

Thomas, D. (ed.): *Syrian Christians under Islam* (Leiden: Brill).  
[Several chapters are of Syriac interest].

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*The Modern Assyrians of the Middle East: Encounters with Western  
Christian Missions, Archaeologists, and Colonial Powers*  
(Studies in Christian Mission, 26)

Leiden: Brill, 2000

Pp. xii, + 292; 2 maps

ISBN 90 04 11641 9.

- [1] This book is a revised edition of the author's *The Nestorians and their Muslim Neighbors*, which was published in 1961. *The Nestorians* was the first book devoted to the Modern Assyrians since A.J. Maclean and W.H. Browne's *The Catholicos of the East and his People* (1892); it was full of information; and it had a sizable bibliography. All these facts quickly made it a standard work of reference, although, being published in a quiet scholarly series, it can only have had modest sales. Copies were anyhow scarce: twenty years ago the present reviewer had the experience of waiting in a queue for what was, apparently, the only one available on inter-library loan in Britain.

- [2] Curiously, while the book was in demand from us ecclesiastical historians, it escaped the notice of other scholars. The explanation for this fact seems to lie in the library world. Cataloguers at the Library of Congress assign subject-headings when they make a record for a new publication, choosing from a fixed list. The list was (and still is) quite inadequate to deal with the Syriac churches and the ethnic groups historically represented by them. Even so, the list in force in 1961 did contain the heading 'Assyrians', glossed as follows: "Here are entered works dealing with the modern adherents of the Nestorian Church as an element in the populations of both Asiatic Turkey and Iraq."<sup>1</sup> While this is not a

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<sup>1</sup> Subject Headings Used in the Dictionary Catalogs of the Library of Congress (6th edition, 1957). In earlier editions the prescribed heading was 'Modern Assyrians'; that would have been better left alone. The definition continues: "The name 'Assyrian' is based on an alleged racial affinity to the Ancient Assyrians. The term 'Assyrian' was used in the

particularly good or clear definition, the heading fitted the book and ought to have been used. Perhaps the cataloguer took his cue from Joseph's own rejection of the name 'Assyrians'. In any case, he used instead only the heading 'Nestorians–history', which was not only dislikable in itself, but also far from the vocabulary of the modern Middle East. So in 1974-5 when the *International Journal of Middle East Studies* published an article entitled "The Assyrian affair of 1933", it was clear that neither the author (K.S. Husry) nor the journal's referees were aware of Joseph's book where the episode was fully treated, using some different sources. (Joseph published a useful reply to Husry later in the same journal.) Clearly *The Nestorians and their Muslim Neighbors* deserved a re-issue with a new title. This we now have, and *The Modern Assyrians of the Middle East* is in fact something better, a significantly revised edition. It is only sad to notice on the verso of the title page the new Library of Congress record with only the same subject-heading 'Nestorians–history'. Fortunately, one can now search library catalogues by keywords in the title!

- [3] The new title deserves a moment's further notice. Besides catching the attention of a wider scholarly audience, perhaps it will also look more attractive to readers from the Assyrian community, by many of whom Joseph has been considered a renegade all these years because of the anti-'Assyrian' views found in the old edition. In his new Preface, Joseph expresses the hope that Assyrians will read the book - and may it be so. Enthusiasts for ancient Assyria will, however, find nothing to conciliate them. Once past the title page, the name 'Assyrians' is hardly used again until near the end of the book. Not only that, but the first chapter has been expanded into a full-scale engagement with those writers, almost all of whom are members of the community, who insist on the identification of the modern Assyrians with the ancient people of that name. Joseph's discussion is now the most comprehensive one on this subject, subsuming the classic article of J.-M. Fiey ("Assyriens" ou "araméens"?", 1965; Fiey was among those who did not know Joseph's work at the time).

- [4] After the discussion of terminology and ethnography, we come to a sequence of chapters taking the history of the Modern

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18th century by Assemani." In subsequent editions these two sentences have been dropped, along with the mention of Asiatic Turkey.

Assyrians from late antiquity (briefly and under the odd title ‘Early beginnings’) to the present day. The chapters are slightly reorganized from the earlier edition and there is new documentation throughout, but the substance, except for what is new at the end, will be familiar to readers of the first edition. Here I shall not try to comb over this old ground, but I offer the following three remarks as a quick orientation for the new reader.

1. I said above that Joseph's book is better known by ecclesiastical than by secular historians. Yet it is on diplomatic and political matters that Joseph is at his best, for example on the delicate legal status of the Assyrians under the Ottoman regime (pp. 59-60), and the complex unfolding of the Mosul question in 1921-5 (pp. 166-85). I wish we had the benefit of his analysis of the supposed promise made by a British officer to the Assyrians in 1918 that they would have their own homeland after the war; but this incident, which is still very important in the memory of the community, is only indirectly mentioned (pp. 146, 155).
2. With matters religious, ecclesiastical and missionary, Joseph is less comfortable. The reader who is told that “after the Council of Ephesus, those who adhered to the teachings of Nestorius organized their own church” which was subsequently “forced to move in the direction of Mesopotamia and Persia” (p. 41, a statement admittedly at variance with most of the rest of the chapter) will naturally be somewhat wary of the treatment of ecclesiastical matters later on in the book. It is also an ominous sign that having banished the name ‘Nestorian’ from the title, the author retains it elsewhere in the book, even in the chapters covering the period after 1918 when it clearly includes people other than members of the Church of the East. For all that it may be a handy term, no theologically sensitive writer could do this.
3. The treatment of missions in particular, which makes up a substantial part of the book, is a classic. The Assyrians were “previously untroubled by the kind of religious prejudices and conflicts that were set into motion” by the missions (p. 88); these missions were the agents of “the

