

John Ross, "**The Christian Dawn in Korea**," Missionary Review of the World 4 (April, 1890): 241-248.

Transcribed by Sung-Deuk Oak

In the autumn of 1874, after a journey of seven days eastward from the port of Newchwang, in Manchuria, I arrived at the "Korean Gate." The village of this name was a long, straggling one, forming then the most easterly outpost of Manchuria, towards Korea. Its name was derived from the fact that it was the only place where Korean merchants could exchange the product of their country for other merchandise bought of Chinese. To me the most interesting of much that was novel was the appearance of the Koreans themselves, as they quietly sauntered over the green hillsides, or their long, loose, white robes crowded the streets where they moved slowly along. With the purpose of ascertaining as much about themselves and their country as possible, I permitted them the most perfect freedom in entering my room at the inn. They began to drop in at 8 A.M., and desisted only at 10 P.M. when they retired to rest. Naturally curious to see the "foreigner," and to learn what they could about western countries, their questions were endless. But in return for my abundant information to them, I got none. They insisted that the language they spoke to each other was Chinese—they wrote only Chinese. In response to questions put to numerous groups for several days in succession, my knowledge of their laws, social customs, family life, national institutions, and even the products and physical character of their country, was exactly what I had before. It subsequently transpired that I was taken for a spy sent to investigate as much about the country and people, in order to utilize the information in some way not to their advantage. Disappointed at failing to secure on any terms a man, however poor and ignorant, who would instruct me in their language, I returned to Newchwang; but a keener interest in the people led me to revisit the "Gate" the following year, when I was more fortunate.

The Koreans divide themselves into three classes: The "upper," composed of officials, and the descendants of such; the "middle," consisting of merchants, and others able to hire labor; and the "lower," embracing all who are employed in any form of manual work. And, as the dignity of labor has yet to be learned in that country, the middle and upper classes never apply themselves to any handicraft. One of the merchant class embarked the value of his worldly goods in a boat across the mighty Yaloo to go to the "Korean Gate." A strong southwest wind blew up the river, and the waves rose high. The storm-beaten boat was upset, and the goods precipitated to the bottom. The owner landed safely up the river; but soon found himself a "ruined" man. "He could not dig; to beg he was ashamed." In his sorry plight he came across the servant who had been sent among the Koreans to hire a teacher. One evening he came with the others, and waiting about half a minute after the others had departed, he engaged himself to be my teacher; then hastily urging me to take no further notice of him than of a stranger, he hurried away, and overtook the others before they had entered their inn. He came and went for the next week like any other stranger; but the night before my departure he again staid after his fellow countrymen had departed just long enough to tell me that he would remain with his fellow lodgers till midnight, and when they were sound asleep would start westwards, travel all night, and in the early morning rest at an inn, where I could breakfast just before midday. It appeared afterwards that he had not informed even his own brother of his intention; and he gave me as the reason for his jealous secrecy that if it were known in his native country that he had gone to serve the "foreigner," all his relatives would be thrown into prison, and the principal men among them probably beheaded. The laws against intercourse with foreigners had always been stringent; but after the failure—first of the French, and then of the American Squadron, for lack of water to force their way to the Korean capital, the Regent issued a still more severe law against any communication with Europeans. Hence the difficulty in obtaining information or

service. The accident which upset the merchant's boat was the first of a series of interesting incidents, which have finally resulted in giving the New Testament, translated from the Revised Version, to the Korean people. The dissemination of the Scriptures and of Christian truth in tracts is all the more important to a people like the Koreans, even though their numbers should be only half of the thirty millions they claim, when we know that every woman in that country can, or in a day, may learn to read. The alphabet in which the language is written is phonetic, and so beautifully simple that any one can easily and speedily master it.

Before the Korean New Testament was ready for the printer, it was deemed advisable carefully to prepare a gospel, which, with a simple tract briefly and intelligently setting forth Christian doctrine, might be first circulated among the people. The gospel according to Luke was selected. In frequent translations and revisions, my colleague, Mr. MacIntyre, did excellent work on this gospel. After it was supposed to be sufficiently accurate, and after the printing press was set up, and Chinese printers initiated into its use, a Korean was required who could set the type. A Korean was then a rare sight; it was still more difficult to secure the services of one. But again help came through a providential accident. Korean medicine is held in high repute among the Chinese, and a glib-tongued quack soon makes money. There came one, however, who was the reverse of eloquent, and he could sell "gold" or "silver" pills only enough to barely cover his daily expenses. With the exhaustion of his stock came the end of his resources. He could not pay his inn fare; he was still more unable to travel homewards. He came a beggar to the mission house, and gladly remained to work. Had there been any alternative this man would not have been employed, for a more unpromising individual I have not encountered. His eye was sleepy, his fingers clumsy, his gait slow, his thoughts of the most sluggish. To understand any process, he required four times as much explanation as any ordinary man. He was just able to keep the two printers going, setting four pages of type while they threw off three thousand copies. But though slow he soon proved himself trustworthy, carrying out satisfactorily whatever he had to do. He had, in setting the type, necessarily to scrutinize closely the manuscript before him. He became interested, and in his broken Chinese began to ask of the printers, who were well-trained Christians, the meaning of this term and that statement. By the time the Gospel of Luke was printed, he became an applicant for baptism. Much to my surprise, he proved himself well acquainted with Christian truth, and in due course was baptized.

