

PALEO-HEBREW SCRIPT IN JERUSALEM AND JUDEA FROM THE SECOND CENTURY B.C.E. THROUGH THE SECOND CENTURY C.E.: A RECONSIDERATION¹

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ABSTRACT

The article focuses on the use of the Paleo-Hebrew script versus the square script (known also as “Jewish script” or “Assyrian”) by the Jews of Judea during the Hellenistic and Roman periods. From the Persian period until the Bar Kokhba Rebellion, Paleo-Hebrew script was used in various Jewish contexts (official, sacred, funerary) and on a variety of substrates (parchment, stone, coins, and pottery). The most representative artefacts bearing inscriptions in the Paleo-Hebrew script are Jewish coins of that time and the Dead Sea Scrolls. One common view is that because the Hasmoneans and the rebels in both revolts sought to establish their sovereignty, they employed symbols of Jewish significance and the archaic and obsolete – but prestigious – Paleo-Hebrew script, which was a reminder of the glorious past. Studies of the Dead Sea Scrolls commonly premise that greater holiness and value was attached to the Paleo-Hebrew script than to the square script. The article shows that, in the Second Temple period, the square script was considered holy. Consequently, those who were scrupulous about observing the laws of ritual purity refrained from using the square script for mundane purposes and used the Paleo-Hebrew script instead.

INTRODUCTION

Three alphabetic scripts evolved during the Iron Age in the southern Levant: Phoenician, Aramaic, and Hebrew. During this era, Hebrew-language texts and inscriptions were written in different scripts in different periods: first in the Canaanite script, then in the Phoenician script, and finally in the Paleo-Hebrew script. This last script, which emerged from the Phoenician script in the ninth century B.C.E., was widely used during the First Temple period (mostly from ca. 850-586 B.C.E.) in the kingdoms of Judah and Israel (Cross 1967; Naveh 1987: 53-124; Ahituv 2008).

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During the Babylonian exile, the Jews adopted the “square Hebrew” script (כתב מרובע) – also known as “Jewish script” or simply “square script” due to the shape of the letters. In rabbinic literature (e.g., B Sanhedrin 21b), it is called “Assyrian script” (כתב אשורית) because its antecedent, Aramaic script, was commonly used in the Assyrian empire.² From the Persian period onwards, this “Jewish script” was commonly used for secular documents as well as for writing the holy Scriptures, and it is still in use today (Cross 1965; Naveh 1987:162-174).

As a result, at least three types of script were in common use during the Second Temple period: Greek script, used primarily for writing Greek;³ “Jewish script,” which the rabbis viewed as sacred and as the only script fit for writing the Bible (B Sanhedrin 21b-22a); and the Paleo-Hebrew script (which the rabbis referred to as “Hebrew script”), a legacy of the First Temple period which the Jews continued to use for certain purposes until the Bar Kokhba Rebellion (132-136 C.E.) (Naveh 1987:112-124; Misgav 2013:3-7).

In this article, we will focus on the use of the Paleo-Hebrew script versus the “Jewish script” by the Jews of Judea during the Hellenistic and Roman periods.

PALEO-HEBREW IN CONTEXT

From the Persian period until the Bar Kokhba Rebellion, Paleo-Hebrew script was used in various Jewish contexts (official, sacred, funerary) and on a variety of substrates (parchment, stone, coins, and pottery). The most representative artefacts bearing inscriptions in the Paleo-Hebrew script are Jewish coins of that time and the Dead Sea Scrolls, whose prevalence can give us a broader understanding of what this script meant to Jews of that era. We will not refer to other types of artefacts (such as the rare use of the Paleo-Hebrew script in funerary contexts, on weights, and ostraca),⁴

² Unless otherwise indicated, translations of the Talmud are based on the Soncino edition and those of the Mishnah are based on Danby’s version.

