

History of Christianity in China: Beginnings to 500 AD

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 08 November 2020

Preacher: Tom Schmidt

[0:00] Hey everyone, we're just going to wait another minute and then we'll get started.

Okay, folks, so it's about a little after nine, so I think we'll get started.

For those of you who aren't aware, I'm recording this, so hopefully if someone you know couldn't be here today, you'll be able to find the recording online. I think the church will send a link out at some point, but right now it's being recorded, so it may ask for permission for you to be recorded.

You don't have to have your audio on or video on or anything like that, so you don't have to worry about privacy concerns on your end. Anyway, I want to welcome you to our Sunday School class on the history of Christianity in China.

My name is Tom Schmidt, and it's great to see you all again. Even though this class is online, I want you to feel free to ask questions throughout our time together. And to do that, you can type a question in the chat, and hopefully I'll see it pop up.

[1:27] And when it's most convenient, I'll give a go at answering it. There's a chance, though, that I'll wait to answer questions till the end. I think some of you might also be watching in person from church.

I'm not sure about that, but if that's the case, you can maybe log into Zoom on your phone or laptop in order to type in a question. If you don't have one, maybe you can find a way to relay your question to someone who can type in question for you.

Now, before we begin, I want to say a few words about why it's important to study the history of Christianity in China. Firstly, studying the history of Christianity in China addresses a misconception that so many folks in our world have today.

You often hear that Christianity is a Western religion or a white religion or a European religion, but historically speaking, that's not true. Christianity arose in the Middle East, not in Europe, and as it spread west into Europe, it also spread southward into Africa and eastward into Asia with just as much speed and in many cases with just as much success.

And the reason for this is that the gospel message is not earthly or human in origin, but it's divine. It's revealed by God, and it's not bound by race or ethnicity, language, geography, culture, or anything like that.

[2:47] And in fact, when we talk about the spread of Christianity in China, I think the very best place to begin is in 30 AD with the Great Commission of Jesus.

The Great Commission that Jesus gave after his resurrection. This is the last command Jesus gave while on earth. We can read about it in the Gospel of Matthew in chapter 28, 19. And here Jesus said, therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

With these words, our Lord Jesus commanded his disciples who were Jewish to take his gospel to the nations, not just to nearby nations, not to nations that only spoke the same language they did or that looked like them or had the same skin color or the same culture, but he commanded them to go to all nations.

And if we look at the gospel records, we see that Jesus did even more than that. He not only commanded his followers to go to the nations, he predicted that they would. He says this in the Gospel of Matthew chapter 24, 14.

He says the gospel of this kingdom will be preached in all the world as a witness to all nations. And then the end will come. And we can all look among us and see Jesus's prediction coming true.

[4:03] Here we are thousands of miles from Jerusalem where Jesus spoke these words. And we are Christians and we're made up of nations from all over the world. In fact, there's some among us from Chinese descent.

And China in Jesus's time was considered to be the most distant nation. And here we are. Jesus was right. The gospel did go to the nations, even to the farthest ones. So these are just two reasons why I think it's beneficial to learn about the history of Christianity in China.

It underscores that the gospel message is not bound by race or culture, but is for all people. And it helps us also to see Jesus's teachings and the truth of his teachings more clearly as we see the gospel indeed going to the nations.

I hope, too, that in this time, learning about the history of Christianity in China in this class will also motivate us to take part in this great commission. And I hope, too, that what we learn in this class will help us to take note of certain mistakes that Christians may have made in the past in missions, but also to take note and learn from their successes.

So before jumping in, let's let me open in a brief word of prayer. Father in heaven, I want you to thank you that you sent your son, Lord Jesus, to present your saving gospel to us and to commission us to bring it to the nations.

[5:25] I praise you that you put your spirit into our hearts to do so. Lord, we pray for all of our missionaries who are laboring throughout the world. We pray that you would bless them with love and with kindness, with humility and with your Holy Spirit, Lord, to share your message.

I pray you'd help us as we learn about the history of Christianity in Asia and in China today. Be with me as I speak. Help me to speak truly and accurately and help us all to listen.

I pray this in the name of Jesus. Amen. Amen. Okay. So just to be clear, you should be able to see a PowerPoint up on the screen. I take it that you all can.

