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MODERN ARAMAIC
AND THE CATHOLICIZATION OF CHRISTIAN
CULTURE IN NORTHERN IRAQ

LANGUAGE POLICY AND MISSIONARY
APPROACH (19th-20th CENTURIES)

Many Modern Aramaic (MA) manuscripts belonging to Chaldean and Catholic institutions in northern Iraq and the surrounding region are becoming available in digitized copies thanks to the tireless and praiseworthy joint effort of the Digital Center for Eastern Manuscripts (Iraq) and the Hill Museum & Manuscript Library (HMML), at the Benedictine Saint John's Abbey in Collegeville, Minnesota. The manuscripts of the Dominican Friars of Mosul (DFM) form by far the most important collection from both a quantitative and qualitative point of view.¹ The DFM collection contains the personal collection of MA manuscripts of the French Dominican Jacques Rhétoré (1841-1921, missionary from 1874 in Mosul and in the mountainous region between Van and Mosul), as well as many of his notes, study materials and the original works that he wrote in MA prose and/or poetry.²

¹ hmml.org. Books and manuscripts have been recently rescued from IS violence by the heroic Superior of the Dominicans of Mosul Michael Najeeb. Before the war in 2014, Father Najeeb was very active in digitizing collections belonging to the Iraqi Dominicans and other private and public Christian libraries of the plain of Mosul and northern Iraq. Some of the manuscripts preserved by the Dominican Friars of Mosul probably served as preparatory materials for Catholic missionary activities and as textual supports for the printed editions of books used in churches, parishes and schools. See Coakley – Taylor 2008, for a catalogue of the Syriac books printed by the Dominican Press in Mosul.

² A detailed survey of Rhétoré's fonds can be found in Poizat 2013, p. 95-99. On Rhétoré as a missionary, see also Alichoran 2006.

A first overview of the contents of these manuscripts³ shows both the strategies and the outcomes of an inexorable process of acculturation toward Catholicism that took place among East Syrians of the Mosul region between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This paper illustrates this process, focusing firstly on the use of MA as a vehicular language to promote European ideas and devotions among East Syrians in northern Iraq, and secondly on some works by Father Rhétoré, especially those revealing his missionary attitude and agenda.

RHÉTORÉ'S HANDBOOKS

Rhétoré wrote grammars of Armenian, Țūrōyo⁴ and Sureth. Țurayt is the current autoglottonym for Țūrōyo or Țorānī, the cluster of Modern Aramaic dialects spoken by Syriac Orthodox Christians in Țur 'Abdin (south-eastern Turkey). Sureth is the autoglottonym used among other names – (Vernacular) Aramaic, (Modern) Assyrian, Chaldean vulgar, (Modern) Syriac, Vernacular Syriac –, for North-Eastern Neo-Aramaic (NENA) varieties that were and are spoken and occasionally written by Christians of various denominations – especially Assyrians, Chaldeans and Syrian Catholics – in northern Iraq, south-eastern Turkey, Syria and north-western Iran. The autoglottonyms Țurayt and Sureth, deriving from Classical Syriac (Cl. Syr.) *surā'īt* “in Syriac”, have a strong confessional connotation, since terms such as *surāyē* or *suryānī* simply mean “Christians” in many languages of the region.

Rhétoré's grammar of Sureth, i.e., Eastern MA (*Grammaire de la langue soureth ou chaldéenne vulgaire selon le dialecte de la plaine de Mossoul et des pays adjacents*, printed in Mosul in 1912) is prescriptive rather than descriptive, clearly conceived as a tool to teach and learn the language and use it for practical purposes and in a proper way.

Spelling conventions, morphological paradigms and lexical choices are proposed according to a classicizing standard – “la langue chaldéenne vulgaire grammaticale,” as he would call it – that echoes the standard literary language developed in the

³ In August 2017, thanks to a Nicky B. Carpenter Fellowship in Manuscript Studies, I was able to consult the Iraqi collections preserved in digitized form at HMML.

⁴ Rhétoré's Țūrōyo grammar (DFM 354 in HMML catalogue and Paris Saulchoir C2 in Poizat 2013, p. 85) is unpublished so far.

Protestant and Catholic missions of Urmia.⁵ Rhétoré occasionally notes dialectal variants, both in pronunciation and grammar, and scribal practices typical of the Mosul plain and neighboring regions, often stigmatizing them as “fautives.” Nevertheless, and in accordance with the practical purpose of the grammar, his mapping of Sureth is a rather simple dichotomy of dialects “of the plain (of Mosul)” vs. those “of the (Hakkari) mountains,” in contrast with the broader scope and greater detail of the *Dictionary* and especially the *Grammar of the dialects of the vernacular Syriac*: as spoken by the Eastern Syrians of Kurdistan, north-west Persia and the plain of Mosul, with illustrations from the dialects of the Jews of Zakho and Azerbaijan, and of the Western Syrians of Tur’Abdin and Ma’lula, which the Anglican missionary Arthur John MacLean published in Oxford, respectively in 1901 and 1895.

Father Rhétoré never published an MA dictionary, but in a note of 1920 he lists among his writings “40 cahiers où il y a collationné de nombreux matériaux pour un Dictionnaire Soureth-français. A ces cahiers s’en ajoutent trois comprenant des notes non coordonnées à ajouter au dit dictionnaire.” Study materials that Father Rhétoré, his colleagues and informants may have prepared and used to write the *Grammaire* are abundant in the manuscript collection of the Dominicans of Mosul and most of them are lexical lists and bilingual glossaries.⁶ On the other hand, MacLean and other Anglican and Protestant missionaries were not active as Rhétoré was as poets in MA and according to the style and meters of traditional MA poetry. The comparison, indeed confrontation, between Catholics and Protestants resurfaces below, and in a much more dramatic way.

Some years ago Bruno Poizat found in the archives of the Dominicans of Saulchoir (Paris) the autograph of another, unpublished handbook by Rhétoré, *La versification en soureth*, and

⁵ Murre-van den Berg, 1999b.

⁶ DFM 178: Copy of the shorter catechism printed in Mosul by Rhétoré, with notes on MA dialect of Gawar (19th cent.); 226 (19th cent.): Conjugation Tables, French and MA; 227 (20th cent.): Conversation Practice, French and MA; 238, 240, 242-4, 261, 363 (19th-20th cent.): MA-French Dictionary; 239 (19th-20th cent.): MA-Arabic-Kurdish-French Dictionary; 241: MA-Arabic-Italian (19th-20th cent.); 242, 261-2: MA-French-Arabic Dictionary (19th-20th cent.); 245 (20th cent.): MA-French Workbook, Verbs (20th cent.); 266: Elements of Grammar of MA (“Chaldean vulgar”); 343 (1876): MA conjugation tables and grammar notes (1876); 347 (1891): MA-French grammar and conjugation tables (1891); 351 (19th cent.): Word lists (p. 1-), an account of local history of the “Nestorian churches” (p. 7-), MA-English glossary (p. 26); 355 (19th-20th cent.): Comparative notes of various languages incl. Armenian, Persian and MA.

published it as vol. 113 of the *Subsidia* series of *Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium*.⁷ In this work, the Dominican missionary shows that he is aware of the social function of poetry – in this case meaning lyrics for songs and hymns – among native Syrians: poetry serves liturgical and pedagogical purposes and is required on certain special occasions in public life such as liturgy, festivals, wedding feasts etc. He wrote *La versification* possibly as a tutorial for missionaries who may themselves compose verses, as he did under the pseudonym Yaqo Nukhraya (Jacques l'Étranger) or Yaqo bar Qushta (Jacques le Véridique).

