

# **The Assyrians** **A Historical and Current Reality**

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## **The Assyrians and the Babylonians: two peoples but one history?**

Certain authors regard the terms Assyria, Babylonia as belonging to the past. The study of the history of the Assyrians and Babylonians is normally limited to the pre-Christian era. In most Western universities it is usually taught that both the Assyrians and the Babylonians ceased to exist many centuries ago - witness the accounts of the destruction of Nineveh in 612 BC and of Babylonia in 539 BC. If we were to continue studying the historical evolution of these peoples from such a narrow viewpoint, we should have to admit that we would be doing them a great injustice. In order to explore the history of these two peoples in greater depth, we have to look somewhat beyond the facts most history books contain. To a certain extent, both peoples have various elements in common: their language, their laws, and even their religion.<sup>1</sup>

From the geographical and historical point of view, the Assyrians and the Babylonian come from Mesopotamia, the area between the two famous rivers, the Tigris (Idiglat) and the Euphrates (Purattu). It is a well-known fact that Mesopotamia was the center of an enormously rich culture. Its history goes back to the dawn of civilization and of sedentary society. Assyria is to be found in the North of Mesopotamia and Babylonia to the South. These empires lasted around 1500 years,<sup>2</sup> generally divided into four periods:

- a) The first Babylonian empire (2350-1110 BC) which extends from the Kassite empire of Nimrud to the second Babylonian confederation.
- b) The first Assyrian empire, typified by the rule of Tiglath-Pileser I (1120-1100);
- c) The second Assyrian empire (1020 - 612).
- d) The second Babylonian empire (625-539).

It is useful to bear in mind that from Sargon of Akkad until Nabonidus (Nabuna'id), the Assyrian and Babylonian empires exercised the height of their power and influence whilst experiencing their moments of greatest splendor during the reigns of:

- Hammurabi	1750-1792;
- Ashurnasirpal II	882-857;

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<sup>1</sup> Addai Scher, in his *History of Chaldea and Assyria (Kaldo wa Ator)*, vol. 2, pp. a,b,c, underlines the fact that the Assyrian-Chaldeans should be regarded as an indivisible whole, as a single people.

<sup>2</sup> On the subject of the union and the dominion of the Assyrian-Chaldeans, J. Oppert, *Histoire des Empires de Chaldée et d'Assyrie*, (Versailles: 1865), 5 ff., also says that by the year 2000 BC of the common era, certain Semitic peoples had already conquered some centuries earlier the land between the Tigris and the Euphrates, where they established their rule. The empire they founded lasted around 1500 years and is referred to by the historians as the Assyrian, Chaldean or Babylonian empire.

-Shalmaneser	827-822;
-Tiglath-pileser III	745-727;
-Shalmaneser V	726-721;
-Sargon II	721-705;
-Sennacherib	705-681;
-Esarhaddon	680-667;
-Ashurbanipal	669-631;
-Nebuchadnezzar	604-562.

The Assyrian and the Babylonian empire continued to expand right up until the Persian invasion and can boast a long list of illustrious kings, of whom we have mentioned only a few.

During the course of the historical development of their empires, the Assyrian and Babylonians made significant contributions to the scientific and social progress of mankind in such fields as religion, philosophy, the sciences in general, as well as in politics and administration. After this very brief historical summary, and given the fact that a wealth of documentation on the subject of these empires is widely available, we shall now go on to examine the post-imperial period in order to prove the historical continuity of the Assyrian people.

### **The Assyrian People and the problem of historical continuity**

The confusion created by the term “Assyrian” has often given rise to endless discussions as to whether the modern-day Assyrians should be regarded as the descendants of the ancient Assyrians. Such debates were based on the fact that certain authors claim that the fall of Nineveh automatically meant the total destruction of the Assyrian people. This presupposition is completely unfounded.

I believe that those who consider the fall of the Assyrian empire as having caused the sudden disappearance of the entire Assyrian people betray their total ignorance of the historical development of this people. If we were to study world history on the basis of this same premise, then no country or culture would have a survival record. The fall of the political system of a state or country has never automatically meant the destruction of an entire people. S. Smith is one of the few historians who, even though he expresses a certain ambivalence in his preliminary remarks, nevertheless affirms that the fall of the Assyrian empire did not automatically lead to its disappearance, but rather to the loss of its independence.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> S. Smith, *Ashurbanipal and the Fall of Assyria*, The Cambridge Ancient History, 3 (Cambridge: The University Press, 1960), 131: “The disappearance of the Assyrian People will always remain a unique and striking phenomenon in ancient history. Other similar kingdoms and empires have indeed passed away, but people have lived on. Recent discoveries have, it is true, shown that poverty-stricken communities perpetuated the old Assyrian names at various places, for instance on the ruined site of Ashur, for many centuries, but the essential truth remains the same. A nation, which had existed for two thousand years and had ruled over a wide area, lost its independent character.” Cf. I.M. Diakonof, *Media*, The Cambridge History of Iran, vol. 2 (Cambridge: The University Press, 1985), 36-148, especially p. 124, where the author explicitly rejects the annihilation of the Assyrians.

The major Assyrian cities were Ashur, the capital, together with the religious centers of the empire: Nimrud or Calah, Arbela, Khorsabad and Harran. There can be no doubt that after the fall of the Neo-Assyrian empire (614-610), its inhabitants went on living and practising the Assyrian religion, which is already a proof of the on-going existence of the people. It is a well-known fact that Assyrian cultural life was infinitely superior to that of its neighboring countries, and included a literary production<sup>4</sup> which right up until the present day we can continue to learn from. This literary culture included such varied fields as medicine, astronomy, mathematics, and history, thanks to which we are now able to study various peoples who would otherwise have fallen into complete oblivion.

