

MOSHETE OF THE BECHUANAS

The story of Robert Moffat

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Serving in southern Africa under Baptist World Mission since 1992

OVERVIEW OF SEGMENTS:

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- SEGMENT THREE – One Missionary, Forty-Thousand Warriors
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SEGMENT ONE – THE BOY WHO WANTED HIS OWN WAY

“Robert, you’re daydreaming!” came the reprimand from Robert Moffat’s mother. Ann Moffat prayed and fretted over young Robert, who had more interest in sailing than in the things of God. Ann often read the thrilling accounts of the work of the Moravian missionaries in Greenland and the East Indies to her children, but Robert, as on this day, seemed to take little interest in such things.

Is it possible that this is the boy who would one day be called “the patriarch missionary of South Africa,” who would travel thousands of miles through uncharted bush and desert, and secure the respect and ear of the most powerful chiefs? Is this the boy who would later defend his little tribe against thousands of Mantatee warriors? Yes, this is the missionary who hewed converts out of granite stone. The natives themselves later testified to Robert Moffat, “you found us beasts and made us men.” Yes, this is the boy who later gave Africa its first African-language Bible and proved that no creature in whose breast beats a human heart, is beyond the reach of the gospel and its transforming power.

It wasn’t that Robert was a bad boy. He obeyed his parents and did well in school. He believed in God and feared His judgment for wrongdoing. But, Robert didn’t want anyone, including God, to interfere with his plans for his life. By the time Robert became a teenager, he had already completed his basic education and even spent some time on a merchant ship.

Born in the year 1795, in Scotland, Robert grew up in harsh times. Unable to afford school, he began working as a gardener for a Mr. John Robertson at age fourteen. Mr. Robertson sent Robert out into the cold darkness at four o’clock each morning and fed him only the bare minimum to sustain the boy. Little did Robert realize how valuable these hardships were in preparing him for the challenges of his life in the wilds of the African bush. Despite his fatigue, Robert forced himself to study at night, believing education was his ticket to a better life.

But, God had other plans for Robert Moffat. He began attending the evangelistic preaching services of the Methodists and, for the first time, at age twenty, realized that he had never been converted. Robert knew a lot of Scripture because he had always obeyed the promise he made to his mother that he would read the Bible every day. Now, the Holy Spirit taught him the truths of those passages and he was born-again.

Another event took place about this time which set Robert on a course for foreign missions. In the providence of God he took note of a poster on a bridge which announced a missionary meeting. This subject aroused great interest in his mind even though the date of the meeting had already expired. It was as if the Spirit of God actually used that outdated meeting announcement to fix Robert’s heart toward foreign missions. His fixation upon the poster was extraordinary and that event constituted his call to missions. Although Robert lacked the required educational preparations, he was ultimately appointed by the London Missionary Society through the highly-regarded recommendation of William Roby.

Moffat was willing to serve wherever needed. Consequently, his mission board actually chose his field for him! To be called to missions by an outdated poster and directed to a particular field by a committee is unorthodox to say the least, and had he failed, these two facts would no doubt have been offered up as explanations for it. It would seem that an outdated poster had more influence than a hundred sermons! How unsearchable are the ways of God and how He delights in small beginnings.

Robert Moffat arrived at Cape Town, South Africa on January 13, 1817. After learning the Dutch language, he determined to go to Afrikaner's kraal (an African village), hundreds of miles in the interior. "Afrikaner will use your skin for his drums and drink from your skull," was the typical warning Moffat received. Everyone, even missionaries, warned Moffat against going to Afrikaner, the most-feared outlaw in southern Africa. But, Moffat could not refuse Afrikaner's invitation.

SEGMENT TWO – Walking into the Death Trap

Afrikaner was the most notorious outlaw of southern Africa and the Cape Town government had placed a price on his head. This renegade Hottentot had terrorized the frontier for many years. The Hottentots were the native people of western South Africa. The wanderings of Afrikaner and his clan always left death, devastation, and pillage in their wake. Afrikaner was especially known for his cruel and heartless tactics, earning him the reputation of a savage beast.

The memory of what Afrikaner did to the mission in Great Namaqualand was still fresh in the minds of those who tried to dissuade Robert Moffat from his planned trip to Afrikaner's kraal. There, at a place called Warm Baths, Afrikaner had forced the missionaries to flee for their lives and burned their house and mission station to the ground. But, it was also there at Warm Baths in Great Namaqualand, that the Lord began to trouble Afrikaner's conscience about the severity of his many sins.

