

Chapter 6

Christians are Persecuted

Rev Merensky and Nachtigal were the first missionaries to settle in the land of Sekhukhune in 1860. They are the missionaries who contributed a lot in bringing Christianity to Sekhukhune land, although much can still be said about the lay people from the very same land who also helped in introducing Christianity to their own country men. They do this by living a Christian life. These are people who earlier went to the Cape Colony and Natal to the White men in search of guns and employment. Instead they find themselves in the circle of missionaries who introduced the Gospel as a new religion to them. Amongst those who heard the word of God we can count Samuel Mathabatha, Jacob Mantladi, Jan Mafadi and many others like Kgasane the Prince who was shot dead while reading the Bible.

These are the Christians who openly professed their faith and believed in the living God on their return to their motherland. So most of them took it upon themselves to evangelise their fellow brothers and sisters on their return. Somehow this makes it easier for missionaries like Merensky to enjoy their work, for there are people who can assist in interpreting to both parties. With people like Martinus Sebusane, missionaries could also put their hope on them. They were also given some task of having some classes or groups of people who want to hear more about the word of God in their mother tongue.

Although their contributions cannot be clearly distinguished, Nachtigal has this to write.

“They and other from their chiefdom earlier worked in the English Colonies. One had been in British Kaffraria and the other in Pietemaritzburg in Natal. There they had learned to know and love God’s word and had also learned to read. One had been baptized in Pietemaritzburg by missionary Allison but the other had not been baptized. They had returned to their homeland and had told their countrymen the things they had heard and some of these had come to share their faith. Each Sunday they preached in a small church which they had built and many came to listen.”
(Delius: 112:83)

Charity begins at home, the lay people started their congregation at home first, by repenting their own family members. That can refer to Jacob Mantladi who was baptized with his family including his mother.

Jan Mafadi

Jan Mafadi had travelled to Port Elizabeth in 1857 in search of work and to purchase a gun. The gun was to be used when defending his motherland. It was also a dream of all young man of his age to possess a gun. In Port Elizabeth he was introduced to a Methodist Church. The love of his new religion pushed him into baptism. He also learnt to read and write. In 1860 he together with Jacob Mantladi, Joseph Kathedi, Samuel Mathabathe and three other converts returned to Bapediland, later to be known as Sekhukhune land. Jacob Mantladi became one of the pioneers Church – planters.

Jacob Mantladi

Jacob Mantladi went to the Cape Colony and worked in Uitenhage where he heard the word of God for the first time. Later he moved to Port Elizabeth where he met Jan

Mafadi his homeboy. Mantladi dreamt that God was speaking to him and felt called to return to his motherland. In 1860 together with the other six converts they returned home. Together with Mafadi, Jacob began preaching to the people and formed a prayer group. They were lucky to convert young people like Sebushane and Joseph Kathedi the blind young man.

The group prayed for the missionaries to come and work in Bapediland. They did this in consultation with the King (Sekwati) who was also longing for missionaries in his land. So when Rev Merensky arrived in 1861 they believed that God had answered their prayer. Jacob Mantladi was baptised by Rev Merensky in 1862. He continued to work as an evangelist under his guidance.

Martinus Sebushane

Martinus Sebushane was among the first seven converts to be baptised by Rev Merensky at Kgalatlou on the 14th January 1862. He was about twenty-two years. He gained the missionary's favour because of his hard working and intelligence. Because of his colleague's help, he made a good progress in reading and writing. The love of Jesus and faith in Him grew with him. In 1864 he fled with Merensky's Christian group to Botshabelo. At Botshabelo he received further upgrading and became one of the powerful preachers. He was a devoted and a fearless layperson. When Merensky left for Germany in 1882, the Rev asked him what he would like to have. To Merensky's surprise, Sebushane who never asked for a beautiful gift from Germany, requested an "Elijah's Garment" meaning a pastor's gown.

Martinus was ordained, and he served at Lobethal, Dilokong and Kgalatlou together with Rev J. Winter. He became one of the founders of Lutheran Bapedi church. The Lutheran Bapedi Church is still a thorny issue to the whole Evangelical Lutheran Church in South Africa (ELCSA).

