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A Brief History of Writing

From the Perspective of Restoration Scripture

Noel B. Reynolds

December 7, 2021

The history of writing

Current studies of the history of languages and writing do not lend ready support for these claims in Restoration scriptures of a family record going all the way back to Abraham and Adam. While early forms of writing have been documented by archaeologists back as far as the middle of the fourth millennium BCE, the “full writing” that we take for granted as displayed in modern public discourse and in the Book of Abraham is not evident in either Mesopotamian or Egyptian texts for another thousand years—still centuries before Abraham.¹ But the absence of evidence cannot disprove the claims. And other finds may open at least a theoretical possibility for the kind of lineage histories described by Enoch, Moses, Abraham, the Brass Plates, and the Manassite scribal tradition hypothesized in this

¹ See Jerrold S. Cooper, “Babylonian beginnings: the origin of the cuneiform writing system in comparative perspective,” and John Baines, “The earliest Egyptian writing: development, context, purpose,” both in Stephen D. Houston, ed., *The First Writing: Script Invention as History and Process* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2004), 93, 150, and 173–175 respectively.

paper.

The invention of writing

One particularly important new point of scholarly consensus corrects the mid-twentieth century assumption that writing was discovered once and then adapted to a variety of linguistic traditions.² Mesoamerican writing is universally acknowledged as proof of at least a second independent invention. Leading historical epigraphers now believe that there were at least four independent inventions of writing: Sumerian, Egyptian, Chinese, and Mesoamerican.³ And they recognize that there could easily have been others not yet manifest in the archaeological record.

However limited the independent inventions of writing as such may have been, these have in turn spawned a vast array of scripts and writing systems, only about 100 of which are in use today. The motivations driving these developments seem to have been widely varied and often overlapping. While not confident of being able to provide full explanations for different script traditions, researchers

² See, especially, chapter six of the classic text on writing: I. J. Gelb, *A Study of Writing*, revised edition (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1963), 190–205.

³ Piotr Michalowski, “Writing and Literacy in Early States: A Mesopotamian Perspective,” in *Literacy: Interdisciplinary Conversations*, Deborah Keller Cohen, ed. (New York: Hampton Press, 1994), 53. See also, Cooper, “Babylonian beginnings,” 71 and 92.

point most frequently to the practical requirements of household and commercial accounting and to elite or religious display as motivations.

In the ANE, writing was widespread for a millennium before being used routinely for sending complex messages and writing literature or histories. Bruce Trigger has concluded that the civilizations that did invent writing first used it “to record economic transactions, convey messages, record ritual texts, celebrate the deeds of rulers, and preserve medical, calendrical, and divinatory knowledge.” As he goes on to observe, “specialized knowledge remained closely linked to oral traditions, and distinctive literary forms and devices for organizing and conveying knowledge did not develop to any considerable degree until a much later period.”⁴ The inexpensive and durable clay tablets used primarily in cuneiform writing traditions give today’s scholars access to a wider range of uses than do the impermanent writing materials used in most other traditions and provide much of the evidence for these conclusions.

Another important development in the thinking of scholars who study the origins of writing is the rejection of their earlier evolutionary theories. While accommodating obvious evidence of improvements and revisions in writing

⁴ Bruce C. Trigger, “Writing systems: a case study in cultural evolution,” in Houston, *The First Writing*, 40.

systems over time, they no longer promote the ideal of gradual evolution from primitive efforts to sophisticated systems. Michalowski articulates this widespread view of his contemporaries in this way:

The earliest writing systems were invented *as systems*, not through gradual evolution, but in quantum leaps in the history of human communication. They coexisted with other systems of communication, with painting, sculpture, pottery, gestures, and natural language, to name but a few. They were not technologically inferior to the early alphabet; to the contrary, they were equally, if not better, suited for their tasks.⁵

Leading Mayan epigrapher Stephen Houston has recently instigated a collaborative effort to explore how writing systems dwindle into obsolescence.⁶ While it may require tens of thousands of native speakers to keep a language from going extinct, a script only needs one reader.⁷ But however large or small the script's competent readership may be, "its survival presupposes a social

⁵ Michalowski, "Writing and Literacy in Early States," 64.

⁶ See Stephen Houston, John Baines, and Jerrold Cooper, "Last Writing: Script Obsolescence in Egypt, Mesopotamia, and Mesoamerica," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 45 (2003): 430–479, in which three prominent epigraphers lay out a preliminary outline and defense of the need for study of script obsolescence. In John Baines, John Bennet, and Stephen Houston, eds., *The Disappearance of Writing Systems: Perspectives on Literacy and Communication* (Sheffield: Equinox Publishing, 2008), a widened circle of epigraphers joins in addressing the question to their studies of a selection of obsolete writing systems.

⁷ Houston, "Last Writing," 433.

investment and relatively broad use.” The scribal schools of Egypt, Mesopotamia, Mesoamerica, and Israel demonstrate how that can work. The biblical Genesis would seem to be a sketchy memory of what might have been a far more complete lineage history at one point in time, and the Book of Abraham may show how Abraham was attempting to extend or resurrect that tradition.

