

SPELLING THE FAITH OR COPING WITH BIBLICAL LITERACY? INTRODUCING 19TH CENTURY BASOTHO CHRISTIANS

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Abstract

Can the Christian faith be spelt out as though it were a word? What does literacy or lack thereof have to do with belief and/or the Bible? What does “reading” the Bible really entail? What did baruti conceive of thuto in relation to their Basotho converts? How did nineteenth century Basotho literati cope with these questions? How does the New Testament witness relate to these issues? These questions lie in the background of the ensuing exploration. My approach is circumlocutory, and I have no delusions about the provisionality of my observations. I only trust that I do some justice to the newspaper articles that to my mind urged this paper.

Key Words: Faith, Literacy, Bible reading

The 19th Century World of Basotho Believers

Before going on to interact with four instructive articles published by the Revs A Mabilie and H Dieterlen in *Leselinyana la Lesotho*² on the subject of proper Christian faith that is based on appropriate literacy, I must briefly outline a number of related background issues. Even with the footnoting of many more points beyond this introduction, as becomes necessary to do so, the present paper can – and certainly shall – not claim capacity to exhaust all the pertinent nineteenth century issues with which our interlocutors had to do.³

The *Societe des Missions Evangeliques de Paris* (translated *Paris Evangelical Mission Society* and hereinafter abbreviated PEMS) missionaries who pioneered work among Morena⁴ Moshoeshoe’s people understood themselves as *baruti* (sg. *moruti*)⁵ because they

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² Hereinafter simply *Leselinyana*. The English rendition of the name “The Little Light of Lesotho” is validated by the name of the first English-language newspaper to come out of Lesotho, *The Little Light of Basutoland* (hereinafter *Little Light*); needless to say, *Leselinyana* was Sesotho-speaking. Adolphe Mabilie founded both *Leselinyana* (November 1863 to date) and *Little Light* (January 1872 and November 1877). He also edited *Leselinyana* from inception till his death in 1894 while *Little Light* he edited for all its brief life.

³ I refer the reader to “Translation and the Vernacular Bible in the debate between my “traditional” and academic worldviews” (in JA Draper [ed.] *Orality, Literacy and Colonialism in Southern Africa* [Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications & Sheffield: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003, 171-87]) for my preliminary thoughts on “biblical literacy” and then to “Selected Nineteenth Century Basotho Readings of The Bible: David Moiloa and The Days of Basotho’s Ignorance” (*Biblical Interpretation/Neotestamentica*, 2005) for more detail regarding *Leselinyana La Lesotho* and nineteenth century Basotho missions.

⁴ *Morena* entails a wide range of English equivalents, including “Lord, King, Chief, Mister, Sir, etc.”; it thus is best left to the context for interpretation. A few other Sesotho concepts suffer the same fate here. Morena

regarded *thuto* as the most critical aspect of their work. One of the lasting achievements of their work among Basotho, *Leselinyana*, began as a brave initiative of one of them, but “became the official Paris Evangelical Missionary Society newspaper in 1874”,⁶ some decade after its inception. The founder remained its editor for roughly thirty years. It is tribute to both the founder and the mission society that “*leselinyana*” became the Sesotho word for “newspaper”, “bulletin” etc., although the derivative *koranta* is used much more frequently.

Leselinyana was meant to inform as well as advance Basotho, especially those who valued *thuto*. The editorial in the inaugural issue of *Leselinyana* paints a grisly picture of life among Basotho prior to the commencement of *thuto*. Then

baruti arrived bearing *thuto*, coming as though a medicine, and indeed they were – the medicine is Molimo’s word. Wars ceased, Basotho returned from Makhooeng and from Bokoni. From Makhooeng they brought cow, goat, sheep, horse, gun, wife and children. We inquired “What manner of *ho jaka* did you undertake seeing as you return driving your own cattle?” They replied, “That is how peaceful it is over there, people are paid in cows for work done”... You ask me [*Leselinyana*] what I come bearing? Well, I have news of other nations; I also come reminding you about your Creator, the same Creator also of Makhooa and all the other nations. Greetings, it is I, *Leselinyana la Lesotho*.⁷

So it is that *Leselinyana* was founded in order to spread news of what was happening elsewhere in the world, near or far, as well as to evangelise Basotho. And the Sesotho term “*thuto*” captured these enlightening functions and much more. Remarkably, *Leselinyana* was intended to accomplish its tasks in Sesotho, the lingo-cultural medium of Basotho only nascently being reduced to writing at the time.⁸ In fact *Leselinyana*’s Sesotho is admirably authentic for this period; names of personalities and places are sometimes Sesothoized beyond facile recognition. At the same time, however, as has already been observed by other Basotho scholars, this Sesotho was profoundly tinged with SeTlhaping (a dialect of SeTswana) as much as it was drawn primarily from Moshoeshoe’s Bakoena ba Mokoteli branch of Sesotho now influenced by the range of groups that submitted under Moshoeshoe, following the stressful days of *Lifaqane*.

Moshoeshoe’s subjects were of complex composition but it is traditional to refer to them simply as *Basotho* (sg. *Mosotho*) as we do presently.

- ⁵ “They were called *baruti* (instructors) by virtue of the emphasis they placed on instruction in the Protestant Christian teachings. It is not surprising then that prior to the establishment of formal education Basotho referred to Protestant Christianity as *thuto* (instruction).” Sepetla Setsomi Molapo, *Majakane: The Emergence of a 19th Century Non-Initiation Basotho Identity and the Interaction of Basotho Culture and Missionary Christianity* (Johannesburg: University of the Witwatersrand, Unpublished MA Dissertation, 2003) 53, sic.
- ⁶ David Ambrose, “Introduction” in *The Little Light of Basutoland*, edited and published monthly at Morija by Adolphe Mabile, 1872-1877, Collated, Bound and Provided with an Introduction and Index by David Ambrose (National University of Lesotho: Institute of Education, 2001, i-vii) i.
- ⁷ A Mabile, “Leselinyana La Lesotho” *Leselinyana La Lesotho* (3 November 1863) 1, my italics. *Molimo* = “God”; *Makhooa* = white people; *Makhooeng* = makhooa’s abode/territory; *Ho jaka* = to go (looking for) work far from one’s home area; *Bokoni* = territories of black peoples north of Lesotho.
- ⁸ Of course insofar as *Leselinyana* was a Christian endeavour, there are some who see this confidence in Sesotho as a natural consequence of the gospel in its spread across worlds and generations (see e.g. Kwame Bediako, *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion*, Edinburgh: Orbis, 1995). But in the milieu of European expansionism and the whole colonial enterprise, it was quite a remarkable feat whose neglect by modern African scholars I have elsewhere lamented (See my “A Plea for Indigenous Written Sources in South African Theological Discourse: Basotho as Test Case” *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, 2004, 19-33). I have also been since encouraged by Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s “Europhone or African Memory: The Challenge of the Pan-Africanist Intellectual in the Era of Globalization” *WAJIBU*, (vol. 19, no. 3, 2004, 4-9).

