

THEN DAVID WROTE A LETTER (2 SAM. 11:14) – HE HIMSELF OR WAS IT HIS SECRETARY?

A STUDY OF THE CRITERIA FOR HANDLING THE
'SEMANTIC CAUSATIVE'

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Summary

One often speaks of important people as if they did everything on their own. 'Caesar beat the Gauls', thus reads a verse in a poem by Bertolt Brecht. In the following line he makes the point: 'Did he not even have a cook with him?' This way of speaking about kings and lords, rulers and commanders, is a very common literary device used not only in many ancient but also in contemporary languages. In speech it is usually used unconsciously—and even decoded unconsciously. But it is at least noticeable, because sometimes the translators of the Old Testament use a causative in its place.

As a result of this usually unnoticed decoding, this characteristic has rarely been explicitly described as a literary phenomenon. The only exception I know of is to be found in Hermann Menge's book about Latin syntax and stylistics, where it is referred to as a 'causative active'. Because it is grammatically an 'active' voice which is to be semantically decoded functionally as a 'causative', I would like to suggest calling this literary device a 'semantic causative'. Now, if this 'semantic causative' is a common form used when speaking about important people, it raises the question: are there criteria which enable us to determine which of the acts are carried out by themselves and which are delegated to others. In my opinion there are indeed certain criteria which can be used to exclude the one or other scenario, but oftentimes a grey area of uncertainty seems to remain. So, did David write this letter himself or was it written by a secretary? In the following I intend to investigate the question of whether a definite answer can be found.

1. Introduction

Who built Thebes of the seven gates?
 In the books you will find the name of kings.
 Did the kings haul up the lumps of rock? (...)
 The young Alexander conquered India.
 Was he alone?
 Caesar beat the Gauls.
 Did he not have even a cook with him?
 Philip of Spain wept when his armada went down.
 Was he the only one to weep?
 Frederick the Second won the Seven Years War.
 Who else won it? (...)
 So many reports.
 So many questions. (...)¹
Bertolt Brecht

It is commonly known that David was a diligent, strong and courageous man. But, with all due respect, his actions reported in 2 Samuel 8 are beyond all imagination. How could he manage all this by himself?

(1) David defeated the Philistines and subdued them, and David took Metheg-ammah out of the hand of the Philistines. (2) And he defeated Moab (...). (3) David also defeated Hadadezer (...). (4) And David took from him 1,700 horsemen, and 20,000 foot soldiers. And David hamstringed all the chariot horses but left enough for 100 chariots. (5) And when the Syrians of Damascus came to help Hadadezer king of Zobah, David struck down 22,000 men of the Syrians. (...) (7) And David took the shields of gold that were carried by the servants of Hadadezer and brought them to Jerusalem. (8) And from Bethah and from Berothai, cities of Hadadezer, King David took very much bronze.

Granted, in each of these statements it is obvious to the reader that David did none of these things by himself. We picture David as the leader of a group of men who carry out his commands, while David himself certainly took part in these actions as well. But why is the grammatical 3rd person singular chosen, which reports these events as if David had acted alone? A first response is this: It is just a common

¹ 'Fragen eines lesenden Arbeiters'—translated by M. Hamburger in *Bertolt Brecht, Poems 1913–1956* (New York / London: Methuen, 1976). This paper was written mainly at Tyndale House, Cambridge. I thank Wolfram Bublitz, Jean-Louis Ska and Zvi Shimon for helpful comments while working on the topic and Rebecca Stocker for translation. An earlier draft of this paper was presented at the SBL International Meeting in St. Andrews, August 2013.

way to speak of great characters, not only in biblical narration.² Usually this form of expression is so natural to the reader that he or she—without even thinking about it—can decode it correctly: David *ordered* the Philistines, Moabites etc. to be killed, the horses to be lamed and the booty to be brought to Jerusalem.³ It is even so common that (as far I can see) none of the main commentaries even mention the fact that David did not accomplish these deeds by himself. This shows that it usually works quite well for us to understand this way of speaking without being conscious of what we are doing.

