

“YOUR ENVOYS ARE SPEAKING TO YOU UNTRUTHS!” (EA 1:82): LIES IN THE INTERNATIONAL EL-AMARNA CORRESPONDENCE

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Summary: “Your Envoys Are Speaking to You Untruths!” (EA 1:82): Lies in the International El-Amarna Correspondence

Lying constitutes the malicious provision of false information or the intentional hiding of correct information. Modern research identifies various types: beneficial (*i.e.*, stated for the benefit of the liar), defensive, offensive, etc. Both the Hebrew Bible and Ancient Near Eastern literature present lying as a moral affront. This article examines the phenomenon as it appears in the 44 international letters in the El-Amarna archive. This period witnessed intensive diplomatic activity between the great powers, during which each king was seeking to gain prestige and increase his kingdom's power on the international stage. An analysis of the documents reveals that lying was commonly practiced in this arena. Herein, I identify the lies, discuss the way in which people are described as liars, elaborate situations in which the correspondents sought to verify statements, and examine cases of fraud. The study thus explores the international correspondence in the El-Amarna literature in light of the biblical texts and new theories in the field of the social sciences.

Keywords: Lying – El-Amarna letters – International Correspondence – International Relations – Hebrew Bible

Resumen: “Tus enviados están dicendote falsedades” (EA 1:82): mentiras en la correspondencia internacional de El-Amarna

Mentir constituye la provisión maliciosa de información falsa o el ocultamiento intencional de información correcta. Investigaciones modernas identifican varios

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tipos: beneficiosa (es decir, que trae un beneficio para quién miente), defensiva, ofensiva, etc. Tanto la Biblia hebrea como la literatura del Cercano Oriente Antiguo presentan la mentira como una afrenta moral. Este artículo examina el fenómeno tal como aparece en las 44 cartas internacionales del archivo de El-Amarna. Este período atestiguó una intensa actividad diplomática entre los grandes poderes, durante el cual cada rey buscaba ganar prestigio e incrementar el poder de su reinado en la escena internacional. Un análisis de estos documentos revela que la mentira era una práctica común en este contexto. Aquí identifico las mentiras, discuto la manera en que las personas son descritas como mentirosas, elaboro situaciones en las cuales los corresponsales buscan verificar declaraciones y examino casos de fraude. Por consiguiente, este estudio explora la correspondencia internacional en la literatura de El-Amarna a la luz de los textos bíblicos y de las nuevas teorías de las ciencias sociales.

Palabras clave: Mentir – Cartas de El-Amarna – Correspondencia internacional – Relaciones internacionales – Biblia Hebrea

This article examines the practice of lying as reflected in the international correspondence found within the mid-fourteenth-century BCE Egyptian El-Amarna archive. In recent years, this phenomenon has been the focus of extensive research in the social and behavioral sciences and humanities. These studies are grounded in modern sources and databases. While lying has been examined in the Hebrew Bible and in Greek and Roman culture, the nature and function of lies in ancient Near Eastern texts has been the object of little research.¹ Herein, I shall thus explore the evidence from the ancient Near East, offering the first preliminary survey of its kind. Methodologically, I shall first review contemporary theories of lying, then proceeding to analyze international letters in the El-Amarna archive.

From a semantic perspective, lying has existed from time immemorial, changing very little in nature over the millennia.² In

¹ See Bacon 1970: 397–430; Gill and Wiseman 1993; Horn-Prouser 1994; Shemesh, 2002: 81–95; Grossman 2004: 483–515.

² Goldberg 2005.

methodological terms, this paper analyzes this ancient historical phenomenon in the light of the social and behavioral sciences, since scholars in these fields have traditionally investigated modern rather early sources in this regard. It thus adopts a comparative phenomenological approach that aids in examining the nature and use of lying in any given society in light of what is known of it from other cultures.³ On occasion, comparative analysis is indeed applied to societies that have no common source.⁴ Early on, E. Durkheim drew attention to the importance of intercultural comparison—both synchronic and diachronic—for advancing the field.⁵ As is well known, this method also bridges diverse fields of knowledge⁶—such as, in the mid-twentieth century, the work of M. Bloch and E. H. Carr.⁷ Today, scholars thus engage in comparative historical studies in an attempt to examine the history of modern European and American societies in the light of ancient Greek, Roman, and even Chinese culture.⁸ These rest on the premise that human nature does not change drastically over time—a notion expressed in classical Greek, Chinese, and European thought.⁹

According to one definition, a lie is a deliberate attempt to mislead another person by the utterance of a statement the speaker knows to be untrue. It may be the passing on of information or the prevention of such, in full or part. The liar also deliberately implants or fosters a misunderstanding in the mind of the receiver of the mes-

³ Knibbe and Versteeg 2008. See also Mandelbaum 1979–1980; Kedar 2009; Desjarlais and Throop 2011.

⁴ Mace and Pagel 1994.

⁵ Durkheim 1982: 157–58; cf. Barnard 2004.

⁶ Schnegg 2014.

⁷ Bloch 1953; Carr 1964.

⁸ Cox, Dunne and Booth 2001. See also Kokaz 2000; Zhang 2001; Tod 2003.

