Biblical Hebrew Changed, but How?

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Abstract

In a hot-off-the-press popular article in *Biblical Archaeology Review* (September/October 2016), Avi Hurvitz discusses "How Biblical Hebrew Changed." It is certainly true that Biblical Hebrew evolved over time, but the particulars of how that happened are more complex and debated than Hurvitz acknowledges. The example that he discusses, ʾ*iggeret* and *sēfer* for "letter," is a case in point.

Introduction

In a recent article in *Biblical Archaeology Review* (September/October 2016), Avi Hurvitz writes about the issue of "How Biblical Hebrew Changed" (Hurvitz 2016). The purpose of his article is to argue that Biblical Hebrew developed over a thousand years—the language of the writers of the Hebrew Bible was not stagnant, "the same from beginning to end" (Hurvitz 2016: 37). Hurvitz aims to engage specifically the so-called "minimalists," represented by Frederick Cryer's view that "the [Old Testament] was written more or less at one go, or at least over a relatively short period of time, so that the texts quite naturally do not reveal signs of significant historical differentiation" (Cryer 1994: 194; cited in Hurvitz 2016: 40). Instead, Hurvitz argues, "the Hebrew language went through three different phases during the Biblical period, and these three phases are reflected in different passages and books" (Hurvitz 2016: 37). For example, the

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poetic parts of the Pentateuch are written in Archaic Biblical Hebrew, the prose sections of the

Pentateuch in Classical Biblical Hebrew, and the books of Esther–Chronicles in Late Biblical

Hebrew. Furthermore, the biblical writers wrote Classical Biblical Hebrew in the First Temple or

preexilic period, and following the sixth century BCE exile of the Israelite people from their

homeland, they wrote Late Biblical Hebrew in the Second Temple or postexilic period. This

division of the books and their respective language varieties into distinct periods is corroborated

by extrabiblical sources in Ugaritic, Hebrew, and Aramaic. Finally, the use of *sēfer* (סֵפֶר) for

"letter" in 2 Sam 11:14 but its synonym *ʾiggeret* (אִגֶּרֶת) in 2 Chr 30:1, for example, is an

illustration of how Biblical Hebrew developed from the early to late period.[1]

In what follows, we will examine various facets of Hurvitz's *ʾiggeret* versus *sēfer* test case,

as argued in his recent article and in more detail elsewhere, in order to show that the illustration

is less decisive, and more complicated, than he says, and then we will make some brief general

remarks on other aspects of Hurvitz's recent article.

Illustration

The variation between late *ʾiggeret* and early *sēfer* for "letter" (in the sense of "epistle" or

"missive") is one of the most impressive illustrations of chronological development in ancient

Hebrew. That is the reason why Hurvitz discussed it in one of his first publications (Hurvitz

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[1] For the benefit of the non-Hebrew reader, we will use the transliterated Hebrew lemmas *ʾiggeret* and *sēfer* throughout this paper, also for forms that are inflected (for example, plural *sefārîm*) or cognate (for example, Aramaic *ʾiggartāʾ*).

1972: 21–22) and why he has cited or discussed it again in about a dozen publications since then, most recently in the present article under discussion (Hurvitz 2016: 40).[2]

Hurvitz's argument is clear and easy to follow:

- First, concerning *distribution in biblical texts*, all instances of *ʾiggeret* in the Hebrew Bible are located in undisputed postexilic or Late Biblical Hebrew writings (13 tokens): twice in Esther (9:26, 29), three times in Aramaic Ezra (4:8, 11; 5:6), six times in Nehemiah (2:7, 8, 9; 6:5, 17, 19), and twice in Chronicles (2 Chr 30:1, 6).
- Second, regarding *opposition between biblical texts*, *sēfer* for "letter" is regularly used in writings that are conventionally dated to the preexilic period and are written in Classical Biblical Hebrew (21 tokens): twice in Samuel (2 Sam 11:14, 15), fourteen times in Kings (1 Kgs 21:8 [twice], 9, 11; 2 Kgs 5:5, 6 [twice], 7; 10:1, 2, 6, 7; 19:14 [// Isa 37:14]; 20:12 [// Isa 39:1]), twice in Isaiah (Isa 37:14 [// 2 Kgs 19:14]; 39:1 [// 2 Kgs 20:12]), and three times in Jeremiah (Jer 29:1, 25, 29).
- Third, relating to *attestation in extrabiblical texts*, *sēfer* is used in preexilic Hebrew inscriptions and Ugaritic, whereas *ʾiggeret* (or its equivalent) is widely used in postexilic (Persian period) Aramaic sources and postbiblical Hebrew and Aramaic sources.

