

# Early Encounters with the Bible among the BaTlhaping: *Historical and Hermeneutical Signs*

**Gerald O. West**

Head of School of Theology, University of Natal  
Pietermaritzburg, South Africa

**In most forms of post-colonial discourse, the Bible's reception is subsumed under the reception of Christianity. This article argues that the Bible is a separable object of power in the protracted transactions between the Tlhaping people of southern Africa and the explorers and missionaries who first brought Bibles among them. The focus of the article is the visits of the explorer William Burchell and the missionary John Campbell to the Tlhaping in the early 1800s. Through a detailed analysis of their journals, diaries and letters, read "against the grain," signs of an emerging indigenous hermeneutic can be detected. While the Bible occupied a particular place in the constellation of meanings the missionaries embodied, it is argued there that the Bible as a distinct object took on a different order and fresh significations among the Tlhaping – significations that may be considered foundational for subsequent moments in their history.**

## Introduction

The bible being on the table gave occasion to explain the nature and use of a book, particularly of that book – how it informed us of God, who made all things; and of the beginning of all things, which seemed to astonish her, and many a look was directed towards the bible.<sup>1</sup>

In the beginning the Bible was there. In this, the first protracted encounter between Christian missionaries and the Tlhaping people of southern Africa,<sup>2</sup> the Bible is palpably present. Stating this may seem rather mundane; of course the Bible is present in the missionary enterprise! We would be surprised if it were not. True, but given its foundational presence, it does disappear remarkably quickly from the analytical gaze of current criticism in its various historical, anthropological, political and literary guises.

While I would not want to lean too heavily on the adjective 'foundational' above, there are grounds for using a formulation like this in discussing the role and presence of the Bible in early missionary encounters in southern Africa. First, it is there in the beginning, along with the guns, beads, ox wagons, ploughs, watches, mirrors, telescopes, letters, tobacco and other items brought by the missionaries. Second, there are signs that the Bible is perceived by indigenous peoples, at least in southern Africa, as an object of power more like the gun than, say, a utilitarian object

---

<sup>1</sup> J. Campbell, *Travels in South Africa: Undertaken at the Request of the Missionary Society* (London (Reprint, Cape Town), Black, Parry, & Co. (Reprint, C. Struik) 1815 (Reprinted 1974)), p. 199.

<sup>2</sup> In my title I have retained the prefix "Ba" (BaTlhaping) for alliterative effect; here and in the rest of the article I revert to the scholarly convention of omitting the prefix (Tlhaping).

like the candle. Third, even in these pre-literate days the Bible begins to be appropriated via a range of interpretative moves yet to be documented and analysed, laying a hermeneutical foundation for successive generations of African interpreters in a context (like South Africa) in which what we have done and what we do with the Bible really does matter.

What the missionaries failed to notice – among their many misrecognitions – was “that the attraction of whites to the Tlhaping flowed from the mystical qualities attributed to them and their things in a hinterland where raids were endemic and where guns, beads, and tobacco had become prime valuables.”<sup>3</sup> Among the “goods of strange power”<sup>4</sup> associated with the arrival of whites in their land was the Bible. However, in studies on the encounter between missionaries and/as colonial agents, including studies on the specific encounter between the Nonconformist missionaries and the Southern Tswana – the focus of this article – the Bible tends to be subsumed and assumed under terms like ‘Christianity,’ ‘the message,’ ‘the Word,’ etc.<sup>5</sup> Clearly, the Bible is part of the missionary-colonial package in that it is integral to most if not all forms of Christianity and colonial activity, particularly the Non-Conformist forms that were propagated amongst the Tlhaping. Here I will argue that a case can be made for treating the Bible as a separable object of strange power which may have been apprehended by the Tlhaping in ways quite different from its collocations within the missionary-colonial package in which it came.<sup>6</sup>

As I have indicated, objects in the encounter between the Tlhaping and missionaries were charged with power. Indeed, in the earliest encounters “The Tlhaping seem to have related to the Europeans as objects, touching and bearing in on them, enjoying a closeness never again permitted by the etiquette of the mission, with its deference to racial separation and the spatial discreteness of person and property.”<sup>7</sup> But not all objects were charged with the same power, so part of my purpose in this article is to determine what power the Bible was perceived to possess.

Tobacco, along with beads and knives, were prized objects of exchange and trade, obtaining their power both from their intrinsic value to the Tlhaping (whether utilitarian or aesthetic) and the increasingly complex trade transactions the Tlhaping were participating in.<sup>8</sup> Guns too were greatly desired by the Tlhaping, but were much more difficult to extract from missionaries and traders because of their scarcity and a reluctance to arm local peoples (unless of course this suited colonial objectives). Though an object of “strange power,” the power of this “most condensed source of European power”<sup>9</sup> is easily understood. Besides the obvious killing power

---

<sup>3</sup> J. Comaroff and J.L. Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution: Christianity, Colonialism and Consciousness in South Africa* 1 (Chicago, University of Chicago Press 1991), p. 179.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. p. 182.

<sup>5</sup> J. Comaroff, *Body of Power, Spirit of Resistance: The Culture and History of a South African People* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press 1985); Comaroff and Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution: Christianity, Colonialism and Consciousness in South Africa*; J.L. Comaroff and J. Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution: The Dialectics of Modernity on a South African Frontier 2* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press 1997); P.S. Landau, *The Realm of the Word: Language, Gender, and Christianity in a Southern African Kingdom* (Portsmouth, Heinemann 1995).

<sup>6</sup> This research was made possible through the financial support of the National Research Foundation, the University of Natal Research Fund, and the Council for World Mission. I acknowledge too the contributions of participants in the African Studies Group, University of Chicago, students of the Chicago Theological Seminary, students of the School of Theology, University of Natal for their contributions to this article through our discussions. In particular I acknowledge the assistance of John Wright and Philippe Denis who have sharpened my historical sensibilities.

<sup>7</sup> Comaroff and Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution: Christianity, Colonialism and Consciousness in South Africa* p. 182.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. pp. 183-184.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. p. 201.

of the gun, possessing a gun signalled some contact or alliance with missionary-colonial forces, which association was in itself a powerful protection against attack from neighbouring groups, including other indigenous peoples and white (mainly boer) settlers.<sup>10</sup>

Mirrors, watches, and telescopes are more problematic with respect to determining their power. Missionaries clearly believed that these goods demonstrated the superiority of their culture and civilisation, and so they were either constantly exhibiting or consistently hiding them. While the explorer William Burchell was at pains to hide his telescope, sextant and thermometer, least the Tlhaping desire them, the missionary John Campbell regularly flashed mirrors and watches in the faces of the Tlhaping leadership. While Burchell was worried that the power of these instruments would not be properly understood by the Tlhaping, Campbell hoped fervently that their power would transform the Tlhaping.<sup>11</sup> Common to all of these items was glass, a commodity “taken to be the window into a new way of seeing and being;”<sup>12</sup> in the Enlightenment self-conceptions of the missionaries “seeing is believing.”<sup>13</sup> Telescopes and pocket compasses were indispensable instruments with which to survey, civilise, and incorporate the uncharted and chaotic African landscape and peoples, and mirrors both literally and metaphorically showed the heathen “their own likeness in all its imperfection.”<sup>14</sup> But quite what the Tlhaping made of these items is less clear from the missionary record. Most missionaries and travellers assumed, like former generations of slave traders, that the “child-like” Africans were drawn to shiny objects. Some, however, were more insightful, recognising that not only was utility highly valued in itself – the Tlhaping were particularly interested in candles and metal-working tools – but that utility was also more connected with beauty for Africans than it was for Europeans.<sup>15</sup> What is certain is that “none of these objects was introduced into a void, and while they brought novel values into the Tswana world, they also acquired meanings different from those intended by their donors.”<sup>16</sup>

But what of the Bible? What power was it perceived to wield, and what meanings did it acquire that were different from those intended by those who brought it among the Tlhaping? We catch glimpses, I will argue, of Tlhaping apprehensions of the Bible in the missionary record. I am of course aware that I am here relying on missionary documentation and therefore on missionary narrative constructions of such encounters, but socially engaged biblical scholars (and anthropologists)<sup>17</sup> have become adept at “reading against the grain,” particularly in contexts like South Africa where, Itumeleng Mosala reminds us, “the appropriation of works and events is always a contradictory process embodying in some form a ‘struggle.’”<sup>18</sup> But before I turn to Tlhaping transactions with the Bible it is necessary to briefly explain my dogged focus on the Bible.

---

<sup>10</sup> W.J. Burchell, *Travels in the Interior of Southern Africa* 2 (London (Reprint, Cape Town), Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, Brown, and Green (Reprint, C. Struik) 1824 (Reprint, 1967)), pp. 376-405.

<sup>11</sup> Comaroff and Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution: Christianity, Colonialism and Consciousness in South Africa* p. 185.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* p. 186.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 186, see also 170-197.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.* p. 184.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> See *Ibid.* pp. xi, 171, 189.

<sup>18</sup> I.J. Mosala, *Biblical Hermeneutics and Black Theology in South Africa* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans 1989), p. 32.

