

BOOK REVIEWS

Alessandro Mengozzi, ed., *Religious Poetry in Vernacular Syriac from Northern Iraq (17th–20th Centuries). An Anthology*, CSCO 627–628 / Syr. 240–241 (Louvain: Peeters, 2011). Pp. xx + 129, €65; pp. xxiv + 163; €60.

AARON MICHAEL BUTTS, YALE UNIVERSITY

The two volumes under review contain editions and English translations of seven poems dating from the early seventeenth to the late twentieth century. The poems are written in what the editor terms ‘Vernacular Syriac’ (or ‘Sureth’, from Classical Syriac *surā’it* ‘in Syriac’), which encompasses a variety of North-Eastern Neo-Aramaic dialects that were spoken, and occasionally written, by East-Syriac authors, whether Church of the East or Chaldean, in Northern Iraq. All of the poems belong to the *dorekṭa* genre, which is generally characterized by stanzas of 3, 4, or 6 metered, rhyming lines. The poems in the volumes expand the scope of the editor’s earlier collection of seventeenth-century *dorekṭa* poems by Israel of Alqosh and Joseph of Telkepe, which appeared in the same series.¹

Each of the seven poems is presented in a critical edition in East-Syriac script (the denotation of vowels follows the manuscripts) and English translation along with an introduction. The poems are arranged in chronological order. The earliest poem in the collection, and possibly the earliest dated example of the *dorekṭa* genre extant, is *On Repentance*. In two of the three manuscripts, it is attributed to a certain Hormizd of Alqosh, who may tentatively be identified as the son of the well-known Israel of Alqosh. The text stands in the tradition of East-Syriac penitential hymns, and it contains numerous *exempla* drawn from the Old and New Testaments. The introduction and translation of this poem were prepared by Rita Saccagno (based on her thesis for the Master of Arts degree at the University of Turin); the edition is the joint work of Saccagno and Mengozzi.

The second and third poems represent the *dorekṭa* genre in the nineteenth century: *On the Torments of Hell* (1855) and *On the Delights*

¹ Alessandro Mengozzi, *Israel of Alqosh and Joseph of Telkepe: A Story in a Truthful Language. Religious Poems in Vernacular Syriac (North Iraq, 17th Century)*, CSCO 589-590 / Syr. 230-231 (Louvain: Peeters, 2002).

of the Kingdom (1856) by Damyanos of Alqosh. These diptych poems draw extensively on works by seventeenth-century Italian orators, such as Father Paolo Segneri (1624–1694) and Father Giovanni Pietro Pinamonti (1632–1703). S. Destefanis, who produced the introduction, translation, and edition of these poems, has done an admirable job of highlighting parallels between these poems and Italian Baroque sermons.

The last four poems in these volumes were composed in the twentieth century. The first is *On a Famine in the Year 1898* by Anne of Telkepe, who was still alive in 1914 when Father Rhétoré was writing his *La versification en Soureth*. This poem is more loosely structured than other *dorekta* poems and does not make as frequent use of anaphora and anadiplosis as other poems in the genre. Mengozzi, who produced the introduction, translation, and edition of the poem, characterizes it as “religious folk poetry” that gives “a rather rustic impression.” It should be noted that this poem may well be the first text authored by a woman to appear in the CSCO series. The second representative of twentieth-century *dorekta* poetry is *On the Hermit Barmalka* by Joseph ‘Abbaya of Alqosh. This poem narrates the story of a young man who leaves behind his wealth to become a solitary, is then tempted by Khatun the wife of the local king (in a sequence of events reminiscent of the Joseph narrative), and is ultimately rescued by an angel. The large amount of direct speech and dialogue reminds one of the Classical Syriac *soḡitā* genre. The entertaining tale is brought to life by the translator E. Braidā, who also produced the edition and wrote the introduction to the poem. In addition to the poem by Joseph ‘Abbaya, Braidā contributed a poem entitled *On an Attack by the Mongols at Karamlish* by Thomas Ḥanna of Karamlish. This poem, composed in 1930, laments the Mongol invasion of the plain of Mosul in 1236. It explicitly acknowledges making use of works by Bar ‘Ebroyo (d. 1236) and by Gewargis Warda. Among its many interesting historical aspects, the poem provides a detailed description of the architecture of Karamlish. The most recent poem in the volumes is *On Exile*, which was composed in 1970 by Yoḥannan Cholāg of Alqosh (1935–2006). The poem is a moving lament of the Christian emigration from Iraq. In both the introduction and translation, its editor Sh. Talia captures the pathos of this tragic reality that continues to affect Syriac Christians throughout much of the Middle East as well as in the diasporas.

In addition to the seven texts, the volumes contain various indices (General, Biblical, Non-Biblical Texts) as well as an introduction by Mengozzi dealing with manuscript history and developments in the language. Mengozzi also provides an invaluable history of religious poetry in ‘Vernacular Syriac’ from Northern Iraq. This history, which runs to almost twenty-five pages and accounts for both published and unpublished works, is the most comprehensive survey currently available. Unlike Mengozzi’s earlier volumes on *Israel of Alqosh and Joseph of Telkepe* (CSCO 589–590 / Syr. 230–231), the volumes under review do not contain a glossary. Thus, the reader must turn to other resources for lexical help.

The chronological distribution of the volumes from the seventeenth century to the twentieth century provides an important diachronic perspective to the study of East-Syriac Christians from this time period. Reading through the volumes, one can, for instance, notice a changing relationship between the Syriac poets and Catholicism. The poems from the earliest period, such as those by Israel of Alqosh and Joseph of Telkepe, do not generally show signs of Catholic influence, even though they were ultimately transmitted by the Chaldean community. The seventeenth-century poem *On Repentance* even ends with a doxology that describes Christ as one “who *dressed in* our human nature (ܠܚܝܬܐ ܕܢܬܝܒܐ) in the latter days” (157), which would certainly be more at home in a Church of the East Christological context than in a Catholic one. The nineteenth-century diptych poems by Damyanos, in contrast, are replete with imagery drawn from Jesuit sources. Similarly, the poem by Anne of Telkepe is dominated by intercession to the Virgin Mary, which, as Mengozzi points out, “shows to what extent Catholic culture had permeated the traditional religious lore of the Chaldeans of the plain of Mosul by the end of the 19th century” (vol. 2, xxi).

The volumes also shed light on the history of the Aramaic language. It is well known that there is a significant chasm in documentation from the Aramaic dialects of Late Antiquity, such as Syriac, to the Neo-Aramaic dialects attested almost exclusively in the modern period. The texts edited here, along with Mengozzi’s earlier volumes (CSCO 589–590 / Syr. 230–231), provide the earliest attestations of Christian North-Eastern Neo-Aramaic, dating from the early seventeenth century when a *koine* based on

the dialect of Alqosh (and possibly also of Telkepe) was developed. These texts, thus, move the attestation of Christian Neo-Aramaic back several centuries from the present day as well as document developments during the intervening period. The texts edited here also provide a Christian counterpart to the Jewish North-Eastern Neo-Aramaic dialects from roughly the same area and time period, which are attested in the Neo-Aramaic targumim published by Y. Sabar.²

In the end, these volumes make available an important collection of primary sources for the study of East-Syriac Christians in the last several centuries. The editor and contributors are to be thanked for this significant contribution.

² See, for instance, Y. Sabar, *A Jewish Neo-Aramaic Dictionary: Dialects of Amidya, Dihok, Nerwa and Zakho, Northwestern Iraq*, Semitica Viva 28 (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2002), where references to many publications can be found.