

THE MAN WITH A PASSION TO GIVE KOREA THE BIBLE

Robert J Thomas, First Protestant Missionary to Korea

“For the word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any twoedged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart..”

(Hebrews 4:12)

This is the moving story of the first Bibles taken to Korea, the "Hermit Kingdom", at a time when North and South Korea were one. They were not in Korean, but Chinese, as there was as yet no Korean Bible. But Chinese was comprehensible to Koreans.

They were taken by a Welshman, Robert Jermain Thomas. Though not well known in Britain, in South Korea he is a household name. It is almost 150 years since he brought the first Bibles to Korea. Now it is probably the most Christianised land on earth.

Robert was raised in a Spiritual atmosphere where the moving of Spirit was a regular experience, and where the Word was given pre-eminence. He was a shining example of the daring lengths that 19th C Bible colporteurs all over the world would go to in their earnest quest to make available the Word of God to all.

Initially sent by the London Missionary Society (LMS) to China, his attention was redirected to Korea. He knew its people needed the gospel, but seeing how westerners had mistreated China, Korea locked its doors to foreigners. Burning with zeal, Robert felt he must do something about the people's ignorance of eternal life. So, offering his services as a colporteur for the National Scottish Bible Society, he used his initiative and ingenuity to take the Bible through the bolted doors of Korea.

Early Days

Robert was born in Rhayader in 1839. His father, Robert Thomas senior, was a protégé of William Williams of Wern, famous minister at Rhosllannerchrugog, Wrexham. Williams, Wern, (along with John Elias and Christmas Evans) was one of the 3 greatest Welsh preachers of his day, with none of the dry academicism of many contemporaries. His style was impassioned and yet clear and well measured. Through him the gospel came to have great impact. Under Williams' ministry Robert Thomas senior learned to preach. He was effectively a spiritual son of Williams, Wern, and much of his passion and purpose was transmitted to him. Some found its way also into Robert Jermain Thomas.

The work in Rhayader flourished. Full-blown revival was experienced in 1841, when more than 100 were added to the small church. These were days of faith, expectation and the realisation of dreams. In such an atmosphere, Robert spent his childhood.

In 1848, Thomas senior moved to Hanover Chapel in Llanover, just south of Abergavenny, at the edge of industrial S Wales. Here he ministered till 1884, 36 years of fruitful ministry.

At 15 Robert preached his first sermon just before going to New College, London for the next 5 years. While still a teenager, he mastered several European languages. He had a stubborn independence of spirit and an outspokenness and boldness in his speaking.

By 1861, Robert was feeling drawn to China. His first request to the LMS was denied. His interest may have been partly motivated by seeing two older fellow students sent there with the LMS.

The LMS finally agreed to send Thomas to Shanghai in 1863, together with his new wife Caroline. On 4 June 1863, just 5 days after the wedding, Robert was ordained, and 10 days later graduated from New College. 5 weeks later, the couple sailed for Shanghai.

The breakneck speed of these events reveals something of the passionate determination and impatience of the young Thomas to hurl himself into the mission field. He was undeterred by the difficulties and opposition he might encounter there.

China

In 1807, Dr Robert Morrison (1782-1834) of the LMS became the first Protestant missionary to China. Assisted by fellow missionary, William Milne (1785-1822), who arrived in 1813, they finished translating the Chinese NT that year, and completed the entire Bible by 1819. (It was this Bible that was taken by Thomas to Korea.) By the time the Thomases arrived in China, Protestant missionary work was well established there, and James Hudson Taylor (1832-1905), perhaps the most famous of all missionaries to China, had already been at work for 12 years.

The Thomases arrived in Shanghai in December 1863, and lived with the Muirheads of the LMS while both started learning Chinese.

In March 1864, while Robert was in Hankow, Caroline had a miscarriage and died four days later. Her last words were, "Jesus is very precious to me."

Thomas was utterly devastated. But he found grace to continue to pursue his dream.

The tragedy was the catalyst to move on from Shanghai. Relations were already strained between the passionate and mercurial Thomas and the more staid Muirhead. Their differences in personality were reflected in a fundamental difference in vision. Muirhead wanted Thomas to set up an Anglo-Chinese school and serve the Chinese without mentioning his faith. Thomas, however, wished to seek ways to directly express his faith to the Chinese he met every day.

Thomas sought permission from the LMS to help set up a new station in Wuchang. But, by December 1864 relations had deteriorated to the point where he resigned from the LMS. It was typical of his totally committed 'all or nothing' approach.

