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“May I treasure up the words in my heart!”: Syriac culture in Modern Aramaic oral tradition

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Abstract — Modern Aramaic philology is a research field that has attracted the attention of few scholars and vernacular literature preserved in manuscripts appears indeed to be a rather marginal phenomenon in comparison with both oral tradition and Classical Syriac writing (copying of the classical heritage and composition of new original texts). In the last few decades and especially in the last few years, a surprising number of grammatical descriptions of modern Aramaic varieties have appeared. All of them include the transcription and translation of oral texts, some of which are particularly valuable from a literary point of view. Both written and oral texts reveal an extraordinary tenacity of classical stories and motifs. A couple of examples will be given here: the story of the Maccabean martyrs and their mother Shmuni and of Joseph and Mary. In both cases oral transmission has preserved ancient lore in the collective memory of the community, although in rather creative and somehow distorted ways, as is typical of the oral/aural medium.

The earliest written witnesses of Modern Aramaic are religious texts composed in learned varieties of Jewish and Christian vernaculars of present-day northern Iraq. Their linguistic, literary and stylistic forms attest the existence of a rich and probably much earlier oral literature in the vernacular. They are written texts that have drawn on classical literatures – Hebrew, Jewish Aramaic and Classical Syriac, but they are clearly intended for oral transmission, being homiletic texts in the case of Jewish authors and lengthy hymns to be chanted by soloists and/or choirs in the case of East Syrian Christians. The latter exhibit stylistic features and structuring devices typical of oral poetry: rhyme, rhythm, formulae, copia verborum, multilingual hendyadis, anaphora and anadiplosis.¹

The earliest dated Christian texts originated in the Mosul plain around the end of the 16th century and the beginning of the 17th century. It was only since the 18th century, however, that Christian Aramaic vernacular literature was committed to writing in manuscripts as a marginal, quantitatively almost insignificant phenomenon in the context of that flourishing of scribal and literary activities which is known as the “school of Alqosh”. Since the 16th century, a number of authors and families of professional scribes of Alqosh, in the Mosul plain, or the surrounding region, were extraordinarily active in copying, reading, commenting Classical Syriac works and became original authors themselves in the classical language and – to a far lesser extent – in the vernacular.²

In the 19th century, this kind of literary production attracted the attention of the first European scholars who dealt with Modern Aramaic. They used it especially as a source of linguistic evidence and were seldom interested in literary features.³ After the first ground-breaking publications, almost a century elapsed before Semitic scholars rediscovered the charm of modern Aramaic tongues.⁴ This renewed interest was cultivated mostly by dialectologists who became progressively more aware of the risk of extinction that threatened what they usually label “Neo-Aramaic” dialects. Only a few scholars devoted themselves to reading and collating manuscripts containing Modern Aramaic literary texts.⁵

The intense and meticulous labor of the linguists resulted in the publication of a number of grammatical descriptions of Neo-Aramaic dialects. Especially in the last few

years, there has been a real boom of publications on Neo-Aramaic.⁶ A new series on Neo-Aramaic studies has recently been launched by the Gorgias Press. The meritorious German series *Semitica Viva*, Harrassowitz Verlag, hosts a growing number of grammatical outlines, always accompanied by the transcription and translation of oral texts and glossaries. Geoffrey Khan can be considered the leading scholar in this kind of publication. For Gorgias Press and Brill, he is the author of a number of grammars structured according to the *Semitica Viva* model, but enriched with thorough and refined treatments of syntax and ample anthologies. The more than 2000 pages of his three-volume *The Neo-Aramaic dialect of Barwar*⁷ can be considered as a monumental achievement not only for Neo-Aramaic and Semitic studies, but more in general for dialectology and descriptive linguistics.⁸

Among the oral texts published in such dialectological publications it is not rare to come across very interesting texts from the point of view of the recent history of the Aramaic-speaking communities and of their oral literature: folktales, fables, specimens of heroic poems, songs... Informants, selected among the most competent and representative speakers of the various dialects, are often talented story-tellers and the texts they have recorded are often felicitous examples of fine oral performances. In this paper, I shall address two of these oral texts, in which Modern Christian Aramaic oral tradition preserves ancient lore. They tell stories which followed similar patterns of transmission. Mentioned in and perhaps originating from Biblical accounts, they were re-elaborated in various forms, expanded with narrative details in extra-canonical midrash-like literary texts, in Classical Syriac and/or other Eastern Christian languages, and are finally to be found circulating in oral form among contemporary Assyrians and Chaldeans.

The plots and characters are so popular and they are so widespread in time and space that it is almost impossible to draw a genealogical tree to illustrate the history of their transmission and their interdependence. In an apt and fascinating metaphor that I heard once used to describe Greek epics, they are stories carried by the current of a narrative river that flows underground and from time to time allows certain parts or details to spring up to the surface, in various forms and languages. We shall focus on two stories: the Maccabean martyrs and the Blessed Virgin Mary and Joseph.

The Maccabean martyrs

The deuterocanonical *Second Book of Maccabees* relates the martyrdom of the noble scribe Eleazar and of a mother and her seven sons as examples of the cruelty of Antiochus Epiphanes to the Jews (2nd century B.C.).⁹ Because of their refusal to eat prohibited food, they were tortured and killed, becoming martyrs by virtue of their respect for the Law and for their fear of God. The same story with small variations is expanded in the *Fourth Book of Maccabees*, which seems to be part of the “canon” in the old Peshitta manuscript known as the Codex Ambrosianus (6th-7th century) together with Book VI of Josephus’ *Bellum judaicum* featuring there as *Fifth Book of the Maccabees*.¹⁰

[The Fourth Book of Maccabees] ... has come down to us in Greek, Latin and Syriac. It was doubtless composed in the first mentioned language. It is found in the great Biblical Codices, the Sinaitic and the Alexandrine, as well as in a number of minor Greek MSS. Being sometimes

attributed to Josephus it is to be found in editions of his works as well as in editions of the Septuagint.¹¹

In 1895 Bensly-Barnes published a number of Syriac works related to the Maccabean martyrs.¹² In the Syriac tradition, since Aphrahat and Ephrem, the courageous mother has been called Shmuni. In a *madrāšā* attributed to Ephrem, she is transformed through a subtle play of comparisons and oppositions into an improbable heroine of virginity.¹³ An anonymous West-Syriac homily contains curious attempts to give the story a Christian flavor. The manuscript is dated Antioch, 1503 of the Seleucidic era. The headings describe the mother and her sons as martyrs of Christ the Savior and in the text the name of Shmuni is occasionally christianized as Mary.¹⁴

Traces of this literary tradition concerning the Maccabean martyrs are preserved in a *dorekta*, attributed to Israel of Alqosh, one of the earliest and probably the most famous author of the first period (17th century), founder of the Shikwānā (or Qashā) family of scribes, leader and inspirer of the so-called “School of Alqosh”. The first verses of this Modern Aramaic hymn are worth quoting since they encode, as it were, all the basic elements of the oral transmission. The poet asks for eloquence, passion and memory to tell his story (‘may I treasure up the words in my heart, so that I may tell them and not forget’) and invites all Syrians to listen to him.

