

Eiji Asada and Aoyama Gakuin: Guided by Faith, Grounded in Scholarship; Dr. Asada's Historic Milestone

Tom Sakon, Ph.D.

This article highlights the life of a remarkable individual who left an indelible mark on the history of Aoyama Gakuin and lived a life “storing treasures in heaven.”

In the courtyard of the Tokyo University of Foreign Studies (東京外国語大学) in Fuchu, Tokyo, Japan, a solitary monument stands as a tribute to Eiji Asada. Dr. D.M. Randel, then-president of the University of Chicago, USA, delivered a congratulatory address at the monument's unveiling ceremony in 2001.¹ The monument honors Asada's contributions as a professor and head of the English Department at the Tokyo School of Foreign Languages (東京外国語大学), the precursor to today's Tokyo University of Foreign Studies. After being spun off from the Higher Commercial School (高等商業学校, now Hitotsubashi University 一橋大学) in 1899, the school flourished under Asada's leadership, establishing a solid foundation for foreign language education in Japan.

Eiji Asada holds the distinction of being the first person to receive a doctorate from the University of Chicago—not just the first Japanese recipient, but the university's very first Ph.D. graduate. This institution, now celebrated for producing over 100 Nobel laureates and excelling in economics, physics, and the humanities, began its doctoral legacy with Asada. His dissertation, titled *The Hebrew Text of Zechariah 1-8: Compared with the Different Ancient Versions*, was a scholarly examination of the Old Testament.

Two defining elements ran through Asada's life: English education and biblical studies—both deeply intertwined with Aoyama Gakuin. Born in Tokuyama, Yamaguchi Prefecture,

1 Eiji Asada, edited by Eizaburo Okuizumi, *The Hebrew Text of Zechariah 1-8: Compared with the Different Ancient Versions: The First Ph.D. dissertation submitted to the University of Chicago in 1893*. (Tokyo: Bunsei Shoin, 2001), p.105.

in 1865, Asada graduated with top marks from Kyoto Junior High School and, at 18, enrolled in Tokyo Eiwa Gakko (東京英和学校, now Aoyama Gakuin 青山学院) in 1884 to pursue English studies. That same year, on Christmas Day, he was baptized at Kanda Methodist Episcopal Church (神田美以教会, now Kudan Church 九段教会), marking his conversion to Christianity.

Although he only spent two months at Tokyo Eiwa Gakko before transferring to the Imperial College Engineering in Tokyo (工部大学校), Asada's ties to Aoyama remained strong. While boarding at the home of his English teacher, James Main Dixon², he continued attending English Bible studies at Aoyama every Sunday³. It was during this time that his Christian faith took root and his familiarity with the Bible deepened.⁴

2 James Main Dixon was a Scottish-born English literature scholar who taught English at the Imperial College Engineering in Tokyo (工部大学校) from 1880, and then at the Tokyo Imperial University, College of Letters (帝国大学文科大学), where he taught English to Soseki Natsume, Yuzaburo Okakura, and others. His father was a pastor, and as a devoted Christian, he had a great influence on Asada. He also wrote several books on Methodism. He co-authored *Illustrated History of Methodism* (1900) and *Life of John Wesley* (1902). See also, Ayako Ono, "Research Report: James Main Dixon's Stay in Japan from 1880 to 1892," in *Shinshu University Journal of Educational Research and Practice*, No. 16 (2022), pp. 191-206.

3 Mikako Asada (ed.), *Asada Eiji Tsuikairoku* (Reprinted edition) (compiled by Saburo Minagawa and Haruo Shiiki, Tokyo Gaigokai (Tokyo University of Foreign Studies Alumni Association) Volunteers, 1996), p. 525.

Koichi Nozaki's dissertation, *Demand and Transformation of Meiji Christianity: Through the Eyes of Eiji Asada* (submitted for a doctoral degree in literature at the University of Tsukuba), offers an in-depth examination of Eiji Asada's life and faith. In the dissertation, Nozaki writes, "It was during his time as a student at Tokyo Eiwa Gakko that Asada became interested in Christianity," adding that "Asada maintained the faith he discovered at this Methodist-affiliated school throughout his life." M. C. Harris, the Methodist missionary known for baptizing the Sapporo Band, described the profound impact of Asada's encounter with Christianity: "He met the Lord Jesus Christ as his Savior while he was still a student. This was the most significant event in his life, one that deeply moved him and reshaped his plans for the future. Aoyama Gakuin should be proud to count him among its students." Among the missionaries sent to Tokyo Eiwa Gakko, J. O. Spencer and J. S. Vail remained close to Asada throughout his years at Aoyama Gakuin and Kanda Church, continuing their relationship with him well into his later years. This enduring connection highlights the deep bond Asada had with Aoyama Gakuin (see Nozaki, *ibid.*, pp. 10-11).

4 Asada noted, "I was born on an island in the Far East, completely outside the sphere of Christian influence. As a child, I had no knowledge of family worship services, there were no Christian churches in my town, and I had no opportunity to hear sermons. My first encounter with Christianity came when I entered Tokyo Eiwa Gakkou, known today as Aoyama Gakuin. I initially enrolled in the school to learn English, but it offered me something far greater than language skills.

