

Myth vs Reality

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Introduction

There are some scholars and authors who maintain that the name “Assyrian” was given to the followers of the Church of the East (also known as Nestorians) by the British missionaries in the nineteenth century . Fiey is one such author who believes that it was the Anglicans who attached the appellation “Assyrian” to the Nestorians.¹ In discussing the reasons for choosing the name Assyrian by the Mission of the Archbishop of Canterbury, he concludes that ”the name was quickly adopted and stayed.”

Among some of the recent articles that expressed strong disagreement with Fiey’s conclusion are those of Bet Ashur² and Warda.³

It is my strong conviction that there is ample evidence to indicate that the connection between the appellation “ Assyrian” and the Church of the East is too old to be associated with the Christian missionaries of the 18th and 19th centuries. The present article is an attempt to adduce further evidence to the effect that the connection dates as far back as the early Christian era.

Historical Documentation

In a general response to Fiey, Coakley states: “In respectful disagreement with Fiey, I think the part played by the Anglican missionaries in later years was slight.”⁴ In an earlier response to Joseph’s statement that “ While the name Chaldean was appropriated by the Uniats, the illustrious twin name Assyrian was in time applied to the Nestorians and that they accepted and used it from the end of the 19th century”⁵. Odisho⁶ quotes Tseretely⁷ stating that “Those (Assyrians)

¹ Fiey, L’Orient Syrien, 1965, p.152]

² Odisho Bet Ashur, The Continuity of Assyrian History, *Nineveh Magazine*, 1994, Vol. 17, No.3.

³ William Warda, The Heritage of Contemporary Assyrians: Setting the Record Straight”, *Journal of The Assyrian Academic Society*, Vol.VIII, No.2, 1994.

⁴ Coakley, *The Church of the East and the Church of England*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1992, p. 367

⁵ John Joseph, *The Nestorians and their Muslim Neighbors* . Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961.

who live in the Soviet Union call themselves Assyrians and their mother tongue Assyrian, an appellation which occurs in the 18th century Georgian documents". More recently, Tseretely specifically refers to some correspondence between the Georgian King Irakli II and Mar Shimun in the years 1769 and 1770 in which Mar Shimun refers to himself as the " Assyrian Catholicos" and the King identifies Mar Shimun's people as "Assyrians."⁸ The above documents are significant because they imply that the appellation "Assyrian" was in circulation before the British missionaries arrived in the region and that they were not the first to use the name Assyrian in connection with the Christians of the Church of the East. In reference to the significance of Tsereteli's documentation, Heinrichs writes: "There is, however, one suggestive indication that the idea of Assyrianism may have a slightly longer history than hitherto assumed: according to Tsereteli..."⁹

One reason why it appears that it was the British who gave the Nestorians the name Assyrian is that during and after WWI the conditions were ripe for the spread of nationalism¹⁰ among the Assyrians. When the ominous clouds of WWI gathered, and enemy raids and threats became reality, Assyrianism became the rallying banner for a people faced with massacre and complete annihilation.

The emergence of nationalism among Assyrians during WWI, followed the missionary work of the Church of England, hence, the second event was seen as the effect, and the first as the cause. But, as we saw above, the name Assyrian was applied to the Church of the East before the arrival of the Anglican missionaries.

Further evidence to substantiate that the Assyrian appellation was in circulation prior to the advent of the Anglican missions to the region is found in the Chronicle of the Carmelites in Persia.¹¹ The Chronicle begins with a mention

⁶ Edward Y. Odisho, *The Sound System of Modern Assyrian (Neo-Aramaic)*. Otto Harrassowitz: Wiesbaden, 1988.

⁷ Konstantin Tseretely *The Modern Assyrian Language* . Moscow NAUKA Publishing House, 1976.

⁸ Konstantin Tseretely *The Journal of Assyrian Academic Society*, Vol. VIII, 2, 1994.

⁹ Wolfhart Heinrichs, "The Modern Assyrians: Name and Nation", *Semitica, Serta philologica Constantino Tsereteli dicata*, 1993, Torino. Page 99.

