

PREFACE

Alphabetic writing is one of the principal features of Western culture. The adoption of the alphabet by the Greeks and the Romans, successively, contributed to the development of classical civilization; it should be remembered, however, that the origins of the Greek script go back to the alphabetic writing used by the Canaanites since about 1700 B.C. The respective cultures of the West and of the Near East were thus interwoven from early on.

Our knowledge of the early history, development and spread of the alphabet is constantly changing. Collating the new data that keep coming to light is like working on a puzzle with an irregular supply of pieces. These have to be fitted together carefully and a constant re-examination of the data must be accompanied by the re-evaluation of accepted views. This introduction to West Semitic epigraphy and palaeography is my personal way of introducing this field of study on the basis of the evidence available to date.

This book is intended for readers with no previous knowledge of Semitic epigraphy and palaeography. This does not mean that scientific problems have been avoided, however, nor that the discussion is not on a scholarly level. On the contrary, in addition to describing the story of the alphabet in antiquity, the book deals with a series of questions which are the subject of scholarly controversy. Some sections (mostly in chapters IV-VI) are the result of my own study, while others are more in the nature of a summary of the research of other scholars, mainly W. F. Albright and F. M. Cross. Although in general my work follows the same lines as theirs, I quite often find myself differing with their views, or at least reviewing their conclusions with a degree of criticism or reservation.

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While I have tried to express my thoughts clearly and concisely, I have not refrained from illustrating the various scripts as thoroughly and fully as possible. Since only a limited number of plates could be used, most of the illustrations are line-drawings. However, it always has to be borne in mind that a drawing does not portray the written text with the same precision as a photographic reproduction, and that the drawing is an interpretation of the inscription, representing the reading of the scholar who executed the drawing (or who instructed the draughtsman). About forty figures were drawn by Mrs. Ada Yardeni and a few by the author; most, however, were taken from previously published works (although I do not necessarily agree with the interpretation conveyed in the drawing).

No attempt has been made to produce here a history of research. I have sought to concentrate on the most important arguments without going into excessive detail. More extensive argumentation, as well as a detailed bibliography, can be found in the studies mentioned in the footnotes. If a problem has already been dealt with in one of my previous papers, the reader is referred to the relevant paper. However, if new evidence has since come to light, this book may offer a revised interpretation.



I wish to express my gratitude to everybody who has come to my aid in the preparation of this book and first of all to my teachers, colleagues and friends with whom I discussed through the years many of the subjects dealt with here. Since the list is quite long, I would like only to mention Prof. N. Avigad and Prof. F. M. Cross, who introduced me to epigraphy and palaeography. I am indebted to Mrs. Inna Pommerantz and Miss Jennifer Goldman who read the manuscript and improved its style. I owe much to Mrs. Ada Yardeni, who invested all her talents in the design of this book, and to my wife, Tamar, who so patiently typed the manuscript, read the proofs and prepared the index. The proofs were also read by Miss Adèle Zarmati. The printing was carried out by Astronel Press and the offset printing — by Art Plus. I wish to thank the Management of Brill, Leiden and Mr. Ben-Zion Yehoshua, Director of the Magnes Press, for their efforts to publish this book in such a handsome form.

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J.N.