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## **The Bible as a site of struggle: an ongoing dialogue with Steve de Gruchy**

### **Introduction**

In October 2007, Steve de Gruchy and I, together with other colleagues from our School, drove from Pietermaritzburg to Bloemfontein to attend and present papers at the the Bible Society of South Africa's Setswana Bible 150 Years Theological Conference. The theme of the conference was "Is the Bible Still Relevant for the Southern Africa Society?" The car journey and the papers we presented continued and deepened a conversation Steve and I had had since his days as Director of the Kuruman Moffat Mission Trust, a position he took up in 1994,<sup>1</sup> and from where he had facilitated my research among the BaTlhaping people of the Kuruman area.

The paper Steve presented, which was later published together with the other papers, had the title "Reversing the Biblical Tide: What Kuruman Teaches London about Mission in a Post-colonial Era".<sup>2</sup> The paper I presented had the title "From Mmahutu to Today: A Case Study".<sup>3</sup> The emphasis of each of our papers framed our conversation, then and in an ongoing way.

In Steve's paper he states his emphasis as follows: "The point is simply this: the translation and printing of the Bible in places like Kuruman began an irreversible process in which the tide of mission has turned back from the South to the North".<sup>4</sup> The reason "the translation and printing of the Bible" is so central to his argument is because, as he says, using the work of Lamin Sanneh, "The flowering of Christian activity in modern Africa has taken place in ground suitably worked by vernacular translation".<sup>5</sup> More specifically, and this is where our work overlaps, Steve and Sanneh both locate African agency at the centre of what Steve

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<sup>1</sup> See Beverley Haddad, "Introduction," in *Keeping Body and Soul Together: Reflections by Steve De Gruchy on Theology and Development*, ed. Beverley Haddad (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2015), vii.

<sup>2</sup> Steve de Gruchy, "Reversing the Biblical Tide: What Kuruman Teaches London About Mission in a Post-Colonial Era," *Acta Theologica Supplementum* 12 (2009).

<sup>3</sup> Gerald O. West, "The Beginning of African Biblical Interpretation: The Bible among the Batlhaping," *Acta Theologica Supplementem* 12, *The Bible and its translations: colonial and postcolonial encounters with the indigenous*(2009).

<sup>4</sup> de Gruchy, "Reversing the Biblical Tide," 48.

<sup>5</sup> de Gruchy, "Reversing the Biblical Tide," 49.

refers to as “this countervailing movement in Christian mission” and what Sanneh refers to as “local [African] criticism”.<sup>6</sup>

We know from Steve’s other work on theology and development how much attention he gave to theorising African ‘assets’.<sup>7</sup> It is these assets that are activated, argues Steve (citing Sanneh), by translation. It was vernacular translation, Sanneh argues, that generated “a resolve on the part of African Christians to question, and sometimes to renounce, the Western presuppositions of the church”. Reflecting on what he has just written, Sanneh adds, “‘Tension’ rather than ‘schism’ describes better what was involved, for the instrument that enabled local criticism to take root and flourish was the translation machinery that mission had itself put in place”.<sup>8</sup>

By invoking Mmahutu, the senior wife of Chief Mothibi of the BaTlhaping people who were indigenous to the area which came to include the Kuruman mission, my own work has sought to understand the nature of African agency with respect to the Bible. Indeed, long before the Bible was translated into her language, Mmahutu was asking questions of the Bible, even though it remained in the hands of the missionaries who brought it among the BaTlhaping in the early 1800s.<sup>9</sup>

In this paper I continue my conversation with Steve, reflecting on the ways in which the Bible might be considered an African site of struggle.

### **Contending about ‘teaching’**

Both Sanneh and Steve are correct. Central to the missionary project in Africa was the translation of the Bible into African vernaculars. This is expressed clearly by John Campbell, one of the Directors of the London Missionary Society (which would become the Council for World Mission in 1973, which is the focus of Steve’s work on the Bible and mission)<sup>10</sup>, who offers the rationale as to why mission and translation were so important. As Campbell travels through the African “interior” towards Chief Mothibi and the BaTlhaping his journal entries record his acquisitive gaze as he maps out the terrain, speculating on the prospects for

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<sup>6</sup> Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1989), 49; cited in de Gruchy, "Reversing the Biblical Tide," 49.

