


# Artificial intelligence and Afrocentric Biblical Hermeneutics crossroads in Zimbabwe (Col 2:8)

**Author:**Lovejoy Chabata<sup>1,2</sup> **Affiliation:**

<sup>1</sup>Department of New Testament, Faculty of Theology, Ethics, Religious Studies and Philosophy, Catholic University of Zimbabwe, Harare, Zimbabwe

<sup>2</sup>Department of New Testament and Related Literature, Faculty of Theology and Religion, University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa

**Corresponding author:**

Lovejoy Chabata,  
lovejoy.chabata@cuz.ac.zw

**Dates:**

Received: 30 July 2024

Accepted: 11 Sept. 2024

Published: 08 Oct. 2024

**How to cite this article:**

Chabata, L., 2024, 'Artificial intelligence and Afrocentric Biblical Hermeneutics crossroads in Zimbabwe (Col 2:8)', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 80(1), a10106. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v80i1.10106>

**Copyright:**

© 2024. The Author. Licensee: AOSIS. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution License.

**Read online:**

Scan this QR code with your smart phone or mobile device to read online.

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is set to revolutionise global knowledge domains and biblical hermeneutics is no exception. At face value, in Zimbabwe, AI has been stigmatised as a humanistic and profane technological system with an immense propensity to cause general religious backsliding, degeneracy, vain philosophising and secularisation of the Gospel of Christ. This article isolated Colossians 2:8 as a lens to investigate the congruency of Artificial Intelligence to the pericope's scope of 'philosophy, vain deceit, tradition of men and rudiments of the world'. The Zimbabwean setting was used to examine whether the Colossian Christian Church's philosophical aspersions bear any semblances to how AI is viewed among the clergy, theologians, Christian believers and academics of religious studies. The qualitative methodological paradigms of African Biblical Hermeneutics and Exegetical Method were employed in the study. The study mainly established that AI, like a tool in the hands of a workman, can either build or destroy, enhance or adulterate biblical hermeneutics depending on how it is viewed and used.

**Contribution:** The article reflects on how the world's most nascent technological development, Artificial Intelligence, impacts on biblical interpretation generally, but, more particularly, in the Zimbabwean context.

**Keywords:** artificial intelligence; afrocentric biblical hermeneutics; colossians 2:8; revelation; secularisation.

## Introduction

Afrocentric Biblical Hermeneutics (ABH), like any other scientific body of knowledge, cannot escape the influence of Artificial Intelligence (AI). Futurity Research Publishing (2024) defined AI as a branch of computer science that deals with the creation of systems capable of performing tasks that require human intellectual effort including supervised and unsupervised machine learning, automated research and processing of large amounts of information in a faster and more efficient way. The term, AI, was coined by John McCarthy, a computer scientist in 1956 (Brown 2023). Afrocentric Biblical Hermeneutics has been defined as biblical interpretation that makes the African social cultural context the subject of interpretation, making the rereading of Christian scriptures premeditatedly Afrocentric (Adamo 2001). In this article, the AI and ABH crossroads refer to the confluence, the critical juncture and nexus between, on the one hand, the interpretation of the Bible in an African, Zimbabwean setting and, on the other hand, the significance of AI in that process. The co-existence of ABH and AI is critically interrogated in this article bringing out the far reaching decisions and options available for African interpreters of Scripture in the wake of AI. Colossians 2:8 provides a befitting plot for the discussion of AI and ABH crossroads. In this article, the bone of contention is whether the incursion of AI in the arena of biblical hermeneutics will trigger an avalanche of controversial knowledge systems that might give rise to dysfunctional and heretic teaching of the scriptures. The article examines the impact of AI on biblical interpretation that is centred on African cultural and social settings with a special focus on the Zimbabwean *sitz-im-leben*.

## Methodology

The Exegetical Method has been chosen as a window into the world of Colossians 2:8. The method was selected because of its key objective of uncovering the author's intended meaning for the

original readers and the text's significance for the contemporary church community. The Exegetical Method serves the purpose of solving a specific interpretive problem in a text (Boyer 2018). In the case of this study, the interpretive problem being solved is whether Paul's warning to the believers in Colossians 2:8, 'to be wary of being spoiled through philosophy, vain deceit, the tradition of men and rudiments of the world, and not after Christ', would apply to the context of AI and biblical hermeneutics in Zimbabwe. The exegetical method enabled this writer to answer the following questions. 'Does information biblical exegetes obtain through AI fall into the category of Colossians 2:8's philosophy that spoils?'. 'Does AI deliver what Colossians 2:8 regards as vain deceit, tradition of men or rudiments of the world?'. 'Is AI in the category of what the Christian Church should beware of?' Afrocentric Biblical Hermeneutics was used in the study to gain insights into how an African, Zimbabwean Bible reading community has responded to the advent of AI, the community's perceptions, views and overall worldview on how AI will intermediate their interpretation of the Gospel of Christ. According to Adamo (2015:59), ABH is a methodology that:

[R]eappraises ancient biblical tradition and African worldviews, cultures and life experiences, with the purpose of correcting the effect of the cultural, ideological conditioning to which Africa and Africans have been subjected in the business of biblical interpretation.

Through the lens of ABH, Colossians 2:8 is critically analysed in terms of the effects of AI on biblical interpretation in Zimbabwe. Questions that the writer sought to answer through ABH are as follows. Do Christian churches in Zimbabwe have the capacity to maximally use AI for the advancement of the Gospel? Can AI produce data that speak to the Zimbabwean cultural and spiritual context without aspersions from conventional religious dogma from Western worldviews? How does Colossians 2:8's occasion correlate with heresy infested homilies of some Zimbabwean preacher? Can AI help or worsen the problem of erroneous teaching of the Word of God in Zimbabwe where eisegesis is markedly problematic in Pentecostal churches where a Gospel genre called 'Pentecostal gospel of prosperity' has dominated pulpits (Gunda 2018). In addition to the foregoing two methods, Focus Group Discussions and Snowball Sampling Technique were used to gather views from church leaders, theologians, academics and ecumenical leaders.

## The world of Colossians 2:8

### Colossians 2:8

#### English

'Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ'.

#### Greek

βλέπετε μή τις ὑμᾶς ἔσται ὁ συλαγωγῶν διὰ τῆς φιλοσοφίας καὶ κενῆς ἀπάτης, κατὰ τὴν παράδοσιν τῶν ἀνθρώπων, κατὰ τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου, καὶ οὐ κατὰ Χριστόν.

From the patristic era (100–451 AD) until the early 19th century AD, Pauline authorship of Colossians was indubitable (Malick 2014). Since the 19th century, scholars have debated the authorship of Colossians around the names of Paul, Timothy, Epaphras or one of Paul's amanuensis (Barclay 1997; Bird 2009; Collins 1988; Dunn 1996), hence the Epistle's designation as disputed or Deutero-Pauline. Objections to Pauline authorship of the epistle mainly relate to divergences in literary style, vocabulary, syntax, theology and perceived post-Pauline, 2nd century anti-heresy apologetics (Malick 2014). In this article, Paul is deemed to be the de facto author of the epistle. The epistle was occasioned by a gangrenous problem of heresy, which the author intended to redress by directing believers to the original Gospel of Christ. Sources of erroneous teaching at the Colossian Church have been identified as opponents of the apostles of Christ who taught abstinence from certain foods and drink (Col 2:16,22), observation of Jewish feasts and Sabbaths (Col 2:16) and stressed on self-abasement, visions and worship of angels (Col 2:18). The opponents of the apostles further taught believers to follow the doctrine of asceticism and inflicting pain on their bodies (Col 2:18). Paul described the teaching of the pseudo-apostles as 'philosophy, empty deceit and rudimentary elements of the world' (Col 2:8). There was also a sense in which the peddlers of false teachings exuded a sense of higher spirituality and a holier-than-others attitude of Judaizers (Col 2:11–12). Colossae had degenerated into a cauldron of cultism and mysticism because of the proliferation of religious groupings that peddled different dogmas. Hooker (1973) questioned the validity of the claim that there were heresies at Colossae arguing that the view is based more on conjecture than solid evidence on the sources of the alleged heresies. Hooker's view lacks enough grounds to stand on as there is overwhelming evidence that Colossae was a hotbed of philosophical and religious worldviews to which Colossian Christians were exposed. Prominent among the philosophical groups were the Essenes who emphasised on ascetic life, the Neopythagoreans, the Gnostics, the Docetists, Redemption Myths, Isis Mysteries, Syncretistic Religion, Merkabah Mysticism, Hedonism, Scepticism, Stoicism and Neoplatonism (Hemingway & Hemingway 2007). A glut of knowledge systems was having a suffocating effect on the original Gospel of Christ. Artificial Intelligence presents similar settings in which large quantities of information on biblical concepts can be accessed indiscriminately and without supervision from trained exegetes. It was against this background of many religious epistemologies that the epistle to the Colossians was written to reinstate Jesus Christ as the focal point of the Gospel message.