³ In rare cases, Hebrew words were written in Greek characters. An important example for our purposes is 4QpPsb [4Q173], which is written entirely in square script except for the Tetragrammaton, which is written in Greek characters (Tov 2004:225)

⁴ In few instances, Paleo-Hebrew letters were employed in everyday life during the late

because we do not believe that these rarer items contribute to the overall picture.

Coins, seals and stamp impressions

Starting in the Persian period, Jewish coins bear inscriptions in the Paleo-Hebrew script. Coins inscribed with the Aramaic name of the Persian province Yehud (יהד) in the Paleo-Hebrew script were minted in Jerusalem in the fourth and third centuries B.C.E. (Meshorer 2001:1-21). The Yehud seal impressions from the fourth century B.C.E. use either Aramaic or Hebrew script. In the early Hellenistic period, jar handles were stamped in Jerusalem with the legends יהד and ירושלם (Jerusalem). Yehud was the official title of Judah under the Persian rule and most probably applied not only to the province but also to its capital city, Jerusalem (Dn 2:25; 5:13; Ezra 5:1, 8; 7:14) (Lipschitz and Vanderhooft 2011).

Eventually, Paleo-Hebrew became the preferred script for Jewish coinage, with the peak under the Hasmonean dynasty (ca. 130-37 B.C.E.), from John Hyrcanus I to Matthias Antigonus (Regev 2013). After a hiatus during the reigns of Herod and his sons and the period of the Roman procurators (during which coins for local usage bear Greek inscriptions), the Paleo-Hebrew script was again employed on the coins minted by the rebels during the Great Revolt against the Romans (66-70 C.E.) and by the Bar-Kokhba administration (132-136 C.E.), as well as for some of the lead weights cast by the Bar-Kokhba administration (Meshorer 2001).

Biblical texts

Biblical texts from the Second Temple period written solely in the Paleo-Hebrew script are rare; only twelve were found at Qumran (Tov 2004:231). The Jewish script

Second Temple period. A fragment of a stone slab with some Paleo-Hebrew letters was found near the Temple Mount in Jerusalem (Mazar 1975). Four names were found in burial contexts: two graffiti on ossuaries from Jerusalem feature the name Eleazar (Rosenthaler 1975; Barkay 1989) and one bears the name Elisha (Weksler-Bdolah 1998:37*). A graffito on a tomb façade from the area of Bet Govrin bears the name Jonathan (ינתן) in Paleo-Hebrew letters alongside the name Shafan (שפן) in the Jewish script (Zissu, Hajaj & Alon 2008). Masada excavations revealed some single letters on ostraca (Yadin and Naveh 1989:6-7, 16, 19, 41) and masons' marks on column drums (Foerster 1995:80-98).

predominates throughout the Dead Sea Scrolls. Sometimes, however, the Paleo-Hebrew script appears in combination with the Jewish script in biblical scrolls. Texts that include several forms of writing in Paleo-Hebrew have been dated to the period from the late third century B.C.E. to the mid-first century C.E. These include:

1. Texts written completely in Paleo-Hebrew characters. Paleographical studies show that these texts were written concurrently with the use of the Jewish script. Emanuel Tov suggested that the texts were probably not written by the Qumran scribes and may have been imported from elsewhere. Tov thought it unlikely that the Paleo-Hebrew texts originated in Pharisaic circles, because, as far as we can tell from the rabbinic literature, use of this script was completely forbidden. Based on criteria related to script, type of text, and scribal approach, Tov assumed that these texts came from the Sadducees, who ascribed great importance to the authenticity of the ancient characters (Tov 2004:237-248).
2. The four-letter divine name (the Tetragrammaton) appears in Paleo-Hebrew letters in texts written in Jewish script. Some scholars assume that the scribes who preserved the script knew that it was the original Hebrew script and its archaic flavour made it suitable for writing the divine name (see discussion in Tov 2004:238-246). But it should be stressed that most sectarian texts tried to avoid writing the Tetragrammaton and employed alternative expressions (see, e.g., the “Testimonia” scroll from Cave 4 at Qumran). We may therefore suggest that the Paleo-Hebrew script served in this case as a warning, perhaps alerting readers not to pronounce the divine name.