- 1 In the name of the Trinity,
O that I had eloquence
and that passion *might strike* me!
- 2 O that passion *might strike* me
both outside and inside,
that I might speak and the ear listen to me!
- 3 Listen, oh Syrians,
to the story of the priest Israel
which he told about the Maccabean martyrs!
- 4 Oh Maccabees, children of Shmuni,
all of you, stay with me,
when I speak for you with my small mouth!
- 5 May I speak with my mouth for you
and sing about you with my heart
and *let my figure sink in your dust* (sic)!
- 6 When they *take pity* on me
may they sprinkle dew on my flame
and *cover* and *protect* me with their peace!
- 7 May they *cover* and *protect* me with their peace
so that, when their eyes look at me,
I may be clothed with their armour!
- 8 May I be clothed with their armour
and may I treasure up the words in my heart
so that I may tell them and not forget.

- 9 In the time in which the cursed Antiochus
was king and sovereign,
he left the perfect way of truth.
- 10 In Jerusalem he slew and destroyed
and like a dragon he hissed
and he destroyed many people.
- 11 In the three days that he came
eighty thousands he killed¹⁵
and when he took them to prison,
- 12 he ordered Eleazar the nobleman:
'Eat swine's flesh,
lest I cook you in the fire!
- 13 And if it happens that you do not eat
and you deny this word of mine,
you will not escape from death.
- [...]
- 28 Great is Shmuni, how much she endured!,
whose seven children, a nest,
were killed in front of her and she did not grieve.
- 29 Great is Shmuni, the holy,
her children were killed, one and six,
but she was not separated from her Lord!
- 30 She *was aflame as she sat*
and when she heard it, voluntarily
she leapt in the cauldron of pitch.¹⁶
- 31 When she leapt, she was cooked
and her soul went out from her body
and she deserved to ascend to the Kingdom.¹⁷

The narrative detail of the mother who 'voluntarily leapt in the cauldron of pitch' (v. 30, ll. b-c) indicates that Israel of Alqosh used sources deriving from *4 Maccabees*. Precisely this incident is in fact the main difference between the *Second* and the *Fourth Book of Maccabees*. In *2 Maccabees* 7:41, the mother is said to have died last, after all her children, whereas the text of *4 Maccabees* 17:1 specifies that she, 'certain guards say, flung herself into the frying pan.'¹⁸

When Jasmin Sinha published in 2000 a grammatical sketch with texts of the Neo-Aramaic dialect of Bēšpən (province of Mardin, southeastern Turkey), probably she did not realize that she had found an oral version of the story of Shmuni. The oral text has been recorded in France, where Sinha's informant, Mr Pətrəs Ide, now lives. The audio-file can be downloaded from *SemArch* – the *Semitisches Tonarchiv* of Heidelberg University (www.semarch.uni-hd.de). The text begins with a proud statement of identity.

*Našmoni Qadāšta*¹⁹

1. *Mā-d-iwux axnux suraye ad-kaldān qatoliqaye átwalayni matwata b- Tūrkiya: Mēr, Baznaye, Īšši, Harbole,*²⁰ *Ḥaššan, Bēšpən, anni átwale etata.*
2. *U mā-d-iwa eta ad-Me'er bi-gawəd šəmməd Našmoni Qadāšta, m- Našmoni Qadāšta yamri amare.*
3. *Átwala šawwá-brone u xa-gawra. gawraw mətle. qām xá- ... malka, yzale m-'əllaw yamər ən lá-batyat mšapyat bí, bgawrat bí u payšat mənni.*
4. *Aya yamra mənnox lá-ypayšan u lá-ygawran u bkalyan go haymanutəd Mšiha.*
5. *Yamər lá-gawrat bí, bronax qatlənnəhen. Yamra qtulə broní. Maytele brona aw-raba, qṭəlle, xzela, baraqul aynaw qṭəlle, l-sāhaduta.*
6. *Xera mtayta sməltá m-āra hal zala l-šmayya. Bronaw hōl bsyaqa b-šmayya bizala l-šmayya. Malaxa lawbūl biyu, šmayya xzela.*
7. *Yamra qtul... ham pa-załoma qatl... qtul áw-xena-že. Šáw ətla bronaw. Qəṭlile u hadax b-qadišuta xazyawa yasqawa yasəq yalaw l-šmayya.*
8. *U aya-že qṭilale, go haymanutəd Mšiha lá-mpəlla u lá-məxšəkla. Aya zəlla l-malkutəd šmayya u m-qam d-ayyá-sāhadutəd d-wədlá ayyá-qadāšta etata ymatti b-šəmmaw.*
10. *Mā-d-iwa Mēr, matəd Mēr átwala dá-eta go šəmmaw, go ṭura mtayta, b-zawnəd m-qam ...ya'ni batər Mšiḥewa āman m-qam Mḥammad mtáytewa eta tama go šəmmaw.*
11. *U hal diyo-že qadāštewa u p-axxa libale yamewa biyaw dəgla. U naše daywane ylablīwalehen šamrīwale l-tama, ymanixáwalehen.*
13. *Kud haymənwa sqila biyaw ynayxiwa, án-daywane l-tama u yatewa.*
14. *U mā-d-iwa matəd Mēr əšti šawwí-bátewa. U kud šeta go šəmmaw yawdiwa xá-šera. axnux lišana yamruxwa šera, u qurdət yamri šawālāđēr.*
15. *Yawdiwa go šəmmaw, yqəṭiwa qənyana u yawdiwa ixala u yzawalehen qam tarəd eta. Tama ybašliwa u yaxliwa u hal ašərta mšalewa go šəmmaw.*
16. *bi-d-áw-yoma ixala u šera yawdiwa u edaw yšaydiwale-že áw-yoma, p-axxa lá-ypaləxwa b-go šəmmaw.*

