

Presbyterians in Persia: Christianity, Cooperation, and Control in Building the Mission at  
Orumiyeh

by

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### Abstract

The establishment of a mission station in Orumiyeh, Persia was the beginning of a vast mission project in the country — spanning more than 100 years and resulting in the appointment of the first United States minister to Persia. This mission was the result of a series of coincidences and particularities, including the socio-economic and political situation of the community of Assyrian Christians to whom it was directed. Beyond this, however, the mission was founded on friendship and affection between Assyrian Christians living in Orumiyeh and the American missionaries. This intersection of familiarity and foreignness, ensconced in recollections of linguistic developments, shared religious practice, and everyday moments spent together, reveal much about the fragile, complicated, and ultimately intimate nature of empire.

## Introduction

In a rural town in northwestern Iran, a printing press has just arrived from America. It will soon finish printing its first work within the white walls of the mission compound. The work in question? The Bible, in a language that did not have a written form a short few years ago and has never before been printed. Deeply involved in this project are a handful of members of the Assyrian Church and one American missionary. Together, they have spent the past years devising a new, written form of the Syriac language that could be printed efficiently and deciding what materials to print when the press arrived. How did such a collaborative project come to be? How did these men wind up in this situation? Was it an act of God, or a pure coincidence?

The establishment of the mission at Orumiyeh, the one that would go on to print Bibles in new Syriac, was deeply rooted in intimacy. The relationships and affection between the missionaries and the Assyrian Christians who they were ministering were paramount to the success of the mission and its work. This closeness was absolutely necessary for the missionaries to enter the community and interact with the residents of Orumiyeh in a meaningful way, and the Assyrian Christians with whom they collaborated also found benefits from their relationships with the Americans — from education to international travel. Furthermore, this setup gave the Assyrians agency in determining the direction of the mission to them in a moment where action was dictated by a higher power from across the world, the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM) — the organization that established and managed the mission. Besides this, the situation of Orumiyeh was essential to the creation of a mission there. The particularities and the people of the place made it an especially consequential place for the establishment of a mission. The position of the Assyrian Christians as an ethnic and religious minority and an impoverished agricultural community made them a good that would decidedly

benefit from a mission. This situation was bolstered by the political situation in Persia, in which borders were continually being disputed, international powers were at play, social divisions were growing stronger, and the central government was crumbling. Thus, it was distinct conditions of the Assyrian Christian population of Orumiyeh, Persia that made intimacy mandatory in a founding moment of imperialism.

## **Persia and Presbyterians**

The situation of the Assyrian Christians of Orumiyeh in Persian society was critical in the decision to establish a mission there. This was deeply affected by the nature of the country at the time. Persia was struggling within, the central government was in debt and struggling to retain control, while European infiltrators continued to gain influence and power. These developments left places like Orumiyeh — in disputed territory and far from the capital — largely autonomous, making a Christian mission there much more conceivable. Furthermore, the lack of a national, secular education system excluded the Christian minority from access to popular education. These two factors, alongside other economic, social, and linguistic ones, defined the borders that afflicted the Assyrian Christian community and made them more receptive to a mission — and more appealing a population for a mission to the ABCFM.

### **Into a Borderland**

The landscape of nineteenth century Persia was defined by borders, in many senses. Some of these borders made Persian society largely impermeable to social outsiders, often on the basis of religion and language. While Persian remained the language of administration and the majority as it had for centuries, other languages swirled under it in chaos. Arabic was a popular second language, taught and highly valued amongst Muslims — though an extensive knowledge of the language remained less common. Knowledge of Western languages, English and French specifically, were highly prized at this moment in Persian history. Access to learning them often was a marker of status — wealthy and royal children often had international tutors for this purpose — and they were an important asset used to attain jobs in government and higher education abroad. Aside from these, languages like Syriac, Armenian, Kurdish, and other Turkic

dialects prevailed in ethnic minority groups and insular or tribal communities, sometimes only surviving in spoken form.

Another societal border in nineteenth century Persia was religion. While Twelver Shi'a Islam predominated, Christians made up a sizeable minority and many distinct sects thrived in the region. In addition, there was some prevalence of Judaism and smaller, lesser known sects and offshoots of Islam. Importantly, language and religious differences from the Persian-Shi'a majority often were correlated, creating communities that were nearly wholly separated from mainstream society. Speaking a different language and practicing a different religion meant a number of things. Beyond a difficulty in communication or lack of shared rituals, these differences necessitated a separate education or rather, exclusion from the Muslim one, further insulating these distinct ethno-religious communities. In cases like this, the geographical location and socio-economic status of minority group take on a heightened significance in determining overall wellbeing and general success of the group.

All of these different borders and determinants of socio-economic well-being coalesced to create the peculiar situation of the Assyrian Christian population of Azerbaijan Province in Northwestern Iran that piqued the interest of American Presbyterian missionaries at this time. The Assyrians constituted their own ethno-linguistic group. Instead of Persian, they spoke a Syriac dialect. A Syriac dialect that was, in fact, without a written component in its modern form. Beyond this ethno-linguistic separation, the Assyrians were not Shi'a Muslims — or Muslims at all. Rather, they practiced their own form of Christianity, sometimes referred to as Nestorianism or Chaldeanism but more appropriately termed “Assyrian Christianity”. All of these barriers between the Assyrians and the rest of Persia created a unique set of unfortunate circumstances, economic, political, and social, for this people.

A lack of a shared language and religion in a system where education was considered a religious undertaking and thus not provided by the state, left the Assyrians to form their own education system and educate their own children. However, given the lower-class status of the vast majority of the Assyrians living in Northwestern Persia, this meant that the community lacked any sort of formalized education and the majority of the population remained uneducated and illiterate. Most Assyrians were either subsistence farmers or share-cropped for Muslim landowners, meaning that they lived in poverty and engaged in demanding, all-day labor with which women and children were expected to help. This left little time and resources for education and care of children. These circumstances were compounded by the fact that the common dialect of Syriac spoken in the region lacked a written component. Thus, while church officials could often read, they were actually reading an older form of Syriac, not comprehensible to the common man, in which the liturgy was written and services were conducted.

The inequitable situation of the Assyrians in this region was also perpetuated by the physical location of this population. Situated on the northwesternmost edge of the empire, they were far from the central government and thus afforded fewer services by the crumbling federal infrastructure. Additionally, much of the population did not reside on the Orumian plain, but in the surrounding mountain villages — many of which were only accessible by foot. These issues were compounded by the lack of status and wealth amongst the group, which granted them little sway with the struggling national government, as they had nothing to provide in exchange for favors. Beyond this, in many ways the Assyrians were truly living on a border — with much of the land they were living on being claimed by multiple groups, including Kurdish tribes and Russia, in addition to Persia itself.

All of these conditions were then magnified again by the international issues facing Persia at the time. Britain and Russia were vying for influence in the state at the highest level and most Western European nations had established a sizable diplomatic delegation in one form or another in the city of Tabriz, about 100 miles from Orumiyeh. The central Qajar government was struggling to maintain control of its land and its government amidst European interference and mounting debt, leaving little attention let alone funds to spare for a poor, rural group — much less one that did not share in the Persian national identity. Border upon border and obstacle upon obstacle churned under a swell in foreign influence and intervention to create the peculiar slice of Persia that the American Board for the Commissioners of Foreign Missions decided to explore for a potential mission in 1829.

### **The Qajar Government**

Before they became the penultimate dynasty of the Persian Empire, the Qajars were a Turkmen tribe that held ancestral land in the Azerbaijan region. In 1779, after the death of Mohammad Karim Khan Zand Shah, the ruler of the Southern Persian Zand Dynasty, Agha Mohammad Khan, the leader of the Qajar Tribe, set out on a mission of reunification and eventually brought all of modern-day Persia under his control in 1794. He established his capital in Tehran, then a village near the ancient city of Ray, and was formally crowned as the Shah (king) in 1796, only to be assassinated in 1797.<sup>1</sup>

Agha Mohammed Khan was followed by his nephew, Fath Ali Shah. His rule was marked by several disastrous wars with Russia and the loss of Georgia, much of the north Caucasus regions, modern-day Armenia, and Azerbaijan (the Republic, not the region of Persia). He was succeeded by his grandson Mohammed Shah in 1834, who ruled until 1848. The most

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<sup>1</sup> “History of Iran: Qajar Dynasty,” Iran Chamber Society, accessed November 4, 2019, <http://www.iranchamber.com/history/qajar/qajar.php>.



important development in this period of rapid change (1797-1848) was the increase in Western influence in Persia, especially in terms of diplomatic contact. This also marks the true beginning of diplomatic conflict between European nations over Persia. It was in the midst of — and to a degree because of — this sudden European interest in the region that Western Christian missionaries entered and were successful in Persia at this time. In a sense, Persia was “opened” to the West by British and Russian influence in the region, as there now was a significant population of Europeans living and working in the nation and these Westerners carried a great deal of weight, especially when it came to dealings with the Qajar government. Furthermore, the loss of territory and concessions to the Europeans had significantly weakened the central Qajar government, particularly in the regions where it was bleeding territory to the Russians. It is no coincidence that when the American Board of Commissioners of Foreign Missions entered Persia, they did so in what is now the Western Azerbaijan province, in the northwesternmost area of the country — far from the capital, bordered by the Ottoman empire (where the British exerted significant influence, particularly in terms of mission work), and right near where Russian control was creeping further and further into the Persian Empire.<sup>2</sup>

These rulers were followed by Naser o-Din Shah, who is widely considered the most effective and successful of the Qajar rulers. His rule is typically identified as the period during which Persia began to modernize, as Western technology, science, and educational methods were introduced at this time. When Naser o-Din Shah took the throne, Persia was in a state of disrepair. Not only was the crown essentially bankrupt, the central government wielded little to no power, leaving the provinces in a state of near — if not complete — autonomy. This is another dimension of Persian society that would prove integral to the success of Presbyterian

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<sup>2</sup> “History of Iran: Qajar Dynasty,” Iran Chamber Society.

missionaries in the region. The Church did not have to contend with the national (Shi'a) government, and having established themselves in a relatively rural area (at the time the now-city of Orumiyeh was no more than a collection of small villages) with a significant Christian minority who lived in peace with their Muslim neighbors, the missions established there experienced very few issues with the government — especially compared to the obstacles they would have to surmount in other cities. One of these such places was Tehran, where the first Presbyterian chapel in the city (founded in 1876) was shut down by the government when a significant proportion of Muslims became interested in its work and began to attend services there.<sup>3</sup>

Much of Naser o-Din's work in modernization and the improvement of public services is actually owed to his advisor, known by the title Amir Kabir (Great Ruler). Under his supervision, for two and a half years, foreign interference was curtailed while trade with foreign entities was encouraged, investment in public works was increased while government spending on the whole was cut, and the first modern Persian university, Dar al-Foonon, was founded. Amir Kabir's extensive work, however, angered Qajar notables who proceeded to form a coalition against him. In 1851, he was exiled to Kashan and killed.<sup>4</sup>

Though Naser o-Din Shah tried to continue upholding the principles exemplified by Amir Kabir and preserve Persian sovereignty by exploiting the mistrust between Britain and Russia, Western influence and interference increased while Persia's territory decreased. In 1856, the British government kept Persia from retaking Herat, which had been part of Safavid Persia (1501-1736), and instead supported its incorporation into Afghanistan, effectively expanding the

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<sup>3</sup> Robin Everard Waterfield, *Christians in Persia: Assyrians, Armenians, Roman Catholics and Protestants* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1973), 102.

<sup>4</sup> "History of Iran: Qajar Dynasty," Iran Chamber Society.

buffer between British-controlled India and rapidly expanding the Russian Empire. Britain also crept further along and inward from the Persian Gulf in the 19th century and Russia was no less active. By 1881, Russia had taken control of modern-day Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, cutting off the cities of Bukhara and Samarqand from Persia and bringing the Russian border to Persia's northeastern one. Furthermore, Naser o-Din Shah had gotten himself into a great deal of economic trouble — from massive personal loans from foreign governments to finance trips to the European continent to trade concessions that gave the British extensive control over the nation's economy.<sup>5</sup> Thus, by the late 19th century, many Persians believed that their government was obligated to foreign interests to the detriment of the country.

This led the Shah to continue to grant extensive concessions to European governments in exchange for pay-offs to the Qajar government, angering the religious establishment — eventually leading to what is known as the Constitutional Revolution. The Constitutional Revolution began in January of 1906 when, outraged at the Shah's lack of response to public protest, groups from the bazaar class and religious establishment, occupied mosques across the country. The January protests resulted in a promise from the Shah to establish a consultative assembly, which was subsequently broken. In response, 10,000 people stormed the British compound in Tehran. By October, an elected group of representatives drafted the nation's first constitution — a document that greatly limited royal authority, provided for a powerful elected legislature (the Majles), and created a cabinet of officials, subject to approval or disapproval by the Majles. The constitution was signed on December 30, 1906 and was quickly followed by The Supplementary Fundamental Laws in 1907, granting the Persia public freedom of press, speech, and association.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> "History of Iran: Qajar Dynasty," Iran Chamber Society.

<sup>6</sup> "History of Iran: Qajar Dynasty," Iran Chamber Society.

