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The Linguistic Image of the Body in the Surayt Dialect among Western Assyrians of Ṭūr ʿAbdīn¹

Abstract

The Tur Abdin dialect has many idiomatic expressions formed in relation to body parts. They serve to express feelings, evaluate manners, underline personal characteristics, describe social interactions and assess the behavior of a person. They can showcase various images of interpersonal contacts with an unlimited temporal scope. The linguistic image of the body which has developed in this language has been researched by only a few specialists. When it comes to the sequences of words that build a metaphor, there is no firm rule; the first word may be a verb or a noun. In many cases it seems that the verb, which is the active element of the saying, is improper, inadequate, not well chosen, because it usually has a different meaning in the formal language. For this work to be transparent, the 177 sayings have been transcribed and translated the way they are understood by speakers (not literally), as well as glossed in detail. All organs of the body that appear in the metaphors, which are thirty, have been listed in a table according to decreasing frequency of usage and in alphabetical order.

Keywords: Assyrians, Tur Abdin, Proverbs, Syriac dialects

¹ This work is not the result of field research or co-financed by any domestic or foreign institution. The author's parents moved from Ṭūr ʿAbdīn to Al-Ġazīra in Syria, where they met. After moving from one village to another, they settled in the town of Qāmišlī (Zālīn) (1958). All the inhabitants of the village of Tel ʿAlō, where the author was born, spoke the Surayt dialect. The proverbs collected in this study were commonly used as written by the author in the transcription. The internal integration and consolidation of genocide survivors eliminated differences that probably existed in their subdialects. For the growing youth, who were filled with the desire to live with dignity, the origin of their parents from one or another village of Ṭūr ʿAbdīn did not matter.



Introduction – State of research on Assyrian proverbs

The truly impressive number of works in Arabic about Arabic proverbs, written by both ancient and contemporary authors, inspires wonder and amazement. This important aspect of verbal folk culture is not limited to a particular country, but contained in works presenting as many proverb as possible (over 10,000) ostensibly known all throughout the Arabic-speaking world. There also exist books that list just over 25,000 Persian proverbs.² A comparative investigation of those collections shows that in many Middle Eastern countries the same proverbs are in use, with an almost identical wording, which attests to a long-term cultural transfer, which has been further intensified with the appearance modern technologies facilitating access to additional content. Many theses have been written on selected metaphors, themes or topics within a national or regional collection of proverbs, not to mention advanced linguistic studies. We can assume that the number of Arabic treatises on proverbs greatly exceed that of books on the popular topic of cooking.

It remains beyond doubt that currently known Arabic proverbs have conserved, partially or entirely, a translated and internalized version of older idioms and words of wisdom which were known in earlier cultures in Assyrian Mesopotamia, Coptic Egypt and Amazigh Maghreb. It is especially startling that among Arabic proverbs some have been taken directly – or in a minimally modified form – from the Bible,³ which in the early years of Christianity could have been commonly used in everyday speech in Palestine.⁴ A study by Antoni Tronina and Marek Starowieyski of moralistic writings about Ahiqar (8th–7th century BCE), written in Aramaic, Syriac, Armenian and Church Slavonic, has shown clear links between some of them and specific verses of many books in the Old Testament. As a clergyman and author of a Syriac language textbook, Tronina followed up on his hypothesis by using the Bible to fill in missing parts of the oldest Aramaic version of the proverbs he had collected.⁵

The analysis of Mesopotamia's native peoples' proverbs and their comparison to Arabic ones in use today would not only broaden our knowledge with one more characteristic of borrowing and adaptation after Muslim conquest in the first centuries of Islam, but also would show the extent of this phenomenon.

² Shelomo D. Goitein, 'The Origin and Historical Significance of the Present-Day Arabic Proverbs', *Islamic Culture, The Hyderabad Quarterly Review* 26 (1952), pp. 169–179.

³ The example could be given of two Libyan proverbs: 1) *Al-Lisān habrā w yaḵsār al-ʿazm* ["The tongue is soft but can break a bone"], 2) *ʿIllī yaḥfār ḥufrā, rāso mǧlāqhā* ["Who digs a pit will fill it with his head"] (Muhammad S.A. Al-Rugūbī, 'Verbal Correlatives in Popular Proverbs Involving Body Organs from the Book of Popular proverbs in Libya by Moncef Mohamed Hagig. Semantic Study and Behavioral Models', *Scientific Journal of Faculty of Education*, 1/13 (2019), pp. 31, 33); the first one appears in the Book of Proverbs (25:15) in an almost identical wording, and regarding the second, Rugūbī explains exactly how it sounded in the Old Testament (Proverbs 26:27, Cohelet 10:8, Sirach 27:26). Ahiqar's aphorism is quite similar: "He who digs a pit for his neighbour will fill it with his own body" (Antoni Tronina, Marek Starowieyski, *Apokryfy syryjskie*, Kraków 2011, no. 41, p. 59). The proverbs in Rugūbī's article are not vocalized and lack diacritics.

⁴ Abraham M. Rihbany, *The Syrian Christ*, London & New York, 3rd edition 1924.

⁵ Antoni Tronina, Mariusz Szmajdziński, *Wprowadzenie do języka syryjskiego*, Kielce 2003.

One of the outstanding works in this aspect was written by B. Ḥaddād. Based on proverbs known in the Mosul dialect of Arabic, the author reveals the significant influence of Aramaic. The analysed proverbs, 328 in total, are listed alphabetically, not vocalized and not numbered.⁶

It can be said with all confidence that the Assyrians were able to preserve their ethnic identity even prior the Islamic conquest. Their distinct language was key to this. Since the majority of present-day Assyrians do not use their own literary language,⁷ their lively and rich folk tradition is almost entirely transmitted orally. This tradition is currently under threat, and its slow disappearance is especially visible among young people, who in the culturally diverse countries of the diaspora inevitably succumb to assimilation.

Research on the Syriac language in the past concentrated on classical Syriac literature, most of which is over a thousand years old, without paying much attention to the contemporary language known as *Sureṭ* (spoken among Eastern Assyrians) or *Surayt* (spoken among Western Assyrians). It is only recently that research acquired an interest in the spoken language in its various dialects. The majority of scholars investigating them belong to different cultures and countries far away from where these dialects are in use in everyday conversation.

In recent years, we have also seen native speakers of the language dealing with the topic. The Tūr °Abdīn dialect is currently being investigated by Shabo Talay, who in 2014–2017, as part of a European research project, performed a comprehensive, panoramic work on its grammar and texts to facilitate *Surayt* language learning. Abdul Massih Saadi has been working systematically and thoroughly for many years. He translated the entire classic Syriac New Testament into *Surayt*,⁸ and is currently translating the books of the Old Testament, starting with the psalms. It is impossible not to mention Jan Bet-Sawoce and his initial efforts over many decades in this domain. The publishing house Bet-Froso Nsibin, founded by him in Sweden, published the magazine “Nsibin” in the years 1987–2006, which included regular contributions in *Surayt* instead of classic Syriac. So far, he has published two dozen books written in *Surayt*. Bet-Sawoce has promoted the use of Latin transliteration. Also worth noting is a group of young Assyrian scholars operating at the University of Heidelberg since 2002, who translated some works of world

⁶ Benyamen Ḥaddād, ‘Al-Āṭār al-ārāmiyya fī amṭāl Muṣul al-°ammiyya’ [Aramaic Traces in Folk Proverbs of Mosul], *Qālā Suryāyā* 6–7 (1975), pp. 122–166.

⁷ Syriac – this is the name of the literary language used in the liturgy of the ancient Churches of Syro-Mesopotamia as well as partially in the Maronite Church. A considerable literature was written in this language. It played the role of a link between Greek culture and the Arab and Latin medieval ages. Today’s Eastern Assyrians (Madenḥāyē) speak a dialect called *Sureṭ* (in Iran, Iraq and Syria, spoken also by some Jews living on the border of Iran, Iraq and Turkey), while Western Assyrians (Ma°erbōyē) speak a dialect called *Surayt* (mainly in Turkey and Syria). On the names of Syria and Assyria, and their relation to the names of the language, see, Richard N. Frye, ‘Assyria and Syria: Synonyms’, *Journal of the Near East Society* 51/4 (1992), pp. 281–285.

⁸ *The New Testament of our Lord Jesus Christ. The Peshitta Version in accordance with the tradition of the Syriac Churches, with a translation in the Suryoyo Language of Tur Abdin*, Prepared in the Monastery of Mor Gabriel, Aramaic Bible Translation. Kitabi Mukaddes Şirketi 2013.

literature into *Surayt*.⁹ Finally, the innovative work of Gabriel Afram, author of a Swedish-Assyrian dictionary,¹⁰ writer and translator into literary Assyrian, and long-time director of the Assyrian station of Swedish Radio, likewise deserves attention. In his lecture at the Assyrian Cultural Center in Gothenburg in April 2010, he presented his next work, a collection of Assyrian proverbs and corresponding proverbs translated into Assyrian from various cultural circles, including that of Poland.

When it comes to proverbs in *Sūreṭ* dialects, the first collection of 18 proverbs in *Sūreṭ* was documented by Socin,¹¹ followed by Maclean's description of 130 proverbs with explanations provided by native informants.¹² Slightly less – 108 – have been collected by Kampffmeyer.¹³ Moreover, in Champion's compendium on proverbs of the world, among 35 Arabic proverbs labelled "Syrian", Maclean found five, and Kampffmeyer one of Syriac origin.¹⁴ Proverbs in the *Sūreṭ* dialect of the Assyrian diaspora in California have been described by Lethin. Out of 30 proverbs described by his native informants, nine (no. 2, 3, 5, 6, 11, 23, 26, 29) are based on body organs.¹⁵

While searching for further materials for this study, I came across two articles on proverbs known to the *sūreṭ*-speaking Jewish population which, before re-emigrating to Israel, lived together with Assyrians in many locations in northern Iraq, most notably in Zakho. The first article was written by J.B. Segal, *nota bene* author of a unique book dedicated to the city of Edessa.¹⁶ Out of 143 proverbs collected by Segal, 19 are based on body parts, and four of these are identical those found in Ṭūr °Abdīn, while two (99 and 100) are similar to the wisdom of the Assyrian sage Ahiqar. Segal wrote down his proverbs with symbols which are difficult to recreate.¹⁷

The author of another article is Yona Sabar, whose ancestors lived in the same locality, Zakho, and whose family used the language at home, thus preserving its proverbs. His study, notably, makes references to works by earlier authors who had described a given proverb. Out of the 153 proverbs he collected, 24 concern body parts.¹⁸ In the footnotes to this article they have been quoted according to his orthography.

Probably the first known collection of Assyrian proverbs in Turkey comes from Mardin, a city dominated until the First World War by its Christian population and an important

⁹ For example, Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, *Le Petit Prince*, 2005.

¹⁰ *Svensk-assyriske ordbok*, Stockholm 2005, pp. 1242.

¹¹ Albert Socin, *Die Neu-Aramäische Dialekte von Urmia bis Mosul*, Tübingen 1882, p. 204.

¹² Arthur J. Maclean, *Grammar of the Dialects of Vernacular Syriac*, Cambridge 1895, pp. 345–358.

¹³ Georg Kampffmeyer, *Neusyrische Sprichwörter im Dialekt von Urmia*, Berlin 1905.

¹⁴ Selwyn G. Champion, *Racial Proverbs. A Selection of the World's Proverbs arranged Linguistically*, London 1966 [1938, 1950], pp. 329–344.

¹⁵ Joyce B. Lethin, 'Syriac Proverbs from California', *Western Folklore* 31/2 (1972).

¹⁶ Judah B. Segal, *Edessa – The Blessed City*, Oxford 1970. The book was translated by Ğ.I. Ğabrā and published by Ar-Ruhā Publishing House, Aleppo 1988.

¹⁷ Judah B. Segal, 'Neo-Aramaic Proverbs of the Jews of Zakho', *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 14/4, (1955), pp. 251–270.

¹⁸ Yona Sabar, 'Multilingual Proverbs in Neo-Aramaic Speech of the Jews of Zakho, Iraq', *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 9/2 (1978), pp. 215–235.

centre and patriarchal seat of the Syriac Orthodox Church.¹⁹ A strong position in Mardin was also held by the Syriac Church known as “Catholic”, which had branched off the former during the 18th and 19th centuries. A bishop of the latter Church, Ishāq Armale from Mardin, collected 1300 proverbs which he listed in alphabetical order, leaving their interpretation to the reader.²⁰

Chronologically, a second collection is provided by Ġūzēf Asmar. It lists 273 proverbs written in the Syriac alphabet, which are categorized and explained according to their use in the Ṭūr ʿAbdīn dialect.²¹ A third, more comprehensive collection was compiled by Archdeacon Laḥdō Ishāq, a native of Āzaḥ. It consists of 1377 proverbs listed alphabetically with an explanation and description of the circumstances. The importance of this work is increased further by a linguistically valuable collection of letters written in the Āzaḥ dialect of Arabic, which have been appended to the book.²²

The most recent work dedicated specifically to the proverbs known in Ṭūr ʿAbdīn is by Basim Bulut.²³ It was written in the Ṭūr ʿAbdīn dialect, in Syriac letters. The 248 proverbs listed there are numbered with letters of the alphabet according to their numerical value, but they are not grouped or ordered based on any criteria. In addition, when commenting on proverbs based on parts of the body, the author unnecessarily describes at great length the natural functions of those organs.

Hence, out of the four aforementioned works only the two shortest ones are formulated using the Ṭūr ʿAbdīn dialect, *Surayt*. This aspect of folk culture, created and developed in such a region, deserves broader and deeper research. This study of proverbs related to body parts is a contribution which I hope will serve to encourage researchers of verbal culture and linguists to develop a greater interest in the contemporary verbal folklore of this dialect. The vast majority of proverbs in this collection comes from my own memory. In the area where I grew up and lived until 1971 they were part of everyday speech. In cases where I had doubts as to the correct wording, I consulted my relatives living in Sweden or available written materials.

Body part metaphors in language

Body part metaphors appear in every language and differ in meaning depending on the culture. Since somatic phraseology mirrors cultural individuality as well as beliefs and traditions, it is often a research subject in linguistics, where phraseological material is studied comparatively in great detail. In the dialect (or language, if preferred) of Ṭūr ʿAbdīn

¹⁹ Michael Abdalla, ‘Przysłowia ludowe i ich kontekst kulturowy w odniesieniu do żywności i żywienia w arabskich dialektach Āzaḥ i Mārdīn’, *Investigationes Linguisticae*, 32 (2015), pp. 1–18.

