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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 inter-
pretations 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.

In a limited number of instances, our understanding of ancient texts is assisted by the text itself providing us with extra-linguistic information which helps us to interpret it, such as the use of *parallelismus membrorum* or other regular literary patterns. Usually the presence of such phenomena is duly noted by scholars and applied to the interpretation of the text, but there are some interesting exceptions, where this phenomenon is not at once visible. In this article I will attempt to show that such a pattern is also present in a group of texts where one would least expect them, namely, in the collection of Aramaic family letters which was found in Hermopolis in Egypt in 1945 and published by E. Bresciani and M. Kamil in 1966.[1]

At some time in the fifth century BCE, this group of letters was to be brought from the city of Memphis in the north of Egypt to Luxor and Syene in Upper Egypt, but apparently the documents never reached their destinations. All but one of these eight letters were written by one scribe, who may or may not be identical to the main sender Makkibanit son of Pasmi, and concern the affairs of two related Aramean families. I will attempt to demonstrate that this scribe's literary strategy in writing these letters is so characteristic that we can effectively use it as an extra-linguistic tool for deriving additional lexical and linguistic information from the letters, and that in this way we can further our understanding of them beyond the result of the efforts of various scholars. We will also see that the most probable background of this curious literary character is to be sought for in the predilection for language play which is characteristic of many ancient texts in West-Semitic languages, especially though certainly not exclusively the Hebrew Bible. The realization of this literary framework in the letters leads us to discover a number of improvements on the usual reading and translation of them, and allows us to reach a firm conclusion about the restoration of the severely damaged letter 6.

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1. E. Bresciani and M. Kamil, *Le lettere aramaiche di Hermopoli* (Rome: Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei, 1966). For ease of reference, in this article I kept to their numbering of the letters, though for all other purposes the edition of B. Porten and A. Yardeni should be used now; see B. Porten and A. Yardeni, *Textbook of Aramaic Documents from Ancient Egypt... 1: Letters...* [Jerusalem: Hebrew University, 1986). A convenient text with translation and commentary in J.C.L. Gibson, *Textbook of Syrian Semitic Inscriptions.* II. *Aramaic Inscriptions...* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), a text with translation in J.M. Lindenberger, *Ancient Aramaic and Hebrew Letters: Second Edition* (Leiden: Brill, 2003). The Hermopolis letters in their geographical context are discussed in B. Porten, *The Elephantine Papyri in English: Three Millennia of Cross-Cultural Continuity and Change* (Leiden: Brill, 1996).

Table 1. *Please Do Not Worry!*

1.3-6	1.6-8	2.2-3	3.3-4	6.8-10
And now, Nabushe is well here.		Nabushe is well here.		Banitsar is well here now, as well as his son.
do not worry about him,		Do not worry about him	Do not worry about Harwas	do not [worry about them]
As you can do for him, I am doing for him.	'He does not enquire after Harwas!'	I do not chase 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 Ahatsin are supporting him.	Now exactly as I do for Harwas, may Banit do to me!		As much as I can [[and now,]] I am doing for him.	
And now, did not you send a letter about him, [[and now,]] that you were angry at me, saying; (continued in next column, 1, 6-8)	Is not Harwas my brother?			

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.[2] Table 1 presents passages from letters 1, 2, 3, and 6 that which 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.[3] 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 כעת, 'now', appears 25 times in these letters. Preceded by ו, '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 [×2], 9; 5.2, 4), but in seven others we find it between messages concerning one and the same subject (1.5, 8, 9, 10;[4] 2.6, 8; 4.6). The word כעת without ו 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.[5] Long ago, R. Degen demonstrated that וכעת, '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'.[6] To this I would add that in light of our comparative table it is almost equally likely that the same word וכעת 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 בשם, 'about, with regard to', literally as 'in the name of' or the like.[7]

The word ארה, which appears in 1.5 and 8, is usually compared with interjections such as Biblical Aramaic אלו, Qumran Aramaic ארי,[8] Targumic (Onkelos and Jonathan) ארי or Rabbinical Hebrew הרי, and consequently translated as 'behold!' The rarity of ארה 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 ארה and Syriac *ara*.[9]

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2. Conventions: [...] = restored text; [[...]] = text to be deleted.

