

# THE BIBLE AND THE THIRD WORLD

*Precolonial, Colonial and  
Postcolonial Encounters*

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CHAPTER I

*Before the empire: the Bible as a marginal and  
a minority text*

The *Way* had not, at all times and in all places, the selfsame name; the sages had not, at all times and in all places, the selfsame human body. (Heaven) caused a suitable religion to be instituted for every region and clime so that each one of the races of mankind might be saved.

Seventh-century Chinese Imperial Rescript

If all this be true, how is it that God waits over sixteen hundred years before giving us any knowledge of it; how is it that the Chinese are left out, and only the barbarians are mentioned?

The Emperor K'and-hsi

As discussed in the introduction, there are three key junctures at which the Bible reached the Third World – precolonial, colonial and postcolonial. This chapter aims to describe the first phase of its arrival in Asia and Africa. In doing so, it will chart the reception and appropriation of the Bible in these continents.

Asia and Africa have close links with biblical Christianity. Africa's connection with the Bible is celebrated in famous courtly and common people who figure in the biblical narratives. These include royal personages such as the Queen of Sheba; the Ethiopian Eunuch; Ebedmelech, another Ethiopian royal (Ebedmelech = son of a king), who helped Jeremiah out of a water tank; and other ordinary people such as Simon of Cyrene who bore the cross and came from North Africa (Luke 23.26).<sup>1</sup> Asia, too, has its claim to biblical connections. India is

<sup>1</sup> There was another Cyrenian called Lucius who was one of those who laid hands on Paul and Barnabas before they embarked on their journey (Acts 13.1–3). Among

mentioned at least twice in the Book of Esther (1.1; 8.9). In Maccabees there is a reference to an Indian mahout with Antiochus' war elephants (1 Macc. 6.8).<sup>2</sup> One often overlooks the fact that, of the twenty-seven books of the New Testament, nearly half were either written in Asia Minor or written as letters to Christian communities there. The popular perception is that Christianity arrived in Asia only a couple of centuries ago under the aegis of the European powers, when they were making political inroads into that region. John England, who has studied the expansion of Christianity in Asia, notes that the Christian presence began 'in the first-century spread of the Palestinian and Syrian Church eastward into Mesopotamia', while 'subsequent missions of the Churches of the East extended to at least twelve countries east of Persia by the eighth century. In some cases active churches continued in a number of countries for the first Roman Catholic missionaries to discover.'<sup>3</sup> In a recent study of the history of Asian Christianity, Samuel Hugh Moffett reminds us of some of these often forgotten facts. He points out that before Christianity moved into Europe, its

first centres were Asian. Asia produced the first known church building, the first New Testament translation, perhaps the first Christian king, the first Christian poets, and even arguably the first Christian state.<sup>4</sup>

other Africans was Apollos of Alexandria (Acts 18.24–19.1) who preached in Corinth (Europe) and Ephesus (Asia).

<sup>2</sup> 'And upon the elephants were wooden towers, strong and covered; they were fastened upon each beast by special harness, and upon each were four armed men who fought from there, and also its Indian driver' (1 Macc. 6.37). There were also other indirect references to India: Indian mercantile products such as textiles, linen and fragrances, birds such as peacocks and animals such as monkeys found their way to the court of King Solomon. See Zacharias P. Thundy, *Buddha and Christ: Nativity Stories and Indian Traditions* (Leiden, E. J. Brill, 1993), pp. 212–17. There is a distinct possibility of a Hindu god figuring in the Hebrew Scripture: when King Ahasuerus is enraged by the refusal of Queen Vashiti to grace the royal assembly, he calls the seven princes and one of them is Krishna (Esther 1.13, 14). I owe this reference to Ari L. Goldman; see his *The Search for God at Harvard* (New York, Ballantine Books, 1991), p. 84.

<sup>3</sup> John C. England, *The Hidden History of Christianity in Asia: The Churches of the East Before 1500* (Delhi, ISPCK, 1996), pp. 1–2.

<sup>4</sup> Samuel Hugh Moffett, *A History of Christianity in Asia*, vol. 1: *Beginnings to 1500*, revised and corrected edition (Maryknoll, NY, Orbis Books, 1998), p. xiii.

INDIA: LITURGICAL AND ICONIC USAGE

In the precolonial days, just before the advent of modern European colonization, the Bible was transmitted to Asia either through sea-routes or along the 'Silk road', together with commercial merchandise. It was mainly traders, travellers, monks and merchants who carried the 'pearl of the Gospel'. It was those who belonged to the Church of the East, often known as Nestorians,<sup>5</sup> who introduced the Christian Bible to Asia. The scope of this book does not warrant a detailed inquiry into the theological and other issues which led to the division of the Church into different groups. For our purposes, it is sufficient to say that the chief controversies centred around the Churches' Christological beliefs. Nestorius, the bishop of Constantinople, defined Christ as one person with two natures, but his ecclesiastical rivals from Alexandria claimed Christ as one person with one nature, both God and man.<sup>6</sup> The Bible that Nestorians brought with them was not the Western canon with its Latin version, but the Eastern Bible in the Syriac version known as the Peshitta.<sup>7</sup> Popularly, the Peshitta (Syriac, 'simple') was often perceived as a common or simple version or as aimed at simple people; alternatively, it was thought to refer to the style of translation. It was, in fact, simple in the sense that its text was free from obeli, asterisks and other marks, and from margins

<sup>5</sup> In this book the term Nestorians will be used rather than the Church of the East.

