Preface

Until recent decades the fascination which Yezidism held for many Westerners lay predominantly in the mystery it represented. Nineteenth-century travellers were intrigued by a community of alleged devil-worshippers, whose members proved to be pleasant and cleanly, and showed none of the characteristics suggested by this sinister epithet. When these travellers' accounts were published in the West, academics became interested in the religion of this community, which they though might hold the clue to untold mysteries of the past, and they were eager for more information, ideally in the form of religious texts. The Yezidis, however, had a reputation for secrecy, which was justified as far as their sacred texts were concerned. For several decades, therefore, Western academics' demand for knowledge was not met by a supply of information that was regarded as relevant. Progress finally appeared to be made in the late 19th century, when two written texts became known which were believed to be the 'Sacred Books' of the Yezidis. However, the authenticity of these sources soon proved doubtful, and it came to be assumed that the Yezidis possessed no textual tradition of importance. As a result, Western academic interest in Yezidism faded in the course of the 1920s and '30s.

More than half a century later, some authentic sacred hymns of this community became known in the West. This led to the realisation that an extensive, orally transmitted body of religious compositions had in fact existed all along, but had been kept carefully hidden. Credit for the publication of these hymns was due to Yezidi scholars, not Westerners. In the course of the 1970s the brothers Jelil and Ordikhan Jelil collected Kurdish folklore in Armenia and included some Yezidi *Qewl*s in their well-known *Kurdskiĭ folklor'*; they did not, however, draw attention to the special character of these texts. Around the same time, in Iraq, Pir Khidir Sileman and Sheikh Khalil Jindy [Rashow], obtained permission from their religious authorities to collect and publish some of their fast-disappearing religious texts. When their book, *Êzdiyatî*, eventually became known in the West around 1990, it prompted a renewed interest in the Yezidi textual tradition. Some of the texts which the work contained were reproduced and translated in Kreyenbroek's *Yezidism: Its Background, Observances and Textual Tradition*, which also aimed to draw attention to the profound differences between the Yezidi tradition, which had long been transmitted without the use of writing, and the highly literate scriptural religions familiar to most Westerners.

These first specimens of Yezidi sacred poetry became known in the West at a time when the Yezidi tradition itself was undergoing profound changes. On the one hand, pressures in the homelands led to the migration of a sizeable proportion of the community to Europe. In the course of time these Yezidis reacted to their new cultural environment by seeking to describe their religious tradition in terms that would be comprehensible to their new neighbours and to their European-educated children—i.e. they began to seek answers to questions that were based on a non-indigenous mental map of what 'religion' was, and how it functioned. The other two religions best known to these Yezidis—Islam and Christianity—have unambiguous, authoritative, written religious traditions, and some Yezidis have come to feel the lack of these qualities in their own religious system. The (few) Yezidis in the Diaspora who still have part of their heritage by heart have therefore begun to publish sacred texts in community periodicals, which are neither easily accessible to non-Yezidis nor invariably long-lived.

The world-view of Yezidis in the countries of origin was likewise affected by literacy. Traditionally regarded as a taboo, the ability to read and write has now become the norm among Yezidi males, whose understanding of many aspects of life is increasingly influenced by literate culture. New ideas inspired by contacts with their co-religionists in the Diaspora and by the modernisation of their cultural environment have led many educated Yezidis in the homelands to search for more 'modern' ways of understanding their religion. At the same time, younger members of Qewwal families (who have the exclusive, hereditary right to perform sacred poetry on formal religious occasions), are increasingly disinclined to follow this exacting but increasingly unrewarding profession. It is therefore to be expected that much traditional knowledge will be lost within the coming two to three decades. Moreover, such factors as migration and modernity are likely to lead to conscious or unconscious reinterpretations of the cultural framework within which the pre-modern Yezidi textual tradition existed. We have almost no adequate descriptions of traditional Yezidi culture at present, and it could well prove nearly impossible to recover authentic pre-modern data a few decades from now.

It seems imperative, therefore, to document as much as possible of the contents of the Yezidis religious tradition, and also of its pre-modern cultural context. As a first step in this direction, a research programme was set up in the University of Göttingen which aimed to collect and publish as much as possible of the Yezidi religious textual tradition, to study the contents in the light of their original cultural context, and finally to contribute to the knowledge of oral literary culture by seeking to analyse the way in which the various components of that tradition functioned and interacted.

The process of collecting texts and discussing contexts yielded far more than was originally envisaged. More texts were collected than could be published with translation and commentary in a single work. Although almost every

poem has some irreplaceable knowledge or insight to contribute, the texts included in the present work are held to offer a representative selection of most religious topics and 'genres' found in the Yezidi tradition. The collection as a whole has been published in its original Kurdish form.[1]

It became clear, moreover, that the Yezidi religious tradition does not, as was previously thought, consist mainly of the poems known as *Qewl* and *Beyt*. While these formal compositions have a particularly high status in Yezidi devotional life, many in fact consist of poetic allusions to storylines which are usually recounted as prose stories *(chîrok)*, and are widely known in the community. Thus the sacred poems—the province of the learned, with whose contents other Yezidis are not expected to be concerned—can now be shown to reflect and enhance elements of basic religious knowledge which is shared by the community as a whole. The 'stories' therefore form another essential element of the Yezidi textual tradition, and both genres come together in the *mishabet* or 'sermon', in which a Qewwal normally recites parts of a hymn, tells the relevant story in prose, and generally draws some moral concussions.

