From Ancient to Modern Assyrians: A Continuity in History

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Until last century, the most popular image in the west representing the ancient Mesopotamians was the picture of the half ruined mythical Tower of Babel destroyed by God when allegedly mankind rose to challenge his authority, or the Assyrian Winged Bull at the British and Louver Museums or Byron's poem that described "the Assyrian who came down like the wolf on the fold, And how his cohorts were gleaming in purple and gold".

Many modern historians took these images and presumed that the ancient Assyrian and Babylonian civilizations perished completely with the fall of the Assyrian or Babylonian Empires. Others, with malice or political intent, tried hard to distort the history of Assyrians, questioned any connection between modern and ancient Assyrians, presented many misconceptions about the Assyrians and portrayed them as blood thirsty people.

Therefore, I felt an urgency to address these matters. My objection was not to write a book per se, but to provide as many historical references as possible to challenge those who question the continuation of Assyrian civilization and people or those who misrepresent or spread misconceptions and myths about the Assyrians and their history.

Allow me to address few of such misconceptions or myths:

Myth No. 1:

The present-day name, Assyrian, is of modern invention that was created by the British missionaries in the mid 19th century.

How often have we heard this myth?

To challenge this myth, let me say that the Assyrians were mentioned throughout the history. Of course, it is not expected that Arabs refer to our people by the English name Assyrian because they use the Arabic word Ashuri, the same with Persians. Meanwhile, the Armenians use the word Asori, the Turks use Asurlar and the Russians use Aissors. We, on the other side, use Suraye (Suroyo) or Athuraye (Athuroryo). Few argue that Suraya is not derived from Assyrian but from Sur. The latest discovery of the rock dated 800 B.C. in southeast Turkish region of Adana with the two languages: Phoenician and Luvian (Hittite) ends that discussion. Archaeologists translated the inscriptions of the rock lately. The inscriptions are by the local king Urikki who describes his relations with the Assyrian empire. The Hittite inscription refers to Assyrians through the name Assur, while the Phoenician inscription refers to Assyrians as Sur. This means clearly that Sur and subsequently Suraya came from and is the same as Assur and did not come from the Lebanese city Sur as few claim.

The lack of references to Assyrians in Western literature is because the Assyrians lost connection with the West almost completely since the Roman-Persian wars. The Assyrians were isolated from Europe for many centuries.

The Tenth Century scholar and bookseller Abu al-Faraj Muhammad ibn Ishaq al-Nadim mentions the Assyrians. In his catalogue or index titled *Fihrist al-Nadim*, he commented on books and scripts belonging to many peoples at the time. Al-Nadim gives a definition of the word *Ashuriyun* (Arabic for Assyrian) as such: *"Their master and chief is named Ibn Siqtiri ibn Ashuri. They collect revenues and profits. In some things they agree with the Jews and about other things they disagree with them. They appear to be a sect of Jesus"*.

The Russian archives include many references to Assyrians. One letter dated May 26, 1784 from Colonel Stepan D. Burnashev, who was in charge of the Russian troops in Tbilisi, Georgia to General Paul S. Potemkin, commander of the Russian forces. In the letter, Burnashev writes: "*Ilia, the son of the former leader of the Assyrian people, who are currently living in the land of the Khan of Urumiye, is seeking to save his people from the yoke of the Muslims. He has asked Erekle to forward his petition to me. He requests that Her Majesty, Empress Catherine, put his people under Her protection. There are 100 villages inhabited by Assyrians in the domain of the khan of Urumiye. In addition, some 20,000 families reside within the borders of Turkey. They are led by a bishop and also request that Russia save them from the Turks."*

The above examples show that Assyrians were mentioned before the 19th century, contrary to what certain historians or writers claim.

Myth No. 2:

With the collapse of Nineveh in 612 B.C., the Assyrians were wiped out and disappeared and their cities were never mentioned again until the 19th century when Layard and Botta rediscovered them.

To challenge this myth, I would like to say that the collapse of an empire or a city-state and their capital cities does not mean the disappearance of their citizens. Jerusalem was completely destroyed by the Romans in A.D. 70; however, the Jews did not disappear. In A.D. 410, Rome was sacked and destroyed by the *Barbarians* of Central Europe; however, the Romans did not disappear. Why are the Assyrians an exception?

Furthermore, many historical accounts prove the presence of Assyrian cities throughout Christianity and Islam, cities that were presumably destroyed and wiped out.