<sup>6</sup> For a detailed account of the creedal confusion and theological misunderstanding among Nestorians and against their rivals, see Moffett, *History of Christianity in Asia*, vol. 1, pp. 175–80, 247–51.

<sup>7</sup> This version, which contains all canonical books of the Old Testament (except Chronicles), was translated straight from the Hebrew, and corresponded closely with the Massoretic text; parts of it had been influenced by LXX (Genesis, Isaiah, the minor prophets and Psalms). The Syriac New Testament, which was known as the 'queen' of all Bible versions, excluded 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, Jude and Revelation and also John 7.53–8.11 and Luke 22.17–18. It superseded Tatian's *Diatessaron*. Since it has been cited by Ephrem, one of the fathers of the Church of the East in the fourth century, the version must have been in existence before that time. The five originally omitted were books included when the Philoxenian version, probably the first Syriac version which can be traced to a single translator, Bishop Philoxenus of Mabbug (485–523), appeared in 508 CE. It was Moses bar Kepha who first called it Peshitta. See Kurt Aland and Barbara Aland, *The Text of the New Testament: An Introduction to the Critical Editions and to the Theory and Practice of Modern Textual Criticism* (Grand Rapids, MI, William B. Eerdmans, 1987).



with various readings in Greek. The Peshitta was unencumbered with textual notations and glossorial expositions. ‘The Peshitto copies’, in Isaac Hall’s view, ‘were free from all this apparatus,’ or ‘simple’ in this sense:

The name never could have meant ‘for simple people’, although Harclenian, in contrast, was intended for, and was most profitably used by scholars; or it could well have referred to the style of translation. It was a ‘clear text’ edition, and ‘simple’ in that sense.<sup>8</sup>

The Peshitta was used by all Syrian Christians without exception – Nestorians, Jacobites, Maronites, Chaldeans, Melkites and St Thomas Christians of Malabar. It was this version which was found in one of the Churches of the Syrian Christians by Claudius Buchanan (1766–1815), the provost of the Fort William College in Calcutta, who, using the colonial authority of the time, surreptitiously spirited it away from the hapless Indian Syrian priests.<sup>9</sup> However, the Peshitta was not the first version of the Bible to reach the sub-continent. There were copies of the Gospels and other portions of the sacred writings already available in India. Eusebius, in his *Ecclesiastical History*, speaks of the visit of Pantaenus, a teacher in the catechetical school of Alexandria, to India in 190 CE. On his arrival there he found that Christians were acquainted with the Gospel of Matthew, a copy of which had been left by the apostle Bartholomew, who ‘had preached to them, and left with them the writing of Matthew in the Hebrew language which they had preserved

<sup>8</sup> Isaac H. Hall, ‘The Syriac Translations of the New Testament’, in *The Syriac New Testament Translated into English from the Peshitto Version*, tr. James Murdock (Boston, MA, Scriptural Tract Repository, 1893), p. 490.

<sup>9</sup> Westcott in his *The Bible in the Church* informs his readers that it was presented to Buchanan by an Indian Syrian bishop; Brooke Foss Westcott, *The Bible in the Church: A Popular Account of the Collection and Reception of the Holy Scriptures in the Christian Churches* (London, Macmillan and Co., 1887), p. 233. For the rather dubious way in which Buchanan acquired manuscripts, either through bribery or using the power of the British government at that time, see Reinhold Wagner, ‘The Malayalam Bible’, *Indian Church History Review* 2:2 (1968), 119–45. The copy he acquired was written in the Estrangelo character, without points, but its date has not yet been accurately determined. The copy at Milan is probably the only complete ancient manuscript of the Syrian Bible in Europe which has the enlarged Syrian canon. But even this copy has only twenty-six books and does not include Revelation; Marshall Broomhall, *The Bible in China* (London, The British and Foreign Bible Society, 1934), pp. 185–6.

until that time'.<sup>10</sup> Jerome, too, attests that Pantaenus was sent to India by Demetrius, the then bishop of Alexandria, at the 'request of delegates of that nation'. There he 'found that Bartholomew, one of the twelve Apostles, had preached the advent of the Lord Jesus Christ according to the Gospel of Matthew, and on his return to Alexandria he brought this with him written in Hebrew characters'.<sup>11</sup> Copies of this were still in existence when Buchanan travelled down to Travancore in 1806 to collect ancient manuscripts, as part of his project of acquiring precious texts.

The Syriac version, especially of the New Testament, naturally reflected the theological position of the Nestorians. When the Portuguese arrived in India in the sixteenth century, they soon discovered to their astonishment a local Christian community totally different from themselves, and possessing a New Testament which was not completely identical to their own Latin version. They found a number of small variants reflecting the Nestorian theology. The Synod of Diamper<sup>12</sup> in its Actio III, Dec. 1-3 observes that

in Acts 20,28 the 'Nestorian heretics' changed in an impious way the words 'the Church of God' into 'the Church of Christ', to give another meaning to the passage . . . because the Nestorians 'incited by the devil' do not want to acknowledge that God has suffered for us, shedding his blood. In 1 John 3 they changed the words *caritatem Dei* to *caritatem Christi* not to say that Christ died for us. In Hebrew 2,9 they added the words *praeter Deum*, instead of *gratia Dei* because of their Nestorian heresy. In Luke 6,35 . . . they substituted *mutum date, et inde sperate*, to defend the practice of taking interest.<sup>13</sup>

In contrast with the Protestants' preoccupation with the Bible during the colonial phase, in the precolonial stage, especially in India, little use was made of it and it was rarely read as a book. Buchanan recalls in his memoirs the words of

<sup>10</sup> *The Ecclesiastical History of Eusebius*, tr. C. F. Cruse (London, George Bell and Sons, 1908), vol. v, chapter 10, p. 178.

