

The Hebrew “Epistolary Perfect” Revisited*

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Within Semitic linguistics there has been debate over the nature of “epistolary tenses” vis-à-vis “performative utterances”. A number of scholars view the two as essentially identical phenomena: “The epistolary perfect ... represents one type of performative perfect.”¹ Consequently the term “epistolary perfect” is viewed by some as unnecessary and/or misleading. Lawton criticizes Pardee² on precisely this point:

In a number of places ... he calls some perfect forms “epistolary” perfects. There is nothing specifically “epistolary” about their use, though, so why use this term? ... If one wants to give them a name, the linguistic category “performatives” should be used, and they should be designated “performative perfects” ...³

On the other hand, some scholars maintain that performatives and epistolaries are distinct phenomena and that “serious confusion has arisen from not keeping epistolary conventions separate from performativity.”⁴ This difference in opinion has consequences not only for one’s understanding of the Hebrew verbal system as a whole but also for the interpretation and translation of individual texts.⁵ The purpose of the present study is to examine the nature of epistolary tenses and performative utterances and to re-evaluate some alleged instances of the Hebrew epistolary perfect.⁶

The relationship between performatives and epistolaries has already been discussed in some detail by Pardee and Whiting in their study of Ugaritic and Akkadian letters.⁷ To clarify precisely what is meant by the term “performative utterance”, they survey the writings of three of the pioneers on the subject: E. Koschmieder, J. L. Austin, and E. Benveniste. Koschmieder referred to utterances such as *Hiermit bitte ich die Herrschaften zu Tisch* as *Koinzidenzfall*, that is, “the true coincidence of word and deed”. This occurs “wenn die im Verbum ausgedrückte Handlung durch

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1 Smith (1995:795); cf. Waltke and O’Connor (1990:489): “The epistolary perfective may be seen as a special case of the instantaneous perfective. Another, overlapping subtype is the performative, in which not only are speaking and acting simultaneous, they are identical.”

2 See e.g. Pardee (1982:35, 49).

3 Lawton (1984:267).

4 Pardee and Whiting (1987:4).

5 Compare e.g. Hendel (1996:162) with Hillers (1995:764).

6 One should refer to Pardee’s survey of the Hebrew evidence (1983); for a similar study of Aramaic epistolaries see Dempsey (1990).

7 Pardee and Whiting (1987).

den Ausspruch des Verbums selbst erfolgt, wenn Tun und Sprechen dasselbe ist.”⁸ Some years later Austin dubbed similar utterances (*I name this ship Liberté, I apologize*) “performative”, in contrast to “constative utterances”:

The constative utterance, under the name, so dear to philosophers, of *statement*, has the property of being true or false. The performance utterance, by contrast, can never be either: it has its own special job, it is used to perform an action. To issue such an utterance *is* to perform the action – an action, perhaps, which one scarcely could perform, at least with so much precision, in any other way.⁹

In a similar vein Benveniste wrote:

Un énoncé performatif n’est pas tel en ce qu’il peut modifier la situation d’un individu, mais en tant qu’il est *par lui-même* un acte. L’énoncé *est* l’acte; celui qui le prononce accomplit l’acte en le dénommant.¹⁰

Pardee and Whiting see a basic distinction in these different formulations between utterances which describe events and those which perform acts. Consequently they classify utterances as either performative or constative and view epistolary tenses as belonging to the latter category.¹¹

That it is justified to maintain a distinction between epistolaries and performatives, as Pardee and Whiting do, is clear for two reasons. Firstly, some alleged epistolaries cannot possibly be considered performative in the sense that an act is performed by the utterance itself. In a case such as 2 Chr 2:12 *w^ec attâ šālaḥtî ʾiš-ḥākām* (“and now I have sent a man of wisdom”) Hendel points out that an “act of sending a gift or a wise man is not accomplished in the act of its utterance”.¹² Likewise, to utter *[wktbt]y ʾl ʾdny* (“I have written to my lord”¹³) does not perform an act of writing.¹⁴ Secondly, cross-linguistic evidence makes it plain that performatives and epistolaries are not the same phenomenon, since they are expressed by different verb forms in a variety of languages: Latin, New Testament Greek, Syriac, and English, for example, all use the present tense for performatives but past tenses for epistolaries.¹⁵

8 Koschmieder (1930:352). In fact, analogous ideas had been proposed much earlier. For example, Škrabec (1903:555) had spoken of a *praesens effectivum* “das die Handlung nicht nur bezeichnet, sondern eben durch das Aussprechen des betreffenden Verbums zugleich vollzieht”. See Verschueren (1995:300, 304).

