

Word Division in West Semitic Writing

J. NAVEH

Hebrew University, Jerusalem

A. R. MILLARD has demonstrated recently¹ 'that word division was normal amongst the majority of West-Semitic scribes'² and that '*scriptio continua* was not the practice of the early Hebrew scribes'.³ The significance of his study for Old Testament textual criticism is conclusive. The following discussion is based mainly on the epigraphic material listed by Millard. It is an attempt to follow the evolution of word-division in West Semitic writing and to suggest some clarification and schematization.

Word division was systematically practised in the formal Semitic writing from its very beginning in the mid-second millennium B.C., but it was often neglected in short texts and non-formal scripts. Only the later Phoenician scribes preferred the continuous writing even in longer texts and formal scripts.

The earliest word divider was a short vertical stroke, which was very often omitted in cursive and vulgar writing. Thus in the Serābīt el-Khādem texts from ca. 1500 B.C., which are actually graffiti, the separation between words is not marked.⁴ However in the Tell Nagila sherd,⁵ from approximately the same time, and in the thirteenth century Lachish bowl,⁶ the short vertical stroke does occur. In the contemporary Lachish ewer the dividing mark consists of three vertically placed dots;⁷ this word divider was adopted in archaic Greek writing.⁸ The vertical stroke was used in the Ugaritic cuneiform alphabet (in the form of a wedge), in the South Arabic monumental writing⁹ and in the earliest Phoenician scripts.

In West Semitic inscriptions from the early first millennium B.C. the vertical stroke

¹ A. R. Millard: 'Scriptio Continua' in Early Hebrew: Ancient Practice or Modern Surmise? *Journal of Semitic Studies* 15 (1970), pp. 2-15.

² *Ibid.*, p. 12.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

⁴ W.F. Albright: *The Proto-Sinaitic Inscriptions and Their Decipherment*, Cambridge (Mass.), 1966.

⁵ Ruth Amiran and A. Eitan, *Yediot* 28 (1964), p. 198, Pl. xviii:5 (Hebrew); *Archaeology* 18 (1965), pp. 221-223, Fig. 10. J. Leibovitch, *Le Muséon* 87 (1965), pp. 229-230.

⁶ Olga Tufnell: *Lachish IV*, London, 1958, Pls. 43, 44:2.

⁷ Olga Tufnell et al., *Lachish II*, London, 1940, Pls. LI:287, LX:3; F.M. Cross, Jr., *BASOR* 134 (1954), p. 20.

⁸ Margherita Guarducci: *Epigrafia greca I*, Rome, 1967, p. 392. The vertical stroke was used mainly in the archaic Greek local scripts, which preserved the older form of the *iota* (e.g. in Crete and Thera). The present writer maintains that the Greeks adopted the alphabet ca 1100 B.C.; see J. Naveh, *AJA* 77 (1973), pp. 1-8.

⁹ The ancestor of this writing, the Proto-Arabic, branched off from the Proto-Canaanite script ca. 1300 B.C. Cf. F.M. Cross, Jr., *EI* 8 (1967), p. 19*.

gradually became shorter, until it turned into a dot. This evolution can be followed in the tenth century Byblos inscriptions (Aḥiram, Yeḥimilk, Eliba'1, Shiptiba'1).¹⁰ In the ninth and the early eighth centuries the short stroke was still in frequent use (in the archaic Phoenician inscription from Cyprus, the fragmentary Moabite inscription from Kerak, the Aramaic inscriptions of Bar-Hadad and Zakir), but at that time and mainly during the eighth century the dot became dominant (e.g. in the inscriptions of Mesha, Kilamu, Bar-Rakib and Siloam). In the mid-eighth century, the Sfire stelae were written without separating words, presumably under cursive influence. The writing on the Karatepe stelae is also continuous but spaces were sometimes left between the words. From the seventh century we have clear examples of word division by spacing (the Aramaic Assur ostrakon and the Saqqarah papyrus). In the seventh century B.C. and later, when the three West Semitic scripts — Phoenician, Hebrew and Aramaic — developed in their own independent ways, three systems existed: 'dotting', spacing and continuous writing. Each script adhered to a different system.

The Hebrew script, which was the most conservative,¹¹ followed the older tradition and separated the words by dots. In the monumental Siloam inscription the words are consistently divided, but in the ostraca, e.g. those from Arad and Lachish, which were written in the semi-formal and cursive styles, the dots were often omitted. The Pentateuch fragments from Qumran written in the Hebrew (or so-called Paleo-Hebrew) script and the Samaritan inscriptions and manuscripts use dots as a rule. However, the dots do not occur at all in the short legends on the coins of the Hasmoneans and those of the First and Second Revolts, in a Paleo-Hebrew burial inscription,¹² as well as in shorter Samaritan texts and amulets.¹³

The Aramaic script, being an official means of communication between various nations, was not used only by Aramaeans. Thus the scribes who were not sensitive to a national scribal tradition allowed themselves innovations; it seems to us that these scribes introduced the spacing. This usage is clearly demonstrated in the mid-seventh century B.C. Assur ostrakon and it was widely accepted later. The Jewish (so-called 'square') script followed the Aramaic tradition.¹⁴ According to the Rab-

¹⁰ For a bibliography of these inscriptions and of those mentioned below see H. Donner & W. Röllig: *Kanaanäische und aramäische Inschriften*, I–III, Wiesbaden, 1962–1964, as well as Millard, *op. cit.* (above, n. 1).

