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Eshem-Bethel and Herem-Bethel : New Evidence from Amherst Papyrus 63

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Karel van der Toorn*

Eshem-Bethel and Herem-Bethel: New Evidence from Amherst Papyrus 63

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The Jews of Elephantine have been qualified as polytheists on account of their veneration for several gods beside Yaho.¹ According to a 400 BCE record of contributions to the Temple of Yaho, the collected money was subsequently earmarked for three gods: Yaho, Eshem-Bethel, and Anat-Bethel (C3.15:126–128).² A judicial record from the same period mentions an oath of innocence, taken by a Jew with respect to an allegation by an Iranian neighbor, in the name of Herem-Bethel (B7.1, 401 BCE). It is clear from the temple record that Anat-Bethel and Eshem-Bethel belonged to the entourage of Yaho. The position of Herem-Bethel is less clear; yet the least we can say is that Herem-Bethel had found sanctuary in the Jewish quarter of the island. By the evidence of these records, the Jews paid their respects to four distinct deities.

One of the things the three »other« gods have in common is the construction of their name. They have a connection, the one way or the other, with Bethel; they are gods from the orbit of Bethel; not Bethel the town, but Bethel the god. By the witness of the name Anat-Yaho as a variant of Anat-Bethel (B7.3:3, late 5th c. BCE), the Jewish community of Elephantine did identify Yaho with Bethel. They took Yaho and Bethel as two names for the same god – as is clear, too, from the Israelite psalms preserved in the Amherst papyrus 63.³ For all practical purposes, Yaho had taken the place of Bethel; as a matter of consequence, he did inherit the gods

¹ See, e.g., Albin van Hoonacker, *Une Communauté Judéo-Araméenne à Éléphantine, en Égypte, aux VI^e et V^e siècles av. J.-C.*, The Schweich Lectures 1914 (London: Humphrey Milton, Oxford University Press, 1915), 82; Albert Vincent, *La religion des Judéo-Araméens d'Éléphantine* (Paris: Geuthner, 1937), 100; 712.

² All references to the Elephantine texts are to the copies published by Bezalel Porten and Ada Yardeni, *Textbook of Aramaic Documents from Ancient Egypt*, 4 vols. (Jerusalem: Hebrew University, 1986–1999), the letters A, B, C, and D being used to designate the pertinent volume.

³ The Amherst papyrus 63 contains three Israelite psalms, only the first of which is known, in a later edition, through the Hebrew Bible (Psalm 20). In the three texts (XII 11–19; XIII 1–10 and XIII 11–17) the names Yaho (passim), Adonay (passim), Bethel (XII 18), and Mār (passim) are used freely alongside one another.

from Bethel's orbit. First of all Anat as his divine consort; and also Eshem-Bethel and Herem-Bethel, whose transfer to the orbit of Yaho did not affect their names apparently. While Anat is quite familiar to scholars of religion, Eshem and Herem are not. This contribution seeks to illuminate the identity of Eshem-Bethel and Herem-Bethel on the basis of the evidence currently available – paying particular attention to new data from Amherst papyrus 63.

There can be no doubt that, to the Jewish soldiers of Elephantine and their Syrian colleagues in Syene, Eshem-Bethel and Herem-Bethel were gods. So much is clear from the presence of Eshem-Bethel in the temple of Yaho, and from the qualification of Herem-Bethel as »the god« (B7.2:7–8). In addition, Eshem and Herem are well attested as gods in names carried by both Jews and Syrians living in Egypt.⁴ It should be noted that in these theophoric names, Eshem and Herem always occur independently of Bethel. People could be called Herem-natan, Eshem-šezib, or Bethel-natan, but it seems nobody named their child after Herem-Bethel or Eshem-Bethel. This observation triggers two questions. The one asks for the identity of Eshem and Herem; the other one concerns the nature of their relationship with Bethel.

