

The Rise of Interest in Jewish Studies in Japanese Academia

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This will be a brief report on the present status of Jewish Studies in Japan. Please be aware that I am going to deal with a country where you can find only two (registered) synagogues, and where most of the people do not know that the Hebrew language is spoken today somewhere in the world. Yet, owing to the symposium's confines, this paper aims to introduce only an outline for those who do not possess any previous knowledge on the subject.

I venture to insert here a short anecdote from my personal experiences in order to give an example of how it *was* before we see how it *is*. It goes back to 1996, on the occasion of the oral defense of my master's thesis in Biblical studies. I can recall the frown of one of the juries, saying, "You have many scientific and modern commentaries out there, but you cite from this medieval Jewish exegete...What was his name again? Oh, yes! Ra..Rashi" (He might be wondering whether this was the first or family name!). The then head of the department, who later became a president of the *International Society of Comparative Literature*, seemed to be calling me, without any malice, 'hebrai yarō' [Hebrew guy]. Other graduate students referred to me as 'Yudaya no hito' [the Jewish man]. Today, with many more such colleagues specializing in Jewish scholarship, you would need to be more specific to identify a scholar of Jewish studies

1. Academic associations for Jewish Studies

We have today three scholarly societies for Jewish Studies in Japan: one "reborn," so to speak, and two founded quite recently. Even these "births" (and one renewal) alone would indicate to us a noticeable increase of interest in Jewish Studies in Japan.

The oldest is *Nihon Yudaya Gakkai* [The Japan Society for Jewish Studies]. This was founded in 1960 in Tokyo, 52 years ago, and originally known as

Nihon Isuraeru Bunka Kyōkai [Japan Association for Jewish Studies¹]. It has borne the present name since 2006. Although not explicit in English translations, the difference of nuance between the old *Kyōkai* and the new *Gakkai* would never be overlooked by any Japanese eyes: the term *Gakkai* conveys that this is now a learned society with a seriously scientific attitude and professionally qualified scholars, whereas *Kyōkai* sounds more neutral.²

In Kobe in 1995, the same year when the great earthquake once ravaged the city, the second oldest (or the second youngest) organization came into being: *Nihon Yudaya Bunka Kenkyūkai* [Japanese-Jewish Friendship and Study Society³]. This society also changed its name, in 2004, to *Kobe Yudaya Bunka Kenkyūkai* [Japanese-Jewish Friendship and Study Society in Kobe]. “Kobe” specifies the venue’s unique character as a welcoming international port town.⁴ This *Kenkyūkai* [study group] is no less than a *Gakkai* in reality, but with a somewhat more modest tone.

The youngest in the family is *Kyoto Yudaya Sisō Gakkai* [Kyoto Association of Jewish Thought], founded in 2008. This association, so far without a name change, does not limit its focus to thought (i.e., philosophy or ethics) alone, but extends its interests also into literature, linguistics, art, religion, and even politics.

2. Other research projects, accomplished and ongoing

The above three academic associations are not the only indicators which marked the rise of interest in Jewish Studies in Japanese academia.

From 1999 to 2004 at *Kokuritsu Minzokugaku Hakubutsukan* [National Museum of Ethnology] in Osaka, a research project called “Jewish Identity and its Regional Characteristics” held numerous workshops, inviting scholars from a variety of areas of Jewish Studies (for example: linguistics, politics, history, philosophy, philology, anthropology). Their core members published two joint works, after their long and intensive cooperation: *Wakaru Yudayagaku* [Jewish

¹ This is the English official appellation. Literal translation would be something like ‘Japan-Israel Association for Cultural Exchange,’ or ‘Japanese Association for Israeli Culture.’

² According to Hiraoka, this changing of the names resulted from the members’ voice to recognize their own activities over 40 years, and the developments in general of Jewish Studies in Japan. See Kotaro Hiraoka’s article, “Nihon ni okeru yudayagaku no genjō: Gakujutsu dantai no shuishotō no kōsatsu” [The Present Status of Jewish Studies in Japan: an Overview of the Prospectuses of Academic Associations] in “The World of Monotheistic Religions” (CISMOR, 2009, p. 55).

³ The word ‘friendship’ finds no equivalence in the Japanese original.

⁴ This attachment to its ‘place of birth’ is manifestly clear in “Toward an Inauguration of the Japanese-Jewish Friendship and Study Society” penned by the founder Kogishi Akira, to be seen on the first pages of every number of their journal, duly titled *Port/Namal/ נמל*.

Studies for All],⁵ an introductory guidebook for the larger public, and *Yudayajin to kokuminkokka* [The Jews and the Nation State],⁶ a collection of articles for the more cultivated audience. Those who participated in these workshops have been individually productive as well. Just to mention the three organizers: Usuki Akira, of the National Museum of Ethnology (now Japan Women's University) has published important works on politics, namely, on Israeli and Arab relationship,⁷ Ichikawa Hiroshi of Tokyo University has written on Jewish thought, focusing on rabbinical Judaism,⁸ and Teshima Isaiah of Doshisha University has written on the Jewish hermeneutic tradition of the Bible.⁹ Visiting scholars from abroad presented informative papers as well. They include: Emmanuel Tov (Hebrew University), Leora Batnitzky (Princeton University), and Norman Golb (University of Chicago).

