

The Long-Term Process of Hebrew Script in Light of Recent Epigraphic Discoveries: From Proto-Sinaitic Beginnings to Iron Age Standardization

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1. Introduction

Until the latter half of the twentieth century, scholarly consensus on the origins of Hebrew script remained relatively stable. The Gezer Calendar—commonly dated to the tenth century BCE—was widely regarded as the earliest Hebrew inscription, and the emergence of Hebrew writing was closely associated with the administrative structures of the United Monarchy.¹ This framework placed the beginnings of Hebrew script firmly within Iron Age II.

Over the past several decades, however, discoveries from earlier horizons have prompted a significant reassessment. Inscriptions such as

1 W. F. Albright, "The Gezer Calendar," *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 92 (1943): 16–26; Ahituv, *Echoes from the Past: Hebrew and Cognate Inscriptions from the Biblical Period* (Jerusalem: Carta, 2008), 252–54.

the Izbet Šarṭah abecedary,² the Khirbet Qeiyafa ostracon,³ the contested Mount Ebal lead object,⁴ the recently published Tel Lachish ostracon,⁵ and the Proto-Sinaitic corpus⁶ suggest that the formation of Hebrew script did not occur as a sudden development in the tenth century. These materials indicate that the formation of Hebrew script unfolded as a long-term, multi-phased process within the broader development of the Northwest Semitic alphabetic tradition. Although the inscriptions vary significantly in date, context, and material characteristics-and their linguistic interpretation remains debated-the early alphabetic tradition that eventually contributed to Hebrew script should be understood within a developmental trajectory that originated in the Middle Bronze Age and continued through the Late Bronze and Early Iron Ages.

Because many early inscriptions preserve limited linguistic information, this study adopts a criterion-based approach to the question of classification. Paleographic and orthographic features provide the

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- 2 Moshe Kochavi, "An Ostracon of the Period of the Judges from Izbet Sartah," *Tel Aviv* 4 (1977): 1-13.
 - 3 Haggai Misgav, Yosef Garfinkel, and Saar Ganor, "The Ostracon," in *Khirbet Qeiyafa Vol. 1: Excavation Report 2007-2008*, ed. Yosef Garfinkel and Saar Ganor (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society; Institute of Archaeology, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 2009), 243-257.
 - 4 Scott Stripling, Gershon Galil, Ivana Kumpova, Jaroslav Valach, Pieter Gert van der Veen, and Daniel Vavrik, "You Are Cursed by the God YHW: An Early Hebrew Inscription from Mt. Ebal," *Heritage Science* 11 (2023): 1-24.
 - 5 Felix Höflmayer, Lyndelle Webster, Haggai Misgav, and Stefan Wimmer, "Early Alphabetic Writing in the Ancient Near East: The 'Missing Link' from Tel Lachish," *Antiquity* 95 (April 2021): 1-17.
 - 6 Douglas Petrovich, *The World's Oldest Alphabet: Hebrew as the Language of the Proto-Consonantal Script* (Jerusalem: Carta, 2016); John C. Darnell, F. W. Dobbs-Allsopp, Marilyn J. Lundberg, P. Kyle McCarter, and Bruce Zuckerman, "Two Early Alphabetic Inscriptions from the Wadi el-Ḥl: New Evidence for the Origin of the Alphabet from the Western Desert of Egypt," *Annual of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 59 (2005): 63-124.

primary indicators, while phonological, morphological, and syntactic considerations are incorporated where the data permit. This approach acknowledges both the fragmentary character of early alphabetic texts and the risk of circular reasoning in attempts to identify “Hebrew” features without explicit criteria.

In light of these developments, this study proposes a developmental framework for understanding the emergence of Hebrew script. Section 2 examines both traditional and newly published inscriptions in reverse chronological order, using the more securely dated later materials as a basis for assessing earlier examples. Section 3 outlines a model consisting of formative, transitional, and standardized phases. Section 4 synthesizes the findings and suggests directions for future research, particularly in areas where linguistic and material analysis can further clarify the relationship between Hebrew and the wider Northwest Semitic alphabetic tradition.

2. Hebrew Inscriptions: Their Development and Debates

The study of Hebrew inscriptions is crucial for tracing the emergence of ancient Hebrew script. For much of the twentieth century, the Gezer Calendar (tenth century BCE) was regarded as the earliest Hebrew inscription, with later Iron Age II texts reflecting a standardized orthography. However, recent discoveries, together with advances in paleographic, orthographic, and linguistic analysis, have introduced significant changes to this framework and have raised new questions regarding classification and chronology.

This chapter surveys the epigraphic evidence in three chronological groups: (1) Iron Age II inscriptions (ninth-sixth centuries BCE), which demonstrate the consolidation of standardized Hebrew writing; (2) tenth-

eleventh century texts, including the Gezer Calendar, which display emergent Hebrew features amid ongoing debates over their linguistic and script classification; and (3) earlier alphabetic experiments of the Late Bronze Age and before—such as the Proto-Sinaitic corpus, the debated Mount Ebal lead object, and the Tel Lachish ostrakon—situated within the broader Northwest Semitic milieu. This chapter provides the descriptive framework for the corpus and prepares the ground for the developmental analysis that follows.

