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'An Inheritance with Sarah': Women in the Church of the East (1500-1850)

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I NTERNATIONALE
K IRCHLICHE
Z EITSCHRIFT

NEUE FOLGE
DER REVUE
INTERNATIONALE
DE THÉOLOGIE

Id teneamus, quod ubique, quod semper, quod ab omnibus creditum est

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“An Inheritance with Sarah”. Women in the Church of the East (1500–1850)*

Heleen Murre-van den Berg

It was commissioned and taken care of, the binding, the binding together and the pressing of this book of the life-giving and reviving Gospel, by her own means, a perfect woman and an upright believer, Alpo – may the Lord give her an inheritance with Sarah, I say, Ripqa and Rachel and Leah and Maryam the daughter of Amram, and Ruth, and with the Magdala woman, the Samaritan woman, and Martha, and the Canaanite woman and with all the righteous and saintly women, Amen.¹

In August 1808, the East Syriac metropolitan Yosep of Shakh, living temporarily in the village of Hassen near what today is the Turkish city of Cizre (Gazarta), supervised the rebinding of a Gospel manuscript. The manuscript had been written in the same region more than two hundred years earlier, in 1591.² This clerical leader probably also jotted the note on the generous woman who made this renovation possible, the “perfect woman and upright believer, Alpo.” That is all we know about her, there are no further references to her husband, her children, her father or her place of origin. Nor are the origins of “her own means” by which she made this donation possible further explained. However, her donation to the church of Mar Mushe in Hassen at least bought her a place in the annals of the history of the East Syriac Church.

It is this participation of women in the religious life of the Church of the East that is the focus of this article. Though historians have become convinced that women played much more important and pervasive roles in earlier phases of Christianity than had been acknowledged in mainline

* Überarbeiteter Text eines Vortrags, den die Autorin am 4. Dezember 2009 im Rahmen eines von der Theologischen Fakultät der Universität Bern organisierten Symposiums zum Thema “Voices Lost and Found: Women in Syriac Christianity” gehalten hat.

¹ Eduard Sachau, *Verzeichniss der Syrischen Handschriften der Königlichen Bibliothek zu Berlin* (Berlin: A. Asher & Co., 1899): Berlin 31 (1591/1808), fo 228a: *mšihā ne' bed lāh mnāyā, `am sārā āmar-nā, w-ripqā w-rāhīl w-lāyā w-maryam braṭ `amram, w-r'ut w-`am magdālāyā, w-šamaryāyā w-marta wa-knānāyā w-`am kulhēyn kē/nāta w-qaddīšātā, Amen.*

² David Wilmshurst, *The Ecclesiastical Organisation of the Church of the East, 1318–1913*, CSCO 582, Subsidia 104 (Louvain: Peeters, 2000), p. 119.

histories, the historiography of Orthodox Christianity, including that of the Syriac churches, has remained a male-dominated narrative. This is partly a matter of the sources, which tend to favor a male perspective on ecclesial and social matters, partly a matter of the way in which these sources have been employed, disregarding the alternative perspectives included in them. That this need not be the case has been shown by Susan Ashbrook Harvey: a careful re-reading of the sources enabled her to complement and sometimes contradict these earlier male-centered stories.³ Whereas Harvey’s work has focused mainly on the earlier periods of the Syriac Churches, especially on the Syrian Orthodox Church, this article attempts a better understanding of women’s roles in the more recent history of the East Syriac Church, traditionally known as the Nestorian Church and today using the name Assyrian Church of the East.⁴

In this article, I add a second layer of interpretation by juxtaposing and connecting what are generally treated as two distinct periods, the ‘early modern’ and the ‘modern’ period, the latter to begin in the late eighteenth or early nineteenth century. In Middle Eastern historiography these terms are often avoided, but a similar distinction between the pre-nineteenth and nineteenth century often is made by distinguishing the pre-Tanzimat period (the period of the Ottoman Reforms starting in 1839) from later Ottoman history. While I certainly will not argue for a radical erasure of this dividing line, it is worth looking for constants and gradual developments that span these three hundred and fifty years.

For the Church of the East, this long period saw the transformation of a traditional and isolated Oriental Christian society into a society in which cultural and religious norms had begun to change under Western influences. From the seventeenth century onwards, Catholic missions worked in the Ottoman Empire, followed, in the nineteenth century, by American Protestant missions. Of these, the work of the American Presbyterians in Urmia (northwestern Iran, bordering on eastern Turkey) was most impor-

³ In my thanks to Susan Ashbrook Harvey for her inspiring work and warm friendship, I also include two graduate students, Rima Nasrallah and Ellen Can. Our discussions on themes of gender and mission, female spirituality, and the relations between Orthodoxy and Protestantism, have much contributed to refining the conclusions of this article.