<sup>7</sup> See his essay “Of Agency, Assets and Appreciation: Seeking Some Commonalities between Theology and Development” in Beverley Haddad, ed. *Keeping Body and Soul Together: Reflections by Steve De Gruchy on Theology and Development* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2015), 66-86.

<sup>8</sup> Sanneh, *Translating the Message*, 4; cited in de Gruchy, "Reversing the Biblical Tide," 49.

<sup>9</sup> John Campbell, *Travels in South Africa: Undertaken at the Request of the Missionary Society*, Third Edition, Corrected ed. (London: Black, Parry, & Co., 1815; reprint, 1974, Cape Town: C. Struik), 199; West, "The Beginning of African Biblical Interpretation: The Bible among the Batlhaping."

<sup>10</sup> de Gruchy, "Reversing the Biblical Tide," 50.

hunting, alliances, trade, mining, and agriculture. All of this potential is to be activated by the Bible, or, more accurately, “the word of God”. For, notes Campbell as he travels among the Africans of ‘the interior’, “[t]he gospel is remarkably fitted for rousing such sleeping, inactive minds, by placing before them the majesty and glory of the infinite Jehovah, the endless, unbounded felicity of the blessed, and the unspeakable misery of the wicked in the world to come – subjects which in all ages have produced wonderful effects on the human mind”.<sup>11</sup> All that is required is, he writes, “to teach some of them to read, and they will teach others”, for “they will thereby be able to read the word of God”.<sup>12</sup>

However, what follows is a protracted contestation among the BaTlhaping about whether or not they should allow the missionaries to settle among them and “to instruct them”.<sup>13</sup> The BaTlhaping were concerned about at least two areas. First, though the Bible was clearly an object with potential power, its presence raised questions about how this object of power should be located among the other objects of power used by the BaTlhaping, such as the *ditaola* (divining-bones) used in the practise of divination (*go laola*).<sup>14</sup> Second, though the BaTlhaping were intrigued by the knowledge conveyed in books, especially the Bible, they were deeply concerned that “if they were to attend to instructions, they would have no time to hunt or to do any thing”,<sup>15</sup> recognising that the rhythms and routines of the mission stations that had already been established in the Cape Colony to the south represented and constructed a very different world, where “notions of time, work, and self-discipline were drawn from the natural lineaments of the industrial capitalist world”.<sup>16</sup>

Here then is a first layer of contestation concerning the Bible. What would the Bible bring with it that would disrupt the life-world of the BaTlhaping?

### **Contending about control**

In all the early encounters of the BaTlhaping with the Bible it was missionary and colonial agents who held the Bible. The first Bible ever to make its appearance among the BaTlhaping was presented to Chief Molehabangwe (Mothibi’s father) by Jan Matthys Kok in 1802, and

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<sup>11</sup> Campbell, *Travels in South Africa*, 170.

<sup>12</sup> Campbell, *Travels in South Africa*, 166.

<sup>13</sup> Campbell, *Travels in South Africa*, 163.

<sup>14</sup> Campbell, *Travels in South Africa*, 193; Isaac Schapera and John L. Comaroff, *The Tswana*, Revised edition ed. (London and New York: Kegan Paul International, 1991), 55-60.

<sup>15</sup> Campbell, *Travels in South Africa*, 193.