<sup>11</sup> Jerome, 'Lives of Illustrious Men', chapter 36, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* vol. III (2nd series), p. 745.

<sup>12</sup> The Synod of Diamper was convened in 1599 to settle theological and ecclesiastical disputes between the St Thomas Christians and the Roman Catholics.

<sup>13</sup> J. P. M. van der Ploeg, *The Christians of St Thomas in South India and Their Syriac Manuscripts* (Bangalore, Dharmaram Publications, 1983), p. 55.

one of the elders of the Church, Abraham, who summed up the position which the Bible held among Indian Syrian Christians: 'For years we have been quarrelling with the Romish Church about supremacy, rites and ceremonies; but the Bible has been out of the question.'<sup>14</sup> The faith of Syrian Christians was not nourished by private reading or study of the Bible. It remained for the people a numinous object denoting the nearness and presence of God. A deep sense of reverence was accorded not necessarily to its contents but to its mystical and magical powers. The Bible must have had a powerful hold on the people quite distinct from any possible practical benefit to be derived from reading its detailed accounts of events and people and its religious and moral content. It was privileged because of its holiness and transcendental properties. Each of the churches of the St Thomas Christians in Kerala had a Bible adorned with gold, silver and precious stones. They were taken out occasionally in procession and people would kiss them; they rarely left the confines of the church precinct since it was felt dishonourable to take the Bible, 'the foundation of the faith'<sup>15</sup> out of the sanctuary. Furthermore, 'Priests used to bless the sick, read the Gospel over them and attach to their bodies pieces of palm leaf or paper on which were written versicles from the Sacred Scripture.'<sup>16</sup>

The fact that the Bible came in a language unfamiliar to the people further distanced it from the faithful. The ecclesiastical lingua franca remained Syriac. In a precious colophon to his commentary on the Epistle to the Romans, Isho'dad (425 CE) wrote: 'This epistle has been translated from Greek into Syriac by Mar Komai with the help of Daniel, the priest, the Indian',<sup>17</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Claudius Buchanan, *Christian Researches in Asia, to Which Are Prefixed a Memoir of the Author, and an Introductory Sketch of Protestant Missions in India: With an Appendix Containing a Summary of the Subsequent Progress of Missionary Operations in the East* (London, The Society for the Promotion of Popular Instruction, 1840), p. 25.

<sup>15</sup> Placid Podipara, 'Hindu in Culture, Christian in Religion, Oriental in Worship', in *The St Thomas Christian Encyclopaedia of India*, vol. II: *Apostle Thomas, Kerala, Malabar Christianity*, ed. George Menachery (Trichur, St Thomas Christian Encyclopaedia of India, 1973), p. 110.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> Cited in John Stewart, *Nestorian Missionary Enterprise: The Story of a Church on Fire* (Edinburgh, T. & T. Clark, 1928), p. 88.

indicating that the ecclesiastical language of Indian Christians at the beginning of the fifth century was Syriac, and not any of the many Indian languages.

A full translation of the Bible was never undertaken in Malayalam or in any other vernacular language until it was translated into Malayalam by Protestant missionaries in 1811. Unlike in the colonial period, when serious efforts were made to translate the Bible into various vernacular languages, the Syriac Bible remained untranslated. Two anecdotes from the memoir of Claudius Buchanan are relevant. The aforementioned Abraham told Buchanan: 'The Bible, Sir, is what we want, in the language of our mountains. With the Bible in his hand every man can become the Priest of his own family.'<sup>18</sup> The other was Buchanan's encounter with the Rajah of Travancore in 1806:

When I told the Rajah that the Syrian Christians were supposed to be of the same religion with the English, he said he thought that could not be the case, else he must have heard it before; if, however, it was so, he considered my desire to visit them as very reasonable. I assured his highness that their *shaster* and ours was the same; and showed him a Syriac New Testament, which I had at hand. The book being bound and gilt after the European manner, the Rajah shook his head, and said he was sure there was not a native in his dominions who could read that book.<sup>19</sup>

Even if the Bible was available in translation, it had only limited purposes. As the Synod of Diamper noted, a vast majority of Malabar Christians were ignorant. More significantly, they were proud of their own Syriac version, and distrusted any new textual intrusions. One of the priests told Buchanan:

But how shall we know that your standard copy is a true translation of our Bible? We cannot depart from our own Bible. It is the true word of God, without corruption – that book which was first used by the Christians at Antioch. What translations you have got in the West, we know not: but the true Bible of Antioch we have had in the mountains of Malabar for fourteen hundred years, or longer. Some of our copies

<sup>18</sup> Buchanan, *Christian Researches in Asia*, p. 25.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 75.

are from ancient times; so old and decayed, that they can scarce be preserved much longer.<sup>20</sup>

The Bible continued to be unavailable in Indian languages even during the time of the Dominican Martyrs of Thana (1321) and throughout the Jesuit mission of Francis Xavier.