⁴ Wilhelm Baum and Dietmar W. Winkler, *Die Apostolische Kirche des Ostens. Geschichte der sogenannten Nestorianer* (Klagenfurt: Verlag Kitab, 2000); Christoph Baumer, *The Church of the East. An Illustrated History of Assyrian Christianity* (London/New York: I. B. Tauris, 2006).

tant for the Church of the East. Earlier research, both into the Protestant missionary movement and into Catholic activities elsewhere in the Middle East, described the changes of the pre-nineteenth and nineteenth centuries as a process of religious modernization that included individualization and an accompanying new type of agency for women as well as for lay men, over and against clerical hierarchies.⁵ Whereas I largely agree with these interpretations, they also need to be refined, because they often assume a considerable contrast between pre- and post-nineteenth-century developments. This contribution aims to show how the developments of the nineteenth century build upon earlier social and religious patterns in East Syriac society, re-interpreting them and adapting them to the new times, at the same time leaving intact many of the older structures and ideas.⁶

Donations

The best-documented role of women in the Church of the East in the early modern period is that of their financial patronage. Around 1500, the Church of the East had started to recover from more than a century of difficulties, after the Mongol ruler Timur Leng had wreaked havoc in much of Central Asia, Persia and Mesopotamia, had destroyed many

⁵ Amanda Porterfield, *Mary Lyon and the Mount Holyoke Missionaries* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), John Joseph, *The Modern Assyrians of the Middle East: Encounters with Western Christian Missions, Archaeologists, & Colonial Powers* (Leiden: Brill, 2000); Bernard Heyberger, *Les chrétiens du Proche Orient au temps de la réforme catholique* [Bibliothèque des Écoles Françaises d'Athènes et de Rome 284] (Rome: École Française de Rome, 1994); idem, “Individualism and Political Modernity: The Catholic Devout Women in Aleppo and Lebanon (17th–19th Centuries),” in: Amira Sonbol (ed.), *Beyond the Exotic: Women's Histories in Islamic Societies* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2005), pp. 71–85.

⁶ For further bibliographical references and background, see my “Dear Mother of my Soul’. Fidelia Fiske and the Role of Women Missionaries in Mid–Nineteenth Century Iran,” in: *Exchange* 30,1 (2001), pp. 33–48; “Generous Devotion: Women in the Church of the East between 1550 and 1850,” in: *Hugoye: Journal of Syriac Studies* 7,1 (2004) (<http://syrcom.cua.edu/Hugoye>). For the general context, see my *From a Spoken to a Written Language. The Introduction and Development of Literary Urmia Aramaic in the Nineteenth Century* [Publication of the “De Goeje Fund” no. XXVIII] (Leiden: NINO, 1999); “Let us partake, all who believe in Christ’. Liturgy in the Church of the East between 1500 and 1850,” in: Martin Tamcke, *Gotteslehre im orientalischen Christentum. Koexistenz mit dem Islam im Bereich des Mashriq* (Göttingen, 25–26 May 2007) (Beirut: Orient-Institut Beirut, 2008), pp. 139–153.

Christian communities completely, and destroyed other communities’ churches and depleted them of their manuscripts. From the late fifteenth century onwards, a considerable increase in manuscript production is attested, reaching surprisingly high levels in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century. Among those that sponsored and commissioned these new manuscripts, Syriac women were well represented, making up about twenty percent of the donors. These donors were usually acknowledged in the colophons, which thus give us considerable insight in the geographical and social make-up of the time.⁷

Like the colophon on Alpo with which I started my contribution, these texts usually state that women paid “from their own means,” most likely consisting of money, houses and land. In contradistinction to what was the case in most parts and social strata of contemporary Europe, in the Middle East it was rather common for women to possess such independent wealth, either because part of their family heritage remained their private property after marriage, or because women acquired additional income during their marriage. It was also rather common, be it in Islamic, Christian or Jewish contexts, that women used their own money to support religious foundations of various kinds, including monasteries and religious books, soup kitchens and schools. This financial freedom was not restricted to married women: the colophons mention women who lived in their father’s households or in a monastery and donated money to order manuscripts.⁸

Quite a number of women donated on their own, like Putta, sister of the priest Daniel and daughter of chief Atallah of Harab Olma, around 1550,⁹ Shmuni, daughter of Na’azar in 1701,¹⁰ Belghan from Alqoshta in 1707,¹¹ and Alpo in 1808. Most of the women donated to a particular church, often liturgical manuscripts like Gospels, *gazzas* and *hudras*. Some women

⁷ Heleen Murre-van den Berg, “I the weak scribe,” Scribes in the Church of the East in the Ottoman Period,” in: *The Journal of Eastern Christian Studies* 58 (2006) pp. 1–2, 9–26; idem, “Generous Devotion” [see note 6].

⁸ Margaret L. Meriwether and Judith E. Tucker, *A Social History of Women & Gender in the Modern Middle East* (Boulder CO: Westview Press, 1999), pp. 10–14.

⁹ Mosul (Bidawid) 1003 (Harab Olma ca. 1550). Manuscripts are referred to by manuscript catalogue and catalogue number, and the place and date of copying as recorded in the manuscript. For full references, see my “Generous Devotion” [see note 6] and Wilmshurst, *The Ecclesiastical Organisation* [see note 2] (both his bibliography of manuscript catalogues and his list of manuscripts).

¹⁰ Dawra Syr 541 (Alqosh 1701).

