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The American Board and the Eastern Churches: the 'Nestorian Mission' (1844-1846)¹

1. INTRODUCTION

In 1846 the first Protestant church in West Asia came into existence. A small group of Armenians in Istanbul who had been affected by the work of missionaries of the *American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions* were no longer tolerated in the Armenian church, and therefore started their own Protestant church. In 1848, a similar development took place in Beirut, resulting in a Protestant church in which Christians from various Eastern Churches joined together.² The only mission of the American Board which at that time did not witness the formation of a separate Protestant church was the mission in Persia, known as the 'Nestorian Mission'.³

It had not been the object of the American missionaries to establish separate Churches in these countries. They had been instructed to work towards the reformation and revival of the Eastern Churches, and in the first years of these missions, from about 1820, their activities indeed seem to have stimulated revival rather than separation. Especially the work among the Armenians caused the missionaries to hope for a gradual reformation of this important Church in Turkey. However, in the forties of the nineteenth century, these hopes gradually were disappointed. Opposition to the American mission

¹ The research for this article at the libraries of Harvard University, Cambridge MA, was made possible by a stipend from the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research (NWO).

² On the formation of the Protestant Church in Beirut, see Habib Badr, *Mission to "Nominal Christians": the Policy and Practice of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions and its Missionaries Concerning Eastern Churches which Led to the Organization of a Protestant Church in Beirut (1819-1848)*, Ph.D. Princeton 1992.

³ The present-day descendants of the 'Nestorians' prefer to be called Assyrians, which is reason for me to use the latter designation when possible. The official name of their Church is *Holy Apostolic Catholic Assyrian Church of the East*, usually shortened to *Church of the East* or *Assyrian Church*. For a recent discussion of their supposed 'nestorianism', see Sebastian Brock, 'The "Nestorian" Church: a lamentable misnomer', *Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester* 78/3 (1996) 23-35.

work grew rather than diminished and the missionaries more and more felt obliged to take a stand against all kinds of 'superstitions' they saw in the Eastern Churches.⁴ The visit of Rufus Anderson, the foreign secretary of the American Board, to the missions in Greece, Turkey and Syria in 1844-1845, marks a turning point in the official policy of the American Board. Anderson's personal acquaintance with these missions made him even more critical towards the Eastern Churches than he was already. In his opinion the formation of separate Protestant communities could hardly be avoided, even if a complete separation could not be asked from the recent 'converts'.⁵

In view of this general change of policy in the mid-forties to accepting the necessity of separate churches for the Protestants, it is remarkable that the mission in Urmia in the same years held to the policy of cooperation with the local Assyrian church, and explicitly rejected the possibility of establishing a separate Protestant community. Until now, studies of the policy of the American Board concerning the Eastern Churches have been based mainly on the missions in Syria and Turkey, and on published documents of the American Board rather than on missionary correspondence.⁶ A closer look at the history of the Nestorian Mission, taking into account unpublished sources, shows that local circumstances allowed for considerable variations on the general policy.⁷

⁴ Mary Walker, 'The American Board and the Oriental Churches. A Brief Survey of Policy Based on Official Documents', *International Review of Mission* 56 (1976) 214-223.

⁵ Rufus Anderson, *Report to the Prudential Committee of a Visit to the Missions in the Levant*, Boston 1844, 1-54. The importance of this visit of Anderson is confirmed by Badr's interpretation of the further developments of the Syria mission, cf. Badr 1992, esp. 231ff.

⁶ So the impressive work of Peter Kawerau, *Amerika und die orientalischen Kirchen. Ursprung und Anfang der amerikanischen Mission unter den Nationalkirchen Westasiens*, Berlin 1958, Walker 1976, Antonie Wessels, *Arab and Christian? Christians in the Middle East*, Kampen 1995, 170-178, and David A. Kerr, 'Mission and Proselytism: A Middle East Perspective', *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 20/1 (1996) 12-22. On the issue of proselytism in the Middle East, see further Norman A. Horner, 'The Problem of Intra-Christian Proselytism', *International Review of Mission* 70 (1982) 304-313.

⁷ The present article is based primarily on unpublished missionary correspondence as found in the papers of the American Board. These are kept at Houghton Library, Harvard University, with call numbers beginning with 'ABC'. I am grateful to Rev. David Y. Hirano of the United Church Board for World Ministries (Cleveland, Ohio) for permission to quote from these. Some of these letters were published, somewhat edited, in the *Missionary Herald*, the magazine of the American Board.

2. THE FIRST YEARS OF THE NESTORIAN MISSION

In November of 1835, the Rev. Justin Perkins, a missionary of the American Board, arrived in Urmia, a town of about 20,000 inhabitants in northwestern Persia. He was accompanied by a physician, Dr. Asahel Grant, and their both wives, Charlotte Bass Perkins and Judith S. Campbell Grant. Their task was to establish a mission among the Assyrian Christians of this region. About 30,000 of them lived in small villages on the plain of Urmia, whereas perhaps another 50,000 lived in tribal groups in the Hakkari mountains, the border region of Turkey and Iran. Part of the Assyrians were in union with Rome, due to Roman Catholic missionary activities in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and were known as Chaldeans. A considerable number of Chaldeans lived in Mosul and the villages north of this town, whereas north of Urmia, on the plain of Salmas, a smaller concentration of Chaldean villages existed.⁸

From the very beginning, the American missionaries were well received. Deacons, priests, and bishops of the Church of the East participated in the work of teaching and translating, the schools which were started had no problems in acquiring pupils, the newly-written language based on the vernacular was readily accepted, and after a few years the missionaries were invited to preach regularly in the Assyrian churches. In 1840 a mission press and a trained printer arrived. The number of missionaries increased considerably, to sixteen adults in the early summer of 1844.⁹ From the missionaries' point of

⁸ Eugène Tisserant's article, 'L'Église nestorienne' in *Dictionnaire de Théologie Catholique* XI,1 (1931) 157-323, still provides the best overview of the growth of Roman Catholic influence among the Assyrian Christians in the 17th and 18th centuries. For a general overview and further bibliographical references, see the author's 'A Syrian Awakening. Alqosh and Urmia as Centres of Neo-Syriac Writing', in R. Lavenant (ed.), *Symposium Syriacum VII, Uppsala 1996*, OCA 256, Roma 1998, pp. 499-515.

