

HENRY NOTT – BRICKLAYER AND BIBLE TRANSLATOR



Tahiti! Island paradise! Luxurious beaches! White sand! Sparkling seas! Warm sun! Palm trees waving in the warm breeze! It was to this paradise in 1891 that the artist Paul Gauguin went in order to escape from “artificial and conventional” European civilization. He was disappointed to find it had been “westernized.” However, had he arrived there 100 years before, he would not have been merely “disappointed.” He would have been dead. Here is what life on Tahiti was like up until the early 1800s:

PARADISE LOST

- Drunkenness, with its attendant miseries, was almost universal.
- Theft was rampant. One of their gods, Hiro, was the protector of thieves. When they went out to steal, they promised Hiro part of the booty in exchange for his assistance.
- One group among them was called *Areois*. They blackened their bodies with charcoal and dyed their faces red. They made it a practice to kill their children as soon as they were born. The chief's wife, Iddeah, was a member of this society and had killed three of her children subsequent to the arrival of the missionaries. Nott affirmed that two-thirds of all babies were killed at birth either by one of these infant-killers or by one of the parents.
- When an enemy was trapped and slain, the murderer would often take a large stone and pound the body to pulp; then, having dried it in the sun, he would cut a hole in the center, thrust his head through and wear it as a *tibuta* (Tahitian garment), the arms dangling down in front and the legs behind. The houses of the defeated foes were burned, prisoners were butchered in cold blood, and those who fled to the mountains were hunted down and slain like wild beasts.
- The altars of their god Oro were often stained with the blood of human sacrifices, offered to ensure his blessing in war or to appease his wrath. A priest who officiated at one of the temples of Oro said to Nott: *“When this temple was erected, every pillar which supports the roof was driven, like a stake, through the body of a human victim.”* Pointing to a large tree a native said to one of the missionaries: *“Thousands of human sacrifices have hung from the branches of that one tree.”* Nott estimated that Chief Pomare, during his reign of thirty years, had sacrificed 2000 human victims as offerings to his idols. His son, Otu, assumed the title Pomare II and was, if possible, more vicious and violent than his father.
- It was commonplace to sacrifice children to their idols, to throw them into the sea to propitiate the sharks or to hurl them into the crater of a seething volcano as a sacred offering.
- When missionaries arrived on Tahiti, they found that the population was only about a tenth of the estimate made by Capt. Cook thirty years earlier. War, human sacrifice, and barbaric violence had taken a fearful human toll. Capt. Cook recorded: *“There is an abyss of dissolute sensuality into which these people have sunk, wholly unknown to every other nation and which no imagination could possibly conceive.”*
- When a native grew old and threatened to be a “burden,” some of his relatives would push him into a freshly dug hole in the sand on the beach, throw stones and earth on him, trample the covering down with their feet and go home to divide whatever property the unfortunate elder had left behind.

Such was “paradise” until missionaries reached Tahiti, the Bible reached its inhabitants, John 3:16 reached their ears, and God reached their hearts. How God reached such a violent and licentious people is, primarily, the story of one uneducated man who doggedly and persistently stuck at the work, convinced that the “whosoever” of John 3:16 included even the brutal Tahitians. That man was the Englishman Henry Nott.

PARADISE REGAINED

In September of 1796, Henry Nott (who was 22 years of age) set sail on the *Duff* in order to bring the gospel to the South Pacific Islands. The ship carried 29 missionaries intended for three groups of islands. Eighteen settled at Tahiti on March 5, 1797. With the help of a translator, who was an unsaved man that lived on the island prior to the missionaries' arriving, Nott conducted their first Christian service on



Sunday, March 19. The meeting was held under cover of some enormous trees. Chief Pomare and a vast concourse of people attended. Pomare said he had been "dreaming about the Book of God which the missionaries had brought" and was eager to hear its message. Nott chose John 3:16 as his text. As those words were translated by Peter, the Swede, and its momentous truths explained, Pomare nodded his head in approbation and exclaimed, "My ty! My ty!" ("Very good! Very good!") This sentiment was echoed by many others. "We are an ignorant people and this message is good for us," said the king. Henry Nott said, "**John 3:16** is the only sure and efficacious remedy for the ignorance and superstitions of mankind."

During the next five years, several of Nott's fellow missionaries deserted, died, were murdered, or went insane. Nott stayed on, learning the Tahitian language. In England, he was "just" a bricklayer, but in Tahiti his hidden gift in linguistics emerged. On August 10, 1801, after much study of the native language, Nott became the first missionary to preach publicly to the people in their own language. As he faced the people on that auspicious day, with gladness welling up in his soul, he said: "*O Tahitians, I come with a message of infinite compassion to those in deep distress. I bring glad tidings of salvation to those in sin's control. I proclaim a gospel of comfort to those in sorrow's gloom.*" Then he quoted the first verse he had translated into the Tahitian tongue: **John 3:16**.

Many times Nott spoke personally to the king about salvation. On one of these occasions Nott said: "*For the sake of your immortal soul and of your influence upon your subjects, I urge you, for the thousandth time, to turn to Christ. Do not longer reject His glorious salvation. Every human soul is of infinite value to Him.*" "Doubtless you are right," replied Pomare, "but for one who has sinned so disgracefully and wallowed in the depths of heathen depravities, there is no hope." "*There is hope,*" rejoined the missionary. And to prove his point he quoted (what else?) the words of **John 3:16**.

Some time later, a native who heard those wonderful words exclaimed, "Is that true?" Assured that it was, he replied, "Your God is unlike our gods. Your God has love; our gods have only cruelty. The offerings we make to them are only to propitiate them." Then he added sadly, "Your God has love for you, but not for us wicked Tahitians." Nott tenderly replied, "*God's love in Christ extends to all. John 3:16 says, 'whosoever believeth.' That includes you.*" Henry Nott was convinced that anyone could be saved if only he would believe on the Lord Jesus Christ.

During nearly 50 years of missionary service, Nott returned to his native land only twice. Since only certain portions of the New Testament had been printed in Tahiti, he was eager to see the whole Tahitian Bible through the press. This he accomplished during his second furlough, from 1836 to 1838. While in England he had an interview with Queen Victoria and presented her with a copy of his Bible. At her request he read **John 3:16** in Tahitian.

After 47 years of tireless and courageous service for Christ, Nott died in Tahiti on May 1, 1844.

"But for the perseverance of a stubborn, uneducated bricklayer, Henry Nott ... the work would no doubt have been abandoned ..." (Ruth Tucker, *From Jerusalem to Irian Jaya*). **"Had Henry Nott done nothing more he deserves to be ever remembered as the man who first unlocked God's Word to the races of Polynesia"** (*History of the London Missionary Society*).