Bishop Toma bar Yacoub, better known as Thomas of Marga, was born in the Ninth century. He documented the histories and stories of holy men and monks. In his documentation, Thomas of Marga mentions of a most noble Mar Hasan, the governor of Adiabene and Athor. And in the biography of the Church of the East regarding Patriarch

Yab-Alaha III (1282–1317), we read about a list of bishops, such as the Bishop of Mosul and Athur. Furthermore, in the chronology of Metropolitan Elia of Nisibin (A.D. 1019) it is recorded that in the Greek Year 935 (A.D. 624) the Jacobites gathered and consecrated Marootha as the first metropolitan of Tikrit at the Monastery of Mar Mattai in the country of Nineveh.

These examples refute the myth that Assyrian cities or region were forgotten.

Myth No. 3:

When Assyrians adopted Aramaic, they lost their Assyrian Akkadian language, thus the real Assyrians lost connection to their ancient roots.

To challenge this myth, I want to assert that the Assyrian Akkadian language and cuneiform for example remained in use centuries after the fall of the Assyrian Empire and into the Christian era. There are Assyrian cuneiform texts found in the Third century A.D. more than 800 years after the Fall of Nineveh and about 1000 years after Assyrians adopted Aramaic. Furthermore, when the Assyrians adopted Aramaic Alphabet around 750 B.C., it remained with them in one form or another to this date.

Let us consider these typical ancient Assyrian Akkadian terms that have survived the fall of the empire and continued in use until today. Such words include:

- a) Months names: Kanon (Kanunu), Adar (Adaru), Nisan (Nissanu), etc
- b) Numbers, such as khamishtu (five); eshirtu (ten); alapu (thousand), etc
- c) Body parts such as: *inu* (eye); *šaptu* (lip); *muhhu* (brain); *libbu* (heart); *birku* (knee), etc
- d) Other general words including *kalbu* (dog); *naru* (river); *šumu* (name); *bitu* (house), etc

Therefore, Assyrian Akkadian language did not die out and the modern Syriac/Aramaic language is related to, and a continuation of, the ancient Assyrian Akkadian language.

Prof. William Wright states: "We speak as we were taught by our fathers and mothers, who were in their turn trained by a preceding generation. This process of transmission is always, and necessarily, more or less imperfect. Hence language is always undergoing a process of modification, partaking of the nature both of decay and of growth".

The transformation from Akkadian to Syriac through the Aramaic occurred in a span of some ten centuries. It was gradual and the Assyrians adapted to developments and modifications. It is like the transformation from Latin to modern Italian. Can we claim today that modern Italians are not descendents of the people of millennia earlier because they dropped Latin? Can anybody deny that at least part of modern Egyptians are descendents of ancient Egyptians? Can anybody deny this right simply because modern

Egyptians, for example, use Arabic and Coptic languages while those of ancient times used an ancient Egyptian language and the Hieroglyphic signs?

Myth No. 4:

Assyrians have not used typical Assyrian names like Ashur and Sargon and that it was only in the last century or so that they start using such names when nationalism spread among them.

To challenge this myth, we could strongly argue that names such as Ashur and Sargon were used well into Christianity and many documents prove that. For example, a beema (plaque) unearthed lately in Syria was dated back to the 7th century. On the plaque, the name of a family that helped in building a church is documented. One member in that family has the name of Otal bar Sargon.

Klaus Beyer in his German book "Aramaic Inscriptions in Ashur, Hatra, and other Mesopotamian Regions" published many Aramaic inscriptions dating between 44 B.C. and A.D. 238. Names such as *Assor* (Assur, Ashur), *Assor(a)hedden* (Assarhaddon), and *Assor alaha* (god Ashur) are repeatedly appearing in inscriptions dating even to the first quarters of the third century of the Christian era.

Therefore, this myth does not stand as well.

Important issues for Consideration

- 1. **Confusing titles**: The various confusing terms used by the Assyrians or by their neighbors in reference to the Assyrians, such as Nestorians, Chaldeans, Jacobites, Suryan, Syrian, Ashur, Athur, Atour, Suraye, Suryaye, etc., added to our problems when it was meant to reflect our rich history. It is important to understand what each name represents, because educated people are very unlikely to be misled and it is important to link these names to Assyrians. For example, the word Ashur (Akkadian Assur) was pronounced later Atur (Atour) as the Akkadian "Sh" switched to "T" in later Aramaic (Kaufman 1974, 19). The different pronunciation of Ashur throughout the centuries is common knowledge among linguists specializing in Semitic languages.
- 2. Kurds and Kurdistan: There is great disagreement among scholar about the origin of Kurds. However, we know that Kurds historically occupied the region of Zagros Mountains that extends from around Kermanshah in western Iran to southern Armenia through Hakkari Mountains in Turkey. The Kurds have slowly expanded to take over Assyrian historic regions. For example, northern Iraq was always known as Assyria (Athur) in antiquity. In A.D. 115 Emperor Trajan occupied the region and became part of Roman Empire and he called it Assyria. Most recently northern Iraq was known as Mosul Vilayet during the roughly 400 years of Ottoman rule and finally Mosul and Nineveh Governorates in modern

