Questions of Reading and Writing in Ancient Israel

RICHARD S. HESS

DENVER SEMINARY

The identification of so many inscriptions from private collections as well as in archaeological excavations raises new questions about the role of reading and writing in ancient Israel. In this respect, the question is not merely one of whether there were scribes who could read and write but also the larger questions of who were the practitioners of this art and where they might be found. Does the evidence provide any clues as to their geographical and social location? Were they limited to the largest urban centers where concerns of administration and royal propaganda might require their presence; or were they also to be found in small towns and rural environments? This study examines the questions of literacy in the light of the inscriptional evidence, the ancient Near Eastern context, and the comparative anthropological discussion.

Key Words: literacy, scribes, epigraphy, Iron Age

Questions of literacy and the debates over who could read and write in Iron Age Israel must take into account a variety of forms of evidence. The purpose of this essay will be to consider several recent discussions of increasing evidence of reading and writing in earliest Israel; increasing evidence for the diversity of texts in monarchic Israel; nonadministrative reasons for literacy; scribal schools and the question of learning how to write; and levels of reading and writing.

INCREASING EVIDENCE OF READING AND WRITING IN EARLIEST ISRAEL

At the center of the discussions of reading and writing in ancient Israel are the actual epigraphical pieces of writing. In this regard, the additional discoveries and publications of these finds have broadened our knowledge of the types of literature that could be represented in the writing of ancient Israel and of the dates during which this material might have been found. Of considerable significance in terms of the latter is the discovery of the abecedary at Tel Zayit. Dating from the mid-10th century, this text now attests to an interest in a form of reading and writing in the Judean village

of Tel Zayit.[1] To this text and the Gezer calendar should be added four other Hebrew inscriptions from the 10th century, not to mention others in the region that might be better identified as Phoenician or Aramaic.[2] The Hebrew texts come from Tel ʿAmal, Tel Batash, Beth Shemesh, and Rehob. The latter three were published between 1991 and 2003, indicating how recently this additional inventory, along with the abecedary, has increased the number of sites with 10th-century Hebrew inscriptions from two to six.

Despite this huge increase in the number of the earliest Hebrew texts, they still remain few in comparison to the many hundreds of inscriptions of this sort from the final centuries of the Northern and Southern Kingdoms of Israel and Judah; i.e., the 8th, 7th, and early 6th centuries. Alan R. Millard has studied the phenomenon of the numbers of texts remaining in the cuneiform world of ancient Syria and Mesopotamia.[3] He considered fluctuations in the number of tablets during the history of major cities and civilizations such as the Third Dynasty of Ur, the Larsa period, the First Dynasty of Babylon, Mari, Ugarit, the Middle Assyrian period, and the Neo-Assyrian era. In all these cases, it is possible to generalize that "where a place has been occupied continuously for a long period, texts that are discovered will usually belong to the last century or so of occupation, and there may be no texts from its beginning."[4] Therefore, the rarity of written documents from the earlier periods of the monarchy is not surprising. It remains consistent with surrounding cultures that preserve written documents such as cuneiform tablets. The presence of many more documents in the last century or so before the destruction of the Israelite and Judean monarchies does not necessarily demonstrate a rise in the number of scribes or in the interest in reading and writing. It is a phenomenon found elsewhere before and contemporary with ancient Israel.

INCREASING EVIDENCE FOR THE DIVERSITY OF TEXTS IN MONARCHIC ISRAEL

If recent discoveries have brought more Hebrew inscriptions to light from the earliest of centuries that attest a distinctive Hebrew paleography, the diversity of the contents of Hebrew inscriptions has also increased for the

---

1. Ron E. Tappy et al., "An Abecedary of the Mid-Tenth Century B.C.E. from the Judaean Shephelah," *BASOR* 344 (2006): 5–46; Richard S. Hess, "Writing about Writing: Abecedaries and Evidence for Literacy in Ancient Israel," *VT* 56 (2006): 342–46.

