

The Story of Zion in Africa

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After studying church history, it is evident that there have been times when the church drifted from the teachings of the Bible. However, it is also evident that at such times God raised up dynamic Christian movements in order to bring the church back to the truth of His word. The Zion movement was one of those movements.

In the late 1800s, a Scottish minister in a Congregational church in Australia by the name of John Alexander Dowie¹ felt deeply burdened by what he saw happening in the church. He felt that Christians were not living in full obedience to Jesus Christ because of false teachings, their lack of faith in the reliability of Scripture, and their desire to fit in with the ways of the world. He believed that many Christians were falling asleep spiritually. Therefore, he started a Christian movement that wholeheartedly embraced Scripture as reliable and authoritative and emphasized the need for God’s people to live holy lives.

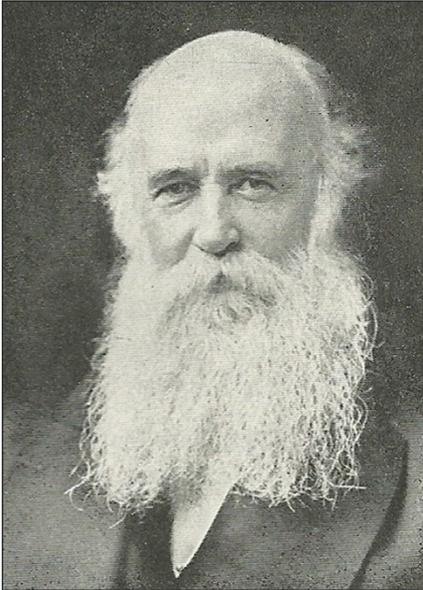
Another distinctive of the movement was the practice of praying for those in the church who were physically ill. This emphasis developed in the movement largely due to a terrible plague that swept through Australia at that time. To this movement he gave the name “Zion” since the Bible teaches in the book of Hebrews that believers in Christ are citizens of the heavenly Jerusalem and, therefore, should live like they belong there. So the name “Zion” was used because the goal of the movement was to encourage Christians to set their minds on their true and eternal home, the city where God will forever dwell with His people.

¹ For a brief overview on Dowie, see D. W. Faupel, “Dowie, John Alexander”, in *Dictionary of Scottish Church History and Theology*, org. ed. Nigel M. de S. Cameron (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1993), 256.

It is important to point out that the Zion movement was not alone in its effort to awaken churches from their spiritual apathy at that time. For example, there was a dynamic movement happening within the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa. This movement was being led by a minister named Andrew Murray, who was also well known for his emphasis on holiness and divine healing.

The Formation of the Christian Catholic Church in Zion

After the Zion movement became well known in Australia, Dowie decided to go on a missionary tour, which would begin with the United States of America (USA). In the early 1890s, Dowie arrived with his family in Chicago and felt that it should become his ministry headquarters. God opened a great door for preaching the gospel there, though it was accompanied by much persecution.



Rev. John Alexander Dowie

While in Chicago, Dowie started what he called “healing homes”. Christians who were sick came to stay in these homes to receive prayer and Christian teaching until they recovered. This drew a lot of attention and was an attractive feature of the movement to many.

Along with many people converting to Christianity through the Zion movement, many who were already Christians wanted to join it as well. However, sometimes their churches did not welcome them back after they began adhering to the teachings of the Zion movement, leaving them without a church home. As a result, Dowie felt that it was necessary to organize a church within the Zion movement so that they would have a place to fellowship. This church was founded in Chicago with five hundred charter members on February 22, 1896, and was called the “Christian Catholic Church in Zion”. The name Catholic, meaning “universal”, was used in the name because the Zion message emphasized the point that the good news about Jesus is for all people. News about the formation of this church spread quickly, even around the world, with the help of a weekly publication of the Zion movement called the *Leaves of Healing*.

The Arrival of the Zion Movement to South Africa

One country in particular that warmly welcomed this news through the *Leaves of Healing* was South Africa. The first main contact there for the Christian Catholic Church in Zion was a Congregational pastor living in Jo-

Johannesburg named Johannes Buchler. He began reading the *Leaves of Healing* and wanted his church to be affiliated with the Zion church in Chicago. After contacting Dowie, Buchler became the first South African pastor for the Christian Catholic Church in Zion in 1898. Buchler proved to be a significant person for the spread of this Christian movement in South Africa primarily because he influenced two other key ministers living in South Africa to join it as well. Those two ministers would shortly thereafter deliver the Zion message to many Africans, beginning with the Zulus and Sothos.

