

PONTIFICIA UNIVERSITAS
ANTONIANUMFacultas Scientiarum Biblicarum
et ArchaeologiaeSTUDIUM BIBLICUM
FRANCISCANUM

Fr. Allegra, the Bible and the Chinese Culture

▶ I begin with an apology. As you know, I am not an expert of Chinese culture. That is why I put the name of Fr. Allegra in the first place. Coming to Hong Kong for the second consecutive year, and having to give a couple of lectures, I looked to Fr. Allegra for inspiration. I read his four contributions in the journal of the SBF in Jerusalem, the *Liber Annuus*. The first is a summary of the history of the “Studium Biblicum Franciscanum Sinense” – the SB in China – from the beginning until 1952-53. The second, written in 1969, is a report on the activity of the Studium Biblicum during the years 1963-1969. The third, published 1974, is a study on Chinese cosmogony based on the “Quaestiones Caelestes” (Tien wen) of Chou Yuan (IV cent. B.C.). The fourth is report on the completion of the Chinese Bible Dictionary by the same Studium Biblicum written in 1975.

▶ 1. *Fr. Allegra and Chinese Culture*

What struck me was Fr. Allegra’s deep spirituality, on the one side, and his open-minded scholarship, on the other. Many in this audience know his profound devotion to the Virgin Immaculate and to her champion the Blessed John Duns Scotus, who was elected as the patron saint of the whole project of the Studium Biblicum. In his passionate dedication to the task of giving Christ to China and China to Christ, Fr. Allegra referred to Isaiah 49:12 – a passage that we will discuss later.

Already in 1952, while describing the methodology he had adopted together with his team, Fr. Allegra wrote as follows:

We had wished to write our commentary [on the Bible] in a way as to also take into consideration the Chinese culture but it was immediately clear from the beginning that such an enterprise would require an extremely long work so that we decided to postpone it. (*LA* 3, 1952-53, 213)

In a footnote he added as follows:

Taking into account the Chinese culture in the commentaries is an extremely necessary yet long and difficult task. A journal, which we have in mind in order to promote the Biblical doctrine, can be a suitable preparation for preliminary investigations. The range of this study is really huge. In our opinion, it concerns ethnology, linguistics, sacred terminology, history of the religions in China, old laws and the like. When finally everything shall be examined and discussed, it will be possible to compose a work similar to H. Gressmann, *Altorientalische Texte zum Alten Testament*. (*ibid.*, note 31, p. 213)

Fr. Allegra takes up again this idea at the beginning of his study on the “Heavenly questions” by Shou Yuan. He writes as follows:



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Alviero Nicacci ofm
was born in Italy and belongs to the Franciscan province of Umbria. Qualifications: Licentiate of theology (Pontificia Università Lateranense: 1969); Licentiate in Ancient Eastern Studies (PIB: 1970); Licentiate in Holy Scriptures (PIB: 1972); Laureate in literature and Philosophy (University of Roma: 1977). Professor (Ordinary) (1988) at the SBF (1978-); exegesis of the Old Testament and biblical Hebrew language; Egyptian and Ugaritic languages. Served as: secretary of the SBF (1978-80); Vicedirector of the SBF (1987-90); Director (1990-1996).

The readers [of this journal, *Liber Annuus*] should not be surprised of the fact that we intend to investigate such a distant and almost foreign text with reference to the Bible. This is not without a reason. In fact, since many years I frequently thought of a certain work to be done, similar to that of Gressmann. In it I would put together texts from the ancient Chinese culture, that is from X cent. BC to III cent. AD, concerning history, wisdom literature, laws, poetic parallelism, myths on creation and flood, elegies, allegories and symbols as well as historical pragmatism etc. These texts could be compared, with utility and delight at least by the Chinese, with the relevant subjects contained in the Holy Scripture. Reflecting on this subject, I almost only considered cosmogonical texts because they, indirectly at least, concern the fundamental doctrine on creation. As far as I understand, the Chinese as the Greeks and Latins did not arrive at the concept of creation. This is my opinion regarding the classical – less accurately called “canonical” – books and also regarding other rather well-known writings such as The Rhapsodies of the Tzu Kingdom, and several other compositions both Taoist and Buddhist. In these circumstances, it is even more surprising and delightful to find by some primitive tribes like “Lolo” and “Miao”, living in Chinese territory until today, a more pure and noble notion of creation, or rather, a knowledge of the production or origin of all things from a Supreme Being.