On the basis of these pieces of evidence, Hurvitz reaches the conclusion that *ʾiggeret* became available as a linguistic variant to biblical authors in the postexilic period and it "gradually pushed aside and eventually replaced" (Hurvitz 2012: 267)[3] *sēfer* as the normative word for "letter." Consequently, for Hurvitz the decisive fact is that "*the word's very emergence on the biblical scene* as a viable alternative to סֵפֶר [*sēfer*] serves as a late chronological marker indicative of postexilic times" (Hurvitz 2012: 270; emphasis original).[4]

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[2] It is remarkable that *ʾiggeret* is actually discussed *twice* in Hurvitz's *magnum opus*, *A Concise Lexicon of Late Biblical Hebrew*, first as the example in the "Structure of the Entries" (Hurvitz 2014: 14–17) and then as the first entry in the lexicon proper (Hurvitz 2014: 25–27).

[3] Other terminology used by Hurvitz includes "replacement" (Hurvitz 1997: 312); "replaced by" (Hurvitz 2000: 150); "encroached on" (Hurvitz 2003: 35); "supplant" (Hurvitz 2014: 15); "did not instantly and fully eliminate" (Hurvitz 2014: 26); "substitution" (Hurvitz 2016: 40).

[4] Other similar statements made by Hurvitz include "a clear-cut distribution pattern" (Hurvitz 1997: 313); "the very appearance of the lexeme in [Biblical Hebrew] is an unmistakable hallmark of lateness" (Hurvitz 1997: 313 n. 34); "an unmistakable hall-mark of [Late Biblical Hebrew]" (Hurvitz 2000: 151);

While we agree unreservedly that the overall shift in usage as described above from sēfer to

ʾiggeret for "letter" is best understood as a chronological development in ancient Hebrew, we

would like to review several mitigating factors and introduce an additional problem that together

complicate Hurvitz's use of these terms for the linguistic dating or periodization of biblical

writings.

(1) *Old Aramaic*: ʾiggeret is attested several times in Old Aramaic texts dated to the seventh

century BCE. On several occasions we have cited this datum to show that it is not a word of the

postexilic period exclusively (Rezetko 2007: 399; Young, Rezetko, and Ehrensvärd 2008, 1:72,

220). Hurvitz responded: "The fact that אִגֶּרֶת [ʾiggeret] is attested in Old Aramaic is very

interesting but irrelevant to the argument. The crucial question here is not 'When was אִגֶּרֶת

[ʾiggeret] first used *in Aramaic*?' but, rather, 'When is it first attested *in* [*Biblical Hebrew*]?' The

most that we can deduce from the presence of אִגֶּרֶת [ʾiggeret] in Old Aramaic is that it was

theoretically possible for Hebrew to have borrowed it from Aramaic prior to the exile. When that

possibility was *actually realized* is another matter altogether" (Hurvitz 2012: 268; emphasis

original; see also 269; 2014: 26).[5] Larger issues here are the degree to which any non-Hebrew

evidence should be used for evaluating the facts of Biblical Hebrew, whether Classical Biblical

Hebrew or Late Biblical Hebrew, and the paucity of extrabiblical Hebrew sources available for

gauging which Hebrew lexemes may or may not have been known by the writers of the Bible,

whether early or late. Nevertheless, we agree with Hurvitz that here we should deal with "fact

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"an unmistakable hallmark of the Northwest Semitic (NWS) linguistic milieu prevailing during and after
the Second Temple period—that is, beginning in the last quarter of the sixth century B.C.E." (Hurvitz
2012: 268).

