

Lottie Moon and Jewish Evangelism

By Jim R. Sibley, August 1, 1999



My curiosity was piqued as I stood before the beautiful painting of Lottie Moon at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. A detail that may have seemed insignificant to some caught my attention. Lottie Moon is honored by Southern Baptists as a pioneer missionary whose life of commitment has earned her a prominent place in the Baptist "Hall of Fame." But this was not what had captured my interest.

Since I am not trained as an art critic, I was not drawn to technical aspects of the painting's execution. Had I been more acquainted with the history and culture of China, perhaps the details of the painting would have been of greater interest. Instead, as a missionary, I could see her resolve, her love, her cultural adaptation, and her burden for the lost. Yet, as a missionary to Israel, I saw something else.

On the desk beside Miss Moon is a scroll, bearing the words of Mark 16:15 in three languages. It was not surprising to me that one of them was English – her native tongue and the language of most who would view this painting. Neither was it surprising that this verse was written in Chinese characters. But the third language puzzled me. Rather than Greek, the original language of the New Testament, it was written in Hebrew. Why would the artist have included Hebrew in a painting of a missionary to China?

My search for the answer yielded several possible explanations. Initially someone suggested the inclusion might have been related to Lottie Moon's engagement to Crawford Toy, the well-known Old Testament and Hebrew professor who taught at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary from 1869-1879. But the engagement was broken off and the exact nature of the relationship between Lottie Moon and Crawford Toy remains somewhat ambiguous. In any case, Crawford Toy had become ancient history by the time Lottie was immersed in her life's work. She was 72-years-old when she died in December of 1912, and the painting portrays her in her maturity. Pastor Li, shown in the painting, had not come to faith until 1890. This suggestion, though well intentioned, completely fails to explain the Hebrew in the painting.

Someone else suggested that Lottie might have had a special love for the Hebrew language. As a student, Lottie was gifted in languages and, in addition to several European languages, studied both Hebrew and Greek at Albemarle Female Institute. Still, she apparently was more at home with Greek than Hebrew. This suggestion sounded more like wild conjecture, and I could find no supporting evidence.

Lottie Moon's uncle, James Barclay, was the first missionary to Jerusalem from the Disciples of Christ denomination. He developed an interest in archaeology and wrote a book about Jerusalem entitled, *The City of the Great King*.¹ He identified some of the stones that make up the "Western Wall" of Herod's Temple as a portion of an ancient gate into the Temple complex, known to this day as "Barclay's Gate." It could be claimed that Lottie held a sentimental attachment to the Jewish people because of her uncle's work in Israel. Unfortunately, there is little or no evidence to support this claim, and, again, this seems an insufficient reason.

I contacted an elderly saint who had been a close friend and prayer partner for a retired missionary to China – in fact, the missionary who had consulted with the artist who painted the portrait. When I asked her about the Hebrew, she immediately replied, "Oh, Honey, that's because the Bible was translated into Chinese by a Jewish believer." As a matter of fact, Joseph Schereschewsky, a great missionary scholar and Jewish believer, had indeed translated the Bible into Chinese in 1873 (the same year Lottie went to China). Though this tidbit was intriguing, it failed as an explanation.

Then I spoke to Catherine Allen, one of Lottie Moon's biographers, and to Betsy Lowery, the archivist at the Women's Missionary Union in Birmingham, Ala. I learned that the artist was Peter Plotkin, a Jewish believer who had become a Southern Baptist, and that the painting was dedicated in 1930.

I found that Plotkin was born into a Jewish home in Russia in 1880. As a small child, his parents and all of his relatives were killed in the anti-Semitic pogroms common to Russia at that period of time. He was adopted by a wealthy Jewish family that had access to the nobility. A close friend of his adoptive family was Leo Tolstoy, and young Peter's initial interest was in literature. Soon, however, he developed a love for painting for which he demonstrated a natural talent. In 1903, he earned his Ph.D. in art at the University of Petrograd and taught in Russia and in Europe prior to the Russian revolution. With the Bolshevik uprising, however, he fled to the United States. In New York City, he met a wealthy physician, who was building a large home in McKinney, Texas (near Dallas). Impressed by the somewhat young, yet very distinguished artist, he asked Plotkin to paint murals on the ceilings of his new home. Following his move to Dallas, Plotkin met and married a Russian Jewish woman, came to faith in Jesus as his Messiah and Savior, and together they had three sons.²

In 1929, the family moved to Abilene, Texas, where Dr. Plotkin was to head the new art department at Simmons College (now Hardin-Simmons University). Rev. Albert T. Douglass, who lived across the street from Simmons College, commissioned this distinguished Southern Baptist artist to paint a memorial portrait of Lottie Moon in such a way as to "challenge every Southern Baptist to renewed and more consistent consecration to Christ."³ Douglass invited Mrs. Jewel Legett Herrin (later, Mrs. Jewel Daniel), who recently returned from missionary service to

China, to work with the artist in the planning and research for the painting. During this time, work on the painting consumed the thoughts of all involved. There was, however, something of eternal consequence that transpired as work progressed, for Plotkin's wife accepted Jesus as her Messiah and Redeemer at the urging of Rev. and Mrs. Douglass.

