

On Hieratic and the Direction of Alphabetic Writing

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Epigraphers have long appreciated that one of the distinguishing features of the developed linear alphabetic scripts of the first millennium Levant (e.g., Phoenician, Old Hebrew, Aramaic) is unidirectional writing from right to left in horizontal lines. Frank Moore Cross had determined that the shift to this new meta-script profile was complete by ca. 1050 BCE.¹ More recent epigraphic finds, such as the inscribed bowl fragment from Tell eš-Šafi,² the ostrakon from Khirbet Qeiyafa,³ and the Meggido jug sherd,⁴ require lowering this date by as much as a century or more, to 1000/950 BCE and possibly later.⁵ The phase of alphabetic writing that leads up to this point witnesses the loss of iconicity in the shapes of individual letters as they become more cursive or schematized (linear) and an increased incidence of unidirectional, horizontal writing, though multidirectional writing still appears.⁶ What

¹ Frank M. Cross, “Early Alphabetic Scripts” in *Leaves from an Epigrapher’s Notebook: Collected Papers in Hebrew and West Semitic Paleography and Epigraphy*, HSS 51 (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2005), 330–343.

² Aren M. Maeir, Stefan J. Wimmer, Alexander Zukerman, and Aaron Demsky, “A Late Iron Age I/Early Iron Age II Old Canaanite Inscription from Tell eš-Šafi/Gath, Israel: Paleography, Dating, and Historical-Cultural Significance,” *BASOR* 351 (2008): 39–71.

³ Haggai Misgav, Yosef Garfinkel, and Saar Ganor, “The Ostrakon” in *Khirbet Qeiyafa, Vol. 1: Excavation Report 2007–2008*, ed. Y. Garfinkel and S. Ganor (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 2009), 243–257.

⁴ 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.

⁵ On the importance of the period from 1050 to after 900 BCE, see esp. Gordon J. Hamilton, “Reconceptualizing the Periods of Early Alphabetic Scripts” in *“An Eye for Form”: Epigraphic Essays in Honor of Frank Moore Cross*, ed. J. A. Hackett and W. E. Aufrecht (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2014), 30–55, 39–42, 42–47. Sass and Finkelstein argue for lowering the endpoint of this period into the ninth century BCE (“Swan-Song,” esp. 24).

⁶ This is a process that Hamilton sees beginning as early as 1400 BCE (“Reconceptualizing,” 35–30). Orly Goldwasser dates the emergence of linearization slightly later in the Late Bronze Age, beginning in the thirteenth century BCE (“From the Iconic to the Linear—the Egyptian Scribes of Lachish and the Modification of the Early Alphabet in the Late Bronze Age,” in *Alphabets, Texts and Artifacts in the Ancient Near East: Studies Presented to Benjamin Sass*, ed. I. Finkelstein, C. Robin, and T. Römer [Paris: Van Dieren Éditeur, 2016], 118–160, 151); cf.

prompted such a conventionalization in the first place seems to have been a question little queried in the past. I suggest that the presence and example of Egyptian hieratic scribalism best accounts for the idea of writing alphabetic letters in one direction, horizontally from right to left.⁷ My warrants for coming to this judgment are several, which I review in what follows. In doing so I bring together a number of threads from the lively discussion about linear alphabetic writing—its nature, origins, development, and diffusion—that has ensued since the discovery of the two early alphabetic inscriptions from the Wadi el-Ḥôl.⁸

First, the invention of the alphabet and its diffusion over the course of much of the second millennium is characterized by adaptation and/or modification stimulated by contact with other writing systems and their supporting scribal apparatuses. One consequence of the delinguistic character of writing, observes Michael P. O'Connor, is that "it is at least as likely for *the notion* of a writing system to be borrowed as for *the system itself* to be taken over."⁹ The paradigm example is the invention of the linear alphabet itself, as Nadav Na'aman has recently emphasized.¹⁰ On most accounts the earliest alphabetic inscriptions, those from Serabit el-Khadem and the Wadi el-Ḥôl, are from Egypt and date to the Middle Kingdom (ca. 1800 BCE).¹¹ The very idea of

Benjamin Sass, *The Genesis of the Alphabet and Its Development in the Second Millennium B.C.* (Wiesbaden: Harassowitz, 1988), 114. P. Kyle McCarter, Jr., early on (following Cross) emphasized the pronounced preference for horizontal writing in this period (*The Antiquity of the Greek Alphabet and Early Phoenician Scripts*, HSM 9 [Missoula: Scholars, 1975], 106).

⁷ Some have anticipated the thesis. For example, see esp. John Ray, "The Alphabet that Never Was: A Possible Egyptian Influence on the Near East," in *Judah Between East and West: The Transition from Persian to Greek Rule (ca. 400–200 BCE)*, ed. L. L. Grabbe and O. Lipschitz, LSTS 75 (London: T & T Clark, 2011), 199–209, 208–209; and, more generally, David M. Carr, *Writing on the Tablet of the Heart: Origins of Scripture and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 86.

⁸ John C. Darnell, F. W. Dobbs-Allsopp, Marilyn J. Lundberg, P. Kyle McCarter, and Bruce Zuckerman, *Two Early Alphabetic Inscriptions from the Wadi el-Ḥôl*, AASOR 59.2 (Boston: American Schools of Oriental Research, 2005).

⁹ Michael P. O'Connor, "Writing Systems, Native Speaker Analyses, and the Earliest Stages of Northwest Semitic Orthography" in *The Word of the Lord Shall Go Forth*, ed. C. L. Meyers and M. O'Connor (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1983), 441.

¹⁰ Nadav Na'aman, "Egyptian Centers and the Distribution of the Alphabet in the Levant," *Tel Aviv* 47 (2020): 29–30.

¹¹ See esp. Alan H. Gardiner, "The Egyptian Origin of the Semitic Alphabet," *JEA* 3 (1916): 1–

writing, the morphological shapes (of most) of the individual letters (or graphemes)—semi-pictographic (high iconicity) in the earliest phase of development—the script’s animating consonantalism, the multidirectional manner of writing (vertically and horizontally), and even the basic materiality of writing (pen and ink on papyrus or pottery, inscription in durable materials such as stone), all are indebted to written Egyptian prototypes, whether hieroglyphic or hieratic.¹² None of this is contested. This is simply to emphasize that the origins of alphabetic writing as currently understood are principally a matter of inspiration from and adaptations of preexisting Egyptian writing practices.