And hopefully you can hear me okay. Again, you can chat, ask a question in the chat if you need to let me know something. That's probably the best way to get in touch with me when we're in this class.

So let's begin. This course is going to be divided into three different classes. Today, we're going to go over Christianity in Asia and China from 30 to 635 AD. And then a week from now, we'll go over Christianity in China from 635 to 1000.

[6:32] And then the third class will be from 1000 to 1500 AD. Each class has a cutoff point at 635 and at 1000 AD and at 1500 AD.

Because in each of those three times, there was a very significant event that occurred in Chinese Christian history. Roughly around that time. And so that provides a convenient cutoff point.

In class today, like I said, we'll be going over Christianity from 30 to 635. We're going to try and peer back as early as we possibly can to discover when Christianity first came to China.

And to do that, I'll have to give us some broad historical context of Asian history and the history of Christianity in Asia generally. And I should probably give you a word of warning about this class.

Our evidence regarding Christianity in China during this time frame is very fragmented and incomplete. It's scattered about in various historical references.

[7:32] And what this means is that here in the 21st century, we need to pick up all these scattered pieces and try and fit them together. So to do that, I'll have to be throwing out a lot of names and dates, places, events, things like that.

So bear with me. Ask questions if you need clarification. And I'll be doing some review as we go on to remind us of what I've mentioned before. Okay, let's begin.

Let's go back in time to about 200 AD. And let's look at a map of the Christian world or a map, at least what the Christian world is often conceived of by Western scholars.

You can see a map right here. And indeed, Christianity had spread to all of these places that you see colored in on the map. But if you look carefully, you'll notice maybe you're historians among us that this territory looks a whole lot like a certain empire that existed at this time.

In fact, it looks exactly like the Roman Empire as it existed around 200 AD. This empire was enormous. It housed many ethnic groups, languages, and cultures. And Christians lived and ministered throughout.

[8:43] But as it turns out, Christianity had spread way beyond the Roman Empire at this time, something that this particular map at least does not reveal. And that's what we're going to be talking about today.

To illustrate this, I want to turn to an Eastern Christian theologian named Bardazin of Edessa. You can see Edessa in the red circle on the map. Bardazin lived around 220 AD in the kingdom of Edessa, which was outside the Roman Empire.

He was a noble of some standing in the court of Abgar, king of Edessa. And he also was a Christian. He wrote in Syriac. And from the perspective of this map, it looks like Edessa is in the Far East.

But if we switch to a different map, we'll see that Edessa is actually very centrally located from the perspective of where the world's people lived in that time.

It's right between Europe, Africa, and Asia. And what's interesting about this is that if we read Bardazin's writings, he tells us that in his day, there were Christians even further east than he was.

[9:46] He says there were Christians in Persia, in the Persian Empire. But even more excitingly, he also tells us that there were Christians even east of them in the Kushan Empire.

Now, the Kushan Empire is roughly centered here where that red dot is. It's in modern-day northeastern Afghanistan was the central location of the Kushan Empire.

But the Kushan Empire stretched south and east of that. You can see in this map here, the Kushan Empire, the capital is kind of in the northwest. But it stretched southeast well into modern-day India.

And it stretched east hundreds of miles into what is today modern-day China. Now, we have good reasons to trust Bardazin's claims that there were Christians in the Kushan Empire because other information that he gives about other things we can verify.

So it seems like he's probably correct that in the early 200s, there were Christians living in what today is modern western China. To get an idea of how early this is, the first Buddhist missionary to China, his name was Han Shingao.

[10:56] He arrived in China around 148 AD, just shortly before this. So in some sense, Christianity has been in China for almost as long as Buddhism has.

But this brings up a question for us. What counts as China? I've been talking about the nation-state of China.

But, of course, there's other ways to define China. We could define China ethnically. We could define China linguistically or even by religion or historically. Though Christians seem to have lived in what today is modern western China, around 200 AD or perhaps before, we don't so far have any evidence that Christians lived in far eastern China, where the Chinese language was commonly spoken or where the Han ethnic group was a majority of the population.

So I want to ask a question. When did the gospel message first arrive in eastern China? I should emphasize that it's possible and perhaps even probable that the gospel message had gone to eastern China well before Bardisen's time in 200 AD.