1) Iron Age IIB-IIC Inscriptions (Ninth-Sixth Centuries BCE)

Iron Age II inscriptions from Samaria, Jerusalem, Lachish, and Arad provide clear evidence for a standardized Hebrew script and language employed across administrative, royal, and religious domains. The Siloam Inscription (701 BCE), commemorating Hezekiah's tunnel, displays mature orthography and grammar, patterns of waw-consecutive consistent with Classical Hebrew narrative syntax, and vocabulary closely parallel to Biblical Hebrew.⁷ The Lachish Letters (588-586 BCE), military dispatches written on ostraca, reveal a well-established scribal tradition that, while rooted in classical Hebrew norms, shows notable use of pronominal suffixes and the conjunction *ki*.⁸ A sixth-century ostrakon from Lachish,

7 K. Lawson Younger, Jr., "The Siloam Tunnel Inscription (COS 2.55)," in *The Context of Scripture*, vol. 2, ed. William W. Hallo (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 145-46; Ahituv, *Echoes from the Past*, 19-25; Gary A. Rendsburg and William M. Schniedewind, "The Siloam Tunnel Inscription: Historical and Linguistic Perspectives," *Israel Exploration Journal* 60, no. 2 (2010): 188-203.

8 Harry Torczyner et al., *Lachish 1 (Tell Ed Duweir): The Lachish Letters*, vol. 1 (Oxford University Press, 1938). See Letter IV, VI, and VII; Abigail Zammit, *The Lachish Letters: A Reappraisal of the Ostraca Discovered in 1935 and 1938 at Tell ed-Duweir* (PhD diss., St Antony's College, University of Oxford, 2016); Ahituv, *Echoes from the Past*, 421-430.

though fragmentary, preserves a date formula and personal names corresponding with the Arad corpus, further attesting to the vitality of Judah's administrative system on the eve of the Babylonian destruction.⁹

Additional corpora reinforce this picture. The Samaria Ostraca (eighth century BCE) record taxation and distribution with standardized administrative vocabulary, while the Arad Ostraca (seventh-sixth centuries BCE) document the routines of a military garrison through formulaic records.¹⁰ Inscriptions from Kuntillet 'Ajrud (ca. 800 BCE) and Khirbet el-Qom (eighth century BCE) attest to Hebrew usage in religious or devotional contexts, invoking Yahweh in blessing formulas and raising debates about the nature of Israelite religion.¹¹ The Samaria and Arad ostraca collectively demonstrate the consolidation of written Hebrew in administrative and military settings, with stable orthographic conventions and consistent grammatical forms across taxation, distribution, and military records.¹² The convergence of these features across fiscal, military, and administrative texts indicates a mature scribal system that preserved Classical Hebrew morphology while accommodating controlled late features.

9 Daniel Vainstub, Hoo-Goo Kang, Barak Sober, Iris Arad, and Yosef Garfinkel, "A New Hebrew Ostrakon from Lachish," *Jerusalem Journal of Archaeology* 8 (2025): 41-50.

10 Cross, Frank Moore Jr. "Epigraphic Notes on Hebrew Documents of the Eighth-Sixth Centuries B.C.: I. A New Reading of a Place Name in the Samaria Ostraca," *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 163 (1961), 12-14; Ahituv, *Echoes from the Past*, 258-312; Yohanan Aharoni, "Arad: Its Inscriptions and Temple," *The Biblical Archaeologist* 31, no. 1 (February 1968): 1-32.

11 Jan Gunneweg, I. Perlman, and Ze'ev Meshel, "The Origin of the Pottery of Kuntillet 'Ajrud," in *Kuntillet 'Ajrud (Horvat Teman): An Iron Age II Religious Site on the Judah-Sinai Border*, ed. Ze'ev Meshel (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 2012), 279-88; Judith M. Hadley, "The Khirbet El-Qom Inscription," *Vetus Testamentum* 37, no. 1 (1987): 50-62.

12 Edward Yechezkel Kutscher, *A History of the Hebrew Language* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1982), 64-68.

Taken together, these corpora demonstrate the consolidation of written Hebrew during Iron Age II, with orthographic conventions and grammatical structures appearing in a stable and systematic form across fiscal, military, and religious texts.

2) Tenth-Eleventh Century Inscriptions

The inscriptions of the tenth and eleventh centuries BCE represent a transitional stage in the history of Hebrew writing, where emerging Hebrew traits still remain within the broader Northwest Semitic continuum.

(1) The Gezer Calendar: Hebrew Script in a Northwest Semitic Milieu

The Gezer Calendar, inscribed on a small limestone tablet and dated to the tenth century BCE, presents an annual agricultural cycle in seven brief lines. Its script is characterized by smooth curves and balanced strokes, with only limited employment of *matres lectionis*. The vocabulary-terms such as *yeraḥ* (“month”), *’āsaf* (“to gather”), *qašir* (“harvest”), and *zera* (“to sow”)-is consistent with Biblical Hebrew usage as documented in epigraphic studies. Phonologically, the Calendar preserves early consonantal spellings with minimal use of *matres lectionis*, and syntactically its short verbal-nominal clauses reflect patterns characteristic of early Northwest Semitic.

