

A PALAEOGRAPHIC NOTE ON THE DISTRIBUTION
OF THE HEBREW SCRIPT *

SINCE the publication of Moscati's book *L'epigrafia ebraica antica* (1935-1950) another fifteen years have passed, during which the Hebrew epigraphic material has been enriched to some extent. With the publication of the Meşad Ḥashavyahu letter, the Murabba'at palimpsest papyrus, the Gibeon graffiti and the palaeo-Hebrew scroll fragments, the division of the Hebrew script into styles became clearer. This material has enabled Professor Cross to deal intensively with the development of the Hebrew script in the period between 800 and 600 B.C.¹ Besides determining the graffiti of the Gibeon jar-handles as a "vulgar semiformal" script, Cross has dealt mainly with the style of the individual characters. Recently two ostraca from Arad were published.² The differences between the two contemporary scripts of these ostraca led us to examine the problem of the styles of the Hebrew scripts. While surveying the Hebrew inscriptions, two questions arose: 1) Can the available epigraphic material throw light on the distribution of writing among the people of Israel? 2) Is it possible to consider the Israelites in any part of the Period of the First Temple as a literate society?

A society can be considered "literate" if, in addition to the professional scribes, there are people who can write, not only among the highest social class, but also among the lower middle classes. Such a situation has to be reflected by three cursive sub-styles: an extreme or a free cursive, a formal or chancery cursive, and a vulgar cursive. The extreme cursive is the handwriting of educated persons which develops freely and which influences the other two trends. Formal cursive is the conservative handwriting of the scribe, who was expected to write clearly and conventionally. The vulgar cursive is the handwriting of a person who learned the formal script — like the educated person — but was not skilled enough for independent development.

Not all the handwritings can be fitted exactly within the above-mentioned framework. The scribe does not always use the formal or chancery hand; his script is influenced by the extreme cursive — this

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¹ F. M. CROSS, JR., *BASOR* 165 (1962), 34-42; *BASOR* 168 (1962), 18-23.

² Y. AHARONI, *IEJ* 16 (1966), 1-7, Pl. 1.

is the case with most of the scribes who wrote on ostraca. Such a handwriting can be termed semi-formal. There are also no exact limits between the extreme and vulgar cursives, since the skill of the writers cannot be exactly measured.

In addition to the cursive and its sub-styles, the lapidary style should be mentioned, the development of which was confined to engraving on stone, although even the lapidary script was influenced by cursive developments.

In this paper we shall disregard the above terms and follow Cross' terminology, using "cursive" for "extreme cursive," "formal" for "formal cursive" and "vulgar" for "vulgar cursive." We shall also use "styles" instead of "sub-styles"; this is permissible, since the lapidary style does not appear, as far as we know, in the Hebrew script at the time when the cursive can be divided into these trends.

The Gezer Calendar is thought to be the earliest Hebrew inscription known up to the present. Its script resembles the scripts of 10th-century Phoenician inscriptions from Byblos. No specifically Hebrew features can be distinguished in the script of the Gezer Calendar,³ and it can therefore be termed Phoenician-Hebrew.⁴ This is in line with the assumption that the Hebrews, who adopted the Phoenician (or Canaanite) script together with other Canaanite cultural values sometime in the 12th or 11th century B.C., for some 200 years followed the scribal tradition current in Canaan and only later developed their own national script.⁵

Although several short or fragmentary 9th-century inscriptions were found in Palestine, almost none can be definitely determined as Hebrew. Four fragments found in Hazor (Area A, stratum VIII; assigned to the mid-9th century) show either clear 10th-century Phoenician scribal

³ There are no reasons of vocabulary or grammar which exclude the possibility that the language of the Gezer Calendar is Phoenician (in Albright's opinion it was "written in perfect classical Hebrew," see *BASOR* 92 [1943], 18, 22-26). We should take into consideration that Gezer became an Israelite city only in the mid-10th century (I K 9:16). However, if we fix the Gezer Calendar in the late 10th century (with Cross, *BASOR* 168, 15), we thereby determine it as a Hebrew inscription.

⁴ This term does not fit the scripts of other known inscriptions, perhaps with the exception of the Tell en-Naşbeh sherd, bearing a *lamed* and a *het* which Albright dates at ca. 1000 B.C.; see C. C. McCown: *Tell en-Naşbeh*, I (Berkeley, 1947), 167, n. 1.