Most probably I shall not have enough time to accomplish such a work. Still I wish to disclose my intention to the reader in the hope that the Studium Biblicum Sinense, or other generous and daring people for Christ’s sake, might be stimulated by these words. In fact we must “give Christ to China and China to Christ” (P. Lebbe) with every effort and with all possible means. (*LA* 24, 1974, 71-72)

It is my intention to give my voice to this wish of our Ven. Fr. Allegra. I hope and pray that his Studium Biblicum in this happy anniversary may find the courage and strength to embark in this project. I warmly hope and pray that as a fruit of the present celebrations the Studium Biblicum in HK may renew enthusiasm and efforts as in the past under the guidance of a new Chinese Fr. Allegra to produce an anthology of Chinese texts relevant for Biblical literature and theology. As in the past, a team work is needed – a cooperation among friars, local and maybe also from abroad, well versed in Chinese culture and prepared in Biblical and oriental studies. I read with profound joy that Fr. Allegra took inspiration for his Studium Biblicum from the Buddhists who came to China and established a group of monks both Indian and local in order to inculturate their religion while translating their sacred books into Chinese (see *LA* 3, 1952-53, 201-203). Relying on God’s help and the cooperation of his friars, Fr. Allegra went off to his daring projects. He was not deterred by adverse circumstances. On the contrary, as he wrote:

During the past years [i.e. when the Studium Biblicum came to HK] we learned a lot and especially the following: first, in this world an apostle could never work in totally favorable circumstances; second, by patience one overcomes all difficulties; and third, the more an enterprise is destined to increase the glory of God, the more it grows and is nurtured with the bread of tears. (*LA* 3, 1952-53, 208)

As you know, the *Chinese Bible Dictionary* of the Studium Biblicum comprises preliminary treatment of subjects such as “Confucianism and the Bible” (pp. 1148-1157), “Taoism and the Bible” (pp. 1157-1165) and “The Nestorian Stela of Sianfu and the Bible” (pp. 1176-1184) as well as “Buddhism and the Bible” and “Islam and the Bible.”¹

World order will be our first subject I am going to discuss. Later on I will examine Isa. 49:12.

▶ 2. World Order in the Bible and in Chinese Culture

The project of an anthology of the Chinese literature related to the Bible is all the more important in the present circumstances. I wish to mention two reasons – but there may be more; first, today’s expansion of Asiatic religions in Western world; second, the challenge represented by the 1997 re-unification of Hong Kong and later of Macao with main-land China.

The expansion of Asiatic religions in the West is a phenomenon that causes deep concern in the Catholic Church. We discover that the Western world is no more Catholic. Many young people identify Christianity with Western civilization and consequently involve Christianity in the crisis of Western civilization. They feel the limitations of technology, rationalism, capitalism, individualism. They sense the inhuman character of today’s culture. Western civilization has produced a break of communication between humanity and the world, humanity and God, and also among human beings themselves. Spirituality, inner values, quality of life have little meaning in terms of economy and profit. Mass concentration in big cities has caused losing contact with the creatures of the world, their meaning and as a consequence no dialogue exists any more



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between human beings and nature. Human activity has lost any connection to God's creation. The result is frustration, isolation, hostility, and consequently a desire of escaping from an unfriendly, polluted world, of taking refuge in something different, which may be drugs or oriental religions.

Undoubtedly the rapid spreading of new, vaguely religious movements and sects throughout the Western world poses a direct challenge to the Church. As Christians, we have to recognize our faults and try to understand the signs of our time because God is speaking to us in this way. He puts his Church to test and intends to purify it, to prepare it for its mission, for a new evangelization. Despite everything, we discover a number of positive demands in the new – some would say neo-gnostic – religious movements of our time. There is a demand of mysticism, of unity, of harmony – cosmic, global harmony with the world and ultimately with God. There is a demand of a spirituality capable of overcoming scientific rationalism, dualism, separation, frustration, lack of meaning. In this context we can understand the need for a “cosmic theology” intimated by Fr. Allegra and Teilhard de Chardin some fifty years ago as I mentioned in my previous lecture.

