

2023

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Recommended Citation

Glaser, Mitch (2023) "The Jewish Bishop and the Chinese Bible," *Journal of Messianic Jewish Studies*: Vol. 4, Article 8.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.biola.edu/jmjs/vol4/iss1/8>

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The Jewish Bishop and the Chinese Bible

Mitch Glaser

Editor's Note: The reader will notice this article was originally written as a book review of the 1999 historical work by Dr. Irene Eber, *The Jewish Bishop and the Chinese Bible: S.I.J. Schereschewsky (1831–1906)*, which was in *Studies in Christian Mission*, Brill: Leiden, 1999. However, the length and content of the review merited inclusion with the the other journal articles related to Christians and the Hebrew Scriptures.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY AND INTRODUCTION

Dr. Matt Friedman, professor of Intercultural Studies at Kingswood University, began his chapter in a book celebrating the hundredth anniversary of the 1910 World Missionary Conference held in Edinburgh, Scotland by summarizing the ways God used Jewish believers in Jesus to touch the world. Dr.



Friedman offers the following summary by Rev. William Ewing who writes in 1910,

A youth named Lederer was converted in Budapest. Glowing with fresh enthusiasm, he went to New York. There he met a young, able, and accomplished student, Schereschewsky by name, and led him to Christ. Schereschewsky went to China, acquired the language, and translated for the first time the Old Testament into Chinese, direct from the original Hebrew, of which he was absolute master. His translation is the standard Chinese version to-day – the instrument used by every missionary in the land. By the blessing of God, the conversion of a Jewish youth in Budapest was the means of giving the Bible to the vast Empire of China. This one fact surely sheds a vivid light upon that word of the great Jewish Christian missionary “If the casting away of them be the reconciling of the world, what shall the receiving of them be but life from the dead?”¹

Friedman’s mention of Schereschewsky provides the fundamental reason why so many who are concerned with both Jewish missions and world missions pay careful attention to the life and work of one who is affectionately called “the Jewish Bishop.”

I would augment Dr. Friedman’s summary of the life of Bishop Samuel Isaac Joseph Schereschewsky (1831–1906), who translated the Hebrew Old Testament into vernacular Mandarin, by noting he was the Anglican Bishop of Shanghai, China, from 1877 to 1884 and the founder of St. John’s University (1879), a well-known Academic institution in China.

He was baptized by immersion in 1855 and joined a Baptist congregation, but he soon became a Presbyterian and went to Western Theological Seminary (now Pittsburgh

1 Qtd. in Matt Friedman, “Back to the Future: Nineteenth Century Foundations for Messianic Judaism” in *Witnessing to Christ in a Pluralistic World: Christian Mission among Other Faiths*, edited by Lalsangkima Pachuau and Knud Jørgensen (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2011), 204.

Theological Seminary), a Presbyterian Church-sponsored seminary.

Two years later he again changed denominations and became Episcopalian, entering General Theological Seminary in New York City. He did not complete his degree as he volunteered for mission work in China. On May 3, 1859, he was appointed as a missionary to China and ordained as a deacon on July 17, 1859 at the Episcopal Calvary St. George's church in Manhattan, New York City. He sailed to China from New York on July 14, 1859. During the journey, which took almost six months, he received instruction in Chinese. Along with another missionary, he was ordained to the priesthood by Bishop Boone on October 28, 1860.

He translated Old Testament into Mandarin, which was published in December 1874. Schereschewsky was ordained the Bishop of China in 1878. On April 21, 1868, he married Susan Mary Waring (1837–1909). One observer commented, “No one save the Bishop himself knows how much the successful completion of his work is due to the devoted self-sacrifice of Mrs. Schereschewsky.”²

The American Bible Society published his revised Mandarin Old Testament in 1899, and the entire “easy Wenli” Bible was published in 1902. The demand overwhelmed the publisher. Schereschewsky also participated in the committee to translate the New Testament, which was published in 1872.³

Missionary historian Marshall Broomhall wrote: “The success of this version was more immediate, more widespread, and more permanent than the most sanguine of the translators had hoped. It marked an epoch in the history of the Bible in China.”⁴

In the same year, the *Book of Common Prayer* appeared. John

2 James Arthur Muller, *Apostle of China, Samuel Isaac Joseph Schereschewsky, 1831-1906* (New York: Morehouse Pub. Co., 1937), 236–237.

3 Muller, 65.

4 Muller, 88.



Burdon, the Anglican bishop of Hong Kong, partnered with the bishop in this effort. The two also translated several hymns.

Schereschewsky's major ministry focus and greatest achievement, however, was the painstaking translation of the Old Testament into Mandarin, which was published in December 1874. The American Bible Society not only supported this project but paid the salaries of Schereschewsky and one of his Chinese assistants.

His remarkable linguistic proficiency included the ability to speak thirteen languages and read twenty. Despite his almost total paralysis later in life and confinement to a chair all day long, he labored at his task for an average of nine hours a day for the rest of his life.⁵

A fellow bishop remarked, after visiting Schereschewsky in his study, that he was "much superior to myself and all his surroundings. . . . He struck me as a man not only of great scholarship but of exceptional refinement of temper and nobility of spirit"⁶ Commenting on Schereschewsky's monumental achievement, the eminent Presbyterian missionary W.A.P. Martin wrote, "Such an example of heroic perseverance, combined with such abilities and such antecedent preparation for his work, is rarely met."⁷

After his best assistant left to rejoin his family in China, however, Schereschewsky found it very difficult to get along with the man who replaced him. "What with scribal irritation and delays in printing and printer's errors, which were legion, the Bishop found it 'rather uphill work.'"⁸

5 "Samuel Schereschewsky," *Biographical Dictionary of Chinese Christianity*, accessed January 20, 2023, <http://bdconline.net/en/stories/samuel-isaac-joseph-schereschewsky>.

