



PROPHETS

The Bible is full of stories of prophets. In fact, most of the Bible is written by prophets. As you read, you find that God used old or young, men or women, farmers or statesmen as prophets. Often, the message God gave through His prophet was rejected and the people chose to cling to their favorite sins rather than to surrender their hearts to God. But when they accepted the message and followed God, what rich blessings they enjoyed.

Following are the amazing stories of men God used far more recently, just as he did the prophets of old, to bring a whole race of people to know Him.

Nsikana, The African Prophet

By Josephine Cunningham Edwards

About two hundred years ago, in the fertile hills of South Africa, lived a tall, muscular young man named Nsikana Gaba. (En-si-KAH-na GAH-ba) He was different from the other young men, and the villagers shook their heads over him, talking about him in a quiet, reverent way.

Many of the villagers didn't mind stealing, just so they didn't get caught. But not Nsikana! He had never heard of the Bible or the Ten Commandments, yet he never stole or joined in the tribal wars. He didn't like the lazy company of the others of his tribe, but would often meditate alone where he could look up at the deep-blue sky or at the stars, and feel a Presence he could not see. The other young men couldn't understand him. When they talked on filthy subjects, Nsikana walked quietly away. They laughed at him sometimes, but more often they felt afraid, so they watched and wondered.

Nsikana's people, the Xosas, had the custom of smearing white clay on their bodies after bathing in the river. We think that strange, but when we realize that make-up is not so different from that clay, we need not be so proud of our superior civilization.

One moonlit night, Nsikana and the other young men of the village bathed themselves, smoothed clay on their clean flesh, and started out together for a dance in a neighboring village. This was a dress-up occasion. No young man in a new suit felt more dressed up than these Xosas on that night so long ago.

They laughed and chanted as their bare feet pounded the path. The one silent, watchful one was Nsikana. He was listening, as he always did, as if to an inner, unseen voice.

Suddenly, a light streamed down from the dark skies and bathed Nsikana, just as the light that shone on Saul while traveling to Damascus. Nsikana stopped in the midst of the circle of brilliance wondering at the strange radiance. He was not afraid as was Saul, for he had done no wrong. A quiet peace such as he had never felt before stole over him. But even as he stood there, the light slowly withdrew and was gone. Nsikana did not move. He stood still in the velvety darkness, filled with wonder.

His companions were far ahead. He could see a flicker of their torch far down the winding path. They had not seen the light nor felt the deep, wondrous peace. Nsikana felt a bewilderment steal over his simple, childlike heart. He walked on silently, awaiting something else, some other wonder.

Presently, he came to the edge of the village where the dance was being held. He could hear the pounding feet and throbbing drums. The long shadows of the dancers leaped and swayed. Bodies gleamed in the glow of the fires. Women tended pots that spread savory odors of the feast that was to follow. Toothless old men beat the drums. Naked children flitted about. Chickens roosted in the trees, and occasionally, out in the darkness, a lion roared. It was a typical African night. The stars of the Southern Cross hung like a giant kite high in the sky.

The bare feet of the dancers stomped on in perfect rhythm. Great circles of men, glistening with sweat, danced tirelessly. There were special dances with special patterns. When one was finished, another would begin, accompanied by eerie, chanting songs. At times, some would sing out questions and others would chant back the answers. There was perfect timing in the monotonous melodies. Sweat flowed freely, but the dancers did not seem weary. They plunged into every new dance with tireless enthusiasm.

In one of the dances a circle was formed. The participants wove to and fro, stepping forward and backward, chanting questions and demanding answers. As fast as one leaped out of the circle another leaped in, chanting the weird answers to the droning questions. Nsikana suddenly sprang into the center to dance and sing like the rest, but the Light would not have it so! He had scarcely begun when the strange brightness came again, bathing him in its soft glorious rays.

