

Note on the Modern Assyrians

by Professor Kelley L. Ross

Teaching in Los Angeles, with a large immigrant community, I get students from all over the world, with especially large contingents from Latin America, Eastern Europe, the Middle East, and the Far East. Among the Middle Eastern students from Iraq and Iran are those who call themselves "Assyrians." This is an extremely interesting and important group of people. They are the remnant of the Syriac speaking Nestorian Christian community of Northern Iraq, which had meant everyone there in Late Antiquity, but is now a group almost vanished in a sea of Arabic, Kurdish, Turkish, and Persian speaking Moslems. Indeed, they have been persecuted in Iraq, both for collaborating during the years of the British Mandate (1920-1932) and simply for not fitting in, religiously and linguistically, to Iraqi nationalist identity. The refugee community in Iran has recently encountered similar difficulties from the Islâmic Revolution there.

Another community of Iraqi Christians calls themselves "Chaldeans." These are basically Assyrians who have entered into doctrinal communion with the Roman Catholic Church (the term was chosen in 1445 by Pope Eugenius IV, though it seems to have been used earlier with other, interchangeable terms for the Assyrians). The actual "Chaldeans" were Aramaeans who settled in southern Iraq, forming the basis of the Neo-Babylonian revival of the X (or XI) Dynasty of Babylon. The expression "Ur of the Chaldees" is anachronistic when applied to the original Ur of the Sumerians, who had nothing to do with the Chaldeans and were long gone before the Chaldeans were anywhere near even existing. As descendants of real Aramaeans, the modern Chaldeans are more likely to be related to the real Chaldeans than anyone else, but there is no documentary or historical connection that can be traced after the age of Nebuchadrezzar, when the ethnic Chaldeans had blended into the older Babylonian population, and Aramaic began to be spoken by everyone.

The Assyrians and Chaldeans are not precisely the last people speaking a descendant of Aramaic. In three villages near Damascus, in the Anti-Lebanon Mountains on the border between Syria and Lebanon, there have survived some remnant speakers of the Western dialect of Syriac. Stories about them turn up occasionally right before Christmas, with the plausible hook that this is the surviving language that would be the closest to the language actually spoken by Jesus -- who used a dialect of Aramaic, not Hebrew, for daily life. There is little hope for the survival of this community of Syriac speakers, however. At the same time, the Western Syriac alphabet sometimes is used to write Arabic by Lebanese Maronite Christians. This used to be characteristic in the Middle Ages: Whatever language you speak, you write it in the alphabet of your religion. Thus, Moses Maimonides wrote Arabic, Ashkenazic Jews wrote German (Yiddish), and Sephardic Jews wrote Spanish (Ladino), in Hebrew letters. In India, Moslems wrote Hindustani in Arabic letters (becoming Urdu) and Hindus wrote it in the Sanskrit Devanagari letters (becoming Hindi).

Further Comments on the Modern "Assyrians"

Preserving their religion, language, and the Eastern version of the Syriac alphabet, the Assyrian community is historically important and a tragic victim of 20th century conflict and nationalism. Because of that, I hesitate to say anything that might seem unkind. However, many Assyrians, as I have seen among my students, have not been content with the great significance of who they are but have cultivated an ethnic mythology that serves to translate what was in the Middle Ages primarily a religious and linguistic identity (Nestorian Christianity and Syriac speech) into what has so often been the bane of the 20th century: an ethnic nationalism with a mythology that distorts history. It has not been uncommon for modern nations and ethnic communities to develop inflated, self-serving ideas of their own importance to a deceptive and, especially when dealing with other communities, unhelpful level. In Egypt, people from the Coptic Christian community may claim that the Greek alphabet (which is used to write Coptic) was derived directly from ancient Egyptian hieroglyphics, ignoring the the fact that the Greek alphabet was borrowed from the Phoenicians, whose own alphabet had been derived much more indirectly, if at all, from Egyptian [cf. p. 28, Who

Are the Copts?, by Rev. Fr. Shenouda Hanna, Cairo, 1967]. Similarly, modern Greeks stoutly and famously maintain that the Modern Greek language, the lone surviving descendant of Classical Greek, is pronounced in exactly the same way as Classical Greek was 2500 years ago [note]. Such a thing is actually impossible (who has the "real" pronunciation of Latin? Italians? Spanish? Portuguese? Romanians? -- actually none); but if challenged, modern Greeks like to say, "We should know." They would know, in fact, if someone among them is more than 2000 years old and can actually remember the ancient pronunciation (there being no audio recordings from back then). Otherwise, they are not exempt from the obvious and natural drift in pronunciation that affects all languages. The proprietary claim, that members of a ethnic, national, or racial group have the right to say whatever they want about themselves, uncontradicted by others, is less paradoxical but morally far nastier [note].