Scholarly interpretations of the Calendar vary considerably. W. F. Albright identified it unequivocally as Hebrew, regarding it as the earliest secure witness to Biblical Hebrew vocabulary and script.¹³ Others adopt a more cautious stance. Daniel Sivan has pointed out that some morphological and syntactic features, such as *yṛḥ* with possibly containing

13 W. F. Albright, “The Gezer Calendar,” 16–26.

a pronominal suffix, align well with Biblical Hebrew, and that both the lexeme set and the clause structure fit comfortably in a Hebrew linguistic sphere.¹⁴ Similarly, Shmuel Ahituv emphasizes that the agricultural vocabulary is fully compatible with Biblical Hebrew and that the artifact's provenance may favor an Israelite context, though he also cautions that no single feature decisively excludes Phoenician.¹⁵ By contrast, Joseph Naveh stresses paleographic continuities with early Phoenician/paleo-Hebrew and warns against relying on script style alone to prove a Hebrew identification.¹⁶ Frank Moore Cross argued that the Gezer Calendar cannot be securely classified as Hebrew, since the letter forms are so similar to Phoenician that epigraphers cannot distinguish between them; at most, it exhibits only faint and rudimentary features later associated with Hebrew script.¹⁷ Ian Young has likewise shown that the Calendar's linguistic profile fits comfortably within early Biblical Hebrew, though its archaic orthography is equally compatible with broader Northwest Semitic usage.¹⁸

Taken together, the Gezer Calendar is best understood as a transitional document. Linguistically, its lexeme set and clause structure align comfortably with Biblical Hebrew usage. Orthographically, however, the

14 Daniel Sivan, "The Gezer Calendar and Northwest Semitic Linguistics," *Israel Exploration Journal* 48 (1998): 101-5.

15 Shmuel Ahituv, *Echoes from the Past*, 252-4.

16 Joseph Naveh, *Early History of the Alphabet: An Introduction to West Semitic Epigraphy and Palaeography*, (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1982), 65, 76.

17 Frank Moore Cross Jr. and David Noel Freedman, *Early Hebrew Orthography: A Study of the Epigraphic Evidence* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2022; orig. pub. New Haven: American Oriental Society, 1952; repr. Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1985), 46-47, 58-60; Frank Moore Cross, "Newly Found Inscriptions in Old Canaanite and Early Phoenician Scripts," *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 238, no. Spring (1980): 14.

18 Ian Young, "The Style of the Gezer Calendar and Some 'Archaic Biblical Hebrew' Passages," *Vetus Testamentum* 42 (1992): 362-75.

preservation of archaic spellings places it within the broader Northwest Semitic continuum rather than within a fully standardized Hebrew system.

(2) The Khirbet Qeiyafa Ostrakon: An Ongoing Debate on Hebrew Script

The Khirbet Qeiyafa ostrakon, discovered in 2008 at the fortified site of Khirbet Qeiyafa in the Elah Valley, is one of the most substantial early alphabetic inscriptions recovered from the southern Levant. Radiocarbon analysis of associated assemblages places it in the late eleventh-early tenth century BCE, within the early Iron IIA horizon. The sherd, measuring approximately 15×16.5 cm, preserves five lines of ink-written text in an irregular early alphabetic ductus. Its discovery in a fortified settlement with casemate walls underscores its importance as early evidence for literacy in the context of Judah's state formation.¹⁹

Despite its significance, major uncertainties remain. The direction of writing—whether strictly right-to-left or boustrophedon—is still disputed, and word division across the lines is unclear. Recent multispectral and computational analyses have sharpened rather than resolved these uncertainties.²⁰ Proposed readings often reconstruct legal or ethical terminology, including *mlk* (“king”) and *špt* (“judge”), but the fragmentary condition of the ostrakon renders all such reconstructions provisional. Interpretations of its linguistic affiliation are sharply divided. Haggai Misgav, in the first report, classified the inscription as Hebrew

19 Garfinkel and Ganor, *Khirbet Qeiyafa Vol. 1*.

20 Donnelly-Lewis, Brain. “The Khirbet Qeiyafa Ostrakon: A New Collation Based on the Multispectral Images, with Translation and Commentary,” *BASOR* 388 (2022), 181–210; Levy, E., and F. Pluquet. “Computer Experiments on the Khirbet Qeiyafa Ostrakon,” *Digital Scholarship in the Humanities* 32 (2017), 816–836.

and proposed that it is the earliest known Hebrew text.²¹ Nearly a decade later, Peter Zilberg also judged Hebrew the most plausible identification, citing lexical items, grammatical patterns, and the Judean provenance as converging evidence.²² Alan Millard likewise viewed a Hebrew interpretation as possible, noting that certain lexical and morphosyntactic features align with later Hebrew usage.²³ By contrast, Christopher Rollston has emphasized paleographic irregularities, orthographic instability, and the absence of uniquely Hebrew diagnostics, placing the ostracon within the broader Northwest Semitic continuum.²⁴ Matthieu Richelle has also proposed alternative readings and highlighted the instability of several letter identifications, adding further caution regarding classification.²⁵ Other scholars likewise stress the fragmentary state of the inscription and the uncertainty of letter identifications, warning against circular reasoning in reconstructing Hebrew morphology.²⁶ Additional inscriptions from the region, such as the Išba‘al inscription from Qeiyafa, also demonstrate the

21 Misgav, Garfinkel, and Ganor, "The Ostracon," 243–57.

22 Peter Zilberg, "The Language of the Khirbet Qeiyafa Ostracon," in *Khirbet Qeiyafa Vol. 4: Excavation Report 2007–2013: Art, Cult, and Epigraphy*, ed. Martin G. Klingbeil (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society; Institute of Archaeology, Southern Adventist University; Institute of Archaeology, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 2018), 289–299.

23 Alan Millard, "The Ostracon from the Days of David Found at Khirbet Qeiyafa," *Tyndale Bulletin* 62 (2011): 1–13.

24 Christopher A. Rollston, "The Khirbet Qeiyafa Ostracon: Methodological Musings and Caveats," *Tel Aviv* 38 (2011): 67–82.

