



## Following Jesus and burying the dead in Ghana: A study of Matthew 8:21-22 in the Dangme translations of the bible

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### Abstract

The translation of Matthew 8:21-22 into Dangme pose a hermeneutical challenge to Dangme Bible readers. This is so because Jesus' command, "Nyââ ye se, nâ o ha ni gbogboe ômâ a pu mâ nitsâmâ a nô gbogboehi" ["Follow me, and let the dead people bury their own dead people"], is difficult to apply by Dangme Christians who value their culture. Using the Mother-tongue biblical hermeneutics approach, and comparing the three Dangme translations of the text with that of the Greek text the paper found out that each of the three translations render Jesus' command, *akolouthei moi* [follow me] differently. Two of the translations use prefixes *ba* (come) and *nôuu* (immediately) before the command "follow me." One of the translations does not render the pronoun *moi* (me). The use of *ni* (person) to qualify *gbogboehi* (dead persons) in two of the translations, and *nihî* (people) in one of the translations means that "the dead" who should be left to bury the dead are in reality not "dead"; they are living people among the Dangme. If they are living, then Jesus may have used *tous nekrous* (the dead) figuratively, and as such it should not be interpreted literally. The Dangme translations of the text give interpretations that are inconsistent with Dangme culture. The Dangme call a dead person *nô* (thing) and not *ni* (person). The paper calls for interpretations that take into consideration the culture of the Dangme, since, when the Bible is translated into a language, it must put on the garment of the culture of the people, if they are to understand and apply its message.

**Keywords:** Matthew, culture, Dangme, bible, hundreds

### Introduction

There are hundreds of Christian denominations in Ghana which can be grouped into five main bodies. These are the Catholic Secretariat, the Ghana Pentecostal Council, the Christian Council of Ghana, the General Council of Pentecostal Churches or African Independent Churches, the Seventh Day Adventists and others<sup>[1]</sup>. These Christian bodies in Ghana use the Bible, the Holy Scriptures – English translations and the Ghanaian mother tongues translations for devotional purposes. In their reading of the Bible they may have come across some sayings which may be difficult to practise by indigenous Ghanaian Christians. One of such is a command of Jesus, "Follow me, and let the dead bury their own dead" (Matt. 8:22).

This paper discusses Jesus' saying to the person who wants to follow him as recorded in Matthew 8:21-22. The first difficulty with this text is that it is being read in Ghana today not by people who want to follow Jesus, but people who are already following Jesus. These are indigenous Ghanaians from families, clans and tribes who have become Christians but have not severed ties with their families where the issue of death and the performance of funerals are part of their worldview. The second challenge with the text is that "the dead" who should "bury their own dead" is not defined, and this may lead to misinterpretations of the text. The question is, in what context did Jesus give that statement? Who are "the dead" who should be left to "bury their own dead"? How is Matthew 8:21-22 rendered in the Dangme<sup>[2]</sup> Bible<sup>[3]</sup>? Does one, on becoming a Christian, sever relationship with one's family? How should "let the dead bury their own dead" be understood by the Dangme?

### The Greek text, Matthew 8:18-22

ivdw.n de. o` VIhsou/j o;clon peri. auvtou.n evke,leusen avpelqei/n eivj to. pe,ranA<sup>19</sup> kai. proselqw.n ei-j grammateu.j ei=pen auvtw/\ dida,skale( avkolouqh,sw soi o[pou eva.n avpe,rch|A<sup>20</sup> kai. le,gei auvtw/\ o` VIhsou/j ai` avlw,pekej fwleou.j e;cousin kai. ta. peteina. tou/ ouvranou/ kataskhnw,seij( o` de. ui`o.j tou/ avnqrw,pou ouv k e;cei pou/ th.n kefalh.n kli,nh|A<sup>21</sup> e[teroj de. tw/n maqhtw/n lauvtou/Ð ei=pen auvtw/\ ku,rie( evpi,treyo,n moi prw/ton avpelqei/n kai. qa,yai to.n pate,ra mouA<sup>22</sup> o` de. VIhsou/j le,gei auvtw/\ avkolou,qei moi kai. a;fej tou.j nekrou.j qa,yai tou.j e` autw/n nekrou,jA (Nestle-Aland 1994).

