

Francis Mason



*The Karen Apostle:
or, Memoir
of Ko Thah-byu*

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Published by Good Press, 2022

goodpress@okpublishing.info

EAN 4066338092519

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CHAPTER I.

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Early life of Ko Thah-Byu.--His Conversion and Baptism...

Often had the Christian voyager gazed on the rocky promontories of Burmah, crowned with their whitened pagodas that glow amid the eternal verdure of tropic climes; but he little thought, that "the misty mountain tops," in the distance, threw their shadows over the every dwellings of a people, that generation after generation had charged their posterity never to worship idols.--Xavier had passed their mountain homes when he went to look on, but not to enter, inhospitable China, and find a surreptitious resting place and grave upon its barren rocks.--Swartz had labored half a century to destroy the three hundred thousand gods of India, without hearing of the nation that had rejected them all from the remotest ages.--Carey had made his forty versions without a line for the people, that were longing, with "hope deferred," for the word of God.--And Judson had lived seven years in Rangoon, preaching the Eternal God, before a single, individual would admit his existence; while the poor unnoticed Karens were continually passing his door, and perhaps singing by the way,

"God is eternal, his life is long,
God is immortal, his life is long;
One kulpa* he dies not,
Two kulpas he dies not;
He is perfect in meritorious attributes,
Kulpas on kulpas he dies not."

[Footnote: * Some long period of time.--E.]

The Catholics, who preceded Protestants in Burmah several decades+ of years, appear to have entirely overlooked the Karens; and it was not till after the late war between the English and the Burmese, and the removal of the Baptist mission to the Tenasserim Coast, that they began to attract the attention of the missionaries. The first allusion to any of that nation, is found in Mr. Judson's journal of April 22d, 1827, where among three hopeful inquirers he mentions "Moung Thah-pyoo, a poor man, belonging to Moung Shway-bay;" but it was not till Mr. Judson's second notice, at the close of the year, that we learn the individual mentioned was a Karen. At that time, Mr. Judson speaking of his hopeful inquirers, says, "The second is Moung Thah-pyoo,* a Karen by nation, imperfectly acquainted with the Burman language, and possessed of very ordinary abilities. He has been about us several months and we hope that his mind, though exceedingly dark and ignorant, has begun to discern the excellency of the religion of Christ." This is the individual to whom the following reminiscences relate. It is very true that he was a man "possessed of very ordinary abilities;" and has therefore left no literary relics, from which to compile a bulky memoir. It is true, that he was degraded among a people that characterize themselves as "a nation most debased among the debased;" that he was a poor man, and a slave, till Mr. Judson set him free. But it is also, true, that he was afterwards a faithful and successful missionary, and a distinguished instrument in the hands of God to arouse the attention of the Karen nation to Christianity. From the day of his baptism to his death, he never intermitted his labors in preaching Christ, where the

Saviour had not so much as been named, from Tavoy to Siam; from Martaban to the borders of Zimmay; and from Rangoon to Arracan. And though he was the first of his nation to go down into the baptismal waters, he lived to see hundreds and hundreds follow his steps, in whose conversion he held a distinguished part. We cannot err in honoring those whom God honors; and it therefore seems proper, that the name of Ko Thah-byu should be rescued from oblivion, and inscribed among the worthies of the church; that the rising generation may learn what "very ordinary abilities," when *wholly* consecrated to God, may accomplish.

[Footnote: + Tens.--E.]

[Footnote: * The word *Moung* is a Burman title of respect applied to middle age men. *Ko* is a similar title applied to elderly men. *Pyoo* and *Byu* are different modes, which have been successively adopted, of spelling the same word. Hence *Moung Thah-pyoo* and *Ko Thah-byu* designate the same man at different periods of his life.-- E.]

Ko Thah-byu was born about the year 1778, at a village called Oo-twau, four days' journey north of Bassein. He resided with his parents until he was fifteen years of age. He was then, as he represented himself, a wicked and ungovernable boy; and, when he left his parents, he became a robber and a murderer. "How many of his fellow men he had murdered, either as principal or accessory," writes one of the brethren, "he did not exactly know himself; more than thirty, without doubt, according to his own confession. His

