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The Making of a Missionary: Hiram Bingham's Odyssey

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Throughout his twenty year tenure as minister of the mission church in Honolulu, Hiram Bingham earned hostile testimonials. Foreign residents and foreign visitors were virtually unanimous in their dislike for the meddlesome missionary. American visitors were appalled by Bingham's influence and actions: W. S. Ruschenberger, for instance, believed a "refined and elegant" missionary was more suitable than a "strong preacher." Similar sentiments were expressed by some of Bingham's colleagues. Asa Thurston complained that his co-worker was "too much disposed to take precedence of [me]"; later missionaries to Hawaii felt that Bingham assumed too much in the governance of the mission. Historians and novelists agree with this assessment.¹

Hiram Bingham has been damned but never explained. To understand why he antagonized his opponents and comrades one must assess the world into which he was born and in which he reached manhood. The influences of these years on his decision to become a missionary are complex: the economic and social fluctuations that characterized early 19th Century New England, the demands and resources of Congregationalism, and Bingham's decision to adopt the mores appropriate to Christian Adulthood were vital to his urge to raise the Lord's banner in the Sandwich Islands. These also helped mold the manner in which Bingham carried out his assignment in the Pacific. Rufus Anderson, corresponding secretary of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM), believed that Bingham was most useful to the mission when defiant, and his defiance arose from his "traits of character." Hence in Anderson's words, Bingham "was made for the position." It is with the making of the missionary that this essay is concerned.²

If his parents had had their way, Hiram Bingham would not have become a missionary. Calvin and Lydia Bingham had chosen their son, born 30

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October 1789, to care for them in their old age and run the family farm in Bennington, Vermont. From his experience, Calvin undoubtedly expected compliance with his request; he had remained with and cared for his aged parents. Calvin had waited until age thirty-seven, when his parents died and he inherited their lands, before coming into his own. His desire for land and his loyalty detained him. His son’s generation reacted differently. As Philip Greven has shown in his study of Andover, Massachusetts, the unilateral use of land inheritance to control the next generation had broken down before the American Revolution. Although inheritance might still be used as an inducement for one member of the family to remain, even this measure was losing its persuasive effect. The transportation revolution was in part responsible for the diminution. Internal improvements were not a boon to backwoods New England but a multifaceted attack on its social fabric: “the new facilities opened up eastern markets, and western competition hurt New England farmers. Prices for goods fell, and the new transportation system bypassed and undercut the poor village farmer”; a farmer’s sons would be unlikely to remain in this economic climate.

As the internal improvements facilitated the movement of farm products from the west, they in turn opened up newer and more fertile western lands. With the drop in New England’s soil fertility and the increased opportunities for travel, it is not surprising that emigration from New England increased in the years after 1800. In Vermont, the population growth slowed from 41% (1800–1810) to 8% (1810–1820); by mid-century the decline in growth had become a flood of departures—145,000 people had left the state. Some of the greatest fluctuations in population occurred in towns, like Bennington, which bordered on New York State.

The result of these statistical shifts is evident in the Bingham family. Of Hiram’s six brothers, only one remained in Bennington. Four left Vermont to built farms in Onondaga County, New York; the fifth became an itinerant minister along the eastern seaboard. It must have been clear to Hiram that greater opportunities existed outside his home town. Indeed, for a time he anticipated pursuing “the business of agriculture . . . in some of the settlements in the west.”

Calvin Bingham’s fifth son was as restless as his brothers but displayed greater ambition. Throughout his autobiography, A Residence of Twenty-One Years in the Sandwich Islands, Hiram Bingham depicts scenes which suggest he was drawn to and needed to be a part of large scale dramatic events. Although written of a later period in his life, these provide clues to understanding his earlier drive to leave Bennington.

A recurring theme in the autobiography is Bingham’s attraction to the awesome power produced when natural forces collided. Time and again, he speculated on the fiery convergence of lava and the Pacific Ocean: Honolulu, he noted, once had been the battleground between Pele, goddess of the volcano, and Neptune, just as it was now the site of a titanic struggle between the Holy and Unholy Spirit. At Palikoolau, his imagination “was here put to the stretch to conceive how this grand panorama was formed.” The missionary
described the “terrific convulsions,” “awful detonations,” and “the indescribable commotion of the elements” which led to its formation.  