### Transliteration

*Idôn de ho I...sous ochlon peri auton ekekeisen apelthein eis to peran. Kai prosselthôn eis grammateus eipen autō; didaskale, akolouth...sō soi apou ean aperch.... Kai legei autō ho I...sous; ai anthrōpou ouk echei tou t...n kephal...n klin.... Eteros de tōn math...tōn [autou] eipen autō; kupie, epitrepson moi prōton apelthein kai thapsai tov patepa mou. Ho de I...sous legei autō; akolouthei moi kai afes tous nekrous thapsai tous eautōn nekrous.*

### Dangme Translation

*Benâ Yesu na kpekpe mi ô<sup>[4]</sup> nâ bôle lâ kâ kpe ô, e fa [kaseli ômâ]<sup>[5]</sup> kâ a po taku ô<sup>[6]</sup> kâ ho e se je ya. Kâkâ nâ mlâa tsôôlô ko ba e ngô ba de lâ ke, "Tsôôlô, he tsuaa he nâ o yaa a ma nyââ o se". Yesu de lâ ke: "Kôkôbohi ngâ muôhi, nâ hiôwe lohwe pâlitsâmâ ngâ tsuhi; se Nômlô Bi ô be he nâ e kâ e yi fôô". E kaseli ômâ a ti nô kpa hu de lâ ke: "Nyômtsâ, ha ma ya pu ye tsâ lolo". Se Yesu de lâ ke,*

“Nyââ ye se, nâ o ha ni gbogboe ômâ nâ a pu mâ nitsâmâ a nô gbogboehi”.

### English translation of the Dangme

When Jesus saw the crowd around him, he ordered [his disciples] to cross the lake to the other side. And a teacher of the law came to him and said, “Teacher, everywhere you go I will follow you”. Jesus told him, “Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nets, but the Son of Man has no where he lays his head”. One of his disciples also told him, “Lord, let me go and bury my father first”. But Jesus told him, “Follow me, and let those who are dead bury their own dead people”.

### Exegesis

In Matthew 8:18-22 the evangelist reports of two “volunteer disciples” [7]. An interesting thing about these men is that each of them offers to follow Jesus. The writer has given a statement about each man regarding his commitment, after which he reports what Jesus says to each man in response to his offer. What is it about each man’s statement that Jesus has to give a response? The first man appears to volunteer unconditionally. The second appears to have an emergency, which will delay his commitment, but just for a time. The focus of this paper is on the second volunteer.

A key phrase that unlocks the understanding of this text is *akolouthei moi* (follow me, v.22; *nyââ ye se*, Dangme). Jesus uses a similar phrase in Matthew’s gospel – Matthew 4:19, 22 where he calls Simon Peter and his brother Andrews, and James the son of Zebedee and his brother John and says *opisô mou* (come after me, v.19); and in Matthew 16:24 where Jesus tells the Twelve disciples after mentioning to them that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things in the hands of the elders, that “If anyone would *thelei elthein opisô mou* (come after me), he must take up his cross and *akoloutheitô moi* (follow me).

*Akoloutheô* meaning “follow” or “following” appears almost exclusively in the gospels – 56 times in the Synoptics and 14 times in John; only 3 times in Acts, once in Paul and 6 times in Revelation. The compound verbs are not normally applied to people. Except for *synakoloutheô*, accompany (Mk. 5:3-7; 14:51; Lk. 23:29), they hardly occur at all in the gospels. Even though *akoloutheô* means following, but following does not in every instance involve being a disciple. Where the Synoptics speak in the indicative of crowds of people who followed Jesus, the word is used in a natural sense. No particular calling can be inferred from this. The word has special significance where it refers to individuals [8].

