

**Gabriel Afram's logical fallacies:
The Jews remembered their adopted Aramaic script as 'Assyrian'.
Ergo, we can call our original Aramaic script and language accordingly.**

Johny Messo (22 April, 2006)

0. On March 27, 2006, I was sent an e-mail which contained a brief article written by Gabriel Afram. The text which was signed by him in Aramaic, Arabic and Swedish was accompanied with an English translation (by Hikmet Ego) and a Turkish one (by Feyyaz Kerimo).

I have numbered the paragraphs of the English translation (click [here](#)) and based on this version I will make some critical remarks. This way, readers can easily compare and judge the arguments of Gabriel Afram and yours truly. (I assume that the text forms part of Gabriel Afram's Swedish-Assyrian dictionary, on which see http://www.suryoye.com/archive/tebe/2005/03/05/g_afram.htm.)

1. Most scholars credit the Sumerians, who were non-Semites, for having invented writing in South-Mesopotamia in about 3,200 BC. Their cuneiform (wedge-shaped) writing system was soon adopted and adapted by, among others, the Semitic Akkadians. The first Akkadian texts go back to ca. 2,500 BC and some 500 years later two Akkadian dialects emerged and evolved into two distinct languages. The language in the south of Mesopotamia was called Babylonian, while the northern/central one was named Assyrian. Assyriologists are agreed that the Assyrian tongue died out centuries before the Christian era. Babylonian, however, seems to have been preserved until at least the third century AD.

Assyrian and Aramaic, it is true, belong to the same language family. But whereas Assyrian is usually grouped as East Semitic, Aramaic can be classified as Northwest Semitic. Unlike Assyrian, however, Aramaic still exists today among various communities and in different varieties. Indeed, it is universally accepted that Aramaic has been spoken and written, uninterruptedly, over 3,000 years.

Gabriel Afram appears to ignore these and similar [facts](#) which are common knowledge to almost every student of [Semitic languages](#). Clearly, the insinuation that only "theologians and clergy" employ and promote the name 'Aramaic' for the language he wishes to call 'Assyrian' is pitifully wrong.

I fail to see any sound reasons for renaming our Aramaic language, or any of its dialects, 'Assyrian' – a name that is already reserved for an ancient language.¹ If Mr. Afram honestly cared about avoiding confusions of names, he should end precisely this kind of futile attempts which unnecessarily mix up these two entirely different names and make matters even more complicated than they already are. In what follows, I will try to demonstrate that his own conclusions are illogical, unfounded and invalid.

2. If we assume, for argument's sake, that the Assyrians were indeed proud of their newly acquired Aramaic language, as Mr. Afram seems to imply, how much more should the multitudes of Arameans, who outnumbered the genuine Assyrians, have prided themselves with *their* sacred mother tongue? Particularly in regard to the elevation of their national language, which enjoyed an official² status in three successive empires, viz. Neo-Assyria (ca. 130 years), Neo-Babylonia and Persia (ca. 200 years), for administrative, diplomatic, commercial and even literary purposes.

Even the Neo-Assyrians themselves always clearly distinguished their language from that of their Aramean subjects. For instance, they could readily recognize an "Aramaic letter" (*egirtu Armītu*) or an "Aramaic document" (*nibzu Armaya*); obviously in contrast to their Assyrian counterparts. Moreover, less than a century before Assyria's collapse, after nearly all the Aramean principalities had been overpowered and incorporated into the Neo-Assyrian Empire, the Assyrians had distinct professions for the "Assyrian scribe" (*tupšarru Aššuraya*) and the "Aramean scribe" (*tupšarru Aramaya*).

Mr. Afram is not clear as to which Aramaic dialect(s) should be called 'Assyrian' and he seems to be stuck in the Neo-Assyrian past. Is he really convinced that all the written and spoken Aramaic dialects should be dubbed 'Assyrian', only because Aramaic was the *second* official language in the

¹ For similar tendencies to substitute the name 'Aramaic', the living language of the Arameans, for 'Assyrian', the dead language of the Assyrians, see http://www.midyatcity.com/articles/gyonan_messo.doc, pp. 3f. and 7f.

² Although Aramaic was certainly used as an international language around 700 BC, many prominent scholars hold that it only acquired *official* status after the Persians gained the hegemony in Mesopotamia in 559 BC.

final hours of Assyria's existence? Or does he want to confine the term 'Assyrian' solely to the Aramaic idiom of the Edessan area and/or the dialects which are still in use among the Middle Eastern Christians? If this being the case, then how will he validate his selective choice? (Surely, none of these dialects descended directly from 'Official Aramaic'.) It is further known that Aramaic prevailed for a much longer period of time practically as the *main* official state language and on a far more intensive scale during the Persian epoch. Would it be accurate or acceptable if someone would currently identify the Aramaic language, or any of its offshoots, as 'Persian'? I think not. Such behavior is perhaps to be expected from ignorant or biased people, but not from respected men like *malpono* Gabriel Afram.

