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The contribution of Prophet Isaiah Shembe to African Biblical Theology

Introduction

The focus of this presentation is the Bible, and its place in Isaiah Shembe's restoration of African community in the aftermath of colonial conquest and missionary-colonial-*kholwa* Christianity. As Elizabeth Gunner reminds us in her book, *The Man of Heaven and the Beautiful Ones of God: Writings from Ibandla Lamanazaretha, a South African Church*, Isaiah Shembe's work with the Bible was a "response on one level to the radical dislocation of the early twentieth-century city, from which many [mainly women]¹ who joined his church in the second decade of the century were seeking respite". Shembe's answer, continues Gunner, "was to recreate the social group and to resituate its mental and material spaces".² Shembe saturated this social project in the Bible, having seized it from the missionary-colonial agents who brought it, recounting in a parable how this was accomplished.

The Parable of the Liberating Bible

Petros Dhlomo, the great collector and historian of Isaiah Shembe's life and ministry,³ tells the story of Shembe's sermon in the home of Nldlovu, "the headman of Zibula at Lenge, in the year 1933",⁴ in which Shembe tells the story of "The Parable of the Liberating Bible".⁵

¹ A 1921 report on Shembe estimated that 95 per cent of his followers were female; Joel Cabrita, "Isaiah Shembe's Theological Nationalism, 1920s–1935," *Journal of Southern African Studies* 35, no. 3 (2009): 618, footnote 58.

² Elizabeth Gunner, *The Man of Heaven and the Beautiful Ones of God: Writings from Ibandla Lamanazaretha, a South African Church* (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 23.

³ Robert Papini, "Introduction," in *The Catechism of the Nazarites and Related Writings*, ed. Robert Papini and Irving Hexham (Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2002), xiii-xiv.

⁴ Irving Hexham and G.C. Oosthuizen, eds., *The Story of Isaiah Shembe: History and Traditions Centered on Ekuphakameni and Mount Nhlankakazi*, vol. 1, Sacred History and Traditions of the Amanazaretha (Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1996), 224.

⁵ Hexham and Oosthuizen, eds., *The Story of Isaiah Shembe*, 224 (§152).

Dhlomo frames the story as follows:

1.1 The man of God, Shembe, came to the home of Ndlovu the headman of Zibula at Lenge, in the year 1933, and there he said these words in his sermon in the evensong: [Shembe began, saying] “In olden times there were two might[y] nations who were fighting over a certain issue. In their war the one conquered the other one and took all their cattle away. They took even their children captive and put them into the school of the victorious nation among them also three sons of the same mother. They were given some work to do in the morning before they went to school. They had to sweep the houses of their teachers and the house of the Pope”.⁶

Re-membering in his own terms the Southern African story of conquest, Shembe begins with the ‘taking’ of African cattle and African children. Significantly, the children are not put to work for the conquering nation, they are put in school. The story continues with a focus on three of these ‘en-schooled’ children, “three sons of the same mother”. Among the tasks given to these children was that they “had to sweep the houses of their teachers and the house of the Pope”. The menial work the African children do is work within the rhythms and systems of the victorious nation, though it is not clear whether there is a distinction between the the “three sons of the same mother” and the other children. Was it only these three that had to perform menial labour in the houses of their conquerors? While this is not clear, Shembe’s focus is clear, it is on these three children precisely because they have access to the masters’ houses, particularly the house of the Pope.

Shembe continues his parable, narrating that,

1.2 “All these children made good progress in school and passed their examinations well. Then they were trained as bishops. In the house of the Pope there was a Bible which was kept under lock by him and only read by himself. On a certain day he [the Pope] had to go for a few weeks to another place and he forgot to lock the Bible up at home. When the boys were sweeping his home they found the Bible unlocked. When they began to read it they discovered that their nation which had been demolished so badly by the war could never be restored unless they would get a book like this one and they considered what to do”.⁷

It is now clear that Shembe is referring to African *kholwa* Christianity. However, Shembe continues, there was a certain book that was locked away from the children. Children of the

⁶ Hexham and Oosthuizen, eds., *The Story of Isaiah Shembe*, 224-25.