He took a position as a customs officer in Chefoo, a port further north, where a theological college acquaintance of his had a medical practice independent of the LMS. It was also closer to Peking where missionaries who travelled out with Thomas were based. In particular Alexander Williamson, of the National Scottish Bible Society.

In 1865 Thomas visited Williamson. While there, he met 2 Korean Catholic traders who told him there were 50,000 Catholics in the country who met illegally in homes and were cared for by just 11 French priests. He also learned of the need for Bibles. The traders had crosses and rosaries, but no Bibles.

Catholics had been in Korea since 1794. There were 10,000 by 1801 when the government began a series of persecutions to stamp out western influence. These had continued ever since. In 1863 alone, over 10,000 lost their lives.

From this moment, Thomas set his heart on going there. His goal was bringing the gospel to the Koreans. He offered to go back to Korea with the traders, taking Chinese Scriptures. Thomas asked Williamson if he could represent the National Scottish Bible Society as a colporteur working into Korea, with them paying his travel expenses. He would take Chinese Bibles, as there were no Korean ones. Koreans could read and understand these.

First Korean Mission, 1865

Thomas resigned as customs officer at Chefoo, and on 4 September 1865 embarked on his first trip to Korea. He was the second known Protestant missionary to Korea. (Karl Gutzlaff, the German Protestant, had visited in 1832 and also distributed Chinese Bibles).

He learned enough of the Korean language from Williamson's two Korean Catholic contacts to be able to communicate some of the truth of the gospel to the local people on the coast. Distributing tracts and NTs in Chinese, Thomas was heavily disguised in Korean clothing as those he sold Bibles to risked being decapitated if discovered. This he did for some 3 months or so. He persuaded many to accept literature, "(Koreans) were very hostile to foreigners but by a little chat in their own language I could persuade them to accept a book or two."

On his return, a junk on which he was travelling was smashed to pieces in a severe gale, though all survived. Finally reaching Manchuria, Thomas continued to share the gospel and give away literature, before making his way back to Peking.

Second Korean Mission, 1866

Thomas had learned more of the Korean language as he travelled. In Peking he continued to relate well to staff at the Korean Embassy and sought all ways to make opportunities to share the gospel with the people God had by now firmly laid upon his heart.

Early In 1866 there was a serious uprising in Korea and many Catholics were massacred as well as some priests. The French dispatched an admiral as 9 French priests had been executed. Anxious to rescue its 2 remaining citizen priests, the government planned a naval expedition. Thomas was accepted as interpreter, which says much for how proficient he had become in a very short time.

But while waiting weeks for the expedition to return from dealing with an insurrection in Saigon, Thomas became frustrated and decided to make alternative arrangements to get to Korea sooner. He offered to accompany as an interpreter an armed American merchant-marine schooner, the *General Sherman*, sailing from Chefoo up the Taedong River to Pyongyang.

The *Sherman* seemed to be on a trade mission, seeking to open up the Korean market, but there is some suspicion there might have been an ulterior motive of plunder, of which it is unlikely Thomas would have been aware. His aim was simply to use the vessel to spread the gospel and transport Chinese Bibles – lots of them – to distribute to as many Koreans as possible.

Becoming involved with this mission reflected the impetuous, impatient side of his nature. It would result in his premature death. But the longer-term impact had amazing consequences for the spread of the gospel in Korea in the years that followed.

Oh Mun Whan, a Korean Christian who worked closely with American Presbyterian Samuel Austin Moffett (in Korea 1892-1935), produced 'The Rev Thomas Story,' an account of the trip based on very many Korean eyewitnesses. This account is used to recount exactly what happened.

The ship sailed from Chefoo in August 1866, crossing the Yellow Sea then proceeding up the relatively wide Taedong River.

It anchored at a number of different places along the lower reaches of the river, where Thomas shared the gospel as much as he could and gave away literature, including many Chinese Bibles. Many visited him on the ship and received a Bible. Whan includes several eyewitness accounts. "There were occasions when the ship was in danger of tipping over due to so many Koreans being aboard. At Poh-ri alone, more than 500 Bibles were handed out." This is how dedicated Thomas was to evangelism.

As the ship sailed up the River to Pyongyang, Thomas tossed gospel tracts onto the riverbank.

Meanwhile, Korean officials became increasingly concerned and tried to turn the ship back at each port of call. They actively discouraged people from contact with the vessel. Nonetheless, many came on board as the crew totally disregarded the officials' warnings.

At one point, after extremely heavy rain, they sailed over a reef at a normally shallow part of the river, not realising there would soon not be sufficient water in the river for them to stay afloat. By this time the ship was running low on food, and the crew were becoming anxious to trade with the locals.