Paul warned believers against 'philosophy' (φιλοσοφία). According to Vine, Unger and White (1985:470), the term 'philosophy' in Colossians 2:8 is used in the germane sense of erroneous teaching of false apostles. Whereas ordinarily the term refers to the love and pursuit of wisdom, to the investigation of truth and nature and to the Greeks denoted the highest effort of the intellect, in Colossians 2:8, the term

connotes any form of knowledge and practice that falls below the approved norm and standard. In the case of the Colossian Church and the broad Christian Church, the term 'philosophy' was used in reference to hollow and vain teaching that only served to confuse and derail the truth of the Gospel of Christ. Elsewhere in the New Testament, this idea of philosophy is described as something that is carnal and insidious to the Christian faith. Acts 17:18,32 make reference to the Epicureans and Stoics who spent most of their time peddling and pursuing enigmatic debates. In 1 Corinthians 1:19–23 and 1 Corinthians 3:18,19, Paul refers to the 'philosophy' as calamitous, deceitful and doomed wisdom of men. Romans 1:21–22 and 1 Corinthians 15:35–36 depict 'philosophy' as that type of vain wisdom that digresses, detracts and puts to question the supreme wisdom of God.

Renner (1990:28) deploys the Greek word 'αφιστημι' to describe the effects of the vain philosophy on those who imbibed it. The word 'αφιστημι' means to stand or step away from the faith in Christ, to withdraw or shrink back away from the original teaching of the Word of God. 2 Corinthians 10:5 describes the philosophy as 'imagination' that must be cast down. In the pastoral epistles, 1 Timothy 6:20; 2 Timothy 2:17–18 and 2 Timothy 3:13, the philosophy is depicted as 'profane and vain babblings and oppositions of science, falsely so-called; cancer, gangrene, deception and seduction'. Some of the peddlers of the vain philosophy that worked against the true Gospel were mentioned as Hymenaeus and Philetus who taught that the resurrection had gone past already. Vine et al. (1985:470) state that Josephus, the famous Jewish historian spoke of Jewish religious sects as 'philosophies' in so far as they held beliefs that were peculiar to their independent schools of thought.

Colossians 2:8 refers to a prevalence of 'vain deceit' in Colossae. The word 'vain' is translated, 'ματαιος' in Greek, meaning 'empty, vacuous, useless, void of significance, point or benefit, fruitless, lacking truth' (Bauer et al. 2000:621). According to Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon (1889:398), 'vain deceit' in Colossians 2:8 carries ideas of 'a philosophy which is devoid of truth and appropriateness; a form of perverseness and depravation; error and folly'. Paul's use of the word, 'beware' (βλέπετε), which means 'watch out, be on guard, look!', points to circumstances of danger that was affecting the church. The language of Colossians 2:8 creates the impression of a marauding hermeneutical gangsterism that was based on spoiling the believers with heresy. The forms of heresy that were spreading in the Colossian community included the worship of angels and other heavenly aeons that included stars, the moon, the sun and the sky itself (Malick 2014). The word 'spoil' (σπαραγῶν) used in the text casts the image of a violent army invading and plundering an innocent and unsuspecting land. Like a ferocious and ruthless army, false prophets, apostles and teachers were threatening to pillage and plunder the Colossian Church believers for their narcissistic and self-aggrandisement interests.

The traditions of men (παράδοσιν τῶν ἀνθρώπων) were another scourge that Paul warned the believers to take heed of. Vine et al. (1985:639) describe the traditions of men as men made instructions that are handed down or passed down generations, an idea that derives from the word, 'παράδοσις', which means 'a handing down'. Bauer et al. (2000:763) define 'traditions of men' as the content of instruction that has been handed down. In the context of Colossians 2:8, Bauer et al. (2000) contend that the adjective, 'tradition of men' is used by Paul to refer to the dissident teaching at Colossae. The term is used in the New Testament invariably to refer to the teaching of the Rabbi, which the Sadducees often rejected, Paul's teaching, which he says he received from the church fathers (1 Cor 11:23), and the teaching of the elders (Mt 15:2; Mk 7:5). Jesus would accuse the Pharisees of turning the attention of disciples from the commandments of God to the traditions of men (Mt 15:3, 6; 23:23; Mk 7:9,13).