Seth Sanders has helpfully pointed out that archaeological evidence for writing in private, non-state contexts is abundant from the centuries before Abraham:

The independence of the linear alphabet from the state until a relatively late period should not surprise us. The history of writing shows very different possible fits between scripts and states. First, a state is not a prerequisite of scribal production: you do not need a state to produce massive amounts of writing. In the Old Assyrian caravan archive of Kültepe we find tens of thousands of texts that merchants wrote (or perhaps had written) to each other; the texts refer to scribes not of the palace or temple but the *kārum*, the trading colony. A later ancient society in a different part of the world provides extensive further examples: Sanskrit was spread widely across south Asia and into China, ignoring numerous political boundaries, by

Buddhist monasteries, not kings.⁸

Although we now know that the less well-known Ugaritic culture that was destroyed shortly after 1200 BCE where it had prospered for centuries on the Mediterranean coast not far north of Israel also spoke a West Semitic language and had an even earlier linear alphabet that used a cuneiform script, there is no evidence of a direct influence on the development of literacy in Israel three or four centuries later.⁹ Ryan Byrne has argued that between the collapse of Ugarit in the early twelfth century BCE and the disappearance of its linear alphabet and the later emergence of a standardized linear alphabet to meet the needs of the Israelite monarchies, alphabetic writing in the Levant continued on a commission basis as elites hired individual scribes to serve their needs.¹⁰

David Calabro's thesis about Egyptian influence in southern Levant

After a careful review of three early ostraca from the Negev and the associated scholarly literature, David Calabro argues for a “a tradition of hieratic writing in

⁸ Sanders, *Invention of Hebrew*, 120.

⁹ See the summary account in Robert Hawley, Dennis Pardee, and Carole Roche-Hawley, “The Scribal Culture of Ugarit,” *Journal of Ancient Near Eastern History* 2, no. 2 (2015): 229–267.

¹⁰ See Ryan Byrne, “The Refuge of Scribalism in Iron I Palestine,” *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 345 (February 2007):1–31.

the southern Levant” that may have had “its ultimate roots in a period even before the New Kingdom”—the time frame most commonly cited by scholars.

On the question of the extent of the hieratic system used in this tradition, Arad 25, 34, and the ostrakon from Tell el-Qudeirat indicate that the hieratic tradition in Judah lasted in a fuller form than only the isolated use of numbers and units of measurement. In particular, it included hieratic alphabetic signs, logographic signs for commodities like wine and barley, and Egyptian conventions of sign sequence. This means that the system overlapped in some ways with alphabetic script and could, at least potentially, have been put to use for purposes other than simple accounting; whether this potential was actually exploited is, of course, unknown in view of the lack of surviving documents.¹¹

The origins of Hebrew language, script, and scribal traditions

Archaeologists and epigraphers have worked to establish the origins of Israelite scribalism using the inscriptions found in excavations. The usual assumption is that until the adoption of a Hebrew version of the northwest Semitic alphabet

¹¹ David Calabro, “The Hieratic Scribal Tradition in Preexilic Judah,” in *Evolving Egypt: Innovation, Appropriation, and Reinterpretation in Ancient Egypt*, eds. Kerry Muhlestein and John Gee (Oxford: Archaeopress, 2012), 83.

around 800 BCE, Israel only had oral traditions. “Writing is never mentioned in the history of the patriarchs.”¹² The emergence of a Hebrew alphabet provided the opportunity to transcribe the oral traditions of Israel and to edit them in various ways for posterity.¹³ Scribal schools would presumably have developed significantly as part of that process. As Israel Finkelstein recently summarized:

Assembling all available data for scribal activity in Israel and Judah reveals no evidence of writing before approximately 800 B.C.E. In fact, it shows that meaningful writing in Israel began in the first half of the eighth century, while in Judah it commenced only in the late eighth and more so in the seventh century B.C.E. . . . Recent archaeological and biblical research has made it clear that *no biblical text could have been written before circa 800 B.C.E. in Israel and about a century later in Judah.* . . . Ninth-century B.C.E. and earlier memories could have been preserved and transmitted

¹² Solomon Gandz was an early explorer of the oral tradition in the Bible who noted how alternatives to written records are mentioned in stories of the patriarchs. See Solomon Gandz, “Oral Tradition in the Bible,” in *Jewish Studies in Memory of George A. Kohut, 1874–1933*, Salo W. Baron and Alexander Marx, eds. (New York: Bloch, 1935), 249.