Consequently one could just drop the whole matter, were it not for some important reasons which require us to examine this linguistic phenomenon thoroughly. First there is the interest in the language: Linguists do not content themselves with knowing *that* a discourse is functioning, but they want to know *how* it functions. Secondly there is the observation that in many cases this linguistic expression is understood very easily (and therefore not noticed), but in certain other cases, in which the decoding cannot be done as smoothly, you stumble over it. In my opinion the linguistic phenomenon, which I introduced above, has not been received sufficient attention in its unproblematic incidences and therefore its problematic ones have also not been given due consideration. This results in misconceptions over and over again concerning the interpretation of passages, probably more than one would suppose at first. So there are indeed important reasons to take a better look at this linguistic phenomenon.

² Probably the most popular non-biblical example is Caesar's self-appraisal after the battle against Pharnakes at Zela: *veni vidi vici—I came, I saw, I conquered*. Of course it was his soldiers who went into the battle and won the victory.

³ The example of 2 Sam. 8:6 (and again v. 14) surprises with an almost unexpected change in the opposite direction. It is not David who is acting, but YHWH. The mention of God being with David is the theological interpretation of David's success. Walter Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel* (Interpretation. A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching; Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1990), states: 'It was David. It was Yahweh. It was not David without Yahweh, it was not Yahweh without David. This human achievement and divine gift is anticipated in chapter 7 and is an expression of the conviction that 'Yahweh was with him' (cf. 1 Sam 16:18), always, everywhere, in all he did' (p. 262). It was Isac Leo Seeligmann who fundamentally described *double causality: Menschliches Heldentum und göttliche Hilfe. Die doppelte Kausalität im alttestamentlichen Geschichtsdenken* in Erhard Blum (ed.), *Isac Leo Seeligmann. Gesammelte Studien zur Hebräischen Bibel* (FAT 41; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004): 137–59 [= *Theologische Zeitschrift* 18 (1962): 141–69].

How shall this literary device be named? Menge called it in his Latin repertory of terms for rhetoric figures a ‘causative active’.⁴ Unfortunately this is a misleading term, because the ‘causative’ is a grammatical term for verb *forms* explicitly expressing that the one who causes the action is not the one who acts. But here we have the phenomenon that the form does not show the difference between the cause and the actor. So what we have is not a causative in terms of form/grammar⁵ but only in terms of meaning/semantics. But according to the linguistic pragmatic viewpoint something is caused to be done. So I suggest naming it a *semantic causative*.⁶

2. Examples for the Semantic Causative

The New Testament gives us a very nice, clear example that even the ancient world was struggling with the semantic causative. John 3:22 reads: After this Jesus and his disciples went into the Judaeen countryside, and he remained there with them and he was baptizing. According to John 4:1–3 the rumour that Jesus was baptizing in Judaea was spread among the people and caused some trouble. But in fact the report of Jesus baptizing was not quite correct. And so John has to state

⁴ Hermann Menge, *Repetitorium der lateinischen Syntax und Stilistik* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, ²⁰1993 =¹¹1953): 189 paragraph 293; this is no longer part of Thorsten Burkard and Markus Schauer’s completely revised second edition 2005. The causative aspect of the verb is usually the basic meaning of the hiphil-stem. In German the causativation of a verb is formed in an analytical way. ‘Buy’ turns into ‘to let buy’ or ‘to make buy’. In its earlier stages German also had synthetic formation through vowel mutation: *fahren* (‘to move’) – *führen* (‘to guide’), *springen* (‘to jump’) – *sprengen* (‘to blast’), *trinken* (‘to drink’) – *tränken* (to give to drink/to saturate/to water [animals]) etc. But the question this article deals with goes beyond the question of possible causative formations or the existence of explicit causative verbs. It is about aspects of the causative meaning of non-causative forms in the light of pragmatics.

⁵ I define a causative in grammar as a verbal phrase that shows that some other person or group is caused to do something by a person or group. There are wider definitions, such as the following: ‘Causatives can be defined as verbs which refer to a causative situation, that is, to a causal relation between two events ...’ (Leonid I. Kulikov in his article ‘Causatives’ in: Martin Haspelmath and Ekkehard König et al. (ed.), *Language Typology and Language Universals* (Berlin / New York: W. de Gruyter, 2001): 886–98, esp. 886), which would include sentences like: ‘John opened the door’, ‘David killed Goliath’, which are examples for what Kulikov names a *lexical causative* (cf. p. 888). Kulikov does not take into consideration the *semantic causative* we discuss here.

