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The New Testament and Politics in Ghana (2017–2023) : Analysis of the “biblification” of Ghanaian Political Discourse by Ken Ofori-Atta (Ghana’s Finance Minister)

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5 The New Testament and Politics in Ghana (2017–2023)

Analysis of the “biblification” of Ghanaian Political Discourse by Ken Ofori-Atta (Ghana’s Finance Minister)

Abstract

This chapter investigates a political reception of the New Testament in Ghana from 2017–2023 which is tentatively labelled as Ofori-Atta phenomenon. In the stated years, Ken Ofori-Atta, then Finance Minister of Ghana, made consistent recourse to biblical texts during his presentations of annual government budget statements to the Ghanaian Parliament. From a postcolonial biblical reception hermeneutical analytic framework, research for the chapter examined the budget statements he presented over the period. Subsequently, it argues that the Ofori-Atta phenomenon is, on the one hand, a biblification of Ghanaian political-economic discourse through economic planning instruments such as national budgets and, on the other hand, a sermonisation of national budget presentation speeches. It projects the Bible, the sacred scripture of Christianity, as a national Holy Scripture which speaks to the entire nation of Ghana through such economic management instruments. Furthermore, Matt 14:13–21 is invoked programmatically and re-interpreted in a secular, political context. The study thus concludes that the Ofori-Atta phenomenon presents a potential political leveraging on an existing high Ghanaian religiosity as it presents the minister as a God-fearing public figure to be admired by all. Consequently, it has negative implications for public accountability in the management of the Ghanaian economy.

Keywords: *Ghanaian politics, Ken Ofori-Atta, Matt 14:13–21, Bible and Politics, Postcolonial Biblical Reception Hermeneutics, New Testament*

1. Introduction

“Mr. Speaker, this is a marked change from when I first stood before this House on 2nd March, 2017. [...] our economic prospects had dimmed considerably. I referred then to the biblical story of five loaves and two fishes [Matt 14:13–21] to illustrate the approach in turning the economy around. Mr. Speaker, I stood here in March 2017 and asked that the country’s paltry 2 fishes and 5 loaves be multiplied.”¹ This is Ken Ofori-Atta, a former Minister for Finance, delivering to the Parliament of Ghana the 2024 Budget Statement and Economic Policy of the Government of Ghana in November 2023. Appointed as Finance Minister in 2017,² Ofori-Atta has consistently made recourse to the Bible in his budget statements including Mid-Year Fiscal Reviews and Expenditure in Advance of Appropriation, which are all (secular) national economic management instruments. Indeed, our preliminary survey of all the budgets he has presented to the Ghanaian parliament since 2017 indicates that they are replete with several references, allusions, and paraphrases of biblical texts. Consequently, in this chapter, we present preliminary³ results of our study of this prime case of the Bible and politics in West Africa which we tentatively label as the Ofori-Atta phenomenon. The Ofori-Atta phenomenon is, on the one hand, a biblification (borrowing from Gunda, 2012) of Ghanaian political-economic discourse through economic planning instruments such as national budgets and, on the other hand, a sermonisation of national budget presentation speeches. It draws a link between politics, economic management, and national governance on the one hand and the Bible as a holy scripture of a specific religious community in a religiously plural and secular country on the other hand.

While Ofori-Atta appropriates texts from different books of the Bible, our focus is on his use of the New Testament (NT), specifically the Gospel of

¹ Paragraphs 938–9 of the 2024 Budget Statement and Economic Policy of the Government of Ghana delivered on 15th November 2023.

² He has since February 2024 been removed from this position and re-assigned a new role.

³ The case presents a large data set that requires an extended time of study to exhaust the various aspects and factors involved. Our present study is, therefore, preliminary and only the first step into it.

Matthew from which he draws the synoptic miracle story of Jesus's feeding of the five thousand people with five loaves of bread and two fish (Matt 14:13–21). He makes consistent recourse to this text throughout his tenure to explain his approach in managing the Ghanaian economy. We approached the phenomenon using an integrated analytic framework of postcolonial biblical reception hermeneutics, i.e. an integration of postcolonial theory into biblical reception history which we think allows for a critical analysis and interrogation of the phenomenon.

Therefore, the first section will briefly discuss this integrated approach, before situating the Ofori-Atta phenomenon in the broader context of the Bible and politics in sub-Saharan Africa in order then to finally discuss the phenomenon itself. It is our observation and argument that the Ofori-Atta phenomenon sees Matt 14:13–21 as illustrating the approach to managing Ghana's economy, namely drawing in the God-factor into the technically secular business of national economic management. We posit that this in principle shifts responsibility to God which within the given religiosity of Ghanaians could be attractive but holds the potential of shielding the minister from public accountability.