⁷ Hexham and Oosthuizen, eds., *The Story of Isaiah Shembe*, 225.

conquered nation had access to some of the books of the victorious nation, thereby allowing them to rise to the level of bishops. But the Pope alone had access to one special book. This, it becomes clear, is the Bible: “In the house of the Pope there was a Bible which was kept under lock by him and only read by himself”. The boys begin reading the locked-away book, the Bible, in the house of the master of the masters, the Pope. Reading the Bible confirms the value of this book, for, “When they began to read it they discovered that their nation which had been demolished so badly by the war could never be restored unless they would get a book like this one”. The parable moves towards its climax as Shembe relates how,

1.3 “When they came back from school they bought a copybook and copied the whole Bible. When they had finished their work, they returned the Bible to its place. Thereafter the Pope came back and saw that he forgot to lock his Bible in. He called the boys who worked in his house and asked them whether they had opened this book. They denied it and said that they did not see that it had not been locked up. Then he forgot about it. The boys considered how they could bring this book to their parents at home.

1.4 At another day, they went and asked permission to visit their parents at home. They were permitted to go and they were given a time by which they must be back. When they came home, they did not stay there, rather they went from home to home and preached about this book until their time of leave was over and policemen were sent to look for these boys. Then they left this book there and returned to school”.⁸

That Shembe is concerned about ‘restoration’, the rebuilding of African community is clear. What is also apparent is that Shembe recognises that the restoration will be of another form of African community, a post-conquest post-colonial post-missionary form of African community. And Shembe recognises too that certain resources of the conquering nation are required for the restoration of post-colonial post-missionary African community. That the Bible is brought to the African parents of the (partially) educated African children, parents whom we must assume have not been educated by the missionary-colonial system, is significant, for it these African elders who have the historical and local African resources necessary for restoration of African community – together with the Bible.

But the (partially) educated African children play an important role, for not only do they have the capacity to recognise the distinctive power of this hidden book, they also have the capacity to copy it, a capacity they have obtained from the missionary-colonial system. That they are resisting African children is also evident, for they subvert the system that has captured them, and they understand the importance of bringing the copied stolen Bible to

⁸ Hexham and Oosthuizen, eds., *The Story of Isaiah Shembe*, 225.

their parents. The boys, it should be noted, do not return willingly to the missionary-colonial school, they have to be forced to return. What they leave behind in their own community is both the written and the oral-aural 'word'. Missionary-colonial power holds the Africans it has conquered under coercive surveillance, but the partially educated African children are able to evade this surveillance, both within and without the centres of power, for periods of time. Surveillance and control are never total.

Having established a(n) (equivalent?) relationship between the cattle the conquerors took and the Bible the servant boys took, Shembe's parable now shifts to what appears to be a catechetical exercise to which the boys are subjected on their return to school.

1.5 "After their return, they had to answer questions. They were asked, 'Do you believe that Thixo [God] can only be found in the Roman Catholic Church?' It was expected that all of them should say so. But the oldest boy did not. Rather he said: 'I believe that Thixo can be found in all beings on earth'. They were greatly startled by these words and they told him to move to the side. Then they called the second boy. He also said the same words: 'Thixo is in all things on earth'. Then they called the third one and he said the same words.

1.6 Then they admonished the boys and said: 'You see, what you have said is deeply contradicting this doctrine, in which you have been instructed; this our teaching in which you have been brought up you should follow together with the others. But should you desert from this doctrine in which you have been educated you will be burned by fire. Now go and sleep and consider this matter well'".⁹

It would seem that this kind of catechetical instruction was routine. What is different now is that these three boys have read the Bible for themselves. The Bible enables them to reject their catechetical instruction, for the Bible confirms their own African experience that God can indeed "be found in all being on earth". Shembe makes it clear, however, that, "It was expected that all of them" that they should conform to their catechetical instruction. However, "the oldest boy did not" conform. Having read the Bible for himself he is able to say with confidence: "'I believe that Thixo can be found in all beings on earth'". The masters were "greatly startled by these words", and he and the other boys, who answer similarly, are threatened with death by burning, with hell, if they persisted in "contradicting this our doctrine, in which you have been instructed". The masters make no attempt to turn to the Bible in their interrogation; their catechism has priority, not the Bible.

