

# THE HISTORY OF THE MALAGASY BIBLE

*“The Word of God is not Bound.”*

**The Sustaining Power of the Bible  
during the Persecution in Madagascar from 1835 to 1861**

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# THE SUSTAINING POWER OF THE BIBLE DURING THE PERSECUTION IN MADAGASCAR FROM 1828 TO 1861

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## Introduction

This is the story of the effect of the Bible on the Merina people of central Madagascar, especially the persecuted Christians in the reign of Ranavalona I (1828 - 1861), to show how it sustained their fidelity to God until the end.

The earlier Catholic missionaries brought the catechism. The later Protestants brought the Bible. This was why their mission bore fruit. The power of the Bible far surpasses that of the catechism.

When indigenous people have the Bible, they can use it even without missionaries. In Madagascar, despite the expulsion of the latter, the native Christians embraced the Bible and made it their own. It was a source of spiritual power, inspiration, encouragement and strength during their tribulations.

The martyrs discovered the Bible is special. It empowered them. Ranavalona I wondered why persecution could not stop them from following 'the religion of the European'. She later realised it was the 'Book' that empowered them. She proclaimed an edict to collect and burn all Bibles to eradicate this religion from her Kingdom.

The Bible had great influence and empowered the early indigenous Christians. Despite her burning of Bibles, Ranavalona I could not stop Christianity. The Christians were able to hide some to use in secret prayers and meetings for reading and sharing the Word. Its power sustained their faith and increased their courage in dark times. Their Bible reading introduced them to the persecutions and martyrdoms of the Early Church. The testimony of the New Testament martyrs influenced the Merina Christians. They preferred death to denial of their faith in Jesus, faithfully standing firm until the end, even under the severest strain. Neither cruelty nor torture could force them to betray their Lord. Their hope and comfort were the reward after death promised in the Bible.

The Malagasy Bible greatly strengthened the martyr church. When they heard God speak to them in their own language, they received strength and courage in trials. The 'Word has great power. This power sustained the faith of Merina Christians during the persecution from 1828 to 1861.

The first Protestant missionaries of the London Missionary Society (LMS), well aware of that power, had redoubled their efforts to translate it. Though the queen expelled them, the Christians now had the Bible in their own language. It became their pastor, leader, teacher, advisor and comforter. During the dark moments of the Malagasy church, it was the Bible that sustained their faith

In fact, the massive spread of Christianity in Africa generally since the 19<sup>th</sup> C has been due to the translation of the Bible into the local language.

## Historical Background

### *The Merina*

The people of the island of Madagascar are composed of 18 ethnic groups. The Merina reside in the highlands in the centre of the island, in and around Antananarivo, the capital. They represent one quarter of the Malagasy population.

The official language is Malagasy, spoken throughout the island with only relatively minor differences of dialect. It belongs to the Malay-Polynesian language family, resembling Malayo-Indonesian dialects more than African languages.

The Malagasy people come from two major groups, black African and Malayo-Indonesian. Successive waves of people established themselves in different points of the island. The migration lasted centuries. These did not form initially one people as it is now, but many separate small kingdoms. Andrianampoinimerina, in 1787-1810, had a plan to bring the whole island together: His son, Radama, followed in his footsteps. As a result, the Malagasy became one people and one nation of different origins.

Although the Malagasy people is a mixture of two groups, there is high proportion of pure Malayo-Indonesian types among the Merina, the dwellers of the centre. Towards the second half of the first millennium, a substantial migration of Malayo-Indonesians to Madagascar took place, the ancestors of the today's Merina people.

### *Radama's contract with Great Britain*

Andrianampoinimerina died in 1810. His dream was to bring the whole island under one kingdom. His son Radama I, a young man of 17, continued his father's dream. He consolidated his kingdom at Imerina and continued the conquest of other kingdoms.

Radama was self-sufficient in everything except firearms and ammunition. His only income for these was the export of slaves. He captured these on military expeditions and brought them to the coast to be exchanged for firearms and ammunition.

At this time Robert Farquhar was the British ambassador in Mauritius, a British protectorate. He was commissioned to extend British power around the Indian Ocean. He thought that alliance with Radama could achieve this. In 1816 he sent a delegation to establish contact. It was well received, so Farquhar secured a treaty of friendship and alliance but failed to address the question of the abolition of the slave trade.

The British had three goals: to acquire sovereignty over Madagascar, to use Radama's power to oust the French, and the abolition of the slave trade

The failure to address the slave trade was a disappointment to Farquhar, but when Farquhar offered him the equivalent in arms and money in lieu of the proceeds of the slave trade, Radama accepted.

When Farquhar returned to England on leave, he was replaced by General John Hall. Hall refused to pay the 'equivalent'. Radama was infuriated and ordered the resumption of the slave trade. It continued until Farquhar returned and renewed the treaty.

This time he took a London Missionary Society (LMS) missionary, David Jones. Radama asked for help in instructing his people. With the support of the king, Jones set to work. Many more missionaries and artisans would follow.

## **The First Protestant Missionaries in Antananarivo**

In February 1818, full of zeal and courage, David Jones and Thomas Bevan, the first LMS missionaries, embarked for Madagascar with their brides, landing in August.

They opened a small school to teach the Malagasy children. Progress was encouraging but Jones' wife and newborn child died in December and all the Bevan family the following year. Jones was forced to retire to Mauritius to recover his health and wait for opportunity to resume the mission.

While in Mauritius, Jones gave himself to educational and religious work among the Malagasy population there, whilst studying to learn the language.

The return of Farquhar to Mauritius gave Jones his opportunity. He sailed with the British representative to Madagascar to renew the treaty, arriving at Antananarivo in October 1820.

Jones set to work without delay. Though lacking basic equipment, he opened his first school in December with three pupils. Radama urged parents to send their children. Numbers increased to 16. Despite the unfavourable conditions, they were remarkably intelligent and quick to learn.

David Griffiths arrived in May 1821 to replace Bevan. He opened a second school. The following year another missionary, John Jeffreys, opened a third.

Jones, Griffiths and Jeffreys were the pioneers in Antananarivo. They introduced the Bible along with reading and writing. They taught that it was the Bible that was the secret of their wisdom and knowledge.

Who were these missionaries? Where were they from? What was their spiritual pedigree? What motivated them?

The Spirit and the Word.

### ***NEUADDLWYD, THE ANTIOCH OF CARDIGANSHIRE***

[Neuaddlwyd: the Antioch of Cardiganshire //www.blogger.com/post-edit.g?blogID=7398675492488710815&postID=2466449893976315978&from=pencil](http://www.blogger.com/post-edit.g?blogID=7398675492488710815&postID=2466449893976315978&from=pencil)

Just off the West Wales main road from Lampeter to Aberaeron, a few miles from the latter, up a narrow lane immediately opposite the Llanerchaeron estate in the beautiful Aeron valley, is a chapel looking out over the valley below.

Several early LMS Madagascar pioneers were trained here, including David Jones, Thomas Bevan, David Griffiths and David Johns. This small Ceredigion chapel is still acknowledged as the mother church of Madagascar's Protestants.

### ***Origins***

The chapel came into being when a farmer named Jones built a small schoolroom to educate his children. It began to be used as an informal meeting place for non-

conformists belonging to the gathered church at Ciliau Aeron, a few miles further up the valley. It was formally licensed for worship in 1746, and a little later they were joined by others unsettled by the increasingly unitarian emphasis in their own church. And so the church at Neuaddlwyd came into being.

In the late 18th & 19th C, Neuaddlwyd became the focal point of an amazing apostolic ministry which not only saw many other churches planted in the immediate area, but also sent as many as 200 trained ministers both all over Wales and to unreached peoples. It also became the source of powerful revivals with far-reaching impact.

### ***The Late 18th C***

Neuaddlwyd broke its links with the church at Ciliau Aeron when that too gradually moved towards Unitarianism. It relied on visiting local Calvinistic ministers in those years, including David Davies, Drefach (1763-1816), a close friend of the famous revival preacher Christmas Evans and an exceptionally powerful preacher. He is generally seen as the greatest Independent church minister. As a result of his monthly visits, the church at Neuaddlwyd grew significantly.

When Davies accepted an invitation to a church in Swansea in 1795, Thomas Phillips, a local farmer, replaced him. He proved to be a hugely influential successor who spent the rest of his life until his death in 1842 serving the church. In this period it became renowned across all of Wales.

### ***Thomas Phillips***

Phillips had been invited to lead the church a year before, but delayed accepting as he wanted to embark on a course of study. In the end, he sacrificed that to take on the role of minister alongside the duties of a farmer. At that time Neuaddlwyd had a membership of 120.

During his ministry the church experienced many times of powerful revival. It increased in size dramatically, and had to be extended several times. The growth continued rapidly, despite the small local population. People were drawn from miles around.

Eventually, more chapels were opened in the surrounding area. One had already been planted before Phillips' pastorate. Now Phillips initiated several others. Penycae, Llanarth, for example, was started in 1819 with informal home meetings, but dramatically grew as a result of revival in 1821 leading to the planting of a separate church. Peniel, Aberaeron also started with a home meeting in the tiny fishing hamlet, with a church planted there in 1833, which soon grew to 350, larger than Neuaddlwyd itself.

In spite of giving away many, the mother church continued to grow greatly. During his ministry Phillips saw literally thousands joined to Neuaddlwyd and its branches. It is unlikely that any minister in Wales was more or even equally as successful.

But Phillips' most significant achievement, which probably made the church planting possible, was his establishing on his farm of an academy for the training of leaders.

### ***The Academy***

It was housed in a humble single storey two-roomed building originally built by Phillips as a schoolroom for his own children. But from 1810 it was dedicated to training young men from poorer backgrounds from the local Independent churches who could not afford a university education, to prepare them for the work of the kingdom of God.

Over the next 30 years, hundreds were trained here, with over 200 going on to lead in different denominational churches across Wales and beyond. The first missionaries to Madagascar were also both trained at the academy.

From early on, all training was done by Phillips in addition to his other responsibilities, though assisted by some of his senior pupils.

