Scribal Memory and Metonymy in Iron Age Judah with Some Discussion of Deuteronomy and the Lachish Letters

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Abstract

Drawing from recent work in media studies as applied to the ancient world, I will argue that all epigraphic evidence and all literary texts that may have their roots in Iron Age Judah must be understood as having a metonymic function because the ancients understood written texts as simple representations of broader messages that had been or would have been delivered in some oral form. I will illustrate this assertion by discussing representations of epigraphic materials in Deuteronomy (phylacteries, *mezuzot*, stelae), text-critical variants in the manuscript evidence of Deuteronomy, and the Lachish letters. I will conclude that the Lachish letters did not necessarily contain the full messages, and the courier of the ostraca would deliver a more elaborate oral communication. This metonymic function of documentary literature may have contributed to the development of the collective scribal memory that preserves the fullness of the traditional literary texts, a fullness that no one manuscript could possibly preserve since the traditional literature was transmitted with textual fluidity so that it existed in textual plurality.

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1. Introduction

The study of ancient media, especially concerning orality and literacy and their relationship to memory, has significantly influenced recent understandings of ancient literature (for a survey of recent secondary literature, see Person and Keith 2017).[1] Two closely related concepts derived from media studies that are most important to the present study are *scribal performance* and *scribal memory*. Alger Doane (1994) used the term *scribal performance* in his study of the two versions of the Anglo-Saxon poem *Soul and Body* to demonstrate textual plurality. He drew on the comparative study of oral traditions (especially Foley 1992) and performance studies (especially Hymes 1985; Bauman 1986) to argue that, when medieval scribes copied texts, they allowed a certain degree of variation, somewhat analogous to how bards perform texts in oral traditions. That is, scribes do not copy texts verbatim because they perform a living tradition even as they "copy" the text. He concluded, "The performing scribe produced the text in an act of writing that evoked the tradition by a combination of eye and ear, script and memory" (Doane 1994: 436). His idea of scribal performance has been applied to the Bible (Niditch 1996; Person 1998; Carr 2005), the Dead Sea Scrolls (Miller 2019), Homeric epic (Ready 2019), and other ancient and medieval literature. Although he did not use the term *scribal memory*, Doane's understanding of scribal performance certainly implied it, as illustrated in the quote above ("script and memory"). The first explicit development of the term *scribal memory* is in the work of New Testament scholar Alan Kirk (2008). Shem Miller (2019) subsequently developed the concept further in his work on the Dead Sea Scrolls.

I have drawn significantly on these and other works on scribal performance and scribal memory in a series of publications (Person 2021; 2022a; 2022b; 2023; 2024) to argue that literary texts primarily reside in scribal memory and, therefore, no one manuscript can possibly represent the fullness of a literary text.[2] Each manuscript has a metonymic function (*pars pro toto*) in that it is only one instantiation of the literary work. For each literary text, scribal memory contains every manuscript of that text, every public reading of a manuscript of that text, and every recitation

1 For some examples of more recent studies, see Ready (2019), Miller (2019), and Mawford and Ntanou (2021).

2 In these publications, I also discuss the cognitive-linguistic mechanisms of word selection as understood by both conversation analysis and the comparative study of oral traditions to explain how word selection within scribal memory, even during *Vorlage*-based "copying," functioned. Crucially, I demonstrate that textual fluidity and textual plurality are not, as often assumed, the result of scribal errors or intentional revisions but characteristics of a tradition that values preserving alternative readings. However, since these approaches are unfamiliar to most readers of this journal, I do not bring these perspectives into the current discussion; rather, I simply refer interested readers to these works, especially the methodological chapter in Person (2023).

of that text. Each scribe gains access to this collective memory through every manuscript he has read or heard (whether in a public reading or recitation). Below, I will summarize some of my recent conclusions and illustrate them by focusing on the Book of Deuteronomy, a literary work most scholars agree has at least some source material from the Kingdom of Judah (see Person 2002; 2010).

If collective scribal memory preserves literary texts, then how might scribal memory relate to epigraphic materials, including documentary texts? Each scribe had limited access to any literary text in the collective memory, and they were aware of this limitation. If so, I argue, individual scribes understood any documentary text they produced as metonymic—that is, the written text pointed to something bigger than what was actually written down. For example, a written record may not contain all the details of a verbal agreement, and an oral communication carried by a messenger may have been more elaborate than the corresponding letter. In this article, I defend this hypothesis by analyzing the Lachish letters, especially Lachish 2 and 3. I conclude that what was written on the ostraca found at Lachish was metonymic and that the messages delivered by the couriers must have been more than what had been written. Of course, we can only speculate about what the fuller message was, but we can be confident that in order for good communication to occur, the fuller message must have been available to the sender, the courier, and the recipient through the interplay of the oral and the written in their social interactions. In fact, I suggest that the metonymic character of documentary texts like letters may have contributed to the development of the collective scribal memory, in which written literary texts representing what may have initially been oral traditions were necessarily understood as metonyms. That is, documentary texts metonymically representing a fuller message than inscribed may have contributed to the evolution of the collective scribal memory as applied to traditional literary texts. At least initially, traditional literary texts probably represented the broader oral tradition.

