



Thou Shall Not Tread on History

By Yoab Benjamin

During the last hundred and fifty years or so, some work of investigation has been carried through on the question of ethnic and linguistic identity of modern Assyrians and their place in human history.

A number of Western and Western-oriented scholars who have recorded the history of the Assyrian people, ancient and modern, have in some instances attempted to deliberately mystify, shroud and even discard significant parts of this history. In other instances, they have ignored and twisted certain essential facts with regards to the ethno-linguistic identity of the Assyrian people. Properly speaking, these critical scholars have formed opinions and passed judgments that have no claim to validity.

It comes as a surprise to the historical inquirer who investigates these scholarly works to discover that their authors have hardly been successful in treating this issue reasonably well and with careful insight that such an undertaking demands. In most cases, their theoretical approach lacks sound judgment, and their studies are for the most part extremely biased. In this manner, these studies are hardly suited to the purpose of giving accurate and coherent coverage to the social and national life of modern Assyrians.

What is rather a matter of astonishment is that these scholars who cannot look upon the Assyrians otherwise than as religious communities, have a tendency to refer to the history and heritage of this nation only in connection with the Nestorian Church, or one of the other ancient Assyrian churches, declaring that the chapter of the Assyrian history is forever closed.

The Assyrian people are left with a depressed feeling when they find out that most writers in the field of modern history have neglected their plight and the harsh realities they have been facing. They feel even more depressed because international political circles and those concerned with the general welfare of humanity have been far from being sympathetic to the plea of the contemporary Assyrians for a realistic understanding of their heartrending lot and the justice of their cause.

But this need not seem strange. These writers can hardly be blamed, since it is not likely to expect from those who do not view the distinguishing traits of the social and national life of these people in the same way as the Assyrians themselves do. Nor is it likely to expect from these authors to write about the remarkable culture and history of the people of this nation, with a degree of exactitude and in a way which will entirely be fair to them.

In any case, to remove doubts and get a true perspective of their social and national life, and to understand and appreciate more fully the value of their cultural heritage, it is entirely important to study these aspects in the light of higher and fuller historical knowledge. It is also of significant value to attempt to investigate patiently the great mass of material objects that were left behind by the Assyrian people of the ancient and recent past, as well as the various texts, sacred and secular, that have reached our present civilization from widely separated periods of their history. For it is to history that the historical inquirer must return in order to free the facts from what darkens them. In our view, appropriate methodology must be employed in formulating the modern Assyrian history. Above all, it should be discussed in a new light by those who are imbued with modern historical spirit, and most importantly, be told by the Assyrians themselves.

With this objective in mind, spreading of the right information about the different aspects of Assyrian life, civil or political, religious or cultural is very essential. It is the concern and the message of the knowledgeable writers who are disposed to think without partiality and prejudice. It is also the task of the candid Assyrian scholars and intellectuals who can inform and bring the magnificent heritage of their people closer to the minds of Assyrian masses through research projects and cultural activities which focus on different aspects of their life, and which respond to matters that affect the mass of the contemporary Assyrians. Such information will afford these people an increase in their awareness and help them free their minds from the many distortions ever present among the less informed readers within the Assyrian community. It will also serve as a contributing factor in asserting the Assyrian personality and its continuum in history.

As we have often seen, a variety of ethnic names and identities have been attributed to the Assyrian people to designate their lineal origin. Loose names like Nestorians and Jacobites, Syrians, Aramaeans, and in some texts, the Lost Tribes of Israel, have been frequently used. *Nabataeans* (al-Anbat) is a name that was used particularly by the Arabs in the aftermath of the Moslem conquest of the Assyrian homeland. And last but not least, the vague appellation of *Chaldaeans* which had formerly been limited to a group of Assyrian people that was formed into a separate Uniate Church in the 16th century, has been lately added to this list of ethnic identities."

On the other hand, names like Aramaic, Chaldaean, and more recently the term Neo-Aramaic, have been indiscriminately applied to refer to the language of modern Assyrians.

In our view, none of these stereotyped names are based on an authentic genealogical descent, or on a scientific defining criterion of an entity. It is very likely that the terms some scholars have used, are for the most part based on and influenced by European modes of analysis and classification. On the other hand, we often find that some of these conservative writers have linguistic sensitivity over the usage of the term Assyrian. One can easily see that the multiplicity of names and the misuse of terminology are due to lack of insight. These appellations which have been determined in an arbitrary manner cannot white-wash the rich cultural identity of the Assyrian people which has been maintained throughout the successive stages of their existence.