1. We, Christians, Chaldean Catholics, we had villages in Turkey: Mēr, Baznaye, Išši, Harbole, Ḥassana, Bēšpən, and they had churches.
2. As for the church of Mēr, it had been built in the name of Saint Našmoni. About Saint Našmoni there is a legend.
3. She had seven sons and a husband. Her husband died and a king came to her and said: – You shall give yourself to me, marry me and be mine. –
4. She said: – I shall not be yours nor marry you. I stand fast in my faith for Christ. –
5. He said: – If you do not marry me, I will kill your sons. – She said: – Then, kill my sons! – He took the oldest son and killed him. She saw it. He killed him before her eyes, as martyrdom.
6. She saw a ladder reaching heaven from the earth. Her son ascended to heaven, he went to heaven. She saw that an angel carried him to heaven.
7. She said: – Kill! – She said to the tyrant: – Kill! Kill the others too! – She had seven sons. He killed them and so, in holiness, she saw that her son ascended to heaven.
9. He killed her too. She stood fast in her faith for Christ. She did not fall and did not doubt. She went to the Kingdom of Heaven. Because of this martyrdom which the holy woman faced, they build churches in her name.
10. As for Mēr, the village of Mēr had a church in her name, built on a mountain in the time before... I mean... after Christ but before Muḥammad this church was built in her name.
12. Until today Našmoni is regarded as a saint. And here too [in France, where the informant now lives] one should not tell lies in her name. The possessed were brought there. They were kept there and were healed.
13. Whoever has deep trust in her is healed. The possessed ... there and came back.

14. As far as the village Mēr is concerned, there lived there sixty or seventy families. Every year they held a festival in her name. In our language we say *šera*, while in Kurdish they say *šawālādēr*.

15. It is held in her name. They slaughtered a cow and prepared a banquet. They went there out in front of the church. They cooked and ate there and prayed in her name until evening.

16. On that day they held a banquet and a festival. Her church too was seized on that day. But here, too, one does not work in her name.

The name of the saint in this dialect or at least in the idiolect of this informant, has the form Našmoni, that probably derives by distortion from the Classical Syriac phrase *bnay Shmuni* ‘the sons of Shmuni’. The final diphthong *-ay* is pronounced *-a*, as in a number of dialects in certain positions.²¹ The meaning of the sequence *bnay shmuni* is probably not understood any more, sounding something like *bnayed shmuni* in the modern dialect, and yields the new name Našmoni for the saint.²²

The narrator from Bēšpēn clearly remembers that Našmoni alias Shmuni had seven sons and that they were killed by an ill-intentioned sovereign. Moreover, he appears to be in line with part of the Classical Syriac tradition that transformed the Jewish mother of the Maccabean martyrs into a Christian Shmuni, persecuted *bhaymanutəd Mšiḥa* ‘because of her faith in Christ’ (4). He then tries to date the construction of Saint Shmuni’s church in Mēr ‘after Christ but before Muḥammad’ (10), probably to emphasize that Muslims – who eventually seized that sacred place – have no claim to it.

The matter of the dispute between the heroic Christian – Christianised – mother and the evil king, however or – rather – consequently, could no longer have been a question of Jewish kashrut, and the narrator readily changes it with a folktale *topos*: the attempt of a king or a ruler to take advantage of a woman in a weak position, in this case a widow (3). The narrator draws from the underground river we spoke of and combines narrative components of different stories. The mother’s vision of a ladder linking earth to heaven and of the angel who carries her son to heaven (6) is another fabulous detail probably added by the narrator and possibly to be found in hagiographical traditions or inspired by the biblical Jacob’s ladder. It confirms the mother in her belief in the future of her sons in the Kingdom of Heaven.

In the second and final part of the text (12-16), we are then taken to the village festival of Našmoni Qaddāšta and told how the saint and her church had power to heal the possessed (*daywane*, possibly ‘mentally disturbed people’).

The Blessed Virgin Mary and Joseph her Husband

The story of the Blessed Virgin Mary and Joseph her husband has its roots in the Gospel of Matthew and in early non-canonical texts, such as the Greek *Protoevangelium of James* (mid-2nd century AD) that tried to cope with a number of narrative gaps in Matthew’s account (1:18-25) or integrated what would become a canonical Gospel with narrative material drawn from other unknown sources, thus both drawing from the depths of our underground river and pouring fresh new water into its currents.

It is not easy to ascertain when apocryphal texts on the infancy of Jesus and the life of his mother Mary entered Classical Syriac literature.²³ In 1899 Ernest Wallis Budge published a text entitled *History of the Blessed Virgin Mary* from a 1890 copy of an East-Syriac manuscript of the 13th-14th centuries. Building on previous studies by

Wright,²⁴ Budge reconstructs three main versions of the story of the Virgin, but he prefers to edit and translate the text of this late eastern collection since:

[The *History of the Blessed Virgin Mary* ...] represents the popular views which were held by devout but unlettered people concerning the earthly life of the Virgin and Child. But the work [...] has considerable value, for it is a tolerably full summary of a number of apocryphal books among which may be mentioned the Protevangelium of James, the Gospel of the Pseudo-Matthew, the Gospel of Thomas, the Gospel of the Infancy, the Gospel of the Nativity of Mary, and the 'Transitus', or Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary. These and other books written in Greek and Latin were laid under contribution by the Syrian translator and editor, and as a result we have in the work before us a careful selection of the most important of the stories concerning the Virgin and Child which were current in Syria and Palestine as early as the end of the IVth century of our era, as well as some which were incorporated with them at a later date.²⁵

Very similar narrative material overflows in the chapters of the *Book of the Bee* dedicated to the birth of Mary and her son Jesus. The *Book of the Bee* is a prose collection which narrates God's intervention in the history of the world, from the beginning to the end, incorporating biblical and non-canonical sources, and it appears to have played a central role in the transmission of traditional Syriac lore to Modern Aramaic poetry.²⁶ It is attributed to Solomon of Baṣra, an East-Syrian writer active in the first half of the 13th century.²⁷ The text was published and translated into English, once again, by Budge in 1886.