In Matthew’s gospel three groups of people are to heed to Jesus’ call to follow: (1) the *ochlon* (the crowds; *kpekpemi*, Dangme; v.18) [9], Who are basically neutral groups forming the object of Jesus’ ministry of preaching, teaching and healing, but as groups they do not exercise faith in him. (2) The Jewish leaders, represented by a teacher of the law (v. 19), who provides a background of Matthew’s story of Jesus; they are the antagonists, the ones responsible for Jesus’ crucifixion. (3) The disciples, the true believers of Jesus; they follow Jesus because they have put their faith in him [10].

The person to whom Jesus makes the statement, “Follow me, and let those who are dead bury their own dead people” (v.22), does not belong to the crowds; neither is he one of the Jewish leaders; he was a *math...t...s* (disciple, *kaselô*,

Dangme), learner, pupil [11]. As the crowds follow Jesus they listen to his teaching and observe his miracles with the hope that they will be convinced and put their faith in him. The disciples were part of the crowds who have put their faith in Jesus as a result of the impact of his teachings and miracles. They have thus become pupils or learners of Jesus, which demands commitment and total obedience. The question now is how should a disciple of Jesus interpret his command in Matthew 8:22?

### Scholarly interpretations of Matthew 8:22

Black suggests that the original Aramaic may have read, “Let the *m \* \* in \* yn* (‘waverers’ [buriers]) bury their ‘dead’) – and the first of the two Aramaic words has been mistakenly translated as if it were from (‘corpse’) [12]. What Black perhaps wants to say here is that, there are people whose professional work it is to bury the dead; they can be left to look after that business, while the man concentrates on a more important work of following Jesus. Black’s suggestion, even though sounds philologically plausible, hardly helps to explain the text. His explanation is weakened by the implausible thesis that Matthew (or some unknown person in the process of the oral tradition) was rather incompetent in Hebrew and Aramaic [13].

Kaiser, Davids, Bruce and Brauch [14] posit that the man made the request because in the east burial took place very soon after death, so, if his father had just died, he would probably be buried the same day; and the man would then be free to follow Jesus. Further, if he was the eldest son, it was his responsibility to see to his father’s burial. So his request was “reasonable”. But his request, “Lord, first let me go and bury my father”, may mean “Let me stay at home until my father dies; when I have buried him, I shall be free of family obligations, and then I will come and follow you” [15]. This interpretation even though sounds nice, but it is not the most natural way to respond to Jesus’ call to discipleship. His demands were peremptory.

Viviano says that Jesus’ reply to the man is harsh and must have sounded shocking to an audience used to *m.Ber.* 3:1, “He whose dead lies unburied before him is exempt from reciting the *šēma*’, from saying the *Tepillah*, and from wearing phylacteries”, that is, “from all duties of the law” [16]. Viviano’s point is further supported by the fact that in Jewish tradition, honouring father and mother was one of the greatest commandments, and to follow Jesus at the expense of not burying one’s father would have been viewed as dishonouring one’s father (cf. Ex. 20:12; Tob. 4:3-4).

Keener says that one of an eldest son’s most basic responsibilities (in both Greek and Jewish cultures) was his father’s burial which initially took place shortly after a person’s death. However, family members would not be outside talking with rabbis during the reclusive mourning period immediately following the death. It has recently been shown that what is in view here is the secondary burial, which took place a year after the first burial, after the flesh had rotted off the bones in a special box in a slot in the tomb’s wall. The son in this narrative could be asking for as much as a year’s delay [17].

This explanation sounds convincing, but the fact that Jesus demands that the son place him above the greatest responsibility a son had toward his father means that Jesus “words are a testimony to his equality with God; only God’s honour could be placed above honouring one’s parents” [18].

Jesus' response to the disciple asking for a leave-of-absence from discipleship is, "Follow me, and let those who are dead bury their own dead people" <sup>[19]</sup>. Who then are "the dead" who are to be left to bury the dead in Matthew 8:22? How has this verse been rendered in the Dangme mother tongue translations?

