

# Christianity in the 7<sup>th</sup> Century

Historical Theology

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## REVIEW: A CENTURIES OLD DEBATE

The greatest theological issues of the Early Church had to do with the nature of Christ. In the 4<sup>th</sup> century, church fathers dealt with the important issue of the deity of Christ. There was much drama and much wrangling, much studying and in the end, certain people, (the Arians) were condemned as heretics. At the Council of Nicaea (325AD), Jesus was recognized as fully divine.

It was necessary in the succeeding years to tighten up the doctrine, to define terms, to set parameters for orthodoxy. And through the years, some bishops and pastors needed to be corrected, but in the end, we gained a solid understanding and expression of the Nature of Christ. Is He two natures or one? If two, how is that possible? Is He 50% God and 50% human? Is He more one than the other? Should we emphasize Christ's unity or His duality?

As the debate continued, the points became finer and finer, the drama should have lessened, and the consequences for disagreement should have been reduced as well. Unfortunately, because it had been such a major issue and because fortunes were made and lost depending on your side of the argument, the discussion continued and became politicized. If you ever wanted to invite high drama, mention something about the nature of Christ.

You may remember Cyril of Alexandria, a pugnacious man who jumped at the opportunity to put Nestorius, the Bishop of Constantinople in his place. So at the Councils of Ephesus (431AD) and Chalcedon (451AD) it was established that Christ

was fully God and fully man. Unfortunately, Nestorius was condemned as a heretic, probably not even believing the things he was accused of believing.

It would be nice to think that the controversy was over, but the key issue of the 7<sup>th</sup> Century, was again, the nature of Christ.

The Third Council of Constantinople convened in 680AD to discuss whether Christ had two will and two "energies."

? What are some other doctrines that became accepted while church leaders argued the fine points of Christ's nature?

? What else was happening in the world?

## I. THE ADVANCE OF ISLAM

### A. THE LOSSES OF BYZANTIUM

While Europe continued as it had for centuries, Islam was advancing. Steadily, Muslim forces were conquering territory from the Byzantines. They weren't the only encroachers as the Byzantines had already lost Jerusalem along with Syria and most of the Eastern territory to the Persians.

In 614AD, the Persians attacked Jerusalem and executed 90,000 Christians, stealing relics and burning churches, including the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. Emperor Heraclius mustered an army that pushed the Persians back and he regained Jerusalem in 628AD along with the "true cross"

supposedly the cross upon which Jesus had been crucified.

Heraclius fortified Jerusalem and sought to check the Muslim advance and regain territories lost to them as well. Meanwhile, the Muslims were advancing. The two forces met at the Battle of Yarmouk.

## B. THE BATTLE OF YARMOUK

The Byzantine forces were an estimated 100,000 soldiers consisting of Cavalry, Infantry and Archers. The Muslim forces consisted of no more than 40,000 swordsmen. The Muslim strategy was to kill as many commanders as possible while the Byzantines sought to use their superior numbers to break the weak points in the enemy line. While the Muslims did succeed at killing several officers, the Byzantines lacked zeal and could not break through.

For 6 days they battled. On day 2, the Muslims retreated before the superior numbers, but they were met by Arab women who ran at them with tent poles and shamed them back to the battlefield. By the end of the day, the Byzantines were demoralized. By the end of the battle, the Muslims had succeeded in defeating the Byzantines which led to the capture of Damascus and eventually, Jerusalem.

Heraclius was at Antioch. When he heard the news of the defeat he saw it as an act of God, punishment for marrying his niece. He set sail for Constantinople, bidding Syria farewell:

Farewell, a long farewell to Syria, my fair province. Thou art an infidel's (enemy's) now. Peace be with you, O Syria—what a beautiful land you will be for the enemy's hands.

He abandoned the East, including Armenia, but was able to hold Anatolia (modern Turkey).

