

## **An African Bible for African Readers: J. G. Shembe's Use of the Bible in the Sermon**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*It is true that Isaiah Shembe used the Bible as one of the important foundations for the creation of his Ibandla lamaNazaretha. While more work needs to be done on how Isaiah Shembe appropriated the Bible in forging his Church, there is a pressing need to research the way in which the Bible is used and interpreted in the Ibandla lamaNazaretha post Isaiah Shembe, by both members of the Church and the leaders: iLanga, iNyanga Yezulu and especially the present leader, UThingo. This paper is part of a broader project in which I try to explore the reception of the Bible in the Ibandla lamaNazaretha. Here I look at the use and appropriation of the Bible by Isaiah Shembe's son and successor, J. G. Shembe, popularly known to members as iLanga (Sun). I argue that while J. G. Shembe is at pains to appropriate the Bible for Africa, presenting it as an African inspired and created text, he is also forced to denounce it as foreign because of its interpretation by the educated elite. This interpretation (by the educated elites) negates African religion and the worship of ancestors which J. G. Shembe supports.*

### **A INTRODUCTION**

It has been stated in a number of studies on Isaiah Shembe and Ibandla lamaNazaretha that the Bible played an important role in the founding of this movement.<sup>1</sup> While more work needs to be done on how Isaiah Shembe appropriated the Bible in forging his Church, there is a pressing need to research the way in which the Bible is used and interpreted in the Church post Isaiah Shembe; by both members of the Church and the leaders: iLanga, iNyanga Yezulu and especially the present leader, UThingo. This is because the Bible still plays an important role in the life of Ibandla lamaNazaretha and the

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<sup>1</sup> See Duncan Brown, "Orality and Christianity: The Hymns of Isaiah Shembe and the Church of the Nazarites," *Current Writing* 7/2 (1995): 69-95; Elizabeth Gunner, *The Man of Heaven and the Beautiful Ones of God: Writing From the Nazareth Church* (Leiden: Brill, 2002; repr., Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2004); Carol A. Muller, *Rituals of Fertility and the Sacrifice of Desire: Nazarite Women's Performances in South Africa* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999); Gerald West, "Reading Shembe 'Remembering' the Bible: Isaiah Shembe's Instructions on Adultery," *Neot* 40/1 (2006): 157-184; Gerald West, "The Bible and the Female Body in Ibandla lamaNazaretha: Isaiah Shembe and Jephthah's daughter," *OTE* 20/2 (2007): 489-509.

reason may be related to Isaiah Shembe's (and the succeeding leaders of the Church) utilising the Bible in creating this movement. As West has stated,

an important task awaiting an African biblical hermeneutics is a comprehensive account of the transaction that constitute the history of the encounters between Africa and the Bible. While the accounts we have of the encounters between Africa and Christianity are well documented, the encounters between Africa and the Bible are partial and fragmentary.<sup>2</sup>

This paper attempts to explore the reception of the Bible in the Church of amaNazaretha. Here I look at the use and appropriation of the Bible by Isaiah Shembe's son and successor, J. G. Shembe, popularly known to members as iLanga (Sun). I argue that J. G. Shembe uses a sermon setting to claim the Bible for Africa, appropriating it to his (African) context and underscoring its relation to the African continent while at the same time rejecting it as a foreign text. This simultaneous appropriation and rejection of the Bible defies a simplistic notion of the Bible as the word of God, and echoes Malukele's assertion that, while African Christians,

may mouth the Bible-is-equal-to-the-word-of-God formula, they are actually creatively pragmatic and selective in their use of the Bible so that the Bible may enhance rather than frustrate their struggles.<sup>3</sup>

Although he was educated at Fort Hare and became one of the first black principals of Adams College, J. G. Shembe can be regarded as an ordinary reader of the Bible, for he was not a biblical scholar. Gerald West has observed with regards to ordinary readers of the Bible that,

they are not as transfixed and fixated by the text as their textually trained pastors and theologians; in Wimbush's words, their hermeneutics is characterised by "a looseness, even playfulness" towards the biblical text. If they do speak of the Bible as the "Word of God," they do so in senses that are more metaphorical than literal; "the Book" is more of a symbol than a text. The Bible they work with is always an already "re-membered" "text"—a text, both written and oral, that has been dismembered, taken apart, and then re-mem-

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<sup>2</sup> Gerald West, *The Academy of the Poor: Towards a Dialogical Reading of the Bible* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999; repr., Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2003), 65.

