



PROFILE IN FAITH

“What Bringest Thou?” The Life and Ministry of Tiyo Soga

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In volume 5 of his *History of the Expansion of Christianity*, Kenneth Scott Latourette writes a single sentence about Tiyo Soga, calling him “an outstanding product of the Presbyterian missions” in South Africa.¹ Indeed, he was. Tiyo Soga was the first black South African to be educated overseas, the first black South African to be ordained overseas, and the subject of the first biography of a black South African.² According to a modern African scholar, Tiyo Soga was “the most prominent African of his time.”³

Tiyo Soga’s father was the husband of eight wives, and the father of thirty-nine children. Tiyo’s mother, Nosutu, had nine children, of whom Tiyo was the seventh. He was born in 1829 at Mgwali on the eastern frontier of the Cape Colony. His mother gave him the name Sani, which means “what bringest thou?” His father changed his name to Tiyo, for a hero of his people. Nosutu became a Christian; her husband, Old Soga, was at best a nominal Christian.

Tiyo was brought to Christian faith by Ntsikana, one of the first of the Xhosa to become a Christian.⁴ Ntsikana had been converted through the ministry of Johannes Theodore Van der Kemp, a Dutch missionary sent out by the London Missionary Society.

Young Tiyo became a student at the Chumie mission station, studying during the week, and worshipping in the mission’s octagonal church building on Sundays. About eight miles from Chumie was Lovedale, a more advanced school founded in 1841 by Scottish missionaries for European and African boys and girls. The African students were chosen by examination. Tiyo and one other boy were candidates for a place at the school. The missionary asked them both, “What is the greatest work of God?” The other boy answered, “The work of creation.” Tiyo replied, “The salvation of mankind, because it shows God’s love.” Tiyo was chosen.

In 1846 “the War of the Axe,” as it was called, began in the eastern part of the Cape Colony between the Africans and the English. Lovedale school was forced to close, and the missionaries and some Africans, including Tiyo and his mother, fled to safer places. The missionaries thought that Tiyo should be sent to Scotland to further his education. They sought his mother’s permission; she replied, “My son is the property of God; wherever he goes, God goes with him.”

John Street United Presbyterian Church in Glasgow adopted the young African boy and supported him during his stay in Scotland. He made a public profession of faith and was baptized on May 7, 1848. Tiyo did well in school, but he was homesick for “the free air of his native hills.” He returned to Africa with a missionary, George Brown, arriving at Port Elizabeth on January 31, 1849. Tiyo worked with Mr. Brown as his interpreter and was taught by the missionary, studying together such books as Jonathan Edwards’s “heart-searching” *Religious Affections*.

The years 1850 and 1851 were filled with battles and bloodshed over the eastern frontier of the Cape Colony. Again Tiyo had to flee for his life, as did the missionaries, who were blamed by both sides. It was decided that Tiyo should return to Scotland and study for the ministry.

In Scotland the John Street Church again gladly received their young African friend and provided support for him while he pursued his studies for the ministry. His goal, he said, was “to learn better how to preach Christ as my known Saviour to my heathen countrymen who know Him not.” As a student at Glasgow University, Tiyo was the first black to wear the red student toga, making his way through the foggy streets to the venerable college in High Street.

He became a Sunday school teacher in a destitute part of the city. Many people were kind to him but at times he suffered ridicule and discrimination because of his color.

John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* was Tiyo's constant companion. Later he would translate that book into Xhosa. *The Pilgrim's Progress* depicted the struggles of a Christian and Soga saw a parallel with black Christians in Africa. The introduction to Soga's translation stated:

*Folks! Here is a book for you to examine. The book tells the story of a traveller who walks the road which many of you would like to travel. Accompany the traveller whilst slowly trying to make acquaintance with each other—stopping to take rest whilst listening to things the traveller tells and reports to you; move along with the traveller to his destination, the end of his journey.*⁵

After a short time in college, Tiyo entered the Theological Hall of the United Presbyterian Church in Edinburgh. He appeared before the Presbytery of Glasgow every other month for examination on his theological studies and for preaching sermons.