3. Dirk Schwiderski, *Handbuch des nordwestsemitischen Briefformulars: Ein Beitrag zur Echtheitsfrage der Aramäischen Briefe des Esrabuches* (Berlin: W. de Gruyter, 2000), *passim*.

4. See below for the connection of the sentences in 1, 9 and 10 with the preceding passage.

5. See, for this interpretation, J.W. Wesselius, 'The Restoration of Hermopolis Letter 6 and the Ransom of Prisoners', in J.W. van Henten *et al.* (eds.), *Tradition and Re-Interpretation in Jewish and Early Christian Literature: Essays in Honour of Jürgen C. H. Lebram* (Leiden: Brill, 1986), pp. 7-18 (14-15).

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 כעת 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 Hoftijzer 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. Nöldeke, *Kurzgefaßte syrische 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 ארה seem even more likely in view of the fact that the word הלו, 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: וכעת הלו יהב להן פרס תנה ויתלקח קדמתהן בסון, 'Now look, because salary has been given to them here, it should be received for them at Syene'.

2.4-7: וכעת הלו מסת כספה זי הוה בידי נתנת ופדת לבנתסר בר תבי אחת נבושה כסף ש 6 וזוז כסף זו וכעת שלחי על תבי ותושר לכי עמר מן קצתה זי כסף ש 1, '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 a shekel (impurity on ten shekels), and now[10], write to Tabi that she send you wool worth[11] one shekel of silver'.

6.5-7: [וכעת אזלי] וזבני עמר כזי תמטה ידכי ואו[שרי לאבהי בסו]ן הלו כספה זי הוה בידה יהב, '[Now look, go] and buy wool, as much as you can, and se[nd it to his father in Sy]ene, because he gave (all) the silver which was in his hand'.[12]

Note that in the first two cases, where the sentence with הלו 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.[13] In any case, in the light of the use of הלו in the Hermopolis letters, it seems rather likely that the Targumic use of interjections for translating Hebrew כי represents a late reflex of such usage in earlier Aramaic.[14]

Words in Syriac', in A. Dietrich (ed.), *Synkretismus im syrisch-persischen Kulturgebiet* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1975), p. 80-108 (89), reprinted (with the same page numbers) in a collection of his essays: *Syriac Perspectives on Late Antiquity* (London: Variorum Reprints, 1984).

10. This instance of כעת may have to be added to the number of cases where it appears to interrupt the normal course of sentences.

11. See Wesselius, 'Hermopolis Letter 6', p. 14.

12. See Wesselius, 'Hermopolis Letter 6', *passim*, and below for the restoration and interpretation which are assumed for letter 6.

13. P. Grelot, 'Le waw d'apodose en araméen d'Égypte', *Semitica* 20 (1970), pp. 33-39; T. Muraoka and B. Porten, *A Grammar of Egyptian Aramaic* (HdO, 32; Leiden: Brill, 2003), p. 327 (§ 84 r).

14. Wesselius, '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 Af'el infinitive of ישר with suffix 3 m.pl. למושרתהם לכן, in 3.10-12 two forms of the Af'el of אתה, first למתיה לכן and then למתית לכן. 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.[15] 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

Makkibanit 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.

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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 *taw* when they are in the accusative; in the plural the nominative has the ending *nun* and the oblique case (genitive and accusative) has *taw*. See J.W. Wesselius, 'Reste einer Kasusflektion in einigen fr, Dialekten', *AION* 40 (1980), pp. 265-68; M.L. Folmer's attempt at a refutation in her *The Aramaic Language in the Achaemenid 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 Fekheriye inscription, where the distinction is preserved for masculine plural endings (-*w* vs. -*y*), like in the Sam'alian inscriptions, see my review of A. Abou Assaf, P. Bordreuil, and A.R. Millard, *La statue de Tell Fekherye et son inscription bilingue assyro-araméenne* (Paris: Éditions Recherche sur la civilisation, 1982), in *BiOr* 40 (1983), cols. 181-82.

