

Empire, Gospel, and Culture

Colonialism has led to racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance, and . . . Africans and people of African descent, and people of Asian descent and indigenous peoples were victims of colonialism and continue to be victims of its consequences.

- *Durban Declaration of the World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance (2001)*, no. 14, 7.

To understand a nation, one must look at its history, culture, and religion, as well as the forces that shaped and transformed it. The following brief description of the history and identity of the Shona people of Zimbabwe and their traditional culture is intended to assist readers in understanding the foundations and developments of the Shona people and how they were transformed and shaped first by colonialism and second by missionary encounters. Like the Greeks and Romans, the Shona people have a mythos or a story that is foundational to their community.

SHONA ETHNOGRAPHY AS NEHANDA MYTHOLOGY

From time immemorial, migration and immigration have shaped and defined human evolution. The Shona people's history is one of migration, conflict, colonial encounters, and reconciliation. Like that of the Greeks and Romans, the Shona story is told and retold because it has significance for one generation after another. Every nation has founders who, in the course of history, have functioned as ancestors, religious priests, or political pillars. The foundations of the Shona can easily be traced to an area south of Zimbabwe called Masvingo, to an ancient city known as "Great Zimbabwe."¹ There is no doubt that Great Zimbabwe is the nerve center of Shona religion, politics, economics, and social

life. By the eleventh century CE, there was at Great Zimbabwe a powerful and organized trading society founded by the Shona ancestors.

Although Great Zimbabwe is no longer the center of the Shona worldview, the ruined city remains part of Shona foundational legend. Hence, the place is now called “Zimbabwean Ruins,” uninhabited but preserved as a valuable cultural center and tourist attraction. The place is attractive because of its stone walls that continue to stand even in the twenty-first century. European explorers and missionaries called one ruined edifice the “Acropolis and the Temple,” because it has a number of enclosures that lead into the inner religious parts of the complex. The name Zimbabwe is derived from these massive impressive stone walls, called *dzimba dzamabwe*, which in Shona means “stone buildings.”

God, kings, and Shona spirits were believed to reside in this place; even today people call it “the dwelling place of gods and kings.” Historical and archaeological discoveries have confirmed that in 1903, Great Zimbabwe was a center of much trade with nations such as India, China, and Persia, as well as the Near East and the Middle East. It is crucial to recognize that the people of Great Zimbabwe were involved not only in local trade but in international trade as well. The contact with other nationalities will be considered in the section below discussing missionary encounters, especially regarding the reception of the Abrahamic faith. Here it suffices to note that before the arrival of the British, Shona culture had contact with people from various parts of the world.

Notable artifacts that include huge soapstone birds have been discovered at Great Zimbabwe; these birds played a significant role in Shona religious culture. The bird, known in Shona as *Shiri ya Mwari*, *Hungwe Shirichena*, or God’s bird of white plumage, was familiar in and around Great Zimbabwe. Religiously, the bird’s function was to interpret the voice of God. Spirit mediums were able to understand and explain what God was saying through this bird, and, in most cases, the bird was rewarded with gifts of fruit and drink.² If this was the case, one can safely say that Great Zimbabwe was the epicenter of Shona religion and culture, and possibly the spiritual headquarters of the Shona ancestral cosmology.

Among other functions, Great Zimbabwe served as a military and economic center because of its location on the edge of the major gold-producing areas of southwestern Zimbabwe. Therefore, it is possible that a combination of religious, economic, and military factors contributed to political and administrative centralization by Shona kings and rulers. The power of kings was consolidated both by economic interests and religious institutions situated in Great Zimbabwe between centers of production (toward the west)

and marketing (toward the coast on the east). At the height of its glory and greatness, Great Zimbabwe attracted people from all over Africa, including Swahili-speaking people from the east coast of Africa. Great Zimbabwe was a place not only of trade, religion, and economics but also of political conflicts among ethnic rulers.

Shona history suggests that the decline of Great Zimbabwe was due to shortages of salt, a common commodity for cooking. I propose a more nuanced reason for decline. While salt is central in Shona traditions, it is also a symbol of wealth and prosperity. Thus, when Shona traditions mention the shortage of salt at Great Zimbabwe, it means that there was a great shortage of food supplies, pastures, fuel, gold, and copper not only at Great Zimbabwe but also around the city's hinterland. The scarcity of natural resources at Great Zimbabwe gave birth to new Shona ethnic empires, ruled by Mutota, who was the chief architect of the Changamire Empire, the Mwenemutapa Empire in the northern part of Zimbabwe, and the Rozvi Empire and Matopo Hills in Matabeleland. As the ruler of these empires, Mutota was always in search of better areas in and around Great Zimbabwe.