The Persian government was still far from stable. With help from Russia, the new Shah, in an attempt to abolish the assembly and nullify the new constitution, shut down the Majles with a series of bombings and arrests of representatives in June 1908. A year later, however, the supporters of the constitutional government marched on Tehran and deposed the Shah, reinstating the constitution and the Majles. This was followed by another Russian-supported attempt by the Shah to retake the throne, that proved unsuccessful. More significantly, however, was the decision by Britain and Russia to divide Persia into spheres of influence (a rather common practice of Western imperial forces in the Middle East at this time), with Russia taking the northern part of the country and Britain exercising control over the southern and eastern regions — leaving the center open to competition between the two. This led to a Russian attempt at taking Tehran following an incident in which an American treasurer general hired by the Persian government attempted to collect taxes from government officials who were Russian protégés and tried to enter the Russian zone for the same purpose. When the Majles refused to dismiss the official in question, Russian troops occupied the capital, when the Bakhtiari tribe (of southwestern Persia) surrounded the capital, forced the Majles to conform to the Russian demands, and then shut down the parliament and suspended the constitution, beginning a short period of governance by Bakhtiari elites.<sup>7</sup>

Late in 1909, the last ruler of the Qajar Dynasty, Ahmad Shah, came to power at the age of only 11. He was as ineffectual a ruler as one would imagine any preteen plunged into this chaos to be. The final straw for the Qajar Dynasty, though, proved to be the occupation of various regions by the Ottomans, the Russians, and the British during the First World War.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> “History of Iran: Qajar Dynasty,” Iran Chamber Society.

<sup>8</sup> “History of Iran: Qajar Dynasty,” Iran Chamber Society.

## Education

The modern Iranian education system was not developed or implemented until the Pahlavi dynasty (1925-1979) came to power. Thus, education in the period of Persian history that is relevant to this exploration was reliant on the *maktab* system. From about the age of five to the age of ten, boys and girls studied together in a co-ed environment.<sup>9</sup> After this point, the sexes were separated and girls were sent to separate *maktabs*, though most girls were not educated past the age of ten at this time.<sup>10</sup> Under this system, children studied at the direction of an *akhoond* (cleric) or *mo'allem* (teacher) — who could be male or female.<sup>11</sup> The setting of the maktab might be one's own home if the family was wealthy; a teacher would be hired by the head of the household and reside in the home, as well as teaching the children of the household.<sup>12</sup> This set-up was true of the Shah's household, which actually hired a British tutor to instruct the “embryo eastern potentates.”<sup>13</sup> Access to quality education — in particular foreign languages — was also thus limited by one's status. For the Shah's children's education at the hands of an English-speaker, a Briton no less, was an important marker of status and almost absolutely a precursor to a higher education abroad.

Middle and lower-class children, on the other hand, attended common *maktabs* which were usually held in a mosque or in the teacher's home.<sup>14</sup> Common *maktabs* were financed by cash and other gifts to the *akhoond*, and were not subsidized or standardized by any sort of governance, religious or otherwise.<sup>15</sup> Curriculum generally consisted of learning the Persian

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<sup>9</sup> Jalil Dustkah and Eqbal Yagma'i, “Education iii. The Traditional Elementary School,” accessed November 4, 2019, <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/education-iii>.

<sup>10</sup> Dustkah and Yagma'i, “Education iii. The Traditional Elementary School.”

<sup>11</sup> Dustkah and Yagma'i, “Education iii. The Traditional Elementary School.”

<sup>12</sup> Dustkah and Yagma'i, “Education iii. The Traditional Elementary School.”

<sup>13</sup> “Persian Princes as Pupils,” *The Evening Star*, October 20, 1902.

<sup>14</sup> Dustkah and Yagma'i, “Education iii. The Traditional Elementary School.”

<sup>15</sup> Dustkah and Yagma'i, “Education iii. The Traditional Elementary School.”

alphabet, reading and writing, and basic mathematics, but the real emphasis was on memorization of passages from the Qur'an and other prayers.<sup>16</sup> In general, “*maktab* teachers were semi-literate, and only able to teach pupils how to recite the Koran, with no comprehension of its meaning, and to read simple Persian texts” and quality and content of the educational experience varied greatly from neighborhood to neighborhood and from teacher to teacher.<sup>17</sup> Additionally, most common *maktabs* concluded classes around noon, allowing students to return home to help with chores or to work in the family trade, making education much more accessible to even the poorest families, but also significantly decreasing its quality.<sup>18</sup>

This system left education open to the influences of foreign missionary influence. For one, education at this time was considered to be tied to religion — opening the door for missionaries to create and run schools for Christian populations, who remained largely uneducated until that point. In addition, illiteracy was quite common amongst the Christian ethnic groups that the missionaries encountered and religion was in no way a stimulus for literacy in this case due to the disparities between liturgical language and colloquial language — in the case of the Assyrian Church, the two were practically two different languages. Furthermore, the Assyrian Christian population at the center of this story had no formalized or traditional system for education, not even something as bare bones as the *maktab* structure that the Muslims followed, making education all but inaccessible to those without a high-ranking clergy member as a relative. This does not mean, however that the rest of the Assyrian Christian community at Orumiyeh did not aspire to higher education, but — as would be expressed repeatedly to the missionaries — economic and social circumstances prohibited the

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<sup>16</sup> Dustkah and Yagma'i, “Education iii. The Traditional Elementary School.”

<sup>17</sup> Dustkah and Yagma'i, “Education iii. The Traditional Elementary School.”

<sup>18</sup> Dustkah and Yagma'i, “Education iii. The Traditional Elementary School.”

establishment of a formal school. With both parents often working in an agricultural setting, children were required from a young age to remain home to look after siblings and the household or to accompany their parents in the fields. Ultimately, this created a cycle where escape from low-paying agricultural labor was nearly impossible for everyday Assyrian Christians. This was furthered by the fact that the only community members to receive extensive education were clergy members. In the Assyrian Church, these positions were passed down by hereditary means and were not accessible by choice. Thus, the majority of the community remained without educational opportunities and thereby limited future employment prospects and social mobility.

Christians, however, would not make up the bulk of the students of American missionary schools. As Persia was opening to Western ideas and principles, there was a desire to access Western-style education, which was prized over a traditional *maktab* one, as evidenced by the Shah and other courtiers' acquisition of foreign tutors. The first and only schools where one could access this kind of education, complete with instruction in English and an exposure to the Western discipline, were run by American missionary organizations. Western-style education was invaluable at this period in Persian history and often served as a ticket to social advancement, as Persian society absorbed more and more Western influence. Most importantly, there was a willingness amongst the population to accept missionary assistance in this realm — the missionaries were providing a service that the government had failed to and doing so on a massive scale and in an apolitical way (as opposed to the British and Russians who had an evident and vested interest in the region). For these reasons, Christians and Muslims alike were very open to the education opportunities presented by American Missionaries.

### **Western Christianity Enters**

In 1829, two American missionaries working in Turkey were sent to find a group of Christians who would benefit from a mission. They eventually came upon a receptive group of Assyrian Christians in an area of Northwestern Persia (now identified as the province of West Azerbaijan) and sent back a recommendation to establish a mission at Orumiyeh, marking the beginning of American Protestant missionary work in what is now Iran.<sup>19</sup> This exploratory venture was arranged by the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM), a nondenominational, American Protestant missionary organization (however, dominated by Presbyterians). The ABCFM determined the area to be an ideal location and established a mission to the Assyrian Christians there at Urmia in the year 1834.<sup>20</sup> After several decades, in 1871, this mission was transferred to the Presbyterian Church (PCUSA), formally beginning the Church's involvement in the region. The Presbyterian Church quickly added a number of new stations: Tehran in 1872, Tabriz in 1873, Hamadan in 1880, Rasht and Kazvin in 1906, Kermanshah in 1910, and Mashad in 1911.<sup>21</sup> The PCUSA mission in Iran became so vast that after 1883 it was split into divisions (East and West) for a time, but reunified in 1931 and was known as the Persia Mission before being renamed the Iran Mission in 1935. The arms of the mission included educational, evangelical, and medical outreach and remained in operation in some capacity until the mission's formal dissolution in 1960, at which point the PCUSA entered a partnership with the Evangelical Church of Iran and continued to provide personnel and funds to carry on some of the medical and educational ministries the mission once operated in the nation.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Frederick J. Heuser Jr., *A Guide to Foreign Missionary Manuscripts in the Presbyterian Historical Society* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1988), 71.

<sup>20</sup> Heuser, *A Guide to Foreign Missionary Manuscripts*, 71.

<sup>21</sup> Heuser, *A Guide to Foreign Missionary Manuscripts*, 71.

<sup>22</sup> Heuser, *A Guide to Foreign Missionary Manuscripts*, 71-72.



There are two groups that are key to understanding the role and the work of the Presbyterian Church in Iran — Assyrian Christians and Armenian Christians. These two Christian groups make up a rather small percentage of the Persian population (who are by a vast majority Shi'a Muslims and have been ruled by people of the same faith for the duration of the Church's involvement in the nation). Furthermore, these Christians generally do not identify ethnically or culturally with the rest of the Persians, as they trace their origin to and identify ethnically (though not necessarily nationally) with other Middle Eastern groups. They are both linguistically, religiously, and ethnically separate from Persians. Given the proximity of the now-defined borders with Armenia and the ancient ones of the Assyrian empire, this should come as no surprise.

Christianity has been practiced in Iran since pre-Islamic times, though some of the missionaries identified in this project did not believe Eastern Christians to truly be Christians. Christians were granted *dimmi* or protected minority status after the Islamic conquest of Iran in 651 CE and had generally lived alongside the Muslim-majority population with little conflict up until this point.<sup>23</sup> The largest concentration of Christians was located in what is now Western Azerbaijan province, near the northwestern border of the state.<sup>24</sup> These Christians lived in a vast network of villages that made up the “city” of Orumiyeh and generally were quite isolated from the rest of the empire. The second group of importance, the Armenians, had a bit more of a tumultuous relationship with the Persian government. After the area was conquered by the Safavid Dynasty, the government of Abbas I Shah forcibly removed thousands of Armenian Christians from their homeland and resettled them in different areas of Persia, mainly in and

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<sup>23</sup> Yahya Armajani, “Christianity viii. Christian Missions in Persia,” accessed November 4, 2019, <http://www.encyclopaediairanica.com/articles/christianity-viii.html>.

<sup>24</sup> Yahya Armajani, “Christianity viii. Christian Missions in Persia.”

around Esfahan. As time went on, however, this dispersion integrated Armenian Christians further into mainstream Persian society. While they maintained insular communities and their own religious practices and language, these communities looked more like neighborhoods within Persian cities than separate villages. Armenians also came to hold a special status in Persian society, generally wealthy and thus wielding greater political influence than the isolated, largely impoverished Assyrians, who lived in agricultural villages in Azerbaijan Province. Both the Armenians and Assyrians, however, exacted a great deal of autonomy during the reign of the Qajars, especially as the central government was bleeding strength and considering that both these peoples lived in relatively contained communities — speaking their own language amongst themselves rather than Persian and retaining distinct cultural and religious practices from other Persians.

Though these groups — the Armenians and the Assyrians — are often referred to collectively and did share much in terms of their experiences of being ministered to by the ABCMF, in actuality their beliefs and practices are quite distinct. It is important to note that they are not identical nor were they understood as such by the missionaries; they did share churches, beliefs, or even a language, despite living in the same region and sometimes in the same villages. There was a significant Armenian Christian population in the area, but the Armenians were not clearly identified or ministered to separately by the ABCFM at Orumiyeh. However, they became deeply involved in the missionary culture of Persia and would later play a much larger role after the Presbyterian takeover of the Persia mission and subsequent expansion across Persia.

It was these groups of people who were sought out by the Reverend Eli Smith and Reverend H. G. O. Dwight when they travelled from Turkey to Persia to investigate the region's

Christian groups.<sup>25</sup> In fact, it would have been hard for Dwight and Smith to miss them. In 1900, the total population of the entire area of Azerbaijan was estimated at 300,000 — consisting of 135,000 (45%) Christians.<sup>26</sup> This broke down to approximately 76,000 Assyrian Christians, 50,000 Armenian Christians, and 1,000 Jews (who were for some reason counted as Christians in this survey).<sup>27</sup> Although Dwight and Smith were expressly directed to find a group of Armenian Christians who would be receptive to an ABCFM mission, they would ultimately come to a different recommendation — the Assyrian Christians of Orumiyeh. It seems that the Board's interest in this group may have originated from an article written in *The Missionary Herald* (the publication of the ABCFM) by a British missionary in Turkey, who detailed the practices of the little-known Assyrian Christian community.<sup>28</sup> However, it is important to note that the Assyrian Christians were not the intended or primary focus of Dwight and Smith's exploratory venture, but rather a sidenote; their existence was a curiosity to the ABCFM that the two men were instructed to confirm or deny and provide more information on — a quarry that was not central to the investigation with which they were tasked. This is a moment in which the coincidence of this endeavor and irrationality of the actual men on the ground becomes clear. Although the ABCFM sent these missionaries to find an Armenian group, they returned having made a genuine connection with a separate Assyrian group.

In their report back to the ABCFM, Smith and Dwight were quite optimistic and reported that they had found the conditions in Orumiyeh and the surrounding area to be incredibly favorable for the establishment of a mission.<sup>29</sup> Not only did they find a population of an

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<sup>25</sup> Waterfield, *Christians in Persia*, 102.

<sup>26</sup> Arianne Ishaya, "Settling Into Diaspora: A History of Urmia Assyrians in the United States," *Journal of Assyrian Academic Studies* 20, no. 1 (2006): 4, <http://www.jaas.org/edocs/v20n1/Arianne-diaspora.pdf>.

<sup>27</sup> Ishaya, "Settling Into Diaspora: A History of Urmia Assyrians in the United States," 4.

<sup>28</sup> Waterfield, *Christians in Persia*, 102.