Thayer (1889:488–489) states that 'traditions of men' referred to precepts and norms that were given over by word of mouth or in writing. The term could also refer to the substance of the teaching or the particular injunctions of Paul's teaching as in 1 Corinthians 11:2; and 2 Thessalonians 2:15 where Paul admonishes his audience to keep the traditions as he had delivered them to them. Thayer further explains that 'traditions of men' also referred to the body of precepts or rituals, which, in the opinion of second temple Jews, were orally delivered by Moses and were supposed to be orally transmitted in unbroken succession to subsequent generations. The oral traditions the Jews bequeathed to succeeding generations, expanded and illustrated the written law. In Galatians 1:14, Paul refers to extra-biblical traditions when he points out that he had exceeded the zeal of his peers in upholding the traditions of his fathers. In the context of Colossians 2:8, 'traditions of men' therefore referred to erroneous teaching, which was passed on to the Colossian believers under the guise of the traditions of the patriarchs, Jewish patriarchs and matriarchs, the prophets, Jesus or the first 12 apostles.

Paul cautioned Colossian believers to be wary of 'the rudiments or elements of the world' (τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου). Vine et al. (1985:196) assert that in Colossians 2:8, 'rudiments or elements of the world' refer to the 'delusive speculations of gentile cults and of Jewish theories'. The speculations and theories of pagan traditions were ranked above the Gospel of Christ. The terms 'elements' and 'rudiments' did not therefore denote the low rank of the philosophies because the purveyors of the teaching actually extolled them above faith in Christ. An example of the rudiments being referred to in Colossians 2:8 was a rife belief held by both gentile cults and the Jews that constellations were animated heavenly beings with the potential to govern human affairs. Paul uses language that depicts the rudimentary elements of Gentile and Jewish religious rituals as forms of bondage and slavery. In Galatians 4:3,9, Paul describes the elementary beliefs of Jewish ceremonialism as 'weak and beggarly rudiments'.

In Colossians, Paul uses the descriptor 'rudiments of the world' twice in 2:8 and in 2:20. In both instances, the genitive 'of the world' (τοῦ κόσμου) is used to distinguish between the knowledge that originates from the earth and that which is divine and heavenly in origin. The sense cascaded is that what the Gentile and Jewish philosophical crusaders were spreading was essentially humanistic and hogwash rigmarole that Christian believers needed to shun. Vine et al. (1985:196) further argue that 'rudiments' was a term also used in reference to the ABCs of the Old Testament as a revelation from God. The term 'rudiments' also captures the basic teaching about the oracles of God, which the writer of the Book of Hebrews renders as 'what is taught to spiritual babes' (Heb 5:12). In Colossians, the weak and beggarly elements include enforcement of Jewish holidays, Sabbaths, (Col 2:16), days consecrated for worship, approved and forbidden foods and continuity of Jewish ceremonial practices. Paul uses emotional language to describe 'the elements' as a 'yoke of bondage' (Gl 4:9).

Bauer et al. (2000:946) contend that in Colossians 2:8, 'rudiments of the world' referred to the teaching that emphasised on the basic components of the natural world, substances underlying the natural world, the basic elements from which physical phenomena were made and composed. The itinerant teachers who were taking Colossae by storm taught the origins of the material world and how such a world was going to disappear in the world conflagration at the end of time as suggested in 2 Peter 3:10,12. It was from such fatalistic teachings that epicurean beliefs in pleasure and the gnostic dismissal of eternal consequences for acts performed in the human body were based. The Colossian Christian believers were being inundated with rudimentary teaching (τα δωδεκα στοιχεῖα) concerning heavenly bodies such as signs of zodiac. In Acts 19:19–20, the apostles burned books of curious arts worth 50000 pieces of silver. The 'elements of the world', which entailed teaching of horoscope, were therefore an affront to the Gospel of Christ. Elements (στοιχεῖα), such as fire, water, air, earth and the sky, were personified and deified in a manner that usurped the honour of God. Bauer et al. (2000:946) argue that in Colossians 2:8, Paul's contention is that the elementary forms of religion that the pagan and Jewish sophists taught were now superseded by the new revelation in Christ. The unregenerate traits in some believers at Colossae were being awakened by the rudimentary teachings. It was as if the false teachers were on a mission of inciting a massive religious backslide of believers at Colossae. By teaching that there were transcendent powers that were in control of world affairs beside the all-powerful God, the false teachers were threatening the focus on Christ as the author and finisher of the Christian faith (Heb 12:2).

