

# Jesus's prayer location in the Gospels and African Christianity

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## **Abstract**

Within Jesus' involvement in prayers, especially as it relates to locations, we are confronted with the task of going through the records of the Gospels to find out how Jesus prayed in sacred spaces. Therefore, this essay examines Jesus's prayer locations in the Gospels in comparison with modern African Christianity. Particularly, it intends to re-examine the concept and emphasis on a particular location for prayer, called the mountain and the issue of stipulated prayer duration. Using the comparative approach in African biblical criticism by drawing from Jesus's location and pattern of private prayers in the Gospels, I argue that similarity, dissimilarity and theological nuances exist between biblical and African understanding of using the mountain as a sacred space for prayer. Did Jesus pray in one particular location? Did Jesus stipulate a particular duration for prayer?

## **Keyword**

*Jesus; prayer; Gospels; Africa; Christianity; sacred spaces*

## **1. Introduction**

Christian spirituality has come under discourse in modern scholarship. Generally, the term “spirituality” is currently understood as something that is not “limited to spiritual practices, such as meditation, but suggests the pursuit of a life shaped by a sense of meaning, values, and perhaps transcendence” (Sheldrake 2016). Although the word spirituality is used in different religions of the world, and by people with no religious beliefs, it is also seen from the perspective of Christianity as something that has to do with living life under the influence of God's spirit. Specifically, “Christian spirituality is associated with following the teachings of Jesus Christ or imitating his values” (Sheldrake 2016; Jacobs 2013). Usually, spirituality is

demonstrated through individual and corporate worship to God through Jesus Christ and daily activities, especially of the individual Christian. Part of Christian worship or daily activity is prayer. The issue of prayer has also come under serious study in Christian spirituality. Previously, scholars have discussed the theme of prayer from diverse perspectives and approaches such as biblical (prayer as rooted in the bible [Sheldrake 2016]), anthropological (prayer as social interaction between man and God and Man and Man), sociological (prayer as a means of solving societal problems) and phenomenological (prayer as spiritual and beyond human total comprehension) approaches (Crowe 2005; Wright 2005; Baker 2008; Giordan & Woodhead 2015; Stawski 2017; Bandak 2017; Froese & Jones 2021). It is obvious that scholars have widely approached the theme of prayer, but only limited or no attention has been given to the use of sacred spaces for prayer in the Gospels in relation to African Christianity. This chapter primarily examines Jesus's location of prayer in the Gospels in relation to modern African Christianity. Particularly, it intends to (re) examine the concept and emphasis on a particular location for prayer called the mountain. Within the discussion, I intend to also bring in the issue of stipulated prayer duration. Using the comparative approach by drawing from Jesus's location and pattern of private prayers in the Gospels, I argue that similarity, dissimilarity and theological nuances exist between the Gospels and African understanding of using the mountain as a sacred space for prayer. The comparative approach in African Biblical Criticism (African Biblical Hermeneutics) seeks to establish similarities and dissimilarities between African and biblical life and thought and correlate one with the other. This is the older model of African contextual bible reading. Previously, African scholars have used this approach in their essays (Dickson 1979, 95-108; Kibicho 1968, 223-238; Akao 1987, 90-103; Goba 1993, 65-73).

From public and pulpit opinions, especially among clerics and non-clerics alike, there is also the argument that there must be a particular location, duration and pattern of prayer in modern African Christianity. As such, some have a particular mountain or place where prayer can only take place. Using the comparative model by drawing from Jesus's location and pattern of private prayer in the Gospels, I show that Jesus's pattern of prayer does not suggest a particular location and duration but a deliberate creation of

spiritual atmosphere anywhere and anytime to pray frequently. So, without playing down retreat or prayer in secluded places like mountain, there is a need to read the New Testament with a deeper theological understanding. Imagine when a person, for instance, is at work where he or she cannot be allowed to go home or somewhere of his or her choice throughout the year, how can such a person pray on a mountain or stipulated place? So, it is important for a Christian to learn how to create an atmosphere of prayer in his or her heart while working. Did Jesus pray in one particular location? Did Jesus stipulate a particular duration for prayer? It is therefore important to find out from the record of the Gospels whether Jesus prayed in a particular location or whether He prayed on the mountains and wilderness for the purpose of secluded spaces befitting a prayer retreat. Here, we shall explore the various locations of Jesus's prayers as recoded in the Gospels.

