Early Aramaic Poetry

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The student of ancient near eastern literature is at a disadvantage when dealing with Aramaic literature since the corpus of texts at his disposal for comment and analysis is limited by the paucity of material that has reached us. In this article I would like to call attention to some features of already known Aramaic literature that have gone unnoticed and to some examples of Aramaic poetry that have been neglected. This article will concentrate on material from the first millennium B.C.E.; in a future study I plan to examine remnants of Aramaic poetry from the early first millennium C.E.

Traces of poetic style and rhetorical devices have been noted in the Zakkur inscription (*KAI* 202) and in the Sfire Treaty Inscriptions (*KAI* 222-224).[1] The connection of the Zakkur inscription with the *Danklied* has been noted as well as the skillful use of chiasmus in the construction of the inscription.[2] In the Sfire inscription the use of paired word and phrases, as well as that of parallelism and fixed forms sheds light on the stylistic resources available to the Aramaic writer of ninth and eighth century.[3] Literary elements may also be discerned in the other Early Aramaic inscriptions.[4] The literary material within the relatively large body of Aramaic texts from Egypt of the Achaemenid period is sparse. Yet, one must endeavor to take as full advantage as possible of the meager material. Among the Elephantine papyri one may point to the Ahiqar tale as the prime example of an Aramaic literary text. Yet, here one must be aware of the composite nature of the Ahiqar text.[5] The framework story is in early Standard Literary Aramaic and is Eastern in linguistic coloring; while the Proverb collection is written in

1 The reading of the name Zakkur is now firmly established by a stele of Adad-Nirari III in the Antakya Museum; cf. A. R. Millard, *PEQ* 110 (1978),23. I am indebted to the authorities of that museum for allowing me to examine the stele in July, 1977.

2 J. C. Greenfield, "The Zakir Inscription and the Danklied," in *Proceedings of the Fifth Congress of Jewish Studies* (Jerusalem, 1969; published 1971),332–39. The recently published inscription from Deir ʿAlla is not discussed in this article since the writer does not believe that it is in Aramaic.

3 J. C. Greenfield, "Stylistic Aspects of the Sefire Treaty Inscriptions," *Acta Orientalia* 29 (1965), 1–18.

4 H. Tawil, "Some Literary Elements in the Opening Sections of the Hadad, Zakir, and the Nerab II Inscriptions in the Light of East and West Semitic Royal Inscriptions," *Orientalia* 43, (1974), 40–65.

5 There is too little left of the Bar-Punash text (*CAP* 71) to draw conclusions as to its category. For a bibliography of Ahiqar studies, cf. R. Degen, "Achikar" in the *Enzyklopädie des Märchens* Bd. 1 (1975), 53–59.

the "Mesopotamian" dialect and is Western.[6] Indeed, one may surmise that a corpus of "proverbs" that circulated in "Aram" in the local dialect in the eighth or seventh century was attributed to the courtier and wise man Ahiqar and were later combined with the popular tale of his fall and return to power.[7] These proverbs and tales circulated in various editions and were preserved in different forms.[8] Thus, the Ahiqar of the Syriac Ahiqar, although he has much in common with our Ahiqar, mouths different proverbs on the whole.[9] This is also true of the Greek reflexes of the Ahiqar story. The relationship between Ahiqar and the book of Proverbs has received renewed attention in recent years.[11]

From the literary point of view the "framework story" belongs with the genre of court tale lacking in earlier literature, biblical or Mesopotamian. Could this genre have arisen in the late Neo-Babylonian or Persian period? The biblical examples of this genre are late—Daniel, Esther, the "Story of the Three Guardsmen" in I Esdras. But the "proverbs" are earlier, and under this heading a variety of forms are conveniently subsumed. These include: the "sentence" (*passim*), the fable (ll.118–20, 204–6), the dispute (ll. 165–66), courtly advice (ll. 100–8), the numerical saying (l. 92) and the praise of wisdom (ll. 94–95). Although there is no larger unit that qualifies as poetry in the "proverbs," elements of rhetoric and style may be discerned in these texts.[12] Egypt, however, does provide the earliest example of Aramaic poetry in the well-known funeral stele (*KAI* 269) presently kept in the Carpentras museum. C. C. Torrey discussed the poetic nature of the inscription and pointed out the use of parallelism and stress-meter; but on the whole this inscription has gone unnoticed by students of Aramaic, nor has adequate attention been paid it by students of biblical poetry.[13]