Similarly, there are modern Christian Assyrians like to claim that, culturally, linguistically, and physically, they are the ancient Assyrians. With some, this goes so far as to say that they are the direct and "unmixed" descendants of the original and autochthonous inhabitants of historical Assyria. Since another way of putting that is that they are ethnically or even racially "pure," I begin to detect overtones that are disturbing, if not appalling, after the history of such claims in the 20th century. Fortunately, not all Assyrians insist on their ethnic purity, and one correspondent has helpfully informed me that Esarhaddon had an Aramaean mother (though I am otherwise not aware of the evidence for this). Since modern Assyrians speak the language of the Aramaeans, who swarmed over the Fertile Crescent from Damascus to Ur, one might wonder what happened to them and why some think that the modern Assyrians are not just the descendants of all the ancient peoples of Mesopotamia (Assyrians, Babylonians, Amorites, Sumerians, Hurrians, Kassites, Hittites, Aramaeans, etc.) who came to speak Aramaic and then Eastern Syriac and adopted Christianity. The modern "Chaldeans," indeed, cannot use that name without awareness that Eastern Syriac speaking Christians are descendants of Babylonians and Chaldeans as well as Assyrians and others. Why the emphasis of the Nestorians is now on the ancient Assyrians almost exclusively is then a good question -- perhaps because the community most recently was largely to be found in northern Iraq, and so in historical Assyria. Unfortunately, once the tendency was manifest to vest the emphasis on the Assyrians, the certainty of the case then becomes less a matter of the historical record than the sort of certainty that, "We should know." Where the historical record is inconvenient, as for those insisting on ethnic purity, various tendentious and distorted readings can then be offered from uncritical Classical historians and the, usually fragmentary, often ambiguous, but also misrepresented, ancient archaeology.

Physically, the people of northern Iraq, Moslems and Christians, probably are pretty much what the ancient people were. At the same time, the mixture of real ancient Assyrians with immigrant Aramaeans, which took place over many years, cannot now be unmixed and distinguished. When the Assyrian kingdom revived after 911 BC, recovering from the Aramaean migrations, the Assyrians at first drove Aramaeans out of the Tigris Valley and planted Assyrian colonies in captured cities to the west. Later, however, when constant war drained Assyrian manpower, they began to import Aramaean communities, perhaps even the Ten Tribes of Israel, into Assyria proper, assimilating them into the Assyrian population, army, and even administration. While this is celebrated by modern Assyrians as magnanimously conceding to foreigners the same rights and privileges as native Assyrians, it does have the awkward consequence that the naturalized Assyrians, under whose influence native Assyrians themselves began to speak Aramaic, subsequently are going to be indistinguishable from the natives. Later, when Aramaic speaking Babylonians and southern Mesopotamian Aramaeans (the true Chaldeans) converted to Christianity, there was going to be little left to differentiate the origins of the members, northern and southern, of the Eastern Syriac and Nestorian communities. Unless all those of Aramaean or Babylonian origin totally left, died, or converted to Islâm, members of the subsequent community cannot count on being the ethnically pure descendants of the ancient Assyrians and no one else.

And since Aramaeans elsewhere also came to be indiscriminately called "Assyrians" or "Syrians"

by Persians and Greeks, almost unlimited confusion becomes possible. Nevertheless, in the Assyrian homeland in northern Iraq, where Assyrian gods continued to be worshiped for several centuries, we may assume that the descendants of the original Assyrian people, mixed or unmixed, will be found. Some intermarriage of Arabs and Turks, immigrants during the Middle Ages, can have occurred, and this would have affected the Christian community less than converts to Islām. Thus, as with the Copts in Egypt, the Christians could well represent the ancient physical type better than Moslems do. That the Christian community of northern Iraq should call itself "Assyrian," to distinguish it from (1) Moslem and Christian Syrians, and (2) Arabic speaking Iraqi Moslems, is reasonable enough considering where they are, the probable physical continuity, and their cultural and linguistic differences with surrounding Moslems; but saying more than that, as with this notion of the unmixed and autochthonous Assyrians, or to the exclusion of the Babylonian/Chaldean population, causes problems.

