

The Scribal Habit of Achaemenid Administrators

Its Educational Underpinnings and Its Reception in the Hebrew Bible

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1. The Intellectual Context of Achaemenid Aramaic Epistolography

Epistolary correspondence in the Achaemenid period, both at the provincial and the governmental level, is part and parcel of a standardized Aramaic chancellery culture. Following a thorough bureaucratic reform toward the end of the sixth century BCE, Aramaic, which up to that point had spread primarily “bottom-up” as a versatile administrative idiom in the Assyrian and Babylonian Empires that facilitated access to the local legal and economic organizational structures of Syria-Palestine, yet without being subject to a centralized language policy, was codified as a uniform means of communication and implemented throughout the imperial territory.¹ Achaemenid Official Aramaic, as it may be called for clarity’s sake, can be recognized most easily by a number of distinctive innovations in spelling practice. It supplemented regional written languages, as in Egypt, Asia Minor, and Iran, or even replaced them, as in Palestine.² An overarching network of clerks, often of local origin, in the provincial administrative centres between Egypt and Afghanistan acted as its social foundation.

Despite obvious differences in qualifications and responsibility across the various echelons between the outback in the periphery and the inner circle of the royal court, these scribes were all trained according to identical norms in script, orthography, grammar, vocabulary, idiom, document formatting, and clerical procedure that constitute the basis of Achaemenid Official Aramaic. The underlying regulations also increasingly influenced, though to varying degrees of success, non-official forms of communication, such as private letters, memorial inscriptions, and spontaneous graffiti. The earliest dated text entirely

¹ See GZELLA, *Cultural History*, 104–156, for the rise of Aramaic in the seventh and sixth centuries BCE and 157–211 for its much more formalized role in the Achaemenid period.

² The most salient orthographic feature is the spelling of “long” consonants with a preceding *n*, hence, e. g., *nt* for /tt/. Other grammatical hallmarks can be found in the usual linguistic descriptions, such as GZELLA, *Imperial Aramaic*; GZELLA, *Cultural History*, 168–182; and STADEL, *Old and Imperial Aramaic*.

composed in this particular variety of Aramaic is a contract written in the year 495 BCE (TAD B5.1). De-regionalization of Aramaic had by then reached such an extent that it is impossible to determine, on grounds of language and style alone, whether an official document from the fifth or fourth century BCE was composed in Memphis or in Bactra.³

Consistency in letter-forms and spelling with but little internal variation must imply formal education, above all when words were not written according to pronunciation but, as often happens in Achaemenid Official Aramaic, according to convention, as in English or French: someone had to explain to apprentices that the preferred spelling of /denā/ “this one” was *znh*, not *dnh*. The socio-cultural foundations of this strikingly uniform bureaucratic system have not yet been researched. Still, it becomes evident from the extant material, limited though it is, that the art of writing surpassed purely technical matters and was grounded in a certain stance: the attitude of a loyal servant to the imperial cause, the awareness of being part of a coherent whole with a higher purpose. This ideal surfaces in many instances of motivational rhetoric that permeate the directive style of Achaemenid administrative correspondence along the chain of command. It was no doubt instilled in scribal training by reading and copying literary texts especially conducive to this rationale. The countless clerks who implemented the Great King’s will in daily life followed not only orders, but also codes.

Up to this point, only a handful of textual sources directly reflect the principles of Achaemenid clerical habit. The chronological and geographic distance between the two main bodies of evidence nonetheless suggests that they represent a more general administrative culture. On the one hand, there are the thirteen letters and a letter fragment on leather from the archive of Aršama (or Arsames, according to the Greek version of the name), the satrap of Egypt at the end of the fifth century BCE (TAD A6.3–16), which were presumably dispatched from the heart of the Empire to the governor’s residence in Memphis and contain all kinds of instructions to subordinate officials.⁴ They are now to be supplemented by another batch of eighteen letters, likewise written on leather and composed in a practically identical style. As place names show, they belong to the provincial administration of Bactria. Eight of them, dated between 353 and 348 BCE (ADAB A1–8), were sent to the provincial governor Bagavant in Khulmi, some 80 kilometres east of the capital Bactra, by his superior (the directive tone of voice makes plain the difference in status) Akhvamazda, who,

³ A recent overview of the material and the most important tools can be found in GZELLA, Sources; cf. GZELLA, Cultural History, 165–168.

⁴ The most convenient edition is PORTEN/YARDENI, Textbook, whose sigla (“TAD”) are adopted here for the Egyptian material, but the commentary in DRIVER, Documents, and the photographs in the same scholar’s preceding *editio maior* from 1956 are still invaluable. See WHITEHEAD, Distinctive Features, for a few remarks on idiom and style.

in all likelihood, was the local satrap during the latter half of the fourth century BCE; these are particularly relevant for the purposes of the present paper. The remaining ten epistolary documents (ADAB B1–10) seem to pertain to lower administrative strata, because they contain the usual salutation formulae for correspondence among peers. Since several letters employ recycled writing material and contain uncorrected mistakes, the surviving copies may be mere drafts that were kept on file in the satrapal archive in Bactra for future reference, not the final versions actually dispatched.⁵

As both sets of texts were acquired on the antiquities market (the former now belongs to the Bodleian Library in Oxford, the latter to the private Khalili Collections in London), their provenance is undocumented. Nevertheless, there are no reasonable doubts as to their authenticity, especially since the language faithfully reflects Achaemenid Official Aramaic usage without being simply derivative: that is, they contain numerous formerly unattested grammatical forms, lexical items, and personal as well as place names that closely match the expectations of comparative Aramaic and Iranian historical grammar and etymology. By contrast, forgeries would normally only reproduce words already known, since falsifiers' skills are, by and large, practical rather than linguistic. As a result, these documents furnish reliable, albeit preliminary, evidence for empire-wide procedural *mores* and attitudes that remained stable during many decades of Achaemenid rule: close monitoring of subordinates (including denunciation by their colleagues, especially when the latter's interests were at stake), control by means of record-keeping, insistence on utmost diligence, personal accountability for mistakes, and the call to make one's superiors happy. A study of the underlying scribal habit can contribute much to fields like economy, administrative practice, and political history that dominate current work on the Persian Empire.