La versification contains an anthology of MA religious verses and is a goldmine of bio-bibliographical information on poets whose lives and works would otherwise be barely known. Several chapters are, however, more critical in nature and reveal the author's attitude toward MA poetry and the society of which it is a typical cultural expression. According to Rhétoré, despite their religious inspiration and their roots in late Cl. Syr. hymnography, MA poems represent a simple and primitive form of folk poetry, which is cultivated by and for uneducated, often illiterate, peasants and herders. Rhétoré recognizes the oral context in which poems were produced and transmitted, the subordination of metrics to music, the circulation and success of texts thanks to roaming bards like David the Blind, Thomas Sindjari, and Elias of Tchamba, who travelled from village to village to sing fables, songs and hymns and collect food and money for their families. Nevertheless, as a nineteenth-century scholar, he is not methodologically equipped to appreciate the aesthetics of repetition and rhythm as well as the formulaic features of oral literature in the vernacular, while he criticizes the abuse of poetic license and of Arabic and Kurdish words, and the perceived prolixity and bad taste of MA poets.

MODERN ARAMAIC AS A PASTORAL CHOICE IN THE DOMINICAN MISSION OF MOSUL

Rhétoré's preference for the vernacular was probably the result of a fortunate consonance between his personal language experience and the push toward vernacularization that had taken place in the Ottoman Middle East, where literalized vernaculars emerged, among religious and linguistic minorities (Kurdish Muslims and MA speaking Jews and Christians in the region that

⁷ Poizat 2013.

concerns us here), alongside the “adoption and adaptation of the most important literary and political languages of the region, that is, Turkish and Arabic.”⁸ Father Rhétoré may indeed have recognized in or even projected onto the diglossia of the East-Syriac communities his own European linguistic background. Born in La Charité-sur-Loire, in Bourgogne, he possibly developed a special sensitivity for dialects during his early pastoral experiences in Mazères (Occitanie) and Corbara (Corsica).

Moreover, the choice of the vernacular, besides or even instead of Cl. Syr. or other literary languages of the region, was in line with the language policy of the Italian friars who had led the Dominican mission from 1750 and in the first half of the nineteenth century, before the arrival of the French.⁹ Manuscripts bear witness to the interest of the Italian Dominicans in learning MA not only for practical pastoral purposes, but also to promote a first standardization of the vernacular as a language for education and liturgy and therefore a written literary language.¹⁰ Arguably, this double level of MA usages remained a characteristic of the Dominican mission

⁸ Murre-van den Berg 2020, p. 15.

⁹ The Mission was founded in 1749, with the permission of Pope Benedict XIV and in 1754 obtained recognition from the sultan and the protection of the British Embassy in Istanbul. The French Embassy initially refused to offer its protection, since the French wanted the return of the French Capuchins, who had missions in Mosul and Diyarbakir between 1636 and 1724. See Galletti 2006, p. 292-294 and 2010, p. 104-115 on the history of the “Italian period” of the Dominican Mission of Mosul and its leading scholars Domenico Lanza (1718-1782), Maurizio Garzoni (1734-1804) and Giuseppe Campanile (1762-1835). In the years 1842-1847, the abbot Giuseppe Valerga (1813-1872) cooperated with the Dominicans of Mosul, Kildani 2010, p. 293-294. From 1847 until his death in 1872, Valerga was Latin Patriarch in Jerusalem, where he “established the Latin Catholic Patriarchal entity in modern history,” see Kildani 2010, p. 291. Valerga was frequently in contact with the Italian-born French Consul Paul-Émile Botta (1802-1870), who served first in Mosul and then in Jerusalem, Kildani 2010, p. 307 and 321-327. French friars arrived in Mosul in 1856 and in 1859 de Propaganda Fide officially entrusted the Mission to the French Province of the Order of Preachers, Duval 1889, p. 4.

¹⁰ Ms. DFM 266: Elements of MA Grammar (“Elementi grammaticali per caldeo-volgare”); Italian-MA-Arabic Vocabulary; Italian-MA (“Chaldean vulgar”) Vocabulary by P. Marchi, O.P., Abbot Valerga, and R.P. Garignani, O.P. (18th-19th cent.); 267 (18th-19th cent.): Italian-MA dictionary; 338 (1787): Printed Italian-Kurdish Grammar and Vocabulary, with MA glossary added, by P. Maurizio Garzoni [Garzoni’s Grammar and Vocabulary marked the beginning of Kurdish linguistics (Galletti 2006)]; 343 (1876): MA Conjugation tables and grammar notes (1876); 347 (1891): MA-French grammar and conjugation tables (1891); 351 (19th cent.): Word lists (p. 1-), an account of local history of the “Nestorian churches” (p. 7-), MA-English glossary (p. 26); 355 (19th-20th cent.): Comparative notes of various languages incl. Armenian, Persian and MA.

in today's northern Iraq throughout its history until the prevalence of Arabic in the twentieth century.¹¹

The ms. DFM 353 (19th cent.) is a good example of this phenomenon. It contains texts that the missionaries probably prepared to learn and practice MA and use it in their ministry. We find, for example, dialogues between characters with distinctive Italian names (Emilio, Vincenzo, Nestorio, Leopoldo... 40r-53v) and the dialogue of a confessor and a penitent, including a long list of sins, in Italian and MA (31r-39v). These MA dialogues are also included, with French translations, among other materials for linguistic and pastoral training, in the ms. DFM 359. The shift from Italian (and Latin) to French as a working language is a clear sign of the national character of the French Dominican mission of Mosul,¹² at least as far as language policy is concerned.

The same ms. DFM 353 contains texts that show the promotion of the vernacular at levels of use higher than the spoken colloquial language. We find one of the numerous copies, possibly versions, of an MA primer of Christian doctrine in questions and answers (5v-20r),¹³ similar to the so-called *Catechism of Saint Pius X*, as well as the Italian and MA translations of some Biblical texts: the books of the minor prophets Nahum, Jonah, Habakkuk and Haggai, the Gospel of John 1-3 and part of 4. It is perhaps surprising to find,

¹¹ On the language policy of the Dominicans in the Syro-Chaldean Seminary of Mosul, see Baarda's contribution to the present volume. The Dominicans of Mosul are today a small, bilingual (Arabic and French), entirely Iraqi community, unfortunately displaced first from Mosul to Qaraqosh, where the friars have heroically continued their pastoral and cultural activities, and then, since 2014, to 'Ankawa-Erbil.