The inaugural editor thus addresses his editorial to *Basotho ba 'ma 'nete a koma*.⁹ One further encounters in the same article authentic Sesotho interjections like “Jae!”, “Che!” and “Be!” that can respectively be rendered “Wow!”, “No!”, and “Fie!” In the same breath however, those Basotho who accepted *thuto* were baptized into European (“Christian” or “biblical”) names. This phenomenon often makes it hard for the modern reader to discern the exact identity of the personalities in question, especially because of the then fashionable habit of generally referring to people by their “first” names.¹⁰ Thanks to these dual processes of “Sesothoization” and “Christianisation” (read “Europeanization”, “civilization” or “colonisation”) *thuto* then entailed much more than mere “instruction”, or Protestant Christianity as Molapo suggests (see note 5) and/or *baruti* thought (see anon).

Basotho, *Thuto* and *Leselinyana*

The *Sesuto-English Dictionary* composed by Mabile and subsequently “revised and considerably enlarged” by Hermann Dieterlen, the other interlocutor of this paper, defines *thuto* thus:

Thuto (from *ho ruta*): Teaching lesson; doctrine; religion. *Ho tsamaisa thuto*: To evangelise.¹¹

The entry for the verb form, (*ho ruta*), is even more enlightening:¹²

Ruta: To teach; to preach. *Ruteha*: To be teachable; to be taught. *Rutehileng*: Clever; educated. *Ithuta*: To teach oneself; to learn. *Ithutela*: To learn for; to study for. *Rutana*: To teach one another. *Rutela*: To teach for. *Ho ruta ntsi*: To teach many people; to teach people bad manners.

Basotho ownership of and contributions to *Leselinyana* gained momentum with the passage of time in keeping with the accession of increasing numbers of Basotho to *thuto* owing to increased exposure. For instance in the February 1878 issue of *Leselinyana* we encounter Isaac Molepo’s terse objection to August Tselanyane’s article that had been published in *Leselinyana* number of the preceding month. Tselanyane had urged Bapeli to move away from the coastal towns of the (Cape) Colony, with Uitenhage and Port Elizabeth receiving specific mention. The advice is proffered because quite a high number of Bapeli were falling victim to a lung disease associated with seaside humidity.¹³ In his rejoinder, and writing from Port Elizabeth unlike Tselanyane who only heard of these disturbing

⁹ A flattering expression meaning “genuine Basotho” but drawn from traditional and initiation language. *Koma* is the sum total of “secrets” or rather wisdom that is passed on to initiates during *lebollo*, i.e. initiation (a.k.a. circumcision or mountain school). It is a language known only to the initiated.

¹⁰ E.g. in A Mabile, “Likarabo tsa Selema 1864 le Mabitso a ba Arabileng” (*Leselinyana La Lesotho*, February 1865) answers to the 1864 monthly questions are published. Of the twenty-four given names of those who ventured answers, *only ten are surnamed* and at least three seem to be women’s names: From Beersheba are David Moilola, Jonah Mokhalo, Jacob Mohapi, Simon Mokhethi, Sophonia Monyekoane, Job Khomongoe, and Simon Makae. Then Jeremiah (of Berea), Ahosi (of Mekoatleng), Amos (Mekoatleng), Amos son of Leie (Mekoatleng), Nehemiah (Thabana Morena), Joas (Th. Morena), Eleazar Mohanoe (Th. Morena), Eliachim (Thaba Morija), David (Th. Morija), Benjamin (Th. Morija), Jacobin (Th. Morija), Samson (Th. Morija), John Lekhesi (Th. Morija), Penelope (Th. Morija), Evodia (Th. Morija), Silas (Th. Morija), and Levi (Th. Morija). It would appear that towns of origin were preferred to identify individuals in question over against surnames. After encouraging his readers to keep answering the quizzes, the editor then adds, “Please remember that only those who buy *Leselinyana* are eligible to answer the questions.”

¹¹ Mabile-Dieterlen, *Sesuto-English Dictionary* [Moriya, Lesotho: Morija Sesuto Book Depot, 2000 (reprint of the 9th edition)] 456.

¹² Mabile-Dieterlen, *Sesuto-English Dictionary*, 387.

¹³ August Tselanyane, “Lengolo” *Leselinyana La Lesotho* (January 1878) 5.

developments through newspaper reports, Isaac Molepo asks, “Does Tselanyane think he can teach Morena Molimo how to do things?”¹⁴

Bapeli, of whom I am one, are traditionally concentrated in and around the present-day Limpopo and Mpumalanga Provinces of the Republic of South Africa. The shortest distance from there to Port Elizabeth entails nothing less than a thousand kilometres. Consequently, even if inadvertently, Tselanyane’s piece is quite informative of the socio-political realities of the time. That is to say, *ho jaka* (working far from home), *Makhooba* (*baruti*, Boers, colonial agents), disease (typhoid fever and tuberculosis), wars (e.g. against land- or cattle-poachers), cattle (wealth and trade), the gun¹⁵ (safety and security), and the potent novel trinity of Molimo’s word (the Bible), school (new initiation-institution) and *thuto* (civilization in its various facets) all craved the attention of Basotho in this era. Basotho were consequently divided into believers and heathens, educated and ignorant, literate and illiterate, circumcisers and genuine Christians, congregants and backsliders, converts and catechists, local evangelists and missionaries... All of these occupied the world that *Leselinyana*, amidst its other functions, both reported on as well as helped carve.

What is more, in this world, the “readers” of *Leselinyana* were simultaneously also the “contributors” of articles thereto. Indeed the editor often stated that those who answered the monthly quizzes or made other types of written contributions to *Leselinyana* were supposed to be subscribers first of all.¹⁶ This synonymy between reader and contributor is important because the manner of reading required was not merely mechanical. In fact it had to be of the calibre betrayed in the following irresistible article by one such Mosotho reader-contributor:¹⁷

Dear editor, I am responding to your kind invitation to anyone with issues to utilize *Leselinyana* to raise them. My problem is this: How shall we, Basotho, advance? We are still very much behind [the times]! We are still ignorant! The whites surpass us in general knowledge – whether of other nations’ affairs, of the seas, or of continents. All we, in turn, can do is perpetually ask questions and listen as they answer. So we are perennial inquirers. But when will we become knowers? Where does this knowledge possessed by the whites come from, considering they are descendants of Adam just like us, crafted from the same clay as us? If you will let me err, I shall venture my perception of where this wisdom issues from. My *moruti* owns many books, which he reads even at

¹⁴ Isaac Molepo, “Lengolo” *Leselinyana La Lesotho* (February 1878) 6. I must point out that the editor deemed it fit to narrate the harsh contents of Molepo’s letter in a single paragraph instead of publishing the letter as received.

¹⁵ “As we passed through the town, there was much hullabaloo with the people demanding, “Majakobe, Stop those people! Turn them back!” But we turned a deaf ear and pretended not to hear them... demanded that I turn back. But I refused... Then they took away *my gun*... I then told them, “The only way I am turning back is if you cut off my head. But for as long as I have it, you will see nothing of me turning back. *Taking my gun was just a waste of your time.*” Then they decided to have three men escort us...” Excerpted from Asere Sehabane, “Mosebetsi oa Molimo” *Leselinyana La Lesotho* (February 1878) 2, my italics.

