Literacy and scribalism in Israel during the Iron Age (ca. 1200-586 BCE)

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Abstract: This chapter discusses the attestations and uses of writing during the Iron Age, in the southern Levant and especially the territories of Israel and Judah. It first adresses the question of writing during the Iron Age I, often regarded as a "Dark Age" in the region, then deals with the origins and uses of the Old Hebrew script in the Iron Age II. Finally, the chapter discusses the extent of literacy in the populations of Israel and Judah, as well as current knowledge on the scribes.

Keywords: Literacy; scribes; epigraphy; inscriptions; Israel; Iron Age; Old Hebrew; alphabet

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Ancient Israel is a unique case among the societies of the Ancient Near East insofar as a whole collection of literary works from the 1st millenium BCE, the Hebrew Bible, has been transmitted by an uninterrupted tradition of handwritten copy down to modern times. By contrast, Mesopotamian literature, for instance, remained buried in the soil of Mesopotamia until modern scholarship rediscovered it. Yet when it comes to epigraphical texts from the Iron Age (ca. 1200-586 BCE), the opposite is true. Compared to the innumerable Akkadian documents of that time, the corpus of Hebrew inscriptions is slim and mostly composed of brief, non literary texts. As a

result, the era of the first redactions of biblical books still contains many unknowns regarding the origins, spread, and extent of literacy. That being said, the detailed study of this corpus, set against the background of Levantine epigraphy, helps to understand the situation in its broad outlines. This chapter will successively discuss the attestations and uses of writing in the Iron Age I, often regarded as a "Dark Age", and the Iron Age II, when the Old Hebrew script flourished. Then it will address one of the most disputed questions: who read and wrote in ancient Israel and Judah?

1. Writing in the "Dark Age" (Iron Age I)

The Hebrew "square script" that is well known today and has been in use, with variations, for the last two millenia, did not yet exist in the Iron Age. For most of the monarchic period, more precisely from about 900 to 586 BCE, scribes used what scholars call the Old Hebrew script (or Paleo-Hebrew script). It is only during or soon after the Babylonian Exile, in the 6th century, that Judeans switched to the Aramaic script, widely used across the entire Near East, for most uses; in time, they developed it into their own local form of the alphabet, which ultimately became the "square script". The Old Hebrew script was not entirely abandoned by Judeans in the Second Temple period, but it was limited in its uses (Perrot and Richelle 2022). It was also used by the Samaritans and the Samaritan script proper stems from it.

For most of the monarchic period in Israel and Judah, therefore, it is the Old Hebrew script that proves relevant. But the question arises of its origins and of what script was used, if any, by the inhabitants of the same territories during the three centuries that separate the earliest assured attestation of Israel, about 1207 BCE (on the Merneptah stele), and the emergence of the Old Hebrew script, about 900 BCE. While this period is sometimes regarded as a "Dark Age," a

growing number of epigraphic findings shed some light on the use of writing at that time. It is also helpful to set this situation against the background of the changes that occurred during the transition from the Late Bronze Age (ca. 1200-1150 BCE) to the Iron Age I (ca. 1200-980 BCE).

A diversity of scripts were in use in the Levant in the 2nd millennium until the end of the Late Bronze Age, including Hittite hieroglyphs and alphabetic scripts (notably the cuneiform alphabet from Ugarit), but above all cuneiform and Egyptian scripts (Sparks 2013: 76, Fig. 1). Cuneiform was used for administrative tasks, diplomatic correspondence, but also literature (Goren et al. 2009). Egyptian scripts were widely used in administrative centers like Lachish because Egypt controlled the region during the Late Bronze Age. This situation ended in the early 12th century, when the palatial system, to which a scribal apparatus was tied, collapsed during events that affected a large part of the Ancient Near East. In particular, the use of the cuneiform script was virtually discontinued in the Levant, as well as the cuneiform alphabetic script. Egypt withdrew from the southern Levant a few decades later, around the middle of the 12th century.

There is one writing system, however, that was apparently not affected by the dramatic events of the 12th century, but may on the contrary have picked up steam in their wake: the Early Alphabetic script, also called the linear alphabet (as opposed to the cuneiform alphabet used in Ugarit in the 13th century BCE). It had actually been in use since the first half of the 2nd millenium, in Egypt (where it is attested by the so-called Proto-Sinaitic inscriptions) and in the Levant (where it is attested by the so-called Proto-Canaanite inscriptions), although it spread further away, including to Mesopotamia and Yemen (Koller 2018). In time, this script was borrowed by the Greeks and the Etruscans; it is ultimately the ancestor to the Latin alphabet.