For the period between the fifth century and that of the Aramaic material from Qumran, we must turn first to the poetic portions of Daniel. Although there can be no doubt that the composition of the book of Daniel must be set in the Hasmonean period, there is equally no doubt in the eyes of this writer that the author of Daniel used in his

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6 E. Y. Kutscher, "Aramaic" in *Linguistics in Southwest Asia and North Africa* (Current Trends in Linguistics 6), edited by C. A. Ferguson, C. T. Hodge and H. H. Paper (The Hague, 1970), 365-66 (reprinted in E. Y. Kutscher, *Hebrew and Aramaic Studies* [Jerusalem, 1977], 108-109); J. C. Greenfield, *JNES* 37(1978), 97. For the term Mesopotamian Aramaic cf. S. A. Kaufman, *The Akkadian Influences on Aramaic, AS* 19 (Chicago, 1974), 8–9.

7 The information concerning Ahiqar from Akkadian sources was assembled by this writer in "The Background and Parallel to a Proverb of Ahiqar" in *Hommages à Andre Dupont-Sommer* (Paris, 1971), 49–59. Little is added to the discussion of this question by I. S. Klotchkoff, "The Tale of Ahiqar: Historical Antecedants of a Literary Hero," [in Russian], *Vestnik Drevni Istori* 1977, 3, 3–10.

8 A fragment of the Demotic version of the Ahiqar text has been published recently by Karl-Th. Zauzich, "Demotische Fragmente zum Ahikar-Roman," in *Folia Rara,* edited by H. Franke, W. Heissig, W. Treue (Wiesbaden, 1976), 180–185.

9 The Syriac texts were recently listed by S. Brock, *JSS* 14 (1969), 205–6. The parallels to the Syriac version from Talmudic sources were noted by A. Yellin, *Dibre Aḥiqar he-Ḥakam* (Jerusalem, 1937).

10 Cf. B. E. Perry, *Aesopica* I (Urbana, 1952), 5–10.

11 Cf. W. McKane, *Proverbs, A New Approach* (London, 1970), 156–82.

12 I plan to deal with this in detail in a future article.

13 C. C. Torrey, "A Specimen of Old Aramaic Verse," *JAOS* 46 (1926), 241–47. Recent translations are those of P. Grelot, *Documents Araméens d'Egypte* (Paris, 1972), 342–43, and J. C. L. Gibson, *Textbook of Syrian Semitic Inscriptions, Vol. 2: Aramaic Inscriptions* (Oxford, 1975), 120–22.

work a great deal of earlier material, especially in the poetic portions of his work.[14] The traditional elements of early Semitic poetry such as parallelism, paired words, stess-meter and alliteration may be found in these poetic passages.[15] But the prose passages also contain many rhetorical elements that have gone unnoticed : 1) the use of two verbs together such as *bᵉnaš ūqᵉṣap* "became angry and enraged" (Dan. 2:12) or *bat ṭᵉwat* "spent the night fasting" (Dan. 6:19)—a feature frequent in Aramaic;[16] 2) phrases in parallel such as *ʾal-yᵉbahălūk raʿyōnāk wᵉzīwāk ʾal-yištannō* "let your thoughts not alarm you or your face darken" (Dan. 5:10); *pišrīn lᵉmipšar wᵉqiṭrīn lᵉmišrē* "to give interpretations and solve problems" (Dan. 4:16), or *ḥelmā lᵉśanʾāk ūpišreh lᵉʿarāk* "would that the dream were for your enemy and its meanings for your foe" (Dan. 4: 16); so too in Ezra 4:12 *wᵉšūrayyā šaklīlū wᵉʾuššāyā yaḥīṭū* "they are completing the walls and repairing the foundation"; 3) the use of repetition:

dī-hāwā ṣābe hāwā qāṭēl
wᵉdī-hāwā ṣābe hāwā maḥē
wᵉdī-hāwā ṣābe hāwā mārīm
wᵉdī-hāwā sābē hāwā mašpīl
He put to death whom he wished,
and whom he wished he let live;
he raised high whom he wished,
and whom he wished he brought low. (Dan. 5:19)[17]

Still other rhetorical devices may be noted.[18]

The Aramaic material presently known from Qumran provides the next examples of Aramaic poetry.[19] None of the extant fragments of Enoch are large enough to be submitted to rhetorical analysis but there is one interesting case of the use of two

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14 W. S. Towner, "The Poetic Passages of Daniel 1–6," *CBQ* 31(1969), 317–26, has examined what may be classified as psalms, prayers, and hymns in these chapters in relation to their biblical parallels. He has not dealt with Dan. 4:7–14, nor has he examined the poetic nature of the passages which he does treat.