As Christians and – allow me to say this – as Franciscans we cannot remain inactive in front of these demands; we cannot allow Asiatic religions, or the so-called “New Age” movement,² respond to them. We do have responses to these demands, and it is highly reproachable that we allowed our world to go astray. The Bible, our Jewish-Christian heritage, is able to provide a satisfying answer to the demands of mysticism, harmony, and meaning.

The answer comes especially from the wisdom tradition of both Testaments. As we saw in the previous lecture, divine wisdom is the plan of the created world, its order. Being present in every creature, divine wisdom is a cosmic link between God the creator, humanity and the world his creatures. By coming into relationship with the creatures, one comes into relationship with God the creator. God reveals himself in creation. St. Francis of Assisi interpreted this biblical vision in a personal, attractive way when he called every being brother and sister. Further, Franciscan theology envisages the world as a ladder to the knowledge and union with God. In this way, the Franciscan movement is a faithful witness to Christian vision of reality.

This vision can have a strong impact in today's world. It is important to show that God is not only the spirit of the universe, a dynamic, auto-organizing but impersonal force of reality. Much more than this, He is the Creator, the supreme, personal Being who made everything out of an act of love. He is the Father who cares for his creatures, who also gave up His only Beloved Son for their redemption and salvation, to make peace between them and Himself, between them and the world, and among themselves.

Why did I speak about Asiatic religions in the west? Because you are here in an ideal position for a dialogue with these religions and this dialogue may have a beneficial impact in the West as a model and inspiration for the Church there.

This is the first reason that I wished to present in order to encourage the Studium Biblicum in HK to take upon itself the task envisaged by Fr. Allegra to prepare an anthology of Chinese culture in relationship with the Bible. The second reason is the 1997 re-unification with main-land China. I don't need to insist on this point because you are aware of it much more than I am. I imagine that the Chinese people shall benefit a lot by discovering that Christianity esteems its culture and that several links exist between their popular religion and Christian revelation.

As I said at the beginning, I cannot teach you anything about Chinese culture. I simply read encyclopedias and general presentations and tried to identify some common ground with the Bible. My intention is to stimulate research by members of the Studium Biblicum and other generous people here. I remember Fr. Marcus Chen speaking to me, last year, about the possibility of comparing Biblical and Chinese wisdom literatures. I decided to address the issue of world order, which is certainly relevant for Biblical wisdom literature and seems to be such also for Chinese religion. It seems that one can speak of Chinese religion in the singular in this case because world order is one of the main issues of Chinese religion as such, underlying the different Chinese religions.

It may well be that, from an in-depth research by specialists, Chinese world order and Biblical world order happen to be quite different in content. Even in this case, I think, it is worthwhile to address externally similar concepts, and also to adopt common terminology in order to convey the Biblical message.

Clearly such an enterprise brings into discussion what we today call the inculturation of the faith. It is a delicate and urgent issue in contemporary Church but I am not going to discuss it here. I simply wish to briefly refer to a biblical model taken from the Gospel of John. As we know, it opens with a hymn to the Incarnate Word called *logos*. Now, John's Gospel adopts a wisdom Christology (i.e. a Christology based on the language and theology of OT wisdom movement) and does it more than the Synoptic Gospels, maybe as much as St. Paul. This being the case, it is surprising that St. John never calls Jesus Wisdom, *sophia*; rather, he calls him *logos*. Why? Because, I think, *logos* was a common religious term in Asia Minor (where according to common opinion his Gospel was put into writing). St. John used *logos* rather than *sophia* in order to better interact with the Hellenistic-stoic milieu of his time although the content of the Johannine *logos* is Jewish, not Hellenistic. This is why, I think, it is useful to compare Chinese and Biblical ideas of world order.³ They have at least external similarities that may help convey the biblical message in today's Chinese society.

It seems, then, that *Tao*, meaning way, order, justice etc., is one of the basic concepts of the Chinese religions. It includes cosmic order, ethical order, correct relationships among heaven, earth, and humanity. In Confucianism, the king was responsible for cosmic order. It was believed that through their effort human beings could reach wisdom, love and righteousness. These attitudes are the basis of five natural relationships:

Research Center.

