Adoniram Judson's Burmese Bible: A Product of Intellect, Passion, and Providence
By Andrew W. Adler

"I used to think, when first contemplating missionary life, that, if I should live to see the Bible translated and printed in some new language, and a church of one hundred members raised up on heathen ground, I should anticipate death with the peaceful feelings of old Simeon."[1] Adoniram Judson saw both of these goals completed before the end of his life in 1850. The 1840 second edition of Adoniram Judson's Burmese translation of the Bible, in the Dunham Bible Museum's collection, is a noteworthy accomplishment. Its history and Adoniram's work should be known and analyzed by evangelicals as an example of the roles of intellect, passion, and Providence in making an impact on the nations of the world.

Adoniram Judson pursued loving God "with all of his mind" and used his intellect to make a significant difference in Burma. Before Judson's conversion, he gave evidence of his linguistic talents. At the early age of 10, he was nicknamed "Virgil" by his classmates due to his skills in Greek and Latin.[2] Though Judson's father was a Congregationalist pastor, Judson's best friend was a Deist and persuaded Judson to become a Deist as well. Judson rebelled against his Christian family and left home. Once when staying at a country inn, Judson heard the moans and cries of a man in the next room who was dying. After the man died, Judson discovered the man was the friend who had led him away from Christ. Judson feared God and death and became a Christian.[3]

Judson graduated valedictorian of Brown University in 1807. His studies in theology, Greek, Hebrew and world cultures at Andover Seminary helped him realize the unanswered

[1] Francis Wayland. *A Memoir of the Life and Labors of Adoniram Judson, D.D.*. Boston: Phillips, Sampson, and Company, 1859, eBook, 105.
[2] Stacy Warburton. *Eastward! The Story of Adoniram Judson.* New York: Round Table Press, Inc., 1937.
[3] Courtney Anderson. *To the Golden Shore*. Grand Rapids" Zondervan, 1956, 36-49.

foreign missions call and prepared him for translating the Bible into Burmese.[4] Instead of letting the pride he had in his intellect hold him back in America, Judson decided to go to the land of Burma he had read about in Syme's *Embassy to Ava.*[5]

William Carey, the Father of Modern Missions, warned Judson of the dangers and near impossibility of surviving Burma, but despite their doubts, Judson and his wife found a ship for the East. Judson spent years mastering the Burmese language and eventually wrote both a Burmese grammar book and English-Burmese dictionary. One author noted that towards the end of Judson's life, "He knew more about the Burmese language and people than any other white man alive."[6] It took him thirty-eight years to translate the Bible from Hebrew and Greek into Burmese. After publishing his initial translation, Judson continued to spend hours studying linguistic factors and biblical commentary "so as to give the exact sense to the Burmese." He spent even more time on the revision than on the first translation.[7] Adoniram's second wife Sarah Boardman described the Judson's recognition of the importance of the Bible in the language of the Burmese people when she wrote, "thousands looked forward with joyful anticipation [for the Burmese Bible], and which for thousands now perishing in their sins, should fall on their knees in thanksgiving to God."[8] Judson's translation of the Bible into Burmese was of such a high quality that former Burmese Prime Minister U Nu told a Christian council, "Oh no, a new translation is not necessary. Judson's captures the language and idiom of Burmese perfectly and is very clear and understandable."[9] This Bible is still being used by the Burmese today.

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[4] *Golden Shore*, 51-57.
[5] *Memoir of the Life and Labors*, 20.
[6] *Golden Shore*, 404.
[7] *Story of Adoniram Judson*, 153.
[8] *Golden Shore*, 412.
[9] Rosalie Hunt "Unforgettable." Christian History. Christianity Today, 01 Apr 2006. Web. 4 Feb

Evangelicals have a reputation in America of not being thinkers. Historian Mark Noll wrote, "The scandal of the evangelical mind is that there is not much of an evangelical mind."[10] We must follow the example of our predecessors such as Adoniram Judson, Jonathan Edwards, and William Carey who used their intellect, reason, and persistence in study to impact the world for the kingdom of God.

