

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *Bibliotheca Sacra* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_bib-sacra_01.php

ARTICLE II

RELIGIOUS SECTS OF SYRIA.¹

By Rev. Leander Thompson, formerly Missionary of the A. B. C. F. M.

WITHIN the bounds of Syria and the Holy Land, there are from twenty to thirty religious sects.

Of the two great divisions of the Muhammedan body, the *Sunmites*, or followers of 'Amar, are the lords of the country, and more numerous than any other single sect of any religion in the land. The other division, called *Shi'ah*, are very few in number, and are generally despised by their brethren of the Sunmite or self-styled orthodox faith, while the *Shi'ah* of Persia, being there the dominant sect, equally despise the Sunmites of Syria, Egypt, and Turkey Proper.

Besides these two great divisions of the Muhammedan body, there are several sects which are commonly regarded as off-shoots, or heretical subdivisions of the family, as the *Metâwileh*, the *Derûz*, the *Nusaivîyeh*, and the *Isma'îlîyeh*.

The *Metâwileh*, or (as the word signifies) the followers of 'Aly, are few comparatively, numbering probably not more than 25,000 souls, and are chiefly found in a single district, called *Belâd Beshârah*, including *Ba'albek* and vicinity. Their religious belief is very similar to that of the *Shi'ah* of Persia; and, like them, they are regarded, by the Sunmites,

¹ A full and complete account of the different Religious Sects in Syria and the Holy Land would obviously fill a volume. The design of the writer, therefore, has been to give merely a *sketch*, including some of the distinctive peculiarities of each sect, but especially of those sects of whom the least is here generally known.

It is proper to state that the Article was prepared, and is now published, at the request of the "Essex North Association."

In addition to a somewhat extended Journal, kept by the writer during a residence in Syria and Palestine of several years as a missionary, the facts here embodied were drawn chiefly from the Memoirs of Missionaries; Journals and Letters of Missionaries in the Missionary Herald; Dr. Wilson's Lectures on the Oriental Churches; Dr. Robinson's Biblical Researches; the Biblical Repository, and Private Correspondence with friends in the East.

as heretics. They have their own feudal lords, have but little friendly intercourse with others, and are exceedingly fierce and warlike. It is said that nothing can induce them to eat or drink with those of another religion. If a Christian chances to eat or drink out of one of their metallic vessels, they invariably, before using it, subject it to a thorough scouring, while an earthen vessel is, at once, dashed to pieces as useless. If a stranger should even happen to *touch* their clothing, they look upon themselves as unclean until they have completed a process of purification.

The *Derâz*, commonly called *Druzes*, are an energetic, warlike people, numbering about 100,000 souls. They inhabit the mountains of Lebanon chiefly, though they are found elsewhere. Formerly they were masters of Lebanon and the adjacent coast, including Beirût as their most important port. But since the late Emîr Beshîr, and some other leading princes, abandoned their former religion and joined the Maronites, the latter have gradually gained the ascendancy, both in numbers and in power.

Of the religion of the Druzes, it is not safe to speak with confidence. Hâkim, an insane Khalif of Egypt, who ascended the throne A. D. 996, is regarded as their founder, and, in some sense, also, their deity. Their religion seems to be a compound of Muhammedanism, Judaism, Christianity, and Paganism. They are known to worship the image of the calf. But, except so far as it has been found out by accident, their religion is a profound secret. Indeed, only a small number, comparatively, of the nominal Druzes, the 'Akâl (the initiated, or knowing ones), understand the peculiarities of their own faith, while the "uninitiated" are content to remain in ignorance. Within the last twenty years, some of their sacred books have, by the fortunes of war, found their way into Europe, and several have fallen into the hands of our missionaries. As yet, however, no complete system of faith or rule of duty has been ascertained. A few articles of no great importance were found, one of which makes it lawful for a Druze to dissemble his faith, by professing to accept that of any person with whom, for the moment, he

may be conversant. And this the Druzes have often been known to do.