## **2. The concept of prayer mountains and prayer duration in African Christianity**

One simple description that can be given to a mountain is that it is the highest point from the earth's crust with most visible and impressive features of the landscape, which can suggest or awaken a sense of sacredness (Bernbaum 2006, 304). Ordinarily, the mountain is a natural creation of God Almighty but humans appropriate deity or sacredness to them, though with some kind of nuance when considering the ones in the Holy Land such as Mount Sinai in Saint Catherine, Mount Tabor located in Lower Galilee, Israel (at the eastern end of the Jezreel Valley, 18 kilometres west of the Sea of Galilee), Mount Olivet in east of Old city of Jerusalem, Mount Zion in Jerusalem, etc. Apart from the Holy Land, there are other places where sacred mountains exist in Europe, Asia and the Americas. In various cultures or religions of the world, some mountains are traditionally referred to as "sacred" because they "have [a] well-established network of myths, beliefs, and religious practices such as pilgrimage, meditation, and sacrifice. [Some] examples are Tai Shan in China ... and the San Francisco Peaks in the United States" (Okyere 2013, 3; Bernbaum 2006, 304-305). In Africa, for instance, some mountains such as Mount Kilimanjaro in Tanzania and Mount Kenya also enjoy some kind of socio-cultural attribution of sacredness and tourism (Brockman 2011, 347).

In Africa, the appropriation and identification of sacred mountains as sacred spaces came from African Indigenous religions and cultures. The understanding of seeing the mountain as a retreat ground first came from African traditionalists. For instance, “Before the re-discovery of mountains as sacred sites for Christian religiosity in Ghana, some of them were the abodes of deities and embodiment of the indigenous peoples’ traditional religious expression” (Okyere 2013:7; Okyere 2012:13, 14, 38-41). For instance, among the Akan people of Ghana, “it is believed that the initial settlers of Atwea mysteriously [where the Atwea Mountain is located] emerged from a mountain deity called *Atwea boɔ*. The mountain deity is therefore believed to be very pivotal in the historical narrative of the birth of the Atwea community” (Okyere 2012:49). Subsequently, in Ghana, the Atwea and other sacred mountains have been re-appropriated for Christian use as Prayer Mountains and even church sites. Also, among the Akamba (Kamba) people of Kenya, for instance, it is believed that the first men were brought by God (*Ngai* or *Mulungu*) out of a rock (*Nzaui*), and as such, that area has been kept sacred to date. This is due to their cultural understanding that God left His footprints on *Nzaui* (rock), thereby considering them as sacred and as such used for religious rites and observances. Also, among the Luo people of Kenya and Tanzania, “Kit-Mikayi’ rocks are considered as sacred and a special place for ritual observances. Also, among the Luo people, outstanding mountains and hills such as *Got Ramogi* and *Got Alila* are generally regarded as sacred and are given religious meaning in the sense that they are believed to be places of God’s special manifestation and, as such, are sacred and viewed as the dwelling places of God when he visits the earth. Also, among the Nyala people of south-west of Sudan and the Samia people of Western Kenya and Eastern Uganda, the Wanga and Odiado hills are considered, respectively, as God’s abode (Gumo & Gisege 2012, 523-543). Also, among the Kikuyu people of Kenya, it is believed that Mount Kenya is God’s abode (Hallencreutz 1979, 97). Among the Awka people of Eastern Nigeria, sacred spaces were initially marked out with the symbol of natural objects like rock, trees, lakes, streams, etc (Ngozi 2016, 4). Also, among the Zimbabwe people of Africa, Chivavarira Hill of Chirumhanzu is regarded as sacred. This hill has become an icon because of the sacredness the people attribute to it. This hill houses a lot of caves, and most importantly for modern Christianity, it is the big cave at the top of the hill which has attracted new

religious faiths such as Masowe yeNyenyedzi Church and AAC led by Paul Mwazha in Zimbabwe (Musoni 2016:1-8). Also, among the Yoruba people of South-Western Nigeria, the concept of *Ori-Oke* (Hills and Mountains) exists. *Ori-Oke* has almost become synonymous with Prayer Mountains in modern Christianity in Nigeria (Omotoye 2018:1-10; Yaovi, Nwosu, Alamu, Odeh, and Mohammed 2018).

From the above, we can see that the concept of mountain location for prayer originated from African Traditional Religion in the sense that there is a belief that a link exists between the physical and divine and as such, the mountain is one of the best sacred spaces to encounter the divine (Mbiti 1990, 25; Haar 1992, 119). This same idea was also imbued in modern African Christianity, in which some mountain sites have been set up by Churches and prophets for people to come for effective prayers. While the Roman Catholic Church is well known for setting apart sacred spaces called monasteries, the use of mountains as sacred spaces for prayer in African Christianity originated mostly from African Indigenous Churches. Here, I use two instances to buttress this fact.

