Language Play in the Aramaic Letters from Hermopolis*

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Abstract

The scribe of the Aramaic family correspondence of the fifth century BCE, which was found in Hermopolis in Egypt in 1945, as a kind of language play deliberately presented the same information in these letters in different words, in effect creating parallelisms between the letters and sometimes even within individual letters. In some cases, this observation helps us to find new interpretations of difficult passages in the Hermopolis letters. Such language play is, albeit in different forms, very common in ancient West Semitic texts, both when dealing with mundane and with highly important political and religious subjects.

Keywords: Egyptian Aramaic, language play, parallelismus membrorum, Hermopolis letters.

* This article is an expanded version of the paper I read for the Annual Meeting of the Society for Biblical Literature in Philadelphia in November 2005. With some hesitation, I decided to be reticent with quoting secondary literature which is not relevant for the thesis of this article and which can readily be traced through the publications which are quoted here or in J. Hoffijzer and K. Jongeling, Dictionary of the North-West Semitic Inscriptions (HDO, 21; Leiden: Brill, 1995), and also to refrain from giving a complete text with a new translation of the letters.
Table 1. Please Do Not Worry!

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1-3-6</th>
<th>1-6-8</th>
<th>2-2-3</th>
<th>3-3-4</th>
<th>6-8-10</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>يتحم شل سه (لا) حور مه</td>
<td>شل دمحه سه (لا) حور مه</td>
<td>لا محس ده</td>
<td>الد دمحه سه (لا) حور مه</td>
<td>الد دمحه سه (لا) حور مه</td>
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</table>

And now, Nabushe is well here.  
Nabusha is well here.  
Bantisar is well here now, as well as his son.

As you can do for him, I am doing for him.  
‘He does not enquire after Harwas!’  
I do not care him from Memphis  
I do not leave him alone  
[And now,] we have been looking for a boat, so that they will bring him to you.

And Tapamut and Ahatis are supporting him.  
Now exactly as I do for Harwas, may Bantis do to me!  
As much as I can [[and now,]] I am doing for him.

And now, did you send a letter about him, [and now,] that you were angry at me, saying: (continued in next column, 1-6-8)
Please Do Not Worry!

The best way to make these peculiar habits visible is to present some of the cases where our scribe deals with the same or comparable matters in a number of tables. Table 1 presents passages from letters 1, 2, 3, 6 that exhibit a number of remarkable agreements with one another. Of course, part of these agreements probably results from the use of a common model for these passages, possibly in the form of a letter-book which the scribe used, as Dirk Schwiderski, among others, has assumed. As we shall see, however, this is only a partial explanation, especially since the mere copying of a letter-book, even with some variations according to the whims of the scribe, would probably result in at least some partial or complete duplication, especially in letters which would be sent to different destinations. There is, in fact, not a single case where we find a proper duplicate.

Each one of the passages dealt with in Table 1 contains at least three of five elements:

1. a statement that all is well with a certain person;
2. a statement that the addressee or addressees should ‘not worry’ about this person;
3. either the reason why the addressee need not worry, or negatively why he or she is still worried;
4. a statement how much the sender is actually doing for the person involved;
5. a rhetorical question about the addressee’s worries.

For one issue regarding the interpretation of letter 3 this table proves highly informative right away. The word סלע, ‘now’, appears 25 times in these letters. Preceded by ‘, ‘and’, in 14 cases, it is used at the beginning of a new subject (1.3, 11; 2.4, 11, 13; 3.5, 7, 11; 4.4, 7 [x2], 9; 5.2, 4), but in seven others we find it between messages concerning one and the same subject (1.5, 8, 9, 10; 2.6, 8; 4.6). The word סלע without ‘in’ seems to introduce a new message concerning the same subject in 1.6, and to have

its basic meaning ‘now, at this moment’ in 6.8. Long ago, R. Degen demonstrated that סלע, ‘and now’, in 3.3-4 should be deleted as a scribal error, as it is found in the middle of a coherent statement ‘as much as I can I am doing for him’. To this I would add that in light of our comparative table it is almost equally likely that the same word סלע is likewise used erroneously in 1.6, in the passage 1.3-6 of Table 1, so that we can translate it as: ‘Did not you send a letter about him, (saying) that you were angry at me, saying, “He does not inquire after Harwas!”’. This removes all the problems that earlier commentators saw in this passage, problems which caused them to translate the common Egyptian Aramaic expression סלע, ‘about, with regard to’, literally as ‘in the name of’ or the like.