Beyond the questions of ethnic mixture or purity, it might strike one as unseemly that Christians should be at pains to get too excited over descent from a people who not only were not Christians but whose terror and brutality were a byword in the ancient world, and who were actually responsible for the disappearance or even extermination of the Ten Tribes of Israel (or who, ironically, could claim to be their descendants). For instance, after capturing one city, King Ashurnasirpal II says:

I built a pillar over against his city gate and I flayed all the chiefs who had revolted, and I covered the pillar with their skin. Some I walled up within the pillar, some I impaled upon the pillar on stakes, and others I bound to stakes around about the pillar... And I cut the limbs of the officers, of the royal officers who had rebelled... [Georges Roux, *Ancient Iraq*, Penguin, 1964, 1992, p.190] This was a typical example of exemplary terror in Assyrian policy, measures that could not even be portrayed today outside of horror movies, but boasted of by the King. In Sacred History, where it involved Israel, this would make the Assyrians as much the moral equivalent of Babylon, Pharaoh, and worse -- not even Hitler got rid of so large a percentage of all Jews. Just as Egyptian Moslems often have mixed feelings about the ancient Egyptians, since Pharaoh is not spoken of well in the Qur'ân (or the Bible), which has led some Moslem fundamentalists to advocate destroying the ancient monuments (as when the Sultan of Egypt, alMalik al'Azîz 'Uthmân, 'Imâd adDîn, the son and successor of Saladin, tried to tear down the Pyramid of Menkaure in 1196 -- producing "Othman's Breach," a big, but not very big, hole in the side of the pyramid), one might expect Iraqi Christians to have mixed feelings about the ancient persecutors and murderers of Israel. Instead, they often seem eager to claim absolute identity with them and even to belittle and denigrate ancient Israel, excusing Assyrian terrorism with equivalent actions taken by the Israelites.

Now to one of a secular persuasion, like myself, the moral equivalence of the Assyrians and Israelites would tend to discredit them both as paradigms of esteem or emulation. From a religious point of view, however, it would seem inescapable that if the Israelites were simply doing what God ordered, in order to take possession of the Promised Land, then the complaint should be with God, not with Israel. That the Hebrews, not the Assyrians, were the Chosen People of God is certainly as fundamental to Christianity as to Judaism. But what has always been the anti-religious project of treating the Old Testament as the mere history of a small and rather nasty Middle Eastern kingdom, has now been taken up by some Assyrians in order to dismiss the significance of Old Testament religion for Christianity itself. What used to be merely the scholarly project of tracing Jewish and Christian religious themes back to earlier mythology -- for instance that the Flood was a common idea in ancient Mesopotamian religion (as in the Epic of Gilgamesh) -- has now been taken up by some Assyrians into an extraordinary and bizarre project of tracing what is significant in Christianity directly to the ancient Assyrians.

Correspondents have thus called my attention to the work of Dr. Simo Parpola, Professor of Assyriology at Helsinki University, whose project seems to be to retroactively apply an anachronistic and grotesquely overinterpreted reading to Assyrian and Babylonian religion, an "esoteric" interpretation that he then can use to claim that all subsequent religion and philosophy,

from Pythagoras to Christianity, has simply employed the esoteric knowledge that already existed in Mesopotamia and was secretly conveyed to the later figures. As secular history, this is baseless and profoundly ahistorical (not to mention subject to dispute by Afrocentrists making similar claims about the esoteric knowledge of Egypt "stolen" by the Greeks, etc.). As religious history, I would expect Christians to regard it as blasphemous -- Jesus Christ is not the Savior because he is a remote reproduction of, of all things, the King of Assyria.