2. Examples from Deuteronomy[3]

If no single manuscript could fully represent a literary text preserved in scribal memory, then there should be some indications of this idea in the biblical text. In the following, I will provide evidence from the Book of Deuteronomy that indicates the following:

3 This section draws from four publications (Person 2021; 2022a; 2023; 2024), combining previous observations concerning Deuteronomy here for the first time. Furthermore, I will discuss a text-critical "variant" in Deut 29:4 that I have not yet discussed in print, which also illustrates the conclusions I have reached in Person (2021; 2023).

(1) The self-referential phrases in Deuteronomy suggest that no manuscript (*sepher*) could possibly contain all the words of the book (*sepher*); some of these self-referential phrases occur in passages that describe the material culture of written objects that necessarily had a metonymic function because these objects could not possibly have contained all of Deuteronomy.

(2) Some text-critical "variants" suggest that the scribes participating in the composition/transmission process of Deuteronomy must have known alternative readings that sometimes influenced their "copying." That is, the source of these alternative readings was not the physical manuscript before them, which they were "copying" into a new manuscript, but the literary text as preserved in the collective memory of the scribes and their community.

2.1. Self-referential phrases in Deuteronomy and the limitations of material culture

Apparent self-referential phrases occur throughout Deuteronomy (see Person 2021). For example, the book begins with the phrase אלה הדברים אשר דבר משה (Deut 1:1; "*These* are the *words* that Moses spoke," my emphasis) and near the end of the book we find this phrase ויהי ככלות משה לכתב את דברי התורה הזאת על ספר עד תמם (Deut 31:24; "When Moses had finished writing down to the very end *these words of this law* in *this book*," my emphasis).[4] Note that my English translation of Deut 31:24 somewhat oddly emphasizes the self-referential character by repeating the demonstrative pronoun with each of the nouns used in the three self-referential phrases, all of which were implied by the demonstrative pronoun in the second phrase ("[these] words of this law in [this] book").

In two passages, one of these self-referential phrases was given in connection to an object or objects, on which "these words" were supposed to have been written. Deuteronomy 6:4–9 referred to phylacteries and *mezuzot* (see also Deut 11:13–21, my emphasis):

> Hear, O Israel: YHWH is our God, YHWH alone. You shall love YHWH your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep *these words* (הדברים האלה) that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

4 All translations are my own, unless otherwise noted.

Even though sometimes "these words" may have referred to the entirety of the Book of Deuteronomy, this clearly could not apply to phylacteries and *mezuzot*. Nevertheless, whatever was written down for phylacteries and *mezuzot* (traditionally Deut 6:4–9 and 11:13–21) clearly had a metonymic function, representing all of God's words in Deuteronomy or the entire Torah.[5] In Deut 27:2–4,8, YHWH commanded the Israelites to write "all the words of this law" on plastered stelae (my emphasis):[6]

> On the day that you cross over the Jordan into the land that YHWH your God is giving you, you shall set up large stones and cover them with plaster. You shall write on them *all the words of this law* (כל דברי התורה הזאת) when you have crossed over, to enter the land that the YHWH your God is giving you, a land flowing with milk and honey, as YHWH, the God of your ancestors, promised you. So when you have crossed over the Jordan, you shall set up these stones, about which I am commanding you today, on Mount Ebal, and you shall cover them with plaster. … You shall write on the stones *all the words of this law* (כל דברי התורה הזאת) very clearly.

No single stela could possibly have contained the entirety of the Book of Deuteronomy. Thus, any stela (even one of many) must have fulfilled a metonymic function; whatever words were supposedly written on the stela contained only some of God's words, even if they metonymically represented all of God's words.

If phylacteries, *mezuzot*, and stelae could not contain all God's words, could an ancient manuscript (*sepher*) do so? Here are the phrases in Deuteronomy that contain the word *sepher*, typically translated as "book" (my emphasis):

28:58: All the words of this law that are written *in this book* (בספר הזה)
28:61: Not recorded in *this book of the law* (בספר התורה הזה)
29:20: All the curses written *in this book* (בספר הזה)
29:21: All the curses of the covenant written *in this book of the law* (בספר התורה הזה)
29:27: Every curse written *in this book* (בספר הזה)
30:10: His commandments and decrees that are written *in this book of the law* (בספר התורה הזה)
31:26: *Take this book of the law* (ספר התורה הזה)

5 For an excellent discussion of how the text found in phylacteries and *mezuzot*, especially at Qumran, can contain text-critical "variants," see Lange and Weigold (2012). They concluded that "the textual history of the instructions in Deut 6:6-9 is characterized by the textual fluidity which is typical for Second Temple times" (2012: 175). That is, their argument parallels well my arguments below, concerning the role of scribal memory and text-critical "variants."

6 For an excellent discussion of Deut 27–29 from the perspective of ritual studies, see Ramos (2021). Ramos's work includes discussions about the material culture behind the text, including comparisons to the Succession Treaty of Esarhaddon and the Sefire Treaty.

