

# The Missionaries' Assistants

## The Role of Assyrians in the Development of Written Urmia Aramaic<sup>1</sup>

Dr. Heleen Murre-van den Berg  
University of Leiden

### 1. *Introduction*

In the thirties of the last century, the vernacular language of the Assyrian Christians of the Urmia plain in Persia became a written language. And not only was this language written for the first time, but also schools were established and, after a printing press was put to work in 1840, a large number of books distributed.<sup>2</sup> The initiators of this new literary tradition were American Protestant missionaries, sent by the *American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions* (ABCFM) in Boston.<sup>3</sup> These missionaries were assisted by local men and women, and it is the contribution of the Assyrians themselves that is the main topic of this paper. Attention will be paid also to the way in which the American missionaries and the Assyrians cooperated.<sup>4</sup>

Before going into the history of the written language in the last century, I want to draw attention to the fact that although the initiative of the American missionaries announced a new era in the history of writing this Neo-Aramaic language, it certainly was not the beginning of it. First of all, Classical Syriac

---

1. The research for this article was made possible by a stipend from the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research (NWO). Permission to quote from the archival material of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, now in Houghton Library, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass., was provided to the author by Dr. David Hirano from the United Church Board for World Ministries in Cleveland, Ohio.

2. The 'Assyrian' language, as it is called by its speakers, consists of a number of closely related Northeastern Neo-Aramaic dialects. In the nineteenth century the dialect of Persian Urmia served as the standard dialect, whereas in the twentieth century the Iraqi have dialects gained importance in the standardized language.

3. For the history of writing and printing in the last century, see Rudolf Macuch, *Geschichte der spät- und neusyrischen Literatur*, Berlin 1976 and H.L. Murre-van den Berg, *From a Spoken to a Written Language. The Introduction and Development of Literary Urmia Aramaic in the Nineteenth Century*, Ph.D. thesis Leiden 1995.

4. The most important early source on Assyrian co-workers of the Protestant mission in Urmia is *Nestorian Biography: Being Sketches of Pious Nestorians who Have Died at Oroomiah, Persia, by Missionaries of the A.B.C.F.M.*, Boston 1857, reprint Chicago 1993.

(*leshana atiqā*) had always been used by the learned men and women among the Assyrians, for writing as well as for reading.<sup>5</sup> When the missionaries arrived, practically all of those who could read were part of the clergy, not so much because the clergy was obliged to learn to read, but rather because those who were interested in acquiring a certain education became deacons or priests. The most learned men were said to be found in the Hakkari mountains, west of Urmia.

A few schools existed before the missionaries arrived, the most interesting being that of the Muqdasi (pilgrim) Hormezd in Geogtapa. Hormezd, who had only daughters, wanted his nephew Auraham to be educated. For four years he employed a priest from Salmas to teach this boy, while a couple of other boys joined the lessons. When this priest left, Hormezd employed Qasha (priest) Dinkha of Tiary, who was said to be one of the most learned men among his people. In the meantime Hormezd's first wife had died and he had married a much younger woman. She bore him a son, who began his education at his father's school. When the American missionaries arrived, Hormezd wanted his son, Yohannan, to be further educated by the missionaries, and he gave himself no rest until one of the missionaries took the boy, then about 10 years old, into his home. Hormezd himself never learned to read. He probably thought that he was too old.<sup>6</sup>

Apart from the ongoing use of the old language, the Assyrians of Alqosh and Telqepe had started a new tradition. In the late fifteenth century, they had started to write in the modern language and they continued to do so up to the nineteenth century. Apparently there was not much contact between the Assyrians of Iraq and those of Iran, and there is no evidence that the writings of Alqosh influenced the creation of the modern language in Urmia. Only in the second half of the nineteenth century do we find references to texts from Alqosh. It is even possible that the Gospel translation published by the missionaries in 1873 in the Alqosh dialect was based on an early Gospel translation from that region, rather than being a translation made by the missionaries and their assistants.<sup>7</sup>

We may conclude that there certainly was a literary tradition among the Assyrians at the time of the arrival of the American missionaries, even if its use was restricted to a limited number of people. This literary tradition was stronger in the mountains than on the Urmia plain, and stronger in the Alqosh area than in the

---

5. It is uncertain how many women in earlier times had been able to acquire a certain education. When the missionaries arrived, they were informed that the only woman that could read was Helena, the sister of Patriarch Shimon XVII Auraham. See Justin Perkins, *Historical Sketch of the Mission to the Nestorians*, New York 1862, 10.

