“DEAR MOTHER OF MY SOUL”
FIDELIA FISKE AND THE ROLE OF WOMEN MISSIONARIES IN MID-NINETEENTH CENTURY IRAN

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Dear Mother of my soul, Miss. Fisk,
How I remember those [heart] melting seasons, when you used to put your arms around my neck, and talk with me, about my soul, and [tell me of my dreadful lost state, and talk of Christ, how He poured out his blood, and] “humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross” [for my sake. He did it not for friends, but for enemies like me [myself]. Especially do I remember how you used to speak of [the love, the measure of which no creature can ever reach]. That love which saw a remedy in its own blood, when there was no help for a lost world. At that time, I did not understand the sacrifices for sin, I was going on, in the road to destruction without thoughts of the world to come, [of my soul, or of death, or the judgment]. I knew nothing of everlasting life, [of a heaven of joy,] of the love of Christ, of the [hope, and] forgiveness there is in Him, or of the joy, [and life] He gives. But you pointed me to the cross of Christ – you shewed me the side from whence, flowed the blood and water, and the fountain of Siloam, where all may wash, and see, I do not know how to express my gratitude to you, [nor I can reckon up in order, the value of your labor in this world of trouble, sorrow and sin]. The more I think of your [labor] for me, and your love to me, I feel that I can never reach to its greatness [or its bounds].

In 1859, Selby, a young Assyrian woman, wrote the above lines to Fidelia Fiske, her former American teacher. Fiske had worked at the “Nestorian Mission” of the American Board (ABCFM) in north-western Iran, in and around the town of Urmia (Orūmīyeh, formerly Rezā’īyeh) till her return for reasons of health in 1857. In 1843 she had been added to this mission

1 ABC 65 no. 6, Selby of Wazerawa to Fiske, 7-4-1859. The letter was originally written in the Neo-Aramaic dialect of Urmia (Iran) and was translated into English by Fidelia Fiske, the missionary who received the letter, in connection with the publication of the letter in Woman and her Saviour by T. Laurie (Boston: Gould and Lincoln, 1863), a book dedicated to Fiske and her work in Iran. For the purpose of this edition, parts of the letters in the ABC collection (see n. 5) were crossed out by a single line, usually making the text run more smoothly. I have retained the crossed-out text between square brackets, because I assume that it more closely reflects the Neo-Aramaic original. Quotations from nineteenth-century texts (both published and unpublished) are given in the original spelling. Note the deviant interpunction and considerable variation in the spelling of proper names.

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station with the express object of setting up the work of women’s education among the Assyrians. She succeeded in establishing a popular girls’ boarding school in Urmia (the “Female Seminary”), which became renowned not only for its comparatively high standard of learning, but even more so for the high rate of conversion among its pupils.2

The “Nestorian Mission” owed its name to the people among which the work was primarily executed: the Nestorians of northwestern Iran, or the Assyrians as they are called today. The continuous presence of their church, the Church of the East, is attested in the region from the late second century onwards. In the nineteenth century as much as in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, missionary work among Christians of another tradition raised the issue of proselytism. Well aware of the sensitivities surrounding such missionary work, the missionaries of the American Board were nonetheless convinced that their activities should not be seen as proselytism. It was their earnest intention to work for a reform of the Church of the East, not for its dissolution into a Protestant body. Somewhat naively, they did not foresee that their evangelical understanding of conversion, together with their emphasis on lay education and participation, would inevitably lead to a separate Protestant Church.3

2 Two recent studies pay considerable attention to Fiske’s activities in Urmia: Amanda Porterfield, Mary Lyon and the Mount Holyoke Missionaries, New York / Oxford: Oxford University Press 1997, and Dana L. Robert, American Women in Mission. A Social History of Their Thought and Practice, Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press 1997. Robert discusses Fiske’s contribution mainly in the context of the development of missionary teachers and boarding schools in general (including Mount Holyoke missiology), whereas Porterfield places Fiske in the context of Mount Holyoke, but in a separate chapter also attempts to analyse Fiske’s contribution in psychological and sociological terms. She suggests, among other things, that Fiske’s work among the Assyrian women constituted the overriding factor in destabilising the relations between the Assyrian and Muslim communities of the region in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. I find this difficult to accept, both in view of the fact that Assyrian-Muslim relationships are known to have been tense well before the arrival of American missionaries, in particular in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and because of the fact that the influence of missionary work on Assyrian men is disregarded. One must assume, however, that the influence of the American missionaries on the Assyrian community as a whole contributed significantly to a further deterioration of the relationships between Assyrians and Muslims.