The basic problem here is not how to prove the historical reality of the Assyrian people; it is rather a question of how to respond to the denial expressed by some modern authors of the continuity of this people after the fall of the empire. Part of the problem is bound up with the terminological confusion which sprang up over the course of the centuries. Let us take a look at two such terms by way of practical example: Atur and Ashur. Authors such as Cook,<sup>5</sup> Olmstead<sup>6</sup> and Rawlinson<sup>7</sup> researched these words and, according to them, the term "Aturia" which is found in royal inscriptions from the time of King Darius (558-486 BC) is the equivalent of the term "Assyria," which Cook identifies as being located in the center of the river Tigris region. Herodotus<sup>8</sup> in his History (484-425) mentions the Assyrians as a nation whose army allied itself with the Persians, although Smith considers the above-mentioned "army" to be little more than a reduced group of men, which continued to exist up until the time of the Christian era.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> On Assyrian literary production see: A. Jaakko Hameen, *Bibliography of Neo-Assyrian (Post War Period)*, in State Archives of Assyria, Bulletin 2 (1988), 73-92; Alasdair Livingstone, *Court Poetry and Literary Miscellanea*, State Archives of Assyria, vol. 3 (Helsinki: The Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, 1989); S. Parpola, *Letters from Assyrian and Babylonian Scholars*, State Archives of Assyria, vol. 10 (Helsinki: The Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, 1993); idem, *Assyrian Prophecies*, State Archives of Assyria, vol. 9 (Helsinki: The Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, 1997).

<sup>5</sup> J.M.Cook, *The Rise of the Achaemenids and the Establishment of their Empire*, Cambridge History of Iran, vol. 2 (Cambridge: The University Press, 1985), 200-291.

<sup>6</sup> A.T.E. Olmstead, *History of the Persian Empire* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1948).

<sup>7</sup> G. Rawlinson, *The History of Herodotus* (New York: 1859).

<sup>8</sup> Herodotus, *Hist.* VII, 63, (vid. Rawlinson, p. 51).

<sup>9</sup> S. Smith, "Notes on the Assyrian Tree," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, (1926): 69: In Achaemenian times there was an Assyrian detachment in the Persian army, but they could only have been a remnant. That remnant persisted through the centuries to the Christian era, and continued to use in their personal names appellations of their pagan deities. This continuance of an Assyrian tradition is significant for two reasons; the miserable conditions of these late Assyrians is attested to by the

Another element, which should be kept in mind, is that of the confusion made by the Greeks between Syria and Assyria. The invaders, being unfamiliar with the environment and its ethnic groups, referred to the entire area between Asia Minor and Egypt as "Syria."<sup>10</sup> Later on, the Greek historians who arrived with the invading forces of Alexander the Great in the Middle East began to call the region of Nineveh<sup>11</sup> "Aturia." There are those<sup>12</sup> who observe that Adiabene was an ancient kingdom situated between the Tigris and the upper and lower Zab rivers, which at that time included Assyria, the province of Nisibis and the district of Ecbatana. In 116 BC the country was conquered by Trajan, who converted it into a Roman province under the name of Assyria, with Arbela<sup>13</sup> as its capital. Those authors who deny the continuity of the Assyrian people argue that the name given to the region is to be taken solely in a geographical sense, and that it has nothing whatsoever to do with the people bearing the same name. There exist, however, other factors, which prove exactly the opposite. The geographical situation is not the only criterion, which defines the Assyrian region; it is thus called because in that region there existed people of that name with its own cultural identity.

Notwithstanding the destruction of Nineveh, Nimrud, Ashur and various other cities, the Assyrians did all they could to keep their religion alive. In 401 BC a Greek general, Xenophon, who was in the employ of Cyrus, king of Persia, the son of Darius, wrote a chronicle about the Assyrians who lived on the banks of the river Tigris. He observes that Ashur, which was at that time called Kinai, was a prosperous city. He recounts that there were still many survivors and that a great number of monuments and dwellings had been preserved. Many towns also survived in the area surrounding Nimrud, which was at that time called Larissa. He also wrote about a town called Mapila, the name of which is regarded by many authors as having given origin to the word "Mosul," and which was a city situated very close to the capital (Nineveh). In the first century of the Christian era, a city called Hatra emerges very close to Ashur. Its inhabitants would seem to have used Aramaic as their language. These people adored gods from Mesopotamia such as Ishshar-Bel. "Ishshar" in fact corresponds to the

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excavations at Ashur, and it is clear that they were reduced to extreme poverty under Persian rule."

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 52; R.N. Frye, "Assyria and Syria: Synonyms," *Journal of Assyrian Academic Studies* 11, no. 2 (1997). The author agrees with the point we are making when he says: "Consequently the Greeks equated the political empire with the Aramaic speaking population living in it, which was quite logical to the Greeks," p. 31.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. E. Hertzfeld, *The Persian Empire* (Wiesbaden: 1968), 305.

<sup>12</sup> American Encyclopedia, art. *Adiabene* (1982) II, p.166.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Paulys Realencyclopädie der Classischen Altertumswissenschaft, (Wiesbaden: 1983).

neo-Assyrian pronunciation of “Ishtar.”<sup>14</sup> They also adored the god Shamash and celebrated the New Year in the same way as the Assyrians.

After the Greeks, arrived the Parthians and then the Romans whose empires were separated by the river Tigris. The Romans conquered Nineveh in 115 BC. When it fell in 200, the province assumed once more the name of Assyria. For this reason, those who claim that the name “Assyria” derives from its geographical position must admit that not only is it the name of the region, but that there are also other elements which clearly indicate the on-going existence of the Assyrian people. Until the time of their conversion to Christianity, these people went on practicing their religion and jealously guarded their traditions.