While the SBF supports research and publication in all areas of biblical studies, a particular focus has been on the archaeological excavation of sites associated with the New Testament and early Christianity in the Middle East. The SBF also carries the tradition of the Franciscans who have helped write the history of the Christian shrines and places of pilgrimage in the Middle East through archaeological excavation and the study of Jewish and Christian literary sources including pilgrims' diaries.

between authority and subject, father and son, father and mother, elders and youth, and between friends. The quest for cosmic order brought with it an interest for astronomy and the calendar. The ultimate ideal was harmony between world and humanity. Ethical behavior essentially consisted in living in harmony with the world. These conceptions may have more than one connection with the Bible.

Certain teachers of Taoism explored the ontological basis of good and evil. A famous passage from the Tao Te Ching of Lao-tse (VI cent. B.C.; some say IV cent. B.C. or even later) was thought to contain the personal name of the God of Israel (see von Strauss-Torney):

One looks at him but one does not perceive him;
his name is *If*
One listen to him but one does not hear him;
his name is *Hî*.
One grasps at him but one does not seize him;
his name is *Wei*.
These three do not allow to investigate him,
but taken together they are the One. (Chap. XIV:1-8)

The three signs read *I, H(i)* and *W(ei)* were thought to be meaningless in Chinese and therefore of foreign origin. They were seen as a Chinese rendering of the Sacred Tetragrammaton of the Israelite God Yahweh, comparable to the Greek rendering *Iao*, and even more faithful to the original spelling. We have to remember that the Jesuits in the XVII-XVIII cent. claimed to have found traces of monotheism comparable to that of the OT in the Tao Te Ching. These opinions, however, have been abandoned by later scholars.⁴ In any case, the speculation in the Tao Te Ching about the One and the Many is noteworthy although I must leave the exact interpretation to the authorities in the field.

Similarities between Taoism and Christianity were also noted concerning healing, confession of sins and salvation. It seems that they were the result of contacts through Manicheism around the II cent. A.D.

Thus, I have chosen to illustrate the biblical idea of wisdom as God's plan of creation and world order, which seemed to me parallel in some way to the Chinese *Tao*. According to Biblical tradition, divine wisdom present in the world allows personal relationships among human beings and between human beings and the creatures. In contradistinction from the Chinese view, the Biblical idea of order is not confined to the horizon of this world; it is rather a cosmic link between God, humanity and the world. In the development of divine revelation from the Old to the New Testament, divine wisdom (or world order, or meaning of the world) becomes incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth. In my previous lecture, we have followed this trajectory through the relevant texts. From them we can derive a satisfying answer to the demands of spirituality and meaning coming from modern society.

▶ **3. Does Isaiah 49:12 Speak of the Chinese?**

I wish now to examine Isa. 49:12 that was a favorite passage of Fr. Allegra and certainly also of other missionaries and Chinese Christians. The reason is, as you know, that Isa. 49:12 has been interpreted to refer to the Land of China. Is this interpretation defensible in the light of modern exegesis?

The passage is found after what is traditionally called the Second Song of the Servant of God in Deutero Isaiah. Here the Servant receives a universal mission far beyond the boundaries of Israel:

God says: "It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the preserved of Israel; I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth. (Isa. 49:6)

Later on, we find our passage. In the RSV it reads as follows:

Lo, these shall come from afar (*merahôq*), and lo, these from the north (*mitstapôn*) and from the west (*miyyam*), and these from the land of Syene (*me'erets sînîm*). (Isa. 49:12)

The RSV has adopted the interpretation "from the land of Syene" for the Masoretic reading *me'erets sînîm*. Syene is the Greek name of modern Assuan on the southern border of Egypt. In this interpretation, of course, no reference to China appears in the biblical text. The China interpretation began in the XVI cent. with Arias Montanus. It was propagated by Cornelius a Lapide and became rather popular also under the impact of the Jesuit mission in India, China and Japan. It was fostered with learned arguments by W. Gesenius in his famous *Thesaurus*, F. Delitzsch, and many others. There were, however, dissenting voices. Already in the XVIII cent. J.D. Michaelis argued that the China interpretation was untenable because China laid outside the horizon of the biblical author. Michaelis, on his part, proposed to change the consonants of the Hebrew text slightly, reading a waw instead of the first yod, i.e. *sewênîm* instead *sînîm*. According to Michaelis, the reading *sewênîm* indicated the inhabitants of Sewêneh, the city mentioned in Eze. 29:10 and 30:6, Greek Syene, the modern Assuan. Coming to contemporary scholars, they generally do not accept the China interpretation. They either leave the Hebrew name untranslated ("the land of the Sinim, or the Sinites") or favor the Assuan interpretation. Very few exegetes maintain the China interpretation (consult Lambert).



