

Bunoa, Pauliasi

(died 1918)

RAYMOND WILKINSON

Raymond Wilkinson, Ed.D. (Andrews University, Berrien Springs, Michigan, USA) was born to missionary parents and grew up in Fiji. He was educated at Longburn College, Massey University New Zealand, and Avondale College Australia. With wife Ruth, his Church service involved teaching and educational administration in the South Pacific Islands. He retired 1994 but since then has enjoyed volunteer service in the islands. Now married to Lola, Raymond has four adult children and eight grandchildren.

Pauliasi Bunoa was an early Fijian convert from the Methodist Church who served the Adventist Church through translating and ministry among his people in the late 1800s and first decades of the 1900s until his death in 1918.

When William Cross and David Cargill, Wesleyan pastors from Tonga, arrived at Lakeba in October 1835,¹ as the first Christian missionaries to Fiji, one of their first converts was the father of a young boy called Bunoa (meaning "Sweaty"), who remembered attending meetings the missionaries held in their home. Persecution forced early Fijian converts to hide in forest caves until the villagers would accept them with their new beliefs.² Approaching manhood, Bunoa chose to be baptized, taking the Bible name of Pauliasi (Paulus³), becoming Pauliasi Bunoa. After attending the Wesleyan training school, he worked, with Seini, his wife, for over 30 years first as a Wesleyan teacher, then an ordained minister.

In 1875 Wesleyan missionary George Brown asked in Fiji for volunteers to go as missionaries to Eastern



Pauliasi Bunoa, the first Seventh-day Adventist ordained minister in the South Sea Islands. He was ordained in 1906.

Pauliasi Bunoa, c. 1906

Photo courtesy of *Fulton's Footprints in Fiji* by Eric B. Hare.

Papua New Guinea. Pauliasi and Seini volunteered, and they worked on New Britain and New Ireland. It was a dangerous mission. Several of the group were killed and cannibalized, and many died of disease. All of Pauliasi's children died of malaria, and Seini also died in 1883.⁴ In 1884 the Wesleyan Church returned Pauliasi to Fiji, where he served the Wesleyan Church as senior pastor of the Suva district. He remarried, to a widow named Mereseini, who already had a daughter.⁵ They made their home in Suavou ('New Suva'), Mereseini's village, and later had two daughters.

In September 1898 John Fulton and Calvin Parker, early Adventist missionaries to Fiji, visited Suavou, across the harbor from Suva township, and met Pauliasi Bunoa, then the Wesleyan district minister, who asked Fulton for Fijian tracts on the second coming of Christ and the Sabbath. Fulton said he was trying to translate some tracts, but his Fijian was not yet good enough. Immediately Pauliasi offered to help with the translating. Fulton suggested Pauliasi help him translate a tract about the Sabbath.⁶ Pauliasi kept asking questions, and Fulton kept writing further Bible answers, which Pauliasi translated. The tract became a 32-page booklet they named *Siga ni Vakacegu* (Day of rest). Fulton had it printed by Pacific Press in Oakland, California, and quickly shipped to Fiji.⁷ It was sold as a way to spread the truth of the Bible Sabbath.

By studying Scripture and translating with Fulton, Pauliasi became convinced God's Sabbath was still the seventh day and decided to keep it holy and resign from the Wesleyan church. The next Sabbath morning, as Pauliasi and his family left Suavou to join the Fultons and Parkers and the small group of Sabbath keepers, the Suavou villagers lined the beach and threatened that if they chose to join the new church, they would not be allowed to return to the village. That morning a storm came, and the family, trudging up the hill in Suva to join the Sabbath keepers, became soaked and muddy. But they kept going and were welcomed by the group. When they returned to Suavou that evening, a meeting was held, but the chief of the village would not allow the people to drive them out,⁸ and before long that village chief, his wife, and several other residents of Suavou were keeping the Sabbath and preparing for baptism.

The leader of the Wesleyan Church in Fiji said he would easily convince Pauliasi to give up the seventh-day Sabbath and preached a special service at Suavou emphasizing the great progress and size of their church and reasons and advantages of keeping the first day holy. After the service, he assured Pauliasi he would welcome him back into the Wesleyan Church. Pauliasi said he would gladly return if he could be shown from the Bible that God changed the Sabbath, but the leader's sermon had used only men's words. Pauliasi ended their discussion by saying that God was the judge of all men. If on the judgment day he was the one found to be wrong in keeping the seventh-day Sabbath, he would blame God Himself, who wrote the fourth commandment with His own finger, and also the patriarchs and prophets of the Old Testament who had taught people to keep the seventh-day Sabbath and kept it themselves. He would blame the Lord Jesus Christ who said He had not come to destroy the law, and also Paul, who said the law was holy, just, and good and who preached on the Sabbath in the synagogue and by the riverbank. Then he asked the church leader, if in the judgment he was the one found to be wrong, who would he blame? The church leader gave no answer but walked away sadly.