⁵ Compare with the cognate Aramaic script: the Aramaeans borrowed the Phoenician script in the 11th or 10th centuries (cf. Albright, *BASOR* 90 [1943], 32, and F. M. Cross — D. N. Freedman, *Early Hebrew Orthography* [New Haven, 1952], 31f.), but the earliest Aramaic features can be seen only in the mid-8th century.

tradition⁶ or its development in the 9th century.⁷ Another fragment found in Hazor (Area B, stratum IX; thought to belong to the late roth-early 9th century)⁸ bears five letters without any national characteristics, but an attempt at a division into words . . .] š' zy l [. . . seems to reflect the Aramaic language.⁹ The fitters' marks on the Samaria ivories are Phoenician (or Aramaic?) letters rather than Hebrew.¹⁰ Cross states that "probably the seal of šm'yhw bn 'zryhw is ninth century in date."¹¹ If so, it may be the only 9th-century Hebrew inscription known at present.¹² Various suggestions for dating other Hebrew inscriptions earlier than the 8th century cannot be accepted.¹³

As strange as it may seem, the earliest Hebrew features can be discerned in the scripts of three 9th-century Moabite inscriptions, namely, the stelae of Mesha and *kmšyt*¹⁴ and a small fragment of another stele.¹⁵ In these scripts the *kaph*, *mem*, *nun* and *pe* began to develop the curved down-strokes. The *waw* is always written with the semi-circular head and the *taw* is of the X-form. In the Hebrew scripts of the 8th century and later, further development of these features can be followed. The 9th-century Moabite inscriptions which borrowed the contemporary Hebrew script¹⁶ may reflect the first stage of the Hebrew scribal tradition.

To be sure, these Moabite inscriptions are engraved in stone and

⁶ Y. YADIN *et alii*, *Hazor*, II (Jerusalem, 1960), 71f., Pl. 169:3, No. 3.

⁷ *Ibid.*, Nos. 1-2, 4.

⁸ Y. YADIN *et alii*, *Hazor*, III-IV (Jerusalem, 1961), Pl. 357, No. 1. No. 2, which is assigned on Pl. 357 to stratum VIII (9th century), is a later Hebrew inscription and in the preliminary report in *IEJ* 8 (1958), 5, is described indeed as belonging to stratum V.

⁹ If this assumption is true, it is the third 9th-century Aramaic inscription found in Galilee. Two others were found at 'En Gev: *lšgy*'—"belonging to the butlers" (B. MAZAR *et alii*, *IEJ* 14 [1964], 27f., Pl. 13) and at Tel Dan: *lḥb[ḥ]y*'—"belonging to the butchers" (N. AVIGAD, *BIES* 30 [1966], 209-12, Pl. IX). A sherd bearing the inscription *byt š* ['n?'] found on Tel Beth Shean seems to be 9th-century in date (cf. N. TSORI, *BIES* 25 [1961], 145f., Pl. VI:3 and J. NAVEH, *Leshonenu* 30 [1966], 72). Does the uncontracted diphthong indicate in Northern Palestine an Aramaic inscription, or is it perhaps a Hebrew inscription in which the historical orthography survived?

¹⁰ Cf. A. R. MILLARD, *Iraq* 24 (1962), 49f.

¹¹ *BASOR* 168 (1962), 15, n. 12 (D. DIRINGER, *Le iscrizioni antico-ebraiche palestinesi* [Firenze, 1934], 199f., Pl. XX: 10).

¹² But see above (n. 9) on the sherd from Beth-Shean.

¹³ S. YEIVIN suggests that the Megiddo seal *lšm' 'bd yrb'm* refers to Jeroboam I (*JNES* 19 [1960], 205-12); AHARONI fixes some short inscriptions found in stratum X at Arad to the late 9th century (*Israel Museum Catalogue*, No. 32, 31).

¹⁴ W. L. REED and F. V. WINNETT, *BASOR* 172 (1963), 1-9.

¹⁵ R. E. MURPHY, *BASOR* 125 (1952), 20-23.

¹⁶ For the later Moabite script see J. NAVEH, *BASOR* 183 (1966), 29f.

they are lapidary in style. Therefore it may be argued that contemporary ink inscriptions were written in a cursive style which might have had a more developed script. Such an argument is based on the assumption that the Hebrew script developed in two parallel styles — lapidary on the one hand and cursive on the other. But a survey of the later Hebrew inscriptions shows that there does not appear to be such parallel development. The independent Hebrew script is a specific cursive progress: the further this development diverges from the mother script, the more it drops the lapidary features.¹⁷ Even in the Mesha and *kmšyt* stelae, the curved down-strokes of the *kaph*, *mem*, *nun* and *pe* are cursive developments.

This one-trend development is obvious in the 8th-century engraved inscriptions, namely the Siloam Inscription, the Royal Steward Inscription,¹⁸ and two fragmentary tomb inscriptions from the village of Silwan (Siloam),¹⁹ the Hebrew inscription on ivory found at Nimrud²⁰ and the "stele-fragment" from Samaria.²¹ The material used on the one hand and the contents of some of these inscriptions on the other would have justified the choice of the lapidary style, if such a style had existed. But all the stone inscriptions and the ivory piece are written in the cursive style. Moreover, most of them even copied the shading which is a specific cursive phenomenon naturally produced while writing with pen and ink. The shading is to be seen also in most 7th- and early 6th-century Hebrew seals. To be sure, for carving on stone, at least from the late 8th century onwards, the formal style was chosen.

