

Babylone Chrétienne: Géopolitique de l'Église de Mésopotamie.

The Geopolitics of the Mesopotamian Church

By Joseph Yacoub. 33 pp. Desclée de Brouwer, Paris, 1996. Index. In French only. 180 FF.

Reviewed by Rochdi Younsi

Never judge a book by its cover, and never has this saying been more apt than in the case of Joseph Yacoub's *Babylone Chrétienne: Géopolitique de l'Église de Mésopotamie*. It is an understatement to say that this work encompasses far more than its title implies. Indeed, by the use of such terms as "Babylone" and "Mésopotamie" on the cover, the author leads us to assume that ancient Mesopotamia and the early days of Christianity will be the only focus of the book. In fact, Yacoub presents a compilation of contemporary events backed by certain historical data, which he carefully selected from the different episodes of the history of Mesopotamia and its churches. Moreover, by constantly shifting between the present and the past, the author has without doubt opted for an unusual periodization of his work, which could leave the reader quite perplexed. As we will see, that approach affects both the methodology and the historiography pertaining to the study of "Assyro-Chaldean" history.

It is important to mention that the book is centered around both the Nestorian Church¹ and the Chaldean one. Perhaps intending to be as inclusive as possible about his subject, the author uses a variety of terms such as "Assyro-Chaldean", "Arameo-Syriac", or even "Arameo-Chaldean", apparently assuming that they are synonymous. However, these varied references will only confuse any reader whose familiarity with Mesopotamian Christianity is elementary. Moreover, like it or not, a significant number of Chaldeans consider their history to be wholly separate from that of the Assyrians. The author's approach is bound to leave them less than satisfied.

The book is divided into four chapters that attempt to address four distinct themes. In the first chapter, Yacoub examines the extent of the consequences experienced by the Christians of Iraq in the aftermath of the 1991 Gulf War. In the second part, he takes a leap into history and theology in order to clarify for us the "Mesopotamian outlook on the Bible". He then proceeds to explain the strong ties between the church and the nation, thus asserting that one cannot be dissociated from the other. Finally, he reviews the twentieth century and the events that caused what he terms the "Mesopotamian tragedy". In its conclusion, the author looks at the future and opens a new debate on whether a

¹ Yacoub's short-hand identification of the two religious orders will not go easily for either of these two communities. Because of historical circumstances, most so-called "Nestorians" reject that appellation. Over time, the "Nestorian" name has acquired a certain pejorative quality. The worshipers in question insist that they belong to the "Church of the East", a name generally given short shrift in Yacoub's pages.

church-based nation is on its way to reemergence. Let us now analyze how Joseph Yacoub explores these themes.

The first chapter is almost entirely devoted to very recent events in the history of the Christians of Iraq. Not surprisingly, the Gulf War and its domestic and international impact constitute its cornerstone. The author starts by providing us with a basic guide to the various Christians communities of Iraq. The importance of the different groups, the number of their churches, and the location of different monasteries and dioceses are fleshed out in great detail. One can find an array of information on the Catholic Chaldeans, the Orthodox Assyrians, the Orthodox Armenians, and the Syrian Orthodox. The author adds various details on each church by explaining the hierarchy within its institutions and by highlighting the major waves of emigration that have affected its followers throughout the years. In some cases, Yacoub includes an anecdote that may not seem crucial at first, but is in fact a hint to a hidden issue. For instance, when dealing with the Chaldeans, he mentions that Patriarch Raphael Bidawid personally baptized the son of Tarek Aziz, the current Deputy Prime Minister, and the only high-ranking Iraqi who is a Christian.² Although this detail may not appear to be very crucial, it could very well be an allusion to the “controversial” ties that the Chaldean Church maintains with the Iraqi regime.

After establishing the background on every Christian institution, Yacoub addresses the legal status of the Christians in today’s Iraq. While he claims that they live under a “controlled freedom”, he spends a large amount of time drawing a rather positive picture of their situation. As supporting evidence, the author summarizes all the laws and decrees that have been issued by the government since 1968 in order to secure the cultural survival of the “Assyro-Chaldeans”. A number of publications and school manuals in Syriac are cited as an illustration of the “freedom” provided by Saddam Hussein. One can also read about the mutual praises that Patriarch Bidawid and the Iraqi leader exchange for Christmas and other holidays, as well as the financial contribution of the government in the building of a new Chaldean Cathedral in Baghdad.

With respect to the Gulf War, Yacoub highlights the impact it had on the Christians who were forced to abandon their villages and to join the Kurds in their march towards the Turkish or Iranian borders. The Assyrians presence among thousands of refugees was certainly not reported by the media at that time. Nor did it constitute a concern for the international community. In fact, the author inserted an interview that Patriarch Bidawid gave to *Golias*, a French review, in which he criticized the Catholic Church of France for “not taking into consideration the biblical importance of Iraq”. Furthermore, the Patriarch sensed a certain “racism against Assyro-Babylonians” within France, which gave more significance to the fate of the Kurds.