2. See the summary of Tappy et al., "An Abecedary," 28–29.

3. Alan R. Millard, "Only Fragments from the Past: The Role of Accident in Our Knowledge of the Ancient Near East," in *Writing and Ancient Near Eastern Society: Papers in Honour of Alan R. Millard* (ed. Piotr Bienkowski, Christopher Mee, and Elizabeth Slater; Library of Hebrew Bible/OTS 426; New York: T. & T. Clark, 2005), 301–19.

4. Ibid., 314.

entire period of the Iron Age. Graham Davies has reflected on this.[5] This now includes the ostracon from Ḥorvat Uza that has variously been identified as a divorce case, a prophetic indictment, and a literary text.[6] Certainly, its literary nature implies a level of composition distinct from standard administrative lists and documents.

Of the many administrative ostraca published from the collection of Shlomo Moussaieff, of special interest is a late-7th-century list of names a number of which scholars have identified as originating from different hands.[7] Alongside these names are the "check marks" known from later Egyptian Aramaic inscriptions.[8] If the different hands writing the names represent different signatories,[9] then this appears to demonstrate evidence for a wider knowledge of writing, at least to the extent of writing one's name, rather than one or two scribes writing all the documents.

One other administrative document is a widow's petition, also written on a potsherd.[10] Also coming from the collection of Moussaieff, this text

5. Graham Davies, "Some Uses of Writing in Ancient Israel in the Light of Recently Published Inscriptions," in *Writing and Ancient Near Eastern Society: Papers in Honour of Alan R. Millard* (Library of Hebrew Bible/OTS 426; New York: T. & T. Clark, 2005), 155–74.

6. See I. Beit-Arieh, "A Literary Ostracon from Ḥorvat ʿUza," *TA* 20 (1993): 55–65; Frank M. Cross, "An Ostracon in Literary Hebrew from Ḥorvat ʿUza," in *The Archaeology of Jordan and Beyond: Essays in Honor of James A. Sauer* (ed. L. E. Stager, J. A. Greene, and M. D. Coogan; Studies in the Archaeology and History of the Levant 1; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2000), 111–13; Graham I. Davies, *Ancient Hebrew Inscriptions: Corpus and Concordance* (vol. 2; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 37.006–007; idem, "Uses of Writing," 157–58; F. W. Dobbs-Allsopp et al., *Hebrew Inscriptions: Texts from the Biblcal Period of the Monarchy with Concordance* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005), 521–27.

7. See Robert Deutsch and Michael Heltzer, *New Epigraphic Evidence from the Biblical Period* (Tel Aviv: Archaeological Center Publications, 1995), 93–102, no. 79; Davies, *Ancient Hebrew Inscriptions*, 99.006; idem, "Uses of Writing," 159–60; Dobbs-Allsopp et al., *Hebrew Inscriptions*, 554–60.

8. Joseph Naveh, "Hebrew and Aramaic Inscriptions," in *Excavations at the City of David, 1978–1985, Directed by Yigal Shiloh*, vol. 4: *Inscriptions* (ed. D. T. Ariel; Qedem 41; Jerusalem: Institute of Archaeology, 2000), 1–14, esp. p. 4.

9. In favor of this, see the detailed studies of Johannes Renz, *Handbuch der althebräischen Epigraphik, I: Text und Documentar; II/I: Zusammenfassende Erörterungen. Paläographie und Glossar; III: Texte und Tafeln* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1999), 127–31, 147; R. G. Lehmann, "Typologie und Signatur: Studien zu einen Listenostrakon aus der Sammlung Moussaieff," *UF* 30 (1998): 399. André Lemaire (Reviews of Robert Deutsch and Michael Heltzer, *New Epigraphic Evidence from the Biblical Period*; idem, *Windows to the Past*; Robert Deutsch, *Messages from the Past: Hebrew Bullae from the Time of Isaiah through the Destruction of the First Temple, Shlomo Moussaieff Collection and an Up to Date Corpus* [Hebrew], *BO* 56 [1999]: 173) has questioned this analysis; Dobbs-Allsopp et al., *Hebrew Inscriptions*, 554.

