

indigenous church “by means of native preachers” and by providing the Scriptures in the native tongue, and to that end he dedicated his life.

But Carey’s influence was felt well beyond India. His work was being closely followed not only in England but also on the Continent and in America, where the inspiration derived from his daring example outweighed in importance all his accomplishments in India.

Adoniram and Ann Judson

While Carey and his colleagues were conducting mission work in India, the Judsons were initiating mission outreach in Burma. Their destination had been India, but like so many missionaries before them, they discovered the East India Company to be an unyielding barrier to missionary work. After months of complications and delays, they were forced to leave India. They painfully separated from Carey and the other missionaries and sailed to Burma. There they would spend the rest of their lives under extreme hardship and privation in an effort to bring the gospel to the people of that closed and uninviting land.

Even as layers of popular mythology surrounded Carey, so also with Ann and Adoniram Judson, who became the heroes of America’s first venture into overseas missions. As with many missionaries of this era, the biographical material is laudatory and limited by lack of original sources. According to his “official” biographer, Adoniram, due to “peculiar views of duty ... had caused to be destroyed” all of his early family letters and personal papers. And later on, during his imprisonment, Ann destroyed his more current correspondence—no doubt fearing the letters would fall into the hands of Burmese authorities.²²

Adoniram Judson was born in Massachusetts in 1788, the son of a Congregational minister. He was barely sixteen when he entered Brown University, and he graduated three years later as valedictorian of his class. During his student days, according to his biographers, he had grown close to a fellow student, Jacob Eames, who espoused deism, a denial of the personal God of the Bible. But Eames’s views made a strong impact on young Judson, who had grown dissatisfied with the biblical faith of his father. After graduation Judson returned home to teach school, but he was restless. Disregarding his parents’ pleas, he set out for New York City, hoping to become a playwright.

His stay in New York was short and unfulfilling. After a matter of weeks he was on his way back to New England, dejected and frustrated about his future. He stopped one night at an inn, during which time his sleep was interrupted by the groans of a sick man in the room next to his. In the morning, as the story goes, he inquired about the unfortunate traveler, only to be informed that the man—Jacob Eames—had died during the night. It was a terrible shock to the twenty-year-old Judson, a time for soul-searching as he slowly made his way home.

There was an air of excitement at the parsonage at Plymouth when Adoniram arrived home in September of 1808. His father was one of several ministers involved in establishing a new seminary at Andover that, unlike Harvard and the other New England divinity schools, would stand on the orthodox tenets of the faith. With the encouragement of his father and the other ministers, Adoniram agreed to enroll. He was admitted as a special student, making no profession of faith, but after only a few months he made a “solemn dedication” of himself to God.²³



Adoniram Judson, pioneer missionary to Burma.

Soon after this commitment, Adoniram read a printed copy of a stirring missionary message given by a British minister. So moved was he that he vowed he would be the first American foreign missionary. Andover Seminary was hardly a beehive of missionary zeal, but there were other students who were very supportive, including Samuel Mills from Williams College, who had been the leader of the “Haystack Prayer Meeting” some years before. This outdoor prayer meeting, an unplanned event, was a landmark in American foreign missions. A group of missionary-minded Williams College students, known as the Society of the Brethren, often met outside for prayer. Caught in a thunderstorm one afternoon, they took shelter under a nearby haystack. It was there under that haystack that they pledged themselves to missionary service. The son of a minister, Mills listened to stories of the missionary pioneers from his mother. Though he never served as an overseas missionary, he was, according to Alan Neely, “a prime mover in the founding of the first foreign mission societies in North America.”²⁴ He led in the formation of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, the American Bible Society, the United Foreign Mission Society, and other benevolent organizations.

Unable to secure the necessary funds for a missionary vocation from the newly formed American Board, Adoniram Judson sailed to England in hopes of obtaining funding for himself and six others through the London Missionary Society (LMS). The LMS, he discovered, was not averse to sponsoring an American missionary, but the directors were not willing to finance him under the American Board. He was prepared to offer himself and his colleagues to the LMS, but when word came of a sizable inheritance received by the American Board, he returned home.