We should always bear in mind that because of the many migrations, conquests, annexations and deportations of numerous Aramean tribes in Syro-Mesopotamia, Aramaic, which had more advantages than Assyrian, would naturally become the second standard language in Assyria. And seen from the perspective of the subdued nations, like the Arameans, it is not astonishing that at least some of them wanted to cast off "the yoke of Assyria," as the Assyrian kings described it. We know, for example, that shortly before Assyria's downfall there were massive revolts in the Assyrian-dominated lands.³ It is quite imaginable, therefore, that after the empire succumbed to the rebellious nations, the liberated peoples, at least those who resisted imperial assimilation and who had not been (fully) Assyrianized, finally could renounce their formerly politicized Assyrian identity and maintain their own identities.⁴

What is more, the true Assyrians were now faced with a serious dilemma. After the disruption of their once powerful empire they were suddenly confronted with new identity questions. For instance, where and how would they be able to retain their native Assyrian identity in an anti-Assyrian milieu? Thus it does not surprise me that even the real Assyrians, who were still bilingual or only Assyrophone (who presumably also included the common people), eventually relinquished no less than their mother tongue *shortly after* their empire, which could no longer protect and sponsor the Assyrian language, was forever eliminated as a political power – a fate that befell other great nations too before and after Assyria in Ancient Mesopotamia. It is precisely in this regard that the Persians had learned a good lesson from the suicidal mistake of their Assyrian predecessors, for they retained their mother tongue.⁵

It should be clear that the Aramaic language was never fully adopted by Assyrian society. And it is wrong to hijack, as it were, the tongue of the Aramean people and bequeath it to the Assyrian nation;⁶ recall that the Assyrian language survived the fall of the Assyrian Empire at least for a few decades.⁷ This is not to deny that Aramaic evolved from a national into an international language at around 700 BC. But neither should we overlook the countless Aramean tribes who swarmed all over Assyria and for whom Aramaic undoubtedly still remained the holy language of *their* ancestors. In consideration to their inferior position (politically, that is), each Aramean generation may very well have retold the memorable, unique and inspiring story of the unforeseen internationalization of *their mother tongue*. Surely, even after this achievement it still remained *their native language*, as it always had been.

What, then, should we make of Mr. Afram's argument that it is usually "mighty nations" who force "their language" upon the subjected peoples? Again, Aramaic could not be 'forced upon' the Aramean city-states, since it was already *theirs*. Their spoken and written language, which Aramaicized the Neo-Assyrian Empire for a good deal, was an intrinsic and substantial part of their Aramean identity. Not only before and during the Neo-Assyrian era, but also in post-Assyrian times, *until this very hour*.

³ The fact that the annals of Assyria came to an abrupt end in 639 BC indicates that the invincible Assyrians did not wish to have the embarrassing losses to be known to, and remembered by, future generations.

⁴ Cf. Prof. Simo Parpola's http://www.auf.nu/cafe/pdf/parpola_eng.pdf, p. 3: "many of its ethnic minorities seem to have retained their identities (at least to some extent) till the very end of the Empire." His examples are "Egyptians, Israelites, Arabs, Anatolians and Iranians" who can be identified "on the basis of their names or the ethnic labels attached to them." It is telling that the Aramean people, who are otherwise always mentioned in scholarly works dealing with ethnic minorities within Assyria, and concerning whom there is plenty of evidence, are disregarded here. Note, too, that the article mentions them only four times and, moreover, reduces them to a *linguistic* group. Hence, "The Aramaization of Assyria" (p. 4) is treated as if it were just a linguistic process. Frankly, Prof. Parpola is biased to the extreme in favor of an Assyrian identity for our people, and for an 'objective scholar' the concluding paragraphs in p. 18 are utterly pointless. In a future article I hope to point out Prof. Parpola's unsound methodology and unfounded conclusions, and inform his readers of *the untold facts*.

⁵ Cf. Prof. J. Joseph's remarks in <http://www.jaas.org/edocs/v11n2/JohnJoseph.pdf>, p. 42 and section 7, below.

⁶ This is also the obvious intention of Prof. S. Parpola. See esp. p. 9 of his article cited above in n. 4.

⁷ Cf. <http://jaas.org/edocs/v13n1/yildiz.pdf>, pp. 19-20, where the survival of the Assyrian language is stressed.

So if Mr. Afram believes that he can use the Aramaic language to push his unfounded Assyrian case, it needs little imagination to realize how Aramaic is far more apt to substantiate the Aramean one.⁸

That there have been, still are and always will be governments who superimpose on their citizens the official language of the state at the expense of the minority languages, is true. But it is equally true that despite such assimilation politics there are many cases to prove that indigenous tongues manage(d) to survive; we ourselves, who have preserved our Aramaic language, are living witnesses in this respect. Hence I do not follow his way of thinking here and his examples do not support his conclusion either. The emergence of the independent republics after the break-up of the USSR, such as Moldova, Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia or Ukraine, demonstrate that Soviet language policies failed to obliterate, at least, the (ethno-)linguistic identities of the former 'Russian' citizens. Actually, modern Russia still counts tens of non-Russian indigenous minority languages. And so do both of the Americas and Australia.

