

**Èṣù is (Not) Satan: Implications of Àjàyí Crowther's Mother-Tongue Bible  
Translation on *Missio Dei***

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**ABSTRACT**

Debates have emerged over the years concerning Samuel Ajayi Crowther's translation of Satan as Èṣù in his mother-tongue translation of the Bible *Bibeli Mimọ*, the first Yoruba translation of the Bible. Yoruba traditional religionists insist that Èṣù is not Satan, so Crowther has misled many people to think that Èṣù is Satan. Some Christians agree that Satan should not be translated as Èṣù without realising that this is a subtle endorsement of the traditionalists' attempt to justify their unrepentant idolatry and undermining of the *missio Dei* for which Crowther translated the Bible. This paper, employing a literary approach, undertakes a comparative analysis that establishes the ontological and functional similarities between Èṣù and Satan. The findings revealed that the view that Èṣù, though similar to the Satan of the Old Testament, is markedly different from the Satan of the NT is untenable and misleading in light of closer scrutiny. This paper affirms the accuracy of Crowther's translation of Satan as Èṣù and that it should be sustained in Yoruba Christians' engagement with Èṣù's adherents as they participate in the *missio Dei*. After demonstrating the impacts of Crowther's mother-tongue translation for the *missio Dei*, it highlighted the need for Yoruba Christians to take seriously the *missio Dei* by reiterating Crowther's identification of Satan as Èṣù and calling on Èṣù's worshippers to repent of their idolatry rather than inadvertently endorsing their unwillingness to repent. This paper thus clarifies that the assumed nuances of differences between Satan and Èṣù are non-existent.

**Keywords:** *Satan/Èṣù, Samuel Àjàyí Crowther, Yoruba, mother-tongue translation, missio Dei*

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## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

Growing up as a Yoruba boy, the words *Èṣù* and *Sàtánì* (Satan) were used synonymously and interchangeably, referring to the same entity, the Satan/devil of the Bible. This is not only in daily conversations but also in the church, and whoever is translating from English to Yoruba during church meetings would use *Èṣù* for Satan and vice versa. This has resulted in only one thing: the equivalence of *Èṣù* and Satan in the minds of many people. This is not only true for Christians but also Muslims. It is also what many movies by non-Christians have portrayed, so this is not peculiar to the Yoruba Christians. Unfortunately, however, this has resulted in backlashes against the Christian faith and its adherents, with some claiming that Bishop Samuel Àjàyí Crowther intentionally translated Satan as *Èṣù* to paint traditional religion as evil and, subsequently, sustain the expansionist agenda of his paymasters, the Western missionaries. In response, some Christian theologians argue that although *Èṣù* is not the New Testament (NT) Satan, he is the Satan of the Old Testament (OT). In contrast, others contend that *Èṣù* is the most fitting Yoruba translation for the biblical Satan and that Crowther was correct in translating Satan as *Èṣù*.

This paper navigates this debate by exploring the nuances that exist in the portraits of Satan and *Èṣù* in the biblical records and Yoruba cosmology, respectively, which underlie the belief that *Èṣù* is not the biblical Satan. It establishes that Satan and *Èṣù* exhibit the same ambivalent morality about humans and God, as well as exercise the same role within the divine council. It thus concludes that *Èṣù* is the correct category for translating the biblical term "Satan" in Yoruba. Therefore, Yoruba Christians should not recoil from declaring this position as they carry out the *missio Dei*, which is God's sending them to participate in His work of reconciling sinners to Himself and transforming humanity. This paper argues that Crowther's mother-tongue translation of the Bible, which some seek to undermine, is part of his involvement in the *missio Dei*, and Christians are to imitate

Crowther's missionary efforts and reiterate his biblical stance that *Èṣù* is to be rejected vehemently.

## 2.0 METHODOLOGY

This paper employed a literary investigation, which entails a comparative study of the biblical Satan and *Èṣù*. It compared who Satan is and what he does in light of exegetical-theological explorations of the biblical data about Satan with who *Èṣù* is and what he does according to verifiable written records about Yoruba cosmology. This paper ultimately applies its findings about Crowther's mother-tongue translation of *Èṣù* as Satan to the subject of the *missio Dei*.

## 3.0 ÈṢÙ IS NOT SATAN: MOTHER-TONGUE BIBLE TRANSLATION UNDER FIRE

"*Èṣù* is not Satan" was the theme for the last "World *Èṣù* Festival," which took place on December 24, 2024, as celebrated by Yoruba traditional religionists. The theme was to reiterate their long-held position that *Èṣù*, a Yoruba divinity, is not the Judeo-Christian Satan, a fallen angel who ended up as God's archenemy. One of those who celebrated the "World *Èṣù* Festival" wrote on her X (formerly, Twitter) handle that "*Èṣù* is not Satan" because he

...is a compassionate and sympathetic *Òrìṣà* who grieves with those who grieve (*o belekun sukun kí erú o bá belekun*) and ensures balance by taking from the undeserving and giving to the deserving (*a gbà lowo nini a gbe fún àìní*)

As *Onílé Òrìta*, the guardian of crossroads, *Èṣù* connects humanity with the divine, delivering our sacrifices (*ẹbọ*) and prayers (*ìwúre*) to *Olódùmarè* and the other *Òrìṣà*. *Èṣù Laalu* is a symbol of justice, wisdom, and order, not evil or chaos. Mislabeled *Èṣù* as "Satan" stems from cultural misunderstanding and colonial influence, which we must actively correct...

