Critical Dictionary of Apocalyptic and Millenarian Movements

Shincheonji Church of Jesus

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Published: 6th June 2025
Briggs, Mary. 2025. "Shincheonji Church of Jesus." In James Crossley and Alastair Lockhart (eds.), *Critical Dictionary of Apocalyptic and Millenarian Movements*. 6 June 2025. Retrieved from www.cdamm.org/articles/shincheonji-church-of-jesus

Introduction

Shincheonji Church of Jesus (Shincheonji) is a new Christian millenarian church established in 1984 by Lee Man-hee (b. 1931) in South Korea's North Chungcheong Province. Shincheonji is an abbreviated form of the phrase *sincheongukjigu* which translates to 'New Heaven New Earth,' a reference to Revelation 21:1 (Kim and Bang 2019, 9–11). Shincheonji can also be understood as a grassroots Korean religious movement due to its historical connections to earlier Korean millenarian Christian movements, its development in South Korea, and the centrality of the nation of South Korea to the church's understanding of the fulfilment of Revelation. However, Shincheonji is also an international church with a growing presence abroad. Although South Korea is home to more members of Shincheonji than any other country, as of 2023, the church claims to have members in 79 other countries (Shincheonji Church of Jesus 2023). Shincheonji in the South Korean context will be the focus of this entry.

Shincheonji attracted international attention in February 2020 when a Covid-19 cluster infection in the city of Daegu was traced back to one of its members. However, the church has always been the subject of mass media attention and public scrutiny in South Korea. Shincheonji is often labelled as 'heresy' (*idan*) or 'pseudo-religion' (*saibi chonggyo*) by many Protestant theologians and pastors, and in news and entertainment media, although it is also referred to as a 'new religion' (*sinchonggyo*) or an 'emerging religion' (*sinheungchonggyo*) by academics and theologians. Those wishing to learn more about Shincheonji will find that most of the academic literature about the church has been written by Protestant theologians attempting to demonstrate why it is heretical or problematic for South Korean society. This raises potential problems for those wishing to study this church; the information presented by each source must be carefully and critically assessed.

History of the Founder

Lee Man-hee, also known as Chairman Lee or 'the Chairman' among Shincheonji members, is the founder of the church and the head of its leadership. Lee is also referred to as the 'promised pastor.' His title does not mark him as someone with official institutional qualifications, however, and Lee is outspoken about the fact that he has never received any formal seminary education (Shincheonji USA 2021). Rather, the title of

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‘promised pastor’ refers to Lee’s role as a messenger of God’s word and of the new heaven and new earth, as promised in the New Testament (some of the cited examples are John 14:26; Revelation 2, 3, 10, 12) (Shincheonji Church of Jesus 2022a). Within Shincheonji, Lee is understood to be a human who possesses unique and authoritative knowledge of biblical truth, which he has recorded and passed down through Shincheonji’s biblical education programme.

Knowledge of Lee’s life prior to the establishment of Shincheonji primarily comes from two categories of sources: Lee’s autobiographical accounts, provided in interviews, seminars, and in his writings, and the biographical accounts of his life provided by theologians and pastors who may or may not be opposed to Shincheonji. The accounts of Lee’s life provided by these two categories of sources can differ greatly, with some details conflicting across the accounts, and portrayals of Lee varying widely. Keeping these discrepancies and uncertainties in mind, the following section should not be taken as a comprehensive account of Lee’s life but rather as a brief outline of his childhood and his religious life prior to Shincheonji that provides the necessary historical context.

Lee was born in Japanese-occupied Korea in 1931 to a farming family in the small rural town of Punggak in Cheongdo county (Han 2014, 71; Introvigne 2020, 4). Although Lee did not attend church as a child and was never baptised, his grandfather was a devoted Christian who had a significant impact on Lee’s religious life. Lee learned to read the Bible as a child, he would pray with his grandfather every morning and evening, and on Sundays he would climb to the top of a mountain to pray (Cha 2015, 175; Shincheonji USA 2021). According to Lee, his life prior to Shincheonji was marked by several profound mystical experiences, with one of the most significant occurring in a field on his family farm. While praying in this field, a giant star appeared above Lee which seemed closer than any normal star. It remained for three days. When Lee’s father came to look at the star, he remarked that stars such as the one above their field indicate the appearance of a great figure in the nation (Shincheonji USA 2021).

Lee had another significant mystical experience soon after the appearance of the star that led to him becoming a committed Christian. While walking towards a mountain in a moment of immense despair, Lee states that he encountered a white and shining heavenly figure. Lee collapsed upon seeing the figure, which he realised was a representation of God. Lee heard the being command him to follow it. After this encounter, Lee climbed to the top of the mountain and made a blood oath promising that he would devote his life to serving God (Cha 2015, 175; Shincheonji USA 2021).

