

Chapter Title: The Democratization of Hebrew

Book Title: A Social History of Hebrew

Book Subtitle: Its Origins Through the Rabbinic Period

Book Author(s): WILLIAM M. SCHNIEDEWIND

Published by: Yale University Press. (2013)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt5vm6sc.9>

---

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at  
<http://about.jstor.org/terms>



*Yale University Press* is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *A Social History of Hebrew*

## *The Democratization of Hebrew*

*The more complex the organization of the state and the economy, the greater the pressure toward graphic representation of speech.*

—Jack Goody

The development of government bureaucracy was a natural catalyst for the development and spread of writing beginning in the eighth century B.C.E. Writing was democratized in ancient Judah. That is, it became widely available and started to become a Judean cultural value. The catalyst for the democratization of writing was—to use a modern term—the *globalization* of society. In this chapter we examine the Hebrew language in the last hundred years before the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem in 586 B.C.E. It is during this period that we see the flourishing of Hebrew writing as preserved in all kinds of written (or epigraphic) evidence. We find hundreds of seals and seal impressions, dozens of letters, tomb inscriptions, a variety of economic texts, and even graffiti. And not surprisingly, it is in this context that a written text, the scroll of the covenant supposedly discovered in the temple (2 Kings 23:2), became the basis for the religious reforms of the late Judean monarchy. The written word had reached its zenith in ancient Judean culture. At the same time, the democratization of writing—its spread to nonscribal

classes—undermined the tight control of writing standards. Democratization of writing extended outside the boundaries of those who would strictly control its standards.

### Inscriptional Evidence for the Spread of Hebrew Writing

Hundreds of Hebrew inscriptions testify to the widespread use of writing during the late Judean monarchy. As the archaeologist Ephraim Stern notes, “Taking into consideration the size of the Judean kingdom during this period, this large body [of inscriptions] is truly astonishing.”<sup>1</sup> The marked increase in epigraphic remains begins already in the late eighth century, but it reaches its apex in the seventh and early sixth centuries. Parenthetically, such a spread of writing was also critical to the formation and religious authority of biblical literature. Indeed, it is hardly surprising that this period also is marked by the appearance of the “writing” prophets (for example, Isaiah, Micah, Amos, Hosea, and Jeremiah) and by a religious reform supposedly prompted by the discovery of a written text. Such examples from biblical literature accord well with the epigraphic picture that emerges from the late Iron Age.

What impact did this marked increase in writing have on the development of the Hebrew language? The spread of writing throughout Judean culture results in a decline in the standardization in writing. As writing is no longer tightly confined to scribal elites, the ability to standardize an “official Hebrew” actually diminishes. This is easy to understand by modern analogies, such as e-mail, texting, and other social media—all forms of writing that challenge the established standards of writing because they flourish outside the realms of those who standardize writing. Thus, this type of democratization in writing results in inconsistencies in grammar and spelling. In ancient Hebrew, the democratization of writing resulted in unevenness in spelling and script. Although the epigraphic evidence for writing during the late Judean monarchy is so vast that we cannot rehearse it all here, it will be useful to examine some examples of writing during the last century of the Judean monarchy, before the conquest of Jerusalem by the Babylonians in 586 B.C.E. This will serve to illustrate some of the types of linguistic changes that we begin to see as well as the role that Hebrew comes to play in the life of the Judean people. Examples will be drawn from seals and seal impressions, letters, economic texts, tomb inscriptions, and graffiti.

#### WRITING FOR ADMINISTRATION

A variety of different types of texts illustrate the importance of Hebrew writing for administration in the late monarchy. These include eco-

nomic texts, seals and seal impressions, and inscribed weights. The teaching of Hebrew reading and writing skills began specifically for administration and commerce, and the commercial and administrative uses of writing would be critical to the spread of writing to a variety of social classes during the late Iron Age.

Excavations at Kadesh Barnea (Tell el-Qudeirat) have recovered some of the best examples of scribal exercises in ancient Judah. Kadesh Barnea was a remote fortress that served trading caravans in the middle of the vast Negev highlands. The excavations recovered ten ostraca dating to the late monarchy. Ostraca 1–6 and 9 date to the last phase of the Iron Age fortress (ca. 600 B.C.E.) and appear to be scribal exercises. The most elaborate example includes six columns with lists of hieratic numbers as well as hieratic abbreviations for accounting terms such as *shekel* and *homer*. It also includes the Paleo-Hebrew letter *b* (𐤁, column 1, line 2) used as an abbreviation for “bath” (as in Arad letter 2:2). The corpus of scribal exercises from this remote outpost highlights the central role that accounting played in trade and commerce.

The large corpus of inscribed jar handles from Gibeon also highlights the use of Hebrew writing in administration. The inscriptions from Gibeon also include a variety of other types of inscriptions, including eighty-four *lmk*, “belonging to the king,” jar-handle inscriptions dating to the late eighth century, which was when the town of Gibeon first became a commercial center for the production of wine. There are sixty-two inscriptions on wine-jar handles from Gibeon that date to the late seventh century or early sixth century B.C.E. They are linguistically uninteresting, mostly comprising scrawled names and references to a *gdr* (גדר), “walled plot”, as well as references to the name of the town itself. The script is legible but not carefully or elegantly executed. The two types of inscriptions from Gibeon are suggestive of the changing role of writing in the late Judean monarchy, that is, from the royal jar handles of the late eighth century to the commercial jar handles of a century later. Writing begins at Gibeon as part of royal administration and develops into nonroyal and commercial use. The royal seals are carefully executed seals, whereas the later commercial inscriptions are scrawled on the storage jars.

Weights belong to the growing corpus of inscribed items relating to commerce.<sup>2</sup> They often have abbreviations for different measurements as well as hieratic numerals (borrowed from Egyptian). Some of the terminology inscribed on weights, like the term *škl* (that is, “shekel”), continued to be used until the Roman period. Other terms, like the term *pym*, which refers to “two-thirds of a shekel,” are known only from Iron Age Hebrew inscriptions

and the Hebrew Bible. Such inscribed weights testify to the spread of the commercial use of writing in the late monarchy. They provide further evidence that ties the growth of writing with developing economic activity.

A variety of seals dating to the late monarchy have been found. The most prominent examples are the royal seal impressions, the earliest of which are the so-called *lmlk*, “belonging to the king,” seals. These are a group of royal seal impressions with the *lmlk* inscription and the name of one of four administrative centers (Hebron, Ziph, Socoh, and *mmšt*). These royal stamps give way to the rosette-style seals and eventually the “Mozah” seals of the Babylonian period (sixth century B.C.E.).

There were also fiscal seal impressions (or fiscal bullae). Two such fiscal seal impressions are published in *West Semitic Stamp Seals*: number 421 reads *b26/šnh/ʔltld/lmlk*, “in the twenty-sixth/year/Eltolad/for the king,” and number 422 reads *b13/šnh/rʕšny/lkšl/mlk*, “in the thirteenth/year/the first crop/of Lachish. For/the king.” Bulla 421 refers to the town of Eltolad, which was apparently paying taxes to the king in the twenty-sixth year of his reign (likely referring to King Josiah, which would be in the year 614 B.C.E.). Bulla 422 is very crudely or quickly carved, probably reflecting the relatively ephemeral nature of these fiscal bullae (which could only be used for one season). The spelling of the word *rʕšny*, “first,” is linguistically problematic. The *nun* points to the Hebrew word *rʕšn*, “first in rank,” but this is never spelled with a final *yod*. The final *yod* points to the Hebrew *rʕšyt*, which is always spelled without a *nun* and with a final *tav*. Thus, the term seems to be a misspelling. Most likely, then, it simply reflects the limited scribal education of the writer of this economic seal impression. The writing—both script and grammar—is crude, but it was nonetheless perfectly functional. Both seals use hieratic numerals, which are known in Hebrew inscriptions dating back to the tenth century B.C.E.