The first instance is South Africa. As early as 1913, the appropriation of *Nhlangakazi* Mountain as a holy mountain by the *Nazaretha* church already existed among the Zulu people of South Africa. *Nhlangakazi* is in Ndwedwe, 30 kilometres North of Inanda, KwaZulu-Natal in South Africa. It is understood among them that a relationship exists between the sanctified royal ancestry of the Zulu nation and the God of the Bible. As such *Inhlangakazi* is understood as both a Mount Zion and a place where Zulu *ubukhozi* is restored and experienced (Hallencreutz 1979:103; Sundkler 1976). The *Nazaretha* church is one of the oldest indigenous Churches in South Africa and one of the largest African traditionalist churches, combining Christianity with the Zulu culture. The Church was founded by an itinerant preacher, Isaiah Shembe (1869-1935), in 1910 (Kelly 2016:230-233). It was inspired by a rich heritage from Isaiah Shembe, who was a prophet, church-leader and hymn-writer (Hallencreutz 1979:103). The Church and other religious tourists numbering about two million, join in the traditional New Year's Fiesta annually because it is believed that it was on the heights of *Inhlangakazi*, prophet Isaiah Shembe received divine instructions to find the church (also known as the Nazareth Baptist Church). The followers revere Shembe, who died in 1935, as their prophet

(Scroll 2019). As part of their religious tradition, the Nazareth Baptist Church visits the Holy Mountain of Nhlangukazi every other year to congregate as part of the annual fiesta to receive spiritual blessings. The activities of the Church during the annual festival are succinctly put by Carl Hallencreutz, thus;

The New Year's Fiesta at Inhlangakozi can be a prolonged and lively festival where singing of Shembe's hymns with their characteristic rhythm is an integral element. The climax of the fiesta is the procession uphill Inhlangakozi with the sermon of the prophet and the ritual on the peak of the mountain. At a terrace below the peak, the prophet, at present a grandson of Isaiah Shembe, gives a sermon, which is based on the Bible and functions as an annual confirmation of the Law. After the sermon, which can last for more than an hour, the prophet invites his people to climb to the peak. There are new rituals including dances and a Communion Service, that take place. Each participant takes a stone, spits on it, and throws it onto a cairn. No prayers are said, the ritual as such is seen to bring blessing. The holy mountain functions as an effective symbol of divine presence (Hallencreutz 1979:102).

The second instance is Nigeria. As early as the 19th century, particularly in 1933, a prophet known as Alfred Ajayi Akintobi (also christened by his followers as Arobijikah 1) already founded a mountain prayer ministry at *Oke Agelu* (Agelu Mountain), which stretched over three kilometres on the Iseyin-Ibadan highway in Ado-Awaye, a community near Iseyin in Oyo State (Balogun 2017). Currently, the Church is being led by the first son (Samuel Ajayi Akintobi) after the demise of his father. The father died and was buried in the site in 1964. The son, Samuel Ajayi Akintobi, is also known as Arobijikah 11. On this mountain, prayer programmes are held regularly and annually, bringing many worshippers and tourists to the site to pray. Also, in North-Western Nigeria, some prayer mountains exist. For example, in the 1990s, Prayer Mountain Hanwa, which is in Zaria, Kaduna State, was already in use for Christian prayers. On this site, some buildings and cross features on the mountain can be found. There are diverse collection of religious spaces, such as established brick churches, simple metal shacks (small crude buildings typically made of boards or

sheets), and some murals of crosses (<https://www.atlasobscura.com/places/prayer-mountain-hanwa>).

Furthermore, the issue of stipulating or emphasising prayer duration or quantifying prayer within time or mechanising prayer is also trending in African Christianity. In African Christianity, prayer is taken as a very important thing. Among Christians generally, prayer is understood as a means of communicating with God. To buttress the above assertion, they often say that “a prayerless Christian is a powerless Christian” (Ayoola and Adediran 2018, 477-90) in the sense that regular prayer keeps the individual Christian in touch with God. This is a genuine position in African Christianity. However, the issue of boasting with time duration and location in which some overzealous clerics and even parishioners who feel they are better and more spiritual than others boast of spending 6 hours or 12 hours or more daily or weekly in prayer is biblically strange in a sense that scripture in the New Testament tells us to pray without ceasing (1 Thess 5:17). By this understanding, a Christian is supposed to always pray. While we do not have a problem with someone praying for 6 hours a day or week or more, the problem is the emphasis on ritual duration instead of emphasising praying without ceasing. How does one pray without ceasing? In our discussion of Jesus’ prayer experience in terms of location and duration, we shall touch on this also.

