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"Strangers and Aliens on Earth" (Hebrews 11:13b): A Socio-Exegetical Inquiry into Christians' Rite of Passage

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Abstract

This study examines the theological and sociological significance of Christian rites of passage through the interpretive lens of Hebrews 11:13b, which portrays believers as "strangers and aliens on the earth." Adopting a socio-exegetical approach, it explores how this pilgrim identity informs Christian perceptions and practices of baptism, marriage, and funeral rites within selected Nigerian denominations, including Anglican, Methodist, Pentecostal, and Indigenous Churches. Guided by Van Gennep's rites of passage framework and Victor Turner's concepts of liminality and communitas, the research integrates biblical exegesis with liturgical theology to assess the spiritual meaning of these rituals. Data gathered from 900 respondents indicate strong affirmation of pilgrim theology and broad consensus that Christian rites function as spiritual milestones symbolizing detachment from worldly values and anticipation of eternal life. Baptism and funeral rites are particularly valued for their eschatological significance, while perspectives on marriage as a symbolic pointer to heavenly realities are more diverse. The study also uncovers tensions between Christian doctrine and African traditional death practices, highlighting the need for contextual theological dialogue. It

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concludes that the Church bears a vital pastoral responsibility in preparing believers for the ultimate transition death by reaffirming the biblical vision of heavenly citizenship. The findings recommend enriched liturgical expression, deeper theological formation, and intentional youth engagement to sustain a spiritually grounded yet culturally sensitive practice of Christian rites. Ultimately, these rites are shown to function not only as markers of life transitions but as embodiments of the Christian journey toward God's eternal promise.

Keywords: Christian Rites of Passage; Hebrews 11:13b; Pilgrim Theology; Liminality; Nigerian Christianity; Liturgical Theology

INTRODUCTION

Human life is filled with transitions—birth, growth, marriage, and death—which are marked by various ceremonies known as rites of passage. A rite of passage is a significant ceremony or ritual that signifies a significant transition in a person's life, often moving them from one social status or role to another. These events are deeply rooted in cultural, social, or religious traditions and help individuals adapt to new roles and responsibilities within their community (Larson, 2014). They are universally found in all known societies throughout history, marking transitions such as birth, puberty, marriage, and death, as well as transitions into specific social groups like initiations. Rites of passage often involve three distinct phases: separation, transition, and incorporation. They reinforce social norms, values, and beliefs, helping individuals understand their place and responsibilities within their community. Examples include coming-of-age ceremonies, quinceañeras, graduations, weddings, and funerals. In African societies, rites of passage are deeply ingrained in cultural practices, often marking significant transitions like circumcision ceremonies (Lebese, et al, 2022).

The Christian tradition places significant spiritual and theological significance on rites such as baptism, confirmation, marriage, ordination, and funeral services. These rites are considered sacred milestones in a believer's journey of faith, as they guide them towards a heavenly homeland. However, these rites have become routine in many Christian communities, often without deep reflection on their significance. This can lead to confusion and blending of traditional beliefs with Christian doctrine. This study aims to examine how Christians understand and practice these rites in light of Hebrews 11:13b,

examining the biblical and theological meanings of these rites and their impact on believers' identity as mere passers-by. It also explores the intersection between Christian rites and African cultural practices, particularly during times of death and mourning. The goal is to help the Church and believers recover the true meaning of these spiritual transitions and live out their faith with a clear understanding of being a pilgrim on earth.

Statement of the Problem

In contemporary Christian practice, rites of passage such as baptism, confirmation, marriage, ordination, and funeral are often conducted as mere religious traditions, with limited reflection on their theological, biblical, and eschatological significance. Hebrews 11:13b presents believers as "strangers and aliens on the earth," suggesting a transient identity that deeply contrasts with worldly values and material attachments. However, many Christians today appear to lack a conscious understanding of this pilgrim identity and how it should influence their interpretation of life transitions. In addition, there is a growing tension between traditional African cultural rites—especially concerning death and burial—and Christian doctrines, leading to confusion and possible syncretism within church communities. Furthermore, theological teachings about the afterlife, heavenly citizenship, and spiritual readiness for death are either misunderstood or underemphasized in many church settings. This problem necessitates a thorough socio-exegetical inquiry into how Christians perceive and practice rites of passage, particularly in relation to the biblical vision of faithful living and dying as strangers and pilgrims on the earth.

Objectives of the Study

1. To examine how Christians interpret and practice rites of passage in the light of Hebrews 11:13b ("strangers and aliens on earth").

2. To explore the theological, biblical, and sociological perspectives that shape Christian understanding of life transitions.

3. To analyze the significance of Christian rites such as baptism, marriage, and funeral as expressions of the pilgrim identity.

4. To assess how various denominations perceive and apply the concept of pilgrimage in their rites.

5. To investigate the possible connections between African traditional rites and Christian perspectives on the final passage (death).