The most mundane yet powerful evidence for Hebrew writing during this period is the considerable mass of personal seals and seal impressions. A recently published collection by Nahman Avigad of West Semitic stamp seals includes about seven hundred Hebrew seals, mostly dating to the seventh and early sixth centuries B.C.E. With every excavation season, more seals are being added to this corpus. These clay objects point to a great number of papyrus and parchment documents that did not survive the vicissitudes of climate and military conflict. Only one papyrus letter has been discovered that predates the Babylonian conquest of Jerusalem in 586 B.C.E. This is an extremely fragmentary letter (Papyrus Muraba’at 17) dating to the seventh century B.C.E., which was preserved in the arid region near the shores of the Dead Sea. The corpus of seals and seal impressions is substantial enough to

establish that a comparatively large number of papyrus and parchment documents have been lost. The large number of lost documents can be illustrated by one collection of forty-nine epigraphic seal impressions excavated in the “House of the Bullae” in 1982 in the City of David (Jerusalem).<sup>3</sup> The archive was discovered in 1982 during excavations. Several of the seal impressions reflect quite elegantly executed seals and represent the highest levels of wealth and power in Jerusalem during the late monarchy. Others, however, are less impressive. Although many of the seal impressions are damaged and only partially legible, the editor describes twelve of them as careless, crude, coarse, or unskilled.<sup>4</sup> This suggests that seals were also being executed for a wide variety of people who often did not have the means to hire a highly skilled scribe-craftsman to execute their seals. In other words, the corpus of seal impressions reflects the activity of both private citizens and skilled government artisans. Yet, all these bullae come from one archive that was burned in 586 B.C.E. in the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem.

There are even seals from people known from biblical literature. The most prominent example is perhaps the exquisitely executed seal impressed by “Gemaryahu, son of Shaphan,” a royal official in Jerusalem (see Jer. 36:10).<sup>5</sup> There are scholars who have doubted the identification of the Gemaryahu seal impression with the biblical figure; however, the appearance of exactly the same name, dating to precisely the same period of time, and located in the same place (that is, Jerusalem), seems sufficient for this identification. The identification, in any case, is irrelevant to the more important discovery—namely, that a plethora of seals executed in diverse ways points to the variety of people involved in the production and use of writing.

The large number of seals and seal impressions reflects the entire scope of Judean society, including the lower classes. Nahman Avigad, who published another large collection of more than two hundred seal impressions, also points to carelessly executed seal impressions and clumsy letter forms in his hoard. He suggests that many of these seals were executed by their owners, but this is difficult to know for certain. Nevertheless, it seems that seal ownership became something of a status symbol in these times. Avigad also makes the interesting observation, “In none of the neighbouring cultures, including Egypt, has so large a hoard of bullae bearing private names come to light from the period of the Judean monarchy.”<sup>6</sup> Moreover, it seems that Hebrew writing itself was a central part of this widespread use of seals. It is important to reiterate that Hebrew seals are unique in their preference for writing rather than iconography.

Judah represents the first evidence for the widespread use of aniconic seals, that is, seals without pictures. Until at least the mid-eighth century B.C.E.,

seals in ancient Israel were anepigraphic—that is, without writing. Thus, a hoard of seal impressions excavated in the royal palace at Samaria dating to the mid- to late eighth century B.C.E. bear no names at all, only images.<sup>7</sup> This observation has recently been sharpened by new discoveries of seal impressions from the ninth century B.C.E. in Jerusalem; in excavations led by Ronny Reich, more than 170 clay bullae used for sealing documents were discovered in the City of David in Jerusalem.<sup>8</sup> These seal impressions are exclusively anepigraphic; that is, not a single bulla has any letters or writing. They all utilize iconography instead of written names and titles to indicate their owners. This stands in stark contrast to seals of the later eighth and seventh centuries that primarily utilize written names to indicate ownership. It marks a watershed in the role of writing in Judean society.

In the ancient Near East, seals generally used graphic images to tell something about the owner. Alan Millard notes the contrast with contemporary Phoenician seals: “Almost all published Phoenician seals bear a design of some sort, whether a simple divine emblem or an elaborate scene, and so that by itself could be sufficient to express identity. On those seals the letters of an owner’s name are strictly superfluous.”<sup>9</sup> This is especially important in a largely nonliterate society. The widespread use of aniconic seals, in contrast, presumes that seals could be readily identified by the writing. This may be rather mundane literacy, but it also implies that writing itself has become a mundane or common part of the culture. The widespread use of seals is also evidence for an increasingly complex economy that prompted the rise of literacy itself. It is representative of the spread of writing through different classes of Judean society—hence, the reason for the title of this chapter, “*The Democratization of Hebrew*.”

Though there is limited linguistic information to be gleaned from seals, a few trends become clear. For example, the City of David excavations illustrate that even seals begin to use vowel letters, that is, what would technically be termed *plene* or “full” spelling. For example, seal B37 inscribes *Ḳhyḇ*, “belonging to Achiab,” where the *y* is an internal vowel letter. Concerning this seal, the epigrapher Yair Shoham observes that “the script is careless.”<sup>10</sup> Other examples of medial vocalic spelling are written in fine script (see B28, B29, B30). Shoham also notes, “At the end of the word *plene* spelling was always used. . . . There is not a single example of defective spelling at the end of the word.”<sup>11</sup> Thus, the use of vowel letters, particularly medial *-w-* (ו) or *-y-* (י) and final *-h* (ה), becomes increasingly commonplace.

The spread of writing does not mean that everyone was literate, but rather that writing was no longer restricted to highly trained scribal elites. For ex-

ample, the pervasive use of seals and weights minimally points to signature literacy or craft literacy, that is, the ability to read and write one's own name, to read and write receipts, and perhaps to read short letters. Christopher Rollston has rightly dismissed assessments that proficiency in alphabetic writing can be easily attained; however, Rollston's critique focuses on advanced proficiency and not the ability to read a seal or write a receipt.<sup>12</sup> It is noteworthy in this regard that there is no evidence of an elaborate school curriculum in Judah. This is not just happenstance, as we learn by comparing school texts in ancient Ugarit, which had elaborate school texts for Akkadian cuneiform but limited school texts (essentially the alphabet) for learning alphabetic cuneiform in their own Ugaritic language. The alphabet creates the potentiality for writing, which a more complicated writing system did not. One can learn an alphabet rather quickly, and it is quite flexible. Therefore, it is hardly surprising that rudimentary literacy, which I would call "craft literacy," is evident throughout the epigraphic record. It did not require years of training. This beginning level of literacy is illustrated, for example, by a recently published ostrakon that contains a list of seventeen different signatures of individuals apparently signing for a receipt or payment.<sup>13</sup> This ostrakon is one of the better-preserved and more elaborate ostraca representing the use of writing in the everyday economic activity of the late Judean kingdom. It is evident in the record of seals, weights, graffiti, and even letters. This does not mean that ancient Judah was a nation of scribes or widely literate, but merely that writing as a technology had transcended the bounds of scribal elites. This is nicely illustrated in the so-called "Letter of a Literate Soldier."

#### THE LETTER OF A LITERATE SOLDIER

Excavations at the site of ancient Lachish in the Judean foothills uncovered thirty-four ostraca along with other assorted seals, seal impressions, and inscribed weights. The ostraca date to the final stage of the Iron Age occupation (ca. 586 B.C.E.). One particular ostrakon discovered at Lachish provides rather remarkable testimony for the cultural prestige of basic literacy in the early sixth century B.C.E. Lachish letter 3, which has been dubbed the "Letter of a Literate Soldier," captures a debate between a junior and a senior officer on the topic of the ability to read.<sup>14</sup> The commanding officer, Yaush, had obviously questioned his junior officer's ability to read in a previous letter. Hoshayahu, the junior officer, writes back, offended by the suggestion that he cannot read. Put differently, the whole letter is addressing the issue of literacy in a nonscribal class of society. The ostrakon is written on both sides, and the text reads as follows:



