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Elusive Scrolls: Could Any Hebrew Literature Have Been Written Prior to the Eighth Century BCE?

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Abstract

Two reasons lead many scholars today to think that the Israelites were not able to produce long, literary works during the 10th and 9th centuries BCE. First, there is a dearth of Hebrew inscriptions from that time; second, the Israelites did not have the necessary socio-economic resources until the 8th century BCE. This article critically assesses these two lines of reasoning in light of current research in the epigraphy and archaeology of the Southern Levant. In addition, it provides several elements which indicate that the necessary conditions for the production of long texts were present in Judah/Israel in the early royal period.

Keywords

Literature – literacy – epigraphy – inscriptions – scribes – Iron Age IIA – Hebrew

Introduction[1]

Until recently, many exegetes did not hesitate to ascribe written sources or redactions of biblical texts to the 10th century BCE, sometimes regarded as a "golden age" for Yahwistic literature. Today, numerous scholars tend to date

1 A version of this article was discussed during a colloquium organised by J. Joosten and R. Hendel at the University of Strasbourg (06/23/2015) thanks to the France-Berkeley Fund. I am grateful to the participants, especially J. Joosten, R. Hendel, K. Schmid and P. Pouchelle, for their feedback, as well as to A. Lemaire and A. Millard for reading the article and giving me useful remarks.

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the same material later, to the Neo-Assyrian period (ca. 900-612 BCE), the Neo-Babylonian period (ca. 612-539 BCE), the Persian period (ca. 539-330 BCE) and even the Hellenistic period (ca. 330-63 BCE). Interestingly, the rationale for this shift in dating does not rest solely on arguments such as literary dependence on Neo-Assyrian works or history of traditions; it is grounded in archaeology and epigraphy too. According to J. Van Seters, "not until the late 8th century was Judah sufficiently advanced as a state that it could produce any written records".[2] Generally speaking, it is the production of long, literary works in the early royal period that is doubted. For instance, the so-called "History of David's Rise" (1 Sam 16-2 Sam 5) should not be dated to the 10th century because the recent archaeological discoveries suggest that "the Jerusalemite administration did not have the socio-economic resources to compose large-scale works until the end of the 8th century".[3] This kind of assertion is all the more impressive when it is repeatedly used by such a highly competent archaeologist as I. Finkelstein, who writes, for instance:

> The story of the death of King Saul in a battle against the Philistines on Mount Gilboa (1 Sam 31) is so out of geographical context with the rest of the Saul cycle that it may be considered a genuine memory related to the expansion of an early north Israelite polity into the northern valleys in the tenth century BCE. This text, too, could not have been put in writing—even in an earlier, north Israelite version—before the first half of the eighth century BCE; the lack of evidence of significant scribal activity in Israel before around 800 BCE (...) makes it difficult to assign the compilation of these texts to an earlier phase in the history of the northern kingdom.[4]

Accordingly, biblical scholars now have at their disposal a precious *terminus a quo* (ca. 800 BCE) for the dating of written sources or redactions of biblical texts. Although this assertion is sometimes called into question,[5] it is routinely

2 J. Van Seters, *The Biblical Saga of King David* (Winona Lake, 2009), p. 119.

3 C. Nihan and D. Nocquet, "1-2 Samuel", in T. Römer, J.-D. Macchi and C. Nihan (eds.), *Introduction à l'Ancien Testament* (MdB 49; Geneva, Labor et Fides, 2009²), p. 368 (my translation).

4 I. Finkelstein, *The Forgotten Kingdom: The Archaeology and History of Northern Israel* (Ancient Near East Monographs 5; Atlanta, 2013), p. 35.

5 E.g. A. Lemaire, "West Semitic Epigraphy and the History of Levant during the 12th-10th Centuries BCE", in G. Galil, A. Gilboa, A. M. Maier and D. Kahn (eds.), *The Ancient Near East in the 12th-10th Centuries BCE: Culture and History* (AOAT 392; Münster, 2012), p. 307.

used by exegetes. The purpose of this article is to provide a detailed assessment of this hypothesis from the point of view of an epigrapher.

Two reasons, illustrated in the quotations above, seem to indicate that no Hebrew literature was produced during the early monarchy period:

(1) *An epigraphical observation*: only a handful of inscriptions from the 10th and 9th centuries BCE have been discovered during numerous excavations across the territory of Ancient Israel, whereas the number of epigraphical findings increases during the 8th century and even more in the 7th-6th centuries; moreover, the few items unearthed which are dated to the 10th-9th centuries are very short texts, sometimes containing only a few letters.

(2) *A socio-archaeological reasoning*: according to some scholars, there is a correlation between the development of a country (especially its state formation) and the emergence of what can be called literature, and archaeology has revealed that Judah did not really develop until the 8th century.

I shall scrutinize both points, then consider some aspects of current knowledge in West-Semitic epigraphy that are not always taken into account in the debate.

1 The Dearth of Inscriptional Evidence During the 10th and 9th Centuries

In this section I will first draw up a summary inventory of the epigraphic data of the royal period in Israel and Judah,[6] then discuss the interpretation of the facts.

1.1 *Raw Data: Palaeo-Hebrew Inscriptions from the Royal Period*

Though it is impossible to calculate the exact number of Palaeo-Hebrew inscriptions due to the dispersion of the documentation and to some scholarly uncertainties (disputed classification of some texts, doubts about the authenticity of others), we can obtain a rough estimate.[7]

6 In practical terms, this means ca. 1000-586 BCE. Of course, the precise date of the beginning of Saul's reign in the late 11th century (if we follow the biblical account) is unknown, and the Northern Kingdom came to an end ca. 720 BCE.

7 We leave aside inscriptions that are clearly foreign (mainly Aramaic and Phoenician texts) but were found in Israel/Judah and are dated to the royal period, because they do not

1.1.1 The Royal Period: An Overview

Let us begin with sigillography. Seals and bullae are important because they hint at the existence of many documents, especially papyri, as the ribbed traces made by papyrus fibres on the reversed side of some bullae show. The sealing process has recently been described by Y. Goren and E. Arie as follows:

> First, the papyrus document was folded into a flat elongated rectangle. The cord was then wrapped around it several times. Next, a flat lump of clay was pressed against the cord. The cord was then wrapped several times around both the papyrus and the lump of clay. After this, another flat lump of clay was placed over both the cord and the first lump and pressed onto them. The top of the two-tiered lump of clay with string in the middle was then impressed with the sealing ring. While the ring was still pressed into the clay, the edges of the bulla were smoothed by fingers, leaving a set of fingerprints all around. The seal was then removed, leaving the clay bulla securely attached to the folded and tied document. After drying, it became impossible to open the document without breaking the bulla or cutting the cord.[8]

The corpus established by N. Avigad and B. Sass, gathering virtually all the inscribed items known until 1991, included 771 Palaeo-Hebrew items (seals and bullae), of which 132 have an established provenance.[9] In 2000, M. Heltzer drew up a list of 116 seals and 54 bullae published in the meantime.[10] Since then, other private collections have been published.[11] In 2005, a team of scholars from Princeton Theological Seminary provided in their turn an update,

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necessarily attest to Israelite literacy. In any case, they would not change the overall picture (the situation is different in the Persian period). That said, in the case of the (rare) texts dating from the 10th century, it is almost impossible to distinguish between the different scripts.

8 Y. Goren and E. Arie, "The Authenticity of the Bullae of Berekhyahu Son of Neriyahu the Scribe", *BASOR* 372 (2014), pp. 151-53 (references to figures have been omitted from the quotation).

9 N. Avigad and B. Sass, *Corpus of West Semitic Stamp Seals* (Jerusalem, 1997), pp. 15-16 (for the scope of the collection) and pp. 548-49 (for the statistics).

10 M. Heltzer, "The Recently Published West Semitic Inscribed Stamp Seals", *UF* 31 (1999), pp. 199-24 (note that the volume appeared in 2000 and that the article took into account inscriptions published in 2000).

11 E.g. R. Deutsch and A. Lemaire, *The Adoniram Collection of West Semitic Inscriptions* (Geneva, 2003); R. Deutsch, *Biblical Period Hebrew Bullae: the Joseph Chaim Kaufman Collection* (Tel Aviv, 2003); idem, *Biblical Period Epigraphy: The Josef Chaim Kaufman Collection: Seals, Bullae, Handles*, Second Volume (Old City of Jaffa, 2011).

adding 18 seals and 192 bullae to Avigad and Sass's corpus (though they do not claim their list to be comprehensive).[12] However, most of the new items come from the antiquity markets and it is plausible that some of them are forgeries. Additionally, excavations in Israel regularly uncover a few more seals and bullae, but that would not alter the overall picture since they would amount to a few dozen items at most. In round numbers, a maximalist estimate would count about 1000 items, whereas a minimalist approach would only take on around 150 items at the very least; the real number certainly lies in between.