natural temper was diabolical. After the Burmese war, he went to Rangoon, and got into Mr. Hough's service." There some religious impressions were made on his mind, and he ever remembered Mr. Hough with great affection; and not unfrequently "Teacher Hough" was mentioned many years afterwards in his public prayers in Tavoy. "He followed Mr. Judson to Amherst," where "Ko Shway-bay," writes one of the missionary sisters, "paid for him a debt of ten or twelve rupees, and took him into his family as a servant.* We had before felt," she continues, "an interest in the Karens as a people who had not adopted the systems of idolatry exhibited by the more civilized nations around them; and this being the first opportunity we had enjoyed of presenting to their minds the religion of the Bible, we naturally felt deeply anxious that the grace of God should make it effectual to his salvation. Truth seemed, however, to make no impression upon his mind for a long time; and Ko Shway-bay getting discouraged with regard to doing him any good, informed us that Ko Thah-byu's moral character proved to be such, that he could no longer retain him in his family. Mr. Judson, however, who at the time lived with us, proposed to pay the debt, if we could find employment by which he could support himself; and he was accordingly transferred to our family. Soon after this period, he began to pay more attention to religious instruction, and though his fits of violent temper gave us a great deal of trouble, it was not very long before we began to see signs of repentance, and the first dawnings of faith in a crucified Saviour. His mind was, however, extremely dark; he was very slow to believe; and then his violent temper often cast him down and quite

discouraged him from praying. After some time, however, his faith began to gain a little strength, and we with great joy perceived a gradual improvement in his character. The little Burman church were, however, very slow to perceive the change, and though he often begged for the privilege of baptism, yet, not having gained a full victory over his violent passions, they could not think he had really been 'born again.' After having been with us about a year, the church gained sufficient evidence of the change to receive him as one of their number, and the next sabbath was appointed for his baptism. During the year, however, another Karen man with a family, and a young woman with her two little orphan brothers, relatives of the family, made their appearance in Maulmain, and, being in a most miserable starving condition, we gave them a little place to live in, and took the young woman into the girls' school, while the two little boys were put into Mr. Boardman's school for boys. The young woman improved much in the school and gave good attention to religious instruction; so that Ko Thah-byu had married her previous to the time appointed for his baptism. He had likewise been studying very diligently in order to be able to read the Burman Bible. But before the day for his baptism arrived, Mr. Boardman being ready to sail for Tavoy, and wishing to take the two little Karen boys with him, Ko Thah-byu concluded to accompany him, as his wife was unwilling to be separated so far from her little brothers; and his baptism was accordingly deferred until he should arrive in Tavoy."

[Footnote: * According to Burman law, the debtor becomes a slave to the creditor.]

His baptism is thus recorded by Mr. Boardman, in his journal of May 16, 1828.

"Repaired early in the morning to a neighboring tank, and administered Christian baptism to Ko Thah-byu, the Karen Christian who accompanied us from Maulmain. May we often have the pleasure of witnessing such scenes. The three Karen visitors were present. They appear to be impressed with the truth of our doctrine. They have urged Ko Thah-byu to accompany them, so that I have left it for him to choose, whether he will go or stay. He has concluded to go. Perhaps God has a work for him to do among his countrymen. He is very zealous in the cause of declaring what he knows."

Before following him into the jungles, it may not be deemed inappropriate to notice, in a separate chapter, the preparation of the Tavoy Karens to receive the gospel.

CHAPTER II.

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Burman oppression of the Karens.--Singular prophecy.--Arrival of the English.--Prophecies fulfilled concerning white foreigners.--Attachment to them.--Arrival of Teachers.--The Karens obtain books...

The remarkable traditions of Scripture doctrines and facts, which make the Karen nation a people prepared for the gospel in a manner above all other unevangelized nations, are well known, and will not be repeated here. But the following extracts from an unpublished address to the English Governor General, written by Sau Qua-la, a Karen assistant missionary, exhibit the local condition and anticipations of the Tavoy Karens so vividly, that, should they contain any thing irrelevant to the present subject, it will be overlooked, it is believed, from the consideration that every sentence is the unsuggested production of a Karen, who, when Ko Thah-byu entered the jungles, was wild as "the untaught Indian."

"Through the goodness of God, my nation, sons of the forest, and children of poverty, ought to praise thy nation, the white foreigners, exceedingly; and we ought to obey your orders, for the Karens, the sons of the eastern forest, have neither head nor ear. They are poor, and scattered every where; are divided in every direction; at the sources of the waters, and in the glens above them. When they fall among the Siamese, the Siamese make them slaves. When they fall among the Burmans, the Burmans make them slaves. So they live on one stream beyond another, and

cannot see each other. They have had other things to do rather than visit. The Burmans made them drag boats, cut ratans, collect dammer, seek bees' wax, gather cardamums, strip bark for cordage, clear away cities, pull logs, and weave large mats. Besides this, they demanded of them presents of yams, the bulbo-tubers of arum, ginger, capsicum, flesh, elephants' tusks, rhinoceros' horns, and all the various kinds of vegetables that are eaten by the Burmans. The men being employed thus, the women had to labor at home. Sometimes the men were not at home four or five days in two or three months. Further, the young females had to secrete themselves, and affect rudeness, and blacken their faces; for if they did not, the Burman officers would drag them away and make them prostitutes. If any one was reputed handsome, and it came to the ears of the Burman rulers, she was taken away immediately; so that the young females dared not appear openly. Sometimes when a Burman asked, 'Is she a maiden?' the Karens would reply falsely, 'No, she has a husband.' The married women, also, that were handsome, had to conceal themselves. The men were compelled by the Burman rulers to guard forts, to act as guides, to kidnap Siamese, and to go from one place to another, till many dropped down dead in the midst of the jungle. Notwithstanding they did all this, they had their arms twisted behind them, were beaten with stripes, boxed with the fist, and pounded with the elbow, days without end.

