

4th September

When thou passest through the waters,

I will be with thee;

and through the rivers,

they shall not overflow thee:

when thou walkest through the fire,

thou shalt not be burned;

neither shall the flame kindle upon thee. Isaiah 43:2

Information about today's memory verse can be found in the lesson for 6th September.

Something to read from Chinese history



September 4th marks the birth of the Wanli Emperor of China, Zhu Yijun, who reigned 1572-1620. In Chinese writing his name looks like this: 朱翊鈞. You can see his portrait on the left. It is housed in **Taiwan's** National Palace Museum at **Taipei** where Chinese national treasures are preserved. They were rescued from the invading Japanese during what became the Second World War and then from the subsequent Communist take over of mainland China.

The longest reigning of all the Ming emperors, the Wanli Emperor came to the throne at the age of eight. He took charge of affairs himself in 1582 and at first was considered a competent and hard working ruler under whose government China was united and prosperous. In the latter part of his reign, however, he withdrew from all activity and concentrated on building his tomb. The reason for this change was that he was in conflict with his ministers over the question of which of his sons was to succeed him and the ministers won the day. The emperor effectively went on strike as a result. This caused

severe difficulties in China as the government could not function properly without him.

He was buried in the magnificent Dingling Mausoleum which he had created among the Ming tombs just outside the Chinese Capital City of **Beijing**.

The Wanli Emperor's tomb is one of the biggest of the Ming tombs and unlike all but one of the others it is open to the public. The tomb was excavated in 1956. In 1966, during the Cultural Revolution,¹ Communist Red Guards stormed the Dingling Mausoleum, and dragged the remains of the Wanli Emperor and his two empresses to the front of the tomb, where they were posthumously denounced and burned after photographs were taken of their skulls. Thousands of other precious historical artefacts were also destroyed. At least the Wanli Emperor's portrait was safe in Taiwan!

Back in 1926 Mrs Alex Tweedie (about whose travels in China we read a couple of days ago²) visited the tombs and she was amazed at the sight of the Animal Avenue that leads up to them:

¹ See lesson for 5th August (yet to come).

² See the lesson for 2nd September.

At the Ming tombs there is a long avenue of enormous animals in solid stone, brought from eighty miles away. Some are standing at attention, others are lying down to rest. They comprise camels, elephants, horses and lions and several weird creatures that are nameless. How did they get those solid weights transported and planted along the Avenue? The Pyramids of Egypt are of colossal stones brought hundreds of miles by water. And we think we are “educated,” that we are so advanced and clever, such engineers and explorers, so artistic and wonderful – until we travel and see what others have done before us, and what monuments of their civilization they have left behind.



The Triumphal Way is nearly a mile long, and there are thirty-six animals of colossal size, twelve or thirteen feet high, or warriors and statesmen nine feet high, to guard its sides.

... there are eleven tombs at the end of this long trail, all more or less alike. Days would be required to visit more than one, for that one takes some hours – and that one was built in 1424 by the man who founded modern Peking – by name Yung Lob.

Here after five centuries, the descendants worship on fête days at the Ming Tombs of their ancestors.... Unfortunately, there is nowhere to stop at the Ming tombs and it is necessary to do the three hours' trail back to Nankou before dark, as the stony track – there is no road – would be impossible for the bearers after dark. I would have loved to spend a week amid those wild, weird, beautiful surroundings, with a tent and camp fitments; but the country was a bit disturbed and everyone had shaken his head at the bare suggestion.



Alas and alack, tragedy lies at the Ming Tombs. Like everything else, like every other historic monument, they are falling to pieces... No one looks after the treasures of the past. It is nobody's job... moss and even trees were growing on the roofs, the great weight had dislodged the Royal yellow tiles, they are lying thick and broken on the ground; destruction is everywhere, the roofs leak... I look back on that day at the Ming Tombs as one of the most interesting in my somewhat interesting life.³

In its article on the Animal Avenue Wikipedia, quoting UNESCO says, “The road leads to 18 pairs of stone statues of mythical animals, which are all sculpted from whole stones and larger than life size...” The idea of a life-sized mythical animal (let alone a *larger* than life-sized one) is an odd concept and I began to investigate. As Mrs Tweedie found, along with the life-like but indeed larger than life-sized camels, elephants, lions, horses and dogs (none of which is even slightly mythical – above you can see a fierce dog, for instance, his collar hung with what look like bells) is at least one dragon – or dinosaur.⁴ In fact the other animals have no claim to be mythical! They all seem to have been creatures the sculptors had seen – so why not the dragon/dinosaur too?

