



Learning to be a Biblical Scribe: Examples from the Letter Writing Genre

*Aprendendo a ser um Escriba Bíblico:
Exemplos do gênero literário carta*

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Abstract

The paper illustrates how scribal education shaped and influenced biblical literature. It discusses how educational curriculum can be reconstructed from Hebrew inscriptions and comparative examples in cuneiform literature. The Hebrew educational curriculum was adapted from cuneiform models in the 12th century BCE. These models were known in Canaan, and then used by early alphabetic scribes. The best repository of ancient Hebrew scribal practice comes from the desert fortress of Kuntillet 'Ajrud where all the categories of elementary scribal education are known. Perhaps the most important of these was letter writing, which was a basic part of a scribe's everyday duties. Not surprisingly, letter writing was also one of the foundations of scribal education, and it was adapted and used for writing biblical literature in ways both mundane and profound. This included both the structuring of biblical narrative and the genre of writing prophets.

Keywords: Scribes. Education. Letters Prophecy. Biblical narrative.

Resumo

O artigo ilustra como a educação dos escribas moldou e influenciou a literatura bíblica. Ele discute como o currículo educacional pode ser reconstruído a partir de inscrições em hebraico e exemplos comparativos na literatura cuneiforme. O currículo educacional hebraico foi adaptado dos modelos cuneiformes no século XII AEC. Esses modelos eram conhecidos em Canaã e depois usados pelos primeiros escribas alfabéticos. O melhor repositório da antiga prática dos escribas hebreus vem da

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fortaleza desértica de Kuntillet 'Ajrud, onde são conhecidas todas as categorias da educação básica dos escribas. Talvez o mais importante deles tenha sido a escrita de cartas, que era uma parte essencial dos deveres diários de um escriba. Não é de surpreender que a escrita de cartas também tenha sido um dos fundamentos da educação dos escribas, e foi adaptada e usada para escrever literatura bíblica de maneiras ao mesmo tempo cotidianas e profundas. Incluindo inclusive a estruturação da narrativa bíblica e o gênero da escrita profética.

Keywords: *Escriba. Educação. Cartas. Profecia. Narrativa Bíblica.*

Introduction

What can we know about how the Bible came to be written? Can we trace some tangible indications of how scribes learned to write? In my book, *The Finger of the Scribe: How Scribes Learned to Write the Bible*,¹ I reconstruct early scribal education in ancient Israel by examining ancient inscriptions and their historical contexts and by comparing other ancient near eastern education paradigms (particularly from cuneiform). The early Israelite scribes borrowed and adapted from cuneiform curricular traditions in the early Iron Age in creating early Hebrew curriculum, and this early scribal curriculum influenced the writing of the Hebrew Bible.

Understanding scribal education is important because it helps us understand the canonization process. For example, in the conclusion to the Mesopotamian Creation Epic *Enuma Elish*, a scribal editor adds, “The wise and the learned should ponder them together, the teacher should repeat them and make the pupil learn by heart. This is the revelation which an Ancient, to whom it was told, wrote down and established for posterity to hear.” Once a text became part of scribal curriculum, it would be learned, studied, and passed on. In this way, it had lasting influence in ways that other literature

¹ This paper summarizes some discussions from my book, *The Finger of the Scribe: How Scribes Learned to Write the Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019). A version of this paper was given at a Conference in Strasbourg in 2019. This book develops aspects of writing and literacy from my book, *How the Bible Became a Book: The Textualization of Ancient Israel* (Cambridge, 2004); translated into Portuguese as *Como a Bíblia tornou-se um livro* (São Paulo: Loyola, 2011).

would not have. One of the most significant parts of scribal curriculum was learning to write letters, and the letter template in turn was adapted and influenced the writing of biblical literature.

Letters were already used as part of the Mesopotamian school curriculum dating back centuries before the earliest Hebrew writing. Letter exercises from the Mesopotamian curriculum were adopted, adapted, and used in the alphabetic cuneiform of the ancient city-state of Ugarit. This common ancient near eastern letter writing tradition also influenced the early Israelite scribal curriculum, where letters likely served as one of the primary school exercises. It is hardly surprising then that we have three actual examples of this scribal exercise in the inscriptions from Kuntillet 'Ajrud. These examples illustrate aspects of adaptation that were critical to scribal training.

Letter Writing in the Ancient Near East

Letter writing was a basic part of near eastern scribal curriculum, and its significance is illustrated by the Ugaritic, Egyptian, and Mesopotamian letters that include narrated scenes of letters being sent and received. For example, *Enmerkar and the Lord of Aratta* explains the invention of writing as resulting from the need to write letters accurately (HALLO; YOUNGER, 2003, p. 1.170).² Letter writing was also part of the literary canon in Egypt.³ For example, the well-known story of “The Report of Wenamun” (ca. 1100 BCE) recounts the journey of an Egyptian emissary traveling up the eastern

² This text also has interesting parallels to Genesis 11 and the idea of “one language”; see Thorkild Jacobsen, *The Harps That Once*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987, p. 275–319.

³ The contact between Egyptian scribes and early alphabetic scribes is also suggested by other texts like the recently published bilingual hieroglyphic-alphabetic abecedarium from Theban Tomb 99, an Egyptian medical text that uses Northwest Semitic incantations, or an eleventh century Northwest Semitic instructional letter written using hieratic script; see Ben Haring, “*Halaham* on an Ostrakon of the Early New Kingdom?” *Journal of the Early New Kingdom?* *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 74 (2015), 189–95; Richard Steiner, “Northwest Semitic Incantations in an Egyptian Medical Papyrus of the Fourteenth Century B.C.E.,” *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 51 (1992), 191–200; and, Ariel Shisha-Halevy, “An Early Northwest-Semitic Text in the Egyptian Hieratic Script,” *Orientalia* n.s. 47 (1978), 145–62.

Mediterranean coast in order to acquire Lebanese timber⁴. Wenamun travels to Byblos where he gets stranded. There, he communicates daily with the prince of Byblos using traditional letter formulas: “Then the prince of Byblos sent to me: ‘Leave my harbor!’ I sent to him, saying: ‘Where shall I go? If you have a ship to carry me, let me be taken back to Egypt!’” Letters were explicitly mentioned as being sent back and forth to Egypt: “(The prince of Byblos) placed my letter in the hand of his messenger, ... and sent them to Egypt.” Likewise, Ugaritic literature uses letters to frame its literary narratives. For example, in *The Baal Cycle* (see *KTU* 1.1-6)⁵ when Yamm’s messengers arrive at the Great Assembly, they employ standard letter formulae: “speak to the Bull, his Father, El: the message of Yamm ...” (l. 33).⁶ Messengers, messages, and messenger formulae carry the narrative thread, and the technical terminology used is known from both actual letters and practice letters—namely, “message (*tḥm*) of Sender” and “speak (*rgm*) to Recipient.” This again illustrates how the letter genre influences other types of literature.

