

Assyria and Syria: Synonyms?

John Joseph, Ph.d.

Professor Richard N. Frye very appropriately begins his article by saying that “Confusion has existed between the two similar words ‘Syria’ and ‘Assyria’ throughout history down to our own day.” His article, unfortunately, perpetuates the confusion.¹

In his concluding remarks, Frye tells us what his discussion of the usage of “Assyrian/Syrian” has shown. It “shows two facts clearly,” he writes: First, “Confusion in Western usage between Syria for the western part of the Fertile Crescent, and Assyria for the ancient land east of the Euphrates”; Second, “The Eastern usage, which did not differentiate between the two except under Western influence or for other external reasons.” Let us look at these two findings more closely:

FIRST: WESTERN USAGE OF “SYRIA” AND “ASSYRIA”: There was a time when the West [the Greeks], not fully familiar with the Near East, did not differentiate between Syria and Assyria, especially when the Assyrians were still in power. But as early as the fifth century B.C., about two centuries after the fall of Nineveh, Herodotus very clearly differentiated between the two terms and regions. Randolph Helm’s researches show that Herodotus “conscientiously” and “consistently” distinguished the names Syria and Assyria and used them independently of each other. To Herodotus, writes Helm, “Syrians” were the inhabitants of the coastal Levant, including North Syria, Phoenicia, and Philistia; he “*never* [emphasis Helm’s] uses the name Syria to apply to Mesopotamia.” To Herodotus Assyria was in Mesopotamia; he never uses the name Assyria to apply to Syria. The clear distinction made by Herodotus, comments Helm, was “lost upon later Classical authors, some of whom interpreted [Herodotus’] *Histories VII.63* as a mandate to refer to Phoenicians, Jews, and any other Levantines as ‘Assyrians’.”² Frye cites the dissertation by Helm without a

¹Well known Semitic scholars, such as Yale University’s Franz Rosenthal, the dean of Aramaic studies in America for over a generation, are of the opinion that ‘Syrian’ and ‘Assyrian’ are of completely different origins even though it remains for future historians to prove the correctness of the theory. See Rosenthal’s *Die aramäische Forschung seit Th. Nöldeke’s Veröffentlichungen* (Leiden,1939), p.3 n.1. For a concise discussion of this subject see article by Wolfhart Heinrichs, a colleague of Frye at Harvard University, entitled “The Modern Assyrians - Name and Nation,” in *Festschrift Philologica Constantino Tsereteli Dicta*, ed. Silvio Zaorani (Torino,1993), pp.104-105.

²See Helm’s “Herodotus *Histories VII.63* and the Geographical Connotations of the Toponym ‘Assyria’ in the Archaemenid Period” (paper presented at the 190th meeting of the American Oriental Society, at San Francisco, April 1980). See also his “‘Greeks’ in the Neo-Assyrian Levant and ‘Assyria’ in Early Greek Writers” (Ph.D. dissertation,

comment on the subject of usage of Assyria/Syria as noted above; on his opening page he even speaks of “the long-accepted statement of Herodotus (7.63) that the Greeks called Assyrians by the name Syrian without initial a-.” [sic] On the following page he notes that Herodotus “may represent a turning point” in the separation of the two terms.

When the Greeks became better acquainted with the Near East, especially after Alexander the Great overthrew the Achaemenian empire in the 4th century B.C., and then the Greeks and Romans ruled the region for centuries, they restricted the name Syria to the lands west of the Euphrates. During the 3rd century B.C., when the Hebrew bible was translated into the Greek Septuagint for the use of the Hellenized Jews of Alexandria, the terms Aramean and Aramaic of the Hebrew Bible were translated into “Syrian” and “the Syrian tongue” respectively.³

During the second century B.C., the learned Posidonius, a Greek who had lived in Syria, wrote that “the people we [Greeks] call Syrians were called by the Syrians themselves Aramaeans... for the people in Syria are Aramaeans.”⁴ Posidonius, who undoubtedly was aware of the confusion that existed in his day between the terms Assyrian and Syrian, knew well that, whatever the etymological relationship between the two names, geographical Aram (Syria), and geographical Assyria were two different geographical, ethnic, and cultural entities. This point is well expressed by Heinrichs in his above-noted article; he bluntly speaks of “the constant naive identification of population groups on the basis of the identity, or near-identity, of their names; such mistakes,” he adds, “are omnipresent in the apologetic literature written by historians with no philological training.”⁵

University of Pennsylvania, 1980), pp. 27-41; see also Herodotus' *Histories*, I.105 and II.106. The late Arnold J. Toynbee has also clarified that the *Syrioi* “are the people whom Herodotus includes in his Fifth Taxation District” which includes “the whole of Phoenicia and the so-called Philistine, Syria, together with Cyprus.” The *Syrioi*, emphasizes Toynbee, are “not the people of an ‘Assyria’ which contains Babylon and which is the ninth district in his list.” *A Study of History* (1954), vol. vii, p. 654 n. 1. See also George Rawlinson, *The History of Herodotus*, ed. Manuel Komroff (New York, 1956), bk. ii, p. 115.