By the late fifteenth century, Great Zimbabwe faced competition from Shona ethnic dynasties in and around the region. The three main rivers in Zimbabwe—Mazoe, Zambezi, and Limpopo—were significant components of the Shona economy. The Mazoe River, a major tributary of the Zambezi River, linked the Zimbabwean goldfields and heartland with lower Zambezi trading settlements. The Mwenemutapa Empire also established trade routes to full capacity, linking all three major rivers. Thus, when David Livingstone and Cecil John Rhodes came to Zimbabwe in the mid-nineteenth century, they found these trading routes in place and exploited them to their advantage.

Other stone walls were erected in and around Zimbabwe, each imitating the complexity of Great Zimbabwe. Nonetheless, Great Zimbabwe still remains the birthplace of Shona religion, politics, and economics and continues to function today as a historic religious, cultural, and tourist center. Great Zimbabwe will always be a place of religious significance, as well as the spiritual headquarters of the Shona ancestors. Colonial and postcolonial Shona Christianity has to an extent been formed and shaped by the religious symbols of Great Zimbabwe. When explorers and missionaries came to Zimbabwe, they found local leaders already practicing African religion and participating in trade. It is to this that I now turn.

DAVID LIVINGSTONE AND CECIL JOHN RHODES

Although the Portuguese were the first to arrive in Zimbabwe, the Englishmen Livingstone and Rhodes occupy a major place in the exploration and evangelization of Africa, especially Zimbabwe. The two foreshadowed the colonization and missionary enterprise in and around Zimbabwe. David Livingstone came to Africa as an explorer under the leadership of Dr. Robert Moffat in 1841 and established a number of mission centers in and around Zimbabwe. In his travels within Zimbabwe, Livingstone was impressed by great rivers, which he thought were navigable on which he sought to reach the heart of Africa. After discovering the great rivers, Livingstone abandoned his missionary activities and carried out a period of geographical discovery and exploration. Between 1849 and 1851, Livingstone devoted all his time to the exploration of Africa, and he made three major expeditions in and around Zimbabwe.

In 1852, Livingstone started his first expedition that saw him in Matabeleland, where he entered into a partnership with King Kololo of the Buluzi tribe. The exploration brought Livingstone to the Zambezi River, where, for the first time, he saw the most spectacular waterfall of the river, exemplified by his renaming what would be hailed as one of the seven wonders of the world from its original Shona name of *Mosi-o-tunya*, or “the smoke that thunders,” to Victoria Falls, in honor of his queen.³ The plateaus in and around the falls were so impressive that Livingstone decided to establish European settlements and Christian missions there. After his first expedition, Livingstone returned to England, where he received a hero’s welcome and made presentations to the British public.⁴ He made an appeal to all the British people to consider Zimbabwe as a viable mission field.

Livingstone also extended special appeals to businesspeople to open up trade in Africa. His dream was to open a path to commerce and Christianity. In 1856, Livingstone again returned to England. His findings on Zimbabwe were published in *Missionary Travels and Researches in South Africa*, and more than twelve thousand copies were sold.⁵ He gave a number of presentations to British libraries and universities as well as to British Parliament. His presentations to British audiences were so successful with both the public and the government in that the British government sponsored his second expedition.

In his farewell speech from England, Livingstone said, “I go back to Central Africa to try to open up a path to commerce and Christianity. Do you carry out the work that I have begun? I leave it up to you!” Inspired by these words, British business entrepreneurs, traders, and missionaries provided

Livingstone and his team with boats and a steamer to sail the rivers of central Africa.

The expedition arrived in Zimbabwe in March 1858 and began to explore the region. The group established relationships with African rulers, African traditional religious leaders, and local people. These relations led to the occupation, colonization, and evangelization of Zimbabwe. By 1866, most parts of Zimbabwe had been reached by British explorers and missionaries. On May 1, 1873, Livingstone died, and his body was shipped to England, where he was buried at Westminster Abbey in London.⁶

While Livingstone died without experiencing the fruit of his labors and dreams for Africa, he indeed was the harbinger of colonization and missionary work in Zimbabwe. His failures as a missionary were probably because he did not see his role as one of building mission stations and converting local people to Christianity. His main objective was to open African frontiers to British colonizers and missionaries. He was indeed the greatest explorer of Africa in the nineteenth century. His observations about the peoples of Zimbabwe, their beliefs, customs, and traditions—often restricted by his Victorian and Christian views—are fundamental to understanding the encounters between African and Western cultures.