The first of these two ministers was Buchler's brother-in-law, Edger Mahon. Mahon was already an effective minister to the Zulus for the Salvation Army at that time. In the early 1900s, Mahon became deathly ill from tuberculosis and was told that he only had a few weeks to live. Upon hearing of this, Buchler sent a letter of encouragement to Mahon telling him not to give up hope and then travelled from Johannesburg to pray for him. The Lord answered his prayer by restoring Mahon's health. As a result, Mahon became a missionary for the Zion movement, and many of the Zulu people he had been ministering to through the Salvation Army also energetically embraced Zion's name and teachings about Christ. Along with ministering to the Zulus, a great door was opened for him to bring the gospel to the Sothos as well.

The other key minister that Johannes Buchler was responsible for bringing into the Zion church movement was a man named Petrus Louis Le Roux. Le Roux was also already an effective missionary to the Zulus through the Dutch Reformed Church. Le Roux had been a student of Andrew Murray and saw him as a mentor even after completing his formal education. After learning about the Zion movement from Buchler, Le Roux joined it in 1903. Like Mahon, he was accompanied by many of the Zulu people to whom he had been ministering. As a result of the labours of these three ministers (Buchler, Mahon, and LeRoux) joining the Zion work, the first members of the Zion movement in South Africa consisted of believers primarily from the following ethnicities: Afrikaans, British, Zulu, and Sotho.

At that time, there arose a great need for the Christian Catholic Church in Zion to be organized in South Africa. Due to this, Dowie decided to send Rev. Daniel Bryant and his wife, Emma. A church deacon and his wife, Mr. and Mrs. Rideout, also accompanied them. Much of their time was spent in Johannesburg as Rev. Bryant was pastoring a congregation there.

As the church work went forward in South Africa under the banner of Zion, rapid growth was happening especially among the Zulus and Sothos. This eventually spread to many other African people groups as well. It is important to note some of the reasons the Zion movement began to grow so quickly among the African people. One reason was that the issue of taking care of everyone in the community was of great interest to them. Therefore, the teaching about praying for the sick in the church naturally resonated with that value. In addition, the fact that the Zion message emphasized the importance of all nationalities to God brought a sense of dignity that many were

hungering for. Furthermore, the timing of the arrival of the Zion movement coincided with the Anglo-Boer war. This created an extraordinary hunger for the gospel message, which the Zion movement was powerfully delivering.



Daniel Bryant visiting Mr. and Mrs. Le Roux and Early Zulu Zionists at Wakkerstroom, 1904

Some of the first African Zionists

At this point in explaining the story of Zion in Africa, it is crucial to take time to look at the lives of some of the African Zionists during the early 1900s. It was a marvelous work that God was doing in the lives of many. For example, there were remarkable African ministers like Timothy Mabuza, a former Methodist Evangelist from Natal, who joined the work after hearing Mahon preach. Mabuza travelled extensively and was responsible for bringing hundreds of drunkards, witch doctors, and others to repentance and faith in Christ. On one occasion, a man named Nongqai Mazibuko travelled fifty miles with his wife and dying daughter to meet Mabuza because he heard that Mabuza worked with Mahon and that sick people were healed through their prayers. When they arrived, Mabuza first explained the way of salvation to them through faith in Christ Jesus. However, the husband and wife were not interested in that but only came to seek healing for their daughter. Mabuza explained to them that God would not heal their child if they were going to continue living in their sin. So Mabuza prayed fervently for the salvation of this couple. After some time the couple began to understand their need to be forgiven, and they happily accepted Jesus Christ as their Lord and Saviour. Mazibuko was so excited about this new life in Christ that he invited Mabuza to come to his village and share the good news about Jesus with all of his old friends.