Equally stimulating to his imagination was the confluence of the Pearl River and the Pacific Ocean:  

Through a narrow channel cut by its own force, its waters pass briskly into the sea, by pulsations, being unequally resisted by the waves of the ocean. The surf often tosses itself to the top of the sand bank... fifteen or twenty feet above the ocean level. For a few moments, it beats back the river, which as the wave recoils, pursues it again, and pours its torrent into the sea, till met by another surge, heavy enough to resist it again... 

The waves clashing with the river reminded Bingham of his own struggles, of “the turbid billows of a restless world [which] rise successively to check the current of the blest stream, whose gentle and untiring flow ‘makes glad the city of our God.’” His work thus found its type not in the beneficient, serene nature painted by his contemporaries of the Hudson River School. Instead, its symbol (and a mark of its importance and his ambition) was the clash of natural forces. These and other scenes depicted in the autobiography, Bingham’s desire “to cut his own channel,” and his need to subdue “the turbid billows of a restless world” testify to his determination and forcefulness. Probably, these were the characteristics which led his parents to choose him as their protector and provider; these same traits made their request impossible to fulfill.  

Age twenty-one was a turning point for Bingham: he would officially become his parents’ caretaker. He appeared to have no other options. A career seemed unlikely, for Calvin Bingham had not allowed his son’s education to interfere with his farm duties. When his brothers turned twenty-one, they left Vermont to farm in New York, but this was not an alternative for Hiram—he could farm in Bennington, too. Another event that confronted the young man concerned religion. He had not undergone a religious conversion and, as son of one of Bennington’s staunchest Congregationalists, that experience would have been expected of him. Not that he lacked preparation for conversion: throughout his childhood he had received “the evangelical doctrines of the Christian religion, and felt the influence of religious instruction, passing through repeated seasons of serious impressions and divine influence.” But he had not publicly taken the vows of the Lord. When he did, conversion provided him with an excuse to break his commitment to his parents.  

In 1811, a modest revival led by the Reverend Marsh occurred in Bennington. Hiram Bingham was among the dozen or more souls reaped in the name of Jesus Christ. If in this sense he fulfilled his parents’ expectations by formally uniting with the Congregational Church of Christ, they would soon be disappointed by his next decision. His brother Stephan ironically noted that Hiram experienced this “great change in his [religious] feelings” simultaneous to achieving his twenty-first year, and “notwithstanding his parents were depending upon him, yet he [now] felt it to be his duty to prepare for the gospel ministry.” Although this decision to disregard his previous committ-
ment to his parents was due in large measure to Bingham's unrestrained ambition and sense of self-importance, it would be callous to conclude that this was the sole reason for his actions. After all, he was raised in a religion that demanded intense commitment, a commitment which superseded that to earthly attachments. Yet Stephan Bingham's comments indicate that his brother, like others of his generation, viewed the ministry in terms of independence and as a means to maturity.⁹

II

For the next eight years, Bingham absorbed religious doctrines and adopted moral attitudes appropriate to the ministry. This socialization process began when he studied with the Reverend Elisha Yale of Johnstown, New York, received additional impetus at Middlebury College, and was completed when he graduated from Andover Theological School in 1819. This was an extended period of identity formation, one which influenced his later actions. Involved with this process was the wedding of Bingham's ambition to his religious ideals, the testing of those ideals and the best was to implement them. He also learned of the foreign mission cause.

To prepare himself for college, Bingham spent two years studying with the Reverend Yale. His mentor opened a new world, and for the first time Bingham read deeply in the classic religious texts and studied Greek and Latin; Jonathan Edwards and Cotton Mather were among those whose works they studied. Yet more than anything they read, it was Yale himself who provided Bingham with a model of behavior. Yale, Bingham averred, "enlarged my views relative to the great work of beneficence... and gave impetus and direction to the little energy I possessed." He acknowledged, too, that his teacher had a strong bearing on the development of his "condition and character," comparing it to Mather's Bonifacius. So powerful was the Reverend Yale's influence that, thirty years later, Bingham sent his son Hiram, Jr., to study with him in the hope that the son would repeat this experience.¹⁰