²⁰ Ishāq Armale, *Salwā ar-raʿīdīn fī amṭāl Mārdīn* [A Consolation to the Thirsty in the Proverbs of Mārdīn], Bayrūt 1927.

²¹ Ġūzēf Asmar, *Ḥikam az-zamān fī amṭāl as-Suryān* [Eternal Wisdom in Assyrian Proverbs], Dimašq 1991.

²² Laḥdō Ishāq, *Amṭāl min Bāzʾabde – ʿard wa-tahlīl* [Proverbs of Bāzʾabde – Overview and Analysis], Dimašq 1994.

²³ Basim Bulut, *Maṭle ṭurʿabdīnōye* [The Proverbs of Ṭūr ʿAbdīn], without publishing location, 2015.

(*Surayt*) there exist many idiomatic expressions built in relation to body parts, bearing witness to a broad imagination in describing emotions, assessing manners, emphasising personal characteristics, describing social interactions, valuing personal behaviour and judging it according to accepted norms. These expressions show a variety of images of interpersonal contact of an unlimited duration. The Assyrian language of Ṭūr °Abdīn is characterized by a rich usage of metaphors related to the heart, eyes, limbs, tongue, and even the belly and buttocks. Except for the etymological analysis of the words in the dialect, including borrowings from neighbouring languages,²⁴ the linguistic image of the body has been researched by very few.

Language is enriched by perceived phenomena, which often shape the way of thinking. In the culture of the inhabitants of Ṭūr °Abdīn the source of thought and all virtue is the heart, which drives the entire body and suggests what a person should say: *lēbī kōmarlī* [*'My heart tells me'*]. It is the most affectionate, sensitive organ, which according to folk narrative is responsible for receiving input from the surrounding, reacting to it and determining behaviour. An image of this function of the heart can be found as early as the 4th century in speeches by Afrahat,²⁵ describing the heart as a volitional, emotional and rational agent where an incessant conflict between good and evil takes place. The good thoughts born and located in the heart are constantly under threat. The tools for expressing the heart's emotions are the hand and the lips, while the eye is an organ that reflects life that and appears as a metaphor of moral values. In addition, it is associated with honesty, hospitality, enthusiasm but also egoism; it is worth noting that the eye always appears in singular. Hospitality, slyness and betrayal can also be referred to by metaphors referring to limbs, while the belly is not only associated with overeating, but also with jealousy. Interestingly, the dialect is characterized by a similar number of proverbs referring to the belly as those referring to the buttocks, expressing patience, mobility, hard work, but also analogical features.

As for the sequence of words which are put together to form a metaphor in the Ṭūr °Abdīn dialect, there is no particular ordering; an idiomatic expression can begin with both a verb or a noun, depending on the context, while both versions remain equally comprehensible. In many cases, one has the impression that the verb, which is the active element of an expression, is quite inappropriate inadequate, inaccurate, or wrongly selected; in most cases it has a different meaning in the literary language. However through frequent use in everyday communication it has been established in spoken language and its adequacy is not questioned.

²⁴ Aziz Tezel, *Comparative Etymological Studies in the Western Neo-Syriac (Ṭūrōyo) Lexicon*, Uppsala 2003.

²⁵ Ks. Andrzej Uciecha, *Ascetyczna nauka w "mowach" Afrahata*, Katowice 2002.

No.	Body part	Frequency	No.	Body part	Frequency
1	<i>ʿAynō</i> (Eye)	19	16	<i>Aḏnō</i> (Ear)	3
2	<i>ʿĪḏō</i> (Hand)	19	17	<i>Bayrō</i> (Flesh)	3
3	<i>Qarʿō</i> (also <i>Rīšō</i>) (Head)	18	18	<i>Daqnō</i> (Beard)	3
4	<i>Lēbō</i> (Heart)	17	19	<i>Sawkō, mantō</i> (Hair)	3
5	<i>Līšōnō</i> (also <i>Lēšōnō</i>) (Tongue)	12	20	<i>ʿAršō</i> (Tooth)	2
6	<i>Ṭīzō</i> (Buttocks)	10	21	<i>Katpō, katfō</i> (Shoulder)	2
7	<i>Gāwō</i> (Belly, Stomach)	9	22	<i>Nḥīrō</i> (Nose)	2
8	<i>Raḡlō</i> (Leg, Foot)	7	23	<i>Saptō</i> (Lip)	2
9	<i>Fēmō</i> (Mouth)	6	24	<i>Barkō</i> (Knee)	1
10	<i>Fōtō</i> (also <i>Pōtō</i>) (Face)	6	25	<i>Bayne-ʿayne</i> (= <i>Bēṭ-ʿayne</i>) (Forehead)	1
11	<i>Garmō</i> (Bones)	6	26	<i>Ġēnīkē</i> (Temple)	1
12	<i>Qḏōlō</i> (Neck)	6	27	<i>Knīšōrō</i> (Navel)	1
13	<i>Admō</i> (Blood)	5	28	<i>Mēḥō</i> (Brain)	1
14	<i>Galdō</i> (Skin)	5	29	<i>Ṣawʿō</i> (Finger)	1
15	<i>Ḥāṣō</i> (Back)	5	30	<i>Ṣakkōṭē</i> (Testicles)	1
Total: 177					

In order for this work to be easier to understand, all 177 proverbs collected here²⁶ have been written in Latin transcription. In order to retain the original reading, I have attempted to make my translations as literal as possible, word-for-word, in order to allow the reader to feel the contrast between the meaning of the proverb and the meanings of its elements. I have described the content of each proverb to the best of my knowledge; however, the process of translating tends to result in the loss of its unique rhyme and rhythm. All of the body to which those proverbs refer (there are 30 of them) have been listed in the table below, according to the frequency of their appearance in the proverbs and in alphabetical order. It should be noted that proverbs where two body parts appear have been grouped according to the first one. Proverbs mentioning animal body parts have not been included. In order to showcase universal human behavioural norms, signs

²⁶ Rugūbī, 'Verbal Correlatives in Popular Proverbs', collected 128 proverbs relating to body parts. In the work by Egyptian scholar Aḥmad Taymūr (1871–1930) *Al-Amṭāl al-ʿāmmiyya: mašrūḥa wa-murattaba ḥasba al-ḥarf al-awwal min al-maṭal maʿa kaššāf mauḏūʿī* ['Folk Proverbs: Explained and listed according to the first letter of a proverb with an index of topics'], Al-Qāhira 1986), listing 3188 proverbs known in Egypt, 249 mention organs of the body, although the alphabetical ordering chosen by the author causes some of the expressions to repeat.

of reaction to sadness or happy events, and the emotions related to them, of which proverbs are a reflection, footnotes have been added to include equivalents, most often being Egyptian, but also Libyan or belonging to the Mosul dialect.²⁷ As intellectual creations, proverbs – like dishes – spread quite fast, crossing geographical, cultural and linguistic borders.

Collected proverbs according to the frequency of occurrence of specific body parts

1. *ʿAynō* (Eye)

- (1) *ʿAl ʿAynī w ʿal qarʿī.*
“On my eyes and my head”.

One of the most frequently used sayings, it is also popular among other peoples in the region, especially Arabic and Kurdish speakers. It expresses a readiness to fulfil a request, a far-reaching hospitality, is a declaration of not refusing help and support, a form of warm greeting.

- (2) *ʿAyna(o)h hōwān b-bahrō.*
“May light fill your eyes”.

This saying is addressed to a person who is being visited by a long-awaited relative. It is both a way to congratulate and to share one’s satisfaction, and to warmly welcome the guest, whose arrival is considered a breakthrough event, a very happy occasion. It is sometimes heard when a young family member returns from long-term civil or military service. Other appropriate circumstances could be: passing an exam at the end of an important stage in one’s education; being accepted to a university or getting a job; and in recent times: the reuniting of families.

It is uttered by the visitor publicly, as he crosses the threshold of the host’s house. All those present should hear it. If those who want to greet the guest cannot come to the host’s house, they should say it when they first meet a family member, although such use can be considered dishonest, forced by circumstances.

²⁷ Comparing the Assyrian folk proverbs in the town of Al-Qōš in northern Iraq with Arabic and English ones, Benyamen Haddād, *Dīwān amṭāl Al-Qōš aš-šarbiyya* [A Collection of Folk Proverbs of Al-Qōš], Duhok 2019, found 102 examples which were equivalent in both wording and meaning. He wrote them all down in their original language and the Arabic translation of the English proverb. A comparison of those proverbs from Al-Qōš with the proverbs used by the Jewish community in Zakho, which are in the same language, could shed some light on the relations between these two Semitic peoples.

The meaning of this expression is a wish that from now on the eye take pleasure in seeing the person who embodies hope and brings light to the household and relatives with their mere appearance.

- (3) *ʿAyne^h ʿaqtō-yō.*²⁸
“His eye is narrow”.

He is sly, not welcoming, a little jealous. To some extent this is similar to no. 6 below.

- (4) *ʿAynī kālā bū darbayde^h.*
“My eye is stuck on his way”.

I am impatiently awaiting his arrival, getting ready to meet him. His coming will bring me joy.

- (5) *ʿAyne^h lək tənō.*
“His eye can’t stand it”.

In its negative meaning: he is somehow jealous, doesn’t want others to be better or praised in his presence. In its positive meaning: he expresses concern about someone who is being hurt or mistreated, encouraging others to empathize with and support this person.

- (6) *ʿAyne^h lō kō saw^{cō}.*
“His eye won’t be satisfied”.

He is a greedy, cunning, sophisticated, dishonourable egoist. He collects worldly goods without restraint and does not wish to share. Although he is not in need, he shamelessly takes anything he is given, even the last penny or last piece of bread from a poor man. He ruthlessly exploits others, and does not worry about other people’s opinion of him, but instead believes that his actions earn him other people’s respect, and is therefore a sign of wisdom. It is a disturbed, socially unacceptable personality trait, regardless of the reasons and motivation behind it. The critics of such an immoral, antisocial and short-sighted attitude often remind (to no avail): *ʿŪ mīṭō ləg mōbəl mēde ʿam rūḥe^h* [“A dead man won’t take anything with him”] or: *Ləg sōwə^c štar mū ʿafrō dū qawrō* [“He will only be satisfied with the ashes in his grave”].²⁹ They want to tell him: Doesn’t everyone come to this world naked and leave this world in the same state!?

²⁸ It also appears in a verbalized version: *Kō māʿəq ʿayne^h* [“He tightens his eye”], or in the feminine gender: *Kō māʿiqō ʿayna^h*.

²⁹ The same meaning is very expressively conveyed in the Egyptian saying: *Mā yəmlaʿ ʿēn əbn ādam illā at-turāb* [“The eye of the son of Adam can only be filled with ashes”] (Taymūr, *Al-Amṭāl al-ʿāmmiyya*, no. 2696, p. 450). An almost identical saying can be found among Ahiqar’s quotes: “Son, human eyes are like lakes: they

- (7) *ʿAyne^h rāḥaḡ mē nḥīrē lak ḥəzyō.*
 “His eye doesn’t see beyond his nose”.

He is focused solely on himself, an egoist and narcissist to the highest degree, he pretends not to see others and completely ignores their situation, opinion, arguments and rights.³⁰

- (8) *ʿAynoḥ ʿal ʿū muklō da^c-ʿenwē-yō, yā ʿəlū qṭōlō dū nōṭūrō?*³¹
 “Are your eyes fixed on the grapes or on killing the guard”?

Grapes used to be one of the main sources of income for the village people in Ṭūr ʿAbdīn. The art of planting vineyards and making various products out of grapes deserve a separate study.³² The saying in question is about defining one’s goals in a way that will not provoke doubts or uncertainty.

- (9) *ʿAynoḥ lō ḥuzyō!*
 “May your eye not see”!

This expression is often used by someone who describes an either unpleasant or joyful event, situation, landscape or phenomenon which has provoked such a strong emotional reaction, be it negative or positive, that words cannot express what he saw, felt or experienced. In the case of a positive reaction, the saying is probably a reference to a description of Paradise in the Gospels.³³ It could also express a desire to not be a witness to an unpleasant situation, an upsetting scene or simply to not find oneself in the wrong place at the wrong time.

- (10) *ʿAynōṭē^h sāmīqī.*
 “His eyes became red”.

This means he is angry or provocative, ready to start a fight, as if he couldn’t control himself or avoid taking a risk which could cost him dearly. It is better to stop talking with him and leave.

can’t be filled with money, but when one dies, they will be filled with ashes” (Tronina, Starowieyski, *Apokryfy syryjskie*, no. 64, p. 64; no. 94, p. 70).

³⁰ In relation to this proverb, it is worth mentioning that in the Middle East, persons with visible “distinguishing marks” can often be the target of malicious comments, e.g. someone with a long nose can hear: “When you read, can you still see the book behind your nose?”.

³¹ Appears in Bulut, *Maṭle turʿabdīnōye*, no. 225, pp. 141–142.

³² This topic has been described in more detail in Michael Abdalla, *Kultura żywienia dawnych i współczesnych Asyryjczyków. Uwarunkowania społeczno-kulturowe*, Warszawa 2001, pp. 184–188.

³³ 1 Corinthians 2:9.

- (11) ʔĪ nūrō kō qudhō mē cayne^h.
 “His eye sparks fire”.

He is very angry, threatening that he might go off at any moment and engage in physical violence.

- (12) Lō mlēle^h caynī.
 “He did not fill my eye”.

He did not convince me of his competence and skills, or of his serious intentions, resourcefulness, responsibility and trustworthiness, which makes me reluctant to entrust him with any tasks, or continue cooperating with him as a long-term partner.

- (13) Māḥatle^h cayne^h a^cle^h (a^cla^h).³⁴
 “He became the object of his eye”.

Used in situation when somebody:

- sees something he likes (e.g. food, clothing, tool, vehicle) and wants to have it at almost any price;
- sees someone he likes (e.g. a girl) and wants to establish a relationship with her;
- is asked to look after someone or something.

- (14) Mē caynī.
 “From my eyes”.

A phrase common in the Middle East, popular among Assyrians and Arabs, in the same words: *Mān cēnī*. It is hard to say who borrowed from whom. It means that a request will be fulfilled willingly and without hesitation, the suggested amount will be accepted for payment, or the transaction will be completed.

- (15) Mōre^h dū mītō caynōtē^h samyē-nē.³⁵
 “A dead man’s relative has blindness in his eyes”.