⁹ Hexham and Oosthuizen, eds., *The Story of Isaiah Shembe*, 225-26.

Affirming the presence of Thixo among all peoples and thereby the dignity of his own particular people, the oldest boy refuses to submit to the formulaic kind of Christian faith Robert Moffat proclaimed among the BaTlhaping, notwithstanding the threat of the fires of hell. And the courage of the older boy enables others to make a similar resisting response. Ironically, the deconstruction of the instruction is the ‘faithful’ response – being faithful to the Bible – but the missionary-colonial instructors are unable to recognise this.

1.7 “On the following day they were called again. When they asked the first boy he repeated what he had said on the previous day. They brought him outside and showed him the fire. He sang the hymn: ‘Our Father in Heaven look at me with you love and do not look (at my sins) with which I have come and which make me ashamed. I was born with them and I do not hide one of them’. So he went into the flames and was burned. When the second one was questioned, he repeated the same words which he had said on the previous day. They showed him the fire also to him and said: ‘Enter there where your brother went in and follow him’. This second boy shouted: ‘Holy, holy, holy!’ And he ran quickly into the flames and was burned”.¹⁰

The masters hoped that fear of the fire would coerce these three boys to conform to the catechism. But the following day the first boy again refuses to follow what he has been taught, repeating “what he had said on the previous day”. And when faced with “the fire”, he sang a hymn and “went into the flames and was burned”. In this parable the flames of the eternal hell of Moffat’s message have become a part of temporal reality. Significantly, the first boy sings a hymn before entering the fire. Again, his response is a faithful response, singing a hymn that draws on the language of the biblical Psalms (eg. Psalm 32, 51) and Matthew’s gospel (eg. Matthew 6:9). The irony is palpable; the young African boy is faithful both to the Bible and Bible-based hymns, and yet he is consigned to the fire because he is considered unfaithful to the missionary-colonial ‘schooled’ faith he has been taught. Significantly, the hymn that the first boy sings is not a missionary-*kholwa* hymn, it is a hymn given to and composed by Isaiah Shembe, an heir of the stolen Bible:

*Baba wethu oseZulwini
Ngibheke ungithande
Ungazibheki engize nazo
Zingijabhisile.*

Chorus:

*Zazalwa kanye nami
Anginakuthukusa nasinye.*

¹⁰ Hexham and Oosthuizen, eds., *The Story of Isaiah Shembe*, 226.

Our Father who is in heaven
Look at me with love
Do not look at [the sins] I come with
They make me ashamed.

Chorus:
They were born with me
I cannot hide even one (Hymn 35).¹¹

The second boy too cites the Bible, quoting from the book of Revelation, repeating the words of the wondrous “four living creatures” who “day and night ... do not cease to say, ‘holy, holy, holy is the Lord God, the almighty, who was and who is and who is to come’” (Revelation 4:8, NAS) as he enters the flames. By choosing to enter the flames rather than recanting these two boys expose the contradictions at the heart of missionary-colonial-*kholwa* Christianity. They stand with the Bible over against missionary-colonial-*kholwa* Christianity.

But the parable of the liberating Bible does not end here. For when the third boy is questioned he responds differently.

1.8 “When the third one came in to be questioned his mother appeared and said: ‘Oh, my child what is wrong that all of you should die on the same day? Would it be so very wrong to say that Thixo belongs to the Roman Catholics, so that your life may be spared and that I may retain you on earth?’ The youngest son saw the point and followed the advice of his mother. He said, ‘I believe that Thixo is found in the Roman Catholic Church only’.