¹² Filoni 2015, p. 119 on the arrival of the French Dominicans in Mosul and the relationship of the mission with French diplomacy: "Nel 1856 ... la Provincia francese dell'Ordine dei Predicatori aveva accettato di rilevare la missione di Mosul tenuta da oltre un secolo dai domenicani italiani e di farne un centro importante della propria attività nel cuore della Mesopotamia. Con l'arrivo del padre Hyacinthe Besson, pro-prefetto della missione di Mosul, infatti, si ebbe uno slancio notevole legando Mosul ai domenicani e alla Francia, che vi nominò pure un vice-console, il quale divenne quasi un tutore della missione stessa." In fact, already in an Italian inscription dated 1845, the Dominicans thanked the French vice-consul M. Rouet for his "efficacious protection" of the Mission, Galletti 2010, p. 155.

¹³ Of some texts the Italian or Latin originals are given, while some texts are in Cl. Syr. or Garshuni Arabic, which is a rather faithful portrait of the multilingualism of the Dominican mission and of the East-Syrian communities in the Mosul region. Other copies or versions of a Christian doctrine in questions and answers may be found in the following mss.: BJI 32 (19th cent.), DCA 53 (1929), 56 (late 19th cent.), DFM 178, 340 (19th cent.), PLT_AFYM 2 (1850), 4, 10 (1839). A *Petit catechisme en langue chaldéenne vulgaire* was published by the Dominican Press in Mosul in 1885, fourth reprint in 1908, Coakley – Taylor 2008, p. 87 and 108.

in a Catholic mission, traces of a project of Bible translation, but, lectionaries and partial Bible translations in the vernacular were already being produced in the eighteenth century by native clergymen¹⁴ and in the Dominican mission of Mosul.

The ms. DFM 4 displays in three columns, from right to left, the text of the Cl. Syr. version – called Pešittā – of Genesis, a translation in an MA variety of the plain of Mosul, and an Italian translation that is possibly taken from the so-called *Bibbia del Martini* (late eighteenth century). From around Genesis 30 onward only the MA text is given in a one-column page layout. Unfortunately, the manuscript is not dated, but it is reasonable to assume that the translation was prepared under the patronage of the Italian Dominicans. A first survey has shown that it is based on the Cl. Syr. Pešittā, and orthography and lexical choices are far less classicizing than in the Urmi Bible, as is customary in the native manuscript tradition of northern Iraqi Christians.¹⁵ The Urmi Bible, an MA translation of the Sacred Scriptures, was published by The American Bible Society in New York in 1893 and it is based on the Greek text of the New Testament and the Hebrew Old Testament.¹⁶

The ms DFM 337 (18th cent.) contains the *Epistle to the Romans* in Latin and MA. The missionaries' attempt to (re-)introduce the reading of the *Pauline Epistles* during the Solemn Mass, according to Catholic usage, may explain their relative abundance in later lectionaries or partial Bible translations in Arabic Garshuni (e.g., QACCT 72, 1901), MA (DFM 317, 1848) and Turkish Garshuni (ACK 122, 1909). The surviving manuscripts and nineteenth-century missionary observers suggest that in the Ottoman period

¹⁴ The MA Gospel lectionary ACA 2 (copied in 1766 by the deacon Israel son of Simon) is probably an early copy of the text studied by Murre-van den Berg (2006a) in an 1888 Urmi manuscript, which according to the colophon is in its turn a copy of a 1769-70 Alqosh manuscript. Murre-van den Berg correctly stresses the importance of this 18th-cent. lectionary from northern Iraq, in comparison with later 19th-cent. translations of the Bible, more or less directly influenced by Protestant missionaries in the Urmi region. Exegetical additions show the author's attachment to the native Syriac tradition, perhaps in reaction to Catholic proselytism, Murre-van den Berg 2008 and 2015, p. 156, and may be a very early written testimony of the practice of oral translation of the Biblical readings from Cl. Syr. to the vernacular, during the liturgy. Such an "argumic" practice is still alive in Syriac Christian assemblies of the plain of Mosul, see Mengozzi 2012, p. 341.

¹⁵ Mengozzi – Miola 2018, p. 284-285. On the predominantly phonetic spelling in the native tradition of MA manuscripts, see Mengozzi 2002, p. 23.

¹⁶ Murre-van den Berg 1999a, p. 109. On the basis of Murre-van den Berg's 1999b thorough analysis, Khan 2016, vol. 1, p. 8-9 underlines the classicizing bias of the Neo-Aramaic translation of the Bible prepared by the American Protestants, as regards spelling, lexical choices and syntax.

the Old Testament and the Epistle readings had largely fallen out of use.¹⁷ As late as 1942, the Chaldean monks of Our Lady of the Seeds (Alqosh) were asked to translate the *Epistles of St Paul* from the classical language to colloquial MA for the church of 'Ankawa near Erbil (ACE 20).

While the missionaries had to learn MA dialects to preach, confess and speak with the Christians who were the main addressees of their pastoral activities, catechesis, with up-to-date methods, and at least the scriptural readings and the hymns in the liturgy required a written form of MA: the Dominican mission was probably the most influential institution that promoted its standardization and diffusion in today's northern Iraq during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

MODERN ARAMAIC WORKS BY FATHER RHÉTORÉ
AND THE CATHOLIC AGENDA OF THE MISSION

The collection of manuscripts that belonged personally to Jacques Rhétoré¹⁸ shows that he was engaged in the study of MA in various ways and with at least three interrelated objectives.

1. As his *Grammaire* and *La versification* demonstrate, he intended to write handbooks for the active and correct use of the language by foreign missionaries and native clergy.

2. The text samples and the bio-bibliographic information on MA poets, including himself, of *La versification* and the manuscripts of poems that he collected or copied himself show that he realized the cultural importance of the traditional stanzaic poems among the Aramaic-speaking Christians and their potential as pastoral tools for the mission. He tried to study and critically describe this popular poetic tradition with the intention of grafting onto it the shoot of genuinely Catholic contents. He possibly patronized contemporary native poets such as David Kora, David of Barzane and Thomas Tektek Sindjari and certainly appreciated the reworking of Italian Jesuit baroque sources in MA verses by Damyanos of Alqosh.¹⁹ In

¹⁷ Murre-van den Berg 2015, p. 154.

¹⁸ Poizat 2013, p. 84-86, gives lists of Rhétoré's works: articles and letters published in missionary periodicals in France, books printed by the Dominican Press in Mosul, manuscripts preserved in the Dominican libraries of Paris and Mosul.

¹⁹ On Damyanos' reworking of themes and motifs of Italian baroque authors such as the Jesuits Paolo Segneri (1624-1694) and Giovanni Pietro Pinamonti (1632-1703), see Destefanis 2011.