¹⁶ “Henceforth in every *Leselinyana* issue there will appear a question so that you will become observant, wiser, as well as learn to research matters. Whoever can correctly answer all the questions of 1864 unassisted by anyone including his/her *moruti* will receive a copy of the New Testament. *These questions are only for those who buy Leselinyana.* Once you find your answer, send it in writing to the editor at Morija. Answers can be sought from the [New] Testament and the Book of Confessions. Three questions are asked in this issue. For January: How were kings appointed [or installed] in Israel? For March: What are the names of people who died on the mountain though they were not in poor health? For April: What things were found inside the Ark of the Covenant, and where in the New Testament are they spoken of?” A Mabile, “Potso” *Leselinyana La Lesotho* (April 1864) 12, my italics. (See also footnote 10 above, last line.)

¹⁷ Here as elsewhere in this paper I reproduce as much of the articles as should give the reader the ability to judge for her/himself whether my deductions are justifiable. I see no other way around this.

night.¹⁸ Should some question baffle him, he rushes to the books, pages through them while at the same time reassuring me, “Just a minute my dear fellow, I will answer you just now.” And of course after a bit of reading he will then explain clearly the answer to what I asked. What wisdom! It is books that make people wise. So why should we Basotho be so ill-fated? Where are our books? Do you perhaps imagine that we could have a comparable host of books printed for us in Sesotho? By no means! So how then, my dear sirs, will we learn? My answer is this: Our relief lies in *us* reading the very books that already exist in the language of the whites. I say, let us make every effort to learn English, so we can read books and newspapers. I used to believe that those who learnt English were trying too hard to render themselves gentlemen amidst fools. I used to say that English was useless, and only for fools. But today I have converted; I am asserting that English is the key by which to open the house of *lithuto*. This is what will make us wiser. Let English be taught in the schools. Hip! Hip! Hip! Hurrah!¹⁹

So there was at this time recognition of more than one dimension of *thuto*. These *lithuto* are exemplified in how the whites can so easily find answers to all manner of questions, even beyond the obviously religious. The key to all *lithuto* is reading; English is the key only because there aren't, and doesn't seem likely to ever exist, comparable quantities of Sesotho books. But, whether via English or Sesotho, therefore the earliest Basotho Christians were “literate” (i.e. reader-writers); they were people *of* (i.e. who subscribed to) *thuto*. They were themselves fascinated by reading and writing as much as they were encouraged by their *baruti* to partake of these civilized skills.²⁰ So, as the first Mosotho editor of *Leselinyana*, Ntate Zakea D Mangoela, indirectly betrays on the occasion of *Leselinyana*'s centenary celebrations, the founder's intentions regarding *Leselinyana*'s benefits covered much more than the parochially religious:

Rev Adolphe Mabile, soon after arriving in Lesotho, strongly desired the publication of a newspaper for the benefit of Christians, to teach them religious and other matters, and to benefit literate non-believers as well.²¹

¹⁸ The reader may recall that light for reading in the night was not only a luxury many could not afford prior to electricity but also one that some still cannot afford even with electricity around. But perhaps our author is thinking more of the precious discipline of not easily succumbing to sleep.

¹⁹ Anonymous, “Ho Mohatsi oa Leselinyana” *Leselinyana La Lesotho* (February 1878) 7. I see no reason to doubt the author's claims to being a Mosotho. What is more, “The newspaper *Imvo Zabantsundu* made the point graphically: ‘The key of knowledge is the English language, without such a mastery of it as will give the scholar a taste for reading, the great English literature is a sealed book, and he remains one of the uneducated, living in the miserably small world of Boer ideals, or those of the untaught Natives.’” David Attwell, “The Transculturation of Enlightenment: The exemplary case of the Rev Tiyo Soga, African Nationalist”, in *The Making of an Indigenous Clergy in Southern Africa*, edited by Philippe Denis (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 1995, 41-57) 45.

²⁰ “It is likely that interest in literacy – reading and writing as forms rather than the contents of the books – on the one hand, and interest in Christian doctrines on the other, worked towards reinforcing one another. For the Basotho, literacy was, from the outset, the innovation which appeared the most extraordinary, and the one most closely related to the missionaries' religious message. Quite probably, literacy appeared to be religious in nature and consequently formed an integral part of Christianity in the minds of the Basotho.” Sybil De Clark *The Evangelical Missionaries and The Basotho, 1833-1933* (Unpublished Doctoral Thesis, UNISA, 2000) 97. The article with an *Anonymous* author cited above seems to contradict De Clark's distinction of literacy as *either* reading and writing as forms *or* reading and writing as concerns book-contents.

²¹ ZD Mangoela, “Leselinyana La Lesotho ke Pulamaliboho ea Likoranta tse Baloang mona South Africa” *Jubilee Edition of Leselinyana La Lesotho* (1 June 1863, 6-7) 6. Interestingly he has *South Africa* in the title of his article and not *Afrika Boroa* (or some other Sesotho variant denoting South or Southern Africa). Neither is it *Southern* but “South” Africa! This is quite welcoming for a South African Mosotho reader-writer such as myself, i.e. one not from Lesotho.

But Mangoela simultaneously confirms another fact of the nineteenth century world we are reviewing: Non-believers, unlike Christians, can be literate or otherwise. In other words, at one level *thuto* divided nineteenth century Basotho into at least three categories: [a] Christians, among whom *thuto* with its attendant literacy was taken for granted, [b] literate non-believers principally comprising backsliders (*bakoenehi*) – for the acquisition of literacy presumed subscription to *thuto*! – and [c] the “heathens” that cared not for *thuto* and were therefore “non-literate” and outside *Leselinyana*’s reach. That Mangoela only sees two Basotho groups being benefited, viz., Christians and literate non-believers, implies the existence of at least one more group. Simply put, *thuto* was a key ingredient of the Christian faith – Dieterlen stresses this connection in the article reproduced below.

Nevertheless, at another level, it was accepted that many adult Basotho converts could not after conversion then undergo school education (see Mabile’s article below). So most of the members of Lesotho congregations, particularly in outlying towns and villages though also in the centres of high *baruti* activity, would have been unable to read and write. Yet their interest in the “read” (i.e. heard) word of Molimo was not dampened, but rather intensified, by this fact. These believers would require school-going children or catechist-schoolteachers to read Molimo’s word aloud for them. This trend persists to this day in many South African societies, and I have personal experience of it with my parents.

But school-going children and/or catechists are not always available or cooperative, and the Spirit will move as and when he pleases. Therefore some among these unschooled believers remarkably begin to pick up their Bibles and “read” unassisted, to the astonishment and disquiet of *baruti* and/or the academe, as we hear below. In other words, these believers are led by the Spirit in their reading of the Bible to beyond those texts that are prescribed by the lectionary. This roaming through the Bible an unsystematic way leads them to ask questions regarding stumbled upon texts that tend to be sidelined by mainstream preaching. The question therefore concerning how these believers carry out the reading exercise is quite pertinent among those who are instructors and/or prescribers or retainers of what literacy entails. The debate is made more fascinating by the gradation of literates.

Mabile on Literacy

Increasing numbers of literate Basotho meant, fairly inevitably and mostly on an ad hoc basis, that more and more Basotho were taking up teaching posts in far-flung towns and villages. As events unfolded, *baruti* tended to establish themselves around towns; a trend comparable to the debatable emphasis on *the city* within the modern charismatic movement. The task of reaching the outskirts of Lesotho was thus the prerogative of catechists (Basotho missionaries) and/or those who returned to their villages after attending school at Morija. The result is that more people were hearing the good news of Jesus Christ and responding to it.

