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 that projected the replacement of the current world order by a perfect new world. ‘New religious’ 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.  

Alke Rots examines one of these leaders, the evangelist, theologian and missionary Nakada Jūji (1870-1939).

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 theology became nationalistic and he came to consider salvation as something given to the world that had never done any harm to His chosen people, the Jews. As he stated firmly, the Japanese people were divinely elected, therefore they were also the descendants of God’s chosen people, which 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 and theological 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 as prophecies regarding Japan and its divine election.

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 to establish the Kingdom of God. 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 ‘Asiatic’ 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 Israel alone. See also: Seisho yori mitaru Nihon [Japan seen from the Bible].

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References


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 earliest ancestors of the world’s races, according to which, it was believed, all nations could be categorized as either: Seisho yori mitaru Nihon [Japan seen from the Bible]. NJZ, Vol. 2, 75.


14. Needless to say, the Arab population of British Palestine (i.e. the vast majority) was remarkably absent from Nakada’s scheme of events.