¹³ An excellent summary of contemporary research on the invention and spread of alphabetic writing in the ancient world can be found in André Lemaire, “Alphabetic Writing in the Mediterranean World: Transmission and Appropriation,” in Baruch Halpern and Kenneth S. Sacks, eds., *Cultural Contact and Appropriation in the Axial-Age Mediterranean World* (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 103–115.

only in oral form (*italics added*).¹⁴

In their comprehensive review of the archaeological evidence, Finkelstein and Sass concluded that:

Hebrew letter shapes make their debut in the late Iron IIA1 or ca. 800–840/830. They first appear on the periphery of Israel and Judah in Rehov and Gath, the former probably under Israelite domination. At that time, the days of the Omrides, there is no archaeological evidence for Hebrew writing (or any other) in Samaria, Jerusalem, or elsewhere in the heartland of Israel and Judah. . . .

Taking the above archaeological evidence and absence at face value would mean that Omride Israel was pre-alphabetic, and that the events of much of the ninth century described in the Book of Kings were transmitted orally and first put in writing some two generations later.

The archaeological evidence, some of it indirect, points to the late ninth century or late Iron IIA2 as the time when the Hebrew alphabet became visible in the Hebrew kingdoms.¹⁵

¹⁴ Finkelstein, *Forgotten Kingdom*, 162–163.

¹⁵ Israel Finkelstein and Benjamin Sass, “The West Semitic Alphabetic Inscriptions, Late Bronze II to Iron IIA: Archaeological Context, Distribution and Chronology,” *Hebrew Bible and Ancient Israel* 2 (2013): 201–202.

But all archaeological conclusions must be seen as temporary. Only a year after publishing this statement, the authors discovered a sherd in their Megiddo excavation of a ninth-century metallurgical workshop that has a radiocarbon date before 850 BCE and that seems to display an early form of cursive Hebrew.¹⁶

Scribal roles in West-Semitic oral cultures

The scribes in Iron Age West Semitic speaking regions provided the technology by which non-literate people could communicate complex messages or texts at a distance. The scribal class provided the means by which anyone in those oral cultures could take advantage of the power of literacy:

If Israelites did not see literature as confined to writing but as traveling through it, this has further implications for the historical nature of written Hebrew: it means that, first, we do not need to assume an earlier written literature to explain the complexity of Hebrew literary culture. What we have seen of earlier West Semitic literature shows that a highly developed culture of *poiesis*, cultural creation through text-making, must have existed in the early Iron Age and earlier, before there was any desire to set it down

¹⁶ See Benjamin Sass and Israel Finkelstein, “The swan-song of Proto-Canaanite in the ninth century BCE in light of an alphabetic inscription from Megiddo,” *Semitica et Classica* 9 (2016): 19–42.

in standardized Hebrew. And this idea persists: in prophetic narratives from the late Iron Age, the decisive feature of a text was its communicative power, not its written nature. Texts like first Isaiah (29:18) concur in describing the deaf, not the blind, miraculously “hearing,” not “seeing,” the words of a book. “Reading” is fundamentally an acoustic performance, and text-reception is imagined as a process of hearing.¹⁷

As these oral cultures made the transition to literacy with the sudden availability of the new northwest Semitic alphabets in the eighth and seventh centuries BCE, it would have been quite natural for them to continue using the terminology of oral performance for the newly enabled process of reading out of written texts by scribes to their non-literate audiences. Hebrew, Arabic, and Aramaic all use the root *qry* which in various verb and noun forms can refer to noise or crying as the crowing of a rooster or to reading and even specifically to scripture reading or to one who proclaims or reads.¹⁸

The development of paleo Hebrew script

¹⁷ Sanders, *Invention of Hebrew*, 146–147.

¹⁸ See online The Comprehensive Aramaic Lexicon Project, accessed 14 April 2021 at cal.huc.edu/index.html. I thank John S. Robertson for calling this dictionary information to my attention. See also the discussion in Schniedewind, *How the Bible Became a Book*, 48–49.

The alphabetic scripts of Phoenician, Aramaic, and Old (paleo) Hebrew developed together in the tenth through eighth centuries. The growing collection of archaeologically discovered inscriptions is now large enough and sufficiently representative of different time periods to allow analyses that can demonstrate the development of character morphology and other writing conventions over time as well as consistency across the geography occupied by Hebrew-speaking people. After detailed analysis of the available datable inscriptions, Rollston concludes that the demonstrable evolution in morphology, orthography, and other writing conventions in those centuries is the same throughout Israel and Judah.

The Old Hebrew script was a distinct national script, differing from the Phoenician and Aramaic series and reflecting independent developments. There must have been . . . a mechanism for the development, use, and retention of a distinct Old Hebrew national script.¹⁹

And that mechanism would obviously be a system of scribal schools in communication with each other and serving the elites of Israel and Judah. “Of necessity, it must be affirmed that the lion’s share of the Old Hebrew epigraphic record does not just reflect “functional knowledge” of the script. Rather, it

¹⁹ Rollston, “Scribal Education,” 60.