The influence can also be seen in biblical narrative (GREENE, 1989, p. 77–136; SCHWIDERSKI, 2000, p. 323–327).⁷ For example, in the story of Jacob’s confrontation with Esau on his return to the land, we read as follows in Gen 32:4-14:

Jacob sent messengers ahead to his brother Esau in the land of Seir, the country of Edom, and instructed them as follows, “Thus shall you say, ‘To my lord Esau, thus says your servant Jacob: I stayed with Laban and remained until now; I have acquired cattle, asses, sheep, and male and female slaves; and I send this

⁴ For a convenient translation, see Miriam Lichtheim, “The Report of Wenamun,” in *Context of Scripture*, 1.41.

⁵ *KTU/CAT: Keilschrift Texte aus Ugarit (KTU)*, is the standard source reference for the cuneiform texts from Ugarit (*Keil* is the German word for wedge), edited by M. Dietrich, O. Loretz, and J. Sanmartin. CAT indicate the English translation: *The Cuneiform Alphabetic Texts (CAT) from Ugarit, Ras Ibn Hani and Other Places*.

⁶ For an exhaustive treatment, see Mark Smith, *The Ugaritic Baal Cycle, Volume I. Introduction with Text, Translation and Commentary of KTU/CAT 1.1-1.2* (VTSup, 105; Leiden/Boston: Brill, 1994); and, Mark Smith and Wayne Pitard, *The Ugaritic Baal Cycle, Volume II. Introduction with Text, Translation and Commentary of KTU/CAT 1.3-1.4* (SVT, 114; Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2009).

⁷ Also see examples in 2Sam 11; 2Kgs 5:5-7, 10:1-7, 19:14, 20:12; Jer 29:1-30; Esth 9:26-29; Ezra 4-7; Neh 2:8, 6:5; 2Chr 21:12.

message to my lord in the hope of gaining your favor." *The messengers returned to Jacob, saying, "We came to your brother Esau; he himself is coming to meet you, and there are four hundred men with him." ... Then after spending the night there, Jacob took from what was at hand and sent presents for his brother Esau...*

In this narrative, this story illustrates the oral setting from which the written genre of letters arises. The oral conventions of messengers and messenger performances become encoded in the letter genre itself, and in turn they are studied as part of scribal curriculum. In this way, the orality is textualized. In this respect, "thus says your servant Jacob" is an oral convention that ceases to be "oral" when it becomes part of learned scribal curriculum and practice.

A Model Letter from Ugarit

Examples of model letters in the alphabetic curriculum from ancient Ugarit are especially instructive of creative adaptation. These Ugaritic letters draw upon the formal elements of the Near Eastern letter genre that have been isolated in a variety of studies (PARDEE, 1982, p. 145–149; HAWLEY, 2003). A full Near Eastern introductory formula might include an Address Formula, a Prostration Formula (when appropriate), a Greeting Formula, and a request for Divine Blessing. All these elements are not present in actual letters where an economy of expression was often preferred. There are at least four examples of model letters from the archives at Ugarit (KTU 5.9, 5.10, 5.11, 5.33), but one example in particular can shed some light on aspects of the training of alphabetic scribes and their creative reuse of the letter model.

The model letter published as KTU 5.9 (=RS 16.265) was written on a tablet containing scribal exercises both the front and back as well as its sides.⁸ The recto has a complete model letter:

⁸ First published in *PRU* 2, no. 19. (PRU: Le Palais Royal d'Ugarit), edited by C. Viroilleaud, J. Nougayrol, and C. Schaeffer. Mission Archéologique de Rash Shamra. Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1955-1970). Recent discussions include Jonathan Yogev and Shamir Yona, "A

KTU 5.9: Recto to Lower Edge

- | | |
|-------------------|-------------------------------------|
| (1) [ḥ]m ḫt/ | Message of ḫtēlu |
| (2) l mnn.ʾlm | to whomever. May the gods |
| (3) ḡrk.tšlmk | guard you, keep you well, |
| (4) tʾzzk.ʾalp ym | strengthen you, for a thousand days |
| (5) w rbt šnt | and ten thousand years |
| (6) bʾd ʾlm | through eternity. |
-
- | | |
|-----------------|------------------------------|
| (7) iršt.aršt | A request, I request, |
| (8) l aḫy.l rʾy | to my brother, to my friend. |
-
- | | |
|------------------|---|
| (9) w ytnnn | And may he grant it [impf/energ] |
| (10) l aḫh.l rʾh | to his brother, to his friend, |
| (11) rʾ ʾlm. | an eternal friend. |
| (12) ttn.w tn | May you give [juss], and give [impv]! |
| (13) w l ttn | and may you indeed give [asseverative I], |
| (14) w al ttn | and would you not give [rhetorical]? |
| (15) tn ks yn | Give a cup of wine [impv], |
| (16) w ištn | and I shall drink it [impf/energic]. |

Several aspects indicate that this is no ordinary letter, but rather an embellished scribal exercise. To begin, in line 2 the letter is addressed to *mnn*, which should be understood as deriving from the Ugaritic indefinite particle *mn* “whomever.”⁹ The second part of the letter will wax eloquent as a request to an unnamed person: “his brother, his friend, his eternal friend.” In

Poetic Letter: The Ugaritic Tablet RS 16.265,” *Studi Epigrafici e Linguistici* 31 (2014), 51–58; Juan-Pablo Vita, “The Scribal Exercise RS 16.265 from Ugarit in its Near-Eastern Context,” in *The Ancient Near East, A Life! Festschrift Karel Van Lerberghe (Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta, 220)*; Leuven: Peeters, 2012), 645–52.

⁹ See another example of use of *mn* in a practice legal text from Ugarit; Alice Mandell, “When Form is Function: A Reassessment of the *Marziḫu* Contract (KTU 3.9) as a Scribal Exercise,” *MAARAV* 23 (2019), 39–67.

scribal practice, there is no need to have a specific addressee. The letter also heaps up parallelism. In lines 3-4, we find three possible blessing words—*ngr*, *šlm*, and *ʿzz* (“to guard,” “to be well,” and “to strengthen”) that all have cognates in Hebrew (נער, שלם, and עזז). Ugaritic letters actually use just one or two of these terms, whereas this practice exercise used the complete array of terms.