The catechists, needless to say, emphasised *thuto*’s connectedness with the faith just as they were taught. On the other hand, converting Basotho were impressed by and interested in the apparently Christian ability to make a book speak. Consequently there were more people learning to read and write that had had nothing to do with *baruti*. This engendered within *baruti* a conviction that the foundations of proper literacy need to be reasserted. In pursuit of this goal therefore, and early on in *Leselinyana*’s fourth year of circulation, the *baruti* assembly set up a national school inspection team headed up by Thaba Bosiu’s *moruti*. He would visit all Lesotho day schools for the purposes of establishing what the

children were being taught as well as the required interventions. He did indeed visit all but two, from which he was prevented by flooded rivers.

Thus driven, and directed at those who are zealous to help out with the urgent and noble task of teaching others to read and write, the February 1871 editorial shares the magnitude of the realization that being able to read does not necessarily mean that one *can* read and/or teach.

Thuto of Molimo begets knowledge: “Add to your faith... knowledge” (2 Peter 1:6). *Thuto* begets love of wisdom and [self-] advancement. The first thing about knowledge is to know Molimo’s sacred Letters. Even if one gets taught the scriptures [lit. letters] during Sunday church meetings, s/he will never know them well unless s/he reads them for her/himself. This is the reason Christians and their children are always being urged to learn (*ithuta*) to read (*ho bala*).²² Reading has the great value of “*ho ruta*, to persuade, to correct, and to bring up in righteous nurture” (2 Timothy 3:16).²³

Now, what we mean by the right manner of reading, which we desire to see everywhere as we go about inspecting schools, has nothing to do with reading fast. It has to do with a good combining of letters, no word posing a stumbling block – except perhaps some difficult names of people, places, etc. – but reading without rushing, observing commas, semicolons and full-stops, each according to its laws. A good reader would thus not be reading as though s/he were singing, but in the manner and pace by which people talk. When a person reads without regard either to these matters or to [the logic of] what s/he is reading, then – no matter how confident – such a person may, during public reading of scripture, read beyond the required passage, and as a result begin one that s/he will not finish. Then those listening will wonder, “How does this one read? S/he has gone beyond the verse at which we had asked her/him to stop.”

Well then, let public reading be carried out properly, so that those listening will understand the point of what is being read, where it begins as well as where it ends. Schoolteachers should also adopt the proper manner of reading we have described above. Indeed so far as we have observed, there are not many children who read that well. Also, because there is scarcity of books, the [New] Testament being the only book that is read the most along with the Psalms and Proverbs, all of which are Molimo’s books, they must thus be read respectfully. If only there could be many other types of books!²⁴

But the church of Lesotho lacks readers from among the older generation. On the one hand this is understandable. It is logical that the earlier labour in Lesotho, when *thuto* was just arriving, had to be geared towards conversion. But now that the work is established, it is fitting that even the older people should learn [to read], especially those still within the learning age. The reading skill gives advantage to all who possess it. If only the various congregations were to agree that none of their members should get married before they have learnt to read. And in smaller congregations, why don’t they stay in church until they have learnt to read – provided they are not too aged. Indeed even some of the grey-haired people are learning. It is so pleasant, during church services, to see each member of the congregation paging through her/his own book and

²² The Sesotho concept *ho bala* primordially entails “counting” – an activity of significance to a people for whom the keeping of livestock was a matter of pride, identity and survival. But with the advent of “letters of the alphabet” it came to refer to a “counting” of another type, viz., “reading”. The primal meaning of “counting” is still preserved as in the naming of the science of calculations (i.e. arithmetic and mathematics) as *lipalo* (plural noun form) – as seen in the article below.

²³ We have already seen that Basotho were keenly aware of the value of all forms of knowledge, i.e. *lithuto*, as well as of the centrality of reading in that regard.

²⁴ From different angles a cry for more books is being made – by Basotho in the hope of access to diverse *lithuto* and by *baruti* for the purposes of freer catechetical experimentation.

reading for her/himself the passages that the *moruti* is referring to. They are like the Berea Christians who, it is said, “did inquire of the scriptures daily, to know if things really still stand as they are being taught” (Acts 17:11). The time must come when all Christians can say, “We no longer believe on account of *baruti*’s teaching, but we have read these matters for ourselves and have heard with our own ears that they are so,” as did the Samaritans (John 4:42).

While we are on this topic, we shall not neglect to encourage those Christians who live in remote towns to also learn [to read] along with their children. We trust that before many years have passed hence, all towns with significant numbers of residents will each have their own children’s schools. We also of course expect to get scores of teachers through the boys’ school [at Morija]. But today, while there still exists a shortage of schools, it is right that those Christians who can read should teach those who cannot, especially the children – this can be done in the mornings or evenings. We recognize that it is hard work, done only by selfless individuals who wish to help their fellow human beings. Many small congregations lament the refusal by many of their literate Christians to teach others. The morning time is better; evenings are bad on account of the danger and sins that love darkness. More will follow on what ought to be taught the children [in schools].²⁵

The foregoing informative article on “reading” (*ho bala*) is followed up, as promised, in the April issue. However, it should be self-evident that the last two paragraphs of the follow-up article that is confessedly about “writing” (*ho ngola*) deal with *ho bala* and thus properly belong more with the preceding article. Other than that, the articles are self-explanatory.

In school, children are taught not only to read, but some other skills as well. Whoever is able to read subsequently gets taught also to write. These two things go together. Writing equally also is of great value. First, it is useful when one desires to preserve some *thuto*-related information that might otherwise get forgotten. Second, in order to inform others about affairs, e.g. informing your friends who are in far away places how you are faring. Of course we are aware that some young people are abusing this facility by using it to woo or to write some such hideous things to one another. In this, as in many other cases where people abuse good things, the fault rests with them rather than with the writing skill itself.

As we saw that not many can read correctly, the same holds true with regard to writing too. Many still cannot write in a straight line, or without either compressing or exaggerating the space between their [sentence] lines. Quite a lot of them also cannot separate words that must be kept separate in a sentence. [At this point the author gives “anexample...”.] Still others cannot write distinct letters e.g. it is impossible to differentiate between their “u” and “n” or their “a” and “o”. Many more cannot use punctuation marks correctly, with the result that one battles when reading their correspondence. Words that follow full stops and semicolons must begin with capital letters, as should the names of people, places, as well as Molimo. Indeed, the one who is able to write, and does write honourable instead of foolish things, enjoys a great advantage.

Another subject taught in school is *lipalo*, viz., addition, subtraction, multiplication, and division. Children are taught to do arithmetic either on the board [lit. stone] or mentally [lit. “by head”]. This is another valuable skill. It is important for the purposes of counting [*ho bala*] money and bartering. Traders will never cheat one who can count; but neither should such a one use this skill to cheat others. Christians have caused us

²⁵ A Mabile, “Hlahlobo ea Likolo tsa Bana: I, Ho Bala” *Leselinyana La Lesotho* (February 1871) 9-11.

disgrace among Basotho by being tight-fisted with their possessions and then overcharging others. Let us deal justly.