In the 13th-14th centuries there were thus East-Syrian copyists and authors – such as Salomon of Baṣra – interested in transmitting, harmonizing, epitomizing old stories about the Virgin Mary. According to the 20th-century manuscript Habbi 3, p. 228,²⁸ a Modern Aramaic poem (*dorekṭa*) *On the Blessed Virgin Mary* was composed in the year 2034 Sel. (1722/23 AD) by a certain Haydeni of Gessa, a village located in the mountain district of Txuma, in the Hakkari region. The date is plausible since the text is preserved in another manuscript collection of *dorekyāta* (Chaldean Patriarchate, Baghdad 560, dated Alqosh 1758 and unavailable at the moment) and, partially, in the miscellaneous manuscript 567 of the Mingana collection, dated Zawitha, in the mountain district of Tiyyari, 1744 AD (now in Birmingham). The content may be described as a poetic rendering of the story of the Holy Virgin Mary as it is told in the *Book of the Bee*, ch. 34-36²⁹ and it may be summarized as follows:

Mary's father and mother are called Zadok or Yonakhir and Dinah or Ḥanna respectively, with tentative etymologies of their names.³⁰ After much fasting and prayer, the sterile couple are granted a daughter who is brought to the Temple while still very young. Joseph is recognized as her chaste worthy husband when a white dove goes forth from the Temple and alights on his staff. Gabriel announces to Mary the conception of Our Lord and an angel appears to Joseph in a dream and encourages him to accept her pregnancy. Mary visits her cousin Elizabeth. When Jesus is born, twelve Persian kings visit the holy family in Bethlehem to honour the new-born child with offerings and worship him.³¹ Mary is finally borne up to Heaven, where the heavenly hosts greet her as their Queen.

Thus the poet transfers old apocryphal narratives from the classical tradition³² to his Modern Aramaic composition. The story runs pleasantly and fluently through the 99 verses. It is the first witness of the text I have come across and I am currently working at a critical edition. A selection of verses is here proposed, in my provisional working translation.

[illegible]

חַדָּשׁ תִּשְׁמַח בְּיָמֶיךָ חֲמִשָּׁה עָשָׂר.
 ❖ חֲמִשָּׁה עָשָׂר יָמִים יִשְׁמַח בְּיָמֶיךָ.

11 דָּגַל מִלֵּךְ בְּעֵתָהּ תִּשְׁמַח בְּיָמֶיךָ.
 חֲמִשָּׁה עָשָׂר יָמִים יִשְׁמַח בְּיָמֶיךָ.
 ❖ לִבְנֵי דָוִד חֲמִשָּׁה עָשָׂר יָמִים יִשְׁמַח בְּיָמֶיךָ.

16 חֲמִשָּׁה עָשָׂר יָמִים יִשְׁמַח בְּיָמֶיךָ.
 חֲמִשָּׁה עָשָׂר יָמִים יִשְׁמַח בְּיָמֶיךָ.
 ❖ חֲמִשָּׁה עָשָׂר יָמִים יִשְׁמַח בְּיָמֶיךָ.

19 חֲמִשָּׁה עָשָׂר יָמִים יִשְׁמַח בְּיָמֶיךָ.
 חֲמִשָּׁה עָשָׂר יָמִים יִשְׁמַח בְּיָמֶיךָ.
 ❖ חֲמִשָּׁה עָשָׂר יָמִים יִשְׁמַח בְּיָמֶיךָ.

20 לִבְנֵי דָוִד חֲמִשָּׁה עָשָׂר יָמִים יִשְׁמַח בְּיָמֶיךָ.
 חֲמִשָּׁה עָשָׂר יָמִים יִשְׁמַח בְּיָמֶיךָ.
 ❖ חֲמִשָּׁה עָשָׂר יָמִים יִשְׁמַח בְּיָמֶיךָ.

21 חֲמִשָּׁה עָשָׂר יָמִים יִשְׁמַח בְּיָמֶיךָ.
 חֲמִשָּׁה עָשָׂר יָמִים יִשְׁמַח בְּיָמֶיךָ.
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25 חֲמִשָּׁה עָשָׂר יָמִים יִשְׁמַח בְּיָמֶיךָ.
 חֲמִשָּׁה עָשָׂר יָמִים יִשְׁמַח בְּיָמֶיךָ.
 ❖ חֲמִשָּׁה עָשָׂר יָמִים יִשְׁמַח בְּיָמֶיךָ.

26 חֲמִשָּׁה עָשָׂר יָמִים יִשְׁמַח בְּיָמֶיךָ.
 חֲמִשָּׁה עָשָׂר יָמִים יִשְׁמַח בְּיָמֶיךָ.
 ❖ חֲמִשָּׁה עָשָׂר יָמִים יִשְׁמַח בְּיָמֶיךָ.

27 ܐܝܬܝܢ ܬܡܗܟ ܡܝܬܠ ܕܝܠܝܬܝܢ.
 ܡܕܡܝܬܝܠ ܕܝܬܝܢ ܕܡܕܝܬܝܢ.
 ܝܬܠ ܕ ܕܝܬܝܢ ܡܝܬܠ ܕܝܬܝܢ.

28 ܐܝܬܝܢ ܡܝܬܠ ܬܡܗܟ ܕܝܬܝܢ.
 ܕ ܕܝܬܝܢ ܬܡܗܟ ܕܝܬܝܢ.
 ܕܝܬܝܢ ܕܝܬܝܢ ܕܝܬܝܢ.

29 ܐܝܬܝܢ ܡܝܬܠ ܡܝܬܠ ܕܝܬܝܢ.
 ܕܝܬܝܢ ܕܝܬܝܢ ܕܝܬܝܢ.
 ܕܝܬܝܢ ܕܝܬܝܢ ܕܝܬܝܢ.

Another poem on the Blessed Mary, written by the priest
 Haydeni of Gessa, which is in the territory of Tkhuma.
 In the year 2034 of the Greek (1723 AD)

- 1 Come, listen you Christians!
 Your servant tells a story,
 the poem on Mary daughter of princes.
- 2 Sadok and Dina did not have a child.
 The people of Israel did not love them.
 They did not get sons nor daughters.
- 3 They used there to make sacrifices and pray
 and they *were sorely tried*³³
 because they did not have sons nor daughters.
- 4 Then Dina told her husband:
 ‘Let us go out into the desert or onto the mountain
 and ask a boon of the great King!’
- 5 They went out into the desert and fasted for a boon.
 They prayed before the King of kings:
 ‘Oh our Father, give us a son or a daughter!’
- 6 Glory be to God! How merciful He is,
 who listened to the prayer of Sadok and Dinah.
 He sent a messenger to announce good news.
- 7 That messenger was an angel.
 He descended from heaven and visited Dinah.
 He also translated the name of Dinah as Anne.
- 8 The meaning of Anne’s name is ‘the Creator had mercy
 on her’,
 while Sadok’s name is Yonakhir the chosen.
 The meaning of Yonakhir is ‘*with stranger children*’,³⁴
- 9 He announced: ‘Anne, you will have a daughter,
 all women will bless you,