⁹ Thucydides, 3.82 (Mynott 2013). See also; Hsü 2000: 360–61; Sowell 2002; Puchala 2003: 37.

sage. Lying is thus a cognitive act that can occur in any area of human life. Every person will thus lie at least once—and usually frequently—during his or her lifetime, also being the victim of lies told by others.¹⁰ Some scholars thus argue that we are surrounded by lies in our daily lives, people lying far more than they are consciously aware of doing so.¹¹ Despite the wide occurrence of the phenomenon, however, most people seek to be truthful, not feeling comfortable in misleading others.¹²

A lie grants the person who utters it control over the situation, albeit temporarily, enabling him or her to achieve results he or she would not gain in any other way. Many people thus deliberately choose this form of speech conduct.¹³ Lies also help conceal bad deeds or intentions.¹⁴ Under such circumstances, which impinge upon the truth and thus on morality and ethics, a person makes the other into an instrument for realizing his or her own personal interests.¹⁵

All societies include people with a more developed sense of lying or greater motivation to do so than others.¹⁶ Pathological liars feel no guilt or shame over their shunning of the truth.¹⁷ The research literature indicates that people are more inclined to lie in some realms than others, most prominently in the political field—the focus of my present concern.¹⁸ A historical review evinces that lying is a relatively common phenomenon amongst leaders, who are not always bothered by the way in which they achieve their goals.¹⁹ Twentieth-century his-

¹⁰ Elaad 2007: 19–20, 48, 52, 165. Cf. Bok 1989: 13.

¹¹ Cohen 1999: 15; Cole 2001: 124–125.

¹² Leslie 2017: 76.

¹³ Bok 1989: 19–20; Ford 1996: 3–8, 18.

¹⁴ Bok 1989: 22.

¹⁵ Rotenstreich 2014: 245.

¹⁶ Kraut 1978: 389; Vrij, Granhag and Porter 2010: 89–121.

¹⁷ Leslie 2017: 76–79.

¹⁸ Ford 1996: 11.

¹⁹ Pfeiffer 1995: 904–6; Ciulla 2005: 323–335.

tory thus demonstrates, for example, the lies Hitler sold to Neville Chamberlain.²⁰ Even many years later, this situation constituted a precedent, serving as a warning sign of the rise of other dictators, such as Saddam Hussein.²¹

The literature evinces that only around half the lies told are exposed. Scholars in the field thus propose various methods for improving these statistics.²² Today, for example, many seek to define lies in accordance with their style and content.²³ When dealing with correspondence—on the internet, for instance—rather than direct speech and personal interaction, lies are more difficult to lay bare because the speaker's body language cannot be read.²⁴ It is also harder to uncover spoken or written lies when they are not delivered in the interlocutor or audience's mother tongue.²⁵

These two factors are particularly relevant to the present study, which looks at written communication rather than direct discourse. This is true despite the fact that the language of missives closely corresponds to that of daily speech.²⁶ The dispatches exchanged between distant lands, moreover, were written in the Middle Babylonian dialect of Akkadian and its local derivatives—*i.e.*, a medium that was not always the native tongue of either the addressee or the writer himself.²⁷ This circumstance made it easy for those who sought to lie to do so.

²⁰ Ekman 1992: 15, 21, 57–58; cf. Kissinger 1994: 314–315; Houghton 2009: 125.

²¹ Brown and Ainley 2005: 28; Leslie 2017: 223–232.

²² Park, Levine, McCornack, Morrison and Ferrara 2002: 144–157; Nahari, Vrij, and Fisher 2014: 227–239.

²³ Newman, Pennebaker, Berry and Richards 2003: 665–675; Nahari and Vrij 2014: 89–94.

²⁴ Ekman 1988: 163–75; Mann, Vrij and Bull 2002: 366–367; Toma and Hancock 2012: 78.

²⁵ Coldwell-Harris and Ayçiçeği-Dinn 2009: 194.

²⁶ Bakhtin 1981: 383–384, 424, 428; Biber and Conrad 2001: 185, 190–192.

²⁷ Moran 1987: xviii–xxii; Izre'el 1991: 1–9; Rainey 2015 1: 10–13.

Having briefly surveyed the nature and character of lies, let us now look at the principal responses they prompt as exemplified in ancient Near Eastern literature. As in other ancient Egyptian literature, lies assume numerous forms herein.²⁸ They are denounced, for instance, in the Instructions of Any (B 15, 9) and Amenemope (10:1–4 (XV, 20–21– XVI, 1–2), two Egyptian sapiential works, as well as the Book of the Dead (Spell 30b, 125).²⁹ In Sumerian proverbs and the Instructions of Shuruppak/g, they are similarly regarded as improper speech acts.³⁰

Like ancient Near Eastern sources, lies are presented in the Hebrew Bible as evil in their very nature.³¹ Practically, however, biblical narrative demonstrates that in some cases lies served a legitimate purpose—saving life, for example. They were thus not absolutely condemned.³² Under these circumstances, the value of truth was temporarily overridden by the sanctity of life.³³

In historical terms, the letters in the El-Amarna archive represent a huge international communications enterprise.³⁴ This developed in consequence of the political situation that prevailed during the fourteenth century. This was characterized by a multipolar balance of power between at least three major actors on the scene, reflecting

²⁸ Shupak 2011: 621, 626.

²⁹ See Lichtheim 1976 2: 155; Faulkner 1985: 28, 32; Tyldesley 2000: 168; Assmann 2005: 60; Shupak 2016: 187, 238.

