

**THE ROLE OF TRADE ROUTES IN THE SPREAD OF CHRISTIANITY
IN ASIA DURING THE FIRST MILLENNIUM**

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By
Robert H. Munson

Vice President of Training
Dakilang Pag-Ibig DIADEM Ministries, Inc.

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INTRODUCTION

It is commonly thought that Christianity is a “Western” religion. This is understandable, since Christianity took on the form of state religion in the West, and the great expansion of the Christian faith in the past five centuries came predominantly from the Roman Catholic Church and Protestant groups that developed out of the Roman church. With the exception of the missionary movement of the Russian Orthodox Church during this time period, little church growth and missionary expansion occurred in historically Asian churches.

However, this historical nearsightedness fails to see the vibrant Asian church of the first millennium. With great scholarship, growth, and missionary fervor, the Eastern church spread over much of Asia in the first millennium.

This is a short article to correct this misconception. Many of the “unreached” people groups of Asia had ancestors who were Christian... of the Eastern Church. This is good for these people to know, and missionaries working there to know.

Additionally, this paper looks at the role of traderoutes in the early spread of Christianity. It is hoped that this study is not merely academic in nature. Rather, it is hoped that this short study might provide insight for mission work in Central Asia and beyond.

Additional Comments:

- Footnotes are placed at the end of each chapter.

- If you are interested in more detail, see the Bibliography at the end. Books by Moffat, England, and Philip, and articles by Dickens, McLaughlin, Harris and Tamras are especially useful.

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CHAPTER ONE

THE STATE AND EXTENT OF EARLY ASIAN TRADE ROUTES

It has often proven difficult, in practice, to determine where trade routes existed and when. Trade routes change over time. Also, written records of such routes are often lacking. Routes have often been discovered indirectly such as through the dispersal of trade goods. For example, dispersal of jade products from a specific mine in Taiwan has shown a vast trade network through Vietnam, Thailand, Malaysia, and the Philippines. This network lacked written documentation although it existed for thousands of years.¹ The dispersal of trade goods suggests a potential for dispersal of people, language, and ideas within the same region. In fact, this network was more than simply a conduit for jade trinkets. The vast group of languages that are judged to make up the Malayo-Polynesian language family is believed to originate in Taiwan.² In some cases, however, merchants did record their voyages. A Roman merchant around 70 A.D. described his work sailing as a trader in the Indian Ocean. The manuscript described dozens of ports in the Indian Ocean. It focused on trade with India and noted the rarity of having direct contact with Chinese traders.³ The combination of archaeological records and written records can be a great help in reconstructing trade routes, but in many cases the routes and their frequency of use must be somewhat speculative.

Figure 1 shows what is believed to be major trade routes in Asia during the 1st century A.D. This figure shows several interesting points. First, there was a tendency for trade routes to be oriented East and West. Trade routes going North and South, except along coastlines are few or minor. There are a number of reasons for this. Among these, people generally migrate East and West rather than North and South because of the tendency of cultures to be adapted to specific climate zones. People have difficulty moving to areas where agriculture, housing, and clothing have to change.⁴ Additionally; the trade routes connected the ancient civilizations of China, India, Mesopotamia, Egypt, and Phoenicia. These all were in a fairly narrow latitudinal belt. A second notable point is the existence of trade funnel points. In the West, major trade routes flowed through Alexandria and Antioch. Elsewhere, land routes went through Duro Europos in Mesopotamia. Sea routes made contact with the coast of Southern India.

