

Japanese and the Bible (Part 2)

Rev. Kazuo Ozaki

In 1853, 4 battleships aka “black ships” lead by U.S. Admiral Perry arrive at a shore of Kurihama, Kanagawa. This poem expresses the worries of the people of the time:

“Peaceful sleep;
was disturbed by Jokisen,
just four cups;
brought sleepless nights”

(This is play on words; “jokisen” has 2 meanings – steamship and the name of high quality tea. This satirical poem means “just 4 cups of tea made no sleep” and “because of the 4 ships the country is in panic and cause sleepless nights”)

Japan was in the restoration period at the end of the Edo Era. Today we’d like to look at how the Words of the Bible were sowed in such a confused soil, and how the truth of the Bible affected the hearts of the samurais who took a big part in this historical turning point.

1 year after the black ships’ arrival, Japan begins to open up the country and signs the treaty of peace and amity with U.S. and Britain. Main ports of Japan opened up to the world and a flood of western culture enters rapidly into Japan.

In 1859, 6 years after the arrival of the black ships, the Verbecks, husband and wife missionary from Holland, depart port of New York by way of the Atlantic Ocean via Cape of Good Hope and the Indian Ocean, stopping at Shanghai, China, arrive at the port of Nagasaki late at night on November 7, 1860.

On the other side, in 1860, ship Kanrinmaru sets sail for U.S. with delegates including Kaishu Katsu . Japan did not have shipbuilding techniques so the ship was a small steamship less than 700 tons which Japan bought from Holland for \$100,000. It was named “Yapan go” which means "Japan" in Dutch. On the ship was young Yukichi Fukuzawa, who later founded Keio University. It is said that Yukichi very eagerly obtained the information of the outside world from John Manjiro, who being shipwrecked before in Shikoku and gone to the U.S., was also on board.

Japan at the time, in March of the same year, the Chief Minister Ii was assassinated by feudal retainers of the Mito Clan at the Sakuradamon Gate of the Edo Castle. In this chaotic time, Christianity was still prohibited and it was 12 years later in 1873, after the era changed to Meiji, that it was finally released. Until then the signs to ban Christians were put up where everyone can see, such as under the Nihonbashi bridge or the gate of Sengakuji Temple where the 47 Ronins’ graves were. One of my listeners in Brazil, Takegoro Oshiyama from Hamamatsu, whose ancestor was an officer of the Shogunate, told me they had the sign in the storage of his home. His father became a Christian through a missionary. When Takegoro was leaving for Brazil, his father told him “Keep your faith” and that faith gave him strength to overcome hardships in the new land.

Since evangelism in Japan was prohibited, what were the missionaries in Japan doing during that period? From the reference, they were officially English teachers, and Dr. Hepburn who was in Yokohama contributed to re-building Japan in this restoration period as a doctor. Of course they did not forget their original purpose.

Missionary Verbeck, after spending 3 years in Nagasaki Magistrate’s Office as an English teacher, taught the New Testament of the Bible, International Law, science and math along with English in a school which Shigenobu Okuma founded with his comrades in the Saga Clan. In the Saga Clan, the feudal lord Nabeshima was a supporter of Western culture and was open to the world and wanted to read the Bible. It is said that the missionary offered him a Bible written in Chinese characters because there was no Japanese translation at that time.

At this school retainers from not only Saga but neighboring clans such as Satsuma, Choshu, Tosa, and Higo were gathered. There might have been young Takamori Saigo or Ryoma Sakamoto.

In 2008 there was an event called “Keiten Aijin (Revere Heaven, Love People) and the Bible” in Kagoshima. “Revere Heaven, Love People” is well known as Takamori Saigo’s favorite motto. In the event there were testimonies that Saigo himself read the Bible and taught it to people. There was a display of the Bible published in Hong Kong which he read fondly. Here I’m sharing one of the things Takamori Saigo wrote about what he read and learned from the Bible;

“Don’t deal with people, deal with heaven. Deal with heaven, do your best and don’t blame others, realize your own lack of faithfulness. That is, Heaven sees and knows everything. Turn to heaven and know how small and not worth your own self. Don’t deal with people and be occupied blaming others. Also heaven loves the others and myself the same way, so you must love others with the love for your own.” Saigo, who was trusted and respected as Satsuma samurai, his guts had a root in the truth of the Bible.

