

From Hebrews, Chapter 13; verse 7.

“Remember your leaders, those who first spoke God’s message to you; and reflecting upon the outcome of their life and work,, follow the example of their faith.”

## THE PITCAIRN COLONY AND A BIBLICAL LEGACY

The story I am about to relate reminds me of an Old Testament tale, yet in other ways is reflective of experiences of early Christian leaders, seeking converts to the Christian faith in many remote cities or villages in Asia Minor. The main theme of my message, however, relates to the founding of a remote colony of Christians in a far-flung location in the South Pacific Ocean. Latitude 25 .4 south, longitude 130.06 west.

On February 6<sup>th</sup> 1808, Captain Mayhew Folger, master of the ship TOPAZ of Boston, wrote in his personal journal: “ Since our last landfall at Tasmania - seeking a warmer latitude, I discovered a remote island. At 1/2 past 1 PM saw land bearing SW by W 1/2 West and proceeded toward the land – the said land being Pitcairn’s Island, discovered in 1767 by Captain Carteret....( Since that date, I determined that the island had been poorly charted upon the British Admiralty charts).” Folger’s narrative continued: “ On approaching the shore, lay off and on until daylight. At 6 am I determined to put off with two boats to explore the land to search for seals. On approaching the shore we saw evidence of smoke from the interior-- at which I was very much surprised it being represented by Captain Carteret in 1767 as destitute of inhabitants. Soon, I discovered a boat paddling toward me with 3 men in her.”

He could only guess about the approaching men. Were these castaways from a shipwreck? They were dressed in native fashion, yet there was something striking about their features. Suddenly, he and his crew were addressed in unmistakable British English.

“What ship is that? Where do you come from?” The questions were given slowly, as if by direction. Folger answered : ”It is the ship TOPAZ of the United States of America. I am Mayhew Folger, her master, an American’.

“You are an American? You come from America? Where is America? Is it in Ireland?” Five years later Captain Folger relayed the following historic conversation with his close friend and fellow shipmaster Amasa Delano. The tale--soon to be recorded --was now alive for mariners of the world to share ---- almost 20 years after the disappearance of the ill-fated HMS BOUNTY from the vast reaches of the South Pacific; a new chapter was about to emerge about the aftermath of this world-famous mutiny.

Captain Folger then proceeded to pose questions to these young men in order to find out their origin or country.

“Who are you,” he queried.

“We are Englishmen.”

“Where were you born?”

“ On that island, which you see before you.”

“ How then, are you Englishmen if you were born on that island which the English do not own and never possessed?”

“ We are Englishmen because our father was an Englishman.”

“Who is your Father?”

With a directness and simplicity they all answered : “Aleck.”

“ Who is Aleck?”

“”Don’t you know Aleck? Well then, do you know Captain Bligh of the Bounty?”

As Folger later told his friend Captain Delano, “Here it was – that place of mystery- the unknown spot where Fletcher Christian had sailed the BOUNTY almost 20 years before. Pitcairn had become their island of life and destiny !

During a two day visit with the only surviving English mutineer, Alexander Smith, Captain Folger learned how Fletcher Christian and other English seamen had been

attacked by Tahitian servants who devised a plot to take the mutineer's wives as concubines or hostages ; they in turn had been openly attacked and killed by the Polynesian wives -- as an act of revenge and retaliation --- thus Smith survived as the only English mutineer. This would be the most unfortunate and tragic event in the history of Pitcairn Island.

These tragic events took place because of the jealousy between native Tahitians and English settlers on the island. A deeper problem began when the land was divided between the families: Unfortunately, the Polynesian men were not given access to property and were treated as slaves by many of the mutineers; particularly Williams and McCoy. An incident of violence culminated on one day in September of 1793, when the four remaining Polynesian men attempted a massacre of the white mutineers. Tragically, Christian, Martin, Mills, Brown and Williams lost their lives. Shortly thereafter, the surviving Tahitian wives turned on the male servants and killed them. This left Alexander Smith as the only surviving male member of the Bounty crew.

