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Trends in Northwest Semitic, Hebrew, and Aramaic Epigraphy

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Aren Wilson-Wright

Interpreting the Sinaitic Inscriptions in Context: A New Reading of Sinai 345[1]

This article argues that Sinai 345 is a dedicatory inscription produced by Semitic speakers during a joint Egyptian-Semitic mining expedition to Serabit el-Khadem. As such, it reflects both Egyptian and Northwest Semitic culture. It is written in an Egyptian influenced variety of Northwest Semitic, but uses a Northwest Semitic dedicatory formula.

Sinai 345 provides an important key to deciphering early alphabetic writing. It is the only object from the Egyptian turquoise mining installation at Serabit el-Khadem inscribed in both hieroglyphic and alphabetic script and, as such, constitutes a virtual bilingual. A. Gardiner exploited this fact when he correlated the Semitic phrase *muʾuhhab-Baʿlat(i)* with the common Egyptian formula *mry ḥt-ḥr nbt mfk3t* 'beloved of Hathor, lady of Turquoise.' In doing so, he laid the foundation for all future work on the Sinaitic inscriptions, guaranteeing the reading 'beloved of the Lady' and securing the identity of seven alphabetic signs.[2] But this short inscription can tell us even more about the language and context of the Sinaitic inscriptions. In this paper, I will offer a new reading of Sinai 345, focusing on the difficult left-hand inscription, and then demonstrate the importance of this inscription for understanding the early history of the alphabet.

   Sinai 345 is a small sandstone sphinx. It was discovered in the Hathor Temple at Serabit el-Khadem in 1906 and is currently on display in the British museum.[3] A crude hieroglyphic inscription is etched on its right shoulder, which reads *mry ḥt-ḥr [nbt] mfk3t* 'beloved of Hathor, [the lady of] Turquoise.' Alphabetic inscriptions appear on both sides of the base

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2 "The Egyptian Origin of the Semitic Alphabet," *JEA* 3 (1916): 1–16.
3 B. Sass, *The Genesis of the Alphabet and Its Development in the Second Millennium B.C.* (Ägypten und Altes Testament 13; Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1988), 12–14, 169.

Figure 1: The Right-Hand Inscription

and run parallel to the flanks of the sphinx (Figures 1 and 2). A further, short alphabetic inscription may have been present on the sphinx's left shoulder, but all that remains of it is a roughly incised *pē*.[4] It is unclear whether the same individual produced both the hieroglyphic and alphabetic inscriptions. Yet the presence of both hieroglyphics and alphabetic script does not necessarily imply that some individuals were literate in both writing systems.[5] Hieroglyphic and alphabetic writers could have produced Sinai 345 working in tandem. An alphabetic writer, for example, could have commissioned the Egyptian inscription – either through an interpreter or speaking Egyptian – and then added his own, similar inscription. Or he could have copied the hieroglyphic inscription from an existing monument.

The alphabetic portion of Sinai 345 does not offer many difficulties. For the most part, I agree with G. Hamilton's collation of the inscription. In the case of two letters, however, I would like to offer my own inter-

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4 G. Hamilton, *The Origins of the West Semitic Alphabet in Egyptian Scripts* (CBQMS 40; Washington D.C.: The Catholic Biblical Association of America, 2006), 334.

5 *Contra* A. F. Rainey, who argues that the inventors and earliest users of alphabetic writing were competent in both hieroglyphic and hieratic script. Rainey's claim lacks supporting evidence and raises more questions than it answers. Why would the users of an established and culturally valued script, Egyptian, feel the need to invent a new writing system? For Rainey's arguments see A. F. Rainey, "Turquoise Miners did *Not* Invent the Alphabet," Online Discussion with Orly Goldwasser, *BAR*, August 25, 2010, http://www.biblicalarchaeology.org/uncategorized/raineys-first-critique/.

