

Japan, the Jews, and divine election: Nakada Jūji's Christian nationalism

In late 19th and early 20th century Japan, several popular religious movements and ideologies emerged combining nationalist notions on the divine nature of the Japanese people and country with millenarian beliefs in the imminent replacement of the current world order by a perfect new world. 'New religions' such as Ōmoto and Sōka Gakkai drew on existing Shinto and Buddhist notions, reinterpreting them in the context of modern Japanese society. Other movements and religious leaders at the time used millenarian and nationalist notions in their attempts to reconcile an imported Christian belief system with their Japanese identity.¹ Aike Rots examines one of these leaders, the evangelist, theologian and missionary Nakada Jūji (1870-1939).

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NAKADA JŪJI CO-FOUNDED the Japanese Holiness Church and wrote extensively on a number of topics, including the relationship between the Japanese nation and the Jews. This article gives a brief introduction to Nakada's life and thought – a creative combination of evangelical millenarianism, Japanese nationalism, political Zionism and Japanese-Jewish common ancestry theories – with particular emphasis on its political subtexts.²

Nakada Jūji was born in 1870. He grew up in the town of Hirosaki, present-day Aomori prefecture, where he was a member of the local Methodist church. In his twenties, he moved to the US, to study theology at the Moody Bible Institute in Chicago. This institute was founded by Dwight Lyman Moody (1837-1899), one of the most influential 19th century American evangelists. Moody advocated a literal or 'fundamentalist' interpretation of the Bible, the experience of sanctification or 'holiness' (the experience of being washed away from sins by the grace of Christ), missionary activism and, significantly, a radical pre-millennial eschatology. These ideas became the point of departure for Nakada's theology. Back in Japan, he founded the Oriental Missionary Society (*Tōyō Senkyōkai*), together with two American missionaries, in 1905. However, despite the initial similarities in belief systems, tensions between Nakada and his partners soon grew. In 1917, Nakada founded his own independent denomination, which he called the Oriental Missionary Holiness Church (*Tōyō Senkyōkai Hōrinesu Kyōkai*). He himself assumed the role of absolute, charismatic leader.

In the course of the late 1920s and early 1930s Nakada's thought became increasingly nationalistic and anti-Western. In 1932, he delivered a series of six lectures on what he thought were Biblical prophecies concerning Japan; these lectures were published as *Seisho yori mitaru Nihon* ('Japan seen from the Bible').³ Shortly thereafter, he published the strongly millenarian *Kokumin e no keikoku* ('Warning to the Nation'),⁴ in which he repeated the conclusions of *Seisho yori mitaru Nihon*, predicted an apocalyptic final war and stressed the urgency of collective Japanese action. These ideas were further developed in a series of short articles and sermons. This development in Nakada's thought met with much resistance within his own denomination and culminated in the schism of 1936. From that moment, Nakada's branch of the Holiness Church continued under the name Kiyome Kyōkai. Meanwhile, the Japanese government had become increasingly intolerant towards the religious movements it considered potentially subversive, and



Above: Nakada Jūji (1870-1939).

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large-scale persecution followed in the early 1940s. Nakada himself did not live to experience this, however, as he died on 24 September 1939.

Jewish heritage and Zionism

Nakada strongly supported the Zionist case and considered the restoration of Israel to be a prerequisite for the Second Coming of Christ. This does not mean Nakada was pro-Jewish, or philo-Semitic, as one scholar has labelled him.⁵ In fact, his stance towards the Jews was much more ambivalent. While he condemned the increasing persecution of the Jews, he also apologetically stated that it was a result of their own sins, and part of God's plan to bring them back to the Holy Land and ('re-') establish the State of Israel.⁶ Nevertheless, they did play an important part in his origin narrative, as well as his millenarian scheme of events, as God's original chosen people. The identification of the Japanese with the Jews was used by Nakada to justify his assertion that the Japanese nation was divinely elected, as we shall see below.

In the course of his life, Nakada came to perceive nations as absolute primordial entities, which all had their particular part to play in God's divine plan. Even his soteriology became nationalistic and he came to consider salvation as something given to entire nations, rather than individuals. Furthermore, in line with nationalist discourse at the time, which was closely connected to notions of origins and 'race', Nakada was looking for an origin myth that would legitimise his identification of true Christianity with the Japanese nation, and allow him to lay claim to the 'empowering heritage'⁷ of 'original' Christianity, not only ideologically but also genealogically.⁸ Unsurprisingly, Nakada was very interested in the common ancestry theories that had been developed by Saeki Yoshirō (1871-1965) and Oyabe Zen'ichirō (1867-1941). These scholars had re-appropriated the centuries-old European myth of the Lost Tribes of Israel,⁹ by suggesting that the Japanese were the descendants of God's chosen people, the original Jewish tribes and, therefore, shared a common ancestry with the contemporary Jews. Following their ideas, Nakada provided ample historical 'evidence' for the Jewish migration to Japan. For instance, he stressed the apparent similarities between Japanese and Jewish traditions, such as religious festivals and shrine architecture, which he considered unmistakable proof of the shared heritage.¹⁰ Nakada went further, creatively combining the Japanese-Jewish common ancestry theories with European myths of racial descent and arriving at the conclusion that the Japanese were the only people in the world 'composed of' all different races.¹¹ This myth of the unique genetic make-up of the Japanese people not only identified the Japanese with the Jews, thereby suggesting that they were also the descendants of God's chosen people, it also implicitly stated the racial superiority of the Japanese.

