

## **The Assyrian Cause and the Modern Aramean Thorn**

By Fred Aprim  
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The world has witnessed a surge in articles, papers, and presentations by renowned scholars, linguists, human right activists, and world politicians about the Assyrians. Such include Prof. Simo Parpola<sup>1</sup>, Prof. Edward Odisho<sup>2</sup>, Prof. Eden Naby<sup>3</sup>, Nina Shea<sup>4</sup> (Freedom House's Center for Religious Freedom), Willy Fautre<sup>5</sup> (Human Rights Without Frontiers), Dr. Paul Marshall<sup>6</sup> (Freedom House's Center for Religious Freedom) and many others who are defending the Assyrian continuity or, and, national quest and rights.

The Assyrians have been considerably visible lately in the world media, especially since the liberation of Iraq and the participation of Assyrians (Chaldo-Assyrians) in the Iraqi Governing Council, Interim Iraqi Government, and finally in the Interim Iraqi National Assembly (Parliament) and are participating with many groups in the planned January 30<sup>th</sup>, 2005 Iraqi elections.

The Assyrians' name and plight has been exclusively discussed on an international level and by leaders of powerful states. Examples are Tony Blair's letter to the al-Ahram Egyptian Newspaper that was published in the Guardian Unlimited of 3/30/2003 and then President Bush's mention of the Assyrians in his speech on 4/28/2003, in Dearborn, Michigan. World's governments and legislative institutions have addressed the Assyrians' situation and their struggle, plight and rights. First, on June 24, 2003, California State Assembly passed the "Assyrians in Iraq" Resolution AJR 31. Then on May 3, 2004, Ms. Eija-Riitta Korhola, MEP (Member of Parliament) from Finland, submitted a question regarding the situation of the Chaldo-Assyrians in Iraq to the European Commission. Additionally, November 22-23, 2004, Dr. Matay Arsan, M.D., representing the Assyrian Academic Society, made a speech at the European Parliament in Brussels, speaking about the question of the Assyrians in relation to the accession of Turkey to the European Union. On December 6, 2004, Bert Koenders, member of the Dutch Parliament, sent a letter to the Dutch Minister of Foreign Relations, Mr. B. Bot in reference to situation of the Assyrians in Iraq. Lastly, but not least, on December 7, 2004, Early Day Motion (EDM) Number 342, tabled by Stephen Pound MP, and entitled "Christian Community in Iraq" was tabled in British House of Commence. The following day, December 8, 2004, a 90 minutes "Adjournment Debate" was convened in the Westminster Hall at the House of Commons to address the suffering and protection of Chaldo-Assyrians.

One might ask, if the oppressed Assyrians are finally appearing on the world scene, as they deserve so, shouldn't all those who cherish democracy, freedom, liberty, and justice assist them? Perhaps so, but region's complexity dictates that the road ahead is neither safe nor easy. Before proceeding, one important point needs to be kept in mind and that is since history does has a chance to play a role is setting policy, historians tempt to politicize the subject and corrupt it. Understanding this fact makes it easier to understand why in certain times historians and scholars say what they say. In many circumstances, they do not write for the sake of history but to serve a special agenda.

### **The Rise of Controversy and Conflict**

Few years ago, the Chaldean issue arose and the separation of Chaldeans and Assyrians was the first major obstacle initiated by the leadership of Barazani and the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and other groups. These groups have major stake in assuring that this separation materializes in order to undermine Assyrian rights in north of Iraq in particular, a region that Kurds have planned to dominate and control. However, the leadership in Iraq was vigilant and contained the problem and the true nationalists from both groups worked hard to reach a political understanding and compromise that kept the one people together through the adaptation of the political Chaldo-Assyrian name. Of course, there is a drive in the Diaspora as well to bring the rebinding of the two separated communities<sup>7</sup> to reality. Many of those who were part of the two extreme sides among the Assyrians and Chaldeans understand today the urgency of a reunion to face the challenges facing the Syriac-speaking Christians in Iraq.

Today, we seem to be facing with another danger and that is of the so-called Arameans. This is important as Turkey's admission to the European Union is being debated. This admission is pre-conditioned with

several key issues. One of these issues is Turkey's treatment of what is identified as its minorities, including the Suryoyo Assyrians of southeastern and Tur-Abdin regions. Some Assyrians have begun to return to their homes and they are going to make a difference in future Turkey. The Arameans are sensing that political affairs in the Middle East, especially in Iraq and Turkey, are slipping through their fingers. Of course, Arameanism extracts its strength mainly from Europe, lesser degree from presence in the United States, and activities in Lebanon. The Arameans want a share of this new political scene or perhaps they are seeking something completely different.