¹¹ Cambridge Add 1984 (Alqosh 1707).

were able to pay for the restoration of a church, or donated land or houses to the church, like Shazemana, wife of Yazdan, who in 1613 donated “a valuable golden cup and a house in Sharukhiya to the church of Mar Pethyon in Amid, partly for the priests of that church, and partly for the table of the bishop.”¹² Or like Lady Ahlijan, wife of Aspania, son of Yannan, daughter of Nahma, son of Hanna, brother of Mar Eliya bar Tappe (thus related to the patriarchal family), whose death was noted in a manuscript in 1624, and who was commemorated for her generous gift to the monastery of Mar Yaquw Hwisha; she “gave two pairs of oxen [...], with land and appurtenances.”¹³

Whereas these two women belonged to the higher classes of the Church of the East, others probably had to do with more modest means. They often commissioned manuscripts in groups, like the all-female group consisting of Amat, her daughter Maryam, Helen, Tekka, and Elfiya, that enabled priest Awdisho from Telkepe to commission a *takhsa* (a priests’ ritual) “thanks to the money and the labor of these women” in 1744, for the monastery of Mar Giwargis of Bet Awire.¹⁴ In 1706, Shona and her mother Nasrat commissioned a Gospel lectionary,¹⁵ whereas other women donated together with their husbands, like in 1723, when “the believer Hanne, the believer Kammo and their righteous wives Sara and Maryam” paid for a voluminous hymn *gazza* in the church of Mar Ahha Allana in Shelmat.¹⁶

Usually, the relationship of a woman with the church or monastery she is donating to, is not stated explicitly. When the manuscript was donated to a village church one should probably infer that this village was also the home of the donor. In cases of monasteries or famous churches in the towns, this may not always have been the case, donations probably coming in from a much wider area. This was certainly the case when donations were made to the churches of Jerusalem. The most interesting donation is that of an anonymous lady who in the later sixteenth century bought a hospice for the East Syriac community in Jerusalem, then transferred it from the Catholic party to the traditional Church of the East who in that

¹² Later note in Vatican Syr 83 (Gazarta 1537).

¹³ Seert (Scher) 34 (Mar Yaquw Hbhissha 1611).

¹⁴ Paris BN Syr 310 (Alqosh 1744); compare also another manuscript from Telkepe, which was commissioned thirty-four years later by a group of “believing women” whose names are not given; it was copied by the same scribe and donated to the same monastery: Mosul 98 (=Bidawid 6016) (Alqosh 1778).

¹⁵ Aqra 6 (=Habbi 10) (Alqosh 1706).

¹⁶ Cambridge Add 1980 (Alqosh 1723).

period were in open rivalry. This “rich woman” is said to have “had the ear of the Turk,” suggesting that her connections with the Ottoman government were good enough to be able to have transferred the property to her community of choice.¹⁷ Not much later, Seltana, *baṭ qyāmā*, daughter of Belghana from Bet Megali in the Gazarta region, donated a Psalter to the “monastery of the Nestorians” in Jerusalem.¹⁸ The many references to the Jerusalem pilgrimage in the manuscripts indicate that for men and women alike, it constituted an important part of the religious geography of the time and thus was considered something worth spending money on.¹⁹

The opening quotation of this article makes clear that the ultimate reason for these donations was to ensure the giver’s place in the life hereafter. Of course, these gifts and the accompanying textual witnesses had an important social function in the Christian community, by confirming existing balances of power and wealth, by establishing new links between families and places, and by maintaining reciprocal links between clergy and lay people. However, the most explicit function of donations was that of adding to the donor’s heavenly credit, directly as a deed of devotion to the Church of Christ, and indirectly via the prayers of those that would later hear of the donation. Prayers in the colophon ask for a fitting recompense for those that have made a donation, a recompense that always is expressed in decidedly gendered terms that replicate the social divisions of the time. In Alpo’s case, in the beautifully rhythmical line quoted above, the copyist prays that she would be allowed to join the female saints of the Old and New Testaments. At Alpo’s funeral, the wider community may have joined in with the lines of a prayer that was written by Israel of Alqosh, one of the major poets of the early seventeenth century, written expressly for the burial of women:²⁰

¹⁷ Samuel Giamil, *Genuinae Relationes inter Sedem Apostolicam et Assyriorum Orientalium seu Chaldaeorum Ecclesiam* (Rome: Ermanno Loescher & Co., 1902), 97–6; Wilmshurst, *The Ecclesiastical Organization* [see note 2], pp. 69; a pre-1581 date is to be supposed.

¹⁸ Jerusalem Syr 15 (Rabban Hormizd 1593).

¹⁹ Sebastian Brock, “East Syriac Pilgrims to Jerusalem in the Early Ottoman Period,” in: *Aram* 18–19 (2006–2007), pp. 189–201.

²⁰ The lines are from an unedited poem (*huttama*) by Israel of Alqosh, in Gr-Add 326 (Dayr Abun 1671). I thank my colleague Gerrit Reinink for drawing my attention to this poem. The same poem can be found in CA 1984 (Alqosh 1707) and Ber 41 (Gugtapa 1834).

May she have enduring joy in the delights of the kingdom, among the ranks of the pious women and the orders of the saints.²¹

Religious lives

Seltana, daughter of Belghana, the woman who gave a Psalter to the Jerusalem monastery, is referred to in the colophon as a *bat qyāmā*, “daughter of the covenant.” In the early history of the Syriac churches, these daughters of the covenant became the prime singers of certain parts of the liturgy, especially the Ephraemic paranetic hymns, the *madrashē*. In this way they participated in one of the core elements of the Sunday ritual. Often the female singers are merely referred to as “virgins” but whether this refers to the same office or another one is difficult to say. Further offices are those of nuns and deaconesses, the first living in a monastery and not participating in the public liturgy, the second, the deaconesses, assisting in the baptism of women, and additionally in the care for the poor and needy. While this suggests that these may have constituted a number of different offices, other, later texts seem to conflate, for instance, the daughters of the covenant with deaconesses.²² All these offices are referred to also in the colophons from the sixteenth century onwards, though, unfortunately, in very low numbers and without texts explaining what these offices might have entailed.

