FROM A NESTORIAN SYRIAC MANUSCRIPT of the 16th Century—a Book of Prayers. Written with a reed pen on a semi-waterproof paper (in the manufacture of which Damascus was once famous), and distinguished for its bold, clear characters and interesting rubrications. ¶ Syriac, a Semitic language, originally a dialect of Aramaic, which in turn sprang from the Phoenician, was the spoken and written language of a vast region East of Antioch, and for a time, the cultural language of Persia. In fact, it ranked in importance second only to Greek throughout the Eastern Roman Empire. ¶ The Nestorians were a Christian sect founded in Edessa about A. D. 435. Undaunted by the persecution of the Byzantine rulers and the Orthodox Eastern Church, they established bishoprics throughout the Near East and soon became the greatest proselytizers of the Christian faith in Asia, with a zeal comparable only to that of the Jesuits whom they anticipated by nine centuries. Adventurous Nestorian missionaries carried their faith into Turkestan and then pushed on to India, Mongolia, and to China, where they achieved their most spectacular success. From Chinese sources we know that their influence spread all over the Empire and that monasteries were erected in scores of cities; but the only direct record so far discovered is the famous Nestorian stone in Shen-si. This stone tablet is inscribed in Chinese, but has a footnote in Syriac, which bears a pronounced resemblance to the writing of this manuscript, and is dated A. D. 781. ¶ Syriac characters seem to have been derived from Cufic, or monumental Arabic, used in rock inscriptions, coins and seals, rather than from the cursive Naskhi, used on papyrus and parchment. Syriac has now been almost entirely superseded by modern Arabic, except in a few isolated communities and among the clergy, and may be considered a dead language. A printed leaf from a New Testament (dated 1843), has been added, in which ancient and modern Syriac are shown in parallel columns.
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