Academic Center.

The SBF is a pontifical faculty that offers courses leading to both the licentiate (S.S.L.) and the doctoral (S.S.D.) degrees in Biblical Studies and Archaeology. The program of studies leading to the licentiate includes two semesters of introductory studies and five regular semesters. The program of studies leading to the doctoral degree requires four additional semesters and the writing of a dissertation.

Other programs of studies lead to diplomas in Oriental Biblical Studies and Archaeology and in Biblical Formation.



Let us review, first, the readings of the ancient versions and the evidence of Qumran. Afterwards, we shall discuss the arguments of the two interpretations. The Septuagint (Greek version) has *ge persón* “the Land of the Persians,” which is an interesting and unique reading; Targum Jonathan has *'ara' darôma'* as well as the Vulgate *terra australis*, both meaning “the land of the South;” the Syriac and the Greek versions other than the Septuagint simply transliterate *sînim*.

The Qumran reading (IQIs^a) presents two differences with respect to the Masoretic text: a waw instead of the first yod and two yods instead of the second yod. Obviously the Qumran reading supports the correction proposed by Michaelis in the XVIII cent. The Assuan interpretation has also been strengthened by the discovery in 1905 of series of Aramaic papyri in Elephantine, the island of the Nile facing Assuan. These papyri derive from a Jewish military colony stationed there at the Southern border of Egypt. According to many interpreters, therefore, the Assuan interpretation is definitely the best and the China interpretation is to be abandoned.

Medieval Jewish exegetes have different opinions. Kimhi interprets *merahôq* as meaning “from the east,” *mitstsapôn* as “from the north,” *miyyam* as “from the west,” and *me'ere'ts sînim* as “from the land of the (Canaanite) Sinim,” a people living in the Phoenician coast according to Gen. 10:17. On the contrary, Ibn Ezra interprets “from the land of Sin,” that is Pelusium on the northern border of Egypt.

Modern exegetes do not accept the interpretation referring to either the Phoenician Sinim or Pelusium because they are both located near the region of exile, which was Babylonia. Indeed, the intention of text is to promise the return of the dispersed Israelites from the extreme borders of the ancient world.

At this point, I wish to make several observations regarding the Biblical text. First, a question: Do really the four phrases “from afar - from the north - from the sea - from the Land of the Sinites” indicate the four cardinal points? It is common opinion, both ancient and modern, that they do but this does not seem quite certain to me. The phrase “Land of the Sinites” could simply parallel the initial “from afar,” and the phrases “from north and from the sea” could belong together to mean “from the north and from the south” (as in Psa. 107:3). Second, the interpretation of *merahôq* as “from the east,” as we find in Targum Jonathan and in traditional Jewish exegesis, depends on the assumption that the four phrases indicate the four cardinal points and that *miyyâm* means “from the west”. Third, if – and only if – “the land of the Sinites” is to indicate the south, then the Assuan interpretation is the more probable. These observations mean, at least, that the Assuan interpretation does not impose itself as the final solution.

Two more difficulties against the China interpretation are to be mentioned. First, the name itself; second, the assumption that China laid outside the horizon of the Bible. According to some scholars, even if there were Jews in China at the time of the Deutero Isaiah in the VI cent. B.C., *sînim* could not be the name of the local people at that time. A. Dillmann would rather expect *Tsin*, with *tsade* instead of *samekh*, as found in Medieval Hebrew (also in Arabic but not in modern Hebrew). Besides, it is claimed that “China,” being a name originated by foreigners, could not have come into being before the Ts' in dynasty, from which it probably derives, by the end of the III cent. B.C.

