

Duesing, Jason G., ed. *Adoniram Judson: A Bicentennial Appreciation of the Pioneer American Missionary*. Studies in Baptist Life and Thought. Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2012. 208 pp. \$24.99.

About the Editor

Jason G. Duesing serves as Provost and Associate Professor of Historical Theology at Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary (Kansas City, MO). Duesing earned his Ph.D. in Historical Theology and Baptist Studies from Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary (Fort Worth, TX), having completed his dissertation on the life and thought of the 17th Century Puritan Henry Jessey. He is also the author a popular book titled *Seven Summits in Church History* and the co-editor (with Malcolm Yarnell and Thomas White) of two books on Baptist ecclesiology: *Upon this Rock: Restoring Integrity in Baptist Churches* and *First Freedom: The Baptist Perspective on Religious Liberty*.

Summary

The volume under review is a biography of pioneer missionary Adoniram Judson that surveys the historical context of Judson's life, the life and ministry of Judson and his wives, and the theological and missiological foundations of his ministry.

The editor's preface establishes the goal of the book while discussing the practice and perils of evangelical biography:

A word should be said regarding the nature and aim of evangelical biography. Too often, in the name of inspiration or education, well-intentioned authors create hagiography or, as Carl Trueman explains, "The uncritical and adulatory description of the life of a hero of the faith." (xxii)

He continues:

This is not to say that inspiration should have no place in the agenda of an author or that works of hagiography have no edifying value or contribution. Rather, as we hope is the case in this volume, authors should seek a balanced approach to writing evangelical biography. Such an approach presents the facts critically while commending the faith and zeal in the life under examination. Yet it refuses to ignore the errors or inconsistencies of that life. (xxii)

Following Duesing's Preface, Southern Baptist luminary Paige Patterson provides a personal introduction to the volume by describing the impact Judson's life and ministry had on his own. Thereafter the book is divided into four sections: "Historical Foundation," "Biographical Presentation," "Missiological and Theological Evaluation," and "Homiletical Interpretation."

The "Historical Foundation" begins with a propaedeutic essay by church historian Michael A.G. Haykin on William Carey and the impact he had on protestant missions in the decades prior to Judson's consecration. Jonathan Edwards scholar Robert Caldwell then describes the theological milieu in which Judson was trained, surveying the Calvinistic and evangelistic "New Divinity" that was prominent in New England during Judson's formative years.

The "Biographical Presentation" divides Judson's life into two periods. The editor provides a chapter titled "Ambition Overthrown" in which he summarizes Judson's early life (1788-1812), with a particular emphasis on how Judson overcame his self-seeking ambition, was converted to Christ and consecrated to the cause of Christ's mission. Church historian Nathan Finn then surveys the majority of Judson's life: the years from 1812-1850, beginning with his embarkation for India and concluding with his death. The biographical section concludes with a chapter titled "So That the World May Know: The Legacy of Adoniram Judson's Wives" in which theologian Candi Finch

summarizes the impact of Judson's three wives – Ann Hasseltine, Sarah Hall Boardman and Emily Chubbuck – on Judson himself and on the couples' missionary work in Burma.

The majority of the actual “Missiological and Theological Evaluation” is contained in an essay by Keith Eitel titled “The Enduring Legacy of Adoniram Judson's Missiological Precepts and Practices.” In it he demonstrates the prescient precepts on which Judson based his practice of ministry. Most significant among these is his focus on the translation of the Christian Scriptures, but Judson appears to have accommodated Burmese culture, contextualized the gospel, and planted churches to be self-reliant (in most ways self-funding, self-propagating, and self-governing) well before these principles were recognized as best practices. The following chapter, by church historian Greg Wills, focuses narrowly on the issue of baptism. In it, Wills carefully examines Judson's change in conviction on the issue and the cost of his conscientious obedience to his revised understanding of Scripture.

Finally, the volume concludes with a “Homiletical Interpretation” by Dr. Daniel Akin titled “Marked for Death, Messengers of Life: Adoniram and Ann Judson” in which he exposites Romans 8:28-39 in the context of Judson's life, call, and ministry.

Critical Evaluation

The volume is a success, inasmuch as the authors fulfill their dual objectives of “[presenting] the facts critically while commending the faith and zeal in the life under consideration” (xxii). On the former, the volume is well-researched, well-reasoned, and well-documented. That its documentation and argumentation is present primarily in footnotes is a strength, as it enables the volume to appeal both to popular and academic

audiences. Historians may choose to argue some of the authors' conclusions, but the authors are successful in establishing their reconstruction of Judson's life and ministry.

On that latter, the editor states that "those who have contributed to this volume hope that their readers will not only gain a renewed desire to see the gospel reach those people still unaware of the name of Jesus Christ (Rom 15:20), but also find encouragement to persevere in the ongoing pursuit of the Great Commission." (xxii-xxiii) Again, the authors succeed. There is much in this volume to exhort believers to obedience, even in the face of suffering, to the global cause of Christ; to encourage those committed to that cause; and to instruct those going to serve as missionaries. The evangelical passion of Judson and his wives is palpable throughout the book, and it will compel many readers to inquire what is so dark in their souls that they do not feel the compassion the Judsons felt for the lost masses.

