

Prof. John Joseph: Selective or Objective

Published in Zinda Magazine, Vol X, Issue 36, Oct 20, 2004

In his article posted on Zinda magazine (October 18, 2004 issue), Prof. John Joseph accused this author of being "selective" when trying to prove a point. He claims that I was misleading the readers about our Assyrian ethnic identity and that the villages of Telkepe, Alqosh, Baghdeda, Bartella, etc. of northern Iraq were not Assyrian villages according to certain references that I have used.

Nothing in the publication world, whether a book, an article, or a piece of art, is objective. Every one in life has a mission and an agenda and we manifest this agenda in our work. So why does an Assyrian question the Assyrian identity? Do certain students after their graduation have certain obligations to institutions that assist them in obtaining their higher education?

I was very surprised from this sudden reappearance of Prof. Joseph on Assyrian Internet media (Zinda) after years of absence. Why would an Assyrian professor reappear only to respond to what an Assyrian nationalist would say in these troubled times and when Assyrians are trying to unite? Why would Prof. Joseph question that these towns and villages are Assyrian and based on what logic? Why does Joseph not question for example Yousuf Hurmiz Jammo (Bishop Sarhad Jammo's father) and his book "The Remains of Nineveh or the History of Telkaif"? Why does he not question Habib Hannona and his book "The Church of the East in the Nineveh Plain"? Why does he not question what these authors stated about Telkaif and other Catholic and Orthodox towns in northern Iraq and these towns Assyrian heritage?

I have stated in an earlier article that few historians had adopted a basic psychology technique, which teaches us that when looking for a mean to deny or question a certain crucial issue, a person needs simply to implant the factor of DOUBT in the mind of the vulnerable reader or listener. The establishment of this DOUBT is enough to create a disturbance in the thoughts of the members of that certain ethnic group, which weakens the thrust power of the community and its movement to defend itself. Prof. Joseph uses this method of implanting doubts about our ethnic identity being Assyrian through what he presents as an objective approach. Certain authors would question the modern Assyrian identity by providing certain favorite quotes of their choice, then after they have implanted that doubt in the readers' mind, they would say, however, there are those who agree that this group is ethnically Assyrian. They call this being objective.

I ask: Is John Joseph not being "selective" when he uses certain references he picks so carefully to put doubts in the readers' minds about modern Assyrian identity? Isn't he being "selective" when he questions the presence of Assyrians and equates the term "Suraye" with Syrian and Aramean and not with Assyrian by providing particular quotes to prove that claim? Why would an Assyrian write two or three books on Assyrians and in his books tries to question the modern Assyrian identity? Since he is expert in Middle East history, why does not he question the Kurdish claims for being Medes for example and devote a book on them?

Background on Joseph's Books

First, in his 1961 book “The Nestorians and Their Muslim Neighbors”, page ix, Joseph wrote that the name Assyrian did not appear before the 19th century, and in page 14 he attributed the emergence of this name to archaeological finds and Western missionaries who brought the name to the local people. And on the back cover of his 2000 revised edition of the above book, which he titled “The Modern Assyrians of the Middle East: Encounters with Western Christian Missions, Archaeologists, and Colonial Powers” it is stated: “When archaeologist Layard further publicized the historic minority [Joseph refers to the Aramaic-speaking Nestorians Christians] as ‘Assyrians’, the name acquired a new connotation when other forces at work in the region—religious, nationalistic, imperialistic—engaged these modern Assyrians in vagaries and manipulations in which they were outnumbered and outclassed.”. Here Joseph is implying that it was the archaeologist Layard who created the modern Assyrians in the 19th century. In addition, John Joseph wrote: “While the name Chaldeans was already, as we have seen, appropriated by those Nestorians who had embraced Roman Catholicism, the illustrious twin name ‘Assyrians’ was eventually adopted by the Nestorians as a name for themselves.”

Prof. Richard Frye in his article “Assyria and Syria: Synonyms” has shown, contrary to Joseph, that some people had used the term Syrian and others Assyrian even before the 19th century.

Joseph returned to discard the Assyrian population of the vast Assyrian empire, and accepts that migrants took over the empire when there was no decisive proof of such claim. There is no solid proof that the Assyrian Empire disintegrated from within because of any migration or prisoners policies, and that its population disappeared. Fact is that the empire fell after long resistance by the Assyrians, i.e. there were great numbers of loyal Assyrians to cause that resistance, unlike Babylon’s fall that took place with no resistance. A fact that proves that Assyria was the backbone of Babylonia during the first half of the first millennium B.C. and when Nineveh fell in 612 B.C., Babylon followed within only 73 years after a very short greatness. Secondly, all Assyrians were not soldiers that perished in the war; many were peasants who continued their lives after the Medes controlled Assyria. Joseph wrote: “... With a much larger Aramean population now under its rule, far removed from the Assyria homebase, the smaller, ethnically-Assyrian population could not resist aramization, a process that gradually transformed the cultural face of the empire, ‘leading to the Assyrians being outlived and absorbed.’”.

Prof. Joseph is not expert in ancient history; he is not an Assyriologist and his information here is wrong. The Assyrians at the time of the fall of Nineveh and the Empire had been speaking the Aramaic language for some 150 years, however, recent discoveries show that Assyrian Akkadian language and the cuneiform writing system was still in use well into Christianity. Who would use Assyrian Akkadian but Assyrians?