2. Postcolonial Biblical Reception Hermeneutics

Explaining this perspective requires brief discussions of the two constituting perspectives: postcolonial theory and biblical reception history. Postcolonial theory has, since its emergence in the late twentieth century, not lent itself to a single definition. For Musa Dube, for instance, it is “an umbrella term” which “is best understood as a complex myriad of methods and theories which study a wide range of texts and their participation in the making or subversion of imperialism” (Dube, 1997, p. 14). Similarly, R. S. Sugirtharajah admits that “Postcolonialism is [...] a notoriously difficult concept to define” (Sugirtharajah, 2023, p. 2). Yet he adds that “The central function of postcolonial criticism is to be a contestatory force, more of a moral stance than a theory or a dogma” being “intercessory and intervening allowing silenced and written-out passages and personalities to have a visibility and a voice” (Sugirtharajah, 2023, p. 2). Thus, postcolonial criticism, following from Dube and Sugirtharajah, is critical about power dynamics in every setting be it textual or non-textual, especially how

that power dynamics function to the domination of many by a few. Consequently, like the Lucan Jesus, it would take the side (intercessory/intervening) of the subjugated, vulnerable without excusing their complicities. In applying it to biblical criticism, postcolonial critics draw attention to the imperial contexts within which the biblical texts, both New and Old Testaments, emerged such as the Egyptian, Persian, Assyrian, Hellenistic, and Roman empires (Sugirtharajah, 2010, p. 251) and the paradoxical history of the Bible as providing resources for both imperial and liberative actions. In this wise, Dube describes the Bible itself as a “colonizing text” because “it has repeatedly authorised the subjugation of nations and lands” (Dube, 1997, p. 15; cf. Sugirtharajah, 2010, p. 251; Sugirtharajah, 2023, p. 7). This potential of the Bible to be used by both the powerful and weak against each other gives postcolonial biblical criticism its instrumentality: paying attention to the power dynamics at work in biblical texts and the use of biblical texts with the aim of unmasking the nature of the dynamics and giving voice to the voiceless, vulnerable, and marginalised who are pushed to the margins of the power constellations in biblical texts and during the reception of biblical texts. Precisely this feature of postcolonial criticism allows its application in this study, because politics by itself is a power-charged phenomenon just as the Bible also wields its own enormous power especially in Ghana where it is revered as the Word of God. Thus, to make recourse to the Bible in a political setting is to magnify the existing power situation.

For this reason, there is need for an approach that deals squarely with this magnitude. Consequently, we integrate the critical focus of postcolonial criticism into reception criticism which equally requires brief explanation. Reception hermeneutics as an approach in biblical reception history studies tends to be descriptive in analysing how subsequent readers have made use of biblical texts. As a research approach, it investigates the use and impact of the Bible on the lives of people in diverse historical and contemporary religio-cultural, political, economic, and social contexts (Beal, 2011).

Integrating postcolonial criticism into reception hermeneutics, however, implies that we seek not only to present, describe, and analyse the Ofori-Atta phenomenon, but also to critically interrogate such appropriations

and where necessary, expose and confront any parochial, self-serving political interest that might be advanced to the detriment of the many who find themselves at the fringes of the political set-up in Ghana. The need for a postcolonial biblical reception hermeneutics is also underlined by the fact that the recognised intrinsic religiosity and high regard for the Bible by many Ghanaians can easily be exploited by politicians to shift public opinion from corruption and mismanagement in national governance to their feigned religiosity by invoking biblical authority in their public political discourse. To ignore this will be tantamount to complicity with some of the vicious factors that keep many African populations impoverished and underdeveloped (Gunda, 2012). Before engaging the Ofori-Atta phenomenon, we will situate it in discussions on the interaction between the Bible and politics in Africa in general and Ghana specifically.

3. Bible and Politics in Africa

African politicians have not hesitated invoking the Bible during political/public discourses to advance political points. Political reception of the Bible is, however, not unique to Africa: whether in the UK (Crossley, 2016), the USA (Siker, 2012), or other parts of the world like New Zealand (Myles, 2016), at one time or the other, the Bible and politics interface. Nonetheless, a remarkable aspect of the African situation is that there, the Bible still comfortably enjoys the revered status as “the Word of God” which is deemed capable of providing solutions to the daily problems of people (Boateng, 2020) and which thereby becomes a meaning-making framework in the lived realities of many African Christians. Consequently, there is no shortage of biblical and para-biblical quotations printed on people’s properties (houses, vehicles, etc) and businesses as one can easily observe in urban centres in Ghana such as Accra and Kumasi. Certainly, such popularity and widespread reception of the Bible in sub-Saharan Africa is due to the pervasive presence of Christianity in the continent. However, the fact that several African countries such as Ghana are religiously plural and constitutionally secular on the one hand, and bedevilled with daily-life-threatening socio-economic problems stemming largely from

suffocating levels of corruption in public service and unpardonable economic mismanagement on the other hand makes the phenomenon worthy of scholarly investigation.

