakeholders, professors, and students.

Implementing effective biblical language programs at the BCT Obinze be significantly improved by several challenges. The College should invest in updated linguistic tools, digital resources, and a comprehensive library of biblical language materials to address these issues. Faculty training programs and initiatives with proficient linguistic scholars also enhance teaching methodologies and linguistic expertise.

The curriculum should be integrated to ensure seamless integration between biblical language courses and broader theological studies and to introduce advanced courses, electives, or specialised tracks in biblical languages to cater to diverse student interests and academic pursuits. Student engagement and support should be enhanced through interactive and practical learning methods, tutoring programs, study groups, or language labs to provide additional support for students struggling with mastering biblical languages.

Cooperating and forming alliances with organisations specialising in biblical language instruction is also essential. Encouraging global partnerships with esteemed religious establishments or language learning centres facilitates sharing best practices, faculty exchanges, or cooperative research initiatives. Attending international conferences and seminars increases exposure to various educational and linguistic philosophies.

Technological integration and access to digital resources and online learning platforms are also essential. Investing in digital infrastructure and platforms for language instruction and facilitating access to comprehensive online libraries and databases for biblical language resources help overcome existing hurdles and promote a more effective and comprehensive approach to language education within theological studies.

## CONCLUSION

This study has underscored the importance of biblical languages in African theological education, emphasising that proficiency in Hebrew and Greek is essential for robust scriptural interpretation, doctrinal precision, and effective pastoral ministry. The research revealed that marginalising these languages in many institutions has weakened biblical exegesis and diminished theological depth among graduates. However, institutions prioritising biblical language training equip their students with the skills necessary to engage Scripture more accurately to understand better the Bible's original meaning within its historical and cultural contexts. The findings indicate a pressing need for African theological institutions to re-integrate biblical languages into their core curricula. Doing so will enhance academic



scholarship and prepare pastors and theologians to faithfully interpret and apply biblical truths in diverse cultural settings. The study recommends developing innovative pedagogical approaches, including digital tools, to make language learning more accessible and relevant for contemporary theological students. Therefore, mastering biblical languages remains an indispensable aspect of theological education. Its restoration and emphasis within African theological institutions will serve as a vital step toward cultivating a generation of theologians and pastors rooted in the Scriptures and equipped to lead with theological integrity in their ministries. This renewed focus on biblical languages will strengthen both theological scholarship and the spiritual vitality of the African church.

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