There were a number of similar academies at this time, but Neuaddlwyd is certainly one of the most significant in terms of its impact through the men trained as leaders within it. Remarkably, in 1822-23, there were 70 students. How they all fitted into two small rooms is unclear; maybe there was a rota. Even more remarkable is how Phillips taught them at the same time as looking after Neuaddlwyd, several church plants, and his own farm.

Two of the best known students trained by Phillips were from local farms: **David Jones** and **Thomas Bevan**. They went to Madagascar in 1818 with the LMS as the first Welsh missionaries. The Bevan family died soon after arriving, and Jones's wife and child likewise succumbed to fever not long after.

David Jones, however, with the help of **David Griffiths** who arrived in 1821, and **David Johns** who arrived in 1826 (both also trained at Neuaddlwyd) and others from Wales and England, in the face of great difficulties and challenges, succeeded in establishing churches on that island which survived years of horrific persecution. These are still revered by the Christians of Madagascar for having given their lives to enable the gospel to come to their country. This story is one of the glories of Neuaddlwyd.

Many others were trained by Phillips.

(To give an idea of the spiritual atmosphere which these early Welsh LMS missionaries came from, see Appendix 1: Two Accounts of the 1821 Revival.)

## **The First Encounters of the Merina with the Bible**

### ***Use of the Bible as text books in schools***

The missionaries believed in education as a powerful means of converting people. From the beginning the only textbook was the Bible. It was used to teach reading, writing and English, and also to evangelise.

Little by little the gospel message permeated the hearts and minds of their pupils, who would become the future converts.

The missionaries failed to convert Radama. He wanted their civilisation not their religion and was taught that the key was the Bible. They also had very little success with adults who were reluctant to leave their debauchery and licentious life style. They were not exposed to the Bible as the pupils.

It was only in schools that they made considerable progress.

At the beginning, the teaching was in English as there was no written Malagasy language at that time and the missionaries' language knowledge was rudimentary. Despite that, the pupils made much progress and in less than six months could read biblical texts fluently.

In 1822, teaching in Malagasy began. The missionaries used translated passages for reading and writing exercises. For example in 1823, 50 Bibles & 200 New Testaments arrived. The missionaries translated them and used them as textbooks in schools.

Once they felt confident enough, they started the translation of the Bible.

### ***Translating the Bible into Malagasy***

From the beginning the missionaries realised that translation of the Bible into Malagasy was of first importance. If Christianity was to take root, the Malagasy must hear the Word in their own language. It was the best way to evangelise the local people.

The missionaries dedicated themselves to teaching and to learning the language thoroughly, whilst not neglecting more formal spiritual work. They held regular Sunday services, which were popular. Jones wrote: "our chapel in town is full, and even the doors and windows are jammed with people" [who couldn't get in]. There had also been trips to people far from the capital.

Though many were attracted to the services, curious about the religion of the European and their speaking ability, they still needed conversion. But once the missionaries related doctrine to private life, the people shied away. To conform their lives to the Scriptures was still far from their mind. Listening to colourful sermons and singing hymns every Sunday was one thing, obeying the commandments was quite another.

The missionaries were convinced that to convert people, they must have the Word in their own language. This was the priority.

Through their influence, in 1823 Radama gave permission to reduce the Malagasy language into written form based on the Roman alphabet.

Jones and Griffiths then started this most arduous work in September. Even if others helped later, the bulk of the first Bible printed in 1835 was largely their work. Bearing in



mind the paucity of available linguistic material their work is based on, one can only admire their accomplishment. That version, the first significant work printed in Malagasy, was in use for many decades. It was only half a century later that it was completely revised.

The work was hard and demanding, but they were helped by 12 of their cleverest students. They had class in the morning and translation in the afternoon. The work advanced rapidly. By early 1825, only 5 years after their arrival, they had not only created a network of schools in and around the capital, but also completed the New Testament and much of the Old Testament.

They translated from not only English but also the original Hebrew and Greek texts, the New Testament from the *Textus Receptus*. Jones and Griffiths had wide knowledge of Bible languages. The 12 students helped in the critique and correction of their translation.

During 1825, the Old Testament proceeded speedily. From December they concentrated only on translation, aiming to finish as quickly as possible. It was vital in preaching. By April 1826 it was complete. All that remained was the revision.

Further help arrived from Wales in September 1826. David Johns, another Neuaddlwyd trainee, came with two artisans, Cummins, a cotton spinner and Cameron, a carpenter. Joseph Freeman came the following year. Johns and Freeman made a valuable contribution to the revision, comparing the translation with the originals and other versions. They aimed for a linguistically accurate literal translation. By the end of 1827, they gave a final touch of revision of the whole Bible, and in November 1828, the whole Bible, except Leviticus, was translated, revised, and re-revised. They found Leviticus very difficult; the words were not familiar and the terms complicated. They had to work on it closely with the students.

### ***The interest of the Merina in the Bible***

The Merina wrestled to get the Bible from the missionaries. At the beginning when the translation was not yet finished, from time to time they printed parts of it. When they published and distributed tracts, small pamphlets or copies of individual books, they were astonished at the great numbers from far and near interested in getting copies. Written texts became very popular and copies of small books of different kinds from the LMS press increased to 20 000 pa by the early 1830s.

When the New Testament was published in 1830, the missionaries circulated many copies. They had had the satisfaction of noticing greater attention by those who attended public worship. Its effect was powerful. As a result the missionaries wanted to print as many as possible. But the supply could not meet the demand. Some came more than seven times to get a copy. They showed great interest and strove to get one.

The people greatly prized the Bible. In one incident, a poor man in a very feeble state of health, who had not been able to leave his home for 5 months, on hearing that the leaders were preparing to leave, determined to attempt to walk to the capital to secure for himself a complete copy of the sacred volume. Though he had 60 miles to travel, he did not rest until he reached the house of the missionary, and obtained his pearl of great price. It is impossible to express the joy in the countenance of this devoted Christian on receiving the sacred book. He pressed it to his bosom and exclaimed: "this contains the words of eternal life; it is my life, and I will take as much care of it as my own life".

## **Uncertain Times for Christianity (1828 – 1835)**

### ***The Death of Radama, Friend of the Missionaries***

Despite Radama's indifference to Christianity, he had an excellent relationship with the missionaries. He gave them every support for the work in schools and in the dissemination of the Malagasy written language. He recruited their students, built schools, encouraged the students by frequent visits and gave personal rewards for the better pupils at the annual examinations. He fully supported the missionaries: morally, financially and materially. They acknowledged that without Radama they would have achieved nothing.

But the King could only go as fast as his people and their chiefs would allow.

Then, in 1828, Radama's health declined and he died in July. His premature death put the missionaries in a difficult situation. Official religious policy changed dramatically.

In his reign he concluded an alliance with Great Britain, suppressed the slave trade, adopted a general system of school education, reduced the Malagasy language to form and order, established a printing press in his capital and introduced Christianity in the very heart of the country. The Malagasy lost a leader who initiated them to the new civilisation and the missionaries lost a friend and supporter. Even today, he is highly appreciated because of the introduction of western civilisation in Madagascar.

Most of all, by accepting the missionaries, Radama introduced the Bible. Without him it was difficult to see how the Bible could have reached the people around Antananarivo. Although he welcomed the missionaries, however, it was their civilisation he was interested in, not their religion. If Christianity prevailed he would have lost the support of his subjects and have had problems with the traditional conservative party that would certainly overthrow him. His attitude to the Bible was complex. He supported the missionaries in translating it into Malagasy, seeing it as part of European power and knowledge. But he also saw its danger to his position.

At his death, the missionaries were anxious of the future. But they still had hope. The students made very good progress and the Bible was translated. The future of the young Malagasy church lay on these scholars and the Bible. The support of Radama had helped the missionaries lay the foundation of Christianity, the Bible. It was the biggest achievement of his reign. The missionaries could have achieved nothing without his willingness to ride roughshod over traditionalist opposition.

### ***The Accession of Ranavalona to the Throne***

Radama reigned from 1810 to 1828. During his sickness he was too weak to publicly designate his successor. So Ramoma, his first wife, made herself queen, under the name Ranavalona I. She summoned a great assembly and announced that the king had designated her as successor. The military supported her, so she was firmly established. No one dared object for fear of being killed.

She was surrounded by conservatives dissatisfied with the rapid changes of Radama's reign and soon began to reverse most of them.

She announced a year-long national mourning for Radama, including the closure of all schools and public worship. But the missionaries used this time to revise their Bible translation and to prepare it for printing.

Though she assured the missionaries of her protection, promising to act towards them as Radama had done, her actions disproved it. She showed signs of enmity towards the Europeans, including the missionaries. She abrogated the treaties with Britain, no longer wishing to receive the annual equivalent. She gave only a one-year stay to a missionary who arrived in 1831, as he could only teach; she wanted artisans not teachers. Every action seemed in disfavour of any Europeans staying in Madagascar.

When the period of mourning ended, she gave permission to open the schools but the number of scholars declined. She made the life of the missionaries tough, especially the Malagasy teachers helping them. In 1829 she forbade any payments to them. Many took other work to sustain their families. A few remained and helped the missionaries.

Although she knew Christianity the queen preferred the traditional religion. She was surrounded by traditionalists who put her on the throne and were extremely powerful and influential during her reign. She revived the traditional religion and customs.

### ***The Transition Period: A Time of Confirming the Church***

The foundation of the church was laid little by little since the arrival of the first missionaries in 1820 by prayer, preaching, Bible studies, teaching in schools, meeting with people and Sunday services.

During the early period of Ranavalona's reign, from 1828 to 1835, the church enjoyed relative freedom. Despite her lack of support, no harsh measures were directed against Christians at this time as the queen required the skills of the missionary artisans. They manufactured a number of useful items such as soap, sulphur, gunpowder and acids. The queen valued their work, and because of this the Christians were spared.

At that time, there were two feuding parties at the court, the traditionalists and the pro-British. The traditionalists wanted to revive the customs and tradition of the ancestors. The pro-British wanted to extend education and enlarge the measures commenced by Radama, not favouring the plan of some of Ranavalona's supporters to eject all Europeans. They argued that education and the skills of the missionaries were of great use to the kingdom.

