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THE LOTUS CROSS

Just how old is Christianity in China?

1st Century A.D.

On August 1, 2002, the Beijing People's Daily reported that while studying stone carvings of recently discovered funeral monuments from the Eastern Han Dynasty (28-220 A.D.), Chinese Professor of Theology Wang Weifan found early Christian designs and engravings illustrating biblical accounts of creation. Related to Iraqi and Middle Eastern Christian designs but tempered by the local style of China's Eastern Han era, the carvings have been dated to 86 A.D. Now exhibited in the Museum of Xuzhou Han Stone Carvings, Jiangsu Province, the monuments were found in twenty intact Han burial tombs. If Professor Wang's assessment proves correct, the earliest known Christian population in China may date from the time of the apostles.

In his forthcoming book, *St. Andrew the Chosen of God*, Greek author George Alexandrou recounts early traditions from varied Middle Eastern and Asian sources suggesting that the Apostle Andrew may have preached near the western border of China. Other traditions record that St. Thaddeus, one of the seventy disciples of the Lord, traveled the Great Silk Route with Edessen/Chinese silk merchants. Believed to have preached in Edessa, St. Thaddeus ("Agai," in Edessen tradition) resembles the first century Christian missionary "Wang-Wai," of scattered border narratives.

455

A Sussanid Persian embassy reaches northern China and trade begins. Many Persians were Nestorians and although there is no record of missionary activity, this may have been one of the earliest visits by Christian foreigners. Written references to a Mar Sergis, a Persian Christian landowner in China, also date from this time.

Stone sutra, with cross rising from the lotus (at top of Chinese inscription), Xian, China.

551

Two Byzantine historians, Procopius and Theophanes, write of Nestorian monks arriving at the court of Emperor Justinian in Constantinople with a gift of silkworms concealed in a bamboo tube. Silk manufacture had been a long-guarded secret inside China, but historians believe that these Nestorian monks were working amidst Bactrian Turkic tribes that controlled much of the Old Silk Road outside the Great Wall.

635

A Persian Nestorian missionary, Alopen, arrives at the Chinese T'ang dynasty capital of Chang'an, bringing Christian scriptures and manuscripts to the imperial court. The visitor is met by a court official and a guard of honor and conducted to the palace. "The Sutras were translated in the Imperial Library. [His Majesty] investigated 'The Way' in his own forbidden apartments, and being deeply convinced of its correctness and truth, he gave special orders for its propagation..." Alopen is later titled "great patron and spiritual lord of the empire," an honorific bestowed by the imperial court.

638

To balance the political and cultural claims of Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism, the Emperor grants an edict of universal religious toleration, which includes Christianity: "...Having observed its principal and most essential points, we reached the conclusion that they cover all that is most important in life... This Teaching is helpful to all creatures and beneficial to all men. So let it have free course throughout the Empire."* The edict is later quoted in a shorter version in a 10th century T'ang dynasty encyclopedia.

649

Emperor T'ai-tsung is succeeded by his son Kao-tsung who is later described as "adding the final embellishment to the true sect" by founding in every prefecture "illustrious monasteries." Records of eleven such churches have been found, and if the claim is not a pious gilding, it would indicate over 350 Nestorian monasteries and thousands of monks, as well as the Christian communities in which they were fostered.

754

After this year, Christians come to be called "Syrians" to differentiate them from the Persian Zoroastrians and Manichees, who were also among China's officially tolerated religions.

781

A Christian monument is erected at Hsian, Shanhsi Province, commemorating the imperial edict of 638 with the inscription, "A Monument Commemorating the Propagation of the Syrian Luminous Religion in China." Surmounted by an open lotus blossom bearing a cross, the stone tablet's inscription celebrates the arrival of Alopen, quotes the edict of toleration, and details the subsequent growth of Christianity.

The monument is lost for centuries, and only rediscovered by Chinese workmen in 1623. The inscription is credited to a "Syrian" Bishop Adam, an eighth-century missionary and prolific scholar-translator whose knowledge of Chinese language and literature was so fluent that Buddhist missionaries came to him for help in translating their scriptures. His Christian translations include the Gospels, St. Paul's epistles, Acts, the Psalter, and possibly the Pentateuch and Isaiah. Christianity increases steadily under the T'ang Dynasty.

907

The T'ang Dynasty falls, and Christianity loses its status as a favored religion. The number of Christians decreases yearly through religious and political persecution. By 980 there are no remaining Christians in China. Christianity will only reappear with the twelfth-century Mongol invasions.

*For further reading see *A History of Christianity in Asia*, Volume I, by Samuel Moffett, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, NY, 1998. George Alexandrou's *St. Andrew, The Chosen of God* will be released in Greek in Athens in early 2004.