<sup>16</sup> Jean Comaroff and John L. Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution: Christianity, Colonialism and Consciousness in South Africa*, 2 vols., vol. One (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 179; John L. Comaroff and Jean Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution: The Dialectics of Modernity on a South African Frontier*, 2 vols., vol. Two (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997). The latter second volume might be described as a detailed study of such routines and regimes.

was almost certainly understood to be a gift associated with trade.<sup>17</sup>

The second Bible was brought by the explorer William Burchell, who kept it hidden in his wagon until the day he used it to discipline one of his employees. On this occasion Burchell “produced a Dutch Testament, and as Van Roye could read tolerably well, I bade him take notice what book it was”.<sup>18</sup> “With some formality”, Burchell uses the Bible in order to administer “the usual *oath* to relate the truth”. However, the prevarications of Van Roye push him to expound on the oath-taking ritual just enacted:

Seeing this, I admonished him of the dreadful crime which he would commit by uttering a falsity at the moment when he called God to witness his veracity: I explained to him in the most solemn and impressive manner, the respect which he as a Christian ought to show to that book; and that it was better he should at once condemn himself by confessing his fault in the presence of his companions, than by prevarication and wilful misrepresentation, pronounce his own condemnation in the presence of God, to whom all our actions and thoughts were known.<sup>19</sup>

Sensing that these admonitions had “had their proper effect upon him” and that “a few words more would decide him to confess that he was blameable”,<sup>20</sup> Burchell reiterates his use of the Bible as iconic symbol by asking Van Roye to once again “lay his hand on the book”, but this time only “after repeating to him the substance of several passages in the New Testament”.<sup>21</sup> These acts and exhortations had the desired effect, and Van Roye confessed that his conduct had not been “influenced by the spirit of obedience which that book taught and commanded a servant to show to a master”.<sup>22</sup>

The third presence of the Bible among the BaTlhaping was the Bible brought by Campbell (discussed above). Campbell was the first among a number of missionaries who would visit the BaTlhaping in an attempt to establish a mission station among them and the neighbouring clans. During these visits the Bible had a more enduring presence, often displayed in public and often used to instruct.

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<sup>17</sup> Johannes T. du Bruyn, "Die Tlhaping En Die Eerste Sendelinge, 1801-1806," *South African Historical Journal* 14 (1982): 20.

<sup>18</sup> William J. Burchell, *Travels in the Interior of Southern Africa*, With a new Introduction by A. Gordon-Brown ed., vol. 2 (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, Brown, and Green, 1824; reprint, 1967, Cape Town: C. Struik), 470.

<sup>19</sup> Burchell, *Travels in the Interior of Southern Africa*, Vol 2, 470.

<sup>20</sup> Burchell, *Travels in the Interior of Southern Africa*, Vol 2, 470.

<sup>21</sup> Burchell, *Travels in the Interior of Southern Africa*, Vol 2, 471. Unfortunately Burchell does indicate what particular passages he used.

<sup>22</sup> Burchell, *Travels in the Interior of Southern Africa*, Vol 2, 471.

In each of these instances the Bible is clearly being controlled by the missionaries and their colonial allies. However, we come across a strange exception in the missionary record, in a letter written by the artisan-missionary Robert Hamilton (who would become one of the founders of the Kuruman mission). In March of 1824 Hamilton leaves the BaTlhaping and undertakes a journey to “the Barolong Town”, the settlement of a related neighbouring clan. While among the Barolong Hamilton preaches “by the consent & in the presence of the chief” from John 3:16 “to about 1000 heathen who assembled according to the orders of the chief”.<sup>23</sup> On the 27<sup>th</sup> March, it being the Sunday, even though he laments that the Sabbath is unknown among these people, he holds a morning service: “Orders were again issued to assemble the people; a great concourse attended and I was called to stand by the chief. I preached from 2 v 38 Acts [?] & good order was again observed”.<sup>24</sup>

What follows is significant, for “[a]fter worship the chief Captain asked to see the Bible. I was requested to lay it on the ground before him, and it was admired by all for a long time. I thought what would their wonder be if they knew its contents!”.<sup>25</sup> Hamilton’s letter is smudged where the biblical text is cited, so it may not be a reference to the book of Acts, though this is the most probable reference. If it is, those listening would have heard: “Peter said to them, ‘Repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit’” (Acts 2:38). This is normal missionary proclamation, echoing the biblical texts we have noted being used on other occasions. What is it that draws forth this request to lay the Bible on the ground? It is not clear, though it may be the reference to the “Holy Spirit”, a form of spiritual power that would later become a core component and presence within every variety of African Christianity.<sup>26</sup> What is clear from this strange request is that these Africans do not want to handle the text themselves, yet. However, they also do not want Hamilton to continue to hold it. They want to observe or “admire” it on its own, separated from the one who brought it among them. And this they do “for a long time”.