The example of the adaptation of the alphabet to cuneiform at thirteenth-century BCE Ugarit is not different. Here, in fact, a double indebtedness to existing writing systems is detectable and makes clear that the alphabet at ancient Ugarit is not invented anew.¹³ On the one hand, there is knowledge of preexisting linear alphabetic traditions. This is explicitly the case with the several tablets that preserve the *halaḥam* order of the alphabet (*KTU* 5.24, 27 [= RS 88.2215]),¹⁴ an order that is now known from a fifteenth-century BCE, hieratic-early alphabetic bilingual ostrakon from Thebes (Ostrakon TT99).¹⁵ The *’abgad* order, which is well known from the linear

16; Gordon J. Hamilton, "The Development of the Early Alphabet," (Ph. D. dissertation, Harvard University, 1985); *The Origins of the West Semitic Alphabet in Egyptian Scripts*, CBQMS 40 (Washington, D.C.: Catholic Biblical Association, 2006); Sass, *Genesis*, esp. 135–144; Darnell et al., *Early Alphabetic Inscriptions*; Orly Goldwasser, "Canaanites Reading Hieroglyphs: Horus is Hathor? – The Invention of the Alphabet in Sinai," *Egypt and the Levant* 16 (2006): 121–160.

¹² Esp. Hamilton, *Origins*.

¹³ See esp. Aaron Koller, "The Diffusion of the Alphabet in the Second Millennium BCE: On the Movement of Scribal Ideas from Egypt to the Levant, Mesopotamia, and Yemen," *Journal of Ancient Egyptian Interconnections* 20 (2018): 1–14, esp. 4–5.

¹⁴ Pierre Bordreuil and Dennis Pardee, "Abécédaire," *RSO* 14 (2001): 341–48; cf. A. G. Loundine, "L'abécédaire de Beth Shemesh," *Muséon* 100 (1987): 243–250.

¹⁵ Ben Haring, "Halaḥam on an Ostrakon of the Early New Kingdom?," *JNES* 74 (2015): 189–196. For reasons to think that the *halaḥam* order may be native to Egypt, see Ray, "Alphabet that Never Was," 200–208. Hieratic and early alphabetic inscriptions also appear in proximity to one another at Lachish as early as the fifteenth c. BCE, see Felix Höflmayer, Haggai Misgav, Lyndelle Webster, and Katharina Streit, "Early alphabetic writing in the ancient Near East: the 'missing link' from Tel Lachish," *Antiquity* 95/381 (2021): 705–719; for the contemporaneous hieratic inscriptions, see Orly Goldwasser, "An Egyptian Scribe from Lachish and the Hieratic Tradition of the Hebrew Kingdoms," *Tel Aviv* 18 (1991): 248–253; Deborah Sweeney, "Section

alphabetic scripts of the first millennium BCE Levant (e.g., Izbet Sartá, Tel Zayit, Kuntillet Ajrud [KA 3.11–14], TAD D2.28; D10), is also attested at Ugarit, in both longer (thirty signs) and shorter (a smaller but uncertain number of signs) versions. And while the abecedaries preserving this latter order from Ugarit (e.g., KTU 5.6, 17, 28) are the earliest such abecedaries currently extant, it is very likely that the sequence itself antedates these particular inscriptions.¹⁶ At the very least, it is apparent that the long *'abgad*, which is the standard form of the cuneiform alphabet in use at Ugarit, is composed of twenty-seven graphemes, corresponding generally to the twenty-seven consonantal phonemes in the Ugaritic language,¹⁷ plus three supplementary signs (*'i*, *'u*, *'š*).¹⁸ The latter are added at the end of the abecedaries, suggesting that the basic sequence preceded the addendum.¹⁹ Certainly, the individual letter names, which appear in a clipped form in syllabic cuneiform on a bi-columnar Ugaritic-Akkadian abecedarium,²⁰ predate the thirteenth century—they are very much at the heart of the acrophonic principle that provoked the alphabet's invention in the first place.²¹ And many of the alphabetic cuneiform

B: the Hieratic Inscriptions," in D. Ussishkin (ed.) *The Renewed Archaeological Excavations at Lachish (1973–1994)* (Tel Aviv: Emery and Claire Yass Publications in Archaeology, 2004), 1601–1617. Goldwasser reports the existence of a hieratic sherd (not yet published) from the same level where the early alphabetic ostrakon was found (in a blog post, June 20, 2021; accessed at:

https://www.academia.edu/49307111/The_new_Dalet_ostrakon_from_Lachish_On_the_crossroad_of_the_early_alphabet_and_hieratic_scripts_Paleographic_remarks_A_blog_entry).

¹⁶ Cf. F. W. Dobbs-Allsopp, "Asia, Ancient Southwest: Scripts, Earliest" in *Encyclopedia of Language and Linguistics*, vol. 1, 2nd ed., ed. K. Brown (Oxford: Elsevier, 2006), 499; Dennis Pardee, "Ugaritic Alphabetic Cuneiform in the Context of Other Alphabetic Systems" in *Studies in Semitic and Afroasiatic Linguistics Presented to Gene B. Gragg*, ed. C.L. Miller (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 182–183.

¹⁷ For a more precise characterization of how Ugaritic's phonemic inventory aligns with the standard alphabetic cuneiform script, see Dennis Pardee, *The Ugaritic Texts and the Origins of West-Semitic Literary Composition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 1–40.

¹⁸ It seems likely that the extra *aleph* signs in the Ugaritic cuneiform alphabet were invented for writing languages in which syllables could begin with a vowel (e.g., Hurrian, Akkadian); see Pardee, "Alphabetic Cuneiform," 183; F. W. Dobbs-Allsopp, *On Biblical Poetry* (New York/Oxford: Oxford University, 2015), 501, n. 426.

¹⁹ Pardee, "Alphabetic Cuneiform," 183; Koller, "Diffusion," 4.

²⁰ Frank M. Cross and Thomas O. Lambdin, "A Ugaritic Abecedarium and the Origins of the Proto-Canaanite Alphabet," *BASOR* 160 (1960): 21–26.

²¹ For details, see Hamilton, *Origins*, esp. 21–26 (with earlier bibliography); cf. Dobbs-Allsopp, "Asia," 499.

signs appear to be modeled on linear alphabetic forms (e.g., *b, g, š*).²² On the other hand, alphabetic writing at Ugarit was plainly adapted to the prevailing norms for writing at this locale, syllabic cuneiform inscribed in clay with a reed stylus. That is, the scribes of Ugarit, well-schooled in the syllabic cuneiform writing system of Mesopotamia, borrowed the notion of cuneiform writing and its techniques and created a syllabary of signs to write the local Northwest Semitic dialect spoken at Ugarit. The individual signs themselves are composed of simple combinations of long, short, and/or angled wedges. This way of forming signs is inspired by syllabic cuneiform, though the individual signs bear no paleographic resemblance to signs in syllabic cuneiform.²³ The materiality of this writing, on clay, and the formatting of the standard, longer cuneiform alphabet is taken over wholly from syllabic cuneiform practices—a “‘cuneiformisation’ for use on clay tablets [that] can be seen as a concession to the familiarity of cuneiform writing practices.”²⁴

I marshal these data toward the suggestion that developments in early alphabetic writing do not just evolve naturally. Indeed, as Ryan Byrne observes, “the Old Canaanite alphabet resisted standardization during the second millennium despite its proximity to both cuneiform and hieroglyphs.”²⁵ Nevertheless, it is this proximity to existing writing systems that provoked developments, modifications, and variations in alphabetic writing over the course of the alphabet’s early history. The direction of writing is a case in point. There is no obvious or natural direction of writing. Early alphabetic inscriptions are written in multiple directions—left-right, right-

²² McCarter, *Antiquity*, 109, n. 22; cf. Franz Rosenthal, Review of Garbini and Durant, *Introduzione alla lingua semitiche*, *JAOS* 116/2 (1966): 280; Pardee, “Alphabetic Cuneiform,” 188–89; Koller, “Diffusion,” 4–5; Philip J. Boyes, *Script and Society: The Social Context of Writing Practices in Late Bronze Age Ugarit* (Oxford: Oxbow, 2021), 116–129. A robust paleographic study documenting this development remains a desideratum.