This saying refers to a person who ceases to distinguish between urgent and non-urgent duties, leading to chaos in family life as a result of strong emotions and melancholy. Such a person is absent-minded and doesn’t notice the responsibilities at hand.

- (16) Mḥēlēle^h caynō.
 “He hit him with the eye”.

³⁴ In the 3rd-person singular feminine: *Māḥatla^h cayna^h a^cle^h (a^cla^h)*.

³⁵ This proverb is listed in Bulut, *Matle tur‘abānōye*, no. 55, p. 39.

The peoples of the Middle East believe in the “evil eye”. It is not impossible that the harsh climate, especially the scorching sun and colourless surroundings, make looks seem harsher too. Some parents with a particularly good-looking child would dress them in a very modest way in order to avoid the attention of jealous people. Diseases of which the main symptom was weight loss, lack of appetite or apathy were supposed to be a result of the “evil eye”. It was sometimes advised to avoid specific people with a particularly keen and deep gaze.

- (17) *Nāfəq mē ʿaynī.*
“He came out of my eye”.

His actions made me lose trust in him. I cannot accept his lifestyle. I do not respect him anymore.

- (18) *Twərle^h ʿayne^h.*³⁶
“He broke his eye”.

He scared him, regardless of the means, in a physical confrontation, with threats or during a heated discussion which ended with the withdrawal of the other side; he thus maintained domination over the other party, potentially obtaining the other party’s obedience and full surrender. In such a situation there is no chance for dialogue, rivalry or competition. In Middle Eastern culture, the eye, including the “evil eye”, is a deeply rooted and complex issue.

- (19) *ʾŪ hā d-ḥōzēllōh b-ʿaynō, ḥzāye^h b-tartē ʿaynē.*
“Who sees you with one eye, sees him with both eyes”.

This is, above all, a call to appreciate other people’s effort, their goodness, gestures of goodwill, noble attitude, and as a result – to pay them back with at least the same, or if possible – double.³⁷

2. ʾĪdō (Hand)

- (1:20) *D-ōbat bū yāmīnō, lō ʾōrat dū sēmōlō uq^cō.*³⁸
“Giving with the right [hand], let the left [hand] not know about it”.

This is a direct quote from Matthew’s Gospel (6:3). Perhaps because of its constant repetition those who do not know its origin could see it as a folk saying. In any case,

³⁶ Appears in the Asmar’s collection, *Hikam az-zamān*, p. 36.

³⁷ Quoting an identical Libyan proverb: *ʾIllī šabḥak b-ʿēn, šbaḥlō^h b-ʾətnēn* Rugūbī, ‘Verbal Correlatives in Popular Proverbs’, p. 20, gives a broader description, mentioning paying back for evil with double the evil.

³⁸ Appears in Asmar’s collection, *Hikam az-zamān*, p. 17. I would like to thank the anonymous Reviewer who pointed out the possible Akkadian or Hebrew origin of this saying.

Christ was talking to people in a language that was part of the local culture, so it is not impossible that such a saying existed earlier.

(2:21) *Dlō b-ʔīduḥ ḥaykat ḥāṣuḥ, lēbuḥ ləg fōyāḥ.*

“You won’t feel relief until you scratch your back with your own hand”.

A motivating and encouraging proverb, used as a metaphor with two meanings:

1. Our needs and the needs of our family, more or less pressing, can be best fulfilled by the person in question, hence one should not be too dependent on others. This concerns every task one should try to do himself or one feels one can do, even if the first attempt was unsuccessful.
2. It showcases a natural biological and spiritual connection between related people. Regardless of the misunderstandings between them, they won’t harm each other significantly. Even saying this sentence in a moment of excitement reduces the tension and directs the fighting people’s minds towards finding a solution. In the latter situation, one would more likely hear a saying which sounds more affirmative: ʔŪ *admō lək-kōwe māyē* [“Blood will not become water”³⁹].

(3:22) *ʔĪ ʔīdō dlō mənḱōtō, kō mənšōqō.*⁴⁰

“The hand which cannot be bitten should be kissed”.

A thought which expresses on one hand bitterness and resignation, and on the other, entices one to give up when it comes, for example, to bureaucracy, but also to an unyielding person in a conflict, such as a neighbour, a difficult, unbeatable rival, or a despotic authority. It is also used when a compromise seems unlikely and further attempts will not bring any results; when one cannot win, only yield; when must give up or agree to the conditions of a humiliating settlement.⁴¹ Because Middle Eastern Christians, especially those who are members of local Churches, often kiss their clergymen on the hand, it was said, sometimes ironically, that because of this tradition one has no choice even if a particular person does not merit such treatment.

³⁹ See example 140. A shorter proverb with the same meaning is encountered in Egypt: *Mā yohroš lak allā ʔīdak* [“You can only scratch yourself with your own hand”] (Taymūr, *Al-Amṭāl al-ʿāmmiyya*, no. 2704, p. 451). It is also mentioned in Segal, ‘Neo-Aramaic Proverbs’, no. 86, p. 264.

⁴⁰ This proverb, with identical wording but in the imperative, is encountered in Libya: *ʔl-ʔīd allī mā taqdarš ʔəḏhā, būshā* (Rugūbī, ‘Verbal Correlatives in Popular Proverbs’, p. 35). In a more direct imperative form it also appears in Egypt: *ʔl-ʔīd allī mā taqdarš taqtaʿhā, būshā* [“If you can’t cut off a hand, kiss it!”] (Taymūr, *Al-Amṭāl al-ʿāmmiyya*, no. 702, p. 117). As a last resort, Egyptians would also advise: *In kān lak ḥāga ʿand kalb, qūl lō: yā sayyid* [“Should you need something from a dog, address him: Lord!”] (Taymūr, *Al-Amṭāl al-ʿāmmiyya*, no. 644, p. 106). It is also quoted in Segal, ‘Neo-Aramaic Proverbs’, no. 72, pp. 262–263.

⁴¹ In the 1990s a Syrian newspaper published a story that allegedly took place in Saudi Arabia, under the title “A tooth for a tooth”. During a school football game, the ball was kicked so hard it broke a student’s two teeth. The case ended up in court, and the father of the victim refused to accept any financial compensation, demanding instead that his son break two of the culprit’s teeth.

- (4:23) ʔĪ ʔīdō dū mklō yārəhtō-yō.
 “A hand is long to reach for food”.

It is considered good manners not to pay a visit during meal times. One meets with others after having eaten at one’s own house. If one happens to be a guest at somebody’s place, it is not appropriate to accept an invitation to the table immediately, even if one is hungry, which the guest usually will not admit. It is surprising that this attitude is especially visible among children and young people. When the guest finally sits at the table, he is encouraged not to hold back, indicating in this way that the company is more important, so the guest tends to say (guided with his tongue, not his heart!), “a hand is long to reach for food”, as though they weren’t feeling awkward.

- (5:24) ʔĪde^h dū ʕāmō kifrīt-yō w hqō pūš-yō.⁴²
 ‘People’s one hand is a match and the other is hay’.

The word ʕāmō obviously indicates outsiders. Not many nations have the experience of centuries of being pushed back from their land by others, who take over everything gradually, if not by polygamy and having many children, then by force. This saying is a way to describe this situation.

- (6:25) ʔĪde^h ftəhtō-yō.
 “His hand is open”.

He is generous, kind-hearted, a willing and trusted donor to noble causes, but not extravagant. Helping the needy gives him pleasure, just like accepting guests, to whom he offers not just what he has, but – if needed – also what he can borrow. He fulfils the human mission through sharing, giving.

- (7:26) ʔĪde^h lō kuzza a^ʕle^h.
 “He holds his hand from him”.

Something prevents him from using force or violence against somebody, be it because of their age, kinship, relationship with their family, out of respect or due to personal characteristics (looks, illness, disability, poverty or hardships suffered by them or their family); he takes pity on somebody.

- (8:27) ʔĪde^h yārəhtō-yō.
 “His hand is long”.

⁴² It is quoted in this wording by Asmar, *Ḥikam az-zamān*, p. 23, and Taymūr, *Al-Amṭāl al-ʕāmmiyya*, no. 703, p. 117.

The meaning here is clear; the speaker from Ṭūr °Abdīn reassures that the person in question is able to do a lot of good, but simultaneously warns that this same person can also do a lot of harm. He asserts that this person has a lot of influence and opportunity, for example, to harm somebody's interests, to be vindictive, to hunt somebody down and harm them, or in the sense of dishonesty – to take away somebody's property. In other words: his hand reaches far.⁴³

(9:28) ʔĪdī tahtī (tahte dī) kēfō-yō.
 “My hand is under a stone”.

This expression describes a state of helplessness and the impossibility to take act. It can be heard when somebody who sees a certain irregularity cannot do anything about it.

(10:29) ʔĪdō ḥdō lō kəmsəfqō (noqšō).⁴⁴
 “One hand cannot clap”.

A saying calling for unity, solidarity, cooperation; self-explanatory.

(11:30) ʔĪdō k-mašgō ʔīdō w at-tartē k-mašgī f(p)ōtō.⁴⁵
 “One hand washes the other, and both wash the face”.

Similar to the previous saying, it showcases the need to work together, because not everything can be done on one's own.

(12:31) ʔĪdō ləg maṭyōle^h.
 “No hand can reach him”.

Describes someone who is so agile and quick that he cannot be caught or subjugated, or when someone has solid support in the form of good connections and therefore can behave obnoxiously or arrogantly because they feel untouchable – even in the case of serious wrongdoings not many would dare to demand justice, not to mention an official trial before the elders or some other established authority. On the other hand, this saying can also describe a person so exceptionally gifted that nobody can compete with them.

(13:32) Lək bōyəz māyē °al ʔīde^h.
 “He doesn't pour water on his hands”.

⁴³ There exists also a classical saying in Arabic *Al-°Ayn bašīra wa-l-yad qašīra* [“The eye sees but the hand is short”].

⁴⁴ The saying appears in the collection by Asmar, *Hikam az-zamān*, p. 16, with an alternative, more adequate verb: *Nqōšō*. It is also known in Egypt, with the same wording: *ʔĪd wāhda mā tsaqqəfš* [“One hand does not clap”] (Taymūr, *Al-Amṭāl al-°ammaṭiya*, no. 703, p. 117), and a similar one is found in Libya: *ʔl-ʔīd bilā uḥṭhā mā tsaqqəfš* [“One hand without her sister does not clap”] (Rugūbī, ‘Verbal Correlatives in Popular Proverbs’, p. 35).

⁴⁵ This expression is found in the following study: Bulut, *Maṭle ṭur°abdīnoye*, no. 74, p. 51.

This expression underscores and reassures that somebody hasn't reached the other person's level, doesn't have the competences or intellectual ability to rival him, face him or threaten him. One can safely assume the competitor's attempts and efforts will be futile.

(14:33) *Maḥaṭ ʿīduḥ b-māyē šāḥīne^h.*
 “Put your hand in warm water”.

This expression gives reassurance and hope to somebody who is worried or anxious about something, or has doubts that their efforts will be fruitful or satisfying.

(15:34) *Mašəḡ ʿīduḥ mēne^h.*
 “Wash somebody off your hands”.

Don't count on him, he is no good and cannot deliver what you expect.

(16:35) *Šafrūnō bī ʿīdō ṭaw mē ʿaṣrō ʿalī dawmō.⁴⁶*
 “A sparrow in the hand is better than ten on a tree”.

A saying popular in many cultures in an identical or similar wording. It surely originates in a land where trees grow, but due to its simplicity and comprehensibility it has been borrowed and adapted in desert areas, as well.

(17:36) *Tlēle ʿīdō.*
 “He hid his hand”.

This expression conveys a totally different meaning than the verb would suggest, so a word-by-word translation would be misleading. This proverb indicates that someone was able to defend himself or repay a favour. It is used mostly to describe conflict situations where physical violence is used (including duels), but extends to disputes or heated intellectual discussions. It implies a positive valuation.

(18:37) *Trē fāṭīḥē ləḡ mīmōdī b-ʿīdō ḥdō.⁴⁷*
 “You can't hold two watermelons with one hand”.

This is often used as a reproach to a person before, during or after they try (or want) to complete two tasks or resolve two matters at once, and as a result cannot do them

⁴⁶ This saying is quoted by Asmar, *Hikam az-zamān*, p. 30. It appears in identical form among Egyptian proverbs (Taymūr, *Al-Amṭāl al-ʿammīyya*, no. 1908, p. 323), and the Libyan equivalent instead of ‘ten’ mentions ‘many’: *ʿUṣṣūr fī-l-yad wa-lā farg ṭayər* (Rugūbī, ‘Verbal Correlatives in Popular Proverbs’, p. 35). In the version quoted by Lethin, ‘Syriac Proverbs from California’, no. 11, p. 94, the number of birds on the tree is one thousand: *Kha sippra geo ida bush spaile min alpa prakha*, similar to the wisdom of Ahiqar (Tronina, Starowieyski, *Apokryfy syryjskie*, no. 67, p. 68).

⁴⁷ Appears in Bulut, *Maṭle ṭurʿabdīnōye*, no. 215, p. 135.

(either or any of them) with due diligence. Because a watermelon is round and rather large in diameter and weight, it is impossible to hold two of them in one hand.

(19:38) ʔŪ ḥā dlō māḥət ʔīde^h bū qēnō da-dēbūrē, ləg məḏwəs.
 “Who doesn’t stick his hand in a hornets’ nest doesn’t get stung”.

This proverb applies to two different circumstances:

- 1) When the speaker wants to warn somebody before taking a course of action the unpredictable results of which can be harmful for them or the opposite of the intended outcome;
- 2) When the speaker comments on a negative result of a thoughtless, irrational move.

3. *Qar^cō (Rīšō) (Head)*

(1:39) Ālōhō k-ḥōze^h ʔū qar^cō w k-māḥət ī kəmme.⁴⁸
 “God sees the head and adjusts [to it] the hat”.

A truly fatalistic saying. A person repeating it doesn’t want to even attempt to improve their situation on their own. They believe they should accept their fate, because such is their destiny according to God’s will.

(2:40) Atyō b-qar^cī.
 “It ended up on my head”.

The saying is a form of self-pity in the face of injustice received from others. I had nothing to do with what happened, but was unjustly accused, the only one under suspicion. I was the only one accused, the only victim.

(3:41) Ḥallē qar^cē də-ḥḏōḏē.
 “They devoured each other’s heads”.

They got into a sharp, long-term and unresolvable fight without a chance for compromise. As a result every involved party lost so much that none of them know who they are anymore.