These strange permutations would seem to be characteristic of a strategy to nationalize Christianity away from its historic and doctrinal roots in Judaism. This is not surprising in a project of ethnic nationalism, but it should be disturbing for anyone with either a historical or a religious regard for the integrity of the Judeo-Christian tradition and Christian church history -- not to mention the possible anti-Semitic overtones of any effort to de-Judaize Christianity. Something tells me that the Pope would take serious exception to this if such ideas spread among the modern Chaldeans. While people are free to make up any religion and call it what they like, it is a shame when a genuine and impressive tradition, that of Nestorian Christianity, with a history of more than 1500 years, is traded in for an invented and dishonest one, especially when the ancient Assyrians, with an empire based on force, massacre, and deportations, hardly seem like a people to idealize and emulate. Jesus Christ as the "Prince of Peace" certainly has no antecedent in Ashurbanipal. The modern Assyrians, as with many nations, like England, are a synthesis of various elements, which can now hardly be separated. England is neither essentially Saxon nor essentially Norman; it is both -- while the people often physically seem to be identical with the Brythonic Celts who inhabited the place under Rome. Similarly, the Assyrians are neither essentially ancient Assyrian, nor essentially Aramaean, Babyonian, Chaldean, or Christian, but all of these in a unique, venerable, and important synthesis, with an admirable history, which modern Assyrians would do well to celebrate on its own terms. One thing I found an Assyrian student claiming, indeed the very first thing that came to my attention about all this, was that, not just are they the pure descendants of the ancient Assyrians, but their language is the direct descendant of the ancient Assyrian language. The falsehood of this is beyond doubt (cf. W.M. Thackston, *Introduction to Syriac*, Ibx Publishers, Bethesda, Maryland, 1999, p.vii; and John Huehnergard, *A Grammar of Akkadian*, Scholars Press, Atlanta, Georgia, 1997, p.xxi). The modern Christians speak the Eastern dialect of Syriac, which developed out of Aramaic. Aramaic is rather closely related to Hebrew and Arabic and only distantly related to ancient Assyrian. Assyrian and Babylonian were both developments of the even more ancient Akkadian, whose records go back well before Hebrew, Aramaic, or Arabic were even written languages. The Akkadians inherited the civilization started by the Sumerians, whose own language was entirely unrelated to Akkadian (and so to Assyrian, Babylonian, Hebrew, Aramaic, or Arabic). Indeed, the affinities of Sumerian are entirely unknown, although the reasonable speculation is that it was related to other vanished ancient languages, like Elamite, Kassite, and Hurrian, and perhaps the modern languages of the Caucasus. The ancient Assyrian language largely ended in the Fall of Assyria, even as Aramaic speaking nomads had spread over the region and the dialects of their language were replacing all the older languages, from Babylonian to Hebrew to Phoenician. Fragmentary Assyrian documents occur for a few years after the Fall, and then disappear forever. Most absurdly, an Assyrian student even claimed to be, not just a descendant of the Assyrians, but even of the Sumerians themselves, whose homeland was rather distant from Assyria, and who ceased to exist as a distinct linguistic community after the end of the III Dynasty of Ur (2112-2004 BC). If the evidence for this is that "We should know," then memory has done for the Christian Assyrians what it has done for no one else on earth. This is in the same category as the English "remembering" that they are actually one of the Ten Tribes of Israel. History means written records, documents and inscriptions. Oral traditions become muddled quickly, turning Minoan palaces into prisons for monsters. Real ancient Assyrian records end with fall of Nineveh, and there is no shred of evidence or logic that the Assyrians were somehow the special descendants of the Sumerians. Although I am now informed that these claims about Aramaic and the Sumerians are not generally held by Assyrians, it has also come to my attention that other claims and confusions about the languages may be. Thus, since the word "Syrian" appears to be a derivative of "Assyrian," and as

