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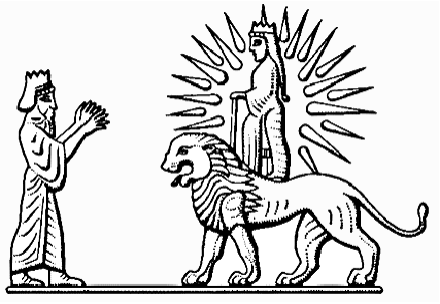

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"The Assembly of Seleucia on the Tigris according to the Syriac 'Acts of Mār Māri'"

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AMIR HARRAK Toronto

The Assembly of Seleucia on the Tigris according to the Syriac *Acts of Mār Mārī*

I. Introduction

Discussing the Christianization of Babylonia at the beginning of the second century of our era, a relatively late Syriac account, the *Acts of Mār Mārī*,[1] claimed that Seleucia on the Tigris witnessed the first Christian missionary activities in Babylonia. A disciple of Mār Addai, who was sent by Saint Thomas the Apostle to Christianize the kingdom of Edessa, dispatched his own disciple, Mārī by name, to spread Christianity in Mesopotamia. Mārī took an itinerary that led him to Nisibis, Erbil, Dasen (west of the Upper Zāb), Bēth Garmai (east of the Tigris, from the Lower Zāb to Diyala), the region of Radan (between Diyala and al-ʻAdhim), and finally Bēth Aramaye, "land of the Arameans," which corresponds to Babylonia proper.

Babylonia was at that time under Parthian rule. It was governed by a "king" named Aphrahat son of Aphrahat, whose seat was in Seleucia-Ctesiphon, two cities that were separated by the Tigris River. Mārī decided to have his first contact with the people of Seleucia, and found no better place to talk to them than the local popular assembly. The *Acts of Mār Mārī* named that assembly, described it, and commented on its activities. More than a century ago, Franz Cumont, a Belgian scholar of Classics and Syriac, published an article[2] in which he identified the assembly of Seleucia as Hellenistic, not much different from the historical assemblies attested in Anatolia during the Roman period. The present paper will propose that the assembly was Babylonian both in name and nature on the basis of another Christian source that escaped the attention of Cumont. Moreover, it will suggest that the assembly may have been a literary motif, giving context to a traditional claim within the Syriac church, that Mār Mārī was the first to Christianize Babylonia. First, let us give the literary contexts in which the issue of the assembly is found.

II. The Sources

The two main sources that mention the assembly of Seleucia are religious in character. The first text, the Syriac *Acts of Mār Mārī*, discusses the intro-

[1] *The Acts of Mār Mārī* in P. Bedjan, ed., *Acta Martyrum et Sanctorum Syriacae*, vol. 1 (Leipzig 1890), pp. 70ff. The actual text must be dated between the 5th and 9th centuries; see J.-M. Fiey, *Jalons pour une Histoire de l'Église en Iraq* (Louvain 1970), p. 40. My English translation of the *Acts* (forthcoming).

[2] F. Cumont, "Note sur un passage des Actes de St Mâri," *Revue de l'Instruction Publique en Belgique*, Tome 36 (1893), pp. 373-378.

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duction of Christianity in Upper Syria and Mesopotamia during the apostolic age. The second text, the Christian Arabic *Kitāb al-Majdal* "Book of the Tower," offers a list of the East Syriac ecclesiastical leaders starting with Addai and Mārī, and ending with the leaders of the early 12th century.

II.a. The Syriac Acts Of Mār Mārī[3]

When the blessed Mār Mārī realized that he had nowhere to go, he pondered about what he would do. Now there were three assemblies (*puḥrā*) in Seleucia, one for the elders, one for the young people, and one for the children, for this is how they organized their assemblies (*puḥrā*). The blessed one thought to stir up controversy at the assembly of the elders (*puḥrā d-sābē*): "If it would be possible, I would hunt their souls starting from this place!". He went to them and they seated him below all of them, saying: "This man is foreigner." And he joined them in singing and in merriment everyday.