(<https://x.com/Simiola33/status/1871458551870460177>)

This distinguishing of Èṣù from Satan is to correct what is believed to be a common misreading of the biblical (and Qur’anic) Satan as Èṣù and to reiterate that Èṣù is to be revered and not degraded as is done by many. Èṣù belongs to the Yoruba pantheon comprising 601 deities, of which 400 are *orisa* [*irinwo mole ojukotun*] while 201 are *ajogun* [*igba mole ojukosi owuro*] (Abimbola 1994, 75–76). The *ajogun* (warriors) who are on the left side of the universe are absolutely and incorrigibly malevolent. In contrast, the *orisa* (divinities) who are on the right side of the universe are naturally benevolent. However, they can be malevolent towards a person or a group of persons that offends them or the societal mores. Straddling both sides is Èṣù, who is indispensable to the acceptance of sacrifices and for whom sacrifices are indispensable to play his mediatory role (Abimbola 1994, 77–78). On the one hand, he receives the sacrifice an individual presents to an *orisa* and takes it along with the individual’s prayers and wishes to *Olodumare* [the supreme deity] (Daramola and Jeje 1967, 286). On the other hand, he receives sacrifices on behalf of every *ajogun* who inflicts evil on an individual and presents them to appease whichever *ajogun* owns the sacrifice and the afflicted is freed from the *ajogun*’s grip. Èṣù, therefore, does not act until a sacrifice is made. Èṣù is thus “one of the most powerful and temperamental but skillful” among the Yoruba pantheon of gods, and he is worshipped every day of the Yoruba four-day week (Kanu 2021, 66).

The argument that Èṣù is not the biblical Satan is neither recent nor only advocated by traditionalists, as academics have done the same over the years. For example, Abimbola (2006) and Bewaji (1998, 14–15) argue that Èṣù is not evil-personified and does not oppose God’s work like the biblical Satan. Instead, as Babayemi (1984, 6) posits, Èṣù mediates between *orun* [heaven] and *aye* [earth], and works for *Olodumare* as his minister of justice, so that the evil Èṣù does is often for justice, thus carrying out *Olodumare*’s will as the custodian of his laws.

Balogun (2014, 66) similarly, contends that “whereas Èṣù is an indigenous divinity in the Yoruba cosmogony, *Satani* is a foreign character introduced into the Yoruba religious vocabulary through Christianity and Islam” and that, like Jesus and Mohammed, Satan “has no precise equivalent in the Yoruba language and religious thought.” He, nevertheless, admits “the fact that Èṣù is similar to Satan in some significant respects.”

Aiyejinna (2009, 5) also disputes the translation of Satan as Èṣù because of “some perceived incidental similarities between the two,” whereas Jesus Christ’s name is simply transliterated into *Jesu Kristi* instead of using either *Orunmila* or *Ela*, both of whom have some similarities with Jesus. Abimbola (2006) and Babayemi (1984, 6) also insist that despite glaring similarities, Èṣù is not Satan. In the same vein, some Christian religious scholars (such as Idowu 1962, 80; Dopamu 2000, 42; Igboin 2019, 225–226; 2013) have also argued that Èṣù is not Satan.

Though Samuel Johnson, J. O. Lucas, and other early Yoruba converts to Christianity are blamed for the identification of Èṣù as the biblical Satan (Ogundipe 2012, 100), Samuel Àjàyí Crowther’s pioneering translation of the Bible into the Yoruba language, *Bibeli Mimọ* (Holy Bible), is held primarily responsible for equating Satan with Èṣù and spreading the popular representation of Satan as Èṣù (Aiyejinna 2009, 4; Idowu 2023; Ayeni 2025). The standard argument in all of these is that Crowther’s use of Èṣù in the Yoruba Bible to translate Satan portrays him “as a disobedient, destructive being, who constantly seeks to incite people against God” and devoid of his intermediating role, which makes Èṣù to be who he is not (Oladejo 2012, 114). Candidly, the advocates of “Èṣù is not Satan,” have a valid concern, considering that while Crowther opted for a dynamic equivalence (thought-for-thought) approach in translating Èṣù as Satan, he simply transliterated “amen” as *amin* and “angel” as *angeli* instead of using the Yoruba thought-for-thought equivalents, *ase* (the Yoruba response to prayer) and *irunmole* (*Olodumare*’s messengers) respectively. Furthermore, they are justified in arguing that

if Crowther did not translate Jesus Christ as *Orunmila* or *Ela* (“heaven knows who will be saved”; the god of wisdom and revelation, witness to creation, and the all-round prophet and priest) but rather transliterated his name as *Jesu Kristi*, then he should have transliterated “Satan” as *Satani* rather than translate him as *Èṣù*. This paper addresses the widespread assumption that *Èṣù* is unlike Satan, especially the NT Satan, in the next section.

#### **4.0 ÈṢÙ IS SATAN: REVISITING CROWTHER’S MOTHER-TONGUE TRANSLATION**

In response to the argument that *Èṣù* is not Satan, Babatola (2024) lists the well-known and worshipped Yoruba deities and insists that *Èṣù* is the most proximate to Satan of all these deities, so Crowther’s choice of *Èṣù* to translate Satan is the most fitting option from the Yoruba worldview to help them properly categorise and situate the biblical Satan. While some authors (e.g., Johnson 1921, 34; Lucas 1948, 51–67; Fadipe 1970, 150–151; Idowu 2023) contend that *Èṣù* is malevolent in his intent and purposes, so he is the same as biblical Satan. The bone of contention for those who argue that *Èṣù* is not Satan is that, though *Èṣù* is much like the OT Satan, he is not an out-and-out, purely malevolent, enemy of God as the NT portrays him. (Idowu 1962, 80, 83; Awolalu and Dopamu 1979, 82–82; Dopamu 1986, 1, 13; 2000, 42). In light of the foregoing, this paper seeks to determine whether it is appropriate to translate Satan as *Èṣù* by comparing biblical teachings about Satan and Yoruba beliefs about *Èṣù*. It begins by identifying the biblical concept of Satan.

