

A cross-cultural reading of Romans 12:1–2:

A theological reflection on mental illnesses incurred from my PhD studies in Scotland

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Abstract

My PhD programme in Scotland started in 2019, after completing master's degrees in South Africa and the USA. Here, I was almost immediately medically diagnosed with anxiety, then with dyslexia through the University Disability Office, and in 2021 I started medical treatment to help overcome Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and depression. The support I received from my medical practice, disability office, and university faculty allowed me to access learning adjustments, including additional time to complete my studies. Since I am a Xhosa Christian, I turned to the Bible for spiritual encouragement to help make sense of these mental health challenges. Such clarity was required because in my own South African Xhosa cultural background it is common to interpret instances of misfortune and illness as the result of a troubled spiritual dimension that can be rectified through propitiation. After a long cycle of therapy and coun-selling, in 2023 I meditated on Romans 12:1–2, which lead me to the questions: how can I 'renew my mind' spiritually to heal my mental illnesses, and how do I honour God as a 'living sacrifice' if my mind is struggling to hope? This paper provides a cross-cultural theological reflection on how I answered these questions and found meaning through a Xhosa Christian

spirituality bound in community, prayer and Bible study. This meditation helped me to understand that it was ‘the will of God’ to continue my PhD journey, which I successfully completed and graduated in 2025.



Introduction

In October 2019, I started my PhD studies in New Testament and Christian Origins at Edinburgh University. I embarked on this PhD quest after successfully completing two theology master’s degrees from Stellenbosch University, South Africa (2015–2019) and Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary, USA (2018–2019). I was fortunate to have been selected as one of two Mandela Rhodes scholars to pursue a PhD program in the United Kingdom, called the ‘Leverhulme Mandela Rhodes Doctoral Scholarship’ (now known as: ‘Shaun Johnson Memorial Scholarship’).¹

Initially, my PhD research project was concerned with John 6:22–59, focussed on Jewish cultural-religious themes embedded in this discourse that delineates Jesus as the ‘Bread of Life’. However, this changed significantly when stumbling on John 6:53–54, where Jesus says: ‘If anyone who eats of my flesh and drinks of my blood they will have eternal life.’ Though this passage is referred to as an example of sacramental theology and alludes to the Christian practice of Eucharist, the verses showed how Jesus’ flesh and blood are sacrificial elements that provide humans who believe in him eternal life. These sacrificial elements challenged and diametrically opposed my own Xhosa cultural religious background, since Jesus’s death on the cross institutes a new covenant with God that is commemorated through the observance of the Lord’s Supper.

¹ The Mandela Rhodes Foundation provides scholarships for African students to pursue a one-year Honours or two-year master’s degree at a South African university, allowing them to become a Mandela Rhodes Scholar. The scholarship is not just limited to covering students’ fees, accommodation, and living expenses for their year in residence. They also participate in a year-long programme where they complete workshops and training on the Foundation’s core values that build on Nelson Mandela’s vision, namely: Leadership, Reconciliation, Entrepreneurship and Education (see also, “The Scholarship”, The Mandela Rhodes Foundation, <https://www.mandelarhodes.org/scholarship/>). The Shaun Johnson Memorial Scholarship provides two Mandela Rhodes alumni scholars with the opportunity to pursue a PhD in any discipline at a university in the United Kingdom.

Yet, in Xhosa indigenous customs, animal sacrifices are offered to ancestors, previously deceased humans who live in the spiritual realm and act as mediators between God and humans, and in exchange provide adherents protection, prosperity, and success.

The dilemma lay in the seemingly competitive mediatory functions of ancestors and Jesus. For instance, Jesus challenges this mediatory element of ancestors, as John 14:6 describes Jesus as the only source through which humans can communicate to God the Father, since Jesus is ‘the way, truth, and life’. Following these connections, I changed the direction of my PhD research to focus on the significance of Jesus’s sacrificial death in the Gospel of John, and how John’s portrayal of Jesus’s death as a Passover Lamb can challenge Xhosa indigenous practices and beliefs in animal sacrifices directed towards the ancestors.² The connection became more profound when discovering the central role lambs had in liberating ancient Israelites from slavery in Egypt, and the function of Xhosa animal sacrifices to ancestors which often include sheep, goats, and oxen/cows. Such an exploration would not only test my own faith in Jesus Christ but also evoke deep theological questions about some of the Xhosa traditions and practices that I was born and raised within in South Africa.