A cursory look at recent studies on the subject demonstrates that the phenomenon of biblification of African politics is not confined to a single African country, but cuts across sub-Saharan Africa. That is clear in Masiwa Ragies Gunda and Joachim Kügler's edited volume on the Bible and politics in Africa which deals with the interface between the Bible and politics in different southern African countries (Gunda & Kügler, 2012). Gunda and Kügler's editorial introduction to the volume observes that "The challenges facing Africa and the continued meteoric growth of Christianity in Africa coupled with the entrenchment of the Bible as the primary African book in most sub-Saharan African countries mean that Africa provides an important background to broach the subject of the Bible and politics" (Gunda & Kügler, 2012, p. 8). Examples from Zimbabwe and South Africa indicate that this phenomenon is a persistent character of African politics.

For instance, Gunda's contribution in the volume (Gunda, 2012, p. 25) observes with concern the widespread use of the Bible in public spheres in Zimbabwe amidst socio-economic crisis, a phenomenon that he characterises as "biblification of the public sphere" and questions whether this phenomenon is good for Africa. His proposal is to "de-biblify" the public sphere and engage in "critical biblification" by which he means, "becoming more engaged and involved in the issues that affect our society by monitoring how [...] [the] Bible is used and abused in the public sphere and clearly making our observations public in order to equip ordinary readers to resist being hoodwinked" (Gunda, 2012, p. 40). Similarly, Gerald West's attention on the African National Congress's (ANC) deployment of religion to shape nation building efforts in South Africa makes it clear that whether it is Thabo Mbeki or Jacob Zuma, the Bible has received demonstrable appropriation in South African politics (West, 2012).

When attention is turned to West Africa, the picture is not any different. Whether in Ghana or Nigeria, the Bible (and broadly speaking religion) has registered its presence in the public space through the frequency with which political actors draw on the Bible and different biblical imagery in their political rhetoric and the many times one president or minister of

state or the other has visited one Christian gathering (especially Pentecostal charismatic ones) or the other (Asamoah-Gyadu, 2016). The whole discourse, however, operates in the larger context of religion and politics where “from colonial to postcolonial times and from indigenous to missionary faiths, religion has continued to play an integral part of daily life [...] and it is impossible to engage in political activity without its influence” (Asamoah-Gyadu, 2016, p. 352).

In Ghana, even though constitutionally a secular state, religion and issues related to religious practices play a key role in national discourse (Asamoah-Gyadu, 2014). One expression of the Bible makes its political reception self-evident. The Bible in “word and text” i.e. as memorised and as written is presented, particularly from the Pentecostal-charismatic spheres, as sacred and potent, emanating with power and presence. The Ghanaian politician is certainly a product and benefactor of the society in which he/she seeks to rule. As a product, the politician, if a Christian, would have been formed with a certain notion of the Bible. In the search for political power, the Ghanaian (Christian) politician, then, explores the affinities of the people to the Bible to his or her advantage. He/she will quote the Bible in speeches, ascribe Biblical passages to political campaigns, and affirm biblical principles to win the masses.

This biblicisation of Ghanaian politics can be seen in a number of contexts. The prominent one is the arena of party politics and national elections. Here, two biblical passages have endeared themselves to politicians of Ghana’s two leading political parties – the National Democratic Congress (NDC) and the New Patriotic Party (NPP) – in recent years. The first is John 3:16. In the 2016 presidential and parliamentary elections of Ghana, the NDC with incumbency used “John 3:16” as a campaign slogan. John 3:16 is, by the way, a popular Bible verse in Ghana; even among non-Christians (a factor that can be explained by the role of Christian mission schools). The NDC appropriated the text as follows. The late former presidents and leaders of the party, *John Jerry Rawlings* and *John Evans Atta Mills*, had “John” as their first name. The incumbent candidate who succeeded John Evans Atta Mills (who died in office) was *John Dramani Mahama*. Thus, he was the third John to lead the NDC in the year 2016 – third John, (twenty-) sixteen. Therefore, the popularity of John 3:16 was exploited to market his election campaigns. For Mahama and the NDC,

then, John 3:16 had less to do with the Johannine theology of the soteriological implication of God's self-giving love through his Son Jesus, and more with its popularity among Ghanaians, making it an easy tool for effective political communication.

The second text is 1 Sam 17:47. The NPP, the main opposition party at the time, similarly made use of the Bible in their campaign trails. Their catch phrase was "The battle is the Lord's" (1 Sam 17:47). Indeed, they have used this verse since 2012 national elections in Ghana which they lost. The party contested the election results in Ghana's Supreme Court and lost and remarkably, its leader, now current president, Nana Addo Dankwa Akuffo Addo, concluded his speech of accepting the court's verdict with "the battle is the Lord's" and subsequent press conferences and other media engagements ended with the same biblical text as well. It would not be only the president who used this biblical text, but also his party communicators and his ministers including Ken Ofori-Atta who adds this text to the myriads of biblical texts that he populates his budget delivery speeches with. Closely looked at, such appropriation was intended to give a veneer of a God-fearing, God-dependant political party and leader (Gifford, 2003) which is certainly appealing to the deep-seated religious sensibilities of Ghanaians. The NPP eventually won the 2016 elections and has subsequently initiated what will go down in the political and religious annals of Ghana as one of the most demonstrably observable instance of the marriage between religion (Christianity specifically) and politics in the country – the National Cathedral saga; that is the attempt by the current President and his government to build a non-denominational national cathedral for the country as a fulfilment, so the President, of his private vow to God (Haynes, 2023; Lauterbach & Bob-Milliar, 2023): to build "the Lord a house when he wins the elections".