“reflects the sophisticated knowledge of trained professionals.”²⁰ Rollston offers his opinion that the state “was the primary aegis for scribal education in Iron II Israel,” but recognizes that “even in Mesopotamia, much schooling occurred in domestic contexts.”²¹

Again, Sanders counters by reversing the logic, arguing that alphabetic scribalism more likely survived the transition to the Iron Age and was eventually co-opted by the state. “The distribution of Hebrew across space and time suggests that skilled writers outside the palace perpetuated the standardization of writing in Israel. . . . We see one script for two kingdoms.”²² Borrowing examples from Rollston, Sanders concludes that “Hebrew scribal technique must have traveled along craft networks.”²³

Until recently, the absence of tenth-century inscriptions in Hebrew had led many scholars to question the development or even the existence of the Solomonic golden age as described in the Hebrew Bible. However, discovery of the Tel Zayit abecedary has provided the evidence necessary for some epigraphers to conclude

²⁰ Ibid., 60–61.

²¹ Ibid., 68.

²² Sanders, *Invention of Hebrew*, 125.

²³ Ibid., 127.

that there was already a scribal system in place in Israel and Judah in the tenth century that was developing a substantially uniform version of “inland Phoenician script,” indicating in turn the hypothetical existence of a sufficiently developed political and social structure to support a system of scribal schools with a national character which would lead to the uniform script and Hebrew language that would dominate the eighth and seventh centuries.

A combination of evidence, including now the Tel Zayit Abecedary, suggests that late 10th-century Israel had an emergent state structure, one that included borrowing or adaptation of the Phoenician alphabetic scribal system in some administrative centers and the learning of this system by a limited number of officials.²⁴

²⁴ David M. Carr, “The Tel Zayit Abecedary in (Social) Context,” in *Literate Culture and Tenth-Century Canaan: The Tel Zayit Abecedary in Context*, Ron E. Tappy and P. Kyle McCarter Jr., eds., (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2008), 124. Over the last two decades epigrapher Benjamin Sass and archaeologist Israel Finkelstein have collaborated on multiple studies that argue for rethinking the dating of these early inscriptions to the early ninth century, which would imply that the Hebrew version of the alphabet may have emerged first, before the Phoenician and Aramaic versions. They specifically assemble a strong argument for lowering the dating of the Tel Zayit Abecedary by a century in Israel Finkelstein, Benjamin Sass, and Lily Singer-Avitz, “Writing in Iron IIA Philistia in the Light of the *Tēl Zayit/Zētā Abecedary*,” *Zeitschrift des Deutschen Palästina-Vereins (1953-)*, 2008 Bd. 124, H. 1 (2008), pp. 1–14. This has been contested strongly, and the resulting debate is carefully documented and explained by David Vanderhooft, who concludes that at least one artifact seems to refute the proposed later chronology. See David S. Vanderhooft, “The Final Phase of the Common ‘Proto-Semitic’ Alphabet in the Southern Levant: A Rejoinder to Sass and Finkelstein,” in *Rethinking Israel: Studies in the History and Archaeology of Ancient Israel in Honor of Israel Finkelstein*, Oded Lipschits, Yuval Gadot, and Matthew J. Adams, eds., (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2017), 441–450.

Strong resistance to this hypothesized institutional approach comes from other leading epigraphers and historical linguists. Aramaic specialist Holger Gzella has suggested “that alphabetic writing was usually transmitted in the domestic sphere, or at least in non-professional environments, hence it circulated more widely and could survive socio-economic crises more easily.”²⁵ Hebrew language historian Seth L. Sanders points out that the Tel Zayit Abecedary has some of the same ancestry as Hebrew script but represents a branch of script development that died out before the rise of Hebrew script in the late ninth century. He also observes that “the West Semitic evidence suggests that the linear alphabet lived for a thousand years or more, from its invention around 2000 B.C.E. to the 9th century, without a state patron.” He gives multiple examples of social complexity developing independently of states.²⁶ The Aramaic script derived from the Phoenician and/or Hebrew alphabets first shows up in monumental inscriptions beginning in the late 9th century.²⁷

²⁵ Gzella, *Cultural History of Aramaic*, 58–59.

²⁶ Seth L. Sanders, “Writing and Early Iron Age Israel: Before National Scripts, Beyond Nations and States,” in *Literate Culture and Tenth-Century Canaan: The Tel Zayit Abecedary in Context*, Ron E. Tappy and P. Kyle McCarter Jr., eds., (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2008), 105 and 120. The long and fully documented version of Sanders’s argument can now be found in chapter 4 of Sanders, *Invention of Hebrew*, 103–155.

²⁷ Benjamin Sass, “Aram and Israel during the 10th–9th centuries BCE, or Iron Age IIA,” in *In Search for Aram and Israel: Politics, Culture, and Identity*, Omer Sergi, Manfred Oeming, and Izaak J. de Hulster, eds. (Tubingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2016), 199–227.