In 1957, Lee joined revivalist Park Tae Seon’s (1917–1990) Christian millenarian faith-healing movement Jeondogwan (an abbreviation of the Korean Cheonbugyo Mission Center and Revival Association, *hanguk cheonbugyo jeondogwan buheunghyeop*), which would become popularly known as Olive Tree. Lee left Jeondogwan in 1967 and joined another new Christian millenarian movement: Temple of the Tabernacle (*jeonmakseongjeon*). Temple of the Tabernacle was an offshoot of the above-mentioned Jeondogwan movement established in 1966 by Yoo Jae-yeol (b.1949) in the city of Gwacheon in Gyeonggi province (Cha 2015, 175–77). Although it is unclear at what time Lee officially left Temple of the Tabernacle (different sources list dates ranging from 1978-1980), what is evident is that the time Lee spent in this movement, and subsequent events from 1980, had a profound impact on him and precipitated the creation of Shincheonji. On 14 March 1980, Yoo stepped down as the leader of Temple of the Tabernacle after Chun Doo-hwan (1931-2021) became the president of South Korea and launched the ‘social purification’ project (*sahoejeonghwa*), which included an initiative to reform ‘pseudo-religions’ (Cha 2015, 179–80; Introvigne 2021, 21–22). Upon stepping down in 1980, Yoo appointed Oh Pyeong-ho, a Presbyterian pastor, to lead

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the church. This decision would have helped insulate Temple of Tabernacle from unwanted attention from the Chun regime. Lee vehemently criticised the decision to have a pastor from a mainstream denomination lead the movement and saw it as a corruption of Temple of the Tabernacle, a sentiment he expressed in a series of letters he wrote to Yoo and other Temple of the Tabernacle leaders. Pastor Oh then chose to incorporate Temple of the Tabernacle into Presbyterianism, changing the name on the sign for the church to 'The Presbyterian Church of Korea's Church of Isaac.' This decision confirmed Lee's fears of corruption and betrayal by Oh and the other church leaders (Cha 2015, 176–78; Introvigne 2020, 5–6).

On 14 March 1984, Lee established Shincheonji, its full name being 'Shincheonji Church of Jesus, the Temple of the Tabernacle of the Testimony' (*shincheonjiyesugyo jeungeojangmakseongjeon*). The events surrounding the end of Temple of the Tabernacle came to be known as the destruction of the first tabernacle in Shincheonji, and the church's full name illustrated Shincheonji's position as the true temple of the tabernacle. Shincheonji's first meetings took place in a basement apartment until its first temple building was erected in June 1984 in the city of Anyang, Gyeonggi province (Cha 2015, 174; Kim and Bang 2019, 12).

Shincheonji Teachings and Eschatology

Like other millenarian Christian movements, Revelation is the most important book of the Bible for Shincheonji and informs the church's eschatology. According to the teaching of Shincheonji, the prophecies contained in Revelation have already been fulfilled in Korea and witnessed by Lee during the twentieth century (Kim and Bang 2019, 10). For Shincheonji, the events surrounding Temple of the Tabernacle's foundation, Lee's involvement in the church, and its eventual destruction by Oh Pyeong-ho and other Presbyterian leaders were the real physical fulfilment of Revelation. Since Lee witnessed these events and testified about them to others, he can be understood as an analogue of John of the New Testament. Through listening to Lee's words, Shincheonji members also become witnesses to the fulfilment of Revelation and can testify to its reality (i.e., the betrayal and destruction of the previous Temple of the Tabernacle and the establishment of Shincheonji), and wherever Shincheonji members gather is the Temple of the Tabernacle of the Testimony (Introvigne 2021, 22; Shincheonji Church of Jesus 2022b). Critically, the centrality of Revelation to Shincheonji does not mean members are unfamiliar with the Bible in its entirety, nor does it mean that the church overlooks the rest of the Bible in its compulsory biblical education programme. On the contrary, Shincheonji members must possess a strong sequential understanding of biblical events and figures to graduate from its biblical education programme.

Shincheonji divides the history of humanity into three eras that mark a series of covenants between God and his people. The first of these eras is the time of the Old Testament and of the covenant of physical Israel. This is the era that promised the arrival of Christ. The second era is the time of the New Testament, which is also the time of Christ's first coming. This second era fulfilled the promises of the Old Testament era but also evidenced the end of the covenant of physical Israel and the failure of its recipients. The first coming of Christ established a new covenant, which is referred to as spiritual Israel. This second covenant was broken in Gwacheon, as is evidenced by the previously discussed end of the Temple of the Tabernacle movement. The third and final era is the one in which we are currently living: the time of Christ's second coming and of the covenant of the new spiritual Israel. This is also the era of the completion of Revelation since all the prophecies have already been physically fulfilled in our reality, as witnessed by Lee (Park

