

SALLABERGER, WALTHER: „Wenn Du mein Bruder bist, ...“ Interaktion und Textgestaltung in altbabylonischen Alltagsbriefen. (Cuneiform Monographs 16). Groningen: Styx, 1999. xiii, 288 S. 17,5 × 25 cm. ISBN 90-5693-029-X. Preis: € 86,00.

In this major work on Old Babylonian letter writing, Sallaberger makes an important contribution not only to our understanding of this particular genre of texts, but also to Assyriology as a broader field of study. On the one hand, he provides fresh new insights into a vast and differentiated corpus of texts, and on the other he shows how this very process can benefit from the application of broader systems of theory and method. The very articulation of the material speaks to the sophistication of the approach. While a narrow philologism would broach the subject by focusing on words taken at face value, Sallaberger aims for an in-depth understanding of linguistic expression as a whole and of the experience which gave rise to such an expression in the first place. Such an approach is known as pragmatics (to which the author makes often explicit reference), but the effectiveness and incisiveness with which it is applied here goes well beyond the limits of a mere theoretical model. The gusto with which the material is presented translates into a rich new appreciation of the social context to which we owe the documentation, while at the same time the deftness of the philological control guarantees the solidity of the interpretation of that very documentary evidence.

The nature of the approach becomes apparent from the very beginning, when the question is raised as to what a letter properly is (“Briefe in alltäglicher Kommunikation”), the answer drawing very effectively on the notion of dialog. The two major sections of the book follow, one dealing with the social context within which the epistolary exchange takes place (“Kontakt und Beziehung”), and the other with the text as a witness of this whole process (“Textstruktur und Textfunktion”). One final section explores in greater detail a broader dimension of human interaction which is specifically documented in the letters, namely the expressive mechanisms aimed at convincing the target audience (“Argumentation”).

The question of the audience is central to the topic and to the book, and it is first raised with regard to the linguistic nature of the discourse (as found in the letters), and its relationship to common everyday speech. Sallaberger addresses in particular the issue of the dialog as found in the exchange of letters, stating that in principle the letters are “monological texts,” although in many cases we can point to specific dialogical situations (p. 14). We may perhaps look at this question in a slightly different light, and consider all letters as in fact essentially dialogical (rather than monological), with only one major difference from a spoken dialog, consisting in the fact that the latter takes place in real time, while a letter exchange presupposes a time lapse. What I wish to stress is that four essential components of the dialog are present in a letter exchange, and that these similarities are more defining than the difference resulting from the inherent time lapse. (1) *There is an audience of one.* Even when several correspondents are addressed, they are conceived as a single counterpart to the exchange. The target audience, in other words, is specifically known to the author even as he or she opens a communication channel (by writing a letter). (2) *There are uniquely shared presuppositions between author and audience.* Two correspondents have reciprocal knowledge of each other and of issues affecting them, in ways that are much more specific than with any other type of relationship between an author and his or her audience. (3) *The audience is not inert.* It stands to reason that every text has an audience, and so does a letter. But, in contrast with other texts, in the case of a letter the audience is expected to function as an author in turn. (4) *The second author's (i. e., the audience's) reply is unpredictable,* and this is why the first author elicits and ex-

pects an articulate response that carries specific information. In other words, the first author has no control over the answer. – Seen in this light, it seems valid to say that the letters are essentially dialogic, not in the form of real time dialog, but, we might say, in the form of virtual real time.

An interesting issue that is directly related to the question of “contact and relationship” but is not raised explicitly in the book (except for an incidental mention on p.30) is the extent to which the king might indeed have taken a personal role in the writing of the letters – in other words, the question as to whether the king may be conceived personally as an “author” for the letters that bear his name. The frequent explicit reference to the fact that individuals had appeared in his presence would seem to suggest that there was an actual audience in front of the king as a physical person and thus analogously, in the case of the letters, a personal dictation by the king as a physical author. And yet, the relatively trivial nature of some of the issues involved makes one doubt that the king would spend much of his time dealing personally with them. I would rather think that the latter is the case, i.e., that the king did *not* take as personal a role as the wording might suggest. Why then the insistence on such a presumed personal participation as a physical interlocutor or correspondent? We may look for an explanation starting from a clue in the epilog of the Code of Hammurapi: “Let any oppressed man who has a complaint come in front of the representation of myself as king of righteousness, and let him have somebody read aloud to him my inscribed stela, let him listen to my precious words, let my stela resolve the case ...” (rev.25: 3–16). Appealing to the code as a monument, to which one has physical access, was clearly more than a rhetorical gesture. It also had, it would appear, broader legal implications: if the king had sanctioned a certain case resolution in the collection of verdicts that go under his name, then a plaintiff might expect the same verdict to be applicable to him as well. Analogous is also the case with the attributive use of seals, which may be inscribed with just the name of the king, but are used on his behalf by members of his court. It is in this vein that we may understand the perception, or presumption, of a real participation by the king in the epistolary exchange. A letter written under Hammurapi’s “signature” had broader legal implications than one written by a member of his court. The same perception and presumption would apply to those occasions when the texts refer to an audience “in front of the king” as a concrete event. Such an audience might in fact have taken place in front of an officer who acted not on his own behalf, but formally and explicitly in the name of the king, and possibly in a physical setting that included a representation of the king in the form of a statue. We are thus at one further remove from a proper dialogical setting, because the king speaks attributively through an intermediary, both as an “author” when a letter is written, and as a physical person when an audience is granted. But even so, the essential dimensions of the dialog as explained above still obtain.