## Separating the Bible and Missionary Christianity

Though not a common move, separating the reception of the Bible from the reception of missionary and colonial Christianity seems to be a reasonable move to make, and at least one other besides me has made it, the African-American biblical scholar Vincent Wimbush. In a series of articles Wimbush argues quite convincingly that the reception of the Bible among African slaves in America can and should be treated separately from the reception of Christianity.<sup>19</sup> I have discussed Wimbush's work at some length elsewhere,<sup>20</sup> here I allude to his work in order to observe that it is somewhat ironic that it is biblical scholars who insist on this kind of separation – the separation of the reception of the Bible from the reception of Christianity. As I observed above, other kinds of scholarly commentators on the colonial encounter tend not to distinguish between the Bible's place in indigenous people's transactions with the missionary-colonial enterprise and the place of Christianity.<sup>21</sup> The Bible is subsumed and assumed by Christianity.

My argument here is similar, but with a twist of perspective, to that put forward by Paul Landau, when he argues that historians of religion have too readily subsumed indigenous practices into religious categories that make sense to European researchers generally and missionary Christianity in particular.<sup>22</sup> Scholars of the colonial and post-colonial, often having thoroughly mastered the master's categories and concepts, cannot perhaps be expected to make distinctions that are not made in the master narrative. For as James Barr reminds us, the Bible is analytically, in the strict philosophical sense, bound up with being Christian.<sup>23</sup> But why should the Tlhaping perceive the order of things as Barr does?<sup>24</sup> My argument is that they did not (and do not).<sup>25</sup> In the remainder of my article I provide a close reading of the journals of the explorer William Burchell and of the missionary John Campbell, in search of the Bible's presence, place, and appropriations during their visits among the Tlhaping people of southern Africa.

## A preamble to the Bible presence

However, before we come to Burchell and Campbell, it is important to consider, briefly, the presence of two missionaries who made their homes in the vicinity of the Tlhaping from 1801-1806, Jan Matthys Kok and William Edwards. With tenuous links to the Suid-Afrikaanse Sendinggenootskap (SASG), who looked after the interests of the London Missionary Society in

---

<sup>19</sup> V.L. Wimbush, Book 'The Bible and African Americans: An Outline of an Interpretative History' in C.H. Felder (ed). *Stony the Road We Trod: African American Biblical Interpretation* (Minneapolis, 1991), pp. 81-97; V.L. Wimbush, 'Reading Texts through Worlds, Worlds through Texts', *Semeia*, 62, pp. 129-140,

<sup>20</sup> G.O. West, *The Academy of the Poor: Towards a Dialogical Reading of the Bible* (Sheffield, Sheffield Academic Press 1999), pp. 82-86.

<sup>21</sup> I am, however, dependent on these same studies for the otherwise thick social history they provide of this encounter. My purpose is not to duplicate their work, but to add to it by probing a particular real, but subsumed, presence.

<sup>22</sup> P. Landau, "Religion" and Christian Conversion in African History: A New Model', *Journal of Religious History*, 23, pp. 8-30; I am also engaged in examining what Landau elsewhere calls the "interpretive situation" of southern Africans. How southern Africans read the Bible is "surely an interesting project," and one that is central to my work over the past ten years, see Landau, *The Realm of the Word: Language, Gender, and Christianity in a Southern African Kingdom* pp. xxi, note 13.

<sup>23</sup> J. Barr, *The Scope and Authority of the Bible* (London, SCM 1980), p. 52.

<sup>24</sup> There is a deliberate allusion here to M. Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York, Random House 1973).

<sup>25</sup> The present place of the Bible among the Tlhaping cannot be discussed here, but there are signs that my bracket is not misplaced.

South Africa, both Kok and Edwards attempted to do mission work among the Tlhaping.<sup>26</sup> The record is replete with evidence of their failure to make much headway in getting the Tlhaping, under the leadership of Molehabangwe, to receive their proclamation of Christianity, though this does not mean that they did not have an impact on the Tlhaping. The obstacles they faced and the impact they may have had are well documented by Johannes du Bruyn, as are the brief sojourns of three other missionaries who worked with Kok and Edwards, Aart Anthonie van der Lingen, Willem Koster and Lambert Jansz. But as I have already made abundantly clear, my particular interest is in the presence of the Bible, and in this respect du Bruyn's work is less illuminating. While the archives may yet yield further light on the presence of this reluctant object in the encounter between these missionaries and the Tlhaping, du Bruyn's careful work does offer one intriguing exchange in which the Bible figures prominently.

In November 1802 Kok, together with three Tlhaping men appeared before the directors of the SASG to report on his progress among the Tlhaping. He claimed that after a discussion on matters to do with Christianity that Molehabangwe had declared his readiness to come and live with Kok.<sup>27</sup> Impressed by Kok's report, the directors sent a letter with Kok to Molehabangwe – and a Bible. In a rather pompous manner the directors assured Molehabangwe that Kok's presence among them

alleen diend tot bevordering van uw hoogst geluk: namenlijk om u Jesus, den eenige waare God, die wij aanbidden te verkondigen ... Wij zenden U een boek, die wij tot een geschenk aanbieden. Dat boek is het woord van Jesus, daar uit zult gij Hem leeren kennen, als den Almachtige en Alomtegenwoordige God, wiens Troon is den Hemel, de Aarde is de voetbank zijner voeten; maar die ook tevens is den liefdevolle Vader Weldoener, Vriend en Verlosser de Menschen. Ja ook van U en uw Volk.<sup>28</sup>

There is no record of how Molehabangwe responded to this letter and the gift of a Bible. However, we can speculate, as does du Bruyn, that Molehabangwe would probably have been more interested in the reports of the three Tlhaping concerning the Cape colony and the whites who controlled it.<sup>29</sup> Indeed, du Bruyn provides a compelling narrative of Molehabangwe's consuming interest in potential lines of trade and alliance with the Colony, and his almost total disinterest in Christianity. What he would have made of the Bible as a separable object is unclear. The items Colony, missionary, letter, and Bible could have been variously collocated, and we will probably have to wait for further visits before we can begin to discern the contours of local Tlhaping collocations. What is clear is that this earliest series of encounters between missionaries and the Tlhaping was characterised by trade. All commentators are in agreement that Kok and Edwards were first and foremost traders. In mitigation of their missionary

---

<sup>26</sup> I draw here and in what follows on the excellent work of Johannes T. du Bruyn, J.T. du Bruyn, 'Die Tlhaping En Die Eerste Sendelinge, 1801-1806', *South African Historical Journal*, 14, pp. 8-34, ; J.T. du Bruyn, *Die Aanvangsjare Van Dir Christelike Sending Onder Die Tlhaping, 1800-1825* (Pretoria, Die Staatsdrukker 1989). For more cursory accounts see J. Du Plessis, *A History of Christian Mission in South Africa* (London, Longmans, Green and Co. 1911), p. 110., and R.B. Beck, Book 'Monarchs and Missionaries among the Tswana and Sotho' in R. Elphick and R. Davenport (ed). *Christianity in South Africa: A Political, Social, and Cultural History* (Berkeley, University of California Press 1997), pp. 107-120.

<sup>27</sup> du Bruyn, 'Die Tlhaping En Die Eerste Sendelinge, 1801-1806', p 20.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid. p 21.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

aspirations it must be said that this was probably so because this was all they were allowed to be by the Tlhaping.

Missionaries were an important part of the great chain of trade which linked them to the Colony, its goods, and the world beyond. Campbell was to lament – in an aside within a letter commenting on Molehabangwe’s son’s assurance to him “that whenever the missionaries have got enough they shall be at liberty to depart” that Mothibi is here “still supposing trade a part of their [the missionaries’] object.” “[H]e cannot indeed,” continues Campbell, “yet think otherwise from the example of Kok and Edwards at the Krooman River ....”<sup>30</sup> However, from the perspective of the Tlhaping, Kok and Edwards may indeed have laid a faithful foundation of Christian mission, though not the version in the public transcript of missionary newsletters and memoirs!

We come, then, to William Burchell’s visit, some six years later, with little understanding of how the Bible may have been perceived among the Tlhaping. With Burchell’s visit the link between the Bible and the letter will become clearer, as will the link between the Bible and the gun, and the Bible and power. Was the Bible simply one more object of trade, or was it an object of stranger power? Burchell’s stay, to which we now turn, will certainly have something to say in contributing to and in clarifying emerging constellations of meaning.

### **Hidden text: Burchell’s visit**

Someone who had no formal commitment to Christian mission, but who did bring a Bible among the Tlhaping, is the explorer William Burchell. Intrepid explorer that he was, his wagons rolled into Dithakong on 13<sup>th</sup> July 1812. John Campbell, it is worth noting, for we will come to his narrative in due course, was slowly making his way around the mission stations in the Colony during this time, and would only arrive in Dithakong a year later. In some sense, then, Burchell prepared the way for Campbell; and, I will argue, the manner in which his Bible was presented and perceived may provide useful clues to the reception of Campbell’s Bible in his later, more sustained stay.