### **3. Jesus’ prayer locations in the Gospels**

Jesus prayed in various locations in ancient Israel during His time. Many of the locations where Jesus prayed were not recorded. As such, it becomes difficult to pinpoint all the sites where Jesus prayed. It is even possible He prayed in the Temple, Synagogues, riverside and even the upper room where He had the last supper with the disciples. Most of Jesus’s activities of prayer in the Temple and Synagogues are healing ministrations He did for others (Mt 21:14). He was frequent in the Temple and Synagogue but was always harassed by the Pharisees and Priests questioning His authority (Mt 21:23; Mk 11:27; Jn 18:20). These harassments might be responsible for His choice of other secluded and secrete places such as mountain and wilderness to pray. Here, I focus on some locations as recorded in the Gospels.

## Wilderness/Deserts

Jesus also carried out His private prayers in the wilderness or desert places. All the Synoptic Gospels (Mt 4:1-11; Mk 1:12-13; and Lk 4:1-13) unanimously attest to this narrative. In all the narratives, particularly in Matthew 4:1; Mark 1:12-13, and Luke 4:1, the Greek word ἔρημος (*eremos*) was used as an adjective and it means solitary, lonely, desolate, or an uninhabited place (Thayer's Greek Lexicon (2011)). It also connotes the understanding of an uncultivated or unpopulated place or a desolate (deserted) area. Figuratively, it gives the understanding of a barren or a solitary place that also provides needed quietness (freedom from disturbance). This description fits into a wilderness or a desert scenario. Considering the Greek word *eremos* from its root word (*erēmo*), it does not suggest absolute barrenness but unappropriated territory affording free range for shepherds and their flocks (Helps Word-Studies 2011, 22). In ancient Israel, a wilderness has some natural endowments such as caves, clefts and basins, hills, patch of corn, a clump of olives, scant palms, some green grasses, etc (Kim 2018, 62-75; 1 Samuel 23:19). In the Hebrew Bible, land that lies waste is referred to as חֲרִבָּה (*chorbah*) and land without water is called יְשִׁימוֹן (*yeshimon* [desert]) (Leviticus 26:31; Ezekiel 38:8,12; Isaiah 5:17; Isaiah 49:19; Ezra 9:9; Numbers 21:20; Isaiah 43:19; Deuteronomy 32:10; Psalm 107:4). In the New Testament, there is no clear distinction between desert and wilderness because the Greek word *eremos* captures the idea altogether. Scholars have also given *eremos* more spiritual meaning such that Jesus's suffering as Son of Man, especially the suffering on the cross, is seen as a kind of wilderness experience (Melbourne 1994:135-151). Also, in the later biblical writings, especially Second Temple Jewish literatures, and rabbinic writings, "the wilderness had been re-interpreted symbolically, cosmologically, and eschatologically, implying a chaotic state that should be transformed by God's grace and a place where God's people are gathered and fed with the hope of a messianic banquet" (Kim 2018:62). However, the presentation of Jesus' experience in a wilderness in terms of fasting in the Synoptic is a narrative of how Jesus went into a wilderness to fast and meditate (pray), in preparation for and continuation of His earthly ministry. While He carried out this exercise, the devil came to tempt Him, but He overcame the devil. All three Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke) do not tell us the exact location of the wilderness where Jesus was tempted. However, the use

of *eremos* gives us the idea of a solitary place. In any case, local tradition claims that the wilderness where Jesus fasted for forty nights and days and was tempted is likely a mountain near the Jordan River, currently called the “Mountain of Temptation.” The mountain is described as a place of “sheer rock and would have been difficult to ascend. It is a place where no one lives or travels through, and would have offered Jesus a solitary place completely cut off from the world around him” (Kosloski 2019). I still think that this answer is not adequate. Therefore, I wish to recommend this for further research.

In another instance, in Matthew 14:13 (after Jesus received the report of the execution of John the Baptist by Herod the tetrarch), Mark 1:35-38 and Luke 5:16, we are told that Jesus went to a solitary or deserted place to pray. In Luke 9:18, it is revealed that the question of His identity, which He posed to the disciples, in which Peter confessed Jesus as the Christ and Son of the Living God, was preceded by a private prayer. Moreover, in Luke 11:1, it is also shown that Jesus’ teaching of the Lord’s Prayer to His disciples was preceded by a private prayer in a secluded place. In all the texts, the same word *eremos* was used to mean a solitary place or desert. The only nuance here is that these differ from that of the temptation. The locations were also not identified.

