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*The Aramaic Text in Demotic Script: The Liturgy of a New Year's
Festival Imported from Bethel to Syene by Exiles from Rash*

Since the death of C. F. Nims in 1988, I have continued to study the Aramaic text in demotic script with the aid of a microscope, consulting frequently with R. Ritner about demotic problems. The results have been so interesting that it seemed appropriate to share some of them prior to monographic publication of the text. By making this announcement in *JAOS*, I am continuing a tradition begun almost a decade ago, when Nims and I published our decipherment of the pagan version of psalm 20 in the *Journal*¹ after first announcing it at the Society's annual meeting.²

It is now clear that we are dealing with the liturgy of a New Year's festival (IVB/8 *rš.š.n.n^m*) celebrated in Epiph = Tishri (VIII/13, XV/2), like the Jewish Rosh Hashanah holiday, rather than in Nisan, the first month of the Persian-Babylonian calendar. The rituals of the festival, as narrated in the text, are similar to those of the Babylonian Akītu festival. Like the latter, they involve the head of the community; the narrator refers to him as a judge (III/6 *īy.n* = *dyn*), but in the ritual he is addressed as "king" (III/9 *m.rk.^m*). He was probably a scion of the royal family.

The ceremony begins with the celebrant's arrival at the gate leading to the courtyard (*t.š.^m* = *dr[h]*) of the New Year's chapel, which appears to have been erected for the occasion next to a graveyard; he stops there and

recites a blessing (III/6-8). A voice from within calls out to him to enter (*m̄n̄n^hr^m īh.r^m* = *mngl tgl*) the courtyard (III/8-9). After he enters and washes his hands (*š.^m h.k^m y.t.why^m* = *rḥk ydwhy*) (III/10-11), the statue of Marah (= Nanai), the Queen of *rš*, is brought into the assembly of the gods (*m.rkt^m r.[š].^{sw} mnḥ.r^m // mr^w b.yn.^[m] [r].^mh¹.n^m*) (IVA/9-10). The gods rise from their thrones (*w̄ykw̄mw̄^rn^m r̄Mn¹ .nk.ḫ^rs¹h.n^m*) and give the order for her to be seated among them (*īw̄t^r.¹[b.]^m mr^w byn^m .rḥn^{sw}*) (IVA/11-13). Each of the assembled gods is asked to bless the king (IVA/15-21, VII/1-7). Sheep are slaughtered and turned into smoke, while sixty singers (*b.ny^m s.m.m̄n^m*) lift their voices and sixty temple servitors (*b.n̄y^r.r̄^h1.n.n^m*) burn myrrh and frankincense (VII/7-13). The chief god is invited to feast on lamb and to become inebriated with wine, to the accompaniment of sweet harp and lyre music (XII/1-10). Spoon-stuffed ducks (*e.b.s^m b.ty^m b.trw.t^m* = ²*bs bty[²] btrwd*) are brought to the table on ivory platters (XV/10-12).

The high point of the festival is the sacred marriage ceremony. The king initiates the rite by declaring: "Nana, thou art my wife (*eynt^r./y^{1m}*)" (XVI/7). "In thy bridal chamber (*bk.n.nky^m* = *bgnnky*), a priest sings," he continues, "Nanai, bring near to me thy lips (*spewtky^m*)" (XVI/8-9). The king and the goddess keep a vigil outside the bridal chamber, with music from a nearby grave (*kr^m knr̄y r̄m̄n¹kbr^m*) preventing them from dozing off (XVI/9-11). At the appointed hour, the king invites the goddess to enter the bridal chamber: "My beloved (*īr-ḥm īy*), enter the door into our house. With my mouth, consort of our lord (*š.kr^m imr̄n* = *šgl dmrn*), let me kiss thee" (XVI/12). They enter the "perfumed hideaway" (*s.tr^m m.^m bsm^p*), where the goddess is laid upon an embroidered bedspread (*ḫby^t.^m* = *rbyd*) (XVI/13-14). The ceremony culminates in an exchange of blessings between Nanai and Baal of Heaven and a promise by the king to rebuild the ruined capital of *rš* (XVI/15-19).