Before he had gone to England, Adoniram had “commenced an acquaintanceship” with Ann (“Nancy”) Hasseltine. Some years earlier Ann, like Adoniram, had undergone a life-changing religious conversion and had sensed a call to overseas missions—a call not prompted by “an attachment to an earthly object,” meaning Adoniram, but because of an “obligation to God ... with a full conviction of its being a call.”²⁵ In February of 1812 she and Adoniram were married, and thirteen days later they set sail for India, arriving in Calcutta in mid-June.



Ann (Nancy) Hasseltine Judson, the first wife of Adoniram Judson.

For Adoniram and Ann the long sea voyage was more than an extended honeymoon. They spent many hours in Bible study—with a particular focus on the meaning and mode of baptism, a subject that had been weighing on Adoniram’s mind. The more he studied the more convinced he became that the Congregational view of infant baptism by sprinkling was wrong. Ann was initially distressed, arguing that the issue was not crucial and stating that even if he became a Baptist she would not. After more study and much persuasion, however, she accepted his view, and after arriving in India they were both baptized by William Ward of Serampore.

When word reached home that the Judsons as well as Luther Rice (one of the other six missionaries commissioned to India by the American Board) had become Baptists, 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 pleased, and they quickly moved to form their own missionary society and underwrite the necessary support.

Unable to remain in India, the Judsons traveled from place to place until they settled in Burma, which had been Adoniram’s first choice for mission work—until he heard frightening reports of brutal treatment of foreigners. Their arrival in Rangoon was a depressing and difficult time for them. Ann, who had undergone a stillbirth on the voyage, was bedridden. Unlike India, Burma had no European community. Poverty was everywhere. The narrow, filthy streets of Rangoon were lined with run-down huts. They were not the first Protestant missionaries in Burma. Others had come and gone, but only Felix Carey and his wife remained. They left soon after the Judsons arrived when Felix was offered a position by the Burmese government (to which his father had bitterly commented, “Felix is shriveled from a missionary into an ambassador”). Later Felix returned to India to join his father in the mission work there.

Two years after they had sailed from America, Adoniram and Ann were serving alone in Burma, spending up to twelve hours a day in language study. The large Baptist mission house in Rangoon had been left to them. Ann, through her daily contacts with Burmese women, caught on to the spoken tongue quickly, but Adoniram struggled laboriously with the written language, a continual sequence of letters with no punctuation or capitals and no divisions between words, sentences, or paragraphs.

Language was not the only barrier standing between the Judsons and the Burmese people. They could find no Burmese concept of an eternal God who personally cared for them. Their first attempts to share the gospel were discouraging: “You cannot imagine how very difficult it is to give them any idea of the true God and the way of salvation by Christ, since their present ideas of deity are so very low.” Buddhism was the religion of Burma, a

religion of ritual and idol worship: “It is now two thousand years since Gaudama [Gautama], their last deity, entered on his state of perfection; and though he now ceases to exist, they still worship a hair of his head, which is enshrined in an enormous pagoda, to which the Burmans go every eighth day.”²⁶



America's first foreign missionaries, commissioned February 5, 1812.



The Judsons aboard the Caravan leaving Crowninshield's Wharf in Salem, Massachusetts, February 18, 1812.

The Judsons' status as the only Protestant missionaries in Burma was brief. Not long after they moved into the spacious mission house, their privacy ended as they made room

for George and Phebe Hough and their children. Hough, a printer, came with his press and type and soon was printing portions of Scripture that Adoniram had slowly been translating. Within two years, two more families arrived; but death, disease, and early departures kept the mission force small.

