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The World's Oldest
ALPHABET

HEBREW AS THE LANGUAGE OF THE
PROTO-CONSONANTAL SCRIPT

WITH A CONTRIBUTION BY
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&

INTRODUCTION BY
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INTRODUCTION

The origin of the alphabet has been a matter of intense interest from time immemorial. The primitive pictographic and cumbersome syllabic forms of written communication that originated in the latter case at least as early as 3200 BC gave way at some point to the incredibly facile and flexible development of alphabets, an advancement dated and attributed to a variety of times and places. The search for the beginnings of alphabetic scripts has borne fruit in the past century or so with focus particularly on the ancient Eastern Mediterranean world. Biblical scholars have been at the forefront of these endeavors since the texts of sacred scriptures have never been evinced, except in alphabetic form, though the assumption is well-nigh universal that the existing exemplars likely sprang from both oral and written traditions, perhaps, in the latter case, non-alphabetically.

The assumption just made must remain somewhat tentative to this point, given the dearth of archaeological support. However, if one grants the antiquity of the written Hebrew tradition in line with that of cultures surrounding the Levant, nothing should stand in the way of positing analogously the existence of Hebrew writings also composed in pre-alphabetic form. Putting this line of thought to the side, the focus of Professor Petrovich's work is not so much on theories about Hebrew pre-alphabetic literature as on the antiquity of the Hebrew alphabetic tradition itself. Indeed, his thesis is that the Hebrew alphabet was not only early, but the earliest of all, the progenitor of all alphabets and alphabetic writing!

Important to his thesis is the irrefutable fact that the use by scribes of alphabetic notations is attested to from a number of sites, exclusively so far to the ancient Near East. Very early movements along this line are seen in both cuneiform syllabic and Egyptian proto-alphabetic signs as visual precursors to the consonants. In the former instance, Denise Schmandt-Besserat brilliantly decoded the so-called "tokens" and "envelopes" of the Sumerian site of Uruk IV B (*ca.* 3200 BC) and ascribed phonetic value to these varied shaped objects, prototypes inevitably leading to alphabetic systems, if not in Mesopotamia itself, at least elsewhere.¹ As for Egypt, the turquoise mines of Serâbit

1 Denise Schmandt-Besserat, "An Archaic Recording System in the Uruk-Jemdet Nasr Period," *AJA* 83/1 (1979), p. 25; *Before Writing, Volume I: From Counting to Cuneiform*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1992; *Before Writing, Volume II: A Catalog of Near Eastern Tokens*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1992; *How Writing Came About*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1996. Sumerian and Akkadian never achieved a true alphabetic scheme, but through a process of phoneticism>syllabification>alphabeticism, it prepared the way for such a development in NW Semitic (e.g., Ugaritic, Phoenician, Aramaic, and eventually Hebrew). See I. J. Gelb, *A Study of Writing*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1974, pp. 204-205.

el Khadîm² (ca. 1850 BC) in the Sinai and Wadi el-Hôl³ (ca. 1800) yielded inscriptions whose characters were modified so as to result in a practicable alphabet. No one has done more to recognize this fact and to present its scholarly defense than Douglas Petrovich.

Ras Shamra (Ugarit, ca. 1350 BC) on the northern Mediterranean coast of modern Syria is another example of an alphabetic script and discrete Semitic dialect, but this is a late-comer compared to those just listed. The adaptability of the “shorthand” of alphabets soon became evident to civilizations near and far, and by 1100 had become utilized and exported by the Phoenicians to Greece and Crete and over time to Italy and Rome, in which places the great Greek and Latin classics came to be composed.

The breakthrough as to the question of the origins of the alphabet represented in this volume is the fruit of the author’s intensive and extensive research and fastidious attention to detail. His acclaimed expertise in epigraphy, palaeography, lexicography, and comparative linguistics and literature has led him to the conviction that of all options one can currently advance as to the ultimate origins of the alphabet, the identification of proto-Hebrew is the very best candidate. Careful perusal of this volume will almost certainly persuade the reader of the validity of Petrovich’s methods and conclusions. One can anticipate the objection that Hebrew works best for the author because of his ideological and/or theological predilections regarding the Bible and all things religious, but such an objection is undermined by the disciplined way in which, by process of elimination, he discredits other contenders, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, builds a solid case for Hebrew as the only alternative by virtue of all the criteria necessary to its certification as the pioneer, as it were, in the long and convoluted train of Semitic cognate and non-Semitic heirs to the alphabetic tradition.