This is not the place to point out all of the new evidence showing that the aforementioned *rš* (also called ³*rš*), the original homeland of our community, is the land between Babylonia and Elam which the Assyrians call Rash/Arash. For the moment, three points must

¹ C. F. Nims and R. C. Steiner, "A Paganized Version of Psalm 20:2-6 from the Aramaic Text in Demotic Script," *JAOS* 103 (1983): 261-74. Other editions of texts from papyrus Amherst 63 are: R. C. Steiner and C. F. Nims, "You Can't Offer Your Sacrifice and Eat it Too: A Polemical Poem from the Aramaic Text in Demotic Script," *JNES* 43 (1984): 89-114; idem, "Ashurbanipal and Shamash-shum-ukin: A Tale of Two Brothers from the Aramaic Text in Demotic Script," *RB* 92 (1985): 60-81; S. P. Vleeming and J. W. Wesseliuss, "An Aramaic Hymn from the Fourth Century B.C.," *BO* 39 (1982; appeared 1983): 501-9; idem, "Betel the Saviour," *JEOL* 28 (1983-84): 110-40; idem, *Studies in Papyrus Amherst 63*, vol. I (Amsterdam: Juda Palache Instituut, 1985).

² Cf. *Abstracts of the One Hundred and Ninety-Second Meeting of the American Oriental Society*, Austin, Texas, March 1982, lecture 18.

suffice. (1) The arch-enemies of *rš* are *kš* = Kash (either a poetic designation of Babylonia, as in Akkadian, or more probably the land of the Kassites) and *ʿylm* = Elam (X/18, XV/15), two of the neighbors of Rash. (2) The land of *rš* is situated “by the side of *hmbn{n}*” (XVI/18), which may be identified with Ḥamban, an immediate neighbor of Rash. (3) The name of the capital city of *rš* is *ʿlp pyt* (X/9–11, bis) or simply *ʿlp* (XVI/18); it is probably connected with cuneiform Ellipi, generally thought to be another immediate neighbor of Rash but perhaps just an alternate name of Rash, derived from the name of its capital (cf. Samerina).

There is also new evidence showing that Ashurbanipal, who captured Rash in his campaign against Elam, deported its inhabitants to Samaria, like the Elamites from Susa (Ezra 4:9–10). Much of the evidence points specifically to the city of Bethel.

The text contains two dialogues dealing with the history of the community. In one of them, a man of the community relates that he was forced to abandon his hometown—a magnificent “city full of ivory houses (*ḫḫy š.n^m = bty šn*)”—when its spring dried up (XI/6–11). The dialogue is immediately followed by the pagan version of psalm 20 (XI/11–19), which has been linked by M. Weinfeld³ and Z. Zevit⁴ to Jeroboam’s temple at Bethel. It appears, therefore, that the drought-stricken

city described in the dialogue is Bethel, a city which was indeed renowned for its “ivory houses (*bty šn*)” (Amos 3:14–15). Furthermore, Bethel was the most important city of Ephraim (in its narrow, tribal sense, at least); thus, Hosea may well have had Bethel in mind when he prophesied that Ephraim’s “fountain shall be parched, his spring dried up” (13:15) and that the resulting famine would lead the Ephraimites to return to Egypt (9:2–3, 6). There is even a possible reference (in a broken context) to the practice, derided by Hosea (13:2), of kissing (*y.š.k.^m*) the golden calves (*ʿkryk.^m*) at the Bethel sanctuary (V/12). Finally, the text refers to the god Bethel both as Esh(em)-Bethel (XV/14, 15) and as “Resident of Hamath (*t.ḫ.m.t^m*)” (VIII/6, 10), thereby establishing another link with the city of Bethel, in which colonists from Hamath worshiped Ashima (II Kgs 17:28–30).

The text betrays its place of origin both in a plea to “raise up our home, Syene (*šwyn.^m*)” (IX/17) and in the second historical dialogue (XVI/1–6). The latter purports to be a conversation between the (Egyptian or Rashan) king and the young spokesman of a newly arrived troop (*k.ʿy[ʿs]ʿm¹ = gys*) of Samaritans (*š.m^m ḫḫ[.ʿy¹.n^m*). The king inquires about the boy’s origin, who replies that he is from Judea (*ʿy¹hwt*), his brothers are from Samaria (*š.mryn.^m*), and his sisters are now being brought from Jerusalem (*y.ʿeḫ¹wš.rm^f.^{1m}*). It appears that the Rashans either lived among or were themselves soldiers from Judea and Samaria. Either way, a link with Elephantine seems unavoidable.

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³ “The Pagan Version of Psalm 20:2–6: Vicissitudes of a Psalmic Creation in Israel and its Neighbors” [Hebrew], *EI* 18 (1985): 131.

⁴ “The Common Origin of the Aramaicized Prayer to Horus and of Psalm 20,” *JAOS* (1990): 224.