The *Nusairiyeh*, commonly called *Ansairiyeh*, are more numerous than the Druzes, numbering at least 200,000 souls. They inhabit principally "the range of mountains extending, on the north of Mount Lebanon, towards Antioch." Indeed they are found, together with the *Isma'îlîyeh*, more or less numerous, in all that large and fertile region that extends from Tripolis, on the south, over mountain and plain, all the way, round the head of the sea, to Tarsus and the plain of Adana. *Lâdakfeh* is their central seaport.

In many respects this singular sect appear strongly to resemble the Druzes. They are supposed to have been originally Muhammedans, though their origin is involved in not a little darkness. There are several subdivisions among themselves, as the *Shemsîyeh*, or worshippers of the sun; the *Komarîyeh*, or worshippers of the moon; the *Kelbîyeh*, or worshippers of the dog; and others. It is not known that they have either stated times or places for worship. They have feasts, though no one knows why they observe them. So far as appears, they have no law concerning marriage, and they believe in a transmigration of souls. But, though they have religious books, their religion, like that of the Druzes, is a profound secret; and, like the Druzes, they dissemble their faith by conforming, externally, to the religion of others with whom, from time to time, they associate. Hitherto, the most cautious and persevering efforts of our missionaries and others, to ascertain what they really believe, though continued through more than fifty years, have proved utterly futile. Mr. Barker, the British ex-consul general, who has lived among them more than half a century, and whose domestics have been mostly from this sect, declares that, on the subject of their religion, no power can unseal their lips. Our own consul at *Lâdakfeh* informed one of our missionaries, a few years since, that even the governor of the city, a Turk, tried every art to wring the secret out of them to no purpose. He took a poor man into his employ, gradually raised him from step to step, and sought

to gain his affection and confidence; and, at length, began to sound him on the matter of religion. Finding all his efforts in this way useless, he imprisoned, beat, and nearly killed him, but with no better success. The poor man finally told him that, if he should actually beat him to death, he would not disclose anything. "But," said he, "you have a slave; commit him to me for forty days; I will take him to the mountains, where he will be initiated into our mysteries; and then, as he is your slave, you may do what you please with him." But the slave, when he returned, was as stubbornly silent as the other, and actually died a martyr to his secret.¹

The *Isma'iliyeh*, or *Ismaelites*, were also, originally, a subdivision, partly religious and partly political, of the Shi'ah sect of the Muhammedans. They are now few in number, being the comparatively feeble remains of the people who, in the time of the crusades, were well known and universally dreaded, under the name of *Hashshashin*² or *Assassins*. They are found in Northern Syria, and between them and their neighbors, the Nusairiyeh, there is the most inextinguishable hatred. They also have a secret, mystical religion, and are divided into several sects, one of which, the *Kud-damôseh*, is universally believed to observe rites whose obscenity does not admit of description.

The *Yezidees*, or devil-worshippers, in Syria, are very few in number, and are found on the extreme north-east frontier, the great mass of the sect being found in the neighboring districts of Mesopotamia and Assyria. According to the late Dr. Grant, who was familiar with them, they profess to believe in one God, and "teach that Satan substituted a Jew for the Saviour on the cross, so that Christ ascended into heaven without having died, and will appear again from thence, to subdue all men to himself. They baptize

¹ See W. M. Thomson's Journal, Missionary Herald, March, 1841.