The intellectual basis of this habit, on the other hand, can best be observed in roughly contemporaneous non-documentary (to avoid the ambiguous term "literary" for the time being) Aramaic compositions that were discovered at Elephantine. The first is a fragmentary papyrus containing an undated Aramaic version, apparently translated from the Babylonian, of the Bisotun inscription in which Darius I celebrates his deeds (TAD C2.1).⁶ One cannot say with certainty why it circulated among the local Judean community other than for reasons of empire-wide propaganda, but its careful spelling and grammar marks it as an official copy that may have served as a model for correct Official Aramaic diction, as a specimen of plain, monumental prose (similar to Augustus's *Res gestae*), and at the same time as an illustration of the grandeur of the imperial

⁵ They were published in 2012 by NAVEH/SHAKED, Documents (henceforth cited as "ADAB"). A synopsis of their contents and context can be found in GZELLA, Bactria.

⁶ The standard major edition of the Aramaic text is GREENFIELD/PORTEN, Bisitun Inscription, but a new comprehensive presentation of all the extant versions is currently in preparation.

cause in which even local functionaries of modest rank participated. It is therefore reasonable to assume that it had its place in literate education and formed part of the curriculum of the provincial scribal school in Egypt. The presence of remnants of what seems to have been a list of goods on the remaining columns of the *verso* of the same papyrus, supposedly added at a later date, provides no further clues, unfortunately, since contents and purpose of that list, commonly referred to as TAD C3.13, remain wholly unclear for the time being.⁷

The second text is more complex: it is a reused papyrus that originally contained a list of shipping records from the year 476–475 BCE (the undertext has been published under the siglum TAD C3.7) and now combines an extensive pre-Achaemenid, judging from the language, collection of Aramaic wisdom sayings of all sorts, presumably first composed around the seventh century BCE and hailing from Syria (although north-western Mesopotamia has also been suggested as a place of origin), with an Achaemenid-period novel about the skilled and loyal court official Aḥiqar who was saved from an intrigue by his moral integrity (TAD C1.1). Being a widely-known sage in lore and literature, Aḥiqar thus came to be perceived as the author of these sayings. Here the hypothesis of an educational context derives support from the age-old didactic purpose of proverbs in general and the rich vocabulary and encyclopaedic scope of this specific collection in particular.⁸

Any direct link between the correspondence on leather of the provincial governors of Egypt and Bactria on the one hand and those compositions on papyrus without a clear pragmatic purpose from Elephantine on the other is conjectural, to be sure, but they all correspond to the same set of scribal standards and were written in Achaemenid Official Aramaic or, in the case of the Aḥiqar sayings, at least copied according to Achaemenid orthography. In addition, the Aḥiqar wisdom maxims contain many precepts that directly relate to a court setting, in particular those about discretion and the power of the written word, and the novel, with its emphasis on circumspect behavior and unwavering allegiance to the king even in times of a personal crisis, extols the ideal of a high-ranking model scribe. They all belong to the same world of ideas and breathe the same official air.

Diligence in the imperial service, as promoted by the administrative letters from Egypt and Bactria, and prudence grounded in a wide-ranging general knowledge, as advocated by the Aḥiqar tradition, are also two core virtues of the ideal sage in post-exilic Israel. When Judaism began to take shape in the

⁷ As a consequence, the hypothesis advanced by MITCHELL, *Berlin Papyrus*, that this papyrus was used for educational purposes in the Elephantine temple library, despite its attractiveness, is speculative.

⁸ Extensive notes on the proverbs (excluding the novel) with biblical parallels can be found in WEIGL, *Achikar-Sprüche*; for their place in early Aramaic literature, see GZELLA, *Kultursprache*, 117–120.

increasing friction between a local cultural heritage and a global imperial context, the student of Scripture as the prototypical carrier of religious wisdom was modelled according to the scribe well-versed in both divine and secular law. Ezra's description as a *sōpēr māhīr* (Ezr 7:6), a "skilled scribe," literally takes up Aḥiqar's epithet *spr ḥkym wmhyr* "a wise and skilled scribe" in the title of the novel (TAD C1.1:1) and places Ezra in the same professional environment as the administrators who opposed the rebuilding of the Temple (they, too, were scribes: Ezr 4:8–9.17.23), yet credits him with particular competence.⁹ Much like Daniel, he surpasses his pagan peers in their own domain.

The Book of Ezra thereby employs a term that evokes all-embracing intellectual activities at a high level – especially mastery of writing and standard forms of expression, the capacity of committing to memory complex traditions, and the ability to apply these skills in daily practice – for making sense of religious texts. Hence it anchors actualizing exegesis in a new social setting, such as dissolving all mixed marriages according to Ezr 9–10 and Neh 13:1–3, and not just the extremely specific cases prohibited by Deut 23:2–9, in established method and technique that was not confined to scriptural interpretation. The Book of Tobit even connects the protagonist to Aḥiqar by means of family ties and thus places itself in the wider literary universe: 1:21–22; 2:10; 11:18; 14:10.¹⁰ Likewise, Daniel is said to have "distinguished himself" (*nšḥ*) among his peers in court service (Dan 6:4), a verb also known from Achaemenid official epistolography and a subtle means of portraying Daniel's double role as a servant to the Great King and to God, both to excellent results.

