

The Professor & The Nationalist

Johny Messo (2004)

“Why would an Assyrian professor ... respond to what an Assyrian nationalist would say,” wrote Mr. Aprim last week in Zindamagazine (Issue 36: 20 October) in his response to the comments of Emeritus Professor Joseph in this magazine (Issue 35: 18 October).

By the same token, one can ask what reasons nationalists have to question the profound researches of distinguished scholars as regards the history and identity of nationalists. Needless to say, both the scholar and the nationalist are equally entitled to their opinions. When it comes to the writing of history, however, both are bound to the same objective criteria. The author’s “intellectual integrity,” to use Prof. Joseph’s words, being one of them.

It is in this respect that I can understand the sincere concerns of Prof. Joseph, who probably saw himself morally obliged to reprove the biased methods of Mr. Aprim, who profiles himself as a “nationalist” as well as an “author and historian” (see some of his [articles](#)).

But why did the “author and historian” Fred Aprim had to resort to serious accusations, indecent and unfounded as they were,¹ in his reply to John Joseph instead of sharing with the Zinda readers a sincere, constructive and educational examination of Joseph’s convictions? Perhaps all of us, including Prof. Joseph himself, could learn from Mr. Aprim and modify our views. Thus, I could only deduce from Mr. Aprim’s reply that his empty rhetoric and his practice of *ad hominem* arguments debunked his very own intellectual shortcomings.

Errors & Cited Scholars

Since Joseph has convincingly corrected some of Aprim’s remarks, this writer would like to point to other uncomfortable statements that were embedded in Aprim’s cited response.

Fred Aprim: “First, in his 1961 book “The Nestorians and Their Muslim Neighbors”, page ix, Joseph wrote that the name Assyrian did not appear before the 19th century, and in page 14 he attributed the emergence of this name to archaeological finds and Western missionaries who brought the name to the local people.”

This whole sentence is quoted almost verbatim² by the copycat Fred Aprim from Prof. Frye’s article (see below) without giving Prof. Frye the credit he deserves. Still, a fairer representation of Joseph’s studies would mention that he rather attempted to objectively examine the use of the appellation ‘Assyrian’ throughout the different centuries when this name did appear in different contexts – to be sure, even “before the 19th century.”

¹ Without any reasonable arguments or proofs, Fred Aprim declared John Joseph to be “a blind antagonist” and an “Anti-Assyrian,” who has a – hidden – agenda. Aprim even implied that Joseph started his academic career as an agent of the CIA and, consequently, insinuated that Prof. Joseph is a renegade and betrays his own people.

² R. Frye, “Assyria and Syria: Synonyms,” in *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 51:4 (1992), p. 284 n.15 reads: “See John Joseph, *The Nestorians and Their Muslim Neighbors* (Princeton, 1961), page ix, where he says the name Assyrian did not appear before the nineteenth century, and page 14, he attributed the emergence of this name to archaeological finds and Western missionaries who brought the name to the local people.”

Besides, has not Dr. Gabriele Yonan, as well as many other reputable scholars, expressed similar remarks? Yonan³ wrote that the name ‘Assyrian’ was suggested by outsiders (read: Westerners) and that this nomenclature, when it turned into a national designation, was first applied to the ‘Nestorian’ Christians by “missionaries, archaeologists and travelers.”

Regarding the referenced article of Prof. Frye (see n. 2), the readers may also be referred to the comments of [Prof. Joseph](#) and [the present writer](#). Moreover, as highlighted in my evaluation, Prof. Frye stated (JNES, 1992:282): “The Greeks never use the term ‘Aramaic’ or ‘Aramaean’ but only ‘Syrian’, while the ancient Hebrews did use the word Aram for Syria.” Peculiarly, though, this quotation could not be found in the same article that was later distributed on the internet or in the republished version in the JAAS.

Joseph’s assertion concerning the Aramaization of the ancient Assyrians, which is well-documented, was rejected by Mr. Aprim, saying that “Prof. Joseph is not [an] expert in ancient history; he is not an Assyriologist and his information here is wrong.”

Aprim’s perception may be true, but in that context Joseph really trusted upon a famous writing by a highly regarded Assyriologist. Prof. Ran Zadok,⁴ for that matter, who, unlike Prof. Joseph, is a renown “expert in ancient history” and a leading Assyriologist, similarly declared 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 [sic] that after the fall of the Assyrian empire Assyria proper has been completely Aramaicized within a few decades.”

Perhaps we have to assume that this confirmation, founded upon first-hand evidence, also must be incorrect according to Aprim’s self-contradictory logic, which is hopefully not to be repeated: “Nothing in the publication world, whether a book, an article, or a piece of art, is objective. Every one in life has a mission and an agenda and we manifest this agenda in our work.” If he really believes so, then by what measures did Mr. Aprim condemn Prof. Joseph’s analyses as “wrong”?

Without referring to any sources, Aprim further averred that “recent discoveries show that Assyrian Akkadian language and the cuneiform writing system was still in use well into Christianity. Who would use Assyrian Akkadian but Assyrians?”

En passant, this is a similar argument as the one put forward by [O.M. Gewargis](#) in JAAS, p.86; see also Joseph’s notes in JAAS 17:1 (2003). If both these writers truly had a profound knowledge regarding their self-confessed Assyrian history, they would have known that Neo-Assyrian cuneiform, based on the latest findings, ceased to exist in less than two decades after the fall of Nineveh.⁵ Prof. Parpola (JAAS 12:2 [2000]:6) may convince both writers that after 600 B.C., “[c]uneiform writing (now in its Babylonian, Elamite and Old Persian forms)

³ *Assyrer heute: Kultur, Sprache, Nationalbewegung der aramäisch sprechenden Christen im Nahen Osten* (Hamburg und Wien, 1978), p. 20 (“Der Name ‘Assyrer’ wurde also von außen herangetragen”) and p. 154 (“Der nunmehr zur Nationalbezeichnung gewordene Name ‘Assyrer’, war ja zuerst den nestorianischen Christen von Missionaren, Archäologen und Reisenden gegeben worden”).