Clearly, Livingstone was eager to leave the practical work of establishing mission centers and converting people to Christianity to those who felt called by God. As a founder of European colonization, Livingstone appealed not only to Christian agents to come to Zimbabwe but also to European businessmen and farmers to settle, occupy, and colonize Shona cultures. This was because he believed that only Christianity, European commerce, and development could bring an end to slave trade, tribal conflicts, and, consequently, transformation of the Shona worldview. Whether Livingstone would have agreed on the manner in which Zimbabwe was later colonized and evangelized, the point is that he opened doors to both pioneer Christian missionaries and colonizers.

CECIL JOHN RHODES: THE PIONEER COLONIZER OF ZIMBABWE

I do not intend to rewrite the history of Cecil John Rhodes and his occupation of Zimbabwe, but I nevertheless offer a brief analysis of the central role he played in both colonization and mission work in Zimbabwe.⁷ Inspired by Livingstone's writings on Africa, Rhodes went to South Africa in 1868 to join his brother, who had already started a cotton farm there. The years between 1868 and 1871 saw the discovery of diamonds in South Africa. Rhodes, who had joined diamond diggers, used his shrewd British business skills to establish several profitable business ventures, including the famous De Beers Mining

Company, becoming a millionaire in the process. With money in hand, Rhodes sought to gain power by spreading British imperialistic principles. He was a strong believer in British superiority, its systems of government and justice, and its principles of peace and liberty. Rhodes was an arrogant advocate of British imperialism and was prepared to spend his fortune spreading British principles in and around Zimbabwe, and he wanted Britain to occupy the rest of Africa. His aims for and dreams of a vast African empire resulted in his being labeled the biggest empire builder of the nineteenth century. In this respect, he was like the Romans and Greeks, whose ideals and mores were enshrined in Aeneas.

By 1884, Africa was a battleground of Western imperialism, with every European country seeking to colonize and occupy a place within the continent. As a shrewd businessman and colonizer, Rhodes persuaded the British government to make missionary roads secure by establishing colonies and by declaring protectorates in southern and central Africa. In 1887, Rhodes, with the help of the British high commissioner, signed a treaty with King Lobengula of the Ndebele people, the second largest tribe in Zimbabwe. Under the treaty, Lobengula agreed to befriend the British queen and promised not to enter into any agreement with another nation without the knowledge and approval of the British high commissioner. With this agreement, part of Zimbabwe became a part of the British Empire.

The illiterate king did not fully understand what he had done to his own land and people. While he regarded Rhodes and other white people as friends, Lobengula's tribe began to experience an influx of British visitors into their land. These British citizens had one aim in mind: to colonize and mine gold in and around Zimbabwe. Under false pretense, the British acted as good friends and persuaded Lobengula to sign more treaties, which granted British groups further mining and trading concessions, and in return the British would help to defend the region from other nations. Rhodes used his personal fortune to secure his strong political position in Zimbabwe, to the extent that he even undermined the queen of England. He also had substantial influence among some leading personalities in both Zimbabwe and Britain. He owned millions of pounds of the De Beers money from Cape Town, which he used to buy or bribe rivals and opponents in southern Africa and Britain.

Rhodes's next move was to form a partnership with the British South African Company with the hope of finally colonizing the rest of Zimbabwe and exploiting its mineral and other resources. After he formed this partnership, in 1889, the British South African Company became a force of change in Zimbabwe. The company needed a royal charter from the queen of England, to authorize their having absolute power over the people of Zimbabwe. After

months of negotiation, the charter was given, which consequently led to the colonization of Zimbabwe. King Lobengula of the Ndebele was greatly undermined by the royal charter, and the rest of the region was now under the control of Rhodes, who began to recruit well-trained artisans and young traders from England.

