

Letter to Alexander Brownlee, 17 July 1843

Livingstone, David, 1813-1873

Published by Livingstone Online (livingstoneonline.org)

[0001]

Lattakoo 17th July 1843

My Dear Friend

Your kind & excellent letter reached me some months ago, and I felt it merited prompt acknowledgement But to answer it has until now been beyond my power. Our Directors expecting at the time we left England that M^rMoffat would soon follow - instructed us to remain at this station, learn the language &c, until, we should recieve the benefit of the local knowledge in choosing a location for a new mission But finding the language by no means as difficult as they imagined I have been during several long periods away from the region of postages acquiring a local knowledge for myself The different journies I have undertaken into the interior of the country have been long & tedious this is not the region of railways. the heavy lumbering Dutch waggon drawn by oxen or slow paced riding oxen are the only means of locomotion unless we choose our own lower extremeties which are slower still. But with these imperfect conveyances I have gone very far into the interior. I have visited tribes never before seen by Europeans & preached the Gospel beyond every other man's line of things. You perhaps might be interested in something of these savage tribes, everything about them is so degraded & impure the mind cannot dwell on the more prominent features of their character I shall however give you a little & by that you may perhaps be enabled to form some opinion on that on which I shall be silent. The whole of the Bechuana nation is sunk into a state of the lowest degradation. It would be difficult to point to their inferiors in the world. Human nature can go no lower than in their case it has done. They are in point of courage the veriest cowards and yet if they can kill without danger of being killed they will murder without compunction and then make long incisions in their skins the scars of which are to be standing memorials of their prowess. I have seen men with from 30 to forty of these "scars of honour" (?) They pointed to them

[0002]

in triumph and were not ashamed to own that many of them betokened the murder of helpless women & children

their sense of native duties will be understood when I tell you the wives are the tillers of the ground, the builders of the houses and the bearers of all heavy burdens. A man is not ashamed to say he is not able to carry a weight & his wife is & he will go & call her for that purpose. I speak of shame but shame they have none. It is a matter of wonder to me that have the word in their language they know so very little of the thing. their knowledge of everything except what relates to their eating and drinking, oxen sheep and goats is most limited. A few fables contain all the knowledge they derive from their forefathers and all the future is darkness. their lives are embittered with fears of being bewitched, nothing bad comes but by that agency & evils cannot be averted but by that means. they seem to think that no one would ever die were he not killed by some witch, their notions of medicine are all based on these suppositions, their doctors pretend to suck out of the bodies of the sick pieces of bones, skins of animals, ashes, goats dung &c &c These being the articles supposed to be used by witches to effect their evil purposes. I was lately with the chief of the Battens, his wife had been ill of an affection of the heart for more than a month, her medical man had extracted many wonderful substances from her system by his skill. I proposed giving him an emetic previous to his next operation lest he should have been deceiving himself the things of witchcraft coming out of his own body instead of that of the patient, but my professional brother did not like the proposition. He slipped away unpercieved by me & having cupped her artfully separated the fibrine from the blood. The white clots of that he now exhibited in triumph. I don't know how he managed to wash of the red particles from that constituent of the blood but I instantly took a little blood from the arm of a bystander, washed the clots with warm water and exhibited [0003]

the same substance as he had done. During the day he found an opportunity of having the village & he availed himself of it. He had been deceiving them for more than a month perhaps they knew he must have put the things into his mouth before before he pretended to suck them out of his patient but they are so afraid of being bewitched by these doctors no one had dared to mention his suspicions, sometimes when I give a child medicine, if he makes any objections to drink it the friends pour it on his head or drink it themselves. If a man is found guilty of stealing they give him an emetic in order to make him vomit his [...] propensity. The chief of the Bakwains shewed me a root which he sprinkled on his legs to make him run fast. And the friends of another chief were very angry with me because they thought

I had given him medicine to change his heart instead of that to cure his disease.

In all other points they are equally degraded, their foolish hearts are darkened. the mind & conscience are defiled. O how we need the prayers of the church for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Never did I feel the necessity for this enlightening power as now. Nothing nothing that the most exalted intellect can do will be of any avail without it. Nothing will penetrate the thick crust of ignorance which envelopes their souls but the beams of the Sun of Righteousness, the Redeemer mighty your almighty to save. I ask you to remember us at the Throne of Grace. We need the prayers of the Lord's people But cannot face how much unless you were present in the dark places of the earth. I might have told you of the success of the gospel but I prefer giving you these simple details in order to stir you up to more ardent prayer on our behalf and that thus ~~th~~we may have greater cause to speak of successes than we have [0004]

You will be pleased to hear the Directors have fully approved of our commencing a new station in the interior. The spot is near to the place Mr Campbell the traveller faced about to go home. the iron foundaries he heard of but was not permitted to see belong to our intended sphere of labour. The reason they refused him a sight of them was not that which influences the proprietors of our secret works at home. It must have been the same fear which is now in operation a fear lest by his presence the iron should be betwitched. Bewitched iron you will say what is that? It is simply the effect of a too energetic application of the bellows it becomes burned to a cinder they then take these out exclaiming behold the effects of witchcraft. The fact is so as the evidence being before their clear eyes no one ever disputes it. they then apply a double portion of their prophylactic medicines to the ore & commence the process anew. To prevent the iron being thus spoiled they use a great many precautions They won't allow anyone who has had intercourse with the other sex since the commencement of the period for working it to approach the furnaces & the men employed at it always sleep in the enclosures for the cattle during the whole of the smelting season. Their tools are as rude as those of old Tubal Cain but my my space won't allow me to particularize. I can only mention their tongs are a piece of the bark of a tree folded on itself, the hammer a stone & the anvil another & yet they manage to make very neat work with their antediluvian implements Among these people M^r Edwards who is older than you & I

intend soon to make a beginning. May the Lord smile on our endeavour to carry his name into that dark region It is also about 30 miles beyond the spot where the tyrant Mosilikatze was visited by M^r Moffat I lately walked over the site of his town & the place where he suffered a dreadful defeat by the Boers but a very few human bones were the only remains of all that belonged to the tyrant

Please present my very kind regards to M^{rs} Brownlee & all the family. Also to D^r Rankin &c I never hear anything of the young James I always forget to remember in my letters some information which may be interesting to you. I shall enclose it on a slip of paper
[0005]

I need not say I shall be glad to hear from you as often as you can find it convenient to write. Every thing is interesting that come from home so you can be at no loss as what to say

Yours Affectionately

D. Livingstone
[0006]

The information to which I refer is a new way of treating Prurigo. I shall be glad if you do not need it but lest you do I send it. It has the recommendation of both British & Foreign medical journals so I think it must be of value. It is as follows
Begin by dipping a bit of rag in aromatic vinegar undiluted, or acetic acid undiluted and touch the pimples with it untill it causes smarting as much as the patient can bear. Next day apply a solution of the nitrate of silver & proceed to apply it for two or three days running then the acetic acid again untill the affliction is cured. If you purchase a sixpence worth of nitrate of silver commonly called lunar caustic & dissolve it in a wine glass of rain water it will do without the acid. The latter is however cheap. Touching the pimples freely with the lunar caustic is very good. This you could do by putting a piece of the caustic in the end of a quill. Mixing the part with a little water & then touching them with the solid medicine a drop or two of nitric acid added to the solution will prevent it being decomposed.
I hope however you have no need of this advice if so I shall be glad to hear that you have need only to know this is in the fire
[0007]

Care of Rev^d Dr Phillip Cape Town

Mr Mrs Brownlee

23 Orr St. Mile End.

Glasgow