In 2003, just shortly before the dissolution of the above project, Dōshisha University in Kyoto founded *CISMOR* (the Center for Interdisciplinary Studies of Monotheistic Religions) and the latter holds conferences of Jewish Studies annually. This center also invites renowned scholars from abroad: Avigdor Shinan (Hebrew University), Peter Schaeffer (Princeton University), Paul Mendes-Flohr (University of Chicago), and Jonathan Magonet (Leo Baeck College). With *CISMOR*, the Faculty of Theology in Doshisha is a rarity in the country, in that they assure two tenured posts for specialists in Judaism. The only other exception, so far as we know today, is a single post in the Department of Religious Studies at Tokyo University.

From 2008 to 2011, at *IIAS*, the Institute for International Advanced Studies in Kyoto, there was a workshop, much smaller in size than the two other projects above-mentioned, but no less fruitful in its activity. The workshop was entitled “Kindaiseishin to kotenkaishaku” [Modernity and Interpretations of Classical Texts]. The fifteen regular members consisted of six classicists (of Homeric studies) and nine Hebraists. Here too, the group enjoyed the rich insights and knowledge of visiting scholars from within the country and equally from abroad. The Hebraists among the latter were Alexander Rofé (Hebrew University), Jeffrey Tigay (University of Pennsylvania), and Takamitsu

⁵ Ed. Teshima Isaiah, *Nihonjitsugyō*, 2002.

⁶ Edited by Ichikawa Hiroshi, Usuki Akira Usuki, Otsuka Kazuo and Teshima Isaiah, Iwanami, 2008.

⁷ *Miezarū Yudayajin* [Invisible Jews: “Orient” in Israel], Heibonsha, 1998. *Sekaikasuru*

Paresutina/Isuraeru funsō [Globalized Conflicts between Palestine and Israel], Iwanami, 2004.

⁸ *Yudayakyō no seishinkōzō* [Spirit of Law in Rabbinic Judaism], University of Tokyo Press, 2004.

⁹ *Yudaya no seishokaishaku* [The Jewish Interpretations of the Bible: Spinoza and the turning points of historical criticism], Iwanami, 2009.

Muraoka (Leiden University). The collected papers were published this March.¹⁰ Seven of the articles were written in English in order to be accessible to a larger audience.

3. Some observations aside from 'institutional' developments

Not all the areas of Jewish studies have been equally treated. When Hiroshi Ichikawa's *Yudayakyō no seishinkouzō* [see footnote 6] was published in 2004, Katsumata Etsuko (Doshisha University) wrote in her review¹¹ that Ichikawa's book will become a pioneering work to fill the void in Jewish studies in Japan. There, she rightly pointed out that the rather flourishing fields at that time were limited to Holocaust studies, Israeli foreign policy, and modern Jewish thought (she names S. Freud, J. Derrida and E. Levinas), and that Judaism, however, despite its center-pillar status for the Jewish mind and its history, had not been seriously studied, except for some translations of introductory books.¹²

Nevertheless, it appears that the void will be filled in the long run. It is specifically in the Judaism-related fields, notably in Biblical studies and philosophy where, perhaps, the things are changing relatively quickly. It is important to note here that, all the existent Japanese translations of the Bible are accomplished by the hand of Christians, and mostly published by Christian associations, except Iwanami's new 'secular' translation which nonetheless respects the Christian order and appellation of the books. The translation of the Talmud has been an ongoing project since 1993.¹³ In addition, the Mishnah has also been partly translated.¹⁴ In 2009, *The Society for Old Testament Studies in Japan*, (note well the appellation) held a symposium entitled "Jewish Studies and Old Testament Studies" (note the order), and opened a way for Jewish-sensitive approaches to the Hebrew Bible. Thus it seems plausible that one day, the Tanakh will be translated as using approaches from Jewish studies, rather than as yet another version of *Kyuyaku Seisho* [the Old Testament].

As for today, it can be said that, even for educated Japanese readers, the

¹⁰ Ikeda Jun (ed.), *Kindaiseishin to kotenkaishaku—Dentō no hōkai to saikōchiku* [Modernity and Interpretations of Ancient Texts: the Collapse and Remaking of Traditions], IAS 1102.

¹¹ See *Journal of the Interdisciplinary Study of Monotheistic Religions*, vol. 1, 2005, pp. 130-31.

¹² A translation of a full-fledged academic work is forthcoming; George Foot Moore's monumental work, *Judaism in the First Centuries of the Christian Era: the Age of Tannaim* (3 volumes).

¹³ The project has been sponsored by the Japanese enterprise Miki, and they are not for sale in ordinary bookstores. So far fifteen volumes are finished.

¹⁴ Tr. Ishikawa Koichirou / Nagakubo Senzou / Miyoshi Yu, *Mishna I-VI*, Kyobunkwan, 2003-.