The word סלע appears in 1.5 and 8, is usually compared with interjections such as Biblical Aramaic סלע, Qumran Aramaic סלע, Targumic (Onkelos and Jonathan) סלע or Rabbinical Hebrew סלע, and consequently translated as ‘behold!’ The rarity of סלע and its exclusive use at the beginning of questions make one wonder, however, whether it may not have had a more specialized function here: in both instances it seems to begin an interrogative sentence, for which the answer ‘no’ is to be expected, a so-called rhetorical question. This would probably be an instance of a syntactically determined use of an original interjection, whether or not there is a link between this word סלע and Syriac ara. 8

6. R. Degen, ‘Die aramäischen Ostraka in der Papyrus-Sammlung der Österreichischen Nationalbibliothek’, in R. Degen et al. (eds.), Neue Ephemeris für Semitische Epigraphik, vol. 3 (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1978), pp. 33-57 (37); his idea that סלע would serve as an introduction to the next sentence, however, seems less likely, though it must be said that the strange pattern of distribution of this word, which indeed usually introduces a new subject in Aramaic letters, remains partially unexplained for the Hermopolis letters.
7. See the discussion as summarized in Hofijzer and Jongeling, Dictionary, p. 1158; the presently proposed translation is already there, though with a question mark.
8. See the Genesis Apocryphon, always with the meaning ‘because’.
9. This particle is usually assumed to be a loanword from Greek ara, as stated in Th. Nödeke, Kiurekgafes syriase Grammatik (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2nd edn, 1966), § 155, but it seems possible that this derivation, as in the case of the Syriac particles ger and den, which look like Greek gar and de, respectively, and are used in a comparable way, but go back on original Semitic words, was based on a Semitic prototype. For more on such particles in Syriac, see S. P. Brock, ‘Some Aspects of Greek
These observations about אַרְגָּלַי seem even more likely in view of the fact that the word בָּאָדָם, also usually translated as ‘behold!’, seems to be used as a conjunction ‘because’ in the Hermopolis letters. It is to be found in the following three passages, each of which appears to support this interpretation:

1.8-9: ‘Now look, because salary has been given to them here, it should be received for them at Syene’.

2.4-7: ‘Now look, because I gave the amount of silver which was in my hand and redeemed Banitsar, the son of Tabi, the sister of Nabushe, for six shekels and a half, silver of shekel (impurity on ten shekels), and now, write to Tabi that she send you wool worth one shekel of silver’.

6.5-7: ‘Now look, go and buy wool, as much as you can, and send it to his father in Syene, because he gave (all) the silver which was in his hand’.

Note that in the first two cases, where the sentence with בָּאָדָם precedes the other one, the apodosis seems to be introduced with a so-called waw apodosis, common in Biblical Hebrew and also attested a number of times in various types of earlier Aramaic. In any case, in the light of the use of בָּאָדָם in the Hermopolis letters, it seems rather likely that the Targumic use of interjections for translating Hebrew בָּאָדָם represents a late reflex of such usage in earlier Aramaic.


11. See Weselius, ‘Hermopolis Letter 6’, passim, and below for the restoration and interpretation which are assumed for letter 6.


13. Weselius, ‘Hermopolis Letter 6’, p. 13. It should be noted that the development of interjections into conjunctions seems to have been a general trend in older Aramaic, but that the picture is not uniform.

In tables 2-4 we encounter the remarkable phenomenon that in two or three parallel passages, which evidently do not belong to the stock of common formulas of ancient Aramaic letter-writing, nearly all elements recur in each of the parallels, though hardly ever with the same words and often in a different order. It seems indeed very unlikely that this strange agreement would be the result of accident only, especially since the situations described are hardly standard. So we must assume that the scribe composed these varying texts dealing with the same matters himself. Whether he did this on the basis of a previous concept or perhaps composed the letters ‘on the fly’ is not easy to determine, of course.