Also, it is good if one can count [*bala*] her/his age as well as the children's respective ages. Similarly one can count the duration of wars and *lifaqane*'s. It would not be as happened with this woman that told me she was over a hundred years old while [I could see] she was still strong-bodied [and much younger than that].²⁶

Among others, the following issues have been raised. *Thuto* is central to survival in the wider world, just as it is critical for religious progress; blessed are the literate for they have direct access to Molimo's word. But like every other noble thing, *thuto* is susceptible to abuse; blessed are those who maximise the value of *thuto* in personal and societal life. Moreover, *thuto* knows no age restrictions; blessed are those who set out to acquire *thuto* as early in life as possible. Also, *thuto* is a demanding affair whose painstaking application very few people, if any, have mastered; blessed are those who constantly strive for perfection with regard to *thuto*. Now before going on to offer my critique of these and other issues raised, let me present another two articles from H. Dieterlen written just over half-a-decade later. These are added to illustrate consistency of outlook among *baruti* regarding literacy.

Dieterlen on Literacy

Today *Leselinyana* has grown into a sizeable newspaper with diverse news items. It is a good thing that Basotho welcome their own newspaper, one that informs them of other countries' affairs, and one that advances them. A nation without a newspaper is not alive... I concede that not all who read *Leselinyana* benefit from that exercise, but the fault in such cases lies with those people and not with *Leselinyana*. A newspaper is a good thing to have. Indeed it is the light [*leseli*] and the *moruti* that can teach us many things if we listen right. It is a *book* written by those who desire to enlighten the nation regarding the latest news as well as facilitate wise counsel...

My dear fellows do not despise Lesotho's newspaper. Rather despise its readers! Some claim to be reading it whereas they are not. They just browse through its pages, swallowing without taking breaks and reflecting on what they are reading. In the end they cannot recall what they were just reading. They are wasting their time, throwing their money into the lake. A person must read with understanding, ruminate over and examine the news from all angles. Even with regard to matters pertaining to Molimo, one must read with the [New] Testament at hand, comparing what is claimed in *Leselinyana* with what the Bible says. Let us not just blindly receive news from others; we must be careful what we are being fed.

After thus ascertaining the contents of *Leselinyana*, the reader must then go over them two or three or even ten more times, this time assimilating the knowledge. Only then can a person say, "I have read", i.e. when *s/he has tested the contents, understood them, found them to be true, stored them in the mind, can relate them to others, and even live by them* [italics original]. One who reads this way will always read *Leselinyana*; s/he will put off the marvellous ignorance that still prevails among Basotho, particularly concerning knowledge of other nations' affairs. My dear sirs, do not deprive yourselves

²⁶ A Mabile, "Hlahlobo ea Likolo tsa Bana: II, Ho Ngola" *Leselinyana La Lesotho* (April 1871) 28-29. The reality that the editor himself commits, in this very article, some of the syntactical errors he here singles out in relation to the writing abilities of the burgeoning guild of Basotho writers need not nullify the many valid points he is making; it is just ironic.

of this pleasant thing on account of trying to save pennies – knowledge has no price tag.²⁷

Some connections with Mabile's sentiments are already perceptible, though the plane is widened further. In Mabile's spirit, Dieterlen affirms the reality that the scope and focus of *Leselinyana* is more than only Lesotho and/or Christian/religious. A reliable indicator of *thuto* among Basotho will be the day when their knowledge of and interest in global events becomes evident to all. Again not all who read *Leselinyana* benefit from that exercise, and what is more, the fault lies with those people rather than with *Leselinyana*. Not all who claim to be reading are in fact reading – some so-called readers are simply wasting their time and pennies. The painstaking and somewhat pricey exercise of reading requires sharp and critical minds like those portrayed by the Berea Christians.

But, on the other hand, the play on *Leselinyana* as being itself, in the final analysis, *leseli* and the *moruti* is noteworthy, particularly in a context where one expects Molimo's word to be the *leseli* and *Leselinyana* to be in its turn just what its name entails, a small but liked source of *leseli*. It is worth pointing out here that this Sesotho word for "light", *leseli*, is also the word for "information". So for Dieterlen *Leselinyana* takes central stage as the guiding light to obscure worlds and facts, whereas for our Anonymous Mosotho author (see above) it was the reading of all manner of books that was the key to effective knowledge. In the following month's issue, Dieterlen published what seems a follow-up article, thereby taking matters to another level still.

The way some people read is astounding. They can pick up a book, page to and read several of its chapters²⁸ fluently, skipping none of the words at all. But when I point at a, b, c, etc. in the children's Spell-book, they fail to read any of the letters²⁹ I point out. It thus becomes evident that they cannot read; they were only taught³⁰ [to recite] certain chapters, which they then read from memory [lit. "by head"]. Other than that they simply cannot read.

The same is true of matters pertaining to the faith. Some people can recite pretty well and tell of matters concerning the forgiveness [of their sins], [their] union with Jesus, and everlasting life. But when asked to point out their personal sin, which convicted them of their sinfulness, they then are at a loss. Such faith is of the head, of the mouth only, and of habit [or custom]. Their confessions are simply recitations of what they were taught by others. They are otherwise trounced by the a, b, c's.

²⁷ Hermann Dieterlen, "Ho Babali ba Leselinyana" *Leselinyana La Lesotho* (January 1878) 1.

²⁸ *Khaohanyo* has come to be used for "chapter" though its basic meaning is "separation". It is not obvious here – and perhaps beside the point – whether reference is to "chapters" rather than to "passages" (*pericopes*). Although I think the latter meaning is more apt, I nevertheless translate *khaohanyo* as "chapter" in this article.

²⁹ Literally "words", as in the writer's preceding sentence. These pioneers of written Sesotho opted to differentiate "word" – a natural Sesotho concept – from the novel "letter" of the alphabet by retaining *mantsoe* for "words" and introducing the derivative *liletere* for "letters of the alphabet" or the more authentic *lih laku* (from Sesotho for "grain"). One would have expected both the literate *moruti* author and the *moruti*-editor to be careful about maintaining this distinction in an article addressing itself to matters alphabetical.

³⁰ *Ba rutiloe* – the passive voice unequivocally takes away the initiative from these "illiterate" readers. (The article later mentions only two "teachers" responsible for the superficial literacy of these paradoxical readers who clearly cannot read, viz., *others' testimonies* and *Molimo's Word*.) This is important because the Sesotho reflexive *ithuta* entails partnership and cooperation between learner and teacher. In other words, the Sesotho conceptualisation credits first the one who takes the initiative (or makes the effort) to get *thuto* while simultaneously recognizing the labour of the teachers. Therefore *ba ithutile* (they learnt) would have sufficed here instead of *ba rutiloe* (they were taught), which presumes some coercion on the part of the teachers.

Now the a, b, c's of the faith begin with a conviction of one's own sinfulness. I mean neither the knowing about nor the believing of it, but the experiencing³¹ of one's own sinfulness. They know [of] sinfulness because they are told of it by the Word of Molimo and through hearing the testimony of others. But the deep inner sense or the recognition of the manifestations [or signs] of that sinfulness cannot be found in them.

Here is the [correct] order of things: "The wages of sin is death."³² Now are you not a sinner? If you cannot distinctly sense your sinfulness, then you have nothing to do with Jesus. But if you do, then the next thing you do is ask: "What must I do to be saved?" (Acts 16:30). The answer is found in the Gospel:³³ "Believe in Morena Jesus, and you will be saved" (Acts 16:31). At this point you can talk to Jesus and say: "Morena, I believe, please help me in my unbelief" (Mark 9:24).

