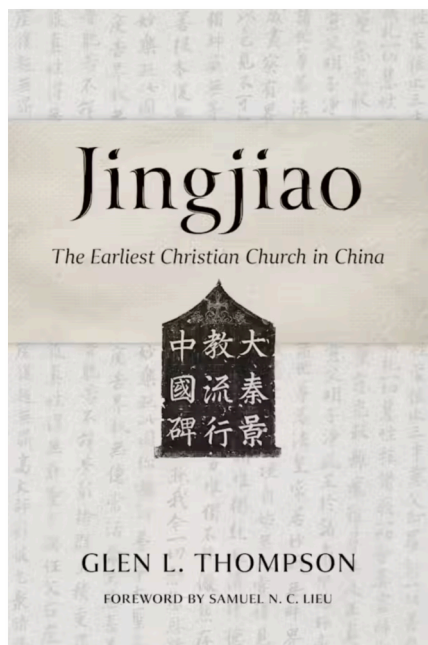


REVIEW: *Jingjiao: The Earliest Christian Church in China* By Glen L. Thompson

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In this work, Glen Thompson aims to capture the history of the Church of the East (Jingjiao or the “luminous religion of Syria”) in China. Thompson, a New Testament and Patristics scholar and retired professor from Wisconsin Lutheran College and Asian Lutheran Seminary (Honk Kong), has also written *The Correspondence of Pope Julius I* (2015) and *In This Way We Came to Rome* (2024). In *Jingjiao*, Thompson explores Syriac and Chinese texts (both written and archaeological) to make sense of this phenomenal church movement that endured under Chinese, Mongol, and Muslim rule from the seventh to fourteenth centuries.

Following a brief introduction, in chapter 1, Thompson lays out the Church of the East’s history from the second to sixth centuries, focusing on its developments in Syria and Persia and its initial expansion through Central Asia. In chapter 2, the author thoroughly discusses the famous Stele from Chang’an—a stone monument discovered near X’ian in 1623 that told the story of the early Church of the East mission to China. In chapter 3, Thompson narrates the initial mission work of Alopen (AD 635) and the growth of the Jingjiao in the seventh and eighth centuries. In chapter 4, he surveys new evidence discovered in the nineteenth century—additional stone monuments and Jingjiao documents. In the next chapter, Thompson builds on this evidence and strives to make sense of Jingjiao theology and beliefs. In chapter 6, he narrates the development of the church, particularly its leadership structures, under the Tang dynasty. In chapter 7, Thompson discusses the continued journey of the Chinese church under various Chinese dynasties as well as Mongol and Muslim rule through the fourteenth century. In a brief epilogue, Thompson discusses the significance of reflecting on Chinese Christianity before the

periods of European colonialism, the Protestant Reformation in Europe, or the modern Catholic and Protestant missionary efforts in China. Finally, the work includes helpful appendices with maps, images, and charts clarifying Jingjiao texts.

Thompson has done a great job presenting a fresh overview of pre-modern, Chinese Christianity. With few people in the world qualified to engage both Syriac and Chinese texts to tell the Church of the East and Jingjiao story, Thompson has carefully worked through the evidence to do just that. Building on the textual evidence, Thompson nicely describes the main themes of Jingjiao teaching and theology. While the theological vocabulary and images are quite contextual to the Chinese Confucian, Daoist, and Buddhist setting, Thompson shows that Jingjiao theology coheres with the rule of faith—the summary of the gospel captured in the historic creeds. Chinese Christianity is both Chinese and Christian.

While I largely appreciated the book, I have just a couple of critiques. First, perhaps due to the nature of the book (history, evidence, theological reflection), there is a good bit of repetition that could probably have been edited back some. Second, when discussing Alopen's journey to China, Thompson seems to indicate that Alopen was not sent as a missionary but rather as a requested bishop for an already existing Christian community resident in China (pp. 55-57). This is an interesting theory consistent with how bishops were appointed in the early church; however, Thompson fails to provide compelling evidence that this was the case. And his assertion seems to contradict the narrative that Alopen's was a missionary journey to proclaim Christ to the Chinese.

In sum, I find this new book to be a great contribution to historic contextual Christianity—a reminder that Christianity has always been a global faith. Professors and students of global Christianity, church history, and mission history (especially those hailing from Asia) will benefit from this study.

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