

**INTERVIEW WITH CHORBISHOP BENYAMIN BETYADGAR
ON THE PUBLICATION OF BIBLE IN MODERN ARAMAIC
(WITH KRISTINA ABRAMOVA)**

Kristina: first of all, I would like to welcome our dear compatriots living in different countries of the world. I am Kristina Abramova, a parishioner of the Mar Shemmon Bar Sabbae Assyrian -Chaldean Catholic Church in Tbilisi. Chorbishop Benyamin Betyadgar is visiting us today. Hello and welcome, Abuna.

Abuna Benyamin: hello, dear Kristina and dear listeners in all parts of the globe. I greet you with love and respect. Thanks for the invitation.

Kristina: I am very happy that today we will talk about the long-awaited project. But first, please tell us about yourself and our Mission here in the Caucasus and namely in Georgia.

Abuna Benyamin: with great pleasure. Dear listeners, there are many different interviews that I gave in America and in other places, so, many people are familiar with them. I, Father Benyamin Betyadgar, was born in Urmia-Iran. After a few years of studying at a school in Urmia, I went to Tehran to study theology in order to become a priest in the future. At this time in Teheran, His Excellency Mar Yohanna Isaiah, the kingdom of heaven to him, founded a seminary there.

After two or three years of study, I realized that studying at the seminary did not satisfy me, it was not thorough, complete, multi-faceted and we would become priests not for a year, two or even five years, but for a long time, there were so many new trends and changes in the world, young people were developing, and they had questions related to religion and not only, thus, in this situation the priest had to be aware of what was happening.

I realized that here, in addition to the fact that the country is Muslim, there is no deep source of knowledge. I considered continuing my studies in another country, which I did. I went to Italy, where I received a full spiritual education. After leaving for America under the guidance of His Excellency Mar Avraham Namu Avraham, I was ordained a priest in San Jose in 1994. Almost a year after my ordination as a priest I asked to come here; I came and I am here to this day, we are here together, we have known each other for so many years.

Kristina: dear Father, we see four - five books here. I would like you to tell our compatriots about them.

Abuna Benyamin: with great pleasure, there were many educated, knowledgeable people in our Church. Especially in the Chaldean Catholic and Assyrian Catholic Churches, as they had the opportunity to send their priests and deacons abroad. They were sent to France, to Italy. There were schools and a seminary of French missionaries in Salamas, there were Lazarists in Urmia, and other missionaries who taught in schools, so there were a large number of literates, educated people who, of course, wrote and created long before me, I am just one of their humble students. They actually created a lot of things. I have always said this and I will repeat it again, so that dear listeners know that our authors, not due to lack of knowledge, used words from Turkish, Persian, Kurdish, and Greek in their books, especially this can be seen in the books of Paul Bejan, may God rest him in heaven, he was an educated, literate, knowledgeable person. This was done so that people who speak a simple language would understand all these books.

That is why in the Holy Scriptures, I will show you this book, it was reprinted in 1993, an ordinary copy of the old edition from 1883 was made, many of our compatriots still use this version of the Holy

Scriptures, despite the fact that the font is small, the text is read and perceived with difficulty, there are a lot of borrowed words, especially Turkish and Persian. Once again, I want to say that those who wrote this used borrowed vocabulary not because they did not have the appropriate knowledge of the language and education, on the contrary, they knew the language, including the ancient one, they knew foreign languages as many of our priests and deacons, as well as other educated people, but they used this vocabulary to facilitate people's understanding of what was written.

Today, dear Kristina and dear listeners, circumstances have changed. Many of our compatriots have left and are still leaving the East and emigrating to Western countries. In these countries, they come from Iraq, Iran, Turkey, Lebanon, Syria in general, from all the countries of the East, there is a large wave of emigration to Western countries so when our compatriots meet they don't understand each other. For example, if you tell a native of Iraq the Persian words "gunakar", he will not understand, if you say "davichi", "chuchagya" he will not understand.