The inaccessibility of the Bible to ordinary people was due to the paucity of copies as well as the language in which it was written. At the beginning of the nineteenth century no printed version was in circulation. A Syrian priest told Buchanan: ‘The learning of the Bible is in a low state among us. Our copies are few in number; and that number is diminishing, instead of increasing; and writing out of a whole copy of the sacred scriptures is a great labour, where there is no profit and little piety.’<sup>21</sup> Before the mass production of the Bible, every copy had to be transcribed by hand. The Christian faith in Malabar survived, as Buchanan pointed out and as he as an evangelical Protestant understood it, because it ‘enjoyed the advantage of the daily prayers, and daily portions of scriptures in their liturgy’, and if these were not available, ‘there would have been in the revolution of ages, no vestige of Christianity left among them’.<sup>22</sup> One of those liturgies which sustained the Malabar Christians was the *Liturgy of the Apostles Addai and Mari*, with its subtle allusions to the New Testament. This liturgy is still in use with little variation. Though it played a crucial role, one should not overstate the biblical elements in it. The liturgy omitted the Passion and Resurrection of Jesus and its oft-repeated theme was: ‘Who didst appear in the body of our humanity, didst illuminate our soul by the light of Thy life-giving Gospel.’<sup>23</sup> George Nedungatt draws attention to the fact that when one speaks of the Bible and the liturgy celebrated in Syriac as ‘sources of the spirituality of the Syro-Malabar Church’, it should be with the proviso that these were conveyed and expounded ‘in homilies, catechesis, symbols, etc.’.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 25.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 76.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., pp. 77–8.

<sup>23</sup> J. M. Neale and R. F. Littledale, *The Liturgies of SS. Mark, James, Clement, Chrysostom, and Basil, and the Church of Malabar* (London, Griffith Farran and Co., 1869), p. 158; see also, England, *Hidden History of Christianity in Asia*, p. 120.

<sup>24</sup> George Nedungatt, ‘The Spirituality of the Syro-Malabar Church’, in *East Syrian*

It is very difficult to assess the extent to which the Bible was used in the precolonial Indian Churches. In addition to its use in the liturgical readings, it provided the basis for the theological formation of Syrian priests. Later generations were raised on the Commentary of Ishod of Marv, a ninth-century Syrian synthesis of patristic biblical exegesis, including the Syriac version of the works of commentators like Chrysostom and Theodore of Mopsuestia. As part of their training, candidates for the priesthood were expected to memorize the Psalter and were required to copy out the Bible. At a time before printing was invented, and when education was not through visual but auditive means, it is tempting to assume that the biblical message could be disseminated through homilies, liturgies, catechesis and images. Even this presupposition, however, is too optimistic 'to be true of the past, seeing that preachers did not even have a translation of the Bible in the language of the ministry of the word, Malayalam.'<sup>25</sup> The situation was comparable to that of medieval England. The majority of Christians were little acquainted with Latin and there was no demand for a vernacular version in English. To exercise one's faith, to grow in spirituality, one did not need to have a copy of the Bible or even know how to read it, however useful this could be. A Bible-based spirituality is something recent and Protestant in its origin and orientation. Nedungatt recounts a recent incident which underlines the Bible's continuing subsidiary role in nurturing Syrian Christian spirituality. When Blessed Alphonsa, as recently as the 1930s, told her Clarist companions that they should come to know Jesus more personally by reading the Gospels, they were reportedly amazed and raised their eyebrows at the suggestion of reading as a means to know the Christ.<sup>26</sup> Now, a little more than a generation later, this idea of personal reading as a means to discern the divine truth is no longer a startling one.

To sum up this section, it is fair to claim that Syrian Christians seldom had any direct contact with the Bible, independent of

*Spirituality*, ed. Augustine Thottakkara (Bangalore, Dharmaram Publications, 1990), p. 178.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

corporate worship and ecclesiastical gatherings. Biblical teaching was conveyed through the enactment of liturgical rites.

CHINA: THE SURROGATE BIBLE — MONUMENTS AND  
MANUSCRIPTS

When Christianity arrived in China it was greeted as a ‘scriptural religion’.<sup>27</sup> It was the Nestorians who introduced the Bible to China: the Syrian Nestorians arrived in China, carrying with them what they claimed to be the true scriptures. The leader of the Nestorians was the Persian bishop, Alopen. It is only his Chinese name that has survived. It looks like the translation of the Syrian name Yahb-Alaha, which is equivalent to the Greek Theodore and the Latin Deodatus. It is from the now famous Nestorian tablet of Hsi-an-fu, or Sing-an-fu, discovered about 1623, that we have come to know about Alopen and the Nestorians in China. The Monument tells of ‘a highly virtuous man named A-lo-pen who, bringing sacred Books, arrived at the court of T’ai-Tsing’ at a date which corresponds to 635 CE. The inscription is in Chinese with Syriac in the margin. At the foot of the main text the year 781 CE is given as the date of its erection. The composition and translation of the monument is attributed to one Adam (Ching-ching), who, according to Moffett, was one of the three important figures in the Nestorian Church in China at the time.<sup>28</sup> Alopen and his band came into China most probably from the Malabar coast of India. The twenty-seven standard works to which the Monument refers probably meant the Syriac New Testament (though it contained only twenty books), or the reference may even be to a translation of some Buddhist literature. If any translation of the Bible was made in Chinese at this time, there is no trace of it now.<sup>29</sup> It was nearly six hundred years before an indigenous version was produced, and this was not Chinese but Mongolian.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>27</sup> John Foster, *The Church of the Tang Dynasty* (London, SPCK, 1939), p. 43.