If we are correct in supposing that the lapidary style is lacking in the Hebrew script, this may indicate that there was little occasion for developing such a style in Israel: there was no widespread custom of erecting stelae by the king and offering votive inscriptions to the deity. Such an assumption may explain how the specific elements for cutting in stone could disappear.

The fact that up to the present almost no Hebrew inscriptions from the 9th century were found is of course accidental, but the quantity of the epigraphic material from the 8th century and onwards shows a

¹⁷ Actually in any script it is the cursive which develops independently, and the lapidary style sooner or later adopts some of these cursive developments. Compare the Aramaic sister script, where the lapidary script survives in spite of the rapid progress of the cursive. Cf. the 7th-century Nerab funeral stelae (G. A. COOKE, *A Text-Book of North-Semitic Inscriptions* [Oxford, 1903], Pls. V, VI).

¹⁸ N. AVIGAD, *IEJ* (1953), 137-52, Pls. 8-12.

¹⁹ A. REIFENBERG, *JPOS* 21 (1948), 134-37; N. AVIGAD, *IEJ* 5 (1955), 163-66, Pl. 24 B, C.

²⁰ A. R. MILLARD, *op. cit.* (n. 10), 45-49, Pl. XXIVa.

²¹ See S. A. BIRNBAUM in *Samaria-Sebaste*, III (London, 1957), 33f., Pl. IV:1.

gradual increase of the distribution of the knowledge of writing among the people of Israel and Judah.

We have some indications of the common use of papyrus. Besides the palimpsest papyrus from Murabba'at,²² about 20 clay sealings of papyrus rolls were found.²³ Since papyrus is not preserved in the humid climate of Palestine, we have to derive our knowledge of the Hebrew script from the available material which, besides stone (including seals), consists mainly of inscriptions on pottery.

About 30 inscriptions on pottery vessels are known today. Some were inscribed after firing or written in ink, but others were inscribed in the soft clay before firing the vessels. These inscriptions bear mainly the names of the owners of the vessels (or the names of those responsible for their capacity) and others indicate the measure of capacity; the inscription *bt lmlk* should be especially mentioned.²⁴

Towards the end of the 7th century, it was preferred to impress a seal on the handle of the jar rather than to write on the soft clay. Recently 80 "private" seal impressions of some 30 specimens and 800 *lmlk* stamps were listed.²⁵ It seems that these sealings came into use possibly instead of the inscriptions of ownership or capacity on the jar.²⁶ The distribution of these seal impressions indicates a widespread use of the script. The fact that most of the private stamps and the seals of the late 7th century and early 6th century do not bear any

²² J. T. MILK, *Les grottes de Murabba'at (DJD II)* (Oxford, 1961), 93-100, Pl. 27.

²³ In his trial dig at the solar shrine of Lachish, AHARONI recently found 17 bullae in a jug. These are to be added to the four previously known sealings, two from Lachish (S. MOSCATI, *L'epigrafia ebraica antica* [Roma, 1951], Pl. XIII: 6, 7), one from Beth Zur (O. R. SELLERS, *The Citadel of Beth Zur* [Philadelphia, 1933], 6of., Fig. 52), and one of unknown provenance (N. AVIGAD, *IEJ* 14 [1964], 193f., Pl. 44 C).

²⁴ MOSCATI, *op. cit.*, 112, Pl. XXIX:2 from Lachish, but see also W. F. ALBRIGHT, *The Excavations of Tell Beit Mirsim III, AASOR* 21-22 (1943), 58, Pl. 60:2 and N. AVIGAD, *IEJ* 3 (1953), 121f., Pl. 5.

²⁵ M. L. HELTZER, *Epigrafika Vostoka* 17 (1965), 18-37.

²⁶ Probably there is some connection between the "private" and royal sealings: (1) Both kinds were generally impressed on ridged handles of gritty dark brown clay, and in one case both were impressed in the same handle (Cf. Y. AHARONI, *Excavations at Ramat Raḥel, Season 1959 and 1960* [Roma, 1962], 16f., Pl. 6:2). (2) The seal *Plykḥm n'r ywḥn* belonged, as suggested by ALBRIGHT, to an official of Joiachin, king of Judah (*JBL* 51 [1934], 77ff.).

(3) The private stamps generally bear only inscriptions, but if any decoration is added, this consists of the four-winged scarab (Cf. F. J. BLISS, *PEFQS* [1900], Fig. 8, opp. p. 219, and MOSCATI, *op. cit.* [n. 23], 81, Nos. 29-30, Pl. XVIII:8, 9), or the two-winged symbol (cf. *l-m/n-r-'/t* impression from 'En Gedi; see B. MAZAR *et alii*, *'Atiqot* V [1966], 34, Pl. 26:1), which are common in the royal seals.

figures may perhaps also indicate that people could identify the ownership of the seal by reading it.