6 Muller, 215.

7 Muller, 220.

8 Muller, 234.

Work at it he did, nevertheless, for eight hours a day, six days a week.

The Bible Society published the new Mandarin version, including his revised Mandarin Old Testament, in 1899. The entire Easy Wenli Bible was published in 1902. The demand for it overwhelmed the publisher. One observer commented, “No one save the Bishop himself knows how much the successful completion of his work is due to the devoted self-sacrifice of Mrs. Schereschewsky.”⁹

He died in 1902 and his wife, Mary Schereschewsky, died on August 20, 1909. She had been nearly blind since before her husband died. All agreed it would have been impossible for Schereschewsky to have done his work without her constant and comprehensive support and help. She was buried in Tokyo beside her husband. One cross mark their graves.

ABOUT IRENE EBER (1929-2019)

The author of this biography of the Jewish Bishop was written by Israeli scholar, Irene Eber. Dr. Eber was a Holocaust survivor and China scholar who was the first to hold the Louis Frieberg chair of Asian Studies at Hebrew University. She received her PhD in 1966 from the Claremont Graduate University in California in Chinese Intellectual History.

In his moving eulogy of Dr. Eber, the former Chairman of the Department of East Asian Studies at the Hebrew University, Dr. Yitzhalk Shichor writes,

She was born in Halle (Germany). Irene’s family was expelled to Mielec in Poland in 1938, when she was nine. She managed to survive, spending the war years hiding in a

9 Müller, 236–237.



chicken coop, in misery and deprivation, a story which she told in her autobiographical book *The Choice: Poland, 1939-1945* (New York: Schocken, 2004), and after the war left as a refugee to the United States. In the United States she could have studied anything but chose Chinese intellectual history. Unknowingly, this was her first step on her way to Israel.

He continues,

The story of the late Professor Irene Eber, who passed away on April 10, 2019, is a typical Jewish story and I want to tell her story from my own perspective. Few people are aware of the story. In 1987 I ended my term as chairman of the Department of East Asian Studies at Hebrew University. Prof. Eber was selected to replace me. Although her academic work began with China's intellectual history, and more specifically with one of modern China's leading reformers, much of her later efforts were concentrated on the links between Judaism and the Jews with China. Her latest book *Jewish Refugees in Shanghai in 1933 through 1947* was published months ago on March 13, 2019. She left a legacy of studies on China, its intellectual history, Confucianism, Jewish communities in China and the history of Judaism in China.¹⁰

From the perspective of Messianic Jewish history, Eber, perhaps because she was a secular Jewish scholar, did not focus on or fully comprehend the spiritual commitments of Bishop Schereschewsky. She described what I would characterize as his spiritual choices and concomitant actions in institutional terms such as his relationship to the Episcopal Church, becoming a bishop, and the details of interchurch politics both in the United States and on the mission field of China. Eber focused on Schereschewsky's work of translation methodology, and to some

10 Eber was a member of the Middle East Institute and participated regularly with their programs (Yitzhak Shichor, "Professor Irene Eber, 1929-2019," Middle East Institute New Delhi, April 12, 2019, <http://www.mei.org.in/mei-remembers-18>). Also see: Holly Mengel, "Irene Eber's 'Choice' to Tell Her Story," Unique at Penn, September 16, 2021, <https://uniqueatpenn.wordpress.com/2021/09/16/irene-ebers-choice-to-tell-her-story/>.

degree his personal history and accomplishments. Yet she says very little about the spiritual dynamic that led to his dedication to Jesus the Messiah and the personal spirituality that motivated him to do the work he was best known for within China. To learn more about his “conversion” and spiritual pilgrimage, one must review other sources and biographical material beyond the pale of Eber’s understanding and interests.

FOCUS OF THE ARTICLE

This article will focus on Schereschewsky’s faith in Jesus the Messiah as a Jewish man and as a well-trained student of the Bible and Hebrew language. We will explore the ways Dr. Irene Eber, the author of the biography, understood the bishop’s faith and what this meant to him in various areas of his life. We believe his faith in Jesus the Messiah was at the core of his motivation for the embracing lifelong work of translating the Hebrew Bible into Chinese and doing so with great sacrifice of soul. Eber places greater focus on the socio-historical dimensions of Schereschewsky’s life, yet we suggest that if this inner spiritual drive is not fully understood, it is impossible to fully understand the accomplishments of the bishop. We will attempt to add this dimension and perspective to Eber’s most able effort.

THE EARLY YEARS

The bishop was born Samuel Isaac Joseph Schereschewsky in May 1831 to an Orthodox Jewish family in the town of Touragè, a *shtetel*¹¹ in southwestern Lithuania.

11 One of a series of small Jewish villages dotting the landscape of the Pale of Settlement, which included areas of Russian Lithuania, where the bishop was



The family was well-off and lived in a college town where a third of the total population of 6,655 was Jewish. His father spent many months away from home cutting down trees and bringing them to the sawmills in the areas primarily owned by Jewish families. Touragè was built on a road with commercial and religious connections to many other cities, and the culture was influenced by the Jewish communities in the west and east.