So far, neither of these two questions has received a satisfactory answer. Not on account of a lack of diligence on the part of scholars, but for a lack of data. The most extensive treatment to date, written by Albert Vincent in the 1930s, devotes 28 pages to Herem-Bethel, and another 26 pages to Eshem-Bethel.⁵ Much of this, however, is a patchwork of sophisticated speculation on the basis of dubious etymology and random association. Most authors are more cautious than Vincent. Yet greater caution has not produced such insights into the nature of Herem and Eshem as might command the consent of the scholarly community. The new evidence of Amherst papyrus #63 may bring about a change in this situation.⁶

⁴ The list includes Ešem-zabad (B3.9:12); Ešem-šezib (B3.9:11; 3:13:12); Ešem-kudurri (C4.8:6); Ešem-rām (B3.9:11; B3.13:12; B4.7:1; C4.8:8; D18.7a; D19.2:1; D22.18:1–2); Ḥerem-natan (B3.9:12; B6.4:9; D18.6a, 6b; D18.10a, 10b; D22.36:1); Herem-šezib (D18.2a, 2b; D22.6:1) and Ḥermān (C3.15:4; C4.4:2; D9.14:6, 12) – assuming the last name does indeed contain a reference to Herem.

⁵ Vincent, *La religion des Judéo-Araméens d'Éléphantine*, chap. XIII: »Le dieu Ḥarambéthel à Éléphantine«: 593–621; chap. XV: »Le dieu Ašimbéthel d'Éléphantine«: 654–680.

⁶ The author gratefully acknowledges to have benefited from the careful and insightful comments by Tawny Holm, Penn State University. Responsibility for the views here expressed lies solely with the author.

Eshem-Bethel

The Amherst papyrus owes its claim to fame among scholars of the Hebrew Bible to what has been called »a paganized version of psalm 20«. ⁷ However, the 9 lines of this forerunner of Psalm 20 (XII 11–19) represent only a fraction of the texts contained in the 23 columns of the papyrus, nearly all of which run into about 20 lines. Written with Demotic characters, the Amherst papyrus is a collection of Aramaic texts from a community historically related to the Jews and the Arameans that served as soldiers in Southern Egypt in the 5th century BCE. The papyrus is a library of sorts. Most of the texts are prayers and hymns, but there is also historical narrative, and at times a mix of genres. The central deity of the papyrus is Bethel, most often referred to with his epithet Mār, »Lord«. Column 16 of the papyrus contains two hymns to Eshem-Bethel; and column 17 has a text celebrating the marriage of Herem-Bethel and Nanay (XVII 7–19).

It should be admitted at the outset that the reading of the names Eshem-Bethel and Herem-Bethel in the Amherst papyrus has been contested because in both cases the orthography has dropped the *mem*. Instead of ^ʔ*šmbytl* and *ħrmbytl* (so in the Elephantine papyri) the Amherst papyrus offers the readings ^ʔ*šbytl* (XVI 1, 15; variant ^ʔ*šbytl* in XVI 14) and *ħrbytl* (XVII 14). In the eyes of Ingo Kottsieper, the absence of the *mem* militates against the interpretation of these names as Eshem-Bethel and Herem-Bethel, respectively. ⁸ The objection is not compelling, however. The phenomenon of a consonant disappearing in composite divine names is not unique to these two deities in the Amherst papyrus; in column 17 the name of Baal-Shamayin is written as *b^cšmyn* (XVII 17). In view of the orthographic variants *ħnwm* (so mostly) and *ħnwb* (A4.5:3, 8; A4.7:5) for the Egyptian god Ḥnum in the Elephantine papyri, the elision of the *mem* before a *beth* in composite divine names should be no cause for wonder. To mark the elision we might adapt the transliteration slightly so as to read either ^ʔ*š<m>bytl* or ^ʔ*šbytl*. ⁹

⁷ See Charles F. Nims and Richard C. Steiner, »A Paganized Version of Psalm 20:2–6 from the Aramaic Text in Demotic Script,« *JAOS* 103 (1983): 261–274; Sven P. Vleeming and Jan W. Wesseliuss, »An Aramaic Hymn from the Fourth Century B. C.,« *BiOr* 39 (1982 [the issue actually appeared Spring 1983]): 501–509.

⁸ See the reference to Kottsieper in Bob Becking, »Die Gottheiten der Juden in Elephantine,« in *Der eine Gott und die Götter: Polytheismus und Monotheismus im antiken Israel*, ed. Manfred Oeming and Konrad Schmid (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 2003): 203–226, esp. 224.

⁹ See also the pertinent observations by Jan Wim Wesseliuss in Vleeming and Wesseliuss, *Studies in Papyrus Amherst 63: Essays on the Aramaic Text in Aramaic/demotic Papyrus Amherst 63*, vol. 2 (Amsterdam: Juda Palache Instituut, 1990), 11–12.

