A Syriac Dialogue between Joseph and Benjamin

ΤΙΜΗΣ ΚΑΙ ΦΙΛΙΑΣ ΕΝΕΚΕΝ

For Professor Rifaat Ebied
Sydney University

Among Rifaat Ebied’s splendidly wide-ranging publications is an edition and translation, published 45 years ago, in conjunction with M.J.L. Young, of an otherwise unknown Arabic poem on Joseph and his brethren;¹ thus it seems appropriate to offer this present edition of a Syriac text on a related topic in his honour.

Syriac literature is particularly rich in poems on Joseph.² An epic poem in twelve books is attributed either to Ephrem or to Balai,³ and there are minnre on him by both Narsai and Jacob

¹ The Story of Joseph in Arabic Verse (Supplement 3 to the Annual of the Leeds University Oriental Society; Leiden, 1975). The present article was originally to appear some ten ago in a Festschrift dedicated to Rifaat Ebied, but unfortunately the volume never materialized. Here I have taken the opportunity to update some bibliographical references.


³ The full text, with all 12 books, is only to be found in the second edition of P. Bedjan’s Histoire complète de Joseph par saint Ephrem (Paris/Leipzig, 1891); his earlier edition (1887) and that by T.J. Lamy, Sancti Ephraem Syri Hymni et Sermones III (Malines, 1889), pp. 249-640, contain only the first 10 books.
Besides these there is a prose narrative falsely attributed to Basil, several anonymous narrative poems, and some dialogue sughyotho. In the last category there are two imperfectly preserved dialogues between Joseph and Potiphar’s wife, and one between Joseph and Benjamin, which is republished in a critical edition and translated here.

Sughyotho with dialogues in alternating stanzas, often accompanied by an alphabetic acrostic, are a distinctive feature of Syriac literature, whose ancestry can be traced back to the Ancient Mesopotamia precedence disputes. The genre has proved to be astonishingly long lived: the earliest examples go back to the late third millennium BC, while examples in Modern Arabic have been collected from the region of the Gulf, thus giving a span of over 4000 years of


6 These are attributed to Narsai, almost certainly wrong; they were edited by P. Bedjan, in his Liber Superiorum, seu Historia Monastica auctore Thoma, episcopo Margensi (Paris/Leipzig, 1901), pp. 519-629, and separately Homiliae Mar-Narsetis in Joseph (Paris/Leipzig, 1901). A German translation of the first two poems is given by H. Näf, Syrische Joseph-Gedichte (Diss. Zürich, 1923); the short third one is derived almost entirely from Book 10 of the epic attributed to Ephrem. The fourth poem is translated into English by A.S. Rodriguez Pereira in his ‘Two Syriac verse homilies on Joseph’, Jaarbericht Ex Oriente Lux 31 (1989/90), 95-120; excerpts can also be found in my “Dinah in a Syriac poem on Joseph”, G. Khan (ed.), Semitic Studies in Honour of Edward Ullendorff (Leiden, 2005), pp. 222-235.

7 Published in my “Joseph and Potiphar’s Wife”: two anonymous dispute poems”, in W. van Bekkum, J.W. Drijvers and A.C. Klugkist (eds), Syriac Polemics. Studies in Honour of Gerrit Reinink (Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta 170; Leuven 2007), pp. 41-57; the first of these was included in my Sughyotho mgabyotho (Monastery of St Ephrem, Holland, 1982), no.3.

8 For earlier editions, see below.


popularity in a variety of different languages – Sumerian, Akkadian, Jewish Aramaic, Hebrew, Syriac, Middle and New Persian, Modern Syriac, Classical and Modern Arabic.

In the majority of Syriac dialogue poems the two speakers are normally biblical characters,\(^{11}\) and this is the case in the present poem, the biblical starting point being Genesis 45:1-15, where Joseph is alone with his brothers, after they have been summoned back to him, Joseph’s special silver cup having been found in Benjamin’s baggage, and just before he reveals his true identity.\(^{12}\) No such dialogue between Joseph and Benjamin is hinted at in the biblical text, though Benjamin receives specific mention in Genesis 45:14; the Syriac composers of these poems, however, were adept at picking on dramatic moments in the biblical text and exploring them in an imaginative way, by means of a dialogue. Joseph opens by asking Benjamin why he is so sorrowful, and it emerges that this is not so much because the cup has been found in his baggage, but because he has lost his brother Joseph (stanza 3). Only when Joseph finally asked Benjamin what his brother looked like (stanza 10) does he bring Benjamin to the realization that he is actually speaking with Joseph in person – at which the dialogue briefly pauses and their tearful embrace is described (stanza 14). In the second half of the poem Joseph inquires about their father Jacob, and finally bids Benjamin go and tell Jacob that Joseph is alive after all. Jacob is given some brief words before the poem ends with a doxology.