Though they had to work under pressure, the missionaries were not discouraged. They used the time that preceded the persecution to redouble their efforts to strengthen the young church. They worked harder in preaching the Gospel, teaching in schools, writing books, revising the translation of the Bible and instructing the artisans. Jones and Griffiths worked on the Bible translation; Cameron helped by Malagasy artisans worked at the printing press, and Johns established six churches and six schools.

The Word of God found its way into the hearts of some Merina. In Radama's reign they came to church only out of curiosity: but now to search for God. Their hearts were stirred and tears came from their eyes as they were seized by great emotion from time to time. They experienced the struggles of the early Christians. The Word of God touched them and many came to the missionaries' homes every evening to talk about salvation. The church was packed every Sunday and after the services many came for the Bible studies which lasted for hours. The people conducted prayer meetings in different houses daily. The missionaries were pleased. Their work was not in vain. Its fruit was growing.

Strangely, whilst Radama did not give permission to administer any sacraments to the Merina, in May 1831, Ranavalona gave them permission to accept baptism, take communion with the missionaries and be married after the Christian rite. It was her way of thanking the missionaries for their work in arts and crafts. The Merina began to

respond. Towards the end of the year, the number of baptised increased to 67 and some participated in the communion.

The missionaries were quick to take advantage of this opportunity. They conducted weekly Sunday services, intensified the Bible studies to instruct the new believers, organised frequent prayer meetings where they read the Bible and sung hymns and choruses based on the Scripture, received many in their homes to advise and encourage them in their faith, and distributed New Testaments to church attenders and school children, 5000 in 1830 alone. All this was to confirm the young church and to spread the message of the Word to the general population. The church grew in quality and quantity.

Without that transitional period during the early reign of Ranavalona, the missionaries wondered what would have happened to their work. Would the indigenous Christians have borne the persecution?

### ***Ranavalona's Edict against the Converts***

From the beginning, it was clear Ranavalona was antipathetic to Christianity, but during her first six years she could not tighten the restrictions on the missionaries as she needed their skills.

Later, the pressure from the traditionalist party was too much. She issued an edict counteracting that giving her subjects permission to participate in Christian sacraments and prohibiting religious meetings. The missionaries could practice their own religion but she strongly warned them not to discuss it with her people.

It was a great blow. The main purpose of their mission was forbidden, to preach the Good News. They were only allowed to teach arts and crafts. Christianity was threatening to vanish in Imerina. They were afraid their tireless effort during more than a decade would come to nothing.

Another blow fell on 1 March 1835. The queen assembled her subjects from every corner of the kingdom. Hundreds of thousands heard her forbid Christian practices and gave strict orders to all to adhere to the ancestral customs. She gave one month to the Christians. Those who were baptised, or who attended public worship or evening prayer meetings were to come forward, accuse themselves and receive her forgiveness. If not, they would be executed. Some protested that Christian teaching had been encouraged by Radama. She became furious and reduced the time limit to one week.

Many came forward and recanted but some remained faithful.

### ***The Expulsion of the Missionaries***

The greatest shock of the Malagasy Christians was the expulsion of the missionaries. Ranavalona applied Radama's order limiting the stay of any European to ten years.

David Jones, the first to reach Antananarivo, had been expelled in June 1830. He had encouraged the Christians to hold fast to his teaching. It would comfort and strengthen them in trials and persecution. In poor health again, in July he left for Mauritius then England, where he spent most of his time spreading the word about the work.

(Jones visited Antananarivo in 1840, but Christianity had been banned and several Christians executed. Sixteen who had fled and tried to board a ship had been captured and brought back to the capital, where they were condemned to be speared to death.

In July, he (along with Griffiths) came across 9 of them being taken to be executed. Jones left with that image and memory on his mind.)

Freeman, Cameron and another named Chick left in June 1835. They were not ordered to leave as the government was happy with their work, manufacturing useful items, but when it became increasingly difficult to carry on their work, with spies following their every move day and night, they saw no point in staying.

Griffiths' time was up in 1834, but due to the influence of his former pupils at the court, he was given one year of extension. In August 1835, Ranavalona sent to expel him. He encouraged and strengthened the Christians in and around Antananarivo until the last. He wanted to remain with his flock in the time of trials but the queen's decision was stern. He left sad, wondering what would happen to the Merina Christians.

Only Johns and Baker remained. They had work to finish before they left, the printing of the complete Bible. They finally left on 22 July 1836. The night before, many Christians came to say their last farewell. They could not meet in the day because of the spies. Both missionaries and Christians were very sad, they prayed and wept bitterly that night. The Christians left at dawn when it was still dark, afraid to be caught and accused of visiting the missionaries clandestinely.

(Johns visited them in 1837 and 1838. During the second visit he arranged the escape of Rafaravavy and her companions to England. See Appendix 2 for her story.)

The departure of the missionaries meant the sheep were now without a shepherd.

In the 16 years from 1820 to 1836, they had achieved a tremendous work of evangelisation. They had erected two church buildings with many attending and 200 communicants, built more than 100 schools with 4000 students and more than 15 000 having passed through them, and compiled a Malagasy-English and English-Malagasy dictionary.

But their greatest achievement was the translation of the Bible into Malagasy. It was a valuable treasure bequeathed to the Malagasy Christians that would soon be used as a guide and support. It helped to spread Christianity throughout the island.

# The Publication of the Malagasy Bible

The first book printed in Malagasy was the Bible. It is a story of persistence and dedication.

## ***Translation***

Efforts to translate the Bible into Malagasy originally began on nearby Mauritius. In 1813, Sir Robert Farquhar, the British governor of Mauritius, initiated a translation of the Gospels. He later encouraged Radama I to invite LMS teachers.

In August 1818, two Welsh missionaries from Neuaddlwyd, Jones and Bevan, arrived. Although the entire group was stricken with malaria, the sole survivor, Jones, did not allow tragedy to deter him. He was determined to make God's Word available to the people of Madagascar. Retreating to Mauritius to regain his health, he started to learn the Malagasy language. Soon after, he began the translation of John.

In October 1820, Jones went to Antananarivo and soon set up a new school. Though conditions were basic, the curriculum was excellent and the children eager to learn. After about 7 months, he received a new co-worker, also from Neuaddlwyd, David Griffiths. They tirelessly devoted themselves to translating the Bible into Malagasy.

Beginning in September 1823, Jones worked on Genesis and Matthew, while Griffiths took Exodus and Luke. Both had amazing stamina. In addition to doing most of the translating, they continued to teach school each day and prepared and conducted church services in three languages. But translating took precedence over all else.

With the aid of 12 students, they translated the entire New Testament and many Old Testament books in just 18 months. The following year, a preliminary translation of the entire Bible was completed. Then corrections and refinements were needed. So two linguists were sent to help Johns (another Neuaddlwyd student) and Freeman.

## ***Printing***

When the translation was completed, the LMS sent Charles Hovenden to set up Madagascar's first printing press.

The Ten Commandments and the Lord's Prayer were the very first portions of the Bible printed in Malagasy, in about April/May 1826. But these were produced in Mauritius and distributed only to Radama's family and some government officials.

The printing of the Bible in Madagascar itself was a long process, from December 1827, just before Radama's death, to June 1835, just before the departure of the last missionaries.

They had major problems with the printing press. Hovenden, who arrived in November 1826, contracted malaria and died within a month, leaving no one who could operate the press. He did not even have time to set up the machine ready for work. Long awaited, when it finally arrived, the specialist died!

The following year, a skilled tradesman from Scotland, James Cameron, with a general knowledge of machinery, with the aid of a handbook found among the machinery, after much trial and error managed to assemble the press and make it work.

Then, in December 1827, all the missionaries assembled to print their very first work, part of Genesis 1, the very first portion of the Bible ever printed in Madagascar.

From 1st January 1828, the press began its first large task, the printing of Luke. Progress was very slow and the work hard and frustrating at times. By May they had only printed the first half of Luke.

It was not only the lack of skilled and experienced workers that slowed down the printing. There were also other things to print. But these men were determined. Hardships could not stop them. They did everything to fulfil their mission.

Another setback came in July 1828, with the death of Radama I. He had been very supportive of the translation project. It soon became evident his successor, Ranavalona I, would not be as supportive.

Shortly after her enthronement, a visitor from England was refused an audience to discuss the translation work. On another occasion, when the missionaries told the queen they still had much to teach the people, including Greek and Hebrew, she said: "I would like to know if you can teach my people something more useful, such as the making of soap." Realising they might be forced to leave before the Bible was completed, Cameron asked for a week to consider the queen's request.

The following week, Cameron presented the queen's messengers with two small bars of soap made from local materials. This and other works carried out by the missionary artisans appeased the queen long enough for them to finish printing all but a few books of the Old Testament.

After a year of struggle, in September 1828, Baker, a printing press specialist, arrived and set to work. They completed Luke towards the end of November and in December distributed hundreds of copies. The Malagasy Christians were happy to receive them.

They did not wait to finish the whole Bible before they printed it but translated it little by little and printed the passages they needed in their teaching and preaching.

With Baker now full time at the press, printing progressed rapidly. He completed the other Gospels in March 1829.

Continuing with the rest of the New Testament, this was completed in February 1830. 3000 copies were made of which 400 were printed and bound for immediate distribution among soldiers, civilians, artisans, teachers, students, housewives, and even slaves. The missionaries wanted to make sure the Word reached everyone in the island.

Despite her initial rebuff of the missionaries, in May 1831 the queen issued a surprising decree, allowing her subjects to be baptised. But this was short-lived. The number of baptisms alarmed the conservatives at the court, who persuaded the queen that the communion service amounted to an oath of allegiance to the British. So, permission was retracted after just 6 months.

The queen's vacillation, along with the evident growing influence of traditionalists, stimulated the missionaries to finish printing the complete Bible.

The New Testament had already been completed, with 1000s in circulation. But in March 1835, Ranavalona I declared Christianity illegal and ordered that all Christian books be turned in to the authorities. This also meant the Malagasy apprentices could no longer work on the printing project.

Translation and publication of the complete Bible was hastened so as to be finished, secretly distributed, and hidden, before the last missionaries were expelled. Most had already been expelled. The few now left joined together to hasten the printing of the Old Testament. They vowed not to leave before printing the whole Bible. The queen had already declared war against Christianity. Leaving without finishing the Bible could mean the end of Christianity in Madagascar.