These clearly had a self-referential function. However, the phrase in Deut 28:61 stands out because it acknowledges that not everything was recorded in this *sepher*. The long list of curses in Deuteronomy 28 ends in 28:61 with "Every other malady and affliction, even though not recorded in the book of this law." That is, even though just two verses earlier we get the phrase "all the words of this law that are written in this book," here we have an explicit acknowledgment that the *sepher* being read did not contain all the words, presumably because the words of God were too numerous. Even though a *sepher* could contain more words than a phylactery, a *mezuzah*, and a stela, it too could not contain all the words of God. Hence, even phrases implying that the *sepher* contained "all of these words" were not understood literally as repeating all of God's words verbatim but as representing all of God's words metonymically.

2.2. Deuteronomy and text-critical "variants"

If phylacteries and *mezuzot* had a metonymic function of pointing to all of God's words, and if any *sepher* upon which the Book of Deuteronomy was written did not literally contain all "these words," then every manuscript (*sepher*) was metonymic, constituting partial representations of the literary text. If this is the case, it provides a better understanding of how ancient literary texts can have textual fluidity and exist in textual plurality. That is, there never was a single "original text" because the literary text primarily and most comprehensively existed in scribal memory. Written texts simply pointed to the literary text. This conclusion helps us understand so-called text-critical "variants" better. Building on Shemaryahu Talmon's insightful and influential thesis of synonymous readings (1961), I have provided a cognitive-linguistic explanation for text-critical variants (Person 2023). Here, I provide a review of some selected "variants" from Deuteronomy, the first two of which closely follow Talmon's definition of "synonymous readings." We find a synonymous reading in Deut 5:27 where we compare the Masoretic Text with 4QDeut[a] (Eshel 1991: 130–131):

MT	all that YHWH our God will say	כל אשר יאמר יהוה אלהינו
4QDeut[n]	all that YHWH our God will speak	כול אשר ידבר יהוה אלוהינו

As noted by Talmon, אמר (say) and דבר (speak) are "one of the commonest pairs of synonyms" (1961: 344). Thus, it is easy to understand why scribes may have substituted one for the other when "copying" a manuscript. In Deut 6:1, we find another synonymous reading, in which we have two verbs that express much the same thing.

MT	בארץ אשר אתם עברים שמה לרשתה in the land which you are crossing over into it to possess it
4QpaleoExodm	בארץ אשר אתמה באים שמה לרשתה in the land which you are entering into it to possess it

As Talmon properly noted, with synonymous readings, there was no "original text," at least not one that can be determined.

The next two examples come from one of Emanuel Tov's studies of harmonizations, in which he allowed that "some such changes were inserted unconsciously" (Tov 2017: 2). Tov argued that harmonization was "the most prominent feature" of the Torah's transmission history because scribes were more likely to make such changes due to the Torah's popularity and sacred status (Tov 2017: 1). Thus, although he does not use the term "scribal memory," it seems implied. The first example of harmonization comes from LXX Deut 9:27, which, according to Tov, includes a harmonizing addition from MT Exod 32:13 (Tov 2008: 277, 282). My visual presentation of these two harmonizations follows Tov's assumptions by placing the "original text" in the first column, the "harmonizing text" in the middle column, and the "source text" in the third column. However, I think "original text" is anachronistic and use this arrangement simply to present his argument (and that of most text critics) to my readers well.

MT Deut 9:27	LXX Deut 9:27	MT Exod 32:13
Remember your servants, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob;	Remember your servants, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; how you swore to them by your own self, [οἷς ὤμοσας κατὰ σεαυτοῦ]	Remember your servants, Abraham, Isaac, and Israel; how you swore to them by your own self, [אשר נשבעת בך]
pay no attention to the stubbornness of this people, their wickedness and their sin.	pay no attention to the stubbornness of this people, their wickedness and their sin.	saying to them, "I will multiply your descendants like the stars of heaven, and all this land that I promised I will give to your descendants, and they shall inherit it forever.

According to Tov, when a scribe was copying a *Vorlage*, now represented by MT Deut 9:27, he remembered the wording in Exod 32:13 and added the phrase "how you swore to them by your own self" into the new manuscript, now represented by the LXX. The second example of harmonization comes from MT Deut 29:4, which includes a substitution that harmonized with Deut 8:4 (Tov 2008: 275, 282):

LXX-Deut 29:4	**MT-Deut 29:4**	**MT-Deut 8:4**
I have led you forty years in the wilderness. your clothes	I have led you forty years in the wilderness. the clothes on your back	Your clothes on your back
[τὰ ἱμάτια ὑμῶν = שלמתיכם]	[שלמתיכם מעליכם]	[מעליך ... שמלתך]
have not worn out, and the sandals on your feet have not worn out.	have not worn out, and the sandals on your feet have not worn out.	did not wear out, and your feet did not swell these forty years.

According to Tov, when a scribe was copying a *Vorlage* now represented by the LXX Deut 29:4, he remembered the wording in Deut 8:4 and substituted the phrase "the clothes on your back" for the presumed "original" phrase "your clothes." Although Tov interprets these two cases as harmonizations, I think we should understand them as synonymous readings. "Remember your servants, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob" and "Remember your servants, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, how you swore to them by your own self" are simply synonymous readings that a scribe could easily substitute. This is even more obvious with "your clothes" and "the clothes on your back." Sidnie White Crawford (2008: 26) and Bénédicte Lemmelijn (2016: 154) have astutely concluded that the identification of most harmonizations is only possible on the basis of text-critical evidence because they fit so well into their literary contexts and would remain unidentified without some empirical evidence. Similarly, I conclude that without the parallel passages (either in the same book or in another book), we would often interpret these "variants" as synonymous readings because they fit so well into their literary contexts. In other words, if all we had were these readings in different versions of the same passage, we would conclude that they are synonymous readings.