³ See the lesson for 1st January (yet to come) for more about Mrs Tweedie.

⁴ Image: Von Der ursprünglich hochladende Benutzer war Richardelainechambers in der Wikipedia auf Englisch - Übertragen aus en.wikipedia nach Commons., CC BY-SA 3.0, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=1645903>



Dragons appear alongside other non-extinct creatures in Chinese art and all the animals in the “Chinese Zodiac” are perfectly ordinary – apart from the dragon. So perhaps he was ordinary too back in ancient times!⁵ After all, God created dinosaurs on day six of the creation week with all the other animals – and Adam and Eve.

A discovery in a library



Do you know what a **codex** is? It is a very old kind of book. Instead of paper, in a codex the pages are made of vellum, parchment or some other material. The plural form of the word codex is **codices**. Today's next story is all about the discovery of the contents of a codex that no one knew about. There is another important word in the story too: **manuscript**. A manuscript is any document written by hand rather than printed. It could be a codex, it could be a single sheet of parchment or paper. It could be old, it could be modern – in fact you probably create manuscripts yourself all the time when you are doing your lessons – if you write with a pen or pencil that is! And what about **uncial**? Do you know what **uncials** are? Well, they are just capital letters of a rather rounded form. Now you are all set for a discovery in an old library!

On **4th September** 1897 a German scholar and researcher died in the prime of life. Georg Schepps (1852-1897) had been a teacher and also a tireless worker in the University library of the German town of Würzburg.⁶ It was here that he made his most important discovery in the autumn of 1885.

He was scanning through the oldest **manuscripts** in the library when he discovered, in some **codices** of the fifth or sixth century, eleven “tracts” by an author, Priscillian, whose writings everyone previously thought were completely lost. Although the name Priscillian did not appear in the library catalogue which just labelled the manuscript “The Works of a Certain Patristic Author”, it was soon clear to both Schepps and other scholars that the codex could be by no one else.

But who was Priscillian and why was this find important?⁷

Priscillian (c.340-c.385) was a Spaniard of wealth and position, a learned and eloquent man of unusual attainments. In common with many of his class he was unable to believe the old heathen religions, yet was not attracted by Christianity, and preferred classic literature to the Scriptures, so he had sought refuge for his soul in the prevalent empty philosophies...

In the providence of God he was converted to Christ, was baptized, and began a new life of devotion to God and separation from the world. He became an enthusiastic student and lover of the Scriptures.

Soon he was holding meetings where he explained to people that true religion was a reality which should affect the whole life and behaviour of the believer. Large numbers of people, especially

⁵ For more information about dragons see <https://creation.com/were-dragons-real-in-medieval-times>

⁶ Image of the University: By Robert Emmerich - photo taken by Robert Emmerich, CC BY-SA 3.0, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=484157>

⁷ Adapted from E H Broadbent, *The Pilgrim Church* (1931).

those who had had a good education, were drawn into the movement.

Priscillian was made Bishop of Avila, but it was not long before he met with the hostility of a part of the Spanish clergy. Bishop Hydatius, Metropolitan of Lusitania in Portugal, led the opposition, and at a Synod held in 380 at Caesaraugusta (Saragossa) accused him of heresy. The proceedings were not successful at first. But then some political events which had nothing to do with Priscillian made it difficult for him. The Emperor Maximus, who had murdered his predecessor Gratian and usurped his place, needed the help of the Spanish clergy to stay in power. They wanted the emperor's help against Priscillian in return for political support.