Figure 2: The Left-Hand Inscription
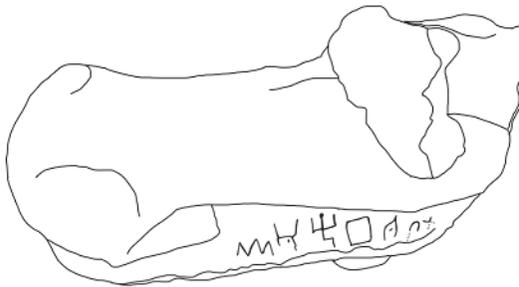
Figure 3: The Right-Hand Inscription (traced from Grimme 1923)
MʾHBꜤLT

pretation based on the photographs from H. Grimme's 1923 monograph.[6] These photographs were taken before the inscription was chalked in around 1932 and thus preserve the finer details of individual letters. Because of this, I used them as the basis for Figures 3 and 4, which were traced using Adobe Photoshop.

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6 *Althebräische Inschriften vom Sinai: Alphabet, Textliches, Sprachliches mit Folgerungen* (Darmstadt: Folkwang-Verlag, 1923). Unfortunately, I have not had the opportunity to examine Sinai 345 in person.

Hamilton sees the remains of a sign near the sphinx's left paw where the corner of the base has chipped off (Sign 1 in Figure 4).[7] He identifies this sign as a *ḥēt*. While I agree that there is a letter here, I disagree with his identification. Sign one consists of a long diagonal stroke, punctuated by two or three horizontal lines (Table 1). If these horizontal lines extend to the left, Hamilton reasons, then the sign would match the *ḥēt* found in Sinai 375a.[8] The match is not particularly close, however. The *ḥēt* in Sinai 375a – as well as the hieratic model that Hamilton proposes and some other possible *ḥēt*'s in Sinai 362 and Sinai 372a – contain four horizontal strokes (Table 1). Hamilton's reading also makes it difficult to interpret the inscription because <HND̲> does not produce a Semitic word or phrase, no matter what the fourth letter is. Therefore, I prefer to read a *hē* here. The reconstructed remains of sign one match the clear *hē* in the right hand inscription (Table 2). The upper horizontal stroke forms the arms of the gesticulating man, the achrophone of *hē*, and may connect up with the 'chock' mark near the head of the following *nûn*, while the lower stroke forms his knees. Although the letter is effaced, this identification enjoys contextual support from the other Sinaitic inscriptions. Sinai 363 also begins with the consonantal sequence <HND̲>, which is cognate with the Ugaritic demonstrative *hnd* 'this'[9] and makes sense in context. In Ugaritic, Proto-Semitic /d̲/ merges with /d/ in most environments including the demonstrative and relative pronouns, so the correspondence of Sinaitic /d̲/ and Ugaritic /d/ is regular.

Sign four consists of a long upright stroke capped by a slightly open head. Several different interpretations have been proposed for this sign. In his 1966 monograph, W. F. Albright argues for a ligature of *bēt* and *ḥa* as part of the verb *nid̲baḥ* 'we shall sacrifice.'[10] But this interpretation is unlikely given the form of the letter. Nothing corresponds to the second and third loops that make up the *ḥa* in Sinai 349 and Sinai 363 (Table 3), nor does any part of the sign resemble the large, angular form of the *bēt*. Hamilton, by contrast, reads a damaged *nûn* here.[11] His reading also runs into problems. The preceding *nûn* is diagonally oriented, has a 'dip' in the

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7 Hamilton examined Sinai 345 at the British Museum in 2002 and informs me that the remains of this sign have since worn away completely. For this reason, the identity of sign one can only be settled on the basis of older photographs.

8 Hamilton, *The Origins* (see n. 4), 334. Semitic inscriptions from Serabit el-Khadem are cited according to Sass, *The Genesis of the Alphabet* (see n. 3).

9 G. del Olmo Lete and J. Sanmartin, *A Dictionary of the Ugaritic Language in the Alphabetic Tradition* (HdO 67; Leiden: Brill, 2003), 344.

10 W. F. Albright, *The Proto-Sinaitic Inscriptions and Their Decipherment* (HTS 22; Cambridge: Harvard University, 1966), 16.