When they approached Pyongyang, Korean officials ordered the boat to leave at once as they did not want foreign trade. The Governor sent the chief of police with a message, but the crew took him hostage and took his official seal from him, hoping to persuade the Koreans to give them food and safe passage in return for his release. The captain said the chief would only be released after seeing the Governor. The boat continued up river while angry crowds lined the shore demanding the chief's release.

Rumours had grown to such an extent it was impossible to berth. The people were convinced the foreigners had come for their children to make soup from their eyeballs. There was nothing to do but to turn round and head down river.

But, as the river level gradually dropped after the rains, the ship ran aground on the muddy river bottom and was stuck fast, not far from the shore. The Koreans attacked. When they tried to board, the crew, who were armed with guns and cannons, opened fire, holding them off for two days.

The Koreans then sent fire ships roped together down river and manoeuvred them so they surrounded the *General Sherman*, and succeeded in setting her on fire.

The surviving crew leapt into the river to escape the inferno. They came ashore with their swords, but were executed, beaten to death and decapitated by the angry mob.

Meanwhile, Thomas was frantically throwing Bibles to those who lined the shore whilst shouting, "Jesus, Jesus." After some time, with his clothes on fire, Thomas jumped overboard clutching his few remaining Bibles and made his way to the bank.

There are variations in the reports of what happened to Thomas next. Here are some:

- According to the witness of 20-year old Whang Myong Dae, Thomas waded ashore carrying a Chinese Bible and crying, "*Jesus, Jesus!*" in Korean to the attackers and offering them the Bible. Whang was so impressed he later embraced Jesus becoming a founder member of a church near Pyongyang.
- Another account, from a minister, refers to a distant relative who was a soldier present during the *General Sherman* incident. This soldier said that one of those being put to death by sword had a red book and begged the soldiers to take it. It was concluded that the man was undoubtedly none other than Thomas.
- Another account says the name of the soldier executioner before whom Thomas knelt, begging him to accept his last remaining Bible, was Chun-Gwon Park. (As we shall see, this account was corroborated 41 years later.) It was said the executioner hesitated, but had to do his duty, later telling his family he had killed a good man.
- Stella Price in chapter 16 of *Chosen for Choson* (2007), says that 26 years after the event, the Korean king recorded that

"The governor [Park] ordered his troops to attack the foreigners ... the Koreans ... sent several burning boats floating down to the schooner ... the crew and passengers began jumping into the water or reaching land by small boats. But there was no hope; soldiers on the shore were ready to pierce them with their spears or behead them with their swords. One eyewitness account says that one man acted a little strangely, offering books to the soldiers. With a Bible in his hand he knelt down before the soldier who was waiting for him and literally begged him to accept the Bible, and in the following moments shut his eyes to pray. The soldier, hesitated, then executed him."

And so Thomas died at only 27 years of age, Korea's first Protestant martyr. Of him it may truly be said that he was "*faithful unto death*" and "**beheaded** for the witness of Jesus, and **for the word of God**" (Rev 2.9 & 20.4).

The Aftermath

Seemingly Robert's efforts had been in vain. But not so. Firstly, his executioner and family members were greatly affected.

- He was greatly troubled and full of remorse. Thomas' martyrdom made a deep impression on his mind. He noticed he had not emerged from the water with a cutlass but brandishing books. Convinced by Robert's beaming face that he had killed a good man, he had taken one of the sodden Bibles home with him.
- Being illiterate, he decided to paper the outside of his house with the pages. People came from far and near to read its words. When he returned from the fields, he found a group of scholars earnestly reading his walls. One became a Christian by reading a Gospel portion plastered on the wall.
- 25 years later, his son helped a Scottish missionary, John Ross, make the first translation of the Korean NT in Shenyang, Manchuria.
- A church grew in the area. A nephew of Robert's killer became a pastor.

Tertullian wrote that 'the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church'. Just how true that is has been demonstrated down through history many times over. What happened over the years that followed the death of Robert Jermain Thomas was yet another example.

And it was not only the executioner who was affected. Others also who witnessed Thomas' last moments, or received his Bibles, were likewise touched.

- Some who had witnessed the end of Thomas's life and the dignity with which he met his end, were greatly impacted. Some of the stories gathered by Oh Mun Whan speak of how some of these later became Christians and were involved in the process of establishing churches in Korea.

In the immediate aftermath of the incident, the Korean authorities did what they could to reclaim and burn the Bibles Thomas had distributed along the Taedong River. An edict was issued threatening arrest for any found in possession of the Bible.

