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A Syriac Dialogue between Joseph and Benjamin

ΤΙΜΗΣ ΚΑΙ ΦΙΛΙΑΣ ΕΝΕΚΕΝ

For Professor Rifaat Ebied
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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 *mimre* 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.

² A survey can be found in K.S. Heal, "Joseph in Syriac tradition", in A.M. Butts, K.S. Heal and R.A. Kitchen (eds), *Narsai: Rethinking his Work and his World* (Tübingen, 2020), pp. 10-62; see also his "Reworking the Biblical text in the dramatic dialogue poems on the Old Testament Patriarch Joseph", in R.B. ter Haar Romeny (ed.), *The Peshitta, its Use in Literature and Liturgy*, «Monographs of the Peshitta Institute» 15 (Leiden, 2006), pp. 87-98.

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.

of Serugh.⁴ Besides these there is a prose narrative falsely attributed to Basil,⁵ several anonymous narrative poems,⁶ and some dialogue *sughyotho*. In the last category there are two imperfectly preserved dialogues between Joseph and Potiphar's wife,⁷ and one between Joseph and Benjamin, which is republished in a critical edition and translated here.⁸

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.⁹ 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,¹⁰ thus giving a span of over 4000 years of

⁴ Narsai (ed. Mingana), Homily 41; Jacob's *mimre* on Joseph have now been published in R. Akhrass and I. Syryany (eds.), *160 Unpublished Homilies of Jacob of Serugh*, I-II (Damascus, 2017), pp. 493-586 (nos. 62-72).

⁵ Syriac is certainly its original language; the text was edited in two dissertations: Teil I. M. Weinberg, *Die Geschichte Josephs angeblich verfasst von Basilus dem Grossen aus Cäsarea*, (Diss. Halle-Wittenberg, 1893); Teil II, S.W. Link, with the same title, (Diss. Bern, 1895). This has been shown to be the source of the Ethiopic History of Joseph, published by E Isaac in the *Journal for the Study of the Pseudepigrapha* 6 (1990), pp. 3-125: see K.S. Heal, "Identifying the Syriac Vorlage of the Ethiopic History of Joseph", in G.A. Kiraz, *Malphono w-Rabo d-Malphone. Studies in Honor of Sebastian P. Brock* (Piscataway NJ, 2008), pp. 205-10.

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 Lovanensia 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.

⁹ See the various contributions by J. Bottéro and others in G.J. Reinink and H.L.J. Vanstiphout (eds.), *Dispute Poems and Dialogues in the Ancient and Medieval Near East* «Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta» 42 (1991), and for the connection with Syriac see especially R. Murray, "Aramaic and Syriac dispute poems and their connections", in M.J. Geller, J.C. Greenfield and M.P. Weitzman (eds), *Studia Aramaica* (Journal of Semitic Studies, Supplement 4; 1995), pp. 157-87; also my "The dispute poem: from Sumer to Syriac", *Journal of the Canadian Society for Syriac Studies* 1 (2001), pp. 3-10, and "Disputations in Syriac literature", in E. Jiménez and C. Mittermayer (eds.), *Disputation Literature in the Near East and Beyond* (Berlin, 2020), pp. 159-74; this volume also has contributions on Modern Syriac and Modern Arabic dialogue poems (by A. Mengozzi and by C. Holes).

¹⁰ C. Holes, "The Rat and the Ship's Captain: a dialogue poem from the Gulf", in *Dialectologia Arabica = Studia Orientalia* 75 (1995), pp. 1-20; "The Dispute of Coffee and Tea", in J.R. Smart (ed.), *Tradition and Modernity in Arabic Language and Literature* (Richmond, 1996), pp. 302-15; "The Debate of Pearl-diving and Oil-wells: a

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 enquires 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 *sughitho*, 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 *sughitho* 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 *sughitho*, 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:

poetic commentary on socio-economic change in the Gulf of the 1930s", *Arabic and Middle Eastern Literatures* 1 (1998), pp. 87-112.

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 Romanos* (Aldershot [Variorum Reprints], 1999), ch. VII.

¹² This happens to be the point at which the (Muslim) Arabic poem, published by Rifaat Ebied, breaks off before a lacuna.

Oxford, Bodleian, Hunt 595, ff.115^v-119^r, of the 15th century.¹³ Cited as B.

Mingana Syriac 494, ff. 70^r-72^r, of 1609/1616. Cited as M2.¹⁴

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-aboboto d-idto qadisbto suryoyto* (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:

Mingana Syriac 129, ff.90^r-91^v, Ashitha, 1855.¹⁵ Cited as M1.

Cambridge Add. 2820, ff.77^v-79^r, Beth Qerma (evidently near Tell Kephe), of 1881.¹⁶ Cited as C.