He was well aware of the great sacrifices the missionaries had made to come to Great Namaqualand, and their pure motives in spreading the gospel there. Now, he must have felt as if he were treading upon holy ground as he plundered their few earthly possessions. This sensation of guilt was accentuated to a frightening level when one of his chiefs stepped across what he thought was a fresh grave. With each step the chief heard soft notes of music coming from beneath him. He was frozen in fear as he remembered the missionary's teaching that music would accompany the resurrection of the dead. Finally, the chief mustered up the courage to flee the spot. Afrikaner, fearing neither the living or the dead, rushed to the spot and found the report to be true. And, being more courageous than his subordinate, ordered his men to unearth the dead musician. To their great surprise and relief, they discovered that the missionaries had buried their piano in what appeared to be a shallow grave at that spot. Afrikaner broke the piano into little pieces.

Robert's first overland trip to Afrikaner's kraal in Great Namaqualand (Namibia) initiated him into the harsh realities of the dry, hot African bush, and demonstrated his tenacity and fearless faith. After traveling hundreds of miles into the interior and suffering from great thirst and intolerable heat, he was rescued by the arrival of Mr. Bartlett from the mission at Pella. Despite great remonstrations and predictions of doom and atrocities, he continued on alone to Great Namaqualand, where he arrived at Afrikaner's kraal on January 26, 1818.

The last missionary to have contact with Afrikaner's clan had described them as "wicked, suspicious, and dangerous people, baptized as well as unbaptized."¹ Robert's first impressions seemed to confirm this analysis, but to his relief, Afrikaner received him with open arms, immediately commanding the women to build him a small hut to live in.

Contrary to all the predictions, Afrikaner opened his heart to the fearless missionary who endangered his life to take the gospel to him. Indeed, Robert Moffat's humble spirit, strong character, and godly lifestyle melted many a savage heart during his fifty years of ministry in Africa. These self-evident traits proved more valuable to him during his years in Africa

¹ Robert Moffat, *Missionary Labours and Scenes in Southern Africa* (New York: Robert Carter, 1843), 78.

than a thousand swords and shields. It was Moffat's successful work with Afrikaner which instantly thrust him into the position of missionary statesman, a post of which he proved worthy the rest of his life.

Robert returned to Cape Town with Afrikaner in 1819, where Afrikaner displayed the most remarkable testimony in character, behavior, and knowledge of Bible doctrines. His transformation was regarded by one as the "eighth wonder of the world," and the Cape Town governor pardoned his crimes. Suddenly, the most feared outlaw for the past twenty years became the most famous Christian convert.

Before the missionaries came, Afrikaner said he thought no more of the Person of God than he did of an insignificant insect. Now, he was able to openly explain his understanding of the sinfulness of man and the justice of God. One man asked him, "were God to punish you for ever for your sins, would he be good and just?" to which Afrikaner replied, "Oh yes! I have sinned in thought, in word, and in deed. Oh yes! I am the great Namacqualand sinner; and God would be just and good, were he to punish me eternally for my sins."² When asked if he thought he could have just simply reformed himself he replied,

When I saw my duty, I fancied I could perform it. I knew I had served the devil with all my heart, and I thought I had only to change masters, and that I could serve God as perfectly as I had served the devil; but I soon found that I was mistaken. I set to work; but when I made the experiment, I discovered, for the first time, that my heart was full of enmity against God. I tried to change my own heart, but it grew worse and worse; and in my despair I came to Christ, pleaded his promises, and obtained relief.³

Moffat's success with Afrikaner was no guarantee that the Bechuanas at Kuruman would accept him. To the contrary, they would try to kill him. Neither could he anticipate the thousands of Mantatee warriors, who would descend upon Kuruman with murder in their eyes and blood on their spears.

² John Campbell, *The Life of Afrikaner, a Namacqua Chief of South Africa* (London: The Religious Tract Society, 1830), 36.

³ Campbell, 39.

SEGMENT THREE – ONE MISSIONARY, FORTY THOUSAND WARRIORS

While at Cape Town, Robert Moffat also welcomed his bride to be, Mary Smith. Her father had finally relented to the will of God and released his daughter to a life of missionary service in South Africa. They were soon married and began their six hundred mile trip from Cape Town to Kuruman by ox cart.

Robert struggled to learn the Sechuana language of the Bechuanas at Kuruman. He realized he would never truly understand the Bechuanas or communicate effectively with them until he mastered the Sechuana language. He concluded that only one method of study would accomplish the imposing task - total immersion in the language for an extended period of time. Thus, in January, 1828, Moffat journeyed to a distant Barolong tribe on the edge of the Kalahari desert. There, he suffered greatly for two months, living as a nomad among extreme wretchedness. But, his elemental understanding of Sechuana developed into a fluent proficiency during that period. His mastery of the Sechuana language was certainly one of the essential keys to his success as a missionary.

