

Do Shinto shrines resemble Israel's tabernacle in structure?

by Toru Yasui

When I was a young child, I used to play on Shinto shrine grounds. I went there to catch cicadas in summer and gather nuts in autumn, in the thick woods surrounding the shrine buildings. I became a Christian in 1989, and since then have seldom gone to Shinto shrines. However, I happened to enter the grounds of a shrine in April 2016, when I was hiking down a mountain. Looking around, I was surprised, because I realized the structure of the shrine resembled Israel's tabernacle despite the fact that it looked very Japanese.



Figure 1: Front garden of the Amada Shrine



Figure 2: A bird's eye view of Amada Shrine. Painting by Tetsuya Kayahara. Supervised by Norio Inoue.

Figure 1 is the photo I took then of the Amada Shinto shrine. Figure 2 is a bird's eye view picture which was displayed at the entrance of the front building, from which we can learn about the structure. The peculiar gate (Fig. 3) which stands in front of the shrine represents the first border which separates the holy place from the secular world. Those who come to pray usually have to come through the gate and then wash their hands and mouths at the water place on the right hand side, called 'Temizuya' (Fig. 4). This reminded me of a verse in the Old Testament.

He put the washbasin (laver) between the Tent and the altar and filled it with water. his sons washed their hands and their feet there whenever they went into the Tent or the altar, ... (Exodus 40:30-32)

The front building is the worshiping place called the 'Haiden,' and the building behind the Haiden is called the 'Honden'. Honden is the god's throne, and a curtain separates the Honden and the Haiden. People are not allowed to enter the Honden.

The curtain will separate the Holy Place from the Most Holy Place. (Exodus 26:33)



Figure 3: Torii gate



Figure 4: Temizuya



Figure 5: A 'Shimenawa' rope is hung at the front. An offering box is set behind the grid. Zechariah 11:13, Mark 12:43.

Another curtain and also a rope called 'Shimenawa' are equipped in front of the Haiden. A grid is used instead of a curtain for this shrine, see Fig. 5.

... set up the Tent of the Lord's presence ... and hang the curtain at the entrance of the tent. (Exodus 40:1,5)

'Shimenawa' too represents a border (a separation) between the holy place and secular world. It is said that the rope portrays clouds, the woven straw hanging down from the rope portrays rain, and the zigzag white paper portray lightning.

When the people heard the thunder and saw the lightning and the smoking mountain, they trembled with fear and stood a long way off. (Exodus 20:18)



Figure 6: Honden (The building on the left). Do the two 'V' type bars called 'Chigi' on the roof look similar to the cherubim's wings? Exodus 25:18-20

After cleansing with water, worshippers stand in front of the Haiden and clap their hands in prayer and bow from the waist. If they wish to ask a Shinto priest to pray for them, the priest cleanses himself with water and puts on clean clothes to enter the Haiden with their prayers. However, even the priest cannot usually enter the Honden, located beyond the Haiden (Fig. 6 Honden: view from the rear).

... sprinkle them with the water of purification and have them wash their clothes. (Numbers 8:7)

I assign the Levites to work in the Tent for the people of Israel and to protect the Israelites from the disaster that would strike them if they came too near the Holy Place. (Numbers 8:19)



Figure 7(a) left and 7(b) right: Komainu

It is interesting that a pair of animals made of stone called 'Komainu' face each other at the entrance of the Haiden (Figs 7(a) and 7(b)). Japanese people say they are dogs. But, to all appearances, they are lions. The animal on the right opens its mouth to say 'ア=A' and the other, on the left, closes its mouth to say 'ン=N'. 'ア' and 'ン' are the first and the last characters of the Japanese alphabet, just like 'α' and 'ω' are the first and last of the Greek alphabet.

I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the ending, says the Lord, which is, and which was, and which is to come, the Almighty. ... I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end. I will give unto him that is athirst of the fountain of the water of life freely. ... I am the first and the last, the beginning and the end. (Revelation 1:8; 21:6; 22:13)



Figure 8: Lions made from stone, in Jerusalem.