Post-exilic Israelite religion was situated in a complex cultural matrix and required authorities that could smoothly navigate between the secular and the sacred sphere; the corresponding ideal depicted in texts like Ezra and Daniel, which explicitly address the tension between both domains, fittingly bears traits of the consummate chancery administrator. An attentive reader may perhaps even detect a very faint echo of the ideal of "pleasing one's superiors," again a recurrent motif in satrapal letters (as will be shown below), in the invitation issued to the faithful servant to "share your master's happiness (*χαρά*)" in Jesus's Parable of the Talents of Gold (Matt 25:21), even if the "happiness" there primarily seems to refer to the eschatological meal.¹¹

⁹ See the corresponding note in WILLIAMSON, *Ezra*, 92. It is of at most secondary importance whether *māhīr* originally means "quick" or "skilled," since this attribute chiefly denotes professional excellence, and the notions of ability and speed obviously converge in the case of expert scribes with their proverbial dexterity. By contrast, SCHNIEDEWIND, *Finger*, 131–133, tries to establish a far-fetched connection with Egyptian military scribes and argues, most implausibly, that Ezr 7:6 borrows the title, whose precise meaning was by then forgotten, from Ps 45:2, but fails to account for the presence of the exact same attribute in the Aḥiqar novel, which is of course significantly closer in chronological, geographic, and cultural terms.

¹⁰ WEIGL, *Achikar-Sprüche*, 14–18, briefly summarizes the significance of this connection.

¹¹ As has already been argued by WELLHAUSEN, *Evangelium Matthaei*, 125.

Terms and ideas that were current in the Achaemenid scribal tradition could easily be received into Israelite religious literature, since Syria-Palestine was also incorporated into the satrapal system when the Persians rose to power and employed local clerks for daily affairs. Achaemenid Official Aramaic thus quickly became the dominant chancellery language in Palestine and seamlessly evolved into a local Aramaic literary language during the Hasmonean period. Both the Achaemenid Aramaic underpinnings of Biblical Aramaic and the former's impact on post-exilic literary Hebrew show beyond doubt that Judean scribes and scholars, too, enjoyed extensive exposure to this particular variety of Aramaic and its administrative and literary heritage.¹²

2. Control, Directive Style, and Motivational Rhetoric

Like other epistolographic traditions, Aramaic letter writing in the Achaemenid period employs largely fixed templates with a clear structure, standardized salutation and politeness formulae (depending on the hierarchical relationship between the sender and the addressee), and a shared set of expressions for the most common pragmatic purposes.¹³ They recur throughout the considerable stylistic range attested by Achaemenid-age letters in Aramaic, from the extensive and rhetorically well-crafted petition to rebuild the temple of the Judean community at Elephantine (TAD A4.7 and 4.8) down to the most mundane personal communications on everyday business matters (especially the many ostraca of the Clermont-Ganneau collection).¹⁴ Knowledge of these conventions, and the attitudes that govern them, must have been part of a formal education, since they relate to fairly strict genre expectations, as is still the case with modern business letters. However, it is at present impossible to say to what extent they were inherited from a pre-Achaemenid scribal tradition, since this particular genre is only regularly attested in Aramaic from the fifth century BCE onwards. Stray finds from earlier periods, that is, the Assur ostracon, dispatched from Babylonia to Assur some time around 650 BCE, and the lamentably fragmentary papyrus letter sent by the Canaanite ruler Adon to the pharaoh in ca. 600 BCE, seem to exhibit at least some degree of formalization, which suggests that conventional templates for administrative letters in Aramaic existed already at that time, but the loss of much evidence written on perishable materials precludes a reliable diachronic assessment.¹⁵

¹² See GZELLA, *Aramaic Dialects*, 28–43, for a recent synthesis.

¹³ The epistolary template has been studied extensively by SCHWIDERSKI, *Handbuch*; he could not yet incorporate the Bactrian letters published more than ten years later, but these correspond very closely to the known genre expectations; see NAVEH/SHAKED, *Documents*, 37–51, for a comparative survey.

¹⁴ Edited by LOZACHMEUR, *Collection*; a selection has previously been included in TAD D.

¹⁵ A summary of the evidence and its significance can be found in GZELLA, *Cultural History*, 139–144.

Be that as it may, a chief feature of the letters sent by Achaemenid officials that immediately strikes the reader is the prominence of control. Written communication was kept on file and could later be consulted, as in the case of repeated complaints. Consider the following example from the Bactrian archive:

From Akhvamazda to Bagavant and the magistrates. And now: Vahuvakhšu son of Šithra-barzana said thus: 'I complained earlier to my lord Akhvamazda about Bagavant and the magistrates, how they robbed the camel-keepers, my servants ...'¹⁶

Most of the remaining part of the letter, until line 9, is what seems to be a verbatim quotation of the original complaint (expressed by the verb *qbl*) by another functionary about Bagavant to his superior. It is then followed, from line 10 onwards, by the sender's announcement to have Bagavant interrogated (compare similar uses of the same verb *šl* in the Aršama-correspondence: TAD A6.8:3; 6.15:8; 6.10:9) and his instruction to restore what has been removed, to refrain from extortion, and to let the camel-keepers do their work. The Aršama letters contain similar reproaches:

From Warohi to Neḥtiḥur and Kendasirma (or: the chief of the treasury?)¹⁷ and his colleagues. And now: I have complained to Aršama about my district-officer Aḥatbasti, who does not bring me rent of any kind.¹⁸

Also he (sc. Maspat) has sent a complaint about you, saying: Neḥtiḥur took the wine which is in Papremis and the crop of the land, all of it, making it his own. Now return the wine, the crop, and anything else that you took, all of it, to Maspat.¹⁹

Likewise, another Bactrian letter extensively cites the reply to a preceding order to build a wall with the addressee's initial reluctance to execute that same order (ADAB A4:1–5) before providing another, very succinct, instruction (lines 5–6), to be followed by a further communication consisting of a brief and urgent admonition to finally carry out the original command, here without a citation, which adds to the impatient tone of voice (ADAB A5:1–3): *hndrz' ḥsyn 'bdw ... 'nrwy l t'bdw* "execute the order rigorously ... do not act otherwise!" (line 2–3). The adverbial use of the adjective *ḥsyn* /ḥassīn/, literally "strong," is a hallmark of Achaemenid executive style and regularly occurs in the context of the power of office exercised by higher-ranking officials.²⁰ The fact that the verbs *qbl* "to complain," together with the related noun *qbylh* /qabilā/ "complaint," and *šl* "to interrogate" are legal terms, reinforces the procedural character of such reprimands.²¹

¹⁶ ADAB A1:1–2.