Along with mentioning ministers like Timothy Mabuza, it is worth noting the significant role that choirs played in the early Zion ministry. When writing about a visit to Le Roux's ministry headquarters in Wakkerstroom, Bryant testified about an all-night church service, which included singing until morning. Likewise, Mahon trained a gospel choir which was known to have some remarkable voices. They even wrote some of their own hymns. It is said that their singing continually melted hard hearts to repent and believe the good news about Jesus.

Another remarkable characteristic of many of the first African Zionists was their courageous stance for Christian holiness. When Daniel and Emma Bryant visited Le Roux in Wakkerstroom, they were encouraged by the growing maturity of the converts that Le Roux had been teaching. For example, the converts had given up the practices of drinking beer and the use of tobacco. They had also given up all forms of witchcraft in which they had formerly trusted. Now, they were trusting in God alone and seeking to live lives that were pleasing to Him. While visiting there, Rev. Daniel Bryant baptized 141 believers in Christ. It was noted that the baptism that day was the most beautiful and quiet service they had ever witnessed.



Rev. Daniel Bryant baptizing 141 Christians at Wakkerstroom, South Africa, May, 1904

Just as in Chicago, converting to Christ in Africa often resulted in severe persecution from the worldly. A case in point was a woman who was converted through the preaching of Zachariah Zulu, who partnered in ministry with Timothy Mabuza. When she refused to make beer due to her Christian convictions, her husband was so angry that he thrust a spear through her chest. After seizing the weapon she managed to call for help. Through the prayers of many believers, God spared her life. Her husband was then arrested and put into prison. After recovering, she began to visit her husband in prison, bringing him food. Her Christian kindness eventually won him to Christ and upon his release he joined the church and became a local preacher.

There is no way to include all of the stories that are worth telling about the early Zionists and those who were affected by their ministry. The ones mentioned here are just examples to describe what the early Zion movement was like when it arrived and began to grow in southern Africa.

A sad turn towards syncretism

Unfortunately, although there were capable leaders among the African Zionists and devoted members in the churches, their connection with the Christian Catholic Church in Zion in the USA was lost at a critical time. Out of the four couples that played such a key role in starting the Zion movement in South Africa, only the Mahons continued in the work.² They did their best to influence as many as possible, but the fact is that many of the early Zionists were left without enough spiritual oversight and encouragement. The Zion movement continued to spread but was quickly becoming syncretistic as many began trying to combine Biblical teachings with traditional African beliefs. This happened due to the influence of another movement that was pressuring African churches to hold on to their traditional beliefs.

Today, Zionists make up a third of the African population in South Africa. In the neighboring country of Swaziland, half of the population considers themselves to be Zionists. It is estimated that there could be around fifteen to eighteen million Zionists in southern Africa, making it the fastest growing new religious movement in the world. Sadly, the message of the gospel was lost in the Zion churches due to the syncretism that set in.

Evidence of an awakening among the Zionists in Africa

Though it is very disheartening that the Zion movement in Africa drifted away from its original biblical teachings, something amazing has been happening in the last few decades. Many Zionists in Africa are asking for an explanation of their spiritual heritage and are once again expressing a deep hunger for pure biblical teachings. Hundreds of requests for help are being sent out on behalf of the Zionists in southern Africa.

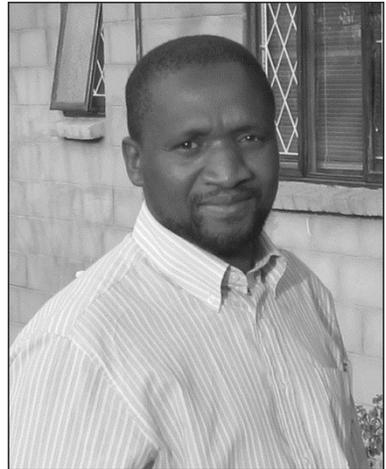
In the 1970s, the Christian Catholic Church in the USA was informed about the status of the Zionists in Africa. At that time, under the direction of Reverend R. Ottersen, strong efforts began to re-establish contact with the Zionists in southern Africa. In 1985, the Christian Catholic Church sent out Rev. and Mrs. Kuehl, the first missionaries to work among the Zionists in Africa since the Bryants. This was of great historical importance because they teamed up with the Mahon Mission, a work in South Africa that continued on from Edger Mahon's ministry. Together, the Christian Catholic

² The Bryants returned to the USA in 1908. Rev. Daniel Bryant then became the first pastor at a church known today as Grace Missionary Church (GMC). GMC partnered with the Mahons through prayer and financial support. In 1908, the Reoux withdrew from the Zion church work and joined the Apostolic Faith Mission (AFM). Rev. Le Roux's efforts of bringing Zionists to AFM proved unsuccessful.

