



Reimagining Sacred Space in the Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical and Historical Study for Nigerian Religious Contexts

Michael Enyinwa Okoronkwo, PhD
Department of Religious Studies
National Open University of Nigeria, Abuja
meokoronkwo@noun.edu.ng
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6628-4400>
+234 905 820 9200

Abstract

This article investigates how the *Acts of the Apostles* redefines sacred space and mediates divine power through ordinary locations transformed by the Spirit's presence. Using Philip Esler's social scientific historical model alongside Vernon Robbins' socio-rhetorical criticism, the study analyses seventeen pericopes in Acts that portray the transformation of houses, public squares, and temples into ritual geographies of divine activity. It argues that Luke's theology of space is not static but dynamic. Holiness relocates from the Jerusalem temple to Spirit-filled communities across social and ethnic boundaries. The analysis demonstrates that sacred space in Acts is constructed through communal prayer, hospitality, and proclamation. This dynamic informs an African theology of space in which divine presence inhabits contextual realities. The article's unique contribution lies in integrating social scientific historical and socio-rhetorical exegesis with African phenomenology of sacred geography to formulate a contextual theology of sacred space relevant for Nigerian religious thought and national transformation.

Keywords: Acts of the Apostles; Esler; Robbins; Sacred Space; Social Scientific Historical, Socio-Rhetorical Criticism

1. Introduction

The concept of sacred space pervades biblical theology and the anthropology of religion. In the *Acts of the Apostles*, sacred geography shifts from the temple to the dispersed community of believers empowered by the Holy Spirit. Early Christian experiences occurred not in monumental temples but in domestic or contested public places. Pentecost, communal worship, healings, and house gatherings happened in socially diverse contexts. This study explores how Acts constructs sacred space as relational and mobile, revealing God's presence across cultural boundaries.

A persistent question drives this research: How does Acts redefine sacred space in relation to divine power, and what theological and contextual insights emerge for Nigerian understandings of sacred geography?



Previous scholarship has examined temple imagery or Luke's pneumatology. Yet few have integrated Esler's social scientific historical model with Robbins' socio-rhetorical analysis to illuminate the social and rhetorical dynamics of space.

The research gap lies in the absence of a comprehensive study that combines these methodological approaches within an African theological framework. Most studies treat Luke's spatial theology in isolation from contemporary African cosmologies. This creates a scholarly void in contextual biblical interpretation that this article addresses.

The objectives are threefold. First, to exegete selected pericopes in Acts that depict sacred space. Second, to interpret them using socio-historical, socio-cultural, and socio-rhetorical perspectives. Third, to develop an African contextual theology of sacred space.

The study is significant because Nigerian Traditional Religion regards land, shrines, and family compounds as loci of divine power (Okoronkwo, 2025; 2024a; 2024b). By juxtaposing Acts' theology of space with indigenous perceptions, the research contributes to dialogue between biblical theology and African cosmology. The theoretical framework combines Esler's socio-historical and socio-cultural models with Robbins' socio-rhetorical criticism. This integration enables a multidimensional reading of Acts that accounts for social dynamics, cultural codes, and rhetorical strategies.

The article proceeds through a literature review, methodological explanation, textual analysis, theological discussion, and an evaluation of impact and relevance. Each section builds toward a comprehensive understanding of sacred space in Acts and its implications for Nigerian Christianity.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

2.1 Sacred Space in Biblical and Theological Scholarship

Classical studies of sacred space emphasised the axis mundi that connects heaven and earth. Mircea Eliade's foundational work *The Sacred and the Profane* (1959) established this paradigm. In biblical theology, the Jerusalem temple functions as such an axis. However, Luke's narrative in Acts dissolves this spatial exclusivity. Wright (2012, 211) observes that Luke presents the Spirit as the new locus of divine presence. This theological shift fundamentally alters how early Christians understood divine geography.



Keener (2015, 628) argues that Acts redefines sacred space through the Spirit's mobility. The Spirit descends not only in Jerusalem but also in Samaria, Caesarea, and beyond. This geographical expansion challenges temple-centred theology. Gaventa (2016, 44) highlights how Acts relocates holiness into community life. The gathered believers become the new temple. Their corporate existence embodies divine presence more fully than physical structures.

Recent scholarship has explored Luke's spatial theology from various angles. Some focus on the temple's symbolic role in Luke-Acts. Others examine the house church as an alternative sacred space. Yet these studies often treat spatial theology in isolation from social and rhetorical dynamics. A comprehensive analysis requires integrating multiple methodological perspectives.

In African scholarship, the spatial dimension of theology has received attention from scholars like Mbiti and Olupona. Mbiti (2015, 47) argues that African religion is geographically grounded in sacred sites. These sites connect communities to ancestors and divine powers. Olupona (2019, 93) describes sacred space as social memory. Places become holy through repeated ritual and communal narrative.

However, the application of socio-rhetorical and socio-historical models to Acts within an African theological frame remains underdeveloped. Although a few scholars have begun exploring such intersections—such as Etukumana's (2024) socio-political reading of Luke-Acts within African Pentecostal cosmologies and Dube's (2000, 2012) postcolonial feminist engagements with Luke's missionary narratives—these efforts remain limited in scope. Earlier methodological contributions by African biblical scholars, including Ukpong's (1995, 2002) inculturation hermeneutics and Adamo's (2001, 2015) African cultural hermeneutics, provide important foundations but do not yet offer sustained socio-rhetorical analyses of Acts. Likewise, broader theological reflections by Bediako (1992, 2004) and Pobee (1979) highlight resonances between early Christian and African cosmologies but stop short of detailed textual engagement with Luke's narrative strategies. Consequently, few studies have attempted to bridge Luke's first-century context with contemporary African cosmologies in a way that integrates socio-historical reconstruction with African worldviews. This gap presents an opportunity for methodological innovation and contextual interpretation.



2.2 Esler's Socio-Historical and Socio-Cultural Models

Philip Esler's socio-historical approach situates biblical texts within the social world of their production. The method focuses on group identity, conflict, and cultural codes (Esler 1994, 9). Esler employs social-scientific categories to interpret early Christian behaviour. These categories include honour, kinship, purity, and patronage. They provide analytical tools for understanding ancient Mediterranean society.

Esler's socio-cultural model examines how these categories shape textual meaning. In Acts, spatial practices express boundary negotiation between Jews and Gentiles. Temple attendance signals Jewish identity and covenant faithfulness. Household meetings represent inclusive fellowship that transcends ethnic boundaries. The temple becomes a contested site of authority. Households become symbols of radical inclusion (Esler 2015, 188).

Esler's framework illuminates Luke's narrative strategy. Luke portrays the early church navigating complex social boundaries. Jewish Christians maintain temple worship while embracing Gentile believers. This tension creates narrative conflict that drives the Acts storyline. Sacred space becomes a focal point for identity negotiation. Where and how communities gather reveals theological commitments.

The socio-cultural model also highlights honour dynamics in ancient society. Public miracles at temple precincts challenge priestly authority. Household hospitality confers patron status on converts like Lydia and Cornelius. These social dynamics shape how sacred space functions rhetorically and theologically. Esler's approach thus provides essential context for interpreting Luke's spatial theology.

2.3 Robbins' Socio-Rhetorical Model

Vernon Robbins developed socio-rhetorical criticism to explore how texts create meaning through interacting textures. These textures include inner-textual (rhetorical argument), inter-textual (allusions), social-cultural, ideological, and sacred dimensions (Robbins 1996, 95). Each texture contributes to the text's persuasive power and theological vision.

The inner texture examines repetitive patterns, narrative structure, and argumentative logic. In Acts, repeated phrases like "with one accord" create rhetorical cohesion. They emphasise communal unity as essential to sacred space. The inter-textual dimension reveals how Luke echoes Old Testament temple



theology while subverting it. References to Solomon's temple and Moses' tabernacle connect Acts to Israel's story. Yet Luke reinterprets these symbols through Christ and the Spirit.

The social-cultural texture explores how texts reflect and shape social relationships. Luke's portrayal of household churches reflects urban patronage systems. The ideological texture uncovers the text's value commitments. Luke privileges Spirit-led inclusion over ritual purity. He values mission over religious boundary maintenance.

The sacred texture exposes theological claims about divine presence and power. Robbins' model reveals how Luke persuades readers to envision sacred geography beyond physical structures. God's presence is not confined to temples. The Spirit sanctifies any space where believers gather in Jesus' name. This theological vision challenges both Jewish and Greco-Roman assumptions about sacred space.

Applying this model to Acts reveals Luke's rhetorical strategy. He constructs a narrative world in which ordinary places become extraordinary through divine encounter. Houses, streets, and marketplaces host miraculous events. These spatial transformations communicate theological truths about God's accessibility and the gospel's universal scope.

2.4 Research Gap and Theoretical Integration

Although many studies examine Luke's temple theology, few integrate Esler's socio-historical insights with Robbins' rhetorical analysis to interpret sacred space. Some scholars employ one method or the other. But combining both approaches yields richer exegetical results. Esler illuminates the social forces shaping sacred geography. Robbins explains how Luke constructs persuasive rhetoric about space.

This article bridges that methodological gap by analysing how Acts constructs sacred geography both rhetorically and socially. The integration reveals multiple dimensions of Luke's spatial theology. Social-scientific analysis shows how early Christians navigated cultural boundaries through spatial practices. Rhetorical analysis demonstrates how Luke persuades readers to embrace a new theology of place.