The sugitho, in the rather rare 6+6 syllable metre, is preserved in comparatively late manuscripts of both the East and the West Syriac traditions. This is unusual for a dialogue sugitho which is almost certainly not ancient enough to predate the fifth- and sixth-century ecclesiastical divisions, for normally the later compositions are transmitted only in a single tradition; thus, for example, the second, and later, of the two extant dialogues between Cain and Abel is only preserved in East Syriac manuscripts. In the case of the present dialogue sugitho, in the absence of any tell-tale terminology, it does not seem possible to say in which of the two traditions the poem originated.

The manuscripts used for the present edition are the following:

(a) West Syriac manuscripts:

---

\(^{11}\) A listing, now needing updating, can be found in my “Syriac dispute poems: the various types”, in Reinink and Vanstiphout (eds), *Dispute Poems and Dialogues in the Ancient and Medieval Near East*, 109-19, reprinted in *From Ephrem to Romanus* (Aldershot [Variorum Reprints], 1999), ch. VII.

\(^{12}\) This happens to be the point at which the (Muslim) Arabic poem, published by Rifaat Elbied, breaks off before a lacuna.
Sebastian Brock

Oxford, Bodleian, Hunt 595, ff.115v-119r, of the 15th century. Cited as B.
Mingana Syriac 494, ff. 70'-72', of 1609/1616. Cited as M2.

Besides these, use has also been made of two editions (with identical texts) of the poem edited by Mor Julius Çiçek, Kapo d-habobe men syome d-abobote d-ìdto gadišito suryeto (Monastery of St Ephrem, Holland, 1977), pp.19-21; and Tenboto d-Tur 'Abdin (Monastery of St Ephrem, Holland, 1987), pp.156-158. Both texts are reproduced from Mor Julius’ own calligraphy; they are cited as K=T.

(b) East Syriac manuscripts:
Cambridge Add. 2820, ff.77v-79r, Beth Qerma (evidently near Tell Kephe), of 1881. Cited as C.

Text

Unless otherwise indicated, the text is that of B.

13 This was the basis for my edition in Sughyotho mgabyotho, where it features as no.4.
14 Mingana Syr. 182H, although also on Joseph and Benjamin at the same point in Genesis, is a different text.
15 The soghytha features in a collection of soghyatha for use throughout the liturgical year; it is designated for the Third Sunday of the Period of Moses. It is not, however, included in the selection of these liturgical soghyatha published by Joseph de Kelayta, Turgane w-taksa da-mshimshanuta w-soghyata (Mosul, 1926).
16 This manuscript has preserved a number of dialogue soghyatha not, or only rarely, found elsewhere: Gold and Wheat (ed. with English tr. in Journal of Semitic Studies 30 (1985), pp. 200-204; repr. in my From Ephrem to Romanos: Interactions between Syriac and Greek in Late Antiquity (Variorum Reprints, 1999), ch. VIII); Joseph and Potiphar’s wife (see above, note 7); Mary and the Gardener, ed. with English tr. in Parole de l’Orient 11 (1983), pp. 223-234; Satan and the Sinful Woman II, ed. with English tr. in Orients Christianus 72 (1988), pp. 55-62; Pishon and the Jordan, ed. with English tr. in Parole de l’Orient 23 (1988), pp. 3-12.
Apparatus

1a  om C M1
   b  C M1 K=T
   d  C M1

2a  C M1
   d  C M1

3a  C M1
   b  B M2 K=T
   c  om dalath C K=T
   d  dalath K=T

5a  C K=T; M2 M1; M1; M1; K=T
   b  M2 M1; C; K=T
A Syriac Dialogue between Joseph and Benjamin
15a  C M1
b  K=T
16a  K=T
b  B M2
17a  C
18a  pr  B M2
b  B M2;  K=T
19a  C M1
bc  repeat 17cd here
20a  [C M2
21c  C M1
d  B M2
22ab  C M1
d  M2;  C M1
A Syriac Dialogue between Joseph and Benjamin

Translation

On Joseph and Benjamin, sons or our father Jacob

1. O my brothers, you have not seen two brothers sitting and talking to one another without the one knowing who the other was.

2. [Joseph] I am amazed, (my) boy, how saddened is your soul and how grieved is your heart, how your tears pour forth.

3. [Benjamin] I will reveal to you, O king, the great pain that I possess, that burns me without leaving me - the light of my eyes, Joseph.

4. [Joseph] Wonder takes hold of me, amazement greatly astonishes me, at how you are weeping over one when you have ten others.

5. [Joseph] Listen to me at this word, (my) child, which I shall tell you: the ten other brothers that you have rejected Joseph.

6. [Benjamin] How should I reject Nisan’s rose - Joseph? How should I forget the light of my eyes, Joseph?

7. [Benjamin] Trembling has fallen upon me and fear and fright: on the one hand, at you, my lord king, and on the other, at my brothers.

8. [Joseph] As the Lord God lives, and by the life of the king of Egypt, no evil will befall you, (my) boy; reveal to me the truth.

9. [Benjamin] If I were to reveal to you the terrible news of Joseph maybe you too, my lord king, would be weeping for Joseph.

11. [Joseph] Recount it to me rightly; reveal the truth and tell me: Whom did Joseph resemble? (My) boy, reveal and explain to me.