The recruited skilled people, who became the British Pioneer Column, included blacksmiths, carpenters, builders, printers, bakers, miners, farmers, and traders. Each of these people was promised three thousand acres of land on arrival in Mashonaland territory and up to fifteen gold claims. In September 1890, the British Pioneer Column made their settlement at a place the leaders called Fort Salisbury, in honor of the imperialist British prime minister. It was clear to the Ndebele and Shona kings and their subjects that the whites had come not only to trade or to look for gold but also to settle, conquer, occupy, and rule the entire region of Zimbabwe.

The years between 1890 and 1980 were characterized by nearly a century of wars, uprisings, evangelism, and complete domination of Zimbabwe by the British. The Shona became a source of cheap labor and were mistakenly regarded as cowards by the British colonizers. With white administration at the center of Shona culture, Rhodes took a final step of renaming Zimbabwe. In 1895, Zimbabwe was colonially and officially renamed Rhodesia, in honor of Rhodes, who claimed to be the founder of a new nation. Having successfully claimed Zimbabwe, Rhodes divided the region into two main administrative provinces: Mashonaland (eastern Zimbabwe) and Matabeleland (western Zimbabwe). British colonization brought not only administrative change of territorial divisions but also forced labor, forced taxation, cultural change, and religious change, among other things. Highways and cities were given British names, political oppression was the order of the day, and the best land was freely given to the British settlers. Missions, schools, and hospitals were introduced and functioned for the most part as preparatory centers for training African minds to be subject to colonial and missionary agendas. Colonialists were eager to offer a form of education to blacks that would transform them to serve colonial masters.⁸

It became clear to both the Ndebele and Shona people that Rhodes had come to colonize, conquer, and transform the Shona worldview. Both the Ndebele and Shona people lost their cattle and land to Rhodes, who by 1895 had introduced white administration to the entire region. The British government promoted many injustices and cared little for the people whose land they colonized and whose culture they disregarded as heathenism. This made the Shona people very bitter and incited them to resist white rule in Zimbabwe.

Determined to fight for their land, religious leaders from both the Ndebele and Shona responded by conducting uprisings against British occupation of Zimbabwe. In both eastern and western Zimbabwe, whites were targeted and, within weeks, about one hundred white families were killed. The response from Rhodes was brutal and furious: he declared war on the indigenous people. While whites had the advantage of superior weapons, the Shona people had bows and arrows, Mwari (God), and ancestors on their side.

SHONA ANCESTORS AND THEIR APPEAL TO MWARI

Two fundamental factors are worth noting. First, from time immemorial, Zimbabwe was composed of many tribal entities, united religiously and culturally by a strong belief in God, who in native language was referred to as Mwari. The monotheism and spirituality of the indigenous people were obvious to the British missionaries who arrived in the 1890s. In Shona society, God was known by many names or appellations and was approached through intermediaries whom the Shona venerated as ancestors. Among the Ndebele people, God was worshiped at the Matopo Hills near present-day Bulawayo. Among the Shona people in eastern Zimbabwe, Mwari was worshiped in every chiefdom and village.

Second, ancestors, regarded as founders of a nation, were highly esteemed; in the worldview of the Shona people, ancestors occupied a central role. They were not worshiped in African culture; rather they were considered as founders and spiritual agents whose role is to communicate the message of God to the people. Often, they were a means to reconciliation between tribes and conflicting parties.

For purposes of this book, I will concentrate mainly on one Shona ancestor named Nehanda, who has received little attention, yet played a pivotal role during the colonial period and years of liberation wars.

In the late nineteenth century, Nehanda Charwe Nyakasikane (c. 1840–1898) was considered to possess supernatural powers. She was imbued with a direct connection to deity analogous to that attributed to the ancestors of Greeks and Romans.⁹ Her role and place in Shona religion and culture resonated with core Shona beliefs in such a way that she captured the worldview of her people by persuading them that Mwari was against the British colonization of Zimbabwe. She encouraged the Shona chiefs and political leaders to expel the British from Zimbabwe. Though her role was prominent throughout the British incursion, it was especially so in 1896, when the Ndebele and Shona tribes joined forces in resisting white occupation. Through her spiritual powers, she convinced nationalistic leaders that whites were

responsible for all the suffering and natural disasters that engulfed the nation. Before Nehanda's influence, natural disasters meant only one thing to the Shona people—an expression of God's anger.