<sup>28</sup> Moffett, *History of Christianity in Asia*, 1, p. 299.

<sup>29</sup> R. Kilgour, *The Bible Throughout the World: A Survey of Scripture Translations* (London, World Dominion Press, 1939), pp. 142–3.

<sup>30</sup> This was undertaken by the Roman Catholic missionary, John of Montecorvino, who translated the New Testament and the Psalms. He arrived in 1294, and in a letter to

In this phase, one cannot speak of the Bible, but only of the incorporation of biblical elements, selective portions of the New Testament, into Chinese writings. The Bible was yet to assume the pre-eminent position which came about following the Reformation and colonial times. The most important among these Chinese materials are the text of the Nestorian Monument and the manuscripts which have come to be known as the Bishop Alopen documents.<sup>31</sup> These manuscripts include *The Jesus-Messiah Sutra; Parable*, part II: *A Discourse on Monotheism; On the Oneness of the Lord of the Universe*; and *The Lord of the Universe's Discourse on Alms-giving*. The Monument and manuscripts reflect a substantial theology based on the Bible, with the exception of *Parable*, part II: *A Discourse on Monotheism* and *On the Oneness of the Lord of the Universe*.<sup>32</sup> These are apologetic tracts on monotheism, and contain no specific biblical references.

The Nestorian Monument text, besides reviewing the history of the Nestorians in China, contains several theological passages. It begins with a Christian affirmation of the Trinitarian formula, followed by the biblical story of creation and the fall of humankind, 'the Glad Tidings' of 'the birth of the Holy One' and how salvation was effected through 'the Messiah the Luminous Lord of the Universe who appeared upon earth as a man'.<sup>33</sup> It describes Jesus as the one who does good works,

Pope Gascon Clement V he wrote: 'I am now old and am become white, more from toils and troubles than from age, for I am fifty-years old. I have a competent knowledge of the Tartar language and character, which is the usual language of the Tartars, and I have now translated in that language and character the whole of New Testament and the Psalter, which I have written in their fairest language', Will H. Hudspeth, *The Bible and China* (London, The British and Foreign Bible Society, 1952), p. 10. The first translation of the entire Bible took another five hundred years, and interestingly it was not produced in China, but in India by John Marshman of Serampore, with the help of an Armenian called John Lasser. This version appeared in 1822 and was followed by Robert Morrison's the next year; see *ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> For discussion on date and authorship see P. Y. Saeki, *The Nestorian Documents and Relics in China* (Tokyo, The Academy of Oriental Culture, 1937), pp. 113–247.

<sup>32</sup> There are vague biblical allusions in *On the Oneness of the Lord of the Universe*. For instance verses 142–52 echo Matthew 7.24–7; and verse 154, 'If a man wants to see the manifestation of the one God, he has only to be pure in heart, for then he can see God', comes nearer to Matthew 5, 'Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God'; and verses 159–62 could be a seventh-century Chinese version of the Parable of the Wheat and the Tares. See Saeki, *Nestorian Documents and Relics in China*, p. 200.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 54–5.



practises right faith, inaugurates life and destroys death. The section which maps salvation is remarkable because it is interspersed with Buddhist, Taoist and Confucian references, and significantly, although the Monument is surmounted by a cross, edits out the death of Christ:

Establishing His New Teaching of Non-assertion which operates silently through the Holy Spirit, another person of the Trinity, He formed in man the capacity for well-doing through the Right faith. Setting up the standard of the eight cardinal virtues, He purged away the dust from human nature and perfected a true character. Widely opening the Three Constant Gates, He brought Life to light and abolished Death. Hanging up the bright Sun, He swept away the abodes of darkness. All the evil devices of the devil were thereupon defeated and destroyed. He then took an oar in the Vessel of Mercy and ascended to the Place of Light. Thereby all rational beings were conveyed across the Gulf. His mighty work being thus completed, He returned at noon to His original position (in Heaven).<sup>34</sup>

Then the Monument text goes on to describe the ethical marks of the Christian life: no holding of male or female slaves; treating the noble and ordinary people with equal respect; no hoarding of property or wealth; setting a good example by fasting in order to subdue the mind; praying seven times a day; and offering a bloodless sacrifice once in seven days.<sup>35</sup> The Monument text ends with a reference to the good works done in the monasteries: ‘The hungry came to be fed; the naked came to be clothed; the sick were cured and restored to health; and the dead were buried and made to rest in peace.’<sup>36</sup> This clearly echoes the phraseology and content of Luke 4, which in turn echoes Isaiah 61.1–4.

*The Jesus-Messiah Sutra* contains 206 verses and was probably one of the earliest attempts to communicate the Christian gospel outside the Mediterranean and Hellenistic cultures. It creatively fuses Mahayana terminology with Christian concepts. The text deals with some of the basic tenets of Christianity – the sovereignty of God and the sinfulness of humankind. The narrative begins in the manner of a Buddhist Sutra: ‘At that time, preaching the laws of Hsu-po (i.e. Jehovah)

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p. 55.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p. 56.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p. 64.

who is the Lord of Heaven, the Messiah spoke thus.' The opening lines speak of God and God's nature as the unmoved mover, and of the innate capacity of human beings to know God. Next comes the Fall and how human beings turned to idolatry. Sin came into the world 'because our ancestor committed the sin of disobedience in the "the Garden of seed-and-fruit bearing (trees)"' (v. 54),<sup>37</sup> and humankind turned to idolatry and made 'the images of camels, elephants, bulls, mules, horses, reindeer, deer, etc., with wood or clay'.<sup>38</sup> Sin is thus defined as a turning away from true worship to the adoration of idols. The remedy is to repent and commit oneself to the Lord of Heaven.