The one hymn to Eshem-Bethel that is most explicit about the character of the god is found in lines 13–17 of column 16. Here is a transliteration plus translation of the pertinent lines, based on photographs of the papyrus.¹⁰

¹³ ḥyl | ²t₂wr + ²l | ḥyl²k | ¹⁴ yhw
²š²byt²lG ḥyl | ²t₂wry.C ²l | ḥyl²k |
 ḥ²mt|k² + k²|t|n²n²n |
 qš²t²k | b²š²mynG ²t₂ mry.C t₂drḥ² |
¹⁵ n₂kt | ²šbyt²lG b²y²by²k |
 ḥzyt + d₂y | t₂b | p₂ty.Cšk |
² ḥyl² | l²rym | trm |
 ḥzyt d₂y + t₂b | ¹⁶ k²dny |
 k²dny | b²mš²{|}g²bk | yq₂²r₂b² |
 rš + ysy + ms²nyk |
 b²k | yḥr.C² | ²ry.C |
 y²mšk | ¹⁷ yd | l₂mry.C
 r₂²pt | ²l.C qnq²n |
 mnpq² | mn₂.C drg w₂ r₂š²H² ²ḥn
 + bš | d₂ḥzyt

Your force is the force of divine bulls, Yahoo;
 Eshem-Bethel, your force is the force of divine bulls.
 Your venom is like that of the sea-serpents.
 Your bow in heaven, You, Lord, you have drawn.
 You strike, Eshem-Bethel, your enemies.
 You see that your hammer is good,
 You raise it with force against the devious one—
 You see that my protection is good
 My protection shall be near your fortress.
 Should your enemies raise their head;
 Should the adversaries be heated against you;
 Should they stretch out their hand against the Lord,
 It will turn weak upon the barred gate.¹¹
 I am coming forth from Darga and Rash
 In a fire you have not seen (before).

¹⁰ My work on papyrus Amherst 63 is based on the Chicago photographs of 1901, a copy of which was kindly provided to me by John A. Larson, Jr. At the Pierpont Morgan Library, John Vincler, Head of Reader Services, gave me access to more recent photographs of the text (2012 or 2013). In my transliteration I follow the system developed by Sven Vleeming and Jan Wim Wesselius, as outlined in the second volume of their *Studies in Papyrus Amherst 63* (see previous note), allowing for some slight adaptations for the convenience of the reader.

¹¹ I interpret *qanqān* as a by-form of *qanqāl*, »latticed gate« or »bar«, see Marcus Jastrow, *A Dictionary of the Targumim, the Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi and the Midrashic Literature*, 2 vols. (London: Luzac/New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons 1903), 1394.

This hymns consists of two parts. The first one is an invocation of Eshem-Bethel; the second one consists of a divine oracle promising safety to the worshippers. A similar combination of prayer and oracle occurs in VII 12–18 and XVI 1–3 (the other hymn to Eshem-Bethel). The format is familiar from the biblical Psalms and is encountered in much of the rest of the ancient Near East as well. The central character of the composition is Eshem-Bethel, a warrior god armed with bow and hammer. The reference to his venom (*ḥmt*), likened to that of the Tanninin (here translated as sea-serpents), does not imply a switch of metaphors. Venom was applied to the tips of arrows to make them more deadly. »For the arrows of Shadday are in me, my spirit absorbs their poison« (*ḥmt*, Job 6:4). The bow is often mentioned as a divine weapon; the »hammer« (*ptyš*, compare Hebrew *paṭṭiš*) is unattested in that capacity, but is appropriate in the context of Eshem-Bethel as divine warrior. Bow, hammer, and arrows – alluded to through the reference to venom – belong to the battle gear of a storm-god: the rainbow, the thunder, and the lightning-bolts.

