

**J.C.J. Sanders, Assyrian-Chaldean Christians In Eastern Turkey and Iran: Their Last Homeland Re-Charted, A.A.Brediusstichting, Kasteel Hernen, The Netherlands (1999) pp.96 + 2 detached maps. Index. Softcover.**

*Reviewed by Francis Sarguis*

This work delivers a lode of information, both textual and visual, to the many inquiring minds in our community who thirst to learn more about their heritage. The author's magnifying glass pores over the last two centuries of our history, clearly a critical period of time which would set the stage for the cataclysmic events to follow.

In his Preface, Sanders refers to his work as a "cultural atlas". This is an apt description, considering the blend of photographs and maps dotted throughout the text. Justifiably, Sanders offers that his work "*is not an encyclopaedia, and even less a strictly scholarly essay. Rather, in this book the author has collected data from rare works often in languages not readily accessible to everyone.*"

Sanders' declared crusade is "*to fight the 'onomatocide' (name-murder) which followed the genocide by reintroducing the original Christian place names.*" (Preface, p.16) The author writes of a culture which "*remained distinct for centuries . . . , lying as it were, hidden in the mountainous region of Eastern Turkey, in Northern Iraq and in North Western Iran ... But, after atrocious persecutions during the last century, this culture was finally annihilated from the region in 1915.*"

Alas, while his effort does shed important light on the genealogy of "place names", it does little to unscramble the onomastic ambivalence associated with the people he discusses. Furthermore, while certainly there cannot be any doubt about the massive losses inflicted both on the Assyrians and the Armenians, "annihilation" (which we normally equate to utter destruction) is not appropriate. As our parents and grandparents can attest, the culture and the people did indeed survive these tragedies, if only to experience yet further atrocities.

Sanders also has an unsettling tendency (at least in the English translation) to utilize ambiguous terms of reference which English-language scholars abandoned some time ago in the interest of simplified terminology. For example, Sanders commonly refers to the "Syrian" language which most scholars would call "Syriac". In fact, the word "Syriac" is not to be found even once between the book's covers, and the blank is not filled by the generally accepted apposition of "Western Syrian" to "Eastern Syrian", terms referring to the new political divide occurring when Persia "acquired the Roman territories east of the Euphrates in 363 A.D." (24; 26-27;77).

Furthermore, while on occasion Sanders limits the term "Chaldean" to "Assyrian-catholic" (7), he more frequently places it in the catch phrase "Assyrian-Chaldean" as if these two names should be seen in parity. In fact,

according to self-avowed “Assyrians”, there is no “Chaldean” in an ethnic sense, but only in the context of a religious confession.

Of course, the “Chaldeans” themselves do not speak with one voice. This reviewer is aware that one group of Chaldeans claims an ethnicity entirely its own, dating back to Ur and Abraham, and different from the “Assyrians”. A number of contemporary Chaldean clerics have written in support of this position. There is another group of Chaldeans who also reject “Assyrian” identity, and they identify themselves as “Christian Arabs”. Finally, there is a third group of Chaldeans – which appears to be much smaller than either of the other two – whose members insist they are “100% Assyrian”. Perhaps it is this third group, and only this one, which is more suited to Sanders’s reference, “Assyrian-Catholic”.

Modern Assyrians ambitiously refer to the homeland of their ancient namesakes as “Bet Nahrain” (i.e., Mesopotamia), and those who offer an opinion usually have in mind all of the area between the Euphrates and the Tigris rivers. With the passage of 2 ½ millenia, and the ever changing landscape of political geography before and after it, an objective and definitive resolution of this geographic concept would be an impossible task. With greater restraint than most, Sanders places “*the once famous Assyria*” between “*two rivers, the Great Zab and, somewhat to the south, the Small Zab . . .*” (19) Under any definition, we can include “Assur, Ninive and Erbil.” It is not really clear whether today’s “Assyrian Christians” are of one mind on the boundary lines. The area suggested by Sanders contains a great deal of specificity (31).