[5] Prior to these publications, unless we are mistaken, Hurvitz had never mentioned the Old Aramaic
evidence for ʾiggeret.

rather than conjecture" (Hurvitz 2012: 268), and so we consent to this criticism of our argument in this particular case.[6]

(2) *Persian Period Aramaic*: In one of his more recent discussions of *ʾiggeret*, Hurvitz indicates, citing Folmer (1995: 630), that "[t]he lexeme *ʾgrh/t* prevails in most [Persian period Aramaic] texts, in official letters as well as in more private letters. The lexeme *spr* only occurs in some private letters, both on papyrus and ostraca" (Hurvitz 2014: 26).[7] Additional relevant statements by Folmer are: "The two lexemes are never found with the meaning 'letter' side by side in one text" (Folmer 1995: 630), and, "One can assume that under the influence of Akkadian in the official chancellaries only the specific lexeme *ʾgrh/t* was used, while in the more private correspondences both *ʾgrh/t* and the older lexeme *spr* were used, albeit that the use of *spr* is restricted and has only survived in relatively early texts and in formulae" (Folmer 1995: 631). The discriminate usage or complementary distribution of these lexemes for "letter" is interesting since it suggests that different writers in different contexts were capable of choosing between the (early/late) lexemes according to their writing purposes.[8] In fact, however, the two lexemes do

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[6] In spite of this, as discussed elsewhere, Hurvitz's criterion of external or nonbiblical or extrabiblical attestation has severe limitations due to the quantity and quality of the available sources in Israel's preexilic and postexilic periods. Hebrew is poorly documented outside the Bible (for figures and discussion see Rezetko and Young 2014: 61–68), and the proportion of Aramaic from the preexilic period is microscopically thin compared to the amount of Aramaic available from the postexilic period. For detailed discussion of problems with Hurvitz's criterion of extrabiblical attestation, see Young 2008: 7–8; Young, Rezetko, and Ehrensvärd 2008, 1:90–91, 143–146, 219–221; 2:84.

[7] Prior to this publication, unless we are mistaken, Hurvitz had never mentioned the continued use of *sēfer* for "letter" in postexilic Aramaic writings.

[8] *ʾiggeret*: A3 3:9, 13; A3 5:5; A3 6:3; A3 8:7; A3 9:2, 8; A4 2:15; A4 3:10; A4 7:7, 18, 19, 24, 28; A4 8:6, 17, 18, 23, 28; A5 1:4, 6; A6 13:2; A6 15:1, 4 (Accordance module of Porten and Yardeni 1986–1999; see also Folmer 1995: 629 n. 161); *sēfer*: A1 9; A2 1:12; A2 2:17; A2 3:5, 12; A2 4:13; A2 5:4, 7, 9; A2 6:10; A2 7:4; A3 4:5 (Accordance module of Porten and Yardeni 1986–1999; see also Folmer 1995: 629 n. 162). Note that *sēfer* with a meaning other than "letter" is used in one letter alongside *ʾiggeret* (A3 8:4 ["document"]).

occur side by side in one fifth century BCE ostracon,[9] the so-called second Passover ostracon:

> [CONCAVE] [1]Now, lo, thus I sent you [2]this <u>letter</u> [*sēfer*] by the boat of *Pmhn*, saying: "I shall enter Syene [3]this day." Now, lo, on account of the Sukkiens/sharp implements [4][...]... this day. If you can d[o (OR: pas[s over) [5]...]... on the Passover then stand w[ith (= by) [6]...] (just) as I would have you stand with [7][...] ..., and his vessels examine [8][...]*ask* [CONVEX] [9][...]... you/I gave to him/her [10][... *if*] you can do (OR: pass over) [11][...]. Now, regard *what* (OR: we saw) [12][... *P*]*mhn* son of ʿ*snd*, saying: [13]"[*What is the*] <u>epistle</u> [*ʾiggeret*]</u> which Mic[aiah] sent you?" [14]Lo, the word (OR: matter) of a document (OR: scribe) [*spr*] it is which [15]Rauk sent to me and I sent to him to explain (OR: translate) for me [16]the word (OR: matter). Moreover, I sent to him to show [17]the order to Hosea."[10]

In this context, we would make two observations about this text. First, the writer speaks about a *sēfer*, but he cites another person who asks about a ʾ*iggeret*. Second, it is interesting that Passover is mentioned explicitly only twice in Aramaic inscriptions,[11] and here in connection with ʾ*iggeret*. One wonders whether that is merely a coincidence given the usage of ʾ*iggeret* in some other texts that are discussed in the next two points.