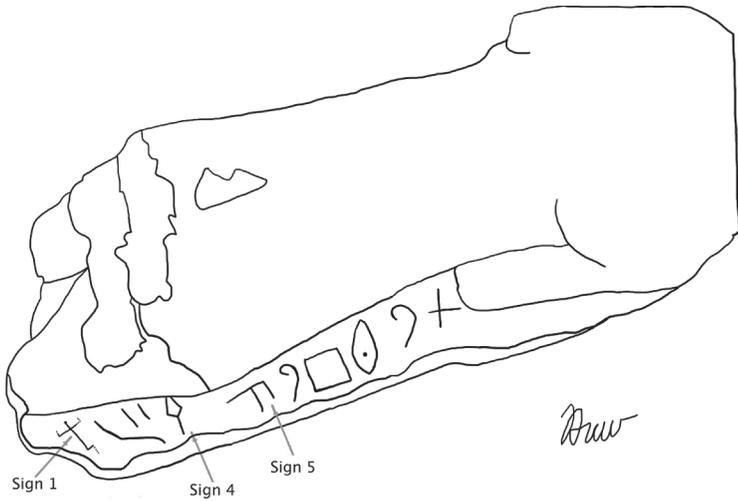**11** Hamilton, *The Origins* (see n. 4), 334.

Figure 4: The Left-Hand Inscription (traced from Grimme 1923). ḤND̠ WZ LBʿLT

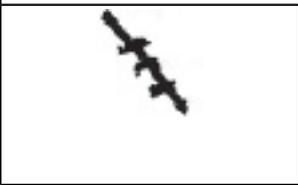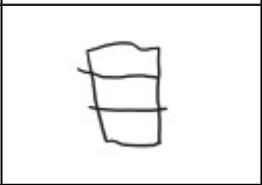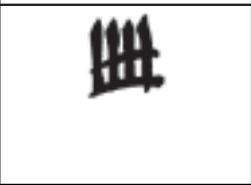Figure 5: A Close up of the Left-hand Inscription

middle reminiscent of the Egyptian horned viper hieroglyph (Gardiner's I9), and lacks a closed head (Table 3).[12] For these reasons, I would prefer to read a *wāw* here. Although most of the clear *wāw*'s at Serabit el-Khadem are horizontally oriented as in Sinai 351, sign 4 matches the upright *wāw* found in Sinai 376. Sign 4 also matches the upright form of the *wāw* inherited by most later forms of the alphabet, and attested in other early alphabetic inscriptions, like the Tel Nagila Sherd and the Lachish Ostracon (Table 3).[13] The open head may be the result of a miscalculation. Perhaps the writer inscribed the *wāw* too close to the seam between the base and the foreleg of the sphinx and was unable to execute it completely.

The consonantal text, on this proposal, thus reads from the right side and continues on the left: MʾHBʿLT / ḤND̠ WZ LBʿLT. The vocalized

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**12** A. Gardiner, *Egyptian Grammar* (3rd ed.; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1957), 476.

13 Vertically oriented *wāw*'s also occur in Sinai 357 and Wadi el-Ḥôl 2, but in these inscriptions the head points down. The existence of three different stances for *wāw* suggests that its orientation was still in flux at this time.

Table 1: Sign 1 Compared with Early Alphabetic ḥēt and its Hieratic Model[a]		
Sinai 345[b]	Sinai 375a	Hieratic O42[c]
Sinai 362	Sinai 372a	

[a] Unless otherwise noted, I traced all of the early alphabetic letters in this article from the photographs available on Inscriptifact. [b] Modified from Hamilton, *The Origins*, 334, who traced the inscription from Grimme, *Althebräische Inschriften*; used with permission. [c] After G. C. J. Möller (ed.), *Hieratische Lesestücke für den akademischen Gebrauch* (2nd ed.; Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs Buchhandlungen, 1927–1935) 1:368, used with permission.