Research Questions

1. How do Christians interpret the phrase "strangers and aliens on earth" (Hebrews 11:13b) in relation to life transitions?
2. What role does Christian theology play in shaping believers' perception of rites of passage?
3. How do Christian rites reflect the idea of heavenly citizenship?
4. Do biblical teachings on rites of passage align with African cultural views?
5. What is the role of the Church in preparing believers for the final passage (death)?

Scope of the Study

The scope of this study is limited to selected Christian denominations in Nigeria, namely Anglicans, Methodists, Pentecostals, and Indigenous Churches. It investigates their understanding and practice of Christian rites of passage—specifically baptism, marriage, and funeral rites—within the framework of Hebrews 11:13b. The study is geographically focused on Lagos and its surrounding areas. It employs a socio-exegetical approach, incorporating scriptural interpretation and field data collected from 900 respondents across the denominations. Furthermore, the study considers biblical, theological, and African traditional perspectives, particularly in relation to death and burial rites.

Theoretical Framework

Rites of passage are defined by Arnold van Gennep's three-phase theory as a planned movement through three stages: incorporation, transition (liminality), and separation. These stages are characterised by customs and rituals that support the transition which symbolises a shift from one social-cultural standing to another (Van Gennep, 2013).

1. Separation: This phase involves the physical or symbolic removal of the individual from their previous social status or group. This could involve leaving a familiar environment, shedding old clothing, or undergoing symbolic acts of detachment.

2. Transition (Liminality): This is the "threshold" or "in-between" stage where the individual is neither fully part of their old nor their new social position. It is a period of ambiguity, uncertainty, and sometimes even disorientation, as the individual is between states.

3. **Incorporation:** In this final phase, the individual is formally reintroduced into society with their new social status. This often involves rituals that publicly acknowledge and validate the individual's new role or position.

Van Gennep's model provides a framework for understanding how societies mark significant life transitions and how individuals adapt to change. According to Van Gennep, a life cycle ritual is a ceremony that an individual goes through while entering one stage of life, sometimes known as a 'rite of passage'. It is linked to significant biological events such as birth, adolescence, marriage, and death (Lancy & Grove, 2015). In his 1909 study, Arnold van Gennep portrayed society as being made up of several social groups, which were further separated into secular (financial strata) and sacred (birth, marriage), with the latter being more closely related with life cycle rites (Van Gennep, 2013).

Victor Turner's theoretical conceptions of liminality and communitas are essential for understanding rites of passage and social systems (Haggar, 2024). Liminality is a transitory period in a rite of passage in which people are neither totally in their old condition nor fully in their new. It frequently requires the suspension of conventional social structures and hierarchies, resulting in momentary equality or formlessness. This might happen during initiation ceremonies, pilgrimages, or as a tourist. Liminal figures may be robbed of their identities and exhibit ambiguous or contradictory characteristics (John, 2008). Communitas, on the other hand, is a sense of unity, equality, and shared identity that arises during liminal periods. It represents an anti-structure, challenging established social order and hierarchies. Forms of communitas include spontaneous, ideological, and normative, each with unique characteristics. Examples include religious movements, social protests, and situations where individuals experience shared purpose and belonging (Tuner, 1974; Olaveson, 2001). Liminality is a key factor in the formation of communitas, which are social bonds and shared experiences. Rituals, with their liminal phases, serve as a structured path for individuals to experience these transitions. These communal experiences can have a profound impact on individuals and societies, potentially leading to social change or a renewed sense of purpose. Turner's work has been influential in social critique, highlighting the limitations and artificiality of social structures. His ideas on liminality and communitas have also been influential in Performance Studies, particularly in understanding the relationship between ritual and performance. His concepts remain relevant in various fields, including anthropology, sociology, and political science (Tuner, 2012).

Liturgical theology theory is more than just farewells; they are a celebration of the Paschal Mystery, a social declaration of hope in the resurrection, and a way to follow the departed into the next life. They include ceremonies that respect the reality of death while also expressing the Christian belief in everlasting life based on Christ's victory over death (Wegner, 2022). The funeral liturgy is rooted in the Paschal Mystery, which explains the suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It provides a framework for understanding death as a passage to new life in Christ. The liturgy uses scripture readings, prayers, and symbolic actions to proclaim that death is not the end but a transformation into a new form of existence. Funeral rites foster hope for the resurrection of the body and eternal life, connecting the individual's death to the broader Christian hope for the final judgment and the ultimate triumph of God's kingdom. The community gathers to express this hope, providing support to the bereaved and affirming their shared belief in the resurrection. Symbolic actions, such as sprinkling holy water, incense, and committal, are essential in funeral rites. These rituals help the community remember the deceased, express their grief, and articulate their hope for the future (Quartier & Hermans, 2007). Funeral rites are designed to be pastoral, addressing the specific needs and circumstances of the bereaved. They encourage adaptation to meet the unique needs of each individual and family. The funeral liturgy offers a space for healing, consolation, and the beginning of the grieving process (Sheppy, 1994; Meyers, 2016).

