

The Battahs of Sumatra.
A New Chapter in Missionary Annals.

IV – Signal Progress

John T. Beighton

[p.570]

To return once more to "my cannibal friend," it is a very remarkable fact that he passed from the superstitious horrors of his beliefs as a Battah, through Mohammedanism, to Christianity. Looking at him as he entered my father's service, and our happy Christian home, it might well be anticipated that he would soon and eagerly become a Christian. He was at once taught our faith, and taught in the midst of the kindest influences and the most attractive examples. Christians had rescued him from cruel slavery. He was fed and clothed, sheltered and befriended by Christians. He was naturally so submissive and lovable, that I do not believe he was ever severely punished, or harshly rebuked. He became familiar with our Bible, and prayers, and hymns, and above all with the life and sayings and sufferings of our Lord Jesus Christ. Yet the astute and zealous votaries of Islam were able to win him over to the faith they taught, and the rewards which it promised. My friend submitted to the initiatory rite of Islam, and became a worshipper at the Mosque. But the time came, when, finding his heart still void, and his spirit without rest, he publicly renounced the faith he had tested, and accepted salvation in Christ and Him crucified. This was in the martyr spirit, for Islam declares all apostates worthy of death. But for the British flag under which we lived he would probably have been murdered.

I have recorded these particulars for a general and a special purpose. Questions have recently been pushed to the front concerning the comparative results of Moslem and Christian missions, and many seem to be perplexed by the success of the first and the failures of the second among tribes with rude and fragmentary forms of worship. Those who really know what Moham-

[p.571]

medanism is can have no such difficulty. The individual case I have given shows what power there is in its creed and law (a cardinal distinction made by itself—*iman* and *din*), even when it has at its side the rival revelations and claims of Christianity—how enormous must its power be when alone it appears and speaks to men and women who are helpless victims to such a reign of undefined but enthralling horrors as are the Battahs!

For what is the chief element of its *iman* or creed? It is the sublime declaration of the unity of God. How startling, and afterwards how reassuring and all-satisfying, must this revelation be to men and women under the awful spell of the horrifying belief that the earth, the air, the heavens are peopled with malignant spirits unceasingly harrying the human race, and only to be combated or controlled by enchantments and sacrifices, often failing egregiously and leaving those who resort to them more helpless and hopeless than before. Here is its emphatic and authoritative annunciation of the absolute and universal supremacy of God:-

"In the name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful!

John T. Beighton, "The Battahs of Sumatra. A New Chapter in Missionary Annals, IV – Signal Progress," *Sunday at Home* No. 1845 (September 7th 1889): 570-573.

"Say, He is God, one [God];
"God the Eternal.
"He begetteth not, nor is begotten.
"And there is none equal unto Him." (Lane).¹
And again ["The Throne Verse"].
"In the name of God the Compassionate, the Merciful!

"God! There is no God but He, the ever-living, the ever-subsisting. Slumber seizeth Him not, nor sleep. To Him belongeth whatsoever is in the heavens, and whatsoever is in the earth. Who is he that shall intercede with Him unless by His permission? He knoweth what [hath been] before them and what [shall be] after them, and they shall not compass aught of His knowledge save what He willeth. His throne comprehendeth the heavens and the earth, and the care of them burdeneth Him not. And He is the High, the Great" (Lane).