¹¹ J. Naveh in J.A. Sanders (ed.): *Near Eastern Archaeology in the Twentieth Century*, New York, 1970, p. 279.

¹² Cf. J. Naveh, *IEJ* 23 (1973), pp. 82–91.

¹³ Cf. J. Strugnell, *RB* 74 (1967), pp. 556–559; J. Kaplan, *IEJ* 17 (1967), pp. 158–162, Pl. 36. It seems likely that the dots in the fragmentary Mount Nebo inscription were used only at the beginning while further on spaces were left between the words; cf. St. Yonick: *Liber Annuus* 17 (1967), pp. 162–221.

¹⁴ The language of the text did not affect the various practices: when the Jews wrote Hebrew texts in the Jewish script, they naturally followed the Aramaic spacing; the Samaritans adhered to the dotting system of the Hebrew script whether they wrote in Hebrew or Aramaic.

binic sources the spaces had to be the breadth of a [small] letter.¹⁵ In some scrolls we find smaller spaces¹⁶ and in the Copper Scroll, which was written in the vulgar semi-formal style, as well as in the cursive documents from Murabba'at, many spaces were omitted;¹⁷ but these are the results of neglect rather than *scriptio continua*.

The only West Semitic script where continuous writing seems to be systematic is the Phoenician. In the late sixth century papyrus from Saqqarah most words were separated by dots; in the Cyprus tariffs of ca. 500 B.C. (CIS I, 86 A–B) dots occur only occasionally; in the late fourth century Aimé-Giron papyrus there is no break between words.¹⁸ In the late Phoenician, Punic and Neo-Punic lapidary inscriptions, continuous writing was practised as a rule, and the separation by dots or spacing was very rare.¹⁹ We really do not know what was the conception or the idea of the Phoenician scribes, who rejected the system of *matres lectionis*²⁰ and introduced *scriptio continua*. An observer can only ask why they endeavored to make the reading as difficult as possible.

Despite the exceptions it seems legitimate to assume that there were systematic practices of word division in West Semitic writing. Some of these exceptions — e.g. the spacing in one Phoenician inscription from the Persian period²¹ and in the Samaritan inscription from Mount Nebo,²² — can perhaps be explained on the basis of the strong influence of the Aramaic script and its offshoots. However, in general it should be stated that while in the earlier stage all scribes followed the common practice, each of the three West Semitic scripts adhered to different systems later on. These were used consistently in formal writing but were often neglected in informal or short writings.

¹⁵ *Maseketh Sopherim* II, 2 (ed. M. Higger, New York, 1937, p. 112); *PT Megillah* I, 11 (71d); *BT Menaḥoth* 30a.

¹⁶ Cf. the Pentateuch fragments from Murabba'at, in P. Benoit et al.: *Discoveries in the Judaean Desert* II, Oxford 1961, Pls. XIX–XX.

¹⁷ Cf. J.T. Milik in M. Baillet et al., *Discoveries in the Judaean Desert*, III, Oxford, 1962, p. 216 and F.M. Cross, Jr., *ibid.*, p. 217.

¹⁸ For the dates of the Phoenician cursive scripts cf. F.M. Cross, Jr., *IEJ* 18 (1968), pp. 228–229; J.B. Peckham: *The Development of the Late Phoenician Scripts*, Cambridge (Mass.), 1968, and the bibliography there.

¹⁹ Cf. Millard, *op. cit.* (above, n. 1), p. 9; J. Starcky, *Mélanges de l'Université Saint Joseph* 45 (1969), pp. 259–273. In Greek manuscripts and the later Greek inscriptions continuous writing was the rule. The distinctions between words was more frequent in cursive writing, see E.M. Thompson: *An Introduction to Greek and Greek and Latin Palaeography*, Oxford, 1912, p. 57; Millard, *op. cit.* (above, n. 1) p. 3. One may wonder whether there was any interrelation between the Phoenician and Greek practices.

²⁰ *Matres lectionis* were used, presumably under the influence of Aramaic writing, as early as the ninth–eighth centuries B.C. by the Hebrew scribes, who were very conservative,

²¹ Starcky, *op. cit.* (above, n. 19).

²² Yonick, *op. cit.* (above, n. 13).