

Dear friend,

I would like to share with you a piece of glad tidings.

About three months ago I was astonished to receive a totally unexpected letter from the Secretary of the British Academy that the Academy had decided to confer on me a Burkitt medal for 2017. Francis Crawford Burkitt (1864-1935) was a distinguished Cambridge professor with significant contributions on the textual criticism of the New Testament and Eastern churches. In memory of his achievements the Academy has been awarding a medal since 1925 in alternating years to New Testament and Old Testament scholars for their outstanding contributions. This year was the turn of an Old Testament scholar.

On the evening of September 27 there was held at the British Academy in London a ceremony of presentation, which I was privileged to attend to receive a medal for Hebrew Bible studies as a recognition by the Academy of my "outstanding contribution to the study of Hebrew grammar and syntax, and the Septuagint" (so in their letter of June 16). About twenty other scholars representing diverse disciplines of humanities and social sciences also received an award or medal. Each recipient was allowed to make a 2-minute acceptance speech and was allowed to bring up to two guests. My wife and our daughter, who lives and works in London, were there. My English speech ran as follows:

My academic career began in 1970 in Manchester as a lecturer in Semitic languages. On the evening of the second Sunday of November that year I switched on our TV, and saw BBC2 telecasting a well-known film, "The bridge on the River Kwai." That was the first time I got to know of those dark pages of my national history. About three months ago, when I received an astounding notice from the British Academy about conferring on me a Burkitt medal for this year, I cast an eye over the list of the past recipients of this medal, and I was absolutely stunned. I was sorely tempted to write a parody of a famous Charles Wesley hymn in the strain of something like: "And can it be that I should gain an interest in the Burkitt medal, a scion of a nation that caused Brits pain, pursuing many to cruel deaths? Amazing grace, that I should be deemed worthy of this honour!" I wouldn't be surprised if there are among fellows of the Academy those who lost their father, uncle or grandfather to these atrocities. This medal has fortified my determination to continue to journey along my Via dolorosa of biblical philology, not alone, but supported by my wife and children, until the day when I hear from up there, 'Muraoka, Τετέλεσται, mission complete.' Thank you so much.

The time limit of two minutes did not allow me to elaborate any further, and the majority of the audience, British, easily understood what I meant. Let me, however, elaborate somewhat. The above-mentioned film is a 1957 British-American co-production about a 415km long railway laid by the Imperial Japanese Army during the WW2, Thai-Burma railway, by employing, against the then current international law, POWs of the Allied Forces. This extremely arduous engineering project caused unimaginable degrees of pain and loss. A total of 61,811 British, Australian, Dutch and American POWs were made to toil, resulting in 12,621 deaths. Of 30,131 British POWs 6,904 perished. There were also brought well over 200,000 labourers from neighbouring Asian countries, ending in tens of thousands of lives lost. The film focuses on a bridge along the line and on the River Kwai near Kanchanaburi in Thailand. In the British Commonwealth the second Sunday of November is called "Remembrance Sunday," and even today Commonwealth soldiers who died in the two world wars of the last century are commemorated through diverse events and activities.

During the reception following the presentation ceremony a number of British people came up to me to say that they had been deeply touched by my speech. Subsequently a few

other people mailed to me, conveying the same sentiment.

It seems to me that this award is not only a personal honour accorded to me by the British Academy, but also a recognition of the rising level of biblical scholarship in Asia. Among the past recipients of the Burkitt medal I spotted a number of European (non-British) and American scholars, but not a single Asian. The overwhelming majority of my own publications are in English, but I do have a number written in Japanese meant for advanced specialists such as an annotated translation of books of the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha. In the recent decades there have been a non-negligible number of Asian scholars gaining a higher degree in theology, biblical studies or Ancient Near Eastern studies, and many of them had their dissertations published and contribute articles to international journals. This applies not only to Japan, but also to Korea and a few other Asian countries.

The hymn of Wesley (1738) begins with: "And can it be that I should gain an interest in the Saviour's blood. Died He for me, who caused His pain? For me, who Him to death pursued? Amazing love! how can it be that Thou, my God, shouldst die for me! etc." *Via dolorosa* is Latin for 'a way of sorrow,' a route in Jerusalem which Jesus trod to Golgotha, carrying His own cross. It is also in the title of my book *My Via dolorosa along the trails of the Japanese Imperialism in Asia*, published last year; it records my voluntary teaching ministry in Asian countries where since my retirement in 2003 I have been teaching my specialism a minimum of five weeks every year. Since 1964, when I left for Jerusalem to advance my knowledge of Hebrew, I have been living outside of Japan, but I'm still a Japanese national by choice. Some people say to me that I should perhaps not mix scholarship with politics, but my answer still is: "I am a human being, Japanese, before I am a scholar."

In my speech I said I cannot miss my wife's and children's support. My wife, who studied biochemistry at a university in Tokyo, could have chosen the path of a career woman, but chose to remain a full-time housewife and a mother of three children born within a space of five years. My *Greek-English Lexicon of the Septuagint* (2009) is dedicated to her: "To Keiko, my wife, who has suffered me so long and who has suffered with me and for me so much." My children were deprived of the pleasure of being spoiled by doting grandparents and were on constant move, one year in Jerusalem for the first son, then with his siblings ten years in UK, 11 years down under in Melbourne, Australia, and then back up to Europe, all because of their father, an academic gypsy.

In the course of my global peregrination I have become indebted to many other individuals, institutions, and publishers. Allow me to single out my late parents, to whom I dedicated my *Grammar of Qumran Aramaic* (2011):

"In fond and grateful memory of Yoshie Muraoka and Sachi Muraoka, who suffered their eldest child and only son to live and work in strange, far-off lands, thereby depriving himself of the chance to pay them his last respects."

The medal I received is a round bronze medal, 7 cm in diameter. On one side there is engraved in Latin: "Fons sapientiae verbum dei" and the other side has an open Bible engraved with a Latin text "meos direxit gressus", so "The fountain of knowledge, the word of God, has directed my steps" and on the open page of the Bible I can read "Vivus est sermo Dei et efficax", i.e. "The word of God is alive and in action" (Heb. 4.12).

Sincerely,
takamitsu muraoka