A key reason why this volume is both accurate and encouraging is the authors' shared commitment to avoiding hagiography. This commitment is highlighted by the exceedingly honest chapter by the editor. Duesing illustrates well the intellectual rebellion and crippling pride that ruled Judson prior to his conversion. There is much in the chapter to minister to those who struggle similarly with self-seeking, not the least of which is the Holy Spirit's conquering that pride and the great use God made of his increasingly humbled vessel. The deconstruction of Judson's pride is a theme that recurs in the book, and provides context for Judson's later distaste for the accolades his ministry would bring.

Unfortunately, however, critical examination of Judson seems to end after Duesing's account of his graduation from Andover. The only potential shortcoming

discussed thereafter is in a discussion of the rebuke Judson received from the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions after his interaction with the London Missionary Society. Further to this point, Eitel writes later in the book:

Judson's lifestyle was exemplary. If someone holds an idealistic or faulty understanding of missions, that quickly fades when reading these historical records. Missionaries are real people with real problems and victories.... He fought cycles of pride before he was a Christian. When spiritually arrested by Christ, he ordered his life to do God's bidding and tried to avoid the personal fame that came with his work. (147)

Both Eitel's words and the lack of attention to the adult Judson's weaknesses leave the reader to think that Judson's conversion and complete sanctification were simultaneous, that his "exemplary" life was the immediate result of his conversion. It seems this is at least implicit hagiography. Readers would be better served by more attention to Judson's progressive sanctification and the struggles he faced in his ministry.

Amongst individual contributions, Candi Finch's chapter stands out as the gem of this volume, distinguishing itself with a carefulness of thought and a literary elegance that communicated well the holistic beauty of the women with whom God graced Judson for help and companionship. Her careful analysis of Ann Judson's own change in conviction on baptism (found in footnote 20) is an excellent example of both her careful scholarship and the aforementioned value to be found in mining the volume's footnoted arguments and documentation.

Wills' chapter on Adoniram and Ann's conversion from paedobaptism to credobaptism also stands out. In it he carefully explicates the details of the Judsons' change of conviction and provides an honest account of the cost of their decision: separation from their ecclesiological home, a loss of financial support just as their work began, numerous attacks on their motives and character that harmed their reputation, and, most painfully,

an alienation from friends and co-laborers. That they bore this burden at the inception of their ministry, persevered and prevailed by the power of the Holy Spirit is one of the key lessons and encouragements of the book.

The volume is not, however, without weaknesses, some quite pronounced. The greatest weakness is the excessive emphasis on Judson's conversion to credobaptism. The event receives more than passing attention in nearly every chapter, receives significant attention in Eitel's chapter, and is the sole subject of Wills' chapter. The first several occurrences of the repetition seem at worst parochial, beneath the otherwise high standards of the volume. However, upon finally arriving at Wills' chapter even sympathetic readers might struggle to hear his thoughtful argument over the progressive din of credobaptistic chauvinism. This is entirely unbecoming a manuscript published by an academic publisher, and it impeaches the volume. Wills' chapter on its own would have been sufficient to describe Judson's theological shift and address the significance of the issue.

A second weakness of the volume is a generalization of the first: the reader will find multiple reasons to question whether the volume seeks to provide a balanced account of Judson and his ministry or whether the selection of material was undertaken to suit a particular agenda. The Judson presented very neatly accommodates the Baptist ecclesiology advocated by the publisher and by the editor in his previously published works. It is certainly fair to highlight Judson's ecclesiology, but what shape might the book have taken if emphasis was allocated more inductively, according to the chronology of Judson's ministry? Certainly the volume would have more directly addressed Judson's rich theodicy, for he maintained his faithful confession in spite of having suffering as his

constant companion in Burma. The book would undoubtedly be enriched by more focus on many aspects of Judson's adult life and ministry (representing only one chapter of eight in the volume) and less on demonstrating that Judson conformed to Baptist ecclesiology.

A final notable weakness is that the book exhibits some of the typical shortcomings of multi-author volumes. The repetition of background material, historical events, personal details, direct quotations, and other material is replete in the volume. With so much repeated material, there are also seeming inconsistencies at various points. For example, the reader must harmonize Wills' particular account of Judson's study of the biblical teaching on baptism with the less specific accounts presented earlier in the volume. There do not appear to be factual inconsistencies, but readers would be better served by a more careful harmonization. It should be noted, however, that this weakness has a corresponding strength: the repetition present in the book is at times pedagogically helpful, enhancing the value of the book for popular audiences.

Conclusion

None of the aforementioned shortcomings should obscure the fact that *Adoniram Judson: A Bicentennial Appreciation of the Pioneer American Missionary* is an enlightening and encouraging biography of America's first commissioned pioneer missionary. Laymen and scholars alike will benefit from the authors' careful recounting of the sanctified lives and sacrificial ministry of Adoniram and his wives.