

Image: courtesy of Ellie Muraoka

Takamitsu Muraoka (1938 – 2026)

On February 10, 2026, Professor Takamitsu Muraoka (Hiroshima 1938 – Leiden 2026) passed away, one day after having celebrated his 88th birthday. Early in December 2025, the death of his wife of sixty years, Keiko, came as a terrible blow, and on Christmas Day 2025 Muraoka himself suffered a stroke, from which he never fully recovered.

The Muraoka family lived in a rural village in the Kagoshima Prefecture, in the far South of Japan. Muraoka's father was a high-ranking officer in the Japanese military and had envisioned a career for his son as a diplomat. The young man, however, much preferred the humanities and chose to read English philology and then Biblical languages and literature (Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek) under Professor Masao Sekine at the Tōkyō Kyōiku University (nowadays University of Tsukuba). As a student he would occasionally visit his parental home; traveling by train from Tokyo at the time took about thirteen hours – a trip that he found pleasant and interesting, even more so than when the trains gradually became faster. In 1964 he went to study at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem (Israel) under various renowned Hebraists and Semitists, including E.Y. Kutscher, C. Rabin, S. Talmon and M. Goshen-Gottstein; that is where he acquired complete fluency in Modern Hebrew.

In 1970 Muraoka defended his Ph.D. dissertation, which was eventually published in a revised expanded version as *Emphatic Words and Structures in Biblical Hebrew* (Jerusalem/Leiden 1985). His dissertation would mark the beginning of a long and remarkable career in Semitic and Biblical philology, lexicography, and linguistics (Biblical and Qumran Hebrew, various types of Aramaic, and Septuagint Greek), with a special focus on syntax. The impressive depth and variety of his knowledge, combined with an indomitable working ethic, would earn Muraoka international fame and recognition as one of the world's greatest scholars in the field.

Immediately after defending his dissertation in 1970, he was appointed as a Lecturer for Semitic Languages at Manchester University (UK). From 1980 to 1991 Muraoka was a full professor of Middle Eastern Studies at Melbourne University (Australia). In 1991 he came to Leiden University (The Netherlands) to take the chair of Hebrew Language and Literature, Israelite Antiquities, and Ugaritic, a post he would hold until his retirement in 2003. Upon arrival in Leiden, he amazed his students by teaching in Dutch from the very start. The present writer remembers a scene during one of the first classes on Hebrew epigraphy. As we were reading the Shiloam inscription, Muraoka asked us about the meaning in Dutch of the word *garzen*. Convinced of his ignorance, we informed the professor that it meant *bijl* ('axe'). The professor hesitated for a moment and said: 'Een *bijl*? Hm, weet u zeker dat het geen *pikhouweel* is?' ('An axe? Hm, are you quite sure it isn't a pick-axe?') Of course the professor was right and the students were amazed at the level of preparation of their newly-arrived teacher.

Muraoka was the editor of the journal *Abr-Nahrain* (1980–1992) and co-edited several volumes on various aspects of Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek. In 2017, he was awarded the Burkitt medal by the British Academy for his 'outstanding contribution to the study of Hebrew grammar and syntax, and the Septuagint.' A complete bibliography for the period 1964–2001 was published in the Festschrift for his sixty-fifth birthday, *Hamlet on a Hill* (2003: 631–44). The *otium* he enjoyed after his retirement as a Leiden Professor in 2003 enabled Muraoka to keep working with unremitting zeal on further major publications. Among his more recent works the following should be mentioned: *A Greek-English Lexicon of the Septuagint* (2009), *A Grammar of Qumran Aramaic* (2011), *An Introduction to Egyptian Aramaic* (2012), *Classical Syriac for Hebraists* (2nd ed., 2015), *A Biblical Aramaic Reader with an Outline Grammar* (2015), *A Biblical Hebrew Reader with an Outline Grammar* (2017), *Jacob of Serugh's Hexaemeron* (2018), *A Syntax of Qumran Hebrew* (2020), *Wisdom of Ben Sira* (2023), *The Book of Judith* (2025). It is worth pointing out that several other bulky works are still under way and will hopefully be published posthumously.