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2014, 178–80; Cha 2015, 181; Introvigne 2020, 10; Shincheonji Church of Jesus 2022a). Although the second coming of Christ is yet to occur, Shincheonji teaches that at the time of this event, the old heaven and earth will give way to the new heaven and the new earth (which is Shincheonji). In this new heaven and new earth, the elect will dwell in the millennial kingdom: the holy city of the new Jerusalem. In this millennial kingdom, Shincheonji maintains there will be 144,000 "sealed" individuals who will be leaders of the great "multitude in white" of saved souls (Shincheonji New Heaven New Earth 2015; Shincheonji (New Heaven New Earth) Church UK 2023). For now, Shincheonji members await Christ's second coming and the arrival of the new heaven and new earth, but they are not waiting passively. In Shincheonji, it is understood that humans must work with God to create a perfect and peaceful world that mirrors heaven through charity, humanitarian works, and promoting peace (Introvigne 2021, 23).

In Shincheonji, biblical truth is not considered self-evident: it must be learned piece by piece through careful study over an extended period of time. In lessons and promotional materials, Shincheonji repeatedly refers to "the secrets of heaven" and "mysteries" of the Bible. Shincheonji's treatment of the Bible as a source of secret knowledge is best exemplified by its understanding of Jesus's parables. According to Shincheonji, Jesus hid the secrets of heaven within parables to protect this sacred knowledge because non-believers would not comprehend the true hidden meanings. These intentionally concealed secrets of heaven are the key to salvation and the kingdom of heaven, i.e., the new Jerusalem (Shincheonji Church of Jesus 2021). This understanding of the Bible is why those who wish to join Shincheonji must demonstrate that they possess knowledge of biblical truth before becoming recognised as members. This is done by graduating from Shincheonji's biblical education centre, known as the Zion Christian Mission Center.

Relationship with Protestantism in South Korea

South Korea's contentious relationship with mainstream South Korean Protestantism is a defining feature of public and academic discourse surrounding the church. As mentioned above, Shincheonji is often referred to as heresy (*idan*) or pseudo-religion (*saibi chonggyo*) by theologians, Protestant pastors, and even mainstream media sources (Byeon 2017; Grisafi 2021, 47). The most frequently cited reason as to why Shincheonji is said to be heretical is that the church teaches that Lee's appearance was the fulfilment of biblical prophecy and, therefore, deifies him by making him equal to Christ (Kim 2022). Shincheonji members refute this claim by stating that even though Lee has a critical role in bringing about the new heaven and the new earth, he is still a human being who serves God. Additional reasons cited as to why Shincheonji is considered heretical are the church's interpretation of parables, its connections to past 'heretical' millenarian Christian movements (e.g., Olive Tree and Temple of the Tabernacle), and its claims that Shincheonji promises physical eternal life (Park 2017).

In February 2020, in Daegu, a Covid-19 cluster infection was traced back to a Shincheonji member, referred to as Patient-31 since they were the thirty-first confirmed case of Covid-19 in South Korea (Introvigne et al. 2020, 76). The attention directed toward Shincheonji in the wake of its association with the country's rapidly growing Covid-19 epidemic was accompanied by increased public scrutiny of the church, its members, and of Lee. Part of the public anxiety surrounding Shincheonji and Covid-19 was a fear that the spread of the virus was somehow part of the church's millenarian vision and not a coincidence (Briggs 2022). The increased attention and fears surrounding the church and Covid-19 had

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serious legal implications for Shincheonji. Lee was arrested in August 2020 and indicted on charges of obstructing an epidemiological investigation, impeding quarantine measures, and embezzlement of church funds (Kim 2020). Lee was cleared of all charges related to Covid-19 in 2021 by both the Suwon District Court and the Court of Appeals but was found guilty of embezzlement of church funds and given a five-year suspended sentence (Lee 2021).

Organisation and Worship

Shincheonji is divided into twelve tribes of Israel, and each member belongs to one of these tribes. According to Shincheonji, the 144,000 sealed individuals in the millennial kingdom will be composed of 12,000 individuals from each of Shincheonji's twelve tribes (Shincheonji New Heaven New Earth 2015). In South Korea, each of the twelve tribes correspond to the Shincheonji churches and members located in one part of the country. For instance, members of the Thaddeus tribe in South Korea are in Cheongdo county. Although Lee is the head of Shincheonji, the management of the church is organised into twenty-four departments, which are responsible for different operations (e.g., publishing, finance). According to Shincheonji, this organisational structure reflects the design of heaven as described in the New Testament. Most operations take place at Shincheonji's headquarters in Gwacheon, a fitting location since it is where the church was first established (Shincheonji Church of Jesus, the Temple of the Tabernacle 2022).