9 Austin (1971:13).

10 Benveniste (1966:274).

11 Pardee and Whiting (1987:26). One should note that Wagner emphatically denies that Koschmieder’s *Koinzidenzfall* is identical to Austin’s “performative utterance” (1997:62ff.), though it seems to me that he fails to do justice to the similarities between the two.

12 Hendel (1996:163).

13 Arad 40:5-6. This restoration is admittedly tentative, yet similar examples are easily found in other languages, e.g. the Syriac *Letter of Mara*: *mīl hnʾ hʾ kbt lk ʿwhdnʾ* “for this reason I have written this reminder to you” (Brockelmann 1913: §77 cā).

14 Cf. Koschmieder (1930:353).

15 For epistolary tenses in Latin and New Testament Greek see the standard grammars, and for the performative use of the present tense see Anscombe and Pierrot (1984) and Fanning (1990:187ff., 202ff.). In Syriac one may compare the epistolary perfect in note 13 with the performative participle *mʿmd ʾnʾ* “I baptize”; see Rogland (forthcoming) for further discussion. In English one can

Epistolary tenses are thus not performative *stricto sensu*; yet this raises the question as to how epistolary tenses differ from other “constative” or “descriptive” (i.e. non-performative) statements. The term itself, according to Pardee, is not intended to indicate an overtly marked grammatical category:

The term “epistolary” as applied to a verbal form was simply borrowed from classical grammar, for in Greek, for example, “epistolary” aorist and perfect (rarely imperfect) forms are used by the writer of a letter or inscription for statements regarding the situation of the writer when writing: “The writer of a letter or book, the dedicator of an offering, may put himself in the position of the reader or beholder who views the action as past...”¹⁶

Pardee and Whiting also appeal to the classical grammarians and argue that the essential feature of an epistolary tense is that events which are contemporaneous to the writer (which they label “epistolary acts”, e.g., acts of writing, sending, requesting) are expressed as past/complete since they are viewed from the temporal perspective of the letter’s recipient.¹⁷

Pardee and Whiting’s definition of epistolary tenses is somewhat problematic, however, since one can find epistolaries which do not refer to events which are contemporaneous to the writer. One can, for instance, write *I have enclosed the requested documents* even before the documents have been placed in the envelope.¹⁸ It may be helpful here to analyze epistolaries within a more formalized approach to tense such as that developed by Reichenbach.¹⁹ Reichenbach argued that tenses may be understood in terms of three time points: the time of speaking (S), the time of the event referred to (E), and a point of reference (R). A point may either overlap with another (symbolized here by “=”) or may precede it (symbolized by “<”). Some typical analyses are:

present:	S=E=R	<i>I see John</i>
future:	S<E=R	<i>I will see John</i>
past:	E=R<S	<i>I saw John</i>

The inclusion of a reference point (R) is helpful for explaining more complex tenses such as the pluperfect or the future-in-the-past. In the sentence *I went to the restaurant where I would meet John, but he had already left* two separate events (E₁, E₂) are related to another event in the past which functions as the reference point (R: *I went to the restaurant*). *He had left* (E₁) refers to an event prior to R, whereas *I would meet John* (E₂) refers to an event which is future in relation to R. These would be analyzed as E₁<R<S and R<E₂<S, respectively.

compare performative presents and an epistolary perfect (in the same sentence!) in the novel *Prince Caspian* by C. S. Lewis, where a character dictates: “Wherefore we most heartily *provoke, challenge, and defy* your Lordship to the said combat and monomachy, and *have sent* these letters by the hand of our well beloved and royal brother Edmund...” (Lewis 1980:152, emphasis mine). As Streck correctly points out (1995:155ff.), Pardee and Whiting’s assumption (following Lakoff 1970:847) that English does not use epistolary tenses is unfounded.