³⁰ For the proverbs, see SP 2.58, 71, 72, 3.55 8.b30, etc.; Alster 1997 1: 56–60; online: <<http://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk/cgi-bin/etcsl.cgi?text=c.6.1>>. Cf. Alster 1996: 1–9. For the Instructions of Shuruppak (lines 35–38).

³¹ Exod 20:6, 29:7; Deut 5:10, 19:18; Isa 32:7; Jer 5:2; Ezek 13:6; Ps 31:19, 52:4–5; Prov 6:17–19, 10:18, 11:18; etc.

³² 1 Sam 19:16, 20:29; Jer 28:26; etc.; cf. Horn-Prouser 1994: 1–19, 183–185; Shemesh 2002: 81–95.

³³ Singer 1999: 2.292; Rotenstreich 2014: 256.

³⁴ Ragionieri 2000: 42–53; Gromova 2007: 277.

its global aspect.³⁵ Although “balance of power” is a modern concept, the same political principle operates within every international arena.³⁶ The most prominent societies of the time were Egypt, Mitanni/Mittani, Babylonia, Hatti, and Assyria.³⁷ A number of independent kingdoms also flourished—such as Arwaza, Alašia, and Ugarit. These were neither empires nor vassal states.³⁸

Imperial interaction was characterized by “horizontal relations”—formal equality, mutuality, and the paying/receiving of tributes.³⁹ Balance of power being by definition dynamic in nature, it constantly shifts as each power seeks to maximize its control and sphere of influence.⁴⁰ As we shall see, however, diplomacy was also a well-employed activity during the El-Amarna age.⁴¹

The royal correspondence is replete with complaints made by the writers that, while not being verifiable, can neither be proved to be lies. Seeking to pressurize their Egyptian counterpart into sending them larger gifts of gold, the kings of Babylon and Mitanni, for example, informed him that they required the precious metal in order to fund palaces, temples, or mausoleums currently under construction.⁴² Kadašman-Enlil I of Babylonia, for example, wrote Amenhotep III that the latter’s envoys had seen the new palace with their own eyes.⁴³ The desire to verify this declaration appears to indicate that it and its ilk quite often came under suspicion.

It is also difficult to prove that Amenhotep III lied in denying Kadašman-Enlil I’s claims that his sister, Pharaoh’s wife, had died in

³⁵ Griffiths and O’Callaghan 2002: 13–14; Gebhard 2017: 35.

³⁶ Holsti 1995: 50–51; Sheehan 1996: 24–28.

³⁷ Liverani 2000: 15–27.

³⁸ Cohen and Westbrook 2000: 6.

³⁹ Liverani 2014: 280–281.

⁴⁰ Sharp 2009: 170–171.

⁴¹ Wilkinson 2010: 365; Lloyd 2014: 114–115.

⁴² EA 4:36–50, 5:13–17, 7:63–67, 19:54–58.

⁴³ EA 3:23–28.

Egypt, this fact being concealed from him.⁴⁴ A case does appear to exist, however, that we can be fairly certain contains falsehoods. This is found in a letter sent by Suppiluliuma I of Hatti to the Egyptian king entreating that they establish good brotherly relations with one another along the lines of those Suppiluliuma had enjoyed with Tušratta of Mitanni before his assassination.⁴⁵ Herein, Suppiluliuma I expresses his sorrow over Tušratta's death in line with international written convention.⁴⁶ In my view, however, his primary purpose was to present himself as the deceased's colleague, thereby removing all suspicion, even indirect, for his demise from himself and ward off any thought that he intended turning Mitanni into a Hittite vassal.⁴⁷

The letter not having survived in good condition, its contents are disputed. Moran argues that it is too badly disfigured to be legible.⁴⁸ P. Artzi and A. F. Rainey suggest that it may not allude to Tušratta's assassination at all.⁴⁹ N. Na'aman, followed by Z. Cochavi-Rainey, however, contend that it does.⁵⁰

The letter reads as follows:

And I [wrote] you about this [crim]e. The son [of Tushratta] committed [a crime] against him. Be[hind the king's back he has conspired, assembled(?)] malicious men, and [this band(?)] that [conspired] with him seized and killed him. [And may the crime] be known before the gods. [And you must] know that his father has established [friendly relations with me]. Since his father has [di]ed I am indeed protecting [his sons(?),

⁴⁴ EA 1:10–52. See below.

⁴⁵ EA 43:1–17.

⁴⁶ EA 29:55–64; KBo I 10:7–24; cf. Artzi 1980: 161–170; Shemesh 2015: 80.

⁴⁷ Thenceforth, Mitanni was known by its Akkadian name Ḫanigalbat: see Astour: 1972: 105; Valério 2011: 173–183.

⁴⁸ Moran 1987: 116.

⁴⁹ Artzi 1993: 8–9; Rainey 2015 2: 1388.

