

# **The Western Missionaries and the Revival of the Neo-Aramaic dialects**

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In this paper, I will deal with the arrival of western missionaries to the regions of the Aramaic-speaking Christians. Then I will review the most important steps, which were led by them and contributed to revive one of the Neo-Aramaic dialects that was spoken in Urmia, North West Iran. This dialect popularly called *Sureth* or *Suret*, and scientifically known as North Eastern Neo-Aramaic dialect (NENA). In the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the western missionaries reduced the Neo-Aramaic dialect of Urmia to writing. The project took place by means of four fundamental factors: translating religious books from Classical Syriac, education, journalism and new literature. I will not pay attention to the effects of missionary work in dividing Aramaic-speaking Churches, as well the negative relations that were to happen between the Christians and their historical neighbors Muslims.

## **The missionaries' arrival**

The history of western missionaries' arrival to regions where Assyrians were living (Ottoman Empire and Persia) goes back to the times of the Crusaders and of the Mongols. But the great wave of western missionaries that arrived to the Aramaic-speaking people, especially in the Urmia region and its plain was in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Therefore, this study will concentrate on the works of the western missions who worked among the Assyrians during that time which were:

1. The American Protestant mission (1834-1918).
2. The Roman Catholic mission (1839-1918).
3. The Anglican mission (1886-1915).
4. The Russian mission (1851-1914).

The declared aims of the missionaries were to educate the Assyrians and enable them to read the Bible in Syriac and *Sureth* so as to renew their spiritual life. To reach these aims practically, they were in

need to find a language able to be understood by the public as large, for the majority of Assyrians did not understand the Classical Syriac in that time.

As I mentioned earlier, the aim to revive the spoken language, *Sureth*, among the Assyrians was to use it as a writing tool, using it in schools and education, in the journalism that was just born, and to create a new literary renaissance. These factors led together to one result: the rise of the *Sureth* as new writing language. Later on played an important role in the development of Assyrian nationalism, and led them to start a national awakening movement.

### **The linguistic situation among Assyrians**

The national language of the Assyrians is divided into two branches; the first one is called Classical Syriac, it is literary, clerical, and classical language, popularly called 'the old language'. This language never become vernacular among the public, but was limited to the church, and was taught in few churches and monasteries. The second one is called modern, spoken or vernacular language, known popularly as *Sureth* or 'the new language'. It was handled and understood by all eastern Assyrians, although in the forms of several different dialects. By reducing the new language to writing, just like the Classical language, the western missionaries contributed to create the concept of holy language outside the Church walls. But truly the first attempts to use the vernacular dialect, was done in the early of the 17<sup>th</sup> century when *Dorekyatha* began to appear.<sup>1</sup> *Dorekyatha* is literature genre in the poetic forms, which was written in *Sureth* for religious purpose in most cases, and it belongs to spoken language heritage more than belonging to the classical Syriac heritage. The tradition considered the Classical language as the holy one as it was spoken by our Lord Jesus Christ, but considered the spoken language (*Sureth*), which just vernacular and popular, a not holy language!

Thus, the eastern Assyrian communities had two languages, Classical Syriac that has a large literary heritage, largely not understood

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<sup>1</sup> The first attempts to write in *Sureth* were done in the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century by Israel of Alqosh and Yousif Jamaldin of Telkepe.

by most of the people, and dialectal Neo-Aramaic, understood by the majority of people but had no written heritage, because it was not yet written. The Assyrian people in their connection with their God used a language not used daily in life, nor was it a mother tongue or a folk means of expression. Thus Assyrians needed a linguistic revolution to pick them up from the linguistic situation as the gap between the two languages became too large.