Talmud is no more than Levinas' 'lectures Talmudiques,' and the Zohar means only the short extracts in the translated works of Scholem. Neither Rambam nor Rashi can be read in our mother tongue. Moreover, Levinas had been long considered solely in the context of phenomenology, and Buber was just the philosopher of *Ich und Du* without even a glance at his compilation of Hassidic folktales, or at his Zionist activity. However, in 2011, *Kyoto Yudaya Shisō Gakkai* held a symposium on "Levinas' philosophy and Jewish thought," where attempts were made to describe the close ties between the two. Another symposium was held in 2010 by *CISMOR* on "Buber and the Hebrew Bible." Moreover, serious students and researchers today eagerly study Hebrew and Aramaic and seek access to primary un-vocalized [i.e., *beli niqud*] sources. We must therefore believe in the old saying "everything good takes time."

However modest they may seem, these developments should not be regarded as so small, because they have occurred in such a short period of time, and in a country where the Jewish presence is plainly minuscule. The prospectus of *Nihon Isuraeru Bunka Kyōkai* (1960 version) reads that the three pillars of the former 'Jewish Studies' in Japan were, quite to our surprise, the Old Testament studies, Islamic studies, and the 'Yudayajin mondai' [literally, the Jewish problem]. Here, the Jewish problem refers to the notorious discourses on the so-called *Protocols of Zion*, and to the quasi-historical pursuit of the Jewish origin of Japanese. From there, we have come rather far.

4. Why Jewish Studies now?

Being a Japanese Hebraist, the same question awaits almost on every corner of the street, "why is a Japanese interested in Judaism?" I reply "why not," and that is personally enough. However, it does appear to be an intriguing question with a slight addition, "why now?"

Below are some hypotheses concerning the reason for the unprecedented developments in Jewish studies outlined above. These developments are quite likely a combination of all these factors (and quite possibly of others which I may have overlooked).

1) **Natural extension of pursuit: from the 'occidental' culture toward primary sources.** Simple logic is that if one wishes to understand the Old Testament (and the New) well, he or she needs to be versed in the Torah. And the same is true with Levinas and the Agaddah, Buber and Hassidism, and so forth. In other words, studies of the Bible and philosophy in Japan have become

sufficiently mature to make a further step toward one of their origins.

2) **Japanese self-understanding as a marginal group vis-à-vis Europe.** Marginal means, of course, that one is within, and yet, on the edge. This self image, blending both self esteem and self contempt, seems to hold true for Jewish people of certain historical periods. Consequently, it might explain a curious empathy among Japanese toward the Jewish people, despite a lack of actual contacts. I hasten to add that this observation is very general, and therefore it should not be pushed too far.¹⁵

3) The third reason I would like to propose is **the decline of the unique cultural domination of Europe.** In other words, the emergence of postmodernism, or structuralism --although these ideas indeed originated from Europe--motivated Japanese intellectuals to realize that "Europe" as an exclusive model was a somewhat illusory entity, and not the sole thing to worship, thus leading them to discover other cultures. Merged with reasons 1 and 2 above, Jewish Studies came to occupy one of the upper lists.

4) **A relatively new field attracts graduate students despite its clear difficulties.** Jewish canonical texts are, in spite of their undisputable importance to world human heritage, one of the most neglected corpuses in Japanese humanities. Furthermore, novice researchers tend to assume, having read what is readily accessible, that there is a vast terra incognita. Newcomers may be intimidated by the thin possibility in the future for teaching what they specialize in. Still, I dare say that Japanese are quite curious a people, and their curiosity may vanquish such fear.

5) **Models set by leading scholars** such as Muraoka Takamitsu, Tsvi Sadan (Sasaki Tsuguya), Katsumata Naoya. Although Japanese are not always thought to be the bravest in doing things different than others, oftentimes, the presence of powerful forerunners helps. To name just three of my compatriots from different generations, Muraoka, professor emeritus of Semitic linguistics in Leiden University, is internationally known as a leading scholar of Biblical Hebrew, and as the co-author (with Paul Joüon) of the unshakable *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew*.¹⁶ After his long absence (in person) from Japanese academia, he came to Kyoto in 2010 at the invitation of IIAS (mentioned above) and read an

¹⁵ Some fifty years ago, this mentality seemingly played a notable role in popularizing the mystical image of the Jews as miraculous entrepreneurs and/or the myth-wise historical hypothesis of the 'lost ten tribes' reaching the ancient Japan. These attract no academics today. Today's scholars prefer to learn directly from Jewish people.

¹⁶ Gregorian&Biblical BookShop, 2006 (2nd ed).

inspiring paper entitled "Could We Still Learn Something from Pre-Modern Jewish Hebraists and Bible Scholars?". Sadan publishes articles in Hebrew, English, Japanese, Yiddish, and Esperanto, and has taught contact linguistics and other related subjects at Bar-Ilan University since 2004. Katsumata is a specialist of medieval Hebrew poems. He has published three critical editions (respectively on Shmuel Hashlishi, Nehemiah Ben Shelomoh, and Shelomoh Suleiman Al-Sinjari) with Dutch and German publishers, and now teaches at Kyoto University. These truly distinguished scholars tower up as ever encouraging figures for other Japanese who may balk at the threshold of Jewish studies.