The study further extends the discussion into African theology. Luke's fluid sacred space resonates with African Traditional Religion's understanding of spiritual presence embedded in land and ritual. Yet Acts universalises sacred space through Christ and the Spirit. This universalising move creates opportunities for



dialogue between biblical theology and African cosmologies. Both traditions affirm divine presence in ordinary contexts. Both value communal gathering as sacred activity.

The unique contribution of this study lies in demonstrating how socio-rhetorical and socio-historical exegesis can inform contextual theology. By reading Acts through African phenomenology of space, the study generates insights relevant for Nigerian Christianity. It shows how biblical texts speak to contemporary questions about sacred geography, religious identity, and communal worship.

3. Methodology and Hermeneutical Approach

The study employs a qualitative, exegetical, and comparative design. This methodological framework integrates textual analysis with social-scientific interpretation and contextual application. The approach is interdisciplinary, drawing on biblical studies, sociology, and African theology.

3.1 Primary Data and Text Selection

The primary data consist of seventeen pericopes from Acts. These passages were selected based on explicit references to sacred space or spatial transformation. The *pericopes* include Acts 1:4–14; 2:1–13; 2:42–47; 3:1–10; 4:1–4; 5:12–16; 6:8–15; 7:44–53; 9:1–19; 10:1–48; 16:13–15; 17:22–34; 18:1–8; 19:8–10; 21:26–30; 22:17–21; 28:23–31.

These texts span the entire Acts narrative. They represent diverse geographical settings: Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, Asia Minor, Macedonia, Greece, and Rome. The selection captures Luke's progressive redefinition of sacred space as the gospel spreads. Each *pericope* contributes to understanding Luke's spatial theology.

3.2 Exegetical Steps

The analysis follows five steps. First, textual identification and historical context. Each pericope is situated within Luke's narrative sequence and first-century Mediterranean culture. Historical background illuminates social dynamics shaping the text.

Second, lexical and semantic analysis of spatial terms. Key Greek words include *topos* (place), *oikos* (house), *hieron* (temple), and *hagios* (holy). Semantic ranges are examined to understand how Luke employs spatial vocabulary. Word studies reveal theological connotations and narrative patterns.



Third, narrative and rhetorical structure analysis using Robbins' inner texture. This step identifies repetitive patterns, narrative progression, and argumentative logic. Rhetorical devices like chiasm, inclusio, and parallelism are noted. The analysis uncovers how Luke structures spatial narratives to communicate theological meaning.

Fourth, interpretation through Esler's socio-historical categories. This step applies social-scientific models to understand group identity, honour dynamics, kinship patterns, and purity concerns. The analysis explores how spatial practices reflect and shape early Christian identity.

Fifth, contextual theological synthesis. Exegetical findings are integrated with African theology to generate contextual insights. The synthesis compares Luke's spatial theology with Nigerian Traditional Religion's understanding of sacred geography. Theological implications for contemporary Nigerian Christianity are drawn.

3.3 Justification of Method

Esler's model illuminates the communal and cultural forces shaping sacred geography. His socio-historical approach explains why certain spaces became significant for early Christians. Social-scientific categories reveal how spatial practices negotiated identity boundaries. This dimension is essential for understanding Acts as a historical document.

Robbins' rhetorical approach interprets how Luke constructs persuasion and theological meaning. His model shows how narrative strategies communicate theological vision. This dimension is essential for understanding Acts as persuasive literature.

Together they provide a multi-dimensional hermeneutic suitable for bridging historical and contemporary contexts. The combination yields exegetical precision and contextual relevance. Historical analysis grounds interpretation in first-century realities. Rhetorical analysis reveals timeless theological truths. Contextual application speaks to contemporary African Christianity.

3.4 Data Sources

Primary texts are analysed alongside secondary literature. Key commentaries include Keener (2015), who provides exhaustive historical and cultural background. Esler (2015) offers social-scientific interpretation



of Luke-Acts. Robbins (1996) supplies the socio-rhetorical framework. African theologians such as Orobator (2018) and Mbiti (2015) contribute contextual perspectives.

Ethnographic insights from Nigerian traditional worship practices complement the textual data. These insights are drawn from published ethnographies and theological reflections. They enhance contextual relevance by connecting biblical exegesis to contemporary religious experience. The integration of textual and ethnographic data strengthens the study's contribution to African theology.

4. Results and Findings

4.1 Sacred Space in the Early Jerusalem Community (Acts 1–5)

In Acts 1:4–14, the disciples gather in an upper room following Jesus' ascension. This domestic setting becomes sacred space through prayer and expectation. The upper room is not inherently holy. Its sacredness derives from the gathered community's devotion. Luke employs the phrase "with one accord" to emphasise communal unity (Acts 1:14). Robbins' inner texture reveals how this repetitive pattern creates rhetorical cohesion. Unity prepares for Pentecost.

Esler's socio-historical lens shows a marginalised group redefining sacred geography outside institutional temple authority. The disciples cannot access the Holy of Holies. They lack priestly status. Yet their gathered presence becomes a new locus of divine encounter. This spatial redefinition challenges temple monopoly on holiness.

At Pentecost (Acts 2:1–13), the Spirit descends in a house. Luke emphasises that "they were all together in one place" (Acts 2:1). The Spirit comes not to the temple but to the gathered community. This signifies divine presence among believers regardless of institutional location. Luke's rhetoric contrasts interior domesticity with public noise that draws the crowd. The sound like rushing wind attracts Jerusalem's multinational population.

The contrast symbolises a shift from private to universal sacred space. What begins in domestic intimacy becomes public proclamation. The Spirit democratises holiness, erasing spatial boundaries. Keener (2015, 1369) notes that the Spirit's coming on all believers challenges priestly exclusivity. Every believer becomes a conduit of divine power.



In Acts 2:42–47, believers meet in homes for teaching and breaking bread. These practices sacralise ordinary domestic life. The community gathers in the temple courts but breaks bread "in their homes" (Acts 2:46). This dual spatial practice maintains Jewish identity while creating new sacred spaces. Esler's socio-cultural model interprets this as fictive kinship formation. Shared meals replace temple sacrifices (Esler 2015, 193).

Luke presents communal life as the new temple ritual. Believers devote themselves to teaching, fellowship, breaking bread, and prayer (Acts 2:42). These activities constitute sacred practices that sanctify domestic space. The household becomes a micro-temple where divine presence dwells.

At the Beautiful Gate (Acts 3:1–10), Peter heals a lame man within temple precincts. The miracle occurs at the threshold between sacred and profane space. The Beautiful Gate marks the boundary between outer courts and inner sanctuary. Peter's healing symbolises divine intervention that transcends physical sanctity. God's power operates at spatial margins.

The act reclaims temple space rhetorically for the risen Christ. Peter declares, "In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, rise up and walk" (Acts 3:6). Jesus' name mediates divine power independently of temple structures. The subsequent arrest (Acts 4:1–4) reveals ideological conflict over spatial control. Temple authorities view the apostles' teaching as territorial encroachment. The apostles represent a new locus of divine authority challenging temple establishment.

4.2 Contested Temple and Emerging Sacredness (Acts 5–7)

At Solomon's Portico (Acts 5:12–16), public miracles extend sacred geography across temple courtyards. The apostles perform "many signs and wonders among the people" (Acts 5:12). These miracles attract crowds. People bring the sick into streets, hoping Peter's shadow might heal them (Acts 5:15). This extraordinary detail emphasises divine power pervading public space.

Robbins' social texture identifies tension between public witness and institutional hostility. The high priest arrests the apostles, accusing them of filling Jerusalem with their teaching (Acts 5:28). Spatial language reveals territorial anxiety. The gospel threatens priestly control over religious space. Yet divine power continues manifesting beyond official sanction.



Stephen's accusation and speech (Acts 6:8–7:53) articulate the theological climax regarding sacred space. Accused of speaking against the temple, Stephen delivers a historical survey of Israel's relationship with God. He concludes that "the Most High does not dwell in houses made by hands" (Acts 7:48). This declaration, quoting Isaiah 66:1–2, undermines the temple's monopoly on holiness.

Stephen's rhetoric employs Israel's historical narrative to challenge spatial exclusivity. He recounts God's appearances to Abraham in Mesopotamia, Moses at Sinai, and Solomon's temple construction. Throughout Israel's history, God reveals himself beyond fixed locations. The tabernacle, mobile by design, symbolises divine presence accompanying God's people. Stephen argues that temple fixation misunderstands divine transcendence.

Esler's socio-historical reading interprets this as boundary-breaking declaration. Divine presence transcends ethnicity and geography (Esler 2015, 198). Stephen's speech threatens social boundaries maintained through spatial practices. By denying the temple exclusive sanctity, Stephen relativises Jewish religious identity markers. This theological position enables Gentile inclusion without requiring temple participation.

4.3 Household and Gentile Sacred Spaces (Acts 9–10; 16; 18)

Saul's conversion (Acts 9:1–19) reveals divine encounter in transit and in Ananias' house. Jesus appears to Saul on the Damascus road, far from Jerusalem's sacred centre. The encounter demonstrates God's geographic freedom. Divine revelation occurs wherever God chooses. Subsequently, Ananias receives a vision directing him to Saul. The healing and baptism occur in Judas' house on Straight Street (Acts 9:11). This private home becomes a site of revelation and healing.

The pattern establishes domestic sanctity as normative for Christian experience. Households become places where God speaks, heals, and commissions. This spatial theology democratises access to divine presence. One need not journey to Jerusalem or access temple precincts. God meets believers in their ordinary contexts.

