



## FESTIVALS IX. ASSYRIAN

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The adoption of Christianity by the Assyrians in the latter part of the 1st century led to the harmonization of older community celebrations and commemorations with Christian doctrine as well as the introduction of specifically Christian religious holidays. This dual nature of many of the religious feasts lends a unique flavor to Assyrian celebrations and to the Assyrian community in Persia, which includes those belonging to the Assyrian Church of the East, commonly called Nestorian, as well as those who have converted to Catholicism or Protestantism. Most, but not all of these celebrations are also observed by the other Assyrians of the Middle East who live or lived west of Persia and belong to the sister church, the Assyrian Orthodox Church, commonly called Jacobite. Religious feasts usually follow fasts, of which there are a great many in the original Assyrian church calendars. For most church members a fast entails restriction of the diet to avoid meat and animal products rather than total abstinence from food during particular parts of the day, as in the case of fasting in Islam. During festivals that break the fast, animal products form an essential part of the meal.

*Ēdā Ṣūrā* (Little Festival—Christmas). The celebrations of the birth of Jesus begin with church programs consisting of music, dramatic presentations of the nativity and the arrival of the magi, Christmas carols, and readings from the Bible, particularly from the Psalms, by children. Friends and family visit and



exchange felicitations. The traditional Christmas breakfast consists of a hearty dish (*harīsa*, q.v.) made with hulled wheat and poultry, cooked slowly overnight and served with a topping of dried, toasted, then crushed coriander seed and melted butter. Early in the morning adult members of the family gather to beat the mixture into a smooth, glutinous mass in which the meat and the wheat should be indistinguishable. The beating of the contents of the pot, usually a fairly large cauldron, is done with wooden sticks. Breakfast usually follows the early morning church service, and visitors may be served from the family *harīsa* pot, thus creating an informal competition for the best *harīsa* that year. As most Assyrians now use the Gregorian calendar, this holiday takes place on 25 December. A few churches continue to hold to the Julian calendar and celebrate Christmas twelve days later than the Gregorian equivalent.

*B'ūtā d-Nīnvāyē* (Supplication of the Ninevites—The Rogation of Nineveh). The three days of fasting retained by the Church of the East and the Chaldean (Catholic) Church, but not by Protestant Assyrians, commemorate the story preserved in the Old Testament regarding God's command to Jonah. The fast precedes the Lenten fast by two weeks. During this fast, people not only abstain from animal products, but some will also consume only water during daylight hours and not break their fast until after sundown. Some young men and women use this fast as an occasion to identify their future husband or wife. This process involves *pūkhūn*, a powder made with seven ingredients ground together with a great deal of salt. The ingredients must include three kinds of lentils, chick peas, wheat, oats, and barley. The youths abstain from drinking water during the day. At night, prior to going to sleep, each scoops as much *pūkhūn* from the bowl as can fit on the nail of the thumb of the right hand and places it in his or her mouth. They do this seven times and make a wish before going to sleep. In their dreams, they are supposed to see the sweetheart they are destined to marry bringing them water.

*Ṣōmā Gūrā* (Great Fast—Lent). All Assyrians traditionally commemorate this fast, but many no longer actually abstain from animal-based foods but rather symbolically forsake a particular food or activity for fifty days (not forty, as among other Christian groups) in commemoration of the time during which Jesus withdrew to the wilderness to fast and meditate. *Khāšba d-Ūš'nā* (The Sunday of Hosanna—Palm Sunday). Palm Sunday ceremonies begin with concerts of psalms by different groups attached to the church. At the close of the service each member receives a branch of a variety of red willow, which



substitutes in northwestern Persia, where almost all Assyrians used to live, for the palm frond of the Biblical story with which Jesus was greeted on entry into Jerusalem.

*ʿRūbtā d-Khšā* (The Friday of Mourning—Good Friday). Assyrian Christians attend church from midnight until about one or two in the morning. Then they light candles and walk ceremoniously around the church in what is called *šhrtā*, keeping vigil, in memory of the removal of the body of Jesus from the cross to the cave. In the past, in the absence of candles, each parishioner would have been handed a piece of wool cut from a large, widely-twined wool rope which had been soaked in beeswax. This waxy rope, lit from the oil lamp held by the *šmšā* (deacon) would light the way for the vigil.

*Ēdā Gūrā* (Great Feast—Easter). The celebration of the resurrection of Christ is the most important religious feast for the Assyrians. It consists of a wide range of ceremonies and festivities that call for communal coordination. During the month before Easter (which usually falls in late March or April), houses are cleaned, aired, and elaborately decorated. Toward the end of Easter week, special breads and pastries are baked, eggs are colored (in the past with natural dyes like onion skin and walnut shells), and each member of the family receives new clothes. Games and dancing on church lawns or nearby meadows follow. Children and adults each have an egg and engage in an Easter egg contest, in which they gently butt the pointed end of their egg against another to see whose egg will break. The egg which breaks is thus won by the owner of the egg that remains unbroken. Teen-aged boys carefully tend a favorite hen that has shown promise of laying hard eggs in preparation for the Easter egg contest. The practice of visiting neighbors and friends to offer Easter greetings is integral to the Easter holiday and, when possible, the holiday is celebrated for a full week. Each town or village is divided into seven sections, and residents of each section remain home on a designated day in order to receive visitors from the other six.