3. These statements either expose an abysmal ignorance of Syriac literature on the part of Mr. Afram or his agenda. I assume that with "our language" he means the one he is writing in. But this language is widely known in academia as "(Classical) Syriac" and virtually all linguistic experts describe it as *an Aramaic dialect*; since this dialect originated in the milieu of Edessa, "Edessan Aramaic" or simply "Edessan/Edessene" may turn out to be a much better and a less confusing designation.⁹

It is an obvious truism that the name Syrian (*Suryoyo*) does not resemble Aramaic (*Oromoyo*) in speech or in writing. But neither do *Suryoyo* ('Syrian') and *Oturoyo* ('Assyrian') in *Aramaic*. Yet it is asserted that these two names are equivalents based on an alleged linguistic evolution that should have taken place in Aramaic. This is certainly not to deny the linguistic reality that in certain Aramaic dialects the letter *ṭ* has evolved into *s*. So, for instance, in the speech of the Arameans of Beth-Qustan; some of the younger Tur 'Abdinians who have grown up in western countries also tend to pronounce *s* in place of *ṭ* (e.g., "daughter" is pronounced as *barso* instead of *barto*). In fact, it is this supposed etymological explanation of the Aramaic name *Suryoyo* that lacks sufficient evidence. Hence critical comments such as those of the late Prof. Rudolf Macuch are to be expected. "This simple philological equation," he rightly noted, "is doubtful."¹⁰ But Mr. Afram's logic is flawed at two more levels.

I fully agree with the admonishment of Prof. Wolfhart P. Heinrichs that "the basic identity of the names does not necessarily imply the identity of the people(s) named by them."¹¹ That is, even if we take it for granted that the etymology of the term 'Syria(ns)' was derived from 'Assyria(ns)' in *Greek*, it does not automatically follow that the people(s) who in later periods were known under the name of Syrians must be 'Assyrians' (see section 4, below). Conversely, the second point to clarify is that there are good examples to show that two entirely different names, whatever their independent etymologies, can indeed be used for one group of people. Take, for example, British/English and Persian/Iranian. So, after closer examination, the reasoning that the appellation Aramaic is erroneous just because it does not look or sound like Syrian, also appears to be no argument at all. As we shall presently see, Mr. Afram's assertion is even contradicted by cold, hard facts.

What I find most disturbing is the idea that "our language" was never called Aramaic in history. Let us ignore, for a moment, the renowned scholars and the fact that even the Bible speaks of "Aramaic." But what about the centuries-old literature, written in "our language," which we inherited from our intellectual predecessors? In the writings of Mor Afrem (d. 373) up to at least those of Bar 'Ebroyo (d. 1286) and Bishop Tuma Audo (see next paragraph), our language and people were consciously named 'Aramean' and even cherished as such! In like manner did the "Suryane of Nestorian Iraq," according to the correct observation of the two authors of *Hagarism*, "quite frequently speak of themselves and their language as Aramean."¹² (Emphasis added by me.) If Mr. Afram really was ignorant of these well-known and irrefutable facts, too, how much credence should we give to his overall claims?

⁸ In http://www.midyatcity.com/articles/turabdin_aramean.doc, pp. 2f., I have also touched briefly on this issue. For more on this subject, cf. Prof. J. Joseph's recommendable book cited in n. 10, below, pp. 11-13 & 29-30.

⁹ See http://www.midyatcity.com/articles/syriac_aramaic.doc, p. 1 and Prof. J. Joseph (next note), p. 10 n. 38.

¹⁰ See section 9, below, and http://www.midyatcity.com/articles/gyonan_messo.doc, p. 7. On this issue also cf. Prof. John Joseph's *The Modern Assyrians of the Middle East: Encounters with Western Christian Missions, Archaeologists, and Colonial Powers* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2000), pp. 19-20.

¹¹ See http://www.midyatcity.com/articles/as_synonyms.doc, p. 3 n. 8. The fact that the meaning of a name can shift is illustrated by the current predominating view of 'Syrians' being citizens of the 'Syrian Arab Republic'!

¹² See *idem*, p. 4 n. 17. For references, cf. <http://www.urhoy.info/2.html> & cited article in n. 8, pp. 3-5 & 6 n. 27.

4. Like Mr. Afram, I have read the preface to the cited dictionary of Tuma Audo (1853-1917) with keen interest. Since this Chaldean Bishop of Urmia, Iran, was cited selectively by Mr. Afram, other statements by Audo (quoted from Cicek's edition) may be of equal, if not more, interest to the reader.

