

HYMN HISTORY

"I HAVE DECIDED TO FOLLOW JESUS"

Adult Bible Class – Community Bible Church – Pastor Scott Bashoor

I. COMPOSITION

- A. **Tune** – Traditional melody from Assam, India
- B. **Text** – Disputed authorship. Theories:
 1. Nokseng (martyred Garo tribesman, late 1800's)
 2. Sadhu Sundar Singh (1889-1929)
 3. Simon K. Marak (1877-1975)

II. A LEGENDARY HYMN

A. A Popular Evangelical Song

- The song has been a standard in the evangelical repertoire for 65 years, but it is older than that.
- It is often excluded from Reformed and Lutheran hymnals for its connection with "decision theology." But this association is due more to its usage by later evangelists than its origin. Originally, it was a hymn of dedication, not freewill theology.

B. A Gift from India

- While authorship of the hymn is disputed, all agree that the song originated in northeastern India in the region of Assam.
- The melody is in C Major, common in Indian music, and the tune uses harmonics common in the same.
- The tune plays nicely on traditional Indian stringed instruments such as the *sitar*. (See back panel QR code.)
- It resembles traditional tunes used in non-Christian religious singing (known as *bhajans*). The tune itself does not appear to be borrowed, but it is in a style of melodies associated with religious devotion.
- The hymn entered the western world thru Australia and the United States.
 - ⊙ As early as 1950, versions of the song appeared in small circulation American songbooks, brought back by missionaries who translated it in various ways.

- ⊙ In the late 1950's, William Reynolds (aka John Clark), an organist with the Billy Graham Assn., was visiting Australia when he discovered it in a simple, undated songbook. The song had been in limited circulation in Australia for a while.
- ⊙ Its usage in Graham's crusades and its later publication under SingSpiration Music helped to spread it across the English-speaking world.

C. The Fruit of Gospel Missions

1. The advance of the gospel surged in NE India in the 1800's due to the missionary work of American Baptists and Welsh Calvinistic Methodists.
 - a. In nearby Burma (Myanmar) Adoniram Judson established a Baptist mission in the early 1800's, and gospel work spilled over into Assam.
 - b. Welsh revivals in the early 1840's brought Calvinistic Methodists as missionaries to NE India, making another beachhead for the gospel.
2. Today there is a sizeable Christian community of various denominations in the NE regions of India.



III. THEORIES OF AUTHORSHIP

A. Nokseng (martyred Garo tribesman, late 1800's)

- The most popular explanation of the song's origin
- Propagated by the notable Indian evangelist, Peramangalam Porinju ("P. P.") Job (1945-2012)
- Job claimed that the song arose sometime after the arrival of Welsh missionaries.
 - ⊙ Nokseng, a member of the Garo tribe in the hill country of Assam, converted to Christ.
 - ⊙ The local chief was outraged at his conversion, threatening to kill his family if he did not recant.

B. Sadhu Sundar Singh (1889-1929)

- Singh was a Sikh who as a boy converted to a form of Christianity in the late 1800's.
 - ⊙ Ostracized by his family, he eventually went off to study at an Anglican seminary. Curiously, he maintained Sikh dress while a student & after.
 - ⊙ He was not allowed to graduate because he did not intend to enter Anglican ministry. Instead, he became an independent missionary and ascetic who became very influential in India & beyond.

- ⊙ Nokseng replied, "I have decided to follow Jesus," after which the chief had his children shot with arrows.
- ⊙ The chief threatened to kill his wife, but Nokseng intoned, "Though none go with me, still I will follow."
- ⊙ After killing his wife, the chief threatened Nokseng's life, but he sang back, "The world behind me, the cross before." The chief then had Nokseng killed.
- ⊙ Nokseng's testimony of faithfulness was so powerful that the chief confessed faith in Christ, followed by many others in the village.