After a while, the president of the assembly (*qaššīš puḥrā*) fell sick. He gave an order to his household concerning who among his family would inherit from him; and necessities for the burial were even prepared for him. The whole city came to visit him, and when the crowds departed from such visits, the blessed Mār Mārī went in to pay him a visit too. When the sickness persisted, the blessed Mār Mārī said to him: "I shall put my hand on you in the name of the true God and you shall be healed." Because the man could not answer, for he was near death, Mār Mārī got up and put his hand on him in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. At that very moment, the sick man saw Heaven opening up! He saw a man, looking like the blessed Mār Mārī, coming down and taking his hand to make him rise. The man was immediately healed and he left his bed.

Then the blessed Mār Mārī spoke to him, saying: "Become a Christian!". He replied: "What is Christianity? Are you introducing a new god into the world?" Mār Mārī said to him: "God is not new, because he exists from the beginning and he is everlasting. He created heaven, the earth, the seas and all that is in them. He cannot be understood nor can he be comprehended. And the Son who was begotten of him shares his nature, and his generation cannot be probed or understood by humans, for he is the light of His divinity. He sent him to the world so that through him it (Humanity) would come to know His Father and that (through) one Holy Spirit, who had spoken through the prophets, eternal salvation would take place. They are three true persons, equal in every regard, containing all that is seen and unseen, almighty, judging everyone. This is the salvation of the Christians and in the name of this one (Christ) we do everything: healing the sick and expelling evil spirits from people." Then the president of the assembly (*rēš puḥrā*) believed in the words of the blessed Mār Mārī, who converted him along with the members of his family. He baptized them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Then the man rose up and went to his assembly (*puḥrā*), and remained there as he had in the past.

After some time, the deputy (*rēš drā'ā)* became sick to death. In like manner, the blessed Mār Mārī accompanied those who went to visit him. Mār Mārī said to him: "I shall put my hand on you in the name of my God and you shall be healed!". That man could not

[3] Bedjan, *Acta Martyrum* I, pp.70ff.

talk to him because he was about to die. Now before his eyes he looked and he too saw Heaven opening up, and a man, looking like the blessed Mār Mārī, coming down and taking his hand to make him rise, and he and the members of his family were converted. And he went to the assembly (*puḥrā*), and reclined on his seat as before. The blessed Mār Mārī too went and reclined on his seat in his place as before. The people who were converted said to each other: "This man is a god!". The president of the assembly (*qaššīš puḥrā*) said to the whole assembly: "My Brothers listen to me! When I was sick, I saw in a vision Heaven opening up and a man looking like this one came down and made me rise from my sickbed!". The president of the assembly (*qaššīš puḥrā*) said to the deputy: "Because we are healed of our sicknesses at his hand, the place where he is now sitting no longer befits him, for his current place is at the bottom. But if we bring him up to us, the citizens of Seleucia will grow angry, because he is a foreigner. So now, let a servant bring a pillow and let him place it for him between you and me!". And they did as they said.

After some time came Mār Mārī's turn among them to do his (food) service (*palḥūṯā*), and those who had converted said to him: "It is your service now, and therefore, you should take care of the bread – for there was a tradition in Seleucia according to which the one who does the service must bring bread from his house – so give bread now." Mār Mārī said to them: "Tell me ahead of time indeed, and I will do whatever you want me to do!". So he wrote a letter to the apostles, his colleagues, which he sent to the city of Edessa. He wrote to them as follows: "As I wrote to you in the past, the land to which you have sent me is full of thorns and thistles that I cannot tread under my feet, nor can I step upon the mountains and hills that are in it! And you wrote to me: 'You have no right to come here or to go elsewhere until you have subjected the mountains and the hills that are in it, have sown in it the living seed, and have sent from the fruits of its produce to Heaven!' When I realized that I had no other choice except to do so, I went to take my seat in the assembly of the elders (*puḥrā d-sābē*), and associated myself with them in eating and drinking. And through the help of God and through your prayers I converted among them the two presidents of the assembly (*qaššīšē d-puḥrā*). Now my turn to do the (food) service (*palḥūṯā*), as is the custom among them, has come. Send me some of the gold which you have so that I can do as they themselves do, because I have nothing right now!". When the light-clad apostles heard these things, they rejoiced and sent him gold as he requested from them. When the day of service came, he served them, and after the whole assembly (*puḥrā*) had eaten and drank, they said concerning the holy Mār Mārī: "This man is a god, because he is different in every regard!". The holy man said to them: "If you want, listen to one word that I would like to tell you." They replied: "Say it!". He said: "Become Christians!" (...).