Undoubtedly, the biblical story that is in the background here is that of the deuteronomistic story of David's intention to build a temple for ancient Israel's Yahwe (2 Sam 7:1–17). But what initially started as a privately funded project with grandiose fundraising events within Ghana and abroad, became a national project with alleged huge sums of Ghanaian tax-payers money allocated for the project. Consequently, it sparked public outcry (from political opponents and civil society organisations) in several ways and has been hit by one alleged scandal after another, leading to the

resignation of such prominent members of the Board of Trustees as Archbishop Nicolas Duncan-Williams, Rev. Eastwood Anaba, Bishop Dag Heward-Mills (all famous Ghanaian charismatic church leaders). It is worth noting that the President's political opponents, particularly the NDC, have not relented in citing other biblical passages to challenge the resolve of the government to build the national cathedral. Equally remarkable is that Ken Ofori-Atta has argued for the economic significance that the cathedral would bring to Ghana. His recent argument for the construction of the national cathedral employed the Johannine apocalyptic image of the "New Jerusalem" (Rev 21) to the effect that the cathedral would make Ghana the "New Jerusalem" in terms of tourist attractions (see Citi Newsroom, 2023).

Thus, the public space in Ghana, particularly the political one, is so profoundly biblified that any academic investigation will find countless instances for analysis. The Bible is used as a tool to propagate political intentions and to capitalise on its impact in the Ghanaian society to advance political interest. Against this background stands the Ofori-Atta phenomenon under study. All that, however, raises the question of other underlying explanatory factor(s) for this phenomenon apart from the political interest.

J. K. Asamoah-Gyadu rightly argues that the interaction between religion – in our specific case the Bible – and politics in "West Africa is rooted in the inseparability between sacred and secular realities in traditional African life and thought" (Asamoah-Gyadu, 2016, p. 352). This traditional understanding of reality, being itself an expression of the cosmology provided by African traditional religions, finds explicit expression in the person of chiefs among many Ghanaian ethnic groups including the Akan. In the chief is vested not only political, administrative, and judicial powers, but such powers are also seen to be held in trust and exercised on behalf of the departed ancestors who are "believed to be real custodians of political and moral power" (Asamoah-Gyadu, 2016, p. 353). Indeed, the traditional worldview – according to which reality is not dichotomised into seen and unseen with the twain never meeting, but the seen and unseen spheres interpenetrating each other – gives a religious dimension to almost every aspect of African existence. Accordingly, for politicians to make frequent recourse to religion in general and the Bible in particular

is reflective of the traditional belief system underlying the understanding of political power.

This primal cosmology still persists among many Ghanaians, educated and non-educated, Christians and non-Christians alike. Hence it is important that it is drawn into the discussion when analysing and interpreting the phenomenon of biblification of politics in Ghana. Then it helps to understand why politicians would find it easy and strategic to draw on religious resources such as sacred texts in secular contexts. For just as the success of the new religious movements in African Christianity in the twentieth century (i.e. the African independent churches and Pentecostal-Charismatic churches) was to a greater extent attributable to their success in harnessing the traditional religious belief system, so also political appropriation of the Bible could be an attempt by politicians to leverage on an existing religious orientation that favours the religiosity of political leaders. Unlike the traditional political leaders, who understood the religious consequences of the abuse of political power, however, the African politician does not seem to defer to any superior source of power except the electorate and even that only when they are seeking re-election.

Hence, the likelihood of their utilisation of the Bible to shield themselves from political and public accountability is a constant possibility (Gunda 2012, p. 39). This makes Gunda's challenge to African biblical scholars to engage in a "critical biblification exercise" by observing political appropriation of the Bible and making such observations public extremely important. We submit that a critical analytical perspective to undertake such observations is a postcolonial biblical reception perspective. As discussed above, postcolonialism's demand to take a moral stand in the interpretative act and speak truth to power and speak to the powerless about the powerful (Sugirtharajah, 1999) makes it a necessary critical ingredient in pursuing political reception of the Bible in sub-Saharan Africa. Consequently, in our analysis of the Ofori-Atta phenomenon below, we interrogate his reception of the Bible and draw attention to any abuse, potential or real.

4. The Ofori-Atta Phenomenon – Biblification of National Budget Statements and Government Economic Policies

Apart from being the former Minister for Finance of the Republic of Ghana, Ofori-Atta is a co-founder and former chairman of the Databank Group in Ghana. He is said to be a relative of the current President of Ghana. Additionally, he is a Christian and has on several occasions declared his faith in Jesus Christ. He worships with the Asbury Dunwell Church in Accra with his family and is very regular at Christian events. Many young people in the church look to him and his wife as a model Christian couple. In presenting the annual budget statements, Ofori-Atta usually appears in a white outfit with a briefcase. This is his consistent appearance on the floor of Ghana's Parliament from 2017–2023. This Christian profile should be borne in mind as we present and discuss his reception of the Bible.

