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# Elijah's Promise

## An Oriental View

*Masakazu Watabe*

Although I was raised in the Church, I observed many cultural ceremonies and festivals originating in Buddhism as I grew up in Japan. One of those was what the Japanese call *ohaka mairi*, a visit to our ancestors' graveyard. It usually took place on a holiday in Japan, which used to be called *Senzo o Uyamau Hi*, Honor Your Ancestors Day.

I recall on one such holiday in my early teens, I had to accompany my mother, her father, and her sister to visit their ancestors' graveyard in Tama, outside of Tokyo. I learned then that this holiday now referred to as *Shūbun no Hi*, Autumnal Equinox Day, was a special day for the deceased because the sun rises from the East and goes down to the West, where our ancestors lived. We were to go to the graveyard to clean their graves with water and leave flowers, usually white. I also learned that the tablets and the boxes of ashes we kept in the mausoleum did not have the names of those I could recognize. They are identified with titles or rankings in Buddhism and new names are given to them to be used in the next world. In order to find out the names by which they were known in this world, I would have to go to their Buddhist temples and go through their registry. As we removed the fallen leaves of autumn and washed the tombstones with water, my grandfather made sure the lock in the back of the mausoleum was tightly closed, saying he did not want to be invited in by his ancestors yet.

I did not realize the significance of the Autumnal Equinox Day, which often is referred to as the Buddhist holiday *Higan*, until I became a more serious student of the scriptures. It was September 21, 1823, when the angel Moroni visited a boy Joseph Smith to tell him about the buried record of Christ on the American continent and also to announce the visit of

Elijah, who will plant in the hearts of the children the promises made to the fathers, and the hearts of the children shall turn to their fathers.<sup>1</sup> This announcement has such close resemblance with the holiday in Japan that I could not excuse it as a mere coincidence. But first let me explain more about Higan.

According to *Nihon Kokugo Daijiten*, the Japanese Language Dictionary, Higan 彼岸 (the other shore) is a short form of *Tō-Higan* 到彼岸 (arriving at the other shore), which is a translation of a Sanskrit word *paramita*.<sup>2</sup> This life on this earth is called *Shigan* 此岸 (this shore), the worldly desires and passions are the river or the ocean in between, and when we die we reach the other side, the world of *paramita* (absolute perfection).

The Buddhist ceremony celebrating this event is called *Higan-e* 彼岸会, which lasts seven days in the fall and spring. The exact middle day of the seven days is called Higan and is the autumnal equinox in the fall and the vernal equinox in the spring. One of the Buddhist sects, *Myōkōji*, has a website which explains the Higan-e as the following:

The Higan-e Ceremony, Memorial Service During the Equinox

Nichiren Shōshū performs the Higan-e Ceremony as a Buddhist practice for accumulating benefits and amassing virtue in the lives of the believer and the deceased. The daylight and the nighttime hours of the vernal and autumnal equinox are equal, signifying the inseparability of darkness (yin) and light (yang), as well as the oneness of good and evil. As the sutra expounds, "the Buddha desires the Middle Way." For this reason, the benefits of performing positive deeds on these days are superior to those practiced at other times. These days of the equinox present exceptional opportunities for us to arrive at the other shore (higan). Moreover, Buddhism expounds the four debts of gratitude, one of which is to one's parents and ancestors. Thus, during the Higan-e Ceremony, we make offerings to the *Gohonzon*, establish memorial tablets for our ancestors and perform memorial services for them. This small good deed becomes the great positive act enabling us to reach the other shore. This is the true significance of the Higan-e Ceremony.<sup>3</sup>

The first documented occurrence of Higan-e in Japan was in 806 AD and was held to console the deceased spirit of Emperor Sūdō 崇道天皇. Higan or Higan-e has been mentioned in works of Japanese literature, folk songs, folk tales, diaries, and poems including *The Tale of Genji* and haiku, indicating that it has been part of Japanese culture for over one thousand years.

The actual visit of Elijah did not take place until the temple in Kirtland was completed. On April 3, 1836, Elijah, Moses, Elias, and Christ himself appeared to Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery and returned the keys to do the work for the dead in this dispensation.<sup>4</sup> What is so interesting and

significant about this event is that April 3 was the day of the Passover. In the April 1836 general conference, Joseph Fielding Smith commented on this special occasion:

It was, I am informed, on the third day of April, 1836, that the Jews, in their homes at the Paschal feast, opened their doors for Elijah to enter. On that very day Elijah did enter—not in the home of the Jews to partake of the Passover with them, but he appeared in the House of the Lord.<sup>5</sup>

It is interesting that the actual coming of Elijah took place on the Jewish holy day, a day celebrated by the Jews, who intimately knew of his mission and his returning to this earth. Conversely, the announcement of Elijah's coming took place on a day special to Buddhists, non-Christians who were unfamiliar with his work and role; nevertheless, they have observed the spirit of Elijah especially on this day for a long period of time.

The gospel in its fullness has made provisions for people who have died without any contact with the gospel of Jesus Christ on this earth. This is particularly important for the Asians, who, though not exposed to Christianity, yet were taught to revere their deceased parents and ancestors. In fact, President David O. McKay told of an intelligent Chinese student who rejected a Christian minister's urge to accept Jesus on this very point. The Chinese student asked the minister:

"Then what about my ancestors who never had an opportunity to hear the name of Jesus?" The minister answered: "They are lost." Said the student: "I will have nothing to do with a religion so unjust as to condemn to eternal punishment men and women who are just as noble as we, perhaps nobler, but who never had an opportunity to hear the name of Jesus."<sup>6</sup>

In other words, the ordinances for the people who will receive the gospel on the other shore was to commence in this final dispensation, and Moroni brought this announcement to the boy Joseph on the night of the Autumnal Equinox Day in 1823.<sup>7</sup> This announcement is extremely important for the Asian people.