Thus, not much more than the names of these offices have survived, presenting us with some tantalizing isolated pieces that hardly enable us to reconstruct the larger picture. As said, Seltana daughter of Belghana is mentioned as a “daughter of the covenant” in a colophon of 1593. In the modern period, the term is mostly used for the wife of the priest (parish priests usually are married in the Syriac churches), but whether that was already the case in the late sixteenth century remains an open question. It is equally possible that the older meaning of the celibate woman serving the church, in the choir or otherwise, should be preferred. Seltana is identified by her father’s rather than by her husband’s name. This suggests that

²¹ Syriac: *b-bussāmē d-bēyī malkūtā, tetbassem b-amminūtā, baynat sedrē d-nakpātā, wa-znāgē d-qaddīsātā*.

²² Susan Ashbrook Harvey, “Revisiting the Daughters of the Covenant: Women’s Choirs and Sacred Song in Ancient Syriac Christianity,” in: *Hugoye* 8,2 (2005) (<http://syrcom.cua.edu/Hugoye>); Clémence Hérou, “The Deaconess in the Syriac Church,” in: Habib Badr (ed.), *Christianity: A History in the Middle East* (Beirut, MECC 2005), pp. 413–433.

she was unmarried, though the evidence is not conclusive since some women seem to have refrained from naming their husbands in the colophons.²³

One “distinguished virgin” (*btultā zāhyā*) is referred to, reminding us of the virgin singers of the earlier period: Shmuni, daughter of Marqos, in 1824,²⁴ as well as two nuns. The first is Maryam, daughter of priest Hormizd, son of Sulaiman, who commissioned a Gospel for the monastery of Rabban Hormizd in 1542. She is described with the Arabic title *rāhiba* (“nun”), but it is not clear whether she lived as a nun in that monastery.²⁵ The second is Khatun. She died in 1629 in the monastery of Mar Yohannan Nahlaya, not far from the small town of Seert (Eastern Turkey), where she was also buried. This suggests that she indeed belonged to the monastic community.²⁶ The last office that is mentioned in the colophons is that of a deaconess. She, *mšammē šānītā* Maryam, also lived in a monastery, that of Mar Augin near Nisibis, to whose library she donated a “Life of Mar Augin” in 1739.²⁷

This indicates that at least some of these celibate women lived in monasteries. Syriac monasteries often were double monasteries, with separate quarters for the women, who in addition to their spiritual duties took on considerable parts of the household work of the community. However, from the late seventeenth century onwards, East Syriac monasticism declined sharply, leading to its almost complete demise, though all through the nineteenth century solitary monks or nuns would continue living in churches.²⁸ In the 1820s, the Catholic party in the Church of the East, the Chaldeans, successfully started a new monastic tradition along Catholic lines, in the by then deserted monastery of Rabban Hormizd near Al-

²³ Murre-van den Berg, “Generous Devotion” [see note 6], #8.

²⁴ Mingana Syr 426 (Alqosh? 1824).

²⁵ Dawra Syr 39 (=Alqosh 20) (Gazarta 1542).

²⁶ Seert (Scher) 34 (Mar Yaquw Hbhisha, 1922/1624). The cataloguer gives only the French “religieuse,” not the Syriac original.

²⁷ Mingana Syr 166 (Alqosh 1739).

²⁸ Percy George Badger (*The Nestorians and Their Rituals*, London 1852, I, pp. 389–391) noted a nun sharing quarters with a monk in the Church of Mar Awdisho at Goonduk in 1850; more famous is Rabban Yonan in Kochanes, see J.F. Coakley, *The Church of the East and the Church of England. A History of the Archbishop of Canterbury’s Assyrian Mission* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), pp. 71, 106, 108.

qosh.²⁹ Whereas this new development, by all accounts, was an all-male affair, it is intriguing that the “distinguished virgin” Shmuni ordered a manuscript in Alqosh in 1824, not only in close geographical proximity to Gabriel Danbo’s new monastic order, but also ordering a “Book of the Seven Hours.” This work belongs to the Catholic monastic literature that was used in the Chaldean monasteries. Either she herself was interested in joining the new Chaldean monastic movement, perhaps by setting up a female counterpart, or she, as a virgin living in her father’s house, was supporting the movement spiritually.

This is what most women who wanted to live a consecrated life probably did, considering a note by Surma d’Bait Mar Shimun, a member of the patriarchal family of Qodshanis in the early twentieth century:

Often girls and youths live as virgins in their parents’ house. They are called *Rabbanyati* [the usual title for nuns, MvdB], although they have not received the blessing of the Bishop, so they are not officially recognized.³⁰

In fact, Surma herself perhaps should be considered such a virgin, having lived a celibate life serving the patriarchal family.³¹ Her description suggests that the titles of “daughter of the covenant” or “distinguished virgin” may have referred to such unmarried women living in their families.