Despite their tireless efforts, the Moffat's could not claim one genuine convert after seven years. Robert likened their hearts to granite stone, while Mary commented that she could not discern the slightest evidence of progress with the native people. They remained filthy brutes, liars, and thieves, seemingly without consciences or initiative. Despite the great sacrifices of the missionaries, the people resented them and blamed them for every illness and drought. At one point, the native warriors threatened to kill Moffat and his family if he did not immediately return to Cape Town.

How Moffat yearned for the conversion of the Bechuanas. The depth of their degradation was appalling. Moffat wrote, "...the world is their god; to acquire the few fleeting and sensual enjoyments it affords, they will endure any hardship, break through any tie, and with brutal enthusiasm tear the yet palpitating heart from the breast of their fallen enemy. Surely these facts are calculated to draw forth our compassion towards them. What a call for missionary exertions! For nothing but the word of inspiration can lead them from 'these doleful shades of heathenish gloom.'"⁴

The turning point finally came, not through a sermon, but through a demonstration of love. Rumors of the advancing Mantatee warriors proved to be true. Like a swarm of locusts, the Mantatees had swept across South Africa, wiping out every tribe in their path and confiscating all their property and cattle. Kuruman was next. There seemed no choice but for the missionaries to flee to Cape Town, leaving the Bechuanas to be slaughtered and scattered into the barren Kalahari Desert. On the contrary, Robert rode to Griqua Town to obtain native horsemen with guns. In the midst of this great crisis an old chief said, "We must not act like Bechuanas, we must act like Makooas (white people)."⁵ His comment betrayed the new attitude among the Bechuanas, who now admired, rather than despised the missionaries.

⁴ *Labours & Scenes*, 249.

⁵ *Labours & Scenes*, 237.

The fearful day arrived. Moffat, one-hundred Griqua horsemen, and a few hundred Bechuana warriors advanced against forty-thousand Mantatee warriors. Moffat rode his horse close to the opposing army and dismounted, hoping to arbitrate some terms of peace. However, he barely escaped as hundreds of Mantatees rushed him, casting their spears in his direction. Unable to negotiate with the Mantatees, the men decided to send in the horsemen in an attempt to intimidate them. But, this only provoked a charge. The two sides were soon locked in mortal combat. Although he nearly fell victim to the conflict, Moffat himself never fired a shot. That was not his role as a missionary. After the battle Moffat wrote, "Contemplating this deadly conflict, we could not but admire the mercy of God, that not one of our number was killed, and only one slightly wounded. One Bechuana lost his life while too eagerly seeking for plunder. The slain of the enemy was between four and five hundred."⁶ Although vastly superior in strength, the Mantatees retreated and abandoned their campaign of war and terror against Kuruman and its vicinity. Moffat's courageous intervention had saved the entire Bechuana tribe.

Now that the Bechuanas had seen the love of Christ in the man, Robert Moffat, they opened their hearts to this man's message of love, the gospel of Jesus Christ. The mission work at Kuruman became a model work in Africa with many converts and a growing Christian community.

One day in 1829, two strangers arrived at Kuruman. These two natives were official representatives from Moselekatse, the most powerful chief in southern Africa. The Bechuanas were terrorized by this strange visitation and they viewed the men as spies. What did Chief Moselekatse want from Robert Moffat?

⁶ *Labours & Scenes*, 244.

SEGMENT FOUR – TAMING THE TYRANT

“Must you go?” Mary Moffat asked as Robert completed his preparations for the great journey to Chief Moselekatse’s kraal. “God did not send me to Africa to hide the gospel, but to proclaim it,” Robert replied. Robert well knew Moselekatse’s prowess at treachery and his insatiable thirst for blood. He knew his warriors had mercilessly slaughtered thousands of innocent men, women, and children. If Afrikaner had been the greatest outlaw of Africa, certainly Moselekatse was the most powerful chief of the interior regions of southern Africa. Robert would not refuse this invitation.

Moselekatse’s ambassadors had never seen such wonderful things as found at Kuruman. They were fascinated by the many parts which made up the wheels of the ox cart. Robert’s iron work was nothing short of a new magic. And, the image in the mirror was not to be trusted. But, the one practice which most impressed them was the native worship of the Bechuana converts. They set orderly and listened to the preaching of God’s Word. Their music was not the sound of war, but of love and joy. One remarked, “You are men, we are but children.” The other replied, “Moselekatse must be taught all these things.”⁷

On November 9, 1829, they embarked eastward on their long, perilous journey through lion-infested wilderness. Moffat could discern anxiety in the faces of the two Matabele ambassadors as they passed through areas decimated by Chief Moselekatse’s army. These men feared retribution by these subjugated tribes, but Moffat’s presence and diplomacy secured their safe passage on several occasions.