6. For a description of the life of Muqdasi Hormezd, see *Nestorian Biography*, 184-87. On his second wife, Khanumjan, and the story of their apparently happy marriage, see *Nestorian Biography*, 203-212.

7. So Macuch, see *Geschichte*, 90-91.

Hakkari mountains.

## **2. Change: the arrival of the American missionaries**

In 1831 two American missionaries, Rev. E. Smith and Rev. H.G. O. Dwight, visited the Urmia region, to find out what would be good places to start new missions. They were amicably received by the Assyrians living in the villages around Urmia. The Assyrians were enthusiastic about the idea of having missionaries come to live among them and they strongly supported the plans for the production of books and the enlarging of the educational system. This led Smith and Dwight, having returned to America, to advise the Prudential Committee of the ABCFM to send missionaries to this area.

When planning for the new mission in Urmia, the secretary of the Board, Rufus Anderson, together with Smith and Dwight, carefully considered what the objective of the new mission should be. They came to the conclusion that the goal of the missionaries should be to contribute to a renewal of the Church of the East and to the restoration of its former glory, as it existed in the time of the great missions to Mongolia and China. The object of the mission certainly should not be to establish a separate Protestant Church. In order to stimulate a revival or reformation of the ancient Assyrian church, the people connected to the ABCFM thought a renewed knowledge of the Scriptures of prime importance. Next to preaching, therefore, teaching people to read and making the Bible available to all was considered to be the most important task of the missionaries.

In November of 1835, Rev. Justin Perkins, joined by a physician, Dr. Asahel Grant, and both their wives, opened the mission in Urmia. These four people were the first of a long line of American missionaries who worked in Urmia and the villages on the plain, until at the end of World War I the mission had to be closed. In 1922 some missionaries were able to return, but the mission was closed for good at the order of Reza Shah in 1934. The missionaries who were most important for the development of the literary language, including teaching and printing, will be mentioned in the following.

Most important and most influential was the above mentioned Justin Perkins. He was the first to arrive in the field, and he stayed there, with two breaks, until 1869, when he returned to the US. There he died on December 31 of that same year, at the age of 64. Since his main occupation always had been with literary matters, he perhaps made the most long-lasting contribution to the formation of the modern written language. His most impressive works are the translations of the New and Old Testament (1846 and 1852) and his commentaries on the books of Genesis, Exodus, and Daniel, which he wrote during his last years in Urmia.<sup>8</sup>

---

8. On Perkins, see Justin Perkins, *A Residence of Eight Years in Persia among the Nestorian Christians with Notices of the Muhammedans*, Andover 1843, and Henry Martin Perkins, *Life of Rev. Justin Perkins, D.D., Pioneer missionary to Persia*, Chicago 1887.

Perkins probably also took the initiative to publish the magazine *Zahrir d-Bahra* (*Rays of Light*), which from 1849 onwards was distributed among the Assyrians. This was one of the very first magazines to be published in Persia.

To give an impression of how Perkins was remembered by the Assyrians who knew him well, a few lines from a sermon delivered after the news of Perkins's death reached Urmia will suffice. Shamasha Yonan from Ada was the preacher.

And, my friends, in this connection [i.e., Perkins's coming to the Assyrians], let us think somewhat about the character of Mr. Perkins. Was he not like a father calling his children to him, did he not call everybody to him, and did we not grow up on his lap? To which of us did he ever say "Go"? Like a father, he did not want his family to be dispersed, but rather that all of them should be close to him; so was Mr. Perkins. He thought of the whole people as his family. He did not want one of his children to be far from home.<sup>9</sup>

About his work on the Bible translation and his commentaries Yonan added:

Nights of labor and days of great toil passed by in their preparation. I worked with him from the beginning of the translations of the New and Old Testament, I saw his work, how he worked on these volumes night and day. Look in every house, in every church, from the mountains to the plains and valleys, from the hamlets to the villages and towns: the labor of Mr. Perkins has filled them with the Holy Scriptures.<sup>10</sup>

The person second in literary matters only to Perkins is David Tappan Stoddard. He died in Urmia at the age of 41, after having labored there from 1843 till 1857.<sup>11</sup> In this relatively short period he made an important contribution with regard to the language. He was the first to make a grammar of the modern language, which appeared in 1855.<sup>12</sup> This grammar was widely distributed in America and Europe, and gave Western linguists a chance to learn about this hitherto unknown language. He also compiled a dictionary, which, although it was never published, formed the

---

9. Shamasha Yonan of Ada, *Sermon in Memory of Perkins* (*Karozuta `al Mota d-Perkins Sahab, men Shamasha Yonan d-`Ada*) [Urmia 1870], 3.

