

Assyrian Christians, Dr. Aaron M. Butts: A Rebuttal¹

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June 2023

Abstract:

In his research titled *Assyrian Christians*, Dr. Aaron M. Butts chronicles the supposed events that led to the propagation and adoption of the Assyrian identity by Syriac Christians, both East Syriac and West Syriac. By converging on the works of historical figures and authors, Dr. Butts argues that the modern-day Assyrians adopted this designation in the nineteenth century and that this name was not the nomenclature discourse prior; but rather Āramāyā “Aramean” and Sūryāyā “Syrian” or “Syriac”. The author of this article will consider and present conflicting evidence that not only stand in contradiction to Dr. Butts’ argument but shall also demonstrate how the Assyrian identity, contrary to the aforementioned hypothesis, did indeed survive post-empire well into the pre-modern period. This rebuttal will tackle certain key issues presented by Dr. Butts and draw on its own conclusion.

Assyria and Assyrian in Pre-Modern Syriac Sources:

Dr. Butts begins his chapter by asserting that the name Āthōrāyā “Assyrian” was not the typical self-designation for individuals belonging to the Syriac heritage, whether East Syriac or West Syriac. To demonstrate this, Dr. Butts references the Syriac version of Eusebius of Caesarea’s *Ecclesiastical History* where Bardaiṣān (154-222 AD), an early Christian writer, is described both as

¹ Butts, Aaron. M. 2017. *Assyrian Christians*. Pp. 599–610 in *A Companion to Assyria*, ed. Eckart Frahm. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons.

an “Aramean” and a “Syrian” (Wright and McLean 1898: 243.18 and 183.7, respectively). This text, translated before 420 AD, proves (according to Dr. Butts), that these were the typical self-designations for Syriac Christians. The source used by Dr. Butts, however, is unconfirmable.

First, Bardaiṣān was a native of the city of Urhāy, also commonly known as Edessa (modern-day Şanlıurfa, Türkiye). The author’s name consists of two words that support this notion; bar “son of” and Daiṣān, the river on which Edessa was situated. Second, his contemporary, the famed Christian theologian Hippolytus of Rome (170–235 AD) reports that Bardaiṣān was an “Armenian”.² It is worth noting here that, the city of Edessa, albeit a significant center for Syriac Christianity, was also home to a sizeable Armenian population that employed the Syriac script prior to the invention of their own alphabet.³

According to another early Christian author, such as, Porphyry (234–305 AD)— Bardaiṣān was a “Babylonian”.⁴ As one can see, these sources demonstrate that there were conflicting opinions by early writers surrounding Bardaiṣān’s genealogy. Following on from Bardaiṣān, Dr. Butts then proceeds to argue that the name Āthōr “Assyria” was relegated to the “city of Mosul”, and by extension, the name “Assyrian” was only employed by Syriac Christians in a ‘geographical’ non-ethnic sense to mean a “citizen of Mosul”. To demonstrate this hypothesis, Dr. Butts cites the *Syriac-Arabic Lexicon* authored by Abū ‘I-Hassān Bar Bahlūl.

Indeed, in his entry for Assyria, Bar Bahlūl glosses this placename as Mosul.⁵ Be this as it may, Bar Bahlūl was a tenth century *floruit* who authored his lexicon under ‘Abbāsīd rule and influence. The name Mosul, according to the ‘Abbāsīds, did not only refer to a city (as we know it today) but also represented the larger province of the same name.⁶ This province lay between the

² *Ante-Nicene Christian Library: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers down to A.D. 325, vol. VI, Hippolytus, Bishop of Rome* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1868), 298.

³ According to local tradition, the Armenian alphabet was introduced in c. 405.

⁴ *Select Works of Porphyry* (London: Thomas Rodd, 1823), 158.

⁵ Rubens Duval, *Lexicon Syriacum auctore Hassano Bar Bahlule* (Parisiis: E Reipublicae typographaeo, 1901), 322.

⁶ Yāqūt al-Hamawī (c. 1179–1229), glossed Āthūr “Assyria” in his index of placenames as follows: “*Mosul, before it received its present name, was called Āthūr, or sometimes Ākūr, with a kaf. It is said that this was anciently the name of al-Jazīrah [northern Mesopotamia], the province being so-called from a city*”.