⁹ According to Rufus Anderson, in his *History of the Missions of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions to the Oriental Churches*, Boston 1875, volume IV (second edition, first edition: Boston 1873/1872), 498-99, the following missionaries were stationed in Urmia or in closeby Seir in 1844: Justin Perkins, Albert L. Holladay, William R. Stocking, Willard Jones, Austin H. Wright, James Lyman Merrick, and David Tappan Stoddard as ordained missionaries, Edward Breath, Fidelia Fiske, and Catherine A. Meyers as assistant missionaries. Six of the male missionaries were married. Their wives, when health and household obligations permitted them, took part in the actual mission work and were listed as assistant missionaries. The letters concerning the general affairs of the mission were never signed by the women belonging to the mission, since apparently they did not participate in the discussions on mission policy. Breath, being an assistant missionary as well, did participate in the discussions and took his share in writing letters to the Prudential Committee.

view, this impressive growth of the mission work lacked only one thing: not one clear case of evangelical conversion could be reported. Although many Assyrians participated in the activities of the missionaries, and some of them even preached the gospel alongside the missionaries and were admitted to communion in the missionaries' private service, it seems that even those few were hardly considered as being truly converted.¹⁰

When the American missionaries first arrived, no other missions were working in the same area. In 1838, however, the French scholar and missionary Eugène Boré arrived in Persia, looking for suitable places for French mission work. In 1839 he obtained permission from the Shah to start a school in Ardishai, about twenty kilometres south of Urmia. Since the American missionaries had also planned to start a school in this village, the Assyrian bishop of the village, Mar Gauriel, was caught between the two parties. After he chose to accept the help of the Americans, this agreement was sealed with the gift of a watch as a token of the missionaries' friendship. For the future, a stipend was promised to him. These financial benefits led the Roman Catholics to assume that Mar Gauriel was bribed by the Protestants.¹¹

In 1840, the Lazarist Fathers of St Vincent de Paul, at Boré's request, started mission work in Persia.¹² They began to work in Isfahan and Tabriz and somewhat later turned to Urmia. Their mission work was cut short by an official firman which was issued by the Shah in 1842, stating 'that no native christians in the empire should [...] be proselyted from one christian sect to another'.¹³ The Lazarist missionaries were considered to have engaged in proselytizing activities and consequently were expelled from the country.¹⁴ Due to

¹⁰ So, e.g., Justin Perkins in *A Residence of Eight Years in Persia among the Nestorian Christians with Notices of the Muhammedans*, Andover 1843, 263 (March 1836).

¹¹ For two accounts of this story by persons involved, see Perkins 1843, 393-96, ABC 16.8.1 vol. 3, no. 175 (16 July 1845) p.p. 70ff, and Eugène Boré, *Correspondance et mémoires d'un voyageur en Orient*, Paris 1840, vol. II 281-2, 353, 360-1, 363. For further versions of this story see Jean-Michel Hornus, 'Notes et Documents. Un rapport du consul de France à Erzeroum sur la situation des chrétiens en Perse au milieu du XIX siècle. Texte du Comte de Challaye publié avec introduction et notes', *Proche Orient Chrétien* 21 (1971) 3-29, 127-151, 289-315, specif. 134-137, and Aristide Chatelet, 'La Mission Lazariste en Perse', *Revue d'histoire des missions* 10 (1933) 503-4 (his description of the mission is continued in vols. 11-16 (1934-1939)).

¹² Unfortunately, no modern study of the Lazarist mission is available. See Tisserant 1931 and the literature mentioned above, in note 11.

¹³ So Justin Perkins, ABC 16.8.1 vol. 3, no. 252 (31 Jan 1845).

¹⁴ Hornus 1971, 293-95.

French diplomatic intervention, the Lazarists were soon permitted to return and thereupon started work in Khosrowa, a town about eighty kilometres north of Urmia with a considerable Chaldean population. The order against proselytism was kept in force and was to play an important role in the coming years.

In this same period, British missionary agencies became interested in the Assyrians. In 1842, George Percy Badger, an Anglican priest, arrived in Mosul to start mission work. In 1843, he went to visit the Assyrian Patriarch, Mar Shimun XVII Auraham (1820-1860), residing in the Hakkari mountains, apparently with the express object to point out to the Patriarch the schismatic nature of the American Protestants and to convince him of the better prospects of an Anglican mission. Badger appears to have hinted also at the possibility of British protection, providing the Patriarch with a further reason for preferring Anglican activities to those of the American Protestants.¹⁵

Another event that greatly influenced the American mission was the massacre of 1843. In the summer of that year, troupes of the Kurdish chiefs Badr Khan Bey and Nurullah attacked a considerable number of villages of the Assyrian Tiary tribe, in the Turkish part of the Hakkari mountains. The reasons for this tragedy included Badr Khan Bey's search for independence from Ottoman power and his need of Assyrian support in this process, as well as the Patriarch's indecisiveness in this matter and tribal rivalry among the mountain Assyrians. The first steps towards mission work in the mountains by the Anglican and the American missionaries — including promises of British support by Badger and the building of a rather sturdy mission house by Grant — probably roused suspicion with regard to their motives with Kurds and Assyrians alike. As a result, both parties were led to take decisions that otherwise would have been thought unwise. The Patriarch certainly was not careful enough in his political reasoning, whereas the Kurds perhaps felt forced to act quickly, before foreign powers, favoring the Christians, would make further moves impossible.¹⁶

¹⁵ George Percy Badger, *The Nestorians and their Rituals: with the Narrative of a Mission to Mesopotamia and Coordistan in 1842-1844, and of a Late Visit to Those Countries in 1850 etc.*, 2 vols., London 1852. For his visit to the Patriarch, see I 244-51. Compare also J. F. Coakley, *The Church of the East and the Church of England. A History of the Archbishop of Canterbury's Assyrian Mission*, Oxford 1992, 18-54.