Note that after the disastrous Bar-Kokhba Revolt, the Paleo-Hebrew script was abandoned in favour of the Jewish script. The Samaritans, who regard themselves as the true successors of Israel, preserve a special version of the Paleo-Hebrew script to this day.⁵

⁵ New studies have shown that during the Second Temple period Samaritans used a version of the square script. A recent paleographic examination of the “Samaritan” script undertaken by Dan Barag (2009) demonstrated that this script is partly influenced by the Paleo-Hebrew script of the coins of the Bar Kokhba War. Many letters lack a parallel in Paleo-Hebrew and two follow the square script. Barag concluded that the Samaritan alphabet was created in the fourth century C.E. as a new, archaizing script formed

A RECONSIDERATION

To better appreciate the significance of Paleo-Hebrew script, we must understand why it was favoured for coins, minute objects that pass from hand to hand in the course of commercial transactions.

By way of introduction, it is important to note that, for the people who minted them, coins had significance beyond their monetary value. Because they were circulated widely, coins were inscribed with political slogans and were viewed as a means to convey messages and advertise the regime. Thus, if a Jewish ruler wanted to proclaim his rule, he inscribed his name and title on the coins he issued (in place of his image, which was common on Gentile coins of the period but forbidden for Jewish coins by the Second Commandment). In order for coins to achieve this larger purpose, users must be able to receive these political messages. It is therefore reasonable to assume that enough Jews were able to read the short inscriptions on the coins, written in Paleo-Hebrew script, to make them effective. Moreover, assuming that a significant portion of the populace knew what was written on the coins, it follows that this script was probably used widely in other contexts, too.⁶ Why, then, of all the Hebrew-language scripts that coexisted during this period, was it the Paleo-Hebrew that was used consistently for coinage, to the exclusion of the square script?

One common view is that because the Hasmoneans and the rebels in both revolts sought to establish their sovereignty, they employed symbols of Jewish significance and the archaic and obsolete – but prestigious – Paleo-Hebrew script, which was a reminder of the glorious past. By using this archaic and perhaps also sacred script, the leadership attempted to stress its connection to the magnificent and idealised historical past (Hanson 1964; Meshorer 2001: 40-41; 48-49; Deutsch 2012:43; Regev 2013:185). Naveh believed that the Paleo-Hebrew script had “nationalistic connotations”

conscientiously to differ from Paleo-Hebrew. Barag explained that the introduction of the Samaritan alphabet is contemporary with the emergence of flourishing Samaritan art and literary activity. He assumed that these developments were a defensive reaction by the Samaritans, who, alarmed by the expansion of Christianity, attempted to preserve their distinctive religious and cultural identity.

⁶ *Pace* Meshorer (2001:40-41), who maintained that only Temple priests knew how to read the Paleo-Hebrew script; this can also be inferred from Siegel (1971).

(1987:119); in Leo Mildenberg's words, "the message of the coins was loud and clear. Language, script, wording, and types boldly proclaimed a political and cultural renaissance of the Jewish state" (1984:69).

But there may be another reason this script was used. Studies of the Dead Sea Scrolls commonly premise that greater holiness and value attached to the Paleo-Hebrew script than to the square script (Tov 2004; Siegel 1971:245). However, an examination of coins does not support this assertion. The most important use of coins is in daily business transactions. Coins are handed from person to person; a person takes them everywhere – even to unclean places such as a privy. If the inscriptions on the coins were written in a holy script, the coins on which they appear would also have some holiness; people would have to be careful and respectful when using them. For example, the Talmudic sages note the importance of not entering unclean places while carrying holy objects: "Our Rabbis taught: One who is about to enter a privy should take off his phylacteries at a distance of four cubits and then enter" (B Berakhoth 23a).

