

***The Imam of the Christians: The World of Dionysius of Tel-Mahre, c. 750–850.* By Philip Wood. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2021. xi + 286 pp. ISBN: 9780691212791. \$39.95, hardback; \$14.72, eBook.**

Philip Wood's book diplomatically opens the complicated and neglected window to the social-political milieu of the late eighth- and early ninth-century Jacobites, the miaphysite Christian community under the patriarchate of Antioch. At the intersection of Jacobite ecclesial and Abbasid histories, Wood, professor of history at Aga Khan University's Institute for the Study of Muslim Civilisations in London, is careful to make the book accessible to any reader familiar with either subject. As the title teases, he is particularly fascinated with the political maneuvering and interreligious engagement of Dionysius of Tel Mahre, the patriarch of the Jacobite church (817–845) who navigated the Islamicate church by securing caliphal endorsement of his position as the head of the church and astutely reframed Islamic political thought to secure rights for the Jacobite *dhimmis*.

Methodologically, Wood sticks very close to his primary sources, especially the surviving fragments from Dionysius. Knowing he is working with relatively niche sources, the introduction provides a necessary, concise, and astutely written background on the Jacobite church, the primary sources, and the relevant scholarship concerning minority communities in the caliphate. The changing context of the Jacobites, a term Wood opts for instead of the more common "Syrian Orthodox," with the growing import of the eastern half of the caliphate after the Abbasid Revolution (661–750 CE) provides the fertile ground for the combination of his two research interests: the history of the post-Arab conquest Syriac Christian communities and the means of continuity for group identities.

In the first three chapters, Wood demonstrates the survival of Christian aristocracies beyond the seventh century and introduces the shifting circumstances of the Jacobite church as its patriarchs slowly learn to capitalize on the powers of the caliphal government through *Königsnähe*, or "proximity to royal influence" (51). The most crucial innovation in the church-state relationship is the new status of the church and its clergy as a source of revenue for the government. The patriarch's legitimacy also becomes dependent on a caliphal diploma, and the patriarchs begin to see the boons of solidifying a monopoly of access to the caliphal government on behalf of all Christians. Dionysius, for example, uses his access to 'Abd Allah ibn Tahir, a regional governor, to stop a lower-ranking official's campaign against Christian enslavers in Edessa.

In chapters four through five, Wood returns to the concept of *Königsnähe* to evidence the effect of changing geographies of caliphal power on Jacobite communities. Harran, for example, was made into the capital by the Umayyad caliph Marwan II, but under the Abbasids' shift east, the high-ranking clergy of Harran lost their royal access. And with less important clergy, the city's Christian elite found themselves weakened. Eastern cities, by contrast, suddenly became more important in the game of ecclesial politics. By the patriarchates of Cyriacus of Takrit (793–817) and Dionysius, Mosul and Takrit, for example, found themselves with elevated influence. A notable demonstration of the shifting centers of power comes in a nifty hierarchical maneuver by Dionysius: when Christians in Takrit voice discontent over Cyriacus's decision to make Mosul a

metropolitan, a city associated with Umayyad patronage, “Dionysius observes that the honour of Takrit is...increased, since submission to a metropolitan is more honourable than is submission to a mere bishop” (131). The Takritians' anxiety and Dionysius's clever response reveal the city's newfound value: in a somewhat similar case in Cyrrhus, Dionysius appealed to the caliph for military assistance. Such violence was off the table in the economically rising Takrit.

Given all of the political and cultural shifts discussed in the previous two chapters, in chapter six, Wood pauses and pulls from an impressive number of external primary and secondary sources to consider how Jacobite communities maintained continuity by looking at how communities “self-fashion themselves” through liturgical reforms between 780 and 896 CE. One prominent trend involved high clerical standards. Yohannan (846–73), for example, was very concerned with the correct use of various sacramental formulas by priests. The liturgical “legislation” also reflects a strong concern about the cohesion of the Christian community (152). It is in this chapter that Wood's research on the preservation of group identities comes through most efficiently. For example, patriarchal legislation from George of Beltan (758–66 and 775–90) and Yohannan created a complete ban on exogamy. These legislations do not automatically equate to a successfully safeguarded in-group, and following the work of Eve Krakowski on Geniza Jews, Wood graciously concedes the “social boundaries were often unclear” (160). But, he makes modest claims that demonstrate an earnest engagement with sociological trends, such as the “escalation of ambition” of the liturgical reforms, that are rather convincing of the reforms having some degree of success (144).

In chapters seven through nine, the heart of the book, Wood makes the argument embedded in the title *The Imam of the Christians*: Dionysius strategically reframes Islamic political thought to caliphal authorities for his own purposes, even claiming patriarchs are analogous to imams. Chapter seven critically overviews the mutually beneficial relationship between the patriarch and al-Ma'mun. Dionysius makes two trips to Egypt on behalf of the caliph and observes, according to a manuscript, “Such a thing [that] had never been seen before in the empire of the Tayyaye—selling people who paid the jizya” (179). Equipped with an understanding of Islamic history, he then frames the selling of the Biamaye as a “violation of the treaty between Muslims and Christians” (180).

In chapter eight, Wood seeks to solve the disparity resulting from the Jewish exilarchs losing authority while the Jacobite patriarchs retrain theirs. It is here where Dionysius presents the titular analogy between an imam and a patriarch. Using the language of consent and election, he draws a hard line between the Jewish and Christian religious authorities: since patriarchs are elected, the patriarchate is essential to the maintenance of morality in the Christian community (207). To subtract from the patriarch's power would be a bane to the caliphate. There is an unresolved problem, though: al-Ma'mun did not envision his own claim to the imamate in terms of consent; he actually denied this. Wood brushes Dionysius's theological error away with two possibilities: 1) ignorance; or 2) a choice to purposefully ignore the “inconvenient military realities of the fourth fitna” (207). Both options seem loaded with ineffective rhetorical measures. Al-Ma'mun could simply deny the analogy that depicted his claim to imamate in terms directly contrary to the state propaganda. The presented options leave more wanting.

Chapter nine notes ways Muslim rule challenged Jacobite mythic history and how their leaders responded to such challenges through a formation of a Suryaya (Wood's preferred term instead of "Syrian") identity. Three criteria contribute to the Suryaya claim: territory, a history of kingship (biblical and mythic), and language. While Dionysius appears unique in combining these three criteria to claim the Suryaya should be considered a unique ethnē, the argument feels somewhat ancillary to Wood's larger argument corresponding to the *Königsnähe* of the Jacobite patriarchs.

The Imam of the Christians should be required reading for graduate-level courses in the history of Christian-Muslim relations and anyone interested in Christianity under early Muslim rule. It is also an appropriate text for advanced undergraduates studying early Christianities. The entertaining cast of miaphysite patriarchs would breathe some fresh air into such courses.

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