### **The Faces of Deception and Trouble**

The issue of Arameans is being extensively brought to the front in order to disturb the Assyrian national surge explained above. Of course, the Aramean movement is some 40 years old, but is gaining some momentum much recently. Several publications have been surfacing here and there defending the Aramean survival in Iraq and Turkey despite the fact that at no time in Iraq modern history an Aramean issue was ever contemplated.

Professor Joseph has come out from his hibernation and ready to defend his ever-old theories and claims, which evolved around one main point. He claims a total Aramization of the ancient Assyrians and a hint that a link between ancient Assyrians and the modern ones was absent. Joseph makes sure to keep his claims alive as he returned to refurbish his old book of 1961 and giving it a new face-lift. The Aramean movement had found in Sebastian Brock and John Joseph few of their best defenders. Joseph started his revival with an article questioning and in a way rejecting this writer's series of articles published in Zinda lately about the Assyrian heritage of certain north of Iraq villages (Read Zinda Magazine: October 18, 2004, issue 35). While Joseph does not want to go on with a back and forth debate with this writer, other sources channel or propagate Joseph's theories. Furthermore, certain writers on the Internet have been involved in some very questionable discussions that are pure heresy and not beneficial to the Assyrian people. The following examples will suffice to make my point:

1. Johny Messo: Johnny Messo is a well-known Aramean from the Netherlands. He has many articles undermining the Assyrian presence (Read Zinda Magazine: November 2, 2004, issue 40). His ideology is that of his role model John Joseph. His problem, as explained by Hanna Hajjar, an Assyrian activist, is that he hates Assyrians more than he loves the Arameans. Therefore, it is expected that a man like him dedicate his time to the liberation of "Aram." However, because of this great hate, he is occupied with how to damage the Assyrian cause; like a dog barking at the wrong tree.
2. Other examples: Furthermore, more recently, the French director Robert Alaux had completed shooting a documentary about the Christian Assyrians of Iraq. While the documentary does benefit the Assyrians to a certain degree for the information it presents, still, he had opted for some reason to insert the title "The Last Arameans" in the title in line with this Aramean propaganda and with the influence from Prof. Sebastian Brock. Of course, when the film was debuted in Beirut lately, Brock was among the attendees. In addition, the Gorgias Press published a new book titled "The Forgotten Genocide: Eastern Christians, The Last Arameans" by Sebastien de Courtois and translated by Vincent Aurora. I wonder why insert the title Aramean in the title of the book? This I ask when all the early 20<sup>th</sup> century documents, letters, and charts related to World War I genocide provided throughout the book, refer to our people as "les Syriens", "anciens Syriens", "la ancienne nation Syrienne", "la nation Syrienne ancienne Orthodoxe", "Syrienne", "Syrians (Syriacs)", "Assyrien", "ancienne descendante de la race Assyrienne", "Jacobites", "Nestorians", "Chaldeans", "Christians", "Assyro-Chaldeans (Assyro-Chaldeans)", and Assyrians. Our people were never referred to as "Arameans" in any of those documents, letters, or charts. However, the influence of Sebastian Brock was left again in the historical introduction section. In other places, the English word Syrian Christians or Syrian people (Arabic Suryan) have been translated to Syriacs. Authors cannot forge and falsify documents but they can give their book any title they wish and force their opinion on the reader. It is a political maneuver to bring the so-called Aramean people and question to the front.

## **The Absence of Reason and Logic**

Why do some scholars translate the English designation Syrian Christians (Arabic Suryan) to Arameans? Of course, here by the word Syrian I am not referring to the modern citizens of the Syrian Arab Republic (Syria); however, the much older English term Syrian (Suryaye/Suryoyo) given to the Syriac-speaking Christians who were living in a region divided only in the 20<sup>th</sup> century among Iran, Iraq, Turkey, Syria, Jordan, and Lebanon. What is closer and more logical to accept, the word Syrian that is originated and derived from Assyrian or being originated from Aramean? What does commonsense, if not for anything else, tell us? Do scholars as John Joseph and Sebastian Brock listen to logic and commonsense? In the past 2000 years of Christianity (excluding the 20<sup>th</sup> century where nationalism in the Middle East began to blossom), how many churches, patriarchs, or bishops were titled the Aramean church, Aramean patriarch, or Aramean bishop? I know few people who have met Joseph and tried to reason with him; however, he, and as I was told, reflected his stubbornness, and refused. He is interested in presenting his point of view only and unwilling to listen to others even if these others were using logic and reason.

It is fair to say that Joseph's arguments denying Assyrian continuity in today's age of illumination are of little value to the majority of the Assyrians. Unfortunately, many scholars use Joseph as reference because of two reasons. First, they do not know any better. The second is that there is not that many modern writers who have written about the Syriac-speaking Christians and their relation with the Middle East Moslem world. What I need to say is that the use of Joseph as reference by scholars does not mean that Joseph's points of view are all factual. Prof. Odisho states: "Joseph's logic in the denial is exclusively based on historical events in their absolute sense and their verbatim wording without subjecting those events and their wording to a dialectic and dynamic interpretation; history is not the exclusive making of isolated decontextualized events or statements." Odisho continues to state: "His [Joseph's] very narrow perspective and his exclusive history-based conceptualization of the problem impose on him a tunnel vision which eliminates very important and relevant information lying in the periphery of the overall vision span."