Hamilton reflects on “what would their wonder be if they knew its contents”, but he does not reflect on what they might be wondering about the Bible. This is not an isolated incident. Later in the day, when he has returned from preaching in another “division” of the settlement, the chief “sent to me to come & tell him & his people the good news once more before I left them & I told him that it afforded me much pleasure to receive that request from him”. Hamilton then describes how,

The people came in great numbers & and continued to do so till worship was almost ended. The subject of discourse was the power of Christ in raising Lazarus from the tomb. Service being ended the King as in the forenoon asked

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<sup>23</sup> R. Hamilton, New Latakoo, 12 April 1824, 2.

<sup>24</sup> R. Hamilton, New Latakoo, 12 April 1824, 3.

<sup>25</sup> R. Hamilton, New Latakoo, 12 April 1824, 3.

<sup>26</sup> For an example among these people see Jean Comaroff, *Body of Power, Spirit of Resistance: The Culture and History of a South African People* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985).

for the Bible, which was again laid on the ground and gazed at with wonder for a considerable time”.<sup>27</sup>

Here is a sign that the Bible is beginning to be seen as distinct from the missionaries. Indeed, here is a clear attempt to take the Bible out of the hands of those who brought it. Here then is another site of contestation, contestation about who holds – who controls – the Bible.

### **Contending about translation**

We are fortunate to have Hamilton’s account of these African requests to put the Bible on the ground, to let go of it, for once Robert Moffat takes control of the Kuruman mission he would never relinquish control over the Bible.

The BaTlhaping would have to wait for a considerable time before the Bible, or even portions of the Bible, were translated into their own language. Envisioned by Campbell, it was Robert Moffat who would endeavour to complete the task of translation. Having displaced James Read, though Read would hover in the background and continue to haunt Moffat,<sup>28</sup> Moffat took control of the mission project among the BaTlhaping. As with the tenure of Read, however, it was Robert Hamilton who did much of the day-to-day work around the mission,<sup>29</sup> particularly during the numerous periods when Moffat was away, either venturing further into the interior or maintaining the lines of connection with the Colony.

Much as Moffat respected Hamilton,<sup>30</sup> when it came to the key task of translation, Hamilton appears not to have played much of a role. As John Moffat, Moffat’s son, informs us, reflecting on the year 1837, “the largest share of duty” in the work of the mission in general and in the task of translation in particular, ‘fell upon’ Robert Moffat, “from his more complete mastery of the Sechwana language, and his personal ascendancy over men”.

Moffat’s letters, journals, and books provide his account of the translation project.<sup>31</sup> What is

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<sup>27</sup> R. Hamilton, New Latakoo, 12 April 1824, 3.

<sup>28</sup> See Robert Moffat and Mary Moffat, *Apprenticeship at Kuruman: Being the Journals and Letters of Robert and Mary Moffat, 1820-1828*, ed. Isaac Schapera (London: Chatto & Windus, 1951), 9, 59, 69, 192.

<sup>29</sup> See Moffat and Moffat, *Apprenticeship at Kuruman*, 9. Read left Dithakong in July 1820, accompanying Campbell and Moffat on their return to Griqua Town; Hamilton remained behind, and was joined by Moffat in May 1821. See also John Moffat’s reflections; John S. Moffat, *The Lives of Robert & Mary Moffat, by Their Son, John S. Moffat*, Third Edition ed. (London: Fisher Unwin, 1885), 80, 86, 120, 28, 80.

