

The Arameans of Aram-naharaim or The Ancient Syrians of Mesopotamia

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The Arameans trace their genealogical lines back to the eponymous ancestor *Aram*, the son of Shem, the son of Noah (Genesis 10:1, 22).¹ In pre-Christian times, notably between 1150-700 B.C., they played a crucial and decisive role in Mesopotamia and ancient Syria.² Due to the advanced scholarship of the past decades, we have become pretty familiar now with their Upper Mesopotamian origins as well as with their many kingdoms and principalities, which they established in the fertile area that has been aptly called “The Cradle of Civilization.”

Within a few centuries the Aramean nation was about to become subdued *politically* by closely related Mesopotamians (Assyrians and neo-Babylonians/Chaldeans); from the sixth century B.C. onwards, however, it was subjected by non-Mesopotamian lords (Persians, Greeks, Romans, Byzantines, Arabs, Ottomans/Turks). Despite these developments, their language, i.e. Aramaic, which advanced to the status of *lingua franca* of the entire Near East (primarily in the Persian era), remained centuries thereafter still in use in the Middle East, once extending as far as Afghanistan on the one hand and Egypt on the other.

In the early days of Christendom, the Aramean people converted almost altogether to Christianity when they embraced the Christian Gospel. Quite rapidly, however, the Christian Arameans finally adopted the already existing Greek term ‘Syrians’³ as a new designation for reasons unimportant here. The second Patriarchate after Jerusalem, viz. Antioch, was the seat of their Patriarch. It was in this capital of Roman Syria where the appellation “Christians,” as applied to the followers of Jesus Christ, stems from (Acts 11:26). Many missionary projects were initiated from Antioch, notably towards the Mesopotamian region. In this area, the intellectual light of Edessa (*Urhoy* in Aramaic), famous for its many circulating legends in later centuries and its literary language which evolved from Aramaic (see n.5), saliently shone forth. Considered as “the mother of all cities in Mesopotamia” among early Aramean writers, experts in the field properly called this “Blessed City” the “Centre of Aramean Christendom” and the “Athens of the Aramean world.”

In the course of the meantime Christian Aramean history, the unity with the Imperial Church in Byzantium could no longer be maintained in the fifth century. Arameans not only could not consent with the presented definition at Chalcedon (451) regarding the relationship between the humanity and divinity of Jesus Christ. Internally, too, they were facing a serious division

¹ According to the most holy source of the Jewish people, the Tanakh or the Christian ‘Old Testament’, the Jews have Aramean ancestry. References to places where both the Jewish Patriarchs and Matriarchs are explicitly called Aramean, can be found in (e.g.) Genesis 24:4, 10; 25:20; 28:5; 29:21 and esp. Deuteronomy 26:5.

² Mesopotamia is the Greek term for the Biblical Hebrew Aram-naharaim, meaning “(the land of) Aram of the two rivers.” Cf. the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible that was completed in the third century B.C. This first translation of the Old Testament also clearly testifies to the fact that the terms ‘Aram(eans)’ and ‘Aramaic’ were translated with ‘Syria(ns)’ and ‘Syrian’ respectively. In Syriac-Aramaic (see n.5, below) Mesopotamia is known as beth-nahrin or Aram-nahrin.

The constant changing borders and the etymology of the originally Greek term ‘Syria’, corresponding especially since the Roman conquest (64 B.C.) upon the Seleucids to one of the former prominent kingdoms of the Arameans, i.e. ‘Aram(-Damascus)’, have a long and complex history with which we are not concerned here.

³ See n.2. Currently, the Arameans reject this designation for obvious reasons: by this name they are frequently (wrongly) associated with Muslim Syrians from the “Syrian Arab Republic.” Either ‘Syriac(-Aramaic)’ or their ancient native name ‘Aramean’ is preferred to nowadays in order to avoid confusion and ambiguity.

between Arameans in the West living under Roman domination (Syriac-Orthodox Church of Antioch), and those in the East under Persian control (Church of the East⁴). Due to external missionary pressures in later times, however, these communities produced Catholics (e.g., Syriac-Catholics) and Protestants; Maronites and Melkites (adherents of the Byzantine *malko*, 'king, emperor' in Aramaic) also share in a common Aramaic heritage.

Even though the heydays of the Arameans were the fourth till the seventh centuries A.D., when many prolific writers produced a massive literature in Syriac,⁵ from the seventh century onwards they were subjected by the Arab peoples, who rapidly conquered the Near East. Due to islamization and arabization, in time the Aramean community declined more and more. Except for a relatively small remnant, Aramaic was quickly superseded by Arabic and many Arameans lost their identity in the increasing ocean of Arabs and Muslims. Noteworthy also is that the ancient Mesopotamian-Greek sciences (e.g., philosophy, medicine, astronomy) were transmitted to the Arab world primarily by means of the Arameans.⁶ Be that as it may, the masters were finally replaced by their students, whose inherited knowledge was adopted by pre-enlightened Europe. Sadly, this plain fact of Aramean intermediary is seldom mentioned in most of the modern textbooks, whether in the Orient or in the Occident.

The 15th century started for the Arameans as one of the most disastrous episodes in their history. The Mongol Timur Lane looted nearly all their towns and villages and decimated the entire Aramean nation in Asia Minor. Aramean survivors withdrew themselves into already populated but isolated mountainous areas, such as Tur-'Abdin, in south-eastern Turkey, another cradle of Aramean Christendom where many of the present-day Syriac-Orthodox come from. In the next centuries, Kurdish and Turkic tribes tried to intrude in these regions, which often caused the same destructive effects upon the already badly injured communities.