10. Yonan d-Ada, *Sermon in Memory of Perkins*, 12.

11. On Stoddard, see Joseph P. Thompson, D.D., *Memoir of Rev. David Tappan Stoddard, Missionary to the Nestorians*, New York 1858.

12. D. T. Stoddard, *Grammar of the Modern Syrian Language as Spoken in Oroomiah, Persia, and in Koordistan*, London 1855 (published also in the *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, vol. 5/6 (1856)).

basis of the *Dictionary of the Dialects of Vernacular Syriac* by Arthur John Maclean which was published in 1901.<sup>13</sup> It is likely that he also contributed to the grammar and spelling book that appeared in Urmia for use in the schools, aside from several publications under his own name, of which the *Outline of Theology (Ktaba d-Te'ologia)*, which appeared after his death in 1857, is most impressive. He was further occupied with the supervision of the Male Seminary, first in Urmia, later in Seir, and as such played an important part in the training of the Assyrian assistants.

William R. Stocking, who was mainly occupied with the supervision of the Female Seminary, also contributed to the press, just as Albert L. Holladay and Dr. Austin H. Wright, the latter being a medical doctor, who alongside his regular work did much in assisting Perkins in later revisions of the Bible translations.

Very important for the success of the printing press was the work of Edward Breath. He arrived in Urmia together with the press, in 1840. Apart from his work in supervising the work of the press, he devoted much time to the cutting of the beautiful Syriac type fonts which make the books and Bibles from the press such a pleasure to read. He died in Urmia in 1861.<sup>14</sup>

All the missionaries mentioned thus far worked in Urmia during the first twenty to thirty years of the Protestant mission. The later history of the Protestant mission and its activities in the field of writing, printing and education deserve separate attention. But a brief mention is in order concerning the most important achievements of the later years. The first missionary that has to be introduced in that regard is the Rev. Benjamin W. Labaree. He worked in Urmia from 1860 to 1906. Under his supervision, the Bible translation of the early period was thoroughly revised. The work was started somewhere in the eighties, and resulted in the edition of 1893. It was printed by the American Bible Society in New York and it is this version which is reprinted until the present day. Another influential missionary of these later days was William Ambrose Shedd. He taught at the College in Urmia, was editor of the magazine *Zahrira d-Bahra*, and was actively involved in attempts to regulate further the spelling of the modern language. He was interested also in ancient manuscripts, both in Classical Syriac and in the modern language and had his pupils copy these manuscripts in class.<sup>15</sup>

### 3. Assyrian co-workers

---

13. Manuscript copies of the grammar and the dictionary are at Beinecke Library, Yale University, New Haven CT.

14. On Edward Breath and his work for the mission press, see the forthcoming article by J.F. Coakley, "Edward Breath and the Typography of Syriac", to be published in *Harvard Library Bulletin*.

15. On Shedd, see Mary Lewis Shedd, *The Measure of a Man, The Life of William Ambrose Shedd, Missionary to Persia*, New York 1922.

From the very beginning, the American missionaries were well received by the Assyrians, both by lay people and by a considerable part of the clergy. The first teachers of Perkins were Qasha Auraham and Mar Yohannan, and bishops, priests and deacons continued to play an important role in the work of the mission.

Apart from the active assistance of clergymen, many Assyrians supported the work of the missionaries by sending their children to the new schools and by attending the meetings that were organized. This is not to say that the Protestant mission at times was not actively opposed, as it was a couple of times by the Patriarchal family. The Persian government certainly would have considered expelling the missionaries if their presence caused unrest among Assyrians; in short, if the Assyrians had opposed them, the missionaries might well have been sent packing. The fact that this never happened suggests that a majority of the Assyrians of the Urmia plain were not opposed to the Protestant missionary presence.

With regard to the introduction of the written language, two groups of Assyrian co-workers can be distinguished. The first group consists of those connected with the printing press, like translators, writers, and printers, and the second of those working in the field of education, those who taught others to read and write the modern language.