The body of the letter illustrates further practice by using adapted grammatical exercises. In line 7, there is reciprocal formula using a cognate accusative structure, “a request I request,” with a nominal and verbal formulation of the root *ʿrš* “to request.” In lines 9-15, five different verbal formulations of the Ugaritic verbal root *ytn* “to give” appear. The last of these instances creates the jocular request, “give me a cup of wine so that I may drink!” This is not a letter to be performed, but rather a scribal exercise framed by adapting traditional message conventions.

Model Letters from Kuntillet ʿAjrud

Ugaritic practice letters have several parallels in the scribal practice letters from the ancient Israelite desert fortress at Kuntillet ʿAjrud. I contend that there are three practice letters (3.1, 3.6, and 3.9) in the inscriptions there.¹⁰ They illustrate aspects of the three formulaic parts of the letter genre in Hebrew—the Address, the Greeting, and the Blessing. Two letters have different versions of an introductory formula, representing the two types of letters reflecting the different relationships between sender and addressee. A third practice letter is fragmentary and includes only the Blessing as well as a formulaic saying. The practice letters are nicely illustrated by the following example (KA 3.6 on Pithos B). This example should be placed in its larger context on a pithos, which includes other scribal exercises including four abecedaries (KA 3.11-14):

¹⁰ These are now published in the official version by Ahituv, Eshel, and Meshel, “The Inscriptions,” in *Kuntillet ʿAjrud: a Religious Centre from the Time of the Judaean Monarchy on the Border of Sinai*, ed. Zeev Meshel (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 2012), 87, 95–97. Early on, Lemaire recognized these were student exercises, *Les écoles et la formation de la Bible dans l’ancien Israël* (OBO, 39; Fribourg, 1981).

Transcription KA 3.6

- 1) 'mr
- 2) 'mryw '
- 3) mr l. 'dn 'y '
- 4) hšlm. 't
- 5) brktk.ly
- 6) hwh tmn
- 7) wl šrth.yb
- 8) rk wyšmrk
- 9) wyhy 'm. 'dn
- 10)y

"Message of Amaryaw, say to my lord: 'Are you well? I have blessed you by Yahweh of Teman and his 'asherah. May he bless you and may he keep you, and may he be with my lord."

The formal language of KA 3.6 finds close parallels in biblical literature. For example, the use of the root 'mr "to say, speak" found in 2 Kings 22:15, the words of the prophetess Huldah, are couched in letter format: "And (Huldah) said to them: 'Thus said ['mr] Yahweh, the God of Israel: Say to ['mr l-] the man who sent you to me: ...'" Here, we see both the sender and the addressee identified as we have in the practice letters. And, the identification is made with the repeated of 'mr to reference both the speaker and the addressee—which we may generalize as, "Thus said Sender" and "Say to Addressee." The prominence of the root 'mr "to speak" in this practice letter should remind us of the well-known prophetic introductory phrase, "Thus said YHWH (*kh 'mr YHWH*)." The phrase has its specific origins in the letter genre that begins, 'mr PN, "Message of the Sender." In this respect, the prophetic speech formula, "Thus said YHWH," is directly related to the textualization of the writing prophets (SCHNIEDEWIND, 2015, p. 314–318).

Another practice letter on Pithos B is KA 3.9, which consists of three lines written on the very top of the large jar¹¹.

¹¹ The reconstruction is developed on the basis of the official publication and photos by Ahituv, Eshel, and Meshel, "The Inscriptions." A more elaborate reconstruction is offered by

KA 3.9 Transcription and Translation

- 1) ['mrXXX¹ 'mr XXX² brktk]lyhwh.ht' m`n wI' šrth.
- 2) [w't]kl' šr yš' l m' š hnn h' w' m pth wntn lh yhw~
- 3) klbbh

- 1) [Message of NAME¹, say to NAME²: I bless you]by Yahweh of the Teman and by his *Asherah*.¹²
- 2) [And now,] whatever he asks from a man, he will give generously. And if he petitions, then Yahwe(h) will give to him
- 3) according to his heart.

The obscured space in line 1 is about 17-20 letters, which gives room for the reconstruction for a letter introduction according to the pattern that we have in the other letter exercises at Kuntillet 'Ajrud. The “dedication” itself is typical of that used in letters. The use of a “dedicatory formulae” or “blessing” in these letters illustrates how scribal learning involves adaption and reuse in a variety of contexts. Lines 2-3 utilize a reciprocal saying similiar

Émile Puech, but he offers no evidence of different or better photographs upon which he bases his readings so it is difficult to have any confidence in his readings, see Émile Puech, “Les inscriptions hébraïques de Kuntillet 'Ajrud (Sinai),” *Revue Biblique*, vol. 121, n. 2, (2014), p. 172.

¹² The interpretation of the Hebrew 'šrh, which is here translated as a proper noun, is debated. See, for example, Benjamin Sass, “On epigraphic Hebrew 'ŠR and *' ŠRH, and on Biblical Asherah*,” *Transeuphratène* 46 (2014), 50–60. Many scholars point out that a proper noun in Hebrew normally does not take a pronominal suffix as in “his Asherah.” This is true in biblical Hebrew, but a proper noun also does not take a definite article as in “the Teman,” which we also have here. Some scholars would therefore argue that these are not proper nouns. However, I do not think the grammar of vernacular Israelian Hebrew of the early Iron Age should be completely defined by the grammar of biblical Hebrew or even Judean Hebrew of the late Iron Age. Note the discussion by Aḥituv, *Echoes from the Past*, 221-24, 319; Mark Smith, *The Early History of God: Yahweh and the Other Deities in Ancient Israel* (2nd ed; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 108–147; Paolo Xella, “Le dieu et 'sa' déesse: l'utilisation des suffixes pronominaux avec des théonymes d'Ebla à Ugarit et à Kuntillet 'Ajrud,” *Ugarit Forschungen*, 27 (1995), 599–610; Steve Wiggins, *A Reassessment of Asherah: With Further Considerations of the Goddess* (Piscataway: Gorgias Press, 2007), 197–208; Puech reads line 1 as *hmlk. 'šyw. 'mr.brkt. 'tkm.lyhwh.htmn.w' šrth*, “Les inscriptions hébraïques de Kuntillet 'Ajrud (Sinai),” 172–74, but he does not give any substantive evidence for these readings nor does he see this as a practice letter (even though his reading might fit such an interpretation).

to *KTU* 5.9:7 as the body of the letter. Indeed, the combination of the letter genre other student exercises is paralleled in *KTU* 5.9. The content of a letter is completely flexible, and this opens up the possible for student exercises as we have here and in *KTU* 5.9.