Peter's visit to Cornelius (Acts 10:1–48) marks a watershed in Acts' spatial theology. The Spirit descends on Gentiles in a Roman household. This event parallels Pentecost, confirming that Gentiles receive the same Spirit without requiring temple participation. Peter declares, "God shows no partiality" (Acts 10:34). This theological principle has spatial implications. Divine impartiality extends to geographical impartiality.



Robbins' ideological texture exposes Luke's rhetorical goal: to legitimate Gentile inclusion by depicting God's impartial sanctification of alien spaces. The Spirit falls on Gentiles "even as on us at the beginning" (Acts 11:15). This parallel validates Cornelius' household as sacred space equivalent to the Jerusalem upper room. Geographic and ethnic boundaries dissolve before the Spirit's presence.

Esler's socio-cultural perspective frames this as social boundary crossing that reconfigures sacred geography. The move from Jewish exclusivity to universal accessibility fundamentally alters Christian identity. Gentile households become legitimate sacred spaces. This theological innovation enables Christianity's transformation from Jewish sect to universal movement.

Lydia's house in Philippi (Acts 16:13–15) illustrates household churches as normative spatial form. Paul meets women praying by a river, outside Philippi's city gate. This marginal location becomes a site of gospel proclamation. Lydia responds, and her household is baptised. She insists, "If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come and stay at my house" (Acts 16:15).

Lydia's hospitality converts domestic space into ritual centre. Her house becomes the gathering place for Philippian believers (Acts 16:40). A woman patron establishes sacred space through hospitality. Oropeza (2020, 77) notes how women and patrons convert domestic areas into ritual centres. Power and piety intersect spatially. Social status enables spatial transformation.

The house of Titius Justus in Corinth (Acts 18:1–8) further illustrates this pattern. When Paul leaves the synagogue, he goes next door to Titius Justus' house (Acts 18:7). This household becomes the base for Corinthian mission. The spatial proximity to the synagogue is rhetorical. Paul's move next door symbolises continuity and rupture. The gospel remains connected to Israel's story but creates new sacred spaces.

4.4 Public and Secular Sacred Spaces (Acts 17; 19; 21–22; 28)

Paul's sermon at the Areopagus (Acts 17:22–34) represents theological reconceptualisation of sacred space. Athens' civic centre becomes a platform for gospel proclamation. Paul declares that "God does not dwell in temples made with hands" (Acts 17:24). This statement echoes Stephen's speech and challenges Greco-Roman temple theology.

Paul relocates divine presence to creation itself. God "gives to all men life and breath and everything" (Acts 17:25). Divine proximity is universal, not temple-confined. Robbins' sacred texture reveals cosmic rhetoric



aligning with Greco-Roman philosophical categories. Paul employs Stoic concepts to persuade an Athenian audience. The strategy demonstrates theological adaptability while maintaining spatial theology's core claim: God transcends human-made sacred spaces.

In Ephesus (Acts 19:8–10), Paul teaches in the Hall of Tyrannus. This secular lecture venue transforms into sacred pedagogical space. After three months in the synagogue, Paul withdraws with disciples to Tyrannus' hall (Acts 19:9). For two years, "all the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord" (Acts 19:10). This remarkable claim attributes missional success to teaching in a rented hall.

Esler's socio-cultural reading emphasises adaptation to urban public culture. Tyrannus' hall represents Greco-Roman educational institutions. By appropriating this space, Paul demonstrates that sacred geography expands wherever God's word is proclaimed. The location sanctifies activity, not vice versa. Teaching and proclamation create sacred space regardless of architectural context.

Paul's temple vision (Acts 22:17–21) and arrest (Acts 21:26–30) expose ongoing conflict over sacred boundaries. Paul reports that while praying in the temple, he fell into a trance and received a vision (Acts 22:17). Even within contested temple space, divine revelation occurs. This demonstrates that God's presence persists amid territorial conflict. The temple remains symbolically significant but no longer exclusively sacred.

Paul's arrest in the temple (Acts 21:26–30) climaxes spatial tension. Jewish pilgrims accuse Paul of defiling the temple by bringing Greeks into it (Acts 21:28). This accusation reveals anxieties about spatial boundaries. The temple's holiness depends on maintaining ethnic and ritual purity. Paul's inclusive mission threatens these boundaries. The subsequent riot demonstrates how sacred space becomes contested ground.

Finally, during Paul's house arrest in Rome (Acts 28:23–31), his rented dwelling becomes a centre of unhindered preaching. Luke concludes Acts with Paul "proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance" (Acts 28:31). This geographical and spatial endpoint completes Luke's narrative arc. The gospel reaches "the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8) in a domestic setting.

The final scene reaffirms household sacred space as Christianity's normative form. Paul's rented house in imperial Rome becomes a site of unhindered proclamation. No temple, no synagogue, no public forum—



just a house where God's word goes forth. This ending underscores Luke's spatial theology. Divine presence sanctifies ordinary places where believers gather in Jesus' name.

5. Discussion and Interpretation

5.1 Theological Meaning of Sacred Space in Acts

Acts constructs a theology of sacred space as relational rather than architectural. Holiness derives from divine presence mediated through the Spirit, not from physical structures. The temple remains symbolically important but is superseded by Spirit-filled community. Luke's narrative portrays movement from *topos hieros* (holy place) to *laos hagios* (holy people).

This theological shift has profound implications. First, it democratises access to divine presence. No priestly mediation or temple pilgrimage is required. Second, it universalises sacred geography. Any place where believers gather becomes potentially sacred. Third, it emphasises communal and ethical dimensions. Sacred space emerges through prayer, hospitality, and justice, not through ritual purity.

The Spirit redefines holiness through presence and mission. Where the Spirit moves, sacred space emerges. This pneumatological understanding challenges static concepts of holiness. Sacred geography becomes dynamic and missional. It follows the Spirit's movement across ethnic, social, and geographical boundaries.

5.2 Socio-Rhetorical and Socio-Historical Integration

By merging Robbins' and Esler's frameworks, we observe that Luke's rhetoric reflects socio-historical realities of displacement and diaspora. The early believers, marginalised within Judaism and the Roman Empire, sacralised spaces accessible to them. Homes, streets, and lecture halls became sites of divine encounter. This spatial strategy enabled community formation despite social marginalisation.

Esler's concept of group identity formation through spatial differentiation illuminates this process (Esler 2015, 205). Early Christians defined themselves partly through distinctive spatial practices. They gathered in homes rather than temples. They welcomed Gentiles into sacred spaces previously restricted to Jews. These practices communicated theological convictions about inclusion and grace.

Robbins' sacred texture explains how narrative rhetoric persuades readers to embrace this new spatial theology. Luke constructs a narrative world in which ordinary places become extraordinary through divine



presence. Repeated patterns of household gatherings, public miracles, and cross-cultural encounters normalise Luke's spatial vision. Readers learn to recognise sacred space wherever the Spirit moves.

The integration also reveals Luke's apologetic strategy. By showing divine presence in diverse locations, Luke argues for Christianity's legitimacy and universality. The gospel is not geographically bound to Jerusalem. It spreads across the empire, sanctifying spaces wherever it goes. This geographical expansion validates Christianity's claim to universal truth.

5.3 Comparison with African Traditional Religion

African cosmology conceives land and community as imbued with sacred power. Shrines, groves, and ancestral compounds symbolise divine proximity (Olupona 2019, 104). Sacred spaces connect communities to spiritual realms. They embody collective memory and identity. Ritual practices at these sites maintain cosmic order and communal wellbeing.

Acts portrays divine presence permeating domestic and social settings similarly. Houses, streets, and public squares become sacred through Spirit's presence. Both traditions affirm that divine power inhabits ordinary contexts. Both value communal gathering as essential to sacred experience. The convergence suggests Acts resonates with African holistic spirituality.

However, important differences exist. African Traditional Religion often ties holiness to territorial continuity. Sacred sites derive power from ancestral connections and historical usage. Specific locations hold unique spiritual significance. By contrast, Acts universalises sacred space through Christ and the Spirit. No location holds intrinsic sanctity. Divine presence follows believers wherever they go.

This theological shift invites African theology to interpret church, home, and public life as spaces of divine encounter beyond ritual centres. It affirms African intuitions about divine presence in communal life while challenging territorial restrictions. The Spirit's freedom to sanctify any space liberates African Christianity from dependence on imported sacred geographies. Indigenous contexts become legitimate sites of divine revelation.

The dialogue between Acts and African Traditional Religion generates constructive theological insights. It suggests that African churches need not replicate Western architectural models. Indigenous spatial forms—



compounds, communal gathering spaces, natural settings—can function as sacred space. What matters is the community's faithfulness and the Spirit's presence, not architectural style.

5.4 Ethical and Ecclesial Implications

The theology of sacred space in Acts challenges contemporary Nigerian Christianity to reconsider its attachment to monumental architecture. Many churches invest heavily in elaborate buildings, viewing physical structures as markers of success. Yet Acts suggests authentic sacredness emerges from communal faith, justice, and mission rather than architecture.

The church should prioritise relational holiness manifested in reconciliation, inclusivity, and hospitality. These practices embody divine presence more faithfully than impressive buildings. Sacred power expresses itself through transformed relationships, ethical witness, and communal solidarity. Where believers gather in Jesus' name with justice and love, there God's presence dwells.

This perspective has practical implications for Nigerian ecclesiology. It challenges prosperity theology's emphasis on material success. It questions denominational competition expressed through architectural rivalry. It redirects attention from building projects to community formation. Resources invested in massive structures might better serve mission, education, and social justice.