<i>ʿbdk.hwšʿyhw šlh.l</i>	(1) עבדכ־הושעיהו שלח־ל
<i>hgd lʿdny yʿwš.yšmʿ</i>	(2) הִגֵּד לְאֲדֹנָי יִאֲוֶשׁ־יִשְׁמַע
<i>yhwʰ t ʿdny šmʿt.šlm</i>	(3) יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי אֲדֹנִי שְׁמַעַת־שְׁלֹמֶה
<i>wšmʿt tḅ [.] wʿt.hpqh</i>	(4) וְשִׁמְעָתָּ תִּבְּ [.] וְעַתָּה־הִפְקַח
<i>[nʿ] t ʿzn ʿbdk.lspr.ʿšr</i>	(5) [נָא] אֵלֶּי אֲנִי עֲבַדְכ־לְסִפְר־אִשֶּׁר
<i>šlhth ʿdny lʿbdk ʿmš.ky.lb</i>	(6) שְׁלַחְתָּהּ אֲדֹנִי לְעִבְדְּךָ אִמְש־כִּי־לִב
<i>ʿbd[k] dwh.mʿz.šlhk.ʿl.ʿbd</i>	(7) עִבְדְּךָ [כ] דָּוִד־מֵאֲז־שְׁלַחְכ־אֶל־עַבְד
<i>k wky ʿmr.ʿdny.P.ydʿth.</i>	(8) כ וְכִי אִמַּר־אֲדֹנָי־לֹא־יִדְעַתָּה־
<i>qrʿ.spr hyhw.ʿm.nsh.ʿ</i>	(9) קָרָא־סֵפֶר חִיְהוּה־אִמ־נִשְׁח־אֶ
<i>yš.lqrʿ ly spr lnšh.wgm.</i>	(10) יִשְׁ־לְקָרָא לִי סֵפֶר לְנִשְׁח־וְגַמ־
<i>kl spr ʿšr ybʿ.ʿly ʿm.</i>	(11) כָּל סֵפֶר אֲשֶׁר יִבֹּא־אֵלַי אִמ־
<i>qrʿty.ʿth wʿwd ʿtnnhw</i>	(12) קָרָאתִי־אֹתָהּ וְעוֹד־אֶתְנַחֲזֶה
<i>kl.mʿwmh wlʿbdk.hgd</i>	(13) כָּל־מֵאוֹמְתָּהּ וְלַעֲבַדְכ־הִגֵּד
<i>lʿmr yrd šr hšbʿ.</i>	(14) לְאִמַּר יֵרֵד שֶׁר הַצִּבְאוֹ־
<i>knjhw bn ʿlntn lbʿ.</i>	(15) כְּנִיחֹ בֶן אֶלְנָתָן לְבֹא־
<i>mšrymh.wʿt</i>	(16) מְצִרִימָה־וְאֹת־
<i>hwdwyhw bn ʿhyhw w</i>	(17) הוֹדְוִיָּהוּ בֶן אֲחִיָּהוּ וְ
<i>ʿnšw šlh lqht.mzh</i>	(18) אֲנִשׁוֹ שְׁלַח לְקַחְתָּ־מִזֶּה־
<i>wspr.tbyhw ʿbd hmlk.hbʿ</i>	(19) וּסְפִיר־טַבִּיָּהוּ עַבְד־הַמֶּלֶךְ־הַבֹּאֵר־
<i>ʿl.šlm.bn ydʿ mʿt hnbʿ lʿm</i>	(20) אֶל־שְׁלֹמֶה־בֶּן יֹדַע מֵאֵת הַנִּבֵּא לְאִמֶּה־
<i>r.hšmr.šlh.ʿb&lt;d&gt;k.ʿl.ʿdny</i>	(21) רִ־הַשְּׁמֵר־שְׁלַח־עַבְדְּךָ־כִּי־אֶל־אֲדֹנִי־

Your servant Hoshayahu sent to inform my lord Yaush: May YHWH cause my lord to hear a report of peace and a report of good things. And now, please explain to your servant the meaning of the letter which you sent to your servant yesterday evening because the heart of your servant has been sick since your sending to your servant and because my lord said, “You do not know how to read a letter” [*P ydʿth qrʿ spr*]. As YHWH lives, never has any man had to read a letter to me. And also every letter that comes to me, surely I read it and, moreover, I can repeat it completely! And concerning your servant, it was reported saying, “The commander of the army, Konyahu ben-Elnathan, came down to enter into Egypt. And he sent to take Hodavyahu ben-Ahiyahu and his men from this place.” And as for the letter of Tobyahu, servant of the king, which came to Shallum ben-Yada through the prophet, saying, “Beware!” your servant sent it to my lord.

We may infer from the passion of the junior officer’s protestation—“As YHWH lives, never has any man had to read a letter to me”—that illiteracy had a social stigma. This would be the first time in history that illiteracy among nonscribal classes was actually socially stigmatized.

One Neo-Assyrian letter provides a useful comparison to the Letter of a Literate Soldier. An administrator during the reign of Sargon II (r. 721–705 B.C.E.) writes as follows:

To the king my lord; your servant Sin-na'di. Good health to the king, my lord! I have no scribe where my lord sent me to. Let the king order either the governor of Arrapha or Aššur-bel-u-taqin to send me one.<sup>15</sup>

This letter exhibits several “peculiarities, even blunders” that reflect the limited scribal training of the writer.<sup>16</sup> Yet, the writer also recognizes the need for a professional scribe and is not ashamed to ask for one to be sent to him. This contrasts with the proud boasts by the Assyrian king Assurbanipal (r. 668–627 B.C.E.) about his ability to read, which might suggest that the scribal education was a desired ability even outside of the scribal classes; however, Assurbanipal was probably not trained in the scribal arts as preparation for kingship. Rather, his brother Siniddinapli, the crown prince, died prior to 672 B.C.E. As a result, Assurbanipal had been trained in scholarly pursuits, including divination, mathematics, and scribal arts, before he became crown prince. In Assurbanipal's case, this later autobiographical boasting relates to fortuitous early scribal training. In contrast, the Judean kings are encouraged to be literate by the Deuteronomic “law of the king” (Deut. 17:18–19a): “When he is seated on the throne of his kingdom, he shall write for himself a copy of this teaching in a scroll before the levitical priests, and it shall be with him and he shall read in it all the days of his life.”<sup>17</sup> This Deuteronomic law was particularly critical for the Josianic reforms in the late seventh century. Indeed, the “law of the king” in particular was utilized in the religious critique of kingship by the Deuteronomistic historian(s).<sup>18</sup> This suggests that the rising social status of literacy in Judah was partially grounded in religion.

It is sometimes suggested—incorrectly—that the Letter of the Literate Soldier is part of a corpus of Lachish letters that represent “official Hebrew.”<sup>19</sup> This assumes two things: first, that there is a standardized or “official” Hebrew, and, second, that the junior officer had a professional scribe or that his scribal skills were equivalent to a well-trained scribe. Yet the second assumption is challenged by the content of the discourse itself. After all, Lachish letter 3 is mostly devoted to protestations that the junior officer needed no professional scribe. The very content of the letter undermines assertions that it is from the pen of a trained scribe. In an earlier article, I argued that the linguistic idiosyncrasies of the letter suggest that it was penned by a junior military officer with rudimentary linguistic skills.<sup>20</sup> These linguistic problems include

spelling errors, grammatical errors, and the use of nonstandard formulas in the letter. The first clue comes in lines 1–2: “Your servant Hoshayahu sent to inform my lord Yaush,” which does not conform to standard epistolary style.<sup>21</sup> Dennis Pardee describes it in his *Handbook of Ancient Hebrew Letters* as “unparalleled.”<sup>22</sup> An example of standard epistolary style can be seen in Lachish letter 2, which begins, “To my lord Yaush, may Yahweh cause my lord to hear peace.” It is also worth comparing the more typical formula used in Genesis 32:4–6:

Jacob sent messengers ahead to his brother Esau . . . and instructed them as follows, “Thus shall you say, ‘*To my lord Esau, thus says your servant Jacob*: I stayed with Laban and remained until now; I have acquired cattle, asses, sheep, and male and female slaves; *and I send to declare (lhgyd) to my lord* in the hope of gaining your favor.’” (emphasis added)

A formal letter should have first mentioned the superior, “To my lord Esau” or “To my lord Yaush,” then followed with the inferior, “your servant Jacob” or “your servant Hoshayahu.” Lachish letter 3 skips the formal introduction and proceeds immediately to the second part of the address that we see in Genesis 32:6, “I send to declare to my lord,” or in Lachish 3, “Hoshayahu sent to inform my lord Yaush.” The failure to employ standard epistolary protocol is the first indication that the writer’s scribal training was rudimentary.

Lachish letter 3 also highlights the increasing use of vowel letters in Hebrew. The most important example of this phenomenon is the word אִישׁ (ʾiṣ), “man,” in lines 9–10, which uses the medial *yod* as a vowel letter. In earlier inscriptions, such as the Siloam Tunnel inscription (from Jerusalem, ca. 710 B.C.E.) or the Mesha inscription (from Moab, ca. 840 B.C.E.), the long *i* vowel in the word for “man” /ʾiṣ/ is spelled without the medial vowel *yod*: שִׁס (ṣiṣ).

