The Jewish Colony at Kaifeng

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Two years ago I had occasion to visit Kaifeng and I was naturally interested in seeing what I could of the relics of the Jewish Colony there. I was disappointed in finding so few traces remaining. Beyond the Jewish physiognomies which you occasionally see on the streets there seems to be nothing.
Bishop White of the Canadian Church Mission has interested himself in preserving the tablets, but there is no single brick or stone left of the old Synagogue. The land where it once stood has been purchased by Bishop White and has now been loaned to the Y. M. C. A. for an athletic field. The stone tablets which formerly stood within the grounds of the Synagogue have been rescued from destruction and now stand in front of the Church. They have been much defaced. One of them is quite illegible. Two of the carved inscriptions, however, can still be read, though some of the characters have been chipped off. I have here rubbings from these two stone tablets and translations, made, I believe, by Bishop Smith of Hongkong 70 years ago. The translations show that some phrases which are now illegible were in a better state of preservation when the translations were made. For example, we read in the translations that the ancestors of the Jews came from India. The characters "T'ien Chu Kuo" 天竺國 "Land of Heavenly Bamboos" cannot now be made out in the Chinese through defacement. There is no doubt about its having been there originally. In the second tablet we can still read the statement that Adam, the first ancestor of the Jews came from India. The dates of the two inscriptions which now remain are the second year of Hungchih (弘治) of the Ming Dynasty, A. D. 1489 and the seventh year Cheng Te (正德) of the same Dynasty, A. D. 513. I must object to Bishop Smith's translations in one or two particulars. In an apparent attempt to make the chronology of the tablet more accurate, the translator makes the writer of the inscription say that Abraham lived in the 146th year of the "Chou State" which he places at the time of Yao (堯) and Sun (舜) over 2000 B. C., but the statement of the tablet is quite clear the 146th year of the Chou Dynasty " (周朝) or B. C. 976, or about 1000 years later than the date ordinarily assigned to Abraham. Moses is stated to have lived about the 613th year of the Chou Dynasty, which would also be about 1000 years later than the date usually assigned to him. It seems to me rather unnecessary for the translator to be so zealous to prove the accuracy of the chronology of the tablet in view of the fact that the inscription begins with the statement that Abraham was the 19th descendant of Pan Ku (盤古) or Adam.

I must defend the standing of the writers of the earlier inscriptions by criticising the translation of their literary titles, which has been repeated in every reference that I have seen to the Kaifeng tablets. The translation reads "Composed by a promoted literary graduate of the Kaifeng Prefecture named Chin Chung; inscribed by a literary graduate of purchased rank of the Hsi An Fu District named Tsao Tso, and engraved by a literary graduate of purchased rank of the Kaifeng Prefecture named Pu Tu." The phrase rendered "promoted Literary Graduate" is Tseng Kuang Sheng Yuan (增廣生員), which means a "shengyuan" or "hsiu-ts'ai " who got his degree in the supplementary list, i. e., in the number added by Imperial Edict to the quota originally assigned to the province. What is translated "Literary Graduates of Purchased Rank" is the phrase "lin Shan Sheng Yuan" (廩膳生員) which means a "shengyuan " or "hsints'ai" who receives a government pension. So poor Tsao Tso and Pu Tu have had their special honor...
turned into dishonor by the translator. The fact is that all three were evidently scholars of some local distinction. I think that the general assumption is that they were members of the Jewish community. I consider this very improbable. It is the custom in China when a tablet is to be set up to honor any temple or public building to invite some scholar of local reputation to compose or write it. He is then posted upon such facts as it is desired shall be contained in the inscription and he draws it up in such a way that it may have the necessary literary flavor. From the internal evidence of the Kaifeng Synagogue inscriptions I feel quite certain that the usual Chinese custom was followed and that the inscriptions were not composed by Jews. A rather patronizing tone pervades both documents. We are told that Jewish and Confucian doctrines are practically identical. The I Ching or Book of Changes is freely quoted, and the Jewish religion is summarized as follows: The main design of it is nothing more than reverence for heaven and veneration for ancestors, fidelity to the prince and obedience to parents, just that which is included in the five human relations, the five constant virtues and the three principal connections of life." In the first tablet we read "To venerate Heaven and to neglect ancestors is to fail in the services which are their due. In the Spring and Autumn, therefore, men sacrifice to their ancestors to show that they serve the dead as they do the living. They offer sheep and oxen and present the fruits of the season to show that they do not neglect the honor due to ancestors when they are gone from us." This certainly does not come from the Old Testament ritual.