Burchell’s ostensible purpose for being there, as he communicates it to Chief Mothibi, Molehabangwe’s son,<sup>31</sup> is quite different from the missionaries. The object of his visit, he says,

was to form an acquaintance with him [Mothibi] and his people, whom I had heard so favorably spoken of at *KárrOkamm*/(Klaarwater): that so much had been said in praise of Litakun [Dithakong], that I had been very desirous of seeing his town; that I wished at the same time to hunt the wild animals, that I might be enabled to take home the skins of them to my own country; that I intended to stop with the Bach|p|ns long enough to learn their language, so that I might be able to tell them myself many things which I wished them to know, and that we might by these means understand each other’s sentiments more clearly than they could be explained through an interpreter: and that I hoped we should thus become true friends, that I might at my return home, report of the Bachapins

---

<sup>30</sup> J. Campbell, Klaarwater, 26 July 1813 [CWM. Africa. South Africa. Incoming correspondence. Box 5-2-D]. Here and in the following CWM is the Council for World Mission, whose papers are housed at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London.

<sup>31</sup> Molehabangwe died in March 1812.

[sic] that they were a good people, and that on hearing this, other white-men would visit him and bring abundance of beads and tobacco.<sup>32</sup>

Burchell then asked Mothibi “whether he thought that what I had said, was good; and whether he approved of my remaining a long time at Litakun.”<sup>33</sup> Avoiding commenting on the substance of Burchell’s speech, Mothibi indicates through the interpreter that “I was at liberty to stay as long as it pleased me, or to depart whenever I chose.”<sup>34</sup>

As it turns out, Burchell stayed not quite a month, leaving Dithakong on the 3<sup>rd</sup> August 1812, hardly enough time to learn the local language and converse in an unmediated manner. But Burchell did cram an awful lot into his three weeks, and his journal is extensive and full of all sorts of observations. My interest, however, is less in his observations, instructive as they are in what they tell of the European gaze and more in trying to interpret what meanings Burchell and his goods of strange power, particularly the Bible, may have acquired in the eyes of the Tlhaping.

Burchell notes, repeatedly, that the Tlhaping are observing him. Following the “interview” with Mothibi recounted briefly above, Burchell goes on to record that “The surrounding multitude were in the highest degree attentive to all we said; the eyes of every individual were fixed upon me, and examined me with utmost curiosity.”<sup>35</sup> Later, having been gazed at at length by a “curious good-humoured crowd,” he recognises that Mothibi and others from the Tlhaping leadership come to his wagon with “no other object than that of mere curiosity.”<sup>36</sup>

It is during this visit to his wagon that the first significant encounter with writing and text takes place. Burchell’s Bible is not as prominent as Campbell’s, but in his visit we already see something of an association being formed between writing, text, book and Bible. Burchell takes out his vocabulary list and reads various sentences to them in their own language, sentences which he has gathered from his guide and interpreter “Muchunka.”<sup>37</sup> Though both amused and pleased by his efforts, Burchell is surprised by how little surprise they show at this use of text, but puts this down to the fact that they “could scarcely be quite ignorant of the nature and use of books and writing, as several white-persons, had at different times, visited their country.”<sup>38</sup> Importantly, perhaps, there appears to be more Tlhaping interest in text during Campbell’s visit, an indication, perhaps, that Burchell’s use of text generated Tlhaping interest.

However, what really interested Mothibi and his advisers at this point was not the text but the gun. This becomes clear later the same day, when Burchell recognises that much of what has transpired in his conversations with Mothibi has been a prelude, “an introduction to another more

---

<sup>32</sup> Burchell, *Travels in the Interior of Southern Africa* p. 365 (unless specified, the references are to Volume 2). These shifts of point of view within a sentence are deliberate, a reminder of the multiple levels of representation present.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid. p. 366.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid. p. 369.

<sup>37</sup> The role of indigenous agents, like “Muchunka,” were clearly central to indigenous understandings of travellers like Burchell and missionaries like Campbell. He could talk directly to the Tlhaping, and they would have used him as a constant guide to what they were encountering.

<sup>38</sup> Burchell, *Travels in the Interior of Southern Africa* pp. 369-370.

*important subject* which it seems, had occupied their thoughts long before my arrival, and had been a matter of national consultation” – namely, the procurement of guns.<sup>39</sup> In fact, the whole of Burchell’s visit is dominated by Mothibi’s determination to get a gun from Burchell, and despite being bested, Burchell tells this story with a real feel for the intricacies and urgency of the acquisition. Finally, Mothibi succeeds, outmanoeuvring Burchell and obtaining a gun.<sup>40</sup>

But the Bible, not the gun, is my concern, notwithstanding that the gun and the Bible are closely associated, even collocated, in indigenous apprehensions of missionaries. And while Burchell is watched and studied for how a gun may be prised from his grasp, other things, including the Bible, will have been noticed and become cause for reflection. It was not only Burchell who “beheld every where, a harvest of new ideas;” and moreover, while Burchell lamented that he “was working alone in so extensive a field [of new ideas], ... where so many eyes were wanted to observe, and so many hands to record,”<sup>41</sup> the Tlhaping did not have this limitation. They had plenty enough eyes and hands.

The next day, only his second in Dithakong, Burchell again takes up text, this time in the form of writing rather than reading. The situation in which he does so is worth recording in some detail, signifying as it does potentially important aspects of text. Seated in the front part of his wagon, Burchell has a constant stream of visitors who sit beside him, “indulging their *inquisitiveness* in examining with their eyes every thing within my sitting-place.” Burchell is tolerant of this, recognising that his two wagons are “loaded with goods of the most extraordinary kind.”<sup>42</sup> But ever the giver as well as the gatherer of information, as are most European travellers, Burchell decides to “amuse them” by taking out his journal “to record a few facts and occurrences as they passed.” “Whenever I wrote, the spectators watched the motion of my hand with great attentiveness, and several of them evidently comprehended the nature and intention of what I was doing.”<sup>43</sup> Writing, it would seem, was not wholly unknown to the Tlhaping.

Writing, it would also seem, connotated concealment, for what really held the attention of the attendant Tlhaping was literally what lay behind the writing. They were intrigued, Burchell tells us about “what was concealed behind the canvas partition which parted off the sleeping-place from that end of the waggon at which we were sitting.” And “although it was explained to them that it was the place where I slept, and that there was nothing in it but my bedding, they would hardly believe me till some of them had taken a peep behind the curtain.”<sup>44</sup> The Tlhaping probing was obviously well founded, for, as Burchell goes on to admit, he did keep certain things hidden. There are even indications, as we will see, that writing prompted the Tlhaping to probe behind the curtain.

That writing and secrecy may have been associated in the perceptions of the Tlhaping is suggested by Burchell’s narrative at this point, for he states (condescendingly) that “When they had seen enough of writing to give them as clear a notion of it as they were capable of, several,

---

<sup>39</sup> Ibid. p. 376.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid. pp. 376-405.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid. p. 379.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid. p. 390.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid. p. 391.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

and more particularly Mollemmi, became very desirous of knowing what was concealed behind the canvas partition which parted off the sleeping-place from that end of the waggon at which we were sitting.”<sup>45</sup> Realising that his concealed space behind the canvas curtain “would be examined,” he “had taken care at night to put into the chests upon which my bedding lay, every thing which they were likely to covet, or which might excite particular attention.” On this occasion “Little therefore was visible but such objects as were familiar, or well-known, to them; unless it was some few articles of which I could not avoid making open use.” Unable to resist addressing his implied readers explicitly, Burchell goes on immediately to comment:

Similar *precautions* are of the highest importance to a European traveller in these countries; but they require at the same time, to be so managed as not to excite any suspicion of concealment; as such suspicion might in some cases be more dangerous than an open exposure of every thing; because, when once raised, it generally leads the natives to imagine more riches to be concealed, than there are in reality.<sup>46</sup>

So what objects did Burchell conceal in his chests behind the canvas partition in his wagon? Watches, optical, mathematical, and astronomical instruments, like telescope, sextant and thermometer seem to have been the objects Burchell was concerned to conceal,<sup>47</sup> because, he says on a number of occasions in his narrative, “the glittering appearance of which might excite in savages the desire of possessing them.”<sup>48</sup> In an entry recorded the day after he allows the Tlhaping to inspect his partitioned place, Burchell reveals something else that was hidden here, not so much an object as an activity: journal writing.

It was only by *a stratagem* that time could be found for writing my *journal*; – I ordered my people to keep all strangers away from my waggon, by telling them that I had been much fatigued, and that, until I made my appearance in public and the waggon was thrown open, they were always to suppose that I was then asleep and must not be disturbed. In the mean time, I was busily employed in writing in my sleeping-place, the only part where I could keep myself undiscovered.<sup>49</sup>

But, as Burchell himself acknowledges, “Mattivi and several of the chieftains were cunning enough to suspect that it might be only a trick to keep myself alone; and they therefore, as they walked by the end of the waggon, peeped in to ascertain the truth.”<sup>50</sup> The truth was, of course, that Burchell was in there writing, but, he maintains, “when they saw that I was not in my sitting-room, they concluded that I was still really asleep, especially as I took the utmost care not to make the least noise, nor by any movement, to cause the waggon to shake.”<sup>51</sup> Were Mothibi and his men so easily fooled? I think not. The constant surveillance of the Tlhaping missed very little. Only the day before, Burchell had recorded in his journal how difficult it was to conceal objects and actions from the Tlhaping. Reflecting on an incident in which some of his men

---

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid. pp. 496, 498-499, 509.

