

The "Epistolary Perfect" in Aramaic Letters

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Dennis PARDEE, in an article in this journal¹, defended his use of the phrase "epistolary perfect"² for a certain usage of the suffix conjugation in Hebrew letters: the writer of a message, assuming the perspective of the recipient, chooses to represent a situation from the viewpoint of that recipient. In that article, PARDEE provided a list of the perfect verbal forms in Hebrew letters he classified as epistolary perfects, forms which described aspects of the epistolary acts themselves ("writing", "sending", "commanding", for example), followed by a list of perfect verbal forms he would exclude from the category of epistolary perfects, forms which described actions performed prior to the writing of the letter.

In both this BN article and in a later study, with Robert WHITING, of the epistolary verbal usage in Ugaritic and Akkadian, it was emphasized that the phrase "epistolary perfect" (and "epistolary preterite", in the later article) did not designate an overtly marked grammatical category: "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"³. PARDEE and WHITING argue for a category of epistolary perfect distinct from the category of performative: while both epistolary perfects and performatives are expressed by the same verbal form, and while both occur in letters, the latter

1 The "Epistolary Perfect" in Hebrew Letters, BN 22 (1988) 34-40.

2 The term "epistolary" as a qualification of a verbal form is a borrowing from classical grammar, see D. PARDEE and R. WHITING, Aspects of epistolary verbal usage in Ugaritic and Akkadian, BSOAS 50 (1987) 1-31 (the epistolary tenses in Greek and Latin are discussed on pp. 2-3).

3 BN 22 (1983) 35, footnote 7; see also BSOAS 50 (1987) 1-2. M. O'CONNOR and B. WALTKE, An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbraun, 1990) § 30.5.1d, discuss the "epistolary perfective" in Biblical Hebrew.

effects an act, the former reports it⁴.

PARDEE has already identified epistolary perfects in some of the Aramaic texts from Egypt: "I am sending this letter (to inquire) about your well-being"⁵ (Hermopolis 1:12 - 13): "I am sending you (greetings of) well-being and life" (Hermopolis 3:5); "I am sending you (greetings of) well-[being and] life" (Hermopolis 7:1); "I am sending you (greetings of) well-being and life" (CLERMONT-GANNEAU 70 A 2 - 3); "I am sending a bless[ing]" (Cambridge Ost 131 - 133 A 1 - 2); "... כען הו[י] שרח לך גבנה" "[Now, I am se]nding you a cheese" (CLERMONT-GANNEAU 167 A 2)⁶. In Biblical Aramaic, the two perfects in Ezra 4:14, "על דנה שלחנא והודיענא למלכא, ("concerning this we are sending and informing the king") are likewise explained by him and WHITING as examples of epistolary perfect⁷. The purpose of this note is to suggest other possible epistolary perfects within the corpus of Aramaic letters.

79 items are listed in J. FITZMYER's chart "Aramaic Letters on Skin or Papyrus"⁸. The majority of the epistolary perfects in these letters occur either in the initial greeting or in the concluding formulae⁹. Examples of epistolary perfects in the initial greeting are (for comparison's sake, I have included PARDEE's examples):

4. Hermopolis 3:5 (2.4)¹⁰: "I am sending you (greetings of) well-being and life".

4 BSOAS 50 (1987) 23-28. The ברך greeting formula of the Hermopolis letters (it also occurs in CLERMONT-GANNEAU 70) I understand as a performative, see BSOAS 50 (1987) 4. I am inclined to understand the *passivum majestatis* Biblical Aramaic phrases טעם שים טעם (Ezra 6:8, 11; 7:13, 21) and מן קדמי טעם (Dan 6:27; assuming these verbs are passive perfects, not passive participles), as well as the active ומוני שמה טעם (Ezra 6:12) as simple past tense, although ומוני שים טעם of Dan 3:29 seems performative. The matter is complicated by the possibility of a Persian origin of the construction, see E.Y. KUTSCHER, Two "Passive" Constructions in Aramaic in Light of the Persian, Proceedings of the International Conference on Semitic Studies (Jerusalem, 1965) 148-151.

5 I have used the present progressive form in my translations, reflecting the English idiom. A present perfect would also be acceptable in a number of cases.

6 BN 22 (1983) 40, note 27, and PARDEE, Letters from Tell Arad, UF 10 (1978) 311, note 86.

7 BSOAS 50 (1987) 28, note 84.

8 J. FITZMYER, Aramaic Epistolography, SEMEIA 22 (1981) 25-57, charts on pp. 40-46.

9 The terminology is FITZMYER's, see SEMEIA 22 (1981) 33-36.

8. Hermopolis 7:1 (2.7): ש[לם ו]חינן שלחתי לכי "I am sending you (greetings of) well-[being and] life".
27. Cowley 42:1 (3.8) שלם ושררה שויא הושרת ל[ך]¹¹; "I am sending yo[u] abundant (greetings of) well-being and prosperity".
38. Padua 1:1 (3.3): [שלם ושררה הושרת לך] "[I am sending you] (greetings of) well-being and prosperity."
47. Driver 2:1 (6:4): [שלם ושררה שגנ]יא הושרת ל[ך] "I am sending yo[u] abundant (greetings of) well-being and prosperity". The phrase occurs also in 48. Driver 3:1 (6.3), in 50. Driver 5:1 (6.7), and in 58. Driver 13 (6.16). The restoration of the phrase in at least one other Driver document is no doubt correct (46. Driver 1 [6.5])¹².