² This word is supposed to be derived from *Hashshish*, the name of a species of grass, from which is obtained a substance that intoxicates and maddens those who receive it into the system. *Assassin* is the English form of the same word, and strictly means one whom *intoxication* infuriates and leads on to deeds of violence and murder.

both by immersion and sprinkling, use the sign of the cross, and, putting off their shoes, kiss the threshold of a Christian church before they enter, but never visit a mosque. Moreover, they practise circumcision; but along with all this, they have also a leaven of Sabianism. They adore the rising sun, and kiss the object first touched by his early rays. They will not blow out a candle, or spit in the fire, lest they defile that sacred element. They will not speak disrespectfully of Satan; alleging that, though now fallen, he will one day be restored to favor, when it might be inconvenient to be found among his enemies. Instead of pronouncing his name, they call him "Lord of the Evening," or Sheikh Mazem (exalted chief); nor will they tolerate the mention of the word *Shat*, the usual name of the Tigris, because of its resemblance to Sheitân (Satan); even the word *naal* (a horse-shoe), is also proscribed, because it is only a transposition of *laan* (to curse), as though Satan were either accursed or cursing. It is said they used to make offerings to him by throwing money or jewels into a deep pit, in the mountains of Sinjar, which the Turks plundered of the offerings of centuries, when that district was conquered."

The *Jews* of Syria and the Holy Land are supposed to number not far from 40,000 souls. They are found principally in Jerusalem, Hebron, Tiberias, and Safed, which are their Holy Places. A considerable number are found, also, in Damascus, Aleppo, Acre, and Beirût. Like the other leading sects, they are subdivided. Besides the Rabbinists, or Talmudists, who are much the most numerous and popular, there are the Chasidîm, the Zoharites, and the Karaites. The Rabbinists are the representatives of the ancient sect of Pharisees. They yield implicit obedience to the doctrines and institutions of the Rabbins, as deduced from the Talmud; and also accept the decisions of the Mishna, as the sole and infallible interpretation of the law.

The *Chasidim* or *Pietists*, date their origin no further back than the year 1740. They are not only the bitter enemies of Christians, but also of all other Jews. They are *Jewish fanatics*, believing in the wildest vagaries; and, like the Der-

vishes among the Muhammedans, working themselves up into the most extravagant ecstasies, breaking out into fits of laughter, clapping their hands, jumping up and down, in the synagogues, in the most frantic manner; and, with their faces turned toward heaven, clenching their fists, as if they would *dare* the Almighty to withhold from them the objects of their requests. They pay almost divine honors to their Rabbins; and believe that the Messiah, whom they are hourly expecting, will be *a mere man*, but will come with such an effulgence of glory, as to produce a complete regeneration in the heart of every Jew, and thenceforth deliver him from every evil.

There is an off-shoot from this sect, called *Habadim*, a word composed of the initial letters of the three Hebrew words that signify respectively, "wisdom, intelligence, and knowledge." They may, not improperly, be termed the "Jewish *Quietists*," as their distinguishing peculiarity consists in the rejection of external forms, and the complete abandonment of the *mind* to abstraction and contemplation. Instead of the baptisms customary among the Jews, they go through the signs, without the use of the element, and consider it their duty to disengage themselves, as much as possible, from matter, because of its tendency to clog the mind in its ascent to the supreme Source of Intelligence. In *prayer*, they make no use of words, but simply place themselves in the attitude of supplication, and exercise themselves in mental ejaculations.

The *Zoharites* are so called from their attachment to the book *Zohar*. They regard the letter of Scripture to be merely the shell, admitting of a mystical interpretation. They believe in a Trinity of persons in the Godhead, in the incarnation of God, once, in the person of Adam, and again to take place in the Messiah. They do not believe that Jerusalem will ever be rebuilt, or that the Messiah will be a temporal prince, but that God will be manifested in the flesh, and, in this state of humiliation, *atone*, not only for the sins of Jews, but for the sins of all who believe on him, whether Jew or Gentile.

The *Karaim*, or Karaites, are the most interesting and hopeful sect among the Jews. They inhabit principally the Crimea, but are found in Palestine also. As a sect, they claim a very high antiquity, and seem to have been, originally, the same as that of the Sadducees, though it is supposed by many, that the errors into which that sect had fallen in the time of our Saviour, and which formed no part of their primitive creed, were the cause of a subdivision,—a small party leaving the main body, and forming a new and protesting sect, of which the modern Karaites are the representatives.