<sup>48</sup> Burchell, *Travels in the Interior of Southern Africa* (Volume 1) p. 577; Burchell, *Travels in the Interior of Southern Africa* pp. 498-499.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid. p. 401.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid. pp. 401-402.

deserted him and his oxen and sheep out of their fear of the Tlhaping, Burchell laments, “This affair [the desertion of his men], in spite of our wish to conceal it, was soon made known to the Chief and the whole town.”<sup>52</sup> The circumstances and the incessant scrutiny of the Tlhaping made concealment difficult.

Why would Burchell, from the perspective of the Tlhaping, openly read from his writings,<sup>53</sup> ostentatiously and publicly write in his journal,<sup>54</sup> but also hide in the back of his wagon in order to spend long hours writing? Were there perhaps different kinds of writing and different kinds of text? Were some forms of writing and text more powerful and therefore purposefully concealed and controlled? These and other related questions must have permeated Tlhaping thinking, and must have laid some sort of foundation for the missionaries who were to engage with them, and text, more protractedly.

But before we come to that, what of Burchell’s Bible, for he definitely had one? It is perhaps appropriate to note that the first foreshadowing we find of Burchell’s Bible comes in his journal entry a few days after Mothibi’s successful acquisition of one of his guns. While Burchell is rather peeved at “the success of their cunning” in obtaining a gun through “so flagrant an act of bad faith” in using the pretext of wanting to fire one of his guns as a means of taking hold (literally) of a gun, he is realistic, recognising that not only is he “completely in their power and that my gun was irrecoverably gone,” but that the desire for the gun came from the wider context in which he and they found themselves.<sup>55</sup> The gun was an important part of an emerging collocation of goods of power. The journal entry three days later, the 17<sup>th</sup> of July, provides an example of another emerging collocation, a collocation that may have included the Bible.

Being a Sunday, Burchell sets out quite deliberately to establish “a connection of ideas.”

This being *Sunday*, my flag was hoisted upon a tall bamboo-cane and fixed at the hinder part of my waggon, conformably to a regulation which we followed while beyond the boundary of the Cape colony. This practice was of considerable utility, in dividing our time, and in assisting the Hottentots in keeping an account of the days of the week. By having this object before their eyes for twelve hours, a connection of ideas was established between the flag and every occurrence which took place on that day, as well as between that and the station at which it was hoisted. We were thus enabled more easily to recollect the place at which, or the day when, it was Sunday, and consequently to keep check upon mistakes in our reckoning.<sup>56</sup>

These signs, as Burchell so clearly articulates, were not only meant to guide wandering Englishmen in a strange land, but to establish new signposts for reconstructing African ways. Among the ideas Burchell intended to connect with the flag was Sunday as a day of rest.<sup>57</sup> What he did not anticipate, though he was pleased to have his day of rest interrupted for this purpose,<sup>58</sup>

---

<sup>52</sup> Ibid. p. 385.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid. p. 369.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid. p. 391.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid. p. 405.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid. p. 425.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid. p. 426.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

was that a delegation of the Tlhaping came to his wagon and wanted to know about prayer. “Muchunka” had explained to his fellow Tlhaping that “it was the custom at Klaarwater to do nothing on that day, excepting to say prayers.” They now “wished to know what prayers were.”<sup>59</sup>

Why they should ask this question is not clear. Perhaps this is one of the activities the Tlhaping imagined taking place in secret in Burchell’s hiding place – the “hinder” hidden and partitioned portion of his wagon – marked on Sundays with the English flag! Again, Burchell’s sense of how these signs collocated and Tlhaping perceptions of these same signs were not necessarily the same. Ever eager to instruct – to give “some new and better ideas” – Burchell told them “of our notions respecting the Deity; of the absolute necessity of a virtuous life; and of the preservation of good-faith between man and man, and between nation and nation.”<sup>60</sup> Of course, Burchell is as interested in gratifying his own curiosity as to their “knowledge and conceptions of the Divinity” as he is in imparting “some new and better ideas.”<sup>61</sup> He is also intensely interested in how the Tlhaping respond to “this mode of argument and explanation,”<sup>62</sup> and his finding (for he was conducting research) was that

had the object of my visit to Litákun been such as it may be supposed that of a *missionary* would be, I think I should have found it not impossible to have gained over their minds an ascendancy, which, with a little management, might have been rendered useful in disposing them for the reception and adoption of the purer principles of religion.<sup>63</sup>

Continuing, and here we get a glimpse of Burchell’s view of missionaries, he goes on to say: “It is by making the untutored savage see and feel the advantage of a virtuous life, that he can be taught to submit to its rules. Where this is not done, the missionary will labour all his life, to no purpose but to cheat himself.”<sup>64</sup>

Interestingly, the conversation then does shift to the flag, providing yet more opportunity for Burchell to elaborate on his understanding of how ideas of flag, rationality, language and nation might be connected.<sup>65</sup> But note, prayer has now been added to the ideas circulating, and not by Burchell. So, I want to suggest, unexpected collocations may have been emerging. Secret writings, hidden places, texts, flags, and prayers may have begun to form associations among the Tlhaping not anticipated or even imagined by Burchell.

Later on the same day, Mothibi too comes to Burchell, drawn by Burchell’s flag, it would seem, but making inquiries about Burchell’s writing “some Sichuana words.” Mothibi asks “if I did it that I might learn them when I returned to my own country,” but is told by Burchell that “it was done that others might learn them also and come to Litákun”.<sup>66</sup> With this remark, Burchell

---

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid. pp. 427-428.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid. p. 427.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid. p. 428.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid. pp. 428-429. Burchell is of the opinion that the Tlhaping are atheists Burchell, *Travels in the Interior of Southern Africa* p. 444.

<sup>64</sup> Burchell, *Travels in the Interior of Southern Africa* p. 429.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid. pp. 429-430.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid. pp. 430-431.

linked himself, and all his signs, to those who would follow him. Among these signs may have been Burchell's Bible, to which we are coming closer.

Some days after these discussions about prayer, days in which Burchell introduced yet another use for text – a place in which portraits of the Tlhaping, and their environs, could be represented<sup>67</sup> – the Bible is overtly used by Burchell. The occasion for the Bible's appearance and its use are of enormous importance, establishing as they do clues to the white-man's connection of ideas about the Bible. Van Roye, one of Burchell's hired "Hottentots," had consistently shown disrespect and open defiance to Burchell, refusing to obey legitimate orders.

It became therefore unavoidable, to take serious notice of his conduct; and I immediately ordered all my men to be present at the waggons, and declared that it was now my intention to punish his disobedience; but that I would first hear, in the presence of all, what he had to say in his defence.<sup>68</sup>

Among those present, besides Burchell's immediate party, were "Matt♣vi and his chieftains, whose whole attention was fixed on us." Intently observing, Mothibi and the other Tlhaping leadership "were sitting at a little distance: not a word was spoken by any one; nor was the least sound to be heard in the mootsi. Neither the Chief, nor any of the natives, attempted to interfere with these transactions; nor did they make the smallest remark: all were serious and still."<sup>69</sup> Mixing his own and local indigenous signs, and thereby forging novel connections of ideas, Burchell conducts a formal trial of Van Roye at the waggons in Mothibi's "mootsi." Having laid out his pistols and sword on the chest in his wagon – more signs for the Tlhaping to conjure with<sup>70</sup> – "to impress more strongly on my people the serious nature of the affair"<sup>71</sup> he then "produced a Dutch Testament, and as Van Roye could read tolerably well, I bade him take notice what book it was."<sup>72</sup> "With some formality" Burchell uses the Bible in order to administer "the usual *oath* to relate the truth." However, the prevarications of Van Roye push him to expound on the oath-taking ritual just enacted:

Seeing this, I admonished him of the dreadful crime which he would commit by uttering a falsity at the moment when he called God to witness his veracity: I explained to him in the most solemn and impressive manner, the respect which he as a Christian ought to show to that book; and that it was better he should at once condemn himself by confessing his fault in the presence of his companions, than by prevarication and wilful misrepresentation, pronounce his own condemnation in the presence of God, to whom all our actions and thoughts were known.<sup>73</sup>

Sensing that these admonitions had "had their proper effect upon him" and that "a few words more would decide him to confess that he was blameable,"<sup>74</sup> Burchell reiterates his use of the

---

<sup>67</sup> Ibid. pp. 463, see also 481, 486.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid. p. 468.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> T.H. Smith, *Conjuring Culture: Biblical Formations of Black America* (Oxford and New York, Oxford University Press 1994).

<sup>71</sup> Burchell, *Travels in the Interior of Southern Africa* p. 468.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid. p. 470.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

Bible as symbol by asking Van Roye to once again “lay his hand on the book,” but this time only “after repeating to him the substance of several passages in the New Testament.”<sup>75</sup> These acts and exhortations had the desired effect, and Van Roye confessed that his conduct had not been “influenced by the spirit of obedience which that book taught and commanded a servant to show to a master.”<sup>76</sup>

His own men, Burchell writes in his journal, “had received a useful lesson”;<sup>77</sup> but what lesson had Mothibi and the Tlhaping learned? Unusually, Burchell is so consumed with establishing his authority among this own men that he neglects to comment on the impact of this incident on those sitting “at a little distance,” those “whose whole attention was fixed on” the proceedings. Those who sat silently watching would have seen remarkable things. They would have seen the Bible used both as a closed object of power and as an opened object with particular things to say. As a closed object the Bible could be used by someone who controlled it to compel others to speak the truth and do their bidding; as an opened object the Bible contained knowledge that was of use in a context of contestation. The Bible, it would seem, shared certain features with weapons like the sword and the pistol. Clearly these and a whole host of connections of ideas were set in motion by Burchell’s use of the Bible. The Bible was now one more idea/object with which the Tlhaping had to transact, and transact they would, for this was clearly a significant item/object of power. Furthermore, whatever the associations and collocations of these signs in the perceptions of the Tlhaping, and my analysis is suggestive rather than definitive,<sup>78</sup> they would have formed the foundation of their biblical interpretation for when next they encountered the Bible.