Anepigraphic bullae should also be taken into account, since some of them too were used to seal papyri. Probably the most important discovery in this respect has recently been made by R. Reich and E. Shukron during excavations in the city of David. They found 10 seals and scarabs, as well as more than 170 bullae bearing a seal impression, and "hundreds of unimpressed, broken clay lumps". Since the bullae were broken, they probably sealed "incoming mail, whether letters or parceled goods", while the seals point to outgoing mail; "in the break of most bullae, the imprint of the thread that closed the letter or packed goods is still visible", and on the reverse side it is sometimes possible to see the imprint made by the lines of a papyrus. Unfortunately the exact number of bullae used for letters is unknown. None of these items bears a Semitic inscription (carved motifs such as proto-Aeolic capitals were found on the anepigraphic bullae), but several seals and bullae, as well as some cartouches, bear Egyptian writing signs. According to the excavators, this discovery "points to the existence of an administrative and commercial center" in Jerusalem "during the late ninth and early eighth centuries BCE".[13]

Glyptic documents apart, the comprehensive corpus published by Renz and Röllig in 1995 contains 485 Palaeo-Hebrew inscriptions from Israel and Judah.[14] Ten years later, the large, albeit not comprehensive collection published by a team from Princeton Seminary mentions 586 provenanced inscriptions and 25 unprovenanced (though the most fragmentary texts are not actually discussed in the volume); however, it includes jar handle impressions.[15] Like the

12 F. W. Dobbs-Allsopp et al., *Hebrew Inscriptions: Texts from the Biblical Period of the Monarchy with Concordance* (New Haven/London, 2005), pp. 639-53.

13 R. Reich, E. Shukron and O. Lernau, "Recent Discoveries in the City of David", *IEJ* 57 (2007), pp. 156-57, 161-62.

14 J. Renz and W. Röllig, *Handbuch der althebraïschen Epigraphik*, 3 vols. (Darmstadt, 1995).

15 Dobbs-Allsopp et al., *Hebrew Inscriptions*. In the meantime, another corpus has been published by G. I. Davies, *Ancient Hebrew Inscriptions: Corpus and Concordance*, 2 vol. (Cambridge, 1991, 2004).

numerous *lmlk* impressions found in several sites, jar handle impressions do not necessarily imply literacy skills and thus are less relevant to our study. As a result, we will adopt the round and very conservative number of 500 texts (taking into account the fact that a few inscriptions have been discovered since 1995).

It should be emphasized that most of these texts are short and written on ostraca or incised on stone. The most interesting media are less represented. Only four fragments of stelae have ever been discovered: one in Samaria (dated in the 8th century)[16] and three in Jerusalem, of which two come from the city of David (both dated to ca. 700) and one from the Ophel (dated in the 7th century).[17] With the famous inscription written on a wall of the Siloam tunnel (ca. 700), they are the only monumental inscriptions from the royal period in Palaeo-Hebrew. Only *one* papyrus from the royal period has been found, in a cave of the Wadi Murabbaʿat; it is dated to the 7th century and is a palimpsest, a letter overwritten by a list of names followed by numerical indications written in hieratic signs.[18]

1.1.2 Texts from the 10th-9th Centuries

How many of these inscriptions are to be dated to the early monarchy? Answering this question is difficult for at least three reasons. First, palaeographical dating cannot be precise for this period because we do not have many well-dated inscriptions that could serve as landmarks. Secondly, several inscriptions have been found in sites at the border of Philistia and Judah (notably Gezer, Tel Zayit, Khirbet Qeiyafa); it is not always clear whether these sites depended on the former or the latter, and this could have changed over time. Moreover, provenance is not necessarily decisive since objects bearing marks of ownership and ostraca could be moved from one location to another. Thirdly, it is almost impossible to distinguish between the scripts of Phoenician, Philistine,

16 N. Avigad, "Samaria (City)", in *NEAEHL* 4 (New York, 1993), p. 1304.

17 J. Naveh, "A Fragment of an Ancient Hebrew Inscription from the Ophel", *IEJ* 32 (1982), pp. 195-198; idem, "Hebrew and Aramaic Inscriptions", in D. T. Ariel (ed.), *Excavations at the City of David, 1978-1989, directed by Yigal Shiloh, VI: Inscriptions* (Qedem 41; Jerusalem, 2000), pp. 1-2; F. M. Cross, "A Fragment of a Monumental Inscription from the City of David", *IEJ* 51 (2001), pp. 44-47; R. Reich and E. Shukron, "A Fragmentary Palaeo-Hebrew Inscription from the City of David, Jerusalem", *IEJ* 58 (2008), pp. 48-50.

18 J. T. Milik, "Palimpseste: lettre, liste de personnes (VIII[e] siècle avant J.-C.)", in P. Benoit, J. T. Milik and R. De Vaux (eds.), *Les grottes de Murabbaʿat* (*DJD* 2; Oxford, 1961), pp. 93-100; F. M. Cross, "Epigraphic Notes on Hebrew Documents of the Eighth-Sixth Centuries BC, II. The Murabbaʿât Papyrus and the Letter Found Near Yabneh-Yam", *BASOR* 165 (1962), pp. 34-42.

Aramaic and Hebrew inscriptions of the 10th century. Yet all these difficulties will not change the overall picture resulting from the most detailed inventories recently made,[19] and we shall not be far from the truth if we take on for practical purposes, *as an upper limit*, the number, given by Aḥituv and Mazar in 2014, of 17 inscriptions for the 10th century and 18 for the 9th century,[20] bearing in mind that some of them are probably Philistine. Of course, the picture would be different if we were to use the low chronology for Iron IIA designed by I. Finkelstein and the low dates of the Byblos royal inscriptions suggested by B. Sass.[21] But as we shall see, most archaeologists doubt the low chronology, and the same can be said for epigraphers with regard to the re-dating of the Byblos texts.[22]

It should be noted that these inscriptions include only ostraca and incisions.[23] Most of them only contain personal names (probably marks of

19 A. Lemaire, "West Semitic Inscriptions and Ninth-Century BCE Ancient Israel", in G. M. Williamson (ed.), *Understanding the History of Ancient Israel* (Proceedings of the British Academy 143; Oxford, 2007), pp. 279-81; idem, "West Semitic Epigraphy", pp. 291-307; idem, "Levantine Literacy (ca. 1000-750 BCE)", in B. Schmidt (ed.), *Tradition, Orality and Literacy in the Southern Levant: Contextualizing the Production of Sacred Writing in Ancient Judah* (Atlanta, forthcoming).

20 S. Aḥituv and A. Mazar, "The Inscriptions from Tel Reḥov and their Contribution to the Study of Script and Writing during Iron Age IIA", in E. Eshel and Y. Levin (eds.), *"See, I will bring a scroll recounting what befell me" (Ps 40.8): Epigraphy and Daily Life from the Bible to the Talmud* (Göttingen, 2014), pp. 40-59 (there is yet another inscription found in Tel Rehov stratum V; it is difficult to tell if it dates from the 10th or the 9th century).

21 I. Finkelstein and B. Sass, "The West Semitic Alphabetic Inscriptions, Late Bronze IIA to Iron IIA: Archaeological Context, Distribution and Chronology", *HeBAI* 2 (2013), pp. 149-220. B. Sass proposed dating the Byblos royal inscriptions later than the 10th century (*The Alphabet at the Turn of the Millennium: The West Semitic Alphabet ca. 1150-850 BCE* [Tel Aviv, 2005], p. 17).

22 A. Lemaire, "La datation des rois de Byblos, Abibaal et Elibaal et les relations entre l'Egypte et le Levant au Xè s. av. n. e.", *CRAI* 2006, pp. 1697-1716; C. A. Rollston, *Writing and Literacy in the World of Ancient Israel: Epigraphic Evidence from the Iron Age* (SBL Archaeology and Biblical Studies 11; Atlanta, 2010), pp. 24-27.

23 One seal found in the vicinity of Tel Miqne/Ekron has been dated to the 9th century by some scholars (Avigad and Sass, *Corpus*, p. 400), but its palaeography would fit a date in the 8th-7th century if we take into account its provenance in the Philistine territory (A. Lemaire, "Phénicien et philistien: paléographie et dialectologie", in M. E. Aubet-Semmler [ed.], *Actas del IV Congreso Internacional de Estudios Fenicios y Púnicos* [Cádiz, 2000], p. 246). Lately, a bulla found at Tell Dothan has been dated to the late 9th century or the early 8th century (A. E. Miglio, "Iron Age Epigraphic Artifacts from Tell Dothan", *BASOR* 371 [2014], pp. 129-139). The late date seems more likely: all the glyptic evidence

ownership): no continuous text has been found. The only possible exception is the Khirbet Qeiyafa ostracon (dated ca. 1000 BCE) that according to some scholars has an ethical or judicial content.[24] According to an essay by E. Puech, this ostracon even alludes to the beginning of the monarchy in Judah.[25] But there are good reasons to think that it only contains a list of anthroponyms.[26] That said, an unknown number of bullae (fewer than 170, in any case) and a couple of seals found in the city of David might date to the late 9th century.

All in all, for the royal period we may draw the following summary (let us recall that all the numbers are very approximate):

- seals and bullae: about 150 (low estimate) or 1000 (high estimate, unprovenanced items included), plus an unknown proportion of the 170 anepigraphic bullae found at the city of David;
- ostraca, incisions and other similar inscriptions: about 500;
- papyrus: 1;
- monumental inscriptions: 4;
- inscriptions dating to the 10th-9th centuries: at most 36 short texts (ostraca and incisions), plus an unknown number of the anepigraphic bullae from the city of David.

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seems to indicate that only anepigraphical seals were in use until the late 9th century BCE (a matter we will discuss further below).

