

Book Review

Steve Cochrane, *Many Monks across the Sea: Church of the East Monastic Mission in Ninth Century Asia*

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Steve Cochrane, *Many Monks across the Sea: Church of the East Monastic Mission in Ninth Century Asia*. Regnum Studies in Mission Series, ed., Paul Woods. Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 2017. xx, 235, ISBN: 9781532644436, \$30.

It's not often that a meticulous academic treatise feels like a breath of fresh air. This important book by Steve Cochrane qualifies. By wading through Cochrane's careful treatment of people, institutions, and movements in parts of western Asia over a millennium ago, one gains a fuller understanding of certain aspects of God's worldwide mission that otherwise are unavailable to English readers. There are plenty of colorful figures to want to know better as well.

Many Monks across the Sea stands in a yawning gap in mission historical awareness among Evangelicals. Perhaps the most common evangelical historical timeline of missions goes back two centuries to William Carey. If pressed, some might include early missionaries to Europe that ministered a few centuries after the acknowledged missionary par excellence, the Apostle Paul. However, even though Samuel Moffett, Philip Jenkins, and other recent scholars have highlighted the many centuries of growth and missions activities of the "Church of the East," that large and eventful swath of mission history ordinarily never escapes the black hole of Evangelicals' blunted historical sensibilities.

The basic challenge that Cochrane's significant study has to overcome for its English-reading audience is the constricted historical framework of Evangelicals' understanding of Christian history, as well as of missions history. The limitation lays in the notion that ancient world history goes back to the Greeks and Romans, and that Christian history thus took shape within the Roman Empire. "Eastern Christianity" only comes into the picture as "Greek" versus Western "Latin" Christianity – from which the Protestant Reformation was set free 500 years ago. Finally, Carey in the 1790s, followed by a few other Anglo stalwarts, caught fire for missions, thus finally launching the Christian gospel throughout the rest of the world.

A fuller appreciation of the Lord of Hosts' passionate use of weak but determined human vessels to bring the good news of Jesus to all the world's peoples sees that God has always been concerned with his entire world, including all sectors of ancient world history – not just the Greeks, Romans, and their imperial activities. As Luke notes in Acts 2:9-11 about those present for Pentecost, the Christian gospel spread in all directions from the very beginning. So did the Church – not just within the boundaries of the Roman Empire. The eastward spread and

maturation of the Christian Church forms the backdrop against which Cochrane's study of the Church of the East's monastic mission is set.

The book moves carefully through key figures and institutions, e.g., the Beit Abhe monastery, up into the ninth-century, all the while citing both primary sources and prior scholarly research about them. The 45-page bibliography, beginning with the five-and-a-half pages of primary sources, demonstrates the thoroughness of this published PhD dissertation. Cochrane carefully traces the monastic training that monks received, including notions of Christian mission instilled in worship and spirituality. How Muslims viewed East Syrian missionaries during the ninth century offers a helpful component to the overall study.

The addition to heretofore scholarly research is Cochrane's conclusion from primary sources "that mission activity was occurring not only to the East but within Mesopotamia to Muslims as well." Cochrane emphasizes how this mission outreach was sustained while the Church was a *dhimmi* community, as well as the key role of Patriarch Timothy in training monks for mission (174). Cochrane also notes several key "pieces to the puzzle" of the Church of the East's mission during the ninth century: "the continuity of monastic mission back to earlier generations, including pre-Islamic times in Arabia," light shed by primary Christian sources, light shed by contemporary Islamic sources, and "the Church's extension to the East in the same period" (174-177). In these ways, Cochrane's study significantly extends what previous scholarly efforts have emphasized.

The book lacks visual aids; maps or other illustrations would help the reader track more closely and clearly. For most English readers, the plethora of unfamiliar names adds to the challenge of keeping track of the ongoing story. Cochrane's ongoing summaries and reviews help. Readers need to focus on both the individual trees and the overall forest to appreciate the vitally important story that this study reports.

The main upshot for readers is to help them personally appreciate more deeply and broadly the passion of God for his entire world. That expanded appreciation should pay dividends in readers' students and others that will benefit. The history of Christian mission reaches the entirety, not just the Greco-Roman/European slice, of the world for which God cares deeply. *Many Monks across the Sea: Church of the East Monastic Mission in Ninth Century Asia* is a welcome effort toward appreciating the full scope of the Lord of Hosts' cosmic passion.