- Unfortunately, this story has not been verified. A book associated with P. P. Job which circulated the idea is lost, and no independent sources confirm it.
 - ⊙ It is certainly a possible explanation. Christian history is replete with stories of great turnarounds following noble martyrdoms.
 - ⊙ But it is also true that evangelists in the 1900's were prone to repeat sensationalized and exaggerated illustrations.
- The lack of corroborating evidence and the presence of counter evidence caution us from accepting the Nokseng theory of the song's origins.

- ☉ Unfortunately, he held to universalistic theology combined with elements of Indian thought.
- One theory of the hymn's composition is that Singh set to music the words allegedly spoken by Nokseng.
 - ☉ While some hymnals in the late 20th century ascribed the text and/or tune to Singh, there is no record of his claiming connection to the song.
 - ☉ Crediting the song to Singh was probably an attempt to explain its unusual popularity.

C. Simon K. Marak (1877-1975)

- Marak was a Garo pastor, schoolteacher, and missionary from Jorhat, Assam, where he became a very influential leader in Baptist churches.
- Recent research based on interviews with his surviving children and others from the area suggest that he wrote the song early in his ministry in the mid 1930's.
- He often traveled to various churches and is believed to have circulated the song in his circuit ministry.
- In 2017 the Assam American Baptist Missionary Union held its sesquicentennial (150th) celebration. Eleven historical articles were commissioned for the commemoration. One of them focuses on the hymn and Marak's involvement, providing the best documentation of all the theories about the song.
- This is now the leading view among informed hymnologists.

- The (sometimes lesser known) stanza, "My cross I'll carry till I see Jesus" was written in 1959 by William Reynolds (BGA). Through connections with Baptist missions, this stanza made its way back to India where Marak eventually translated it into Assamese.
- In response to Reynold's stanza, Marak himself may have penned a 4th stanza.
- In the 1960's Hope Publishing, under the direction of John W. Peterson, added a stanza which likely led to the song's association with freewill theology: "Will you decide now to follow Jesus?"
- In American hymnals, the wording of the various stanzas depends on the publisher and denomination.
- Numerous other stanzas have been generated to fit the tune. One CCLI entry contains 10 stanzas!

Assamese Baptist Hymnal (2008)

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I Have Decided to follow Jesus.

- ১। যীচুৰেই পাছত যাবলৈ ললৌ, (৩)
ঘুৰি নাযাওঁ, ঘুৰি নাযাওঁ।
- ২। সংসাৰখন ত্যাগি, ক্ৰুচকাঠ তুলি (৩)
তেওঁৰ পাছ ললৌ, তেওঁৰ পাছ ললৌ।
- ৩। যদিও কোনো মোৰ লগত নাহে, (৩)
ঘুৰি নাযাওঁ, ঘুৰি নাযাওঁ।
- ৪। তেওঁক আঁসে নকৰি মই চলিলে, (৩)
কিবাটি পাম, কিবাটি পাম।

চিহ্নমান মাৰাক

C. Assamese Baptist Hymnal Translation (2008)

Stanza 1

I have decided to follow Jesus. (3)
I will not turn away. I will not turn away.

Stanza 2

Leaving the world, I took up the cross. (3)
I followed Him. I followed Him.

Stanza 3

Though no one comes with me, (3)
I won't go back. I won't go back.

Stanza 4

If I walk without Him, (3)
I shall receive the crown. I shall receive the crown.

D. Another Translation of an Assamese Version

Stanza 1

I have decided to follow Jesus. (3)
No turning back. No turning back.

Stanza 2

Though no one join me I still will follow. (3)
No turning back. No turning back.

Stanza 3

My cross I'll carry till I see Jesus. (3)
No turning back. No turning back.

Stanza 4

The world behind me, the cross before me. (3)
No turning back. No turning back.

V. YOUTUBE RECORDING

[Sanjeeb Sircar on Sitar \(with western influences\)](#)



IV. DEVELOPMENT OF THE TEXT

A. Originally Two Verses

- Initially, the first 2 stanzas made up the entirety of the song.
- Marak wrote these in Assamese.
- The third and fourth stanzas were added later upon interaction with American musicians.

B. Additional Verses by Americans