<sup>29</sup> Waterfield, *Christians in Persia*, 102.

estimated 125,000 Assyrians living in Orumiyeh, they found them to be sufficiently Christian (by Reformed Western standards) yet distinct enough to have avoided any sort of deep, large-scale relationship with the Roman Catholic missionaries who were already active in the area.<sup>30</sup> This quickly earned these Christians the designation of the “Protestants of the East”.<sup>31</sup> In addition, the competitive, sectarian motivations that underscored this fact were not lost on even Smith and Dwight themselves, who wrote in their report that this group was “in imminent danger of being led astray by the ever-watchful, wily, and active missionaries of Rome”.<sup>32</sup> Beyond this, the population of Assyrians were poor and illiterate, thus constituting a group that would benefit greatly from a sustained educational effort.<sup>33</sup> Furthermore, Orumiyeh had been recently devastated by a massive outbreak of cholera when Dwight and Smith arrived — an epidemic so severe it had wiped out nearly half of the area’s residents — making it an ideal place to start a medical mission, as well.<sup>34</sup>

The Persia Mission, following the recommendations of Smith and Dwight, was established by Reverend Justin and Mrs. Perkins, who reached the city of Tabriz — then considered the most important city in Iran and the location of all foreign embassies, as well as being located a short 150 kilometers (93 miles) from Orumiyeh — in August of 1834.<sup>35</sup> There, they were met by members of the British Embassy, and were taken to a house prepared for them by their British connections.<sup>36</sup> In 1835, the Persia Mission officially received protected status from the British government, which was retained until the British withdrew their officials from

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<sup>30</sup> Waterfield, *Christians in Persia*, 102.

<sup>31</sup> Waterfield, *Christians in Persia*, 102.

<sup>32</sup> Waterfield, *Christians in Persia*, 102.

<sup>33</sup> Waterfield, *Christians in Persia*, 102.

<sup>34</sup> Waterfield, *Christians in Persia*, 102-103.

<sup>35</sup> Waterfield, *Christians in Persia*, 103-104.

<sup>36</sup> Waterfield, *Christians in Persia*, 103.

the region in 1839.<sup>37</sup> At this point, the American missionaries turned to the Russians, who granted them protections that from same year until 1851, when the British returned and the mission again received British protection until the appointment of the first American Minister to Persia in 1883 — with the sole purpose of protecting and supporting American missionaries in the region.<sup>38</sup> This back and forth bespeaks the perilous nature of American missionaries in Persia at the time; not carrying American passports and without any sort of connection to their home government, the Perkinses were essentially on their own in an unfamiliar land. Thus, the relationships that they formed — with Assyrian Christians, Persian government officials, and foreign ambassadors — were absolutely essential to their survival and the survival of the mission at Orumiyeh. Their careful navigation of a new and unknown land required the quick and intimate formation of relationships across cultural boundaries.

In October 1834, Reverend Perkins and another missionary set out on exploratory mission to Orumiyeh, where the mission was to be established.<sup>39</sup> There, they met an Assyrian bishop who agreed to tutor Reverend Perkins in the Syriac language, as well as a handful of other clergy members of the Assyrian church. These connections were incredibly important ones because, at this point, the pillar of the ABCFM's involvement in Persia — a goal that was to be bolstered by the establishment of schools and medical facilities — was the revival of Christianity in the East. The Americans did not enter Persia to minister to Muslims, rather they began their crusade with the Christians who were already in the region. This was a key philosophy of the ABCFM in this period; it was what they were doing with missions to Armenian Christians and other groups at other missions. These groups — particularly in the Middle East — were believed

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<sup>37</sup> Waterfield, *Christians in Persia*, 103.

<sup>38</sup> Waterfield, *Christians in Persia*, 103.

<sup>39</sup> Waterfield, *Christians in Persia*, 104.

to be weak to the point of near extinction, as well as at risk of falling under the influence of the Catholic missionary presence there. Thus, revitalization of Eastern Christian groups was a primary concern to the ABCFM, so the early connections made with the Assyrian religious authorities were incredibly important to the intent of the mission and would be essential to the continuation of the Persia Mission.

The ABCFM mission was staffed by Reverend Perkins, who was a linguist and as well as missionary and did a great deal of work with the Syriac language — including collecting many Syriac manuscripts that are now housed in European and American libraries.<sup>40</sup> It is common for linguists or at least linguistically talented individuals to be the first to enter a mission field, in order to communicate with the population and to translate key religious texts, prayers, and songs into the home language. Reverend Perkins, the proprietor of the first branch of the Persia Mission, is credited with having essentially modernized the Syriac language in doing this.<sup>41</sup> The Syriac used by the Assyrian church at this time was an ancient dialect of sorts and was not understood by everyday people, even devoted parishioners.<sup>42</sup> The colloquial Syriac used by the Assyrian peoples in the region was not only deeply divorced from the language used by the church but had become a sort of conglomerate of Syriac, Persian, and Turkish words that rendered it practically its own new language.<sup>43</sup> Furthermore, Syriac could not be printed, due to the type and style of symbols used in its production.<sup>44</sup> Reverend Perkins developed a system by which the language could be printed and used the popular form of the language to translate

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<sup>40</sup> Waterfield, *Christians in Persia*, 105.

<sup>41</sup> Waterfield, *Christians in Persia*, 105.

<sup>42</sup> Waterfield, *Christians in Persia*, 105.

<sup>43</sup> Waterfield, *Christians in Persia*, 105.

<sup>44</sup> Waterfield, *Christians in Persia*, 105.

prayers, hymns, and other religious texts, forming what some argue to be the basics of modern Syriac writing.<sup>45</sup>

Reverend Perkins would spend the next year ministering and teaching to the English-speaking population of Tabriz, while he learned Syriac at the direction of his Bishop tutor. In October 1935, the Board recruited a man by the name of Dr. Asahel Grant to join Reverend Perkins and help establish the medical arm of the intended mission in Persia.<sup>46</sup> Dr. Grant met with the governor of Urmia upon his arrival in Persia, who was overjoyed to have some medical relief for his people and quickly found houses for the mission to occupy.<sup>47</sup> In November, Dr. Grant, Reverend Perkins, and their wives relocated to Urmia — which would be the center of the Persia Mission for the next century.<sup>48</sup> Around this time, Reverend Perkins wrote that the mission consisted of “the dwellings of the missionaries (four families), our seminary of about fifty pupils — our girls’ boarding school of between twenty and thirty — our printing establishment — in all about 100 individuals, besides our school for young [Muslims], and our medical dispensary”.<sup>49</sup>

Reverend Perkins established his mission in a traditional compound style, which he described as “A little spot enclosed by grace, Out of the world’s wild wilderness”.<sup>50</sup> Some view this architecture as a mechanism that further distanced the Americans from the Assyrians and the Persians that they were attempting to minister to. Another dividing factor commonly remarked on was the evident wealth of the American missionaries — perfectly evidenced by the fact that the Reverend Perkins rode around the city and the mission on a “very fine white horse”.<sup>51</sup> The

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<sup>45</sup> Waterfield, *Christians in Persia*, 106.

<sup>46</sup> Waterfield, *Christians in Persia*, 104.

<sup>47</sup> Waterfield, *Christians in Persia*, 104.

<sup>48</sup> Waterfield, *Christians in Persia*, 104.

<sup>49</sup> Waterfield, *Christians in Persia*, 104.

<sup>50</sup> Waterfield, *Christians in Persia*, 105.

<sup>51</sup> Waterfield, *Christians in Persia*, 105.

Roman Catholics in the region were particularly scandalized by the money that the Americans seemed to be swimming in, even speculating that they paid pupils to attend their schools.<sup>52</sup> There has been very little written on this subject in recent years, but it is evident that the mission's relationship with the Assyrian Christians to be incredibly unequal; wealth, location, and foreign protection were integral pieces in this puzzle of disparity. One of the keystone texts on Christianity in Persia, published in 1973, concluded to this effect that "All this can now be seen in the proper perspective and it seems quite impossible that any other pattern could have been adopted. The [Assyrians] were so desperately poor, illiterate, and prone to excessive drinking that it was impossible to enter into a relationship of equality with them."<sup>53</sup> Regardless of the inherently flawed, colonial, and racist view that this statement purports, all sides of the story are in agreement — the socio-economic situation of and the relationship between the American missionaries and the Assyrian Christians was anything but equal. This does not mean, however, that the connections the missionaries made with the Assyrian population were superficial or that the Assyrian Christians lacked agency in their dealing with the mission. Rather, the American privilege displayed by the Perkinses and their counterparts was counteracted by the fact that they absolutely needed relationships with members of the Assyrian Church to be successful in any capacity. These economic advantages became one of the few bargaining chips held by the Americans in a situation where they desperately needed the skills of local Assyrians to minister to this group — language, help with physical navigations, cultural knowledge, and more.

The plans that the ABCFM and Reverend Perkins concocted to begin ministering to the Assyrian Christians were not solely for the benefit of this Christian population, however. The schools, medical center, and printing house that they established served this community, but

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<sup>52</sup> Waterfield, *Christians in Persia*, 105.

<sup>53</sup> Waterfield, *Christians in Persia*, 105.



were services delivered with expectation of appreciating returns. Rather, this was simply the first step in a plan to evangelize the East. The ABCFM — at an organizational level — saw reforming and strengthening the social power associated with the Assyrian Church in Persia as integral to success at eventually evangelizing the Muslim population of the region.<sup>54</sup> They believed that eventually the Assyrian Church would “exert a commanding influence in the regeneration of Asia” and minister to the Shi’a at the guidance of Western Christians, who saw them as sort of native allies-in-Christ.<sup>55</sup>

This attitude towards Eastern Christianity, however, did not last beyond the ABCFM’s tenure at the head of American Protestant mission work in the region. The Presbyterian Church itself had a much less universal view of Christianity and saw the Assyrian Church as anti-Christian in many ways. One missionary clearly articulated the Church’s opinion of these individuals, writing “The old [Assyrian] Church is a fossil, it is the grave of piety and Christian effort. It can never be reformed. Hence for our Christians to live at all, they have been compelled to leave it... the separation is complete”.<sup>56</sup> This was not a clear-cut issue, however, even on an individual level. Missionaries themselves flip-flopped on this issue, at time expressing beliefs that the Assyrian Christians could not possibly be Christians and at times expressing joy at the familiarity of their practices. Whatever the case may have been, Assyrian Christianity was at least familiar to the American missionaries. It may not have been acceptable in its current iteration or “fully Christian,” but its traditions were recognizable by reformed Western standards and much more approachable to the missionaries than Muslim religious practices. Thus, the idea

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<sup>54</sup> Waterfield, *Christians in Persia*, 103.

<sup>55</sup> Waterfield, *Christians in Persia*, 103.

<sup>56</sup> Waterfield, *Christians in Persia*, 133.

of the “better natives” evangelizing and assimilating the more unfamiliar Muslim population of the rest of Persia into Presbyterianism continued under PCUSA’s oversight.

It is notable, however, despite the repeatedly expressed prejudice against the sect, that the Persia Mission still found many of its strongest allies amongst the Armenian-speaking Christians of Persia. The relationship though, especially from a Presbyterian view, was irrevocably changed. This was evidenced in particular by the fact that by the time the PCUSA established a mission station in Tehran, despite the overwhelming prevalence of Armenian contacts, the Church chose to make Persian the language of operation.<sup>57</sup> This marked an abrupt transition from the philosophy present the time of the establishment of the mission at Orumiyeh. Instead of choosing to continue ministering to and reforming particular groups, the missionary efforts of the PCUSA became much broader, in an attempt to reach and convert more Muslims. Records from the time show that at the formation of the church in Tehran, the services were attended by a combination of Christians and Muslims.<sup>58</sup> By making the language of operation Persian, the mission was able to make their operations accessible to everyone at the start, rather than assuming their former strategy of reforming Christians with the expectation that there would be an eventual expansion or trickle down of the mission to Muslims. By 1882, the fledgling church boasted 29 members, with the new converts being made up of four Muslims, one Jew, and three Armenians — again demonstrating that the aim of the mission had perceptibly changed under PCUSA leadership.

All of these developments, leading up to the expansion of the mission out of Orumiyeh, were dependent upon the borders that defined modern life in Persia. The illiteracy and impoverished nature of the Assyrian Christians informed their desire for education, as it

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<sup>57</sup> Waterfield, *Christians in Persia*, 133-134.

<sup>58</sup> Waterfield, *Christians in Persia*, 134.

informed the desires of ABCFM members to minister to them. The rapidly deteriorating government meant that a new mission would have little, if any trouble with the authorities. This was compounded by the fact that European powers were swiftly staking out their own territories and spheres of influence within the country. On top of this, the Assyrians lacked a written common language and their worship used a language that had not been popularly spoken in hundreds of years, which marked them as in need of reform to the ABCFM. Thus, all of these coalescing borders — religion, ethnicity, rural location, poverty, removal from the central government, and language — made Orumiyeh a uniquely advantageous place for the establishment of a Christian mission to the Assyrians.

## **Dwight and Smith**

Dwight and Smith made up the exploratory committee that informed the decision to ultimately establish a mission to the Assyrian Christians at Orumiyeh. Much of their exploration was informed by coincidence — their visit to Orumiyeh was, after all, not their intended trip but a small side expedition. Given the information-gathering nature of their venture, Dwight and Smith were not necessarily interested in forming long-lasting relationships. They were simply traveling through and already has established missions elsewhere. However, these men were responsible for the decision to place the nascent mission in Orumiyeh, as a result of what they saw there. Though they carried with them prejudice, they genuinely saw some of themselves and the church in the Assyrians they encountered. Much of this was rooted in the religious similarities they encountered in speaking with the locals. Ultimately, while Smith and Dwight believed the Assyrians to be lost and led astray by Muslim influence, they found them recognizably Christian and worth saving efforts. They also laid the foundation for intimacy and lasting relationships with the Assyrian clergy they interacted with.