On the other hand, coins, including those bearing an inscription in the Paleo-Hebrew script, would have been passed in the course of business from a ritually impure person to a pure person and might even have been used for trade with Gentiles. It is therefore likely that there was no concern of impurity regarding coins, of the sort that pertained to other common objects for which purity strictures were observed.

Another example of the overall attitude towards coins in the Second Temple period is provided by the Tyrian sheqel. This coin, important for the religious economy because it was used for paying the annual half-sheqel donation to the Temple, bore the blatant image of a heathen deity: the obverse depicted Heracles/Melqart (the tutelary deity of Tyre), while the reverse featured an eagle with the inscription "of Tyre the holy [city] and [city] of refuge". But the Jews did not refrain from using this coin for the Temple, despite the prohibition against graven images, which was strictly observed throughout the Second Temple period. What was important about this coin was not the image or the inscription but its silver content. Because the Tyrian sheqel was the coin with the highest silver content, it was accepted for payment of the Temple tax (Meshorer 1984; Meshorer 2001:72-78).

This strongly suggests that the inscriptions on coins were not considered to be holy. Quite the opposite: the Paleo-Hebrew script was employed for mundane purposes. We assume that, contrary to the view noted above, this script was used precisely to detract from the sanctity of the words and decrease their value and importance, so that objects could circulate for everyday use.

Now let us test this hypothesis with regard to the Dead Sea Scrolls. As mentioned above, the Paleo-Hebrew script is found in the Dead Sea Scrolls. Although the vast majority of the scrolls are written in the square Hebrew script, Emanuel Tov collected information on about 40 scrolls in which the Paleo-Hebrew script does appear, primarily to write the divine name. This phenomenon is not unique to one type of scroll but is found in all categories, both biblical and non-biblical. There are even cases of two scrolls with the same text, where in one the divine name is written in the Paleo-Hebrew script and in the other in the square script (for example, the Psalms Peshar 11QPsa and 11QPsb and the Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice). No scroll has been found in which the divine name is written in both the Paleo-Hebrew script and the square script (Tov 2004:225). This suggests that the variation in script is significant. Building on our proposal regarding coins, the decision to write the divine name in the Paleo-Hebrew script must be linked to the way the scrolls were to be used and not to their content (biblical scrolls versus sectarian scrolls, etc.). In other words, when a scroll was to be used for non-ritual purposes – like Torah study or reading practice – the choice fell on a copy with lesser sanctity, i.e., a scroll in which God's name does not appear at all or appears but not in the sacred script.⁷ A parallel phenomenon found in these scrolls is the substitution of lesser titles for divine names

⁷ It was Segal (1951:39 n.6) who first proposed that the Paleo-Hebrew script was used for mundane purposes. He knew only the Habakkuk Peshar, where he first identified this phenomenon. His position was opposed by Siegel (1971), who asserted that a distinction in the script in the sectarian scrolls only did not coincide with the reality, inasmuch as the divine name was written in the Paleo-Hebrew script in many biblical scrolls published in the years after Segal's article. Moreover, there are biblical scrolls written entirely in the Paleo-Hebrew script. Siegel's conclusion was, therefore, that the Paleo-Hebrew script had greater sanctity. According to the theory presented here, there is no contradiction in Segal's proposition: the choice of a script with a greater or lesser holiness resulted not from the sanctity or value of the scroll's contents, but from its intended use (ritual or mundane).

