

Book Review of

“The Language of Contemporary Assyrians (Sureth)”

Robin Bet Shmuel (PhD)

This book is a thesis for a doctorate degree submitted at the end of April 2014 to the High Institute for Doctorate in Literature, Human and Social Studies to get the Doctorate Degree in Syriac language and its literature at the Department of Arabic language and its literature, College of Arts – Second Branch (Al-Fanar) at the Lebanese University. The thesis was under the supervision of Professor *Dr. Rabia Abi Fadhel* who on May 2nd, 2014 submitted the thesis to the Institute to get their permission to print it for the viva along with *Dr. Iskander Yalda* as Assistant Supervisor. The viva was on January 9th, 2015 and it resulted in granting the thesis writer a State Doctorate Degree with the grade “Very Good” in the subject of the thesis, which was entitled; **“The Spoken Syriac (Sureth,) and the Literature of ‘Durikyatha’ and the Influence of Arabic Language in it: a Historic, Linguistic, Hermeneutical, and Comparative Study”**. But the author

chose to change the title, when this book was prepared for publication, to “The Language of Contemporary Assyrians (*Sureth*)” since the main focus in the two titles is the *Sureth* language.

The objective of the thesis is to study the spoken Syriac language that is in use among the Contemporary Assyrians which is one of five dialects, in our opinion, born in the extended Assyrian Empire that is also known as Mesopotamia as a result of mixing the two Semitic languages of the ancient eastern culture: the Acadian with its two dialects, Assyrian in Nineveh and Babylonian in Babylon; and the Aramaic with its many dialects.

The problem of the thesis lies in the presence of two languages in the lives of the Eastern Assyrians (Bilingual people): Classical Syriac used in their religious liturgy, which most of them don't understand, and a living spoken Syriac that is understood by the native speakers, which we call *Sureth*, and it was codified in two phases, then developed, had influence on and was influenced by its environment. The study raised a central question, and sought to answer it throughout the thesis: can the classical Syriac withstand the challenge in front of the *Sureth*, especially when the latter, *Sureth*, has its own literature and is used in all fields of life?

To address the problem of the thesis, I chose the Comparative Historical Linguistic Hermeneutical research approach, because it is more suited to the scientific research requirements of my linguistic subject. To speak about a language that was presumably born since the eighth century BC and is still spoken by the oldest civilization in the region means, among other things, that it is a historic language; consequently, the selected approach should have one of the elements of History. And this was the reason behind selecting this approach, with all what was required in terms of statistics, lexicons, equilibriums, and comparisons to support the use of this approach academically.

The first reason for choosing the subject of the thesis is the need to have a historical perspective of my national language (*Sureth*), which I highly appreciate. The second reason is the scarcity of its academic studies, particularly by its native speakers, and its ties to the Semitic linguistic origins, along with the adjacent non-Semitic linguistic presence; namely the studies that are dedicated to the history of *Sureth*, its linguistic roots (etymology), and its evolution to a modern literary language that can stand out. The study also tries to extrapolate the status quo of the Assyrian people by studying their spoken language that constitutes the most important element of their civilized sustainability and continuance.

The thesis is divided into introduction and two main parts, where I covered what is related to the roots (historic origins), the tree (literature of *Dorikyatha*), and the fruit (the outcome and what is new). Each part contains three interconnected chapters of similar numbers of pages, and each chapter begins with an introduction and closes with a conclusion. I finished the study with a deductive conclusion, and I attached a catalogue of Arabic, Syriac, and English sources and indexes of places and people.

Part one covered the historic aspect of the thesis, which alludes to the roots of the proprietors of the language and their civilized continuance up to the present time. This part also focused on the history of the Assyrian speakers of *Sureth* or *Suret* and divided this history into two parts: first, before the birth of Christ, and second, after his birth. The first chapter of this part proved with historic documentation, and scientific logic, that the contemporary Assyrians are the decedents of the ancient Assyrians who founded in Mesopotamia one of the oldest human civilizations in the world. So, one of the concerns of this thesis also was to refute the idea of the extinction of the Assyrians, and the death of their language as some allege. This part also focuses in detail on the history of spoken language of the Assyrians popularly known as “*Sureth*”. It stressed its linguistic origins dating back to the Akkadian and Aramaic languages, which

prevailed in the Assyrian Empire, and dwelled into the history of its codification, starting from the individual attempts that took place at the end of the sixteenth century AD, in poetic records, known as *Durikyatha*, to its systematic and wide scale codification in the mid-nineteenth century AD. And it covered the stages of the evolution of *Sureth*, and the elements that contributed to reaching the platform of being a common literary language among the Assyrians.

