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Adoniram Judson and Early American Missions

Beth McFadden

Adoniram Judson's life is one that exhibits the power of redemption and the art of endurance. A man of great talent and prestige, Judson once lived passionately for his own glory, but his fervor was quickly channeled toward a life of missions and service. In the midst of tireless work, suffering and abuse, Judson learned humility and applied his tenacity to a greater purpose. This paper examines the critical transition of Judson's character and approach to missions as contrasted between his early adulthood and his early experiences of trial in his first years of foreign mission work.

BACKGROUND

Adoniram Judson, born in 1788, grew up in a Christian home and was given much opportunity for success. Adoniram was born to a caring and nurturing mother, though little information is recorded about her.¹ His father, however, was known for being incredibly stern. Judson Sr. was a minister described as having a "decidedly imposing appearance" and "inflexible integrity."² Needless to say, Adoniram Judson was raised under a man who perhaps inspired both a sense of fear and one of awe in him. As will be discussed later, this strictness present in his upbringing may foreshadow Judson's eventual rebellion from faith.

Judson's childhood was also definitively marked by his relationship with education. From an early age, Judson showed great intellectual potential. A common story told of young Judson is his private attempt to solve a riddle in a newspaper. Judson solved the riddle, took it into the post office to send to the editor, only to discover that the postman returned the letter to his father.³ His father spread out the newspaper and examined Judson's answers carefully, yet his response remained silent.⁴ The following day his father handed him a book of arithmetic and said, "You are a very acute boy, Adoniram, and I expect you to become a great man."⁵ These expectations were largely met by Judson. He first learned navigation, and had the Greek language mastered by age twelve.⁶ As he continued to rise to the top of academia, entering Brown's University at age sixteen, Judson became increasingly aware of his potential and developed "extravagant ambition."⁷ It was at this point in his life that he considered becoming a clergyman. Unfortunately, this potential career path was not motivated by his Christian status—for he was not near becoming a Christian—but by his desire to do something impressive and memorable with his great intellectual talents.⁸ This glory-seeking approach to life was only solidified by Judson's securing of the title of valedictorian upon his graduation. At last he had tangibly proven his superiority; he wrote home to his father with the simple message, "Dear Father: I have got it."⁹

Judson spent a number of years in a state of wandering and confident establishment of his dreams and desires. During this time he established a school for young women, and taught for

¹ Rosalie Hall Hunt, *Bless God and Take Courage: The Judson History and Legacy*. (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 2005), 2.

² *Ibid.* 2

³ Stacy Reuben Warburton, *Eastward! The Story of Adoniram Judson*. (New York: Round Table Press, 1937), 2.

⁴ J. Mervin Hull, *Judson the Pioneer*. (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1913), 6.

⁵ *Ibid.* 6

⁶ Faith Coxe Bailey, *Adoniram Judson: America's First Foreign Missionary*. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1955), 9.

⁷ *Ibid.* 10

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Hull 12

one year while completing two books.¹⁰ However, he quickly grew tired of this venture and chose to begin touring the South instead. Judson went through a brief acting stint and continued to explore the West.¹¹ It was also during this time that he declared himself an atheist and admitted this reality to his parents. Judson had become very close with a friend he refers to only as E---- in his journals, and this friend had thoroughly convinced him of the superior and intellectually stimulating nature of atheism.¹² Interestingly enough, E---- will later prove to be a catalyst of Judson's coming to faith. Regardless, upon hearing of Judson's fall from faith, his father was enraged and his mother incredibly upset.¹³ Apparently the memory of his mother's tears haunted him during his rejection of faith.¹⁴

Adoniram Judson's coming to faith, as mentioned above, was spurred on by an incredibly curious event. During one of his trips he stumbled upon a countryside inn to stay the night. He was placed in a room next to a dying man, and proceeded to hear him groan in pain all night. In the morning, he casually asked the innkeeper the status of the man. The man had passed in the night. Upon further inquiry, Judson discovered that this man was his dear friend E----.¹⁵ The realization that E---- was gone, indefinitely, caused Judson to reconsider his arrogant assumptions about life and death.¹⁶ At this moment, "he could think of only one thing: God and his own eternal future."¹⁷ Consumed by questions such as, "Was the Bible true? Was salvation necessary? Could he himself be saved? Was Christ the way?"—Judson sought answers anywhere he could find them.¹⁸ Still far from committing his life to Christ, Judson entered Andover Theological Seminary in hopes of finding truth.¹⁹