The Bible is the primary source of the basic understanding of Christians about who or what Satan is. Satan in the OT, either as a noun (*שָׂטָן*) or a verb (*שָׂטַן*), means to be or act as an opponent. (Caldwell 1913, 32; Farrar 2019, 31), whether human (1 Sam. 29:4; 1 Kings 11:14) or superhuman/celestial (Num. 22:22–32; Job 1–2; Zech. 3:1–2; 1 Chron. 21:1). Stokes (2014, 252) forcefully proves that the words *שָׂטָן* and *שָׂטַן* in the OT are used for an adversary or opponent, who can also attack, but never for an accuser. The LXX, under later

(Persian) influences (Brown 1907, s.v. *שָׂטָן*), translates (rather than transliterates) *שָׂטָן* in Job and Zechariah as *ὁ διάβολος*, a word that in classical Greek describes someone with the ability and inclination to do evil, especially with their words, and which recent English translations of the LXX render as “the slanderer” (Cox 2007, 670; Howard 2007, 815).

The Greek transliteration of *שָׂטָן*, *ὁ σατανάς*, and its Greek [LXX] translation, *ὁ διάβολος*, were not the normative designations for Satan in Jewish literature before Christianity (Farrar 2019, 57; Laato 2013, 4), but they became so in the NT, seeing that each NT writer used at least one of both designations in their reference to Satan (Farrar and Williams 2016b, 75). Two other standard designations of Satan in the NT are “*ὁ πονηρός* (‘the evil one’, 12 times) and *ὁ αρχὸν* (‘the prince/ruler’ [of the demons; of this world; of the power of the air], eight times)” (Farrar 2019, 58; cf. Farrar and Williams 2016a, 43–46, 56–57). These four most common NT designations of Satan “all have Second Temple Jewish precedents or parallels”, mostly in texts that refer to a supernatural Satan. (Farrar 2019, 58). Furthermore, the LXX’s use of a generic article (as in *ὁ διάβολος*) in Job and Zechariah describes Satan as a specific being and not merely an office. (Farrar 2019, 35; Wallace 1996, 227–31). The LXX, therefore, “represents a religio-historical bridge between the Hebrew Bible’s heavenly accuser and the New Testament Devil” (Farrar 2019, 35). While the OT has fewer references to Satan, there are between 130 and 140 references to Satan in the NT using different terms.<sup>1</sup> And these terms have “an underlying terminological and conceptual coherence” that allows one to speak of an individual who is Satan in the NT. (Farrar 2019, 57).

In forthcoming subsections, this paper will demonstrate the main characteristics of the biblical Satan and compare them with what is known of *Èṣù* in the Yoruba worldview.

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<sup>1</sup> An exact count of 137 is reached by Farrar and Williams (2016a, 61).

#### 4.1 Membership of the Divine Council

The first thing to note about Satan is his judicial role as a member of the divine council<sup>2</sup> (Peckham 2020, 246; Farrar 2019, 31; White 2014, 65; Page 2007, 453; Goldingay 2006, 45; Floyd 2000, 374; Japhet 1993, 375; Mullen, Jr. 1992, 214; Tate 1992, 463–64; Clines 1989, 19); Day 1988, 79; Hartley 1988, 71; Meyers and Meyers 1988, 184; Tidwell 1975, 352–53; also Mullen, Jr. 1980; Alden 1993, 53; Tigray 1996, 514; Aune 1997, 277; Routledge 1998, 18–19; Mermelstein and Holtz, eds. 2015; Heiser 2016, 10), contra some who think Satan was an intruder in the divine council ((see Andersen 1976, 82; and the discussion in Hamilton 1992, 986). In Job 1–2 and Zechariah 3, Satan, with the definite article (שָׂטָן), features in the divine council setting as a spiritual being who “serves God as a sort of prosecuting attorney in the heavenly court” (Stokes 2014, 251–252; also Gaster 1962, 224–225; von Rad and Foerster 1964, 73–75; Day 1988, 25–43; Baloian 1997, 1231; Hamilton 1992, 985–986; Breytenbach and Day 1999, 726–732; Walton 2008, 714–715; Pierce 2010, 1196–1197), serving as a legal opponent (Wanke 1997, 1268–69; also Nielsen 1974, 73–77). In Job (1:6; 2:1), Satan, as one of “the sons of God,” sought “to challenge and test the good” as “the enemy of sham and false pretensions” (Caldwell 1913, 32). Similarly, Èṣù’s “main preoccupation” as a member of *Olodumare*’s council is to test human fidelity to God (Ogundipe 2012, 105; Idowu 1962, 81). The foregoing reveals the prosecutorial role played by Satan and Èṣù in the divine council as God’s minister of justice, and this paper highlights this aspect in the following subsection.

#### 4.2 God’s Minister of Justice

The Bible teaches clearly that Satan serves as God’s minister of justice. Unlike the LXX’s generic article, the definite article (ἁ) attached

to Satan (שָׂטָן) in Job and Zechariah implies that it is most likely not a proper name, since Hebrew proper names practically do not take the definite article (Farrar 2019, 32; Rollston 2016, 4; Laato 2013, 4; Klein 2008, 135). Thus, most scholars posit that the article probably identifies Satan “as an adversarial (prosecutorial?) portfolio within the heavenly court, or as a ‘specific celestial being’ who occupies this office” (Farrar 2019, 32; see also Peckham 2020, 245 n. 10; Boda 2016, 229–230; Laato 2013, 19; Pope 2008, 9; Capelli 2005, 140; Breytenbach and Day 1999, 728; Newsom 1996, 347; Meyers and Meyers 1988, 183), speaking of his function as an opponent (Farrar 2019, 34), rather than his person as an embodiment of only evil and maliciousness, a function that reveals his zealous honour for Yahweh as his king to whom he reports and whose will he does (Caldwell 1913, 32). Similarly, Èṣù is *Olodumare*’s minister, a member of his divine council who enforces *Olodumare*’s justice on those who offend (Ogundipe 2012, 105). He enforces law and order (Kanu 2021, 66), though in a brutal way. Therefore, Yorubas greatly fear Èṣù and do everything to be in his good books by maintaining social orderliness and self-restraint to avoid his maliciousness.

