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A table of contents for the *Africa Journal of Evangelical Theology* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_ajet-02.php

THE ROOTS OF THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF EAST AFRICA: THE EAST AFRICA SCOTTISH MISSION 1889-1901

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In a previous issue of AJET (14.2 1995) Professor Omulokoli researched the "Foundational History of the Africa Inland Church, 1895-1903." In a continuation of his historical research of the beginnings of churches in Kenya, Professor Omulokoli traces the roots of the Presbyterian Church of East Africa. Those early pioneering days of Christian missions were not meant for the timid or weak. Many laid down their lives for the cause of Christ. But beyond the human factor lay the sovereign God who paved the way and enabled his servants to lay the foundations of the Christian Church as we know it today.

INTRODUCTION: FORMATION OF THE EAST AFRICA SCOTTISH MISSION

The Presbyterian Church was not introduced to East Africa by the Church itself, but rather, by a group of committed lay Christians who formed a private Christian body known as the East Africa Scottish Mission (EASM). In 1888, the Imperial British East Africa Company (IBEAC) was formed and given a

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Royal Charter by the British government to conduct trade and commence in East Africa.¹ As the Company took control over the territory under its jurisdiction, some of its directors felt that they should also turn their attention to the spiritual and moral well-being of the people in the region. Among these were, Sir William Mackinnon, who was the chairman of the Company, Mr. Alexander Low Bruce, who was a son-in-law of Dr. David Livingstone, and Sir T. Fowell Buxton, from a renowned philanthropic family.² With this in mind they formed a private Christian body in 1889 known as the East African Scottish Mission.³

The Mission was to work along comprehensive lines, combining evangelistic or spiritual, education, medical, and industrial elements. This was in tune with the thinking of Livingstone and others who believed that the best way of evangelising Africa was on the broad basis of Christianity, commerce, and civilization. The implementation of this kind of philosophy had proved successful at Lovedale and Blythswood in South Africa, as well as at Blantyre and Livingstonia in Malawi.⁴ It was in this connection that when the Mission was looking for a suitable leader, its directors asked the Free Church of Scotland to release to them Dr. James Stewart, the Principal of Lovedale, for one year to enable him to start the Mission's work in East Africa.

As the task of recruiting the missionary party went on, apart from Stewart, there was another person from the South African front. This was Dr. Robert Unwin Moffat, a grandson and a namesake of the famed missionary in Botswana, Robert Moffat. Together with these two, there was also a group of four people from Britain. These were, Thomas Watson as evangelist, John Linton as carpenter, John Grieg as engineer, and Cornelius Rahman as storekeeper. The two groups converged at Mombasa, and, together with George Wilson, an employee of the Company as guide, they eventually left for the interior on 19th September, 1891. Their instructions then were that they should establish the first mission station at Dagoretti, a place where the

¹ C.P. Groves. *The planting of Christianity in Africa. Volume Three, 1878-1914.* London. Lutterworth Press, 1964. First printed in 1955, p. 26.

² Roland Oliver. *The Missionary Factor in East Africa.* London: Longmans Green & Co., 1952, p. 170.

Mrs. Henry E. Scott. *A Saint in Kenya: A Life of Marion Scott Stevenson.* London. Hodder and Stoughton, 1932, p. 58, includes the name of Peter Mackinnon.

³ Robert MacPherson. *The Presbyterian Church in Kenya.* Nairobi: Presbyterian Church of East Africa, 1970, p. 21. Note: For much of the work, I have relied heavily, but not exclusively, on Macpherson.

⁴ C.P. Groves, p. 88: Mackay refers to this as the approach which takes care of the hand, head, and heart.

Company had set up an outpost which George Wilson had evacuated in early 1891, after about one year of existence.