There were trade routes between the Roman Empire and China active in the first century. So an early Christian or even an apostle could have gotten on a boat and sailed to China. It's not impossible.

[12:18] But if a Christian did so, we don't have any good evidence showing that this happened. It may have happened. We just don't know about it. But, in fact, there's another Christian theologian named Origen.

He's writing in the eastern Roman Empire around 245 AD. And he tells us that he had not heard of the gospel reaching China yet. On the other hand, there is another theologian named Arnobius.

He's writing in Latin in the western Roman Empire. And around 300 AD, he tells us that the gospel had reached the Chinese. But Arnobius is writing way off in the western empire, about as far removed from China as you can get.

He's not the most reliable of authors. So scholars are skeptical of this claim. Origen is considered much more reliable. He's also writing in the east of the empire, a bit closer to China.

But, of course, both authors could be right. Origen could be right that by 245 the gospel had not reached China. And Arnobius could be right that by 300 it had. But we can't be sure.

[13:26] So, in any case, if we want to talk about the first instance we know of where a formal mission was sent to eastern China, then we need to start talking about a church known as the Church of the East.

Sometimes this church is more commonly called the Nestorian Church. And as I'm going to talk about, it was this church who was the first to send missions to eastern China.

Sadly, though, their efforts have often gone unappreciated in western scholarship. One reason for this is that simply that they were based out of Persia, not Rome.

This church was the native church of Persia. And, in fact, the Church of the East is just the name for the Persian church, a church which still exists today. What all this means is that the Church of the East was not Roman or even western in origin.

And because western scholarship owes its foundations to Rome and the west, anything outside of Rome tends to not be studied as well. Scholars don't know the languages as well.

[14:29] Scholars aren't often trained in Persian history. And like many of us, scholars tend to focus on what they know best. So the history of Christianity in Persia often falls through the cracks.

But there's another reason, though, that the Church of the East has often been understudied. And hence, missions to China have been understudied. And that's because too often western scholars have believed that the Church of the East was heretical.

That's why they call them Nestorian. So some scholars don't think that or have not thought that they were actually true Christians. So before talking about how the Church of the East reached China, I think it would help us if I paused here to give us a little bit of history about the Church of the East and address this idea of them being Nestorian or being heretical.

Because as we'll see in this class, it was the Church of the East and evidently the Church of the East alone that ministered in China for around a thousand years. So it's important to know about them and to understand what they believed.

So to introduce the Church of the East, we should probably begin in 325 A.D. with the Council of Nicaea, which took place in Rome.

[15:45] This is the first ecumenical council. I know that names, places, dates are getting pretty heavy right now. So please ask me if you've got any questions. To sum up, we've been talking about the history of the Church of the East.

This was a native church in Persia. It was the church that ministered in China for about a thousand years. And right now we're talking about the theology of the Church of the East and how it relates to the great Council of Nicaea, which was held in 325 A.D.

Now, this council is known as the first ecumenical council. Ecumenical sometimes means worldwide, but really it just refers to the Roman Empire that worked for the Roman world.

So it was worldwide as far as Romans were concerned. The Church of the East did not participate in this council. And the council came about because Rome, the Roman Emperor Constantine, had become a Christian.

And for the first time, Roman Christians were able to freely gather in a massively public way. And so they held a council to determine certain theological matters. And at this council of Nicaea, they issued a creed called the Nicene Creed that confessed that Jesus is fully God and fully man.

[16:56] Of course, there were lots of councils before Nicaea. The divinity of Jesus was nothing new at all. But this was just the first time that Roman Christians were able to publicly gather and make a unified public confession of faith.

This council is revered by Catholics, by Orthodox, and by Protestants and evangelicals alike. Now, some of you might be getting your heretic sniffing noses all at Twitter wondering why on earth the Church of the East didn't come to this council.

Well, there's a good reason for this. As history tells us, Rome and Persia at this time were arch enemies. This was like the Soviet Union and the United States back in the day. And when Constantine, the emperor of Rome, became a Christian, this meant that Christians in Rome could finally worship freely.

But sadly, it meant quite the opposite for Christians in Persia. All of a sudden, Christians in Persia were seen as enemies by the Persian state. Because the arch enemy of Persia, the Roman Empire, apparently had just become Christian.

