SOME REMARKS ON THE ARAMAIC LETTERS FROM HERMOPOLIS

The recently published Aramaic letters from Hermopolis (E. Bresciani e M. Kamil, Le lettere aramaiche di Hermopoli, atti della accademia nazionale dei lincei, anno 1966, memorie classe di science morali, storiche e filologiche. Serie VIII — Volume XII, Fascicolo 5 (pp. 358-428 + 10 plates), Roma, Accademia nazionale dei Lincei, 1966) have for a long time been anticipated with tense expectation by Semitists and Old Testament scholars. It must accordingly be greeted with satisfaction that they eventually can be studied on basis of this careful publication with introduction and notes. In the following I shall make a short mention of some of the problems connected with these letters.

The letters were found in February 1945 in Tuna el Gebel (Hermopolis West) in the Ibis temple (dedicated to Thot) during some excavations under the leadership of Sami Gabra. The outward circumstances of the discovery give no basis for the dating. This has to be fixed from the letters and the essential support is the palaeography which points to the fifth century B.C. The basis of comparison is first and foremost the Aramaic papyri and ostraca from Elephantine and next the Aramaic documents edited by G. R. Driver (Aramaic Documents of the fifth Century B.C., Oxford 1954, abridged and revised edition 1957).

The shape of the Aramaic language in the letters cannot, as a matter of course, be used for the dating. It may rather be said that on assumption of the correct dating our knowledge of the extension and development of the Aramaic language in the fifth century B.C. has been slightly increased. Subject to the conclusions that can be drawn on such an unsafe basis as eight short letters their language may be said to represent a somewhat later stage of the development of the Aramaic language than the Elephantine papyri. By way of examples can be mentioned the more consistent use of d instead of z, of the pronominal form 'm in stead of hm, of aphel instead of haphel and the assimilation of n (cp. E. Bresciani, p. 369 f). From the syntax the periphrastic imperative (occurring at least 4 times, cp. E. Bresciani, p. 370) may be stressed as something especially remarkable, i.e. an imperative of the verb hwy "to be", followed by a participle of the main verb, e.g. hwy lqh "you shall be taking" = "you shall take" (no. III 9). In consideration of the almost boring use of perf.
of *hwy* + partic. of another verb in later Aramaic (specially in Syriac) the above mentioned periphrastic imperative can be taken as a form of analogy 1). It is, however, strange that there is no evidence of it elsewhere, and this fact raises the question whether it is only a dialectic phenomenon in these papyri. Seven of the letters (nos. I-VI and VIII) are written by the same scribe, whereas one letter (no. VII) is written by another one, but the phenomenon mentioned appears in either group. So the conclusion may be that it is a common linguistic phenomenon within the circle from which the letters originate.

It would be of even greater importance to state whether it is a mere literary phenomenon or it can be taken as a proof of Aramaic as a spoken language in the milieu of the letters. The present writer is inclined to the conception that the so-called “Reichsaramäisch” was not only used in more official documents, but also in everyday language by some people in Elephasite, among others the Jews. It cannot be decided from the existing evidence whether the same thing holds good of the letters from Hermopolis.

The Hermopolis letters are probably all sent from Memphis by persons with relatives or friends in Syene or Luxor. In contradistinction to the Elephantine papyri the scribes are not named in the eight letters from Hermopolis 2).

The names of the persons in the letters are nowhere Jewish, and the contents show clearly that the persons do not belong to the Jewish religion, not even in the unorthodox or syncretistic form we know from Elephantine. The senders of the letters salute the temple of the Babylonian god Nebu (no. I), the temple of the Babylonian goddess Banit (nos. II and III), the temple of the Phoenician god Bethel (no. IV) and the temple of Malakat tamin “The Queen of Heaven” (no. VI). E. Bresciani (o.c., p. 366) therefore uses the expression that the letters are from a milieu of “heathens or Ara-

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1) It is doubtful whether we have an example of perf. of *hwy* + partic. of *ty* “to come” in Cowley, *Aramaic Papyri of the Fifth Century B.C.*, Oxford 1923, no. 41, 3: “he used to come”. This construction is not found in BA. In O.T. Hebrew we find jussive + partic., e.g. Gen i 6; Ps cix 12.

2) It seems to be a rule in the Elephantine papyri that in all documents of legal importance an official scribe is used and his name is always mentioned whereas this is not the case in the more private letters, reports, or the like (see Cowley, o.c., nos. 30-34, 37-38, 42 and Kraeling, *The Brooklyn Museum Aramaic Papyri*, New Haven 1953, no. 13). In the Aramaic documents edited by G. R. Driver an Egyptian is mentioned as scribe in no. IV and a Persian in nos. VI-X. In such cases the rule is as Driver writes (abridged edit., pp. 18 f) that “the *Ḵdāb* will have been no mere amanuensis but rather a clerk or secretary or a translator”. 