As such, the Bible which samurais of the restoration period had was from Shanghai, China. There was no Japanese translation yet. When Japan opened up the country, U.S. and Britain concluded a treaty of peace and amity which let the British Imperial Navy Eastern Fleet arrive at Nagasaki. The city of Nagasaki is in turmoil. The chief retainer Wakasanokami Murata from Saga Clan was sent to the Nagasaki Magistrate. One day one of his men finds a small package drifting on the waves of Nagasaki Bay. Inside there was a book in foreign language and the Dutch translator told him it was an English Bible. Then Wakasanokami searched for Missionary Verbeck who was teaching English, by sending his men and pleading to, “Please teach me what’s written in this English Bible”.

We can imagine how Missionary Verbeck was delighted to hear this. “It was worth waiting. God opened up the path!” Holding his excitement, he meets Wakasanokami and reads the Bible to him. Though they did not have any knowledge of English, the Words of the Bible went down into the hearts of these young men like burnt soil absorbs water.

This is how he expressed his emotion when he was touched by the Words of the Bible, recorded in the 100th memorial booklet of Saga Church;

“I cannot express how I was impressed when I first read about the character and the work of Jesus Christ. I’ve never seen, heard, or imagined such a person. I was captured by His character and how he lived His life”.

Thus, Wakasanokami gets baptized with his younger brother. The Shogunate which prohibited Christianity for 250 years cannot easily overlook the chief retainer of Saga converting to Christianity. The feudal lord Naohiro Nabeshima smoothed it over by making Wakasanokami retire from his position, but it’s said it was because the feudal lord was also positive about foreign culture at heart.

After he was freed and came back to his home, Wakasanokami rents the storage of a farm and held meetings with his men and family and also worked on translation of the Bible. He passes away in 1872, a year before the prohibition of Christianity was released, but just as what he said, “What remains after one’s death is not what he collected but what he scattered”, the first protestant church was born in Saga, and the Saga Church entered 136th year this year. The Scripture “unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit,” was fulfilled.

One of the interpreters of the European/American mission delegates was Jo Nijjima. He also dedicated his life to education based on the Bible. He became Christian in America so he was fluent in English. When he met with the Commissioner of the Minister of Education Fujimaro Tanaka at a hotel in Washington, it’s said he passionately spoke how the truth of the Bible which changed him will affect education.

Jo Nijjima violates a national interdict and escapes overseas in an American ship Berlin at the age of 21. Fortunately the shipmaster takes care of him and he was baptized, then he starts studying at Amherst College. He stayed at professor Seelye’s house. Professor Seelye was the one who had a big influence on Kanzo Uchimura, who later entered the school. Dr. Clark, who is well known for the quote “Boys, be ambitious” and later taught at Sapporo Agricultural School, was also teaching at the college.

Author Ryotaro Shiba mentions Jo Nijjima and Yukichi Fukuzawa as representative educators of the Meiji Era. It is interesting that both were influenced by the Bible.

Right after coming back to Japan, Jo Nijima holds a Bible study meeting in his hometown, Annaka, Gunma. Despite the area where old Japanese tradition and convention remains, the record says there were 30 seekers from that meeting.

His next mission was to found a school in Osaka. But he could not find an appropriate place. In despair, he visits Kyoto where an exposition was held which was rare in Japan at that time. There he meets Advisor of the Kyoto Prefecture Kakuma Yamamoto, which opens up the foundation of Doshisha English School.

Kakuma was originally an Aizu retainer but he was captured at the Battle of Toba-Fushimi and was taken prisoner by the enemy side to the Satsuma Clan residence. Then the petition he wrote to the new government was approved and he was taken as an advisor of the Kyoto Prefecture. However, he was struggling physically; he lost his sight from an eye disease which he had for years and he had trouble walking. Then meeting American missionaries at the international exposition makes a big change in his philosophy of life. The book he read from the missionary was called "The Essence of Christianity". He writes his impact as follows;

"This book solved the question I was struggling with for years. I wanted to serve the country and I studied military science, I also studied law hoping to lay a right road for people. However, I realized the limitation in law. Law can set the barrier but it cannot reform the hearts. If there was no wall people will go back. But I saw a light of the dawn to my blindness. Now I can see the way very clearly in my heart, even though I cannot see with my naked eyes. This is what I had been seeking for a long time in my unconsciousness".

In 1875, Kakuma find a kindred spirit in Jo Nijima, and together they found Christian based school. He gets authorization from Kyoto Prefecture, offers his land with low cost, thus the first Christian college Doshisha was born in Kyoto.