#### ***Translators, writers, and printers***

Two of the translators who worked with Perkins on the translation of the New Testament were Qasha Dinkha and Shamasha Eshoo. Both came from the mountains, Dinkha from Tiary and Eshoo from Gawar. Dinkha worked with the missionaries from 1837 onwards and made a large contribution to the first productions of the press, up to the translation of the New Testament. After that he was less involved with the press and more with preaching, often in the mountain villages. As mentioned earlier, Dinkha was one of the few educated people among the Assyrians and had taught in the school set up by Hormezd.<sup>16</sup> Eshoo worked as a corrector at the press, and he also was a good calligrapher. He probably assisted in making reading materials before the arrival of the printing press. He died in 1845.

Dinkha's work on the Bible translation was taken over by two young men, Shamasha Yosep of Degala and Shamasha Yonan of Ada. They had been educated in the seminary run by the missionaries. Both of them were good scholars, not only in the field of the modern language and Classical Syriac, but also in of Hebrew, Greek, English, and Persian. In November of 1846, Perkins wrote a letter to the secretary of the Board on the occasion of the publication of the New Testament edition. In this letter he mentions these two men:

I have at present, as assistants in translation and proofreading, two very interes-

---

16. On Dinkha, see *Nestorian Biography* 1857, 101-110.

ting young men. One of them, deacon Joseph of Degala has been with me, engaged in these labors, more than three years. I have seldom seen his equal, in point of native talent, in any land. [...] He has become quite a competent and efficient coadjutor. He is also a very good Hebrew scholar. My other assistant, Yonan, (Jonas,) of Ada, is quite young, but he is little, if at all, inferior to Joseph, in talent and promise.<sup>17</sup>

When Yosep died in 1864 at the age of forty, a long obituary about him appeared in *Zahrira d-Bahra*. In this piece his contribution to the press and his work of preaching are praised. The words are very similar to those I just quoted, which suggests that Perkins probably was the author of the obituary.

In the late fifties, several Protestant congregations had come into being, still part of the Assyrian Church. Yonan of Ada was one of the pastors of these congregations. As such he gave the sermon in memory of Perkins. In his own obituary, which appeared in *Zahrira d-Bahra* in 1880, his work on the Bible translations was brought to mind, as well as his last work, which consisted of a commentary on the Bible. I do not know whether this commentary was ever published. The opening lines of the obituary are as follows:

Sh. Yonan was a very well-known man. There is hardly any Assyrian village on the Urmia plain in which his name is not known. He was very talented, and he developed even more because of his close friendship with Dr. Perkins and Mr. Rhea. All his abilities were used in Christ's service.<sup>18</sup>

We do not know very much about the printers who worked with Breath. Two of them are mentioned in the *Nestorian Biography*: Yonan of Charbash and Ismial of Urmia.<sup>19</sup> Both are described as very able men and of Ismial it is mentioned that he, apart from being the carpenter of the printing press, was very skilled in technical matters connected to type founding, such as punch cutting. He also corrected the last proof sheets.

At the end of the nineteenth century the number of Assyrians who contributed to the work of the missionaries had grown considerably. I will mention only a few of them, most of whom were involved in the revision of the Bible translation in the eighties and nineties. The names of the Assyrians who contributed to the revised version of 1893 are given in the introduction to a preliminary translation of

---

17. ABCFM archives, ABC 16.8.1 v.3, nr. 249, 6.

18. Khnanisho Auraham and Rabbi Shmuel Badal, *Ktaba d-Luqqate men Zahrira d-Bahra d-40 shenne, 1850-1890* (a collection of articles earlier published in *Zahrira d-Bahra*), Urmia 1895, 310.

19. On Yonan, see *Nestorian Biography*, 54-62, on Ismial, 62-64.

Genesis that appeared in 1886. These are: Qasha Oshana d-Tkhuma, Shamasha Baba d-Kosi, Oraham d-Gulpasan, Qasha Oshana 'of the College', and Qasha Yosep d-Wazirabad.<sup>20</sup>

The latter Oshana worked for a long time at the College in Urmia as professor of Ancient Languages, probably comprising Hebrew, Greek and Classical Syriac. His wife Sara, a daughter of Qasha Auraham of Geogtapa, was well educated too and translated English books for the mission press. They both died in 1915, when the troubles began in Urmia, Oshana being at that time 90 years of age.<sup>21</sup>