The first mission station to be established in Sekhukhuneland is Kgalatlou at the mountain foot of Thabantsho under chief Boleu in 14 August 1860. The mission station was named Gerlaschhoop in honour of General Van Gerlach who had just died. The naming of this mission station showed clearly the position of the missionaries and the Lydenburg republic. They were so close, having one aim to penetrate the Bapedi kingdom and to bring in their influential law to the whole land of Sekhukhune.

Co-incidentally this is the very same mission station where persecution of Christianity started, and it is the very same station to be closed. The second mission stations were founded on the 28 August 1861 at the heartland of Sekhukhune Kgalatlou. Both the mission station was founded under the leadership of King Sekwati. Surprisingly under King Sekhukhune two more mission stations were founded, that is, Ga-Ratau, Garbelstadt mission station among the Matlala people of chief Maserumule. Garbelstadt is also known as Phatametsane together with the two mentioned above.

Reverend Heinrich Grutzner

Rev. H. Grutzner was born on the 20th March 1834 in a small town called Strehlen in Silesia, Germany. He came to South Africa in 1839 as a Berlin missionary. He was Merensky's right hand man. Together with his friend Merensky, Rev Grutzner left Emmaus in the Natal Colony to Swaziland though Swaziland was still part of the

Lydenburg Republic. However their aim of evangelising the Amaswazi was adjourned because the Amaswazi king expelled them from his country. Unlike Merensky who worked at the heartland of Sekhukhune, Grutzner worked under the Boleu chief or Bakopa. The distraction of Gerlachshoop in 1863 under the Amaswazi raid, made him to come and work under his friend Merensky for a while, before the final persecutions of all Christians in Sekhukhuneland in 1864. Grutzner was one of the founder members of Botshabelo. But Grutzner did not take Botshabelo as a place of “rest”. He left and worked in the Northern Transvaal where he worked amongst the BaVenda people. In late 1874 Grutzner came back to Botshabelo where he worked as superintendent of the mission station. When Merensky returned to Germany, Grutzner acted as a superintendent of the Transvaal Synodic Region. Grutzner arrived at Botshabelo at a time when the mission station was experiencing a very hard time, because of Chief Dinkwanyane who had pulled off his subjects to a place called Mafolofolo, but because of his hard work, Grutzner was able to re-organise the congregation that was scattered because of this confusion. In 1878 after the return of Rev Merensky Grutzner was sent to Bethany in the Orange Free State, where he became the superintendent of the Free State Synodic Region. He went back to Germany where he died on the 7th April 1910. Grutzner was one of the greatest Berlin missionaries who worked hard amongst his converts. He is still remembered by the Northern Sotho Christians of the Lutheran Church for his well-known hymn 110, though he translated many hymns into Northern Sotho and Southern Sotho.

The missionaries couldn't find a mission station in the area controlled by chief Mabhoko of the Ndzundza Ndebele. The aim of the missionaries was to convert all black peoples in the independent kingdom of the Bapedi. Persecution began before the area was

covered. It developed because of the suspicions that, blacks leaders have against the missionaries. The black leaders have never trusted the kind of role the Lydenburg government was playing. The country was divided with borders, and there were areas where blacks were not allowed to walk or settle. Missionaries though played an independent part, but they remained puppets of the Boers in Lydenburg. Their mission was well understood, particularly by king Sekhukhune who was once quoted saying: "The word of God is powerful, it doesn't force me, but like oil in a dry skin, it has already softened my heart."

The word of God was correctly executed, but the close link between the missionaries and the white Government in Lydenburg gave them suspicions. Rev Merensky was also quoted saying: " He wished to remain nothing more than a missionary in the eyes of his congregation, nonetheless, he will always be willing to support his government in its attempts to maintain law and order."

When the Lydenburg government and the Amaswazi impis attacked and destroyed the chieftdom of Boleu at Thabantsho, Merensky was quick to warn Sekhukhune that the same event can happen to him, if he keeps on defying the government of Lydenburg. Sekhukhune avoided dealing directly with the missionaries. He assembled all his subjects from all over the country in the royal kraal. The aim was to find out from them, what it is which they have not done right and a way forward. It must be remembered that, the king believed that the land has been bewitched because of the outbreak of fever that killed many people.

