

Did Prince Cetshwayo Read the Old Testament in 1859? The Role of the Bible and the Art of Reading in the Interaction between Norwegian Missionaries and the Zulu Elite in the Mid-19th Century¹

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Abstract

The context of this essay is the celebration of 150 years of theological – including Old Testament – studies in South Africa, commemorating the establishing of a theological seminary in Stellenbosch in 1859. The essay discusses another but simultaneous incident reflecting the early interface between South Africa and the Bible. In late 1859, the Zulu Prince (later King) Cetshwayo approached Norwegian missionaries operating at the border between Natal and Zululand, expressing his wish to learn to read. The missionaries saw this as a God-given opportunity to expose the prince to the Word of God, and Moses, a Christian Zulu, was put in charge of the instruction. Based on Norwegian (and to some extent British: Colenso) missionary sources, the essay discusses this incident in 1859 from the perspective that the Bible is perceived by both missionaries and Zulus as a particular object of power, within the more general exchange of goods and services between the missionaries and the Zulu elite.

A INTRODUCTION

One hundred and fifty years ago, in September 1859, the Zulu Prince – and later King – Cetshwayo approached Norwegian missionaries operating at the border between Natal and Zululand, telling them that he would like to learn to read. The incident is reported by the missionary Ommund Oftebro, who was residing at a mission station in Empangeni, only one and a half hour's walk from the residence of Prince Cetshwayo. In a letter dated October 14, 1859 – later published in the magazine of the Norwegian Missionary Society – Oftebro summarises some of his experiences the last few weeks, including a brief visit by the British Bishop John W. Colenso and a baptism ceremony, where the Norwegian Superintendent Hans P. S. Schreuder had come to Empangeni to

¹ The essay is built on a paper that was read at the Joint Conference of the Academic Societies in the Fields of Religion and Theology, University of Stellenbosch, 22-26 June 2009. The conference commemorated the establishing of the Theological Seminary in Stellenbosch in 1859, and a subsequent history of 150 years of academic study of theology and religion in South Africa.

baptize three young boys, amongst them Zibukjana Ka Gudu, from now called Moses.² The day after the baptism, Oftebro (1860:51, my translation of the Norwegian original – K. H.) writes, Schreuder and his delegation were invited to meet Prince Cetshwayo:

[We] found him most friendly and hospitable, and the prince expressed his wish and decision – to learn to read! Could he be serious? Whether he was or not, we had to give it a try. Even though I would not be able to visit Empangeni, the Lord had now arranged that I have a Christian, Moses, whom the prince both knows and cares about, and who is willing to and – I hope – capable too, to go into this errand. And while I sit here and write, Moses is sitting from morning to afternoon together with Ukekjwajo [Cetshwayo], telling him the Word of God and singing our hymns together with him, according to the request of the prince. The first day he learned the alphabet, the next he turned the first page of the book. He is reading very seriously, and when he has made some progress, he returns to what he has read previously, to check whether he is still able to read it.

In this essay I will discuss some aspects of the role of the Bible in the interaction between Norwegian missionaries and some representatives of the Zulu elite in the mid-19th century. Let me emphasize the phrase “some aspects;” other aspects of the same interaction, such as the resistance against colonial and missionary Westernisation (cf. Comaroff & Comaroff 1991), will have to wait till a later stage. The main focus of the present essay is the role of the Bible and the art of reading in the more general exchange of commodities and services between the missionaries and the Zulus. The missionary narrative about Prince Cetshwayo serves as a point of departure, and will hopefully enable me to do some justice to the somewhat rhetorical title of this essay – “Did Prince Cetshwayo read the Old Testament in 1859?” – which is my way of paying tribute to the celebration of 150 years of Old Testament studies in Stellenbosch and South Africa.