My PhD’s theological questions regarding ancestors, Jesus’s sacrificial death on the cross, and Xhosa animal sacrifice, would become a real-life concern when I was medically diagnosed with depression and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in 2021. In the same period, I completed an assessment with the university’s disability office that revealed I had a learning difficulty in the form of dyslexia. Such results, in a Xhosa religious worldview, can often lead individuals to start to question whether they are in good standing with their ancestors and proceed to seek consultation and direction from a ‘priest-diviner’ or ‘indigenous spiritual doctor’ to discern what can be done to atone for their misfortune and illness. However, my parents brought me up to embrace Xhosa indigenous beliefs in relationship with Protestant Christian teachings and modern Western forms of medicine and therapy. For example, in 2017, I suffered

² My PhD thesis was titled: “The Dilemmas of Jesus’s Sacrificial Death on a Roman Cross: Towards a Xhosa Christian Hermeneutic for Xhosa Indigenous Customs of Animal Sacrifice”. Though there is an embargo on my thesis because I hope to have it published, the abstract is available here: Edinburgh Research Archive, the University of Edinburgh, <https://hdl.handle.net/1842/43969>.

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from severe burnout and was taking anti-depressants as the basic task of waking up and living became extremely difficult. Not only did my father drive me to a Christian councillor in a Johannesburg Methodist church, but my mother also arranged for me to receive targeted mentorship advice from a university professor who was an ordained Presbyterian minister. Coming from these notable personal experiences, I decided to pursue therapy and counselling after receiving the diagnoses of 2021, which would lead me on a two-year journey of healing alongside my PhD studies.

I learned to navigate the terrain of these mental illnesses and a learning difficulty by actively participating in the Protestant church community my wife and I attended, along with the observing of Christian spiritual disciplines of prayer, Bible study, and meditation. During a quiet time in 2023, I stumbled across Romans 12:1–2, where the Apostle challenges Christians to be ‘transformed by the renewal of their minds’ and become ‘living sacrifices’ for God. This renewal of the mind is connected to a Christian convert aiming to pursue the ‘will of God’ and ‘not conforming to the pattern of this world’. Yet I wondered how I can renew my mind if I am struggling with mental illnesses? And what honour can I possibly bestow on God as a ‘living sacrifice’ if I am unable to see or feel hope? To answer these two questions became possible through a cross-cultural reflection of Romans 12:1–2 through my evolving Xhosa Christian background. I discovered that my learning difficulty was a gift, understood that my mental illness was a product of unresolved trauma, and actively sought to overcome difficulties from my past unapologetically. In doing so, I would start to restore my mental health, successfully defend my PhD thesis, and graduate from Edinburgh University as a Doctor of Philosophy in 2025, embodying the words of Nelson Mandela: ‘It always seems impossible until it is done.’



A cross-cultural reading of Romans 12:1–2

Mental health issues are an ongoing challenge in the United Kingdom. For instance, 1 in 4 people in England experience a mental health problem of some kind each year.³ Scotland is no different; in a 2013 health survey

³ Cf. Mind, “Mental Health Facts and Statistics”, <https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/types-of-mental-health-problems/mental-health-facts-and-statistics/>. See also, Carl Baker and Esme Kirk-Wade, “Mental Health Statistics: Prevalence,

24% and 20% of adults between 25–34 and 35–44, respectively, said that their jobs were ‘very’ or ‘extremely stressful’.⁴ My own mental health issues of depression and PTSD, came from a two-fold pressure of navigating the difficulties of completing a PhD thesis with dyslexia, and having to face unresolved traumas from my past. The counselling support I received assisted in this, with sessions over time enabling me to engage with three internal selves – the child, the teenager, and the adult – in order to better address the source of each issue that arose from discussions. Such a demarcation of the self was a fruitful exercise, as it allows an individual to not only locate the origins of their pain but also identifies the prevailing interrogatives that arise when having to face those past events. Therapeutic techniques to assist in the healing process, included engaging in conversations with targeted questions to help unpack the problem, and homework exercises in the form of writing letters to these three selves for one’s own personal reflection.