(4:42) Kō mōḥe b-qar^ce^h d-wāzīrō.⁴⁹
 “Hits the minister’s head”.

The word *wāzīrō* (‘minister’) is commonly metaphorically used to describe a person who is handsome, sensible, wise, affluent and with good manners. It describes someone who has a life of abundance or at least creates such an impression with his lifestyle.

⁴⁸ The saying is quoted by Bulut, *Maṭle ṭur^cabdīnōye*, no. 120, p. 78.

⁴⁹ It appears in Iṣḥāq, *Amṭāl min Bāzābde*, no. 501, p. 119: *Mā yə^crəf rāsō ‘ala ēš mḥaddē*.

(5:43) *Kō yōmān b-qar^ce^h.*
 “They swear by his head”.

The person on whose head the oath is sworn is considered by the speaker or speakers to enjoy moral authority, representing noble values; he is able to take care of the weaker, relieving tensions and conflicts, issuing fair verdicts; he is trustworthy. These people are usually parents, grandparents, older siblings and representatives of the family.

(6:44) *Ləg nōfəq rīšō a^cme^h.*
 “He cannot match his head”.

He could not keep up with him; his weaker intellectual or financial resources or physical predispositions will not allow him to compete with him, to keep up with the pace.

(7:45) *Lō kōdā^c qar^ce^h al ayna mhadde-yō.*
 “He doesn’t know what pillow his head is on”.

This expression concerns a person who is indecisive, in a dilemma, suffering from instability, lost.

(8:46) *Ma^clēle^h qar^cī.*
 “He lifted my head”.

A typical saying by parents or older siblings when a younger family member (son, daughter, brother, sister, grandson, granddaughter) are successful, get promoted or are distinguished in their studies or professional or social life.

(9:47) *Māgəğle^h qar^cī.*
 “He stunned my head” or “He made my head dizzy”.

A saying often used in a situation when somebody – whether asked or not – says far too much and too loudly,⁵⁰ speaking senselessly, or when they incessantly demand something.

(10:48) *Mlēle^h qar^ce^h.*
 “He filled his head”.

A saying that describes the successful indoctrination and brainwashing of a person in order to make them perform a specific deed, believe in an ideology or accept a worldview. Such a person is negatively perceived by their family and close friends because they

⁵⁰ A similar saying is found in the Arabic dialect of Mosul: *‘Amal rāsī danbərke* [“He made a drum out of my head”] (Ḥaddād, ‘Al-Ātār al-ārāmiyya’, p. 146).

present a different attitude or act in a way that is different from the model the family had assumed and followed.

- (11:49) *Mōhīnā rēšō*⁵¹ ʔēbe^h.
 “We will hit him with our head”.

This is an announcement of the intent to pay somebody a visit. There is in reality no direct link between a head and a visit, except that when the guests and hosts greet each other with a hug, their heads touch.⁵²

- (12:50) *Mōrawle^h qar^eh*.⁵³
 “Made his head bigger”.

This saying is about a person who has been praised, elevated and ascribed all virtues to the point that they believe they are better than they are in reality. Based on this assessment, the praised person has become arrogant, which is negatively perceived by others. Sometimes: a person’s strengths have been purposefully emphasised to increase their morale, make them believe in themselves, or in order to prepare them for a task set by the interlocutor, employer or agitator.

- (13:51) *Qar^eh nāšifō-yō*.
 “His head is hard”.

He is stubborn, does not resign, does not accept advice, cannot be persuaded. He doesn’t want to acknowledge or admit his mistakes, even if he knows he made them. He doesn’t know the word “sorry”.

- (14:52) *Qar^eh šāhən*.
 “His head heated up”.

He entered a trance-like state during a conversation or action he is involved in. He is out of control, has been swept up by a wave of enthusiasm, makes senseless promises or declarations that cannot be fulfilled; he donates sums of money that are inadequate for the occasion or organizes parties above his stance.

- (15:53) *Qaṭmō ^cal qar^eoh*.
 “Ashes on your head”.

⁵¹ *Rīšō* is the literary form of *qar^eō*.

⁵² Interestingly, an identical saying is encountered in the Arabic dialect of Assyrians from Āzaḥ (Ishāq, *Amṭāl min Bāzābde*, no. 523, p. 122): *Rāḥ qarab rās fiyən*. Based on this and other examples, Y. Said claims that the Āzaḥ Arabic subdialect is simply a translation of Surayt. See his letter in Ishāq, *Amṭāl min Bāzābde*, p. 218.

⁵³ Another popular version of this saying starts with the noun: *Qar^e yārū* [“His head grew bigger”].

This saying describes what is – for the speaker – a short-term state of helplessness. It is often said by parents to children who e.g. cannot find something that was in plain sight, when they fail an exam, or when they cannot complete a simple task or they do it in a way that is inept or inexact. The closest descriptive word would be *clumsy*.⁵⁴

(16:54) *Taḥtē qar^eh rākīḥō-yō.*
“It is soft under his head”.

Describes a person who has an easy, carefree life, and doesn’t think much about others, having never experienced poverty and its hardships.

(17:55) *Twar ʔū qar^o w-lō tawrat ʔū lēbō.*⁵⁵
“Hurt the head, but don’t break the heart”.

This expression is an exhortation to be sensitive, delicate and understanding towards every person, regardless of the geographic location. A wound on the head can heal quickly, but a wound inflicted on the heart may never heal.

(18:56) *ʔŪ rīšō dlō kōyū, laytō snīqūtō d-mītāšar bī dāsmāle.*⁵⁶
“There is no need to bandage a head that does not hurt”.

This is a warning against taking rash actions, the effects of which are difficult to predict. Since every worry is detrimental to one’s physical and mental health, they have to be prevented at the source.

4. *Lēbō* (Heart)

(1:57) *Čīk lēbī ʔēbā/ʔēbe^h.*⁵⁷
“My heart got stuck in him/her”.

As a representation of honesty, this metaphor carries a clear meaning: someone or something caught my eye, I fell in love with them or it. This can be described with the

⁵⁴ It seems this saying has nothing in common with the Roman Catholic celebration known as “Ash Wednesday”, where the priest puts ashes on the heads of the faithful to remind them that “they are dust and to dust they will return” (Gen 3:19). This tradition was established in the 10th century by Pope Urban II and falls 46 days before Easter.

⁵⁵ Taken from Bulut, *Maṭle tur^oabdīnōye*, no. 16, p. 17. Here we can see that depending on the particular body part indicated, the same verb can have a different meaning.

⁵⁶ In Bulut (*Maṭle tur^oabdīnōye*, no. 21, p. 19) this saying appears in a different word order. An identical proverb is known among Eastern Assyrians: *Risha d’la mraya, la asrite b’dismala!* (according to the author’s spelling: Lethin, ‘Syriac Proverbs from California’, pp. 87–101). Bandaging of the head in the case of migraines is a common practice in folk medicine. Also attested by Segal, ‘Neo-Aramaic Proverbs’, no. 14, p. 256, without the word *dāsmāle* or *dismala*.

⁵⁷ Another version: *Čīkō b-lēbī* [“Got stuck in my heart”].

following image: the heart “jumps out” and moves to the beloved person, settling down in them, or the person has already found a place in one’s heart, to the point that the two become one, including on a spiritual level.

(2:58) *Kō qōyāš⁵⁸ lēbī.*
 “My heart curdles”.

I have doubts, I’m anxious, I suspect there’s a hidden agenda. I have mixed feelings, worrying signals. This looks unreal, unclear, in a way disguised, but in no case can I back away, I have to try regardless of the outcome. This expression of doubt and uncertainty can be heard from someone who is directly affected, who has a dilemma or comes to somebody older and more experienced to ask for guidance. An opinion presented in such way means one can never be fully sure about the honesty or real possibility of fulfilling a promise, and the task which awaits completion may never get started or finalized.

(3:59) *Latle^h lēbō.⁵⁹*
 “He has no heart”.

He has no will or motivation to start doing something or go somewhere. This could be due to laziness, and less frequently – to a lack of courage or excess caution.

(4:60) *Lēbī fāyāš mēne^h.*
 “My heart grew apart from him”.

For some reason I have become resentful towards him, temporarily loosening my relations with him, which he may not know but others have noticed.

(5:61) *Lēbī lō kuzze.*
 “My heart is not going”.

I have no appetite, I am not hungry, my stomach doesn’t accept food, I can’t force myself.⁶⁰

⁵⁸ The same verb describes the curdling of milk, when it becomes stratified e.g. as a result of fermentation. In some folk traditions this effect is described as a product “going bad”. This saying appears in two additional versions: 1) in a similar meaning in past tense: *Qīš lēbī* [“My heart curdled”], 2) *Lēbī kō mīqāš* [“My heart is curdling”], meaning: I’m not sure they will keep their promise, or may not be willing to fulfill their declaration, e.g. quitting a bad habit or bad company, finalizing a task. Their attitude and suggestions are not convincing enough for me to trust them, I have a premonition they will not do it, but will not admit it. A possible etymology and broad use of this verb in the languages of the region is further described in Tezel, *Comparative Etymological Studies*, p. 74. It is worth mentioning that scissors in Arabic are called *maqāš*.

⁵⁹ The proverb is quoted by Asmar, *Hikam az-zamān*, p. 41.

⁶⁰ In the 1960s, village homes did not have tables. In order to have a meal people would sit down on the floor around a common platter, from which one would eat with hands or spoons. Forks and knives were neither used

- (6:62) *Lēbī mgawlə^c*.
 “My heart became cloudy, nauseous”.

In other words, I feel like vomiting. The reason may be an unpleasant view, e.g. a rotten wound, a creeping worm, a disgusting food which brings unpleasant associations or contains a hair or a worm. It could also be an artificial noise which makes the body resonate, such as moving a hard object against a metal surface.

- (7:63) *Lēbī qāyər*.
 “My heart has gotten cold”.

I no longer have enthusiasm, I have lost the will to do something; can apply to feelings too.

- (8:64) *Lēbī yāqəd a^cle^h*.⁶¹
 “My heart burned out over him”.

The verb *yāqəd* means ‘to burn’ (in past tense), but here the meaning is closer to ‘soften’. The expression is about emotions that provoke pity in reaction to somebody’s story or to seeing somebody in need of solidarity, support or help.

- (9:65) *Lēbī yārəm*.⁶²
 “My heart swelled”.

He keeps rambling about the simplest topic to exhaustion, not considering that others may not be interested at all. When asked for an opinion, suggestion or explanation – which could be provided in one sentence – he unnecessarily and unexpectedly begins a long monologue. The person who had asked the question would gladly interrupt, but not every situation, relationship or company allows for this.

nor needed. When a child would visit their friends who were having a meal, they would be invited to join, but even when very hungry, the visiting child would almost always refuse, even after two or more offers to join in the meal. Such an attitude can today be explained by the children prioritizing the decision to maintain the perceived reputation of their family, so that the hosts do not think their own parents have no resources to feed their children. This explanation is confirmed by similar behaviour observed in other situations.

⁶¹ Another popular version: *Lēbe^h yāqəd ^cal rūhe^h* [“His heart burned over himself”], meaning he became very sorry and sad because of not being understood or supported. Also appears in active voice: *Mōqadle lēbī* [“He burned my heart”] or *Kō mōqəd ʿū lēbō* [“He burns my heart”] – he provokes pity and deep sympathy. This is said by a sympathizing observer, convinced that the person in question has been or is being mistreated, unappreciated, left out, excluded or has bad luck, without making any claims or expressing bitterness towards anybody. Righteous and sensitive people should notice such a person and offer them consolation and support.

⁶² Also appears in verbal form: *Mārəmle lēbī* [“He made my heart swell”]. Not every language, including English, has a transitive form of the verb ‘to swell’.

(10:66) *Lō mgaul^cat lēbuh, dlō hufhat!*⁶³

“Don’t make your heart nauseous so that you don’t throw up”!

This saying contains advice not to be picky about something before trying it or not to believe something is impossible before finding out that one’s resources may be entirely sufficient. It is a way to convince a person to trust in their abilities and to be more courageous and self-confident.

(11:67) *Lō tōrat lēbe^h!*

“Do not abandon his heart”!

A piece of advice and simultaneously a request for fulfilling somebody’s (usually a young family member’s) plea, request or choice, so that they are not disappointed. The person whose request has been denied is usually resentful, self-pitying, and in extreme cases, may even feel unwanted.

(12:68) *Mākūle lēbī.*

“He caused pain to my heart”.

His state provokes pity and sympathy, his story moves my conscience. Were I able to alleviate his pain, I wouldn’t hesitate for a moment. When the person’s situation is critical and they can describe it with well-chosen, adequate words, it is often said: *Kō mabhē*⁶⁴ *ak-kēfē* or *Kō markāh ak-kēfē* [“He can make even stones weep / softens them”].⁶⁵

(13:69) *Maṭnaḥle lēbī.*

“He brought relief to my heart”.

In other words: he got even with somebody for a wrongdoing or failure the other person was the reason for, or: he skilfully defended himself against accusations, defused the charges, answered the questions exhaustively, addressed all doubts and presented the issue in a way which impressed me a lot. The same meaning is expressed by the proverb: *Fāyāḥ lēbī a^cle^h* [“For what had happened to him, my heart was relieved”].

(14:70) *Qī^c (or bīt) lēbī.*⁶⁶

“My heart tore apart, broke”.

This expression is heard when someone gets very scared about something or unexpectedly finds out about something that provokes a strong reaction. It can be used

⁶³ This is found in Bulut, *Maṭle tur^cabdīnōye*, no. 46, p. 33.

⁶⁴ *Mabhē*, the transitive form of the verb ‘to cry’, means ‘to make someone cry’.

⁶⁵ Certain peoples of the Middle East hire a professional wailer for the funeral of a dead relative, in order to soften the hearts of those present and make everybody join in the grief.

⁶⁶ Can appear in the past tense: *Qī^cle lēbī* [“Tore my heart apart”].

when an eye-catching yet made-up story with a great emotional load is disseminated as a joke, e.g. on the 1st of April. In any case, the result is short-lived and temporary.

(15:71) *Ṭwīr lēbī.*
 “My heart broken”.

I no longer feel like doing something, I have lost my enthusiasm or have been slightly disappointed. When used with the active form of the verb: *ṭwārle*, it can also mean reprimanding somebody, persuading them to the point where they have to give up or no longer feel like proceeding.