It appeared that even before Luke was published, the translation was revised abroad in the Korean capital, and caused so much interest that an occasional underling attached to the annual embassy, bearing tribute from the Korean King to the Emperor of China, dropped in to see the work. These visits gradually became more numerous, and among the young men was one the exact antipodes of the compositor. He was nimble-fingered, quick-eyed, and smart in speech, in thought, and action. He was engaged as compositor, and the other man set free to begin a work for which he seemed, on account of his acquired knowledge, better adapted. With a few hundred copies of the printed gospel and as many more large tracts, he was sent to his native valley, about four hundred miles directly east of Moukden. He spent a fortnight in the journey, and in half a year returned, reporting that he had sold the books, which were being read by the people with deep interest, and that some men wished me to go to baptize them. Believing that this last statement was merely intended to please me, and made on the supposition that I would never face the arduous journey implied in going there, I paid no attention to it. The man was sent, however, with a further supply of books to other valleys, and after the lapse of another half year he returned, repeating exactly the same story.

During the period of this book-distribution a revolution had broken out in the Korean capital, in which the Progressionists, who sought to open their country to western nations, worsted the official and literary men, who opposed any change. Many of the latter were killed, more were cast into prison, and some, who were transported into the armies on the frontier, escaped across the Yaloo to Manchurian soil, where their lives were safe. A few of these found their way to the valleys which had been visited by the colporteur. They saw our books, and their

curiosity was excited about the work going on in Moukden. Having nothing to do, they slowly wended their way towards us. Or presenting themselves, they mentioned the books they had seen, stating that many of the men were praying to the "God of Heaven." This statement from men who were ignorant of the meaning of what they were saying, was such strong confirmation of the story of the colporteur that I resolved to investigate the matter on the spot, believing it too serious to be neglected. As soon as my colleague, Mr. Webster, was informed of my resolution, with his characteristic courage and enthusiasm, he volunteered to accompany me. It was then summer. The heavy rains of early autumn would soon fall, after which the considerable portion of the road, which was boggy, would become impassable. Waiting till the keen frosts of our winter solidified bog and made bridges across our rivers, we started in the middle of November. After the first half of the journey was over, we were compelled to leave wheeled vehicles behind, and with a few indispensable articles on pack mules finish the other seven days' journey on our ponies. We were gradually ascending, till one afternoon we halted at an inn about 2,000 feet above the sea. Two feet of snow lay on the ground, a pathway having been trodden down by preceding travelers. About 3 A.M. next morning, in brilliant moonlight, we set out to scale the two passes which lay between us and the Koreans. From the west fort of the one pass to the eastern base of the second was a distance of thirty miles. Once we tried to ride; but soon had to dismount, and made no second attempt, as the path was so steep, narrow and rough. With a halt on the top of the first pass, we had to walk the whole distance, and thoroughly worn out we at last came in sight of a house, which to our -delight proved to be a Chinese inn. Entering the gateway, and throwing our horses' reins to the nearest attendant, we moved into the inn, threw ourselves on the brick bed, resolved to rest there till next day before searching out our Korean friends.

We were resting for but a few minutes when in marched a body of about a dozen Koreans, gentlemanly in appearance, garments, manner and speech. They came in to welcome us. This they did with a smile lighting up their faces, as though they had been welcoming long lost and very dear friends. Being hospitable, it would have been a disgrace to them had we remained in the inn, so, perforce, we had to go to be their guests. We were conducted into the home of the principal farmer, in whose guest-room we found a crowd of men filling the warm, close room.

Of the refugees, on whose story we had undertaken the journey, every man sooner or later became a convert, and was baptized. The oldest of them was the first. He was a hereditary official, and possessed of the Korean highest literary degree. Him we had brought with us to act as our intermediary, as from his degree, his birth and his social status, he was acknowledged superior, and could secure information beyond our reach. He was sent out in the evening to investigate the character of the Korean farmers. Late at night he returned, with a favorable report. Next morning we were therefore prepared to receive the applicants for baptism. About thirty men appeared, and the fact was noticeable that they were all well clad. None of the farm servants, no boy, and no woman was among them. They were all farmers and heads of families. Their women and children were, they said, believers; but they thought the younger people would not be received, and their women, for social reasons, could not present themselves where the men were met. As this was the only opportunity for investigation, the examination through which the men had to go was pretty thorough. Some were baptized, and some postponed for further Christian instruction.