To end this chapter, Yacoub describes the legal and political status of the Christians living in northern Iraq, under the rule of the autonomous Kurdish

² Tarek Aziz is a member of the Chaldean community. He was born Mikhail Youkhana.

government. Once again, the author lists all the legal rights granted to the Christian minority, which is represented by five members in the Kurdish parliament, one of whom serves as a cabinet minister. In addition to their political participation, their cultural rights are guaranteed by the Kurdish constitution. For instance, in order to preserve the language among “Assyro-Chaldean” youth, school materials in Syriac were made available. Similarly, with the adoption of the Assyrian calendar, both the religious and national holidays are legally celebrated by the “Assyro-Chaldeans” of the region: April 1st for the Assyrian New Year and August 7th for Martyrs’ Day.

Despite their impressive gains in Northern Iraq, Assyrians continue to emigrate, thus weakening their historical tie to that region. Yacoub blames the migration on isolated acts of violence against Assyrians, who often find themselves caught in the crossfire among different Kurdish factions.

In reading the first chapter, the reader will be struck by the fact that Yacoub refers to his people as “Assyro-Chaldeans”, yet invariably offers examples pertaining only to the Chaldean segment of the community. Not until his description of the situation in the Iraqi Kurdistan does he address Assyrians as a separate entity from the Chaldean community.

The second chapter of the book appears to be closer to a theological study of “Mesopotamian Christianity”. The biblical importance of Mesopotamia lies in the fact that Abraham, according to Yacoub, was an “Arameo-Chaldean”. The author continues detailing the special status that “Assyro-Chaldeans” had before they were “cursed for their cruelty”. The reasons for the demise of their civilization are backed by a series of biblical verses, which condemned their “immoral and bloody practices”.

Yacoub tackles an important point pertaining to the “identity crisis within Mesopotamian Christianity”. He explains that, throughout the centuries, religious consciousness emerged to the detriment of the ethnic one. He claims that terms such as “Assyrian”, “Babylonian”, and “Chaldean” gradually vanished while names like “Nestorian”, “Syrian”, and “Jacobite” emerged. The author asserts that the source of the crisis is the religious divisions within Christianity. But can one accurately claim that terms such as “Assyrian” and “Chaldean” have disappeared? This could be debatable.

In any case, it is clear that the emergence of Christianity sparked a deep change for “Assyro-Chaldeans”. They gradually abandoned the beliefs of their pagan ancestors and embraced the new faith. According to the author, feeling guilty about the atrocities they committed against the Hebrews, for instance, they started adopting Jewish names. We learn that one of the tribes of the Hakkari mountains is called Levy and that the family of Mar Shamoun is from the Nephtali tribe. This, he argues, is common because “the oppressor repents by identifying with his victims.”

The debate over identity is carried into the third chapter of the book, when the author analyzes the ties between the church and the nation. He upholds the notion that the two elements cannot be separated. In order to support that claim, he proposes to review the entire background to an historical “Assyro-

Chaldean” presence in Mesopotamia. That chapter is therefore a long historical account starting with the Babylonian Empire and ending with the missionary ventures into 19th century Mesopotamia.

The Assyro-Babylonian Empire is glorified through a list of scientific and cultural contributions, which did not prevent the collapse of the kingdom when foreign powers invaded Mesopotamia. What took place under foreign domination can be added to the “Assyro-Chaldean tragedy”. Indeed, both the Romans and the Persians committed some of the most shocking atrocities against the population. Yacoub praises King Yazdegerd I of Persia who, in 410 AD., put an end to the persecutions and allowed “Assyro-Chaldeans” to freely worship Jesus. Furthermore, he ordered the restoration of all the destroyed churches. That era constituted the revival of Mesopotamian churches, which undertook to organize themselves around a centralized system of administration.

Within the context of identity, Yacoub could not continue his analysis without touching upon the most commonly asked question about the Assyrians’ faith: Is the Church of the East Nestorian?

Although the author claims that Assyrians are wrongly called Nestorians today, he does not clearly answer the question. In fact, his answer remains quite ambiguous throughout the book. Furthermore, Yacoub shows a certain inconsistency in his writing. While he mentions the “Church of the East” when formulating his question, he responds by referring to the “Mesopotamian Church”, which, he claims, became Nestorian in November 497 AD.. How does one define the “Mesopotamian Church”? What is the difference between “the Mesopotamian Church” and “the Church of the East”? Unfortunately, the author remains vague in his account, thus limiting himself to a pure narrative of the theological dispute between Nestorius and the rest of the Clergy. Yacoub’s appraisal of the whole issue remains unclear, even though he claims that Nestorius was simply “misunderstood”. In the meantime, with respect to the division that occurred in 1445, when a segment of the Church of the East joined the Roman Catholic Church, we learn that in the same year, it was decided that those “Assyro-Chaldeans” who rejected Nestorius’ doctrine would now be known as “Chaldeans”. Subsequently, the latter would again become Nestorian, thus abandoning their Catholic faith. Surprisingly, the importance of such an intriguing event is neither highlighted nor explained. The reader is therefore tempted to ask a simple question: Who are those who call themselves Chaldeans today? The fact that the Chaldean Church reunited with Rome in 1681 certainly does not help resolve the dilemma. In light of this confusing summary, it appears that the author omits to deal with some of the most crucial and fascinating issues pertaining to those he calls the “Assyro-Chaldeans”. Readers who hope to deepen their knowledge about the origin of the different churches of Iraq may be frustrated by such a gap.