The Schereschewsky family was well-known in Jewish Lithuania and was Ashkenazi, though his mother was part Sephardic. He was named Samuel Joseph after his father, which was a Sephardic tradition. He learned the basics of Jewish life and religion, attending cheder (weekly Hebrew school). At first, he did not attend a yeshiva (boys' private religious school) as his parents felt it was too expensive.

However, as time went by, Schereschewsky faced the possibility of long-term conscription into the Russian army. Since attending yeshiva was one way to avoid that possibility, his family decided to send their son to the well-known yeshiva in Zhitomir, a town in what is now Ukraine. He left home to study in 1847 at sixteen years of age.

The yeshiva in Zhitomir was well-known and yet for a time was viewed as “modern” as it was heavily influenced by the Haskalah, the Jewish Enlightenment. He studied more secular topics during this unique moment in the yeshiva's history. Schereschewsky enjoyed his time and completed a four-year general degree after which he was able to specialize in rabbinic studies or teacher training.¹²

According to Eber, “it furthermore exposed young Jewish boys, most of them probably for the first time, to non-Jews who are neither peasants nor servants.” Some of the teachers at this

born.

¹² Eber, *The Jewish Bishop and the Chinese Bible*, 26.

yeshiva were leading men of what was known as the Russian Haskalah and wrote books and articles on topics related to society and religion in both Yiddish and Hebrew.¹³

Schereschewsky and the other students were allowed to wear European dress and not required to wear a yarmulke. The Bible was taught in German—most likely Mendelssohn’s (1729–1786) translation. “Bible and language study were separated, thereby allowing teachers to instruct their charges in the systematic study of the Hebrew language.”¹⁴

Eber suggests this early experience caused the young Schereschewsky, who was reading a translated Bible, to become aware of the importance of a well-prepared translation. This yeshiva and others like it grew increasingly unpopular with the local and traditional orthodox community and closed in 1885. According to Eber, “these new *republic schools* were said to support apostasy and to be steppingstones to conversion. . . . Such fears were not exaggerated for even if they did not actively support apostasy, it was certainly a means towards secularization.”¹⁵

According to Eber it was quite possible that the teachers at this Yeshiva studied other German philosophers and that Schereschewsky was introduced to these writers and secular thinkers.

She adds a startling statement that gives a window into the role of Jewish missions in Lithuania at this time, “the London Society for Promoting Christianity among the Jews, moreover, was circulating large numbers of Yiddish and Hebrew Old and New Testaments, and the latter especially aroused the curiosity of young inquiring minds.”¹⁶

13 Ibid, 26–27.

14 Ibid, 27.

15 Ibid, 29.

16 Ibid, 30.



BECOMING A BELIEVER
IN JESUS THE MESSIAH

Eber claims that not only did this Haskalah-influenced study program open the mind of Schereschewsky and influence his scholarship, but it also impacted his soul. She was certain the London Society¹⁷ New Testaments, in whole or in part, found their way into the school. However, as much as I personally appreciate hearing about the efforts of the Jewish missions, Eber did not substantiate her claim with any noted research though these resources were available at the time Eber wrote the book.

We do not understand why she did not take this extra step to review various LJS annual reports and histories of the LJS available at the Bodleian library at Oxford. This could easily be done, but it seems the available resources were not used or noted.

She simply writes, “whether it [the New Testament] was on one of the teachers’ bookshelves, or whether one of the students brought it to the Yeshiva, it was most certainly clandestinely passed from hand to hand.” She suggested the New Testament both fascinated and repelled young readers. She adds, “Interest in this text, so very different from anything that they ever read, probably ranged from intense rejection to mild curiosity.”¹⁸

Yet, once again, she shows no actual historical documentation Schereschewsky found or read the New Testament in the yeshiva, though there is no evidence to believe she is mistaken or overstating. She writes “there is little doubt Schereschewsky’s first encounter with Christianity, via the

17 The London Jews Society (LJS) was a Jewish mission sponsored by the Anglican church.

18 Ibid.

New Testament, occurred at the yeshiva.”¹⁹ Years later in 1859, his letter of application to enter a missionary career stated he had been a believer in Jesus for seven years. This would mean he became a Jesus follower in 1852.

It is possible his newfound faith was one of the reasons he decided to withdraw from the yeshiva as Schereschewsky left Zhitomir in 1852 and arrived in Breslau, Germany after an additional year of rabbinic studies in Frankfurt. Eber asks, “was there a chance encounter with a missionary? Or did someone give him a name, an address, and suggest contacting members of the London Society in Germany, where the London Society has been especially active in the past two decades?”²⁰

Once again, this is speculation on Eber’s part as she does not utilize archival material and apparently leans upon more anecdotal information.

According to Eber, upon arrival in Breslau, Germany, Schereschewsky worked as a *glazier*— one who works with glass. In an interesting footnote, Eber quotes David Eichhorn, a Jewish scholar who wrote his dissertation on nineteenth-century Jewish missions and mentions that one of the occupations Hebrew Christians were taught in Germany was to work with glass.²¹

Once again, Eber takes some liberty in positing the ways Schereschewsky may have been influenced by LJS missionaries. She mentions, “for the activities of the London Society and other less well-known and short-lived societies were directed towards Jewish paupers in addition to non-Jewish immigrants in Germany’s port cities.” She adds, “still, the young Schereschewsky, now 19 or 20 years old and about to

19 Ibid.

20 Ibid, 31.

21 Ibid, 32.



embark on a momentous journey into the outside world would have had few misgivings about leaving Eastern Europe.”²²

She suggests he may have studied at the University of Breslau, but there is little evidence to substantiate this idea. She adds that Schereschewsky may have heard of Dr. Henricus Christophilius Neumann (1778–1865) through sympathizers in Zhitomir. Neumann was a lecturer in Hebrew at the University of Breslau and, according to Eber, was a covert “agent” of the LJS. The history of the LJS corroborates the story as Neumann served with the LJS for two decades and taught at the University of Breslau. He was also a Jewish believer in Jesus.