But please, be sure not to circumvent the a, b, c's. Let matters be begun where they begin.³⁴

It is remarkable though hardly surprising that the above articles share so much of a similar perspective, and indeed they build on one another despite their focusing on different aspects of the literacy project as well as being a few years apart. It is testimony to the honestly transparent intentions of the PEMS *baruti* that they can speak so consistently about matters close to their hearts. The most important contribution from Dieterlen, if I am not to repeat points already stated in other ways earlier, is his paradigmatic understanding of reading. For him reading is a type of the process of accession to the Christian faith. Both processes have to be intentional and meticulous – certain steps must be followed! This is the aspect of their literacy debate that spurred me to the writing of this paper.

Reading along with Baruti and Jesus

Notwithstanding my slant and reservations about the PEMS *baruti*, it is significant to me that I identify with most of the concerns that Mabile and Dieterlen express around the questions of reading and writing, particularly insofar as they relate to the Bible. Regardless of a significant proportion of Christians remaining "illiterate", it would certainly be awkward if not unreasonable to expect a modern mind to imagine Christianity apart from the Book. Indeed one wonders whether Christians the world over would have a touch in common were it not for their sharing a relatively fixed canon wherein are kept the writings of that first generation of Christians with which we experience the need to feel connected.

Our insistence that these writings form a "canon", i.e. concrete parameters, is to a degree an assertion of (at least Protestant) Christianity's need for letters as opposed to less material sources that are thus more pliable. In other words, the insistence on (written) scripture is precisely what is at stake if Protestants are to feel any connection with their first-century ancestors *despite* the Roman Catholic Church, which, outside of the Orthodox Churches, would be their natural link with first century Christianity. It is thus graspable

³¹ *Ikutloa* is another reflexive from the root verb meaning "to hear". It thus involves the experiencing of an inner, perhaps intuitive, sense of something. It speaks of the ability to hear one's inner voice, which reality might be facilitated by sensing, feeling, consciousness, self-understanding, wellness, recuperation, self-awareness, meditation, etc.

³² Distinctively highlighted like other direct quotes, yet unlike with subsequent scripture citations, the provenance of the words, i.e. Romans 6:23, is not given.

³³ *Evangelii* is generally ambivalent in *Leselinyana*. It means either [a] the Christian proclamation or [b] the first four books of the New Testament collectively or [c] individually. In this case, though, it either denotes [d] the whole New Testament, the volume of the good news or the general Christian proclamation [a] notwithstanding the specific quoting of the Acts verse.

³⁴ H Dieterlen, "A, B, C", *Leselinyana La Lesotho* (February 1878) 3-4.

why so much energy is expended in *Leselinyana* towards the repudiation of the Roman Catholic Church and its missionaries' efforts.³⁵ And although the "books" of the New Testament were written in order to address specific first-century situations rather than as timeless textbooks or as contra Roman Catholic Church literature, we have inherited and do indeed use them in much the same manner that their writers inherited and used the Hebrew Bible – in translation and yet efficiently.³⁶

So yes, it is hard to envision Christianity without the Bible, not least in Africa – the hub of mother tongue Bible production that predates even Christianity *per se*. Once they stand written and translated, we can do little less than to read our Bibles. But it is precisely at this juncture, when everyone starts to read their Bibles, that a paradox surfaces. It is in the reading of the Bible that Christians both connect and disconnect with fellow Christians of other times and places. It is in the reading of this fairly fixed canon that Christians devolve into diverse denominations whose justification necessitates further intransigent readings of the Bible. It is also in Bible reading that some come to the faith while others learn all manner of excuses for their disbelief or divergence. An even more interesting example of this reality than erstwhile pro and contra apartheid South African hermeneutics is the burgeoning hermeneutics of reconfigurations of spaces in the years since the demise of apartheid. On the one hand those whom apartheid had privileged now feel both abandoned by their western benefactors and threatened by their loss of privilege.³⁷ On the other hand the previously excluded feel that the academy is dragging its feet or merely paying lip service to many critical issues.³⁸

Even so, we can do little else than read our Bibles. Cognisant as we now are of the differences that accrue to us even during the Bible reading process, can we legitimately ask those who claim to be Christians whether and how they read the scriptures? Does our canon provide us with precedents in this regard? It would appear that the New Testament has cases akin to those we are grappling with.³⁹ Jesus, the main character of the New Testament, himself certainly never asked people to spell but he sure was concerned about the sort of questions Mabile and Dieterlen are exploring above. Beyond "It Is Written"⁴⁰,

³⁵ See e.g. A Mabile, "Thuto ea Roma ke e Hlorisang", *Leselinyana La Lesotho* (June 1865) for an explicit description of the frightful manner by which the Catholic faith is propagated.

³⁶ "In the third century BC, in Alexandria, Egypt, the five books of Moses were translated into Greek. The rest of the Old Testament followed. In this way, Ptolemy II got the sacred books in a language he understood. The "Septuagint" became the Bible of the Jews in the diaspora, and later the Bible of the first Christians.... [Also] the biblical frame of reference for the Gospel writers and for the primitive Christian church." Ype Schaaf, *On their way rejoicing: The history and role of the bible in Africa* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1994) 5-6.

³⁷ For an instructive insider-summary of the issues see "Social Identity and South African Biblical Hermeneutics: A Struggle Against Prejudice?" forthcoming in the *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, 2005.

³⁸ See the varied contributions to the special issues of the *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* subtitled "The Agency of the Oppressed Discourse: Consciousness, Liberation, and Survival in Theological Perspective," guest edited by Tinyiko Maluleke and Sarojini Nadar, vol. 120, November 2004.

³⁹ The angel of the Lord *and* the Spirit helped Philip set one example. "And the angel of the Lord spoke unto Philip, saying, "Arise, and go toward..." And he arose and went. And, behold, a man of Ethiopia ... [who] had come to Jerusalem for to worship, was returning, and sitting in his chariot *read* Isaiah the prophet. Then the Spirit said unto Philip, "Go near..." And Philip ran towards him, and *heard* him *read* the prophet Isaiah, and said, "*Do you understand what you are reading?*" And he said, "How can I, except someone should guide me?" And he desired Philip that he would come up and sit with him. The place of the scripture which he read was..." (Acts 8:26-33 *my italics*).

⁴⁰ A survey of the phrase *it is written* in the canonical Gospels is illuminating. [a] Most of the occurrences come from Jesus' lips: "A person shall not live by bread alone" (Matthew 4:4 & Luke 4:4); "You should not tempt YHWH your God" (Matthew 4:7); "Worship and serve only YHWH your God" (Matthew 4:10 & Luke 4:8); "Behold I send my messenger ahead of you" (Matthew 11:10 & Luke 7:27); "My house shall be called a

Jesus often went on to flabbergastedly enquire “Have You Not Read?”⁴¹ What is more, according to Luke, the lettered evangelist, Jesus went beyond whether people read to inquiring *how* they read⁴² as well as himself demonstrating how to read (– something of a Jesus’ custom?).⁴³

The canonical Evangelists’ evidence of Jesus’ concern with the reading of the Holy Scriptures is abundant if not overwhelming. Jesus constantly expected his interlocutors to bring their readings of the scriptures to whatever discussion they engaged him in. Even in his sermons, as with the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus almost always made reference to the written code – though there he overtly conflates tradition with scripture through the phrase “You have heard...”. So if Jesus was barely literate as remains plausible, then it must be quite instructive that he and other “illiterates” known to both Dieterlen and I should be so insistent that scripture be read before any decisions, actions or sermons are taken or given.