In part II, we examined the early recorded literature in *Sureth* (instead of its sister, Syriac), and we dealt with the poetic texts written in *Sureth* and the texts that were translated for the first time into Arabic. We chose in our translation, especially the early texts, a literal translation except when extreme necessity dictated otherwise, in which case we resorted to adapted translation. That was to maintain the general level of the written poem, four centuries old, and to adhere, as much as possible, to the spirit of the original text in order to bring about a text that is in harmony with the poem genuineness and to reflect its linguistic and literary levels. We dealt with the poem as a historic document, to be displayed as it is, without interference in its language, style, and discourse. Then we looked into the Arabic influence in the Literature of *Durikyatha*, from the stand point that discussing any Semitic language or dialect in the Middle East region will not ripen in isolation of Arabic, or

without addressing its impact, because it dominated the culture of the region since its appearance in the seventh century. So we counted the intruding words in the selected poems, most of which were borrowed from Semitic sister Arabic, then we inventoried the non-Semitic words that came from the neighboring languages prevailing in the region of the Assyrians (i.e. Persian, Turkish, and Kurdish). We also compared the manuscripts that contained poems to the manuscripts that we were able to examine, or the ones that we have in our possession on paper or in digital form.

The thesis draws an unprecedented attention to the fact that the Surethitic achievements that came under the term “literature of *Durikyatha*” are exclusively attributed to none other than *Sureth*. And this pioneered term that was born with the writing of this language came from the cognizance of the change that was brought about by the *Duriktha* poet himself. We did not find the term before the date it was used, or its similarity in phonetics or spelling, neither in Syriac heritage nor in the heritage of the surrounding languages, for, as the thesis concluded, it is uniquely attached to the literature of *Sureth*. The result was that the etymology of the term *Durikta* or *Duriktha*, as the study concluded, is that *Durikta* came from Syriac root *Drak* (meaning *to know, to comprehend, to understand*) and *Adrik* (with many meanings some of which are *took note, chase,*

arrive, reach, and ripen the fruit)¹, and it has a close root in Akkadian *Durku* (meaning *path* or *road*)². This meaning in its context supports the purpose of writing *Durikyatha* by the spoken language, the *Sureth*, to have the people understand it and to have the religious culture reach as much people as possible in the Assyrian Society, because the Syriac language was incomprehensible to them as it was not their spoken language but the language of the Church, Liturgy, and Literature. Of course, the linguistic rooting, that this study is unique to, needs to have more comparative studies between *Sureth*, on the one hand, and Akkadian Aramaic, on the other, so as to expose the motives and implications that were behind its emergence.

The thesis used Assyrian and Syriac nomenclatures interchangeably, to refer to the *Sureth* speaking people because, in our opinion, they are synonymous, parallel, tied and equal in meaning and originality, because the second nomenclature, Syriac, is a translation of the Assyrian into many languages such as Greek, Roman, Persian, Arabic, Armenian, and others³. The Syriac nomenclature is entrenched in the culture of the region after the Assyrians

¹ Eugen Manna, the Guide of the Interested in the Language of the Arameans, Aramaic-Arabic Lexicon, P 160,161

² Amer Abdullah Al-Jumaily, The Geographical Knowledge of the Ancient Iraqis, PHD Thesis, Mosul 2006, P 346

³ Saad Saady, "Syriacs; Nomenclature and Indication" Bet-Nahrain Magazine, No 25, Duhok 1999, P 34. We fully agree with the opinion of Mr. Saad Saady

converted to Christianity and espoused the Eastern Christian identity with the endowment of the Syriac language and literature. This thesis devoted the nomenclature “Syriac” to refer to the Ancient classical Syriac language (*Lishana Atiqa*; old language) and adopted the nomenclature “*Sureth*” to refer to the Neo-written Syriac language (*Lishana Khata*; new language). With an emphasis on popularity of the name “*Sureth*” by all its native speakers, in addition to the scientific nomenclature at the academic levels, namely The North Eastern Neo-Aramaic (NENA). The name “Neo-Written Syriac Language”, which was adopted by this thesis, and is henceforth proposed for use as a language name scientifically and officially, would be one of the new outcomes that the thesis came up with.

