

History of the Church in Japan - Part 1: 1901 - The Establishment of the Japanese Mission

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President Lorenzo Snow, who had pursued a course of expansion since he became leader of the Church in 1898, announced plans on February 14, 1901, to open a mission in Japan. He chose Elder Heber J. Grant of the Council of the Twelve Apostles to preside over the new mission.

When President Snow announced the new mission, he explained that he had been thinking about such a mission for many years. In 1872, "a party of distinguished officials of the Japanese government [the Iwakura Mission] visited Salt Lake en route to Washington from their own country," reported President Snow in 1901.

During their stopover they called on the Legislature and were given an appropriate welcome. . . . They expressed a great deal of interest in Utah and the manner in which it had been settled by the Mormons. Our talk was altogether very pleasant and they expressed considerable wonderment as to why we had not sent missionaries to Japan. That, together with the knowledge that they are a progressive people has remained with me until the present time, and while it may not be the actuating motive in attempting to open a mission there now, it probably had something to do with it." (Deseret News 52 (April 6, 1901): 9.)

On June 26, 1901, President Snow added:

As to these brethren who will shortly leave for Japan the Lord has not revealed to me that they will succeed, but He has shown me that it is their duty to go. They need not worry concerning the results, only be careful to search the Spirit of the Lord to see what it indicates to them. Do not be governed by your own wisdom, but rather by the wisdom of God. (Heber J. Grant, "A Japanese Journal," Gordon A. Madsen, 12-13).

President Heber J. Grant and his companions were the first to admit that they did not know much about Japan. In Elder Grant's words the new mission was an "unknown quality." But in spite of some misgivings and apprehensions, President Snow, Mission President Grant, and the others all believed the new mission would succeed. Other Christian groups had done well, President Snow reasoned; why not the Latter-day Saints? [See "From the East" for an overview of how Christianity was introduced in Japan.]

Before going to Japan, President Grant chose two mature and experienced missionaries, Louis A. Kelsch and Horace S. Ensign, to go with him. Then, on May 10, 1901, he called

eighteen-year-old Alma O. Taylor. Even before the missionaries left Salt Lake City, Elder Taylor worked on the Japanese language and later he demonstrated unusual linguistic ability.

The Japan-bound elders departed from Salt Lake City on July 24, 1901, and traveled to Vancouver, British Columbia, where they boarded the Empress of India, which carried them to Japan. They arrived there on August 12.

On their arrival they found that even if they had desired to slip into the country unnoticed, they could not have done so. The foreign press in Yokohama had received word of their coming, and as became evident during the coming weeks, the Christian community was united together to drum the Mormons out of the country before they could gain a foothold. Almost before the four elders settled into the Grand Hotel in Yokohama, they found themselves in a verbal battle in the local newspapers that went on intermittently for several months. At least eight newspapers and many more writers became involved.

Somewhat surprisingly, in a land where Victorian morality had little or no place, the basic issue was whether the Mormons could be allowed within a reasonable distance of Christian women. When President Grant and his companions applied for permanent accommodations at a Western-style boarding house, the owner, Mr. Staniland, told them bluntly that he could not consider taking them in. When word of this action reached the press, it caused a heated debate between liberals who were willing to accept the elders in spite of the polygamy issue and those conservatives who claimed that polygamy was not dead and hence the missionaries could not be accepted.

Years passed before the Latter-day Saint missionaries developed any degree of mutuality with the established Christian missions. There is no evidence that the established Japanese religious denominations paid any attention to the Mormons.

Read much more in "From the East: The History of the Latter-day Saints in Asia, 1851-1996." [Buy it here](#)