Later Joseph stated: “... Unlike the Assyrians, the Persians did not forget their own mother tongue, they maintained their national-linguistic identity, largely because their own Aramaic-speaking subjects did not predominate from within Persia as they did in the core region of Assyria, later known as Bait Aramaye—home of the Arameans. (With the advent of Islam, centuries after the Achaemenids, Sasanian Persians were also able to resist arabization; they liberally borrowed from the Arabic vocabulary and even adopted the Arabic script, but they were able to Persianize what they borrowed. In

the case of the Assyrians and other ethnicities aramization was total just as the absorption of the various other peoples would be, centuries later, through arabization.)". We need to remind Joseph that the modern Italians have abandoned their Latin language and script too. Would Joseph dare to argue with the present-day Italians that they are not the descendents of the ancient Romans? Furthermore, I have stated already that Assyrian Akkadian was still in use after the fall of the empire.

Joseph continues to confuse the reader in a very methodical way yet trying not to show himself as a blind antagonist, when he stated in another paragraph: "In the eighteenth century Assemani used "Assyrian" in reference to the Nestorians but with no implication that they were the descendants of the Assyrians. Assemani, according to Fiey, found a certain Assyrian descentance in all the peoples in the region: Jacobite, Nestorian, Sabaeans, Yezidis, and a great deal among the Kurds."

And then he continues to claim that the Nestorian Assyrians were Arameans and even more when he wrote: "Members of the Aramean community of Iraq, mostly Nestorian Christians, and many of them Persian converts who had held offices of trust under the Sassanians, now served the Arab administration." Joseph failed to stress on the issue that many missionaries have admitted that the Christians of the Mosul plain, Urmia region, and Hakkari Mountains have referred to themselves as "Surayeh," which we know today that it is the Christian version of Assurayeh or Ashurayeh, the Syriac equivalent for the English Assyrian. Again, it is Joseph's thought against many others.

The question here is: Why should we listen to what an expert in religion or a physician and missionary, who traveled to the Middle East, would say about the word "Suraye" and not consider the opinion of an Assyriologist like Prof. Simo Parpola or linguist like Prof. Edward Odisho for example who assert that "Suraye" meant simply Assyrians. Why is it that when an Assyrian nationalist chooses his quotes to prove the Assyrian continuity he is branded "selective"; however, when some one like John Joseph and his likes select quotes for their work, the work is not branded selective rather scholarly and objective?

Some Other Claims by Prof. Joseph

According to Mark Marcus, Prof. John Joseph made a presentation in an early 1980s MESA Conference in Chicago. In that conference, Joseph referred to Assyrians as Christian Kurds (<http://www.aina.org/bbs/index.cgi?read=26971>). He made many Assyrians angry during his presentation and was confronted by fellow Assyrians in the audience including Ashur Beth-Shlimon (<http://www.aina.org/bbs/index.cgi?read=26972>).

Prof. Joseph's Higher Education

James Petras reports that from the early 1950s, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) has intruded to a large degree into philanthropic foundations. Such foundations included the Ford Foundation (FF), which by the late 1950s, it possessed over \$3 billion in assets. The leaders of the Foundation were in total agreement with Washington's post-WWII projection of world power. Citing Saunders, Petras writes: "The CIA considers foundations such as Ford "The best and most plausible kind of funding cover" (Saunders 135). Petras continues to state that by 1954, John McCloy, the new president of the FF, epitomized imperial power by integrating the FF with CIA operations. Citing Saunders again, Petras writes that according to a former CIA operative, the Agency influenced many universities and

publishing houses (Petras, James. Paper titled "The Ford Foundation and the CIA: A documented case of philanthropic collaboration with the Secret Police." Posted December 15, 2001. <http://www.rebellion.org/petras/english/ford010102.htm>).

The FF is very selective in providing certain students and researchers from throughout the world with grants for advanced studies in American universities. John Joseph was one of the FF recruits and received grants for his education in the United States. According to Petras: "the FF imposes conditions such as the "professionalization" of academic personnel and "raising standards." In effect this translates into the promotion of social scientific work based on the assumptions, values and orientations of the U.S. empire; to have professionals de-linked from the class struggle and connected with pro-imperial U.S. academics and foundation functionaries supporting the neo- liberal model". This does not mean that the FF does not occasionally provide grants to individuals who might have conflict with U.S. foreign policies, yet seek academic research (Petras, James. Paper titled "The Ford Foundation and the CIA: A documented case of philanthropic collaboration with the Secret Police." Posted December 15, 2001. <http://www.rebellion.org/petras/english/ford010102.htm>).

So I ask: what is John Joseph's agenda?

Few Final Remarks

I want to thank Prof. Joseph for reading my articles. I want to add that whatever is in the articles about the Assyrian towns of northern Iraq have come from the references provided in each of those articles. Using the term Assyrian instead of Suraye, Chaldean, Nestorian, etc. is not something new. This is now a common knowledge and has been proven by many scholars. It is only regrettable that professor Joseph continues to live in isolation and refuses to look beyond his domain of old references provided by missionaries, physicians, and certain travelers, who were agents of Imperial Powers.

To comments on Prof. Joseph remarks, Xenophon's and Ainsworth's accounts in my articles were for example from Jammo and Hannon's books. If Prof. Joseph has an objection here, he should read those books and criticize their authors. Additionally, I need to bring to Prof. Joseph's attention that I did not refer to Patricia Crone and Michael Cook as "ANTI Assyrian," as he opted on his part to conclude. In fact, if Prof. Joseph had read the article much closer, he would have realized that it was to him that I was hinting of being Anti-Assyrian. There has been plenty of negative opinion due to the Old Testament and certain missionaries about the Assyrian history. When I find a bright note in a book, I will use it to make my point despite what other material that same book includes. We need to reconstruct the Assyrian history that some authors have corrupted. In doing so, we need all the positive points that we can collect. Those like Joseph can get busy publicizing the negative and questionable material.

Lastly but not least, John Joseph states that he is not interested in my personal opinion. That is strange because if he's not, why then is he reading my articles. On the other hand, I thank Joseph for giving my work the attention to the degree which he analyzes them.