Historical linguists generally agree that as the nations of Israel, Edom, Moab, Damascus, and Ammon emerged in the tenth and ninth centuries BCE, they established their own national versions of Northwest Semitic language and that they soon adopted national versions of the new alphabetic script. Benjamin Sass has identified the formation of new states in the early ninth century as the primary impetus for developing writing to serve the needs of royal bureaucracies.²⁸

While the coastal cities of Phoenicia have traditionally been assumed to have hosted the initial formulations of alphabetic script derived from Proto-Canaanite, Sass points out that there is no artifactual evidence for that. He hypothesizes that Damascus may have started that with the Aramaic alphabet but recognizes that it could also have been Israel that first invented a national alphabet derived from Proto-Canaanite. While there are no alphabetic inscriptions surviving from the first half of the ninth century in the entire area, the developments in each of the neighboring nations in the second half of the century came so quickly that it is not possible to say for sure which one may have been the primary instigator. The Hebrew script developed first in Samaria where “it would have answered the need created by the emerging Israelite state and its

²⁸ Ibid., 213–224. See also A. Lemaire, “Alphabetic Writing,” 110–115.

bureaucracy.”²⁹ The impressive standardization of Hebrew language and script is usually traced to the eighth and seventh centuries and is attributed to the cooperative efforts of scribal schools across Israelite territory.

Historical Background of the Scribal Traditions in Ancient Israel

Academics have been slow to affirm or describe an early scribal culture among the ancient Israelites. Epigraphers believe the first alphabetic Hebrew script did not appear until around 800 BCE. Archaeologists have not excavated anything they would identify as scribal facilities. And the oldest surviving Hebrew documents of consequence are papyri or parchment from the second century BCE. Nonetheless, in his article for the *Oxford Handbook of Biblical Studies*, Richard Kratz confidently reasons backwards from the great outpouring of biblical and related writings in later centuries to the assumption of a developed scribal culture that exceeded other ANE models in significant ways:

The growth of the Old Testament presupposes the Israelite-Judaeen scribal culture. From it the biblical tradition took over the practices, knowledge,

²⁹ Benjamin Sass, *The Alphabet at the Turn of the Millennium* (Tel Aviv: Journal of the Institute of Archaeology of Tel Aviv Univ. Occasional Publications, No. 4, 2005), 59–60. See also 85–88.

and literary remains of the scribes. At the same time they pioneered with what they took over, or produced independently on the basis of it, a very particular way that was also unique in the whole of the ancient Near East. The genre and the content of the biblical books burst the limits of the usual praxis of the scribes. From the scribes developed the scribal scholars, and from the Israelite-Judaeen scribal culture they developed the Jewish tradition in the Old Testament.³⁰

Early scribes in Israel

In his 1965 textbook on the social institutions of ancient Israel, Roland de Vaux recognized that the only textual information we have about Israel's scribes must be inferred from a small number of biblical references. From those few mentions, de Vaux inferred that the "royal secretary" listed with King David's staff occupied a position modeled after the "royal scribe" that served Egyptian pharaohs and had responsibilities for all royal communications, collections for the temple, and counsel regarding external relations. The few that are named were from one family.

³⁰ Richard G. Kratz, "The Growth of the Old Testament," *Oxford Handbook of Biblical Studies* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2008), 1, DOI: 10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199237777.003.0028 (online publication Sept. 2009).

And it seemed there were many others unnamed performing lesser scribal duties.³¹

Reviewing these same passages, Schniedewind recognizes the existence of individual scribes in the service of monarchies, but concludes that the development of independent writing traditions and “scribal schools . . . would await Israel’s transition to a more urban state in the eighth century.”³²

Michael Fishbane lamented the lack of historical descriptions of the training and organization of Israelite scribes, but went on to list the roles that scribes would have had to fill in support of the monarchy, the temple, the military, and others:

It may be assumed . . . that the skills taught in their various guild centres and schools . . . enabled these scribes to serve a variety of administrative and state functions. Some served the military and aided in conscription; . . . others, Levites by lineage, served as overseers of the priestly rotations, . . . or provided administrative services to the Temple and its upkeep; . . . and still other scribes served in the royal court, providing the king with diplomatic skill and sage wisdom. Trained in the forms and rhetoric of international diplomatic correspondence, and thus kept abreast of internal and external

³¹ Roland de Vaux, *Ancient Israel: Social Institutions I* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1965), 131-32.

³² William M. Schniedewind, *How the Bible Became a Book* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2004), 59. See the development of this idea, pp. 75–90.

affairs, many of these court scribes—as individuals and as family guilds—were directly caught up in religious and political affairs affecting the nation as a whole.³³

Menahem Haran argued for the possibility of a few modest libraries in Jerusalem in the biblical period including certainly a library in the king’s court and another in the Temple.³⁴

Doubts about the need for and the existence of scribal schools in ancient Israel

Doubts about the existence of scribal schools in ancient Israel have been raised on several grounds. In the 1970s many scholars assumed that the simplicity of the Old Hebrew alphabet that emerged at the end of the ninth century made reading and writing so much easier that the old-style scribal schools of Egypt and Mesopotamia would not have been necessary for teaching people to read and write.³⁵ Others have pointed to the complete absence of mentions of schools in the

³³ Michael Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 25–26. In this abbreviated excerpt, I have omitted Fishbane’s references to supporting passages in the Hebrew Bible.