## **The Journey to Orumiyeh**

When Smith and Dwight set forth from Malta to explore potential sites that would benefit from an ABCFM mission, they were not specifically instructed to seek out the Assyrian Christians for whom the Orumiyeh Mission would be established. In fact, they were not even seeking a Christian group in Persia to minister to. Rather, they were on an exploratory mission to seek out a group of Armenian Christians who might be receptive to the establishment of a mission. The ABCFM Committee, believing this Christian group to be important, but lacking the basic information to establish a station in Armenia, expressed to Smith and Dwight the

following: “respecting the Armenian people in their several places of dispersion... the desire of the Committee [is] to know more about them, as they are in Armenia itself, and to ascertain what can be done for their intellectual, moral, and spiritual improvement”.<sup>59</sup> In the instructions to Smith and Dwight on their journey, later published in the ABCFM’s annual journal, some attention is given to a region that the ABCFM calls Persian-Armenia, where the Armenian patriarch was said to live, and the Committee tells Smith and Dwight that “Persia will naturally attract their attention, specifically the northern frontier”.<sup>60</sup> Smith and Dwight were also explicitly encouraged to investigate any other ethnic or religious they may come across in their journey — including the Assyrians, about whom there was great curiosity in the moment, stemming from a recent article in the same ABCFM journal — though they were to focus on the Armenians.<sup>61</sup>

Towards the end of the specifics provided to the two men by the ABCFM, there is a brief mention of “[a]nother company of wandering shepherds” that the missionaries may encounter, in Kurdistan.<sup>62</sup> Thought by the ABCFM to number about 100,000 and identified as Nestorians, Smith and Dwight are informed that “[s]o large a body of nominal Christians may well deserve a visit to the residence of at least one of their spiritual heads”.<sup>63</sup> Beyond this, Smith and Dwight are encouraged to seek out a “numerous and independent sect of Christians, called Chaldeans” who had been written about some years before by a missionary who had heard about the group, but had been unable to track them down and observe them and their practices personally.<sup>64</sup> While the ABCFM had a lot of general information about Christians in Persia and the surrounding area,

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<sup>59</sup> American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, “Extracts from Instructions to Messrs. Smith and Dwight, concerning the Exploring Tour in Armenia” *The Missionary herald* xxvi. (1830): 75.

<sup>60</sup> American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, “Extracts from Instructions”: 75.

<sup>61</sup> American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, “Extracts from Instructions”: 75.

<sup>62</sup> American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, “Extracts from Instructions”: 75.

<sup>63</sup> American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, “Extracts from Instructions”: 75.

<sup>64</sup> American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, “Extracts from Instructions”: 75.

confusion and misinformation persisted. This is largely because little, if any, of the information came from the experiences of ABCFM missionaries themselves. Rather, it was a cobbled together set of facts gathered from sources the ABCFM regarded as less trustworthy — Catholic missionaries, German missionaries in Armenia, secondhand stories gathered by ABCFM missionaries in other fields, or British missionaries in Turkey. This is particularly important because the lack of firsthand, reliable knowledge left the ABCFM in the dark as to whether the so-called Nestorians and Chaldeans would be receptive to *their* mission or Christian by *their* standards. Thus, while Dwight and Smith were not meant to be researching the viability or establishment of a mission to these people, they were instructed to dig a little deeper and see what they could ascertain about this group's practices and attitude towards ABCFM missionaries, providing an informational foundation and perhaps a connection with Assyrian church leadership that the ABCFM could rely on in evaluating future potential involvement with the group. However, upon actual contact with this group, Dwight and Smith found them more appealing and receptive to a mission than the Armenian groups that had been the actual subject of their exploratory venture in the region.

How did this mere handful of lines in a two-page instructional birth a new mission, to an unintended group of Christians? Perhaps it was divinely ordained, or maybe sheer coincidence. Regardless, Smith and Dwight's journey into Persia and eventually into the Assyrian community began in Tabriz — where they stopped to see Abbas Mirza, the governor of the province of Azerbaijan and heir apparent to the throne. Abbas Mirza was adored by Europeans who found themselves in Persia on diplomatic and business engagements, and his home city of Tabriz also

happened to be home to a significant portion of the Armenian Christian diaspora in Persia.<sup>65</sup> While Dwight and Smith were unable to meet Abbas Mirza, who was off on some sort of military expedition, they stayed in Tabriz long enough to form an opinion of the Armenian Christians they found there, writing “[o]f the moral character of the Armenians of Tebriz we received the worst impression”.<sup>66</sup> In particular, the missionaries were alarmed by the prevalence of polygyny, consumption of wine and other alcoholic beverages, and practice of selling daughters into concubinage amongst members of the sect, and further found the priests to be particularly unprincipled.<sup>67</sup> They also encountered disease and its hindering effects on mission work in Tabriz, recounting a failed attempt to establish a Christian school by a Mr. Nisbet, whose plans were derailed when an untimely outbreak of cholera arrived in Tabriz before his teacher could and were never resumed — another bad omen suggesting that Tabriz was not an appropriate place to establish the mission.<sup>68</sup>

Not particularly pleased with their experiences in Tabriz, Smith and Dwight set out to explore the rest of Azerbaijan province. In the region around Orumiyeh, the men were shocked by the hospitality and respect they received from the people they encountered, as well as the apparent receptiveness of the communities they encountered to their intentions to establish a Christian mission.<sup>69</sup> Dwight and Smith were also intrigued by the position that these Azerbaijani residents occupied, simultaneously separate from the Turks to their east and their fellow Persians.<sup>70</sup> The two men were, of course, pleased to note that “[t]he Persian, of Aderbaijan

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<sup>65</sup> Eli Smith and H. G. O. Dwight, *Researches of the Rev. E. Smith and Rev. H.G.O. Dwight in Armenia : including a journey through Asia Minor, and into Georgia and Persia, with a visit to the Nestorian and Chaldean Christians of Oormiah and Salmas* (Boston: Crocker and Brewster, 1833), 148.

<sup>66</sup> Smith and Dwight, *Researches*, 148, 152.

<sup>67</sup> Smith and Dwight, *Researches*, 152-154.

<sup>68</sup> Smith and Dwight, *Researches*, 154.

<sup>69</sup> Smith and Dwight, *Researches*, 166-168.

<sup>70</sup> Smith and Dwight, *Researches*, 163.

especially, differs also from the Turk, in his readiness to admit European innovations,” marking their openness to European-style education and medicine, and thereby a mission.<sup>71</sup> The missionaries also acknowledged that “[d]eep interest in those almost unknown sects [of Christians in the Azerbaijan region] made [Dwight and Smith] determine from first, if possible to visit them”.<sup>72</sup>

And this is exactly what Smith and Dwight did. They spent their days travelling through the villages in the Orumiyeh region. Eventually, they encountered a man who would determine the course of the Persia mission for decades to come. The man was a young Assyrian bishop who the missionaries identified as Mar Yohannan (Sir/Lord Yohannan). After the missionaries sat in on one of his prayer services in Orumiyeh, Mar Yohannan and the other priests returned with Dwight and Smith to their accommodations to discuss their religious beliefs and church structure.<sup>73</sup> Though making up only a handful of pages in a two-volume report of their exploratory trip, the connection forged by these men with Mar Yohannan would become incredibly important to the establishment of the Persia Mission.

### **Religious Practices and Beliefs of the Assyrians**

In their short interaction with Mar Yohannan and a handful of other church officials, Dwight and Smith collected basic information about the practices and beliefs of the group they call the Nestorians (the Assyrian Christians) — which they later confirmed and supplemented with information from other priests, patriarchs, and bishops. The differences and similarities between the Western Presbyterianism practiced by Dwight, Smith, and missionaries who come to

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<sup>71</sup> Smith and Dwight, *Researches*, 168.

<sup>72</sup> Smith and Dwight, *Researches*, 175.

<sup>73</sup> Smith and Dwight, *Researches*, 211.



follow them would go on to inform the course of the mission to the Assyrians in the Orumiyeh region and determined its establishment.

In many ways, the Christianity practiced by this population was immediately recognizable and acceptable to Smith and Dwight. Despite the fact that the common man was unable to understand the church services, Smith and Dwight were pleased to discover that the clergy had no difficulty reading and translating passages from the Bible for them.<sup>74</sup> Furthermore, the form of the New Testament brought by Dwight and Smith (a Syriac translation) was the same version that the Assyrian leaders used in their teachings.<sup>75</sup> Smith and Dwight were also pleased to find an absence of images in the church, and were delighted when Yohannan quoted a Psalm in justification of this when asked why.<sup>76</sup>

In terms of prayer and confession, the exploratory mission encountered varying familiarity and foreignness. One of the most jarring differing practices to the missionaries was the sacrifice of animals in prayer. The Assyrians would often have an animal taken to the church of the saint they were praying to regarding a serious issue and have it sacrificed as an offering.<sup>77</sup> The sacrifice itself was unfamiliar and un-Christian (in accordance with the belief that Christ was the final sacrifice) to Smith and Dwight, but praying to saints was equally abhorrent. While the bishop did acknowledge that he and his coreligionists prayed to saints and regarded them as mediators, their canon included no prayers that addressed the saints directly and independently from God — somewhat mollifying the missionaries.<sup>78</sup> Though this practice seemed to suggest some Catholic leanings, Dwight and Smith were relieved to find that members of the Assyrian

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<sup>74</sup> Smith and Dwight, *Researches*, 213.

<sup>75</sup> Smith and Dwight, *Researches*, 213.

<sup>76</sup> Smith and Dwight, *Researches*, 213.

<sup>77</sup> Smith and Dwight, *Researches*, 216.

<sup>78</sup> Smith and Dwight, *Researches*, 214.

Church did not practice auricular confession nor did they ban clergy (aside from the highest ranks, such as bishop and patriarch) from marrying.<sup>79</sup> Furthermore, the Assyrians did not believe in purgatory or any other state for the dead besides heaven and hell, again differentiating them from the Presbyterians' Catholic competition.<sup>80</sup> Yet, the Assyrians did often offer up prayers for the dead — a practice odd to the missionaries — but as there was no requirement or ritual beyond the behest of the family, it was deemed harmless.<sup>81</sup> The missionaries were further confounded by Yohannan's apparent belief that only certain sins were enough to condemn a believer to hell and that some were lesser — a belief that they did not find to be confirmed anywhere in the literature of the Assyrians.<sup>82</sup>

Though many of the rituals of the Assyrians looked similar to those of the American Presbyterians, there were a handful of notable differences even in the most intrinsic Christian practices. One of these was the practice of the eucharist, communion. The Assyrians regarded communion as much more sacred than their Presbyterian counterparts did. They baked a special, separate bread for the purpose and were shocked that the Presbyterians used everyday bread.<sup>83</sup> The clergy also wore special robes and removed their shoes when preparing the bread for communion (steps not taken in the course of everyday prayer or Sunday services).<sup>84</sup> The Assyrian Church also only offered the eucharist on certain special days, rather than every Sunday and were abhorred by the fact that the Presbyterians would remove the sacraments from the sanctuary to offer communion to the sick and dying, believing that this rendered them unconsecrated and instead had the dying carried to the church for their last communion when

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<sup>79</sup> Smith and Dwight, *Researches*, 226.

<sup>80</sup> Smith and Dwight, *Researches*, 215.

<sup>81</sup> Smith and Dwight, *Researches*, 215.

<sup>82</sup> Smith and Dwight, *Researches*, 215.

<sup>83</sup> Smith and Dwight, *Researches*, 228-229.

<sup>84</sup> Smith and Dwight, *Researches*, 228-229.

possible.<sup>85</sup> However, one important agreement between the sects was offering admittance to any Christian of any other denomination to take communion.<sup>86</sup> Beyond communion, the Assyrians allowed marriage ceremonies to be performed outside of the church (usually in the home) and the rituals of baptism varied from Presbyterian ones significantly — but most importantly was not performed regularly or uniformly, aside from the missionaries' qualms with the mechanics of the ceremony itself.<sup>87</sup>

Aside from the aforementioned conflicts, a few ideological lapses remained. These included the history of the (defunct) Nestorian name of the sect. Smith and Dwight heard and concurred that it was likely that the name of this particular people located in Northwestern Persia came not from Nestorius himself, but from the biblical town of Nazareth, ultimately making its existence more acceptable to the missionaries and the ABCFM than if the church was descended from Nestorius and his clan.<sup>88</sup> Beyond this, Dwight and Smith found the group lacking in understanding of deeper theological concepts like the absolution of sin. Particularly, they found the lack of understanding of “regeneration and sanctification by the Spirit, distinct from baptism” concerning, and were unable to ascertain if the clergy believed that sin was pardoned solely in the death of Christ.<sup>89</sup>

Differences as small as these — like the Assyrian proclivity to make the sign of the cross, deemed unnecessary and performative by the Presbyterian Church — still carried importance. They were signs to the missionaries that the Assyrian Church was desperately in need of the reform and righting. However, most of what Smith and Dwight encountered was immediately

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<sup>85</sup> Smith and Dwight, *Researches*, 228, 230.

<sup>86</sup> Smith and Dwight, *Researches*, 230.