Euphrates and Tigris Rivers encompassing upper Mesopotamia and included the districts of Diyār Bakr (chief city: Āmīd), Diyār Muḍar (chief city: Raḡḡa), and Diyār Rabī‘ah (chief city: Mosul).

In fact, in his *Chronography*, the thirteenth century Syriac Orthodox polymath Bar Hebraeus employs the name Assyria to mean both the district around Nineveh and Arbelā as well as the larger province.⁷ In what follows, the author of this article shall demonstrate how the name Aramean was conceived by the very source Dr. Butts used in his argument. First, Bar Bahlūl ironically glosses the name “Aram”, as a place name, to mean the “city of Ḥarrān” and by extension, an “Aramean”, would be a “citizen of Ḥarrān”.⁸ Second, the name “Aramean” according to this tenth century lexicon is also glossed as follows: “pagan”, “heathen”, and “Nabatean”.⁹

As far as the Assyrian identity is concerned, Dr. Butts then proceeds to argue that this name was used by pre-modern Syriac writers to mean “enemies of Christians”; and went on to present a number of sources each of which complimented one another. For example, the imagery in Isaiah 10:5–34 depicts the Biblical Assyrians as “enemies of Israel”. To demonstrate the transmission of these views in some Syriac texts, Dr. Butts cites the Syriac Orthodox Patriarch, Mōr Mīkhā’ēl Rabō “the Great” (c. 1126–1199). In his famed *Chronicle*, Mōr Mīkhā’ēl metaphorically refers to the ruler of Mosul as the “Assyrian pig” (Chabot 1899–1910: 3.261 [French translation]; 4.630.2.24 [Syriac text]).¹⁰

Indeed, Dr. Butts was not in error when citing this passage. However, Dr. Butts, failed to offer the reader alternative passages from the same source that did employ the name Assyrian in an ethnic sense. In his *Chronicle*, Mōr Mīkhā’ēl claimed ancient Assyrian and Babylonian kings as the ancestors of his Syriac Christian contemporaries.¹¹ Further, Mōr Mīkhā’ēl also argued that the name “Syrian” was applied by various people who inhabited pre-modern Middle East.

⁷ SMMJ 00211, fol. 195r; Vat.Sir.388, fol. 94r; SMMJ 00211, fol. 218r

⁸ Rubens Duval, *Lexicon Syriacum auctore Hassano Bar Bahlule* (Parisiis: E Reipublicae typographaeo, 1901), 295.

⁹ Ibid. 296.

¹⁰ The fall of Edessa occurred between 24 and 26 December 1144 to the Turkish atabeg Imād ad-Dīn Zengī, ruler of Mosul.

¹¹ SOAA 00250 S (1598), fol. 379v

Those who inhabited the west of the Euphrates River, according to this text, were “the real Syrians” as they inhabited geographical Syria. Those from the east of the Euphrates River toward Persia (i.e., the Assyrians), were metaphorically labelled “Syrian” as they spoke the Syriac language, that is, the Aramaic language. As one can see, the use of the name “Syrian” was multi-layered and also had meant “speaker of the Syriac language”. It is worth noting here that, Mōr Mīkhā’ēl acknowledged a portion of his own church as Assyrians and reported that these were the same as those from Āshūr, who founded the city of Nineveh.^{12 13}

The area of contention presented by Dr. Butts was not only attributed to West Syriac sources but also encompassed East Syriac sources. For example, in the medieval East Syriac text attributed to Mār Qardāgh, this saint is said to have descended from the renowned lineage of the “*house of Nīmrōd*” on his father’s side and from the “*house of Sanḥarīb (Sennacherib)*” on his mother’s side.¹⁴ Dr. Butts holds the view that such references may have developed due to the fact that the region around Arbelā preserved ‘some’ awareness of its Assyrian past. In his notes, Dr. Butts argues that the connection with an Assyrian ancestry in this text was a deliberate “*Assyrianising*” in an attempt by Syriac Christians to “*understand themselves and their place in the world*”.