(3) *Mishnaic Hebrew*: Periodically Hurvitz has said that ʾ*iggeret* is "(well) documented" in Mishnaic or Rabbinic Hebrew in order to bolster the lateness of ʾ*iggeret* (Hurvitz 1997:12; 2000:150; 2012: 268; 2016: 40). The Mishnah texts he cites are Moʿed Qat 3:3; Giṭ 9:3 (Aramaic); and ʾOhal 17:5 (Hurvitz 2012: 267; 2014: 16–17, 25–26). He also comments that "in [Rabbinic Hebrew] there is an unmistakable distinction between the two: ספר [*sēfer*] invariably denotes a *book*, a *literary composition* ... whereas אגרת [ʾ*iggeret*] signifies a *letter* or *legal document*" (Hurvitz 2014: 26). In actual fact, however, ʾ*iggeret* in used only ten times in the

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[9] D7 24 (Accordance module of Porten and Yardeni 1986–1999).

[10] Accordance module of Porten and Yardeni 1986–1999; see also Schwiderski 2004: 154 for the Aramaic text.

[11] The other inscription is D7 6:9, the so-called (first) Passover ostracon. There is also A4 1, the so-called Passover papyrus, which is understood to be speaking about Passover even though the word is not preserved there.

Mishnah and it means "letter" in the sense of "epistle" or "missive" only once (ʾOhal 17:5) or perhaps twice (Šabb 8:5). Elsewhere, ʾiggeret means "deed, writ, etc." Furthermore, Bergey observes: "The Mishnaic references appear to semantically restrict this lexeme to a communication pertaining to some specific socio-religious practice or jurisprudence" (Bergey 1983: 149).

(4) *Late Biblical Hebrew*: In his treatment of ʾiggeret in Late Biblical Hebrew, Bergey says this:

> In conclusion, אגרת [ʾiggeret] penetrated the literary Hebrew lexical stock at some point in the post-exilic period where it shared, together with the already commonly used ספר [sēfer], the semantic sphere "letter." The incidence of אגרת [ʾiggeret] in [Late Biblical Hebrew] sources is as follows: In Nehemiah it alone appears; in Chronicles it occurs two out of three times (the two usages refer to a written communiqué pertaining to Passover; however, ספר [sēfer] is a political document ... Esther shows a numerical preference for ספר [sēfer] which appears six times, but אגרת [ʾiggeret] is found only twice. These two occurrences, like those in Chronicles and the Mishnah, have a socio-religious concern -- here Purim and its perpetual celebration (Bergey 1983: 149).

In a previous publication, we cited Bergey's observations because we believe it is noteworthy that some writers, while they use both ʾiggeret and sēfer, use them in different contexts for different referents. Consequently, in those writings, the two lexemes are not synonymous in meaning, and factors other than linguistic change alone seem to be at play in the selection of one or the other lexeme (Rezetko 2007: 400; see also Young, Rezetko, and Ehrensvärd 2008, 1:72, 88 n. 14). We continue to believe that Bergey's observations about usage have merit, especially since there are no exceptions to the "rule" in Esther and Chronicles, where ʾiggeret and sēfer are clearly used in different contexts, socio-religious and political, respectively. (Compare 2 Chr 30:1, 6 with 32:17 and Esth 9:26, 29 with 9:20, 25, 30; see also 1:22; 3:13; 8:5, 10.)