³⁴ Menahem Haran, “Archives, Libraries, and the Order of the Biblical Books,” *Journal of Ancient Near Eastern Studies* 22 (1993): 554–57.

³⁵ Summarizing the views of other specialists of the 1970s, Kenneth A. Kitchen wrote that “from 1100 BC (and probably rather earlier), writing in Canaan, then in Israel, Phoenicia and round about was clearly part of everyday life and not restricted solely to a special scribal elite.” See K. A. Kitchen, *The Bible in its World: The Bible and Archaeology Today* (Downers Grove,

Bible or to the failure of archaeologists to find archaeological evidence of such schools in Israel as have been found in other ANE locations. After a thorough and critical review of the available evidence and arguments in 1985, James Crenshaw concluded that the evidence for schools in Israel was weak and that “considerable diversity characterized education in ancient Israel.”³⁶ BYU scholar Paul Hoskisson has argued that the recurrence of the alphabet game *atbash* in Jeremiah’s writings demonstrates an assumption of widespread literacy in Jeremiah’s day.³⁷

Embedded in his 2015 paper on ancient abecedaries (inscriptions used to teach alphabets), Aaron Demsky provided arguments and evidence for his minority view that by the eighth century BCE Israel was a literate society with “wider access to writing and reading and a greater influence of the written word upon the general populace, especially when we look at both literary and epigraphic sources.”³⁸

IL: Intervarsity Press, 1977), 18. One writer concluded that “writing was theoretically within the competence of any ancient Israelite, not the prerogative of an elite professional class alone,” and “it was, in fact, quite widely practiced.” See A. R. Millard, “The Practice of Writing in Ancient Israel,” *The Biblical Archaeologist* 35, no. 4 (Dec.1972), 111.

³⁶ James L. Crenshaw, “Education in Ancient Israel,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 104 (1985): 601–615.

³⁷ Paul Y. Hoskisson, “Jeremiah’s Game,” *Insights* 30, no.1 (March 25, 2010). See Brant Gardner’s critique of Hoskisson’s argument in Gardner, “Literacy and Orality,” 40–41.

³⁸ Aaron Demsky, “The Interface of Oral and Written Traditions in Ancient Israel: The Case of Abecedaries,” in *Origins of the Alphabet: Proceedings of the first Polis Institute Interdisciplinary Conference*, Christophe Rico and Claudia Attucci, eds. (Newcastle Upon Tyne, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015), 17,

Demsky's optimism has been grounded partially in the Izbet Sartah inscription discovered in Ephraimite territory in 1976. The sherd contains 87 letters in five lines in the Proto-Canaanite script and has been dated to the 12th century. "The fifth line is incised with the earliest linear abecedary of 22 letters in the Proto-Canaanite script." Its alphabet displays a slightly different order, and the entire inscription is written left to right.³⁹ Of particular interest for this paper is Demsky's conclusion that this sherd provides clear evidence of "a wide distribution and use of writing during the period of the Judges, *at least among the tribes of Joseph.*"⁴⁰

Arie Shaus, a Tel Aviv University graduate student in archaeology and applied mathematics, assembled an interdisciplinary team for a forensic-document examination and reassessment of the sixteen ostraca from the Judahite fort at Arad

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/301349273_The_Interface_of_Oral_and_Written_Traditions_in_Ancient_Israel_The_Case_of_the_Abecedaries. Like Hoskisson, Demsky also advances and explains the example of *atbash* in Jeremiah as evidence for assumed literacy in seventh century (p. 48).

³⁹ Aaron Demsky, "A Proto-Canaanite Abecedary Dating from the Period of the Judges and Its Implications for the History of the Alphabet," *Tel Aviv* 4, nos. 1-2 (1977), 14. Epigraphers have not yet worked out all their differences on theories for the origin of the Proto-Canaanite alphabet. See the widely accepted explanation of Orly Goldwasser of how it could have been invented in the turquoise mining community in the Sinai at about the same time Demsky's Izbet Sartah inscription was written. Orly Goldwasser, "How the Alphabet was born from Hieroglyphs," *Biblical Archaeology Review* 36, no. 2 (2010): 1-25.

⁴⁰ Demsky, "A Proto-Canaanite Abecedary," 24. See also Demsky's responses to the first decade of commentaries and critiques of his initial paper. Aaron Demsky, "The 'Izbet Sartah Ostrakon Ten Years, Later,'" in Israel Finkelstein, ed., *Izbet Sartah: An Early Iron Age Site near Rosh Ha'ayin, Israel* (Oxford: BAR International Series 299, 1986), 186-197.

that are dated to about 600 BCE and concluded that a dozen different personnel had contributed to these writings—promoting the picture of widespread literacy in ancient Israel.⁴¹ Richard Hess surveyed the full range of inscriptions found in Israelite territory from the Iron Age and concluded that these provided sufficient evidence of widespread literacy throughout those six centuries—literacy being defined as the ability minimally to read or write these limited inscriptions.⁴²

Other scholars believe scribal schools were the key to Israelite literacy.