²³ For details about the paleography of alphabetic cuneiform, see J. L. Ellison, “The Scribal Art at Ugarit” in *Epigraphy, Philology, & the Hebrew Bible: Methodological Perspectives on Philological & Comparative Study of the Hebrew Bible in Honor of Jo Ann Hackett*, ed. J. M. Hutton and A. D. Rubin (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2015), 157–190.

²⁴ Boyes, *Script and Society*, 126–127; cf. F. W. Dobbs-Allsopp, *On Biblical Poetry*, 455, n. 24.

²⁵ Ryan Byrne, “The Refuge of Scribalism in Iron I Palestine,” *BASOR* 345 (2007): 17.

left, up-down, down-up—“in a fashion like, and probably suggested by, Egyptian hieroglyphic.”²⁶ The convention for writing the standard (long) cuneiform alphabet at Ugarit from left to right in horizontal lines is taken over in whole from the practice of writing syllabic cuneiform during the Middle Babylonian period—the force of this standardizing influence is accentuated to good effect in light of the much smaller corpus of alphabetic cuneiform written with a reduced graphemic inventory and in both directions.²⁷ To suppose that hieratic is the ultimate stimulus for the right-to-left directionality of the developed alphabetic scripts of the Iron Age Levant is an inference from the fact that hieratic was the only form of writing known at the time with such an orientation—“Egyptian writing regularly runs in this direction [right-to-left]. This is invariably true of hieratic and its later replacement, demotic, and it is the preferred arrangement for hieroglyphic texts.”²⁸

In support of this inference is Aaron Koller’s contention that during the second millennium the spread of the alphabet mainly seems to be “in the hands of those working as [professional] scribes in other scripts already.”²⁹ This follows generally from what has been learned about the ethnography of writing in the pre-Hellenistic Near East, namely, that it is almost exclusively the prerogative of a scribally educated elite. More specifically, as Koller documents, early alphabetic inscriptions mostly appear in proximity to Egyptian or Mesopotamian scribal activity. An obvious example is the cuneiform alphabet at Ugarit just described. Another is the TT99 ostrakon from Thebes. As Koller remarks, “the writer was clearly a trained Egyptian scribe. He writes in hieratic, followed by the alphabetic symbols at the end of

²⁶ Frank M. Cross, “The Origin and Early Evolution of the Alphabet,” in *Epigrapher’s Notebook*, 322.

²⁷ The latter corpus is collected in Manfred Dietrich and Oswald Loretz, *Die Keilalphabeten. Die phönizisch-kanaanäischen und altarabischen Alphabeten in Ugarit*, *Abhandlungen zur Literatur Alt-Syrien-Palästinas 1* (Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 1988), 145–275. The basic profile of these texts—relatively few in number, mostly short, inscribed on objects, non-standardized—is reminiscent of that of the contemporary corpus of linear alphabetic inscriptions.

²⁸ Ray, “Alphabet that Never Was,” 208.

²⁹ Koller, “Diffusion,” 2.

the line.”³⁰ Indeed, it is the scribalism on display in the Egyptian centers in Canaan that proves especially crucial for the diffusion of the alphabet throughout the Levant, as Na’aman shows.³¹ Koller emphasizes throughout his discussion that though the alphabet traveled in the first centuries of its existence in the hands of scribes also “proficient” in cuneiform (Mesopotamia and Ugarit) or hieratic or hieroglyphic (Egypt and the Levant), it never displaced these established writing systems. It was only in the aftermath of the Late Bronze/Iron Age transition in the Levant, once the larger territorial polities of Hatti, Egypt, and Mesopotamia and their supporting scribal infrastructures either came to an end (Hatti) or withdrew from the Levant (Egypt, Babylon, Assyria), that linear alphabetic writing gains an opportunity and need to function as a self-sustaining, independent writing system. This happens gradually—multi- and unidirectional alphabetic writing appear to overlap throughout this transition period and into Iron IIA.³² No doubt that Byrne is correct in his surmise that the “refuge” for alphabetic writing was scribalism itself (e.g., curricular items are one of the main kinds of inscriptions surviving from the period) and that it is precisely the alphabet’s “irrelevance”—only existing on the margins of dominant social structures—that accounts for its survival.³³ That is, the alphabet’s detachability from the scribal infrastructures (Egyptian, Babylonian) that enabled its diffusion meant that the alphabet could persist even in the absence of these infrastructures.³⁴

Hieratic scribalism, of course, directly impacted the morphological shape of many early alphabetic signs from an early period.³⁵ It is equally

³⁰ Koller, “Diffusion,” 3.

³¹ Na’aman, “Egyptian Centers,” 29–54.

³² Hamilton, “Reconceptualizing,” 49–50; cf. Misgav et al., “Ostrakon,” 246–249; Sass and Finkelstein, “Swan-Song,” 26–40; Christopher Rollston, “The Emergence of Alphabetic Scripts” in *A Companion to Ancient Near Eastern Languages*, ed. R. Hasselbach-Andee (Hoboken: Wiley, 2020), 76–77.

³³ Byrne, “Refuge of Scribalism,” 22–23; cf. Seth L. Sanders, *The Invention of Hebrew* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 2009), 101.

³⁴ Hieroglyphic Luwian, which is a peripheral writing system prior to the Iron Age, also survives and flourishes for some centuries. By contrast, Linear B, Hittite cuneiform, and alphabetic cuneiform do not survive the Late Bronze/Iron Age transition.

