

Robert Morrison



IN 1782 a baby boy was born in Northumberland to an English mother and a Scottish father. This was their eighth child and they named him Robert Morrison. Not long afterward the family moved to Newcastle, where Robert's father worked as a shoemaker. They were a Christian family, and the children grew up learning the Bible. By the age of twelve Robert could recite the whole of Psalm 119!

When Robert was fourteen years old, he was apprenticed to his father's shoe business where he worked twelve to fourteen hours each day. Sadly, he fell into poor company and abandoned his Christian upbringing. However, while he may have thought he was finished with his parent's God, God had not finished with him. He later wrote,

I was brought to a serious concern about my soul. I felt the dread of eternal condemnation. The fear of death compassed me about and I was led nightly to cry to God that He would pardon my sin, that He would

grant me an interest in the Saviour, and that He would renew me in the spirit of my mind. Sin became a burden. It was then that I experienced a change of life, and, I trust, a change of heart, too. I broke off from my former careless company, and gave myself to reading, meditation and prayer. It pleased God to reveal His Son in me, and at that time I experienced much of the 'kindness of youth and the love of espousals'.

● A call to be a missionary

Robert found it difficult to find time to read his Bible and Christian books as much as he would like so would bring them to work with him. He wanted to become a missionary, but his parents were against it. He obeyed his parents, but in 1801 he was able to study Latin, Greek, Hebrew, theology, and shorthand from a Presbyterian minister in Newcastle. In 1803 he entered George Collison's Hoxton Academy in London to train as a minister. Alongside his studies, he was also able to visit the poor and sick and preach in villages and churches around London.



Robert still felt the calling to become a missionary in distant lands, but his parents still opposed this. His mother opposed this the most strongly and Robert promised her that he would not leave England while she was alive. While she was ill Robert helped take care of her and, just before she died in 1804, he joyfully received her blessing to become a missionary.

● Training to be a missionary

Robert was twenty-two when he joined the London Missionary Society and was sent to an academy near Portsmouth for further training. He couldn't decide whether to be a missionary to Africa or China but eventually felt that he should go to China. He had prayed that God would send him to the place with the greatest difficulties. He now had to study medicine and astronomy as well as the Chinese language before he could begin his missionary work.

Robert learned Chinese from a student named Yong Sam-tak, whom he shared lodgings with. He also had to learn about Chinese culture; once he absent-mindedly burnt a piece of paper with Chinese writing on it and Yong Sam-tak stormed out in a superstitious rage! He returned a few days later and from then on Robert wrote the Chinese characters on a piece of tin which could be wiped clean. Gradually Robert learned the language and Yong Sam-tak began to join him in family worship.

The missionary society directors wanted Robert to compile a Chinese dictionary that could be used by future missionaries as well as begin translating the Scriptures. He couldn't do this by learning

Chinese from one man: he would have to travel to China to learn more.

● The situation in China

Robert entered China at a time when missionary work was highly restricted in the country. It was limited to only a few cities and the government threatened death to anyone caught teaching Chinese to foreigners. The Qing Dynasty controlled China from 1644 to 1911; they were very conservative and inflexible, not wanting to deal with the outside world. Foreigners were not allowed to talk to the locals unless it was to trade—there simply was no option for missionaries. All foreigners entering China were interrogated about why they were there, and if they didn't have a good answer, they would be put on the next ship home!

● Entering China for the first time

Robert was ordained as a missionary on 8 January 1807 and by the end of the month he sailed for China. He could not travel directly to China as the only ships that did this belonged to the East India Company which had a policy of not carrying missionaries. The East India Company was a company which dominated trade in East and Southeast Asia and India. Instead, Robert first travelled to New York which took three months. He then stayed in New York for a month, and in the providence of God, met a United States consul (official), who promised protection for him at the American Consul at Guangzhou (Canton) in China. A final voyage then took

Robert to China, arriving on 4 September 1807.

