

Book Review: FROM THE OXUS RIVER TO THE CHINESE SHORES: Studies on East Syriac Christianity in China and Central Asia

Today we're glad to bring you a new book review by Ed Schroeder, Crossings co-founder and original Thursday Theology blogger. This week Ed reviews a multi-author exploration of the history of Christianity in the East.

Peace and Joy,
Carol Braun, for the editorial team

FROM THE OXUS RIVER TO THE CHINESE SHORES: *Studies on East Syriac Christianity in China and Central Asia*.

Li Tang & Dietmar W. Winkler, editors.

Vienna and Berlin: LIT Verlag, 2013.

472 pages, paperback, \$69.95.

"How they brought the Good News from Jerusalem to Rome."

That was Archibald Hunter's title for his chapter on the Acts of the Apostles in his *Introducing the New Testament*, a textbook from my seminary days three score years ago. But there is no biblical book that tells us about the Gospel shower ("*Platzregen*," Luther called it, a moving thundershower) going east. Not just west to the capital of the Roman Empire, as we

all know, but in the opposite direction: “How they brought the Good News from Jerusalem to Chang’an, the capital of the Chinese Empire.” Which most of us don’t know.

Granted, that *Platzregen* didn’t get to China within the first century of the Christian era, and so such a report, “The Acts of the Apostles Thomas and Bartholomew,” didn’t make it into the New Testament canon. Probably none was ever written. But just as Roman roads were the highway for the Gospel’s move west, so the Silk Road was the avenue for the Gospel’s traveling east. And that’s a long road, 4,172 miles from Jerusalem to Chang’an. (FYI, Jerusalem to Rome is a mere 1,434 miles.)

We Western Christians are largely ignorant about the Syriac-speaking Church of the East—yes, the Church all the way to the Far East. So it was in my seminary education in the 1950s. And all to our own deficit, if for no other reason than that Syriac is a kindred-language to Aramaic, the language of Jesus and his disciples. The scholars writing the twenty-nine essays in this book are out to correct that defect.

But it was not Jerusalem, it was Antioch that became the sending center. In both directions. Already in the Book of Acts we hear, “It was in Antioch that the disciples were first called Christians” (Acts 11:26). It was “the church in Antioch...[that] laid hands on Paul and Barnabas and sent them off” (Acts 13). They went west. What we don’t learn from the New Testament book of Acts is that it was from Antioch that the Gospel mission also went east. It was Antioch, at the western end of the Silk Road, where the “Church of the East” took off.

While Paul and Barnabas (and eventually Peter too?) “went west,” others headed east. Thomas, Bartholomew (and a certain “Addai of the Seventy” designated alongside both of them as “apostle” by Christians in Babylon) got the Silk Road traffic going. It

flourished. Syriac was the language of the faith.

So much so, that in that ancient imperial capital at the far eastern end of the Silk Road, Chang'an, now Xi'an ("she-an"), there is a stele commemorating the *Platzregen's* arrival there. (Merriam-Webster's Collegiate for 'stele': "an inscribed stone slab or pillar used for commemorative purposes.") It speaks of the "luminous religion" (*Jingjiao*) that arrived at the imperial court in 635 A.D. when Syriac missionary Alopen presented the Christian Gospel to the emperor in that city.

Here are Wikipedia's specs: "The Nestorian Stele is a Tang Chinese stele erected in 781 that documents 150 years of early Christianity in China. It is a 279-cm-tall [that is, nine-foot-tall] limestone block with text in both Chinese and Syriac describing the existence of Christian communities in several cities in northern China. It reveals that the initial Christian church had met recognition by the Tang Emperor Taizong, due to efforts of the Christian missionary Alopen in 635. Buried in 845, probably during religious suppression, the stele was not rediscovered until 1625." (Wikipedia, "Nestorian Stele," accessed June 12, 2014. More on the label "Nestorian" below.)

(Incidentally, in 1992, eight of us Crossings folks, on our way to do a Crossings workshop in Beijing, made a side trip to Xi'an to see this stele. We brought back home a rubbing—yes, nine feet tall—for show-and-tell.)

This volume is a collection of papers presented at the Third International Conference on the "Church of the East in China and Central Asia," held in 2009 in Salzburg, Austria. The "Oxus River" in the title is at the midpoint of the Silk Road, touching today's Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan, and Turkmenistan.

The papers deal with diverse topics arranged into four thematic

groups: 1. Manuscripts and Inscriptions; 2. Historical Inquiry and Archaeological Excavations; 3. Syriac Christianity along the Silk Road; and 4. Liturgical Traditions and Theological Reflections.

In the first group, various scholars have undertaken studies on manuscripts and inscriptions unearthed in China and Central Asia.