In his private life, there was another major project to which he devoted much of his time. His viewing of the famous 1957 film *The Bridge over the River Kwai* in 1970 for the first time opened his eyes to the dark pages of his own national history and the atrocities committed by the Japanese military forces. The film tells the story of the Thai-Burma railway, when many prisoners of war were forced to do hard labour, which led to the loss of tens of thousands of lives. The experience had a profound influence on his view of Japanese militarism and led to a fateful decision. Muraoka himself was a devout Christian. After his retirement from Leiden University in 2003 he made it a point to give yearly lecture series on biblical languages and the Septuagint for at least a month at Christian seminaries in various Asian countries that had suffered under the Japanese occupation, including South Korea, Indonesia, Singapore, Hong Kong, Shanghai, and the Philippines. (As of 2021 he did the same online.) He also edited and translated into Japanese the personal memoirs of E. Willem Lindeijer, a Dutch science teacher and medical orderly from the Dutch East Indies, who was held as a prisoner of war in Kamaishi (Iwate, Japan) during World War II and was forced to work in the iron mines there. This autobiographical document deeply impressed Muraoka since, despite the hardships described, it contained not a single reproach towards the Japanese. The book was published in Japan as *Kisses to Nell and the Children. From a Japanese Prisoner of War Camp* (ネルと子供たちにキスを—日本の捕虜収容所から; Tōkyō: Misuzu Shobō, 2000). It was used as the basis for a musical staged by pupils of a high school in Kamaishi in 2004. In 2015, Muraoka attended the Wednesday Demonstration for Japanese military comfort women victims held in Korea, on which occasion he spoke the following words: 'The history of the Japanese

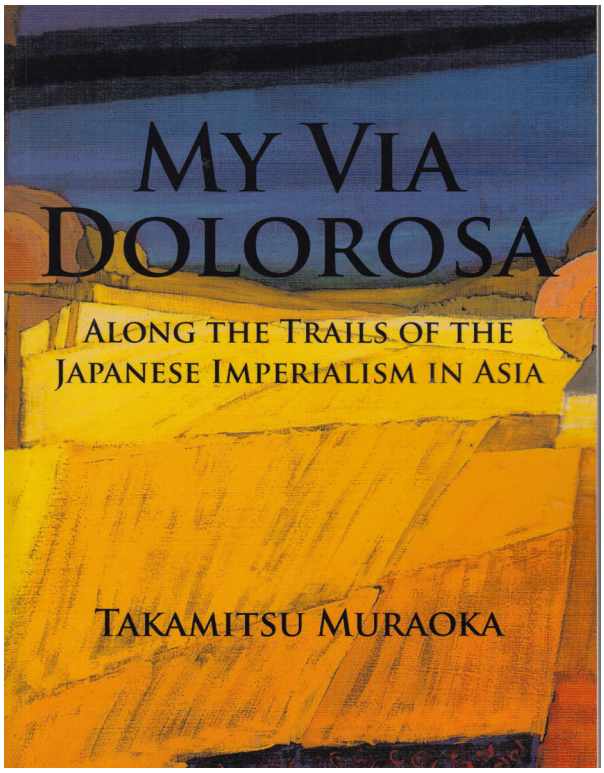


Figure 1: *The cover of* My Via Dolorosa: Along the Trails of the Japanese Imperialism in Asia, *AuthorHouse UK, 2016.*

military inflicting wounds on you and trampling your dignity as human beings is the history of my homeland, and I bear responsibility as a Japanese citizen. (…) As a Japanese citizen, I feel nothing but shame and intense anger at the current government's actions that worsen the wounds of the victims.'[1] In 2000, Muraoka was also a co-founder of the Foundation 'Dialogue Netherlands-Japan-Indonesia'. On his long-term endeavour towards international reconciliation Muraoka published a personal testimony, entitled *My Via Dolorosa. Along the Trails of the Japanese Imperialism in Asia* (Figure 1).

Takamitsu Muraoka will be remembered by his former colleagues and grateful students as a devoted teacher, a faithful mentor, a scholar of well-nigh unfathomable learning, and a remarkable human being.[2]

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1 *Seoul Economic Daily*, February 14, 2026 (https://en.sedaily.com/politics/2026/02/14/japanese-scholar-who-apologized-to-comfort-women-victims).
2 An interesting interview with Muraoka by William A. Ross is at https://williamaross.com/2018/02/08/12th-international-lxx-day-an-interview-with-t-muraoka/. A one-hour interview with him from 2024 for the Asian Biblical and Theological Network in Europe is at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5rNbIipxJeU.