16 Pardee (1983:34), citing Smyth (1956: §1942).

17 Pardee and Whiting (1987:27f.); similarly Tropper (1998:158).

18 See further Streck (1995:157 n.360) and note 19 in Rogland (forthcoming).

19 Reichenbach (1947:287ff.).

Though the writer of a letter often describes an event (E) with his moment of speaking (S) as his reference point (R),²⁰ Binnick points out that with epistolary tenses there is a shift in reference point away from the moment of speech to the time of the letter's recipient, and the event is viewed as past from this perspective.²¹ Epistolary tenses therefore include the relation $E < R$. However, it is interesting to note that Streck and Hendel, both of whom have recently analyzed Akkadian and Hebrew epistolary tenses in Reichenbachian terms, disagree as to how the moment of speaking (S) is to be included in the analysis. Hendel follows Pardee and Whiting's view that the speaker refers to events which are present from his perspective ($S = E$) and consequently analyzes epistolary tenses as $S = E < R$.²² Streck, on the other hand, understands the events to be *future* to the speaker (as with *I have enclosed the documents*: $S < E$) and thus analyzes $S < E < R$.²³ What are we to make of these differing analyses? In fact, I would argue that both are mistaken in including the speaker's time (S). As the classical grammarians have pointed out, the unique feature of epistolary tenses is simply the fact that an event is viewed from the recipient's perspective and not from the speaker's actual point in time ($R \neq S$); the crucial element is simply $E < R$. It would appear that in these cases the time of the speaker (S) is not taken into consideration at all and it is hence unnecessary to include it in the analysis. Indeed, Comrie has pointed out that in some cases only two of the three time points are sufficient for locating a situation in time and consequently either S or R can be dispensed with under certain conditions.²⁴ It therefore makes no difference whether the situation referred to is present ($S = E$) or future ($S < E$) to the speaker, since the speaker's "now" (S) is temporarily ignored. Performative utterances can, of course, occur in a letter, and the fact that Classical Hebrew utilizes the same verbal conjugation for both epistolaries and performatives can occasionally present some challenges when it comes to the actual philological analysis of texts. If we bear in mind the theoretical distinctions discussed above it will usually be clear how individual cases are to be analyzed. The blessing formula of e.g. Arad 16:2-3 *brtk lyhwh*²⁵ is simply performative; the fact that *brk* occurs as a performative outside of letters indicates that it is not epistolary.²⁶ Pardee and Whiting correctly call this formula a performative utterance which happens to occur in a letter.²⁷ In other cases it is clear that we are dealing with non-performative epistolary tenses, e.g. 2 Chr 2:12 *w^{ec} attā šālahī ʾiš-ḥākām* (see above).²⁸

20 E.g. *I am writing to inform you...* ($S = R = E$).

21 Binnick (1991:250).

22 Hendel (1996:162); cf. Lakoff (1970:847).

23 Streck (1995:156).

24 Comrie (1981).

25 So also Arad 21:2; 40:3.

26 E.g. Gen 17:20; Ps 118:26; 129:8 (see Wagner 1997:104).

27 Pardee and Whiting (1987:30). It should be noted that this represents a development from Pardee's earlier studies, in which he claimed that Arad 16:2-3 *brtk lyhwh* is "an epistolary perfect, to be translated 'I bless' or 'I hereby bless'" (1978:311) and that the blessing formula is "not exclusively epistolary in usage". (1983:40 n.27)

28 So also 1 Kgs 15:19; 2 Kgs 5:6; Arad 24:18-19; Lachish 3:18; Lachish 5:6-7; contrast e.g. Renz and Röllig (1995:414, 423). Pardee translates Lachish 3:1-2 *šlh l[h]g[d]* as "Your servant Hoshayahu

Interestingly, it appears that the non-performative, epistolary uses of the verb *šlh*²⁹ have led some to think that other instances of the same verb are also non-performative, e.g. Arad 16:1-2 *ʔhk ḥnnyhw šlh lšlm ʔlyšb wlšlm bytk* “your brother Hananyahu sends/has sent (?) greetings to Elyashib and to your house”³⁰. However, such an analysis fails to notice the important fact that we are dealing in this case with an abstract object (“greetings”) which can in fact be “sent” by a verbal utterance.³¹ I would take this expression (also attested in Aramaic) as analogous to the English idiom, which is an alternative to the clearly performative “I greet you”.³² The expression is, naturally, primarily to be found in letters, since in person one would normally say *I greet you*. I would therefore call this an idiomatic performative which is limited to letters.³³