He discovered at Andover that intellectualism did not die in theology and that the Bible was not free of the drama he so loved.²⁰ His desire to excel pushed him deeper than simple success, toward genuine knowledge of truth. In the same year Judson entered the seminary, in 1808, he "made a solemn decision of [him] self to God."²¹ This decision took "all his ability, all his accomplishments, all his attractive personality" and made them "subject to the orders of Jesus Christ."²² Though Judson still maintained his great confidence in himself, much growth and humility followed his conversion as he attempted to serve God in the most unlikely places.

GETTING OVER SEAS

Once Judson had committed his life to Christ, there was no going back. Francis Wayland implied Judson's confidence and dedication in his faith by saying, "From the moment that he fully believed, I think he never doubted."²³ With his fervor, Judson quickly found a sense of calling toward one of the most challenging lives he could have been called to. A fellow student recommended to him the *Star of the East*, a sermon written by the chaplain of the British East India Company.²⁴ Upon reading this he was immediately interested in the missions taking place

¹⁰ Warburton 11

¹¹ Ibid. 11, 12

¹² Bailey 11

¹³ Ibid. 12

¹⁴ Ibid. 12

¹⁵ This story, included in each biography utilized, can be found on pages in Bailey 15, 16; Warburton 13; Hull 21

¹⁶ Bailey 16

¹⁷ Warburton 13

¹⁸ Warburton 14

¹⁹ Hull 22

²⁰ Bailey 16

²¹ Hull 22

²² Hull 22

²³ Warburton 19

²⁴ Hunt 16.

in India.²⁵ He soon came across Embassy to Ava, which convinced him of the need for the gospel in Burma.²⁶ In wrestling with this recognition, Judson was clearly reminded of Jesus' call to, "Go ye into all the world and preach the gospel;" in early 1810, Judson committed his life to the salvation of the East.²⁷ Little did he know, the process of getting his feet planted on Eastern soil would require great suffering and great tenacity.

Judson graduated from Andover soon after this moment of dedication in June of 1810.²⁸ His first feat was to inform his parents of his chosen life path. As it turns out, Judson had been offered a prestigious pulpit position as an assistant to one of his previous professors, a position that would have both pleased his father and met all of Judson's own original ambitions toward fame and glory. In one conversation, Judson had to both decline this glorious position and inform his parents that he planned to have an overseas pulpit.²⁹ His father was silent and his mother simply wept.³⁰ But support came not in the form of family approval, but in discovering other men who shared Judson's vision for missionary work.

A small group of men from Williams College had dedicated their lives to foreign missions, sharing Judson's missionary vision.³¹ Connecting with Judson through Andover, the men began wrestling together with the most dominant obstacle to their vision—who would send them?³² They knew of the work of William Carey and the work happening on Indian ground, but these missionaries were sent through British funding, and at this time there was no American missionary society to which they could offer themselves as missionaries.³³ Judson made an ambitious effort toward funding by writing the London Missionary Society, with hopes of being sent through them.³⁴ Awaiting the British response, the insistent men approached one of their professors about the subject, and Professor Stuart honestly responded by mentioning he is hearing a great amount of talk about missions, "but I hear nothing about what you are doing here to get there!"³⁵ Judson responded by complaining that there is no American missionary society to get them anywhere.³⁶ Professor Stuart again pointed out that one can have courage to write a letter or dream a dream, but that it takes far more courage to go to one's brother and request, "will you pay for my food and clothing and doctor bills so that I can obey God's call?"³⁷ It was this conversation that led Judson to attend a meeting of the General Association of Congregational Churches.³⁸ Here, the ambitious group of men presented their case and asked whether an American society would send them, or whether they would have to "commit themselves to the direction of a European society."³⁹ Expecting a yes or no, Judson was disappointed that the association simply founded the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, a timid board which did not think the congregational churches were strong enough to support such risky endeavors.⁴⁰