According to Eber, “If these assumptions are correct, Schereschewsky’s arrival in Breslau was far from accidental. Even as early as 1852 he may have accepted the warm fellowship and help offered by the LJS rather than turning to the mainstream Jewish community.”²³

We can see that Eber is framing Schereschewsky’s turning to Christianity as something based upon his need, cultural background, and the possible “duplicitous” attention from members of the LJS towards young impressionable men who were deemed ready to move outside of Orthodoxy. She wrote,

In spite of their small membership and their essentially ephemeral existence, the many Protestant missionary societies were amazingly active, with missionaries and converts or potential converts maintaining personal relationships between Europe and America. The intensely mobile Jewish population, both within and without Germany, provided a fruitful field for missionaries to extend a helping hand to single young men only just emerging from close knit small communities in Eastern Europe. Although the missionary goal was eventual conversion or baptism—an effort that sometimes took years—they also offered advice,

²² Ibid, 33.

²³ Ibid.

shelter and employment. Saving souls often began with saving bodies. In addition, missionary societies provided a new social context for people who were cast adrift and had a need to belong. The missionaries were active in most major East Prussian and Silesian cities, for example, Berlin, Leipzig and Cologne. The number of Protestant baptism in Breslau was especially high.²⁴

Once again Eber fails to quote directly from LJS missionary reports, which were readily available. There is no reason to question her quantification of the LJS' efforts at the time as various resource corroborate the level of their missionary work in Germany at the time.²⁵ She does make some use of W.T. Gidney's history of the LJS as a secondary source quoted by Dr. Louis Meyers, a well-known and respected Messianic Jew and historian of missions to the Jews during this period.

Eber goes into some length regarding the "conversion" of Schereschewsky, suggesting he became a believer in Jesus in Breslau. She shows a bit more understanding of the gospel message the bishop believed:

The message was simple and, while it may have been expressed in different ways, it always contains two central elements: acceptance of Jesus Christ as the savior, and the fulfillment of Messianic prophecy. Belief in Jesus was sometimes described as the direct approach to the "heart of God" through Jesus, the Savior, with no need for human intermediaries. Messianic expectations, the missionaries explained, is a part of Judaism. Even the holy trinity, without

24 Ibid, 33–34. She draws her information from an article penned by Dr. Louis Meyer writing in the *Missionary Review of the World*, vol. 15, 12 [December 1902], 905–906. She also quotes from LJS historian, W.T. Gidney's work on the history of the LJS (Eber, *The Jewish Bishop and the Chinese Bible*, 128–129).

25 W.T. Gidney, *The History of the London Society for Promoting Christianity among the Jews, from 1809 to 1908* (London: London Society for Promoting Christianity among the Jews, 1908).



which the coming of the Messiah cannot be explained, is mentioned in Jewish sources.²⁶

She goes on to say “the Jew was not asked to give up anything” regarding identity:

All Jews were asked to do was to include faith in Jesus Christ in their belief. They did not have to join the church either before or after baptism, they can continue to observe some or all of the Jewish commandments (*mitzvot*) if they so desired. As part of their recompense, Jews would gain entrance into a new congregation of believers in which they would have full status. No longer outsiders, they would belong.”²⁷

Eber thought Schereschewsky and other “converts” to Christianity through the mission agencies were told that they would not lose their Jewish identity but rather it would be strengthened. Far from losing their Jewish identity, the converts’ Jewish identity is reaffirmed. She said that the missionaries taught the Jewish believers that “their role in God’s plan [was] given a special, universal meaning. Proselytizing Jews is thus a holy task, and each Jewish conversion brings the world process one step closer to salvation for all.”²⁸

This accurately reflects what she believed the missionaries were teaching Schereschewsky regarding Romans 11:25–36.

However, Eber does not think Schereschewsky was baptized in Breslau, which in Eber’s mind was synonymous with becoming a believer in Jesus and joining the church. She writes,

More importantly, [those who influenced him in Breslau] also played a role in his intellectual development and his concept of mission, enunciated at a later time. They also contributed toward his self-identification as a Christian who wished to

26 Ibid, 34.

27 Ibid.

28 Ibid, 35.

retain his culture and past experience by integrating them with another faith. His encounter with Judeo-Christian ideas, both in conversations and from reading about them [in various missionary publications] probably left a deep and lasting impression. Many years later, Schereschewsky's name still appeared on the patrons list of several Hebrew Christian Brotherhoods, as these societies were later called in America.²⁹

Eber concludes that Schereschewsky's academic and religious mentor in Breslau was Dr. Neumann, whose academic career began in 1832 and greatly influenced both Jewish students and more learned Jews. She writes,

Still active in the early 1850s, when he was already some seventy years old, he was the sort of grandfather figure young Schereschewsky had never known. A kindly old man, Neumann cared especially for the young men among his students who, having left home, were now embarked on a new and daunting venture. . . . he provided a model for young men like Schereschewsky. Associated with the London Society for over two decades, when young Samuel arrived in Breslau, it is likely that Neumann introduced the newcomer to the ideology of Jewish Christianity. He may have even directed Schereschewsky's academic studies at a crucial time in the young man's life. . . .