<sup>30</sup> See for example his letter to the Directors in February 1844, as he sums up Hamilton’s tenure; Moffat, *The Lives of Robert & Mary Moffat*, 246-67.

<sup>31</sup> For a summary version see Frank R. Bradlow, *Printing for Africa: The Story of Robert Moffat and the Kuruman Press* (Kuruman: Kuruman Moffat Mission Trust, 1987), 1-10. What follows in this chapter is the longer slower version. For an analysis of what would become “an established literary genre” by the late nineteenth century see Comaroff and

clear throughout is that Moffat is translating ‘the message’ of the Bible. On the first page of the “Preface” to his book *Missionary Labours and Scenes in Southern Africa*, Moffat reflects on how his “record of events” in Southern Africa relates to “the philosophy of missions” in general. He asserts that his book “will ... show that, amid circumstantial differences, there is a radical identity in the operations of human depravity, in Asia, in Polynesia, and in Africa; and that while the Gospel is the only, it is also the uniform, remedy for the distress of a world convulsed by sin, and writhing with anguish”.<sup>32</sup>

It is not so much the Bible (that is, the particular texts of the Bible) which is being translated as it is the core message of the Bible (that is, ‘the Gospel’). The translation project is, for Moffat, a theological project. He is not offering the BaTlhaping access to the Bible on its own terms (and theirs), he is translating ‘the message’ for them.

In a letter to his brother, somewhat off the record, Moffat sums up the state of the mission in 1822: “All the good that can be said of them [the BaTlhaping] is briefly thus: they have got accustomed to us, and out of mere friendship for the favours they receive occasionally attend divine service”.<sup>33</sup> He then goes on to refute the claims of John Campbell about the BaTlhaping, saying, “Mr. Campbell, I see in the *Missionary Chronicle*, asserts that they have acquired correct notions of God, etc., etc. Let me assure you that the authority he has it from is false”. Immediately he continues, making a link between translation and “correct notions of God, etc., etc.”, saying, “The apostasy of our interpreter, a Bootchuana, and the abominable conduct of some of the Hottentots [who had also served in some situations as interpreters], have been the source of much grief to us, and formed a stumbling block in the way of the Bootchuanas”.<sup>34</sup>

The letter confirms such connections, for Moffat turns, after a paragraph enumerating “how many difficulties we labour under among a people like these”, to a paragraph on “a subject of more importance – the language”.<sup>35</sup>

To you, who I should suppose have never studied a barbarous tongue, no idea can be formed of the labour and difficulty attendant on its acquisition, especially through a very imperfect interpreter. It is only within these few months that I have been in possession of means, through very imperfect, of

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Comaroff, *Christianity, Colonialism and Consciousness in South Africa*, 172-78. And for a specific analysis of Moffat’s *Missionary Labours and Scenes in Southern Africa* (1842) see Leon de Kock, *Civilising Barbarians: Missionary Narrative and African Textual Response in Nineteenth-Century South Africa* (Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press, 1996), 142-62.

<sup>32</sup> Robert Moffat, *Missionary Labours and Scenes in Southern Africa* (London: John Snow, 1842; reprint, Reprinted 1969), v.

<sup>33</sup> Moffat and Moffat, *Apprenticeship at Kuruman*, 57.

<sup>34</sup> Moffat and Moffat, *Apprenticeship at Kuruman*, 57.

<sup>35</sup> Moffat and Moffat, *Apprenticeship at Kuruman*, 57.

acquiring it. In the course of that time I have been collecting words, idioms, and phrases. The language, which is barren and barbarous enough, and which of course is perfectly consonant to their ideas, will hardly admit of Theology.<sup>36</sup>

Moffat is not convinced that the Southern Tswana African languages can carry the weight of the message,<sup>37</sup> though there is perhaps a hint here that the capacity of a language that has not yet had to bear such a burden might be increased by engagement with “Theology”. The hard work required to make the language receptive to “Theology” would become Moffat’s preoccupation. However, he continues to lament, year after year, in letter after letter, that “[t]he situation of a missionary in this part of the country unavoidably obliges him to devote nearly the whole of his time to temporal things. Seeing this”, he says, “I have for the present resolved comparatively to neglect these, and persevere till I am master of the language ...”.<sup>38</sup> Moffat’s notion of ‘mastery’ includes both the common sense understanding of becoming proficient in a language and the sense of controlling or disciplining the language so that it does the speaker’s bidding.