Besides pragmatics, Sallaberger deals in a substantive way with questions of semiotics (see, e.g., p.77 ff.). In this vein, I would like to suggest how one might carry even further an argument that he has very convincingly developed. On pp.88–92, he proposes a new understanding of the formula *ana šulmim šapārum*: rather than inquiring about somebody’s well-being (as it is normally understood), the formula implies that “through the sending (of the letter) one effects the well-being of the addressee” (p.89). There is little question in my mind that this is the right interpretation. To appreciate even more its impact, we may seek to extend the argument by considering a distributional property of the formula in question. The concept conveyed by the word *šulumum* and related terms refers to a beneficial effect that is ultimately bestowed by the deity. Humans can contribute to such a bestowal by a word that is uttered (*krb*) or written (*špr*).

HUMAN AS SUBJECT	DEITY AS SUBJECT
<i>kurbim lū šalmāku</i> (65) “bless (and) I am well”	<i>Marduk... likrub</i> (89 a) “may Marduk bless”
<i>ana šulmīka ašpuram</i> (45 e) “I wrote for your well-being”	<i>šalamka... Marduk liqbī</i> (63 a) “may Marduk pronounce your well-being”

In other words, the formula *ana šulmim šapārum* is the epistolary equivalent of *karābum*, and may be understood as “to bless by means of a written message.” The tablet thus becomes like an instrument of blessing, with a role similar to the “magical” component of incantations – such as an onion that is peeled to signify the progressive discarding of evil.

There are portions of the book that go well beyond the subject matter as defined by its source material (the letters), and venture boldly into the field of intellectual history. The most apparent is the last chapter on argumentation, which takes up very directly the underlying philosophical dimensions, and in particular the concept of a “thetic” distancing (p. 217), whereby conclusions and inferences are assumed to be valid of their own weight, as it were, apart from (though not against) any emotional appeal. Thus the whole chapter develops into an important discussion of the uses of rationality in everyday life in Mesopotamia. Along similar lines I found of even greater interest the section on gratitude (pp. 110–127). As everywhere else in the book, the discussion deals with verbal expressions of thanksgiving on the one hand (or lack thereof) and, on the other, the underlying attitudinal dimension. What is particularly interesting is precisely the search for behavioral categories that might be applicable in spite of the lack of lexical correspondences. Thus “gratitude” is very properly understood as the recognition of a good received and the concomitant acceptance of a potential obligation to provide something in return (pp. 113, 124). Whenever such an obligation is not explicitly present, we can at best speak of praise, but not properly of gratitude. Sallaberger seeks to find possible equivalents for the action of giving thanks (in particular, the notion of “blessing” as expressed by the root *krb*), and he remains rigorously attentive to the fundamental semiotic canons he has set for himself.

Of the many contributions to a better understanding of the letters as historical documents one may note in particular a variety of new criteria that assist in better defining the temporal sequence of the letters – see, e. g., p. 37 f. (the replacement of the name with a title in letter headings develops within early OB times), p. 54 (reference to the addressee in the third person begins to spread at the time of Hammurapi or shortly before; on p. 72 this change is placed within a broader historical perspective). As a small addition to this topic, I may offer the observation that the formula *tuppī annīam ina amārim* “upon seeing this tablet of mine,” regular in the royal letters from the time of Hammurapi (and see pp. 141, 160), is replaced by its equivalent *enūma tuppī annīam tamaru/ā* “when you see this tablet of mine” in letters dated to subsequent kings.

It should also be noted that the many statistical charts offered throughout the book distinguish themselves by virtue of being perfectly consonant with the argument that is being developed, rather than serving merely as an extrinsic reorganization of the data.

We are in debt to Sallaberger for a brilliant and masterly new addition to our discipline – pointing in new directions and shedding much new light on a major corpus of texts.

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