Examples of epistolary perfects in the concluding formulae:

3. Hermopolis 2:17 (2.2): לשלמכן שלחתי ספרה זונה "I am sending this letter (to inquire) about your well-being"; this phrase occurs also in 4. Hermopolis 3:13 (2.4), in 5. Hermopolis 4:12 - 13 (2.1), in 6. Hermopolis 5:9 (2.5); the phrase שלחתי ספרה זונה occurs in 2. Hermopolis 1: 12 - 13 (2.3), the phrase can be restored in 7. Hermopolis 6:[10] (2.6), and occurs in 8. Hermopolis 7:4 (2.7).
39. Padua 2:1 - 5 (3.4): לשלמכני [שלחתי ספרה זונה] "I am sending this letter [(to inquire) about your well-being]".

Examples of epistolary perfects within the body of a letter are more difficult to find. Possibilities are:

11. Cowley 16:8 (5.2): [לעל ודנה קדם מראי שלחתי לאמר] "[concerning] this I am sending before my lord, saying ..." The papyrus is damaged, but the verb שלחתי seems to refer to the present petition.

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- 10 The numbers preceding the names of the documents refer to FITZMYER's charts, the numbers in brackets following the names of the documents refer to texts in B. PORTEN and A. YARDENI, *Textbook of Aramaic Documents from Ancient Egypt*, Vol. 1, *Letters* (Jerusalem: The Hebrew University, 1986). K. BEYER, *Die aramäischen Texte vom Toten Meer* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1984) has edited some of the other texts included in FITZMYER's charts ("Briefe des Simon bar Kosiba", "Sendschreiben von Rabban Gamaliel II", "Mird: Brief [8. Jh. n. Chr.]").
- 11 The reading of PORTEN and YARDENI differs from that of A. COWLEY, *Aramaic Papyrus of the Fifth Century B.C.* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1923) 141, who read: [שלם ו ברת שגיא מר חת לך]
- 12 As J.D. WHITEHEAD, *Early Aramaic Epistolography: The Arsames Correspondence* (dissertation, University of Chicago, 1974) 187, note 1, and 254, has noted, the extended alliteration of the phrase suggests it is original in Aramaic.

16. Cowley 30:28 - 29 (4.7): על זנה שלחן הודיען "concerning this we are sending (and) informing".

59. Ezra 4:14: על דנה שלחנא והודיענא למלכא "concerning this we are sending and informing the king".

68. Letter of Š.b. Kosibah II: כתבה לכון ושלחה לכון ... די ... וית כול ¹³:
"... and all ... which ... I am writing ... and sending to you ..."

74. Letter of Š.b. Kosibah VIII: גברין די תשלח עמהן תר(י) גברין "I am sending you two donkeys, with which you shall send two men ..."

I have not included phrases such as נבוועקב כתב ("Nabuaquab wrote") 14. Cowley 26 (6.2), למחר כתבה אגרתא זא כזי כן שמיע לן לאמר, [ב] (" on the ... of Mehir I wrote this letter, when we heard ...") 38. Padua 1:13 (3.3), or שמעון בר "שמעון בר" ("Simon bar Yehuda wrote it") 70. Letter of Š.b. Kosibah IV, 1. 7, under the rubric of epistolary perfect for the same reasons noted by PARDEE ¹⁴.

FITZMYER lists 43 items in his "Aramaic Messages on Ostraca" chart. In the context of the initial greeting, epistolary perfects are found in:

29. CLERMONT-GANNEAU 70 A 2 - 3: שלם וחין שלחן לך "I am sending you (greetings of) well-being and life".

35. Cambridge Ost 131 - 133 A 1 - 2: ברכ[ה]ן שלחן לכי "I am sending you a blessing".

Epistolary perfects in the concluding formulae of the ostraca:

29. CLERMONT-GANNEAU 70 B 2: לשלמן שלחן ספריא "I am sending this letter (to inquire) about your well-being".

Examples of possible epistolary perfects in the body of the text:

10. Berlin 10679 A 1: כענת הלו כן שלחן לך "now, thus I am sending you ..."

11. Bodleian Libr Ost B 5 - 6: חגע שלחן שלם ינאק "Haggai is sending (a greeting of) well-being for the infant".

31. CLERMONT-GANNEAU 167 A 2: כען הו[ו]שרת לך גבנה ...] "[now, I am sending you a cheese".

13 This is a badly preserved palimpsest, and it is possible that the writer is referring to earlier messages.

14 BN 22 (1983) 36-37. "I would not accept such 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 footing as the *šlh* formula cited above. 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 *šlh* formula was written down before it was carried out and is thus a true 'epistolary' perfect".

38. Strasbourg Libr 3 - 4; וְכַעַת שְׁלַח לְךָ "and now, I am sending you ..." This is followed by an identification of the messenger and a list of goods sent.

There are also instances of participles being preferred to epistolary perfects, for example: בְּזוֹךְ שֶׁלַח אָנֹכִי עֲלֵיכֶם "on that account I am sending to you" (23. Cowley 38:9 [4.3]), מְהוֹדְעִין אֲנַחְנָא לְמַלְכָא "we are informing the king" (59. Ezra 4:16), וְלִכְּסֵם מְהוֹדְעִין, "and we are informing you" (63. Ezra 7:24), and the three instances of מְהוֹדְעִין אֲנַחְנָא לְכוּן "we are informing you" (75. - 77. Letter of R. Gamaliel II). This preference for participles can also be found in Tannaitic Hebrew¹⁵.

15 BN 22 (1983) 37.