

LESOTHO SENDS MISSIONARIES - PART 5

“We are expecting a great chief who died and rose again”

A mission led by Sehababane

A mission team departed in May 1874, consisting of Asser Sehababane as its leader. They travelled by foot, only stopping for longer periods due to fever or when a chief showed genuine interest in their work. For example, at Chief Nyamati's village, they remained for 19 days as the people there had already had indigenous traditions that pointed to the return of a great chief, a theme that seemed to meld beautifully with that of the Gospel. As recorded by Sehababane, the gist of the conversation was as follows:

“They said: We have a teaching which our forefathers taught us that a certain Chief of theirs passed away, and then rose and will return. We continue to expect him, and if your teaching does not explain where he has gone, or if it diverts us away from this teaching, we will not accept it. Upon hearing these things, we understood that when one listens carefully, it can be said that they were speaking of Jesus; but they did not know the name of their Chief. So we said: These matters (of yours) are the same as that of the Chief of whom we are speaking.” [Reference to Shona 10 da week: Coillard, p. 250]

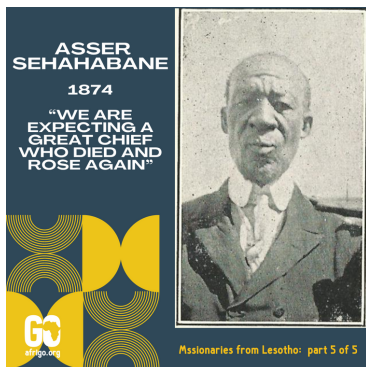
The expedition returned to Morija in October to share details of the trip with Mabile and others. Little did Sehababane and his team know that while they had been preparing to leave for Zimbabwe, events in Lesotho were unfolding that would dramatically demonstrate the solidarity of the Church of Lesotho with this initiative. At the second Synod of the church of Basotholand, held in 1874, at which 98 delegates (teachers, elders, evangelists and ministers) from the 14 parishes were represented, it was resolved to officially support the Zimbabwe Mission, establishing a special fund.

Mabile wrote that “One of my catechists [evangelists] spontaneously opened the collection by placing five shillings on the table. Immediately from all sides the catechists and delegates responded; one might have said that each one had had the same thought and had prepared his offering in advance. It was a great moment.” Within no time, 40 pounds was collected for the mission to Bonyai [modern Zimbabwe].

Berthoud and Creux (Swiss missionaries), together with the evangelists Bethuel Ralitau and Jeremia Nthanye went north in May 1875 to join Eliakim Matlanye and others in order to found a permanent mission station among the Tsonga people, and this was established first in two parts of the North-eastern part of South Africa and then elsewhere.

Basotho, as well as the Tsonga and Bapedi began to be trained as evangelists and teachers at Morija, a trend which continued for many years. Eventually, ordained pastors were also trained. In April 1875, the PEMS Missionary conference in Lesotho decided to send Sehabane and 3 other evangelists back to the Northern Transvaal with the intention of founding a mission in Zimbabwe by Basotho evangelists. It was to be a ‘mission of Africans to Africans’.

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The expedition was postponed after learning that the neighbouring government, weary of educated Africans proceeding to the north, would not permit the Basotho evangelists to pass. It was then decided to send Rev Hermann Dieterlen, a newly arrived missionary to head up a larger expedition, which totaled 22 in all, including the 4 evangelists, with the expectation that the neighbouring government would not block the progress of a white missionary.

Leaving in April 1876, they arrived in Pretoria, the capital of South Africa, and were suddenly arrested and thrown into jail. Dieterlen was bailed out of jail the following day by a German minister who lived in Pretoria, after which he was able to arrange the release of the Basotho he came with. The Boers of the republic were badly divided in opinion, but for the moment a certain faction decided that all missionary activity should cease, and no one should be allowed to evangelize further north. Eventually all members were released without charges and allowed to return to Lesotho the following month.

Final Efforts at reaching Zimbabwe

In August 1876, Simone Buys and Bethuel Ralitau returned to Zimbabwe. This trip reconfirmed the faith of the reached nationals like Chief Nyamati who wished for a permanent mission to be established among them. In April of the following year, Francois Coillard (a veteran missionary) and 4 other Basotho evangelists, including Sehabane, along with family and some assisting with cattle, left on an expedition. By this time the British had annexed parts of South Africa and so the expedition was able to pass through the capital of Pretoria without any difficulties; in fact some of the officials involved in the prior arrest now showed a combination of remorse and kindness to the new group.

Elleck K. Mashingaidze commented:

From 1869-1890 the Dutch Reformed Church of South Africa, the Paris Mission of Lesotho (PEM), the Berlin Missionary Society and the Swiss Mission, between them organized not less than twenty-one missionary expeditions to Zimbabwe...most of the expeditions were almost entirely African in both membership and leadership. In short, it was the Christian convictions, sacrifices, initiatives, moral courage and physical endurance of the Sotho, Venda, Pedi and Eurafrikan Christians that sustained the missionary fervour in Mashonaland for over two decades prior to the British colonization of Zimbabwe in 1890.”

If the Basotho evangelists played no long-term role in nurturing the church among the Zimbabwean people, they at least had the pleasure of seeing the establishment of a series of missions across southern Zimbabwe by the Berlin Mission and then the Dutch Reformed Church, followed by the Church of Sweden and others over the coming decades.

Parts of the Venda-speaking areas of the southwest of South Africa, where there are also resident people known locally as ‘Basotho’, the Evangelical Lutherans (who grew out of the Church of Sweden Mission) utilized the Sotho hymnbook of the Church of Lesotho, entitled ‘Lifela tsa Sione’ (Songs of Zion), and thus these hymns, many composed by Rev Coillard himself, are still sung there with gusto to the present day.