24 In the excavation report, H. Misgav, Y. Garfinkel and S. Ganor suggested that it was a "message" ("The Ostracon", in Y. Garfinkel and S. Ganor [eds.], *Khirbet Qeiyafa*, vol. 1: *Excavations Report 2007-2008* [Jerusalem, 2009], p. 255), while A. Yardeni spoke of "perhaps a draft of a monumental text, such as a votive or burial inscription or a magical text" ("Further Observations on the Ostracon", in *ibid*., pp. 259-260). According to other scholars, the text contains ethical and/or judicial comments (G. Galil, "The Hebrew Inscription from Khirbet Qeiyafa/Neṭa'im", *UF* 41 [2009], pp. 193-242; B. Becking and P. Sanders, "Plead for the Poor and the Widow: The Ostracon from Khirbet Qeiyafa as Expression of Social Consciousness", *ZAR* 17 [2011], pp. 133-148; R. Achenbach, "The Protection of *Personae miserae* in Ancient Israelite Law and Wisdom and in the Ostracon from Khirbet Qeiyafa", *Semitica* 54 [2012], pp. 93-125). C. A. Rollston thinks it is "probably a literary or ethical text" ("What's the Oldest Hebrew Inscription?", *BAR* 38.3 [2012], p. 37), but he also formulates very prudent remarks in another article ("The Khirbet Qeiyafa Ostracon: Methodological Musings and Caveats", *TA* 38 [2011], pp. 79-80).

25 E. Puech, "L'ostracon de Khirbet Qeyafa et les débuts de la royauté en Israël", *RB* 117 [2010], pp. 162-184.

26 A. Millard, "The Ostracon from the Days of David Found at Khirbet Qeiyafa", *Tyndale Bulletin* 62 (2011), pp. 1-13; M. Richelle, "Quelques nouvelles lectures sur l'ostracon de Khirbet Qeiyafa", *Semitica* 57 (2015), pp. 147-62.

1.2 *Analysis*

In view of the above, two striking phenomena need some explanation:

(1) The *quantitative difference* between the number of discovered texts of some kinds (monumental inscriptions and papyri) and others (ostraca, incisions . . .).
(2) The *diachronic difference* between the early part of the royal period and the subsequent centuries. To what extent does it reflect a development in scribal activity?

1.2.1 Organic Materials

The solution to the first problem lies in a difference in the conservation of the texts, which depends on the inscribed medium. Most long texts would have been written on organic materials (papyrus or parchment), wax tablets and wooden boards.[27] Due to the climactic conditions in Palestine, these perishable documents would only have survived in exceptional cases. To substantiate this description, we can look at the situation in a country where we do have a large documentation in papyri. Precisely, we have accurate statistics regarding the Greek and Latin texts from Egypt. What do we learn from them and how does it relate to the situation in Palestine?

First, not only were literary texts often couched on papyri, it was the main medium for this kind of text. Out of 9875 Greek and Latin literary works from Egypt, 7,100 (i.e. 71%) were written on papyri, 2575 (i.e. 25%) on parchment, 339 (i.e. 3%) on ostraca, and 148 (i.e. 1%) on wood. Out of 15,195 ostraca, only 339 (i.e. about 2%) contained literary works.[28] In the region of ancient Israel and Judah, to the best of my knowledge, there is only one such document out of the hundreds of published ostraca: a text from Horvat ʿUza, dated from the second half of the 7th century and written in a fairly elevated language, though its precise content remains difficult to ascertain.[29]

Secondly, the notion that papyri survived less well in the Near East than in Egypt is warranted. As J. Gascou writes:

27 A. Bülow-Jacobsen, "Writing Materials in the Ancient World", in R. S. Bagnall (ed.), *Oxford Handbook of Papyrology* (Oxford, 2009), pp. 3-29. Aramaic texts on parchment dated to the 4th century BCE have been found in Bactria (*ibid*., p. 11).

28 *Ibid*., p. 4.

29 I. Beit-Arieh, "Epigraphic Finds", in I. Beit-Arieh (ed.), *Ḥorvat ʿUza and Ḥorvat Radum: Two Fortresses in the Biblical Negev* (Monograph series of the Institute of Archaeology, 25; Tel Aviv, 2007), pp. 122-8. See lately N. Naʿaman, "A Sapiential Composition from Ḥorvat ʿUza", *HeBAI* 2 (2013), pp. 221-33.

> So far only about 600 Greek and Latin papyri from the Near East (including those found in Egypt) have come to light (...) this is hardly anything compared to the roughly 50,000 Greek and Latin papyri of Egyptian provenance published so far.[30]

Admittedly, the use of papyri for writing may have been more widespread in Egypt than in the rest of the Near East because the medium was produced there and thus widely available, but this can hardly be the sole factor for the disparity in the numbers. Gascou explains this phenomenon by the fact that some regions of the Near East experienced many more destructions than in Egypt, whether due to human conflicts or to excessive rainfall, or as a consequence of the continuous occupation of sites.[31] A case in point is Tel Beth-Shean, "the most extensively excavated Egyptian New Kingdom garrison town in Canaan".[32] The Egyptian presence there for 300 years, from the XIIIth dynasty to the XXth (14th to 12th), left plenty of inscriptions: many scarabs and stelae, some ostraca, an inscription on a clay cylinder, faience plaques inscribed with personal names, inscribed door-jambs and lintels...[33] However, not a single papyrus has been reported. In fact, according to B. Legras, the most ancient text on papyrus found outside Egypt is the papyrus Murrabbaʿat 17, already mentioned (and dated ca. 700).[34] A. Millard notes that the "oldest examples of West Semitic books in roll form" were found at Elephantine and date to the 5th century BCE.[35] Yet the papyrus had been used in Egypt for a long time, and it was probably introduced into Canaan when they controlled it in the 2nd millennium. There may be a hint of the presence of papyrus in Phoenicia, since some features in the Aḥiram inscription (dated to ca. 1000 BCE) might be due to a hand trained in cursive writing.[36]

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30 J. Gascou, "The Papyrology of the Near East", in Bagnall (ed.), *Oxford Handbook of Papyrology*, p. 475.

31 *Ibid.*

32 A. Mazar, "The Egyptian Garrison Town at Beth-Shean", in S. Bar, D. Kahn and J. J. Shirley (eds.), *Egypt, Canaan and Israel: History, Imperialism, Ideology and Literature* (Leiden, 2011), p. 151.

33 *Ibid.*, pp. 153-54, 158-60, 162, 167-69, 176-77.

34 B. Legras, "La papyrologie documentaire grecque en 2005: Bilan et perspectives", *Anabases* 1 (2005), p. 218 (online: http://anabases.revues.org/1480, visited the 06/29/2015).

35 A. Millard, "Books in Ancient Israel", in C. Roche (ed.), *D'Ougarit à Jérusalem: Recueil d'études épigraphiques et archéologiques offert à Pierre Bordreuil* (Orient et Méditerranée 2; Paris, 2008), p. 255.

36 R. G. Lehmann, "Calligraphy and Craftsmanship in the Ahirom Inscription: Considerations on Skilled Linear Flat Writing in Early First Millennium Byblos", *MAARAV* 15.2 (2008),

Thirdly, the phenomenon of deterioration is widely attested, even in Egypt: among the discovered papyri, many are disintegrated, badly preserved, sometimes carbonized. Yet there were factors of possible preservation, notably exposition to the desert sand, which had the effect of neutralizing the deterioration due to the humidity, and storage in "jars, boxes, and chests in collapsed buildings in dry areas or in tombs in desert cemeteries".[37] By contrast, as B. Legras notes, "outside of Egypt, papyrus is only preserved in a similar environment (Negev, Syrian desert) or in a 'carbonised' form (Derveni, Petra)".[38] One may add: in caves, since the only provenanced papyri discovered in Palestine and dated to the 1st millennium BCE were found in caves (near Qumran, at Murraba'at and at Ketef Jericho) or just outside them (in the case of some fragments from Ketef Jericho).[39]

Against this background, we can understand the following simple fact: the ratio of the discovered papyrus to the number of papyri that we know actually existed in Palestine during the royal period is one out of hundreds. Indeed, of four centuries of monarchy in Israel and Judah, only one papyrus has ever been found, whereas 150 inscribed seals or bullae (at the very least; the real number is probably several hundreds) and 170 anepigraphic bullae have been found. Admittedly, there is no systematic correspondence between bullae and papyri, since a single papyrus sometimes was sealed by several bullae[40] and because bullae could be used for parceled goods; but on the other hand,

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pp. 119-164. This would lend some credibility to the cultural reality presupposed at the time of the 2nd millennium by the Report of Wenamun (the story itself may be fictive). In this narrative, perhaps written at the end of the 20th Dynasty, an Egyptian official, Wenamun, brings 500 papyri to Byblos. Note, however, that a recent translation speak of 500 "smooth linen mats" instead (M. Lichtheim, "The Report of Wenamun", in W. W. Hallo and K. L. Younger [eds.], *The Context of Scripture*, vol. 1: *Canonical Compositions* [Leiden/Boston, 2003], p. 92).

37 J. Frösén, "Conservation of Ancient Papyri Materials", in Bagnall (ed.), *Oxford Handbook of Papyrology*, pp. 79-80.

38 Legras, "La papyrologie documentaire grecque", p. 218.

39 For the Ketef Jericho documents, see below. We do not know the provenance of the "Marzeaḥ papyrus", containing two lines palaeographically dated to the 7th century, though many believe it comes from Transjordan. It was sealed by a Moabite bulla. Some scholars regard it as a possible forgery. Cf. S. Aḥituv, *Echoes from the Past* (Jerusalem, 2008), pp. 427-31. Likewise, the papyrus bearing two decrees by Ptolemy II issued ca. 260, and important for the history of Judah, is unprovenanced (A. Jördens, "Griechische Texte aus Ägypten", in B. Janowski and G. Wilhelm [eds.], *Texte aus der Umwelt des Alten Testaments*, Neue Folde, Band 2 [Gütersloh, 2005], p. 370).