The Thesis concluded that *Sureth* is, in fact, one of the very old Iraqi (Mesopotamian) languages that are still spoken and written by the Assyrians of today regardless of the multiplicity of their names at present. Although it is not scientifically known when this language was created, or when it appeared, or when it spread, but the historical evidences discussed by the thesis lead to the conclusion that *Sureth* was born in the time between the eighth and ninth century BC in Mesopotamia. And that was the result of contact of the two Semitic languages of the culture of the ancient East: Akkadian with its two dialects Assyrian and Babylonian, and Aramaic,

with its various dialects, and as a product of their combination and mixture.

This Akkadian and Aramaic languages combination and mixture produced many languages and dialects due to the sprawling geography of Mesopotamia. Of the nascent dialects that are still vivid in their written and spoken forms, we have five dialects. The first to be written is the dialect of *Alruha* that evolved to become a language after the fourth century AD, and came to be known as Classical Syriac, the language of Eastern Christian Religious Rituals and its literary language as well. After the theological debates in the Christian Church that started in the fifth Century, the Classical Syriac got divided into two dialects: Eastern, which was characterized by the prolonged A (example; *Alahaa*) and was adopted by the Church of the East in the Persian Empire; and Western, which was characterized by the prolonged O (example: *Aloho*) and was adopted by the Antioch Eastern Church in the Eastern Roman empire. Each side developed their own script, which began to be known as Eastern or *Nestorian* script, and Western or *Jacobite* script, a division which has continued until now. They both kept a unified script that preceded the creation of the two church dialect scripts by many centuries, which is called the *Estrangelo* script in reference to the Holy Gospel. The second nascent dialect of the Akkadian Aramaic linguistic pollination is *Sureth*, which is

the main focus of this thesis, and it has been written for the first time at the last decade and the first decade of the sixteenth century AD and the seventeenth century AD, respectively. The third dialect, *Turoyou*, has been written by its speakers in the last decade of the last century. The fourth and fifth dialects are *Maalula* dialect and *Mandean Sabean* dialect, and they have not been recorded or written yet.

Since the emergence of a language, any language for that matter, does not come from a vacuum, the thesis has proven that *Sureth* was inherited by its contemporary Assyrian Syriac speakers from their ancient Assyrian forefathers who emerged some 5000 years ago, reinforcing the saying that ‘man is the son of what he inherits’. And the Assyrians are still the only national group that widely uses the language in the social and cultural life. Besides, this language was also used by other people who lived among the Assyrians such as the Jews, but not by any other separate groups in the region. The most important proof that the language of the contemporary Assyrians, *Sureth*, has its roots (Etymology) in the language of the ancient Assyrians, is the dialectal diversity that *Sureth* is distinguished with, and this is supported by the 130 dialects that University of Cambridge collected, tabulated, archived, and made available to researchers and students. Despite this *surethic* dialectal diversity, each dialect demonstrates linguistic characteristics

that are not demonstrated with other sister dialects; however, the mutual discourse is still comprehensible by all its speakers, and this explains the linguistic independence of *Sureth* and the fact that it has passed the dialectal stage to become a written language (Common Standard Language). Moreover, the deep and wide dialectal diversity explains, in our opinion, the long history of Sureth, the expansion of the area of its usage, and its rich linguistic heritage.