Through my education—primarily through books—I came to learn about Christianity more deeply than through any other means. At first, I approached the Bible critically, even with the intent to find

Asada excelled in mathematics and science during his time at Daiichi High School (第一高等中学) and the Department of Mathematics at Tokyo Imperial University's College of Science (帝国大学理科大学). Yet, despite his academic success, his growing Christian faith and interest in theology eventually surpassed his passion for science. He left Imperial University in 1888 to pursue theological studies in the United States, enrolling in the Department of Literature at Northwestern University at the age of 23.

At Northwestern, Asada encountered influential figures such as Otohiko Mashima (間島弟彦)—whose name endures in the Mashima Memorial Building (間島記念館) at Aoyama Gakuin—and Hatanoshin Yamaga (山鹿旗之進), both closely connected to Aoyama. The seeds of faith sown at Aoyama Gakuin began to flourish. In 1891, he graduated with a Bachelor of Divinity degree, earning a prestigious \$300 honor prize (equivalent to approximately 1 million yen today).

Asada then moved to New York, where he continued his studies at Columbia University's Graduate School of Linguistics and Union Theological Seminary. There, he mastered Semitic languages, including Hebrew, Aramaic, and Syriac, as well as Greek and Latin. In 1892, he received a scholarship to the University of Chicago's Graduate School of Philology, and just a year later, at the age of 28, he was awarded his Ph.D.

Eiji Asada's reputation had already spread widely when Youitsu Honda (本多庸一), Chancellor of Aoyama Gakuin, invited him to join the institution as a professor at its School of Theology. Asada was appointed to teach Old Testament studies and quickly became a sought-after figure, both in the classroom and as a lecturer on biblical topics. At the 6th YMCA Summer School in Hakone—where Kanzo Uchimura delivered his renowned lecture, *The Greatest Legacy*—Asada was selected as one of the leading Christian speakers of the time, presenting on the topic of Bibliology.⁵

fault. But then I came across the words of our Lord in Luke 23:34: 'Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.' As I read those words, my heart trembled, and I found myself murmuring, 'This is what Christianity truly is.'" (Nozaki, *ibid.*, pp. 10-11).

- 5 Other speakers included Naohiro Sakamoto (坂本直寛, a nephew of Ryoma Sakamoto, civil rights activist, and pastor), Masatake Oshima (大島正健, one of the first students at Sapporo Agricultural College札幌農学校, a professor at Doshisha University and Severance Medical School), Kaiseki Matsumura (松村介石), Masahisa Uemura (植村正久, theologian and pastor), Tomoyoshi Murai (村井知至, a professor at Tokyo Foreign Language School), Hajime Onishi (大西祝, philosopher and professor at Waseda University), Yujiro Motora (元良勇次郎, psychologist and professor at

The faith sown in his heart at Aoyama Gakuin when he was 18 had blossomed, earning him the trust of Chancellor Honda. In 1896, Asada attended the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church in Cleveland, Ohio, as a lay delegate representing the Japanese Methodist Episcopal Church. There, he delivered a speech to American church representatives, earning enthusiastic applause from the audience.

However, as time passed, Asada's role as an Old Testament scholar at Aoyama Gakuin began to diminish.⁶ His advanced expertise in biblical studies was ahead of its time in Japan, and he found fewer opportunities to teach his specialty in the theology department.⁷ Despite this, his exceptional command of English gained recognition. He began lecturing on English at the Tokyo Higher Commercial School (東京高等商業学校, now Hitotsubashi University一橋大学) and eventually became a professor at the newly established affiliated foreign language school, which later became Tokyo University of Foreign Studies (東京外国語大学). His focus gradually shifted to English education.

As a leading figure in the field of English education, Asada visited schools across Japan and served as a commissioner for the Higher Civil Service Examination for Government Officials (文官高等試験. Now the National Civil Service Examination 国家公務員試験). Despite his many professional commitments, he remained connected to Aoyama Gakuin, teaching English at the upper secondary school (青山学院高等科) every Tuesday and Friday throughout his life. He worked tirelessly to ensure that graduates of Aoyama Gakuin were exempt from the English exam required for the secondary teacher's examination and contributed significantly to advancing Aoyama's English education.⁸ He

Imperial University 帝国大学), Youitsu Honda (本多庸一, Chancellor of Aoyama Gakuin), and others.

6 He was compelled to step down from teaching Old Testament studies in the School of Theology after 1897. Despite the support of Chancellor Honda and Dean Julius Soper, Asada ultimately ceased all lectures in the department when Chancellor Honda resigned as Chancellor of Aoyama Gakuin in 1907 to assume the presidency of the Methodist Episcopal Church in Japan. Asada entrusted the responsibility of teaching Old Testament studies in the School of Theology to Yoshisuke Sakon (左近義彌) (see Nozaki, *ibid.*, pp. 21-24) .