⁵⁰ EA 43:1–17; Na'aman 1995: 118; Cochavi-Rainey 2005: 95.

and ...] for them. And his eldest son [on account of the friendly rela]tions with his father [I treat] favorably. How I treat him [favorably you] do not know ... you do not know ... nobody [knows].⁵¹

As the end of this passage evinces, the author stresses that neither his Egyptian peer nor anyone else involved are aware of the extent of his good relations with the kingdom of Mitanni. In other words, he is looking to provide an alternative version of what is already known. Lies are indeed frequently linked to a distortion of commonly held information.⁵² The lack of availability of details makes it easier to mislead and disinform.⁵³

In order to understand the Hittite king's false claims, we must understand the political situation in the years preceding the assassination. During this period, Hatti began making threatening noises over the Mitanni gains in Syria.⁵⁴ A zero-sum conflict developed between the two countries in light of the lack of the possibility of cooperation, the achievements made by one side being experienced as a loss by the other and vice versa.⁵⁵ At a certain point, Suppiluliuma I sought to attack his rival Tušratta in a type of "probing mission." This yielding no results, he turned to diplomatic channels in order to isolate Tušratta in the international arena.⁵⁶ He thus made a pact with Artatama II of Hurri, a kingdom north of Mitanni, and Alše, another small kingdom lying north of his rival.⁵⁷ South of Mitanni, he estab-

⁵¹ EA 43:1–17.

⁵² Cohen 1999: 41.

⁵³ Cole 2001: 108.

⁵⁴ Klengel 1992: 109; 1999: 155–156; Bryce 2005: 155–158. Cf. Beckman 1993: 55.

⁵⁵ Maschler, Solan and Zamir 2013: 9, 77, 111.

⁵⁶ EA 17:30–38. Goetze 1975: 6; Podany 2010: 270.

⁵⁷ CTH 51 obv. 1–2, 25–26. See Beckman 1996: 38 §1, 39 §3; Altman 2018: 302–304; cf. Altman 1984: 44; 2004: 82; Wilhelm 1995 2:1251; Bryce 2005: 157–158; 2014: 41–42; Singer 2009: 59.

lished ties with Babylonia, taking a Babylonian princess as a wife.⁵⁸ From this direction, Assyria also began to become stronger, gaining recognition amongst the Egyptian as a power of equal standing.⁵⁹ At the time, Aššur-uballiṭ I had freed himself from the yoke of Mitanni and was gradually forming his country into a hostile front against its former occupier.⁶⁰ Whatever the case, the developments occurred without any liaison with Hatti.⁶¹

In time, Suppiluliuma I also started engaging in diplomacy along the northern Lebanese coast.⁶² These Hittite actions prompted Tušratta to intervene in northern and central Syria in order to safeguard his political interests.⁶³ Suppiluliuma I immediately reacted, initiating the “First Syrian War” and defeating Mitanni.⁶⁴ Tušratta was assassinated not long afterwards, apparently at the hands of one of his sons.⁶⁵ According to the Hittite king, Šuttarna III, the heir of Artatama II of Hurri, swiftly sought to fill the power vacuum created in the region, being supported by Assyria and Alše.

The son thus switching alliance from Hatti to Assyria, the Hittite king crowned Šattiwaza, Tušratta’s heir, king of Hanigalbat as a vassal monarch.⁶⁶ This move is alluded to in the letter quoted above.⁶⁷

⁵⁸ *SBo* I, 46–47, no. 84; cf. Bin-Nun 1975: 176–77; Singer 2002: 70–77; Bryce 2005: 159.

⁵⁹ Artzi 1997: 320–336.

⁶⁰ Harrak 1987: 38, 50; Wilhelm 1989: 35; Mayer 1995: 175–177; Altman 2004: 72.

⁶¹ Wilhelm 1989: 35; Altman 2004: 87.

⁶² EA 59:21–24; Altman 2001: 10; 2004: 83.

⁶³ EA 85:51–55, 86:10–12, 95:27–35; *CTH* 53:1–11; Beckman 1996: 50 §1; Altman 2004: 84–85; 2018: 321; Kitchen 1962: 26; Klengel 1999: 157; Warburton 2001: 75.

⁶⁴ *CTH* 51:1–47; Beckman 1996: 38–40 §§1–5; Altman 2018: 302–305; cf. Stavi 2015: 81ff.

⁶⁵ EA 43:1–17; Wilhelm 1989: 37; Beckman 1993: 55; Altman 2004: 96.

⁶⁶ *CTH* 51:48–67, 52:31–47; Beckman 1996: 40–41 §§6–7, 45–46 §§4–6; Altman 2018: 305–307, 314–316. Cf. Güterbock 1956: 110–11; Harrak 1987: 43–44; Altman 2004: 184–187, 264–270, 308–309.

⁶⁷ EA 43:12–14; Na’aman 1995: 118.

The Hittite fear of Syria led to a political triangle designed to divide the fields of conquest between Hatti, Mitanni, and Egypt.⁶⁸ In line with the principles of game theory, this created a “triangular duel,” the winner of the first duel then facing the third party.⁶⁹ Strengthened by its overthrow of Mitanni, Hatti was thus on course to confront Egypt.⁷⁰

At this point, however, Suppiluliuma I sought to prevent a clash developing with the latter, whose field of interest in Syria focused upon the Lebanese coastal strip and the area around Damascus.⁷¹ At the same time, Egypt, which was losing ground as a military power following the reforms introduced by Amenhotep IV/Akhenaten, had no grounds to compete with Hatti. This fact explains her decision not to extend any assistance to her ally Mitanni.⁷²

In the vassal treaty Suppiluliuma I arranged for Šattiwaza, Tušratta’s son (*CTH* 51), he further sought to clear himself, painting the Mitanni king as the aggressor.⁷³ This representation directly contravened his declaration in his letter to Pharaoh of their mutual relationship (see above). In the “appendix” to the treaty (*CTH* 52), he likewise stressed the mercy he had extended to Šattiwaza, depicting himself as a person whom the gods regarded as loyal and true.⁷⁴ In general, the prefaces to Suppiluliuma’s vassal treaties evince that he systematically endeavored to clear himself of all guilt of aggression.⁷⁵ For the sake of comparison, in the Neo-Assyrian imperial inscriptions

⁶⁸ Beckerath 1997: 71.