After much very hard work, day and night, finally, in June 1835, the entire Bible was released. The Malagasy Bible had been born.

As the ban was in effect, before departing in July, Johns and Baker quickly distributed it secretly to the Merina Christians. 70 were buried to save them from destruction. Eleven strenuous years of passionately devoted translation, culminating in a feverish haste to finish it before the final blow fell, went into the completion of the task. It was none too soon. Within the year, all but two missionaries would leave the island.

But the word of God was spreading. This is the greatest gift they left to the people of Madagascar, God's Word in their own language!

When the first copies of the NT rolled off his press, the operator, Baker, saw the joy of the Malagasy and exclaimed: "I do not mean to prophesy, but I cannot believe that God's word will ever be exterminated from this country!"

His words were indeed prophetic. Neither malaria nor the challenge of learning a difficult tongue nor the antagonistic decrees of a ruler could prevent God's Word from being made available in Madagascar.

"The Word of God is not bound." (2 Timothy 2.9)

The expelled missionaries left behind about 70 copies of the complete Bible. A Malagasy who bade farewell to Griffiths as he left Antananarivo later recalled his striking words. Holding up a New Testament, Griffiths said,

*"I have taught you that this is the Word of God. Your queen says it is only the word of man and she will destroy it, but as we believe that this is really the book of Him who said, "Heaven and earth shall pass away, but My Word shall never pass away", all that the queen can do will not destroy it, but it will live and grow."*

When the missionaries left, the Bible would become the pastor, guide, teacher, advisor and comforter of the Merina Christians, who were now a shepherdless flock.

From that time, they moved around with their Bible under their arms or in their bags. It became their fellow traveller in the dark moments of persecution. Their reading of it gave them courage and strength.

### ***The Rise of Indigenous Leaders***

When the last missionaries departed, the government relaxed their vigilance against the Christians. They hoped Christianity would die away when their shepherds left. But to their surprise, the numbers increased day after day. The government spies even noticed that prayer meetings became frequent and many homes were used as venues after the church had been closed.

This growth was due to the ability of the young indigenous leaders. The missionaries had formed young skilled leaders. The more advanced acted as monitors to teach



classes and younger children, studying and teaching in various schools at the same time. From this experience they received good leadership training and when time came for the missionaries to leave, they could lead the young church.

The island was in a troubled period. The Christians needed wise and strong leaders to give them courage to continue. It was during that time of persecution that they showed their faithfulness to the Lord. With the help of charismatic and inspiring indigenous leaders, they proved their desire to follow Christ. These leaders gave them strength and courage. The Christians quickly began to organise church affairs. House meetings gave some opportunity to preach and teach, and many possessed great ability. Their preaching was persuasive and irresistible. They became stronger as they faced difficulties and worries. They did not recoil from great sacrifice, though freely acknowledging their fragility. These leaders encouraged community spirit. They stood together to face the trials and possible martyrdom. For them, the climb to Calvary had already begun. All wholeheartedly devoted their lives to the Lord. They intensified their prayer meetings and Bible reading in various secret places. Throughout these times of problems and difficulties, strong and courageous leaders were more than ever needed. The former students of the missionaries were up to it. They held the spirit of the Christian community high, ready to face anything, even death through martyrdom.

# **The Sustaining Power of the Bible during Persecution**

## ***The Causes of Persecution***

The main cause of the persecution of the Christians in Madagascar was the queen's patriotism and strong attachment to ancestral traditions.

The Merina were attached to the customs and religious rites of their ancestors, valuing above all their traditional religion. Christianity could not walk hand-in-hand with Malagasy ancestral customs and religion such as charms, divination, ancestral worship and licentious debauchery customs. It denounced them as evil. So, the Malagasy converts had to abandon their traditional customs and religious practices. The queen, as the guarantor of the ancestral traditions, could not tolerate the spread of Christian practices that would undermine and denigrate Malagasy traditions.

Another reason was that the queen and her counsellors suspected a hidden plan by the missionaries to overthrow the government. Why did they spend much money and effort for people they did not know and had no blood relationship with? They could not understand what animates Christians: freely you have received; freely give' (Matthew 10:8). They were convinced the missionaries had come to take the land and the Christians were their allies. So, Ranaivalona's cruelty against the Christians was considered patriotism since they were a threat to the traditional customs and the stability of the nation. She could not give up her kingdom to foreigners and traitors. Christians were deemed traitors because they allied with the missionaries to overthrow the government. Furthermore, spies sent out to gather information about the Christians reported to the queen that her subjects prayed to the kings of England. They made up a story that Jehovah had been the first king of England and Jesus the second. The missionaries taught the Christians to fear Jehovah and obey Christ not her, their sovereign. So, they intended to divert the hearts of the Malagasy from her. It infuriated the queen that the loyalty of her subjects was diverted from her, their rightful sovereign, to the kings of England.

A further reason for the persecution was the zeal of the new Christians. They met very frequently, morning and evening, for prayers, Bible study, and followed the teaching of the missionaries. They rejected ancestral customs and practices and even openly attacked their fellow citizens who followed them. The students of the missionaries even dared to discuss this matter with the elders. This zeal inflamed not only the jealousy of the queen, as the guardian of the traditional religion, but also the anti-Christian tendency among non-Christians who practised and valued Malagasy traditions.

## ***The Malagasy Bible in the Hands of the Merina Christians***

Before the missionaries were compelled to leave, they published the complete Malagasy Bible, leaving a precious gift in the hands of the scattered and shepherdless Merina Christians. From then on, the Bible was their most significant companion. It enlightened their path during the dark period of persecution, encouraging and emboldening them.

Access to the Bible made the Merina Christians aware that God was on their side as with the persecuted Stephen (Acts 6-7), and the early Christians (Acts 8:1-3). They listened to the Scripture more than to the queen. In their hardships, they found in it inspiration and encouragement. They knew the worst could happen to them, but instead of being afraid, their courage was increased, their faith made firm and their strength to endure abundantly enlarged. They found new strength in the Bible. The role of the Malagasy Bible in the foundation of the early church in Madagascar was

invaluable. Passed stealthily from hand to hand, and read in secret and at the peril of their lives, it became the fuel which kept the sacred fire burning during 25 years of ruthless persecution.

The Bible was greatly prized among the early Christians in Madagascar. Imitating the early Christians (Acts 4:32-35), they gained new strength through mutual support. The Bible assisted them in their struggles to remain firm in their faith, despite the threat of death.

They loved and valued the Bible deeply. Reading it influenced their daily lives. Through the dark days of persecution, when they came together to hear the Word, it calmed their terror and aroused hope and courage. The Bible enabled the Christians to stand firm in the trials and hardships. The Merina not only loved to possess the Bible; they were steeped in its message. They read and pondered it thoroughly, turned to it for guidance, comfort and inspiration and found in it what they needed in life. It never failed to meet their expectations and needs. No matter what happened, they did not abandon God nor deny their faith in Him. Devotion to and love of the Bible burned in their hearts. Even those put in chains in their own homes under guard, kept their Bible in their hearts. Nothing could separate them from their Bible, not 'affliction, or distress, or persecution, or hunger, or nakedness, or peril, or the sword' (Ro 8:35).

### ***How the Early Merina Christians used the Bible***

When public worship was prohibited in March 1835, on pain of death, the Christians met secretly to pray and read the Bible.

Rainitsiheva, with his wife Rafaravavy Marie, worked boldly to support their fearful and scattered fellow Christians, gathering a few in their house.

Rafaravavy was fortified by the Holy Spirit. She could not tolerate them not gathering together. Some were afraid and stopped gathering. She asked the few assembled Christians: 'Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, are we going to cease praying to the Lord?' Then she showed them her Bible. Seeing it, an extraordinary emotion seized them and they fell to their knees. It was like a real Pentecost for them. She then opened and read it. While listening, the fire of the Holy Scripture stirred their hearts and they prayed for a long time. The Bible rekindled the fire in their hearts and they became stronger than ever. From then on they met as often as possible to hear the Word.

During the first phase of persecution the Christians met every evening, from house to house, to pray and read. Those attending testified of a deep peace and joy. They continued till dawn. The queen's death threat could not stop their secret meeting. They always found occasions to meet, in lonely huts, deep in the forest, in caves or on mountaintops. They even managed to gather in Antananarivo. In the very capital there were huts where Christians met in secret. Bolting the door, they would listen almost breathlessly for the sound of the soldiers on the watch, and hearing no one, would squat close to one another on the rush mat on the floor, and in a low, quiet tone someone would read the treasured Word. They believed the Scripture contains the truth that could set them free. And to have access to that truth, they learnt to read the Bible among themselves.

Since schools were shut down, they formed small groups of five or six to read the Bible. Those who had attended missionary schools taught the others. Once the missionaries left, the indigenous leaders insisted that rapid literacy training was absolutely necessary, for it gave access to the truth. Their endeavour to learn to read the Bible was unremitting. It clearly showed their keenness to search the Scripture.

On occasions they shared the Word among themselves. One read the passage that the pastor or the assembly chose. Then, each in turn commented on the passage. Afterwards, a pastor or an elder concluded. This trained them to find the Scripture response to every situation they met. They came together to search in the Bible for a response to every situation they experienced, and when they found a similar situation in the Scripture, they came away stronger than ever.

They also memorised the Scriptures. Those with a Bible read it constantly. They kept it carefully, learning it by heart, in case they were forced to run away without it. By such a practice, its pages, torn and tattered by constant reading and often known by heart, worked a great work. In their heart it became like the seed buried in the darkness of the soil. But the darkness could not prevent it from germinating. The queen could not stop 'the people of the Book' from following their religion.

### ***Christians Empowered by the Bible during Persecution***

The martyrs' church was built upon the impregnable rock of the Bible. The 'rain fell, the flood came, and the wind blew and buffeted the house, but it did not collapse; it had been set solidly on rock' (Matthew 7:25). They turned to the Bible constantly. It was their strength and encouragement during persecution. The Christians were called the people of the Book. Relying upon the word of God, seeking its guidance and inspiration at all times, and finding therein all the comfort and strength they sorely needed, the Malagasy Christians endured their afflictions with invincible courage and came through the ordeal of suffering triumphant.