Literary texts were used for the teaching of European languages, and unspecified historical texts, portions of the Old Testament and prophetic books for Hebrew. Between 1842 and 1845 . . . Neumann taught a variety of Hebrew grammar courses based on Genesis, the Books of Samuel and Malachi. He also taught the Psalms, Amos and selected historical texts. He seems not to have authored many books.³⁰

She adds, most importantly from our perspective, rational theology and biblical criticism did not flourish at Breslau. The

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid, 36.



faculty for Protestant theology gave Schereschewsky access to the works of men who were well-known and more conservative scholars of the Hebrew Old Testament at the time. Eber states, “in short, Breslau was his first systematic introduction to the New Testament, to Christian theology and to ethics as well as to Greek, English and French.”³¹

Again, Eber was uncertain whether Schereschewsky was officially enrolled at Breslau or if he simply attended lectures and was influenced by Neumann. However, she writes, “the Greek he learned in Breslau was sufficient to allow him to read the New Testament in that language, as was noted later by his American teacher, Professor Samuel H Turner.”³²

Additionally, Eber mentions China was not quite on the consciousness of German theologians and Christians in the West as it was to become thirty years later. But reaching the Chinese with the gospel message was already a growing concern in the early 1850s. There was a well-known lecture in 1850 by Carl Godslope who called for men and women to become missionaries to China. She says it is possible he was influenced by the echoes of this message reverberating through the community of faith in Breslau.³³

In the 1840s and 50s there was increasing interest in missionary work in China as well as the translation of the Bible into Chinese. Eber summarizes the Breslau portion of Schereschewsky’s life as follows:

Schereschewsky must have had access to these articles in Breslau, thereby further stimulating his interest in Bible translation awakened by reading the Mendelssohn Bible [a German version of the Old Testament]. . . .

31 Ibid, 37.

32 Ibid.

33 Ibid, 37.

The problems connected with translating the Bible into Chinese provided a linkage that joined intellectual interest with personal and spiritual needs. Although the connection between Bible, mission and translating would have been only vaguely articulated then, if at all, it partially explains why Schereschewsky took the fateful step of immigrating to America in 1854 and why, after only a little more than a year at the Western Theological seminary, he requested a missionary appointment in 1857.³⁴

NEW YORK CITY
AND THEOLOGICAL STUDIES

Caroline Cheryl Schereschewsky, Joseph's daughter, wrote that her father had come to America because, "democratic ideals appealed to him because Jews did not have to suffer the indignities they did in Europe."³⁵

Eber mentions that Schereschewsky had a letter of introduction to John Neander "a convert and missionary agent" (note Eber's prejudicial language) given to him by John Jacobi, who was a staff member for LJS and immigrated to America in the 1820s. Jacobi was the publisher of a German newspaper in St. Louis and sporadically acted as an agent for the American Society for Ameliorating the Condition of the Jews.³⁶ Eber notes,

Neumann may have arranged this letter, although the missionaries also recruited emigrants waiting at ports of embarkation. One such short-lived missionary group in Bremen was the 'Society of Friends of Israel' in which

34 Ibid.

35 Ibid, 40.

36 Ibid, 41.



Neander was active before his departure for America in 1845 and with whom Jacobi had worked.³⁷

She writes about Schereschewsky possibly joining a group, “not so much out of solidarity with the Jewish community as for companionship and practical support in managing the crossing.”³⁸

Eber obviously held a traditional mainstream Jewish view of Jewish believers in Jesus and did not recognize the depth of faith and connection with other Jewish believers and Jesus as the real reason why Schereschewsky identified with other Messianic Jews in America at that time. She viewed this move in sociological rather than spiritual terms and believed Schereschewsky was acting out of need and not necessarily out of conviction.

Eber mentions that Schereschewsky would have landed in New York City in March or August 1854. Immediately, according to Eber, his letter of introduction proved effective. “Instead of turning for help to any of the existing German or Jewish networks, he was aided by the American Society and its German Jewish converts.”³⁹ Eber writes,

During the year and a half that he remained in New York, Schereschewsky lived, worked and walked in these parts of Manhattan [the poor areas]. Here, and venturing into the newer business districts west, he plied his trade as glazier, needing only his diamond for cutting and a frame box with glass. . . .

The Jewish population within the immigrant communities grew by leaps and bounds. Between 1825 and 1865, the 10,000 strong community increased to 150,000. The Jewish community of New York lost its monolithic character as the initial Sephardi community of Portuguese and Spanish Jews

37 Ibid.

38 Ibid.

39 Ibid, 43. The American society refers to the American Association for the Amelioration of the Condition of the Jews, which was established by Joseph Fry, the founder of the LJS in the UK.

was soon outnumbered by the German Jews and a sprinkling of Polish, Russian and other Eastern European Jewish co-religionists. Although by 1850 they were nine congregations with synagogues on the lower East Side, congregational life among the German-Jewish immigrants developed slowly.⁴⁰

According to Eber, who viewed religious fervor primarily in sociological terms of changes and circumstances, the reactions of this group to their new life in a new land were often mixed. They resisted change yet were also quick to abandon their old ways and tended to rapidly assimilate. “Among these uprooted men and women, Protestant missionaries—themselves mostly immigrant converts—sought candidates for conversion.”⁴¹

According to Eber, the Jewish missions were active for more than two decades and mostly interdenominational in affiliation as their baptized converts were free to join any church though they seemed to maintain close connections with the Presbyterian churches. She writes,

Despite their widespread activities none of their missionary societies had any spectacular success with Jewish immigrants to the New World. Indeed, their energetic proselytizing galvanized community leaders against the missionaries, stirring them to counteract the missionary challenge. To that end, they worked to build stronger community among the immigrants by melding disparate Jewish groups together.⁴²

As mentioned, Eber held academic prejudices towards Jewish believers in Jesus and missions to the Jews. This perspective kept Eber from fully appreciating the life, motivation, and accomplishments of the Jewish bishop.