Joseph fails to address the linguistic and cultural aspects of Assyrian society in a fair and scientific manner. He fails in using any logic and commonsense as well. He makes unforgiving mistakes such as assuming that the Assyrian Akkadian language and script died completely as the Assyrians adopted the Aramaic. Thus, this contributed to the Aramization of the Assyrians. I have showed elsewhere (Zinda Magazine: August 26, 2003, issue 23) that Akkadian remained with the Assyrians into Christianity; contrary to what Joseph had continuously implied. Joseph inflates the influence of Arameans, through their language. However, many scholars have proven that the Aramaic language borrowed its alphabet from the Phoenicians; meaning it was not theirs to start with. If so, how did this primitive Aramean society overcome the sophisticated Assyrian civilization? Furthermore, where did the Phoenicians get their alphabet from? Alphabet did not come from nowhere; it must have evolved from previous writing systems. Hanna Hajjar argues that the Ugaritic Cuneiform is the link between the Phoenician alphabet and Akkadian and thus Sumerian Cuneiform. Additionally, where is the logic in Joseph's claims? Odisho states if Joseph's claims are true then the Irish of today could not have justifiable reasons to be of the Irish of yesteryears because they switched from Celtic to English and the modern Egyptians too since they switched from ancient Coptic to Arabic. Could he deny the ethnic heritage of modern Native Americans because they use English today? Where is the logic in Joseph's argument? Why does not he try to apply his argument on these other examples. I would be very interested in reading about the reviews he will get from scholars from Ireland and Egypt. Odisho wonders, why is it that these groups could trace their background to their ancient corresponding people, however, the Assyrians who switched from Assyrian Akkadian to Aramaic through Aramaic-Assyrian koiné could not? Why are we seeing such bias on Joseph's part and those in his camp?

## **Final Remarks**

I think that Prof. Joseph is obligated to apologize to the Assyrian people for the damage he has caused all these years. Any person in Joseph's shoes and in his 80s should feel such obligation if for no reason at all then at least for the memory of his parents, who grew up as Assyrians. The problem with Joseph is that he is not willing to listen to logic and commonsense. He is unwilling to consider most of the recent findings by Assyriologists. He is stuck with what few missionaries and travelers had stated over a century ago, even

when these missionaries and travelers were not experts in Assyrian history. While science and knowledge is traveling at amazing speed and enlightening us with different discoveries, Joseph remains in his cocoon with the old theories of 150 years ago. I find that strange in a person who claims to be a scholar and objective.

The Aramean cause, if there is one, should relate to Syria since whatever history the Arameans exclusively had in the past was based in their little kingdoms run by powerful families in Damascus and other localities in Syria. However, in Syria, almost the entire Aramean community that prided itself through centuries with its Aramaic language has been Arabized today and it is safe to state that in Syria it is a Christian Arab community. The question is, why are the Arameans and those sympathizing with them intruding themselves on Iraqi affairs today?

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<sup>1</sup> Parpola, Simo. Paper titled "National and Ethnic Identity in the Neo-Assyrian Empire and Assyrian Identity in Post-Empire Times". In *Journal of Assyrian Academic Studies*. Vol. 18, No. 2, 2004. Chicago.

<sup>2</sup> Odisho, Edward Y. Paper titled "Bilingualism: A Salient and Dynamic Feature of Ancient Civilizations." In *Mediterranean language Review*. Edited by Marcel Erdal, Warner Arnold, Victor Friedman, Johannes Niehoff-Panagiotidis with the editorial assistance of Ingeborg Hauenschield. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2002.

<sup>3</sup> Naby, Eden.

<sup>4</sup> Nina Shea. Article titled "Canary in a Coal Mine: Iraq's Future as a Tolerant, Democratic Nation is at Stake". October 14, 2004. Posted at (<http://www.nationalreview.com/comment/she200410140830.asp>)

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.hrwf.net/html/2004IraqRelfreee.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> Marshal, Paul. On October 6, 2004, Dr. Paul Marshall, senior fellow of Freedom House's Center for Religious Freedom, testified before the House International Relations Committee, on the State Department's Country Report on Religious Freedom. In his Iraq part, Dr. Marshall spoke of growing evidence of ethnic cleansing against native Chaldo-Assyrian Christians in Iraq.

<sup>7</sup> The separation of Chaldeans from the Church of the East (Nestorians) finds roots in 1552; however, in modern Iraq the complete separation occurred officially in 1830 when the Chaldean Catholic Church was formally established and its own patriarch consecrated.