A third item to note from the trade routes is that certain groups potentially had a great deal of power because of their ability to control (and hinder) trade. Medo-Persia, Arabia (in the Persian Gulf and Red Sea), India, and the peoples of the Tarim Basin (in what is now Western China) could exact tribute and limit trade as they saw fit. In practice, this ability to control trade also meant that they were often the traders. For example, while trade routes connecting China to Rome existed well before the time of Christ, it is believed that direct contact between the two empires did not really exist until late in the 2nd century A.D.⁵ Trade between the two empires occurred through intermediate traders, or a series of traders. This situation gave these groups along the route both power and influence. One of these groups was the Sogdians. They were the

go-betweens in trade through Central Asia. The Sogdians interacted with many diverse groups that did not know each other. During the first millennium, many of the Sogdian merchants were Christian, and had hymns in their own language, while saying liturgy in Syriac.⁶

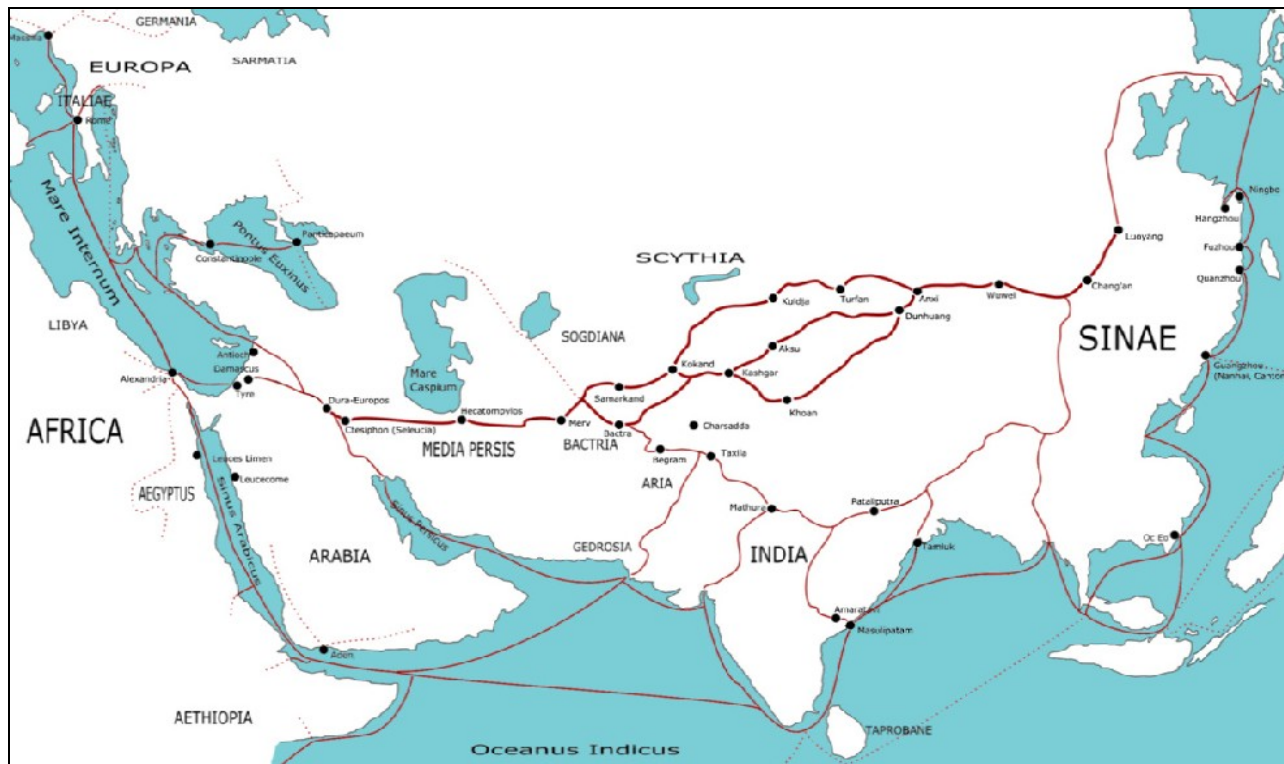


Figure 1. Major Trade Routes of Asia in the First Century A.D.⁷

There is still much that needs to be explored regarding trade routes. Trade routes did change over time. Additionally, some trade routes were more accessible at some times over others. Much depended on the political situation of the trading peoples and the land and trading centers that the routes went through. However, there is an ample amount of evidence to show strong trading ties between Eastern Asia and Western Asia (including North Africa and Europe) from written accounts and material artifacts. Although there was a huge number and variety of such routes (every village would have at least a walking path that traders and other individuals could use), the most important trade routes were the land route between China and Europe going through central Asia, and the sea route connecting Egypt to India and Indochina. These routes funneled through a limited number of trading centers, giving a great deal of power and wealth to these centers.