So the Persian government reasoned that Christians in Persia must be on the side of the Romans and therefore must be enemies. As a result, Christians in Persia were terribly persecuted. There were thousands, thousands that were martyred during this time.

[18:17] And this is why the Persian church didn't go to the Council of Nicaea. If they had, they would have been viewed as allies of the Romans and they would have been persecuted.

Not because they were Christians, but because they were viewed as traitors to Persia. And this continued in 381 with the second ecumenical council held in Constantinople.

Nearby where the Council of Nicaea was held. This council is also revered by Protestants. It defined the divinity of the Holy Spirit. Again, this wasn't anything substantially new. It was just the first time they were able to do so in a large empire-wide council.

The Church of the East also did not attend this council as well. And for similar reasons. But all this changed around 410 AD.

At this time, the Persian emperor abandoned the practice of persecuting Christians. And he decided to allow Persian Christians to freely assemble.

[19:16] So they did. They had a council in 410. And what did they do? They promptly affirmed the Council of Nicaea and the Council of Constantinople. They agreed with those councils.

So far, so good. At this point, the Persian Church and the Roman Church were in theological agreement. And at this point, you might be wondering why some people view the Church of the East as heretical. If they agree with these councils that everybody agrees with.

Well, something happened in 431. Then the third council, the Council of Ephesus, was convened. And this is where a Roman man named Nestorius was condemned for heresy.

And in this case, the Church of the East never ratified the council. And actually, from that point onward, the Roman Church considered the Persian Church to be heretical.

They cut them off from communion. And they're still out of communion to this day, technically speaking. Although there's been some moves to reunite. The reasons why Nestorius was condemned are complicated.

[20:18] But the most important issue is that the Council of Ephesus proclaimed that Mary should be called the Mother of God or the Theotokos. However, Nestorius and the Church of the East disagreed.

They did not think that the term Mother of God was appropriate for Mary. In this sense, the Church of the East agreed with Nestorius. But that's not to say that they were followers of Nestorius.

Nestorius didn't live in Persia. He wasn't associated with them. The Church of the East just disagreed with this term because it was new. And it didn't seem to them to be appropriate on biblical and theological grounds.

Probably some of us who are listening today think the same. Roman Christians at the time, of course, disagreed. And for centuries, they insisted on calling the Church of the East the Nestorian Church.

And the name stuck. So it's ironic that Protestants sometimes think of the Church of the East as heretical. When Protestants and evangelicals often agree with them on the reason why they're heretical.

[21:21] That Mary should not be called the Mother of God. Okay. So to sum up, the Church of the East, it's often called the Nestorian Church.

But it doesn't really seem to have been Nestorian. Nestorius didn't found the Church. He wasn't a member of it. And Nestorius doesn't seem to have been all that bad to begin with. In fact, Martin Luther is said to have read through Nestorius' teachings and couldn't really find anything wrong with them.

So as far as ancient Christology goes of the Church of the East, they seem to have been fairly orthodox. So let's do a quick recap.

We've seen that there were Christians in Western China around 200 AD. And we've been trying to figure out when the first Christians came to Eastern China.

So we've been looking at the Persian Church of the East to learn more about them. We've learned about them a bit theologically. And now I want us to examine how far eastward the Church of the East extended.

[22:25] What were their missions like? And when did they reach Eastern China? Now, remember, our historical evidence for the spread of Christianity in Asia at this early point in time is very fragmentary.

So we don't have very much to go by. One thing we can do, though, to answer these questions is to look at attendance lists at various Church of the East councils.

The Church of the East preserved records of all the councils or many of the councils that they held. And in them, they record the locations of where representatives from various far-flung provinces came from.

So if we look at Church of the East council that happened in 424 AD, we find that they record a bishop coming from Merv Turkmenistan in modern-day Turkmenistan.

They record another bishop coming from Sijistan, which is on the Afghanistan-Pakistan border, and another bishop coming from Herat in Afghanistan. This means that there would have been very sizable Christian populations in these areas around this time and probably decades beforehand as well to build up enough folks to be able to commission someone, a bishop, to go there.

[23:35] They were probably a pretty large congregation or congregations. So this tells us that the Church of the East had great success in planting churches at least this far east by the early 400s or the 300s, if not earlier.