Returning to Folger's visit ashore --- the American shipmaster noticed many groves, green with trees and coconut fronds, and also noted that the seas fringing the island were white with surf, making access only to a "lee shore." Breadfruit trees (brought from Tahiti) and neat huts formed an oblong square in the center of the tiny village..

The daughter of John Smith (a.k. Alex Smith) received the American shipmaster at his small house. Folger later wrote: "Smith was a fine looking man close to fifty years of age. During our meeting, he denied being directly involved in the mutiny, but expressed horror at the conduct of Captain Bligh to his crew. In subsequent weeks, he chose to follow the fortunes of Fletcher Christian at this remote, lonely outpost.

Folger noted that Smith- now a patriarch - was so greatly respected that no one acted in opposition to his fatherly wishes. Regarding the Tahitian intermarriages, and their offspring – Folger also noted that cordial relationships prevailed in the small colony. As he reported later, “it appears that occasional quarrels were quickly settled in concert with Alexander Smith.”

An interview with Christian’s son - Friday Fletcher October Christian, was also of great interest to Captain Folger. He described the lad as being 5 feet and ten inches tall, and wearing a straw hat, similar to those worn by sailors. Like his male companions, he wore a mantle resembling a Chilean Pancho, which hung down to the knees and round the waist a girdle was evident similar to the Indians of the Marquesas Islands; all this clothing was from the bark of trees, grown on the island.

What form of civil society could hold this remote colony together after such travail and tragedy? The answer, in great measure, was later attributed to the Bible rescued from the Bounty, prior to the destruction of the ship by Christian and his men.

During his visit to the island, Captain Folger asked one of the Tahitian wives. “Have you been taught any religion?”

The reply was: “yes, a very good religion.”

“In what do you believe?” The reply was “We believe in God the Father Almighty.”

Again the question came “Who taught you this belief?” The answer came without any reservation----

“By Fletcher Christian’s orders – and also by our beloved Aleck. We say a prayer every day at Noon, as follows:

“ I will arise every day and go to my Father and say to him:

‘Father, I have sinned against heaven, and before thee, and am no more worthy of being called thy son or daughter.’”

“Do you continue to do this every day?” “Yes we never neglect it.”

Indeed, the islanders’ practice of Christian piety continued. According to a brief census taken in the 1830’s. by another British ship, the progeny of the mutineers continued to re-populate Pitcairn. From the time of the massacres and under the leadership of Smith and the island women, it was resolved to use the ship’s Bible lessons as a mainstay of their Christian faith, especially as the children of Pitcairn grew to adulthood. In a small school house on the island originally built by Fletcher Christian and John Adams/ Alex Smith, the teachings of the Bible became a mainstay of island learning..

In subsequent visits by passing ships,, when the islanders were asked who they claimed as their king, the inhabitants were quick to say, “Why King George, of course! “And for higher education, many Bounty descendants sought further education in New Zealand. Other islanders joined passing ships as crewmen. One noted islander George Parkin Christian, great grandson of Fletcher Christian served as a ship’s officer on the last American whaleship CHARLES W. MORGAN from 1893 – 1913.

Years later, Captain Mayhew Folger having retired to the village of Massilon, Ohio served as a postmaster. Eventually, he passed the log of the TOPAZ on to his grandson who became a rear admiral in the United States Navy. Upon Admiral Folger’s retirement he left the log to the Nantucket Whaling Museum, as well as a generous bequest for the construction of the Peter Foulger Museum, all part of the Nantucket Historical Association, and close to the present Whaling Museum next door.

One of the maritime artifacts given to Mayhew Folger by Alexander Smith was the BOUNTY'S Chronometer, which was briefly stolen and eventually recovered – a long story – and now serves as a working time piece at the Greenwich Naval Observatory in London.

Certainly, for the descendents of this tiny community in the mid-Pacific, the words of the hymn - “Of Christ there is no east or west” - would have especial meaning, especially at the time of their daily prayers, which continue to this day.

Amen

Renny A. Stackpole

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