<sup>87</sup> Smith and Dwight, *Researches*, 226, 231.

<sup>88</sup> Smith and Dwight, *Researches*, 214.

<sup>89</sup> Smith and Dwight, *Researches*, 225.

recognizable to them as quasi-Protestantism in practice. They were welcome to participate in services, even to take communion and formed a nearly instantaneous connection with church leaders on a theological basis, which would prove essential to the decision to establish a mission in Orumiyeh. The church was familiar enough to allow for entry and yet distinct in practice enough to lend itself to some reform — reform that would not ultimately change the message or indeed much significant theology behind the church.

Borders were essential to the complicated understanding of the Assyrian Christian community that Dwight and Smith, and ultimately the ABCFM and later missionaries came to. While these groups of Christians were quite different from each other — to the point of sometimes arguing that the other group was not Christian at all — in a setting defined by borders, they belonged to the same group. Of course, religion was a piece of this. More importantly, the Assyrians and the Americans were Christian outsiders in a Muslim-majority land. On a journey overwhelmingly marked by unfavorable encounters with Muslims and Armenian Christians, whom they often considered even more entrenched in sin, the discovery of this group that rejected Muslim and Catholic-esque traditions was a respite for these protestant missionaries. Beyond this basic religious common ground, the Assyrian Christian community in Orumiyeh seemed to Dwight and Smith one whose only hope was their faith — they repeatedly remarked that though clergy members seemed as though they were better off than the masses, they were incredibly poor as well — marking this religious community as one that was scarcely holding itself together in the face of domination by unfamiliar religious forces. Thus, Dwight and Smith found the Assyrian Christians much in need of the works a mission could provide, but recognizable as Christians in an unexplored, distant setting.

### **Recommendation for the Establishment of a Mission**

In addition to this encounter and other similar ones with church officials, Dwight and Smith found the people of Orumiyeh to be in an ideal social position and geographical location for receiving a mission. First, being in Persia, and so close to Tabriz where all of the European embassies were located, a mission to Orumiyeh would have access to diplomatic protection from friendly nations.<sup>90</sup> Furthermore, proximity to a British embassy meant that communication home would be smooth and run through secure, established channels.<sup>91</sup> In addition, the governor, Abbas Mirza, was incredibly accepting of European and American visitors to his province and would undoubtedly provide support and protection for a mission under his jurisdiction.<sup>92</sup> The missionaries also noted the good climate and productive soil of the region as potential advantages for the future mission.<sup>93</sup>

As for the people themselves, Smith and Dwight noted the poverty of the Christian sects due to taxation by Muslims and the sharecropping/serfdom system that kept most of the Nestorians occupied in tending to land that they did not own.<sup>94</sup> Other factors regularly addressed in the report include the prevalence of disease in the region (particularly cholera and “the plague”) and the inability of the Nestorians to educate their children for a host of reasons (including the lack of a modern written language, Muslim oppression, and the demands of an agricultural society — a combination of factors that “puts it out of the power of parents to educate their children”).<sup>95</sup> With regard to religious beliefs and practices, Smith and Dwight also found the Nestorians favorable to a mission. They list their openness to other sects of

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<sup>90</sup> Smith and Dwight, *Researches*, 263.

<sup>91</sup> Smith and Dwight, *Researches*, 264.

<sup>92</sup> Smith and Dwight, *Researches*, 263.

<sup>93</sup> Smith and Dwight, *Researches*, 263.

<sup>94</sup> Smith and Dwight, *Researches*, 190.

<sup>95</sup> Smith and Dwight, *Researches*, 240.

Christianity, rejection of auricular confession, communion open to all Christians, and several other characteristics as favorable assets, ultimately concluding “a mission to the Nestorians would meet with far fewer obstacles than among any other of the old churches”.<sup>96</sup>

As for the exploratory delegation’s overall opinion of Persia and the viability of a mission there, Smith and Dwight wrote:

“Such a mission [to Muslims] we are not prepared to decidedly recommend; though our persuasion is strong, that a missionary, while directing his attention expressly and primarily to the Christian population, would find many occasions and means of doing good to the followers of Muhammad also, as a secondary branch of labor.— The Armenian population is so small and dispersed that any considerable number could with difficulty be reached; not to mention another certainly important consideration — their extreme degradation. In hesitating to recommend these two classes of people [Muslims and Armenians] as promising objects of missionary labor in Persia, we are of course to be understood as declining to propose the city of Tabriz for missionary station — But to the Nestorians of Oormiah we would specially direct you attention.”<sup>97</sup>

Dwight and Smith’s conclusion about the future of a mission in Persia is evident — the only route forward ought to be through the revival of the Nestorian church, with the secondary focus being the salvation of other religious groups, as they are too far removed from the church as these Westerners saw it to be effectively reached through the establishment of a mission.

However, Dwight and Smith did not think a mission in Orumiyeh would be simple or straightforward for their successors.

Though they clearly identify Orumiyeh, with intended focus on the Assyrian Christians, as the ideal location for the establishment of a new mission, Smith and Dwight were not reserved in proposing the issues that they foresaw with this undertaking. The first was potential conflict

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<sup>96</sup> Smith and Dwight, *Researches*, 264.

<sup>97</sup> Smith and Dwight, *Researches*, 263.

with the Kurds who inhabited the mountain regions near Orumiyeh, also occupied by a number of Assyrian Christian and mixed Christian-Muslim villages.<sup>98</sup> Another problem presented by the delegation was the remoteness — or rather potential remoteness — of the location. The men were of the opinion that “[a]mong the natives, there would be no intelligent society” and were worried that Tabriz was too far away (nearly 100 miles) and, even worse, they worried that it was an unstable point of contact, when Abbas Mirza who was holding together the pseudo-court of European diplomats and embassies could be whisked off to assume the position of Shah at any time, presumably taking his Western company with him.<sup>99</sup> A third key issue that Smith and Dwight foresaw — one that would persist until even after the mission managed to connect with Assyrian women in a significant context by bringing in American *women* to work with them — was the reluctance of women to be and women’s families to have them be associated with the mission.<sup>100</sup> Though Dwight and Smith wrote “If the notions of the Nestorians are like those of the Armenians at Shoosha and Tebriz, of which there is little doubt, no female domestics even could be obtained.”<sup>101</sup> They were correct; the mission would have great difficulty encountering Assyrian women in any context for several years.

### Smith’s Reflections

Although Dwight and Smith’s volume of researches as they were delivered to the ABCFM Commission are useful for understanding exactly what they saw on the ground in their travels through the Western Azerbaijan region and how they reacted in that moment, it is not particularly helpful for understanding how they saw themselves and their mission in a long-term,

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<sup>98</sup> Smith and Dwight, *Researches*, 264.

<sup>99</sup> Smith and Dwight, *Researches*, 264.

<sup>100</sup> Smith and Dwight, *Researches*, 264.

<sup>101</sup> Smith and Dwight, *Researches*, 264.

spiritual context. However, Smith — upon his return to the United States from stints at numerous mission stations and on several exploratory missions across Western Asia — preached extensively on the region and his understanding of and future of the people residing there. In his sermon entitled “Moral and Religious Conditions of Western Asia,” Smith discusses his view of Muslims and various Christian groups in the area, giving particular attention to the Persians he encountered on his journey with Dwight.<sup>102</sup> He begins by establishing that the Christians who inhabit the region are only Christian by name, and that their position is sorely harmed by the Muslims whose religion “not only condemns all Christians to the fire of hell, but obligates professors to compel them to adopt to their creed... upon penalty of death”.<sup>103</sup> Needless to say, Smith does not have a high opinion of the Muslims he has encountered, but he expresses specifically that one issue — and one necessary inroad to eventual conversion of the masses — is the nature of education. He writes: “Their education was almost exclusively limited to their religion, and made them disparage every other species of knowledge, and every source of knowledge not Mohammedan.”<sup>104</sup> Smith was also alarmed by the lack of knowledge of foreign nations amongst the Muslims with whom he interacted, claiming “an almost entire ignorance of the geography of Europe was universal. Of our country, they even now know still less” — another flaw he saw that might be solved by the establishment of western institutions of education in the region.<sup>105</sup>

As for the Christians of the Near East, Smith viewed them as lost and incapable of defending themselves from Muslim domination or reviving on their own. In fact, he believed

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<sup>102</sup> Eli Smith, *Missionary Sermons and Addresses* (Boston: Perkins and Marvin, 1833).

<sup>103</sup> Eli Smith, *Missionary Sermons and Addresses*, 14, 22.

<sup>104</sup> Eli Smith, *Missionary Sermons and Addresses*, 24.

<sup>105</sup> Eli Smith, *Missionary Sermons and Addresses*, 24.



“Christianity had not retained enough of its heavenly character to make its professors any better than the followers of Mohammed”.<sup>106</sup> Throughout the sermon in question, Smith reflects on Matthew 5:13, which states “Ye are the salt of the earth; but if salt have lost his savor, wherewith shall it be salted? It is thenceforth good for nothing, but to be cast out and trodden under foot of men”. The salt that has lost its savor was Smith’s poignant analogy for the Christians of Western Asia and it served his view that foreign intervention was necessary to revive the churches to a tee — he believed the work of the ABCFM was the means by which the salt would be re-salted. He wrote: “This revival of religion must be effected [sic] by foreign aid. The salt there has lost its savor: it cannot salt itself,” thus foreign missionaries with their lively institutions and higher understanding must enter and “salt” or revive the Christians in that region.<sup>107</sup> Furthermore, he believed that the Christians of Western Asia had become so lost that missionaries needed to step in and inform them of what would be in their best interest as “Men there know not their wants enough to supply them... [we] must inform them of their wants and how to supply them”.<sup>108</sup>

This grants a glance into the position of Smith in his exploration and conclusion and to that of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, of which Smith was a longtime and highly respected member. They shared the opinion that “Neither in the Turkish empire, nor in Greece, nor in Persia... is the revival of pure religion impractical; for in them all can missionaries reside, and travel, and by various means enforce the truth upon the hearts of the native Christian population, at least”.<sup>109</sup> As evidenced by the inclusion of “at least,” the revival of Eastern churches was not the final goal of the missionaries on the ground or their

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<sup>106</sup> Eli Smith, *Missionary Sermons and Addresses*, 62.

<sup>107</sup> Eli Smith, *Missionary Sermons and Addresses*, 80.

<sup>108</sup> Eli Smith, *Missionary Sermons and Addresses*, 80.

<sup>109</sup> Eli Smith, *Missionary Sermons and Addresses*, 73.

organization. It was simply viewed as a step in the ultimate conversion of less familiar religious groups in the region: Catholics, Muslims, and Jews, amongst others. However, the accessibility and receptiveness of these groups, especially in Western Asia was iffy at best, given the limited knowledge and linguistic abilities of the missionaries. Thus, the Assyrian Christians and other Protestant-esque groups were seen as a sort of bridge from the western missionaries to the vast non-Christian populations of the area. Furthermore, this was not an approach unique to the ABCFM or American missionaries. In fact, Smith notes that this — the collapse of the Christian authority and the accessibility of the church to missionaries — was exactly why there were German missionaries working with Armenian Christians in nearby Shusha.<sup>110</sup>

There is another layer to Smith's theory of and desire for establishing mission stations in Western Asia. At the time of delivering this sermon, Smith was a missionary in Syria — one of relatively few ABCFM missionaries working in the region — and was uniquely familiar with the noncommittal nature of missionary efforts in the Middle East. Acknowledging the incredible difficulty, loneliness, and lack of support that came with working in the area, Smith reminds his audience of the peripatetic nature of former efforts: "Perhaps in no other field has so large a part of the labor of missionaries been itinerant".<sup>111</sup> While many had traversed the region "with the Bible and religious books in their hands... only a few [had] fixed themselves in permanent stations".<sup>112</sup> This was an issue that Smith found particularly important, as he believed the "roaming missionary" model that had previously been adhered to was a key reason that missionaries had experienced so few successes in the region.<sup>113</sup> He argued that missionary labor

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<sup>110</sup> Eli Smith, *Missionary Sermons and Addresses*, 63.

<sup>111</sup> Eli Smith, *Missionary Sermons and Addresses*, 76.

<sup>112</sup> Eli Smith, *Missionary Sermons and Addresses*, 77.

<sup>113</sup> Eli Smith, *Missionary Sermons and Addresses*, 77.

had been stretched thin to cover massive swathes of territory at the expense of depth and extended interactions, to the detriment of efficacy.<sup>114</sup> Thus, Smith was a proponent of sustained, permanent missionary efforts in Western Asia, despite the difficulties frequently encountered that drove missionaries to travel, especially this initial reluctance of many populations — which Smith argued resulted in “fewer individual conversations at the outset” but greater returns in the long run.<sup>115</sup>

Beyond his general ideas about missionary work, this sermon — being removed from his visit to Persia and not entirely focused on the subject — presents the most lingering and important impressions Smith had of his journey there. Among these were two key characteristics that compelled Smith to promote the establishment of a mission there. The first was Abbas Mirza. Despite not having actually met him, Smith was adamant about his support of a mission, writing “the governor of the province where most of the native Christians reside... the heir apparent to the throne... has long favored the introduction of European improvements into his country” and noted that the members of the English embassy in Tabriz also thought Abbas Mirza would support a mission in Western Azerbaijan.<sup>116</sup> The second reason Smith found himself enamored of Persia for a new station was the disposition of those he encountered to religious debate. He was of the impression that “[w]ith none of the haughty reserve of the Turks, the learned Persians are always disposed for religious conversation and argument,” giving missionaries a more likely inroad (even to non-Christians) than they found in other regions, where discussing other religions was more taboo.<sup>117</sup> Smith was also encouraged by the

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<sup>114</sup> Eli Smith, *Missionary Sermons and Addresses*, 77.