Table 2. *Exchanging Cloth and Oil for Castor*

2.11-14	3.10-12	4.7-10	Order of 4.7-10
וכעת זבנת	זבנת		
	חטבת		
משח זית ליקה וכתן ואף לכי תקבת 1 שפרת ואף משח בשם לבת בנת	ומשח בשם	ונתנהי במשח	2
	למתיה לכן		
ולעד אשכח אש למושרתהם לכן	ולה אשכחת אש למיתית לכן	וכעת אן אשכחת אש מהימן אחה לכן מדעם	3 (with a sentence between 2 and 3)
וכעת הושרי לי תקם חפנן 5	וכעת תקם יתו לי חפנן 5	וכעת תקם יתו לן	1
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	2
	to bring (them) to you,		
but I have not yet found a man 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.	3 (with a sentence between 2 and 3)
And now: send to me five measures of castor oil.	And now: let them bring me five measures of castor oil.	And now: let them bring me castor oil.	1

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

Transactions with Wood and Grain

In letters 2 and 3, Makkibanit 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 Tashi, 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*

2.14-16	3.9-10	Order of 3.9-10
והוי יהבת	והוי לקה	1
עבר	שערן	2
לוחפרע	מן תשי	3
ויהוי זבן	ויהב	4
גשרן	בגשרן	5
ושבק	ושבק	6
בבתה	למה	8
אל תקמי קדמהה		
כל גשר זי ישכח	כל גשר זי תשכח	7
יזבן		
And give	And take	1
grain	barley	2
to Wahpre	from Tashi	3
that he may buy	and sell it	4
beams	for beams,	5
and leave (them)	and leave	6
in his house.	with Mama	8
Do not stand in his way;		
every beam that he finds	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.

Table 4. *Redemption of a Relative and his Son*

2.4-6	6.3-7	Order of 6.3-7
וכעת הלו מסת כספה זי הוה בידי נתנת (text: נתתן)	הלו כספה זי הוה בידה יהב	9
	וכעת יהב	1
	מ[כבנת בר פסמי] חתן נבשה	2
ופדת לבנתסר בר תבי אחת נבושה	ואפקני אנה וברי	4
כסף ש 6 וזוז כסף זז	כסף ש 6 וזוז כסף [לעשרתה]	3
וכעת שלחי על תבי		
	[וכעת אזלי] וזבני	6
ותושר לכי	ואו[שרי לאבהי בס]ון	8
עמר מן קצתה זי כסף ש 1	עמר כזי תמטה ידכי	7
	וכתבת לה ע[ל ספר]	5
And now: Because I have given as much silver as was in my hand	For he has given (all) the money which was in his hand	9
	And now: (he) gave	1
	Ma[kkibanit, the son of Pasmi,] the brother-in-law of Nabushe,	2
and redeemed Banitsar, the son of Tabi, the sister of Nabushe,	and liberated us, me and my son,	4
(for) six shekels and one zuz of silver—silver of one zuz (impurity) to the ten shekels),	six shekels and one zuz of silver—silver of one zuz (impurity) [to the ten (shekels)]	3
And now: write to Tabi		
	[Go now] and buy	6
that she send to you	and se[nd it to his father in Sye]ne	8
wool which is worth one shekel	wool (as much) as you can	7
	and I wrote [a document] about this for him	5

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

16.   Wesselius, 'Hermopolis Letter 6', *passim*.

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 פדה, 'to redeem, to buy the freedom' (2.5), and the Af'el of נפק, 'to bring out, to liberate' (6.4), just like the biblical pair פדה and הוציא. There is one striking exception to the use of parallel words in these two passages. The reason which is given why Makkibanit 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 הלו, 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 הלו 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: וכעת הן את ערב עליכי אתיה לתפמת, 'and now: if there is a ערב against/on/to you, 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—וכעת הלו יהב להן פרס תנה ויתלקח קדמתהן בסון, 'Now look, because salary has been given to them here, it should be received for them at Syene' (note the parallelism of the Pe'il of יהב and the Itpe'el of לקח)—has elicited comments from, 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