Iraq history. Northern Iraq and specifically Mosul were never known as Kurdistan. There never existed a kingdom, state, or political region known as Kurdistan. When we allow writers to constantly refer to Assyria as Kurdistan, we are allowing history to be corrupted. Kurds in the last 200 years have slowly moved and occupied Assyrian Christian regions such as Diyar Bakir, Mardin, Mosul, Urmia etc. and they have become a majority when they were not earlier.

Let me give you couple of examples. 19th century travelers estimated the population of Diyar Bakir at 30,000 to 40,000, with one-third Christian. Today Diyar Bakir has no Christians and is predominantly a Kurdish town. In 1932, Mosul had about 111,000 Christians; 40,000 Yezidis; 80,000 Arabs; 16,000 Shabak; 80,000 Kurds, and other smaller groups. Consequently, the Kurdish population was less than that of the Assyrians. Today, Kurds claim that Mosul is a Kurdish city. How did they do it? Through repeating a myth, because when one continues to repeat a lie without challenge, that lie becomes history. Of course, forced demographic change helps in that process.

- 3. The So-called ancient Assyrian cruelty. To single out Assyrians as cruel is unfair and bias since cruelty has accompanied mankind since the very moment that mankind was created. All nations are cruel during times of war whether ancient or modern. Could we say that the Americans are cruel people because the U.S. dropped the atomic bomb on Hiroshima and Nagazaki killing instantly over 100,000 and was the cause for the suffering of thousands more for decades to come? Was Moses, God's man, not cruel when he ordered his men to kill all enemy men, boys, and non-virgin women and save only the virgins as wives when his people were involved in war (Numbers 31: 8-18)? Was the action of Jews' filling of a Church in Najran (today in Saudi Arabia) with 2000 Jacobite Survani Christians, including priests, deacons, readers, etc. and piling wood around the church and burning them alive inside a church not cruel? If we compare these actions to those of the Assyrians one could see the unfairness by certain writers. We read from manuscripts that the Assyrian kings asked their enemies to surrender before a war in order to avoid bloodshed, and how women and children prisoners of war were carried in a humane way on carts. Does that reflect cruelty? The Assyrians were singled out in modern literature because they depicted cruelty in their art and displayed them on their walls for all to see as a method of deterrence, while other nations hide and cover their cruel acts. The Assyrians did this for a good purpose; they wanted to install fear in the minds of the kings who visited Nineveh so they would think twice before contemplating with the thought of rebellion against Assyrian rule.
- 4. **Governments Policies**: Middle Eastern governments succeeded in applying the policy of "divide and conquer" on the Assyrians. They used one Christian denomination against the other and used certain individuals to undermine the aspirations of the community at large. Therefore, instead of investing time in bringing our cause to the attention of the outside world, Assyrians have been busy arguing among themselves. Furthermore, the indoctrination (brain washing) of

the Assyrian children in the Middle Eastern schools have contributed to this confusion among many Assyrians about their history. Arabization, Turkification, and most recently Kurdification policies have done great damage. We must undo that damage through education.

- 5. Islam and its Effect: One could argue that Islam in fact helped protect Assyrians identity, while negatively impacting their religious character. Islam brought up the phenomenon of "Moslem umma" or Moslem nation. The laws, taxes, rights, etc. applied on Moslems and non-Moslems were different, thus, the two communities were treated differently. It was this structure that kept contacts between the Moslems and the Assyrian and Armenian Christian communities very limited throughout the centuries and left the two Moslem and Christian communities sharply divided until this very day. Louise Sweet in her book "Peoples and Cultures of the Middle East" points to the fact that: *"The Armenian communities remain unassimilated, as also did the Assyrians"*. Of course, today, Islam is being politicized and that is what makes it more dangerous.
- 6. **Cultural continuity:** This is very important and I will spend more time here. Assyrians became Christians in the First century and have continued to remain so until this very day. However, the complete switch from the ancient Assyrian religion to Christianity did not occur over night; it took almost seven centuries for the majority of Assyrians to convert. Many of these Christians converted to Islam and were lost forever. Historical references and archeology show that many Assyrians continued to worship god Ashur and other ancient Assyrian deities in northern Mesopotamia (Beth Nahrain) until the 7th century of the Christian era.