<sup>3</sup> Tinyiko Malukele, "Black and African Theologies in the New World Order: A Time to Drink from Our Own Wells," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 96 (1996): [http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Epistle\\_of\\_Barnabas\\_3-19](http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Epistle_of_Barnabas_3-19), cited in Gerald West, "Mapping African Biblical Interpretation: A Tentative Sketch," in *The Bible in Africa: Transactions, Trends, and Trajectories* (ed. Gerald West and Musa Dube; Leiden: Brill, 2000), 48.

bered.<sup>4</sup>

This article is engaged with Shembe's "re-membering" of the Bible in his sermon in the way explicated by West above. Closely related to this notion of "re-membering" is "neo-indigenous hermeneutics." The latter brings together traditional interpretive as well as missionary/colonial methods. Drawing on the work of Christopher Ballentine (1993), West designates *marabi* (South African jazz) as a metaphor for "neo-traditional" hermeneutics. Both *marabi* as music and *marabi* as a metaphor for biblical interpretation, according to West, are examples of

those "purposive act[s] of reconstruction" in which indigenous people have "created a middle ground between a displaced "traditional" order and a modern world whose vitality was both elusive and estranging," by "the repositioning of signs in sequences of practice," a *bricolage*, that promises "to subvert the divisive structures of colonial society, returning to the displaced a tangible identity and the power to impose coherence upon a disarticulated world" (Comaroff 1985: 253-254).<sup>5</sup>

While I employ both the notion of "re-membering" and "neo-colonial" hermeneutics in my approach to analysing J. G. Shembe's sermon, what is more relevant for me is West's allusion to what Musa Dube calls *Semoya* reading in his explication of "neo-colonial" hermeneutics. This (*Semoya* reading) is "a communal and participatory mode of interpretation through the use of songs, dramatised narration and repetition."<sup>6</sup> But for this article and J. G. Shembe's sermon, it is not the "communal" and the "participatory" modes that are important and relevant, but the use of songs, and especially "dramatised narration and repetition." This in itself is a form of interpretation; as Musa Dube goes on to state:

This indigenous method of interpretation capitalizes on recalling, narrating and dramatizing the story without explicitly defining what it means. Instead, the meaning is articulated by graphically bringing the story to life through a dramatic narration.<sup>7</sup>

In the rest of this article I explore how J. G. Shembe "re-members" the Bible in his sermon by narrating it as an oral text (which is more akin to Musa Dube's *Semoya* reading and Gerald West's "neo-colonial" hermeneutics), but first, I look at how Shembe claims it for Africa (or how he Africanises it).

<sup>4</sup> West, *Academy of the Poor*, 78.

<sup>5</sup> Gerald West, "Indigenous Exegesis: Exploring the Interface between Missionary Methods and the Rhetorical Rhythms of Africa – Locating local Reading Resources in the Academy," *Neot* 36/1-2 (2002): 147-162 (257).

<sup>6</sup> West, "Indigenous Exegesis," 158.

<sup>7</sup> Musa Dube, *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*. (St. Louis: Chalice, 2000), 190, cited in West, "Indigenous Exegesis," 158.