The word *Karaim*, from *Kara* (Scripture), indicates the leading peculiarity of this sect. They are *Scripturists*. They utterly reject the Talmud, and rigidly appeal to the text of the Old Testament, as the exclusive and only infallible source and test of religious truth. They glory in their name, as one clearly and honorably expressive of the fundamental peculiarity of their creed. Yet they do not hesitate to consult the Talmud; in which, while they do not admit its binding authority over the conscience, they find some good things, mixed with much that they reject as bad.

Unlike the Talmudist, also, who chiefly applies the Cabalistic art to bring out mysterious or recondite meanings from the sacred text, the Karaites maintain that the Scripture is its own interpreter, and that the sense of a passage is to be determined by the grammatical meaning of the words, the scope and connection, and a comparison of parallel passages. They are free from many of the superstitions of other Jewish sects; and the standard and tone of morals among them are greatly superior to those of their brethren. They affirm that *their* ancestors had no share in the crucifixion of Jesus; and that they are, themselves, friendly to Christians, willing to listen, with candor and patience, to their arguments, and to treat them with respect. Except by the Talmudist Jews, who hold them in great abhorrence, they are held in high esteem by all classes and sects, as a high-minded, candid, and moral people.

In connection with an account of the Jews, we must not

omit a passing notice of their old enemies, the *Samaritans*. This sect, now dwindled to a few families, comprising not more than 150 or 200 souls, are found only in the city of Nâbulus, the ancient Shechem and Sychar. They are very strict in the performance of their worship. Four times a year, with great regularity, they go up to their Holy Place, on Mount Gerizim, near Nâbulus, for this purpose. Here they sacrifice the Passover; here is their "*Kibleh*," the sacred spot where, according to tradition, the tabernacle of the Lord, with the ark of the covenant, was pitched; and towards which they always turn their faces in prayer. They are proud of their ancient manuscripts, of which they have many, some many centuries old; and one, if their own testimony is reliable, nearly 3500 years of age. It is still as true as in the days of our Saviour, that "the Jews have no dealings with the Samaritans," the hatred between the two sects being as bitter as ever.

Before passing to the Christian sects of Syria, it is proper to say that there are several small associations of men in the country, which do not properly come under either of the three great divisions by which the people are commonly distinguished. Some of these are, doubtless, Pagans. The most common are the *Nowâr*, or *Gipsies*. Small bodies of this singular people are often found, roving from place to place, in every part of the land. The English name is supposed, by some, to be derived from Egypt; but what they believe, and what they are, except that they are everywhere despised as deceitful, thievish, and dangerous neighbors, it is very difficult to determine.

The different *Christian* sects of Syria and Palestine are supposed to embrace not far from half a million of souls. They are divided into Greeks, Greek Catholics, Maronites, Latins, Syrians, Syrian Catholics, Armenians, Armenian Catholics, Copts, Abyssinians, and Protestants. Of these eleven sects, the *Greeks* are about as numerous as the other ten combined. Twelve years ago they were reckoned, by our missionaries, at 240,000. Dr. Wilson, a distinguished Scotch missionary, has since reckoned them at not less than

345,000, a number greater, by more than 100,000, than the estimate of the American missionaries.

This body of nominal Christians are not Greeks, as some infer from their name. They are Arabs, and speak the Arabic language. They denominate themselves, "The Catholic and Apostolic Oriental church." Their worship is generally conducted in the Arabic language, though, on certain occasions, a portion of the service, and sometimes even the whole, is in Greek. The high clergy are Greeks by birth, and are rarely able to speak the Arabic fluently. Hence, when they officiate, it becomes almost a matter of necessity to employ the *Greek*.

The parish priests are generally selected from the ranks of the common people, the ceremony of ordination being their only qualification for their office. They marry, and, like other men, engage in the usual secular occupations of the country.