The increasing use of vowel letters should also influence the way that we read other parts of this inscription. In lines 6 and 7 we find the difficult verbal form שְׁלַחְתָּ (šlḥt), “you sent,” and on line 8 the form יָדַעְתָּ (ydc), “you know.” Normally, the 2ms perfect would be spelled with a final *-t* (ת-) rather than with the final vowel letter *-th* (תה-), even though it was apparently pronounced /-tā/. Although the spelling using a final *h* as a vowel letter would become quite typical in the Qumran Hebrew texts, it would not be used until Rabbinic Hebrew and does not ever seem to have been a standard spelling in Hebrew. Occasionally, the 2ms perfect is found with the longer *-th* suffix in SBH (for example, Gen. 3:12; 15:3; 21:23; Exod. 12:44; 25:12; 26:32, 33 [contrast v. 34]), but it is clearly exceptional. James Barr observes that this phenomenon in the Hebrew Bible is associated with the verb *ntn*

(נתן, “to give”) and the III-*heb* class of verbs.<sup>23</sup> Neither of these observations, however, applies to Lachish 3. As a result, Frank Moore Cross was quite reluctant to read *šlhth*, “you sent,” and *yd<sup>c</sup>th*, “you know,” as simple verbs with the *mater lectionis* letter *heb*; instead, he suggested that the 2ms verbs here attach a 3ms suffix *-h*, thus rendering the text as “you sent *it*” and “you know *it*.” Cross argued that “regularly in pre-Exilic Hebrew prose the 2.m.s. form without the suffix is written without *he*.”<sup>24</sup> The writing with final *heb* would become frequent only in Qumran Hebrew, although it is also attested in Aramaic. Two other examples of the long spelling of the 2ms perfect verbal suffix are attested in the Arad letters (*ktbth* [כתבתה] 7:6) and the Lachish letters (*yd<sup>c</sup>th* [ידעתה] 2:6). Cross’s interpretation depends on rather rigid conceptions about the evolution of *matres lectionis* in Hebrew and does not take into consideration sociolinguistic aspects of the inscription. For example, the author of the ostrakon was apparently a soldier and not a professional scribe. Surely, this must be taken into consideration just as if we were reading a letter by someone with an elementary education as opposed to a college education. Moreover, the spread of writing to nonscribal classes also results in a diminishing of the standard spelling.

In line 9 we must reckon with the contraction *hyhwh* (חיהוה, “as surely as Yahweh lives”) from the expected *hy yhwh*. Several scholars have grasped this idiosyncratic writing as reflecting scribal practices in the Iron Age.<sup>25</sup> Dennis Pardee, however, observes, “The occurrence of the phenomenon in practically every student’s paper they read should lead scholars to be wary of accepting it as a legitimate option open to ancient scribes.”<sup>26</sup> While it is likely that this orthography reflects aspects of the spoken idiom, where the two words would be run together, this should not be regarded as normative scribal practice. More likely, this incidental influence of vernacular pronunciation on the spelling is another indication of the rudimentary level of the officer’s scribal training.

Line 12, *tnnhw* (אתננהו), has been interpreted in various ways. The most plausible reading takes this from the verbal root *tnh* (תנה, “to repeat”), with a 3ms verbal suffix attached, hence, “I could repeat it”; in other words, the soldier could repeat the contents of the document (/sēper/ ספר). However, the spelling *tnh* is typical of Aramaic, which regularly interchanges the grapheme *t*, where in Hebrew we find *š*. Thus, in SBH we usually find *šnh* (שנה, “to repeat, recite”), yet the lexeme *tnh* is found in Judges 5:11 and 11:40. An alternative is to read the verb as deriving from *ntn* (נתן, “to give”) with a 3ms suffix, hence, the sentence in lines 12–13 might be translated: “and I would not give him anything”; in other words, the soldier would not pay a scribe (/sōpēr/ ספר) anything to read the letter for him. However, this reading

is also problematic, as it cannot easily account for the extra *n*. Perhaps it is the infamous enclitic *nun*; however, in SBH this is spelled either  $\gamma mnw$  (אתננו) or  $\gamma mhw$  (אתנהו),<sup>27</sup> never, as we have in Lachish 3,  $\gamma mnhw$  (אתננהו). Rather than understanding this as Aramaic influence, it again seems prudent to consider the possibility that the variant simply arises from a writer with rudimentary training.

In short, the linguistic idiosyncrasies of the Letter of a Literate Soldier reflect a quite basic level of literacy that a junior officer might be expected to have. In this respect, the accusations of the superior officer, which prompted the junior officer's impassioned defense of his reading skills, were probably quite justified. Given the importance of clear and accurate writing in military communiqués, it made sense for the senior commander to request that the junior officer get a scribe. What is more remarkable is that he had to ask at all, and then that the junior officer is so offended at his request! This letter is powerful evidence pointing to seminal changes in the social fabric of society during the late Judean monarchy and the impact that the spread of writing could have on Hebrew itself.

#### A WORKER'S JUDICIAL PLEA

Another ostrakon, known as the Yavneh Yam ostrakon, discovered at a small military fortress on the Mediterranean coast just south of the modern city of Tel Aviv, also speaks to the spread of writing and literature in the late Judean monarchy.<sup>28</sup> The ostrakon can be dated to about 600 B.C.E. and was found in a guardroom of the fortress that served as an agricultural administrative center at the end of the Judean monarchy. The text is a judicial plea from an agricultural worker complaining that his garment was unjustly confiscated.

<i>yšmʿ ʔdny.hšr</i>	ישמע אדני-השר	(1)
<i>ʔt dbr.ʿbdk</i>	את דבר עבדה-עבדך	(2)
<i>qsr.hyh.ʿbdk.bḥ</i>	קצר-היה-עבדך-בח	(3)
<i>šr ʔsm.wyqsr ʿbdk</i>	צר אסמ-ויקצר עבדך	(4)
<i>wykl wʔsmkymm. lḥny šb</i>	ויכל ואסמ כיממ-לפני שב	(5)
<i>t kʔr kl [ʿ]bdk ʔt qsr wʔ</i>	ת כאשר כל [ע]בדך את קצר וא	(6)
<i>sm kymm wybʔ.hwšʕhw bn šb</i>	סמ כיממ ויבא-הושעיהו בנ שב	(7)
<i>y.wyqh.ʔt bgd ʿbdk kʔr klt</i>	י-ויקה-את בגד עבדך כאשר כלת	(8)
<i>ʔt qsry zh ymm lqh.ʔt bgd ʿbdk</i>	את קצרי זה יממ לקח-את בגד עבדך	(9)
<i>wkl ʔhy.yʕnw ly.hqšrm ʔty bḥm</i>	וכל אחי-יענו לי-הקשרמ אחי בחמ	(10)
<i>hšmš ʔhy.yʕnw ly.ʔmn nqty.mʔ</i>	השמש אחי-יענו לי-אמנ נקתי-מא	(11)
<i>[šm whʔ gzl ʔ] bgdy wʔm lʔ.lšr lḥš</i>	[שמ והא גזל את] בגדי ואמ לא-לשר לחש	(12)

[b ʔ bgd] ʔb[dk wt]n ʔlw.rh עבֹדְכָה וְהָיָה אֲלוֹיֶרַח (13)  
 [mm whš]bt ʔ [bgd ʔbdk wlʔ tldm [ . . . ] [ . . . ] מִמֶּנִּי וְהָיָה בָתְּ אֶת [בְּגָדְךָ] בְּדֶכְךָ וְלֹא תִדְהַמּוּ (14)

May my lord, the official, hear the matter of his servant. Your servant was reaping, your servant was in Hatzar Asam; and, your servant reaped, and he finished. Now it was stored as usual before the Sabbath. At the time your [se]rvant completed the reaping and it was stored as usual; then, Hoshayahu son of Shobay came, and he took your servant's garment. When I had finished my reaping at that time, a few days ago, he took your servant's garment. All my companions will testify for me, all who were reaping with me in the heat of the sun; my brothers will testify for me. Truly, I am innocent from any gu[ilt]. Please return] my garment. If the official does not consider it an obligation to retur[n your] ser[vant's garment, then please hav[e pi[ty] upon him [and ret-] urn your [se]rvant's [garment]. You must not remain silent [when your servant is without his garment.]

The language of the plea, besides being rather redundant and perhaps reflecting aspects of oral speech, has a couple of striking linguistic features. First is the use of the periphrastic verbal construction, that is, the use of a participle coordinated with the verb for “to be,” *byh* (הָיָה), in line 3 *qsr.hyh*, “was reaping.”<sup>29</sup> This is a verbal construction that becomes increasingly common in later stages of Hebrew, probably as a result of its regular use in Aramaic.<sup>30</sup> However, it is also known in some BH texts, especially LBH, as well as QH. It is a regular form in RH. This verbal construction stands in contrast to the use of the *waw* consecutive (or “preterite continuative”) as a narrative tense in lines 4 and 5 (*wyqsr, wykʔ*) and again in lines 7 and 8 (*wybʔ, wyqh*). In fact, the full construction in lines 2–3, “Your servant was working at the harvest, your servant was in Hatzar Asam,” is the typical use of a temporal anchor that we find in SBH to begin a sequence of *waw* consecutives; and line 6 begins with another temporal marker, “when,” that is followed by *waw* consecutives. Because the verb in SBH does not primarily mark time, the time of the action must be established by a temporal marker, in this case when they were working at the harvest. The following string of *waw* consecutives encodes not past time but a continuation of the marked time, namely, when “your servant was harvesting” or “when we finished harvesting,” which happens to be in the past, as is often the case with narratives that use *waw* consecutives in SBH. Thus, we see in this text aspects of the early Hebrew verbal system that emphasized aspect (temporal markers + *waw* consecutive) as well as the later development of the verbal system (for example, the periphrastic construction) that will increasingly encode tense.