### Colossians 2:8 in the contexts of artificial intelligence and Zimbabwe

The scenario of Colossians 2:8 and the advent of AI appear like the fulfilment of Daniel 14:4, which portended that a

time was coming when 'many shall run to and fro, and knowledge shall be increased'. As observed above, there were numerous philosophical worldviews in Colossae that Christian believers got attracted to. Renner (1990:108) argues that erroneous philosophies were making inroads into the Colossian church at an alarming rate because of the attractiveness of and love for wisdom that obsessed the believers. Renner (1990:110) further points out that the appeal for acquiring sublime knowledge among the Colossians was hard to resist as the sophists packaged their philosophies in mesmerising, sensationalised and tantalising tales. The abundance of worldly wisdom in Colossae typified the alacrity and rate at which the world has been exposed to information in this era of AI. As Futurity Research Publishing (2024) argues, AI makes it easy for researchers to access and process large volumes of information at a faster rate than ever before. There are questions that ensue from the availability of such massive information to an average Christian. For example, does the unlearned interpreter of biblical literature in Zimbabwe not face the risk of imbibing anything and everything that AI downloads including teaching that threatens the foundations of the Christian faith itself? Does the Zimbabwean Christian Church's context not face the similar problem of diverse epistemological invasions like the Colossian Christian Church? To answer the above questions, the following similarities between the world of Colossians 2:8 and the Zimbabwean religious landscape can be identified:

- Just as there were numerous philosophical groupings in Colossae, Zimbabwe has multiple Christian movements that pursue diverse faith perspectives. The movements are composed of Pentecostal and Charismatic churches, Mainline or Missionary churches, African Independent Churches and the self-styled Prophetic Movements (Ruzivo 2008).
- Like in the Colossian context, in Zimbabwe, there are self-styled prophets and apostles who claim to possess superior revelation of mysteries of heaven including angels (Gunda 2012).
- Like the Colossian context, there are pseudo-Christian and cultic religious movements in Zimbabwe that mostly base their religious doctrines on unique wisdom and manuscripts authored by church founders than on the Bible (Gunda & Machingura 2013).
- Just as Colossian believers were exploited by false teachers and pseudo-apostles because of their gullibility, Zimbabweans have been preyed upon by tricksters and merchandisers of the Gospel (Chimuka 2018).
- Religious movements in Zimbabwe, like the Christian movements in Colossae, are largely polarised along doctrinal disparities and peculiarities (Tarusarira 2020:65).
- Just as Paul feared that the immature and innocent Colossian Church believers were going to be spoiled by weird philosophies of itinerant teachers, the Zimbabwean-believing community has been terribly abused, deceived and used by purveyors of strange biblical doctrines (Sibanda et al. 2024).

In Zimbabwe, like elsewhere on the African continent, the computer and the smart phone have opened vast information airways that keep both the clergy and laity glued to the internet. The clergy have often been found guilty of plagiarising sermonic and didactic content from AI sources. The unsuspecting and loyal church followers have consumed AI-generated sermons and Bible lessons without caring to scrutinise the relevance of the content to their social contexts. How AI fits into the African worldview of biblical hermeneutics is a subject that demands critical attention given that AI originated in the West and ABH is concerned with situating interpretation of the Bible in African cultural and social settings. Nthamburi and Waruta (1997) argue that Scripture loses its validity and authoritative relevance to an African if that African is not allowed to understand it in their own cultural patterns. In this vein, hermeneutical models that AI facilitates have to resonate to the African social settings. The extent to which AI captures the African philosophical worldview needs unpacking. Goffi (2023) argues that African ethics applied to AI is mainly addressed through a Western perspective. It therefore follows that discussions of African settings that ensue from AI are shaped by Western thought patterns. The lack of the African experience and cultural epistemological frameworks in educational information fed into AI platforms is tendentious towards uploading of neo-imperialist biblical hermeneutics, which has hitherto not given attention to African worldviews. As Goffi (2023) contends, if AI gets loaded with interpretational paradigms that do not factor cultural diversity and social particularisms, a travesty and an injustice will have occurred in contravention of the United Nations fundamental value of cultural diversity as stated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Article 22) and the Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity (Article 4) of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2001. It is critical that local Zimbabwean theologians play an active role in participating in the modelling of biblical interpretation information that is fed into AI software.