Table 2: Sign 1 as a hē	
Sinai 345 L Sign 1	Sinai 345R Sign 3
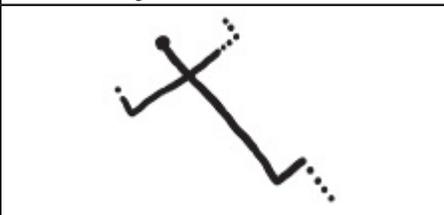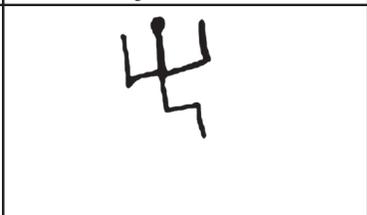
inscription then reads: *muʾuhhab-Baʿlat(i)*; *han*(v)*ḏū wvz(u) li-Baʿlat(i)*, "Beloved of the Lady; This inscription is for the Lady." Context confirms the validity of this reading. Sinai 345 was found in the Hathor temple, and is thus most likely a votive object. Cross-culturally, votive objects often bear an inscription identifying the dedicated item. The seventh century B.C.E. Ur box, for example, carries the Phoenician inscription: "The ivory box which ʾAmat-Baʿl, daughter of Paṭias maidservant of El gave as a gift

Table 3: Sign 4 and Other Early Alphabetic *wāw*'s

Sinai 345	Sinai 376[a]	Tel Nagila Sherd[b]	Lachish Ostraca[c]

[a] Traced from G. Gerster, *Sinai: Land der Offenbarung* (Berlin: Darmstadt, 1961), pl. 65. [b] Traced from J. Leibovitch, "Le tesson de Tell Nagila," *Mus* 78 (1965): pl. 42. [c] Traced from B. Sass, *The Genesis of the Alphabet*, fig. 165.

Figure 6: An Early Alphabetic *ḥa*
Sinai 349

to ˤAštart her lady" (KAI 29). The structure and syntax of Sinai 345 also find close parallels with other Northwest Semitic dedicatory inscriptions. One of the most common dedicatory formulae has the form: item dedicated ± demonstrative[14] ± relative pronoun + noun phrase (indicating the dedicant) + verb phrase (including a verb of dedication) + *l-* + a divine name.[15] With the exception of the noun phrase and the verb phrase, Sinai 345 follows this formula exactly.

The right-hand inscription of Sinai 345 matches the third column of Sinai 374, except for one crucial detail: *bēt* is written once, not twice.[16] For

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[14] In most other Semitic languages, the demonstrative normally follows its head noun. The inverted order of the Sinaitic inscriptions may be the result of contact with Egyptian, where certain demonstratives (e. g. *p3*) regularly precede their head nouns. A good parallel to Sinai 345 is Ethio-Semitic, where attributes – including demonstratives – are preposed to the head noun due to contact with Cushitic. For more on contact between Egyptian and the language of the Sinaitic inscriptions see below. Gardiner, *Egyptian Grammar* (see n. 12), 85–86 treats the syntax of the Egyptian demonstratives.

[15] I would like to thank Jeremy Hutton for sharing a list of Northwest Semitic dedicatory formulae, which he compiled from KAI.

[16] The relevant section of Sinai 374 reads: <MʔHB BˤLT> 'beloved of the Lady.' A similar consonantal sequence appears in several other Sinaitic inscriptions (e. g. Sinai 348), but

this reason, Albright objects that "the underlying characters do not reproduce a **muʔahhabu Baʕalti* which would be expected at this stage of Canaanite and Hebrew" and instead reads *maʔ hab ʕulata* 'pray, give a burnt offering!'[17] Leaving aside the linguistic errors in Albright's reading – and I should mention in passing that it is impossible to tell whether the Sinaitic inscriptions *are* Canaanite, much less Hebrew[18] – we should not assume *a priori* what the language of the Sinaitic inscriptions was. Rather we should interpret clues within the texts themselves to determine its properties. I suggest, therefore, that single *bēt* is a *sandhi* writing of the phrase *muʔuhhab-Baʕlat(i)*. This suggests that short final vowels had been lost or were in the process of being lost when the Sinaitic inscriptions were written, at least on the head noun in the construct state.[19] Similar instances of case-vowel elision appear only much later in the 1st millennium, at least several centuries after the disappearance of short final vowels. In Lachish Letter 3:9, for example, <ḤYHWH> represents /ḥay yahwê/ 'by the life of Yahweh' for earlier /ḥaya yahwê/, while in Cyprian Phoenician <MLKTY> represents /milk kittī/ 'King of Cyprus' for earlier /milku kittī/. Other 1st millennium examples of *sandhi* writing appear in Judg 6:32, 1 Chr 9:40, Samaria Ostracon 2:7, and KAI 7:3.[20]

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lacks both the *aleph* and one of the *bēt*'s. If <MHBʕLT> represents the same formula as <MʔHB Bʕ LT>, then the absence of the *aleph* at such an early date and in pre-vocalic position, where it would be maximally articulated, is puzzling. Perhaps the glottal stop had already weakened in the language of the Sinaitic inscriptions. Or perhaps <MHBʕLT> is a different formula.