It is striking that a workman's complaint from a remote agricultural center takes a written form. The issue of a garment taken in pledge was apparently a well-known legal issue (see Exod. 22:26–27; Deut. 24:10–15; Amos 2:8). Of course, the worker need not have had any direct knowledge of the written legislation in order to file his complaint. Nevertheless, the written complaint suggests the role that Hebrew writing was coming to have in this period. It is usually assumed that the worker had a scribe write out the complaint for him. Of course, the assumption that a scribe was involved is just that—an assumption, which is predicated on the implausibility of an agricultural worker being able to write. This may or may not be well founded. The real question, however, is why the complaint needed to be written at all. The use of the written word here seems to be useful in further establishing the authority and legitimacy of the complaint. This is a noteworthy development for the social role of writing in Judean society, and it can be illustrated in other examples. It is also noteworthy linguistically. Even though the complaint is rather crude in its style, it still uses classical literary forms of SBH, like the *waw* consecutive preceded by a temporal marker to indicate the time of the event (instead of encoding time within the verb itself or using the *waw* as a tense converter, that is, a *waw* conversive). This is an aspect of the Hebrew verbal system that deteriorates in LBH and disappears in QH and RH but is nicely preserved here in a worker's complaint.

#### GRAFFITI

Other telling evidence for the spread of Hebrew writing is graffiti. Whereas the Letter of a Literate Soldier addresses the ability to read, graffiti points to the ability to write among nonscribal classes. The two most important ancient Hebrew graffiti are the Khirbet el-Qôm inscriptions and the Khirbet Beit-Lei inscription.

The most well known corpus of graffiti was discovered in the burial caves at Khirbet el-Qôm.<sup>31</sup> The inscriptions are well known for their lack of religious orthodoxy. One graffito, for example, asks for a blessing “for his Asherah,” *wlʔšhrth* (ולאשרתה). The workman may have known how to write, but he was apparently not well versed in monotheism! Although the inscription is clear enough, there are several problems in interpreting it.

- |                                |                       |   |
|--------------------------------|-----------------------|---|
| 1) <i>ryhw.hʿʿšr.ktbh</i>      | אריהוה[ע]שרכתבה       | Uriyahu, the ?, inscribed it.                     |
| 2) <i>brk.ryhw.lyhwh</i>       | ברכאריהוהליהוה        | Blessed be Uriyahu to Yahweh;                     |
| 3) <i>wmsryh.ʔšrth.hwšʿ lh</i> | ומצריהוהלאשרתההושע לה | and, from his enemies, for Asherah, may save him. |
| 4) <i>ldnyhw</i>               | לדניהו                | For Daniyahu                                      |

- |                       |           |                           |
|-----------------------|-----------|---------------------------|
| 5) <i>wlʕsrhth</i>    | ולאשרתה   | And for his Asherah       |
| 6) <i>[wlʕ]r[ht]h</i> | ולאשר[ת]ה | [And for] his [Ashe]ra[h] |

I have provided a rather wooden translation to illustrate some of the difficulties. First, the title of Uriyahu in line 1 is unclear. Some read the word as *hʕsr*, “the rich one,” which makes little sense but seems to be the most straightforward reading for the actual inscription. Dropping the *ʕayin* gives the more intelligible reading *hšr*, “the official,” which might be explained as an error or as resulting from a flaw in the rock surface. Second, the word order of line 3 is strange. The most elegant solution would be to see it as another scribal error, in this case switching the order of “and for Asherah” and “from his enemies.” This yields the translation of lines 2–3 as “Blessed be Uriah to Yahweh and to Asherah. And, from his enemies, save him.” Line 4 seems to be a disconnected personal name, though it may be a specification of “to him” from the end of line 3, that is, “save him, that is, Daniyahu.” This, however, is an awkward solution. Finally, line 5 seems to be a disconnected repetition of “and for his Asherah.” Finally, it is often observed that proper nouns—that is, Asherah—do not take suffixes in SBH, yet this is exactly what we seem to have in the construction *ʕsrth*, “his Asherah.” The same grammatical construction can be seen in Kuntillet ʕAjrud ostraca 18:1 and 19:7, and therefore it cannot be considered a simple grammatical error. Yet, the Hebrew word *ʕsrh* can be either a common noun meaning “sacred pole” or a personal name, “Asherah,” and this might account for the unusual grammatical construction. Given the nature of the inscription, namely, a graffito scrawled in a tomb, the unusual grammatical construction might simply reflect vernacular. It is also possible that it reflects the limited scribal training of the writer of these graffiti.

Another, less well-known graffito from Khirbet el-Qôm provides the identity of the writer, namely, a tomb cutter who asks for a blessing upon himself. It reads:

*brk hšrk/yškb bzh zqnm* (ברכ|הצר|כ/ישכב|בוה|וקנמ). (Blessed be your stone cutter. May he rest in this place, [in] old age.)

The two lines are separated by a considerable space and should be considered separate topics (and might even be considered separate inscriptions, though they are written by the same hand). Such graffiti are not uncommon in the ancient world, but what is interesting here is the social class of the person who inscribes the graffiti. Ancient graffiti can usually be ascribed to scribes or bureaucrats doodling away under assorted circumstances. In the case of the Khirbet el-Qôm graffiti, the author identifies himself as the tomb cutter. This



again suggests a type of craftsman literacy that seems to have been rather commonplace in Judah during the late monarchy.

Another group of five inscriptions was discovered scrawled in the burial caves near Khirbet Beit-Lei, about five miles east of Lachish. They date to the end of the Judean monarchy,<sup>32</sup> but the graffiti are difficult to decipher in the soft limestone. They are usually understood to have been written by refugees from the Babylonian invasion of Judah in the early sixth century, but it is difficult to make any linguistic comments about the Hebrew because of the uncertainty of the readings.<sup>33</sup> When we add to this the linguistic ambiguity inherent in graffiti as a genre, it becomes even more ambiguous. Nevertheless, there is a literary quality to the first inscription, which appears to be a psalm praising *yhwh ʾlhy kl hʾrṣ* (יהוה אלהי כל הארץ), “Yahweh, the God of all the earth,” and *ʾlhy yršlm* (אלהי ירושלם), “the God of Jerusalem.” As such, it reflects the use of Hebrew writing to address religious feelings in an unofficial context.

What is the purpose of such writing? In part, it seems to underscore the increasing role that writing played throughout Judean society of the late monarchy period. At the same time, graffiti do seem to draw from the use of writing in magic rituals to express power. In both the Khirbet el-Qôm and the Khirbet Beit-Lei inscriptions, the writing asks for blessing or good wishes for those who did the writing. It may be inferred that the act of writing itself actuates the blessings and the desires of those writing the graffiti. Although writing may become more mundane through its use for a variety of mundane purposes, it does not lose its sacred character.

#### KETEF HINNOM SILVER AMULETS

In a tomb just outside the walls of Jerusalem, archaeologist Gabriel Barkay excavated two small silver amulets, or charms, which were finely engraved with more than twenty lines.<sup>34</sup> The amulets were in a burial depository within a tomb complex located on the western shoulder of the Hinnom Valley, on the old road that would have led from Jerusalem toward Bethlehem. The archaeological context requires that these amulets be dated to the late seventh century B.C.E.<sup>35</sup> The text of the amulets paraphrases two well-known biblical passages. The first is the priestly blessing known from Numbers 6:24–26, “May YHWH bless you and keep you. May YHWH make his face to shine upon you and give you peace! May he be gracious to you. May YHWH lift up his face upon you.” The second passage is the well-known text from Deuteronomy 7:9: “Know, therefore, that only YHWH your God is God, the steadfast God who keeps His covenant faithfully to the thousandth generation of those who love Him and keep His command-

ments.” This latter text continued to be an important text in the Second Temple period (see Dan. 9:4; Neh. 1:5).<sup>36</sup> The use of these biblical texts in amulets, furthermore, seems to be an attempt to literally carry out the injunction of the *shema*, namely, “Bind them [the teaching] as a sign on your hand and let them serve as a symbol on your forehead; *inscribe* them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates” (Deut. 6:8–9). Indeed, writing on the doorposts (the *mezuzot*) became a Jewish tradition practiced even today. The use of these amulets might be regarded as an early expression of the later practice of using phylacteries (or tefillin; see Matt. 23:3; *m. Shevu’ot* 3:8, 11). Wisdom literature mentions the wearing of words of wisdom around the neck, on the fingers, or on the chest (see Prov. 1:9; 3:3; 6:21; 7:3); however, usually this is understood metaphorically. What is notable about the development of this tradition is that it is the text from a particular book, the Torah, that is to be written on the doorposts, in the phylacteries, or—in the present case—on amulets.