Notwithstanding the importance Audo may have attached to the said etymology of the Aramaic name *Suryoyo*, about which see the preceding paragraph, his foreword shows undoubtedly that he was consciously aware of the fact that the language he spoke and wrote in was *Aramaic*. Although he knew that the Jews called the Aramaic characters 'Assyrian' (p. 6), he also remarked (p. 9) that "Syria, Mesopotamia, Assyria, the land of Sinear and their surroundings" were called "Aram" by the Jews, "because Aram, the son of Shem, ruled over them and populated them with his descendants. For this reason, the language is not called *Suryoyo* in the Old [Testament], but 'Aramaic', which is its genuine and original name, as it appears to us." Then he goes on to explain that the adopted name *Suryoyo* is of Greek origin and that "all those from the land of Aram [*Beṭ-Orom*]," who are identified as "Aramean tribes," when they converted to Christianity and believed in Jesus Christ "were called *Suryoye*."¹³

When he tries to explain (p. 11) that the Jews at the turn of the Christian era no longer "spoke in the Hebrew tongue, the tongue of their fathers, but in *Suryoyo*," and that their contemporary teachers called their language "Aramaic or *Suryoyo* and sometimes they call it Assyrian," he erred. First, the Hebrew language was beyond doubt still alive in those centuries in the Holy Land. Secondly, like Mr. Afram the Chaldean Bishop did not distinguish between *script* and *language* (see section 6, below).

At the close of his preface (p. 14), Audo calls upon his readers, whom he identified as "every one of the children of the Aramean race," to care for, learn and sponsor "the precious Aramaic language."

Also particularly interesting is the dictionary itself which is still popular in the Syriac-Orthodox community. Under the entry *Oromoyo* readers can find this explanation: "Arameans, that is, *Suryoye*. Aramaic language, [that is,] *Suryoyo*!" This clarification, I would like to add, is in full keeping with Audo's predecessors in earlier centuries. Besides, readers will search in vain for the names *Oṭuroyo* and *Suryoyo*, for these were not included by Bishop Audo. Unless these, too, were excluded by the late Bishop Cicek in the reprint of 1985. I doubt this, but those who promulgate this idea may prove it.

Although the linguistic hypothesis that the Greeks may have extracted 'Syria(ns)' from 'Assyria(ns)' in Greek is arguable, it seems not far-fetched to me; but consider my remarks in the preceding section. However, that the linguistic development of these names also should have taken place *simultaneously or at least independently* in the Aramaic language is, I dare say, plain wrong. There is no significant evidence to prove or argue cogently that the terms *Suryoyo* and *Suroyo*¹⁴ go back to an original Aramaic form *Oṭuroyo* or *Aṣuroyo*, and this premise is shaky at best; cf. section 9, below.

Finally, I would like to return to Mr. Afram. First, it must be said that his selective way of quoting and his denial of the facts we cited from Audo's dictionary are inappropriate for a man of his stature. Secondly, it is both self-contradictory and awkward if he expects his readers to accept Bishop Audo as an authority, while this truly learned clergyman belongs exactly to Mr. Afram's dismissive category of "theologians and clergy" (see his section 1). If Mr. Afram really considers Tuma Audo as a specialist, we should expect him to recognize – and eagerly promote – that we *Suryoye* are *Arameans* and that the "true and original name" of our language and script is *Aramaic*, as Tuma Audo asserted in his lexicon.

5. It is indeed true that the late Archbishop Cicek omitted this sentence from the reprinted dictionary. Whatever its cause, that line definitely should have been included by the Syriac-Orthodox prelate.

6. Elsewhere I have already briefly discussed the issue of *ḵṭab Ašuri* ("the Assyrian script"),¹⁵ as the rabbinical scholars dubbed the *Aramaic* characters; it probably goes back to Greek "Assyria [or Sýria]

¹³ Note that in the 19th century the main champion of the *linguistic theory* that the Greeks shortened the appellative 'Assyria(ns)', which produced the term 'Syria(ns)', was not Ernest Renan, but Theodor Nöldeke. Be that as it may, 'Syrian' was understood by both of them as a term originally applied to the *non-Assyrian* subjects, whereas in later times the name would be reserved for the *Arameans*. Cf. n. 11, above, and n. 32, below.

¹⁴ For an explanation of this name, see http://www.midyatcity.com/articles/turabdin_aramean.doc, p. 4 n. 12.