15 For these elements, as well as the relationship of these texts with earlier material, in Dan. 4: 7–14 and 7:9-10, 13–14 cf. a forthcoming study.

16 Note the material quoted below from various Qumran Aramaic texts. This feature as well as that of using two phrases in parallel is widespread in Syriac prose and poetry. Some examples, to which many more can be added, are quoted by Th. Nöldeke, *Compendious Syriac Grammar* (London, 1904) § § 336–37, pp. 273–76. In the article referred to in n.15 the relationship of this trait to similar traits in Akkadian will be dealt with. For Syriac "Kunstprosa" style cf. S. P. Brock, *Le Muséon* 89 (1976), 263–66.

17 This repetitive device may be seen in Ugaritic, e.g., *UT* 49 VI, 16–22; 51 VI, 45–53; in Biblical Hebrew, e.g., Isa. 2:7–8, etc; in Early Aramaic Sfire I A 21–24; cf. *Acta Orientalia* 29 (1969), 12–18.

18 Thus, Dan. 5:6 fits in the "Convention in Hebrew Literature: The Reaction to Bad News," discussed by D. R. Hillers, *ZAW* 77 (1965), 86–90. Note, too, the important collocation of Dan.4:30 and Syriac Ahiqar, l. 116 made by H. L. Ginsberg, *JNES* 18 (1959), 145.

19 Most of the Aramaic texts from Qumran are conveniently collected by J. A. Fitzmyer and D. J. Harrington, *A Manual of Palestinian Aramaic,* Biblica et Orientalia 34 (Rome, 1978). Missing are the Enoch texts first published by J. T. Milik, *The Books of Enoch: Aramaic Fragments of Qumran Cave 4* (Oxford, 1976). The user of the texts in both aforementioned volumes must exercise his critical faculties. Cf. M. Sokoloff, "Notes on the Aramaic Fragments of Enoch from Qumran Cave 4." *Maarav* 1(1979), 197–224.

synonomous verbs together: *ʾḥwywny wʾḥzywny* he showed me (Enoch 106:19).[20] But when one turns to the Genesis Apocryphon one can easily identify rhetorical and poetic elements. Thus the use of two verbs together: *šnʾ wšḥt* 'changed and spoiled' (Col. II, 17); *lmqṣ wlmʿqr* 'to chop down and uproot' (XIX, 15); *tqpw wgbrw* 'became severe and intense' (XX, 18); *šbq wšlḥ* 'set free and sent away' (XXII, 25–26), etc.; or the uses of phrases in parallelism: *wʿmy tmll wly tʾmr* "you will speak to me and tell me" (II, 13) or in series of three:

> *dy mnk zrʿ dn/ wmnk hrywnʾ dn/ wmnk nṣbt pryʾ* [*dn*]
> that this seed is from you; that this conception is from
> you; and the planting of [this] fruit is from you (II, 15);
> *wlʾ mn kwl zr/ wlʾ mn kwl ʿyryn/ wlʾ mn kwl bny šm*[*yn*]
> and not from any stranger, and not from any of the
> watchers, and not from any of the sons of hea[ven] (II, 16).

In another passage the well known principle of "the breakup of stereotyped phrases"[21] is applied to the biblical *wᵉḥāytā napšī biglālēk* (Gen. 12:13), for which we find *wʾḥy bṭlyky wtplṭ npšy bdylyky* "and I will live because of you and my life will be saved due to you" (XIX, 20). The tendency to expand the biblical *Vorlage* by Aramaic rhetorical means can also be seen in the treatment of Gen. 15:1 where *ʾal-tīrāʾ ʾabrām ʾānōkī māgēn lāk śᵉkarkā harbeh mᵉʾod* "Fear not Abram, I am a shield to you, your reward shall be very great" (NJPS) is rendered:

> *ʾl tdḥl ʾnh ʿmk*
> *wʾhwh lk sʿd wtqp*
> *wʾnh mgn ʿlyk*
> *wʾsprk lk ltqyp brʾ mnk*
> *ʿtrk wnksyk yśgwn lḥdʾ*
> Do not fear for I am with you, and I will be support and strength for you; I will be a shield for you, and a buckler against one stronger than you; your wealth and possessions shall increase greatly (XXII, 30-32).