These two amulets would not have been unique. They were not one-of-a-kind objects. We must assume that these chance finds represent a much larger phenomenon in the late monarchic period. People would use inscribed texts as amulets that were worn around the neck. We also have examples of writing used on doors, gates, and even in the foundations of buildings as protection. Although such writing was not intended to be read, it speaks to the religious power that *written* texts came to have in the late Judean monarchy.

### The Use of Vowel Letters in Standard Biblical Hebrew

The generally accepted view of the history of vowel letters is that they were first introduced in Aramaic by the ninth century and subsequently Hebrew borrowed this spelling convention.<sup>37</sup> This influence of Aramaic upon Hebrew is seen as developing from the Assyrians’ use of Aramaic as a lingua franca for their dealings with the west, with the most well-known example in the biblical account of the Assyrians at the gates of Jerusalem in 701 B.C.E. At that time, the Assyrian king Sennacherib was campaigning in the southern Levant in response to Hezekiah’s carefully planned rebellion against Assyrian hegemony, and the Assyrians came to Jerusalem, where negotiations for surrender took place. The Judean officials requested that Aramaic be spoken rather than Hebrew, which indicates that Judean scribes had transnational training (see 2 Kings 18:26; Isa. 36:11). The Assyrians apparently sent administrators with training in Aramaic, namely the <sup>LU</sup>A.BA scribes (*sepīru*), who spread Assyrian administration and ideology into the new provinces of the empire.<sup>38</sup> Judean scribes—those responsible for the composition and

editing of the Hebrew Bible—would likely have learned Aramaic from Assyrian administrators, so it is hardly surprising that Aramaic influence creeps into biblical texts as well as Epigraphic Hebrew of the late Iron II period. One major contribution to Hebrew from the <sup>LÚ</sup>A.BA, or Aramaic-writing, scribes may have been the introduction of vowel letters. It is also through the use of vowel letters that both Hebrew and Aramaic distinguish themselves from Phoenician writing during the eighth and seventh centuries B.C.E.

For decades, the classic study of orthography in ancient Hebrew was the monograph *Early Hebrew Orthography: A Study of the Epigraphic Evidence* by Frank Moore Cross and David Noel Freedman. They argued that “orthographic patterns followed rigid laws.”<sup>39</sup> Yet orthographic patterns only follow rigid laws when there are official standards and standard keepers to enforce them. In our own times, social media (for example, texting, instant messaging, e-mail) all demonstrate that rigid laws of spelling and grammar can quickly disintegrate without the social structures to enforce the standards. Moreover, the neogrammarian approach that has dominated historical Hebrew linguistics has largely focused on the reconstruction of phonology—that is, vernacular—even though the evidence is exclusively textual. It now needs to be rethought in the context of the linguistics of writing systems. Modern linguistic studies of spelling and writing systems would tend to support the basic line of Cross and Freedman’s argumentation, namely, that spelling conventions tend to be fixed and show extraordinary conservatism. Changes in spelling, however, follow social and political changes, particularly as they affect the training of scribes, and do not necessarily closely mirror dialect geography. For example, we know from later Punic inscriptions that vernacular Phoenician probably had the most aggressive implementation of the so-called Canaanite shift—that is, /ā/ to /ō/—extending even to the shift of short-*a* vowels; at the same time, written Phoenician was the most conservative, even though the Phoenician spoken language underwent dramatic phonetic changes that only appear beginning in the fifth century B.C.E. in Punic (that is, the writing of Phoenician with Greek letters). The case of Phoenician demonstrates how radical changes in speech forms often do not show up in written texts until major political or social changes occur—in the Phoenician case, the rise of Hellenism and the use of the Greek alphabetic writing system to write Phoenician (which we then call “Punic”). Whereas the Phoenician orthography remained quite stable between the tenth and fifth centuries B.C.E., the Hebrew writing system showed significant innovations, particularly in its use of vowel letters.

To be sure, the introduction of vowel letters into West Semitic writing systems appears already with the Ugaritic *cuneiform* alphabet by the fourteenth

century B.C.E. Whereas the later Phoenician *linear* alphabet had no vowel letters whatsoever, Ugaritic had already introduced three vowel letters—*ʾa*, *ʾi*, and *ʾu*—in conjunction with the presumed “glottal stop” (that is, the Semitic letter *ʾaleph*). Presumably, this innovation in Ugaritic was influenced by the cuneiform (Akkadian) writing system, which was the primary writing system for West Semitic scribes during the second millennium B.C.E. The Phoenician linear alphabet itself, however, was an adaptation of the vowel-less Egyptian hieroglyphic writing system; therefore, any introduction of vowels into the system was a further step in its innovation. Phoenician did not make this innovation until the language began to be written in Greek letters. Aramaic, by contrast, already began to show this innovation by the ninth century B.C.E. We may posit that the introduction of vowel letters in Aramaic was also an influence of bilingual Akkadian-Aramaic scribes who saw the utility of vowel letters. Once the concept was introduced among scribes who worked transnationally, the innovation spread and was adapted locally for Hebrew. Vowel letters already appeared in Hebrew inscriptions of the late eighth century and became quite prominent by the seventh century B.C.E. Yet, no standardized use of vowel letters can be discerned in Hebrew during the Iron Age.

### Scribal Schools for Standard Biblical Hebrew

Linguistic standardization requires strict political or social control of writing. This might be accomplished either within strong government political structures or within narrowly circumscribed scribal schools. Though there was movement toward a much more urbanized society in Judah and a stronger centralized government in Jerusalem, these trends were apparently accompanied by the breakdown of narrowly controlled writing in scribal schools. And, as a result, it is worth recognizing that there is no strict standardization of Hebrew during the Iron Age, especially after we begin to see the proliferation of writing and its use outside of scribal classes.

There is little evidence for the equivalent of the Mesopotmian *edubba*, or scribal school, in ancient Judah. There may be a variety of explanations for this, but it is probably not ideal to simply argue that an elaborate scribal school system existed but we have not found the evidence yet. To begin with, Mesopotamian and Egyptian were different cultures with much larger and richer bureaucracies than ancient Judah had. As a result, it is not surprising that far more elaborate structures for the education of scribes developed in those places. Writing had a rather circumscribed role as an administrative and communicative tool in the Levant in the second millennium and into the first millennium B.C.E. In addition, based on comparative evidence, we may

assume that scribal schools were based on a family apprenticeship system. The clients for their skills were primarily the palace and, to a lesser extent, the temple, but in the small and relatively poor kingdoms of the Levant, there was only a limited need for writing.

Writing is fundamentally a luxury good, and the spread of writing and growth of the scribal profession was likewise a reflex of the economic realities of the Near East. David Jamieson-Drake in his book *Scribes and Schools in Monarchic Judah* reminds us of some aspects required for luxury items.<sup>40</sup> These include the ability of elites to provide them with support, regional trade, technology, and the evidence of economic control systems (for example, standardized weights, seals). The elite support of scribes is nicely underscored by the Egyptian Papyrus Anastasi when it urges, “Be a scribe. It saves you from toil and protects you from all manner of work.”<sup>41</sup> The larger and more wealthy the economy, the more scribes it could support. On the one hand, archaeologists have noted the lack of imported pottery in Judah before the seventh century B.C.E., and on the other hand, there is significant evidence of economic control systems in the Iron IIB–C period (725–586 B.C.E.). It is hardly surprising then that the flourishing of writing—a luxury item—coincided with the economic development of the late monarchy. It is within this context that scribes must have begun to proliferate. Yet, there was no background for a large, well-developed system of scribal schools for the late Judean monarchy.

Even in Mesopotamia, the location of scribal schools was in small family settings and not under direct state control. In the Levant, scribal schools developed in a wider regional context, as is evidenced by the use of the Phoenician alphabet from the southern Levant, along the coast, and up into Asia Minor and Syria. The localization of scribal schools had to be predicated on the growth of local economies and bureaucracy that we see in the late Iron Age, but the growing number of Judean scribes was not under direct institutional direction or control. Ironically then, the growth of writing did not necessarily result in either a higher quality of writing or a rigid standardization in writing.

