



By John Pavelka from Austin, TX, USA - Plaque Marking the Sinking of the General Sherman, CC BY 2.0  
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**T**HEN was the part of the hand sent from him; and this writing was written. 25 And this is the writing that was written, MENE, MENE, TEKEL, UPHARSIN. 26 This is the interpretation of the thing: MENE; God hath numbered thy kingdom, and finished it. 27 TEKEL; Thou art weighed in the balances, and art found wanting. 28 PERES; Thy kingdom is divided, and given to the Medes and Persians. (Dan 5:24-28)

These were horrific words to King Belshazzar. He had no question of his guilt as he was yet holding the golden vessels from the Temple of the Lord in his depraved hands and, only moments earlier having uttered blasphemies against a God whom he thought to ridicule. But there may be other examples in history of which great joy and salvation may come from the writing on the wall. I speak of a teahouse in Kaesong of old Korea.

Kaesong today is located approximately twelve miles north of the DMZ in the Peoples' Republic of Korea (NORTH KOREA). Before the advent of the brutal dictatorship of Communism, North Korea was a bastion of Christian faith – particularly that of the Presbyterian Church.

In the summer of 1866, an American steamer by the name of the General Sherman, or William Tecumseh Sherman, sailed into the estuary of the Taedong River for the purpose of opening the land to western trade. Though they were warned not to progress as far as Pyongyang, this warning was disregarded by Captain Page, the skipper. Aboard the vessel was a missionary named Robert Germaine Thomas who was bringing bibles to distribute. Some few days after the 9<sup>th</sup> of July, the General Sherman struck a sandbar and was dead in the waters of the river. The Koreans were able to destroy the vessel by means of fire boats. The crewmembers and passengers that survived were beheaded, including the missionary.

Before judging the Korean people too harshly, we should remember that the Korean authorities had warned the ship many times not to advance as far as Pyongyang. Moreover, the royal Choseon court which ruled Korea was well aware of the devastating

effect and results of the First and the Second Opium War in China which followed from their links to European contacts. Thus, Korea opted to become totally isolationist with regard to foreigners. It was for this reason that Korea came to be known as the 'Hermit Kingdom.'

The missionary bringing Bibles (mentioned above) gave his own Korean scripted Bible to his executioner before he was beheaded. No one knows for certain what happened to that Bible, but there are some clues in the history of the Christian faith of Korea that may shed light on the matter.

In that teahouse located in Kaesong were walls covered with Scripture written in Hangul (the Korean alphabet of twenty-four characters). Why were these walls plastered with pages from the Bible? Again, we cannot be sure; but many speculate that the pages were taken from Robert Thomas' Bible given at the point of his death. The owner of the teahouse had no idea what the words meant. He ran out of rice paper in covering his walls, so he used the pages of this mysterious Bible to cover those walls.

Patrons would come from miles around to read the walls of the teahouse of Kaesong. Perhaps their hearts were being prepared for the coming missionary work which followed in the latter part of the nineteenth century. Who knows if the walls are still covered with Scripture at Kaesong, but it is unlikely since the city has fallen into Communist hands.

There is another story which may relate to the pages of Mr. Thomas' Bible which I read many years ago in an old missionary biography. I have tried, without success, to verify the facts of the story; but I believe it to be very true nonetheless. The story relates to Dr. Horace Underwood who was one of the greatest, if not THE greatest, protestant missionaries to Korea. Dr. Underwood had first heard reports of missionaries from India while a four year old boy in New Jersey. At the age of four, he dedicated his life to becoming a missionary, and never wavered from that resolution. Because the missionaries from India had given such a compelling account of their work, it was India to which Underwood felt compelled to go. He went first to medical school believing this would be a great boon to his work among the poor of the land. He then attended seminary. Upon completion, he sought sponsorship to India. In spite of all his best efforts, the doors never opened for him to go there. On his last appeal to the Presbyterian Mission Board to go to India, once more there was not found a need for his services; however, at the moment of that appeal, another missionary destined to open the mission field in Korea cancelled his plans to go. Dr. Underwood was invited, I believe, at the efficacious drawing of the Holy Spirit, to Korea. He is today considered a great hero to the Christian people of Korea having translated the larger text of the Korean Bible as well as the classical hymns of the church into Korean. He arrived in Korea in 1885 and remained there until 1916 in which year he passed into his reward with the Lord.

When Dr. Underwood arrived in Korea, great challenges faced the good man as regards customs, language, and unfamiliar living accommodations. But he persevered. After being in Korea for a few months, he had converted no one to Christ. He was beginning to feel that his calling to Korea had not been of the Lord; however, in the autumn of his first year there, an elderly gentleman showed up from an east coast fishing village called Kangnung. This village was located across the central highlands and mountains of the Taebaek Range and was on the shoreline of the Sea of Japan – quite a distance from Seoul. The elderly man wondered when Dr. Underwood would be coming to Kangnung to baptize the Christian believers there?

Dr. Underwood was amazed at this request. He told the man that it was impossible that there could be believers in that remote region since no missionaries had been there. The old man disagreed and asserted that there was, indeed, believers in Kangnung. Dr.

Underwood assured the man that he would come to Kangnung to examine those who claimed Christ as their Savior when the snows of spring made passage possible. When spring arrived, the elderly man appeared again before Dr. Underwood could make the journey. He came with 21 men and women in tow who claimed Christ as Lord. During Dr. Underwood's examination of these good people, it was determined that they were qualified for baptism and he baptized them. It was later revealed that these people had sixteen chapters from the Book of John, and those sixteen chapters formed the knowledge of their salvation!

This incident inspired Dr. Underwood to continue with diligence in the Korean mission. Today, the largest religious group in Korea is Christian, and the greater part of these are Protestant and Presbyterian, thanks to the labors of Dr. Underwood under inspiration of the Holy Ghost. Today, Korea sends more missionaries than any other country when measured per capita. When I flew with the military over the Korean peninsula, I do not remember seeing a single village without a church.

I still do not know from whence came the pages of the Bible to paper the walls of the teahouse in Kaesong, or the sixteen chapters of the Book of John that led those 21 souls to Christ – that is, in the human sense; but I know that God works in mysterious ways, His wonders to perform. Perhaps He used the Bible of a martyred missionary on the Taedong River to witness of Himself long after the missionary passed into the Annals of the Kingdom.

Now friend, you and I have the complete Bible at our disposal. Have we used each chapter to the profit that these twenty-one believers of Kangnung, Korea, used their own sixteen chapters to find the Lord?

[http://web.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/General\\_Sherman\\_incident](http://web.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/General_Sherman_incident)