From 2017–2023 he presented seven budget statements and economic policies of the government of Ghana to the Ghanaian Parliament with their corresponding mid-year fiscal policy reviews⁴ and in some cases expenditure in advance of appropriation.⁵ Therefore, three key political-economic documents are sources of the Ofori-Atta phenomenon namely, budget statement and economic policy, mid-year fiscal reviews of presented budgets, and where necessary expenditure in advance of appropriation. We have surveyed all these sources spanning 2017 to 2024 and the following observations are remarkable before the focus is set on the NT texts.

We observe that all the three sources in all the years under study have been highly biblified – meaning the existence of several biblical texts in the documents – with the frequency of the biblification varying from one year to another; 2019 being the highly biblified year, exhibiting not less than fifteen (15) biblical passages; followed by 2021 with about ten (10) cases, and

⁴ Usually termed as mid-year budget reviews.

⁵ Like the Case of 2021 Expenditure in Advance of Appropriation for January to March 2021 submitted on 28th October 2020.

the least is 2022. The modes of appropriation can also be observed: 1) direct quotation with references, 2) allusions to biblical passages, themes, and images, and 3) paraphrases of biblical texts. The biblical texts are used, at each instance, to communicate or illustrate a certain message without recourse to their biblical, literary contexts.

Moreover, some of the references are wrong and some of the paraphrases lead to re-writing of the biblical texts to make them suitable for the purpose for which he is making recourse to them. Examples for each will illustrate the point. In paragraph 1144 of the 2021 budget statement, Ofori-Atta calls for national unity by arguing, “we should always be united on the broad goal of advancing the welfare and progress of our people [...]. There is more to us than we have so far realised. As the Lord said in Genesis 11:5, ‘If as one people speaking the same language they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them.’” Certainly, the text, from the Tower of Babel story in Gen 11:1–9 is in verse 6 and not 5⁶ and what is quoted here is a paraphrased condensation of the entire verse. The same thing applies to the 2018 budget paragraph 876 where the miraculous feeding of the five thousand people is erroneously said to be found in Matt 13 instead of 14. The paraphrased condensation is also found in the *Expenditure in Advance of Appropriation for January to March 2021* paragraph 46: “Let me, Mr. Speaker, [...] leave us with Psalm 133; ‘How good and pleasant it is when God’s people live together in Unity for then the hand bestows His blessings’.” Definitely, the song of ascent has its middle section here mutilated and the rest rephrased. It is difficult to ascertain why the minister appropriates the texts in this manner. We posit, however, that he might be quoting from memory – which will not be surprising as there are many Ghanaian Christians who have whole chapters of biblical books and whole Psalms in memory. Granted that, it is still surprising that the pains are not taken to cross-check the references, given the political and technical level at which he is located and presenting the budget. This then leads us to the conclusion that the interest in this bibli-fication lies more in drawing on the revered authority of the Bible in the Ghanaian context to advance the political views expressed than being

⁶ Surely, one might not want to stretch that beyond limits as the original texts were initially transmitted without chapters and verses.

faithful to the Bible. Relatedly, we observe that his use of the Bible suggests that he finds it an effective rhetorical material for the communication of his political ideas. That doubtlessly creates a fertile ground for potential abuse of the Bible.

Moreover, the manner of appropriation covers biblical texts from both the OT and the NT, which points to the scope of the minister's knowledge of the Bible. The following books of the Bible feature in the three sources: Genesis, Exodus, 1&2 Samuel, Nehemiah, Psalms, Proverbs, Isaiah, Ezekiel, and Joel; Matthew, John, Ephesians, Philippians, 2 Timothy, and 1 Peter. It thus seems that the Ofori-Atta phenomenon favours the OT texts more than that of the NT. Nonetheless, as it will be demonstrated shortly below, an NT text – Matt 14:13–21 – becomes the controlling and agenda-setting biblical text for this phenomenon.

Additionally, a close look at the phenomenon indicates that Ofori-Atta de-contextualises the biblical texts, repurposes them, in order then to re-contextualise them for his own use. In other words, the texts are freed from their literary and canonical contexts in order for them to be useful for the political context. Here again lurks the danger of abuse and call for careful scrutiny. Furthermore, in Ofori-Atta's hands, the Bible speaks and applies to the whole nation – Christian and non-Christian alike. Consequently, the Bible becomes a sacred text for all Ghanaians and not only Christians in Ghana. Put differently, the Bible ceases to be the Holy Scripture of one of three major religious communities in Ghana, but that of the entire country. This has interreligious implications which lie beyond the scope of this study.