40 Ibid, 45–46.

41 Ibid.

42 Ibid, 47. Eber draws these conclusions from Jonathan Sarna, “The American Jewish Response to Nineteenth-Century Christian Missions,” *The Journal of American History* 68, no. 1 (June 1981): 49.



According to his daughter, in the spring of 1855, while celebrating the Passover with believers, Schereschewsky finally committed himself to Christ. An observer wrote, “At last he rose, and in a voice stifled with emotion, said, ‘I can no longer deny my Lord. I will follow Him without the camp [a reference to Hebrews 13:13].”⁴³

SEMINARY TRAINING AND CALL TO CHINA

Schereschewsky began his Christian theological training at the Presbyterian Seminary in Pittsburgh. For several reasons, he did not find the training to be valuable and was not a committed Presbyterian. He transferred to General Theological Seminary, an Episcopal seminary New York City. He already had a missionary burden for China and was hoping this move would enable him to receive an appointment as a missionary to China in order to translate the Bible, which he believed was God’s call on his life.

MINISTRY IN CHINA

Schereschewsky arrived in Shanghai on December 21, 1859, was ordained into the Anglican priesthood on October 28, 1860, and served in Beijing from 1862 until 1875 as part of the Beijing Translation Committee. He was the primary translator for the Psalms and eventually the Book of Common Prayer.

He completed the translation of the Hebrew Bible into Mandarin in 1874. In the preface to the translation, he wrote the following, which sums up his life’s chief work:

43 Muller, 32.

This book is the holy scripture. The holy scripture was revealed by God, so that men will know the true way. Should men desire to examine the rules of life and death, heavenly Justice, the distinction between body and soul after death as such man may attain the heavenly kingdom, separating from hell, and giving them a method for saving their souls.⁴⁴

He returned to the United States in 1875 and eventually accepted a call to be the Bishop of Shanghai and was consecrated at Grace Church, in Greenwich Village on October 31, 1877. He returned to Shanghai and founded St. John's College in 1879. He served as Bishop of Shanghai until 1883, when he resigned for health reasons and returned to the United States.

According to one biographer the details of the illness are as follows,

During 1879, Schereschewsky translated the whole Prayer Book into Wen-li, or classic style. Later that year, he went up the river to Wuchang, and began the translation of the Apocrypha. He had only completed one book when he was smitten down during the intense heat of the summer of 1881, and his physicians ordered his removal to Europe. He left for Geneva, Switzerland in 1882 and resigned his Bishopric in 1883 when it became evident that his treatment would be protracted.⁴⁵

Twelve years later he returned to China although, according to Marshall Broomhall, a historian of the Chinese church, he became "paralyzed in every limb, and with his powers of speech partly gone, sitting for nearly twenty-five years in the same chair, slowly and painfully typing out with two fingers his Mandarin

44 "Preface," *The Old Testament in Mandarin* (Peking: American Bible Society, 1875), P1.

45 "Dr. Joseph Schereschewsky," *Messianic Good News*, October 5, 2012, <http://www.messianicgoodnews.org/dr-joseph-schereschewsky/>.



translation of the Old Testament and Easy Wen-li translation of the whole Bible”⁴⁶

He did complete a new translation of the Hebrew Bible into Mandarin and a new translation of the New Testament into Mandarin in 1899.

SCHERESCHEWSKY,
HIS JEWISH IDENTITY
AND TRIP TO KAIFENG

Early in his career, Schereschewsky traveled to the traditional Jewish area within China. Kaifeng was one of the early capitals of China and would today be considered a third-level city in China. I had an opportunity to visit Kaifeng,⁴⁷ meet some of the current Jewish community living in this area and visit a museum dedicated to the history of the Chinese Jews. Schereschewsky was tested by his ministry in Kaifeng. He traveled there expecting to be able to minister to the Chinese Jews, perhaps exploring the more direct missionary side of his responsibilities as a bishop. Or perhaps it was more than this, and he was trying to do something spiritual for his own people?

However, he found very few Chinese Jews living there, and secondly, did not find them to be open to the gospel message. This frustrated the bishop but also reaffirmed his call not to be a direct missionary, but rather a Bible translator as his way of helping the Chinese people.

Schereschewsky was able to accept his spiritual gifts and

46 Marshall Broomhall, ed. *The Chinese Empire: A General and Missionary Survey* (London: Morgan and Scott, 1907), 442.

47 Madison Jackson, “The Jews of Kaifeng: China’s Native Jewish Community,” *My Jewish Learning*, accessed January 26, 2023, <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/the-jews-of-kaifeng-chinas-only-native-jewish-community/>.

nature, recognizing that he had quite a bit to contribute to God's work on earth, but it would not be in the form of direct missionary work. There is no doubt the bishop loved his own Jewish people. It was not a lack of love that kept him from continuing to minister in Kaifeng, but rather his sense of duty and calling, and keen ability to focus on his task of translation.