In Turkey in Asia, the Greek Church has four Patriarchates, having their seats at Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch, and Jerusalem. The two patriarchates in Syria and Palestine are *nominally* independent of the Patriarch of Constantinople, but *really*, to a great extent, under his control. The Patriarch of Antioch has under his jurisdiction eight bishoprics, viz. Beirût (which is the largest), Tripolis, 'Ak-kâr, Laodicea, Hamah, Hums, Saidanâya and Ma'lûla, and Tyre.

The Patriarchate of Jerusalem embraces the whole of Palestine, and also has under its jurisdiction eight bishoprics, viz. Nazareth, 'Akka, Lydda, Gaza, Sebaste, Nâbulus, Philadelphia, and Petra. The Patriarch himself resides at Constantinople, and never even visits his flock; while all the bishops of the Patriarchate, except the bishop of 'Akka, are shut up in the convents at Jerusalem, where they transact, under the general direction of the absent Patriarch, all the business of the Patriarchate.

The *Greek-Catholic Church*, now embracing from 30,000 to 40,000 souls, had its origin about one hundred and twenty years ago. Its adherents retain many of the peculiarities of

the Greek church from which they seceded. Their religious services are performed in the Arabic language. They observe the Oriental calendar, receive the sacrament of the Lord's supper in both kinds, as formerly, and their priests are allowed to marry. But, on the other hand, they acknowledge the supremacy of the Pope of Rome, and adopt some other peculiarities of the Roman church. They have their own Patriarch, who resides at Damascus, the sect being found chiefly in Damascus, Aleppo, Beirût, Sidon, and the villages of Lebanon. The high clergy, unlike those of the Greek church, are generally Arabs by birth, but educated at Rome. "They thus unite a natural attachment to their countrymen, with some degree of European cultivation;" one result of this is a decided superiority of the common people of the sect, in every respect, over those who still adhere to the Greek church. In intelligence, in enterprise, in wealth, and consequently in influence, they stand high in comparison with all other Christian sects around them. Our missionaries have generally found them more candid and more open to conviction than any others; and some of the most interesting and useful members of the Mission churches have come from their ranks.

The *Maronite Church* embraces not far from 200,000 souls, found chiefly in Lebanon, Aleppo, and Damascus. The Maronites are not Arabs, though they strongly resemble the Arabs in their general appearance, habits, and costume. They are the descendants of the ancient *Syrians*. Their ecclesiastical language is accordingly *Syriac*, though it is understood only by the few who are more learned than the mass. They speak the Arabic, and often write it in the Syriac character, under the name of Carshuneh. Their *name* is derived from their first bishop, who flourished in the seventh century. Of all papists, they have generally been regarded as the most thoroughly and fanatically papal. Yet, exclusive and bigoted as they are in their attachment to Rome, they have their own distinct ecclesiastical establishment, and also some usages not tolerated by the Papal church elsewhere. They have saints of their own; and

every candidate for the priesthood, not already under the vow of celibacy, is allowed to marry before ordination ; so that nearly all the parish priests are married men. They have many bishops, over whom is a Patriarch (an unmarried man), who styles himself "Patriarch of Antioch," but usually resides in the Convent of Kanôbîn, on Mount Lebanon. The mass of the Maronites, like the Greeks, are very ignorant ; but, for a select number, and especially for candidates for the office of priest, the Patriarch has a college at 'Ain Warkah, in Lebanon, which ranks higher than any other seminary of learning in Syria.

The *Latins* of Syria and Palestine are native Roman Catholics, of the European church. They are very few in number ; and are found principally in Jerusalem, Bethlehem, Nazareth, Jaffa, and St. John in the Desert. Their ecclesiastical relations connect them with the convents, and they are under the immediate supervision of the monks.