- who laboured under the sin of childish Eve.
- 10 Through childish Eve they came under the sway of sin,
in your daughter all nations and peoples
will receive blessings.'
- 11 In less than a year they had a daughter.
They took her in their arms and brought her to the temple.
They gave her into the hands of their high priest.
- ...
- 16 When she reached the year in which she began to walk³⁵
they took her on their arms and brought her to the temple.
She remained in the temple till she grew up.
- ...
- 19 She dwelt there and her companions
grew up and reached marriageable age.
They were given husbands by permission of the priests.
- 20 Those maidens were daughters of nobles.
They were given in marriage by permission of the priests
according to the law of Moses and Aaron his brother.
- 21 Maryam remained there alone,
since they did not find any perfect man.
Therefore they gave her to Joseph her fellow countryman.
- 22 Then honest Joseph said:
'I am a virgin. I do not want the girl.
I shall preserve my virginity.
- ...
- 24 They were still praying when a dove came
(and) alighted on the staff of honest Joseph.
Even this Joseph did not believe.
- 25 In that moment the dove flew up,
circled around and closed her wings.
She flew away and settled on honest Joseph.
- 26 When the priests saw, they were all surprised
and they all kissed Joseph's head.
Then they gave Mary to him.
- 27 Joseph accepted then with surprise.
He glorified the name of the merciful Lord,
but spoke this word to the priest.
- 28 Joseph spoke this word to the priests:
'This year I have fallen on hard times.
I cannot make a wedding feast for you.'³⁶
- 29 Then he took her and brought her to his house.
By order of the priests he took her with him
and respected her honor treating her like his sister.

As is narrated in this text, Joseph's reaction when the priests offered him Mary in marriage is rather strange (v. 22). It is not clear why he should have refused a girl who had grown up and been educated in the temple, or why he made a vow of chastity: 'I am a virgin. I do not want the girl. I shall preserve my virginity.' Joseph's chastity³⁷ is in line with the western, Catholic tradition, especially with the dogmatic concerns on Mary, her virginity, immaculate conception, assumption into heaven, etc.

Bruno Poizat drew my attention to a partial copy of the same *dorekta* on Mary, preserved in a manuscript which once belonged to Father Jacques Rhéthoré and is now in the library of the Dominicans of Mosul. In the Mosul manuscript the text is attributed to a certain Brahim of Txuma and Father Rhétoré wrote in the margins and on the blank pages before the text that its contents are theologically and historically questionable. He then added the very precious information that an adaptation of this poem to the language of the Mosul plain was to be found in another manuscript (MDM 87: 115-116). It is probably this adaptation to the language of the Mosul plain – and to the Catholic sensitivity of the missionaries working there among the Chaldeans – that is attributed to Haydeni of Gessa in the manuscript Habbi 3.

In the archetypal text, more faithfully preserved in the version attributed to Brahim of Txuma and criticized by Rhéthoré on account of its contents, Joseph gives the priests a much more comprehensible answer (22_R, MDM 87: 121): 'I have wives and I've got children too. I do not take leave of my family's heart.' Therefore, when the miracle of the dove points him out as the perfect husband for Mary (24-26), one cannot but have sympathy for this man, married to more than one woman and presumably with many children, who does not really appear enthusiastic about marrying again. He tries to put off the usual wedding feast and candidly confesses that he has no money to pay for it (28).

22_R ܠܡܝܬܐ ܕܡܪܝܡ ܗܘܐ ܕܡܝܬܐ ܕܡܪܝܡ
 ܕܡܝܬܐ ܕܡܪܝܡ ܗܘܐ ܕܡܝܬܐ ܕܡܪܝܡ
 ܕܡܝܬܐ ܕܡܪܝܡ ܗܘܐ ܕܡܝܬܐ ܕܡܪܝܡ

22_R By that word Joseph became her spouse³⁸
 and said: 'I have wives and I've got children too.
 I do not take leave of my family's heart.'

Joseph's previous marriages in the old apocryphal text probably served to solve textual problems and narrative gaps in the New Testament, which says that Jesus had brothers. The alleged author of the *Protoevangelium of James* explicitly claims he is a son of Joseph and therefore a stepbrother of Jesus. In passing from the traditional lore of East Syrians living in the Hakkari mountains to the new Catholic Chaldean identity of the plain of Mosul, someone – not necessarily a western missionary – felt the need to make a chaste Joseph out of the old polygamous one, and this of course in order to reaffirm Mary's chastity.

Various versions of this modern poem and its classical sources circulated among the Assyrians at least as early as the 18th century and they have probably contributed to the preservation of the old narratives until the present day. In 1998 Shabo Talay recorded

the voice of Awiqam Shakro reciting the oral text that I give here in English translation, excluding the episode of the annunciation and Mary's discussion with the archangel Gabriel.

Die Heilige Maria ³⁹

1. Saint Mary, her parents had no children. They used to ascend to the mountain. Every time they went to the Church, they remained behind the whole assembly.
2. There were people who mocked them because they had no children. They mocked them and said: You have neither sons nor daughters!
3. She said to her husband: – Let's go up to the mountain and fast and pray God. Maybe God will give us a son or a daughter, whatever God wants to give us.
4. He prepared himself. She took then her husband and both ascended to the mountain. They fasted three days in prayer. While they were sleeping, they saw in a dream a form like an angel who came to them and said: ... The name of the father of the Virgin Mary was Tsadok and her mother Dinah.
5. When the angel appeared to them in a dream, he changed their names. The name of Dinah, he changed it to Hanna, and the name of Tsadok he changed it to Jonaxar.
6. He said: You will get a daughter and they all shall ... everything will be blessed. Through her Christ will come, and through her all women will be blessed.
7. I mean, it went on and on and this really happened after a year. I mean, they got a daughter and they took care of her around a year, until she was able to walk.
8. She was a year old and learned to walk. They took her and brought her in the Temple, in the Church, I mean, in the Church as a birth-offering.
9. She wove ... she wove rugs and other things and spun yarn for the church.
10. She stayed there and finally they sent her to school with the nuns. They stayed at school until they were eighteen years old, until they were twenty years old they stayed at school.
11. All the others went away and married, but she remained there alone. She did not marry, she remained unmarried.
12. They found no one to whom they could marry her, no-one proper to marry her.
13. The priests went to church to pray. There was a certain Joseph, he was her cousin.⁴⁰ I mean, before the priests had finished praying, there came a dove from God, which flew and settled on Joseph's shoulders.
14. The priests were very pleased and said: Finally we have found someone to whom we can marry her. He will take good care of her.
15. They said: – We will marry her to you! – He said: I have women, I have sons and daughters. I will accept, but – he said – she will not be a real wife for the moment. I will take her with me, but now I will not celebrate the marriage.
- [...]
20. She became pregnant and Josef saw that she looked so, I mean, pregnant and wanted to divorce her. The Jews said to Joseph: – You are married without a wedding! – The poor man, indeed, had not celebrated the marriage.
21. When he saw her, he too was He said: – I do not believe you until I go there and see her with my eyes.
22. He went and met her. Behold, she was really pregnant. In his heart he thought she might have... in a bad way.
23. He went to bed. He decided in his heart and said: – I will give her a divorce letter and I will divorce her in a country far away.
24. In the evening he fell asleep. An angel of the Lord came in his dreams. He said to him: – Why do you want to abandon her? The one by whom she is pregnant will be called son of the Most High. This is from God.