10. Pierre Bordreuil, Felice Israel, and Dennis Pardee, "Deux ostraca de la collection Sh. Moussaïeff: I) Contribution financière pour le temple de YHWH; II) Réclamation d'une veuve auprès d'un fonctionnaire," *Sem* 46 (1996): 49–61; eidem, "King's Command and Widow's Plea," *NEA* (1998): 2–13; Davies, *Ancient Hebrew Inscriptions*, 99.008; idem, "Uses of Writing," 161–62; Israel Ephal and Joseph Naveh, "Remarks on the Recently Published Moussaieff Ostraca," *IEJ* 48 (1998): 269–73; A. Berlejung and A. Schüle, "Erwägungen zu den neuen Ostraka aus der Sammlung Moussaïeff," *ZAH* 11 (1998): 68–73; Dobbs-Allsopp et al., *Hebrew Inscriptions*, 570–73.

suggests that a formal written request such as that already found at Yavneh-Yam (Mesad Hashavyahu) was not so rare in ancient Israel.

Monumental inscriptions have been known from the Iron Age nations surrounding Israel and Judah: the Moabite Mesha stele, the Aramaic stele from Tel Dan, and the Neo-Philistine text from Tel Miqne. In Jerusalem, the Siloam tunnel inscription attested to a public document, although both its obscure position in the middle of a water tunnel and its anomalous content made it less than what one would expect for a monumental inscription.[11] However, there now exist two other fragments of a monumental character found in Jerusalem excavations (not counting the contested Jehoash inscription) and a small monumental fragment from the Samaria excavations.[12] The larger fragment from Shiloh's excavations at the City of David may date from the late 8th century and seems to describe an official duty or "collection" at a particular time.[13]

All these examples from the 10th century and later, attesting to an increasing variety of genres of writing as well as a greater and greater number of inscriptions, give evidence of a culture in which many more inscriptions—personal and public, earlier and later, more literary and more administrative—were available in ancient Israel. We have omitted the large increase in the attestation of seals and their impressions or bullae. These are also noted and duly recorded by Davies and others. However, these reference works cannot keep up with the increasing publication of these in the past few years. Writing in 2005, Davies could count upward of 500 bullae that had been published.

Thus, we have an increasing number of extant documents on both clay and stone. It seems unlikely that future excavations, with increasingly sophisticated techniques for the recovery of written texts, will reveal fewer written documents or indicate anything but the presence of more reading and writing in ancient Israel.

Nonadministrative Reasons for Literacy

Returning to the variety of forms of evidence, other directions in addition to those of epigraphy may be considered. More removed but nevertheless of great significance are the anthropological and sociological theories that serve to provide a context for the interpretation of the evidence. Without

---

11. Ibid., 499–506.

12. For the smaller Jerusalem fragment, see Joseph Naveh, "A Fragment of an Ancient Hebrew Inscription from the Ophel," *IEJ* 32 (1982): 195–98; Graham I. Davies, *Ancient Hebrew Inscriptions: Corpus and Concordance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 4:125; Dobbs-Allsopp et al., *Hebrew Inscriptions*, 226–27. For the Samaria fragment, see E. L. Sukenik, "Note on a Fragment of an Israelite Stele Found at Samaria," *PEFQS* (1936): 156; Davies, *Corpus and Concordance*, 3:312; Dobbs-Allsopp et al., *Hebrew Inscriptions*, 496–97.

13. See Yigal Shiloh, "City of David Excavation 1978," *BA* 42 (1979): 170; Davies, *Corpus and Concordance*, 4:120; idem, "Uses of Writing," 163; Naveh, "Hebrew and Aramaic Inscriptions," 1–2; Frank M. Cross, "A Fragment of a Monumental Inscription from the City of David," *IEJ* 51 (2001): 44–47; Dobbs-Allsopp et al., *Hebrew Inscriptions*, 227–29.