Religious Framework

As the soul travels through samsara, the cycle of birth, death, and reincarnation, until liberation (*moksha*) is attained, death is seen in Hinduism as a transition rather than an end. Antyeshti (funeral rites) are essential for the soul's advancement and for the living to honour the dead; in fact, the most popular method is cremation, which allows the soul to be released and represents the body being returned to nature. Hinduism involves various rituals, including rites performed by the eldest son or a priest, which involve chanting mantras, passing an oil lamp over the body, and offering flowers. The ancestors are venerated through the Sraddha ceremony, which maintains connection with the deceased. Post-cremation rituals include bone-gathering ceremonies and memorial services to honor the departed and offer prayers for their journey. Hindus believe in reincarnation, where the soul is eternal and will be reborn into a new body. These rituals provide closure for the deceased and help the living express grief and cope with loss (Cooper & Rusell, 2017; Williams, 2016; Ogunbiyi, et al, 2024).

Buddhism sees death not as an end but as a passage from one life to the next. Supporting the deceased's passage through the intermediate state (*bardo*) and promoting a favourable rebirth are the main goals of Buddhist death rites. Establishing a calm atmosphere, thinking back on the life of the departed, carrying out good deeds, chanting and offering, reading the Tibetan Book of the Dead, appreciating consciousness, donating organs, honouring the body, and writing are all important components of these ceremonies (Lim, 2021). In Tibetan Buddhism, the deceased are guided through the transitional states during the bardo period by the Tibetan Book of the Dead. Determining the subsequent rebirth depends on one's level of consciousness at the time of death (Choi, 2021). Donating an organ is frequently seen as a selfless deed that is consistent with Buddhist teachings. After death, the body is typically left undisturbed for a while to give consciousness time to depart. In many Buddhist traditions, especially Theravada Buddhism, cremation is a common practice (Ogunbiyi, et al, 2024). Buddhist death rites aim to ease the transition, generate positive karma, and remind the living of impermanence. They aim to facilitate a favourable rebirth and promote a peaceful transition for the deceased.

Islamic death rites emphasise solemnity and reverence for the deceased and their transition to the afterlife. These practices include washing and shrouding the body, performing a funeral prayer (*Salatul Janazah*) (Quran 2:156), and burial, preferably as soon as possible after death. Cremation is forbidden, and the body is buried facing Mecca, often without a casket. Key aspects of Islamic death rituals include immediate care, such as closing the eyes, bounding the jaw, and covering the body. The funeral prayer (*Salatul Janazah*) is performed by the community to seek forgiveness for the deceased. Burial should occur quickly, and the body is placed in the grave without a casket, facing Mecca (Abdel Haleem & Abdel Haleem, 2008). The afterlife is believed to be a place of judgement and eventual reunion with God. Important considerations include community involvement, respect for the body, and the prohibition of cremation. Organ donation is also allowed, though it is a complex issue with varying interpretations. The overarching theme of Islamic death rites is to honour the deceased, provide solace to the living, and reinforce the belief in the continuation of life after death (Jahangir & Hamid, 2022).

In African societies, rites of passage are traditional ceremonies that mark significant transitions in a person's life. These transitions include birth, the attainment of maturity, marriage, entrance into eldership, and ultimately, ancestorship. Each stage is marked by particular customs and teachings that help individuals assume new responsibilities within

the community. For instance, initiation into adulthood often involves a period of seclusion, instruction in cultural values, and in some cultures, the act of circumcision, which serves as a key symbolic rite. These practices are not merely ceremonial but are essential for passing on values, maintaining order, and reinforcing communal identity across generations (Pedersen & Rytter, 2017; Olupona, 2014). Death, too, is viewed as a rite of passage in many African cultures. Rather than being seen as the end of life, death represents a transition from the physical world to the spiritual realm, where the deceased become ancestors. This transition is guided by rituals and mourning practices, which vary among ethnic groups but generally include phases such as separation from the community, spiritual transition, and eventual reintegration as an ancestor. These ceremonies often involve symbolic actions like music, dancing, storytelling, the shaving of hair, and sometimes animal sacrifices. Mourning may last for an extended period—weeks, months, or even years—and includes social restrictions for the bereaved family. The significance of these rites is not only social but spiritual; they help the community process loss and ensure that the spirit of the deceased finds rest and remains connected to the living. Different communities have unique burial customs, which may involve elaborate tombs, the use of symbolic objects, or even preserving certain bones for ritual purposes. In the modern era, online platforms have emerged as spaces where members of the African diaspora continue to engage in conversations about mourning and adapt traditional practices to their present contexts (Nnoruga, 2024; Lebese, 2022; Clarke & Huggins, 2024; Baloyi & Makobe-Rabothata, 2014). Overall, African funeral practices are deeply rooted in cultural and religious beliefs. They reflect the community understands of life, death, and the ongoing connection between the living and the ancestral world.

