

TRANSLATION

The Legacy of Rennyo Shōnin

Rennyo Shōnin Itoku ki

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY NABATA TAKASHI

INTRODUCTION

THE PRESENT TEXT, *Rennyo shōnin itoku ki*, or the Legacy of Rennyo Shōnin, is an early sixteenth century biography which, in extolling the achievements of Rennyo (1415–1499), the eighth hereditary leader of the Honganji lineage who transformed the Honganji from a middling temple to a national institution, raises him from a historical figure to near legendary status on a par with Hōnen (1133–1212), founder of the Jōdoshū, and Shinran (1173–1262), founder of the Jōdo Shinshū. Beneath the title of the work it says, “Compiled by Rengo, Recorded by Jitsugo,” Rengo (1468–1543) and Jitsugo (1492–1583) being Rennyo’s seventh and tenth sons, respectively, who each produced numerous documents on Rennyo’s life and teaching. The document in hand thus represents a work co-authored by these two.

The biography is a three-part work divided into (1) Rennyo’s role as Restorer of Shinshū, (2) the wondrous occurrences that happened while he was alive, (3) the benefits to others accrued after his death. This three part structure resembles the *Hō-on kō shiki*, a life of Shinran written by Kakunyo (1270–1351), the second heir to the Honganji lineage. A colophon to the *Itoku ki* states that it was compiled from materials gathered by Rengo Kennen and Jitsugo Kenshun, who was adopted into the Honsen-ji lineage by Rengo, and that it was examined and corrected by Jitsugo’s son Jitsukyō in Tenmon 2 (1533) when he was age seventy. However, Jitsukyō died in 1533 at age 26, hence there is a discrepancy in the information given in the colophon.

It should also be noted, moreover, that, contentwise, *Itoku ki* is not a work of pure historical scholarship as it is not altogether free of political coloration.

That is, Rengo and Jitsugo, as well as the latter's son Jitsukyō, all belonged to the lineage of the Kaga Honsen-ji. This was an important Shinshū temple in present-day Ishikawa prefecture ever since the time of its founding by Rennyo's uncle Nyojō (1412–1460). Nyojō was only a few years older than Rennyo and studied with him under Rennyo's father Zonnyo. In 1457, after Zonnyo died, Nyojō figured importantly in the transfer of power from Zonnyo to Rennyo when his stepmother challenged the succession in favor of her own son. This would suggest that this document written after the death of Rennyo in 1499 was intended to extol his achievements where and when they relate in particular to the Dharma transmission of the Honsen-ji.

What readers throughout the ages have loved about *Itoku ki* is its colorful literary allusions from the Chinese classics, its opulent use of *kambun* terms, and the many strange and wonderful events that happen in the life of Rennyo that transform him into a saintly figure. The biographers thus knew exactly what they were about when they titled the work *The Legacy of Rennyo Shōnin*, for it praises in biography form a version of Rennyo that people could well believe in. Crafting the work from good quality materials at their disposal, they mixed in a pinch of the stuff legends are made off and a touch of literary flair to draw the tide of Rennyo worship to its highest point. The vibrant, positive image Rennyo has enjoyed as well as the sheer veneration he has received during the modern age ever since the early Tokugawa period are due in large part to the present work.