Baba d-Kosi was the compiler of a huge dictionary of the modern Assyrian Aramaic language of which, unfortunately, only a few volumes were published. Through this work on the dictionary and his contributions to *Zahrira d-Bahra* on linguistic matters, he played an important role in shaping the modern language.<sup>22</sup>

Another important man of this latter period was Shmuel Badal d-Gugtapa. He was born in 1865, and after his education, part of which took place in the United States, he taught at the College. From 1895 till his death in 1908, he worked as an editor of *Zahrira d-Bahra*.<sup>23</sup>

### **Teachers**

The village schools, although under the supervision of the missionaries, were run by Assyrians. If somebody was able to read and write and was willing to start a school in his village, the missionaries would pay him a small salary, and supply him with some school books. Later some of the pupils of the Male Seminary became teachers in the village schools. In the early period, the bishops, in whose dioceses the schools were, assisted the missionaries in the supervision of these schools. The names of the teachers in village schools usually were not mentioned in the missionary correspondence, so we do not know very much about them.

Some teachers, however, did receive quite some attention in the early sources, because of their role in the very beginning of the mission. These were Qasha Auraham of Gugtapa, who was Muqdasi Hormezd's nephew, and Mar Yohannan of

---

20. *Sepra d-Brita (The Book of Genesis)*, [Urmia 1886], 2.

21. According to Macuch, *Geschichte*, 181, Oshana 'd-Kalej' was identical to Oshana Saru. J.F. Coakley, in *The Church of the East and the Church of England. A History of The Archbishop of Canterbury's Assyrian Mission*, Oxford 1992, 106 n. 180, notes the existence of two Oshana's from Tkhuma, both perhaps even from the village of Saru, one of them connected to the American College, the other working as an assistant at the Anglican mission. This explains the addition 'of the College', and suggests that the other Oshana among the revisors of the Bible translation might have been the 'Anglican' Oshana.

22. Macuch, *Geschichte*, 216.

23. Macuch, *Geschichte* 169, 215.



Gawilan. These two Assyrians were the Perkinses' teachers when they first arrived in the country, during their stay in Tabriz and later in Urmia. Auraham was Perkins's main assistant in the first years of the mission. They worked together when Perkins started to write the modern language, they prepared school materials together, and they both taught in the new school in Urmia. When Auraham died in 1871, the following was written in *Zahrira d-Bahra*:

Qasha Auraham and Mar Yohannan were the first to receive Mr. Perkins and Dr. Grant. He [Auraham] went to Erzerum to teach the language of the Syrians to Mr. Cochran in the winter of 1848. He assisted in the work of the translation in the early years.<sup>24</sup>

Mar Yohannan had been a very important person for the early Protestant missionaries. He was the first to welcome the missionaries, and in his position as a bishop, this was an important gesture. For many years he gave his steady support. This certainly was one of the reasons why Perkins consented in taking the bishop with him when he first went on leave to the United States in 1842. Mar Yohannan was very much impressed by Christian life there, whereas he, in turn, made a deep impression on the American Christians who came to see him. After his return to Persia, he decided to marry, following the example of Protestant pastors. For most of his life, Mar Yohannan stayed loyal to the Protestant missionaries, although in those periods when the Patriarchal family was opposing the missionaries, he had a hard time in manoeuvring between the two parties. The obituary written when Mar Yohannan died in 1874 described his burial in the church of Mart Maryam in Urmia alongside Shamasha Isaac, the brother of the former Patriarch, Mar Shimun XVII Auraham, which probably was considered a place of honor. According to the obituary, his chief importance for the missionaries, apart from his cordial reception at the very beginning, had been his effort to establish schools.<sup>25</sup>

Another teacher employed by the mission in the early years was Qasha Yohannan from Kosi. He was introduced to Perkins by Auraham, because he also belonged to the small group of Assyrian priests who not only could read Classical Syriac, but also could translate texts written in this language into the modern language. After having worked for a number of years in the Male Seminary, he was entrusted with the superintendence of a number of village schools and travelled around as an itinerating preacher. He died in 1845.<sup>26</sup>

---

24. *Ktaba d-Luqqate*, 304.

25. *Ktaba d-Luqqate*, 305-6. See further Perkins, *A Residence*, with numerous references to Mar Yohannan in the early years of the mission.

26. *Nestorian Biography*, 1-21.