Indeed, the Syriac heritage is rich; however, the hagiography of Mār Qardāgh is not the only literary source that supports an awareness of an Assyrian past. One may also consider the medieval apocryphal text titled the *Doctrina Addai*, also commonly known as the *Teaching of Addai*. The oldest surviving text, authored possibly around the same time as the Syriac version of Eusebius of Caesarea’s *Ecclesiastical History*, claims to chronicle the Christianisation of upper Mesopotamia. According to this text, easterners from Assyria “*passed into the country of the Romans to see the miracles which Addai performed*” and “*in their own country of the Assyrians they taught the sons of their nation*”.¹⁵

Although the oldest surviving manuscript of *Doctrina Addai* is dated by scholars to the fourth- or fifth century AD; it was, however,

¹² Ibid. fol. 378v

¹³ Ibid. fol. 379r

¹⁴ Sachau 222; Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin 75 (1881), fol. 168v

¹⁵ National Library of Russia, MS Syr. 4 (Pigulevskaya 48), fol. 23r-24v

copied from an earlier text dating to the first century AD. Following its Christianisation, Assyria became a significant centre for Syriac Christianity. According to the East Syriac synodical documents of the Church of the East, Assyria was transformed into an archdiocese and the Bishop of Arbelā, capital of this province, took the title of “Metropolitan of the Assyrians”.¹⁶ It is also worth noting that, references to an Assyrian *ethnos* is widely attested in the East Syriac letters of Mār ʿĪmātē’ōs I (c. 740–823), Catholicos-Patriarch of the Church of the East.¹⁷

Dr. Butts’ research begins by asserting that the name Assyrian was not a common self-designation for Syriac Christians, both East Syriac and West Syriac. To demonstrate this hypothesis, Dr. Butts employed a secondary source that, as the author of this article has shown, is unconfirmable. Dr. Butts then proceeds to relegate the name Assyria to the city of Mosul and went on to diminish the significance of the name Assyrian to a ‘geographical’ identity associated with a city. To bolster his hypothesis, Dr. Butts employed a number of sources, taken at face value, that offered no objectivity nor explained to the reader of the complexity of the Aramean, Assyrian, and Syriac identities.

Assyrian Christians in Nineteenth-Century Literature from the West and Assyrian Identity and the Church of the East:

In what follows, the author of this article will tackle two sub-chapter titles. In this stanza there appears to be a tenuous and at times abstract connection between Syriac Christians and the ancient Assyrians as noted by Dr. Butts. Quoting the writings of British traveler Claudius James Rich (1787–1821); Dr. Butts argues that the earliest occurrence of the phrase “Assyrian Christians” is to be found in this writer’s work titled *Narrative of a Residence in Koordistan and on the Site of Ancient Nineveh* (1836: 1. 120).¹⁸ However, according to Dr. Butts, the usage of this term was purely “geographic” since Rich “gives no indication that Assyrian was a self-designation used by the communities in question”.

¹⁶ Vat.Sir.598, fol. 108v

¹⁷ THRI00010, fol. 33

¹⁸ The earliest reference to the phrase “Assyrian Christians” in English occurs in Humphrey Prideaux’s *The Old and New Testament Connected in the History of the Jews and Neighbouring Nations* (1749: 763).

First, a careful inspection of said reference on page 120 and one shall see a notice: “*the following extract, relating to the Christians of Assyria, are from Assemani*”. Of course, Giuseppe Simone Assemani (1687-1768) was an orientalist and prelate belonging to the Antiochene Syriac Maronite Church. Second, Assemani, a Syriac Christian himself, often used the name Assyrian in reference to the adherents of the Church of the East, Chaldean Catholic Church, as well as the Syriac Orthodox Church. The use of the phrase “Assyrian Christians” was not an observation made by Rich, as argued by Dr. Butts.

The connection between East Syriac Christians and Assyria, according to Dr. Butts, was also popularised by the British traveler and archeologist Austen Henry Layard (1817-1894). The passage cited by Dr. Butts is from Layard’s work *Nineveh and its Remains* (1849) where the famed archaeologist reported that there were good reasons to suppose the Christians he met were the “*descendants of the ancient Assyrians*”. Dr. Butts, however, argues that Layard came to this conclusion through the influence of Hormuzd Rassam (1826-1910): “*who was born in Mosul to a prominent Church of the East family*”.