³⁵ Esp. Darnell et al., *Early Alphabetic Inscriptions*; Hamilton, *Origins*. See also Goldwasser’s

apparent in the format and layout of the TT99 ostrakon from Thebes.³⁶ From the time of Seti I onwards till the last Ramessides leave Palestine, Egyptian campaigning in the Levant is renewed and intensifies dramatically.³⁷ This increased Egyptian presence is accompanied by scribal support structures.³⁸ The latter is implicated by the corpus of New Kingdom royal inscriptions found in the Levant (e.g., royal stelae, hieratic inscriptions, inscribed architectural elements).³⁹ Of particular interest here are the thirty-eight hieratic inscriptions, most of which date to the Nineteenth or Twentieth Dynasty and come from the southern coastal region, the Shephelah, and the northern Negev.⁴⁰ This is a core area of early alphabetic writing as well.⁴¹ Such proximity of hieratic and alphabetic writing, argue Israel Finkelstein and Benjamin Sass, lends “support to the assumption that Proto-Canaanite was linked, albeit in a still unknown way, to the Egyptian activity in this main region of Egyptian domination in the Levant in the 13th and 12th centuries.”⁴² Na’aman provides depth to this insight and Orly Goldwasser gives it specificity

paleographic assessment of the *bet* in the new early alphabetic inscription from Lachish, which is modeled on the hieratic version of the house signs from the period (“New *Dalet ostrakon*”).

³⁶ Haring, “*Halaḥam*.”

³⁷ For details, see most recently Raphael Greenberg, *Archaeology of the Bronze Age Levant* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2020), 272–353, esp. 287–341.

³⁸ Esp. Na’aman, “Egyptian Centers.”

³⁹ For a convenient list, see Eythan Levy, “A Note on the Geographical Distribution of New Kingdom Egyptian Inscriptions from the Levant,” *Journal of Ancient Egyptian Interconnections* 14 (2017): 14–21.

⁴⁰ Levy, “Note,” 15–16, Fig. 1, Table 2; Stefan Wimmer, “Lachish is Lachish on the Lachish Bowl: An Object Lesson for Reading Hieratic, with Little Surprising Results” in *The Late Bronze and Early Iron Ages of Southern Canaan* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2019), 136, 144, Map 7.1. Notably, sixteen inscriptions have been recovered from Tel Sera’ and ten from Lachish.

⁴¹ Conveniently, compare the maps in Israel Finkelstein and Benjamin Sass, “The West Semitic Alphabetic Inscriptions, Late Bronze II to Iron IIA: Archeological Context, Distribution and Chronology,” *HBAI* 2 (2013): 149–220, Maps 1–3, with that in Wimmer, “Lachish” (Map 7). The newly recovered early alphabetic ostrakon dating to the fifteenth c. BCE (Höflmayer et al., “Early Alphabetic Writing”) suggests that this entanglement with hieratic scribalism occurs even earlier in the Late Bronze Age in this region—as Goldwasser notes, “Egyptian scribes and administrators were probably present in Canaan already in the latter part of the 18th Dynasty, even if not permanently, such as on the large scale of the Ramesside period (“New *Dalet ostrakon*”; cf. Na’aman, “Egyptian Centers”). This new ostrakon—still pre-linearization—provides a datable linchpin for the close of the earliest phase of alphabetic writing, Hamilton’s “Early Alphabetic A.”

⁴² Finkelstein and Sass, “West Semitic Alphabetic Inscriptions,” 183–184; cf. Goldwasser, “Iconic to the Linear,” 157; Koller, “Diffusion,” 4, 6.

of detail when she compares the alphabetic inscriptions on bowls and bowl fragments from Lachish and Qubur el-Walaydah to the hieratic inscriptions on bowls, especially from Lachish and Tel Sera': "The alphabetic writings in a running line or two lines on complete bowls is strongly reminiscent of the script arrangement on the *Egyptian hieratic* bowls discovered at Lachish and Tell Sera."⁴³ Critically, part of this likeness in arrangement is the direction of the writing, right to left on horizontal lines. This kind of "interference" (Goldwasser's term) would eventually, literally change the direction of alphabetic writing and the snapshot that these bowls provide is as close as we can currently come to viewing this interfering process in progress.

Lachish is one center of writing in this period. Multiple hieratic and early alphabetic inscriptions from the period have been recovered from the site. Notable is the recent find of a jar sherd containing a fragmentary early alphabetic inscription from a twelfth-century context.⁴⁴ The inscription was incised before firing. Parts of three lines are extant. They are written right to left and the middle line likely contains the word *spr* "scribe."⁴⁵ William M. Schniedewind proposes to read the two legible signs on the third lines as a combination of a hieratic numeral ("5") and the hieratic symbol for *hq3.t* "heqat."⁴⁶ If Schniedewind's reading proves correct, it would be, as he notes, the earliest such usage of a hieratic numeral and special sign in alphabetic inscriptions.⁴⁷ The latter feature in the "old Hebrew" inscriptions of the Iron Age, and are now known from Philistia and Transjordan as well.⁴⁸ Even absent Schniedewind's construal of the new Lachish jar fragment, Stephan Wimmer emphasizes that the "abnormal" hieratic tradition reflected in these several

⁴³ Na'aman, "Egyptian Centers," esp. 32–39; Goldwasser, "Iconic to Linear," 158.

⁴⁴ Benjamin Sass, Yosef Garfinkel, Michael G. Hasel, and Martin G. Klingbeil, "The Lachish Jar Sherd: An Early Alphabetic Inscription Discovered in 2014," *BASOR* 374 (2015): 233–245.

⁴⁵ Sass et al., "Lachish Jar Sherd," 23.

⁴⁶ William M. Schniedewind, "The Alphabetic 'Scribe' of the Lachish Jar Inscription and the Hieratic Tradition in the Early Iron Age," *BASOR* 383 (2020): 137–140.

⁴⁷ Schniedewind, "Alphabetic 'Scribe'," 139.

⁴⁸ Stephan J. Wimmer, "Palestinian Hieratic in Non-Hebrew Context: Egyptian Numerals and Special Signs in Regions Neighboring Israel" in *Tell it in Gath*, ed. I. Shai et al., *ÄAT* 90 (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2018), 709–721.

first millennium alphabetic script traditions (what he calls “Palästinisches Hieratisch”) “can to some extent be traced back to the Ramesside administration of Canaan.”⁴⁹ Most consequential for my thesis is the prospect that the Lachish jar inscription witnesses a moment, as Schniedewind remarks, “when the Egyptian hieratic tradition was being adopted by alphabetic scribes.”⁵⁰ Such an adoption includes the hieratic numerals and symbols, which is Schniedewind’s immediate concern, but also, I submit, the arrangement of the writing, viz. from right to left in horizontal lines. If the TT99 ostrakon from Thebes witnesses an Egyptian scribe writing early alphabetic signs (so Koller), some several centuries later the new Lachish jar fragment may witness an alphabetic scribe writing very much like an Egyptian scribe, with knowledge of the hieratic tradition and its enabling meta-script conventions. This is the subaltern mimicking the scribal practice of the colonizer.⁵¹

As at Lachish, roughly contemporaneous Late Bronze hieratic and early alphabetic inscriptions were found at Qubur el-Walaydah.⁵² And two other sites from the region, Tell el-Far’ah (S) and Tell eṣ-Ṣafi, boast Late Bronze hieratic and early Iron Age alphabetic inscriptions.⁵³ The Tell eṣ-Ṣafi early alphabetic inscription, which the excavators date to the late Iron I/early Iron IIA period, is especially remarkable. The script is likely oriented from right to left and in Wimmer’s judgment one or more hieratic symbols are preserved

⁴⁹ Wimmer, “Palestinian Hieratic,” 710; cf. Stephan J. Wimmer, *Palästinisches Hieratisch: Die Zahl- und Sonderzeichen in der althebräischen Schrift*, ÄAT 75 (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2008), 275–278; Goldwasser, “Egyptian Scribe,” 248–253.