Adoniram Judson had a passion for the Gospel and for his mission in Burma. He and his family went through much suffering in order to accomplish the translation of the Bible. Judson's first wife Ann and their three children all died from sicknesses in Burma. Judson spent almost two years in prison during the time the British were fighting the Burmese. His feet would be hoisted up on a bamboo pole during the night and mosquitoes would pester him and his fellow prisoners in the jungle prison.[11] His wife Ann had a child Marie during his time in prison. Ann was unable to breastfeed, so the jailor allowed Adoniram to leave the jail temporarily and plead with village women to nurse their baby. After all of this suffering, according to Judson's son Edward, Adoniram questioned what had he accomplished in exchange for this heavy cost; his letters were filled with loneliness. It took Judson over a year to overcome the emotional distress caused by the series of calamities; eventually he married Sarah Boardman. The sufferings continued as Sarah also died and 3 of their children did not survive childhood. Judson began to really understand the emotional and physical cost of producing this Bible. Adoniram Judson wrote in his *Advice to Missionary Candidates,* "It may be profitable to bear in mind, that a large proportion of those who come out on a mission to the East die within five years after leaving their native land. Walk softly, therefore; death is narrowly watching your steps." Judson was frustrated with the missionaries who would come for a short time then leave when suffering

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2011. <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ch/2006/issue90/14.39.html?start=2>.

[10] Mark Noll. *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*, 1.

[11] *Story of Adoniram Judson*, 88-113.

began. He wrote, "They are all good for nothing… The motto of every missionary whether preacher, printer, or schoolmaster, ought to be '*Devoted for life.*"[12] Judson understood the call for Christians to carry their cross. He was willing to take the Gospel to a land where his life was threatened and where his family would surely suffer. The Judson translation cost blood, comfort, loneliness, and tears, but "Happy is the missionary who goes to a country where the Bible is translated to his hand."[13] This generation of Americans needs the courage and passion of Adoniram Judson. According to the Barna Group, less than 55% of American evangelical Christians shared their faith in the past year. Evangelicals should not be reluctant or scared of rejection, but look to the example of Judson and be passionate about the Gospel even amidst suffering.

Judson firmly relied on the grace and Providence of God for his work in Burma. God's sovereignty was evident in Judson's work in Burma. The Karen, a tribal people of the East, had a legend that a white son of the God "Y'wah" would come with the words of God. Adoniram brought the Burmese Bible to a Karen named Ko Tha Byu who led nearly the whole Karen tribe to the truth from Y'wah.[14] The preservation of the Bible during the persecutions is also an act of Providence. During Judson's imprisonment, the king's men emptied out Judson's house. Ann found out ahead of time and buried the Bible. She came back later, dug it up, and let Judson hide it in his pillow in prison.[15] This was the only transcript of the New Testament and its preservation is a miracle. In his Burmese catechism, he wrote "The God. . . who sends the Holy Spirit to enable those to become disciples who were chosen before the world was, and give to the

[12] *Golden Shore*, 409.
[13] *Golden Shore*, 399.
[14] *Golden Shore*, 385-386.
[15] *Golden Shore*, 302-314.

Son, we worship."[16] His only English sermon in Burma was about how "the missionary must cry out to all with the message of salvation in order that the 'invitation of mercy and love which will penetrate the ears and hearts of the elect only' may be made effectual."[17] Judson understood the need to rely on God. Through the suffering, they trusted the Pauline statement that "all things work together for the good." Evangelicals should trust the providence of God in their evangelism, suffering, and service. It is not a battle of intellect and will-power. Evangelicals, like Judson, should put their trust chiefly in God in order to bless the nations.

Adoniram Judson's Burmese Bible was produced through intellect, passion, and Providence. His outstanding long-term influence and success is something evangelicals should look to for their own work. In 2001, there were 617,000 Baptists and 1,900,000 affiliates in Burma.[18] One hundred and fifty years later, his work continues to make an impact, and his Burmese translation of the Bible is still of great use to this day. The Dunham Bible Museum, in 2009, was able to send a digitized version of the Bible to Christian literature distributors near Myanmar, the new name for Burma.[19] Evangelicals must learn from this man's success that we, as the Abrahamic covenant states, may be a blessing to all nations. As Adoniram Judson prayed, "May he [God] make his own inspired word, now complete in Burman tongue, the grand instrument of filling all Burmah with songs of praise to our Great God and Saviour Jesus Christ."[20]

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[16] John Piper. "A Catechism Question for Missions Week." Taste and See (1986): n. pag. Web. 4 Feb 2011. <http://www.desiringgod.org/resource-library/taste-see-articles/a-catechism-question-for-missions-week>.

[17] John Piper. "A Catechism Question for Missions Week." Taste and See (1986): n. pag. Web. 4 Feb 2011. <http://www.desiringgod.org/resource-library/taste-see-articles/a-catechism-question-for-missions-week>.

[18] Patrick Johnstone and Jason Mandryk. *Operation World*: 21st Century Edition, 6th ed. Waynesboro, GA: Paternoster, 2001, 462.

[19] *Dunham Bible Museum News*, Vol. 6, Issue 3, June 2009, 1.

[20] *Golden Shore*, 411.

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