Eshem-Bethel is a warrior god promising protection to his worshippers gathered in their fortress. A fortress (*mšgb*) is a shield against enemy attacks and a symbol of protection. »Yahweh is a fortress (*mišgāb*) for the oppressed, and a fortress in times of trouble« (Psalm 9:10). The fortress of the worshippers of Eshem-Bethel benefits from a special divine protection, called *kdn* after the Akkadian term *kidinnu*. There is divine protection against demons (»You should know that I have entered into the *kidinnu*-protection of my lords [i. e., gods]«) and against human enemies (Babylon is an *āl kidinni*, »city under divine protection«).¹² The *kidinnu* that Eshem-Bethel provides will deter human enemies from attacking. Should adversaries lay siege to the city, the god himself will »come forth« (*NPQ*) from Darga and Rash »in a fire that you have not seen (before).« The divine epiphany will be from the ascent (Darga, literally »ladder«) and the mountaintop (Rash, literally »head«), situated in the homeland of the community in the Lebanon.¹³

¹² References to be found in *CAD* K 342–343. See also James Nathan Ford, »The Ancient Mesopotamian Motif of *kidinnu* ›divine protection of temple cities and their citizens: in Akkadian and Aramaic Magic,« in *Encounters by the Rivers of Babylon*, ed. Uri Gabbay and Shai Secunda, Texts and Studies in Ancient Judaism 160 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014): 271–283. As nearly always in the Amherst papyrus, there are alternative readings possible. Since the context is one of warfare, *kdn* might also be understood as a defective writing of *kidōn*, the Hebrew word for javelin. The translation offered by Richard C. Steiner in *COS* 1.99 (p. 321, »... may my linen be good, my linen which will touch your couch«) is based on a reading *ṭb ktny ktny bmškbk yqrb*, which is technically possible (the sign for D can also be read as T or Ṭ, and the sign for K also represents G and Q), but is hard to reconcile with the context.

¹³ See Sven P. Vleeming and Jan Wim Wesseliuss, *Studies in Papyrus Amherst 63*, vol. 1 (Amsterdam: Juda Palache Instituut, 1985), 9; Ingo Kottsieper, »Anmerkungen zu Pap Amherst 63, I, Teil II–V,« *UF* 29 (1997 [1998]): 385–434, esp. 406–416.

Rash is the home address of Eshem-Bethel; it is from here that he will hasten to the rescue of his people.

In the hymn under scrutiny, Eshem-Bethel is identified with two other gods: Yaho and Bethel. The identification with Yaho (in line 14) is explicit though not uncontested; other occurrences of Yaho use a Demotic sign-combination that is slightly different. Since such slight variants in sign-combinations are not uncommon in the Amherst papyrus, the reading yhw is a distinct possibility and, in view of the alternatives, in the end the most likely one. Also, the identification between Eshem-Bethel and Yaho fits the religious imagination that permeates papyrus Amherst. Here is why. In lines 14 and 17, Eshem-Bethel is referred to as »the Lord«. Richard Steiner renders the sign-combination for Lord (or »My Lord«, mry.C) as »Mar«, thus turning it into a proper name. He has good reason to do so. If we read »Ba^cal«, »Bēl«, and »Adōnay« as – secondary – proper names of Haddu, Marduk, and Yahweh/Yaho, there is no compelling reason to treat Bethel's epithet otherwise. For Mār, »Lord«, is the conventional designation of Bethel in the Amherst papyrus.¹⁴ Now if Eshem-Bethel is identified with Bethel (through the use of the epithet Mār); and if Bethel and Yaho are identified with one another; then the identification of Eshem-Bethel and Yaho should come as no surprise.

Eshem-Bethel is a warrior god intimately associated with storms and tempests. Yet if there is one trait that characterizes him more specifically, it is fire. His epiphany from Darga and Rash will be »in a fire (*bš*, to be understood as *b²š*) that you have not seen (before).« The same association occurs in another prayer to Eshem-Bethel – in fact, a combination of a hymn plus an oracle. The relatively short text is found in lines 1–3 of column 16.

¹ š³b³b³ | y³s³q³ ||| °šbytlG
 nb[w.C] °bš³r | m³r³t³[k³ |
 tb³ | ḥ³lm³ | b[x x x][z³x |
² q³dm³t | mn³.C q³r³t³k³ | b³rnš³
 t³sm | š³lm³ ||| d³c³d + °lmn³.C
 b³yrḥ [x x x] nbw.C + y³dk³rk |
 [b]°ḥšby | °ys³m³k |
 °l.C °rḥ³ | wbrmn³.C

¹⁴ The fact that Mār is the epithet of Bethel is particularly clear in the cycle of psalms in X 9–XI 16; the first psalm opens with the invocation of Bethel (X 9: »Bethel, God on high«), a god addressed in the next line and throughout the psalms as Mār, »Lord« (X 10: »Do let it rain, Lord«). According to the list of divine blessings, Mār blesses »from Rash« (VIII 2; see also XVII 15); which implies his identity with Bethel because Rash is the home address of Bethel, »the God of Rash«. For references to »the God of Rash« see VI 15; VII 7, 11; IX 3, 16, 18 [2x], 20; X 15, 22; XI 6, 14.