³The Authorized Version of the Bible continued to use the terms that the Septuagint had adopted until very recent times (1970), when ‘Aramean’ and ‘Aramaic’ of the original were used.

⁴See J.G. Kidd, *Posidonius* (Cambridge Classical Texts and Commentaries, 1988), vol. 2, pt. 2, pp. 955-956. See also Arthur J. Maclean, “Syrian Christians,” *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*; Frederic Macler, “Syrians (or Aramaeans)” [sic] in *ibid.*, where the two terms are “taken for granted” to have been originally synonymous. Consult also Sebastian Brock, “Eusebius and Syriac Christianity,” in Harold W. Attridge and Gohei Hata, eds., *Eusebius, Christianity, and Judaism* (Leiden 1992), p.226.

⁵*Op. cit.*, pp.102, 103.

In his reference to Lucian of Samosata, who “calls the people of Syria by the term Assyrian,” Frye has him saying: “I who wrote (this) am Assyrian” (p.33). This statement illustrates Helm’s remark that the clear distinction made by Herodotus--and by others after him--was lost upon some of the later Classical authors. Oxford scholar Fergus Millar notes this confusion of ‘Syrian’ and ‘Assyrian’ and refers to Lucian, and to Tatian, who also associated himself with Assyria--saying that he was born “in the land of the Assyrians,” hence his nickname “Tatian the Assyrian”: Tatian (Greek Tatianos), writes Millar, no more came from geographical Assyria “than did that other ‘Assyrian’ with a Latin name, Lucian (Greek Lucianos) of Samosata.”⁶

SECOND: EASTERN USAGE OF “SYRIA” AND “ASSYRIA”: Here the clearly-shown “fact” is that the two terms were not differentiated from each other “except under Western influence or for other external reasons.” This does not mean that there was no confusion in the use of these terms to the east of the Euphrates also. Because some of the confusion in this discussion is, in my opinion, generated by the author himself, I would like to note below what I find especially puzzling:

-- The Aramaic language, writes Frye, “came to be called Syriac in the West or Assyrian in the East” (p.32).

--While ‘Syriac’ was used in the West, ‘Assyriac’ was used in the East (p.32). ‘Assyriac’? Here mention is made of “prefixed a-” used in the East, “especially by the Armenians.”

--We are told that “Asori” in Armenian refers to “Classical Syriac,” a dialect of Aramaic; but *Aramaic*, “called Syrian by the Romans,” is called “Assyrian by the Armenians,” an obvious misreading of *Asori*.

What is missing from the above statement is that in the Armenian language ‘Syrian’ and ‘Assyrian’ both start with an initial A [the vague “prefixed a-” above], and the two words are distinguished from each other: *Asori*, singular, refers to a ‘Syrian’ [Aramean] person (as in *Suraya/Soroyo*)--*Asoriner* is the plural. Syriac language [Aramaic] in Armenian is *Asoreren*. The word for ‘Assyrian’ in Armenian is *Asorestants’i*.

The names for geographical Syria and Mesopotamia are also distinct in the Armenian language and both start with an initial A. *Asorik’*, wrote Professor

⁶See Millar’s *The Roman Near East, 31 B.C.-A.D.337* (Cambridge, 1993), pp.227,454-455,460.

Sanjian in a letter to this writer, is “the traditional Armenian term for Syria,” and *Asorestan* “for Assyria.”⁷

A look at Frye’s Table 1, at the end of his article, shows that the information there does not seem to support his conclusion that Eastern usage “did not differentiate” between the terms Syrian and Assyrian. According to the Table, even in the ancient Assyrian dialect of Akkadian, ‘Assyria’ and geographical Syria were rendered by two distinct terms: Ashur and Arame, respectively. In every one of the eight Near Eastern languages and dialects of the Table, the names for the “Area of Assyria” and for the “Area of Syria” *are differentiated*--they are distinctive terms, bearing no resemblance to each other. According to the Table, the “Area of Assyria” was known in Armenian as Norshirakan, apparently a borrowing from the Partheans; ‘Asorestan’ in Armenian refers, according to the Table, to the “Area of Mesopotamia.”⁸