The last example of text-critical "variants" is a long list of "variants" from three different verses (Exod 32:11; Deut 9:26,29), all of which contain a phrase that can be considered a synonymous reading (Sanderson 1986: 146):

Exod 32:11

MT אשר הוצאת מארץ מצרים בכח גדול וביד חזקה
whom you brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand

SP אשר הוצאת ממצרים בכוח גדול ובזרוע נטויה
whom you brought out of Egypt with great power and with a raised arm

4QpaleoExod^{m} אשר הוצ[את ו]בזרוע חזק[ה
whom you brought [out with] a strong arm

LXX οὓς ἐξήγαγες ἐκ γῆς Αἰγύπτου ἐν ἰσχύι μεγάλῃ καὶ ἐν τῷ βραχίονί σου τῷ ὑψηλῷ
[=אשר הוצאת מארץ מצרים בכח גדול ובזרוע נטויה]
whom you brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a raised arm

Deut 9:26

MT אשר הוצאת ממצרים ביד חזקה
whom you brought out of Egypt with a mighty hand

SP אשר הוצאת ממצרים בידך החזקה
whom you brought out of Egypt with your mighty hand

LXX οὓς ἐξήγαγες ἐκ γῆς Αἰγύπτου ἐν τῇ ἰσχύι σου τῇ μεγάλῃ καὶ ἐν τῇ χειρί σου τῇ κραταιᾷ καὶ ἐν τῷ βραχίονί σου τῷ ὑψηλῷ
[=אשר הוצאת מארץ מצרים בכחך גדול ובידך החזקה ובזרעך הנטויה]
whom you brought out of the land of Egypt with your great power, with your mighty hand, and with your raised arm

Deut 9:29

MT אשר הוצאת בכחך הגדל ובזרעך הנטויה
whom you brought out with your great power and with your raised arm

SP אשר הוצאת ממצרים בכחך הגדול ובזרועך הנטויה
whom you brought out of Egypt with your great power and with your raised arm

LXX οὓς ἐξήγαγες ἐκ γῆς Αἰγύπτου ἐν τῇ ἰσχύι σου τῇ μεγάλῃ καὶ ἐν τῷ βραχίονί σου τῷ ὑψηλῷ
[=אשר הוצאת מארץ מצרים בכחך הגדל ובזרעך הנטויה]
whom you brought out of the land of Egypt with your great power and with your raised arm

LXX^{B} οὓς ἐξήγαγες ἐκ γῆς Αἰγύπτου ἐν τῇ ἰσχύι σου τῇ μεγάλῃ καὶ ἐν τῇ χειρί σου τῇ κραταιᾷ καὶ ἐν τῷ βραχίονί σου τῷ ὑψηλῷ
[= אשר הוצאת מארץ מצרים בכחך הגדל וביד החזקה ובזרעך הנטויה]
whom you brought out of the land of Egypt with your great power, with your mighty hand, and with your raised arm

In this case, we have too many possible sources to identify the source text for a harmonizing addition or substitution. Instead, it seems to me that these phrases arose from a formulaic system that can be summarized in the following chart:

whom you brought out	[lacking]	with [your] great power
	of Egypt	with [a/your] mighty hand
	of the land of Egypt	with [a/your] raised/strong arm

That is, every instantiation of this phrase began with the wording in the first column, selected a phrase (or not) from the second column, and then selected one or more phrases from the last column, keeping those selected from the third column in the same order as given in the chart. This example provides us with an excellent case in which whichever phrase was in the scribe's *Vorlage* could easily have been substituted by what might seem to us as a different phrase. However, since every instantiation of this phrase represents the formulaic system preserved in scribal memory, what we tend to perceive as "different" phrases would have been understood by ancient scribes as the "same" phrase. If this is the case, it severely undermines our common assumptions about linear developments underlying such "variants," most often assumed to have evolved from the shortest to the longest (see Person 2023: 304–310).

On the basis of many text-critical "variants" and earlier descriptions of scribal performance and scribal memory (Doane 1994; Kirk 2008; Miller 2019; Ready 2019), I have reached in my recent monograph, *Scribal Memory and Word Selection*, the following conclusion concerning *Vorlage*-based "copying":

> Performing scribes transmitted a living tradition to their contemporary audience as they exercised their scribal memory while copying their *Vorlagen*. Scribes never stopped performing. Whether they were sticking to their *Vorlagen* or departing from them, their *Vorlagen* were ancillary—that is, visual, material supports for the primary existence and transmission of the literary texts in the medium of memory. When performing their texts, they drew not only from the *Vorlagen* physically present before them, but also from those *Vorlagen* that existed within scribal memory, which included traditional associations of words and traditional interpretations of literary texts. When scribes copied their *Vorlagen* into new manuscripts; written texts, traditional texts, and performed texts all interfaced with one another in the mind of the scribes in ways that often produced what we understand as variants, but for them are simply alternative attestations of tradition and performance (Person 2023: 36–37).