In his most recent discussion, Hurvitz does not mention this issue (Hurvitz 2016: 40). However, in an earlier discussion, without mentioning Bergey's or our discussions of this issue, he comments: "The coexistence of the two [ʾiggeret and sēfer] in [Late Biblical Hebrew] is particularly conspicuous in the book of Esther, where they occasionally appear side by side without a clear-cut distinction between the different possible meanings" (Hurvitz 2014: 26). This is accurate to the extent that both lexemes can be translated "letter" in their various contexts, but it is inaccurate seeing that the "meanings" in the sense of "referents" in the various contexts are clearly distinguishable. In a still earlier discussion, Hurvitz takes us to task for focusing our remarks on Bergey's observations about socio-religious versus political usage while failing to cite Bergey's sentence (cited above!) beginning "In conclusion..." (Hurvitz 2012: 270).[12] His main tactic, however, is to talk down the significance of semantic equivalence for "dating purposes" (Hurvitz 2012: 270; he speaks about semantic "nuance," "range," "sense," "shade," and "sphere").[13] In response, in historical linguistics, corpus linguistics, studies of language variation and change, and so on, the requirement of semantic equivalence or comparability is regarded as a crucial methodological guideline. It is important "in order to avoid too much 'noise'" (Cantos Gómez 2012: 104) and because "comparing diachronic corpora that differ in other ways (such as size, genre or region)[14] means that it may be difficult to determine whether research findings are due to change over time or some other factor" (Baker 2010: 60). In the

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[12] Prior to this publication (and in response to us), unless we are mistaken, Hurvitz had never mentioned or discussed Bergey's observations about socio-religious versus political usage, even though Bergey's Ph.D. thesis was completed thirty years prior to Hurvitz's article, in 1983, and was written under Hurvitz's supervision (Bergey 1983: iv).

[13] Elsewhere, however, Hurvitz wishes to stress that these lexemes indeed are "semantic equivalents" (Hurvitz 1997: 312 n. 33) and that they have "semantic and functional correspondence" (Hurvitz 2000: 150).

[14] For example, Genesis–Kings versus Esther–Chronicles.

present case, and in regard to Esther and Chronicles, while in the larger history of Hebrew there is undoubtedly a general change over time from *sēfer* to *ʾiggeret* for "letter," it is also the case that some other factor seems to be the driving force behind the writers' selection of either *ʾiggeret* or *sēfer*.

In a footnote, Hurvitz discusses "two additional problems with Rezetko's line of argumentation" (Hurvitz 2012: 270 n. 8).[15] First, he underlines that the usage of *ʾiggeret* in Nehemiah "is strikingly 'political' and therefore provides direct 'linguistic contrast' for the 'political' use of *sēfer* in early contexts" (for example, 2 Sam 11:14, 15; 1 Kgs 21:8 [twice], 9, 11). Hurvitz is right, but to be fair, we and Bergey know that usage in Nehemiah is not identical to usage in Esther and Chronicles (Bergey 1983: 149; Rezetko 2007: 400 n. 111); otherwise, Hurvitz's point is immaterial because it is simply the case that there is "linguistic contrast" between Nehemiah and Samuel/Kings in usage of *ʾiggeret* and *sēfer*, respectively, and there is also "linguistic contrast" between Nehemiah and Esther/Chronicles in usage of *ʾiggeret* (and *sēfer*). Second, another criticism of our earlier discussions is our remark that letter-writing in a socio-religious context is unattested in Classical Biblical Hebrew literature (Samuel, Kings, Isaiah, and Jeremiah) (Rezetko 2007: 400 n. 111; Young, Rezetko, and Ehrensvärd 2008, 1:72), and "[t]hus we cannot discount that they would have used אגרת [*ʾiggeret*] if the opportunity had presented itself" (Rezetko 2007: 400 n. 111). We agree that this is a valid criticism of our

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[15] In a separate footnote, Hurvitz also says: "Rezetko (2007: 399) presents this linguistic material with certain inaccuracies in that he mixes Hebrew and Aramaic references in a list of 'terminology for official "letter" in [Biblical Hebrew]'" (Hurvitz 2012: 267 n. 4). However, in that list, as in the list above in the present article, the Aramaic references are clearly distinguished from the Hebrew ones: "Aramaic Ezra 4:8, 11; 5:6."

"conjectural" argument because the context of Jeremiah's letter to the exiles in Babylon can be considered a socio-religious context (see *sēfer* in Jer 29:1, 25, 29).