doubt, there is much that could be said here. However, a useful starting point is the recent study by M. C. A. Macdonald entitled "Literacy in an Oral Environment."[14] For Macdonald, the definition of a literate society does not require that a majority or any particular percentage of the society be able to read and write. Instead, a literate society requires literacy of at least some of its members in order to function as it does on a daily basis. In contrast to this, an oral society is one in which memory and the spoken word are used in place of reading and writing for all essential aspects of the society. Macdonald observes examples of groups who learn to write without being able to read as well as those who learn to read without being able to write. The former include clear examples only of children who are in the process of being educated in literacy and of those occasional individuals who wish to demonstrate the ability to write their names. However, those who learn to read without being able to write include much larger groups, especially in terms of religious reasons. Thus, Sweden and Scotland in the 17th and 18th centuries included nationwide programs to teach people how to read the Christian Bible and other religious literature to aid in its memory and understanding. To this should be compared those in the Highlands of Scotland who were taught to read the Bible in English without understanding the language, just as children in modern parts of West Africa are taught to pronounce and memorize the Quran without understanding it.

Religious purposes for the development of the ability to read are not the only reasons for a people to learn to recognize a script. The Tuareg of northwest Africa learn to read and to write their script largely for purposes of personal amusement. They use their Tifinagh characters to write and to read games and puzzles but rarely do they function for serious literary or economic purposes. Further, they learn how to read and write in informal contexts. Children learn from other children in order to play their games. Older adults will not teach it to their own children and grandchildren, because they regard it as childish and beneath their dignity. The Safaitic inscriptions, written between 1600 and 2100 years ago, comprise many tens of thousands of graffiti across the Western Arabian peninsula. Yet the reason for the nomads to learn to write and read these inscriptions remains a mystery.[15] The effect of motives for literacy such as religion and entertainment belies attempts to limit the introduction and emergence of ancient reading and writing to purely economic or political concerns. Thus, the assumption that people in ancient Israel could not read because their towns were not of a sufficient size to require a scribal bureaucracy should not and cannot serve as a legitimate criterion. And indeed, the discovery

---

14. M. C. A. Macdonald, "Literacy in an Oral Environment," in *Writing and Ancient Near Eastern Society: Papers in Honour of Alan R. Millard* (ed. Piotr Bienkowski, Christopher Mee, and Elizabeth Slater; Library of Hebrew Bible/OTS 426; New York: T. & T. Clark, 2005), 49–118.

15. "It does not seem to have been for any practical purpose," Macdonald, "Oral Environment," 75.

of abecedaries, such as that found at Tel Zayit, further demonstrates that the interest in learning to read could exist outside the major administrative centers of ancient Israel and in towns and villages, where concerns other than the purely administrative may have played a role.

SCRIBAL SCHOOLS AND THE QUESTION OF LEARNING HOW TO WRITE

Another area regarding reading and writing is the existence of scribal schools. Despite long debate on the existence of formal training centers, there seems to be no certain conclusion. Recently, Christopher A. Rollston has contributed to the discussion of this issue.[16] He argues that proficiency in writing alphabets is not attained easily. In fact, he refers to some seven studies that argue for the need of at least several years of work before it is possible to write a modern alphabet.[17] While this evidence is used to support the presence of scribal schools or their equivalent, it also calls into question the ability of people to learn an alphabet with some degree of ease; and therefore of more than a few elite scribes having acquired this skill. It had been thought that the more complex writing systems in Egypt, Anatolia, and Mesopotamia, with their hundreds of syllabic and ideographic signs, created the necessity for professional scribal schools and a trained elite who could write and read. On the other hand, the alphabetic scripts such as Hebrew contained about two dozen signs. This made the entire operation far easier to learn and to use. After all, if someone could write his or her name and patronym, he or she might well have the skill to write half of the alphabet. It would seem to be no great feat to learn the remainder and to use it with sufficient skill to write other texts.

Rollston's study calls all of this into question. If modern educational professionals argue that the acquisition of the alphabet requires years of study, can there be any doubt that all of this would have required a few elite persons in ancient Israel who could read and write? However, this

---

16. Christopher A. Rollston, "Scribal Education in Ancient Israel: The Old Hebrew Epigraphic Evidence," *BASOR* 344 (2006): 47–74.