The tablet of 1513 reads even more like a Confucian essay than the earlier tablet. The translation is perhaps rather misleading in that the familiar tao " is translated "Eternal Reason."

The general tone of the two inscriptions indicates that the process of the absorption of the colony into the general population was rather advanced at the time when they were written.

As to the historical facts which we may glean from the tablets, that of A.D. 1513 contains the sentence, "This religion entered China during the Han Dynasty." This evidently tradition merely, and we have no particular reason either to doubt or to believe the statement. It is not claimed that the Jews who came to China in the Han Dynasty were the ancestors of the Kaifeng Jews for it is distinctly stated that the ancestors of the Colony came from India during the Sung Dynasty (A.D. 960) and that the first Synagogue was built in the first year of Lung Hsing of the Sung Dynasty (A.D. 1164), and that it was rebuilt in the 16th year of Chih Yuan Dynasty (A.D. 1296). Other details are given regarding various repairs at other times. We are informed also that the Hebrew scriptures in 53 sections were deposited in the Synagogue, and that during the reign of T’ien Shun of the Ming Dynasty (1457-1465) the Jewish colony at Ningpo furnished them with copies of the Scriptures. This last statement is interesting as showing the existence of other communities of Jews in China at that
period. I have heard several singular reports of Jewish travelers that they have found people in Shantung and also in Mongolia who speak a debased form of Hebrew allied to the Yiddish. These reports have not been carefully verified and so must be considered for the present as rumors only. If true, they would seem to indicate former Jewish colonies in Mongolia and Shantung.

The Kaifeng inscriptions give various details of the ceremonies observed in the Synagogue and contain mention of Sabbath observance. They show a certain familiarity with the names of the ancient heroes of Jewish history. Thus, in the second tablet we read "From the beginning of the world our first father Adam handed down the doctrine to Abraham; Abraham to Isaac; Isaac to Jacob; to the Twelve Patriarchs; the twelve Patriarchs to Moses; Moses to Aaron; Aaron to Joshua and Joshua to Ezra." The older tablet gives a shorter list saying merely that Abraham handed down the doctrines to Moses and that they were again handed down to the time of the reformer of religion and wise instructor, Ezra. I am obliged to criticize the historical accuracy of the writer of the inscription as well as that of the translator. The writer states that the Jewish ancestors arrived at Kaifeng, or Pien Liang, in the Sung Dynasty and were cordially received by the Emperor who said "Since they have come to our Central land and reverently observe the customs of their ancestors, let them hand down the doctrines at Pien Liang. Now Pien Liang was the official name of Kaifeng in the Yuan Dynasty not in the Sung. The Sungs called the city Pien Ching. Further on the statement is made that the Synagogue was erected in the 1st year of Lung Hsing (A.D. 1163). Now Lung Hsing was the second Emperor of the Southern Sung Dynasty and in his time Kaifeng had been abandoned to the Chin Tartars, who captured the city in the year 1127 after which the Southern Sungs made their capital at Nanking. So the Emperor Lung Hsing resident at Nanking could not have been the one who welcomed the Jews at Kaifeng. Their arrival must have been at least two generations earlier before it fell into the hands of the Chin Tartars.

The earliest account of China by foreign travelers is that written by a Mohammedan who visited South China early in the ninth Century during the Tang Dynasty. He speaks of large numbers of foreigners at Canton and other cities of South China. In the commentary on this account written by Abu Zeid al Hasan we find an account of the over-running of South China by an army of brigands led by Bei Chu. Canton was captured and the inhabitants put to the Sword. The Arab writer says, "There are persons fully acquainted with the affairs of China who assure us that, besides the Chinese who were massacred on this occasion, there perished 120,000 Mohammedans, Jews, Christians and Parsees who were there on account of traffic." Whatever we may think of the accuracy of this number, it seems established that there were at Canton many foreigners, including both Jews and Christians in the ninth century of the Christian era.