In light of this background, it has been suggested that the reason Hebrew was chosen over Greek was that Plotkin did not know Greek, though he knew Hebrew well. Although at first this argument may seem logical, it cannot stand, for Plotkin did not know Chinese either! Furthermore, great effort was expended to insure accuracy in the details of the painting. Surely all involved knew that the original language of the New Testament was Greek. Still, I was left with my question.

Romans 1:16 seems to be the verse that explains why Hebrew is in the painting. Paul writes, *"For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek."* Based on the standard Greek lexicon, "first" should probably be translated "especially" in this verse.⁴

Based on this verse, as well as others, and on the apparent distinction between apostles to the Jews and apostles to the gentiles, some conclude that there are only two kinds of missions in the New Testament – not home and foreign, but Jewish missions and gentile missions.

The answer I sought came from Plotkin, himself. While working on the painting, Plotkin wrote, "When the picture is finished will you tell them that it was painted by an old Jew who went in the wrong road 46 years but found Jesus at last; and that He loves His people?"⁵ It appears the artist was primarily motivated by a love for his Lord and for the Jewish people. Plotkin's own son revealed that Romans 1:16 was in fact one of his father's favorite verses.

The artist was not alone in his burden for Jewish evangelism. Jewel (Herrin) Daniel went to China at the invitation of Lottie Moon and counted herself a close friend. She had been forced from China by the Communist threat in 1926, but determined to continue with missionary work at home. She said, "The verse that says, 'Tell it to the Jew first' kept going through my mind. Then the Lord said that He wanted me to take up Jewish work."⁶ She devoted herself to Jewish ministry in Dallas from 1930 until near the end of her life, in 1991, at the age of 106.

The story is told of two of Lottie Moon's contemporaries. Each year Hudson Taylor would send a check to the Mildmay Mission to the Jews, a British mission organization founded and directed by John Wilkinson. On the notation line of the check, Taylor would write, "To the Jew first." And every year, John Wilkinson sent a check to the China Inland Mission, directed by Hudson Taylor. On the notation line, Wilkinson would write, "... and also to the Greek."⁷

The likeliest basis for our answer seems to be Romans 1:16. The painting of Lottie Moon was intended to stir an interest in missions. The English and Chinese represent the gentile world, while the Hebrew reminds us of the concern every believer should have for the salvation of the Jewish people.

Though Crawford Toy may have had nothing to do with the Hebrew in the painting, in 1875 (two years after Lottie had left for China), at the annual meeting of the Southern Baptist Convention, Toy introduced the following resolution, which was adopted by the messengers:

WHEREAS, In the providence of God there seems now to be a special call on Southern Baptists to make effort for the conversion of the Jews; therefore,

Resolved. That the Home Mission Board be instructed to inquire into the expediency of appointing, and if found practicable, to send out a missionary to the Jews, as soon as a suitable man can be found.

Until about 1950, this understanding of the missionary task of the Church was much more common among Southern Baptists, and there was a much greater emphasis on Jewish evangelism than there has been in the intervening decades. But God has given us a new day and a renewed awareness of the need to share the gospel with our Jewish friends ... and also with our gentile friends.

1 *The City of the Great King; or, Jerusalem As It Was, As It Is, and As It Is To Be*. Philadelphia: C. Desilver, 1859.

2 Based on a personal interview with his oldest son, Mr. Peter Plotkin, Jr., January 11, 1999.

3 Jewel Daniel, "Painting and Presentation of the Lottie Moon Memorial Picture," the WMU archives.

4 Bauer, Arndt, Gingrich, & Danker, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, 1979, p. 726 (2.c.).

5 *Daniel*, p.3.

6 *Baptist Standard*, 8/22/64, p. 12.

7 Samuel H. Wilkinson, *The Life of John Wilkinson, Jewish Missionary*. London: Morgan & Scott, 1908, pp. 308f.