The introductions to practice letters tend to be more complete than actual letters. In our Hebrew exemplars, the most complete practice letter is exemplified by Inscription 3.6 on Pithos B. A good parallel to this is found in the Ugaritic tablet, which is a relatively complete student exercise. Two aspects of the Ugaritic practice letter are especially notable. First, the triple invocation of the gods' protection is unusual; in actual Ugaritic letters, there is never more than one or two of these phrases. Typically, "may the gods of Ugarit keep you well (Ugaritic, *šlm*; cp. Hebrew, *שלם*)." The same is true with Hebrew letters. For example, many of the Arad letters omit most elements of the introduction except an abbreviated Address Formula (e.g., *'l 'lšb* "To Eliashib," see Arad letters 1-11; or, *'l 'dny 'lšb* "To my lord, Eliashib," Arad 18:1-2).¹³ A Divine Blessing is another standard parts of a form letter preserved in many letters (e.g., *brktk lyhwh* "I bless you to Yahweh," Arad 16:2-3, 21:2, 40:3). These are sometime omitted in actual letters, but they always appear in the formal practice template. The introduction is then followed by a formal transition to the body of the letter, "and now" (written *w't* in inscriptions and *plene, w'th*, in biblical texts). The body of the letter, of course, was entirely variable. There was apparently no rigid form to the model letter that students practiced. In this respect, we should not be surprised by the differences between the three practice letters from Kuntillet 'Ajrud.

Letter Writing Exercises and Biblical Literature

The content within ancient Hebrew letters also alludes to the central role of letters and messengers in ancient Israel. Several mention letters and

¹³ This pattern actually follows the large corpus of the Mari letters, which also have just the abbreviated address without all the additional formalities; see Wolfgang Heimpel, *Letters to the King of Mari: A New Translation, with Historical Introduction, Notes, and Commentary* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2003).

messengers as a subject matter discussed within the letter (see Arad 16, 24, 40; Lachish 3, 5, 6, 7, 16, 18). Lachish Letter 3 nicely illustrates an interaction with multiple letters:

[Introduction] Your servant Hoshaiah sends (*šlh*) to report (*ngd*) to my lord Yaush: May Yahweh cause my lord to hear a good report.

[Body] And now (*w'th*), please explain to your servant the meaning of the letter (*spr*) that you sent (*šlh*) to your servant yesterday. For your servant has been sick at heart ever since you sent (*šlh*) it to your servant. And, because my lord said, "Don't you know how to read a letter (*spr*)?" As Yahweh lives, no one has ever tried to read me a letter (*spr*)! And also, any letter (*spr*) comes to me, I can read it. And moreover, I can recount everything in it.

And, as for your servant, it has been reported (*ngd*), saying (*l'mr*), "General Koniah son of Elnatan has moved south in order to enter Egypt." He has sent (*šlh*) (messengers) to fetch Hodaviah son of Aḥiah and his men from here.

And, as for the letter (*spr*) of Tobiah, servant of the king, which came to Shallum son of Yada', from the prophet saying (*l'mr*), "Beware," your servant has sent (*šlh*) it to my lord.

The body of the letter begins with a direct response by a junior officer to a superior officer questioning whether he was able to read or needed a scribe to help with the letter. The scribe's claim to be able to recite the content of the letter also recalls the etiological origins of letter writing—that is, as an aid to memory in the oral delivery of messages. In the next paragraph, the junior officer then relates a communiqué about the commander of the army traveling to Egypt. He apparently is sending letters (*šlh*) to fetch some other personnel to his location. Finally, in the last paragraph, he relays a message from an unnamed prophet written in a letter. Thus, in addition to his own correspondence, he is relaying the contents of two other separate correspondences. This is not unusual. Another letter, Lachish 6, mentions other letters passed along to him from the king and military officers that apparently contained some disconcerting news, although the exact content is not relayed. These examples show how significant the writing of letters was in Judean bureaucracy at all levels.

The terminology utilized in ancient Hebrew letters would also be used in biblical narratives. These terms include *l'mr* "saying," *spr* "letter," *ngd* "to

report,”¹⁴ *šlh* “to send,” and *šlm* “welfare” (as illustrated in Lachish Letter 3 above). These are some of the most common terms and expressions in the Hebrew Bible. Especially note the use of *l`mr*—usually translated as “saying” but really the marker of a direct quote. This stylistic letter writing feature would become a standard part of biblical narrative. The phrase occurs about 900 times in the Hebrew Bible. Two of the more interesting examples of this expression in biblical literature underscore its close association with the letter genre. In 2 Kings 5:6, a messenger from the king of Aram “brought the letter from the king of Israel, saying (*l`mr*): ‘And now (*w`th*), ...’.” And, according to 2 Kings 10:1-2, “Jehu wrote letters and sent them to Samaria, to the rulers of Jezreel, to the elders, and to the guardians of the sons of Ahab, saying (*l`mr*): ‘And now (*w`th*), ...’.” Both of these examples are striking because they incorporate—without adaptation—the standard transitional expression that is found in the Hebrew epigraphic corpus, “and now” (*w`th*); this directly connects the use of *l`mr* “saying” with the letter genre (see further discussion below).¹⁵ In other words, although *l`mr* often seems to just repeat the idea of the speech act already expressed in the narrative framing, it is actually the formal introduction to direct speech drawn out of the real life context of messenger formulas and the letter genre.

The background of *l`mr* “saying” in the letter genre can be further illustrated by the practice letters from Kuntilet `Ajrud. These letters use with the same verbal root as *l`mr* “saying” in the prefatory introduction, “Speech (*`mr*) of PN.” The introduction to the letter is not direct speech, but rather it introduces the direct “speech” /*`ōmer*/ by the sender of the letter. And, the connection is further developed in the use of the expression, “thus says PN” (*kh `mr* PN), in the messenger formula. This is well-known in the expression, “thus says Yahweh,” but it can be used more generally as in “thus says Pharaoh” (Exodus 5:10), “thus says Balak” (Numbers 22:16), or “thus says

¹⁴ Always in the *Hiphil* conjugation, for example, *lhgd */lehaggīd/* “to report,” in Lachish 3:1-2.