⁶ From a Hebrew linguistic perspective another label might be *unmarked causative* (whereas the hiphil is the *marked causative*).

that it was not Jesus himself who was baptizing: Now when Jesus learned that the Pharisees had heard that Jesus was making and baptizing more disciples than John—although Jesus himself did not baptize, but only his disciples—, he left Judaea and departed again for Galilee. In order to explain the semantic causative which created misunderstandings the passage here states more precisely: it was not Jesus himself, who baptized, but only his disciples who baptized on his behalf—he let them baptize.⁷ This clarification is a very fortunate occurrence for our examination of the semantic causative.⁸ It shows clearly that the statement ‘Jesus baptized’ can be understood in different ways.

Jesus was baptizing

- | | |
|-----------------------------------|---|
| a) Jesus himself baptized | and no one else |
| b) Jesus himself baptized | and let his disciples carry out baptisms |
| c) Jesus himself did not baptize, | but he let his disciples carry out baptisms |

The ones who spread the news that Jesus let his disciples baptize worded it in the form of a *semantic causative*, which is not unambiguous but contains an oscillating meaning between Jesus being the one who is acting and Jesus being the one who causes the action. This indistinctness, arising out of the incongruity of form and function, holds the potential of being misunderstood. The Pharisees who took it literally thought that meaning (a), maybe even (b) was true and misunderstood the report. The evangelist clarifies for the reader that only (c) was true and that it was a misunderstanding to interpret the statement according to meaning (a) and (b). Jesus himself was not actively involved in baptizing, only his disciples. Here the

⁷ In my interpretation this passage is an explanatory supplement, synchronically, whereas the supposed tension between v. 1 and v. 2, together with the fact that *καίτοιγε*, with which the subordinate sentence begins, is a *hapax legomenon*, lead to much discussion in diachronic interpretation. It is often concluded that v. 2 has been added later, possibly as an editorial gloss. Bultmann’s argument, that an editor with the intention of correcting the text might as well have done it in 3:22, argues for a coherent reading. Cf. on the discussion for example Hartwig Thyen, *Das Johannesevangelium* (HNT 6; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005): 239–40, and Herman Ridderbos, *The Gospel of John: A Theological Commentary* (Cambridge: Eerdmans, 1997): 153 annotation 145.

⁸ It occurs fairly often in language that the linguistic form and its function are incongruent. It works when they are used regularly enough for them to become conventional and the reader or listener with the adequate linguistic competence can understand them at least most of the time correctly. For an introduction to pragmatics of linguistics cf. Wolfram Bublitz, *Englische Pragmatik. Eine Einführung* (Grundlagen der Anglistik und Amerikanistik 21; Berlin: Erich Schmidt Verlag, 2001).

movens/causa agentis of the action is not its *agens* at the same time; this case I call an *exclusive semantic causative*.

Let us take a short look at a good example of an *inclusive semantic causative*. 1 Samuel 27 narrates within a few verses a whole chain of David's actions, so that this text contains certain parallel structures when compared with the introductory example of 2 Samuel 8. However, in contrast to that particular passage, this one mentions various occasions where David's men carried out the reported actions alongside David:

² So David arose and went over, he and the six hundred men who were with him, to Achish (...), king of Gath. ³ And David lived with Achish at Gath, he and his men, every man with his household, and David with his two wives (...). ⁴ And when it was told Saul that David had fled to Gath, he no longer sought him. ⁵ Then David said to Achish, 'If I have found favor in your eyes, let a place be given me in one of the country towns that I may dwell there. (...)'. ⁶ So that day Achish gave him Ziklag (...). ⁸ Now David and his men went up and made raids against the Geshurites (...). ⁹ And David would strike the land and would leave neither man nor woman alive, but would take away the sheep, the oxen, the donkeys, the camels, and the garments, and come back to Achish. ¹⁰ When Achish asked, 'Where have you [Plural] made a raid today?' David would say, 'Against the Negeb of Judah,' or, 'Against the Negeb of the Jerahmeelites,' or, 'Against the Negeb of the Kenites'. ¹¹ And David would leave neither man nor woman alive to bring news to Gath, thinking, 'lest they should tell about us and say, "So David has done."'