We must understand that Assyrian religion was not pagan, rather monotheistic and all the diverse deities were simply being conceived of as powers, aspects, qualities, or attributes of Ashur, the National God (Parpola 1997). Therefore, it came naturally for Assyrians to accept Christianity.

The 2000 years of uncontested continuity of Assyrian Christianity is very important, but this religious continuation has roots in antiquity.

"Ma'amoodeeta" (Baptism), is a religious process by which one cleanses his or her sins. This practice has ancient roots in the form of sprinkling water in the path of god Tammuz. This tradition was part of the Akitu Festival along with celebrating the freedom of Marduk in Babylon or Ashur in Nineveh. Ancient Assyrians would sprinkle each other with water to wash away their sins before welcoming god Tammuz after his liberation from goddess of death. We know that Akitu Festival was celebrated throughout Mesopotamia until the Greek era and perhaps much later. (Bidmead, 2004. p. 169). The Syriac-speaking Churches commemorate this day today and calls it Nusardel with special prayers. Afterwards Assyrians hit the streets and sprinkle water on each other. During the Akitu ceremonies, the temples distributed meat and other food to members of the community (Dardamayev). This tradition continues today in what is known as "dokhrana" (offerings).

Today, in the Assyrian villages, the Assyrians would gather their children in pairs of brides and grooms. These children would visit every house in the village, where they would be offered different sweets. Later, they would gather to share a special meal made for the occasion. This tradition had its roots also in the ancient Assyrian/Babylonian Akitu Festival. This feast is known today as "Kalu D'Soulaqa" (the Bride of Ascension). I understand that certain references date this back to the massacres of Tamerlane and how Assyrian women dressed in white and helped Assyrian men to defend themselves. Both traditions have their importance.

Furthermore, to celebrate the coming of spring in Assyrian villages today, girls go out to the prairies, gather bunches of flowers and herbs (Diqna d' Nisan), and suspend them from their house's ceilings. This has ancient roots as well.

The point is that the Assyrian Christians of today did not come fully blossomed like an artificial flower in a vacuumed glass ball; they were the same people who earlier worshiped god Ashur. In the transformation from their religion to Christianity, the Assyrians did not change many habits or customs fundamentally. If one studies the Assyrian prophecy corpus, published first in 1875 by George Smith under "addresses of encouragement to Esarhaddon" (and referred to as the oracles) we would see amazing parallels between the Old Testament and the Assyrian prophecies. These prophecies have tight links to the cult of Ishtar, Assyrian royal ideology, mythology, and iconography, and thus represent genuinely Mesopotamian phenomenon.

It is just fitting to refer to Oracle 3.3 that describes a scene reminiscent of Jesus' Last Supper. Goddess Ishtar invites the gods, her fathers, and brothers, to a covenant meal, in which she addresses them as such: "You will go to your cities and districts, eat bread and forget this covenant. But when you drink from this water, you will remember me and keep this covenant which I have made on behalf of Esarhaddon."

The Creation, i.e. the story of Paradise of Eden, Adam and Eve, and the curse of death have Sumerian parallels in the Dilmun poem (Kramer, 1981, p. 141) or in the Mesopotamian Atra-hasis epic. The creation of man was being told 1,500 years before Mesopotamia sank under the flood of Alexander and Hellenism and the epic was buried for long until some related Hebrew traditions worked into the Book of Genesis and a synopsis of material by Berossus, the Babylonian priest, put into Greek. (Lambert and Millard, 1999). There is also the seven tablets that formed the series designated as Enuma Elish (meaning When Above) that describes the creation of the gods, the heaven and earth, the seasons, and all human life. (Schrader, 1888. p.3 and Bidmead, 2004. p. 64).

The sanctity of the 7th day of creation in Genesis is another example. The Egyptians and Greeks did not know the week by 7 days, rather 10 days. Romans before Christ had the week for 8 days. Making a week of 7 days was a Mesopotamian institution. The Jews

used it while in captivity in Babylon and gave it later to the Arabs. And in writing the Old Testament, the Jews kept the holiness of the 7th day. The 7th day was sacred to Marduk (as well as the 14th, 21st, and 28th days to other gods). It was regarded as "an evil day" where the ruler did not change his garments or mount a chariot; it was designated as "um nuh libbii," meaning "the day of the resting of the heart" or 'the rest day'. (Schrader, 1888. pp.19-20) What does Genesis say that God did on the 7th day? He rested.

The story of Moses (Exodus chapter 2) (lived in late 13th and early 12th century B.C.) being left in the ark (basket) by the Nile river's shore and then being found by a daughter of Pharaoh and raised as royalty through his real mother has similarity to the earlier story of King Sargon I of Akkad (2371 - 2316 B.C.).