²⁵ Ibid. 16

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Bailey 18, 19

²⁸ Ibid. 19

²⁹ Hunt 17

³⁰ Ibid. 17

³¹ Bailey 19

³² Hunt 17

³³ Hull 28

³⁴ Hunt 18

³⁵ Bailey 21

³⁶ Ibid. 21

³⁷ Ibid. 22

³⁸ Warburton 27

³⁹ Ibid. 28

⁴⁰ Bailey 23

Though Judson was disappointed in the results of his meeting with the General Association, meeting Ann Hasseltine, the daughter of a Congregationalist deacon, far from disappointed him. Judson was immediately struck by Ann's beauty, and he wasted no time in trying to win her heart. One month after the meeting he had written her a letter of proposal.⁴¹ Eventually, Judson also wrote her parents, saying,

“I have now to ask, whether you can part with your daughter early next spring, to see her no more in this world; whether you can consent to her departure for a heathen land, and her subjection to the hardships and sufferings of a missionary life,...to every kind of want and distress; to degradation, insult, persecution, and perhaps a violent death. Can you consent to all this...for the sake of perishing, immortal souls; for the sake of Zion, and the glory of God?⁴²

As is evident by this request, the commitment of Adoniram and Ann was no small one. Nonetheless, Ann agreed to marry Adoniram and the two began making plans.

Meanwhile, the newly-founded American mission board decided to send Judson to England to request funding from the London Missionary Society.⁴³ Judson set sail for England on the *Packet*, but soon encountered a French war vessel, which took Judson's entire ship prisoner.⁴⁴ Soon Judson found himself in Bayonne, being walked through French streets and mocked before he was placed in prison.⁴⁵ Judson loudly protested his treatment, and got the attention of a fellow American who later bailed him out of prison.⁴⁶ He spent the rest of his time in France living with an American and awaiting a new passport.⁴⁷ Finally, after a four-month detour, Judson made his way to London.⁴⁸ He made his request in front of the London Missionary Society, and they agreed to fully fund him if he went overseas under complete British jurisdiction.⁴⁹ When Judson returned to the American Board with this news, he presented an ultimatum: if Americans do not fund him he will become a British missionary instead.⁵⁰ The board responded adamantly, “You can consider your support guaranteed, by the board. You'll go out *American* missionaries—yes, sir!”⁵¹

In February of 1812, Adoniram and Ann were married, ordained, commissioned, and placed aboard the *Caravan* in route to Calcutta, India.⁵² During their journey, Judson was persuaded to become a Baptist, rather than Congregationalist, and eventually Ann followed suit.⁵³ This compromised their funding by the Congregationalist church, and thus the couple arrived in India with uncertain support.⁵⁴ Not only this, but after ten short days in Calcutta the British East India Company demanded the missionaries leave.⁵⁵ Deeply frustrated by this, Judson was adamantly opposed to this fate and shared his concerns with William Carey, who went on to explain,

⁴¹ Hunt 24

⁴² Ibid. 26

⁴³ Hull 34

⁴⁴ Warburton 33

⁴⁵ Ibid. 33

⁴⁶ Hull 38

⁴⁷ Warburton 34

⁴⁸ Ibid. 35

⁴⁹ Bailey 29

⁵⁰ Ibid. 30

⁵¹ Ibid. 30

⁵² Hull 44, 46, 50

⁵³ Warburton 50

⁵⁴ Bailey 34, 35

⁵⁵ Hull 56

“They have every right, or they think they do...the British East India Company controls the commerce and, yes, most of the government, here in India. How does it maintain that control? By keeping a large and heavy thumb solidly on our dark-skinned natives! By telling them they are inferior! That they belong under that thumb! And what will Christianity teach them? That under Christ black men are equal with white!”⁵⁶

Thus, the Judsons finally arrived in India, only to face uncertain financial support, broken relationships with their fellow Congregationalist missionaries, and rejection rather than welcome. Exhibiting their unrelenting dedication, Ann simply wrote, “I feel confident that Jesus will go with us and direct our steps; and in that case it is of little consequence whether we have more or less of society.”⁵⁷

