

PERSONAL REFLECTIONS ON JOHN JOSEPH'S HYPOTHESIS

Published in Zinda magazine, Vol VIII, Issue 23, August 26, 2002

It is a well-established fact that few so-called scholars and historians, who were and still are in search of personal glory, had abused and distorted ancient history. Nobody can and beyond any reasonable doubt prove that today's Assyrians are not the descendants of the ancient Assyrians. I wonder if such historians could dare to claim that at least segments of today Greeks, Italians, Iranians, Egyptians are not the logical descendants of the ancient Greeks, Romans, Persians and Egyptians respectively? Few historians had adopted the 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 and this is what John Joseph had applied in his newest book, or should I say his new old book with basically new title and cover.

The latest book by Joseph, *The Modern Assyrians of the Middle East*, is simply a revised edition of his 1961 book *"The Nestorians and Their Muslim Neighbors"*. I guess Joseph lacks creativity and vision to publish something new so he looked in his old stuff, picked this 40 years old book and gave it a face-lift. While the author justified his motion of giving the title *"The Nestorians and Their Muslim Neighbors"* to his old book by claiming that he was speaking about the members of the Church of the East, what justification could we give the author for changing the title to *"The Modern Assyrians of the Middle East,"* yet neglecting completely, for example, the Orthodox Assyrians, wrongly named Jacobites. If the author had decided to address the Assyrians of the Middle East, why did he ignore the Catholic Assyrians throughout WWI and their condition in Iraq today with the exception of mentioning the issue from a narrow prospective of the Churches' dialogue? Does Joseph believe that the members of the Chaldean Catholic Church and Syriac Orthodox Church are not Assyrians?

In this new-old book, the author implanted this factor of doubt here and there to confuse the reader and did this in a very methodical and clever way. He did so while trying not to show himself as a completely blind antagonist. He stated, for example, in one paragraph, quote: *"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 descendance in all the peoples in the region: Jacobite, Nestorian, Sabaeans, Yezidis, and a great deal among the Kurds."* Unquote. Even in this quote, he is adding further doubt by choosing a quote that is mysterious enough by bringing the Kurds in his argument and the thought that there was no implication that the Nestorians were descendants of the Assyrians!

Some readers and critics out there jump hastily when Assyrians try to justify their link to ancient Assyrians. They blame Assyrian authors today for being selective; one wonders who is not selective among today's historians? When reporters travel thousands of miles from New York to north of Iraq and return only to publish an article about the Kurdish struggle and ignore the Assyrians, they are being selective. When authors write about the Holocaust as a word synonymous with the Jews, they in fact are being selective, in a horrible manner. We are all selective in what we do, with perhaps very minimal

exceptions So why should Assyrian authors be branded being selective when everybody else is trying to prove that the Assyrians of today are not the descendants of the ancient Assyrians? Is being selective a privilege of the few?

Joseph in his book implied that it was the archaeologist Layard who had created the modern Assyrian name in the 19th century as he stated, quote: "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." Unquote.

Well, we have to respect any person's opinion, but we must remember that this opinion of Joseph was confronted meanwhile by Prof. Richard Frye for example, who in his article "Assyria and Syria: Synonyms" has shown, contrary to Joseph, that people had used the term Syrian and Assyrian before the 19th century. Other Professors like Simo Parpola have proven that Assyrians didn't simply vanish. In fact the Assyrian name was used in Russian archives during the 17th century. I am not sure what Joseph is looking for really. Is he asking the Armenians, for example, to use the English term Assyrians in their documents, when they use Asori in their own Armenian language? Is Joseph asking the Arabs to use the English term Assyrian when they use Ashuri in their own Arabic language?