And we can continue going through attendance records of the Church of the East to track who was coming. So, for instance, in Merv Turkmenistan, these dates, you know, 424, 486, you can see them on the screen all the way down to 585.

These are when councils were held and Merv sent representatives to all those councils. The same we can say for the church in Herat, Afghanistan. They sent representatives over a very long period of time.

The same for the church in Sijistan and modern-day Pakistan and Afghanistan. In other words, this kind of evidence shows us that there were large Christian communities in what today is Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, and Pakistan for hundreds of years, probably in the 300s and well into the 500s or 600s.

And we'll see later on in the course, well after that. But you'll notice that this doesn't give us lists of anyone east of them. And that seems to be because we know from records of the Church of the East that anyone, any Christian communities that lived farther east of these three, apparently didn't have to send representatives to councils because that person would have to go thousands of miles over land, which was just impractical.

[25:05] So this evidence tells us where Christians were, but it doesn't tell us where they weren't. In other words, there could have been many communities farther east. We just don't know based on this evidence.

So what can we do? What else can we do to figure out how far east the Church of the East went? One thing we can do is we can search through ancient writings and see if any of them give us accounts of Christians in further eastern areas.

And indeed, there are such accounts. One concerns the eastern Huns, which are sometimes called the Hephthalites, in what is today eastern Afghanistan, western China, around 500 AD.

This account tells us that around 500 AD, the emperor of Persia fell into some trouble. His name was Kavad I. He was dethroned. He had to flee eastward into exile.

He brought some of his subjects, some of whom were Christian. And he sought refuge amongst the Huns, the Hephthalites. And these Christians began a ministry amongst these people.

[26:12] And they were there for about 30 years, these Christians, marrying, having children, and sharing the gospel, ministering to people. And apparently, as the story goes, there was a Persian bishop who had a vision.

An angel appeared to him and told him that he needed to send help to these Christians. So he did. He commissioned some missionaries to go out to assist these folks. They did.

They arrived. They created an alphabet for the Huns. They translated the scriptures for them. They continued a very successful ministry, baptizing many. And these folks were again helped by an Armenian bishop who came and ministered amongst the Huns for a long time.

He taught them how to use agriculture, how to plant crops. Eventually, that Persian emperor I mentioned, Kavad I, he regained the throne.

He returned to Persia, regained the throne, and he remembered how kind the Christians were to him when he was in exile. And throughout his reign, Christians had much more freedom and many more privileges in Persia than they had, than they usually had.

[27 : 25] And this story is beautiful because it shows what great success the gospel has when Christians care for the persecuted and the oppressed, and when Christians of different ethnic groups and cultures and languages gather together to minister.

And we see this with the Persian Christians, the Armenian bishop, and the Huns working together. But, you know, again, this account only gets us into Western China once again.

We've been there earlier, 300 years earlier, around 200. We were already in this same location. So what about further east? Well, there is another account that does get us closer. This story concerns the Mongols.

The account is written in Syriac, and it talks about Christians who were Mongols, who lived in eastern Mongolia, east of Karakorum, sometime between 500 and 750 AD.

It's hard to get a firm date. And these Christians were part of the Church of the East, meaning they were part of the Persian Church. This means that by this point, the Persian Church had extended thousands of miles east of Afghanistan and western China.

[28 : 34] How this tribe of the Mongols converted, though, remains mysterious. We don't know. The account explains that these Mongolian Christians read the Old and New Testaments.

They had some literature in Syriac. They also had some literature in their own languages. And they believed in the Trinity, that they were Orthodox believers. But beyond that, we don't get many more information about them.

We get information about their customs. They loved eating horse milk and horse meat and horse blood. That was a typical Mongolian diet back in the day.

But beyond that, we don't know much. So now, at least, though, we're getting pretty far east. We're in Mongolia. We're not in China. But I want to know about eastern Chinese Christians in particular.

What about them? Well, we do have two accounts from this time frame. One is a Chinese source that tells about Buddhist monks in the Chinese capital of Luyeng under Emperor Xuanwu of the Northern Wei Dynasty around 500 AD.

[29 : 44] And that's located here on the map. And this is what the Chinese source says. It says, The Yangmen Monastery, that's a Buddhist monastery, was built by the Emperor Xuanwu and is situated at east of the Deju Temple.

