

Isak – the Son of the Rainmaker – and the Bible: An Example of Resistance Hermeneutics in Zululand around 1870

Knut Holter

ABSTRACT

With illustrative cases from Norwegian mission work in Zululand around 1870, the article discusses how the scripturalising focus of missionary Christianity enabled converts to counter aspects of missionary teaching. Two cases are discussed, both being related to Isak, one of the first converts. One is Isak's suggestion to organize the converts under an induna, a Zulu chief, rather than under the missionaries, hence integrating the Christian communities more explicitly into Zulu society. The other is Isak's taking of wives numbers two and three, referring to Abraham and other biblical polygamists. In both cases the interpretive power vis-à-vis the Bible is at stake. The cases are interpreted as examples of a kind of resistance hermeneutics that, with the tools of missionary scripturalisation, tries to develop a contextualized form of Christianity.

Introduction

Scripturalisation, quite generally, and translations of the Bible into vernacular languages, more particularly, are key characteristics of Protestant, missionary Christianity of the last couple of centuries. From a strategic perspective, the vernacular Bible would survive the missionaries and have the potential of reaching geographical, sociological and cultural contexts which the missionaries were prevented from reaching. And, from a theological perspective, the vernacular Bible would allow any reader to meet God directly. Scripturalisation and Bible translation, accordingly, reflects a democratizing process, allowing the founding texts of the church to be read by ordinary readers outside the control of missionaries and other religious specialists.

In this article I will discuss two examples of the role of scripturalisation in missionary Christianity, both examples being found within the mission work of Norwegian Lutherans in Zululand, South Africa, around 1870, and both being related to competing interpretations of the Bible: the missionaries versus Isak, one of their early converts. Firstly, a brief contextualisation of Isak in relation