The Reverend Yale provided an important and constant source of conviction, which eased Bingham's transition into the ministry. This was not the only form of encouragement the young man received: the ministry was perhaps the only profession at this time to provide scholarships to indigent students, and such a scholarship enabled him to attend Middlebury College from 1813–1816.¹¹

As an undergraduate, Bingham continued to receive religious instruction, both scholarly and spiritual. One can infer from his surviving essays that the latter was more important: he began to select and promulgate certain personality traits appropriate to Christian Adulthood. In these essays, he rebuked the blasphemous, those who used alcohol excessively and who were guilty of "profane swearing, perjury, sabbath breaking, gaming, contention, slander, [and] murder." By contrast, the true Christian sought "the society of the virtuous" and longed "to prepare himself to be both useful and good." Such men reined in ambition, prejudice, and pride of intellect and curbed the urge
to dance. Regulation, self-control, and probity were the hallmarks of converted and committed youth of the early 1800s. Clearly, Bingham was no exception, even carrying his analysis of a Christian’s characteristics to the contents of dreams: we must learn, he wrote, “the importance of regulating our thoughts when awake so that they might be properly employed when we sleep.”

He was also susceptible to the evangelical’s fervor to place his ideals in action, a tendency reinforced by the periodic revivals that swept Middlebury while he was a student there. These religious upheavals unsettled Bingham’s complacency as they questioned his religious fervor. The effect of this period of uncertainty was to solidify his beliefs, harden his resolve, and buoy his uncompromising nature; all of these added yet another degree of conviction to his commitment to the ministry and moral action. Thus, after one bout of anxiety, he joined the Philadelphian Society whose members met for disputations and theological conversations; this particular group was one of the most committed of the early American collegiate religious societies, according to historian Clarence Shedd. It was under the aegis of this society that Bingham organized religious conferences for his classmates so they might learn from their doubts; in 1815, he helped direct Middlebury’s Concert of Prayer, an intercollegiate expression of concern for foreign and domestic heathen. He carried his commitment off-campus as well, where his organizational abilities and reform zeal affected local schoolchildren: in 1816, Bingham and classmate David Root convinced the local elders to establish New England’s first Sunday School. These were the first instances, but certainly not the last, of Bingham’s determination to mold others to conform to his standard.

With each success there was always the fear that individual aggrandizement would supersede commitment to the cause of religious reform. Bingham was cognizant of the problem, and his resolution of it had important remifications for his work in the Sandwich Islands. In an essay written in 1814, for instance, he outlined the role of the “Peacemaker,” a man who spurned the applause of mankind and instead worked to promote man’s “highest felicity”; his ear was “deaf to calumny” and he trained “the tender mind . . . to virtue, furnished [it] with correct principles for action, and filled [it] with happiness.” The Peacemaker, like Jesus Christ, brought “peace, harmony and love” to the domestic circle as well as to the nation. If there was dissension, a tougher stance was adopted: the Peacemaker became a “voluntary ambassador . . . to rebellious subjects . . . [and] with all his powers endeavors to persuade the rebels to lay down their arms, return their allegiance, and be reconciled with their sovereign.” This was an image of action with which Bingham was comfortable. Here, his ambition was channelled properly: in the Lord’s work, his ideals could not be tarnished by personal pride and material gain. Too, obstreperousness might often be required to overwhelm God’s enemies—in Bingham’s words, he was called upon to “noisily” proclaim His beneficences to mankind—and he felt that his zeal would not be construed as egotism but as commendable enthusiasm in His service. Thus the demands of Bingham’s forceful and uncompromising personality dovetailed neatly with the requirements of his vocation; the latter provided focus for the former. And it was in
this context (ironically, one that Bingham labeled “peacemaker”) that he later viewed and justified the disputatious nature of his work in Hawaii.\textsuperscript{14}