It is not sufficiently realised that the unity of God involves the idea of perfection. This is a completely new idea, not only to the fetish worshipper and the trembling victim of demon rule, but wherever there is a systematised plurality of gods. Just as these men see among their fellowmen deficiencies and contradictions even among the best, so, wherever there is a pantheon, the various energies and characteristics of human life are divided among separate and conflicting divinities such as Brahma, the Creator; Vishnu, the Preserver; and Siva (or his more popular wife Kali), the Destroyer. Wherever Islam speaks, it speaks in the most emphatic and continually reiterated language: "There is but one God, and in Him are vested all the energies and characteristics you have hitherto assigned to different existences. He is at once omnipotent and eternal, infinitely wise and infinitely good, inexorably righteous and unceasingly merciful, claiming for Himself alone the adoration and the obedience of every other form of intelligent being in the universe; the hosts of angels and the nations of the earth; the Almighty Creator and the Supreme Governor of all—the absolutely and eternally Perfect One." It is quite true that Islam presents for the most part to the human mind God in His majesty and power, and this is the aspect, say what we will, in which He becomes specially impressive to the races in which Islam prevails; but it should be known that every² *surah* or chapter of the Kuran begins with the exclamation, "In the name of God, the Compassionating, the Compassionate," and Lane adds, "Mohammed was never weary of telling the people how God was The Very Forgiving, that His love for man was more tender than that of the mother bird for her young."

And, on the other hand, I ask what is the chief element of its *din* or law? I must not speak of ablution and temperance (including fasting) and almsgiving, and the pilgrimage to Mecca, all of which have their practical value as requiring self-restraint and self-sacrifice, but limit myself to the duty of prayer—declared by Mohammed to be "the pillar of religion" and "the key to Paradise." Five times a day is every Moslem summoned to turn his face towards Mecca, and prostrate himself before his God, and what is the prayer he offers? It is the *Fatuah* (El-Fátihah) or "Preface" to the Kuran, and has well been designated "the Lord's prayer" of the Moslem world.

¹ Lane's "Selections from the Ewan," new edition, by S. Lane Poole. Sir Richard Burton (can there be a higher authority?) renders (Hitchman's "Auto. of Burton," i., 209) the initiatory exclamation of the *Surahs*: "In the name of Allah, the Compassionating, the Compassionate!" Even the reader who knows nothing of Arabic can, I think, see that this version of the line appears to be more in accordance with the original: *Bismillah, er Rahman er Rahmeen*! Is it not obvious that in rendering *Rahman* and *Rahmeen* the same word should be used with different terminations—one, according to Burton, representing action, and the other character?

² Except one, where it was evidently omitted by accident.

John T. Beighton, "The Battahs of Sumatra. A New Chapter in Missionary Annals, IV – Signal Progress," *Sunday at Home* No. 1845 (September 7th 1889): 570-573.

"In the Name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful.
"Praise be to God, the Lord of the worlds,
"The Compassionate, the Merciful.
"The king of the day of judgment.
"Thee do we worship, and of Thee seek we help.
"Guide us in the right way,
"The way of those to whom Thou hast been gracious,
"Not of these with whom Thou art wroth, nor of the erring" (Lane).

And, mark it, every man is to offer this prayer—offer it wherever he may be and in whatever state. There is no priesthood in Islam. Every spirit is to approach God and receive blessing from Him in its own individuality. Can we wonder, in view of these facts, that wherever Islam prevails it arrays human nature in a dignity before unknown?

Some reference must be made to the revelation it makes of immortality. Not only does it distinctly declare the personal immortality of man, but in the most solemn and persistent manner announces a day of final judgment. The penalties for the wicked are depicted in terms of realistic

[p.572]

horror, and the rewards for the righteous in descriptions of equal sensuousness. And no doubt both have enormous power in their influence on the minds to which they appeal. As a matter of simple justice, however, it should be known that intelligent Moslems may be found who regard these representations as only symbolical. Ancient commentators on the Kuran declare, in particular, that there are pleasures, for those who are prepared and entitled, far higher in their nature than a literal interpretation of the passages relating to them would imply. Al Ghazili (professor of theology at Bagdad, who died A.D. 1111), one of the most eminent of these commentators, is quoted by Sale ("Preliminary Discourse," Ed. 1795, vol. i. p. 132), as declaring that the "highest honour" in Paradise will be to "behold the face of God morning and evening," and that this "will give such exquisite delight that in respect thereof all the other pleasures of Paradise will be forgotten and lightly esteemed;" and not without reason, since, as the same author says, "every other enjoyment is equally tasted with the very brute beast who is turned loose into luxuriant pasture." And Sale (whose authority on Moslem questions has not been diminished by any subsequent author) adds in a passage which ought not to be ignored: "The reader will observe, by the way, that this is a full confutation of those who pretend the Mohammedans admit of no spiritual pleasures in the next life, but make the happiness of the blessed to consist wholly in corporeal enjoyments." Notwithstanding, I am compelled by what I know on the subject, to believe that the pictures continually occurring in the Kuran of the voluptuous pleasures of Paradise have largely to do with the success of the proselytising zeal of its votaries. So much for the object in its general aspect.