One evening, Robert walked from his camp down to a water hole. As he knelt down to draw water his eye caught sight of three reflections that the moon was casting off the opposite side of the pool. There, staring at him, were three lions, sipping water only a few yards away. As he slowly turned to make his retreat he spotted another lion on his side of the pool. Ever so slowly he crept on hands and knees until he finally reached his wagon. He lost both his sleep and a lamb to the pride that night and was never so happy to see the first rays of the morning sun.

It was during this trip that Robert Moffat passed through the country of the “tree people,” who lived in small huts high in the trees, apparently to protect them from the many lions which seemed to rule over that area of Africa, and had developed an appetite for human flesh.

Finally, they reached the place which today is Pretoria, South Africa. But, in 1830, it was a totally unexplored region, deep in the remote, interior of southern Africa. Here, there was but one law, the word of the absolute monarch and tyrant, Moselekatse. “There are the mountains where Chief Moselekatse lives,” stated one of the natives while pointing to a distant range. “Are you afraid to meet Moselekatse?” asked the other. They looked amazed upon the countenance of the courageous missionary as he simply replied, “no.” Moselekatse was known by many great accolades such as *Pezoolu* (King of Heaven), the *Great Elephant*, and the *Lion’s Paw*.

⁷ *Labours & Scenes*, 338.

Few events in the annals of missionary history compare with the historic meeting between the representatives of light and darkness on that day in 1830. Moffat walked between columns of dancing warriors, adorned in animal skins, feathers, and their deadly assegais (short spears), all dancing and chanting to their war songs and the praise of their monarch. The noise was deafening, the smells repugnant, and the sight intimidating, but the intrepid missionary walked onward in the hope of shedding the light of the gospel into such a dark corner of the world.

There, before him stood the great monarch of southern Africa. Moffat writes, “He came up to us, and having been instructed in our mode of salutation, gave each a clumsy but hearty shake of the hand. He then politely turned to the food, which was placed at our feet, and invited us to partake.”⁸ Moselekatse then took hold of Moffat’s right arm in an expression of affection which endured for many years. “The land is before you; you are come to your *son*. You must sleep where you please.”⁹ [*italics mine*] How am I his father, Robert wondered? The great chief continued, “... you have been my father. You have made my heart as white as milk; I cease not to wonder at the love of a stranger. You never saw me before, but you love me more than my own people. You fed me when I was hungry; you clothed me when I was naked; you carried me in your bosom;”¹⁰ When Moffat questioned Moselekatse’s meaning, the chief replied that as Moffat cared for his messengers at Kuruman, so he cared for the great chief himself.

This was no trite tribute, for Moselekatse revered Moffat as a father for the next thirty years. The tyrant was known to rest his head on Moffat’s shoulder and listen to Bible stories. Thus were sowed the seeds of the gospel among the great Matabeles. Moffat’s courage and faith opened the door to the American missionaries of later years and even to his own son, John Moffat, who evangelized among this most feared tribe in the interior of southern Africa.

Robert Moffat was the model, pioneer missionary of his day in southern Africa. He, like Livingstone, changed the course of history in Africa and took the gospel across the trackless expanses. Like J. Hudson Taylor, he was known for his walk with the Lord and his ministry became the model for others. Like William Carey, he mastered the language, translated the Bible, and plodded on through the most distressful and discouraging circumstances. Like John Paton, he stood fearless before murderous natives. Like Jonathan Goforth, he endured great privations and loss of children.

While the name “Robert Moffat” is well known to students of missionary history, there was a time when he was affectionately known in nearly every village of southern Africa as, “Moshete of the Bechuanas,” a name of affection given to him by none other than Chief Moselekatse himself. Few men attain the status of “giant” during their own lifetimes. Robert Moffat was thus regarded in his generation, not only by his peers, but from the least of the savage natives to the nobility of the Cape Colony. Without gun or government and from the obscurity of an outpost on the edge of the Kalahari Desert, he became the most influential white man in southern Africa. He is arguably the most

⁸ *Labours & Scenes*, 350.

⁹ *Labours & Scenes*, 350.

¹⁰ *Labours & Scenes*, 354.

significant figure in the Christian history of that region, and in that sense could be labeled, “the apostle of southern Africa.”

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LIST OF PHOTOS

The following photos may be used at various points in the story.

“lions at pool.jpg”

“Moffat age 20.jpg”

“Moffat in old age.jpg”

“Moffat-Mary at 20.jpg”

“Moffat-Mary old.jpg”

“Moselekatse.jpg”