## **Mountains**

Jesus also prayed numerous times on Mountains as recorded in the Gospels. One of the most popular Mountain prayer experiences of Jesus Christ is the famous Mount of Transfiguration, known to us today in the New Testament as the place where Jesus prayed and was transfigured in the presence of the disciples He took along. This was an event in which Jesus became radiant in glory upon a mountain. This narrative tells us that Jesus and three of his disciples, namely, Peter, James, and John, went to a mountain (later referred to as the Mount of Transfiguration) to pray (Lee, 2004:2, 21-23, 72-76, 103). The crux of the narrative is that suddenly, during the prayer, Jesus’ clothes became dazzling white, Elijah and Moses suddenly appeared and were discussing with Jesus, and finally a voice came from Heaven saying, “this is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him.” In this event, while Moses represents the law, Elijah represents the Prophet, thereby giving credence to the fact that Jesus is indeed the Son of God who has come to fulfil the law and the

prophet. The detail of this event are recorded by the Synoptic Gospels (Mt 17:1-8; Mk 9:2-8; and Lk 9:28-36) and were also referred to in the Second Epistle of Peter, particularly in 2 Peter 1:16-18. In the Gospel of John (1:14), the event is theologically alluded to by John. All the Synoptic Gospels are unanimous in the crux of the narrative of the transfiguration experience except Luke's nuance of "after about eight days" (Carlston 1961:235-236) – Matthew and Mark say after six days, after the event of Peter confessing the identity of Jesus Christ. The usage of after six days by Matthew and Mark and the use of about eight days by Luke could mean that the event happened between six and eight days after Peter's confession of Jesus as the Christ and Son of the Living God at Caesarea Philippi. Among the Synoptic Gospels, Luke was the evangelist who specifically made it clear that Jesus went with these selected disciples (Peter, James and John [PJ2]) to the mountain to pray. All three used the same Greek noun ὄρος (*oros*) to mean a mountain or hill. Matthew and Mark used the Greek adjective ὑψηλός (*hupsélos* [high or lofty]) to qualify *oros* to tell their audience that the Mountain where Jesus was transfigured was very high. Which of the mountains in ancient Israel best fit into this description?

In the narrative presented to us by the Synoptic Gospels, the location of the Mountain of Transfiguration is shown or mentioned. However, two sites have historically been considered strong possibilities for the "Mount of Transfiguration." One of them is Mount Tabor, a mountain 1,886 feet high above sea level and located at the eastern end of the Jezreel Valley, eleven miles west of the Sea of Galilee. This mountain at the time of Jesus was the landmark for an important junction on the Roman Highway known as the "Way of the Sea", which was a connecting road up to Damascus. Mount Tabor is seen by some as the "earliest traditional location for the Mountain of Transfiguration, a tradition established by a 3rd century Christian scholar named Origen." This submission was also confirmed later by "the Latin priest and historian Jerome, and a theologian known as Cyril of Jerusalem in the 4th century AD" (Niles 2017). As early as the 5th century, there were already church structures being built to commemorate the site.

The other possible mountain regarded as the location of the Mountain of Transfiguration is Mount Hermon. This mountain, which is 9,232 feet above sea level is located near Caesarea Philippi, where the previous events also recorded in the Gospels took place (Niles 2017). Some scholars believe

that Mount Hermon conforms better to the record than the traditional site of Mount Tabor (Sybrowsky 2003:63; Edersheim 1950:92), especially when considering it from the accounts of Matthew and Mark that used the adjective ὑψηλός (*hupsélos* [high or lofty]) to qualify the particular mountain. Although “the Old Testament texts associated both mountains [Mount Tabor and Mount Hermon] with holy and sacred locations of righteousness, the arguments for Mount Hermon as the location of the transfiguration are more convincing” (Sybrowsky 2003:63).

On another occasion, after Jesus fed the multitude of listeners numbering about five thousand with five loaves of bread and two fish, He decided to retreat to a mountain to pray (Mt 14:22-24; Mk 6:45-46). Also, in Luke 6:12, we are told that prior to the choosing of His disciples, He went to a mountain to pray. Another possible mountain where Jesus prayed is that of Mount Olivet (Mount of Olives). Luke’s (22:39-46) account says that Jesus prayed on the Mount of Olives the night before His arrest. Luke differs from Matthew (26:42-43) and Mark (14:32-34) on this narrative. While Matthew and Mark pointed out that Jesus prayed at the Garden of Gethsemane (the foot of Mount of Olives), Luke says Jesus prayed on the Mount of Olives. If we go by Luke’s narrative and that of Matthew and Mark, it is very likely that when Jesus told His disciples to pray at the foot of the Mountain, He went further to the Mountain to pray just to be alone as usual. Another allusion to this point that Jesus prayed on Gethsemane and Mount Olivet is the unanimity of the Gospels that testify to Jesus’s prayer experience in that area (whether at the root or the mountain itself) as a regular exercise, such that Judas is even aware of the place according to John (18:1). By implication, Jesus might have prayed alone several times on that site.