That is, the ancient scribes understood that any *sepher* is but one instantiation of the literary text and that this instantiation has the metonymic function of pointing to the literary text, which exists most comprehensively in the collective scribal memory. Therefore, much of what we perceive in a post-Gutenberg world as "different" could have been perceived by the ancients as "same." What we perceive as "textual versions" based on text-critical "variants" could have been perceived as the "same" literary text that necessarily is entextualized with the characteristic of textual plurality. For example, any manuscript (*sepher*) of Deuteronomy could not possibly represent the entire Book (*sepher*) of Deuteronomy; therefore, every manuscript of the book had a metonymic function. Consequently, what we identify as text-critical "variants" would have been understood by the ancients as the "same" text, regardless of what we might insist is "different." When producing a new manuscript of the Book of Deuteronomy based on "copying," scribes may have been influenced by *Vorlagen* (oral and/or written) accessible through scribal memory and other than the physical manuscript before them, *even if* the latter was the most influential.

3. Metonymy in the Lachish Letters

If collective scribal memory preserved traditional literature, how might scribal memory function in relation to epigraphic materials, including documentary texts like letters? If scribes perceived the written text of traditional literature to have a metonymic function—that it did not contain the entirety of the literary text—then this same idea may have also applied to documentary texts. For example, scribes could have understood a letter's message to be more extensive than the written words. In fact and even though I first reached the conclusions about collective scribal memory of literary texts, it is quite possible that the metonymic function of documentary literature, like letters, preceded the development of collective scribal memory of traditional literature.

The Lachish letters are among the ostraca discovered at Tell ed-Duweir in an archaeological excavation in 1935. They were written in the years prior to the Babylonian invasion in 587 BCE and consisted of correspondences among Judean military officials. The Lachish letters continue to generate various interpretations and controversies, even concerning basic issues about the sender(s) and recipient(s). I will refrain from entering into many of these discussions because most of the debated issues have little bearing on my argument here. Rather, I have chosen to simply follow Abigail Zammit's (2016) interpretation in her excellent Oxford dissertation, allowing me to focus on the Lachish letters' metonymic character, something that has often gone overlooked in secondary literature. I

will begin by analyzing the epistolary openings, especially the formulaic character they exhibit (see also Heide, this volume). Next, I will offer a close reading of two letters: Lachish 2, which seems to comprise only an epistolary opening with no body, and Lachish 3, which is the longest letter in the corpus with the most information in the body. I will then be able to conclude that the Lachish letters were metonymic in that the real carriers of the messages were the couriers of the ostraca, not the ostraca themselves.

3.1. Epistolary openings of the Lachish Letters

Below are all of the epistolary openings of the Lachish letters (Zammit 2016, Vol. I: 100, 114, 132, 141, 146, 151, 152; her translation):

Lachish 2:1–3a *'l'dny y'wšyšm' yhwh 't 'dny šm't šlm 't kym 't kym*
To my lord Yā'ûš. May YHWH let my lord hear tiding(s) of peace today, this very day!

Lachish 3:1–4a *'bdk hwš'yhw šlḥ l hgdl'dny [y]'[w]š yšm' yhw[h 't] 'dny šm't šlm* w[šm't ṭb]
Your servant Hôša'yāhû sends to repo[rt] to my lord [Y]ā'[û]š. May YHW[H let m]y lord hear tiding(s) of peace and [tidings of good (fortune)!]

Lachish 4:1–2a *yšm' yh[wh 't 'dny] 't kym šm't ṭ b*
May YH[WH let my lord] hear this very day tiding(s) of good (fortune)!

Lachish 5:1–3a *yšm' [yhwh 't 'd]ny [šm't šl]m wṭ b ['t kym] 't k[ym]*
May [YHWH let my lo]rd hear [tiding(s) of pea]ce and good (fortune) [this very day,] this v[ery day!]

Lachish 6:1b–2a *'l'dnyy'wš yr' yhwh 't 'dny 'th 't hzh šlm*
To my lord Yā'ûš. May YHWH let my lord see, at this time, peace.

Lachish 8:1–2a *yšm' y[hwh] 't 'dny š[m]'t ṭ b 't kym kym*
May Y[HWH] let my lord hear tidings of good (fortune) this very day, this day!

Lachish 9:1–2a *yšm' yhwh 't 'dny š[m't] šlm*
May YHWH let my lo[rd] hear [tiding(s)] of peace.