40 Avigad and Sass, *Corpus*, pp. 34-37.

a seal could be impressed on dozens of documents. More importantly, only some categories of papyri were commonly sealed, such as legal deeds (cf. Jer 31:10-14; Neh 9:38; etc.) and letters (cf. 1 Kgs 21:8; etc.).[41] Even in this case, it is likely that

> the production of two copies, one sealed and one open, would have been common. The sealed copy would be stored in a secure place (e.g., a temple, palace, or scribal home) and was the one that would be consulted in a legal case as the seals were proof that there had been no tampering with the document. The open copy would have been used for easy reference.[42]

Therefore, the findings hint at the existence of hundreds of papyri.

If there were literary works, they were probably not sealed and are consequently entirely invisible in archaeological terms: they did not even leave bullae. All of this means that we only see the tip of the iceberg. In other words, *there is no simple quantitative correlation between the findings and ancient reality when it comes to the medium the most likely used during the Iron Age II for writing and copying literary texts*. Moreover, we have absolutely no means to determine the extent of literary production.

1.2.2 Other Media

These considerations regarding perishable materials do not resolve all the problems surrounding the dearth of texts in the early royal period, though. In this regard, B. Sass and I. Finkelstein have raised the most relevant question (irrespective of the date they give for the time of the foundation of Levantine kingdoms):

> If indeed all West Semitic kingdoms adopted the alphabet for their administrations practically at the time of their foundation ca. 900 BCE, it would be surprising that for many decades after their foundation, during much of the ninth century, the kingdoms of Israel and Judah will have restricted the use of the Hebrew alphabet to perishable papyrus (or parchment) at court (...) How is it that the Hebrew alphabet has not trickled down from the postulated papyri to archaeologically-detectable

41 In Is 29:11-12, a collection of visions is only (and rhetorically) *compared* to a sealed book; in addition, the situation is regarded as abnormal; in Dan 12:9, words are *figuratively* sealed.

42 Rollston, *Writing and Literacy*, p. 77.

> ostraca and inscribed seals, nor to bullae with papyrus imprints, in the richest archaeological record in the Levant?[43]

Several remarks are in order here. First, although this is a small number, we do have 36 inscriptions dating from the 10th-9th century according to the most accepted chronology. Inscribed seals are not to be expected in this period, since Israelites apparently used only anepigraphic seals to close their documents prior to ca. 800 BCE, as we shall see. Moreover, each discovery likely points to the existence of many more texts. Let us compare the situation with Beth-Shean in the 8th century. Only four ostraca dated to this period were found during the excavations.[44] They bear a few personal names and hieratic numerals. Nobody would imagine that they were the sole such documents that were actually produced in this town in the 8th century, as if it had been a local one-day incursion into the writing system (somebody suddenly decided to write a few dockets, then everybody forgot about writing lists on ostraca overnight). Rather, it is only by chance that a few remnants of the administrative work have been found. Similarly, at least a number of the 36 inscriptions from the 10th-9th centuries hint to the existence of more documents. In fact, palaeographic considerations point to a continuous scribal tradition in the region since the 2nd millennium (see below).

Secondly, the same sort of question also applies to later periods to a large extent. From Samaria, the capital of Israel for about 150 years, we have:

(a) a collection of 107 ostraca bearing dates (when legible) of three years in the 1st half of the 8th century (795, 794 and 776 according to A. Lemaire,[45] 783-782 BCE according to A. Rainey);[46]
(b) twelve inscriptions from the 2nd half of the same century: one ostracon mentioning a payment, one ostracon with a list of names, some marks of

43 Finkelstein and Sass, "The West Semitic Alphabetic Inscriptions", p. 199.

44 A. Mazar, "Iron Age Inscriptions", in A. Mazar (ed.), *Excavations at Tel Beth-Shean, 1989-1996*, vol. 1: *From the Late Bronze Age IIB to the Medieval Period* (Jerusalem, 2006), pp. 505-513. Another Iron Age ostracon has been found during a survey in 1959-60; its date is debated (9th, 8th or 7th century) (see Dobbs-Allsopp *et al.*, *Hebrew Inscriptions*, pp. 139-40).

45 A. Lemaire, *Inscriptions hébraïques*, vol. 1: *Les ostraca* (LAPO; Paris, 1977), p. 81.

46 Cf. Aḥituv, *Echoes*, p. 259 (assuming that there was a coregency between Joash and Jeroboam II, so that the 9th, 10th and 15th years "all fell around 783-782" BCE).

ownership on utensils, a fragment of a stela, and one illegible text on a bowl;[47]

(c) one illegible seal impression that may date from the 8th century, and another one with only two letters, that may be Hebrew or Moabite and the date of which is unclear.[48]

In view of this evidence, nobody doubts that scribal activity took place there from the beginning of the 8th century at least. And yet, only two or three years of administrative activity out of half a century (ca. 800-750) are represented in the ostraca, and only five years out of three decades (ca. 750-720), assuming for the sake of the argument that the two last ostraca, the stela and the seal impressions date from differing years, and that the latter are to be included (the other texts are not of an administrative nature). How is it that the bureaucracy of the capital of the Northern kingdom has not left any written trace for, say, 72 years out of the 80 years covered by the period between 800 and the fall of Samaria? This is no less astonishing than the dearth of inscriptions from the 10th-9th centuries.[49]

This leads us to the third consideration: most texts, including ostraca, are not archaeologically detectable. This is arguably the case for many ostraca written in ink, because it fades. Among the 107 Samaria ostraca dated to the 1st half of the 8th century, 10 are completely illegible and 27 illegible for the most part (they preserve less than 7 letters each);[50] in other words, about a third of the collection is in a very bad state. In addition, most of the other Samaria ostraca contain lacunae. But how many ostraca have not been detected at all during excavations due to their poor state of preservation? A similar question applies to texts written with ink on plaster walls, such as the prophetic composition found at Tell Deir ʿAlla[51] and several fragmentary inscriptions, including

47 J. W. Crowfoot, G. M. Crowfoot and K. M. Kenyon, *The Objects from Samaria* (London, 1957), pp. 9-34.

48 *Ibid*., pp. 89 and 87 respectively; see also *WSS* 711 and 1078 respectively.

49 Of course, one may object that new excavations could yield more inscriptions, and it is possible that some of the unprovenanced Israelite seals already known, like some published in *WSS*, come from the city of Samaria. But, precisely, we are dealing in this section of the article with the disparity, in the data presently available, between the actual finds in excavations and the quantity of texts that we surmise have existed.

50 M. Richelle, *Le royaume d'Israël dans la première moitié du VIII^e siècle avant notre ère: Analyse critique des sources épigraphiques, bibliques et archéologiques* (PhD thesis, E.P.H.E. Paris, 2010), pp. 28-99.

51 J. Hoftijzer and G. van der Kooij, *Aramaic Texts from Deir ʿAlla* (Leiden, 1976).

some of a literary quality, discovered at Kuntillet ʿAjrud.[52] Although it does not seem likely that plaster walls counted among the most frequently used media, these discoveries nevertheless lift the veil on a category of important documents that probably did not leave any trace in most cases. In passing, it is worth noting that the Deir ʿAlla inscriptions, dating from the early 8th century, were most probably copied from a scroll.[53]

Even monumental inscriptions on stone are not necessarily far better preserved than papyri. Of each of the four stelae found in Samaria and Jerusalem, only a few words have been preserved. The fact that only tiny fragments of stelae are discovered proves that 90% of each of them has been pulverized. How many stelae have been destroyed in their entirety? We simply do not know the answer, but it is clear that in this matter as in general, the absence of evidence is not evidence of absence. Besides, there may be another explanation for the absence of discovered stelae during the early royal period in Judah/Israel: perhaps this medium came into use in the Southern Levant only as an imitation of Neo-Assyrian practice, when Mesopotamian kings left stelae as testimonies to their western campaigns, that is not before the second half of the 9th century,[54] which is the horizon of the earliest discovered stela (Tel Dan, Mesha). This is only a hypothesis, and one has to remember that the Phoenicians used stelae in the 10th century.[55]

Finally, all this reminds us of a general truth: only an infinitesimal proportion of the documents that existed in Antiquity has survived. Moreover, it was often the most recent documents of a given archaeological period which

52 S. Aḥituv, E. Eshel and Z. Meshel, "The Inscriptions", in Z. Meshel (ed.), *Kuntillet ʿAjrud. An Iron Age Religious Site on the Judah-Sinai Border* (Jerusalem, 2012), pp. 105-21. See lately E. Puech, "Les inscriptions hébraïques de Kuntillet ʿAjrud (Sinaï)", *RB* 121 (2014), pp. 175-87.

53 A. Millard, "Aspects of Prophetic Writings", *SBET* 7 (1989/2), pp. 90, 93; A. Lemaire, "Les inscriptions sur plâtre", in J. Hoftijzer and G. van der Kooij (eds.), *The Balaam Text from Deir Alla Re-evaluated: Proceedings of the International Symposium, Leiden, 21-24 August 1989* (Leiden/Copenhague/New York, 1991), p. 43.

