

The Australian Japanese Mission

Australian Baptists have always been keenly interested in missionary work overseas. At the beginning they sent gifts to London for the Baptist Missionary Society in days when, crippled by heavy chapel debts and unable to make the most of the many opportunities of their own home mission, they seemed least able to afford it. Before long there was a demand that they themselves should engage in a mission to the heathen.

One notable attempt to do this was made in the seventies of the last century.¹ A young Baptist pastor, Mr. William Hack, who had pioneered work at Hilton in South Australia,² felt a strong call to missionary service. He applied in 1870 to the South Australian Baptist Missionary Society for service in Faridpur. Here the South Australians were supporting native workers engaged by Baptist Missionary Society agents stationed at Dacca. Hack was rejected on the grounds of ill-health. Undeterred he made two further applications to the Society in the following years, but his offers of service were declined.

In the meantime his interests were attracted towards Japan, a mission field now opening after the favourable treaties between this country and some of the Western Powers in 1858. Hack now made a new approach to the committee of the South Australian Baptist Missionary Society, seeking support for a mission to Japan which he personally would undertake. He suggested that the committee give priority to Faridpur "and *afterwards* to give Japan what was left of their funds." No work could be sustained in such a fashion, so that the committee had little choice but to decline his undertaking.

The intrepid enthusiast now sought the aid of private persons. While some strongly opposed his venture, others rallied to his support, so that within a few weeks the sum of £350 had been subscribed. Encouraged by these gifts, Hack, his wife and three small sons, Miss Stonehouse (his wife's sister), Mr. and Mrs. Clode, Mr. Baley and a children's nurse left Australia in November, 1873 for the Land of the Rising Sun.

The party disembarked at Nagasaki on January 12, 1874. Hack rented a house previously used as a printing office. Clode, who had some experience in the printing trade, had speculated on the journey over whether this might be useful in Japan. The answer to these questionings came when, a few weeks after the arrival, the plant was offered to the missionaries. Gifts from Australia at this

juncture made purchase possible. The group engaged in job-printing and produced a secular paper named "The Rising Sun" in order to support themselves in their labours. The proceeds were small, but the party persisted in their mission, determined that their printing house should be primarily a mission press. They issued tracts in English for seamen visiting their port, and others in Japanese "consisting of the Lord's Prayer, 24th Psalm, 67th Psalm, and one on Miracles." It soon became evident that the poverty-stricken Japanese could not afford to buy such literature. To be effective, tracts had to be distributed free of cost. ". . . many times," wrote Hack, "I have been nearly dragged to the ground by eager hands stretched out to receive the 'crumbs' of eternal life and truth which I had to distribute in the shape of tracts." Thus began the ministry of what Hack claimed to be the first mission press Japan had known.

Soon after arrival, a large room in the house was opened for preaching. The missionaries were disappointed when few Japanese could be induced to attend the services held there. However, seamen from British and American vessels in port came in encouraging numbers. In addition to these services at the mission house, the missionary band visited the sailors on their ships, holding meetings on board whenever opportunities presented themselves. Hospital visitation also became a fruitful avenue of service. In all this work they sought to distribute the tracts they were producing. They were overjoyed by conversions among the sailors.

They were rewarded when on September 27, 1874 they were joined in their mission by one of the seamen. Mr. John D. Clark was a Christian of some standing and came to them highly commended by his superior officer, Commander Bax of H.M.S. Dwarf. He was appointed to assist Mr. Clode at the mission press.

In the meantime, Hack, leaving control of the press in Clode's hands, secured a position as teacher of English at Hiroshima in order to provide support for himself and his family. Hiroshima then had a population of 100,000, and was the centre of a great agricultural district. Hack took with him a Japanese servant who had a fair grasp of English to act as interpreter. About a month after arrival, he opened his house for preaching. In contrast to the former experience at Nagasaki, the response of the Japanese here was good. Hack worked through his interpreter. His own efforts to communicate with the Japanese through a Romanized version of the Fourth Gospel were far from satisfactory "as the quaint pronunciation of different words would raise a smile and often a laugh." But the discussions which he encouraged at these meetings gave promise of success, even though Hack found it all but impossible to communicate clearly the truths he was seeking to present in a language he himself could not speak. However, he believed

that some good was being done. Seed was sown and appeared to be taking root.

A further step was taken in September, 1874 when Hack secured the services of a more proficient interpreter, a Japanese gentleman named Minoi. A month later Mr. Yuba, the former interpreter who had accompanied Hack from Nagasaki, declared his intention of becoming a Christian. As he was about to go to Tokio, arrangements were speedily made for his baptism. Then on the day determined upon, Sunday, October 10, Hack's eldest child died after a brief illness. Though deeply distressed, Hack baptized his first convert a few hours later.