While acknowledging his need of African interpreters (and translation assistants), Moffat does not approve of any of the African interpreters with whom he works, worrying in each instance that Africans do not have the capacity for understanding the gospel:

A missionary who commences giving direct instruction to the natives, though far from being competent in the language, is proceeding on safer ground than if he were employing an interpreter, who is not proficient in both languages, and who has not a tolerable understanding of the doctrines of the Gospel. Trusting to an ignorant and unqualified interpreter, is attended with consequences not only ludicrous, but dangerous to the very objects which lie nearest the missionary’s heart.<sup>39</sup>

For Moffat the remedy resides in the moral character of the missionary. Moffat imagines that the missionary character corrects the mistranslated message, which is why he is so fiercely committed to purging the mission of those who lack the appropriate moral character (whether European or African),<sup>40</sup> and so become “an enemy to the mission”.<sup>41</sup> For Moffat, the perfect proclaimer of the message is the moral missionary who has mastered the language.

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<sup>36</sup> Moffat and Moffat, *Apprenticeship at Kuruman*, 57.

<sup>37</sup> This is contrary to what is claimed by some scholars; see Comaroff and Comaroff, *Christianity, Colonialism and Consciousness in South Africa*, 217; Steve de Gruchy, “The Alleged Political Conservatism of Robert Moffat,” in *The London Missionary Society in Southern Africa: Historical Essays in Celebration of the Bicentenary of the Lms in Southern Africa 1799-1999*, ed. John W. de Gruchy (Cape Town: David Philip, 1999), 27.

<sup>38</sup> Moffat and Moffat, *Apprenticeship at Kuruman*, 58.

<sup>39</sup> Moffat, *Missionary Labours and Scenes*, 293-94.

<sup>40</sup> See for example Moffat and Moffat, *Apprenticeship at Kuruman*, 68-70.

<sup>41</sup> Moffat, *Missionary Labours and Scenes*, 295.



Moffat's journal for March-June 1827 documents his journey to acquire the language, leaving Kuruman on Wednesday 28<sup>th</sup> March 1827.<sup>42</sup> This journal is full of geographical, environmental, and social detail,<sup>43</sup> as well as the location of particular local peoples in the ongoing aftermath of the regional unrest.<sup>44</sup> As always, Moffat continues to take every opportunity, particularly on the Sabbath, to preach and converse with the local African peoples.<sup>45</sup> Learning the language, however, is often subordinated to instruction. When, for example on the 15<sup>th</sup> of April, he preached "unto them the Gospel of salvation", he notices that the local people are discussing aspects of what he has said among themselves. Instead of sitting among them as a listener, imbibing the language and noting how the local language is being used to translate the particular concepts he has used in his sermon and what aspects of his message resonate most with his African interlocutors, he is "much grieved to hear them making a kind of diversion of some part of the discourse, particularly that which related to a future state of reward".<sup>46</sup> Unable to listen more than "a few minutes", Moffat intervenes to instruct, to intimidate, and to silence: "After listening a few minutes, I went and placed myself among them, and resumed the subject in a way of argument; when they changed their tone, especially when I dwelt on the article of death, to them a subject of all others the most unpleasant, and alas, no wonder, for the utmost stretch of their faith is annihilation".<sup>47</sup>

What such one-sided 'conversations' do demonstrate is that Moffat has a very limited understanding of the diversity of biblical theologies on any of the theological subjects he instructs about. Moffat works within a fixed theological frame, and does his translation work, on his own, within this frame. First, in Moffat's mind there is a simple correspondence between the Bible, the biblical message, and the missionary message. Translation of the missionary message is the translation of the Bible and translation of the Bible is translation of the missionary message because, for Moffat, the biblical message is singular, hence his regular use of 'Gospel' with a capital 'G'. Second, Moffat imagines that the only competency he requires in the local language is the competency to translate this singular message.