So far, no contemporary references to any special role in the liturgy for the women who held these offices have surfaced. They probably sung certain parts of the liturgy, like women and girls do in the East Syriac churches today. This would imply that they were able to read Classical Syriac, the liturgical language considerably different from the modern spoken language. When the Protestant missionaries introduced female

²⁹ Stéphane Bello, *La congrégation de S. Hormisdas et l’église chaldéenne dans la première moitié du XIXe siècle*, OCA 122 (Rome: Pont. Institutum Orientalium Studiorum, 1939).

³⁰ Surma d’Bait Mar Shimun, *Assyrian Church Customs and the Murder of Mar Shimun* (Vehicle editions, ca. 1920), p. 32.

³¹ Coakley, *The Church of the East* [see note 28]; Claire Weibel Yacoub, *Surma l’Assyro-Chaldéenne (1993–1975): Dans la tourmente de Mésopotamie* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2007).

education in the late 1830s, they concluded that only one woman of the last Syriac community could read: Helena, the sister of the patriarch.³² Whereas it is likely that the number of reading women was small, the missionaries may well have underestimated the number of educated women, not having been made aware of women who, privately, had learned to read from their fathers, especially when these were priests. One early example surfaces in a manuscript of 1521, in which priest Aprem, son of the priest Yaquw, noted that he wrote this codex for “his own learned daughters Tamar and Shmuni.”³³ The volume included, among other things, Eliya of Anbar’s *Book of the Centuries*, a rather arcane ascetic text discussing Dionysian cosmologies.

In cities like Mosul and Diyarbakir some girls might have learned to write. We know of a girl named Theresa, daughter of the priest Khadjador, who was fifteen years old when, in 1767, she wrote an Arabic manuscript including homilies and discourses by John of Damascus and Paul of Antioch.³⁴ She lived in Ain Tannur, a Christian village near Diyarbakir. In her colophon, she acknowledged the new Catholic hierarchy, including the local metropolitan, the Chaldean patriarch Yosep IV in Diyarbakir and Pope Clement XIII in Rome, in addition to the names and dates of death of their predecessors. Her work is the only manuscript written by a woman to have survived from this period and should be seen in connection to the efforts that Catholic missionaries put in educating women in the western parts of the Ottoman Empire and encouraging them to participate more in the religious life of the parish churches.³⁵ To what extent similar activities were undertaken in Diyarbakir is not known, but Theresa’s scribal activities suggests that she too, like women in Aleppo and Damascus, was inspired to personally contribute to the Catholic movement.

Such participation was further encouraged by the Protestant movement of the nineteenth century. The Presbyterian missionaries in Urmia, sent by the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, had started to work in Iran in 1835 and almost from day one had started special courses for girls. This was undertaken more systematically in 1843, after the unmarried female missionary Fidelia Fiske arrived. In addition to the

³² Justin Perkins, *Missionary Life in Persia: Being Glimpses of a Quarter of a Century of Labors Among the Nestorian Christians* (Andover: Allen, Morill & Wardwell, 1863), p. 10.

³³ Mosul (Scher/Bidawid) 74 (Ahtus 1521).

³⁴ Diyarbakir (Scher) 155 (Ain Tannur 1767).

³⁵ Heyberger, “Individualism and Political Modernity” [see note 5].

mixed village schools that were supported by the mission, she founded a girls' boarding school which imitated Mount Holyoke. This school in South Hadley (Massachusetts), where Fiske herself had been trained, was one of the first institutes of higher learning for young women in North America, founded by Mary Lyon in 1837.³⁶

Its characteristics included first of all a strong emphasis on community life and Evangelical conversion: the "Female Seminary" in Urmia, especially in its first decades, was a hotbed of spiritual renewal and commitment. Very similar to the waves of Evangelical revival that took place in colleges like Mount Holyoke, the girls in the Female Seminary converted to Protestant types of Christianity in yearly periods of revivalist fervor. Secondly, the school in Urmia aspired to provide the girls and young women with serious theological training, learning them to make use of biblical source languages such as Hebrew and Classical Syriac, in the context of Puritan theology exemplified by the works of Jonathan Edwards. This type of theological training took place in addition to introductions into mathematics, history, and geography, and alongside subjects such as needlework and various other aspects of housekeeping that the missionaries thought essential for the education of Syrian women.

The school profoundly changed these women's views on religion. A young woman named Raheel, who had been evangelically converted by Fidelia Fiske, wrote to Fiske's mother in America that her daughter for the first time had shown to her people that "Christ died for women also." As Raheel wrote, the priests "used to dwell much on those words of Solomon, 'One man among a thousand I have found, but a woman among all these have I not found'."³⁷ As can be inferred from the discussion of female sponsorship, there is nothing that suggests that women in this period were thought to be excluded from salvation and eternal life. Nevertheless, Raheel's letter suggests that for some women, Evangelical Protestantism opened understandings of religious salvation that had previously seemed closed to them. A new type of religious agency became available, an

³⁶ Porterfield, *Mary Lyon* [see note 5]; Dana L. Robert, *American Women in Mission: A Social History of Their Thought and Practice* (Macon: Mercer University Press 1996), p. 93–114; Heleen Murre-van den Berg, "Nineteenth-century Protestant Missions and Middle Eastern Women: An Overview," in: Inger Marie Okkenhaug and Ingvild Flakerud (ed.), *Gender, Religion and Change in the Middle East: Two Hundred Years of History* (Oxford/New York: Berg 2005), pp. 103–122.