This passage switches constantly between David as a single person (singular) and David with his whole group (plural). On three different occasions one of David's actions, which was first stated in the singular (*he arose and went over*, v. 2; *he lived*, v. 3; *he made raids*, v. 8), is more clearly specified by indicating that his men did each of these actions alongside him: *he and the six hundred men who were with him*, v. 2; *he and his men*, v. 3; and *his men*, v. 8). At first David, as a *pars pro toto*, stands for the whole group. So he is spoken of metonymically. Then, by insertions, the group as a whole is taken into account. Based on the knowledge that David was travelling with a larger group of men, the text can make the statement that *David had fled to Gath* implying that his men must have gone with him too (v. 4), also that *Achish gave him Ziklag*, again implying that he did not give it to David alone, but to his men as well (v. 6). On yet another occasion the statement *David would strike the land* (v. 9) written in the singular form is opposed by Achish's use of the plural saying *Where have all of you made a raid*

today? (v. 10). This alternation between singular and plural is also represented in David's thoughts: *Lest they should tell about us and say: So David has done.*⁹

Whereas in 1 Samuel 27 the textual context clarifies the case, there are no textual hints in the list of David's deeds mentioned above, to which we return for a moment to discuss whether there are other criteria for the *semantic causative*.

David defeated the Philistines (V. 1)

- | | |
|---|----------------------------------|
| a) David defeated the Philistines himself | and no one else |
| b) David defeated the Philistines himself | and let his soldiers defeat them |
| c) David himself did not defeat them | but let his soldiers defeat them |

Possibility (a) is basically unimaginable and therefore can be excluded, consequently meaning (b) or (c) needs to be decoded, although there are no direct textual hints to a *semantic causative* given in the context. Here the criterion for the decoding of the *semantic causative* is common knowledge about what is possible and what is impossible. So the reader's denotation of the expression is to interpret it automatically and naturally as a *semantic causative*, because a literal understanding does not make sense.¹⁰ Furthermore, possibilities (b) and (c) are supported by the fact that David was king, which evokes the readers' previous knowledge of rulers, in particular that kings have subjects and authority over them and that they usually do not do the hard work themselves, but order others to do it. So we can say that a *semantic causative* is definitely used here. But one question remains open: whether David participated in the action or not. Without any further hints in the text, which would explain it more clearly, we cannot decide for sure whether it is an exclusive (c) or inclusive (b) *semantic causative*. So ultimately this question cannot be solved, although it seems very likely that David was fighting beside his men, at least joining the battle.¹¹ But with probability and imaginability we cannot achieve certainty.

⁹ Alternations of this kind are often found in narration. Another example is 2 Sam. 5:6–7: *And the king and his men went to Jerusalem against the Jebusites, (...). Nevertheless, David took the stronghold of Zion, that is, the city of David.*

¹⁰ A literal sense could be denoted if David was the protagonist, e.g. in a fairy tale—within a fictional setting superhuman feats become imaginable.

¹¹ Otherwise one could expect that staying away from the battlefield would have been denoted as in 2 Sam. 18:3.

Before turning to the question of the David-letter in 2 Samuel, we take a look at some examples, in which the use of the *semantic causative* can be recognized clearly, and ask about the pragmatics of its use.

An example which clearly marks responsibility by using the *semantic causative* is the narrative of Ahab and Naboth in 1 Kings 21:13–19. In order to incorporate Naboth's vineyard into his own possessions, Ahab engages false witnesses, blaming Naboth of blaspheming both God and the king. The consequence is: *they took him outside the city and stoned him to death with stones* (v. 13). Apparently Ahab was not present during the stoning, because in the following verse (v. 14) the message of Naboth's death reaches Jezebel, and in v. 15 she passes it on to her husband Ahab. Then Elijah is instructed to confront Ahab with his sin: *And you shall say to him: Thus says the Lord: You have killed and also taken possession!* (v. 19).¹² God is speaking plain language here. The pragmatics of the *semantic causative* in this example is in a linguistically very economical way (according to the principle of least effort) to make it clear that Ahab is to assume full responsibility for the action.

Another example: The same Jeroboam who is honoured (in form of a semantic causative) for having built Shechem and Penuel in 1 Kings 12:25 (Then Jeroboam built Shechem in the hill country of Ephraim and lived there. And he went out from there and built Penuel) is blamed for having installed the idols that constitute the sin of Israel, which is the cause for the devastating verdict over all kings of Israel from then on: *And he made two golden calves (...) And he set one in Bethel, and the other he put in Daniel* (vv. 28–29). It is very obvious that Jeroboam neither carried out the building of Shechem and Penuel himself, nor transported and installed the idols, but of course he caused all this to be done.¹³

¹² The difficulty of this phrase in Hebrew is the interrogative pronoun *ha-*. It is actually not a question, but rather, concerning its function, is a reproach.