### **Garden of Gethsemane**

According to the Gospels, Jesus had always come to this site with His disciples for prayers. The night before Jesus’ arrest, trial, and execution, it was at this site (Garden of Gethsemane) that he stayed with the disciples following the Last Supper in Jerusalem. Jesus’s prayer at this site is recorded in all the Gospels (Mt 26:36-38; Mk 14:32-34; Lk 14:32-34; Jn 18:1). Jesus prayed in this site towards the end of His ministry. It was a time of agony in the sense that His time to suffer and die was near. As such, He prayed throughout the night. He prayed three times in Gethsemane as follows: the

first time (Mt 26:39-41; Mk 14:35-38; Lk 22:41-46), the second time (Mat 26:42-43; Mk 14:39-40), and the third time (Mt 26:44-46; Mk 14:41-42). His prayer point was the same: “My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want” (Mt 26:39,42,44; Mk 14:36,39; Lk 22:42). Luke 22:39-46 gives another dimension to the narrative, making it different from Matthew’s and Mark’s account. Although the prayer point is consistent in the three narratives, in Luke’s account, we are told that Jesus prayed this same prayer at the Mount of Olives. We are also told that it was his custom to pray at the Mount of Olives. John alludes to a garden where Jesus and His disciples usually meet, and which was also known to Judas (Jn 18:1-2). Luke also adds that an angel from heaven appeared to him and gave him strength (verse 43). Luke also adds that during the prayer, because of the anguish, the sweat that came out of Jesus’s body was as thick as blood. In the narrative, the synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke) captured the disciples’ inability to pray. However, Matthew and Mark add duration to it when Jesus asked Peter to pray or stay awake for at least one hour to prevent the trial that was about to come (Mt 26:40; Mk 14:37).

The mention of Mount of Olives by Luke and Gethsemane (Γεθσημανή) by Matthew and Mark gives credence to the fact that Jesus prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane and the Mount of Olives because there is a relationship between the two sites. The relationship is that the Garden of Gethsemane is located at the foot of the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem. The Garden harbours Olive trees, which were of economic and religious value because the oil from the press were used for anointing oil, oil for lamps, cooking, healing, and cleaning. The name “Gethsemane” is derived from two Hebrew/Aramaic words, “Gat Shemani,” which literally means “oil press.” Indeed a press is located in the midst of the Garden (Metzger and Coogan 1993:253; Doron 2021). In Matthew 26:36 and Mark 14:32, it is called *χωρίον* (*chōrion*), meaning a place or estate. The Gospel of John says Jesus entered a garden (κήπος (*kēpos*)) with his disciples (Jn 18:1).

#### **4. Comparison with and theological implication for African Christianity**

From the concept of the mountain from the African and Gospels’ experiences of using mountains as a sacred space for prayer, we can deduce

a very clear similarity. While the Gospels show to us the spiritual values of using mountains as sacred space for prayer, the African people have also shown to us the spiritual value placed on sacred mountains and objects. Just like Jesus Christ and His disciples prayed on the mountains for spiritual succour and renewal, African Christianity has done same with tremendous results of miracles. Also, just as the use of sacred spaces like mountains and deserts as shown in the Gospels attract some kind of special spiritual experiences, the same is the experience in African Christianity in a sense that people testify of their special spiritual experiences when they went to a mountain for special prayers. This experience was also vivid in Jesus' experiences in such sacred spaces. For instance, the transfiguration where there was a display of theophany, the wilderness and Gethsemane experiences where angels came to attend to Jesus at the end of the prayers are evidences of special spiritual experience. Although, we cannot show vividly any theophanic experience on the mountain in African Christian experience, some clerics like Prophet Isaiah Shembe of South Africa and Prophet Alfred Ajayi Akintobi of Nigeria have testified they had their calling and commissioning on a mountain top experience. Worshippers in African Christianity alike have also testified of receiving some kind of miracles when they went to a mountain to pray. While some similarities exist between African and Gospels' experiences of using mountains as sacred space for prayer, dissimilarity also abounds. While the sacred spaces where Jesus had prayer experiences were God and monotheistic driven experiences that of African Traditional Religious experiences where driven by the spirits of the ancestors and deities (pantheism<sup>1</sup>). Even before African Christianity embraced the use of mountains as sacred spaces for spirituality, African Indigenous Religion has long practiced it. This is why African Christianity must be careful of syncretism<sup>2</sup> by creating a clear distinction between African Christianity and African Traditional Religion. While the above similarities exist between the biblical and African experiences of using mountains as sacred spaces, a theological clarity must be well spelt out as well. First, Unlike some who think in African Christianity that

