

Introducing 'Bible stories hidden in Chinese characters' by Timothy D. Boyle

(Reviewed by Miriam Davis)

'Can you suggest any stories to tell about Kanji that I could use on Home Assignment' asked a fellow missionary some years ago. Off the top of my head all that came to mind were ones that seem to have become the regular 'stock-in-trade' of missionaries such as 義, (we become righteous 義 [gi] in God's eyes when we place the self 我 [ware] under the 'lamb' 羊 [hitsuji]) and 船, (made up of a pictograph of a boat 舟 to which the characters for 'eight' 八 [hachi] and 'people' 口 [kuchi, 'mouth'] are added and bring to mind Noah's ark and his family.)

Now with 'Bible stories hidden in Chinese characters' available in English we have a rich and fascinating resource on Kanji to suit a number of purposes: stories to use in teaching the gospel to Japanese; illustrations for furlough talks; and for the learner of Japanese aids to memorizing Kanji.

In Part 1 Boyle develops the hypothesis that there is a link between the original forms of Chinese characters and the first 11 chapters of Genesis. He illustrates this by explaining the derivation of approximately 150 characters grouped by themes such as 'Happiness in the Garden of Eden'; 'Adam and Eve'; 'the Devil'; 'the First Clothes' and 'Punishment for Sin'. Boyle summarizes Part 1 as follows 'even if one takes my analysis as being pure speculation with no real basis, that does not really change the main purpose I have in writing this book. **Namely, that these associations can be used as illustrations to help explain and understand the truths taught in Scripture (p.142).'**

Part 2, 'Biblical Association Games with Kanji' takes a further 86 kanji and links them to Biblical themes other than the Genesis stories: e.g. there are chapters on Jesus Christ, the Cross, the Lamb of God and Sacrifice and Worship. In some cases the associations are made without reference to the character's origin or derivation.

In part 1 we learn for example, that the radical 示 'shimesu hen' (derived from 示) means 'God'. The right hand element of 神 [SHIN, kami] can be thought of as 2 hands reaching down to create and bless man (9, p. 45). 福 [FUKU, happiness, blessing] is what the first 一 person 口 found in the garden 田 with 示 God. 田 in Japanese is a rice paddy but it originally meant garden. Boyle further suggests that one might think of 田 as 4 rivers 十 within the boundaries of a garden 口 (19, p.51). Another kanji (37, p.65) with the God radical is the 祉 [SHI, happiness] of 福祉 (welfare). Literally this means 'God 示 remains 止 [todo(maru)]'. When God remains with us we are blessed and happy.

There are gems of information both spiritual and linguistic scattered throughout the pages of this book. Have you ever realized that 謝罪 [*shazai*, apology] literally means to give thanks 謝 for sin 罪? I hadn't. Boyle gives a fascinating explanation of the differences in Western and Japanese conceptions of apologizing and thanking (p.26). You can learn the differences between the 2 kanji used for forgiveness (p.85). Pages 89-90 introduce the kanji used for fear (恐れ [*osore*] – emotional fear and 畏[*I, osore*] – respect) along with some helpful thoughts on the meaning of 'the fear of the Lord'. I certainly felt I could use Boyle's explanation of 'holy' with Japanese Christians or nonbelievers. In order to be 聖 (SEI, holy) one needs to have a king 王 of one's ears 耳 and mouth 口 (p.155). The explanation of 王 too, lends itself to Biblical interpretation. The top line represents heaven and the bottom earth. The middle horizontal line together with the vertical line form a cross 十, and that cross 十 connects heaven and earth. Explanations of the compound word 十字架 (cross p.167) and 恵 (grace p.200) are also excellent.

In some cases kanji stories can be used to highlight the differences between Biblical teaching and Japanese culture. One example is 躰 [*shitsuke*, discipline p. 158.] This kanji has been explained as follows. 'Discipline is like a beautiful decoration on the body and thus 身 body and 美 beautiful were combined.' Boyle points out, however, that it is inward beauty that is emphasized in the Bible. If we could make a new kanji it would be by adding 心 heart to beautiful and not body.

There are some minus points. In part 1 some characters are presented in their original Chinese form. Learners of Japanese may prefer to ignore these to avoid confusion. The Japanese forms below the larger Chinese ones in these cases are small and a little difficult to distinguish. Not all kanji explained are 'jooyoo kanji'. Some stories may be a little far-fetched and more difficult to remember than the character itself. I personally found more of the stories in Part 2 helpful than in Part 1. I can imagine myself dipping into the book for a sermon illustration and for this purpose a separate word index is available from the Language Adviser. This it is a book I can thoroughly recommend to anyone wishing to learn about kanji and how to relate Biblical concepts to Japanese culture.

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Also available in Japanese as 「漢字に秘(ひ)められた聖書物語」 although the English version is a rewriting of the Japanese rather than a translation. An index to the kanji used mentioned in the book is also available by e mail from the OMF Language Advisor at la@omf.or.jp