17. Ibid., 48. Rollston cites the following: E. H. Henderson, *Teaching Spelling* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1985); L. C. Ehri, "Learning to Read and Learning to Spell Are One and the Same, Almost," in *Learning to Spell: Research, Theory, and Practice across Languages* (ed. C. A. Perfetti, L. Rieben, and M. Fayol; Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum, 1997), 237–69; idem, "Grapheme-Phoneme Knowledge Is Essential for Learning to Read in English," in *Word Recognition in Beginning Literacy* (ed. J. L. Metsala and L. C. Ehri; Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum, 1998), 3–40; "Phases of Acquisition in Learning to Read Words and Implications for Teaching," in *Learning and Teaching Reading* (ed. R. Stainthorp and R. Thomlinson; British Journal of Educational Psychology Monograph Series 1; Leicester: British Psychological Society, 2002), 7–28; P. H. K. Seymour, "Foundations of Orthographic Developments," in *Learning to Spell: Research, Theory, and Practice across Languages* (ed. C. A. Perfetti, L. Rieben, and M. Fayol; Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum, 1997), 319–37; D. J. Richgels, "Invented Spelling, Phonemic Awareness, and Reading and Writing Instruction," in *Handbook of Early Literacy Research* (ed. S. B. Neuman and D. K. Dickinson; New York: Guilford, 2002), 142–55; J. R. Beech, "Ehri's Model of Phases of Learning to Read: A Brief Critique," *Journal of Research in Reading* 28 (2005): 50–58.

may not be the whole picture. When we return to Macdonald's essay, "Literacy in an Oral Environment," we find a different set of data. Consider the Tuareg people, who inhabit part of modern Algeria, Niger, and Mali, and who use the already-mentioned Tifinagh characters for amusement and for various practical tasks. Macdonald reports that they can learn all the characters in a single day by watching others use them and asking questions.[18] This script is not merely a code of a few signs. It is consonantal but also descended from the Libyan-Berber script. Nor is this the only script that can be learned relatively quickly.

In his discussion of ancient nomads who learned the languages of settled peoples, Macdonald gives the following personal example:

> The alphabets used by the nomads presumably had their ultimate origin in a settled literate society and, although there is no evidence of the process, the following hypothesis seems to offer a plausible explanation, though I would emphasize that it can be no more than an hypothesis. If, for instance, a nomad in Arabia was guarding a caravan or visiting an oasis and saw someone writing a letter or doing his accounts, he may well have said 'teach me to do that', simply out of curiosity. I and others have had just this experience with Bedouins on excavations. Because the nomad comes from an oral culture he has a highly developed memory and so learns the skill very quickly. In my case, I wrote the unjoined forms of the letters of the Arabic alphabet on the Bedouin's hand and the next day he was writing his name and mine, still in rather wobbly unjoined forms of the Arabic letters I had written on his palm.[19]

How is it possible that the Tuareg and the Bedouin learn and use their alphabet within a day, whereas the professional studies to which Rollston refers require years of work? Certainly, the Bedouin and the Turareg are not writing advanced literary compositions, but they are writing. There may be elements involved such as the emphasis on memory in oral cultures, mentioned by Macdonald. Clearly, there is a high personal motivation in these students. At least in the case of the Bedouin, these are not children but adults. One may also point to the absence of a formal, public, and uniform method of teaching. The learner has one or two tutors and works with them in a personal manner.

An examination of the materials cited by Rollston suggests that he is focusing on the study of children who learn to spell and to write English in an English culture. These studies incorporate developmental psychology of children at the young ages when they enter preschool or begin primary school.[20] They discuss the acquisition of spelling English words that

18. Macdonald, "Oral Environment," 61.
19. Ibid., 78–79.
20. See the studies listed in n. 19. These deal with English spelling and literacy acquisition by young children, usually in English-language environments and always in formal educational contexts.

are significantly different from ancient Semitic scripts. The words have written vowels and they are often pronounced in a manner different from the way in which one might expect them to be spelled. Indeed, in some of these studies the additional years required for students to learn to spell tend to focus on learning to spell vowels correctly and on words that don't "sound" the way that they are spelled.