II.b. Kitāb Al-Majdal[4]

Mār Mārī the Apostle – may his prayer protect all the believers.[5]

He was one of the ordained among the seventy (disciples) and a Hebrew. He began his missionary work and Christianized Babylonia, Ahwaz, and the rest of the regions along the Tigris, Persia, and Kashkar, and the people of the Radan (region), where there was a wealthy

[4] Maris, Amri et Salibae, *Aḥbār faṭarika kursī al-Mašriq*, edited by R. Gismondi (Rome 1899), p. 3-4.

[5] This line is the entry to the account about Mārī.

man named Halqānā.[6] He (Halqānā) built three hundred and sixty churches, convents and monasteries, furnishing them with endowments. He (Mār Mārī) headed to the city of Seleucia, which is to the east of al-Madā`in, while Ctesiphon is to its west. Seleucus, one of the servants of Alexander, built this city, and some people said that al-Madā`in was built by Samiram(is), queen of Babylonia.[7] Dionysius the priest was with him. But he found Mazdaism and the pursuing of pleasures strong there, and so he wrote to Addai to relieve him from (the mission in) it. But Addai replied to him with authority, denying him that (request). So he (Mārī) conducted himself toward them (people of Seleucia) with kindness, until he converted them.

The Magians had the custom of convening an assembly (*fuḥr*), a convention in which people gathered with regard to religion according to specific rules. The young had an assembly (*fuḥr*), as did the children and the elders, but he headed for the assembly of the elders (*fuḥr al-mašāyiḥ*) for they were more flexible. When he met them, he spoke with them with the sweetest of words, and thus they trusted him.

Then the head of the assembly (*ra'īs al-fuḥr*) fell seriously ill and was about to die, and Mārī visited him and made him rise by the cross. When his relatives came to him, he told them about the admirable things that he saw, even confirming the divinity of Mārī. Mārī said to him: "I am not what you think, but am the apostle of the Creator of heaven, earth and all creatures. He sent me so that you may believe in his Son Jesus Christ and if you believe in him, giving up your worship of what has no intelligence and understanding – things that were created for you – then you will live."

A few days after, the deputy to the head of the assembly (*ḫalīfat ra'īs al-fuḥr*) fell ill, and Mārī healed him. All his family accepted the Faith, and so the door was opened for the holy man. Upon realizing these things, the head of the assembly (*ra'īs al-fuḥr*) thought that this was the hand of heaven, and said (to Mārī): "You must not sit at the back of the assembly (*fuḥr*)!". But because of the people, they could not seat him in the front of the assembly but only at the back.

(Mārī) was selected by lot to prepare the banquet (*fuḥr*), and they said to him: "Prepare the food and we will provide you with the rest!". He replied: "I do not need anything from you!". So he wrote to Addai, informing him of this, and asked him for what he needed, and Addai sent him more than what was necessary. When Mārī prepared the banquet (*fuḥr*), you could hear hymns beyond compare, in such a way that when the two other assemblies (*fuḥr-ayn*) heard it, they came, and the people thought that he was a god, and all submitted to him.

III. Textual Interpretation

The assembly of Seleucia according to the *Acts of Mār Mārī* and *Kitāb al-Majdal* is of three types: the assembly of the elders, that of the youth, and that of the children. Cumont saw in this tripartite assembly a Greek institution, and

[6] He is called Laqnā in the Syriac *Acts*, probably a short form of the original "Halqānā."

[7] The detail about Samiramis "of Babylonia" (Šamuramat of Assyrian sources) is based on Greek sources in which Babylonia and Assyria were often confused.

went as far as translating the second sentence in the passage given in section II.a above into Greek.

