

***Qdham Wa Dhwathar (Prior and Post)*, Mall Graphics, Morton Grove, Illinois, 2004. 444 pp + Introduction, index and table of contents.**

*Comments by Prof. Edward Odisho*

Before I proceed to make some comments on the new publication of my friend and my co-editor at *Journal of the Assyrian Academic Studies* (JAAS) Daniel D. Benjamin, I would like to set the scene for the commentary by bringing to the attention of the readers certain facts about Daniel Benjamin's history and language works. Benjamin is not a stranger to the world of printing, authoring and publishing. He has a long history of association with the Assyrian (Aramaic) language since the days of the Assyrian School of the late Qasha Yousip De Kelaita where he was a student. His interest in the Assyrian language has evolved and burgeoned as part of a family culture of love, association and devotion to the native tongue and its promotion through learning, teaching, printing, authoring and publishing. In this short commentary, the focus will be on the most recent intellectual and literary activities and works of Benjamin.

In 1989 Benjamin joined the editorial board of JAAS and since then he has been a huge asset to JAAS. His writing and artistic skills and his high work ethics have been invaluable for the qualitative and quantitative progress of JAAS. In 1992, he brilliantly succeeded in collecting, categorizing and tabulating in a massive single volume all the contents of all issues of the renowned Assyrian magazine of *Gilgamish*. Our co-editor Youel Baaba shouldered the burden of publishing the volume. Besides the many articles, poems and commentaries that he published in JAAS, Benjamin authored two major books, namely, *Zmiratha d Rāwatha* (1998) and *Amūra Trīda* (1999) and assisted in the printing and publication of several other books.

However, the focus of this commentary is a new publication that Benjamin single-handedly reprinted and presented as a free gift to the Assyrian people and all Syriac-speakers around the world. This publication is one of the most important religious works in the long history of the Church of the East. Benjamin has spent years in reprinting Qasha Yousip De Kelaita's edition of *Qdham Wa Dhwathar* first appearing in 1923.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For the first time in the history of the Church of the East, this book was compiled and printed by Qasha Yousip DeKalaita from a number of old and rare manuscripts in accordance with the rite of Dayra Illaita in Alkosh. It contains the Evening, Night and Dawn Prayers according to the rite of the Church of the East. It is worth mentioning that an exact impression of the book of *Qdham Wa Dhwathar* was produced in 1966 by Shamasha David Benjamin (Daniel Benjamin's father) at his Nineveh Printing Press in Kirkuk – Iraq. Incidentally, in 1996, Daniel had reprinted another religious book which was also premised on an earlier version of Qasha Yousip DeKelaita in 1936, called *Qthawa d'Thorgame w'Roushma d'Takhsa Damshamshane Wa Dhbeem `am Soghyatha*.

Unfortunately, I am the least qualified person to dwell on the religious significance of this publication except for the fact that it will, certainly, contribute richly to our religious literature and liturgy. Nevertheless, I believe I am eligible to underscore the cultural, literary and aesthetic significance of this publication.

Culturally, our Christian belief and our Church of the East denomination are major components of our historical and national identity. Thus, our religious literature and liturgy help maintain our day-to-day cultural practices and preserve our historical and national identity. As for the significance of this work in the context of overall literature, there is no doubt, whatsoever, that any publication of high linguistic caliber, whether in traditional literature or religious literature, is an asset for the maintenance of our native language. From the linguistic perspective, the Aramaic *New Testament* is as significant as other religious texts foremost of which is the *Qdham Wa Dhwathar*. Aesthetically, if Qasha Yousip De Kelaita initiated the first attempt early in the twentieth century at guarding the integrity of this religious pearl and preserving its sanctity then Rabi Daniel Benjamin has duplicated the marvel of his teacher and mentor early in the twenty-first century. I am not sure whether Benjamin accomplished this work in respect of the memory of his teacher or in awe of the cultural and religious holiness of *Qdham Wa Dhwathar*. My conjecture is that he accomplished this work for both reasons— admiration for a mentor and reverence for liturgical texts. However, there seems to be another hidden urge that motivated Benjamin to reprint *Qdham Wa Dhwathar*. Few people would be aware of this latter urge if they have not had an opportunity to work with him quite intimately. Rabi Benjamin has long nurtured a romantic relationship of love and passion for letters, diacritics, words, margins and pages that all harmoniously relate to each other holistically to produce a written text that amounts to musical composition. When Rabi Benjamin looks at a printed page he sees too many things that many of us do not notice; therefore, whoever works with him should be aware of two things— his work ethics and his aesthetic and calligraphic values. In many respects, Benjamin’s latest work reminds me of the works of the late scholar Paul Bedjan and the late Qasha Yousip De Kelaita. They both had served their language and religion very devotedly through editing and reprinting of liturgical masterpieces. Benjamin has always emulated Bedjan’s and De Kelaita’s scholarly ethics and achievements. In my capacity as an intimate friend of him, I sincerely believe that at a time when Aramaic language is endangered,<sup>2</sup> Benjamin’s skills and devotion to his native language render him a literary rarity worthy of all respect. His *Qdham Wa Dhwathar* certainly enhances his already outstanding stature as a writer and poet.

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<sup>2</sup> Thanks to Mel Gibson’s ‘*Passion*’ attention was once again focused on Aramaic as a historical language of human civilization.