



BOOK REVIEWS

ADAM H. BECKER. *Revival and Awakening: American Evangelical Missionaries in Iran and the Origins of Assyrian Nationalism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015. xviii + 357 pages, notes, bibliography, index. Paper US\$32.50 ISBN 978-0-2261-4528-0.

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Adam H. Becker provides a richly detailed and eloquent account of the process by which American evangelical missionary activity in northwestern Iran and the eastern portions of the Ottoman Empire (now southeastern Turkey and northern Iraq) during the nineteenth century fostered the development of national consciousness among indigenous Syriac Christian students and associates, which enabled the creation of a modern Assyrian nationalism in the twentieth century. Becker's complex and nuanced work adds to the ranks of recent studies on nationalism in the Middle East, most notably Reza Zia Ebrahimi's, *The Emergence of Iranian Nationalism: Race and the Politics of Dislocation* (Columbia University Press, 2016) that are theoretically sophisticated and reflect a refined understanding of the impact of Orientalist knowledge on indigenous interlocutors and their own agency in the process of forging and reifying new nationalist narratives based on selective reading and interpretation of the past. Since these essentially modernist studies identify the recent inventedness of newly re-imagined national communities, locate the formative role of Western scholarship in their development, and analyze the autoethnographic process of indigenous self-identification as ancient nations undergoing revival, their arguments and conclusions are inherently in conflict with the nationalist, primordialist narratives that they systematically unpack. Like Ebrahimi, Becker remains conscious of the likely potential to ruffle some nationalist feathers while demonstrating both empathy and scholarly bravery in his persistence to interpret his sources faithfully and to abundantly illustrate and rigorously support his analysis and conclusions.

Becker's introduction simultaneously establishes the chronological, geographical, and social terrain to be considered in the book's eight chapters

while interweaving a cogent explanation of his theoretical approach and primary sources—masterfully demonstrating the utility of both to illustrate and sustain the study’s basic arguments out of the gate. *Revival and Awakening* is focused on the American Presbyterian mission in Urmia, Iran and the impact of its activities in surrounding regions such as the Urmia plain and Hakkari mountains between the years 1834, which marks the arrival of mission director Justin Perkins, and 1918, by which time the seeds of Assyrian nationalism had been sown. Blending elements of Talal Asad’s arguments concerning the relationship between secularism and the discursive process of identifying and defining “religion” with aspects of Benedict Anderson’s observations regarding the formation of imagined national communities as well as Partha Chatterjee’s formulation of the “rule of colonial difference” Becker’s theoretical framework integrates religious, nationalism, and postcolonial studies theory to explain the seemingly paradoxical role of missionary activity—which in Urmia involved a Neo-Aramaic printing press and publishing—in inculcating secularism, and ultimately facilitating ethnonationalism. The bulk of *Revival and Awakening* draws from a heretofore unstudied archive of literature published by the missionaries and their “native assistants” in Syriac and Neo-Aramaic, which includes Bibles, commentaries, novellas, almanacs, and textbooks, as well as missionary memoirs and materials published for an American readership. The mission’s several newspapers feature most prominently, and include *Rays of Light* (*Zahrir d-bahra*) published monthly between 1849 and 1918—the year the press was destroyed amidst the horrific regional violence and upheavals of World War I—and the indigenously authored nationalist organ *Star* (*Kokhwa*) published from 1906–1918.


The first two chapters juxtapose the social and religious landscape of early nineteenth century Urmia and Hakkari with the background and worldview of the American Protestant missionaries who would serve there. Chapter 1 introduces the East Syrian or “Nestorian” Christians of the region and their geographic, linguistic, economic, and political differences on the eve of the American mission in the 1830s and points out how secularism and liberal political assumptions (eg. religious freedom, tolerance) can impinge the ability to fully comprehend heterogeneous premodern societies. The early life and career of missionary Justin Perkins, who led the Urmia mission from 1834 until shortly before his death in 1869 is the central focus of Chapter 2. It compares Perkins’ arrival in Urmia with his at times challenging 1842 visit to the United States with East Syrian bishop Mar Yokhannan, and the Protestant theology of the “free gift” in the context of mass printing and distribution of religious books with local traditions of manuscript production, distribution, and use. The advent of the Urmia mission press and the volume and breadth of its output is described in the third chapter, which centers around the publication of *Rays of Light*, and the ways its content promoted the development of an East Syrian national identity, subsequently termed “Assyrian” and linked with an imagined ancient heritage. Chapter 4 surveys new practices fostered by the mission’s educational institutions such as Bible study, preaching, public prayer, and classroom discipline, demonstrating the social rather than individualizing effects of Protestant reform.

The consequences of the mission's early efforts are considered in the next two chapters. New concepts concerning death and mourning and the American critique of East Syrian funeral practices are illustrated in Chapter 5, which links mission revivals of the 1840s and 1850s with the emergence of national identity. The sixth chapter analyzes the ways in which journals and letters written by the mission's native assistants illustrate how they had assimilated the message of reform and propagated it via preaching tours outside Urmia. The relationship between the growth of Western missionary activity and of the Syrian Evangelical Church during the late nineteenth century, culminating in the publication of the nationalist *Star* in 1906 is examined in Chapter 7. The eighth and final chapter analyzes how European and American scholarship informed early twentieth century nationalist debates regarding Aramaic language and history that ultimately enabled the self-designation and communal renaming as "Assyrian." An epilogue contextualizes the life and poetry of early Assyrian nationalist David George Malik within the dramatic events of the 1910s and 1920s, and describes developments within the mission community and the renamed "Assyrian Church of the East" in the wake of World War I.

Scholarly work on the subject of modern Assyrian national identity has been extremely limited to date. As such, Becker's monograph is strongly recommended for graduate students and scholars interested in the historical development of Assyrianism. *Revival and Awakening* is equally important as a source on American missionary activity in the Middle East, and will be of interest to Middle Eastern studies specialists and Americanists alike, as well as specialists in mission studies, nationalism studies, postcolonial studies, and Syriac studies.

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SARA PURSLEY, *Familiar Futures: Time, Selfhood, and Sovereignty in Iraq*. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2019). Pp. 304. \$30.00, paperback. ISBN 9781503607488.

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A compelling study of the trajectories of development, human and territorial, Sara Pursley's *Familiar Futures* approaches the history of Iraq through the unravelling of conflicting temporalities to explore the articulations of selfhood and the production of subjectivity after World War I. Pursley examines the conceptualization of time and its immediate and residual impact on the