Moffat hardly ever acknowledges the difficulties of interpreting particular biblical texts or

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<sup>42</sup> Moffat and Moffat, *Apprenticeship at Kuruman*, 237-60, 38. See also the letters to his wife; Moffat and Moffat, *Apprenticeship at Kuruman*, 261-64, 64-66, 66-67.

<sup>43</sup> Moffat and Moffat, *Apprenticeship at Kuruman*, 239-40, 44-45, 49, 57.

<sup>44</sup> Moffat and Moffat, *Apprenticeship at Kuruman*, 241, 50, 51, 54-56.

<sup>45</sup> Moffat and Moffat, *Apprenticeship at Kuruman*, 243, 46, 47-48, 49, 50, 51, 53-54, 56, 57, 58, 60.

<sup>46</sup> Moffat and Moffat, *Apprenticeship at Kuruman*, 246.

<sup>47</sup> Moffat and Moffat, *Apprenticeship at Kuruman*, 246. Moffat knows that, "Death and a future state are subjects they do not like to contemplate, and when they are introduced it frequently operates like an imperative order for them to depart"; Moffat and Moffat, *Apprenticeship at Kuruman*, 252.

how he constructs a unified singular message from the diversity of voices within the Bible. Furthermore, it is significant that there is no reference at all to local African collaborators in the translation process. Moffat does not draw into the translation process any of his target audience. He is still, after so many years, the lone crusader-translator, trusting only himself to be the arbiter of how to render both a particular biblical verse and the Bible as a whole. The effects of Moffat's particular ideo-theological orientation on his translation and related African vernacular translations would be felt for years to come, as generations of Africans would, in the words of Musa Dube, in reading such missionary translations be "consuming a colonial time bomb".<sup>48</sup>

### **Other related sites of struggle**

For the purposes of this Steve de Gruchy Lecture my paper must move towards concluding. The fuller story of how the Bible shifted from a tool of imperialism to becoming an African icon is told in my forthcoming book, *The Stolen Bible: From Tool of Imperialism to African Icon*.<sup>49</sup>

For now I will briefly indicate other ways in which the Bible is a site of struggle. Steve would not have approved of my portrayal of Robert Moffat, whose name is associated with the Kuruman Moffat Mission Trust of which Steve was the Director from 1994-2000. Steve held Moffat in high regard.<sup>50</sup> This was an area in which we agreed to disagree; and I am genuinely sorry that Steve was not able to read a draft of my new book and offer his comments on my representation of Robert Moffat.

However, what we agreed fully on was how Moffat's translation project, flawed as it may have been, ushered in "an irreversible process" of African agency in the areas of interpretation of the Bible and even of Bible translation itself.<sup>51</sup> African vernacular Bibles "enabled local criticism to take root and flourish", generating a host of African 'theologies' or 'gospels', wherever one looks around the African continent.<sup>52</sup>

Steve is explicit about this dimension of African agency. In his paper already referred to,

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<sup>48</sup> Musa W. Dube, "Consuming a Colonial Time Bomb: Translating *Badimo* into 'Demons' in the Setswana Bible (Matthew 8:28-34; 15:2; 10:8)," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 73(1999).

<sup>49</sup> Gerald O. West, *The Stolen Bible: From Tool of Imperialism to African Icon* (Leiden and Pietermaritzburg: Brill and Cluster Publications, 2016).

<sup>50</sup> de Gruchy, "The Alleged Political Conservatism of Robert Moffat."