The Judson’s continued to seek a place where they could settle and share the gospel. First, they boarded the *Creole*, which was headed to Mauritius.⁵⁸ The East India Company caught word of their plan, and again detained them.⁵⁹ The couple continued to attempt to make it to various lands, but only encountered shut doors, more delays, and a heavier thumb from the East India Company. The couple was getting dangerously close to the deportation date set by the British when they determined to get on any ship that was going any place besides England or the States.⁶⁰ The only ship sailing was headed to Burma. All those the Judsons had encountered warned them of the impossibility of ministering to Burma. Equally desperate and faithful, the couple boarded the *Georgiana* and sailed the “crazy old vessel” toward Rangoon, Burma.⁶¹

MINISTRY

Burma was repulsive to the Judsons—the smell, the government, the climate; and mission truly seemed impossible.⁶² Not only were they uninvited, they knew none of the language, had no connections in the area, and had no political weight. Plus, their incredible plan was “to meet Buddhism that declared there was no god to save, no soul to be saved, and no sin to be saved from, with the Christian truth that God was real, man was sinful, and that Christ had died on the cross to save anyone who would believe.”⁶³

The couple started with the first necessary feat—language. Not a single English-speaker was present, and a Burmese dictionary or grammatical system did not exist.⁶⁴ Both brilliant linguists, the two set out determined to master the language, studying intensively twelve hours a day.⁶⁵

In the midst of their studies, during 1814-1815, the family experienced incredible physical ailment. Ann’s health became critical due to the climate, and she had to leave Burma for three months.⁶⁶ The Judson’s first child also suffered due to the climate, and died after only eight months.⁶⁷ Adoniram, too, suffered awful headaches due to his intense studying. His damaged eyes were healed only after lying in bed for a month, a time during which he wondered if God

⁵⁶ Bailey 35

⁵⁷ Warburton 52

⁵⁸ Hull 58

⁵⁹ Ibid. 59

⁶⁰ Bailey 41

⁶¹ Hull 66

⁶² Bailey 43, 44

⁶³ Ibid. 44, 45

⁶⁴ Hunt 53

⁶⁵ Ibid. 54

⁶⁶ Bailey 47

⁶⁷ Ibid. 47

was stopping their mission.⁶⁸ Adoniram spent seven months lost at sea, a time when Ann waited worriedly, and was then forced to flee Burma due to an outbreak of Cholera.⁶⁹

Alas, three years after they had arrived, after the couple had experienced enough heartbreak and suffering for a lifetime, Judson finally finished his first task, the creation of an English-Burmese grammar book.⁷⁰ This gave way to his first tract—the first Burmese message of salvation.⁷¹ Soon after the tract was released, a man showed up at the Judson house inquiring, “How long time will it take me to learn the religion of Jesus?”⁷² The Judsons began to see the seemingly minuscule fruits of their labors.

A translation of Matthew was completed, as well as an English-Burmese dictionary.⁷³ Eventually, the Judsons also opened a *zayat*—a Christian gathering place.⁷⁴ Around this time the two young missionaries began to see their first converts. These stories mark only the beginning of the Judson’s lives in Burma. Countless experiences of suffering, sickness, and war litter the remainder of the Judson’s story—trial and sickness and grief were emotions all too common to the Judson’s daily life. However, the couple exhibits throughout their life a profound faithfulness and endurance that deserves great attention and respect. It is the development of their character and approach to missions evident in the Judson’s transition from American life to life as missionaries that will be explored next.

DEVELOPMENT

The development of Judson’s personal character and missional philosophy are brought to light with the understanding of his early background and subsequent experiences in mission work. There are a number of ways that this development is evident, particularly in the critical transition of Judson’s life and attitude prior to his missionary experience, and following his first years of life overseas.

First, the personal character of Adoniram Judson, by process of extreme trial, shifted from one of extreme overconfidence to one of eventual humility. As was discussed earlier, Judson grew up with an immodest view of his own greatness. He excelled at everything he did and approached life as if it were an opportunity to be the greatest. He acquired the best education and adopted the newest skills and had the opportunity to shine as impressively as he wanted to. But missions affected his trajectory profoundly. Before he even became a Christian Judson had a brief sense of the value of humility. According to Hunt, he suddenly realized that to be a follower of Christ would upset most of his dreams of future fame...there flashed into his mind the words, ‘not unto us, not unto us, but to thy name be the glory.’⁷⁵ Though he ignored these thoughts for a number of years, eventually Judson lived this statement unto his death, living a far from glamorous life in hopes that God would be known and thus glorified following his efforts.