¹⁶ See John Joseph, *The Nestorians and their Muslim Neighbors. A Study of Western Influence on their Relations*, Princeton (New Jersey) 1961, 64-66. For the missionaries' view on the matter, see Thomas Laurie, *Dr. Grant and the Mountain Nestorians*, Bos-

The events caused the Patriarch's flight to Mosul, where he obtained help from Anglican and American missionaries alike. Another part of his family, among whom were his influential brothers, went to the Urmia plain, where the party arrived in the summer of 1844. Now the religious and civil leaders of the Assyrians were closer to the mission work of the Anglicans and Americans than they ever had been. In Mosul the Patriarch became better acquainted with Anglican, American, and Roman Catholic missionary activities, whereas in Urmia the Patriarch's brothers could observe the blooming center of the American mission.

The arrival of missionaries from other western countries, together with the upheaval caused by the attacks of Badr Khan Bey, thoroughly changed the conditions for the mission sponsored by the American Board. Soon the mission work would be criticized from several directions. This crisis forced the missionaries, after nearly ten years of relative peace, to rethink the means and objectives of their mission work.

3. THE CRISIS

In 1844 various slumbering conflicts surfaced. The first was a dispute about a church in Ardishai. The small Chaldean community in Ardishai apparently had no church of its own and therefore had decided to restore a dilapidated Assyrian church. In this they were assisted by the Lazarist missionaries. Mar Gauriel, the Assyrian bishop residing in Ardishai, opposed this move and asked the American missionaries for help. The latter considered the Catholic seizure of the church entirely illegal and decided to take action. Late in 1843, Mr. Stocking travelled to Teheran with three Assyrian bishops, Mar Gauriel, Mar Yohannan, and Mar Yosep, to plead for the Assyrians' case.¹⁷ The Russian ambassador, Count Medem,¹⁸ saw reason to ask not only for the return of the church into Assyrian hands, but also for the expulsion of the Lazarist missionaries, on account of their proselytizing activities towards the Eastern Christians. Stocking objected

ton 1853, and a letter from Laurie and Smith, *Missionary Herald* 41/4 (1846) 116-125 (13 April 1844).

¹⁷ *Missionary Herald* 40/8 (1844) 261-3, 'general letter from the mission' (28 March 1844).

¹⁸ On Count Medem (or De Medem in French sources), a Protestant from Kurland, see Hornus 1971, 293, n.77.

to the proposed expulsion, but did not succeed in changing the ambassador's mind.¹⁹ The Persian government granted both requests and government officials were sent to execute the orders. When these arrived in Urmia, the American missionaries were expected to share in the expenses, because of their involvement in the matter of the Ardishai church.²⁰ Understandably, the Lazarist missionaries blamed the American missionaries for their expulsion whereupon French diplomats in the capital tried to strike a blow at the Protestant mission.

Then, in the summer of 1844, another conflict emerged. Earlier in the year, the brothers of the Patriarch, living in a house in Degalla that was rented for them by the missionaries, had started to oppose the mission. The main reason for this seems to have been that the mission had not continued its financial allowance to the family, which in the eyes of the missionaries was less needy than when the family first arrived from the mountains. Opposition ceased when the missionaries succeeded in re-obtaining the Ardishai church for the Assyrians. The brothers of the Patriarch thereafter moved to Urmia and again lived in a house furnished by the mission. No regular allowance was paid to them, although occasional help was offered.

In June, when the teachers of the village schools had assembled for a conference, an anti-Roman Catholic tract which was being printed by the missionaries gave the Patriarch's brothers a new reason to oppose the mission.²¹ Although the tract aimed at attacking the Roman Catholic Church, some of the teachers at the conference understood it as opposing the Assyrian Church. Other complaints were heard too, like the fact that the teachers did not receive a salary during the conference. In the same month, the brothers of the Patriarch again asked for a stipend from the missionaries, which was denied to them. Thus the patriarchal family had ample reason to start opposition again. It ordered the teachers and the printers of the mission

¹⁹ See the above mentioned letter of 28 March 1844, published in the *Missionary Herald* 40/8, and Perkins's letter of 16 July 1845, ABC 16.8.1 vol. 3, no. 175, p. 28ff, where Perkins reviewed the case of the Ardishai church.

²⁰ According to the American missionary Jones (ABC 16.8.1 vol. 3, no. 191, 9 April 1845), \$700 was spent, including Stocking's trip to Teheran. On the Ardishai church, see also Hornus 1971, 296-301.

²¹ This tract goes by under a number of different titles, a.o., 'On the faith of the Protestants', 'On Papacy', and 'A Refutation of Popery'. For the history of this tract, see my 'The Missionaries' Assistants. The Role of Assyrians in the Development of Written Urmia Aramaic', *Journal of the Assyrian Academic Society* x,2 (1996) 3-17.

press to go home and no longer work for the mission. They obeyed, but most of them returned after the weekend. To prevent further difficulties, the missionaries then sent the teachers and printers home. The tract was no further distributed.²²

At this time, all four Assyrian bishops of the Urmia plain, Mar Gauriel, Mar Eliya, Mar Yohannan and Mar Yosep, received a stipend from the mission. This stipend was paid to enable the bishops to live on the mission premises and receive instruction, whereas they in turn taught languages to the missionaries and assisted them with various activities. The missionaries were aware of the fact that the amount of 'work' expected from the bishops was not entirely equivalent to the salary they received. In a letter discussing this matter they wrote: 'Here we would remark that it is not merely *for the labor which they actually perform* that we employ them; but that they may give up other business, and receive such instruction as they need to fit them for the work which, if not by a divine call, yet in an important sense, by the responsibility of their office, they are bound to perform: and we hope much more from such labors as they may one day perform, when they shall have become better qualified, than from any work which they *now* do.'²³

Earlier in the same letter, the missionaries hinted at the fact that there was an additional reason for the employment of the bishops. Rather than 'to seek the improvement of the people irrespective of the wishes and without the cooperation of the ecclesiastical order', they preferred 'to conciliate the ecclesiastics, and by laboring to improve both them and their people together, to give them the assurance that it was not our object to undermine their authority and subvert their episcopal organization.'