Consider, for example, the following two excerpts from the conclusion of one of the studies Rollston cites, Linnea C. Ehri's "Grapheme-Phoneme Knowledge Is Essential for Learning to Read Words in English":

> Moreover, getting off the ground in learning to read is not easy. Beginners must accomplish some very difficult tasks. They must retain in memory 52 upper- and lower-case letter shapes and learn how these letters operate singly or in combination to symbolize phonemes in words. They must learn how to find the invisible seams in the flow of speech in order to segment words into phonemes. . . . First-grade teachers need to adopt as a primary goal that of helping students reach the full alphabetic phase in their sight word reading. For students, this means learning the major grapheme-phoneme correspondences, vowel correspondences being most important.[21]

Contrast these statements with Hebrew epigraphy of the Iron Age. Instead of 52 letter shapes, there are 22 to be learned. The Hebrew letters do not function differently in combination as is the case in English, so this does not need to be learned. Syllables always begin with a consonant, unlike in English, so the beginnings of words "in the flow of speech" become that much easier to identify. Finally, the "full alphabetic phase," which Ehri envisions as taught in first grade, includes the "grapheme-phoneme correspondences" that would be the basis for all Hebrew reading and writing. The most difficult part of this in English learning, vowel correspondences, does not exist in Hebrew.

Whether these points are sufficient to explain the differences between the studies that Rollston cites and the experiences of Africans and Middle Easterners is not certain. Other factors may also be involved. However, the need for extended periods of time in which to learn to write the consonantal Semitic alphabet of ancient Hebrew has not been demonstrated. At this point, we may conclude that formal schools may not have been the only place for learning to write the alphabet.

LEVELS OF READING AND WRITING

The ability to write is not identical to the ability to read. As already noted, there are those who can read but not write. The opposite is also true but not nearly as frequent. Nor is the ability to read the same at all levels. One can read without being able to write. In general, the increased evidence of texts in ancient Israel raises the likelihood that more people could read.

21. Ehri, "Grapheme-Phoneme Knowledge," 33–34.

Studies of this question regularly address Lachish ostracon 3, the sender of which, an official, protests the ability to read and repeat the letter with accuracy.[22] The implication is that a scribe is not necessary for the understanding of a written document. Corresponding to this is a Neo-Assyrian letter the author of which also held an administrative position of some sort.[23] In this case, however, the writer sends a note to request the services of a scribe. The author can write, but in a simpler script and with less grammatical accuracy than a scribe might be able to achieve. The administrator can write and presumably is able to read these signs that he composes. However, the ability is less than that of a professional scribe. Simo Parpola, the editor of this text, maintains that this cuneiform text provides evidence for greater literacy in the Neo-Assyrian period than had previously been thought. If this is true for the syllabic script of Assyrian, can the same be said for the alphabetic script of Hebrew? Here as well it is likely that professional scribes existed and wrote many of the texts that we have. Nevertheless, it is also likely that many others within and perhaps outside the royal administration were able to read and to write, with various degrees of competency.

In summary, the evidence of texts in ancient Israel continues to grow in terms of quantity and quality. There are a variety of reasons for learning how to write. However, the learning of writing does not necessarily require one's participation in long years of study. This suggests increasing evidence for the presence of a variety of competencies of reading and writing, both in ancient Israel and among its neighbors.

22. William M. Schniedewind, "Sociolinguistic Reflections on the Letter of a 'Literate' Soldier (Lachish 3)," *ZAH* 13 (2000): 157–67.

23. The letter is K 652 (*ABL* 151). See Simo Parpola, "The Man without a Scribe and the Question of Literacy in the Assyrian Empire," in Ana šadî Labnāni lū allik: *Beiträge zu altorientalischen und mittelmeerischen Kulturen. Festschrift für Wolfgang Röllig* (ed. Beate Pongratz-Leisten, Hartmut Kühne, and Paolo Xella; AOAT 247; Kevelaer: Butzon & Bercker / Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1997), 315–24.