YOURS FAITHFULLY
VIRTUAL LETTERS FROM THE BIBLE
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YOURS FAITHFULLY
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EDITED BY
PHILIP R. DAVIES
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INTRODUCTION:
IN PRAISE OF VIRTUAL LETTERS

The title ‘Yours Faithfully’ might be a rather misleading one for this collection. Just as ‘virtual’, which used to mean something like ‘virtuous’, ‘possessing effective power’, now means ‘artificial’, ‘synthetic’ or ersatz (as in ‘virtual reality’), so these ‘virtual letters’ are of course confections. They are certainly not always faithful to historical reality or plausibility, though some do indeed try to represent the implied views of their supposed writers, most of whom have not had the opportunity of expressing these before. Nor are they all ‘faith-ful’, expressing religious values that many readers of the Bible espouse (and perhaps impute to the biblical characters, or at least the virtuous ones). Some, on the contrary, are defiant, and some subversive. But all, I hope, worth reading.

What do we define as a ‘letter’? In his edition of ancient Hebrew letters, Dennis Pardee defines a letter as ‘a written document effecting communication between two or more persons who cannot communicate orally’ (Pardee 1982: 2), but this defines the genre, not the function of each and every letter. Ancient letters serve a variety of writers, addressees and communicative contexts. The letter is not, and never was, always a real communication between two living persons. There are collections of both ancient Mesopotamian and Egyptian model letters, provided for the training of scribes and, as Edward Wente says of the Egyptian examples (Wente 1990: 2), ‘it is not always easy to determine which of these letters are copies of real letters and which ones are entirely fictitious’. And what do we make of the letters deposited in Egyptian burial chambers? Some are clearly written by surviving friends and relatives to the deceased. Others are letters of or about the deceased, possibly for use by the new immigrant into the netherworld. In Mesopotamia, ‘letter-prayers’ were addressed to gods, and perhaps ‘posted’ in temples. Perhaps intermediaries gave the authors an oral reply from the divine recipient? When the biblical prophet opens with ‘Thus says Yahweh’ he is, after all, adopting the role of a messenger and employing the standard formula to precede a verbatim quotation. How many prophetic oracles might in fact be replies to letters – whether real, imagined or implied ones?
Literacy rates were low in the ancient pre-classical world – probably between one and five per cent – and concentrated in urban centres and among royal and temple administrations. So even those letters from the living to the living were usually not written or read by the correspondents, but dictated to a scribe (who will have composed it in the recommended style) and read out to the (usually illiterate) recipient. In the story of Jeremiah, for example, sending his collection of oracles to the king (Jeremiah 36), he uses his own scribe (Baruch) and the king has the contents read out to him. No doubt Jeremiah’s letter to the exiles in Babylonia (Jeremiah 29) would have been similarly communicated. In the process of transferring the spoken to the written, the scribe would adapt to the prescribed form, rephrasing and perhaps abbreviating (given the limited capacity of the writing materials).

But scribes did not only write letters when dictated to them. There are numerous examples of scribal compositions that use the epistolary form, but as a literary device, often within a narrative. Here again, as Michalowski remarks of Mesopotamian examples, ‘it is impossible to distinguish between “real” and “imaginary” letters’ (Michalowski 1993: 4). Scholars still debate hotly whether the letters incorporated into the book of Ezra to and from the Persian king are real, invented, or something in between, (‘edited’). David’s letter to Joab ordering the death of Uriah has a parallel from a millennium or more earlier when Sargon of Akkad escaped a similar plot (the Sargon being a born survivor, evidently, for he, like Moses, had been saved when his mother placed him in a reed box and floated him on a river, whence he was taken and adopted). In fact this device is a well-known one in ancient narrative. So is David’s letter real? Is the text of it real? Is the story even real?

By the time of the New Testament, the letter was a highly popular literary genre. Of the 27 New Testament documents, as Gamble notes (Gamble 2002: 188), no fewer than 21 are letters. Some of Paul’s epistles probably represent real letters to real communities, though they might have been combined and edited, and some are widely regarded by scholars as pseudepigraphic, including perhaps even the ‘personal’ letters to Timothy and Titus. But what about the Epistle ‘to the Hebrews’? Who really wrote it, and to whom? Its contents are more like a treatise, but treatises often assumed the form of epistles in the classical world. Or the letters to the ‘seven churches’ in the book of Revelation? The ‘open letter’ was a prominent feature of the classical world, a major literary genre, and the recipient was the reading (or hearing) public. Even the openings of the gospel of Luke and the book of Acts bear marks of epistolary features as the author writes
his account to ‘Theophilus’ (a real person or any reader who is, as the name in Greek means, ‘beloved of God’).