Joseph assumed a conclusion that the ancient Assyrians couldn't have survived because they dropped their mother language, i.e. the cuneiform Akkadian, and adopted the Aramaic, unlike the Persians. Joseph stated, quote: "... 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..." Unquote. First, we need to remind Joseph that his argument has no foundation since the Assyrians replaced their complex Akkadian cuneiform language with the easier alphabetical Aramaic in 752 BC while the empire continued some 150 years after that and was in fact real powerful then. The Akkadian was the language of the Assyrian courts but everybody did not read or write it, although they spoke it. A good reason for using the Aramaic was to facilitate administrative tasks because Aramaic was better known in the other vast regions of the Assyrian Empire. Meanwhile, there is ample proof of how Aramaic is influenced by the Akkadian language. The Akkadian itself survived long after the empire had fallen. Aro and Whiting wrote: "...I have argued elsewhere that Akkadian was likely to have survived throughout the Parthian period, at least until the mid-3rd century AD." Read Sanna Aro and R. M. Whiting, *The Heirs of Assyria*, a paper by M. J. Geller titled "The Survival of Babylonian Wissenschaft in Later Tradition." Secondly, Syriac manuscripts tell us that: "Bait Aramaye is an ecclesiastical administrative term referring to southern Mesopotamia, or al-Iraq al-Arabi, or Bilad al-Nabat of the Arabic sources. The ecclesiastical term for northern Mesopotamia, Athur (Assyria), corresponds to al-Jazira, or the land of Mosul of the Arab geographers; see Fiey, *Assyrie III*, 12, 36." Read Amir Harrak, "The Chronicals of Zuqnin," Parts III & IV, AD 488-775. Hence Harrak is telling us that Bait Aramaye was applied to southern Mesopotamia and not Assyria.

Furthermore, we need to remind Joseph that Assyria later in the Christian era was assigned Assyrian bishops who were titled "bishops of Nineveh" in many periods. And when the Romans invaded the region in the second century of the Christian era, they called it "Province of Assyria."

And then Joseph claims that the Nestorian Assyrians were Arameans and even more when he wrote, quote: "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." Unquote. We need yet again remind Joseph that many missionaries have admitted that the Christians of the Mosul plain in Iraq, Urmia region in Iran, and Hakkari Mountains in Turkey 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.

Although the book contains some good information about the inter-relations between the Assyrian Christians and their Moslem neighbors in the Middle East, the author fell too short in addressing seriously many issues relating to many important matters. The authors, for example, dedicated very few lines to the Mosul and Kirkuk incidents between the Assyrians and the locals and he basically leads the reader to the conclusion by blaming the Assyrians for the troubles! As important as these incidents were in the history of modern Iraq, he did not bother to address the two incidents thoroughly.

In his analysis, the author casually discusses the Nestorians in this manner on page 154, quote: "It is difficult to speak with confidence of a national sentiment among these Christians [author referring to Nestorians], a people who had never constituted a single and comprehensive state. Their history was unlike that of the European Christians of Turkey, who for centuries had nourished a common stock of traditions and aspiration that were identified with particular territories, furnishing the minorities with a psychological basis for a centralized political entity. The Nestorians, like the rest of the Eastern Christians, with the possible exception of the Maronites and the Armenians, had no local nucleus or a definite area of homeland." Unquote. I am not sure what the scholarly world calls this paragraph, but it is full of inaccuracies. How the Assyrians conducted and ran their daily lives and where their homes were for centuries and their traditions are well defined in many history books.

Then the author on page 149 claims that one of the reasons the British brought the Assyrians from Urmia to Iraq was because of famine! I am wondering what references Mr. Joseph was using to reach this silly conclusion? The British had their eyes on the oil in Iraq. They needed a separate group like the Assyrians to use them as a political card against the future government in Iraq in order to have things go their way in Iraq. At this time the British were sure what was the future of the three Ottoman wilayats, Mosul, Baghdad and Basrah. Famine, in the eye of most political analysts, was not even a reason worth mentioning.

Furthermore, the hypothesis presented by the author disproving the linkage of ancient and modern Assyrians would not change any Assyrians' perception to whether he is an Assyrian or not, since it is Joseph's thought against many others who have proven otherwise. Joseph had failed to convince this reader with his weak argument. The Assyrians have lived in northern Mesopotamia (Assyria) from time immemorial. The Assyrians of today speak the same Aramaic language spoken by the ancient

Assyrians, or any number of dialects of it, a language that had much Akkadian influence in it. And finally, the Assyrians adopted Christianity during the first century and the Assyrian church records have kept that linkage alive till this very moment.