Khamis bar Kardahe, A poem

Late Syriac writers (13th century)

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(a) ” Ten thousand times ten thousand glories uttered by the Church, and never-ending springs of the pouring forth of the Spirit, flow towards the dust, unto Thee, Thou Bay of the Mysterious Orb, the Everlasting, the Son of the essence of Self-existence, Who from virginity took a garment of humanity, and hid therewith the effulgence of His Divinity! (b) . . . . ” After the similitude of His hidden likeness had become corrupt, and the image of His mysterious self had been defaced and defiled, and the transcript of His similitude had been utterly ruined, and after the model of His own creation had been swallowed up in the gaping bowels of the insatiable sheal, the good God deigned to renew and to restore it. And when the set time for the fulfilment of this His benevolent purpose towards the creation had arrived, the Lord spread abroad His mercy as the sea, and His pity as the great deep, and He poured forth and enlarged the goodness and the grace of His Divinity, by sending His consubstantial Son,----the Son of Self-existence. In a befitting way His Will descended towards men; He sent His Beloved, the Begotten of Himself, that is, His Express Image, Who in consummate wisdom, took upon Him, from us, a nature and a person. In a wonderful manner he clothed Himself with a corruptible garment, covering therewith His excellent glory, and when the time appointed in His wisdom had come, He mended and repaired it, and sewed together its rents. He was borne in the womb according to the laws and peculiarities of nature, and was brought forth by His mother.”

(c) ” The Begotten, the Highest, the Ancient of days, Who has set us free, drew milk from the breast as do sucklings and infants, was bound in swaddling clothes, and was placed in a manger like a child of the poor and needy, although He is verily and indeed the King of kings, to Whom the highest worship is due. Crowds of simple and untutored shepherds surround the cave where He lay, and bow to Him in adoration. Legions of spiritual, excellent, and adoring Powers,----the living chariots of |40 the wonderful cherubim,----the speaking wheels, with open eyes and replete with wisdom and intelligence, now stationary, now lifted up,----myriads of Seraphim, as quick as light, with outstretched wings, whose it is to sing thrice Holy,----the glorious, admirable, and awful company of exalted thrones,----the company of those who keep watch over the kingdom of the Lord, all the beautiful armies, lordships, dominions, invincible powers, archangels, angels, and messengers, surround Ephratha in nine circles, fly to and fro, ascend and descend as eagles, dance, rejoice, clap their hands and feet like children of freedom, sing and sound their trumpets on the

day of the Nativity, and on their lyres praise the Child Born,----sing the most exalted hallelujahs, thrice Holies, psalms, glories, and holy songs, unto God in the highest, increase of security and peace upon the earth, and the descent of good-will and its continuance among men.

The unbelieving Magi, the worshippers of idols, Chaldeans, and sorcerers, and such as adore the great lights,----men well versed in astronomy and astrology, and deeply read in these sciences,----were troubled and perplexed, they snorted like wild beasts, and cried out and demanded one of another, 'Who is this before whom the mountains tremble, and the images are moved, and the idols quake, and the heathen priests are confounded, and their altars fall to ruin, and the high places are annihilated?' They fled to the treasuries of their volumes, opened the scrolls, searched them diligently, and discovered therein that what had been foretold generations before by Zoroaster the highly venerated and esteemed was now fulfilled. Then the lips of these scribes were shut, and they were confounded; and they chose out from among them kings of high renown and of great riches, and they delivered into their hands gifts, tithes, and vow-offerings, and sent them away with a commission, and bade them to be watchful. And as they went forth, behold a star of great brightness, bearing on its surface the image of a woman with a child in her bosom, guided and accompanied them into the land of Judea. In all haste, like men in earnest, they accomplished their journey, and entering the cave they offered their gifts, and bent to Him the knee. After this they returned to their own land continually glorifying God.

The spiritual essences, those who dwell in the regions of the Spirit, were enraptured, and the |41 earthly, such as were alive and such as were in the grave, rejoiced, saying : 'He is One to all generations.'

(d) . . . . " From these things, then, let us rest assured that the Messiah is One in two Natures, and two Persons subsisting in one Parsopa of Filiation, since the Natures did not commingle; and in like manner we believe of the Persons. The Son of the Father clothed Himself with Him of Mary, and was conceived in the womb. But let no man filch a word from this, and wilfully pervert it by specious philosophy, so as to conclude that there are two Sons. For there is one Son only, not a Son and a Son making two ; but One Son, we repeat, as it is most proper to maintain, even as a man by clothing himself with a garment is not called two men. The Will of the Creator descended and united Itself to the will of the creature : the Divine Nature clothed itself with the human nature, which thus became co-equal in everything, in reverence, in worship, and in praise, for they have but one Parsopa ; in essence, however, not so, for this were impossible.....Now, in what we have laid down, there is no doubt, double-meaning, or equivocation whatever; neither in what we have declared is there any folly or ignorance; but as it is written, all has been arranged in a 'goodly and pleasant way,' and after a suitable order;----all, we say, has been set forth worthily, rightly, truly, firmly, and on a solid foundation.....