The Assyrians, Babylonians, and Arameans devoted themselves to Christianity after its advent, and they were one of the first communities and people to convert collectively, a thing which explains their common racial bond. Thus, they founded the first church in the ancient eastern world, at *Hediab* (Erbil of today), that was known as Eastern Church (under the Roman authority) and Church of the East (under Persian authority). The Assyrians saw in Christianity, which came with a language that was not strange to them, an alternative to the power they lost before six centuries. The Church naturally filled the political vacuum and administered peoples' secular affairs as well as their spiritual needs. And after it adopted the Syriac language, as its ritual language, it became a vessel that stored the memories of the people as a whole. Syriac language has also become an important component of the national existence of the Assyrians and

their cultural Christian identity without which they can be hardly known.

But *Sureth* began to decline after the emergence of the Arabic language in the beginning of seventh century AD, which forced *Sureth* to lose a huge part of its area of usage as a daily spoken language in favor of the Arabic language that entered the region under the influence of Islam. This led *Sureth* to corner itself in the rough mountainous terrain and remote regions where the Arabic influence did not reach, so it concentrated in South East of Turkey, North of Iraq, and North West of Iran. The tangible influence of Arabic came through the vocabulary of daily discourse that *Sureth* had missed at a certain stage in time, for many reasons, and particularly after the Mongolian conquest. The classical Syriac also declined in favor of Arabic language and became generally incomprehensible by the vast majority of the Assyrians, especially those living east of Tigris River, since it became their ritual and literary language which is not spoken by anyone of them.

During the sixteenth century AD the winds of change were blowing in from the West to the East and notably to the Middle East, and that helped the idea of writing in *Sureth*. The pressure of the internal condition on the Assyrian people, from the stand point of Syriac being incomprehensible, and

the external state of affairs coming with the news of change both accelerated and formulated the idea of changing the written language. On the external level, the sixteenth century changed a lot of the ancient conservative views and opened the road to a complete human liberation from the illusions of the past. And on the internal level, the priority was given to freedom of imagination, and expressive simplicity of the spoken language, eliminating the established tradition of the Classical Syriac literature written by Holy Syriac in the Eastern culture.

After the Ottoman conquest of the regions inhabited by the Assyrians in the first half of sixteenth century, and their permission to the European missionaries, particularly French and Italian, to work in the Ottoman territories, there began to appear some cultural activities among the non-Muslim ottoman communities. The European missionaries began to bring the news of European renaissance, and the religious reforms to the region. The activities of the European missionaries culminated in uniting a segment of the believers of the Church of the East with the seat of Rome in 1553 AD and the birth of a new church in the region under the name “Catholic Chaldean Church”. The news also reached them of the religious reforms led by German reformer Martin Luther (1483 AD – 1546 AD), who translated in 1521 AD the New Testament to the spoken German language from Latin, which

was no longer the language easy to understand or spoken in everyday life. The believers of the church of the east also heard the news of the first Gospel in western Syriac printed in 1555 by the modern printing presses that flourished in Europe. Besides, the new Gregorian calendar was adopted in the western world on 15th of October 1582 AD instead of the old Julian Calendar that was in use since 46 BC, and this was approved by Pope Gregorius XIII (1572 AD – 1585 AD) with the help of one of the Eastern Christianity scholars (Syrian Orthodox Patriarch *Namatullah*) who came to Rome in 1578 and died there in 1587 AD. The combination of these factors, in our opinion, invigorated and justified the writing in *Sureth* and led to the emergence of its own literature that came to be known as *Durikyatha*. This term refers to poetry that is written by a comprehensible language, and explains the connection of the *Duriktha* term with spoken language, just as the Lebanese *Zajal* means what is written by the spoken Lebanese dialect rather than by the Classical Arabic.

Most of the religious texts of *Durikyatha* literature that goes back to the end of sixteenth century was written by the clergy of the church of the east who felt the winds of change affecting their cognizance. The result was that the *Duriktha* poet - relying on his traditional religious culture, along with the availability of the acquired culture from European missionary activity – was able to write new poetic religious

text with his spoken language *Sureth*, enriching the text with faith based implications, written quotations, and religious symbols, that he borrowed from the Holy Gospel and its characters.