Exegetical Framework

Hebrews 11:13b reads: "They confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth" (NRSV). This declaration refers to the faith patriarchs—Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—who lived and died without receiving the full realization of God's promises. The text places emphasis on their conscious identity as outsiders in the world, anticipating something beyond the material. The use of the Greek terms *xenoi* (strangers) and *parepidēmoi* (sojourners or pilgrims) draws attention to the transient condition of believers and the theological concept of earth as a temporary dwelling (Attridge, 1989). The historical context of Hebrews indicates that the recipients were a community under pressure—possibly Jewish Christians tempted to revert to their previous traditions to avoid

persecution. By invoking the example of the patriarchs, the author encourages steadfastness in a faith journey that often involves suffering, displacement, and waiting. The imagery of sojourning has deep biblical roots, especially in Genesis 23:4 where Abraham, despite being promised the land, refers to himself as a foreigner and sojourner. This reinforces the motif of temporary dwelling and points to a deeper hope in God's ultimate provision (Johnson, 2006).

Theologically, Hebrews 11 presents a model of faith that is rooted in expectation, not possession. The faithful are described as those who "desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one" (Heb. 11:16). The notion of pilgrimage becomes a metaphor for the Christian life—one marked by continual transition toward divine fulfillment. It is not merely about waiting; it is about living in alignment with a future reality. This eschatological orientation separates the believer from the values of the world and calls for a life consistent with the coming kingdom (Koester, 2001). Within this theological frame, Christian rites of passage are more than ceremonial transitions; they are ritual enactments of the journeying faith described in Hebrews 11. Baptism, for instance, marks a definitive break from the old life and an entrance into new life with Christ (Rom. 6:4). It signals the start of a pilgrim journey, one that identifies the individual with Christ's death and resurrection. Confirmation strengthens this identity by publicly affirming the person's commitment to continue the journey in faith and obedience.

Marriage, understood sacramentally, reflects the pilgrim identity through the commitment of two individuals to journey together under God's covenant. Ordination introduces the pilgrim into a path of service and sacrificial leadership. The Christian funeral marks not merely the end of earthly life but a transition to eternal communion with God, reinforcing the belief that life on earth is not final. Each rite is a threshold—structured around departure, transition, and incorporation (Turner, 1969; Grimes, 2000). The idea of being a stranger or pilgrim has implications not only for individual spirituality but also for ecclesial and social identity. The Church itself is portrayed in Scripture as a pilgrim people, not fully at home in any culture or political order (Phil. 3:20; 1 Pet. 2:11). Christian rites, therefore, carry a counter-cultural message. They challenge worldly definitions of identity, success, and permanence. They remind the believer that our loyalties, values, and citizenship are shaped by the promise of God, not the systems of the world (Vanhoozer, 2005).

Hebrews 11:13b highlights the belief of Christians who view death as a necessary passage into God's promised life, as seen in John 11:25-26 and John 14:1-2, as the faithful died believing in God's promises and receiving the full promise of eternal life. Therefore, life on earth is temporary (Job 1:21; 1 Tim. 6:7), and these faithful individuals were not rooted in the things of the world but in the God who called them. Their lives were marked by deep trust, and their deaths were the final step in their walk with God. This way of thinking is not unusual in African culture, where death is seen as a transition into the ancestral world. The writer of Hebrews speaks of the dead in Christ as a "cloud of witnesses" who surround and encourage the living, showing a deep connection between those who have died and those still alive in faith. In conclusion, Hebrews 11:13b teaches us that death is part of our journey with God and a doorway through which we pass into His presence.

Evaluating Heb. 11:13b "they confessed that they were strangers and aliens on the earth" from a sociological perspective provides a stance on faith and the rejection of excessive materialistic ideals, worldly values and belief systems, and moral decadences and an emphasis on a more spiritual, higher reality. The verse also highlights the formation of a community of faith, where individuals find belonging within a group united by their shared faith. This concept is rooted in the historical context, where social identity was often tied to one's place of residence and social standing (Jamal, 2016). In a cultural context that glorifies ownership, self-determination, and control, the Christian who embraces the pilgrim identity is making a radical confession. Each rite of passage becomes a proclamation that this world is not the final destination. Rather, the Christian walks by faith toward the fulfillment of God’s promise. Hebrews 11:13b, therefore, is not merely descriptive of ancient saints; it is normative for Christian life and community today (Bruce, 1990; Smith, 2009). Thus, to engage in Christian rites of passage is to participate liturgically and communally in the narrative of pilgrimage. These rites serve to locate the believer within a history of faithful wandering, hopeful waiting, and obedient living. They become both acts of remembrance and acts of anticipation—rooted in a theology that sees earthly life as sacred but not ultimate.

