Interpreting the World:
Ntsikana and Birth of Xhosa Christianity

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Introduction
South Africa’s modern history boasts several influential and prophetic voices who have risen to prominence at times of socio-political crisis and upheaval. Household names like Nelson Mandela, Steve Biko, and Desmond Tutu stand tall on the horizon of South Africa’s struggle for independence in the last century. Ntsikana however is relatively inconspicuous by comparison. At a popular level, Ntsikana’s legacy is now largely confined to the books *Imibengol* (Bennie 1935), once available in Xhosa high schools and more recently *African Intellectuals in the 19th and early 20th century South Africa* (Ndletyana, 2008). Yet despite his traditional and unremarkable upbringing in a rural homestead, he emerges within his culture’s oral tradition and the written record, as a man of paramount importance, not only for the South African church, but for Christian identity amongst the Xhosa. A brief flurry of academic publications (for example Hodgson, 1980, 1981, 1984) examining historical records have had limited success in reviving this pre-eminent forbearer of African Christian faith. Regrettably it is the legend of Ntsikana that lives on, at the expense of an accurate historical narrative, which when combined with critical reflection, ought to leave an indelible mark on contemporary Christianity in South Africa.

This study therefore sets out to re-evaluate Ntsikana against the backdrop of the clash of colonial and indigenous worlds in the Eastern Cape in the early 19th century and revive his significance for Christian and missiological thinking today. Part one sketches the key historical events which punctuated and affected his short life of 41 years. Part two examines the extent to which Ntsikana successfully re-interpreted his world and assimilated the Christian gospel at a time when opposing Xhosa voices were clamoring for defiant resistance against colonial Christian witness. Analysis of the ‘Great Hymn’ demonstrates Ntsikana’s unmistakable contextualization of the gospel in the face of traditional practices, colonial oppression and his rival, Nxele. Part three investigates some implications for missiology, in light of the alleged interaction between Ntsikana and Johannes Van der Kemp (of the London Missionary Society) and his successors. It is important to consider how the acceptance and inculturation of the gospel by first generation Christians was brought about by the respective roles of general and special revelation – what Lamin Sanneh calls ‘revelation and divine initiative that precedes and anticipates historical mission’ (1983: 170). It is argued that the divine initiative is traceable to the period leading up to Ntsikana’s ‘conversion’ experience and his subsequent indigenous expression of faith through the Great Hymn and other compositions.

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1 Literally meaning ‘cuts of meat’ or ‘titbits’ it is used here to allude to Bennie’s anthology comprising different historical sources. William Govan Bennie (1869-1942) was a teacher at Lovedale for many years before holding positions as chief inspector of African education in the Cape Province and teaching Xhosa at the University of Cape Town.
Part One: Intrusion and Emergence

The emergence of Ntsikana as one of the first Christian Xhosa prophet-leaders may at first seem incongruous given the historical landscape of the early 19th century, but was in fact a prerequisite of the colonial policy of land acquisition. The situation on the Eastern frontier of the British Cape colony deteriorated rapidly for the Xhosa-speaking people as different cultures collided repeatedly from as early as 1779. Milton describes how from as early as the 1770’s contact between the Europeans and Xhosa for trading purposes soon developed into cattle raids, which eventually escalated into the land-grab for the 3500 km² of Zuurveld pasture under the direction of Baron von Plettenburg (1983: 26-31). Xhosa ascendency was eventually broken following Britain’s re-occupation of the Cape in 1806. In December 1811 the colonial government mobilized unprecedented military strength which saw the British army drive the Xhosa east, out of the Zuurveld and across the Fish river (the fourth frontier war). Ensuing cattle raids by the Xhosa were repelled and eventually led to the brokering of a deal between Governor Lord Charles Somerset and the Xhosa chief Ngqika.

With a buffer zone now firmly established between the Fish and Keiskamma rivers, further discord was only inevitable. The Zuurveld had been intended for settlement by British soldiers without employment since the defeat of Napoleon at the Battle of Waterloo. Out of ninety thousand Britons who applied, five thousand were accepted, arriving separate parties in Algoa Bay in April 1820. The hostility of the landscape was matched by the conflicting interests of settler, missionary, and the local landdrost (officials given local jurisdiction). If the Xhosa had lost the struggle to hold on to political and economic independence, the battle for sacred power continued unabated for decades to come (Hodgson, 1997: 68-88). By 1812 not only were the Xhosa facing superior colonial military force but were also riven by serious internal division. The feud between rival chiefs Ngqika and Ndlambe that led to the battle of Amalinde in 1818 rendered political solutions to the crisis futile. As Peires (2003: 75) notes, the situation necessitated a transition of leadership ‘from the hands of chiefs into the hands of prophet-figures’.