Pauliasi soon made up his mind to join the Seventh-day Adventist Church, and before long, he and members of his family were baptized.⁹

John Fulton continued to study with Pauliasi, suggesting ideas about presenting truth. At that time Pauliasi approached pastors Fulton and Parker, urging them to get a training school started. He told them from his own experience how helpful his years at the Wesleyan training center had been. From that time, Fulton began to urge the establishment of a training center for Fiji.¹⁰ He started training another young man, Alipati (Albert—the first Fijian to keep the Sabbath under John Cole's preaching), with Pauliasi. Both became effective preachers of truth.

Pauliasi actively preached while still helping with translating abridged versions of *Book of Bible Readings* (*Balebale ni Parofisai*) and *The Great Controversy* (*Tukutuku ni Veigauna*). When the translation work was nearing completion, John Fulton was appointed to go to Avondale College in Australia in 1903 to be the college Bible teacher. While at Avondale, he arranged the printing of *Balebale ni Parofisai* and completed the translation of *Tukutuku ni Veigauna*. Before the academic year was finished, *Tukutuku ni Veigauna* was printed and packed, ready to be shipped to Fiji.¹¹

At Avondale John Fulton also followed up on the idea of starting a training school that Pauliasi had strongly advocated. He met Septimus Carr, a student who expressed an interest in serving God in Fiji, training young people as workers for God. In 1905, Carr became principal of Fiji's new Buresala Training School.¹²

In the Australasian Union Conference meetings of 1901, Pauliasi Bunoa was issued a ministerial license, recognizing the work God was doing through him.¹³ Also in 1901, Pauliasi traveled to his home area, the Lau group, preaching at Lakeba, the island where Christianity was first brought to Fiji, and also on the little island of Cikobia-i-Lau, his family's home island. Soon all those living on Cikobia (about 30) were worshipping on the Sabbath, and Pauliasi wrote to Fulton that he had 50 people in the Lau group who were Sabbath keepers.¹⁴

Pauliasi continued spreading truth in new areas. In December 1903 he wrote to Fulton from Namrai, a village on the east coast of Fiji's main island, reporting some of the converts had started to pay tithe, put away tobacco and yaqona (native kava drink), and were requesting from several villages for services to be conducted every Sabbath—more than he could manage on his own. He also told of the conversion of a local chief, and that while in Levuka he had met two of his former colleagues who were still ministers in the Wesleyan Church and had read to them from *Balebale ni Parofisai*. Both had promised to obey the truth, and as they worked on a distant island, Pauliasi hoped they would be a light shining in another part of Fiji.¹⁵

Pauliasi was a man of many skills. He was an able captain of the mission yacht the *Cina* (Lamp and could sail confidently to most places. Once, however, before a trip to a more remote area, he recommended they hire an experienced pilot. As they were approaching an island at night, they could hear the breakers on the reef. The hired captain knew there was a narrow passage through the reef to a safe lagoon, but he would not approach the reef at night and went below to sleep. Pauliasi called for silence and listened carefully as they sailed along

the reef. His sensitive ears heard where the waves were not breaking on the reef, and he sailed the boat through the passage safely.¹⁶ In 1907 Pauliasi also demonstrated his building skills as he worked with two Tongans to help build a new Tongan-style building at Buresala to serve as both their classroom and church.¹⁷ Because many Tongans lived in his home area in Lau, he was quite familiar with their style of building.

In 1906 Pauliasi attended the meetings of the Australasian Union Conference, convened at Avondale College in Australia, September 13 to 23. As part of the opening service of the conference, O. A. Olsen, the union president, invited testimonies to be given, and Pauliasi (with J. E. Fulton translating) spoke of God's wonderful leading in his life. During the Sabbath School time, Pauliasi (translated by Mrs. Parker) gave a talk in the Junior division, where the children listened with much interest. On Tuesday Pauliasi, with Emori, a Fijian student, sang an item in Fijian.

On September 22, the second Sabbath of the conference, Pauliasi spoke to children in the Primary Sabbath School. That afternoon the union president, O. A. Olsen, led in the service in which Pauliasi Bunoa was ordained to the gospel ministry of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. In the service, C. H. Parker spoke of the work God was doing through Pauliasi, who also gave a testimony thanking God for being able to meet with others of God's people and for the privilege of taking the truth to the people of Fiji. Elder Olsen asked for a show of hands of those who felt God had called Pauliasi as His messenger. All responded positively. The president then had Pauliasi kneel with ministers kneeling around him, while three prayers of dedication were offered. When the Committee on Credentials and Licenses gave its report, Pauliasi was listed with those granted credentials.¹⁸