It would seem that the scribe varied both the lexical and the linguistic features of his letters. This is particularly clear from the expression ‘in order to bring to you’ or ‘in order to bring them to you’. In 2.11-14 we find the Apel infinitive of מָשָׁה with suffix 3 m.pl., in 3.10-12 two forms of the Apel of מָשָׁה, first מָשָׁה and then מָשָׁה - מָשָׁה. The first infinitive has a suffix 3 m.pl., the second one is in the absolute state and the third is apparently in the construct state before the preposition with suffix, probably expressing the fact that the infinitive is determined, having been mentioned already in the same letter. Note also the variation in the last consonant (Mem or Nun) of the suffixes 2 and 3 m.pl.

Exchanging Cloth and Oil for Castor

Makkabananit and Nabushe apparently need castor oil, and they write to three of their correspondents that they have some other kinds of oil which they want to exchange for it.

15. This appears to confirm my thesis that the Semitic case system still functioned in the Aramaic underlying the Hermopolis letters. The visible signs of this would be that feminine nouns in the singular absolute state end in he when they are syntactically a nominative or a genitive, and in tow when they are in the accusative; in the plural the nominative has the ending mun and the oblique case (genitive and accusative) has tow. See J.W. Weselius, ‘Reste einer Kasuskonfugion in emigen frührarmischen Dialekten’, AION 40 (1980), pp. 265-68; M.L. Folmer’s attempt at a refutation in her The Aramaic Language in the Achaeomile Period: A Study in Linguistic Variation (OLA, 68; Leuven: Peeters, 1995), pp. 252-53, is ultimately unconvincing. For the situation with regard to retention of the case system in the Tell Fekheriyeh inscription, where the distinction is preserved for masculine plural endings (vs -vs-), like in the Sam‘alian inscriptions, see my review of A. Abou Assaf, P. Bordreuil, and A.R. Millard, La statue de Tell Fekheriyeh et son inscription bilingue cyraco-aramaïenne (Paris: Editions Recherche sur la civilisation, 1982), in BOr 40 (1983), cols. 181-82.
Table 2. Exchanging Cloth and Oil for Castor

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>2.11-14</th>
<th>3.10-12</th>
<th>4.7-10</th>
<th>Order of 4.7-10</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>למשה במא</td>
<td>משלמה במא</td>
<td>משלמה במא</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>משלמה במא</td>
<td>משלמה במא</td>
<td>משלמה במא</td>
<td>3 (with a sentence between 2 and 3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>למשה במא</td>
<td>משלמה במא</td>
<td>משלמה במא</td>
<td>1</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

And now: I bought I bought colored cloth, olive oil for Yake, and also for you a beautiful ..., and also perfumed oil for the house of Banit.

and perfumed oil and we will exchange it for oil to bring (them) to you.

but I have not yet found a man to bring them to you.

And now: if I find a trustworthy man I will send you something.

And now: let them bring me five measures of castor oil.

And now: let them bring me castor oil.

In Table 2 we see that they describe this transaction in the same order in letters 2 and 3, but in reversed order in letter 4. They note that they cannot yet send the oil because they have not yet found a reliable person to bring it to their correspondents, expressing this by means of three different sentences. While the connection between 2 and 3 is very clear, the fact that letter 4 apparently deals with the same transaction only becomes clear once one puts it in the comparative table.

Transactions with Wood and Grain

In letters 2 and 3, Makkibani instructs two of his relatives in Syene to exchange grain for wooden beams, which are to be left in his mother Mama’s house. In letter 2, he instructs Tash, probably his wife, to provide his brother Wahpre with the necessary grain, and in letter 3 he describes the same transaction from the point of view of Wahpre, the addressee of part of that letter. Again, we see from Table 3 that the order of the elements of the instruction are almost the same (the only exception probably being the result of grammatical considerations), and that nearly all the elements recur in each letter.