A quintessential instance that illustrates the foregoing three observations is paragraph 293 of the 2019 budget: "I believe, that with faith as our shield and God-loving Ghanaians as partners, the promise of God in Genesis 12:2–3 will also be ours: 'I will make you a great nation; I will bless you and make your name [Ghana] great [...]. And in you all the families of the [earth] [Ghana] shall be blessed.'" To be seen here is not only the de- and re-contextualisation of the Abrahamic blessings,⁷ but also the text is applied to the entire nation and thus becomes the Holy Scripture for the

⁷ Square brackets part of the original quotes.

entire country. We should not forget that apart from using collective expressions like “will also be ours”, he is standing before the elected representatives of the people of Ghana, the Parliament of the Republic of Ghana, making this presentation, hence the national status assumed by the Bible by implication.

Ultimately, the Ofori-Atta phenomenon is not only the biblicization of Ghanaian political-economic discourse, but also a “*sermonisation*” of the budget presentation speeches and their associated economic-political documents. Sermonisation here means using biblical texts in a homiletic fashion to exhort the nation. For instance, in paragraph 6 of his 2019 mid-year fiscal review speech, he exhorts the Parliament and the people of Ghana, “Mr. Speaker, as we cross the Mid-Year mark, let us thank God and bless His holy name for his love which endures forever. I am confident that as in Isaiah 61:7–8, instead of shame and dishonour, Ghana will enjoy a double share of honour, we will possess a double portion of prosperity.” Furthermore, it sees the Bible as a source of “the approach” to economic recovery and growth and hence attributing such recovery and growth to God which then potentially shifts responsibility from the minister to God and thus provides a potential escape route from public accountability. For if it is God whose grace is responsible for the economic growth, then he is to take blame if such does not happen. This is the observation we make with particular reference to the appropriation of the NT specifically Matt 14:13–21.

5. Ofori-Atta and the New Testament: Matthew 14:13–21 as “the approach” to Economic Recovery and Growth in Ghana

Specific NT texts that are quoted and alluded to include Matt 14:13–21; 25:14–30; John 6:9; Eph 3:20; Phil 1:6; 4:19; 2 Tim 1:7; James 1:4; and 1 Pet 1:10; 2:9. Definitely, a better appreciation of the appropriation of these texts requires case by case contextual analysis for which space would not

permit here. Therefore, attention will be given to Matthew 14:13–21,⁸ Jesus’s miraculous feeding of five thousand men with five loaves of bread and two fish. As already mentioned, the Ofori-Atta phenomenon has used this text in a programmatic manner and sees it as illustrative of his approach to managing the Ghanaian economy. This is explicitly expressed in our opening quotation, i.e. paragraph 938 of the 2024 budget: “Mr. Speaker, this is a marked change from when I first stood before this House on 2nd March 2017. [...] our economic prospects had dimmed considerably. I referred then to the biblical story of five loaves and two fishes to illustrate the approach in turning the economy around.” “2017” and “Matt 14:13–21”, then, build a reference point to which he frequently refers to in his budget statements. It is helpful to illustrate this observation by presenting the evidence for all the years starting from the 2018⁹ budget, paragraph 876: “Mr. Speaker, in my debut appearance in this august House, my backbencher friends across the aisle traded Bible quotations with me. As I invoked the miracle of Jesus feeding the 5,000 with five loaves of bread and three fish (Mathew 13 [sic]), they responded with Philippines [sic] 4:19 ‘And my God will meet all your needs according to the riches of His glory in Christ Jesus.’” This is repeated in 2019 paragraph 8, “Mr. Speaker, I stood here in March 2017 and asked that the country’s paltry 2 fishes and 5 loaves be multiplied [...].” Similarly, in 2020 paragraph 9: “In the 2017 Budget, we illustrated the NPP Government’s expectations, aspirations and hope for Ghana’s future, using the miracle of Jesus when he fed 5,000 people with 5 loaves of bread and two fish.” Equally in 2021 paragraph 4 of the Expenditure in Advance of Appropriation: “Mr. Speaker, in 2017, [...] I invoked ‘*The miracle of the five (5) loaves and two (2) fishes*’ [sic] to illustrate the predicament we found ourselves in [...], I was declaring our faith and hope in a God who can do much with little [...].” He is silent on it in 2022 and 2023, but repeats it in his 2024 budget, paragraph 939, “Mr. Speaker, I stood here in March 2017 and asked that the country’s paltry 2 fishes and 5 loaves be multiplied. Indeed, as the young boy gave all he had to the multitude, so have we and the Lord, in response, has blessed our nation, and this we should not forget.”

⁸ That it is Matthew’s version of the text that he has in mind is clear from the 2018 budget.

⁹ He first used the text in 2017. Hence our starting from 2018.