Perhaps what makes it come as a surprise, at least to the Assyrian reader, is when he discovers that there have been, even among Assyrians, men of intellectual ability who have argued and disputed the Assyrian character of their own people. Two prominent Assyrian scholars of Western cultural conditioning, Hormuzd Rassam and John Joseph, have reinterpreted Mesopotamian history and its culture following an approach that is more in line with the concept of some conventional Western researchers. They consider modern Assyrian-speaking natives of Mesopotamia of Chaldaean character.

This is intentional historical forgery and the aim is obviously to undermine the Assyrian sense of ethnic identity.

Rassam and Joseph who allowed their zeal to overcome their responsibilities as scholars have failed to set the subject matter they dealt with in proper perspective. The authors, and more particularly Rassam whose archaeological background should have made him more familiar with his ancient Assyrian culture, seem to have overlooked the very important fact that the archaeological discoveries made in Assyria and Babylonia did not reveal existence of any ruined Chaldaean community center. Nor was it possible to identify the name of Chaldaean, or Chaldaeae, in any ancient account mentioned in the inscriptions found in these discoveries.

Unlike analyses of most of the successor generation of the Assyrian writers, Rassam's views with regards to the origin of the Assyrian people, as well as those of the Assyrian academician John Joseph, and the conclusions of all those who propounded such ideas or attempted to draw up a new cultural face for this society, have no mentionable significance anywhere in the majority of the Assyrian people.

The knowledgeable reader finds these two authors jumping back and forth between antiquity and the early modern period of Mesopotamian history, creating a rupture between the Assyrian people and their glorious heritage.

On the basis of their discussion, the authors drew wrong conclusions in their attempt to determine the nature and characteristics of the personality of the Assyrian people. Intentionally or not, they gave a confused picture about the racial bonds and cultural chronology of the Assyrian nation (Umta Aturaita). Their work, which contains many misguided notions, confuses this people's status and identity. One would not think that their work is of such a standard as to justify their assertions. In fact their conclusions do not seem to have any factual foundation; they appear to be unfounded as they are misleading.

The terms Chaldeyutha and Chaldaean bear a variety of different and blurred meanings. It is, however quite generally believed that the appellation Chaldeyutha was applied particularly to a group of people inhabiting Babylonia who "computed the positions of planets". Some evidence in old Assyrian books and chronicles suggest that this term was used in this sense without any racial connotation, and beyond that, linked with the concept of atheism, divination and Magianism.

If these people are to be regarded as astrologers and fortune-tellers, then there is no justification in applying their name

to the people of the most ancient civilizations. Taking this fact into consideration, one cannot possibly doubt that it was not likely for the pre-Christianity people of Assyria and Babylonia to put up with, or to describe themselves by a term indicating such practices. Nor was it likely for them after adopting Christianity to be nicknamed by a descriptive name given to some other people whose name was never considered acceptable because of its pre-Christian pagan connotations. The semantic association of the term Chaldaean with these epithets survived until the Roman Catholic missionaries gave this appellation to a group of Assyrian people that was formed into a separate Uniate Church to which the same name Chaldaean was given as well. It deserves to be mentioned here that when the Achaemenid Xerxes possessed authority over Assyria and Babylonia, "Babylon disappeared as an independent satrapy and was annexed to Assyria. Her troops were intermingled with those from Assyria to prevent further uprising and were now known as Chaldaeans, for since 482 the very name of Babylonia was officially under ban". It is here that we find the origin of the confusion, and it is from this cause that the appellation Chaldaeans was improperly given to the land known in recorded history as Babylonia.

When Christianity spread to Babylonia, a small number of the Chaldaeans, or more correctly pseudo-Chaldaeans, adopted the new faith. Now as Christians, they were only called Chaldaeans by way of abuse.¹⁹ Not long after the rise of Islam, the Chaldaeans were designated as Sabians (al-Sabiya). Their own way of life was confronted and influenced by Arab culture. During the centuries that followed, they adopted the Arabic tongue and were mostly Islamized.

Here a question arises: If the settlements of the Chaldaeans were in the cities of the Tigris-Euphrates bottom, why do the scholars, eminent though they are, tend to call the present-day Assyrians who have been living in the same country where the old bearers of their name lived, by the name of the Chaldaeans, and why are these scholars biased for the Chaldaeans and against the Assyrians?

While to some the terms Assyrian and Chaldaean count as synonyms in general usage, it cannot be denied that clear-cut distinctions between the two exist, and there are etymological and ethnological reasons for preferences in their use.

To put things in their right perspective, it should be pointed out that even if the Chaldaeans had some indigenous characteristics, their personality is only a pan of the more general and total Assyrian character. There is no room for doubt that the society that formed the backbone of Mesopotamia consisted of Assyrians. According to Biblical genealogy, they are descended from Noah through his son Ashur. The general denomination of Assyrians included the inhabitants of the geographic area normally described as Babylonia. The plain truth is that the Chaldaeans are a pan of the Assyrian nation, and, any appellation given to them other than Assyrians is erroneous and misleading.

