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 Allia is not discussed in this article since the writer does not believe that it is in Aramaic.
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 (II.118–20, 204–6), the dispute (II. 165–66), courtly advice (II. 100–8), the numerical saying (I. 92) and the praise of wisdom (II. 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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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 Ahiqar he-Hakam (Jerusalem, 1937).


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

work a great deal of earlier material, especially in the poetic portions of his work.\textsuperscript{14} The traditional elements of early Semitic poetry such as parallelism, paired words, stessmeter and alliteration may be found in these poetic passages.\textsuperscript{15} But the prose passages also contain many rhetorical elements that have gone unnoticed: 1) the use of two verbs together such as \textit{b'n\textsuperscript{a}s ūq\textsuperscript{s}āp} "became angry and enraged" (Dan. 2:12) or \textit{bāt ūwat} "spent the night fasting" (Dan. 6:19)—a feature frequent in Aramaic;\textsuperscript{16} 2) phrases in parallel such as \textit{3al-y\textsuperscript{b}ahālāk ra\textsuperscript{c}yōnāk w\textsuperscript{z}īwāk 3al-yi\textsuperscript{s}ṭānānō} "let your thoughts not alarm you or your face darken" (Dan. 5:10); \textit{pišrīn l\textsuperscript{m}i\textsuperscript{s}ār w\textsuperscript{q}ī\textsuperscript{n}rīn l\textsuperscript{m}ī\textsuperscript{s}rē} "to give interpretations and solve problems" (Dan. 4:16), or \textit{ḥēlāmā l\textsuperscript{s}ān\textsuperscript{āk ūpi\textsuperscript{s}rēh l\textsuperscript{c}arāk} "would that the dream were for your enemy and its meanings for your foe" (Dan. 4:16); so too in Ezra 4:12 \textit{w\textsuperscript{s}ū\textsuperscript{r}ayyā šaklīlā w\textsuperscript{b}u\textsuperscript{s}sāyā yāhi\textsuperscript{t}ū "they are completing the walls and repairing the foundation"}; 3) the use of repetition:

\begin{quote}
di-hawtī šābē hawtī qaṭēl
\textit{w\textsuperscript{d}i-hawtī šābē hawtī mahē}
\textit{w\textsuperscript{d}i-hawtī šābē hawtī mārīm}
\textit{w\textsuperscript{d}i-hawtī šābē hawtī maṣālī}
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)\textsuperscript{17}
\end{quote}

Still other rhetorical devices may be noted.\textsuperscript{18}

The Aramaic material presently known from Qumran provides the next examples of Aramaic poetry.\textsuperscript{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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\textsuperscript{14} W. S. Towner, "The Poetic Passages of Daniel 1–6," \textit{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.

\textsuperscript{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.

\textsuperscript{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. Noldeke, \textit{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, \textit{Le Muséon} 89 (1976), 263–66.

\textsuperscript{17} This repetitive device may be seen in Ugaritic, e.g., \textit{UT} 49 VI, 16–22; 51 VI, 45–53; in Biblical Hebrew, e.g., Isa. 2:7–8, etc.; in Early Aramaic 

\textsuperscript{18} Thus, Dan. 5:6 fits in the "Convention in Hebrew Literature: The Reaction to Bad News," discussed by D. R. Hillers, \textit{ZAW} 77 (1965), 86–90. Note, too, the important collocation of Dan.4:30 and Syriac 

synonymous verbs together: \( \Upsilon \nu \alpha \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \nu \n
The only sustained poetical piece in the Genesis Apocryphon, as preserved, is the description of Sarai in Col. XX. It was recognized as a *wasi*—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.  

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:

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kmh nṣyḥ ṣḥpyr lh ẓlm ṣṇpyḥ3
wkm? [. . . w]km? ṣṛṣq lh ṣr rṣḥ
km? ṣyn ihyn lh ṣynyḥ3
wμ? ṣṛg hw? lh ṣṇḥ3
wkl ṣṣ ṣṇpyḥ? [ ]
km? y3 lh ḥḥḥ
wkm? ṣḥpyr lh kwl lbnh3
drṣḥḥ m? ṣḥpyrn ṣwḥḥ km? klın
w[ ] kwl mḥzh ṣḥḥ3
km? ṣyn kpyh wm? ṣṛṣq lnwn kwl ṣbṭy yḥ3
ṛglḥḥ km? ṣḥpyrn wkm? ṣlḥ lh ṣḥḥ3
wkl bṭwln wklDn dy y₄ln lgnw ln yṣṣṛwn mnḥ3
w[ ] kwl ṣṣ yḥḥ ṣḥḥ ṣḥḥ
w[ ly] ṣḥḥ lh l ṣḥḥ mn kwln
w[ m] kwl ṣḥḥ ṣḥḥ dh
ḥkm? ṣḥyḥ y3 ṣḥḥ3
wdl yḥḥḥ y33
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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,  

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)


23 Since ṣḥḥ is used in this text one may doubt that ḥmyḥ 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).

We do not know enough about the vocabulary of Standard Literary Aramaic to be sure of the meaning of certain terms (such as nq) 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. It is possible that the other items mentioned—fineness of hair, for example—were chosen for the same reason.

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 is 'fine'. The wisdom praised here is practical sagacity and the meaning 'handiwork' proposed for this word should be seriously considered. The exact sort of handiwork intended, I believe, is weaving. Indeed, as we know from Exod. 35: 25-26 spinning was a sign of hokmat leb among women and the 2ēšet 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 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. 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. 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:

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: 'nt 'ḥty ṣgy) ḫkym wšpry) 'nt mn ḫhn "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.
Levi’s summons to his children;
Wisdom poem;
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.