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Samuel Mutendi of the Zion Christian Church:  
Interpretations of a Prophet  
By Dana L. Robert

From the 1910s through 1940s, a wave of indigenous church leaders spread across southern and central Africa. As the white governments of South Africa and Rhodesia (Zimbabwe) steadily tightened legal restrictions on African labor, and restricted land ownership, independent prophets such as Enoch Mngijima, Edward Lion, Engenas Lekganyane, and Johane Maranke launched evangelistic movements that recruited thousands of rural, displaced, and migrant Africans into what scholars later called “African Independent” or “African Initiated” Churches (AICs). Early AIC leaders had prior relationships with a range of missions including Presbyterian, Methodist, Dutch Reformed, and the pentecostal Apostolic Faith Mission. But they chafed under restrictive white control in both church and state. Inspired by dreams and visions, and certain of their own dignity and callings, they founded churches characterized by deep engagement with rural African cultures. By the mid twentieth century, the AICs were the largest and most vigorous evangelistic movements in southern and central Africa. Today in South Africa, the Zion Christian Church (ZCC) of Engenas Lekganyane remains the largest denomination. [1]

One of the most important of the early AIC leaders was migrant laborer and former policeman Samuel Mutendi of Rhodesia. After having joined the nascent Zionist group of Lekganyane in South Africa, around 1925 Mutendi returned to Rhodesia and started his own ministry. He led the Rhodesian Zion Christian Church until his death in 1976. Under his leadership, the church grew into one of the largest denominations in the country. [2] Mutendi was known as a healer, especially for barren women. He believed in education and self-improvement, and he founded schools wherever he went—in defiance of white regulations, and for which he was arrested multiple times. In common with other large Zionist movements, he founded a holy headquarters or “Zion,” like a residential mission station to which people came to be healed, or live nearby. As a member of the royal Rozvi clan of the Karanga (Shona), Mutendi took on the prerogatives of a traditional chief, including rainmaking through use of his holy staff, and having seventeen wives and approximately 80 children. Samuel Mutendi exercised prophetic ministry in defiance of the white Ian Smith regime during the protracted Zimbabwean liberation war of 1965-1980. He preached that Africans should not bow and scrape at the presence of whites. He sued the white government for conniving with the head tribal chief in the country to seize

Rozvi land, on which there were ancestral graves. Several of his sons were arrested for protesting the land seizure, tried in court, and sentenced to prison. [3] With the loss of his land, and despite his advanced age, Mutendi led his followers to found a new holy Zion City at Defe Dopota in the north of the country.

The ministry of Samuel Mutendi exemplifies the challenges of historical documentation of major figures, most of whose lives were spent in oral contexts among non-literate peoples. His ministry began among a shifting terrain of labor migration, increasing racially-based legal disabilities, modernization through education, and crisis over control of land. Indigenous Christian leaders met the challenges of their context by crafting multiple new religio-social configurations and hybridities. Despite secular sociological biases that fail to acknowledge churches as “social movements,” the Zionist movement of Samuel Mutendi, David Masuka, Andreas Shoko, and others, represented quiet but firm widespread resistance to narratives of white control. Religious prophets preached sermons in the vernacular, exorcised evil spirits, cured witches, and led rural healing movements that were ridiculed or ignored by mainstream missions. Most references by missionaries or government officials dismissed them as heathens to be converted, or latent troublemakers to be regulated. Thus in their early decades, these ministries were largely undocumented by modern scholars. The first major effort to document them was by Swedish Lutheran missionary bishop Bengt Sundkler, whose 1948 classic *Bantu Prophets in South Africa* put the phenomenon of AICs on the scholarly agenda. [4]

The three documents in this issue of the *Journal of African Christian Biography* represent different lenses on a leader much of whose ministry, therefore, remains lost in the fog of time. However, his stature as founder of a major tradition in Zimbabwe means that his legacy is ripe for appropriation, interpretation, and reinterpretation by a range of interested parties, including scholars and contemporary church leaders who draw upon his authority for their own purposes. As founding father, or “saint” of the ZCC, his burial place at Defe attracts tens of thousands of followers in annual pilgrimages. The largest branch of his succession, led by his son Nehemiah Mutendi, has constructed a huge and impressive Zion complex at Mbungo Estates outside Masvingo in Central Zimbabwe. The importance of the ZCC in Zimbabwe today is indicated by its role in the inauguration of church member Emmerson Mnangagwa as third president of Zimbabwe on November 25, 2017. Bishop Nehemiah gave the inaugural prayer, and the ZCC band and dancers performed in their church uniforms.

