

The Peculiar Conversion of Nan Inta

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Everyone who becomes a Christian has a unique story. The ultimate cause of salvation is God convicting a person of sin and graciously turning their heart to himself so that they might exercise faith and repentance. However, the secondary reasons that people are initially attracted to the Gospel are much more varied. For some people, a crisis in their life leads them to reach out for help. For others, they are impressed by the love and welcome of the Christian community. And still others have burning questions about the origin and meaning of life. One of the most unique and peculiar accounts that I have encountered is the story of Nān Inta, the first convert in the ministry of Daniel McGilvary. Regarded widely as the Father of the Church in Northern Thailand, McGilvary gives the following account in his autobiography.

“In the fall of 1868 occurred two events which, widely different as they might seem to be, were in reality closely connected, and of much importance in their bearing on the mission. One was a total eclipse of the sun on August 17th, and the other was the conversion of Nān Inta, our first baptized convert. I well remember his tall figure and thoughtful face when he first appeared at our sala, shortly after our arrival in Chiangmai. He had a cough, and had come for medicine. He had heard, too, that we taught a new religion, and wished to enquire about that. Some soothing expectorant sufficiently relieved his cough to encourage him to make another call. On each visit religion was the all-absorbing topic. He had studied Buddhism, and he diligently practised its precepts. As an abbot he had led others to make offerings for the monastery worship, and he had two sons of his own in the monastic order. But Buddhism had never satisfied his deep spiritual nature. What of the thousands of failures and transgressions from the results of which there was no escape? The doctrine of a free and full pardon through the merits of another, was both new and attractive to him, but it controverted the fundamental principle of his religion.

We had some arguments, also, on the science of geography, on the shape of the earth, on the nature of eclipses, and the like. What he heard was as foreign to all his preconceived ideas as was the doctrine of salvation from sin by the death of Christ. Just before the great eclipse was to occur I told him of it, naming the day and the hour when it was to occur. I pointed out that the eclipse could not be caused by a monster which attacked the sun, as he had been taught. If that were the cause, no one could foretell the day when the monster would be moved to make the attack. He at once caught that idea. If the eclipse came off as I said, he would have to admit that his teaching was wrong on a point perfectly capable of being tested by the senses. There would then be a strong presumption that we were right in religion as well as eclipses. He waited with intense interest for the day to come. The sky was clear, and everything was favorable. He watched, with a smoked glass that we had furnished, the reflection of the sun in a bucket of water. He followed the coming of the eclipse, its progress, and its passing off, as anxiously as the wise men of old followed the star of Bethlehem - and, like them, he, too, was led to the Saviour.

Early the next morning he came to see me. His first words were, “Mên tê” (It’s really true). “The teacher’s books teach truth. Ours are wrong.” This confident assurance had evidently been reached after a sleepless night. A complete revolution had taken place in his mind; but it was one that cost him a severe struggle. His only hope had rested on the teachings of Buddha, and it was no light thing to see the foundation of his hope undermined. The eclipse started an ever-widening rift. He began, as never before, to examine the credentials of Christianity. He soon learned to read Siamese in order to gain access to our Scriptures. We read the Gospel of John together. He studied the Shorter Catechism. He had a logical mind, and it was never idle. Whenever we met, if only for a few moments, he always had some question to ask me, or some new doubt to solve. When tempted to doubt, he fell back on the eclipse, saying, “I know my books were wrong there. If the Gospel seems too good to be true in that it offers to pardon and cleanse and adopt guilty sinners, and give them a title to a heavenly inheritance, it is simply because it is divine, and not human.” While the truth dawned gradually on his mind, the full vision seemed to be sudden. His own account was that afterwards, when walking in the fields and pondering the subject, it all became very plain to him. His doubts all vanished. Henceforth for him to live was Christ; and he counted all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Him.” (p.96-98)

With the widespread acceptance of modern science in Thailand, one would be hard pressed to find anyone today who believes that an eclipse is caused by a monster attacking the sun. But at a certain time and place, God used McGilvary’s challenge to that belief to get the wheels turning for Nān Inta so that he might more diligently study the claims of Christianity. The secondary means of people coming to faith in the 21st century will be, in some cases, different than those in past eras but praise be to God who uses changing secondary means to point people back to the unchanging Gospel story that is always powerful and always relevant. “Faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the Word of Christ.” (Romans 10:17)