By the way, the Komainu look strikingly similar to the pair of stone lions (Fig. 8) I spotted in Israel during my trip.

Another interesting thing is the design on the roof tiles (Fig. 9). It is as though the first Hebrew capital letter 'י' of YHWH 'יהוה' (read from the right to left) are designed to make three swirl shapes, representing the Trinity.



Figure 9: Design of the roof tiles.

Fig. 10 compares the structures of Israel's Tabernacle and Shinto shrines. There are remarkable resemblances between the two. However, there is just one difference; Shinto shrines do not have altars for animal sacrifices. What could be a possible reason? The Old Testament tells us that God designated only *one* place for animal sacrifices:

You are not to offer your sacrifices wherever you choose. You must offer them only in one place that the Lord will choose in the territory of one of your tribes. (Deuteronomy 12:13,14)

In Japan there are about 80,000 Shinto shrines of the same or similar structure, and we can find them not only in the remote villages, but also in urban areas crowded with large buildings.

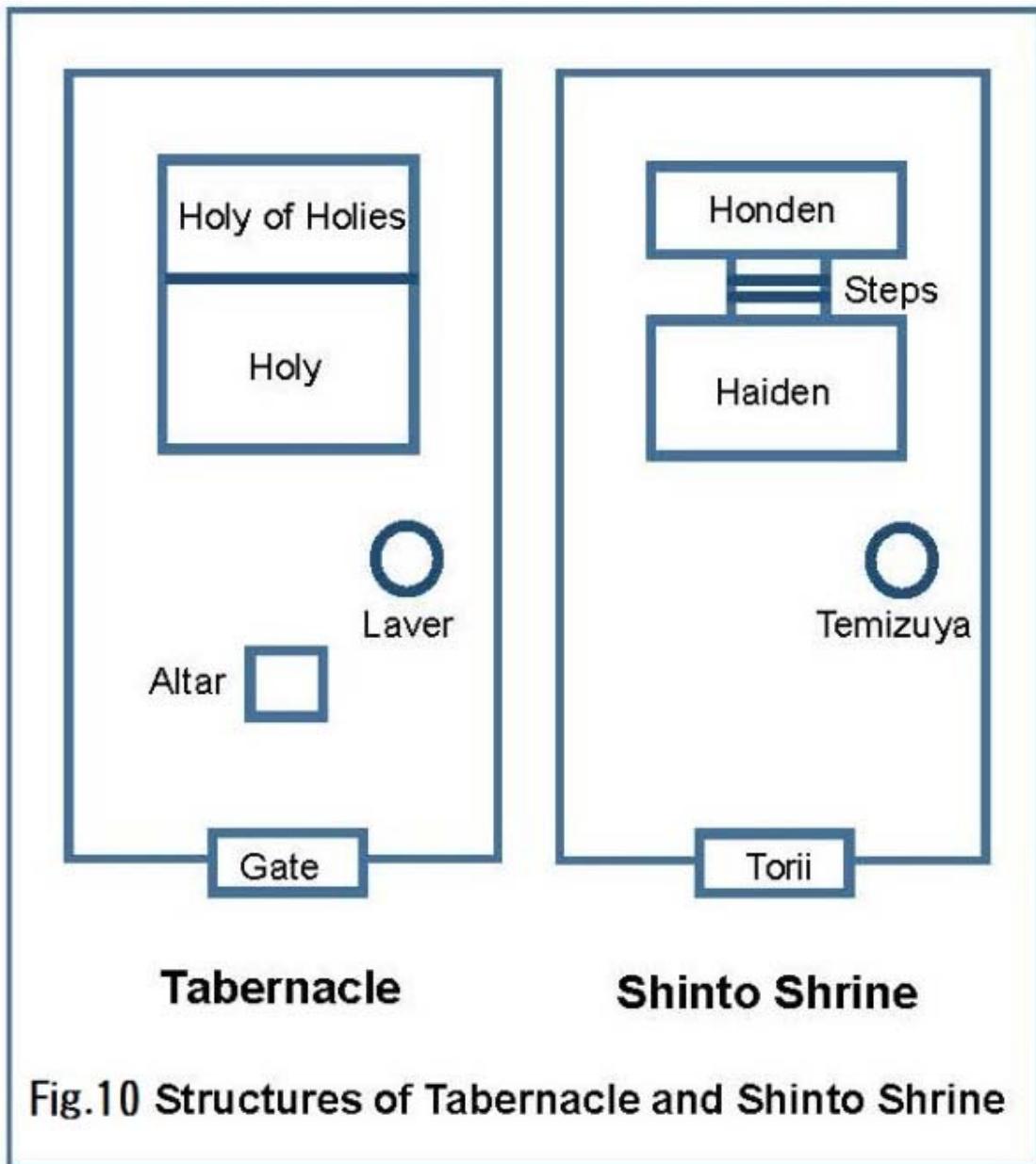
Shinto (which means "god's way") is the ancient Japanese religion, and according to the old historical documents, Kojiki and Nihonshoki, its history started in the era of the first Emperor Jinmu who was enthroned in 660 BC. Shintoism is a form of animism, polytheism, and the worshipping of ancestors, but at its basis is the concept of consecration, which separates the holy from the secular. It has no doctrines. However, their architectures, worshipping methods, ceremonies and carnivals have been handed down diligently and have lasted a very long time. There are no idols inside the shrine buildings—they are empty (note: only a few special shrines keep something called the 'Three Sacred Treasures of Japan' in their buildings). Therefore, it is as though Shinto worshippers are praying to the "space" in the shrines. And they often say, *'I do not know who is inside, but I am moved to tears because I am thankful and in awe.'*¹