25 Matthieu Richelle, "Quelques nouvelles lectures sur l'ostracon de Khirbet Qeiyafa," *Semitica* 57 (2015): 147–62; idem, "Elusive Scrolls: Could Any Hebrew Literature Have Been Written prior to the Eighth Century BCE?" *Vetus Testamentum* 66 (2016): 556–94.

26 Israel Finkelstein and Alexander Fantalkin, "Khirbet Qeiyafa: An Unsensational Archaeological and Historical Interpretation," *Tel Aviv* 39 (2012): 38–63; Alan Millard, "The Ostracon from the Days of David Found at Khirbet Qeiyafa," *Tyndale Bulletin* 61 (2011): 1–13; Dong-Hyuk Kim, "Recent Debates on the Linguistic Dating of Biblical Texts: A Survey of Scholarship," *Korean Journal of Old Testament Studies* 21, no. 1 (2015): 213–43.

linguistic fluidity of the early tenth-century Judean milieu.²⁷

Despite disagreement, the ostracon remains pivotal. Materially, it provides rare multi-line text securely dated to ca. 1025-975 BCE. Linguistically, its constructions can align with Hebrew, though alternative readings persist. Comparatively, it stands alongside the Izbet Šarṭaḥ abecedary in the trajectory from early alphabetic experiments to the standardized Hebrew script of Iron Age II. Studies of early literacy and alphabetic development in the tenth century further situate the Qeiyafa ostracon within a broader cultural transition toward increasingly systematized scribal practice.²⁸ The ostracon may not prove Hebrew unambiguously, but it constitutes first-order evidence for alphabetic literacy in the cultural milieu that produced later Hebrew inscriptions.

(3) The Izbet Šarṭaḥ Ostracon: Pedagogical Practice in a Northwest Semitic Context

The Izbet Šarṭaḥ ostracon, discovered in 1976 near Aphek on the western edge of Samaria, dates to the late twelfth or early eleventh century BCE, marking the transition from the Late Bronze Age to the early Iron Age. Inscribed in ink with five horizontal lines, the sherd is most notable for the final line, which preserves a sequence widely regarded as an early abecedary.²⁹ The letter order diverges from the canonical Phoenician-

27 Yosef Garfinkel, Mitka R. Golub, Haggai Misgav, and Saar Ganor, "The 'Isba'al Inscription from Khirbet Qeiyafa," *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 373 (2015): 217-33.

28 Ron E. Tappy, P. Kyle McCarter, Marilyn J. Lundberg, and Bruce Zuckerman, "An Abecedary of the Mid-Tenth Century B.C.E. from the Judaean Shephelah," *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 344 (2006): 5-46; Ron E. Tappy and P. Kyle McCarter, eds., *Literate Culture and Tenth-Century Canaan: The Tel Zayit Abecedary in Context* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2008).

29 Kochavi, "An Ostracon of the Period of the Judges," 1-13.

Hebrew sequence and includes inverted and rotated signs, suggesting that it represents an experimental stage of alphabetic pedagogy rather than reflecting a fully standardized script. This combination of irregular letter forms and non-standard sequencing makes the ostracon one of the earliest and most instructive examples of alphabetic training in the Levant.³⁰ Phonologically, the abecedary preserves early alphabetic letter values, while morphologically the inscription yields no determinable verbal or nominal forms.

Interpretations of the inscription have differed according to how its language and function are assessed. Joseph Naveh classified it as 'late Proto-Canaanite,' stressing the absence of diagnostic Hebrew features and interpreting the piece as a scribal exercise rather than a functional text.³¹ Frank Moore Cross likewise situated the ostracon within a transitional Northwest Semitic milieu, emphasizing its experimental order of letters and its rudimentary role in literacy training.³² By contrast, Aaron Demsky proposed that the inscription reflects not merely individual practice but communal instruction, anticipating the diffusion of literacy within wider Israelite society.³³ For Demsky, the abecedary represents a crucial link between Proto-Sinaitic traditions and the earliest phases of Hebrew writing, where oral memory techniques and written training intersected in the process of education.³⁴

30 Cross, "Newly Found Inscriptions," 1-20.

31 Naveh, *Early History of the Alphabet*, 36-37.

32 Frank M. Cross, "Newly Found Inscriptions," 9-14.

33 Aaron Demsky, "A Proto-Canaanite Abecedary Dating from the Period of the Judges and Its Implications for the History of the Alphabet," *Tel Aviv* 4 (1977): 14-27; Aaron Demsky, "The 'Izbet Sartah Ostracon: Ten Years Later," in *Izbet Sartah: An Early Iron Age Site near Rosh Ha'ayin, Israel*, ed. Israel Finkelstein, BAR International Series 299 (Oxford: British Archaeological Reports, 1986), 186-97.

34 Aaron Demsky, "The Interface of Oral and Written Traditions in Ancient Israel: The

While not decisive evidence for Hebrew, the Izbet Šarḥa ostrakon remains significant as the earliest known abecedary in the region. It illustrates alphabetic experimentation in a pedagogical setting and offers insight into early literacy practices. In contrast to the Khirbet Qeiyafa ostrakon, which reflects functional writing, the Izbet Šarḥa ostrakon underscores the educational dimension of early alphabetic use and a phased transition from Late Canaanite practices toward the earliest phases of Hebrew writing.