Robert arrived at Guangzhou where his countrymen and





ing Chinese clothes and shoes, eating Chinese food, using chopsticks, and wearing his hair as the Chinese did. However, he realised that this was a mistake as the clothes made him stand out even more and attract attention which he didn't want, and the food made him feel unwell (as he wasn't used to it). Therefore, he went back to wearing Western clothes.

a few Americans received him. However, they had disheartening stories about the missionary work in China. The Chinese people were forbidden by their government to have anything to do with Westerners, often under the threat of death. There were also Roman Catholic missionaries who would stir people up against missionaries of other denominations. The Roman Catholics were based in Macau, which was a Portuguese colony, and had the protection of the Portuguese. When Robert arrived in Macau he was stripped, interviewed, and then expelled from the city by the Roman Catholic authorities.

● Living at Guangzhou

Robert settled in Guangzhou lodging in the American Supercargoes of Messrs Milnor and Bull (an American company). In secret he continued to learn Chinese, being careful to never leave his books in the open.

Robert started by trying to live like the Chinese, by wear-

It was a lonely time. Robert spent many hours shut up alone in his room, working on the dictionary and Bible translation, and hiding from the Chinese authorities. He had Chinese servants who helped him with his daily needs—such as food—and who also secretly helped him learn the Chinese language. Expenses were very high and sadly some of his servants cheated him too. Robert tried to live in a single room to lower the expenses, but the lack of fresh air and exercise made him feel unwell. He was surrounded by unfriendly people in a hostile city.

● Escape to Macau

Life became more difficult when Britain and France were at war, and the British Navy blockaded Macau to prevent the French from damaging English trade.

The Chinese authorities in Guangzhou fiercely resented this and threatened the English people living there. These, with Robert, had to flee to Macau.



It was a dangerous journey between Guangzhou and Macau, the sea was full of pirates. Robert had to take his precious luggage with him, containing translation work that he had done so far. The political tension eventually eased but it left the Chinese authorities even more suspicious of foreigners.

Robert had trouble finding somewhere suitable to live in Macau. He was also very unwell; however, he carried on with his translation work. He prayed to God in Chinese, pouring out his soul, trying to master the language as well as he could. He was very unhappy and thought of leaving China for Malaya, where there were fewer barriers to missionary work.

● A happier time

While Robert was struggling in Macau, the Morton family arrived in the area. Robert fell in love with their daughter Mary, and they were married on 20 February 1809.

On the very day that Robert and Mary were married, Robert was offered a job as a Chinese secretary and translator at the British Factory by the East India Company. It was very unusual for a missionary to be in paid work of this sort, but because Robert was worried about the heavy financial burden he was putting on the London Missionary Society he accepted the position. It proved to be very useful for him, because it gave him a legitimate job in the eyes of the Chinese authorities and allowed him to mingle more freely with the Chinese people. It also helped him with his translation work because the daily translation work he did for the company made him even more familiar with the Chinese language.

● Married life

Foreign women were not allowed to live in Guangzhou so when Robert returned there he had to leave Mary in Macau. This meant that they had many anxious times as Robert made dangerous journeys between the two places. Their first child, a boy whom they named James, was born on 5 March 1811, and sadly died the same day. Mary was too ill to attend the funeral and Robert buried his first child on a lonely mountainside.

The following year was happier time. A little girl called Rebecca was born to the couple, and also Robert's Chinese grammar book was sent to print. His work translating the Bible into Chinese continued.

● The arrival of William and Rachel Milne

In 1813 two new missionaries arrived to help the Morrises: William and Rachel Milne. Initially they were expelled from Macau, but eventually both couples settled in Guangzhou. Around this time the Chinese authorities were made aware of Robert's work. Their response was an angry one and they introduced a new law forbidding the printing and publication of Christian books in China. It was a crime punishable by death. Robert wrote to people in England, 'We will scrupulously obey Governments as far as their degrees do not oppose what is required by the Almighty; I will be careful not to invite the notice of the Government'.

● Completion of the New Testament translation

In 1813 the Chinese New Testament was completed and printed. It was a huge milestone



as it was the first New Testament in the genuine everyday speech of the Chinese, and understandable to ordinary people. Robert and William then worked on translating the Old Testament together.

The next step was to find a place where they could base a mission station and have a printing press within reach of the Chinese coast. They decided on Malacca, Malaysia, as it had means of transporting material to almost any part of China, and William Milne settled there.