⁶⁹ Dixit and Nalebuff 1993: 329–331.

⁷⁰ Mayer 1995: 186; Altman 2004: 82; Bryce 2014: 41–42.

⁷¹ Klengel 1992: 108–110.

⁷² Redford 1993: 173–174; 1984: 195; Bryan 2000: 83–84; Artzi 2000: 211; 2005: 462–479; Podany 2010: 270–271.

⁷³ *CTH* 51 obv. 1–10; Beckman 1996: 38 §1; Altman 2018: 302–303.

⁷⁴ *CTH* 52 obv. 26; Beckman 1996: 45 §3; Altman 2018: 314.

⁷⁵ Altman 2018: 24–42; cf. Altman 1977: 27–49.

these kings also portrayed themselves as being compelled to react to the provocations of weaker kingdoms.⁷⁶

In light of the circumstances laid out above, it seems unlikely that the waning Tušratta would incite Suppiluliuma I, whose power was on the rise.⁷⁷ The statements made by the king of Mitanni with respect to Hittite aggression thus ring true.⁷⁸ Although small states can indeed provoke larger ones, these are exceptional cases.⁷⁹

The above discussion demonstrates that, in the instance under investigation, the words of the Hittite king in EA 43 regarding the mutuality that prevailed between him and the king of Mitanni and the profound shock he had experienced upon hearing the news of his colleague's assassination were in fact falsehoods. His interest—even if only at that specific point in time—was to safeguard good relations with Egypt. In typological terms, this is a defensive lie.⁸⁰ The original text clearly contains both truths and lies, a device that grants credibility to the speaker's words.⁸¹

Another form of lie in the El-Amarna archive is that of deception. According to the Oxford Dictionary, this is “wrongful or criminal [action or speech] intended to result in financial or personal gain.”⁸² Deception thus involves a deliberate intent to mislead some-

⁷⁶ Oded 1992: 34, 40–42, 54, 59.

⁷⁷ Gromova 2007: 292.

⁷⁸ EA 17:30–38.

⁷⁹ Rosencrance 1973: 120; Betts 2003: 34–43.

⁸⁰ Bok 1989: 18; Cohen 1999: 41; DePaulo, Ansfield, Kirkendol and Boden 2004: 147.

⁸¹ See Ekman 1992: 38, 41; Elaad 2007: 47; Nahari and Vrij 2014: 89. For this rhetorical strategy in the Hebrew Bible, see Shemesh 2002: 93–94; Grossman 2004: 483–515.

⁸² See English Oxford Living Dictionaries: <<https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/fraud>>.

one into thinking that a statement is true when it is false.⁸³ It provides immediate gratification and a measure of control over its victim.⁸⁴

This form of lying is well known in the biblical texts.⁸⁵ It also occurs frequently in the El-Amarna letters. As we shall see, the kings of Babylon and Mitanni frequently complain of being deceived by the Egyptian Pharaohs. Many of these instances are related to the quality and quantity of the gifts of gold sent by the Egyptians. Kadaš-man-Enlil I asserts, for example, that the gold he received was of poor quality, a fact revealed when it was melted in the presence of the Egyptian envoy, who could thus testify to the truth of the matter.⁸⁶ The same problem recurred in the days of his son Burnaburiaš, who sought to offer his Egyptian colleague a “diplomatic” way out of the impasse: “May the [eyes] of my brother see it and may my brother seal it and may he send it. As for the previous gold that my brother sent, evidently my brother did not see it. It was a deputy of my brother who sealed it and sent it.”⁸⁷

Attributing the blame to an anonymous official rather than to Pharaoh constitutes a type of “white lie”—*i.e.*, one with social value designed to prevent the Egyptian king from being hurt.⁸⁸

In another letter sent by Tušratta to Teye/Tiy, Amenhotep IV’s mother, the Mitanni king protested against the deception practiced by the son now occupying his father’s throne:

*But as for the words of Mimmureya, [your] hus[band,
it is you that knows (them), but] my greeting gift which
[your husband said] to s[end], you have not s[ent], [and*

⁸³ Bok 1989: 13; Cohen 1999: 17.

⁸⁴ Siegel 2010: 342, 375–376; Britt and Rocque 2016: 185.

⁸⁵ Gen 27:12, 29:19–26; cf. Cohen 1999: 109–110; Shemesh 2002: 84.

⁸⁶ EA 3:13–17.

⁸⁷ EA 7:68–70; cf. 10:16–24. See Rainey 2015 1: 87.

⁸⁸ Elaad 2007: 38; cf. Singer 1999: 292.