⁴ “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.

⁵ Cf., e.g., [E. Yildiz](#), “The Assyrians: A Historical and Current Reality,” in JAAS 13/1 (1999), p. 20: “These tablets deal with Assyrian legal terminology and date from the years 603-600 B.C.”

continued to be used for monumental inscriptions.” Has Mr. Aprim himself, who referred us to Prof. Simo Parpola as well as Prof. Edward Y. Odisho, carefully read Parpola’s writings?

Regarding Prof. Parpola’s theories, Assyrian Zinda contributor Francis Sarguis (Issue 21: August 6, 2001) already observed that “admiration for Dr. Parpola of Helsinki University seems to be avidly [held] by a number of pop historians in the Assyrian community, even if his thesis raises eyebrows among his academic peers.” (This line reminds me of the words of [Dr. George Kiraz](#) when he, too, criticized “Mr. Aprim’s pop history-style objections.”)

Let me recall to Mr. Aprim the conclusions of Prof. Odisho: “Nestorianism as a religious identity seems to be a continuation of the ethnic and historical presence of the remaining Assyrians and the Arameans with whom they merged ... [The] Christians of the highlands of Turkey and the plains of Azerbaijan are historically affiliated with the ancient population of that region, namely, the Assyrians and the Arameans.”⁶ In my opinion, this view is basically not that far from what Joseph (2000:32) concluded; even so, compare Joseph’s latest book (2000:27-29) for a brief discussion of Odisho’s argumentation.

Prof. John Joseph Deserves Respect

The reason I noted down these remarks has nothing to do with our deplorable name issue as such, on the contrary; to my mind, this national dilemma requires a practical, political solution. Nor am I interested in arguing with Aprim about history. Especially because in his vision objective history cannot be written and every writer seems to have his/her own agenda.

If he wishes, Mr. Aprim – or other readers – may discuss our history with a professionally accredited historian like Prof. John Joseph. The Professor himself was even generous enough to send interested readers pages from his book by e-mail. Thus, he indirectly invited those who do not agree with him for an honest and intellectual debate about his own deductions; even though Joseph’s study is extensive, one has to admit that it is by no means a complete discussion of the respective historical names that are used by our people today.

After I could not refrain from exposing Mr. Aprim’s bias *à la* Joseph, my actual intention was, since nobody else did, to express my opinion that Prof. Joseph really did not deserve an offensive response – despite his personal convictions, which we all may, or may not, agree with.

I think there are many among our people, even among the Zinda readers, who have a one-sided view of Prof. Joseph. This is regrettable, because he is often solely associated with his opinions regarding our historical names, whilst his discussion of this subject does not even represent 15% of his book that was published in 1961 and revised in 2000. What else do his critics among our people know, or rather want to know, about this intriguing personality?

As a member of the Syriac-Orthodox community, I can bear witness to the fact that his *Muslim-Christian relations and inter-Christian rivalries in the Middle East: The case of the Jacobites in an age of transition* (1983) remains hitherto a lonely volume in academic libraries describing in details the modern history of the ‘Suryoye’; I really would look forward to an updated revision of this precious work as well.

⁶ E.Y. Odisho, *The Sound System of Modern Assyrian (Neo-Aramaic)* (Wiesbaden, 1988), pp. 17-18.

So here you have already a scholar who has written two priceless books about the modern histories of the West- and East-Syriacs respectively. Not just a scholar, but an intellectual who belongs to our very own people and who has devoted a lifetime of study to the history of his people. Now, if this remarkable achievement in itself does not suffice to receive any appreciation or respect from ones own people, I truly would like to know what does.

How many Arameans/Syriacs, Assyrians or Chaldeans – be they nationalists or be they scholars – can boast this same reputation as Prof. Joseph? Moreover, when it comes to the portrayal or defending of our people in the academic world, I believe I am correct when I say that Prof. Joseph’s record speaks for itself.

See, for instance, his “The Turko-Iraqi Frontier and the Assyrians,” in J. Kritzeck and R.B. Winder (eds.), *The World of Islam: Studies in honour of Philip K. Hitti* (New York, 1959), pp. 255-270, or his refutation in the *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 6 (1975), pp. 115-117, of a piece of writing written by a biased Iraqi Professor, Khaldun S. Husry, who wrote about “The Assyrian Affair of 1933.” Also, a similar critique in Zinda (January 28, 2002), “Exploiting the Assyrian presence in Iraq,” comes to mind in this regard.

Thus, I suggest Zindamagazine to interview Prof. Joseph so that the readers can get an honest impression about this scholar, his intentions and motivations – rather than having prejudiced people misinterpret or even accuse him of many things for no sound reasons only because they believe that he has a controversial view of our history. This is not to say that people necessarily need to agree with him, for *everyone* is entitled to his/her own way of thinking.

By way of concluding my remarks, I would like to quote some of Dr. John Pierre Ameer’s words taken from his critical but respectful peer review of Joseph’s last book (JAAS 15:2 2001), p. 72: “The most important point to make in this review is to encourage readers toward this outstanding work of scholarship—scholars of the Middle East will find that it contains a wealth of information, with comprehensive footnotes and a bibliography as extensive as one would wish...For Assyrians of my generation, my children’s generation, and my grandchildren’s generation, this book is required. Nothing compares to it in presenting a clear, detailed, and balanced narration and summary of our recent history.”

[Source: http://www.zindamagazine.com/html/archives/2004/11.2.04/index_tue.php]