Zimbabweans interviewed in this research expressed mixed reactions to how AI is impacting their theology. Some of the interviewees viewed AI ambivalence and nonchalance as a system that aims to subvert humanity's God-ordained dominion over all creation by elevating man-made machines to the same level if not a higher status than mankind that was created in the image of God. As Dorobantu (2022) argues, conservative Christians will perceive AI as 'agnostic about theological issues, is atheistic and assumes a radical physicalism that excludes the existence of God, spirits or even minds'. A similar observation is shared by Kamai (2023), who states that because AI has potential to alter the way people live and think, some believers see it as a danger to Christianity. Other interviewees felt that AI should be viewed positively as it brings with it more advantages than disadvantages. Rev Dr Kenneth Mtata, the former Secretary General of the Zimbabwe Council of Churches, who is now working at the

World Council of Churches as Director of Programs for Public Witness and Diakonia, remarked that the Church should realise that AI has to stay and will inevitably impact the way biblical researchers go about their hermeneutics. According to Rev Dr Mtata, AI has potential to enhance bible study methods by creating access to inexhaustible scriptural resources. He further opined that AI avails biblical researchers with advanced search tools, linguistic analysis and biblical commentaries and lexicons that would normally be expensive for believers to buy in hard copy form. On how AI will fit into the scope of ABH, Rev Dr Mtata said that AI can assist in the translation and contextualisation of the Bible across different cultures and languages ensuring that the message of the Gospel remains accessible and relevant to diverse audiences. On a cautionary note, Rev Dr Mtata felt that AI interpretations must be handled with caution to ensure that they align with sound theological principles. He further expressed concern that AI has potential to introduce biases and misinterpretations, a risk that ought to be managed.

Another respondent, Rev Dr Roy Musasiwa, the Principal of Domboshawa Theological College in Harare, pointed out that AI has the potential to increase biblical literacy and expose more people to foundational truths of the Scriptures. Dr Musasiwa argued that AI is a time and resource saving mechanism. Vast amounts of time and resources that could be channelled into field and archival research are saved just as exegetes are left with lots of time to delve into deeper discourse aimed at transformation of readers and hearers of the Word of God. Rev Dr Musasiwa, however, warned that AI should not be over-glorified as a panacea to Zimbabwe's hermeneutical problems given that it mainly feeds on Western sources that are opposed to locally God-given moral and social values. Rev Dr Musasiwa cited the issue of same-sex marriages that Western sponsored AI biblical interpretation may advance to the detriment of local cultural values that prohibit homosexuality. Rev Dr Musasiwa also lamented that AI can also easily gravitate into a source of laziness for academics who may end up relying heavily on AI instead of engaging directly with Scriptures in robust theological scholarship. Another contributor to views on the impact of AI on biblical hermeneutics in Zimbabwe, who is the President of the Evangelical Fellowship of Zimbabwe, an over 2000-member organisation, Rev Bishop Never Muparutsa, remarked that while AI can be a one-stop shop for gathering information, it should never be allowed to replace the personal communication between God and the believer through inspiration and revelation. Bishop Muparutsa emphasised that the warning Paul gave to the Colossian Church to beware of people who may spoil them through philosophy should also be heeded by Zimbabwean Christians as they too risk being misled by what heretics can post in AI platforms.

Respondent, Rev Dr Nathan Nhira, the General Secretary of the Apostolic Faith Mission of Zimbabwe, highlighted

that AI should be embraced as a tool that can enhance and revolutionise pastoral research to uncover valuable insights into scriptural meaning. Rev Nhira added that the clergy should not shy away from using AI as it will not replace them but augment their working methods. He added that the biblical exegete's time with God as led by the Holy Spirit should never be supplanted by AI, which should remain a tool for communicating knowledge. Rev Nhira also opined that in an increasingly interconnected world, pastors minister to diverse, multicultural congregations whereby AI will serve as the source of valuable information on the cultural and ethical values of those congregations. Rev Dr Nhira pointed out that as Paul guided the Colossian believers to guard against misleading philosophy, religious leaders in Zimbabwe should be at the forefront of helping believers discern error coated in flowery language. Theologian Rev Dr John Ringson added his voice on how AI affects biblical hermeneutics. He contended that with respect to the African context in general, AI misses out gravely on the need to deal with the normative and existential dimensions of biblical research. He added that in an African setting human relationships and networks are primal. To the extent that AI does not place emphasis on the human context, African Christian believers may view it as a tool of social disengagement. Another respondent, Rev Dr John Musariri, an academic, corroborated Rev Dr Ringson's views by stating that by promoting automated learning at the expense of human interaction in the learning process, AI defies the aspect of fellowship and communion, which are fundamentals of discipleship in an African context. Another interviewee, Mrs Winnie Chamboko, who works as a Chaplain with the Zimbabwe Republic Police, Criminal Investigations Section, reiterated that the absence of human agency in the interpretation of sacred texts in AI may be construed as undermining the spiritual and communal aspects of Bible study. Pastor Milcah Manyati of the Heart of Healing International Church in Zimbabwe argued that while an individual can access loads of information through AI, the Zimbabwean church goer will always want to see a spiritual mentor to help them distil down and understand better that information. Thus, the human dimension remains invaluable for the internalisation of information from AI. Bishop Munetsi Zowa of Pentecostal Assemblies of Zimbabwe added his view by pointing out that AI complements traditional methods of biblical interpretation in fostering a deeper understanding of the Gospel message. He further stated that Christian leaders should remain accountable for what members of the flock are ingesting from AI sources by ensuring that information consumed from AI does not threaten the core tenets of the Christian faith.