B EXCHANGE OF COMMODITIES, SERVICES – AND THE BIBLE – ACCORDING TO SOME MISSIONARY SOURCES ON ZULULAND

Let us on our way from Stellenbosch to Zululand go via Stavanger, a town situated on the south-western coast of Norway; today the country’s oil-capital, characterized by its offshore oil industry, whereas in the mid-19th century, a small town making a living out of fishing industry and shipping. Its

² The Norwegian missionaries tend to use their own way of spelling names in isiZulu, such as “Ukekjwayo” for “Cetshwayo.” I have not been able to verify the spelling of “Zibukjana Ka Gudu,” and in later sources he is referred to as “Moses” (cf. Jørgensen 2002).

geographical localization and its trade linked to ships crossing the North Sea made 19th century Stavanger sensitive to political and religious movements in neighbouring Britain, Germany and the Netherlands. One result was that the early 19th century mission revivals in these neighbouring countries received quite some attention in Stavanger. When the Norwegian Missionary Society was established in 1842, Stavanger was therefore made its centre and the home of its School of Mission and Theology, a seminary – now a specialized university – established to train missionaries for overseas service. The School of Mission and Theology is today the host of the Norwegian Mission Archives and Mission Museum, and amongst a large number of items we find a pair of ivory tusks, a gift from Prince Cetshwayo's father, King Mpande, to the first graduates from Stavanger, some time in the 1850s. This pair of tusks is a lasting reminiscence of the exchange of commodities and services between the Norwegian missionaries and representatives of the Zulu elite.

The Norwegian missionaries were not settlers in the ordinary meaning of the word. They were actually discouraged by their superiors from engaging in trade (cf. Jørgensen 1990:189-190). Nevertheless, they soon found themselves engaged in various forms of exchange of commodities and services with the Zulus (cf. Simensen 1986). According to the Norwegian church historian Torstein Jørgensen, who analysed the encounter between the Norwegian missionaries and the Zulu kingdom in the mid-19th century, the initiative to this kind of interaction often came from the Zulu side (cf. Jørgensen 1990:225-231). The presence of missionaries meant access to European commodities such as cotton, linen, knives, matches, and so forth, and with the exception of liquor and guns, the Norwegians were willing to participate in the exchange. But the presence of missionaries also meant access to services such as employment, medical care and even diplomatic advice in relation to the British and Boer colonies (cf. Jørgensen 1990:195-211). In spite of all this, it must have been clear to the Zulus that the main purpose of the missionaries was not the commodities and services as such, but to expose as many Zulus as possible to what the missionaries referred to as “the Word of God.”

The Norwegian sources can be complemented by contemporary British sources. The very same year – that is in 1859, when the theological seminary was established in Stellenbosch and Prince Cetshwayo approached the Norwegian missionaries at the border between Natal and Zululand – another missionary, the British Bishop John W. Colenso, made a ten weeks expedition into Zululand. Colenso's expedition resulted in two booklets published in 1860; his own account (cf. Colenso 1860a = 1982:41-161), and the accounts of three of his helpers, published in isiZulu and English (cf. Colenso 1860b = 1982:163-203). The British expedition approached the same Zulu elite as the Norwegians did, and the booklets show that exchange of commodities and services here too was part of the interaction. Amongst all the items for exchange listed by

Colenso and his helpers, there are also references to bibles. For personal use, of course, but also to be used as gifts. The expedition seems to have brought a pile of copies of Genesis for distribution. In passing, Colenso mentions that he left some copies of Genesis with some missionaries (cf. Colenso [1860a] 1982:70), and one of Colenso's helpers – William, the interpreter – also mentions that "the book about the beginning" is amongst the gifts that are distributed (cf. Colenso [1860b] 1982:181).

C THE ROLE OF THE BIBLE AND THE ART OF READING IN THE EXCHANGE OF COMMODITIES AND SERVICES

As demonstrated by this brief survey of some missionary sources from Zululand, the Bible was indeed part of the general exchange of commodities and services between the Norwegian and other missionaries and the Zulu elite in the mid-19th century. But what role did the Bible – and the closely related art of reading – play?

Gerald O. West has investigated early encounters with the Bible among the Tlhaping, and a couple of his observations may prove helpful in the present attempt at interpreting Prince Cetshwayo's interaction with the Norwegians on the art of reading. First, West argues that the Tlhaping reception of the Bible can be separated from the reception of missionary and colonial Christianity (cf. West 2004:255, 2002:34-35). Most historians tend to take for granted that the church's introduction of the Bible in a certain context makes her the *de facto* owner of the Bible in that context. West, however, argues that so is not necessarily the case. Concurring with Vincent L. Wimbush, who has done research on the reception of the Bible among African slaves in America, West argues that the Bible may be seized by groups outside church control, and thus live a life more or less independent of the church (cf. West 2000:45-50, cf. also Razafindrakoto 2006). Secondly, West argues that the Bible is not conceptualized by the Tlhaping as just another object of trade; rather, it is an object somehow charged with power. This power can to some extent be manipulated by those who control the Bible, not only by missionaries, but by anyone who possesses it or is able to read it. As such the Bible shares features with other western objects charged with power, such as weapons like the sword and pistol (cf. West 2004: 265, 275 and 2002:30-31).