The burning one appears, Eshem-Bethel;
 Nabu has proclaimed your kingship.
 Stand up, young man, in ...
 I presented myself at your banquet, son of man.
 You will establish peace everlasting!
 At new moon [and ...] Nabu will mention you;
 He will put you in my mind
 On earth and on high.

Two gods play a role in this text: Eshem-Bethel and Nabu. Nabu acts in the capacity of herald, scribe, and secretary – entirely in keeping with the folk etymology of his name (»the One Who Calls«) and his attributes in the Mesopotamian theology. Nabu proclaims and mentions, thus reminding his master of someone special. This someone special is a human being, a »son of man«. This is the man who is addressed throughout the text, and whose »rule« or »kingship« (*mārūt*) Nabu proclaims. The context of the text is a ceremony of either enthronement or re-enthronement on the occasion of the New Year. Eshem-Bethel is the god who grants kingship, and under whose protection the human king will reign. Little is said about the god's character, apart from the fact that he is described as »burning« (*šbb*). Fire is the distinctive attribute of Eshem-Bethel.

The close association of Eshem-Bethel and fire (°ēš) is hardly a coincidence. Eshem-Bethel is Bethel in his capacity as the god who is »burning« and who manifests himself »in a fire that you have not seen (before).« Earlier scholars have proposed a link between Eshem and the Mesopotamian deity Išum.¹⁵ Though their proposal has been dismissed by most later scholars, there is an analogy between Eshem and Išum that deserves to be noted. Išum, too, is a warrior god associated with fire. In his case, this is not the fire of lightning, but the fire of the torch carried by the night watchman.¹⁶ Jean Bottéro and others have explained the name Išum on the basis of the common Semitic word for fire, °š/°T.¹⁷ Perhaps the explanation is ultimately a folk etymology; yet the point is whether in antiquity this etymology was productive of meaning. On the face of the available evidence, it would seem to have been so. In the cases of both Eshem and Išum, the name of

¹⁵ See Arthur Ungnad, *Aramäische Papyrus aus Elephantine: Kleine Ausgabe unter Zugrundelegung von Eduard Sachau's Erstausgabe* (Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs, 1911), 41; Friedrich Eduard König, »Die Gottheit Aschima,« *ZAW* 34 (1914): 16–30, esp. 23–25.

¹⁶ See Andrew R. George, »The Gods Išum and Ĥendursanga: Night Watchmen and Street-lighting in Babylonia,« *JNES* 74 (2015): 1–8.

¹⁷ Jean Bottéro, »Les divinités sémitiques anciennes en Mésopotamie,« in *Le Antiche Divinità Semitiche*, ed. Sabatino Moscati, *Studi Semitici* 1 (Rome: Istituto di Studi Orientali, 1958): 17–63, esp. 43–43.

the deities was associated with fire; and since a god's essence was supposed to be contained in his name, Eshem and Išum developed into gods associated with fire in the one form or the other.¹⁸

Herem-Bethel

Herem-Bethel occurs only once in the Amherst papyrus. The hymn in question celebrates his marriage with Nanay. The text is a valuable addition to the small corpus of »sacred marriage texts« from the West Semitic realm.¹⁹ It ends with a series of blessings that have no immediate relation with what precedes; I therefore limit myself to a transliteration and translation of lines 7–14 of column 17.