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2 The mines are ca. 50 km NW of Mount Sinai. See W. F. Albright, “The Early Alphabetic Inscriptions from Sinai and Their Decipherment,” *BASOR* 110 (1948): 6–22; I. J. Gelb, *A Study of Writing*. Rev. ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962, pp. 122–128; Joseph Naveh, *Origins of the Alphabets*. Jerusalem: Jerusalem Publishing House, 1994, pp. 14–17. James K. Hoffmeier, *Ancient Israel in Sinai: The Evidence for the Authenticity of the Wilderness Tradition*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011.

3 This site is ca. 40 km NW of Luxor/Karnak, 55 km SE of Abydos, and 15 km west of the Nile River. See John C. Darnell, F. W. Dobbs-Allsopp, Marilyn J. Lundberg, P. Kyle McCarter, Bruce Zuckerman, and Colleen Manassa, “Two Early Alphabetic Inscriptions from the Wadi el-Hôl: New Evidence for the Origin of the Alphabet from the Western Desert of Egypt,” *AASOR* 59 (2005): 90.

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THE INSCRIPTIONS OF THE PERIOD OF EGYPT'S MIDDLE KINGDOM

THE CAPTION ON SINAI 115

BACKGROUND TO THE INSCRIPTION

Sinai 115 (Fig. 2), called the Renefsheri Stele by Porter and Moss (1962: 348), is located along what is called the Old/Original Approach to the Sacred Cave, in the northwestern quadrant of the site of ancient turquoise mines at Serâbîṭ el-Khâdim (Gardiner et al. 1952: pl. 92). A discussion of the background to these turquoise mines will be reserved for the beginning of Chapter 3. The eastern face of the stele is badly weathered, which is due to its position, with so few other stelae in the vicinity and thus subject to the brunt of the easterly winds. Nothing but the date remains visible on this side of the stele (Gardiner et al. 1955: 118).

The western face was protected from the damaging easterly winds throughout the millennia, and much more of its inscription has been preserved, especially at the top, middle, and very bottom of the stele (Gardiner et al. 1952: pl. 39). The legible part of the stele, written in ME, reads as follows: "The god's [i.e. pharaoh's] treasurer, the intendant, governor of Lower Egypt, Renfanûp, possessing honour, conceived of Sittjehenu, true of voice. Name-list of the company who were in this mining district: ('Ptah-snofru,' added in a rough graffito at the end of the line) The scribe[,] Ameny-heteru, of the northern district. His serving-man[,] Senwosret. The attendant[,] Senwosret (this latter in rough graffito). The petty official of the Great House[,] Heba. The petty official of the Great (?) House[,] Kemsu. Petty official of the Treasury[,] Iufnai. Petty official of the Treasury[,] Habsu. Domestic [of the reis] / / / . Domestic of the reis[,] 'Ankren. / / / senb" (Gardiner et al. 1955: 118–119).

The lines that follow this unspectacular text had weathered completely at the time of Gardiner's publication, but the illustrated scene at the very bottom of the stele has survived, as well as its caption. The scene depicts a man who is seated on a donkey that is being led by a youth and driven from behind by an even shorter youth (Gardiner et al. 1955: 118–119; *idem* 1952: pl. 39; Černý 1935: 387). Over the scene is a caption that was written mostly in hieroglyphic Egyptian, but with the fascinating addition of a Canaanite syllabic and a PCH letter. The mostly-ME text reads sinistrotrograde (right to left), rather than dextrotrograde (left to right). Černý did not attempt to translate the caption, while Gardiner translated only the first two words. Neither of these scholars transliterated any part of the caption, which contains seven words.