3) Late Bronze Age and Earlier Alphabetic Experiments

This section turns to the earliest and most debated materials, where the origins of alphabetic writing intersect with the cultural milieu of the Late Bronze Age. Because linguistic data in this period are extremely limited, classification must rely primarily on paleographic criteria, and scholars warn that early alphabetic inscriptions require explicit methodological caution.³⁵

(1) Mount Ebal Lead Tablet: A Contested Claim of Early Hebrew Writing

The so-called Mount Ebal lead tablet, announced in 2022 by Scott Stripling and his team, has quickly become one of the most contested artifacts in recent epigraphic debate. The object was recovered from the dump material of Adam Zertal's earlier excavations at the Mount Ebal altar. Stripling and his colleagues argue that it should be dated to the

Case of the Abecedaries," in *Origins of the Alphabet: Proceedings of the First Polis Institute Interdisciplinary Conference*, ed. Christophe Rico and Claudia Attucci (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015), 26–28.

35 Matthieu Richelle, "Elusive Scrolls: Could Any Hebrew Literature Have Been Written prior to the Eighth Century BCE?" *Vetus Testamentum* 66 (2016): 556–94.

Late Bronze Age (thirteenth-twelfth centuries BCE) and, on the basis of X-ray tomography, report traces of proto-alphabetic characters. They further suggest that these markings include the divine name *YHW* and repeated curse formulae with lexemes such as *'rr* (“to curse”) and *mwt* (“to die”).³⁶ Were this interpretation correct, the artifact would represent the earliest known Hebrew inscription and the earliest attestation of the Tetragrammaton. Supplementary lead isotope analysis further indicated affinities with Aegean ores, a result consistent with long-distance exchange networks documented for the Late Bronze Age.³⁷ Recent critiques, however, stress that imaging-based readings require multi-analyst verification and that the proposed lexemes do not align securely with Late Bronze Northwest Semitic morphology.³⁸

The interpretation of the tablet, however, remains highly contested. Stripling’s team regards the object as direct evidence for Hebrew writing in the Late Bronze Age and reads it as a formal curse text rooted in Canaanite religious practice. Yet a number of scholars have raised substantial objections. Naama Yahalom-Mack has pointed out that Aegean-sourced lead circulated widely for centuries, making the isotopic data insufficient to establish a thirteenth-century date, and without secure stratigraphic context the chronological attribution remains uncertain.³⁹ Aren Maeir and Christopher Rollston emphasize the fragmentary state of the object and the danger of perceiving letterforms where none exist.⁴⁰ Matthieu Richelle

36 Stripling et al., “You Are Cursed by the God YHW,” 1–24.

37 Ibid., 13–16.

38 Richelle, “Quelques nouvelles lectures sur l’ostracon de Khirbet Qeiyafa,” *Semitica* 57 (2015): 147–62.

39 Naama Yahalom-Mack, “The Source of the Lead of the Mount Ebal ‘Tablet,’” *Israel Exploration Journal* 73, no. 2 (2023): 153–159.

40 Aren M. Maeir and Christopher A. Rollston, “The So-Called Mount Ebal Curse Tablet: A

likewise warns that without demonstrable letter-sequence coherence, the object cannot be treated as a readable inscription.⁴¹ Amihai Mazar has gone further, suggesting that the artifact may not be an inscribed tablet at all but rather a utilitarian item such as a fishing-net sinker.⁴² Rollston has additionally cautioned that even if some of the markings prove alphabetic, they cannot be securely classified as Hebrew and may reflect only a generic Northwest Semitic script of the early alphabetic tradition.⁴³

In light of these divergent views, the Mount Ebal lead tablet must be regarded as highly contested: its date, reading, and even status as an inscription remain unsettled. Its significance, however, lies in how it has broadened debate on the possible use of alphabetic writing in pre-monarchic Israel. Considered alongside the Izbet Šarṭah abecedary, the Khirbet Qeiyafa ostrakon, and the Proto-Sinaitic corpus, it highlights both the promise and the pitfalls of reconstructing the earliest phases of Hebrew script. Recent studies emphasize that such pre-Iron Age inscriptions must be interpreted within a pan-Canaanite rather than narrowly Hebrew framework.⁴⁴

Critical Response," *Israel Exploration Journal* 73, no. 2 (2023): 132-142.

41 Richelle, "Quelques nouvelles lectures," 158.

42 Amihai Mazar, "The Lead Object from Mount Ebal as a Fishing-Net Sinker," *Israel Exploration Journal* 73, no. 2 (2023): 143-152.

43 Maeir and Rollston, "The So-Called Mount Ebal Curse Tablet," 138-141.

44 Alan Millard, "Ancient Hebrew Inscriptions," *European Journal of Theology* 29 (2020): 109-21.

(2) The Tel Lachish Ostrakon: Alphabetic Expansion into Canaan

Recent discoveries at Tel Lachish have yielded an inscribed ostrakon from a well-defined context in Area S (stratum S-2), dated securely to the transition from the late Middle Bronze to the early Late Bronze Age (the fifteenth century BCE).⁴⁵ Published by Felix Höflmayer and colleagues, the find has been described as a “missing link” between the Proto-Sinaitic inscriptions and the later Late Bronze corpus.⁴⁶ The ostrakon exhibits several paleographic traits that indicate an early phase of alphabetic development in Canaan: its letters are simplified from their pictographic prototypes into linear forms, they show little or no use of *matres lectionis*, and the shapes of certain signs still retain vestiges of their hieroglyphic origins.⁴⁷ Its stratigraphic association with Cypriot imports, monumental architecture, and radiocarbon dates reinforces the chronological attribution.⁴⁸ Together with contemporaneous Egyptian hieratic inscriptions from Lachish and textual references to the site under Amenhotep II, the ostrakon indicates that alphabetic literacy had already reached urban centers of the southern Levant by the fifteenth century BCE,⁴⁹ situating Lachish within the core zone of early alphabetic innovation. Recent analyses further underscore that the Lachish ostrakon demonstrates early alphabetic experimentation within a complex

45 Felix Höflmayer, Haggai Misgav, Lyndelle Webster, Katharina Streit, “Early alphabetic writing in the ancient Near East: the ‘missing link’ from Tel Lachish,” *Antiquity* 95, no. 381 (2021): 705-19.