As with the wider African religious world view, there was no divide between sacred and secular for the Xhosa. It was now the task of the diviners to explain the presence of white settlers in a manner which would appeal to the traditional view and possibly appease colonial dominance. One response came through the ministry of Ntsikana, to whom we will shortly turn. The only other response of note to the crisis was propounded by the diviner and military leader Nxele, serving Ntiskana’s rival chiefdom of Ndlambe. By 1816, Nxele had become a well established councillor to chief Ndlambe, preaching an orthodox message of moral purity in keeping with his calling as a diviner. Nxele’s initial receptiveness towards European missionaries (who were once again present in the Zuurveld – following Johannes van der Kemp’s first visit there in 1799 representing the London Missionary Society) waned upon the mutual realisation that his claims to divine origins and authority were unacceptable. The incompatibility of the God of the whites with the Xhosa god Mdalidiphu soon became apparent. His attempted synthesis of European and African beliefs failed.
In the years after his birth (c.1780), Ntiskana’s progression from childhood into adulthood was firmly rooted in Xhosa tradition and nobility, thus far untouched by European culture. In lieu of any schooling, boys were found not in the classroom but on the veldt, herding goats. Ntiskana’s promotion to cattle tending would have come when he was fifteen, followed a few years later by the rites of passage to manhood. This ceremony of circumcision, a pre-requisite for the exercise of influence in the community, saw boys living by themselves, smeared in white clay for several weeks. The Xhosa minister and writer, John Knox Bokwe (1914: 6) commented, “The lads are assembled to receive instruction from the old men as to their duties as men, and then they are publicly discharged”. Prior to this, at whatever age, the Inkwenkwe (boys) were treated as exactly that – boys.

In 1799, when Ntsikana was approaching his own circumcision rites (as an Abakweta), Bokwe (1914: 5) recounts an unusual appearance in Ngqikaland:

One day a strange, elderly, white man arrived in Gaikaland. After being cautiously welcomed by the chief, he was allowed to pitch his tent on the banks of the Kieskama River. The natives gave the stranger a name peculiar to the circumstance of his arrival, as they have since done to every European who has come to dwell with them, sometimes descriptive of a blemish in his person, or a certain mannerism in his bearing. The name given to the new arrival was Nyengana, meaning one who had appeared sneakingly, as if by accident.

Providential might have been a more accurate word to describe the pivotal arrival of Johannes Van der Kemp at Debe, recounted here by Bokwe. Van der Kemp’s work there was brief and somewhat unremarkable, especially given that most of his missionary career was spent in Bethelsdorp, where he was spurned by most white settlers and embraced by the Khoi-Khoi and impoverished communities. However, Isaac Williams Wauchope’s (2008: 52) recollection of his grandmother’s musings as a child offer further insight into the nature of Van der Kemp’s missionary activity at Debe between 1799 and 1801:

The preaching of Van der Kemp was of a conversational character. There were several trees and the men sat under one tree while the women occupied the shade of another…Van der Kemp told them that

There was God in heaven;
He created all things,
The sun, the moon, the stars.
There was one, Sifuba-sibenzi,
(The Broad-breasted one)

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2 Bokwe notes in his preface: “The following sketch is gathered from all the materials of information, written or oral, known to exist.” Amongst his sources are: personal accounts from his own family who knew Ntiskana and his family; an article published in Isigidimi Samaxosa in 1878 on Ntikana and an excerpt from the 1845 issue of Ikwezi (the first Xhosa-English periodical published in the South African missionfield) which corroborates much of what was said in Isigidimi Samaxosa:”
He is the leader of men;  
Was heralded by a Star;  
His feet were wounded for us,  
His hands were pierced for us  
His blood was shed for us.  

Bokwe tells how the small crowd of ‘boys’ (probably between the ages of fifteen and nineteen), wrapped in their karosses listening at a distance to Van der Kemp. He records how “one of these boys seems especially to drink in the words of this strange white man” (1914 :6). He goes on to assert, “This is Ntsikana receiving the precious seed” (1914 :13).  

During the next fifteen years of his life, Ntsikana gained renown as a singer, dancer and orator in addition to becoming hereditary councillor to chief Ngqika. Apart from the possibility of Ntsikana hearing itinerant missionary James Read preaching somewhere between the Peddie district (where Ntsikana had settled with his two wives Nontsonta and Nomanto) and the Kat River district in 1811, there are no records of spiritual stirrings until he settled at Gqora in the latter district.  