**1. Ngmami Klôuklôu ô, (The Full Bible in Dangme)** <sup>[20]</sup>  
*Se Yesu de lâ ke, "Ba nyâa se! Ha nâ ni gbogboe ômâ nâ a pu mâ nitsâmâ a ni gbogboehi"* [But Jesus says to him, "Come follow me! Let those who are dead bury their own dead people"].

**2. Somi He ô, (The Dangme New Testament)** <sup>[21]</sup>  
*Se Yesu de lâ ke: "Nyâa ye se, nâ o ha ni gbogboe ômâ a pu mâ nitsâmâ a ni gbogboehi"* [But Jesus says to him, "Follow me, and let the dead people bury their own dead people"].

**3. Wami Munyu ô: Somi He ô kê Laa amâ (The Living New Testament and Psalms)** <sup>[22]</sup>  
*Se Yesu de lâ ke, "Moo nyâa ye se nôuu ne o ngmâa nihi nâ gbo ngâ mumi mi ômâ a he nâ a pu a he* [But Jesus says to him, "You follow me immediately and leave those who are dead spiritually to bury themselves"].

#### Linguistics Analysis of the Dangme translations

All the three Dangme translations of Matthew 8:22 start with, "*Se Yesu de lâ ke*" [but Jesus says or is saying to him], a direct translation of *ho de I...sous legei autō*. Each of the three translations render Jesus' command, *akolouthei moi* [follow me] differently. While the *Ngmami Klôuklôu ô* translate it as "*Ba nyâa se!*", the *Somi He ô* render it as "*Nyâa ye se*", and the *Wami Munyu ô: Somi He ô kê Laa amâ*, "*Moo nyâa ye se nôuu*".

"*Ba nyâa se!*", means "Come follow me". The "*ba*" (come) preceding the "*nyâa se*" is uncalled for because the disciple making the request was right there with Jesus. Thus, he did not need to "come" to him and follow him. "*Nyâa se*" (follow) is incomplete; the translators failed to translate the pronoun *moi* which is *ye* (me). The correct translation is "*nyâa ye se*" (follow me). The *Somi He ô* however has got it right "*Nyâa ye se*". "*Moo nyâa ye se nôuu*" means "you, follow me immediately". The "*moo*" (you) has been used to prefix the "*nyâa ye se*" for emphasis. Jesus is addressing the disciple who wants to take a leave-of-absence from discipleship. Here, the translators have demonstrated their understanding of Greek grammar; for, Jesus' command *akolouthei* addresses a second person singular. The "*nôuu*" (immediately) that ends the phrase is not found in the Greek text. The translators may have used it as a comment, to show that Jesus would not grant the disciple the leave-of-absence.

Who are the "dead" who should be left to bury the dead? Two of the Dangme translations, *Ngmami Klôuklôu ô* and *Somi He ô* translate the Greek adjective *tous nekrous* (the dead) as a noun by expanding the meaning. Thus *tous nekrous* (the dead) is *ni gbogboe ômâ* (the dead people). In Dangme "*nô*" is used for a "thing", "*ni*" for a "person". Thus the Dangme say *nô fâa nô* to mean "everything". This means a dead person is "*nô gbogboe*". But the two Dangme translations render *tous nekrous* (the dead) as *ni gbogboe ômâ*. The prefix "*ni*" is used to connote a person; thus we have "*nihi*" (persons). In Dangme there are expressions