#### **4. *The cooperation of Americans and Assyrians***

How did the American missionaries and the Assyrians work together? First of all, the missionaries were nearly completely dependent on the cooperation of the Assyrians. If they had not sent their children to the schools, if they had not bought and read the productions of the printing press, and if they had not opened their houses and churches for the preaching of the missionaries, the latter probably would soon have left. During the many years that the American missionaries were present, it was this acceptance by the Assyrians that made their work possible.

However, the Assyrians who benefited from the work of the missionaries, in general did not have much influence on the work of the mission itself. It was only the Assyrians closest to the missionaries who were able to influence the latter, and as a result, to exert some influence on the policy and activities of the mission. A detailed study of the history of the mission in Urmia will yield many examples of this. Here, let us simply note a few examples of this reciprocal influence as it related to language and to education.

##### ***Schools***

Immediately after his arrival, Perkins started to prepare for a school, which was opened in the beginning of January 1836 with the help of Qasha Auraham. As mentioned above, Auraham was rather important in the early years of the school in Urmia. From the very beginning, the missionaries employed local people in their schools. This was even more true for the village schools, which soon began to be established all over the Urmia plain. These usually were supervised by the bishop of that area, whereas the classes were given by a priest or deacon who could read and write. The missionaries exerted a kind of general supervision, visiting all these schools once in a while. This proved to be an excellent way to provide elementary education to a large number of pupils. From the beginning, education for girls was encouraged and most of these schools had indeed girls attending. Most Assyrian parents apparently were not against it.

In Urmia, the Male Seminary provided a somewhat higher level of education, and the brighter boys, many of them future priests and deacons, were sent to the city. Classical Syriac constituted a large part of the curriculum, next to Persian and English. It is told in one of the missionaries' letters that in the Female Seminary the girls for the greater part of the day were engaged in orally translating the Peshitta into the modern language and this probably was the case in the Male Seminary as well.<sup>27</sup> After 1846, when the New Testament had become available in the modern language, Classical Syriac continued to be part of the curriculum, because the missionaries as well as the Assyrians deemed the knowledge of this language an essential part of their children's education.

---

27. Stocking, Febr. 21, 1845, ABC 16.8.1 v.3 nr. 255.

***Bible translations***

The Bible translations should be considered one of the main results of the cooperation between the American missionaries and the Assyrians. In the foregoing a number of Assyrians were mentioned who worked on these translations. What the missionaries do not tell us in their letters, is how exactly they proceeded in translating the Bible. Did Perkins propose a translation, and were the Assyrians asked to judge whether that was a correct use of their language? Or did the Assyrians make a first draft, which then was read by Perkins to see whether it correctly represented the original? We do not know. However, when Perkins tells us in the introduction of one of his last publications that Yonan of Ada translated the book into the modern language, this suggests that Perkins always had been aware of the fact that his mastery of the language was never as good as that of native speakers, no matter how fluent his language must have been after a 35-year stay in Persia.<sup>28</sup> It is likely, therefore, that the Assyrians who worked on the Bible translation made quite a large contribution to the actual text.

There is more that illustrates how the missionaries wanted to take the opinions of the Assyrians into consideration. When the missionaries started to translate the New Testament, they decided to make the translation from the Peshitta version rather than from the Greek text which was used for the American Bible translations. Apparently they had learned from the Assyrians to value the Peshitta. However, the Prudential Committee of the American Board as well as the American Bible Society, who were to supply the necessary funds for the edition, were very much against a translation based on the Peshitta. Mainly from lack of knowledge, they considered the Peshitta a corrupt translation and they could not imagine that such a text could be the basis of a new translation in the modern language. Whatever Perkins and his fellow missionaries argued, they were not permitted to translate from the Peshitta. The missionaries, grudgingly, began to translate from the Greek. In 1844-5 opposition arose against the work of the missionaries, incited by the brothers of the Patriarch who had come to the Urmia plain after the massacres in Tiary. In that same period the Persian government accused the missionaries of proselytizing. They were risking expulsion if it could be proved that they wanted to make the Assyrians Protestant by disconnecting them from their own church or by distributing books that would lead to such a result. This was not the intention of the missionaries and they did as much as they could to remove the impression. Because the Assyrians were likely to interpret a translation from the Greek as an attempt to introduce Protestantism among them, the missionaries again brought the matter before the Prudential Committee in

---

28. [Justin Perkins], *Nuhara `al Ktaba d-Mapqana (Commentary on the Book of Exodus)*, [Urmia] 1869, 2. Compare also his *Nuhara d-`al Ktaba d-Daniel Nbiya (Commentary on the Book of Daniel)* [Urmia] 1869, h.