Such courageous witness for Christ made a deep impression upon the Japanese. Almost immediately, one of Hack's servants named Shimpe declared himself a follower of Christ. Early in November a Buddhist priest named Hirota came begging instruction in the Christian faith. He had previously been under Christian influence at Osaka, and little instruction was required to lead him to a commitment to Jesus Christ. Thereupon he declared his determination to preach Christ everywhere. Hack allowed him to preach on the following Sunday and was greatly impressed both by his eloquence and by the content of his message which was related to him afterwards by his interpreter. Subsequently Minjoi the interpreter, Hirota and Shimpe were baptized, and a church constituted on November 26, 1874. This appears to have been the first church in Japan outside an open port.

Hack now judged the time ripe to transfer the leadership of the preaching services to the Japanese. As a result of this step, the number of the inquirers increased rapidly. Hirota proved to be a most energetic worker. Three baptismal services were held in December, and by the end of January, 1875, the native membership of the Hiroshima Baptist Church had increased to fifteen.

The missionaries were convinced that for the continued success of their venture, more adequate backing was needed. In the proper sense of the word they were not "missionaries," for nobody sent them. They were dependent for financial support upon the gifts of a few interested people. In order to put the mission on a better footing, Hack left the field and made his way to Britain where he spent some time in the years 1875 and 1876. Wherever he told his story, his enthusiasm won subscribers to his cause.

Unfortunately Hack soon became seriously ill, doubtless as a result of his labours in Japan and of that weakness that had hindered him from becoming the first Australian Baptist missionary in India. Hence he was at length forced to return to Japan with the extensive deputation programme he had planned largely unachieved. During an absence of eighteen months, only £1,530:10:3 had been received by the mission, of which

£702 : 15 : 3 was raised in England, and the remainder in Australia. Hack had been able to remit only £990 of this to the field.³

When reports of what had been achieved in Japan reached Australia through English religious periodicals, the work caught the imagination of the Baptists. Churches pledged support to the mission and contributions were made by Sunday Schools.⁴ The Melbourne Baptist Ministers' Fraternal meeting in September, 1876 brought a recommendation to the annual meetings of the Baptist Association of Victoria held two months later

“that the Baptist Foreign Missionary Society⁵ be requested to take over the Mymensing Mission Station so that the Victorian churches may unite their efforts on the Japan Mission; and that should the society consent to this, steps be taken by this association to secure joint action on the part of our churches in the various Australian colonies for the purpose of forming and sustaining an Australasian Baptist Mission for Japan.”⁶

The resolution was received by the Association, and remitted to its Executive Committee for further consideration before being implemented. Information was sought from South Australia.⁷ Had the action suggested been taken, the whole course of Australian Baptist missionary endeavour would have been changed. Japan, instead of East Bengal, India, would have become its field.

But just when Australian Baptists had become aware of his mission, Hack was making his way back to Japan, where he discovered that the affairs of the Australian Japanese Mission were in a distressing state. During his absence dissension had arisen between the brethren labouring at Nagasaki and, without sufficient aid from outside, they were faced with dire poverty. At the same time the native church at Hiroshima was in confusion. Many of the members were scattered, and the pastor had been compelled to enter secular employment in order to live.

In such circumstances Hack found it necessary to wind up the work. He returned to Australia heavily in debt, possibly at the beginning of 1877.

The Australian Japanese Mission had failed. The reasons for this failure are not difficult to discover. The mission itself was an enthusiastic venture without the backing of the churches. The long absence of its leader from the field led to a slackening of control with consequent dissension among the mission staff. Responsibility was given into the hands of native leaders before they were ready to assume it. Converts received inadequate instruction before baptism. Had the work continued a little longer, it is possible that the Australian churches may have accepted the responsibility for it, and have been aided by English Baptists.

The venture should not be forgotten, for it is an illustration of early Australian Baptist missionary enterprise. The story is in truth a preliminary chapter in the record of the Australian Baptist Missionary Society which today labours in India, Pakistan, New Guinea and the Netherlands New Guinea.

NOTES

¹ The story is told in an account written by Hack published in *The Baptist Magazine*, LXVIII (January, 1876), pp. 22ff.

² H. Estcourt Hughes, *The Story of Our First Hundred Years. The Baptist Church of South Australia* (1937), p. 103.

³ Letter in *The English Freeman* of May 25th, 1877. Reprinted in *The Victorian Freeman*, I. 9 (August, 1877), p. 139.

⁴ E.g. the Sunday School of the Fenwick Street, Geelong (Victoria) Baptist Church reported that it was making monthly missionary collections, part of which was devoted to the Japanese Mission. *The Victorian Freeman*, I. 5 (April, 1877), p. 78.

i.e. the Baptist Missionary Society. Victorian Baptists were supporting native evangelists in the Mymensingh district employed as helpers of Rev. R. Bion, a B.M.S. missionary.

⁶ Minutes of the Sixteenth Annual Session of the Baptist Association of Victoria, held on November, 6th, 7th and 8th, 1876.

⁷ Baptist Association of Victoria, Executive Committee Minutes, November 27th, 1876.

⁸ *The Victorian Freeman*, I. 9 (August, 1877), p. 139.

BASIL S. BROWN.