Would it be just a mere coincidence that this important historical event took place on the twenty-first of September? Would an unlearned teenage boy, Joseph Smith, have had a chance to learn about the significance of Higan in upstate New York in 1823 just to fabricate a date? I tend to think that it was neither a mere coincidence nor a fabrication by Joseph Smith.

The Lord designates certain days for us and sets them aside as holy days so that we can remember some important spiritual events relating to our eternal salvation.<sup>8</sup> One of the most important holy days of all is the Sabbath. The Lord ended his work of creation on the seventh day

and blessed it and sanctified it (Gen. 2:2-3). Through Moses he commanded the Israelites to keep the Sabbath day holy to remind them that he had freed them from bondage (Ex. 20:8-11; Deut. 5:15). Just as the Lord had freed the Israelites from the bondage of the Egyptians, he has freed us from the bondage of both physical and spiritual death through his atoning sacrifice. He rose between the end of the Sabbath and the first day of the week (Matt. 28:1-8; Mark 16:1-9; Luke 24:1-7; John 20:1), which is now designated as the Sabbath, and we have been told in this dispensation to pay devotions to him on this day (D&C 59:9-17). The word *sacrifice* comes from Latin *sacr-* meaning "sacred" and the suffix *-facere* meaning "to make;" it is related to such words as *sacrament*.<sup>9</sup> In fact, some Latter-day apostles such as James E. Talmage and Melvin J. Ballard suggest that Heavenly Father's sacred sacrament was giving his son Jesus Christ as an atoning sacrifice for us.<sup>10</sup>

Another important holy day for members of the Church is April 6. According to the Latter-day revelations, this date marks the actual birth-day of our Savior and the restoration of his Church upon the earth.<sup>11</sup> Members meet every year for general conference in commemoration of the organization of the restored Church; just as the Israelites must have been taught to remember these and other important days designated by the Lord. I can think of other days designated as their holy days: *Pesach*, The Feast of Passover; *Shavuot* or Pentecost, The Feast of Weeks; *Yom Kippur*, The Day of Atonement; *Succoth*, The Feast of Tabernacles.

Is the announcement of the coming of Elijah on the Autumnal Equinox Day coincidence? It may well be. However, when I think of the many Asians who have accepted the gospel, and I believe there will be many more when they realize what the gospel of Jesus Christ in its fullness offers, I cannot help but suspect that this is part of Heavenly Father's intricate plan and one of the special holy days he designates. My own father, the first convert to the Church in the city of Sendai after World War II, was overjoyed when, after studying both Catholicism and Protestant teachings, he heard about the fact that temple work could be done for his relatives and friends that he lost in the war.<sup>12</sup>

As I think of the visit to the family graveyard in Japan with my mother, her sister, and my grandfather, all of whom have already gone on to the spirit world, I am filled with joy from the knowledge of the restored gospel, and I have become more grateful to the Lord for sending heavenly messengers to Joseph Smith to restore the gospel of Jesus Christ in its fullness. At least for me, and, I am sure, for many Asians and others who honor and revere their parents and ancestors, the visit of Moroni on the night of the autumnal equinox in 1823 was an extremely significant event.

As was announced, Elijah did come and the promises made to the fathers are being planted in the hearts of the children, and the hearts of the children are turning to their fathers all over the world.

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1. B. H. Roberts, *A Comprehensive History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Century One*, 6 vols. (Provo, Utah: Corporation of the President, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1965), 1:71–72; Doctrine and Covenants 2.

2. *Nihon Kokugo Daijiten*, 1st ed., 20 vols. (Tokyo: Shogakukan, 1972–1976), 16:610–11.

3. Koshozan Myokoji, "The Higan-e Ceremony, Memorial Service during the Equinox," <http://www.myokoji.jp/page/higane.htm>.

4. Roberts, *Comprehensive History*, 1:389, 2:76; Doctrine and Covenants 110.

5. Joseph Fielding Smith, in *106th Annual Conference of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1936): 75.

6. Llewelyn R. McKay, *True to the Faith: Sermons and Writings of David O. McKay* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1966), 21–22.

7. Some may argue that September 21 in the United States is September 22 in Japan. According to the Myoshinji Temple website, "The Higan-e Ceremony is widely practiced in all forms of Buddhism in Japan and is usually conducted on March 21 and September 22, the days of the vernal and autumnal equinoxes." "Memorial Service During the Equinox-Higane," <http://nichirensoshumyoshinji.org/ScheduleData/Ceremonies/Higane.htm>.

8. "The Purpose of Holidays," "The Sabbath (Shabbat)," *Old Testament Student Manual: Genesis–2 Samuel* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1980), 181.

9. Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, 11th ed., s.v. "Sacrifice."

10. See James E. Talmage, *Jesus the Christ* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1981), 214; and M. Russell Ballard, ed., *Melvin J. Ballard—Crusader for Righteousness* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1966), 134–37.

11. Roberts, *Comprehensive History*, 1:195–96; Doctrine and Covenants 20:1; 21:3; Talmage, *Jesus the Christ*, 104.

12. See Masao Watabe's story in Spencer J. Palmer, *The Expanding Church* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1978), 171–75.