METHODOLOGY

The study investigates how Christians interpret and practice rites of passage in light of Hebrews 11:13b, which refers to believers as "strangers and aliens on the earth." It utilizes biblical, liturgical theology, and sociological perspectives. The study details its methodology, participants, and data collection and interpretation.

Research Design

The study utilized a descriptive survey design, allowing participants to express their views on Christian rites of passage, such as baptism, marriage, and funeral rites, within a biblical framework. This design was suitable for the research, as it allowed for a wide range of participants to express their beliefs, interpretations, and practices across different denominations, ensuring comprehensive understanding of Christian beliefs.

Population and Sampling

The study involved 900 participants from four main Christian groups in Nigeria: Anglicans, Methodists, Pentecostals, and Indigenous Churches. Each group was equally represented, with 225 respondents. A stratified random sampling method was used to ensure balanced representation, allowing fair comparisons and preventing overrepresentation in the study.

Research Instrument

To collect information on rites of passage and lessons found in Hebrews 11:13b, the research employed a questionnaire. Background data such as gender, age, religious affiliation, and church position were gathered in the first section. In the second section, participants were asked if they agreed or disagreed with the statements using a 5-point Likert scale. Experts in the fields of theology and Christian education evaluated the questions, which were created based on previous readings and biblical thoughts.

Data Collection

In order to distribute questionnaires, the researcher went to churches in Lagos and the surrounding regions; some churches even offered aid. Church leaders and elders assisted in disseminating and outlining the goal of the study. The goal was explained to the participants, and their agreement was acquired. A complete response rate was demonstrated by the successful retrieval of all 900 surveys.

Data Analysis

The researcher used statistical tools like frequencies, percentages, and tables to analyze responses, presenting how people responded to each item

Ethical Considerations

The research respected the dignity and privacy of all participants. No names or personal information were collected. Participants were not forced to respond and could withdraw at any point. The data gathered was used solely for academic purposes. Every effort was made to conduct the study with honesty, transparency, and respect for the church communities involved.

RESULTS

Section 1: Participants' Demography on "Strangers and Aliens on Earth" (Hebrews 11:13b): A Socio-Exegetical Inquiry into Christian Rites of Passage

Variable	Categories	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male Female	450 450	50% 50%
Age Group	18–25 26–35 36–45 46–55 56 – above	46 53 198 216 387	5.11% 5.89% 22% 24% 43%
Church Denomination	Anglicans Methodists Pentecostals Indigenous Churches	225 225 225 225	25% 25% 25% 25%
Position in Church	Clergy/Pastor Elder/Deacon Regular Member	69 194 637	7.66% 21.56% 70.78%

Source: Field survey, 2025

The gender data shows a perfect split: 450 males and 450 females. This means men and women participated equally in the study. That balance is important because it allows us to hear from both sides without one outweighing the other. It also reflects a shared concern and interest in Christian rites of passage among both genders.

When it comes to age, the majority of the participants are people aged 56 and above, who make up 43% of the total. This is followed by those between 46 and 55 years

(24%) and 36 to 45 years (22%). The younger groups—those aged 26–35 (5.89%) and 18–25 (5.11%)—are much fewer. This shows that older adults are the ones who mostly took part in the study. It could be because they have more personal experience with life events like marriage, parenthood, becoming elders, or preparing for burial—events that usually involve rites of passage in church. The lower number of young adults may reflect less interest, less involvement in such practices, or simply that younger people are less present in church activities focused on these issues.

The denominational data is evenly spread. Each group—Anglicans, Methodists, Pentecostals, and Indigenous Churches—had 224 respondents, which is 25% each. This equal spread allows us to compare different church traditions fairly. It also means that no one denomination dominates the results, which is good for getting a fuller understanding of how different Christians approach rites of passage.

On church roles, regular members make up the largest part of the respondents (637 people, or 70.78%). Elders and deacons follow with 194 people (21.56%), and clergy or pastors are the smallest group with only 69 people (7.66%). The study primarily focuses on insights from ordinary churchgoers who attend services, go through rites, and live with their meaning daily. Elders and deacons also contribute to conducting these rites, only few pastors and clergy participated in the surveys.