The uprisings (1896–1897) against the colonialists were inevitable because the colonial occupation had seriously undermined Shona religion, culture, and political independence. Nehanda's role in multiple wars of liberation was prominent, and she was considered to be the female incarnation of the oracle spirit grandmother of the Shona people. Nehanda decreed that whites must be driven by force from Zimbabwe, and she summoned other religious leaders to join her in the resistance. Thus religious leaders in both eastern and western Zimbabwe joined in the war of resistance. Religious and ancestral leaders such as Nehanda gave religious sanction to the risings and used their religious places as command centers for intelligence purposes. The development of the Mwari cult from 1896 to 1897 led to the establishment of cults all over the country, so much so that political leaders and ancestral spirits collaborated in training and sending young warriors to fight the British. Through use of secret messages to communicate with other spirit mediums, she effectively coordinated a powerful resistance force.

The British tried to persuade religious leaders to join them and even at times bribed them to accept British occupation, but Nehanda resisted. Her spiritual powers and influence were indeed behind the birth of postcolonial Zimbabwe. She finally became a target of the British and was captured in 1897. She was sentenced to death by hanging in 1898, to the end steadfastly refusing and denouncing British occupation of Zimbabwe.

In her dying words, Nehanda told the British, “My bones will rise again.” These few words were a source of inspiration to the second generation of liberation fighters, and were finally realized in the war that culminated in the independence of Zimbabwe in 1980, when her remains were given a heroine's burial at Zimbabwe's Heroes' Acre, a memorial place for all who fought for the independence of the Shona and Ndebele people. Her role in resisting British colonization qualifies her to be the founder of the Shona people.

The spirit of Nehanda did not die with her hanging; rather, it appeared in other female religious leaders, who were constantly consulted on military decisions during the war of liberation. The spirit of Nehanda and her prophecies provided valuable assistance to the revolutionary struggle and rebirth of postcolonial Zimbabwe. Female leaders who were possessed with Nehanda's spirit were always in conflict with colonization, so much so that during the second war of liberation, British settlers sought to kill them. In 1972, the spirit of Nehanda found a new medium in an elderly woman who

was eventually taken to Mozambique by freedom fighters. While in exile, she continued to be a source of inspiration and guidance to the operations of Shona people in Zimbabwe. Thus religious leaders and spirit mediums were the revolutionary forces that brought an end to British occupation.

I contend that Shona people can be called Nehanda people because their political, social, and religious foundations are shaped and informed by the indomitable spirit and revolutionary prophetic stance of Nehanda, a female spiritual leader who resisted the imposition of British colonialism, which finally led to a postcolonial Zimbabwe in 1980. As a New Testament scholar from the Shona diaspora, I do not intend to speak on behalf of all the Shona people, however, nor do I suggest that their cultural theology has not changed.

What I seek to offer is an African hermeneutical perspective that can help both Western and African Christian theologians appropriate a cultural, theological understanding of the apostle Paul and his creative reshaping of Abraham in the book of Romans. In his essay “The Case for a New Bible,” Canaan Banana, a British Methodist clergyman, argues, “The people in the Bible—both Old and New Testament—are people whose lives and faith response to God provide lessons for who come after. Each culture has its record of those people.”¹⁰ Banana is right: Zimbabweans have such figures as *Mbuya*, or Grandmother Nehanda, and other traditional religious leaders whose lives opened new possibilities for postcolonial Shona culture.

Nehanda, as a founder of the Shona people, fought relentlessly to defend her people’s religious, cultural, and political values against adulteration by Western colonizers. She died a martyr at the hands of British overlords on account of her religious convictions.¹¹ Her indomitable courage was immortalized in the hearts and minds of young, gallant Zimbabwean fighters for African heritage.¹² Thus Nehanda is venerated in present-day Zimbabwe as the spiritual founder of a postcolonial Zimbabwe.

Her status is similar to that of Aeneas (and of Abraham), and she must be accorded an honored place alongside such leading religious leaders from other ancient cultures. Virgil, as well as the poet of the *Odyssey* and *Iliad*, celebrates Aeneas as the founding father of Greeks and Romans. Virgil’s *Aeneid* documents the tale of pious Aeneas, ancestor of the house of Caesar, leading his people and his gods from fallen Troy to the land of the Romans.¹³ Both Homer and Virgil represent a literary culture at its most authoritative. Their stories were learned by many in and around the Greco-Roman Empire, stamped on the memory of every literate person. The ideology they sought to transmit defines much of what the world knows as of the Greco-Romans Empire.