17 "The Early Inscriptions from Sinai and their Decipherment," *BASOR* 110 (1948): 16.

18 The linguistic features that distinguish Canaanite from the other Northwest Semitic languages (e. g. 1cs pronoun *ʔanōkī* instead of *ʔanākū*) are all vocalic and thus cannot be detected in the consonantal orthography of the Sinaitic inscriptions. J. Huehnergard, "Remarks on the Classification of the Northwest Semitic Languages," in *The Balaam Text from Deir ʿAlla Re-evaluated: Proceedings of the International Symposium held at Leiden 21–24 August 1989* (ed. J. Hoftijzer and G. van der Kooij; Leiden: Brill, 1991), 285–286.

19 If the case vowels have been lost in the construct, then the language of the Sinaitic inscriptions exhibits a convergent development toward Akkadian, which had lost the case vowel on the head noun of a construct chain already in Old Akkadian. In this regard, it differs from other 2nd millennium Northwest Semitic languages, which retained case vowels in this position. J. Huehnergard, "Proto-Semitic and Proto-Akkadian," in *The Akkadian Language in its Semitic Context: Studies in the Akkadian of the Third and Second Millenium BC* (ed. G. Deutscher and N. J. C. Kouwenberg; Leiden: NINO, 2006), 6–7. I would like to thank Seth Sanders and Jeremy Hutton for alerting me to this structural parallel with Akkadian.

20 Judg 6:32 has <YRBʕL> for */Yĕrub-Ba'al/ 'May Baal Contend,' while 1 Chr 9:40 has <MRYBʕL> for */Mĕrîb-Ba'al/ 'Contention of Baal' (cf. 1 Chr 8:34). In Samaria Ostracon 2:7 */Mĕrîb-Ba'al/ 'Contention of Baal' is written <MRBʕL>, while in KAI 7:3 *biy-Yiḥī-Milk/, from earlier */bin Yiḥī-Milk/ is written <BYḤMLK>.

The first word of the left-hand inscription of Sinai 345 provides another clue about the language of the Sinaitic inscriptions. The term *han*(v)*ḏū* is cognate with the Ugaritic near demonstrative *hnd* 'this,' which consists of the presentative particle *han-* and the demonstrative element *dū*. In a recent article, Naʾama Pat-El links this Ugaritic form to the development of the definite article in Central Semitic. According to her reconstruction, the presentative was first attached to adjectives and demonstratives to form adnominals like *hanṭāb* 'the good one' or 'a good one' and *hanḏū* 'this or this one.' Over time, this use of the presentative was reanalyzed as a marker of definiteness and expanded to nouns modified by a demonstrative or adjective and later to nouns in general. But in some languages, such as Ugaritic, the presentative was only attached to demonstratives.[21] If, therefore, Pat-El is right about *hanḏū*, then the Sinaitic inscriptions preserve a very early stage in the development that would produce the definite article in Central Semitic. The presentative particle did not mark definiteness, but it was used as an adnominal marker on the demonstrative *hanḏū*.

Further support for the reading offered above comes from the word /*wVz*/, which I propose is an Egyptian loanword corresponding to Middle Egyptian *wḏ* 'inscribed stela' and Coptic *ouoeit* /woit/ 'pillar.'[22] In Sinai 345, this word may refer to the inscription itself and may even have referred to writing more generally in the language of the Sinaitic inscriptions. Both historical and linguistic data support these claims. The contact between speakers of Egyptian and speakers of Semitic at Serabit el-Khadem as part of the turquoise mining operations provided a natural context for linguistic borrowing.