Tiyo completed his theological studies and was honored, with his friend Robert Johnston (who was going as a missionary to South Africa), by a reception for them, and the gift of thirty-eight theological books. Tiyo replied to a letter, signed by 186 students of his fellow students to their "beloved brother in Christ," thanking them for their kindness, and promising to always remember Scotland as his second home. On December 23, 1856, he was ordained as a minister of the United Presbyterian Church. For a few months he preached in many places in Scotland to congregations eager to hear the "newly-fledged Kafir preacher."⁶

On February 27, 1857, he married a Scottish woman, Janet Burnside, a pretty Scots lass who was to be his faithful companion and a devoted mother to their children. Little is known about her background or her life in Africa. "But she was of sterling character and was to endure with fortitude the loneliness of isolated mission stations on an uneasy frontier, as well as the loneliness of a white woman married to a black man in a colour-conscious society."⁷

Tiyo and Janet Soga and Robert Johnston and his wife sailed from England on the *Lady of the Lake* on April 13, 1857, and after a long voyage of three months arrived in South Africa. Tiyo Soga returned to a people dispersed by war and demoralized by their recent religious practices that had promised so much but delivered only suffering and sorrow. He was not

discouraged, however, because, as he said, "it is by terrible things that God sometimes accomplishes His purposes. In the present calamities I think I see the future salvation of my countrymen."

Tiyo Soga and Robert Johnston began a new mission at Mgwali. Sunday services were held at the station; on other days the missionaries visited outstations. On Saturdays the two men read their Hebrew and Greek Testaments and studied history and other subjects together.

A new church building opened on June 15, 1862, built through the efforts of Tiyo Soga, who had raised the money for the building and superintended the quarrying of stones and the making of bricks. It was, he said, "the most commodious and substantial, and the neatest native church in British Kaffraria." (This church building is still in use today.)

In April 1864 "the good and honoured" Dr. Alexander Duff of Calcutta visited Tiyo Soga's mission. "I shall not readily forget the shake of the good doctor's hand on alighting from his mule wagon," Tiyo wrote. "Interest, sympathy, and Christian brotherly love were in that shake." Duff later wrote that in all of South Africa he had found no mission station "conducted in a more orderly, vigorous, systematic way, than that of my admirable brother, the Rev. Tiyo Soga."

On June 4, 1868, Tiyo and his family left his beloved Mgwali to undertake a new and difficult work in Tutaka. He faced many disappointments and setbacks as he tried to reach his people with the gospel of Christ. "Nevertheless, to the true servant of the Lord Jesus, the sky which overhangs the missionary field is not all darkness and gloom," he wrote, "but is often relieved with glimpses of glorious sunshine." When faced with the complexities of the political situation in South Africa, he remembered that "the Lord is Governor among the nations. All these difficulties, like mountain mists, must vanish before the glorious rising of the Sun of righteousness."

In July 1871 it was apparent that Tiyo Soga was dying. In his illness, he said, he found the greatest comfort in having no will of his own, but the Lord's, as to life or death. His loving anxious wife and his faithful old mother watched over him. His bed was placed by the window of his study so he could look out in the direction of the country where he was born, and where he had labored as an ambassador for Christ for over ten years. On August 12 he died. John Chalmers wrote, "All the struggles, sorrows, sufferings, disappointments of 42 years were for ever hushed in death." He was buried in an orchard of his own planting, just as their spring blossoms were appearing, and the trees were putting forth their tender buds.

On the wall of the church he had built at Mgwali, a tablet was placed by his fellow missionaries in the memory of the Reverend Tiyo Soga:

He was a friend of God, a lover of His Son, inspired by His Spirit, a disciple of His holy Word. A zealous churchman, an ardent patriot, a large-hearted philanthropist, a dutiful son, an affectionate brother, a tender husband, a loving father, a faithful friend, a learned scholar, an eloquent orator and in manners a gentleman. A model Caffrarian for the imitation and inspiration of his countrymen.

“A friend of God”; “a zealous churchman”; “an ardent patriot”—these phrases sum up Tiyo Soga’s life. He loved God, the church, and his country—in that order.