¹³ Commentaries usually make no remarks on this expression. The commentary of M. Noth, *Könige, I* (BKAT IX/1; Neukirchener Verlag, 1968): 285, is one exception. Relating to the textual differentiation of *שִׁים* and *נָתַן* in this context: 'Der Satz 29a kann so verstanden werden und will vielleicht so verstanden sein, daß Jerobeam in Bethel die (feierliche) Aufstellung des neuen Kultbildes selbst vornahm oder jedenfalls dabei anwesend war' ['Verse 29a can and maybe wants to be understood in the sense that Jeroboam carried out the (ceremonial) installation of the new idol himself, or at least that he was present.']. Noth allows the literal meaning along with the possibility of understanding the expression as a *semantic causative*.

Elijah is responsible for the killing of the 950 priests, so the *semantic causative* is used there: *Elijah caused them to go down / led them down*¹⁴ and (he) *slaughtered them there* (1 Kings 18:40).¹⁵ Nehemiah says about himself: *I built the wall* (Neh. 6:1). Where causation is almost certainly to be assumed and is not directly relevant to what is being said, it need not even receive grammatical form. These few examples of the many available demonstrate sufficiently that the *semantic causative* as a form of expression indeed occurs fairly often in the Hebrew language.¹⁶

3. Summary: Criteria for the Analysis of the Semantic Causative

To summarize the discussion so far the following conclusion can be drawn: Where explicit signals are given in the context the *semantic causative* can be identified and recognized as such and there are no decoding problems. But what if these explicit signals are absent?

- 1) Where there is a lack of definite signals, common knowledge about what is possible and what is impossible helps to decide whether a finite verb form is to be denoted as a *semantic causative* (for certain or probably) or not. This is the case, for instance, in the introductory ‘David as commander’-example, where it is impossible or at least very unlikely that the person at hand could have accomplished these actions alone.
- 2) Furthermore we can ask whether someone has the position to delegate something to be done, i.e. to let others fulfil his/her orders. This does not concern the semantic dimension of the verbs so much, as almost every accomplishment of an action implied in a verb can be caused to be done. But what matters is whether a person has the position, authority and/or opportunity to let someone else carry out an action on his behalf. A

¹⁴ הִי hi, the only grammatical causative in the chain of the three verbs; remarkably the LXX chooses an undoubtable active form: καὶ κατάγει αὐτοὺς Ηλίου.

¹⁵ The NIV translates a causative: *Elijah had them brought down [... and had them] slaughtered there*. Again in the following example: *I had rebuilt the wall*.

¹⁶ Of course there are also examples in the New Testament: Mary says to Jesus, of whom she thinks it is the gardener: *Tell me, where you have put him, then I will take him from there* (John 20:15); would she really manage to do that on her own?

semantic causative presupposes a person who is in a position of authority and / or ability to delegate an action.

To distinguish between whether an expression has to be read as a *semantic causative* or just as a ‘simple’ active depends on the reader’s knowledge of whether an action can or cannot be carried out by one person alone and the reader’s knowledge of the person’s ability or inability to order an action. These criteria denote some cases unmistakably as *semantic causatives*, in other cases we can (only/at least) achieve different levels of probability. In case of denoting a finite verb as a *semantic causative*, we still have to decide whether it is an *inclusive* or an *exclusive* one. Without explicit hints in the text we cannot achieve a clear classification; we can only discuss probabilities.

Beside these criteria employed to identify a *semantic causative* as such we have to take into consideration the pragmatical linguistic aspects of the *semantic causative*: It is often used for marking a responsibility for an action and/or a result of an action, whether it is positive in the sense of praising or negative in the sense of blaming a person.¹⁷ It is a quick way to do this, according to the internalized and mostly unconscious principle of language economy: as one of those many tools to express meaning in a very short but striking and effective way. Even when something seems to have a complicated structure of formulation, it is often the most economical way to express something. In fact, the *semantic causative* is related to what German linguists call ‘Herrschaftssemantik’—semantics of rule/domination.