(e) "Behold Him, Who is clothed with light, wrapped in swaddling bands ; what a mystery is here! No less wonderful is it that He Who is seated on the throne of heaven should have

been laid in a manger! The Ancient of times became a Son of Mary in the latter time, and appeared as the Father, Lord, and Master, of the sons of Adam, loosing from off their nature the bands of the curse and of sin, and causing a light to shine forth through the shadows of death. The sun of His love chose an orb from the firmament of humanity, and made the rays of His moon to be the rational confidence of man ; so that henceforth the grossness of the dark earth cannot hide the one from the other, He having destroyed it by the splendour of His brightness. He brought down the Spiritual, and guided it to the nature of the dust, wherefrom He chose Him out an abode to manifest forth the mystery of perfect and great |42 salvation, and to exhibit true liberty to the children of flesh, who had become the slaves of falsehood and error.....

(f) "A daughter of man, the chaste Virgin, became as a haven of safety to the rational vessel, tossed about in the tempestuous sea, so that henceforth the winds of error are powerless to drive it hither and thither, nor can the tumultuous waves, raised by Satan, cause trouble to its rowers, now that the true Jewel has been brought up by the power of the Almighty arm of God, enclosed in the shell of the chaste Virgin, and elect bosom, which shall, having indeed the companionship of a human body, but without any [conjugal] intercourse, open upon the shore of the cave of Bethlehem, the rivulet of which is small. Towards this Jewel we bow the neck and shoulders, and for it we barter our souls; because it sheds forth light in darkness, and is a Pearl which all the merchants extol. Not all the wealth of the world can purchase it, therefore let us cast away all our silver and gold, and all that we possess, and hasten and gaze on its pure and varied beauty, so that perchance its reflection may be impi'essed upon our minds, and it may become to us a treasure of life in earthen vessels.....

(g) " Behold Adam, the begetter of nations, is begotten again, and the Creator of men has become a little child! He [the first Adam] who would have arrogated to himself the sovereignty unreasonably, took it [in Christ] when He was born an infant. Hail to thee, O daughter, whose Son caused fatherhood to exist! Hail to Thee, O Infant, Who filledst the womb of Thy mother with grace! Hail, Mary, who honouredest in thy bosom a united Man filled with purity, the reasonable temple of the Divinity! The Holy Spirit was the Master Who wove in thee the tabernacle of the Humanity, and the words of the Angel messenger were as His threads thereto. Hail to the Begotten, the Unspeakable, the Wonder working! Hail to the Begotten, the equal with His Father in dominion and sovereignty, Who became the origin of reconciliation and peace! (h) " The Sceptre has sprung out of the root of Jesse, according to the prophecies, and the branch has arisen out of his stock, as had been declared, and the Star of Jacob has appeared from the Virgin, the second heaven full of purity.

(i) " Let us rejoice and sing praises, let us be merry and |43 joyfull, because the King is born at Ephratha, and has received the adoration of sovereigns through their gifts. Let the priests who surround the altar clap their hands, and let the Church dance for joy, since He is born Who will instantly destroy all those that hate her. Let the heavens rejoice, and let the earth be glad, because the Lord has been sent to create peace above and below, and to make all one. Henceforth the Leader of the weak, Who has been exalted, shall abolish

death; and the Strength of the fallen, Who has been raised up, shall drive the oppressor far off. On this day the Law of despised nature puts to silence the scribes, and the Barrier of tradition, Which has been broken through, shall from this time forth annul their scriptures. The time has come for the Holy Church to adorn her neck with glory, because the body of her truth which was wounded is now suddenly healed, and the shoulders of her children are freed from the yoke of death.

(j) " That which good and righteous men, who declared the set seasons, waited for, has at length appeared and come to pass, and has dazzled the minds of men; the Essence, in Itself simple, has, by a wonderful operation, made Itself compound through the different 'kinds of flesh' [1 Corint. xv. 39,] and the accidents of colour, and thereby manifested the hidden mysteries of Itself.