¹⁷ It is unclear whether the word *kndsyrn* is a personal name or the title of a functionary, see the bibliography in HOFTIJZER/JONGELING, Dictionary, 519 (s. v. *knzsrn*, presumably a variant spelling).

¹⁸ TAD A6.14:1–2.

¹⁹ TAD A6.15:5–7.

²⁰ See the references in GZELLA (ed.), Aramaic Dictionary, 298–299.

²¹ The material is surveyed in GZELLA (ed.), Aramaic Dictionary, 647–648 and 744–745, respectively.

Regrettably, the original material context in which the satrapal letters from Egypt and Bactria were discovered has not been documented; hence one does not know how exactly – e. g., by the addressee’s name, by date of composition, by topic, etc. – the corresponding archives were organized in order to retrieve earlier letters for consultation.

Explicit references to formal complaints and the ensuing paper trails, which sharply distinguish such official letters from the more ephemeral private communications (where no comparable references to record-keeping occur), must have made it clear to functionaries that they were constantly being watched and assessed by their superiors, right up to the satrap, who, in turn, was supposed to periodically report to the Great King himself (ADAB A2:1; TAD A4.5:2–3; 4.7:4–5). This is thus the inner-bureaucratic counterpart to the common topos of the King’s omnipresent “eyes and ears,” a kind of secret police regularly mentioned by Greek historians when they refer to the Achaemenid Empire: consider, for instance, Herodotus’s *Histories* (I,100: κατὰσκοποί τε καὶ κατήκοι), Xenophon’s *Cyropaedia* (VIII,2,10–12: τοὺς βασιλέως καλουμένους ὀφθαλμοὺς καὶ τὰ βασιλέως ὦτα), or Plutarch’s *Moralia* (522–523: ὠτακουστάς).²² As has been noted long ago, the institution of imperial informants may also underlie the depiction of the Adversary (*haś-šātān*) in the Book of Job (1:7), a text which, in the light of its many Aramaic loans, a few innovations in verbal syntax, extensive inner-biblical exegesis, and the reception of various scientific ideas of the day together with their proper terminology (especially meteorology, astronomy, and calendrical calculation), was presumably composed in the fifth or fourth century BCE as well.²³

When the relationship between God and the believer was increasingly conceptualized in terms of legal and procedural concepts in Jewish literature after the fourth century BCE,²⁴ one may suppose that such experiences of universal control, record-keeping, and evaluation also – though, given the many older Ancient Near Eastern parallels for the idea that destiny and the future were “inscribed” into the world, presumably not exclusively – contributed to consolidating the motif of “heavenly books.” Especially relevant in this context are the “documents” (*spryn*) to be opened on Judgment Day at the beginning the court case against the beastly creatures that represent the worldly empires in Daniel (7:10; cf 12:1), presumably in support of the charges brought against them for all their misdeeds.²⁵ The context in Daniel thus seems to differ somewhat from

²² Compare also BRIANT, *Cyrus to Alexander*, 343–344.

²³ See most recently SEOW, *Job 1–21*, 274, with references to earlier bibliography. I hope to publish some notes on date, language, and intellectual background of the Book of Job in due course.

²⁴ A discussion of the most salient terms can be found in GZELLA, *Verwaltungsterminologie*, 11–14.

²⁵ As BEVAN, *Daniel*, 123, has already correctly pointed out (whereas many other commen-

that of the sealed book scroll in Revelation (5:1–8:1), which rather contains mysterious predictions about the end of the world, even though the concept of sealed documents as such obviously belongs to chancellery procedures, too.²⁶

A novel fascination with chancellery culture can moreover be observed time and again in the Book of Ezra-Nehemiah with its inventory lists (e. g., Ezr 1:9–11, comparable in form and contents to TAD C3.13), genealogical registry (especially Ezr 8:1–14 with two instances of the technical term *yhś* “to register” in 8:1.3; extensive genealogies for Ezra himself, the community leaders, priests, and Levites also occur, namely in Ezr 7:1–5 and Neh 11:4–17; 12:1–26), and official letters (Ezr 4:8–6:18), regardless of the problem whether these ultimately derive from authentic documents or from literary imagination. Ancient archives (Ezr 5:17; 6:1) and chronicles (4:15) repeatedly play a prominent role, and the verb *bqr* “to research, investigate” acts as a key term (4:15.19; 5:17; 6:1; 7:14). In fact, opponents and supporters of the rebuilding of the Temple both refer to historical precedents as guidelines for the present. The entire narration is thus imbued with an administrative atmosphere. Not surprisingly, then, “a return to the sources” also characterizes religious life (Neh 8:13–14). It is very likely that a vivid memory of the elaborate record-keeping in the Achaemenid bureaucratic tradition – which, as inherited legal terminology in Aramaic documents from Hasmonean and early Roman Judea shows, long outlived the Persian chancellery as an institution – provided a principal source of inspiration to the authors.²⁷

Monitoring and reporting, conversely, rests on a clear division of formal tasks and responsibilities, in which each individual functionary was supposed to know his proper place in an overarching order (regardless of the fact that the exact organizational structure may have differed in the individual provinces, as some instances of variation in the terms for different kinds of functionaries suggest). This is made explicit in expressions like *’bdt nps̄hm* ⟨*y*⟩*’bdw* “They should do their own work” (ADAB A1:11) or *šbq yhk̄w l’bydthm* “Let them embark on their work” (ADAB A4:5). The use of the adjective *hyb* /ḥayyāb/ “obligated” (ADAB A6:4.7.8) shows that carrying out one’s tasks was a legal duty, just like paying taxes (ADAB A1:2.11.12) or obligations under private law (TAD B3.8:42).²⁸ It thereby accounts for the prominence of a notably directive style with threats,

tators leave this unexplained): “and the books, recording the crimes of the Gentile potentates, are opened.”