America. This time, they succeeded in convincing the committee that a translation from the Peshitta would not introduce heresy and that such a translation would be better suited for use among the Assyrians than a translation from the Greek ever could be. In 1846 they published a beautiful edition of the New Testament translated from the Peshitta, with notes referring to the Greek text and accompanied by the original Peshitta text.

The Peshitta became the subject of discussion again a couple of years later, when the OT had to be printed. Because the Old Testament Peshitta at times is rather different from the Hebrew, the missionaries knew that they would not obtain permission for a translation based on the Peshitta. In order not to offend the Assyrians by discarding the Peshitta, they argued in favor of printing the Peshitta text in a parallel column. Again, it took quite some time before the Prudential Committee gave its permission. And again, the main argument in the letters of the missionaries was the Assyrians' view on the matter: it was believed they would not use a modern translation which did not incorporate the Peshitta.<sup>29</sup>

The revised version of 1893 was primarily done by Assyrians. At that time there were enough Assyrians who were well educated and able to execute this project. In the committee of six translators, only one missionary was present, Mr. Benjamin W. Labaree. The Assyrians in yet another way were given more influence on the final form of this translation. In the introduction to the Genesis translation, its readers were asked to send their comments to the editors, in order to make the final translation as good as possible.<sup>30</sup> We don't know how many readers reacted, nor whether anything was done with the comments. However, the version of 1893 does indeed differ from the translation of 1886, so further discussion about it had taken place. This all suggests that the revised version of 1893 was at least as much the work of the Assyrians as that of the missionaries.

### ***Other productions of the press***

In the first period of the mission press, the majority of books and tracts were published anonymously. In the copies that have found their way to the collections in the US and in London, the names of the alleged authors or translators are added in handwriting, but it is uncertain who added these names. Among these, no Assyrian names occur. In the missionary correspondence, usually only missionaries are mentioned as having worked on such and such a book. However, it can be assumed that the Assyrians who worked with the press were involved in most of these books. It is rather unlikely that the missionaries would have been able to publish all these books in the modern language without the help of native speakers.

---

29. For the missionary correspondence on the editions of New and Old Testament, see Piet Dirksen, "The Urmia Edition of the Peshitta: The Story behind the Text", in Alexander RofJ (ed.), *Textus, Studies of the Hebrew University Bible Project*, vol. XVIII, Jerusalem 1995, 158-167.

30. *Sepra d-Brita*, [Urmia 1886], 11.

But apart from translation activities and contributions to *Zahrira d-Bahra*, there are no indications that in the first period of the mission, up to 1870, Assyrian authors contributed substantially to the mission press.

However, there were other ways in which the Assyrians influenced the press in the early period of the mission. Sometime in 1843, Grant, who was then in Mosul, sent a Classical Syriac tract to the missionaries in Urmia which was called "About the Faith of the Protestants", or "Against Papacy". This tract had been translated from Arabic by a certain Micha.<sup>31</sup> Grant wanted this tract to be printed on the press in Urmia (in Classical Syriac), in order to distribute it among the Christians of Mosul. Before the missionaries in Urmia decided to have it printed, they had it read by their main assistants of that period, Qasha Dinkha and Shamasha Eshoo. The latter considered it a good tract for the Assyrians of Urmia too and thereupon it was translated into the modern language and printed.<sup>32</sup> In the summer of 1844, the tract was ready and was given to read to the teachers of the village schools who at that time were assembled in Seir for a kind of summer training school. There, it seems many of them were offended by the tract, because the way in which Roman-Catholicism was attacked could easily be understood as opposing the Assyrian Church as well. When the missionaries learned of their objections, they decided that the tract should not be further distributed. Unfortunately, a few copies were handed out already, copies that caused the missionaries trouble later that same year, when an accusation of proselytism by the Persian government was based on this tract among other things.<sup>33</sup>

### ***Zahrira d-Bahra and Kokhva***

To conclude the overview of the cooperation of Assyrians and Americans in

---

31. See Ms Syriac 11, Houghton Library, Harvard University, Cambridge Mass. This Micha probably is the same as the Jacobite "millwright" who, according to Thomas Laurie, *Dr. Grant and the Mountain Nestorians*, Boston 1853, 204, learned to read in adulthood and acted as an interpreter for the missionaries in Mosul. The identification of Ms Syriac 11 as being the tract under discussion is based on its comparison with the printed version in the modern language. The spelling of "Protestants" with initial *b* provides an interesting affirmation of its Arabic original.