Section 2: Participants' Perception, Interpretation Practices of Christian Rite of Passage in the Context of (Heb. 11:13b)

This section adopted the use of 5-point Likert scale: Strongly Agree (SA), Agree (A), Strongly Disagree (SD), Disagree (D) and Undecided (U)

Variables	SA	A	SD	D	U
1. Christians consider themselves to be pilgrims, strangers, and aliens (Hebrews 11:13b) on this earth.	589 (66.3%)	279 (31.4%)	9 (1%)	10 (1.1%)	1 (0.1%)
2. The Church's teachings and basic Christian theology have a big impact on how each believer thinks about life transitions.	743 (83.6%)	67 (7.5%)	4 (0.5%)	29 (3.3%)	57 (6.4%)
3. The idea of "strangers and aliens" (Hebrews 11:13b) urges believers to withdraw from worldly behaviours and practices.	612 (68.9%)	258 (29%)	8 (0.9%)	3 (0.3%)	19 (2.1%)
4. Christian rites provide opportunities for spiritual growth, deepening of faith, and commitment.	819 (91%)	80 (8.9%)	1 (0.1%)	(%)	(%)

Variables	SA	A	SD	D	U
5. The idea of heavenly citizenship is reflected in all Christian rites (Baptism, Holy Communion, Wedding, Funeral etc).	757 (85.2%)	111 (15.2%)	17 (1.9%)	5 (0.6%)	10 (1.1%)
6. Baptism has spiritual significance and is crucial for all believers especially concerning the rite of passage to heaven.	769 (86.6%)	131 (14.8%)	(%)	(%)	(%)
7. Christian wedding ceremonies symbolise the heavenly wedding after the final passage (death).	518 (58.3%)	82 (9.2%)	95 (10.7%)	73 (8.2%)	132 (14.9%)
8. Funeral ceremonies in Christianity have no effect on the final passage of the deceased either to heaven or hell.	790 (89%)	47 (5.3%)	23 (2.6%)	27 (3%)	13 (1.5%)
9. There are connections between biblical faith and African views on the final rite of passage.	289 (32.5%)	116 (13.1%)	271 (30.5%)	191 (21.5%)	33 (3.7%)
10. The Church plays an active role in helping people prepare for the final passage (death).	716 (80.6%)	170 (19.1%)	2 (0.2%)	1 (0.1%)	1 (0.1%)

Source: Field survey, 2025

The data gathered through the Likert scale reveals a strong affirmation among participants regarding their identity as pilgrims, strangers, and aliens on earth, as described in Hebrews 11:13b. Out of the total respondents, 66.3% strongly agree and 31.4% agree with this perspective. Only a very small percentage—1% strongly disagree, 1.1% disagree, and 0.1% are undecided—do not share this conviction. This indicates that the majority hold to a spiritual understanding of life as a journey toward a heavenly destination. On the influence of church teachings and Christian theology on believers' understanding of life transitions, 83.6% strongly agree, and 7.5% agree, suggesting that the theological foundation offered by the Church plays a key role in shaping how Christians interpret events such as birth, marriage, and death. A marginal 0.5% strongly disagree, 3.3% disagree, and 6.4% are undecided, pointing to the general acceptance of church instruction in shaping worldview.

The teaching of believers being "strangers and aliens" also influences conduct, with 68.9% strongly agreeing and 29% agreeing that this encourages detachment from worldly lifestyles. Less than 1% strongly disagree, 0.3% disagree, and 2.1% are undecided, further reinforcing the idea that Christian identity affects behavior. Regarding Christian rites as avenues for spiritual growth, 91% strongly agree and 8.9% agree. Only 0.1% strongly disagree, with no record of those who disagree or are undecided. This shows nearly unanimous agreement that rites like baptism, communion, and others help in strengthening faith and commitment.

The perception that Christian rites reflect heavenly citizenship is also strong. 85.2% strongly agree and 15.2% agree. Very few respondents—1.9% strongly disagree, 0.6% disagree, and 1.1% undecided—dispute this view. This suggests that for most believers, rites are not mere ceremonies but symbolic of deeper spiritual truths. On the role of baptism, 86.6% strongly agree and 14.8% agree that it has deep spiritual importance, especially as it relates to the believer's transition to eternal life. No respondent selected disagreement or neutrality, indicating full affirmation of baptism's value. However, views are more divided concerning the symbolism of Christian weddings. 58.3% strongly agree that weddings mirror the heavenly wedding to come, 9.2% agree, while 10.7% strongly disagree, 8.2% disagree, and 14.9% are undecided. This spread shows some uncertainty or differing theological understanding among respondents regarding the eschatological meaning of weddings.

For funeral ceremonies, 89% strongly agree and 5.3% agree that they have no effect on the eternal destination of the deceased. Only a small number—2.6% strongly disagree, 3% disagree, and 1.5% undecided—hold otherwise. The dominant view is that the final destination is determined before death and not altered by burial rituals. The question on connections between biblical faith and African views on final rites of passage reveals a mixed response. Only 32.5% strongly agree and 13.1% agree to the existence of such connections, while 30.5% strongly disagree, 21.5% disagree, and 3.7% are undecided. This indicates that opinions are split, possibly due to differing cultural experiences and levels of syncretism in local expressions of Christianity. Lastly, on the Church's role in preparing believers for death, 80.6% strongly agree and 19.1% agree. Just 0.4% expressed any disagreement or uncertainty. This demonstrates a general recognition of the Church's pastoral responsibility in guiding members toward a godly end of life.