46 Höflmayer et al., “Early Alphabetic Writing,” 705.

47 *Ibid.*, 713-14.

48 *Ibid.*, 716.

49 Wimmer, Stefan Jakob; Lyndelle Webster; Katharina Streit; Felix Höflmayer. “A New Hieratic Ostrakon from Lachish.” *Zeitschrift für Ägyptische Sprache und Altertumskunde* 150, no. 1 (2022): 146-156.

Canaanite urban setting, not merely in peripheral mining regions.⁵⁰

(3) Proto-Sinaitic Inscriptions: Alphabetic Innovation in a Canaanite Milieu

The Proto-Sinaitic inscriptions, discovered principally at Serabit el-Khadim in Sinai and at Wadi el-Ḥôl in Egypt's Western Desert, represent one of the earliest known experiments in adapting Egyptian hieroglyphs into a consonantal alphabetic system.⁵¹ Dating between the nineteenth and fourteenth centuries BCE, the corpus preserves roughly twenty-two signs that combine pictographic and linear elements. Their archaeological contexts—mining expeditions at Serabit, caravan and military routes in Egypt's borderlands—demonstrate close interaction between Canaanite-speaking laborers and Egyptian administrators. The Wadi el-Ḥôl inscriptions, usually assigned to the late Middle Kingdom (nineteenth–eighteenth centuries BCE), are particularly significant in providing a chronological and cultural bridge between Egyptian hieroglyphic models and later Northwest Semitic alphabets.⁵²

The classification of these inscriptions has provoked ongoing debate. Douglas Petrovich has argued that words such as *bēt* (“house”) and *ʿēl* (“God”) reveal Hebrew vocabulary, exhibit morphological and

50 Felix Höflmayer et al., “Early Alphabetic Writing in the Ancient Near East: The ‘Missing Link’ from Tel Lachish,” 705–19.

51 Hamilton simplifies the terminology by using *Proto-Canaanite* for the earliest alphabetic inscriptions and *Old Canaanite* for the later, more linear stage, while insisting these terms are purely palaeographic and carry no ethnic or linguistic claims. See more discussion of the terminology for them in Gordon J. Hamilton, *The Origins of the West Semitic Alphabet in Egyptian Scripts* (Washington, DC: Catholic Biblical Association of America, 2006), 4.

52 Darnell et al., “Two Early Alphabetic Inscriptions,” 70–72.; John C. Darnell, “Wadi el-Hol,” in *UCLA Encyclopedia of Egyptology*, ed. Jacco Dieleman and Willeke Wendrich (Los Angeles: University of California, Los Angeles, 2013), 13–15.

syntactic consistency more closely aligned with Biblical Hebrew than with generic Canaanite.⁵³ On this basis, he has suggested that Hebrew writing traditions originated centuries before the rise of the monarchy. Most specialists, however, have rejected this attribution. Joseph Naveh treated the texts as experimental alphabetic experiments that developed into Proto-Canaanite and eventually into Phoenician.⁵⁴ Benjamin Sass emphasized their pictographic and non-standard character, arguing that genuine linearization emerged only in the Late Bronze Age and Iron Ages.⁵⁵ Frank Moore Cross traced a trajectory from Proto-Sinaitic through Proto-Canaanite to Phoenician, from which Hebrew and Aramaic scripts later branched,⁵⁶ while Rollston cautioned against anachronistic classification, noting that the ambiguous forms and broadly Northwest Semitic lexicon of the corpus preclude a specifically Hebrew identification.⁵⁷ By contrast, Orly Goldwasser proposed that Semitic laborers untrained in Egyptian writing system adapted hieroglyphs pictorially, producing a flexible consonantal system usable across Canaanite dialects.⁵⁸

53 Douglas N. Petrovich, *The World's Oldest Alphabet*, See Sinai 115, 378.

54 Joseph Naveh, *Early History of the Alphabet: An Introduction to West Semitic Epigraphy and Palaeography*, 2nd ed. (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1987), 26-30.

55 Benjamin Sass, "The Genesis of the Alphabet and Its Development in the Second Millennium B.C.: Twenty Years Later," *de Kêmi à Birît Nâri: Revue Internationale de l'Orient Ancien* 2 (2004-2005): 147-166, especially, 157; In this early work Sass proposed a comparatively early origin for the alphabet, placing Proto-Sinaitic inscriptions in the Middle Bronze Age (ca. eighteenth-seventeenth centuries BCE). Nearly two decades later, however, he reconsidered this position, arguing instead that the earliest inscriptions are pictographic and non-standard and that genuine linearization of the alphabet only emerged in the Late Bronze and Iron Ages. See, *The Genesis of the Alphabet and Its Development in the Second Millennium B.C.* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1988).

