

Leo Baeck and Tetsutarō Ariga

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There has not been much religious or political contact with Judaism throughout Japanese history. Even after the Meiji Restoration², a period of Western-influenced modernization in the nineteenth century, knowledge about Jews and Judaism was not a direct one. Rather, it remained a mediated, indirect one that was brought, in part, through Christian mission work after Japan was opened up to Western contact. It was also brought, in part, through the works of anti-Semitic writers and scholars whose works entered Japan between the mid-nineteenth century and the early twentieth century.

In this relationship between modern Japan and Judaism, the Japanese Christian theologian Tetsutarō Ariga (1899-1977) published his translation of Leo Baeck's *The Essence of Judaism (Das Wesen des Judentums)* in 1946³. In a letter to Baeck, Ariga illuminated the problems inherent in Jewish studies in modern Japan by writing that “[i]n our country information about Judaism has been chiefly supplied either by Christian scholars or by the Anti-Judaists.” At the same time, Ariga's translation was a significant event for the later development of Jewish studies as an academic discipline in modern Japan. In fact, Ariga influenced a number of eminent scholars who came to lay the foundation for the study of Judaism in Japan.

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² Major political, economic and cultural changes occurred in nineteenth-century Japan. At that time, the control of the country was transferred from the Tokugawa government to Emperor Meiji and it is said that modernization of Japan advanced.

³ It seems that Ariga translated the second edition in 1922, not the first edition in 1905.

In this presentation, I would like first to describe Ariga's life and then to turn attention to the correspondence between Ariga and Baeck. I will focus on two letters: one in which Baeck thanked Ariga for his translation, and another in which Ariga described his motive for translating Baeck's book. Finally, I will mention the relationship between Jewish studies and Japan, which I view and understand in the light of Ariga's letter.

1. Who was Tetsutarō Ariga?

Ariga was a professor at Doshisha University when he published the translation of *The Essence of Judaism* in 1946. However, Ariga left Doshisha shortly afterwards, moving to the Faculty of Letters of Kyoto University, the only national university in Japan with a department dedicated to the study of Christianity. The Department of Christian Studies at Kyoto University was originally founded in May 1922 as the Second Department of Religious Studies. Ariga was appointed to this department as a full professor in 1948. Ariga's area of specialization was the history of Christian thought, with a central focus on Patristics. Ariga established his standing in the study of the Patristic thought with his *Origen Studies* (1943), while elucidating what he called "*hayathology*," a distinctive interpretation of Christianity which originates in Judaism by tracing the development of the historical interaction between Hebraism and Hellenism. The result of his study was published as *The Problem of Ontology in Christian Thought* (1969). Ariga's early emphasis on Jewish studies may have been the outcome of his emphasis on the relationship between Hebraism and Hellenism.

Ariga was born in Osaka in the year 1899 as the first son of Bunhachirō, his father, and Naka, his mother. As the family moved to Tokyo several years later, Ariga graduated from the First Prefectural Middle School in Tokyo, and entered the School of Theology of Doshisha University in Kyoto, Japan. After graduating from the university in 1922, Ariga

studied at the University of Chicago, Columbia University, and Union Theological Seminary in New York. Returning to Japan, he started teaching theology at Doshisha University in 1926. In 1935, Ariga went back to Union Theological Seminary where he received a Th.D. degree. After the war, in 1947, Ariga became the first dean of the Department of Theology at Doshisha University under the new system. From 1948 until his retirement he was professor at Kyoto University. In 1965, he participated in the Second Vatican Council as a Protestant observer from Japan.

Although Ariga was a professor of Christian studies, it would be fair to say that he was one of the scholars who laid the foundation for the study of Judaism as an academic discipline in Japan. Many distinguished scholars of Judaism and the Old Testament were trained under Ariga, including such well-known names as Yoshimori Hiraishi, a specialist on Philo of Alexandria and Martin Buber, and Yūzaburō Morita, a scholar of religious philosophy and Jewish thought. Above all, Hiroya Katsumura, a relative of Ariga, stands out as a prominent scholar of Jewish studies and the Old Testament in Japan today. Katsumura was one of the founders and the president of the Kyoto Association of Jewish Thought. At its first meeting on June 7, 2008, Katsumura gave the presidential address, “Leo Baeck and Tetsutarō Ariga: The Dawn of Jewish Studies in Kyoto,” which details the post-war interaction between the two men.

2. Their letters⁴

I would like to focus on two letters: one in which Baeck thanked Ariga for his translation, and another in which Ariga described his motive for translating Baeck’s book.

⁴ All the letters contained in this presentation are found in the collection of documents related to Tetsutarō Ariga, which was presented to Kyoto University Archives as a gift in March 2010.

Letter 1:

Leo Baeck to Tetsutarō Ariga, December 26, 1947 (English, handwritten)

283, WATFORD WAY,
HENDON, N. W. 4 London
December 26th, 1947
Dr. T. Ariga
Doshisha University

Dear Dr. Ariga,

Some time ago Chaplain M. Daina has let me know that you have translated my book “Essence of Judaism” into Japanese language, and now I was privileged to receive a copy of this translation.

I wish to express to you my deep gratitude for having taken your courage into both your hands in order to carry out this hard and difficult work. May I hope that your pains will be rewarded and the book will find true readers in Japan. I would be most happy to know it.