Letters in the ancient world, then, including the Bible, may be real or imaginary; they may communicate between living, dead or divine, represent verbatim outpourings or artificially constructed and edited works of literary art. It is now common, especially among classical and New Testament scholars, to distinguish the ‘letter’ (a genuine, usually private communication between individuals) from the ‘epistle’ (an artistic composition). But such classification can easily proliferate (and it has!), and the boundaries are very fluid. There is still something to be said for the principle that ‘a letter is a letter is a letter’ regardless of the reality of its correspondents or circumstances. As an example of the problems of precise classification, the ‘Letters’ pages of the daily newspaper will typically contain writings ostensibly to the ‘Editor’ but often edited by the ‘Letters Editor’ and written not for the journalist but the reading public. They may be highly literary or resemble the common personal letter between individuals. Presumably a few are actually from imaginary persons or signed under a false name (or ‘name and address withheld’!). Perhaps we need a new subgenre, the ‘letter to the editor’? But the ‘virtual letter’ is not a new sub-genre at all. It encompasses a huge range of writings ancient and modern.

* * * * * * * * * * * * * *

And so to the present collection of ‘virtual letters’. Like ancient letters, these are sometimes from the dead (Isaac to Abraham), to the dead (Esther to her mother) and from deities to mortals (Jesus to his mother?). The levels of pretence also vary tremendously: some make no effort to conceal their modernity (Aaron to Miriam, Ramses to Moses); others conform to our perception of ancient modes of communication. Some of the letters have been edited and annotated; most stand as they left the pen (or computer). The idea of a collection of virtual biblical letters was not devised with a single format, or a single audience in mind. It is a set of variations on a very fertile theme, and its uses range from the devotional to the scholarly. Indeed, some of these letters have been used for Bible study groups, others for University and seminary classes. For the scholar, there is plenty of sub-text (Isaac emerges here as a very well-educated person, and Sarah in her letter to Abraham puzzles over the problem of the alternating names for God in Genesis). But there is also a great deal of theological reflection and challenge here. Nineveh’s letter to Judah, Sarah’s to Rebekah, Salu’s to Zur, Jephthah’s daughter to her father, Athalyah’s to Elijah, Judas’ to James and that of ‘Jezebel’ to John, invite us to listen to excluded voices,
and reconsider our appraisal of victor and victim, hero and villain. Other writers, especially Saul’s ‘special advisor’ Shmuel, also seem to possess a foreknowledge of the modern Middle East and its problems, mired as they are in the Bible and in its racial and geographical antagonisms.

But let us not distinguish the ancient from the modern too neatly. The highly literate Big Fish who could not stomach Jonah is no modern fancy. Before dismissing this as an outrageous licence, recall the talking snake of Genesis 3 and the talking ass of Numbers 22! What letter could be truer than this one to the biblical tradition itself?

Some of the letters, I feel, should (or even may have) been written once: Jeremiah should surely have corresponded with Ezekiel. Did he include his younger contemporary among all the other prophets he condemned? Haggai and Zechariah are two other contemporaries with shared goals, who, if they did not correspond, ought to have conversed. And can one believe that Nehemiah and Ezra met only once (and without exchanging a word?) Was there a certain coolness between them, of the kind that required a formal letter? The first two lacunae have now been filled; the last one remains unwritten.

Less likely is it that Ahitophel should have left two suicide notes – but loquacity was often expected of biblical characters about to die. In any case, Ahitophel enjoyed a reputation for prudence, and conceivably an eye for posterity too. What would he have made of his metamorphosis by John Dryden into the Earl of Shaftesbury?

The letters are arranged in canonical order, though they may be read, of course, in any order. The relevant biblical sections are supplied where this may be helpful, because all the letters arise from a careful and reflective reading of the biblical text, and are best enjoyed by the reader familiar with the source. Two letters in particular, from non-biblical characters should delight any reader who has had dealings with editors or publishers.

I conclude by thanking those friends and colleagues who agreed to contribute, and hope that this book provokes not only enjoyment but also the desire to produce more of these ‘virtual letters’.