Eber explores Schereschewsky's Jewish identity in chapter seven of her biography. She notes Schereschewsky attempted to integrate his identity as both a Jew and a Christian.

He never denied his Jewish antecedents. Nor was he allowed to forget them. Lydia Fey in Shanghai [one of his fellow missionaries in China] called him a Polish Russian Jew. . . . A visitor in Cambridge described him as "the most Jewish appearing man." But, aside from Lydia Faye (who gave the word, "Jew" pejorative implications), and especially in the early years of the mission, Schereschewsky was apparently accepted precisely for who he was: a devout Christian of Jewish background.⁴⁸

Eber further explores,

That Schereschewsky never saw himself as anything but a Christian in adulthood is beyond doubt. But even if a Jew cannot reconcile Jesus Christ, the son of God and Messiah, with Judaism—something Schereschewsky clearly knew—he nonetheless succeeded in integrating his Jewish past with his Christian present. Both parts of his life, one so different from the other, became necessary ingredients of who he was.

The decision to convert and accept baptism is revealing. We can safely dismiss the suggestion that Schereschewsky sold out to buy in. . . . In New York, if not earlier, Schereschewsky had found a group of like-minded man, Hebrew Christians, among whom baptism was not a prerequisite for acceptance.

48 Eber, *The Jewish Bishop*, 242.



Nor did abject poverty drive him to baptism. He had friends, and he had a trade, such as it was.⁴⁹

His daughter Carolyn suggested that her father had a life-changing spiritual experience. Carolyn wrote, in Breslau “one day he entered a Cathedral, and a light shown upon the crucifix on the altar, a thrill passed through him.”⁵⁰

Eber claims that Carolyn never refers to this event again. Eber does not seem to recognize any type of spiritual experience of the bishop.

Schereschewsky’s decision to become a baptized Jew had apparently germinated for several years until what was probably a somewhat emotional Passover *seder* at a gathering of his Hebrew Christian friends in April 1855. . . . it was also significant that, when he was in London for the [Global Anglican] Lambeth conference of 1878, he attended services of the London Society, then at Palestine Place [in London], where prayers were read in Hebrew. Was it that he needed to hear the prayers in the familiar language?⁵¹

Eber takes the discussion one step further and reflects her own secular and quasi-religious Jewish perspective,

According to Jewish law (halakha) Schereschewsky was an apostate (mumar). A Jew who accepts Christianity . . . is seen in Jewish eyes as an apostate in the fullest sense. He loses certain legal rights under Jewish law and the rules of mourning are not observed upon his death. Although popularly such a person was regarded as “dead”, halakhic opinion throughout the ages has maintained that an apostate remains a Jew. Indeed, . . . it is technically impossible for a Jew (born to a Jewish mother or properly converted to Judaism) to change his religion. In terms of halakha, the apostate is a sinner, but

49 Ibid, 243.

50 Ibid.

51 Ibid.

he is a Jewish sinner. The basis for this halakhic reasoning is Deuteronomy 29:13–14: God made His covenant with Israel then and for all times; with this and all later generations.

Schereschewsky was surely aware that by converting he did not cease to be a Jew. Thus, when he presumably uttered on that fateful April 1855 eve, “I will follow Him without the camp,” he was not saying “I renounce being a Jew.” His self-perception ... was fortuitously reinforced by missionary colleagues in Peking who charged him with translating the Old Testament. He fully accepted their dictum as his own when he wrote in 1864, “. . . I ought to regard it as my special call in this country until this work is done, and . . . with the assistance of God I . . . shall have contributed a great share toward the missionary cause in China.”⁵²

ILLNESS, PARTIAL RECOVERY, AND COMPLETION OF HIS WORK

It is important to understand the spiritual impetus and drive the bishop had for his translation, particularly the update of his translation of the Hebrew Bible into Chinese. He produced this work through great hardship and sacrifice, as he was suffering from what seems to have been an ALS-like disease of his nervous system that infected him for twenty-five years and seemed to be the result of severe sunstroke.

The summer heat in Shanghai was almost intolerable for him, to the point that Mary wrote in 1879, “We have grave doubts whether, with a constitution impaired by long residence in China, he will be able to stand the Shanghai climate.” He also suffered from frequent diarrhea.⁵³

⁵² Ibid, 243–244.

⁵³ Muller, 142.



The summer of 1881 brought prolonged and intense heat that further sapped his energy. The shack in which he spent hours translating was like an oven. These and other cares occasioned constant worry and anxiety, leading to a visible decrease in energy and health. Finally, overcome by heat exhaustion and a high fever, he suffered from a lesion in his brain that forced the physicians to order him to leave China, lest he not survive. His colleague Dr. Boone said that there was “no indication that he will recover full power of mind or body or be capable of any sustained mental effort.” His career as a missionary seemed to have ended abruptly.⁵⁴

On the advice of their doctors, in March 1882, the Schereschewskys went to Geneva, Switzerland, for treatment. After four years, he was still paralyzed in his legs and arms and could speak only with difficulty. For the rest of his life, he had to be carried up and down stairs and could travel only in a three-wheeled chair pedaled by someone else. His mental powers, which had never suffered damage, were as keen as ever, and he had regained his nervous energy. The disparity between his physical incapacity and his mental and nervous vitality caused him considerable suffering. Still, his wife Mary said,

He accepts everything with his usual lovely patience and tranquility, which is a perpetual support and comfort to me. This has been our Heavenly Father’s special gift to him, and had it been otherwise I hardly know how we could have met and sustained the many trials that have arisen from his illness.⁵⁵

That he held his stylus in his mouth to write the Chinese letters for his Old Testament translation update is corroborated as are many of the other stories about his exemplary life.