⁵⁰ Schniedewind, “Alphabetic ‘Scribe,’” 137.

⁵¹ Cf. Na’aman, “Egyptian Centers,” 47.

⁵² Frank M. Cross, “Newly Found Inscriptions in Old Canaanite and Early Phoenician Scripts,” *BASOR* 238 (1980): 1–20, 1–4 (= *Leaves*, 213–30, 213–216); Stephan J. Wimmer and Gunnar Lehmann, “Two Hieratic Inscriptions from Qubur el-Walaydah,” *Ägypten und Levante* 24 (2014): 343–348.

⁵³ Gunnar Lehmann and Tammi J. Schneider, “Tell el-Farah (South) 1999 ostrakon,” *UF* 31 (1999): 251–254 (ca. Iron II); Orly Goldwasser and Stephan Wimmer, “Hieratic Fragments from Tell el-Far’ah (South),” *BASOR* 313 (1999): 39–42; Maeir et al., “Canaanite Inscription,” 39–71; Stephan J. Wimmer and Aren M. Maeir, “The Prince of Safit?: A Late Bronze Age Hieratic Inscription from Tell eṣ-Ṣāfi/Gath,” *ZDPV* 123 (2007): 37–48.

among the several alphabetic signs.⁵⁴ If this latter assessment is correct, then these several meta-script conventions may be added to a growing number of points of connection (mostly paleographic in nature) linking Iron I/IIA alphabetic writing with its Late Bronze alphabetic ancestors. One-directional alphabetic writing of the early Iron Age “clearly” descends from earlier alphabetic models.⁵⁵

What impact hieratic scribalism had in the northern Levant during the last part of the Late Bronze Age is unknown, since to date no New Kingdom hieratic inscriptions have been found north of Beth Shean.⁵⁶ Ugarit was a cosmopolitan city, with evidence for as many as eight different languages and five different scripts in use, including Egyptian and hieroglyphic.⁵⁷ Certainly, the linear alphabet was known at Ugarit and the nature of its several alphabetic traditions—multidirectional writing, smaller and larger graphemic inventories, the shapes of (some) individual alphabetic signs—is consistent generally with the profile of what is known about the roughly contemporary corpus of early (linear) alphabetic inscriptions from the southern Levant and Egypt. Na’aman compellingly posits Byblos as possibly a second coastal center of alphabetic scribalism with demonstrable cultural affiliations with Egypt, at least from the eleventh century on, and perhaps as early as the fourteenth century BCE.⁵⁸ He even speculates that Byblos may have served as the intermediary introducing the linear alphabetic script to Ugarit.⁵⁹

The small number and mostly brief and ephemeral nature of the early

⁵⁴ On the direction of writing, see Maeir et al., “Canaanite Inscription,” esp. 48, 50, 55; cf. Hamilton, “Reconceptualizing,” 39. On the presence of hieratic symbols, see Wimmer, *Palastisches Hieratish*, 128–129; “Palestinian Hieratic,” 716 (Wimmer believes the direction of writing could also be from left to right); cf. Maeir et al., “Canaanite Inscription,” 53–54.

⁵⁵ Hamilton, “Reconceptualizing,” 42–50, esp. 42; Sass and Finkelstein, “Swan-Song,” esp. 39–40; Na’aman, “Egyptian Centers,” 37. Slightly later Iron IIA alphabetic inscriptions have also been recovered from the site, see Aren M. Maeir (ed.), *Tell es-Safi/Gath I: Report on the 1996–2005 Seasons* ÄAT 69 (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2012), 32.

⁵⁶ Levy, “Note,” 15; Wimmer, “Lachish,” 144.

⁵⁷ Pierre Bordreuil and Dennis Pardee, *A Manual of Ugaritic* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2009), 8.

⁵⁸ Na’aman, “Egyptian Centers,” esp. 40–44.

⁵⁹ Na’aman, “Egyptian Centers,” 43–44.

alphabetic inscriptions from the Late Bronze and early Iron ages are important data to consider. Aside from the “cuneiformisation” of the linear alphabet at Ugarit, the alphabet seems not to have been standardized for writing readily recognizable languages prior to the rise of the so-called “national”⁶⁰ scripts of Iron IIA.⁶¹ That is, on current evidence, the linear alphabet during this period primarily appears in proximity to scribes proficient in other writing systems and inscribes a miscellany of (mostly) ownership tags, school exercises, and perhaps some basic record-keeping.⁶² A preference for horizontal writing and even for specifically right-to-left oriented writing may be discerned in these materials, especially throughout the Late Bronze/Iron Age transition and into Iron IIA—Hamilton, building on Cross, characterizes this phase (his “Early Alphabetic C”) as the “single-directional stage of alphabetic writing.”⁶³ Yet this latter meta-script convention does not come into acute focus as such until its standardization in the coastal Phoenician script of the old Byblian inscriptions (traditionally dated to the tenth c. BCE),⁶⁴ the “old Hebrew” script (which becomes distinguishable as such during the ninth c. BCE),⁶⁵ and the various script-languages of the several West Semitic royal inscriptions (which are

⁶⁰ I use the term as a convenience only. The “nation state” is likely not the most accurate descriptor of the extended territorial polities that eventually emerge in the southern Levant in the Iron Age, and, regardless, it is best, as Hamilton advises, “to avoid any suggestion that there were national scripts late in Iron Age I or early in Iron Age II” (“Reconceptualizing,” 43).

⁶¹ This is a point Seth L. Sanders stresses well in “What was the Alphabet For?” *Maarav* 11 (2004): 25–56, 42–47.

⁶² Byrne, “Refuge of Scribalism,” 1–31; Sanders, *Invention*, 106–113. The observable decline in writing (Byrne, “Refuge of Scribalism,” 17; Finkelstein and Sass, “West Semitic Alphabetic Inscriptions,” 186) is consistent with the broader cultural decline of the period.

⁶³ Hamilton, “Reconceptualizing,” 42; cf. F. M. Cross, “The Evolution of the Proto-Canaanite Alphabet” in *Leaves*, 310 (= *BASOR* 134 [1954]: 15–24); McCarter, *Antiquity*, 29 (“a uniform system of sinistrotic writing”).