Yae, who was the main character in NHK's Taiga drama "Yae No Sakura", is a younger sister of Kakuma. She studies western gunnery from Shozan Sakuma, and learns gun handling from Kakuma. She taught gunnery to Byakkotai boys in the Battle of Aizu, but they were defeated. In despair, she visit her brother Kakuma in Kyoto. There she meets Jo Nijima and get engaged and get baptized. She gets married the following year but we can see what filled her empty heart after their loss in the battle was the Bible and the deep, gentle love of her Christian husband Jo.

Now let's talk about 10,000 yen bill – Yukichi Fukuzawa. He studied Western science and culture in Nagasaki and it's said that he was ordered by his clan to go to Edo to start Western studies class and that was the origin of Keio Gijuku University. He went to U.S. with Kaishu Katsu in 1860. He was hired by the Shogunate after returning to Japan, then he visits Europe accompanying Europe mission delegates. I have observed the Gutenberg Bible which introduced world's first printing machine in the National Library in Russia. Yukichi must have encountered many Bibles as he visited different places of the world.

However, how he came in touch with Christianity was through missionaries. For missionary Shaw, who came to Keio Gijuku to teach English, he built a Western-style room next to his own house and looked after him. Not only that, he encouraged him to teach his students Bible instead of English. Missionary Shaw writes this situation in his report to his organization;

"Mr. Fukuzawa has done so much in Japanese education. About 300 boys from all over Japan come to the school and they are from good families. In my class there are 14 boys whom I teach Bible as morality. Among those who wants to learn more about Christianity I hold evening class every week. By God's work, I believe I will be baptizing them in the near future."

3 months after this letter was written, on Christmas, 8 Japanese were baptized. 3 of them were Keio Gijuku students and one of them was Yukio Ozaki, who later became known as "God of constitutional politics". Also Clara Whitney, daughter of a teacher Whitney who had friendship with missionary Shaw, married son of Kaishu Katsu and raised a Christian home.

Missionary Shaw suffered rheumatism since young age. He was fascinated by a beautiful nature of Karuizawa, Nagano, where he happened to stop by to rest. Because he introduced that widely to his fellow missionaries, still

many missionary organizations hold summer retreats in Karuizawa today. "Karuizawa Shaw Memorial Chapel" still remains in the grove of trees in Karuizawa.

Yukichi himself was not a Christian, but his children were influenced by their father's Christian based teaching and discipline. The oldest son Ichitaro studied abroad at a college in the U.S. then got baptized. The third daughter and the fourth daughter also became Christian. The fourth daughter Taki served as the president of YWCA for 20 years and 2 elder sisters of Yukichi became Christians as well.

It is said that life is determined by encounters. We cannot predict when and who we will encounter. It is a world of mystery. In Japanese language the word "mystery" is written "God's secret". God who foresees everything from heaven loves each person on earth and arranges "all things work together for good".

My life is but a weaving, between my God and me,
I do not choose the colours, He worketh steadily,
Oft times He weaveth sorrow, and I in foolish pride,
Forget He sees the upper, and I the underside.

Following is a song by a nursery poet Misuzu Kaneko;

In the deep blue sky,
Like the pebbles at the bottom of the sea,
The daytime stars, sinking until night comes,
Are invisible to our eyes,
But though we can't see them, they are there.
Things invisible are still there.

A fallen withered dandelion
Silently hides in the cracks of a roof tile
Its strong roots, waiting until spring comes,
Are invisible to our eyes.
But though we can't see the, they are there.
Things invisible are still there.

Let us read once again the letter Apostle Paul wrote to the church of Corinth;

Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all.
– 2 Cor. 4:16-17

Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain. – 1 Cor. 15:58

Prayer:

Our Father in Heaven, You ordered Your disciples to spread the Gospel to the world 2000 years ago through Jesus. And that Gospel reached a Far East island country, Japan, through missionaries who are also Your disciples. Still, many people in Japan, though they have hearts to believe, are lost without knowing the Heavenly Father. Please lead them to be intimate with the Bible so that they would know the way to "Revere Heaven, love people", to know the truth, and to live a life full of hope and joy. Please help those who are already saved, that they will devote to do Your work as witnesses of the Gospel.

We pray that the church will serve Your purposes here in Tucson, as the light of the world, the salt of the earth. Lord, please deepen the faith of each person in the church and lift us up to the higher ground, higher grace. Amen.