And now for the special aspect of this great question. Islam preceded Christianity as a missionary agency in the Eastern tropics. It appears to have been introduced to the Malayan peninsula at the end of the twelfth or the beginning of the thirteenth century, and probably by means of traders from Arabia. Marsden quotes Marco Polo as stating that he found it prevailing on the coast of Sumatra. This was in 1268. The Malays seem everywhere to have embraced it eagerly, and with it the Arabic character, which has now, I believe, superseded all the original forms of writing which may have existed among them. No converts to Islam have been characterised by intenser devotedness to the imported faith. At the proper seasons shiploads of pilgrims (including women)

John T. Beighton, "The Battahs of Sumatra. A New Chapter in Missionary Annals, IV – Signal Progress," *Sunday at Home* No. 1845 (September 7th 1889): 570-573.

leave the ports of these seas for Arabia, and many perform the pilgrimage two or three times during their life. The Malays occupying the districts surrounding the Battahs on their heights became Mohammedans centuries ago. No marvel that at last the aggressive efforts of the enthusiastic leaders in faith of these neighbouring tribes proved successful. Among the Battahs of the south, Islam has become the established creed and cult. And it is now making its way among the Battahs of their central home. Who can wonder? If among Pagans generally the revelation of a perfect, supreme, and only God is full of power, how much more must it be this to a race cowed down into abject and unremitting fear by the realisation of nothing spiritual but cruel and malicious demons! And, again, it is a significant fact that as the rule of strong government (though foreign) advances, so does the faith of Islam (also foreign), showing how the feeling of disorder and conflict amongst themselves urges the people to seek and welcome the domination over them of a definite and principal authority, religious as well as civil. The missionaries complain of the multiplied difficulties of their work when they have to face Mohammedans in their fight with the heathenism of Battahland. But their own records show that the history of my departed Battah friend is being repeated, and to very many of the race Islam is proving the "pioneer" to Christianity. And this it ought to be. With all its perversions and inventions, the Kuraii- accepts the Christian Scriptures as inspired, and Christ Himself as a Prophet only inferior to its own Author.

Examining the reports of the Rhenish Missionary Society, the following statements have been noticed. As to the presence and strength of Islamism we read of one station: "The great difficulties encountered here are the long distances, bad roads, the ever-moving population, and already far-spread Islamism." Another missionary reports that "he has only Mohammedans in his whole district, of whom six families have adopted the Christian faith." Of a third station it is said, "It is very important that Christians should take a firm footing and hinder the spread of Islamism," and it is added that the missionary "has again baptized eighty Mohammedans." Such success, remarkable as it would be anywhere among Moslems, is the more signal when it is achieved among those who have all the ardour of a "first love."