The Nabu temple in Nineveh was restored during the first century of the Christian era. Inscriptions belonging to this self-same period have been found written in Assyrian, Aramaic and Greek. Nimrud and its temples were rebuilt and Ashur, before disappearing under the Sassanid domination, was transformed into a large and prosperous city in whose temples the adoration of Assyrian gods was re-introduced, eight centuries after the fall of the Assyrian empire itself.

### **Linguistic complexity**

The cuneiform Assyrian language did not die out as a consequence of the fall of the Assyrian Empire. There are even those who believe that the Assyrian language had already disappeared before the fall of the empire. This conjecture is completely unfounded.<sup>15</sup> One expert on this subject, W. Andrae, can provide us with precious insights for understanding how far the Assyrian language had developed and what sort of people availed themselves of it: “They were not mere scribes, but rather philosophical poets whose prayers and writings delighted the king.”<sup>16</sup> Fortunately, thanks to the translations that are now available, we have copious material at our disposal.

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<sup>14</sup> S. Parpola, *Assyrian Prophecies*, p. XXVI: The word “Ishtar” is translated as “it is the spirit of God, who, residing in the heart of the prophet, *spirits* him and speaks through his or her lips”.

<sup>15</sup> J. Joseph, “The Bible and the Assyrians. It kept their Memory Alive,” *Journal of Assyrian Academic Studies*, 12, no.1 (1998): 72. When he says: “There was nothing ‘Assyrian’ to be read and remembered,” and even worse: “the language of the cuneiform documents, Akkadian, had ceased to exist as carrier of ancient Assyrian culture even before the fall of the Assyrian empire” this proves that the author in question should familiarize himself better with the most recent discoveries in the field of Assyrian studies which attest to the vast literary activity associated with cuneiform sources from the period of the Assyrian empire.

<sup>16</sup> W. Andrae, *Das wiedererstandene Assur*. Zweite und durchgesehene und erweiterte Auflage herausgegeben von B. Hrouda (1977), 19. Cf. Alasdair Livingstone, *Court Poetry and Literary Miscellanea*, p. XX.

It is important to draw a distinction between the disappearance of a language and its co-existence with another.<sup>17</sup> As the latest discoveries have revealed, various tablets with cuneiform writing have been found close to the river Habur in the area called Sheikh Hamed. These tablets deal with Assyrian legal terminology and date from the years 603-600 BC. We should perhaps examine this topic from the point of view of its linguistic history, which would enable us to make a closer study of the appearance and evolution of the Aramaic language in the territories of the Assyrian Empire.

It should be pointed out that several Assyrian kings insisted that their correspondence be written exclusively in the vernacular (Assyrian),<sup>18</sup> as can be seen in the letter from Sargon II to Sin-iddin of Ur. Furthermore, after the deportation en masse<sup>19</sup> of the Arameans to Assyria, Aramaic gradually became a common means of communication, though it should be borne in mind that Assyrian continued to be the language of the ruling classes, while Aramaic was the language of the underdogs.

What we can safely say is that gradually Aramaic began to replace cuneiform Assyrian. One of the reasons for this inversion was that Aramaic has a much simpler alphabet compared with the almost 700 syllables or so used in Assyrian and Babylonian, and constitutes by itself a separate linguistic branch called "Eastern Semitic" by contrast with the others which are grouped under the term "western Semitic languages". The spread of Aramaic throughout the Assyrian empire was mainly due, as we have just indicated, to the relative simplicity of the language itself, as well as to the large-scale deportation of Arameans to Assyria between the 9<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> centuries BC. As time went by, the deportees began to occupy important positions within the Assyrian government, which in turn led to their language becoming the main means of communication at both on administrative and international level.<sup>20</sup> This tendency for Aramaic to predominate over Assyrian was a significant contributing factor leading to the present-day state of confusion with which we now have to contend.

### **The Assyrian people and the Bible**

In spite of the huge amount of documentation in our possession concerning the Assyrian people, there are those who believe that this people vanished from the face of the earth and may only be known by means of the biblical references

<sup>17</sup> There is no need to go back to the time of the domination of the Assyrian empire to demonstrate that the cuneiform language not only had not disappeared, but was also of great service to Aramaic because of its vocalic precision. As an example of this cf. the Uruk oath text (150 BC, circa, written in syllabic cuneiform. Cf. J. Ribera-Florit, *Gramática del Arameo Clásico (Oficial)* (Barcelona: 1993), 9.

<sup>18</sup> S. Parpola, *The Correspondence of Sargon II*, State Archives of Assyria, vol. 1 (Helsinki: The Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, 1987), p. XVI.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. O. Bustenay, *Mass Deportations and Deportees in the Neo-Assyrian Empire* (Wiesbaden: Reichert, 1979), 116-135.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. V. Hug, *Altaramäische Grammatik der Texte des 7. und 6. Jahrhunderts v. Chr.* (Heidelberg: 1993), 20 ff.

to it. An objective researcher would never arrive at such a hasty conclusion. It would perhaps be more reasonable to say that the Holy Scriptures speak of the Assyrians in the same way as they also speak of various other peoples. It is, however, incorrect to say that all we are left with now are historical reminiscences. I believe it is necessary to explore a little more deeply the historical evolution of the Assyrian people.

The Assyrian people never stopped existing in that its memory, its history and its cultural heritage are abundantly attested to. The documentation we possess consists of Assyrian sources written in the vernacular, in Aramaic and in Greek and it continues from after the fall of the Assyrian Empire until well into the Christian era.