(Skehan 1980). This supports the argument that the change of script diminished the sanctity of the text.⁸

A similar reason for the use of the Paleo-Hebrew script for mundane purposes can be found in the mishnaic law that the Holy Writings render the hands impure (M *Yadayim* 3:5). Later, though, the Mishnah rules that not every holy book renders the hands impure, but only those “written in the Assyrian script, on leather, and in ink” (M *Yadayim* 4:5). In other words, a book written in the Assyrian script was deemed holy and used for religious rites such as the public reading of the Torah. Because of their great holiness, such books were accorded the status of an object that renders other objects ritually impure⁹ – a manoeuvre intended to keep people from handling them inappropriately or placing them where they could be treated disrespectfully, wear out, or be destroyed (B *Shabbat* 14a). Evidently this approach was common in Qumran, too. For example, at Qumran, contact with a Torah scroll immediately rendered a person impure – a critical issue in a society that was scrupulous in its observance of the laws of ritual purity (see, e.g., Josephus, *Wars*, 2:149-150; the Community Rule, cols. v-vi; Birenboim 2003). They needed to a way to study these scrolls without rendering themselves impure or raising concerns that God’s name might be unwittingly desecrated. Two solutions to the problem were devised in Qumran. The first was to write copies of the texts in which the divine name was written in the

⁸ Oddly, scholars of the Dead Sea Scrolls have preferred to distinguish between the two phenomena and say that one is meant to reduce the text’s holiness, while the other (writing the divine name in Paleo-Hebrew script) is meant to enhance its sanctity. The contradiction is magnified by the fact that these phenomena coexist in some texts, such as the Habakkuk Peshet, in which the divine name is written in the Paleo-Hebrew script when it appears in the passages quoted from Habakkuk but is replaced in the commentary by the Hebrew word for El “god”.

⁹ We might have expected that because the Paleo-Hebrew script does not render the hands impure it is holier, but the Mishnah (*Yadayim* 4:6) relates an anecdote that poses this very question: “The Sadducees say, ‘We cry out against you, Pharisees, for you say, ‘The Holy Scriptures render the hands unclean.’” Rabbi Johanan ben Zakkai said, “Have we naught against the Pharisees save this! For lo, they say ‘The bones of an ass are clean, and the bones of Johanan the High Priest are unclean.’” They said to him, ‘As is our love for them so is their uncleanness—that no man make spoons of the bones of his father or mother.’ He said to them, ‘Even so the Holy Scriptures: as is our love for them so their uncleanness; whereas the writings of Homer which are held in no account do not render the hands unclean.’”

Paleo-Hebrew script, which had lesser sanctity (Skehan 1980). The second solution was to write the entire text in the Paleo-Hebrew script. These conventions meant that persons who used these scrolls did not have to worry about becoming impure by touching the scroll or about defiling it. This worked because these concerns applied only to scrolls in which the divine name was written in the square script, not to those where it was written in the Paleo-Hebrew script. As the Mishnah (*Yadayim* 4:5) itself explains, “[Paleo-]Hebrew script does not render the hands impure”. In other words, this script is not sacred but mundane.

At this point in time, we cannot yet say with certainty which of the Dead Sea Scrolls were used for ritual purposes in Qumran. However, various holy objects found there – phylacteries and mezuzahs – definitely served a ritual purpose, and all of them are written in the square script (Nahman 2009).¹⁰ The fact that none of these clearly sacred objects employs the Paleo-Hebrew script is additional evidence against the claim that it was the holier and more important script: Because phylacteries and mezuzahs are ritual objects, we would expect the scribes to have been most meticulous about writing them in the “holy script”; in fact, they are written in the Jewish script. So if we had entertained the notion that only the Pharisees attributed sanctity to the Jewish script, we now see that the Qumran sect did so as well.

Thus, both Jewish coins and the Dead Sea Scrolls reveal the prevailing attitudes towards the two scripts during the Second Temple period. The square Jewish script was accorded a holy status and used for sacred texts and ritual matters, while the Paleo-Hebrew script had a lesser status and was used primarily for mundane purposes. This view is in line with the rabbinic statement that the sacred script is the Assyrian script.¹¹

¹⁰ As the talmudic sages, too, wrote: “Books [of Scripture] may be written in any language, while phylacteries and mezuzahs may be written only in the Assyrian script” (M *Megillah* 1:8).