Church and the Mahon Mission began the large endeavor of reaching the millions of lost Zionists. To signify this, the Mahon Mission changed its name to the Zion Evangelical Ministries of Africa (ZEMA). Since then, other significant mission organizations such as The Evangelical Alliance Mission (TEAM) and Serving In Missions (SIM) have begun partnering with ZEMA in this worthy work. The effort to reconnect the African Zionists with their historical Christian roots continues to this day and is steadily growing in missionary personnel.

In the past three decades, much progress has been made through the missionary endeavors. One significant tool for evangelism has been a course called “This We Believe”. This course explains the Evangelical Protestant roots of the Zion movement and the beliefs of the Christian Catholic Church. Along with this, a four-year Bible School program called “Zion Evangelical Bible School” (ZEBS) has been developed for the training of Zion leaders and has been growing steadily. Today, there are over forty locations in southern Africa (including in South Africa, Swaziland, Mozambique, and Zimbabwe) where ZEBS are being offered. The result of this work is that leaders with a passion for preaching the good news about Jesus Christ are once again being raised up among the Zionists.

One such example is a Zion minister named Robert Thunywashe. He received Christ as his Lord and Saviour at the age of twelve and then was greatly encouraged in the Lord by his grandmother. Later, he was encouraged to study at Union



Rev. Robert Thunywahe

Bible Institute in Pietermaritzburg, where he received a Diploma in Biblical Studies in 1997. In 1998, a ZEMA missionary named Richard Akers invited him to help with teaching and interpreting at the Zion Evangelical Bible School in Mtata. Today, Thunywashe, who has a sincere heart for winning fellow Zionists to Christ, is responsible for teaching about 120 students at six ZEBS in the Eastern Cape province.

An exemplary Zionist from the Kwa-Zulu Natal province is a minister named Khuba Mpungose. His mother was a witchdoctor and as a young person he was told that he was also expected to become one. However, after coming to faith in Christ alone for salvation, he told his family that as a Christian he was not allowed to do those things. Mpungose completed the ZEBS program as well as additional biblical studies in Durban and is now teaching at several ZEBS. He even had the privilege of influencing his own mother to put her faith in Christ.

In the Gauteng province of South Africa, there is a very influential ZEBS instructor named Godfrey Maseko. Soon after the Kuehls arrived to South Africa, they were welcomed by Mr. and Mrs. Maseko and have been friends with them ever since. Soon after that time, Maseko gave his life to Christ. Later on, he completed the ZEBS program. However, after that, the Lord was putting it on his heart to study further. After being accepted to study at the International College of Bible and Missions in Roodeport, he immediately resigned from his job as a trainer for a printing company so that he could give his full time to biblical studies. Amazingly, the Lord provided all the funds necessary through a Christian friend and missionary. He completed the degree in 2004 and went on to complete an honors program in 2006. In 2004 he also began teaching at ZEBS. Now he is teaching at six locations in the Gauteng province. Recently, he and Tim Kuehl started a school in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe. At the first class they had seventy-six Zionists students who were delighted to begin the program. At least one student travelled as far as four hundred kilometers to attend. It is truly amazing what God is doing once again among many such Zionists in southern Africa.

The aim of all this work is to assist in bringing the Zion church movement back to its faith in, and obedience to, the Lord Jesus Christ. There is so much more that could be said about the marvelous work that the Lord is doing among the Zionists in Africa. However, the information above is just meant to be a snapshot of what this ministry looks like. Again, the evidence suggests that an awakening is taking place among the Zionists in southern Africa, but only time will tell how the story will finish. May the Lord guide the movement back to Himself. If you are a believer in Christ, you are invited to pray for the Zionists in southern Africa. In fact, perhaps the Lord is calling you to join this work.

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