Bingham’s education at Middlebury convinced him of the correctness and general acceptance of his views. He was not certain, however, how ultimately to express his beliefs. Memorialists and historians alike have too often assumed a direct correlation between Bingham’s generation’s religious conversion and the decision to go abroad as a foreign missionary. This might have been true for a later generation, but the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions had barely been formed when Bingham underwent his conversion. As noted, Bingham, and others of his age, first had to choose the ministry as a career, then absorb its ideals and outlook. The decision of how best to serve mankind came later and, in Bingham’s case, was not devoid of personal or secular concerns. Thus in his final year of college, he could not decide whether his ministry would be “to Christians or pagans.” Although offered a chance to step immediately into foreign mission work upon graduation, he demurred. His older brother, Amos, a minister in Goshen, Connecticut, urged Hiram to teach a group of visiting Sandwich Island youths and then return with them as a missionary. Tempted, Bingham refused on the same grounds that had led him from Bennington to Middlebury—ambition, opportunity, and financial assistance. He had decided he must attend Andover Theological School “to be myself better prepared for usefulness.” Again, as at Middlebury, he received money from a friend, and later from the school itself, to further his professional training. Left unsaid, but certainly a consideration, were the opportunities for advancement such an education provided.\textsuperscript{15}

Andover was founded in 1808 as a Congregational alternative to the Unitarian-influenced Harvard Theological School. Andover was charged with both preserving the doctrinal standards of Congregationalism and with unifying its two major factions, the Edwardsians and the Hopkinsians. One vehicle which furthered this unity and preservation was the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM), created in 1810. Foreign missions was a cause both groups could agree upon, and mission work quickly became paramount among Andover students. Indeed, several students were largely responsible for the organization’s existence. And the Theological School was the main source of missionaries: by 1848, one hundred Andover-educated missionaries were working for the ABCFM.\textsuperscript{16}

In addition to the ABCFM, Andover had strong ties to other American benevolent societies—directors of the American Bible and the American Tract Societies resided in nearby Boston; Andover students filled the ranks of these groups, too. As Lois Banner argues, religious youth were attracted to Andover because of its connections to religious organizations and the career advantages they afforded. Attendance at Andover brought these students to the source of influence of the American Congregational community. Bingham was not the only one to exploit this advantage.\textsuperscript{17}

Andover was the final stage of Bingham’s professional training. His studies were designed so that he would learn the tools of the minister’s trade: intense scriptural study, Greek, Latin, and homiletics were his daily fare. He disliked
the constant studying and found it "trying," but recognized that Andover was offering him yet another advantage—the first step into manhood: his years at the Theological School, he wrote his parents, contrasted favorably with what he described as his "trifling childhood and unstable youth." As such, it is not too surprising that he began to consider the direction and form his career would take. In a diary entry dated November 1816, he listed four possibilities which would have involved affiliation with the three major American benevolent societies—the ABCFM, the Bible and the Tract Societies. His extra-curricular activities mirrored his professional concerns as well as his uncertainty of its scope. He joined Andover's Tract Society, was appointed to the Corban Society (which afforded "relief to indigent students"), pushed for the creation of a Bible Society, and became a member of the Society of Inquiry, a secret society devoted to the development of missionary sentiment among its members. His association with the latter organization had a telling effect: foreign mission work began to take precedence over the other possibilities.\(^\text{18}\)

**III**

A complex set of factors account for his decision to ally with the foreign mission cause. It has been argued that "moral stewardship" formed the missionaries' quest, both foreign and domestic—that it provided an opportunity to "control people through precept and persuasion." According to this view, early 19th Century ideals of benevolence and humanitarianism were in fact "instruments for molding the country to God's—and the steward's—ideas." It was the chance to exercise this kind of power that reportedly attracted Bingham and others to the cause of the "heathen," and one that defined their activities.\(^\text{19}\)

Certainly there is some truth in this analysis: Bingham spoke of himself and his fellow converted students as "the Saints of the Earth," acknowledging the exclusive quality of his work. This approach, however, discounts the missionary's firm belief in service and self-sacrifice, Bingham's sense that because he lived in a land of "milk and honey" it was his "duty to impart these blessings to those less favored—for the opportunity to 'do good' confers the obligation to 'do good.' " In this sense, milk and honey did not mean wholly transporting western civilization to the Pacific Islanders. One of the Sandwich Island Mission's goals was to counter what its members felt to be a nefarious mercantile spirit in American culture. To a degree, the missionaries were social critics, and their lives exemplified that criticism.\(^\text{20}\)

