

The Life and Work of Adoniram Judson, Missionary To Burma

Adoniram Judson was born on the 9th August 1788, the son of a stern and humourless Congregationalist minister, in Malden, Massachusetts, USA.(1) He showed early in his life that he was a brilliant child.(2) However, during his time at what is now known as Brown's College(3) he was greatly influenced by the Deistic beliefs of a close friend called Jacob Eames.(4) On his return home he announced to his shocked parents his rejection of Christianity and left for New York to take up a career as a playwright.(5) This turned out to be a mistake, and sickened and disappointed he found himself alone at an inn. There was only one room left on that rainy night, and that was next door to a dying man.(6) After a fitful night he was brought to his senses by the reality of death and returned home to his parents,(7) but they were still unable to help him or to answer his intellectual reservations(8). However it was arranged for him to enter Andover Theological Seminary as a special student,(9) and here, after several months that he finally overcame his reservations and dedicated his life to the Lord.(10)

It wasn't long before he began to become interested in overseas mission work,(11) but as yet no American had ever considered missionary work except within the continent itself, and so no mission society existed to support him.(12) It was during his study of mission work in the East that he came upon a copy of a book by a British army officer entitled *An Account of an Embassy to the Kingdom of Ava*.(13)

This book had a profound effect upon him and from that time on his goal was to preach the Gospel in Burma.(14) but how could he do so without a mission society?(15) The answer was that he couldn't, but together with group of like-minded students from the Seminary he was instrumental in the establishment of what came to be known as *The American Board*.(16) This organisation supported all Congregational foreign missions for over a century after its formation.(17)

Finance was a problem, so Adoniram was despatched to the *London Missionary Society* (LMS) to raise support there. On the way his ship was captured by a French privateer, so he was forced to travel to London via a French prison, from which he had to escape!(18) On his return to the States it was decided that the new mission would be funded exclusively by Americans, rather than jointly with the LMS.(19)

So it was that on 19th February 1812, Adoniram, his wife Ann (known as Nancy) together with another missionary couple - Samuel and Harriet Newell - sailed from Salem, Massachusetts on board the brig *Caravan*. Their destination - India...



On the voyage Adoniram continued a translation of the New Testament from Greek into English, and as he did so he became convinced that the Baptist position of baptism by full immersion was the Scriptural one.(20) So, shortly after their arrival at Serampore he and Nancy were baptised by William Ward,(21) one of William Carey's assistants. As a result he felt compelled to resign from the Congregationalists and solicit the American Baptists for support, though as yet they had no missionary society.(22)

Dr. Carey soon informed him that he had gained a false impression of Burma(23) - Carey's son William had been there for four years and was nearly ready to abandon the attempt.(24) *The East India Company* would not allow the Americans to remain in their territories, and the situation in Burma appeared hopeless.(25) So, though Burma was still much on Judson's heart, they finally decided to sail on to Java(26) or Penang.(27) Yet after spending several weeks being hounded by the *Company* they took passage from Madras on the only ship available, and that was bound for Rangoon in Burma!(28)

Lack of space does not allow a detailed account of the work in Burma, and I have summarised Judson's missionary principles elsewhere. So in the remaining I can offer only a very brief summary of a fascinating tale...

The Judson's suffered terribly from tropical diseases and from the corruption of the Burmese officials.(29) yet though it all they struggled on. The Lord at times used their times of personal tragedy for good. The loss of their second child, Roger, became an opportunity to form an unlikely friendship with the Viceroy of Rangoon and his wife, which in turn gave them some protection from the unscrupulous petty officials.(30)

Learning the language gave way to teaching and translation of the Bible. With the arrival of a printer(31) and press Adoniram began to print tracts and portions of the NT in Burmese.(32) His first breakthrough came when he decided to build a *Zayat* - a Buddhist-style meditation room on a main street where he could hold meetings and teach passers by in a way that was not foreign to the people.(33) This helped to break down some of the barriers between him and his hearers,(34) and produced, with time their first convert, Maung Nau.(35) They had been in Burma for 6 years.