To Nsikana's eyes the whole village was suddenly ablaze with glory, but to his amazement no one else saw the light. They danced on as if nothing was happening. Instantly Nsikana realized that the message was from a Great One, for him, and him alone. The song died on his lips. He left the circle quickly and stood for a moment thinking. The

noise and confusion of the dance filled the village. Many of the young men were drinking the strong, native-brewed mtwala which made them foolish and loose-mouthed.

Nsikana had never touched the stuff. His hours of meditation alone in his kraal had led him to the conclusion that strong drink was evil. Anything that numbed his ability to think could not be good, he decided. Nsikana did not know of the Holy Spirit, yet here, in the clamor of the noisy village he felt the Spirit's presence. "I cannot stay here," he told himself. "The light will not come again to this place. I must go away and meditate. I do not know what it is or why it has come to me, but I must go where all is still so I can learn more about it." He did not know he was repeating the words of holy men of old who had written, "Be still, and know that I am God," Psalm 46:10.

Swiftly Nsikana strode away, his heart beating wildly in anticipation. His burning desire was to get away from the pulsing throb of the drums. He had no desire now to be one of the frenzied dancers. Alone in the darkness of the bush he knew that he was in danger. But the lion, the lurking leopard, the fangs of the coiled snake, did not enter his mind. He trode down the path swiftly, steadily, fearlessly. Soon he was threading his way among the rocks that skirted the bed of the Gquora River. The water was shallow here, but he stepped carefully for the rocks were as sharp as the points of spears.

Just as the water flowed over his feet, the radiant light again streamed down over him. He stopped instantly, unafraid; his whole being alert and listening. His heart surged with a joy he had never felt before. "Nsikana! Nsikana!" A Voice lovelier than a rainbow called to him from the midst of the light.

"I am here, Great One," he answered, trembling with eagerness. "What does the Great One want of His poor Xosa child?"

The Voice came again, melodious and sweet, so thrilling that the flesh of the young man tingled. The invisible Speaker bade him step down into the deeper waters of the stream and bathe the hardened clay from his body. He did so eagerly. While he was bathing, the light faded away. The darkness that closed gently about him had a sweetness and assurance in it. He had been obedient to the Voice. He stopped to wash his blanket carefully, for some of the white clay had rubbed off on it. Then he flung it wet across his strong shoulders and went on toward his village.

Bells of joy rang in his heart. The light had spoken! The Being drenched in light knew him by name! The dim outlines of the huts of his village rose before him. All was still. Only the old, the weak, and the sick had stayed behind, and they were sleeping. Suddenly he stopped stock-still in the path. The light! The light! It was shining down again, enveloping his hut and his kraal! He could see his great white ox chewing his cud placidly in a glow brighter than the noonday sun.

"Great One! Great One!" he whispered, his voice breaking in his joy and excitement. Drawn by a mighty power, Nsikana walked closer, quietly and reverently. While the others

were dancing or sleeping, Nsikana met the Jesus of the Damascus road. He met the Great One of the burning bush and the pillar of cloud and fire. That night the Voice spoke to him of many things. The words of counsel sank deep in his heart. This was not so strange for "in every nation he that feareth him, and worketh righteousness, is accepted with Him," Acts 10:35.

Nsikana knelt a long while, bathed in light, listening. He felt no weariness, for the Voice seemed to fill him with strength. Suddenly the light was gone. The dazed young man made his way to his hut, rolled out his sleeping mat, and lay down. Though at peace, he could not sleep. The wondrous things he had seen and heard drove sleep from him. He pondered the counsel he had received. The beautiful Voice had bade him go on the morrow to talk to the great chief of the Xosas.

The next day his companions regaled him with accounts of the pleasures he had missed. They scolded him for leaving just as the fun was beginning. They joked with him, calling him *mtebe*, which means "old man." But he did not care what they called him. Silently he went to the kraal of the great chief. The talk all around the great kraal was of the night before, but Nsikana's mind was too full of more important matters to pay attention to such trivia.