¹⁵ Formally, the expression *l`mr* “saying” parallels the use of the imperative verb *rgm* “speak thus”, which introduces direct speech in Ugaritic letters. For example, *KTU* 2.16 begins, “Message of Talmiyānu: To Ṭarriyell, my mother, *speak (rgm)*: ‘May it be well ...!’” Other parallels may be found in Mesopotamian letters such as the Mari corpus where we find *qibima umma* “speak, thus.”

Ben-Hadad” (1 Kings 20:5). Indeed, the latter examples are the origin of what becomes the more frequently used expression in the Bible, “Thus said YHWH.” The letter genre finds a variety of expressions in biblical literature, but the most well-known of these is prophetic speech—“Thus said YHWH”—which borrows directly from letter writing. The role of the messenger and written letters is also a trope in biblical storytelling.

The transition formula in letters, *wʿt(h)*¹⁶ “and now,” was an important device that functioned as a new paragraph marker and was learned by ancient scribes when practicing the writing of model letters.¹⁷ The use of *wʿt(h)* is especially important in ancient Hebrew because the writing system did not have many auxiliary markers to mark semantic functions in the way we have in modern languages (e.g., commas, periods, spaces, line breaks, tabs, paragraphs, etc). The only regularly used auxiliary marker in epigraphic Hebrew was a dot “•” that was often used as a word divider. By the time of the Dead Sea Scrolls, the “•” was replaced by the space.¹⁸ In addition, paragraphing and larger breaks using empty space were beginning to be seen in the Scroll manuscripts. However, there is little evidence that such

¹⁶ The typical spelling in Epigraphic Hebrew is the shorted form *wʿt*, while the longer (*plene*) spelling *wʿth* is found in Standard Biblical Hebrew. The orthography has been the subject of some discussion. Dennis Pardee rightly rejected Freedman’s suggestion that the defective spelling in inscriptions “indicates a pronunciation of *ʿat* or *ʿēt*” (David Noel Freedman, “The Orthography of the Arad Ostraca,” *IEJ* 19 [1969], 52; cited by Dennis Pardee, “Letters from Tel Arad,” *UF* 10 [1978], 292). Pardee favors Aharoni’s vocalization, *ʿattā*, which was based on the variation in the spelling of 2ms verbal forms (e.g., *ydʿth*, Arad 40:9; see Aharoni, *Arad Inscriptions* [Jerusalem: IES, 1981], 12). Freedman’s suggestion makes it difficult to account for the Standard Biblical Hebrew orthography. As Pardee had noted, the vocalization of *wʿt* is uncertain, and it is difficult to know whether its status in Epigraphic Hebrew as a homograph with *ʿēt* “time” might have influenced the biblical orthography or whether its orthography was simply the reflection of a phonological development.

¹⁷ The transitional particle *wʿt* was identified by Pardee in an article (“Letters from Tel Arad,” *UF* 10 [1978], 289–336) as well as his co-authored *Handbook of Ancient Hebrew Letters* (1982). He notes that although he translates *wʿt* literally, “it corresponds more nearly to a paragraph division in English usage” (1978: 292). For a more complete discussion of this marker in NWS (Northwest Semitic texts), see my forthcoming contribution to the Pardee *Festschrift*, “And now’: The Transition Particle in Epigraphic Hebrew and Biblical Hebrew.”

¹⁸ For a general overview of the history and function of the space in writing, see Paul Saenger, *Space Between Words: The Origins of Silent Reading* (Figuræ: Reading Medieval Culture; Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1997).

conventions were used in epigraphic Hebrew. For this reason, the use of *wʿt(h)* as a paragraph marker is especially critical in the early development of Hebrew writing.

The use of *wʿt* as a sectional divider in Epigraphic Hebrew letters is consistent and impressive. It either occurs or can be restored from context in seventeen of the Arad letters (1:2, 2:1, 3:1, 5:1-2, 6:1, 7:1-2, 8:1, 9:1, 10:1, 11:2, 14:1, 16:3, 17:1, 18:3, 21:3, 40:4); it appears five times in the Lachish Letters (2:3, 3:4, 4:1-2, 5:2-3; 9:3); and, it also appears once in a Wadi Murabbaʿat papyrus.¹⁹ Other Iron Age Canaanite letters use *wʿt* as well; for example, it is found in an Edomite letter from Horvat ʿUza (BEIT-ARIEH; CRESSON, 1985, p. 97–98), and an Ammonite letter from Tell El-Mazār (YASSINE; TEIXIDOR, 1986, p. 47; SCHWIDERSKI, 2000, p. 55–61). In all of these cases, *wʿt* served as a transitional particle denoting the shift from the *praescriptio* (that is, the formal address and greeting) to the body of the letter. From a formal point of view, *wʿt* marks the progression from the scribe announcing the sender (and sometimes a formal stereotyped greeting) to the actual content of the message. This makes explicit the shift in speaker from the scribe himself to the scribe as mouthpiece of the sender. The paragraph marker *wʿt* realigns the focus from the structure of the letter to the actual letter itself. A couple examples illustrate both the variety and consistency of its usage in inscriptions:

1) Arad 16:1 *ʿhk.ḥnnyhw.šlh lšl*

16:2 *m.ʿlyšb.wlšlm bytk br*

16:3 *ktk lyhwh.wʿt kšʿty*

“Your brother, Hananiah, sends for the welfare of Elyashib and for the welfare of your house. I bless you by Yahweh. And now, when I left ...”

¹⁹ Some of the unprovenanced texts like the Moussaieff Ostrakon or the “Silver, Pistachio and Grain” Ostrakon must be treated with some skepticism (see Dobbs-Allsopp et al., *Hebrew Inscriptions*, 570–71, and Aḥituv, *Echoes from the Past*, 199–202). The latter, for example, has the incorrect epigraphic spelling *wʿth* (as in Standard Biblical Hebrew, but not Epigraphic Hebrew), which makes it even more suspect as a forgery.

2) Lachish 3:1 *ʿbdk.hwšʿ yhw šlh.l*

3:2 *hgd lʿ dny yʿ wš.yšmʿ*

3:3 *yhw h ʿ t ʿ dny šmʿ t šlm*

3:4 *wšmʿ t t b[.] wʿ t.hpqh*

“Your servant, Hoshayahu, sends to tell my lord Yaush: May Yahweh cause my lord to hear a report of peace and a good report. And now, please open...

