The "Epistolary Perfect" in Hebrew Letters[1]

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As one reader[2] of the manuscript of my article on the Arad letters[3] and now Walter GROSS in a recent fascicle of this journal[4] have questioned my use of the phrase "epistolary perfect"[5] for certain usages of the perfect form in Hebrew letters[6], a more explicit statement regarding the term appears to be in order.

The term "epistolary" as applied to a verbal form was simply borrowed from classical grammar, for in Greek, for example, "epistolary" aorist and perfect (rarely imperfect) forms are used by the writer of a letter or inscription for statements regarding the situation of the writer when writing: "The writer of a letter or book, the dedicator of an offering, may put himself in the position of the reader or beholder who views the action as past...."[7]

Occurrences in Hebrew letters are clearest in the *praescriptiones* of letters. Examples such as *šlh* in Arad 16:1 indicate that the perfect forms are indeed specifically epistolary and not simply perfects of completed action, as one might argue for the *brk* formula (in the same letter and in Arad 21 and 24). A list is here provided of all forms of which I am aware which should be termed "epistolary" perfects, followed by another list of forms which I would specifically exclude from that category:

Arad 3:2-3 *wṣwk hnnyhw* 'Hananyahu (hereby) orders you ...'[8]

Arad 16:1-3 *'ḥk hnnyhw šlh lšlm 'lyšb wlšlm bytk brktk lyhwh* 'Your brother Hananyahu (hereby) sends greetings to (you) Elyashib and to your household. I (hereby) bless you to YHWH.'[9]

The word "perfect" of my phrase is, of course, simply the traditional name for the *qāṭal* or "suffix-conjugation" verbal form. The term "epistolary perfect" is not meant to describe a syntactically distinguishable entity of Hebrew grammar but one usage of the perfect form among others. The term "epistolary" (aorist, perfect, imperfect, pluperfect, etc.) has been thought necessary in classical grammar, one may assume, because modern usage differs - at least in Englisch one says 'I am writing to inform you that ...' (though the present perfect is also acceptable, especially near the end of the letter, if properly qualified, e.g., 'I have written this letter to you ...'). The "epistolary" perfect is thus a modern translational category of grammar and is to be seen as representing a different way of describing a given entity from that used in English, for example, and not as an overtly marked grammatical category.

8 One could perhaps describe *ṣwk* as a simple perfect of completed action leading up to the present letter since *hnnyhw* had to give the order before the writer could write it down. I termed it an "epistolary" perfect because the writer is transmitting the order and in English, at least, this would be done in the present tense for an order of which the letter is the immediate transmission. The "hereby" of my translation is meant to convey the epistolary aspect and thus reflects the usual translation of the "performative perfect," e.g., *ntty* 'I (hereby) give'. (For a recent linguistic discussion of performatives, see LEVINSON, Pragmatics [cited in n. 7], pp. 226-63). Note that the *brk* formula is probably itself a "performative" perfect since it is attested in at least one non-epistolary context (see next note).

9 The transitive *brk* formula is always in the perfect; see Handbook, p. 49; B. COUROYER, "*brk* et les formules égyptiennes de salutation," RB 85 (1978) 575-85. For the possibility that the Kuntillet Ajrud attestations of the *brk* formula were also epistolographically inspired, see A. LEMAIRE, Les écoles et la formation de la Bible dans l'ancien Israël (Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis 39; 1981) 28. Note that LEMAIRE apparently does not consider the Khirbet el-Kom example of the formula to have been inscribed by a scribe practicing his epistolary phrases (ibid., p. 15 and RB 84 [1977] 597-603).

Arad 21:1-3 *bnk yhwkl šlh lšlm gdlyhw* [*bn*] *'ly'r wlšlm bytk brktk*

l[*yhw*]*h* 'Your son Yehukal (hereby) sends greetings to (you) Gedalyahu [son of] Elyair and to your household. I (hereby) bless you to [YHW]H.'

Arad 24:18-19 *hnh šlhty lh^C yd bkm* 'I (hereby) send[10] (you this message) to warn you ...'

Arad 40:1-3 *bnkm gmr*[*yhw*] *wnhmyhw šlh*[*w lšlm*] *mlkyhw brkt*[*k l yhw*]*h* 'Your son Gemar[yahu], as well as Nehemyahu, (hereby) sen[d greetings to (you)] Malkiyahu. I (hereby) bless [you to YHW]H.'

Arad 40:5-6 [*wktbt*]*y 'l 'dny* '[I (hereby) wri]te to my lord ...'[11]

Lachish 3:1-2 ^C*bdk hwš^C yhw šlh l*[*h*]*g*[*d*] *l*[*'d*]*ny* [*y'*]*wš* 'Your servant Hoshayahu (hereby) [re]po[rts] to my [lor]d [Ya]ush.'