The chief was holding audience in his house. About him were his servants, wives, and dogs. Leopard skins lay on the smooth earth floor where Nsikana sat down to wait. He rose to his feet soberly when asked to tell his mission. "I have a message for the chief from the Great One of the heavens who dwells in light," he responded quietly. The reply was so strange that every eye in the room turned to him. The chief bade him go on, interest flickering in his somber old eyes. Such a thing had never happened to any Xosa king.

Nsikana revealed all that had happened the previous night. His voice was vibrant with the importance of his message. The chief leaned forward, cupping his hand behind his ear, listening intently. Nsikana's voice went on in the silent hut. He told the chief of the strange Voice that had spoken to him from the midst of the light, calling him by name. The Voice said, 'I have many things to reveal to you, Nsikana, for the salvation of your people.' The Voice told me there would come to this country a strange race of men, with flesh the color of a plucked fowl. There will be hair on their heads and on their faces, but not such as we have; it will be long and straight."

The old chief gasped, shaking his head in surprise. Every person in the room listened carefully as Nsikana went on. "They will be a clever, strong people. They will know many wonderful things the people of the villages have never dreamed of. This strange race will know how to travel faster than the leopard or the cheetah, in a strange wagon of fire." Dramatically, Nsikana pointed to the cleft in the Ntaba Dzika Ndoti Mountains. "In the dream that the Voice gave to me, I saw the wagon of fire, long, fierce, and terrible, coming through a cut in those mountains. But this will not be while we live. These men will come after we have lain down, old and weary, and have been covered with the good mother earth. Then what I have told you about will happen. But we must warn and prepare our

children for the great and terrible things they will see and hear after we have laid our burdens down."

No one in the kraal realized the passage of time. No one wanted Nsikana's voice to cease. So much had been packed into that light-drenched interview with the Lord. Nsikana told them that this race would bring to the country two things that would change the people's lives. First, he would bring a strange calabash, full of the drink of wickedness. "Our *mowa and mtwala* are evil, and upset men's minds and thinking, but this will be far worse. We must teach our children and our children's children never to touch it or taste it, for there is a curse upon it. If they drink it, sorrow, misery, disease, poverty, and death will come upon them as swiftly as a lion leaps upon the zebra."

His next warning was almost impossible for them to understand. "They will bring with them strange round things of many sizes, made of gold and silver. These will be as the buttons we make for the fastening of our clothing, but they will have no holes in them, and they will not be for decoration or for apparel. They are to be for trade and barter, as a man now trades a pig for a goat. He will carry these buttons with him in bags, and he will have a great love for them. For them, some of this race will not hesitate to cheat and lie and kill. They will teach our people the importance of the buttons so that they too will begin to love them and will do all they can to gather many. But this devotion to the buttons without holes will ruin our people. They will go anywhere to acquire them, and the nation will be scattered. No one will ever be able to bring the tribes together again."

So overcome was Nsikana at what he had seen, that he covered his face with his hands and his chest heaved with his sobs. Presently, he continued, "Parents will not see the graves of their children. They will die in a far country. Nor will the children care for the old ones when they are weak and sick and in trouble."

At this juncture Nsikana called for a pot of water. When a servant brought it to him, he poured it out on the ground in front of the chief. The dry ground quickly absorbed it. "Pick up this water again," Nsikana directed the waiting servant, handing the pot back to him. The man sank to his knees and trembled, shaking his head.

"That is impossible!" the chief cried. "Spilled water can never be picked up, you know that."

"Neither can the Xosa people ever be gathered together again after they are scattered by the calabash and the buttons." Nsikana replied calmly. He stood silently, his face expressive of great sorrow. Then a look of joy crossed his countenance. He took a step nearer to the chief.

"But there is a way out, there is good news to come!" His voice was ringing now with joy. "Not all of the men who come will be evil and cruel to our people. Good men will come to help us. They will heal our diseases and teach us a better way to live. We will be able to tell these people from the others, for they will bring with them warnings against the buttons and the calabash.