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- 1 Pantheism simply means the belief that God and the material world are one and the same thing and that God is present in everything. It also means belief in all deities.
  - 2 Syncretism simply means the combination of different beliefs; that is, the combination of different systems of philosophical or religious belief or practice.

the only place to see (experience) God personally is going to a particular mountain, African Christianity should understand that Jesus going to the mountain or the Garden of Olives to pray does not imply that He went because that is the only place He can relate with God but as a result of the solitary nature of the location for private retreat.

Second, unlike some who believe in praying in one particular location called mountain, Jesus did not pray in one particular location, rather He prayed in various locations thereby showing that the emphasis should not be on a particular location but the need to explore a solitary environment wherever we find ourselves. This implies that by Jesus praying in different places, He also emphasises the need to create the environment of worship/prayer within our heart spontaneously and wherever we find ourselves. Although Jacob's well was not one of the places Jesus prayed, Jesus emphasised this understanding in His conversation with the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well in John 4:1-24, especially verse 24. Before Jesus had the conversation with this woman in Samaria, the emphasis of worship (prayer) location had been on the Temple in Jerusalem and Mount Gerizim, a place where the blessings and curses in Deuteronomy 28 was pronounced in the Old Testament. Jesus made it clear that the prayer life or worship life of the Christian should not be limited by geographical locations. While Jesus did not cancel Temple worship or prayer in other geographical locations, the emphasis is on the stimulation (creation) of spiritual atmosphere anywhere and anytime. As such, worshipping in the Church building should be done in a way that shows spirituality and not a mere ritual of attending a Church service.

Third, unlike some who worship prophets and sacred spaces such as Prayer Mountains in African Christianity, Jesus taking His disciples with him to mountains to pray is mostly to teach them by example to constantly pray privately. Particularly, in the Garden of Gethsemane experience, He told the disciples to pray while He went further to pray. He came three times to check on them to challenge them to pray. One of the scenarios in the Gospels that buttress this is Jesus's emphasis of the Temple as a place of prayer. Although, the various narratives captured above did not vividly tell us that Jesus had His private prayers in the Temple, He emphasises that

the Temple is the House (place) of Prayer.<sup>3</sup> This is theologically significant for New Testament Christianity in a sense that the Temple is no longer a mere building on a mountainous site like Mount Zion in a particular geographical location but a spiritual Temple now located in the heart (spirit) of the Christian. Two main scriptures among others allude to this understanding. The first is in the Old Testament, particularly in Psalm 23:6b where we are told: “...I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever” (New Revised Standard Version 1989). Does it mean, a worshipper of God or a Christian will literally stay in the Church all day, all week and all year without doing any other meaningful things in life? Not at all, because the word House of Yaweh (הַיְהוָה בְּרִיתֵי [bə-ḥêṭ Yah-weh]) as used in the text figuratively means the ever abiding presence of God which is sometimes symbolised by the Temple (like Mount Zion that cannot be moved). By implication, as a Christian, the emphasis is on constant connection or relationship with God through His Holy Spirit in our spirit-man (inner-man). The other scripture in the New Testament is 1 Corinthians 6:19 where we are told that a Christian harbours a temple (ναός [*naos*]) in his or her body. As such, the Holy Spirit (God) resides there. This shows that the emphasis of prayer should not just be on location or in words but most importantly on constant connection of our inner-man (spirit being) with the Spirit of God. This same idea is also present in 1 Thessalonians 5:17 where we are told to pray always (without ceasing).

Fourth, unlike some in African Christianity who believe that they have not prayed until they go to a particular place and take a particular position, the isolation of the mountains or wilderness where Jesus prayed reminds us as African Christians to find our own wilderness or mountain each day away from everyone, connecting with God spiritually and his mysterious plan. For some of us this might be an actual place in the wilderness or mountain around us, away from the business of modern life. For others this might simply mean going to your bedroom and turning off all of your electronics, spending time in the silence and isolation. Wherever your mountain or

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3 Jesus, having chased the money changers and commerciality from the Temple, said that His Father’s House is primarily a place of prayer (spiritual worship), not commercial arena or platform. See Matthew 21:12-13; Luke 19:45-46. For other Old Testament reference to the Temple as a place of prayer (worship), see also, Isaiah 56:7; Jeremiah 7:11; Psalm 93:5.