Divine election and imperialism

Nakada believed that the Japanese nation had a crucial part to play in the End Time, and the preparation for the Second Coming of Christ. This claim was further legitimised by his Biblical exegesis. He saw any Biblical references to the east and the rising sun as prophecies regarding Japan and its divine mission. Examples include the angel coming up from the east mentioned in Revelation 7:1-4, and the rising of the sun mentioned in Psalms 50:1 and 113:3. Moreover, the 'unknown nation' that, according to Isaiah 55:5, would come to the aid of Israel, was identified with Japan.¹²

Nakada stated that the divine responsibility of the Japanese people was to earnestly and collectively pray: for the imminent arrival of Christ, for the Jewish people, and for the restoration of Israel. According to Nakada, God had chosen the Japanese people to perform this task because, he believed, they were only nation in the world that had never done any harm to His chosen people, the Jews. As he stated firmly, the Japanese people were divinely elected to save the Jews from their persecutors, and support them in the creation of their own state.¹³ Nakada's condemnation of Western anti-Semitism fits well with his attempts to discredit the West and its corrupted interpretations of Christianity; and, accordingly, to create a binary opposition between, on the one hand, the nations of the East (including Japan, the Jews, and the other 'Asian' nations), and on the other, the morally degraded West, which was presented as responsible for the corruption of Christianity and the suffering of God's people.

However, the divine mission of the Japanese people was not limited to harmlessly praying for the Jews, or donating money. As with other millenarian ideologies, despite claiming that the ultimate goal is world peace, violence played an important part in Nakada's eschatology. The increasing militarisation of Japan was wholeheartedly supported by Nakada, who perceived the great war that was about to happen as providential and as a requirement for the collapse of this world order and the establishment of a new one. In concrete political terms: the British occupation of Palestine at the time was interpreted by Nakada in the light of his radical East-West dichotomy, according to which the British were a morally corrupted colonial power occupying

the Holy Land, and it was part of God's plan that the Japanese army would 'save' the Jews from this oppressor.¹⁴ Thus, according to Nakada, the Japanese army, while not being aware of it, were in fact serving God. Eventually, supported by the prayers of the nation, the Japanese army would rescue the Jews from the Western powers – which were in name Christian, but actually represented the Antichrist – and help them establish the State of Israel. Hence, despite his condemnation of the Western oppression of the Jews, Nakada was strongly supportive of Japanese. Unsurprisingly then, according to Nakada's exegesis, even Japan's military rise and intervention was prophesied in the Bible: 'Isaiah 46 says 'from the east I summon a bird of prey'. This 'bird' refers to airplanes. The surprisingly powerful airplanes rising up from the country in the east will meet with the Antichrist and rescue the troubled nation [the Jews].'¹⁵

It can be argued that Nakada used the Jews to legitimate his own nationalist agenda, in which the dominant Other were not so much the Jews, but the West. As they had long constituted 'the Other's main Other', the creation of this imagined alliance between the Jews and the Japanese was part of a strategy for the differentiation between East and West. Moreover, as the Jews had always carried the ambivalent label of being the 'chosen people' in the dominant European religious ideology, this identification served to create a divine justification for the moral, religious and racial superiority of the Japanese people. The Jews, however, were denied any agency – they were presented as completely passive victims of the corrupted Western nations' persecution, dependent on the Japanese nation to rescue them. Eventually, Nakada's theological project developed into a myth of differentiation between East and West, and a Christian-Zionist ideological legitimisation of Japanese militarism and imperialism. Despite its radical conclusions, it was firmly embedded in contemporary religious and political discourses and drew on a variety of ideological sources (Evangelical millenarianism, pan-Asian imperialism, and theories of ethnic descent), which it combined creatively. As such, it can be seen as a peculiar but genuine attempt to re-appropriate Christian ideology in such a way that it could be made compatible with Japanese national identity.

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9. See Parfitt, Tudor. 2002. *The Lost Tribes of Israel: The History of a Myth*. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson.
10. *Nihon-Isuraeru-jin* [Japanese Israelites]. NJZ. Vol. 7, 106-107; *Seisho yori mitaru Nihon* [Japan seen from the Bible]. NJZ. Vol. 2, 68-76.
11. He based this thought on the paradigm, dominant in Europe at the time, that the three sons of Noah (Shem, Ham and Japheth) were the early ancestors of the world's 'three races', according to which, it was believed, all nations could be categorised. See *Seisho yori mitaru Nihon* [Japan seen from the Bible]. NJZ. Vol. 2, 75.
12. *Seisho yori mitaru Nihon* [Japan seen from the Bible]. NJZ. Vol. 2, 167-169; *Kokumin e no keikoku* [Warning to the nation]. NJZ. Vol. 2, 184-195.
13. *Kokumin e no keikoku* [Warning to the Nation]. NJZ. Vol. 2, 190.
14. Needless to say, the Arab population of British Palestine (i.e. the vast majority) was remarkably absent from Nakada's scheme of events.
15. *Seisho yori mitaru Nihon* [Japan seen from the Bible]. NJZ. Vol. 2, 122-123.