However, only brief texts have been found in the Early Alphabetic script (see Albright 1969 and Sass 1988 for classical studies). Moreover, this script was not completely standardized before the end of the 2nd millennium. Beforehand, the texts could be written horizontally or vertically, from left to right, from right to left, or both alternatively (*boustrophedon* style); the shapes of the letters exhibit considerable variation; the stance of the letters was not fixed either, which means that they could face in various directions. Most probably, it was not standardized because it had not been adopted by a political power and "did not yet represent an official language" (Sanders 2009: 49; see also Byrne 2007: 17). Its use may have been kept low key by scribes because the political situation forced them to mainly use Egyptian scripts or the cuneiform script (Lemaire 2008: 47), or because it was less prestigious than the systems of writing that scribes had painstakingly learned (Koller 2018: 3).

After the disruption of the early 12th century, the Early Alphabetic script now represented the main writing system in use in the Levant. A few dozen inscriptions from the 12th to the 10th centuries have been found (for inventories and dating hypotheses, see Sass and Finkelstein 2013; 2016: 25-38; Lemaire 2012: 295-303; Aḥituv and Mazar 2020: 431-35). During that period, it is not possible to distinguish between Phoenician, Philistine, or Hebrew inscriptions based on the script (except for the Byblian inscriptions from the 11th c.). Likewise, the meager linguistic data contained in such short texts is seldom diagnostic. Nonetheless, they give us a glimpse into the use of writing at that time.

In the northern Levant, the script was standardized in the 11th century by the Phoenicians, and they used it for royal inscriptions in Byblos in the 10th century (Rollston 2010: 19-27). In the

southern Levant, most texts come from cities of the Shephelah considered to be Canaanite. The following selection of inscriptions attests a continuous scribal tradition stretching from the Late Bronze Age through the Iron I to the Iron IIA:

- several texts come from the last stratum of the Late Bronze Age (stratum VI) at Lachish, including the Lachish jar inscription (12th c.), which seems to include a personal name, the word "scribe," and a measure of wheat indicated by signs borrowed from the Egyptian accounting system (Schniedewind 2020). At that time, Lachish was the most important city of the region, and probably an Egyptian administrative center, before its destruction ca. 1130 BCE and a subsequent gap in the settlement of roughly 200 years;
- an inscription from the 12th c. or the early 11th c. bearing a personal name (probably Jerubba'al) was found at Khirbet el-Ra'i, the city which took over as the main settlement center in the Shephelah after the destruction of Lachish (Rollston et al. 2021);
- a jar inscription from the 12th or 11th century (McCarter, Bunimovitz and Lederman 2011) and an ostracon from the 11th century (Lemaire 2015: 17) was found at Beth-Shemesh;
- two inscriptions were found at Khirbet Qeiyafa: an ostracon (ca. 1000 BCE) which comprises five lines and is regarded by some as a continuous text with legal or ethical contents, but is more likely a list of personal names (Millard 2011; Richelle 2015), and the slighly later 'Išba'al inscription (Garfinkel et al. 2015); it is debated whether Qeiyafa belonged to Judah or to a Philistine polity or was something else.

Other texts have been found originating from Philistia, notably an inscribed potsherd found at Qubur el-Walayda (dated ca. 1100 BCE by Lemaire [2012: 298]), from the periphery of Philistia, like the 'Izbet Sartah abecedary (dated to the 11th century, see Lemaire 2012: 298-99), and from other parts of the Southern Levant. For instance, an incision on a pottery sherd from Tel Rehov,

in the Jordan Valley, is to be dated somewhere between the late 13th and the early 10th c. (Aḥituv and Mazar 2020: 415-16). An incision on a jar handle from Khirbet Raddana (15 km north of Jerusalem) is often dated to the 12th or 11th century (Lemaire 2015: 20). The Ophel pithos inscription from Jerusalem shows that the Early Alphabetic script was known there in the 10th century (after Aḥituv and Mazar 2020: 431; some prefer a date in the early 9th c.), and an inscription from Manahat, 4 km south of Jerusalem, dates from the 11th century or around 1000 BCE (Lemaire 2015: 19).