Footnotes for Chapter One

¹Carolyn Barry, “Jade Earrings Reveal Ancient S.E. Asian Trade Route” [on-line article] available at <http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2007/11/071120-jade-trade.html>; Internet; accessed 5 September 2008.

²Jared Diamond, *Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1999), 142.

³Raoul McLaughlin, “Silk Ties: The Links Between Ancient Rome and China,” *History Today*. Vol. 58 #1 (January 2008): 34.

⁴Diamond, 105.

⁵McLaughlin, 36.

⁶Mark Dickens, “Nestorian Christianity in Central Asia”. 2000. in *AV-STM Leadership Development Program 2006*. [CD-ROM] Baguio City, 2006, 5.

⁷“Ancient Silk Route in the 1st Century” [on-line article] at www.geocities.com/bhuniahoo/pedong.html; Internet; accessed 16 February 2008.

CHAPTER TWO

THE EARLY SPREAD OF CHRISTIANITY IN ASIA

While often ignored in favor of a Western focus on the spread of the Church, the East had some (most) of the phenomenal spread of Christianity in the first millennium. Few Christians, even Asian Christians, have a sense of how quickly Christianity reached many parts of Asia during the first millennium. A combination of archaeological evidence and written accounts gives a fairly clear indication of this early growth.

The Acts of the Apostle (In the New Testament of the Holy Bible) describes the first steps of this initial spread into Asia. Chapter two describes Hellenistic Jews and proselytes coming to Jerusalem for the Feast of Pentecost and hearing the gospel of Christ preached to them in their heart languages. The places listed includes many Asian regions. These include modern day Iraq and Iran (Parthia, Medea, Mesopotamia), Israel (Judea), Turkey (Cappadocia, Pontus, Asia, Phrygia, Pamphylia), and Arabia. Probably Luke noted this to show God's heart to reach Asia. Additionally, it could be surmised that they were listed because Christianity began to grow in those regions from this inaugural event of the Christian church. In subsequent chapters in Acts, Christianity crosses cultural barriers after this initial passage from Hebraic Jews to Hellenistic Jews and proselytes. It crosses to Samaritans and "God-fearers", and then to pagan Gentiles.⁸

The spread of the church Eastward appears to have come from two main sources. The first was the Jerusalem church. Despite assumptions made by some historians that Christians in Mesopotamia and Parthia came through mission work from Antioch, the Christians in these Eastern regions appear to have more in common with the Jerusalem church.⁹ This is in line with the legends of church Fathers showing several of the Apostles as witnessing in Asia (including Thomas, Matthew, Bartholomew, Andrew, James the Less, and Simon the Zealot).¹⁰ While some of these may be fictional, I Peter 5:13 suggests that Peter worked for a time in Babylon (Mesopotamia). Considering the large Jewish Diaspora located there at that time, there seems no reason to think that he was speaking metaphorically of some other place. In fact, northern tribe diaspora were centered around the northern Mesopotamian areas of Nisibis and Adiabene, while southern tribe diaspora tended to be centered in southern Mesopotamia such as around Nehardea. Nisibis and Adiabene, particularly, were also centers of early Christianity.¹¹ Also parts of the legend that Thomas went to India has considerable documentary support and some circumstantial support.¹² The earliest church centers in Asia east of Judea were found in the city of Edessa of the principality of Osroene, Arbela, the capital of the Kingdom of Adiabene¹³, and Southern India.¹⁴ The first is in present-day Turkey while the second is in Iraq. These sites appear to go back to approximately the time of the apostles.