Opportunity and ambition also played a role in Bingham's decision to bring Christ to Hawaii. At the end of his first semester at Andover, he again visited his brother Amos in Goshen, Connecticut. Amos re-introduced the subject of the Sandwich Island Mission: "he adverted to the importance of sending some person to take charge . . . seeming to imply . . . that in case I should be a missionary, I might direct my attention to that object." Never one to miss a cue, Hiram followed his brother's advice. Several years later he wrote that from the time of this visit to Goshen, "I think there has been in my mind
a permanent desire to be employed in that field." The way was cleared when Henry Obookiah, a Sandwich Island youth who had expected to lead the mission, died before it could be organized. Another potential leader, Samuel J. Mills, who several years earlier had been instrumental in forming the ABCFM, also died. Hiram Bingham applied for the post in the spring of 1819, and was accepted shortly thereafter.21

One impediment remained to his departure to the Islands. The directors of the ABCFM had decided that all missionaries must be married, concluding that the resultant Christian homes would be invaluable examples to the Islanders; marriage would also immunize the missionaries from sexual temptation. Protection was not easily obtained, however. When Sarah Shepherd spurned Bingham's offer of marriage, he became despondent: eight years of preparation for his life's work seemed undone. He wrote Jeremiah Evarts, corresponding secretary of the ABCFM, that he had decided "to watch [God's] hand to see what he designs to do for me or whether he means to send me alone."22

Providence worked its wonders. On 19 September 1819, Bingham was ordained in Goshen, Connecticut, site of the ABCFM school for Sandwich Islanders. That morning he met Sybil Moseley who had driven to Goshen with friends from Westfield, Massachusetts to attend the ordination. She had asked Bingham for directions and he offered to drive her there. Along the way it became clear to both of them that they answered each other's prayers. Bingham needed a devoted and pious wife, one who was willing to sail immediately 18,000 miles to the Sandwich Islands. Sybil was nothing if not pious: entries in her diary show her to have been consumed with concern for the condition of her soul. She was also intently interested in foreign missions: just two weeks before she met Bingham she had confided in her diary that her "request for the year, if life be continued, . . . is that, wholly unfit as I am, God would be pleased in His wisdom . . . to open the door for me among the heathen. . . ." It might be that she travelled to Goshen to fulfill this dream, to find a husband with whom she could work "among the heathen." In any event, Hiram Bingham offered her that opportunity, she quickly accepted, and three weeks later, on 11 October 1819, the couple was married in Hartford, Connecticut. They then journeyed to Boston to join the rest of the mission family assembling for the long voyage to the Pacific. This voyage was important to the religious fortunes of New England Congregationalism, but it was also a personal milestone for Hiram Bingham: not yet thirty years old, recently married and newly ordained, he had come of age.23

NOTES


5 Stephan Bingham, untitled article, passim; Jennings, Memorials, p. 291; Hiram Bingham to Samuel Worcester, 16 July 1819, Bingham Family Papers, Yale University Library (Hereafter: B-YUL).

6 Hiram Bingham, A Residence of Twenty-One Years in the Sandwich Islands, (Hartford: H. Huntington, 1849), p. 112, 131, 143.

7 Ibid., p. 217, 388-391.

8 Stephan Bingham, untitled articles, passim; Jennings, Memorials, p. 291; Bingham to Worcester, 16 July 1819, B-YUL.


10 Bingham to Worcester, 16 July 1819, B-YUL.


12 Hiram Bingham, “The Influence of Social Intercourse,” 16 September 1813: Bingham was aware of the selection process involved in achieving Christian adulthood. In this essay he emphasized that “all social intercourse is assimilating: consequently our habits and manners will be formed similar [to those] ... with whom we associate.” It is clear from his subsequent actions with whom Bingham associated and the effect that had on his views is equally clear. See, too, Bingham, “Intemperance,” “The Utility of Dancing,” and the “Art of Dreaming,” reel 2, Bingham Family Papers, University of California-Berkeley (Hereafter: UC-Berkeley).


18 Hiram Bingham to Parents, 27 November 1816, reel 1, Bingham Family Papers, UC-Berkeley; for his various activities at Andover, see Bingham, “Journal of Hiram Bingham at Middlebury, Andover Theological,” B-YUL.


21 Bingham to Worcester, 16 July 1819, B-YUL.