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## **B J. G. SHEMBE AND AFRICANISM IN HIS SERMON**

The sermon I discuss here was preached by J. G. Shembe in July 1968 in eKuphakameni. As Elizabeth Gunner has noted, there was great significance placed upon the written word and recording in Ibandla lamaNazaretha in the time of Isaiah Shembe and after: "Handwritten notebooks often circulate privately among members of a particular family or congregation; they are usually notes of sermons or accounts of visions and dreams..."<sup>8</sup> However, starting from the 1960's onwards there appeared another form of recording. This was the tape-recording of sermons and the preserving of these tapes for future members of the family and of the congregation. These tapes have been reproduced and sold within the Church, and in recent years they have been re-recorded on compact discs to keep up with changing technologies. The sermon on which this discussion is based is one of those recordings.

This sermon was preached at the time of the height of Africanist politics where African scholars were engaged in deconstructing the colonialist discourse which tended to present pre-colonial Africa as a dark continent with no civilisation and no history. These scholars sought to negate the colonialist discourse's claim by showing that Africa indeed has a history and its own civilisation. Figures like King Shaka (the Zulu King of the 19th century and the creator of the Zulu Kingdom) became prominent in this process of rewriting African history. While in the colonialist discourse King Shaka was portrayed as a barbaric leader who slaughtered people wantonly, in the Africanist writing he became a hero. With regards to King Shaka's representation which is informed by the colonialist discourse, Shembe says the following:

Some people say Shaka was Satan. When we all grew up it was said in schools that Shaka was Satan. But Shembe said Shaka was an Angel of God. He was sent from heaven to cleanse Black people from their sins. He did not know how to do that so he did it by the spear. He cleansed them by the spear. He also came to make them love one another. Eat with one spoon. Sometimes I wish that Shaka be resurrected and repeat what he did. In this hatred people have for one another! But Shaka left the Zulus loving each other as one person.

On the one hand it is in his appropriation of the Bible that J. G. Shembe's position on the issues of Africa and its history and civilisation is most pronounced. On the other hand in his reading of the Bible he seems to be torn between identifying with the Israelites (who are involved in the struggle for liberation like the South African amaNazaretha members his sermon is intended for, and who are witnessing what the Israelites witnessed in the form of God's revelation) and the Egyptians (who are Africans like himself).

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<sup>8</sup> Gunner, *The Man of Heaven*, 16.

Referring to the project he initiated—of collecting and writing stories of (Isaiah) Shembe's deeds—he says that what is seen in Ibandla lamaNazaretha is enormous and without precedent in Africa. And he compares what happens in Ibandla lamaNazaretha or what amaNazaretha have to the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt.

He thinks his comparison is justified because not only did God reveal himself to the Israelites through miraculous deeds as he did to amaNazaretha, but also, perhaps more importantly for Shembe, because "[the Israelites] too were in this our land of Africa" [*Nabo babekuleli zwe lakithi e-Africa*], and the author of the Bible which amaNazaretha read, "did not take it from overseas. He took it here in our land." [*akalithathanga emazweni aphereseya. Walithatha lapha ezweni lakithi.*]

The author Shembe refers to is Moses. To be sure, it is a claim which many biblical scholars would enthusiastically take him to task for. For example, as van Dyk states,

[d]oubt about Moses' authorship of the whole Pentateuch had already been expressed at an early stage. Originally it centred on the fact that Moses could not have described his own death and certain other events in the Pentateuch.<sup>9</sup>

But concerns of this kind are related to the job of critical biblical scholarship and not to ordinary readers whose concern is more related to deconstructing oppressive discourses as Shembe is doing.

The ambiguity in Shembe's formulation lies in the fact that he wants to claim Moses for Africa because he was born in Africa and was raised by Africans even though he was not black, whilst foregrounding race as an important marker of Africanness. The latter point is shown by his continuous reference to the phrase: "Mnyama, njengami nawe." [Black, like you and me.] Talking about Moses' birth and work, he says:

Moses was a prominent priest of Egypt. At the beginning it was not said that he was an Israelite but he was said to be an Egyptian. The Egyptians are black people, like us. At the beginning they were like us, but now they have mingled with the Muslims, their hair is now *mahalahahla*, it is no longer like yours. Their face also has changed. But there are still those who are really black. It is these Egyptians who started Moses' religion. Because Moses, when he was born of Jewish parents, his mother and father abandoned him, fearing that he would be killed. He was found by the daughter of the King of Egypt. This girl was black, like you and me. He thus grew up as the child of the King's daughter. He grew up in the royal

<sup>9</sup> Peet J. Van Dyk, *How to Analyse the Bible* (Pretoria: Van Schaik Publishers, 1987), 25.

house. He became a prominent priest and worshipped as the Egyptians were worshipping. But he had not forgotten that he was a Jew because he was white like the Jews and he knew how he was found.