Text

Unless otherwise indicated, the text is that of B.

ܠܐ ܢܘܨܐ ܕܡܫܝܚܐ ܕܡܫܝܚܐ ܕܡܫܝܚܐ

ܐܝܢ ܕܡܫܝܚܐ ܕܡܫܝܚܐ ܕܡܫܝܚܐ ܕܡܫܝܚܐ ܕܡܫܝܚܐ
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ܕܡܫܝܚܐ [ܕܡܫܝܚܐ] ܕܡܫܝܚܐ ܕܡܫܝܚܐ ܕܡܫܝܚܐ ܕܡܫܝܚܐ
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ܕܡܫܝܚܐ [ܕܡܫܝܚܐ] ܕܡܫܝܚܐ ܕܡܫܝܚܐ ܕܡܫܝܚܐ ܕܡܫܝܚܐ

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, *Turgame w-taksa da-mshamsbanuta 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 *Oriens Christianus* 72 (1988), pp. 55-62; Pishon and the Jordan, ed. with English tr. in *Parole de l'Orient* 23 (1988), pp. 3-12.

הם זהו פירוש של כלל הדיאלקט.

16. א. [בשם] חתום, הוציא חתימה, שהיא כמילת חתום.
 והוא בזה של להוציא הם זהו שם הדיאלקט.

17. א. פירוש הדיאלקט הוא שם של כלל הדיאלקט.
 ולפי זה שם הדיאלקט הוא שם הדיאלקט.

18. א. שם הדיאלקט הוא שם של כלל הדיאלקט.
 והוא שם הדיאלקט של כלל הדיאלקט.

19. א. [שם] שם של כלל הדיאלקט הוא שם הדיאלקט.
 והוא שם הדיאלקט של כלל הדיאלקט.

20. א. שם הדיאלקט הוא שם של כלל הדיאלקט.
 והוא שם הדיאלקט של כלל הדיאלקט.

21. א. [-] שם של כלל הדיאלקט הוא שם הדיאלקט.
 והוא שם הדיאלקט של כלל הדיאלקט.

22. א. שם הדיאלקט הוא שם של כלל הדיאלקט.
 והוא שם הדיאלקט של כלל הדיאלקט.

Apparatus

- 1a אר om C M1
- b רשם M1 K=T
- d לר om ד C M1
- 2a ימח C M1
- d עתח C M1
- 3a רחל pr B M2 K=T
- b רחל pr dalath K=T; חרש om dalath C K=T
- c רחל K=T
- רחל B; ד C M1
- 5a רחל C K=T; רחל B!; רחל M1; רחל M2
- c רחל M1; רחל C; רחל K=T

- כחמ] pr *beth* C M1
 d חכא] om *dalath* K=T
 6a חכא] כח K=T
 bd transposed in K=T
 c כח] כח K=T
 7b כחא] om *waw* K=T
 8b כחא] כח K=T
 9a חכא] B; כח K=T
 כחא]+ *seyame* K=T; כח C M1
 b חכא] כח K=T
 c חכא] pr *dalath* K=T
 חכא] tp K=T; om חכא] C; חכא] M1
 d K=T substitute: חכא] כח
 10b חכא] כח K=T
 c חכא] כח K=T
 d חכא] כח C M1; חכא] כח K=T
 11a-d K=T substitute: חכא] כח
 חכא] כח
 a חכא] כח M1
 b חכא] om *waw* C M1
 חכא] + חכא] C
 c חכא] om C
 12b חכא] כח K=T
 c חכא] כח K=T
 d חכא] כח C M1; חכא] כח K=T
 13b חכא] כח C; om *waw* K=T
 חכא] - חכא] C
 חכא] כח C
 c חכא] כח pr *dalath* M2; tp K=T
 d חכא] כח K=T
 14b חכא] כח tp K=T
 c חכא] + חכא] B M2; חכא] כח K=T
 חכא] כח K=T
 d חכא] om C
 K=T substitute חכא] כח