This calls for further analysis. To begin with, the Ofori-Atta phenomenon has been consistent with the appropriation of Matthew and to the extent that it continues to be referred to confirms our deduction that it functions as a programmatic text for the minister's approach to managing the Ghanaian economy. Noteworthy is that from the 2017 to 2024 budgets, he has progressively explained the function of the text in his hands. An important function that he gives to the text is *illustration* in two senses. The first sense is that with the text he describes the meagre economic resources available, and the second sense indicates how he and his government will multiply these resources, i.e. economic recovery and growth. This is obvious in paragraph 877 of the 2018 budget which comments on the paragraph 876 already quoted above: "Mr. Speaker, with the little inherited from the Mahama Government [i.e. the previous government], our performance these ten months are indeed nothing less than a miracle as evidenced by the blessings and achievements I have just enumerated. I can only add, Mr. Speaker, that the combination of Philippians 4:19 and Mathew 13, hard work and obedience have greatly benefited our dear country." In other words, "the little inherited" corresponds to the five loaves of bread and two fish while the claimed economic performance represents the multiplication. Not to be overlooked here is the divine dimension of the entire phenomenon. It is not just for illustrative reasons that Ofori-Atta clings to this biblical text, but there is reason to think that he actually believes it can apply to the economic fortunes of the country. He intimates this in the above quotation; "the combination of Philippians 4:19 and Mathew 13, hard work and obedience have greatly benefited our dear country" is to be understood in this light. The evidence gains more weight in the 2019 quote above where he argues, "And, indeed, as the young boy gave all he had to the multitude,¹⁰ so have we and the Lord, in response, has, indeed, blessed our nation." The emphasis is on the "and the Lord [...] has [...] blessed our nation." We should understand this to mean not only the much-needed economic management expertise and competence to guarantee the expected results of economic growth, but more importantly, it will appear, the divine role therein. Simply put, excellent economic management competence is not enough to lift the many Ghanaians out of the chocking dungeons of poverty through economic

¹⁰ Referencing the Johannine version of the story, John 6:1–13.

growth, but we need God to come in! Undoubtedly, that is consistent with his boss's (the President's) mantra in using 1 Sam 17:47; the battle is the Lord's.

Besides illustrating the meagre economic resources and the ability to multiply it albeit with God's help, the text also expresses the minister's party's hope for the future of the Ghanaian economy: "We illustrated the NPP Government's expectations, aspirations and hope for Ghana's future, using the miracle of Jesus when he fed 5,000 people with 5 loaves of bread and two fish." Obviously, the "expectations, aspirations and hope" is economic abundance. Here too we should not forget that the God factor is in mind as the next paragraph commenting on this quote indicates, paragraph 10 of the 2020 budget: "Mr Speaker exactly 2 years, 8 months and 12 days later, I stand before you to declare that indeed God has been gracious."

Ofori-Atta attributes more functions to the text in the subsequent years. Indeed, it still plays the illustrative role, but with increased nuances. In 2021, the text still illustrates the paucity of economic resources, but the minister adds another dimension by stating in paragraph 4 that "in 2017 [...] I invoked '*The miracle of the five (5) loaves and two (2) fishes*' to illustrate the predicament we found ourselves in [...], I was declaring our faith and hope in a God who can do much with little and in fact do exceedingly above all we can ask or think." In addition to the illustrative role is the declaration of faith in the God-factor.¹¹

Finally, the development in his understanding of the political use of the text reaches its zenith in the 2024 budget when he notes, after describing the dire nature of the economy he inherited from the previous government, that "I referred then to the biblical story of five loaves and two fishes to illustrate *the approach* in turning the economy around."¹² Matthew 14:13–21 thus provides the minister with "the approach in turning the [Ghanaian] economy around." Holding the preceding analysis together with this, it can be deciphered that the approach in turning the economy around is "trust in God to send a miracle even if you are working hard and pursuing sound economic policies". That is certainly a caricatured view of

¹¹ The reference to Eph 3:20 is indicative.

¹² Emphasis added.

the Ofori-Atta phenomenon at this point, but it captures the essentials of coupling the secular, technical task of national economic management with divine influence, so that as Jesus “looked up to heaven” and gave thanks holding the five loaves of bread and two fish and this subsequently fed the multitude, so also with the Ghanaian economy in his hands, Ofori-Atta looks up to God with the hope that he will help bring about economic growth.

It is important to interrogate this phenomenon from an exegetical point of view. Without the space to go into detailed exegetical analysis of the pericope Matt 14:13–21, some exegetical highlights will serve our purpose here. Source critically, the pericope as it stands is Matthew’s redaction of his primary source, Mark 6:32–44. Following his *Vorlage*, he sets the story right after the pericope on Herod’s execution of John the Baptist (Matt 14:1–12). After hearing about John’s execution, Jesus withdraws himself to a deserted place by means of a boat, but crowds followed him on foot (v. 13). Upon seeing the crowd, he is moved by compassion because of them (ἐσπλαγχνίσθη ἐπ’ αὐτοῖς) and heals the sick (v. 14). In the evening, his disciples request that he dismisses the crowds to go and find food for themselves since they could not feed them, having only five loaves of bread and two fishes (vv. 15, 17). Jesus rejects the disciples’ request and asked that they be fed (v. 16). He asks for the five loaves and two fish, orders the crowds to sit down, looks up to heaven, blesses, then breaks the bread, and gives them to the disciples who in turn distribute them to the seated crowds (vv. 18–19). Eventually, the over five thousand people¹³ are fed to the full with the comparatively little food, leaving surplus (vv. 20–21). Clearly, the story exhibits significant OT parallels such as 2 Kings 4:42–44.¹⁴ That aside, it is significant to emphasise that v. 14 is essential for reading the story which is very relevant in interrogating its political reception in the Ofori-Atta phenomenon. For in this verse, Jesus’s compassion for the crowds is the propelling force of his initial action of healing the sick among the crowd: “When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick.”¹⁵ Furthermore, the temporal reference in v. 15 “evening” and the repetition of the