It is understandable, therefore, that the brothers of the Patriarch, although they did not have the rank of bishop, thought themselves worthy of a similar stipend in return for their support of the American mission. When, in the summer of 1844, the missionaries indicated that they were not willing to give the family more money than it

²² Stocking, ABC 16.8.1 vol. 3, no. 255 (26 July 1844).

²³ ABC 16.8.1 vol. 3, no. 159 (20 July 1844), signed by Holladay, Perkins, Stocking, Wright and Stoddard. On the employment of the bishops, see also the author's 'Gedelijk of geestelijk gewin? Assyrische bisschoppen op de loonlijst van een Amerikaanse zendingspost' [Material or Spiritual Gains? Assyrian Bishops being paid by American Missionaries], *Nederlands archief voor kerkgeschiedenis* [Dutch Review of Church History] 77-2 (1997) 241-257.

had received already, additional demands were brought forward. The family requested that books or tracts in the modern language should not be further distributed and that the Bible translation in the modern language should be based on the Classical Syriac Peshitta rather than on the Greek text. The family succeeded in persuading the four bishops under employment of the missionaries to support their demands and a delegation of bishops and priests was sent to the missionaries.

The missionaries, however, were reluctant to give in to the Patriarch's brothers. When the latter realized that they would not succeed in their course, their tone changed to open hostility. Bans were issued against every Assyrian who was working with the missionaries. The bishops were caught between the patriarchal family and the missionaries, and only non-clergy were able to resist the pressure of the family and stay with the missionaries.

The missionaries then decided to cease all operations for one year: the seminaries, the printing press and the village schools were all suspended, and no salaries were to be paid to the bishops any more. Stocking wrote in a letter of July 22, 1844: 'A temporary withdrawal of our labors, instead of being attended with any disastrous results to our Mission, might prove a salutary and wholesome lesson both to ecclesiastics and people, and furnish them with an opportunity of learning the nature of those advantages it is our desire to confer upon them.'²⁴

This decision did not settle the matter. In September the bishops were still paid by the mission. Meanwhile the Patriarch's brothers, in particular deacon Isaac, assumed 'a tone of increased hostility'. Mar Yohannan, who always had been a loyal supporter of the Protestant missionaries, went on a village tour to collect money for the patriarchal family. He harassed other Assyrians who stayed with the missionaries, whereas he also complied with Isaac's demands with regard to the printing press. The family further requested that all Assyrians working for the missionaries should 'kiss the hands of the Patriarch's Brothers', thereby 'acknowledge them as the heads of the people'. Soon afterwards, two of the remaining three bishops, Mar Gauriel and Mar Yosep, joined Mar Yohannan on his tour on behalf of the patriarchal family.

²⁴ ABC 16.8.1 vol. 3, no. 255.

Despite these mounting tensions, the missionaries stood by their decision to disregard the orders concerning the editions of books and tracts in the vernacular. So also, they did not change their mind concerning the stipends for one or two brothers. However, they decided not to interfere when their employees wanted to express their reverence for the patriarchal family, although the missionaries would not allow the patriarchal family to force them to acknowledge the family's authority. Early in October, the missionaries decided to bring the matter to a conclusion by setting clear conditions: they asked the bishops to return to the mission or otherwise to lose their salaries.²⁵

When the bishops did indeed return to the mission later in October, the mission had difficulties in deciding how to proceed. Were the bishops to be 'received in their former connection' and again receive their former salaries? Or should a different policy be adopted? The missionaries disagreed on this matter, in such a degree that Anderson in Boston had to be consulted. In the meantime the bishops were again employed by the mission. In February 1845, the Prudential Committee gave its consent to the employment of the bishops, provided that the mission paid 'only for services actually rendered, and for no services more than their fair and true value for the mission', and that 'care be taken to preserve the independence of the mission'.²⁶ By the time this decision reached the missionaries in Urmia, however, they themselves had decided not to employ the bishops any more on a regular basis, as we will see below.

Although the missionaries apparently did not stick rigidly to their decision to cease their operations for one year, most of their work was indeed either continued at a much smaller scale or closed down completely. Hardly anything was printed on the mission press, whereas the village schools were suspended for the whole season. The Male Seminary in Urmia remained closed during most of the winter and was reopened in the spring of 1845 on a different footing,

²⁵ Stoddard, ABC 16.8.1 vol. 3, no. 160 (24 Oct. 1844).