4. Did David Write the Letter about Uriah?

According to these results we approach our initial question: Did David write the letter about Uriah or did he ask somebody to write it? First we can state that there are instances of the use of **וִיכְתַב** as a *semantic causative* in Ancient Near Eastern texts. In Jer 36:1ff. Jeremiah is instructed by God: *Take for yourself a scroll and write* (**כתב** qal

¹⁷ Very illustrative is the example of Nathan confronting David with his guilt of adultery with Bathsheba and murder of Uriah: *You have struck down Uriah the Hittite with the sword* (12:9). As the reader knows, David commands the murder of his officer, and Joab subtly carries this order out through the Ammonites at Rabbah. Nathan is using the *semantic causative* drastically for the sake of stating unmistakably that in God’s eyes David is guilty of Uriah’s murder. The Hebrew verb **נָכַה** leads to another interesting *vice versa* aspect of causativity: It is causative in form (hiphil) but active in meaning (‘striking down’) which would be a worthwhile examining in itself.

imperative) *on it all the words that I have spoken to you* (v. 2). Although the phrase *take for yourself* (אֶל־חָתָם¹⁸) stresses that Jeremiah has to take action, two verses further the accomplishment of this task is reported, but with a remarkable twist that indicates the option to take God's instruction as a *semantic causative*: *Then Jeremiah called Baruch the son of Neriah, and Baruch wrote (וַיִּכְתֹּב) on a scroll at the dictation of Jeremiah all the words of the Lord that he had spoken to him* (v. 4). This example shows plainly that the task God gave Jeremiah could be simply understood in the sense that the transcription did not necessarily have to be done by Jeremiah himself, but that he could let someone else write. V. 4 is also an example of contextual marking that Baruch is writing on his own; there is no room for ambiguity left.¹⁹ It is the same in Esther 8, where Mordechai writes to the Jews the letter of monarchic device: *He wrote in the name of Ahasuerus* (v. 10), but, in fact, as we learnt from v. 9, the letters are actually written by *the writers of the king*.²⁰

2 Samuel 11:14–15 reads:

In the morning David wrote a letter (וַיִּכְתֹּב) to Joab and sent it by the hand of Uriah. And he wrote (וַיִּכְתֹּב) in the letter: Set Uriah in the forefront of the hardest fighting, and then draw back from him that he may be struck down and die.

¹⁸ The same phrase in Ezek. 24:2 and in 3rd person in Deut. 17:18 (*he [Moses] shall write for himself* ...). This *ethical dative* stresses the persons own activity, as it does in the phrase אֶל־חָתָם go by yourself (Gen. 12:1 and 22:2).

¹⁹ For the writing activity of Jeremiah cf. Georg Fischer, *Jeremia* 26–52 (HThKAT; Freiburg, Basel, Wien: Herder, 2005). Fisher thinks, that Jeremiah was able to write himself (shown the clearest in 32:10; 51:60), cf. p. 289. Fisher proves that for the later prophets writing was part of the common tasks (Is. 8:1; Ezek. 4:1; 37:16; Ex. 2:9; Ps. 40:8); cf. pp. 287–88. But due to the option to interpret not otherwise explicitly marked examples of כָּתַב as *semantic causative* it might be that Jeremiah dictated most passages and thus usually did not write himself.

²⁰ A suitable example for a *semantic causative* in another ancient language is found in Old Babylonian letters. These are letters written by a scribe but dictated (not necessarily as a word-for-word dictation) by the sender, and another scribe reads the letter to the sender's recipient. One of these senders is KA-Aa and his addressee Gimilija. The opening of the letter marks an awareness of the indirect process of communication: 'To Gimilija say: here [is what] KA-Aa [says]'. But then, although two scribes are involved in the writing and reading process, the letter says: 'I wrote to you concerning your well-being. Write to me concerning your well-being', as if both, sender and receiver were writing themselves. Cf. F. R. Kraus, *Altbabylonische Briefe in Umschrift und Übersetzung. Heft X* (Briefe aus kleineren westeuropäischen Sammlungen; Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1985): 5: ¹ Zu Gimilija ² sprich: ³ hier ⁴ (folgt, was) KA-Aa (ausrichten läßt) (...) ¹⁸ Ich schreibe dir wegen deines Befindens, ^{19,20} Schreibe mir über dein Befinden!