Pauliasi was impressed by the atmosphere and spirit of the conference. He wrote an article entitled "Our Conference at Cooranbong" for the *Union Conference Record*, commenting how smoothly the business of the church was conducted. It was clear, he said, that the Holy Spirit was present and hearts were united. He referred to the gathering as a "clean conference" that had ended appropriately with a praise service.¹⁹

Returning to Fiji, Pauliasi continued to evangelize new areas successfully. The interest he had created in Australia also resulted in several groups raising money to support his work. In 1907, at the South Australian Camp Meeting, over £20 was collected.²⁰ The four young people's societies in the South Australian Conference also chose to support Pauliasi's work, and many children reported on the means by which they had earned their contributions.²¹ In April 1908 the *Union Conference Record* carried an article by the teacher at Kangarilla Church-School telling how its eight pupils had raised 10s. 3½d. for their "Pauliasi Box" by selling produce from their missionary garden and items they produced in school, and by gathering gum from nearby wattle trees.²²

In 1910 Pauliasi, by then at least 80 years old, wrote a letter to J. E. Fulton from Lakeba, where he was still working, saying that he had recently bought a small boat and was able to visit nearby islands. He admitted they had been in bad storms and almost wrecked several times but wrote that he was willing to die there if that was God's will.²³ Understandably, in the middle of that year, the Fijian Annual Council asked Pauliasi to move to Buresala, from where he could visit many churches more safely and also serve as a mentor for the young workers in training. In the same *Union Conference Record*, in a letter addressed to "The Members of the True

Church," Pauliasi mentioned his increasing weakness and asked for prayer on his behalf.²⁴

In 1916 Pauliasi was still working as a minister and evangelist and was considered a man of stature and influence in the church in the region, for in the council of the Central Polynesian Conference (which included Samoa and Tonga as well as Fiji), Pauliasi was listed as a member of the Conference Executive Committee.²⁵ He continued to visit churches, preach, and bring people to the Lord right up to the time of his final sickness. He was one of the victims of the Spanish Influenza epidemic of 1918²⁶ and was buried in the small cemetery at Suvavou where the Fiji Mission headquarters are located.²⁷ His obituary was written by C. H. Parker and published in the *Union Conference Record*.²⁸

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NOTES

1. Mora Dickson, *The Inseparable Grief: Margaret Cargill of Fiji* (London: Epworth Press, 1976), 71.

2. Ibid., 108.

3. See Acts 13:7.

4. "Methodist Church in Fiji and Rotuma," Facebook, October 12, 2017, <https://m.facebook.com/MethodistChurchFiji/posts/1552629324827000>.

5. Milton Hook, Lotu Savasava: Early Adventism in Fiji, no date, accessed March 19, 2019,

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6. J. E. Fulton, "The Work in Fiji," *Union Conference Record*, July 22, 1901, 21.[?]

7. Eric B. Hare, *Fulton's Footprints in Fiji* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1969), 107.

8. C. H. Parker, "Providential Leadings in Fiji," *The Missionary Leader*, October 1929, 7.

9. Hare, *Fulton's Footprints*, 113–114.
10. C. H. Parker, "Our Training Centres in Fiji—Part 2," *The Missionary Leader*, June 1928, 7–8.
11. Hare, *Fulton's Footprints*, 107.
12. Ibid., 173–179.
13. "Fourteenth Meeting, Friday, July 26," *Union Conference Record*, July 31, 1901, 91.
14. Geo. A. Irwin, "The Work in Australasia," *Union Conference Record*, June 1, 1902. 14.
15. P. Bunoa, "Fiji," trans. J. E. Fulton, *ARH*, May 5, 1904, 3.
16. Hare, *Fulton's Footprints*, 134–135.
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18. "Australasian Union Conference Meetings of 1906," Special Number, *Union Conference Record*, October 1, 1906, 4, 12, 52, 54, 55–57, 67–68.
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20. Edwin S. Butz, "Spiritual Interests of the South Australian Camp-Meeting," *Union Conference Record*, April 29, 1907, 5.
21. E. S. Butz, "South Australian Conference," *Union Conference Record*, May 6, 1907, 6.
22. Evelyn Gooding, "Kangarilla Church-School," *Union Conference Record*, April 27, 1908, 6.
23. J. E. Fulton, "A Letter from Pauliasi Bunoa," *Union Conference Record*, January 10, 1910, 4.
24. A. G. Stewart, "The Fijian Annual Council," and P. Bunoa, "A Letter from Our Fijian Minister," trans. J. E. Fulton, *Union Conference Record*, July 4, 1910, 2.
25. C. H. Parker, "Recommendations of the Central Polynesian Conference," *Australasian Record*, November 27, 1916.
26. A. G. Stewart, *Trophies from Cannibal Isles* (Washington D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1956), 90.
27. Hare, *Fulton's Footprints*, 237.
28. C. H. Parker, "Pauliasi Bunoa obituary," *Australasian Record*, January 20, 1919, 7.

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