54 N. Naʿaman, "Royal Inscriptions and the Histories of Joash and Ahaz, Kings of Judah", *VT* 48 (1998), p. 335.

55 The discovery of two silver scrolls bearing blessings at Ketef Ḥinnom, dating from ca. 600 BCE, shows that still other media could be used for writing texts (G. Barkay, "The Priestly Benediction on Silver Plaques from Ketef Ḥinnom in Jerusalem", *TA* 19 [1992], pp. 139-192; G. Barkay, A. G. Vaughn, M. J. Lundberg and B. Zuckerman, "The Amulets from Ketef Ḥinnom: A New Edition and Evaluation", *BASOR* 334 [2004], pp. 41-71). The preservation of these amulets is most probably due to the fact that they were deposited in a tomb. That said, they were evidently not used for reading; their main interest for our present discussion is the decision to use the form of scrolls to inscribe short "literary" texts.

survived, because they lay in the debris of destruction layers.[56] Destructions occasioned by wars, as during the Assyrian and Babylonian invasions, had the double effect of preserving some inscriptions in such layers, and of burning or pulverizing many others; continuous human occupation also led to the discarding of texts.[57] This may at least partly explain the small proportion of discovered ostraca from the 10th-9th centuries compared to the following centuries (we shall return to this matter below). Furthermore, it is frequently only by chance that we find inscriptions.[58]

1.2.3 Comparison with the Persian Period

The disparity between archaeological discoveries and ancient reality is corroborated by the case study of the Persian period. Almost everybody agrees that biblical texts were written in Yehud at that time and that earlier writings were simultaneously transmitted by handwritten copy, as well as read and reused (as Samuel-Kings by the Chronicler). The scribes were not only tradents of older texts, they also composed new prophetic texts (e.g. Haggai and at least a part of Zechariah, probably Joel), entirely new narratives (sources/redactions of Ezra-Nehemiah) and some literary texts (probably Job; some Psalms like Ps 107, etc.). Also, many scholars today regard this period as important for the formation or the finalisation of the Pentateuch as we know it.[59] And we know from epigraphy that scribal activity took place in Jerusalem at this time, since the authorities received and sent letters to the Elephantine community in the 5th century. This is not to say that as many texts as in the late royal period were written during the Persian period, but the scribal activity was far from negligible.

Here, naturally, we have to take into account Aramaic texts since it was the language mainly used by Judaeans, at least in writing; only a few Palaeo-Hebrew inscriptions from the Persian period have been found (14 according

56 A. Millard, "Isaiah—a Writing Prophet?", in K. J. Dell, G. Davies and Y. Von Koh (eds.), *Genesis, Isaiah and Psalms: A Festschrift to Honour Professor John Emerton for His Eightieth Birthday* (Leiden/Boston, 2010), p. 106.

57 R. S. Hess, "Literacy in Ancient Israel", in P. Longs, D. W. Baker and G. J. Wenham (eds.), *Windows into Old Testament History: Evidence, Argument, and the Crisis of "Biblical Israel"* (Grand Rapids, 2002), pp. 92-93.

58 A. Millard, "Only Fragments from the Past: the Role of Accident in our Knowledge of the Ancient Near East", in P. Bienkowski, C. Mee and E. Slater (eds.), *Writing and Ancient Near Eastern Society: Papers in Honour of Alan R. Millard* (New York/London, 2005), pp. 301-319.

59 For an inventory of texts written during the Persian period, see for example D. Carr, *The Formation of the Hebrew Bible* (New York, 2011), pp. 204-24, though the list of texts would sometimes greatly differ depending on the scholar.

to Hamilton).[60] Perhaps, as A. Lemaire suggests, "the utilization of Palaeo-Hebrew script was restricted to some 'archaising' uses: seals, literature . . ."[61] Hamilton notes that a coin inscribed with cursive letters "suggests that there may have been a whole cursive tradition of Paleo-Hebrew script on organic writing materials that have perished".[62]

Although it is not always easy to draw a clear line between the Persian and the Hellenistic period, the following counts give us an upper limit:[63]

- From Idumea, the most important discovery is the 1899 Aramaic ostraca coming from the region of Hebron, most of them commodity sheets (they include 23 letters, but no literary text).[64] According to a calculation made by Porten and Yardeni, 350 other Aramaic ostraca, found in 33 sites in Palestine, date from the Persian and Hellenistic period.[65]
- From Samaria, twelve very short Aramaic inscriptions from the Persian period have been found in the city of Samaria.[66] In addition, about 37 papyri have been discovered in the Wadi Daliyeh (though they really come from Samaria); they date from before the reign of Alexander the Great.[67]
- From Mt. Gerizim, some Aramaic inscriptions might date to the Persian period according to the *editio princeps*, but J. Dušek has shown that they mainly come from the 2nd century, though some of them could date from

60 G. J. Hamilton, "Palaeo-Hebrew Texts and Scripts of the Persian Period", in J. A. Hackett and W. A. Aufrecht (eds.), *"An Eye for Form": Epigraphic Essays in Honor of F. M. Cross* (Winona Lake, 2014), pp. 253-290.

61 A. Lemaire, "Les inscriptions palestiniennes d'époque perse: Un bilan provisoire", *Transeu* 1 (1989), p. 96 fn. 39.

62 Hamilton, "Palaeo-Hebrew Texts", p. 286.

63 For other inventories of West-Semitic Inscriptions from Persian period Palestine, see Lemaire, "Les inscriptions palestiniennes d'époque perse", pp. 87-106, completed by other surveys by the same scholar in articles titled "Epigraphie" in the same journal: *Transeu* 4 (1991), pp. 113-18; *Transeu* 10 (1995), pp. 145-50; *Transeu* 17 (1999), pp. 111-16; *Transeu* 24 (2002), pp. 137-41; *Transeu* 32 (2006), pp. 185-94. See also idem, "Fifth- and Fourth-Century Issues: Governorship and Priesthood in Jerusalem", in B. T. Arnold and R. S. Hess (eds.), *Ancient Israel's History: An Introduction to Issues and Sources* (Grand Rapids, 2014), pp. 406-25.

64 B. Porten and A. Yardeni, *Textbook of Aramaic Ostraca from Idumea* (Winona Lake, 2014), p. xx.

65 *Ibid*., p. xv.

66 G. A. Reisner, C. S. Fischer and D. G. Lyon, *Harvard Excavations at Samaria*, vol. 1: *Text* (Cambridge, 1924), pp. 62, 248; Crowfoot, Crowfoot and Kenyon, *The Objects from Samaria*, pp. 26-32.

67 J. Dušek, *Les manuscrits araméens du Wadi Daliyeh et la Samarie vers 450-332 av. J.-C.* (CHANE 30; Leiden/Boston, 2007).

the late 3rd century; as for the Palaeo-Hebrew inscriptions, they may date from the 2nd half of the 3rd century to the 2nd century.[68] Therefore, no text can be ascribed with certainty to the Persian period.

- From Yehud, we have 440 Aramaic jar handle impressions from the late 6th century to the 3th century;[69] in addition, 65 unprovenanced bullae and 2 seals, most of them in Aramaic, some others in Palaeo-Hebrew, *may* come from this region.[70] In addition, in a recent inventory, Lemaire mentions a few other jar inscriptions.[71] Six papyri were found during the excavations at Ketef Jericho (which belonged to Yehud during the Persian period), but they most probably date from the Hellenistic period. The first was found in 1986 in a cave and is palaeographically dated to the third quarter of the 4th century.[72] Five more fragments of papyri were found in 1993, one in the same cave and four outside of it, but they only bear a couple of letters and the editor does not suggest a more precise date than the 4th century;[73] however, it is likely that like the first papyrus, these documents were brought there by refugees in 312 BCE, when Ptolemy I deported people from Samaria.[74]

Two lessons may be learned from this summary inventory. First, the epigraphic harvest from the Persian period is, to say the least, far from exhibiting a huge increase compared to the royal period (since most of the inscriptions from the royal period come from the 8th to the beginning of the 6th century, it is as if both periods spanned about two centuries and may be directly compared.) There are more ostraca from the Persian period, though most of them come from one location; on the other hand, there are fewer seals and bullae than during the royal times, and no monumental inscriptions. The discovery of 37 papyri is a matter of chance (fortunately, they were left in a cave) and it does

68 J. Dušek, *Aramaic and Hebrew Inscriptions from Mt. Gerizim and Samaria between Antiochus III and Antiochus VI Epiphanes* (CHANE 54; Leiden/Boston, 2012), p. 59.

69 O. Lipschits and D. S. Vanderhooft, *The Yehud Stamp Impressions: A Corpus of Inscribed Impressions from the Persian and Hellenistic Periods in Judah* (Winona Lake, 2011), pp. 11-12.

70 N. Avigad, *Bullae and Seals from the Post-Exilic Judean Archive* (Qedem 4; Jerusalem, 1976).

71 A. Lemaire, *Levantine Epigraphy and History in the Achaemenid Period* (*539-332 BCE*) (Oxford, 2015), p. 89. Lemaire also mentions a few ostraca, but they are already counted in the total of 350 ostraca for all of Palestine given above.

72 H. Eshel and H. Misgav, "A Fourth Century BCE Document from Ketef Yeriḥo", *IEJ* 38 (1988), pp. 158-176; idem, "Jericho papList of Loans ar", in J. Charlesworth et al., *Miscellaneous Texts from the Judaean Desert* (DJD 38; Oxford, 2000), pp. 21-30.

73 E. Eshel, "Jericho papUnidentified Texts ar", in *ibid.*, pp. 53-54.

74 See Dušek, *Les manucrits araméens*, p. 450.

not change the overall picture, since we know thanks to seals and bullae that there existed hundreds of papyri during the royal period.