Table 3. Transactions with Wood and Grain

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>2.14-16</th>
<th>3.9-10</th>
<th>Order of 3.9-10</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>משלמה במא</td>
<td>משלמה במא</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>משלמה במא</td>
<td>משלמה במא</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>משלמה במא</td>
<td>משלמה במא</td>
<td>3</td>
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<td>משלמה במא</td>
<td>4</td>
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<td>משלמה במא</td>
<td>5</td>
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<td>משלמה במא</td>
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<td>6</td>
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<tr>
<td>משלמה במא</td>
<td>משלמה במא</td>
<td>7</td>
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<tr>
<td>משלמה במא</td>
<td>משלמה במא</td>
<td>8</td>
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</table>

And give And take barley 1

to Wahpre from Tash 2

that he may buy and sell it beams 4

and leave (them) and leave beams for beams, 5

in his house, with Mama 6

Do not stand in his way; every beam that you find 7

let him buy

Redemption of a Relative

In Table 4 some issues which have been written about in a number of publications are visualized in a new way. The passages evidently deal with an amount of 6.5 shekels of silver, but scholars do not agree for what purpose this silver was used.
As is apparent from the table, the alignment appears to confirm my restoration, though one should of course always remain cautious about restored texts. 17

It is remarkable that even for this complex transaction all the parts of one version correspond with parts in the other once, and that nearly everywhere the scribe did not repeat his words, but chose synonyms or alternative expressions. See especially the parallelism of the verb אָכַּל, 'to redeem, to buy the freedom' (2.5), and the Apel of אֶכָּל, 'to bring out, to liberate' (6.4), just like the biblical pair דָּבָר and אָמַר. There is one striking exception to the use of parallel words in these two passages. The reason which is given why Makkibanim is to be reimbursed at one, namely, because he used all his available silver for redeeming Banitsar and his son, is introduced in both cases with the word נָבֹא, which is usually taken to be an interjection 'look, behold!', though they are in entirely different positions in the course of reasoning in the two versions. This goes a long way towards demonstrating that this נָבֹא should be translated as a conjunction 'because' in these cases (see above).

A Security or a Pot?

One of the most problematic passages in the Hermopolis correspondence is to be found in 1.9: וַיַּכְּלֵהוּ בֵּית הָעָלָמִים אֶל הַמַּכְלֵמָה 'and now: if there is a בֵּית הָעָלָמִים in the house, send it/him to Tapamut!'. This sentence, which must have a connection with the preceding sentence, where it is said that this Tapamut and a certain Ahatsin must be reimbursed for their care for Banitsar—וַיִּשַׁמַּח נְכָר אֵל הַמַּכְלֵמָה לְאֶחַת—lacks any connection with the preceding sentences, among others, J.P. Hayes and J. Hoftijzer, H. Donner, and B. Porten and J.C. Greenfield, who even devoted the better part of their erudite article 'The Guarantor at Elephantine-Syene' to the elucidation of this problematic word. 18 All the commentators are in agreement that this word is to be derived from the


In an article in the Lebrem Festschrift of 1986 I proposed that it served to buy the freedom of a certain Banitsar and his son, supposedly in-laws of Makkibanim, giving a new restoration of the fragmentary letter 6 and assuming that its most important purpose was to retrieve the money which Makkibanim spent on Banitsar's release from his closest relatives. 16

well-known root בּרָה, widely attested in Hebrew and Aramaic, for 'to stand bail, to give a security', and discuss the question which form we would find here, with highly variant results. It would be possible, of course, to discuss the relative merits of the various positions, but there may be a shortcut around this. For this reason we will first examine the form רָהָּך, clearly the Af'el 2 fem. imperative of the verb רָהְך, 'to bring, to send', with a suffix which clearly refers back to בּרָה.