¹³ Factoring the women and children into the account.

¹⁴ See also 1 Kings 17:8–16; 2 Kings 4:1–7.

¹⁵ NRSV.

“crowd” in vv. 15, 19 make it reasonable to see the compassion that drove Jesus to heal the crowd to be the same emotion propelling the feeding of the crowd (Ukeachusim et al., 2021). This is grounded in the fact that the tradition that traded the story (Mark) has compassion as part of it and importantly the second feeding pericope, Matt 15:32–38, links compassion directly with the feeding miracle.

In relation to the Ofori-Atta phenomenon, therefore, it should be emphasized that it is not the multiplication per se but the motivation, the divine compassion expressed for those who are held hostage by the lack of basic necessities of life like food. This is where the text challenges the Ofori-Atta phenomenon and other political appropriation of the NT – does Ofori-Atta and by extension Ghanaian/African politicians really feel for the glaring needs of the many people who are living from hand-to-mouth daily or even those who barely can afford a single meal a day in Ghana? Juxtaposing the manifest socio-economic problems in Ghana and many parts of Africa with the staggering levels of corruption in public service as well as countless cases of economic mismanagement and wastes makes it clear that compassion is a scarce ingredient in Ghanaian politics. Moreover, an exegetical observation makes it worth highlighting that the story stresses the fact that all were fed to the full (καὶ ἔφαγον πάντες καὶ ἐχορτάσθησαν v. 20) which equally presents another challenge to the political reception – to what extent does economic growth lead to equitable distribution of resources? Is “the approach” to turning the economic fortunes of Ghana comprehensive enough to reach every Ghanaian, or is it narrowly designed to enrich a few people with politicians being the immediate beneficiaries?

Beyond these exegetical implications, it is important to state that the Ofori-Atta phenomenon has the potential of leveraging on the religiosity of Ghanaians and thus courting popular support amidst an ailing economy that is currently being “redeemed” by the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Moreover, the phenomenon, by its suggestion on the reliance on God who is capable of multiplying national resources, has the tendency to shift responsibility of economic growth and success to God instead of the minister. A concomitant implication of this shift is that the minister and by extension the government could be shielded from public accountability. Finally, the Ofori-Atta phenomenon does not seem to take seriously

the interreligious implication when it set forth the NT and the Bible as a national sacred text. Peaceful and religiously tolerant though Ghanaians may be, but that must not be taken for granted.

6. Conclusion

The Ofori-Atta phenomenon is a biblification of Ghanaian political-economic discourse with accompanying documents such as national budget statements and economic policies as well as the sermonisation of national budget presentation speeches on the floor of Ghana's Parliament. It projects the Bible, the sacred scripture of Christianity, as a national Holy Scripture which speaks to the entire nation of Ghana through such economic management tools as national budget statements and government economic policies. It invokes Matt 14:13–21 in a programmatic manner and gives the text its own interpretations within a secular, political context. Ken Ofori-Atta, as a Christian politician, might simply be attempting to give expression to his Christian faith in public service. Yet in our judgement, the appropriation of the New Testament and other biblical texts in the manner presented above shifts the responsibility for economic recovery and growth in Ghana to God, which could eventually shield the minister and by extension the government from public accountability. Moreover, it can potentially create a mind-set that relents in exhausting all empirically grounded economic growth strategies, since God can intervene with a miracle. Furthermore, the frequent recourse to the Bible by the finance minister in a highly religious country like Ghana could be interpreted as an attempt to leverage on this high religiosity for political ends, because it presents the minister as a God-fearing public figure to be admired by all. Such admiration could also interfere with public accountability in the management of the Ghanaian economy. Indeed, it should be stated that it is hard to observe empirically the extent to which the use of Matt 14:13–21 (and the Bible as whole) in national economic management has yielded the expected economic boom since 2017, for the Ghanaian economy has suffered several setbacks and is currently under a three-year IMF bail-out program since 2023. Ultimately, it must, therefore, be argued that the recourse to the Bible in politics in Ghana and other parts of Africa

is not an expression of a belief in the divine power thereof, but a leveraging on an existing religiosity for political ends; ends that actually benefit the political elites more than the masses.

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