⁷ nn^o | ^oty | ^oynt{y} |
mn^t | s^ow₂ry.C h^odw₂ +
 n_hry bsm^o | l^o + mn^oh_hry |
⁸ ^oltn + t₃^ol_{nsy} | mn₂.Crd₃ + ^oll | + yq₂rk₂y |
 z^oblg^on | ^ol + yq₂r |
 bg^on^onky | š^or | k₂^omr |
⁹ nny + ^oly + q₂rb | spwtky |
 h₂ln + b^omt^on | nny
 brmš^o | r₂mšt | ^oymk |
¹⁰ ^op₂ + h₁lm^o | b_hr.C ^oz₂^o |
 yr₂m[š]^ok | ql | b^oz₂t^orn.C
 š^ohryty | mn₂.C ^ot |
¹¹ yr₂^omšk | nbly.C
 b^oq₂br | š₂b{y}{^oty.C
 {y}r₂mš^ok | ql | knry.C
 {b}q₂br | ¹² h₂rm{^oty.C
 t₂^ok | dlt^o | b^obyt^on |
 bp₂ym^o | š^ogl | d₃mrn.C yš^oq^ok |
¹³ w + ^ozl | ^oz₂n | w₄hl |
 b^o{n}n_hry | t^orb |

18 For more on fire as a divine force, or as a deity in its own right, see Patrick D. Miller, Jr., »Fire in the Mythology of Canaan and Israel,« *CBQ* 27 (1965): 256–261.

19 See Martti Nissinen and Risto Uro, ed., *Sacred Marriages: The Divine-Human Sexual Metaphor from Sumer to Early Christianity* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2008); Martti Nissinen, »Akkadian Rituals and Poetry of Divine Love,« in *Mythology and Mythologies: Methodological Approaches to Intercultural Influences*, ed. R. M. Whiting, Melammu Symposia 2 (Helsinki: The Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, 2001): 93–136; Martti Nissinen, »Love Lyrics of Nabû and Tašmetu: An Assyrian Song of Songs?,« in *Und Mose schrieb dieses Lied auf*, Festschrift Oswald Loretz, ed. Manfred Dietrich and Ingo Kottsieper, AOAT 250 (Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 1998): 585–634.

^ok nḥr | z^otr | m^o{|}bsmR
¹⁴ yš^ok{|}y^bk | ^ol + r₂byd^o | ḥr.CbytlG
^ol.C r₃qmn | ^ol | bš^omwhy |

[God:] Nanay, you be my wife!

[Chorus:] Bring a bed of aromatic branches,

Sweet fragrances for his nostrils.

Our goddess, you must carry a bedspread to your Darling

Twigs of cedar to the Darling.

In your bridal chamber a priest is singing.

[God:] Nanay, put your lips close to me.

Let us enter our bed, Nanay.

In the evening I have sung a serenade in your company.

[Chorus:] Indeed! The chosen lad has come.

His voice will sing you a serenade in our sanctuary—

[God:] My One of the Dawn, who are you?

Let my harp bring you a serenade

In the grave of my Painted One.

Let the sound of my lyre bring you a serenade,

In the grave of my Mistress.

[Chorus:] You will go to the door in our house

With his mouth, Consort of Our Lord, he will kiss you.

[God:] And as I come and enter,

She is pleasant to my nostrils

Like the sweet-smelling fragrance of savory.²⁰

[Chorus:] Herem-Bethel will make you lay down on the bedspread;

El on embroidered cloth in his heavens.

Even if there are details in this text that may escape us, the general drift is clear. This is a nuptial song with different speakers, similar to the polyphony of the biblical Song of Songs. Two voices alternate with each other; the one belongs to the god in his role as groom; the other belongs to the chorus addressing the goddess in her role of coy mistress; the goddess herself remains silent. To facilitate the understanding, the translation identifies who's speaking between square brackets. The opening statement by the god, »Nanay, you be my wife«, is the formal phrase used in the conclusion of a marriage.²¹ As the song progresses, the action

²⁰ On *zateru* (compare Arabic *za^otar*, *ša^otar*), see CAD Z 74; Marcus Jastrow, *A Dictionary of the Targumim, the Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi and the Midrashic Literature*, 2 vols. (London: Luzac/ New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1903), 1306 s.v. *šitrê*.

²¹ See Samuel J. Greengus, »The Old Babylonian Marriage Contract,« *JAOS* 89 (1969): 505–532, esp. 515–520. One instance of the *verba solemnia* is found in Theophilus G. Pinches, »Some Recent Discoveries in the Realm of Assyriology, with Special Reference to the Private Life of the Babylonians,« *Journal of the Transactions of the Victoria Institute* 26 (1892/1893): 123–185, esp. 154, col. ii, 14: *atta lu aššatu anāku lu mutka*, »You be my wife, I your husband«.

moves from the god wooing his mistress, to the goddess opening the door for her lover, culminating to his laying her down on the bedspread. The gods involved are identified as Nanay and Herem-Bethel, the latter being assimilated to El. Nanay figures regularly in Near Eastern love lyrics, but her usual partner is Nabu. Nabu, however, is completely absent from this text; his role has been usurped by Herem-Bethel. In the ideology of papyrus Amherst, this is not an usurpation, however; being the supreme deity, Herem-Bethel is entitled to Nanay.