The phrase *ʾānōkī māgēn lāk* is rendered in the three middle lines, with *māgēn* rendered by the doublet *sʿd wtqp* in the second, and by *mgn* and *ʾsprk* (its Iranian equivalent) in the third and fourth lines. In the fifth *śᵉkar* is rendered again by a doublet *ʿtr* and *nksyn*. Thus the Bible's simple *wᵉloʾ qārab ʾēleyhā* (Gen. 20:4) becomes by the same principle *wlʾ ykl lmqrb bhʾ wʾp lʾ ydʿhʾ* "He was not able to draw near to her and also did not 'know' her" in XX, 17. Although this tendency is undoubtedly connected with the use of various types of *parallelismus membrorum* and paired words in ancient near eastern literature, the expansive tendency of Aramaic prose and poetry is somewhat unique, and its development may be traced in later Syriac prose and poetry.

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20 Milik, *ibid.* 353; cf. too Enoch 89:1 (p. 358) *ḥpyt wksyt* 'covered and overlaid'; 89:5 (p. 358) *sqʿyn wṭbʿyn* sinking and submerging. This should serve as a guide and a control for completing this highly fragmentary text.

21 Cf. E. Z. Melamed, "Break-Up of Stereotyped Phrases as an Artistic Device in Biblical Poetry," *Scripta Hierosolymitana* 8 (1961), 115–53.

The only sustained poetical piece in the Genesis Apocryphon, as preserved, is the description of Sarai in Col. XX. It was recognized as a *waṣf*—the detailed description of the beauty of a bride—some years ago and as such belongs with both earlier and later examples of the genre.[22] The first line of Col. XX is missing, and some lines at the end of Col. XIX are also lost. Thus, although it is not possible to ascertain how much of the poem is lost, the remainder may be set out as follows:

kmh nṣyḥ wšpyr lh ṣlm ʾnpyhʾ
wkmʾ [. . . .*w*]*kmʾ rqyq lh śʿr rʾyšh*
kmʾ yʾyn lhyn lh ʿynyhʾ
wmʾ rgg hwʾ lh ʾnphʾ
wkl nṣ ʾnpyhʾ [ ]

kmʾ yʾʾ lh ḥdyh
wkmʾ špyr lh kwl lbnhʾ
drʿyhʾ mʾ špyrn wydyhʾ kmʾ klyln
w[ ] *kwl mḥzh ydyhʾ*
kmʾ yʾyn kpyh wmʾ ʾrykn wqṭynn kwl ʾsbʿt ydyhʾ
rglyhʾ kmʾ špyrn wkmʾ šlmʾ lhn lh šqyhʾ

wkl btwln wklʾn dy yʿln lgnwn lʾ yšprwn mnhʾ
wʿl kwl nšyn šwpr šprh
wʿlyʾ šprhʾ l ʿlʾ mn kwlhn
wʿm kwl špʾ dn
ḥkmʾ śgyʾ ʿmhʾ
wdl ydyhʾ yʾʾ

How splendid and beautiful the shape of her face,
and how [and] how fine the hair of her head,
how lovely are her eyes,
how pleasing is her nose,
and all the *radiance* of her face.

How lovely is her breast,
and how beautiful all her whiteness,
her arms, how beautiful; and her hands how perfect,
and [ ] the appearance of her hands,[23]
how lovely are her palms;
and how long and thin the fingers of her hands;
how beautiful are her feet,
and how perfect are her legs.

No virgin or bride who enters the bridal-chamber is more beautiful than she;
her beauty is above that of all other women,
her beauty surpasses that of all of them;
and with all of this beauty,
she has much wisdom,
and her handiwork is fine. (XX, 2–8)

22 M. Goshen-Gottstein, *Revue de Qumran* 2 (1959–60), 46–48.

23 Since *rgyg* is used in this text one may doubt that *ḥmyd* would also be used in it. I have otherwise followed Fitzmyer's text which is, as he has noted, at times conjectural.