It's a Buddhist temple. At the time when Buddhism was in vogue at Luyeng, foreign monks came from everywhere, holding their canes and the sutras. So having that guess, they brought canes and they brought texts.

Sutras are sacred texts. This is why Xuanwu built this temple. In order to offer them a place to stay. This monastery has as many as a thousand rooms.

The places made for studying are numerous. And the account goes on. There more than 3,000 monks coming from many places were living, with some of them even coming from the very far western countries, such as Daqin.

We'll talk about that in a moment. They lived among the common people, and their houses and shops were numerous. For clothing, these foreigners used the Chinese fashion.

[30:55] Now, this is interesting. It speaks of Buddhist monks coming to a Buddhist monastery and staying there. And the Buddhist monks are coming from all over. But then it says that some monks came from very far western countries, like Daqin.

Daqin is the name for Rome. Sometimes, remember, from the Chinese perspective, Rome is just way off in the west, so far away you can barely imagine it.

So sometimes Daqin refers to Rome. Sometimes it refers to western Persia. But it's that far, far western area. And it says there were monks coming from Daqin.

And these monks, though, if we read carefully, they apparently didn't stay in the Buddhist monastery. They apparently lived in houses and had shops amongst the people.

And remember, that Buddhist monastery, the first part of the account, said it was built so that monks could live there. Buddhist monks could live there. But these guys don't seem to be doing that. So could these monks be Christians?

[32:03] We know that they're coming from Rome or Persia. And monks from there were Christian. And they don't seem to be living with the Buddhists. They don't seem to be Zoroastrians.

That's the traditional religion of Persia because Zoroastrianism doesn't have monasticity. They don't have monks. It's maybe possible that they were Manichean monks.

Well, this is interesting. And I think it bears a little more investigation. To do that, I want to look at a second account. This is from about 50 years after this one.

It's from 550 A.D. It's from a Greek source. And it concerns the secret of silk. And the account goes like this.

Back then, the Byzantine Empire, the Byzantine Empire is a name for the later Roman Empire. The Byzantine Empire loved silk. And nobles and rich folks spent tons and tons of money buying silk from China via a very expensive trade route through Persia and India.

[33:13] And the Chinese jealously guarded their silk monopoly. And the Byzantines, the Romans, they didn't know about silkworms. They didn't know how to raise them or feed them. You'll have to do very particular proper things to do that.

They didn't know how to harvest silk. So they were stuck. They were stuck paying these huge prices for silk. But as this account goes, one day, two Persian monks showed up in the court of the capital of the Byzantine Empire, the Roman Empire at the time, in Constantinople.

And these guys seemed to be from the Church of the East. And they were from India. The Church of the East had a big presence in India. And these monks said that they had just returned from China via India because they'd also spent a very long time in China.

And I have to say, these monks don't seem to be the most scrupulous or honest folks because they told the emperor that for the right amount of money, they would bring him the secretive silk.

And so after they were commissioned, they traveled back to India. And then from India, they came to China by boat. So now they're on the coast of eastern China or southeastern China. Once in China, they smuggled out silkworm larvae in the middle of their hollowed out canes.

[34:27] And then they came all the way back to Constantinople with their prize. And that's how the silk monopoly was broken. Now, the story is interesting for a lot of reasons.

But what concerns us here is Christianity in China, because what this story seems to reveal is that there apparently were Persian monks who spent so long in China that they were able to get involved with trading and with merchants.

And in fact, they had gotten so involved that they were able to access the jealously guarded secret of silk in China. And this suggests that the Persian monks had been there had been some kind of Persian Church of the East presence in China for many decades before, because you don't just show up in China and gain access to a secret like the secret of silk in a short period of time.

Huh. So let's go back to that earlier story about those foreign monks in the capital of Lu Yang. Remember that I have it underlined here that these foreign monks had shops.

Well, that's interesting, because the other monks we just read about, the secret of silk monks, they also seem to have been involved in merchandise and trading.

[35 : 44] And in fact, many other accounts tell us that Church of the East missionaries also function as merchants, as a way to raise funds for themselves, to get permission to go to countries. This is much like missionaries do today, where they will get a regular job.

And so that's interesting. It seems to correlate with these foreign monks who were hanging out in the capital of Lu Yang, interacting with these Buddhist monks.