In 1815 there were three noteworthy incidents which combine to form what is accepted as Ntsikana’s conversion experience (Peires, 2010; Hodgson, 1980: 3; Bokwe, 1914: 7-13). The first occurred as Ntsikana went out one day to inspect his cattle at day break. Standing in his kraal, a ray of light struck the side of Hulushe, his most prized ox, holding Ntsikana’s gaze. Bokwe (1914: 7-8) notes how his face betrayed excited feelings as he prostrated himself on the ground. A boy observing Ntsikana nearby was unable to explain who or what might have held his attention when he was asked if he had seen the spectacle. Activities around the farmstead then continued as usual.  

Later that day, Ntsikana attended a dance during which he was expected to give one of his usual virtuoso performances. Bokwe (1914: 11) describes the events which unfolded:  

He gives a start. Suddenly a violent gale arises. At first, no one heads it. It keeps on however, till at last the dancers stop for a little, and Ntsikana returns to his seat.  

Twice more the gale appeared during his attempt to dance, eventually forcing him to abandon the proceedings. This time the spectacle was visible to the on-lookers, whose superstitious instinct lead them to believe that the son of Gaba was bewitched.  

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3 These are the words of Mina, the grandmother of Isaac Williams Wauchope.  
4 Bokwe also notes: “I regret that I cannot state the exact dates of these occurrences, but if I may be allowed to make a guess, it was some time about 1815. Our English readers must excuse this want of exactness, as my countrymen were as yet not very particular about counting up days or months, or sometimes even years”.  

5
On their sudden return home, Ntsikana’s companions were to witness more vexing behaviour:

As they neared home, they came to a small river. Here Ntsikana threw aside his blanket, plunged himself into the water and washed off all the red ochre that painted his body (Bokwe: 11-12).

These intrusions and breaks with Ntsikana’s traditional norms, may rightly be understood as the first whispers of a substantial change of identity, indeed a spiritual awakening. Viewed by themselves, they appear somewhat tenuous as evidence of Christian conversion. Where was the witness of the missionary? Why such unusual indications of a divine call? Indeed an important, albeit secular reading of these events by Peires (1979: 59) readily dismisses them as merely a superstitious commitment to moral renewal: ‘It should be emphasised that there was nothing Christian in this: Ntsikana had experienced a mystical vision and an urge to rid himself of impurity, all completely comprehensible in Xhosa religious terms.’

However the authenticity and importance of Ntsikana’s experiences on this day – his strong sense of conviction in the kraal and behaviour indicative of some kind of break from traditional identity – are best evaluated in light of subsequent events in his life, particularly his last words as he lay dying (see below).

Initially, Ntsikana was compelled to tell of something that had entered him and an urge to pray: “‘The thing that has entered within me directs that all should pray; no one understands it in this country as yet, except perhaps Ngcongolo’” (Bokwe: 12-13)

Ntsikana’s initial Christian development can be traced in the aftermath of this important day. In parallel to the unfolding self-destruction of his rival, Nxele, Bokwe (1914: 15-16) describes Ntsikana’s witness to the gospel:

[He] went on with his preaching work in right earnest, and crowds came to listen to his words. In some hearts the seed was taking root, and eyes were being opened to the importance of the thing spoken about. They showed not merely by attending the meetings regularly, but praying in their houses. It is noteworthy that old Soga, the father of the Rev. Tiyo Soga and others of that name was amongst the first among the Gaika to embrace Ntsikana’s new teaching and accept these beginnings of Christianity.

It should come as no surprise that prayer gatherings epitomized corporate worship experienced during those early days. The Bible had had no formal impact upon Xhosa culture, to say nothing of there being records of translations into isiXhosa. Further to the call to pray, Ntsikana became known for his prophetic words instructing his followers to cautiously embrace the material culture of the settler:

5 ‘Ngcongolo’ was the name given to the Rev. James Read, who had appeared in the Kat River district as earlier as 1811.
6 Emphasis mine.
A time is coming when you will see people whom you have never seen before, whose ears, which are bored, are like the curve of a dried ox-skin. Be careful of those people; do not receive them to dwell among you, but let them pass unmolested (Bokwe, 1914: 16-17).

Whilst it is unclear whether the referent here is the missionary or settler, it does confirm the view that Ntsikana’s previous communication with missionaries was as best circumspect and transient. Missionary, settler, soldier – they were by and large an unknown quantity to the rural Xhosa. We can conclude that no missionary was directly responsible for the conversion of the first Xhosa to Christianity.

Ntsikana’s first influential contact with a missionary was with Joseph Williams in 1816, a year after his conversion experience. Williams, in service with the London Missionary Society, was the first European missionary who died and was buried amongst the Ngqi ka clan, near Fort Beaufort (1818). At the time of his arrival, Ntsikana was living at Twatwa, near Seymour, in the Kat River district, and he is reported to have often made the fifty kilometre journey to visit Williams, ‘which he would hardly have done unless he had already seen the “glorious light” himself.’ (Wauchope, 1908: 55, 62).