Philip R. Davies
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Letter 1

SARAH TO ABRAHAM

(Genesis 11.26–23.2)

I really don’t know whether to laugh or cry today. I’ve shed so many tears since you nearly murdered my only son. (I sometimes think you forget that all I have is Isaac, while you have Ishmael as well.) I’ve just read the account you have sent me of that awful day on the mountain in Moriah – the high point of your life of obedience to El, you say. That leaves me stunned! I still don’t understand why you did it, and I know that Isaac has been damaged by this experience too. He never speaks of it, but I see a shadow in him, now, that was not there before; and to think that his name means ‘laughter’!

Last time I challenged you about this, you told me that you believed that El was testing you then, and that you needed to show him, once and for all, that you would trust him. You were so aware of your failures in the past to trust the god who called you, you said. That’s all very well, I said, but what about trusting me? Why sneak away with Isaac that morning, telling him that you were going to sacrifice together? And why, in heaven’s name, did you not share this word from El with me? Was not Isaac a blessing of El to me as much as you? Shouldn’t I have had a say in this show of trust? I don’t see any change of heart in your memoir.

Of course, I would never have agreed to it! And you know it. But did that give you the right to act alone? I still have nightmares – not about what might have happened, our son slaughtered and burnt on that altar, but what did happen: the way you calmly used him to carry the altar wood, then bound him alive like an animal for sacrifice, and then made to slash his throat.

That was when I decided I had to leave you – something else you miss out, making it look as if I died immediately afterwards. (In Hebron!) I couldn’t bear the feeling of betrayal. And now you send me this draft of your story of our life together as a peace offering – with a note saying you still love me and hope we can be together again.
Dear, dear Abe, you just don’t get it, do you? I come out of this badly in every way. Look back to the start of your story. You simply say that you ‘took’ me to be your wife, saying nothing at all about the way you wooed me. I didn’t fancy you at first – you already looked too old. But in truth you really loved me. Even when it turned out that I couldn’t conceive a child, you called me your ‘Beauty’. But here you just write ‘Sarai was barren’.

Then, thanks to Terah, you dragged me with your family away from our home in Ur. You said we were off to some fertile coastlands by the Great Sea, but, again because of your father, we stuck in the dull, northern town of Haran till he died. In that horrible place (it couldn’t compare for climate or culture with Ur) we eventually settled down, made some good friends and a good living, and grew middle-aged together. So what a blow when you suddenly had this urge – a call from Yahweh you now say – to move on to Canaan. I would have resisted more, but you insisted that we were at last going to settle down for good, in a fertile country.

Well, when we got there, there was a famine! We didn’t ‘settle down’ at all – we had to go on to Egypt. Maybe we would have died otherwise – but something died there anyway – and you know what I mean. I know that we had often joked about being half-brother and sister, and sometimes it even spiced up our lovemaking, but I never imagined you would actually give me to another man to save your own skin – or rather, to help you make a profit!

When the pharaoh suspected and he confronted me, I saved you from execution. Your account says nothing about this, nor your promise to me that it would never happen again. But, of course it did and I lied and said I was your sister. I guess if you’ve been forced into adultery once, the second time is easier. But thank heaven it didn’t come to that. Abimelech was a better man than you this time. So what a joke that your account records El saying to him in a dream that you were a prophet. I think that you have always been more interested in profiting than prophesying. You’re not attached to wealth, it is true, but wealth seems to attach itself to you. Whereas, as you know, I only care for Isaac. Sorry to be blunt, but your letter does ask for an honest assessment of your memories, and I appreciate that. But now that I am nearing death, I find myself living more and more in memories these days too. And not exactly the same memories as yours!

I’m not going to say anything about your memories of Lot. You know I found it hard to have him around all those years, and that I share your disappointment in him. You have been like a father to him. But you longed for your own son, and we agreed that you would have one with Hagar.
I never realized what a disaster that would be. It simply tore open old wounds when Hagar began to look down on me. In return, I treated her badly, and much worse after Isaac was born. I wonder if your willingness to kill our son had anything to do with getting back at me for this?

I must end, because the caravan is leaving for Beersheba after lunch. But before I do, let me say something that intrigues me a lot. In the story of that terrible day, you switch from talking about El to Yahweh. As we have always worshipped the Most High, I find your new name for God rather confusing. Who is this Yahweh? The same god in different guises, as we might talk of El Elyon and El Shaddai, or a different one? There are times in your story when it seems that El and Yahweh have different characters and concerns. Are you suggesting that there on Moriah you heard the voice of another god – or discovered something new about our old one? Was it a new god who rescued Isaac?