Most senior epigraphers studying inscriptions in ancient Israel have been less optimistic about literacy levels and have emphasized the need for scribal schools. Christopher Rollston has assembled convincing rebuttals to those earlier doubts, relying principally on accumulating epigraphic evidence from the ninth through seventh centuries.⁴³ After reviewing empirical studies of writing education and the

⁴¹ Arie Shaus, et. al., “Forensic document examination and algorithmic handwriting analysis of Judahite biblical period inscriptions reveal significant literacy level,” *PLOS ONE* (September 9, 2020), accessed October 20, 2021 online at <https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article/authors?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0237962>.

⁴² Richard S. Hess, “Literacy in Iron Age Israel,” in V. Philips Long, David W. Baker, and Gordon J. Wenham, eds., *Windows into Old Testament History: Evidence, Argument, and the Crisis of “Biblical Israel”* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), 82–102.

⁴³ Christopher A. Rollston, “Scribal Education in Ancient Israel: The Old Hebrew Epigraphic Evidence,” *Bulletin of the American School for Oriental Research* 344 (2006): 47–74. For another report of this study see Christopher A. Rollston, *Writing and Literacy in the World of Ancient Israel: Epigraphic Evidence from the Iron Age* (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2010), 127–135. A

experience of Israeli schools in teaching modern Hebrew, Rollston concludes that “any suggestion that proficiency in one’s *first* alphabetic writing system (ancient or modern) can be achieved in a few days or weeks must be considered most problematic.”⁴⁴ Further, the earlier skeptics have insisted on looking for public schools serving broad sectors of the population. Rollston looks instead for evidence of standardized scribal education serving elites in ancient Israel, following patterns long established in Egypt and Mesopotamia.

In his 2010 study of writing and literacy in ancient Israel, Rollston acknowledges ongoing lack of consensus about “the evidence for ‘schools’ in ancient Israel” and concludes that

the Old Hebrew epigraphic record reflects depth, sophistication, and consistency in the production of written materials, and that the Old Hebrew data are most consistent with the presence of a mechanism for the formal, standardized education of scribal elites in ancient Israel.⁴⁵

Aaron Burke dates the final withdrawal of Egyptian empire installations

new generation of scholars with rapidly growing archaeological discoveries is raising new questions about scribal practices. See e.g., Andrew R. Burlingame, “Writing and Literacy in the World of Ancient Israel: Recent Developments and Future Directions,” *Bibliotheca Orientalis* 56, nos. 1-2 (January-April 2019), 46–74.

⁴⁴ Rollston, “Scribal Education,” 49.

⁴⁵ Rollston, *Writing and Literacy*, 91–92.

from Jaffa between 1135 and 1125 BCE.⁴⁶ As already mentioned, Burke goes on from there to assemble the archaeological evidence for his conclusion that specialists, and especially professional scribes stayed behind, having already become embedded in the local economy, culture, and familial structures, becoming in effect the founders of a scribal culture that spread throughout Phoenicia, including ancient Israel.⁴⁷

Perhaps the most careful and comprehensive review of the evidence for writing and scribalism in the Levant was published in 2007 by Ryan Byrne.⁴⁸ He points to convincing evidence for the existence of commission-based scribes serving various elites in the Levant from as early as 2000 BCE. Further, the default script was an alphabetic Old Canaanite that was not fully developed or consistent across time and space, but served the limited needs of these elites. Their scribes were also competent in other more advanced scripts such as Ugaritic or Egyptian when international communication was required. This widely shared Canaanite script provided the baseline for the national scripts that were quickly developed at the end of the ninth century to serve the needs of the new polities that featured their

⁴⁶ Aaron A. Burke, “Left Behind,” 51.

⁴⁷ Burke, “Left Behind,” 50–66.

⁴⁸ Ryan Byrne, “The Refuge of Scribalism in Iron I Palestine,” *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 345 (February 2007): 1–31.

own related languages, including Aramaic, Hebrew, Edomite, Ammonite, and Moabite—providing evidence that “the scribal trade survived at the margins of the decentralized political economy of Iron I Palestine.”⁴⁹

In his study of scribal culture in the ANE, van der Toorn likewise recognized the absence of historical descriptions of scribal schools, but uses the Bible as the principal evidence for their existence: “The books of the Bible would not have seen the light in the oral culture of Israel if it were not for the professional scribes. They are the main figures behind biblical literature; we owe the Bible entirely to them.”⁵⁰ In a following section, I will suggest how a Josephite scribal school originating among the descendants of Ephraim and/or Manasseh in Egypt and maintaining its continuity down through the times of the northern kingdom and the seventh century as refugees in Jerusalem could fit well with what is now known about scribalism in ancient Israel and could have produced the Brass Plates that appear at the end of the seventh century.