However, *Sureth* was not subject to wide and systematic codification until the middle of the nineteenth century, under the western missionaries who came to the regions inhabited by the followers of the church of the east, from the first third of the aforementioned century, and with the zeal of the Assyrians themselves, especially the Assyrians of Urmia, who were enthusiastic to the idea of writing in the spoken language, instead of Syriac. Therefore, the thesis distinguished the two codifications: Individual, which came as personal attempts by some of the clergy of the church of the east in Ottoman Empire; and Institutional, which was carried on by the foreign missionaries along with, again, a wide participation from the clergy of the church of the east in Persia.

Later on when *Sureth* was systematically written, it came to be known as Modern Language (*Lishana Khata*) and that was in accordance with the date of its codification, not in accordance with the date of its birth or time of existence. Therefore, the expression of Old and Modern, in reality, ascribe to the date of codification, and not to the history of

the language itself, as the codification of Syriac preceded *Sureth* by more than 1500 years. This thesis hopes to resolve this standing confusion among most of the Assyrians, and some of the Orientalists when “Old and Modern” are understood to be in accordance to the time of codification and thus the *Sureth* is described as modern in relation to the time of its codification. This is one of the new things this thesis came up with, for the language that was and still is known by ‘modern’, meaning *Sureth*, is in fact historically older than the language that was and still is known as ‘old’, meaning classical Syriac. This is derived from the *Sureth* Lexicon when compared to the Syriac Lexicon on the issues of the origins and linguistic etymology that goes back to the mother source Akkadian. The thesis also found out that *Sureth* has developed grammatical structures in a different way than the rest of other related Semitic languages, by keeping much of the Akkadian characteristics and dropping many of the structural patterns related to Classical Syriac.

Sureth began to evolve slowly, just like any other living language, to a more integral independence, and established its own new literature and culture independent from the culture of religious Syriac and related to the peoples’ lives and their physical concerns. Although there were many *Sureth* dialects as already mentioned, the Assyrian writers were successful to create a common language from these dialects

and kept their own dialect in their own lives and activities. So common literary and cultural *Sureth* publications were multiplied, and teaching became in *Sureth*. Besides, a considerable press was established in *Sureth*, and the new media outlets and satellites became a key factor in consolidating the common *Sureth*. The evolution of *Sureth* was internal as well as external: internal through relying on Syriac literature that was written before *Sureth*, and external through the surrounding languages. But the greatest impact came from the older sister Semitic language, namely Arabic, and through it indirectly and from the surrounding languages, such as Persian, Kurdish, and Turkish that were already influenced by the Arabic Quran. Consequently, the *Sureth* evolution came in all linguistic levels: phonological, structural, morphological, and lexical, and it has today the standard, colloquial, renewed, generated, extraneous, congregated, and others. And it continues to evolve in its own Semitic environment, and non-Semitic neighborhood, and lastly in the European, American, and Australian Diaspora. We would like to refer again to one of the new scientific projects, which adds to its development and conservation, undertaken by the British University of Cambridge, from 2004 to 2009, namely 'Modern Assyrian Language Documentation Project (MALDP)-University of Cambridge'.

The thesis also confirmed that Syriac and *Sureth* are very close to each other, which is not strange, as both languages belong to the same Semitic ancestor, and each evolved in its own climate. A simple calculation of vocabulary used by both languages resulted in finding out that 70% were commonly used by both languages in meaning and wording, which enhances their unified roots. If we consider a period after 150 years of writing in systematic *Sureth*, we notice written *Sureth* becoming closer to Classical Syriac, especially with those who are fluent in Classical Syriac. Although the beginning of writing in *Sureth* was characterized with lexical poverty, incomplete grammar, multiple dictations, different morphology, and extraneous words from other different languages, today *Sureth* possesses a rich lexicon, and a grammar that is headed to integration, dictation that is almost unified, and is trimmed from time to time off the extraneous words whenever the native vocabulary is available. Today, *Sureth* Landscape covers the area from Mosul in the South, Lake Van in the North, Lake Urmia in the East, and East of Tigris in the East. *Sureth* is represented in general in North of Iraq and in particular in Nineveh Plain, North West Iraq (Urmia), and North Syria, East Beirut, and in Diaspora since last century. The thesis concluded that the attempts carried out by the many establishments to write in *Sureth* coincided with the emergence of national awareness

of the Assyrian people in the nineteenth century as the same awareness was growing among other people in the region.