In similar manner, Nehanda's story is engraved in the hearts and memories of Shona people, and her struggles with European colonizers define much of what the world knows of Zimbabwe. Her struggles against colonization are a fitting hermeneutic for biblical interpretation in Zimbabwe because her story resembles that of faith-founders such as Abraham. As a contemporary Shona Christian, I seek to offer an autobiographical experience of the colonial and missionary presence in Zimbabwe, as well as the aftermath of this encounter. The primary theological challenge most Shona people face involves maintaining a balance between being an African and being a Christian. In spite of its adverse effects, colonization and missionary enterprises in Zimbabwe initiated for the Shona an era of both progress and change. The preservation of Shona ancestral culture and the adaptation of traditional institutions to meet Christian innovations is the principal theme of this book.

NATURE AND IDENTITY OF THE SHONA OR NEHANDA PEOPLE

The Shona, who are rightly called Nehanda people, are not a people without myths. Like Greeks, Romans, and Jews, they too have stories to tell about their gods, ancestors, and the achievements of their nation. The Shona were indeed profoundly influenced by British and American ideas and ideals in politics, religion, and social life. The culture known as "Shona" originated from a Bantu settlement of the high fertile plateau between the Limpopo and Zambezi Rivers, bounded in the east by the Kalahari Desert.¹⁴ The Shona of Zimbabwe refer to persons as *munhu* (singular) and *vanhu* (plural). Etymologically, the term *Bantu/Vanhu* simply refers to human beings who inhabit central and southern Africa. Modern inhabitants of Zimbabwe still refer to themselves as descendants of Bantu: simply meaning people or human beings.

By the end of the second century BCE, the first Bantu migration from the north settled in what is now Zimbabwe, and they had great allegiance to ancestors.¹⁵ Among these migrant groups were bands of stone-age Khoisan migrants, commonly known as the Bushmen. The ancestors of the Bantu migrated in search of pasture lands, good agricultural areas, water, and stock-raising areas. One important legacy of the Bantu-speaking peoples is that they linguistically borrowed from each other and were physically integrated. They finally settled in what is now called central and southern Africa. In contemporary Zimbabwe, Bantu people are classified into five ethnic categories, namely, "the *Zezeru*, *Korekore*, *Karanga*, *Manyika*, and *Ndau* people."¹⁶ Shona peoples did not call themselves by this name, but the extension

of the term to all ethnic tribes in Zimbabwe appears to have been a British colonial innovation.

The other largest ethnic group of people in Zimbabwe is the Ndebele, who in the third century BCE migrated from South Africa to settle in an area called Bulawayo. It is believed that they were from the tribe of Soshangane, who was a Zulu king in the eastern part of South Africa.¹⁷ The Ndebele arrived with the powerful military organization developed by the Zulu and were able to conduct raids deep into the Shona areas, collecting women and cattle from defeated peoples. Nevertheless, the Ndebele and the Shona were able to live together as different people, with their own ancestors, cultural values, and political differences. The autochthonous Shona peoples were able to maintain their autonomy against various outside influences, to the extent that they became the official largest ethnic group in Zimbabwe.

Shona became the language of communication, followed by the Ndebele language and other tribal languages in and around Zimbabwe. Politically and linguistically, Zimbabwe has two major regions, categorized as Mashonaland and Matabeleland, with the former predominantly speaking the Shona language as well as other dialects. The latter speaks what is called Ndebele, which is basically the Zulu language. Thus Shona contemporary groupings cover most of Zimbabwe, with ethnic peoples within the region speaking different dialects. Independent chiefdoms, united by geographical propinquity and their common Shona language, culture, and religious affiliation, define the people of Zimbabwe and give them a sense of distinctiveness.

Indeed, by the time British colonialists and American missionaries arrived, African religion was already well developed and was practiced by the major ethnic groups in Zimbabwe, including the Ndebele people. By 1890, Zimbabwe was united religiously by a strong belief in *Mwari/Mwali* (God), whom the Shona religious priests and followers called the Supreme Being. Both missionaries and colonialists viewed the Mwari cult, or God cult, with great suspicion. The home of the cult of the High God, Mwali or Mwari, was centered in the Matopo Hills of Bulawayo.¹⁸ While the Ndebele and Shona lived together and worshiped the same God, they had different political, religious, and cultural heroes whom they venerated as spirit mediums able to hear from Mwari and to transmit the message to all peoples. These spirit mediums were known as Mhondoro and founders of a people.

