THE DISPUTE OF THE MONTHS
IN SURETH AND ITS EAST-SYRIAC
VORLAGE

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ABSTRACT

In 1896 Lidzbarski published a Sureth (Christian North-Eastern Neo-Aramaic) version of the Dispute of the Months, as preserved in the ms. Berlin 134 (Sachau 336). The text is here republished with an English translation and compared with its Classical Syriac Vorlage. For the purpose of comparison, a provisional critical edition of the East-Syriac text in the classical language has been prepared on the basis of five manuscripts. The East-Syriac (and Sureth) version contains fewer references to Biblical and Christian culture than the West-Syriac text, as published by Brock in 1985, and appears to be a folk ballad with a few Christian motifs rather than a liturgical hymn. The text was attributed to the late 13th-century poet Khamis bar Qardah and has been preserved in a couple of manuscript witnesses of the second part of his Diwān.
WITNESSES

In 1896 Lidzbarski published a Sureth (Christian North-Eastern Neo-Aramaic) version of the *Dispute of the Months*.\(^1\) In the present paper I intend to republish this text with an English translation and with a provisional edition of its East-Syriac Vorlage.

The Sureth text is preserved in a miscellaneous multilingual manuscript of the Berlin Sachau collection (Berlin 134, Sachau 336),\(^2\) written in 1883 by the copyist Fransi (Francis) Méri of Telkepe, a major Chaldean center near Mosul. The same copyist wrote a number of other Sureth manuscripts of the Sachau collection, which bears witness to the interest of Eduard Sachau in the languages spoken in northern Iraq and south-eastern Turkey. Berlin 134 is a good example of Sachau’s choices in collecting texts.\(^3\) It contains:

1. a Kurdish Garshuni erotic poem;\(^4\)

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\(^1\) Mark Lidzbarski, *Die neu-aramäische Handschriften der Königlichen Bibliothek zu Berlin* (Weimar: Emil Felber, 1896), vol. 1, 442–6 (Sureth text and Arabic transl. by J. Shamir), vol. 2, 344–7 (German transl).


2. Sureth erotic triplets;
3. the famous Sureth poem by David the Blind on the Virgin Mary (b-rhemmā d-bābā w-bronā), which is a kind of national anthem for the Chaldeans of the plain of Mosul;
4. the *Story of Aḥiqar* and
5. Aesopic fables in Classical Syriac;
6. Sureth poems:
   6.a The *Dispute of the Months*,
   6.b The *Dispute of Gold and Wheat*,
   6.c *The Girl Māmoy Loved by a Bishop in Azerbaidjan*,
   6.d *The Dispute of Cup, Jar and Wineskin*,
   6.e *Satan and the Sinful Woman*,


7 On versions and fortune of Aḥiqar, see Riccardo Contini and Cristiano Grottanelli (eds.), Il saggio Ahiqar: Fortuna e trasformazione di uno scritto sapienziale. Il testo più antico e le sue versioni (Brescia: Paideia, 2005). An up-dated bibliography on the various Neo-Aramaic versions can be found in Alessandro Mengozzi, “D’Ahiqar au tapis volant du roi Salomon”.

6.f  *Simon Magus and Simon Peter,*\(^9\)
6.g  *The Cherub and the Thief,*\(^10\)
6.h  *Mary and the Gardener,*\(^11\)
7.  the prose story of a *Duenna (kabrimānā) and a Young Prince.*\(^12\)

Lidzbarski published the Sureth texts of the three dispute poems: *The Dispute of the Months, The Dispute of Gold and Wheat* and *The Dispute of Cup, Jar and Wineskin,* the latter preceded by a short Classical Syriac dialogue poem of a new friend who asks to be admitted to a company of drinkers.\(^13\) He copied *en face* the Arabic translation by Jeremiah Shamir, who was the key

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\(^12\) An Arabic translation of this Sureth story, by Jeremiah Shamir (see n. 14, below), can be found in the ms. Berlin 133 (Sachau 200), 58b-63b. A more recent and elaborate Sureth version is added at the end of a manuscript collection of hagiographic texts, dated 1937 (ms. 135 of the Chaldean Church of the Sacred Heart of Telkepe, near Mosul: QACCT 135 in the database of www.hmml.org), where it is entitled *Story of Sayf al-Masīḥ, son of the king of Rumia, and Eğubatnām, daughter of the King of France.* The ms. contains 21 lives of martyrs and saints and the last two texts are the stories of Alīqār and Sayf al-Masīḥ. 13 of the other 19 texts were copied from Paul Bedjan, *Vies des saints en langue chaldéenne moderne* (Paris-Leipzig: Harrassowitz, 1912).