Let us then return to Oftebro and his report about Prince Cetshwayo's wish to learn to read. Little is said, at least explicitly, about why the prince wants to engage in this. Still, Oftebro (1860:51, my translation – K. H.) briefly suggests two possible motifs:

Does the Prince consider becoming a Christian, or is he simply interested in learning to read and write? I dare not answer, but put it all in the hands of God, the only one who can perform miracles.

Accordingly, one possible motif – and for obvious reasons the one favoured by the missionary – is that the prince actually intends to convert to Christianity. Oftebro assures his Norwegian readers that he puts the whole thing in the hands of God. Still, as God is able to perform miracles, the readers are encouraged to hope and pray that the prince's wish to learn to read could be a first step towards conversion. Oftebro is fully aware of his readers' expectations for results of the missionary enterprise, in the form of conversions. It had taken fourteen years from the start of the Norwegian missionary enterprise in Zululand in 1844 to the first baptism in 1858. But now, in September 1859, Oftebro is able to report that something is about to begin. On Sunday three young men were baptized, he reports, and on Monday the prince himself came to seek the services of the missionaries.

The other possible motif – not that much favoured by Oftebro and therefore introduced by a modifying “simply” – is that Prince Cetshwayo means exactly what he says. He says that he would like to learn to read because he actually would like to learn to read! This would come as no surprise to Oftebro. The arts of reading and writing are repeatedly presented in the missionary sources as a major exponent of western civilization. It is therefore only to be expected that some Zulus eventually would find it attractive, although the missionary rhetoric subordinates this motif of civilization under the motif of conversion.

In other words, Oftebro sees two possible motifs in Prince Cetshwayo's desire to learn to read, attraction to western civilization and/or Christian conversion. However, one could – and I will – ask whether Oftebro (1860:51, my translation – K. H.) provides evidence even of a third possible motif, although without elaborating on it. In his rendering of the dialogue between himself and Prince Cetshwayo, the missionary lets the prince claim that:

He will fight with the book, he says, until he conquers it, and then
he will learn to write.

Prince Cetshwayo – here in Oftebro's literary construct – demonstrates a determined will to enter the realm of literacy. This will of his is expressed through military metaphors, as he argues that he wants to “fight with” and eventually “conquer” the “book.” Oftebro mentions this only in passing, but I am tempted to see more in these military metaphors than he does. Could it be that Prince Cetshwayo sees a third motif for appropriating the art of reading the Bible, that is without accepting neither western civilization nor Christian conversion? Could it be that he sees the Bible not only as a key symbol of European missionaries and colonialists, but even more as a sacred object charged with power, a power over which he is able to gain control, independently of the Europeans? Based on Gerald O. West's analysis of early encounters with the Bible among the Tlhaping it makes sense to raise these questions. And, I would tend to argue, based on a parallel – and slightly

younger – report by one of Oftebro’s Norwegian colleagues in Zululand, it even makes some sense to answer the questions affirmatively.

Nearly a decade after Oftebro’s brief dialogue with Prince Cetshwayo, in a report from 1868, another Norwegian missionary, Jan Olaus Kielland reconstructs a more detailed conversation with the prince. The latter is visiting Empangeni, and Kielland makes use of the opportunity to pay him a visit and expose him to some aspects of the Christian faith (cf. Kielland 1868:144-148). Kielland’s entry to the conversation with Prince Cetshwayo is an axe. On the request of the prince he has brought an “American axe”, and as the receiver is satisfied with this gift, the missionary gets the opportunity and courage to use it as an entry to a conversation about God and his word (Kielland 1868:144, my translation – K. H.).

You often admire the products of white people, and their skills and understanding that are able to make such products. But you, too, can achieve similar skills. [...] You, too, can receive the wisdom and power that is needed for this. From where have white people got it and why are they in so many things superior to black people? Is it not first and foremost the Word of God which they have received, that performs such great things among them and has taught them and enlightened them so that they now have a high position in all knowledge and insight? And this Word of God has such a power also for you.