1.9 Then the Pope said that they should bring a book where he should write these words down and make an affidavit. This he did. When he slept in the night his spirit was taken up and brought to the joyful place of the selected ones. He heard a wonderful singing from a certain place and when he looked there he saw a large crowd of people who were clad in white gowns, on the other side of the river. When he looked intensely he saw there his two brothers with whom he had been together and who were burned by the fire.

1.10 He wanted to go to them. But a voice said: ‘You cannot go to your brothers. Because they died for the promise while you did not die for it’. Then this boy wept bitterly until the morning dawned and even when he had risen he did not cease weeping. He went to the Pope and said to him: ‘I was wrong

¹¹ I am grateful to Nkosinathi Sithole for identifying this hymn for me, and for his translation.

when I said that Thixo is found in the Roman Catholic Church only and when I wrote that affidavit. Rather Thixo is there in all things on earth’.

1.11 The Pope said: ‘I do not know what I should say, because this comes from your heart. What do you say?’ He replied: ‘It would be better that the Pope would cut off this my hand by which I wrote’. The Pope said: ‘No, I cannot do that. I do not have the authority to do so even with your permission’. Then this boy went to that place where the fire was burning on the previous day and where his brothers had died. He stirred it up again with his hand, and when the fire was burning he burned himself to death.

1.12 But the lord said: ‘This does not help you either because it has not been done by others to you. You did it by yourself. You separated from your brothers when they died and you chose for yourself to live’.¹²

The intervention of the mother shifts the focus of the parable. Understandably, having lost two sons to the fire, the mother intervenes, persuading her third son that it would not be so wrong “to say that Thixo belongs to the Roman Catholics, so that your life may be spared and that I may retain you on earth”. He follows her pragmatic advice, saying what is required of him. But the Pope demands more, requiring not only oral but written assent, saying “that they should bring a book where he should write these words down and make an affidavit”, which he did.¹³ Writing, it would seem, mediates between the temporal and the eternal. Shembe, like his mentor Leshega, understands too the role that legal ‘text’ plays in the maintenance of the missionary-colonial-*kholwa* system, and how it is to resist.

That night, when the third boy slept, “his spirit was taken up and brought to the joyful place of the elected ones. He heard a wonderful singing from a certain place and when he looked there he saw a large crowd of people who were clad in white gowns, on the other side of the river”, where “he saw his two brothers”. But when he “wanted to go to them”, a voice said to him, ““You cannot go to your brothers. Because they died for a promise while you did not die for it””.¹⁴ Shembe is almost certainly alluding here to the parable that Jesus tells in Luke 16:19-31, though he reconfigures certain elements. But the overall thrust is the same as that of the parable Jesus tells, in which God and the angels say to the faithless and unjust one: “between us and you there is a great chasm fixed, so that those who wish to come over from here to you will not be able, and that none may cross over from there to us” (Luke 16:26,

¹² Hexham and Oosthuizen, eds., *The Story of Isaiah Shembe*, 226-27.

¹³ Hexham and Oosthuizen, eds., *The Story of Isaiah Shembe*, 226-27.

¹⁴ Hexham and Oosthuizen, eds., *The Story of Isaiah Shembe*, 227.

NAS). The reference to “a large crowd of people who were clad in white gowns” alludes to Revelation 7:9-17, where there is “a great multitude which no one could count, from every nation and all tribes and peoples and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes” (Revelation 7:9, NAS), who are then identified as “the ones who come out of the great tribulation, [who] ... have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb” (Revelation 7:14, NAS).