In addition to therapy and counselling, I continued to engage in the spiritual disciplines of Bible study, prayer and meditation. These spiritual practices reflect my Christian background, shaped by both Protestant and Charismatic church experiences. While the Protestant Presbyterian context I was born and raised in highlighted the sacredness of the scriptural text,

Services and Funding in England”, 1 March 2024, House of Commons Library, <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/SN06988/SN06988.pdf>; Ewan Carr et al., “Trajectories of Mental Health Among UK University Staff and Postgraduate Students During the Pandemic”, *Occupational and Environmental Medicine* 79, no. 8 (2022): 514–20; and Greta Liubertiene et al., “Common Mental Health Conditions”, in *Adult Psychiatric Morbidity Survey: Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing, England, 2023/4*, ed. Sarah Morris et al. (NHS England, 2025), <https://digital.nhs.uk/data-and-information/publications/statistical/adult-psychiatric-morbidity-survey/survey-of-mental-health-and-wellbeing-england-2023-24/common-mental-health-conditions>.

⁴ Cf. Erin Deakin, “Mental Health and Wellbeing”, in *The Scottish Health Survey 2023 – Volume 1: Main Report* (Scottish Government, 2024), <https://www.gov.scot/publications/scottish-health-survey-2023-volume-1-main-report/pages/7/>. See also, Scottish Action for Mental Health (SAMH), “Understanding Mental Health Problems”, https://www.samh.org.uk/documents/SAMH_Understanding_mental_health_problems_e-use.pdf; Nicola C. Byrom, et al., “Predicting Stress and mental wellbeing among doctoral researchers”, *Journal of Mental Health* 31, no. 6 (2022): 783–91; and NHS Inform, “Mental health”, <https://www.nhsinform.scot/illnesses-and-conditions/mental-health>.

Charismatic and Pentecostal churches emphasised that Christian converts have an active relationship with the living God. After my medical diagnosis of mental health problems, the teachings from both church traditions were put to the test. I began to consider whether God had abandoned me, enquired during prayer if I had done something wrong, and struggled to reconcile the physical effects of mental illness on my body with Christian faith teachings in scripture. These interrogatives cohere with Xhosa indigenous beliefs, where instances of misfortune, illness, and bad luck can be attributed to a person's unfruitful relationship with the ancestors. In common with many other African groups, Xhosa people regard ancestors as transcended spirit agents that can provide blessing and honour on their human offspring but can also bring about misfortune as punishment if human progeny causes them to become angry.⁵ The biblical worldview is less definite, though it affirms that those who commit wrongdoing or evil will be punished (e.g., Ps 34:16, 37:9; Prov 11:21; Isa 13:11), and God can discipline followers like a parent disciplines a child, which is also considered to be a blessing (e.g., Heb 12:6, Prov 3:11–12, Ps 94:12; Job 5:17).

The continuous low moods and tiredness of depression, and troubled sleep from PTSD, had real-life effects on my daily life and faith journey. Though there are Bible passages such as Psalm 34:18 that highlight how: 'The LORD is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit' (NIV), the way I felt in my body and mind led me to a deep desire for God's saving grace and nearness to make the downcastness go away entirely. Yet, I would learn that the closeness of God does not mean bodily freedom from pain. Rather, God's nearness and saving work is a multifaceted and can result in treatment of individuals in more holistic ways than we would expect. For instance, the medical support had issued

⁵ Cf. Berthold A. Pauw, *Christianity and Xhosa Tradition: Belief and Ritual Among Xhosa-speaking Christians* (Oxford University Press, 1975), 110–13; Jacob K. Olupona, *African Religions: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2014), 28; and Charles Nyamiti, *Christ As Our Ancestor: Christology from an African Perspective* (Mambo Press, 1984), 15–16. See also, W. D. Hammond-Tooke, "Urbanisation and the Interpretation of Misfortune: A Quantitative Analysis", *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute* 40, no. 1 (1970): 29–30; John S. Mbiti, *African Religions & Philosophy*, 2nd ed. (Heinemann, 1990), 80–83; and Kwame Bediako, *Christianity in Africa: Renewal of a Non-Western Religion* (Edinburgh University Press, 1995), 216–18.