There is good grist for the mill. “*The language of paradise was initially agreed upon as Hebrew but, in the eleventh century, the Nestorian Ibn at-Tayyib explained that the language of paradise must be Nabatean.*” (21) And in Solomon-like fashion, addressed to both skeptic and believer: “*Whether or not the Assyrian Christians are direct descendants from the Assyrians mentioned in the Bible is difficult to prove. But they do not consider themselves Arabs; their language differs much from Arabic, and they are not Muslims like the majority of Arabs.*” (21)

While admittedly the book “*is concentrated on the situation [of the Assyrians] in the Middle East of around 1915,*” the author frequently digresses to more recent times. Several miscues prove that this is less familiar territory to him. According to Sanders, for example: “*When Simon XXI Ishaï, with his see in Turlock, California, proved not to have remained celibate, one of his relatives shot him dead.*” (25) But Turlock has never been known as a “see”, and while the failure of this Patriarch to remain celibate was distressing to all of his followers, it is commonly assumed in the community that other more political reasons inspired the crime. It is puzzling also how the author can write that “*[t]he relationships between the Nestorians, the Chaldeans and the Jacobites are good, partially because their positions are already weak.*” Moreover, although clearly these constituencies do not represent large populations, many Assyrians would surely balk at his low estimates: 170,000 followers of the *Church of the East*,

including 1,000 of them in Malabar, India; 170,000 followers of the *Chaldean Church*, not counting a much larger number in Malabar (26). It is a small but interesting illustration of the unevenness in presentation that population estimates are provided for Syrian Catholics and Armenian Catholics, but no figures are offered for the larger Syrian Orthodox “Jacobites” (27).

Sanders presents his geographic story in five parts: The Hakkari District (35-46), Seert and Surroundings (47-62), From Turkey to Iraq (48-66), Shemdinan (67-68); and The East-Syrian Churches in Iran - particularly Azerbaijan (69-76). While each treatment contains much of interest, this reviewer was especially interested in the segment relating to The Hakkari. Here, Sanders relies heavily on the accounts and detailed maps produced by the Dominican Father Jacques Rhétoré. Rhétoré traveled deep into this mountainous region, particularly its eastern part, an area of limited knowledge to other researchers (such as Ainsworth and Layard). This reviewer has had the privilege of reading some of Rhétoré's extensive travel notes, in their original French. Maintained in the Dominican Archives in Paris, a portion of these notes is currently being translated to English, in a project supervised by Professor Bruno Poizat of Lyons, France. It is hoped that the translation will reach fruition, so that English-reading Assyrians can benefit from the effort. Rhétoré proves himself a non-pareil observer and diarist; Sanders is justified in holding his work in high esteem.

The book includes several notices about Syriac Christianity in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and a variety of photographs (some originals, others more recent). It also features a bibliography, albeit a modest one. The book includes two especially useful guiding tools in the form of a Geographical Index, and a Register of Maps. While the English translation of the book contains a number of typographical errors, these are minor in nature. No doubt there are also some errors of substance. For example, one perceptive reader recently noted that, “at page 72, Sanders seems to have confused two different *Mar Shimuns*”.

Tucked into the book are two large maps best described by Professor Coakley of Harvard as “*the splendid large-scale (1:250,000) pre-World War I British map of the area (GSGS series 1522, Turkey in Asia, 1901-16; sheets 26 and 27), with many names of extra Assyrian villages overprinted in red.*”

A few words about the author. Sanders is a native of the Netherlands. He studied Hebrew and then, while in seminary, he took up Aramaic. According to Professor Coakley, “*Sanders began to be acquainted with Assyrian Christians in 1959, and during his long career as a Catholic priest and scholar he has made a number of journeys in the Assyrian lands of the Middle East.*”

This book was originally published in Dutch (in 1997). The English version (which could stand improvement) was produced with the help of some generous individuals and also of the David Barsom Perley Fund at Harvard University. Though in soft cover, it is a handsome book. With its limited run, it is likely to go out of print quickly. Copies are presently available at the price of \$35 from the Al-Itekal Bookstore, 3638 W. Montrose, Chicago, IL 60618.