Unable to join his brothers in heaven because of his words, both spoken and written, the third son is distraught. But even his attempts to recant are rebuffed by the Pope. Through his words, both spoken and written, he has changed his destiny. Unable to live “on earth” (as his mother wanted) knowing that he has betrayed his brothers and the Bible, the third son destroys first the hand with which he wrote and then his whole body in the fire. But even that is not enough to unite him with his brothers and the “large crowd of people who were clad in white gowns”. For “the lord” has the final word, saying: “This does not help you either because it has not been done by others to you. You did it by yourself. You separated from your brothers when they died and you chose for yourself to live”. Though this ‘lord’ could be Shembe, it is more likely to be God, for in the next paragraph of the parable there is a clear designation of Shembe. God speaks directly to the third son, excluding him from among those who have been persecuted for their faith by the empire, whether the Roman empire of the book of Revelation or the Dutch and British empires of Shembe’s South Africa.

At this point the parable of the liberating Bible shifts from parable to sermon:

1.13 “The lord of Ekuphakameni [Shembe] said: ‘The death of the young man did not help him in any way. He did not go to the place where his brothers were because he did not die for the promise. Now I speak no longer of these people. Rather I speak today to you people of Ekuphakameni. You have been told that a young man of Ekuphakameni should never write a letter to a maiden of Ekuphakameni and a maiden of Ekuphakameni is not allowed to write to a young man of Ekuphakameni. I ask you: what kind of a Bible do you write? Because you will suffer very much on the Last Day. And when you will then come to me and say: ‘Our father, I wish to enter the Kingdom’. Then I shall be unable to do anything because you have broken the law of which you were told not to break it’.¹⁵

A remarkable parable becomes an even more remarkable sermon. The Bible is clearly appropriated by Shembe as a text of power, which is why it must be stolen. But once stolen, copied, and shared with the community its message is quite different from ‘the instruction’ of missionary-*kholwa* Christianity. And yet Shembe requires of his followers a similar

¹⁵ Hexham and Oosthuizen, eds., *The Story of Isaiah Shembe*, 227-28.

obedience to “the law” as that demanded by the Pope. Indeed, law is a key feature of Shembe’s new community, and laws on the relationship between men and women, alluded to in the sermon, are central tenets of ‘the law’.

The oral/aural Bible: Shembe’s law

If recognising the power of the Bible is a first move in Shembe’s biblical hermeneutics, and seizing it by stealth his second move, then the third distinctive move Shembe makes is his engagement and participation with the major characters of the Bible, especially Moses from the Old Testament and Paul from the New Testament. Among the ‘texts’ associated with Isaiah Shembe are a genre known as *imithetho*/laws. ‘Laws’ form a considerable part of the corpus of Shembe’s ‘writings’,¹⁶ and the use of this term may well allude to ‘the law of Moses’.

Significantly, those sections in one of the notebooks, the use of which was encouraged by Shembe among his followers, that include the designation ‘law’ are about marriage and adultery; indeed, many of Shembe’s instructions are about the relations between men and women.¹⁷ So the shift in Shembe’s story about the stolen Bible from the three young boys who stole the Bible to the issue of young men and women writing to each other is not a tangential topic. The Bible is for Shembe extensively about law, and law is primarily about how the community should govern the relationships between men and women.

While the oral record indicates that Shembe did not intend to start a church, Carol Muller notes that “his growing following of women, young girls, and orphans persuaded him to provide a space of sanctuary for them”,¹⁸ so he ‘obtained’ land, sometime between 1911 and 1916.¹⁹ On this site, called Ekuphakameni, says Muller, “Shembe established what became

¹⁶ It is not clear to what extent Shembe was literate, and his ‘writings’ are all produced by his followers, much like ‘the writings’ of Jesus; see Gerald O. West, "Reading Shembe 'Re-Membering' the Bible: Isaiah Shembe's Instructions on Adultery," *Neotestamentica* 40, no. 1 (2006); Gerald O. West, "The Bible and the Female Body in Ibandla Lamanazaretha: Isaiah Shembe and Jephthah's Daughter," *Old Testament Essays* 20, no. 2 (2007); Gerald O. West, "Constructing African Christianity: The Voice of Paul in the Formative Teachings of Isaiah Shembe," in *Paul, Grace and Freedom: Essays in Honour of John K. Riches*, ed. Paul Middleton, Angus Paddison, and Karen Wenell (London and New York: T&T Clark, 2009).

