



## Spreading the Word Through Japanese Manga

By Roald Lidal

Manga—the Japanese comic style—has for years been extremely popular in its country of origin. A staggering 2.1 billion manga magazines and books are sold every year.

The top selling manga title is Shonen Jump, a 486-page magazine which sells 3.2 million copies every single week. Manga now accounts for 40 percent of all published titles in Japan. It is not only read by children and young adults, but by businessmen, professionals and people from all walks of life.

Japan is not alone in its love for manga. It now constitutes a significant part of 21<sup>st</sup> century world pop culture. This unique visual style appeals to youth across the globe. New Life League Japan <http://www.nlljapan.com/e/index.htm> has for many years had a desire to reach Japan's youth through manga. A few years ago we held manga contests to find Christian illustrators, and we published five different titles as a result. While they sold far more copies than any regular book, we did not feel we made the impact we wanted with these first efforts.

We then conceived the idea of re-telling the main story of the Bible in manga form. At this time the Lord sent highly professional manga artists our way. We also decided to think globally, rather than just domestically.

The first book, Manga Messiah, was therefore first published in English in 2006 in the United Kingdom and the Philippines,

and released in the United States and Canada in 2007. This year, the Japanese, Spanish, Norwegian and Indonesian editions have been published, and 13 more languages will soon be ready for printing. To date, 650,000 copies of Manga Messiah have been printed, but before the end of 2008 we expect to reach at least 1.5 million copies. The second New Testament book, Manga Metamorphosis, is just off the press in Japanese, and English will follow in a few weeks. The Old Testament has been divided into three titles: Manga Mutiny, Manga Melech and Manga Messengers. The first of these will be out by the fall of 2008. New Life League Japan has established a U.S.-based non-profit organization, called NEXT [<http://www.nextmanga.com/>], to hold copyrights and distribute publishing rights. Our goal is to see millions of these books distributed throughout the world in at least 30 languages. Publishers worldwide are very enthusiastic about them.

We want to reach the world's youth – often referred to as the largest unreached segment of the world's population. We are working to distribute 800,000 copies of Manga Messiah to schoolchildren in Uganda. Prison ministries and youth ministries have shown great interest in these titles as well.

We have just started, but have been overwhelmed with the response from both readers and publishers. In Japan, where a Christian book normally sells to the tune of only 1,500 – 2,000 copies per year, the first

25,000 copies of Manga Messiah sold in a matter of less than three months. Another 10,000 are presently on the press, and we are planning a printing of 100,000 for summer outreaches.

In Singapore, one organization sold 11,000 copies within two weeks. A girl in the Philippines wrote us saying she had only one complaint: she could never read Manga Messiah alone. Several others were always reading over her shoulder.

Some feel that manga “cheapens” the Gospel, that God’s Holy Word should not be put into such a form. We at New Life League, however, feel that to reach today’s youth we need to speak a language they understand.

We did not want these manga books to appear religious, as this could be a hindrance to the Gospel. Therefore, we used the Hebrew names for Jesus, Mary and Joseph. Rather than referring to the Bible, we spoke of the “Ancient texts.”

We did not, will not and cannot change the Gospel message, but do believe manga has a great potential to relay old truths in new ways. Manga speaks to the emotions, and we believe children and people from all walks of life will be touched by the Gospel message through these books.

This manga product does not simply tell Bible stories in a captivating way. It focuses on the story of the Bible: God seeking to save the lost.

The development cost of these books is naturally very high. We are, however, seeking to cover these through grants and royalties. The purpose of the books is ministry. We believe a high quality product at a low cost, in a form that today’s youth will read and appreciate, has potential beyond anything we have seen in the world of literature in recent years.

*Japan is not alone in its love of manga style books and magazines.*

*In Hong Kong it has been estimated that manga hold 60 percent of the market share. In South Korea, it had captured 50 – 70 percent of the market even before it became legal to sell manga there in 1998. In Thailand the Japanese comic book business is worth more than US\$ 66 million. Manga is not just an Asian phenomenon. In the United Kingdom, sales of manga doubled between 2003 and 2004. In France, Japanese manga made up 14 percent of the entire comics market in 2003, with a wholesale value of \$25 million. In 2004, Germany was estimated to have a manga readership of 2.4 million and growing. In Latin America, especially Mexico, translated Japanese manga are fast replacing traditional comics on the newsstands.*

*Manga is one of the fastest-growing segments of the American publishing industry. The leading publisher of manga for English-readers estimates their audience at nearly 15 million fans. Sales in United States and Canada together in 2005 reached over \$207 million dollars.*

*Manga is not a fad or craze but is now firmly entrenched within the world's highly-connected youth culture, showing steady growth in the Western marketplace since the 1970s. Youth are embracing manga on an ever-increasing scale internationally. This includes large numbers of girls (approximately 60 percent of US readership is female), and adolescent males who have grown up with PlayStations and the Internet and normally do not regard themselves as regular book readers.*

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