

Arman Akopian, *Introduction to Aramean and Syriac Studies: A Manual* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2017). Pp. 573 ; \$119.00.

EMMANUEL AÏM, TEL AVIV

This volume is a contribution without parallel to Aramaic and Syriac studies. Although modestly titled as an 'introduction' and a 'manual', it is in fact nothing less than the very first book that deals exhaustively with the unbroken three-thousand-year-long history of the Arameans. Indeed, until now, works devoted to Arameans have tended to cover a single period or a single aspect of their history or culture. This is understandable: it would be a challenging task to describe a civilization that took the most diverse forms (from kingdoms in biblical times to pre-modern tribal systems to the present-day diaspora) and a people that never pursued unified political objectives and whose existence as a distinct nation is not recognized by all. The author takes up this challenge and offers a well-structured and coherent account of these apparently heterogeneous and amorphous events, groups, and individuals and thereby happily fills a serious lacuna in academic literature.

The book is organized into 27 chapters, each subdivided into shorter sections. The chapters are supplemented by no less than 133 images and figures, 7 tables and 4 maps, as well as a bibliography and an index. The copious and varied content makes it impossible to review each chapter individually, so that I will broadly survey the major themes.

The book opens with the ancient period (pp. 1–148). After a conventional overview of the Semitic peoples and languages (ch. 1), the author introduces us to the Aramean tribes, kingdoms, and religion (chs. 2–3). After the fall of Aramean political power, Aramaic became the administrative language of the

Assyrian, Babylonian, and Persian empires, and subsequently the common language of the Middle East in the early days of Christianity (ch. 4). Akopian does an excellent job describing the early Aramean states as well as the principalities and cities of the Hellenistic and Roman periods (Hatra, Adiabene, Palmyra, Dura-Europos, the Nabatean realm).

In the following chapters, the author introduces the Syriac world (pp. 149–454). He first presents the kingdom of Osrhoene and the birth and growth of the Syriac language and Syriac Christianity (chs. 5–11). Akopian next turns to the many intellectual activities in which the Syriacs engaged: translations, theology, philosophy, etc. (chs. 12–18). Along the way, he portrays various churchmen and scholars and their works, and he does not shy away from addressing lesser-known topics such as translations from Pahlavi (pp. 248–249), alchemy (pp. 292–293), and fiction literature (pp. 293–294), thereby constructing a vivid tableau of the Golden Age of Syriac civilization.

The narrative then describes the interactions between Syriacs and other peoples, from the Arab conquest to the present day (pp. 307–400). After a period of symbiotic relations between Syriacs and Arabs during the first two Caliphates (ch. 19), Syriac Christianity underwent a huge expansion towards India and China during the Mongol era (ch. 20). Around the same time, the Crusades opened the way for Catholicism and Uniatism (ch. 21). Following a long phase of decline, the modern period begins with the arrival of the Western missions which sparked a linguistic and literary renewal and the awakening of a national identity (chs. 22–23). It ends by multiple tragedies: genocide, massacres, mass expulsions, etc. (ch. 24). The narrative addresses various topics such as the Hakkari Nestorian tribes (pp. 370–372), the Ottoman millet system (pp. 385–386), and the post-World War I Conferences (pp. 404–405), offering a comprehensive account

of the social and historical background to the challenges that the Syriacs had, and still have, to face.

Finally, the book touches upon the modern Aramaic dialects, the current use of Classical Syriac, and the origins and development of Aramaic studies in the context of Orientalism (chs. 25–27). Inasmuch as the genealogy and internal classification of Aramaic is still a matter of scholarly debate, Akopian helpfully adds the well-known classification of Beyer in an appendix.<sup>1</sup>

Overall, this volume is a kind of encyclopedia. Each section covers a particular topic in a concise but comprehensive manner, ranging from the cult of Hadad in Damascus to the Syriac churches of India, from Kilammuwa, the king of Sam'al to the Lebanese nationalist leader Etienne Saqr, from papyri to Modern Aramaic TV broadcasts, and I see no relevant aspect of Aramean history and culture not covered or at least mentioned.

The author successfully manages to turn his huge compilation into a flowing narrative. Throughout the book, familiar figures such as Elagabalus, the pilgrim Egeria, Marco Polo, and the legendary Prester John rub shoulders with great Arameans (e.g., Queen Zenobia, Bardaisan, Saint Ephrem, Bar Hebraeus) and individuals known mainly to experts (e.g., the Chaldean priest and author Berossus or the first Syriac hermit Yulyana Saba). Akopian's ability to construct a fascinating narrative by weaving together synthesis and specific information is on display on every page. Countless details and anecdotes enrich the discussion throughout, for example, that moon worship in Harran can be traced up to the 12th century (p. 156) or that the wife of Septimius Severus was a Hellenized Aramean princess from Emesa (p. 99). Other useful aspects include English translations of about fifteen texts and extracts (in the notes) as well as the notices that places or monuments are listed as UNESCO World Heritage Sites.

---

<sup>1</sup> K. Beyer, *The Aramaic language: Its Distribution and Subdivisions* (Göttingen 1986).

Tracing Aramean history requires more than one kind of specialized knowledge, and the author skillfully handles many such fields, including archeology, codicology, theology, and geopolitical dynamics. One of these fields is linguistics, and throughout the book Akopian deftly navigates the numerous ancient Aramaic dialects, their sources (inscriptions, ostraca, graffiti, etc.), their scripts, and adaptation to non-Semitic languages (Parthian, Pahlavi, Avestan, Sogdian, Uighur, Mongolian).

The author adds depth to his narrative by extensively referencing Armenian history (e.g., contacts between churches), language (e.g., Armenian-speaking Syriacs), literature (e.g., Armenian translations of Syriac texts, Armenian garshuni), and scholars (e.g. Movses Khorenatsi, Ananias Shirakatsi), thereby shedding light on many aspects of Syriac history and Syriac–Armenian relations.

The book's weak points lie in its format as an introduction. Firstly, Akopian usually synthesizes the scholarly contributions to each topic. Thus, seasoned researchers will find inaccuracies here and there, omissions, or lack of most recent interpretations. For example, linguists might quibble that the triliterality of the Semitic roots (p. 26) is not assumed by all; historians might ask for more space to be devoted to the history of Lebanon, since it constitutes a unique case among Syriacs of a homogeneous population concentration with political autonomy. Secondly, bibliographic references (in the body text or footnotes) are deliberately avoided; academics and curious readers will find this somewhat frustrating.

Two remarks on the material aspect of the book: Some illustrations are of poor quality (pp. 5, 9, 15, 59, 74, 77, 85, 126, 225, 227) and, overall, it is unfortunate that the illustrations are not printed in color. Also, given its thickness, one regrets that the volume does not come in hardcover.

Despite these very minor reservations, the author and publisher deserve high praise for producing a masterful and long overdue work.<sup>2</sup> The volume is a treasure-trove of information and a must-read not only for Aramaicists, Syriacists, and Semiticists but, also for those interested in the history of the Middle East, specialists and non-specialists alike.

---

<sup>2</sup> The book was originally published in Armenian in 2015, and a Russian translation appeared in 2022.