7 See Tetsuzo Okada 岡田哲蔵, "Mourning the Life of Eiji Asada," in Mikako Asada (ed.), *ibid.*, pp. 527-534; Yoshiyasu Hiraiwa 平岩愼保, "An Aspect of the Late Dr. Asada's Life," *ibid.*, pp. 581-582; Seimei Yoshioka 吉岡誠明, "Mourning the Late Dr. Asada," *ibid.*, pp. 595-599; and Takayuki Namae 生江孝之, "In Memory of My Former Teacher, Dr. Asada, and to Express My Hopes," *ibid.*, pp. 599-603.

8 See "Application for a Teaching License without an Examination" 「高等科 試験を須ずして教

also helped graduates secure employment and maintained relationships with his former students, offering encouragement as they pursued careers as English teachers.

Even when faced with roles that did not align with his original aspirations, Asada approached his work with unwavering faith, dedicating himself fully to each task as an act of devotion to God. This faith, nurtured at Aoyama Gakuin, became the foundation of his life. No matter how busy he was, he made it a priority to attend Sunday worship services with his family. His wife, Mikako—a graduate of Joshi Gakuin (also known as Presbyterian Girls' School)—was introduced to him by Kajiko Yajima (矢嶋楫子), the school's founder and first president. During times when his church was without a senior pastor, Asada often stepped into the pulpit, delivering sermons and supporting the congregation.⁹ Even when pressed for time, he would ride his bicycle to church to ensure he never missed a service.¹⁰

One of his students at Aoyama Gakuin High School captured the essence of Asada's true passion:

“Twice a month during school worship services, he would read from the Old Testament—Psalms or Isaiah—with a clear, refined, and beautiful voice. His reading was natural yet sublime, and his eyes shone with a fire that revealed his deep connection to the text. These moments were unlike anything in his English lectures or speeches. This was his true calling: reading, reflecting on, preaching, and sharing the Old Testament. While he may have taken pride in training thousands of students in foreign language schools and advancing English education across Japan, his real strength lay in his love for the Old Testament and the faith it inspired in him.”¹¹

Eiji Asada was an extraordinary teacher whose journey with Christianity began at Aoyama Gakuin. He taught there, gave his talents to the institution, and continued contributing to

員免許状を受領せしむる儀に付願」(with curriculum vitae of 本多庸一、ベンジャミン・チャップル、ゼニー・ステヴェンソン・ヴェール、エー・エム・ブルックス、岡田哲蔵、石坂正信、鵜澤聰明、斎藤良一、和田正幾、浅田栄次、高橋丁十郎、ジュリアス・ソーバル) in the Aoyama Gakuin Reference Center (青山学院資料センター) collection, and the Center's document AA146/A2-3, “Dr. Eiji Asada, a brief biography.”

9 Obituary by The Rev. Kunisaburo Nakagawa (中川邦三郎, Kudan Methodist Episcopal Church 九段美以教会), Mikako Asada(ed.), *ibid.*, pp. 591-592.

10 Hiraiwa, *ibid.*, p. 582.

11 Antei Hiyane (比屋根安定), “Boku no Kokoro ni ejita Sensei” (The Teacher Reflected in My Heart), Mikako Asada(ed.), *ibid.*, p. 563.

its legacy even after his official ties with the school ended and his career took him elsewhere.

On November 10, 1914, Asada collapsed in the library of the Tokyo University of Foreign Studies. He passed away at dawn the following day at the age of 49. His funeral was held in the auditorium of Aoyama Gakuin (青山学院講堂), officiated by Rev. Wasuke Ishikawa (石川和助), pastor of Aoyama Chojamaru Church (青山長者丸教会). Over 2,000 people attended, including prominent figures such as Tomoyoshi Murai, professor at the Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, who delivered a eulogy recounting Asada's life; Hatanoshin Yamaga, a friend from his days in Chicago, who gave a sermon; and Mizutaro Takagi (高木壬太郎), the fourth Chancellor of Aoyama Gakuin, alongside Naibu Kanda (神田乃武), president of the Tokyo English Association. One of Asada's former students, Antei Hiyane—a historian of Christianity and later a professor at the Aoyama Gakuin School of Theology—captured the profound impact his teacher had on him:

“As he often said, ‘Beyond the Jordan,’ he has now crossed the Jordan River and entered the beautiful Kingdom of God. His cry of ‘Beyond the Jordan’ is deeply engraved in my heart. When we too enter that Kingdom and are reunited with our teacher, we will share stories, speak of our long-cherished aspirations, and reflect on the work we have carried forward. We will say, ‘Teacher, we have succeeded in fulfilling your aspirations. We carried out the legacy you entrusted to us.’ We will rejoice together and receive the overflowing blessings of heaven.”¹²

Although there may not be a physical monument to his life on the Aoyama Campus, the testimony of Christ's love that Asada embodied is deeply engraved in the spirit of Aoyama Gakuin. The legacy he left behind continues to shine like a beacon, guiding toward a future filled with hope and the ultimate joy of sharing in the boundless blessings of heaven.

¹² See Hiyane, *ibid.*, p. 564.