A Friend of God

Tiyo’s journal, reminiscent of those of David Brainerd and Henry Martyn, reveals his deep love for God and his earnest desire to live for him. We find many entries such as these:

Lord’s day evening, 7th March—O most merciful God and Father, I lay before Thee all my character. Have mercy upon me, a sinner. Bless Thy word to me, and may it overcome all evil that is within me.

Sabbath, 14th May—Preached today on the women who followed Christ, especially Mary Magdalene. Oh! My Heavenly Father, Thou knowest me. If Thou hast begun the good work in me, carry it on unto the day of the Lord Jesus. I desire earnestly to be Thine. But, oh! the hardness of my heart. By Thy blessed Spirit quicken me, and make me live.

A Zealous Churchman

Tiyo Soga loved the church and he served it faithfully as a missionary and a preacher.

John Chalmers wrote of Soga’s preaching:

Whilst he could not be claimed as the most eloquent South African preacher in English, there was something about the whole man, his purity of life, his sincerity, his disinterestedness, his faithful dealing with men, which made every sentence that he uttered go home to the hearts of his hearers.

Saying good-bye to an English congregation he had served for some years, Tiyo Soga reviewed his ministry among them:

I have administered to you and to your children the sacraments of the Church, and have expounded the only rule of faith and duty, the Word of God. I have spoken to you of Jesus, our blessed Lord and Saviour. I have striven to lead your thoughts to dwell on that heavenly home which awaits the faithful worshippers in the Church below.

Tiyo Soga wrote more than thirty hymns, including “Heaven Is My Home,” “This Do in Remembrance of Me,” and “Christ, the Christian’s Inheritance.” His hymns, wrote John Chalmers, “shall continue to be sung as long as there are Kafir Christians to celebrate in the sanctuary, or in the home, the victories of the cross of Christ.” Soga happily worked with seven missionaries of seven denominations on a revision of the Kafir Bible.

Tiyo Soga was a faithful Presbyterian but he loved all parts of Christ’s church. “I have come in contact with Christians of all denominations,” he wrote,

and I have seen them all loving the same Bible, and holding it as the one rule of faith and practice. I have, as a Kafir, often wished that these good friends of all denominations had never perplexed my countrymen with their isms, that they had come here to evangelize the heathen, bearing only one name, and having only the one distinction of being Christians.

An Ardent Patriot

“A tone of sadness pervaded his whole missionary life,” writes Donovan Williams.

It was impossible to get at the cause, and yet, perhaps, it was the fact that he stood alone . . . He lived on a frontier—territorial and psychological—which accepted the Western educated Christian black as much as it did the white. But beyond that frontier lay black pagan society on the one side, and white Christian society on the other. Tiyo Soga had strong bonds which made him the slave of both.⁸

“Whilst deeply attached to my people,” Soga wrote, “I am the loyal subject of the best government of the aborigines that ever existed under heaven.” He called Queen Victoria “the best friend of all people.” Prince Albert, later duke of Edinburgh (and second son of “our beloved Queen”) visited South Africa in 1860. He presented Tiyo Soga with “the most beautifully bound Bible” Tiyo had ever seen “here or in Scotland.” When Albert died early in 1862, Tiyo grieved deeply and preached on the words from Romans 13:7—“Honour to whom honour” is due. He ended: “Peace to his

ashes! God's own consolation to his bereaved family, and our sorrowing Sovereign. May God prove to them a present help; and may they, in 'the Man of Sorrows,' find that they have an High Priest who can be touched with the feeling of their infirmities." His admiration for the queen and British rule was tempered, however, by the fact that British soldiers had conquered his homeland. He could not tolerate the singing of "Rule Britannia," saying that there was "so much vain glory and pride about it."

Soga appreciated what "civilization" could do for Africa, but only if it was accompanied by Christianity. "My faith in civilization alone, if it does not follow in the wake of Christianity, is gone," he wrote. "Civilization is the handmaid of Christianity only when it is the result of Christianity." He dreaded "the civilized, refined sins and immoralities of Europe," he said, "more than the native vices of the Kafirs."

Soga was proud of being an African, "a Kafir of the Kafirs," he called himself. He loved his land and his people. He told them in a sermon, "I have seen other nations; but I love my own the more. I have seen other places; but I would not exchange the Mg-wali for them all."