## Summary of key findings of the research

This study has revealed the following salient facts on the 'marriage' between AI and ABH.

## Advantages

Artificial intelligence and ABH are more of friends than foes for the following reasons:

- Afrocentric Biblical Hermeneutics stands to benefit from AI's capacity to process large amounts of scientific information by automatically collecting data from multiple sources including published articles, books, data bases, websites and other sources of information (Futurity Research Publishing 2024).
- Artificial intelligence tokenisation facility for separation of text into individual words or phrases to make lexical analysis easy. Through lemmatisation and stemming, AI simplifies words to lay bare the basic meaning of the text.
- Artificial intelligence can analyse large amounts of information faster than humans saving lots of time and resources in the process.
- Artificial intelligence can be an effective tool in the analysis of qualitative data and social phenomena.

## Disadvantages

The following precautions should be taken in the use of AI in ABH:

- Afrocentric Biblical Hermeneutics highly ranks human agency, moral responsibility, communalism and cultural norms while AI is bent on supplanting and usurping human supremacy above synthetic artifacts (Brown 2023).
- Afrocentric Biblical Hermeneutics aims at incorporating the marginalised poor people who might not afford the cost of digital technologies, thus making AI inaccessible to some quarters in Africa.
- Artificial intelligence has roots in Western philosophies, which traditionally bastardise African cultural norms and values (Adamo 2015).

## Conclusion

The study has shown that theologians, academics, members of the clergy and laypersons in Zimbabwe think that no matter how influential AI becomes, Bible exegetes and Christians should ensure that technologies created by humankind remain subservient and subordinate to people. Persons cannot manufacture computers and then confer a superior status to that which they have made. According to Brown (2023), the interaction between AI and Scriptures should follow ethical principles that guarantee human dignity, justice and compassion, stewardship and accountability, honesty, wisdom and integrity. The research exposed gaps in AI and African Biblical studies research as more research is needed to investigate whether human simulation of AI amounts to idolatry. There is also need for research that demystifies the fear of the unknown AI monster by extensively explicating the roles of AI in theological and biblical research.

## Acknowledgements

### Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationship(s) that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

### Author's contributions

L.C. declares that they are the sole author of this research article.

### Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance received from the Research and Ethics Committee of the Catholic University of Zimbabwe.

### Funding information

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

### Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

### Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and are the product of professional research. It does not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated institution, funder, agency or that of the publisher. The authors are responsible for this article's results, findings and content.