such as "*nihi a nô tomi*" (doing wrong things against people); "*niatsâ*" (a rich person); "*ni lelô*" (a wise person); *nimeli* (the living elders of a family). The fact that the two translations prefix *gbogboe ômâ* (the dead) with "*ni*" means that in Dangme cosmology, it is living people who bury the dead and not the dead who bury the dead. Thus "the dead" Jesus refers to as those who should bury the dead are living people among the Dangme. Jesus may have used *tous nekrous* (the dead) figuratively, and as such it should not be interpreted literally. There is nothing in the text to suggest that *tous nekrous* (the dead) who should be left to bury the dead are dead spiritually, even though that is how the *Wami Munyu ô: Somi He ô kê Laa amâ* translate *tous nekrous - nihi nâ gbo ngâ mumi mi ômâ* (those who are spiritually dead). The translators' use of "*nihi*" (people who are alive) as a prefix for "*nâ gbo*" (who are dead), nullifies their point. How can people be alive and at the same time dead in Dangme cosmology? And how can *nô nâ gbo* (the dead) bury *nô nâ gbo* (the dead)? <sup>[19]</sup> In the light of this linguistic insight, my Dangme translation of Matthew 8:22 is: *Se Yesu de lâ ke: "Nyâa ye se, nâ o ha ni gbogboe ômâ a pu mâ nitsâmâ a nô gbogboehi"* [But Jesus says to him, "Follow me, and let the dead people bury their own dead people"].

Among the Dangme there are people who bury the dead. They are called *nô puli* (*nô pulô*, sing.). They are the elderly people in families on whom the responsibility of the performance of funeral rites are placed. What Jesus means is that the disciple should leave that work for them to do, and concentrate on following him. However, it is difficult to obey this command in the light of Exodus 20:12 which enjoins Christians to honour their parents. And one way of honouring our parents is to take good care of them when they are alive, and give them a befitting burial when they die. The critical question here is, is it right for a Christian to shirk off these responsibilities, especially the second one?

#### Gbenô ke nô pumi kê ya peemi (death and burial) among the Dangme

The Dangme believe that *gbenô*, <sup>[23]</sup> death occurs through a number of ways: *sâsâa gbenô* (destiny death), *kpadehi a dâ mi gbenô* (death caused by ghosts), *wô bôbôa gbenô* (death resulting from black magic), *nya gbenô* (death as a result of curse), *tsopa popoe dâ mi gbenô* (death resulting from 'black medicine'), *Abosiami dâ mi gbenô* (death caused by Satan) <sup>[24]</sup>.

When somebody is struggling to die, family members stay around the person, especially, his brother, sister, his wife and eldest son or daughter. The person's eldest brother or sister is also called upon to be around. This is done to prevent a person from falling while struggling to die. The dying person is given water to cool his or her heart. The person's brother or sister sits behind him or her till breathing ceases.

When a person dies, it is put down on the floor, and the head is covered with a piece of cloth, to prevent house flies from entering into the nostrils, and ears. Then people who matter in the vicinity are informed to come around, to help preserve the body. Chemicals such as '*akpetesi*' (a local alcoholic drink), kerosene, a mixture of cement and salt dissolved in water, are given to the corpse. Some concoction made from corn dough, '*hefukpe*' (ammoniated camphor; naphthalene balls), *nguô* or *ayilô* (lime), is smeared on the corpse, after which it is made to sit on a chamber pot. These are done to prevent decomposition of the corpse <sup>[25]</sup>.



When the corpse has been preserved, the *nimeli ômâ*, (living elders of the family) meet to think about how to bury the deceased. What they consider first is the day of burial. When they get the date, the *nimeli ômâ* (elders) send people to the towns and villages where family members and relatives are, to inform them of the death and the date of burial. It is at this meeting also that the *nimeli ômâ* (elders), decide on things that they will need to bury the *nô ô* (dead person) [26]. The children of the deceased play important roles in the burial of their parents. There is a Dangme saying that “*bi ne puô e tsâ*” (it is the child of a person who buries his/her

father) [27]. This means that it is the children of a person who provides most of the things needed to bury their deceased parents.

Now, back to the disciple who has asked Jesus for a leave-of-absence to go and bury his father, and the response Jesus gives him in Matthew 8:22; should he go or not because he is a disciple of Jesus? If he does not go, who would play his role for him? And what would his family members say about him? Would his presence and role at his father’s burial and funeral make any difference? How would he feel when he goes home later after his father had been buried?