¹⁵ But see esp. R.C. Steiner, "Why the Aramaic script was called 'Assyrian' in Hebrew, Greek and Demotic," *Orientalia* 62 (1993), pp. 80-82; *idem*, "The 'mbqr' at Qumran, the 'Episkopos' in the Athenian Empire, and the Meaning of 'lbqr' in Ezra 7:14; on the Relation of Ezra's Mission to the Persian Legal Project," in *Journal of Biblical Literature* 120:4 (2001), p. 637 n. 70.

grámmata,” i.e. *Aramaic* letters.¹⁶ With *ktab Ašuri* the Jews referred to the *script* that Ezra the *scribe*, according to rabbinical traditions, brought back from the Babylonian exile. Hence the explanation of Wilhelm Gesenius that the Jews lost their original script, commonly known as Palaeo-Hebrew. But what else did Gesenius declare in a clarifying footnote about the expression “Assyrian characters”? “The name אַשּׁוּר (Assyria),” he explained, “is here used in the widest sense, to include the countries on the Mediterranean inhabited by Aramaeans.”¹⁷ This script, he continued on the following page, was retained by the Samaritans “after their separation from the Jews, while the Jews gradually (between the sixth and the fourth century) exchanged it for an Aramaic character. From this gradually arose (from about the fourth to the middle of the third century) what is called the *square character*.”

The distinction between *script* and *language* is evident in the Babylonian Talmud. [Sanhedrin 21b](#) records: “Originally, the Torah was given to [the people of] Israel in the Hebrew script and the sacred [Hebrew] language. But in the time of Ezra, the Torah was given to them in the Assyrian script and the Aramaic language. They selected for Israel the Assyrian script and the sacred language, while they left the Hebrew script and the Aramaic language for the ordinary people [Samaritans].” [Folio 22a](#) notes: “Why was it called Assyrian? Because it was brought with them from Assyria [*Ašur*]”; the return of the Judean exiles from *Babylon* is meant here. In the same folio another notable tradition explained: “Because its script was upright [a pun on the Hebrew passive verb *me’ušeret*].” (My translations.)

The Jewish rabbis did not call each and every one of their written and/or spoken Aramaic idioms ‘Assyrian’, nor did they call the cognate dialects, such as Edessan Aramaic, thus. Other names in use among Jewish writers were ‘the [Aramaic] translation’ (*targum*), ‘Aramaic’ (*Arammi*) and ‘Syrian’ (*Sursi*; probably a loanword from the Septuagint *Suristi*; it denoted esp. Jewish Palestinian Aramaic).

According to their holiest book, called the Old Testament (OT) in Christian parlance, the Jewish people described our homeland as *Aram-naharaim*, i.e. “[the land of] Aram of the (two) rivers.” Today, however, many among us use the name *Bet-nahrin* which is a loan translation of the Greek Mesopotamia. We inherited this by now popular term from our fathers, but how many of us know that our intellectual forefathers also employed the appellation *Orom-nahrin*, as does our Aramaic Bible?¹⁸

Furthermore, the OT also gives testimony to the fact that the Jewish people have *Aramean* ancestry! One scholar aptly commented that it “is extraordinarily interesting that the Israelites *thought* they were related to the Aramaeans.” Like many others, he believes “that the Israelites were part of the same movement of population as the Aramaeans and were conscious of a close relationship with that population group... The biblical writers are so strong on the point...that it must have some basis in fact.”¹⁹ Prof. Edward Lipiński came to a similar conclusion: “The biblical tradition assuming the parentage of the Hebrew patriarchs with the Aramaeans of the Harrān area is thus explainable in the historical context of the 10th century B.C. ... The other tradition, which links Abraham’s clan with Ur of the Chaldees, is obviously more recent [*sc.* after the seventh century BC].”²⁰

Finally, some parts of the OT were written “in Aramaic” (Daniel 2:4), while others were visibly influenced either by the Aramaic language or their Aramean neighbors; popular terms in this respect are ‘Aramaisms’ and ‘Aramaization’. In later times, the Jews even produced their books and prayers, such as the Targumim, the Talmudim and the Kaddish prayer, either in whole or in part in Aramaic.

7. The historical achievements of the Arameans perhaps may be overshadowed by, among others, the Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians and Greeks. But only uninformed or prejudiced people will downplay the significant role of the ancient Aramean people, let alone the invaluable contributions made by their converted descendants in the first millennium of the Christian era, in world history.

Notice, for example, the testimony of an admired and renowned Semitist: “The Greeks and Romans knew the Near East mainly through the Arameans, for it was they who united and canalized the sources of its culture, bringing together Babylonian, Persian and Hebrew elements and transmitting

¹⁶ Cf. *idem*; <http://www.jaas.org/edocs/v11n2/JohnJoseph.pdf>, p. 43, esp. n. 15. A brief summary of my understanding of *ktab Ašuri* can be found at http://www.midyatcity.com/articles/as_synonyms.doc, p. 5.

¹⁷ See <http://www.davidcox.com.mx/library/Gesenius%20-%20Hebrew%20Grammar.pdf>, p. 28 n. 1.

¹⁸ Thus, for example, in Genesis 24:10 and Deuteronomy 23:4 (Pešitta edition of United Bible Societies, 1979).

¹⁹ J.F. Healey, “Ancient Aramaic Culture and the Bible,” *ARAM* 1:1 (1989), pp. 35 (italics are Healey’s) and 36.