Therefore, today, in order to preserve and purify the language, since we have analogues of borrowed words in our language, because we are not looking for a name for such a word as "a computer" or "a phone", although there are attempts to create similar words, but our goal is not to spread something artificial, unreal, incomprehensible to the broad masses of the population, we use words that have existed in our language since ancient times, instead of "gunakar" - "khataya" - sinner is a very simple, common, well-known word "khtita" - sin, "khataya". Instead of "dyzhmyn" I will use the word "bildvava" - enemy.

Many of our compatriots living both abroad and in their historical homeland have become inflamed with love for their native language and are gradually beginning to use native words. Since they also want to turn to the roots of their native language, to use native words and many simply did not have this opportunity. When you consider a project, for example, a draft revision of the Holy Scriptures, the New and Old Testaments, containing about 2,000 to 3,000 thousand pages, it is a little frightening, alarming, there is a certain fear and apprehension. When I start it, when I can finish it, it's a big deal how much time I have to work on it. It stops a little bit, scares a person away. But we cannot sit idly by and then, for our children, descendants who will grow up in America, Europe, Australia, Canada and other countries popularize Turkish, borrowed words, just because they were used in the speech of my grandfather's grandfather and our ancestors in general in Iran.

I speak with all respect to them, the kingdom of heaven to them, with all love for them, because it was they who brought us the Gospel, the Old Testament, the faith, despite the diseases, hunger, vicissitudes of fate, wars, enmity, persecution, thank you very much for this, we are ready to kiss their hands for what they contributed, but we cannot continue to develop and go forward in the same spirit. This is what made me wonder how long I should be a repetition of a legacy that I know is very far from the primordial ancient heritage of our forefathers. How long do I have to be a copy of something that, if you think about it, I don't understand, I don't understand these words, these are not native words, the chants are not mine, the style of icon painting in churches is not mine, the style of architecture is not mine. All this was the reason why I took on this project.

I turned to the main sources of the Holy Scriptures, written in Hebrew and Greek, used other languages that I know, asked for help from many people, and used many relevant literature in my work. And I decided to translate our books into a pure language, then I will show you in detail, I know you have additional questions, so there is the purity of the language in which our Lord Jesus Christ preached, in this book. We boast that this is the language of Jesus Christ, we great Assyrians and Chaldeans. But the great Chaldeans, Assyrians, and Syrians, who speak the language of Christ, must read, speak and do everything that is given in this book.

At the end of your question I will say that the number of borrowed words in the books, I showed you at the beginning, are limited. There are no more than 100-150 words. These are words like "fanjara", "chuchagya", "kirvysh", "gunakar", "davichi", "ibadatkyaruta". These words are constantly repeated, but believe me, they are few. To learn 150 new words or 20, 30 verbs for the spread of the language is

not difficult, it is a matter of one month, five days, especially for young people who want to do it. Thus, all of the above was the reason for my decision to start, implement and complete this project and it really happened.

Kristina: Abuna, and yet, what was the need for the publication of this book? I know that there is an old version that has been used for many years.

Abuna Benyamin: as I said, there was a need for people to have an edited book, since the old book contains not only borrowed words, but also grammatical errors. Here is a small example: the verb “aver” is written through “alap”, “vav”, although we know that “aver” is written through “e”, “vit” and many similar errors, the vocalization of “scapa”, pronouns and verbs are used incorrectly due to the fact that people wrote as they spoke. What goal they pursued I have already mentioned above.

Accordingly, the goal was not only to clear the language of lexical and grammatical errors, but also to use an updated font with new, beautiful, clear letters. Also, the other goal was to complete the Holy Scripture as 9 books are missed in this version.

We know that in the spiritual heritage that we received from our ancestors, there are versions of the Holy Scriptures based on the Septuagint (Translation of the seventy translators). This book here is in Greek. This is very ancient tradition, it is full and complete. There are all the books, such as (the books of Maccabee, Nehemiah, Judith, Esther, and other books).

In the Hebrew version which is the Hebrew Holy Scripture “Tanakh” (the letter “tav”-torah-the Pentateuch; the letter “nun”-nviye-the prophets; “kyap”-ktave-the books), together this abbreviation is used in Hebrew to refer to the Holy Scripture, so here, the book in Hebrew, there are no these 9 books. What I did is, in the old version of Pshitta, which we also edited and published here a few years ago, is that all these books are present, but they are not in the modern language, they are not in this book. To this day, our compatriots who read in modern Aramaic are not familiar with the books of the Maccabees, Ben-Sirach, and the Book of Wisdom however, they are very interesting, full of meaning, spiritual and their message is very deep.