DISCUSSION

A gender-equity distribution of 50% male and 50% female is shown by the study, suggesting that Christian identity and rites of passage are universally important. This is in line with current theology research, which emphasises eschatological hope and inclusive discipleship (Grenz & Kjesbo, 1995). Gender equality makes ensuring that gender domination doesn't affect how rites like baptism, confirmation, marriage, and funeral liturgy are interpreted. Although, Ogunbiyi and his colleagues note that in many Nigerian

churches, women are more in attendance than men. This situation is often linked to women's active participation in church life, their search for spiritual support and divine help, and their strong faith in the promises of life after death (Ogunbiyi, et al, 2025). Unfortunately, both men and women are accepted into the Christian community in Nigeria, where baptism or confirmation is regarded as a public statement of faith and devotion to Christ. Though they are not opposed to it, cultural and traditional perspectives often highlight the biblical stance of the husband's headship and the wife's submission for reciprocal love, respect, and shared obligation in marriage. The prospect of resurrection and everlasting life for all believers, regardless of gender, is frequently the focal point of funerals, which are occasions to honour and commemorate the departed. However, cultural customs may differ (Okoli & Okwuosa, 2020; Doe, 2013).

According to the survey, older persons are more interested in themes of mortality and rites of passage as they consider their final fate, faith legacy, and the fleeting nature of life. This is consistent with Hebrews 11:13's biblical notion of journey (Marshall, 2004). However, the lack of representation from younger age groups (18–35 years) raises the possibility that many young people may not view eschatological identity as a pressing theological concern. This could be because modern youth ministry tends to focus on present-focused or prosperity-oriented theology (Smith & Denton, 2005). Through ageing and other life phases, these rituals honour spiritual development, a sense of community, and a person's relationship with God. Baptism or infant dedication marks a child's admission into the Christian community and is frequently followed by blessings and faith-centred family activities. A Christian funeral ceremony signifies the passing from this life to the next—eternal life with God. It honours the deceased's life and religion while providing consolation to those in mourning. The shift to a higher level of social and moral responsibility within the society is frequently marked with coming-of-age ceremonies in particular.

Anglican, Methodist, Pentecostal, and Indigenous are the four main church traditions that were the subject of the survey. The "stranger and pilgrim motif" is shared by the Anglican and Methodist churches, whereas Pentecostal and Indigenous groups embrace more impromptu worship styles. Because theological anthropology and eschatology frequently integrate socio-culturally contextualised expressions, this balanced selection enables a comprehensive understanding of how ecclesial traditions affect these fields (Kalu, 2008).

The responses received from the participants reveal that the majority of Christians hold a strong sense of identity as "strangers and pilgrims" on the earth, as stated in Hebrews 11:13b. This biblical idea is not just a theological concept for them—it shapes their view of life as a temporary journey, with heaven as the final destination. That 97.7% either strongly agreed or agreed with this statement shows how deeply this idea is rooted in the Christian consciousness among the people surveyed. The data also makes it clear that church teachings and the general framework of Christian theology strongly influence how believers understand life events such as birth, marriage, and death. This is shown in the 91.1% who affirmed the Church's role in shaping their interpretation of life transitions. These transitions are not merely social or cultural rituals; they are spiritual milestones influenced by scripture and pastoral teaching. This highlights the importance of the Church's teaching ministry in forming believers' understanding of spiritual matters.

Another interesting finding is that the concept of believers being strangers and aliens doesn't stop at identity—it also affects behavior. The majority believe that this view leads them to pull away from worldly practices and lifestyles that conflict with Christian values. It's clear that their faith identity informs how they live and what they choose to engage in or avoid in society. In addition, almost all participants agreed that Christian rites—such as baptism, communion, weddings, and funerals—help them grow spiritually. This shows that these rites are seen as more than traditions or routines; they are understood to be part of their spiritual journey, helping them draw closer to God and remain committed in their faith walk. Baptism, in particular, stood out as having deep meaning for the respondents. All participants either strongly agreed or agreed that baptism is crucial, especially as it relates to readiness for the life after death. Many Christians believe that salvation is a gift from God, received through faith in Jesus Christ, not solely dependent on baptism. Different denominations have varying practices regarding baptism, including immersion, sprinkling, infant and adult baptism. Some, like The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, practice baptism for the dead, believing it can provide blessings for those who have died without baptism. Therefore, baptism is a symbolic rite and event in Christianity that symbolises a believer's resurrection from a life of sin and their death to a new life in Christ. It represents a spiritual cleaning and rebirth and is frequently seen as an essential step for embracing Christianity and being ready for the hereafter (Nyarko, 2024).