³⁷ Murre-van den Berg, "Dear Mother of my Soul" [see note 6], p. 41 (Raheel, 1859).

agency that was based on the combination of considerable biblical knowledge that enabled individual interpretation, with highly personal conversion trajectories that encouraged these young women to share these insights with others. This new-found religious freedom was stimulated and nurtured in the alternative religious community of the Female Seminary. In this spiritual family ("the Lord's household"), the missionary teacher became a surrogate mother, while the girls experienced a new kind of sisterhood with their like-minded friends, in Urmia as well as in America. In this, they imitated the monastic communities that had disappeared – in their communal ideal, in the freedom of religious interpretation and in the importance of a saintly leader to be emulated, the "dear mother of my soul" or spiritual "guide" which Fiske was to many of her pupils.³⁸

The combination of newly found spiritual agency and academic accomplishment motivated some of the school's graduates to become active in the Protestant mission. Most went on to teach in the schools, including the Seminary itself. Some of the bravest volunteered to venture into the high mountains of Kurdistan, seen as desolate and "wild" places, to preach the Gospel as "Bible women" among the isolated Syrians of the mountains.³⁹ Though the women were not allowed to preach in public church services (whether Protestant or Church of the East), these young converts found many opportunities to preach and teach the Evangelical message, informally in homes and closed gardens, as well as in segregated public meetings for women and children only. Initially, like in Europe and America, most of these alternative careers were connected to the church, but later in the century more educational opportunities were added, also in Urmia, especially in the practice of medicine and nursing.⁴⁰

Not unlike the theological ideas of the Church of the East, for the Protestants this female contribution was first and foremost a way to transcend this world and become well-prepared for the next, for the women themselves and for those whom they taught. "While the diseased body was returning to dust, the soul had returned to its Father, and the companion of immortal spirits was singing the sweet song of Moses and the Lamb." So it was formulated by Sarah, a girl in Fidelia Fiske's school, about her friend

³⁸ Ibid, pp. 37–39.

³⁹ Thomas Laurie, *Woman and her Saviour in Persia. By a Returned Missionary* (Boston: Gould and Lincoln, 1863), pp. 205–222.

⁴⁰ Murre-van den Berg, *From a Spoken* [see note 6], pp. 69–70.

Sarah, a girl of fifteen who had been Fiske's first convert in Urmia. Her words were repeated in the *Nestorian Biography*, a small volume published collectively by the missionaries for their American sponsors and their children.⁴¹ This collection of conversion stories is above all a story of those "who have died," those who completed their earthly course successfully, who remained true to their Evangelical conversion and died "in the Lord." While thus the ultimate goal of the new religious women is very similar to those who sponsored ritual books, one difference at least needs to be noted: rather than replicating segregated gender patterns in the imagination of the world to come, Protestants emphasized the disembodied souls, spirits that, genderless, were part of the angelic choirs.

Family

While American and Syriac Protestants hoped to transcend gender in the world to come, in this world they shared much of the prevailing patriarchal cultures, be they Eastern Christian, Islamic or Protestant American. All three tended to restrict the roles of women primarily to their responsibilities for home and family, not for the domain of church and society. However, Protestant missionaries introduced some noticeable modifications to this shared framework.

One of these is that the missionaries valued the household and the nuclear family over and above the Syrian's extended family and women's economic responsibilities for it. The missionaries saw this difference exemplified by the lack of a separate word for "home" in Syriac (alongside *baytā* for "house," "family"). They strongly disapproved of the fact that women shared in the hard work of the fields, often with children on their backs. According to them, this not only reflected a limited understanding of women's responsibilities for the home, but was part of the harsh treatment married women regularly suffered from their husbands, having to endure physical and verbal abuses in serving their families.⁴² While the missionaries advocated the ideal of marital companionship, they also shared patriarchal assumptions of women being subservient to the male heads of the family. Thus they discouraged active female resistance to abuse and suppression, hoping that schooling would give women tools to

⁴¹ *Nestorian Biography: Sketches of Pious Nestorians who Have Died at Oroomiah, Persia* (Boston: Massachusetts Sabbath School Society, 1857), pp. 36–38.

⁴² Laurie, *Woman and her Saviour* [see note 39], pp. 14–26.

better organize their households. By virtue of their knowledge, patience and restraint, they would elicit better conduct from their husbands, converting them and their children to a Christian way of life. In line with contemporary American ideas, the missionaries saw women as the key to the transformation of society: improving the education of women became an essential part of improving society along the lines of Protestant Christian ideals.⁴³

Whilst education of women was not part of the Syrian concept of the ideal woman, she surely was believed to be the centre of the family, being responsible for the material as well as spiritual welfare of the members of the household, in addition to her responsibilities for the wider community. Despite the missionaries' disapproving notes on the way Syrian men treated their wives, ideals of mutual love and respect between spouses and between parents and children were common to both traditions. This becomes clear from a Syriac gravestone from the seventeenth century, commemorating Nazekhatun ("Lady Naze") of the village of Salmas in north-western Persia. She is described as a virtuous woman, beloved by her husband and children, having supported those around her that needed her help:

This is the tomb and the resting place of Nazekhatun, handmaiden of Christ, who died in the month Tammuz, may the Lord grant her rest among the righteous women. Nazekhatun was a blessed woman, she supported orphans and widows. She left behind sons and daughters, she left them in sadness, she passed away in the year 1631. She was excellent in this world, without iniquity or wrong-doing. She vanished as in a dream, may Christ refresh her in the resurrection at the appointed time. She left grieve in this world and sadness without end. This stone was engraved for Nazekhatun, daughter of the glorious Aumig of Salmas, and wife of Mas'ud, son of the honorable Denha.⁴⁴

⁴³ See Porterfield's discussion of "Republican Motherhood" (*Mary Lyon* [note 5], pp. 11–16), a concept introduced by Linda K. Kerber in: *Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: The University of North Carolina Press, 1980).