	10th-9th	**8th-early 6th**	**Persian period**
Sigillography	• An unknown proportion of the 170 anepigraphic bullae found at the city of David	• 150 provenanced inscribed items • 850 unprovenanced inscribed items • anepigraphic bullae	67 unprovenanced inscribed items
Ostraca, incisions and similar inscriptions	36 (upper limit)	500	• 1899 ostraca from Idumea • 350 other ostraca (including some from the Hellenistic period) • a few jar inscriptions
Monumental inscriptions	0	4	0
Papyri	0	1	• 37 from Samaria • 0 from Yehud

Secondly, as A. Lemaire summarizes: "La Judée est encore très pauvre en découvertes épigraphiques d'époque perse. Elle ne semble avoir produit aucun *papyrus* de cette époque, ni pratiquement aucun *ostracon* lisible, ni même de tablette cunéiforme".[75] In sum, *not a single long or literary text has been found in Yehud for the two centuries of the Persian period*. It is thus clear that *even a period where significant scribal activity took place did not necessarily leave many artifacts related to long texts*.

75 A. Lemaire, "Epigraphie et religion en Palestine à l'époque achéménide", *Transeu* 22 (2001), p. 109. No papyrus from Yehud has been found since this article (see Lemaire, *Levantine Epigraphy*, p. 89.

Generally speaking, wherever we place the cursor in the chronological continuum of the 1st millennium BCE prior to the Hellenistic period, there is a dearth of long, literary works in Judah and Israel, and as we have seen above, the material conditions imply that we should not expect otherwise. In other words, there is almost no real observable diachronic difference when it comes to long texts until the time of the Dead Sea scrolls.

1.2.4 A Possible Development from the 8th Century On

This is not to say that the quantitative difference between the 10th-9th centuries and the rest of the royal period with regard to *non-organic* script materials does not reflect any development. It would be surprising if, after so many excavations in so many sites, the striking contrast between the early part of the royal period and the rest of it were only a matter of chance when it comes to solid objects like seals. Similarly, as we have already noted, the effects of violent destructions and of continuous human occupation on earlier archaeological levels may only partly explain this disparity.

Other factors exist. Although the proliferation of inscribed seals and bullae from the 8th century on does not prove an increase in the use of papyrus (because open papyri did not leave any trace), it reflects in all probability an increase in the number of people sealing documents with inscribed objects. Since this primarily concerned legal deeds and letters, it may be due to the growth of the administration during the Iron Age IIB.[76] This is all the more probable given that Jerusalem saw an impressive demographic growth in the 8th century, which certainly required more bureaucracy.

According to another plausible hypothesis, which is not incompatible with the former, the elite used mostly anepigraphic seals during the early royal period, then switched to inscribed seals ca. 800 *because more people were now able to read the impressions*. Such a (partial) "democratization" of literacy from 800 on, more precisely a growth in the number of people able to read and to write, is all the more plausible since people who were seemingly not scribes left graffiti,[77] and since inscriptions have been found across most of the territories of Israel and Judah.[78] This second scenario does not rule out the possibility that inscribed seals were used before, though it would have been a very limited practice, foreshadowing the later situation. However, a collection of anepigraphic seals and seal impressions from the 10th and 9th centuries have been discovered during the excavations at Tel Reḥov in well-established

76 Cf. Rollston, *Writing and Literacy*, p. 133.

77 Aḥituv, *Echoes*, pp. 220-39.

78 Dobbs-Allsopp *et al.*, *Hebrew Inscriptions*, map on the reverse of the cover.

stratigraphic contexts, and according to O. Keel and A. Mazar, this provides a *terminus post quem*: "inscribed Semitic seals did not appear in the region prior to 830 BCE".[79] That said, one cannot absolutely rule out the possibility that using inscribed seals was simply not an established tradition in the region during the Iron Age IIA, irrespective of people's ability to read.

Whatever the correct explanation, it implies at most a development of the administrative activity and/or an increase of the rate of literacy, not the *apparition* of literacy or literary composition; in no way does it preclude the possibility that large-scale literary works were written before the 8th century, even if they were produced by a very limited number of people. Does it, however, make it probable that *more* literature was written during the 8th-7th centuries than during the 10th-9th centuries? On the one hand, if the number of literate people and the number of professional scribes grow, it seems likely that the number of potential writers will grow too. But it would be going too far to regard the production of literature as a phenomenon mechanically related to the demography; it is rooted in the cultural and religious life of the country, and thus is not necessarily a predictable variable. Obviously, we should also resist the temptation of retro-projecting into the Antiquity the tendencies we observe in the modern world. Whereas it is easy nowadays for anybody to compose a book with paper or on a computer, so much so that publishers are overwhelmed by the quantity of manuscripts of books they receive each year, in Ancient Israel it seems to have required not only papyrus or parchment, but also the hiring of a professional scribe. Even a skilled poet like Jeremiah needed to work in tandem with a scribe. For all these reasons, it would be imprudent to state that the relatively high proportion of discovered inscriptions from the 8th-7th centuries compared to other periods *necessarily implies* that the literary production was at its peak in Judah at this time. Strictly speaking, it creates a *presumption* that more *potential* writers existed. The limit of this line of thought is that the passage from potential to actual depends on the unpredictable human "life of the mind", and that a few motivated writers would have sufficed to produce, at any other period, many works that would significantly alter the statistics.

To close this section: in view of the concrete material conditions regarding the writing and the preservation of texts, no conclusion can be made based on the quantitative approach; the dearth of inscriptions dating to the early royal period does not constitute a reason to doubt the possible existence of literature at that time.

79 O. Keel and A. Mazar, "Iron Age Seals and Seals Impressions from Tel Reḥov", in J. Aviram et al. (eds.), *Ephraim Stern Volume* (EI 29; Jerusalem, 2009), p. 66*.

2 The Socio-Archaeological Argument

The second reason that leads many to doubt the existence of Hebrew literature prior to the 8th century consists in a syllogism:

(a) A certain level of development (such as "high urban civilization", the presence of a "state" or of a "complex society") is required for a country to be able to produce long or even literary texts;
(b) Judah, and Jerusalem in particular, was not really developed before the 8th century;
(c) It follows that no literature could have been written in Judah during the 10th and 9th centuries.

However, we may ask whether the two premises are really warranted.

2.1 *The Alleged Correlation between the "Level of Development" and the Production of Literature*

With regard to (a), in his influential book, D. W. Jamieson-Drake argues that there is a strong correlation between "artifactual evidence for writing" and "other variables indicative of regional economic interdependence and centralized control", "increases in regional economic productivity observed in the 8th and 7th centuries", as well as a link with "evidence for trade, skilled artisanship, and centralized control during the same period".[80] This work has sometimes been mentioned by other scholars as a demonstration that literature could not be produced in a country which was not well developed. However, relying solely on "artifactual evidence for writing" means that one leaves aside the quantities of writing on perishable materials that did not leave any trace. As we have seen, what the increase in artifactual evidence from the 8th century may reflect is a development in bureaucracy and/or an increase in the rate of literacy, not the apparition of literacy. As to a correlation between the *existence* of literature (preserved or not) and variables like

80 D. W. Jamieson-Drake, *Scribes and Schools in Monarchic Judah: A Socio-Archaeological Approach* (JSOTSup 109; Sheffield, 1991), p. 155. The enduring influence of this book is apparent in a recent and interesting article reviewing several important monographs on scribal education in Ancient Israel: L. Quick, "Recent Research on Ancient Israelite Education: A Bibliographical Essay", *CBR* 13 (2014), pp. 9-33 (see esp. p. 12: "Scholarship undertaken after Jamieson-Drake's important work must keep this finding of a Judaean scribal tradition in Jerusalem from the eighth century onwards at the forefront of their analyses").

those aforementioned, it has not yet been proven. In the case of Ancient Israel, it simply cannot be established, because it is impossible to evaluate one of the two parameters in question, namely the amount of literary works actually written (most of them would have been written on papyrus or leather).

It is also a precarious enterprise to assess the second parameter, the level of "development" of a country. In fact, the scholarly study of "state formation" in Iron Age Levant is still in its infancy. Typical is the case of Moab: most archaeologists date its "state formation" to the second half of the 9th century, but they debate the correct category to describe this society: was it a "tribal state", a "segmentary state", or an "early state"?[81] As for Edom, radiocarbon dating has established that contrary to expectations, the copper-smelting production at Khirbet en-Naḥas was in activity since ca. 1300 BCE and at its peak during the 10th and the 9th centuries, when it functioned on an industrial scale; in addition, significant building activity took place there during the 10th century (in particular, a four-chamber gate and large buildings were constructed).[82] As a result, it is now established that there were "local Levantine complex societies during the tenth and ninth centuries BCE in Edom capable of organizing a vast copper production system that centered on Faynan".[83] If the power that controlled this industry at this time was Edom, then it is worth remembering that only a few years ago, no one would have judged it developed enough for that.[84] If it was Judah,[85] then this kingdom is underestimated by some scholars. In any case,[86] the breakthrough in Levantine archaeology made by the team of

81 M. L. Steiner, "Moab during the Iron Age II Period", in M. L. Steiner and A. E. Killebrew (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of the Archaeology of the Levant c. 8000-332 B.C.E.* (Oxford, 2012), pp. 772, 777-79.

82 T. E. Levy et al., "Excavations at Khirbat en-Nahas 2002-2009: An Iron Age Copper Production Center in the Lowlands of Edom", in T. E. Levy, M. Najjar and E. Ben-Yosef (eds.), *New Insights into the Iron Age Archaeology of Edom, Southern Jordan*, vol. 1 (Los Angeles, 2014), pp. 89-245.