Region	Year	Gospel Arrived From
Mesopotamia	1 st century	Jerusalem (Land route)
Persia	1 st or 2 nd century	Jerusalem (Land route)
Southern India	1 st or 2 nd century	Jerusalem (Sea route)
Arabia ¹⁵	2 rd to 4 th century	Mesopotamia (Land route)
Yemen ¹⁶	2 nd to 4 th century	Alexandria (Sea route)
Turkestan ¹⁷	3 rd to 4 th century	Persia (Land route)
Sri Lanka ¹⁸	4 th – 6 th century	India (Sea route)
Malaysia ¹⁸	7 th century	India (Sea route)
China ¹⁹	7 th century (635AD)	Turkestan (Land route)
Korea ¹⁶	7 th century	China (Land route)
Tibet ¹⁷	7 th to 8 th century	Turkestan (Land route)
Japan ¹⁹	8 th century	China (Land route)
Burma ²⁰	11 th century	India (Sea route)
Thailand ²⁰	14 th century	India (Sea route)

Table 1. Approximate Dates of the Spread of the Gospel to Various Regions in Asia.

Table 1 can be used as a general guide to when Christianity is believed to have reached regions of Asia based on writings and archaeological evidence. Some of these dates are rather conservative. For example, the exact date that Christianity reached Arabia can be dated from as early as the 1st century (based on Acts 2) to the 4th century when there were known to be entire tribes of Arab Christians. Some of the dates are based on when bishops or metropolitans were assigned which gives a good date when the Christian population reaches a certain “critical mass”.

A study of the spread of Christianity in Asia shows that in the first millennium, the gospel had reached the full breadth of Southern Asia. This in no sense means that all peoples in the Asia south of present day Russia had the Gospel. The mission stations, monasteries, schools, and churches were thinly scattered along narrow bands. What was needed was to consolidate the gains and to in-fill further away from the major trade routes.

A sad truth was that, in general, gains were not consolidated. There are many reasons for this (some known, some only surmised). However, these go well beyond the scope of this paper.

Footnotes for Chapter Two

⁸Holy Bible, The.

⁹T. V. Philip, *East of the Euphrates : Early Christianity in Asia* (Delhi, India: CSS & ISPCK, 1998), 5.

¹⁰Ruth Tucker, *From Jerusalem to Irian Jaya* (Grand Rapids, MI: Academie Books, 1983), 26.

¹¹Richard Bauckham, "What if Paul Had Travelled East Rather Than West?," *Biblical Interpretation*, Vol. 8 #1/2 (April 2000), 175.

¹²Philip, 9ff.

¹³Samuel Hugh Moffett. *A History of Christianity in Asia*, Vol. 1 (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1998), xiv-xv.

¹⁴Philip, 14.

¹⁵Philip, 67.

¹⁶Nate Wilson, "Early Christian Missionaries" [on-line article] at <http://home.att.net/~nathan.wilson/missionbios.html>; Internet; accessed 5 September 2008.

¹⁷John C. England, *The Hidden History of Christianity in Asia: The Churches of the East Before the Year 1500*. (Delhi, India: ISPCK, 1996), 43-50.

¹⁸Ibid, 93-105.

¹⁹Esha Emmanuel Tamras, "Assyrian Christian Missions in China 635 - 1550 AD" [on-line article] at www.edessa.com/history/monumnet.htm; Internet; accessed on 16 February 2008.

²⁰Philip, 153.

CHAPTER THREE

TRADE ROUTES AND THE SPREAD OF CHRISTIANITY

Correlation of Spread and Trade Routes

A look at the trade routes (Figure 1) and the spread of Christianity shows several patterns. First, the spread of Christianity occurred generally in a West to East fashion. There is little movement of Christianity from South to North within Asia. This is predictable based on the major trade routes. Siberia was reached by Russian Orthodox Christians nearly 1000 years after Christianity had reached China.²¹ Second, Christianity tended to move along two routes. The first is the overland route starting in the vicinity of Antioch, and going through Mesopotamia, Persia, Central Asia, China, and Korea. The second is the sea route starting from the vicinity of Alexandria to India, to Sri Lanka, and to Malaysia. Third, a more detailed look at the spread shows that it started from major trade centers. In the West, the trade centers of Antioch and Alexandria quickly gained ascendancy as Christian centers over Jerusalem. Edessa and Duro-Europos in Mesopotamia were also both Christian and trade centers. Major trading centers Burkhana and Samarquand in Turkestan, Crangamore in Southern India, and Chang-An in China became regional centers for Christianity as well.²²

Intention of Spread Utilizing Trade Routes

The correlation between the paths of trade and the spread of Christianity in Asia may be obvious, but the intentionality of the relationship is not as easy to recognize. However, in fact, Asian Christians purposely used trade routes as part of their mission strategy.