The best example of the lack of standardization is in the variable-spelling practices that we see in Hebrew inscriptions dating to the late monarchy. Perhaps not surprisingly, this variable spelling continues into the Hebrew Bible itself and has been the subject of more than one monograph.<sup>42</sup> James Barr, in particular, vividly illustrates the variable spelling that we find in the Hebrew Bible. He lists, for example, different spellings of *ephod* (*ʔd* and *ʔwd*) and the word for “generations,” *toledot* (*tldt*, *twldt*, *tldwt*, and *twldwt*). Indeed, as Barr notes, “the variability of the biblical spelling is one of its fundamen-

tal characteristics.”<sup>43</sup> Barr raises the question of whether these differences should be understood as resulting at a linguistic level or at a scribal level. Both of Barr’s categories actually refer to ways of relating the transcription of speech into text; however, this is not the best way to understand spelling practices, since (as we have discussed in the opening chapter) writing is not a transcription system. Rather, learned spelling practices are usually related to social and ideological conventions rather than the scribe’s attempt to reproduce a precise linguistic transcription of speech. Indeed, while the introduction of vowels does bring us one step closer to transcription, the intermittent use of vowel letters in Hebrew hardly makes ancient Hebrew writing a real attempt at transcription.

The variable spelling of Hebrew should hardly be surprising, and it is actually the expected orthographic practice. In English, for example, variable spellings were quite common in Old and Middle English, even in writings from the same scribe.<sup>44</sup> Furthermore, Alan Millard has pointed out that variable spelling is quite typical for the Near East in antiquity.<sup>45</sup> Indeed, the cuneiform and hieroglyphic writing systems certainly lent themselves to variable spelling practices. In contrast, Phoenician was quite standardized in its orthography. Standard Phoenician spelling changed very little from the tenth century through the fifth century B.C.E. However, Phoenician was also an austere writing system that used only consonants; in this respect, it was certainly not a transcription system. To be sure, there were dialectal varieties of Phoenician, particularly from Byblos, that had their own orthography, but these too seem to be quite stable.<sup>46</sup> Likewise, Ugaritic has a relatively stable orthography. The introduction of vowel letters, however, introduces an extraordinary opportunity for variability in spelling. The spread of writing outside of a small and narrow cadre of scribal schools further exacerbated the variability of spelling that we witness in Hebrew inscriptions from the late monarchy as well as in the Hebrew Bible.

The employ of the scribal profession within the palace is well known from biblical texts from the late Iron Age.<sup>47</sup> For example, the book of Jeremiah mentioned that a “scribal chamber” was located within the palace (36:12), and the scribe Baruch was familiar in the halls of the palace (vv. 11–20). Scribes were part of the royal bureaucracy, and some even had the title Scribe of the King; moreover, royal scribes were also involved with matters related to the temple and the temple economy (for example, 2 Kings 12:11; 22:3). One scribe named Jonathan has his house converted by the government officials into a prison (Jer. 37:15–20). There were military scribes (2 Kings 18:18; 25:19; Jer. 52:25), and scribes were associated with the keeping of royal chronicles (for example 1 Kings 11:41; 14:19, 29). Judean scribes were

apparently bilingual—knowing both Hebrew and Aramaic (2 Kings 18:26). The Assyrians used Aramaic as an imperial lingua franca for their administration. As a result, there is little evidence to suggest Judean scribes would have had a direct knowledge of Akkadian; there is, for example, little evidence of cuneiform found in excavations in Israel dating to the Neo-Assyrian period.<sup>48</sup> The burgeoning palace and the government bureaucracy were, not surprisingly, main employers for the scribes. Yet, in spite of this, there is no direct evidence for a royal scribal school or the institutionalization of the scribal profession in Judah.

### Democratization of Hebrew Writing in Judah

Writing was democratized in Judah during the late monarchy. What do we mean by *democratization*? The term describes the spread of writing through a variety of social classes in Judah during the late eighth through early sixth centuries B.C.E. Imperialism and urbanization were the critical social processes that would enable writing as a technology of communication to break free of the closed circles of the scribal elite. These social processes were precipitated, first of all, by the Assyrian conquests in the Levant. For the Assyrians, urbanization was a political strategy that allowed the Assyrians to utilize the periphery of their empire for the greatest benefit to the center.<sup>49</sup> Urbanization led to the increased use of writing in government bureaucracy and the economy. Writing would thus become a more common technology throughout Judah in the late monarchic period.

The sudden and precipitous increase in both the quantity and variety of texts in the late Iron Age also raises interesting comparative issues. The changes in Judean society beginning in the late eighth century can account for the remarkable increase in the epigraphic evidence. And as Joachim Latacz notes in his study of ancient Greece, “the beginning of textuality in early literate cultures can regularly be deduced from a sudden increase in the quantity of texts.”<sup>50</sup> This increase in the number and type of texts also speaks to the beginning of textuality in ancient Judah. Textuality, however, is not simply a scribal phenomenon. Rather, what makes this emerging textuality interesting is the spread of writing among nonscribal classes. For example, a significant number of Hebrew seals are written rather crudely, reflecting writing among nonelites. Texts like the Letter of a Literate Soldier, the judicial plea from Mesad Hashavyahu, and the graffiti from Khirbet el-Qôm and Khirbet Beit-Lei only serve to further suggest that Hebrew writing had spread outside of scribal classes. It should hardly be surprising that the religious reforms of Josiah were predicated on a written text found in the temple (see

1 Kings 22–23), whereas prophets like Isaiah or Hosea never quote texts to prove their cases. Jeremiah revealingly complains that the *torah*—that is, “teaching”—had become a text in the late Judean monarchy (Jer. 8:8). Indeed, texts like the Ketef Hinnom amulets certainly confirm that Hebrew as a written language became religiously important during the late monarchy.

The democratization of writing raises the question of literacy rates in ancient Judah. The question of literacy in turn raises the problem of defining literacy and then quantifying literacy. For example, the Assyrians developed a two-tier system of literacy among scribes and bureaucrats. There is evidence from seals, seal impressions, and administrative texts for a higher rate of mundane literacy, but it is almost impossible to quantify literacy rates. The arguments for widespread literacy have followed several paths. Some have argued for literacy even in the premonarchic period, as illustrated by a commonly cited story about the “young lad of Sukkoth” who could read and write (Judg. 9:14). Biblical texts thus become a basis for the argument for early and widespread literacy in Israel. Such arguments beg several questions. Foremost, there is debate about the dating of the biblical stories and then about the historical value of such anecdotal tales. For this reason scholars have increasingly looked to epigraphic and archaeological evidence. The sharp increase in the number and variety of inscriptions in the late eighth century B.C.E. makes it a more likely setting for broadening of literacy. Likewise, the societal changes (urbanization, globalization) accompanying the rise of the Assyrian Empire point to the late Judean monarchy as a more plausible setting for the spread of literacy. Naysayers, however, are quick to point out that such archaeological and epigraphic evidence “cannot lead to secure results.”<sup>51</sup> The evidence, however, does point to a decisive shift toward increasing literacy, even if the extent will be impossible to measure precisely. More important, the evidence points to a more central role that writing had in Judean society.

The necessary ambiguities in interpreting the evidence have naturally (and correctly) urged investigation into theoretical frameworks for literacy. Indeed, ancient literacy has been a hotly debated topic among social theorists from many disciplines. Some scholars, such as Jack Goody, Walter Ong, and Eric Havelock, have argued for early literacy, especially in ancient Greece.<sup>52</sup> Others, such as William Harris, have been quite critical of exaggerated claims for widespread literacy and its cultural implications.<sup>53</sup> Harris, for example, argues that the printing press was necessary in order to produce inexpensive texts and that there was only “a rather low level of craftsman’s literacy without the printing press.”<sup>54</sup> Harris also points out that extensive school systems are necessary to achieve majority literacy and that “rural patterns of living



are inimical to the spread of literacy.”<sup>55</sup> Harris sees the Industrial Revolution as a turning point in economic complexity, wherein education was held to be indispensable to the state’s economic well-being. Finally, there must be a widespread ideology that values reading and writing. Harris downplays the substantive shift on the orality-literacy continuum, namely, the shift from widespread illiteracy toward widespread yet mundane literacy. If modern standards of literacy are applied to the ancient world, then it will come up short. Yet, there were technological advances in writing technology, changes toward a more urban society, and movement toward a more global and complex economy in the late Iron Age that set the stage for a seminal shift along the orality-literacy continuum. Moreover, recent studies have noted that the spread of literacy need not be unidirectional—that is, from the public to the private sector.<sup>56</sup> Additionally, the shift from oral authority toward textual authority can also serve ideological causes. In Judah, the numerous seal impressions, jar inscriptions, and graffiti make it clear that writing was widely employed for economic reasons and outside of the government administration or the temple cult. Although an extensive school system might be necessary for advanced literacy, it was not for mundane literacy. In sum, Harris defines literacy too narrowly and along modern standards. As Susan Niditch has emphasized, orality and literacy exist along a continuum.<sup>57</sup> For the present purposes, it is important to note the decisive shift that takes place along this continuum. This shift is marked by the large number of epigraphic remains in Hebrew during the late Iron Age that point to a process of democratization of Hebrew writing.