The underlying logic of the transfer assumes that Herem-Bethel is in fact an avatar of Bethel, for Bethel – the Lord, Mār – is the #1 deity of papyrus Amherst 63. Herem-Bethel and Eshem-Bethel resemble each other in the sense that they are both particular manifestations of Bethel – the latter in his capacity as the storm-god who answers with fire, the former as the lover of Nanay. The name Herem (*ħrm*) must somehow be connected to the sacred marriage ceremonies. The etymology of *ħrm* is uncontested; it derives from the common Semitic root *HRM*, which refers to the sphere of the sacred – awe-inspiring, forbidding, fascinating. In the combination Herem-Bethel, the term has usually been understood on the analogy of Arabic *ḥarām*, »sacred precinct, sanctuary«, as in the name *Ḥarām aš-Šarīf* for the site of the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem. According to this line of reasoning, Herem-Bethel must be understood as a genitive construction meaning »Sacred precinct of Bethel«; the understanding of Herem as »sacred property« or »taboo« (of either Bethel or Yaho) is a variant of this solution. The present sacred marriage text compels us to look for another explanation. In fact, there is a well-known connection between the notion of the sacred and sex. The Akkadian word for prostitute is *ḥarimtu*, semantically the equivalent of Hebrew *qēdēšâ* (»prostitute«, but literally »the holy one, the consecrated one«). The male counterpart of the Babylonian *ḥarimtu* is the *ḥarmu*, »young lover« or »mate«, a rare word known best for its occurrence in the description of the god Dumuzi as the »mate« or »young lover« of Ishtar (^d*Ištar ša ḥarmaša* ^d*Dumuzi*).²² On this analogy, Herem-Bethel is Bethel in his capacity as sexual mate. The name is presumably to be pronounced as Ḥarim-Bethel, in view of Akkadian *ḥarimtu* and the occurrence of Ḥarim (*ḥa-ri-im*) in personal names found among West-Semitic exiles in the Neo-Babylonian Empire.²³

²² See Walter Farber, *Beschwörungsrituale an Ištar und Dumuzi: Atti Ištar ša ḥarmaša Dumuzi* (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1977). On Akkadian *ḥarmu* see also the observations by Julia Assante, »The kar.kid / *ḥarimtu*, Prostitute or Single Woman? A Reconsideration of the Evidence,« *UF* 30 (1998): 5–96, esp. 13–14 (reference courtesy Tawny Holm).

²³ See Laurie Pearce and Cornelia Wunsch, *Documents of Judean Exiles and West Semites in Babylonia in the Collection of David Sofer*, CUSAS 28 (Bethesda, MD: CDL Press, 2015), 54.

If *herem* (*harim*) in the compound name Herem-Bethel goes back to *harmu* as title of Dumuzi, there is reason to ask whether the sacred marriage here described is perhaps modeled on that of Ištar and Dumuzi. Many lines of these love lyrics are too general to answer that question; but there is one element that does point in the direction of the Ištar-Dumuzi mythology; it is the twofold reference to the grave. The song and the music of »the chosen lad« are to *RMŠ* his lady lover »in the grave« (lines 10–11). The verb *RMŠ* is unattested elsewhere. It is most likely interpreted as a denominative derived from *rmš*, »evening«, which yields a variety of possible meanings. On account of the reference to music and singing, I have opted for the etymological corresponding »to bring a serenade« (from Italian *sera*, evening). In the logic of the song, it is Nanay who hears the serenade »in the grave«. Is the use of this word a faint echo of the descent of Ištar to the Netherworld and her periodical return among the living? Possibly so – though the »grave« (or, less specifically, »chamber«) is more likely a metaphor for the impenetrable room where the goddess is hiding. If the goddess is indeed referred to as *hrmt*, according to a possible reading of the difficult signs at the beginning of line 12, there would be another parallel with Ištar.²⁴