In doing so, he associated Syriac *puḥrā d-sābē* with the Greek *gerousia,* a council made of a certain number of *gerontes,* "elders," as is attested in Greek cities in Anatolia during the Hellenistic and Roman periods. In the *puḥrā da-ʿlaymē* he saw the Greek *ephēboi*, young men 14 to 20 years of age who obtained their education in the *ephēbia,* an institution which was still functioning during the second century of our era, before it disappeared shortly thereafter. As for the *puḥrā da-ṭlāyē*, Cumont identified it with the school of the *neoi*, an institution meant to give youngsters early education. He also translated *qaššīš puḥrā* as *prostates*-"president" of the Greek inscriptions, whereas the title of his assistant was taken (though hesitantly) as the equivalent of the *gymnasiarch* of the Greek sources.[8]

Furthermore, Cumont subscribed to the opinion that the assembly of the elders did not have any political role to play, unlike the Greek *boule*, a council of citizens that undertook the affairs of the city. Rather, the assembly was a group of men of mature age, who used to gather for entertainment, something like the *Bürgercasinos* of the German cities in the late 1900s. This identification fits well with the claim made by the *Acts of Mār Mārī*, that the elders of Seleucia had only one concern: to indulge themselves to drunkenness and overeating. This claim may have been amplified by the biographer of Mār Mārī, according to Cumont, so as to highlight the struggle of the holy man in his attempt to convert such a perverse nation. Thus, driven by his puritan spirit, the biographer caricatured the assembly of the elders. Otherwise, he was faithful to the sources which he quoted, and this is reflected in the sound details related to the assembly found in the rest of his account. One such detail concerns the citizens of Seleucia who were the only ones entitled to become members of the assembly, whereas foreigners could not join the assembly as members, though they could be accepted into it as guests. This was also the case in the Greek cities of Asia Minor, according to Cumont.

No one denies the Hellenistic influence on Babylonia, where Seleucia was located. Greek replaced Aramaic as the language of official secular administration although only to some extent, and some new offices, including the *dioikētes* and the *prostates*, appeared in the Babylonian administration. Syncretism of some Greek and Babylonian deities had taken place, in the case of Anu=Ouranos, Ea=Kronos, Bel=Zeus,[9] and Nabu=Apollo. The last association was made in a bilingual inscription, Greek and Parthian, dated to the year 150/151 of our era.[10] The inscription was incised on the thighs of a bronze statue of Hercules, uncovered near the site of Seleucia, perhaps not far away from the temple of Apollo in which it once stood.[11] The Babylonian assembly became more or less like the Greek *boule*, and this seems to be the case of Babylon itself. Though here the Hellenized assembly remained religious, elsewhere, as in Uruk, it became increasingly secular. A clan system was introduced in

[8] Cumont, *op. cit*., p. 378.
[9] G. McEwan, *Priest and Temple in Hellenistic Babylonia* (Wiesbaden 1981), p.186f.
[10] F. A. Pennacchietti, "L'iscrizione bilingue greco-partica dell'Eracle di Seleucia," *Mesopotamia* 22 (1987), pp. 169-184.
[11] W. I. Al-Salihi, "The Weary Hercules of Mesene," *Mesopotamia* 22 (1987), pp. 159-67, figs. 57-66.

Babylon, and as the prebend transactions show, the prebend system was in the hands of these tribes. Moreover, the clans were the source of all the high officials working in temple and in the civil administration. If Babylonian cities bore some Hellenistic influence, one can confidently say that Seleucia was more Hellenistic, given the fact that Seleucus built it or rebuilt it and that a large Greek community lived there as well as native Babylonians and Jews.

But the problem in Cumont's study is his mistranslation of technical terms found in the Syriac text. True, his rendering of *puḥrā* as *sumposion*, a private drinking party following the evening meal, reflects the general meaning given to the word in Syriac literature and dictionaries.[12] Some Syriac sources go as far as equating *puḥrā* with Greek *sumposion* "a drinking event," just as Cumont compliantly did.[13] Nonetheless, even though Syriac lexicography proves Cumont correct, entertainment does not seem to be the only activity of the *puḥrā.* Although the *Acts of Mār Mārī* made this claim, the 12th century *Kitāb al-Majdal* (II.b. above) highlighted the religious nature of the *fuḥr* (Syriac *puḥrā*): "…convention in which people gathered with regard to religion according to specific rules." Nothing more is said about "the specific rules," but the religious function of the *fuḥr* is clearly expressed. Even the *Acts of Mār Mārī* attached specific offices to the *puḥrā* (the head of the assembly, his deputy), suggesting that this must have been an institution entrusted with some kind of official function other than drinking and merry making. This sense of *puḥrā* seems not attested in Syriac literature, but it happens that this term is Babylonian and it refers to the Babylonian assembly par excellence.

