CHAPTER NINE

A “GOOD AND BLESSED FATHER”
YONAN OF ADA ON JUSTIN PERKINS, URMIA (IRAN), 1870

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It is difficult to overestimate his labors, continued now for more than a third of a century, or the value of his experience. It is a gratification to him, and to us all, that he can leave us in the atmosphere of revivals; and that, after he is gone, the many works from his pen will continue to speak to the people whom he loved. But many will sorrow at his leaving Persia, and most of all that they shall see his face no more.¹

John. H. Shedd, missionary in Urmia in the northwestern province of Azerbaijan in Persia, wrote these lines in a note to his employers in 1869. The note refers to his fellow missionary Justin Perkins, who had returned home after a missionary career of thirty-five years. Perkins died in that same year, at the 31st of December. In the following year, missionary administrator Rufus Anderson, in the first comprehensive history of the missions of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM) who had sponsored the mission in Urmia, styled him the “father of the Nestorian mission” and “the Apostle to the Nestorians,”² honoring his continuous presence from the early beginnings of this mission and his crucial role in transmitting Evangelically-attuned Protestantism to the Christians of the Church of the East. This positive reception of Perkins’ contribution was reiterated by his only surviving son, Henry Martyn Perkins, in a hagiographical work that was published in 1887.³

² Anderson, History II, pp. 304, 322.
While there can be little doubt about the depth and breadth of Perkins’ contribution to the Urmia mission with regard to the development of the Syriac language and literature as well as more generally to the mission’s theological stance and practical policies, this article seeks to understand his influence not from the perspective of his fellow missionaries or home board administrators, but from the local recipients of his mission. This is possible because, almost uniquely in nineteenth-century mission history, a local perspective on Perkins’ contribution has been preserved. It is this that forms the basis of the present chapter.

So far it has been difficult to retrieve the voices of those that were missionized in the nineteenth century, even if critical reading of mostly unpublished missionary reports has yielded a wealth of information on the local reception of Western missions. Especially in cases where missionaries introduced writing, local texts that reflect on the missions usually lag behind a good many decades to the start of the missions.

This is also true for the “Nestorian Mission” of the ABCFM in Urmia, one of the many mission posts that this organization maintained in the Middle East from the middle of the 1830s. This mission, which at its high point comprised a foreign missionary community of about fifteen people was active among those who today call themselves the Assyrians of the Church of the East but were then usually referred to as the “Nestorians.” Concerning the introduction of writing, the missions in the Middle East were atypical: in Urmia missionaries learned to write the local languages from the Assyrian clergy rather than the other way round. However, by popularizing the writing of the vernacular, the missionaries not only encouraged the non-clerical segments of the population to take up writing, but also stimulated the writing of texts other than the texts from the ancient liturgical and scholarly traditions. Thus, like elsewhere, it took some time before Assyrian Christians started to write about the missions that had changed the life of their community.

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5 On writing and literature, also in the period preceding the Protestant missions, see Rudolf Macuch, Geschichte der spät- und neusyrischen Literature (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1976), H.L. Murre-van den Berg, From a Spoken to a Written Language. The Introduction