I wonder too where Burchell kept his Bible. Did he keep it in public view, or was it to be found among his telescope, sextant and thermometer, “the glittering appearance of which might excite in savages the desire of possessing them”?<sup>79</sup> Burchell never, according to his record, offers the Bible to the Tlhaping; this would be the task of those who came after him. And yet his visit lays a foundation of signs, and possible connections between these signs, to which the missionaries who came next would build. But, as we have observed, the Tlhaping would make their own connections and construct their own meanings. Clearly the Bible was an object of strange power; this had been demonstrated by Burchell. But was it of any potential use to the Tlhaping? With this question in mind we move on, waiting among the Tlhaping for the missionaries who were on their way.

### **Revealed Text: Campbell’s stay**

I turn now to follow the footsteps of John Campbell, traveller and missionary. After the death of Dr van der Kemp, “that valuable man who [pioneered and] superintended the African missions” on behalf of the London Missionary Society,<sup>80</sup>

---

<sup>75</sup> Ibid. p. 471.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> A more definitive analysis would require a fuller social history of the Bible’s presence among the Tlhaping, of which this article is only the first act.

<sup>79</sup> Burchell, *Travels in the Interior of Southern Africa* p. 577.

<sup>80</sup> Campbell, *Travels in South Africa: Undertaken at the Request of the Missionary Society* p. v.

the Directors thought it expedient to request one of their own body, the Rev. John Campbell, to visit the country, personally to inspect the different settlements, and to establish such regulations, in concurrence with Mr. Read and the other missionaries [already in Southern Africa], as might be most conducive to the attainment of the great end proposed – the conversion of the heathen, keeping in view at the same time the promotion of their civilization.<sup>81</sup>

John Campbell, a director of the London Missionary Society, had been commissioned and sent to the Cape in 1812 in order “to survey the progress and prospects of mission work in the interior”.<sup>82</sup> Campbell made his way from mission post to mission post in the Colony, and when he came to Klaarwater, which was then some distance north of the boundary of the Cape Colony—though the boundary was to follow him some years later (in 1825) almost as far as Klaarwater—he heard that Chief Mothibi of the Tlhaping people, a hundred miles further to the north, had (allegedly) expressed some interest in receiving missionaries.<sup>83</sup> With barely a pause in Klaarwater, spending no more than a week there, Campbell and his party set off for Dithakong (“Lattakoo”), then the capital of Chief Mothibi, on the 15<sup>th</sup> June 1813.

We pick up the missionary trail and tale as they arrive on the outskirts of Dithakong, Chief Mothibi’s ‘capital’ at that time, in the afternoon of 24<sup>th</sup> June 1813. Having crested a hill, “Lattakoo came all at once into view, lying in a valley between hills, stretching about three or four miles from E. to W.”<sup>84</sup> As they descended the hill towards “the African city,” they were “rather surprised that no person was to be seen in any direction, except two or three boys,” and the absence of an overt presence continued even as the wagons wound their way between the houses, save for a lone man who “made signs” for them to follow him. The stillness continued, “as if the town had been forsaken of its inhabitants,” persisting even when they “were conducted” into the Chief’s circular court (*kgotla*), “a square,<sup>85</sup> formed by bushes and branches of trees laid one above another.” This space was not forsaken, for there “several hundreds of people assembled together, and a number of tall men with spears, draw[n] up in military order on the north side of the square.” And then the silence was broken! “In a few minutes the square was filled with men, women, and children, who poured in from all quarters, to the number of a thousand or more. The noise from so many tongues, bawling with all their might, was rather confounding, after being so long accustomed to the stillness of the wilderness.”<sup>86</sup>

Clearly, all was not as it had seemed to the missionaries! Signed upon and conducted into a dense symbolic space not of their choosing or understanding,<sup>87</sup> Campbell and company become the objects of Tswana scrutiny. With a feeling of being “completely in their power,” Campbell confesses in a letter written some days later, “They narrowly inspected us, made remarks upon

---

<sup>81</sup> Ibid. p. vi.

<sup>82</sup> Comaroff and Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution: Christianity, Colonialism and Consciousness in South Africa* p. 178.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> Campbell, *Travels in South Africa: Undertaken at the Request of the Missionary Society* p. 180.

<sup>85</sup> The “square” would have been round; that it is described as “a square” demonstrates both some recognition of the political space into which they had been brought and the desire to re-vision what they found. Comaroff and Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution: Christianity, Colonialism and Consciousness in South Africa* pp. 182-183; Comaroff and Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution: The Dialectics of Modernity on a South African Frontier* pp. 287-293.

<sup>86</sup> Campbell, *Travels in South Africa: Undertaken at the Request of the Missionary Society* p. 180.

<sup>87</sup> Comaroff, *Body of Power, Spirit of Resistance: The Culture and History of a South African People* pp. 54-60; Landau, *The Realm of the Word: Language, Gender, and Christianity in a Southern African Kingdom* pp. xvii, 20-25.

us, and without ceremony touched us ....”<sup>88</sup> The Tlhaping “see,” “feasting their eyes,” they “examine,” and they “touch.”<sup>89</sup> Having been momentarily “separated,” and having “lost sight of each in the crowd,” the missionaries soon gathered themselves, though they “could hardly find out each other,” and devised “a scheme, which after a while answered our purpose; we drew up the waggons in the form of a square, and placed our tent in the centre.”<sup>90</sup> Being led into a round “square” not of their own making, they construct a square – one of the first of many laagers – which they (partially) control.<sup>91</sup> From this site of some control they plot and execute “the real object” of their visit, which they explain in the following terms to the nine local leaders, representing Chief Mothibi in his absence from the city, who gather in their tent “a little after sun-set” on that day.<sup>92</sup>

Through three interpreters, viz. in the Dutch, Coranna, and Bootchuana languages, I informed them that I had come from a remote country, beyond the sun, where the true God, who made all things, was known – that the people of that country had long ago sent some of their brethren to Klaar Water, and other parts of Africa, to tell them many things which they did not know, in order to do them good, and make them better and happier – that having heard since I came into these parts, to see how our friends were going on, that the Matchappees were a people friendly to strangers, I had come to Lattakoo to inquire if they were willing to receive teachers – that if they were willing, then teachers should be sent to live among them.<sup>93</sup>

The leadership reply that they may not give an answer until Mothibi returns, after which there is an informal, it would appear, exchange of gifts: tobacco and milk.<sup>94</sup> A more formal, already ritualised exchange would take place on Mothibi’s return, but this and the number of other significant observations, interactions, and transactions that are recorded over the next few days as Campbell (impatiently) waits for the arrival of Mothibi cannot concern us here, for the focus of this article is the Bible. But the Bible does make its (recorded) appearance in the evening of the 27<sup>th</sup>, when the uncle of the Chief, “Munaneeets,” comes to Campbell’s tent with an interpreter. In what followed there was “much interesting conversation,” during which the Bible is explicitly designated in discourse.

The Bible was almost certainly present on other occasions, but this presence we must infer, for it is not explicitly stated. Two days earlier, on the first morning after their arrival (the 25<sup>th</sup> June) Campbell and his party hold worship in their kitchen – a house in “the square, used by them for some public purpose” but assigned to the missionaries as their kitchen – which is attended by “some of the people.”<sup>95</sup> It is hard to imagine the Bible not being present and not being used as either an unopened sacred object or an opened text during this time of worship. Similarly, during worship in the afternoon of the 27<sup>th</sup>, at which “About forty of the men sat round us very quietly

---

<sup>88</sup> J. Campbell, Klaarwater, 26 July 1813 [CWM. Africa. South Africa. Incoming correspondence. Box 5-2-D].

<sup>89</sup> J. Campbell, Klaarwater, 26 July 1813 [CWM. Africa. South Africa. Incoming correspondence. Box 5-2-D].

<sup>90</sup> Campbell, *Travels in South Africa: Undertaken at the Request of the Missionary Society* p. 180.

<sup>91</sup> Campbell never quite copes with the way in which local people, mainly the leadership, just walk into “our tent” Ibid. pp. 181, 184.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid. p. 181.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid. p. 182.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid. p. 181.

during the whole time,”<sup>96</sup> the Bible too must have been present. But the first explicit reference to the Bible in this narrative, where it is separated out from the normal practice and patterns of the missionaries, is in this discussion with the Chief’s uncle.