I am very sorry for not knowing the noble Japanese language, but I will greatly treasure this book. Once more I thank you very much.

With all my good wishes,

Yours sincerely
L. Baeck

Letter 2:

Tetsutarō Ariga to Leo Baeck, Kyoto, December 26, 1947 (English)

December 26, 1947⁵
Dr. Leo Baeck,
c/o American Jewish Congress,

⁵ While Baeck wrote his letter to Ariga (Letter 1) on December 26, 1947, after receiving a copy of the Japanese translation of *The Essence of Judaism*, by seemingly a strange coincidence, Ariga also wrote his letter to Baeck (Letter 2) on the very same date, which he wrote separately after being notified by Daina that a copy of the translation had been sent to Baeck.

November 18, 2019
AN EXPECTED AFFINITIES:
JAPANESE RECEPTIONS OF
GERMAN JEWISH THOUGHT & CULTURE

1834 Broadway, New York 23, N. Y.

Dear Dr. Baeck :

Probably you have received by this time a copy of the Japanese translation of your book on *Das Wesen des Judentums*. The translation was done by myself and the publisher Zenkoku Shobo published it in October, 1946. We got the permission of the Military Government here, although we had no means to get in touch with you at that time. Recently I heard from Rabbi M. Daina, who is a chaplain here, that you had a narrow escape from Germany under the Nazi regime and gone to the United States. So I take the liberty of directly addressing the author of that excellent work on Judaism.

What moved me to translate your book into Japanese is stated in the translator's Preface as follows:

“In our country information about Judaism has been chiefly supplied either by Christian scholars or by the Anti-Judaists. The former had to take up the subject of Jewish people and their religion in connection with the O. T. [Old Testament] History and the Beginnings of Christianity. The subject was discussed in so far as it was necessary to explain the nature of Christianity and its contrast with Judaism. The Jewish people are to them the people of the Old Covenant: unbelieving people who rejected Christ and have been rejected by him. Would the Jews ever acquiesce in such a verdict? What the Anti-Judaists have been saying are out of the question. They have made up a phantom for themselves by collecting all the available facts and legends, just in order to ascribe to this people all the evils and conspiracies of the world. They have often ignored the difference between Judaism and Christianity. Generally speaking, they danced to the music of Antisemitism in Germany.

To be emancipated from such distorted pictures of Judaism is necessary not only for the sake of Judaism itself but also for Japanese people themselves. Now is a time for such emancipation. The Jewish religion, from whose bosom both Christianity and Islam sprang, which nevertheless has maintained its own faith to this day without any compromise, is certainly a phenomenon worthy of admiration in the history of the world. It is therefore a great loss to the Japanese people, if there are supplied no reliable materials to let them have a right understanding of this religion or thought-movement. And if we want to know something about a religion, we must first go to a responsible person who takes his stand right in the religion and hear whatever explanations he makes about it.

In this sense, then, I believe Leo Baeck's Essence of Judaism, as a presentation of its contents by a Jewish scholar, will play an important role in the work of leading us to a right

understanding. Doubtless it is not unallowable to criticize Judaism from outside. But it would not be fair to base one's judgments only on such materials as are prejudiced against Judaism. The translator himself is no Jew, nor has he given up his right to criticize Judaism. But his sense of justice and fairness has moved him to translate this book and present it to the reading public of Japan."

I am a Christian theologian, but to me fairness is one of the most important things taught by Jesus. As dean of the only Theological Faculty existing during the wartime Japan, I know quite well what minority means especially under a totalitarian regime.

I hope you will understand the reason why a Japanese translation of your book appeared here without your knowledge. With whatever terms you will impose we shall be ready to comply.

I should appreciate it very much if you would kindly write me about your life and experiences in the past and about what you are doing now. I am a graduate of this university (Doshisha), studied theology in Union Theological Seminary, New York, and also visited Germany in 1935. If you prefer to write in German, please feel free to do so, as I understand it just as well as English. In case you need a reference for me, please get in touch with Rabbi Morris B. Chapman, 1031 Arlington Avenue North, St. Petersburg, Florida.

Yours very sincerely
Tetsutaro Ariga, Th. D.

3. Jewish Studies and Japan

Ariga appreciated Baeck's book as a guide to a "right understanding" of Judaism. In his letter, he emphasized that he was a Christian theologian and not a Jew. Can Japanese people who do not profess Jewish faith study and understand Judaism and Jewish thought with any substantive degree of accuracy? Ariga's letter shows that this question was a profound problem for him.

Ariga attempted to understand Judaism as fairly as possible—he in fact expressed in writing to Baeck that "to me fairness is one of the most important things taught by Jesus." As a Christian theologian, he might have thought that if he did not understand Judaism without prejudice, he would not understand Christianity properly, or that if he did not study

Judaism correctly, he would not fully understand the “fairness” that Jesus taught him. In that sense, Ariga’s translation has been significant for the study of Christianity in Japan. This notion that was central to Ariga’s scholarship influenced, both directly and indirectly, both the study of Judaism and the study of Christianity in present-day Japan.

To be sure, it is difficult to grasp the meaning of “fairness” as an academic methodology simply by analyzing his letter. However, the correspondence between Ariga and Baeck should be taken as indicating not only an example of Japanese receptions of German Jewish thought but also an important step for Jewish studies in Japan.