Possible origins of scribal schools in Israel

⁴⁹ Ibid., 1. The competing theories about contemporary scribal curricula and schools is laid out on pages 5–12.

⁵⁰ Van der Toorn, *Scribal Culture*, 75. Notice how this same logic would also argue that Nephi had to be a professional scribe.

Some of the most recent work based in archaeological evidence has produced two different theories about the origins of Hebrew scribal schools—one Mesopotamian and the other Egyptian. Schniedewind argues that the early Hebrew inscriptions (circa 800 BCE) found at Kuntillet ‘Ajrud “represent fragments of the entire range of an educational curriculum for an ancient Israelite scribe” and that “the outlines of this early scribal curriculum will correspond strikingly with the framework of the Mesopotamian scribal curriculum.” Using what is known about the Mesopotamian curriculum, he proposes that it can then be shown how that scribal education “shaped the composition of biblical literature.”⁵¹ On the other hand, Seth Sanders warns scholars who emphasize the connections of Israelite scribal traditions to those in Mesopotamia that however similar they may have been in the roles and functions they served, the Hebrew scribes were much more adventurous and open to change in their rewriting of traditional texts than were the Babylonians.⁵²

One of the first attempts to describe the rise of scribalism in Israel focused on the officialdom described in the Hebrew Bible for the United Monarchy as

⁵¹ William M. Schniedewind, *The Finger of the Scribe: How Scribes Learned to Write the Bible* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2019), 8.

⁵² He makes this argument in many ways in Seth L. Sanders, *From Adapa to Enoch: Scribal Culture and Religious Vision in Judea and Babylon* (Tubingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007).

supplemented by the archaeological evidence then available.⁵³ Mettinger collected the biblical references to the royal secretaries of David and Solomon and their assistants to support the assertion of scribal schools established to train administrators in both the palace and the temple. Invoking the arguments of H-J. Hermisson, he concluded “that Israel actually had a scribal school for the education of officials.”⁵⁴ He speculated that David may even have employed a native Egyptian as royal secretary with a support staff of bi-lingual scribes while borrowing the model for “royal secretary” from the Egyptians.⁵⁵ Understood in this way, the royal scribal school would then have been the source or channel through which the monarchy and culture developed a broad range of Egyptian influence.⁵⁶ Mettinger’s argument would also be strengthened by noting that the Egyptian script was the most obvious candidate for writing and record keeping in the centuries before the development of Hebrew alphabetic script around 800 BCE.

As mentioned above, Aaron Burke comes at the problem from the archaeological west as an authority on the closure of Egyptian imperial installations

⁵³ Tryggve N. D. Mettinger, *Solomonic State Officials: A Study of the Civil Government Officials of the Israelite Monarchy* (Lund: CWK Gleerups Förlag, 1971).

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 143–144, referring to Hans-Jurgen Hermisson, *Studien zur israelitischen Spruchweisheit* (Neukirchener, Germany: Verlag des Erziehungsvereins, 1968).

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 48–49.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 146–157.

in Jaffa in 1125 BCE, including the administrative offices that employed Egyptian scribes. He argued that archaeological evidences demonstrate that many of these scribes, who were already integrated into the local culture and population with families and secondary businesses, must have been left behind providing the root that soon branched out to fill the needs of the rising Israelite monarchy not far to the east.⁵⁷ Manasseh territory was only about 30 miles from the administrative center at Jaffa.

Scholars assume that the Israelites only had oral traditions which would be eventually transcribed by the emerging class of scribes and finally collected and edited into the Hebrew Bible by scribal schools in Jerusalem in the seventh century or later. If the primarily Egyptian textual tradition of the Brass Plates had been handed down from Abraham's time in written form as will be hypothesized below, that documentary history has not left any obvious trace in the archaeological record of ancient Palestine. Energized by the development and spread of alphabetic

⁵⁷ Burke, "Left Behind." Burke's analysis is consistent with Carolyn Higginbotham's effort to integrate the findings of both textual studies and archaeological exploration to illuminate the nature and extent of the Egyptian influence in Palestine during the 13th and 12th centuries. She found that although the Egyptian empire did not practice "direct rule" in these northern provinces, there is considerable evidence that Palestinian elites chose to import and display a significant range of Egyptian cultural practices and materials during those centuries. See Carolyn R. Higginbotham, *Egyptianization and Elite Emulation in Ramesside Palestine: Governance and Accommodation on the Imperial Periphery* (Leiden: Brill, 2000).

writing systems in the Levant early in the first millennium,⁵⁸ it is possible that all of these proposed origins for Israelite scribal activity contributed to the scribal schools that did leave clear traces in the eighth and seventh centuries.

⁵⁸ Schniedewind, *Finger of the Scribe*, 12, argues that the plaster inscriptions at Kuntillet 'Ajrud show that "a scribal curriculum had already developed in early Israel" coincident with "the very beginning of alphabetic writing in the early Iron Age."