Acts also models spatial inclusivity that challenges religious territorialism. In Nigeria, religious tensions often revolve around sacred sites and worship spaces. Muslims and Christians compete for space and influence. Indigenous practitioners face marginalisation. Acts' theology suggests sacred space need not be exclusive. Divine presence is generous, sanctifying diverse locations and communities.

This vision promotes peaceful coexistence. Recognising God's presence beyond exclusive locations encourages interfaith respect. It reduces conflict over land and worship centres. Each community can experience sacred space without denying others' access to divine presence. This theological foundation supports religious tolerance and civic harmony.



6. Contribution, Impact, and Policy Relevance

6.1 Academic Contribution

This study contributes a contextual theology of sacred geography that integrates socio-rhetorical exegesis with African phenomenology of space. Its originality lies in demonstrating that Luke's reconfiguration of sacred space parallels African communal spirituality. This parallel offers biblical foundation for contextual theology of place.

The research advances Luke-Acts studies by combining Esler's socio-historical and Robbins' socio-rhetorical models in a single interpretive frame. Previous studies typically employ one approach or the other. Combining both yields multidimensional readings that account for social dynamics and rhetorical strategies simultaneously. This methodological integration models how interdisciplinary approaches enrich biblical interpretation.

The study also contributes to African biblical hermeneutics. It demonstrates how African cosmologies can function as hermeneutical lenses for biblical interpretation. Rather than imposing Western theological frameworks, the study engages Acts through African phenomenology of space. This approach generates contextual insights while maintaining exegetical rigour.

For socio-rhetorical criticism, the study shows how Robbins' model applies to spatial theology. Previous applications focused on social identity or christological claims. This study demonstrates socio-rhetorical criticism's utility for analysing sacred geography. The method illuminates how Luke constructs spatial theology through narrative rhetoric.

6.2 National and Ecclesial Impact

Within Nigeria, religious tensions often revolve around territorial claims and sacred sites. Muslim-Christian conflicts sometimes concern worship spaces or land use. Indigenous practitioners face marginalisation from both religions. This study's insights promote dialogue and peaceful coexistence.

Recognising God's presence beyond exclusive locations encourages interfaith respect. If divine presence is not territorially confined, then religious communities need not compete for sacred space. Each tradition can honour its sacred sites without claiming exclusive access to divine presence. This theological perspective reduces conflict over land and worship centres.



For Nigerian churches, the study challenges architectural triumphalism. Many denominations compete to build the largest or most impressive structures. This competition diverts resources from mission and social service. Acts' theology suggests that sacred power manifests through transformed communities, not impressive buildings. Churches can redirect resources toward education, healthcare, and poverty alleviation.

The emphasis on household sacred space supports small group ministry and cell church models. Nigerian mega-churches often struggle to foster intimate community. Acts' household gatherings model how domestic spaces can function as primary loci of spiritual formation. This approach promotes relational discipleship and mutual care.

The study also affirms African cosmologies while offering Christological reinterpretation. It respects African intuitions about sacred space while showing how Christ universalises divine presence. This balanced approach supports theological indigenisation without syncretism. African Christianity can develop distinctive spatial theologies rooted in both biblical tradition and African cosmology.

6.3 Policy and Educational Relevance

For theological education, the findings support curriculum reform integrating contextual hermeneutics and African cosmology into biblical studies. Nigerian seminaries often use Western textbooks and methods exclusively. This study models how African contexts can function as hermeneutical resources, not just application fields.

Seminaries can employ this framework to teach space theology as a lens for public theology and nation-building. Students learn to interpret biblical texts through African lenses while maintaining academic rigour. They develop contextual theologies relevant for Nigerian ministry. This approach produces church leaders equipped for African contexts rather than trained primarily in Western paradigms.

Church organisations can adopt this framework to design community-oriented worship spaces embodying inclusivity and social transformation. Rather than replicating Western cathedral models, churches can create indigenous sacred spaces. Outdoor gathering areas, multipurpose community centres, and adapted traditional structures can function as worship spaces. The key is fostering community and Spirit-filled worship, not architectural grandeur.



For government and educational policymakers, this research contributes to national integration and religious harmony. This study addresses national challenges including religious conflict that threatens Nigerian unity. It offers theological resources for promoting peaceful coexistence. It shows how reinterpreting sacred space can reduce territorial conflicts.

The Nigerian Interreligious Council and similar bodies can utilise these insights for dialogue initiatives. Understanding how different traditions conceptualise sacred space facilitates mutual respect. Comparative studies of Christian, Muslim, and indigenous sacred geographies can build bridges across religious divides. This theological work supports peace-building and social cohesion.

Universities can integrate this research into religious studies and peace studies curricula. Students learn how theological concepts influence social conflict and cooperation. They develop analytical tools for addressing religion's role in Nigerian public life. This interdisciplinary approach connects biblical studies to sociology, anthropology, and political science.

6.4 Alignment with National and Institutional Research Objectives

In line with national and institutional priorities that emphasise research as a driver of development, this study contributes to cultural integration, moral renewal, and the intellectual indigenisation of theology. These objectives reflect the broader commitment of research funding and academic institutions in Nigeria to address developmental challenges through contextually relevant scholarship. Issues such as religious conflict, cultural alienation, and dependence on imported theologies continue to hinder national progress, underscoring the need for locally grounded theological reflection.

This research addresses these challenges directly. By linking biblical hermeneutics with socio-cultural realities, it demonstrates how theological scholarship can inform policy on religious harmony and civic ethics. The study models indigenous scholarship that engages global academic conversations while addressing local concerns.

Cultural integration occurs when diverse traditions find common ground. This study facilitates dialogue between Christianity and African Traditional Religion. It shows how biblical theology resonates with African cosmologies without requiring cultural abandonment. This approach supports cultural continuity amid religious transformation.



Moral renewal requires theological foundations. Nigerian society faces ethical crises in governance, economics, and social relations. This study's emphasis on relational holiness and communal ethics provides theological resources for moral discourse. Sacred space manifested through justice, reconciliation, and hospitality offers vision for societal transformation.

Intellectual indigenisation ensures that Nigerian scholarship contributes to global knowledge production. This study demonstrates that African contexts generate valuable theological insights. It positions Nigerian biblical scholarship as contributing to international conversations, not merely consuming Western scholarship. This intellectual self-sufficiency supports national development.

7. Conclusion

Acts of the Apostles redefines sacred space as dynamic, inclusive, and mission-oriented. Through the Holy Spirit, divine presence migrates from the Jerusalem temple to communities gathered in houses, public halls, and even prisons. Luke's narrative constructs a theology in which sacred geography follows the Spirit's movement across social and ethnic boundaries.

Using Esler's socio-historical and socio-cultural perspectives, sacred geography emerges as a social construct shaped by identity, power, and boundary negotiation. Early Christians sacralised accessible spaces—homes and streets—precisely because they lacked access to traditional religious centres. These spatial practices expressed theological convictions about inclusion, grace, and divine impartiality.

Robbins' socio-rhetorical model reveals Luke's persuasive strategy inviting readers to internalise this new theology of place. Through repeated patterns of household gatherings, cross-cultural encounters, and public miracles, Luke normalises the vision of sacred space as relational rather than architectural. The narrative rhetoric persuades readers that God's presence sanctifies any context where believers gather in faith.

The integration of these methodological approaches yields rich exegetical results. It demonstrates how first-century social dynamics shaped Luke's spatial theology. It shows how Luke's rhetoric constructs theological meaning through narrative patterns. It illuminates the text's enduring relevance for contemporary questions about sacred geography.

For Nigerian theology, this reinterpretation affirms that divine presence sanctifies human contexts—villages, cities, and homes—where justice, prayer, and fellowship flourish. African cosmologies intuitively



grasp this truth. Sacred power inhabits communal life, not just ritual centres. Acts provides biblical warrant for developing contextual theologies of place rooted in African experience.

The church's task is to embody sacred power through ethical witness and communal solidarity. Rather than investing in monumental architecture, churches should prioritise relational holiness. Sacred space manifests where believers practice reconciliation, hospitality, and justice. These practices make every Spirit-filled community a living temple of God.

The study's practical implications extend to multiple spheres. Ecclesially, it challenges architectural triumphalism and supports community-centred ministry. Socially, it promotes interfaith dialogue and reduces religious territorialism. Educationally, it models contextual hermeneutics and indigenous theological scholarship. Politically, it contributes to peace-building and national integration.

Future research may explore comparative studies between Acts and African sacred narratives to deepen the theology of place within global Christianity. Examining how different African cultures conceptualise sacred space could generate additional contextual insights. Comparative analysis of Christian, Muslim, and indigenous sacred geographies might yield resources for interfaith dialogue.

Further studies could also investigate how Luke's spatial theology relates to contemporary urban planning and architecture. How might cities design public spaces that honour diverse sacred geographies? What architectural forms best express Acts' inclusive vision of sacred space? These questions connect biblical theology to practical concerns about built environments.

Additionally, empirical research examining how Nigerian Christians actually experience sacred space would complement this textual study. Ethnographic studies of worship practices, spatial arrangements, and architectural choices could test this article's theological proposals. Such research would assess how biblical spatial theology translates into lived practice.

Ultimately, sacred space in Acts—and in Nigeria—points beyond geography to transformed relationships. Physical locations matter insofar as they host Spirit-filled communities practising faith, hope, and love. The theological vision is profoundly relational. God dwells not in buildings but among people gathered in Jesus' name.



