

PAINFUL CONNOTATIONS

Some cities are the centerline cities of civilizations and cultures. They are in the cornerstone position of human risings and declines.

Mardin is such kind of city ¹. It is much spoken, but less researched city.

As of its historical root, Mardin is like a twin sisters with its name in Syriac language. In Syriac language “**Merdo**” means “**Castle**”, and “**Merdin**” means “**Castles**” ². Because Mardin is the name of the fortified place that is located between the Syriac Schools of Nisibis and Urfa (Edessa), which are considered as one of the oldest Universities in the world.

Mardin is a historical heritage that bears the ancient traces of Mesopotamia. In the historical process, there has always been a heterogeneous social structure, diversified ethnic origins, diversified languages, diversified cultures and spiritual customs in the heart of this heritage.

All cultures and carriers of cultures who have been contributing to this heritage from past to this day, that stand side by side and sometimes intertwine with each other, have various perspectives, various

¹ The name Mardin refers to all districts of Mardin. Mardin is the name of a region, geography and a social laboratory that opens a door to the hope. Once upon a time, it was a land of wisdom that breathed a life into the culture and literature of Syriac. It is not a place where they've been born and grown only. It is also a living space where they still try to maintain their religious-linguistic-cultural existence despite being upside down, the challenges and migrations.

² All existing Syriac encyclopedic dictionaries and specifically below mentioned references interpret the word MERDO as a fortified place. Notar Merdo is defined as a Garrison soldier or guard.

- a) Syriac-Arabic Lexicon, Chaldean Archbishop of Van, Mar Evgin Manna, Babylon Central Publication, Beirut 1970, page 417.
- b) The treasure of Syriac Language, Syriac-Syriac Dictionary, Chaldean Archbishop of Urmiye (Wagneri), Mar Tuma Odo, 2nd Chapter, Swedish Assyrian Federation Edition, Stockholm 1979, page 72.
- c) Syriac-Syriac Dictionary, Lexicon Syriacom, Hasan Bar Bahlul, Paris II S, MDCCCC1, page 1152.
- d) Syriac-English Dictionary, A Compendious, Assyrian Dictionary J. Payne Smith (Mrs. Margoliouth) Oxford, At The Clarendon Press, 1903, page 299.
- e) Syriac-English, English-Syriac Dictionary, Gorgias Concise, Syriac-English, English-Syriac Dictionary, Sebastian P. Brock, George A. Kiraz. Gorgias Press 2015, page 117.

passion for Mardin. However, from the point of the Syriac heritage this perspective, this passion is more intrinsic. And it has very different historical nuances.

Like algae seeping through old stones, the history with ups and downs of Mardin strikes its roots to the heart of Syriacs scattered around the world. Because Mardin is the name of region that carries the specific gravity of Syriac culture and literature. It is a historical basin of literary and intellectual studies in Syriac language that have a savory fragrant. Literary studies that have been done in this basin have a universal reputation. From this aspect, it continues to water the world of spirit and meaning of Syriacs.

In the spiritual world of Syriacs, mind (thinking) has a role of legislation and heart has a role of executor. Because heart is an organ of mercy and compassion. With a conscience that it has developed, it offers a man the ladders of escalation, by keeping him in the course of the **“Love of God and Human”**. Therefore, when a Syriac saint and thinker who has been raised in the region of Mardin says, **“Tkhus huşobayk lvoth lebokh = Send your thoughts to your heart”**, refers to the necessity of union of the heart with the mind in order to breath the soul into the life.

Archbishop of Mardin Hanna Dolabani, who has represented well with his intellectual-cultural equipment in the last century the Spirit of Mardin that reaches out the ancient ages of Bethnahrin (Mesopotamia), explains the rich history and the meaning of Mardin which has various points of views and shades in this way:

“If there is a pleasure about history, then the spirit of that pleasure is the pleasure of the light that man sees when he opens his eyes for the first time in his native land. This pleasure appears in some people in the way of telling about things belonging to his native land, and in others in the way of writing.”

A modern Syriac writer ³, in his journey to the roots of the Syriac culture, defines Mardin as **“The City of Sun”**, while he emphasizes the story of eight stars that have fallen from the sky to the region of Upper Bethnahrin (Mesopotamia).

And later on he writes, **“The light and the time have passed slowly over these cities ⁴ and they continue to shine through their all glare, by enrichening the land of humanity.”**

³ İsa Yusuf, Afrem, “The Star Cities of Mesopotamia”, Avesta, 1st edition, Istanbul, 2011.

⁴ According to the Prof. Dr. Afrem İsa Yusuf the star cities of Mesopotamia are these: Urfa (Edessa), Nisibis, Diyarbakir, Mardin, Erbil, Kirkuk, Sulaymaniyah (Slemani), Duhok.