The conversion of Maung Nau "gave the mission a new impetus":

Rangoon's idle curiosity about the new religion had been satisfied. The enquirers who came now were genuinely interested in Christianity as a faith for themselves.(36)

Adoniram tried unsuccessfully to petition the despotic Emperor to allow religious freedom, but he would not hear of it.(37) News of Judson's failure with the Emperor led to increased persecution of the believers, yet despite this they remained faithful(38).

For some time Burma had been raiding *East India Company* territory because they took the English commander's refusal to fight as a sign of weakness.(39) This erupted in open

war,(40) and Adoniram was thrown into death prison with the other foreigners.(41) Nancy remained free, and by some miracle managed to find the time and strength to look after him, petition for his release, and deliver and care for another child.(42) As it became more obvious that the Burmese would lose Adoniram was pressed into service as interpreter. Peace came once more in 1826, but the character of the mission had been changed. Burma itself was more closed than ever.

After recovering from the loss of Nancy, Judson continued with his translation of the Burmese Bible.(43) It was at this time that he and a colleague George Boardman were instrumental in the conversion of a member of the Karen People, Ko Tha Byu.(44) Ko Tha Byu has come to be known as the *Karen Apostle*,(45) the virtual founder of Karen Christianity. Recognising that Christianity was the fulfilment of his people's own legends his ministry resulted in the conversion of thousands. Within 25 years there were 11 878 baptised Karen believers.(46)

Adoniram Judson died on 11th April 1850.(47) He had not seen vast numbers saved directly through his ministry, but he will be remembered for his role in the establishment of US missions, his outstanding translation of the Bible into Burmese and his foundational work among the Burmese people.(48) I do not think that it was merely coincidence that a book called *An Embassy to the Kingdom of Ava* fell into his hands while at Bible College. For Adoniram Judson was indirectly responsible for the fulfilment of the Karen legends and provided for them their lost book, the Bible.(49)

1) *Adoniram Judson's Missionary Principles*

- 2) He needed an organisation to send him overseas. He was instrumental in the formation of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions.(50)
- 3) He recognised that doctrinal differences between missionaries on subjects like the mode and significance of Baptism could weaken their effectiveness.(51)
- 4) He devoted himself to fully grasping the language and making the message of the Gospel (especially the abstract terms that that involves) understandable to the people of Burma.(52)
- 5) He began to print tracts and Scriptures in the language of the country.(53)
- 6) Nancy began a school for Burmese girls - evangelism through education.(54)
- 7) He worked on faithfully even though it took him six years to win his first convert.(55)
- 8) He built a Zayat or 'meditation place' which Buddhist teachers used to teach and debate with passers by. He even visited a Buddhist service to learn how the meetings were conducted.(56)

- 9) Once the barrier of the first convert had been overcome, the Burmese showed increased interest in Christianity, once they realised that it was not just a western religion.(57)
- 10) He tried to gain the approval of the Emperor to preach the Gospel in his country, but when that was refused he carried on regardless as best he could.(58)
- 11) He insisted that converts undergo a period of intense training - far more than that which an American would have received because of the pressures of persecution) before he would baptise them.(59)
- 12) He avoided direct affronts to either the Emperor or the Buddhist religion.(60)
- 13) In the presence of the Emperor he wore a white robe which would mark him out as a religious teacher, without allowing him to be confused with a Buddhist priest (who wore yellow).(61)
- 14) They used bribery on many occasions to oil the wheels of bureaucracy!(62)
- 15) He recommended that any missionary gaining finance for any service other than missionary work should count that money the property of the mission and hand it over to the mission.(63)
- 16) He recognised the importance of having a complete Burmese Bible that would not have to be revised within a few years. He translated from the original Greek and Hebrew, not from a translation.(64)
- 17) He saw mission work as a job for life, not for only a few years.(65)
- 18) He had three excellent marriages:
- 19) Ann (Nancy) Hasseltine;(66)
- 20) Sarah Hall Boardman;(67)
- 21) Fanny Forester alias Emily Chubbuck.(68)
- 22) All three were missionaries in their own right.
- 23) He adopted the customs and way of thinking of the Burmese. This enabled him to think as they thought.(69)
- 24) He never accused anyone unless he was certain of the facts.(70)

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(1) Anderson, Courtney. *To The Golden Shore: The Life of Adoniram Judson*. (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1987) 8.