## References

- Adamo, D.T., 2001, *Reading and interpreting the bible in African indigenous churches*, WIPF and Stock Publishers, Eugene, OR.
- Adamo, D.T., 2015, 'What is African biblical hermeneutics?', *Black Theology* 13(1), 59–72. <https://doi.org/10.1179/1476994815Z.00000000047>
- Barclay, J.M.G., 1997, *Colossians and Philemon: T&T Clark study guides*, T&T Clark, London.
- Bauer, W., Danker, F.W., Arndt, W.F. & Gingrich, F.W., 2000, *A Greek English lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature*, University of Chicago of Chicago Press, Chicago, IL.
- Bird, M.F., 2009, *Colossians and Philemon*, Cascade, Eugene, OR.
- Boyer, S.W., 2018, 'Hermeneutics and the exegetical method', in *Biblical leadership development, Christian Faith perspectives in leadership and business*, pp. 61–78, Palgrave Macmillan, Cham.
- Brown, T., 2023, *AI in the bible: Does the bible mention artificial intelligence?*, FAITH GPT, Bible Study Tools, viewed 30 November 2023, from <https://www.faihgpt.io>
- Chimuka, T., 2018, 'The threat of gullibility: Faith and Christian behaviour in Southern Africa', *Oral History Journal of Southern Africa* 5(1), 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.25159/2309-5792/2641>
- Collins, R.F., 1988, *Letters that Paul did not write*, Michael Glazier, Wilmington, DE.
- Dorobantu, M., 2022, 'Artificial Intelligence as a testing ground for key theological questions', *Zygon* 57(4), 984–999. <https://doi.org/10.1111/zygo.12831>
- Dunn, J.D.G., 1996, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI.
- Futurity Research Publishing, 2024, 'AI in scientific articles: How to use it correctly', *The Journal of Futurity Philosophy*.
- Goffi, E.R., 2023, 'Teaching ethics applied to AI from a cultural standpoint: What African "AI Ethics" for Africa?', in C.C. Corrigan, S.A. Asakipaam, J.J. Kponyo & C. Luetge (eds.), *AI ethics in higher education: Insights from Africa and beyond*, pp. 13–26, Springer, Cham.
- Gunda, M., & Machingura, F., 2013, 'The "Man of God": Understanding Biblical influence on contemporary Mega-Church prophets in Zimbabwe', in E. Chitando, M.R. Gunda & J. Kügler (eds.), *Prophets, profits and the bible in Zimbabwe*, Bible in Africa Series, vol. 12, pp. 15–28, Chapter 2, University of Bamberg Press, Bamberg.
- Gunda, M.R., 2012, 'Prediction and power: Prophets and prophecy in the Old Testament and Zimbabwean Christianity', *Exchange* 41(4), 335–351. <https://doi.org/10.1163/1572543X-12341237>
- Gunda, M.R., 2018, 'The Pentecostal Gospel of prosperity and divisive nature of mega-church superstar men of god (Prophets) in Zimbabwe', in L. Togarasei (ed.), *Aspects of Pentecostal Christianity in Zimbabwe*, pp. 111–124, Springer, Cham.
- Hemingway, C. & Hemingway, S., 2007, *Intellectual pursuits of the Hellenistic age*, p. 2000, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY, viewed 01 April 2007, from [https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/ipha/hd\\_ipha.htm](https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/ipha/hd_ipha.htm)
- Hooker, M., 1973, 'Were there false teachers in Colossae?', in B. Lindars & S.S. Smalley (eds.), *Christ and Spirit in the New Testament*, pp. 315–331, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Kamai, P.H., 2023, 'Artificial intelligence and the future of Christianity: A threat or potential', *AKU: An African Journal of Contemporary Research* 4(3), 83–93. <https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.25435.54567>
- Malick, D., 2014, *An introduction to the Book of Colossians*, Bible.org, Dallas Theological Seminary, Dallas, TX.
- Nthamburi, Z. & Waruta, D., 1997, 'Biblical hermeneutics in African instituted churches', in W.K. Hannah (ed.), *The Bible in African Christianity: Essays in Biblical Theology*, pp. 15–30, Acton, Nairobi.
- Renner, R., 1990, *Merchandising the anointing: Developing discernment for these last days*, Albury Publishing, Rick Renner Ministries, Tulsa, OK.
- Ruzivo, M., 2008, 'A mapping of Church groups in Zimbabwe', in M. Ruzivo (ed.), *The role of the Church in the struggle for democratic change in Zimbabwe*, pp. 4–14, Zimbabwe Institute Publications, Harare.
- Sibanda, F., Sibanda, O., Ntombana, L. & Jere, T., 2024, 'False hope religion? Socio-economic turmoil and the rise of prosperity gospel in Zimbabwe', *Pharos Journal of Theology* 105(2), 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.46222/pharosjot.105.25>
- Tarusarira, J., 2020, 'The Zimbabwe Council of Churches and "Crisis" Ecumenical Groups', in E. Chitando (ed.), *The Zimbabwe Council of Churches and development in Zimbabwe*, pp. 65–78, MacMillan, Palgrave.
- Thayer, J.H., 1889, *A Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament*, Harper & Brothers, New York, NY.
- Vine, W.E., Unger, M.F. & White, Jr. W., 1985, *Vine's complete expository dictionary of the Old and New Testament words*, Thomas Nelson Publishers, Nashville, TN.