(5) *Classical Biblical Hebrew*: Two cornerstones of Hurvitz's linguistic dating procedure include the methodological guidelines of linguistic distribution and opposition (see above), whereby generally speaking early items are found in early texts and late items are found in late texts, though Hurvitz allows that early items could continue to be used to some degree by late writers and even that some mainly late items were available and could be used sporadically by early writers. We have criticized Hurvitz's method on various fronts, for example, demonstrating that continuity of early language in late writings is the norm rather than the exception, or stressing the literary-linguistic circularity in Hurvitz's approach (for example, Young, Rezetko, and Ehrensvärd 2008; Rezetko and Young 2014; Rezetko and Naaijer 2016a/b). Here we would like to call attention again to the second issue, suggesting that at least some of the "early contexts" (Hurvitz 2012: 270 n. 8) where *sēfer* is used might not be early contexts or texts at all.

An immensely important part of Hurvitz's method is to juxtapose later phrases with their earlier counterparts ("linguistic contrast") in texts that he considers to be early and late, respectively, for example as here (Hurvitz 2014: 15, 25):

2 Sam. 11:14	בְּיַד אוּרִיָּה	**סֵפֶר** אֶל יוֹאָב וַיִּשְׁלַח	וַיִּכְתֹּב דָּוִד
1 Kgs. 21:8	אֶל הַזְּקֵנִים	**סְפָרִים**... וַתִּשְׁלַח...	וַתִּכְתֹּב [אִיזָבֶל]
2 Kgs. 10:1	אֶל שָׂרֵי יִזְרְעֶאל	**סְפָרִים** וַיִּשְׁלַח...	וַיִּכְתֹּב יֵהוּא
[~ 2 Chron. 30:1	עַל אֶפְרַיִם וּמְנַשֶּׁה	כָּתַב **אִגְּרוֹת** וְגַם... יְחִזְקִיָּהוּ וַיִּשְׁלַח]

Hurvitz would remark that Samuel and Kings are early books, and they have the early noun *sēfer*, and Chronicles is a late book, and it has the late noun *ʾiggeret*. That seems simple enough. However, in this case, we would start by arguing that *sēfer* and *ʾiggeret* in these juxtaposed texts are not actually synonymous (see above), and then we would argue that while *sēfer* may be an early lexeme, in both absolute and relative senses, we do not know that the texts and occurrences

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with *sēfer* in Samuel and Kings are actually early. Hurvitz, like most language scholars, *assumes* that this is true for Samuel and Kings, but literary and textual scholars have a variety of other views on these writings, and sometimes they make good arguments for why they are late, meaning that they had their origin in the exilic or postexilic period instead of the preexilic period. (That does not mean, of course, that throughout its long history, ancient Hebrew did not change.) Here we will cursorily summarize two examples, 1 Kgs 21:1–16 and 2 Sam 11:2–12:25.

1 Kings 21:1–16

> ...[8]So she wrote letters [*sēfer*] in Ahab's name and sealed them with his seal; she sent the letters [*sēfer*] to the elders and the nobles who lived with Naboth in his city. [9]She wrote in the letters [*sēfer*], "Proclaim a fast, and seat Naboth at the head of the assembly; [10]seat two scoundrels opposite him, and have them bring a charge against him, saying, 'You have cursed God and the king.' Then take him out, and stone him to death." [11]The men of his city, the elders and the nobles who lived in his city, did as Jezebel had sent word to them. Just as it was written in the letters [*sēfer*] that she had sent to them,...