32. The tract is untitled and undated. The first line states the subject: "*al haymanuta d-protestantaye d-preshlun men idta d-Rhome xaltanta*", "On the faith of the Protestants which separates them from the erring Church of Rome". The type font used in the tract was replaced sometime at the end of 1844 by another, thus providing a terminus ad quem. The number of pages and the correspondence with the Classical Syriac manuscript all fit the descriptions of the tract given by the missionaries. See, e.g., Stocking, July 26, 1844, ABC:16.8.1 v.3 nr. 255, and Perkins, Journal entry Nov. 27, 1844 (copy of letter to Count Medem), in ABC:16.8.1 v.3 nr. 252. Whether the tract was printed also in its Classical Syriac version, as had been Grant's request, is not certain.

33. See, a.o., Perkins and Stocking, Nov. 27, 1844, ABC:16.8.1 v.3 nr. 250.

matters concerning the language, the missionary magazine *Zahrira d-Bahra* has to be mentioned. In the early years of the magazine, most of the articles were written by the missionaries, although probably translated and corrected by their Assyrian assistants. As literacy rose among the Assyrians, more and more of them contributed to the magazine and towards the end of the century the paper became an important forum for discussions within the Assyrian community. Not only "Protestant" contributions were accepted. There were discussions about the relation between the Old Church and the Protestants as well as about the relations to Roman Catholics, although it seems that there were no Roman Catholics actually contributing to the discussion. One of the issues that caused a lot of discussion on the pages of *Zahrira d-Bahra* was the further development of the written language. The two main subjects were spelling -more or less closer to Classical Syriac-, and vocabulary -using more or less 'foreign' words. These discussions contributed considerably to the awareness of the Assyrians of the development of their own language.<sup>34</sup>

In 1906, a new magazine was started, *Kokhva (The Star)*. At this time, *Zahrira d-Bahra* was no longer felt to represent the whole of the Assyrian community, because it was too closely connected with the Protestant mission. *Kokhva* was meant to be a paper for the Assyrian people, at a time when a new feeling of Assyrian nationalism began to emerge. This nationalism was felt to transcend the boundaries of confessional differences. The Protestant missionaries encouraged this initiative, and the new magazine was printed on the mission press, alongside *Zahrira d-Bahra*. Seventy years after the missionaries had introduced the writing of the modern language amongst the Assyrians of Urmia, their grandchildren started to edit their own paper in the modern language.

## 5. Conclusions

Many aspects of the mission work of the American Protestants in nineteenth-century Urmia need further research. One of these is the contribution of the Assyrians to the mission work. The present paper has focused on the contribution of the Assyrians to the work related to the introduction of the written language based on their vernacular. Two conclusions can be drawn from the present overview.

The first is that the number of Assyrians who assisted the missionaries always was considerable. It is safe to say that usually the number of Assyrian assistants surpassed the number of American missionaries. This is not to suggest that the Assyrians had a direct influence on the policy of the mission. It is clear that it always was the missionaries who had the last say. Moreover, the Assyrians were employed by the missionaries and were paid for their services. As such they were

---

34. Unfortunately very few issues of *Zahrira d-Bahra* of these later years have been preserved. For an overview of the contents of the period between 1897 and 1918, see Macuch, *Geschichte*, 138-187.

dependent on the latter. But their sheer number indicates that they should not be forgotten and that they should receive their credit for the success of the introduction of the written language.

Secondly, the events in the years 1844 and 1845 make clear that, however much the Assyrians had become dependent on the missionaries for education and social help, the missionaries were dependent on the Assyrians for general support. The Assyrians' general support was the only thing that could prevent the missionaries from being expelled from the country, because the Persian government certainly would not tolerate any disturbances among the Christians of Persia. The missionaries, therefore, did their utmost not to forfeit the Assyrians' trust in their mission and they more and more respected the distinctive character of this ancient Christian people. The fact that the missionaries were able to conduct their mission in Persia for almost a hundred years indicates that they succeeded.