

## History of the Church in Japan - Part 5: 1923-1924 - The Closing of the Early Japan Mission

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Elder Hilton A. Robertson was appointed president of the mission when the Ivies were released in October 1923. The period of his leadership, which ended with the closing of the mission, was short-lived for two principal reasons. The more serious was a problem that arose in Japan as a result of passage of the Oriental or Japanese exclusion laws in the United States. A second contributing factor was the great Tokyo earthquake of September 1, 1923.

First, some comments about the earthquake. The destruction that came in the wake of this terrible disaster was very great. About 91,000 people died—many in the flames that engulfed Tokyo, some under falling debris, and others as a result of riots and disorders. Several missionaries, including the Robertsons, were in Tokyo at the time of the disaster and were fortunate to escape bodily harm or death. Through the entire disaster, Robertson reported, not one member of the Church was injured, nor were any of the missionaries. The mission home lost some tile from the roof and plaster from the walls, but aside from that the place fared very well. (Hilton A. Robertson, General Conference, October 1924)

America's Japanese exclusion law caused the most serious problems. In 1924 Congress enacted a new immigration law, the second Johnson Act (also called Exclusion Act of 1924), containing a section forbidding admittance to the United States of "aliens ineligible for citizenship." Because the Asians of China and Japan were the only aliens not eligible for citizenship, the law was a direct insult to the Japanese nation and was interpreted by the Japanese as such.

The law went into effect on July 1, 1924. That day was observed throughout Japan as a "day of humiliation," and Tokyo blazed with posters which read "Hate Everything American." The situation became very tense for the missionaries after this law was passed. On one occasion, shortly after the 1924 exclusion law went into effect, President Robertson found two posters tacked to his door saying, "Bei-jin Haiseki" or "American go home."

On June 13, 1924, President Hilton A. Robertson received a telegram from Church headquarters in Salt Lake City; it contained 12,000 yen but no message of explanation. Nevertheless, Robertson and his missionaries had a good idea why the money had been sent. For several years rumors had circulated among them concerning the possible closing of the mission. (Japan Mission Journals, 1901-1924, June 13, 1924, LDS Church Archives)

Why an earlier telegram from President Heber J. Grant had been delayed is not known, but on Thursday, June 26, 1924, the following arrived at the mission office; it was dated June 9:

Have decided to withdraw all missionaries from Japan temporarily. Cabling you twelve thousand yen for that purpose. If more needed cable us. Arrange return immediately. Grant. (Grant, Letterbook, February 21, 1924 to July 19, 1924, LDS Church Archives).

The man who had opened the mission in 1901 had made the decision to close it temporarily.

When the telegram arrived on June 26 instructing them to return, the missionaries promptly set about making arrangements for closure of the mission. During the first three weeks of July, elders and sisters arrived at Tokyo from their various locations. They spent most of their last month or so in Japan visiting members, selling and giving away mission-owned goods, shipping books, and engaging in similar activities.

Then, on July 24, 1924, Elders William E. Davis and Milton B. Taylor, along with Elder and Sister F. Wallace Browning (who had visited China since the notice of closing came), boarded the S.S. President Cleveland and sailed for the United States.

All meetings were canceled after June 29 except sacrament meeting, which was held until the last Sunday before departure. Only two to four Japanese Saints attended during that time. The elders passed out three thousand seven hundred tracts during these last days. Finally, on August 2, President and Sister Robertson went to Osaka to encourage the Saints there to "live up to their duties." They boarded the S.S. President Pierce in Kobe, and all the remaining missionaries, Elder and Sister Elwood L. Christiansen and Elders Rulon Esplin, Vinal G. Mauss, Lewis H. Moore, and Ernest B. Woodward, boarded the same ship in Yokohama. They sailed from Japan on August 7, 1924 and the early mission of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints to Japan was closed.

When the missionaries arrived in Salt Lake City on August 22, 1924, President Grant greeted them with, "Thank God you are home because I know what is in store for the people of that land and we are glad you are safely home." President Robertson made a statement many years later that was similar in spirit to that of President Grant's greeting. He said:

I think that the mission was closed for a purpose in 1924 when we returned home. I feel that the Lord knew what was going to transpire [speaking of ultranationalism and World War II] and he called the missionaries home and ordered the mission closed temporarily. Later on we find that the other denominations throughout the world who were proselyting in Japan were forced to close their missions and return to America at great loss and sacrifice. (Hilton A. Robertson, General Conference, April 1947).

Considering the number of problems the mission had faced through the years, the disruptions of the final two years, and the psychological distress suffered by the missionaries, it is easy to understand the decision of the First Presidency and the Council

of the Twelve to close the mission. It was true that the results had been "almost negligible." Nevertheless, the mission did produce some lasting contributions, translation work in particular, and a few converts were brought into the Church who remained faithful through the years until the work was recommenced following World War II.