In the end, it is untenable to argue that the Early Alphabetic script was confined to the Shephelah for most of Iron I and then spread from it (as argued by Sass and Finkelstein 2013: 177). It is much more realistic to adopt a multi-center model according to which this script was more largely diffused in the Levant, perhaps radiating from Egyptian government centers, including Beth-Shean and Lachish, and from Byblos, long tied to Egypt (Na'aman 2020).

Moreover, it is possible that the brief inscriptions on which most discussions are based only constitute the tip of the iceberg if the Early Alphabetic Script was also used to write on papyrus, as a number of scholars assume or regard as possible (Millard 2012 ; Lemaire 2008: 48; Amadasi Guzzo 2014). Papyrus is a perishable material that rarely survives in the Levantine climate. The writing practices of the inhabitants of the Levant in the Late Bronze Age and Iron I were a legacy from their Egyptian overlords, and more precisely from the Egyptian scribes or Egyptian-trained scribes residing in the region—papyrus was a typical medium for writing amongst Egyptian scribes. Significantly, the lexemes used in Hebrew to designate ink, papyrus, and a number of other scribal tools and implements were borrowed from Egyptian, most probably during the New Kingdom (1549-1069 BCE) (Zhakevitch 2020). It was also the time when the accounting system

based on hieratic numerals, well attested in Old Hebrew texts from the 1st millenium, was borrowed. The recently discovered Lachish Jar Inscription demonstrates that it had already happened in the 12th century; according to Schniedewind, "this inscription would stand at a transition point when linear alphabetic is beginning to be used administratively and when the Egyptian hieratic tradition is being adopted by alphabetic scribes" (Schniedewind 2020: 139).

Therefore, it seems that there was a continuous scribal use of papyrus from Iron I to Iron II. Since it is unlikely that the Egyptian scripts and language continued to be used for administrative purposes in the Levant long after Egypt's withdrawal (there are no known examples currently), it is probably the Early Alphabetic script that was used to write on papyrus, both in Byblos (Na'aman 2020: 42) and also in the Southern Levant. This would provide a more plausible explanation for the rarity of the documentation in the late second millenium than the notion that the main script was still restricted to ownership marks. An indirect confirmation comes from the earliest of the Byblos royal inscriptions, namely the Ahiram sarcophagus inscription (ca. 1000 BCE), since it was written by a scribe used to writing in a cursive form of the Phoenician script (Lehmann 2008). The use of papyrus for fast writing may have been in place in Byblos for some time (Na'aman 2020: 44).

In the end, writing was present in the territories of the future kingdoms of Israel and Judah in the Iron Age I, although it must be acknowledged that we are still ignorant to a great extent about its uses and its practitioners.

2. Writing in the Iron age II and the flourishing of the Old Hebrew script In terms of *longue durée*, the main phenomenon that can be observed with regard to writing between the 12th and the 8th centuries BCE is the emergence of "national" (or "regional", see Lehmann 2020: 78) scripts stemming from the Early Alphabetic script, notably Phoenician in the 11th century, Old Hebrew in the early 9th century, and Aramaic in the 8th century.

There are currently two models as regards the birth of the Old Hebrew script. According to one theory, the Old Hebrew script derives from the Phoenician script from Byblos (Rollston 2010: 42-44). Because of some paleographical differences between the Byblian inscriptions and a number of alphabetic texts from the southern Levant and Syria, a variant of this hypothesis posits a second center of diffusion, perhaps Tyre (Amadasi Guzzo 2014). Either way, the strongest argument in favor of the notion that Phoenician represented the mother script of (notably) Old Hebrew is the fact that both scripts comprise 22 graphemes, whereas the phonology of Hebrew would have required more characters to be fully expressed. The explanation would be that the Phoenicians selected the exact number of graphemes they needed, and that the Hebrew scribes just took up the Phoenician alphabet as it stood.

That said, we do not possess for the Phoenician language the same range of external documentation that is available for Hebrew to determine whether there was, or not, a perfect fit between graphemes and phonemes, so it is not entirely clear that Phoenician did not require more than 22 graphemes (Lehmann 2012). In addition, the shorter version of the alphabet, with only 22 signs, is already attested in the late 13th century at Ugarit. Hence there is another model positing that the Old Hebrew script is not the daughter script of Phoenician but a sister, deriving in parallel from the Early Alphabetic script in which the reduction of the alphabet had already

occurred (e.g. Hamilton 2014). A number of inscriptions found in the Southern Levant may attest intermediary stages between the Early Alphabetic Script and the Old Hebrew script. In particular, the Tel Rehov inscriptions exhibit a gradual paleographical development from Early Alphabetic to Old Hebrew, distributed over a sequence of strata dated from the 11th to the 9th century (Aḥituv and Mazar 2020; see Green this volume). It is at the transition between the late 10th and the early 9th century that the script begins to exhibit paleographical features that will be characteristic of the Old Hebrew script in later inscriptions.