(16:72) *Ṭalyō ḥad lēbe^h w sōwō nūrō b-^cēbe^h.*⁶⁷
 “A child [acts] as his heart [dictates], and the old man has fire inside”.

The saying differentiates between the innocent, natural, authentic actions of a child, unburdened with bad intentions, and the actions of some adults in specific and clear situations, which may arise from ambiguous, hidden intentions.

(17:73) *Yālaffē^h cal-lēbe^h.*
 “He learned it by heart”.

In other words: he learned something (schoolwork, manners, other knowledge) perfectly, memorizing it.

5. *Līšōnō* (also *Lēšōnō*) (Tongue)

(1:74) *Bū lēšōnō bāsīmō g-məfqat kurfō mū naqwayda.*⁶⁸
 “With a gentle tongue you’ll get the snake out of its hole”.

In Ṭūr °Abdīn, especially its southern, flat part, in the summer season one can encounter smaller and larger snakes. Unlike other wild animals no attempt has been noted to domesticate them, therefore there exists a traditionally perceived mutual hostility towards them. If even such an animal can be won over with a soft voice, how much easier must it be with another human!

(2:75) *Bū lēšōnō ḥalyō g-mašəlḥat aḡ-ḡūlē d-ḥawroh.*
 “With a sweet tongue you’ll undress your companion”.

⁶⁷ Appears in Asmar, *Ḥikam az-zamān*, p. 21.

⁶⁸ An identical saying is noted by Lethin, ‘Syriac Proverbs from California’, no. 25, p. 98: *Leshana khulya up khowe ke pālitle min geo buzzeḥ*. It appears in Bulut, *Maṭle ṭur°abdīnōye*, no. 64, p. 44 in a slightly different word order.

By speaking calmly, in a soft voice, with convincing arguments and examples, you may not outsmart somebody, but you may still convince them to make far-reaching concessions, almost hypnotising them to the point they will not refuse to give you even the clothes off their back.

- (3:76) *Bū lēšōnō ḥalyō g-məblat ʔū šahyō lam-māyē rābe wəg-madə^cratlē šahyō.*⁶⁹
 “With a sweet tongue you will lead the thirsty to the great water and bring him thirsty”.

This proverb expresses an exceptional creativity, similar to the previous one, and acknowledges the need for self-control, calmness and self-restraint, while showing the superiority and efficiency of speaking in a rational, delicate way.

- (4:77) *Gəd māḥətnō lēšōnoḥ b-tīzoḥ!*
 “I will stick your tongue up your arse”!

The saying expresses a threat of retaliation for nasty and hurtful words, which one considers untrue, and which do not show good manners and/or leave no room for dialogue.

- (5:78) *Kāle^h al rīše^h d-līšōnī.*
 “It’s on the tip of my tongue”.

The speaker cannot remember or isn’t sure whether the detail they want to give is accurate. This often concerns names.

- (6:79) *Kūt mēde taḥte līšōne^h (or taḥte d-līšōne^h).*⁷⁰
 “There is something under his tongue”.

The listener feels that his interlocutor does not want to reveal something, at least not right now and in this company. They know something, but for some reason do not feel like speaking up or explaining. The saying does not imply that this is a definite secret; in other circumstances something further may be revealed.

- (7:80) *Lēšōne^h ḥalyō-γō.*
 “His tongue is sweet”.

This proverb describes a person who talks in a calm, delicate, pleasant voice, and expresses themselves logically, showing respect for their listeners. Even when not saying the truth, they are pleasant to listen to.

⁶⁹ In a version known among the Jews of Zakho, the tongue is not present, and instead of a “great water” a spring is mentioned: *gēzil l-’ēna, ’ēna kkēta* (Sabar, ‘Multilingual Proverbs’, no. 46).

⁷⁰ Quoted by Bulut, *Maṭle ṭur’abdīnōye*, no. 232, p. 146, but with an inadequate attempt to explain the meaning.

- (8:81) *Lēšōne^h yāqāḍ bū ḥalwō, nṗḥle^h ba-d-dawgē.*
 “His tongue was burned by milk, he blew on the buttermilk”.

This saying is used metaphorically in at least two types of conflict situations:

- the person who has been hurt, but cannot settle scores with a wrongdoer spills their anger on others who are not involved;
- when rash and thoughtless actions bring negative consequences, and one attempts unsuccessfully to contain or remediate the damage.

- (9:82) *Lēšōne^h yārīḥō-yō.*⁷¹
 “His tongue is long”.

This expression describes a person who does not choose their words carefully, saying whatever comes to their mind in a critical, uncontrollable, snarky, hurtful way that harms others (present or not). If not stopped, this person can provoke conflict.

- (10:83) *Nāfāq mēnē b-līšōnī.*⁷²
 “Hair has grown on my tongue”.

This saying expresses a degree of resentment, exasperation and pessimism. The speaker complains that his advice and warnings have been completely ignored. It is also a way to indirectly criticise or reprimand the person to whom this advice or warning had been directed.

- (11:84) *Mat^cab rūḥoḥ w-lō mat^cbat līšōnoḥ.*
 “Better force more effort on yourself than on your tongue”.

This saying also expresses resentment, and to some extent also sympathy; that asking someone or trying to persuade them to get to work have been unsuccessful. Even when the person in question agrees to complete the task, they may not be up to it or do it ineptly or inefficiently. Therefore, it is better to complete the task by oneself; this saying usually applies to one’s own adult children.

- (12:85) *ᵓŪ barnōšō kō mūtāšar b-līšōne^h.*
 “A man binds himself with his tongue”.

This saying emphasises that one is obliged to keep one’s word and fulfil one’s promises.⁷³

⁷¹ Another, equally common formulation is: *Kō mōrəḥ līšōne^h* [“He elongates his tongue”], meaning that he allows himself too much, and the imperative: *Lō mārḥat līšōnoḥ!* [“Don’t elongate your tongue!”], spoken in anger.

⁷² Quoted in Asmar, *Ḥikam az-zamān*, p. 22.

⁷³ A more firm and clear saying is found in faraway Libya: *Ellī a^cta kələmtō^h, a^cta raqəbtō^h* [“Who gave his word, gave his head!”] (Rugūbī, ‘Verbal Correlatives in Popular Proverbs’, p. 39). The geographical proximity between Libya and Egypt results in the two countries sharing a number of similar-sounding proverbs.

6. *Ṭīzō* (Buttocks)⁷⁴

- (1:86) *Bōqūnō laḡ ʿōrē b-ṭīze^h*.⁷⁵
 “Even a *bōqūnō* will not fit in his butt”.

Bōqūnō is the name of the middle part of an onion, characterised by overgrown parenchyma. In the past, villagers would not cut an onion with a knife, but hit it with their fist or cover with a towel and hit with their heel. The *bōqūnō* would fall out and be caught by kids. It has a delicate taste and is pleasantly soft.

The saying describes a person who gets angry for no reason, is intolerant, or does not accept arguments, criticism or advice.

- (2:87) *Čīk (kītō) šāšwōnē b-ṭīze^h*.
 “He has ants in his butt”.

This proverb describes a young, restless person, who moves too fast, almost running, and noisily makes rash gestures, who shouts and cannot calm down.

- (3:88) *Čīr ṭīze^h*.
 “His buttocks tore apart”.

An expression said exclusively by a man and about another man who, in spite of working hard and persistently, still cannot fulfil his current needs.

- (4:89) *Nāfəq b-ṭīzō nāšīfō*.
 “He got away with a dry ass”.

He got out of trouble unscathed, successfully passed the test, overcame difficulties, avoided someone’s scheming and the snares they set, who did not bring shame to his relatives and did not get into trouble with those who witnessed his speeches, performances, and confrontations.

- (5:90) *Taḥte ṭīze^h šāḥīnōyō-yō*.
 “It is warm under his buttocks”.

His life is carefree, comfortable, he is wealthy and can afford anything. The main criterion for such an assessment is that he doesn’t sleep on the ground or on thin felt, but on a thick woollen mattress, and maybe even a bed.

⁷⁴ The work of Saʿīd al-Kaʿbī should be considered a bold undertaking. He collected 140 Iraqi Arabic proverbs related to private parts of the body and published at his own expense in London (2010) under the title: *Al-Amṭāl al-makšūfa*.

⁷⁵ Appears in Bulut, *Maṭle ṭurʿabdīnōye*, no 169, p. 105.

- (6:91) *Taḥte ṯize^h taryō-yō.*
 “It is wet under his buttocks”.

The saying describes a person whose words suggest that they don’t want to admit something, are hiding something, or aren’t telling the truth. Even if aware that others know who is guilty, this person has a reason – to protect their friend or direct suspicion away from themselves – to lie, manipulate, and mislead others so that they do not discover the truth.

- (7:92) *Trē ṯize^h b-šarwōlō ḥā.*
 “Two butts in one underpants”.

This expression describes two people who are not only friends, but want to become similar to each other in every aspect, by having – or trying to have, or pretending to have – similar tastes, identical opinions, speaking with one voice, supporting each other and backing each other regardless of circumstances.

- (8:93) *ʔŪ ḥā d-əzzē lū šaydō da-n-nūnē, ṯize^h gəd tōre.⁷⁶*
 “We who goes fishing will get his buttocks wet”.

Fishing in the rivers of the region, when water was flowing in them, was a common pastime. However, the proverb is not as much about fishing, as about the risk and consequences related to any action or decision, which have to be considered and accepted.

- (9:94) *ʔŪ šarwōlāwō lū ṯizāwō k-mālaq.*
 “That underpant fit that buttock”.

This saying can be heard when the similarly negative behaviours or attitudes are compared of two people, one of whom is already known for their objectionable reputation, and the other is (almost surprisingly) now also starting to behave dishonestly and dishonourably. In another context, it can be a positive assessment of a right and just measure of punishment, one adequate to the deed.

- (10:95) *ʔŪ ṯizō d-hōweyale^h mēḥō, lō m‘araṭwā.*
 “If the butt had a brain, it would not have farted”.⁷⁷

⁷⁶ Quoted in identical wording by Segal, ‘Neo-Aramaic Proverbs’, no. 47, p. 260.

⁷⁷ English does not clearly distinguish between *pəšwīlō* (passing gas without a sound, verbal form: *mpāšēle*) and *‘arṯīlō* (passing gas with a sound, verbal form: *m‘araṭle*), although for this particular function of the digestive system many different words can be used. Interestingly, the Tūr ‘Abdīn description of somebody with the participle *m‘arṯōnō* means this person is not treated seriously at all. There are many sayings about the most intimate body parts among the Jews of Al-Qōš, such as (according to the author’s spelling): *šuqle tēre, mpille basir ʔēre* [“He left the saddle to follow his penis”], *šumox bxāzitta, ‘āya lak xāzitta* [“You’ll see your own anus before you’ll see

A rather peculiar comparison between a person who cannot keep a secret, who speaks off the cuff about sensitive and potentially harmful topics, and is described as thoughtless, i.e., like a butt that shamelessly passes gas.⁷⁸

7. *Gāwō*⁷⁹ (Belly, Stomach)

(1:96) *Gāwe^h kō kōyū*.⁸⁰
 “His belly hurts”.

In other words: he is jealous, feels neglected, unnoticed, and this shows when somebody else (present or not, usually of a similar age) is praised, but this person is overlooked – intentionally or not. The symptoms of this reaction are: making oneself appear smaller, looking away, expressing in one’s looks a hidden sadness or resentment, a feeling of unworthiness, and sometimes outright rebellion. A child is most devastated when hearing: *Ṭammāmē ʿal qarʿoh*⁸¹ [“Shame be on your head”] or *Qaṭmō ʿal qarʿoh* [“Ashes on your head”].⁸² In no case is this saying related to physical pain.

It is nothing new that conflicts arise between siblings, for example, when one of them is favoured (regardless of gender) by their parents or grandparents for their looks, resourcefulness, courage, articulateness, good posture, good grades, or diligence with chores. In such cases, the other child (or other children) feels underrated; compare the Biblical example of Joseph.

(2:97) *Gāwe^h māṭī sē nḥīre^h*.
 “His belly reached his nose”.

He is obese, with a plump belly (the most common symptom of male obesity!), almost reaching his nose. The saying implies slight criticism, but also acknowledges that one lives in comfortable prosperity.

that thing”], *rīṣī tammaʿkar dar qūni miflis* [“The beard of a greedy man is in the arse of the bankrupt man”], *ḥammam bʿurṭyāsa lak sāxin* [“You don’t heat up your bath with a fart”] (Sabar, ‘Multilingual Proverbs’, no. 129, 126, 110, 58). In other versions, also encountered in the Arabic dialect of Āzaḥ, instead of a bath an omelette is mentioned.

⁷⁸ Proverbs no. 4, 5, 7, 8 and 9 appear in Bulut, *Maṭle ṭurʿabdīnōye*, under numbers 167, 166, 68, 72, 102, p. 104, 104, 46, 49, 67.

⁷⁹ Eastern Assyrian uses *gaw* to mean “inside” – so thus the word *gāwō* is commonly used to describe “innards”. It is probably the source of the Arabic dialectal: *ḡuwwā*.

⁸⁰ Appears also in a verbal version: *Kō māḳū gāwe^h* [“He hurts his belly”].

⁸¹ According to Robert Payne Smith, *A Compendious Syriac Dictionary, founded upon the Thesaurus Syriacus*, ed. J. Payne Smith, Winona Lake, Indiana 1998, p. 176, the base of the word *ṭammāme* is the verb *ṭmā* – to bring shame. This is probably the source of the Arabic literary: *tāma* in a slightly modified meaning of ‘catastrophe’, ‘misfortune’, ‘Doomsday’ (as a noun) and ‘sly’ (as an adjective). The word *qarʿō* – as stated above – means head.

⁸² See no. (15:53) above.

- (3:98) *Kuzze gāwe^h.*
 “His belly goes”.

In other words: he has diarrhoea.

- (4:99) *Lək tōre ḥabrō b-gāwe^h.*
 “He doesn’t leave a word in his belly”.

He cannot keep a secret. Even when not asked, he expresses himself on a subject, providing details which can harm him or his family. One has to be careful around him, not trust him.

- (5:100) *Rōḥūmō d-gāwe^h-yō.*
 “He is an admirer of his own belly”.

He goes to great lengths to please himself with food. Even though it isn’t necessarily at other people’s expense, in their eyes he is seen as unsophisticated, lacking self-restraint and sympathy, possibly also being greedy or egoistic.⁸³

- (6:101) *ʔŪ gāwō d-sōwə^c, ʔī ʔaynō g-mīnakfō.*
 “When the belly is full, the eye is ashamed”.