Akkadian *puḫru* refers technically to one of the most prestigious social and religious institutions in Mesopotamia, the assembly. Cumont was aware of this Akkadian term, since he quoted Raabe, who first suggested the connection between the Syriac and Akkadian terms.[14] Perhaps not being familiar with Akkadian,[15] and misled by the entertainment detail found in the Syriac *Acts of Mār Mārī,* Cumont overlooked the possible Akkadian origin of *puḥrā*, and was thus led to translate this term as *sumposion.* The historical assembly in Mesopotamia is well known.[16] Since the dawn of history, Mesopotamian cities had each a popular assembly made of socially equal citizens. Babylonian sources of the first millennium B.C. refer to *puḫru ša māti,* "assembly of the country," *puḫur ummāni,* "assembly of the people," and the assemblies of Babylon, Sippar, Nippur, Ur, Uruk, etc. In referring to the assembly, these sources use the Sumerian logogram UKKIN, but sometimes *puḫru* is also found written syllabically. The mandate of the assembly was restricted

[12] *Sumposion* is made of SUN = "with," POSION (< PIPTW "to drink"). Etymologically the word means a drinking party/meeting. In point of fact, such events (put on by private individuals) were of a more cultural nature. That is to say, eating and drinking took place but also reading of poetry, singing, playing musical instruments, dancing etc. Syriac *puḥrā* essentially corresponds to this meaning.

[13] See R. Payne Smith, *Thesaurus Syriacus* (Oxford 1901), p. 3085 sub PWḤR'.

[14] Cumont, *op. cit*., p. 374 note 3. R. Raabe, *Die Geschichte des Dominus Mâris* (Leipzig 1893), p. 37.

[15] By the time Cumont published his article more than a century ago, the Sumerians were barely known and Assyriology was still at its formative stage; see P. Garelli, *L'Assyriologie* (Paris 1972), pp. 23ff.

[16] See among others M. A. Dandamajev, "The Neo-Babylonian Popular Assembly," in P. Vavroušek-V. Soušek, *Šulmu: Papers on the Ancient Near East Presented at International Conference of Socialist Countries (Prague, Sept. 30-Oct. 3, 1986)* (Prague 1988), pp. 63-71.

to making judicial decisions in the context of family law and property. In the latter domain, it dealt with temple property and thefts of cattle. Thus, it is difficult to disassociate Syriac *puḥrā* from Akkadian *puḫru*.[17]

The late Babylonian assembly and the assembly of Seleucia shared common features. The Babylonian assembly was connected with the city main temple. Members of the assembly participated in the cultic rituals and festivities taking place in the temple, and had a share in the temple's revenues. Although the Syriac *Acts of Mār Mārī* do not link the assembly with a temple in Seleucia, *Kitāb al-Majdal*, which must have used another Syriac version of the *Acts*, made it amply clear that the members of the assembly convened "on account of religion," as stated above.[18] The Babylonian assemblies were presided over by high temple officials, and sometimes by governors of the cities. The president of the assembly was called *rab puḫri*,[19] a title that finds its echo in Syriac *qaššīš* (and: *rēš*) *puḥrā*. The term *qaššīš* should not be translated as "priest" – its usual meaning in Syriac – but as "head of a community." It occurs in this sense in Hatran inscriptions, where it also means the eldest son within a family.[20] The Syriac *Acts* mention another presiding official, *rēš drā'ā*, whose title and role puzzled several scholars, including Cumont. Here too the 12th century Christian source *Kitāb al-Majdal* gives us a reasonable translation of the Syriac term: *ḫalīfā* "deputy" to the head of the assembly. Akkadian does not seem to have an equivalent term, though deputies to the presidents could well have existed within the assemblies.

Mār Mārī is said to have selected the assembly of the elders to begin his preaching, since these were more flexible than the youths and the children. This assembly is called *puḥrā d-sābē*, a term which literally translates and partially duplicates Babylonian *puḫru ša šībūtu*. In fact, Mesopotamian sources frequently make mention of the *šībūtu*, in reference to the most influential members among the citizens; for the elders were responsible for solving local problems in the context of the temple assembly.[21] In some cases, the elders made decisions without the presence of all the assembly's members, and in this situation, they served as the latter's representative.