Then, to make matters worse at a Synod in Burdigala (Bordeaux) in 384, Bishop Ithacus, a thoroughly evil man, joined the attack. He accused Priscillian and those to whom they called "Priscillianists", of witchcraft and immoral behaviour. Those who he had accused were brought to Treves (Trier), condemned by the Church, and handed over to the civil power for execution in 385.

There were two good bishops, Martin of Tours and Ambrose of Milan, who protested against this unjust verdict but they were ignored.

Priscillian and six others were beheaded, among them a distinguished lady, Euchrotia, widow of a well known poet and orator. This was the first instance of the execution of Christians by the Church, an example to be followed afterwards with such terrible frequency. After this Martin and Ambrose refused to have any fellowship whatever with Hydatius and the other bishops who were responsible, and when the Emperor Maximus fell, the cruel torture and murder of these saintly persons was recorded with abhorrence and Ithacus was deprived of his bishopric.

The bodies of Priscillian and his companions were brought to Spain and they were honoured as martyrs. Nevertheless a Synod in Treves approved what had been done, thus giving the official sanction of the Roman Church to the execution, and this was confirmed by the Synod of Braga held 176 years later, so that the ruling Church not only persecuted those whom it called Priscillianists, but handed down as history that Priscillian and those who believed as he did were punished for holding heretical teachings and because of the wickedness of their lives. This continued for centuries to be the generally received opinion of them.

Although Priscillian had written voluminously, it was thought that all his writings had disappeared, so diligently had they been destroyed... In 1886 Georg Schepps discovered in the library of the University of Würzburg eleven of Priscillian's works, which he describes as being "contained in a precious **Uncial** manuscript... which until now had remained unknown." It is written in very old Latin and is one of the oldest Latin manuscripts known to exist. It consists of eleven tracts (some parts are missing) of which the first four contain details of Priscillian's trial, and the remaining seven his teaching. The reading of these, Priscillian's own writings, shows that the account handed down of him was wholly untrue, that he was a man of saintly character, sound in doctrine, and an energetic reformer, and that those associated with him were companies of men and women who were true and devoted followers of Christ. Not content with murdering these people, exiling them, confiscating their goods, the Church authorities have persistently blackened their memory.

The style of Priscillian's writing is vivid and telling, he constantly quotes Scripture in support of what he advances and shows an intimate acquaintance with the whole of the Old and New Testaments. He maintained, however, the right of the Christian to read other literature, and this was made the occasion of accusing him of wishing to include the Apocrypha in the Canon of Scripture, which he did not do. He defends himself and his friends for their habit of holding Bible readings in which laymen were active and women took part, also for their objection to taking the Lord's Supper with frivolous and worldly minded persons. For Priscillian the theological disputations in the

Church had little value, for he knew the gift of God, and had accepted it by a living faith. He would not dispute as to the Trinity, being content to know that in Christ the true One God is laid hold of by the help of the Divine Spirit. He taught that the object of redemption is that we should be turned to God and therefore an energetic turning from the world is needed, lest anything might hinder fellowship with God. This salvation is not a magical event brought about by some sacrament, but a spiritual act. The Church indeed baptizes, and conveys the commands or Word of God, to men, but each one must decide for himself and believe for himself, said Priscillian. If communion with Christ should be broken it is for each one to restore it by personal repentance. There is no special official grace, laymen have the Spirit as much as clergy. Far from teaching the heresy of Manichaeism, he refuted it at great length.

Good works follow repentance and faith because in receiving the new life the believer has received into himself that which contains the very essence of morality, wrote Priscillian. Scripture is not only historical truth, but is at the same time a means of grace. The spirit feeds upon it and finds that every portion of it contains revelation, instruction, and guidance for daily life. To see the allegorical meaning of Scripture requires no technical training, but faith.⁸

What an amazing discovery Georg Schepps had made! Thanks to what he found we now know the truth. Priscillian had been called an evil heretic. He had been put to death and his writings rooted out and destroyed. Those who understood the truth as he did were martyred wherever they could be found. But Priscillian was a Bible believing Christian whose only crime was to oppose the errors in the church of his day.

8 Simplified and abridged from E H Broadbent, *The Pilgrim Church* p.34 and FN 22 on p37.