*the] solid cast [statues of gold which] I requested [from your husband], saying: “[My] br[other, statues of gold] and real lapis lazuli [may he send] t[o me].” But now, as for Nap[hurreya your son], he has plated statues of wood [and sent (them)].*⁸⁹

In contrast to the son’s duplicity, his father Amenhotep III is painted as acting uprightly, molding statues of pure gold for his colleague in the presence of the Mitanni envoys.⁹⁰ In political terms, the son’s deeds point to the deterioration in relations between Egypt and Mitanni as the former took advantage of the latter’s decline.⁹¹ During Tušratta’s reign, splits began appearing in the Mitanni royal dynasty, thereby weakening its status in the international arena.⁹² This circumstance also diminished the kingdom’s attractiveness as an ally in times of trouble.⁹³ In order to bolster its declining prestige on the international stage as well as internally, the Mitanni king thus entreated his Egyptian colleague to give him valuable presents, primarily gold.⁹⁴

In the incident of the vanished Babylonian princess in Egypt and the possible attempt to defraud Kadašman-Enlil I’s envoys, Amenhotep III sought to clear himself of any guilt of lying or deception. In order to reinforce the trustworthiness of his words, he swore in the letter that he had no interest in engaging in such conduct: “And if yo[ur sister is] dead, why would they conceal [her] de[ath and why]

⁸⁹ EA 26:33–41. See Rainey 2015 1: 279. Cf. EA 20:46–52.

⁹⁰ EA 27:19–27.

⁹¹ Podany 2010: 240.

⁹² Harak 1987: 20–21; Bryce 2014: 43.

⁹³ In general, mutual relations exist between a state’s internal stability and its position beyond its borders: see Wendt 1999: 243; Griffiths and O’Callaghan 2002: 253; Kegley and Blanton 2011: 240–243.

⁹⁴ Harak 1987: 20–21; Cochavi-Rainey 1999: 51–162; Artzi 2004: 107. Cf. Wilkinson 2011: 268.

would we present anoth[er? ... Surely the great god(?)] Amun [knows your] sis[ter is alive!].”⁹⁵

We also find a form of lobbying for an act of deception in the letters. This is linked to Kadašman-Enlil I’s abortive attempts to take an Egyptian princess to wife, which failed despite the fact that he sent Babylonian princesses to Egypt.⁹⁶ This conduct contravened the mutual relations that existed between the large kingdoms in the region.⁹⁷ Just like the arrogant attitude displayed in EA 1, this Pharaonic behavior derived from the Egyptian kings’ sense of superiority—which rested on Egyptian anthropocentrism and the desire to gain status and prestige in the international arena.⁹⁸

When the Babylonian king understood he was not going to gain an Egyptian bride from amongst Pharaoh’s daughters, he suggested a scheme to his colleague: “When they told me this message, I wrote t[o my brother] thus, saying, ‘There are grown daughters [of someone], beautiful women. Send one as if she were [yo]ur [daughter]. Who will say, “She is not the king’s daughter?”””⁹⁹

As modern political science research indicates, great importance attaches to a country’s image and prestige—and that of its leaders—on the international stage.¹⁰⁰ This principle also operated in the ancient world, several international-relations scholars having demonstrated the affinities between international systems from various regions and periods.¹⁰¹ As a result of the decline in Mitanni’s

⁹⁵ EA 1:43–46; Rainey 2015 1: 61.

⁹⁶ EA 1:10–52, 2:6–13, 3:7–12, 4:4–22.

⁹⁷ Liverani 2000: 16–20.

⁹⁸ Schulman 1979: 179–180; Cochavi-Rainey 1993: 77–78; Meier 2000: 171; Morris 2006: 193; Lloyd 2014: 99.

⁹⁹ EA 4:10–13. See Rainey 2015 1: 73.

¹⁰⁰ Holsti 1995: 6; Brown and Ainley 2005: 86; Barston 2013: 16.

¹⁰¹ Holsti 1995: 23–28; Galán 1995: 91–92; Zaccagnini 2000: 149–153. See also above.

international prestige and the rise of Hatti and Assyria, the kingdom's ruler, Tušratta, became greatly concerned about rumours about him that had reached the Egyptian throne, for example. He thus wrote Amenhotep III asking him not to listen to them:

*And I want to say one thing more to my brother: In the presence of my brother, evil words are numerous; one, who speaks (to him), is not (however) at hand, those (evil words) do not come before the sight of a great one. (Now, however) an evil word was spoken(?) to the king; a babbler(?) has in bad manner spoken to my brother <concerning> my person, he has denounced me ...*¹⁰²

The king of Alašia similarly sought to refute falsehoods told about his citizens to the Egyptian Pharaoh.¹⁰³ The ruler of Ugarit also represented the words of the Egyptian delegate Hanya as untrustworthy.¹⁰⁴ In both these cases, the writers alleged that they had acted sincerely, the diplomatic incident being the result, at most, of a misunderstanding.¹⁰⁵

In a number of the letters, we find rulers seeking to verify their claims to others. Tušratta of Mitanni, for example, took pains to renew and tighten his country's ties with Egypt after they had broken off. He thus asserts that he had ascended the throne at a young age, the murder of his brother Artasumara and another person by the name of Ud-ḥi/Pirḥi having prevented him from maintaining relations between the two kingdoms.¹⁰⁶ Writing to Pharaoh, he declares that he

¹⁰² EA 24:IV, 1–5; cf. 24:IV, 108–110, 28:46–49. See Rainey 2015 1: 227.