Then follows a summary of the law, based on selections from the Hebrew Scripture and the New Testament. There are ten vows and sixteen ethical precepts. These ten vows are the same as the Ten Commandments except that there is no mention of the Sabbath or idolatry. It is clear that the Christian gospel was seen as validating the ancient social customs of the Chinese – loyalty to the Emperor and fidelity to family. Service to God, service to the Emperor and to the parents were seen as inseparable: 'Of all these three things, the first thing is to obey the Lord of Heaven. The second is to obey the Sacred Superior. The third is to obey father and mother' (vv. 90–2).<sup>39</sup> To these, seven more vows were added from the Chinese precepts: show kindness to all living beings; serve father and mother; none should commit adultery; none should steal; none should covet another's money, property, rank, field, house or his man-servant or maid servant; none should forge false documents; and none should serve the Lord of Heaven at another's expense.<sup>40</sup> Added to these are important rules of life: not to take advantage of the defenceless; not to turn away from the poor; feed the hungry even though they are your adversaries; assist those who are labouring hard; clothe the naked; do not laugh at those who have chronic disease; care for the orphans and widows; do not quarrel or take each other to court. But above all, obey the Lord of Heaven.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 130.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 134.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 135–6.

The final section provides a concise history of the Jesus story. It begins with the fallen nature of humankind. Since all have sinned against the Lord of Heaven, the Lord of Heaven took pity on all and made a cool wind (Holy Spirit) to enter a virgin named, Mo-yen (Mary). He thus made clear his power, so that all might believe and ‘return to good relations’. Mary bore a son named Ishu (Jesus) the Messiah. He was baptized by John and a voice sounded: ‘The messiah is my son’ (v. 173). Between the ages of twelve and thirty-three he ‘sought for all people of evil life and made them return to the good life and the right way’ (v. 177). After gathering the twelve, Jesus went on to heal the sick, the lame and the blind, to cure ‘the deformed and strangely coloured people’ (those afflicted with leprosy), and to cast out devils. But the literary men (i.e. scribes) were looking for every opportunity to destroy him, brought him before Pilate falsely accusing him, plotting his trial before Pilate. Eventually Jesus met his death on a tree, hanged between two high-waymen. There was darkness, the earth quaked, the graves opened and the dead were raised to life, as depicted in the Matthean passage (Matt. 27.51–3). The manuscript then breaks off in mid-sentence.

*The Lord of the Universe’s Discourse on Alms-giving* contains references to passages in Genesis 1–3, Isaiah 53, Acts 1–2 and Matthew 5–7. Notably absent from the text of the Sermon on the Mount is the Lord’s Prayer. The text, especially verses 30–62, covers more or less the whole of Matthew 7. The stress on Jesus’ teaching may be a response to the Chinese preference for great teachers such as Confucius and Meniscus. Clearly, the Golden Rule presented a special problem to the translator: ‘Whatsoever you would others do for you, others would also the same to be done by you. What others need to be done by you, you may naturally need to be done by them. Whatever others would do to you, you should again do to them as to reward and compensate them, (vv. 55, 56).<sup>41</sup> The document describes the

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., p. 210. Saeki attributes the poor translation of the verse to the author of the *Jesus-Messiah Sutra* not knowing the Confucian Golden Rule. Saeki does not agree with the suggestion that the negative form of the Chinese Rule would have confused the author. He draws attention to the existence of the negative form of the Golden

work of Christ as a 'sacrificing transformation', but, in keeping with the Nestorian belief, it makes clear that only his human nature suffered while his divine nature was unimpaired: 'For instance, it seems to be plain, therefore, that though the Messiah suffered death in His body of the "five attributes",<sup>42</sup> His life did not end therewith' (v. 100).<sup>43</sup> Unlike the *Jesus-Messiah Sutra*, this discourse mentions the resurrection of Jesus, the witness of the women disciples, Jesus' appearance to and his commissioning of the disciples. Just as Jesus in the Gospels offered a stark choice, the text urges the faithful to choose between God and mammon/idolatry:

All mankind should turn toward Heaven, and try to know the One (person of the Godhead), the Lord of Heaven and his determined will only . . . If there be any who go astray from the Way, they are those who are in fear of men or who give themselves up to the worship of the sun, the moon, and the stars and even the fire-gods. Those who are in fear of men, or who give themselves up to the devils and demons and the Yakchas and the Rakchasas etc., will fall into the hot Hell and have to remain there for ever. (vv. 242–5)

The document identifies the early disciples as poor and nondescript; it offers a reward to those who listen to the words of the good Sutra and put them into practice, and at the same time offers a warning to those who refuse to practise what is commanded: 'If there be any who neither delight (to hear these words) nor desire to listen to what is preached here they are in company with the devils. They shall be cast out into the Hell for ever' (v. 262).

It is obvious that the Bible as a sacred text was not a priority for the Nestorians or the Chinese Christians at this stage. Taken

Rule in the Jewish literature and the *Didache*, and, more importantly, to how the latter was used on many occasions by the Nestorian author; see pp. 236–8.