²⁶ Anderson, ABC 2.1.1 vol. 8, p. 32 (26 Febr. 1845). Compare also the *Annual Report* 36 (1845) 113-126, in which the troubles of these years are summarized for the general public. Anderson's earlier reactions on the matter of the employment of the bishops can be found in his letters of 15 Oct., 11 Nov., and 29 Nov. 1844, ABC 2.1.1 vol. 7, p. 230, 278, 313.

with fewer pupils who were more closely supervised.²⁷ It was only the Female Seminary that was reopened in the fall of 1844 as usual.²⁸

In the fall of 1844, a new problem emerged: the American missionaries were accused of proselytizing. French officials in Teheran, who had been closely watching the American missionaries since the latter's small victory in Ardishai, asked for an investigation into their activities. This was granted, and two Persian officers were sent to Urmia. According to the American missionaries, these officers were then bribed by the Lazarists and were advised to question only those people who were critical about the Protestant mission. The resulting report was believed to be very negative, and in November Perkins and Stocking decided to travel to Teheran to consult the Russian ambassador. In Tabriz they learned from 'English gentlemen' that the report was indeed as hostile as they had apprehended, and they decided to proceed to Teheran as quickly as possible.²⁹

There they were able to convince Count Medem 'that we have never built a church in this country — having our own worship in our private dwellings; and that our sole object is to enlighten and improve the Nestorians, but by no means to proselyte them',³⁰ that no proselytes had been made up to date, and that they did not distribute books that attacked the Assyrian Church, perhaps apart from the tract 'on Papacy', that 'we ourselves rather regret having printed'.³¹ Their explicit rejection of any form of proselytism was accepted by the Russian ambassador and he offered them his support at the Persian court. Count Medem succeeded in having the accusation of proselytism removed. On December 19th, Perkins and Stocking started their journey back to Urmia. Severe winter weather accounted for a difficult journey, but they arrived home safely at January 4th, 1845.

When Anderson, writing on behalf of the Prudential Committee in Boston, heard of the missionaries' clear denial of any proselytizing activities, he expressed his great concern about their course. To him it seemed that the missionaries had made considerable 'concessions

²⁷ Stoddard, ABC 16.8.1 vol. 3, no. 269 (19 May 1845).

²⁸ Stocking, ABC 16.7.1 vol. 3, no. 257 (21 Febr. 1845).

²⁹ So Perkins in his journal, ABC 16.8.1 vol. 3, nr. 252 (14 November).

³⁰ Id., 27 November.

³¹ Perkins and Stocking, ABC 16.8.1 vol. 3, no. 250 (27 Nov. 1844). See also nt. 18.

in words on the subject of *proselyting*'.³² It was hard for Anderson to understand that Perkins and Stocking did not have to make any concessions, but had been frank with the Russian ambassador as to the object of their mission. At this point, Perkins and Stocking evidently differed with Anderson. They did not see any reason to separate those affected by the Protestant preaching from the existing Assyrian Church, whereas Anderson thought it a matter of principle that the missionaries at any time should be free to organize their 'converts' — a word the missionaries in Urmia expressly avoided — in separate organizations.³³

These attacks on the mission all came from the outside. Unfortunately, however, these troubles also fuelled a slumbering conflict between the members of the mission in Urmia. The conflict circled around different opinions on the preferred policy of the mission and had everything to do with the diverging policy of the Nestorian Mission with regard to proselytism and the formation of separate Protestant communities.

The first tangible result of these differences of opinion was Willard Jones's decision to ask for permission to return to the United States in June 1844. Although Jones asserts that the reason for this request was his belief that the 'mission is based upon principles [...] of *worldly policy*',³⁴ and that far too much 'conformity in views and practice to Eastern Customs' existed among the other members of the mission,³⁵ it seems that his inability to adapt to life in Persia and his lack of success in learning the languages of the region played a more decisive role in the matter.³⁶

Before in October 1844 a decision had to be made whether to re-employ the bishops after they had sided with the Patriarch, Jones, who had been a stern opponent of their re-employment, had left the mission. As mentioned above, the missionaries were not able to reach a unanimous decision; with a majority of one vote only the bishops were to be 'received in their former connection'. To fully inform the Prudential Committee on the matter, they let both Perkins, who favored the decision, and James L. Merrick, who was against it, write a

³² ABC 2.1.1 vol. 8, p. 32 (26 Febr. 1845).

³³ See, e.g., Holladay's reply to Anderson, ABC 16.8.1 vol. 3, no. 173 (22 May 1845).

³⁴ ABC 16.8.1 vol. 3, no. 199.

³⁵ ABC 16.8.1 vol. 3, no. 202 (27 Feb. 1845).

³⁶ Perkins, ABC 16.8.1 vol. 3, nos. 231 (5 Augustus 1844) and 175 (16 July 1845).

letter to Anderson.³⁷ According to Merrick, he had Breath, the printer, and Wright, the physician, on his side. Holladay, Stocking, and Stoddard agreed with Perkins.³⁸

Merrick was the most outspoken of the dissenting members.³⁹ He had been added to the Nestorian Mission in 1841, after the Prudential Committee in Boston had decided to end Merrick's mission among the Persians in Tabriz. Merrick never really consented to his removal to Urmia and never cordially participated in the work among the Assyrians. As much as possible, he limited his activities to the Persian-speaking Muslims. He ran a small school for Persian boys and was engaged in the translation of an apologetic work into Persian. This was permitted to him by the Board and his colleagues in Urmia, provided that he would also take part in the work among the Assyrians. Merrick, however, allowed his work among the Muslims to take up all his time, leaving him no opportunity to learn even one of the languages of the Assyrians. This made it impossible for him to engage in the preaching activities of his colleagues among the Assyrians. Since preaching among the Persian Muslims was considered too dangerous, Merrick refrained from preaching completely, at a time when Anderson, the secretary of the Prudential Committee, had come to the conclusion that preaching should be considered the single most important task of every missionary of the American Board.⁴⁰

³⁷ Merrick, ABC 16.8.1 vol. 3, no. 209 (15 October 1844), and Perkins, ABC 16.8.1 vol. 3, no. 230 (22 October 1844). Compare also two letters from Stoddard, one on behalf of the mission and one private, ABC 16.8.1 vol. 3, nos. 160 and 270 (both dated to 24 October 1844).

³⁸ An earlier letter (ABC 16.8.1 vol. 3, no. 159, 26 July 1844) is signed by Holladay, Perkins, Stocking, Wright, and Stoddard, including a note that these members of the mission 'concur in the general views herein expressed'. This letter, commenting on Jones's decision to leave the mission, cautiously defends the then current policy of the mission of employing the bishops. Merrick, Jones, and Breath apparently did not agree. Thus Wright was not unconditionally at Merrick's side. Breath, although he agreed with Merrick and Jones, did not leave the mission, and apparently managed to maintain good relations with its other members.