¹¹ Support for this claim can also be found in the words of the rabbinic authorities of the eleventh to the sixteenth centuries (Rishonim), specifically Maimonides (Responsum 268) and Rabbi Obadiah of Bertinoro (commentary on M *Yadayim* 4:5, s.v. *ketav ivri*). In the words of the latter, “*Hebrew script*: The script that came from Mesopotamia, which is used by the Cutheans to this day and which the Jews used for mundane purposes. The inscriptions on coins that we have from the time of the Jewish kings are engraved in this

This insight – that it was the Assyrian script that was holy and more important, whereas the common script in everyday use was the Paleo-Hebrew – can yield many new directions for future research, for example: which of the Qumran scrolls were used for non-ritual purposes, the significance of writing using one form or the other for a specific object, why the Samaritans decided to adopt the script that the Jews deemed less important, and other matters.

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, we see that, in the Second Temple period, even a script could be regarded as sacred. The Assyrian or square script was regarded as holy. Consequently, those who were scrupulous about observing the laws of ritual purity refrained from using the square script for mundane purposes and used the Paleo-Hebrew script instead. The talmudic sages preserved this ancient law, enacted in the Second Temple period, in several places; for example, “They selected for Israel the Assyrian script and the Hebrew language, leaving the [Paleo]Hebrew script and the Aramaic language for the commoners (*hedyototh*)” (B *Sanhedrin* 21b).¹² Apparently, just as the Jews of the Second Temple period observed many laws that are familiar to us – such as those regarding ritual purity and impurity – they also observed laws and regulations with which we are less familiar, such as the form of writing and the script. For some objects and places, only one type of script could be used. It is clear, however, that these rules

script. But the script we use for books today is called the Assyrian script; that was the script used on the Tablets of the Law and is called Assyrian (*ashurith*) because it is the approved (*me'ushar*) script.”

¹² The Talmud subsequently asks, “Who are meant by *hedyototh*?” R. Hisda answers “the Cutheans,” i.e., the Samaritans. A further discussion that is not relevant to our current concern would address the questions raised by this statement; for example, when the *baraita* (quoted in the Talmud) refers to *hedyototh*, does it have in mind the same persons as understood by R. Hisda—an *amora* of the third to fourth century C.E. – or is it simply referring to the common folk? And why did the Samaritans adopt the Paleo-Hebrew script during the Second Temple period or shortly thereafter? The written evidence from Mt. Gerizim, notably the dedicatory inscriptions for the Samaritan temple, suggests that the square script was dominant there (Barag 2009; Dusek 2012:54-63, and lit. cit. there). This leads to the hypothesis that the Samaritans, too, originally used the square script for sacred purposes, and only later created their own version of the Paleo-Hebrew script.

were not absolute, and sometimes people were more – or less – scrupulous in their observance. We view such places (i.e., the “Abba Tomb” in Jerusalem)¹³ as the exceptions to the rule.

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¹³ The “Abba Tomb,” located just north of Jerusalem’s Old City, contains a puzzling find – a seven-line Aramaic epitaph written before 70 C.E. in Paleo-Hebrew script (Rosenthal 1973; Naveh, 1987:120-121). The inscription reads: “I, Abba, son of the priest El’az(ar), son of Aharon the high (priest), I, Abba, the oppressed and the persecuted, who was born in Jerusalem and exiled to Babylon, and carried up (for interment) Mattathai son of Yehud[ah] and buried him in the cave which I purchased by the writ.” Prof. Y. M. Grintz has suggested that the magnificent ossuary found together with the Aramaic inscription of Abba son of Elazar the priest belonged to Matthias Antigonus, the last Hasmonean king. This theory received compelling support by the initial analysis of the bones, preserved in the ossuary: a decapitated skull that had belonged to a tall 25-year-old man, who was tortured until he lost consciousness, after which he was beheaded – a description consistent with Josephus’ and Dio Cassius’s descriptions of the execution of Matthias Antigonus. These findings, made in the early 1970s, were recently re-discussed by Yoel Elitzur (2013).

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