INITIAL EFFORTS AT KIBWEZI

Contrary to the wishes and instructions of the directors of the Mission, Stewart seemed to have decided early against Dagoretti⁵ and instead, opted for an alternate site among the Kamba. Eventually, because of adverse reports at that time about the situation at Dagoretti, and since, on the surface, Kibwezi seemed to be the most suitable option, after the missionary party had stopped there for some time, Stewart decided to establish the first mission station at Kibwezi. Located on the Maasai-Kamba border, and about 200 miles from the coast, Kibwezi looked attractive when the group arrived there and made the decision on it in December, 1891. Soon, an agreement was reached in which the Mission purchased 300 acres of land there from Kilungu, the chief of the area.

Once the group had settled on Kibwezi as the right choice, the process of opening up the mission station began in earnest with the construction of the required buildings. These facilities included houses, stores, cow-sheds, a dispensary, and a church. One of the highlights of this early period was the completion of the construction of a church, which was duly opened in a special service on 10th March, 1892. It was after this first crucial landmark that Stewart went to Scotland on leave that month, leaving behind Dr. Moffat to be in charge of the work of the Mission.

While the work of establishing the Mission station at Kibwezi was going on, the Mission began to experience losses in the personnel sphere. First, in the very initial days, John Greg died of dysentery on 18th December, 1891. Then in March, 1892, Stewart went on furlough, and from there, relocated to his base in South Africa. This bad situation changed drastically for the worse in that after the personnel losses of the period of June, 1892 to January, 1893, Thomas Watson was the only person left in the work of the Mission. We learn that,

In June, Rebman seems to have had some sort of breakdown and had to be repatriated. John Linton fell ill and remained ailing for the rest of the year. George Wilson, having completed his assignment as guide, took charge of work on the Mombasa-Kibwezi road. In December, Dr. Moffat resigned to join Sir Gerald Portal's expedition to Uganda. In January,

⁵ Horace R.A. Philip. *A New Day In Kenya*. London. World Dominion Press, 1936, p. 15.

1893, Linton died. Watson was now, after only 13 months, the sole survivor at Kibwezi of the original missionary party.⁶

At the end of January, 1893, Watson was the lone missionary at Kibwezi. This state of affairs changed when three new people arrived within the next twelve months. First, on 15th March, 1893, a medical man, Dr. David Charters, and a gardener, Mr. John Paterson arrived as new recruits. Then on 12th January, 1894, a teacher, Victor Hill, and his wife joined the missionary team.

At the mission station, progress picked up in a number of directions. After some experiments in brick making, a brick dormitory was erected. With time, brick making became an established feature of the station's development, and in turn, this facilitated the building of many more permanent houses. In the agricultural sphere, Paterson's skills and competence were soon demonstrated as Kibwezi increasingly took on the picture of a thriving garden. With experiments in farming grapes and coffee, by 1896, the Mission was able to supply coffee seed for planting to two European farmers around Nairobi.⁷ All the while evangelistic activities were being promoted as well.

When the personnel situation appeared to be stable and the work at Kibwezi running smoothly, Watson traveled to the upper areas of Ukambani where he opened a new station at Nzoi in 1894. In this same year, however, two set-backs were experienced. To begin with, Dr. Charters, together with a guest went on a hunting trip near Kibwezi but never came back, possibly killed by the Maasai or wild animals.⁸ Next, in December, 1894, the Hills resigned on account of ill-health and returned home. When Charters disappeared, Watson was forced to abandon the new station at Nzoi and return to Kibwezi to take charge of the work there.

With the reduction in the missionary task force which had been experienced in 1894, it was truly encouraging when a medical person, Dr. Matthew Wilson, and a carpenter, Mr. James Lundie, arrived as new reinforcements in April, 1895. This restored the stability which was needed in the personnel level at Kibwezi. This same year, 1895, Watson and Dr. Wilson made an exploratory visit to Dagoretti with a view to gauging its suitability as the central station of the Mission. Their assessment was positive, and after

⁶ Robert MacPherson, p. 25.

⁷ C.P. Groves, p. 223: Paterson introduced the growing of the coffee crop in Kenya.

⁸ H.R.A. Philip, p. 16.

discussion with the rest of the missionary team at Kibwezi, it was agreed upon that it was important and urgent that the field headquarters of the Mission should be relocated from Kibwezi to Dagoretti. It was resolved, however, that implementation should wait until Watson was able to go home on furlough, during which period he would present to the Mission directors in Edinburgh the case for moving the main station from Kibwezi to Dagoretti.