56 Cross, "Newly Found Inscriptions," 1-20.

57 Rollston, "The Emergence of Alphabetic Scripts," 77-78.

58 Orly Goldwasser, "Canaanites Reading Hieroglyphs: Horus is Hathor?-The Invention of

In sum, the Proto-Sinaitic inscriptions remain fundamental to the study of alphabetic origins. Petrovich's proposal for an early Hebrew tradition has not gained scholarly support, and the broader consensus interprets these texts as a region-wide Canaanite experiment in the formation of an alphabetic system. These inscriptions illustrate how Semitic speakers operating within Egyptian hieroglyphic environments adapted pictorial signs into a consonantal script. Moreover, as later discoveries such as the Tel Lachish ostrakon demonstrates, the development of alphabetic writing continued to evolve within the Canaanite cultural sphere itself, gaining increasing structure and consistency over time. Rather than attributing standardization to a single external source such as the Phoenicians, the evidence suggests a long-term, locally grounded process of refinement across multiple sites in the southern Levant, providing the cultural and linguistic foundations from which Hebrew writing would eventually emerge.

4) Synthesis

In sum, the securely identified Hebrew inscriptions of Iron Age II anchor the tradition, while the earlier Late Bronze materials remain more uncertain. These corpora provide the foundation for a developmental model, which the next chapter reconstructs through shared orthographic features. They also underscore the need for careful methodological distinction between securely Hebrew inscriptions and alphabetic texts that participate more broadly in the Northwest Semitic milieu.⁵⁹

the Alphabet in Sinai," *Ägypten und Levante* 16 (2006): 121-60.

59 Millard, "Ancient Hebrew Inscriptions," 109-21.

3. Reconstructing the Hebrew Script Tradition

Building on the previous chapter, this chapter reconstructs the development of Hebrew script by tracing its formative, transitional, and standardized stages through shared orthographic features.

1) Formative Script Stage (Late Bronze and Earlier; Pre-Standardized Experiments)

The earliest alphabetic inscriptions, including the Proto-Sinaitic texts from Serabit el-Khadim and the Wadi el-Hôl inscriptions in Egypt's Western Desert, are generally regarded as belonging to a pre-standardized stage. Letter forms and usage vary widely, *matres lectionis* were absent, and the signs still depend on Egyptian hieroglyphic prototypes. Most scholars thus regard this stage as experimental rather than fully developed. A minority view, advanced by Douglas Petrovich, argues that a full set of twenty-two consonantal signs was already in use, essentially equivalent to later Hebrew, though this interpretation has not gained consensus.

The debated Mount Ebal lead object further illustrates this ambiguity: Stripling and his team interpret it as proto-alphabetic, including the divine name YHW, while others deny it is an inscription at all. Regardless, it leaves open the possibility that Hebrew-related traditions reached back to the Late Bronze Age.

More decisively, the recently published Tel Lachish ostrakon (fifteenth century BCE) provides early alphabetic evidence securely embedded in a southern Levantine urban context. Höflmayer and colleagues interpret it as a “missing link” between Proto-Sinaitic and later traditions, showing that alphabetic practice had spread into Canaanite city-states centuries before the Iron Age. Taken together, these formative inscriptions reveal an unstable but foundational milieu, anticipating the later consolidation of

diagnostic Hebrew features in the Iron Age.

2) Transitional Script Stage (Tenth-Eleventh Centuries BCE; Between Canaanite and Hebrew)

By the early Iron Age, inscriptions such as the Gezer Calendar, the Khirbet Qeiyafa ostrakon, and the Izbet Šarṭah abecedary suggest a transitional phase of alphabetic practice with increasing orthographic coherence. The Gezer Calendar employs stabilized vocabulary and careful lineation but retains archaic spellings and limited *matres lectionis*, placing it within the wider Northwest Semitic continuum rather than securely within Hebrew. The Qeiyafa ostrakon, found in a fortified Judahite site, preserves five lines of irregular text. Galil and Misgav identify it as Hebrew on lexical and morphological grounds, while Rollston and McCarter stress its irregularities and classify it more cautiously as Canaanite or as Phoenician, reflecting broader debates about Hebrew-Phoenician relations. The Izbet Šarṭah ostrakon preserves a non-standard abecedary; Naveh viewed it as Late Canaanite, whereas Demsky emphasized its pedagogical role as an early stage of scribal training.

Taken together, these inscriptions mark a transitional horizon where Hebrew-related traits surface but orthography remains fluid and boundaries with Phoenician indistinct-preparing the way for the standardized script of Iron Age II.

3) Standardized Script Stage (Iron Age II, Ninth-Sixth Centuries BCE; Consolidation of Hebrew Orthography)

From the ninth century onward, inscriptions appear to provide clearer evidence of a standardized Hebrew script. The Siloam Tunnel Inscription suggests balanced letter forms and conventional orthography, with verbal morphology and vocabulary closely parallel to Biblical Hebrew. The

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Lachish Letters, written on the eve of Judah's destruction, show relatively stable spelling conventions and consistent use of pronominal suffixes and conjunctions characteristic of Biblical Hebrew. Administrative corpora such as the Samaria Ostraca and the Arad Ostraca display formulaic vocabulary and bureaucratic precision, while inscriptions from Kuntillet 'Ajrud and Khirbet el-Qom seem to incorporate religious expression into Hebrew epigraphic practice.

Collectively, these corpora may be taken to illustrate the consolidation of Hebrew writing, marked by stabilized consonantal use, patterned employment of *matres lectionis*, and consistent graphemic forms across diverse administrative, military, and religious contexts. These convergences set the stage for the synthesis that follows, tracing how discrete practices appear to have solidified into a coherent Hebrew scribal tradition.