³⁹ On Merrick, see further Clifton Jackson Phillips, *Protestant America and the Pagan World, The first Half Century of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, 1810-1860* (Harvard East Asian Monographs 32) Cambridge 1969, 147-8, who points to Merrick's importance for the work among Muslims. David H. Finnie, in *Pioneers East. The Early American Experience in the Middle East*, Cambridge 1976, 221-224, has been the only one so far to pay attention to the conflict in which Merrick was involved, attributing most of it to 'personality problems'.

⁴⁰ Anderson 1844, 32. See further R. Pierce Beaver, *To Advance the Gospel. Selections from the Writings of Rufus Anderson*, Grand Rapids 1967, Grand Rapids (Michigan) 73-88 and 'Rufus Anderson, 1796-1889. To Evangelize, Not Civilize', in Gerald H.

This alone was enough reason for Anderson to consider seriously having Merrick return to the United States.⁴¹

Merrick's letter of October 15, 1844 presents a clear picture of his opinions on the Nestorian Mission and the employment of the bishops. The first point he makes is that 'pecuniary interests' all along played an important role for the Assyrians who worked for the mission. Merrick says that money was paid for permission to establish schools, to preach in a certain village, and, of course, for the support of the bishops. According to Merrick the bishops had not been sincere in their sympathies with the mission, and this was proved by their siding with the patriarchal family when its members started opposition. This opposition, although it certainly was based also on some principled objections, from the very start was meant to acquire financial support for the family. On this Merrick and Perkins agreed. Merrick, however, claims not to understand why the other missionaries drew the line at this point: 'When all the bishops and many of the priests and deacons on the plain of Oroomiah have been employed and paid in such a manner as to make it for their pecuniary interest to favor the operations of the Mission; when such is the fact, why did we reject the patriarchal family?' The argument that the Patriarch's brothers were clearly driven by the wish to control the work of the mission, while the bishops and other clergy were sympathetic to the mission, did not convince Merrick. For him, it was impossible to acknowledge any difference between the earlier policy of paying the bishops and the arrangement wished for by the patriarchal family: 'If our general policy of attaching influential men to us by pecuniary ties is good and scriptural, I for one see no sufficient cause why any honest jury in christendom should not bring us in guilty of wilfully and wofully hindering the Gospel where we proferred to be laboring for its promotion.'

The main point of Merrick's letter is not, of course, to defend a policy of 'attaching influential men to us', be it by pecuniary ties or any other means. After having reminded the reader that neither Jesus nor the apostles used any money to influence the important Jews of their time, Merrick presents his main argument against re-employ-

Anderson (ed.), *Mission Legacies. Biographical Studies of Leaders of the Modern Missionary Movement*, New York 1994, and William R. Hutchison, *Errand to the World. American Protestant Thought and Foreign Missions*, Chicago/London 1987, 77-90.

⁴¹ ABC 2.1.1 vol. 7, p. 288ff (15 Nov. 1844).

ment of the bishops: the bishops *are* not and never *have* been critical of the 'old forms' and 'superstitions' that are part of the Assyrian Church. Therefore, 'to work by, and with, and in the name of the bishops, is cautiously to inculcate what they believe in common with us, and to beware of touching on their authority and venerable forms.' It was the mission's close connection to the bishops that prevented the missionaries from criticizing various aspects of Assyrian Christianity which, at least in Merrick's opinion, should have been criticized. These included the keeping of the many fasts, the episcopal organization, prayers for the dead, prayers to saints and the Virgin Mary, as well as the lack of true 'repentance'. According to Merrick, the retraction of the tract 'On the Protestant Faith' constituted another example of too much leniency towards the Assyrian clergy. Finally, Merrick expresses his fear of fostering 'hypocrisy and falsehood', thus encouraging conversions for the sake of money. Such 'fainthearted converts' will never be able to evangelize the 'proud and subtle Musulmân', as was the ultimate goal of the mission among the Eastern Christians, 'and when they will be able to grapple the mysteries of Islâm, is more than mortal can save conjecture'.

The letter written by Perkins, October 22, 1844, presents a completely different assessment of the situation. Perkins thinks that the patriarchal family, when they realized that they were losing their grip on the Assyrian people of the Urmia plain, did whatever it took to have the bishops on their side again. The difficulties of the bishops in manoeuvring between the two parties should be treated with some leniency, because they, contrary to the patriarchal family, were not really opposed to the mission. According to Perkins, the re-employment of the bishops, after the patriarchal family seemed to have given up trying to dictate the work of the American mission, can only be for the benefit of the whole work, even if the bishops have not completely severed themselves from the family.

Perkins then proceeds to refute the charge of Merrick and Jones of the 'worldliness' of employing bishops, 'of having sought to *buy influence* in the employment of these men', virtually 'to have bribed them to our interests'. His first argument is that the '*employment* [...] was *Providential*', which is as much as to say that Perkins denies having deliberately sought to employ the bishops to buy influence, but that in all cases, especially in those of Mar Yohannan and Mar Gauriel, there were good reasons for employing them at that particular time. He further mentions that the salaries of the bishops are not particu-

larly high, from 96 to 125 dollars a year. Their employment also provided an excellent opportunity to educate the bishops, who were 'docile men', and who did what they could for the mission. However, Perkins is so honest as to admit that other reasons for the employment of the bishops existed. The fact that for some tasks the bishops perhaps were not the best qualified or the most bright assistants they could wish for, was made up for by the fact that there were '*very important advantages*' to their connection to the mission: it inspires 'confidence in us and in our work, among the entire people'. And he adds that this 'connection forestalls an organized clerical opposition', makes it possible 'to extend our *educational* efforts to the mass of the people', and 'also opens to us unbounded facilities for preaching the gospel in their churches.' And although Perkins's letter shows that he is aware of the danger of the bishops 'requiring of us too much deference to their office or opinions', until that happens, he sees no reason to make any changes.