The following are resolutions from the gathering.

- Christian beliefs must be stopped in the whole land.
- Missionaries must never be trusted as they represent the white government and therefore they must go out of the land.
- Traditional beliefs must be adhered to and be practiced by all people.
- Traditional healers must heal the land and Christians who are also bewitched by the cleverness of a white man.
- All people must take orders from the king and that includes Christians and missionaries.
- No day must be put aside as a day of rest or worship that includes Sunday, for the king needs soldiers' everyday.
- That Martinus Sebushane the convert must stop moving around with the royal wife under his arm.

At the end everybody believed that Christianity has brought nothing than division, confusion and misery in the community. Finger was pointed directly to the converts whom they believed had done more damage than missionaries.

From 16 June 1864 persecution followed one another, Christians were made to chop wood on Sundays. The whole aim was to keep them busy so that they may not have time of attending church service. And even to prove that they are taking orders from the king and not the missionaries. Christians responded by chopping more wood on Saturday so that, on Sunday they may go and worship their God. That was a sign to prove to the king that they are still his subjects and they will remain loyal to him.

Realising that Christians are not prepared to abandon their faith in God, the king gave orders that all Christians not be allowed to plant their fields and, their livestock were taken to the royal camp. Still Christians were not prepared to recant. The King called another royal meeting; in that gathering Christians were beaten and tortured before the multitude. Stick and knobkerrie were used. It was a matter of death and surrender. More than 30 people lost their lives. Still Christians could not agree to the demands of the King. Because of the night darkness and sympathy from other people, few Christians were able to escape to the mountains but their huts or houses were burnt down. Their wives were taken to royal court and ordered to work in the royal fields. And all women who remained steadfast to their beliefs were also tortured.

S. S. P. Mminele reported that, "Christian women were made to stand half naked in the river of Moutse for the whole day. No food was given to them from Thursday to Monday. But still Christian women stood firm on their faith. The king called his half brother prince Dinkwanyane to the royal court. The King wanted him to abandon his religion and that can be proven by him starting drinking beer and marrying many wives. The Prince made it clear that, he is not prepared to go back to heathen lives and that he is prepared to live by his new religion and God is the only God who will shape his life."

As if this was not enough, the King found out that, his principal wife Tlakale and the Prince had been baptised on the 7th November 1864. He then called a big meeting at Thaba Mosego, which drew soldiers from all villages under him, and the few numbers of Christians were also called to appear before the great council of blood. The King made clear his distrust for the missionaries by telling them that they were liars and thieves who had stolen his people and that the missionaries want to make themselves chiefs in his land.

On the very same day Christians were made to submit to the traditional healers or diviners of the country to heal them. The King and the nations believe that the blood or the red wine they drink during the holy service as the blood of Jesus or the bread of the holy communion as the body of Christ is a white man's medicine that is used to bewitched the King's subjects to turn against him and follow Christ like tamed sheep. The truth about it was that Christians were made to drink wine and eat bread. So the Christians were made to vomit the blood, and this resulted in making them to be weaker in their bodies because of the loss of water in their bodies, and as such more than two lives were lost.

When the King realised that the Christians were still holding to their faith, he banned them from his land and commanded them to leave his country. Martinus Sebushane one of the converts was quoted saying. "You... are driving us out of this country today, but know that the word of God will come back here at Thaba Mosego" (Mminele: 26:83)

Christians who have escaped this "blood" torture and killing live on mountains. Their wives at home were allowed to work at the fields of the King. They were also told to stop praying as their husbands were dead on the mountains. The King gave the instruction that no one must give them food. The Christians survived by drinking water at Steelpoort River and because of the fact that it was raining there was more water. So even during that hard time, when Christians were dying everyday, were loosing their field, livestock, houses, children and wives, those who survived remained steadfast in their faith, and when asked why are they not preparing to renounce their faith and come home, and live a normal live again, their responses, were simple:

"Our bodies get hurt, but our soul remain free and unharmed. They comforted one another by this." "Be not afraid of those who kill and harm your body, but not your soul because of my name: Anyone who stand and witness about me I will also witness for him before my Father in heaven."