The use of *wʿt* is as a transition marker so consistent in Iron Age inscriptions that one must assume that it was a device that scribes learned to use in writing letters²⁰.

So, how did this rudimentary element of letters impact biblical literature? The expression *wʿth* (always with the full spelling) is remarkably common in biblical Hebrew, appearing 273 times. In other words, more than half of the 435 occurrences in biblical literature of the word *ʿth* (עתה, “now”) are with the conjunctive particle *waw* underscoring its predominant usage as a transitional expression.²¹ frequent construction reflects the basic scribal education where the expression *wʿth* was taught to all young scribes as part of the rubrics of letter writing. The usefulness of *wʿth* as a transition particle in letters was then adapted in a variety of contexts in biblical literature.

The use of the expression *wʿth* within oral discourse is complicated by its role in the scribal rubric. The oral aspects of the expression are evident in biblical literature. For example, *wʿth* is sometimes followed by an imperative of *šmʿ* “hear, listen” (e.g., Genesis 27:8, 43; Deuteronomy 4:1; 1 Samuel 8:9, 15:1, 26:19, 28:22), and the Dead Sea Scrolls also feature this construction

²⁰ The paragraph marker was also used in Aramaic dialects as well. Beginning with biblical Aramaic, the Book of Ezra uses *wkʿnt*, *wkʿt*, and *wkʿn*—which all may be translated “and now”—as opening transitional particles in its letters (4:11, 17; 5:17; 7:12). See Schwiderski, *Handbuch des nordwestsemitischen Briefformulars*, 164–73.

²¹ The standard Hebrew Dictionary of Koehler and Baumgartner suggests that 241 out of 273 occurrences introduce a new section, while 24 times it may be translated “but now.” A few of these adversarial examples are actually suspect (e.g., Gen 32:11; Deut 10:22), while the remainder are concentrated in later Biblical Hebrew (e.g., Isa 43:1, 44:1, 47:8, 48:16, 49:5, 64:7; Hag 2:4; Ezr 9:8).

(e.g., CD 1:1, 2:2, 2:14, 4Q185, 4Q525). This use of *wʿth* with an imperative of *šmʿ* “hear, listen” can be taken as evidence of its use as a marker in oral discourse. For example, Dennis Pardee suggests, “Such a usage arose from standard speech wherein *wʿt* marks the point of transition between a preamble of any kind (historical, circumstantial, causal) and the point of a given statement” (PARDEE, 1978, p. 292). This suggestion is substantiated by a survey of its use in biblical literature. All 26 occurrences of *wʿth* in the Book of Genesis appear within direct speech. For example, in Gen 3:22 we read,

Then the LORD God said, “See, the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil; *and now (wʿth)*, he might reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life.”

At the same time, direct speech is both textualized in letter writing and learned as part of scribal practice. These examples precisely represent the use of *wʿth* in the context of a letter. It transitions the introduction to the body of the model letter as follows: “Message/Speech of the Sender to the Recipient: May you be blessed by YHWH. How is your well-being? *And now*, [Body of the Message].” Thus, *wʿt(h)* was formally embedded in direct speech, and it was also learned as a textual formula.

The relationship between the use of *wʿt(h)* in Epigraphic Hebrew and in Biblical Hebrew warrants some reflection. How is its regular usage as a transitional particle, essentially a paragraph divider, reflected in biblical literature? It is quite regularly used in biblical speeches as a transitional marker in the speech. In addition to marking transitions in oral discourse, there are instances that recall its more formal use in letter writing. For example, we read in 1 Samuel 15:1, “Samuel said to Saul, “YHWH sent me to anoint you king over his people Israel; *and now (wʿth)*, listen to the words of YHWH. ...” Here the function of *wʿth* is transitional as in Epigraphic Hebrew. Likewise, the use of *wʿth* followed by the imperative *šmʿ* “hear” recalls the messenger formula utilized in letters.²² For example, the narrator subtly

²² Examples of the expression *wʿth šmʿ* (or variations thereof) include Gen 27:8, 42; Ex 19:5; Deut 4:1; 1Sam 8:9, 15:1, 25:7, 26:19; Isa 44:1, 47:8; Jer 37:20, 42:18; Amos 7:16; Prov 5:7.

employs features of formal messenger scene in 1 Samuel 28:21-22, “The woman came to Saul, and when she saw that he was terrified, she said to him, ‘Your maidservant has listened to you; I have taken my life in my hand, and have listened to what you have said to me. And now, you also listen (w‘th šm‘-n’) to your maidservant: let me set a morsel of bread before you.”

The role of w‘th in letters is most explicit in 2 Kings 5:6, “He brought the letter (hspr) to the king of Israel, which read (l‘mr): ‘And now (w‘th), when this letter reaches you, know that I have sent to you my servant Na‘aman that you may cure him of his leprosy.’” In this example, the use of w‘th most closely reminds us of Epigraphic Hebrew with regard to their context of written letters; and, it is worth noting that w‘th actually follows l‘mr which is traditionally translated “saying” but is functionally a linguistic marker of a direct quotation translated in these contexts as “which read.” These examples illustrate the influence and adaptation of the scribal learning and practice. Since writing lacks many of the semiotic cues of speech, developing semiotic markers like the dot (•) as a word divider (i.e., a “space”), l‘mr as a quotation mark, and w‘th as a paragraph marker gave biblical authors the pragmatic tools needed to help readers understand the written word. It was this formal use that in turn explains why w‘t(h) came to be used so commonly in biblical texts.

From Letters and Messengers to Prophetic Speech

The most striking adaption of the letter genre in biblical literature is prophetic speech, although most scholars emphasize the *Sitz im Leben* of the messenger and messenger speech, e.g., Genesis 32:4-14 (KÖHLER, 1923; WESTERMANN, 1991, p. 98–128; ROSS, 1962, p. 98–107). The messenger scene involved a sender, a messenger, a message, and an audience. These elements were all part of prophetic speech. God sent (šlh) the prophet, his messenger, with the “word of God” (the message), to an audience—usually, the Judean people as a group. One of the titles that became associated with prophet is *mal‘āk* “messenger.” In post-exilic biblical literature, the term developed into a synonym for a prophet. The last book of the Hebrew canon is, in fact, the

prophetic book of Malachi, literally “my messenger.” The prophet Haggai was given the title, “the messenger of God” (1:13); the book of Chronicles concludes by referring to the prophets as divine messengers (2Chr 36:15); and deuterо-Isaiah refers to the prophets as “my messengers” (Isa 44:26). This adoption of the term *mal`āḳ* “messenger” for the prophets reflected the fact that they were sent (*šlh*) by God (e.g., 2 Samuel 12:25; Judges 6:8; 2 Kings 17:13; Jeremiah 14:14-15, 23:21, 25:4; etc).