With the destruction of the Zimbabwean economy in the early 2000s, the resulting emigration of thousands of Zimbabwean ZCC members has

expanded a primarily rural movement abroad and into more urban areas. Thus the meaning of Samuel Mutendi's legacy is being renegotiated in a transcultural context, and litigated by interested parties in South Africa and elsewhere. For example, the mammoth ZCC of Engenas Lekganyane has sought to exert control over Zimbabwean Zionists living in South Africa, based on the spurious grounds that the original incorporation of the ZCC name in South Africa entitles it to control the Zimbabwean church. There is a lot riding on shaping the narrative of Samuel Mutendi, even as many aspects of his life simply lack full documentation in a modern scholarly sense.

From a postcolonial perspective, therefore, one can argue that all of history about Samuel Mutendi is a matter of interpretation—though critical historians will find some evidence more convincing than others. The earliest documents about Mutendi's church were for internal purposes, coming from oral tradition. Thus variation in the Mutendi narrative was a normal part of the process of church development. Only in 1965 did a major scholarly project focus on the Shona Zionists, when a young doctoral student M. L. "Inus" Daneel moved for three years into the rural homelands of central Zimbabwe. Having grown up on a Dutch Reformed mission station near Fort Victoria (now Masvingo), Daneel was fluent in Karanga, the Shona dialect of Samuel Mutendi. As a participant-observer, Daneel lived for length of time in Zion City with the Mutendi family. His close relationship with Samuel Mutendi was such that Mutendi adopted him as a son and gave him unique access on both a personal and scholarly level. Daneel's three-volume *Old and New in Southern Shona Independent Churches* remains the classic, founding study of Shona independency, with which subsequent interpreters must reckon. [5] Of the early generation of AIC scholars, including Bengt Sundkler, Harold Turner, and G. C. Oosthuizen, Daneel was the only one to have lived for years among the people he studied. He subsequently spent decades facilitating theological education by extension among them, and founding a grassroots environmental movement that in its heyday was the largest tree planting movement in southern Africa. [6] In 1991, the Ndaza Zionists consecrated him a bishop in honor of his work among them, and by virtue of his adoption he remains the "elder brother" of Bishop Nehemiah Mutendi, current head of the main branch of the ZCC.

The first essay in this journal issue is thus a brief encyclopedia entry by Inus Daneel, first published in 1998 in the *Biographical Dictionary of Christian Missions*, edited by Gerald H. Anderson. [7] While the entry gives a few basic facts about Mutendi's life, several interpretive features should be noted. In this essay, Daneel focuses on the leadership of Samuel Mutendi in launching large evangelistic campaigns. The insistence that Mutendi himself was a "missionary,"

and the original publication of the article in a dictionary on missions, echoes the important interpretive argument put forward in Daneel's writings that AICs were not primarily reactive movements to white racism, but proactive missionary movements in their own right. The vast majority of converts to AICS were not previously members of western denominations, but were evangelized by great indigenous mission leaders. In other words, a leader like Samuel Mutendi should be interpreted on his own terms, as a great leader, and not through the lens of white-centered narratives about reaction to racism. A second interpretive point made in the brief biography is Daneel's interpretation of Mutendi as a "black icon" who "mirrored the life of Christ in an African setting." [8] This point stems from Mutendi's repeated assertions to Daneel that he was not himself a Messiah or Christ figure, but rather pointed his followers to Christ. This important theological point not only confirms the theological orthodoxy of the Zionist movement, but it contradicts Bengt Sundkler's 1948 claim that Zionist leaders were "black Messiahs." [9] The brief biographical entry thus establishes Samuel Mutendi as a mainstream church leader, missionary, and theologian.

The second article in this issue, by Dr. Vengesai Chimininge, represents second generation scholarship. Senior Lecturer in Religious Studies at the Open University of Zimbabwe, and also a supporter of the church, Chimininge builds upon the primary internal Mutendi church narrative from the 1950s (*Rungano*) and Daneel's writings. The article goes further, however, by deepening and extending the analysis of Samuel Mutendi's family origins, and bringing to fore the series of dreams and visions through which he established his leadership. [10] The strength of the article lies in its engagement with the spiritual grounding of Mutendi's movement. It relies also upon interviews with current church leaders and Mutendi family members. Chimininge takes at face value the supernatural origins of Mutendi's ministry as recounted in the *Rungano*, and narratives of his calling as affirmed by the doctrines and beliefs of the current church. Thus his approach to Samuel Mutendi says more about the current self-identity of the church than do Daneel's observations from the 1960s.

