

History of the Church in Japan - Part 3: 1903-1909 - Translation of the Book of Mormon

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In 1902 Heber J. Grant returned to Japan, this time bringing with him his wife Augusta, their daughter Mary, Horace Ensign's wife Mary, and six additional missionaries. With the new missionaries, the mission was large enough to hold regular Sunday services. The missionaries started a Sunday School in the hope that prospective members would find it helpful in their quest for truth.

By March 1903, the elders had made considerable progress in the Japanese language—they had spoken to each other in Japanese in their church services and had even translated some hymns ("We Thank Thee O God For A Prophet" was first) and some tracts--and were quite comfortable in their surroundings; therefore, President Grant assigned pairs of companions and sent them into the field -- to Hojo, Naoetsu, and Nagano

As would be expected, new elders came into the field from time to time, transfers were made, and cities were opened and closed. President Grant established the general pattern of missionary work before he was released to go home.

He was nevertheless dissatisfied with his performance while in Japan. He did not learn Japanese, nor did he move to Japanese-style accommodations or eat Japanese food when he could avoid it. Furthermore, during his presidency a very few converts came into the Church. When he received his release to return to Salt Lake City, his first impulse was to ask for a six-month extension. But when he questioned himself as to his motives for wanting to stay, he concluded:

What good is there for you to stay here? How much more can you do than Brother Ensign? And I began to realize it was a desire to be able to come home and tell you [the members of the Church] I had done something which prompted my wish to stay there longer. (General Conference, October 4, 1903)

President Grant was too hard on himself. He had accomplished much and had established a new mission. On September 8, 1903, President Grant and his family sailed from Yokohama for home. He was replaced by Elder Horace Ensign, who was already in the mission.

During Elder Ensign's presidency some important things were accomplished. For example, Sunday Schools were organized in Hojo and Tokyo. Most important, however, were his contributions in the area of publications. He directed the writing and printing of a number of tracts and published a hymnal in Japanese. He also instigated the lengthy process of translating the Book of Mormon.

On January 11, 1904, President Ensign asked all of the missionaries to begin translating different sections of the Book of Mormon. This procedure did not work out, for a number

of reasons, but it was a beginning. By September, however, President Ensign could see that the translation would have to be placed in the hands of no more than one or two men.

By September 15, he had completed the First Book of Nephi — forty-nine English pages. Neither Elder Taylor nor President Ensign knew at the outset how large a project it would prove to be.

Shortly before President Ensign received his release to return home, new elders arrived in Japan, and it was possible to open the work in Sapporo on the island of Hokkaido and Sendai in northern Honshu. Ensign's release came on July 27, 1905. Young Elder Taylor was to be his replacement. By the time of the Ensigns' departure, seven people had been baptized, but two had been excommunicated.

During President Taylor's period, 1905 to 1909, the work moved at a generally slow pace. The number of missionaries grew slightly and averaged thirteen during these five years. But convert baptisms were few — one in 1905 and two in 1906 and 1907 — and people at home began raising questions concerning the practicality of the mission. In answer to these criticisms, President Taylor sent a blanket rebuff to the doubting members of the Church.

Is the Japan mission a failure? Is it premature? The shortest answer to both these questions is an emphatic "NO!" It is the mission of "Mormonism" to preach the gospel to all the world for a witness before the end shall come. Therefore, counting its success or failure by the number of converts made is a gross mistake. (Alma O. Taylor, "About Japan and the Japanese Mission," *Improvement Era*, November 1906).

The first translation of the Book of Mormon was completed on March 21, 1906, but the corrections and revisions took longer than the original work. Because he was dissatisfied with his early sections, Taylor revised the entire first translation, and this took from May 1906 until December. The finished product was off the press on October 6, 1909. Five thousand copies were printed.

President Taylor and Elder Caine received their releases to return home on December 18, 1909. Taylor had served almost nine years, and Caine had devoted eight. Elder Elbert D. Thomas was appointed the new mission president.