⁶⁴ Esp. Christopher Rollston, “The Dating of the Early Royal Byblian Phoenician Inscriptions: A Response to Benjamin Sass,” *Maarav* 15 (2008): 57–93; cf. Na’aman, “Egyptian Centers,” 42–44 (late eleventh c.). Finkelstein and Sass prefer to regard these inscriptions as a part of the emergence of monumental inscriptions in the Levant during “the second half of the ninth century” (“West Semitic Alphabetic Inscriptions,” 200, n. 196).

⁶⁵ Esp. Shmuel Ahituv and Amihai Mazar, “The Inscriptions from Tel Rehov and Their Contribution to the Study of Script and Writing During Iron Age IIA” in “*See, I will bring a scroll recounting what befell me*” (*Ps 40:8*): *Epigraphy and Daily Life from the Bible to the Talmud Dedicated to the Memory of Professor Hanan Eshel*, ed. E. Eshel and Y. Levin, *Journal of Ancient Judaism*, Supplement 12 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2014), 39–68, 189–203; cf. Sass and Finkelstein, “Swan-Song,” 19–42.

dated historically to the latter part of the ninth c. BCE).⁶⁶ That is, given the nature of the evidence the settledness of the convention can only be appreciated retrospectively, as already having been fixed. Both the provocation and allure of such standardization—including consistency of writing direction and the stabilization in letter shape and stance that the latter drove⁶⁷—was greater ease, efficiency and speed in learning, writing, and reading alphabetic scripts.⁶⁸ While all of the earliest evidence for these newly standardized alphabetic scripts is preserved in inscribed durable materials (stone monuments, clay pots or sherds), aspects of these scripts’ paleography (i.e., their “cursivization”) and the fact of the systemization itself presume writing in ink on perishable materials (papyrus, animal skins). So Sass and Finkelstein surmise: “the stream-lining, or ‘cursivization’ of the alphabet was not sparked off by a word here, a word there, scrawled on a pot, but rather by a critical mass of documents written with pen and ink on papyrus or skins; [before] such a mass it is implausible that the cursive will have emerged.”⁶⁹ Of course, papyrus and animal skins are not conducive to long term preservation in the climatic regimes that typified much of the ancient Levant, and thus these posited forms of flat, fast writing mostly have not survived. However, some material traces of this writing practice (beyond what the cursivization of the scripts and attendant meta-script conventions imply) do exist. Stamp seals

⁶⁶ Nadav Na’aman, “Three Notes on the Aramaic Inscription from Tel Dan” in *Ancient Israel’s History and Historiography: The First Temple Period. Collected Essays. Volume 3* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2006), 173–86, esp. 173–76 (= *IEJ* 50 [2000]: 92–104); Sanders, *Invention of Hebrew*, 113–22; F. W. Dobbs-Allsopp and Dan Pioske, “On the Appearance of Royal Inscriptions in Alphabetic Scripts in the Levant: An Exercise in ‘Historically Anchored Philology,’” *Maarav* 23 (2019): 389–442.

⁶⁷ Esp. Cross, “Evolution,” 310; McCarter, *Antiquity*, 29.

⁶⁸ So Hamilton succinctly and recently in “Reconceptualizing,” 42. A primordial social driver of such enhanced legibility was the need for mutual intelligibility in a written medium absent the superimposed imperial modes of writing of earlier eras—such intelligibility is given eloquent expression already in the written curses of the Zakkur stela (*KAI* 202 B.16–22) addressed to “whomever” would efface or remove the stela. Cf. M. B. Parkes, *Their Hands before Our Eyes: A Closer Look at Scribes* (London and New York: Routledge, 2008), 55–69.

⁶⁹ Finkelstein and Sass, “Swan-Song,” 40; cf. Reinhard G. Lehman, “Calligraphy and Craftsmanship in the Ahirom Inscription: Considerations on Skilled Linear Flat Writing in Early First Millennium Byblos,” *Maarav* 15 (2008): 119–64; Matthieu Richelle, “Elusive Scrolls: Could Any Hebrew Literature Have Been Written Prior to the Eighth Century BCE?”, *VT* 66 (2016): 556–594; Parkes, *Their Hands before Our Eyes*, 71–85.

and/or bullae (lumps of clay bearing seal impressions used with thread to close a document) have survived: most from controlled excavations date from Iron II or later.⁷⁰ For example, from the City of David excavations, approximately ten seals and scarabs and fragments of more than 170 bullae with seal impressions have been recovered.⁷¹ These likely date to the late ninth or early eighth centuries BCE and all are anepigraphic—no seals or sealings with alphabetic inscriptions from archeological excavations pre-date the eighth century. The bullae often preserve the impressions in the clay left by the closing string and on the reverse some even contain imprints of the papyrus itself. And not insignificantly, some of these seals and bullae bear Egyptian writing (mostly “pseudo hieroglyphs”) and even several cartouches—these underscore the Egyptian source of the writing practices being imitated.

The peculiar variations of the name of David’s one scribe preserved in the Bible—*šērāyâ* (2 Sam 8:17), *šěyā’* (2 Sam 20:25 [K]), *šěwā’* (2 Sam 2:25 [Q]), *šīšā’* (1 Kgs 4:3), *šawšā’* (1 Chron 18:16)—seem most prudently explained as corruptions of the Egyptian term for scribe, *sš š’t*.⁷² This may represent, if correct, a cultural memory of (Hebrew) alphabetic scribalism’s ancient indebtedness to Egyptian forerunners. That is, the actual name of David’s scribe was long lost, while what was remembered (in several bastardized forms) was the Egyptian term for the function the Hebrew *sōpēr* carried forward.⁷³ The story of Wenamun (*COS* 1.41), likely dating to an eleventh- or

⁷⁰ *WSSS* is the standard collection. Some more recent general discussions include Sanders, *Invention*, 209–11, nn. 5–8; Finkelstein and Sass, “West Semitic Alphabetic Inscriptions,” esp. 191–92; Ahituv and Mazar, “Inscriptions,” esp. 59; Richelle, “Elusive Scrolls,” 559–560.

⁷¹ Ronny Reich, Eli Shukron, and Omri Lerna, “Recent Discoveries in the City of David,” *IEJ* 57 (2007): 153–169, at 156–57. There are Iron I seals and sealings from the Levant (all anepigraphic), e.g., David Ben-Shlomo, “New Evidence of Seals and Sealings from Philistia,” *Tel Aviv* 33 (2006): 134–162 (sealing #7442 from Tel Miqne-Ekron may have papyrus impressions, p. 140).

⁷² See Dan Pioske, “The Scribe of David: A Portrait of a Life,” *Maarav* 20/2 (2013): 1–2, 6 (with literature).