This vision liberates African Christianity from dependence on imported architectural models. It affirms indigenous spatial forms as legitimate expressions of Christian worship. It redirects attention from physical structures to communal practices. Most importantly, it assures believers that divine presence accompanies them wherever they gather in faith.

The article's unique contribution lies in demonstrating how socio-rhetorical and socio-historical exegesis can inform African contextual theology. By integrating these methodologies with African phenomenology of sacred space, the study generates insights relevant for both global biblical scholarship and Nigerian Christianity. It models how African scholars can contribute to international theological conversations while addressing local contexts. As Nigerian Christianity matures, it requires contextual theologies that honour both biblical tradition and African cosmology. This study contributes to that ongoing project. It shows how careful biblical exegesis, informed by social-scientific and rhetorical methods, yields theological insights applicable to contemporary contexts. It demonstrates that rigorous scholarship and pastoral relevance need not conflict.

In conclusion, Acts invites believers to recognise sacred space wherever the Spirit creates community, empowers mission, and embodies justice. Every Spirit-filled gathering becomes a living temple. Every act of hospitality sanctifies domestic space. Every proclamation of the gospel transforms public squares into sacred geography. This vision, rooted in Luke's first-century narrative, speaks powerfully to twenty-first-century Nigeria, calling churches to embody sacred power through transformed relationships and faithful witness.

References

- Adamo, David T. 2001. *Reading and Interpreting the Bible in African Indigenous Churches*. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock.
- . 2015. *African Cultural Hermeneutics*. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books.
- Bediako, Kwame. 1992. *Theology and Identity: The Impact of Culture upon Christian Thought in the Second Century and in Modern Africa*. Oxford: Regnum.
- . 2004. *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Dube, Musa W. 2000. *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*. St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press.
- . 2012. "Reading for Decolonization (Luke 9:1–6)." In *Postcolonial Perspectives in African Biblical Interpretations*, edited by Musa W. Dube, Andrew Mbuvi, and Dora Mbuwayesango, 65–78. Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature.
- Eliade, Mircea. 1959. *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*. New York: Harcourt. <https://archive.org/details/sacredprofanenat00elia>.



- Esler, Philip F. 1994. *The First Christians in Their Social Worlds: Social-Scientific Approaches to New Testament Interpretation*. London: Routledge.
<https://www.taylorfrancis.com/books/mono/10.4324/9780203427729>.
- . 2015 [1987]. *Community and Gospel in Luke–Acts: The Social and Political Motivations of Lucan Theology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203427729>.
- Etukumana, Godwin A. 2024. “African Pentecostalism and Politics: Reading Luke–Acts in Its Political, Sociological and Religious Contexts.” *Verbum et Ecclesia* 45 (1): a2907.
<https://verbumetecclisia.org.za/index.php/ve/article/view/2907>;
<https://scielo.org.za/pdf/vee/v45n1/07.pdf>
- Gaventa, Beverly R. 2003. *The Acts of the Apostles*. Nashville: Abingdon Press.
<https://www.abingdonpress.com/product/9780687058211>.
- Keener, Craig S. 2015. *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary*. Vol. 2. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic.
- Mbiti, John S. 2015. *African Religions and Philosophy*. 2nd ed. Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers.
https://books.google.com.ng/books/about/African_Religions_Philosophy.html?id=eTUpo9IH-fYC&redir_esc=y.
- Okoronkwo, Michael Enyinwa. 2024a. “Negotiating the Sacred: A Socio-Historical and Cultural Critique of Sacred Spaces in Markan Christianity and African Traditional Religion.” *Icheke Journal of the Faculty of Humanities* 22 (2): 171–198.
- . 2024b. “Sacred Geographies: Decolonizing the Comparative Study of Sacred Spaces in Lukan Christianity and African Traditional Religion.” *African Journal of Biblical Studies (AJBS)* 39: 281–306.
- . 2025. “Sacred Spaces in Matthean Christianity and African Traditional Religion: A Socio-Historical and Cultural Comparative Analysis.” *International Journal of Arts, Communication and Pedagogy (IJACOP)* 4 (1): 142–165.
- Olupona, Jacob K. 2014. *African Religions: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
<https://doi.org/10.1093/actrade/9780199790586.001.0001>.
- Orobator, Agbonkhanmeghe E. 2018. *Religion and Faith in Africa: Confessions of an Animist*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books. <https://orbisbooks.com/products/religion-and-faith-in-africa>.
- Oropeza, B. J. 2020. *Perspectives on Luke–Acts and Early Christian Identity*. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock.
- Pobee, John S. 1979. *Toward an African Theology*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press.
- Robbins, Vernon K. 1996. *Exploring the Texture of Texts: A Guide to Socio-Rhetorical Interpretation*. Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International.
- Ukpong, Justin S. 1995. “Inculturation Hermeneutics: An African Approach to Biblical Interpretation.” *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 91: 3–14.
- . 2002. “Reading the Bible in a Global Village: Issues and Challenges from an African Perspective.” In *Reading the Bible in a Global Village: Cape Town*, edited by Justin S. Ukpong et al., 9–39. Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature
- Wright, N. T. 2012. *How God Became King: The Forgotten Story of the Gospels*. London: SPCK.



HOMOSEXUALITY AND RELIGIOUS FAITH IN COMBAT: X-RAYING THE SOCIO-RELIGIOUS THERAPIES

CLIFFORD MEESUA SIBANI, PhD
Department of Religious and Cultural Studies,
Faculty of Humanities, Rivers State University,
Nkpolu-Oroworukwo, Port Harcourt
08037948880 clifford.sibani@ust.edu.ng

&

JACKSON, ETIOWO ASUQUO
Department of Religious and Cultural Studies,
Faculty of Humanities, Rivers State University,
Nkpolu-Oroworukwo, Port Harcourt
08030497753 etiowo.jackson@rsu.edu.ng

Abstract

Homosexuality and religious faith in combat: X-raying the socio-religious therapies stands as the subject matter of this research. Homosexuality is an abominable form of sexual intercourse between male and male or female and female. This research investigates the longstanding conflict between homosexuality and religious faith, analyzing both the historical roots and modern impacts of this clash within religious and homosexual communities. Traditional doctrines in major religions, including Christianity, Islam, and Judaism, have generally viewed homosexuality as incompatible with their teachings. These views, reinforced over centuries, have influenced societal attitudes, leading to exclusion, discrimination, and significant personal struggles for homosexual individuals who seek to reconcile their sexual orientation with their religious beliefs. The consequences are profound, affecting mental health and well-being, as homosexual individuals experience stigmatization, familial rejection, and internalized conflict within religious settings. To address these challenges, this paper explores remedies aimed at fostering reconciliation, acceptance, and support for homosexual individuals within religious contexts. Theological reinterpretation by progressive scholars advocates for new interpretations of scripture that embrace inclusivity and compassion. Counseling services and support groups offer resources that respect both faith and identity, while interfaith dialogues encourage understanding and shared values across diverse communities. Policy changes and anti-discrimination laws further support homosexual rights, prompting religious institutions to reconsider exclusive practices. Through these paths, faith and homosexual identity can coexist harmoniously, creating a more inclusive and compassionate future for all. This research utilized books, journals, internet sources, etc and employed the analytical method. It recommends that religious bodies should help in



the transformation process of homosexuals since they are helpless and need a loving and caring community.

Keywords: Faith, Homosexuality, Interfaith, Reinterpretation, Religious

Introduction

Homosexuality and religious faith are two aspects of human identity that often intersect with great complexity, particularly in communities or regions where religious beliefs form a central pillar of cultural and social life. Around the world, many individuals who are identified as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer (LGBTQ+) face unique challenges when their sexual orientation conflicts with the teachings of their faith. In religions such as Christianity, Islam, and Judaism, traditional interpretations of sacred texts often portray homosexuality as incompatible with the ideals of spiritual purity, family structure, or moral conduct. These religious doctrines have historically influenced societal attitudes toward homosexuals, often leading to marginalization, discrimination, and even criminalization of homosexuality in certain cultures. For homosexual within religious communities, the struggle to reconcile these identities can lead to profound internal conflicts, strained family relationships, and broader social isolation.

In recent years, the clash between homosexuality and religious beliefs has taken on new dimensions as homosexual rights movements gain momentum worldwide. As society increasingly advocates for inclusivity and equality, religious institutions face a dilemma: how to maintain the tenets of their faith while acknowledging the rights and identities of homosexual individuals. This conflict is visible across both secular and religious settings, with religious groups differing widely in their responses. While some religious communities resist changes to long-standing beliefs, others actively seek ways to reinterpret or evolve their doctrines in support of inclusivity. This ongoing conflict between sexuality



and faith raises questions about how individuals, communities, and institutions can find pathways to understanding, respect, and even reconciliation.

Biblical condemnation of same-sex acts reflects ancient cultural norms rather than an eternal moral principle, and he advocates for an inclusive reading of scripture (Vines, 2014). Religious doctrines on homosexuality vary considerably, with some traditions maintaining strict prohibitions while others adopt more nuanced or inclusive interpretations. In Christianity, Islam, and Judaism, traditional teachings have often condemned homosexuality, yet modern re-evaluations are increasingly shaping new paths toward acceptance. Hinduism, Buddhism, and Indigenous beliefs generally exhibit greater tolerance, though acceptance levels vary based on cultural contexts. Understanding these diverse religious perspectives provides essential context for analyzing the complex relationship between religious beliefs and homosexual identities, which will be further explored in this research.