In a report prepared for the Glasgow Missionary Society in 1823 (two years after Ntsiskan’s death and five years following Williams’ death) John Brownlee (cited in Wauchope, 1908: 56) of the Tyumie mission station noted,

There is a kraal of about a hundred population who, from the time of his death to my entrance into Kafirland (a period of two years) were accustomed to meet regularly for worship, morning and evening, and to observe the Lord’s Day. The chief person of the kraal (Ntsikana), who conducted the worship, died about two years ago (1821)… On the day of his death (of which he appeared to be fully aware), although he was able to conduct worship, he spoke as one on the brink of eternity, expressing a calm resignation to the will, and a humble confidence in the mercy of God, He appeared deeply interested in the salvation of his countrymen, and earnestly entreated those around him to meet death in its most terrific form rather than give up the profession of religion.

Ntsikana’s stature as a Christian pioneer amongst his own people had not only grown significantly by this point, due to his genuine willingness to heed the advice of the missionary. The differences between Ntsikana and Nxele became very apparent. Whilst the former was ‘holding prayer meetings, composing hymns, and finally charging his people never to give up the faith’ (Bokwe, 1914: 56) his rival Nxele was pitting uThixo, the God of the whites with Mdalidiphu, the god known to the Xhosa (Peires, 2003: 80). In 1819 he was eventually banished to Robben Island for his role in the assault on Grahamstown. Peires sees their different interpretations of the world around them as ‘alternative permutations of the same stock concepts, deriving from the necessity of fusing Xhosa religion with Christianity in order to formulate a new world-view capable of comprehending the irruption of the Europeans (1979: 60-61). Theses responses resonate today: nationalist hostility verses pacifist submission.
So convinced was he of the importance of true Christian teachings, that during in his dying moments Ntsikana addressed his children, urging them not to dispense with the teaching of the missionaries, but to embrace it:

I am going home to my Father. Do not, after I die, go back to Kafirdom (ema-Xoseni meaning heathendom). I want you to go to Buluneli (Rev. John Brownlee’s) at Gwali. Have nothing to do with heathen dances, but keep a firm hold of the word of God. Always stick together, and be as close to one another as particles of a ball of cement…don’t allow my children to return to red clay and heathenism; take them to Gwali. I am going home to my Father, to my Master! (Bokwe, 1914: 30).

John Brownlee was indeed the only missionary available at that time to take Ntsikana’s growing flock forwards in their new found faith. It was not until three years after Brownlee’s death in 1824, that a new mission station, the first Lovdale in 1836 was established by John Bennie and John Ross. With the seeds of indigenous Christianity already sown amongst the Xhosa, by a Xhosa, the future of the church was now placed largely in the hands of a newly mobilised missionary enterprise.

But it was Ntsikana’s hymns in particular which ensured that these seedlings of indigenous Christianity grew and remained vibrant amongst the Xhosa. Closer analysis of his hymn composition reveals fascinating insights into how his conversion experience, his retrospective and subsequent gleanings from these missionaries created the beginnings of a self-theologising Xhosa Christianity.

**Part Two: Expressing the Christian Faith**
There is a sense in which congregational songs, amongst other things express theological values that invariably reflect those held by the people who sing them. It should not come as a surprise that the hymns of Ntsikana became a vehicle for communicating the Christian message and defining the community. Besides, it formed a natural outlet for someone whose natural gifting was as a singer and orator. Ntsikana’s most famous composition ‘the Great Hymn’, made an impression well beyond the local congregation and missionary.

Cowper Rose (a lieutenant with the Royal Engineers), describes hearing the hymn for the first time at Wesleyville in 1829:

There was one hymn that had been composed by a Kaffer, with which I was particularly pleased, and which I afterwards obtained; the four words of each verse were repeated by a single bass voice; while all, males and females, joined in the remainder. It perhaps owed much of its merit to the circumstances under which I heard it, and will be by you considered monotonous. I send it, however, at all risks. (1829: 135-36).

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7 The Methodist Church began missionary activity on arrival of the Rev William Shaw with the British Settlers in 1820. Their missionary outreaches were established round about 1823 with their first mission station, Wesleyville, which lies approximately 40km’s west of East London in the Eastern Cape.
According to Janet Hodgson (1980: 13), the Great Hymn (not his first composition) was sung regularly at Sunday worship across most of rural Kaffraria where the gospel had penetrated. The hymn was preserved by oral tradition, until in 1827 it was printed for the first time by Brownlee in 1827 (Hodgson, 1980: 14) who as noted above had established the first Lovedale in Tyumie with the Glasgow Missionary Society in 1820.