In his effort to prove that the terms Syrian and Assyrian, are synonyms, Frye cites the 12th century Patriarch of the Syrian Orthodox Church (Jacobite), Michael the Syrian. The prelate clearly wrote, according to Frye--citing *volume 3* of Michael’s work--that “the inhabitants of the land to the west of the Euphrates River were properly called Syrians, and by analogy, all those who speak the same language... both east and west of the Euphrates to the borders of Persia, are called Syrians” (p.33). Then Frye cites three cryptic words from Patriarch Michael--this time referring to *volume 1*--which are translated into “Assyrians, i.e., Syrians” (*twry’d hywn swryy*), and this sole source in Syriac is presumably yet another proof of “the continuous equating of the terms ‘Syrian’ and ‘Assyrian’.” By *Athoraye*, the renowned Patriarch undoubtedly meant the inhabitants in and around Mosul. As has been pointed out by many before, someone with the surname *Athoraya* means simply that the person hails from the city of *Athor*, the name by which the city of Mosul and its province were known during the pre-Islamic period. Christians continued to use the geographical designation *Athoraya* as a surname, a common practice in the Middle East, where a surname identifies a person with the name of his birthplace.⁹

Yet another example of the interchangeable use of the terms Syrian and Assyrian--in a variety of combinations: Jacobite Syrian, Eastern Assyrian, Chaldean, Syrian and Assyrian--comes from the 17th century writings of the Carmelites in Iran (p.34). This plethora of names came about not because of the

⁷See this writer’s *The Nestorians and Their Muslim Neighbors* (Princeton, 1961), p.15 n.53. My information there is corroborated by the late Avedis K. Sanjian, Narekatsi Professor of Armenian Studies at the University of California, Los Angeles, in a letter dated October 10, 1994. Consult also Heinrichs, *op. cit.*, pp. 106-107.

⁸Article, p.35.

⁹See J.-M. Fiey, “‘Assyriens’ ou ‘Araméens’?”, *L’Orient syrien*, 10 (1965), p.156; Heinrichs, pp.105-106.

ethnic origin of the various Eastern Christian communities but because of the geographical location of their churches or patriarchates. An expression like “Christians of Assyria” imperceptibly becomes “Assyrian Christians” and then “Christian Assyrians.”¹⁰ As early as the 18th century, the British historian Gibbon was aware of these confusions. The Nestorians, wrote Gibbon, “Under the name of Chaldeans or Assyrians, are confounded with the most learned or the most powerful nation of Eastern antiquity.”¹¹ The various names by which these Aramaic-speaking Christians were known, and the titles used by the Roman Catholic Church in reference to their patriarchs--sometimes with such exotic combinations as “Chaldeans of Assyria,” or “Eastern Chaldeans of Catholic Assyria”--were “hardly ever used” by the patriarchs or the people themselves, as the late Dominican scholar Fiey has observed.¹²

The above examples, according to Frye, prove that “the assertion by some that the word ‘Assyrian’ was a creation of Westerners in the eighteenth or nineteenth century is surely incorrect.” Here Frye cites a single source and attributes to its author something that the author does not say. Frye cites p.ix of my book *The Nestorians and Their Muslim Neighbors*, where he has me saying: “The name Assyrian did not appear before the nineteenth century.” What I did write in my Preface was that the Nestorians “are known also as Assyrians, *a name commonly used in reference to them* only since the First World War.” [Italics added.]

The name Assyrian was certainly used prior to the nineteenth century. Thanks to the Old Testament, ‘Assyrian’ was a well known name throughout the centuries and wherever the Bible was held holy, whether in the East or West. In the works of the early Eastern Christian writers, notes Fiey, we find all the gamut of references to these ancients, employing indifferently the words Syrians, Athurians, Chaldeans, and Babylonians, but these writers never identified with these people. “I have made indices of my *Christian Assyria*,” emphasized Fiey, “and have had to align some 50 pages of proper names of people; there is not a single writer who has an ‘Assyrian’ name.”¹³

¹⁰For this example, see J.F.Coakley, *The Church of the East and the Church of England*, (Oxford, 1992), pp.65-66.

¹¹Edward Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, ed. J.B. Bury (London, 1898), v. 150. See also Joseph, *op. cit.* p.14.

¹²For the profusion of patriarchal titles and names coined by the Roman Catholic Church, see Fiey’s “‘Assyriens’ ou ‘Araméens?’”, pp.146-150, and his more recent, posthumously published article, “Comment l’Occident en vint à parler de ‘Chaldéen?’” in *Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester*, 78 (Autumn 1996), pp.163-170.

¹³See his “‘Assyriens’ ou ‘Araméens?’”, p.146.