¹⁰³ EA 38:7–22. See Rainey 2015: 138. Cf. Liverani 1990: 98.

¹⁰⁴ EA 47:22–30.

¹⁰⁵ EA 38:19–22, 47:12–21.

¹⁰⁶ EA 17:11–22. See Altman 1984: 44; Wilhelm 1995 2: 1250; Kahn 2011: 147.

has succeeded in thwarting the Hittite invasion of his lands, this boast being meant to strengthen their interrelations—which in turn would assist him in facing the rise of the kingdom of Hatti.¹⁰⁷ In order to validate this claim, he sent his colleague a tribute: “Now, one chariot, two horses, one lad and one maiden from the spoil of the land of Hatti have I sent you.”¹⁰⁸

In another letter to Egypt, Tušratta charges Amenhotep IV with not supplying him with the raw gold and gold statues Amenhotep III had promised him.¹⁰⁹ In support of this allegation, he directs the son to his mother, Teye, so that she can affirm it:

*[As for] all [the things] that I say, I call no [oth]er witnesses. Teye, [your mother,] it is she that I call, so inquire of Teye, your [mother]: if among the words that I speak, there is [even on]e word not true; [if there is one wo]rd that is not of Nimmureya, your father; if [Nimm]ureya, your father, [did not] generate [love] mutually with me; if Nimmureya, your father, [did n]ot say: “When I have caused the gold of [the land of Eg]ypt to be sufficient in the land of Hanigalbat, then, for sure, I will not send [gol]d.”*¹¹⁰

Referral of a correspondent to a third party to confirm the writer’s statements also occurs in Babylonian-Egyptian communications. Seeking to refute Kadašman-Enlil I’s charge that his sister had vanished at the Egyptian court, Amenhotep III asked his Babylonian colleague to send a prominent envoy to Egypt to identify her, thus proving she was still alive.¹¹¹ Conversely, when Burnaburiaš of Baby-

¹⁰⁷ EA 17:30–35. See Klengel 1999: 155; Kahn 2011: 155.

¹⁰⁸ EA 17:36–38. See Rainey 2015 1: 136.

¹⁰⁹ EA 29:136–140.

¹¹⁰ EA 29:45–50; cf. EA 28:42–49. See Rainey 2015 1: 307.

¹¹¹ EA 1:32–34.

lonia complained to Amenhotep III for not having sent special envoys to inquire of his health, he suggested that his Egyptian colleague check his claim: “From the day that my brother’s envoy re[ached me], my body has been unwell and his envoy has not on any [occasion in] my presence eaten food or drunk spirits. [Whe]n you ask your envoy, he will tell you.”¹¹²

The need to verify statements also appears in cases related to crimes committed. During the period under discussion, Egyptian control over the Syro-Canaanite space weakened, the crime rate thus increasing.¹¹³ In large part, the offences took the form of terrorism and guerilla warfare due to the political aspects of the developments.¹¹⁴ One of the hardest struck was the Amurru region within the Syro-Lebanese coastal strip.¹¹⁵ At the end of the last letter (EA 7), the Babylonian king draws his Egyptian colleague’s attention to the fact that his envoy Šalmu had been mugged twice within the territory under Egyptian rule in Syria.¹¹⁶ In another, he raises another issue, this time related to the murder of Babylonian traders in the northern Canaanite region of Ḥannatōna/Ḥannathon.¹¹⁷ In order to strengthen his claim and make it easier for the Egyptian authorities to deal with the case, he provides him with the names of those who sent the assassins and those who witnessed the event.¹¹⁸ Finally, he asks him to investigate the matter and verify the charge:

*But if they dispute you, Šum-Hadda, having constrained
one man of mine, has detained him with him and as for*

¹¹² EA 7:8–11.

¹¹³ Galil 1997: 7–52; Breier 2016: 11–27.

¹¹⁴ For the political distinction between terror and conventional crime, see Merari 2007: 12–14, 24–26; Deflem 2009: 533–540.

¹¹⁵ Altman, 1978: 3–24; Liverani 2004: 59–117.

¹¹⁶ EA 7:73–82.

¹¹⁷ EA 8:8–42.

¹¹⁸ EA 8:13–24.

another man, Sutarna of 'Akkā, having forced him into service he is still serving him. Let these men come to you; investigate and ask [if they are de]ad so that you may be apprised.¹¹⁹

For the sake of comparison, we may note that the assaulting and murdering of traders in Syria is also reported in a later letter sent by Hattusili III of Hatti to Kadašman-Enlil II of Babylon. Herein, Hattusili III, in whose territory the offences were ostensibly committed, requested proof that would confirm the Babylonians' charge that Hittites were responsible.¹²⁰

Ancient kings frequently drew attention to lies told them. Amenhotep III thus represents the Babylonian envoys of Kadašman-Enlil I as liars endeavouring to cover up the crimes they had committed:

Now, we are brothers, I and you, both of us, but I got angry concerning your envoys because they speak to you, saying: "Nothing is given to us who go to Egypt." Those who come to me, does one of the two go [without] taking silver, gold, oil, garments, everything nice [more than from] another country, but he speaks untruth to the one who sends him. The first time the envoys went off to your f[ath]er their mouths were speaking untruths. The second time they went forth they are speaking lies to you. So I myself said: "Whether [I gi]ve them something or not, they will speak lies." So I made up my mind about them; I did not gi[ve to] them further.¹²¹

¹¹⁹ EA 8:34–42. See Rainey 2015 1: 91.