\(^13\) Mark Lidzbarski, *Die neu-aramäische Handschriften,* vol. 1, 442-57 (Sureth text and Arabic transl.), vol. 2, 344-56 (German transl.).
Dispute of the Months

figure for Sachau’s activities as a collector of texts and purchaser of manuscripts in northern Iraq.14

In a footnote at the beginning of his German translation of the disputes, Lidzbarski observes that this kind of Wettstreite appear to be rather popular among the East Syrians, whom he called the “Nestorians”, and that they also occur in Arabic literature, where the Dispute of Pen and Sword appears to be one of the favorite themes.15


Thanks to numerous studies and text editions by Sebastian Brock, hymns that have the structure of dialogue or dispute poems form one of the best-known genres in Classical Syriac literature. In 1985, Brock published and translated into English a number of Classical Syriac and Jewish Aramaic poems concerning the months of the year. Among them we find the *Dispute of the Months* and the *Dispute of Gold and Wheat*. For the *Dispute of Gold and Wheat*, Brock had at his disposal only


the late East-Syriac version preserved in the manuscript Cambridge Add. 2820 and the Sureth free poetic adaptation published by Lidzbarski. For the *Dispute of the Months*, Brock chose as the base text for his edition the ms. Add. 17141 of the British Library (henceforth A; dated to the eighth-ninth century on paleographic grounds). This manuscript is one of the earliest West Syriac collections of madrāsā and soghiṭā hymns, which are intended for liturgical use but are not yet ordered according to the liturgical calendar. Brock collated the text of A with three other versions of the *Dispute*. The first six-and-a-half verses of the poem are quoted by Anton of Tagrit (9th century) in his handbook of rhetoric as an example of personification (R). As for the *Dispute of Gold and Wheat*, Brock had at his disposal the late East Syriac (B) and the Sureth (S) versions of the *Dispute of the Months*.

When they are available, the variants of the quotation by Anton of Tagrit (R) are often preferable to the text preserved in the West-Syriac version of A. In some cases, the text of R corresponds to the late East Syriac version (B). The East-Syriac version is meanwhile known from witnesses other than B, which was the only East-Syriac manuscript available to Brock. For the present, provisional edition of the East-Syriac text, I collated four manuscripts and the text of an early 20th-century Alqosh manuscript as published by Shleymon Hoshaba in his 2002 edition of the *Book of Khamis bar Qardaḥē*.

- Baghdad Church of the East 6 (1719), 214-6
- Baghdad Church of the East 10 (19th cent.?), 226-32

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18 The manuscripts of the Archbishopric of the Church of the East in Baghdad were photographed in the context of a 2005 project for the preservation and documentation of Syriac manuscripts: Hubert Kaufhold, “Über einige Projekte der Digitalisierung syrischer Handschriften” (Orients Christianus 90 [2006]), 210–6. Since the folios of this manuscript are not numbered, I refer to page numbers as given in the jpeg file names.
• Cambridge Add. 2820 (Telkepe 1881), 98a-99b (B; collated by Brock)
• Chaldean Monastery 921 (Alqosh 1906)\textsuperscript{19}
• Trichur 25 (19th-20th cent.?), 86a-b

The East-Syriac dispute poems were included in two types of manuscript collections of soghyāthā in books of soghyāthā ordered according to the liturgical calendar (Baghdad 6) and in late manuscripts that preserve the second part of the Book of Khamis (Baghdad 10, Chaldean Monastery 921, Trichur 25). In this second type of manuscripts, the disputes are thus implicitly attributed to the late 13th-century East Syriac poet Khamis bar Qardaḥē.\textsuperscript{20} Cambridge Add. 2820 is somewhat in between the two types of manuscripts, in that it contains soghyāthā for liturgical use as well as a number of poems of the Khamis collection.