The prophetic message was the “word of YHWH”—a technical term in the Hebrew Bible that refers to a divine speech (MOWINCKEL, 1934, p. 199–227). Thus, we find the formal expression, “the word of YHWH came to the prophet,” repeated frequently (more than 40x) within the Hebrew Bible.²³ The meaning and form of the “word of YHWH” was transformed in the post-exilic period. Specifically, prophetic speech - “the word of YHWH” - was textualized and broadened. For example, it came to be equated with *Torah* as a written text (e.g., 2 Chronicles 34:21; 35:6). The genre of the letter itself thing facilitated this shift from the oral message (“word of YHWH”) to a physical manuscript (“scroll of the Torah”) (SCHNIEDEWIND, 2015, p. 314-315). But the shift from oral to written was easily facilitated by the shift in the messenger *Sitz im Leben* from an oral message to a messenger carrying written texts. The development of the letter genre and its linguistic formalities paved the path for the writing prophets. Royal bureaucracy may have also played a role in the adaptation of the messenger formula. As writing prophets like Isaiah became royal counselors in a bureaucracy that increasingly utilized writing, so also the prophets adapted the tools of that bureaucracy—in this case, letter writing.

Prophetic speech reflects the introductory language of the message, in particular, the expression, “Thus said YHWH (*kh`mr yhwh*).” This formula occurs 293 times in the Hebrew Bible, and the formula lent authority to the prophetic word. There were two formal types of the letter template: one from a superior to an inferior and one from an inferior/equal to a

²³ Occasionally, this expression will be used for someone not normally considered a prophet; e.g., Abram in a vision (Gen 15:1), Solomon (1Kgs 6:11). These are exceptions.

superior/equal. The prophetic messenger formula naturally followed the form of a letter from a superior (the Divine King) to an inferior. In Marc Brettler's study, *God is King: Understanding an Israelite Metaphor*, he discusses the many parallels wherein divine kingship draws directly upon human kingship.²⁴ His study could have been extended further to include the use of messengers and the adaptation of the letter genre for prophetic speech. In the Hebrew Bible God is like a human king in his use of messengers, and prophetic speech is essentially an adaptation of the royal letter genre.

One of the more striking examples of prophecy by letter is in Jeremiah 29. The chapter begins, "These are the words of a letter that the prophet Jeremiah sent." It also mentions the scribe who served as the messenger (v. 3), "The letter was sent through Elasah, son of Shaphan and Gemariah, son of Hilkiah." A second letter is then mentioned in Jer 29:24-32 (DIJKSTRA, 1983, p. 319-22):

To Shemaiah the Nehelamite you shall say: Thus said YHWH of Hosts, the God of Israel: Because you sent letters in your own name to all the people in Jerusalem, to Zephaniah son of Maaseiah, the priest, and to the rest of the priests, saying, "YHWH appointed you priest instead of Jehoiada, the priest, to exercise authority in the House of YHWH over every madman who plays a prophet, to put him into the stocks and into the pillory. Now why have you not rebuked Jeremiah of Anathoth, who plays a prophet among you? For he has actually sent a message [in a letter] to us in Babylon, saying: 'It will be a long time. Build houses and live in them, plant gardens and enjoy their fruit.'" The priest Zephaniah read this letter in the hearing of Jeremiah, the prophet. And, the word of YHWH came to Jeremiah: Send a message [in the form of a letter] to all the exiles, saying: "Thus said YHWH concerning Shemaiah the Nehelamite: Because Shemaiah prophesied to you, though I did not send him, and has led you to trust a lie, assuredly, thus said YHWH: 'I am going to punish Shemaiah the Nehelamite and his offspring. There shall be no man of his line dwelling among this people or seeing the good things I am going to do for My people'—declares YHWH—for he has urged disloyalty toward YHWH."

In these letters, the textualization of the prophetic word is actualized in the form of letters. Of course, the letter genre more generally became the

²⁴ M. Z. Brettler, *God is King: Understanding an Israelite Metaphor (Journal for the Study of the Old Testament, Supplement Series, 76; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1989)*, discusses the many parallels wherein divine kingship parallels human kingship.

genre of prophetic speech, but these examples give this textualization an explicit narrative framing. One might even suggest that the word of YHWH was commissioned as a text in the form of letters. In a sense, these examples offer justification for the textualization of the divine word, that is, for the genre of the writing prophets.

Wisdom Sayings in Letter Writing

The practice letter KA 3.9 also includes a fragment from the proverbial sayings genre (lines 2-3), “whatever he asks from a man, he will give generously. And if he petitions, then Yahwe(h) will give to him according to his desire,” as part of a student exercise that begins with a practice letter. Indirect parallels can be found in a variety of places. For example, in an Aramaic Inscription from eastern Turkey, the Sam’alian king Panamu wrote, *wmz ’š’l mn ’lhy ytn ly* “And whatever I shall ask from my god, may he give to me” (KAI 214:4), and also in the same inscription, *wmh ’š’l mn ’lhy mt ytnw ly* “and whatever I shall ask from my god, surely he shall give me” (ll. 12-13). There are close linguistic parallels here with the terms *š’l* “to ask” and *ntn* “to give” as well as with the syntactic structure. Scholars have also suggested a number of biblical correlates including the following:

Ps 20:5 *ytn lk klbbk* “He shall give to you according to your desire”

Ps 37:21 *šdyq ḥwnn wnwtn* “the righteous is generous and gives”

Ps 37:26 *kl hywm ḥwnn wmlwh* “he is always generous and lends”

Ps 112:5 *ṭwb ’yš ḥwnn wmlwh* “all goes well with the man who lends generously”

We may imagine that such language would have been learned and memorized from school exercises, then applied in a variety of literary

contexts. Indeed, the example from Psalm 112, which is an acrostic psalm, might itself have its origins as an adapted school exercise.

