

## Reply to John Joseph

*Richard N. Frye, Ph.D.*

In the JAAS, Vol. XI, No.2 (1997) my article entitled “Assyria and Syria: Synonyms” elicited reply by Professor Joseph, which puzzled me since it seemed to me he agreed with most of what I wrote. Let me review the matter again, since it seems I was not clear enough for some readers. First, in regard to **etymology**, surely no one accepts a different origin for the two words. I fail to see an Egyptian or other explanation simply for the words, and not geographical or ethnic questions. The next point is the early Greek designation of **people** as reported in Herodotus (7.63), where he talks about the Assyrians in the Achaemenid army:

“These people (Assyrians) were called Syrians by the Greeks, the name for them elsewhere being Assyrian.”

As I wrote (p.32):

“Herodotus may represent a turning point in this separation (Syria = the Levant and Assyria = Mesopotamia).”

Formerly all inhabitants of the “Fertile Crescent” of the Assyrian Empire were called Assyrians/Syrians by the Greeks, and presumably others. This means that after the time of Herodotus the Greeks spoke of Syrians in the Levant and Assyrians in northern Mesopotamia, because of changed political circumstances. I hope this is not disputed. (Let us not forget that in early times the inhabitants of Palestine were also called Syrians by the Greeks).

If the above is accepted we now turn to language, and no one disputes the spread of Aramaic over the entire “Fertile Crescent.” I suggested that a reason for the confusion of names is the fact that the Aramaic language was the *lingua franca* of the Assyrian Empire, so in the minds of some people the inhabitants of the “Fertile Crescent” were Assyrians/Syrians who spoke Assyrian/Aramaic. So we have added Aramaic to the Assyrians/Syrians equation. After the spread of Christianity the language was called Syriac by outsiders or form of Suryani by indigenous speakers. Joseph is quite right; they were all synonyms, but I fail to see the problem John Joseph has in this regard.

I do, however, acknowledge confusion in understanding his words in his book *The Nestorians and their Muslim Neighbors*, p.ix, when he wrote:

“Nestorians are known as Assyrians, a name commonly used in reference to them only since the First World War.”

I took his wording “commonly” to mean generally, usually, and even exclusively, which I gather was a wrong interpretation. I assume then that Joseph accepts the usage before World War I, *and not just in regard to the Assyrians mentioned in*

*the Bible*.\* We should not forget that common usage of self-identity of the inhabitants of the Middle East until recent times was by clan, tribe or village, and little concern was directed to larger designations. General membership in larger units was more by religion than by political assignment. Perhaps if the Sanjaks of Aleppo, Damascus and elsewhere had remained after World War I, the use of the political term Syria would not have caused confusion. But that is not my concern, although it may be one for Joseph.

I wrote my article in answer to the assertion that the word Syria was an ancient Egyptian word and did not realize the hornets' nest of modern Assyrian disputes which arose. I do stand by the last sentences of my article, with the added observation that disputes over the use of the word Syrian/Assyrian reminds one of the disputes by Western Christian theologians in the Middle Ages over the number of angels who could dance on a pin point.

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\* I do not understand why Joseph and others ignore the evidence of Armenian and Persian sources in regard to usage with initial a-, including contemporary practice.