

Introduction

This is a story about two men who succeeded in helping the Korean people, with their thousand-year-old faith in Confucian values, adopt a new faith in the American Christ as the Savior who would save their souls and rebuild their nation.

Just over a century ago, in 1910, the Choson Dynasty (1392–1910) on the Korean peninsula came to an end after over five hundred years of rule. It was a kingdom firmly built on Confucian ideals and beliefs.¹ As the longest-lasting Confucian dynasty in history, it tried to create the ideal Confucian state in Choson, from the royal house down to the rural farming family. It resulted in the “height of classical Korean culture, trade, science, literature, and technology.” But in the nineteenth century, as infighting, power struggles, foreign pressures, and revolt at home grew, the kingdom weakened rapidly as the century came to a close. Both the government and the people looked for a way out.

American Christian churches began sending missionaries to Korea

1. “Korea” and “Choson” are both used in this book. The modern name, “Korea” comes from Koryo, a former dynasty. From 1897 to 1910, the Choson Dynasty was formally known as the Korean Empire. Despite the name change, it was the same monarchy that sat on the throne.

in 1885. There, they started building schools, hospitals, and churches to better the people's lives.

George Heber Jones was an eager twenty-one-year-old working as program staff in an upstate New York YMCA when he heard the voice of God, out of the blue, telling him to go to Choson as a missionary. He had never heard of Choson, and didn't know where it was on the map. Shortly, he was drafted as a missionary candidate of the Methodist Episcopal Church, placed on track to become an ordained clergy, received a little missionary training, and put on a train out of his hometown, Utica, for San Francisco. From there, he caught a steamboat headed for Japan. It took the voice of God less than ten months to land him in Choson! He had been sent by God to be an apostle to the Korean people, without speaking a word of Korean.

Choe Pyonghon was a thirty-year-old Confucian scholar who kept failing to pass the civil service exams to get a government post. Civil service was deemed the ideal career in Confucian Choson. He didn't pass, time and again, but not because he didn't have the brains. What he lacked was the right political pedigree, right connections, and money. By 1888, the civil exam system had become totally corrupt, with offices being sold to the highest bidder. To pay his way while waiting for the next round of exams, in 1888, Choe hired himself out as a Korean language tutor to teach Jones and other American missionaries the Korean language. While he had read a few books critical of the Western religion, this was the first time Choe came face-to-face with Westerners or Christians.

During their five years of close interaction, the men learned a lot from each other. Jones learned the language and became one of the most fluent speakers among the missionaries. But, more importantly, he learned about the Confucian mindset, culture, and longings of the people from Choe. This later helped him speak to the needs of the

Korean people as he preached his American Christ. From Jones, Choe learned about the West and its civilization. In addition, he heard the story of Jesus through Jones and the Bible. After his Christian conversion, Choe became an effective evangelist for the Way of Jesus. He used everything that his Confucian tradition had taught him to tell the Koreans that Jesus was a Savior they could trust. Jesus, he said, would save them and their nation from their plight.

In the following two decades, Jones and Choe helped to build the Korean church with spiritual power, social impact, and cultural warmth. Their initial years together had helped them know how to best present the American Christ to a Confucian society. Together, they saw the deeply-felt needs of the Korean people, who were looking for personal peace and national prosperity. They were able to present a living Savior who knew their suffering and offered a new way to save themselves and their nation. Jones and Choe preached that Jesus would help Koreans find their original goodness and rebuild their nation.

Now, over one hundred years after the end of the Confucian monarchy, nearly 30 percent of South Koreans (population 48.7 million, 2010) identify themselves as Christian²—the largest percentage of Christians in an Asian nation, aside from the Philippines. Korea also boasts of having the largest church in the world. It also has the largest Presbyterian, Methodist, and Pentecostal Churches in the world. Its vibrant spirituality, devout church life,

2. Of the South Korean population, 29.2 percent are Christian (of which 18.3% (of the total) profess to be Protestants, and 10.9% to be Catholics), 22.8 percent are Buddhist, and the rest adhere to various faiths, including Jeungism, Daesunism, Cheondoism, Taoism, Confucianism, and Won Buddhism. The population figure is from 2010, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ks.html>. Interestingly, according to 2005 statistics compiled by the South Korean government, approximately 46.5 percent of the South Korean population expresses no religious preference. *NSO online KOSIS database*. <http://kosis.nso.go.kr:7001/ups/chapterRetrieve.jsp?pubcode=MA&seq=292&pub=3>. Retrieved Aug. 8, 2006.

and missionary zeal are well-known around the world; its number of missionaries—17,697—is second only to US churches.³

How can we explain this religious revolution in modern Korea? Many people look to the 1970s and 1980s to find the cause of the rapid growth of Christianity in Korea. But to understand the real story behind the growth of the Korean church, we need to rediscover the story of its first 25 years, and that of heroes such as the two men in our story. There, we will learn how the story of the American Christ came to Korea, and gradually, became a part of the Korean people's story. He is no longer the American Christ, but Jesus of Korea.

The story unfolds in four parts.

Part 1 introduces the world of the American missionary and the Korean *sonbi*, or Confucian scholar. We ask, “*Who was Jesus Christ for George Heber Jones as he got ready to leave America for missionary work in Korea?*” and “*What was happening in Choe Pyonghon’s life and the Confucian Choson society that made him receptive to the missionary preaching about the American Christ?*”

Part 2 presents the initial encounter between the American missionary and the Korean *sonbi*. We ask, “*What did Jones discover about the realities of Korea that helped him reframe his American Christ as Jesus, Savior of the Korean people?*” and “*How was Choe able to let go of his old Confucian masters’ books and grasp the new Book of Master Jesus?*”

Part 3 shows the American missionary and Korean Christian *sonbi* actively engaged in the saving work of Jesus. We ask: “*How did Jesus save the Korean people and society through Jones’s missionary service in Chemulpo?*” and “*How did Choe convince the Koreans that the American Christ can indeed save them from their personal sins and national demise?*”

3. There are around 17,697 Korean missionaries serving in 168 countries, making South Korea the second largest missionary-sending country in the world, according to a report by KWMC (Korean World Mission Center). <http://www.christianpost.com/article/20080729/thousands-of-korean-missionaries-lauded-at-major-conference/>.

Part 4 shows the American missionary and Korean Christian *sonbi* engaged in nation-building. We ask, “*What did Jones’s Christ promise the Korean people, facing the loss of their identity in the tragic end of their nation, and what would be required of them to rebuild a new one?*” and “*How does Choe’s Jesus help the Korean Christians confront the national crisis, and what is demanded of his followers as Korean Christians?*”

The story, in four parts, will show how the American Christ gradually became embedded in the soil of Confucian Choson to become the Jesus of Korea, the Savior of the people and the nation.