Satan’s prosecutorial role has an accusation aspect, which involves finding faults and bringing charges, whether accurate or false. (Hamilton 1992, 985). Thus, making Satan appear to have the nuances of a slanderer (Rambau 2017, 126). For example, Satan does not accuse Job of sinfulness but of having ulterior motives for serving God. At the same time, he questions God’s assessment of Job and his justice system, “which rewards virtue with material prosperity and stable physical health” (Rambau 2017, 138). He slighted Job’s motives and challenged God’s rule and character (Wilson 2015, 34; Andersen 1976, 89; cf. Alden 1993, 55), in a “patently slanderous” manner (Hamilton 1992, 985; Day 1988, 76; Newsom 1996, 349). His “going to and fro” the earth (Job 1:7; 2:2; cf. 1 Pet 5:7) is understood by some as similar to the Persian “royal spy” and what obtains in earlier ancient Near East “divine court scenes” (Peckham 2020, 247;

<sup>2</sup> The divine council consists of ‘gods’ or celestial beings to whom, it is believed, God delegated ruling authority as to what transpires on earth (e.g., 1 Kgs 22:19-23; 2 Chr 18:18-22; Pss 29:1-2; 82; 89:5-8; Job 1:6-12; 2:1-7; Isa 6:1-13; Zech 3:1-7; Dan 7:9-14; cf Isa 24:21-23; Jer 23:18, 22; Ezek 1-3; Dan 4:13, 17; Amos 3:7-8).

Pope 2008, 9, 11), whereby Satan's straddling the earth and heaven is his duty as a watchman or spy that reports human activities to the divine council (cf. Dan 4:13). The NT thus calls Satan "the accuser" (Rev 12:10; Farrar 2019, 34; Page 1995, 30; Crump 1992, 154–155).

Èṣù also straddles and arbitrates between the physical and spiritual worlds. (Kanu 2021, 66; Oladejo 2012, 113; Gbádégesin 2007, 39; Abimbola 1994, 76). Living at the crossroads (Èṣù *on'ile orita*; "Èṣù, the landlord of crossroads"), he controls the traffic between the physical and spiritual realms. (Cosentino 1987, 262). Èṣù regularly reports the activities of human beings and the divinities to *Olodumare* and "checks and makes reports on the correctness of worship in general and sacrifices in particular" (Kolawole 2020, 283; Idowu 1962, 80). His slanderous nature is encapsulated in his *oriki* [praise song] as "*a bá ni wá ọràn bá ò rí dá*" ["the one who creates problems for the innocent"] and "*a so ebi di are, a so are di ebi*" ["the one who acquits the guilty as innocent and condemns the innocent as guilty"].

Included in the judicial role of Satan is his attack on or execution of offenders. Satan's destruction of Job's property, health, and children reveals that he is more than just a prosecutor (Page 2007, 450; Riley 1999, 247). Stokes thus prefers to define Satan as an executioner and not just an accuser and/or adversary, having demonstrated that  $\text{𐤁𐤏𐤔}$  and  $\text{𐤁𐤏𐤔}$  (as used in Num. 22:22, 32; 1 Sam. 29:4; 2 Sam. 19:23; 1 Kings 5:18; 11:14, 23, 25; Pss. 38:21; 71:13; 109:4, 6, 20, 29) imply physical attack whereby the noun  $\text{𐤁𐤏𐤔}$  means an "attacker," and in some legal contexts 'executioner,'" so the title  $\text{𐤁𐤏𐤔𐤁}$  in the OT means "the Attacker" or, more likely, 'the Executioner'" (Stokes 2014, 253–61). Therefore, Satan, in an act of justice, sought to attack Balaam for his disobedience (Num. 22:22, 32) and Joshua, the high priest, for his guiltiness symbolised by filthy garments (Zech. 3:1–2) (Stokes 2014, 262–64). Therefore, what the writer of 2 Samuel (24:1) describes as  $\text{𐤁𐤏𐤔}$   $\text{𐤁𐤏𐤔}$  ("the anger of the Lord"), the writer of 1 Chronicles (21:1) explicitly calls  $\text{𐤁𐤏𐤔}$  (*sātān*),

indicating that Satan works for God as his executioner. Just as Satan has the power of death and he kills (Heb 2:14; cf. Job 1:18–20; John 8:44; 10:10), Èṣù has the power of death and he kills, as symbolised by one of his objects of worship, the Èṣù's club (Idowu 1962, 79). The everyday Yoruba appeal that "*Èṣù mase mi omo elòmù ni o se*" (Èṣù, do not implicate or attack me, (you can) implicate/attack another person's child) reveals that Èṣù, like Satan, accuses and attacks others. Often, his evil acts [attacks] are for justice (Babayemi 1984, 6).

While Yorubas generally believe that Èṣù is a servant of *Olodumare*, there seems to be a common assumption that the biblical Satan is not a servant of Yahweh, especially from the NT perspective. However, Satan's judicial role is indicative of his relationship with God as his servant. Satan, as a member of the divine council, acts as a subordinate to God's authority. (Tate 1992, 463; Tollington 1993, 115–116). As seen in how he asks for and obtains God's permission to attack Job, and in how he dares not act beyond God's permission (Farrar 2019, 32–33). God's interaction with Satan about Job hints at an official communication (Newsom 1996, 348), whereby his permission of Satan to attack Job is an outcome of deliberative heavenly court proceedings (Hartley 1988, 72; cf. Wilson 2015, 34), to (dis)prove Satan's estimation of God's justice and kingdom, and not just God's arbitrary or unilateral decision (Peckham 2020, 250; Wilson 2015, 32; Blenkinsopp 2002, 179; Clines 1989, 25; Andersen 1976, 95). Therefore, Satan's prosecutorial function in the heavenly court is "firmly under God's control", and he can only act within God's permission (Rambau 2017, 126, 138; Page 2007, 450; O'Brien 2004, 188).