La versification, Rhétoré is of course rather precise in describing the poets' positions toward "Nestorianism", Catholicism and the Chaldean movement.²⁰

3. While collecting, copying, and studying poems and writing an MA grammar and an *ars poetica*, Rhétoré learned how to compose original poems in and translate prose texts into MA.

Rhétoré's MA production reflects the missionary project of Catholicizing the Christian culture of northern Iraq. Both missionaries and native authors and clergy embraced this project of Catholicization of the Syriac culture of the region. Between the mid-nineteenth and mid-twentieth centuries, the MA and Cl. Syr. translations – often via Arabic – of works by authors such as Alfonso Maria de' Liguori (1696-1787)²¹ served as textual instruments for diffusing the ideas of the Catholic (Counter-) Reformation and European popular devotional practices such as the cult of Mary and the Saints – some of which were imported from European hagiography –, daily visits to the Eucharist, and the *Via Crucis*.²²

The publication of the *Manuel de piété ou Livre de prières, de méditation et des offices (en langue chaldéenne)* by the Persian Lazarist Paul Bedjan,²³ as well as others of his works, created – as it were – a language, style and lexicon for the expression of Catholic devotion in MA. Finally, Catholics from Urmia to Mosul were able to hold in their hands a prayer book very similar to those circulating among contemporary Catholics in the national languages of France, Italy and Spain. The book was printed as a very elegant, and probably expensive, edition in Paris in 1886 and parts of it have been copied

²⁰ The criticism against Nestorianism that Rhétoré (Poizat 2013, p. 58) attributes to Israel of Alqosh (early 17th cent.) is most probably based on an ideological variant in the manuscript available to him: Israel of Alqosh was a proud supporter of the East-Syriac tradition, against the "Jacobite" corruption, Mengozzi 2011, p. viii. Examples of Rhétoré's anti-"Nestorian" and pro-Catholic bias can be seen in the biographical portraits of Yonan of Tkhuma and the poetess Anne of Telkepe, Mengozzi 2011, p. xiv and xxii.

²¹ Such as the MA translations of the *Book of Preparation for Death* (DCA 124, 1853, from Arabic), *The Necklaces of the Holy Liturgy* (DFM 99, 19th-20th cent.). Timoteos Maqdasi bishop of Zakho translated from Latin into Cl. Syr. *History of Heresies and Their Refutation* (ACZ 10 and 24, 1903) and *Moral Theology* (ACZ 6, 1910; 8, 1914). *Visits to the Holy Eucharist and the Virgin Mary (a prayer for each day of the month)*, attributed to Alfonso Maria de' Liguori is one of the most frequently copied MA texts.

²² On the Catholicization of the Chaldean liturgy see Murre-van den Berg 2015, p. 149-150.

²³ On Paul Bedjan, his intellectual and missionary activities, see Murre-van den Berg 2006b.

by more or less elegant and competent East Syriac hands, sometimes adapted to local dialects and spelling conventions.²⁴

More specifically, Rhétoré's work seems to follow a typically Catholic, as opposed to Protestant, agenda. In contrast with the pioneering experiments of the Italian Dominicans, Rhétoré and the French Dominicans working at his time were apparently not as much concerned with Bible translation as they were interested in translating into MA European texts to be used in pastoral activities: not only the catechism, but also hagiographical narratives and textual supports for Catholic devotional practices. Unsurprisingly some of the latter texts have a clear Dominican connotation. For example, Father Rhétoré or one of his helpers translated into MA the rules of two confraternities for lay people belonging to Dominican spirituality: *Confraternitas SS. Nominis Jesu* and *Militiae Angelicae seu cinguli Sancti Thomae Aquinatis* (DFM 95 and 96, both dated 1877). A *Life of St. Blaise, martyr and bishop of Sebaste* and the *Story of the martyrdom of the Holy Child Bar-Alaha and his Mother* were written or translated in MA prose in 1879 (DFM 132 and 318). Possibly later, a *Story of St. Benvenuta* (Benvenuta Bojani, a pious lady of the Third Order of Saint Dominic, born in Cividale del Friuli and died in 1292) was written in this missionary milieu (DFM 428).

Although it is not always clear what role he played, Rhétoré appears to have been involved in the preparation and publication of the following MA books of the Dominican Press of Mosul: a *Book of the Rosary* (Mosul 1884) that contains a number of his hymns;²⁵ a collection of metrical fables and songs for children (mss.: DFM 270-1, 19th cent., and DFM 319, dated 1892-1894; book printed in Mosul in 1896), some of which may very well be poetic translations or adaptations from La Fontaine; two collections of stanzaic hymns (1896)²⁶ and poems (Mosul 1914); and a *Book of the infancy of our Lord Jesus Christ*.²⁷

Native speakers probably assisted Rhétoré in writing MA poems and, in his turn, he may have helped native poets to write down their

²⁴ This return from printed books to manuscripts is a fascinating subject, that deserves a thorough investigation. In HMML digitized copies of Iraqi collections, I have seen scores of prayer books that look like and may very well be handwritten copies of Bedjan's *Manuel de piété* or serving the same purpose.

²⁵ The book may contain an abbreviated version of Andrew Pradel, *Manuel du très-saint Rosaire* (Paris 1862) or the MA version of its Arabic translation, Coakley – Taylor 2008, p. 86.

²⁶ Second edition in Mosul, 1954, and reprinted in Baghdad, 1990, p. 94-95.

²⁷ Ms. dated Ashitha 1909 and now in Paris, book printed in Mosul in 1913, *ibid.* p. 108.

works according to the standard language he was promoting, polish their theological terminology and attune religious ideas to Roman Catholic orthodoxy. Rhétoré's fables and hymns were published under the name of David the Blind. The missionaries preferred to attribute them to the popular native poet, a Chaldean Homer of the Christians of the Mosul plain in the nineteenth century. David had indeed helped Father Rhétoré, correcting and revising the texts, but the French Dominican claims to be the real author of the texts. On the other hand, Rhétoré lists among David's works the famous hymn of St. Mary (incipit *b-šemmā d-bābā w-bronā* "In the name of the Father and the Son"), that was to become a kind of national anthem for the Chaldeans of the plain of Nineveh²⁸ and has sometimes been attributed to the French missionary,²⁹ given the Thomistic flavour of its theological language.

NESTORIUS AND LUTHER

Rhétoré cultivated MA poetry not only as a pastoral tool but as an instrument of both lyrical and political expression, written for himself and his – perhaps more imagined than real – European readership. Some of his poetic works seem to be a journal in verse of his experience among the Eastern Christians and an artistic way to express the missionary's worldview and his perception of the history and culture of the lost souls that were the target of his missionary work.

In his MA poem *La Montagnarde chaldéenne et l'ange*, the Chaldean mountain girl is a personification of the East Syrians, who refused union with Rome. On fol. 1r (recto=left page) the poem is dedicated to José María Larroca: "Au Révérendissime Père Marie Joseph Larocca [*sic*] Maître Générale de l'Ordre de S. Dominique Hommage de respect filial et d'affectueuse vénération à l'occasion de son Jubilé sacerdotal. f. J. Rh." A first version or the first part of the poem must therefore have been composed while Father Larroca was Master of the Order of Preachers, i.e., between 1879 and 1891.³⁰

²⁸ Recordings can be found online, associated with various images, for example: www.youtube.com/watch?v=zmtptNMa8vI4 (sung by Father Yohannan Cholagh, Alqosh 1935-2006).