⁴⁴ Rubens Duval, "Inscriptions syriaques de Salamas en Perse," in: *Journal Asiatique* 8/5 (1885), pp. 39–62, here 57–62, tombstone dated to July 1631.

In both traditions too, women were made responsible for the spiritual welfare of their families. Partly this was a matter of the living example of Christian virtue, as referred to in this gravestone. Partly it was intercessory prayer for the members of the family, of importance in both Syriac and Protestant Christianity. It is here, however, that the missionaries introduced radical new ideas, inspired by a rather different definition of the way in which prayer and rituals affect the world.⁴⁵ Among the Syriac Christians, as in many traditional forms of religion, women's mediating roles involved practices that the missionaries considered "superstitious observances," described by them, with a reference to the New Testament (I Tim 4,7) as "'old wives' fables,' fasts and prayers."⁴⁶ Women prayed at the shrines of the saints to obtain blessings (*brāḳā*) from them, then brought these blessings back to their houses in material, tangible forms as sacred dust (*ḥnānā*), sanctified water or cloth, or, on Sundays, in the form of the blessed bread from the church. Unacceptable in missionary eyes were the protective prayers that could be ordered from priests, small scrolls that were sewed into the clothes of their husband and children, put away in a secret place in the house, or burnt and its ashes mixed with water into a potion to drink. These rituals were believed to ward off the influence of demons that caused sickness, infertility or death, would help in acquiring good husbands and wives for the children or new love between longstanding husbands and wives, help a cow to give more milk or secure rain in a dry period.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ For an in-depth discussion of such processes, see Webb Keane, *Christian Moderns: Freedom & Fetish in the Mission Encounter* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), discussing a similar encounter between Dutch Calvinists and Papuan traditional religionists.

⁴⁶ *Nestorian Biography* [see note 41], p.207.

⁴⁷ Albert Socin, *Die neu-aramäischen Dialekte von Urmia bis Mosul. Texte und Übersetzung* (Tübingen: Laupp, 1882), pp. 173, 177–178. On the scrolls, see Hermann Gollancz, *The Book of Protection. Being a Collection of Charms, now ed. for the First Time from Syriac MSS* (London: H. Frowde, 1912); Erica C.D. Hunter, "Amulets and the Assyrians of Kurdistan," in: *Journal of The Assyrian Academic Society* 9,2 (1995), pp. 25–31; idem, "Magic and Medicine amongst the Christians of Kurdistan," in: Erica C.D. Hunter, *The Christian Heritage of Iraq. Collected papers from the Christianity of Iraq I-V Seminar days* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2009), pp. 187–202.

Another important aspect of women's religious involvement that was opposed by the missionaries was that of the long and rigorous fasting periods of the Church. Women were the primary agents in keeping their families at this practice, protecting them from eating the wrong foods and bringing the cycle of the liturgical year into the heart of the family, in the daily rhythm of the meals that mirror the alternation of periods of repentance and asceticism with those of abundance and festivities.⁴⁸

The religious responsibility for family members reached over the barrier of death, searching peace for those that passed away by donating a manuscript or giving money to the church. In 1569, Dormlik of Nisibus had a manuscript written "on behalf of her late husband Darwish." In the early eighteenth century, a group of family members, the couple Hanna and his wife Hane, and their relatives Kanun, Isa, Jema, and Hormizd, ordered a beautiful *hudra* to commemorate the death of Hanna and Hane's son Abd al-Masih,⁴⁹ ensuring his rest during the time he waited for the resurrection.

Over and against these practices, the missionaries stressed the importance of personal prayers as the only way through which humans could elicit divine intervention in the material world. Evangelical believers were to pray intensively and earnestly for and with family members, for their material and bodily well-being, and, most importantly, for their eternal welfare. In this, Fiske's "spiritual motherhood," in which prayer played a central role, became an example for these women to follow, first among their friends and family, later also in the new Protestant families that were established. Not only praying changed in form and meaning, teaching Christianity in the home became different. The women, having learned to read and interpret the bible for themselves, were to teach both the contents and the techniques of bible reading to their children.⁵⁰ Rather than bring-

⁴⁸ For the importance of fasts in Orthodox Christianity in the Middle East and the changes under Catholic influence, see Bernard Heyberger, "Les transformations du jeûne chez les chrétiens d'Orient," in: *Le corps et le sacré en Orient musulman* (Revue des mondes musulmans et de la Méditerranée 113–114 [2006]), 267–286; Aïda Kanafani-Zahar, "Le Carême et le Ramadan: recréer le corps," in: *Ibid*, pp. 287–300 (<http://remmm.revues.org>).