<sup>115</sup> Eli Smith, *Missionary Sermons and Addresses*, 77.

<sup>116</sup> Eli Smith, *Missionary Sermons and Addresses*, 72.

<sup>117</sup> Eli Smith, *Missionary Sermons and Addresses*, 73.

prevalence of and apparent respect for the Bible itself in Persia, noting that it was often sold in bookstores and displayed alongside the Quran.<sup>118</sup> To Smith, these factors demonstrated an openness that would allow missionaries to permeate Persian society more easily — secular openness from Abbas Mirza (who wielded authority not only as governor of Western Azerbaijan but also as the widely-regarded heir-apparent to the throne, indicating a potential future ally in expanding the mission across the nation) and a deeply important religious openness in Persia society. Coupled with the prevalence of a group practicing Christianity recognizable, though troubled, by Western standards, these factors made Orumiyeh, Persia the ideal spot for a nascent mission station.

In the end, Smith and Dwight's impressions of Orumiyeh were incredibly important. Though they found plenty of sinful practices they hoped to rectify, they were spurred on by the fact that they recognized the Christianity they saw around them. Though it may have been far from their own practice and in need of reform, it was familiar and reachable in a foreign setting. Furthermore, they continued to be informed by border in their investigation and were particularly struck with the political situation of Orumiyeh and the province of Azerbaijan, having encountered a handful of Europeans who assured them that the governor (evidently the sole authority in the region) would be open to a mission. Beyond this, their early and albeit brief interactions formed the foundation on which those who followed them would establish close relationships essential to the forthcoming mission. Conclusively, the potential that Smith and Dwight saw in the Assyrian Christians of Orumiyeh was so striking that they recommended it for a mission, when they were not asked to investigate it so deeply — thus, despite what prejudices they held and expressed, they believed that Orumiyeh specifically and Persia on a broader scale

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<sup>118</sup> Eli Smith, *Missionary Sermons and Addresses*, 73.

had the potential to house a successful and transformational mission that would go on to revive Eastern Christianity.

## **Perkins Arrives**

Reverend Perkins, who was responsible for establishing the mission, picked up where Smith and Dwight left off. Although he received similar directives from the ABCFM, Perkins' interests and decisions took him in a different direction. Where Dwight and Smith were simply interested in gathering information to make a decision about where a mission would thrive, Perkins was actually building that mission up from the ground — as well as creating a life for himself and his family in Orumiyeh. As a result, Perkins was interested in establishing deep and lasting relationships with the people he encountered. In fact, these relationships were essential for his survival, as well as the establishment of the mission. These close relationships, while granting Perkins the social power and actual knowledge he needed to do his work and establish the mission, also granted his Assyrian companions a great deal of agency in the development of the mission.

### **The Perkins Family Arrives in Tabriz**

Similar to Dwight and Smith, the Perkins were also tasked with a host of duties in a commission from the ABCFM when they set out to establish a mission to the Assyrians at Orumiyeh. Rev. Perkins recalls these instructions in a series of notes, later compiled into a volume titled *Residence of Eight Years in Persia Amongst Nestorians*, recounting the establishment of the mission there and his first years of service. Primarily, he was instructed to figure out what the Assyrian Christians believed and how they practiced, as — aside from the then-recent publications of Dwight and Smith — the only other detailed information available on the Assyrians was from Catholic missionaries and thus not useful for the purposes of the

ABCFM.<sup>119</sup> Beyond this, Perkins was to send a report regarding the numbers of Assyrians, their manners of residence, religious doctrines and rites, and educational and moral status back to the ABCFM, as soon as he was able to collect this data.<sup>120</sup>

Aside from these tasks, the ABCFM Committee provided some advice to Rev. Perkins that would direct his first movements in Persia. One was regarding the mountainous region situated around the city of Orumiyeh proper. While a large chunk of the Assyrian Christian population occupied the city itself and the villages on the plain of Orumiyeh, there was also a significant Christian population in the mountain villages, located beyond the plain. However, this presented a few challenges. First, the ABCFM believed the Kurdish population, specifically village elites and governors, in the mountains to be more hostile to missionary efforts than their counterparts on the plain. Second, these mountain villages were incredibly difficult to access and navigate. Some were so remote that they could only be accessed on foot — the paths in and out proved too treacherous even for donkeys. Thus, the ABCFM warned the Perkins that they were unsure about his ability to access the mountain region and emphasized that it would not be easy. However, they also highlighted the importance of penetration into the mountain region. Not only could it be housing unforeseen Kurdish hostilities, but the highest-ranking patriarch in the Assyrian church resided in one of these mountainous villages and his approval and cooperation would be essential in the establishment of the mission.<sup>121</sup>

Furthermore, Rev. Perkins was given the key directive that he was not to engage in lengthy conversations or negotiations regarding the mission of any kind until he was able to

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<sup>119</sup> Justin Perkins, *A residence of eight years in Persia, among the Nestorian Christians: with notice of the Muhammedans* (Andover: Allen, Morrill, and Wardwel, 1843), 30.

<sup>120</sup> Perkins, *A residence of eight years in Persia*, 30.

<sup>121</sup> Perkins, *A residence of eight years in Persia*, 30.

speak the Syriac language of the Assyrian Christians and was told to never, under any circumstances, trust his interpreters to be able to convey his words accurately.<sup>122</sup> This is, of course, pretty standard advice to foreign missionaries, but language would become unusually important to the mission at Orumiyeh and close to Perkins' heart, as well as go on to shape the early days and the formation of relationships with locals at the mission.<sup>123</sup> Finally, Perkins was steered to express his intentions in a very specific way, in order to gain the trust of the Persian Assyrian Christians. He was told to "Convince the people, that [he came] among them with no design to take away their religious privileges, nor to subject them to any foreign ecclesiastical power."<sup>124</sup> The question, of course, arises as to whether Perkins was being truthful or not in expressing this message. Ultimately, though Perkins himself was subjected to a "foreign ecclesiastical power" — the ABCFM — and thus so too was his mission station, he did not subject the members of the mission to any such power and gave the existing patriarchal structure continued religious authority. He would eventually open a seminary and help to create a more formalized structure for making church-wide decisions in a democratic manner. Although the ABCFM may have intended for Perkins to state these things as empty platitudes, he did hold true to them in the most broad sense — which is not to say he did not act in certain ways because of his *own* association with a foreign power and a separate ecclesiastical authority, for example, by encouraging certain reforms within the church to make it more in line with Presbyterian convention.

Given the vulnerable situation of the Persian empire at this time, already inundated with Russian and British influence, it was incredibly important that Perkins made it clear that the

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<sup>122</sup> Perkins, *A residence of eight years in Persia*, 30.

<sup>123</sup> Perkins, *A residence of eight years in Persia*, 30.

<sup>124</sup> Perkins, *A residence of eight years in Persia*, 31.



establishment of the mission at Orumiyeh was a non-political matter, simply something done in the favor of bettering Christianity and fostering a Christian community irrespective of nationality. He was also counseled to remind the Assyrian Christians that “The only acknowledged head of the church to which [he] belong[ed] [was] Jesus Christ, and [his] only authoritative standard in ecclesiastical matters, [was] the New Testament,” again emphasizing the idea that Rev. Perkins was to express to the Persian people that his aim was not to sway them to some type of imperialist agenda, but rather only to welcome them further into the fold of Christianity.<sup>125</sup> Given the deep entanglement of Persian officials (religious and otherwise) with imperial powers at this point and the almost expressly political aims of other foreigners in the country, this distinction was incredibly important to the mission and making involvement in it attractive to local populations. This also was a much easier duty for an American at this moment, as the United States had no formal diplomatic contact with Persia at this point. There would be no U.S. ambassador to the country until 1883, when the prevalence of American missionary work in the nation mandated it.<sup>126</sup> Thus, there was no commonly understood American imperial purpose or intent, as there was for British and Russian internationals. This also meant, however, that missionaries as individuals were left to navigate the increasingly complex environment of a Persia bleeding sovereignty to other nation on their own, with no institutional system to protect them.

The Rev. and Mrs. Perkins encountered these aforementioned imperial complexities at Persia’s semi-autonomous border on their way to Orumiyeh from the United States, a circuitous journey that took them six months to complete and was laden with encounters with disease and

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<sup>125</sup> Perkins, *A residence of eight years in Persia*, 30.

<sup>126</sup> Waterfield, *Christians in Persia*, 103.

unruly European powers.<sup>127</sup> At one point, travelling essentially alone through unfamiliar territory, the Perkins found themselves face to face with Russian guards who refused to let them go any further, given that they did not carry passports with them.<sup>128</sup> Held captive by these Russian soldiers for weeks, the Perkins were finally freed only when another European power — the English, who just happened to be vying for the same territory — interceded on their behalf.<sup>129</sup> After Rev. Perkins sent out a desperate plea through an intermediary to an English ambassador in Tabriz, there was some negotiation between the English and Russian embassies, upon the conclusion of which Rev. and Mrs. Perkins were allowed to pass into Persia and were released into the hands of British officials.<sup>130</sup> The Perkins' flirtation with the European powers in Persia did not simply end here, however. Rather, after this diplomatic arbitration, the English ambassador went on to procure a home in Tabriz for the couple, allowing them to settle in and recover from their arduous journey — and provide Mrs. Perkins with a safe place to give birth to and nurse their child, who was born days after all of this occurred.<sup>131</sup>

In this moment, borders become clear and absolutely vital to the survival of the missionaries and their nascent mission. The Perkinses are very much lost in a land that they are unaware is riddled with borders — to the point that it nearly costs them their lives on their journey into Persia. Yet, as is increasingly indisputable in this story, these borders and the interactions around them foster intimacy for those excluded, included, or otherwise grouped together by them. In this case, Reverend and Mrs. Perkins are wholly at the mercy of the British

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<sup>127</sup> Henry Martyn Perkins, *Rev. Justin Perkins, D.D.* (Chicago: Women's Presbyterian Board of Missions of the Northwest, 1887), 7.

<sup>128</sup> Perkins, *Rev. Justin Perkins, D.D.*, 15-16.

<sup>129</sup> Perkins, *Rev. Justin Perkins, D.D.*, 15-16.

<sup>130</sup> Perkins, *Rev. Justin Perkins, D.D.*, 15-16.

<sup>131</sup> Perkins, *Rev. Justin Perkins, D.D.*, 16.

delegation in Tabriz, with whom they have no prior relationship. They have nowhere to turn and no hope but to accept whatever the British ambassador and associates can arrange for them. Here, this predicament is amplified by the fact that Mrs. Perkins is pregnant and about to give birth. The missionaries have no option but to trust and build relationships with those they encounter who they believe are on their side. Ultimately, this decision and the forthcoming help extended by the British government resulted in a decades-long relationship where the embassy granted the Americans protections (in terms of actual protection and assumed protection coming from association with the embassy), issued them British documents, introduced them to key officials and community members, and provided familiarity and comfort in an unknown land.

### **Off to Orumiyeh**

Once he had procured comfortable accommodations in Tabriz and had a bit of time to rest, Rev. Perkins set out on a fact-finding mission to Orumiyeh (about 90 miles away). There, Rev. Perkins found the Assyrian Christian sect “reduced in numbers, poor and oppressed, living in a state of semi-serfdom to their Mohammedan masters.”<sup>132</sup> However, he was encouraged that “though surrounded by the gross darkness of Mohammedanism, it was found they had clung to some of the forms of a pure Christianity,” which was evidenced to him by characteristics such as the existence of stone churches as houses of worship and the use of the Nicene Creed as a profession of faith.<sup>133</sup> Furthermore, Perkins was pleased to find that the population was incredibly hospitable — despite being largely illiterate and ignorant to Western culture.<sup>134</sup>

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<sup>132</sup> Perkins, *Rev. Justin Perkins, D.D.*, 17.

<sup>133</sup> Perkins, *Rev. Justin Perkins, D.D.*, 17.

<sup>134</sup> Perkins, *Rev. Justin Perkins, D.D.*, 19.

As for demographic features, Rev. Perkins recorded that 600 Nestorians resided in the city of Orumiyeh itself and that most of the Christian population actually resided in the surrounding villages, some of them in solely Christian villages and some in mixed villages, side by side with Muslims and Jews.<sup>135</sup> Perkins also quickly drew distinctions between the mountain villages and those on the plain. He typified the mountain villages as less civilized and characterized by inaccessibility and noted that these areas were ruled cruelly by the Kurds, apparently leading to perennial migration from the mountains onto the plain of Assyrian Christians seeking asylum.<sup>136</sup> The villages on the plain, while better off than those in the mountains, were populated by poor farmers in a sort of sharecropping relationship with the Christians plowing and cultivating fields owned by landed Muslims.<sup>137</sup> Perkins was distraught by the economic and social situation of the Assyrian Christians in this regard, explaining that while this setup was not a uniquely Muslim-Christian one, he felt that Muslim peasants were better respected than their Christian counterparts.<sup>138</sup>

Rev. Perkins also made note of many observations he had on the status of various ethnic and religious groups in Persian society. Like Dwight and Smith, he was not taken with the Armenians he encountered in Persia and described them as having an air of “spiritless servility” about them.<sup>139</sup> In particular, Perkins was bothered by the closeness of the Armenian population to the Muslim government in Persia and considered the social and economic privilege that this afforded them ill-gotten and sin-inducing — so much so that he classified the Armenians as more

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<sup>135</sup> Perkins, *A residence of eight years in Persia*, 9.