Once "born," the Old Hebrew script developed and spread. It was used not only in Israel and Judah, but also, for some time, in Moab, most probably because the latter country was Israel's vassal for several decades in the 9th century. As it happens, the longest text in this script is the Moabite stone (late 9th century), a basalt stone that originally bore more than 31 lines of text and commemorates the accomplishments of Mesha, king of Moab, including his victories againt the Israelites (to be compared with 2 Kgs 3). To be more precise, the script of this inscription is virtually indistinguishable from Old Hebrew, although some scholars prefer to make a distinction (Puech 1988: 203 fn. 58).

The number of inscriptions in Old Hebrew from the 9th century BCE is very limited, but there is no doubt that most of the documents have disappeared because they were written on perishable materials such as papyrus, possibly leather and wax tablets. Long texts may well have been written at that time, and even in the 10th century (e.g. Lemaire 2015: 34; Richelle 2016; Vanderhooft 2017: 448; Rollston 2018: 472; Blum 2019). The oldest inscriptions in this script already bear cursive features and presuppose a practice of fast writing with ink, which is a hint that long texts were written as early as the beginning of the 9th century (Sass and Finkelstein

2016: 38), or even in the late 10th century if we take into account the most widely accepted chronology (cf. Aḥituv and Mazar 2020). Because cursivization is a gradual development that is the result of a long practice, it might point to fast writing with ink well into the 10th century. Although most of the inscriptions that have been discovered from the 10th and 9th centuries come from the territory of Israel, this is no solid reason for distinguishing between this country and Judah as regards writing, as if Judah was a sort of island deprived of substantial literacy before the 8th century (*pace* Finkelstein 2020; cf. Hogue this volume). Such an *argumentum ex silentio* proves weak in the context of the realities of Levantine writing (Richelle 2016). The Early alphabetic script is attested in the region of Jerusalem in late Iron I, perhaps ca. 1000 BCE (Lemaire 2015: 19-20), and in Jerusalem itself in Iron IIA, probably in the 10th century, as shown by the Ophel Pithos inscription. Writing technology was clearly known in Judah in the 10th and 9th centuries (Rollston 2017: 15-16). The scarcity of epigraphical findings is to be compared with the relative scarcity of archaeological findings from the Iron IIA in Judah (Aḥituv and Mazar 2020 435), especially in Jerusalem. Moreover, although most biblical scholars hold that the bulk of biblical literature was written in Judah between the 8th century and the Persian period, and although many seals and bullae have been found, only one small fragment of papyrus has ever been discovered in this territory for these periods (Yardeni 2018: 153-54; a couple of other fragments of papyri are unprovenanced and were most likely forged). Only brief inscriptions, and no papyri, have been found in the northern kingdom of Israel, where some argue that some significant literary activity took place in the 8th century (Finkelstein 2017). In Samaria, the capital of the kingdom, most decades of that century have not yielded any single inscription, which shows that writing activity in any form is often archaeologically invisible.

From the 8th century, the documentation in Old Hebrew grows (for collections, see Davies 1991; Dobbs-Allsopp et al. 2005; Aḥituv 2008; Renz and Röllig 2016; Yardeni 2018). Monumental inscriptions are attested, although only fragments of steles from the capital cities of Samaria and Jerusalem have been discovered. The best example is the beautiful inscription from ca. 700 BCE found in the Siloam Tunnel in Jerusalem, commemorating the completion of the tunnel by the meeting of two teams working from opposite ends.

As already noted, many texts were written on papyrus, and this was the main medium used for long, literary texts. As a result, virtually no literary work in Old Hebrew script has been recovered. An ostracon (inscribed potsherd) from Horvat ‘Uza (inscription No. 1) from the second half of the 7th century BCE seem to provide an exception. At Kuntillet ‘Ajrud, a site located in the eastern Sinai, a few ink inscriptions on plaster from the early 8th century BCE may have included literary texts but they are so badly preserved that their interpretation remains uncertain, and the origins of the persons responsible for these texts are debated.