In their constant quest for information and opportunities to provide information, scrutinising as they are scrutinised, the missionaries “enquired of him their reason for practising circumcision.”<sup>97</sup> It is not clear what prompts this question, but quite possibly what appear to be a series of ritual activities each day involving women, perhaps the initiation of young women,<sup>98</sup> may, by association, have generated a question to do with male initiation.<sup>99</sup> The Chief’s uncle replies that “it came to them from father to son.” Sensing, no doubt, an opportunity “to instruct,” the missionaries continue to probe, asking “Do you not know why your fathers did it?” To which the Chief’s uncle and his companions “shook their heads, saying, No.” Immediately the missionaries respond, Campbell reports, saying: “We told them that *our book* informed us how it began in the world, and gave them the names of Abraham, Ishmael, and Isaac, as the first persons who were circumcised.”<sup>100</sup> The illocutionary intent of this information is clearly to establish an earlier, and therefore superior, claim of origin. Origins were becoming increasingly important to the emerging modernity of missionary England, and so the Bible was seen as particularly potent, containing as it did ‘the Origin’ of all origins.<sup>101</sup>

However, what impressed the Chief’s uncle and his colleagues was not this claim to an all-encompassing origin, but the naming, maybe, of the missionaries’ ancestors, Abraham, Ishmael, and Isaac, which is why “This appeared to them very interesting information, and they all tried to repeat the names we had mentioned, over and over again, looking to us for correction, if they pronounced any of them wrong. Munaneets, and the others who joined the company, appeared anxious to have them fixed on their memories.”<sup>102</sup> Here then is another hint at how the Bible may have been apprehended by the Tlhaping: the book – the Bible – may have appeared, from the perspective of the Tlhaping, to contain the names of the missionaries’ ancestors, and hence would have been a book of great value. There may too have been considerable slippage and misunderstanding. The missionaries were intent on proclaiming the founding fathers of the Christian faith, but in naming these earliest ancestors of the circumcision ritual, a ritual central to the identity of the Tlhaping, they may have been understood by the Tlhaping to have been naming (forgotten) Tlhaping ancestors. Such an understanding would, indeed, have imbued the Bible with strange and wonderful power, given the profound place of ancestors in the life of the Tlhaping,<sup>103</sup> though the missionaries would have been uncomfortable with such an appropriation of either the Bible or their interpretation, understanding little of the significance of ancestors

---

<sup>96</sup> Ibid. p. 191.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid. pp. 185-186, 188, 191, 194-195; Comaroff, *Body of Power, Spirit of Resistance: The Culture and History of a South African People* pp. 114-118.

<sup>99</sup> Comaroff, *Body of Power, Spirit of Resistance: The Culture and History of a South African People* pp. 85-115.

<sup>100</sup> Campbell, *Travels in South Africa: Undertaken at the Request of the Missionary Society* pp. 191-192, my emphasis.

<sup>101</sup> The English were, of course, about to have their views on origins thoroughly shaken and stirred by an English explorer and naturalist, Charles Darwin. Darwin, *The Origin of Species: By Means of Natural Selection of the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life* (New York, Washington Square Press 1963).

<sup>102</sup> Campbell, *Travels in South Africa: Undertaken at the Request of the Missionary Society* p. 192.

<sup>103</sup> I. Schapera and J.L. Comaroff, *The Tswana* (London and New York, Kegan Paul International 1991), pp. 53-60.

among Africans.<sup>104</sup> The missionary attempt to subsume the Tlhaping's oral account of circumcision under their textual, biblical account may have marked the Bible, in the eyes of the Tlhaping, as a site worth watching, and perhaps even occupying; or it may have demonstrated the dangers of this strange object of power.

Impressed, but probably also a little perplexed by this intense interest in the names of Abraham, Ishmael, and Isaac, the missionaries carry on with their questioning form of instruction, asking next "if they knew any thing of the origin of mankind, or when they came." The people reply, "saying they came from some country beyond them, pointing to the N. which is the direction in which Judea lies."<sup>105</sup> That two men came out of the water; the one rich, having plenty of cattle, the other poor, having only dogs. One lived by oxen, the other by hunting. One of them fell, and the mark of his foot is on a rock to this day." With no apparent attempt to probe this African origin story in more detail, but with a clear indication of the inadequacy of this story (and the circumcision story), the missionaries immediately "endeavoured to explain to them how knowledge, conveyed by means of books, was more certain than that conveyed by memory from father to son."<sup>106</sup> The Chief's uncle, "Munaneets," is quick to realise the source of this "knowledge," knowing long before Michel Foucault theorised it, the articulations of power and knowledge on each other,<sup>107</sup> for he asks "if they should be taught to understand books." The use of the modal "should" perhaps conveys, as it often does in English, a sense of asking permission; Campbell's reconstruction and representation of this dialogue (via three other languages!) may accurately capture a concern on the part of the Chief's uncle as to whether, given the evident power of the book(s) – so openly exhibited by the missionaries but hidden by Burchell – they the Tlhaping would be granted access to the book(s). That the missionaries and the Chief's representatives have in mind 'that Book' in particular is clear from the missionaries' answer: "We answered they would; and when the person we should send (provided Mateebe consented), had learned their language, he would change the Bible from our language into theirs."<sup>108</sup>

However, one of the local leaders was clearly worried about this portent of outside instruction, including perhaps the presence of the Bible as a new (outside) site and source of

---

<sup>104</sup> Comaroff and Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution: Christianity, Colonialism and Consciousness in South Africa* pp. 152-156.

<sup>105</sup> This is a puzzling reference; could it mean biblical Judea, and if so, might the missionaries have here 'seen' confirmed the origin of all peoples, even these 'sons of Ham,' from this distant land in and of the Bible? That Campbell thought in such categories is evident from a letter to Mr David Langton dated 27<sup>th</sup> July 1813, in which Campbell apologises for not having written sooner, saying that he has "written much from this land of Ham." Campbell then goes on to present him with an account of his visit to Dithakong (J. Campbell, Klaar Water, 27 July 1813 [CWM. Africa. South Africa. Incoming correspondence. Box 5-2-D]).

<sup>106</sup> Campbell, *Travels in South Africa: Undertaken at the Request of the Missionary Society* p. 192.

<sup>107</sup> I use the terms power and knowledge in close conjunction here and the term power/knowledge a little later deliberately, realising the hardworking hyphen (in the French *pouvoir-savoir*) and slash (in the English) bear a heavy load of theory. Accepting Foucault's invitation "to see what we can make of" his fragments of analysis (79), my use is intended to allude to this theory, especially to the fragmentary nature of Foucault's theory (79), to the implicit contrast of "idle knowledge" (79) with local forms of knowledge and criticism, subjugated knowledges (81-82), and their emergence as sites of contestation and struggle over against "the tyranny of globalising discourses" (83) and their appropriation as genealogies which wage war on the effects of power of dominant discourses (84), whether scientific (Foucault's focus) or other forms of dominating discourse. In particular, my use picks up on Foucault's analysis of the articulation of each on the other, namely, that "the exercise of power itself creates and causes to emerge new objects of knowledge and accumulates new bodies of information," that the "exercise of power perpetually creates knowledge and, conversely, knowledge constantly induces effects of power," and that it "is not possible for power to be exercised without knowledge, it is impossible for knowledge not to engender power" (52) M. Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Writings and Other Interviews 1972-1977* (New York, Pantheon 1980).

<sup>108</sup> Campbell, *Travels in South Africa: Undertaken at the Request of the Missionary Society* p. 192.

power/knowledge, though quite how the Bible is apprehended by this protagonist is ambiguous. During this conversation, Campbell reports, “an old man who is averse to our sending teachers, asked how we made candles, pointing to that which was on our table. He also said,” Campbell continues, “he did not need instruction from any one, for the dice [*bola* ?] which hung from his neck informed him of every thing which happened at a distance; and added, if they were to attend to instructions, they would have no time to hunt or to do any thing.”<sup>109</sup> This fascinating transaction, re-presenting as it does a complex exchange, seems to suggest a profound grasp by this “old man” – possibly an *ngaka* (an indigenous doctor/diviner/healer), given that he is wearing a “dice,” one of the elements among the bones, shells, and other materials making up the *ditaola* used in divining,<sup>110</sup> – of the dangerousness of non-indigenous instruction/knowledge. The context of the discussion, and the centrality of the Bible in the discussion – if not also centrally positioned on the table in the meeting space<sup>111</sup> – makes it likely that he assumes that the missionaries book(s) are their equivalent of his “dice.” My conjecture finds some support from Robert Moffat’s later account of an incident in which he writes, “My books puzzled them.” “They asked if they were my ‘Bola,’ prognosticating dice.”<sup>112</sup>

Whether his aversion to “instruction” is an aversion to both the source (the Book) and the interpreter of the source (the missionaries) is not clear. We must not assume that this “old man” shares the assumption of the missionaries that the book and its instruction are one and the same thing. His concern that “if they were to attend to instructions, they would have no time to hunt or to do any thing,” may reflect the first signs of resistance to the time schedules and modes of production of established mission station, church and school routines to the south, whose “notions of time, work, and self-discipline were drawn from the natural lineaments of the industrial capitalist world,”<sup>113</sup> in which case the focus of his aversion is the instruction regime rather than the source of power/knowledge itself, the Book.

But I may be imagining a fissure where there is none, for this insightful “old man” may be making a simpler point; by pointing to the candles, and asking how missionaries made them, he may be demonstrating an important difference between knowledge that he and his people would find useful – how to make candles – and knowledge that is potentially damaging and dangerous – knowledge of what happens “at a distance,” circumcision, ancestors, and origins. The book, the source of the latter, but not, it would seem from his analysis, of the former, is as much a problem as the instruction.