Watson was not able to leave for Britain until June, 1896, and remained there for about fifteen months, arriving back at Kibwezi on 24th October, 1897. While in Scotland, he had been involved in a number of significant developments on behalf of the Mission. First, he had been ordained as a minister in the Free Church of Scotland. Secondly, he had assisted in inspiring the Mission's directing committee at home to capture a fresh vision for the work in East Africa. Since the death in 1893 of two key directors of the Mission, Mackinnon and Bruce, the Mission had suffered from lack of effective leadership. In the reorganisation which ensued, the committee received a new lease of life. Through this rejuvenation, for the first time, a code of regulations was issued, and 40,000 pounds was raised in the form of an endowment trust. Thirdly, and lastly, Watson was given permission by the committee to transfer the central station of the Mission from Kibwezi to Kikuyu, upon his return to Kenya.

TRANSFER OF THE MISSION TO KIKUYU

Watson returned from his furlough in Britain on 24th October, 1897, and joined Paterson, Lundie, and Dr. Wilson at Kibwezi. Three days later, on 27th October, he began making arrangements aimed at setting up the central station of the Mission at Kikuyu. First, he went to see the Commissioner-General of the Protectorate at Machakos, where the latter was then on a visit from his base in Mombasa. Next, he went to Kikuyu to hammer out some agreements with the local leaders. Although Watson had preferred a particular site near the Company's former fort at Dagoretti, the leader of the local clan, Munyua, a son of Waiyaki, offered him land at neighbouring Baraniki instead. It was on 2nd December, 1897, when Watson left Kikuyu, returned to Kibwezi, and from there proceeded to Mombasa to secure final authority from the government to acquire the site at Baraniki as offered by Munyua.

Getting approval from the government took long. When it had been finally granted, Watson left Kibwezi on 29th February, 1898, to open a station at Baraniki.⁹ He was joined there by Dr. Wilson on 30th March. In the mean time,

⁹ Robert MacPherson. p. 27: This marks the actual moving to the Kikuyu area and not August when Watson merely returned there after evacuating Kibwezi. See H.R.A. Philip, p. 17.

the piece of land purchased from Munyua, and the necessary stamp duty requirements from the government were fulfilled. As they cleared the land, they also began the construction of buildings. Then on Sunday, 10th April, they began holding English services in Fort Smith.

In December, 1897, Paterson had gone on leave. On the very day on which English services commenced at Fort Smith, news had come to Baraniki that Lundie, at Kibwezi, was sick from black water fever. Dr. Wilson went to attend to him at Kibwezi before proceeding to Mombasa to recruit some Swahili workers for various tasks. As it turned out, on his way back from Mombasa, Dr. Wilson himself died at Mtito Andei on 8th June, 1898, of black water fever. Watson was forced back to Kibwezi in June, and when Lundie's health continued to deteriorate, he repatriated him to Britain on 11th July. This meant that as had happened in January, 1883, Watson was alone again in July 1889, but now, with two stations to take care of. In the midst of this predicament, he evacuated the Kibwezi station on 27th August, 1898, and returned to Kikuyu.

Following his closure of Kibwezi on 28th August, 1898, Watson settled at Baraniki where he began making progress in his work. It was here that he was joined on 7th January, 1899 by two missionaries, Paterson, who was returning from leave, and Alexander Walker a carpenter who accompanied Paterson. An additional missionary, arrived on 27th February, in the person of a medical man, Dr. Homer. It was not long after his arrival that Dr. Homer disapproved of Baraniki as being an unhealthy location not suitable for the main station of the Mission. This eventually resulted in the relocation to the present site at Thogoto where thirty acres of land was purchased on 20th July, 1899, with a further ten acres bought in the following year. With this done, the construction of permanent mission buildings was embarked upon, facilitated by the availability of strong quarry stone on one hand, and the success in endeavours in brick-making on the other. When Thogoto was opened, however, Baraniki was not closed as Paterson remained there, continuing with his agricultural projects.