So that's one reason to think that this account around 500 AD is referring to Christian monks. We can get another little detail, too. Earlier in this Chinese account, it mentions canes.

I have this underlined here that these foreign monks were holding. And if you listen carefully to that account of the secret of silk, the Persian monks had canes, too. They kept the larvae of the silkworms in their canes.

And it just so happens that we have an ancient silk picture of a monk that was found in China, which you can see here. It's heavily damaged.

[36 : 52] It's probably from the 8th or 9th century. And it seems to be of a Christian. And we believe this because if you look really closely, I'm zooming in here.

If you look really closely at his headpiece, I hope it comes out clear on your screen. You can see a cross on his headpiece. And there's other crosses throughout the picture as well.

And if we zoom out, it's going to be really hard to see on the big screen. So there's a drawing. You can see he's holding some kind of, there's some going diagonally from the lower left to the upper right, some straight object or line.

And if we look at an artist's representation, it appears that he's holding a cane. This Christian monk or bishop, whoever he is, is holding a cane.

So putting all of this together, it seems like Christian monks were working in eastern China by the early 500s or even sometime in the 400s.

[37 : 59] They were involved with trade. They were involved with merchants. They were also apparently interacting with Buddhist monks in the capital city. They adopted foreign dress.

They also adopted things like canes. This is extremely early. In fact, this is about a century earlier than most scholars think that Christianity came to China.

To give you some context, in the late 400s, this is precisely when St. Patrick was evangelizing the Irish. So I think we can say with a good amount of confidence that the earliest Christian missions to China, of which we are aware, were occurring around the late 400s, the early 500s, which was roughly around the time that St. Patrick was evangelizing the Irish.

At that time, it seems that Persian monks were working amongst the Chinese. Okay. That's a lot of material to get that one date.

But I wanted to do all that to give us a foundation about the Church of the East so that next week when we launch in to a big turning point in missions in China, we'll have a good foundation to work with.

[39 : 11] Next class, we're going to start off in Xi'an, China, another capital in ancient China in 635 AD. And our knowledge of Christianity is about to explode at this point because of the discovery of this monument that we will talk about in the next class.

Next class, we're going to have a lot of pictures of archaeological discoveries, paintings, manuscripts, things like that. Hopefully, you'll join for that class. I think we do have a little bit of time if you have any questions.

If not, that's fine. I'm going to try and bring up my chat here. It's not letting me. There we go. Okay. Let me. Huh.

Okay. And I'll see if there's any questions. If not, that's fine, too. And this is going to be recorded, hopefully available online. You can email me or ask me at church if you have any questions.

That's fine, too. All right. So I think that, ah, here's a question.

[40 : 28] Okay. Could you tell us any more about the history of Nestorianism in China? Thank you, Jessica. Just to give you an overview, we're going to talk more about Nestorianism or the Church of the East in China next class.

But just to give you an overview, we're going to find out that these Church of the East missionaries, they went all over China. We'll see that next class and in the class after that.

All over China, the Northeast, the Southeast, the East. There's evidence we'll talk about. They even made it to Japan. There's evidence that they made it to Southeastern Asia as well. And we'll talk all about that in the coming classes.

Another question. Did Thomas the Disciple go East? That's a great question. So traditionally, Thomas the Disciple went Eastward into Persia and India. And in fact, you heard me mention India a few times.

That's because there were Christians in India. Well, they're still there. The Church of the East has been in India for well over 1,500 years.

[41 : 34] There's a debate about how early we want to trace Christianity to India. And we know that I think we can be certain there were Christians in India around 200 or before.

They could have been there well before. The question of whether Thomas himself went there is a difficult one. The Indian Christians believe that he did. And there is some interesting circumstantial evidence that he made it there.

One is that there's this apocryphal document called the Acts of Thomas that talks about Thomas going to India. And it seems to come from the third century. It has some fantastic stories.

Scholars traditionally dismissed it as kind of made up. But there's a couple things about it that maybe indicate that there's some kernels of truth there.

One is that, if I'm remembering correctly, Thomas gets on a boat and sails to India from Egypt. And there actually was a trade route from Egypt to India at that time.

[42 : 33] So it's very possible that that could have actually occurred. The second piece of evidence is that, according to the account, he meets some king, an Indian king named Gundafirnes. And he converts to become a Christian.