The views on Christian weddings are mixed, with most agreeing that they symbolize the final heavenly union between Christ and the Church. The main symbolism

of a Christian wedding is the covenant bond between a husband and woman, similar to Christ's relationship with the church. Some Christians see marriage as a premonition of the heavenly wedding, marking a change from single status to a new position in the community and a public proclamation of commitment. The notion of a future "heavenly wedding" is sometimes connected to biblical passages, such as Revelation 19:7-9, which refers to the "marriage supper of the Lamb." There could be a need for more teaching on the spiritual symbolism of marriage in relation to eternity (Meyers, 2016).

Regarding funerals, the vast majority of participants made it apparent that funeral rites had no influence on the deceased's ultimate fate in either heaven or hell. It is essentially a service for the living, providing solace as well as a place for grieving and remembering. Rather than the burial itself, a person's faith and deeds during life decide where their soul will go up. This demonstrates that individuals believe salvation is decided before death and is unaffected by actions taken after death. This interpretation runs counter to certain traditional African beliefs that ceremonies have an impact on the deceased's journey. It's evident that the majority of Christians polled had a solid biblical knowledge of death and the afterlife (Ayodeji, 2013).

One area where the responses were divided was the question of whether biblical faith connects with African traditional views on the final rite of passage. While some respondents see a link, many do not. These point to a complex relationship between African culture and Christianity, especially in matters of death and burial. Christianity and African religions acknowledge death as a significant life transition, requiring specific rituals to mark the occasion. Both systems emphasise community during death and mourning, aiming for comfort, closure, and spiritual connection. Christianity emphasises individual relationships with God and preparation for the afterlife, while African religions focus on community and deceased integration. Religious leaders perform final rites in Christianity, while African rituals involve the entire community and are guided by cultural traditions. Christianity's final rites are more standardised and spiritual, while African rituals vary depending on the cultural group (Asamoah-Gyadu, 2022; Grillo, 2024; Olupona, 2009). Some may see areas of agreement or overlap, while others reject any form of syncretism. This remains a sensitive area that needs ongoing dialogue and teaching within the African church.

Finally, the role of the Church in preparing believers for death was strongly affirmed. Almost all respondents agreed that the Church has a responsibility to help people prepare spiritually for the final journey. The Church plays a crucial role in spiritual preparation, offering theological perspectives on death and the afterlife, promoting a "pilgrim mindset," guiding individuals in examining their lives, administering sacraments, and encouraging prayer and contemplation. Pastoral care offers compassionate presence, listening, and guidance to those ill, dying, or grieving. Ministering to families helps them cope with the impending loss of a loved one, providing comfort and facilitating open communication. Conducting funeral services organizes meaningful rites to honor the deceased and offer hope to the bereaved. Facilitating grief support groups creates a safe space for individuals to share their experiences of loss and find healing together. Advocating for quality end-of-life care promotes palliative care services that prioritize comfort and quality of life for those facing terminal illness. Addressing ethical concerns, such as advance care planning and pain management techniques, ensures respect, compassion, and sensitivity for the dying. By actively engaging in these areas, the Church can play a vital role in helping people prepare for death, not as an ending but as a transition to a new and eternal life with God. The responses show that many Christians look to the Church for guidance, comfort, and preparation in the face of death (Braun & Zir, 2001).

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study affirm that a majority of Christians strongly identify with the pilgrim theology expressed in Hebrews 11:13b, viewing themselves as strangers and aliens on earth. This theological identity shapes how they interpret life events and participate in rites of passage such as baptism, marriage, and funerals. The research also reveals that Christian rites are not mere rituals but are perceived as spiritual milestones that reinforce the believer's journey toward heavenly citizenship. Baptism and funerals, in particular, hold deep spiritual significance among the respondents, while interpretations of marriage ceremonies show varied levels of theological understanding. Though there is general awareness of the biblical framework, the connection between Christian and African traditional views on rites of passage remains a contested area with mixed responses. Importantly, the role of the Church in preparing believers for the final transition—death—is widely recognized and appreciated. This underscores the necessity of continued

theological education, pastoral care, and liturgical clarity on the significance of Christian rites.

The study recommends several recommendations for churches to enhance their understanding of rites of passage, particularly baptism, marriage, and funeral rites. It suggests investing in robust theological education to deepen believers' understanding of their spiritual significance. The study also suggests contextualizing Christian liturgies to reflect the pilgrim identity emphasized in Hebrews 11:13b, making rites more theologically meaningful. It also suggests prioritizing end-of-life pastoral care, encouraging members to live with spiritual readiness. It also suggests engaging African cultural perspectives by creating open dialogues between biblical faith and traditional beliefs, particularly around the final rite of passage. It also suggests developing targeted programs for youth to understand and appreciate rites of passage from a biblical perspective. Finally, it suggests promoting pilgrim spirituality in worship.

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