The queen could not understand how the Christians remained faithful during the persecution despite the execution of some of their members. The only explanation was the Bible. It was the well from where they drew their strength. Before leaving, the missionaries built the martyr church on the very strong foundation of the Bible. The Merina Christians made a real commitment to the new faith. They were wholeheartedly devoted to it and its spread throughout the island. Their conversion was not skin-deep but deeply rooted because of the Word of God. The fierce and unrelenting persecution could not stop their religious practices. The Word was rooted so deeply in their hearts and minds that even violent persecution could not suppress it. Death and punishment only strengthened their faith.

The following extract from a letter of a native Christian to Freeman and Johns in 1839 confirms how the Merina Christians were saturated with the spirit of the Scriptures:

*We have seen what happened to the prophets and the ancients in former times, to Christ and his apostles, and the godly who have gone before us, and whose afflictions were far more than ours; even Christ was afflicted! And we that are but grass and stubble, should we plead exemption? ... 'For even hereunto were ye called', says the Apostle Peter. 'For Christ also hath suffered for us, leaving us an example that we should follow in his steps'. The Son of the Most High himself sustained all these sufferings, much more may we expect of them... Oh! that the admonition of Paul may be fixed in our hearts: 'wherefore take unto you the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all to stand.'*

This extract shows the Merina Christians had a real mastery of the Bible and how it empowered them. Their deep and intimate knowledge of it helped them stand firm. Many preferred death rather than to deny their faith in Jesus. Their world was saturated with the Scriptures. They were impregnated with the Word, their source of strength and courage in their trials. Their hymns and choruses, based on the biblical themes, reflected fearless professions of faith. The martyr church was a Church of the Bible.

They showed undivided love and respect for it and it gave them in return unshakeable confidence. The Bible was an inexhaustible fountain of God's revelation to them.

One of the reasons for the failure of the 17<sup>th</sup> C Catholic missionaries to Madagascar was that they did not give the Christians the Bible. It was only from 1818, when the LMS missionaries gave partial or complete translations of the Bible to the Malagasy Christians, that Christianity started to put down roots in Madagascar. They drew from the Bible their rule of life, church organisation, and decisions. In a word, what sustained, instructed, encouraged and strengthened the martyr church during the dark period of persecution? The Bible. The Bible was the fuel that kept the sacred fire burning in the heart of the Merina Christians. The Bible became their norm of life. They lived, suffered and died for the Lord Jesus Christ because they had learnt of Him and from Him through the Bible. It sustained them.

### ***The Queen Collects the Bibles and Burns them***

Despite Ranavalona's increasing hostility to Christianity from 1835, the Merina Christians continued to worship secretly. Bible reading still continued in hidden and remote places. There were more Christians by 1835 than before Radama's death.

The queen asked why the new religion gained many more adherents than when Christian worship was permitted. After a thorough investigation she realised the reason was the Bible. Once she discovered the source of the Christians' courage and strength, she took immediate action. A few days after the edict of March 1835, there was a great tumult in and around Antananarivo. The queen sent thousands of soldiers to raid the houses of everyone suspected of being a Christian. They were searching for Bibles. They were instructed to search every possible place where they could hide Bibles. Beds were overturned, rice-pits were dug into, even the thatch of the roofs probed.

The raid surprised the Christians and many Bibles were seized. The soldiers brought them to Antananarivo, heaped them with dry grass and wood and, before many people, set the stack alight. The hearts of Christians who attended grew sad. They saw their 'treasure' on fire. The sky was reddened for miles by the lurid flame of the bonfire. The queen was happy as she watched at the flame and the curling smoke rising to the sky. She thought it would put an end to Christian worship.

She was wrong. The physical Bibles were burnt and reduced to ashes but not in the hearts of the Christians. They had read, re-read and memorised it. It was written with indelible ink in their hearts and minds. No one could remove or burn it from there. So, Christian worship went on, because once they came to Christ, through the Bible, nothing could separate them from Him, neither life nor death (Ro 8:34-39). Those Christians were ready for anything. They had already set their desires towards heaven (Phil 2:2-5) and counted earthly things as loss for Christ (Phil 1:21). Rev 14.13 came to them in its full vigour: 'Blessed are the dead, who die in the Lord'.

That is why Rafaralahy Andriamazoto, witnessing the death of Rasalama, said 'If I die such a peaceful death, I too prefer to die for the Lord'. And his wish was fulfilled. A year later he too was crowned with a martyr's death. (See Appendix 2 for fuller details.)

Even more amazingly, when the executioner had pity on her tender age and beauty, sparing her life at the cliff edge where Christians were hurled to their death, Ranivo pleaded to die for the Lord and to share the fate of her friends. (See Appendix 3.)

### ***Christians Hide their Bibles***

Although possession of the Bible was punishable by death, the Christians hid those that survived the soldiers' raid. The Bible was their 'treasure' (Mt 13:44). They kept it as

the apple of their eye. They buried some in the earth for greater security and stored others in various hiding-places far from the reach of the queen's spies and soldiers.

(One of these, stained by the damp soil, is one of the most treasured possessions in the BFBS Library in London. The Christians of Vonizongo used it during the persecution. They took great care of it for several years. They repaired and sewed it with thread of vegetable fibre, and protected it with a cover of skin. When the dark period was over, the missionaries took it and put it in that library in memory of persecution in Madagascar. It is bulky and the quality of the paper was not good so it was difficult to hide and easily torn apart.)

Some found the entire Bible too bulky to hide easily, so they cut some into sections and divided them among the members so they could hide it easily or carry it in their bosoms unnoticed. The copies were few because of the raid, and everyone wanted one, so they had to share the few remaining. When they came to their secret meetings, each took out the portion they guarded so zealously, and read it to the assembly; sometimes a Psalm, sometimes an Epistle, sometimes some cherished pages of the word of the Master Himself. They made sure their Bible remained hidden from the queen and her spies who were everywhere.

Due to the scarcity of Bibles, their leaders wrote to the missionaries in London to send more Bibles. 'Do send us some,' they wrote, 'and let them be of a small print, so that we may easily preserve them'. Despite the death sentence for those caught with the Bible, there was a great desire for the Book.

Hiding it from the queen's spies was one problem. Hiding it from their own was another. Not a few were betrayed by fellow Christians or friends, even by kin.

An example was the betrayal of Ratsitapahina and his friend Rabearahaba by his own wife. They were on their way to a mission. At a river crossing, she denounced them to the soldiers at the boat, helping people cross the river. She told them they were on their way to stir rebellion against the queen and they had a Bible because they were Christians. The soldiers searched them and found their Bible. They were arrested and brought to Antananarivo. They were tortured to denounce their fellow Christians but refused to name any name. So they were executed.

Many more were caught with a Bible. Some were executed, others jailed or reduced to slavery with their entire household. This latter was so degrading, some preferred execution. In 1849 alone, 69 were caught in possession of the Bible, of whom 42 were made slaves, and their property seized; and 27, who had also preached or explained, were made slaves with their wives and children.

Possession of the Bible in Ranavalona's reign was punishable by death, reduction to slavery or a life jail term.

## The Three Waves of Persecution

### ***The First Wave (1837-1842)***

Ranavalona declared war against Christianity at the beginning of 1835. In February, she publicly thanked the missionaries for their efforts in teaching in schools and their work as artisans and complimented them for their good work and their good conduct. But at the same time, she prohibited them from baptising and conducting meetings.

The strike against the Europeans was the first step against the Christians. They were overwhelmed with grief and terror. The second was against the Malagasy Christians themselves. On 1st March 1835 she announced:

*If, then, any would change the customs of our ancestors, ... I abhor that. ... As to baptism, societies, places of worship distinct from the schools, and the observance of the Sabbath - how many rules are there in this land? Is it not I alone that rule? These things are not to be done; they are unlawful in my country, for they are not the customs of our ancestors. Now then, to those who have observed baptism, entered into society, and formed separate houses for prayer (or worship) I grant you one month to confess (to make self accusation) and if you come not within that period, but wait to be first found out, and accused by others, I denounce death against such.*

Under such a threat some abandoned Christianity. They came and received pardon, renouncing their faith. But others remained steadfast, despite the risk of being denounced or caught by the soldiers, such as Rafaravavy Mary, Paul Rainitsiheva and his wife. They lived in fear of arrest. They had to hide not only themselves but also their Bible. This Bible gave them strength to carry their cross courageously.

1836 was a year of respite. The Christians awaited the consequences of the queen's edict. The queen was thinking of what to do if they remained stubborn.

Then in 1837, the thunder burst.

(See Appendix 2 for specific examples of martyrdom.)

### ***The Second Wave (1849)***

The hunting of Christians continued. Many were denounced and thrown into jail; others were caught in hiding places and cruelly tortured to denounce their fellow Christians. The cause of their great hardships was simply being Christians. Their religion was their only crime. Many bore in their bodies the marks of their sufferings. The scars of their torture and the hot iron stamped on their flesh remained as indelible marks of their persecution. They suffered much in this life, but were not downhearted because their hope was in the life to come.

Almost 15 years had passed since Christian worship and possession of the Bible were publicly prohibited. During that time every available means had been employed to enforce the prohibition, often very cruelly to the point of death. The steadfast decision of those who were caught, to neither renounce their religion nor denounce their friends became the means to increase the agony of their sufferings. They did not deny they had been praying and had the Bible, but said, "tell our friends we will not denounce them. We do not want them to be killed. Greet them for us, and if we don't meet alive again, see you in heaven".

Many were reduced to slavery during that time. Their sufferings were no less than those thrown into jail and tortured, just different. They were sold in public markets like animals and subjected to painful miseries due to separation from loved ones. Family members were bought by different people. Many families were broken apart during that period. In addition, many were sold under two conditions; firstly, they could not be redeemed by family members, and secondly, they were to be treated very harshly.

Many were not sold into perpetual slavery but sentenced to forced labour. They were subjected to the hardest kinds of labour like quarrying or carrying stones for the erection of government buildings, or fetching timber from hundreds of miles for the same constructions or other equally hard labour. They worked under close surveillance and a brief moment of rest meant a lashing. Many carried the marks of their punishment to the grave.