25. He got up and asked Saint Mary to go home and asked: – Explain to me, where does it come from ...? She swore to him and said:
26. Oh Josef,
I swear to you by the pure blood of Abel,
the righteous, first-born and only:
there is no one who spoke to me ever!
27. Oh Josef,
I swear to you by the ascension
of St. Elijah in the heavenly homeland;
there is no one who came near this pure body!
28. Oh Josef,
I swear to you all oaths,
so that you yourself feel the truth.
Let us wait and see what will happen in the end!
29. He said: – I believe, it is as you said, I believe you. – Then they went and from then on they lived together until the time came when the birth of Christ was near. Then Christ was born and that was from God.
30. I know this story too so far.

The narrator, Awiqam Shakro was born in 1933 in Iraq in the village of Nočiya and emigrated to Syria as a baby. His family settled in the village of Tell Fēza, one of the villages along the Khabur river where many Assyrians from the Hakkari region sought and found refuge.⁴¹ He tells the story of Mary, her parents and her cousin Joseph quite faithfully. The Jewish temple becomes a church (8) and the noble girls educated in the temple become nuns in a convent school. They prepare for marriage, yet they are called nuns (*rabbanyate*, 11). But it is in the final part that it becomes clear that Shakro's source must be a version of our *dorekta*. He shifts appropriately from prose to verse at the most dramatic point in the story of Mary and Joseph, when Joseph asks her about her pregnancy, which had been announced to him in a dream. In defence of her honour as a virgin, the maiden answers in three rhyming verses, each composed of three lines of various lengths and introduced by the formula 'Oh Joseph, I swear to you...' (26-28) With slight variation, they contain the same text of vv. 59-62 of the *dorekta* attributed to Haydeni of Gessa in the plain of Mosul and to Brahim of Txuma in the mountains of Hakkari.

58. ܡܕܕ ܬܡܝܬ ܝܡܝܬ ܡܪܝܡ ܕܝܫܘܥ
ܠܡܝܬ ܡܕܕ ܡܕܕ ܡܕܕ ܡܕܕ ܡܕܕ
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60. ܡܕܕ ܡܕܕ ܡܕܕ ܡܕܕ ܡܕܕ ܡܕܕ
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61. ܡܕܕ ܡܕܕ ܡܕܕ ܡܕܕ ܡܕܕ ܡܕܕ
ܡܕܕ ܡܕܕ ܡܕܕ ܡܕܕ ܡܕܕ ܡܕܕ
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ܕܠܗ ܡܢ ܕܠܝܠܐ ܕܠܝܠܐ ܕܠܝܠܐ.
ܕܠܗ ܠܝܠܐ ܡܡܝܬܐ ܕܡܡܝܬܐ ܕܡܡܝܬܐ.

62 ܕܡܡܝܬܐ ܡܡܝܬܐ ܡܡܝܬܐ ܡܡܝܬܐ.
ܕܡܡܝܬܐ ܡܡܝܬܐ ܡܡܝܬܐ ܡܡܝܬܐ.
ܕܡܡܝܬܐ ܡܡܝܬܐ ܡܡܝܬܐ ܡܡܝܬܐ.

63 ܕܡܡܝܬܐ ܡܡܝܬܐ ܡܡܝܬܐ ܡܡܝܬܐ.
ܕܡܡܝܬܐ ܡܡܝܬܐ ܡܡܝܬܐ ܡܡܝܬܐ.
ܕܡܡܝܬܐ ܡܡܝܬܐ ܡܡܝܬܐ ܡܡܝܬܐ.

64 ܕܡܡܝܬܐ ܡܡܝܬܐ ܡܡܝܬܐ ܡܡܝܬܐ.
ܕܡܡܝܬܐ ܡܡܝܬܐ ܡܡܝܬܐ ܡܡܝܬܐ.
ܕܡܡܝܬܐ ܡܡܝܬܐ ܡܡܝܬܐ ܡܡܝܬܐ.

- 58 When Joseph got up from the sleep of the night,
he summoned the virgin Mary:
‘Mary, reveal to me what happened!’
- 59 ‘I swear to you, Joseph, on the fingers
that moulded Adam from the dust.
There is no one who spoke to me with evil intent.
- 60 I swear to you, Joseph, on the innocent blood
of Abel, upright first-born of the beginning.
There is no one who touched this chaste body.
- 61 I swear to you, Joseph, on the removal
of St Elijah from temporal space.
There is no one who spoke to me with accusation.
- 62 I swear to you, Joseph, with all oaths
on the books of the prophets and of the Fathers.
There is no one who spoke to me with ill intent.’
- 63 ‘Mary, I trusted from the beginning of your story.
There is no need at all for oaths.
Let us be patient and we will see how it ends.
- 64 A decree was issued by Caesar Augustus.
Everyone will be written in the register in his tribe
to collect taxes, tributes and duties.