Trade routes were used as the hub from which mission work could branch out. This is most clear in the work of Nestorian Patriarch Yeshuyab II during the 7th century. He authorized the mission to China utilizing the overland trade route, often known as the “Silk Road”. This work is evidenced today in China with monuments such as the Nestorian Stele and the Da Qin Pagoda.²³ But the vision was much greater. The vision was to set up monasteries and churches in a 5,000 mile long string across the breadth of Asia, along the Silk Road. From there, Christianity could go into the surrounding peoples.²⁴ To a lesser extent this can be seen in the sea route with Christianity spreading out slowly from its home in trade ports.

Trade routes provided part of the method of mission as well. For example, a mission team put together to reach the Hapthalite Huns in the 6th century was composed of two merchants, a missionary bishop, and four priests.²⁵ Lay people served as missionaries, not just priests. This use of merchants in missions could go beyond this. It is interesting to note that in the early Asian church, the Syriac word for “merchant” was used as a metaphor for evangelist.²⁶ It should not be surprising, then, to see the roles overlap. An interesting example of this was in Viet Nam where

a Persian monk in Hanoi in the 8th century, ministered, in part, by assisting in developing trade with China.²⁷

Traders have an advantage over other missionaries. This advantage is that they have a clear justification for being there. All outsiders need a socially acceptable role when they are in a new culture. A foreigner who cannot find an acceptable role within a different culture will be given a role. Roles given by the local culture often are things such as “stranger”, “alien”, “criminal, or “spy”. A merchant can travel and be welcomed where many cannot. He has a place in a culture and is accepted.²⁸ Additionally; merchants have the advantage of a job that provides funding wherever they go. Therefore, they could serve as “tentmakers”, not dependent on support from home churches or monasteries.²⁹

One characteristic of trading centers on major trade routes that could help the spread of Christianity is that they are cosmopolitan. In other words, they are multi-ethnic and multicultural. An example of this is Alexandria. Alexandria had large European, Asiatic, and African populations. The large Jewish population had its own district as did native Egyptians. Different ethnic groups were accorded a great deal of freedom. Different languages and religions coexisted. In fact, a syncretistic religion developed that incorporated elements of native Egyptian and Greek beliefs. Alexandria was a center of scholarship and knowledge. It should hardly be surprising that the individuals motivated to make Hebrew Scriptures accessible to Hellenistic Jews were the Jews of Alexandria.³⁰ Alexandria, like many trading centers, became a melting pot of ideas and a meeting place of cultures and languages that allowed Christianity access to new areas. Often monocultural areas have difficulty accepting Christianity since the culture is tied to traditional beliefs. Such an attitude is much weaker in multicultural cities.

The targeting of cosmopolitan centers for mission strategy went beyond choice of location, but in form of outreach. The outreach method (and the training for the missionaries) was chosen that matched the environment they would be in.

“As part of their missionary strategy, the Church of the East set up a number of schools in the Persian Empire where monks studied theology, medicine, music and other academic subjects before being sent out to evangelize. Whenever the Nestorians established a new episcopal see (the seat of a bishop), they also set up a school, a library and a hospital, thus combining educational and medical work with their preaching.”³¹

Missionaries were able to combine evangelism with medical care and education holistically to minister in major trading centers.

This chapter shows that Christianity moved through Asia along trade routes (which is hardly surprising). However, of more interest is that this movement was intentionally built around the trade routes. Missionaries were trained and strategy was tailored to take advantage of trade routes and trading centers in the spread of Christianity.