Lachish 3:19-21 *wspr ... šlhh ^C b<d>k 'l 'dny* 'As for the letter of ..., I (= your servant) (herewith) send it to my lord.'[12]

Lachish 5:6-7 *hšb ^C bdk hsprm 'l 'dny* 'I (= your servant) (herewith) return the letters to my lord.'

papMur 17:1 [*š*]*lh šlht 't šlm bytk* 'I (hereby) send heartfelt greetings to your household.'[13]

I have only found one example from the Bar Kochba letters of a form that might have been a perfect in the earlier periods, viz., *m^C yd 'ny* 'I swear' in papMur 43:3. DION has pointed out to me that the imperfect formula *yd^C yhy lk* in papMur 42:2-3 would not be expected to occur in the perfect because similar forms are attested in the older Aramaic letters[14] which do have other "epistolary" perfects (see note 27, below). Another form which might be considered an "episto- lary" perfect is the signature formula *ktbh*. I would not accept such

10 Because this example is from the body of the letter, English usage would here permit the present perfect (*cf.* Handbook, p. 60, "I have sent").
11 If correctly restored by the editor, this interpretation is probable.
12 It appears very likely to me that the letter in question was sent along with Lachish 3; the author is not referring to a previous situation.
13 The context is uncertain and the infinitive absolute otherwise unattest- ed in this formula, but the "epistolary" character of *šlh* must be judged likely from the examples cited above.
14 DION cites *ydy^C yhwy lk* 'may it be known to you' (AD 4:3; 7:8); *ydy^C lhw' lmlk'* (Ezra 4:12, 13; 5:8). There are also parallels for the parti- cipial form cited here above and below ad Tannaitic Hebrew, e.g., Ezra 4:16; 7:24.

a classification for two reasons: 1) *ktbh* is a quasi-legal formula
and thus is not a statement addressed to the reader on the same foot-
ing as the *šlḥ* formula cited above[15]. 2) *ktbh*, as a signature formula
at the end of a letter, follows the action it describes and thus the
perfect is correct even from the English point of view, whereas the
šlḥ formula was written down before it was carried out and is thus a
true "epistolary" perfect.

Phoenician: KAI 50:1 *'mr 'ḥtk bš'* '(Thus) says your sister Basu'
(Basu being the writer of the letter).

KAI 50:2 *brktk* = Arad 16, 21, 24.

Biblical Hebrew: 2 Kings 5:6 *šlḥty* 'I (herewith) send ...'[16]
2 Chron. 2:12 *šlḥty* 'I (herewith) send ...'[17]

Tannaitic Hebrew appears to prefer participles, as was noted above for
the Bar Kochba correspondence, according to the examples cited by
SPERLING in our Handbook (e.g., Handbook §8.2.2 A 29 *mhwd^{c}n'*;
§8.5.2 A 1 *šw'l*)[18].

I would specifically exclude from the category of "epistolary" perfects
the following perfect forms, for the reasons noted:

The perfect forms in the Meṣad Ḥashavyahu letter, which are apparently
describing the situation leading up to the letter, not epistolary
actions.

Arad 16:4 *šlḥty*. I have interpreted this form as describing a past
action[19]. The phrase *mbytk* 'from your house' which immediately pre-
cedes *šlḥty* seems, in any case, to rule out an interpretation of the
form as specifically "epistolary."

Arad 17:8 *ntn*: an archival note, rather than an epistolary remark[20].

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15 For the identification of the *ktbh* signature formula, see PARDEE, DION,
    and WHITEHEAD, JBL 97 (1978) 341-42; Handbook, pp. 125, 130-31, 152.
16 Following the epistolary formula *kbw' hspr hzh 'lyk* 'when this letter
    reaches you', we translated *šlḥty* as a future perfect in the Handbook
    (p. 172).
17 Again, the present perfect is acceptable here in English and we trans-
    lated thus in the Handbook (p. 180).
18 For Handbook §8.1.2:8 *ydw^c yh'*, see note 14, above.
19 See my note, UF 10 (1978) 311.
20 UF 10 (1978) 326; Handbook, p. 53.

Arad 21:3 ^{c}šh refers to an act of the addressee.

Arad 40:4-5 hṭh ... 'm[rt] describe the situation leading up to the
  letter.

Arad 40:6-7 rṣh: ditto.

Arad 40:7-8 [b]' ... ntn: ditto.

Arad 40:9 yd^{c}th: cognitive perfect.

Arad 40:10 nttm describes the situation leading up to the letter.

Arad 40:11 ln: either participle or ditto.

Arad 40:12 bqš ... [ntt] describe situation leading up to the letter.

Arad 40:15 [^{c}šth]: ditto.

Arad 111:5 hyh: context uncertain.

Lachish 2:4 zkr: describes situation leading up to the present letter
  (literal English 'has remembered').

Lachish 2:6 yd^{c}th: cognitive perfect.

Lachish 3:6 šlh: describes situation leading up to the letter (note
  'yesterday' in the same line).

Lachish 3:7 dwh: ditto or verbal adjective.

Lachish 3:8 'mr: same as line 6.

Lachish 3:9 nsh: general historical statement.

Lachish 3:12 qr'ty: action singled out from list of repeated past
  actions[21].

Lachish 3:13 hgd: same as line 6.

Lachish 3:14 yrd is embedded in repeated previous message, where it
  apparently described a situation leading up to that message.