Chimininge's focus on the semi-autobiographical *Rungano* and on the self-representation of the current leadership is not consistent in all respects with Daneel's analysis. The use of different sources leads to different interpretive emphases. Daneel's accounts were based on listening and recording many dozens of Mutendi's sermons, and of spending months in personal discussions with him in the 1960s and 70s. As a product of the church, the *Rungano* represents the church's theological narrative and divine charter. It did not necessarily represent Bishop Mutendi's own self-presentation, though obviously Mutendi allowed it. The *Rungano* narrative contains tropes of divine encounter clearly modeled on

the life of Jesus. In it, Mutendi is visited by the Angel Gabriel who calls him into ministry. Like Jesus, he raises a young girl from the dead. [11] He is queried by black religious leaders from the Dutch Reformed Church, who challenge his authority to preach without a license, in clear parallel to Jesus' questioning by Jewish religious authorities. In the *Rungano*, the parallel between the life of Jesus and that of Mutendi lend sacred authority to his ministry. Chiminingo also mentions dates that are highly significant to the history of the movement. He notes that Mutendi preached "fire baptism" in 1921, an act that would put his pentecostal roots prior to meeting Engenas Legkanyane. [12] With angels guiding him to partner with Legkanyane, Samuel Mutendi's spiritual pedigree flows from independent divine guidance, rather than any kind of derivative authority from Engenas Legkanyane, the founder of the South African ZCC.

The third document in this issue of the *Journal* is the composite of two recent reflections written by Inus Daneel. The chief purpose of these reflections is to share more information about the legacy of Samuel Mutendi by someone who knew him well during the 1960s and 1970s, both as a peer and an "adopted son." A second purpose is to defend Mutendi from accusations against his integrity made in 2016 by a western scholar. [13] As the only outsider to spend time with Mutendi in lengthy discussions, and live with him and his wives, Daneel's memoirs are particularly valuable to the church today. They contain insights and information to which nobody else was privy, including Mutendi's many children who experienced him as a father figure rather than personal confidant. As one of the oldest living "sons" of Mutendi, Daneel's words also carry authority that is respected by the current Bishop Nehemiah Mutendi, his "younger" brother. [14] This document, composed of memories of over fifty years ago by a friend and scholar, holds unique significance for future historical studies of the Zion Christian Church.

Daneel's recollections contain the strengths and weaknesses of an insider-outsider document, based on memories of years past. The obvious challenge of this kind of document is that memories can be faulty, as over time the mind shapes and rationalizes events from the past. Memoirs also can mix up chronologies and so should be cross-checked with documentation from the past era, such as newspaper accounts and other interviews. The main focus of the memoir is Daneel's own relationship with the Mutendi family, something that was hidden in the scholarship of the 1960s and 1970s, but is now being recalled before it is too late. Seen through the lens of a loving personal relationship with Samuel Mutendi, Daneel's memoir says as much about himself as it does about Mutendi.

An example of original material in this memoir is information on the home life of Mutendi and his wives in Zion City. A second example of unique material references the trial of the Mutendi family for resisting the seizure of Rozvi land. Daneel vividly remembers the strains of living as a white man who sided with the black population during the fifteen-year civil war. Thus the narrative is concerned with personal experiences of crossing racial divides, and solidarity in the face of a full-blown racial war. The hospitality of Samuel Mutendi and his wives extended to sharing family meals and down time with his white son. Public loyalty to each other went both ways. Daneel recalls how throughout the trial, he sat in the docket with the Mutendi sons, as an act of solidarity with his adopted family. [15] Then when the Mutendis were sentenced, Daneel used his own funds to bail out the entire family so that none of them had to serve prison time. They walked out of court together, a witness to interracial solidarity.

Each of the documents in this issue of the *JACB* focus on the biography of Samuel Mutendi. Their use of different sources and purposes provides varied readings of the life of a major Shona church leader. Together they portray him as a great prophet with regard to mission work, healing ministry, church planting, and public leadership during the age of apartheid in Rhodesia. Cumulatively, they demonstrate why the task of African Christian biography is both challenging and necessary for the documentation of African Christianity. None of the articles will be the last word on the historical analysis of Samuel Mutendi. But without them, future historians will not be able to understand the fullness of his life and legacy.