The fourth chapter is a recapitulation of the main events that shaped the history of the “Assyro-Chaldeans” throughout the twentieth century. Undoubtedly, the First World War and its consequences represent the most crucial moment. Indeed, the British minority policy during the mandate period

would lead to an outbreak of anti-Assyrian sentiments, immediately after the independence of Iraq in 1932. That independence had in fact been conditioned on the protection of the minorities by King Faysal. The text by the League of Nations should have stipulated that Assyrians would enjoy autonomy within a “homogeneous unit”. However, Faysal managed to amend the text before its issuance by the League. Instead of “unit” the final text read “units”, which inevitably, assured the dispersion of the Assyrian population, making it impossible for them to build any territorial claim. The precarious situation in which Assyrians found themselves at that time was a clear prelude to the 1933 massacre.

By 1945, “Assyro-Chaldeans” were thought to have disappeared. Neither Western media nor Western scholars paid much attention to the Christians of Iraq they wrongly believed that they all had left and settled in the United States or Australia. That fact is used by the author as a transition into more recent facts about “Assyro-Chaldeans”. He traces the evolution of their status since 1972 when a new Iraqi constitution was adopted, thus acknowledging the notion of “national plurality within the framework of Iraqi unity”. From that point onwards, a series of laws giving cultural and religious freedom to “Assyro-Chaldeans” would be implemented. That included the teaching of Syriac and the establishment of TV and radio programs in the same language. Furthermore, the government ordered the restitution of Iraqi citizenship to Mar Shamoun XXIII, who had lost it in 1933.

All these measures were taken in exchange for a complete submission of different communities and their political support to the Iraqi authorities. By 1976, however, all the rights granted to the “Assyro-Chaldeans” were gradually restricted and a wave of “anti-Assyro-Chaldean” policies were to be implemented. The author mentions a continuous interference in churches' affairs, arrests, and summary executions. In 1984, 153 Assyrians were arrested and tortured.

Immediately after listing all these oppressive measures against the “Assyro-Chaldeans”, Yacoub makes an obvious methodological mistake. He starts a new section in order to explain this “sudden change in the attitude of the Iraqi authorities”. We therefore logically expect to understand what was behind such a shift of policy. Instead, the author lists various domestic and international factors that, in fact, explain the complete opposite. For instance, he mentions the “more humanistic” approach to minorities in the Ba’ath party’s ideology. He then refers to the “aim at rallying the Assyrians to the regime” and to “put an end to the Assyro-Chaldean emigration”. These factors certainly do not explain the oppression, rather the contrary. It is unclear whether it is a question of organization of chapters or simply an error in the printing process of the book. The fact remains that the reader is once again confused about the methodology of the work.

The end of that chapter is an overview of the status that “Assyro-Chaldeans” have in both Turkey and Iran. We also find a detailed survey of the demographical distribution of “Assyro-Chaldeans” in countries such as France,

Belgium, and Sweden. The author also chose to include another section in which he lists a series of witnessed incidents in which “Assyro-Chaldeans” were killed by Kurds.

In the conclusion of the book, Yacoub announces a new debate on whether a church-based nation will appear in the future. Unfortunately, what seems to be a fascinating question is quickly turned into a mere summary of the agreement that was signed in 1994 between the Pope John Paul II and Mar Dinkha IV. The latter is the current Patriarch of the Church of the East, which is theologically separate from the Chaldean Church. Surprisingly, despite that important difference, the author does not mention the impact that that historical recognition by the Vatican had on both the Chaldean Church and the Chaldean community. Can one really state that Mar Dinkha went to Rome as the representative of the “Assyro-Chaldeans”? Furthermore, what about the initial question the author asked on the so-called church-based nation? Unfortunately, it appears that, although he asks intriguing questions, Yacoub remains very reticent and vague in both his answers and analyses.

In sum, Joseph Yacoub has undoubtedly done extensive research on the Christians of Iraq throughout the ages. *Babylone Chrétienne: Géopolitique de L'Église de Mésopotamie* provides a wide variety of data about Assyrians, Chaldeans, and other Christian communities of Iraq. The problem, however, lies in the manner in which that tremendous amount of information was amassed and presented to the reader. The lack of organization of the chapters, the sections, and the subsections reflects the absence of any chronological order and coherent periodization, thus rendering the narrative difficult to follow. Moreover, by interchangeably using different names to identify the Assyrians and the Chaldeans, the author creates a sense of confusion in the reader's mind. The problem cannot be solved by simply referring to all the Christians of Iraq as “Assyro-Chaldeans”.

If the purpose of Joseph Yacoub's endeavor was to gather a substantial amount of facts on the past and current history of the Christians of Iraq, then the goal has certainly been achieved, thus making the book useful at least for that limited purpose. However, if the aim was to really explain the geopolitical role of the so-called “Church of Mesopotamia”, as the title claims, the author might first consider providing a clear definition and description of that church by placing it in a comprehensible historical context.