Jesus thus summarily belongs in the category of the very people whom we see disconcerting *moruti* Dieterlen. People like Jesus do not read a chapter (or each Bible book) from beginning to end. And instead of reading every letter and punctuation as it appears in the text (i.e. “exegeting”), they really only reproduce what they have heard over and again via the readings of others. To add salt to injury, they move too swiftly from the writers of old to their own situations – reading themselves into places where they were not foreseen. Typically therefore, after reading the prophet Isaiah in the synagogue, Jesus “closed *the book*, and he gave *it* again to the minister, and sat down” immediately adding “This day is this scripture fulfilled in your ears” (Luke 4:20-21).

This type of readers facilely contrasts with, say, the Ethiopian eunuch with whom Philip interacts. Whereas the learned eunuch is interested in first of all duly understanding what the prophet meant in its own right, Jesus and Dieterlen’s culprits are only too eager to see

house of prayer” (Matthew 21:13; Mark 11:17 & Luke 19:46); “The son of man goes as it is written of him” (Matthew 26:24; 26:31; Mark 14:21; 14:27; Luke 18:31; 20:17; 22:37; 24:44; 24:46 & John 15:25); “This people only pay me lip service” (Mark 7:6); “The son of man must suffer many things” (Mark 9:12); “Elijah has already come and they did to him as is written of him” (Mark 9:13); “the last days stand foretold (Luke 21:22); “And they shall all be taught of God” (John 6:45); “The testimony of two is true” (John 8:17); and “I said, You are gods” (John 10:34). [b] By contrast, six other characters share the only other eight times that *it is written* appears in the Gospels, viz., Herod’s priests and scribes in response to the query of the wise easterners (Matthew 2:5); the tempter in the wilderness (Matthew 4:6 & Luke 4:10); the author of Mark (Mark 1:2); Luke at the presentation of Jesus at the temple (Luke 2:23); Luke’s comments re John the Baptizer (Luke 3:4); Jesus’ disciples recalling scripture re God’s house (John 2:17; cf. John 12:16 where his disciples remembered what was written re his death); and the obstinate descendants of Abraham (John 6:31). [c] The two remaining plausible references to the Hebrew Scriptures (viz., Luke 4:17 & John 12:14) are not much more than narrative seams.

⁴¹ “That he who made *them* at the beginning made them male and female?” (Matthew 19:4); “Out of the mouth of babes and sucklings you have perfected praise?” (Matthew 21:16); “The stone which the builders rejected, the same has become the head of the corner: This is the Lord’s doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes?” (Matthew 21:42 & Mark 12:10-11); “That which was spoken unto you by God, saying, I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob?” (Matthew 22:29-32; cf. Mark 12:24-27); and “What David did, when he had need, and was an hungered, he, and those that were with him?” (Mark 2:25 & Luke 6:3).

⁴² “And, behold, a certain lawyer stood up, and tempted him, saying, Master, what shall I do to inherit eternal life? He said unto him, What is written in the law? *How do you read?* And he answering said, You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbour as yourself. And he said unto him, You have answered right: Do this, and you shall live” (Luke 10:25-29).

⁴³ “And Jesus returned in the power of the Spirit into Galilee... And he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up: And, *as his custom was, he went into the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and stood up for to read.* And there was delivered unto him the book of the prophet Isaiah. And when he had opened the book, he found the place where it was written...” (Luke 4:14-17).

themselves in the pages of scripture. They are participant readers.⁴⁴ My interactions within the Pentecostal Movement often leave me feeling like our *baruti* did as people rush to claim, preferably, the materially favourable promises and blessings of scripture. Nevertheless I should not overstate this point because I am often equally irritated by fellow scholars who, for example, read the title of the last book of the Bible as “Revelations” instead of just “Revelation”.

Our verdict that some people “simply cannot read” tacitly means that we hold suspect what they read “into” (*interpret* or *eisegete*) the pericopes they “read” – for everyone recognizes that they cannot spell (*exegete*). How can they come to valid conclusions from “head” or “heard” readings? Aren’t they only replicating the testimonies they are merely repeating?

Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary, the brother of James, and Joses, and of Judas, and Simon? And are not his sisters here with us? And they were offended at him” (Mark 6:3; cf. Matthew 13:55 where “the carpenter’s son”).

How presumptuous of Jesus therefore to think that he can read, let alone teach, in public and with authority! While Dieterlen and I might desire some exhibition of the intellectual appreciation of what has been read (“can you spell it out systematically?”), Jesus seems to insist on the demonstration of a form of behaviour that is in keeping with what has been read (“do likewise and *you* will live”). Jesus’ participatory (i.e. self-involving) reading of the scriptures leads to pro-liberty conclusions like:

Have you not read what David did, when he was an hungered, and they that were with him; How he entered into the house of God, and did eat the showbread, which was not lawful for him to eat, neither for those who were with him, but only for the priests? Or have you not read in the law, how that on the Sabbath days the priests in the temple profane the Sabbath, and are blameless? But I say unto you that in this place stands *one* greater than the temple. But if you had known what *this* means, “I will have mercy and not sacrifice,” you would not have condemned the guiltless. For the Son of man is Lord even of the Sabbath day (Matthew 12:3-8).

Scripture or, more accurately, the reading of scripture ought not to condemn the guiltless. Engaging the letter ought not to kill but, with the Spirit’s quickening, it ought to give life. According to Jesus’ manner of reading, scripture affirms rather than places obstacles in the way of YHWH’s people. Scripture, just like the Sabbath et al, is there to serve its readers, hearers, or heeders. In other words, people should be the better for having consulted scripture rather than experience more alienation as a result thereof. All that concerns these “readers” already stands written in the Book. So they need to consult the Book for answers to their present concerns, and the Spirit leads them to relevant passages in the Book as well as to the right explicators of the Word. In other words, for these “readers” nothing happens

⁴⁴ “According to Prophet Harris’s own account ... certain events changed the course of his life and made him a prophet of God and Christ. These events included a trance-visitation in which he said the Angel Gabriel called him into the preaching ministry. In subsequent trance-visitations during his ministry, Harris also ‘saw’ Moses, Elijah and Jesus...” Kwame Bediako, *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion*, Edinburgh University Press & Orbis Books, 1995, 92. Should I be so blessed as to have a divine visitation, my theological training taught me to be humble enough not to think that it could be *Gabriel*; indeed I should be so circumspect as not to be certain that it was an angel from Molimo. On the contrary, “Prophet Harris’s appropriation of the Bible as truth ‘was in ways that were no longer simple patterns of ‘belief in’ the truth as he had known previously, but an African pattern of ‘participation in’ the truth. It was no longer a question of what Moses saw, or what Elijah did, or the words and works of Jesus as reported in the Bible. It became a question of involvement – as with the ancestors, the living dead – with Moses, with Elijah, with the Archangel Gabriel, and supremely with Jesus Christ.” Kwame Bediako, *Christianity in Africa*, 104, citing David Shank.

to or around them that the scriptures did not foresee, regardless of whether or not at the time of the incident they were aware of that scriptural foresight.