It is very strange that the shrines in this far away land resemble Israel's Tabernacle. Is it just a coincidence? We cannot know the things that happened a long time ago, because there are no living eye witnesses. However, one possible explanation might be this:

The Silk Road, which travelled through the Eurasian Continent and through Jerusalem has existed since BCE. Despite separation from the continent by sea, Nara Japan is the eastern destination of the Silk Road.² In the Shosoin Repository in Nara, many goods and treasures of the ancient Middle East, Persia, etc., are carefully preserved. It is likely that the Old Testament and Tabernacle worshipping belief were brought to Japan through the Silk Road. Then why is Shintoism polytheistic? In the Kojiki, it says that according to Shintoism, "Amenominakanushi was the first kami (god) to come into being in the Plain of Heaven as a solitary kami, and to hide his presence. Also counted as one of the zoka sanshin (three kami of creation)",³ then after that, many other gods appeared.

The curtain between the sanctuary and the Holy of Holies was torn in two from top to bottom when Jesus Christ was put on the cross (Matthew 27:51). The true way to the Creator God (the Holy of Holies) was opened. But in Japan, the curtain between the Haiden and Honden of Shinto Shrines remain closed even after 2000 years. See Fig. 10.

Therefore, it is my belief that no other nation fits the following Bible passage more than Japan—a nation which preserved the style of worship marvelously, but through history and through modern evolutionary thought lost sight of the Creator God.



*For as I walked through your city and looked at the places where you worship, I found an altar on which is written, 'To an **Unknown God**.' That which you worship, then, **even though you do not know it**, is what I now proclaim to you. God, who made the world and everything in it, is Lord of heaven and earth ... He has given proof of this to everyone by raising that man from death! (Acts 17:23-31)*

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References

1. There is another religion in Japan—Buddhism. It was brought to Japan in 538 AD. When it came, a battle broke out between the parties of Buddhism and Shintoism. However, the nation eventually accepted both. It is said that the reason behind the acceptance of Buddhism was that the nation wanted a religion which deals with death and funerals, because Shintoism regards them only as being unclean. Thus it has been in the culture for the Japanese to go to Shinto shrines when babies are born, and for weddings (more recently, weddings are held in Christian style), and when people die, have funerals in Buddhist style.
2. Silk Road, UNESCO, <http://en.unesco.org/silkroad/countries-alongside-silk-road-routes/japan>
3. Quoted from Digital Museum of Kokugakuin University website <http://kamc.kokugakuin.ac.jp/DM/>; search for Amenominakanushi.