Leaving the problem of the name open for discussion, I will now comment on the assumption that China remained outside the horizon of the Bible. Indeed, we do not have any positive evidence that China was part of the world known in Biblical times. However, some texts from Isaiah envisage a large range of countries from where Jews are to come back to the Promise Land. Let us read a couple of them, one probably of Proto Isaiah, the second of Deutero Isaiah.

In that day the Lord will extend his hand yet a second time to recover the remnant which is left of his people, from Assyria, from Egypt, from Pathros (Upper Egypt; LXX “from Babylon”), from Ethiopia (Kush), from Elam, from Shinar (LXX “from the East”), from Hamath (LXX “from Arabia”), and from the coastlands of the sea. (missing in the LXX) (Isa. 11:11)

[Israel] Fear not, for I am with you; I will bring your offspring from the east, and from the west I will gather you;

I will say to the north, Give up, and to the south, Do not withhold; bring my sons from afar (*merahôq*) and my daughters from the end of the earth (*miqtseh ha'arets*) (Isa. 43:5-6)

Note the phrase *merahôq* “from afar,” also found in 49:12, parallel to “from the end of the earth” in 43:6.

From these passages we get the idea that the Israelite exiles will come back from different countries that formed the limits of the ancient world. It is of importance for our discussion to note that we do not possess literary evidence of a Jewish Diaspora in all the countries mentioned in these lists. For instance, for Upper Egypt we have the evidence of the Aramaic papyri in the V-IV cent. B.C. but no biblical record of Jewish refugees before that date (although we read of Jewish refugees in Lower Egypt at the time of Jeremiah). This means that we cannot exclude the possibility of China being in the list simply because no literary records are available to confirm it.

Further, some facts can positively help to envisage the possibility that China was within the horizon of the Biblical world. I name three of them: a) early trade relations with the Far East; b) a Jewish community living in China since ancient times; and c) the Jewish legend of the Ten Lost Tribes. Admittedly, these facts

The Museum

Attached to the SBF is a museum. Founded in 1902, the museum is designed to serve not only students but also visitors to the Holy Land. Individual rooms in the museum are devoted to some of particularly important sites such as Nazareth, Capernaum, Mt. Nebo, the Herodion, and the monasteries of the Judean desert. Also noteworthy are a series of Byzantine oil lamps with Greek inscriptions, and a collection of ceramics from the 16th to the 19th century school of Savona that belonged to the ancient Pharmacy of St. Savior's Monastery.



are no more than hints and their value is rather scanty. Still, they are worth mentioning in order to get a complete picture of the problem.

a) It is well-known that silk trade existed since very early time with China and the Far East by the way of Arabia and the Persian Gulf. It is also known that Jews from Persia since early times established direct links with the “silk-men,” as the Chinese were called. Therefore, even if no Jewish Diaspora existed there, the name China may have been used by the prophet to indicate an extreme remote country.

b) Thank to Jesuit missionaries a Jewish community living in K’ai-Fung-Fu, the ancient capital of Honan, was known in Europe since the XVII cent. This community, which no longer exists, had an old synagogue which was rebuilt many times. Three marble inscriptions from the years 1489, 1512, and 1663 have been found in this synagogue that shed light on the history, life, religious practices, liturgical books, festivals etc. of the Jewish settlements in China. Admittedly, these records are late. According to Jewish oral tradition reported by missionaries, however, the Jews entered China under the Han dynasty during the reign of Han Ming-ti (58-76 A.D.). The fact that the Chinese called the Jews “The sect which extracts the sinews” (Tiao Kiu Kiaou) after the prescription of Gen. 32:33 and not in a different way according to a certain characteristic of Rabbinic Judaism, is a sign of an early date for their arrival in China. The fact that among their Historical Books we find the two Books of the Maccabees, Judith and Ben Sira is another sign of great antiquity.

From the examination of the surviving Torah scrolls of the K’ai-Fung-Fu community (originally thirteen scrolls) it appears that the community came from Babylonia or Persia. In fact, the division of the Torah in 53 portions (*parashiyot*), one for each of the 52 Sabbaths of the year, with an additional *parashah* for Simhat Torah (Deut. 33-34) corresponds to the Babylonian custom while it differs from the Masoretic tradition, which has 54 portions. The *Haftarot* (portions from the prophets) and the ritual books in use also show an affiliation of the community with Babylonia or ancient Persia. A recent investigation on these scrolls by Lehman has revealed a Yemenite influence on the K’ai-Fung-Fu manuscripts. It also revealed that “the pronunciation of Hebrew in KFF, apparently under the influence of the Chinese of former centuries, was rather different from the pronunciations in the West” (Lehman, 191).

