That Christian missionaries have had a profound impact on African societies and the course of African history is undeniable. It is not possible, however, to extrapolate this into the past and assume that the missionaries were at the outset successful in converting Africans. After more than three decades of evangelisation in the Eastern Cape, Henry Calderwood of the London Missionary Society commented that if he viewed 'the Caffres as a nation, they may be said to have refused the Gospel'. This pattern of failure during the initial period of proclamation was repeated elsewhere in Southern Africa, where the message and its bearers were treated with indifference and even hostility and where converts were few and far between. It is crucial to unravel the reasons for African resistance to the missionary message during the pioneer period, for these encounters can shed some light on later developments in African Christianity.

Xhosa response to the missionaries was shaped by the political and economic context within which the Gospel was preached. The frontier Xhosa had been under constant pressure since the eighteenth century due to the competition between Boer and Xhosa pastoralists for land and cattle on the Suurveld. The Dutch and later the British authorities attempted to establish firm boundaries between the two groups, resulting in the expulsion of the Gqunukhwebe and Ndlambe Xhosa over the Fish River in 1812, a boundary which was extended to the Keiskamma River in 1819. As the frontier closed, land became more scarce and colonial interference in Xhosaland increased. When missionaries began arriving in significant numbers in the 1820’s, the Xhosa associated the white evangelists with white encroachment.
There was consequently profound suspicion as to missionary motives in evangelising the Xhosa, as the Wesleyan Stephen Kay noted:

By one class it is surmised that we are desirous of getting into our possession the best parts of their country, and by another, that we are merely making church-goers of the people for the purpose of taming the men, with the view of ultimately making British soldiers of them; and by a third, that our object is to reduce the power of the chiefs and get their subjects wholly under our command.³

In addition, Xhosa response to the Wesleyan message was influenced by the threat missionary teachings posed to Xhosa social structure, and by their negative perceptions of the austere lifestyle of the missionaries and of the diverse collection of converts on the mission stations, many of whom were social undesirables.⁴

While all of these factors had some bearing on Xhosa resistance to the Gospel, another element has been investigated very little in studies of Xhosaland, namely the actual religious interaction between evangelist and evangelised. To explore this dynamic, it is necessary to fill an important gap in our knowledge of missionary endeavours. Much is known about the social, religious, and cultural background of the missionaries and the content of their message.⁵ In addition, the lack of response and even outright opposition of Africans to the Gospel during the initial decades of evangelisation during the 1820's to the 1850's in the Eastern Cape and Natal have been well-documented by historians such as Donovan Williams and Norman Etherington.⁶ However, what lies between these two—namely, how Africans perceived the Gospel and how this influenced their response—has not yet been examined.

To bridge this gap, the correspondence of the first ten years of evangelisation (1825-35) at two Wesleyan Methodist mission stations in the present-day Transkei and Ciskei was studied to unearth missionary records of African questions about and replies to Wesleyan sermons. There were many obstacles to an undertaking of this kind, such as an incomplete knowledge of the Xhosa culture of this time period and the bias of the missionaries in recording and interpreting information. Notwithstanding these difficulties, a remarkable consistency in the comments was found, suggesting that there was a common set of perceptions among the Xhosa about missionary teachings on divinity, morality, and the afterlife, and