In the 19th century the weakened Syriac flock reappeared in the Western picture and the temptation of proselytizing among the Aramean *Christians* could not be resisted by Catholics and Protestants alike. However, after having faced yet other severe tragedies – particularly in 1894-1896 and the Genocide year of 1915, where among other Christians hundreds of thousands of Arameans were innocent victims of an inhuman process of systematic ethnic cleansing in the Ottoman Empire –, a first emigration wave started to the West. 1933 is furthermore a dark year for the 'Nestorian' or 'Assyrian' community when in August of that year a couple of thousand Arameans were innocently slaughtered in Simele, Iraq, by the new regime. Further, from the 1960s onwards, many Syriac-Orthodox fled the Tur-'Abdin region, mostly to Europe, due to repeated oppressions of Kurds; whilst the Turkish authorities turned a blind eye towards these atrocities. In the late 1970s Arameans from Syria, followed by

⁴ When members of this denomination, i.e. 'Nestorians' (the term itself being a misnomer), officially joined the Roman Catholic Church in 1551-1553, the 'Chaldean' church was born. In 1976 the Church of the East formally prefixed the term 'Assyrian' to its name. This latter name bears historically little, if any, justification.

⁵ The term 'Syriac' finally triumphed as the commonly known name for the Aramaic cultural and literary dialect originating in Edessa (since 1983 Sanliurfa, i.e. "glorious Urfa," in Turkey). Early writers often juxtaposed 'Aramaic' and 'Syriac'. Other well known terms, in particular through its usage by Jacob of Edessa (†708), are nahroyo ('Meso)potamian' and Urhoyo 'Edessene'. Hence the most appropriate name for this dialect would probably be Edessene/Edessan Aramaic; cf. (e.g.) Palmyrene Aramaic. Many experts have confirmed that this dialect was comprehensible to people in first-century A.D. Palestine and that it was akin to the Aramaic dialect Jesus and His followers had spoken in the same period.

⁶ In the seventh century, the Arameans were already well-experienced in translating Greek text into their own language, so they simply continued translating texts. This time, however, the target language was also Arabic. Hence they translated the texts either indirectly from Aramaic into Arabic or directly from Greek into Arabic.

Arameans from Iraq since the first Gulf war (and recently also because of the second one), also fled to Western countries.

With regard to the ironical Western missionary enterprises among *Christian* Arameans in an increased fundamental Muslim environment, one Syriac-Orthodox, writing in the first part of the 20th century, not all too surprising named his book “Whither Christian Missions?” It also has to be noted that in none of the above cases Western countries have supported the fragile Aramean people in any serious way whatsoever. Remarkably enough, since its penetration into Mesopotamia (to pursue its own financial interests) and in the brief aftermath of the collapse of the Ottoman Empire during the time of the “Peace Conferences” organized by the League of Nations, the precursor of the United Nations, the ‘Christian’ West (rather European superpowers) has thus far clearly been more in favor of the Muslims on the expense of the Arameans, the neglected and forgotten indigenous population who at present have lost their homeland and live dispersed throughout the world. The Allies did make the Aramean people, who finally felt abandoned by them, valuable promises that were never fulfilled. Hence some Aramean writers tried to raise again the attention of the civilized world to just listen to their heartbreaking stories by giving their books telling titles like “The British Betrayal.”

The past three decades the Arameans have developed themselves pretty well on their own, both on spiritual and cultural or socio-political level. They have founded numerous churches and monasteries in the Diaspora for which many new clergymen and deacons have been consecrated. They also have established a great number of unions, foundations, associations, and national confederations, all united into one transcending umbrella organization known as the [Syriac Universal Alliance \(SUA\)](#). Since 1983 SUA is a recognized representative body of the Aramean people, has established good relations with UNESCO and enjoys since 1999 the NGO Special Consultative status with the Economic and the Social Council of the United Nations (ECOSOC).

Striking is that although having been subjected by foreign peoples in their own homeland, the Aramean people have always withstood assimilation. Indeed, they have been able to preserve their ancient-old identity throughout their long history. A self-awareness of their Aramean descent is already visible in the writings of famous writers like Ephrem the Syrian (†373), Jacob of Serugh (†521), Jacob of Edessa (†708), Yeshu‘dad from Haditha (†853), Bar Bahlul from Baghdad (fl. 963), Dionysius Bar-Salibi (†1171), Bar-‘Ebroyo (†1286), Michael the Great/Elder (†1199) and many others. This Aramean self-reflection also continued in the writings of the early 20th century nationalists like Naoum Fayege (†1930), and the late Patriarchs of the Syriac-Orthodox of Antioch Apherem I Barsaum (1887-1933-1957) and Ignatius Ya‘qub III (1912-1957-1980) until even the current Patriarch Zakka I Iwas (1932-1980-present). The Muslim milieu, in which quite a number of Arameans are still living in since the 7th century A.D., has kept alive the awareness of their distinctive identity. Until this very moment, the Aramean people endure serious external and internal pressures, such as turkification, arabization and kurdification.

Like any other Diaspora community the Arameans, too, suffer from the isolation of their homeland today and from the lack of support from a supportive country in safeguarding as many fragments as possible of their centuries-old national heritage. At present, a nostalgic desire to those ancient heydays is stronger than ever among the current generation of Arameans. Hence a multimedia project like The Hidden Pearl, which was realized through a perfect cooperation between the SUA and the Syriac-Orthodox Church of Antioch, is an excellent response from the leaders to the longing of its community for a firm identity - surely

a unique identity to be proud of. But it is the Aramean youth that should understand its moral obligations both to their forbears and their offspring. For it certainly is the responsibility of the present generation to polish that excavated pearl, make it shine as never before and to pass this invaluable treasure on to the future generations.