Literary tensions between 1 Kgs 21:1–16 and 21:17–29 (and also between 1 Kgs 21:1–16 and 2 Kgs 9:21–26), such as Jezebel as the one responsible for Naboth's death in 21:1–16 but Ahab as the one condemned in 21:17–29, have led many scholars to see 21:1–16 as a distinct and later layer of writing or editing than 21:17–29 (and also than 2 Kgs 9:21–26). Furthermore, many of these scholars have concluded, on the basis of an assortment of literary, thematic, linguistic, and historical evidence, that the story in 21:1–16 was originally written in the postexilic period, in the fifth or fourth century BCE. Discussions representing this point of view, with ample references to additional literature, are Rofé 1988, Cronauer 2005, and Knauf 2011. If these scholars are correct about the historical provenance of 1 Kgs 21:1–16, then *sēfer* for "letter" in 21:8 (twice), 9, 11 would be a late (postclassical) use of the old (classical) noun. As such, *sēfer*

would not be an element of early preexilic Hebrew but rather a product of late postexilic writing, and its use would be contemporaneous with the use of ʾiggeret by some other late writers.

2 Samuel 11:2–12:25

> ...[11:14]In the morning David wrote a letter [*sēfer*] to Joab, and sent it by the hand of Uriah. [15]In the letter [*sēfer*] he wrote, "Set Uriah in the forefront of the hardest fighting, and then draw back from him, so that he may be struck down and die."...

In the past scholars have usually argued that the Chronicler omitted the David–Bathsheba story from his Samuel source (2 Sam 11:1//1 Chr 20:1a — omitted: 2 Sam 11:2–12:25 — 2 Sam 12:26, [27–29], 30–31//1 Chr 20:1b–3). In recent years, however, the view that this story (and perhaps all of the so-called Court History/Succession Narrative in 2 Sam 9–20 + 1 Kgs 1–2) is a post-Chronistic addition to Samuel has gained momentum. The arguments are literary and textual in scope.[16] We have cited representatives of this view elsewhere.[17] In particular, De Troyer and Trebolle present empirical text-critical data that the material of 2 Sam 11:2–12:25 was added to Samuel at a late date rather than omitted from Chronicles (De Troyer 2012; Trebolle 2006; 2016: 201–203). Again, repeating what we said above, if these scholars are correct about the historical provenance of 2 Sam 11:2–12:25, then *sēfer* for "letter" in 11:14, 15 would be a late (postclassical) use of the old (classical) noun. As such, *sēfer* would not be an element of early preexilic Hebrew but rather a product of late postexilic writing, and its use would be contemporaneous with the use of ʾiggeret by some other late writers.[18]

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[16] Some might be inclined to consider the *accumulation* of late linguistic features in 2 Sam 11–12, discussed in Rezetko and Young 2014: 196–202, as an argument in support of this view as well.

[17] Rezetko and Young 2014: 174–175 n. 10.

[18] It is worth pointing out that the two passages discussed here, 2 Sam 11–12 and 1 Kgs 21, both of which may be late supplements in their respective books, have many similarities with each other (Avioz 2006), and some have argued that 1 Kgs 21 was composed on the model of 2 Sam 11–12 (McKenzie 2014, with citations of others).

How would a change of perspective on the origin of 2 Sam 11–12 and 1 Kgs 21, including their use of *sēfer* for "letter" rather than *ʾiggeret*, impact Hurvitz's conclusions? First, the view that there was an overall shift in usage from *sēfer* to *ʾiggeret* for "letter" in ancient Hebrew would remain intact. Second, nonetheless, juxtaposing texts such as, for example, 2 Chr 30:1 with 2 Sam 11:14 or 1 Kgs 21:8 (see above), if the point is that the former is late and has late language whereas the latter are early and have early language, would be inaccurate, or at least misleading. In other words, on the one hand, whereas *ʾiggeret* would be a relatively later development in the history of ancient Hebrew, on the other hand, in an absolute period of time, say the 5th or 4th century BCE, *ʾiggeret* and *sēfer* for "letter" would have been used simultaneously by different writers or even by the same writer. Third, furthermore, though *ʾiggeret* would be a distinctive element of late writings, in the sense that it is not found in early writings, *sēfer* for "letter" would not be a distinctive element of early writings, with the consequence that its appearance, instead of *ʾiggeret*, could not function as a sign of early historical provenance. In other words, the value of *ʾiggeret* and *sēfer* as "letter" for the linguistic dating or periodization of biblical writings, whether in their original or edited forms, would be further invalidated. Fourth, and finally, rather than assuming the default position that many Hebrew language scholars hold, which is that chronological development is the best or even the only explanation for the distribution of *ʾiggeret* and *sēfer* for "letter" in Biblical Hebrew, the door would be opened to contemplate explanations for language variation other than change as such, as for instance with the possibility that the selection of *ʾiggeret* rather than *sēfer* in some instances in Esther and Chronicles relates to some other factor, perhaps a stylistic or socio-religious one.