According to E.Y. Odisho, this tendency to confuse the fall of the Assyrian Empire with its total destruction<sup>21</sup> is the fruit of an erroneous interpretation of the words of the prophet Nahum.<sup>22</sup> Generally speaking the biblical references present an image of the Assyrians as a people punished by God on account of their arrogance and brutality, without taking into account the positive aspects of their empire as manifested during its years of greatest splendor.<sup>23</sup>

Apart from the written documentation which has come down to us, we should also bear in mind the deeply-rooted oral tradition of the Assyrian people, which preserved its specific identity even after its conversion to Christianity. There is indisputable evidence to prove this: for example, the close church-state links, and the characteristic Church-nation structure obtained. The traditional denominational Churches have clearly preserved their constituent parts in terms of being national. Their liturgical-cultural heritage confirms this characteristic, even though many authors who operate within rigid scholastic parameters do not agree with it. At a later point in this article we shall explain the terms which are erroneously used to refer to these peoples, terms such as “Nestorians,” “Syriac-Jacobites,” “Eastern/Western Syrians,” “Syrians,” and so forth. All of these factors, and others besides, have brought us to the present-day mistaken view of the question. Nevertheless, it must be said that most modern researchers hardly bother themselves with the task of penetrating in greater detail the historical reality of this people.

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<sup>21</sup> An example of such an unfounded claim is to be found in the book by, W. Durant, *The Story of Civilization: Our Oriental Heritage* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1954), 283-284: “Nineveh was laid to waste . . . , the population was slaughtered or enslaved, . . . . At one blow Assyria disappeared from history. Nothing remained of her except certain tactics and weapons of war, . . . . Not a stone remained visible of all the temples . . . .”

<sup>22</sup> E.Y. Odisho, *The Sound System of Modern Assyrian (Neo-Aramaic)* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1988), 7: “It is my belief that the confusion between the annihilation of the Assyrian political system and the annihilation of the Assyrian people has emanated from Prophet Nahum’s words. It is, therefore, unfortunate that many writers on ancient history regurgitate the prophecy without objective scrutiny and interpretation.”

<sup>23</sup> Cf. H.W.F. Saggs, *The Assyrian People. Peoples of Old Testament Times*, ed. D.J. Wiseman (Oxford: 1973), 156-196, here cf. p.171.

As I pointed out earlier, the Assyrians have only been studied in terms of a people who have vanished. However, the fall of the Assyrian empire did not automatically bring with it the total and absolute disappearance of the Assyrians; what is more, there are clear indications to the contrary. For example, we have no indication that the Assyrian people ever suffered deportation, and from this we may deduce that they can legitimately boast of their historical and cultural continuity right up until the present day.<sup>24</sup>

The recognition of the Assyrian people's rights as a people-nation, which the West had forgotten about, was obtained once more in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. The reasons for this sinking into obscurity goes way back to the times of the difficult situation created by the Persian and Roman domination of the country. As has already been shown, the Persians dominated the Assyrians, and this fact has led many scholars to regard this group of people, which by then had converted to Christianity, as being of Persian origin. Nevertheless, however as much as some authors may wish to go on denying this people's survival during the course of many centuries, these ethnic groups, who can rightly claim an illustrious ancestry and real links with important ancient civilizations are, beyond all doubt, a very real on-going reality.

### **The Assyrians after their conversion to Christianity**

With the arrival of Christianity, the institutional church gradually assumed the role of the state, and was transformed into the national Church of the country. Having been deprived of their political leaders and the ruling dynasty, the Assyrians re-grouped around their ecclesiastical institutions. For this reason the Patriarch came to represent for his people not only spiritual, but also temporal authority. In this way the Church<sup>25</sup> became the safe-keeper of the traditions and culture of its people. Had things not been so, the Assyrian community would have had great difficulty in overcoming the countless obstacles it had to face and would probably not have survived to the present day.

After its conversion, this people, as well as being called Assyrian or Chaldean also began to be called by various different names: Nestorians, Syrians, Syriac Jacobites, and Arameans. However, many of these terms are relatively recent; in ancient times the expression generally used was the "Church of the East." These newer names evolved as a result of religious and ethnographical problems. If we look at them analytically, it will be noted that the terms "Nestorian" and "Jacobite" are inappropriately used, given that the The Church

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<sup>24</sup> J. A. Brinkman, rightly recognizes a fundamental point, i.e., there is no reason to think that the Assyrian people lack cultural and historical continuity, since there is no evidence to prove that the Assyrians were moved or deported. In a talk he gave on January 17, 1999 he affirmed: "There is no reason to believe that there would be no racial or cultural continuity in Assyria, since there is no evidence that the population of Assyria was removed."

<sup>25</sup> We shall use the expression "Assyrian-Chaldean Church" because it has the advantage of joining together, in a single term, references to both branches of what was once the unified ancient "Church of the East."



of the East goes back to the Apostolic tradition, whereas both of these terms were only coined as a result of the Christological controversies of the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> centuries. In fact, the term “Nestorian” was introduced by the Jacobites (Monophysites), who thereby reduced the doctrines of an entire tradition to the person of Nestorius, because of his close links with the school of Antioch<sup>26</sup> and that of the Monophysites to the figure of Jacob Baradæus. For their part, the Assyrians never called themselves Nestorians; the truth is that they had the label forced upon them against their will.<sup>27</sup>

The term “Syriac,” which derives its origin from Syria, as well as being artificial lacks a historical basis. This term was applied by the Greeks to those countries of Assyrian origin<sup>28</sup> situated to the East of the Euphrates. Nevertheless, this Christian community, which lived to the West of the Euphrates, is totally different in origin. In my opinion, this confusion is mainly due to one specific historical fact: Antioch was the capital of Syria and at the same time an important center for the propagation of Christianity, where for the first time the baptized received the name of “Christians.”