Religious Views on Homosexuality

Throughout history, major religious traditions have largely condemned homosexuality, shaping the attitudes and policies of societies in ways that persist today. While interpretations and practices vary across and even within religions, most religious doctrines have traditionally considered homosexual behavior to be morally incompatible with religious ideals of family, sexuality, and purity.

In Christianity, the dominant historical stance on homosexuality has been negative, with particular passages in the Bible frequently cited as evidence. Leviticus 18:22, for example, labels homosexual acts as an “abomination,” and Leviticus 20:13 prescribes severe punishment. The Apostle Paul’s letters, especially in Romans 1:26–27, also condemn homosexual acts as “unnatural,” presenting such behavior as a departure from God’s will. These verses have profoundly shaped Christian views, leading



many Christian denominations to prohibit homosexual relationships or consider them sinful. However, interpretations vary, with some modern denominations re-examining these passages. For instance, scholars like Matthew Vines (as cited in Brownson, 2013), argue that biblical references to homosexuality should be understood in their ancient cultural context, which differs significantly from contemporary understandings of sexual orientation.

In Islam, traditional views on homosexuality are also conservative, rooted in the teachings of the Quran and Hadith (sayings of the Prophet Muhammad). Several verses in the Quran (e.g., Surah Al-A'raf 7:80-84) recount the story of the people of Lot, often interpreted as a condemnation of homosexual behavior. Islamic jurists have historically classified homosexual acts as sinful and have prescribed punishments ranging from fines to severe penalties under Sharia law, depending on the school of jurisprudence and historical period. However, like in Christianity, contemporary interpretations of Islamic scripture vary. According to Kugle (2014), these verses may not necessarily apply to consensual same-sex relationships as understood today. The Quran does not explicitly address consensual same-sex relationships as they are understood today. Kugle (2010) viewed that homosexuality in Islam suggests that the Quranic condemnation of the people of Lot focuses on issues like lust, inhospitality, and violence, rather than on consensual, loving relationships between individuals of the same gender. This is a very strong argument on the issue of homosexuality and religious acceptance.

Social Attitude towards Homosexuality

Religious teachings have not only shaped theological views on homosexuality but have also significantly influenced societal attitudes across historical periods and cultures. In regions where



religious authority intertwined with governance, religious beliefs became embedded in social norms and legal codes, often leading to widespread stigmatization and criminalization of homosexuality. In 2006, the Conservative Rabbinical Assembly issued a ruling allowing same-sex relationships and ordination of homosexual rabbis, though individual congregations retain autonomy in their practices. This approach reflects the Conservative movement's commitment to both tradition and contemporary ethical values, (Herdt & Howe, 2007).

In medieval Europe, Christian doctrine heavily influenced laws and social attitudes toward homosexuality. Homosexual acts were criminalized under laws enacted by Christian rulers and were punishable by severe penalties, including imprisonment or death. This condemnation of homosexuality persisted through the Middle Ages and the early modern period, where acts perceived as morally deviant were harshly punished, particularly in Christian states, (Vines, 2014).

In Islamic societies, traditional interpretations of Sharia law shaped legal and social norms around sexuality, often leading to the criminalization of homosexual acts. Many Muslim-majority countries maintain laws prohibiting homosexuality, influenced by both religious teachings and colonial-era legal codes that were often retained post-independence. In certain Islamic societies, homosexuality remains highly stigmatized, with punishments ranging from imprisonment to, in extreme cases, the death penalty. However, societal attitudes vary, with some countries and regions adopting more lenient approaches, particularly where secular governance coexists with religious influence. In Orthodox communities, traditional views on homosexuality often result in stigmatization and exclusion of homosexuals, (The Interfaith Alliance, 2020).

Homosexuality and Religious Faith in Modern Society



As society has shifted toward greater secularization and advocacy for human rights, attitudes toward homosexuals have evolved significantly, often coming into conflict with traditional religious beliefs. While secular movements have championed homosexual rights, some religious groups continue to resist these changes, holding on to doctrines that view homosexuality as incompatible with their faith. The 20th and 21st centuries have witnessed significant secularization in many parts of the world, as well as a growing emphasis on individual rights and freedoms. Secular movements have played a pivotal role in advancing homosexual rights by advocating for separation of religious doctrine from civil law and emphasizing the importance of human rights and equality.

1. Secularization and Legal Reforms:

As societies have become more secular, laws based on religious morality have increasingly been re-evaluated and, in many cases, removed from the legal system. In the United States, for example, the landmark 2003 Supreme Court case *Lawrence v. Texas* struck down laws criminalizing homosexual conduct, setting a precedent for the legal recognition of homosexual rights. This case marked a significant shift in how the law approached issues of personal morality, reflecting secular values of privacy and equality over religiously motivated prohibitions, (Keshet, 2018). Similarly, in countries like the United Kingdom and Canada, secular values have influenced the decriminalization of homosexuality, marriage equality, and anti-discrimination protections. These changes highlight the shift from religious-based law to secular legal frameworks that prioritize individual freedoms and equality for homosexuals.

2. Human Rights Movements and Homosexual Advocacy:

Human rights movements have been instrumental in promoting homosexual rights by framing discrimination based on sexual orientation as a violation of fundamental human rights. Organizations



like Amnesty International, the Human Rights Campaign, and Out Right Action International advocate for homosexual rights globally, often challenging laws that are based on religious beliefs, (Johnson & Vanderbeck, 2014). In the international arena, bodies such as the United Nations have increasingly recognized homosexual rights as human rights. The UN's Universal Declaration of Human Rights has been used to advocate for the decriminalization of homosexuality worldwide, underscoring the principle that all individuals are entitled to dignity and equality. This secular human rights framework is instrumental in challenging laws in regions where religious beliefs continue to shape negative attitudes toward homosexuals.

3. Public Opinion and Cultural Shifts:

Secularization has also led to changing cultural norms, particularly in Western societies, where public opinion on homosexual issues has become more favorable. This shift is reflected in media representation, educational initiatives, and the rise of pride movements, all of which have helped normalize diverse sexual orientations and gender identities. This cultural shift is particularly evident among younger generations, who are generally more accepting of homosexuals and less influenced by traditional religious teachings. As secular values become more mainstream, these changes further reinforce acceptance and inclusion, (Greenberg, 2004).

Religious Resistance to Social Change

Despite the growing secular acceptance of homosexual rights, many religious groups continue to resist these changes, often based on doctrinal teachings that regard homosexuality as abomination, sinful or morally unacceptable. This resistance manifests in both public opposition to homosexual rights and internal policies that uphold traditional beliefs on sexuality.

1. Opposition to Marriage Equality:



One of the most visible forms of religious resistance to homosexual rights is opposition to marriage equality. In the United States, for example, conservative Christian organizations like the Family Research Council and Alliance Defending Freedom have actively lobbied against same-sex marriage. They argue that marriage should remain defined as a union between one man and one woman, based on their interpretation of biblical teachings, (Dehlin, Galliher, Bradshaw & Crowell, 2015). In countries with strong religious influence, such as Russia and many Muslim-majority nations, marriage equality is not recognized, and religious authorities often lead the opposition. In these societies, religious beliefs are often intertwined with national identity, and opposition to homosexual rights is seen as a defense of cultural and moral values.

2. Conversion Therapy and "Reparative" Ministries:

Some religious groups promote conversion therapy, a practice that claims to “cure” homosexuals of their sexual orientation or gender identity. Organizations like Exodus International, before its closure in 2013, advocated for conversion therapy based on Christian teachings. Similarly, some Islamic and Orthodox Jewish groups have promoted conversion therapy practices in an attempt to align homosexuals with traditional religious norms. Conversion therapy has been widely criticized by Medical and Psychological Associations as ineffective and harmful. Despite these condemnations, certain religious groups continue to support such practices, viewing them as a means to “redeem” homosexuals from what they perceive as sinful behavior, (Barnard & Curry, 2012).

3. Religious Exemptions and Anti-Discrimination Laws:

In response to expanding homosexual rights, some religious groups have sought exemptions from anti-discrimination laws, arguing that being compelled to accept homosexuals violates their religious freedom. In the United States, for instance, the Religious Freedom Restoration Act (RFRA) has been



used to defend businesses and religious organizations that refuse to serve homosexuals on religious grounds. This debate over religious exemptions highlights the tension between freedom of religion and the rights of homosexuals. Proponents argue that religious institutions should not be forced to act against their beliefs, while opponents maintain that religious freedom should not justify discrimination, (The World Council of Churches. (2022).

Implications for Homosexuals in a Socio-Religious Context

For homosexuals, family is often the first source of identity and support. However, when families hold conservative religious beliefs that denounce or marginalize homosexual identities, individuals may experience isolation, guilt, and internalized shame.

1. Internalized Shame and Religious Guilt:

Homosexuals from religious backgrounds frequently grapple with internalized shame, especially if their religious teachings label homosexuality as immoral, abominable or sinful. This internal conflict is often referred to as "cognitive dissonance," where the individual's personal identity is in direct opposition to religious beliefs. Research shows that this dissonance can lead to feelings of guilt, shame, and worthlessness, Barnes & Meyer (as cited in Barnard & Curry, 2012). Religious teachings can amplify these feelings, especially when homosexuals try to reconcile their identity with their faith. Some may attempt to change their orientation through prayer or counseling, hoping to "resolve" the dissonance. However, research shows that these attempts, often labeled "conversion therapy," can have detrimental effects on mental health, leading to increased anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation.