The Egyptian mining expeditions to Serabit el-Khadem included a wide variety of individuals and specialists. At least two groups within the expeditionary party were bilingual: interpreters (ꜥ*w*) and what others have termed 'assimilated' Semites (ꜥ*3mw*). These groups may have overlapped to some extent, perhaps with assimilated Semites playing the role of interpreter. Whatever the relationship between the two, interpreters were a crucial and highly visible part of the expedition. Contemporary Egyptian inscriptions from the Middle Kingdom – the period with the largest Semitic presence – mention at least eleven different interpreters attached

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21 N. Pat-El, "The Development of the Semitic Definite Article: A Syntactic Approach," *JSS* 54 (2009): 42–43.

22 A. Erman and H. Grappow (ed.), *Das Wörterbuch der ägyptischen Sprache*, 5 vols. (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1926), 1:398–399. W. E. Crum, *A Coptic Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1939), 493a.

to the royal mining expeditions, all of whom bore Egyptian names.[23] Interpreters may even have used alphabetic writing. Although their services were crucial to the success of the expedition, interpreters were generally not important enough to inscribe their own hieroglyphic inscriptions, with the exception of two related graffiti at Rôḍ el-Aîr (Sinai 510, 511). So it would not be surprising for these individuals to adopt what O. Goldwasser terms a 'peripheral system' to record their experiences.[24]

‘Assimilated’ Semites also took part in the Egyptian mining expeditions. In a series of inscriptions from the reign of Amenemhet III (1860–1814 B.C.E.), the mother of the chief steward's deputy Ituneferu (*itw-nfrw*) is consistently identified as an Asiatic (*ʿ3 m.t*).[25] In another inscription from the same time period, the private individual Sinefer (*sn-nfr*) is also referred to as an Asiatic.[26] As M. Bietak has argued, even first and second-generation Semitic immigrants could adopt Egyptian names for use within Egyptian society.[27] So it is entirely possible that the ‘assimilated’ Semites who took part in the Sinai expeditions still spoke a Semitic language, especially if they were second-generation immigrants. Typically, when an immigrant group shifts languages, the first generation remains monolingual in the ancestral language, the second generation is bilingual, and the third generation is monolingual in the local language or has a passive understanding of the ancestral language.[28] ‘Assimilated’ Semites may have used the alphabetic script as well. The desire to do so may have been weaker, however, since some ‘assimilated’ Semites, like the chief steward's deputy, had the social standing and means to commission hieroglyphic inscriptions. They did not need the fringe alphabetic script because they had access to the prestige script.

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23 Interpreters (*ʿw*) are mentioned in Sinai 85N 10–11; 92W; 100W 5–6; 105N 1; 112W 9; S 1; and 123b. Egyptian inscriptions from Serabit el-Khadem are cited according to A. T. Gardiner, T. E. Peet, and J. Černý, (ed.), *The Inscriptions of Sinai, Part II: Translations and Commentary* (London: Egypt Exploration Society, 1955).

24 "The Advantage of the Cultural Periphery: The Invention of the Alphabet in Sinai (Circa 1840 B.C.E.)," in *Culture Contacts and the Making of Cultures: Papers in Homage to Itamar Even-Zohar* (ed. R. Sela-Sheffy and G. Toury; Tel-Aviv: Tel-Aviv University, Unit of Culture Research, 2011), 289–291; idem, "Canaanites Reading Hieroglyphics: Part I – Horus is Hathor? Part II – The Invention of the Alphabet in Sinai," *Ägypten und Levant* 16 (2006): 152–153.

25 Ituneferu (*itw-nfrw*) appears in Sinai 93W; 95 f; and 98r l, b.

26 Sinefer (*sn-nfr*) is mentioned in Sinai 112.

27 "From Where Came the Hyksos and Where Did They Go?," in *The Second Intermediate Period (Thirteenth-Seventeenth Dynasties): Current Research, Future Progress* (ed. M. Marée; Leuven: Peeters, 2010), 147. See also T. Schneider, *Ausländer in Ägypten während des Mittleren Reiches und der Hyksoszeit: Teil 2, Die ausländische Bevölkerung* (Ägypten und Altes Testament 42; Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2003), 207–231.

