

## Assyrians, Syrians and Syriac, Notes and Historical Facts

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Since it is safe to say that the Assyrians ethnic, national, civic administrative and other aspects of their daily life stopped being written and preserved by Assyrians after the fall of Nineveh in 612 B.C., with the exception of the few periods when those smaller Assyrian kingdoms of Adiabene in Arbil and Harran and Osroene in the northwest of Land of Ashur were started, the Assyrian history began to live its long period of foreign manipulation. This national literature vacuum permitted, in a way, few foreign scholars to almost rewrite the Assyrian history, in order to serve a certain personal or ideological purpose. We notice, for example, at certain occasions, few historians emphasizing on the publication of those images of the Assyrian history which were less popular, like the so called Assyrian cruelty as portrayed by Byron, while ignoring to mention all other glorious contributions of Assyrians to world civilization, a point so elegantly put by H. W. F. Saggs in "Civilization Before Greece and Rome" when he said;

"Some of the manifestations of ancient (as of modern) warfare were distinctly nasty. The Assyrians have gained a particularly bad name for atrocities in warfare, from a combination of biblical notoriety and their own striking war reliefs in the British Museum. But in fact they were in no way worse than their contemporaries."

Or may be this paragraph from "Ancient Civilizations, Great Empires At Their Heights" by Timothy R. Roberts

"It is only half the truth when talking about the ancient Assyrian cruelty, perhaps, as some historian have suggested , the Assyrians were open about their cruelty because they hoped to quell rebellion or discourage opposition by publicizing the fate of losers. After all, those terrible punishments were meted out only to those people who resisted the Assyrian armies. Cities that surrendered without a fight were not sacked; they suffered only the indignity of an Assyrian governor and a yearly tribute."

and he continues to say;

"...captive women were politely loaded in carts and were not subjected to violence on the journey, consideration of this kind was a unique mercy in this brutal age."

We could, too, note from our explorations through history books that it was the mere ignorance of the others which resulted in distortion of known facts. It was that vacuum and the language barrier of few of those so called scholars which contributed to the birth of these various interpretation of the Assyrian name.

The term Syrians, today, describes the predominantly Arab Muslim inhabitants of Syria. It must be noted and be clear that this term, Syrians, is not associated in any way or shape with the Syrian word in the term Syrian Orthodox Church, a denomination of the Assyrian Church. Though the same terminology, yet they represent two different peoples.

The state of Syria has had many names during its long history. Historical accounts dating back to the 9th century B.C. indicate that Syria consisted of several city states each with its own name. We read too that they were later incorporated in the Assyrian Empire. The region was known as Abar Nhara {‘Across the River’ (Euphrates)} by the Assyrians, Babylonians and later by the Persians. It was known as Syria short for Assyria by the Greeks and the Romans (because it has long remained under the rule of the Assyrians) during and after the Selucides were driven out of Mesopotamia in the mid of the 2nd. century B.C. When the Roman Pompey annexed it, the small kingdoms comprising Syria gave way to the ‘province of Syria’ in 64 B.C. We do not see a change in this name except for periods in the Arab rule when the entire region comprising Syria, Lebanon, Trans Jordan and Palestine was called ‘bilad al-Sham’. The Turks used the Wilayat system (provinces) to run the Ottoman Empire, Syria was not any different. After its independence, in 1945, Syria retained its original name.

Assyrians, meanwhile, became Christians as we read from the historical and Biblical counts of Abgar the Toparch (Top = local , arch = ruler) and his letter to Jesus. It was these same Assyrians who so zealously believed in this new faith, Christianity, that testament to their endeavors is found in the Syriac inscribed Nestorian Monument in China and the Assyrian Church rites on the Malabar coast of India. It is safe to say, too, that the Church directed the civic and national affairs of the Assyrian people until the beginning of the 20th century. It was this Church which guided the Assyrians under the ‘millet’ system and produced scholars in theology, liturgy and science like Abdisho Bar Brikha, the 13th. century Metropolitan on Nisibis and Armenia. One negative point which is argued at times, understandably, is that it was this Christian belief which led to the break down of the Assyrians fragile structure and to the confusion regarding the Assyrians’ name since each new denomination of church was labeled differently added to that were; first, the tribal system Assyrians continue to live under and second the fact that they were scattered under the influence of various social and political systems of the Romans, Greeks, Persians, Turks, Kurds and Arabs.

It is portrayed, by quite few, as devastating that present day Assyrians are not doing enough to educate themselves and those around them with the facts about their history. They, on the other side, continue to put higher emphasis on religion as compared to nationality. Few justify this behavior to the centuries old religious persecution this great nation had experienced, and still is, being surrounded by Muslim nations and hence, when migrating to the western Christian countries, they try to bring that common factor they share with these new natives. The fact that Assyrians in general speak about their churches first during a conversation with any westerner they come in contact with, is a common observation which can be noticed easily.