<sup>136</sup> Perkins, *A residence of eight years in Persia*, 11.

<sup>137</sup> Perkins, *A residence of eight years in Persia*, 9.

<sup>138</sup> Perkins, *A residence of eight years in Persia*, 9.

<sup>139</sup> Perkins, *A residence of eight years in Persia*, 17.

depraved than even the Muslims.<sup>140</sup> Perkins also quickly learned that Azerbaijanis (people hailing from the province of Azerbaijan, where Orumiyeh and Tabriz are located) were highly regarded in Persian society, as the Shah and his family were from the area and the region was credited with producing the best soldiers in the royal army.<sup>141</sup> As for the Kurds, Perkins found them — though decidedly Muslim — less corrupted than the general Muslim population of Persia.<sup>142</sup> However, lest this be seen as a suggestion for a future mission, Perkins remarks that the benefits of a conversion effort to the Kurdish Muslims would likely be largely ineffective and certainly produce reduced benefits, as the Kurdish peoples were nomadic.<sup>143</sup>

He also found the people of the Azerbaijan region to be especially inquisitive and intelligent, crediting this to the fact that they are of mixed race and not purely ethnically Persian, but closer to Europeans.<sup>144</sup> Here, Perkins also takes time to recount his encounters with sin amongst the Persians he has met. He records that all sins are prevalent amongst the population in question, and is especially alarmed by the common practice of sodomy.<sup>145</sup> The Reverend was further struck with the politeness of the Azerbaijanis, explaining that they reflect an aspect of Persian society he is continually encountering — politeness that is not sincere.<sup>146</sup> While Perkins believes this to belie that “their real character is that of treachery and falsehood in the extreme” and finds this universal “lying” abhorrent, he actually has come into contact with a Persian cultural behavior known as *taarof* or the offering of excessive sacrifices and/or politeness for a

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<sup>140</sup> Perkins, *A residence of eight years in Persia*, 17.

<sup>141</sup> Perkins, *A residence of eight years in Persia*, 149.

<sup>142</sup> Perkins, *A residence of eight years in Persia*, 191.

<sup>143</sup> Perkins, *A residence of eight years in Persia*, 191.

<sup>144</sup> Perkins, *A residence of eight years in Persia*, 149.

<sup>145</sup> Perkins, *A residence of eight years in Persia*, 150.

<sup>146</sup> Perkins, *A residence of eight years in Persia*, 149.

guest or stranger — a practice with which Perkins is clearly not familiar and one which will continue to torment him in his work at Orumiyeh.<sup>147</sup>

Though Perkins general conclusions regarding the people of Orumiyeh and Persia on whole mirror Dwight and Smith's, a few key differences between them inform their differing approaches moving forward. Firstly, Dwight and Smith were purely interested in gathering information, they had no need for extended, transformational personal interactions with the people they encountered on their exploratory mission. Perkins, on the other hand, had accepted this appointment where his goal was to transform the hearts and minds of the people that he encountered. Beyond this, Perkins was committed to remaining in Persia. Not only in the sense that he had been contracted to serve there by the ABCFM, but he had brought his wife with him and had already had a child born on Persian soil; he was committed to building a life suitable for his family in Orumiyeh. Thus, the focus of Perkin's first weeks and months was relationships. Of course, he had concrete needs — amongst them as language teacher and a plot of land for the mission — but he also needed a foundation of trustworthy people with whom he could begin to reach the community of Assyrian Christians and build the mission and his new life. Thus, though Perkins, in a comprehensive sense at least, seems to hold many of the same negative opinions and prejudices as Dwight and Smith, he must choose to seek out the good over the bad for his own survival and for the future of the mission. This a predicament that allows Perkins to hold contradictory beliefs simultaneously — he at once believes that the population of Orumiyeh in sinful *and* that the local men with whom he staffs his mission and who he relies on time and again are true followers of Christ. Fundamentally, Perkins must choose intimacy and trust-building even when he finds himself in a situation where he must overcome his prejudices, while

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<sup>147</sup> Perkins, *A residence of eight years in Persia*, 149.

Dwight and Smith have no need or desire to build relationships in Persia and can be content to generalize, depreciate the population, and move on, returning home to the United States or to their missions elsewhere.

After travelling through the region and upon collecting the necessary preliminary information, Rev. Perkins arranged a meeting with Abba Mirza, the governor of the Azerbaijan province with whom Dwight and Smith had been unable to meet due to logistical conflicts. After seemingly endless pleasantries, lavish compliments, and continual asking after his health (again, typical *taarof* that is remarkable to Perkins), the Reverend was invited into the governor's chambers to sit side by side with Abbas Mirza, where the two discussed the benefits of European education and Perkins' intent in the province as a handful of skeptical mullahs look on.<sup>148</sup> As the visit drew to a close, Perkins was pleased to find Abbas Mirza not opposed in the slightest to Western education or the distribution of Christian literature among the Nestorians.<sup>149</sup> However, he was somewhat alarmed by the presence of the mullahs in their meeting and worried about their influence in regional government, but reckoned that they would not cause too much trouble and noted that Abbas Mirza seemed to dominate them and the ABCFM needn't worry, as he was on their side.<sup>150</sup> Perkins was even further convinced that Dwight and Smith had judged Abbas Mirza's leanings correctly when the prince-governor procured a house for him in Orumiyeh, upon learning that he had been staying in churches when travelling outside of Tabriz.<sup>151</sup> Ultimately, Dwight, Smith, and Perkins had judged Abbas Mirza correctly. After the mission had been in operation for a year — and upon seeing the overwhelmingly positive reception to

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<sup>148</sup> Perkins, *A residence of eight years in Persia*, 184.

<sup>149</sup> Perkins, *A residence of eight years in Persia*, 184-185.

<sup>150</sup> Perkins, *A residence of eight years in Persia*, 185.

<sup>151</sup> Perkins, *A residence of eight years in Persia*, 185.

European education of his people — Abbas Mirza sent a delegate to Orumiyeh to inform Rev. Perkins that he had pledged the protection of three soldiers (whose salaries of \$3.00/month he paid himself) to protect the missionaries.<sup>152</sup>

In addition to this political visit, Perkins had to pay another crucial one before getting the mission set up. This time to the new ambassador from England, a man by the name of Henry Ellis. Having also already fallen out of favor with Russian military officials along the border on their inaugural trip to Persia, Perkins first set about securing the protection of the other major power in the country for the mission.<sup>153</sup> Finding the ambassador very interested in his work, Perkins also manages to obtain British passports for himself and his wife, giving them some additional social power and protection from other governmental forces.<sup>154</sup> Rev. Perkins also makes notes of having issues obtaining any sort of protection or guarantee of nonaggression from the Russian government due to its close ties with the Russian Orthodox Church and its strategic interests in the region.<sup>155</sup> As he put it, “the bigoted priesthood in Russia impels the government [to eject the Protestant missionaries]” and promised protection from the English and Persian officials attempting whole-heartedly to rid the territory of Russian influence was his only means to combat this impending threat.<sup>156</sup>

### **Yohannan and Abraham**

Another absolutely essential and nearly instantaneous connection that Perkins made prior to the establishment of the mission was with another familiar character, the bishop who had sat

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<sup>152</sup> Perkins, *Rev. Justin Perkins, D.D.*, 30.

<sup>153</sup> Perkins, *A residence of eight years in Persia*, 219.

<sup>154</sup> Perkins, *A residence of eight years in Persia*, 219.

<sup>155</sup> Perkins, *A residence of eight years in Persia*, 221-223.

<sup>156</sup> Perkins, *A residence of eight years in Persia*, 221-223.



with Smith and Dwight as they combed through the complexities of religious practice and beliefs after a church service — Mar Yohannan. Upon realizing that Perkins was a friend of Dwight and Smith's, Rev. Perkins recounts that Mar Yohannan greeted him like an old friend and welcomed him to the area.<sup>157</sup> Beyond just being a friendly face, the young bishop gave Perkins a valuable connection with the religious authorities of Orumiyeh, as the clerical positions were traditionally handed down through a line of male descendants and Mar Yohannan's father just so happened to be the head priest in Gavalan (a major village in the Orumiyeh area) and also visited several satellite villages to conduct services weekly — a position that granted him (and by extension his family) a great deal of power and status in his community.<sup>158</sup> This made many facets of the mission acceptable and respectable to the Assyrian community where they might otherwise not have been. In essence, by having Mar Yohannan — a respected church official — as a visible and vocal advocate for mission, Perkins gained quick and easy access to the already-Christian and now-receptive body of Assyrian Christians who were involved in their local churches. This was incredibly important, given that the Assyrian Christian community of Orumiyeh was not defined by one or two large churches, but rather a smattering of small parishes in various villages, which priests, bishops, and deacons would travel between. Thus, having the authority of a bishop — and by extension, in a system where acceptance to the clergy is hereditary, a whole handful of church officials — was essential to the development of the mission and the amenable nature of the communities receiving the mission.

Aside from the indispensable clout gained from the mission's association with this prominent religious family, this meeting with Mar Yohannan and his family served as a fact-

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<sup>157</sup> Perkins, *A residence of eight years in Persia*, 173.

<sup>158</sup> Perkins, *A residence of eight years in Persia*, 173.

finding mission of sorts for Perkins. Not only did he gain further insight into the clerical structure of the Assyrian church, but he also uncovered one key fact that delighted him to no end. Both Mar Yohannan and his father denied emphatically being Catholics or Catholic-affiliated in any way, considering themselves a distinct sect in a way that convinced Perkins (at least) that their church was relatively reformed by Western standards.<sup>159</sup> Furthermore, the men refuted the assertion that the Nestorian church was bleeding members to a sort of Catholic-sanctioned form of Nestorianism — a rumor that had been running rampant at the time of Smith and Dwight’s visit and concerned the ABCFM greatly.<sup>160</sup> This refutation was at least somewhat false, as one of the church’s most prominent patriarchs had recently left the Assyrian church for its Catholic-influenced counterpart; he would ultimately return, however. Although these reassurances from Yohannan and others were evidently false to Perkins, he passed them on to the ABCFM. He did not, however, stop trying to win these individuals back. Perkins, for decades, had semi-obsessive preoccupation with this group he called the Chaldeans — a term that he continually uses to refer to Catholic-influenced or converted Assyrians, despite Yohannan’s insistence that the Assyrian Christian population (whom he terms “Nestorians”) prefer to be called Chaldeans instead.<sup>161</sup> Instead of taking this aforementioned assertion at face value and conceding that the Assyrians lost were few and far between, Perkins — and his Assyrian companions — expressed over and over their desire to win back the lost Assyrian Christians, explaining that the Catholic-converted Assyrian Christians “need only the helping hand of Protestant missionaries, who are already among them, to be led back to the enclosure from which they have been driven astray.”<sup>162</sup>

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<sup>159</sup> Perkins, *A residence of eight years in Persia*, 174.

<sup>160</sup> Perkins, *A residence of eight years in Persia*, 174.

<sup>161</sup> Perkins, *A residence of eight years in Persia*, 175.

<sup>162</sup> Perkins, *A residence of eight years in Persia*, 200.

Perkins found yet another integral asset in Mar Yohannan and his family — access to the Syriac dialect spoken by the Assyrian residents of the region. As Perkins had been instructed to limit his interactions and conversations until he learned the language, he was incredibly eager to find a tutor who could help him become conversant quickly. Fortunately, Mar Yohannan was quick to offer to tutor Rev. Perkins — on the condition that he and his brother receive instruction in English in exchange.<sup>163</sup> Aside from this agreement serving as an incredible asset to the mission and Perkins its face, it actually granted them a less obvious advantage: as a result of this arrangement, Yohannan and his brother Abraham moved into the Perkins' home in Tabriz while they were teaching him.<sup>164</sup> This gave the budding mission around-the-clock access to two individuals from the region, who were constantly available to help navigate through the mountains, introduce the missionaries at other villages, provide connections to patriarchs and clergymen, answer any logistical or religious questions, and, of course, translate for them.

This is not to say, however, that Yohannan and Abraham were at the mercy of the mission or that they were bound in some kind of servitude to Perkins. Rather, the two men would repeatedly leverage their positions — in the church and as locals — to get things from the mission and the missionaries. This is evident in the agreement that Yohannan reached with Perkins, agreeing to teach him to speak Syriac but only on the condition that he provide he and his brother with education in English and a home in the city of Tabriz, both things that would otherwise have remained inaccessible to the brothers and granted them a great deal of new-found mobility. Though Yohannan and Abraham held sway within their community, they were still quite poor. Their education and the status that came with it was only afforded to them on the

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<sup>163</sup> Perkins, *A residence of eight years in Persia*, 176.

<sup>164</sup> Perkins, *A residence of eight years in Persia*, 176.

basis that they were to be clergy members based on their birth into a family in which the men had long served as ministers in the church. While this may seem to suggest a degree of economic privilege in an agrarian society, the clergy — as well as the whole church structure — remained quite poor. In fact, bishops (such as Yohannan) received no salary from any church authority or body, but rather made a small sum from religious taxes, fees for weddings, and voluntary contributions from their congregations.<sup>165</sup> Thus, while Abraham and Yohannan were relatively advantaged as a result of their position in their community, without an international and wealthy connection through Perkins, higher education, travel to America, and even moving to a big city less than a hundred miles away would not have been within their means. Furthermore, this arrangement was enduring. Yohannan and Abraham did not move in with Perkins and his family for a few months or a year, but permanently — even when the Perkins left Tabriz and set up camp in Orumiyeh. As Rev. Perkins put it, “They [Priest Abraham and Bishop Yohannan] appear much attached to us and seem to take it for granted that they are to live in our families.”<sup>166</sup> Yohannan and Abraham tied themselves and their family to the mission, and while this was the first of these agreements made by Mar Yohannan, it was far from the last — he would go on to travel to America with the Perkins family. He also would eventually convince a doctor (once the mission managed to attract one) to take on another one of his brothers as a medical student.