David wrote

- a) David himself wrote and no one else
- b) David himself wrote and let someone else write as well
- c) David himself did not write but let someone else write

One of the very few scholars reflecting the problem is Thomas Schaak.

He states:

After obtaining a general view of his military campaign, the king decides to send a message to his representative on the battlefield. But now instead of using the oral method of delivering a message, he uses the written medium for doing so. Apparently this was not the common practice back in those days, but it was a possibility, for example when the wording of the message especially mattered. The doubts as to whether David and Joab were actually able to read are quite valid, as neither of them originated from a family of officials, and a literate Israelite elite supporting the state could not have yet been developed in the newly founded state. Rather there are some indications, which may lead to the assumption that David engaged Canaanite officials for administrative positions, who possessed the necessary knowledge and skills. It was probably such officials who did the reading and writing—when it was needed. Thus the communication situation described in 11:14–15 was common, even though a medium was being used, which was rare in this time but induced by the new political era—writing.²¹

Whereas Schaak is arguing on the basis of probability,²² we want to ask: Can we determine in a methodically secure way, which one of the three meanings mentioned above is to be decoded here? Unlike the example of Jeremiah writing by dictation to Baruch we do not have an explicit hint that possibility (a) is false, which means that there is no evidence that David did not really write himself. Unlike the ‘David as commander’-example where possibility (a) could be excluded because of improbability due to impossibility, we now have an action that can indeed be accomplished by one person alone. These observations speak for a possibility of aspect (a)—no more, no less. Not only linguistically, but also historically it is not impossible that David was able to write. There are examples of ancient kings who could read and write,²³ and an assertion of David being unable to write in light of his rural background is based on the false assumption of rural illiteracy.

²¹ Thomas Schaak, *Die Ungeduld des Papiers. Studien zum alttestamentlichen Verständnis des Schreibens anhand des Verbuns katab im Kontext administrativer Vorgänge* (BZAW 262; Berlin/New York: De Gruyter, 1998): 32–33.

²² Note the words: doubts, could, rather, indications, may, probably etc.

²³ Ashurbanipal, one of the Assyrian kings of the 7th century BC, claims that he could read and write on his own. Unfortunately the tablets in the Niniveh collection of the

On the contrary, based on the fact that the context is full of reports about messengers and servants and that rulers are used to delegate tasks, it is easily conceivable that we have to read it as an exclusive *semantic causative* (c).²⁴ Possibility (b) is according to its material logic rather improbable, it would only be imaginable in the sense of David putting a concluding remark on the written letter.²⁵ The evidence that David in fact has a writer whose name is even mentioned in the list of members of David's cabinet in 2 Samuel 8:15–18 (Seraiah; v. 17) makes possibility (c) even more probable: David dictated the letter.

Well, did David write the letter himself or did he dictate it? Even if we could prove that writing was one of the common tasks of an Israelite monarch of the first days, from a linguistic angle the expression *David wrote* does not reveal whether David wrote the letter himself or not. And *vice versa*: even if we could prove that Israelite monarchs were unable to write, based on the linguistic observations, we would have to assume that, from the narrator's point of view, David might have formed a laudable exception. This ambiguity, haziness and vagueness simply results from the observation that neither aspect (a) nor aspect (c) can be excluded as a possible meaning based on our criteria, and even aspect (b), though rather unlikely, could theoretically be true. So unfortunately we cannot cut the Gordian knot.²⁶

5. Conclusion and Further Implications

So if we cannot answer the initial question of whether David or his secretary wrote the letter about Uriah, what is the benefit of this study? I am convinced that the conscious and deliberate recognition of the *semantic causative* as a self-evident and conventional semantic possibility in the frame which I have just outlined sheds light on other passages of Scripture. Sometimes a specific analysis will resolve

British Museum, which seem to be scribal exercises, cannot be assigned to a certain person.

²⁴ The argument that there must not be any confidants in this action, is invalid, as there are already confidants among David's servants beforehand as well as afterwards.

²⁵ Gal. 6:11; 1 Cor 16:21; Phlm. 19; cf. Becker relating to Gal. 6:11 in Jürgen Becker and Ulrich Luz, *Die Briefe an die Galater, Epheser und Kolosser* (NTD 8/1; 18th edn; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1998).

²⁶ The same with 1 Samuel 10:25 *Samuel wrote*. As there is no hint in the context we cannot decide, whether Samuel wrote on his own or not.

questions, in some cases prompt new questions and sometimes keep old questions open—but at least in a methodically ascertained manner.