Year 18 of Amenemhat III (ca. 1842 BC)

Petrovich Translation:
"6 Levantines: Hebrews of Bethel, the Beloved"

Middle Egyptian Transcription:
itn-wi srsw ibr n *itn-wi* = Levantine 6 = 6
Gb-[b]itu mr *Tbrê* = Hebrews of n = of

Sinai 115
Dynasty 12 *Gb-bitu* = House of the Earth-God = Beth-el *mr* = beloved

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Fig. 2. Caption on Sinai 115 (the Renefsheri Stele)—composite drawing and Fig. 2a (below) photograph (copyright The Egyptian Exploration Society).



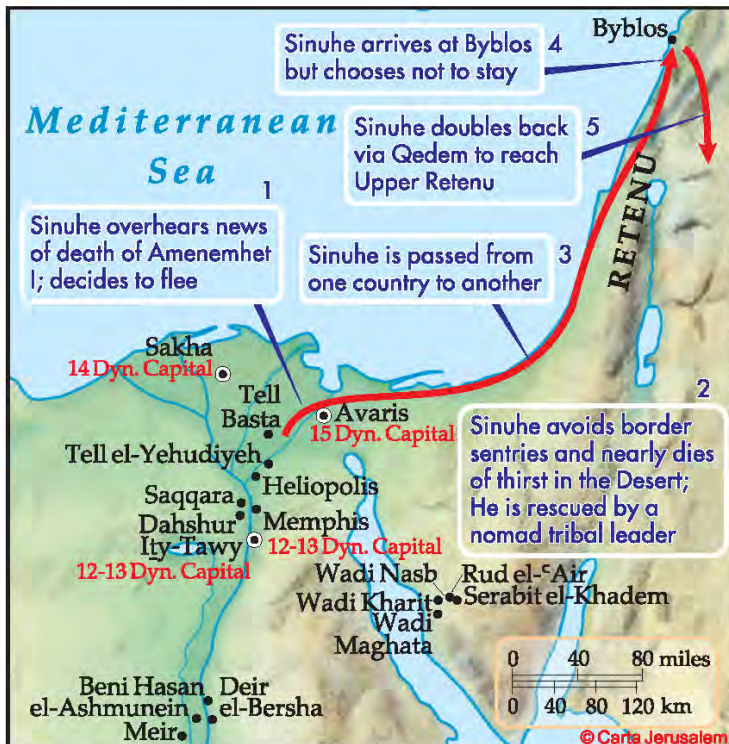
as a quail chick.

The fifteenth and final pictograph [H15] on Sinai 115's caption is the *mr*-hoe (U6), which derives from the Egyptian verb *mr*, meaning "to love" (Hoch 1998: 57; Faulkner 1981: 111). The form here on Sinai 115 must be an adjective or a participle functioning adjectivally, considering its position on the inscription, which yields the familiar translation of "beloved." The implication is that the word preceding the *mr*-hoe must be a noun, proper noun, or substantive.

TRANSLATION AND ORTHOGRAPHY

The first word [H1–H5] on Sinai 115's caption is *ʔtjnwi*. Gardiner translated this word as "[Re]tjenu" (Gardiner et al. 1955: 119). This rendering is not only correct, but it represents sheer genius on his part. The only reason Gardiner wrote the "Re" part in brackets is that the Egyptian word for the Levant is *Retjenu*, while the first word on Sinai 115 actually reads *ʔtjnwi*, the Levantine way of writing "Levant(ines)" in antiquity. Gardiner's expansive grasp of Egyptian literature must have led to his ability to translate this word correctly.

The oldest known examples of Retjenu people in Egyptian texts are found in the biography of Sinuhe (Saretta 2016: 20; Gardiner 1947: 142), the main character in the text of the Middle Kingdom literary work titled, *The Story of Sinuhe* (for discussions of whose text, see Worthington 2004: 116–119; Galán 1998: 71–81; Spalinger 1998: 311–339; Tobin 1995: 161–178; and Góedicke 1986: 167–174). The setting of the story is the time of Sesostri's I's reign, when Sinuhe traveled to Byblos, then turned toward Qedem, where he took refuge with *ḥkꜣ n Rtnw*



THE ADVENTURES OF SINUHE

(from *The Sacred Bridge: Carta's Atlas of the Biblical World* / Anson F. Rainey & R. Steven Notley)