According to Kielland’s reconstruction of his conversation with Prince Cetshwayo, the white superiority as far as knowledge and insight are concerned – and the “American axe” is an exemplification of this – is a result of the presence of the Word of God among the whites. Here we should notice the repetition of the term “power” in the missionary’s rhetoric. First he argues that Prince Cetshwayo can receive the “power” that is needed for making the products of the whites, and then he relates this “power” to the Word of God. Somewhat later he elaborates further on the relationship between the terms “power” and “the Word of God” (Kielland 1868:145, my translation – K. H.):

The Word of God possesses an extraordinary power, it enlightens the human being and it transforms the human being. It transforms peoples and nations, and nothing is untouched by it, when human beings receive it.

It is reasonable to argue, I think, that Kielland’s focus on the transforming ability of the Word of God – as “power” – may have invited Prince Cetshwayo to understand this Word of God – that is the Bible – as a sacred object charged with a special power. Further, the prince must also have realised that this power may be available to him.

The question is how: How can Prince Cetshwayo experience this power? Kielland relates it to the listening to the Word of God. From his perspective, as a Lutheran theologian, the Word of God must be proclaimed and received, and then it may transform people and peoples. From Prince Cetshwayo's perspective, however, the art of reading must have been essential, as the one who is able to read the Word of God will somehow be in control of its transforming power.

It may be that I read too much into the sources. Still, I find it reasonable to think that the motivation behind Prince Cetshwayo's wish to learn to read may have been quite complex. Kielland may be right in that attraction to western civilization or Christian conversion may have been parts of his motivation, but I would argue that so is the possibility to gain some control over the inherent power of what appeared to be a key factor in missionary and other western religion, the Word of God.

D AND FINALLY: DID PRINCE CETSHWAYO READ THE OLD TESTAMENT IN 1859?

Let me finally return once more to the incident at the residence of Prince Cetshwayo in 1859. Oftebro was able to report to his Norwegian readers that one of the three young men that recently had been baptized – Moses – is put in charge of the instruction of the prince (Oftebro 1860:51, my translation – K. H.):³

[...] while I sit here and write, Moses is sitting from morning to afternoon together with Ukekjwajo [Cetshwayo], telling him the Word of God and singing our hymns together with him, according to the request of the prince.

Now, did Prince Cetshwayo read the Old Testament in 1859? That is, do Oftebro's references to "the book" and "the Word of God" imply biblical or even Old Testament texts? It may of course be argued that this question of mine is irrelevant in relation to the celebration of the establishing of a theological seminary in the European-South African community the same year, and also that it is speculative in relation to our quite meager historical sources. Still, the question should be raised, I think, because it may draw some attention to the parallel focus on the Bible by the European-South African and African-South African communities. Did Prince Cetshwayo struggle with the texts of for example Genesis, at the same time as the first class in Stellenbosch was struggling with the same texts, and what did they make out of these texts? I refer to Genesis, simply because Genesis texts in isiZulu were available in

³ Let it here be remarked that Oftebro and his readers back in Norway at this time would not be able to imagine that Moses only a few years later, from 1866 to 1869, would go to Norway to be inscribed as a theological student at the School of Mission and Theology in Stavanger, Oftebro's own *alma mater*, cf. Jørgensen 2002.

1859. A first textbook in isiZulu, published as early as in 1837, contained the first samples of a translation of portions of Genesis and two Psalms. In 1859, however, more books were available; translations of Matthew, Psalms and Genesis, as well as a prayer book. During his 1859 expedition into Zululand, Bishop Colenso was working on a translation of Exodus. When Oftebro reports that Prince Cetshwayo the first day learned the alphabet and the next day turned the first page of the book, this “book” may therefore have been the textbook from 1837, with its Old Testament texts, but it may also have been some of the subsequent bible translations, such as for example Genesis.

In a year when we celebrate 150 years of academic Old Testament studies in South Africa, it should be remembered that the Bible – and indeed the Old Testament – has lived a life outside academia too, a life serving the interpretation of life and faith of most South African communities. The heritage from Stellenbosch in 1859 is a major exponent of the roles of the Bible, but so is also the 1859 narrative about Prince Cetshwayo, and all those similar narratives about early examples of interaction with the Bible. In order to continue serving church and society, the South African guild of Old Testament studies must therefore include the traditions of both Stellenbosch and Prince Cetshwayo, and even in that respect – with an allusion to Jurie Le Roux’s important study of South African Old Testament scholarship – be a story of two ways (cf. Le Roux 1993). There may be some tension in this, still, here is our history, and here is also a potential for our future.

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