

Scholars trying to learn more

Scholars today are trying to unravel some of the mysteries about Jews living in China.

ONE OF those scholars is Dr. David B. Weisberg, professor of Bible and Semitic languages at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion in Cincinnati, who talked about his work in an address in Mobile.

Weisberg was this year's speaker for an institute conducted on an annual basis for Mobile area clergy under the sponsorship of organizations of Spring Hill Avenue Temple. Additionally, Weisberg presented a public lecture about the Jews of China under the auspices of the local temple and the Mobile Area Jewish-Christian Dialogue.

THE PROFESSOR said the Jews he is studying are "a historical community ... that is dying out. In the 20th century there is only a handful of Jews left.

"The one comforting thing is that we do have records which scholars can study and hopefully tell us more about the lives and history and destiny of the Jews in China."

Jews to whom Weisberg referred live in the town of Kaifeng in eastern China, where they first settled about 1,000 years ago, according to calculations of scholars.

Weisberg emphasized that he was not talking about Jews who have settled in China in modern times, mainly those who came from Europe shortly before World War II and established homes in the seaport city of Shanghai on China's east coast.

Kaifeng, where the historic community of Jews lives, is located inland not far from the city of Shanghai.

THE SPEAKER said, "No one really knows how the Jews (of Kaifeng) got to China, but there are several hints about how they might have come."

Kaifeng formerly had a synagogue,

although one does not exist today. Standing in the synagogue were stone pillars, or memorial tablets, which presented some historical records about the Jewish community. These records made reference to India as the ancestry of the Chinese Jews, according to Weisberg.

The time when Jews moved from India to China is believed to be about 1,000 years ago because "there was no Jewish neighborhood (in China), and there were no records that we know of until ... the 10th, 11th and 12th centuries of the Christian era."

THE ROUTE the Jews traveled from India to China is a mystery, according to Weisberg.

One theory is that the Jews "entered China from the west by traveling overland in caravans with traders, with explorers who came into China." India has a common border with China.

A second theory is that the Jews "sailed with enterprising sailors" who entered China from its eastern seacoast. The Jews could have traveled inland to Kaifeng from the coastal city of Shanghai.

Weisberg said a further question exists about how the Jews got to India.

His belief, the speaker said, is that the Jews of India left Israel before the Christian era.

Weisberg recalled that in the eighth century before the Christian era, military forces of the ancient empire of Assyria invaded Israel and exiled the northern tribes of Jews.

A **SECOND** exile from Israel took place in the sixth century before the Christian era, when Jews from Israel's southern kingdom were dispersed.

Leaving Israel, the Jews traveled westward to Iraq, Iran and India, according to the belief of scholars.

about Jews in China

After the Jews settled in Kaifeng, China, "they had their own synagogue, religious leaders, holy Scriptures and memorial tablets," according to Weisberg.

The professor said, "The year 1642 was a very tragic year" for Kaifeng. The town, which is situated on the banks of the Yellow River, was devastated by a flood of the river.

THE KAIFENG synagogue was destroyed by the flood, and even though it was rebuilt, that flood "marked the beginning of a slow decline of the community of Jews in Kaifeng, China, which continues to this day," said Weisberg.

Much information that is known today about the Chinese Jews was recorded by Catholics and Protestants who were in China "teaching and doing missionary work," Weisberg said.

One source of information is a Catholic priest of the Jesuit order, Matei Ricci, who was in China about 250 to 300 years ago.

Weisberg said Ricci drew some sketches of the Jews of China, who "were Chinese in appearance, and they had pigtailed and the typical Chinese dress and caps."

WHEN THE Jews rebuilt their synagogue after the flood, "one of the exciting things they did," Weisberg said, was prepare memorial books on rice paper. The Jews' names are listed in the books in Hebrew and Chinese.

From these books, "you can see what the people were named, what kinds of customs they had as a reflection of their names."

Unfortunately, Weisberg said, all these memorial books have been lost except one, which is preserved at the college where Weisberg teaches.

Besides the memorial books, Weisberg said, "there are 13 Torah scrolls of the law that we know of" that have been preserved from the Jews of China.

THESE SCROLLS "exist around the world — Israel, Paris, London, the United States." One is preserved at Southern Methodist University in Dallas.

Bibles known as "section books

of the Bible" have been preserved from the Jews of China. "There were 53 section books," according to Weisberg, who said only 13 exist today.

Weisberg said he is involved in studying the Scriptures from China.

"The question is, 'Does this Bible (from China) differ very much from the Bible that we have today?'" said the professor. The answer, according to studies thus far, is that the Bibles "are remarkably similar."

Weisberg said members of the Jewish community in Kaifeng may have numbered in the thousands in the 17th and 18th centuries. By the turn of this century only 100 to 200 Jews remained.

IN RECENT years Betsy Gidwitz, a professor at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, visited Kaifeng and wrote about the experience. She talked to people who "recognized themselves that they were Jewish although they didn't practice anything.... We're looking at something that is dying out," Weisberg said.



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David B. Weisberg