

The Burmese are one of the great ethnic groups of Asia. With a population of more than 32 million people, their homeland is the nation of Myanmar (formerly Burma), where they make up about 60 per cent of the population.<sup>1</sup> Hundreds of thousands of Burmese also live in neighbouring countries such as Bangladesh,<sup>2</sup> Thailand, Malaysia and Laos, while tens of thousands more now make their homes in Western nations, especially the United States and the United Kingdom.

The Burmese call themselves Bama, or Bhama. As a national identity they sometimes also refer to themselves as the Myen, from which the new name of Myanmar is derived. The Burmese language is part of the Tibeto-Burman linguistic family, not closely related to other regional giants like Thai, Chinese, Malay or Khmer.

The Burmese are believed to have originated in China and to have made their way into today's Myanmar in the 9th century AD. They quickly established themselves as the major power in the fertile Irrawaddy River Valley, building their greatest capital at Bagan (Pagan) in 1044. The city contained more than 13,000 Buddhist temples before it was sacked by the Mongol hordes in 1287.

The Burmese have zealously followed

Theravada Buddhism since the 11th century, when the King of Burma invited the Buddhist monk Arahan from Ceylon (Sri Lanka) to instruct him and his subjects on the teachings



of Buddha. The Pali script (derived from Sanskrit) was introduced to Myanmar at this time. During the one thousand years since, Buddhism has become intertwined with their ethnic identity to such an extent that it is commonly said, 'To be Burmese is to be Buddhist'.<sup>3</sup> Today, thousands of gold-coloured temple roofs can be seen scattered throughout the country.<sup>4</sup>

Baptist missionary Adoniram Judson, one of the first Protestant foreign missionaries in history, first arrived in Burma in 1813. Facing extraordinary hardships, imprisonment and loneliness, Judson and his family almost single-handedly established the gospel in this seat of Buddhism and translated the Bible into Burmese.<sup>5</sup> Judson was often overwhelmed with the task of bringing the proud Burmese people to Christ, but with eyes of faith he could see the day when the name of Jesus would conquer the teachings of Arahan that flooded the land. Judson boldly said, 'Perhaps we stand on the dividing line of the empires of darkness and light. On shade of Arahan, weep over your falling temples, retire from the scenes of your past greatness. . . . A voice mightier than mine, a still, small voice will before long sweep away every vestige of your dominion. The churches of Jesus will soon supplant these idolatrous monuments and the chantings of the devotees of Buddha will die away before the Christian hymn of praise.'<sup>6</sup> When Judson died, he left behind a church of almost 8,000 members.<sup>7</sup> The Burmese are one of the largest unreached people groups in the world. They live alongside many Christian people groups, yet most Burmese refuse to consider the claims of the gospel from a tribal person, whom they consider inferior to themselves.



### Population:

31,401,000 (2000)  
35,309,500 (2010)  
39,705,700 (2020)

**Countries:** Myanmar, Bangladesh, Thailand, China, Malaysia, USA, United Kingdom, India, Cambodia, Sri Lanka, Germany, Laos and many other nations

**Buddhism:** Theravada  
**Christians:** 40,000

## Overview of the Burmese

**Other Names:** Bama, Bhama, Myen, Myan, Bamachaka, Burman, Man, Bamas, Myanmas

### Population Sources:

30,944,900 in Myanmar (2000, GEM)  
300,000 in Bangladesh (2001, P Johnstone and J Mandryk)  
61,900 in Thailand (2000, GEM)  
23,000 in China (2003, Joshua Project II)  
20,000 in Malaysia (2003, Joshua Project II)  
20,000 in USA (2000, P Hattaway)  
12,000 in United Kingdom (2003, Joshua Project II)<sup>8</sup>

**Language:** Sino-Tibetan, Tibeto-Burman, Lolo-Burmese, Burmish, Southern

**Dialects:** 4 (Merguese, Yaw, Burmese, Palaw)

**Professing Buddhists:** 99%

**Practising Buddhists:** 80%

**Christians:** 0.1%

**Scripture:** Bible 1835; New Testament 1832; Portions 1815

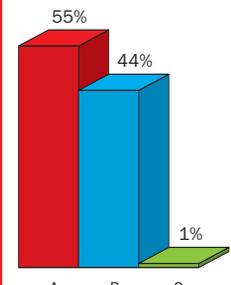
**Jesus film:** available

**Gospel Recordings:** Burmese

**Christian Broadcasting:** available

**ROPAL code:** BMS

## Status of Evangelization



**A** = Have never heard the gospel  
**B** = Have heard the gospel but have not become Christians  
**C** = Are adherents to some form of Christianity