- 15a $\text{חַם} [\text{חַמֵּם}]$ C M1
b $\text{כִּי־יִצְעַק} [\text{כִּי־יִצְעַק}]$ K=T
c $\text{חַמֵּם} [\text{חַמֵּם}]$ K=T
d $\text{חַמֵּם} [\text{חַמֵּם}] + \text{חַמֵּם} [\text{חַמֵּם}]$ B M2
 $\text{חַמֵּם} [\text{חַמֵּם}]$ K=T
- 16a $\text{חַמֵּם} [\text{חַמֵּם}]$ pr $\text{חַמֵּם} [\text{חַמֵּם}]$ K=T
 $\text{חַמֵּם} [\text{חַמֵּם}]$ K=T
b $\text{חַמֵּם} [\text{חַמֵּם}]$ B M2
cd K=T has stanza 18cd here
- 17a $\text{חַמֵּם} [\text{חַמֵּם}]$ C
d $\text{חַמֵּם} [\text{חַמֵּם}]$ K=T
- 18a $\text{חַמֵּם} [\text{חַמֵּם}]$ pr *man* B M2
b $\text{חַמֵּם} [\text{חַמֵּם}]$ B M2; $\text{חַמֵּם} [\text{חַמֵּם}]$ K=T
 $\text{חַמֵּם} [\text{חַמֵּם}]$ K=T
cd K=T repeat 17cd here
- 19a $\text{חַמֵּם} [\text{חַמֵּם}]$ K=T
b $\text{חַמֵּם} [\text{חַמֵּם}]$ C M1
bcd K=T substitute $\text{חַמֵּם} [\text{חַמֵּם}]$
- 20-22 K=T substitute $\text{חַמֵּם} [\text{חַמֵּם}]$
- 20a $\text{חַמֵּם} [\text{חַמֵּם}]$ C
 $\text{חַמֵּם} [\text{חַמֵּם}]$ M2
- 21c $\text{חַמֵּם} [\text{חַמֵּם}]$ C M1
d $\text{חַמֵּם} [\text{חַמֵּם}]$ B M2
 $\text{חַמֵּם} [\text{חַמֵּם}]$ om *dalath* B
- 22ab $\text{חַמֵּם} [\text{חַמֵּם}]$ - $\text{חַמֵּם} [\text{חַמֵּם}]$ C M1
d $\text{חַמֵּם} [\text{חַמֵּם}] + \text{חַמֵּם} [\text{חַמֵּם}]$ M2; $\text{חַמֵּם} [\text{חַמֵּם}]$ C M1

- Maybe you will be disclosing to me that his likeness has been seen by
you among the slaves?
11. [Joseph] Recount it to me rightly;
Whom did Joseph resemble? reveal the truth and tell me:
(My) boy, reveal and explain to me.
12. [Benjamin] Joseph has no resemblance either 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.
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? (My) boy, reveal to me the truth:
ever since I departed from him; (my) boy, reveal to me and
tell me.
16. [Benjamin] His eyes flow with tears, his white hairs are soiled with ashes;
he has made sackcloth his clothing ever since he heard that you were
dead, Joseph.
17. [Benjamin] His mouth solemnly swears by God without ceasing
that he will never be comforted 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;
show him my likeness 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.

The 6+6 syllable metre is rather rarely used in *sughyotho*, 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 *mar(y)*, 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 *had l-had*). 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 *maslen*.¹⁷ 21c as it stands has seven syllables; possibly 'al is a case of dittography, before 'Laymuteh, and should be deleted in; alternatively one might suppress *leh* - but in neither case is there manuscript support. In 22ab the West Syriac text is preferable: *aba* is simply treated as a monosyllable, 'ba, as happens occasionally in Jacob of Serugh's *mimre*; this has not been recognized in the East Syriac recension, which has rewritten the lines.¹⁸ A more intractable problem is raised in 22d: B's *neshtap'un b-'aminu* has the right number of syllables but lacks a subject; M2's *neshtap'un rahmaw(hy) b-'aminu* provides the expected subject but is too long, with eight syllables; possibly the solution is to be found in the East Syriac *rahmaw(hy) nehwon b-'aminu*, if *nehwon* was treated as a monosyllable, *nhwon*, or the last word was treated as a dissyllable, *b-'minu*; on the other hand, perhaps the poet simply left the reader to supply the obvious subject.

In 5 the East Syriac tradition has evidently misunderstood the form of the verb in 5c, reading it as 2 sing. imperative, rather than 3 pl. perfect; this has produced the rather forced irony of Joseph telling Benjamin 'Reject Joseph for the ten other brothers you have'. Though the precise nuance intended in 10cd is not entirely clear, the West Syriac reading in 10d seems much preferable.

Otherwise, in the cases where the Eastern and Western Syriac traditions divide (notably 2a, 2d, 9a, 18b, 21c) it is not clear which has preserved the original reading. In several cases C has introduced corruptions of its own (e.g. 9a, 17a, 20a).

There is no indication what the manuscript basis for Mor Julius' editions was. On a few occasions there are minor agreements with the East Syriac manuscripts, and the combination indicates that B and M2 are probably secondary there. On the other hand, the lack of any support for the much more striking divergences in stanzas 11, 14, 18-22 strongly suggests that

¹⁷ See T. Nöldeke, *Kurzgefasste syrische Grammatik* (repr. Darmstadt, 1966), section 64B.

¹⁸ In K of Mor Julius' editions, the elision of the vowel in *n-'mar* is specifically marked in 15b and 19c.

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 siriaco 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.