medications for me to take to assist with both mental health problems. My impatience became clear during a Bible study in 2023, when I read and meditated on Romans 12:1–2. Before proceeding to offer a brief exegetical interpretation from my Xhosa Christian context in the subsection that follows, I must make clear that my initial reading of this Bible passage focused on how a Christian should live ‘faithfully towards the living God’. I decided to refer to this principle as ‘fidelity to God’ and considered it to be aligned to living a life that honours the Lord in all that a person does in their everyday life. Upon further study, however, my interpretation of Romans 12:1–2 would become slightly nuanced and even more significant when considered cross-culturally in conversation with other African readings of this passage.



Fidelity to God in Romans 12:1–2: An African Christian consideration

In my Bible study and meditation on Romans 12:1–2, there were three phrases that stood out for me: ‘living sacrifice’, ‘renewing of your mind’, and ‘the will of God’. Commentators agree that this section summarises the previous theological instructions in Romans 1–11, and is the first of Paul’s exhortations (Rom 12–15) that focus on how Christians can adequately respond to the letter’s teachings.⁶ This is evidenced by Paul’s explicit statement directed to the readers that says: ‘I exhort’ (*παρακαλῶ*).⁷ The Greek verb *παρακαλέω* can also mean in English: ‘to urge, appeal to, and encourage’.⁸ This appeal to Christian listeners is grounded upon the ‘mercies/compassion of God’ (cf. Rom 12:1), which is alluded to in the

⁶ Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (BECNT 6; Baker Academic, 1998), 642–43; Douglas J. Moo, *The Letter to the Romans*, 2nd ed., The New International Commentary on the New Testament (NICNT; Eerdmans, 2018), 766–68; James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 9–16* (WBC 38; Word, 1988), 707–08; C. E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on The Epistle to the Romans*, vol. 2: Romans IV–XVI and Essays (ICC; T&T Clark, 1994), 595–96; Robert Jewett, *Romans: A Commentary* (Hermenia; Fortress Press, 2007), 724–25.

⁷ Cf., Jewett, *Romans*, 724; Cranfield, *A Critical*, 597; Dunn, *Romans*, 708; Moo, *The Letter*, 767; and Schreiner, *Romans*, 642.

⁸ *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature (BDAG)*, ed. Frederick William Danker, 3rd ed. (University of Chicago Press, 2000), s.v., *παρακαλέω*.

previous chapter of Romans (11:30–32) to highlight the mercy God has shown to now include Gentiles as part of God’s people. Thomas Schreiner, however, points out that the mercy shown by God is conjoined with the phrase ‘I exhort’, and suggests that the Greek preposition διὰ that follows it should be translated as ‘because of’ and not ‘through’ to highlight its manifold function in the Old Testament (e.g., Gen 43:14, Ps 51:1; Jer 42:12).⁹ I propose that the grace from which Paul appeals to Christ’s followers is based on the saving work God achieved through Jesus’s death.

In Romans 5:8, Jesus’s death displays the magnitude of God’s love for us as humanity. Tsion Seyoum Meren has recently proposed reading Paul’s ideas of suffering in Romans 5:3–5 as an ‘embodied experience’ that ‘discloses the cognition of vulnerability, weakness, helplessness and limitation, thereby, positioning the sufferer as a recipient of God’s gift of love and hope’.¹⁰ When viewed in this light, suffering does not become something that is disconnected from the person’s own self. Instead, as Merren puts it, ‘suffering shapes one’s lifestyle in a holistic manner and casts new scenarios on the human subject’.¹¹ Jesus suffering death on the cross not only saves Christians by reconciling them with the living God but also provides them with a new hope through the gift of the Holy Spirit (cf. Rom 5:5 and 5:10–11). The appeal in Roman 12:1 calls Christians ‘to present their bodies’ as ‘living sacrifices’ that are ‘holy’ and ‘acceptable’ to God. The language of ‘presenting bodies’, ‘holy’ and ‘pleasing’ resembles that of the Old Testament sacrificial cult, where the bodies of live animals presented at the altar had to be without blemish so they were considered holy before God, and offered as whole-burnt offerings that were a ‘pleasing’ aroma for the Lord.¹² Paul’s concern, I propose, aims to encourage Christian followers to embody their faith in ways that are honourable and pleasing to the living God. This includes embracing periods of suffering and pursuing God even in times of uncertainty, mental health issues, and illness, where the willingness of the Christian convert to participate in God’s saving mission through Jesus can be realised in their person on account of them being vessels that can house the Holy Spirit.