Arguably, the most striking parallel to the Kuntillet ʿAjrud wisdom saying is Psalm 20:5. The appeal to the “God of Jacob” suggests that Psalm 20 may have originally been a northern psalm, and this would add another connection to the northern traits of the site of Kuntillet ʿAjrud and its inscriptions.²⁵ The psalm also has some salient motifs that point to its use in royal liturgy. For example, the psalm ends with the enjoiner, “O Yahweh, give victory to the king!” (v. 10a [English, 9a]). This is significant given the royal motifs in the iconography of the Kuntillet ʿAjrud drawings (ORNAN, 2015, p. 3–26), as well as the apparent mention of a king in one of the letter templates (KA 3.1).

The combination of the letter genre with a different scribal exercise is paralleled in the school tablet from Ugarit, *KTU* 5.9. After the introduction, the body of the letter (ll. 7-16) is used for a humorous grammatical exercise (e.g., using the verbal forms of the word *ytn* “to give”): “And may he give it to his brother ... and I shall drink it.” The content of a letter, of course, must be completely flexible. This opens up the possibility of attaching a playful student exercise as we find in *KTU* 5.9, or adding a pious proverbial saying as we find in the Kuntillet ʿAjrud example. What is relevant here is the way the genre of a letter allows the student to adapt the body of the letter to various types of practice.

The proverbial saying in KA 3.9 is more significant than first meets the eye. In this particular case, such sayings were learned by scribes and employed especially in diplomatic correspondence (although they could be adapted and used for various purposes). Once we recognize the pattern, we can adduce further parallels. For example, scholars have long noted certain

²⁵ The appeal to the “God of Jacob” suggests that Psalm 20 may have originally been a northern psalm, but the language of the psalm as a whole is not demonstrably northern; see Gary Rendsburg, *Linguistic Evidence for the Northern Origin of Selected Psalms*, (*SBL Monograph Series*, 43; Atlanta: Scholars, 1990). If it were originally northern, then we must hypothesize that it was redacted and adapted in Jerusalem leaving only “the God of Jacob” as a trace of its origins.

correlations between the biblical Psalms and the Amarna diplomatic corpus (JIRKU, 1933, p. 108–120).²⁶ One example is Psalm 21:3 [Eng. v. 2], תַּאֲוֹת לְבוֹ נְתַתָּהּ, לֹא וְאַרְשֵׁת שְׂפָתָיו בְּלִי-מְנוּעָה “You give him the desire of his heart, and you do not withhold any request.” This also has a certain general resonance with KA 3.9, but has an even more impressive parallel with a Babylonian letter to Pharaoh (EA 9:7-10):

ul-tu ab-bu-ú-a-a ù ab-bu-ka it-ti a-ḥa-mi[-iš] ṭa-bu-ta id-bu-bu šu-ul-ma-na ba-na-a a-na a-ḥa-mi-iš ul-te-bi-i-lu ù me-re-el-ta ba-ni-ta a-na a-ḥa-mi-iš ul ik-¹lu-²ù “From the time my fathers and your fathers mutually spoke in friendship, they sent good gifts to one another, and they did not withhold any request.”²⁷

As Avi Sheveka points out, this Babylonian letter uses diplomatic language typical of requests. It was stock terminology evoking a mutual relationship or “brotherhood.” This particular parallel is notable because of the unusual word אַרְשֵׁת in Ps 21:3. The lexeme is a clear cognate to the Amarna term *mēreltu* “request” (< Akkadian, *mēreštu*) from the root *erēšū* “to desire, request” (2005, p. 297–320).

However, while Ps 21:3 employs this Akkadian term, it is a *hapax legomenon* in Biblical Hebrew, and it never appears in later Hebrew.²⁸ The word appears to be an older loanword from Akkadian. The reciprocity results in requests and desires being mutually fulfilled by the diplomatic “brothers.” And, this is not the only example. Moshe Weinfeld explains this fulfilling of desires as a part of diplomatic exchange intended to create good relationships. Within the biblical narrative, this dynamic is especially clear in the messages between Israel and Phoenicia (WEINFELD, 2001, p. 178-183). The example of Solomon and Hiram illustrates this well. In fact, Hiram’s letter to Solomon encodes the general paradigm in 1Kgs 5:22: “Hiram sent word to

²⁶ More recently, these are developed by Richard Hess, “Hebrew Psalms and Amarna Correspondence from Jerusalem,” *Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentlich Wissenschaft* 101 (1989), 249–65, and Avi Sheveka, “A Trace of the Tradition of Diplomatic Correspondence in Royal Psalms,” *Journal of Semitic Studies*, 50 (2005), 297–320.

²⁷ The translation is my own, and I use the transcription from the new edition by A. F. Rainey, *The El-Amarna Correspondence*, volume 1, 92–93.

²⁸ The word may also appear in Ps 61:6, but there it is spelled אַרְשֵׁת, which seems to be a corrupted form of the original root *’rš*, see HALOT, *ad loc*.

Solomon: ‘I have heard that you have sent to me, and I will do all that which you desired (אָנִי אֶעֱשֶׂה אֶת־כָּל־חַפְצֶיךָ).’” Or, to paraphrase in the language from the Amarna letters or Ps 21:3, Hiram received Solomon’s request, and he will not withhold any request. Diplomatic terminology also creates the backdrop to the playful phrasing in *KTU* 5.9, the Ugaritic school text referenced above, *iršt.aršt/l ahy.l r ‘y* “A request, I request, to my brother, to my friend.” It looks like just a playful little grammatical exercise, and it is. But this playful scribal exercise shows how scribal education relating to diplomatic terminology and relationships gets used and adapted into letters and literature.

Conclusion

In sum, scribal education was the foundation upon which biblical literature was written. Scribes practiced and learned, then they applied their training to the everyday tasks like writing letters and keeping records, but also the more profound task of writing biblical literature. The student exercise of learning to write letters illustrates the adaptation of translating formal learning into literature in a number of ways. Indeed, the sending of messages is the foundation for biblical literary narrative. And, the technical terminology of letter writing also influenced the framing of biblical literature. This includes very structuring of texts using expression like “and now” (*w^e‘atâ*) as a paragraphing device and the “saying” (*lēmôr*) as a marker of direct speech, was dependent on the sending and delivering of letters through messengers. The form of biblical prophecy was directly adapted from the *Sitz im Leben* of the sending and receiving of letters. Finally, the reciprocity saying, which is so critical for diplomatic correspondence, illustrates how scribal curriculum was learned, used, and adapted into a variety of contexts.

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