PROGRESS UNDER HARSHIPS

There was wide-spread drought in the entire region in the last three years of the 1890's. In the case of Kikuyu and its vicinity, this was accompanied by famine, rinderpest and smallpox. These caused much havoc among the population and drove the mission to devising ways and means of dealing with this crisis. Because of the complications which smallpox had contributed to the combined difficulties, it was estimated that by April, 1900, about 50% of the population at Kikuyu had died. An appeal for famine relief was made to the directors of the Mission in Scotland. When the financial assistance for this

purpose was released towards the end of 1899, those on the actual scene set up a famine relief camp at Thogoto on 8th January, 1900, under Watson, with another one at Baraniki, operated by Paterson and Walker.

The tragedies of drought, famine, rinderpest, and smallpox not only issued into famine relief on the part of the Mission, but also provided opportunities for assisting the surrounding community in other ways. At one level, in May, 1900, Mrs. Watson started a day school for refugee children, and in another direction, an evening school was set up to serve the young men who were workers in the mission in the day time.¹⁰ This laid the foundation for the educational work of the Church, which was to prove to be a very significant facet of its endeavours in later years. While all this was going on, the English Sunday services which Watson had started in 1898 at Fort Smith were maintained. Then, when normalcy returned after the years of struggle under drought, famine, and disease, Sunday services in Kiswahili were started at Thogoto on 19th August, 1900. With the confidence of the local Kikuyu people having been gained, the Mission seemed to be set on a path of progress and prosperity.

These bright prospects were, however, jolted by crucial occurrences on the personnel scene in 1900. Earlier, Watson had traveled to Mombasa where he had married Minnie Cunning on 18th December, 1899, at the Church Missionary Society (CMS) Church at the Freretown mission station. In the latter part of 1900, Dr. Homer resigned in September, then Walker had to be repatriated home, and finally, a tired and worn out Watson succumbed to an attack of pneumonia, dying on 4th December, 1900, almost a year after his wedding. This signified the end of an era.

Watson's death in December, 1900 left two people in the work of the Mission. One of these was John Patterson who continued with his agricultural activities at Baraniki, where he had remained and retained when Thogoto was opened as the main station. The other one was Watson's wife, Minnie, widowed after only one year of marriage. She took overall charge of Thogoto, running the two schools, one for refugee children during the day and the other one in the evenings for the young men working in the mission station. She even went on to ensure that the quarrying of stones continued, convinced that they would be needed for building in the near future.

With the death of Watson, the Mission had reached a crucial turning point in its life. In the past, even when the missionary force decreased, Watson was always there as the constant factor from the inception of the Mission. With

¹⁰ (Mrs.) Henry E. Scott, p. 59.

the disappearance of that main chain of continuity, very significant steps needed to be taken to propel the Mission beyond that moment of loss and deprivation.

HANDING OVER TO THE CHURCH OF SCOTLAND MISSION

The East Africa Scottish Mission had been founded in 1889 as a private venture by a group of concerned Christians. Although it had experienced a slump after two of its key directors died in 1893, it had sprung up to new vigour following Watson's encouragement during his furlough in 1896-1897. It was providential that even before his death towards the end of 1900, negotiations had been underway for the directors of the Mission to hand it over to the Church of Scotland to administer its work. With his death, the tempo for this take-over was accelerated.

Indeed, on 15th December, 1900, less than two weeks after his death, the directors formally approached the Foreign Mission Committee (FMC) of the Church of Scotland on this matter. Although there was a long transitional period in which the details were being worked out, the basic framework of the agreement between the two parties had been reached by 21st April, 1901. It was understood that the Mission would hand over all assets and endowments, and that the Church in turn, would fully take over the work of the Mission in East Africa. When these steps were taken and the changes effected, the Church of Scotland Mission (CSM) took over from the East Africa Scottish Mission (EASM) in 1901.¹¹

¹¹ (Mrs.) Henry E. Scott, p. 60. Although the handing over was agreed upon in 1901, the process was not actually completed until 1907.