The second group deals with the historical aspect of East Syriac Christianity, divided into two historical periods: The Tang (seventh- through tenth-century, the era of the stele) and the Mongol-Yuan (thirteenth- and fourteenth-century) dynasties.

Fascinating here are the various papers investigating the text of the stele itself. Here the rubrics of contemporary scholarship come into play, investigating not only the text of the stele, but also its context. For example, Max Deeg elaborates on the Syriac priest Yisi, the donor of the stele, who is telling the story, and interprets him against the political background of the Tang Dynasty, proposing that the content of the Xi'an inscription was political propaganda blended with religious rhetoric.

Group three looks at Christian communities along the Silk Road before it gets to China.

The final group, seven essays on theological and liturgical perspectives on East Syriac Christianity, was most fascinating for me. Several of them probe the difficulty in translating Christian proclamation—incarnation, trinity, faith—into the Buddhist-Confucian-saturated Chinese language. Ditto for the umpteen other languages encountered along that four-thousand-mile road. Major one being Sogdian, which I'd never heard of, but which I now know was the lingua franca all along that Silk Road.

This difficulty in translating is probed especially by Glen L. Thompson's chapter on "How the Jingjiao Became Nestorian: Western Perceptions and Eastern Realities." 'Jingjiao' is the Chinese term on the stele for the Christian faith, which translators have rendered as "luminous religion." The accuracy of the label 'Nestorian', linked to the stele ever since its discovery in the seventeenth century, is challenged by Thompson. He examines how the term 'Nestorian', already in the days of Nestorius, patriarch of Constantinople in the fifth century, slipped into Christian vocabulary as the generic epithet for anyone allegedly departing from orthodoxy.

Nestorius himself, a major voice in Antiochene (= Syriac) Christianity, lost in one of the major controversies of early church history. His opponent was Cyril, patriarch of Alexandria. Patriarch contra patriarch. What triggered the debate, of all things, was dissent about appropriate titles for the Virgin Mary. Cyril said "*theotokos*," Mother of God. Nestorius said "*Christotokos*," Mother of the Messiah. Cyril ("out to win at any cost," so one of my teachers) brought Nestorius down. He even succeeded in getting Emperor Theodosius II to ban Nestorius (for life, without parole) to the Egyptian desert, where, after sixteen years, he died in misery.

Church politics and imperial politics—then and now—work on the same paradigm. The one at the top of the pyramid calls the shots. This all in contradiction to the primal mandate of the Church's Head in that discussion (Matt. 20) with his disciples about authority (triggered by their own lust for top positions): "It shall not be so among you."

So 'Nestorian' became a dirty word in Christian vocabulary, regardless of whether or not the item so labeled came close to Nestorius's own teaching. Let alone whether Nestorius really was a threat to the free flow of the Gospel.

Thompson reflects on how this “Western perception,” a negative perception, colored the “Eastern realities” of the Syriac church that came to be in China. With massive documentation, he chronicles the history of ‘Nestorian’ as a pejorative term. Thus, “while the Church of the East itself preferred other terms, they never could shake this one. And the explorers and writers of the early modern period naturally adopted the same terminology for the new documents and archeological discoveries of the Jingjiao. It remains to be seen whether a less emotive term, and one with more accurate connotations, will ever be successfully introduced and thus allow the Chinese Jingjiao movement to be judged on its own merits” (435).

On the side, I can still hear my own teacher, Werner Elert (Erlangen University, 1953), telling us “*Nestorius war kein Ketzer.*” Nestorius was no heretic. He was the victim of church politics. ‘Martyr’ might be a better word for him—both in its original meaning as a witness, and then as one who dies on the witness stand.

But that’s a subject for another report.

Some of the essays also touch on the demise of these Christian communities in the Church of the East as persecution came when new emperors ascended the throne in China, and also when the Mongol invasion swept west from the Far East. Perhaps that will be a topic for some future conference of these researchers.

This book is truly an ecumenical, international product. Half of the authors come from middle or east Asia. The names of the editors, Li Tang and Dietmar W. Winkler, already signal its international pedigree. Both editors are connected with the Mayr-Meinhof Institute for Eastern Christian Studies in Salzburg.

Syriac Christianity spread along the Silk Road together with

Aramaic culture and liturgy. The staging posts of Christian merchants along the trade routes grew into first missionary centers. Thus, the mission of the Church of the East stretched from Persia to Arabia and India; and from the Oxus River in central Asia to the Chinese shores. What we receive in this volume are studies on the Church of the East in its historical setting. Contributors have shed new light on this subject from various perspectives and academic disciplines, providing fresh insights into the rich heritage of Syriac Christianity. For this reviewer it was a journey into a new and unknown world.

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