The thesis concluded that the pioneer *Durikyatha* poets would not have been able to write their poems in *Sureth* if they had not had enough awareness and cognizant of change, and boldness to challenge the power of a sacred and ancient language such as Syriac that had also a very significant literary stand. The language of the pioneers declared the poets' readiness to rebel against the prevailing literary customs, and to get out of the traditional cultural frameworks, and to introduce a fundamental change to the daily verbal dictionary usage, and to replace the original words that were used in the church traditions, which -due to their repeated usage- have been afflicted with inertia and the inability to communicate the sought meaning to the receptors. Therefore, the thesis concluded that the term *Duriktha* or *Durikyatha*, which the poets used to refer to their new Surethic literature, came as a result of their cognizance of codification, for the term stands as an intense expression of awareness of modernization. However, we still do not have a documented piece of writing today to know the opinion of the pioneer *Durikyatha* poets or their view on the change that came as a result of transformation in cognizance, and why they wrote their poems in *Sureth* instead of Syriac, which was the common language of literature at that time.

As for the conclusion, it summarized the thesis and displayed the most important findings, notably:

- That *Sureth* was fed through three main sources: Akkadian language, Aramaic Language, and surrounding languages. It has been confirmed that the spoken language in Babylon and Nineveh since about the eighth century BC is the same *Sureth* that is spoken today and has so far continued to be spoken taking in consideration the natural linguistic development that accompanied it 3000 thousand years of age. For the language is like a living person, and as any person is in continuous development so is the language, especially when it is used by people. Therefore, *Sureth* is a living language that breathes development naturally just as any living language. Literature is what develops the society or people, and would have a strong link with life when the spoken language (*Sureth*) is written. And would have a weak link with life when the written language (Syriac) is not spoken.
- The recording of poems of *Durikyatha* in spoken language (*Sureth*) came as a result of internal and external reasons. It did not come to the minds of the pioneers that the early recording experiment would end up with a written language that would be used by their successors and will reach after several centuries to the level of a common modern written literary language, especially after it

departed from its dialectal characteristics, and amounted gradually to the level of eloquent literary language, and achieved what is called the third language, which is between the eloquent old Syriac and the spoken popular dialects. Today, *Sureth* is considered their mother tongue that establishes their unified national identity, despite the diversity of their churches, and multiplicity of nomenclatures. It is used in literature, media, education, and to some extent in spiritual activities at Church. In fact, today *Sureth* has its own literature, grammar, morphology, and lexicon, in addition to having popular heritage.

This thesis is the first academic study that attests to the capability of ‘modern written Syriac’ to evolve, and keep pace with the requirements of modern-day life, and take advantage of linguistic knowledge, as *Sureth* continued to evolve through education, media, literature, and arts, along with the emphasis that *Durikyatha* poems did not cut off links with the rich Syriac heritage recorded since the first half of the fourth century AD.

The thesis calls on to take care of and develop *Sureth* to perpetuate the continued civilization and national existence of its speakers, for being their spoken and written common national language. In particular, because today the Assyrians

are spread throughout the world, where they can employ the information revolution and new electronic technology to serve this purpose and continue to thrive through the World Wide Web.

The thesis recommends the heirs of *Sureth* to study Akkadian, the language of their forefathers, and learn how to read cuneiform script, which is unknown to the most of the Assyrians. This will enable them to identify the affinities between *Sureth* and Akkadian, and to demonstrate the similarities and differences between the two, to purposely link them together more accurately, and to recognize the residual, verbal, compound, and lexical Akkadian, which we think is still active in *Sureth*.

The real problem facing *Sureth*, to steadfast in its historic regions of the Middle East, remains: can it defy the odds and succeed to survive and continue in the middle of pressing external circumstance (Migration and Diaspora), and internal supporting circumstances (the languages of the majority, which are threatening the languages of minorities with death and extinction)? This question might give an access to an academic study to be undertaken by someone else in the future, especially as this thesis had paved the road for other researchers.