## II. CHRISTIANITY IN ENGLAND

Christianity had been in England since the arrival of Roman soldiers in the late 100sAD. Britain had produced theologians, including the heretic, Pelagius. Britain had seen the rise of Patrick who grew up in a Christian home and from there was able to take Christianity to Ireland.

With the invasion of Barbarians threatening Rome, Rome eventually abandoned Britain. While pockets of Christians remained to the north, pagans infiltrated the south. These northern Christians were not connected to Rome, but were sustained by a connection to Ireland.

Gregory the Great sent a mission to convert the pagans of England in 595AD. Central to this mission was a young man named Augustine.

## III. CHRISTIANITY IN GERMANY

Many of the invading barbarians had adopted Christianity in some form, usually Arian Christianity. The closer they got to Rome, the more Christianized they became, but there were still pagans in the north of Europe and the Frankish church was in need for reform.

For this task, Boniface was sent as a missionary to the Franks and Germans.

## IV. CHRISTIANITY IN CHINA

### A. THE NESTORIANS OF PERSIA

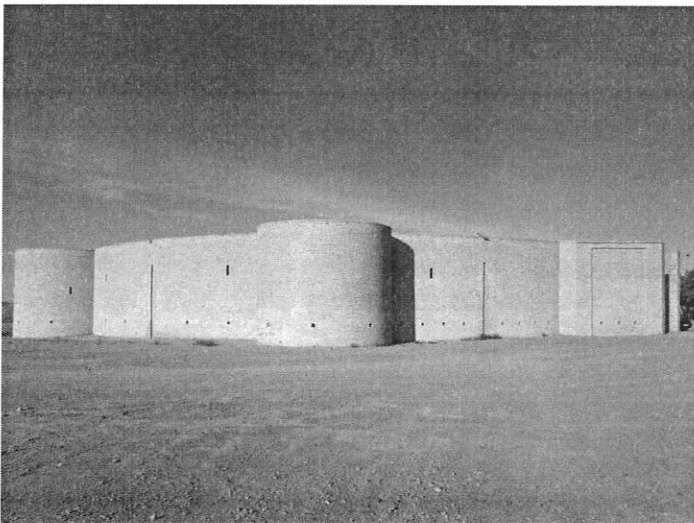
You may recall that when Nestorius was condemned as a heretic, his followers were pushed east into Syria and the Sassanid (Persian) Empire. Settling there, they built churches and continued to practice Christianity.

## B. THE SILK ROAD

The Silk Road was a trade route between China and the West from 200BC to 1453AD. Normally, a volatile region, The Han Dynasty brought political stability making trade safe to territories west.

? Why was it called the "Silk Road?"

Trade ebbed and flowed with the rise and fall of governments. During the Mongolian Empire (1206-1368), trade flourished. In 1453AD, the Ottoman Empire cut off trade between East and West and the route abruptly ended. Just as Christian Roman



soldiers took the Gospel to Britain, Christian Traders took the Gospel to China.

"In 781, an inscribed stele shows Nestorian Christian missionaries arriving on the Silk Road. Christianity had spread both east and west, simultaneously bringing Syriac language and evolving the forms of worship." (*The Silk Road*, Wikipedia, 2022)

## C. THE CHURCH IN CHANG'AN

The Christian writer Arnobius who lived in the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> centuries claimed that Christianity had reached the land of Seres (a Roman name for China). However, there is no evidence to support that proposition at this time.



From what we know, Christianity spread to China during the 7<sup>th</sup> century. "Two monks were preaching Christianity in India in the 6<sup>th</sup> century before they smuggled silkworm eggs from China to the Byzantine Empire.

The first documentation of Christianity entering China was written on an 8<sup>th</sup>-century stone tablet known as the Nestorian Stele. It records that Christians reached the Tang dynasty capital Xi'an in 635." (*Christianity in China*, Wikipedia)

Alopen was the leader of the Christian traders who established a church in Cang'an (now Xi'an). They were given permission to both build the church and establish worship by the Emperor Taizong. He invited Christians to translate their books and add them to his imperial library. Christianity thrived in China for 200 years.