The meaning is clear, though – fortunately – this shameful practice is not employed or effective in every case and everywhere, especially not in self-respecting countries and civilised societies. The proverb says that if you invite somebody, e.g. for a good lunch, they will not refuse your request. This is commonly known as corruption.⁸⁴

- (7:102) *ʔŪ gāwō sāwə^c, ēlō ʔī ʔaynō hēs kāfəntō-yō.⁸⁵*
 “The belly is full, but the eye is still hungry”.

This describes a case when the food looks so pleasant, appetizing, and tempting that even a sated person would not refuse to take a bite or would not stop eating.

⁸³ The lack of respect for such a person in others’ eyes is attested by the Egyptian saying: *Mən kānət ḥamməto^h baṭno^h, qīmtō^h mā ḥaraḡ mənḥā* [“He whose concern is in his belly has no other value”] (Taymūr, *Al-Amṭāl al-ʔāmmiyya*, no. 2871, p. 478).

⁸⁴ Such a habit has been forced by unpunished civil servants, e.g. in Syria, preying on citizens; even nowadays they will not fulfil the simplest request without “bakshish”. Unfortunately, this has almost become a rule. A similar saying is found in Egypt and most likely beyond: *ʔfəəm əl-famm, təstəḥī əl-ʔən* (Taymūr, *Al-Amṭāl al-ʔāmmiyya*, no. 151, p. 27). Surprisingly, a closer similarity to the example from Tūr ʔAbdīn is found in Libya: *ʔfəəm əl-bṭēna, təstəḥī əl-wēna* [“Feed the belly and the eye will feel ashamed”] (Rugūbī, ‘Verbal Correlatives in Popular Proverbs’, p. 28).

⁸⁵ An identical saying is found in Libya: *ʔl-ʔən ḡrʔāne^h wə-l-baṭən šəbʔāne^h* [“The eye is hungry and the belly is full”] (Rugūbī, ‘Verbal Correlatives in Popular Proverbs’, p. 28).

(8:103) ʔŪ laḥmō da-ḥ-ḥēṭē kōba^cle^h gāwō mē fūlad.

“Bread made of wheat requires a stomach made of steel”.

Wheat bread is a measure of social or material status. Regardless of one’s wealth, a noble man is one who has unchanging feelings towards his relatives, friends, and acquaintances, and is constantly dedicated to the community. Replacing barley bread – commonly associated with poverty – with wheat bread should not influence one’s personality and attitude. The saying also reveals a degree of resentment towards those whose mentality is subject to change depending on their material wealth or position.⁸⁶

(9:104) ʔŪ muklō latyō dīdī, mā ʔū gāwo-ste⁸⁷ latyō dīdī!

“The food is not mine, but is the belly equally not mine”!

This expression is used by a guest to justify himself when – even though he is not hungry or claims he has already eaten (which may not be true) – the host persuades him to continue eating, which is the duty of any self-respecting host.⁸⁸

8. Raḡlō (Leg, Foot)

(1:105) Azze^h bayna-r-raḡlē (or) qma-r-raḡlē.

“He went among the legs”.

In other words: he got lost in the crowd, disappeared, was not noticed by the participants of an assembly, but also his effort, work and statements were in vain. It was not his fault that what he sowed did not sprout, or – intentionally or unintentionally – the sprouts were trampled.

(2:106) Fṭāšle^h raḡle^h zād mē qumte^h.⁸⁹

“Stretched his leg further than his height”.

He miscalculated his strength. In attempting to accomplish a task, he exceeded his capabilities. He did not manage to finish what he began, he succumbed to failure.

(3:107) Lō mḥalqat raḡloḥ rāḥūqō dlō mitarplat.⁹⁰

“Do not throw your leg too far so you do not fall down”.

⁸⁶ Already published in Abdalla, *Kultura żywienia*, pp. 131–132.

⁸⁷ A possible etymology of the suffix *-ste*, see Tezel, *Comparative Etymological Studies*, p. 250.

⁸⁸ The essence of proverbs #88 and #89 can be found in the Mosul saying: *Bə-l-təmm hlēḥəl w bə-l-baṭən ʿazā* [“Hallelujah on the lips, grief in the stomach”] (Haddād, ‘Al-Āṭār al-ārāmiyya’, p. 135).

⁸⁹ This proverb is also attested by Asmar, *Hikam az-zamān*, p. 20.

⁹⁰ The proverb is quoted by Bulut, *Maṭle turʿabdīnōye*, no. 121, p. 78.

In our everyday activities each of us has their own limits and not everyone can summon as much willpower, ambition, determination and strength as is required for accomplishing a task they had never dealt with before. For some people, this can be risky and result in defeat, which is what this saying warns against.

(4:108) *Mḥēle^h ʿū nargō⁹¹ b-raḡle^h d-rūḥe^h.*
 “He hit his leg with the axe”.

He made a bad choice: did not react immediately to the first indicators of a crooked game, of unacceptable behaviour or life choices by a family member. His losses and failures are his own fault. This is an equivalent of scoring an “own goal” in sports.

(5:109) *Raḡle^h b-ḥēnō-yō.*
 “His leg is covered with henna”.

He is very delicate and so careful that it makes him heavy. He takes care of his feet like a woman takes care of her hair, which she covers with henna to strengthen and beautify it.

(6:110) *Raḡle^h yāqurtō-yō.⁹²*
 “His leg is heavy”.

He is not willing to pay visits to anyone at all or to someone specific. Such is his nature, and when he is encouraged to visit somebody or go somewhere he can be seen hesitating, being indecisive. Even if he can be convinced, he does it without enthusiasm or eagerness.

(7:111) *Raḡlō ʿal raḡlō.*
 “Foot on foot”.

The saying emphasizes that someone is doing well, there is nothing to worry about, he lives comfortably.⁹³

⁹¹ In a brochure by Fehmi Bargello, *Bēṭ-Nahrīn – darguštō d-mardūtō* [Mesopotamia – the Cradle of Culture], Jönköping 2003, p. 31, the tool closest to *nargō* is an axe. The illustration in the brochure shows that on both sides of the handle the blade has the same length, but one end is sharp, while the other is blunt.

⁹² There exists also a saying with the opposite meaning: *Raḡle^h ḥāyāftō-yō* [“His leg is light”].

⁹³ Placing one leg on top of the other in the presence of people you do not know may be perceived as indicating a lack of respect for them.

9. *Fēmō* (Mouth)

- (1:112) *D-hōwē fēmoh malyō rūqē, lō rayqat qmū nuhrōyō.*
 “Even if your mouth is full of saliva, do not spit in front of strangers”.

Even if your head is full of thoughts and you can't hold yourself back, it is paramount that you think before you speak, especially in the presence of strangers or people one doesn't know well. It is most important to not reveal secrets which can harm oneself, one's closest relatives or others, or bring shame on somebody.⁹⁴

- (2:113) *Habrō bū fēmō-yō.*
 “It's just a word in the mouth”.

We (you) cannot believe what is said hastily and uncritically. Whoever said this does not believe it himself. It is not real. So it is unwise to take it seriously. We (you) have to be careful.

- (3:114) *Fāyāš fēme^h fīhō.*
 “His mouth was opened”.

Somebody was amazed by something or saw something which impressed him greatly.

- (4:115) *Mē fēmoh l-^oadne^h dā-lōhō.*
 “From your mouth to God's ear”.

A form of wish that one's prayers be heard and answered.

- (5:116) *ʔŪ fākō d-fēme^h latyō dīde^h.*⁹⁵
 “The bite in his mouth is not his”.

The person described by this proverb is unusually welcoming and so generous that they are ready to give everything they own to those in need, including the food which is already in their mouth.

⁹⁴ Warnings against abusive speech are frequent in wisdom literature; among the sayings of Ahiqar we encounter: “Watch over your mouth so it does not harm you”, “The mouth's trap is more dangerous than an ambush in war” (Tronina, Starowiejski, *Apokryfy syryjskie*, no. 14b, p. 26, no. 16, p. 27). In some Arab countries there exist various ways of “opinion polling”. An almost 100-year-old man was asked by a stranger when leaving church after Mass (Qāmašlī, 1961): “Which times are better – now or when you were young?” In 1958–1961 Syria and Egypt were officially one country under the name of the United Arab Republic. Seeing through the intentions of the inquirer the old man answered: “Definitely now. Our women no longer have to make noodles at home – they can buy them in a shop!”.

⁹⁵ Appears in Asmar, *Ḥikam az-zamān*, p. 15. A Mosul proverb with the opposite meaning is: *Yāntāš əl-ləqme mə-l-təmm* [“To grab a bite from the mouth”] (Ḥaddād, ‘Al-Ātār al-ārāmiyya’, p. 164).

- (6:117) ܘܘܢ ܦܐܟܘܢ ܡܐܦܝ ܠܘܟܡܘܢ.
 “The bite has reached the mouth”.

This usually describes critical situations when one faces a dilemma. The work is almost done, but can it be completed? The hardships of raising a child or nurturing a crop will soon bring expected results, but will I be able to enjoy them? This is an eternal problem inscribed in the life of an Assyrian. The conditions in the Middle East too often force people to suddenly abandon their home, leaving behind the achievements of their ancestors: real estate, vineyards, even food reserves.

10. *Fōtō* (also *Pōtō*) (Face)

- (1:118) *B-fōtō ḥləqtō w ḥdō dlō ḥlōqō.*
 “One side of the face shaved, the other unshaved”.

This saying is about urging someone to come immediately to an important family occasion. The person in question is supposed to leave before he even finishes shaving his face.

- (2:119) *Fōte^h ḥəd ḥlamtō d-laḥmō-yō.*
 “His face is like a loaf of bread”.

This saying describes the physical appearance of someone plump, living in abundance and good health, who is successful in life. His face is so round that it looks like a magnificent loaf of village bread.⁹⁶

- (3:120) *Fōte^h māšəgtō-yō ba mazrūqayde^h.*⁹⁷
 “His face is washed with his urine”.

He has no shame, is uncultured, untrustworthy, has no conscience, does not respect elders and those worthy of esteem. His behaviour and attitude towards others are defiant, ostentatious, do not fit within social norms; they are unacceptable, but he does not care about it.

Though there exists a wide range of various customs accepted widely on a global scale, the criteria for assessing one’s degree of conformity in following them are often subjective, just like reactions to inappropriate or socially harmful incidents or habits. It

⁹⁶ Traditional Middle Eastern bread comes in the shape of round flat cakes, which is mirrored in a Mosul saying that relates to the round shape not only of a bread loaf, but also of a Communion host: *Wəččō^h mətəl-əl-baršūne* [“His face like a Communion host”] (Ḥaddād, ‘Al-Āṭār alārāmiyya’, p. 162).

⁹⁷ In the original version instead of *mazrūqē* [‘urine’] there was probably the word *rūqe* [‘spit’], which is more logical – this version is found in Bulut, *Maṭle tur‘abdīnōye*, no. 198, p. 123. A corresponding saying from Mosul is: *Wəččō^h bāb ḥammām* [“His face is like a bathroom door”] (Ḥaddād, ‘Al-Āṭār alārāmiyya’, p. 161).

has to be assumed, however, that in each case the reaction reveals one's attitude, being a measure of knowledge and tolerance.

- (4:121) *Kītō laħmō ʿal fōṭe^h.*
 “There is bread on his face”.

Describes a person whose sudden appearance or mere physical presence brings success in a specific situation or endeavour. It mostly refers to a new-born child, if their arrival into the world coincided with an improvement in the quality of life of the family or a notable professional, educational, or other success for one of the family members. A person so described is perceived as being unusually good-looking, regardless of their gender. This expression can also describe a fiancé or fiancée, groom or bride, when one or both families see an improvement in their life conditions during the period of engagement or after the marriage.

- (5:122) *Kō māḵəm fōṭe^h.*
 “Makes his face black”.

The person in question lies, does not tell the truth, pretends not to know, not to have heard or seen.

- (6:123) *Kō mōħe^h ʿū ħabrō bī fōṭō.⁹⁸*
 “He hits the word right in the face”.

He speaks directly, bluntly, manoeuvring and flattering. He points out the mistakes of others loudly and not very gently, reminding them of their earlier statements, declarations, or attitudes.

11. *Garmō* (Bone)

- (1:124) *Ag-garmē dīdan-nē w ʿū baṣrō ēluħ-yō.*
 “The bones are ours, and the meat belongs to you”.

This saying was heard in villages where the locals employed a teacher who would help their children learn to read and write. It was said that the teacher travelled around the villages in the night to see whether the children were working on their lessons in the dim light of petroleum lamps. Parents were so concerned with their children's education that they allowed teachers to take over disciplining their children by repeating the above sentence.⁹⁹

⁹⁸ In the Āzālā version, it is given by Iṣḥāq, *Amṭāl min Bāzābde*, no. 737, p. 165: *Yəḍrəb kəlmātū fī wəĉĉ raḥfīqū.*

⁹⁹ A similar meaning is hidden in a harsh Egyptian saying, but the acting party here is the parents, not the teacher: *Iḍrab ibnak w-əħsen adabo^h, mā ymūt illā lammā yaḥrağ ağalo^h* [“Beat your son and straighten his behaviour, for he will not die before his time is due”] (Taymūr, *Al-Amṭāl al-ĉammīyya*, no. 143, p. 26). Ahiqar

- (2:125) *K-yōtū w māṣaṭ lag-garmē dī lāšayde^h.*
 “He sits and listens to the bones of his body”.

This proverb suggests that in the environment where it was created people believed bones were a bodily mean for the memory storage, where all the information about the events of a lifetime would be written. A person so described carries a heavy load of rather sad memories and experiences, which evoke reflection, sympathy, and respect.

- (3:126) *Mōfaqlē^h garmō mē cayne^h.*¹⁰⁰
 “He took out a bone from his eye”.

He tired someone with his incessant talking to the point of the listener giving up; he pressed so doggedly that the interlocutor yielded to his demands, not because of his arguments, but simply to get rid of him.

- (4:127) *Nāfəl rūḥō ba-g-garmayde^h.*
 “A soul (=life) entered his bones”.

The word *rūḥō* is a synonym for life, as attested by the popular sayings: *Laytō rūḥō ʿēbe^h* [“There’s no sign of life in him” and “He is exceptionally lazy”], *ʿĪ rūḥō nāfiqō mēne^h* [“Life left him”]. This particular saying means that life returned to him, e.g. when he warmed up after suffering from hypothermia.