17.   Against J. Hoftijzer, 'Six Shekels and a Half', *SEL* 6 (1989), pp. 117-22.
18.   J.P. Hayes and J. Hoftijzer, 'Notae Hermopolitanae', *VT* 20 (1970) pp. 98-106 (101-102); H. Donner, 'Bemerkungen zum Verständnis zweier aramäischer Briefe aus Hermopolis', in H. Goedicke (ed.), *Near Eastern Studies in Honor of W. F. Albright* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1971), pp. 75-85 (76-83); B. Porten and J. C. Greenfield, 'The Guarantor at Elephantine-Syene', *JAOS* 89 (1969), pp. 153-58.

well-known root ערב, 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 אתיה, clearly the Af'el 2 fem. imperative of the verb אתה, 'to bring, to send', with a suffix which clearly refers back to ערב.

The problem of the suffix of 3 m.sg. in Aramaic has been discussed many times, most penetratingly by S.F. Bennett.[19] On the whole it would seem that in the periods of Old and Official Aramaic the suffix was -*hi* when attached to verbal or nominal forms ending with a vowel, and -*eh* when suffixed to forms ending with a consonant. As the most likely vocalization of the imperative 2 fem. אתי would be *'etāy*, one could hesitate whether the form -*h* (for -*eh*) for the suffix would be expected here, and the impression that -*hy* (-*hi*) 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 *g*e*lā'īw*, which evidently derives from a form with the suffix -*hy* (-*hi*).[20] 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[21], 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 ערב 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, ערבא זי קדם כישוש, 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

19. S.F. Bennett, 'Objective Pronominal Suffixes in Aramaic' (Ph.D. dissertation, Yale University, 1984).

20. Nöldeke, *Kurzgefaßte syrische Grammatik*, §193. For more on the development of the suffix -*hi* in Syriac, see Bennett, *Objective Pronominal Suffixes*, pp. 293-302, and J.W. Wesselius, 'The Spelling of the Third Person Masculine Singular Suffixed Pronoun in Syriac', *BiOr* 39 (1982), cols. 251-54.

21. Muraoka and Porten, *Grammar*, p. 50.

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 Ahatsin 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 Nanayham sent him. There follows a sentence which poses some problems, כתנה זי התתי לי סון הי מלבש אנה, 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 הי: 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,[22] 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: וכעת מטתני כתנה זי אושרתי לי ואשכחתה שנמת כלה ולבבי לה דבק לה, 'And now: the tunic which you sent me has reached me, but I found it to be completely linen,[23] and I do not like it' (4.4-5). This can be attained quite easily by assuming that the scribe wrote a *waw* in the word סון instead of the graphically similar *dalet* (the frequent appearance of סן, 'Syene', in these letters may have had an

22. Wesselius, 'Hermopolis Letter 6', pp. 12-13.

23. For this interpretation as an Egyptian word for '(sheet of) linen', see Hoftijzer and Jongeling, *Dictionary*, p. 1175, and the literature quoted there.

influence here) in the intended word סדן, 'linen garment'.[24] In that case he would have used the Semitic word סדן instead of the Egyptian שנמת in the parallel sentence, and would have used the exclamation מלבש אנה, 'what shall I put on?' (with proclitic *ma-*, just as in 5.7: מהי דה, 'what is this?') instead of the לבבי לה דבק לה, '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 5. *Parallelism, Synonyms and Antonyms in the Aramaic Letters from Hermopolis*