The most important Hebrew epigraphic material consists, of course, of the ostraca, some of which were incised but most of which are written in ink. The incised ostraca comprise 2 docketts from Tell Qasile,²⁷ a name list and a message-like short letter ("Barley letter") from Samaria.²⁸ The ink-written ostraca include: 1) Docketts — 63 from Samaria,²⁹ one from Meşad Ḥashavyahu,³⁰ and perhaps one from Lachish;³¹ 2) Name lists — 1 from the Ophel,³² 2 from Lachish (Nos. 1, 19), and some from Arad (unpublished);³³ 3) Letters — one petition to the local governor (Meşad Ḥashavyahu),³⁴ administrative correspondence (18 Lachish letters), and messages (most of the Arad letters).

This material seems to be written mainly by professional second-grade scribes. Their writing cannot reliably reflect the formal script used by first-grade scribes who wrote on papyrus and were employed by the king, the temple, and the courts of law. The ostraca were written in a semi-formal style. The formal style has been preserved, as mentioned above, on the 8th-century stone-inscriptions and on the 7th- to early 6th-century seals, as well as on the late 7th-century inscriptions on two alabaster vases found at Susa.³⁵

Do we know at present any Hebrew inscription written in a free cursive? Perhaps one of the two already published Arad letters³⁶ was not written by a scribe, but rather by Elyashib's commander. If we compare these contemporary ostraca, both addressed to Elyashib, we can distinguish two different hands. No. 1, which is simply an order, is written in a more developed script, without emphasizing the shading; No. 2 bears more formal shaded characters, and its contents indicate

²⁷ B. MAISLER (MAZAR), *IEJ* 1 (1950-51), 208-10, Pls. 37 A and 38 A.

²⁸ S. A. BIRNBAUM, *op. cit.* (n. 21), Pl. I: 1 and 4.

²⁹ G. A. REISNER *et alii*, *Harvard Excavations at Samaria* (Cambridge, Mass., 1924), 227-46; DIRINGER, *op. cit.* (n. 11), 66-68; MOSCATTI, *op. cit.*, (n. 23), 27-31.

³⁰ J. NAVEH, *IEJ* 12 (1962), 30f., Pl. 6 A, C.

³¹ H. TORCZYNER (TUR-SINAI), *Lachish*, I (London, 1938), No. 20 (if it is not a fragment of an inscribed jar).

³² MOSCATTI, *op. cit.* (n. 23), 44-46, Pl. X.

³³ Some of the name lists are accounts, cf. *Lachish* No. 19 and one from Arad (AHARONI, *IEJ* 15 [1965], 250).

³⁴ J. NAVEH, *IEJ* 10 (1960), 129-39, Pl. 17.

³⁵ CH. CLERMONT-GANNEAU, *Recueil d'archéologie orientale*, VII (Paris, 1906), 294-304, Pl. V:A-C; M. LIDZBARSKI, *Ephemeris für semitische Epigraphik*, III (Giessen, 1915), 47f.

³⁶ AHARONI, *op. cit.* (n. 2).

that it is a letter from an officer lower in rank than Elyashib, probably written by a second-grade scribe.

The vulgar style is best known from 6th-century finds: the Gibeon jar-handles³⁷ and the graffiti from a burial chamber east of Lachish.³⁸ But some of the 7th-century seals, including those which are preserved as impressions, seem also to demonstrate a vulgar style.³⁹

In spite of the scanty material the author suggests as a working hypothesis that the available Hebrew inscriptions indicate that in the late 7th and early 6th centuries the people of Judah may be considered a literate society.⁴⁰ This assumption does not exclude the existence of such a society even earlier, and the discovery of further epigraphic material may prove it.

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³⁷ J. B. PRITCHARD, *Hebrew Inscriptions and Stamps from Gibeon* (Philadelphia, 1959); *idem*, *BASOR* 160 (1960), 2-6.

³⁸ J. NAVEH, *IEJ* 13 (1963), 74-92, Pls. 9-13 (the revised dating is after Professor Cross' suggestion).

³⁹ E.g., the seal 'kbr/hqm published by N. AVIGAD, *IEJ* 13 (1963), 332f., Pl. 34 C. Most of the private stamps show that the seals were not engraved in the formal, but rather in the vulgar style. See MOSCATI, *op. cit.* (n. 23), Pls. XVI-XIV.

⁴⁰ R. DE VAUX, in *Ancient Israel* (London, 1961), 49, states that "the commandment of Dt. 6:9; 11:20 presumed that every head of family could write."