It should be remembered that the Syriac people, as such, does not exist, nor does the language of that name. Such a term lacks linguistic and historical roots.

As regards the term “Syrians,” this label properly describes the inhabitants of Syria, a country with which the Christian community in question had no ethnic links whatsoever.

The terms Syriac and Syrian were used interchangeably to express the same concept. After the schism of the 5<sup>th</sup> century, the conflicts that led to their separation began to characterize the differences between the so-called Syriac Churches: Eastern and Western. Be that as it may, as far as the Orientals themselves were concerned, only the Jacobites (Monophysites) acquired the title of Syriac Church.

As regards the title “Christians of the East,” the term “Eastern” is extremely generic and tells us nothing of the ethnic origins, the concrete people or language of the group in question. The label “Church of the East” or “Oriental Church” had as its prime motivation, I believe, the intention of excluding a certain group from this Church. Practically speaking, no one can think that by using the expression “Oriental Church” it would be possible to avoid the tendency for the name “Assyrian” to predominate over the other members of this Church. This would take for granted the fact that those in charge of the Assyrian Church were fully and explicitly conscious of the problem itself. In fact, the letter sent by Timothy to the monks of Mar Marun leaves no doubt as to the fact that Assyria,

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<sup>26</sup> Cf. R. Le Coz, *Histoire de l’Eglise d’Orient; Chrétiens d’Irak, d’Iran et de Turquie* (Paris: 1995), 51.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Aziz S. Atiya, *A History of Eastern Christianity* (London: Methuen & Co Ltd, 1968), 240.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. J. Yacoub, *Babylone chrétienne. Géopolitique de l’Eglise de Mésopotamie* (Paris: 1996), 13 ff.

Babylonia, Persia and the other oriental countries such as India and China were all under his jurisdiction.<sup>29</sup>

Another plausible interpretation underlines the fact that the title “Oriental Church” may have another origin, in that converts were in the habit of renouncing their ethnic-national name since it reminded them of their pagan past. Beginning at around this time there was even the frequent tendency to replace proper names with biblical ones, a practice which is still widespread in certain Churches, for example the Coptic Church, whose priests receive a new name after ordination.

These Christians, whose origins go back to the Apostolic tradition, were also called “Persian Christians” or the “Persian Church,” terms which are connected with the Persian domination at the time of early Christianity. However that may be, even though the Assyrians were invaded by the Persians, they never identified with them, since they regarded the Persians living in their territories as invaders and as occupying forces. The difficulties and persecutions inflicted upon the Assyrian faithful under Persian domination are a clear indication of the fact that they were perfectly aware that they were not part of the Persian empire, but that their relationship with it was defined in terms of overlords (the Persians) on the one hand and underlings (the Assyrians) on the other.

As a result, the answer to our initial question should be given by the Assyrians themselves and we should abandon all artificially elaborated schemes. On the one hand we find the so-called Nestorians and Chaldeans who call themselves *Suraye* (*Suraya* in the singular), whose language is called *Suret*. On the other the so-called Syriacs who call themselves *Suryoye* (singular *Suryoyo*), whose language is called *Suryoyo*. For many these terms are all more or less synonyms of one thing: “Christians.” Leaving to one side all these terms, however, both Churches are conscious of belonging to the Oriental Church. For instance, if we take a closer and more careful look at the Aramaic transcription of the terms “*Suraya*” and “*Suryoyo*” we find they are preceded by the letter “A” with a symbol above indicating that this “A” is not to be pronounced. If we therefore eliminate this sign, the more exact pronunciation of these two words would be “*Asuraya*” and “*Asuryoyo*,” a clear indication of their connection with the word “Assyrian.” Since the beginning of this century the term “*Aturaye*”<sup>30</sup> began to replace the term “*Suraye*.”

We could say that the names “Assyrian,” “Chaldean,” “Babylonian” and “Aramaic” are perhaps not only the most correct but also the most scientifically appropriate. Since the remotest periods the term Aramaic was used to describe a concrete people with various territories. Just as with Aramaic the terms Assyrian, Chaldean and Babylonian find their *raison d’être* in historical and ethnic fact. It is well known that the Patriarchs of the Eastern Church were in the habit of using the titles “Patriarch of Babylonia,” “of the Chaldeans” or “of Assyria.” In our

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Bidawid Raphaël, *Les Lettres du Patriarche nestorien Timothée I*, Studi e Testi 187, Ciudad del Vaticano 1956, 30, (XLI), p.117. Rafaël Bidawid is the present Patriarch of that part of this church, which has been united with Rome since 1552, since that time it has been called “Chaldean.”

<sup>30</sup> *Aturaya*, comes from the word *Atur* and means Assyria.

own times, the branch in communion with Rome is called the Chaldean Church. The two sister branches now should re-unite so that in this way the expression *Assyrian-Chaldean* can re-cover its full meaning, thus putting an end to the conflicts of the past which led this Church to split into two.