¹²⁰ KBo I, 10: rev. 14–25. Beckman 1996: 136 §10; Na'aman 1999: 110*, 114*; cf. Liverani 1990: 99–100.

¹²¹ EA 1:64–77. See Rainey 2015 1: 63.

According to the reading of Moran and Cochavi-Rainey, Tušratta of Mitanni similarly paints the words Amenhotep IV wrote him as untrustworthy: “They [the words?] are not at all t[r]ue.”¹²² Rainey, on the other hand, interprets these lines as intimating that the Mitanni king was merely asking a rhetorical question: “[And true are those wor]ds or not? No?”¹²³ This is a form of an emphatic statement, which does not always expect an answer.¹²⁴ Tarḥundaradu of Arzawa in western Anatolia likewise adduced people as untrustworthy. One of these was Kalbaya, his own envoy: “Behold, with regard to this matter that Kalbaya said to me: ‘We should establish a blood-relationship between ourselves.’ I do not trust Kalbaya. He said it, but it does not figure on the tablet.”¹²⁵

The kings of Egypt and Arzawa both quoted words uttered by envoys to which they sought to give the lie.¹²⁶ Hereby, they endeavored to give greater weight to their statements—a phenomenon also recorded in other letters in the El-Amarna archive.¹²⁷ Identification of lying envoys is similarly recorded in documents from Mari.¹²⁸ The El-Amarna letters also indicate, however, that truthful envoys won recognition. In one of Tušratta’s letters to Amenhotep III, for example, the Mitanni king praises the trustworthiness of the Egyptian envoy Mane, who spoke the truth to him.¹²⁹

In summary, in this article I have examined the phenomenon of the lie in the international El-Amarna correspondence. I first

¹²² EA 29:141. See Moran 1987: 96; Cochavi-Rainey 2005: 85.

¹²³ See Rainey 2015 1: 317.

¹²⁴ See English Oxford Living Dictionaries: <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/rhetorical_question>; Cambridge Dictionary: <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/rhetorical_question>; cf. Crystal 2008: 400.

¹²⁵ EA 32:1–6. See Rainey 2015 1: 331.

¹²⁶ EA 1:68, 32:2–3.

¹²⁷ Breier 2018: 17–19.

¹²⁸ A. 885: 22–25; cf. Durand 1991: 67; Elgavish 1998: 207.

¹²⁹ EA 21:24–32, 24:II 95–106.

briefly reviewed the concept of the lie as analyzed in contemporary scholarly literature. Herein, lying is defined as deliberately delivering misleading information. While these studies demonstrate that lying is widespread across all human cultures and societies, it is more common in certain areas than others—in particular in the political realm, with which this article deals. Modern research also evinces that it is easier to lie in writing than orally, it also being more difficult to expose lies when uttered in a language that is not the native tongue of the addressee. This fact is relevant to ancient documents, which are both written and composed in various languages. We have also seen that in ancient Near Eastern wisdom texts and the Hebrew Bible lies carry a negative valence.

I then proceeded to describe the international setting of the El-Amarna period. This was characterized by a multi-polar balance of power due to the existence of five empires—Egypt, Assyria, Babylonia, Mitanni, and Hatti. The balance being dynamic, each sought to maximize their power in the region.

Turning directly to the El-Amarna letters, I presented a case in which it was possible to prove the falsehood involved. Herein, Suppiluliuma of Hatti wrote to the Egyptian king declaring that he had had fraternal relations with Tušratta of Mitanni before his assassination. In light of other testimonies, however, it becomes clear that the Hittite king was in fact the sworn enemy of the Mitanni monarch, attacking him militarily and then isolating him diplomatically. The lie was designed to present the writer as unwilling to put Egyptian interests in Syria at risk.

Examining the concept of deception as reflected in the letters, I demonstrated the way in which the kings of Babylonia and Mitanni claimed that the Pharaohs defrauded them in relation to the tributes they paid, stinting on both the quality and quantity of the gold they sent to Egypt. We also saw how one of the Babylonian kings suggested that his Egyptian counterpart disguise an anonymous Egyptian

woman as Pharaoh's daughter. The rulers likewise appealed to their colleagues not to listen to the lies and rumors circulated about them. In the other direction, they further endeavored to adduce proof to verify their claims. In general, they referred the addressees to people who could substantiate their statements. We also discovered cases in which they pointed out liars whose words should not be trusted.

This discussion of the international correspondence in the El-Amarna archive indicates that lying in its various forms was a well-known phenomenon in the ancient world, the study of ancient documents testifying to the fact that it closely resembles modern theories of lying developed in the field of the social sciences and humanities on the basis of contemporary sources.

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Abbreviations

A = *Mari Documents by Museum Numbers*

AOF = *Altorientalische Forschungen*

*CAH*³ = *The Cambridge Ancient History*

CTH = Laroche, E. 1971. *Catalogue des textes hittites*. Paris.

EA = *The El-Amanra Letters*

JANES = *Journal of Ancient Near Eastern Society*

JCS = *Journal of Cuneiform Studies*

JNES = *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*

JNSL = *Journal of North-West Semitic Studies*

JSPR = *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*

UF = *Ugarit Forschungen*