²⁹ Coakley – Taylor 2008, p. 95; Mengozzi 2011, p. xv.

³⁰ On p. 4r a pencil note informs us that another copy "se trouve dans le grand cahier de poésies avec des changements". Design, calligraphy and decorations suggest that DFM 346 may be the original copy. The practice of donating poems in exotic languages was customary among orientalists in European academies of the

Fol. 3r contains a detailed map of northern Mesopotamia (Mardin, Diyarbakir, Mosul and Urmia), color-coded by religious affiliation of the minorities (various Christian denominations and Yazidis). A dotted line indicates the “approximate” western border of the (Dominican) mission, as if it was conceived as a territorial entity, along the lines of a modern nation state. A nation, the “Nestorian nation,” is the Christian community that Rhétoré represents as a Chaldean mountain girl, as stated in the title of fol. 4r. The language of the poem is described as a standardized form of MA, “a grammatical Chaldean vulgar” in Rhétoré’s term: “*La Montagnarde chaldéenne et l’ange. Pièce en langue chaldéenne vulgaire grammaticale, suivie de notes contenant un exposé de la situation physique, religieuse, morale et politique de la nation Nestorienne.*” The poem consists of 70 quatrains of 8 syllable lines. Usually three MA verses are written on recto pages and French prose faces them on verso pages.

In *La versification*, Father Rhétoré does not mention this poem, preserved as ms. 346 of the collection of the Dominican Friars of Mosul, in the list of his own works. The omission could be due to the author’s distancing from the contents of the poem, at a later stage of his experience as a missionary, or to the fact that it is a poem composed for a particular occasion, but never actually presented to the dedicatee and therefore perceived as an unpublished private document, perhaps confidential, and, moreover, an uncompleted work.

The Chaldean mountain girl is described as a miserable servant, abandoned on the harsh and rugged mountains, who laments her misery and asks the Lord why He has been so hard only with her among the Christian peoples (vv. 1-13). Her guardian angel appears and tells her that the cause of her suffering is the great crime (*gunhā rabā*) that she has committed in accepting Nestorius’s heresy. God punishes all those who embrace his heretical thoughts and the Chaldean Church is now surrounded by enemies. Inside her, all kinds of crimes and sins are committed and there are also Chaldeans who go abroad to collect money in her name (vv. 13-26).

18th and 19th centuries and missionaries were very active in selling and donating oriental manuscripts to western academies and libraries. Father Rhétoré, e.g., donated a manuscript collection of poems to the Franco-American coptologist and semitist Henri Hyvernât on the occasion of the latter’s visit to Van in 1888. The manuscript is preserved at the Catholic University of America (Washington DC), where Hyvernât was the first professor of scripture and oriental languages, Poizat 2013, p. 86.

The direct speech of the Chaldean mountain girl and the angel are introduced and linked by several verses attributed to the writer (vv. 1-2, 11-2, 26, 68-9) as if he were a narrator and the dialogue were to be performed as a drama. The angel announces that finally God has heard the cry and the prayer of His servant, and has sent the missionaries to save her:

- 30 *ܘܚܘܪܘܢܝܗܘܢ ܥܠܝܬܝܗܘܢ ܡܝܫܘܪܝܢ* *À son ordre, des missionnaires se sont levés ;*
ܘܕܘܠܘܟܘܢ ܕܘܥܝܢܝܗܘܢ ܕܘܥܝܢܝܗܘܢ ܕܘܥܝܢܝܗܘܢ *agneaux de paix ils ont parcouru tes montagnes*
ܘܕܘܠܘܟܘܢ ܕܘܥܝܢܝܗܘܢ ܕܘܥܝܢܝܗܘܢ ܕܘܥܝܢܝܗܘܢ *y répandant la lumière du salut ;*
ܘܕܘܠܘܟܘܢ ܕܘܥܝܢܝܗܘܢ ܕܘܥܝܢܝܗܘܢ ܕܘܥܝܢܝܗܘܢ *mais toi, toujours, tu as résisté à leur voix.*
- 31 *ܘܕܘܠܘܟܘܢ ܕܘܥܝܢܝܗܘܢ ܕܘܥܝܢܝܗܘܢ ܕܘܥܝܢܝܗܘܢ* *Tu leur as demandé la richesse,*
ܘܕܘܠܘܟܘܢ ܕܘܥܝܢܝܗܘܢ ܕܘܥܝܢܝܗܘܢ ܕܘܥܝܢܝܗܘܢ *la puissance et les biens du monde*
ܘܕܘܠܘܟܘܢ ܕܘܥܝܢܝܗܘܢ ܕܘܥܝܢܝܗܘܢ ܕܘܥܝܢܝܗܘܢ *et tu n'as compté pour rien les trésors*
ܘܕܘܠܘܟܘܢ ܕܘܥܝܢܝܗܘܢ ܕܘܥܝܢܝܗܘܢ ܕܘܥܝܢܝܗܘܢ *contenus dans leurs paroles et leur prédication*
- 32 *ܘܕܘܠܘܟܘܢ ܕܘܥܝܢܝܗܘܢ ܕܘܥܝܢܝܗܘܢ ܕܘܥܝܢܝܗܘܢ* *Vois l'aveuglement extrême de ton esprit*
ܘܕܘܠܘܟܘܢ ܕܘܥܝܢܝܗܘܢ ܕܘܥܝܢܝܗܘܢ ܕܘܥܝܢܝܗܘܢ *et la malice épaisse fixée en ton cœur :*
ܘܕܘܠܘܟܘܢ ܕܘܥܝܢܝܗܘܢ ܕܘܥܝܢܝܗܘܢ ܕܘܥܝܢܝܗܘܢ *tu as repoussé la lumière du Seigneur et, en même*
ܘܕܘܠܘܟܘܢ ܕܘܥܝܢܝܗܘܢ ܕܘܥܝܢܝܗܘܢ ܕܘܥܝܢܝܗܘܢ *temps,*
ܘܕܘܠܘܟܘܢ ܕܘܥܝܢܝܗܘܢ ܕܘܥܝܢܝܗܘܢ ܕܘܥܝܢܝܗܘܢ *tu as accueilli chez toi une erreur nouvelle.*
- 33 *ܘܕܘܠܘܟܘܢ ܕܘܥܝܢܝܗܘܢ ܕܘܥܝܢܝܗܘܢ ܕܘܥܝܢܝܗܘܢ* *L'erreur de Luther, ce moine impur,*
ܘܕܘܠܘܟܘܢ ܕܘܥܝܢܝܗܘܢ ܕܘܥܝܢܝܗܘܢ ܕܘܥܝܢܝܗܘܢ *qui foula aux pieds ses vœux, s'attacha à une*
ܘܕܘܠܘܟܘܢ ܕܘܥܝܢܝܗܘܢ ܕܘܥܝܢܝܗܘܢ ܕܘܥܝܢܝܗܘܢ *femme*
ܘܕܘܠܘܟܘܢ ܕܘܥܝܢܝܗܘܢ ܕܘܥܝܢܝܗܘܢ ܕܘܥܝܢܝܗܘܢ *et s'opposa à tous les Docteurs*
ܘܕܘܠܘܟܘܢ ܕܘܥܝܢܝܗܘܢ ܕܘܥܝܢܝܗܘܢ ܕܘܥܝܢܝܗܘܢ *avec un orgueil sans exemple.*
- 34³¹ *ܘܕܘܠܘܟܘܢ ܕܘܥܝܢܝܗܘܢ ܕܘܥܝܢܝܗܘܢ ܕܘܥܝܢܝܗܘܢ* *L'erreur méprisable et remplie de malice*
ܘܕܘܠܘܟܘܢ ܕܘܥܝܢܝܗܘܢ ܕܘܥܝܢܝܗܘܢ ܕܘܥܝܢܝܗܘܢ *car elle dessèche le cœur,*
ܘܕܘܠܘܟܘܢ ܕܘܥܝܢܝܗܘܢ ܕܘܥܝܢܝܗܘܢ ܕܘܥܝܢܝܗܘܢ *ébranle la foi*
ܘܕܘܠܘܟܘܢ ܕܘܥܝܢܝܗܘܢ ܕܘܥܝܢܝܗܘܢ ܕܘܥܝܢܝܗܘܢ *et produit de divisions.*
- 35 *ܘܕܘܠܘܟܘܢ ܕܘܥܝܢܝܗܘܢ ܕܘܥܝܢܝܗܘܢ ܕܘܥܝܢܝܗܘܢ* *On appelle du nom de Protestants*
ܘܕܘܠܘܟܘܢ ܕܘܥܝܢܝܗܘܢ ܕܘܥܝܢܝܗܘܢ ܕܘܥܝܢܝܗܘܢ *ceux qui s'attachent à cette erreur et en effet*
ܘܕܘܠܘܟܘܢ ܕܘܥܝܢܝܗܘܢ ܕܘܥܝܢܝܗܘܢ ܕܘܥܝܢܝܗܘܢ *comme des déchireurs ils se répandent par le*
ܘܕܘܠܘܟܘܢ ܕܘܥܝܢܝܗܘܢ ܕܘܥܝܢܝܗܘܢ ܕܘܥܝܢܝܗܘܢ *monde*
ܘܕܘܠܘܟܘܢ ܕܘܥܝܢܝܗܘܢ ܕܘܥܝܢܝܗܘܢ ܕܘܥܝܢܝܗܘܢ *apportant la mort dans le bercail du Christ.*