And Thomas is later martyred. I think the king converts. Anyway, he meets a king named Gundafirnes. Thomas is later martyred. Thomas starts a ministry there. And scholars dismiss this. Gundafirnes never existed.

He's a made up figure. But when the British were in India and Pakistan and eastern Afghanistan in the late 1800s, they started finding coins of an unknown king named Gundafirnes.

Coins, of course, last forever. You put them in the dirt and they don't decay. And they started finding these coins. And some people, some pneumatologists, people who study coins, they started studying them.

There are some inscriptions that were found. And most scholars date Gundafirnes to about 55 AD. And that sounds like a good time for when Thomas would be in India.

[43 : 36] So, again, we don't know. There's some reports that there's one of the churches that's or areas that Thomas had one of his ministries that there is Roman brick buildings there.

So there was a Roman trading port there that provides some evidence that that may have happened. So, in short, I think it's probably likely Thomas went east. How far east he went, I don't know.

It would not surprise me if he reached India at all. I don't think we can be certain of it. I think we can be certain, though, that some early Christians did go to India at a very early point, probably no later than like the late 100s, the late second century.

Okay. Another question. Did the Church of the East affirm the hypostatic union, two natures, one person? That's a great question. And that's a long answer. So the hypostatic union is this idea that the Greek word hypostasis, that there's a union of the divinity and humanity of Jesus in this Greek term, the hypostasis of Jesus, which is often considered.

Sometimes hypostasis means person, in the person of Christ. Other times it means an instance of some kind of nature. And so the question of did the Church of the East affirm this, I think an honest answer would be yes and no.

[44 : 59] And the reason why is because if you study the history of theology, the word hypostasis is originally was a very fuzzy term. And so people, it's a Greek term, and Greeks disagreed on what it meant.

And folks in the Latin tradition had an even harder time understanding it. And folks in the Syriac tradition, which is the Church of the East, had a hard time as well. There's a report of St. Jerome, the great translator of the Latin Bible.

He has this account of when he went to the Greek East. He, of course, was fluent in Greek. And the Greek theologians were telling him about this word hypostasis and what it means.

And he was saying, that's not what it means. I don't think it means that. So the short answer is that the Nestorius and the Church of the East, they talked about something called a prosopaeic union, which comes from the Greek word prosopon, which confusingly also means person.

So they had two natures in one person. They had an idea of two natures, one person in Jesus. But the word they used for person was prosopon, the word that the Greek Easterners eventually settled on was hypostasis.

[46 : 12] And according to some, these are overlapping terms. It depends. It depends who you ask. To give you the final end of the story, I believe in the 1970s, maybe it was earlier, maybe it was more recent, the Roman Catholic Church and the Church of the East got together and they issued a statement saying that past theological differences over this terminology were made not because there's actual disagreements, but because they were misunderstanding one another.

They were talking past one another. So if you want to be charitable, yes, they did affirm the hypostatic union using a different word, if that makes sense.

Another question, what written language is being used in China at this time? Are you using translated documents for your study? The written language in China at the time was medieval Chinese, but almost all the sources I cited, except that one source, there was the one source about the Buddhist monastery that was in Chinese.

And I used a translation because I don't read Chinese. All the other documents were in other languages. They were in Greek, but especially Syriac. Syriac was the lingua franca of Eastern trade, or at least of the Church of the East.

So the Church of the East covered many languages like Persia, like Persian, Greece, Greek, sorry, I'm getting confused here. The Church of the East spoke Syriac.

[47:35] They also spoke Persian. They spoke Greek. They spoke Sogdian, Uyghur, various Turkic languages. And so, but most of the written stuff we have is in Syriac.

So that's where most of our information is coming from. Next class, there's going to be a bunch in Chinese, and I'm going to have to rely on. Translation for that, unfortunately.

But there'll be Christian documents, too, that are in Chinese, which is going to be really fun. I'm conscious of the time. I know that we've got church starting in a little bit.

So if you do have any more questions, feel free to get in touch with me. And if not, I hope I see you all next week. And we're going to try to get this recording shared online.

Hopefully that'll work. I have had Zoom hiccup on me a few times, and it not worked. But it's recording now. Hopefully it'll work. And we'll put it online for you to refer to later on.

[48:37] Thank you all so much. Thank you.