To give one of many possible examples²⁷ for further implications of the matter, we turn to a earlier passage in the David and Bathsheba Episode. After David had made inquiries about Bathsheba *David sent messengers* (v. 4). The verse continues: *וַיִּקְחֶהָ וַתָּבוֹא אֵלָיו* and *he took her and she came to him*.²⁸ Randall C. Bailey assumes in his book ‘David in Love and war’, based on the apparent parallel structure of David’s and Bathsheba’s actions, that Bathsheba was an equal and therefore willing partner for David.²⁹ As a plain proof for his conclusion Bailey points out that *לָקַח* is written in the qal-stem, instead of the hiphil, which he would expect in case of Bathshebas passive behavior.³⁰

In fact, the entire scene shows that Bathsheba does not come by her own choice or free will, but that she, being seized by David’s messengers, has to come.

Considering the context we can clearly determine *וַיִּקְחֶהָ* (*and he took her*) as an exclusive *semantic causative*, for David sent messengers (Plural!) and he himself remained in the palace, until she

²⁷ In the narrative of David and Bathsheba (2 Sam. 11) there are several occurrences of the *semantic causative*. Next to the *semantic causative* that is mentioned hereafter and the one pointing out David’s guilt (further on), the following examples are found in this passage: When *Joab was besieging the city* (v. 16a), of course his soldiers were besieging the city under his command. The remark in v. 17ab *the men of the city came out and fought with Joab* means certainly that they fought with Joab’s army. And when David assigns the messenger to instruct Joab: *Strengthen your attack* (v. 25b), he is referring to the attack of the army. When it is said of Bathsheba in v. 5b that *she sent and told David* she sent a messenger and did not tell David the news herself, just as in v. 13a *David invited him* (Uriah) it is very unlikely that David gave the invitation to Uriah directly, but rather sent a messenger to Uriah.

²⁸ *וַיִּקְחֶהָ* some German translations directly turn into a causative: *he let her be taken* (e.g. Luther, Elberfelder, Einheitsübersetzung), cf. e.g. *לָקַחְתִּיךָ* in Num. 23:11 *I have taken you*, translated as *I let you be brought* (Elberfelder). Other passages containing the word *לָקַח* are structured in a similar way, e.g. four references in 1 Sam. 8:11, 13, 14, 16; 1 Sam. 17:31 (Saul sent for David); 2 Sam. 14:2 (Joab sent and brought the wise woman from Tekoa); 1 Kgs 7:13 (Solomon sent and brought Hiram from Tyre); Gen. 20:2 (Abimelech from Gerar sent and took Sara); Ex. 2:5 the daughter of Pharaoh took the basket with the baby through sending her servants. Often *וַיִּקַּח* (and he took) is combined with *וַיִּשְׁלַח*. 1 Sam. 16:12 shows that this can be expressed with a grammatical causative as well: *וַיִּבְיָאֵהוּ וַיִּשְׁלַח* *he (Samuel) sent and brought him in* (hiphil); cf. Jgs 19:21.

²⁹ Cf. Randall C. Bailey, *David in Love and War: The Pursuit of Power in 2 Samuel 10–12* (JSOTSS 75; Sheffield: JSOT, 1990), 88.

³⁰ But as we have seen above, *לָקַח* only exists in the qal-stem, apart from three exceptions.

was brought to him. But still, taking the passage literally, it states that David took her. So the only way this expression can be decoded is: *he let her be taken (by the messengers and he is responsible for what is going on)*. This expression is chosen to clearly mark that David is responsible for what is happening. לָקַח used in connection to a group of men being sent to her by David clearly excludes the ability of voluntariness and so וַתָּבוֹא אֵלָיו (and she came to him) has to be denoted: *she had to come because she was brought to him*. This in fact is a form of expression corresponding reversely to the *semantic causative*, which is worth a study of its own; as we lack an appropriate term I will temporarily name it the *semantic passive*. Whereas Bailey's argument is based on the grammatical form, my analysis takes into consideration the functional aspects of language from a linguistic pragmatic viewpoint.

I hope biblical interpretations will yet reveal some surprises by keeping the phenomenon of the *semantic causative* in mind and thus reading the grammatical 3rd person with increased awareness for its possible implications for function and pragmatics.