### Endnotes:

1. The *World Christian Database* estimates five million members as of 2015, Todd M. Johnson and Gina A. Zurlo, eds. *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed March 2018).  
<http://www.worldchristiandatabase.org.ezproxy.bu.edu/wcd/esweb.asp?WCI=Results&Query=183&PageSize=250&cntxt=1>.
2. The *World Christian Database* estimates that as of 2015, the Zimbabwean ZCC had 900,000 members, Johnson and Zurlo, *World Christian Database* (accessed March 2018).  
<http://www.worldchristiandatabase.org.ezproxy.bu.edu/wcd/esweb.asp?WCI=Results&Query=183&PageSize=250&cntxt=1>.
3. Inus Daneel, interview by author, March 7, 2018, Baton Rouge, Louisiana.
4. Bengt Sundkler, *Bantu Prophets in South Africa* (London: Lutterworth, 1948).
5. Marthinus L. Daneel, *Old and New in Southern Shona Independent Churches, vol. 1: Background and Rise of the Major Movements* (The Hague: Mouton, 1971), Daneel, *Old and New in Southern Shona Independent Churches, vol. 2: Church Growth: Causative Factors and Recruitment Techniques* (The Hague, 1974), Daneel, *Old and New in Southern Shona*

*Independent Churches, vol. 3: Church Leadership and Fission Dynamics* (Gweru, Zimbabwe: Mambo, 1988). For an online multimedia archive see Marthinus L. Daneel, *Old and New in Shona Religion*, <http://sites.bu.edu/shonareligion/>

6. See Marthinus L. Daneel, *African Earthkeepers, vol. 1: Interfaith Mission in Earth-Care* (Pretoria, Unisa: 1998), Daneel, *African Earthkeepers, vol. 2: Environmental Mission and Liberation in Christian Perspective* (Pretoria, Unisa, 1999).

7. Marthinus L. Daneel, "Samuel Mutendi," in *Biographical Dictionary of Christian Missions*, ed. Gerald Anderson (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998).

8. Daneel, "Samuel Mutendi," in *Biographical Dictionary of Christian Missions*, 483.

9. Between Sundkler's book *Bantu Prophets*, and his second book *Zulu Zion*, he had conversations with people to correct aspects of the first book. One of these issues was whether "black messianism" was an issue among Zionists. Daneel and Sundkler discussed this issue in person, and Daneel insisted to Bishop Sundkler that AIC leaders do not put themselves in the place of Jesus Christ when they act as traditional messengers, pleading and praying for their followers before Christ. In African traditional societies, the go-between is not the chief himself, and his power is derived from that of the chief. Daneel, interview by author, March 7, 2018.

10. See also Vengesai Chimininge. "A Phenomenological Quest of Understanding the Sacrality of the Defe Dopota Shrine in the Zion Christian Church of Samuel Mutendi" (master's thesis, University of Zimbabwe, 2005) and Vengesai Chimininge, "An Analysis of Myths and Rituals Associated with the Origins and Development of Zion Christian Church of Samuel Mutendi in Zimbabwe" (PhD diss., University of South Africa, 2012).

11. In his time with Mutendi in the 1960s, Daneel knew the *Rungano* and was aware of its claims that Mutendi had raised a girl from the dead. He did not press the issue with him. But in all the sermons he recorded, and the discussions he had with Mutendi, he never heard him claim the power of raising from the dead for himself. Instead, Samuel Mutendi repeatedly told his followers that he himself was not Jesus Christ. Like a traditional messenger, he would vouch for his followers before God. But only Jesus had the power to get them into heaven. Daneel, interview by author, March 7, 2018.

12. Barry Morton argues that archival evidence of church records proves that Mutendi was a leader in the Zion Apostolic Church prior to joining Legkanyane at a date later than that put forth in the *Rugano*. While Morton's analysis of church records is helpful and suggestive, his larger conclusion that Samuel Mutendi was a "liar" both ignores the bishop's legacy of integrity and resistance, and overanalyzes the meaning of the *Rugano* as a technical "autobiography" rather than a communally-generated, church resource based on oral traditions. Barry Morton, "Samuel Mutendi's Biography Cannot Be True" (unpublished manuscript, 2016),

[https://www.academia.edu/26700853/Samuel\\_Mutendis\\_Biography\\_Cannot\\_Be\\_True?auto=download](https://www.academia.edu/26700853/Samuel_Mutendis_Biography_Cannot_Be_True?auto=download), accessed March 9, 2018.

13. Morton, "Samuel Mutendi's Autobiography Cannot Be True." Morton's use of archival documents contradicts the *Rungano* at several key points.

14. Bishop Nehemiah named the church library and archives at Mbungu Estates after Daneel.

15. Daneel, interview by author, March 7, 2018.