

Iskandar Bcheiry, *An Early Christian Reaction to Islam. Iṣū'yahb III and the Muslim Arabs*, Georgias Eastern Christian Studies 57, Piscataway NJ: Georgias Press 2019, 191 p., ISBN 978-1-4632-4098-1

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This book is a revised version of Iskandar Bcheiry's doctoral thesis, submitted to the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago under the supervision of Dr Mark Swanson. As a thesis, it responds to a specific gap in the scholarship, highlighted by Victoria Erhart in an article that called for a detailed study of Iṣū'yahb III's corpus of letters to assess his views on the Muslim Arabs.¹ Bcheiry's book thus makes an important contribution.

The book is structured in response to Bcheiry's central thesis, that the letters of Iṣū'yahb III which contain references to the Muslim Arabs can be grouped into three periods (his time as Bishop of Nineveh, as Metropolitan of Hidyāb and as Patriarch-Catholicos), which show the development of his thought over approximately thirty years.

The introduction provides a rough sketch of Iṣū'yahb III's life and the corpus of letters that lie at the heart of the book. Some of the introductory remarks feel a bit brief but are sufficient to give the general reader a sense of the religious and political landscape. Bcheiry is clear about the new approach he wishes to diverge from the scholarly consensus in relation to the chronology of the letters, but from the introduction alone it is hard to work out where this line of argument is going.

The first chapter, on the historical background, outlines the history of Christianity in Persia, the persecution of Christians by the Sasanians, the organisation of the Church of the East, and the Arab conquest of Persia. Bcheiry illustrates this history with a range of Syriac sources, particularly the Synodicon Orientale, but the secondary sources leave something to be desired. He is reliant on Wigram's *An Introduction to the History of the Assyrian Church*, which was written in 1910, for instance.² It is also worth noting that there are several books cited in the bibliography, but which have not been used to nuance the historical background as it is outlined here. As a result, this chapter suffers slightly from making generalisations

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¹ Victoria Erhart, "The Church of the East during the Period of the Four Rightly-Guided Calips," *Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester* 78/3 (1996): 55–71.

² William Ainger Wigram, *An Introduction to the History of the Assyrian Church: or the Church of the Sassanid Persian Empire, 100–640 A.D.* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2004).

and would have benefitted from engaging with more recent scholarship. Overall, this does not affect the book's general argument, but there are places where it would have helped. For instance, on page 29, Bcheiry discusses the establishment of theological schools in the Church of the East: reference to the secondary literature (notably the work of Adam Becker) would have strengthened his discussion of Iṣū'yahb's experiences at the school of Nisibis in the second chapter.³ A couple of times, there are no references in connection with well-documented subjects (p. 35, the Church of the East in Central Asia, China and India; p. 36, Babai the Great) and whilst this does not undermine Bcheiry's argument in the book, it would have helped the reader to feel on firm ground. This opening chapter is brief and offers a useful survey to the non-specialist reader, but it is poorly referenced and fails to engage with recent scholarship, which means it is, in places, a slightly naïve account of the early history of the Church of the East.

The second chapter presents a survey of the life and letters of Iṣū'yahb III. The biographical information comes largely from the work of Jean-Maurice Fiey and, as with the previous chapter, would have benefited from engagement with more recent scholarship. Nevertheless, this chapter is helpful in giving a sense of Iṣū'yahb III's career and his literary output (which included hagiography and liturgy, as well as the letters under discussion). Bcheiry outlines the traditional grouping of the letters according to the three stages of Iṣū'yahb's career, as Bishop of Nineveh, Metropolitan of Hidyāb and as Patriarch-Catholicos. Most modern scholarship has followed Fiey's suggestion that some of the letters traditionally assigned to Iṣū'yahb's episcopate must in fact date from his time as Metropolitan. Bcheiry contends that Fiey's argument is not a strong one and defends the traditional chronology. If this is the case, then modern scholars have overlooked some of the earliest references to Muslim Arabs in Christian sources.

In the third chapter, Bcheiry begins to explore what the letters tell us about Iṣū'yahb's attitudes to the Muslim Arabs. His thesis is that the letters present a clear change in attitude over time. The letters dating from Iṣū'yahb's episcopate reflect an early attitude, in which the Muslim Arabs were seen as an instrument of divine punishment (as in Ep. 39) but there are also early signs of his later, more pragmatic attitude. For instance, a number of these letters highlight his view that the Muslim Arabs, as

³ Adam Becker, *Fear of God and the Beginning of Wisdom: The School of Nisibis and the Development of Scholastic Culture in Late Antique Mesopotamia* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006).