Alter might be, let us be inspired by Jesus's actions and take time away from the world to refresh our souls from time to time (Kosloski 2019). We must not also forget that there are some people of the world whose countries or regions do not have any mountain or wilderness but rivers. Why the emphasis on mountain and wilderness? Are we saying these kinds of people must travel to the regions where there are mountains and wilderness before they can experience deep spirituality or miracle? Not at all; then locate your place of private prayer; not just one particular place but a solitary place befitting for your private prayers and meditations.

Fifth, unlike some who emphasises duration (quantification) of prayers in African Christianity, Jesus's prayer life emphasises consistence and quality time with God (the Holy Spirit). Jesus was visiting solitary places such as mountains or deserted places to have private prayers. The emphasis is not on duration but on consistent quality time with God. As recorded in the Gospels, our Lord Jesus Christ was a man of prayer who prayed consistently. When He was baptized, we are told that He was praying (Luke 3:21). Also, we were told that before He was transfigured, He was praying with the disciples on the mountain (Luke 9:28-29). Prior to choosing His disciples, we are also told that "He continued all night in prayer to God" (Luke 6:12-13). When the miracle of feeding over five thousand people with five loaves and two fish took place, and when they spoke well of Him, and sincerely intended to make Him a physical King, we are also told that "He went up into a mountain alone to pray" (John 6:1-15). When tempted in the garden of Gethsemane, He told His disciples to pray while He went further to pray (Mark 14:34-35). After feeding the multitude numbering over five thousand with five loaves and two fish, He withdrew to have private prayer on a mountain (Matthew 14:22-24). The issue of praying was given a new dimension by Paul in 1 Thessalonians 5:17 where we are told to pray without ceasing. How does one pray without ceasing? It simply means that prayer is something that must always go on in the heart and spirit of a Christian. Combining this with the understanding of our body being the temple of God, it means we are mobile prayer agents. Our hearts must be emitting prayer all the time.

## 5. Conclusion

In this chapter, I have shown that Jesus's involvement in prayers does not emphasise location and pattern but solitary place and personal spiritual connectivity and relationship with God. It has also shown that in the New Testament, Jesus's prayer encounter on the mountain is a pointer to private meeting with God to commune with Him and Him with the individual. It has also shown that the mountains and wilderness mentioned in Jesus's prayer experience in the Gospels mostly represent solitary retreats for prayers not an emphasis on a particular location. We can also understand from Jesus's experience especially of not praying in just one particular location that God is everywhere because He is Spirit. However, just like in the experience of the transfiguration at the Mount of Transfiguration, we can attract God's *shekinah*<sup>4</sup> or special presence to any location by our personal intimate relationship with Him. This was what happened to Jacob when he laid down using a stone as a pillow in Luz (Gen.28 verse 19) when he was on his way to Laban's house in Paddan-Aram to find a wife. God showed Himself by an epiphanic presence by sending an angel. There was a ladder connecting heaven to earth. Jacob never intended to have such an experience but as he stayed alone in that location, God showed up to make him know that He is Omnipresent (Genesis 28:10-22). Jacob created a sacred space thereafter and called the place Bethel (House of God). It also shows to us that Jesus's prayers on mountains or wilderness are as a result of the solitary nature of the chosen location. So, the idea of going to a physical mountain to pray is good. However, it should not be necessarily based on the understanding that, that is the only place to see God. Such prayer place could also be your house or the Church especially when the place is free from people. We should also develop the habit of praying always without necessarily putting emphasis on location.

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4 The word *shekinah* does not appear in the Bible, but the concept clearly does. The Jewish rabbis coined this extra-biblical expression, a form of a Hebrew word that literally means "he caused to dwell," signifying that it was a divine visitation of the presence or dwelling of the Lord God on this earth. The *Shekinah* was first evident when the Israelites set out from Succoth in their escape from Egypt. There the Lord appeared in a cloudy pillar in the day and a fiery pillar by night: "After leaving Succoth they camped at Etham on the edge of the desert. By day the LORD went ahead of them in a pillar of cloud to guide them on their way and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, so that they could travel by day or night. Neither the pillar of cloud by day nor the pillar of fire by night left its place in front of the people" (Exodus 13:20–22).

Also, from the study, we can also see that a particular location or duration was not stipulated for prayer but constant private prayer and connection with the Spirit of God should be of paramount importance to African Christianity. It is therefore important for African Christianity to draw from the rich theological understanding of Jesus's prayer experiences that portray boundless Christian spirituality. Jesus's prayer was spiritually motivated (provoked). Prayers could be loud or silent, what is important is one's connection with God in prayers.

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