I translated these books from the original sources, comparing them with our Pshitta in Old Aramaic, with our tradition, which is the great heritage of our ancestors, translated and then included in this book. Therefore, this book now coincides with the Jerusalem Bible, with which many are familiar, the Apostolic churches, especially the Catholic ones, use it actively, with the French ecumenical translation of the Bible (Tob), and with the books adopted by the Roman Episcopal Council, coincides completely, down to the dots and commas.

I should note that in Pshitta on old Aramaic language, which we worked on, I will show it to you, here it is in the old language, we printed it in Tbilisi, in Georgia, there are certain inaccuracies in the lines, for example, you read-line seven, then immediately the tenth, then the fifth, then the sixth.

I saw that there were shortcomings here, and I corrected them, indicating their presence in the old version of Pshitta. But this book that was published by us is a Pshitta in modern Aramaic, it is two-color, written in a language that we all understand, all books without exception are included in it, starting with the Old Testament, the prophets, the Jewish Heritage, the Gospel, the epistles of the Apostle Paul, and other books up to Revelation. There is everything here, and we can take it with great joy, it will remain a memory and a useful publication for our compatriots in the future.

Kristina: Abuna, if anyone wants to buy these books, how can they do it?

Abuna Benyamin: these books, with the help of some of our parishioners, especially thanks to Deacon Levan Shuman, are available on Amazon, anyone who visits our web site subaran.com (you can see this address during the interview) can get acquainted with our publications, see what we have and then if someone wants to buy them, they can do it by using the way they choose. There is a category of people who prefer to have such things at home. I would like these books to be in the home of every person who realizes that he has a certain duty to his church and nation. These are four, five, ten - books that will decorate and fill our homes with the heritage of our ancestors.

Kristina: What is the situation of our parish here, Abuna?

Abuna Benyamin: the situation of our parish here! You also are one of the members of our parish from the first days, we have been together for a long time. When I arrived, how old were you? Sixteen years old, now you're mother, you have daughter and a family. Our compatriots know a lot about the situation here in Georgia, when I visit America, they listen to me very carefully, and I express my gratitude to them for this, we have meetings on television and radio and they are aware of the situation of local people. This is a country where there are no private sources of income as well as no resources: no gold, no silver, no oil, no gas. This is a country, the existence of which, in a certain way, should depend on other countries, especially now during the pandemic and corona virus, when even the flow of tourists who used to visit the country is now suspended, there is no work, life is hard, many of our young people want to leave the country, go to Europe to France, Germany to other countries. They want to go to work, study, do something. Therefore, there is a difficult situation, of course, especially the material one. Those people who have a job and earn little money, because of the fear of tomorrow, try to save some money. They are afraid, if there is no work tomorrow, what should they do? And I cannot tell them to donate the amount, because want to organize something in the church, I understand that it will be very difficult for people to do this. This is our situation.

Kristina: Abuna, what source did you use for these books, and who helped you with your work?

Abuna Benyamin: you mean the sources of these books in printing process? As I have already said, many sources were used, one of them, I showed you, is this Septuagint in Greek, also our Pshitta in the ancient language, which we also worked on here, the Hebrew Holy Scripture, was published in Stuttgart, authors worked on it in Germany, it is very famous, it is made with precision, scrupulousness and is considered as a very good edition. When I was in the seminary in Rome, we studied from it and from the Greek version.

There is another book of Holy Scripture-the Syriac, which is written in the Jacobite language, the Western dialect, it is also like our Pshitta, this is Pshitta, but in Western dialect. And there are things in this book with which I compared the texts. In short, when we printed the book, I will not lie if I say that we read it ten times from beginning to end, especially me. So why was it? For example: you read a sentence, the same sentence should be checked in other books to see if everything is accurate because this is not a book of grammar, if you miss a mistake, it is offensive but fixable, this is not a book of history, which describes the battle or the history of the nation, even if you make a mistake somewhere, it is not a very big tragedy, but we are dealing with the Holy Scriptures and I am responsible for this, it is responsibly to make sure that everything coincides with everything that is in the original sources, every little thing else is heresy. If you use a word that doesn't match the sources, it's just an irreparable and impossible thing. That is why the work took so long, about ten years, in my opinion and we will definitely talk about it later, but it lasted for many years and we paid great attention to these stages. These are our sources.