28 D. Winford, *An Introduction to Contact Linguistics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), 236–237.

Semitic speakers at Serabit el-Khadem had many opportunities to borrow the word *wḏ* from their Egyptian counterparts. The term *wḏ* itself appears in an Egyptian inscription dated to the fourth year of Amenemhet IV (about 1811 B.C.E.); the term was in common use during the Middle Kingdom.[29] Moreover, Egyptian stelae were a common sight at Serabit el-Khadem. Excavators uncovered at least 50 round-topped stelae, which date to the Middle Kingdom, in the vicinity of the Hathor temple, the rock shrine, and mines F and J.

The consonantal phonology of /wVz/ is consistent with the few Egyptian loans into Semitic from the Middle Kingdom. Hebrew *zeret* and Aramaic *zret*, both meaning 'handspan,' are plausibly derived from Egyptian *ḏr.t*, which has the same meaning. Although these words are attested about a millennium after the Middle Kingdom, they must have been borrowed much earlier, since the feminine morpheme –t and the phoneme /ḏ/ disappear early in the history of Egyptian. Later borrowings of *ḏr.t*, such as Ugaritic *drt*, do not reproduce the initial /ḏ/ but instead reflect the merger of Egyptian /ḏ/ and /d/. For this reason, T. Lambdin dates the introduction of *ḏr.t* into Hebrew and Aramaic to the Middle Kingdom or earlier; likewise, Y. Muchiki dates it to the end of the 3rd millennium or beginning of the 2nd.[30] Less certainly, the Hebrew term *šaʿaṭnēz*, which appears in Lev 19:19 and Deut 22:11 and refers to a taboo type of fabric, may correspond to the unattested Egyptian compound *šˁd-nḏ* meaning 'falsely woven.'[31] Conversely, Egyptian <ḏ> renders /z/ in Semitic names and loanwords. The name of the 13th dynasty Hyksos ruler *ḫnḏr* is probably a transcription of Semitic *ḫunzīr* 'wild boar.'[32] In the syllabically written Semitic words attested in the New Kingdom and 3rd Intermediate Period, Semitic /z/ is always written with Egyptian <ḏ>. Egyptian *di₃=tu* corresponds to Semitic **zêtu* 'olive,' while *qa=ra=ḏi=na* represents Semitic **garzinnu* 'ax.'[33]

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29 Gardiner, Peet, and Černý, *The Inscriptions of Sinai, Part II*, 237.

30 T. Lambdin, "Egyptian Loanwords in the Old Testament," *JAOS* 73 (1953): 149–150. Y. Muchiki, *Egyptian Proper Names and Loanwords in North-West Semitic* (SBLDS 173; Atlanta: SBL, 1999), 243.

31 T. Lambdin, "Egyptian Loanwords" (see n. 30) 155. Y. Muchiki, *Egyptian Proper Names* (see n. 29), 257. Apart from these two words, Egyptian *ḏ* is always rendered with *ṣādê* or *ṭēt* in Hebrew and Aramaic, mirroring the inner-Egyptian change of **ḏ* > d. Ibid., 186, 264.

32 T. Schneider, *Ausländer in Ägypten während des Mittleren Reiches und der Hyksoszeit: Teil 1, Die ausländische Könige* (Ägypten und Altes Testament 42; Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 1998), 157. idem, *Ausländer in Ägypten, Teil 2* (see n. 27), 157–159.

33 These and other examples can be found in J. Hoch, *Semitic Words in Egyptian Texts of the New Kingdom and Third Intermediate Period* (Princeton: Princeton University Press,