The question remains: What does it mean that the terms Assyria and Syria are *Synonyms*? Can we substitute the word Assyrian for ‘Syrian’ wherever it is used in antiquity? Can we call the peoples of the various Aramean principalities in geographical Syria ‘Assyrians’ if ‘Assyria’ is synonymous with ‘Syria’? In his *magnum opus*, *The Heritage of Persia*, Frye wrote of the omnipresence of the Aramean people: “All around the Fertile Crescent from the twelfth century BC Aramaic-speaking nomads infiltrated and took power, forming small principalities”; one may conclude, he continues, “that the Aramaeans were well ensconced here [in Babylon] as they were on the other side of the Syrian desert. Their movement into the Fertile Crescent resembles that later of the Arab tribes before Islam into the same territory.” Can we call these Arameans ‘Assyrians’ since the Arameans are called Syrians?

One may argue that the word Syria is derived from Assyria--and a good case may be made for that position--but surely that does not transform geographical Syria and the predominantly Aramean inhabitants of the Fertile Crescent into Assyrians. If ‘Syria’ is a truncated form of ‘Assyria,’ it simply serves as a reminder that geographical Syria was once ruled by the ancient Assyrian empire. If I read Frye’s impressive *The Heritage of Persia* correctly, the Assyrian conquest of the Arameans ended up being suicidal for the Assyrians. “In Mesopotamia as in Syria,” wrote Frye just over thirty years ago, “the Aramaeans were subjected to Assyrian aggression and suffered much from Assyrian rule. In one respect, however, they [the Arameans] conquered their masters”; the Assyrians were forced to adopt both the language and script of the Arameans. Then for centuries, we read Frye say, “Assyrian *political* expansion” was accompanied by “the Aramaean *ethnic* expansion.” The time came when “Even lower classes, except for peasants in out-of-the-way villages, all over the the area of modern northern Iraq, knew little or no Assyrian [Akkadian] but spoke Aramaic.”¹⁴

The Akkadian language, as carrier of ancient Assyrian culture and identity, had ceased to exist while the Assyrians were still in power. After the fall of their empire, its Aramaic-speaking population, with no cohesive force that a central Assyrian government of their own would provide, gradually became a part of the other groups and nationalities that had become speakers of the Aramaic tongue. Unlike the Assyrians, the Persians, who also had adopted Aramaic as an official language, did not forget their own mother tongue; they maintained their national-linguistic identity and largely because their Aramaic-speaking subjects did not predominate from within Persia as they did in Assyria. (With the advent of Islam, the Persians were able, again, to resist arabization; they liberally borrowed from the Arabic vocabulary and even adopted the Arabic script, but they were able to Persianize what they borrowed.) In the case of the Assyrians, aramaization was total just as the absorption of the various other ethnicities

¹⁴*The Heritage of Persia*, Mentor Book edition, 1966 printing, p.80 and p.32 n.5 of the article.

would be, centuries later, through arabization. The dominance of Aramaic over Akkadian in both speech and writing was so extensive in the 8th century BC, that Aramaic *script* came to be mistakenly called “Assyrian script.”¹⁵ A similarity to this would be to call the Arabic script that the Persians use, “Persian script.”

Most of the contradictions of the article under review, it seems to me, would have been resolved if, instead of dwelling on the uncertain etymological relationship of the two names Syria and Assyria, its author had built upon the interaction between the *peoples* of geographical Syria and Assyria, a subject that he had so ably but briefly covered in the 1960s.

When the Aramaic-speaking Christians of the nineteenth century were calling themselves *Syrians* (*Suraye* or *Soroyo*), in Urmiah, Hakkari, and Tur ‘Abdin, they were referring to an ancestry that had given them their mother tongue and the venerable language of their liturgy and literature for the previous 1,800 years, the Arameans. There would have been no contradictions if Professor Frye had used *Aramean* and *Syrian* as synonyms, a usage that started over 2,000 years ago, early during the Hellenistic period, an era of Near Eastern history that lasted almost a thousand years. By the time we come to the Christian era, Frye himself informs us that the “Area of Mesopotamia” was called “Home of the Arameans” [*Bet Aramaye*] in Syriac.¹⁶

¹⁵See Richard C. Steiner, “Why the Aramaic Script was called ‘Assyrian’ in Hebrew, Greek, and Demotic,” in *Orientalia* (Rome: Pontificium institutum biblicum), 62 (1993), pp. 80-82; Joseph Naveh and Jonas C. Greenfield, “Hebrew and Aramaic in the Persian Period,” in *Cambridge History of Judaism* (1984), v. 1, pp. 126-127. Compare Frye, article, p.32, and n.8, where he vaguely speaks of “The use of the term ‘Assyrian’ for the Aramaic language [sic] and alphabet...” The Greek term *Assyria Grammata* and the Hebrew *Ktab Ashuri*, both mean “Assyrian script,” or writing; they refer to the Aramaic *script* that the Assyrians used, and not to the Aramaic *language*.

¹⁶Table 1, p.35. We are not told what the “Area of Mesopotamia” is called in Aramaic during the pre-Christian period—undoubtedly *Bet Aramaye* for a good part of that period.