

Religion Today
January 28-February 3, 2001
Jesus in Japan
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Have you ever wondered how a religion takes hold in a new culture? Often, the new religion is met with stiff resistance. When Buddhism first entered China it took more than two centuries to catch on. Occasionally, a missionary comes to a new country, develops a following, but then the missionary leaves and the followers return to their previous ways.

Sometimes, however, a religion excites its new followers and inspires them to take on the new religion and make it their own. It no longer needs outside support and becomes a vital element of its new cultural home. The new followers bring the religion into their own way of life and adapt it to fit their society. Take the Japanese village of Shingo, for instance.

The citizens of Shingo claim Jesus died in their village and his remains lie in a burial mound just outside the town, even though the Christian gospels indicate Jesus preached the coming of "the kingdom"; then crucified in Jerusalem; resurrected; and ascended bodily into heaven. According to the beliefs of Shingo's citizens, Jesus came to Japan in his early 20s to study the Japanese religion Shinto. He then returned to Israel at age 33 to preach the teachings of the "holy kingdom" of Japan. When he was led to his crucifixion, his brother Isukiri took his place. Jesus then escaped back to Japan, settled in Shingo, married, had three daughters, and lived to the ripe old age of 106.

These claims are supported by a number of facts, villagers claim. First, there is an ancient tomb near the village. Second, one of the village's traditional chants is claimed to be in Hebrew. Third, the villagers at one time wore clothes with a Star of David inscribed on them. Fourth, the villagers traditionally paint a cross on

their children's foreheads for protection. Finally, a man claiming to be descended from Jesus died only recently.

Whether any of these claims are true has never been evaluated. Archaeologists have never studied the tomb. On the face, however, it seems probable Shingo's citizens were attracted by Christ's story and wanted to "bring it home" in some way.

In the end, what we see is an example of how religions can migrate from culture to culture. Shingo's citizens thought it important to bring not just the Jesus story to Japan, but Jesus himself. Thus Jesus becomes Japanese in thought and training, and "his" descendants are Japanese. This strong identification with the Jesus story transforms it, for the people of Shingo, from a story about a man in a far away, strange place, to something immediate in which they and their ancestors played a direct and important role. And it is a religion's direct relevance to people, whether or not we agree with it that makes it powerful.