Perkins was also welcomed into the literal and spiritual family of the Assyrian clergy, as he had welcomed Yohannan and Abraham into his. Shortly after making the aforementioned arrangements with the brothers, Perkins sought out Patriarch Elias, one of the elders of the

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<sup>165</sup> Smith and Dwight, *Researches*, 223.

<sup>166</sup> Perkins, *A residence of eight years in Persia*, 232.

Church. In their meeting, he was emphatic that the Americans bring over a printing press to be used by the community.<sup>167</sup> While Dwight and Smith had brought with them some printed materials (namely Bibles and prayer books) to distribute amongst the clergy, the large majority of the population was illiterate, and furthermore unable to comprehend the ancient iteration of the Assyrian language in which church services were conducted and liturgy and related materials were written.<sup>168</sup> Beyond this, the written, old Assyrian was apparently incredibly difficult to print on a modern printing press, presenting yet another challenge.<sup>169</sup> Thus began another collaboration between Yohannan, Abraham, and Perkins — creating a new written form of the modern dialect of Syriac. Though Perkins is largely credited with this achievement in Western sources, it is clear from the writings of Perkins and his son that this was a collective undertaking, involving their Assyrian Christian companions at the highest level.<sup>170</sup> The creation of a universal and printable writing system for the language of the masses was essential to Perkins' mission, as he needed to print and distribute Bibles and prayer books to be studied and to facilitate worship. However, this was also an important undertaking for the Assyrian community of Orumiyeh. After all, the bringing of a printing press — to be used to print a Bible, prayers, and religious texts in the language of the people, rather than the older form only understood by the educated clergy — to the mission was first suggested by a local Patriarch, not by Perkins or by the ABCFM. This was a next step that was necessary for more universal and accessible education for the children (and adults) of the community. Literacy became a much more attainable goal for the community once it no longer required learning a new language and education — sites of education as well as physical face-to-face hours with instructors — was no longer a privilege

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<sup>167</sup> Perkins, *A residence of eight years in Persia*, 181.

<sup>168</sup> Waterfield, *Christians in Persia*, 105.

<sup>169</sup> Waterfield, *Christians in Persia*, 105.

<sup>170</sup> Perkins, *Rev. Justin Perkins, D.D.*, 43.

extended to clergy and family members, a system that in part came to be because previously the only written language was the ancient jargon of religious rites.

### **Education at Orumiyeh**

The education provided at the mission itself was also not designed by Perkins or the ABCFM alone but relied on the cooperation and input of the Assyrian Christian community. Education was one of the chief concerns of the Assyrian Christian community, as expressed repeatedly to Dwight and Smith and later to Perkins. It was one of the key aspects of society that Assyrians and Christians more generally were left out of in a Shi'a majority society. As the *maktab* system continued to prevail, education stayed a religious undertaking, leaving poor, rural Christian communities to devise a system of their own with limited resources and time. Before the arrival of a mission, complete with funding, staff, and infrastructure to support such an undertaking, the only sort of education available in this agricultural community was reserved for future clergy members — a hereditary group, who were often sent elsewhere to study at the direction of a patriarch. This did not mean, however, that there wasn't a desire for education amongst the Assyrian Christians. Many of the community members acknowledged that they saw the development of some sort of educational system as key to their ability to advance in Persian society. However, the furthest this idea had progressed was to Sunday school classes, largely due to the fact that this was the only time off that adults had. Otherwise, everyone (including older children) was expected to be doing their part, scraping out an existence in the fields or caring for the home and children (wives often worked the fields, leaving older children home to care for younger ones). Furthermore, the only people qualified to teach (as in, the only literate people) were church officials — who were often spread between a handful of villages churches and thusly limited in their time. The advent of a mission organization with money and staff to spare,

provided a new opportunity for more extensive education, not just limited to the day of worship. Beyond this, Western, European-style education specifically was valued and chosen for the children of families with the most wealth — and granted the most upward mobility in a province overrun by foreign officials and embassies. Thus, the enterprise of procuring and adapting American education became communal, with input from and instruction by Assyrian Christians at every step of the way.

It appears, in fact, that Perkins' Assyrian contacts actually began teaching before he did. While Perkins was off on business in Tabriz, Abraham, one of the men who had been staying with him to teach him Syriac and learn English, began teaching English classes in his home village, at no direction and with no input from Perkins.<sup>171</sup> Of this development, Perkins wrote “The first English school among the Nestorians, originated by one of their own ecclesiastics, is, I trust, a harbinger of a brighter day, about to rise.”<sup>172</sup> He also continued to take the same approach he had with the creation of the new writing system, collaborating with Abraham and Yohannan in writing translations of prayers. He and Abraham wrote this essential collection of prayers in the new Syriac on large cards, to be used in instruction of the pupils of the mission school.<sup>173</sup> Once the writing system was finalized and the prayer cards were finished, the mission school in Orumieh was opened.<sup>174</sup> At its start, the class consisted of seven young boys, who were instructed by Priest Abraham, who would teach them from the cards.<sup>175</sup> It would later be described as the “first Lancasterian school-room ever opened in Central Asia” by Perkins and would quickly attract many more pupils — and much attention from Muslims and Christians

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<sup>171</sup> Perkins, *A residence of eight years in Persia*, 224.

<sup>172</sup> Perkins, *A residence of eight years in Persia*, 224.

<sup>173</sup> Perkins, *Rev. Justin Perkins, D.D.*, 43.

<sup>174</sup> Perkins, *Rev. Justin Perkins, D.D.*, 43-44.

<sup>175</sup> Perkins, *Rev. Justin Perkins, D.D.*, 44.

alike.<sup>176</sup> Even as the school continued to grow, however, the Assyrian contributions to the education system were not lost. In fact, until Abraham's death, it was he who actually taught the students, while Perkins instead focused on the management of the mission and other projects, like the small seminary he would go on to start on the mission property.<sup>177</sup> Abraham's influence on the mission was not simply in his role of teacher, however. He commanded great control over many of the projects, working with Perkins closely and on a daily basis, along with his brother. In fact, when the printing press finally did arrive in Orumiyeh, a few years later in 1836, it is Abraham who decides what will be printed first — a modern Syriac translation of the Bible, something the community had been missing for years.<sup>178</sup>

Where his brother held great sway over the development of mission education, Mar Yohannan played an important role in shaping the mission as a whole. After a year in Persia, he was invited to travel to the United States to attend a special ABCFM meeting with the Perkinses about the future of missions in the region and was even invited to offer up some prayers for newly commissioned missionaries.<sup>179</sup> Yohannan would continue to return regularly to the U.S. with the Perkins family whenever they went back, helping to arrange for new missionaries to come back with them and participating in Rev. Perkins' business with the ABCFM.<sup>180</sup> This international mobility, granted to him by close association with Perkins and by extension the ABCFM, was not an opportunity that otherwise would have been afforded to a poor bishop from Azerbaijan, despite the clout he carried in his community. Simply put, Yohannan — and other

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<sup>176</sup> Perkins, *A residence of eight years in Persia*, 250.

<sup>177</sup> Perkins, *Rev. Justin Perkins, D.D.*, 20.

<sup>178</sup> Perkins, *Rev. Justin Perkins, D.D.*, 45.

<sup>179</sup> Perkins, *Rev. Justin Perkins, D.D.*, 28.

<sup>180</sup> American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, "Mission to the Nestorians of Persia" *The Missionary herald xxxviii*. (1843): 7-8.



Assyrian Christians like him — lacked the necessary funds to travel abroad, as well as the linguistic and social connections. Though he was a powerful member of his Assyrian Christian community, it was a community that lacked an international web and was very much regionally limited. Yet, while the ABCFM may have had the final say in many mission-related matters, the organization recognized Yohannan's authority in his involvement with the mission at Orumiyeh and asked him to be involved in training and briefing new missionaries for that particular field, determining new directions for the mission, and even asked him to deliver prayers and offer a few words at some of their meetings, recognizing his position as a bishop. Thus, Yohannan retained his status and his authority even in his travels abroad, and was able to transform the social power he held at home into a bargaining tool with the ABCFM for the benefit of the mission and his own personal advancement, in ways that otherwise would have been impossible.

This social power was essential to the establishment and development of the mission in ways that should not be underestimated. One of the greatest issues that the mission faced in its early years was in reaching women in a meaningful capacity. The school for girls was not established until the wife of the mission's doctor arrived and was able to make connection with a handful of local women and decided to open a school for girls with four pupils.<sup>181</sup> The operation remained small and was apparently less than successful. When it was taken over by another missionary woman following her departure, the decision was made to turn it into a boarding school, in order to have more contact with students and have a greater effect on them.<sup>182</sup> However, it proved impossible to find female students to attend a boarding school for a litany of reasons, for example if the woman had familial obligations like caring for younger siblings or

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<sup>181</sup> Thomas Laurie, *Woman and her Savior in Persia* (Boston: Gould and Lincoln, 1863), 51.

<sup>182</sup> Laurie, *Woman and her Savior in Persia*, 51.

working in the field, or was already engaged.<sup>183</sup> Most importantly, a young woman sleeping away from her home was not considered respectable in the community. However, once Mar Yohannan heard of this issue, he found pupils for the boarding school.<sup>184</sup> With his approval, as a respected member of the community and a church official, girls attending the mission's boarding school became respectable. In addition to all the work Yohannan did for the mission and alongside Perkins, he continued to teach Sunday school classes, as well as retaining his role and performing his duties as a bishop in the Assyrian church.

Beyond the influence wielded by Yohannan and Abraham in analytical terms, they shared a deep closeness with the Perkins family. Over the years, Perkins would chronicle not only the mission endeavors that the men carried out together, but smaller everyday moments, such as Yohanna and Abraham learning to sit in chairs in the Perkins home (as opposed to on the floor, as was their custom) and becoming accustomed to using forks and knives to eat their meals.<sup>185</sup> In fact, they would continue to live with the Perkins family for many years, becoming "much attached" to Perkins and his wife and children and growing used to sharing a home, providing Mar Yohannan with a sense of family he was destined to eschew as bishop, forbidden to marry by Assyrian traditions.<sup>186</sup>

### Conclusion

Ultimately, the Presbyterian mission to Orumiyeh was not the absolutist exercise it seemed. In the place of domination or intimidation, the founding moments of the establishment

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<sup>183</sup> Laurie, *Woman and her Savior in Persia*, 51.

<sup>184</sup> Laurie, *Woman and her Savior in Persia*, 51.

<sup>185</sup> Perkins, *A residence of eight years in Persia*, 197.

<sup>186</sup> Perkins, *A residence of eight years in Persia*, 232.

of the mission were defined by cooperation and collaboration. In the Assyrians of Orumiyeh, the exploratory committee of Dwight and Smith saw enough of themselves in an unfamiliar land to initiate an endeavor in what they believed would save and strengthen those who they had encountered. Though some of the accounts of the missionaries are certainly not devoid of Orientalist or other inappropriate stereotypes, the missionaries of the ABCFM were not despots nor did they hold absolute power in the creation of the mission.

Throughout the establishment of the mission and continuing for many years after, the Assyrians — especially specific Assyrians — had a great deal of agency in the work of the mission. Whether it was Priest Abraham teaching classes or dictating what ought to be printed on the American-supplied mission printing press or Mar Yohannan helping to create the new Syriac alphabet or traveling to the US or their younger brother studying medicine and travelling the region with Dr. Grant. It was not as if the American missionaries simply brought resources to be used by the Assyrian Christians, however. Rather, the Americans and the Assyrians provided resources to each other. The most notable of these, of course, was the exchange of linguistic knowledge. In this case, Perkins taught Yohannan and Abraham English — an incredibly valuable asset, which they passed on to their community by providing lessons — yet, equally if not more valuable, was their teaching Syriac to Perkins. Furthermore, in living and frequently travelling with him, they provided on demand translation in addition to social and spatial knowledge that would otherwise have remained inaccessible to Perkins and the other Americans. Moreover, Yohannan and Abraham also granted Perkins and the mission their social power, as high-ranking and well-known members of the Assyrian clergy. This power was often reflected in the procurement of students for missionary schools and appointments with patriarchs, which otherwise would have been much more difficult, if not altogether impossible. This is not to

suggest, however, that either party viewed their relationship simply as an exchange of benefits or a way to move up the proverbial ladder. The relationship between these men was one of mutual and genuine affection — they would live together for many years and experience each other's culture deeply, becoming like family.

In sum, the mission to Orumiyeh was a community-controlled endeavor. Assyrian religious leaders were an integral part of every aspect of its establishment and management, and their authority was essential to the success claimed by the American missionaries. Yet, this was unique to this particular time and place. As the mission expanded and moved to other regions, Persians would not be granted this same level of influence, for a number of reasons — most prominent of all being that it simply was not a necessity, as the mission network became more developed and the education provided garnered notoriety and respect. This progression is not dissimilar to other founding moments of imperialist projects, but the particular conditions of the Assyrian population of Orumiyeh — from their lower position in Persian society, to their physically inaccessible location, to their linguistic status, to the swirling national and international conflicts enveloping them — make the intimacy required in early moments of imperialist interactions abundantly clear.

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