Even though he was "white like the Jews," the Bible Moses wrote is, according to J. G. Shembe, an African text. It is based on the Egyptian religion on the basis of which Moses was raised and the laws stipulated in the Bible were not new to the Africans:

When he left Egypt travelling with his people, going to where God had told him, he wrote these books, of Genesis up to Joshua. But the laws there are similar to those of the Zulus, the Xhosas and the Sotho and other black nations, they are not different. All Moses' laws are like that, they are similar to the ones of your nation. Perhaps what God taught him which was not there [in Africa] is the Sabbath that we are in today. But circumcision has always been yours, you Africans.

## **C THE BIBLE AS AN ORAL TEXT**

Having established the Africanness of the Bible, Shembe returns to the text which is the basis of his sermon.<sup>10</sup> This is the story of Saul's establishment as the king of the Israelites and his dethroning and replacement by David. That this text is the basis of the sermon is evidenced by the fact that the compact disc in which the sermon is recorded, is entitled, "Sayuli" [Saul]. This is worth mentioning because there are many other biblical texts that Shembe references in his sermon. What is important about this text is that it is presented mainly as an oral text. Shembe, instead of reading the text from the Bible, narrates the story. In telling this story orally, rather than read it from the Bible, Shembe makes it his own and the congregants he is addressing.

This rendering of the text in oral form is another way in which Shembe appropriates the Bible for Africa. Ruth Finnegan points to the crucial role the oral arts have played in Africa:

For Africa is celebrated above all for the treasure of her voiced and auditory arts, and as the home of oral literature, orature and orality, and the genesis and inspiration of the voiced traditions of the great diaspora.<sup>11</sup>

The oral art of story-telling which Shembe employs here is characterised by its fluidity and the fact that no telling of one story is the same as the other. In the

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<sup>10</sup> Unfortunately the part of the sermon that is recorded on the CD does not have the actual biblical citation. Shembe only says later that he read "the book of Saul."

<sup>11</sup> Ruth Finnegan, *The Oral and Beyond: Doing Things with Words in Africa* (Oxford: James Currey; Chicago: University of Chicago Press; Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2007) 1.

words of one of Megan Biesele's informants, the reason for dissimilarities is that

people sometimes separate for a while and still go on telling stories. But all these stories about the old times – people use different words and different names for the same things. There are many different ways to talk. Different people just have different minds.<sup>12</sup>

Because the storyteller always has control over the narrative technique, in each telling the story belongs to the narrator and the same goes for J. G. Shembe and the biblical narrative of Samuel. The power over the text afforded by oral narration allows Shembe to stop the narrative wherever he wants and digress to other stories outside the Bible, or in other chapters of the Bible. Moreover, telling the narrative orally enables him to recreate it, using his own words and choosing the order of events in the story as well as omitting parts of the narrative which are not important for his purpose. For instance, the story that is told in Shembe's sermon comprises of 1 Sam 9:1-15:35. But narrating the story orally enables him to abridge the narrative, making it conform to the short time offered by the sermon setting.

For example, 1 Sam 10:1 in the old Zulu version favoured in Ibandla lamaNazaretha reads: "*USamuel wa tabata umfuma wamafutha, wamtela ekanda lake, wam anga, wa ti, Aku ngokuba uJehova u ku gcobile ukuba ube inkosi yefa lake na?*" [Samuel took the flask of oil and poured it over his [Saul's] head, kissed him and said: Is it not that Jehovah anointed you king of his inheritance?]. This part of the text is presented as follows in Shembe's sermon:

When they were leaving the next morning he [Samuel] called him [Saul] to the side, on the road, saying to the servant that he must go on. He poured oil over his head and said, "I anoint you king of Israel."