Concluding remarks

Poetry is a way of treasuring up words, telling them and not forgetting, as Israel of Alqosh says in his poem on Shmuni. I hope I have been able to illustrate the function of Modern Aramaic poetry and oral tradition in preserving and creatively elaborating on old classical narrative material. The stories derived from or created around the Bible are

extraordinarily persistent throughout the centuries and pass from the earliest attestations, via late poetic adaptations or prose collections to the contemporary oral traditions of the Assyrians and Chaldeans. Authors, scribes and oral performers select themes and expand on them according to their cultural background and their expressive needs. The media employed in the transmission, manuscripts on the one hand and memory and voice on the other, leave their marks in the texts and contribute to re-shaping their form and content. The name of the mother of the seven martyrs changes from Shmuni to Mary, or via Bnay Shmuni to Nashmuni, but her courage and fortitude continues to be sung, repeated and told with admiration. From one manuscript to the other, Joseph may be transformed from a polygamous father of many sons and daughters to a chaste virginal guardian of Mary's virginity, but neither poets nor storytellers can resist filling in the gaps of the Gospel narrative for their audiences, who are evidently eager to know everything about the earthly and heavenly life of the mother of Our Lord the Savior. Who were Mary's parents? What did Joseph say to Mary when he discovered her pregnancy? What did she say to defend herself?⁴⁴

¹ Y. Sabar, "Some Comparative Observations on the Lexicons of Nerwa Texts in Jewish Neo-Aramaic and the Neo-Syriac Poems of Alqosh and Telkepe," in *Studi Afroasiatici* ed. A. Mengozzi (FrancoAngeli: Milano, 2005), 391-96; A. Mengozzi ed., *A Story in a Truthful Language: Religious Poems in Vernacular Syriac by Israel of Alqosh and Joseph of Telkepe (North Iraq, 17th century)*, CSCO 590, *Scriptores Syri* 231 (Peeters: Leuven, 2002); Idem ed., *Religious Poetry in Vernacular Syriac from Northern Iraq (17th-20th Centuries). An Anthology*, with contributions by E. Braidā, S. Destefanis, R. Saccagno and Sh. Talia, CSCO 627-628, *Scriptores Syri* 240-241 (Peeters: Leuven, 2011).

² H.L. Murre-van den Berg, "A Syrian Awakening. Alqosh and Urmia as Centers of Neo-Syriac Writing," in *VII Symposium Syriacum (1996)*, OCA. 256, ed. R. Lavenant (Romae: Pontificio Istituto Orientale, 1998), 499-515; Eadem, "Classical Syriac, Neo-Aramaic, and Arabic in the Church of the East and the Chaldean Church between 1500 and 1800," in *Aramaic in its Historical and Linguistic Setting*, ed. H. Gzella and M. Folmer (Harrassowitz: Wiesbaden, 2008), 335-51; Eadem, "Bible, Theology and Grammar: Scholarly Trends in the Church of the East between 1500 and 1850," in *The Volume of the Fourth Syriac Language Conference (Duhok: Beth Mardotha)*, 51-68.

³ S.P. Brock, "Review of R. Macuch, *Geschichte der spät- und neusyrischen Literatur*, Berlin 1976," *JSS* 23 (1978) 129 [129-38].

⁴ A. Mengozzi, "The Neo-Aramaic Manuscripts of the British Library: Notes on the Study of the Durikyata as a Neo-Syriac Genre," *Muséon* 112.3-4 (1999) 459-94.

⁵ E.g. G. Khan, "The North-Eastern Neo-Aramaic Dialects," *JSS* 52 (2007) 1-20.

⁶ A. Rubin, "Review of R. Voigt (Hrsg.), *From Beyond the Mediterranean*," *Akten des 7. internationalen Semitoarämitistenkongresses*, Aachen 2007," *JSS* 55 (2010) 265 [263-265].

⁷ G. Khan, *The Neo-Aramaic Dialect of Barwar*, HdO 1: The Near and Middle East 96 (Brill: Leiden, 2008).

⁸ A. Mengozzi, "Studi neoaramaici tra ricerca sul campo e filologia: note in margine a Semitica Viva 24, 26, 28 e 32," *Henoch* 26 (2004) 338-64; Idem, "Neo-Aramaic Studies: A Survey of Recent Publications", submitted to *Aramaic Studies* (forthcoming).

⁹ 2 Maccabees 6:18-7:42. Paul Bedjan published the Syriac text of 2 Maccabees at the end of the 3d vol. of the *Acta martyrum et sanctorum*: P. Bedjan, ed., *Acta martyrum et sanctorum*, (Otto Harrassowitz: Paris-Leipzig, 1892), vol. III, 682-86. On the reception of the story of the Maccabean martyrs in the Greek tradition see A.B. Schneider, *Jüdischer Erbe in christlicher Tradition. Eine kanongeschichtliche Untersuchung zur Bedeutung und Rezeption der Makkabäerbücher in der Alten Kirche des Ostens*, Inauguraldissertation (Heidelberg: Ruprecht-Karls-Universität, 2000); in the Latin Church, L.F. Pizzolato and Ch. Somenzi, *I sette fratelli Maccabei nella Chiesa antica d'Occidente*, *Studia patristica mediolanensia* 25, (Vita e Pensiero Edizioni: Milano, 2005).

¹⁰ S.P. Brock, *The Bible in the Syriac Tradition*, Gorgias Handbooks 7, (Gorgias Press: Piscataway, NJ, 2006), 43.

¹¹ R.L. Bensly and W.E. Barnes, *The Fourth Book of Maccabees and Kindred Documents in Syriac*, (Cambridge University Press, 1895), xi. The author of *4 Maccabees* exploits the *exemplum* of the Maccabean martyrs in demonstrating the moral philosophical thesis that the rational part of man is superior and has to rule over the senses and passions. For an English translation and an updated introduction to the cultural-historical importance of this book, see H. Anderson, “4 Maccabees,” in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* 2, ed. J.H. Charlesworth (Darton, Longman & Todd: London, 1985), 531-64. An Italian edition of the Greek text, with translation and ample commentary has also appeared recently: G. Scarpat, *Quarto libro dei Maccabei*, Biblica 9, (Paideia: Brescia, 2006).

¹² Two of them are of Greek provenance: a literal translation from the Greek of a panegyric on the Maccabees by Gregory of Nazianzus (4th century), and two versions of a Greek homily of Severus of Antioch (6th century): see R.L. Bensly and W.E. Barnes, *The Fourth Book of Maccabees*, XXI-XXV.

¹³ St. 32-33 of the *madrāšā* attributed to Ephrem (R.L. Bensly and W.E. Barnes, *The Fourth Book of Maccabees*, XXI-XXV). The idea that heroism and martyrdom are not exclusively male is also present in *4 Maccabees*: see, e.g., 14:11, 16:2, 16:14.

¹⁴ On various Marys in early Christian traditions, see F.S. Jones ed., *Which Mary? The Marys of Early Christian Tradition* (Brill: Leiden, 2002). An anonymous East-Syriac *mēmra* on Shmuni is preserved by a late Malabar manuscript. The 678 dodecasyllables of the ‘short metrical homily’ (*mēmra z‘orā* in l. 42) are rhymed in groups of approximately 10-30 lines. According to R.L. Bensly and W.E. Barnes, *The Fourth Book of Maccabees*, xxv, it can be described as a poetic version of *4 Maccabees*. After asking the martyrs’ assistance in his poetic task, the author re-tells and rhetorically expands the story, mentioning the seven sons by name: Gadday, Tarsay, Ḥusay, Ḥevron, Ḥevṣon, Bakos, and Jonadhav. More on the Maccabean martyrs in Syriac historiography and hagiographical poetry can be found in W. Witakowski, “Mart(y) Shmuni, the Mother of the Maccabean Martyrs, in Syriac Tradition,” in *VI Symposium Syriacum* 1992, OCA 247, ed. R. Lavenant (Romae: Pontificio Istituto Orientale, 1994), 153-68.