⁷³ There is much else in the Hebrew Bible that reflects knowledge of scroll technology (e.g., 2 Sam 1:18; 2 Kgs 22; Isa 29:11–12; Jer 36; Ps 45:2), though transfixing on the originating historicity of these materials is often a complex and contested endeavor.

tenth-century horizon,⁷⁴ references several forms of writing, some of which will have likely been in ink on papyrus (or other perishable materials): “the dispatch of Amun” (*COS* 1, 91; hieratic?), “letter(s)” (*COS* 1, 91, 92; cuneiform? hieratic? alphabetic?), “daybook of his forefathers” (*COS* 1, 91; alphabetic).⁷⁵ Alongside these is mentioned an inscribed “stela” bearing Wenamun’s name— “in another day [when] an envoy comes from the land of Egypt who knows writing and reads your name....” (*COS* 1, 92). Such inscribed (and re-inscribed) stelae have survived, suggesting that scholars are not wrong to presume the existence of more perishable forms of writing (such as on papyrus) alongside these more durable inscriptions.

There is also the mid-eighth-century BCE ink on plaster texts from Deir ‘Alla which were displayed on a wall in the shape of a sheet of papyrus, including the use of both black and red ink (the standard inks used by Egyptian scribes).⁷⁶ Artistic representations of alphabetic scribes have survived. Most notably, from the eighth century BCE are the iconic image on many Neo-Assyrian artifacts of the twin scribes, one writing in cuneiform on a clay tablet and the other writing in the linear alphabet on a papyrus roll, and an orthostat from Zincirli showing an enthroned Bar-Rakib and his scribe.⁷⁷ The scribe in the latter holds in his left hand what appears to be a scribe’s pen case, which would have contained reeds, red and black ink, and a knife for cutting the papyrus. Scribes like the unnamed scribe in this relief would have prepared copies of the inscriptions that stone carvers would engrave on this (*KAI* 218) and similar monuments.⁷⁸ And there is the well-known Iron Age inscription on

⁷⁴ For a convenient summary discussion, see Na’aman, “Egyptian Centers,” 40–42.

⁷⁵ The Egyptian phrase *'rw(t) h3w (n) n3yf ityw* literally means “scrolls of the time (of) his fathers,” according to J. A. Emerton, “A Questionable Theory of Egyptian Influence on a Genre of Hebrew Literature,” in *Semitic Studies in Honour of Edward Ullendorf*, ed. Geoffrey Khan (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 194–195. Cf. Na’aman, “Egyptian Centers,” 40–42. And there is the fact that the story itself is written in hieratic on a papyrus roll (though obviously from Egypt).

⁷⁶ J. Hoftizer and G. van der Kooij, eds., *Aramaic Texts from Deir ‘Alla*, DMOA 19 (Leiden: Brill, 1976). Ahituv and Mazar comment specifically on the use of red (red-brown) ink in several of the Rehob (and other) inscriptions (“Inscriptions,” 48, 55–57, 59). The text is even labeled a *spr* “(papyrus) roll, scroll” (*KAI* 312.1).

⁷⁷ Conveniently, see Dobbs-Allsopp and Pioske, “Royal Inscriptions,” Pls. XXXII, XXXVII.

⁷⁸ See Bruce Zuckerman and Lynn S. Dodd, “Pots and Alphabets: Refractions of Reflections on

papyrus from Wadi Murabba'at.⁷⁹ It is inscribed in the “old Hebrew” script and dates to the seventh century BCE. It is a palimpsest, a letter overwritten by a list of names with hieratic numerals.⁸⁰ So papyri were certainly used in the Iron Age, even if most have not survived. And as crucially, these all point to a materiality of writing that is distinctly Egyptian in origin—and of course hieratic was evolved specifically for fast writing on papyrus.⁸¹ It seems prudent to conclude that the right-to-left direction of writing in horizontal lines was settled on as a part of this larger process, as the linear alphabetic scripts were being adapted for the fast writing of legible languages in long(er) forms (letters, legal contracts, religious or literary texts), all in imitation of the region’s principal model for such writing on perishable materials, Egyptian hieratic.⁸² This kind of mimicry is precisely mirrored earlier at Ugarit where the left-to-right directionality of the main, longer form of the cuneiform alphabet was adopted from the manner of writing syllabic cuneiform—“the fundamental fact about writing in this period,” notes Seth L. Sanders, “is the dominance of syllabic cuneiform.”

The period of this fixation was extended. It is ultimately rooted in the Ramesside rule of southern Canaan during the thirteenth and twelfth centuries BCE and the hieratic scribalism that accompanied this Egyptian

Typological Method,” *Maarav* 10 (2003):106–7; Marilyn J. Lundberg, “Editor’s Notes: The Aḥiram Inscription,” *Maarav* 11 (2004): 81–93; Na’aman, “Egyptian Centers,” 34.

⁷⁹ J. T. Milik, “Palimpseste: lettre, liste de personnes (VIII^e siècle avant J.-C.),” in *Les grottes de Murabba'at*, DJD 2, eds. P. Benoit, J. T. Milik and R. De Vaux (Oxford: Oxford University, 1961), 93–100.

⁸⁰ More recently, two other fragments of Iron Age Hebrew papyri have been recovered, see Shmuel Aḥituv, Eitan Klein and Amir Ganor, “The ‘Jerusalem’ Papyrus,” *IEJ* 67 (2017): 168–182; <https://www.haaretz.com/archaeology/2022-09-07/ty-article/israel-regains-rare-ancient-hebrew-papyrus-from-first-temple-period/00000183-1728-d6f3-a7ff-ffea08eb0000>. Post-Iron Age collections of alphabetic writings on papyri or animal skins are well attested, e.g., Elephantine, Oxyrhynchus, Dead Sea Scrolls.

⁸¹ The title of the sixth chapter in Philip Zhakevich’s recent *Scribal Tools in Ancient Israel* (University Park, PA: Eisenbrauns, 2020) well emphasizes this point: “Egypt’s Influence on Canaan and Ancient Israel.”