(2) Latourette, K.S. 'The Great Century In Europe And The United States of America, AD 1800 - AD 1914', *A History of the Expansion Of Christianity*, Vol. IV. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976) 81; He learnt to read in 7 days at the age of 3 (Anderson, 14) and knew 3 languages (English, Greek and Latin) by the age of 10 (Anderson, 20). He graduated from Rhode Island College top of his class (Anderson, 34).

(3) Latourette, IV, 81.

(4) Anderson, 32.

(5) Tucker, Ruth. *From Jerusalem To Irian Jaya*. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983) 121; Anderson, 39.

(6) Anderson, 42:

But though the night was still, he could not sleep. In the next room beyond the partition he could hear sounds, not very loud; footsteps coming and going; a board creaking; low voices; a groan or gasp. These did not disturb him unduly - not even the realisation that a man might be dying. Death was a commonplace in Adoniram's New England. It might come to anyone, at any age. What disturbed him was the thought that the man in the next room might not be prepared for death. Was he himself?... There was a terror in these fantastically unwinding ideas. But as they presented themselves, another part of himself jeered. Midnight fancies! that part said scornfully. What a skin-deep thing this freethinking philosophy of Adoniram Judson, valedictorian, scholar, teacher, ambitious man, must be! What would the classmates at Brown say to these terrors of the night, who thought of him as bold in thought? Above all what would Eames say - Eames the clear-headed, sceptical, witty, talented? He imagined Eames laughter and felt shame.

When Adoniram woke the sun was streaming in at the window. His apprehensions had vanished with the darkness. He could hardly believe he had given in to such weakness. He dressed quickly and ran downstairs, looking for the innkeeper... He found his host, asked for the bill, and - perhaps noticing the man somber-faced - asked casually whether the young man in the next room was better. "He is dead," was the answer...

"Did you know who he was?"

"Oh yes, Young man from the college in Providence. Name was Eames, Jacob Eames."

(7) Anderson, 45.

(8) Anderson, 46.

(9) "His father was one of several ministers involved in the establishing a new seminary at Andover that, unlike Harvard, and the other New England divinity schools, would stand on the orthodox tenets of faith." Tucker, 122; Anderson, 48.

(10) 2nd December 1808. Anderson, 50; Latourette, IV, 81.

(11) Anderson, 52.

(12) Anderson, 53.

(13) It was written by Michael Symes in 1795. Anderson, 54; Richardson, Don. *Eternity In Their Hearts*. rev. (Ventura, California: Regal Books, 1985) 73-75.

(14) Anderson, 56-57.

(15) Anderson, 62.

(16) Anderson, 68; Latourette, IV, 81.

(17) Anderson, 69.

(18) Anderson, 90-91.

(19) Latourette, IV, 82.

(20) Anderson, 127-129.

(21) Latourette, K.S. 'The Great Century In Northern Africa And Asia', *A History of the Expansion Of Christianity*, Vol. VI. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976) 228.

(22) Anderson, 145-146:

And Adoniram's father made a decision of his own. Adoniram's baptism four years earlier had forced him to reconsider his own position. Eventually that uncompromisingly honest old man came to the same conclusion his son had reached. At the age of sixty-seven, he resigned his pastorate in Plymouth and was baptised... together with his wife and daughter Abigail."; Latourette, IV, 82: "Another of the initial band of missionaries, Luther Rice, also felt constrained to become a Baptist.