Another evidence of Satan's service to God is seen in Jesus's temptation, where a synergy exists between God and Satan, with the Holy Spirit driving/leading Jesus to be tempted by Satan (Mark 1:12; Matt 4:1; Luke 4:1; Page 2007, 456). This means that Satan's temptation of Jesus was divinely arranged as a part of God's plan, with Satan serving God's purpose of proving Jesus's "faithfulness to God

and fitness for ministry” (de Bruin 2022, 444).<sup>3</sup> Luke 22:31–32 also portrays Satan as working for God as his executioner (de Bruin 2022, 446; 2022; Farrar 2019, 34; Stokes 2019, 41; Page 1995, 30; Crump 1992, 154–55), doing the sifting God himself does (as in Isa. 30:28; Amos 9:9) for “wheat” not “chaff” (as in Luke 3:17). The verb (ἐξαιτέω) used to describe Satan’s request in Luke 22:31 means that Satan asked and received God’s permission to sift Jesus’s disciples because he has the right to do so (Louw and Nida 1989, § 1.407–408; Bauer et al. 2000, s.v. ἐξαιτέω), similar to his request to test Job’s faithfulness to God (Stählin 1964; Bovon 2012, 135, 177). Paul, on two occasions, speaks of handing over specific individuals to Satan (παράδιδωμι τῷ σατανᾷ) as a form of church discipline (1 Cor. 5:5; 1 Tim. 1:20),<sup>4</sup> with a remedial and restorative intention towards the individuals’ ultimate salvation (Page 2007, 462–463). In 2 Corinthians 12:7, Paul speaks of a “messenger of Satan” (ἄγγελος σατανα) given (ἐδόθη) to him for his good:<sup>5</sup> to keep him humble and to teach him that God’s grace was sufficient for him (vv. 7, 9).<sup>6</sup> The passive voice of ἐδόθη implies a divine source of the messenger, i.e., he is from God (Page 1995, 464; Harris 2005, 855–856). This undercuts the assumption that Satan, unlike Èşù, only works against God and his will. Satan is thus like a “prosecuting attorney” (Boda 2016, 230; Fokkelman 2012, 15; Lange 2009, 43) for God against those who offend God’s holiness, but he does not act beyond God’s permission and limits for him (as in Zechariah 3), just as Èşù does for *Olodumare*.

<sup>3</sup> Some are of the opinion that the temptations Jesus faced relate to how he would fulfil his role as Messiah (see Kirk 1972a; 1972b; Garlington 1994).

<sup>4</sup> Forkman (1972, 183) points out the differences between the accounts.

<sup>5</sup> The NT highlights the educative value of suffering (as in Rom 5:3–4; Jas 1:2–4; 1 Pet 1:6–7; and Heb 12:5–11).

<sup>6</sup> While Johnson (1999, 152) demonstrates the similarity between the experiences of Job and Paul, Garrett (1995) shows how Paul’s discussion of his thorn brings together the Job model of affliction and the παιδεία/discipline model of affliction.

### 4.3 Dominion of the Cosmos

Satan and Èşù are both “restless, wandering beings, whose main preoccupation is to test human fidelity to God” (Ogundipe 2012, 105; Idowu 1962, 81). On the two occasions that God asked Satan where he was coming from in the book of Job (1:7; 2:2), Satan replied, “From going to and fro on the earth, and from walking up and down on it.” Satan’s *ἄνω καὶ κάτω* (“walking up and down”) is understood as his asserting “dominion or sovereignty over” the earth (see Klein 2008, 100), and the Bible says that Satan controls this world (John 12:31; 14:30; 16:11; 2 Cor. 4:4; 1 John 4:4; 5:19). Satan’s promise to give Jesus “all the kingdoms of the world” and their glory because they have been given to him and he gives the authority to whoever he wants (Matt 4:8–9; Luke 4:6–7) also confirms his dominion over the earth (Green 1997, 194; Bovon 2002, 143). Similarly, the pervasiveness of evil in the human world confirms Satan’s pervasive influence (Nolland 2002, 180; France 2007, 135). Èşù has a similar pervasive influence, as he is scapegoated for every evil that happens in the world (Idowu 1962, 83; Abimbola 1994, 86–87; Gbádégésin 2007, 36).

Not only does Satan control this world, he also controls the demonic world (Eph. 2:2). Jesus, in a pericope that is commonly accepted as historically accurate (see Twelftree 1993, 113; Bock 2008, 75–76; Sheets 2008, 29), agrees with “his opponents’ belief in a prince of demons but discards their preferred designation *Beelzebub* in favour of *ὁ σατανάς* (Mark 3:22–30; Matt. 12:24–32; Luke 11:13–22)” (Farrar 2019, 57). Satan, thus, heads a kingdom of demonic powers that opposes God’s kingdom (Evans 2005, 67; cf. Herrmann 1999, 154–156), and these demons work “within God’s inscrutable design and purpose” (Ogundipe 2012, 102).

Therefore, while Satan in the OT is not “the malevolent prince of demons that ‘Satan’ subsequently became” in the NT (Floyd 2000, 374), the NT’s description of Satan aligns with the Yoruba view of Èşù. Èşù is the head of the *ajogun*, which has eight warlords who are simultaneously messengers to Èşù. These eight messengers of Èşù are *ikù* (death), *àrùn* (disease), *òfò* (loss), *ègbà* (paralysis), *òràn* (big

trouble), *èpe* (curse), *èwòn* (imprisonment), and *èse* (affliction), and he inflicts people with them as he pleases (Gbádégesin 2007, 39; Abimbola 2006, 75; Abimbola 1994, 76). Satan and the demons under his control also inflict people with disease (Job 2:7; Luke 13:16), loss (Job 1:13–17), paralysis (Mark 9:18; Acts 8:7), trouble (2 Cor. 12:7), curse, imprisonment (Rev. 2:10), and afflictions (Acts 10:38). This shows that *Èṣù* occupies same status with the biblical Satan.