the new civil authority, could be persuaded away from supporting the “Jacobites” (whose influence in the region had been growing in the first part of the seventh century). Ep. 48B demonstrates Iṣū’yahb’s capacity to find theological common ground: he notes that the Muslim Arabs do not believe that God could suffer, in contrast to the miaphysite claim that Christ suffered in his humanity and in his divinity on the cross. It seems that these efforts worked. Ep. 49B suggests that the Muslim Arabs began to withdraw support from the “Jacobites,” following what Iṣū’yahb calls “an indescribable miracle.” This presents a helpful survey of the tensions between “Jacobites” and “Nestorians” in the region (as well as with others, including Christians who converted or moved between religious communities). Bcheiry also explores the way these tensions are paralleled in hagiographical literature, notably in the *Lives of Marutha and Abudemeh* and the *Histories of Rabban Hormizd the Persian and Rabban Bar idta*. In concluding his assessment of Iṣū’yahb’s early views of the Muslim Arabs, it would have been useful to make comparisons with other early Christian responses to Islam. Michael Penn’s work on the earliest Syriac writings on Islam is cited in the bibliography, but there is no engagement with other sources here. As in the first chapter, this does not detract from Bcheiry’s overall argument, but it would have made it feel more robust.

The second part of this chapter maintains that the fall of Seleucia-Ctesiphon in 637 created a crisis for the institution of the Patriarchate and that the Church-State relationship needed to be re-formed. In this context, Iṣū’yahb’s letters from his time as Metropolitan of Hidyāb reflect a more positive attitude to the Muslim Arabs because of the collaboration that was now required with the new authorities. This section is perhaps a little under-developed, but Bcheiry highlights a number of ways in which Iṣū’yahb encouraged his clergy and monks to engage with the authorities and the indirect references he makes to the political situation in Seleucia-Ctesiphon. The chapter concludes, slightly confusingly as it is thematic rather than chronological, with a close reading of a letter written when Iṣū’yahb was Patriarch (Ep. 7C), but this letter explores Iṣū’yahb’s view of the Zoroastrian elite and the changing political situation. The contrast with the Zoroastrian rulers who persecuted the Church of the East allowed Iṣū’yahb to take a positive view of the Muslim Arabs. Bcheiry does not make the connection explicit, but the attitudes here seem to parallel Iṣū’yahb’s views on the relationship between the Muslim Arabs and the “Jacobites” in the time of his episcopacy at Nineveh.

The fourth chapter considers Iṣū'yahb III's generally positive views of the Muslim Arabs expressed in the letters written during his patriarchate. Iṣū'yahb's time as patriarch was marked by a series of crises in the ecclesiastical province of Fars, in the southern part of the Sasanian Empire, a province which had long been reluctant to submit to the authority of the Patriarch in Seleucia-Ctesiphon. Iṣū'yahb restored the Patriarchal seat to the Imperial city, and whilst Seleucia-Ctesiphon had a dwindling political importance, it clearly remained symbolically significant. Iṣū'yahb intervened in Fars, but the local authorities refused to receive two Patriarchal delegations in 651/2, after which they were excommunicated. In the wider political context, this region also saw some of the last pockets of Persian resistance to the Muslim Arabs. A particularly significant moment in this crisis was the conversion of the Christians in Mazūn to Islam. In his letters, Iṣū'yahb is clear that the reasons for this were not due to persecution by the Muslim Arabs but instead were financial, and Iṣū'yahb blamed the Metropolitan of Fars. He claims that the Christians of the region had a weak faith and illegitimate leaders deriving from uncanonical episcopal consecrations. Bcheiry suggests that whilst Iṣū'yahb blamed the local leaders for the apostasy, perhaps it was Iṣū'yahb's policy of cooperation with the Muslim Arabs that drove a wedge between Fars and the Patriarch. This is a plausible argument, and would have benefitted from a more thorough exploration. The chapter concludes with another close reading, this time of Ep. 14C, and showing the parallels with the *Life of Patriarch Sabrīšū* (a text that Iṣū'yahb knew). The comparisons are compelling and the extended quotations from this hagiographical text are helpful. Bcheiry, however, glosses over the fact here that the *vita's* positive perception of the Arabs was likely due to the conversion of the Arab king in the text to Christianity. Though perhaps this was Iṣū'yahb's ultimate hope in pursuing his policy of cooperation and good relations, a point Bcheiry ends with in his brief conclusion.

Bcheiry has written an important book that reassesses some of the earliest references to the Muslim Arabs in Christian sources. It also makes a significant contribution to our understanding of the life and work of Patriarch Iṣū'yahb III, particularly in the context of the collapse of the Sassanian Empire and the emergence of a new political reality. It has a number of imperfections: the use of terms like "Nestorian" and "Jacobite" are grating in modern scholarship, there are moments where assertions feel poorly referenced, and some apparatus better to understand the collection of letters would have been helpful. Nevertheless, the inclusion of

extensive quotations from Iṣū'yahb's letters in Syriac and English alone makes this a useful book; it strengthens Bcheiry's thesis and allows the reader to see the evolution in Iṣū'yahb's thought and attitudes to the Muslim Arabs over a period of approximately thirty years, during which Iṣū'yahb's known world changed irrevocably.