⁴⁹ Murre-van den Berg, "Generous Devotion" [see note 6], #16.

⁵⁰ Cf. Murre-van den Berg, "Dear Mother of my Soul" [see note 6]; compare also the story of "Mary, the wife of priest Aslan" who is portrayed as an ideal woman, especially after her conversion, cf. *Nestorian Biography* [see note 41], pp. 221–230.

ing their children blessed earth to protect them from evil, bible verses were to strengthen their faith. Rather than teach the children to recite the prayers of the liturgy and introduce them to the rituals of fasting, mothers were to encourage daily bible reading and individual reflection in prayer.

Conclusions

There can be little doubt that in traditional Syriac Christianity women played important roles. In these highly segregated communities, where public roles for women were possible only in the highest social classes, women were able to exert more influence than many have thought. Through the money they gave for manuscripts, convents and churches, they enabled the Church of the East to regain some of its former grandeur; through their prayers and care, they ensured the religious rhythm of the house and the material and spiritual well-being of its members. In many respects, not much changed with the coming of foreign missionaries, be they Catholic or Protestant: they too operated from patriarchal assumptions, they too saw the primary tasks of the women in the household, and they too saw the ultimate importance of Christianity in securing life after death. And while earlier literature may have been inclined to attribute the introduction of female agency to western missionaries, this overview suggests that missionaries merely enabled a new kind of agency to evolve, an agency of the intellect and the emotions rather than of money, rituals and sacred objects.

This, of course, is a monumental change, one that in many ways is crucial to understanding the modernization process that was to take place in the remainder of the nineteenth century. As a result, women, like lay men, were taking the opportunity to participate in religion, not only in forms complementary to those of the clergy, but also in forms that competed with clerical prerogatives. Through their newly found immediate access to the bible, women and lay men competed with the clergy on their own terrain, that of understanding and transmitting the sacred scriptures. While few Syriac Christians went all the way in becoming a Protestant, the spiritual autonomy that was created in the process over time transformed into a new type of secular leadership that would challenge the near-theocratic clerical rule over the East Syriac community.

The missionaries' opinions on religious efficacy, too, drew wider circles than the Protestant community, inspiring clergy of the Church of the East to eschew from protective rituals, to encourage the reading of the bible in the modern language, to pay more attention to preaching and to

emphasize the intentions of those who officiate over and above the mere thoughtless execution of it. A wider impact too, had missionary discussions on the importance of cleanliness and an orderly household, as well as on the importance of learning, science, rationalism, democracy and progress in general. While Protestant and Catholic missionaries certainly were not the only ones to emphasize these themes, through their long-term involvement in the region, they were the ones that showed what these concepts meant in practice.

This close encounter also implied that the ambiguities of these modern practices could not remain hidden. Missionaries as much as Syriac Christians held on to the belief in the ultimate power of God, a power that surely surpassed science. Though God could not be forced, earnest prayers were expected to be efficacious, and while all believers were considered equal, women were not allowed the same opportunities as men. It would take later generations of Protestants and Orthodox to challenge these assumptions in East and West.

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Deutsche Zusammenfassung

Die Autorin untersucht, wie sich Frauen am Leben der Kirche des Ostens (früher oft Nestorianer genannt) beteiligt haben – so gut sich das angesichts der aus männlicher Perspektive tradierten Überlieferung erheben lässt. Für die frühmoderne Zeit (d.h. ca. 1500–1800) leisten wohlhabende Frauen finanzielle Unterstützung beim Wiederaufbau der nach der Katastrophe der Mongolenzeit darniederliegenden kirchlichen Institutionen, etwa von Klöstern oder Schulen samt ihren Bibliotheken von Handschriften. Aus deren Kolophon, das nähere Angaben über die Produktion eines (handgeschriebenen) Buches liefert, ergeben sich bisweilen Hinweise auf die soziale Herkunft der Donatorinnen, die aber nicht immer mit letzter Präzision bestimmt werden kann. So ist

bei der Bezeichnung „Tochter des Bundes“ manchmal offen, ob es sich um Jungfrauen, Sängerinnen oder Diakoninnen handelt, die in Klöstern – die freilich seit dem späten 17. Jahrhundert einen Niedergang erfahren – leben, oder um zölibatär lebende Frauen oder um Frauen von Priestern. Es ist anzunehmen, dass manche fähig waren, das in der Liturgie verwendete klassische Syrisch zu verstehen. Einen gewissen Aufschwung in der Erziehung von Frauen und infolgedessen in der kirchlichen Arbeit brachten die römisch-katholische (17. Jh.) und die protestantische amerikanische Mission (19. Jh.); hinsichtlich der letzteren ist besonders die mit dem Namen Fidelity Fiske verbundene Schule im nordwestlichen Iran zu erwähnen. Von ihr gingen auch Impulse aus, welche die traditionelle Rolle der syrischen Frau veränderten, auch wenn am Haushalt (nunmehr eher die Kernfamilie als die *extended family*) als primärem Ort ihres Wirkens festgehalten wurde. Der den Frauen eröffnete direkte Zugang zur Bibel und zu den wichtigsten Zeugnissen der kirchlichen Tradition versetzte sie in die Lage, den Führungsanspruch der Geistlichen in der traditionellen ostsyrischen Gemeinschaft zu relativieren.