The Assyrian people, Chaldaeans included, speak of themselves as *Suraye* or *Suryaye*. These native terms which are still of constant employment among the Assyrians came into popular communal use since the first centuries of our era. There are also some Assyrians who speak of themselves as *Suryan* (Syrian). This is an ethnic term given to the Assyrian people by the Greeks. It is also the religious name common to the followers of the old Patriarchate of Antioch. While all these different usages have survived in certain contexts to the present day, the descriptive name *Aturaye* (Assyrians) has in the last one hundred and fifty years become increasingly important and popular; The Assyrian language has been known under various designations, such as; *Suraya*, *Suryaya*, *Surith*,²⁵ all of which are adaptations of the original word *Ashuraya* or *Aturaya* (Assyrian). They are appellations that have been of constant use among the Assyrians though the original term is indeed more appropriate and more desirable for the Assyrian people. The Assyrian nation consists of the people who are born into it and brought up into its culture, and who in addition cherish the Assyrian tongue. Its people are composed of Assyrians still surviving upon their home soil where they have resided in unbroken continuity, and of many Assyrian communities spread over many nations. But, in almost every case, they remain a distinct people, with a distinct language and culture. They all share a common origin, characterized by the awareness of being the lineal descendants and the heirs of the Assyrian history and fame. The Assyrian Christian society is composed of different religious communities. Assyrians of the Church of the East, previously known as *Nestorians* and who are numerically the largest Assyrian Christian denomination, Chaldaean [Assyrian] Catholics, Syrian Catholics, Syrian Orthodox, known also as *Jacobites*, and the new congregations which contain the proselytes who converted from the old faith to the doctrines of the churches formed by the American and European missionaries.

The main criterion of this classification is strictly religious. Athur (Assyria) as a country no longer exists, but the Assyrian people have attachment to, and are proud of, the soil upon which their Assyrian ancestors trod, and by far more in the history of the land of their beloved homeland which served as the cradle for a succession of civilizations.

One further aspect of the subject of the Assyrian identity is relevant to our discussion and is worthy of serious consideration. In their cultural campaign and in all instances where Mesopotamian history is discussed, leading Arab thinkers, present the Assyrian heritage from their points of view that are more in line with pan-Arab (al-Qawmiyyah al-ʿArabiyyah) thinking.

During the last three decades, the Assyrians have been subject to an intense system of social control and discriminatory practices against them in some Arab countries. The aim of the governments in these countries is the eventual extinction of Assyrian consciousness and identification. It is no surprise nowadays to notice that the true ethnic identity of the Assyrians, their culture and ancestral language, are

gradually being denied by the political leadership of these states.

In this manner, a systematic process of linguistic and racial "Arabization" has, over recent years, worked its effect and is becoming efficient.

Added to the above, is the fact that the Assyrian people are, in relation to the governments of these countries, not perceived as an ethnic minority but communities of different religious denominations. The structure of these "religious communities" is being strengthened by the recognition given to them by the authorities of these states. The main purpose from the point of view of these countries' leaderships is to make the churches responsible to the authorities for the loyalty of their Christian subjects

In the perplexity of this situation and amidst this mounting tide of narrow *Arabist* ideology, the Assyrians who have for thousands of years kept faith with their origin, are encouraged to abandon the ideology of having cultural traits common to their people. The Arab leadership goes beyond that and forces the Assyrians to embrace the Arabist national ideology. In other words, the Assyrians are being asked to commit ethnic suicide by being submerged in Arabism. The oddity is that this ideology extends the term of Arab to every and all citizens of the entire Arab homeland, irrespective of their ethnic origin. According to the socio-cultural criteria of these Arab states, the Christians are an integral part of the Arabs. Thus, the descriptive name of Christian Arabs is the current vogue.

Within this situation which is becoming more and more acute, the Assyrians who are conscious of the bonds that bind them to their past have some reason to believe that undermining Assyrian culture and identity eases their assimilation in the Arab majority. The present-day Assyrians have a national character and are the heirs, both culturally and racially, to the earlier inhabitants of the ancient Assyrian Empire. This is what anthropology teaches and reveals. It is also what their tradition points to, and they passionately believe in it. The Assyrians have always remembered their past and have sought to keep that past alive in the present. The roots of their culture are too deep and their traditions are too long to allow them to forget. They, as the interested party, don't have to look into a crystal ball to prove their ethnic presence. They already know themselves. The modern Assyrians believe that their ancestors were created from the very dust of the Land of Ashur on which their footprints are deep and lasting.