30. At his command, missionaries rose up;
as lambs of peace, they travelled through your mountains
spreading there the light of salvation;
but you always resisted their voices.

31. You asked them for wealth,
power and worldly goods
and you counted for nothing the treasures
contained in their words and preaching.

32. See the extreme blindness of your mind
and the thick malice fixed in your heart:
you have rejected the light of the Lord and at the same time
you have welcomed a new error in your house.

³¹ V. 34 is on p. 27 (f. 33v).

33. The error of Luther, that impure monk,
 who trampled on his vows, took a woman for himself
 and opposed all Doctors
 with unprecedented pride.

34. The despicable and mischievous error
 that dries up the hearts,
 shakes faith
 and produces divisions.

35. Those who are attached to this error
 are called by the name of Protestant (*proṭ*)
 and like rippers (*pāroṭē*) they spread through the world.
 They brought death in Jesus's sheepfold.

Rhétoré makes the angel say that the Chaldean response to the missionaries' work was vitiated by moral and theological flaws. The Chaldean nation asked for money and power from the missionaries rather than doctrine and education³² and added a second doctrinal "error" to traditional Nestorianism. The world *ḡeltā* (error) is highlighted by means of two stylistic devices that are typical of MA and, in general, oral-oriented poetry:³³ verses 32 and 34 are linked by anadiplosis, 34 and 35 by anaphora. More sophisticated from a formal point of view are the wordplay *proṭāyē* (Protestants)/*pāroṭē* (rippers) in v. 35 and the antithetic transformation of the title of the first and famous Urmī Protestant periodical *Zahrirē d-bahrā* (Rays of light)³⁴ into *zahrirē d-'ād bēhrā d-duḡlā* (Rays of that deceitful light) in v. 37.

37 ܠܥܝܢܝܢ ܕܗܘܐ ܕܗܘܐ ܕܗܘܐ ܕܗܘܐ. « Les rayons de cette lumière » mension-
 ܠܥܝܢܝܢ ܕܗܘܐ ܕܗܘܐ ܕܗܘܐ ܕܗܘܐ. gère
 ܠܥܝܢܝܢ ܕܗܘܐ ܕܗܘܐ ܕܗܘܐ ܕܗܘܐ. en venant dans ton pays y ont reçu bon
 ܠܥܝܢܝܢ ܕܗܘܐ ܕܗܘܐ ܕܗܘܐ ܕܗܘܐ. accueil,
 ܠܥܝܢܝܢ ܕܗܘܐ ܕܗܘܐ ܕܗܘܐ ܕܗܘܐ. et les prédicants de cette iniquité
 ܠܥܝܢܝܢ ܕܗܘܐ ܕܗܘܐ ܕܗܘܐ ܕܗܘܐ. sont en pleine faveur chez toi.

³² Foreign missions, and perhaps foreign governments for or through the missions, invested substantial sums of money and human resources in the region. Sometimes they actually paid salaries to native East-Syriac clergymen to obtain their support. See, e.g., Duval 1889, p. 31; Murre-van den Berg 1999b, p. 124; Flynn 2016, p. 733 on the American mission in Urmia and Fiori's contribution to the present volume on the derogatory terms "wet" (paid by Catholic missionaries) and "dry" Christians in Mosul. A systematic study of funding, structures and the relationships with local clergy of the Catholic missions in the region has still to be done and may shed light on their relationships with France as a colonial power.

³³ Mengozzi 2002, p. 75-79.

³⁴ On the American mission in Urmia and the periodical *Zahrirē d-bahrā*, see Becker 2015.

prepared a series of lessons in MA on Luther's life and the refutation of his doctrine for the boarders of the Dominican school of Mar Ya'qub near Duhok (DFM 320), where Father Rhétoré had been active some 20-30 years before.