Burma was a discouraging field of service. At times there were encouraging signs of interest, but then the inquiries would suddenly drop off as rumors of official crackdowns surfaced. Toleration of the missionaries fluctuated from one extreme to another with the continual turnover of viceroys in Rangoon. When the Judsons were in favor at the court, they were free to propagate the gospel and the Burmese responded to the relaxed controls; but when they were out of favor, they maintained a low profile, spending their time at the mission house in translation work.

From their early days in Rangoon, the Judsons were unhappy with the out-of-the-way location of the mission house. For a short while they moved out of the mission house and lived in a small dwelling among the teeming population of the city, but a fire ravaged their area and drove them back to the secluded mission house. However, their dream of attracting large numbers of people came to fruition through the concept of a *zayat*. 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. In 1819, five years after the Judsons arrived in Burma, they secured property not far from the mission house on the Pagoda Road, a well-traveled thoroughfare. Their *zayat* was a 20-by-20-foot hut with a wide veranda, all elevated on poles several feet off the ground. This was not to be an Asian version of a New England meeting-house. They attended a religious service at a nearby *zayat* to familiarize themselves with seating patterns and other cultural peculiarities.

The concept worked. Almost immediately visitors who would never have come to the mission house began stopping by, and the Judsons entered a new phase of their ministry. The following month Maung Nau made profession of faith at a Sunday service in the *zayat* packed with Burmese people. This was the beginning of the Burmese church in Rangoon, and by the summer of 1820 there were ten baptized members. From the beginning, the Burmese converts took an active role in evangelism: one woman opened a school in her house; a young man became an assistant pastor; and others distributed tracts. The work went forward even when the Judsons were away.

Both Adoniram and Ann suffered frequent bouts of tropical fevers, and baby Roger, born to them the year after they settled in Rangoon, died of fever at six months. In 1820 they returned to India for medical care for Ann, and two years later she took an extended sick leave back to the United States.

While Ann was away, Adoniram buried himself in his translation work, completing the New Testament in less than a year. In the meantime, his situation had drastically changed. Dr. Jonathan Price, a medical missionary working with Adoniram, was ordered to appear before the emperor at Ava, several weeks' journey upriver. Adoniram, fluent in the Burmese language, felt obligated to accompany him. For a time the two missionaries enjoyed the favor of the royal court, but by early 1824 the political situation in Burma began to look ominous. Ann had returned from the United States, and she joined Adoniram in Ava, but their reunion was brief. War broke out between Burma and England, and all foreigners were suspected of being spies. Both Adoniram and Price were arrested and confined in a death prison, where they awaited execution.

Life in prison was appalling. The missionaries were incarcerated with common criminals in a filthy, vermin-infested, dank prison house, with fetters binding their ankles. At night the Spotted Faces (prison guards whose face and chest were branded for being one-time criminals themselves) hoisted the ankle fetters to a pole suspended from the ceiling, until only their heads and shoulders rested on the ground. By morning the weary

prisoners were numb and stiff, but the daytime offered them little relief. Each day executions were carried out, and the prisoners never knew who would be next.

INDIA AND BURMA



Adoniram's suffering was difficult for Ann. Daily she sought out officials, explaining that, as an American citizen, Adoniram had no connections with the British government. Sometimes her pleas and bribes allowed her a brief visit and gained Adoniram temporary relief; but all the while he continued to languish in prison. Her visits stopped for a time, but then in mid-February of 1825, eight months after Adoniram had been arrested, she returned carrying a small bundle—baby Maria, less than three weeks old.

The following May, with British troops marching toward Ava, the prisoners were suddenly removed from the prison house and forced on a death march to a location farther north. Having been bound in prison for most of a year without exercise, the prisoners were unprepared for the arduous pace under the scorching sun, and some died on the way. For Adoniram death would have been relief. His bare feet were raw and bleeding—each step was excruciating. As they marched, they crossed a bridge spanning a dry rocky riverbed, and for a moment he was tempted to hurl himself over the edge and end it all.