political and cultural imperialism of the “Christian” powers” (p. 69); the missionaries did harm by “refusing to recognize any truth or values in Nestorian beliefs and practices” (p. 95); and the “unseemly struggle” among the different missions was a scandal (p. 133). Praise for the missionaries is limited, more or less, to their role in the relief of suffering during World War I (p.140). This whole position, in my opinion, needs some correction. Briefly: most of the de-racinating and de-stabilizing attributable to the missions would have come anyway in the twentieth century, and they would have been worse if the missions had not prepared the Assyrians to meet the modern world. But it is not so much at that point where I would fault Joseph (and others). It is rather that he is hardly interested in the *primary*, religious work of the missions (there are no tabulations of parishes, schools, books printed, etc.—they would be dull, to be sure), but only in the secondary, social and political, effects of this work. Those scholars, on the other hand, who put in long hours in missionary archives reading reports of the day-to-day activities of missionaries, do not usually emerge with the censorious judgment given by Joseph. Is that just because we become comfortable and sympathetic with the people whose correspondence we are reading? Or is it that something is being neglected by the others? In my opinion, the reader should keep in brackets the more general statements that Joseph makes about missions to the Assyrians until we have, for example, a more comprehensive history of the American ABCFM/Presbyterian mission than anything presently available.

- [5] The last two chapters (9 ‘Between mutually hostile neighbors’ and 10 ‘From missions to ecumenism’) are substantially new in this edition. These chapters do not very easily come under the subtitle “encounters with Western Christian missions, archaeologists, and colonial powers”, but they are certainly valuable, having a good deal of material that is not readily available elsewhere. Ch. 9 includes an account of the recent history of the Kurds, with whose affairs the Assyrians are now so closely connected. (The Assyrian party in Kurdistan is Zo’a (*ṣaw’a* ‘movement’), not Zo’a.) But these chapters are selective too, and if the idea is to bring the history of

the Assyrians down to date there should be something more than the occasional sentence about Assyrians in the diaspora, and something about modern Assyrian literature and culture. Ch. 10 has a discussion of the exercise of “rethinking missions” that has gone on in postcolonial times, and a section entitled “The Roman Catholic Church and Islam”, neither of which is particularly relevant to the Assyrians. The second half of the chapter takes the history of the Church of the East from its low point in the 1930s to the important doctrinal agreement of 1998 with the Roman Catholic Church, which serves as a sort of happy ending to the whole study.

- [6] The bibliography has been greatly expanded, although some of the new entries are not very helpful, e.g. books on the remote biblical background and on religious pluralism, and many encyclopedia articles. Macuch's *Geschichte der spät- und neusyrischen Literatur* (1976) appears, but nothing in modern Syriac has been added to the few titles in the first edition, not even Jacob bar Malek Ismael, *The Assyrians and the Two World Wars* (Tehran 1964); nor anything significant in Arabic since 1961. German readers will be surprised not to see P. Kawerau, *Amerika und die orientalischen Kirchen* (1957) or any of the books of Gabriele Yonan, especially *Assyrer heute* (1978), or the articles of Martin Tamcke. The useful book of John Guest on the Yezidis, *Survival among the Kurds* (2nd ed. 1993) is also an omission.

- [7] John Joseph's last book *Muslim-Christian relations and inter-Christian rivalries in the Middle East: the case of the Jacobites in an age of transition* (State University of New York Press, 1983) was unpleasantly marred by the absence of copy-editing, and I hoped that the obvious remedies would have been applied to this one. Alas, they have not been, and the number of errors in spelling, grammar, punctuation, etc., is well above what should ever be associated with the names of John Joseph and E.J. Brill.

- [8] To sum up: Joseph's *Modern Assyrians* is not a book that displaces others, but it is welcome and valuable alike to those who have, and those who have not, used the earlier edition. It is still the best discussion of the political history of the Modern Assyrians and still the richest bibliographical guide to the subject, its discussion of the international politics after World War I is particularly thorough,

and it is absolutely required reading for anyone wishing to understand the debate over the identity of the ‘Assyrians’.

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HILARION ALFEYEV

*The Spiritual World of Isaac the Syrian*

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- [1] Isaac the Syrian, or Isaac (Ishaq) of Nineveh, was a remarkable writer in a remarkable but largely neglected tradition of East Syriac writers. Many civilizations have experienced lamentably brief periods of intellectual florescence, golden moments, where great works of genius were produced: fifth and fourth century Athens, first century BCE Rome, the Song dynasty in China, Elizabethan England, to name a few. The reasons why these moments occurred are very difficult to discover, perhaps because of the great complexity of historical, sociological, and cultural factors at work. But mankind is much the richer for their having occurred. Isaac stands at the head of an intellectual florescence of the Syriac speaking culture in the seventh and eighth centuries of what is now Iraq, Iran, Kuwait, and Qatar. His writings had such irresistible force that within about one hundred years after his death many of them had crossed the nearly impenetrable (for Easterners) political and theological divide between Eastern Christianity and Western (that is, Byzantine and Roman) in Greek translation. It is a credit to mankind, I think, that works of genius eventually gain widespread recognition, even when they are imbued with cultural expression and concerns that may seem foreign to many.

- [2] The complete works of Isaac are only now becoming available in translation, and so we should welcome Alfeyev's introduction to Isaac's thought. Alfeyev's method is quite straightforward. He divides what Isaac writes into various subjects, e.g. prayer, humility, faith and knowledge, contemplation, and then adduces many passages where Isaac is allowed to express his views on these subjects. The result is that the reader obtains a rather good idea of