2. Family Rejection and Acceptance Struggles:



Homosexuals may also face significant challenges within their families, especially when coming out to parents or relatives with conservative religious beliefs. Family rejection, whether in the form of direct exclusion or indirect disapproval, has been associated with increased risks of substance abuse, depression, and even suicide (Ryan et al., 2009). Many homosexuals from religious families are at risk of being disowned or forced into environments that prioritize religious teachings over acceptance. Homosexuals whose families offer some level of acceptance, there is often a long period of negotiation, where family members attempt to balance their beliefs with their love for their child. This negotiation can create an ongoing sense of tension and instability for the individual.

3. Pressure to Conform or Remain Closeted:

Many homosexuals raised in religious families face pressure to conform to heterosexual norms or remain closeted. This may manifest as pressure to pursue heterosexual relationships, attend religious counseling, or keep their orientation hidden. Hiding one's sexual orientation or gender identity can have long-term effects on self-esteem and identity development, leading to issues with self-worth and chronic stress (Herek et al., 1999).

4. Exclusion from Community Life:

Homosexuals often experience exclusion from religious practices and community life, including leadership roles, religious education, and sacraments like marriage. In Christian denominations, for example, many congregations limit LGBTQ+ participation, sometimes refusing membership or religious rites such as baptism for same-sex couples, (Boswell, 2024). This exclusion can lead to feelings of alienation and a sense of unworthiness. Homosexuals may struggle to find a sense of belonging in communities that reject their identity, often leading them to distance themselves from their faith entirely.



5. Discrimination in Religious Organizations and Schools:

Discrimination within religious organizations and schools is common, particularly in environments that uphold strict moral codes. Many LGBTQ+ students and employees in religious schools' face expulsion or termination based on their sexual orientation, creating an environment where they must choose between expressing their identity or being a part of their faith community Higa et al., (cited in Ryan et al., 2009). The secular educational arm of the church should be fortified with sound moral teachings, to meet children and youth needs. The contemporary youth is such that is overly exposed through information & Communication Technology (ICT), to many things. Unless thorough teaching of the word of God is incorporated into their secular educational system, youths and children would be misinformed on the issue of homosexuality, and they would be overly expose and indulge in the practice. Youths should be made to understand potential threats and dangers posed by their indulging in homosexual practices. The danger inculcates such, affecting self and relationship between others and with God, (Onotere & Ufuoma, 2024).

6. Stigmatization and Social Ostracism:

Homosexuals in religious settings often face a form of social ostracism known as “shunning,” where community members avoid or exclude them based on their sexual orientation or gender identity. And this identity can be demeaning if not well guided (Oko and Ogbodo, 2022). In conservative communities, being openly homosexuals can lead to ostracism at social gatherings, public events, or within neighborhood networks, often leading individuals to feel isolated and disconnected. Stigmatization can manifest in indirect ways, such as gossip, avoidance, or silence on homosexual issues within the community. This creates a culture of unspoken discrimination, where LGBTQ+



individuals feel marginalized and unsupported. The fear of ostracism can lead to self-censorship, where individuals suppress their identity to avoid conflict or exclusion.

Mental Health Impacts on Homosexuals

The mental health consequences of homosexuals living within unsupportive religious environments shows the increased prevalence of depression, anxiety, and suicidal cases.

1. Increased Rates of Depression and Anxiety:

Homosexuals in conservative religious settings are more likely to experience higher rates of depression, higher levels of psychological distress and anxiety. The experience where individuals face chronic stress due to societal stigma and prejudice, is particularly intense for LGBTQ+ individuals within religious communities. This stress is exacerbated by the added pressure to reconcile religious beliefs with personal identity, which can lead to persistent feelings of guilt and shame. This culminates in high risk of suicidal and self-harm. These feelings are often compounded by isolation and lack of access to supportive networks or mental health services, creating a cycle of distress that can be difficult to escape.

2. Family Rejection and Internalized Homophobia Impacts:

Family rejection has been identified as a major risk factor for poor mental health among LGBTQ+ youth. Studies by the Family Acceptance Project reveal that LGBTQ+ youth rejected by religious families are at significantly higher risk of depression, substance abuse, and suicidal thoughts (Ryan et al., 2009). Internalized homophobia, or the internalization of negative societal and religious beliefs about one's sexuality, is another significant mental health issue. homosexuals who internalize these beliefs may experience self-hatred, low self-esteem, and self-destructive behaviors, all of which contribute to poor mental health outcomes.



Ho

Homosexual Therapies: A Socio-religious Approach

1. Christian Reinterpretation and Inclusive Theology:

In Christianity, some theologians, such as Matthew Vines and James Brownson, advocate for reinterpretations of key Biblical passages commonly cited against homosexuality. In his book *God and the Gay Christian*, Vines argues that verses historically used to condemn homosexuality—like those in *Leviticus* and *Romans*—reflect cultural norms rather than God’s eternal love and commands. He suggests these texts should be understood in the context of monogamous, loving relationships, which were less recognized in ancient times. Brownson (2013) says, in *Bible, gender, sexuality*, contends that the Bible’s references to same-sex relationships are not condemning committed, loving LGBTQ+ relationships. Instead, he highlights the historical context in which these verses were written, suggesting that the Bible’s overarching message of love and acceptance should guide Christian attitudes toward LGBTQ+ inclusion.

2. Progressive Islamic Thought:

Islamic scholars like Scott Siraj al-Haqq Kugle (2014) offer reinterpretations of Quranic verses that have historically been used to denounce homosexuality. Kugle (2010) argues that the Quran’s passages on homosexuality are open to interpretation and that the Quran itself contains themes of diversity and inclusion. Kugle’s work encourages Muslim communities to focus on principles of justice and compassion rather than strict condemnation. These reinterpretations open up discussions within Muslim communities, where LGBTQ+ Muslims can find validation for their identities within the framework of Islamic faith.

3. Homosexual Acceptance in Jewish Thought:



Jewish scholars within Conservative and Reform Judaism have increasingly called for LGBTQ+ inclusion. Rabbi Steven Greenberg, an openly gay Orthodox rabbi, advocates for reinterpretations of Torah passages related to same-sex relationships, arguing that these references address specific behaviours rather than sexual orientation. His work supports LGBTQ+ acceptance within Jewish law, allowing observant LGBTQ+ Jews to reconcile their faith with their identity.

4. Faith-Based Counselling for Homosexual Acceptance:

Faith-based counselling programs, such as those offered by organizations like Beloved Arise or The Reformation Project, provide LGBTQ+ individuals with resources to process their experiences within a faith-based framework. These organizations prioritize non-judgmental, inclusive counseling that respects both an individual's faith and sexual orientation. By focusing on self-acceptance and compassion, they provide support for homosexuals seeking to balance religious and personal identity. Programmes like these also offer guidance for family members and friends, helping them develop a deeper understanding and acceptance of loved ones who are homosexuals. By fostering open conversations about faith and sexuality, counseling services help bridge the gap between LGBTQ+ individuals and their religious communities.

5. Support Groups within Faith Communities:

Many LGBTQ+ affirming churches and faith communities offer support groups specifically designed for LGBTQ+ members. Groups like the United Methodist Church, Reconciling Ministries Network and the Catholic New Ways Ministry serve as inclusive spaces where LGBTQ+ individuals can discuss their experiences and find community within their faith, (Badgett, 2020). Support groups also empower them to engage with religious leaders, advocating for more inclusive practices within their



faith traditions. By fostering collective understanding, these groups contribute to a broader cultural shift within religious settings.

6. Role of Mental Health Professionals with Religious Literacy:

Mental health professionals with an understanding of religious beliefs can offer specialized counseling for homosexuals from conservative religious backgrounds. Counselling and care are expected to inspire a new spirit of compassionate love for the ingenerated adherents of religion in Nigeria (Oko, 2015: 298). Therapists trained in both LGBTQ+ issues and religious dynamics are better equipped to help client's process religious guilt, shame, and internalized homophobia without compromising their spiritual beliefs.

Conclusion

The adversarial relationship between homosexuality and religious faith, highlighting historical roots, doctrinal interpretations, personal and social impacts experienced by homosexuals within religious settings have been examined. For centuries, many religious traditions, including Christianity, Islam, and Judaism, have maintained doctrines that conflict with homosexuals, often leading to exclusion, discrimination, and internalized struggles.

The paths to reconciliation and inclusion are emerging. Theological reinterpretation offers a new lens through which religious texts are understood, allowing for inclusive interpretations that emphasize love, mercy, kindness, compassion, and justice. Counseling resources and support groups provide homosexuals with affirming spaces to explore and reconcile faith with identity, while interfaith dialogues promote mutual understanding and respect between religious and homosexuals.



Ultimately, these approaches underscore the potential for faith and homosexuals to coexist in harmony. Through continued dialogue, compassion, and an evolving understanding of sacred texts, religious communities have the opportunity to cultivate inclusive environments where homosexuals can embrace both their faith and identity. The journey toward reconciliation is ongoing, yet it offers a promising vision for the future—one in which religious faith and homosexuals no longer need to be in conflict, but rather can thrive together within supportive, understanding communities.