We shall now concentrate on certain debates, which sprang up in recent times, which cast doubts on the real and tangible existence of the Assyrian-Chaldeans at the present time. At the beginning of this article, I observed that we cannot hope to do justice to the Assyrian if we regard them as being an extinct people. Without going back to the dawn of their history, after their conversion to Christianity, it was the constant persecutions inflicted upon them, which prevented the complete organization of this people as Church and Nation. Those authors who deny the real existence of these two closely-related peoples should make the effort to familiarize themselves better with the situation of a group which in antiquity was persecuted by various foreign empires and which, in much more recent times, was repeatedly attacked by Kurds and Turks, since World War I it continued to demand its identity, autonomy and independence. It seems to me that no reasonably intelligent human being would put his life at risk for the sake of something, which does not exist. How many thousands of Assyrians lost their lives during World War I for this very cause? Is it possible that this whole question is caused by the mass hallucination of an entire people? I believe that the intelligent and diligent researcher should bear in mind a whole set of factors that seem to be essential in order to make a complete study of the historical evolution of a people. It is interesting that no-one casts doubt on the fact that the modern French go back to the ancient Gauls, the Spanish to the Iberians and the Celts and Jews to the ancient Israelites. The Turks claim to descend from the Hittites, the modern Egyptians claim to come from the ancient Egyptians, despite the fact that today all of them speak Arabic. Modern-day Assyrians belong to that small group of peoples whose real, tangible and historical existence is systematically denied. There is no doubt that very little time and space has been dedicated to the study of the history and culture of the Assyrians. Most researchers concentrate their attention on the Old Testament data. Nevertheless, such total disregard for the history and culture of the Assyrians is extremely puzzling, given that it could be of vital importance for a correct understanding of the Ancient Eastern cultures. Thanks to the vast number of victories which the Assyrian annals record and the various ways in which the Assyrians influenced human history, we have been able to familiarize ourselves with many forgotten peoples, as well as solving several enigmas of the ancient cultures of the East, and especially those mentioned in the Old Testament.

Those who deny the real, present-day existence of the Assyrians because they believe they were annihilated long ago must admit that even during the various invasions they suffered, the Assyrians carried on receiving the tributes paid by their vassals (the best example of this is to be found in the case of the Aramaic states).<sup>31</sup> This fact is true both of antiquity as well as of later times.

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<sup>31</sup> Concerning the domination of the Aramaic states by the Assyrians see the work of P.E.Dion, *Les Araméens à l'âge du Fer: Histoire politique et Structures Sociales* (Paris: 1997). This is a well-documented and reasonably complete work

Modern scholars today are quite happy to admit that a considerable number of Jews with their own schools and traditions continued to exist in Babylonia right up until the Middle Ages. These groups of people survived all the invasions and domination through the centuries without ever losing their sense of identity. Nevertheless it would seem that in the opinion of many, the Assyrians must necessarily represent an exception to this rule, since, for some reason, it has already been irrefutably decided that they were totally and utterly exterminated many centuries ago. I believe that before arriving at such radical conclusions there are many other factors to consider which contradict this opinion. It is true that the Scriptures often speak of the Assyrians, and it is perfectly understandable that most biblical references to this people are rather negative in content. However, it would be wrong to study the history of the Assyrians exclusively on the basis of the biblical references we possess. We should also take into account the oral tradition, which is exactly what is done in the case of the Jews, the Arabs and various other Oriental peoples,<sup>32</sup> since in all these cultures the validity of their oral traditions is recognized.

Despite all that has been said hitherto, many modern authors who have occupied themselves with the history of the Assyrians seem to ignore the importance of oral tradition even though it might enable them to clear up countless doubts in the course of their research.

Beyond any shadow of a doubt, the serious contributions made by J.-M Fiey are of outstanding value and throw much light on several topics in direct connection with the Assyrian people. It should be added that the conclusions he draws at the end of his article<sup>33</sup> should be somewhat qualified. This respected author should underline the fact that the Assyrian writers had, for the most part,

<sup>32</sup> The Rabbinic tradition accords the same rank and value to oral tradition as to written tradition. J.M. Baumgarten, "The unwritten Law in the Pre-Rabbinic Period," *JSJ* 3 (1972): 7-29; idem, "From Criticism and the Oral Law," *JSJ* 5 (1974): 34-40; N.K. Chadwick, *The Growth of Literature*, II & III, (Cambridge: 1936/40), (the author deals with the literature of various cultures); I. Heinemann, "Die Lehre vom ungeschriebenen Gesetz im jüdischen Schriftum," *HUCA* 4 (1927): 149-171; L. Finkelstein, "The Transmission of the Early Rabbinic Tradition," *HUCA* 16 (1941): 115-135; R. Brown, "Midrashim as Oral Traditions," *HUCA* 47 (1972): 1981-1989; B.O. Long, "Recent Field Studies in Oral Literature and their Bearing on Old Testament Criticism," *VT* 26 (1976): 187-198; W.S. Towner, "Form Criticism of Rabbinic Literature," *JSJ* 24 (1973): 101-118; J. Vansina, *Oral Tradition: a Study in Historical Methodology* (Chicago: 1965); J. Neusner, "The Rabbinic Tradition about the Pharisees before 70 AD: the Problem of Oral Tradition," *Kairos* 14 (1972): 57-70; Id., "The Written Tradition in the Pre-Rabbinic Period," *JSJ* 4 (1974): 56-65; Id., *Oral Tradition in Judaism: the case of the Mishnah*, (New York: 1987); H.L. Strack - G. Stemberger, *Einleitung in Talmud und Midrasch* 7 (Munich: 1982) - the Spanish edition was prepared by M. Pérez Fernández, *Introducción a la Literatura Talmúdica y Midrásica* (Valencia: 1988).