Hymn singing was an excellent means of teaching basic Christian doctrine, facilitating the memorization of words in a non-literate society. With respect to the Great Hymn, Bokwe (1914: 25) notes:

[Ntsikana] would chant the first two bars in a loud voice and then the people would join in repeating the words line by line. To the old Christians it never fails to move them to tears even to this present day. Read in light of present day knowledge of Bible truths, the hymn is wonderfully complete as a theological creed.

It is inevitable not least within an oral culture, that additions and omissions occur to original works. Hodgson (1980: 214-26) has traced the Hymn’s development with great precision showing its developments throughout the 19th century including the changes between the 1820s and later decades in the order of the Hymn’s line. As we examine certain words and phrases of the Hymn we come to understand how Ntsikana interpreted his world in order to express his faith.

**God as Supreme**

Line one of the Great Hymn first draws attention to the transcendence of God, who nevertheless was now also worshipped for his immanence:

*Ulo Tixo omkulu, ngosezulwini*

Thou art this God who is great, Thou art the one who is in heaven

The term for the great God *uThixo* originates from the Khoikhoi (*Tuikwa*) whose interaction with the Xhosa led to this designation for the supreme deity. Superior to the ancestors, *uThixo* was the transcendent, unknowable being, approached only in times of national crisis such as war, drought or epidemic disease. The use of ‘this God’ is shorthand for ‘the one who is close to me’, which contrasts with the Xhosa equivalent to ‘thou’ – a formal address (Hahn and Schapera, cited in Hodgson, 1880: 27). Ntsikana, in keeping with his traditional view of God maintains that God, as the one who is in heaven, is superior. However, in a radical departure from tradition, this supreme God is deemed approachable. Although *uThixo* does not dwell in the place where the ancestors’ spirits were designated to dwell (in the grave, below rivers, in the kraal), his presence is immanent (Falati: 1895: 10). Whilst Nxele held that God who made all things was upon the earth and beneath, Ntsikana’s view of God if anything reflects king Solomon as he considers God’s nearness in the temple: ‘will God really dwell on earth?’ (1 Kings 8:22-53).
God as Protector

Lines 2-4 develop the theme of God as protector, building on the idea of God’s greatness and presence in line 1:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Ungu Wena-wena Kaka lenyaniso;} \\
\text{Ungu Wena-wena Nqaba yenyaniso.} \\
\text{Ungu Wena-wena Hlati lenyaniso.}
\end{align*}
\]

Thou art the very one, the true shield;
Thou art the very one, the true stronghold.
Thou art the very one, the true thicket.\(^8\)

Ntsikana uses an emphatic pronoun (wena-wena) to ascribe four characteristics to uThixo. The shield (Kaka) would have been the Xhosa warrior’s only protection against the enemy’s assegai (spear). Standing at over four feet long and covered in ox-hide, it would have doubled up as a shelter when held above the head. Such defensive weapons were limited however, in particular against the bullets of the British forces. Ntsikana therefore uses the shield image to show that rather than being limited in defence, God is the real shield, protecting against all adversity. The true stronghold (Nqaba) may designate the familiar British forts protecting their frontier, however Hodgson (1980: 29) says that it is more likely the cave, which was a typical Xhosa stronghold which has captured Ntsikana’s imagination. Once again, the reality in view is that God is the stronghold warding off the threat of attack. This may explain why Ntsikana’s followers cast aside the customary weapons and sang God’s praises as their true defence.

The third image which reinforces the idea of God as protector is contained within the idea of the true forest (Hlati). In western Kaffraria, the vegetation was more dense and suitable as a place of refuge, particularly for women during times of war. Hodgson (1980: 30) writes:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Time and time again, during the hundred years of conflict on the Xhosa-Cape frontier, the Xhosa would withdraw to the Waterkloof and Amatola mountain ranges to conduct their resistance from their forest strongholds, frustrating all efforts by the colonial forces to dislodge them through their superior knowledge of the terrain.}
\end{align*}
\]

The image would have also related God to the traditional milieu. Forests were sacred places because of their association with the ancestors. Ntsikana not only confronts this cultural assumption (filling the symbol with truth), but affirms it, thus enabling it to make theological sense to his followers. There is a resonance with the language employed by David throughout the Psalms and in particular 2 Samuel 22, when he uses similar idiom to describe God:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{The Lord is my rock, and my fortress, and my deliverer;}
\end{align*}
\]

\(^8\) Lines 2-4 appear as lines 11-13 in John Brownlee’s 1927 translation (Hodgson, 1980: 14).
The God of my rock, in him will I trust: he is my shield
and the horn of my salvation, my high tower, and my refuge,
my saviour who saves me from violence.