¹⁷ West, "Reading Shembe 'Re-Membering' the Bible: Isaiah Shembe's Instructions on Adultery."

¹⁸ Carol Ann Muller, *Rituals of Fertility and the Sacrifice of Desire: Nazarite Women's Performance in South Africa* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1999), 19.

¹⁹ Muller indicates the dates of 1915 or 1916, and states that he “purchased” the land “using money given to him by those he had healed”; Muller, *Nazarite Women's Performance in*

the headquarters of a large and powerful religious community”. How he did this, she continues, was by “[c]ombining his deep knowledge of the mission Bible with his respect for Nguni traditional ways, and with some knowledge of commodity capitalism, he constituted a new and hybrid regime of religious truth ... in competition with ideologies of the state and the Christian mission.²⁰ Shembe’s law relocates African women in a new ‘moral’ community.

Shembe’s biblical theology

If we read the extensive material attributed to and associated with the Prophet Isaiah Shembe we find a remarkable ‘biblical’ theology, but a biblical theology largely independent of missionary-colonial-*kholwa* Christianity. While drawing on a range of other resources, including Nguni religious and cultural resources, resources from the political and economic resources of the late 1800s and early 1900s, and a few resources from missionary Christianity, it is the Bible that is central to Isaiah Shembe’s project of the restoration of African community. In undertaking this task of restoration, Shembe locates himself alongside the biblical Moses and Paul, in particular. Both are important in Shembe’s project of community construction. In these teachings Shembe appropriates the authority and rhetoric of Moses the law-giver addressing the people of ‘Israel’ (in the Pentateuch) and the authority of rhetoric of Paul the apostle addressing the churches he has established (in the Epistles). In each case Shembe engages with these biblical ancestors with whom he shares the task of building community.²¹ Neither traditional African tribal authorities nor missionary-*kholwa* Christianity were able to construct a “moral ethnicity”,²² but the Bible and its ancestral figures provide Shembe with plenty of potential for both a “virtuous polity” and a “theological nationalism”, “a discourse that, to legitimate itself, posited national unity on ideas of virtue, healing, peacefulness, repentance and submission to Jehovah’s dictates”.²³ As Joel Cabrita argues, “Shembe’s ministry was preoccupied with both ‘mourning for [his] scattered nation’ [with a particular concern for the plight of African women] and working tirelessly to re-found it upon the new social possibilities exemplified by his Nazaretha communities, some of which endure

South Africa, 19. However, oral re-membering indicates a date of 1911, and insists that the land was donated to him by an Indian; personal communication, Rev F.I. Mgidi, 29 July 2015.

²⁰ Muller, *Nazarite Women's Performance in South Africa*, 19.

²¹ And with whom he shares the call of God, via a heavenly voice; I am grateful to Mthokozisi Myeza for this observation; personal communication, 29 July 2015.

²² Joel M. Cabrita, "A Theological Biography of Isaiah Shembe, C.1870-1935" (University of Cambridge, 2008).

²³ Cabrita, "Isaiah Shembe’s Theological Nationalism," 618, 09.

to this day”²⁴.

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²⁴ Cabrita, "Isaiah Shembe's Theological Nationalism," 625. The focus of this presentation is the biblical hermeneutics of Isaiah Shembe. For some analysis of the contemporary biblical hermeneutics of the communities Isaiah Shembe founded, see Nkosinathi Sithole, "Acquiescence or Resistance? The Role of the Aic in the Struggle against Apartheid," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 137(2010); Nkosinathi Sithole, "An African Bible for African Readers: J.G. Shembe's Use of the Bible in the Sermon " *Old Testament Essays* 24, no. 1 (2011); Gerald O. West, "Layers of Reception of Jephthah's Daughter (Judges 11) among the Amanazaretha: From the Early 1900s to Today," in *Reception History and Biblical Studies: Theory and Practice*, ed. William John Lyons and Emma England (London: Bloomsburg T&T Clark, 2015).