The East-Syriac copies most likely derive from a common archetype and there is very little, almost exclusively orthographic variation among them. The Sureth version clearly reflects a text similar to the East-Syriac archetype. The translator renders the seven syllable lines of the original in lines


of seven or eight syllables, possibly compatible with the melody according to which the hymn was sung. However, in accordance with the taste of Late Syriac and Modern Aramaic poetry, he stabilizes as AAAA the rhyme that in the original occurs sparsely and in rather irregular patterns (1b-1d, 3a-3b-3d, 4a-4b-4c, 6a-6b, 7a-7b, 7c-7d, 15b-15d, 16a-16b).

The scribe of the Sureth version uses the customary phonetic rather than phonological spelling of northern Iraqi manuscripts. For example, he interchangeably uses e and ē, a and ā: compare, e.g., 12a pleṭē ... tamoz with 14a tāmoẓ pleṭē. One remarkable feature of this text is the hypercorrect use of the \( \text{linea occultans} \) for matres lectionis such as \( \text{y} \) in \( \text{y} \) (12c) and \( \text{y} \) (12d). In \( \text{y} \) for ‘taste’ and \( \text{y} \) for ‘they give’ (13b) the system of historical spelling and \( \text{linea occultans} \) clearly seizes up. The word \( \text{y} \) (15a) seems to be an odd combination of the vowels of the historical spelling (\( \text{y} \)) and the phonetic rendering of the actual pronunciation (\( \text{y} \)).

**SYRIAC DISPUTE POEMS AS ORAL POETRY**

If we compare the East-Syriac version of the *Dispute of the Months*, including its Sureth poetic adaptation, with the West-Syriac text (A) published by Brock, we find a higher degree of textual variation, as is typical of oral tradition.

In both versions, the Syriac *Dispute of the Months* appears as a complete calendar in verses, inserted in the incomplete frame of a Mesopotamian dispute. The deity who plays the role of

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22 See Enrique Jiménez, *The Babylonian Disputation Poems* (Leiden: Brill, 2017) on the Mesopotamian dispute and its incredible diffusion in literary traditions that have been directly or indirectly in contact with the ancient Mesopotamian civilization. The format of the Mesopotamian dispute is characterized by the following features: 1. poetic form, 2. tripartite structure (introduction, disputation proper, and conclusion), 3. few or no narrative
arbiter and judge in the Mesopotamian dispute is here replaced by the personification of the year, who sits among the months to judge their case (v. 1). However, the prologue in heaven is not closed at the end by the epilogue, where the winner is usually proclaimed in the Mesopotamian dispute.

As is typical for oral poetry, the poetic language of the text is formulaic. The term “formula” is here intended in the technical sense that has been developed and refined in the context of the study of oral traditions. Formulas and, more generally, repetition create a rhythmical text that is easy to memorize, recite, and improvise for a vocal performer and easy to be decoded and understood by the audience. The *Dispute of the Months* is built on formulas that make the structure of the text transparent. They mark the rotation of characters on stage, introduce the name of the month that is going to speak, and repeat the name of the month that is leaving the scene. Moreover, the months usually start their speech using formulas portions, 4. usually inanimate disputants, 5. supremacy or precedence as main matter of debate.

23 The definition of the formula as “a group of words employed under the same metrical conditions to express a given essential idea” (John M. Foley, *Traditional Oral Epic. The Odyssey, Beowulf, and the Serbo-Croatian Return Song* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990], 2, n. 3) and consequently the description of its function as a metrical filler, a mnemotechnic device and a tool for improvisation, go back to the studies of Milman Parry (1902-1935) and Albert Lord (1912-1991) on ancient Homeric and modern Serbo-Croatian epics. From the point of view of cultural anthropology (orality vs. literacy) and literary criticism, more recent studies on oral tradition have highlighted other and more important functions of formulas in the aesthetics and social meanings of oral texts, i.e. texts that are orally composed (improvised) and transmitted and preserved — at least partly — by memory. Oral texts may be composed and preserved in written form, but they are nevertheless supposed to be performed orally, by a human voice. See, e.g., the anthropological and philosophical approach of Marshall McLuhan’s pupil Walter Jackson Ong, *Orality and Literacy. The Technologizing of the Word* (New York: Routledge, 1982) and the cultural and literary approaches in a miscellaneous volume such as Alger N. Doane and Carol Braun Pasternack, *Vox Intexta. Orality and Textuality in the Middle Ages* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), largely inspired by the studies of Paul Zumthor (1915-1995) on medieval European literatures.
that contain the semiotic pair “to speak, tell” and “to give ear, listen” that verbalizes and stylizes the poet-audience interaction in oral/aural transmission:24 e.g., “Nisan went out and Iyyar came in to say these words: “... Come, give ear and listen!” (v. 5).25