(2 Samuel 22:2-3; cf. Psalm 31:2-4)

Whether Ntsikana was alluding to king David’s language at the point of composition, he no doubt would have been exposed to him when in contact with Joseph Williams between 1816-18 (Hodgson, 1980: 31). Either way Ntsikana would have taken the biblical language and used it to interpret his own experience of God as protector, or used symbolic categories in much the same way that David did to ascribe attributes to the God he had come to know. Flemming’s work on communication and contextualisation explains how central the concept of ‘worldview’ is to the dissemination of the gospel in any given culture. He says that ‘any anthropological analysis of culture reveals a system of symbols which embody meanings, feelings and values’ (2005: 119-120). The shield, stronghold and thicket are each rooted in Ntsikana’s symbolic world. The Great Hymn as a whole is exemplary of how his teaching gained its impact by relating symbolism and imagery to the existential situation of his people (Hodgson, 1984: 21).

**God as Creator**

Lines 6-10 form a unit in the middle of the of the Great Hymn asserting God as the creator:

> Ulo dal’ubom, wedala pezulu.
> Lo Mdal’ owadala wadala izulu.
> Lo Menzi wenkwenkwezi noZilimela;
> Yabinza inkwenkwezi, isixelela.
> Lo Menzi wenfaman’ uzenza ngabom?

Who created life (below) and created (life) above.
The Creator who created, created heaven.
This maker of the stars, and the Pleiades;
A star flashed forth, telling us.
The maker of the blind, does He not make them on purpose?

Again like the Psalmist (Psalm 19:1-6), Ntsikana looks upwards and around him to find the signature of the one who displays his glory and handiwork in creation. Not for the first time, he shows the force of the statement in the Psalm that ‘there is no speech or language where their voice is not heard’ (v3). According to McLaren (cited in Hodgson, 1980: 36) the Xhosa would traditionally have had limited interest in cosmology, as it did not intrude on their lives like thunder, lightening, hail, rain, and sunshine. Some stars and planets received names such as the Pleiades star cluster, known as *Isilimela*. When the Pleiades first appeared in the eastern horizon at dawn each year, the cultivation season began (June). The concept of new life coincided with the season for the *abakweta* (circumcision) school which symbolized the new ‘birth’ of an adult male (Hodgson, 1980: 36).
Here again Ntsikana infuses Christian meaning into cultural symbols to communicate his knowledge of God. However it is unlikely that this originated in a vacuum. Isaac Williams Wauchope’s grandmother (herself probably then aged 8 or 9) muses on the words preached by Van der Kemp to chief Ngqika (in whose company was Ntsikana, probably aged 19). Van der Kemp spoke of a God in heaven, who created all things including the sun, the moon, the stars. These words echo those found in the Great Hymn, perhaps indicating that the missionary’s teaching, dormant for fifteen years, were playing a preparatory role with Ntsikana.

In the context of the hymn’s praise of God for his creation, comes the line: ‘The maker of the blind, does He not make them on purpose?’ The logical question is, if this great God creates, why does he create imperfections? Traditional answers looked to the witch doctor to determine who or what was responsible for inflicting pain or suffering on a person. Ntsikana gives an explanation showing that being born blind is the will of God and therefore exists to glorify Him. Indeed John Brownlee’s translation of this line may indicate that Ntsikana intended to convey something of the truth that all men are born blind until God opens their eyes to see (Hodgson, 1980: 14).

**God as Redeemer**

Lines 16 to 19 of the Great Hymn are a statement of the atoning sacrifice of Jesus for sins.

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Ozandla Zako zinamanxeba Wen.a
Onyawo Zako zinamanxeba Wena.
Ugazi Lako Limrolo yinina?
Ugazi Lako lipalalele tina.
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Those hands of Thine, they are wounded.
Those feet of Thine, they are wounded.
Thy blood, why is it streaming?
Thy blood, it was shed for us.