²⁰ E. Lipiński, *The Aramaeans: Their Ancient History, Culture, Religion* (Peeters, 2000), pp. 74f. For an interesting online article about Israel’s *Aramean* origins, see <http://www.bibleorigins.net/ArameanIsrael.html>.

them to Christianity, and with Christianity to the West. From the West, at a later date, the Arameans [*sc.* Syriac-Orthodox & ‘Nestorians’] were to bring to the East Greek culture, especially philosophy, which became known to the Arabs through the medium of Aramaic.”²¹

In section 2, above, some attention has already been paid to the non-military conquest of Assyria by the Aramaic language. This “development seems incomprehensible to” Mr. Afram, but it proves to me a conspicuous lack of knowledge about Assyro-Aramean history on his part. Since the linguistic capture of Assyria by the Aramaic language can only be understood in the light of the “Aramaization of Assyria,” as this process is generally called, I will quote three more *Assyriologists* on this topic.

According to Prof. Albert Kirk Grayson, “there were Arameans within Assyria itself, and their numbers gradually increased as time went by. This in turn had a major cultural impact upon Assyrian civilization. ... The reason for this major Aramaic presence [*sc.* that Aramaic was widespread in Assyria] was the increasing number of Arameans living in Assyria from the 9th century on.”²² “It was surely through the penetration of Arameans into Assyrian society *at all levels*,” noted another scholar, “that the greatest impact was made.”²³ Still another specialist confirmed this, saying that the Assyrians “were capable of constant Assyrianization of foreigners only in their core country, namely Assyria proper and certain adjacent regions...whereas in the periphery...the West-Semitic (practically *Aramean*) majority prevailed and even increased in the last generation of the Assyrian empire...There is *no doubt that after the fall of the Assyrian empire Assyria proper has been completely Aramaicized* within a few decades.”²⁴ (In the last two quotations the emphasis was added by me.)

In *The Hidden Pearl: The Aramaic Heritage and the Syriac-Orthodox Church* (Rome, 2001), supervised by Prof. Sebastian P. Brock, a parallel was drawn with the linguistic capture of the Roman Empire by the Greek language. The authors recalled this famous utterance by the Roman poet Horace: “Captured Greece took captive her captor.” This analogy is truly appropriate, for the Roman armies who had subjugated the Greeks were in reality conquered by the Greek culture, language, arts, etc. Similarly, the Assyrian army had deprived scores of Aramean city-states of their political freedom so as to integrate them into the Assyrian Empire. Because of this massive influx of Arameans, it only would be a matter of time before the political rulers would be conquered linguistically, culturally and demographically. So, ultimately, the Aramean people who had lost their freedom had the last laugh.²⁵

I would like to stress another point. But first we have to realize that there is an enormous difference between a *script* and a *language*. The Aramaic *alphabet* contained no more than 22 consonants, still less than many western languages. In contrast, the Assyrian *cuneiform script* used no fewer than 600 to 700 signs. This explains for a great part why the Aramaic *script* was so appealing to the Assyrians. Further, we have to remember that Assyrian and Aramaic, being Semitic languages, belong to one and the same family; linguistically, they may be considered as ‘cousins’ to one another.

These facts beg the question of why the superior Assyrians did not borrow just the Aramaic *writing system* from the inferior Arameans and adapt it according to their speech. After all, both *languages* were akin to each other! But they did not do so, for Aramaic finally replaced *their native language too*. Both the Aramaic script and language relegated the status of Assyrian sooner or later to a language solely employed by the elite. After this happened, the once dominated language was becoming the dominating language and it gained *prestige* throughout the Assyrian, Chaldean and Persian empires. Eventually, the loss of their *mother tongue* (not their *script*) would be catastrophic to the Assyrians.²⁶

In addition, there are examples of non-Aramean nations who did adopt the Aramaic alphabet without losing their own ethno-linguistic identity;²⁷ recall the notion of *Garšuni* that is familiar to many of us.

²¹ Sabatino Moscati, *Ancient Semitic Civilizations* (New York, 1957), p. 179. For more on the ancient Arameans, see (e.g.) the book quoted in n. 20 (note especially its extensive bibliography) and *The Hidden Pearl* (see below).

²² A.K. Grayson, “Mesopotamia (History and Culture of Assyria),” in D. N. Freedman (ed.), *Anchor Bible Dictionary* Vol. 4 (New York: Doubleday, 1992), pp. 740 and 741.

²³ A.R. Millard, “Assyrians and Arameans,” in *Iraq* 45 (1983), p. 107.

²⁴ Zadok, “The Ethno-Linguistic Character of the Jezireh and Adjacent Regions in the 9th-7th centuries (Assyria Proper vs. Periphery),” in Mario Liverani (ed.), *Neo-Assyrian Geography* (University of Rome, 1995), p. 281.

²⁵ See (e.g.) J. Joseph in n. 8 and his neat summary in <http://www.jaas.org/edocs/v11n2/JohnJoseph.pdf>, pp. 42f.

