

# The Japanese Hymnal

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Of the hymnals discussed in this issue, the Japanese is unique in that it is used by a people with no tradition of hymn singing. The current hymnal is the third used by the Saints in Japan. Elder Alma O. Taylor translated the first two LDS hymns during the summer of 1902, one year after arriving in Japan at age 19. Shortly before that, on February 10, 1902, Elder Taylor had delivered the first LDS speech in Japanese, a testimony laboriously prepared the previous night.<sup>1</sup> Because of the overwhelming difficulty of the Japanese language, these first hymns were regarded by some as "vulgar and coarse"; yet one critic said, "I forget the vulgar, unrefined words while listening to your rendition of the music."<sup>2</sup>

The first hymnal, the *Psalmody of the Japan Mission of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, was published in 1905. Compiled by Elders Horace S. Ensign and Frederick A. Caine, the sixty-six translations contained therein were the work of "several persons, but in every instance the services of Japanese poets were secured to arrange the hymns into Japanese verse."<sup>3</sup> The hymns originated in the English LDS *Hymn Book*, *Deseret Sunday School Song Book*, and the *Children's Friend*. Because the Japanese versions required more syllables than the original English texts, new tunes were written for each hymn. These tunes "proved to be imperfect from a musical standpoint and the songs were so long that much of the force of the words was lost."<sup>4</sup> It was suggested that the texts be reset to fit the original tunes so that the missionaries, already familiar with the melodies, could give more support in hymn singing. With this in mind, preparation of the second hymnal commenced in the summer of 1914. Completed in 1915, it contained 220 hymns and was used until 1960. During the period 1924-1948 missionaries were withdrawn from Japan, and the Church virtually ceased to exist there.

The present hymnal (1960) contains 299 hymns, 208 from the 1915 Japanese edition and the remainder from the 1958 English version. The texts of 207 of the 208 already translated were altered to render more precise meaning or to better match the music. One of the two settings of the Doxology was the only text unchanged. Alterations ranged from a change in verb conjugation to a nearly complete retranslation.

In many instances the Japanese translation has improved on the original text. For instance, the Japanese version of "How Firm a Foundation" overcomes the stuttering effect of the last eight measures of the English text by replacing the four-line stanzas with five-line stanzas, with no repetition of the text.

The Japanese hymnal contains hymns of all types, including those of Mormon, Protestant, and Catholic origin. Many hymns deleted in the current English hymnal are still sung in Japan. While the Japanese texts are generally outstanding, many of the hymn tunes are of poor quality, or have secular connotations. An example of the latter is "Lord, Dismiss Us With Thy Blessing" which is known to virtually every Japanese as the kindergarten song, "Musunde, Hiraite." Some other tunes that have been discontinued in the English edition (and some that haven't) do not reinforce the messages of the texts as prayers or praises to God. Perhaps the Japanese, apt at assimilating foreign cultures and disciplines, will one day soon write hymn tunes to equal the high quality of their hymn texts.

<sup>1</sup>[Don W. Marsh], *The Light of the Sun: Japan and the Saints* (n.p., [1968?]), p. 13.