

Makea of Rarotonga



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John Williams had set out from England in 1817, for the Pacific islands. He decided that he would build his own ship from the materials he could find on the island of Rarotonga where he was stranded in 1827. As he prepared for the task, gathering odd tools, looking for timber among the trees of the forest, employing some of the strong young men from the villages around to help him, one man, a chief named Makea, took a special interest in what he was doing.

“I’d like to help you, Mr. Williams,” he offered. “I’m big and strong and can lift those heavy timbers easily. Just tell me what to do and I’ll do it for you.”

Makea certainly was big and strong. He was about 190 cms. (6 feet 2 inches) tall. He was also very heavily built. His upper legs were the same size as the missionary’s body. His feet and legs were beautifully decorated with tattoos up to two inches above the knee. Similarly his hands and arms were decorated up to and above the elbows. His movement and general appearance gave the impression that he was born to rule. It was said that before the coming of the Christian missionaries he ruled with violence and tyranny, but he abandoned his cruel ways to a great extent with the coming of the gospel.

After the boat, ‘*Messenger of Peace*’ was completed John Williams was preparing to return to Raiatea, Tahiti. He spoke to Makea, “Makea, you have been such a great help to me in the building of the ship. I’d like to do something for you as a reward. Would you like to come on the ship with me when we return to Tahiti?”

“Thank you, Mr. Williams,” Makea responded enthusiastically, “that would be wonderful.”

So Makea visited Raiatea, Tahiti on the “*Messenger of Peace*” and became friendly with the local chiefs and people of Raiatea. They put on great feasts for him and generally showed him much kindness. But one chief began to doubt the missionaries.

“Why do you do so much for the missionaries?” he asked. “You don’t need to give them so much food, or work so much for them.”

Makea listened to these comments and began to act on them. He returned to Rarotonga in a small ship that was laden with food and presents from the Raiateans. When he arrived home he was greatly puffed up with pride as he showed off his ship-load of goods. But his attitude to the missionary on Rarotonga, Aaron Buzzacott, had changed. Because Makea, the chief, was distant and not as helpful as he used to be, his people adopted the same attitudes. Aaron was feeling suddenly very unwelcome in the island. He called a meeting of the chiefs and the people and spoke plainly to them.

“There seems to be something different in the attitude of you people towards us. If we have offended you in some way, please tell us and we can make it right. If you are tired of having us on your island, then we can pack up and go to another island. There are plenty of other islanders who would be glad to welcome us and treat us more kindly than you are at present. We have made many sacrifices to come here for your good. The least you could do is show us a little kindness and respect in return.”

Aaron’s words had the desired effect and from then on the unhelpful attitudes were gone and friendliness and goodwill were restored. That evening Makea visited Mr. Buzzacott, a scripture portion in his hand. Holding it up Makea promised, “Mr. Buzzacott, don’t be sad or heavy hearted. From now on I will follow this.” Although Makea was sympathetic to the missionaries and could see the good that the Christian teaching brought to the community, he had no personal commitment to following in the Christian way. But a change was to come.

Two women came to Aaron for counsel. One was Makea’s wife and the other was a woman from Aitutaki. This woman, named Tapaeru, was very helpful in placing and protecting the first teachers on Rarotonga. Both women appeared very agitated and were obviously convicted of their sins.

“I feel so guilty and full of sins, Mr. Buzzacott,” cried Tapaeru, “would you allow me to confess some of them to you. The burden of them is too great.”

Most of the sins she confessed were sins of adultery, and some of them had involved her with Makea. The chief himself was suffering under his own guilty convictions. His brother, the ‘chief judge’ of the area under the mission’s system of law and order, had recently died. This had left Makea in the position of chief judge.

“But how can I judge others when I am guilty of the same sins myself?” he thought.

Makea went to see Aaron. “I am in deep trouble,” he began. “I have had to judge several men recently and found them guilty of adultery. But you know that I have been guilty of the same sins. I have no right to judge another man when I am guilty myself.”