"In the midst of these sufferings, they remembered the ancient sayings of the Elders, and prayed beneath the bushes, though the rains poured upon them, or the musquetoos, the gnats, the leeches, or the horseflies bit

them. The Elders said, 'Children and grandchildren, as to the Karen nation, their God will yet save them.' Hence, in their deep affliction, they prayed, 'If God will save us, let him save speedily. We can endure these sufferings no longer. Alas! where is God?'

"Sometimes the Burmans would kidnap the Karens in Siam and carry them up to Ava, to the presence of the king; and thus separated from father or mother, husband or wife, child or grandchild, they yearned for each other, and many sickened and died on the way, before reaching the monarch's feet. Sometimes the Siamese kidnapped the Karens in Burmah, and subjected them to like treatment. The Karens in Siam knew that those whom the Siamese brought from Burmah were their relatives, and their tears flowed when they saw them; yet they dared not tell the Siamese, or supplicate for them. So those in Burmah, when they saw the Burmans leading away the Karens they had kidnapped in Siam, knew they were their cousins; yet they dared not speak or entreat for them; for if they said they were their relations, or begged for them, death was the immediate consequence. Moreover the Karens dared not dwell near the cities; for the Burmans took away all their rice and paddy, and every thing they had, and carried off their women by force. Hence they went far off, and dwelt on the streamlets and in the gorges of the mountains. After all, the rulers sometimes took their paddy; and in a state of starvation they would eat at random the roots and leaves of the jungle, and thus great numbers died. Sometimes the rulers assembled them together near the city, where, having nothing to eat, great numbers died of sickness and

starvation. Sometimes they would have to carry rice for soldiers under march, and being unable to cultivate their fields, great numbers died of hunger from this cause. Then, those whom the rulers called, if unable to go, either from sickness in their families, or in their own persons, had to give money to the officers that came, and money for the rulers that sent them; and if they had no money, they were compelled to borrow of the Burmans, and thus became their slaves.

"Furthermore, the Karens were not permitted to go into the presence of the rulers. They were only allowed to hold a little communication with the Burman that was set over them. At one time, in the days of Diwoon, when the Karens were fast dying off with starvation, and were so employed that they could not cultivate the land, my uncle, who is a chief, determined to go and ask the governor to give the Karens liberty to cultivate the land and raise provisions to a small extent. So he went in to Diwoon; but he was thrown into prison immediately. His brethren had no rice to bring him, and they could feed him there only with the stems of wild plantain trees, the male blossoms with their spathes, and the young shoots of bamboos.

"Great Ruler, the ancestors of the Karens charged their posterity thus; 'Children and grandchildren, if the thing come by land, weep; if by water, laugh. It will not come in our days, but it will in yours. If it come first by water, you will be able to take breath; but if first by land, you will not find a spot to dwell in.' Hence, when the Karens were in the midst of their intense sufferings, they longed for those that were to come by water, to come first.

"Again, the Elders said, 'When the Karens have cleared the Hornbill city* three times, happiness will arrive.' So when the Burman rulers made them clear it the last time, they said among themselves, 'Now we may suppose happiness is coming, for this completes the third time of clearing the Hornbill city;' and true enough, for before they had finished, we heard that the white foreigners had taken Rangoon! Then the Burman rulers made the Karens carry stones and throw them into Tavoy river, that the foreign ships might not be able to come up. They compelled them also to become soldiers, and to muster, each one with a bow and quiver; and as they had no guns, every one had to arm himself also with a cudgel; for the Burmans said, that, when the foreigners got on land, they would be unable to walk, and might be beaten to death with sticks. When, however, the news came that the foreigners had entered the mouth of Tavoy river, the Karens let themselves down over the wall of the city by night, and fled into the jungles. Then the Karens all ran and secreted themselves, both men and women and children; cooking food only when the smoke could be concealed by the clouds and vapors; for they were apprehensive that if the Burmans were overcome, they would fly also, and trace them by the smoke. Some of the men in the city were unable to get away, and remained till it was taken; and some that fled were unable to find their families, they having previously secreted themselves. In a little more than ten days however, we heard that the foreigners had taken possession, and that those, who wished to go to the city, had liberty. Then the Karens rejoiced and said, 'Now happiness has arrived. The thing has