References

- Badgett, M. V. L. (2020). *The economic case for LGBT equality: Why fair and equal treatment benefits us all*. Beacon Press.
- Barnard, C. J., & Curry, T. J. (2012). The relationship between religious identity, internalized homophobia, and mental health among LGBTQ+ individuals in religious settings. *Mental Health, Religion & Culture, 15(9)*, 925-936.
- Boswell, J. (2024). *Christianity, social tolerance, and homosexuality: Gay people in Western Europe from the beginning of the Christian era to the fourteenth century*. University of Chicago Press.
- Brownson, J. V. (2013). *Bible, gender, sexuality: Reframing the church's debate on same-sex relationships*. Eerdmans Publishing.
- Dehlin, J. P., Galliher, R. V., Bradshaw, W. S., & Crowell, K. A. (2015). Psychosocial correlates of religious approaches to same-sex attraction: A Mormon perspective. *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Mental Health, 19(2)*, 184-206.
- Greenberg, S. (2004). *Wrestling with God and men: Homosexuality in the Jewish tradition*. University of Wisconsin Press.
- Herdt, G. H., & Howe, C. (2007). *21st century sexualities: Contemporary issues in health, education, and rights*. Routledge.
- Herek, B. J., et al., (1999). *Psychological impact on homosexuals*. MacCole publishers.
- Johnson, P., & Vanderbeck, R. M. (2014). *Law, religion, and homosexuality*. Routledge.
- Keshet, J. (2018). *Supporting LGBTQ+ individuals in Jewish communities: A guide for Synagogues and community leaders*. Keshet Press.



- Kugle, S. S. (2010). *Homosexuality in Islam: Critical reflection on gay, lesbian, and transgender Muslims*. Oneworld Publications.
- Kugle, S. S. (2014). *Living out Islam: Voices of gay, lesbian, and transgender Muslims*. NYU Press.
- Oko, A. E. & Ogbodo, C.N. (2022). Rediscovering and Preserving African Identity in Globalization Process. *NIU Journal of Humanities*, Vol.7.(2):19-27.
- Oko, A. E. (2015). The Role of Christian Association of Nigeria in the Management of Socio-Religious Conflicts in Nigeria. *Contemporary Journal of Inter-Disciplinary Studies*. Vol. 2 (2):287-305
- Onotere, D. U. & Ufuoma, E. U. (2024). Homosexuality: An African Christian ethical perspective. *Research Journal of Humanities and Cultural Studies*, 10(4), 86-96. <https://www.iiardjournals.org/get/RJHCS/VOL.%2010%20NO.%204%202024/HOMOSEXUALITY%2086-96.pdf>
- Ryan, H., et al., (2009). *Remediation of LGBTQ+ individuals*. Utopos publishers.
- The Interfaith Alliance. (2020). *Interfaith perspectives on LGBTQ+ Inclusion: A guide to dialogue and understanding*. www.interfaithalliance.org
- The World Council of Churches. (2022). *A pathway to inclusivity: Faith and LGBTQ+ rights in global contexts*. World Council of Churches Publications.
- Vines, M. (2014). *God and the gay Christian: The biblical case in support of same-sex relationships*. Convergent Books.



Social Welfare for Older Persons in Biblical Scripture: An Analysis Through a Modern Social Work Lens

Gbeminiyi Mujaheed Adegbola PhD

Department of Sociological Studies
Tai Solarin University of Education
adegbolagm@tasued.edu.ng, 08163881377

&

Professor Olatubosun Tope Omotayo

Department of Adult and Development Education
Tai Solarin University of Education
omotayoot@tasued.edu.ng; 08060486168

Abstract

This article explores the biblical foundation for the social welfare of older persons, drawing exclusively from scripture in both the Old and New Testaments. Through thematic analysis of key passages, the study identifies core principles concerning the dignity, caregiving, justice, and community responsibility owed to the elderly. Scripture presents a holistic model of elder care that includes familial obligation, community-based support, and social justice imperatives. The article examines



commandments such as "honor your father and your mother," gleaning laws, prophetic calls to defend widows, and the early church's structured care for ageing widows, revealing a moral framework deeply concerned with the well-being of older adults. Parallels are drawn between these biblical teachings and modern social work values particularly respect for human dignity, intergenerational solidarity, advocacy for vulnerable populations, and inclusion of older persons as active contributors to society. The analysis demonstrates that the Bible not only prescribes compassionate elder care but positions it as a sacred duty and societal cornerstone. These insights provide a theological foundation that can enrich contemporary gerontological practice and inform faith-based approaches to elder welfare in policy and caregiving.

Keywords: Older persons, Social welfare, Biblical scripture, Social work, Elder care.

Introduction

The ethical treatment and care of older persons is a central concern in contemporary social welfare and social work practice. Interestingly, this concern is not new as the Bible, across both the Old and New Testaments, contains numerous teachings on the dignity, care, and justice due to the elderly. In ancient Israel and the early Christian church, there were no formal state pensions or structured social care systems; instead, responsibility for the welfare of older adults rested on families, religious institutions, and the broader community. Biblical scripture reflects a culture that highly valued its elders, viewing longevity as a blessing and expecting society to honor and provide for those of advanced age. As McKinney and Hill (2017) note, biblical perspectives reveal that "honour and care of the elderly is an integral part of the Christian vision of life" (p. 59).

This article explores key biblical passages related to social welfare for older persons and analyzes them thematically through the lens of contemporary social work principles. The themes addressed include the dignity and respect accorded to elders, family responsibility and caregiving for ageing parents, community support systems for the elderly, justice and protection of vulnerable older adults, and the



inclusion and participation of elders in society. Each section will cite scripture from both the Old and New Testaments, interpret the passages in context, and draw parallels to current social work values and practices.

Practically focusing exclusively on biblical scripture, we aim to understand how care for older persons is both mandated and modeled in Judeo-Christian texts, and how these ancient principles align with or inform today's approaches to elder care. The analysis will demonstrate that many core values in contemporary gerontological social work such as promoting dignity, ensuring social justice for vulnerable elders, strengthening family and community support, and fostering active ageing, strongly resonate with biblical teachings written millennia ago. This congruence underscores the enduring wisdom of biblical ethics regarding the elderly. We begin with the biblical call to honor the dignity of older persons.

Dignity and Respect for the Elderly in Scripture

One of the most apparent biblical themes regarding older persons is the call to treat them with honor, respect, and dignity. The Bible explicitly commands reverence for the elderly as a demonstration of reverence for God. In the Old Testament, for example, the Law of Moses states: *“Stand up in the presence of the aged, show respect for the elderly and revere your God. I am the Lord”* (Leviticus 19:32, New International Version [NIV], 2011). This injunction links respect for older people with piety toward God, implying that honoring the elderly is a sacred duty. The imagery of rising in the presence of the aged suggests a cultural norm of deference, akin to how one might stand for a judge or a king. In other words, the elderly are to be treated with a high degree of esteem. This principle affirms the inherent dignity of older individuals. From a modern social work perspective, this resonates with



the core value of respect for the dignity and worth of the person, a foundational principle in the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) Code of Ethics (NASW, 2021). Social workers today combat ageism by promoting positive views of ageing and advocating that older client be treated with respect. Biblical law anticipated this value by discouraging disdain or neglect toward the elderly.

Ancient wisdom literature further reinforces the honor due to old age. Proverbs 16:31 declares: *“Gray hair is a crown of splendor; it is attained in the way of righteousness”* (NIV, 2011). In Israelite culture, gray hair, often symbolic of advanced age, was regarded not as a liability, but as a “crown of glory.” Similarly, Proverbs 20:29 states: *“The glory of young men is their strength, gray hair the splendor of the old”* (NIV, 2011). These proverbs poetically affirm that long life and the wisdom presumed to come with it are honorable. Rather than glorifying youth and productivity alone, the Bible elevates the dignity and contribution of older adults. This view challenges modern societies, which often prize youth, to also value the contributions and insights of elders. In contemporary practice, social workers embrace strengths-based approaches with older adults, recognizing their life experience, resilience, and wisdom as assets to families and communities. The biblical exaltation of gray hair as a “crown” parallels this strengths-based model, emphasizing that a person’s worth is often enhanced and not diminished by age.

In the New Testament, the ethos of respect for elders continues within the early Christian community. The Apostle Paul instructs Timothy, a young church leader, on how to relate to older congregants: *“Do not rebuke an older man harshly, but exhort him as if he were your father... Treat older women as mothers”* (1 Timothy 5:1–2, NIV, 2011). While given in a church leadership context, this guidance reflects a broader principle of treating elders with familial respect and gentleness. Even when



correction is necessary, younger persons are instructed to approach older men as they would a father, with humility and deference and to regard older women with the care accorded to one's own mother. Such instructions reinforce the norm of dignity in communication and interaction with elders. This approach aligns closely with contemporary person-centered care, which emphasizes respectful interaction, empowerment, and relational dignity when working with older clients.

Beyond direct commands, Scripture provides narrative examples that highlight respect for the elderly. A poignant instance occurs at the crucifixion of Jesus, where even amid his suffering, he ensures that his mother Mary will be cared for. Observing her and the disciple John, Jesus says, “*Woman, here is your son,*” and to John, “*Here is your mother*” (John 19:26–27, NIV, 2011). From that hour, the disciple took her into his home. In this scene, Jesus honours his mother by entrusting her to a faithful friend, ensuring that Mary will not be left alone or vulnerable in her old age. The implicit message is that older persons deserve care, security, and familial love. Jesus’ action exemplifies the fifth commandment: “*Honor your father and your mother*” (Exodus 20:12, NIV, 2011) in practice. For contemporary social workers, this story illustrates the principle of filial responsibility and respect. Across many cultures, caregiving for ageing parents is seen as a moral and sometimes legal duty, and social workers often support families in fulfilling this obligation. The dignity accorded to Mary reflects a broader biblical ethic in which older women and men are recognized as deserving of honour and protection. Taken together, these scriptures affirm a coherent biblical ethic: to respect, honour, and care for the elderly is a sacred duty, one that aligns with the core social work values of dignity, compassion, and justice.