#### 4.4 Moral Character

The most important aspect to consider is the NT portrayal of Satan's moral character, which many assume to be entirely evil, thus making him unlike *Èṣù*. However, they readily admit that *Èṣù* is much like the OT Satan (Idowu 1962, 80, 83; Awolalu and Dopamu 1979, 82–83; Dopamu 1986, 1, 13; 2000, 42). The assumption that the NT pictures Satan as an out-and-out, purely malevolent, enemy of God rather than his executioner, one who works against God rather than for him, underlays the constant argument that *Èṣù* is not Satan. Different theologians have, however, investigated Satan's moral character, and they have described it using different adjectives such as “noble” and “good” (Rollston 2016, 15–16), “benign” (Newsom 1996, 347; cf. Pope 2008, 9; Meyers and Meyers 1988, 183), “morally neutral” (see Rudman 2008, 192), ambiguous (Tate 1992, 463; Farrar 2019, 34), “not...normative” (Boda 2016, 230), “insolent” (Page 1995, 29), and “evil” (Laato 2013, 19). Satan's ambivalent nature is demonstrated in the divergent opinions of commentators about him in Job's scenario, either as a loyal prosecutor who seeks out and accuses persons found disloyal to Yahweh on the one hand (Eichrodt 1967, 205; Wink 1993, 13–14), or as an insidious, contemptuous fellow who is a troublemaker, a disturber of Yahweh's kingdom, and an adversary of both humans and Yahweh, on the other hand (Hartley 1988, 32, 33, 71; Alter 2010, 12; Boda 2016, 230, 248; cf. Andersen 1976, 87). Similarly, while the Second Temple writings have different antecedents to the NT Satan (see Brown 2015; Farrar 2019; de Bruin 2022), Satan in both

contexts is construed differently, ranging from being God's “minister of justice” (Kelly 2006; 2017) to being evil (de Bruin 2022, 436). Some authors (such as Farrar 2019; Farrar and Williams 2016a; 2016b; Kelly 2006) consider the NT depiction of Satan as evolving to become monolithic or coherent. For example, Paul depicts Satan as both God's agent (Stokes 2019, 208; Brown 2015, 200) and a rebel (Bell 2007, 245).

However, this is not to say that Satan, even when he works under God as a prosecutor, is not malevolent and opposed to God, because he was malevolent towards Job and antagonistic towards God. For instance, God's question to Satan about Job suggests “something of a taunt and provocation” (Pope 2008, 11) and “an ongoing rivalry with Satan” (Newsom 1996, 349). Satan also opposed God's assessment of Job and God later accused Satan of inciting him against Job to destroy Job without reason (Job 2:3). This antagonism between God and Satan, even in his judicial role, also manifests in God's rebuke of Satan in Zechariah 3:2. The verb *רָצַף*, the root word for God's “rebuke” of Satan in Zechariah 3, reveals God's “particularly strong invective against his opponents” (Klein 2008, 136), indicating that he had a strained relationship with Satan in the OT (Page 1995, 21). Satan's strained relationship with God whose purposes he serves thus makes him an “intimate enemy—one's trusted colleague, close associate, brother” rather than an outsider-enemy, which is why he is so apt to express conflict among Jews such that: “Those who asked, ‘How could God's angel become his enemy?’ were thus asking, in effect, ‘How could one of *us* become one of *them*?’” (Pagels 1995, 49). This description is true of *Èṣù*, who is so intimate with Yorubas that they call him “*Baba mi*” [“my Father”] (Kanu 2021, 66; Cosentino 1987, 261–62), yet they dread him so much for how easily he can become inimical towards them. *Èṣù*'s mediation between humans and spirit-beings, between the spirit-beings (the *orisas* and the *ajoguns*), is as both an *orisa* and a master of the *ajogun* simultaneously (Abimbola 1994, 81–86), making *Èṣù* a friend of all other deities and a



mediator between *orun* [heaven] and *aye* [earth] (Bewaji 1998, 14). Yet, *Èṣù* is also an adversary of these other deities (Idowu 1962, 81), thus making him an intimate enemy of these deities.

It is noteworthy that Satan incites people to sin and misleads them (1 Chron. 21:1; Matt. 4:10; Mark 1:13; Luke 4:8; Acts 5:3; 1 Cor. 7:5; 2 Cor. 2:11; 1 Tim. 5:15). According to Luke, Satan possesses, not tempts, Judas to betray Jesus (Bovon 2012, 135; de Bruin 2022, 445), while John says that the devil influenced Judas to betray Jesus (Johnson 1991, 335). In other words, Satan entered (Luke 22:3; John 13:27) into Judas's heart, having put the thought there to betray Jesus (Jn. 13:2; Page 2007, 461). *Èṣù* also incites people to sin, and his ability to confuse is one reason he is greatly feared. *Èṣù*, as a troublemaker and mischief maker (Johnson 1921, 34; Hallgren 1995, 91), is the scapegoat blamed for every evil action and occurrence (Idowu 1962, 83; Gbádégesin 2007, 36). Wande Abimbola (1994, 86–87), a scholar of the Yoruba language and literature, describes *Èṣù* as an anti-God who is held responsible for evil in the world because God is perceived as always and only good, and therefore not responsible for evil. This is exactly how the Bible holds Satan responsible for evil in the world. While Ogúntolá-Láguda (2013, 99) believes that though *Èṣù* can be evil occasionally, he does more good deeds than bad, which is why people venerate him more than other divinities of his status. The truth is that the people worship *Èṣù* every day because they fear him for how easily he could become inimical towards them, despite being a cherished companion (Idowu 1962, 80; Igboin 2019, 223).