- (5:128) *ʿŪ garmayde^h cwiḡō-yō.*
 “His bone is crooked”.

It is a negative assessment of a person who out of stubbornness does not act in accordance with accepted moral norms or arrangements.

- (6:129) *ʿŪ šalfō māfī lū garmō.*¹⁰¹
 “The knife reached the bone”.

Can be used in two situations:

- to ascertain the painful reality that the situation is serious and immediate action is necessary;
- someone has crossed the line and has to be stopped without further delay.

is quoted as saying: “My son, do not spare your son from beatings, for they are to a boy what fertilizer is to a garden” (Tronina, Starowieyski, *Apokryfy syryjskie*, no. 22, p. 40).

¹⁰⁰ Appears in Bulut, *Maṭle ṡuʿabdinōye*, no. 217, p. 136.

¹⁰¹ Also in Asmar, *Hikam az-zamān*, p. 30.

12. *Qdōlō*¹⁰² (Neck)

- (1:130) *Hīīī b-qdōloh*.¹⁰³
 “My sins on your neck”.

The sentence represents strong advice and a strong request to do or avoid something. It sounds gentle and betrays trust between the interlocutors, with a large dose of hope, bordering on the conviction that this will be done.

- (2:131) *ʔī ryaqtō ʿaṣyō b-qdōle^h*.
 “Spit got stuck in his throat”.

He was reprimanded and could say nothing in his defence, being buried under endless arguments to the point where he lost the dispute and had nothing to say. In a different context: a peacefully disposed, reserved, level-headed person is verbally attacked or threatened (justly, even if for an unimportant reason, a one-time incident, an unintentional or accidental action, or unjustly – but in both cases inadequately) by someone who is pushy, foul-mouthed, harsh and known for aggressiveness – and prefers to remain silent. The proverb is used with a hint of sympathy towards them and resentment or disapproval towards the assailant.

- (3:132) *Maḥtōle^h b-qdōlī*.
 “He placed it in my neck”.

This cliché describes a situation where the blame is placed on someone who is not guilty.

- (4:133) *Manšafle^h qdōle^h*.
 “He dried somebody’s neck”.

The expression has a similar meaning to the one above. In a discussion one participant used arguments and conclusions to the point where he silenced his opponent, who had nothing more to say and finally gave up. It is also used when someone reprimands another person for an inappropriate deed, incident or behaviour that does not conform to established social norms.

¹⁰² Due to people’s limited knowledge of human anatomy the word *qdōlō* also describes the esophagus.

¹⁰³ It is quoted by Ishāq, *Amṭāl min Bāzʿabde*, no. 505, p. 119, in a slightly different, milder sense for an unspecified person: *ʔal-ḥaṭṭiyyē fī raqbət flān*.

- (5:134) *Qdōle^h lō kuzze^h qum ġarġar.*¹⁰⁴
 “Even a *ġarġar* can jump over his neck”.

This describes the physical appearance of an overweight person, with a neck so thick and muscular that even the *ġarġar* blade cannot injure or penetrate it.

- (6:135) *Ṭrōwē (= Ṭrō hōwē) qdōloh^h ḥdī gamlō w gāwuh^h ḥdū tawrō.*¹⁰⁵
 “May your neck be like a camel’s, and your belly like a bull’s”.

The quality of being corpulent used to be (and maybe still is?) a sign of a life of abundance. In addition, pale skin differentiated those who led a sedentary lifestyle (literate civil servants) from workers or peasants who spent most of the time outside, under the sun and were usually illiterate. This proverb advises one to pursue the career of a civil servant, which can be achieved through education, which requires working on one’s abilities in the shade. In some situations this saying can express a call to be physically strong, or to resist or not give up.

13. *Admō* (Blood)

- (1:136) *Laytēbe^h admō.*¹⁰⁶
 “There is no blood in him”.

There is no reaction from him or no activity whatsoever in response to words, stimuli, or signals. A person thus described displays a passive attitude in almost any situation, so that nobody would even ask their opinion.

- (2:137) *ʔŪ admayde^h ḥāyīfō-yō.*¹⁰⁷
 “His blood is light”.

This saying distinguishes a person who is naturally calm and does not create an atmosphere of conflict, is socially apt and not so much agile as they are tactful, cultured, understanding and unobtrusive; a person who does not impose themselves on others, who is likable.

¹⁰⁴ *Ġarġar*, or a cutter-thresher, has been known in the Middle East since ancient times and was called a *tribulum* by the Romans. In the 1960s in north-east Syria there were specialized workshops producing *ġarġar*. The tool is equipped with two wooden rollers, fitted out with big and sharp blades (*nargē*): some parallel to the long axis of the cylinder, others perpendicular. A description of an identical tool, with the same name and function, is found in Bār Bahlūl (Rubens Duval, *Hassano Bar Bahlul Lexicon Syriacum*, Amsterdam 1970, vol. II, pp. 514–515). The inhabitants of Tūr ʿAbdīn probably knew other methods for threshing; in a brochure with illustrations and the names of agricultural tools by Bargello, *Bēl-Nahrīn*, *ġarġar* does not appear.

¹⁰⁵ The saying is also quoted by Asmar, *Hikam az-zamān*, p. 21.

¹⁰⁶ Appears in *ibidem*, p. 34.

¹⁰⁷ Mentioned by Asmar, *ibidem*, p. 32.

- (3:138) ʔŪ *admayde^h māyīrō-yō*.¹⁰⁸
 “His blood is bitter”.

The saying describes a person whose facial features, especially their eyes and nose, and sometimes also their voice or gestures, provoke an unjustified subjective aversion, leading one to turn away from them or avoid direct contact. Such an opinion is often heard in the street based on the superficial observations of passers-by.

- (4:139) ʔŪ *admayde^h šāhīnō-yō*.¹⁰⁹
 ‘His blood is hot’.

He gets angry too quickly, without justification, and he reacts or makes decisions too quickly without thinking them through, proceeding to action impulsively, without calculating, which he often later regrets. Does not listen to reason, harming not only himself, but also others.

- (5:140) ʔŪ *admō lək-kōwē māyē*.¹¹⁰
 “Blood does not turn into water”.

This saying underscores the importance and irreplaceability of the bonds of blood, acknowledging the duties one has towards one’s relatives and the trust one can place in them. One does not choose one’s family.

14. *Galdō* (Skin)

- (1:141) *Galde^h kō hōyək*.
 “His skin itches”.

¹⁰⁸ Also encountered in the opposite meaning: ʔŪ *admayde^h halyō-yō* [“His blood is sweet”].

¹⁰⁹ The second part of the saying is included in Asmar, *Hikam az-zamān*, p. 41. There exists an opposite version: ʔŪ *admayde^h qāyīrō-yō* [“His blood is cold”], meaning he is lazy, slow, excessively sluggish and inert.

¹¹⁰ A shortened version appears among the Jews of Zakho: *Dumma l-dumma grāšix* (Sabar, ‘Multilingual Proverbs’, no. 4; the author’s explanation: *The blood of relatives who had not known each other boils when they meet*). A more expanded version appears among Egyptian proverbs: ʔ*Il-dīfr mā yaṭlaʿs min əl-laḥm wə-l-damm mā yəbqāš mayya* [“The fingernail does not abandon the flesh, and blood will not become water”] (Taymūr, *Al-Amṭāl al-ʿāmmiyya*, no. 1768, p. 300), ʔ*Umri-d-damm mā yibqa mayya* [“Blood never turns into water”] (no. 1950, p. 330), *Mā yaḥməl hammak, illā-l-lī min dammak* [“Your worries are only shared by a relative”] (no. 2672, p. 446). A reassuring meaning is found in another Egyptian proverb: *Sikkīnat əl-aḥl mtallima* [“A relative’s knife is blunt”] (no. 1606, p. 272). In this context it is appropriate to mention that both ancient Assyrian-Egyptian and Christian-era Antioch-Alexandrian relations, including linguistic borrowings, are thousands of years old. For more details on Antioch-Alexandrian relations, including Syriac borrowings in Egypt, see M. Abdalla, M. Rucki, ‘To South-East of Rome: Relations between the Syriac and Coptic Churches’, *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft*, 172/2 (2022), pp. 347–372.

The saying describes a person who:

- is provocative, who does not accept agreements, does not want to compromise in situations which could potentially lead to violence; it can also refer to a child who does not want to calm down, who stubbornly and relentlessly demands something from parents that they are unable to provide;
- a feisty, confrontational person who will not leave others alone. Bystanders may attempt to persuade them that their attempts will lead nowhere.

It corresponds to the proverb #10 above: *ʿAynōtē sāmīqī* [“His eyes reddened”].

- (2:142) *Hāwī galdō w garmō.*
 “He became skin and bone”.

In other words: he lost weight due to illness, nostalgia, platonic love,¹¹¹ hard work or malnutrition. His looks inspire sympathy and concern.

- (3:143) *Nāfəq mē galde^h.*¹¹²
 “He went out of his skin”.

He became very angry, to an uncontrollable degree.

- (4:144) *ʿŪ galdayde^h hlīmō-yō.*¹¹³
 “His skin is thick”.

This proverb does not require further explanation.

- (5:145) *ʿŪ hā dlō hōyək u galdayde^h b-ʿīdē d-rūhe, lēbe^h ləg fōyəḥ.*
 “Who does not scratch his skin with his own hand, will not be satisfied”.

This proverb showcases a common principle that just as an itchy place is only known to the person whose skin is itching, his needs and problems are known to nobody better than to himself. Hence it is best if one looks for a solution on one’s own to the best of one’s abilities, without engaging others.

¹¹¹ In the life of the Assyrian doctor Gabriel Baḥtīšō^c (died 828) such an episode was mentioned: a young man was brought to him who suffered from insomnia and a lack of appetite, and who was constantly losing weight. Not seeing any physical illnesses, the doctor told him to list the names of the girls he knew, while measuring his pulse. At the mention of one of the names, his heart rate suddenly shot up; the doctor advised the parents to ask for this girl’s hand for their son. See M. Abdalla ‘Assyrian Loyalty and Devotion to Medical Profession: Three Centuries of Baḥtīšō^c’s Family Service to Mankind’, *Journal of Assyrian Academic Studies* 16/2 (2002), pp. 5–29.

¹¹² Appears in Asmar, *Hikam az-zamān*, p. 62.

¹¹³ Ibidem, p. 37.

15. *Hāṣh* (Back)

- (1:146) *ʔī naqla dlō mqāfat sōwō dā-mšaurat ʔēbe^h, snād hāṣuḥ l-šūrō!*¹¹⁴
 “When you can’t find an old man to consult, lean your back against a wall”!

This saying is directed at those who seek advice and support that is most easily obtained from those with great life experience. In the Middle East those are primarily elders, who are respected in society. Very often the oldest person in the family is called “the pillar of the household”. They are perceived as good advisors in any situation which requires a solution. The person seeking advice can feel his back “leaning against a wall”; the expression “back leaning against a wall” is itself associated with calming down, bringing hope or comfort, and making dangers irrelevant.

- (2:147) *Lō maṣrat hāṣuḥ ʔēbe^h!*
 “Do not tie your back to him”!

He cannot be counted on. He will not fulfil expectations or deliver on his promises. If you count on him only, you will lose or be disappointed. It is better to look for solutions elsewhere.

- (3:148) *Mḥalle lu-wa-brō – malle: āḥ hāṣī!*
 “They beat his son, and he said: Oh, my back”!

This expression is a reaction to an unfortunate event, not necessarily related to the son as the victim. It is both a piece of advice and a call to draw conclusions. If the resentful father had someone to support him, he would not experience failure and disappointment because the culprit would be too afraid to target his belongings.¹¹⁵

- (4:149) *Ṭūrō-yō b-hāṣuḥ.*¹¹⁶
 “He is [like] a mountain behind your back”.

This proverb underscores and reassures that the given family member, usually a son, is a great means of support and can be relied on; he will come to the rescue whenever necessary and will never leave the family to their fate. He can be trusted.

- (5:150) *Ṭwarte^h hāṣī.*
 “He broke my back”.

¹¹⁴ Taken from Bulut, *Maṭle turʿabdīnōye*, no. 106, p. 70.

¹¹⁵ A similar meaning is expressed by the Egyptian saying: *ʔllī lōh dahr mā yəndərabš ʿala baṭno^h* [“Who has a back, will not be hit on the belly”] (Taymūr, *Al-Amṭāl al-ʿāmmiyya*, no. 335, p. 56).

¹¹⁶ Appears in Asmar, *Ḥikam az-zamān*, p. 21.

This saying expresses regret, sadness, helplessness, and resignation after the loss of or a hardship faced by a close person who was relied upon to support the family and improve its material situation. It is often said by parents after the death of an adult son.

16. *Aḏnō* (Ear)

(1:151) *Bətləḥ aḏnī (bītō aḏnī).*

“You pierced my ear (my ear broke)”.

This saying is a firm way of pointing out that someone is speaking too loudly and in a monotonous way, indicating a request to stop.

(2:152) *D-ḥōzat bəṭre^h d-aḏnoḥ, ...*

“Just as it is impossible for you to see the back of your ear, so...”.

The second part of this saying is to make the listener aware that what they are intending to undertake or achieve, or what they are asking for is unattainable, just as it is impossible to see the back of one’s own ear.

(3:153) *Grāšle^h aḏne^h.*

“He pulled his ear”.

This expression communicates that someone has reprimanded or scolded someone else in a slightly harsher way than by just drawing attention to them. A type of mild punishment, the effect of which is to achieve obedience, a definitive means of persuasion to stop, desist and submit. Such a reaction to the inappropriate behavior of someone, usually or exclusively a younger family member, is considered in the eyes of society not only acceptable and right, but also praiseworthy. *Gəḏ gōrašnō aḏne^h* [“I will pull his ear”] is often uttered by someone ‘in the heat of the moment’ when hearing complaints or complaints against one of his children.

17. *Baṣrō* (Flesh)

(1:154) *Baṣrō dlō garmē layt.*¹¹⁷

“There is no flesh without bones”.

This expression underlines an organic, cause-effect relationship between work and the results that are its fruits. Without effort one cannot achieve any success. Just like flesh is attached to the bones, covering and protecting them, there exists a close and vital co-dependency between them in a sense of their creation; similarly persistent work, effort and commitment can guarantee the continuity of expected results.

¹¹⁷ The proverb is mentioned in Bulut, *Maṭle ṭur^cabdīnōye*, no. 145, p. 92.