⁹ Cf. Schreiner, *Romans*, 642–43.

¹⁰ Tsion Seyoum Merren, “A Gospel for the Vulnerable: An Embodied Reading of Suffering in Romans 5:3–5”, *Neotestamentica* 59, no. 2 (2025): 308.

¹¹ Merren, “A Gospel for the Vulnerable”, 318.

¹² See also, Dunn, *Romans*, 709–11; Moo, *The Letter*, 769–70; Schreiner, *Romans*, 644–45; Jewett, *Romans*, 729; and Cranfield, *A Critical*, 599–601.

Two instructions that Paul provides to guide Christians to pursue this living sacrificial quest are, ‘not to conform to the pattern of this world’ and ‘be transformed by the renewal of the mind’ (cf. Rom 12:2). Isaac Boaheng’s exegesis on Romans 12:1 argues that all Christian believers are now priests through the priesthood of Jesus Christ.¹³ This then requires the Christian to participate in spiritual forms of sacrifice, as in 1 Peter 2:5 for example, and that this the outworking of this includes: ‘prayer, praise, thanksgiving, repentance, justice, kindness, and love’.¹⁴ With this in view, Paul’s above-mentioned instructions to resist conformity and to pursue a transformed mind, function as a strategy of discernment for negotiating daily life. For instance, David M. Kasali puts it like this:

This renewing is an internal process, a reorientation of our world view as we seek to live the way Christ lived and to think as he thought. By offering our bodies to God, we are offering him our minds. Nothing is left behind to conform to the pattern of this world. Once we have made this sacrifice, we are ready for his service.¹⁵

‘Transforming the mind’ becomes the primary task once conformity to the world is rejected, where the Christian actively attempts to discern the will of God. However, it must be said here that Paul operates within an apocalyptic framework that characterised the present age as evil, and the one that is to come as blessed.¹⁶ Nevertheless, nonconformity is recognition that the Christian is changed through the Christian Gospel message of the Son of God: Jesus died so we are reconciled to God and saved through his life (cf. Rom 5:10). Thus, a Christian’s ‘reasonable worship’ (cf. Rom 12:1) is to be available to participate in this saving work as a living sacrifice, and is the perfect, acceptable, and good, will of God (cf. Rom 12:2).

¹³ Isaac Boaheng, “Applying Paul’s Theological and Ethical Teaching in Romans 12:1 to an African Context”, *International Journal of Social Sciences and Religion* 4, no. 1 (2023): 34, <https://doi.org/10.53639/ijssr.v4i1.126>.

¹⁴ Boaheng, “Applying Paul’s Theological”, 35.

¹⁵ David M. Kasali, “Romans”, in *African Bible Commentary*, ed. Tokunoh Adeyemo et al., (Langham Creative Projects, 2006), 1394–95.

¹⁶ Cf., Moo, *The Letter*, 773–74; Dunn, *Romans*, 717–18; Schreiner, *Romans*, 647–48; Jewett, *Romans*, 733; and Cranfield, *A Critical*, 608–09.



Conclusion

I have attempted to provide a cross-cultural reflection on Romans 12:1–2 in the light of Christian Gospel claims in Romans 5:1–11. This ‘embodied’ interpretation displayed that the suffering of Jesus on the cross calls the Christian convert to embrace and acknowledge their own bodily suffering. The Christian convert carries a new hope in the form of the Holy Spirit and must be willing and available to participate in God’s saving work, in a way that is pleasing to God, and to strive to ultimately do what is honourable before God. Such a sacrificial way of living requires discernment – avoiding conformity to ‘worldly’ patterns and pursuing the transformation of our minds in seeking God.