The foregoing attests to the ambiguity of character of both Satan and *Èṣù*. The NT presents Satan, not as an outright opponent of God as some assume, but as a being who simultaneously serves and opposes God (de Bruin 2022, 445, 447; Farrar 2019, 34; Kelly 2017, 71–77; 2006, 93–103). *Èṣù* is considered neutral in that he is neither inherently benevolent nor malevolent but just an arbitrator between all the forces on both sides of the

universe (Aiyejinna 2009, 4; Abimbola 2006, 48). Some authors (e.g., Idowu 1962, 45; Awolalu 1979, 29; Gates Jr. 1988, 6; see Adeeko and Adesokan, eds. 2017, 120) attest to how *Èṣù*'s ambiguity as both benevolent and malevolent is to an almost unrestrained extent, thus he is called *àse burúkú se rere* [“the doer of both evil and good”] (Gbádégesin 2007, 34). It, however, needs to be clarified that just as Satan's “good” deeds have sinister motives, so also is *Èṣù*'s benevolence largely selfish in nature. When *Èṣù* is properly fed with sacrifices, he is a benevolent protector (Kanu 2021, 66; Cosentino 1987, 261–62), but when *Èṣù* is not properly fed with sacrifices, he accuses human beings and other divinities before *Olodumare* (Kanu 2021, 66). Though some Yorubas view *Èṣù*'s evil as intended for a greater good, this does not make him a good spirit because his evil eventually eclipses his purported goodness. (Gbádégesin 2007, 34–35).

*Èṣù*'s malevolence is demonstrated in his identification as “the god of mischief”, who is greatly feared for his mischievousness and has to be placated continuously before he delivers the messages he is sent (Kanu 2021, 66). Ogundipe (2012, 105, 231) Observes a rebellion undertaken by *Èṣù* against God in Yoruba mythology, which led to his banishment from heaven, similar to Satan's rebellion in the Bible. However, the reason for their rebellion differs. *Èṣù*, as a trickster (Aiyejinna 2009, 3–4), changes his appearance as he wishes, similar to how Satan changes his appearance (2 Cor 11:14). *Èṣù* can choose to be mischievous by exploiting his ability to mutate into as many as 256 forms as he wishes (Idowu 1962, 80; Opoku 1978, 70; Kanu 2021, 66; The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica 2025), as indicated by his epithet *elegbara*, literally “*Elegba ara*, that is, the one with many manifestations” (Aiyejinna 2009, 3–4). His trickery causes fights among close friends, and he takes delight in chaos and destruction (Idowu 1962, 82; Cosentino 1987, 262–63; Pelton 1980, 141). In Yoruba cosmology, evil is more closely associated with *Èṣù* than with any other *orisa*. (Dopamu 2000, 28), such that he is thought of as “infinitely diabolical and

unrepentantly destructive” (Gbádégesin 2007, 36).

It is thus obvious, from the foregoing, that *Èṣù* is not different from Satan in terms of membership of the divine council, judicial responsibility as God’s ministers, dominion of the cosmos, and morality. Therefore, Crowther was not wrong to have equated *Èṣù* with Satan in his Bible translation. Crowther’s translation is reminiscent of the LXX’s preference to translate  $\text{ὁ διάβολος}$  as *ó diábolos* rather than transliterate it as some advocates of “*Èṣù* is not Satan” wish Satan to be transliterated into Yoruba. Therefore, Crowther’s choice of *Èṣù* is an accurate “thought-for-thought” translation of Satan as he did not make *Èṣù* evil but rather only “codified and canonised” the general belief about *Èṣù* as evil (Idowu 2023).

#### **5.0 IMPLICATIONS OF CROWTHER’S MOTHER-TONGUE TRANSLATION FOR THE *MISSIO DEI***

This paper argues that Crowther’s translation of Satan as *Èṣù* is a remarkable attempt to accomplish the *missio Dei* and that Yoruba Christians need to deploy his translation of Satan as *Èṣù* as they participate in the *missio Dei* today. This position is despite whatever attacks launched against Crowther’s translation, such as ignorance about who *Èṣù* is as someone who was captured and sold into slavery as a young boy of just 12 years old (<https://alamojayoruba.com/esu-is-not-satan-who-esu-is-and-who-he-is-not/>). The previous section refuted this assumption by demonstrating that *Èṣù* is conceptually and ontologically equivalent to Satan.

Worse than the attacks against Crowther’s translation is the sinister motives attached to Crowther’s translation of Satan as *Èṣù*, which are that he did so to avenge the role of his people, the Yorubas, in the slave trade that destabilised him and his family (Oyeyemi 2012, 1), and that he imitates the westerners’ “psychological disdain for, and rejection of, African culture” (Aiyejinna 2009, 4). History reveals, to the contrary, that Crowther neither sought to avenge the slave trade on his people nor hated or rejected the African culture for the slave trade. Instead, Crowther volunteered to

be part of the 1841 “Niger Expedition,” a Christian mission voyage from Sierra Leone to the Niger area, to Yorubaland (his native land), in order to meet the spiritual needs of freed slaves who had returned home and required spiritual nurture. (Ajayi 1965, 28–30; Ajani 2013, 64). His love for his people and Africans not only made him translate the Bible into the Yoruba language, but it also made him resign in 1890 to protest against denigrating comments by some white missionaries about Africans (<https://wycliffe.org.uk/story/samuel-crowther>). His love is seen in his evangelistic fervour, a fact that is simultaneously adduced as a reason Crowther translated Satan as *Èṣù*. Kanu (2021, 70) is of the view that Crowther and other early translators of the Bible into Yoruba and Igbo languages were overzealous to evangelise Africans and that this made them poorly committed to exploring and establishing a more pertinent category for the biblical Satan/devil in these languages. However, the previous section already established that *Èṣù* is the most pertinent and accurate “thought-for-thought” equivalent of Satan.

Crowther was an active participant in the *missio Dei*, not only among his own people group (the Yoruba) but also among other people groups in the defunct Niger Area, now known as Nigeria. His missionary efforts among his countrymen motivated the Church of England to ordain him as a (missionary) bishop, the Anglican bishop of West Africa, in 1864, making him the first African bishop of the Anglican Church. The indelible impact of Crowther’s involvement in the *missio Dei* is evident in the numerous Anglican institutions in Nigeria that bear his name, immortalising him.<sup>7</sup> Some Anglican churches, including the Church of Nigeria, celebrate Crowther annually on December 31 with a feast on their liturgical calendar

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<sup>7</sup> The church’s only university is named “Ajayi Crowther University” and situated in Oyo, not far from Crowther’s birthplace, Osogun. Some of its seminaries are named after him, e.g., Crowther Graduate Theological Seminary, Abeokuta, Ogun State; Bishop Crowther Seminary, Awka, Anambra State; and Bishop Crowther College of Theology, Okene, Kogi State.