The problem of the suffix of 3 m.sg. in Aramaic has been discussed many times, most penetratingly by S.F. Bennett. On the whole it would seem that in the periods of Old and Official Aramaic the suffix was -ה when attached to verbal or nominal forms ending with a vowel, and -ה when suffixed to forms ending with a consonant. As the most likely vocalization of the imperative 2 fem. רָהָּך would be רָהְךְ, one could hesitate whether the form -ה (for -ה) for the suffix would be expected here, and the impression that -ה (ה) would be far more likely is reinforced by the comparative material from later Aramaic. Syriac, the only one among those dialects in which one does not expect radical innovations with regard to this suffix (apart from the results of well-known phonetic laws), has גֵּלָלָּה, which evidently derives from a form with the suffix -ה (ה). Though one can never exclude the possibility of a defective spelling for this suffix, for which there are a small number of parallels in other Egyptian Aramaic texts, the assumption that this is not a masculine suffix at all, and must consequently be feminine, seems very attractive. This possibility becomes even more likely because there is a well-known feminine noun בּרָות in later Aramaic, meaning 'kettle, pot'. Though it is not found in the dictionaries of earlier Aramaic, I would tend to identify it in a number of texts where it has hitherto not been recognized. The most important of these is an Aramaic endorsement on an Akkadian contract about a certain Ki-Shamash hiring a copper kettle (CIS, II, 65). The brief text, לא רָהָּךְ שָׁמַש, is usually translated as something like 'the pledge which is before/at the disposal of Ki-Shamash', but especially as it is clear that the contract itself is a straightforward

document of hire and exhibits no connection whatsoever with the taking or giving of pledges, I see no objection to translating simply: 'the kettle which is in the possession of Ki-Shamash'. These endorsements served to identify the subjects of texts quickly, especially to those who had little or no knowledge of cuneiform writing and nothing would be more logical than simply listing the object concerned and the name of the person who had hired it. As a cautious conclusion about our passage in the Hermopolis letters we can state that probably some kind of vessel was to be sent to Tapamut and Ahatins as a reward for what they did for Banitsar.

What Shall I Wear?

In 4.4-6 Nabushezib (also called Nabushe) expresses his displeasure at the garment that his wife Nanayam sent him. There follows a sentence which poses some problems. המֵעֲדָה היא מַיֶּה לְךָ מִשְׁכָּּבְךָ, usually translated as 'the garment which you brought me in (or: to) Syene, this I am wearing'. From the side of the substance of the text not much can be said against this interpretation; it is different with the grammatical aspect. Apart from the problem of the absence of a preposition before 'Syene', this interpretation is rendered doubtful by the uncertainty about the grammatical status of the personal pronoun מִשְׁכָּּבְךָ: we can hardly assume that it functions as an accusative here, as that would be unique in the earlier phases of Aramaic.

As noted above, the scribe who wrote the Hermopolis letters had a marked tendency to repeat an account of one and the same event in slightly different words. Usually he did this when the same information was to be conveyed to different people, but sometimes he gave the same information twice in one letter, as for example in letter 1 (see Table 1 above). It would seem at least possible that the sentence which we are discussing here is parallel with the preceding reference to the garment which Nabushe did not like: מה בְּ טַנְכָּךְ מַיֶּה לְךָ מִשְׁכָּּבְךָ, 'And now: the tunic which you sent to me has reached me, but I found it to be completely linen', and I do not like it' (4.4-5). This can be attained quite easily by assuming that the scribe wrote a word מֵעֲדָה instead of the graphically similar דָּלֵת (the frequent appearance of מֵעֲדָה, 'Syene', in these letters may have had an
influence here) in the intended word הָלֶךְ, ‘linen garment’. In that case he would have used the Semitic word הָלֶךְ instead of the Egyptian אֵשֶׁת in the parallel sentence, and would have used the exclamation אֲלֹהָה, ‘what shall I put on?’ (with proclitic ma-, just as in 5.7: הָלֶךְ רְאוֹבָא, ‘what is this?’) instead of the הָלֶךְ אֵשֶׁת הָלֶךְ, ‘my heart is not attached to it’, of the other sentence.