Some pieces of information concerning this Jewish community is interesting for our subject. The 1489 inscription reveals a strong Chinese influence on Jewish practice:

“It is incumbent upon the Jew to venerate his ancestors. Twice in the year—in spring and in autumn—he offers them oxen and sheep together with the fruits of the season (compare Tobit iv. 17; Tosef., Shek. i. 12).

Four days every month are devoted to purification, fasting and charitable acts.

Each seventh day is devoted to rest, and a fresh period of good deeds commences anew.” Here reference is made to the ancient Chinese work, the “Book of Diagrams.” In the fourth season of the year the Jew places himself under severe restraint for seven days [seven in place of the Ten Penitential Days]. One entire day [Day of Atonement] he abstains altogether from food, devoting the time to prayer and repentance. (*JE*, 37)

In the same inscription important similarities are noted by the Chinese themselves between Judaism and their religion:

During the Han dynasty this religion [i.e. Judaism] entered China. In 1164 a synagogue was built at Peen [K’ai-Fung-Foo]. In 1296 it was rebuilt. [...]

Those who practice this religion are found in other places than Peen [K’ai-Fung-Foo]; but, wherever they are met with, they all, without exception, honor the sacred writings and venerate Eternal Reason in the same manner as the Chinese, shunning superstitious practices and image-worship. These sacred books concern not Jews only, but kings and subjects, parents and children, old and young. Differing little from our [the Chinese!] laws, they are summed up in the worship of heaven [God], the honor of parents, and the veneration of ancestors. (*JE*, 34)

In the description of the K’ai-Fung-Fu synagogue handed down by the Jesuits in the XVIII cent., we find some significant elements that distinguish this building from normal Jewish synagogues. The differences attest to a deep inculturation of Judaism in China (see *JE* 36-37). These include an “Hall of the ancestors” (Abraham, the twelve sons of Jacob, Moses, Aaron, Joshua, Ezra, and other Biblical personages, both men and women) in the fourth court of the synagogue.

The veneration of the ancestors and other Chinese customs adopted by the K’ai-Fung-Fu Jews such as the veneration of the emperor cannot fail to recall the story of the so-called “Controversy of the Chinese Rites” that arose in XVIII cent. on similar issues (see *CE*, 37-40). As we know, the form of adaptation promoted by the Jesuits concerning the doctrine of God, the veneration of the ancestors, particularly Confucius, and the veneration of the emperor, was finally rejected by Pope Benedict XIV in 1742. Indeed, history can teach us find new forms of inculturation today.

Two small interesting details are worth mentioning: the “chair of Moses” and the custom of veiling one’s face while reading the Torah. In fact, in the center of the synagogue proper there was “a magnificent elevated

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chair with embroidered cushions, upon which the scroll of the Law rested while being read. This was called the «chair of Moses» (compare Matt. xxiii. 2)” (*JE*, 37). Further,

A remarkable custom prescribed that he who read the Law should cover his face with a transparent veil of gauze, in imitation of Moses (Ex. xxxiv. 33), a practice unknown otherwise, but to which Paul seems to allude as being well established in his time, when he says, “For until this day remained the same veil untaken away in the reading of the Old Testament” (II Cor. iii. 14) (*ibid.*).

c) Lastly, let me briefly mention the Jewish Legend of the Ten Lost Tribes. According to this legend, after the destruction of Samaria in 721 B.C. the northern tribes were dispersed throughout the world. China is among the numerous nations mentioned in this connection. However, it is risky to assign an historical value to this legend and use it in relation to Isa 49:12 (see *JE*, 33; *EJ*, 1003-1006).

In sum, this small detour from Isa. 49:12 to the history of the K’ai-Fung-Fu and other matters has not been unfruitful because it has contributed some useful points for our discussion.