Four hundred years later in the time of Kublai-Khan of the Yuan Dynasty, Marco Polo visited China and at that time there were certainly many foreigners of different faiths in North China. In the writings of Marco Polo I find only one direct reference to the Jews. That is in his account of the rebellion of Nayan, Prince of Manchuria and some adjacent regions, against his Kinsman
Kublai Khan. According to Marco Polo, Prince Nayan had become a Christian and had the cross displayed upon his banners. I will quote from Marco Polo: "After the Great Khan had conquered Nayan it came to pass that the different kinds of people who were present, Saracens and Idolaters and Jews, and many others that believed not in God, did give those that were Christians because of the cross that Nayan had borne on his standard. Thus they would say to the Christians, "See now what precious help this God's cross of yours hath rendered Nayan who was a Christian and a worshipper thereof," and such a din arose about

the matter that it reached the Great Khan's own ears, when it did so, he sharply rebuked those who cast these jibes at the Christians, and he also bade the Christians be of good heart 'for if the Cross had rendered no help to Nayan, in that it had done right well—for Nayan was a disloyal and traitorous rebel against his Lord—wherefore the Cross of Your Lord did well in that it gave him no help against the right.' Most of the Mohammedans, Jews and Christians who were in North China in Marco Polo's time appear to have entered China by the Northern land route. The Kaifeng Jews coming from India must have come by the southern sea route.

The first knowledge of the existence of the Honan Colony reached Europe through the Jesuit missionaries who were at the Court in the early days of the late dynasty. A young Jew from Kaifeng called upon Father Ricci at Peking, whereupon Jesuit missionaries went to Kaifeng to investigate. Through them the European Jews first heard of their co-religionists in Honan. Letters in Hebrew were exchanged between London and Kaifeng. At the time when these Jews were first introduced to the Western world by the Jesuit missionaries they were on the down-grade as regards worldly prosperity, and since that time their poverty has increased year by year until now the colony is actually extinct. In 1850 Bishop Smith of Hongkong interested himself in them and, since then both Protestant missionaries and Jewish merchants have visited Kaifeng in an attempt to arouse them without success. Before the last attempts by Protestant missionaries to help them, the Taiping Rebellion had already completed their ruin. In the 16th century, the Synagogue was described as a building 300 feet in length and 150 in breadth, but in 1870 it was only a heap of ruins and as I have said, two years ago there was not even a broken brick to represent the old building. They seem to have always been regarded by the Chinese of Kaifeng as a sect of Mohammedans. They called them the T'iao Chin Hui-hui (挑筋同同) or Sinew Picking Mohammedans. "You will remember that in Genesis Jacob is said to have wrestled with the Angel of the Lord all night and the Angel touched the hollow of his thigh. Therefore the Children of Israel eat not of the sinew which shrank. . . . because he touched the hollow of Jacob's thigh in the sinew that shrank. "The author of the article on the Jewish Colony at Kaifeng in the Jewish Encyclopaedia argues from this name great antiquity, because he thinks that the practice of Rabbinical Judaism would have suggested to the Chinese more distinctive peculiarities of the Jews than this of
picking out the sinew. I do not think much of the argument. It presupposes that on their
arrival in Kaifeng these Jews were punctilious in the observance of all the rites of Rabbinical
Judaism. This is extremely unlikely in view of traders and also that their forebears had lived
for a long period in India before they migrated to China.

There appears to be two great lessons to be learned from the history of the Jewish Colony at
Kaifeng.

The first is that the Jew as a trader has met his match in China. Instead of enriching themselves
at the expense of their Chinese neighbors, the Kaifeng Jews have themselves been sucked dry in
the competition of trade. Year by year they have sunk lower in poverty until they have at last
given up the struggle.

The second lesson which we may learn from the experience of the Kaifeng Jews is the
extraordinary absorptive or assimilating force of Chinese society. The enormous mass of the
Chinese makes a human ocean in which the rivulets from outside soon lose their identity.
Christianity established itself here not later than the 8th and again in the Yuan Dynasty in the
13th Century, but the Church has been smothered. The Jews have established themselves, but
little by little, the tenets and ceremonies of their religion have been modified and adapted to
the hereditary beliefs and superstitions of the surrounding Chinese population, until the Jewish
religion has disappeared like the small stream in the ocean.

The Mohammedans so far have kept their identity because they have settled among the
Chinese in such prodigious numbers. Wherever they constitute a minority of the people you
may clearly see the disintegrating forces at work. Modern Catholic and Protestant Missions
retain their individuality because of the unfailing supply of Western leaders that continues to
pour into China. What would happen if these leaders were to be withdrawn we cannot but
wonder in view of the fate of the Middle Age Christian Communities and of the Jewish Colony
of Kaifeng.

(The above address was delivered by Dr. Tenney at the Medical Conference held at Peking last
week. It is exclusively published in the Review.)