To get an idea of what a long, literary text looked like in the monarchic period, it is best to turn to the plaster inscriptions from the 8th century found at Deir ‘Alla, in the Jordan Valley. They do not belong to the corpus of Israelite or Judean inscriptions: they are not written in Old Hebrew script but in Aramaic, and they reflect a dialect close to the Aramaic language. Yet they come from a site that was located immediately to the east of the Northern Kingdom at that time, and in a region that was alternately controlled by Israel and by Aram-Damascus. These inscriptions contain a long description of a vision given by divinities to Balaam, son of Beor, the same seer who is mentioned in Num 22-24. The layout of the text, in columns, suggests that it was copied from a scroll.

The vast majority of epigraphs found in the territories of Israel and Judah are brief texts. Seals and bullae contain personal names and sometimes titles (Avigad and Sass 1997). An exception is two silver amulets from ca. 600 BCE, found in a tomb at Ketef Hinnom (Jerusalem), bearing formulas very similar to the Priestly blessing of Num 6: 24-26. Much more common are many brief inscriptions incised on pottery or stone, that indicate the ownership and/or contents of jars and other recipients. Ostraca generally contain lists of names and commodities; some of them bear messages. They were used for everyday writing. The most important collections come from Samaria, Arad, Lachish, and Horvat ‘Uza. In the royal palace in Samaria, around a hundred dockets from the early 8th century record quantities of oil and wine. The Arad inscriptions (from the 9th or 8th century to the early 6th century) contain much administrative or accounting information (lists of names and commodities), and some letters as well. The same is true of the Lachish ostraca, which shed some light on the situation in an important military site in the last phase of the Judahite royal period. Such documents provide limited but precious information about the administration in Israel and Judah, some glimpses into people’s day-to-day life, and linguistic data about the Hebrew spoken in the Iron Age.

In Israel and in Judah, the script naturally developed over the following centuries and epigraphers have described the paleography of ink inscriptions (Rollston 2009; 2014), seals (Herr 2014), and monumental inscriptions (Vanderhooft 2014). That said, it is important to note that lapidary inscriptions were not engraved by scribes but by masons, who copied models but did not have the same proficiency in literacy. Some of the latter may have been illiterate, but the consistency of the letterforms in monumental inscriptions renders this hypothesis questionable (Keimer 2015: 197 fn. 10). In addition, it is a striking fact that cursive script was used on monumental

inscriptions, perhaps for aesthetic beauty (Keimer 2015: 206). It is certainly for such reasons that the Siloam Tunnel inscription reproduces broadstrokes and thinstrokes even though it was not made with ink. It is essential to realize that Israelites and Judeans did not have recourse to different writing systems for everyday inscriptions and for monumental writing, as did a number of other people, for instance the Egyptians. In sum, a wide array of texts have come to light thanks to excavations and they bear witness to multiform uses of writing in ancient Israel and Judah, mostly from the 8th century on. This raises the question of who actually wrote (and read) those documents, to which we now turn.

3. Who read and wrote in Ancient Israel?

A number of scholars have argued that a relatively high proportion of the population of Israel and Judah were able to read and to write (Millard 2012), at least from the 8th century on (Demsky 2014: 90), or from the late monarchic period (Naveh 1968: 74). However, a widely held view today is that reading and writing concerned only a very limited number of people (Puech 1988; Young 1998b; Rollston 2010: 127-35). It is also plausible that various degrees of literacy coexisted (Schniedewind 2013: 104-105). The discussion rests on a number of considerations.

First, many authors have pointed out the *relative simplicity of the linear alphabet*, compared to more complex systems of writing like the cuneiform script, and claimed that it made its use accessible to a large part of the population. Yet empirical evidence reveals that acquiring proficiency in an alphabetic script requires months or even years of learning (Rollston 2006: 48-49). This does not necessarily apply to a rudimentary form of literacy, however (Schniedewind 2013: 105). It is also important to note that many inscriptions from the 8th-6th centuries BCE exhibit common orthographic and paleographic features, and some presuppose the ability to use

hieratic numerals, which seems to presuppose a standardized scribal curriculum (Rollston 2006). That said, because many other inscriptions are very brief, it is not always possible to see whether their texts followed such scribal conventions. What is sure is that many inscriptions exhibit a good execution of the script.