⁸² Ray even speculates that “the right-to-left preference may have been encouraged by the use of papyrus rolls, where it would be easier for a right-handed person to arrange his text in such a way” (“Alphabet that Never Was,” 208). M. B. Parkes comments more generally on the difference in the mechanics of righthanded and lefthanded scribes in *Their Hands before Our Eyes*, 62–83.

presence. This is a moment when the linear alphabetic mimicry of hieratic scribal practices appears with especially acute clarity. The process persists through the Late Bronze/Iron Age transition and the convention of writing from right to left is finally fixed at some point prior to the appearance of inscriptions of legible languages during the tenth and ninth centuries BCE. Much remains unknown given the meagerness of the current data. But enough is known to suggest that the process was gradual and complex and should not be conceptualized as a primarily linear development.⁸³ The outstanding new datum to emerge over the last decade or so is that multidirectional alphabetic writing persisted into the middle of the tenth century BCE (and perhaps later). This means that the conventionalization of single-direction alphabetic writing occurred in some places (presumably under the impress of fast, flat writing) and not in others. Certain nodes of influence readily resolve themselves. For example, the reduction to twenty-two graphemes still seems best accounted for by the supposition of coastal Phoenician influence, since Phoenician has the same number of consonantal phonemes and because languages with larger consonantal phonemic inventories (Hebrew, Aramaic) would presumably adopt scripts with larger syllabaries if available (as with the cuneiform alphabet at Ugarit).⁸⁴ Yet not every aspect of the emergent alphabetic scripts

⁸³ Hamilton is right to highlight Cross' stress on the "complex to simple" trajectory of alphabetic script development ("Reconceptualizing," 50; cf. Na'aman. "Egyptian Centers," 44). This way of conceptualizing this period of alphabetic development—non-linear, multidimensional, prolonged—matches how historians and archaeologists are beginning to understand the Late Bronze/Iron Age transition more broadly, e.g., Eric H. Cline, *1177 BC: The Year Civilization Collapsed* (Princeton: Princeton University, 2014); A. Bernard Knapp and Sturt W. Manning, "Crisis in Context: The End of the Late Bronze Age in the Eastern Mediterranean," *AJA* 120 (2016): 99–139.

⁸⁴ McCarter, "Paleographic Notes," 47. Of course, scribes were writing languages with reduced phonemic inventories at least as far back as thirteenth-century Ugarit. And most of the inscriptions in the linear alphabet from the Late Bronze Age through Iron IIA are fragmentary or too short to identify the language being written down, let alone the nature or extent of its phonemic inventory. However, some will have been languages with reduced numbers of consonantal phonemes. Hamilton, emphasizing the sparsity of the data, can imagine a much more complex situation in which the reduced graphemic inventory arose over time as multiple linguistic communities with languages with reduced phonemic inventories experimented with alphabetic writing and mutually influenced each other's writing practice (personal communication). Given the prominence of early alphabetic inscriptions from the Shephelah, Finkelstein and Sass raise the possibility that the reduction of the graphemic inventory

of the Iron Age Levant is readily connected to coastal Phoenician scribalism. P. Kyle McCarter and Hamilton argue at length that the morphology of a number of the individual signs in inscriptions from southern, hinterland sites (e.g., Gezer calendar, Tel Zayit abecedary) descend not from coastal Phoenician but from earlier inscriptions written in several directions from the south—as McCarter emphasizes, “inland Canaan had a long history of alphabetic literacy prior to the 10th century B.C.E.”⁸⁵ Indeed, Hamilton’s claims are most encompassing: “there is nothing distinctively Phoenician about the script of the growing number of late 11th- to early 9th-century B.C.E. inscriptions from southern sites.”⁸⁶ The use of hieratic numerals and symbols and word division in the “old Hebrew” script are meta-script conventions that equally do not derive from coastal Phoenician prototypes. What role (if any) Phoenician scribalism may have played in mediating right-to-left directionality during the early Iron Age is unknown. The Izbet Sartá sherd (ca. eleventh c. BCE) shows that direction of writing, phenomenologically, is separable from the reduction in number of graphemes. The association of right-to-left directionality with Phoenician scribalism (“the inveterate Phoenician tradition of sinistrograde writing”)⁸⁷ mainly would appear to be a consequence of the temporal priority usually assigned to the old Byblian inscriptions and Cross’s labeling the arrowhead script “early linear Phoenician.” Of course, there is no obvious or natural way for writing the Phoenician language⁸⁸ and other regions in the Levant (e.g., Philistia) have an equally impactful history of alphabetic writing. Finkelstein and Sass even suppose that the diffusion of the linear alphabet moved from the south to other regions in the eastern Mediterranean, including

happened first in the south and then spread to the rest of the Levant (“West Semitic Alphabetic Inscriptions,” 185, 201).

⁸⁵ McCarter, “Paleographic Notes,” 49–56, quote at p. 49; Hamilton, “Reconceptualizing,” 42–49.

⁸⁶ Hamilton, “Reconceptualizing,” 43.

⁸⁷ McCarter, *Antiquity*, 103.

⁸⁸ If E. L. Greenstein is correct in identifying the language of the cuneiform inscription on an amphora from Sarepta as Phoenician (“A Phoenician Inscription in Ugaritic Script?”, *JANES* 8 [1976]: 49–57), then it is noteworthy that the reduced script is used but written left to right.

Phoenicia.⁸⁹ Yet even if Phoenician scribalism played a role in mediating the direction of alphabetic writing, the likeliest ultimate source or model for this convention remains Egyptian hieratic—“the right-to-left habit later left its mark on the Phoenician writing- system, possibly because papyrus was used as a medium at sites such as Byblos.”⁹⁰ Byblos, like other port cities on the Mediterranean coast, had a long history of cultural association with Egypt—one need only note the Egyptian artifacts (e.g., sarcophagus, royal statue) on which several of the old Byblian inscriptions are inscribed.⁹¹

In sum, evidence (however sparse) exists to suggest that the right-to-left direction that linear alphabetic writing assumes during the first millennium in the Levant is a meta-script convention ultimately rooted in Egyptian hieratic scribalism. Alphabetic writing initially emerges, develops, and spreads under the inspiration of and in contact with pre-existing writing systems, including especially Egyptian hieratic. The latter is written from right to left—indeed, the only ancient writing system prior to the stabilization of the linear alphabet to be written in such a manner. Hieratic was used in support of Egyptian rule of Canaan during the latter part of the Late Bronze Age, a period in which hieratic and early alphabetic inscriptions are found in close proximity to one another. And the materiality of alphabetic writing—with pen and ink on papyrus rolls closed with clay sealings—along with several meta-script conventions (single-file writing in horizontal lines, use of hieratic numerals and symbols in the “old Hebrew” script) are unquestionably adopted from hieratic scribal practices. That the direction of alphabetic writing should also derive from hieratic, in the end, is perhaps unsurprising.⁹²

⁸⁹ Finkelstein and Sass, “West Semitic Alphabetic Inscriptions,” 200.

⁹⁰ Ray, “Alphabet that Never Was,” 209.

⁹¹ For elaboration of Byblos’ connections with Egypt, see Na’aman, “Egyptian Centers,” 30–32, 40–44.

⁹² A version of the paper was presented at the Old Testament Research Colloquium, Princeton Theological Seminary (October 19, 2022). I thank the members of the colloquium, especially Lisa Cleath and Andrew Peecher, who served as formal respondents, for the rich conversation about the paper. Thanks also to Heath Dewrell, Aaron Koller, Dan Pioske, Mark Smith and an anonymous reviewer for *JANES* for reading and commenting on an earlier draft of the

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