In 1814 Robert Morrison baptised his first Chinese convert, a man named Tsae A-Ko. The new Chinese grammar book finally arrived from the printers, and the Morrisons had their second son, John. Mary Morrison was seriously ill though and was ordered to return to England for her health. She took their two small children with her, leaving Robert on his own in China for the next six years.

The East India Company officially dismissed Robert from working with them because of his Christian publishing work, but the local officers did not carry this out. In 1817 Robert was even sent by the Company to interpret for Lord Amherst's embassy for their presentations to the Chinese emperor in Beijing!

● A dispensary for the Chinese people

Robert was very upset by the poverty and suffering of the poor people he saw. Often these people would spend all their money on drugs and herbs that were useless. This led Robert to set up a dispensary (pharmacy) in China, headed by a skilful Chinese doctor who had learned how to treat people.



● The Ultra Ganges mission

Robert and William set up an Anglo-Chinese College in Malacca, where people could study Chinese. The students weren't made to declare that they were a Christian before attending the school, but it was hoped that the strong Christian environment would influence people. They also established a school for Chinese and Malay children in 1818. That same year also saw the publication of the whole Chinese Bible.

The Malaya settlement became a hub of missionary work. It was the extreme eastern outpost of Protestant missions in Asia and became known as the 'Ultra Ganges' mission. Many new missionaries for the Asian continent first spent time at the college and then were sent to work in various places such as Penang, Java, and Singapore. The settlement also had printing presses that produced Gospels, tracts, and pamphlets. However, the work was difficult, and it was felt that while people listened, they didn't always respond.

● Great losses

Robert's wife Mary had returned to China in but died in 1821. Rachel Milne had passed away earlier and in 1822 William Milne died. Of the four original missionaries, only Robert remained. He wrote an account of those fifteen years of missionary work, and while China was still hostile of European and Christian influence, the amount of Chinese literary work and translation achieved was immense.

● Return to England

In 1824 Robert travelled back to England. While there, he set up a language institute to train missionaries, presented a copy of

the Chinese Bible to King George IV, and taught Chinese classes in the hope of stirring up interest and sympathy for China.

While Robert was in England he met and married a lady called Eliza Armstrong, with whom he eventually had five more children. The new couple, along with the two children from Robert's first marriage, travelled to China in 1826.

● **Return to China**

When the Morrises arrived in Guangzhou Robert found that things had changed. The mission property had been neglected and there were new officials at the East India Company who did not have so much respect for missionary work. Relationships between the English traders and Chinese officials were also becoming increasingly strained due to the political situation, partially caused by the tyranny of the mandarins, but also by the British forcing the opium trade on the Chinese people.

However, the little church founded by Robert was growing and people were baptised. Many also believed in secret but did not dare risk persecution by making a public confession of faith. In 1832 Robert was able to write, 'There is now in Canton a state of society, in respect of Chinese, totally different from what I found in 1807. Chinese scholars, missionary students, English presses and Chinese Scriptures, with public worship of God, have all grown up since that period. I have served my generation, and the Lord knows when I must fall asleep. He felt that he was reaching the end of his work.

● **Increasing difficulties**

The Roman Catholics made work difficult for Robert: in 1833 they moved against him, leading to the suppression of the printing presses. The printed Scriptures were the best and most profitable way of spreading the Word of God so this caused a huge problem. Chinese helpers quietly and loyally circulated the publications that were already printed. The East India Company lost its monopoly in China, so Robert lost his work for them. Life was changing.

● **'In my Father's house are many mansions'**

Eliza Morrison and some of the children returned to England. In June 1834 Robert preached his last sermon from the text 'In my Father's house are many mansions' (John 14.2). On the first of August he died in his son's arms at the age of fifty-two. He was buried with his first wife and child at the Protestant Cemetery in Macau.

Robert was the first Protestant missionary to China, where he had served patiently and cheerfully for twenty-seven years. He had published over thirty books in this time and founded a college. However his biggest and more important achievement was the publication of the Chinese Bible, over two hundred years ago. Just before Robert arrived in China, someone had asked him, 'Do you really expect to make an impression on the great Chinese empire?', Robert had replied 'No Sir, I expect God will!'