<sup>42</sup> The 'five attributes' are related to the five organs of sensation – eye, ear, nose, tongue and hands. Saeki writes: 'According to the Buddhist doctrine, the union of these five attributes dates from the quickening moment of birth and contributes to a personal being', *ibid.*, p. 199.

<sup>43</sup> In describing the relationship between Jesus and Joseph of Arimathea (Matt. 27. 57–9), who asked for the body of Jesus, the text is careful in drawing attention only to the human aspect of this association: 'Now, when it was dark, there came a man who was a flesh-relation of "the five attributes" of the Messiah, and who was devoted to the Lord of the Universe and was called Yao-hsi (i.e. Joseph) at the change of name' (v. 115).

together, the Nestorian Monument text and the Alopen documents can be seen as a surrogate Bible. They are not a straightforward translation. The nearest to a translation we have is the Sermon on the Mount. Even here there is much summarizing and paraphrasing of scripture, with explanations, illustrations and moralizing. Yet beneath the makeshift metaphors, and the ornamental and flowery language, they do manage to convey the basic narrative facts of Jesus' life and some of the most essential doctrinal teachings of the Christian Church.

The appropriation of the Christian Scripture for Chinese culture involved a massive metaphorical and linguistic transformation. The line between inculturation, contextualization and distortion of the gospel is hard to define. For instance, the Nestorian Monument text freely uses terms, metaphors and similes from Buddhism, Confucianism and Taoism. Phrases like 'the eight cardinal virtues', 'hanging up . . . the Sun' and 'He took an oar in the vessel of mercy' are unmistakably Buddhist. The vessel of mercy could be a reference either to Amitabh Buddha's boat, which carries the saved to paradise, or to the Buddhist goddess of Mercy, Kuan-yin, who is herself regarded as a 'boat of mercy'. The 'new teaching of non-assertion' is a principle of Taoism but has a corresponding concept in Confucianism as well. 'How to rule both families and kingdoms' is from the Confucian teaching. The 'two principles of nature' yin and yang form the basic cosmology of Taoism and Confucianism.<sup>44</sup> The verse, 'Thereby all rational beings were conveyed across the Gulf', could have been from the Confucian Taoist book, *I Ching* (the *Book of Changes*).

Earlier mission historians, without the benefit of the Alopen documents, tended to be dismissive of the form of Christianity advocated by the Nestorians, for it lacked the basic tenets of orthodoxy and was replete with Confucian, Buddhist and Taoist concepts.<sup>45</sup> A closer reading of these texts reveals that

<sup>44</sup> See Moffett, *History of Christianity in Asia*, 1, p. 311.

<sup>45</sup> For example James Legge accused the Nestorians of diluting the gospel message. See James Legge, *The Nestorian Monument of Hsi-an-Fu in Shen-Hsi, China* (London, Trubner and Co., 1888).

the type of Christian faith the early Nestorians communicated was much more complex than the ‘hopeless syncretism’,<sup>46</sup> or neutered gospel, for which it was criticized. It is true that the Monument text does not contain what became the hallmark of evangelical Christianity a millennium later – the death of Christ and the supremacy of Christian Scripture. The Alopen documents, however, contain clear references to the trial, death and resurrection of Jesus.

On the advocacy of pluralism, the documents are ambivalent. On the one hand, *The Lord of the Universe’s Discourse on Alms-giving* claims that ‘the rest of the people (of Persia) all worship the Lord of the Universe and are united in declaring that I-shu (i.e. Jesus) is the Messiah’ (v. 220).<sup>47</sup> On the other hand, we come across statements like, ‘Every man talks in his vernacular speech, saying: we each have our own special Lord of Heaven. Each faith has its abiding merit’,<sup>48</sup> and ‘Those who have received the Lord of Heaven and His teachings must first teach other people to worship all Devas’ (vv. 96, 97).<sup>49</sup>

Later Christian missionaries, in the colonial period, often dismissive of other cultures found Chinese philosophy and religions impregnable. One of the problems that Nestorians and later Roman Catholics and Protestants faced was how to present the gospel to a people who believed in the grandeur of their culture and the superiority of their way of life. What we see in these documents is the creative nature of the translating efforts of Nestorians. They used the Christian text as a springboard rather than an immobilizing anchor. The documents demonstrate that translation was for them an independent transcreative act, an experience of freedom. Unlike the colonial preoccupation with exact philological equivalents, a way of assuming control, Nestorians were looking for parallel expressions in Chinese culture. In translation, inevitably, original texts lose their texture and tone, and in the process they gain a new texture and tone. This is what we see happening in the earlier Nestorian materials. The Christian text was forced to shed

<sup>46</sup> Foster, *The Church of the Tang Dynasty*, p. 112.

<sup>47</sup> Saeki, *Nestorian Documents and Relics in China*, p. 226.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 127.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 134.

some of its theological claims and at the same time was infused with images and concepts from the Chinese religious and philosophical heritage. The sacred text of Christians became an open text, subject to a variety of renditions.