What should we conclude, then, about Isa. 49:12? After considering all the arguments, both new and old, I would say that no interpretation imposes itself as the only possible. The Assuan interpretation is well supported by the Qumran evidence, yet remains uncertain. The reason is that a phrase like “the Land of the Syenites” (the Assuan inhabitants) is rather surprising as a geographical designation of the kind found in Isaiah, where we usually find names of countries, not of individual cities. Besides, it was a city far away and not particularly well known in the Bible.

All in all, we can still accept the China interpretation proposed by scholars and propagated by the XVII-XVIII cent. missionaries.

There is a small argument in favor of this solution. Let us consider a somehow parallel case concerning the story of Isaac, the son of Abraham in the monotheistic religions (a symposium on this subject was held in March this year in Jerusalem, organized by the SBF in Jerusalem).⁵ Now, for the Jews the binding of Isaac took place on Mount Moriah, the place of the future temple. For the Samaritans it took place on Mount Garizim, near modern Nablus, where their temple stood. For the Christians, Isaac is Christ and the traditions of the Moriah (the Temple Mount) were transferred to Mount Golgotha (the Calvary). For the Muslims, the victim was Ishmael, their ancestor, not Isaac. Who is right in this remarkable adaptation of the divine revelation by the monotheistic religions? We are allowed to say, I think, that everybody is right. God is still nourishing the faith of different religious communities in this way. Who would dare to say that He is wrong?

For these reasons Fr. Allegra adopted the China interpretation although he thought that it was time-honoured yet scarcely convincing from the critical point of view (see Allegra, 218). The comment of the Chinese Bible of the Studium Biblicum on Isa. 49:12 is as follows:

The returnees came back from all different parts (verse 12). There were not only Israelites but also people from other nations. Among these nations, the prophet mentioned *Sinim* which corresponded to Assuan of today, south of Egypt. Regarding this, Arias, Alapide and Gesenius thought this must refer to China. In the past, Indians and Persians called the Middle Kingdom “China”. (China prospered during Ch’in Dynasty and since then, the Middle Kingdom was known as China, as a variant of the name Chin.) This view may not match the literal sense. Nevertheless because the Servant of God is the light of all peoples and he died for all, we Chinese must be among those who are to be redeemed. Gradually we Chinese must become part of the people of Christ the King. Today, the more persecution the faithful are facing, the more we have to trust the saving grace of Our Lord Jesus. He will make the True Light shine all over our nation, leading them up to Mount Sion. All compatriots will know him and become part of His Kingdom – the Holy Church – and we will all joyously call the Church as Mother, singing to her, ‘All my sources are in you’ (Ps 87:5-7).⁶

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Research Center.

While the SBF supports research and publication in all areas of biblical studies, a particular focus has been on the archaeological excavation of sites associated with the New Testament and early Christianity in the Middle East. The SBF also carries of the tradition of the Franciscans who have helped write the history of the Christian shrines and places of pilgrimage in the Middle East through archaeological excavation and the study of Jewish and Christian literary sources including pilgrims' diaries.

LA = *Liber Annuus*.

Tao Tê Ching = *The Tao Tê Ching. The Writings of Chuang-Tzu. The Thâi-Shang Tractate of Actions and Their Retributions*, Translated by James Legge, Introduction by D.T. Suzuki, s.d.

TRE = *Theologische Realenzyklopädie*, s.v. "China".

Von Strauss-Torney V., "Der Name 𐤆𐤍𐤅𐤃 bei Lao-tse," ZAW 4 (1884) 28-34.

Endnotes

- ¹ Courtesy of Fr. Benjamin Leong.
- ² See Angle.
- ³ Fr. Allegra wrote that the Johannine *logos* should be translated as "Divine Word" (*Shang Yien*), not as *Tao*. According to him, *Tao* corresponds to the stoic *logos*. See his "Word, Divine word, God's Word," *Heng Yi* No. 11 (in Chinese; courtesy of Fr. Benjamin Leong).
- ⁴ See *Tao Tê Ching*, 105-106.
- ⁵ The proceedings of this symposium have been just published: F. Manns, ed., *The Sacrifice of Isaac in the Three Monotheistic Religions*. Proceedings of a symposium on the interpretation of the Scripture held in Jerusalem, March 16-17, 1995.
- ⁶ Translated by Bro. William Ng.

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