Comparative evidence leads to mixed results. On the one hand, evidence of widespread use of an alphabetic script can be found in the tens of thousands of rock graffitis, written in Safaitic and Thamudic, found especially in the Arabic peninsula. They were not written by scribes but by shepherds during trips, as a past-time. This gives the impression of a kind of mass literacy. On the other hand, these brief texts only contain very simple information, like personal names. We now know that the more substantial texts were incised on wooden sticks (from palm-leaf stalks), with a cursive form of the script. The graffiti are merely evidence of a very basic form of literacy that subsisted alongside the fluent use of writing for commercial and administrative purposes in towns (Stein 2010). Besides, comparative data from other areas rather suggests that the use of an alphabet does not necessarily prompt widespread literacy; in fact, the estimations of the rate of literacy in Greek and Roman societies does not exceed 10-15% of the population (Harris 1989: 327-30). In Palestine, the evidence concerning writing among Jews from the Roman period also indicates a low rate of literacy (Hezser 2001: 497). A decisive factor behind a widespread use of writing is the symbolic and social capital attached to writing, which varies between cultures (Street 1984).

Second, the *wide distribution of the inscriptions* in the territories of Israel and Judah may suggest the presence of literate people in numerous sites. Moreover, inscriptions are found in all sorts of contexts, both public and domestic (Aḥituv and Mazar 2020: 435). That said, it remains possible

that people had recourse to the services of scribes to write the texts they needed and incise marks of ownerships on objects they owned, and then brought back these documents and items to their home or working place. That inscriptions are found in many archaeological sites could perhaps be interpreted by the hypothesis of "local clerks" present in many places to record lists and other commercial data, to be distinguished from the kind of scribes who wrote down literary texts and official documentation and correspondence.

Third, the *increase in the number of inscriptions* and its use on a *greater variety of media* in the late monarchic period suggests that more people were able to read at that time. For instance, seals were almost never inscribed before the 8th century. Many vessels bore a mark of ownership or an indication about the contents. This does not allow us to assess the spread of literacy with much precision, however.

Fourth, a number of ostraca seem to indicate that literacy spread beyond the guild of scribes to reach *a number of officials, at least in the military*. Letters exchanged between soldiers, found at Lachish, Arad, and Horvat 'Uza, favor this hypothesis. Several hands can be detected behind these texts, whereas it is unlikely that a multiplicity of scribes worked in these small fortresses; moreover, some letters mention that the soldiers wrote the texts themselves (Faigenbaum et al. 2021: 154, about Arad). An important document in this regard is Lachish ostracon No 3. Hosha'yah, a military official from (probably) the Shephelah, replies to Ya'ush, who likely was the chief soldier in Lachish. According to the most widely accepted interpretation of the ostracon, Hosha'yah quotes Ya'ush who had said: "you cannot read a letter" (or: "you did not understand it; call a scribe!"), and Hosha'yah swears that he is able to read on his own: "No one has tried to read a letter to me – ever!" (see Dobbs-Allsopp : 308-14). The fact that Hosha'yah felt offended

at the accusation that he was unable to read suggests that it was a relatively common skill in the higher ranks of the army. Thus it seems reasonable to posit that a number of military officials were literate in the late monarchic period.

That said, it is not that easy to find inscriptions that were demonstrably written by people that were neither scribes nor officials. In a number of cases, one may wonder if they had recourse to a scribe. Graffiti, like the inscriptions scratched on the walls of a burial cave at Khirbet Beit-Lei (8km from Lachish), perhaps in the early 6th century BCE, are examples of possible candidates, since there is no reason to assume that the persons who inscribed them happened to be scribes or military officials.

Fifth, a number of *biblical passages* are sometimes adduced to argue that a large array of people could read and write during the monarchic period (for a detailed discussion of this evidence, see Young 1998a). Besides scribes, a number of persons are said to have written or read a text: kings (see e.g. 2 Sam 11:14-15; 2 Kgs 5:7; 10:1,6; 19:14; 23:2; cf. also the prescription to read the Torah in Deut 17:19), prophets (Isa 8:1; Ezek 24:2), priests (Num 5:23; Deut 31:9-11) and Levites (Neh 8:8). However, without even raising the question of the historicity of these stories, it is worth noting that the verb "to write" (*katab*) in Biblical Hebrew often serves as a shorthand for "to have a text written by somebody else" (Nissinen 2014), and the same certainly holds true for "to read" (*qara'*). A striking example is Jeremiah, who is ordered by God to write down his oracles on a scroll (Jer 36:2) but actually has his scribe, Baruch, do it on his dictation (Jer 36:4).