(k) " The hope of the good, and the parables of the just, are now brought to light, and the sayings of the prophets are fulfilled in the birth of the Highest. The Fire and the Spirit, whose mysteriousness Moses the Prophet worshipped on the mount, have manifested their excellence in vile flesh. The stone cut out without hands, as prophesied of by Daniel, appears in the Child born without conjugal intercourse or connexion. Though the seals of virginity are unbroken, behold a child is found wrapped in swaddling bands, even as Isaiah had declared, that a Virgin should bring forth Emmanuel. A Branch from the root of Jesse sprouts out where there is no water; and the daughter of David inwardly magnifies and praises the Lord's Son. The emblem of Aaron's rod that budded speaks from afar that the tree of virginity bears fruit without having been watered. The prophets figured forth the hidden mystery of Him in divers manners, and in various wavs the righteous |44 declared His beauteous signs, and those who searched diligently prefigured Him in proverbs; but the perfect accomplishment of the whole has appeared to us in a wonderful mystery, and in an astounding way. He covered and hid His dazzling brightness with a corporeal, corruptible and vile garment, for had He appeared to the children of the dust in His glory, who could have looked upon His Divine splendour, who would have been so rash as to gaze upon His exalted Image, or who could dare to conceive of Him Who is beyond all conception? Did He not say to the son of Amram : 'Turn back, for no man can look upon Me and live?' Great is He Who is Born, Who strikes all creatures with awe!

(l) " Hitherto the law of nature was in force, but in the appearance of the Saviour from a virgin, the law of birth from [conjugal] union was abrogated; and the mind that would comprehend how this was must lose itself in the inquiry.

(m) " On the exalted throne of that glorious Temple whose two gates are built in wisdom on the confines of the two worlds, [reference here is made to the Divinity and Humanity of Christ,] there the Lord of all creation sat as Supreme Ruler. Like kings who take a survey of all their dominions in order to manifest the greatness of their affection towards the nations under their sway, and to cause peace and safety to dwell among them;----for a similar end the Messiah, the King, took upon Him a human body, that the two worlds, the visible and invisible, might be comprehended in Him, and that by a gate within a gate [the

Divine Nature hidden under the Human] He might bring both together, and join them in One. This is the mystery contained in the words spoken by the Spirit, that from a daughter of David and of Abraham the Messiah should be born. David says of Him, that ' His throne shall stand as the sun, and shall endure as the moon to order and to establish all things,' that is, by His manifested Divinity, and by the life and wisdom of His Humanity;

for in the motions of Himself He comprehends all the angels in the highest, and, in the members of His Body, He comprehends man who is on the earth, thereby fulfilling, as in a rational way, that the two worlds are, by the power of His Spirit, but One body, and He is that very One Who through these sees the things which we cannot sec. He is the very One |45 Who makes all visible creatures to subsist, Who tries and judges them. Before the Union these offices belonged to the Person of the Divinity; afterwards it was given to the Person of the Humanity. And since all these things are fulfilled in this Begotten One, He is therefore Man and Lord most truly, certainly, and beyond all doubt. Let our abject race, therefore, rejoice, exult, and leap for joy, since the King of the highest and of the deep came down in order to raise it from its fall, and through Him the pure in heart see God. Let not heretics, with perverse minds, dispute this truth; but henceforward let angels and men rejoice together, because they shall abide one Church for ever ....

(n) " By His birth He has opened the gates of the highest which were shut, and by His nativity He found again the lost sheep of the Father, as was figured in the shepherds who crowded round the manger, praising Him Who is the Good Shepherd. These did not indeed comprehend the meaning of the occurrence ; but nevertheless they took up and repeated the song of the angels. For in those days men were like beasts in every thing, living like brutes in sensual lusts, and they stumbled in their goings over the stumbling-block of sin through the obliquity of their souls : they were, moreover, vain-glorious, and walked after the law of their nature without any discernment. And whilst in this condition, led about forcibly by this law of their nature, they took medicine for their souls from the manger of His Body, and thus prefigured to us the mystery of His sacraments, their actions loudly proclaiming and foreshadowing His Body as our meat, and His Blood as our drink, which fulfil in us the mystery of life. Whilst these were thus engaged round about the manger, the angels in heaven were singing praises unto Him ; and let us, in the renewal of that life which was decayed, join in their exultations.

