

The Nestorian Tablet

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Source: *The Biblical World*, Vol. 33, No. 4 (Apr., 1909), pp. 218+279-282

Published by: The University of Chicago Press

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3141917>

Accessed: 12-10-2016 14:29 UTC

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Exploration and Discovery

THE NESTORIAN TABLET

For centuries the western world has been more or less vaguely conscious that there existed in Northern China a stone tablet erected by Syrian Christians of the Nestorian persuasion who introduced Christianity there more than a thousand years ago. This tablet was discovered by Chinese laborers as long ago as 1625, at Sian-fu (Si-ngan fu) in Shensi. It was regarded with interest by the Chinese, and seems to have been set up by them, near the west gate of Sian-fu, in the grounds of an old Buddha temple. Efforts to protect the stone have at various times been made, but without resulting in the erection of any permanent shelter over it. (See frontispiece) Its long inscription in Chinese and Syriac has more than once been copied and translated. It relates the coming to China of Olopun, in the time of the emperor Taitsung, A. D. 635; his admission to the country, the translation into Chinese of the sacred books which he brought, and the propagation of the Illustrious Religion (Christianity), by the emperor's permission, throughout his realm. After recounting the history of the mission for nearly one hundred and fifty years (A. D. 635-781), the tablet records the conspicuous favors conferred upon the church by a certain high official under the emperor Suhtsung, and how "the white-clad members of the Illustrious Congregation now considering these men, have desired to engrave a broad tablet, in order to set forth a eulogy of their magnanimous deeds."¹ An ode follows, and the date, in the second year of Kienchung, of the Tang Dynasty, A. D. 781. The Syriac inscription also gives the date as "the year of the Greeks 1092," a characteristically Syriac way of dating by the era of Seleucus, 312 B. C. Marco Polo, it will be remembered, visiting China at a later date, found Christian churches of this Syriac type, and when the Catholics entered China in 1292 they encountered the Nestorians. But in the vicissitudes of later times these Syro-Chinese Christians seem to have lost their individuality and disappeared in the surrounding religious communities.

The past year has witnessed a notable event in the history of this famous and historic tablet, for through the efforts of Mr. Frits von Holm, M. R. A. S., formerly of the Danish army, and now of Columbia University, a faith-

¹ The translation is that of Dr. A. Wylie, published in S. W. Williams, *The Middle Kingdom*, pp. 277-85, and in the *Open Court*, January 1909, p. 41.



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THE NESTORIAN TABLET
(As Mr. von Holm found it)

ful copy of it in marble has been brought to this country and placed in the Metropolitan Museum in New York. Von Holm presented to the International Congress of Orientalists, at Copenhagen, in August last, a report of his expedition, which is reproduced, along with kindred material, in the *Open Court*, January, 1909. Impressed with the importance of the tablet, von Holm, after securing the necessary funds in London and New York, made his way in 1907 to China, arriving in Sian-fu on June 10, and easily found the stone, in the grounds of the Buddha temple just outside the city. The monument is a marble slab, ten feet high and weighing two tons. Von Holm soon found that to purchase the stone and remove it was impracticable, on account of local prejudice. He therefore arranged to have an exact copy of it made, in similar material, by local stone-cutters, and this was done. For the absolute precision of this replica, von Holm vouches in the strongest terms. Upon its completion, it was conveyed in a stout cart to Chengshow, in the neighboring province of Honan, and thence it was taken by rail to Hankow, on the Yangtse. After vexatious customs delays there, it was at length, through the good offices of Sir Robert Hart, released and removed by boat to Shanghai, whence it was shipped in February, 1908, to New York, to be deposited in the Metropolitan Museum. Students of Christian history, especially of the history of missions and of the history of Syrian Christianity, will keenly appreciate the efforts of von Holm and Sir Purdon Clarke in securing this notable object for an American museum.

Not the least result of von Holm's Sian-fu expedition is the removal of the original stone from its exposed situation on the temple farm, to the "Peilin," or Forest of Tablets, within the city. The local authorities were doubtless moved by von Holm's interest in the monument to take this praiseworthy although somewhat tardy step for its preservation. The original Nestorian Tablet is therefore no longer left in neglect and exposure in the fields outside the city, but now stands in relative security, among numbers of other ancient tablets within the walls of the Peilin at Sian-fu.

The opening lines of the inscription on the Tablet, or Chingchiaopei, are of remarkable interest, and in some ways recall, in spite of their diffuse Chinese style, the beginning of the Apology of Aristides (A. D. 138-61), a work preserved only in Syriac, it will be remembered.