Some days later (30<sup>th</sup> June), with the city still awaiting the arrival of Chief Mothibi, and with many significant interactions transacted each day, including the constant gathering and giving of

<sup>109</sup> Ibid. p. 193.

<sup>110</sup> I am grateful to Mogapi Motsomaesi and Mantso ‘Smadz’ Matsepe for elucidating and helping me to interpret elements of this encounter. For a more detailed discussion of the ‘bones’ used by Tswana diviners and of Tswana divination see Schapera and Comaroff, *The Tswana* pp. 57-58.

<sup>111</sup> Some days later during a visit from Mothibi’s senior wife, Mmahutu, the Bible is clearly positioned on the table in the missionaries’ tent (see below).

<sup>112</sup> R. Moffat, *Missionary Labours and Scenes in Southern Africa* (London (Reprint, New York), John Snow (Reprint, Johnson Reprint Corporation 1842 (Reprinted 1969)), p. 384; Comaroff and Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution: The Dialectics of Modernity on a South African Frontier* p. 345.

<sup>113</sup> Comaroff and Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution: Christianity, Colonialism and Consciousness in South Africa* p. 179; Comaroff and Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution: The Dialectics of Modernity on a South African Frontier*. The latter second volume might be described as a detailed study of such routines and regimes.

information, the Bible is again foregrounded. Campbell's major preoccupation during this time is seeking permission to "instruct the people." The local leadership consistently insists that he wait for Mothibi's return. When Campbell and his men indicate an interest in using the time until Mothibi's return "to visit a large village about a day and a half's journey higher up the country," they receive a visit, that evening (after a busy day full of formative transactions, including Campbell's showing "a person his own face in the looking glass," another missionary brought object saturated with symbolic significance)<sup>114</sup> from Mmahutu, "the queen," Mothibi's senior wife.<sup>115</sup> She entered their tent and said that she "was averse" to their "going any where till Mateebe came," and that at the very least they should leave part of their wagons and party behind. Using her reluctance to have them leave as a lever, the missionaries claim that they would never have thought of leaving Dithakong "even for a day before Mateebe's return" had they "been permitted to instruct the people; but that having nothing to do," they wished to visit that village and hunt. However, they are persuaded not to leave, and once this matter is settled, the missionaries "endeavoured to convey some information."<sup>116</sup>

What follows is a remarkable exchange, signifying as it does a range of possible appropriations of the Bible:

We explained to her the nature of a letter, by means of which a person could convey his thoughts to a friend at a distance. Mr. A. shewed her one he had received from his wife, by which he knew every thing that had happened at Klaar Water for two days after he left it. This information highly entertained her, especially when told that A. Kok, who brought it, knew nothing of what it contained, which we explained by telling her the use of sealing wax. The bible being on the table gave occasion to explain the nature and use of a book, particularly of that book – how it informed us of God, who made all things; and of the beginning of all things, which seemed to astonish her, and many a look was directed towards the bible.<sup>117</sup>

Returning to a theme already raised, the reliability of text over against oral transmission from father to son (see above), the missionaries draw Mmahutu's attention to the power of the letter as text in at least two respects. First, text can re-present "every thing" that happened in a place in a person's absence. Second, text can be made to hide its message from the bearer and reveal its contents only to the intended receiver. Turning from the letter, to a quite different genre of text (from the perspective of the missionaries), the Bible, but here conflated with the letter (from the perspective of the Tlhaping), the missionaries use the interest generated in their exposition of the letter to return to their preoccupation with the contents of the Bible, particularly the matter of origins.

Mmahutu is astonished, but what she is astonished at may not be what the missionaries imagine. Clearly, from her perspective text has power, with some appearing to have more power than others, hence "many a look" at the Bible. Text can reveal and text can hide; text can be

---

<sup>114</sup> Comaroff and Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution: Christianity, Colonialism and Consciousness in South Africa* pp. 170-197.

<sup>115</sup> Campbell, *Travels in South Africa: Undertaken at the Request of the Missionary Society* pp. 200, 207.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.* p. 199.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*

manipulated by the people who transact with it. Clearly too, text contains knowledge/power; its contents, for those who have the power to make it speak, has to do with matters of importance to a community. This becomes clearer in a letter written by Campbell to a friend, Mr David Langton, some days later (27<sup>th</sup> July) in which he elaborates on this episode. Immediately following the final sentence in the quotation above, the following is added: “Mr Reads eye caught a verse very suitable to our situation in the page that was lying open, viz. Math. 4-16.”<sup>118</sup> If this text was read, and the literary context suggests it would have been, Mmahutu would have heard this: “The people which sat in darkness saw great light; and to them which sat in the region and shadow of death light is sprung up”. This then makes some sense of Mmahutu’s questions, recorded in the next paragraph of the journal entry: “‘Will people who are dead, rise up again?’ ‘Is God under the earth, or where is he?’”<sup>119</sup> But only some sense, for her questions do not seem to deal directly with the passage read. The passage clearly makes sense to the missionaries, being made to bear the full weight of English missionary images of Africa.<sup>120</sup> However, such allusions are probably absent from Mmahutu’s hearing of this sentence from the Bible. Whatever she hears, and it may be the word “death,” prompts here to bring her own questions to the text/missionaries, disturbed as she and others have become by talk of people rising from the dead, worrying especially that their slain enemies might arise.<sup>121</sup>

Already we see emerging evidence from this very early encounter of a recognition that the Bible is power/knowledge, that as power/knowledge it can be manipulated by those that control it, that it is beginning to be prised from the hands of the missionaries by indigenous questions, and, most significantly, that the bearer, like the bearer of the letter, might not know the power/knowledge it contains. Perhaps the missionaries are not fully in control of this object of strange power – the Bible – they carry; perhaps others – the Tlhaping – could access its mysterious power. I pause here, allowing these possibilities to linger, providing as they do potential trajectories for understanding African biblical interpretation.

There is no pause in Campbell’s narrative, though. Having “answered her [Mmahutu’s] questions,” though we are given no hint of how her questions were answered, and having heard and accepted her concerns that they not leave the city until Mothibi’s return, the missionaries show her (and her companions) a watch, “which both astonished and terrified them.” Commenting on this reaction to the watch, Campbell says, “On observing the work in motion, they concluded that it must be alive, and on offering to put it to their ears, to hear it sound, they held up their hands to drive it away as if it had been a serpent.”<sup>122</sup> Their interpreter also comments on this encounter with the watch, in the vernacular, saying “something to them which made them laugh immoderately.” But what he actually said was probably hidden from the hearing of the missionaries and so from us, for when translated, the missionaries “found he had said, that before he went to Klaar water, he was as ignorant as they were, but there he had been taught many good things, which they also would be taught if Mateebe permitted missionaries to

<sup>118</sup> J. Campbell, Klaar Water, 27 July 1813 [CWM. Africa. South Africa. Incoming correspondence. Box 5-2-D].

<sup>119</sup> Campbell, *Travels in South Africa: Undertaken at the Request of the Missionary Society* p. 199.

<sup>120</sup> Comaroff and Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution: Christianity, Colonialism and Consciousness in South Africa* pp. 86-125.

<sup>121</sup> Moffat, *Missionary Labours and Scenes in Southern Africa* pp. 403-405; Comaroff and Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution: The Dialectics of Modernity on a South African Frontier* p. 342.

<sup>122</sup> Campbell, *Travels in South Africa: Undertaken at the Request of the Missionary Society* p. 200.

settle among them.”<sup>123</sup> How this could have caused Mmahutu and her companions to “laugh immoderately” is difficult to imagine! But the missionaries did not bother to probe any further, for they had heard what they wanted to hear.

The multiple layers of language and translation clearly offered fertile ground not only for accidental misunderstandings but calculated misunderstandings, as the theoretical work of the Comaroffs<sup>124</sup> and James Scott<sup>125</sup> on hegemony, ideology, and resistance amply demonstrate.<sup>126</sup> Language in these early encounters was an obvious site for “infrapolitical” exchanges, “a politics of disguise and anonymity that takes place in public view but is designed to have a double meaning or to shield the identity [and/or ideology] of the actors.”<sup>127</sup> Here we find, unlike the missionaries, “a tactical choice born of a prudent awareness of the balance of power,”<sup>128</sup> in which what was said was intended to communicate one thing to those in the know and another to outsiders.<sup>129</sup> Such misunderstandings are a very early “foundational”<sup>130</sup> form of infrapolitics, a form that was soon to be joined by a host of others as the contours of the colonisation became ever clearer. Misunderstanding and misconceptions, as elementary forms of infrapolitics, are aptly appropriated by the Comaroff’s as major metaphors of the “long conversation,” “a dialogue at once poetic and pragmatic,”<sup>131</sup> a dialogue, in the words of William Burchell, with “each party using his own language and comprehending very little of what was said by the other; and talking probably on subjects widely different.”<sup>132</sup>

Here, then, is “a discernible Tswana commentary ... spoken less in narrative form than in the symbolism of gesture, action, and reaction, and in the expressive play of language itself.”<sup>133</sup> Quite what this commentary (on commentary) says is difficult to determine, but perhaps the reaction to the watch (the first layer of commentary) is not unrelated to the reaction to the Bible, given their proximity in the missionaries tent (and narrative). Here, perhaps, are two “devices capable of working transformations,”<sup>134</sup> “indispensable tools” in navigating, charting, incorporating, and so transforming that which was other.<sup>135</sup> Juxtaposed in text and tent, the Bible and watch comment on each other, each occupying a particular place in the missionaries’ scheme of things, but just how they are commented on by Mmahutu and her translator must remain somewhat obscure, deliberately so for the missionaries, but also, perhaps, somewhat inchoate and incipient for the indigenous commentators themselves as they observed for all they were

---

<sup>123</sup> Ibid.