Along with these historical characteristics, Mardin, takes a leading part in literature with its philosophical and scientific studies that are done by the School of Nisibis ⁵. It is known that by virtue of the initiative character of Syriac thinkers and men of letters who wrote in Syriac language, it has made intellectual contributions in history that are intrinsic to the socio-cultural life of the region of Bethnahrin (Mesopotamia), to the Arabic language, to the Islamic philosophy and to the East-West culture ⁶. In the history of thought, the importance of Syriac thought has played a role in the transmission of antiquity to the Islamic world ⁷. Renan Ernest (1823-1892), a French historian and thinker writes, **“Syriacs have realized aforetime that the goal of the universe is to develop the thought.”** ⁸

In terms of these distinctive contributions, Mardin is a place that has enriched the humanity with its characteristic features and where valuable figures have been born and raised in who have made the history. These saintly figures who have attained the secret of humanity, who have reached the depth of the spirit of geography, who have strengthened the meaning, who have brightened up the socio-cultural life are in the position of envoys and builders of peace who have built **“bridges instead of walls”** among different cultures and religions with the sincerity of divine and human love in the loops of history. History speaks highly of them. **They have succeeded by esteeming, breeding and good manners that comes from sincere acceptance without mingling the tool and the goal with each other. They have succeeded by meeting all kinds of challenges with a spiritual breakthrough. They have succeeded not by the love of power, but by the power of love.**

Although the centers of light and knowledge have disappeared in the busy corridors of history, a journey to the past centuries of Mardin will help us to meet up with some of the most important

⁵ The School of Nisibis is considered as one of the ancient universities in the world. There were universities in many cities of Upper Mesopotamia in the years of B.C and A.D. The most famous were the academies of Antioch, Urfa (Urhoy), Qinnasrin and Nisibis. Many wise men from many nations have graduated from these universities which had various branches of education. The education was mainly in Syriac language. Besides, Greek and Hebrew languages were taught.

⁶ Cemal Yildirim, The History of Science, Remzi Bookstore Publications, Istanbul 1983, page 71. And Inter-Civilization Dialogue Symposium, September 18-20, 1998, Diyarbakir Metropolitan Municipality Publications, No:12, pages 167-169.

⁷ Doru, M.Nesim, “Metaphysics in the Syriac Thought”, Divan Book, 1st edition, Istanbul, 2016.

⁸ Afrem Isa Yusuf, “Scientific Pioneers of Mesopotamia, Syriac Interpreters and Philosophers”, Doz Publishing, 1st Edition, Istanbul, 2007, See Preface, pages 7-9.

brilliant figures who have been raised in these centers in the old ages. Mar Jacob of Nisibis, Mar Ephrem, Mar Narsai, Mar Gabriel, Mar Simeon d'Zayte and Archbishop of Dara Mar Ioannis Yuhanon, are the main ones of these saintly figures who have shaped the course of history of their age and have lived in memories until today ⁹.

St. Mar Jacob (308-338), the first Archbishop of Nisibis, has pioneering initiatives and roles that have provided the spread of the teaching of Christianity in the region and the development of Syriac language. He is an academician and thinker who attended the Council of Nicaea along with 318 Church Fathers in 325. He has also titles as the **“father”** and **“viticulturist”** of Nisibis. He was the teacher of St. Mar Ephrem (306-373), who was also called as the Sun of Syriacs.

Because of his tremendous generativity and great contributions which have the characteristic of monument in terms of knowledge to the Syriac culture, literature and social thought, Mar Ephrem was given a title of **“The Sun of Syriacs”**. It would not be an exaggeration if he was characterized as the real father of the Syriac literature, who has turned the infecundity in literary space to the fecundity in his era.

Mar Philoxenus of Manbec (+ 523), who has amplified the literary language of Syriac and Greek in the Mar Gabriel Monastery, bases the historical roots of Addai, grandfather of Mar Nestorius who was appointed as an Archbishop of Constantinople (380-451) in 428, on the village of Atik which is located close to today's city of Dara. Later on, Addai, grandfather of the Patriarch Nestorius has moved to Marash ¹⁰.

⁹ There were numerous cultural figures of the Syriac language who have been raised in the region of Mardin. I commemorate them with respect because of their lights they have spread. I have included here only some notable and well-known figures in terms exemplification. Other Syriac figures who have contributed greatly to the regional life are a subject of research of itself.

¹⁰ Fr. Rogee Yusuf Agras, Religious Epistles in Syriac-Arabic languages, Mar Philexsenus of Manbec, 1st chapter, Darun-Lebanese Ruhana Alshamali Press, 1st edition, 2007, pages 382-384.