¹⁵ 2 Maccabees 5:14.

¹⁶ 4 Maccabees 17:1.

¹⁷ Text and translation in A. Mengozzi, *A Story in a Truthful Language*.

¹⁸ R.L. Bensly and W.E. Barnes, *The Fourth Book of Maccabees and Kindred Documents in Syriac*, XII-XIII.

¹⁹ J. Sinha, *Der neuostaramäische Dialekt von Bepin (Provinz Mardin, Südosttürkei). Eine grammatische Darstellung*, Semitica Viva 24 (Harrassowitz: Wiesbaden, 2000), 212-15.

²⁰ Omitted in Sinha’s transcription.

²¹ See Barwar where an open *ε* or an *a* are allophones of the phoneme *ay* in various phonetic contexts (G. Khan, *The Neo-Aramaic Dialect of Barwar*, 78) or Telkepe final *-ay*, regularly pronounced *-a* as a 3rd-pl verbal ending: E. Coghill, “Some Notable Features in North-Eastern Neo-Aramaic dialects of Iraq,” in *Neo-Aramaic Dialect Studies*, Gorgias Neo-Aramaic Studies 1, ed. G. Khan (Gorgias Press: Piscataway, NJ, 2008), 91-104.

²² I am grateful to prof. Fabrizio A. Pennacchietti for suggesting to me this explanation of the name Našmoni.

²³ For an overview of the manuscript transmission of this kind of apocryphal literature in Syriac, see A. Baumstark, *Geschichte der syrischen Literatur*, (A. Marcus und E. Webers Verlag: Bonn, 1922), 69-70.

²⁴ W. Wright, *Contribution to the Apocryphal literature*, (Williams and Norgate: London, 1865).

²⁵ E.A.W. Budge, *The History of the Blessed Virgin Mary and The history of the likeness of Christ which the Jews of Tiberias made to mock at*, (Luzac and Co.: London, 1899), viii.

²⁶ A. Mengozzi, *Religious Poetry in Vernacular Syriac*, viii, x-xi.

²⁷ A. Baumstark, *Geschichte*, 309.

²⁸ On this manuscript and, more in general, on the history of transmission of Christian Neo-Aramaic literature, see A. Mengozzi, “The Neo-Aramaic Manuscripts.”

²⁹ E.A.W. Budge, *The Book of the Bee: The Syriac text by bishop Shlēmôn or Solomon*, (The Clarendon Press: Oxford, 1886), 76-79.

³⁰ E.A.W. Budge, *The History of the Blessed Virgin Mary*, Syr. text, 9; Eng. trans., 11.

³¹ *Book of the Bee*, ch. XXXIX (E.A.W. Budge, *The Book of the Bee*, 84). On the Magi in the Syriac tradition, see W. Witakowski, "The Magi in Syriac Tradition," in *Malphono w-Rabo d-Malphone. Studies in Honor of Sebastian P. Brock*, Gorgias Eastern Christian Studies 3, ed. G.A. Kiraz, (Gorgias Press: Piscataway, NJ, 2008), 809-43.

³² For example, the name Dinah given to Mary's mother is characteristic of the East-Syriac tradition of the *Cave of Treasures*: Su-Min Ri, *Commentaire de la Caverne des trésors: étude sur l'histoire du texte et de ses sources*, CSCO 581, Subsidia 103 (Peeters: Louvain, 2000), 435.

³³ The meaning of the text is unclear: lit. 'they stayed in a narrow place'.

³⁴ 'With children not his own'?

³⁵ Lit. 'she went on her foot'.

³⁶ E.A.W. Budge, *The Book of the Bee*, 79: 'For the Jews did not approach their wives until they made a feast to the high priest, and then they took them'.

³⁷ In his reconstruction of the saga of the biblical patriarchs, Giovanni Garbini suggested that there might be a connection between the name of the New Testament Joseph and the other "chaste" Joseph of the Old Testament: G. Garbini, *Mito e storia nella Bibbia*, Studi biblici 137 (Paideia: Brescia, 2003), 83.

³⁸ The word for 'spouse' should be the Arabic-derived *فَخِينَة*. This line and the beginning of the following are probably corrupt in the Mosul ms. and violate the metre.

³⁹ Sh. Talay, *Neuaramäische Texte in den Dialekten der Khabur-Assyrer in Nordostsyrien*, SV 41 (Harrassowitz: Wiesbaden, 2009), text 17.4; unfortunately the audio-file is not yet downloadable from the *SemArch* data-base.

⁴⁰ E.A.W. Budge, *The Book of the Bee*, 75: 'Joseph's father and Mary's father were cousins'.

⁴¹ Between 1934 and 1937, under the French Mandate, around 10.000 Assyrians were given permission to settle in 34 villages along the Khabur river in north east Syria, where they managed to create a prosperous agricultural system through intensive use of the river water and reached a reasonable level of economic and social wealth. Settlement in the various villages reflected and still reflects the original tribal and clanic structure of their society before World War I, when the Assyrians lived in their homeland, i.e. the southeastern Turkish territory between the Iranian border to the east, the Tigris to the west, Lake Van to the north and the Iraq border to the south. Shabo Talay dedicated two volumes of the *Semitica Viva* series to the dialects of the Khabur Assyrians: comparative grammatical outlines are arranged in the first volume: Sh. Talay, *Die neuaramäischen Dialekte der Khabur-Assyrer in Nordostsyrien*, SV 40 (Harrassowitz: Wiesbaden, 2008); whereas a wonderful collection of oral texts are transliterated and translated in the second volume: Sh. Talay, *Neuaramäische Texte*.

⁴² Ms. *فَخِينَة*.

⁴³ Footnote in the ms: *زەزەسەر* *zeresar* is a Kurdish word which means census'.

⁴⁴ See also the dialogue poems (*suḡiyāṭa*) on Joseph and Mary: see Sebastian P. Brock, *Mary and Joseph, and Other Dialogue Poems on Mary*, Texts from Christian Late Antiquity 8 (Gorgias Press: Piscataway, NJ, forthcoming).