When the Chaldean mountain girl asks the guardian angel how she can find salvation (vv. 43-4), the angel invites her to be humble and return to the voices of her fathers:

46 ܡܫܥܘܬܐ ܕܥܘܠܐ ܕܡܪܝܢܐ ܕܡܪܝܢܐ ܕܡܪܝܢܐ ܕܡܪܝܢܐ ܕܡܪܝܢܐ
 ܡܫܥܘܬܐ ܕܥܘܠܐ ܕܡܪܝܢܐ ܕܡܪܝܢܐ ܕܡܪܝܢܐ ܕܡܪܝܢܐ
 ܡܫܥܘܬܐ ܕܥܘܠܐ ܕܡܪܝܢܐ ܕܡܪܝܢܐ ܕܡܪܝܢܐ ܕܡܪܝܢܐ
 *ܡܫܥܘܬܐ ܕܥܘܠܐ ܕܡܪܝܢܐ ܕܡܪܝܢܐ ܕܡܪܝܢܐ ܕܡܪܝܢܐ
 *Marche dans la voie de tes pères :
 Bar-Sabaé, la gloire de ta nation,
 Saint Ephrem, l'ornement de ton pays,
 et Mar Pétiou la lumière de ta
 montagne*

46. Walk in the way of your fathers:
 Bar-Sab'ē, the glory of your nation,
 Saint Ephrem, the ornament of your country,
 and Mar Petion the light of your mountain.

The angel's invitation to return to the past glories of the Church of the East and its glorious authors and saints³⁶ is followed by a long exaltation of union with Rome and the Pope as the only way of escape from the present misery. The Virgin Mary will liberate the poor Chaldean mountain girl, and the Anglican division is nothing but another source of suffering (vv. 45-63).

The angel then asks the girl to spread his message to all the mountain tribes (vv. 64-5), who were in fact more reluctant to accept union with Rome. The "Nestorian" tribes are named one by one, with more or less honorific epithets, so as to state that they are the true Chaldean nation, that must accept union with Rome and orthodox theology or face God's wrath and die, while tribes and flocks of the plain are already Catholic, safely protected within the borders of the Dominican mission.³⁷

Probably later, the poet added two verses (66-7), copied on ff. 22r-23v, that contain what looks like an easy post eventum

³⁶ Rhétoré was also a good Syriacist and has left a number of study materials on Cl. Syr. literature: *Notes syriaques* 1-5 (DFM 365-9, 1915); 6 (370, 1916); excerpts and translations of Ephrem, Jacob of Serugh, Balai, Thomas of Marga, and other authors, in Cl. Syr. and French translation (371, 1916); *Notes syriaques* 8 (372, 1917).

³⁷ Assyrian scholar and author Odisho Malko Giwargis Ashitha 1997, p. 18-19, quotes this couple of verses by Rhétoré in the introduction to a collection of poems by Rabban Yonan of Tkhuma and vehemently criticizes the French missionary, who is harshly described as a raven that flies from village to village to convert Assyrians to Catholicism. I am grateful to Nicholas al-Jeloo, of the University of Melbourne, for drawing this text to my attention.

prophecy: the Muslims will rise against her and kill her, while Qodchanis, the small village on the Hakkari mountains where the “Nestorian” Patriarch had sought refuge, will be destroyed. A note by the author explains:

Note. En 1916 les deux dernières strophes ont vu leur accomplissement [sic for accomplissement]. Chassés de leurs montagnes par les Kurdes, les nestoriens passèrent en Perse puis descendirent à Bakouba près de Bagdad où ils restèrent jusqu’à la fin du 1920. Ils revinrent à Mossoul pour essayer de retrouver un territoire habitable. Mais ils avaient [?] perdu dans l’exil et les guerres les deux tiers de leur nation, tous leurs villages étaient ruinés et Cothcanès détruit.

In v. 66, what we now know as the Assyrian genocide, in which indeed two thirds of the Assyrian population were killed or died, sounds like a threat and is described as perpetrated by the Muslims “by God’s hand”.

66 ܟܘܼܨܘܼܬܝܼܟܘܼܢ ܕܝܫܡܝܠܝܼܬܝܼܢ ܕܝܫܡܝܠܝܼܬܝܼܢ *Les Ismaélites qui t’entourent*
 ܟܘܼܨܝܼܟܘܼܢ ܕܝܫܡܝܠܝܼܬܝܼܢ ܕܝܫܡܝܠܝܼܬܝܼܢ *main de Dieu ; ils te frapperont jusqu’à ce*
 ܕܝܫܡܝܠܝܼܬܝܼܢ ܕܝܫܡܝܠܝܼܬܝܼܢ *qu’ils t’exterminent*
 ܟܘܼܨܝܼܟܘܼܢ ܕܝܫܡܝܠܝܼܬܝܼܢ ܕܝܫܡܝܠܝܼܬܝܼܢ *si tu n’écoutes pas la voix de ton Maître.*

66. The Ishmaelites who surround you
 rose up against you by God’s hand.
 They will hit you until they kill you
 if you do not listen to the voice of your Lord.

Rhétoré adopts the Biblical view of history, shared by MA poets, according to which nations are punished by God’s hand because of their sins. It is a commonplace in MA poetry that all disasters that befell the East-Syrian communities are punishments for the sins of the Christians.³⁸

According to MA tradition, in the last verses (68-9) the writer asks the readers to pray for the poor Chaldean girl and a poetic colophon is added in which the poet reveals something more of himself. The colophon is a quatrain of eight syllable lines, written with different inks to the poem, and contains a typical example of missionary psychology and rhetoric.

ܟܘܼܨܝܼܟܘܼܢ ܕܝܫܡܝܠܝܼܬܝܼܢ ܕܝܫܡܝܠܝܼܬܝܼܢ *Fait par quelqu’un qui est sorti de*
 ܟܘܼܨܝܼܟܘܼܢ ܕܝܫܡܝܠܝܼܬܝܼܢ ܕܝܫܡܝܠܝܼܬܝܼܢ *son pays, à [sic] laissé la douceur et*
 ܟܘܼܨܝܼܟܘܼܢ ܕܝܫܡܝܠܝܼܬܝܼܢ ܕܝܫܡܝܠܝܼܬܝܼܢ *l’affection des siens pour travailler*
 ܟܘܼܨܝܼܟܘܼܢ ܕܝܫܡܝܠܝܼܬܝܼܢ ܕܝܫܡܝܠܝܼܬܝܼܢ *au salut de sa sœur chaldéenne, afin*
 ܟܘܼܨܝܼܟܘܼܢ ܕܝܫܡܝܠܝܼܬܝܼܢ ܕܝܫܡܝܠܝܼܬܝܼܢ *que le Seigneur l’accepte dans la joie*
 ܟܘܼܨܝܼܟܘܼܢ ܕܝܫܡܝܠܝܼܬܝܼܢ ܕܝܫܡܝܠܝܼܬܝܼܢ *de sa maison*

³⁸ Mengozzi 1999, p. 478-479.

Made by someone who departed from his homeland
 leaving the love and compassion of his family,
 to work for the salvation of his Chaldean sister,
 so that the Lord may accept her in the joy of his house.