"Mainly, though, they will bring with them *umqulu*, a scroll. The Voice told me there will be marks on the *umqulu* that will speak words of life. I do not know how marks can talk, but the Voice said that our children would understand this. If we take the words that the *umqulu* will speak, and obey and love them in our lives and hearts, the buttons and the calabash will never break the unity of our nation. Our families will be blessed and established by the words of the Great One in the marks of the *umqulu*."

Nsikana Gaba bowed politely and turned to go. The chief and his family stood as he left. Then the whole kraal burst into a babble of amazement. Did the chief believe these strange words? What could be done? Was this danger coming soon? The old chief pondered for a while. "We must do as Nsikana has told us," he said deliberately. "Our children must be taught. Then when the evil comes, the blow will be softened."

Because of the chief's counsel and the young man's blameless life, Nsikana Gaba came to be looked upon as a prophet. The people listened to what he said. In the years that followed, the light came many times to him as he sat pondering, or when he knelt, talking to the Great One.

On a gentle rise of ground near his old village, still stands "The Bell of Nsikana." It is the strangest bell in all the world. A great concave section has been split from the side of a gigantic boulder. This is so suspended, that when it is tapped with a rock, a rumbling reverberation is heard all over the countryside. The old people love to tell the tales their fathers and their grandfathers have told them of the doings of this great man. It is said that when the people heard the bell, they dropped whatever they were doing and ran to Nsikana's kraal. It was a signal that he had seen another vision. They felt themselves to be a people favored of God. They listened to the prophet wide eyed.

Nsikana had never seen a white man, could not read, and never saw a book except in vision, yet he preached the gospel. He told the people about the creation of the world. He talked to them about Christ who suffered death for all the world. He described the holy city, the New Jerusalem, which he saw the same way the seer of Patmos saw it. He told them of the better land and the better life, where death and sorrow and suffering will be unknown.

Nsikana taught his people a song. He sang it so often that even the little children knew it by heart. It is a delightful song, full of the funny little clickclicks of the Xosa language that strangers cannot pronounce. When reading and writing came to the tribe, men wrote Nsikana's words and his music down. Translated to English, here is how it goes:

**"Thou great God of heaven, Thou art a shield of Truth.
'Thou art a true Refuge. Thou are a shelter of Truth.
Thou art He that dwelleth on High.
Thou that created life, Created the heavens.
The Maker of stars and constellations and shooting stars talks to us.
The Maker of darkness made it purposely.
The trumpet blew, calling us. That witnesses to seek souls,**

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**He that gathereth, gathereth the flock and leadeth us.
Thou art a great garment that we wear.
Thy hands have wounds, Thy feet have wounds-For whom was Thy blood shed?
Have we asked Thee to pay this great price?
Have we asked for Thy city?**

The people still talk about Nsikana Gaba, the prophet of the Xosa people. For how true his prophecies have proved to be! The calabash of the white trader was the downfall of many in the tribe. As bad as was the native brew, the whiskey of the white men was much worse. When gold was discovered in the Transvaal and diamonds were found in Kimberly, men came offering "buttons without holes" to the Xosa young men, to hire them to work in the mines for these gold and silver pieces. The old ones wept to see their young men go, for they remembered the prophecy of Nsikana. Many never returned, and no one knew whether they were alive or dead.

Today if you travel to the country where Nsikana lived, you can buy a ticket for the "wagon of fire." It will carry you down the tracks through the very cleft in the mountains that Nsikana pointed to. Not far away the village people proudly show the prophet's huge bell. Better yet are the results of the *umqulu!* You can see churches that the missionaries have helped to build in which to teach the people to beware of the calabash and the love of the buttons without holes.

How can the people doubt that Nsikana was a true prophet when they are now being taught to follow the same light he told them about nearly two hundred years ago? Undoubtedly it was the Lord of the Damascus road who spoke to him.