<sup>124</sup> Comaroff and Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution: Christianity, Colonialism and Consciousness in South Africa* pp. 13-39.

<sup>125</sup> J.C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven and London, Yale University Press 1990).

<sup>126</sup> West, *The Academy of the Poor: Towards a Dialogical Reading of the Bible* pp. 39-49.

<sup>127</sup> Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* p. 19.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid. p. 183.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid. p. 184.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid. p. 201.

<sup>131</sup> Comaroff and Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution: Christianity, Colonialism and Consciousness in South Africa* p. 171.

<sup>132</sup> Burchell, *Travels in the Interior of Southern Africa* pp. 2,433.

<sup>133</sup> Comaroff and Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution: Christianity, Colonialism and Consciousness in South Africa* p. 171.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid. p. 185.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid. p. 186. I add the Bible to the Comaroff’s inventory of devices such as looking glass, clocks, telescopes, and compasses Comaroff and Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution: Christianity, Colonialism and Consciousness in South Africa* pp. 185-186.

worth in an attempt perhaps to find a place for these “goods of strange power”<sup>136</sup> – including the Bible–in their rapidly changing world.

My analysis of Campbell’s narrative now jumps to the day of Mothibi’s return (5<sup>th</sup> July). “About sun-set, Mateebe, attended by his brother, and some of his chief men, approached our tent.”<sup>137</sup> “On entering, he sat down and remained in silence,” at which point Campbell “made him a present of some trinkets,” including a copper comb, a silver headband, and a chain, “furnished ... by the ladies of Kingsland,” and his own carefully chosen present, the lid of his shaving box which contained a looking glass.<sup>138</sup> From this parcel of gifts Campbell took “a gilded copper comb and put it in his hair, and tied a silver spangled band and tassel round his head, and a chain about his neck, and last of all presented him with a looking glass ....”<sup>139</sup> Undeflected, and perhaps unimpressed, by his image in the looking glass, Chief Mothibi ruptured the ritual public transcript just enough to unsettle the missionaries, by assuring them: ““You would have been perfectly safe, though ... I had received no presents.””<sup>140</sup>

With the preliminaries out of the way, from the perspective of the missionaries, important as the role of gifts were in constructing “a social relationship by acting as a vehicle for the self,”<sup>141</sup> Campbell then began to tell Chief Mothibi of his real purpose, namely, “to instruct the nations of Africa.”<sup>142</sup> More specifically, having heard in Klaarwater that Mothibi’s people “would be glad to have teachers as well as other nations,” he, Campbell, “had undertaken a journey to his country to ask permission to send them, and his protection for them when with him.” Mothibi’s initial response to this request was to object, saying that “his people had no time to attend to their instructions, because they had to attend to their cattle, to sowing, reaping, and many other things,” a refrain that resonates with that of the “old man” (see above). “[B]esides’,” and here again the “old man” encountered earlier foreshadows his Chief, Mothibi continues (and Campbell is here quoting him), ““the things which this people teach are contrary to all our customs, which the people will not give up.””<sup>143</sup> Knowing that the looking glass deflects as much as it reflects, Mothibi probes behind it and cuts to the heart of the matter; like the “old man” who saw the world behind the Bible, Mothibi sees the world behind the looking glass.

But Mothibi must know that he must negotiate with this world, but preferably at an arm’s length, for he immediately continues, according to Campbell’s narrative, to say that ““It would not do for them [missionary teachers] to live at Lattakoo [Dithakong], but should they be willing to live at a distance, I should have no objection to send some of the children to them to learn the Dutch

---

<sup>136</sup> Comaroff and Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution: Christianity, Colonialism and Consciousness in South Africa* p. 182.

<sup>137</sup> Campbell, *Travels in South Africa: Undertaken at the Request of the Missionary Society* p. 207.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid. ; Comaroff and Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution: Christianity, Colonialism and Consciousness in South Africa* p. 183.

<sup>139</sup> J. Campbell, Klaarwater, 26 July 1813 [CWM. Africa. South Africa. Incoming correspondence. Box 5-2-D].

<sup>140</sup> Campbell, *Travels in South Africa: Undertaken at the Request of the Missionary Society* p. 208.

<sup>141</sup> Comaroff and Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution: Christianity, Colonialism and Consciousness in South Africa* p. 183. Campbell, like Burchell before him, was contributing towards the construction of a mythology of gift-giving – a ritualised practice informed by colonial notions of the indigenous other Burchell, *Travels in the Interior of Southern Africa* pp. 398-399.. For a more detailed account of the practice of gift giving and its significance see Comaroff and Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution: Christianity, Colonialism and Consciousness in South Africa* pp. 183-188..

<sup>142</sup> Campbell, *Travels in South Africa: Undertaken at the Request of the Missionary Society* p. 208.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid.

language.”<sup>144</sup> What follows is worth quoting in full, juxtaposing as it does the Bible, the looking glass, text as power/knowledge, and writing.

I [writes Campbell] stated to him that the teachers we should send, would convey information of the true God who made the heavens, the earth and all creatures and things in them – of his love to the world – of the laws he has given respecting good and evil, and pointing to a bible which lay on the table, I assured him that that book contained every thing missionaries had to make known to him and his people, and that when missionaries should learn his language, they would change all its contents into his language. He seemed, by a significant shake of his head, to intimate that he considered what I said, an impossibility. To convince him that things could be written in his language, we read to him the names of his predecessors and all his family. For the first time he smiled, on hearing their names read over, and seemed full of astonishment and pleasure. We then assured him, that instruction would not interfere with industry; that the inhabitants of my country were industrious, as he might be convinced of, by our clothes, waggons, and so forth, which they made – that his people would not be compelled to receive instruction, for only those who were willing would be instructed, and they would not interfere with his government. After answering some other objections, the king said, “SEND INSTRUCTORS, AND I WILL BE A FATHER TO THEM.”<sup>145</sup>

That “that book” might gather, locate, and collocate other goods of power in ways the missionaries were unable to apprehend seems plausible from such an account. We will have to wait and see what indigenous South Africans did do with “that book,” but for now Mothibi’s smile is sufficient to point to the possibility of appropriations of the Bible beyond the comprehension and (mis)conception of the missionaries. So while it may appear that the missionaries have had their way, at least in part, and the capitalised final sentence signals their sense of victory, Mothibi’s final sentence itself is full of ambiguity, and the terms of the conversation as a whole are far from clear.

## Conclusion

This conversation, and the longer conversation within which it is a moment, always had two components: its overt content, what was talked about, and alongside these exchanges another kind of exchange, “an often quiet, occasionally strident struggle between the Europeans and Africans to gain mastery over the *terms* of the encounter.”<sup>146</sup> Jean and John Comaroff identify four crucial domains that constituted the struggle to dictate the terms of the conversation: “issues of production and time, ... [which] were to mark out the central arena of debate and struggle between colonizer and colonized;”<sup>147</sup> “the politics of space, in which both parties tried to appropriate the physical context in which their interactions (literally) ‘took place’; the battle to control dominant material and symbolic values ...; and the contest over the media through which the conversation itself was proceeding, over the very nature of language and representation.”<sup>148</sup>

---

<sup>144</sup> Ibid.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid. pp. 208-209. Campbell’s letter account of this encounter is more or less identical, see J. Campbell, Klaarwater, 26 July 1813 [CWM. Africa. South Africa. Incoming correspondence. Box 5-2-D].

<sup>146</sup> Comaroff and Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution: Christianity, Colonialism and Consciousness in South Africa* p. 199.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid. p. 179.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid. p. 199.

Each of these elements of the struggle are present in the conversation cited above, and each deserves further elaboration. In this article I have focussed on the third and fourth in their formative stages. From the perspective of the Tlhaping – and a more detailed analysis would want to distinguish between the different perspectives of different social sectors of the Tlhaping people, taking into account that the Bible may well have been apprehended differently by the Tlhaping leadership, Tlhaping traditional healers, Tlhaping women, etc. – the Bible is present in the encounter as a potentially distinct object of mysterious power, though this has seldom been acknowledged or analysed by scholars of the colonial and post-colonial encounter. Among the cumulative cacophony of signs the Tlhaping would have had to negotiate (with) is the Bible. The missionary narrative, limited as it is, clearly contains evidence of purposive acts of reconstruction, as the Tlhaping appropriate and reposition selected signs in their own orders of practice,<sup>149</sup> creating a foundational bricolage for their own emerging biblical interpretation.

---

<sup>149</sup> See Comaroff, *Body of Power, Spirit of Resistance: The Culture and History of a South African People* pp. 253-254; Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*