One version of the story of the Deluge (Flood) existed in Mesopotamia as early as 2000 B.C. Its similarities with Noah's Bible account of the Flood are amazing.

The following story comes from King Ashurbanipal's library at Nineveh. It goes as such:

This story is about a king called Utnapishtim. One day the god Enlil decids to destroy all the people on Earth with a great flood. Another god, Ea, warns Utnapishtim. He tells him to tear down his reed house and to build a boat and take his family, the animals and all the craftsmen on board. Adad, another god, caused a great storm. It sounded like a battle going on in heaven. Rain poured down for seven days and seven nights. Then it stopped. Utnapishtim looked out and saw nothing but water. He thought everything had been destroyed and he wept. Then the water began to go down and he sent out a dove to see if there was any dry land. The bird couldn't find anywhere to perch so it came back. But when he sent out a raven it didn't come back. Utnapishtim knew that the water must have gone down and it was safe to come out of the boat.

Utnapishtim was so happy that he made a sacrifice to the gods. At first Enlil was angry that some humans had survived, but the goddess Ishtar told him to be merciful. She, Ishtar, put her necklace in the sky (similar to the rainbow in the Bible story) to show that the gods would never send such a flood again. (Read Lorna Oakes. The Assyrians Activity Book, The British Museum) and (Samuel Noah Kramer. History Begins at Sumer: Thirty-Nine Firsts in Recorded History. Third revised edition 1981. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1956. p. 148)

The Mesopotamian version of the "Epic of Gilgamesh," which is the first account of a superhero, pre-dates the Bible by about 2,000 years with its mention of a great flood to rid earth of humankind. Gilgamesh is also the first account of the themes found in the Adam and Eve story, the serpent responsible for the loss of immortality, and a paradise regained, pre-dating the Christian concept of heaven.

Of course, the Gilgamesh of the British Museum discovered by George Smith, has Sumerian origins. The Sumerian version of the Flood comes from the six-column Sumerian tablet in the Nippur collection. It was published in 1914 by Arno Poebel.

In Conclusion

The efforts to undermine the descent of modern Assyrians from their ancient ancestors and thus their indigenous status in the Middle East has become a political issue. Dr. Arian Ishaya who exposes such political games played by those who consider it a sport to question the identity of the contemporary Assyrians writes:

"Assyrians call themselves Assyrian for a very simple and convincing reason: they are age-old inhabitants of ancient Assyria. That is their homeland. They have churches there that date as far back as third and fourth centuries AD. That is sufficient and says it all. There is no need to engage in the inconclusive argument of racial and cultural purity. Palestinians say they are Palestinian because their forefathers inhabited Palestine and the French say France is their homeland because they have lived there for many centuries. One claim is as valid as the other. What makes the French claim more respectable and that of the Palestinians questionable, is not science, it is politics-pure and simple."

Although evidence is plentiful about this continuity and its logical progression, one wonders, why some individuals continue to question the existence of the Assyrians and their continuity. Their assertions are rooted in politics and not true history.

In summary, to prove the Assyrian continuity, we must consider many factors, including the following four:

- 1. The connection to land: Assyrians have continued to live in northern Mesopotamia, and specifically the Nineveh or Mosul Province, without interruption since the Assyrian empire. They have remembered Assyria and its cities in their literature throughout history.
- 2. Language: Assyrians continue to speak the ancient Assyrian Akkadian, with specific modifications and change that comes naturally from interacting with other cultural groups around. This is normal with every living language.
- 3. Religion: Assyrians did not convert from paganism to Christianity. Assyrian religion was monotheistic, similar to Christianity; meaning, Assyrians were not pagans. Adopting Christianity was natural since it has roots in ancient Mesopotamian theological practices.
- 4. Culture, traits and habits: These facets include the specific names that Assyrians alone continue to use; the food they eat, other unique cultural aspects like the Raweh and Lilyaneh, which are unique songs performed by competing parties, the Rogation of the Ninevites (Ba'aoota d' Ninwayeh), a three-day fast commemorating God's message to the Assyrians through prophet Jonah. Whether Armenians or Copts do today, or have in the past, commemorate the Rogation of the Ninevites does not take away from the argument.

I hope that non-Assyrian writers would be more open-minded, look at the Assyrian history from a wider perspective, and study Syriac and Arabic archives in addition to English references before embarking on this complex topic.

We should all take part in the monumental effort to undo the misconceptions of the past. I applaud the efforts of Prof. Simo Parpola and the University of Helsinki in establishing MELAMU. Assyrians as well must establish such a project so that we could add to the rich history that we Assyrians have.

Thank you.

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