12. [Benjamin] Joseph has no resemblance among kings or among slaves. There is one person to whom I would liken him, but I am afraid to tell you.

13. [Benjamin] My lord king, he resembles you, and his face is like your face; the scent that comes to me from you is like the scent of my brother Jacob. (My) boy, reveal and explain to me.

14. Weeping befell between them and they began to embrace one another. They were asking each other all that had happened to them.

15. [Joseph] What is the old man Jacob doing? ever since I departed from him; (My) boy, reveal to me the truth: (my) boy, reveal to me and tell me.

16. [Benjamin] His eyes flow with tears, his white hairs are soiled with ashes; his mouth solemnly swears by God without ceasing that he will never be comforted until he sees Joseph. He has made sackcloth his clothing ever since he heard that you were dead, Joseph.

17. [Benjamin] His mouth solemnly swears that he will never be comforted by God without ceasing until he sees Joseph.

18. [Benjamin] (When) he is thirsty, it is his tears that he drinks, when he is hungry, it is ashes that he consumes; and he swears that ‘I will not reject the light of my eyes, Joseph’.

19. [Joseph] Arise, (my) boy, and go and take my garments to the old man Jacob; and tell him that Joseph is alive. my garments to the old man Jacob; and tell him that Joseph is alive.

20. He had breathed the scent of the dead, (but now) the old man Jacob said, ‘(It is) the scent of a dead man who has come alive; (my) boy, reveal to me the truth.’
21. Praise be to God who brought Joseph to life for Jacob!
   And he told him about his youthfulness and about his return to him.

22. Thanks be to God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit,
   and upon you, the audience, may (his mercy) continually be outpoured.

Main variants:

2a amazed] astonished C M1
2d pour forth] burst forth C M1
3a O king[ my lord king B M2 K=T
5cd the ten brothers that you have rejected Joseph] Reject Joseph for the ten other brothers you have C M1; apart from Joseph you have ten other brothers K=T.
9ac K=T read: If you were to hear it...you would have been showing me his likeness.
9b terrible] grievous C M1.
11a-d K=T read: [Benjamin] How many cruel arrows/ have I been wounded by as a result of you, my lord king,/ Realise that Joseph has no likeness/ among all the people of Egypt.
14c asking] kissing K=T.
14d K=T read: but the one did not recognise the other.
15d tell] explain K=T.
18cd K=T repeat 17cd here.
19bcd K=T read: good tidings of peace to Joseph/ and say to him ‘Joseph is alive;/ he is still in existence in Egypt’.
20a of the dead] of the garment C.
20-22 K=T read: 20 Chieftains kneel before him/ and kings venerate his majesty;/ all the people in Egypt/ are yoked beneath his bidding. 21 Kings listen to his word,/ the nobles do his will,/ while his servants and maids/ kiss his portrait at a distance. 22 Come along, honoured old man;/ come in peace, clothed in white (hair);/ bring your family and children/ for the corn that is in Egypt.
22d (see discussion below).
The 6+6 syllable metre is rather rarely used in Syriac, and perhaps for this reason a number of corruptions have crept into the text, since there was probably an unconscious tendency to slip into the more usual syllabic metres, with 7 or 8 syllables. Thus in 3a all the West Syriac witnesses have added ma(ry), presumably influenced by verses 7 and 9, but going against the metre; it is significant that the substituted stanzas 19-21, and parts of 11 and 19, in K=T are in the 7 syllable metre. The same thing can be observed in 14c, where the two West Syriac manuscripts have added hwaw, making a seven-syllable line (this has been remedied in K=T by altering la-hdade at the end of the line to bad l-bad). The transmitted text of 16b has 8 syllables; possibly the verb of 16a originally did service for 16b as well, and mpalplan is a secondary addition, providing a smoother sense. In 18c, although the participle is always written out as three syllables (masle 'na), resulting in a seven-syllable line, it must originally be have been meant to be read as the abbreviated form maste.
these will be secondary developments: their secondary character is further indicated by the presence of several lines with seven, rather than six, syllables. Likewise, the alteration of the speaker in stanza 11, breaking the symmetry of the allocation of stanzas, will also be secondary.

**Abstract:** Among the many Syriac poems on the biblical Patriarch Joseph are two Dialogue poems, one between Joseph and Potiphar’s Wife, the other between Joseph and Benjamin. The latter, for which the scenario is the moment when Joseph reveals his true identity to his brothers (Gen. 45:1-15), is edited here from late manuscripts belonging to both East and West Syriac tradition, accompanied by an English translation.

**Key Words:** Syriac, dialogue poems, Joseph, Benjamin.

**Resumen:** Entre los numerosos poemas en siríaco sobre el patriarca José existen dos poemas dialógicos, uno entre José y la mujer de Potifar, el otro entre José y Benjamín. Este último, se da cuando José revela su verdadera identidad a sus hermanos (Gn 45,1-15), el cual editamos en este trabajo a partir de manuscritos tardíos de la tradición oriental y occidental siriaca, acompañados de su traducción al inglés.

**Palabras clave:** Siriaco, poemas dialógicos, José, Benjamín.