An Aramaic Papyrus in Demotic Script

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George Hughes, Charles Nims, and Richard Steiner are working together on the transliteration and translation of a papyrus on which the Aramaic language was transcribed in demotic Egyptian script. The scribe, writing either from dictation or from a memorized text, did not know Aramaic; and his division of words, which helps our understanding of the document, is erratic. Demotic writing does not represent all the phonological distinctions of Aramaic, and there are many problems in determining the readings. The writing uses both alphabetic symbols and ligatures representing more than one letter; for some of the latter we do not yet know the Aramaic equiv-

Columns 8 (right) and 9 of the demotic Aramaic papyrus (photograph from the Amherst collection)

alent. But the demotic also preserves some phonetical differences that Aramaic writing obscures.

The papyrus is the longest Imperial Aramaic document known. It is 3.56 meters long and 30 centimeters high. It was cut into six sections, the first in fragments, and with an estimated 18–24 centimeters lost between this and the second section. The text is written in twenty-three columns of varying width, covering all of the recto and sixty percent of the verso. The upper and lower edges of the document are damaged, with the damaged area greater for the first two sheets.

Raymond Bowman, who first determined that the text was Aramaic, translated a few lines of a litany almost forty years ago. In our present study we have found out that the last six columns have a story about the brother and sister of the king of Babylon.

The papyrus once was part of the collection of Lord Amherst and was probably acquired by him in Egypt in the last century. The collection was purchased by the Pierpont Morgan Library about 1918, but was not brought to this country until after the Second World War. We have worked from photographs given by Lord Amherst to Wilhelm Spiegelberg and passed on at his death to William Edgerton.