What is so striking here and noted by many others before me is that the epistolary openings generally did not mention the letter's sender and recipient. The sender was only identified in Lachish 3, and the recipient in Lachish 2, 3, and 6. All of the letters included a blessing that clearly had a formulaic character, which can be represented in the following chart:

May YHWH let my lord hear	peace	[lacking]
		at this time
May YHWH let my lord see	tiding(s) of peace	today
	tiding(s) of good (fortune)	this day
		this very day

That is, every opening blessing selected a phrase from the first two columns and attached to them a phrase from the third column. The order of the phrases in the last two columns was flexible. What I want to assert here is that *linguistically* the same scribe could have produced all these letters and their "different" phrases of blessing. Of course, it is equally possible that multiple scribes produced these phrases.[7] I do not want to argue about how many senders or recipients are embodied in the Lachish letters; it seems to me that we lack sufficient evidence to answer many of these questions. However, I will assume Zammit's conclusions as a way to suggest how the same scribe could have used different instantiations. Based on similarities in handwriting style, Zammit concluded that Lachish 2, 6, 18, and 21 might have been written by the same scribe, as may have also been the case with Lachish 3 and 12 (Zammit 2016, Vol. I: 193). If this is so, the same scribe used at least three "different" opening blessings:[8]

2:1b–3a: May YHWH let my lord hear tiding(s) of peace today, this very day!
3:2b–4a: May YHW[H let m[y lord hear tiding(s) of peace and [tidings of good (fortune)!]
6:1b–2a: May YHWH let my lord see, at this time, peace.

Another argument for grouping the letters is that five of the ostraca came from the same pot: Lachish 2, 6, 7, 8, and 18 (Zammit 2016, Vol. I: 228). If these letters represented the same sender or scribe, then this sender or scribe may have used three "different" opening blessings:

2:1b–3a: May YHWH let my lord hear tiding(s) of peace today, this very day!
6:1b–2a: May YHWH let my lord see, at this time, peace.
8:1 –2a: May Y[HWH] let my lord hear tiding(s) of good (fortune) this very day, this day!

7 Some scholars have noted both possibilities but tend to use this diversity to argue for multiple scribes (see Birnbaum 1939: 24, 27; Na'aman 2003: 175; Bridge 2010: 529). For an excellent discussion of letters including not only the Lachish letters but other early Hebrew letters, see Heide (this volume). Heide's study focuses on epistolary openings and closings and also includes a discussion of their formulaic character.

8 Zammit also noted that Lachish 2, 3, and 18 uniquely have "letters with 'forked' downstrokes … indicative of the split nib of the stylus" (2016, Vol. I: 191).

In sum, although I think that there are strong arguments for multiple scribes (if not multiple senders) of the letters, the variation in the epistolary openings is not one of them. The formulaic nature of openings strongly suggests that the same scribe or sender may have produced letters with this level of variation, especially since this kind of variation is something that occurs naturally in conversation and in oral traditions.[9] That is, much like the argument I made above for the formulaic system of the phrase "whom you brought out of Egypt with a mighty hand" in Exod 32:11 and Deut 9:26,29, every instantiation of this blessing metonymically recalled the full formulaic system as stored in scribal memory. Thus, we can see how scribal memory functioned even in the writing of documentary literature, such as the opening blessings in the Lachish letters.

3.2. Lachish 2

The fact that the sender and the recipient were often unidentified should alert us that the letters had a metonymic function. That is, what was actually written on the ostraca was not the entire message. Whoever delivered the ostraca was the primary carrier of the message, mostly held in his memory. The couriers not only knew who the senders and recipients were but also the important message represented by the ostraca. This is especially evident in Lachish 2, which has been described by Reinhard Lehmann (2003: 94) as a "minimal document," which contains no real information, even though it is one of the three letters that identified the recipient.

Lachish 2
(Zammit 2016, Vol. I: 100–103; see also Vol. II: 5–6; 2017: 44; her translation)

1.	*'l'dny . y'wšyšm' .*	To my lord Yā'ûš. May
2.	*yhwh't'dny . šm'tšl*	YHWH let my lord hear tiding(s) of peac-
3.	*m . 't . kym . 't . kymmy . 'bd*	e today, this very day! Who is your servant
4.	*kklb . ky . zkr . 'dny . 't .*	(but) a dog, that my lord remembered
5.	*['']bdh . ybkr . yhwh't'*	his [se]rvant? May YHWH promptly bring (to) my
6.	*[dn]y . dbr . 'šr . l' . yd'th*	l[or]d information which you (or I) do not know!

9 This argument does not preclude well-nuanced arguments that some variation may serve a particular purpose. For example, Bridge concluded that "the unique greeting wish of *Lachish 6* shows that senders can vary their language, including conventional formulae and other expressions, according to subject matter" (Bridge 2010: 533). I find Bridge's argument on the basis of Brown and Levinson's politeness theory, especially as applied to the phrase "Who is your servant (but) a dog," generally convincing. I am not theoretically opposed to such sociolinguistic arguments. The difficulty, in my view, is our methodological inability to know when something "different" has such a function and when it does not.

This letter was really just an epistolary opening with an extended blessing. There was no body to this letter conveying the information it was supposed to deliver. In fact, the letter ended with what Zammit described as "a *vague* wishful message for information … to be quickly granted to Ya'ush, or to the servant himself" (2017: 54; emphasis in original), apparently an explicit acknowledgment that the letter contained no useful information. Because of this seeming absurdity, Lehmann (2003: 92) suggested that this letter was simply a "pass" or "accreditation seal," verifying that the courier was not an undercover Babylonian spy, and Alice Mandel (2022) proposed that Lachish 2 was not a letter but a template for training scribes. I do not think we have to go quite that far because I argue that the letters did not contain the entire message. Moreover, as I will discuss below, we should consider the possibility that a courier carried more than one ostracon, especially if he stopped at several outposts on his way to Lachish. Although it is the case that Lachish 2 demonstrates this most overtly, I do not think that it is aberrant. The courier was the real messenger, not the letter(s), and the message was always more than the letter(s) could have conveyed. I also do not think this was a particularity of the context of impending war when military officers were required to take special precautions with sensitive information (see Rollston 2023). That is, even though the Babylonian threat may have increased the reticence to include sensitive information, letters were typically delivered by those who could provide more information than delivered in writing, especially if the letter was an ostracon.