As with lines 6-9, these words reflect the preaching of Van der Kemp as witnessed by Wauchope’s grandmother between 1799 and 1801. The indirect impact at this time would have certainly contrasted to William’s teaching fifteen year later, which is more likely the source for Ntsikana’s more developed theology of God’s redeeming work in Christ. The repetition of the words ‘blood’ and ‘wounded’ points to the understanding that, in keeping with Xhosa tradition, the spilling of blood symbolised expiation. The key point here is that Ntsikana recognises a divine substitute ‘shed for us’. Indeed he takes it a step further introducing a Xhosa literary device encouraging people to respond, personally and corporately: ‘Thy blood, why is it streaming?’ In answering this question himself, Ntsikana reflects the transitional nature of his spiritual understanding during which time he moved from an initial sense of corporate confession of sin, to recognition of personal guilt, to a reception of the gift of love, as expressed in the final two lines: ‘This great price, have we called for it? This home of Thine, have we called for it?’.
It has been observed that the Great Hymn, though theologically unimpeachable, is more African than it looks. Hodgson’s conclusions are worth noting: ‘Ntsikana makes skilled use of picturesque terms and a subtle play on words, which although it is conveying something new is interpreted in terms of the familiar, and has the power to generate a strong emotional response in all who sing it’ (1980: 23-24). Everyday categories and symbols have been re-interpreted from within a Christian world view in what is essentially a theocentric composition. If it is true that the faith of Ntsikana was expressed and sustained by visible symbols reinterpreted through the lens of gospel truth, it is pertinent to ask what role these outward forms played in his spiritual awakening. Demerest (1992: 14) poses the question in such a way as to beckon some theological interaction: to what extent can we attribute to the benighted Pagan implicit faith because he is ‘enveloped by the reality of the divine presence?’

Part Three: Preparing the World for the Gospel
The Great Hymn contains a wealth of symbols and categories drawn from the world around Ntsikana that he used to express his new found faith. As representative of his world view, what role did they play in the lead up to Ntsikana’s conversion, given the scarcity of missionary witness? From a theological point of view Norman Anderson’s question is pertinent here: ‘can we doubt that God is able to speak directly to the human heart, and particularly so when neither human messenger nor printed page is available to bear testimony?’ (1970: 103).

Here I shall briefly evaluate the role of general revelation in salvation, in the hope of arriving at some instructive conclusions about Ntsikana’s own conversion experience. Theological innovations over the last twenty years have alleged that reformed evangelicalism denies any merit to the role of general revelation in salvation (Sanders, 1994; Pinnock, 1996)⁹. It is asserted that the effects of the Fall on man’s cognitive abilities have been inflated, thus denying any contribution of general revelation to the knowledge of God, apart from special revelation (see Demerest, 1982: 138). However, Reformed evangelicalism finds consensus in saying that sin acts as a veil preventing man from reading the divine script in nature, rendering him guilty and without excuse (Berkhof, 1933: 28; Grudem, 1994: 122-23).

The representative of reformed evangelicalism mentioned here do not neglect the significance of general revelation in salvation. Whilst denying that general revelation alone saves, they equally and clearly state the positive and necessary dimension of general revelation in salvation. Berkhof notes that general revelation provides the very foundation upon which gentile religion is based (cf. Acts 17:27-28) and that despite living in darkness and the ignorance of sin, people ‘share in the illumination of the Logos and in the general operation of the Holy Spirit’ (1933: 30). Indeed Berkhof goes as far as to say that general revelation even generates a proper understanding of special revelation, when God’s natural revelation is considered retrospectively, after

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⁹ Sanders provocatively asks ‘what kind of God is he who gives man enough knowledge to damn him but not enough to save him?’, pp. 68-69.
conversion (1933: 31). Grudem notes that the witness of nature enables people to know that God exists and that as their creator they owe him obedience as those who have sinned against him (1994: 123). Primitive religions may even contemplate the idea of atonement although this would be considered as ‘extraordinary speculation’ (1994: 123). Thus the reformed evangelical position does not deny that humanity is offered some gracious and true (if limited) knowledge of God, such that all people are ‘without excuse’.

The positive dimension of general revelation in Psalm 19 has been pointed out by Hoffmeier (2000: 17-24) who argues that the glory of God (v1) brings veiled information about God, but not what is necessary to know God in any intimate or salvific sense. The record in the book of Acts confirms this position. Cornelius the ‘god-fearer’ had responded positively to the universal witness of God, yet lacked the benefits of gospel revelation (Acts 10:22c, 33b, 36-43). General revelation’s modest fund of theocentric knowledge may also be seen in Luke’s account of Paul in Athens where he acknowledges glimpses of truth in the Stoic’s understanding of God, despite their ignorance and error (Acts 17:25-28). Taken together with Romans 1:18-28, where the suppressing of the knowledge of God renders people defenceless before God, we may conclude that general revelation serves a positive as well as a negative function.

It is important to maintain the distinction between general and special revelation in order to avoid drawing the false conclusion that God, by his Spirit is active and accessible in other religions. If not, general revelation fast becomes a locus of salvation apart from special revelation thus compromising the exclusive claims of the gospel. Pinnock goes as far as to argue that ‘practically anything in the created order can be sacramental of God’s presence’ (1996: 62). In saying this he capitulates the importance of special revelation in bringing people to faith and offers no help to explaining the process of salvation in the life of Ntsikana.