The West-Syriac version has also a refrain, construed with the combination of formulas occurring elsewhere in the text: ‘Come and listen to what the months have to say and give praise to their Creator!’ (transl. by Brock 1985). The refrain points to a choral performance of the text in the context of liturgy, which is a very specific performance arena of oral poems: no matter how they are composed and preserved, hymns are supposed to be performed vocally.

Compared to the 23 verses of the West-Syriac version (A), the seventeen verses of the East-Syriac version appear to have or, perhaps, to have preserved the character of a simpler folk ballad, rather than a liturgical hymn concerned with Biblical references or theological and exegetical matters. In the East-Syriac version we do not find vv. 8 and 21-23 of A, that contain explicit references to Mary, Jesus, John the Baptist, and his mother Elisabeth and are thus possibly added to a text that


25 I suspect that the formula ܘܠܢܕܐ ܡܠܐ ‘and his voice raises (raising his voice > loudly)’ (2a in the East-Syriac version and 2a and 5a in the West-Syriac version of the Dispute of the Months) does not have a descriptive content, but it is used as a metrical filler, pretty much as the famous Homeric formula ἔπεα πτερόεντα ‘winged words’, that introduces all kind of speech: George Miller Calhoun, “The Art of Formula in Homer” (Classical Philology 30 [1935]): 215–27 and Milman Parry, “About Winged Words” (Classical Philology 32 [1937]): 59–63.
otherwise speaks of seasons, fruits, peasants’ life, the economy, even war (sickles as swords), and the power of a king.

The only Christian themes preserved by both versions are Christmas and Jesus’ Baptism in the closing verses and the cross carried by the months Ab and Illul (August and September) on their shoulders (v. 14 in the East-Syriac and v. 16 in the West-Syriac text), as a possible allusion to the feast of the Holy Cross, celebrated respectively on September 13th and 14th by the East and West Syrians.

The absence in the East-Syriac version of the Christian characters mentioned in the West-Syriac text and the fast pace of its shorter text make the dispute, in which every month praises itself, a kind of prelude for a Christmas carol. The increasing tension of the discussion focuses all the attention on the final verse, in which December and January defend themselves from the other months’ mockery and reply that precisely in them, which are sterile and seemingly insignificant for agriculture and human economy, Jesus was born and was baptized. “By His birth He made all things rejoice”: Divine economy reverses the fortunes of the winter months that cannot let people rejoice with their flowers and fruits.

The differences in wording and text character of the two versions of the *Dispute of the Months* can be perfectly understood in the context of the oral and mixed (written and oral) traditions in which they have been produced, preserved, and transmitted. Textual variation should be interpreted not so much in the negative sense of alteration, contamination, or distortion of an original, but as a product of the creative process typical of oral poetry. Each version of an oral text differs from the other, not only because songs are continuously reshaped by the skills of the performers (memory, improvisation, free recombination of formulas, motifs, stylistic, rhythmical and melodic figures, virtuosity...) but also because they are adapted to different audiences, listeners, and performance arenas. A traditional repertoire of themes (description of nature and human society or references to the Bible in our dispute) are combined in calendars in which the
religious elements come more or less to the fore according to the type of texts that the author wants to bring into play, in balance between the needs and preferences of liturgy and pedagogical entertainment.26

The West-Syriac text is more clearly a hymn, whereas the East-Syriac text and its Sureth poetic translation seem to reduce explicit references to Christian culture, so as to preserve themes and atmosphere of more archaic folk ballads, not necessarily Christian, and highlight, by contrast, the final verse on Christmas. It is difficult to say which version of the text is earlier. Both ultimately derive from the same oral tradition.