Cumont's identification of Syriac *puḥrā da-'laymē* as the *ephēboi* and *puḥrā da-ṭlāyē* as the *neoi* is not necessarily more acceptable than his earlier identification of the *puḥrā d-sābē* as the *gerousia.* Here one might mention that cuneiform sources also suggest that young people participated in the Mesopotamian assembly. In the case of the Assyrian trading colony in Cappadocia (early 2nd millennium B.C.) and in special circumstances, the full assembly, *ṣaḫir rabi* "young and old" (*kārum* TUR GAL), was summoned.[22] In *Gilgamesh*

[17] Aramaic has the root PḤR but its meaning, "to make pottery," does not fit the context of the Syriac and Arabic sources under study. Otherwise, Syriac *puḥrā* usually means "banquet" as will be seen later.

[18] Assuming that Mār Mārī went indeed to Babylonia to preach Christianity, the drunkards in the *Acts of Mār Mārī* could hardly be his main audience. Thus, it would be only logical that he would have addressed the local elders who had played some official role in Seleucia, as seems to be the case in the scenario offered by *Kitāb al-Majdal*.

[19] W. von Soden, *Akkadisches Handwörterbuch* Band II (Wiesbaden 1972), p. 938.

[20] Aggoula, RIH 338.

[21] M. A. Dandamayev, "Neo-Babylonian Elders," in *Societies and Languages of the Ancient Near East: Studies in Honour of I. M. Diakonoff* (Warminster 1982) pp. 38-41.

[22] A. B. Clay, *Babylonian Inscriptions in the Collection of J. B. Nies*, vol. 4: Letters and Transactions from Cappadocia (New Haven 1927), 83:40.

and Agga lines 40-44, Gilgamesh (king of Uruk) is said to have sought the support of the assembly of the elders in his bid to resist Agga (king of Kish), and afterward he turned to the full assembly to seek the same. One might add the case of the young Rehoboam, son of Solomon, who sought "the counsel of the old men" but then forsook the counsel which the young men gave him (I Kings 6:1-11). Although none of these sources suggests that there was an assembly of young men (let alone an assembly of the children), nothing justifies Cumont's translation of *puḥrā* by *symposium.* Even the *ephēboi* mentioned in inscriptions found in Babylonia before 111/110 BC are not linked with a specific assembly but to a gymnasium.[23]

In short, a mere look at the technical terms related to Seleucia's assembly in the *Acts of Mār Mārī* and their Akkadian counterparts highly suggests that the assembly in question was of the Mesopotamian type:

	Syriac	Arabic	Akkadian
Assembly:	*puḥrā*	*fuḥr*	*puḫru*
Head of the Assembly:	*qaššīš puḥrā*	*ra'īs al- fuḥr*	*rab puḫri*
Assembly of the Elders:	*puḥrā d-sābē*	*fuḥr al-mašā'iḥ*	*puḫru ša šībūtu*
Deputy of the President:	*rēš drā'ā*	*ḫalīfat ra'īs al-fuḥr*	(—)

There remains the issue of the banquet, which plays an important role in the *Acts of Mār Mārī* and a minor role in *Kitāb al-Majdal*. The author of the Acts dwelt on the drunkenness not only of the elders in their assembly, but of the people of Seleucia at large. Mārī is said to have given up hope in converting the local people "for they were found to be drunk at all times." *Kitāb al-Majdal* by contrast, while acknowledging that there was a banquet in the assembly of the elders, did not denigrate the people of Seleucia. It simply claimed that Mārī, who was asked to prepare the banquet, exploited it in support of his preaching. Thus, he sung hymns before the elders, and they were so beautiful that the members of the other two assemblies gathered to enjoy them. In admiration, all the people became convinced that Mār Mārī was divine.

It is clear that the two Christian accounts about Mārī at the assembly of Seleucia used different sources, in which the assembly and the banquet linked to it formed a common motif. The problem is that the historical assembly, whether Babylonian or Hellenistic, did not include a banquet, and that the banquet[24] was an integral part of the divine assembly in Mesopotamian mythology. To illustrate this point, we will quote the Babylonian Creation story *enūma eliš*, in which the divine assembly unanimously acclaimed Marduk as its leader after a debate, followed by a banquet. In Tablet III 131-139,[25] the gods are said to have assembled to assign Marduk the task of killing Tiamat, as follows:

ilū rabûti kališunu mušimmū šīmāti
īrubūma muttiš Anšar imlû [ḫūdûta]
innišqū aḫū aḫī ina puḫri (UKKIN) […]

[23] A. Oppenheimer, *Babylonia Talmudica* = Beihefte zum Tübinger Atlas des Vorderen Orients, B47 (Wiesbaden 1982), pp. 56ff.