speakers of Aramaic came to generally be called either "Syrians" or "Assyrians," and the language itself ultimately "Syriac," the claim can be made that all Syrians, or all speakers of Syriac, were all descendants of the ancient Assyrians! Since Greek and Roman historians speak of the inhabitants of Syria, and even of Babylon, as "Syrians," because of their language, it then becomes possible to claim that the Babylonians themselves must really be Assyrians. Thus, one of the causes of the actual downfall of Assyria, the advent of the Aramaeans, is turned around into a means of spreading the Assyrians to everywhere that the Aramaeans ever went. This is very bizarre when applied to Babylon (where the Chaldean Aramaeans supplied the last Dynasty), but still peculiar enough when applied to Syria. Thus, the Roman Emperor Elagabalus, whose mother was Syrian, can be claimed as an Assyrian himself. However, the error in this is evident from the very name of the Emperor: El was an ancient Syrian god, not an Assyrian one. (The related word in Assyro-Babylonian simply meant "god," not a particular god as in Syria-Phoenicia-Palestine.) The inhabitants of Syria at the time of the final Assyrian conquest were the speakers of the ancient Canaanite languages related to Phoenician, Hebrew, etc. (as at the city of Ugarit), the Neo-Hittite cities in the north, left over from the collapse of the earlier Hittite Empire, whatever would have been left of the Hurrian-Mitanni people who had dominated the great bend area east of the Euphrates river (see the map above), and the recently arrived Aramaeans, whose petty kingdoms reached and spilled over the Habur River. The Hittites and Mitanni were Indo-European speakers, and the Hurrian language was unrelated to either Indo-European or Semitic languages. While the Assyrians certainly wouldn't have minded colonizing the region with Assyrian settlements, they really did not have the population to do that. The Assyrian dilemma was quite the opposite: attempting to restrain the tide of Aramaeans and other non-Assyrians from overrunning the Assyrian homeland along the Tigris. Assyrian colonization efforts were with the peoples they deported from one area to another -- then ultimately into Assyria to assimilate them as Assyrian subjects.

Some Assyrians also claim that the Hebrew alphabet was invented by them. This claim can arise because the familiar "square script" of the Hebrew alphabet was not the ancient alphabet of Palestine, similar to the Phoenician alphabet, but a version of the Aramaic alphabet, originally adopted by the Jews of the Babylonian community and called, from the location and language, 'Ashshûrî (cf. *The Early Alphabet* by John F. Healy, The University of California Press/British Museum, 1990, p. 43). Again we have the now familiar identities of Aramaic with Assyrian with Syrian with Syriac. Christian Assyrians are related to this only because they are what remains of Aramaic speakers, though both their language (Syriac) and their alphabet (Syriac) have undergone considerable changes since that period. If what they mean to claim is that they originally invented the alphabet as such, then they go too far, since the Aramaic alphabet itself is a version of the older alphabet used originally by Hebrews, Phoenicians, and others.

Among other self-flattering Assyrian stories from my students is one that the Persian Empire was conquered, not by the Persians, but by Assyrians hired by Cyrus the Great. Why Iranian peoples who were largely responsible for the destruction of Assyria itself, to an extent that an Assyrian state really never existed again, would then need the help of their crushed former enemies to extend their own conquests, assimilating them into the new tactics and equipment used by the Persian army, is unclear. Some of the documentary evidence cited for this is the list given by Herodotus of the ethnic units conscripted into the Persian army, which included people identified by Herodotus as, alternatively, "Syrians" or "Assyrians." As above, this confusion of people from northern Iraq with those of the Levant can be seized upon to mean that the people were all true ethnic Assyrians. The actual text gives no hint of how many ethnic Assyrians would be involved. They have really disappeared into the growing sea of Aramaic speakers. Furthermore, the ethnic units in the Persian army were not the core of the army. Conscripted subject peoples could never be entirely trusted. The core of the army would have to be Iranian, like the 10,000 "Immortals" -- called that because casualties were immediately replaced, an uncommon practice even in modern armies.

Claims to be the actual people who founded the first civilization, invented writing and then the alphabet, and then were the secret power behind later empires may well enhance the "self-esteem" of the people who make them, but they are tragic and disgraceful when they replace with fiction the

real history that is unique and significant enough. The translation of Greek philosophy into Arabic, when it came, was often based on the precedent of translations into Syriac that were made first in Late Antiquity. Christian missionaries who turned up the court of T'ang Dynasty China in 635 were Nestorians all the way from Iraq. This has to have been some of the most ambitious and dangerous missionary work ever undertaken by Christians. Their own Syriac alphabet then became the basis for the alphabets used in Central Asia by the Uigers, Mongols, and Manchurians. That alphabet until recently was still used to write Mongolian. With all this fascinating and important history, it is seems shameful to ignore or belittle it in favor of inventions that magnify an earlier and very different culture and religion, with the implication of insulting the roots of Christianity itself in ancient Israel. The ancient Assyrians, in short, are not worthy of the mediaeval and modern Assyrians.