Different interpretations are possible for Arad 3:2-3 *wšwk ḥnnyhw*. Pardee calls this epistolary³⁴, yet it could easily be understood as a third-person performative (“Hananyahu hereby commands you”).³⁵ One could also interpret it simply as a past tense reporting a command which was given and then written down (E=R<S).³⁶ In sum, there is a clear distinction to be made between epistolary tenses and performative utterances, despite one ambiguous Hebrew example. As Pardee and

(hereby) [re]po[rts] to my [lor]d [Ya]ush” (1983:36), which sounds performative, yet I think this is probably an elliptical expression for “has sent [this letter] to report...” and is thus epistolary (cf. Streck 1995:155 n.355). For the reasons why the Arad and Lachish examples should be taken as perfects rather than participles see Pardee (1978:311).

29 See the preceding note.

30 Pardee (1983:35f.); cf. Streck’s discussion of the Akkadian verb *šapāru* (1995:158).

31 So also Arad 21:1-2 (*bnk yhwkl šlh lšlm gdlyhw*); Arad 40:1-3 (*bnkm gmr[yhu] wnhmyhw šlh[w lšlm] mlkyhw*); papMur 17:1 (*[š]lh šlht ʔt šlm bytk*).

32 The following observations support a performative analysis of the English idiom: Firstly, to the best of my knowledge it always occurs in the present tense (*I send my greetings*) and never in a past tense, which would be expected if it were epistolary (cf. n. 15 above). Secondly, the idiom does not occur in the progressive present (**I am sending greetings*) and thus does not appear simply to be descriptive (“constative”) in nature. Contrast the use of the progressive form with non-abstract objects: *I am sending you my latest novel*.

33 This limitation to a written medium is similar to the Akkadian and Ugaritic prostration formula, which Pardee and Whiting call “performative-epistolary” (1987:5f., 28ff.). Assuming that this formula is in fact performative, for the sake of terminological and conceptual clarity it would be vastly preferable likewise to call it an idiomatic performative limited to letters.

34 Pardee (1983:35). As pointed out above (n. 27), however, the distinction between performatives and epistolaries is not consistently observed in Pardee’s earlier studies, and his comments on this example could indicate that he understood it as performative: “One could perhaps describe *wšwk* as a simple perfect of completed action leading up to the present letter since *ḥnnyhw* had to give the order before the writer could write it down. I termed it an ‘epistolary’ perfect because the writer is transmitting the order and in English, at least, this would be done in the present tense for an order of which the letter is the immediate transmission. The ‘hereby’ of my translation is meant to convey the epistolary aspect and thus reflects the usual translation of the ‘performative perfect’” (Pardee 1983:35 n.8).

35 Performative utterances may occasionally occur in the third person; see Koschmieder (1930:353) and Talstra (1982:28). Compare 2 Sam 24:23 “O king, Arauna gives (*nātan*) all this to the king” with the parallel in 1 Chr 21:23 “I give (*nātattī*) it all”.

36 So Blau (1996:110); cf. Renz and Röllig (1995:361).

Whiting succinctly state, an epistolary "reports an act, it does not effect it"³⁷. More specifically, an epistolary reports an event – whether present (S=E) or future (S<E) to the speaker/writer – from the temporal perspective of the letter's recipient. In such cases the recipient's time functions as the reference point (R). The actual time of the speaker (S) is temporarily ignored, and epistolary tenses should be analyzed simply as E<R. From a grammatical perspective, these epistolary perfects illustrate one way in which relative tense functions in the Hebrew verbal system.³⁸

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³⁷ Pardee and Whiting (1987:27).

³⁸ So Hendel (1996:162f.). It should be noted that Hendel (ibid.) and Waltke and O'Connor (1990:489) also attempt to provide a socio-linguistic explanation of the phenomenon when they claim that epistolary perfects are expressions of courtesy or deference.

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Abstract:

This study examines the “epistolary perfect” in Classical Hebrew, with particular attention to the relationship between performative and epistolary verb usage. A number of Hebrew examples as well as cross-linguistic evidence demonstrate that performatives and epistolaries should be viewed as distinct phenomena. A reanalysis of some alleged instances of Hebrew “epistolary perfects” is also presented.

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