Perkins concludes his letter by mentioning some of the undesirable effects that could result from breaking the connection with the bishops. He expects that the mission would be forced to close many of its schools and to stop the printing press. All efforts for a gradual reformation of the venerable Assyrian Church will have been in vain. And not unimportantly, at the very moment of his writing this letter, both the 'Puseyites', i.e., the Anglican missionaries, and the French Roman Catholics are trying to gain influence among the Assyrians, whereas Russian protection cannot be counted upon forever. Perkins stresses the fact that the well-being of the Nestorian Mission is entirely dependent on its good relations with the Assyrian people and their bishops.

One could argue that these two letters represent two different opinions on missionary methods or on missionary goals. Is one allowed to pay influential people when these payments can easily be interpreted as payments for their actual support and even protection of the mission? In view of the present article, it is more important, however, that these different opinions on mission policy originate in diametrically opposed judgments of the actual situation of the Assyrians and their Church. Merrick was decidedly negative about the Assyrian Church and its customs. He did not believe this Church could be reformed into an 'Evangelical body', and he hardly seems to have wanted it. His negative attitude towards the Assyrians contrasts sharply with his admiration for Persian Muslim civilization. Merrick,

like Jones, avoided adapting himself to the Assyrian way of living and did not even learn the Assyrians' language. Perkins, on the other hand, was much more sympathetic to the Assyrians. He believed that reformation of the Old Church was possible and was indeed on its way. In his letters and books, he gives the impression of enjoying life among the Assyrians, he spoke and wrote their language and gradually learned to appreciate their culture. In the early years of his stay in Persia, he wrote that it is of prime importance for a missionary 'not to offend the people whom he [i.e., the missionary] would benefit, in the common matters of life, as well as in relation to their religious customs and prejudices'.⁴² Although Perkins certainly was critical of many of the customs and beliefs of the Assyrians, and he, as much as Merrick and Jones, could be criticised for his lack of real understanding of Assyrian Church, his main concern was not to eradicate the Assyrian's religious forms as quickly as possible, but rather to slowly enlarge the missionaries' influence on the Assyrians by cooperating as much as possible with the Assyrian clergy. The fact that an independent Protestant Church came into existence less than two years after Perkins's leaving the mission field can hardly be considered a coincidence. He certainly was one of the persons who had always opposed this separation.

The conflict over the bishops' employment lost much of its sting after Merrick was forced to return to the United States in the summer of the next year. In the letters explaining this decision, Anderson is careful not to present the conflict as the main reason for Merrick's return. His main argument is the fact that Merrick had refrained from preaching among the Assyrians because of language problems, without seriously trying to learn one of their languages. Merrick's disagreement with the other members of the mission is mentioned as an additional factor only.⁴³ Of course Merrick felt that his deviant opinions on the mission policy had been the main reason for his recall,⁴⁴ but Anderson's letters and his views on mission policy provide sufficient reason to believe that the Board's secretary was primarily concerned with the fact that Merrick did not partake in preaching. In fact, as to the employment of the bishops, the possibil-

⁴² Perkins 1843, 356 (8 Dec 1838).

⁴³ ABC 2.1.1 vol. 8, p. 32ff, in a letter to the mission (26 Febr. 1845) and to Merrick (27 Febr.).

⁴⁴ ABC 16.81 vol. 3, no. 213 (19 May 1845).

ity of reviving the Assyrian Church, and the need for separate Protestant communities, one is inclined to think that Anderson should have been on Merrick's side rather than on that of the other missionaries.

4. AFTERMATH

Early in 1845, the situation started to improve. John and priest Auraham, two Assyrian assistants of the missionaries, had been summoned to Tabriz to testify on the American mission. They had confirmed before a governmental committee that the mission certainly was not proselytizing. John is reported to have said: 'These ten years, that I have been with them, they have never said to me, change your customs, or do not fast, or give up your old religion. I have seen only good in them.'⁴⁵ The opposition of the patriarchal family became less violent and shortly after Merrick left in the early summer, the missionaries made some important changes in their arrangements with the bishops. Whether the general improvement of the mission's outlook constituted the main reason for this, or whether the missionaries only when Merrick was absent were able to discuss the matter freely and openly is hard to tell from the sources, but the resulting agreement appears to be quite close to what Merrick must have had in mind. Fixed stipends were not to be paid any more, whereas presents were to be given in return for actual assistance. At the same time, the bishops were cordially invited to visit the missionaries and reside on the mission premises as long as they wanted. The bishops took it better than the missionaries had expected, the latter noting that only Mar Gauriel expressed some 'childish dissatisfaction with the change.'⁴⁶

In a letter of February 1845, the missionaries again brought up the matter of the Bible translation. The Prudential Committee earlier had asked them to translate from the Greek text, rather than from the Peshitta, as had been the missionaries' initial proposal. In view of the past disturbances in the relations of the missionaries with the ecclesiastics and the supposedly ongoing influence of Anglicans on the patriarchal family, Perkins feared that a translation from the Greek would create unnecessary disturbances. The Prudential Committee,

⁴⁵ Wright, ABC 16.8.1 vol. 3, no. 282 (28 Febr. 1845).