Lachish 3:18 šlh apparently describes a past action[22].

Lachish 4: All perfects describe past situations.

Lachish 5:4 [š]lhth describes action leading up to the present letter.

Lachish 6:3 šlh: ditto.

Lachish 6:13-14 qr' ... hyh: describe situation leading up to the
  present letter.

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21 See T.O. LAMBDIN, Introduction to Biblical Hebrew (New York; Scribner's,
   1971) §197.
22 It is not impossible that the writer is requesting guidance concerning a
   demand made upon him by knyhw, though I consider it doubtful that
   hwš^{c}yhw, perhaps the self-professed "dog" (klb) of other Lachish letters
   would have so put off knyhw, who is termed a šr, i.e., a śar, a command-
   ing officer certainly higher in rank than was hwš^{c}yhw.

Lachish 18:2 *šlḥ*: ditto[23].

papMur 17:1 *'mr*: context uncertain (if it is the writer speaking in the
   third person, as in KAI 50:1 cited above, the form may well be an
   "epistolary" one).

Phoenician: KAI 50:3 *šlḥt*: refers to situation leading up to the present
   letter, as perceived by the writer.

KAI 50:4 *ml't*: context uncertain.

Biblical Hebrew: I will not specifically note non-"epistolary" perfect
   forms in the letter fragments preserved in the Bible, but it is worth
   noting that the prophetic form *kh 'mr* which is quoted in the letter
   (-form) recorded in 2 Chron. 21:12-15[24] does not contain an "episto-
   lary" perfect since it describes a pre-epistolary speech-act (i.e.,
   YHWH speaks to Elijah, who then writes to Jehoram). Compare the various
   references to previous messages and letters in the Arad and Lachish
   letters cited above, this section.

In this short note I have made no attempt to establish the "epistolary"
perfect as a general Near Eastern phenomenon, but it appears that it may well
be one for a casual glance turned up examples immediately in sources as dis-
parate, geographically, culturally, and linguistically, as Mari Akkadian[25],

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23 Note *yšlḥ* in line 1, probably for sending something elsewhere and other-
   wise than with the present letter.
24 Handbook, p. 181.
25 ARM(T) I 24:3-5 *a-nu-um-ma me-ḫe-er ṭup-pí-im ša a-na Iš-ḫi-^{d}Addu
   ú-ša-at-te₄-ru i-na ṭup-pí-ia an-ni-im ú-ša-at-te₄-ra-am-ma uš-ta-bi-la-kum*
   "Or çà, la réponse de la tablette que j'ai fait écrire à Išḫi-Addu, dans
   cette mienne tablette je l'ai fait recopier et je te l'envoie." The "epis-
   tolary" perfect form is *uš-ta-bi-la-kum*, for the letter to which refer-
   ence is made is written, below, on the very same tablet. Note that the
   D-preterite *ú-ša-aṭ-ṭe₄-ra-am-ma* is used with respect to the Š-perfect
   uš-ta-bi-la-kum very much like the pluperfect with respect to the imper-
   fect in Latin epistolary usage (see LAKOFF, Language 46 [1970] 847, cited
   above, n. 6).
26 E.g., CTA 52 (= UT 89 = KTU 2.12):6-11 *l p^{c}n 'adty šb^{c}d w šb^{c}'id mrḥqtm
   qlt* 'At the feet of my lady, seven times (this way), seven times (that)
   (from) afar do I (hereby) fall.' This particular formula is, of course,
   frequent in Ugaritic letters and has many parallels in the El Amarna
   letters, usually in the preterite, though with some West-Semitic "suffix
   conjugation" forms.

Ugaritic[26], and Aramaic from Egypt[27].

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27 E.g., Hermopolis 1:12-13 *lšlmky šlḥt sprh znh* 'In order to greet you do
I (hereby) send this letter'; 3:5 *šlm whyn šlḥt lk* 'Well-being and (long)
life [i.e., greetings for said] I (hereby) send to you.' (It is also in
the Hermopolis letters that the *brk* formula, though not exclusively
epistolary in usage [see notes 8 and 9, above], is most consistently
used.) DION has called my attention to a like usage of the Aramaic *hwšr*,
synonym of *šlḥ* 'send': [... *kᶜn hw*]*šrt lk gbnh* 'Now, I (herewith) send
you a cheese' (so A. DUPONT-SOMMER, who has only partially edited this
text, CLERMONT-GANNEAU 167, in CRAI 1947, p. 180). DUPONT-SOMMER has,
elsewhere (Revue des Etudes Sémitiques et Babyloniaca 1942-45, p. 70;
RSO 32 [1957] 406), compared the Aramaic forms of *hwšr* with various forms
of *uššuru* in Amarna Akkadian and, though DUPONT-SOMMER did not make the
point, *uššuru* is occasionally used in "epistolary" perfect (suffix-con-
jugation) forms, e.g., EA 34:52 (reference to oil apparently sent with
the letter) and EA 120:41 (reference to a list of items written on the
obverse of the same tablet), both times *ušširti*.