²⁶ Cf. *idem*.

²⁷ See, for example, P. Oktor Skjærvø, “Aramaic Scripts for Iranian Languages,” pp. 515-535, and György Kara, “Aramaic Scripts for Altaic Languages,” pp. 536-558, in P.T. Daniels & W. Bright (eds.), *The World's Writing Systems* (Oxford University Press, 1996).

In the same way, the Persians later took over the Arabic script without giving up their language, the Turks dropped the Arabic alphabet in 1928 when they switched over to the Latin one, certain Kurdish groups in Arab countries are still using the Arabic characters to write their language in, etc.

8. See section 6 on the Aramean ancestry of the Jews, which is testified by their *and our* Bible. Again, Mr. Afram prefers to focus on just one historical phase, but seems to ignore other established facts.

The Assyrians conquered Damascus in 732 BC by which they removed the final serious Aramean stronghold in order to carry on their western expansions. But this does not mean that this monarchy, which roughly corresponds to modern Syria, was either the sole heartland of the ancient Arameans or the only region where the Arameans were to be found in large numbers. They were also significantly present in northern and southern Mesopotamia, and even within Assyria proper, as we noted above.

If it turns out that Mr. Afram did not know these facts, it becomes clear why he (mistakenly) presupposes that the Assyrians subjugated the distant Arameans of Damascus, easily assimilated them, forcibly confiscated their Aramaic script and language, and finally patented them as ‘Assyrian’.

With regard to the Upper Mesopotamian origins of the Aramean people, Mr. Afram may like to read http://www.midyatcity.com/articles/indigenous_arameans.doc.

9. Only Hebrew and Aramaic are *alphabets* and both consist of 22 letters. Assyrian, on the other hand, is a *cuneiform script* with literally hundreds of signs. The Assyrian writing system is not an Assyrian invention either, as we saw above. It was Sumerian in origin, but the Akkadians adopted it and further developed it. As regards the Aramaic script, its ancestor was either Phoenician or Proto-Canaanite.

It is true that each of the 22 letters of the Aramaic, Hebrew or Phoenician alphabets have distinct meanings. But the origin of this phenomenon should not be sought in Mesopotamia, as Mr. Afram thinks, but in Egypt. In this country, Semitic people who lived there were inspired by the hieroglyphs before they invented the alphabetic script around 1900 BC,²⁸ and possibly even earlier.

Next comes a short paragraph that would have made more sense had it been attached to Mr. Afram’s section 4; although I have already dealt with this issue in sections 3 and 4, I will pursue the matter a little further here.

The attempt to explain how the name *Suryoyo* originated in Aramaic is vague, too concise and hence unsuccessful. Again, in themselves the two mentioned linguistic phenomena are true. It is undisputed that the letter *t* (as in ‘*think*’) can develop into *s*, as is the case in certain Aramaic vernaculars. Nor is it denied that the consonant *š* (as in ‘*short*’) can be pronounced as *s* in certain languages or dialects, such as Neo-Assyrian; this occurs mostly among those people whose alphabets lack this sound, as in Greek.

Be that as it may, my main point is that it is very unlikely that this alleged development took place in Aramaic: *Oturoyo* > (*O*)*suroyo* > *Suroyo* > *Suryoyo* or *Ašuroyo* > (*A*)*šuroyo* > *Suroyo* > *Suryoyo*. Indeed, we are not told whether *Sur(y)oyo* is supposed to have been derived from *Oturoyo* or *Ašuroyo* – the term was certainly not derived from both these names, so it must be either one of them.

I hope to return to this issue in detail in a future study (see n. 4). Then I will also elucidate on what grounds I believe that *Sur(y)oyo* can not be traced back to either *Oturoyo* or *Ašuroyo* in Aramaic; nor to Neo-Assyrian *Aššurayu*, as Prof. Parpola suggests.²⁹ The Aramaic name *Sur(y)oyo* is, in my view, nothing more than a borrowing from the Greek vocabulary, as most scholars believe.³⁰

Here it suffices to note that we can easily maneuver ourselves into the position of *malpōno* Afram or Prof. Parpola (admittedly, his interpretation is creative) if we resort to existing linguistic rules only. But we should not forget that linguistic explanations need to be compatible with other known facts.

Mr. Afram’s examples concerning the letters *t*, *t̄*, *s* and *š* illustrate that the name for ‘Assyria’ was *Ašur* in Hebrew and *Atur* in Aramaic (*Otur* in Tur ‘Abdin Aramaic) at least since the Persian epoch. There are also other words to show that the *Proto-Semitic* *t̄* later became *t̄/t*; some words were initially written with *š* in Aramaic, such as *Ašur*. For instance, the equivalents of Hebrew *šeleg* (‘snow’), *šmone* (‘eight’), *šub* (‘again’) and *šeql* (‘to weigh’) occur in Aramaic as *telag*, *temone*, *tub* and *teqal*.