Mar Philoxenus, who became an Archbishop of Manbec in 485, writes in above-mentioned book: **“There was a man called Addai of Marash. He was from the village of Atik, close to the city of Dara. His wife's name was Malka. This Addai, laid his hand against a pregnant woman from that village as a result of disagreement and he beat her. Immediately after, the woman had a miscarriage and her son died. She was also almost dying. Therefore, Addai took his wife and ran out from that village and he moved to the region of Hatuku which was located in the territory of Sufyanies. After staying for a while there, they dwelt in the city of Samsat. Their 2 sons were born there (in Samsat). They named the older son as Belshamin, and the younger son as Abishum. After Addai and his wife died, their sons moved to the city**

Mar Narsai (399-503) has run for 40 years the School of Nisibis, which was also called as **“The Language of East”** according to the historical records. He has taught the Syriac language. In that school, he has written 360 poetic discourses which consist of 12 chapters and equal to the number of the days of a year. He has also composed riffs, chorales, dodecasyllable lines of poetry.

The School Nisibis, which could keep its reputation until 12th Century ¹¹, has brought in many doctors, philosophers, sociologists-writers to the region and specifically to the caliphates of Baghdad. It has contributed to the spread of Syriac and Hellenistic cultures in the East.

In every period of history there have been examples of figures who had built **“bridges instead walls”** on the behalf of the peace of common life. One of those figures is Mar Gabriel who is known by his good relations he has established with Muslim-Arabic leaders. It is assumed that because of those relations, Syriacs, who had lived in the region, have got through that period without getting much harm¹².

Mar Gabriel, one of the greatest saints of the region of Turabdin, was born in the village of Beth Kustan (Alagoz) of Midyat in 594. He was an Archbishop of Turabdin between the years of 634-668.

Within this context, another example of figures is Mar Simeon d’Zayte, was born in the village of Habsus (Mercimekli) of Midyat in 657. This important figure has been raised in the Mar Gabriel Monastery and became an Archbishop of Urfa-Harran in 700. With his colorful personality, he has had a great role in the history of Mar Gabriel Monastery and was one of the brilliant personages of his own time. He was an esteemed figure who was not discriminating among people and has established warm relationships with the social walks of life. He was an epitomic figure who has had strong dialogues with Muslim authorities of his own time, has built churches for Christians and mosques for Muslims. Specifically, he has built a beautiful and well-designed mosque and a madrassah in Nisibis at his own expense and was paying salary with his own money to muezzins and Muslim preachers who were serving there ¹³.

of Marash. And they got married there. Belshamin begat a son and he named him Theodore. Abishum also begat a son and he named him Nestorius.....”

¹¹ İsa Yusuf, Afrem, “The Star Cities of Mesopotamia”, Avesta, 1st edition, Istanbul, 2011.

¹² Yakup Bilge, A 1600-year Tradition – Mar Gabriel Monastery, GDK Publications 124, 1st edition, Istanbul, June-2011, page 57.

¹³ Melfono Zekay Demir, Habsus, A Syriac-Mhallamian Village in Tur Abdin, pages 123-128, GDK Publication No: 198, Istanbul, 2003.

Mar Ivannis Yuhanon (+ 860), who was also known as a Daraitan, is a good theologian who has been raised in Deyrulzafaran Monastery. He was an honorable writer and an important figure with his great literary works that he has brought in to the Syriac literature.

A famous Syriac state chronicler Mar Eliyo (975-1046), who became an Archbishop of Nisibis in 1008, has an important place after the aforementioned figures in the literary world of the Syriac literature ¹⁴.

An Archbishop of Mardin Mar Yuhanon (1087-1165) is originally from Urfa. However, during his 40-year service marathon, he has left behind a very pleasant voice in Mardin. He was an eminent personage, a brilliant theologian and a torch of light who has been honored by all authorities of his own time¹⁵. His endeavors to keep alive the Syriac language and literature which is spoken highly by history, set a good example to endeavors that are made in this area today. Because of his services, he has a great honor in the memory of Syriacs who live in the center of Mardin. He is still commemorated in daily speeches.

To be objective, it would be unfair not to commemorate Mar Abd Yesu (+1318) ¹⁶ of Nisibis, who was a philosopher and jurist of the rural region of the city. He is a brilliant personage of the Syriac literature.

¹⁴ Mar Eliyo of Nisibis, was one the favorite Syriac writers and thinkers of his own time. He was a member of the Eastern Assyrian Church which is known today as the Apostolic Eastern Assyrian Church.

¹⁵ İsa Yusuf, Prof. Dr. Afrem, "The Star Cities of Mesopotamia", Avesta, 1st edition, page 85, Istanbul, 2011.