The Scribe and His Instruments

Table 5 is a comparative list of the parallel words and expressions in the letters, mainly based on tables 1-4.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aramaic</th>
<th>Hebrew</th>
<th>Note</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>הָלֶךְ</td>
<td>הָלֶךְ</td>
<td>to bring</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>הָלֶךְ</td>
<td>הָלֶךְ</td>
<td>to buy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>הָלֶךְ</td>
<td>הָלֶךְ</td>
<td>to be given</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>הָלֶךְ</td>
<td>הָלֶךְ</td>
<td>to give to</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>הָלֶךְ</td>
<td>הָלֶךְ</td>
<td>to give</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>הָלֶךְ</td>
<td>הָלֶךְ</td>
<td>‘linen garment’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>הָלֶךְ</td>
<td>הָלֶךְ</td>
<td>‘grain’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>הָלֶךְ</td>
<td>הָלֶךְ</td>
<td>to redeem</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>הָלֶךְ</td>
<td>הָלֶךְ</td>
<td>to bring them to you</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note how much this list of synonyms and complementary verbs looks like a list of words used in poetic parallelism. As far as we can see, the scribe let hardly any opportunity to use a parallelism or a synonym pass by. Note also that he sometimes used words which were probably not common in his ordinary Aramaic, such as the perfect tense of הָלֶךְ, ‘to give’ (with an emendation accepted by most scholars), instead of ordinary הָלֶךְ (2.4), or the (H)Aֵפֶל of הָלֶךְ, ‘to send’, for the (H)Aֵפֶל of הָלֶךְ with the same meaning (passim). Maybe we even have to view the interchange of Hafֵפֶל and Aֵפֶל in these letters in the same light.

We can now begin to draw a preliminary literary profile of the scribe of the Hermopolis letters. Over and above his possible reliance on written or remembered models of letter-writing, he described the same events and situations in different letters in a very peculiar way. The same or nearly the same parts of the sentence are found in both cases, though usually in a different order. Only rarely the same words are found in corresponding places, synonyms are commonly used instead. This literary strategy of our scribe constitutes an extra-linguistic source of information about the text, which can help us to discover or identify its correct interpretation. As we saw above, some use has been made in the past of this character of the letters, by others and by myself, though hitherto only in an intuitive and unsystematic manner. Clearly much is gained from a systematic exploration.

It is hardly surprising that we would find literary traits in such mundane documents as these letters. B. Porten has shown long ago that the Jewish and Aramean documents from southern Egypt in the fifth century BCE exhibit a well-developed literary style and can be connected with a number of biblical texts, and it seems rather likely that the same scribes wrote and copied both practical documents such as contracts and letters, and literary documents; the latter category is, of course, considerably under-represented in the documents which have come down to us. It is therefore hardly surprising that our scribe was able to compose his letters in this singular way.

One final issue to be addressed, however, is the reason why the scribe of the Hermopolis letters chose this unusual literary strategy. The answer that comes to mind immediately, namely, that he simply liked to do this, may have more to it than it would seem at first glance. During the last decades, interest in all kinds of word-play employed in the Hebrew Bible and in the literatures of the ancient Near East has grown. At least as far


26. See, for example, the collection of essays in Scott B. Noegel (ed.), *Puns and Paradox: Word Play in the Hebrew Bible and Ancient Near Eastern Literature* (Bethesda: CDL Press, 2000). Noegel also maintains an online bibliography of publications dealing with such word-play in the Bible and the ancient Near East; see <http://faculty.washington.edu/snogel/wordplay.html>.

24. It may be added that the print of the photograph in Porten's and Yardeni's new edition, which is better than the one in the original publication, seems to allow for the interpretation of this letter as a dalet, with a loose piece of papyrus covering the upper stroke of the letter; in that case we need not assume an error, of course.
as the Hebrew Bible is concerned, there has been less interest in other types of language play. Yet it can be observed that various other kinds of word-play are employed in the Hebrew Bible. Such play can be a very serious matter, as it is not rarely found in contexts which are of crucial importance for the narrative and the history of Israel in general. Of course, the situation is very different here. Here we are dealing with a private person who dealt in his letters with family matters which may have loomed large in his own eyes and those of his family, but which would hardly have seemed of more than ephemeral importance. And yet he gave considerable attention to the form of his epistles and showed himself a true man of letters who took the possibilities of playing with words and sentences very seriously. One can wonder whether Makkibain or his scribe ever expected his letters to be read together, especially those which were meant to be sent to different destinations (1-5 to Syene and 6-7 to Luxor). Still, the desire to use the literary form of parallelismus membrorum, and also to avoid unnecessary literal repetition, appears to have been so deeply ingrained in the scribe’s mind that the literary strategy described above became one of the striking features of his correspondence, helping scholars of more than two millennia later to interpret his letters and to fathom the elasticity of his use of Aramaic vocabulary and grammar.