Tucker, 123:

When word reached the United States that the Judsons as well as Luther Rice... had moved into the Baptist camp, there was an uproar among the Congregationalists. How could their star missionary desert them after all they had invested in him? The Baptists, however, were elated, and they quickly moved to form their own missionary society and underwrite his support.

(23) Anderson, 132: "Symes, in his ignorance of Burmese customs, had not realised that, instead of being treated like a distinguished visitor, he had actually been led about with subtle mockery, and dealt a succession of calculated insults in the guise of compliments. The Burmese court had secretly rocked with laughter during his whole mission."

(24) Anderson, 134.

(25) Anderson, 133-134.

(26) Anderson, 147.

(27) Anderson, 164.

(28) Anderson, 165; Latourette, IV, 83.

(29) Tucker, 127.

(30) Anderson, 192, 204.

(31) The printer was Mr. George H. Hough and his wife Phebe, Anderson, 184; Tucker, 125. Although Anderson does not mention it, Judson often had problems with his printers following Hough's departure for India, perhaps because he is writing for the Judson Press... See Faith C. Bailey, *Adoniram Judson: Missionary To Burma 1813-1850*. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1955) 94-96.

(32) Anderson, 197.

(33) Anderson, 203, 220-221; Latourette, VI, 229; Tucker, 126: "A Zayat was a shelter open to anyone who wanted to rest or to discuss the day's events, or to listen to Buddhist lay teachers who often stopped by. It was a place to relax and forget the pressures of the day, and there were many such shelters in Rangoon."

(34) Tucker, 126: "They understood clearly that they were not opening a New England meeting house, but rather a Burmese Zayat."

(35) 27th June 1819: Anderson, .223-224.

(36) Anderson, 231.

(37) Anderson, 255.

(38) Anderson, 262; Tucker, 126: "Toleration of the missionaries fluctuated from one extreme to another with the continual turnover of viceroys in Rangoon. When the Judsons were in favour at court, they were free to propagate the Gospel; but when they were out of favour, they laid low, spending their time at the mission house in translation work."

(39) Anderson, 287.

(40) In 1824: Latourette, VI, 129.

(41) Anderson, 302-303.

(42) Latourette, VI, 129.

(43) Completed in 1834: Latourette, VI, 129.; Anderson, 409-410.

(44) Anderson, 386.

(45) Anderson, 386; Richardson, 93.

(46) Latourette, VI, 231.

(47) Latourette, VI, 231: "He died... on the voyage he had undertaken in the hope of recovery. Like another great pioneer, Coke, he was buried at sea."

(48) Richardson, 93: "...Judson's translation of the Bible in to Burmese became foundational for all that his later-arriving colleagues were to accomplish among Burma's many minority peoples. If Judson himself had been caught up in a Karen-type response, he might never have found time to complete that translation!"

(49) See Richardson, 73-109.

(50) Anderson, 67-69.

(51) Anderson, 128.

- (52) Anderson, 180.
- (53) Anderson, 195-197.
- (54) Anderson, 196.
- (55) Anderson, 224.
- (56) Anderson, .220.
- (57) Anderson, 204-205,208.
- (58) Anderson, 255.
- (59) Anderson, 235.
- (60) Anderson, 236.
- (61) Anderson, 236; pace Richardson, 92.
- (62) Tucker, 128; Anderson, 312. Not a principle to be copied today!
- (63) Anderson, 367.
- (64) Anderson, 409-410, 418.
- (65) Anderson, 409.
- (66) Tucker, 123: "Unlike Dorothy Carey, Nancy was burdened for the unevangelised and insisted that her going to India was not because of 'an attachment to an earthly object,' meaning Adoniram, but because of 'obligation to God... with a full conviction of its being a call...'"
- (67) Anderson, 413, 417.
- (68) Anderson, 463.
- (69) Anderson, 493.
- (70) Anderson, 426.
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