⁵⁴ Muller, 175.

⁵⁵ Muller, 185-186.

RETURN
TO CHINA

Finally, after thirteen years, he was given permission to return to China. Almost as soon as the Schereschewskys returned to Shanghai in 1895, he resumed his translation work, assisted by three Chinese, including one woman who knew English.⁵⁶

The 1890 General Missionary Conference decided to sponsor a Union version of the Chinese Bible. He didn't think that a new Mandarin version was needed, and he knew that a Union version would take many years to complete, so he worked on the revision of his Mandarin version and on the Easy Wenli.

The revised Mandarin Old Testament was ready for publication in December 1896. It would be printed in Japan, so The American Bible Society, who sponsored the Bible, recommended that Schereschewsky move to Japan and oversee the printing of the Bible. He and Mary left Shanghai for Japan in December 1897. Both benefitted greatly from the more temperate climate of Tokyo.

The Schereschewskys spent the next ten years in Tokyo where he oversaw the printing of the new Mandarin Old Testament in 1899 and the Wenli Bible in 1902 (Classical Chinese, also known as literary Chinese).

The Jewish bishop died on October 15, 1906, and his wife Mary passed into the presence of the Lord on August 20, 1909.

⁵⁶ Muller, 223-224.



CONCLUSION

Value of the Book for Messianic Jewish History, OT Translation, and Chinese Missions

Dr. Irene Eber's book on the life of Bishop Schereschewsky is extremely valuable in several areas: for Messianic Jewish mission history, missions to China, and of course, translation of the Hebrew Bible into Chinese and other languages. I highly recommend this book as Eber is a careful scholar. I would only add the caveat that she did not share or even understand the faith of the bishop. This is a profound, weak point in her biography. On the other hand, because of her understanding of translation and the Hebrew Bible as literature, her comments on this very significant area of the bishop's work are excellent.

In Hebrews 11–12, the author lists some of the great Jewish faith heroes of the Hebrew Scriptures. These faithful men and women who followed their God with sacrificial service now reside in the presence of God and form a "great cloud of witnesses." They provide an example to us in how to walk by faith, endure hardship by faith and even to die in faith knowing the promises of God will one day gloriously be fulfilled, when we will hear the voice of the Lord Jesus saying, "well done good and faithful servant" (Mathew 25:23).

Bishop Schereschewsky should be included in this list of heroes of the faith. His dedication and faithfulness to the Bible, the Chinese people, and the task of translation echoes through the ages, serving as a modern-day example of selfless and sacrificial service to the Jewish Messiah. At the end of his life, the bishop was plagued by a mysterious neurological disease, which did not allow him to write with his hand or utilize his primitive typewriter. Still, he continued in his task completing

his update of the Mandarin Bible by placing the stylus between his teeth and writing out the Mandarin words he cherished and believed were spoken by the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob through Jewish authors.

Perhaps this is why his life and work became the subject of many different books and chapters within volumes penned by both Christian missiologists and historians of Bible translation and the Messianic Jewish movement over the course of the last century.

Scherschewsky's Mandarin and Easy Wenli Bible were in high demand for more than ten years, until they were superseded by the Union Version of the Chinese Bible in 1919. His Mandarin Old Testament was the basis of that version and a Wenli translation. Since he worked from the Hebrew Masoretic text, that text is the one from which the Union Version Old Testament was translated. Years later, several qualified scholars believed that his Old Testament was superior to the Union Version. Schereschewsky's lasting legacy was his translations of the Bible and example of sacrificial, even heroic, service for the Lord despite enormous obstacles and incapacitating illness.

Contributions to Translation

Eber does an excellent job summarizing some of the basic issues related to the translation of the Old Testament from Hebrew into Chinese, including the issue of the terms used for God and whether a literary or non-literal translation was best. The latter was especially important as the bishop's translation was a single-author translation rather than a committee-led one. Eber does an excellent job summarizing Schereschewsky's contributions to Bible translation in general, especially the Chinese translation of the Hebrew Bible.



For example, the “term question” raged at this time in history—that is, how to translate the name of God into Chinese. The bishop objected to Shang Di, “which, as the name of the chief deity in the Chinese pantheon was . . . no more appropriate for the Christian God than Jupiter or Baal. He had less objection to Shen, but favored Tian Zhu (Ti’en Chu), which had long been used by the Roman Catholics.”⁵⁷

The Anglican church chose to honor the bishop on the Day of Pentecost, and the collect (prayer) for that day is well worth noting:

O God, who in your providence called Joseph Schereschewsky to the ministry of this church and gave him the gifts and the perseverance to translate the Holy Scriptures: Inspire us, by his example and prayers, to commit our talents to your service, confident that you uphold those whom you call; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.⁵⁸



⁵⁷ Muller, 67.

⁵⁸ “The Lessons Appointed for Use on the Feast of Samuel Isaac Joseph Schereschewsky,” Lectionary Page, accessed January 30, 2023, <https://www.lectionarypage.net/LesserFF/Oct/Scheres.html>.

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