An area of Judson’s character that never faltered was his tenacity; originally used for his own glorification, it was then channeled toward the furthering of the gospel. The confidence and enthusiasm he once used to cling to atheism and become the greatest of all, he quickly applied to his missional calling. Judson himself wrote, “a little more sleep and we shall sleep in the grave...a life once spent is irrevocable...if it has been a useless life, it can never be improve...no

⁶⁸ Ibid. 48

⁶⁹ Hunt 67

⁷⁰ Bailey 48

⁷¹ Hunt 68

⁷² Bailey 49

⁷³ Ibid. 50

⁷⁴ Warburton 76

⁷⁵ Hunt 15

day will lose its share of influence in determining where shall be our seat in heaven.”⁷⁶ He determined, “I have some hope that I shall be enabled to keep this in mind, in whatever I do—is it pleasing to God?”⁷⁷ Judson’s attitude here is not merely a thought, but is exhibited in his fervor overseas. Upon returning from a seven-month voyage that he spent trapped at sea, Judson returned home saying, “I’m not waiting one more day to preach the gospel.”⁷⁸ Not only this account, but all of the stories included about Judson reflect his overwhelming determination to carry out the mission at hand, regardless of what trial he may face.

Finally, Judson’s missional philosophy also matured and developed throughout his lifetime of missions. Initially, he viewed the States as being the furthest thing from a mission field, and he referred to other nations as heathen lands. When the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions shied away from his proposal of overseas work, Judson protested saying, “They’re still thinking about this country as a mission field. Ridiculous! With our strong new government in Washington, our president, our states, and churches in every one of them, mind you—us, a mission field!”⁷⁹ Judson clearly saw the States as sufficiently saved, and other places as entirely in need, and this attitude is not explicitly resolved in Judson’s stories and writing. However, his discussion of other lands does improve and reflect greater humility. Originally disgusted by the people of Burma and all their community holds, Adoniram and Ann both grew immensely in their ability to sincerely care for the people of Burma. Judson once predicted “swarthy countenances will every where meet our eye, the jargon of an unknown tongue will assail our ears, and we shall witness the assembling of the heathen to celebrate the worship of idol gods. We shall be weary of the world, and wish for wings like a dove, that we may fly away and be at rest.”⁸⁰ Though the Judsons did meet a world that caused them much weariness, they also developed in important appreciation for the Burmese people and land. Hunt claims that the Judsons would reach out in friendship to many of the Burmese living around them, and even grew to love and appreciate “their keen minds and inquiring attitudes,” showing a brief recognition of their mental and social equality with the Judsons.⁸¹

Much of the maturity and developed humility evident in Adoniram Judson’s story can be summed up in his own words: “If the whole world was all before us, where to choose our place of rest, we should not desire to leave Burma... I know not that I shall live to see a single convert; but notwithstanding I feel that I would not leave my present situation to be made a king.”⁸² Though he began life embracing arrogance and rejecting God, Adoniram Judson learned to channel his ambition into an unwavering faithfulness to the gospel. Likewise, in comparison to Judson’s initial desire to succeed in his own glory, his stated rejection of kingship further demonstrates his newfound humility. Finally, though he began his mission career with a questionable attitude toward the very people he sought to save, he and Ann learned to treat the Burmese people with a degree of love and respect that is remarkable. This drastic shift in attitude and character in only the time between Judson’s early adulthood and early mission experience shows the incredible ability of God to redeem us and use our strengths for the betterment of his kingdom. The Judsons set a standard of great tenacity and faithfulness in choosing their life of

⁷⁶ Francis Wayland, *A Memoir of the Life and Labors of the Rev. Adoniram Judson*. Vol. I. (Boston: Phillips, Sampson, and Company, 1853), 33.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.* 32

⁷⁸ Bailey 55

⁷⁹ *Ibid.* 21

⁸⁰ Wayland, *A Memoir of the Life and Labors of the Rev. Adoniram Judson*. Vol. I, 34.

⁸¹ Hunt 55

⁸² Warburton 68

missions, and thus left a remarkable legacy that paved the way for what became a movement of American mission work.