3.3. Lachish 3

In contrast to Lachish 2, Lachish 3 is the most elaborate letter and the only one to identify both the sender and recipient.

Lachish 3
(Zammit 2016, Vol. I: 114–132; see also Vol. II: 7–10; 2018; 2019; her translation)
(outer surface)

1.	*ʿbdk . hwšʿyhw . šlḥ . l*	Your servant Hôšaʿyāhû sends to
2.	*hgdlʾdny . [y]ʾ[w]š . yšmʿ .*	repo[rt] to my lord [Y]āʾ[û]š. May
3.	*yhw[hʾtʾ]ʾdny . šmʿt . šlm*	YHW[H let m]y lord hear tiding(s) of peace
4.	*w[šmʿt . ṭb]wʿtpqḥ*	and [tidings of good (fortune)!] And now open,
5.	*nʾʾtʾznʿbdklspr . ʾšr*	I beg you, the ear of your servant about the letter which
6.	*šlḥthʾlʿbdkʾmš . ky . lb*	you sent to your servant yesterday evening. For your servant
7.	*ʿbdk dwh . mʾz . šlḥk . ʾl . ʿbd*	has been sick at heart since you sent (the letter) to your servan-

8.	*kwky'mr . 'dny . l' . yd 'th .*	t, and because my lord said, "You do not know
9.	*qr'sprḥyhwh . 'm . nsh . '*	how to read a letter!" As YHWH lives, has anyone ever
10.	*yšlqr'lysprlnṣḥ . wgm .*	tried to read me a letter or, for that matter,
11.	*klspr'šryb' . 'ly'm .*	every letter which comes to me? Have I not
12.	*qr'ty . 'thw'wd . 'tnnhw*	read it and even repeated it
13.	*'l . m'wm[hw]l'bdk . hgd .*	down to its smallest det[ail? Now,] it has been reported to your servant,
14.	*l'mrydśr . hṣb'*	saying, "The commander of the army
15.	*kny[hw]bn'lntnlb' .*	Konyā[hû], son of 'Elnathan, has come down to go
16.	*mṣrymh . w't*	to Egypt. And as for
(reverse: inner surface)		
17.	*hwdwyhwbn'ḥyhww*	Hôdawyāhû, son of Aḥīyāhū, and
18.	*'nšwšlḥ . lqḥt . mzh .*	his men, he has sent to take (them) from here.
19.	*wspr . ṭbyhw'bd . hmlk . hb'*	And the letter of Ṭôḇîyāhū, the servant of the king, which came
20.	*'l . šlm . bnyd' . m't . hnb' . l'm*	to Šallūm, son of Yādā', from the prophet, sayin-
21.	*r . hšmr . šlḥ . 'b<d>k . 'l . 'dny .*	g, "Beware!", your ser<v>ant has sent it to my lord.

There are various interesting issues related to Lachish 3, but here, I am only interested in how even this most detailed of the letters was, nevertheless, metonymic. That is, I am especially interested in demonstrating that this ostracon did not contain the entire message. Both Hôša'yāhû and Yā'ûš would have shared much of this knowledge, and I assert that that would have also been the case for the letter's courier, whom I argue was the primary bearer of the message, not the ostracon. Various scholars have made sound arguments that this letter differed from the others (including the full epistolary opening) because it began with a personal issue (that is, Yā'ûš's assumption that Hôša'yāhû was illiterate), provoking a more emotional and less deferential response from Hôša'yāhû (Schniedewind 2000: 159; Na'aman 2003: 175; Bridge 2010: 530; Zammit 2019: 120–121). Although fascinating, I will not summarize the various reconstructions of this controversy and the shared knowledge surrounding it. Rather, I will simply focus on aspects of the letter vague enough to suggest its metonymic character.

The Hebrew word *sepher* occurs eleven times in the Lachish letters, five of which are in Lachish 3 (Zammit 2016, Vol. I: 194; Briggs 2018: 11). *Sepher* simply means a written document, but translations are often more descriptive. In my discussion of Deuteronomy above, I followed general convention and translated *sepher* as "book"; in Lachish 3, it is generally translated as "letter." Lachish 3

was apparently using *sepher* to refer to more than one "letter." In Lachish 3:5, Hôšaʿyāhû is clearly referring to an earlier letter he received from Yāʾûš, accusing him that he does "not know how to read a letter," to which Hôšaʿyāhû responded with an emotional self-defense. However, I strongly suspect that there was more to the letter from Yāʾûš than this accusation, but what that was we do not know. In his self-defense, Hôšaʿyāhû referred to previous letters, which he had read and could recall in detail. That is, as Seth Sanders suggested, Hôšaʿyāhû was not simply defending his ability to read but was also "asserting a kind of mastery over the circulation of messages" (2009: 144).