Toward the end of his life, Father Rhétoré returned to the theme of the tragic persecution and killing of Christians. His French prose report entitled *Les chrétiens aux bêtes* is considered one of the most accurate testimonies on the massacres of the Christians in Mardin in 1915.³⁹ He also wrote an MA poem *On the massacre of the Christians during the time of Sultan Reshad* (DFM 188).⁴⁰ In *La versification* he informs us that:

En 1914, par suite de la guerre qui eut lieu à cette époque il fut déporté avec deux autres missionnaires, d'abord à Mardine et puis à Konia jusqu'à la fin de la guerre en nov. 1918. [...] Il se trouvait à Mardine pendant les massacres et il composa sur ce sujet une pièce de poésie [*sic*] de plus de onze cent vers, sous le nom de Jean Bar Qouchta.⁴¹

The poem numbers 129 stanzas of 8 septenaries, with alternate rhyme. Verses are written on left pages, the number and first word of each stanza are rubricated. On the right pages there are explicative notes in MA prose. The text is composed in the wake of complaints and religious poems on wars, famines and epidemics that are attested in MA literature since at least the eighteenth century,⁴² but the combination of verses and explicative notes is an innovation by Father Rhétoré.

³⁹ Riccardi 2015, p. 8. The manuscript is preserved at the Dominican library of Paris, Saulchoir. It has been published in Italian translation in Impagliazzo 2000 and published with notes by Alichoran 2005.

⁴⁰ Poizat 2013, p. 86.

⁴¹ Poizat 2013, p. 76.

⁴² Mengozzi 2011, p. xvii-xix. The ms. CAM 76, copied in April 1928 by the deacon Matikha son of Joesph of Alqosh, contains many of these poems: *On the Russian-Turkish War* by Stephan Rayes of Alqosh (45v-52v), *On the massacre of Adana* by the deacon 'amma (?) of Telkepe (1909, 83v-87r), *On the massacre of the Christian people in Armenia* by the priest Hormizd (1895, 118v-121v), *On the massacre of Alqosh* by Isaac Maqdassi of Alqosh (1832, 121v-123v), *Lament on killing and plundering* by the priest Matē Esnāk (1904, 123v-126r), *On the attack to Alqosh in the year 1922 of the Greek* by the priest Israel of Alqosh (128r-131r), *On the attack to Alqosh in 1832* by Damyanos of Alqosh (in Cl. Syr., 131r-133v), *On Rome* (probably on the capture of Rome in 1870) by the priest Isaac Maqdassi of Alqosh (1870, 136r-138r), *On the attack to Alqosh in 1832* by Joseph 'Abaya of Alqosh (145v-151v), *On the Patriarchs of our Chaldean Church* by Ḥanna Khāwšābu and Joseph Ḥanina of Alqosh, pupils of the Patriarchal Seminary (1921, 154v-159v), *On the Accident to the Families Rayes and Shushane*, by Isaac Maqdassi, 1872 (175v-176v), *On Seferberlik*, by Isa Maqdassi of Alqosh (1914, 176v-178r), *On the war of Alqosh*, by Isaac Maqdassi (1840, 178r-180v).

CONCLUDING REMARKS

MA manuscripts from northern Iraq bear witness to the dramatic process of Catholicization of the Christian culture that took place in the plain of Mosul and the surrounding region from the eighteenth to the twentieth centuries. MA traditional poetry and the translations into MA, often via Arabic, of European works on spirituality and devotion were instrumental in this process, in which both foreign missionaries and native clergymen were involved. With well-trained staff, schools and a printing press, the Dominican mission of Mosul was probably the most influential institution that promoted both the knowledge of MA among the missionaries and the diffusion of a standardized form of the vernacular. MA functioned as a pastoral tool and a way to foster education and intellectual life – good Catholic intellectual and spiritual life – among the East Syrians.

The Italian friars who led the mission until the mid-nineteenth century started a project of translation of the Bible from Cl. Syr. to MA and translated into MA texts of Catholic devotion such as a short catechism in questions and answers, the litanies of Jesus, Mary and the Sacred Heart, the mysteries of the Rosary, and the acts of faith, hope, charity and contrition.

When the French friars took over, Jacques Rhétoré became the leading figure of the mission's language policy. He wrote and printed a grammar, conceived as a normative handbook of a standardized vernacular rather than a description of dialectal diversity in the Mosul region. He or his entourage translated into MA prose the rule of Dominican confraternities for lay people and a number of lives of saints and martyrs.

Rhétoré also cultivated, throughout his life, a true passion for the traditional vernacular poetry of the East-Syrians, attested from the late sixteenth century onward. He collected, copied and studied manuscripts and wrote a handbook of metrics that is also a critical study of MA religious poetry and a sketch of its history. In cooperation with the native poet David the Blind, he wrote metrical fables, songs for children and hymns to be used in the schools and churches of northern Iraq. In the poem *La Montagnarde chaldéenne et l'ange*, dedicated to the master of the Order of Preachers between 1879-1891, but reworked over time, he describes the East-Syrian tribes of the Hakkari mountains as a miserable girl who will be punished by God if she does not recognize her errors, i.e., the Nestorian heresy and her Protestant sympathies.

There is something tragic in Father Rhétoré's ambivalent missionary approach to East-Syriac Christianity. On the one hand he was a passionate student of both Syriac cultural and spiritual

heritage and Sureth oral poetry, so as to write and express himself, his missionary vision and psychology, in the poetic language of vernacular Modern Aramaic. Indeed, we owe to him much of what we know about Sureth religious literature. On the other hand, unquestioning loyalty to the Church and the Order to which he belonged led him to despise and condemn the East-Syriac original contiguity with the Nestorian “error,” as a kind of theological original sin, and the contemporary proclivity of many East-Syriac clergymen for Protestant money and influence.

Anti-Protestant polemic was almost an obsession for the Dominican missionaries. Competition with Lutheran, and even more so with Anglican and American Evangelical, missionaries, was indeed a problem, especially in Persia, whereas in the Mosul region it seems to have re-proposed in the East stereotyped arguments of a European conflict of identities and nationalisms. Native Christians with their traditions and languages were seen as easily manipulated. America and the competing European powers were of course behind the various missions that tended to be national ones. The Dominican mission was no exception and, albeit rooted in religious concerns, its efforts for the Catholicization of East-Syrians in the nineteenth century may be seen as a consolidation of French culture, language and therefore political influence in the region.

L'œuvre des missionnaires se consacra [...] à apporter le catholicisme aux chrétiens des autres confessions. L'appartenance à l'Église de Rome permit à l'Église chaldéenne de s'ouvrir sur le monde, mais elle contribua aussi à créer une fracture entre musulmans et chrétiens. Le ralliement au catholicisme avait aussi un ressort politique : le gouvernement français étendait à tous les catholiques de l'Empire ottoman⁴³.

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⁴³ Galletti 2010, p. 116-117. Still in 1888, the French claimed their right to protect all Eastern Christians precisely because of the presence of French missions in the region for more than three centuries (Filoni 2015, 143). For a German (Protestant) perception of the French protection of the Christians and its geopolitical significance, see Fiori's contribution to the present volume.

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