Those who were remained free did not enjoy tranquillity. They lived in constant fear of being caught or denounced, wandering from place to place as outcasts. Soldiers and spies were everywhere. It became almost impossible to hide from them. The queen encouraged spies and informers and employed many of them. Often they went in disguise around the city and villages, to listen to what people were talking of in their houses or in public during market days or any other public gatherings. Christians were between anvil and hammer. If they stayed in their villages, imminent capture awaited them. Wandering and hiding in desert places and mountains they were at risk of roaming bandits who raided slaves and goods. The queen made their lives unbearable.

The darkest year of Ranavalona's reign was 1849. Christians had suffered and been persecuted for almost a quarter of a century but that year was the worst. Hundreds suffered severe punishment and 18 were put to death:

- 37 who had explained or preached the Word were made slaves with their wives and children.
- 42 who had possessed books were made slaves, and their property seized.
- 27 who had possessed books and preached, or explained, were made slaves with their wives and children.
- 6 with whom it was the second offence were imprisoned.
- 18 were put to death.

(For more details, see Appendix 3.)

### ***The Third and Last Wave (1857)***

From 1849 to 1857, Christianity advanced in a time of darkness. Their leaders became more careful in their secret meetings for prayer and Bible reading, avoiding unnecessary exposure to death. Meanwhile, the government was satisfied with their killings during the earlier persecutions, thinking the Christians would not dare continue their practices. The queen's anger was tempered.

But in 1857, a last fierce outbreak of persecution took place.

It originated in a plot to overthrow the queen. She was now too old to lead the country. She was in her late seventies and easily irritated. It led to the killing of many innocent people. Many were sentenced to death for minor faults.

Rakotondradama, a good prince and friend of Christians, grieved at what his mother did. He planned to take power from his mother, leaving her as 'queen mother', with no power but venerated as the mother of the king. But the plan was betrayed. The queen



acted swiftly. She accused her ministers and officers of plotting with the Europeans to overthrow her. They had not only betrayed her trust but also the country.

She then turned on the Christians. The queen was enraged against them because they were friends of the Europeans. She was convinced that meant they were also behind the plot. They became the scapegoats. She sent thousands of soldiers to search for and arrest them. Antananarivo and the surrounding villages were in terror during those days. Hundreds of Christians were arrested.

(For more details, see Appendix 4.)

### ***The Bible, the Martyrs' Source of Strength until Death***

In 1859, the Queen's edict was still being proclaimed every second week in all the markets. The search was as keen as ever. Sometimes, in a flutter of terror, friends burnt at last the tracts, hymns, Testaments, treasured so long. The preachers changed their names and were in hiding; but every evening they met the brethren for mutual encouragement and instruction from 7 to 8. On the mountain, too, the Scriptures were read in some cave, some chasm among the boulders, while sharp eyes kept watch.

Some avoided martyrdom by denying their faith and recanting. But the martyrs remained faithful to Christ until death. None renounced their faith. All embraced their fate with courage.

The Bible was the source of their strength for they had it in their hands or their hearts. They read, learnt and meditated on it. And it made them stronger than ever in their faith. Its power had produced those astonishing transformations of character that made them living undeniable evidences of a wonderful moral change. Their faith was based on the Bible. It was their companion through the dark period of persecution, the foundation on which the martyrs' church was built. It taught them fellowship based on the example of the early New Testament Christians and conduct in the face of the temptation of leaving Christianity through fear. It gave them assurance that the Christian life they had embraced had a sure foundation. Their familiarity with it made them imitate and follow the example of Jesus and early Christians who died a martyr's death, like Stephen. Their safe and unerring guide was the Word of God, the Bible. It helped them embrace martyrdom with joy and serenity. The danger to which they were exposed could not stop them from listening to its words of instruction and encouragement. Their daily reading filled them with the Word.

As a result, they had a new way of looking at life and death. Martyrdom in the New Testament was part of Christianity. Suffering and tribulation belonged to the very nature of the early Church. Jesus said to his disciples 'if they persecuted me, so will they persecute you' (Jn 15:20). Being familiar with the Bible, the early Christians in Madagascar stood firm in their tribulations. They imitated Christ and his followers, preferring death to the denial of their faith for they believed they would be rewarded on the day of judgement. What mattered for them was to be with the Lord. To live or to die would have the same effect. With Paul they could say 'neither death nor life could not separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ our Lord' (Ro 8:38-39); and 'For me to live is Christ, and to die is gain' (Phil 1:21). Their eyes were set on the judgment seat of Christ.

In sum, the Merina martyrs, like the early Christians, embraced death with courage and joy, with the Bible in their hands. Its power sustained them until death, a martyr's death.

## **The Contribution of the Bible to the Growth of Christianity during the Persecutions**

The translation of the Malagasy Bible produced more far-reaching effects than the LMS missionaries could ever have imagined. It contributed to the growth of Christianity in Madagascar and sustained the Merina Christians during the persecution. The martyrs were imbued and impregnated with the Word of God, their source of courage and strength during the dark period they experienced.

The early 17<sup>th</sup> C Catholic missionaries gave the Malagasy their catechetical books. The LMS missionaries gave them the Bible. The impact of the Bible was far superior.

The survival of Christianity during the reign of Ranavalona I was due to the availability of the Bible to the indigenous Christians. It was the source of their courage and strength. They came to it for instruction, consolation, establishment and inspiration and it never let them down. It empowered them in their trials and tribulations.

Due to the Bible, the cause of God prevailed in Madagascar during that dark period. Persecution, cruelty and martyrdom could not destroy Christians sustained by the power of the Bible. They walked hand-in-hand with it through the dark period of persecution and came out victorious. The martyrs lived, suffered and died for Christ because they learnt of Him and from Him through the Holy Word of God.

Ranavalona was fighting a losing battle. She sought to eradicate Christianity, but the opposite happened. During the terrible persecutions, the number of Christians increased greatly through the invincible constancy of the martyrs. Their courage and death attracted the admiration of the population and drew new adherents.

Before the persecutions in 1835, there were few Christians. In the capital, there were about 1000 in 1836; but just after Ranavalona's death in 1861, there were over 7000.

Numbers began to increase from the time Ranavalona prohibited Christian worship and persecuted Christians. Punishments and martyrdoms only served to expand and strengthen the Church. Instead of discouraging them, persecution challenged them, and the Bible empowered them to respond to the challenge. Persecution tested their faithfulness to the Lord. The Malagasy people, who had high esteem of bravery, not only praised the martyrs' courage but also joined their ranks. They were attracted not by material benefits but by the Word and the teaching of Jesus.

Love of the Bible rooted the faith deeply in the hearts and minds of the Christians. Even violent persecution could not quench it, but only strengthen and promote it. Empowered by the Bible, they did not keep quiet but proclaimed the Word of God in secret to their fellow villagers, attracting many converts during the period of persecution.

The charismatic indigenous leaders were better able to explain the faith than the missionaries. Their preaching was down to earth and effective, related to the daily life of the indigenous Christians. They knew their flock better than the missionaries; and so could speak more meaningfully to them. With the assistance of the Bible, they helped the Malagasy Christians to appropriate Christianity as their own, not 'the religion of the Europeans' as the queen said, and to hold firmly to it.

So, due to the power of the Bible, the fierce persecutions resulted in a wondrous growth of Christianity.

# THE BIBLE IN MADAGASCAR AFTER THE PERSECUTIONS

## *Preparations during the Persecutions*

Through the long years of persecution, work on the Malagasy Bible did not stop. A New Testament was published and shipped to Mauritius, to be smuggled in as opportunity arose.

Hopes being raised of renewing the Madagascar mission, the LMS asked Griffiths to revise the Malagasy Bible. In 1855 Meller and Griffiths completed the New Testament. By 1858 the Old Testament had been revised to the end of Job, and Judges 10 had passed through the press when progress was suspended until there was some prospect of distribution.

Interest in England was deeply stirred by the 1858 publication of William Ellis's *Three Visits to Madagascar*, glowing with the testimony to the living power of the Scriptures, and to the steadfastness of those "always bearing about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus".

## *The new King (1861 - 1863)*

Ranavalona died on 16 August 1861. Her son, a professed Christian, succeeded under the title Radama II, and once more the country was open to the Gospel.

The Malagasy revision was completed and all New Testaments and portions in stock, nearly 12,000, sent out with the missionaries who hastened to renew their labours.

Pen cannot describe the gladness with which those books were welcomed by the children of the martyrs; the confessors who had escaped the precipice, the stake, the cross, or had survived the wilderness; the men and women who had been won to Christ by the reading of the Word on the mountain-side or in the city in the dangerous hour before the evening curfew.

For 3 days after their arrival crowds of eager purchasers thronged the mission-house from morning till night. How far below reality every calculation as to the number of believers had fallen!

One visitor told of young officers who asked if he had brought "the book of Jesus Christ"; of people from distant villages who met him with the cry "Bibles! Bibles!" of men who remembered with tears the first missionaries; of fugitives who showed him the texts that had given them heart and hope in the years of their wanderings.

## *The new Queen (1863 - 1868)*

In those early months the King had expressed his desire for the freest circulation and use of the Scriptures. But within a year there were signs of serious trouble. The nobles felt it was not safe for such a king to live, and he was replaced by a new queen. On the day she was enthroned, complete freedom of religion was proclaimed, though she herself never abandoned the old paganism.

The progress of the revised Bible had been checked by the death of Griffiths in 1863, but the work was finished with the help of Meller. The first consignment arrived in 1866.

The people could not contain their joy. All their Bibles except perhaps a dozen priceless copies had perished in the martyr days. They pressed forward in such intense excitement to obtain copies that the doors of the depot had to be closed and the books handed out through the window.

By this date the number of avowed Christians had increased to 16–18,000. Churches and schools had sprung up in the capital with congregations in scores of surrounding villages.

### ***Ranavalona II (1868 - 1883)***

At the close of her brief reign in March 1868, the queen was succeeded by her cousin Ranavalona II. The new Queen opened the neglected palace Bible. As she read, a great light broke upon her, and "her mind was changed." She turned from the old idols.