²⁶ Much information on the topos of the heavenly book in general has been collected by KOEP, *Himmlische Buch*; for Revelation in particular, see now the in-depth study by GRADL, *Buch*. Most commentators of Daniel confine themselves to older biblical and Ancient Near Eastern parallels when discussing this concept; compare MONTGOMERY, Daniel, 299 and 472, and BENTZEN, Daniel, 33 and 51, for particularly useful lists. However, NEWSOM, Daniel, 231, notes that the “reference to the books opened for the court is part of a larger ‘scribalization of heaven’ that becomes pronounced in the religious imagination of Judaism in the Hellenistic period,” yet without commenting on the reasons.

²⁷ See HEALEY, *Legal Tradition*, for a broad survey.

²⁸ See the references GZELLA (ed.), *Aramaic Dictionary*, 264–265.

repeated injunctions or reprimands, and emphatic uses of independent personal pronouns with finite verbs (regularly with *nšh*, see below) in both corpora. Consequently, functionaries could be held responsible when they failed to execute an order and were liable to personally compensate their superiors for any financial damage (ADAB A6:8–11).²⁹ For the same reason, they were regularly subject to formal complaints and interrogations (see above on the similarly legal terminology employed in these cases).

There is more to it, however. Administrators were expected to perform their functions not only as a legal obligation, like a contracted job, but also in service to a higher cause by showing commitment and pleasing their superiors, who constantly watched them like hawks. Encouraging remarks along these lines abound in the Egyptian as well as in the Bactrian corpus; similarities in wording (*nšh*, in the reflexive or middle-voice *t*-factitive stem “to do one’s best, to distinguish oneself,” here regularly employed together with a fronted independent personal pronoun for extra emphasis: “as for you, do distinguish yourself;”³⁰ *hđī* “to be content,” in the factitive stem: “to please, make happy;” and *ʔb ʔd* “to do good” for “to act rightly,” that is, in accordance with the superior’s wish) demonstrate that such motivational rhetoric also belonged to the official epistolary register. In a particularly striking, though badly damaged, example, pleasing the satrap by committing oneself to one’s function is equated to pleasing the gods:

And now, do distinguish yourself (*ʔnšh*) ... act in such a way that you please (*ʔhdy*) the gods and Aršama. Also, what you dispatched ... to me by Ana ... 1 tunic, 2 purple skins. That one brought to me, but not ... you dispatched and ... lack and I was not pleased (*[ʔ] hdyt*) ...³¹

This implies that superiors put quite some pressure on their subordinates to identify themselves with transcendent values that were seen as foundational to the imperial cause. (It remains yet to be investigated whether the remarkably frequent use of passive constructions in the material from the inner circle of imperial administration, as in ADAB A5, also reinforces the power of the administrative system at the expense of personal agency, or whether it is simply the result of imperfect learning of Aramaic and corresponding Iranian linguistic substrate.) Moreover, the connotations of service and loyalty that such an ex-

²⁹ See BRIANT, *Cyrus to Alexander*, 595–596, for a brief sketch of the historical background.

³⁰ Translations of this root vary considerably in scholarship: others prefer “to be active,” such as DRIVER, *Documents*; “to be diligent,” like PORTEN/YARDENI, *Textbook*; etc. (see the references in HOFTIJZER/JONGELING, *Dictionary*, 751). However, the nuance “to distinguish oneself” adopted here for the *t*-factitive stem ties in best with the basic-stem meaning “to triumph,” which, in Aramaic, is clearly attested in a text discovered at Qumran (4Q545 1a–b 2:19). Hence the *t*-factitive stem would, in accordance with its normal functional range with intransitive or low-transitivity basic-stem verbs, mean “to show oneself triumphant.” Compare similar uses of the *t*-factitive in Hebrew, e. g., *hli* “to be sick” in the Qal as opposed to “to make oneself look sick, to behave like a sick person” in the Hitpael.

³¹ TAD A6.16:1–3.

pression evoke clearly emerge from the use of the same verb in the Aramaic Bisotun inscription for the commitment of Darius's devoted allies: "they did their very best with me (*šgy' my 'tnšhw*)" (TAD C2.1:75). If the Aramaic version of Darius's *res gestae* was indeed an educational text, as will be argued below, it may have directly influenced the style of the official correspondence.

Similar phrases as in the beginning of TAD A6.16 recur in both exchanges of letters, although with a somewhat different frequency and distributional pattern (which may be the result of personal preference or, given the small amount of material, simply a coincidence). Aršama's chancellery, for one, exhibits a certain tendency to use *nšh* "to distinguish oneself" and *hđi* "to please" (factitive stem), whereas Akhvamazda's staff once employs *tb 'bd* "to do good":

Now I have also sent word to you before about this matter. Do distinguish yourselves (*tnšhw*) in taking strict care of my domestic staff and possessions, so that my estate will not suffer any kind of loss!³²

Now do distinguish yourselves (*tnšhw*) and instruct my district-officer to bring me the rent ... to me to Babylon!³³

Act in such a way that you please me (*ly thdwn*).³⁴

You did not act rightly (*l' tb 'bd*), because you acted disobediently and did not act according to my instruction!³⁵

Two instances of the verb *hđi* "to be content" that occur in Bactrian letters from lower administrative echelons may suggest that such phrases were not restricted to top-level functionaries, but, unfortunately, the context is unclear in both cases. As a result, it cannot be determined whether the word was employed there in the same, technical, way as in the Aršama archive, that is, for good performance, or with its general sense:

I am glad (*hđh*).³⁶

He will be glad (*hđh*) ...³⁷

Nonetheless, regular appeals to a higher authority in cases of extortion and exploitation (see, e. g., ADAB A1:1–2, TAD A6.14:1–2, and TAD A6.15:5–7, all cited above) suggest that the prototype of a selfless state-servant was often an ideal rather than a reality, especially since there is no unambiguous evidence that provincial governors were aware of any public-private divide. At the same time, patronage by higher-ranking functionaries apparently provided at least some checks and balances.