A couple of specific passages seem, at first, to suggest that virtually anybody was supposed to be able to write. In Judges 8:14, Gideon catches "a young man (*na'ar*), one of the people of Succoth" and questions him; the young man "writes" for him the (names of the) 77 officials and elders of Succoth. Because nothing in the narrative suggests that the young man was chosen for his ability to write (the reason was rather that he was from Succoth), this verse gives the impression that any such person randomly selected in the population was able to write down personal names. Taken at face value, the scene is situated in the time of the Judges, which would be Iron I, but many exegetes would regard the narrative as a fiction from the late Iron Age or later. Still, this might provide information on the realities of the time when it was written. However, here again, the verb "to write" is equivocal. Furthermore, some have noted that *na'ar* can designate a large range of roles, including servant, attendant or official (Young 1998a: 250). In any case, the kind of literacy that is evoked is "name literacy," it does not point to a high level of literacy.

According to Deuteronomy, the Israelites are required to write the laws of Moses "on the doorposts of your house and on your gates" (Deut 6:9; 11:20). But this does not mean that all the inhabitants of Judah were able to read texts in, say, the 7th century (the usual dating of the earliest core of Deuteronomy). In addition to the "ideal" or "utopic" perspective of this text, such a reference to inscriptions is more realistically explained by the iconic dimension of writing (Carr 2005: 121-22); even today, the presence of inscriptions in Hebrew and Latin in synagogues and churches does not mean that any participant in the religious services are able to read the texts. In the end, the biblical data do not enable us to determine who was able to read and write in the monarchic period beyond scribes and possibly some officials.

To conclude so far, there is no unequivocal evidence for widespread literacy beyond scribes and officials in ancient Israel and Judah during the Iron Age, at least as long as we are speaking of a substantial level of literacy, enabling a person to write messages, for instance. Yet there is a widespread presence of writing in these countries. It remains possible that lower forms of literacies existed and that a number of people had the ability to write their own name, a few words, perhaps lists, but it so happens that the unequivocal data mostly points to the work of trained scribes and officials. It is also possible that a greater number of people were able to read but not to write. By nature, however, this cannot be observed on inscriptions. The increase in the variety of inscriptions and media may, however, suggest a growing number of people able to read at least brief inscriptions. In the end, it is the work of the scribes that is best illuminated by the documentation.

What do we know about scribes in monarchic Israel and Judah? Only a few are named in the Hebrew Bible, notably David's scribe (named Seraiah in 2 Sam 8:17, Sheva in 2 Sam 20:25, and Shavsha in 1 Chr 18:16) and Solomon's scribes (Elihoreph and Ahijah, sons of Shisha, in 1 Kgs 4:3). If Shisha is the same person as David's scribe, then this suggests that the scribal office was, at least in some cases, an hereditary profession. Another interesting case is the role played by Jeremiah's scribe, Baruch son of Neriyah (Jer 36), since it suggests that even such a skillful person as this prophet had recourse to a professional scribe to draft his oracles on a scroll.[1] While there were female scribes in Mesopotamia (Stol 2016: 367-71), it is not clear whether this was also the case in Israel and Judah. A possible hint is the mention of "the sons of *hassopheret*" in

[1] A number of unprovenanced seals and bullae in Old Hebrew script also mention scribes (Avigad and Sass 1993: 57-58, 175), including two bullae of "Baruch, son of Neriyahu, the scribe", but their authenticity is questionable (for the Baruch bullae, see Goren and Arie 2014).

Ezra 2:55; the latter Hebrew word could mean “female scribe”, although such a reference, without any personal name, seems unusual.

Much ink has been spilled by modern scholars to try and understand how their early predecessors spilled their own ink. The Hebrew Bible provides precious information on the tools used by scribes and the medium on which they wrote (Zhakevitch 2020). The epigraphical data indicate that scribes used rush brushes to write, as opposed to the reed pen that was adopted later, in the Hellenistic period (Longacre 2021). The use of a chisel-shaped broad-nib pen enabled fast writing and had calligraphic consequences (van der Kooij 1986; Lehmann 2020: 84-87); notably, it facilitated shading in the calligraphy, that is, variations in the thickness of the strokes, as can be observed in ink inscriptions.