### **Subjecting the spoken language to writing**

The attempt of subjecting the spoken language to writing was led by Western missionaries or at least its first spark was lighted by them. Worth adding that this was done with the help of the Assyrians, who were not even aware of this linguistic transition. It seems that when the Assyrian accepted this linguistic, historic, transition they acquired the strong national sense, strengthened and promoted by the important Assyrian discoveries by such archeologists as Botta, Layard and Rassam at the beginning of the second half of the nineteenth century. After Layard made a link between the ancient Assyrians and the modern Assyrians who worked with him in his excavations, the nationalism among the latter reached its peak.<sup>2</sup>

The first step in exploiting the spoken language in writing consisted of translating the religious books, the most important media to spread the language in written forms among any community. The translation of the New Testament into *Sureth* was finished in 1846, the Old Testament in 1852; the Gospel and other religious books were translated and have been printed too.

### **Education**

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<sup>2</sup> Heleen Murre-van der Berg, "Chaldeans and Assyrians: the Church of the East in Ottoman period", published in: *The Christian Heritage of Iraq*, collected papers from the Christianity of Iraq I-V seminar days, edited by: Erica C.D. Hunter. Gorgias press: USA, 2009.

After the settlement of the missionaries in Urmia and its surrounding villages, they started to establish schools to educate the children of Assyrians. The students studied in classrooms Syriac in both branches, Classical and *Sureth* as well English and Persian, in addition to other subjects. The level of teaching in these schools reached the level of education in other civilized states. The schools were organized according to western divisions; there were primary, secondary and high schools for boys and other ones for girls. There were private schools for teaching clergies and pastors to serve the several dioceses of the Church. Two colleges were built in Urmia, one of them was for medical studies named "College of Medicine in Urmia (1881-1918)", the number of physicians who graduated from this college was 34, 28 of them were Assyrians, 5 were Muslims, and one was American. The Neo-Aramaic (*Sureth*) Bible was a main part of the education, its availability with other liturgical books facilitated the teaching process in the Assyrian schools and the community.

The missionaries employed local Assyrian teachers to help them in the teaching purpose; most of them were priests and deacons who knew Classical Syriac in reading and writing. In fact, the education system could not have functioned if the local Assyrian did not participate in it too, and if they did not agree with the teaching's goals of the missionaries.<sup>3</sup> In Hakkari, the Anglicans opened schools for education in Qudshanis firstly; the second school was in the village of Ashitha, and the third in Bebede (Beth Baide).<sup>4</sup>

It is worth to mention, that the Assyrians continued the teaching of the mother language by imitating the missionaries, for they opened

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<sup>3</sup> The famous teachers were: Mar Yokhanan, Qasha Auraham Morhach, Qasha Yokhana d'Kosi, Qasha Dinkha, Qasha Oshana d' Calej, Decan Yousif, Deacon Eshoo, Deacon Yonan d'Adad, Yuosep d' Degala, and others. See Robin Bet Shmuel, *Bokhra d'Atwiatha*, (The Firstborn Prints), (Baghdad, 1999), 106,107.

<sup>4</sup> *Bebede* is the writer's native village; its school was built by supervision of Dr. Wigram. The project started in 1909 and finished in 1911, it was a very big building with 16-18 rooms in two floors with all the axillaries. It was a Patriarchate see from 1921-1924. After the Patriarchate moved to Mosul, the building became occupied by the Assyrian refuges until 1954 when my father returned it to school again in order to teach the children of the village. The building had been completely destroyed during the Kurdish revolution in September 1961.

private schools especially in Iraq in the early formation of the new Iraq State in 1921.<sup>5</sup>

### Journalism

The 3<sup>rd</sup> step to revive the spoken language was Journalism. Journalistic activities were born in the early second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when the newspaper *Zahrir D'bahra* 'Rays of Light' emerged in 1849 for the first time in the new history of Assyrians.<sup>6</sup>

Through the pioneering Assyrian journalism, the spoken language became prominent and it spread out, the modern Assyrian thoughts and culture reaching many towns and villages and families across the North and beyond. The press deepened the awareness of the readers of their native mother language, and reinforced their sense of revival of *Sureth* and thus contributed to the growth of social and religious status of the Assyrian people. Thus, journalism was the foundation stone in the Assyrian cultural development, it became the first pillar in the edifice of the spoken language.