<u>Discussion</u>

In other publications we have discussed probably every aspect of the conventional (that is, Hurvitz's) linguistic dating approach to biblical writings, including theoretical and methodological differences between linguistic dating and historical linguistics.[19] We have learned a tremendous amount from others, including Hurvitz and others who disagree or agree with us, especially as we have pondered, reconsidered, and modified our perspectives and methods. That said, we continue to find that some march on, it seems, without critical interaction with issues such as literary-linguistic circularity, problems with the correlation of Biblical Hebrew and extrabiblical language, unexpected rates of accumulation (or non-accumulation) of Late Biblical Hebrew language in different sources, theoretical and methodological difficulties with language periodization, and so on. All of these issues are germane to Hurvitz's discussion of "How Biblical Hebrew Changed." Nonetheless, at this juncture we will conclude by commenting on two other aspects Hurvitz's article.

In the mind of Hurvitz, like many language scholars, the sources for Biblical Hebrew are *the text of the Bible* "as crystallized and preserved in the so-called Masoretic text" (Hurvitz 2016: 37), and *the books of the Bible* as undifferentiated wholes (see Hurvitz 2016: 38), that is, with no regard for the complex production history of biblical literature. Hurvitz, by his own admission, "deal[s] exclusively with biblical texts in the way in which they have crystallized and in the form in which they now stand—regardless of textual alterations, literary developments and editorial activities which they may or may not have undergone during their long transmission" (Hurvitz

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[19] In a nutshell, linguistic dating as currently practiced by many Hebraists and biblicists is a top-down, theory-driven, and prescriptive undertaking which does not resemble very closely the descriptive slant of conventional historical linguistics (for discussion see Rezetko and Young 2014: 3–7, 14–21).

1982: 21).[20] Such an approach might give the appearance of objectivity and simplicity, but it has no basis in general historical linguistic method and it flies in the face of very much of what we know about the composition, redaction, and transmission of the Bible (Rezetko and Young 2014, *passim*). In short, historical linguistic research is dependent on careful evaluation of the nature of the sources. *It matters* when 2 Sam 11–12 and 1 Kgs 21 were written and/or edited (and also whether we study the language of these passages in the Masoretic Text or another text)!

I noted in the introduction that Hurvitz's objective is to argue against the so-called minimalist notion that the language of the Bible reveals little historical development because it was produced in a short span of time. Specifically, Hurvitz's sparring partner is an article that was penned more than two decades ago (Cryer 1994). About that article, Hurvitz *appropriately concludes*, "this view is conclusively refuted by the evidence reviewed here and described at greater length in scholarly literature" (Hurvitz 2016: 40). Yet what Hurvitz means by "scholarly literature" is awfully biased in favor of scholars who agree with his viewpoints and methods, and statements like "linguists and philologists do agree" (Hurvitz 2016: 39) on this and that issue are equally dismissive of other perspectives and approaches (see Ehrensvärd, Rezetko, and Young 2016).[21] Regrettably, Cryer is a strawman in a discussion that has continued and advanced in the intervening two decades between his article and Hurvitz's. In conclusion, while it is certainly true that Biblical Hebrew evolved over time, the particulars of how that happened are more complex and debated than Hurvitz acknowledges, and the example that he discusses, *ʾiggeret* and *sēfer* for "letter," is a case in point.

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[20] For other similar quotes and references from Hurvitz's writings, see Young, Rezetko, and Ehrensvärd 2008, 1:16–18.

[21] Other similar references by Hurvitz relate to "[t]he great Semitists and Hebraists of the 19th century" (Hurvitz 2016: 37); "modern linguistic scholarship" (Hurvitz 2016: 37); "linguists and philologists" (Hurvitz 2016: 39); see also Hurvitz 2016: 62 n 3.

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