Footnotes for Chapter Three

²¹Patrick Johnstone, *The Church is Bigger Than You Think: The Unfinished Work of World Evangelization* (Manila: OMF Literature, 1998), 70.

²²England, 43ff.

²³Glen L. Thompson, “Christ on the Silk Road” *Touchstone: A Journal of Mere Christianity*, Vol. 20 #3 (April 2007): 31.

²⁴Paula Harris, “Nestorian Community, Spirituality, and Mission.” in *Global Missiology for the 21st Century: The Iguassu Dialogue*. William Taylor, ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2000), 498.

²⁵Harris, 497.

²⁶Dickens, 2.

²⁷England, 95.

²⁸Donald N. Larson, “The Viable Missionary: Learner, Trader, Story Teller” in *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement: The Notebook*. Ralph D. Winter and Steven G. Hawthorne eds. (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1999), 312-313.

²⁹Dickens, 2.

³⁰Camden N. Cobern, “Alexandria” in *International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia* [CD-ROM] Biblesoft, 1996.

³¹Dickens, 2-3.

CHAPTER IV CONCLUSIONS

The Asian church was stunning in its growth and strength. By the year 1000 the Nestorians had spread from Syria to Iran and Yemen and then across central Asia, Mongolia, Tibet, China, parts of India, Thailand and Burma. It was the dominant faith between the Caspian Sea and the borders of China. There were then 12 million associated with this Church in 250 dioceses. By the thirteenth century there were 72 metropolitan patriarchs and 200 bishops in China and surrounding areas. This represented 24% of all Christians in the world of that time and over 6% of the population of Asia.³²

The success of the Nestorians in missions in the first millennium, even though they never gained majority status nor became a state religion should lead Christians to study their methods. Likewise, the collapse of the Nestorians between the 13th and 16th centuries should provide concern and counsel to Christians today. But the collapse, regardless of its relevance today, goes beyond the scope of this paper.

The Asian church grew naturally with the trade routes providing the “backbone” to that growth. Trade routes were in some ways simply the way people and information traveled and so in one sense the church had no other way to grow. However, in another sense, the Nestorian church utilized trade routes, and the multicultural environment created by trade routes to spread the Gospel of Christ. They utilized merchants in their mission strategy, and utilized trading centers as centers for Christian outreach.

This researcher believes that there is much in the Asian missions of the first millennium that holds value for mission outreach in Asia in the third millennium. First, the Asia of the first and third millennia is a large, populous land of many religions and nations-- most of whom are somewhat hostile to the Christian message. Therefore, one might suppose that the methods used in the first may have value in the third. Second, the method of reaching out through multicultural economic centers using holistic ministry may hold greater promise than methods in common use in the 20th century. Third, the existence of millions of “Asian Diaspora” suggest the possibility of tapping in on a huge number of bi-cultural tentmakers who can use their flexibility and occupation to gain access to regions out of reach from traditional professional “outsider” missionaries.³³ Finally, the successful integration of “professional” missionaries (at that time, priests) with missional layleaders (merchants) should be viewed with interest by modern strategists.

On a final note, it may be useful to consider what are the major trade routes and trade centers of today. Paved roads and accurate ocean charts allow good transportation between all major cities in the world. However, these roads and sea routes do not appear to correspond in role and

importance with the routes and trade centers of the past. The trade centers of the first millennium seem in many ways to correspond with the major hub airports of the present day. The hub airports of megacities are becoming international cities in their own rights, with stores, restaurants, educational centers, hotels, and thousands of multicultural permanent workers and transients. Perhaps these hub airports may provide the environment conducive to sharing the gospel in the 21st century in otherwise hostile lands. The Asian church appeared to die in the 13th to 15th centuries as Muslims (generally) took over the trade routes from Christians. It would be wise for Christians today to take advantage of all opportunities for witness in Asia.

Footnotes for Conclusions

³²Johnstone, 73.

³³Kirk Franklin, "Apostle Paul, Asian Diaspora, and Mission." *Global Missiology*. October 2006. in AV-STM Leadership Development Program 2006. [CD-ROM] Baguio City, 2006.

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