How do we explain the origins of Ntsikana’s faith, given both the salvific limits of general revelation and the scarcity of gospel witness in his life. The seeds of the gospel had clearly been sown by the time Ntsikana is alleged to have been converted. I would also suggest that his response to this gospel witness was aided by his interpretation of the natural world, not prevented by it, a point which reformed evangelicalism must not lose sight of. More recently, Terrance Tiessen (2004) has given a realistic but favourable reading to the function of general revelation. In Romans 1:18f., Tiessen suggests that together with a widespread sinful response, a positive response is entirely plausible. He argues that this response is itself by God’s grace, and commensurate with ‘the particular revelation with which he has graced them’ (2004: 145). It is important to note that this ‘accessibilist’ position stops short of crediting general revelation with any saving value on account that Scripture offers no examples.

The strength of Tiessen’s argument lies in his reference to the ways in which a general evangelical readings of scripture may have underestimated the extent to which special revelation is experienced (2004: 150). Tiessen
also makes the point that no revelation (general or special) has saving power in itself, but that it must be accompanied by the illuminating work of the Holy Spirit (cf. Berkof, 1933: 30). Thus, whilst no one can be saved by general revelation alone, we cannot conclude that “those whose knowledge is restricted to universally accessible modes of revelation cannot be saved.” (2004: 157). Herein lies a helpful explanation of the spiritual awakening in Ntsikana. If he did indeed ‘drink in the words of the strange white man’ as Bokwe notes, then it is undoubtedly this seed, lying dormant for sixteen years, which together with his positive response to God’s universal witness, brings him to salvation.

The process of Ntsikana’s conversion (Hodgson, 1980: 4; 1984: 21-25) echoes Cornelius’ gradual conversion in Acts 10-11. The narrative in Acts highlights this incident as a crucial watershed moment as the gospel broke into Gentile territory. Ntsikana, like Cornelius was providentially prepared by his kraal vision and the ensuing events of the day (cf. Acts 10:3). There was a sense in which he was also theologically enlightened, when he found himself unable to shake off ‘the thing calling him to pray’ (cf. Cornelius in Acts 10:4, 22, 35).

Finally we are given evidence that Ntsikana was wholly converted, as the hymn and encounters with Joseph Williams prove (cf. Acts 10:44-48; 11:14-17). Like Cornelius, we can presume that Ntsikana, in Teissen’s view, was one who responded positively to general revelation (especially judging by his assimilation of every day symbols into his Christian hymns). Though insufficient to save him, general revelation was not ineffectual in his salvation.

Conclusion

Where written sources are available, the historical narrative of Ntsikana’s life is by no means described from a neutral position. John Knox Bokwe and Isaac Williams Wauchope in particular each represent strands of Xhosa Christianity meshed with decades of foreign missionary activity. As those who no doubt sang the Great Hymn themselves, they have also unashamedly sung the praise of the father of Xhosa Christianity. They also evaluate his legacy of faith in light of the many thousand of subsequent Xhosa Christian generations. It is therefore important to recognise the work of Hodgson who’s academic acumen leads her to the conclusion that a significant transition was occurring amongst the Xhosa in close association with Ntsikana: “by interpreting Christianity within his traditional world view, [Ntsikana] was able to fulfil the spiritual needs of his countrymen who were moving between two cultures” (1980: 81).

The appropriation and translation of Ntsikana’s symbolic world before and after his conversion is seen in the language of the Great Hymn, discussed briefly above. What is remarkable, is that the hymn was composed with minimal communication with missionary teaching. The main sources can only have been the missionaries Johan Van der Kemp approximately fifteen years prior to his conversion in 1815 (when Ntsikana was still an uncircumcised boy and at best only allowed to eavesdrop on Van der Kemp’s preaching) and Joseph Williams in 1816-17, a year after Ntsikana’s first spiritual awakening.
Based on the evidence provided by the case of his conversion, it seems reasonable to argue that at critical junctures in the history of cross-cultural mission and building on the pattern in Acts 10-11, God does see fit to unveil himself in more irregular ways, which accompanied by later gospel testimony, appear to ratify the conversion experience. Richardson aptly captures the idea and it resonates with the example of Ntsikana: ‘surely the God who prepared the gospel for the world, also prepared the world for the gospel’ (1981: 27). In summary, Ntsikana provides a paradigm for explaining the origins of the Christian faith in contexts where Christian witness is severely limited or even non existent. His testimony and subsequent hymn compositions point to continuity and discontinuity between pre-conversion and post-conversion world views as symbols are developed and transformed by Christian truth. The interpretation of his world is paramount not only to his conversion experience, but to the indigenous Christian faith amongst the Xhosa of which he is the pioneer and for which he must be remembered.
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