**THE EAST-SYRIAC TEXT**

Another poem on the months

The months of the Year gather together to tell the story of their products. The Year is seated like a lord to listen to the case that came up among them.

Nisan came in and raised his voice to say these words:

‘The Year is not as pleased with you all, months, as he is with me.

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26 Alessandro Mengozzi, “Syrische Streitgedichte als mündliche Dichtung”.

27 Trichur 25: مَدِيَان.

28 Baghdad 10, Cambridge 2820: مَدِيَان, wherever it occurs.

29 Cambridge 2820: مَدِيَان. 
In me new things take place
and good tidings are announced.
In me the Lord adorns the mountains
like candles when they give light.

In me the cycles of the sun extend
and the hours of the day grow longer.
In me swallows sing melodies of sweet notes.'

Nisan went out and Iyyar came in
to say these words:
'Go, Nisan! You are not better than me.
Stop your chatter! Come, give ear and listen!

In me bloom much-desired roses,
in me sweet scents send forth their fragrance.
In me a crown of the Year is woven
and the hearts of labourers rejoice.

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30 Baghdad 6: 
31 Cambridge 2820: مَحَبَّة
32 Cambridge 2820: مَحَبَّة
33 Baghdad 10, Trichur 25, Hoshabba (2002: ms.): مَحَبَّة
34 Hoshabba (2002): مَحَبَّة
35 Cambridge 2820: مَحَبَّة, wherever it occurs.
36 Hoshabba (2002): مَحَبَّة
37 Baghdad 6: مَحَبَّة
38 Cambridge 2820: كَوْلُبُ 'they weave/one weaves'.
In me the ears of corn grow
tall in the field,
blades grow thick and tall,
when beards grow on the tips
of the ears
at the command of the Lord
their Maker.’

Iyyar went out and Haziran came in
to say these words:
‘Go, Iyyar! You are not better
than me.
Stop your chatter! Come, give
ear and listen!

All creatures gather together
in me
and come forth as from the
bridal chamber.
Like servants before their
master
they bow down in the fields.

The beauty of their sheaves
shines
like glittering swords.
The heart of the widow
rejoices
whose house is full of
provisions.

Sheaves are piled high in me
heap on heap in the
granaries,
whence the poor may eat, be
satiated
and glorify their Creator.’

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39 Cambridge 2820: ﴾٠﴿
40 Trichur 25: ﴾٠﴿
41 Baghdad 6: ﴾٠﴿
Haziran went out and
Tammuz came in
to say these words:
‘Go, Iyar! You are not better
than me.
Stop your chatter! Come, give
ear and listen!

Sweet bunches grow ripe in
me,
they give the taste of their
sweetness,
quinces, pomegranates,
grapes,
and all of them with
innumerable fruits.’

Tammuz went out and Ab
and Illul came in,
two months together.
They bore a cross on their
shoulders.
They came and bowed before
the Year.

The two Teshris pressed the
wine,
the pure oil of their produce,
whence the poor may eat, be
satiated
and glorify their Creator.

Then the months began to
pour scorn on
the two Kanuns and said:
‘Barren and desolate months,

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42 Trichur 25: ٢٥٤
43 Baghdad 6: ٢٥٤
44 Cambridge 2820: ٢٥٤
45 Cambridge 2820: ٢٥٤, Trichur 25: ٢٥٤
46 Baghdad 10: ٢٥٤
47 Trichur 25: ٢٥٤
what do you have to say?"

In reply they said:

‘Our Lord’s birth happened in us,
He was born in one and baptized in the other,
and by His birth He made all things rejoice.’

**THE SURETH TEXT**

Another (poem) on the months of the year

The months of the Year gathered together
to speak about their goods.
They spoke to each other and showed their love.

Nisan came in and came near
and spoke these words:
He revealed that the year is not pleased
with all his fellow months.