In a book "Light from the Ancient Past" Vol. II, by Jack Finegan, the author referred to the Peshitta and to the Yonan Codex and said;

"Of the Peshitta version there are several hundred manuscripts. One of these is the Yonan Codex. This takes its name from the Yonan family of the Christian community near Lake Urmia in Azerbaijan, is in the possession of Mr. Norman Yonan of Washington, D.C., and in 1955 was on loan to the Library of Congress for exhibition. The Codex contains 227 leaves and extends from Matthew to Hebrews. The Peshitta appears to be that of the standard Peshitta Syriac, and the writing to be of the 7th century at the earliest."

There is no excuse, in my mind, to such publication. Why should we allow anybody to refer to us as the Christian community? Norman Yonan, a known Assyrian, or those of the later generation of that family, should have made sure that the word Assyrian was going to be printed along with this historical link.

In an article posted in The Assyrian Experience (Harvard University), Naby and Hopper wrote;

"What was valued in the {Assyrian} community was religion - Christianity from early in the first century forward. The apparent goal of literacy and knowledge became the perpetuation and expansion of the faith. An exception was the knowledge and copying of Greek scientific texts which became the basis for Islamic science through Syriac translation, and by Syriac-speaking Christians."

Naby and Hopper later wrote;

"Others, within and without the community, have interpreted the self-designation 'Surayi' or 'Suroyo' narrowly as Syrian without reference to the historically constant designation by Armenians of 'Surayi' as Asori = Assyrian, and the explanation of Herodotus for the use of the term Syrian and Assyrian as western and eastern usage"

What we are reading above is that the Armenians of today, the descendants of those Armenians of antiquity, had called the Assyrians 'Asori' for the longest of time, and they still do. They never associated the Assyrians with the word Syrians in any of their publications baring in mind that they have shared a long history with the Assyrians.

Zaia Nimrod Canon in his book " The Missing Link in Assyrian History" stated;

"Al-Suryan, is a foreign word. It is the Arabic version of the Greek word Syrian, a corrupt for Assyrian."

Lets turn to Audrey Vine and what she wrote in her book "The Nestorian Churches";

"These various sections of the old Indian Church are often called 'Syrian', as indicative of their origin. Thus the Uniates are called Romo-Syrians, the Jacobites Orthodox Syrians, the Thomas Christians Reformed Syrians..."

There is no doubt that these Christian denominations referred to them as Syrians are not the inhabitants of present day Syria, they are, rather, the Assyrian Christians living in the land extending from the eastern Mediterranean realm to the Indian frontier who the Greek called Syrians in their books.

On page 185, Vine returned to state;

"The Nestorian Christians call themselves simply Christians or Syrians, but if wishing to distinguish themselves from members of other Churches, they use the term Christians of the East."

It has been argued that after the Assyrians adapted Christianity, few of them opted to distant themselves from the Assyrian name since the Assyrians of antiquity were pagans, hence Vine's reference to some Assyrians calling themselves as Christians and who the Greek called Syrians. Although this particular point could be challenged since the Assyrians as we read in the Bible (Jonah 3:10) repented, hence, they believed in God and accordingly their city, Nineveh, was spared;

"And God saw their works that they turned from their evil way and God repented of the evil that he had said that he would do unto them; and he did not."

What language did these Assyrians speak with? Lets read closely from the book "The Early Alphabet" by John Healey;

"... Edessa (Urhai) became the focus of the spread of Christianity in the Semitic-speaking world. As a result, by about AD 200 the Bible was translated into the local Aramaic dialect, which became known as Syriac ..."

" ... A rather crude version of this script (the estrangela) is found in the very earliest Syriac inscriptions of the 1st. century AD from the area of Edessa. As a result of sectarian strife among the Syriac-speaking Christians, there developed western and eastern script variants called respectively Jacobite (after the supposed founder of the western Syrian church, which the orthodox regarded as heretical) and Nestorian (after the supposed heresy of the eastern Syrians)."

" The Nestorian or East Syrian script developed fully later (12th. or 13th. centuries AD), but its features appear as early as the 6th. century AD, at which point it is still very similar to Estrangela."

In a foot note from the book "St. Isaac of Nineveh", a St. Vladimir's Seminary Press publication, this statement is noted;

" 'East Syrians' is a term frequently used to describe the Persian Church rather than 'Nestorian'."

Regardless to the issue that the East Syrians was to describe the Persian Church or the Nestorian Church, the point is that East Syrians is definitely not a reference to the inhabitants of Syria.

W.A. Wigram in his book "The Assyrians and Their Neighbors" wrote;

"From being a vernacular language (author is speaking about Syriac), it soon developed a literature, though one which was largely translated from the Greek, and it could even give a name to a district. The province of 'Syria' known to the Romans did not refer to any country ever occupied by any 'king of Syria', but simply to the land, under Roman dominion, occupied by Syriac-speakers.