4) Synthesis: From Pre-Standardization to Consolidation

The analysis of this chapter demonstrates that the Hebrew script did not emerge as a single act of invention but developed gradually over an extended period from the Late Bronze Age into the Iron Age. The formative inscriptions reveal an unstable yet foundational stage in which essential elements of later Hebrew writing were first articulated, while the transitional inscriptions of the eleventh-tenth centuries BCE display emerging Hebrew features that nonetheless remain intertwined with broader Canaanite and Phoenician traditions. In the ninth-sixth centuries BCE, the standardized phase reflects the consolidation of these earlier influences into a coherent scribal culture marked by stable orthographic, graphemic, and grammatical conventions. Taken together, these developments show that Hebrew writing emerged through a cumulative process shaped by multiple regional and linguistic traditions, ultimately

providing the scriptural and administrative foundation for the Hebrew of the biblical texts.

4. Conclusion

This study has reinterpreted the origins of the Hebrew script not as a single act of invention or as the isolated development of a specific region, but as a long-term and cumulative process extending from the Late Bronze Age into the Iron Age. By arranging alphabetic inscriptions from various periods and regions into three developmental stages—formative, transitional, and standardized—this study has shown that the Hebrew script tradition gradually acquired its identity within a broader Northwest Semitic alphabetic environment. This approach provides a balanced framework that moves beyond the older Phoenician-origin model on the one hand and, on the other, the tendency to identify early inscriptions too quickly as Hebrew.

The formative materials (Proto-Sinaitic, Tel Lachish, and the debated Mount Ebal lead object) represent an unstandardized stage in which diverse regional experiments and cross-cultural influences coexisted across the domains of sign shape, orthography, and function. In particular, the hieroglyphic features and early consonantal experimentation preserved in these formative inscriptions suggest that alphabetic writing had already begun developing in the Egypt-Canaan frontier during the Middle Bronze Age. Such an environment opens the possibility that communities associated with early Israel may have encountered alphabetic practices at a relatively early stage, making it difficult to restrict the emergence of Hebrew writing to the Iron Age alone.

The transitional inscriptions (Izbet Šarḥāh, Khirbet Qeiyafa, the Gezer Calendar) reveal the gradual appearance of Hebrew-related features while still reflecting multilayered connections with Canaanite and Phoenician traditions. By contrast, the standardized inscriptions of Iron Age II (especially IIB-IIC) clearly demonstrate the consolidation of a unified Hebrew scribal culture through stabilized letter forms, consistent use of *matres lectionis*, and regularized morphological and syntactic patterns. Comparison of these three stages confirms that the Hebrew script did not arise suddenly but emerged through centuries of accumulated scribal practice.

This study further emphasizes that, given the fragmentary linguistic and paleographic information preserved in early inscriptions, evaluating the relationship between Hebrew and the wider Northwest Semitic tradition requires well-defined criteria. Reliable classification demands the integrated consideration of paleography, orthography, morphology, and syntax, and cautions against rapid identifications based on a single diagnostic feature, which risk circular reasoning. In this respect, the developmental model proposed here provides a coherent interpretive framework that acknowledges both the fragmentary nature and the contested character of the early evidence while enabling a broader reconstruction of the script's evolutionary trajectory.

Future research will benefit from more refined phonological, morphological, and syntactic analysis, as well as from interdisciplinary collaboration that integrates materials science, imaging technologies, and paleographic study. As such research progresses, it will enable a more nuanced understanding of how Hebrew writing developed a distinctive identity within the wider Canaanite alphabetic tradition and how this scribal culture ultimately provided the literary foundations of Biblical Hebrew. By presenting this long-term developmental structure, the

present study seeks to contribute to a renewed alignment of research on the origins of the Hebrew script.

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검색어

히브리어 비문, 원시-시나이, 게셀 달력, 키르벳 케이야파, 이즈벳 사르타,
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[ABSTRACT]

The Long-Term Process of Hebrew Script in Light of Recent Epigraphic Discoveries: From Proto-Sinaitic Beginnings to Iron Age Standardization

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This study re-evaluates the origins and development of Hebrew script within the wider Northwest Semitic alphabetic tradition and proposes a developmental model consisting of formative, transitional, and standardized stages. Rather than emerging suddenly in the Iron Age, Hebrew writing is shown to have arisen through a long-term and cumulative process extending back to the Middle and Late Bronze Ages. Formative inscriptions — such as Proto — Sinaitic, the contested Mount Ebal object, and the early alphabetic ostrakon from Tel Lachish — reflect experimental adaptations of Egyptian hieroglyphic principles within a Canaanite milieu, suggesting that communities associated with early Israel may have encountered alphabetic practices earlier than previously assumed. Transitional inscriptions, including the Izbet Šarṭah abecedar, the Khirbet Qeiyafa ostrakon, and the Gezer Calendar, reveal emerging Hebrew-related features while retaining strong affinities with broader Canaanite and Phoenician traditions. By the standardized stage of Iron Age II, inscriptions such as the Lachish Letters, Arad and Samaria ostraca, and the Siloam Inscription attest to a coherent Hebrew scribal culture characterized by stabilized graphemic forms, patterned use of

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matres lectionis, and consistent morphological structures. Taken together, this diachronic framework demonstrates that Hebrew script crystallized gradually within the cultural and linguistic matrix of the southern Levant and underscores the need for integrated linguistic, paleographic, and material-scientific approaches in future research.

key words

Hebrew inscriptions, Proto-Sinaitic, Gezer Calendar, Khirbet Qeiyafa, Izbet Şarḥāh, Tel Lachish Ostrakon, Hebrew script origins, Northwest Semitic epigraphy

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