<sup>33</sup> J. M. Fiey, "Assyriens" ou "Araméens," *L'Orient Syrien* 10 (1965): 146-148, 156; also J.F. Coakley, *The Church of the East and the Church of England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 366 ff., the author says that the name "Assyrian" had been recorded since the remotest times.

received their education and training in monasteries, and for that very reason all Assyrian writers had biblical names. The reason why the Assyrians usually refused to use traditional proper names was, as we have already mentioned, because of their total identification with the new religion which was Judeo-Christian by origin and tradition. Despite the abundance of biblical names in normal use, Assyrian names do occasionally occur as, for example, in the case of Raz-Marduk,<sup>34</sup> who was a convert to Christianity within the Church in question. Without spending any further time on the subject, we should perhaps simply mention the information provided by Tatian who speaks of himself as “having been born in the land of the Assyrians.”<sup>35</sup> According to Segal, Tatian’s town of birth was Adiabene, and in fact he returned there in 172 AD,<sup>36</sup> Vööbus also comments: “P. E. Kahle proposed the view that Tatian returned to his home country of Assyria and settled there. This proposition doubtlessly fits in better with our present knowledge.”<sup>37</sup> Tatian was not only born in the land of the Assyrians, but he also refers to himself as being an Assyrian.<sup>38</sup> It is clear that he is referring to his ethnic group and not simply to his geographical birthplace.

Consequently, the fact that we do not come across typically Assyrian names is due to the fact that almost all the names of the Patriarchs, who were important public figures, were biblical because they had changed them (see appendix at the end of this article), as was usual among the Christians of their culture at that time. One has to go back to the first centuries of the Christian era in order to appreciate just how rare the use of typically Assyrian names was, and this is due to the ceaseless persecutions inflicted on those who had converted to Christianity from the very beginning.

The consequence of this harsh situation of constant oppression and harassment over a period of centuries led the Assyrians to attach much more importance to their Christian religion than to their national identity *per se*. This phenomenon, moreover, was further accentuated by the rise of Islam, which initiated the persecution of the Assyrians principally because of their religion. It is impossible for those who have never lived in the Middle East to understand the complexity of this situation. Those who have never suffered under similar

<sup>34</sup> W.G. Young, *Patriarch, Shah and Caliph. A Study of the Relationships of the Church of the East with the Sassanid Empire and the Early Caliphates up to 829 AD, with Special References to Available Translated Syriac Sources* (Rawalpindi, Pakistan: Christian Study Centre, 1974), 13.

<sup>35</sup> Tatian, *Oratio*, 42.

<sup>36</sup> J.B. Segal, *Edessa ‘The Blessed City’* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), 165; Cf. S.H. Moffett, *A History of Christianity in Asia vol. I: Beginnings to 1500* (San Francisco: Harper Collins Publishers, 1991), 72.

<sup>37</sup> A. Vööbus, *The Early Versions of the New Testament: Manuscript Studies* (Stockholm: The Estonian Theological Society in Exile, 1954), 24.

<sup>38</sup> A. Vööbus, *Studies in the History of the Gospel Text in Syriac*, *Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium*, 128 (Louvain: 1951), 10: “KglLohgA: ʘL |L J– JäL UFFlkÆL K±.”

circumstances will never be able to comprehend the fate of a people which once numbered more than eighty million Christians, at a time when there were hardly half that number in the West. The Assyrian Christians paid a very high price for protecting their identity, especially when we consider their present situation that offers only the prospect of fleeing from their country to live in the Diaspora with a constant feeling of nostalgia for their homeland.

It is perfectly understandable that the Assyrians of today continue claim the right to their own identity. Other peoples with less justification seem to receive more recognition than they do. Their tradition, their language, and their history clearly show that they are not the same as the Syrians with whom they have often been confused. We prefer to accept Frye's opinion: "The modern Assyrians, with more justification, since their language is a Semitic tongue related to ancient Assyrian, claim descent from ancient Assyrians: and history is more the record of what people believe than the mere recording of events."<sup>39</sup> The most serious wound, which can be inflicted upon a people, is to take its identity from it. The Assyrians have already suffered enough in defense of their identity: I believe that they deserve more consideration than they are being given at the present time. On countless occasions they were promised that their land would be returned, yet justice has never been done to them. The only way to do them justice is to recognize their existence, and to support them in their task of re-building themselves as a people, which is exactly what they have always struggled to do.

## Appendix

We offer the following list of the patriarchs who were considered as political heads as well as fathers of the Assyrian-Chaldean Church. (In order to avoid any kind of confusion, the following list is given only according to the name of patriarchal seat): Mar Thoma Shlikha, Mar Addai (regarded as the founder of the patriarchal seat of **Seleucia-Ctesiphon** around the year 37 AD). The Patriarchs who resided there are: Mar Aggai, Mar Mari (120), Mar Abres (121-137), Mar Awraham I (159-171), Mar Ya'co I (-190), Ahha d'Abui (204-220), Shahlupa (220-240), from 240-317 vacant seat, Papa (317-329), Mar Shim'on Bar Sabb'a (329-341), Mar Shahdoste (341-345), Barbasmin (345- 350), from 350-363 vacant seat, Tumarsa (363-371), Qayoma (372-399), Mar Ishac I (399-410), Mar Ahha (410-415), Mar Yab-Alaha I (415-420), Ma'ana (420), Frabokht (420) - these last two patriarchs were deposed because they had been forced upon the Church by the political authorities - Dadisho I (412-456), Mar Babwahi (457-484), Aqaq (485-496), Mar Babai I (497-503) - who was given the title of "Nestorian Patriarch" - Shila (503-523), Narsai & Elisha (524-539) - both patriarchs acted concurrently as heads of the Assyrian-Chaldean Church, thus provoking a schism which was to last for almost 150 years), Mar Paulos I (539-540), Mar Abba I (540-552), Mar Yawsep I (552-566), Mar Ezaquiel (567-581), Isho-Yab I (582-595), Sabrisho I (596-604), Gregorius I (605-609), from 609-628 vacant seat, Isho-Yab II (628-645), Mar Emme (645-649), Isho-Yab III (649-660), Giwerguis I (661-680), Yohannan I Bar Marta (681-683), from 683-685