¹⁰ Political or social philosophy in which the good of the nation is paramount. See the Columbia Encyclopedia, Third Edition. Also, see De Kalaita, "On the Road to Nineveh. A Brief History of Assyrian Nationalism 1892-1990, JAAS, Vol. VIII No.1, 1994

¹¹ *A Chronicle of the Carmelites in Persia and the Papal Mission of the XVII and XVIII Centuries*, Vol. 1. (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode , 1939).

of the split in the Church of the East in 1552. Then it further dwells on the subject as follows: “Under Pope Julius III (1549-55), certain of the Nestorian Chaldeans refused to obey the ‘Patriarch at Babylon’ and came into communion with the Catholic Church. The Pope appointed for them, as they petitioned, a patriarch they had chosen named Simeon Sulaka, a monk of the Order of S. Pacomius. Sulaka went back to his people with the pallium of a patriarch and the title of “*Patriarch of the Eastern Assyrians.*”

The compiler of the Chronicle, in footnote 4 of the same page, changes “Assyrian” to “Chaldean” and the statement thus reads as: “...and on 19.4.1553 was proclaimed Patriarch of the Chaldeans” . What this change signifies is that, at least temporarily , the patriarch was identified as the *Patriarch of the Eastern Assyrians*, but soon afterwards, in order to distinguish between those who have joined Rome and those who have not, the name was changed to *Chaldean*. This might have been done, also, for reasons of consistency, as it is implied in LeCoz,¹² who writes that “ On the 7th of August, 1445, the Nestorians of Cypress who had joined Rome were given the name Chaldean by Pope Eugene IV and that since then this name was used to designate those Christians from the Church of the East who had joined Rome”. Bet Ashur¹³ citing Koodapuzha¹⁴ also highlights this change of name from “Assyrian” to “Chaldean”.

Therefore, it can be safely concluded, that Rome first chose the name “Assyrian” for the Christians of the Church of the East, but for reasons of consistency, as well as to differentiate between the Assyrians who have not joined Rome and those who have, they changed it to “Chaldean.” However, regardless of the reasons behind the change of the appellation, the important historical fact remains untouched in that the appellation Assyrian is traced back as far as 1552.

Tatian, who lived in the second century of our era, and is the author of the Syriac Gospel known as the Diatessaron, in his “Address to the Greeks” once said: “*I am an Assyrian...*”¹⁵

¹² Raymond Le Coz, *Histoire de l'Eglise d'Orient*. (Paris: Les Editions du Cerf, 1995): page 327

¹³ Odisho Bet Ashur, The Continuity of Assyrian History, *Nineveh Magazine*, 1994, Vol. 17, No.3.

¹⁴ Xavier Koodapuzha, *Faith and Communion of the Indian Church of Saint Thomas Christians*, *Oriental Institute of Religious Studies, Kerala, India*, page 59.

¹⁵ Samuel Hugh Moffett, *A History of Christianity in Asia*, Vol. 1, Orbis Books, New York, 1998. Page 74.

In fact, in Segal's investigation of the early history of Christianity¹⁶ there are instances and events which reveal some important facts concerning Assyria and Adiabene as interchangeable names. In the *Doctrine of Addai*, the Apostle Addai, on the introduction of Christianity to Edessa, describes the discovery of the cross at Jerusalem by Queen Protonice, wife of Emperor Claudius. With reference to this discovery, Segal comments on the name of Queen Protonice, by saying that Protonice may be a variant of Stratonice, wife of the king of Assyria, and one of the reputed founders of the temple of Hierapolis. Segal further states that Protonice in this story obviously reflects Helena, mother of Constantine the Great, whom history credits with the finding of the Cross. But local legend confused this Helena with an earlier Queen Helena, who was queen of Adiabene, "which was popularly called Assyria."¹⁷ Further down, we read: "The story of religious development in Adiabene and that of Edessa seem to be almost inextricably interwoven....Merchants played a part also in the proselytization of Edessa... And sympathizers to Christianity came, we are told, to Edessa in the guise of merchants to witness the acts of Addai and then to return home to spread the faith in *their own country of the Assyrians*, that is, Adiabene."¹⁸ The statement: *their own country of the Assyrians* in the above quotation is the English translation of the Syriac original transliterated here as: "Va b'atra dilhun d'Aturaye". Here the term *Aturaye* is translated *Assyrians*.¹⁹

Conclusion:

Therefore, from what we saw above, there is ample evidence that the name "Assyrian," applied to the followers of the Church of the East did not originate in the 19th century. Its historical usage, is, at least much older than Fiey's claim of its connection with the British Christian missionaries of the 19th century. In reality, its usage goes back even to the days of early Christianity and the emergence of the state of Adiabene. Thus the opinion that the appellation Assyrian was invented by the British missionaries, is just a myth. The reality is that the appellation 'Assyrian' was there centuries prior to the arrival of the Anglican missions.

¹⁶ J.B. Segal. *Edessa, The Blessed City*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), pages 47-69.

¹⁷ Segal, p. 51.

¹⁸ Segal, p. 68.

¹⁹ W. Cureton. *Ancient Syriac Documents* (Amsterdam: Oriental Press, 1967), p.16.