How did scribes learn to write? It has been suggested that some buildings or rooms served as schools, especially in locations where abecedaries have been found (Lemaire 1981). However, because it seems difficult to establish that any specific place in Israel or Judah fulfilled this function, this hypothesis is rarely adopted today. Perhaps, like in Ugarit, “schools formed around individual scribes in a domestic setting, where these very scribes (…) not only taught but carried out their duties” (Hawley, Pardee and Roche-Hawley 2015: 246). In other words, we do not need to hypothesize that specific public buildings were devoted to the training of scribes; what really mattered was the presence of an experienced scribe and a few tools.

As a result, recent research has focused on the *curriculum* followed by apprentices, regardless of the precise setting where it took place. Two kinds of evidence shed light on the manner in which they were trained. First, abecedaries and scribal exercises. The former constitutes the most

evident testimonies of the presence of apprentices. Abecedaries have been found in various places. Some of them were models written by a teacher, others were attempts at imitation made by apprentices. On Pithos B from Kuntillet ʻAjrud, dated to the early 8th century BCE, we see no less than four abecedaries, numbered 3.11-14 in the *editio princeps* (Aḥituv, Eshel, and Meshel 2012). Schniedewind writes that "Inscriptions 3.12 and 3.14 are written in red ink in a flowing, elegant hand, whereas Inscriptions 3.11 and 3.13 are written in black ink reflecting a more basic hand." The former are likely the work of a teacher, and the latter of beginners. Interestingly, in Egypt, master scribes sometimes used red ink to make corrections on the work of apprentices (Schniedewind 2019:28-29). On the same pithos, a student also practiced the writing of several signs, notably the letter *yod* and hieratic numerals, in particular the sign for "70". Intensive training in hieratic numerals, alongside signs for measures and commodities, is attested on four ostraca from Kadesh Barnea (Tell el-Qudeirât) dated to the 6th century BCE. One of them lists key numerals from 1 to 10,000 (Aḥituv 2008: 210-12). Yet another case where we can see both the hand of a teacher and that of an apprentice is a stone inscription found in the City of David and dated to the 7th century BCE. It contains a name written twice, first by an experienced and then by a beginner's hand (Rollston 2012). The presence, on the same document, of a model text written by a trained scribe and of an exercise by an apprentice, echoes practices that are well attested in Mesopotamia and in Egypt.

Other epigraphs were likely written by persons with limited practice. Such is the case, for instance, of the so-called "*mpqd* ostracon" from Tel ʻIra, dated to the 7th century BCE: "the bold script written in uneven lines seems to be the work of a non-professional, unskilled scribe, who, although being familiar with the formal cursive Hebrew script, apparently did not have much practice in writing" (Yardeni 2018: 160). Similarly, the so-called "Ahiqam ostracon" from

Horvat ‘Uza exhibits crude handwriting (Mendel 2011: 57). Such situations raise the question of whether we are dealing with texts inscribed by “early career scribes” or by other kind of professionals who had acquired training in order to write down some records, but whose job proper was not to be a scribe. It is not always possible to tell. But the context sometimes favors the latter possibility, as in the two inscriptions just mentioned, since they come from fortresses. In the case of the Ahiqam ostracon, Mendel argues that it was written by a lower-rank soldier (Mendel 2011: 57-64).

Generally speaking, it is likely that the training of scribes in Israel and Judah could include several stages enabling them to acquire skills of increasing complexity, as in other societies from the Near East, from the ability to write down ownership marks as well as lists of names and commodities, to the use of hieratic numerals for bookkeeping, to the ability to write messages and finally the ability to write literary works. The evidence concerning the most advanced part of the curriculum is slim but likely included memorization and recitation of texts (Carr 2005; Schniedewind 2019). It is likely that some scribes only learned the first stages of the curriculum while others also went on to acquire the higher levels of literacy.

Although much eludes our knowledge due to the lack of preservation of documents, the evidence provided by the epigraphical findings and by the Hebrew Bible sheds precious light on the multifaceted writing tradition in the territories of Israel and Judah. While it seems that only a limited part of the population was literate in a meaningful way, writing was important in these cultures, and the manifold uses of writing by its practitioners were enough to leave a limited but rich and varied documentation that is ever growing with new discoveries.

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