I originally wrote these remarks in order to have something to which I could refer Assyrian students, who might make some of these claims in class, so that I wouldn't have to argue with them and waste time in class about it. Since this material has been posted with my other class materials on the Internet, however, I have been contacted by some Assyrians who have wanted to straighten out the "mistakes" in the account. Since I am not the specialist in ancient history, Assyriology, or linguistics, I am really not the person to whom people should complain about any of this. What I have presented simply seems to me the standard and well established scholarly understanding of these matters, as I have gathered from many sources over the years, all the way back to my class in ancient Middle Eastern history at the American University of Beirut in 1970. Anyone who has complaints about my treatment should first consult some standard sources, as follows. More importantly, readers should actually pay attention to what is asserted here. I receive e-mail, even telephone calls, from people who have apparently overlooked much of this treatment, for instance thinking that I deny that the modern Assyrians are descended from the ancient Assyrians at all. I fear for the state of reading comprehension if anyone reading all this could think that. The best general ancient history of Sumeria, Babylonia, and Assyria that I am aware of is *Ancient Iraq* by Georges Roux (Penguin Books, 1966, 1980, 1992). Roux's admiration for the Assyrians leads him to tone down his characterization of their ferocity, but his description of events and quotations from Assyrian records speak for themselves. His description of the ethnic communities of the ancient Middle East is thorough and excellent. No one is going to confuse the Aramaeans with the Assyrians from his account. More varied and recent information can be found in *The Oxford Companion to Archaeology*, edited by Brian M. Fagan (Oxford University Press, 1996). This book draws on the knowledge of literally dozens of specialists. Particular attention should be paid to the sections "Mesopotamia: Assyria," pp. 455-456, and "Near East: Iron Age Civilizations in the Near East," pp. 496-498. Especially, it should be noted that:

The Assyrian heartland occupied a triangular region bounded by the Tigris and Lesser Zab Rivers to the west and southeast respectively, and by the lower elevations of the Zagros Mountains to the north. From the middle of fourteenth century B.C. to the end of the seventh century B.C., this area....formed the irreducible core of the Assyrian state, from which it grew during expansionist periods and to which it retreated in times of weakness. [p. 455] This is worthy of attention because I have now seen claims that the Assyrian heartland was all the space between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers, reaching well over into northern Syria, and that the city of Harran, in the great bend of the Euphrates, which later contained an Assyrian palace and administrative center, and to which the last Assyrian kings retreated under the onslaught of the Babylonians and Medes, was an ethnically Assyrian city. Instead, that northern Syrian area, and that city, may at first have had undifferentiated Akkadian speakers, and then were Hurrian and Neo-Hittite, eventually covered by Aramaeans, whose city-states, the Oxford Companion says, "stretched from the Upper Tigris River south through the Habur River area to the Euphrates River" [p. 498 -- the Habur River is labelled on the map above]. Indeed, Tiglathpileser III (744-727), in initiating the policy of deportation and forced resettlement, transferred 18,000 Aramaeans from the left bank of the Tigris to northern Syria [Roux, p. 307]. Maps of the Assyrian heartland can be found in the *Cultural Atlas of Mesopotamia and the Ancient Near East*, by Michael Roaf [Facts on File, Inc., Andromeda Oxford Ltd., 1966,

2000, p.160] and in the Historical Atlas of the Ancient World, 4,000,000- 500 BC by John Haywood [Barnes & Noble, 2000, §1.12].

How appropriate the exaltation of the Assyrians may be for Christians is not ultimately for me to say. How accurate it may be to trace Christianity to Assyria rather than to Judea can easily be resolved by almost any study of Church history in Late Antiquity, as dealt with in the many sources cited in "Decadence, Rome and Romania, the Emperors Who Weren't, and Other Reflections on Roman History". The moral appropriateness of projects to fictionalize history, especially in the interest of racial purity, is for me, and anyone, to say: It is reprehensible.