[24] The Akkadian word for banquet is *qerītu,* lit. "invitation," but in the *Acts of Mār Mārī* it occurs as *palḫūṭa*, lit. "service."

[25] W. G. Lambert and S. B. Parker, *Enūma Eliš, the Babylonian Epic of Creation: The Cuneiform Text*, (Birmingham 1974), p. 20.

lišānu iškunū ina qirēti ušbū
ašnan īkulū iptiqū kurunnu
širisa matqu usanninū rāṭīš[un]
šikru ina šatê ḫabāṣu zum[ri]
ma'diš ēgû kabattašun ītel[liṣ]
ana Marduk muter gimillīšunu išimmū šīmta

All the great gods who fix the fates,
entered into the presence of Anshar and were filled with joy.
They kissed each other, in the assembly […]
They exchanged words; they sat at the banquet,
they ate grain, drank fine wine,
they wetted their drinking pipes with sweet beer.
While drinking beer, their bodies turned animated;
they became quite carefree, and were very happy;
to Marduk their avenger they decreed destiny.

During the debate, the deities also made Marduk the head of their assembly. The divine assembly in Tablet III took place in Nippur, the seat of the major Sumerian deity Enlil, but after Marduk became the head of the assembly, the Assembly was held in Babylon, his abode. In Tablet VI, where the debate about making Marduk the head of the Babylonian pantheon was about to end, Marduk, now the head of the divine assembly, addressed the gods in the following terms (VI 72-75):[26]

Annam Bābili šubat narmêkun
nugâ ašruššu ḫidûtašu tašbāma
ūšibūma ilū rabûti
zarbaba iškunū ina qirēti ušbū

'Yes! Babylon is also your dwelling place!
Sing joyfully there, reside in happiness!'
The great gods sat down,
they set out the beer mugs; they sat at the banquet.

Thus, while the banquet at the assembly is obvious in Mesopotamian mythology, there is not a shred of evidence that the Mesopotamian historical assembly was concerned with judicial matters and at the same time happy banqueting. We have seen that Syriac *puḥrā* generally means "banquet" and not "assembly" outside the *Acts of Mār Mārī*. How and when this technical term shifted meanings is not known. The fact that *puḥrā* in the *Acts* preserved the basic meaning of Akkadian *puḫru* suggests that the story of Mār Mārī at the assembly of Seleucia may be of a relatively early date.

IV. Concluding Remarks

Cumont's identification of the Hellenistic assembly in the *Acts of Mār Mārī* is not without merit. Ancient assemblies in the Near East resembled each other in terms of organization (note the role of the elders) and aim, since they all in-

[26] Ibid., p. 36.

cluded a debate element. Nonetheless, though the assembly of Seleucia according to the *Acts of Mār Mārī* may look like the Hellenistic assembly, it reflects better a Babylonian type of assembly, because both are called with the same name, and each has a religious character.

If the assembly in the *Acts of Mār Mārī* was historical, and Mār Mārī indeed preached in it, this would be the only piece of evidence concerning the Christianization of Mesopotamia. Otherwise, the early history of Syriac Christianity is shrouded in mystery, as no primary source has ever survived from the first three centuries of the Christian era. This total lack of early sources casts doubt on the historicity of the preaching of Mār Māri at the assembly of Seleucia.

In their attempt to write the early history of their Christian faith, Syriac writers used several legends. The correspondence of king Abgar with Jesus, reported by Eusebius of Caesarea (Palestine) and the Syriac Teaching of Addai, is one among many other legends used to explain the birth of Christianity in Upper Syria. The assembly-banquet in the *Acts of Mār Mārī* could be yet another legend to demonstrate the origins of Christianity in Babylonia.

Finally, with regard to whether the assembly in the *Acts of Mār Mārī* was historical or mythological, the fact that it was drawn from the ancient Mesopotamian heritage highlights the role of Syriac literature as a link between the Assyrian-Babylonian antiquities and early medieval Mesopotamia.