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A Threefold Legacy: How Adoniram Judson’s Wives Contributed to the Ministry of the Man Who First Translated the Bible for the Burmese People by Rebecca Rizzotti

In a glass case in the Dunham Bible Museum sits a book, open to public eye, filled seemingly with mere curves and squiggles. To an uninformed passerby, it may appear a simple curiosity, yet there is a story of incredible suffering, perseverance, and patience behind that book. It is a Burmese Bible. Adoniram Judson, as the first missionary sent out from the United States to a foreign country and the first person to translate the Bible into Burmese, is a well-known figure in the annals of missions. Yet in the many biographies, narratives, and articles centering on his life and work, the lives and work of his three wives—especially the latter two—are often overlooked. Each woman contributed immensely to a different aspect of his service that was essential to success as a missionary.

Ann Hasseltine Judson demonstrated an incredible spirit of self-sacrifice during her marriage to Adoniram—first in agreeing to leave her family and homeland for a future of sickness and suffering, just days after their wedding in 1812—but most especially during her husband’s twenty-one months in brutal Burmese prisons in 1824-1825, his punishment for the false charge of espionage as he ministered in Rangoon. She “saved Judson’s life during the prison years... several times...Ann loved him fiercely, unreservedly, even to the point of giving her life for him. They were equals in calling, in spirit, in commitment.”¹ Her most famous role in the preservation of the fledgling Burmese Bible was the incident in which she hid the manuscript from Adoniram’s persecutors, sewed it into a pillow, and then brought it to Adoniram for safekeeping! However, she also visited the governor many times to plead for Adoniram’s release. She “incessantly begged the governor to give...an order to take Mr. Judson out of the large prison...[he]...at length gave

[her] the order...”² Rosalie Hall Hunt writes, “Three times the governor was ordered to execute Judson, but the man’s deep respect and admiration for Ann caused him to spare Judson each time.”³

The sacrificial, “unreserved” love that Ann demonstrated is crucial for a healthy marriage, especially in challenging circumstances. But Ann also was invaluable to the literary work. She “mastered a complex language and wrote the first catechism in Burmese. She also learned Siamese and translated the first scripture ever written in that language... translating several books of the Bible ...”⁴ Unfortunately, the trying time had taken its toll on Ann. Her first child, delivered at sea, was stillborn; her son Roger died in infancy; and her daughter, Maria, born while Adoniram was in prison, was sickly from the beginning. Ann died at age 36 of spinal meningitis, “just six months after [Adoniram’s] release.”⁵ Maria died six months later, at the young age of two. Adoniram still worked at completing the translation, even through the suffering.

Sarah Hall Boardman Judson had married George D. Boardman in 1825, and they had arrived in Burma in 1827, a year after Ann died. Sarah was eager to see the people brought to Christ, but by 1832, George and two of their three children had died. Yet she “remained on the field...[and] carried on her husband’s jungle ministry.”⁶ Sarah married Judson in 1834 and “was a gifted partner and knew the language better than any but himself.”⁷ While Adoniram worked on completing the second edition of the Burmese Bible, Sarah “translated Pilgrim’s Progress, several hymns, and other materials into the Burmese language. She wrote four volumes of a Scripture catechism, and she learned the language of the Peguan tribe to help translate the New Testament and tracts.”⁸ She did this all in the midst of bearing eight more children, and suffering the loss of three of them, before dying in 1845 at age forty-one.

Emily Chubbuck Judson was the unlikely third wife of Adoniram Judson. By the time he met her in late 1845, he had already completed the second edition of the Burmese Bible, but was still active in missions and working on a Burmese-English dictionary. Emily had published several stories to support her financially struggling family. Adoniram recognized talent in her work and asked her to write a biography of his late wife Sarah (finished in 1847). As Adoniram shared Sarah's story with her, they fell in love; in June 1846 they were married. Emily "explored depths of life, depths to which few of us would want to descend...having descended to depths of suffering, she also ascended to heights of faith, heights attained...by few."⁹ She was his companion and scribe, writing the story of her husband's life for later generations in the last years of his incredibly fruitful life. He died in 1850, at the age of sixty-two.

The three Mrs. Judsons, with all their individualities, have a fundamental trait in common with each other and with Adoniram: the making and keeping of long-term commitments. Such a concept is astounding in today's world, but this fact reveals a sad deficiency in our culture. Long-term commitments strengthen resolution, patience, and dedication; these qualities make for a better nation and a better world. And no task is more requiring of a long-term commitment than the translation of Scripture! Adoniram Judson said that "in our natural state we spend our days in seeking the wealth and honors of this life, which we yet know to be short and transitory, and we become too forgetful of that awful eternity to which we are rapidly hastening."¹⁰

The long list of the accomplishments of Adoniram Judson would not exist without the faithful assistance of his three wives, who fulfilled the commission of "helpmeet" to the best of their abilities with stellar results. Ann's fidelity saved the life of her husband and the precious first, incomplete copy of the Burmese Bible; Sarah's skill provided the Burmans with hymns and a

Pilgrim's Progress in their own language; Emily's talent preserved Sarah's and Adoniram's stories for those few who aspire to the glorious mission of saving human souls.

The shining examples of the Judsons, the messengers of life to the Burmese, are a testimony to resilient faith, compelling love, and intense passion—a passion for the fire of Christ to ignite the darkest, deepest corner of the world. Their passion paid off. Today, there are approximately 4.3 million Burmese Christians—8 percent of the total population.¹¹ The Christians are singled out by the Buddhist government for countless injustices, including bodily harm and the burning of their homes and churches; but the example of the Judsons stands as a reminder to “not fear those who kill the body, but rather fear Him who can destroy both body and soul in Hell” (Matthew 10:28, ESV). The modern-day Burmese Christians not only continue worshiping in the face of persecution,¹² but also delight in distributing Bibles in Burmese (and in other minority languages) by bicycle—Bibles that would not be available save for Judson's relentless work. They say that no matter what, they will stand firm.¹³ One evangelist said, “When they press us more, we win more.”¹⁴ The Christians have long been “waiting for some peace to come raining down out of the heavens on these war-torn fields,” but their faith is incredibly solid, and they “believe the victory is sealed. The serpent struck, but it was crushed beneath His heel.”¹⁵ May their example inspire us all to “rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame.”¹⁶

Works Cited

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