When three of his sons departed for study in Scotland, their father gave them a small notebook titled "The Inheritance of My Children," containing sixty-two entries he had written for their guidance. He told them that there was among some whites a prejudice against black people and reminded them that "God has made no race mentally and morally superior to other races." (Robert Burns's song "A Man's a Man for All That" was a great favorite with him.) Tiyo Soga told his sons that they would be greatly helped by an education in Scotland, but he warned them against an attitude of superiority toward black society or a tendency to separate themselves from it. He urged them to cherish the memory of their mother—"an upright, conscientious, thrifty, Christian Scot." "You will ever be thankful for your connection by this tie to the white race," but you should "take your place in the world as coloured, not as white men; as Kafirs, not as English." "I consider it the height of ingratitude and impiety," he wrote, "for any person to be discontented with the complexion which God has given him."

Events in South Africa turned Tiyo Soga more and more toward black consciousness. He strongly defended the territorial and moral integrity of the Africans.⁹ In May 1865 he wrote a letter to a newspaper in which he reviewed the wrongs done to Africans and the vices of civilization that had harmed them, but rejoiced in the fact that, despite all the disasters, Africa,

he believed, had a bright future. He wrote, "I find the Negro in the present struggle in America looking forward—though still with chains on his hands and with chains on his feet—yet looking forward to the dawn of a better day for himself and all his sable brethren in Africa."¹⁰ Tiyo Soga not only believed that Africa possessed a brighter future but also a substantial past. He spent a great deal of time seeking to preserve the Xhosa heritage and urged the missionaries to "identify themselves with the people" and "reap a splendid harvest in the study of their history, prejudices, habits and customs."¹¹

When Tiyo Soga visited his friend William Thompson in Cape Town in September 1860, his presence caused Thompson to remember "the names of Cyprian, Tertullian, and Augustine, and others of northern Africa, embalmed in the memory as among the noblest men of the primitive Church, and as the first-fruits unto God of the rich harvest this continent has yet to produce." Unknown by most of the Christian world today, Tiyo Soga was part of the rich harvest that Africa has produced and is still producing. "Sani"—"what bringest thou?"—his mother's name for her son was a good one. The answer is: a dedicated and faithful Christian missionary who loved God, the church, and his people.¹²

Notes

1. Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of the Expansion of Christianity* 5 vol. (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1937–1945), 5:355.

2. John A. Chalmers, *Tiyo Soga: Page of South African Mission Work* (Edinburgh: Andrew Elliot, 1877). John Chalmers, son of a missionary, and Tiyo Soga became close friends and colleagues. The endnotes for this article do not include the quotations that are taken from this book. A more recent biography of Tiyo Soga is by Donovan Williams, *Umfundisi: A Biography of Tiyo Soga* (Lovedale, South Africa: Lovedale Press, 1978).

3. Mcebisi Ndletyana, *African Intellectuals in the 19th and Early 20th Century: South Africa* (Cape Town: HSRC Press, 2008), p. 22. This book contains chapters on five South African intellectuals in the 19th and early 20th centuries.

4. The Xhosa are people living in southeast South Africa who speak one of the Bantu languages.

5. Isabel Hofmeyr, *The Portable Bunyan: A Transnational History of The Pilgrim's Progress* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2004), p. 135. Tiyo Soga's translation of Bunyan's book is still regarded as "a standard work in Xhosa" (Williams, *Umfundisi*, p. 107).

6. *Kafir*, a term for a black African, was used proudly by Tiyo Soga for himself and his people, but has since become a racial epithet.

7. Williams, *Umfundisi*, p. 26.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 125.

9. Ndletyana claims that “Soga’s ideas were the precursor of nationalist thought, and sowed the seeds of black consciousness and black theology in South Africa” (*African Intellectuals*, p. 17).

10. Williams, *Umfundisi*, p. 96. Williams states that in Tiyo Soga one finds the “first evidence of Africa-consciousness on the part of a black in southern Africa” (p. 97).

11. Ndletyana, *African Intellectuals*, p. 26.

12. Thanks to two of my students at Covenant Theological Seminary for drawing my attention to Tiyo Soga—Brad Wos, a missionary to South Africa, and Grant Owens, a South African.



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