Thenceforth divine service was held within the palace; Sunday labour was stopped and Sunday markets closed. The symbols of heathenism were swept away; and the people turned in masses to the religion of the Queen. By 1871 the number of churches had increased to 621, with nearly 232,000 attendants with over 2000 native pastors and evangelists.

In response, thousands of Bibles and New Testaments were sent. In 1870 alone, the BFBS sent over 60,000 copies. Between 1868 and 1873 they printed 299,800 Bibles, New Testaments and portions.

Prices were fixed low in view of the prevailing poverty, but still did not seem small to ordinary people. Even so, in 1874, in a few months 6300 light and convenient pocket Bibles were sold. Instead of passing a rare copy from hand to hand, the scholars in the Bible classes could now read mostly from their own books.

Of the transformation taking place in the minds and hearts of tens of thousands there could be no question. Bible classes, sometimes 3/4 hours long, were attended by 200-400. Men and women left their fields and market stalls to learn more. From the palace to the mud hut the spirit of the Bereans was abroad. At noon in the rice valleys, when the workers sheltered under a shady tree; on the hill-top in the steaming forest, when the carriers laid down their loads and stretched their tired limbs on the ground; in the cool of the day when people sat outside their houses, groups of listeners could be seen gathered around one who read. And the book in his hand was ever the same, the New Testament.

Copper-coloured Betsileos from the south and jet-black woolly-headed Sakalavas from the west made 2-3 months' journeys in quest of the Scriptures. In strange villages where the Gospel story was told for the first time, "Tell it us again," was the cry; "these things are new to us, but they make us glad to hear; tell it again." The change showed itself in everyday talk. The sayings of bygone generations were yielding precedence to the sacred text. By them the missionary himself was expected to justify every action and requirement. "There is the Word of God. If we have been wrong, show us from that book; but until you show us... "

Even in high politics and warfare the Gospel exercised its power. When going to fight the Queen's enemies, the Prime Minister said; "You are Christians now; no more of the cruelties of our heathen wars!" A rebel chief, invited to a parley, said, "why don't you harry and enslave us as in the old time?" The Book was the answer. They were told, "If ever we make war on you without just cause, or kill or punish the guiltless, show us this book; then indeed we shall be self-condemned."

## APPENDIX 1

### *Two Accounts of the 1821 Neuaddlwyd Revival*

In the summer of 1819, Evan Williams, ... a boy of 14 years old, who was in school at Neuaddlwyd with Dr Phillips, at the same time as Mr Griffiths Griffiths, .... invited Mr Griffiths to preach in his father's house in Llanarth one Sunday evening. Mr Griffiths agreed and took along some of his fellow students. Jenkin Williams told them that if they promised to come to his home and preach on Sunday evening every other week that he would prepare some food for them, but he would not be able to pay them anything else. The students agreed and continued to go there for some months very successfully. Soon after this (i.e. in 1821) there was a strong revival around Neuaddlwyd and Aberaeron, mostly at prayer meetings and through the offices of Messrs P Griffiths, and his friend Daniel Griffiths, who were at that time students in Dr Phillips' College. This revival was notably strong, those it took hold of were totally overcome and they began to praise and jump around. This blessed shower spread through the surrounding areas, and among the places was Llanarth, the result being that people flocked to become members of Neuaddlwyd. As a result regular public services were set up in Llanarth every Sunday night, instead of fortnightly as before, and a successful Sunday school was also started. After some time ... a barn was rented near the parish burial ground to hold services in. Soon they began to look for land to build a chapel, and talked of forming a church here.

[From *Hanes Eglwysi Annibynnol Cymru / History of the Welsh Independents* by Thomas Rees and John Thomas, translated by Gareth Hicks on [www.genuki.org.uk/big/wal/CGN/Hanes3.html](http://www.genuki.org.uk/big/wal/CGN/Hanes3.html)]

*1821 Neuaddlwyd under Dr Thomas Phillips, P Griffiths & D Griffiths etc, Glynarthen & Henllan.*

'[A]nd about the end of the first summer, a powerful revival broke out, the most powerful I ever remember. It did not break out with him [Daniel Griffiths], but the stirring started one Sabbath when Dr. Phillips was preaching on 1 Peter 4:6. That was an amazing Sabbath. There was a great noise in the chapel, and no noise as well. I will remember that stirring whilst I live. The fire rekindled in a fellowship meeting in Cilfforch, and subsequently, under the Rev. T. Griffiths, Hawen, in Caehaidd (a farm of that name). This renewal was so powerful that there was hardly anyone who was not obliged to feel it. With this movement, Daniel started, and various other of the students, sailing splendidly on successful gifts; he would preach wherever he was sent for. He went down to Aberaeron, and towards Ffosyffin, and down to Newquay, and up to Llanddewi-aberarth, Llannon, and Cefn Llanddewi. These places were in the Methodists' area; and some started towards Neuaddlwyd from these parts. Some chapels would send for him as if he had the revival at his fingertips. The Arminians would send for him, and he went everywhere. He preached out in the fields, on top of the mines [or quarries], and thousands followed him in every region. When he went down to the Pembrokeshire Association, many whispered through the crowd that Daniel Griffiths was there, and many sought to catch sight of him. This was related to me by the oldest minister in Carmarthenshire today (Feb. 1.) But, despite all the good he did for religion in Cardiganshire, many tried to persecute him, and blacken him if they could. Many lies were said about him—he was threatened—he was evil spoken of—he was desired to become a soldier—he was told to go to some other region—he was warned not to go to preach at a farmhouse near Ffosyffin, because there would be some weather, for sure; but he took no notice of them, because preaching and saving

souls was his motto everywhere. Many thousands followed him. Perhaps no greater crowd was seen than that in Aberaeron listening to him on a Sabbath night when he spoke in the King's Yard. Many remember the meeting. Some were born anew there, and they are on the walls of Zion today. He received much kindness for Glamorganshire, in gifts, when in Cardiganshire, and received many from the people of Neuaddlwyd and its neighbourhood, so that he did not have to spend a single penny the whole time he was there. The start of the first summer he came to the school, he went to the North during the holidays, and hundreds will always remember him. He had several calls in the North to be Minister, but he was not inclined to answer any of them.'

(P. Griffiths, *Cofiant y diweddar Barch. Daniel Griffiths, Soar, Castellnedd, Swydd Forganwg*, p.17-20; *EM* 1823, p.339; S. Thomas, *Cofiant y Parch. Phylip Griffiths, Alltwen*, Trefynnon, 1902, pp.39-40; *HEAC* ii. 122) [From the United Kingdom Wells website (<http://www.ukwells.org/>)]

## APPENDIX 2

### *The First Wave of Persecution (1837-1842)*

1836 was a year of respite. The Christians were waiting the consequences of the queen's edict and its effect; the queen herself was thinking of what to do if they remained stubborn.

The thunder burst in 1837.

#### ***Rafaravavy Mary's trial***

The first to experience it was Rafaravavy Mary, a young woman of noble rank. She was denounced by three of her servants, whom she treated as her own sisters, for retaining the Bible and continuing to follow Christian practices. Her father whom she loved much asked her to deny her Master or she would die. She remained steadfast. The first time Ranavalona granted her life because of the service her father rendered to her kingdom. When freed she interceded to her father for her servants whom he threw into jail. 'Do not hold this sin against them' (Acts 7:60), for 'they don't know what they were doing' (Lk 23:34). Two later became fervent Christians.

She was denounced a second time, with 16 fellow Christians, on 20 July 1837. She was considered the leader of the group. The soldiers caught her and she was thrown into jail to await her fate. On the way, she thought this was her end. To calm her agitated spirit, she re-memorised Isa 41:10 'Fear not, I am with you; be not dismayed; I am your God', and the prayer of Stephen, 'Lord, receive my spirit' (Acts 7:59; Lk 23:46). The queen issued an order to execute her on the 5 August, but due to a fire which broke out the previous evening, ravaging hundreds of houses around the palace, and the palace courtyard itself, her life was spared. Government affairs stood still after the fire. She was ready to die and prepared herself for it but God still had work for her. She went into exile in London then to Mauritius where she died in 1848.

#### ***Rasalama the first to be crowned martyr***

Meanwhile the 16 others were reduced to slavery for life and all their possessions delivered to the public. They were divided among the queen's officers who were ordered to treat them very harshly. Rasalama with 9 others were put under the watchful eyes of her kinsman Ramiandravola. Despite their blood relationship, he treated her harshly, making her work seven days a week. On the 13 August, Rasalama refused to work. She said that it was Sunday, the day for the Lord; it is against His commandment to work. Ramiandravola was infuriated and insulted her. But she warned him 'Pay due regard to what you are saying; for you and I have to stand before the Judge one day'. The expectation of judgment dominated the thought of Christians during the persecution. Overwhelmed by anger, Ramiandravola reported her disobedience to her master and her faithfulness to the Lord's command to respect Sundays. The queen immediately gave an order to execute her the next morning.

She was thrown into jail and chained with feet, hands and neck tied together very closely with a very heavy metal, with the neck between the legs so that she could barely breathe because of the weight and tightness of the metal. She suffered grievously that night. Very early next day, they removed her chains and led her to the place of execution. She did not show any fear before her suffering and imminent death. She was permeated by the word of God, which gave her unshakeable courage. Passing by the chapel, her face lit up with smile and she said to her executioner and the people around her, 'There I heard the Word of the Saviour'. On the way to the place

of execution, she never ceased to pray and sing the sacred hymns she used to sing with her fellow Christians.

Arriving faint and weary but calm and ready to meet her Master, she asked permission to pray. She knelt and committed herself to God. After that, she said 'I am ready'. Then they speared her to death. She was the first Malagasy Christian to receive a martyr's crown. The crowd were amazed at her heroism and the peaceful light on her face as she died. 'This praying must be true', they said, 'if people can dare to die in such a manner'. She was 39. Her courage and strength came from the Bible that she had already in her heart.