Concluding Observations

The new evidence from the Amherst papyrus shows that Eshem-Bethel and Herem-Bethel are distinct manifestations of Bethel. Unlike the name Anat-Bethel, their names are not genitive constructions but appositions, the first name qualifying the aspect under which the god Bethel manifests himself. Anat-Bethel is the »Anat-of-Bethel«, meaning Anat the consort of Bethel; Eshem-Bethel and Herem-Bethel are »Bethel-as-Eshem« (Bethel in his capacity as god of fire) and »Bethel-as-Herem« (Bethel in his capacity as divine mate), respectively. Neither Eshem nor Herem occurs in the Amherst papyrus as an independent god. Anat does, in line 9 of column 8 (^ḥnt). This does not warrant the conclusion that Eshem and Bethel never had an existence independent of Bethel; their independent existence as gods is a possibility that we cannot rule out.²⁵ Yet on the evidence

²⁴ There remains the as yet unresolved problem of the duality between *HRM* (*harimtu*, *harmu*) and *HRM* (*Herem*). Note also, however, the dual writing of the root *RHM/RHM* in columns 14–15, where *rhm* is the writing for the verb (»to show mercy«, XIV 3, 16–17; XV 1) and *rhm* is the writing for »Maiden«, a title of Nanay (XIV 4, 5, 10, 16) that echoes »Maiden Anat« (*rhm* [not *rhm*!] ^{nt}) from Ugaritic texts (*KTU* 1.6 ii 27, cf. line 5).

²⁵ A connection between Eshem and ʾAšimā³, the god of Hamath (2 Kings 17:30), is likely; see also the references to the god ʾšym³ as one of the three gods of Teima (along with *šlm* and *šnglʿ*),

of the Amherst papyrus, in combination with the other Aramaic texts from Egypt (most notably the Elephantine papyri), there is good reason to assume that the references to Eshem and Herem in the personal names of Syrians and Jews are in fact indirect references to Bethel.

In the religious life of the Jewish community of Elephantine, Yaho (the Jewish equivalent of Bethel), Eshem-Bethel, and Herem-Bethel were treated as distinct deities – even though the evidence shows that Eshem and Herem were actually understood to be aspects of Bethel (and, on account of his identification with Bethel, of Yaho). Does this make these Jews polytheists? The tension between the One (Yaho, Bethel) and the many (his various manifestations or aspects) is a familiar phenomenon in religion. In the Christian tradition, there are the many manifestations of Saint Mary, distinguished by their iconography, place of worship, and particular field of specialization. In Hinduism, there are the avatars of Vishnu and the iconographic repertoire of Krishna in his different roles. The monotheism/polytheism binary is inadequate as a conceptual tool to come to terms with the underlying issue of unity versus diversity. The Elephantine Jews embraced the diversity without surrendering the unity; their God was in no way inferior to Bethel and had no smaller repertoire of manifestations.

Abstract: The pluralism that characterized the religious life of the Jewish community at Elephantine (5th century BCE) included the veneration of Eshem-Bethel and Herem-Bethel. This contribution seeks to illuminate the identity of these gods on the basis of new evidence from the Aramaic texts in Demotic script known as papyrus Amherst 63. It shows that Eshem-Bethel and Herem-Bethel are particular manifestations of Bethel; the one in his role as fiery storm-god; the other in his capacity as sexual mate of a divine consort.

Zusammenfassung: Die Vielfalt, die das religiöse Leben der jüdischen Gemeinde auf Elephantine im 5. Jhd. v. Chr. kennzeichnete, beinhaltete die Verehrung von Eshem-Bethel und Herem-Bethel. Dieser Beitrag möchte die Identität dieser Götter auf der Basis neuer Hinweise aus den aramäischen Texten in demotischer Schrift, die unter der Bezeichnung Papyrus Amherst 63 bekannt sind, erhellen. Diese zeigen, dass Eshem-Bethel und Herem-Bethel Manifestationen von Bethel sind, der eine in seiner Rolle als feuriger Sturmgott, der andere in seiner Funktion als Sexualpartner einer göttlichen Gemahlin.

see Klaus Beyer and Alasdair Livingstone, »Die neuesten aramäischen Inschriften aus Taima,« *ZDMG* 137 (1987): 285–296, esp. 287–288. There may also be a connection with Eshmun the main god of Sidon, for which see Sergio Ribichini in *DDD*: 583–587.