³² TAD A6.10:5–6.

³³ TAD A6.14:2–3.

³⁴ TAD A6.14:3–4.

³⁵ ADAB A6:5.

³⁶ ADAB B3:7; note on the margin, context broken.

³⁷ ADAB B5:8; meaning uncertain, because the following expression contains an unknown word.

The impact of the Achaemenid scribal habit on the “administrative turn” of Israelite religion in the post-exilic period goes beyond a general fascination with books and archives and even seems to include highly specific lexical elements of technical chancellery style. Intriguingly, the very uncommon root *nšḥ* “to distinguish oneself,” well known from the motivational rhetoric of the Aršama letters and the commitment of loyal allies to the Great King in the Bisotun inscription, recurs, in the same verbal stem, in the court stories about Daniel in the lion’s den from the eponymous biblical book.³⁸ The context is quite similar to the official letters: here, too, it refers to the desire of court functionaries to stand out constantly – as in scholarship, outstanding quality reveals itself in high performance during a long period of time and not in a one-time lucky shot – in the service to the imperial cause:

Then this Daniel used to distinguished himself (*h^awā miṭnaṣṣaḥ*, periphrastic construction for stressing that Daniel was regularly successful)³⁹ among the administrators and satraps, because there was an extraordinary spirit in him, and the king planned to set him over the whole kingdom.⁴⁰

The exegetical significance of this non-trivial and evidently deliberate choice of words has until now escaped commentators, even those who otherwise devote quite some attention to philological matters.⁴¹ The “extraordinary spirit” in Daniel thus does not only grant him insight into the mysteries of the world, as they appear in symbolic dreams and visions in order to forecast the course of history, and helps him interpret secret messages, but also enables him to surpass his competitors in his function as a loyal top-level government official (which eventually arouses their envy, as repeated success in competitive environments tends to do). As with Ezra, the “skilled scribe” who possesses expert knowledge of both secular and sacred law, the ideal of excellence that underlies the Book of Daniel equally pertains to the worldly and the divine sphere. The use of the rare, technical, and semantically laden verb *nšḥ* evokes the notion of a model administrator who distinguishes himself by exceptional professional aptitude and by unflinching allegiance. This presupposes a remarkable familiarity with the subtleties of chancellery style among the learned circles in which the Book of Daniel originated. The specific wording illustrates yet again the importance of the Achaemenid scribal habit in all its complexity for post-exilic Israelite literature: all the more reason for reading Ezra and the court stories of Daniel

³⁸ The very few attestations of this verb in first-millennium BCE Aramaic are all discussed in GZELLA (ed.), *Aramaic Dictionary*, 494–495.

³⁹ See GZELLA, *Tempus*, 246–248, on the semantics of this particular construction in Dan 6:4.

⁴⁰ Dan 6:4.

⁴¹ Commentaries on the Book of Daniel checked include BENTZEN, BEVAN, COLLINS, MONTGOMERY, NEWSON, and PLÖGER, as well as the extensive monograph on Daniel 6 by HELMS, *Konfliktfelder*.

attentively and rigorously against the background of Persian administrative culture and Official Aramaic style as their main linguistic and imaginary frame of reference.

3. Educational Underpinnings of the Ideal of the Loyal Clerk

In comparison with what is known about the institutional framework of cuneiform writing, evidence for the education of scribes in the West Semitic alphabet languages is extremely limited; hence the underlying curriculum remains elusive. However, when one combines the various bits and pieces of information scattered throughout Syria-Palestine in the first millennium BCE, it is possible to gain a few insights into the practical modalities of teaching clerks who were supposed to write in Aramaic, Hebrew, Phoenician, and other cognate idioms. Such a reconstruction of at least a few core aspects of scribal training by way of approximation – and, to be sure, a good deal of historical imagination – can lead to a clearer idea of the formal, technical, and, ultimately, ideological underpinnings of the writing tradition that originated in the Syrian principalities of the early first millennium, was subsequently received into the bureaucracy of the Assyrian Empire when it incorporated them as provinces, continued to evolve under Babylonian sway, and eventually underwent a process of rigorous standardization and consolidation at the beginning of Achaemenid rule. Orthographic and grammatical minutiae in the material make it possible to identify, albeit in broad strokes, a knowledge transfer of certain elements of Aramaic scribal practice from ninth- and eighth-century Syria to the emerging bilingual Akkadian-Aramaic bureaucracy of the Assyrian Empire on the one hand and the Babylonian origin of Achaemenid Aramaic on the other. Presumably, the agents of both developments were scribal experts who continued their career under new political conditions, but in an environment of different coexisting varieties of Aramaic.⁴²

Everything begins with the individual letters of the alphabet: their forms, their names, and their established order. Corresponding exercise texts, termed “abecedaries,” are widely attested throughout Syria-Palestine – the earliest examples even antedate the process of state formation – and have also been discovered in the Achaemenid Official Aramaic writing context of Elephantine (TAD D10:1–2; 22.28). In addition, various lists show that the alphabetical sequence acted as a principle for organizing information, just as it still does. One may suppose that experience with spelling, vocabulary, and personal names (which were particularly important, since they would always constitute variable