The *Syrian*, or *Jacobite* church embraces, in Syria, but a small number of persons ; and these are found chiefly in Damascus, and a few other cities and towns still further north. Like the Maronites, they have a Syrian origin, their church-service being in the Syriac language, though, like the Maronites, they also speak the Arabic. They are commonly known, in the country, by the simple name Suriân, i. e. Syrians, the name *Jacobite*, common among the Syrians of Mesopotamia, being rarely heard. Their Patriarch, Mar Ignatius, like the ecclesiastical head of the Maronites, is styled "Patriarch of Antioch," and resides at Deir Zaffrân, near Mardîn in Mesopotamia.

The *Syrian Catholics*, also few in number, are found in Aleppo, Damascus, Râsheiya, and some small villages in Mount Lebanon. But little is known of them beyond the general fact that they bear to the Syrian church the same relation which the Greek Catholics bear to the Greek church ; that is, they are papists who still retain some of the rites, and use the language, of the church from which they seceded.

The *Armenians* of Syria are, with few exceptions, Arme-

nians nationally, as well as in religious faith. An Arab, who has adopted the Armenian religion, is rarely found. Yet the Armenians, as a sect, have long existed in the country; and, as everywhere else, are an active, enterprising, and often wealthy, people. Their church and convent at Jerusalem are the richest in the country, and among the richest in the Eastern world. Though their number is small, they have considerable influence, and their own ecclesiastical establishment, at the head of which is a Patriarch, who is styled "Patriarch of Jerusalem."

The *Armenian Catholics* are a papal off-shoot from the ancient church, similar to those from the Greek and Syrian churches. They still retain many of the rites and ceremonies of the original church. Their Patriarch resides at Bzumâr, far up on the northern heights of Lebanon.

The *Coptic Christians* are very few in number, and are found only in Jerusalem, where they have a convent of considerable note, and a chapel in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. The Coptic church is the church of Egypt, there being there from 150,000 to 200,000 souls connected with that body. They are the descendants of the ancient Egyptians, and the Arabic word Copt, or *Kubt*, is supposed to be derived from the ancient Greek form of the name, Egypt. A peculiarity which distinguishes the Coptic from other Oriental churches, is the practice of circumcision. It is said, however, that they regard this more as a *civil* than a religious custom; and, from the fact that they also baptize, this seems probable.

The *Abyssinian Church*, like the Coptic, has a convent, and a few adherents in Jerusalem. They regard themselves as a branch of the Coptic church, which they imitate both in doctrine and discipline, though they far outstrip the Copts in absurd legends, superstitious ceremonies, and the worship of saints and angels. Pontius Pilate and his wife have, each, a place in the calendar of their saints; the former, because he washed his hands and declared himself innocent, when he condemned Jesus; and the latter, because she sent her husband the charge to have nothing to do with that

just person arraigned at his bar. Their worship is conducted in the ancient Ethiopic language, which, however, very few understand. Besides the rite of circumcision, they adopt some other peculiarities of the Jews, and many also of the surrounding pagan sects.

The last Christian sect it was proposed to notice, is the *Protestant*. Until within a few years, Protestants have not been recognized in Syria, Palestine, or in any part of Turkey, as a distinct body of Christians. They are, of course, few comparatively; but they are gradually increasing, from year to year; and this cannot, probably, be said of any other sect of any other name in the land. Besides the families of missionaries, and of English, Scotch, and German residents, they embrace the members of six or seven small churches gathered by missionaries from this country and Great Britain, and also native families here and there, which, though not connected with the churches as members, are associated, more or less intimately, with the members, and recognize the missionaries as their spiritual instructors and guides.

It may be added, that the Protestants of Syria and the Holy Land, few as they are in numbers, represent the Congregational, the Dutch Reformed, three branches of the Presbyterian, the Campbellite Baptist churches of the United States; Presbyterians of the Established and Free churches in Scotland and Ireland; Baptists and Episcopalians, high and low, from England; Lutherans from Prussia; and, probably, to some extent, many other sects from various Protestant lands.