First, it should be corrected here that Rassam was not a faithful of the Church of the East and was a Chaldean Catholic. Second, several prelates of the Chaldean Catholic Church— during this period —self identified as “Assyrians” or “Assyrian-Chaldeans”.^{19 20} One prominent Chaldean Catholic authority during this period was Mār Tōmā Audō (1854-1918) who claimed that as East Syriacs, his community were the descendants of the ancient Assyrians, or of Āshūr.²¹ If Dr. Butts research has demonstrated anything is that western authorities documented their encounters with Syriac Christians who identified themselves as well as their community as Assyrians.

As far as the Aramean name is concerned, Dr. Butts insists that this was the common self-designation for Syriac Christians. In his work titled *A Modern Syriac-English Dictionary* (1900), the East Syriac writer Dr. Abraham Yohannan reports: “*The Nestorians claim*

¹⁹ For the name “Chaldean”, an appendix follows.

²⁰ *Statistica con Cenni Storici della Gerarchia e dei Federli di Rito Orientale* (Rome: S. Con. pro Ecclesia Orientali, 1932).

²¹ Mār Tōmā Audō, *Qaryānē Gōbyē “Selected Readings”* (Ūrmī: 1906), 170.

*further that in reality they should be called Āthōrāyē, that is Assyrians... Furthermore, the Syriacs insist that the term Āramāyē (Arameans) was a misnomer”.*²² Dr. Yohannan reiterated this observation again in his work titled *The Death of a Nation* (1916: 1): the expression Aramean “*was disliked by them (the Assyrians). They insist that the term (Aramean) was a misnomer*”.

²² A distinction is made between the “Syriacs” of Assyria and the Arameans in the letters of Mār Īshō‘yahb III, the seventh century Catholicos-Patriarch of the Church of the East. See. VatSir.157, fol.59r.

Conclusion:

The central theme of Dr. Butts' argument was to outline the historical background for the events that led to the promotion of the Assyrian identity in the nineteenth century and to the ensuing development of the Assyrian nationalist ideology within Syriac communities. The fact is that it is a misconception to start with as it takes the stance of an outsider looking in rather than working within the community then expanding and contrasting to what was written prior about said people. This approach also tends to damage or minimise the historical significance and contributions of the Assyrian people. Further, this approach also renders them at worst, obsolete; or at best, distorting the historical reality as academic society continues to maintain a dormancy-like stance.

Compounding these issues is the continued use of antiquated works by scholars whose arguments and veracity have not stood the test of time. Whilst the author of this article does appreciate the mention of the atrocities that has befallen the Assyrian people, which continues at the writing of this piece— it is made under the lens of a people that clasped on to this appellation less than a century earlier. On a more significant note, is this continued probing into the historicity of the Assyrian identity as well as its use today which harks back to the claims by British and other European travelers that the name 'Assyrian' was foreign and therefore was given to those people who now claim to be "Assyrians". The author of this article would also like to point out that this type of rhetoric may be seen as a form of cultural erasure which has an unfortunate precedent. For one, it was said arguments that were directly responsible to the ostracising of Indigenous Assyrians by the then Iraqi Government in 1933 and their eventual massacre at Simele.

Appendix:

The term “Chaldean” was first officially used for members of the Church of the East who accepted Catholicism in the fifteenth century on the island of Cyprus. It is important to note that this appellation was of western origins and was approved by Pope Eugene IV (1383–1447) at the Council of Florence in 1445. This union, however, was short lived and eventually dissolved. Just over a century later, a dispute erupted in the Assyrian heartland surrounding the leadership of the Church of the East.

Mār Yōḥannān Sūlāqā, an abbot at the Monastery of Rabban Hormisd at Ālqōsh, was selected by some influential families as an alternative patriarch. As Mār Sūlāqā failed to oust the existing Catholicos-Patriarch of the Church of the East; he was sent to Rome where he presented his Profession of Catholic Faith and was officially declared “Patriarch of the Assyrians” presiding over the “Eastern Church of the Assyrians”.²³ The successors of this Catholic off shoot later received the name “Chaldean” to distinguish the new community from their brethren in the Church of the East. Be this as it may, the native community continued to identify themselves as “Assyrians” or “Assyrian-Chaldeans”.

²³ Simeone Maiolo, *Episcopi Vulturariensis Historiarum Totius Orbis* (Romae: 1585), 385.