### “Distinctiveness” in Language and Literature

One reflex of the nationalistic sentiments that emerged in ancient Israel is the obsession in biblical literature with Israel’s distinctiveness. Not surprisingly, this topic of distinctiveness has been the subject of some reflection by biblical scholars.<sup>58</sup> By *distinctiveness*, I refer to the self-perception of Israel as a chosen people that is reflected in the Bible. It is, of course, quite typical of ancient peoples to think of themselves as special or chosen, and examples can certainly be cited from ancient Egypt or Mesopotamia. Moreover, I should hasten to add that we are *not* interested in the problem of Israel’s actual distinctiveness within her Near Eastern context. Scholars have long debated the extent of ancient Israel’s distinctiveness, and much of the recent quest for Israel’s distinctiveness stems from modern religious and ideological sensibilities.<sup>59</sup> Or scholars have tended to diminish the unique aspects of ancient

Israel. The present issue then is not Israel's actual distinctiveness but rather how Israel perceived itself.

The scholarly discussion may be understood, to some extent, as also arising from the Bible's own obsession with Israel's distinctiveness. Peter Machinist has adroitly suggested that it was Israel's comparative "newness," especially when seen against her Near Eastern neighbors like Egypt or Babylon, whose histories stretched back into the prehistoric periods, that motivated the biblical attempts to highlight Israel's uniqueness and distinctiveness.<sup>60</sup> The rulers in Jerusalem could not compete with Babylon or Thebes in grandeur or antiquity, but their scribes were involved in forging an identity of distinctiveness in religion, land, and language. In the words of the Deuteronomist:

It was not because you were more numerous than any other people that Yahweh set his heart on you and chose you—for you were the fewest of all peoples. It was because Yahweh loved you and kept the oath that he swore to your ancestors, that Yahweh has brought you out with a mighty hand, and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt. (Deut. 7:7–8)

Not merely were the people chosen, but also the land, as the Deuteronomist makes clear:

. . . the land that Yahweh swore to your ancestors to give them and to their descendants, a land flowing with milk and honey. For the land that you are about to enter to occupy is not like the land of Egypt, from which you have come, where you sow your seed and irrigate by foot like a vegetable garden. But the land that you are crossing over to occupy is a land of hills and valleys, watered by rain from the sky, a land that Yahweh your God looks after . . . (Deut. 11:9–12)

In the Bible, the Hebrew word *Judah* refers to the territory (Judah), the people (Judeans), and the language (Judean) of the small kingdom in the southern hills of Palestine. As linguistic anthropologists have pointed out, the multiple applications of this term imply a certain conceptual universe. Judeans were part of an ethnic group ("Judeans"), spoke a distinct language ("Judean"), and lived within distinct borders ("Judah").

With regard to a distinct national dialect (as mentioned earlier), the language of the kingdom of Judah is first called "Judean" in a story set in the late eighth century B.C.E.<sup>61</sup> Judean officials plead with an Assyrian emissary of Sennacherib to speak Aramaic rather than Judean: "Please speak to your servants in the Aramaic language, for we understand it; do not speak to us in

the Judean language within the hearing of the people who are on the wall” (2 Kings 18:26, compare Isa. 36:11; also see 2 Chron. 32:18).

In contrast, the term *Hebrew* (*ḥbryt*, עִבְרִית) does not appear as a linguistic description in the Bible.<sup>62</sup> Perhaps the earliest biblical reference to the Hebrew language, in Isaiah 19:18, refers to speaking “the language of Canaan” (*špt knʿn*) in the land of Egypt; in this case, the use of the term *Canaan* probably reflects a more general population as well as the literary contrast with Egypt. In Jewish literature of late antiquity, Hebrew is usually called “the holy language,” with reference to the biblical corpus, and the “language of the sages,” when referring to the language of the oral tradition—what is called Mishnaic or Rabbinic Hebrew. When the term *Hebrew* first appears in the Bible (for example, Gen. 14:13; 39:14; 41:12; Exod. 2:11; Jon. 1:9), it refers not to a language but rather to an ethnicity. It occurs almost always as a synonym of the more commonly encountered “sons of Israel” when the in-group came in contact with the out-group; that is, *Hebrew* often seems to be a pejorative description of the Israelites used by foreigners. Only with reference to the categorization of native-born versus foreign slaves does it appear as an in-group ethnic term (Exod. 21:2; Deut. 15:12). Though the term *Hebrew* as a language reference appears in the Talmud, it rarely refers to what we call the Hebrew language. In one citation, most opinions assert that *Hebrew* refers to some Aramaic dialect (*b. Megillah* 18a). The designation *Hebrew* appears in the Talmud in one other linguistic context, referring to the old Canaanite alphabet, which is called “Hebrew writing” as contrasted with “Assyrian writing” (*b. Megillah* 3a). The newer alphabetic style, at least in the shape of its letters, replaced the older one throughout the Near East during the early Persian period, evolving into the “square character” and its cursive derivatives that are in use today. The term *Hebrew* becomes common as a linguistic term only during the last thousand years. Apparently, the term *Hebrew* as the in-group reference among Jews to their own language borrows from Arabic and was first introduced by Saadia Gaon (882–942 C.E.) in his grammatical writings.<sup>63</sup> This new designation for the Hebrew language spread only when Jews began to write their grammatical studies in their own language a few centuries later. The self-description of Hebrew in the Bible is “Judean,” which referred to the language spoken in Judah.

### Commonly Proposed Features of Epigraphic Hebrew

Epigraphic Hebrew is primarily represented by the corpus of Hebrew inscriptions from the late Iron Age, that is, from about 725 to 586 B.C.E. Though there are important inscriptions from the earlier Iron Age (discussed

in chapter 3), it is best to characterize Epigraphic Hebrew by the bulk of Hebrew inscriptions from the late Judean monarchy.

Some commonly proposed features of Epigraphic Hebrew include the following:

1. Use of *-h* as the 3ms suffix (instead of SBH *-w*). For example, we find *ḥdh*, “his servant” (עבדה, Mesad Hashavyahu 1:2), and *-w* on plural nouns, e.g., *šwḥ* “his men” (אנשי, Lachish 2.3:18) versus SBH *šyw* (אנשי).
2. Standardized use of the *lamed of ownership*. This form is used on inscribed objects to designate the owner of the object, e.g., *lpqh•smdr*, “Belonging to Pekah, SMDR-wine” (Hazor 7:1); see also the *lmlk*, “belonging to the king,” jar handles.
3. Developed system for accounting and record keeping (note Jer. 32:10). This consisted of standardized use of columns, hieratic numbers, and abbreviations for measurements and quantities, e.g., use of columns and hieratic numbers in Kadesh Barnea 6; the use of *b-* in Arad 2:2 as an abbreviation for the measurement *bt*, “bath.”
4. Use of *matres lectionis*. The *waw* represents a /u/ vowel, *yod* represents an /i/ vowel, and final *heh* can represent the vowels /a/, /e/, and /o/, e.g., *ḥyl*, “Achiel” (אחיאֵל, Jerusalem 25:1), and *ḥyb*, “Achiab” (אחיאב, Seal B 37); though, often defective spelling is employed, e.g., *ʿt* (as opposed to *ʿth*) “now” (עתה, in the Arad and Lachish ostraca, and *brkt* (as opposed to *brkty*), “I bless” (ברכתה, Arad 21:2; Kuntillet ʿAjrud 18:1).
5. *Plene* spelling resulting in elongated verbal forms, e.g., *šlḥth* (as opposed to SBH *šlḥt*), “you sent” (שלחתה, Lachish 3:6), *yḏʿth*, “you [do not] know” (ידעתה, Lachish 3:8), and *ktbth*, “you wrote” (כתבתה, Arad 7:6).
6. Use of the *waw* consecutive in narratives, e.g., *wyqh•t bgd ḥbdk*, “And he took your servant’s cloak” (ויקח אתה בגד עבדך, Mesad Hashavyahu 1:8).
7. Use of the infinitive absolute as an imperative, e.g., *ʿtnn•lktym*, “now give to the Kittim” (עתה נתן לכתים, Arad 1:2).
8. Use of the periphrastic construction to denote ongoing events set in the past, e.g., *qsr•hyh•ḥbdk*, “your servant was harvesting” (קצר היה עבדך, Mesad Hashavyahu 1:3).
9. Regular usage of both the definite article *h-* and the accusative particle *ʾt* (את), e.g., *qrʾty•th*, “I read it” (קראתי אתה, Lachish 3:12).