“You’re right, Makea,” responded Aaron, “What do you think you should do about it?”

“But Mr. Buzzacott, that’s not all I’ve done. There’s a lot more.” And Makea poured out a long list of other sins he had committed, making a clean breast of it all.

“You ask me what I think I should do.” he went on. “I shouldn’t have special treatment because I’m a chief. I should be tried for my sins the same as everyone else.”

Naturally, no-one from the local area was willing to act as judge of the judge and chief, Makea, so they called for the chiefs and judges of the two nearby mission stations to come.

A large crowd of people, chiefs, judges and onlookers, assembled at the entrance of Makea’s house, which was the usual place for trials. Makea stood up before them all and solemnly confessed his sins, as did Tapaeru. The highly respected judge of the other mission station passed the sentence on them both. They were required to pay fines and they listened while the judge spoke to them of their need to sin no more, faithfully following the examples of scripture. This one act of total humility by their chief impressed and changed the people far more than many sermons or lectures from the authorities.

One Sunday Aaron preached about the story of Zacchaeus, emphasizing the need for restitution if anyone has done wrong to another person. This message brought a strong response. People came to the missionary’s house with goods they had stolen, either from Mr. Williams during his visit, or from Mr. Buzzacott. There were various tools, knives from the kitchen, plates, articles of clothing, bed sheets; it was a remarkable array.

“I’ve brought you a chicken, Mr. Buzzacott, because I kept your tools for so long,” said one.

“Here is some taro in this basket, Mr. Buzzacott. I’m sorry I stole your plates,” offered another.

So the stolen goods were returned and other gifts of restitution were offered and accepted.

Makea had not taken any goods, but he had robbed some of the lesser chiefs of their lands, placing his favourites as tenants on the land. He sent a message to all the people he had offended in this way.

“Would you all come to a feast I am preparing for you,” he requested.

The people all came for the feast, which was a wonderful array of pigs, chickens and taro cooked in the earth oven, spread out on banana leaves. They were wondering why they had been invited. After they had finished eating, Makea stood up before them, “I have done you many wrongs in the days before the Christian gospel came to our island. I took away your lands, but now I’m sorry I did that. Now we understand how the Creator God wants us to live I can’t keep your lands any longer. I want you to go back again to your own lands and stay on them. I promise that no-one will disturb you again.”

Every-one was amazed at this change in Makea's attitude.
"What a wonderful thing is the gospel!" they cried.

It was these events that brought Makea to the place of commitment of his life to Christ.

"I must follow after God's way truly, Mr Buzzacott," he said. "Will you teach me all about God the Creator and His Son Jesus," he begged. "I really want to know them in my heart. I also want to learn to read well, so I can read the scriptures."

He attended the adult reading class every morning, sharing the group with a reformed sorcerer, a former heathen priest, and three old warriors, all of whom had been notorious in their day for their cruelties and 'heathen abominations. If there was no-one else to teach them, the most advanced students from the children's school were placed in charge of this group of adults. It was truly an example of 'a little child shall lead them', as these children were to be seen teaching Makea and the older men the mysteries of reading and writing. After nearly two years of teaching Makea became a member of the church and from then on lived out his new-found faith in God.

Makea lived long enough after his conversion to prove the reality of the change brought about by having God in his life. As a chief he saw that the laws were enforced fairly for everyone. He had wide roads made to connect the villages. He prepared a list of prices for goods they traded in when whaling ships called. Previously the whalers had taken advantage of the islanders, but Makea wanted to see a fair deal for his people. The changes in his personality when he began to live the Christian life were so marked that he became highly respected by his islander people as well as Europeans.

"His rule began in times of fearful darkness and bloodshed. When it closed everything seemed changed", wrote Aaron Buzzacott of Makea. "The customs, the manners, the habits, the worship, the life of his people, were all changed. Makea was an example of the mighty way in which God can change people.

Adapted from: *Mission Life in the Islands of the Pacific*, Rev A. Buzzacott, John Snow & Co., London , 1866