(o) " The Invisible Will came down, took a parsopa, and appeared openly, and thereby renewed that which was broken up. And the rain of the wicked one descended furiously upon Him, because without water He made the rod of the wonderful Virgin Child to bud, and without germinating heat He made it to blossom anew, and thereby consummated all by restoring our nature. |46 (p) " The form which had been marred [human nature] was again glorified; the piece of silver which had been lost was found; the sheep that had wandered was brought home safe; the hungry prodigal ate, and left of that which was placed before him; the leaven leavened the three measures of meal; the stranger in Jerusalem, who had fallen among thieves that robbed him in the descent to Jericho, and who was found plun-

dered, wounded, and stricken, despised, and cast out, has been healed, since the Heavenly Physician has been sent to the earth to dispense medicine to the afflicted, to heal the sick, and to give sight to the blind; and not to this end only, but also to break the gates of steel, and to raise the dead, because His power is great, and His medicine healing, and whatever pleaseth Him that He doeth. Therefore, O Christ, Thy birth is worthy of all worship and praise.

(q) "The wicked one foresaw the shadow of salvation in Moses, and hence it was that he stirred up the deceitful Pharaoh not to suffer a Hebrew child to live, thereby hoping to destroy Moses among the children. And when Satan could not compass this his wicked end, he made use of Herod as a cloak, whom he incited to slay all the children of Bethlehem, the fool thinking in this way to destroy Him Who gives life to all. (Consider these ways of the Creator, thou discriminating one, and observe how His providence is ordered by rule, and preserves the middle of the road. Who can deny His wisdom but the unbelieving; and who can refuse coming to Him to be sanctified but the impure? When the vile fox discovered that he could not approach the place of the Lion, he was confounded and put to shame, both he and his mean instrument with him. Then the Father brought His Son out of Egypt, even as the prophet David, that lyre of the Spirit, had declared when he said : ' Out of Egypt have I called My Son.' (Attend now, thou prudent one, and perceive how he reminds us of the things relating to Moses in Egypt, who was saved from the water in an ark of bulrushes, even as Pharaoh was afterwards drowned by water.

The birth of the Saviour at Bethlehem, which spot had been purchased by a good and accepted man for seven sheep, and called by him Ephratha on account of its spring, typifies, declares, and makes known to us that He destroys the power of the seven |47carnal lusts which matter generates, and, moreover, that from Him shall flow forth rivers of the knowledge of the fear of God, which shall destroy the wicked one as by a flood. The material water drowned in its depths the material man [Pharaoh], and the immaterial water drowns the immaterial one [i.e. Satan]. Behold a great mystery! Hail, then, to the economy which surpasses all comprehension! Hail to that Providence, the story of which strikes even the pure in heart with awe! Behold, on this day, drink is set down in the place appointed for meat, from the manger issues the spring of life, which is meat and drink, spirit and power, unto all such as believe on Him, but a drowning flood to all those who resist Him. Such is the property of water, that it quenches the thirst of the thirsty, and destroys the rash and froward. Here, then, in the cave of a flinty rock, is set up the beautiful stone, the very building of the Born One, the Temple of the Lord, figuring to us that faith in Him cannot be moved for ever and ever, because it is founded on a truth which frees the world from all doubt and uncertainty.

(r) " The life-giving Spirit was the agent in His pure conception, and gave a body and members to the Infant by the power of God, and joined it to Him in one immutable parsopal dignity, not to be changed for ever and ever.....

(s) ”Abraham, Moses, and David, were truly the beauty, excellency, and dignity of the Old Testament, and in their wonderful actions and lives figured forth the mystery of the Son. Abraham through the lamb, Moses through the fire, and the illustrious David, in all his actions, ministered to the mystery of Him. Saul persecuted with all his might the injured David; even so did the wicked and deceitful Herod [persecute the Saviour]. On David's account the priests were slain by the sword of the proud, just as the innocent children were slaughtered on Christ's account. From among the priests Abiathar was the only one saved; so John the son of the barren ones was the only child preserved. David fled and dwelt among the Gentiles; and the Son of David fled into Egypt from the hand of the infidel. The high-priesthood was cut off from the house of Eli in Abiathar; and in John prophecy ceased in the house of Jacob. And whereas He twisted the Old and New Covenants into one, we believe that He is Lord of both. At the |48 annunciation He was called Jesus, that is, a Saviour, because he was destined to redeem men from the power of the Hater. He was also called Christ, a name of union and of dignity, because in Him a new life was joined to the mortality of dust. The legal shadow has now passed away, and the light has broken forth in the renewing of the Spirit, not in the oldness of the letter.