Within days, Ann arrived at the new location, once again pleading her husband's case. But her own life and baby Maria's was now in jeopardy. She was so ill that she could no longer nurse the baby. Sympathetic guards permitted Adoniram to go out of the prison twice daily to seek nourishment for his baby from other nursing mothers.

Finally, in November of 1825, after nearly a year and a half of prison confinement, Adoniram was released with the stipulation that he would help interpret peace negotiations with the British. He was also allowed a reunion with Ann and the baby. Of this time Ann wrote, "No persons on earth were ever happier than we were during the fortnight we passed at the English Camp."²⁷ After that, they returned to Rangoon for a short time and then went to Amherst, where Ann remained with Maria while Adoniram returned to help finalize the

negotiations. The weeks dragged into months, and before he was able to return, Adoniram received a letter with a black seal. Ann had died of fever, followed a few months later by baby Maria.

Judson's immediate reaction to her death was to drown his sorrows in work. For more than a year he kept up a hectic pace of translation work and evangelism, but his heart was not in his labors. He attempted to suppress his guilt and grief, but he could not forgive himself for not being with Ann and the baby when he was needed most. As the depression increased, his output decreased, and he avoided contact with others—no longer eating with the other missionaries at the mission house. Finally, some two years after Ann's death, he went into the jungle, built a hut, and lived as a recluse. He dug a grave where he kept vigil for days on end, filling his mind with morbid thoughts of death. Spiritual desolation engulfed him: "God is to me the Great Unknown. I believe in him, but I find him not."²⁸

Adoniram's mental problems raised great concern among both missionaries and native converts. They visited him and brought him food and prayed for him. Slowly, he recovered from the paralyzing depression—with a new depth of spirituality that intensified his ministry. He traveled in Burma, helping other missionaries at their outposts. As he did, he sensed a new spirit of interest "through the whole length and breadth of the land." It was a profound feeling: "I sometimes feel alarmed like a person who sees a mighty engine beginning to move, over which he knows he has no control."²⁹

As exhilarating as Judson's itinerant ministry was, he knew that there was an even greater task to be accomplished—completing the Burmese Bible. That required setting aside two years and keeping up a pace of translating of more than twenty-five Old Testament verses each day from Hebrew into Burmese—two enormously complex languages. He met his goal, but then followed more years of revision work. Not until 1840, fourteen years after Ann's death, was he able to send the last page of his Burmese Bible to the printer.

In the meantime, Judson had been concentrating on more than his revisions. In 1834, at the age of forty-six, he married Sarah Boardman, a thirty-year-old widow who had continued her mission work after the death of her husband. During the first ten years of their marriage, she gave birth to eight children (and buried two). The strain was too much. In 1845, the year after her last child was born, while they were en route to the United States, Sarah died.

Adoniram and three of their children who had accompanied Sarah arrived in America deeply sorrowful at a time that would have been a joyous reunion with family and friends. It had been thirty-three years since he had last seen his native land. Country towns and fishing wharves had turned into great cities and seaports. He hardly recognized the once-familiar New England countryside. Thirty-three years of progress had changed his homeland and had changed him. He suddenly found himself a celebrity. Everybody, it seemed, wanted to see and hear this man whose name had become a household word and whose missionary work had become a legend. Though he shunned publicity, he agreed to accommodate his enthusiastic supporters and began a tiring circuit of speaking engagements.

During his travels, Judson was introduced to Emily Chubbock, a young author of popular fiction written under the pseudonym Fanny Forrester. He was impressed with her lively writing style, but he was astounded that such brilliant talent of a professing Christian (and a Baptist at that) would be wasted on secular endeavors. His suggestion that Emily write a biography of Sarah was eagerly accepted, and their friendship quickly blossomed. He proposed marriage in January of 1846, less than a month after their first meeting. The decision to marry Emily was controversial. Judson was a venerated saint of Protestant America, and as such the prospects of his marrying a secular author still in her twenties,