Sometimes they are led to passages they are unfamiliar with. On occasion my mother has asked me to help her “read” some of the more unyielding words in her Sesotho Bible. She prefers to read by herself with the occasional need for assistance when a complex term is encountered – a reality conceded by Mabile above in connection with trained readers. But she could never be coerced into reading during the Sunday meetings. *Baruti* would concur that private reading scripture is more desirable than the ability to sing pericopes in public. It is as though the text of the Bible will divine the “reader” and so begs to be consulted. Scripture speaks into the reader’s reality directly and immediately. Reading this way means that understanding is lived out instead of being an end in itself. Indeed, and to his credit, Dieterlen envisages the point when the Mosotho reader can live by what has been read.

How exciting when your eyes are opened to the reality, “It is written of me in the book.” Reading with Jesus, though clearly other than a formally literate affair, is nonetheless not head-reading. It is a quest for self-discovery (destiny) and liberating (vital) participation in the unfolding of the creator’s mind as discoverable in scripture. It encompasses every experienced moment of life. It leaves the “reader” convicted this or the other way. This is why it matters how one reads – faith comes out of this “reading” (or more aptly “hearing”) process, as we shall shortly hear Paul assert. But the question lingers whether it really is our business to spell out the faith?

Spelling out the Faith

In attempting to do justice to our *baruti* I must, in conclusion, reflect on the significance of spelling out the faith. Their main contention is that as much as a person reading words must be able to break those words down into their constitutive letters, or phrases into constitutive words, and sentences into constitutive phrases, etc. – thus demonstrating ability to see connections between them – so too must one who claims to be a believer be capable of breaking down the process by which s/he came to the faith. This is important because one cannot be confident of her salvation unless she is certain that she followed the correct order by which to receive Molimo’s (unmerited and un-earnable) favour.

There is need for the following steps in this order: (a) An unambiguous concrete moment in life when the conviction dawned on you that you are a sinner, (b) an acknowledgement of your need of and desire for the salvation Jesus offers in the (heard or read) gospel, and (c) a penitent explicated faith in Morena Jesus’ ability to save and sustain you despite yourself. Here again the *baruti* do not seem to have strayed from the biblical plot. For instance in Romans 10 the apostle Paul provides some order by which people obtain salvation. What is fascinating in this chapter is how the learned New Testament apostle seems also to read (Hebrew) scripture in the manner that we saw Jesus and other participant-reader culprits do. For instance Moses and Isaiah address Paul’s contemporaries (Romans 10:18-21) just as Moses and Elijah did not find it difficult to converse with Jesus at certain critical points of the latter’s life and ministry (Matthew 17:3; Mark 9:4 & Luke 9:30).

Even more intriguing, however, Paul also seems certain of the particular *order* whereby salvation is attained:

The word is near you, *even* in your mouth, and in your heart: That is, the word of faith, *which we preach*; That if you will *confess* with your mouth the Lord Jesus, and *believe* in your heart that God raised him from the dead, *you will be saved*. For with the heart a

person believes unto righteousness; and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation... So then *faith comes by hearing*, and hearing by the *word of God*. For whosoever shall *call* upon the name of the Lord shall be *saved*. How then shall they call on him in whom they have not *believed*? And how shall they *believe* in him of whom they have not heard? And how shall they *hear* without a preacher? And how shall they *preach*, except they be sent? (Romans 10:8-17).

Indeed it is the proclaimed (heard) word that will bring forth faith. Indeed many have come to the faith from private auditions with scripture. The animation of the text of scripture whether by an evangelist or by private “reading” (i.e. *hearing*) is what engenders faith. So, following Jesus’ example, we should feel brave enough to state “It is written”, or ask, “Have you (not) read?” and even “How do you read?”. (My experience of Jesus in the canonical gospels is that he did not ask these questions as mere rhetorical tools but was in fact genuinely interested in the interlocutor’s responses.) Or perhaps even like Philip we can venture, at the prompting of the Spirit of course, “Do you understand what you are reading?” – beckoning invitation to conversation – instead of self-righteously presuming the other’s ignorance and thus unleashing a heap of red-hot sincere but perhaps ill-guided conversion-talk on them.

Our evidence seems to suggest that it is not within our rights to prescribe to “others” how they should read, i.e. to inflict our “readings” on them at the expense of all other “readings” they have acquired by whatever means. The questions Jesus often asked do not judge but invite the interlocutor to explicate his/her manner of reading while at the same time hinting at the inquirer’s reading and/or bias. Both readers of scripture are conversing as equals, and the challenge occurs at the level of each reading’s relevance to the fostering of life. The reading of the lawyer who temptingly inquired about the conditions required for the procurement of salvation was affirmed – the only query that remained pertained to whether or not he *did* as he read.⁴⁵

We have encountered hints in the various articles reproduced in this paper of Christians abusing their literacy and numeracy competencies. Both this possibility and other allusions to, for instance, “*thuto* of Molimo” and *lithuto* have both affirmed the centrality of *thuto* to the nineteenth century missionary enterprise among Basotho as well as highlighted the reality that *thuto* in and of itself is not the absolute answer. The problems attending *thuto* notwithstanding, we also see how Basotho have benefited immensely from the space for reflection about life generally as about Molimo specifically, and to carry out that reflection in Sesotho. This is the noblest achievement of *thuto* among Basotho; that they should participate not only as beneficiaries but also as agents thereof.

Today as then, many Christians do not necessarily possess the facility to read and write. And, in our so-called post-colonial world, many who are literate do not possess the ability to read and/or write in their mother tongues. Indeed even among those who possess it, there are varying degrees of “competence” whether from the perspective of reading and writing as such or from the perspective of how such skills are benefiting the quality of the life that possess them. Whilst *thuto* divided Basotho into various compartments based on varying ability to read and write, it simultaneously also urged young and old to aspire to self-reading of the Bible as of other sources of *leseli* such as newspapers. Indeed the various Christians congregations could boldly look to the Berea or Samaritan Christians for examples on how to manage the “good news”.

⁴⁵ My participant reading of this conversation between Jesus and the lawyer as told by Luke has been published as “Who Is My Neighbour? Envisioning African Christianity’s Role Within World Christianity.” *Theologia Viatorum*, 2004.

We cannot ignore that the task of enlightening readings, as the various texts cited above betray, belongs severally to Morena's angel, the Spirit, Molimo's word, as well as inspired expositions. Yet we must also aver that the responsibility to sharpen one's reading (and writing) skills remains the imperative of every Christian. So without taking away from Molimo the prerogative of knowing for sure whether someone is *the* believer or reader that s/he claims to be, we can concede that reading the Bible is a faith-generating, participation-inviting, and deeply spiritual exercise that we all shall continue to engage in for the sake of our convictions and in response to the needs of our contexts – for it is written! Only may our spirituality never deprive us of the benefits of reading alongside others as equals. And may our readings of life and of the Bible interface in a mutually transformative discourse. May we not to err on the side of condemning our fellow-readers of scripture and of life.

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