“In me new things are made new

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48 Baghdad 10, Trichur 25: 
49 Cambridge 2820: 
50 Hoshabba (2002): 
51 After v. 1 and 6, there is a mysterious blank line in the manuscript, with a centered rubric ‘another (poem)’, as if it marked the beginning of a new text.
52 حُبَّلَٰ can be read as *bkālay* ‘they wept’, but that clearly does not fit the context. More likely, it is a phonetic rendering of *bkālay*, with a shwa-like pronunciation of the [u] of *bkālay* ‘in all of them’. 
and good tidings are announced.\textsuperscript{53}
In me also the mountains adorn themselves\textsuperscript{54}
like candles when they give light.

In me the cycles of the sun extend
and the hours of the day grow longer.
All swallows fly
and prolong sweet melodies.”

Nisan went out and Iyyar came in
to say these words:
“Go, Nisan!” and he drove him away.
He went and listened to him.

“Much-desired roses are in me conceived\textsuperscript{55},
and pleasant scents appear.
Woven crowns in me are carried\textsuperscript{56}
and flowers blossom too.

The ears of corn of the fields increase,
extend, spread and grow high.
They bring forth ears of corn on their tips.

\textsuperscript{53} The third plural verbal forms can be interpreted as impersonal constructions with passive meaning: ‘they announce good tidings’ > ‘good tidings are announced’.
\textsuperscript{54} Lit. ‘mountains adorn’.
\textsuperscript{55} Lit. ‘roses conceive, get pregnant’.
\textsuperscript{56} Lit. ‘they carry, bear’.
\textsuperscript{57} As after v. 1, there is a mysterious blank line in the manuscript, with a centered rubric \textit{אַסְמָאָה הָעַרָרָא} ‘another (poem)’, as if it marked the beginning of a new text.
They are at the command of their creator.”

Iyyar went out and Haziran came in to say these words: “Go, Haziran!” and he drove him away. “Your speech has finished and come to an end”

“When all creation rises and goes outside in this day, out of bliss it praises the Heights that gives peace and welfare to the earth.

The beauty of their sickles lightens like drawn swords.” Their widows thanks to me rejoice and their orphans thanks to me are nourished.

Sheaves are piled high in me and threshing floors are full. The poor receive their food and raise glory to God.”

Haziran went out and Tammuz came in to say these words: “Go, Haziran!” and called him poor.

58 With Shamir, Lidzbarski translates both magš-aylı (10a) and megelyāth-ebč (10b) as ‘their sickles’, but a copula is missing in 10b: ‘like swords [are] their sickles’. Alternatively, the second form maybe a participle of the verb magš ‘to lay bare, uncover’: mekh saypī neglyāthē (7) ‘like drawn swords’ (7), but the possessive suffix is difficult to understand in this case.
“Bow and genuflect in front of me!” He said to him.

“Vines in me ripen, and offer [their] sweet taste, grapes and quinces give pleasure to all mouths that taste them.”

Tammuz went out and Ab and Illul came, two months together’. They bore a cross on their shoulders. They glorified the creator of the year.

Teshri and his fellow came forward. They showed the oil of their presses and they provided for the needy. The two Kanuns rebuked them.

When they were speaking so they called them sterile months. They despised them greatly. “What do you have?” They said to them.

In reply they said to them that Our Lord’s birth happened in them and he was baptized in the second of them.

59 Lit. ‘the two months were similar to each other’.

61 Sic for or as a phonetic rendering of a different syllabic structure of the form.
By his birth he made all creatures rejoice from the first of them\(^{69}\), so that they yell all with their voices glory to their creator.

Amen amen!

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**


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\(^{69}\) With Shamir, Lidzbarski translates *mḥad diyḥyben* as ‘to the extreme limit (from Arabic ḥadd’). I prefer to read it as ‘from one (from Aramaic ḥad) of them’, which forms a kind of hysteron proteron with the preceding lines: ‘He was baptised in the second of them [the second Kanun, i.e., January]. By his birth he made all creatures rejoice from the first of them [the first Kanun, i.e., December’]. Admittedly, ‘first’ should be qāmīyā rather than xa (< ḥad).


Littmann, Enno. “Neuarabische Streitgedichte.” In *Festschrift zur Feier des Zweihundertjährigen Bestehens der Akademie der