Immediately after the above-mentioned anointment episode, which is Shembe's recreation of 1 Sam 10:1, perhaps moving back a little to 1 Sam 9:26-27 as well, Shembe digresses to 1 Sam 9:2 which describes Saul's features. He says, "*Kuthiwa-ke lo muntu wayemuhle kakhulu, emude futhi kunabo bonke abantu bakwa Israel. USawuli.*" ["It is said that this man was very handsome and he was taller than all the people of Israel."] The purpose of this reconfiguration is not obvious, but one can only conjecture that maybe Shembe felt that physical qualities are less important than a person's status and position, or perhaps he thought his audience would want to know why Saul was

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<sup>12</sup> Megan Biesele, "Different People Just Have Different Minds: A Personal Attempt to Understand Jul'hoan Storytelling Aesthetics," in *Oral Literature and Performance in Southern Africa* (ed. Duncan Brown; Oxford: James Currey; Cape Town: David Philip, 1999), 161.

chosen and his features are offered as an explanation.

One of the techniques Shembe employs in his sermon is to link the selected biblical text to the context of his audience. His ability to grasp the audience's context illustrates Shembe's awareness of the complex position the Bible holds within Ibandla lamaNazaretha; that it is accepted as representing the word of God, yet, at the same time, rejected as a foreign text.

Therefore as we are here at Kuphakameni we are like this Saul we read about. God chose him from the people of Israel. He made him king. You also are chosen by God. He made you heads of the black nations. Even the whites if they want God they do come here.

Nonetheless, Shembe's oral biblical storytelling does not mean that the Bible as a text is absent or ignored. That he indeed read from the book of Samuel is shown by the following claim: "*Namuhla ngifunde incwadi yomuntu, lo muntu ngimthanda ngoba kwakuwumuntu okhethiwe, njengani nje. Nani ningabantu abakhethiwe.* [Today I read the book of a person [Saul], I like this person because he was chosen, like you. You are also chosen people.] He asserts reading the text in spite of the fact that one does not hear any text being read. Although the recorded sermon apparently starts some minutes later than the actual beginning of the sermon, it is clear that whatever was read was just a small part of the text, the main text is presented orally in the rest of the sermon.

Later on in his narration, towards the end of the first narration of Saul's adventure against the Philistines, Shembe again returns to the Bible and reads a few verses from it. This is 1 Sam 13:11:

*Uma nibheka encwadini yona leyo ka Samuweli wokuqala, isahluko seshumi nantathu, ivesi leshumi nanye. [Reads] USamuweli wathi: "Wenzani?" Usawuli wathi, "Ngabona ukuthi abantu bahlakazekile kimi, nokuthi awufikanga ngesikhathi esimisiweyo, nokuthi amaFilisti abuthene eMikimashi, ngathi manje amaFilisti ayakwehlela kimi eGilgali ngingakhulekanga kuJehova ngase ngiziqinisa nganikela ngomnikelo wokusha." USamuweli wathi kuSawuli, "Wenze kabi, ngokuba awugcinanga umyalo kaJehova uThixo wakho akuyala ngawo. Ngokuba uJehova wayeqinisile umbuso wakho kwaIsrael kodwa manje umbuso wakho awusayukuma. UJehova uzozifunela omunye onjengenhliziyi yakhe, uJehova ummisile yena abe yinkosi yabantu bakhe ngokuba awugcinanga lokhu akuyale ngakho uJehova."*

[If you look at that book of I Samuel, chapter thirteen, verse eleven [reads] Samuel said, "What are you doing?" Saul said, "I realised that the people were drifting away from me, and that you yourself did not come on the stipulated time, and I thought the Philistines will descend to me at Gilgal before I have placated Jehovah, then I strengthened myself and made the whole-offering." Samuel said to



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Saul, "You acted badly, because you did not keep the command the Lord your God laid on you. For God had established your dynasty over Israel, but now your kingship will not endure. Jehovah will seek another who is like his heart, Jehovah has appointed him king of his people, because you did not keep the commands the Lord laid before you."]