Looking again through your story, I prefer the parts when you speak of Yahweh, not El. Yahweh gets me out of the pharoah’s bedroom, sends Lot away, cares for Hagar after I drove her away, and hears you when you plead for Lot’s safety in Sodom. Even when El promised us a son, it is Yahweh behind the mysterious visit of the three men, just before I conceived Isaac, the son of my laughter. When I think further about this, I wonder whether El tempted us at times to do things that were not for the best, like leading me to believe it was right to send Hagar and Ishmael out into the desert to die – and testing you to sacrifice Isaac.

When you come to revise this first draft, please think about what I have said. And tell me more about Yahweh. What does the name mean? It seems to me, looking back now, that not all that we heard from the mouth of the most high El was equally good and true. Perhaps this new god is a better one for you and your descendants?

Ah, dear Abe! Strangely, writing all this down has done me good. I feel the need to see you again, at least once more. Please come and visit me here soon, that we may talk more about your god, and give thanks for Isaac, the son of our laughter, as well as our tears.

Your beautiful princess,
Sarah
Notes

1. The evidence for assuming that Abraham and Sarah were separated near the end of Sarah’s life comes from Gen. 22.19, which indicates that Abraham was living in Beersheba, and Gen. 23.2, which says that Sarah died at Kiriath-arba (Hebron), 25 miles to the north. Phyllis Trible writes, ‘Sarah died alone. Then Abraham went to her’ (Phyllis Trible, ‘Gen 22: The Sacrifice of Sarah’, in Alice Bach [ed.], Women in the Hebrew Bible: A Reader [London: Routledge, 1999], p. 287).

2. El or Elohim (both translated in the NRSV as God) is the name by which God or the gods would probably have been known by Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob, Leah and Rachel. According to the Pentateuch, the name Yahweh, (translated as ‘the LORD’), perhaps meaning ‘The one who is’, is first revealed to Moses (Exod. 3.15). Thus, the inclusion of Yahweh’s name at this time in the history of patriarchal religion is historically anachronistic. The letter seeks to make narrative sense of the use of both names in the canonical text, and to account for the way the narrator presents Elohim, (the creator God from Genesis 1) as a god who may ask Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, but the LORD, Yahweh, forbids this (see T. Desmond Alexander, Abraham in the Negev: A Source Critical Investigation of Genesis 20:1–22:19 [Carlisle: Paternoster Press], pp. 80-81, with reference to F. Delitzsch, A New Commentary on Genesis [Edinburgh: T. &T. Clark, 1988-89], II, pp. 90-91).
Letter 2
ISAAC TO ABRAHAM

(Genesis 22)

The last time we heard from Isaac was in his ‘Testament of Isaac’ (c. first century CE). That letter showed how he had absorbed the cultural obsessions of Jewish Egyptian and, later, Christian Coptic communities. This latest missive comes after a time lapse of two thousand years. This Isaac – clearly a fraud – has absorbed the skeptical, over-complicating literature so typical of the modern world. Unlike his namesake in the ‘Testament of Isaac’, he now refuses to submit himself to the ‘holy height’ of God and become ‘like the silver that is burned, smelted, purified in the fire’ (cf. Testament of Isaac 6.1-5; 8.3, 4). He represents the defiance of secular modernity, and the sad loss of the knowledge that God never actually allows the son to be harmed, and that the one who submits to God is saved.

In the interests of textual integrity we are publishing the letter in the form that it was passed to us. We are resisting the temptation to cut (sacrifice?) the more offensive parts to make it better. Readers are encouraged to consult our own careful annotations and footnotes. These are at least as important as the letter.

The Editors
Europe, December 2003

Abraham,

I won’t, if you’ll excuse me, call you ‘Father’, or even ‘Dearest Father’, as Franz Kafka does in his love-hate epistle to his father. (I’ve been sitting here, pen poised for millennia, procrastinating by reading other letters from sons to fathers, and I have to say I find Kafka’s opening disingenuous in the extreme.) That word ‘Father’ is not a private one for us, you who are now for Every(monotheistic)Man generic father, Avraham Avinu, First Father, paternal origin, A-man, just as surely as Adam is The-First-Man-In-The-World. Once upon a time, long ago, in the childhood world before the ‘sacrifice’, I could call you ‘Father’ and you could reply to me, the one that God called your ‘only’, by saying ‘Hinneni beni; Here I am my son’. You were indeed physically ‘there’ for me then, but now you are every-