There are other sources in Italian, English, and French, written and intended for readers. There are many versions of the Holy Scriptures and there are a wide variety of versions of the Holy Scriptures, some are simple for children, but there are also academic publications for higher educational institutions, for scientific works and researches. Such versions are also available in Italian and French. I compared more with those publications that are considered sources for research, scientific works and not for simple reading and interpretation to the people. I used these such sources to check that Jesus said this word for sure, yes or no, and it takes a lot of time.

It's very hard work, especially when you're the one who has to lead this project. It's a little, I don't want to say scary, but it's alarming as you think whether it's right or not. It throws a person into doubt, but with God's help, with your help, and with the help of the parish, we did it.

Kristina: I am very happy that I took part in this project, me and my family.

Abuna Benyamin: you, your daughter, your sister, and your niece. Their job was to put this book with its mistakes into the computer. Each of them had their own part. They said, “we don't know, we can make mistakes,” and I said, “enter everything into the computer” correctly, incorrectly, write it as it is, and then I will edit everything. They printed and finished it, I added these 9 books, which I translated and then read, edited, compared 7-8 times until I finished. Therefore, I thank not only you, there were 4-5 other people with you who also took part in printing and I thank them for the fact that this project was realized.

Kristina: I am very happy and realize how important this is for each of our compatriots.

Abuna Benyamin: yes, this is important, this is our faith and not a cookbook. This is our faith, the foundation of our faith. For centuries, we have been one of the oldest churches to believe in Jesus, so this project is important. I think it is a shame for us, after so many years of proclaiming our faith, to use a book that was published 200 years ago, let's say 150 years ago. Then there were no opportunities, there were no funds, there was no technology that we have today, definitely then it was not possible. But today, when all this is available, we have so many opportunities, do we have to use old publications again? This factor prompted me to implement the project.

Kristina: I would like to ask you, who financed this project? Because I know that it is expensive, and our people here do not have the opportunity to support such a large project financially.

Abuna Benyamin: clearly, as I said, you yourself live here in this country and work day and night, doing hard work. Our people don't have the ability to finance this, my dears, we have several foreign organizations in Europe and thank God we have a Diocese in Detroit, Michigan, also many of my friends, relatives and beloved ones in California, parishioners of our Church especially in San Jose, who help. There has never been a time when I have asked these people for anything, and they would refuse, not even asking what you need it for. I told you very often about this, I call them and tell them that I want to organize something and need 5 thousand, without finishing the conversation, the money is already in the account. They support us so much and trust me so much. But I, on my part, have not yet given them any reason to doubt that their money, their help, is being misspent. We do not have fun with this money and do not waste it. We work and work hard and this is evident from the result.

But specifically for this project, we asked for funding from Catholic organizations that are located in Munich: Kirche in not and l'ouvre d'Orient (France), the latter has not yet allocated an amount for the project, but they have assured us of their support. The book, with such a thin, beautiful paper, we printed in Minsk, in Belarus, since there was no corresponding technology in Georgia. As I said, we received

some of the funds from the organizations, however this was not enough, and we used the money that the State of Georgia annually allocates to all the churches, including ours, to complete the project.

Therefore, we are very careful to determine the value of these books so when we say that they cost 150, 100 or 40, you know our goal is not to make money, we do not want to make money on these books. We have completed the work, received the finance for printing and published it. But all these eight years, there were so many employees who worked on this, starting with you and your daughter as well as the others who also took part in this project. This was not included in the cost of the project, I cannot say I have worked on this for 10 years and spent 10 thousand a year, so give me 100 thousand for the case. They only funded the publication, which is the smallest part of the total amount spent on this book and also on completing the project as a whole. However, there were a lot of expenses: computers were changed, new programs were downloaded, new fonts were created, and many other things, you know, so from this point of view, there was such kind of support.