(<https://www.drraphaeljames.com/2018/05/the-most-reverend-samuel-ajayi-crowther.html>).

Crowther's translation and publication efforts were part of his efforts in fulfilling the *missio Dei*. His *Bibeli Mimọ* made him "the first African mother-tongue translator" of the Bible in the modern era (<https://wycliffe.org.uk/story/a-brief-history-of-bible-translation>). Though the Yoruba alphabets Crowther used in his translation of the Bible standardised the inscription of Yoruba language, occasioned an explosion of written literatures in Yoruba language, and birthed Yoruba nationalism (Oladejo 2012, 103–104, 110–111; Eades 1980), the more important impact of his translation is that it "set new standards for later African translations" of the Bible (<https://www.bu.edu/missiology/missionary-biography/c-d/crowther-samuel-adjai-or-ajayi-c-1807-1891/>). Seeing that translation of the Bible into people's vernacular provides wider access to and better understanding of the gospel message, thus fulfilling the *missio Dei* (Thinane 2024, 2), Crowther proves himself a pacesetter in exploring Bible translation as a means of evangelising his people and participating in the *missio Dei*. His mother-tongue translation of the Bible contributed to the spread and permanence of Christianity in Yorubaland, just as is the case with other African tribes that had the Bible translated into their dialects (see Thinane 2024, 4–5; Togarasei 2009, 52; Loba-Mkole 2008, 253; Watt 2005, 19; Hermanson 2002, 7). Crowther's mother-tongue translation of the Bible is a testament to Moore's (2014, 77) claim that "Bible translation is one of the most effective mission tools."

Another important aspect to address concerning Crowther's translation efforts as part of his involvement in the *missio Dei* is the concealed but dangerous motive behind the insistence that *Èṣù* is not Satan. Underlying the argument by traditionalists that *Èṣù* is not Satan is the belief that *Èṣù* is not to be rejected as preached by Yoruba Christians; rather, *Èṣù* is to be worshipped and appeased, as against the gospel message. This belief, when endorsed by Christians who think that *Èṣù* is not Satan

[the NT out-and-out enemy of God], actually undermines the *missio Dei* because, as demonstrated in this paper, the NT Satan is not substantially different from *Èṣù*. Therefore, the *missio Dei*, which underlay Crowther's translation efforts, means that Yoruba Christians must reiterate Crowther's assertion that *Èṣù* is Satan and so *Èṣù* must be ardently rejected by as many who desire God's salvation. The translation of Satan as *Èṣù* for Yorubas implies a total rejection of *Èṣù*, his worship, works, and objects, especially expressed in songs.<sup>8</sup> This is what the Bible teaches and what Christians must emphasise.

Kanu (2021, 70) thinks that translating Satan as *Èṣù* in the Yoruba Bible (same for *Ekwensu* in Igbo Bible) results in the confusion of *Èṣù*'s functions in traditional Yoruba religion and a conflict between Christianity and traditional African religion (especially *Èṣù* worshippers), which in turn hinders positive, fruitful interaction and dialogue between Christians and Yoruba traditional religionists. The researcher disagrees with this position because the comparative study of Satan and *Èṣù* in the previous section provides basic, sufficient information for Christians to dialogue with adherents of *Èṣù* and prove to them that *Èṣù* is the biblical Satan, thus creating more opportunities to fulfil the *missio Dei* among idol worshippers. Crowther was pioneer of "an early form of Christian-Muslim dialogue for Africa" during his missions in the upper and middle Niger territories (<https://www.bu.edu/missiology/missionary-biography/c-d/crowther-samuel-adjai-or-ajayi-c-1807-1891/>), so Christians who imitate Crowther by engaging traditionalists in dialogue and demonstrating that *Èṣù* is indeed Satan contribute to fulfilling the *mission Dei* as they "destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ" (2 Cor 10:5, ESV).

The Bible teaches that Satan corrupts the truth, intending to deceive, and traditional Yoruba belief portrays *Èṣù* as a deceiver. Yet,

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<sup>8</sup> For some of these songs, see Gbádégesin (2007, 45–46) and Dopámú (2000, 35–38).

some Yorubas do not think that Èṣù is deceiving them to believe that he is not the Satan they are to reject in line with the *missio Dei*. This is to show how great Èṣù's (Satan's) deception is on many, including Christians, who believe that Èṣù is not Satan. This means that, in accomplishing the *missio Dei* among those caught up by Satan's wiles, Christians must put on the whole armour of God, preaching the gospel and "praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication" (Eph 6:18, ESV). This is to bring down Satan's strongholds in the lives of the people and remove the veil with which he blinds them (cf. 2 Cor 4:3–6).

## 6.0 CONCLUSION

Èṣù is deceitful, and the continuous denial that he is not the deceitful Satan, not only by his worshippers but even by Christian religious scholars, despite the obvious ontological and functional semblance, indicates that he is successful in deceiving as many people as he can. The assumed outright opposition of NT Satan found missing in most portraits of Èṣù is basic to the argument that Èṣù is not Satan. However, this paper shows that this outright opposition does not make Èṣù substantially different from the biblical Satan, who is not an outright opponent of God. Christians, therefore, have the responsibility to reiterate Crowther's valid conceptualisation of Satan as Èṣù in his Yoruba translation as they participate in the *missio Dei*. Yoruba Christians have the divine mandate to preach the gospel to their unsaved neighbours, who believe that Èṣù is not to be vehemently rejected, and pray that they will be saved, thus fulfilling the *missio Dei*.

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