The grace of the Father has appeared in the Wonderful Begotten One, teaching us, as it is written, to deny ungodliness and worldly lusts. On this day the bark of prophecy has reached the shore; in This Begotten One all the types are fulfilled. Water and clay have become like the subtler elements of air and fire, since Jesus took from them a body. Whereto, then, serve the orders, multitudes, classes, and appointments, of the heavenly hosts who magnify the Lord within the veil? Whereto the circuits of the spheres, the sun, and the moon? Whereto the sea and the dry land, the mountains and plains? Wherefore dost thou thus ask, O inquirer? Wouldest thou say that their creation was superfluous, or that humanity could have done without them, or that they cannot hide that radiance? If thereby thou meanest what the apostle did when he said, ' that God may be all in all,' thou dost rightly interpret the mystery of the perfect man [Saint Paul], for this is its true signification. For the Parsopa of the Word, as on this day, appeared in the body, and has centred in His own beauty the sight and contemplation of all minds. Henceforth men will not be deluded into the worship of bulls and calves, nor be attracted after the bright shining of any of the planets. But, thou, keep this charge of mine and be watchful.

(t) ” The Church exults in Thy adorable birth, Thou Saviour of the world, since thereby the nations and the nations [Jews and Gentiles] are made one, and the shepherds of earth and the angels in the heavens above unitedly sing and praise Thee.

(u) ” Let the Church rejoice in this first-born of festivals, and on this chief of her solemn assemblies, in the contemplation of this glorious and wonderful providence, and let her with watchful mind keep guard over its mysteries, and let her show herself beauteous and perfect by being ready to do good deeds, and in nothing coming short of perfection. Let her bring up her children in every good work little by little, and at all times cause |49 the idea of the Saviour's Image to be conceived in the bowels of their spiritual thoughts, in order that

Christ may be truly formed in their hearts, as saith the Apostle Paul in his Epistle. For such is the profit to be derived from all the festivals observed by the Church; and unless this is the result, all our labour will be in vain, and in vain all the round whereby we commemorate the life and actions of the Saviour. O God, make us to be blameless, that we may live in purity, in faith, and in a right spirit, and that we may apprehend salvation by the eye of our minds, close our sight against every earthly lust, and lift up our eyes towards the high and heavenly kingdom, and there behold Him, Who is clothed in a bodily garment hiding therewith His dazzling Form, seated on the right hand of the Almighty, invisible to mortal ken. And as we have honoured this festival of the Nativity with the voice of the [Church] services, so may we sing to the Begotten in the mystical Sion. And now with an equal praise we magnify the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, because He has saved His people in a wonderful way, and redeemed us with a mighty arm.

(w) "We praise the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one Essence, because He has saved those of earth by the birth of Jesus Christ ; to Him be glory. And may this illustrious festival of the Nativity be blessed, and Satan driven far off from the baptized, and may the grace of the Adorable Spirit descend upon us. To the erring author [of this hymn] stretch forth Thy hand, O Lord."----From the Khamees, and appointed in the Gezza to be read on the Feast of the Holy Nativity. Note to the online edition Khamis bar Kardahe, of Arbel, was a younger contemporary of Bar-Hebraeus, as we learn from his correspondence with Daniel bar Khattab. He bequeathed his name to one of the Nestorian service books, still called the Khamis. Wright indicates that this passage of Badger is a poem by Khamis. He is not mentioned in S.Brock, A brief outline of Syriac literature (1997) however. So all this information comes from W. Wright, A short history of Syriac literature, (1894) pp.284-5.

An interesting extract from another Nestorian service book precedes it in Badger: "With all these proofs to establish the humanity of the Saviour, I am astounded at the tenets of the erring heretics. Manes, Marcion, and the worthless Simon deny [Christ's] body, and thereby deprive our race of salvation. Eutyches, also, who falsely asserted that the [Christ's] body descended from above, equally denies our body, [i.e. that Christ's body was like our own.] Eunomius and his followers denied the soul [of Christ]; Apollinaris denied the mind [of Christ] ; but the worst of all was Jacob [Baradseus] who makes the self-existent passible. This erring man maintains that there is but one nature in Christ, and says that the self-existent became flesh, thereby destroying the co-equality of the Persons of the Trinity, and inflicting a serious injury on mankind. After him come the erroneous Chalcedonians, whose creed resembles his, since they believe that there are two Natures and one Person in Christ. And this creed is maintained by all the West, by the Romans, the Greeks, the Egyptians, the Copts, the Melchites, and by most of the Georgians. This wicked party excommunicated Mar Nestorius, who was true, and who taught the truth in the |39 Church. He confessed two Natures and two Persons in Christ even as the disciples declared to all nations in their preaching; and all nations received this doctrine, which is well known in all the Churches of the East as it was preached and manifested by Mar Mari the Apostle." From the Gezza.

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Licence. published 1852.