The important missionary magazines, which appeared in Urmia and played a good role to revive the spoken language, were:<sup>7</sup>

1. *Zahrir D'bahra* (Rays of light, 1849-1918), published by American Mission (Protestant) In spoken language.

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<sup>5</sup> Five private Assyrian schools were established in Iraq, for more details see Robin Shamuel. *The Private Assyrian Schools in Iraq in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century*. unpublished thesis for MA, Leiden University 2008.

<sup>6</sup>The Assyrian journalism has a priority in appearance in accordance to some neighbors. For example, it was prior to *Al-Zawraa* by twenty years (published in Baghdad in 1869 by Medhat Pasha in the Turkish and Arabic languages), and prior to Kurdistan newspaper by forty nine years (issued in Cairo by Medhat Badrakhhan in 1898 in the Arabic and Kurdish).

<sup>7</sup> Yoab Benjamin, *Yoab Benjamin's studies in language and literature*,(USA, 2002), p. 57.

2. *Qala D'shrara* (Voice of the truth, 1897-1915), published by French Lazarist mission (Catholic) in spoken and Classical Syriac language.
3. *Urmi Orthodekseta* (Orthodox Urmi, 1904-1915), published by Russian Orthodox Mission (Orthodox) in spoken language.

The total amount of newspapers and magazines printed in *Sureth* at Urmia was 21.<sup>8</sup> Through these many publications, journalism became the Assyrian's window to the world. It brought them closer to the new cultures and modern literatures, as they were able to read samples of international literature, especially the English and American poetry.

## **Literature**

A new national literature had appeared as a result of reviving the spoken language directly. This Assyrian literary renaissance is not the product of the missionaries, but the indirect result of their religious and cultural activities. The missionaries did not write any important work in literature field either in old or modern language.

Under the guidance of missionaries, and after the installation of several printing presses, Assyrian writers started to publish and translate several books in several purposes in *Sureth*. Assyrian literature omitted religious topics, especially after the Assyrians were exposed to national and international cultures through the revived language. Assyrians were able to read for the first time free poetry and prose works that had existed in the West. Since the beginning of the twentieth century, the Assyrians poets intended to break the classical poetry bonds, which depended on meter and rhyme, their goal was to adopt new forms of free poetry. The period from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century until the end of the First World War, witnessed the rise of a large number of writers, poets, intellectuals and nationalists who wrote in *Sureth*, they espoused the new spirit of western culture and literature, to the limit they tried to write new poems according to western style.

## **Conclusion**

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<sup>^</sup> Yoab Benjamin, Yoab Benjamin's studies in language and literature,(USA, 2002), 75.

A widely used dialect among the Neo-Aramaic dialects (NENA) popularly called (*Sureth*) was subjected to writing since the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This linguistic transition was led and supported by western missionaries who arrived in the Urmia regions, in North West Iran. Four fundamental steps taken up by missionaries: translating, educating, journalism and new literature, played a crucial role to revive one of the *Sureth's* dialects, spoken in Urmia and its plain, in such a way that it become a common language for Assyrian community of a good standard.

The use of Urmia dialect in writing was the first step in transferring the concept of a holy language, Classical Syriac (according to our tradition) to outside the Church walls. It is worth mentioning, that the early attempts to transfer the concept of holy language outside the Church were done by some clergies (Israel of al-Qush, Hurmis Alkoshaya, Yosif Jamaldin of Telkef) who wrote religious poems called *Dorekyatha*. These poems (*Dorekyatha*) written in *Sureth*, were accepted by the spiritual leadership of the Church because they were authored by priests and were born in the atmosphere of the Christian faith as their themes were quoted from the Bible's stories.

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