The Jewish Neo-Aramaic Dialect of Betanure (Province of Dihok)
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Preface

The dialect of the Jewish village of Betanure in northern Iraq is among the most gravely endangered varieties of Aramaic spoken at the present time. One of the most archaizing Jewish Neo-Aramaic varieties and a conservative variety within the NENA as a whole, the dialect was spoken in the late 1940s by a tiny community of merely seventeen large families. Since the immigration of this community in its entirety to Israel in 1951 the number of the dialect’s speakers has been gradually decreasing. This is due to the integration of their descendants into Hebrew-speaking Israeli society, as is the case with Jewish Neo-Aramaic in general. Among the Betanure-born people themselves, moreover, the dialect has been eroded through the impact of Israeli Hebrew and the intrusion of extraneous features from other Jewish Neo-Aramaic varieties to which it was exposed in Israel, most notably the Jewish Neo-Aramaic dialect of Zakho.

Today there are at most three dozen speakers of the dialect. The majority of these exhibit a large proportion of alien influences in their speech. The only active and fully competent speakers of the Neo-Aramaic of Betanure are in their seventies and eighties. Thus, the dialect shall soon meet its ineluctable extinction and share the fate that has already befallen several other modern Aramaic idioms, namely Mlašš, Jewish Bojil (near ʿAqrā, Iraq), Jewish Shukho (Barware, Iraq), Jewish Gzira (Cizre, Turkey) and Jewish Gawar (Yüksekoz, Turkey).

The precarious condition and extreme rarity of the Neo-Aramaic of Betanure, coupled with the lack of both scholarly data on the dialect and traditional literature written in it, render the documentation of its linguistic profile one of the most urgent tasks in Neo-Aramaic dialectological research. Indeed, had I started my fieldwork on the dialect today rather than several years ago, it would have been impossible to assemble a text-corpus such as the one offered in this volume and to use it as a reliable data-base for the grammatical description and the glossary. An investigation of the dialect now for the first time would have been based on much less proficient speakers than the last superb speaker of the dialect, Mr. Mordechai Saidof, who died three years ago, and my second best informant, Mr. Rahamim Khaleda, who is now hardly available due to deteriorating health. All remaining speakers display a rather poor competence as story-tellers, and their idiolects are all considerably contaminated with non-Betanure words and grammatical traits.
Beyond the fact that the present work is a description of a hitherto unknown Neo-Aramaic variety, it is my hope that the introduction, and especially the extensive and diversified text-corpus, will serve as a memorial to an Aramaic-speaking Jewish community whose history, at least four hundred years old, ended abruptly fifty six years ago, and to a traditional way of life, folklore and oral literature that are no longer in existence.

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Hezy Mutzafi, Tel Aviv University,
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Symbols and abbreviations

Symbols:

> developed into diachronically
< developed from diachronically
→ developed into synchronically; in the glossary: see entry
← developed from synchronically
# word boundary
[ ] phonetic transcription; complementary word, form, letter number of section in the texts, following a textual example phonemic transcription
/ / question to informant asked by author (in the texts)
\ \ underlying synchronic form
| + before word
* word-emphasis, viz. entirely pharyngealized word
! reconstructed form
✓ root, verbal root
~ interchangeable with
.... hesitation / omitted Hebrew explanation (in the texts)

Abbreviations:

A verbal stem A ($\S 3.2$
A. (superscript) word or phrase from the Jewish Neo-Aramaic of ‘Amadiyya acc. according; accusative
act. active
adj. adjective
adv. adverb
Akk. Akkadian
‘Amad. Jewish Neo-Aramaic of ‘Amadiyya, Iraq
anal. analogy
‘Ank. ‘Ankawa Christian Neo-Aramaic, Iraq
Ar. Arabic
Aram. Aramaic
Armen. Armenian