Shincheonji's weekly worship schedule mirrors the schedules of most Protestant churches in South Korea. There are two worship services during the week, with services taking place on Wednesdays and Sundays, although some locations may also have Friday evening and early morning prayers. The exact content of the services is difficult to verify since they are not open to the public. There are, however, several distinctive features of Shincheonji worship noted below. First, members wear black and white attire to services, typically consisting of white button-down tops and black skirts or trousers, along with an identification card proving their membership. Members also kneel or sit together on the floor of the worship hall, with exceptions for those who need to sit in a chair (Introvigne 2021, 23). Another notable feature of Shincheonji's worship services is the use of songs produced by their own music team, distinguished by a sound similar to other forms of Korean Christian pop music and lyrics consistent with church's teachings (HMBC, n.d.).

Membership and Evangelism

In 2020, there were an estimated 245,000 Shincheonji members in South Korea and an estimated 60,000 to 100,000 abroad (Introvigne 2021, 23). Even considering the likelihood of some members having left, Shincheonji's membership has likely increased because nearly 250,000 individuals have graduated from Zion Christian Mission Center since 2020 (Shincheonji Church of Jesus 2022c, [0:23:34–0:23:45]; Shincheonji Church of Jesus 2023 [0:19:57–0:20:08].

Although official statistical and demographic information about Shincheonji's members is unavailable, previous social scientific research on Shincheonji shows that many members were previously members of mainstream Protestant churches or grew up in Protestant families (Lee 2015; personal communications 15 and 16 December 2021). However, not everyone who joins Shincheonji is from a Christian background.

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Members of other religious communities (e.g., Buddhism) or non-religious individuals also join the church, meaning they only become Christians through Shincheonji (personal communications 15 and 16 December 2021).

To become an official member of Shincheonji, prospective members must attend Shincheonji's biblical education programme for six months, which is offered for free through Zion Christian Mission Center. To complete the course, students must pass an exam that consists of 300 questions assessing their knowledge of the Bible and their understanding of the fulfilment of Revelation (Park 2014, 171; Kim and Bang 2019, 12). After graduating from the programme, these individuals become registered members of Shincheonji.

Shincheonji members are expected to regularly attend worship services and prioritise church-related activities over more mundane aspects of life since the church is working to create a peaceful world suitable to host the new heaven and the new earth (Lee 2015, 164–65). Despite the emphasis on the importance of life within Shincheonji, this is not to the exclusion of other aspects of life; most members hold jobs outside of the church, get married, have children, and attend university.

Members are also expected to evangelise, and Shincheonji's various evangelism methods have been a topic of consistent discussion in academic literature, the mass media, and popular discourse, with the most widely discussed method being called 'deceptive evangelism' by those opposed to the church and its evangelism strategies (Introvigne 2021, 26). According to Shincheonji's critics, the church's evangelism involves members 'infiltrating' mainstream Protestant churches to convince congregants to join Shincheonji. They also allege that Shincheonji uses other forms of deception to collect the personal and contact information of individuals they wish to evangelise, such as asking individuals on the street to fill out surveys for the purpose of conducting market research (Park 2014, 169; Byeon 2017, 19; MBC PD Note 2020). These practices are sometimes referred to as 'harvesting' by those critical of Shincheonji; however, within Shincheonji, 'harvesting' refers to all evangelism rather than a specific method. Shincheonji members do not deny using dissimulation as part of evangelism but assert that it can be useful in the initial stages of introducing people to their church, given the difficulties posed by negative public perceptions of Shincheonji (Introvigne 2020, 15; Introvigne 2021, 26).

Shincheonji members also use a strategy of 'open evangelism.' As the name implies, open evangelism is when a member is immediately forthcoming about their ties with Shincheonji at the start of their evangelism activities (An 2020, 21). Examples of open evangelism include inviting someone to attend Shincheonji's biblical education classes, bringing a friend or acquaintance to speak to another evangelist, and openly discussing your Shincheonji membership with friends and family. After the increase in negative media attention directed toward Shincheonji at the start of South Korea's Covid-19 epidemic in February 2020, Shincheonji moved away from covert forms of evangelism and open evangelism became the preferred method (Introvigne 2021, 26).

Shincheonji and its members also leverage online platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, and blogs to reach potential members. The church has released a series of biblical education lessons on its YouTube channel, including beginner, intermediate, and advanced lessons. Some members also maintain online blogs to publicly share Shincheonji-related content, such as discussing hardships faced by members due to religious stigma, their opinions on events concerning Shincheonji, and sharing the church's teachings.

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Note: The author used the Revised Romanisation of the Korean system for transliterating Korean words, with the exception of names of public figures, organisations, and authors. All translations are the author's own, except for the English translations of the titles of Korean sources and Korean journals, as these were provided by the original sources.

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