But we are supported, thanks a lot for this, especially the diocese of Michigan and Detroit, which, since the first day of my arrival here, under the leadership of His Excellency Mar Avraham, he is already retired today and now Mar Francis is in his place, he is one of the best bishops that we have today, love our Mission here in Georgia and support it very much. And among the priests, I would like to single out, and I think none of the priests will be offended, Abuna Manuel Boji, whom I mentioned in the preface of this Holy Scripture. He not only supported projects of this type but also gave support to our entire nation in difficulties for many years, he was a strong supporter of our parish in America. Thanks to all the parishioners, from small to large, those who donated a dollar, and those who donated thousands, thank you for implementing this project and supporting other projects that we have. May God protect them. God bless them, thank you very much.

Kristina: Abuna, can you tell us who is funding our Mission?

Abuna Benyamin: as I said, and we have already talked about this, our Mission is funded from Detroit, to be more precise, 90 out of 100 percent from Detroit, a certain part, a small one, is allocated by the Vatican, this is 5 thousand dollars a year, if I am not mistaken, for all needs and this stays like this for so many years.

The Vatican, of course, helps in different places, and we can't sit here and ask everyone for money. You know, especially for a priest, it can be a little inconvenient as I have to go to America, beg for money because I do not do it for myself, I do it for the parish, for the people, I am not shy and will do it as long as I am the priest. As you can see by yourself it is necessary. This year, unlike last year, we provide food assistance to 150 families for six months, thanks to Abuna Manuel Boji, Ron Boji and Melody Boji, they are brother, sister and their uncle - priest.

It became possible, precisely because there is a bridge of friendship, a relationship of love, mutual understanding, trust and it creates what those people are there for; yes, they have money, but there are a hundred of problems, there are difficulties, especially when there is such a difficult situation in Iraq and there are many of our refugees in other countries. They can help just one country and their soul will be calm because they say we helped any way. But they are helping Iraq with one hand, taking care of us with the other, helping different people here and there. This increases the Church and makes it truly Catholic (universal), turning it into one flesh.

So, we don't hesitate, I don't hesitate to go and ask them as they understand me in half a word and know what to do and always do everything at the highest level. We thank them from today to the moment we are alive, me and my parish, you and everyone.

Kristina: yes, all together.

Kristina: Abuna I am very glad to express my gratitude for your precious time as well for your prudent, hard work that is determined to spreading our faith and language.

Abuna Benyamin: well done, thank you very much, I hope that in the future, when your daughter grows up, she will be able to do useful things for her people, although she is doing it now, by the way, she sings very beautifully in Church.

Kristina: thanks.

Kristina: Abuna, are there any projects in the future that you would like to say something about?

Abuna Benyamin: yes, I would like to briefly mention these three books that you see here. This Holy Scripture is the main source, and three other books are derived from it. The epistles of the Apostle Paul, which we read in the Church, it is for deacons, we took the text from this book and made small changes. This is the Holy Gospel that the priests read, the same is taken from here, also we printed the Old Testament readings (readings first and last) we have 4 readings: that is, the first and second readings, the epistles of the Apostle Paul and the Gospel. And this book was printed so that the deacons could use it with joy, use it in the churches.

There are other projects that follow after this, at the moment it is a project of clarification of the Holy Scriptures. We want to record the project in a conference format and upload it to YouTube.

You know yourself what is happening and this is not only because of the existing pandemic caused by the corona virus in the world. Nowadays, many churches are empty, work is suspended, people are afraid to move, but also for the future, because many of our young people study on Sundays, work and are busy with other things. It is difficult, many elderly people stay at home, especially those who are sick and cannot go out. They'll open the computer and everything will watch.

And it is good that the voice of the Church, the good news of the Church, the Gospel and the hope of the Church will reach people in this way. For this device, we need to spend about 15-20 thousand. My attitude is don't do anything and if you do, then do it well. Well done! You already know me, you're already used to it. Yes, to do well. Because if you do something halfway, record a video, and the voice is static, the image is unclear, the person will listen once, listen a second time, then leave it. But these conferences, which will be conducted in our language and then translated into Russian for Russian speakers, will, I think, be very successful.