83 N. G. Smith, M. Najjar and T. E. Levy, "New Perspectives on the Iron Age Edom Steppe and Highlands", in Levy, Najjar and Ben-Yosef (eds.), *New Insights*, vol. 1, p. 3.

84 According to I. Finkelstein and O. Lipschits, it was Moab ("The Genesis of Moab: A Proposal", *Levant* 43 [2011], pp. 139-152). This proposal does not seem to have been followed by other scholars.

85 A possibility mentioned by A. Lemaire, "The United Monarchy: Saul, David and Solomon", in H. Shanks (ed.), *Ancient Israel: From Abraham to the Roman Destruction of the Temple* (Washington, 2011^3), p. 127.

86 The excavators of Khirbet en-Nahas (KEN) note that "at this time in our research, it is difficult to pinpoint which ethnic group was responsible for the rapid increase in monumental construction activities at KEN and the concomitant first instance of industrial-scale copper production (…) it should be emphasized that the bulk of archaeological material

T. E. Levy and M. Najjar is a reminder of the difficulty of making judgments regarding the stage of development of Iron Age "states".

In addition, possible counter-examples to the premise (a) have been exhibited. This may be the case of Jerusalem in the 14th century: several cuneiform letters discovered at Tell el-Amarna were sent from this city by king Abdi-heba, and yet, the archaeological remains of the latter are unimpressive: "there is very little physical evidence for the Late Bronze Age Jerusalem ruled by Abdi-heba".[87] Several scholars have noted that, reasoning in the theoretical framework of premise (a), one would never have guessed that such letters, written in one of the most complicated writing systems of Antiquity, could have come from this town.[88] Moreover, a fragment of cuneiform tablet has recently been unearthed at the Ophel; C. Rollston regards it as a "further demonstration of the fact that Late Bronze Age Jerusalem had a contingent of scribes with formal, standardized education in cuneiform".[89] A similar example would be Shechem, a "small and unfortified" town during the same period, since the El-Amarna letters sent by king Labayu most probably come from there.[90] On the other hand, it is not entirely clear whether a direct comparison between Canaan in the 10th century and in the 14th century is possible, notably because in the latter period its cities were integrated into the Egyptian international system.[91] Perhaps the

represents the primary component of the population at the site (i.e., the chief labor force); thus, in case of control by a minority of different ethnicity, it would be extremely difficult to recognize in the archaeological record" (T. E. Levy, M. Najjar and E. Ben-Yosef, "Conclusion", in T. E. Levy, M. Najjar and E. Ben-Yosef [eds.], *New Insights into the Iron Age Archaeology of Edom, Southern Jordan*, vol. 2 [Los Angeles, 2014], pp. 982-83).

87 A. E. Killebrew, "Jerusalem: Capital City Created in Stone and in Imagination", in N. Yoffee (ed.), *The Cambridge World History*, vol. 3: *Early Cities in Comparative Perspective, 4000 BCE-1200 BCE* (Cambridge, 2015), p. 422.

88 N. Naʿaman, "The Contribution of the Amarna Letters to the Debate on Jerusalem's Political Position in the Tenth Century BCE", *BASOR* 304 (1996), p. 21; E. Blum, "Solomon and the United Monarchy: The Textual Evidence", in R. G. Kratz and H. Spieckermann (eds.), *One God—One Cult—One Nation: Archaeological and Biblical Perspectives* (BZAW 405; Berlin/New York, 2010), p. 72.

89 C. A. Rollston, "A Fragmentary Cuneiform Tablet from the Ophel (Jerusalem): Methodological Musings about the Proposed Genre and Sitz im Leben", *Antiguo Oriente* 8 (2010), pp. 11-21.

90 Finkelstein, *Forgotten Kingdom*, p. 17 fn 1.

91 I owe this remark to Ronald Hendel (oral communication). For a criticism of the comparison made by some scholars between Jerusalem in these two periods in terms of political structure, see Van Seters (*The Biblical Saga*, pp. 73-85). Here my concern is only with the scribal education and its relationship with the degree of development exhibited by the archaeological record.

scribes in Canaan owed their cuneiform education to this system. Concerning the evidence found at Tell el-Amarna, S. Izre'el writes:

> There is some evidence (…) that there were also [at Akhetaton] guest students from abroad, who learned the letter formulae to be used for the correspondence between their lords, the vassals, and their master, the Pharaoh. We do not know who these students scribes were or which cities they came from. Since the language of the bulk of the Amarna letters from Canaan differs substantially from the language of the letters written by the scribes of the Pharaoh, one might surmise that there were also local cuneiform schools in Canaan. Yet, it is also possible that some scribes were educated, fully or in part, in Egypt.[92]

With regard to Jerusalem, Moran notes that the scribe responsible for the letters sent from this city to the Pharaoh may have studied in a Syrian tradition (in view of some features of these texts).[93] Whatever the case, it turns out that *the degree of material development of the local infrastructure in Jerusalem was not decisive in the ability to produce elaborate texts*. If the Jerusalemite scribe was trained in a foreign context, then afterwards, his sole presence in this city, however poorly developed it may have been, sufficed. The same can be said if we were to suppose that a cuneiform "school", or at least a standardized scribal training, existed in Jerusalem, since in concrete terms this would have involved merely the presence of a few individuals and the simplest logistics (e.g. clay tablets and stylus). The writing of texts is an activity that trained people could practice with rudimentary means in any place, regardless of the size of the buildings, the presence of fortifications in the cities, the production of luxury goods, and so on.

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92 S. Izre'el, *The Amarna Scholarly Tablets* (Cuneiform Monographs; Gröningen, 1997), p. 12.

93 W. Moran, "The Syrian Scribe of the Jerusalem Amarna Letters", in H. Goedicke and J. J. M. Roberts (eds.), *Unity and Diversity: Essays in the History, Literature and Religion of the Ancient Near East* (London, 1975), pp. 146-66, esp. 156. According to Z. Cochavi-Rainey and A. F. Rainey, "the Jerusalem Amarna letters are the most complex compositions in all the collection of texts from that archaeological find. The scribe of those letters demonstrates independence from the other texts that derived from the Southern Levant" ("Finite Verbal Usage in the Jerusalem Amarna Letters", *UF* 39 [2007], p. 55). In another article, Rainey has pointed out several scribal errors in these letters and noted that there were made by a scribe "writing in Canaan, using occasional West Semitisms, but still following a relatively foreign, North Syrian system with many Assyrianisms, and adopting certain Egyptian poetic, or semi-poetic, idioms" ("The Scatterbrained Scribe", in Y. Avishur and J. Blau [eds.], *Studies in Bible and the Ancient Near East Presented to Samuel E. Loewenstamm* [Jerusalem, 1978], p. 150).

In any case, Moab provides another counter-example: no one denies the presence of trained scribes at the very first stage of Moabite "state formation" according to most archaeologists (dated to the second half of the 9th century) since the impressive Mesha stele was written then. Generally speaking, as E. Blum has noticed, "the quasi-literary inscriptions we actually have are almost all (except the Shiloah-inscription) from the ninth or the beginning eighth century BCE: Mesha, Tel Dan, Kuntillet ʿAjrud, Tell Deir Alla—and none of these elaborated texts comes from a long-established kingdom."[94]

2.2 *The Level of Development of Judah in the 10th Century*

Concerning the second premise (b), does it really reflect the current state of archaeological research? According to I. Finkelstein, "new analyses of the archaeological data from Jerusalem have shown that in the tenth century BCE it was no more than a small, poor highlands settlement without monumental construction".[95] Yet the scholarly community is divided with regard to the archaeological remains that should be ascribed to the Jerusalem of the 10th century.[96] To add to the complexity of the debate, several scholars, notably Finkelstein, have hypothesized that the Jerusalem of the 10th century, including the palace of the Davidic kings, was situated on the Temple Mount, in which case this city remains largely *terra incognita*[97] and the only characteristic known to archaeologists is the (fairly limited) maximal surface area of the city.

On this last subject, Finkelstein himself acknowledges that the size of the city (as well as the presence of fortifications) is not decisive. Speaking

94 Blum, "Solomon", p. 71.

95 Finkelstein, *Forgotten Kingdom*, p. 43.

96 There is an ongoing debate about the dating of the well-known "Stepped Stone Structure" and of the "Large Stone Structure" unearthed by E. Mazar in the city of David, as well as about the relationship between them. To mention but a few recent publications on this topic: E. Mazar, *The Palace of King David, Excavations at the Summit of the City of David: Preliminary Report of Seasons 2005-2007* (Jerusalem/New York, 2009); I. Finkelstein, "The 'Large Stone Structure' in Jerusalem: Reality versus Yearning", *ZDPV* 127 (2011), pp. 1-10; A. Faust, "The Large Stone Structure in the City of David: A Reexamination", *ZDPV* 126 (2010), pp. 116-130; A. Mazar, "Archaeology and the Biblical Narrative: The Case of the United Monarchy", in Kratz and Spieckermann (eds.), *One God*, pp. 35-46. The publication of the first volume of the excavations final reports, just released, may open the way to new discussions (E. Mazar, *The Summit of the City of David. Excavations 2005-2008, Final Reports volume 1: Area G* [Jerusalem, 2015]).