²⁸ Cf. this BBC report (d.d. November 19, 1999) http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/521235.stm.

²⁹ See the above-cited article in n. 4, pp. 11-14.

³⁰ *Contra* Prof. Parpola (*idem*, p. 14), who concludes that *Suroyo* “cannot be regarded as a loanword but as an *indigenous selfdesignation*, which the Aramaic-speaking Assyrians shared with their Akkadian-speaking fellow citizens.” (The italics are his.)

10. The conclusion is that the *script*, which the Jewish people exchanged for their national Hebrew one and which they for one reason or another remembered as “the Assyrian characters/script,” is Aramaic. Virtually all scholars recognize this as an undisputed fact. Gabriel Afram clearly does not.

It is neither sound reasoning, nor convincing to claim that even when the Jewish designation for the Aramaic *script* may be wrong (as it in reality is), the present-day Aramaic-speaking Christians “more than anyone else” should have “the right to call their script or language [*sic*] Assyrian.”

The remarks about the Chaldean name, which are in no way related to the question as to whether or not the Aramaic script or language should be called ‘Assyrian’, were really meaningless. Even so, Mr. Afram probably was unaware that the Aramaic *language* really has been called ‘Chaldean’ in previous centuries under the primary influence of the Latin father Jerome (cf. his comments on Daniel 2:4).

But already in the 19th century scholars rightly objected against this name. Notably Prof. Noldeke, who categorically stated: “Of all the names of this nation and its language is the use of the *original* ‘Aramean’ [and ‘Aramaic’]³¹ essentially also *the only one*, which still strongly fits into current scholarship. This, however, is hardly true for the name ‘Syrian’. For, as we saw above, this name is essentially not suitable to describe a particular dialect, since it can be used with equal right by the most diverse dialects. [Here he allows an exception for the dialect which I choose to call Edessan Aramaic] ... The name ‘Chaldean’ is altogether to be avoided. For a scientific designation of the particular Aramaic dialects and dialect groups we have to create for ourselves technical terms.”³²

In addition to ‘Edessan Aramaic/Edessan/Edessene’, students of Aramaic dialectology might prefer to use ‘Tur ‘Abdin Aramaic/Tur ‘Abdinian’, too, as a technical term for the vernacular of the Tur ‘Abdin area instead of descriptors like *Torani*, *Turoyo* and even *Surayt*.

In sum, Mr. Afram has not given us any evidence at all, nor any cogent arguments to support his grand assertions. Our language, in its spoken and written variants, *is* undeniably Aramaic. And neither our language, nor our script have been descended from Assyrian, as some of the nationalists proclaim. Really, any Assyriologist can tell how, when and why the Assyrian script and language are dead for over 2,500 years now. And any Aramaist will confirm that our script and language truly are Aramaic.

Anyone who denies these facts, apparently prefers to remain *willingly ignorant*, to speak in Biblical terms (2 Pet. 3:5). As a matter of fact, the two main facts and arguments adduced by Mr. Afram can even be used against him.

True, the Jews termed the adopted square *script* (albeit inaccurately) ‘Assyrian’. But they were always keen to remember the *language* as ‘Aramaic’. Again, the most Holy Book of the Jews *and the Suryoye* calls our language ‘Aramaic’ and our homeland *Aram-naharaim*! If Mr. Afram regards the Jewish traditions as authoritative or inspiring, so as to discover and suggest proper names for our script, language or people, he should now promote these original names *with equal zeal*.

He referred us to Tuma Audo, but on a closer look it appeared that this Bishop factually stated that *Aramaic* is the “genuine and original name” for our language and script, as *Aramean* is for our people. This case, too, will prove how much Mr. Afram really respects and shares the belief of the esteemed Bishop Tuma Audo.

³¹ For German ‘aramäisch(e)’, the English language reserves the term ‘Aramean’ often for the Christians, people, nation, community, church and history, whereas ‘Aramaic’ is used for the language, script, culture and literature.

³² Th. Nöldeke, “Die Namen der aramäischen Nation und Sprache,” in *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 25 (1871), pp. 113-131. See p. 131: “Von den Namen dieser Nation und ihrer Sprache ist im Grunde der ursprüngliche ‚aramäisch‘ auch der einzige, der noch für den Gebrauch der heutigen Wissenschaft streng passt. ‚Syrisch‘ deckt sich allerdings damit ziemlich, aber, wie wir sahen, ist dieser Name im Grunde nicht dazu geeignet, einen einzelnen dialect zu bezeichnen, da er mit demselben Recht von den verschiedensten Dialecten gebraucht wird...Vollständig zu vermeiden ist der Name ‚chaldäisch‘. Zur wissenschaftlichen Bezeichnung der einzelnen aramäischen Dialecte und Dialectgruppe müssen wir uns mehrere Termini technici schaffen.” (The somewhat free translation as well as the italics are mine.)