Behold the unchangeably true and invisible, who existed through all eternity without origin; the far-seeing perfect intelligence, whose mysterious existence is everlasting; operating on primordial substance he created the universe, being more excellent than all holy intelligences, inasmuch as he is the source of all that is honorable. This is our eternal true lord God, triune and mysterious in sub-

stance. He appointed the cross as the means for determining the four cardinal points; he moved the original spirit, and produced the two principles of nature; the somber void was changed, and heaven and earth were opened out; the sun and moon revolved and day and night commenced; having perfected all inferior objects he then made the first man; upon him he bestowed an excellent disposition, giving him in charge the government of all created beings; man, acting out the original principles of his nature, was pure and unostentatious; his unsullied and expansive mind was free from the least inordinate desire until Satan introduced the seeds of falsehood, to deteriorate his purity of principle; the opening thus commenced in his virtue gradually enlarged, and by this crevice in his nature was obscured and rendered vicious; hence three hundred and sixty-five sects followed each other in continuous track, inventing every species of doctrinal complexity; while some pointed to material objects as the source of their faith, others reduced all to vacancy, even to the annihilation of the two primeval principles; some sought to call down blessings by prayers and supplications, while others by an assumption of excellence held themselves up as superior to their fellows;² their intellects and thoughts continually wavering, their minds and affections incessantly on the move, they never obtained their vast desires, but being exhausted and distressed they revolved in their own heated atmosphere, till by an accumulation of obscurity they lost their path, and after long groping in darkness they were unable to return. Thereupon our Trinity being divided in nature, the illustrious and honorable Messiah, veiling his true dignity, appeared in the world as a man; angelic powers promulgated the glad tidings, a virgin gave birth to the Holy One in Syria; a bright star announced the felicitous event, and Persians observing the splendor came to present tribute; the ancient dispensation as declared by the twenty-four holy men,³ was then fulfilled; and he laid down great principles for the government of families and kingdoms; he established the new religion of the silent operation of the pure spirit of the Triune, he rendered virtue subservient to direct faith, he fixed the extent of the eight boundaries, thus completing the truth and freeing it from dross; he opened the gate of the three constant principles, introducing life and destroying death; he suspended the bright sun to invade the chambers of darkness, and the falsehoods of the devil were thereupon defeated; he set in motion the vessel of mercy by which to ascend to the bright mansions, whereupon rational beings were then released; having thus completed the manifestation of his power, in clear day he ascended to his true station. Twenty-seven sacred books have been left, which disseminate intelligence by unfolding the original transforming principles. By the rule for admission it is the custom to apply the water of baptism, to wash away all superficial show and to cleanse and purify the neophytes. As a seal,

² The Gnostics are, perhaps, meant.

³ The Jewish division of the Old Testament into twenty-four books was well known to the Christian fathers (Jerome, Victorinus) and suggested to Victorinus the four and twenty elders of Rev. 4.

they hold the cross, whose influence is reflected in every direction, uniting all without distinction. As they strike the wood the fame of their benevolence is diffused abroad; worshiping toward the east, they hasten on the way to life and glory; they preserve the beard to symbolize their outward actions, they shave the crown to indicate the absence of inward affections; they do not keep slaves, but put noble and mean all on an equality; they do not amass wealth, but cast all their property into the common stock; they fast in order to perfect themselves by self-inspection; they submit to restraints, in order to strengthen themselves by silent watchfulness; seven times a day they have worship and praise for the benefit of the living and the dead; once in seven days they sacrifice, to cleanse the heart and return to purity.⁴

Brief as it is, this extraordinary preface comprises theology, cosmogony, the incarnation, Christology, scripture, and a practical manual of Christian usage. The mention of twenty-seven sacred books is difficult, for the Syrian churches ordinarily accepted but twenty-two of our New Testament books. The Nestorians of East Syria were particularly slow to accept the four disputed general epistles and Revelation, nor did these ever find their way into the Peshitto version. That they were recognized by the Nestorians in China in the seventh and eighth centuries is a point to be taken account of by students of the Syrian canon. On the whole this preface, despite its obscurities and obvious literary defects, must be reckoned a remarkable compendium of Christian doctrine and practice in its day. It seems filled with echoes of the apologists, and exhibits reminiscences of Aristides, Tatian, and the Epistle to Diognetus which can hardly be mere coincidences. A thoroughgoing comparison of this preface with the apologetic literature would probably yield valuable results.

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⁴ Wylie's translation as above.