I stated elsewhere that in Ibandla lamaNazaretha when preachers want to refer to the Bible, they normally do not read for themselves. Instead, they ask someone else to read that particular text, and as the requested person reads, the preacher repeats the words read from the Bible, sometimes changing the wording and sometimes expanding on what the text says.<sup>13</sup> But J. G. Shembe reads the Bible himself here and in other sermons, which means this tendency had not started in his time (1935-1977) but perhaps in the time of A. K. Shembe (1978-1995), who employs it in his sermons.

Nevertheless, whether it is J. G. Shembe reading for himself or A. K. Shembe having someone else read for him, and even though it is "re-membered," the Bible as text, as West has noted, is always present: "This does not imply the absence of the Bible as text, for although the Bible as text is not central to the corporate practice of 're-membering,' it does have a presence. Even those who are illiterate have considerable exposure to biblical texts being read."<sup>14</sup>

## **D THE BIBLE REJECTED AS FOREIGN**

Although there is a profound biblical presence, both textual and oral, in Shembe's sermon the Bible is supported by other narratives internal to Ibandla lamaNazaretha. The latter are given more prominence in Shembe's rhetoric. His rhetoric reveals that while Shembe in fact utilises the Bible, he is not completely comfortable with it. His discomfiture emanates from the fact that his theology is incongruent with that of the missionary-trained African elites who claim that their theology, which is against African religion and the worship of the ancestors, is based on the teachings of the Bible.<sup>15</sup> The most prominent locus of conflict between Shembe's incorporation of African religion in his theology and the theology of those Africans who belong to orthodox Christian Churches involves ancestral worship.

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<sup>13</sup> See Nkosinathi Sithole, "Testimony, Identity and Power: Oral Narratives of Near-Death Experiences in the Nazarite Church." (MA diss., University of KwaZulu-Natal), 2005.

<sup>14</sup> West, "Reading Shembe," 160.

<sup>15</sup> In fact their theology is based on the teachings of the missionaries who did not separate Christianity from Western civilisation.

J. G. Shembe's stance is unequivocal on this issue:

There are many people, you Nazarites, as I always tell you, who say when they pray, "Lord, forgive me my sins." Who are you? Who are you to say, "Lord forgive me my sins." How do you know that God hears your prayer? As you are like me, how is God going to hear your prayer? Your tongue is evil. Your heart is evil. Your thoughts are evil. Your deeds are evil. They are like mine. In his prayer a wise person says, "Father, I have sinned. You my ancestors, I have sinned." But I do not know because some people say their fathers are dead. Some say they are ghosts. Some say they are apparitions. We do not believe that here in eKuphakameni. We believe that our fathers exist. And our mothers are here and our grandmothers are here. And that they look after us. And that they are the ones we should direct our prayers to and they will forward them to God. That is what we believe. But there are many even here at Kuphakameni who do not believe that. They say I am a deserter. They say I am a bad person because I believe my prayer is forwarded to God by my father. And yours if it is to be heard it is forwarded by your father. It is forwarded by your mother, it is forwarded by your grand- mother. And that if your father inhibits your prayer it will not reach God. Even your mother if she is preventing you, saying, "Lord do not accept this prayer of my child," it will not be accepted.

Earlier on when he wanted to support his claim that amaNazaretha are chosen by God to join the Church not on the basis of merit, but because of divine grace alone, Shembe used the Bible as a reference, reading Rom 9:13-18. But to support the claim above he could not resort to the Bible because it did not accord with his idea of sin in his theology. Instead, he invoked the Church's cultural treasure and told the story of a barren woman who had come to Isaiah Shembe for help.