The Shona had great reverence for three major figures—namely, Nehanda, Chaminuka, and Kaguvi—with Nehanda, the female spirit medium described above, being given a prominent role. The Ndebele people had great reverence for Mzilikazi. The outbreak of the risings in both western and eastern

Zimbabwe and the campaigns of resistance by both the Ndebele and the Shona were to a large extent attributable to the working relationship between the Mhondoro cults and Mwari. The history of Shona Christianity in Zimbabwe is a complex and intriguing compound of romance, idealism, courage, arrogance, association, avarice, and construction. By 1870, most of Zimbabwe had had an encounter with both European and American cultural agents, who had different interests. The Europeans were interested in hunting, trading, exploration, and the colonization of Zimbabwe. On the contrary, Americans were well invested in missionary work, evangelism, and farming. They established health facilities, educational centers, and theological centers that later became incubators of African Christianity during and after the colonial era. Moreover, Shona Christianity involved, on a larger scale, intractable problems similar to those faced by the apostle Paul in his Greco-Roman missionary world, namely, power dynamics among nationalities, Roman ideology, ancestral claims, religious mores, and Christian faith. While Aeneas and Abraham were competing ancestors in the Greco-Roman world, the British Empire, represented by Cecil John Rhodes, competed with indigenous culture with its allegiance to ancestors and Christian missionaries. Thus the synthesis and antithesis of the colonial encounter with indigenous culture greatly transformed the future of postcolonial indigenous Christianity.

Zimbabwe was, in fact, a great deal more primitive for both colonizers and missionaries, at least from the perspective of Western imperialism. They both aspired to bring civilization and light to a people whose culture they considered superstitious, backward, and heathen. The goal of the colonists and missionaries was threefold—to civilize, evangelize, and colonize. They introduced a way of life that was first and foremost European and North American, stamped with Western Christianity. The man who came to embody this new ethos of empire was David Livingstone, a champion of both missionary and colonial domination of Zimbabwe.¹⁹ The institution that embodied evangelism was the London Missionary Society (LMS) under the leadership of John Smith Moffat.²⁰ For Livingstone, commerce and colonization—the original foundations of the empire—were necessary but not sufficient.

By allusion and analogy, Nehanda, who came to embody resistance against the Europeans, became a new Abraham, who through her valor embodied the religious, political, and cultural framework of Zimbabweans. Nehanda's goal was to resist foreign domination, but her efforts met with imperial ideologies of self-aggrandizement. I turn next to discuss the complexities of the postcolonial situation for Zimbabwean communities, including their encounters with the

colonists and missionaries. For some, the encounter was one of resistance, compromise, or cultural renaissance.

SCRAMBLE, CONQUEST, MISSION, AND COLONIZATION OF ZIMBABWE

It is no exaggeration to say that by the mid-1870s, central Africa had encountered European imperialism. Overpopulation and land hunger in Europe, opportunities for commerce, trading, social advancement abroad, exploration, and evangelism are some of the well-documented claims that led to the colonization of Africa, especially Zimbabwe. While few African or European leaders failed to see the revolutionary changes that would come to Zimbabwe, *Mbuya*, or Grandmother Nehanda, the spirit medium of Zimbabwe, sternly warned indigenous people of the encroachment of white settlers. The results of her prophetic predictions were experienced within a matter of months, if not weeks. The Berlin Conference, to regulate European colonization and trade in Africa, took place in 1884–1885 and laid the foundation for what is called the scramble for Africa or partition of Africa.²¹ The seeds of colonial and missionary ventures were sown at this meeting, which resulted in the General Act of the conference at Berlin. The act laid geographical boundaries in Africa for the various European imperial powers, leading to an influx of Western missionaries and colonialists to partition Africa without regard to native cultures or languages.

The partition of Africa led to the invasion, occupation, and annexation of African land by such people as Cecil John Rhodes. While Rhodes is credited as the vanguard of imperialism, his arrival in Zimbabwe did not precede that of missionaries. African theologians, historians, and politicians have for years argued that colonialism and Christianity came to Zimbabwe at the same time. I contend that Christian missionaries were the first to set foot in Zimbabwe in 1829 and thus paved the way for colonialists.²² By 1829, British and Portuguese Christian missionaries had visited three main countries: Zimbabwe, Zambia, and Malawi. In the fifteenth century, the Portuguese missionaries had been the first to evangelize central Africa, but their efforts did not produce any converts. Under the leadership of Dr. Robert Moffat, a Scottish missionary, the Portuguese missions came under the banner of the London Missionary Society and established relations with Mzilikazi, the Ndebele king.

