

# Telo, Johana araap (c. 1900–2001)

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Godfrey K. Sang is a historical researcher and writer with an interest in Adventist history. He holds a B.A. in History from the University of Eastern Africa Baraton and a number of qualifications from other universities. He is a published author. He is the co-author of the book *On the Wings of a Sparrow: How the Seventh-day Adventist Church Came to Western Kenya*.

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Johana araap Telo was a pioneer Kipsigis Seventh-day Adventist, evangelist, and teacher.

Johana araap Telo was born about the year 1900 at Sosiote in Kericho in Western Kenya.<sup>1</sup> Sosiote would become a part of Location 1 whose headquarters was in nearby Kiptere. In 1922 he moved to the Kabokyek area where he acquired land and became a farmer. He then joined the Africa Inland Mission at nearby Sitotwet and it was from here that he began formal education and learned to read and write. After his schooling he was appointed to become the headman of the Kabokyek area in the provincial administration set up by the British. He worked under Chief Kimuge araap Kaplelach.

At the turn of 1943, the Kericho district commissioner H. R. Gregory-Smith decided to merge most of the 21 locations in Kericho and in the process there were a number of headmen who lost their jobs. Telo was one of them. He took to habitual drinking while living in Kabokyek. One day in 1947 he went to Kebeneti searching for alcohol. After drinking early in the morning and getting quite drunk, he staggered down the road towards home. Along the road, the Kebeneti SDA Church founded by Stephen Biomdo was holding its camp meeting. A curious Telo decided to see what it was all about. At that moment there was a little boy who stood on a table reciting long portions of the Bible from memory, leaving the crowd in great awe. Telo was overwhelmed by emotion.

After the meeting he approached the little lad and found out that he was Samuel Kipkemoi, the six-year old son of Stephen araap Biomdo. They immediately became close friends. Telo began to find the slightest excuse to visit the home of Stephen just to see the little lad and challenge him even more on memorizing verses. Telo quit drinking alcohol and began to read the Bible earnestly. He began memorizing whole chapters and competing with Samuel, despite the age difference. He also joined the baptismal class and in a few months he was baptized and became a Seventh-day Adventist. He continued his search of the Scriptures, read them through several times, and in the process of memorizing whole sections he was eventually able to bring all of it to memory. He also took to preaching and teaching, with his specialty being Bible prophecy. With the books of Daniel and Revelation at his fingertips, he did not need to refer to any portion of the Bible except by memory.

Telo secured large sections of the Kabokyek area and designated land where a church and school could be built. When the nearby Kericho-Kisumu highway was completed, the East Africa Union decided to base the Kipsigis Mission at Kabokyek, since Kebeneti was rather difficult to access due to the poor road. Pastor Paul Nyamweya

was appointed as the station director at Kabokyek. Telo traveled widely, preaching the gospel, with many being awed by his memorization of the Bible in the Kalenjin language. In various places he planted churches and was a sought-after speaker during camp meetings. His favorite topic was Bible prophecy, and he often called people to be ready for the imminent return of Christ.

In 1957, the Nandi-Kipsigis lesson quarterly was first released with the great help of Telo. The quarterly, which was printed on the press at Kendu Bay, was distributed to the members in Kebeneti and Kabokyek, including the new churches at Marumbasi and Ngariet. It was a 32-page booklet which sold for 50 cents or Sh. 1.60 for the annual subscription. The first print run produced some 500 lessons. These were distributed to Paul Siele (who became the first Kipsigis ordained pastor), Daniel Langat, Elijah Kipsigei Kilel, Enoch Keino, Harun Moiben, Caleb Kipkessio, and Silvano Ruto. That is how the first Sabbath School lesson was distributed to the Kalenjins. Paul Siele and Daniel Langat distributed them to the Sotik area, while Elijah araap Kilel took his to the Kabokyek area, and it was distributed further south by Enoch araap Keino. Kipkessio and Ruto took theirs to Nandi. The translation work at Kabokyek was the initiative of the new mission director Robert J. Wieland who also founded a new church magazine *Sikiliza* published in the Kiswahili language.

Telo was instrumental in securing land to establish the Kabokyek Primary School and set aside later the land that would go on to create a secondary school at Kabokyek which today remains as the premier Adventist secondary school in the region. Telo personally canvassed for parents to bring their children to the schools. He also got teachers for the school, including going to Kebeneti and convincing Stephen Biomdo to teach at Kabokyek. Telo himself taught at the school for a while. In 1948, at the advice of Biomdo, Telo applied for the registration of the Kabokyek School, bringing to two the number of Adventist schools in Kericho. In 1950 he began a campaign to construct a permanent church building at Kabokyek. His earnest pressure on successive presidents of the Central Kenya Mission Field eventually bore fruit and in 1956 the mission director Robert J. Wieland began the construction of a large modern church. Wieland, who often came down to personally supervise the construction, slept in a classroom with his family. He brought in building materials from Nairobi in a lorry that had been purchased for that purpose to lower the cost. The church was finally completed and is still in use today.

In 1964 Kabokyek ceased to be a mission station and was absorbed by the Central Kenya Conference as a church district. Many more churches have since been established from this one.

In August 1999 Telo's wife Sarah died after 65 years of marriage. A little over a year later on, February 8, 2001, Telo died peacefully at the age of 101. They were survived by their nine children. To the day he died his favorite song was *Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing*<sup>2</sup>. In his final days, as senility set in, he seemed to get his mind back only when someone discussed the Bible with him, and he would sing his favorite song without a problem.

During his funeral, a strange light from the sky shone over his coffin and a sudden flash of lightening was seen, followed by deafening thunder sending mourners scampering for shelter. This was unusual since his funeral

took place during the dry season and there was no rain even after the flash of lightning. The officiating pastor told the shocked mourners that as the world saluted its fallen soldiers with a 21-gun salute, the lightning flash and the blasting boom were heaven's "gun salute" to its fallen soldier.

Source

Sang, Godfrey K. and Hosea K. Kili, *On the Wings of a Sparrow: How the Seventh-day Adventist Church Came to Western Kenya*. Nairobi, Kenya: Gapman Publications Ltd., 2017.

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## NOTES

1. Information in this article has been adapted from the following book coauthored by the author of this article: Godfrey K. Sang, and Hosea K. Kili, *On the Wings of a Sparrow: How the Seventh-day Adventist Church Came to Western Kenya* (Nairobi, Kenya: Gapman Publications Ltd., 2017), 198-202.
2. *Seventh-day Adventist Hymnal*, song number 334.

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