⁴² The relevant evidence has been collected and analyzed by GZELLA, *New Light*.

elements in otherwise largely fixed templates, such as receipts and contract) was subsequently acquired through studying and practicing lists of names, like those attested, across more than a thousand years, at Ugarit (KTU 5.1; 5.7; 5.18; 5.22), Kuntillet Ajrud, and Roman Judea. Simple numerical exercises such as those in the Qadesh Barnea ostraca and sample document forms like the practice letters known from Ugarit (KTU 5.9; 5.10; 5.11; 5.33) and Kuntillet Ajrud would have been an obvious next step in this apparently very stable curriculum, even though they are not directly documented for the early Aramaic tradition.⁴³

Arguably, however, there seems to be fairly good evidence for what must have been elements of higher education, that is, the study of proverbs, which, thanks to their encyclopaedic scope and epigrammatic brevity, enjoy a long-standing prominence in teaching, and of other more advanced literary material. The most relevant texts from the Achaemenid cultural orbit are, as has already been pointed out above, the Aramaic version of the Bisotun inscription (TAD C2.1), the Aḥiqar novel (TAD C1.1:1–78), and the Aḥiqar wisdom sayings (TAD C1.1:79–222), all discovered at Elephantine. Personal names indicate that provincial scribes were generally recruited from the local population: those that crop up in the Bactrian letters, for instance, are consistently of Iranian origin, and partly even feature regional elements such as the divine river Oxus (*wḥšw*) as a theophoric element in Haš(y)a-vaxšu (*hšwḥšw*)⁴⁴ – people with no connections to Bactria would simply not be called like that. A formation according to empire-wide standards would thus have been an important aim of their education and contributed to the rise of a scribal elite with a shared supra-regional intellectual and cultural baggage. This purpose may be remotely comparable to that of the German *Humanistisches Gymnasium*, the Classics curricula at the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge, the French *Écoles normales supérieures*, and other modern institutions that were especially geared to producing competent civil servants with the right skills, mindset, and cultural orientation. Outlining the social and cultural background of the Achaemenid mandarins (were these itinerant master scribes dispatched throughout the imperial territory at the behest of the central chancellery?) who actually determined these standards would be an interesting, though challenging, topic for further research.

⁴³ For abecedaries, see the overview in GZELLA, *Abecedaries*; the official publication of the Kuntillet Ajrud inscriptions is now MESHEL, *Kuntillet Ajrud*; and the exercises with hieratic numerals from Qadesh Barnea have been discussed and situated in their context by WIMMER, *Hieratisch*, 92–113. SCHNIEDEWIND, *Finger*, provides an eminently readable general survey of the material with a rich bibliography, but the coverage is not quite complete (Achaemenid evidence receives no treatment, this apparently being a result of the author's extremely early dating of biblical texts), the alleged link of the education of alphabet scribes in the Iron Age with purported "remnants" of an erstwhile Bronze-Age curriculum is at best tenuous, and the interpretation of individual data is often fanciful.

⁴⁴ See NAVEH/SHAKED, *Documents*, 51 and 58–59.

Thanks to its laconic style with limited vocabulary and short sentences, and the repetitiveness due to recurring formulae with which Darius summarizes his military campaigns (constant reference to the numbers of enemies killed or taken as prisoners would at the same time provide ample opportunity for exercising one's numerical skills), the Bisotun inscription in particular would make for a suitable school text. This hypothesis can be supported by the very formal and, even by Achaemenid standards, consistent orthography.⁴⁵ If the variant forms of the suffix *-hwm* "they" and the noun *ʔll* "shadow" in unconnected fragments of columns I and III instead of usual *-hm* and *ʔl* elsewhere do not result from inconsistency, but point to another manuscript of the text (one may also note that the colour of the papyrus fragment of column I looks a bit brighter than the rest), that may at least suggest, even without providing a conclusive proof, that several copies of the Aramaic Bisotun inscription circulated at Elephantine. This result would further corroborate its interpretation as a school text.

Besides its purely linguistic suitability for scribal education, the contents also promote the idea of loyalty and integrity, thereby exposing students to the model of an exemplary civil servant who fully commits himself to the grandeur of the imperial cause and its divine approval. It has already been pointed out above that the verb *nšh* "to distinguish oneself," here used for Darius's faithful supporters (TAD C2.1:75), crops up several times in the Aršama correspondence as a technical term for good functioning in provincial administration. Moreover, the Aramaic text contains, contrary to the other versions, an insertion from Darius's tomb inscription from Naqš-e Rostam (lines 50–60 there) with a series of ethical precepts that may have been directly translated from the Persian. Unfortunately, both the Persian and the Aramaic are severely damaged, but the overall character of the message can still be identified:

Make known how you are made and what your conduct is⁴⁶ ... your ear may say; hear what one says in public ... What a poor man does, that consider! Also, your past/before you ... your goods/blessed be you, you will be feeble ...⁴⁷

The Aḥiqar novel, in turn, illustrates the ideal of a competent and devoted government official in more detail by means of a specific example: the protagonist, a legendary top-level functionary at the Assyrian court, fell victim to a false accusation of high treason due to an intrigue of his adopted nephew, but was

⁴⁵ Exceptions are exceedingly rare given the length of the composition: the more innovative spelling *lʔr* "against" in line 9 instead of historical *lʔq* in lines 15 and 22 (see GZELLA, Cultural History, 114, on the underlying phonetic change) and phonetic *ʔhr* "guard yourself!" with assimilation of the dentals in contact instead of expected *ʔdhr* in line 65. Possibly, *lmmʔh* "upon arrival" may have been spelled *lmmʔ* once in line 41, but only the last two letters of the word are preserved.

⁴⁶ See GZELLA, Tempus, 185–187, for a discussion of the initial phrase and further bibliography.