There are yet other categories of texts that form part of the Yezidi religious tradition. These notably include the *Qeside* and also, according to some modern sources, the *Khizêmok*, *Payîzok* and *Robarîn* (see Ch. 3). The relative status (i.e. the degree of 'holiness') of a religious poem is determined by the occasions when it is typically performed, and on the poetic category to which it is assigned, often for reasons that are no longer clear. The *Qewlêd Bêran* ('ram hymns'), for instance, are regarded as superior to other *Qewl*s because they are performed as part of the formal procession of religious dignitaries known as *Sema'*. *Qewl*s are more prestigious than *Beyt*s, although the two groups are outwardly similar. *Qeside*s are felt to be less holy than *Qewl*s, but in at least one case the contents of a *Qeside* and a *Qewl* are practically identical. The classification of a given poem as belonging to one of these categories therefore appears to be a question of tradition rather than of outward characteristics, and the Yezidi categories do not fully correspond to our concept of 'genre'.

The development of these functions, definitions, and interactions was probably deeply influenced by the non-literate character of the tradition. The same is true of the way Yezidism shaped its sacred history. The traditional Yezidi view of world history, based on presuppositions which differ profoundly from those taken for granted by modern Western historians, emerges clearly from the texts published here. While both the oral character of the tradition and the different world-view reflected there make it more difficult to use the information found in the texts as 'historical' evidence in a Western sense, the abundance of the material can occasionally help us reconstruct a sequence of events in the linear, time-oriented way demanded by our concept of history. Clearly no absolute accuracy can be claimed, but the frequent occurrence of some statements and

1 *Pern ji Edebê Dînê Êzdiyan.* 2 vols. Dihok, Spîrêz, 2004.

references does give some indication both as to the time of origin of these passages, and of the community's status at that period. Thus, the prominence of a declaration that the community (calling itself 'the Sunna') is proud of not being Shi'ite ('Rafidite', ZM 7) suggests that such views were an issue in the community when the text was composed. This would imply that part of the textual tradition goes back to a time when the Sunna-Shi'a controversy still seemed relevant to the community. Most modern Yezidis, however, regard their faith as wholly unrelated to Islam and the available evidence suggests that Muslims have shared this opinion for several centuries. It would seem, therefore, that the sacred poems contain many passages that are relatively early in origin, reflecting a state of affairs before Yezidism came to regard itself as wholly independent of Islam. This is confirmed, it seems, by the frequent references to typically Muslim or Sufi concepts found in the texts. Another text (QF 47), which advises to 'throw to the Muslims' those Yezidis who don't obey authority, obviously reflects a later stage in the community's self-perception.

It should perhaps be stated explicitly that any attempt to write down parts of an oral tradition inevitably takes those texts out of one sphere, with its own laws and perspectives, and brings them into one that is governed by different rules and expected to meet different demands. In a strongly literate culture, for example, a published text is usually held to be more authentic than other versions, whereas oral culture does not allow one to make such judgements and one version is necessarily taken to be as valid as the next. Nor can any collection be considered to represent a definitive and exclusive corpus, a 'canon', or the direct equivalent of a sacred book. While the abstract concept of a collection of all sacred poems does occasionally play a role in Yezidi thought as a counterpart to the Bible or the Qor'an (witness the poems themselves, and the evidence of modern Diaspora culture), in practice the fluidity of an oral tradition prevented these compositions from functioning as an exclusive and rigid basis of religious authority.

The texts published here are predominantly based on the tradition of Sheykhan in Northern Iraq, with some input from Qewwals living in Syria and Turkey. Much interesting material is probably yet to be found among Yezidi communities based elsewhere.

The transcription of Kurdish and Arabic words posed the usual problems, originating from a number of factors. Arabic and Kurmanji Kurdish are normally transcribed in different ways in Roman script, the Kurdish orthography being based on that of Turkish, which seems unfamiliar to many Westerners and may lead to mispronunciations. Secondly, Arabic has several consonants which in Kurdish occur only in loan-words, and are realised as distinct sounds in some dialects but not in others; some of these are usually represented when Kurdish is written in Arabic script but not in Roman. As a result, a simple, consistent and comprehensible system of transcription is practically impossible. As a pragmatic solution, when Kurdish or Arabic words form part of the English text—except in the titles of texts, longer sentences, or discussions on linguistic

points—they are transcribed in the simplest possible way: without length-marks except where this might lead to problems; with *sh, ch, zh*, and *j* pronounced as in English; *kh* as the last sound in Scottish *loch*, and *gh* as its voiced counterpart. Elsewhere the standard transcription is used for Arabic, and the usual Roman orthography for Kurdish (with *ş, ç, j, c, x, ẍ*), with the additional sign ʿ for *ʿayn*, but no other diacritics.

The task of translating the texts and writing introductory chapters, commentary and introductions to individual texts devolved on P. G. Kreyenbroek. Most of the texts are based on Kh. Rashow's transcriptions of recordings that were made by himself or sent to him by friends or colleagues in Iraq. In a few cases the only available source was a written transcription made by an acquaintance of Dr. Rashow in Iraq, who did not provide a clear indication as to his own sources. Since the family in question possesses a *keshkul*, a manuscript that probably contains *Qewl*s, it is likely that many of the transcripts are based on this. Where the texts published here have the same title as those found in Kreyenbroek 1995, the present work contains different versions except in the case of the 'Hymn of the Creation of the World' and the moving 'Hymn of the Moment of Death', both of which contain information we thought was needed in this work, but of which no other versions were available to us. Some additional information on *chirok*s was contributed by Dr. Rashow who, as a Sheikh trained in religious knowledge, is a trustworthy source for traditions of this type.

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Philip G. Kreyenbroek