The term /*w*V*z*/ was a need-based loan into the language of the Sinaitic inscriptions. The Semitic speakers at Serabit el-Khadem had only recently acquired writing and therefore needed a word to designate 'inscription.'[34] Naturally, they borrowed it from the Egyptians, whose writing system had inspired the invention of the alphabet. The choice of *wḏ* over a more general term like *sš* 'document' or 'writing' may have been motivated by cultural and environmental factors. Because Egyptian steliform inscriptions were so common at Serabit el-Khadem, Semitic speakers may have associated this graphic arrangement with writing more generally. In many cases, they consciously imitated Egyptian stelae in their own inscriptions, as if this layout were integral to the writing process: at least eight Sinaitic inscriptions are steliform.[35] The semantic expansion of *wḏ* could also be the result of imperfect intercultural communication.[36] We can even imagine a situation that would facilitate such a change: a Semitic speaker and a bilingual are watching a stonemason inscribe a stela. Curious about the act of writing, the Semite asks "What's he doing?" "Making a *wḏ*," the bilingual replies, confirming the Semitic speaker's association of the term *wḏ* with inscriptions in general.

The appearance of an Egyptian loanword in the Sinaitic inscriptions has three implications, one linguistic, the other two methodological. The use of *zayn* to render Egyptian <ḏ> suggests that the language of the Sinaitic inscriptions preserved the Proto-Semitic affricates. By itself, this phonological information is not particularly exciting. Many Semitic languages maintained the affricate series for a long time, sometimes into the 1st millennium B.C.E. But it may prove useful for identifying Egyptian loanwords in the Sinaitic inscriptions, which brings me to my second point.

Given the close contact between speakers of Egyptian and Semitic at Serabit el-Khadem and the existence of bilingual individuals, the Sinaitic inscriptions may contain more Egyptian loanwords, especially those associated with writing and mining. These were, after all, the two most prominent activities at Serabit el-Khadem. Egyptian loanwords into other Semitic languages often fall into these semantic domains as well. In Biblical Hebrew, for example, both *qeset* 'scribe's palette' and *nōpek*

1994), 303–304, 395. On the phenomenon of group writing in the Late period as a whole see 498–504.

34 Arabic provides a good parallel. When speakers of Arabic adopted writing, they borrowed writing-related nouns and verbs from literate societies, including *maṣḥaf* 'book' from Ethiopic and *kataba* 'to write' from Aramaic.

35 The relevant inscriptions are Sinai 349; 350; 351; 352; 353; 354; 356; 360; 367; and 377.

36 Winford, *An Introduction to Contact Linguistics* (see n. 28), 45.

'turquoise' come from Egyptian.[37] Egyptian personal names might also appear, especially if interpreters and 'assimilated' Semites used the alphabetic script.

Finally, Sinai 345 provides further evidence that the alphabet was invented within an Egyptian context. If my reading is correct, some of earliest users of alphabetic script borrowed an Egyptian word to refer to inscriptions, which they began to produce under Egyptian cultural influence. Because Serabit el-Khadem was the logical site for this loan to enter Sinaitic, there is a possibility that alphabetic writing was invented at Serabit el-Khadem, as Goldwasser has recently suggested.[38] But caution is necessary. Before speculating about the geographic origins of alphabetic writing, we should make sense of the earliest alphabetic inscriptions. Only then will we be in a position to test hypotheses based on first-hand evidence from the earliest users of the alphabet. As Sinai 345 shows, these individuals spoke a contact variety of Northwest Semitic language and were acquainted with Northwest Semitic dedicatory formulae.

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37 Muchiki, *Egyptian Proper Names* (see n. 30), 255, 251.
38 "The Advantage of the Cultural Periphery" (see n. 24), *passim*; "Canaanites Reading Hieroglyphics" (see n. 24), 132–133. By contrast, J. C. Darnell *et al.*, "Two Early Alphabetic Inscriptions from the Wadi el-Ḥôl: New Evidence for the Origins of the Alphabet from the Western Desert of Egypt," *AASOR* 59 (2005): 90, argue that alphabetic writing started in Egypt.

Hebrew Bible and Ancient Israel

Hebrew Bible and
Ancient Israel volume 2 (2013), no. 2

Hebrew Bible and Ancient Israel is a new, peer-reviewed, quarterly journal focusing primarily on the biblical texts in their ancient historical contexts, but also on the history of Israel in its own right. Each issue has a topical focus. The primary language is English, but articles may also be published in German and French. A specific goal of the new journal is to foster discussion among different academic cultures within a larger international context pertaining to the study of the Hebrew Bible and ancient Israel in the first millennium b.c.e.

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