⁴⁷ TAD C2.1:66–70.

spared by the executioner, who himself had once been saved by Aḥiqar. Since Aḥiqar is consistently referred to with the title “wise scribe” (*spr ḥkym*, TAD C1.1:1.11.18.35.42), and once with the expanded version “wise and competent scribe” (*spr ḥkym wṁhyr*, TAD C1.1:1), on which see above, he could serve as a suitable role model for those who were streamlined to excel in government service and to embody its professional and moral virtues. Here, too, the scribal school is the most convincing *Sitz im Leben*.

Several of the virtues implied in the novel are vividly and poignantly depicted in the collection of proverbs that subsequently came to be associated with the figure of Aḥiqar. As linguistic differences show, the proverbs were at some point secondarily appended to the somewhat younger novel, with which they were then transmitted on the same papyrus.⁴⁸ The linguistic garb of these maxims, animal fables, and similes marks them as more advanced reading: the number of different lexemes they contain (some 550, which brings them close to the about 650 vocabulary items in total in Ezra and Daniel) and the degree of syntactic subordination (easily verifiable by counting the subordinators *zy* and *ky*) are both significantly higher than in contemporaneous material; they give this particular variety of Aramaic the status of a sophisticated literary language. The broad range of topics covered may lay the ground for a general education by way of an ensuing oral exposition and discussion. In addition, the use of synonyms, so well represented here, would furnish the most obvious opportunity to display some creativity and personal expression in official documents.⁴⁹ Even more relevant for scribal training is the prominence of sayings about the power of speech, personal discretion, and court etiquette in column VI, such as:

... that in every place are their eyes and ears. But as for your mouth, watch out! Let it not be their prey.⁵⁰

More than every guard (alternatively: everything that is being guarded) watch your mouth and harden your heart towards him who asks, for a word is a bird and the one who sends it forth is a man of no sense (literally: heart).⁵¹

... for stronger is ambush of mouth than ambush of battle.⁵²

Soft is a king's speech, and yet it is sharper and stronger than a two-edged knife.⁵³

⁴⁸ A summary of the discussion can be found in GZELLA, *Cultural History*, 151–153.

⁴⁹ For the importance of synonymy, one may roughly compare the series of five distinct modal forms of the verb “to give” in the Ugaritic practice letter KTU 5.9:9–15 (compare SCHNIEDEWIND, *Finger*, 98–101) from the beginning of the Syro-Palestine alphabetic writing culture on the one hand and the subtle differences in the order of constituent parts in otherwise highly formulaic Palmyrene inscriptions (see GIANTO, *Variation*) from the end of the Achaemenid Official Aramaic scribal tradition on the other.

⁵⁰ TAD C1.1:81b.

⁵¹ TAD C1.1:82.

⁵² TAD C1.1:83b; reading and meaning of the first half of the line are not entirely clear.

⁵³ TAD C1.1:84b.

Soft is a king's tongue, but it can break the ribs of a dragon like invisible death.⁵⁴

Several other maxims in the same column emphasize the unbridgeable gap between a king and common people and thereby encourage respecting authority by means of prudent behavior. They cultivate the right attitude for government service and further reinforce the usefulness of the Aḥiqar sayings for scribal education. While thematic parallels abound in biblical wisdom literature (compare, for instance, Prov 25:15, Job 5:15.21, or Sir 28:17–18),⁵⁵ the message they convey is so entrenched in the collective experience of perils and opportunities in the antechamber of power that it proves difficult to posit any direct dependence. Still, a few instances of what seem to be characteristically Achaemenid spelling conventions in the Book of Proverbs may point to at least some familiarity with Achaemenid chancellery traditions.⁵⁶ In addition, the second of the four apocalyptic beasts in the vision of Daniel 7 is said to have “three ribs in its mouth” (7:5), which corresponds to the association of ribs (*ʾ*) with superhuman strength in TAD C1.1:90, and the big-mouthed little horn that appears later on (7:8.20) may evoke the negative connotations of the mouth (*pm*) and human folly that appear several times in TAD C1.1:81–83.⁵⁷ The evidence is too tenuous to make a convincing case for deliberate allusions to the Aḥiqar proverbs in either biblical text, but they do reflect the spelling techniques, expressions, and metaphors that were already entrenched in Achaemenid scribal training.

The specific clerical habit that governs the official correspondence of Achaemenid functionaries with its marked emphasis on subscribing to the imperial cause seems to have been instilled through an advanced education that tops off the craftsmanship of reading, writing, and record-keeping. Prudence, loyalty, and efficiency are the values that come to the fore in texts that plausibly formed part of the curriculum, such as the Bisotun inscription, the Aḥiqar novel, and the Aḥiqar wisdom sayings. For the same reason, it would be grossly mistaken to dissociate the language of the Achaemenid Official Aramaic documents, that is, letters, contracts, and economic texts, from its basis in a particular stance that extends beyond the pragmatic matters of bureaucratic daily life, and thereby to reduce the role of Aramaic in the Persian period to that of a mere administrative code. Thanks to a common linguistic and cultural tradition, many ideas and expressions pertaining to the world of archives, documents, and secretaries were increasingly received into Israelite literature after the “scribal,” or “administrative,” turn of the post-exilic period. When the institutions of Palace and Temple lost their function as the dominant markers of identification in an increasingly cosmopolitan environment, the inherited type of the loyal and

⁵⁴ TAD C1.1:89b–90a.

⁵⁵ WEIGL, *Achikar-Sprüche*, 82–127, provides much additional comparative material.

⁵⁶ These are discussed by GZELLA, *Unusual Verbal Forms*.

⁵⁷ See GZELLA (ed.), *Aramaic Dictionary*, 580 and 609.

competent government official fed into the new ideal of the learned scribe as the carrier of theology and religious practice. Ezra and Daniel in particular became suitable role models for successfully finding one's way in both the secular and the sacred sphere.

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