- Many were thrown away.
- Some gathered them up and the pages were used as wallpaper.
- Others held on to them, and read them. Stella Price writes: 'Despite immediate threat to themselves, some had cherished the gift of the Scriptures. One was an 11-year-old-boy, Choe Ch'i-rang. He had gone with his uncle to the Taedong River Bank to see the ship and the foreigners, and brought back three copies of the Scriptures. Rev Moffett later met him in 1891 and using the Shanghai printed NT presented to him by Thomas, instructed him further in the knowledge of Christ.'
- Perhaps the most amazing story involves a government official named Pak Yong-Sik. He took home some of the Bibles thrown onto the riverbank and used them to wallpaper rooms in his house. So, people were able to read the gospel there for themselves. When American Presbyterian missionary Samuel Moffett went to Korea in the early 1890s, he came across those influenced by the fateful last mission of Robert Thomas. One was Choe Chi'rang who had recently bought the former home of Pak Yong-Sik. The walls were still papered with pages from one of Thomas' Bibles. Moffat was able to read them for himself and to share the gospel with Choe and some of his friends. As a result a small church was established in that very home, the first church in that part of Pyongyang.

Truly, "... my word ... that goeth forth out of my mouth: ... shall not return unto me void, but it shall accomplish that which I please, and it shall prosper in the thing whereto I sent it." (Isa 55.11)

The 1907 Pyongyang Revival & the Welsh Revival

In 1903, revival broke out in Wonsan. Many thousands were born again. But the biggest revival in Korea's history came a few years later.

In 1904 the Welsh revival broke out in Loughor, sweeping through the Valleys and sparking off revival in parts of India and other places.

In September 1906, Howard Agnew Johnston (1860-1936), an American, visited Seoul bringing news of the revival in the Khasia Hills in India and the 1904 revival in Wales which had provoked it. Hearing his stories, visiting church leaders from Pyongyang were strongly moved to pray and seek God for a similar move in their own land. They met and prayed throughout the winter. The result was an outpouring of the Spirit in Changdaehyun church in Pyongyang.

The outpouring started in an annual 10-day New Year Bible study on 6 January 1907 with over 1000 present, some from many miles away. The gathering was moved to fresh repentance in tears following a sermon from William Blair (1876-1970) on 1 Corinthians 12.27 urging them to get right with one another.

A church elder came to the front and publicly confessed he had been misusing money entrusted into his care. That triggered an outpouring of public repentance, and many

queued until the early hours to confess sin and find fresh forgiveness and grace from God. The revival had begun.

A policeman confessed he had come to spy on the meeting. A woman confessed adultery; her husband publicly forgave her.

Later, an old man named Chun-Gwon Park went to the front and publicly confessed he had been the one who had killed Thomas 41 years before. The impact of this testimony was profound. This old man's son eventually became an elder of the Presbyterian Church in Korea.

On the Tuesday evening, during a time in which leaders had been getting right with one another, Elder Kim confessed his hatred of William Blair, and asked his forgiveness. Blair began to pray, but got no further than saying 'Father, Father ...' He later wrote: 'It seemed as if the roof was lifted from the building and the Spirit of God came down from heaven in a mighty avalanche of power upon us.' Blair fell to the floor beside Kim and wept and prayed as never before. Others fell to the ground before the Lord while hundreds stood with arms outstretched to heaven crying out to God together. Blair wrote: 'the cry went over the city until the heathen were in consternation'. From that moment Korea would never be the same.

This pattern of corporate crying out to God became a feature of Korean church life from then on.

The revival spread quickly to other cities. Many thousands were saved and added to the churches in the greatest move of the Spirit in the history of the church there. Within two months 2,000 had been converted and by the middle of the year 30,000 had become Christians.

The Link between Wales and Korea

It wasn't until 20 years after the death of Robert Thomas, in 1886, that the first Korean Protestant convert was baptised, and a year later there were still only 7 Korean converts. But after that the church grew very rapidly. Today, 40% of South Koreans profess to be Christians and the nation has some of the largest congregations in the world. (The North, however, remains largely closed to the gospel.)

Today Koreans frequently visit Wales to see Hanover Chapel, and some Rhayader also, because they regard Wales as their spiritual mother, the place where Robert Thomas was born and nurtured to give his life so that their ancestors could receive the good news of the gospel of Christ.

John L Birkin

March 2014

Sources

<http://daibach-welldigger.blogspot.co.uk/2011/08/man-who-brought-gospel-to-korea.html>

Revival Fire: 150 Years of Revival - Mathew Backholer (2010)

Flashpoints of Revival - Geoff Waugh (1998)

Chosen for Choson - Stella Price (2007) (The main source)