- (2:155) *D-oḥlīnā baṣrō dā-ḥdōdē, lə-k-kuḥlīnā garmē dā-ḥdōdē*.¹¹⁸
 “Even if we eat each other’s flesh, we can’t eat our own bones”.

The proverb underscores the naturally strong biological and spiritual connection between relatives. Regardless of the type of misunderstanding, they cannot significantly harm one another; even saying this in moments of tension can reduce it, directing the conflicted parties towards finding a solution.

- (3:156) *Ḥīle^h ʔū baṣraydan*.
 “He devoured our flesh”.

He is relentless and his whining is unbearable. He won’t stop talking, his mouth never shuts, to the point where others can’t stand him. Others need to actively react to stop him. If this is about a child, the parents would usually make a concession, at least partially trying to fulfil the child’s demands.

18. *Daqnō* (Beard)

- (1:157) *Bū daqnānō*.
 “On this beard”.

The person saying this phrase would at the same time grasp his beard with the thumb, index finger and middle finger of his right hand, top to bottom. He thus wants to emphasise his determination to deliver on what he has promised or his readiness to fulfil his threat regardless of the consequences. Such a sign can be a warning for others that threats made by someone (mentioned by name) towards someone else (also mentioned by name) may be realised.

- (2:158) *Māḥātī daqnī b-ʔīde^h*.
 “I put my beard in his hand”.

Voluntarily, trustingly, inadvertently or by being naïve, I provided him with a means to treat me as he pleases. I lent him money, I let him use my equipment, accepted him under my roof, shared my possessions, did him a favour or agreed to a compromise, and now he commands me, dictates his conditions to me. I have become completely dependent on his good or bad will.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁸ Appears in Asmar, *Hikam az-zamān*, p. 17.

¹¹⁹ In the Egyptian collection we find three proverbs with a similar meaning: 1) *Āḥir əl-ma^crūf yəndereb bə-l-kfūf* [‘The result of philanthropy is beating one’s hands’], 2) *ʔsl eš-šarr fi^cl əl-ḥēr* [‘The source of evil are good deeds’], 3) *ʔAllimto^h as-sirqa ḥatt ʔido^h fi-l-ḥirqa* [‘I taught him to be a thief, he put his hand in my clothes’] (Taymūr, *Al-Amṯāl al-ʔāmmiyya*, no. 6, 141, 1924, p. 2, 25, 325).

- (3:159) *Mē kul daqnō manṭō.*
 “From every beard a hair”.

The proverb describes a state of skilful knowledge and experience acquired from varying sources. This can be a piece of advice for a student or an expression of respect towards someone who is well-versed in various topics.

19. *Sawkō* (Hair)¹²⁰

- (1:160) *Kītō manṭō bū qāṭīrō.*
 “There is a hair in the yoghurt”.

This phrase is used when the interlocutor makes an impression of hiding a detail, or when a person acts in a way that is designed to mislead others.¹²¹

- (2:161) *Sawkē^h ḥāwī ka^ckō* or *Sawkē^h ḥāwār.*
 “His hair has become like *ka^ckō*” or “His hair has turned white”.

Ka^ckō is a type of white crescent-shaped pastry with a diameter up to 10 cm, with a hole in the middle, made for sick children. The proverb describes advanced age or living through moments of horror or difficult times, but also the personal aspect of difficult family relationships or a life of misfortunes and worries.

- (3:162) *Sawkī ḥāwār.*
 “My hair turned white”.

Describes exasperation due to a long wait for somebody or something.¹²²

20. ‘*Aršō* (Tooth)

- (1:163) *‘Aršōnē^h twīrī bū ḥaudal.*¹²³
 “His teeth broke [while eating] *ḥaudal*”.

Ḥaudal is a type of custard, which is made by slowly pouring wheat flour into hot grape juice while stirring constantly until the mixture thickens. Such a dessert, usually

¹²⁰ It is worth noting that there are five words describing body hair in the Tūr ‘Abdīn dialect: *manṭō* (hair, plural *mēnē*, indicates chest hair), *sa^crō* (hair in general, including animal fur), *sawkō* (hair on a human head), *šā^cre* (pubic hair), *šahfō* (hair on the head, usually lush and disheveled).

¹²¹ Considered in M. Abdalla, ‘Milk – its culinary uses and role in Assyrian/Aramean Culture – Then and Now’, in: *Ausgewählte Beiträge zur aramäischen Sprache, Geschichte und Kultur*, ed. Shabo Talay, Piscataway 2008, pp. 11–34.

¹²² Such a state is better described by the Mosul saying: *Šāb rāsī wā-l-‘adas mā rādāḥ* [“My head became grey, and the lentils are still not cooked/softened”] (Ḥaddād, ‘Al-Āṭār alārāmiyya’, p. 144). The Arabic verb *rādāḥ* is explained by Ḥaddād to be borrowed from the Aramaic *rāḥ* or *rkēḥ*.

¹²³ The saying is listed in Bulut, *Matle ṭur‘abdīnōye*, no. 235, p. 147.

made during periods of fasting, is soft and everybody can eat it, even those who have no teeth. The saying describes a person who is unable to perform even simple tasks or performs them ineptly, and is often used to allude to a person who comes up with various excuses to avoid doing something.

- (2:164) *Kul ^caršō m-dīde^h kōḥəl ʔa^cmō.*
 “Every tooth of his has a taste”.

He indulges himself and can afford any dish, including expensive, seasonal or exotic delicacies. The saying describes a person living in affluence or who treats eating itself as an important goal of life, probably with a hidden, indistinct, and not directly expressed hint of jealousy, which however does not imply wishing the person ill.

21. *Katpō, katfō* (Shoulder)

- (1:165) *Katpī yāqurtō-yō.*
 “My shoulder is heavy”.

An expression of doubt in the sense of performing a certain task, undertaking a certain action. For the person saying this, many issues remain unclear, making them hesitate with their decision, and they have doubts whether the chosen person is up to the task.

- (2:166) *Manḥət katfō!*
 “Lower your shoulder”!

In other words: drop this, accept a compromise!

22. *Nḥīrō* (Nose)

- (1:167) *ʔŪ nḥīrō dlō yōqəḏ, dam^cō lək nəḥtō.*¹²⁴
 “If the nose doesn’t get burned, the tear won’t flow”.

The proverb describes a situation where sympathy and solidarity are expressed towards a family member who has been subjected to some misfortune, mixed with a sense of duty in terms of helping them. It should be noted that the saying mentions two organs located near each other in the body. The source of this saying or the inspiration for it was probably a verse from Corinthians.¹²⁵

¹²⁴ Appears in Asmar, *Hikam az-zamān*, p. 19.

¹²⁵ 1 Corinthians 12:26.

- (2:168) *Nhīre^h lō kō yōqəd.*¹²⁶
 “His nose doesn’t burn”.

The saying entails a reprimand for a person’s withdrawal from society, indifference and callousness. A person described in such way is not interested in what is happening around them, does not react, does not speak up about topics that require an opinion or intervention.

23. *Saptō* (Lip)

- (1:169) *Sappōtē^h lak mōtən l-ḥdōdē.*
 “His lips do not touch”.

Although lips touch when pronouncing certain consonants, this expression describes a person who is exceptionally talkative, never shuts up, does not let others speak.

- (2:170) *Yārīḥō saptē^h.*
 “His lip grew longer”.

Describes a person who indulges in self-pity, feels internal pain they cannot or do not want to show or express. Such a state, combined with heartfelt but repressed crying, sometimes forced, is often seen in children who experience a temporary lack of care from their mother.

24. *Barkō* (Knee)

- (1:171) *ʔŪ laḥmattē^h ʔal barkōtayyē^h-yō.*¹²⁷
 “Their bread is on their knees”.

This proverb communicates disappointment with specific persons who, as long as they were in need, made an impression of being nice, grateful, appreciative and willing to return favours, but changed as soon as they received what they wanted. They suddenly turned away and pretended nothing had happened. They can no longer be trusted; they are like *dēwē b-galdē dā-ʔwōnē* [“Wolves in sheep skin”]. Another version of this proverb: *Ī malḥattē^h ʔal barkōtayyē^h-yō* [“They carry their salt on their knees”].

The intention behind this metaphor can be described graphically. It is known that bread and salt in folk culture represent humanity, nobility, and closeness, but the influence

¹²⁶ Listed in Bulut, *Maṭle ṭurʔabdinōye*, no. 218, p. 137.

¹²⁷ The saying is mentioned in Asmar, *Ḥikam az-zamān*, p. 38. Among the proverbs of the inhabitants of Qarabāš (Karabaş, 14 km to the east from Diyarbakir), bread is replaced with salt (Yūsuf Qarabāši, ‘Min amṭāl Qarabāš’ [From the Proverbs of Qarabāš], *Al-Mağalla al-Batiryarkiyya* (Damascus), 159 (1978), pp. 548–551).

of those is minimal on people who are not characterised by such features. They do not appreciate the deep meaning of bread and salt, unscrupulously taking what they want and desiring everything; but when the smallest difficulty appears, the bread falls on the ground and the salt is spilled. Such people cannot be trusted, just as bread and salt on the ground is a sacrilege.

25. *Baynē-^caynē* (= *Bēṭ-^caynē*) (Forehead)

- (1:172) *Bī da^ctō d-baynē-^caynī.*
 “By the sweat of my forehead”.

This is what someone says who wants to make his interlocutors aware of the fact that he attained what he has honestly, thanks to his own hard work, and continues to do so. This biblical formula (Genesis 3:19) refers to performing physical work on the land to obtain food as a form of punishment for disobedience and sin. However, nowadays it also means mental work.¹²⁸

26. *Ġēnīkē* (Temple)

- (1:173) *Manqarleh^h ʔī ġēnīkaydī¹²⁹.*
 “He made my temple hurt”.

The saying underscores or expresses that a person’s whining or rambling has become insupportable. It is known that there is an artery just underneath the temple with blood flowing under high pressure.

27. *Knīšōrō* (Navel)

- (1:174) *Qtə^cleh^h knīšōre^h.*
 “He cut his navel”.

Often said with disbelief, a question mark or a hint of doubt, when someone seems to know everything about another person.

¹²⁸ Both the Egyptian saying: *ʔl-māl ʔllī mā tə^cab fih ʔl-yad, mā yəḥzən ʔl-qalb* [“Wealth not achieved through the labour of one’s hand doesn’t cause pain to one’s heart”] (Taymūr, *Al-Amṭāl al-^cāmmiyya*, no. 2641, p. 441), and the Libyan: *ʔllī mā yākol b-ʔido^h, mā yəšba^c* [“Who does not eat with his own hand will not be satisfied”] (Rugūbī, ‘Verbal Correlatives in Popular Proverbs’, p. 34), present the same meaning in a clearer manner.

¹²⁹ The word *ġēnīke* is of foreign origin, perhaps a Kurdish dialect. This part of the head in Syriac is called *šed^cō* (appears in: R. Payne Smith, *A Compendious Syriac English Dictionary, founded upon the Thesaurus Syriacus*, ed. J. Payne Smith, Winona Lake, Indiana 1998, p. 474, left column). Interestingly, the Arabic term for headache or migraine is almost identical: *šudā^c*.

28. *Mēḥō* (Brain)

(1:175) *Mēḥe^h hāwī dawgē*.
 “His brain became buttermilk”.

He is so tired and exhausted that he can no longer comprehend anything. He has been given too much advice or too many words of wisdom. He no longer understands what is spoken to him, having heard so many utterances and contradicting arguments at the same time that he has got lost and can no longer discern what is real and honest and what is false and full of lies. He has lost the ability to concentrate, has become disoriented and dazed.

29. *Ṣau^cō* (Finger)

(1:176) *Ṣau^cōṭoh latnē ḥad ḥdōdē*.¹³⁰
 ‘Your fingers are not equal’.

This saying aims at explaining and justifying the different attitudes, behaviours and reactions of people, including family members and especially children, of which one is gifted and self-reliant, while another is less talented and creative.¹³¹

30. *Ṣakkōṭē* (Testicles)

(1:177) *Hēš ṣakkōṭē la-ḥzēle ^cal mē rīš^h*.
 “He has not seen dark testicles above his head yet”.

Those who know this saying describe a trivial origin: the story of a man who was so amazed with his own physical dexterity that he believed nobody could defeat him. Others warned him that he could keep thinking so until he would see dark testicles hanging over his head, and this warning came true one day when a stronger man with a darker skin tone threw him to the ground and pinned down his chest with his knees.¹³²

Summary

The proverbs listed here concern many aspects of life. An analysis of their syntax shows that almost half of them (98) are nominal sentences, beginning with a noun (sometimes with an article or pronoun), 79 are verbal sentences in various forms (mostly

¹³⁰ An identical proverb appears in Zakho: *Kullu ṣub²ās ²īox lēwa xa²* (Sabar, ‘Multilingual Proverbs’, no. 83).

¹³¹ In Taymūr’s Egyptian collection of proverbs we can find the following variation: *ʿAl-qulūb mōš zayy ba^cdahā* [‘Hearts are not identical’] (Taymūr, *Al-Amṭāl al-^cāmmiyya*, no. 229, p. 386).

¹³² The proverb and its explanation are listed by Bulut, *Maṭle ṭur^cabdīnōye*, no. 181, p. 112. The stronger man had to be part of Bedouin society, because they traditionally do not wear pants.

in the third person, past tense), while others begin with another part of speech (pronoun, preposition, participle).

The composition of most proverbs makes them difficult to understand in direct translation for people from other cultures. It is also clear that the meaning of individual words provides no clue on the meaning of the whole expression, even for speakers of the language in which these proverbs are uttered. The semantic meaning of the compounds becomes obvious only when words are linked together and the sentence is treated as a whole; not uttering them together will disturb the accepted template, to which the speakers' ears are accustomed. The relationship between words is arbitrary, but the structure is tightly related to the meaning. It has to be noted that the authors of those sayings were not only observant and proficient in analytical thinking, but also had great linguistic intuitions and a sense of rhythm. They made an accurate diagnosis and came up with an interpretation of cultural customs. This concerns both the sequence of elements in a proverb and their creative associations. The conveyed chain of thought, invoked in specific circumstances, has become engraved – in spite of its flaws – in the memory of the members of a community thanks to the frequency of usage.

In conclusion, it has to be repeated that proverbs are most often used by those – both men and women – with the most life experience, which does not necessarily have to correlate with formal education. Instructive, critical proverbs are almost exclusively directed by an older person to a younger; one must by tradition respect their elders, especially parents and grandparents.

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