#### AFRICA: LATIN BIBLE AND LOCAL CONTROVERSIES

The picture in Africa was slightly different. It is not easy to determine how Christianity entered Africa. Possibly it took root through Jewish residents of North Africa, and possibly also through missionaries from Asia Minor. The Christianity which came to Africa was initially hellenized and eventually adapted itself to Egyptian language and culture. This adaptation was facilitated by the infusion of native religion and rituals. It contained elements from non-Christian religions. Augustine, in one of his tracts, mentions that in the fifth century Christians believed that God was Saturn re-christened. The Christianity practised both by sophisticated thinkers like Tertullian and ordinary people had as much in common with the practices of their indigenous religion as with the new faith.<sup>50</sup>

With no well-marked literary tradition of her own, and no indigenous writings to record her own ancient and rich folklore, Africa in the early stages appropriated scripts from other lands. The use of Coptic and Ethiopic in the north-east of the continent is evidence for this. Ethiopic was introduced by colonialists from Arabia. In later years of the second century and the early years of the third, there not only existed Christian congregations in North African cities but also far into the desert. Tunisia produced three great Latin Church figures: Tertullian (160–212 CE), Cyprian (200–58) and Augustine (354–430). Though there were persecutions, Christian communities and congregations continued to grow. The numbers of illustrious African bishops, articulate speakers and erudite scholars who graced the ecumenical assemblies affirmed the vibrancy of the African Church. Africa was the centre of great biblical activity. Egypt became known for its translation work.

<sup>50</sup> See Susan Raven, *Rome in Africa* (London, Routledge, 1993), p. 168.

The Greek version of the Hebrew Bible – the Septuagint – was produced there. The Hebrew Law books were translated into Greek in the Egyptian city of Alexandria about 285–247 BCE. More than a thousand years before the English had their own vernacular Bible in the form of the Authorized Version, Africans had their own in Sahidic, an Egyptian language. It was this hive of translation activity which earned Africa the title, ‘the cradle of Bible translation’.

Cities like Carthage, Hippo and Alexandria were known for their great deliberations on the Bible. Clement, Origen, Cyprian and Augustine were the pioneers in biblical exposition, and initiated a variety of reading methods. The most influential was Augustine’s allegorical or spiritual interpretation, which he saw as an effective tool for a fallen humanity to discern God’s signs and symbols. It was Tertullian who worked out the exegetical method, typology, which Maureen Tilley hails as ‘the heart of the North African hermeneutics’.<sup>51</sup>

Despite fervent biblical activities, the use of the Bible in Africa in this phase remained elitist and confined to the Latinized classes. Augustine was a case in point. He belonged to the Latinized minority, who became increasingly isolated both linguistically and economically from the local peasant population. When Augustine tells in his *Confessions* of hearing a voice saying ‘Take, read’, the version he read was not in his native language, Berber. Though there were Berber congregations, they did not have any portion of the scripture translated into Berber until the nineteenth century.<sup>52</sup> The version Augustine used was the Latin version of the Alexandrian LXX, employed also by Tertullian and Cyprian, ‘which was notoriously unclassical, and even ungrammatical in its language’.<sup>53</sup> In North Africa, Latin and not Greek was the official language. Though there were indigenous languages, Latin was the language of administration and culture and cultivated by the educated lay

<sup>51</sup> Maureen A. Tilley, *The Bible in Christian North Africa: The Donatist World* (Minneapolis, MN, Fortress Press, 1997), p. 26.

<sup>52</sup> Kilgour, *The Bible Throughout the World*, p. 35.

<sup>53</sup> David Norton, *A History of the Bible As Literature*, vol. 1: *From Antiquity to 1700* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 5.



people of the time. In spite of his African background, Augustine remained elitist; when he moved back to Carthage after his stay in Italy, he lived among those who were cultivated and Latinized, and thus removed from his own indigenous heritage. The fact that he could not connect with agricultural workers who spoke Punic, from whom the Donatists drew considerable support, was an indication of his remoteness from his own people. Later he urged his fellow-clergy to study the local language, Punic, so that they could make themselves understood by the local people. Although Augustine was a great exponent of the Bible,<sup>54</sup> he used his intellectual power and hermeneutical skills to side with the Established Church or imperial powers against those who wanted to be independent of Roman control. His ruthless handling of the Donatist controversy was illustrative of this. One of the reasons for his repudiation of the Donatists was because of his misunderstanding of what came to be known as one of the basic tenets of African exegesis, duality of reference or contrariness of signification, that is, what is censured in one context is condoned in another. He was both attracted to and repelled by it. Though he was appreciative of an ecclesiology propelled by such an exegesis, Augustine was, according to Pamela Bright, apprehensive of such an exegetical practice: 'He was alienated by an exegetical system that ignored (or seemed to ignore) so many of the tools of interpretation which Augustine himself had sharpened over the course of his own rhetorical training and which he now sought to make available for the interpretation of the biblical text.'<sup>55</sup> There was also an ambiguity in Augustine with regard to things African. In the initial stages, he was repelled by the African propensity for the supernatural, but over the years he gradually changed his view. On his return from Milan, he was rational in his approach, discounted the possibility of miraculous healing and went on to ridicule the naivety of the Donatists:

<sup>54</sup> For various uses of the Bible in Augustine's writings, see *Augustine and the Bible*, ed. and tr. Pamela Bright (Notre Dame, IN, University of Notre Dame Press, 1999).

<sup>55</sup> Pamela Bright, 'Biblical Ambiguity in African Exegesis', in *De Doctrina Christiana: A Classic of Western Culture*, ed. Duane W. H. Arnold and Pamela Bright (Notre Dame, IN, University of Notre Dame Press, 1995), p. 26.