¹⁶ Mar Abd Yesu Brikha, was an Archbishop of the Eastern Assyrian Church which is known today as the Apostolic Eastern Assyrian Church. Because of his literary work in the Syriac language, he is accepted as the bright genius of his own time.

¹⁷ In fact, besides these two monasteries which are located in the center of Mardin, there are 8 active monasteries in total within the borders of Mardin that serve indirectly the recognition of Mardin and the regional development. These monasteries which contribute to the tourism of country and the regional tourism live a life in a subalternity.

Other six monasteries are: Mar Hobel and Mar Abrohom Monastery of Midyat, Salah Mar Jacob Monastery, Hah Virgin Mary Monastery, Mar Augin Monastery in Mount Izla, Mar Malke Monastery, Mar Jacob d'Karno Monastery.

The main resource of Syriac literary books that have been written in the historical schools, Monasteries and churches of Mardin is directed mostly to the moral equipment of divine love. Syriac writers and thinkers, who have acted based upon the truth that says, **“Human is a human only when he treats the truth with righteousness and the creation with morality”**, have left a rich legacy in the literary area. With their spiritual intelligence and literary works that prefer the pureness of inner world rather than the pureness of outer world, they have initiated the development of the social thought and have contributed to the common life by understanding the logic of **“vine and branch”**.

According to the world of the thought of those writers, humanity is not in the cold and dark emptiness, but in the light, profundity and pureness of the path that passes through a human.

When viewed from the window of all these narratives, then Mardin is a book that needs to be read. Mardin is a story that needs to be interpreted. Mardin is poetry that needs to be sung. Mardin is a lyrics that needs to be composed. Mardin is a composition that needs to be sung pleasantly.

In a nutshell, Mardin is a grammar of cultures. There is a dematerializing and civilizing in the basic rules of this grammar. There is a balance between the soul and the body; the individuality and the freedom. Because if the materiality precludes the spirituality, and the priority in love changes from living creatures to non-living creatures, the way and course will begin to corrupt.

The real power that makes the human a human and makes him possible to live a humanly life is SINCERITY (that comes out from love) and responsibility of it. The step that is not taken with the awareness and responsibility of sincerity will not lead to success. For sincerity is the spirit of life. Sincerity is a great battle to be won. Sincerity is a behavior that prioritizes the moral coherence. It is a self-criticism of a man before he tidies up his environment and the society. It is a viewing his own blind areas. And getting his act together and being aware of it. A man comprehends the texture, flavor and visible-invisible dimensions of life by the spirit of sincerity. He tastes by that spirit. And he gives a meaning to life and finds the meaning of life to the degree that he can keep that spirit.

Mardin inspires with enthralling inspirations from its ancient soul those who approach to itself with sincerity. And it makes them to experience the spiritual transformations that are not found in other searches. Mardin’s soul and its historical places whisper differently to everyone. The spirit that has pervaded those historical places gives good clues to those who want to understand the nature of human.

The historical stones of Mar Gabriel and Deyrulzafaran¹⁷ Monasteries which are in the position of two windows of Mardin that open to the world remind and say a lot to me. But the most, they shout

out the sanctity of human honor that struggles with unjust treatment... and the dispersion of the Syriac culture that has enriched the multi-dimensional soul of Mardin...!

If the essentiality is to uphold the human life and honor, then if Mardin can create its **“own dissertation”** in order to find **“the new”** in existing meaning and to improve its **“own new”** for the sake of growth, it can be a scope, a point of origin to malfunctions and obstructions in some areas...!

Therefore, if Mardin can be a subject with its all values again, as it was in the past, it will make stronger its regional mission. It can contribute more to the parameters of democratic intellect and social progress with its distinctive values. And the way of it passes through the sincere awareness, the collective moral compass, the collective conscience and the collective intelligence.

The expression, **“Love and sincerity are the most difficult aspects of thought.”** is effectual in all areas of life. However, this expression should illuminate and lighten Mardin more with new methods according to the conditions of the road. It should find more meaning in the reality of Mardin.

Unproductiveness within the Syriac culture and literature is not independent from the general condition of Syrians. In fact, this present time is a continuation at different degrees of the old ages and events.

Synthesizing the thoughts of the saint personages, who have engraved in the past of the region of Mardin, who have ensouled (invigorated) the Syriac culture and literature, with today's thoughts will enrich the life. Because thoughts of those wise men that strengthens the meaning will lead to open the lid of our hidden treasure.

Therefore, the voices of consciences and hearts should be stronger than the tones of voices, without abandoning the goodness in us, without resorting to any evil despite conditions and events that leads to the evil...!

As Mahatma Gandhi says, **“the voice of conscience is above all laws.”**

Yusuf Begtaş