Shembe was travelling around Mzimkhulu in the South Coast and had called on all the people who wanted to be prayed for. When Shembe was praying for all the women who did not have children, he threw out this particular barren woman. She went out and cried while Shembe continued to pray for the other women. When he came out and saw her still crying Isaiah Shembe called her and asked why she was crying. She said she was crying because she was ordered to leave while others were being prayed for. Shembe said to her he forced her out because when he tried to pray for her, he perceived a man's hand which pushed away is own. The woman said she wanted to confess. She told Shembe that she had been promiscuous. She had disappointed her father because sometimes when a man was prepared to pay the lobola for her, she would reject that man and get another man. When she finally decided to marry the man that she married, her father did not want to take part in the wedding. He urged his brothers to help her. When she was leaving for her groom's home, he came out and cursed her, saying, "Aphume nobovu!" [lit.

They (thorns) came out with the pus; figuratively meaning he was relieved that she was finally leaving]. She got married and failed to conceive. Shembe told her to go to her father to ask forgiveness. Her father accepted her and slaughtered a goat, saying, "*Ngesula leli gama lami engalisho ukuthi aphume nobovu*" [I am erasing my word I said, that they came out with the pus]. After that she got pregnant and a child was born.

Having told this story, J. G. Shembe poses a challenge to his audience (an imagined audience of non-Nazarite members seem to be the main target of this statement) which reveals a complete rejection of the Bible:

Where is your child, which you obtain from these gods of yours, who are in the Bible, who are not of Shembe, who are not of your forefathers?

While these words at first glance suggest a complete rejection of the Bible, what is actually rejected and being challenged is a certain interpretation of the Bible and Christianity by the educated elites and the "Kholwa," who believed that in order to embrace Christianity they had to jettison their African ways. Joel Cabrita engages extensively with these issues of conflict between the "Kholwa" and the Nazaretha members. Writing about the differences between Isaiah Shembe and John Dube, she states: "Shembe's Nazaretha Christianity sanctioned polygamy and the recognition of the ancestors, both of which practices Dube's American Zulu Mission denounced as examples of heathen degradation."<sup>16</sup> Shembe's biblical presentation is clearly intended for these "Kholwa" about whom Cabrita writes, and not for amaNazaretha. That the "Kholwa" was his target, is further strengthened by Shembe's following statement (and accusation):

You say your grandfather was a pagan, wearing loinskins, was Satan. Yes, you say it well because you are Satan. You, who wear trousers and skirts. You, who pray and who worship.

Interestingly, in supporting this claim, Shembe again resorts to the Bible, calling on the ten commandments, an act which serves to confirm the authority of the Bible:

Because your forefathers did not commit adultery, they did not steal. You are doing all these things. Where is your holiness then?

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<sup>16</sup> Joel M. Cabrita, "A Theological Biography of Isaiah Shembe, c.1870-1935." (Ph.D thesis, University of Cambridge, 2007), 46; See also Paul La Hausse, *Restless Identities: Signatures of Nationalism, Zulu Ethnicity and History of the Lives of Petros Lamula (c.1881-1948) and Lymon Maling (1889-1936)* (Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2000.)

## E CONCLUSION

From this single sermon, among many similar sermons, it is clear that the Bible plays a pivotal role in Ibandla lamaNazaretha. The tradition of reading and perfecting the knowledge of the Bible that Isaiah Shembe started was continued by his successors and his followers then and in the present. But the use of the Bible is influenced by the context and identity of each individual user and his framework. J. G. Shembe advocated Africanism and his reading of the Bible reflected that. He was at pains to claim and appropriate the Bible for Africa; as an African text created by African people and dealing with the issues that concern them. It is clear from the way he constantly refers to the Bible in the above discussed sermon (and other sermons) that he highly regarded the Bible. The only problem he had was with its interpretation by the educated elites and the "Kholwa," who mistook Christianity (and the Bible) for Western civilisation: that if you still held on to African ways you could never be a Christian. It is through a close reading of (or listening to) the sermon that one can discern that it moves through the ranks of the Nazaretha audience and on to the imagined audience of the "Kholwa" and the educated elites outside the sacred community.

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