Sebastian Brock in his book "St. Ephrem the Syrian" wrote;

"But Ephrem also happens to be a religious poet of quite outstanding stature, one who deserves to rank alongside the greatest of theologian poets in the Christian tradition. That he has only rarely been recognized as such is due largely to the inaccessibility of his work, written in Syriac (a dialect of Aramaic) and for the most part poorly served by translations into modern languages."

Let's read from scholars of closer contact to the Assyrians, Dr. Murad Kamil in his book "The History of Al-Suryan (the Syrian) literature" spoke about Syriac as the language of the Assyrians and wrote:

"Edessa (modern Urfa) was established during the era of the Assyrians along the borders of the land of Ashur the great, on a mountain range on the north-eastern region of Bet Nahrain, and their language was the eastern Aramaic dialect which the Greek called Syriac and it became the capital of a kingdom called Osrhoene..."

Hence facts show without any doubts that Syriac was and still is used as a reference to the Assyrian language, and for the records, it must never be used in association with the ethnic name of the Assyrians.

I would like here to quote a scholar of theology, John M. L. Young, who in several sections of his very famous book, *By Foot to China*, mentioned the word Syrians. Lets read from page 63 as he speaks about the Assyrian Church and its teachings;

"Now there are three Syrian words commonly used [remember he is speaking about the Assyrians] Parsufa, (Greek: Prosopon) which means a person ... (we confess) that Jesus Christ has one parsufa, in the like manner as we confess in the western church. But they [the Syrian churches] also teach that Jesus Christ has two kejane or nature: the divine and human, like as we confess. And besides, they teach that he has two kenuma or as they say: One person double in natures and their kenuma..."

These three words John Young is referring to, parsupa / janeh / Qnomeh as 'Syrian words' are pure Syriac (Assyrian) words used in the Assyrian Church Liturgy and it is a very natural conclusion to say that since he was talking about the Nestorian Church, then we can conclude easily that he meant that; there were three Assyrian Christian words commonly used.

Next on page 68, John Young left no doubt at all with what he meant by the word Syrian when he said;

"Neither the Syrian-Persian Church of the East nor modern Protestant scholarship accept "Nestorianism," but neither does either hold Nestorius to have been a 'Nestorian' or a heretic."

Here, with the term 'Syrian-Persian Church' he is absolutely meaning the Assyrian-Persian Church with no question since there is no such thing as a combination of two countries (Syria-Persia) church.

The Syrian term used to identify the Assyrian Christians is brought to light by Sebastian Brock and Susan Harvey in "*Holy Women of the Syrian Orient*", a publication of University of California Press, where they stated;

"Whether governed by Romans or Persians, the Syrian Christians were in a minority position (and their language was always overshadowed by the dominant language of their rulers). While the eastern Syrians were a religious minority in an empire largely Zoroastrian, the western Syrians were a minority of a different kind. They shared the faith but not the culture of their rulers, and in the heated christological debates of the fifth century they found even their faith to be at odds with that of their government. The struggle of the western Syrians was thus of a more bitter kind. Christians within the Christian Empire, they were nonetheless set apart."

It is very clear here, again, that the term Syrians used with association to the Christian Churches, has no connection to the term Syrians, relating to the inhabitants of present day Syria. Having referred to the conditions of the two sects of the Assyrian Christians, being western and eastern Syrians, ruled by two different powers Romans and Persians, hammered the last nail in the coffin of the theory that the word Syrians used in all the religious publications is a reference to the Syrian as inhabitants of Syria, since there had never been two different parts of Syria, the country, with one in Persia and the other in Syria.

In conclusion, we can see that Assyrians and their churches were called Syrians by the Greek. We see, too, that one of the Assyrian Churches has been called The Syrian Orthodox Church, Jacobite and at

times as the Western Syrian Church. Another was called The Church of the East, The Nestorian Church, the Eastern Syrian Church, or the Persian Church. We have read too that Syriac is a term relating to the language of the Assyrian people and it is not a designation to any particular group of people or sect and I need to emphasize again that we must differentiate between the Syrians as inhabitants of today's Syria and that word Syrians associated with the Christian churches.

Need to mention here that I will be publishing another article later on the other Rite of the Assyrian Church called the Chaldean Church, how that name was established and a brief history about its original followers who were Assyrians, subjects of The Church of the East, given the name Chaldeans by Rome after converting to Catholicism.

Finally, I have to say here that this matter is of great misfortune to the Assyrian people. The world theologians, linguists and history scholars owe it to the descendants of that great civilization, the Assyrians, to clear this issue of very unfortunate misunderstanding, it is the least they could do in return for the Assyrians' great contributions to world civilization.