One of these other letters was "the letter of Ṭôḇîyāhū" (Lachish 3:19). The letter of Ṭôḇîyāhū can be summarized as containing the message "Beware" (Lachish 3:21), a message that came from "the prophet." Presumably, the prophet could be referred to simply as "the prophet," because Yāʾûš knew who this was (Smelik 1990: 136; Zammit 2016, Vol. I: 318). Furthermore, Hôšaʿyāhû could reduce the prophet's message to one word, "Beware!," because he could assume that Yāʾûš knew what they should beware. In Lachish 3:13, we have the phrase "it has been reported to your servant," presumably also referring to one of these previous letters. This letter concerned "The commander of the army, Konyāhû," going down to Egypt. Although this is widely assumed to have referred to the Judean army seeking military aid from Egypt to counter the Babylonian threat, the report in Lachish 3 remained vague as to the purpose of this trip because again Hôšaʿyāhû could assume that Yāʾûš shared this knowledge. What is unclear is whether Hôšaʿyāhû's report about this trip to Egypt itself contained new information for Yāʾûš—that is, informing him that what may have been planned had now occurred—or was simply a reiteration of information that Yāʾûš already knew. It is also possible that Lachish 3 was the letter Hôšaʿyāhû sent to Yāʾûš with "the letter of Ṭôḇîyāhū." According to this interpretation, "Beware!" may not have been a summary of something Yāʾûš already knew but of another letter that Hôšaʿyāhû was passing on to Yāʾûš along with Lachish 3 (Williamson 2013: 281–282).

In sum, Lachish 3, even though it is the most detailed of the Lachish letters, nevertheless provides us with significant indications that the Lachish letters constituted metonymic representations of messages more extensive than those inscribed on the ostraca. These messages were communicated more fully by the couriers, who were the primary means by which the messages were delivered. While this is likely to have been the case for all letters, it doubly applies to the Lachish letters, which might have pertained to sensitive military intelligence that should not fall into the hands of the Babylonians. It would be bad enough if the courier was captured, but if the full message was recorded in writing, the

risk of the Babylonians learning military secrets would have increased. Thus, the Lachish letters tended to be vague in content. Lachish 3 was the most specific, but most of this specificity did not really concern military matters but Hôša'yāhû's complaint about Yā'ûš's assumption that he was illiterate. Nevertheless, the explicit identification of both the sender and the recipient of Lachish 3 did relay more information than the other letters, which could have proved useful to the Babylonian army had they intercepted the letter.

4. Conclusion

Even the most elaborate of the Lachish letters illustrates my contention that all epigraphic evidence and all literary texts rooted in Iron Age Judah must be understood as having a metonymic function because the ancients understood written texts as simplified representations of more comprehensive messages. In the case of traditional literature like the Book of Deuteronomy, the literary text resided in the collective scribal memory so that no one manuscript could possibly contain its entirety. In the case of the Lachish letters, the collective scribal memory could play a part, especially in the formulaic system of blessings of the epistolary openings. However, letters would not (in the vast majority of cases, at least) become traditional literature and would not be retained in the collective scribal memory. Nevertheless, memory was still necessary in that the letters' couriers were probably required to provide much more elaborate messages than those written on the broken pottery, knowledge which has been lost with the deaths of those directly involved despite the epigraphic remains. Although speculative, I wonder if the courier was (at least in some cases) also the military scribe who wrote the ostracon. If so, this may also help us explain how the Lachish letters represent the work of multiple scribes, even if we have only one sender and one recipient.

Acknowledgments

This is my second publication on epigraphic material from Lachish, both following a suggestion by Yosef Garfinkel. In Person (2024), I discuss two bullae from Lachish as a way of demonstrating how the cognitive-linguistic mechanisms related to person reference span various forms of language, from everyday conversation through epigraphic materials (specifically the Lachish bullae) to *Vorlage*-based "copying." In that work, I argued that the fuller identification of "Eliakim, (son of) Yehozarah" made by Klingbeil et al. (2019) was simply a reimagination of what was most likely contained in the scribal memory of the time. That is, the name on the seal and in the bullae impressions—"Eliakim,

(son of) Yehozarah"—pointed to a cognitive category concerning this individual within the collective memory. I want to thank Professor Garfinkel for his suggestions and both Mitka Golub and him for hosting me at the conference *Epigraphy in the Kingdom of Judah* in May 2023 (sponsored by the Roger and Susan Hertzog Center for the Archaeological Study of Jerusalem and Judah at Hebrew University), where I presented an early version of this article. I also want to thank the other participants of the conference, especially Martin Heide and Chris Rollston, whose papers are closely connected with mine. This article was improved because of my interactions with all these colleagues.

After reading her dissertation, I contacted Abigail Zammit by email to introduce myself and express my desire to use her work. She graciously provided me with two offprints (Zammit 2017; 2019) and a forthcoming publication (Zammit 2018), and we have continued the conversation. I want to thank her for her expertise and assistance but also note that any mistakes in this work concerning the Lachish letters are my own.

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