⁴⁶ Wright, ABC 16.8.1 vol. 3, no. 176 (18 July 1845), Perkins, ABC 16.8.1 vol. 3, no. 237 (12 August 1845).

after some further correspondence, gave its consent and the translation was made accordingly.⁴⁷ In the meantime, Breath had provided the press with new printing types and in 1845 a few beautiful books were printed. Two additional types were used in 1846 to print the edition of the New Testament.⁴⁸

In the summer of 1845 the first signs of a revival among the Assyrians of Geogtapa became visible. This was one of the villages where the above mentioned John and Auraham and had been preaching frequently. Early in 1846, a full-fledged revival took place among the students of the Female Seminary, which soon afterwards was followed by a similar movement among the students of the Male Seminary. Now the missionaries could point to concrete results of their mission work. This had become all the more important as Merrick continued to oppose the mission policy after his return to America. When, in the fall of 1846, he failed to receive satisfaction from the Prudential Committee, he first turned to the President of the American Board, Theodore Frelinghuysen,⁴⁹ and after the latter had indicated that he did not want to become involved in the quarrel, Merrick sought a wider audience. In November 1846, he published an article in *The Boston Recorder*, a weekly paper that was widely read by the American Christian public and regularly published on the missions of the American Board. In this article, Merrick voiced his objections against the policy of the Nestorian Mission. With the news of the revivals having reached America, Merrick stressed the necessity of organizing separate Protestant churches, in view of the superstitious practices in the Assyrian Church. The missionaries in Urmia were pressed by Anderson to furnish a reply, and this was published in June of the following year. In July Merrick received another chance to explain his position, after which the editors apparently put

⁴⁷ See Piet Dirksen, 'The Urmia Edition of the Peshitta: The Story behind the Text', in Alexander Rofé, *Textus. Studies of the Hebrew University Bible Project*, vol. XVIII, Jerusalem 1995, 157-167 and my *From a Spoken to a Written Language. The Introduction and Development of Literary Urmia Aramaic in the Nineteenth Century* [Ph.D. Leiden 1995].

⁴⁸ For a discussion of these types and some specimens, see J.F. Coakley, 'Edward Breath and the Typography of Syriac', *Harvard Library Bulletin* 6/4 (1995) 41-64, specif. 50-54.

⁴⁹ ABC 16.8.1 vol. 3, no. 222 (24 Nov. 1845) and 223 (undated).

an end to the discussion.⁵⁰ Merrick continued his search for a public vindication of his opinions by publishing his side of the story, thus providing material for ongoing discussion.⁵¹

5. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

When in 1844 the Nestorian Mission in Urmia had to deal with opposition from the Assyrian clergy, the Persian government, and Roman Catholic and Anglican missionaries at the same time, considerable differences of opinion between its members came to light. The result of the ensuing discussion was that two of its members, Jones and Merrick, returned to America. The missionaries in Urmia continued their work on much the same footing as before, although for practical reasons some changes were introduced. Contrary to Merrick and Jones, Perkins and his colleagues believed in the possibility of revival in the Assyrian Church and in the good will of most of the clergy who worked with the mission. They aimed at reform of the existing communities rather than organizing the 'converts' into separate communities.

In this, the Nestorian Mission differed from most of the other missions in West Asia, where in the forties of the nineteenth century important steps were taken towards separate Protestant organizations. What constituted the difference between these missions in the Ottoman Empire and the mission in Persia?

Most important in my opinion is the fact that the missionaries in Urmia were far more positive about the Assyrian Church than those in Constantinople or Beirut were about the Armenian, Greek Orthodox or Greek Catholic Church. They earnestly believed in the possibility of reform, long after the missionaries in Turkey had lost their faith in it. In this the missionaries in Urmia were helped by the fact that many Assyrians were willing to work with them, including a considerable number of clergy. Even when the patriarchal family started opposition, it did not succeed in changing this basic positive attitude of the Assyrians. That the reasons for this positive attitude were not purely spiritual seems clear. One can hardly expect a people

⁵⁰ Merrick, *The Boston Recorder*, 19 Nov. 1846, Anderson, 3 Dec. 1846, Perkins, Stocking, Wright and Stoddard, 24 June 1847, Merrick, 29 July 1847, and an anonymous contribution of 5 August 1847.

⁵¹ J. L. Merrick, *An Appeal to the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions [Twelve Years in the service of the Board]*, Springfield 1847.

in difficult circumstances like the Assyrians of Persia not to see the benefits of their relation with missionaries from western countries. In this respect, the Christians in Persia probably were more in need of help than those in the western part of the Ottoman Empire.

The present article also indicates that the positive attitude towards the Assyrians should be attributed to the 'first brother' Justin Perkins in particular. He was the central person of the Nestorian Mission from 1835 to 1869. As mentioned above, it was almost immediately after his return to the United States that the final steps were taken towards an independent Protestant Church. Further research into the later period is needed, but perhaps it is mainly due to Perkins that, even after, in the fifties, a number of local churches had adopted many Protestant characteristics, these congregations continued to be part of the Assyrian Church rather than constituting a new Church.

A few words on Anderson's contribution to the discussion should conclude this article. The developments in Urmia in the mid-forties provide a good example of the implementation of Anderson's ideas about the centrality of preaching. On the one hand, it was Merrick's apparent lack of interest in preaching which constituted the main reason for his recall and subsequent dismissal. In fact, even the discussions of the earlier years between Merrick and Anderson on mission among the Persian Muslims can be seen in this light. The lack of possibilities for public and formal preaching among Muslims prevented Anderson from seeing any opportunities there. On the other hand, I assume that the abundant preaching activities of Perkins and his colleagues among the Assyrians induced Anderson to be basically positive about the Nestorian Mission, however unconventional this mission might have been in his eyes. The mission's rejection of proselytism, its employment of the bishops, its use of the Peshitta — it all must have weighed heavily on Anderson's mind. But the fact that preaching constituted such an important part of the mission's activities sufficed to make Anderson give permission for more controversial activities, even before in 1845 the news of the first revivals reached Boston. It was precisely Anderson's emphasis on preaching as the central activity of every missionary of the American Board — a comparatively new element in missionary thinking of the nineteenth century — which constituted the main reason for the Board's leniency with the 'conservative' policy of the Nestorian Mission. Without the freedom of preaching which was allowed to the missionaries in

Urmia by the Assyrian clergy, the history of this mission probably would have been rather different.

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