<sup>51</sup> Gosnell Yorke, "Bible Translation in Anglophone Africa and Her Diaspora: A Postcolonial Agenda," *Black Theology: An International Journal* 2, no. 2 (2004); Gosnell Yorke and Peter Renju, eds., *Bible Translation and African Languages* (Nairobi: Acton, 2004).

<sup>52</sup> Gerald O. West, "Africa's Liberation Theologies: An Historical-Hermeneutical Analysis," in *The Changing World Religion Map: Sacred Places, Identities, Practices and Politics*, ed. Stanley D. Brunn (Dordrecht, Heidelberg, New York, London: Springer, 2015).

Steve argues that “the availability of the Bible in the languages of the South ... lead to new ways of reading the Bible and of understanding mission. This shaped”, he continues, “the wider social and political pressures to end the hegemony of colonial Christianity throughout the world, climaxing in the Bangkok meeting of the World Council of Churches’ Commission for World Mission and Evangelism (CWME) in 1972/3”.<sup>53</sup> More specifically, referring to his own ecclesial context, “These wider pressures, set in motion by the translation of the Bible by the LMS, led to fundamental changes to the LMS itself, through which it became the CWM in 1973”, which in turn led to far-reaching transformations of the CWM as a mission organisation.<sup>54</sup>

In sum, Steve argues, “The Kurumans of the world are now teaching London about mission. The periphery speaks to the centre, reminding us that the Gospel which Moffat made available to the Batswana in their mother tongue has a certain logic that resists domestication”.<sup>55</sup>

This brings me to my final sense in which the Bible is a site of struggle, for I disagree with Steve that Moffat’s ‘Gospel’ embodies “a certain logic that resists domestication”. I would argue, together with Itumeleng Mosala,<sup>56</sup> that Moffat’s gospel is just one gospel among other contending gospels. The Bible does not have a singular monovocal message with the only problem being how to ‘correctly’ interpret that message. The Bible has multiple, often contending messages. The Bible is itself – intrinsically – a site of struggle.

### **A final word of conversation**

This is where our conversation came to an end, interrupted in that most final way, when Steve died. I remember talking to Steve as Head of our School about the Ujamaa Centre for Community Development and Research having decided to work in a more overt manner with local churches and communities with the notion that the Bible was itself – intrinsically – a site of struggle. We were about to embark on a collaborative project with our sister centre, the Sinomlando Centre for Oral History and Memory Work in Africa, with Chart (the Collaborative in HIV and AIDS, Religion and Theology) of which Steve was a founder member, and the Theology and Development Programme, which Steve had worked so hard to establish from 2000 until his death in 2010. Central to this collaborative project, “Contending for Life: Training Church Leaders to Work within a Prophetic Tradition”, was the notion that African culture, Christian theology, and the Bible were sites of struggle – intrinsically. Culture, theology, and the Bible were plurivalent, embodying diverse and even contending voices.

Steve was very excited about this project, and even went so far as to insist that the Ujamaa

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<sup>53</sup> de Gruchy, "Reversing the Biblical Tide," 59-50.

<sup>54</sup> de Gruchy, "Reversing the Biblical Tide," 50.

<sup>55</sup> de Gruchy, "Reversing the Biblical Tide," 50.

<sup>56</sup> Itumeleng J. Mosala, *Biblical Hermeneutics and Black Theology in South Africa* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989).

Centre should 'patent' their way working with the Bible as a site of struggle. Like those of us who work within the collaborative processes of Contextual Bible Study,<sup>57</sup> Steve worried that our methodologies were being taken up by those who used them in ways that did not do justice to our core commitments and values, including the commitment to the Bible as a site of struggle. This paper, and the papers that will follow in the next few years as part of my next book will be doing just that, 'patenting' the notion of the Bible as a site of struggle (within Contextual Bible Study methodology).

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<sup>57</sup> Gerald O. West, "Reading the Bible with the Marginalised: The Value/S of Contextual Bible Reading," *Stellenbosch Theological Journal* 1, no. 2 (2015).

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