This is one of the future projects that we must implement. The project that follows this and I think it is very, very important. By the book of grammar that we wrote two or three years ago, we published a book of grammar in modern Aramaic, 800 pages of Russian and English versions, and it is for this book, namely for its lessons we will record video lessons: lesson one, second, third, fourth, and so on. We will record a video so that our children can watch it on YouTube, if they do not have time to come to school and learn, they can sit down and watch how we teach.

There are records on the Internet where they teach and I don't want to praise myself and humiliate others right now, it's obscene, whoever did it. They have a desire to do something, people want to do something for their children, they want to spread knowledge, but, dear brothers and sisters, before you start spreading anything, make sure it is yours or not yours, whether you speak correctly, whether you pronounce words correctly, your pronunciation is pure or not, the words that you spread among the people are genuine or borrowed. That's what you should pay more attention to and the case will go forward, I think, very well.

We welcome this inspiration, the seriousness of the attitude that these people who are engaged in teaching on TV, radio, in the computer on YouTube have, they are creative people, people who can't help but do something, create something, and this is a great thing, a great talent, only it must be used

correctly to achieve their own goal, and this goal is to spread the grammar of our language, the purity of our language, the beauty and depth of our language, and not words that are simply written in our language. These are our projects.

Kristina: Abuna, do you have a request that you would like to address to our compatriots?

Abuna Benyamin: a request to our compatriots, what can be other than gratitude first of all, and second- the wish to live in peace, especially in peace and tranquility in our countries in the East, in peace, whatever countries we are in and to be successful. I see in recent years, after people emigrated, after such a large wave of emigration to other countries, many of our young people are studying, studying well, studying at universities, developing, becoming doctors, lawyers, becoming famous architects, and this is very good.

My request will be, when we meet people, any person, I or you, whoever you are, treat everyone as a personality, and not as a person whom you have already formed opinion about, with obligations. I can't say, I meet you, I consider you as an Assyrian and that is why you are my brother, however if I see a Chaldean I am not so much excited, if I meet a non-representative of the Church of the East, I will refrain from communicating and I will start talking against.

Whoever side such an attitude comes from, will it be from my or your side, from the side of the priest or the patriarch, this is a mistake, this is not nice. This does not strengthen the feeling of love for the nation. I do not see this, a person who loves his nation cannot not love another person and it is not necessary that he is a representative of his own nation. A person cannot help but love another person, if there is in someone's nature not to love human, then there is no humanity in him at all. And if he behaves like this with me, he will behave the same way with his family members, as well as with the representatives of his nation, his deacons, his priests. He will practice such kind of attitude to his mother, sister, father, relatives, friends. This should not be like this.

My request will be, look at each other as people who are different. Which of us is good? – All. Which of us is bad? – Nobody, just I am different, you are different, he is different, we are different. Our way of thinking is different, our life is different, the story of our life is different, countries we come from are different, however this must not be an obstacle and the reason, which scares and separates us from a sister and from a brother as well as from other person, who, if hand in hand with me, together we can do much greater deeds than I alone, living on my own.

I do not want to put to shame anyone, this is just my request and I hope that these words will not remain for me beautiful expressions for moralizing, so that people will say what a good fellow he is, but let them be embodied through my life actions, reflected in my work, let my meetings with people be of such a nature and proceed in such a manner.

Kristina: thank you very much, Abuna! I say goodbye to you and hope you will be happy and successful in life. See you soon.

Abuna Benyamin: I also say goodbye to you, thank you very much for your time, dear Kristina, and I hope that in the projects that we will implement in the future, you will be directly involved, you will be with us if you have time, you and your daughter, all our people. Thank you again, thank you all, thanks to the person you can't see, he's sitting behind the camera, it's Levan. He is responsible for the organization and technical support of the recording. He will also take care of our programs in the future, thank you very much, dear! Thank you all, welcome to us in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit! God bless you all! I love you all. We hope to see you physically here, as spiritually you are always with us in prayer and in fasting, in friendship and brotherhood. All the best to you, be happy.