**A Dangme commentary on Matthew 8:21-22**

**Table 1**

Dangme	English
<p><i>Ngmami Klôuklôu ô kaneli, kâ tue boli kâ gbitso kome nâ sisi nu mi yee kpee. Kake ji none Yesu de ngâ Mt. 8:22 ke: “Nyââ ye se, nâ o ha ni gbogboe ômâ nâ a pu mâ nitsâmâ a nô gbogboehi”. Yesu fô gbitso nâ ô ngô ha e kaseli babauu ô a kpâti nô kake nâ ngâ lâ blô bae nâ e ya pu e tsâ.</i></p> <p><i>Gbitso nâ Yesu fô ha e kaselô nâ ô ji nyagba ha Dangme Klisto kaseli ejakaa, ngâ Dangme li a je ô, a de ô ke, “Bi nâ puô e tsâ”; [pi e tsâ kâ kâ, se kâ e nyâ hu]. Munyu nâ ô sisi tsôô mi ji kaa, ke nô ko gbo, ne e ngâ bi mâ ô, mâ lâ a bôô ni hi nâ a kâ maa pu nôô he môde. Kikâ me a munyu kpô kâ e sisi tsôô mi nôô kâ Mawu munyu nâ a ngma ke, “Moo bu o tsâ kâ o nyâ” (Ex. 20:12) ô kô. Mâni ji buu nâ bimâ ma kâ ha a fôli? Lôô ji bimâ maa wo a fôli a hâmi nyami be nâ a ngâ wami mi, a maa hiâ a nô; nâ ke a gbo ô, a kâ weku maa to blô nya kâ ha pumi kâ ya pee mi.</i></p> <p><i>E ji anôkualé kaa Yesu ji Nyômtsâ nâ e sa nâ a bu lâ tue ngâ nô fââ nô mi. Se, ani, e sa kaa ke nô ko ba pee Yesu kaselô ô, e ngmâ e blô nya nitsumi ngâ weku ne e je mi ô he lo? Ani, Dangme no ji mo loko o ba pee Klisto kaselô, loo Klisto kaselô ji mo loko o ba pee Dangme no? Ani Klisto se nyemi tsiôô Dangme kusumi nya lo?</i></p>	<p>Bible readers and listeners come across some sayings that are difficult to understand. One of such is Jesus’ saying in Matthew 8:22, “Follow me, and let the dead bury their own dead”. Jesus gave this command to one of his many disciples who asked for a leave-of-absence to go and bury his father.</p> <p>This command is difficult for Dangme disciples of Jesus to understand and obey. There is a Dangme saying that “it is a child who buries his father” [and mother too]. This saying means that when someone dies and he or she has children, it is the children who team up with family members to bury the deceased and perform the funeral. The Dangme saying is in line with what God says in Exodus 20:12a, “Honour your father and mother”. What does it mean to honour one’s parents? It means children must show respect and provide for the needs of their parents while they are alive; and when they die, team up with the family to give them a befitting burial and funeral performance. It is true that Jesus is Lord. But when someone becomes his disciple, it is right for that person to shirk family responsibilities? Are you first a Dangme before becoming a disciple of Jesus or a disciple of Jesus first before becoming a Dangme? Is Christianity against Dangme culture?</p>

**Conclusion**

Jesus’ command in Matthew 8:21-22 to those who want to be his disciples poses a hermeneutical challenge to Dangme Bible readers. The Dangme translations of the text give interpretations that are inconsistent with Dangme culture. Dangme Christians want a pragmatic interpretation of “*Nyââ ye se, nâ o ha ni gbogboe ômâ a pu mâ nitsâmâ a nô gbogboehi*” [But Jesus says to him, “Follow me, and let the dead people bury their own dead people”]. The interpretation must take into consideration the culture of the Dangme, since, when the Bible is translated into a language, it must put on the garment of the culture of the people, if they are to understand and apply it message.

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