Through friendships with local kings and leaders, missionaries were allowed to establish mission centers and devoted most of their time and energy to teaching, preaching, and literacy work. With the passing of time, books and Bibles in indigenous languages were printed first in Bulawayo and then

in Harare. The medium through which literacy and the Western worldview were transmitted to indigenous people was colonial and missionary education. Chapter 2 will focus on the role colonial and missionary education played in forming, shaping, and awakening Shona religious worldview through the reconstruction and appropriation of Paul's theology.

Notes

1. D. E. Nedham, E. K. Mashingaidze, and N. Bhebe, eds., *From Iron Age to Independence: A History of Central Africa* (Harare, Zimbabwe: Longman, 1984), 15.
2. The bird is depicted today on most Zimbabwean coins and even on notes.
3. David Livingstone was the most well-known European missionary-explorer of central Africa and the first one to be fascinated by the Victoria Falls, but he was by no means the only European to set foot on the continent; there were others before him such as the Portuguese, who penetrated central Africa from Mozambique. Robert Moffat of the London Missionary Society was also before David Livingstone.
4. See Needham, Mashingaidze, and Bhebe, eds., *From Iron Age to Independence*, 90–92.
5. David Livingstone, *Missionary Travels and Researches in South Africa* (London, 1857). This work is also available online at <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/1039/1039-h/1039-h.htm>, and in various modern print and ebook formats.
6. Needham, Mashingaidze, and Bhebe, eds., *From Iron Age to Independence*, 46.
7. Cecil John Rhodes's history is well documented in *ibid.*, 111–21.
8. Ethel Tawse Jolie, who was elected to the Rhodesian Legislative Council in 1920, argued, "We do not intend to hand over this country to the Natives. Let us make no pretense of educating them in the same way we educate Whites." Dickson A. Mungazi, *Colonial Education for Africans: George Stark's Policy in Zimbabwe* (New York: Praeger, 1991), 1.
9. See T. P. Wisemann, *The Myths of Rome* (Devon, UK: University of Exeter Press, 2004). Wiseman helps readers to understand the *Aeneid* story as a legendary poem of Greek and Roman founders whose stories were evolving from oral cultures to literate times. At the center of these stories is the prominent role of Aeneas, who wandered from the land of the Molossians and joined with Odysseus in founding Rome. Similarly, Nehanda of Zimbabwe is not just a mythical figure but a real female ancestress heroine whose story helps to identify and signify the identity, ethos, and mores of the Shona people.
10. Canaan S. Banana, *Rewriting the Bible: The Real Issues* (Gweru, Zimbabwe: Mambo Press, 1993), 17–32.
11. *Ibid.*
12. *Ibid.*
13. For a detailed discussion of Aeneas, see Wiseman, *The Myths of Rome*, 215–16.
14. The word *Bantu* is used in this book to simply mean the largest ethnic peoples or human beings who settled in central Africa in the second century BCE and their contemporary descendants. For an elaborate history of the Bantu people, see Needham, Mashingaidze, and Bhebe, eds., *From Iron Age to Independence*, 5–14.
15. M. F. C. Bourdillion, *The Shona Peoples: An Ethnography of the Contemporary Shona, with Special Reference to Their Religion* (Harare, Zimbabwe: Mambo Press, 1987), 6–7.
16. *Ibid.*, 16–17.
17. *Ibid.*, 14.
18. Terence Ranger, *Voices from the Rocks: Nature, Culture and History in the Matopos Hills of Zimbabwe* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 11–38.

19. See Musa Dube, *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2000), 5–6.

20. See Needham, Mashingaidze, and Bhebe, eds., *From Iron Age to Independence*, 96–101.

21. Represented at the Berlin Conference were Austria-Hungary, Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Great Britain, Italy, the Netherlands, Portugal, Russia, Spain, Sweden-Norway, Turkey, and the United States. France, Germany, Great Britain, and Portugal were the major players in the conference.

22. Needham, Mashingaidze, and Bhebe, eds., *From Iron Age to Independence*, 96.