

A Bible that traveled



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There was great excitement amongst the Fijian people in a small coastal village on one of the main islands of the Fiji group. A boat had arrived and a large pile of wooden packing cases had been left on the wharf. These boxes were the centre of attention for they displayed marks and labels that indicated they had been sent from England.

Husky, well-built Fijian youths volunteered to carry the boxes up the hill to the missionary's house which over-looked the sea. Soon the air was split with the sounds of a hammer and the creak of the wooden lids being prized off the cases.

This was early in the 1870s; the Christian gospel had been taught in the Fiji Islands for about 20 years. Faithful men had learned the language, translated the Bible, and now it had been printed in the Fijian language.

The village people recognised the new Bibles and there was a great chorus, "Please let me have one!" There were so few Bibles and so many people who wanted one for themselves. The missionary gave one of the precious few to a teacher who had walked down to the coast from the little mountain village where he lived. This man was a teacher because he had become a Christian and had taught those in his village about Jesus, too. He cared for a small community of Christians, surrounded by many in nearby villages who still served evil gods.

The teacher walked the two days' journey to his home, carrying the precious Bible wrapped in a piece of cloth and then tied up in a woven grass mat. It was late at night when he reached his village. The news soon spread that the teacher had returned with his new Bible. All the people of the village crowded into the teacher's house and sat cross-legged on the floor, waiting for him to finish his meal. Then he washed his hands in the earthenware basin which was brought to him by his little daughter. He opened the bundle of mats and the cloth that contained the precious book. All the people, young and old, crept nearer to view the new Bible which had come all the way from England, six months' journey by sailing ship.

"Now, let us pray," said the teacher, and someone commenced singing a favourite hymn in their own language. They gave thanks for the arrival of the Bible in their village. Then the teacher turned the fresh, new pages of the book and read aloud the stories of the lost sheep, the lost coin and the lost son who returned home. The teacher then led his people in prayer for those who lived in the surrounding hills who had not yet believed in Jesus the Son of God.

As soon as the prayer was ended the teacher's daughter, Mere, took hold of the Bible and began to spell out some of the words. Suddenly, through the quiet stillness there was a scream of terror. Everyone jumped up and shouted, "It's war! It's war! The enemy has come!"

In a moment everyone had rushed out of the house. They could hear the bloodcurdling war-crisis of their enemies. Some of the village houses were already on fire, blazing fiercely in the strong evening breeze. The people scattered in all directions. Little Mere, still clutching the new Bible, was hurried away by her mother and together they hid in the long reeds some distance from their village.

The horror of that night will be remembered, the wild cries and shrieks of terror, the dull thuds of heavy clubs as the fleeing people were struck down. The blaze of the burning houses lit up the surrounding hill-sides.

Slowly, the chant of the warriors died down as they dragged their victims away to the cannibal ovens in their own villages. Then there was silence, sad silence. It seemed the night would never end, but at last the dawn came. Little Mere and her mother crept stealthily out of their place of hiding. Alone, Mere's mother went to the smoking ruins of their village.

After a time, Mere saw her returning along the bush track, crying as if her heart would break. She had met some women who had told her the sad tidings that her husband, the teacher was among those who had been killed and dragged away to the cannibal ovens. The whole village had been destroyed, and all their mats, baskets and wooden dishes had been taken away or burned. Only one thing remained of all their possessions, the Bible which Mere had carried off the night before.

"Let us have prayers," said Mere's mother, and so saying, she turned in her grief to the wonderful fourteenth chapter of John's gospel, the passage which reads, "Let not your heart be troubled....." Mere and her mother and the women who had returned with her, knelt down and prayed God to forgive those who had ravaged their village and brought sorrow into their lives by killing their loved ones. They baked yams and ate a good meal before setting off on the two-day walk down the mountain to the coast.

When they arrived at the missionary's home, Mere's mother told him the sad story and showed him the only article they had saved... the new Bible. In the Bible, Mere's mother wrote: "This is Mere Nasau's Bible. Is it not a brand plucked from the burning?" And she gave the Bible to Mere to keep.

The missionary did all he could to help Mere and her mother, then later made arrangements for them to go and live with the mother's people on the island where she had been born.

In her mother's village, Mere attended the mission school. In those days the Bible was the only reading book they used. Mere treasured her Bible and learned to recite many passages from it. One year she won a prize for reciting the greatest number of chapters. It was a great occasion and Mere treasured her Bible even more.

Mere grew up and married a teacher named Josaia. They had not long been married when there came a call for teachers to take the Christian message to

New Britain, one of the islands of what we now know as Papua New Guinea. Josaia and Mere volunteered to go. Of course they took their special Bible with them. Every morning and evening they read together from it.

After working together in New Britain for a few years, Mere fell ill. She knows as the weeks went by that she could not recover. One day she called Josaia. "I am going," she said gently, "you are staying. Take my Book which we have read together each day; it has been a light to our path. Take it, read it, obey it." So Mere died and was given a Christian burial in New Britain, (now Papua New Guinea).

After a time, Josaia returned to Fiji. The church appointed him to a village high up in the mountains. One night he was sitting in his house with a group of village people. They began to tell stories of the old days. There was an old man, a very old man, who remembered the days before they had become Christians in that village. He said, "There used to be a village over on that hill," he said, with a nod towards a nearby rise. "There are only the foundations left. But I remember as a young man, and a heathen, the time we raided that village. We attacked it at night, burned the houses and killed the Christians. Among the Christians we killed was the teacher."

Everyone sat in silence, thinking of how God's love had changed their lives. Then Josaia took Mere's Bible, worn and old from much use, and broke the silence. "Do you see this Book?" he said. "It once belonged to the teacher you killed. It was saved by his little daughter. It was the only thing they saved. Years later, she became my wife. We took this Book to New Britain and there it was used as we taught the people God's love. Mere died there, but the Book has returned to the place where it began its ministry. So now I am using it as I teach the Christian way to these who are descendants of the men who killed the teacher."

Everyone sat in a deeper silence, contemplating the wonder of God's ways. "The Word does not fail to do what God plans for it," said Josaia softly, tears of gratitude running down his cheeks.

Adapted from "Deep Sea Canoe", by Dr. Alan Tippett, William Carey Library, South Pasadena, California, William Carey Library, 553 Hermosa St., South Pasadena, California, 91030