

## Robert Morrison (1782-1834)



Robert Morrison was born at Wingate, near Morpeth, on 5 January, 1782, his father being an agricultural labourer at that time.

In 1785, the family moved to Newcastle and was connected with the High Street Presbyterian Church. In the main, Morrison was a grave, serious-minded youth but there were times of drunkenness and restless wandering. He was converted by the age of 15 and he worked long hours with his father making shoe-making implements as well as studying the Scriptures, Latin and various sciences. He developed a great love for books, especially the Bible and he began to teach himself Latin, Greek and Hebrew. His reading of missionary magazines saw him become determined to become a missionary and he hoped that God would send him to the most difficult part of the unevangelised world.

In 1803 he went to Hoxton Academy as a student for the Congregational ministry, with the purpose of becoming a missionary. In 1804 he proceeded to Dr. David Bogue's famous Missionary Academy at Gosport and subsequently, was accepted by the London Missionary Society.

[**David Bogue** was born in 1750. He trained for the ministry in Edinburgh and became an Independent minister at Gosport. He established an Academy for the training of Congregational ministers in 1780 and 15 years later joined with others in forming the London Missionary Society. His Academy became mainly a training institute for missionaries. He also took part in the formation of the British and Foreign Bible Society and the Religious Tract Society.]

The LMS and Dr. Bogue urged him to consider translating the Bible into Chinese. He readily agreed to this and while he studied medicine and astronomy in London, he had a young Chinese man come to live with him and so his language studies commenced..

In 1807, Robert Morrison was ordained and received into the LMS, and in September of that year he arrived in Canton, the first Protestant missionary to China.

He faced apparently insurmountable difficulties: the East India Company would not provide passage for missionaries – essentially, foreigners were not allowed except in the factories of the East India Company.

He eventually reached Canton via America and India. This was a difficult place to serve – foreign women were banned from Canton and the Chinese faced death if they taught their language to foreigners. Words such as 'barbarians' and 'foreign devils' were often on the lips of the local people.

When it came to evangelisation, he found himself looking over his shoulder for the East India Company, Chinese authorities and the Roman Catholic priests. Sadly, this burden was increased by a dreadful lack of support from Christians at home.

In 1808, residents of the trading post or 'factory' in Canton moved for the summer to Macau and he moved with them – he continued to work on a dictionary of more than one thousand pages.

Robert Morrison's situation changed dramatically on 20 February 1809, when he married Mary Morton, the daughter of a doctor. On the same day he was offered the post of Chinese Secretary and Translator for the East India Company. While the idea of taking secular work was distasteful to him, he saw this as God's provision as this paid position relieved the financial burden from the LMS and gave him a degree of security. This enabled him to proceed with Bible translation although this could not be done openly. The New Testament was completed in 1813 – prior to that date he had completed several of its books as well as working on a Chinese Grammar.

In 1814, Morrison had baptised the first convert under his ministry – the first Protestant convert in China.

However, Robert Morrison continued to face difficulties. The attitude to foreign women in Canton meant that Robert and Mary were often apart and their pain was increased when their first child died on the day it was born. Robert was refused a portion of ground in which to bury his child and this was only achieved after long negotiation. In the years that followed, Mary suffered long periods of ill health and at one stage spent six years in England with their next two children. During this time of lonely separation, Robert threw himself into translating the Old Testament, his dictionary and Chinese Grammar. The East India Company discovered the extent of Robert's Christian activity and decided to dismiss him – something they did not put into immediate effect because they realised he was virtually impossible to replace.

Following a trip to Peking, Robert discovered that people had broken into the press that was dealing with his publications and his colleague William Milne was unwell – supporters in England were also publicising his work, despite his requests that they pray and keep quiet. Undeterred, he turned to other things, opening a dispensary that would become a significant ministry in the years that followed. He was also instrumental in the establishment of an Anglo-Chinese college at Malacca.

In 1819 Robert Morrison was able to record his prize achievement – the completion of the Old Testament to add to that of the New.

In 1820, Mary and the children returned to be with him in Macau, but this time of happiness was brief. In 1821, Mary and their new-born baby both died. Once more, Robert had to fight for a place where they could be buried and the other two children had to be sent back to England. A year later his dear friend, William Milne, also died. Despite these blows, he persisted with his work with untiring zeal, often devoting from six to eight hours a day to his Chinese Dictionary, which he completed in 1823.

Robert Morrison took his one and only furlough in England from 1823. This was a busy time of speaking and teaching engagements and remarriage. In April, 1826, he returned to China with his new wife, Elizabeth Armstrong, and two young children.

He continued to work under the most trying circumstances, serving the East India Company and concealing his evangelical activities from it. Reinforcements came from America, but in 1832, after 25 years' work, despite great progress in translation, education and literature distribution, he had to report that there were only 25 converts.

When his 27 years of service to the East India Company was terminated, he received no pension and in 1833, his wife and children left for England due to her declining health. Robert was exhausted by his years of labour and his life ended as sadly as the years that had gone before, because he died at Canton on 1 August, 1834, before hearing of his family's safe arrival back home.

Robert Morrison was an example of indomitable courage and devotion. He faced great hardship for the Gospel, including apathy from Christians at home, yet he persisted. When asked, 'What do the Chinese with all their ancient civilisation and wisdom require from Europe?' he replied, 'The knowledge of Christ.'

It was in that spirit that he served God and strove to bring that knowledge to them. If a multitude of converts is the measure of the life of a missionary, then Robert Morrison scarcely deserves a mention. Thankfully, it is not so, and heaven employs other criteria to judge a person's contribution.

(Adapted from A Hundred Eminent Congregationalists, Albert Peel, and Christian Missionaries, Owen Milton)