

Question:

Why does the Swahili Bible use the word "*mwivi*" instead of "*mwizi*"?
What does *mwivi* really mean?

Answer:

The words *mwivi* and *mwizi* both mean the same thing: a thief—someone who steals. The difference between them is not in meaning, but in language usage across time.

The Swahili used in early Bible translations—especially the Union Version Bible—was based on an older coastal dialect known as Kimvita, historically used in Mombasa and along the East African coast. This dialect contains vocabulary and expressions that are no longer commonly used in modern standard Swahili.

That's why, in older Swahili Bible translations, you'll frequently encounter words like *mwivi* (thief) instead of the more familiar modern term *mwizi*. Despite the different spelling and pronunciation, *mwivi* still refers to a thief.

Biblical Examples of "Mwivi" (Thief) in Scripture:

What's the Difference Between "Mwivi" and "Mwizi"?

Here are some examples from the Swahili Union Version and their English equivalents from the English Standard Version:

1. Exodus 22:2

- *Swahili*: "Ikiwa mwivi akiingizwa..."
- *ESV*: "If a thief is found breaking in..."

2. Job 24:14

- *Swahili*: "Mwivi huamka alfajiri..."
- *ESV*: "The murderer rises before it is light... and the thief breaks in at night."

3. Psalm 50:18

- *Swahili*: "Ulipomwona mwivi, ulipendezwa naye..."
- *ESV*: "If you see a thief, you are pleased with him..."

4. Proverbs 6:30

- *Swahili*: "Watu hawamdharau mwivi akiiba..."
- *ESV*: "People do not despise a thief if he steals..."

5. Joel 2:9

- *Swahili*: "Huteka nyara kama mwivi..."
- *ESV*: "They enter through the windows like a thief."

6. Luke 12:39

- *Swahili*: "Kama mwenye nyumba angalijua saa atakayokuja mwivi..."
- *ESV*: "If the master of the house had known at what hour the thief was coming..."

These passages reflect that *mwivi* is simply the older word for *mwizi*, used consistently throughout the Swahili Union Bible.

Why Is Jesus Described as Coming "Like a Thief"?

Beyond the language question, there's a profound theological truth in the way Jesus' return is described in Scripture.

Revelation 16:15

"Behold, I am coming like a thief! Blessed is the one who stays awake, keeping his garments on, that he may not go about naked and be seen exposed!"

This verse echoes Jesus' earlier teachings in the Gospels, where He warns His followers to always be ready, because His return will be sudden and unexpected—just like the arrival of a thief who does not announce his coming.

- Matthew 24:43-44

"But know this, that if the master of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. Therefore

you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect."

- 1 Thessalonians 5:2-4

"For you yourselves are fully aware that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night... But you are not in darkness, brothers, for that day to surprise you like a thief."

The idea of Jesus coming "like a thief" emphasizes watchfulness, spiritual preparedness, and urgency. A thief does not ring the bell or give prior notice. Likewise, Christ's second coming will not be scheduled on a calendar for the world to prepare. Those who are spiritually awake and clothed in righteousness will not be caught off guard. Those asleep in sin, however, will face judgment.

This imagery also humbles us: while the world may expect a conquering king with fanfare (like a soldier), Christ's return will be quiet and surprising—to test the readiness of our hearts.

- *Mwivi* and *mwizi* are simply two versions of the same Swahili word, meaning "thief."

What's the Difference Between "Mwivi" and "Mwizi"?

- The use of *mwivi* in the Bible reflects the older Kimvita dialect used in early Swahili translations.
- More importantly, the use of the word in Scripture draws attention to a crucial truth: Jesus will return like a thief—suddenly and without warning.
- As believers, we must be spiritually awake, alert, and clothed in righteousness (Revelation 16:15), always ready for His return.

May the Lord bless you as you remain watchful.

Come, Lord Jesus. (Revelation 22:20)

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