In the afternoon of the same day we rode to the other end of the valley, where we enacted the same scene. Next morning, in a falling shower of snow, we crossed a mountain ridge to the second valley, where we encountered the same experience. On the following day, over a higher and more picturesque range, we entered the third and most extensive valley. Nearly a hundred men, from 16 to 72 years of age, presented themselves for baptism. In the three valleys, 85 men were baptized, and far more postponed. We were here informed that the heavy snowfall might come on at anytime. This fall would prevent us for at least three months from returning to Moukden, and for various reasons it was impossible for us to venture that risk. We resolved,

therefore, at that time to proceed no further, but to return to the same place again. Our resolution was formed with the less reluctance, as the experiences of those baptized, and especially of those postponed, would be useful in spreading the knowledge among the other applicants, both of the amount of Christian instruction demanded and the kind of life required on the part of those who desired to become members of the Christian Church. We were informed—and from what we had seen we were now prepared to believe almost anything—that in each of the 28 valleys which lay between us and the long white mountain 400 miles to the northeast, there was a larger or smaller number of believers waiting to be received into the Church.

Early in the following summer we revisited the valleys; but, though we found guides awaiting us to lead us to other valleys, we concluded it would be both unkind and unchristian on our part to proceed further than in the matter, for a serious persecution had broken out against the converts. The landlords were Chinese, and the Koreans were farmers. As we confined our visits and attention to the Koreans exclusively, the Chinese came to the not unnatural conclusion that a plot was being formed against their interests. To prevent further mischief they hired a “rabble of the baser sort,” chiefly Korean farm servants, and arming them with swords and other weapons, set them upon those who had been prominently connected with the new movement. No man was killed, but many were slashed and wounded. The design was apparently not to kill, but to terrorize; and this was effectually done, for several men had to abandon the houses they had built and the farms they had reclaimed. With the exception of doing a little to undo the erroneous suspicions of the Chinese, we proceeded no further than. But some men were baptized, persecution or no persecution, desired to enter the Church.

It was painful, on account of still more important work in Moukden, to have to refuse the frequently expressed and earnest wish that we should remain among them for at least half a year. Another opportunity for seeing the people has not recurred. But the work, by means of the colporteur, supported by Mr. Atkinson, of London, and another, who has since joined him, under the British and Foreign Bible Society, has not only retained its ground, but has widely extended its influence. So that on the Korean and Chinese sides of the Yaloo river, I am told that “there are thousands who daily read the Scripture, and pray to God.”

THE FIRST KOREAN CONGREGATION.

One of the youngest of the refugees seemed to me to possess greater force of character, and a more fearless disposition than the others, while he was also a fair scholar. As he expressed a wish after baptism to, return to the capital, whence he had fled for his life, to instruct his relatives and acquaintances, he was placed under special training for a time. When he was supposed sufficiently well informed to be able to meet the objections of the gainsayer, and to answer the questions of the inquirer, he was permitted to go to the Korean capital. As his class are all educated in Chinese, read and write only a high-class Chinese style, they contemptuously ignore the “vulgar” tongue, and will neither read nor write in that tongue. Giving this fact its due weight this man was given a few books in Christian literature, and a few portions of Scripture in that Chinese style.

Next year I had a letter from him requesting me to go to the capital, as 13 of his friends desired to be formed into a congregation. It was impossible for me then to spare the long time implied in an overland journey even if a European could obtain permission to enter the scaled nation. Next year another letter urged me to the city, as there were 79 believers. It was still impossible to go.

In due course Korea opened four ports to foreign intercourse by treaty: First with Japan, then with the United States and various European nations. Our American Presbyterian brethren, forward in all mission work, sent to Korea one, and then other missionaries. In connection with the New Testament I went to the capital by sea, which made the journey both possible and easy, arriving on an evening which was to me of peculiar interest. My host, the Rev. Mr. Underwood,

informed me that he was to go his little chapel that night to organize his small company into a Presbyterian Church. Gladly accepting his kind invitation, I accompanied him and his medical colleague, when the darkness had fairly enmantled the city. Crossing the wide main streets, which, like all those eastern city streets, are unlit, we were guided by a Korean, with a small lantern, among narrow lanes till at last we were ushered into a small, open courtyard, whose gate was opened to our knock. A gentle tapping at a paper window secured our entry into a room, where we found a company of fourteen well dressed, intelligent-looking men. One of these was baptized that night, but the principal business was the election by the others of two men to be their elders. Two were unanimously elected, and the next Sabbath ordained.

It turned out that these two men were cousins of the man who had gone from Moukden. They were believers for six years, so that they must have been of the first company. It also transpired that thirteen of the fourteen baptized members forming the church were the converts either of that man or another, who had left Moukden subsequently. But what was most interesting to me was the assurance that there were over 300 men of that class in the city believers, who were for various reasons not then quite prepared, publicly, to join the Church.

The man who was the human instrument in starting this remarkable movement was then away in another province, and frequent letters to his missionary notified him of similar work in that other province. It is needless to adduce other facts of a like nature to show how the grace of God that bringeth salvation has appeared in Korea, and is moving among that people in manner justifying our expectations of a rich and speedy harvest. Nor is it possible here to give our reasons for believing that Korea will be one of the first eastern nations to become a Christian nation.

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