### ***Rafaralahy Andriamazoto martyred***

On 16 February 1838, Rafaralahy Andriamazoto was denounced by his best friend, the one who converted him. Rafaralahy was a successful businessman, and his friend a poor man. Because of their close friendship, Rafaralahy received him as a business partner and confided a big sum of money to him. Because of mismanagement or greed, the latter consumed all the money and when Rafaralahy demanded his share, he turned against him and accused him to the queen of conducting a prayer meeting in his house and keeping a Bible. It was a way of getting rid of his debt. Rafaralahy remembered Ps 41:10-11: 'Even the friend who had my trust, who shared my table, had turned against me; but you, Lord, have mercy and raise me up'. Rafaralahy was arrested with 11 others.

The executioners tortured him to accuse his fellow Christians; but he refused. He said, 'Do whatever you want to me but I will never denounce my friends'. Then on 19 February, he was brought to execution. There he followed the example of Rasalama, asking his executioner to allow him to pray before his execution. He prayed for the country, the persecuted Christians and himself. Then they pierced him to death. The last words from the depth of his heart were the words of Jesus himself, repeated by Stephen, 'Father, receive my spirit' (Lk 23:46; Acts 7:59). He died a peaceful death. His prayer was granted; for when he had witnessed the martyrdom of Rasalama, he had wished 'If I can die such a peaceful death. I wish too to die for the Lord'. He was the second Malagasy Christian to receive a martyr's crown.

Rafaralahy did not suffer alone, his entire household suffered with him. His old mother suffered terribly from the loss of a beloved son; and died in grief within a few days. His pregnant wife was caught and put in jail. She was cruelly tortured. If not pregnant she would have been executed too. And the three lepers under his care also suffered a lot, because no one took care of them and Rafaralahy's death quickened their death. Though not martyred, they carried with him the cross of martyrdom.

### ***Ramanisa killed by tangena ordeal***

The hunting of Christians continued increasing. They lived in constant fear of being caught or denounced. But with the Bible they obtained strength; they read encouraging passages such as Pro 3:25-26: 'Be not afraid of sudden terror, of the ruin of the wicked when it comes; for the Lord will be your confidence, and will keep your foot from the snare'. This calmed their fear.

The following year, Ramanisa underwent the *tangena* ordeal (used to determine the guilt or innocence of an accused party) She was the cousin of Rafaralahy, denounced along with him. When Rafaralahy died, her husband repudiated her. Her father hated her because she refused to renounce Jesus and all her kin had run away from her. What consoled her was the words of Jesus she knew by heart: 'If the world hates you, realise that it hated me first. If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you' (Jn 15:18, 20);



'But do not be afraid, I am always with you' (Mt 28:20). She drank the *tangena* and died. She was a beautiful young woman in her early thirties. At her death those present exclaimed that her face was 'like the face of an angel' (Acts 6:15).

### ***The decapitation at Ambohipotsy***

On 23 May 1840, 16 Christians were caught on their way to escape to Mauritius. The one entrusted to lead them betrayed them. They were brought to Antananarivo for trial the following morning, but one managed to escape during the night. The queen pronounced the sentence: five to perpetual slavery as 'they were still young and did not know what they were doing; the remaining ten to death.

They were put in jail, under the watchful eyes of four layers of guards, awaiting their fate next morning. But that night, one was delivered miraculously. Rabary says the door of the prison was opened and his chains loosened. He woke up and alerted his friends. He did not want to escape but his friends forced him saying 'God still has a mission for you to accomplish, go'. After saying good-bye, he left. During that time, the guards were in deep sleep. It reminded them of the miraculous delivery of Peter in Acts 12:6-19. The 9 were brought to Ambohipotsy on the 9 July 1840. Along their way, they still had the courage to preach the Good News to the soldiers and people with them. Arriving, they knelt together and prayed and sang. Then the executioners decapitated them one by one. They were the fourth set of martyrs. They died calmly and peacefully said those who witnessed their execution.

### ***The martyrdom of Ratsitapahina and Rabearahaba***

Two years later, 2 Christians from Vonizongo were martyred: Ratsitapahina and Rabearahaba. They were denounced by the wife of Ratsitapahina, of plotting a rebellion against the queen and of being Christians and having the Bible. They were sentenced to death. On 19 June 1842, Ratsitapahina was decapitated at the market of Antotohazo. His executioner suspended his head on a mat in the middle of the market so every one could see. Rabearahaba was decapitated the following morning at the market of Ankazobe. His head was also displayed on a mat. These executions were purposely done before many people to terrorise the population, and especially to discourage the Christians from continuing with their practices. Christianity was blooming in that district because it was far from the watchful eye of the queen; and the Christians enjoyed relative freedom.

## APPENDIX 3

### *The martyrs of 1849*

For Christians, 1849 was the darkest year of Ranavalona's reign. They had suffered and been persecuted for almost a quarter of a century but that year was the worst. In that one year, hundreds suffered severe punishment and 18 were put to death:

- 37 who had explained or preached the Word made slaves with their wives and children;
- 42 who had possessed books were made slaves, and their property seized;
- 27 who had possessed books and preached, or explained, were made slaves with their wives and children;
- 6 with whom it was the second offence were imprisoned;
- 18 were put to death.

On 28 March 1849, soldiers heavily armed with guns and spears took the prisoners, chained hand and foot. Before the multitude from the four corners of the kingdom, the queen sentenced 18 to death: 14 to be hurled off the steep rock of Ampamarinana; 4 to be burnt alive at Faravohitra.

When their sentence was pronounced they came closer to one another to comfort and encourage the younger ones. They used the passages of Scriptures they knew by heart to lift up their hearts, such as Mat 10:39, 'Whoever loses his life for my sake will find it'; Rev 14:13, 'Blessed are those who die in the Lord'; Ro 8:18, 'The sufferings of this present time are nothing compared with the glory to be revealed in us'; and many others. After whispering to one another words of comfort, they started to sing.

When the queen heard them singing, she ordered them to be silent, but they continued. She then ordered the executioners to treat them with the greatest indignity. They were beaten and stripped; and to insult them were wrapped in old torn dirty mats. Their mouths were stuffed with dirty rags to prevent them from singing or speaking to one another. They did not walk to the places of execution but were carried like animals. Each was tied along a pole and two men carried them on their shoulders.

When the 14 arrived, they were untied from the poles. The executioner tied their hands and feet. They were still wrapped with the old mats. Then each was suspended by a cord on the edge of the precipice. They were again asked to renounce Christ and take the required oaths to save their life but none did. The cord was cut and within seconds their bodies were battered at the foot of the precipice, 80m below.

Ranivo was reserved until the last. She saw all the others hurled over the fatal rock. She was a young beautiful woman of noble rank. Because of her tender age and position, the executioners thought she would recant after seeing her friends perish; but she did not. The chief executioner struck her on the face and tried to force her to take the oaths and renounce Christ; but she refused. Despite that, he spared her life. That grieved her; she wanted to share the fate of her fellow Christians. She begged him to do so but her plea was not granted.

The 4 to be burnt begged to be put to death before being burnt, but their plea was not granted. The executioner wanted them to die a painful death. Each was tied to a pole, on a pile of dried grass and wood. Then the fire was set alight, they were burnt alive. Like the three young men thrown into the furnace during the reign of Nebuchadnezzar, they raised their voices singing, glorifying and blessing God (Dan 3). Ramanandalana

gave birth and the baby came out of the fire but the executioner thrust him back into the flames. The infant received the crown of martyr with the parents.

They prayed in the middle of the flames as long as they had life. Their last words were 'O Lord, receive our spirits, for thy love to us has caused this to us. And lay not this sin to their charge'. Then they died softly and gently. The people present were astonished; they did not hear any cry of pain or lament from them. 'Indeed, gently was their going forth of life. And astonished were all the people around that beheld the burning of them there' (Ellis 1859:429).

The 14 and the 4 all died a heroic death. They met their fate with courage because they had put their trust in Christ and the Bible sustained them until the end. The bodies of the 14 thrown off were dragged to be burnt and reduced into ashes as their 4 friends. For the Merina who venerate the bodies of the ancestors, it was a shocking punishment. But the queen did it purposely to undermine Christianity and discourage her subjects from following it.

## APPENDIX 4

### *The third and last wave of persecution (1857)*

On 18 July, fourteen were sentenced to death. They suffered a novel form of execution; they were stoned almost to death before having their heads cut off. Along their way to the place of execution, the soldiers tortured them with spears and whips. Their bodies were wounded and bleeding, but they did not pay much attention to the torture of their flesh. They continued their prayer, mutual encouragement and unceasing songs of praise and thanksgiving along the way. Arriving at the place, they knelt together and prayed. Then the soldiers tied each to a pole, facing the crowd already armed with stones and ready to strike. At the command of the executioner, stones flew like giant hail towards the martyrs. Their last prayer was that of Stephen, 'Lord Jesus, receive my spirit' (Acts 7:59). Afterwards their heads were cut off and exposed on poles.

Fifty were sentenced to undergo the *tangena* ordeal. 42 survived but 8 died. Their bodies were not given to their families for proper burial but fed to the dogs. That was a great insult. The queen ordered it purposely to make the families of the victims and the Christians suffer. It was very painful. But even such an insult and disgrace could not shake the faith of those Christians. It was built on the rock of the Bible.

Nine of those who were caught and thrown into jail managed to escape; but their fate was not easy. They were living their martyrdom while still alive. They had to wander from place to place in hiding. They lived in constant fear. They suffered from fatigue, hunger and thirst. In their hiding places, they continually read the Bible, their only source of strength during their desperate situation. This sustained and gave them courage during the period of persecution. Without it they could not stand those years of trial.

Fifty-eight were condemned to be placed in irons for life. They were chained by the neck with heavy iron fetters; 'groups of up to six were fettered together with iron collars linked by short iron bars to the collars of the fellow-prisoners'. Then they were banished to unhealthy districts. Many died of fatigue, sickness and hunger. When one died, his head was cut off to free the body from the chains and those remaining alive were burdened with the heavy iron that person carried. This was the most painful torture the Merina Christians had to endure. Of the 58, only 22 returned alive to Antananarivo at the death of the queen in 1861. Patten says that 'they reappeared as if risen from the dead. Some bore the deep scars of chains and fetters; some were worn almost to skeletons by prolonged sufferings from hunger and fever, could scarcely drag themselves along the roads that led to the capital'. What was important, they had persevered until the end.