<sup>39</sup> R.N. Frye, *Assyria and Syria: Synonyms*, p.34.

vacant seat, Hnan-Isho I (685-700), Yohannan no legiimo (691-693), from 700-714 vacant seat, Sliva Zkha (714-728), from 728-731 vacant seat, Petion (731-740), Mar Abba II (741-751), Sorin (754: he was deposed by the Caliph at the request of the Bishops); Ya'qo II (754-773), Hnan-Isho II (774-780). Patriarchs resident in **Baghdad**: Timothy I (780-823), Isho Ben Nun (823-828), Guiwarguis II (828-830), Sabrisho II (837-850), from 850-853 vacant seat, Theodosio or Athanasio (853-858), from 858-860 vacant seat, Sarguis I (860-872), from 872-877 vacant seat, Israel de Kashkar (877), Anoshe I (877-884), Yahannan II Bar Narsai (884-892), Yohannan III (893-899), Yohannan IV Bar Abgare (900-905), Abraham III Abraza (905-937), Emmanuel (937-960), Israel (961-962), Abdisho I (963-986), Mari II Bar-Tobia (987-1000), Yohannan V Ibn Yssa (1000-1011), Yohannan VI Nazuk (1012-1020), Isho-Yab IV Bar Ezequiel (1020-1025), from 1025-1028 vacant seat, Elia I (1028-1049), Yohannan VII Bar Targala (1049-1057), Sabrisho II Zambur (1057-1071), Abdisho II Ben Aridh (1072-1091), Mackikha I (1092-1110), Elia II Bar Moqli (1116-1132), Bar Sauma I (1133-1136), from 1136-1139 vacant seat, Abdisho III Bar Moqli (1139-1148), Isho-Yah V Albaladi (1148-1176), Elia III (1176-1190), Yab-Alaha (1190-1222), Sabrisho IV Bar Qaioma (1222-1226), Sabrisho V (1226-1256), Mackikha II (1257-1265), Denkha I (1265-1282). Patriarch resident in **Maragha**: Yab-Alaha III (1283-1317). Patriarch with seat in **Erbil**: Timothy II (1318-1332). Patriarch resident in **Karemle**: Denkha II (1332-1364). Patriarchs with seat in Mosul: Shim'un II (1365-1392), from 1392-1403 vacant seat, Shim'un III (1403-1407), from 1407-1437 vacant seat, Elias IV (1437), Shim'un IV (1437-1497). Patriarchs resident in **Djezire**, monastery of Mar Yohannan: Shim'un V (1497-1501), Elias V (1502-1503). Patriarchs resident in **Alqosh**, Raban Hormez Monastery: Shim'un VI (1504-1538), Shim'un VII (1538-1555), Shim'un VIII Denkha (1555-1558), Elias VI (1558-1576), Elias VII (1576-1591), Elias VIII (1591-1617), Elias IX Shim'un (1617-1660), Elias X Yohannan Marogin (1660-1700), Elias XI Moragin (1700-1722), Elias XII Denkha (1172-1778), Elias XIII Isho-Yab (1778-1804). Patriarchs resident once more in **Mosul**: Yohannan VIII Hormez \* (1830-1888), Niqaleos Zaia\* (1840-1847), Yawsep VI Audo\* (1848-1878), Elias IV Abo-Alyonan\* (1879-1894), Abdisho V Khayat\* (1894-1899), Yawsep Emmanuel II Toma\* (1900-1947). Patriarchs resident in **Baghdad**: Yawsep VII Ghanima\* (1947-1958), Paulos II Sheiko\* (1958-1989), Rafael Bidawid\* (1989). In order to complete our list of Patriarchs and to prove our point about continuity here are those who are missing from the above list: Patriarch resident in **Amed** (Amida): Shim'un VIII Yohannan Sulaqa\* (1552-1555), Patriarchs resident in **Sirt**: Abdisho IV Marun\* (1555-1567), Yab-Alaha V\* (1578-1580). Patriarch resident in **Urmia**: Shim'un IX Denkha\* (1581-1600). Patriarchs resident in **Salamas**: Shim'un X\* (1600-1638), Shimun XI\* (1638-1656). Patriarch resident in **Urmia**: Shim'un XII\* (1656-1662). Patriarchs resident in **Qotshane** (Turkey): Shimun XIII Denkha (1662-1700), Shim'un XV Shleman (1700-1740), Shim'un XVI Maqdassi (1740-1780), Shim'un XVI Yohannan (1780-1820), Shim'un XVII Abraham (1820-1861), Shim'un XVIII Ruel (1861-1903). Patriarch resident in **Salamas**: Shim'un XIX Benyamin (assassinated) (1903-1918). Patriarch resident in **Mosul**: Shim'un XX Paulos (1918-1920). Patriarch resident in **San Francisco** (USA): Shim'un XXI Ishai

(assassinated) (1920-1975). Patriarch resident in **Chicago** (USA) Mar Denkha IV (1976-). The following Catholic Patriarchs of **Amida** (present-day Diyarbekir) are needed to complete the list : Yawsep I (1681-1695), Yawsep II (1696-1713), Yawsep III(1713-1757), Yawsep IV (1757-1781), Yawsep V (1804-1828). The above-mentioned patriarchs marked with an asterisk (\*) were in communion with Rome.