אתה (H)Af'el, 'to bring'	ישר (H)Af'el, 'to bring'	
זבן Pe'al, 'to buy'	יהב ב Pe'al, 'to sell'	
יהב Pe'il, 'to be given'	לקח Itpe'el, 'to be taken'	
יהב ל Pe'al, 'to give to'	לקח מן Pe'al, 'to receive from'	
נתן perf. pe'al, 'to give'	יהב perf. Pe'al, 'to give'	
סדן, 'linen garment'	שנמת, 'linen garment'	
עבר, 'grain'	שערן, 'barley'	
פדה Pe'al, 'to redeem'	נפק (H)Af'el, 'to bring out'	
למושרתהם לכן, 'to bring them to you'	למתיה לכן, 'to bring them to you'	למיתית לכן, 'to bring them to you'

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 נתן, 'to give' (with an emendation accepted by most scholars), instead of ordinary יהב (2.4), or the (H)Af'el of ישר, 'to send', for the (H)Af'el of אתה with the same meaning (*passim*). Maybe we even have to view the interchange of Haf'el and Af'el 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.[25]

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.[26] At least as far as

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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.

25. B. Porten, 'Structure and Chiasm in Aramaic Contracts and Letters', in J.W. Welch (ed.), *Chiasmus in Antiquity* (Hildesheim: Gerstenberg, 1981), pp. 169-82; *idem*, 'Elephantine Aramaic Contracts and the Priestly Literature', in M. Brettler and M. Fishbane (eds.), *Minhah le-Nahum: Biblical and Other Studies Presented to Nahum M. Sarna in Honour of his 70th Birthday* (JSOTSup, 154, Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), pp. 257-71.

26. See, for example, the collection of essays in Scott B. Noegel (ed.), *Puns and Pundits: 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/snoegel/wordplay.html>.

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.[27] 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 Makkibanit 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.

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27.   J.W. Wesselius, 'Language Play in the Old Testament and in Ancient North-West Semitic Inscriptions: Some Notes on the Kilamuwa Inscription', in R.P. Gordon and J.C. de Moor (eds.), *The Old Testament in Its World: Papers Read at the Winter Meeting. Januari 2003, The Society for Old Testament Study, and at the Joint Meeting, July 2003, The Society for Old Testament Study and Het Oudtestamentisch Werkgezelschap in Nederland en België* (Leiden: Brill, 2005), pp. 253-65; *idem*, 'From Stumbling Blocks to Cornerstones: The Function of Problematic Episodes in the Primary History and in Ezra–Nehemiah', in Riemer Roukema, Bert Jan Lietaert Peerbolte, Klaas Spronk and Jan-Wim Wesselius (eds.), *The Interpretation of Exodus: Studies in Honour of Cornelis Houtman* (Leuven: Peeters, 2006), pp. 37-63.

Book Review

P.S.F. van Keulen and W.Th. van Peursen (eds.), *Corpus Linguistics and Textual History: A Computer-Assisted Interdisciplinary Approach to the Peshitta*. Studia Semitica Neerlandica, 48, Van Gorcum, 2006. Pp. 308. ISBN 90-232-4194-0. Price €109.00.

Anyone working with Semitic texts, whether as expositor, literary/textual critic, or translator, will benefit from studying these studies, and those who are prepared to make the effort necessary to grasp the themes, and to suppress any Luddite tendencies they may be nursing, will enjoy them as well as deriving benefit. Different readers will fall at different fences, depending on the complexity of technical language they are prepared to engage with, but even the comparatively computer-illiterate will be well rewarded with improved insight into the methodology of computer-assisted textual analysis and the interactions between programmers, linguists, and biblical scholars.

In the fields of linguistics and textual analysis there have been misunderstandings between computer-linguistic scholars and those taking a more traditional text-critical approach. The initiators of the CALAP (Computer-Assisted Linguistic Analysis of the Peshitta) project believe that mutual understanding can be reached and that it is worth the effort to do so: the contents of this book give strong support to their belief. Once it is acknowledged that linguistic phenomena constitute one aspect of the essence of a text, the relationship between such analyses and traditional textual criticism and history is clear.

This book is mainly comprised of papers presented at the CALAP seminar held in 2003; some additional contributions have been included. The main focus is the methodology of the interaction between information technology, linguistics and textual criticism and textual history,