But let us trace the present prosperous work of Christian missions to its beginnings. To the enterprising Baptist brethren of Serampore, and to the Baptist Missionary Society, is due the honour of first appearing upon the scene. Would that they had never retired from it! The heroes of Serampore led the way. In the "Periodical Accounts of the Baptist Missionary Society it is recorded that in 1819, "Mr. Nathaniel Ward (nephew of Mr. Ward of Serampore) has proceeded to Sumatra with a printing-press, and some other missionaries are expected shortly to follow." Accordingly, in the same year there started from England Messrs. Burton and Evans, and they joined Mr. Ward in June 1820. The "instructions" to the two missionaries are given at length, and amongst them occurs a passage which is full of significance in view of recent controversy, in which violent attack has been rebuked as if a common course with missionaries: "Use no harsh language either with reference to the person, character, or writings of Mohammed, or the notions and practices of heathen superstition, but attempt gradually to awaken a concern after superior instruction, and then communicate that information as they are able to bear it." Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles was at this time

[p.573]

governor of the British territory in Sumatra, and, acting on his advice, Mr. Evans remained with Mr. Ward at Bencoolen, while Mr. Burton proceeded to the northern part of the island for the

John T. Beighton, "The Battahs of Sumatra. A New Chapter in Missionary Annals, IV – Signal Progress," *Sunday at Home* No. 1845 (September 7th 1889): 570-573.

purpose of commencing a mission among the Battahs, "of whose moral condition," it was announced, "some faint idea may be formed, when it is stated, on the authority of the governor, that it is not only their practice to eat prisoners taken in war, but that the capital punishment of the country—a punishment as common as hanging in England [i.e. in 1820]—is eating the criminal alive. The population of this Sumatran tribe is estimated at about a million; they have no caste among them; nor is it known that they practise any religious observances whatever; but it is remarkable that, a little before the arrival of the missionaries, they had sent a deputation to the British governor, requesting to know of what religion they should be!"

The response to the question is found in the counsel given by the sagacious and kindly Sir Stamford Raffles. Mr. Burton sailed, as stated, from Bencoolen to the Battah country, and made his way in it as far as the furthest trade station of the East India Company, whose official Sir Stamford was. He finally selected as his residence Siboga, in the magnificent bay of Tapanuli (See first chapter). He appears to have settled there in 1821 and was soon able to make himself understood by the Battahs. He then composed and distributed tracts in the language, and translated, in successive portions, the Gospel or St. John. He appears also to have commenced the compiling of a dictionary of English, Malay, and Battah. In the year 1824, accompanied by Mr. Ward, he accomplished a very important excursion into the Battah country, journeying in it so far as to be able to obtain a distant view of the superb Tobah lake. A report of this journey is published in the twelfth number of the "Friend of India" and is well worth reading. It appears from it, that at that date any men "caught" in the act of robbery with violence and housebreaking were eaten. "No money can save them." At one village they saw the skull of a man who had just been eaten, and at another the travellers were told that "twelve months ago twenty men were completely eaten in one day." And yet, speaking generally, they describe the people as quiet, industrious, and kindly, the women inquisitive but modest, the fields cultivated, and everywhere signs of plenty. They went where no white man had ever been seen, and, though the inhabitants collected in thousands at different places, they never felt themselves in peril. Mr. Burton's knowledge of the language, no doubt, prevented misunderstanding and suspicion.

Unhappily, the mission begun by such heroic men, and with so much promise, came to an end in the very next year (1825), with the transfer to the Dutch Government of all territory in Sumatra which had been under the authority of Great Britain. It is difficult at this distance of time from this occurrence to feel assured that the circumstances fully justified this disastrous abandonment of the field; but we ought to be satisfied that the great and good men, who were served by such able and brave agents, would never have proceeded to such an extreme step had they not clearly seen it to be an inevitable necessity. There was, no doubt, fear as to the safety of the agents in the change of governments, and, moreover, expectation of hindrance in the work through the jealousies then rampant between the two governments of Britain and Holland. In July, 1825, Mr. Burton and his family, and the Battah girls in the Orphan Institution in Mrs. Burton's charge sailed for Calcutta. They were followed by Mr. Evans, and, though Mr. Ward seems to have continued for several years after his educational work at Padang, he appears to have done nothing for the Battahs, and, indeed, to have been only nominally connected with missionary service.

This document is in the Public Domain. Prepared for the Web by Rob & Michelle Bradshaw.

<http://www.victoriansunday.org/>