The "poem" may be divided into three parts. The first describes Sarai's facial features, the second her body and the third her beauty in general, with a few words about her wisdom and ability. The key words repeated in all three sections are *špr* and *y*ʾ. We do not know enough about the vocabulary of Standard Literary Aramaic to be sure of the meaning of certain terms (such as *nṣ*) despite the certitude with which some scholars have translated them. Some references are clearer today than they were when the Genesis Apocryphon was first published; thus the reference to Sarai's hands as 'long and thin' was not simply a matter of physical beauty but also a sign of grace, as we now know from the horoscopes from Qumran Cave 4.[24] It is possible that the other items mentioned—fineness of hair, for example—were chosen for the same reason.[25]

There is an item in the description which is unusual for the traditional *waṣf*, that is, referring to the wisdom of the bride and to the fact that the *dl ydyh*ʾ is 'fine'. The wisdom praised here is practical sagacity and the meaning 'handiwork' proposed for this word should be seriously considered.[26] The exact sort of handiwork intended, I believe, is weaving.[27] Indeed, as we know from Exod. 35: 25–26 spinning was a sign of *hokmat lēb* among women and the *ʾēšet ḥayil* was praised for her skill at weaving (Prov. 31:19). The rabbis referred to the spindel as the sign of a woman's *ḥokmā* (PT *Sota* 3, 4 19a; BT *Yoma* 66b). The praise in this poem then encompasses physical beauty, signs of grace, and skills. It is a unique composition, for the praise of physical beauty is usually restrained in Jewish writings of the period.[28] In the Genesis Apocryphon it is appropriately placed in the mouth of a gentile. It goes without saying that many of the rhetorical elements noted above for Aramaic poetry are to be found in this poem.

It is quite likely that among the as yet unpublished material in Aramaic from Qumran there are some other poetic compositions. But the inexcusable delay in their publication has excluded these compositions from consideration here. One of these may be in the fragments of the Aramaic Testament of Levi still awaiting publication. The few lines that have been published to date make it amply clear that the Geniza fragments first published at the beginning of this century represent an authentic version of this early text.[29] At the end of the Cambridge fragment of the Aramaic Testament of Levi there is an Aramaic poem that has gone, on the whole, unnoticed. It is imperfectly preserved and full study will be possible only with the publication of the Qumran text. Yet, from the extant lines of TL 83–94 the following sections may be discerned:

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24 Cf. the text published as 4Q 186 in *DJD* V. 88–91. In this text fingers and toes that are long and thin are positive signs while hairiness is negative. Cf. the interesting discussion of this text, with reference to literature, by M. Hengel in *Qumran, sa piété, sa théologie et son milieu* ed. M. Delcor (Paris-Gembloux, 1978), 369–70.

25 The texts published by I. Gruenwald, *Tarbiz* 40 (1971), 301–19 dealing with physiognomic and chieromantic matters provide clues to other physical signs.

26 H. L. Ginsberg, *JNES* 18 (1959), 147.

27 The word *dl* should be related to Aramaic/Syriac *dl/dwl* to weave, but of that— more elsewhere.

28 In the enigmatic Aramaic inscription from Arebsun (*KAI* No. 264) we read in ll. 5–6: *ʾnt ʾḥty śgyʾ ḥkym wšpyrʾ ʾnt mn ʾlhn* "you my sister are very wise and more beautiful than the goddesses." This inscription may very well be an Aramaic-Iranian heterograph.

29 Cf. J. C. Greenfield and M. E. Stone, "Remarks on the Aramaic Testament of Levi from the Geniza," *RB* 86 (1979), 214–30. In this article various aspects of the texts are discussed and new readings based on examination by means of an ultraviolet lamp are presented. Nevertheless, the text still has many lacunae which only the promised publication of the Qumran text can overcome.

83 Levi's summons to his children;
84–87 Wisdom poem;
88–94 Poetic praise of wisdom.

This is followed by a prose praise of wisdom in TL 95. The poem belongs with the praises of wisdom known from Proverbs, Ahiqar, Ben-Sira and elsewhere. The author of this piece was not a skilled poet and at times the line between prose and poetry is thin. But considering the slight amount of "poetic" compositions that has reached us in Aramaic, it is worthy of attention.[30]

This then is the inventory of Aramaic poetry of the first millennium B.C.E. It may be hoped that, despite the slenderness of the corpus, more attention will be paid to it by scholars and that new discoveries will enrich it.

Addendum

While this article was in press, the study of James C. Vanderkam, "The Poetry of 1 Q Ap Gen xx 2–8," appeared in *Revue de Qumran* 10 (1979), 55–66. Regrettably this writer could not refer to it in his study.

30 The use of paired words and parallel phrases are also a feature of this text.