*Kālū Sūlāqā* (Bride Ascension—Ascension Day). The fortieth day after Easter marks the ascension of Jesus into Heaven and is celebrated as a joyous occasion when the Holy Spirit comes to the symbolic bride, the Church. On this springtime occasion, older children join in groups, dress one of the young girls like a bride, gather (wild) flowers, and then walk from door to door in the neighborhood gathering items of food which they prepare and cook alfresco. With the change from rural to urban life, families have come to use this occasion to picnic in gardens, fields, and mountains. A rival derivation of the



holiday from Assyrian history attaches the celebration to the Assyrians' struggle to retain a mountain stronghold being attacked by the Mongols. According to this narrative, the Assyrians managed to turn imminent defeat into victory when Azo Maron, the wife of the leader, dressed in her bridal finery and together with other Assyrian wives and sisters of the fighters, urged them to persist in the fight in order to defend their women.

*Local feasts and festivals* The origin of the various local feasts and festivals has not been precisely determined. Although the celebrations are essentially religious, they may include elements of national and traditional origin. Most of these days have been named after Christian Assyrian saints and martyrs and serve as patron saint days, which are occasions for joyful celebration and feasting. These festivals are called *šhrā* (singular) in Assyrian, meaning days of joyful songs, mirth, and happiness. *šhrī* (plural) often occur in spring or summer, and are therefore sometimes considered fruit-gathering festivals, which they may have been in pre-Christian times. There are numerous feasts and festivals observed in Urmia connected with fruit-gathering such as ones for grapes, apples, and other fruit. These are named after saints like Peter, Paul, Sargis, or the very popular *Šhrā d-Mart Maryam*, the festival of St. Mary, which falls on 15 August. By custom, no one will harvest or even eat grapes before that date, even if a few happen to be ripe. On that night, miraculously, *blqā* (stain or color) is expected to fall on them and they ripen. The grapes are symbolically blessed at church and the harvest begins. Other *šhrī* may bear the names of districts around Urmia, like the *Šhrā d-Charbash*, *Sepurgan*, and so forth. *Šhrā* resembles a carnival and people will often travel to a district that is celebrating its *Šhrā*. Heads of families stand at the entrance to their homes waiting to invite guests to enter for refreshments. Singing, games, dancing, horse racing, pole vaulting, jumping, tug of war, and wrestling are the kinds of communal celebrations and sports that take place. *Šhrī* activities are marked by the sound of *zornādāvūlā* (horns and drums).

Memorials, on the other hand, are called *dūkrānē* on which no other food except *mrtūkhā* is eaten. *Mrtūkhā* in its original meaning refers to a mixture of flour and lard cooked together with salt as the only seasoning. The mixture is rolled into a ball (*kūdā*) and distributed in the community both to households who had before the occasion contributed money or ingredients for making the *mrtūkhā* or to the needy. In its secondary derived meaning, *mrtukhā* means a small piece of food that a beggar might request.

*Nusrdayl*. An important festival, *Nusrdayl* is described in the *Ḥūdhrā*, a



standard liturgical text. Religious sources ascribe the practice of *Nusrdayl* to an event in the life of St. Thomas, who, it is said, passed through Urmiya on his way to India. Such was the power of Christianity in that town that many came to be baptized by St. Thomas, who performed the rite by sprinkling water on the crowd. It occurs on the seventh Sunday after Ascension, so that it falls in midsummer and may in the past have been an occasion connected with the summer solstice (perhaps connected to the concept of the resurrection of plants and trees by the ancient Assyrian god of the underworld, Tammuz or Dumuzi, who sprinkles water on sown fields and gardens to hasten their growth). On this day Assyrians splash each other with water, and thus in Persia the festival is also known by its Persian name, *Āb-pāšān*. Although a favorite activity for boys and girls, such is the popularity of the event that in the city of Urmia it has gained acceptance among non-Assyrians as well. In villages and rural areas inhabited by Assyrians the ceremony is accompanied by dancing and singing, while in cities such as Tehran, Assyrians assemble in family picnics to splash water on each other.

Assyrian festivals in Persia represent a composite of several cultures, especially the Christian one of the traditional Syriac churches shared by Assyrians across the Middle East. In Persia, under the influence of Protestant missionaries in the 19th century, Protestant Assyrians dropped many traditional festivals associated with the old church (the Church of the East) in favor of Western Christian holidays. In the process, the pre-Christian festivals, adapted to meet Christian needs but recalling the ancient Assyrian heritage, have also been laid aside. A rediscovery of the pre-missionary past reveals festivals as an important link across several millennia of Assyrian culture. [It was not possible to confirm the transliteration of all the Syriac terms in this article—*EIr*.]

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