97 I. Finkelstein, I. Koch and O. Lipschits, "The Mound on the Mount: A Possible Solution to the 'Problem with Jerusalem'", *JHS* 11 (2011), article 12 (http://www.jhsonline.org/Articles/article_159.pdf, visited the 06/29/2015).

of the northern kingdom, initially controlled by Tirzah, he writes: "in its formative days, the northern kingdom ruled over a larger, richer, and much more densely settled territory than Judah; still, it was ruled from an unassuming, unfortified settlement with seemingly no monuments."[98] Finkelstein provides other examples of modest capitals that controlled relatively extended kingdoms, including Shechem in the Late Bronze Age, Gibeon/Gibeah in the time of the house of Saul, and Jerusalem under the Hasmonean dynasty.[99] He himself draws the logical conclusion: "there is no correlation between the modest nature of the seat of the kings and the ability of the kingdom to expand territorially."[100] Taking him at his words, we are to conclude that Jerusalem, even if it was an "unassuming, unfortified settlement with seemingly no monuments" during the 10th century, was nevertheless theoretically able to control an extended kingdom.

This discussion concerning the extent of the kingdom controlled by Jerusalem in the 10th century is related to the dating of the most impressive architectural structures in the region, in particular the palaces discovered in Meggido and the six-chambered gates found at the same site as well as in Gezer and Hazor. They were dated to the 10th century by Y. Yadin and ascribed to Solomon (cf. 1 Kgs 9:15) but Finkelstein dates them to the 9th century and ascribe them to the Omrides. Here again, we only need to note that the issue is still much debated today.[101] It is also interwoven with the vexing

98 Finkelstein, *Forgotten Kingdom*, p. 82.

99 *Ibid*., pp. 73s, 80.

100 *Ibid*., pp. 73s.

101 E.g. A. Ben-Tor, "Hazor in the Tenth Century BCE", *NEA* 76.2 (2013), pp. 105-109; S. Ortiz and S. Wolff, "Guarding the Border to Jerusalem: The Iron Age City of Gezer", *NEA* 75.1 (2012), pp. 4-19; A. Mazar, "Archaeology and the Bible: Reflections on Historical Memory in the Deuteronomistic History", in C. M. Maier (ed.), *Congress Volume Munich 2013* (VTSup 163; Leiden/Boston, 2014), pp. 355-58. Nevertheless, let us assume for a moment, for the sake of argument, that Finkelstein is right about Megiddo, Gezer and Hazor. Then the kingdom of Israel was no less developed in the first half of the 9th century than Moab in the next half century. At that time, Moab, a small country, counted many agricultural settlements, some fortresses, and a couple of fortified towns, including Tell Dhiban, the capital, endowed with a palace (Steiner, "Moab", pp. 772-773) and Khirbat al-Mudaynah in the wadi ath-Thamad, where a six-chambered gate and tripartite buildings were found, and which is regarded by Finkelstein as providing a good example of "Omride architecture" (I. Finkelstein and O. Lipschits, "Omride Architecture in Moab: Jahaz and Ataroth", *ZDPV* 126 [2010], pp. 29-42; even if it this city is to be identified as Jahaz [Yahaṣ] and built by the Omrides as Finkelstein thinks, it was taken by Mesha according to his stele, line 20). Now let us even accept for a moment that there is a correlation between the development of a country and the ability to produce literature, as Finkelstein thinks. Since

problem of the chronology of Iron Age IIA. In this regard, what is certain is that many years after the introduction by I. Finkelstein of the "low chronology" (in 1996),[102] "most archaeologists still lean towards the more traditional chronology",[103] often in the form of the "modified conventional chronology" designed by A. Mazar.[104] Although this does not settle the debate, it is worth noting that Finkelstein has been compelled to revise his own chronology due to radiocarbon measures;[105] in his last book, he dates the beginning of the Iron IIA ca. 940-930.[106]

Finally, the "level of development" of the kingdom ruled by David / Solomon would be clearly revised upwards if it controlled the copper mines of Khirbet en-Nahas, as mentioned above, but this is impossible to decide.[107] Similarly, the site of Khirbet Qeiyafa may have belonged to Judah;[108] however, other proposals have been made and the data seem ambivalent.[109]

Moab was able in the second half of the 9th century to produce a long royal inscription such as the Mesha stele, containing more than 34 lines and written in good narrative style, then we have to conclude that Israel was able to produce similarly "long texts", that is of a size comparable to a short biblical chapter, *as early as the first half of the 9th century*.

102 I. Finkelstein, "The Archaeology of the United Monarchy: An alternative View", *Levant* 28 (1996), pp. 177-187.

103 J. W. Hardin, "Judah during the Iron Age II Period", in Steiner and Killebrew (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of the Archaeology of the Levant*, p. 745.

104 A. Mazar, "The Debate over the Chronology of the Iron Age in the Southern Levant: Its History, the Current Situation, and a Suggested Resolution", in T. E. Levy and T. Higham (eds.), *The Bible and Radiocarbon Dating* (London/Oakville, 2005), pp. 13-28; A. Mazar, "From 1200 to 850 BCE", in L. L. Grabbe (ed.), *Israel in Transition. From Late Bronze II to Iron IIa* (*c. 1250-850 BCE*), vol. 1: *Archaeology* (LHB.OTS 491; New York/London, 2008), p. 99. Among the many essays that undermines the low chronology, see lately H. Katz and A. Faust, "The Chronology of the Iron Age IIA in Judah in Light of Tel 'Eton Tomb C3 and Other Assemblages", *BASOR* 371 (2014), pp. 103-127. According to Smith, Najjar and Levy, radiocarbon dates from Khirbet en-Naḥas support the "modified conventional chronology" and make "untenable" many claims of the "low chronology", "especially for the tenth-century BCE socioeconomic and history of the southern Levant" ("New Perspectives", p. 3).

105 I. Finkelstein and E. Piasetzky, "The Iron Age Chronology Debate: Is the Gap Narrowing?", *NEA* 74/1 (2011), pp. 50-54.

106 Finkelstein, *Forgotten Kingdom*, p. 64.

107 See fn 86.

108 Garfinkel and Ganor (eds.), *Khirbet Qeiyafa*, vol. 1; Y. Garfinkel, S. Ganor and M. G. Hasel (eds.), *Khirbet Qeiyafa*, vol. 2: *Excavations Report 2009-2013* (Jerusalem, 2014).

109 Khirbet Qeiyafa may have belonged to an "early north Israelite entity" according to I. Finkelstein and A. Fantalkin ("Khirbet Qeiyafa: An Unsensational Archaeological and

In sum, the situation is complicated, there is a debate and this fact should be taken into account. Moreover, Finkelstein's views remain isolated on several important points. While this is no proof that he is wrong (he may be right on some points: time will tell, hopefully), the least that can be said for our present purpose is that categorical claims that Jerusalem was an insignificant town in the 10th century go beyond current knowledge and do not reflect the uncertainties of the scholarly debate. This leads us to conclude that not only is the first premise of the syllogism evoked at the beginning of this section invalid: the second premise proves to be far from being established.

3 Were the Conditions for Producing Literature Present in the Early Royal Period?

If what precedes is correct, there is no direct attestation of literary works from the 10th-9th centuries in the archaeological record, but the main reasons which convince some scholars that such works could not possibly have been written in this period are not well grounded. However, this does not prove that the conditions for producing literature during the early royal period were present. As far as we know, at the same period, Greek epic poems were orally composed and transmitted, before the Greeks borrowed the alphabet from the Phoenicians in the 8th century.[110] Mycenaean texts had been written beforehand, but the linear B script tradition seems to have come to an end in the 12th century, when the Mycenaean civilisation collapsed, after which a "Dark Age" took place.[111] Could it be that southern Canaan experienced a similar interruption in the scribal tradition? In this section, I will point out, on the contrary, some positive evidence regarding the conditions rendering possible the production of literary works in the early royal period.

3.1 *A Continuous Scribal Tradition*

First, there are traces of a continuous scribal tradition in Palestine since the 2nd millennium. Of course, cuneiform tablets found across the country from the 18th-13th centuries[112] as well as at Tell el-Amarna (14th century) demonstrate the enduring presence of trained scribes in Canaan during the 2nd

Historical Interpretation", *TA* 39 [2012], pp. 38-63), and to the Philistines according to Lemaire, "The United Monarchy", p. 105.

110 S. Saïd, M. Trédé and A. Le Boulluec, *Histoire de la littérature grecque* (Paris, 2013[3]), pp. 11-25, 55.

111 J. Whitley, *The Archaeology of Ancient Greece* (Cambridge, 2001), pp. 77-101, esp. 77, 100.

112 W. Horowitz, T. Oshima and S. L. Sanders, *Cuneiform in Canaan* (Jerusalem, 2006).

millennium. However, this tradition apparently came to an end ca. 1200 BCE (unless this is due to the limits of our documentation). The next attestations are stelae left by Neo-Assyrian kings during their western campaigns or administrative texts related to the Assyrian occupation.[113] Similarly, the alphabetic cuneiform tradition attested at Ugarit in the 13th century came to a sudden end in the beginning of the 12th century.

But we also have traces of another parallel scribal tradition. So-called "Proto-Sinaitic" and "Proto-Canaanite" inscriptions have been long known, but the data available today show that this script tradition extends into the first millennium, since inscriptions from the 11th-10th century (found at Izbet Sartah,[114] Tell es-Safi,[115] Khirbet Qeiyafa and at the Ophel)[116] arguably belong to this tradition. Hamilton has recently proposed a new periodization:[117] in Early Alphabetic A (ca. 1900-1400), texts still are semi-pictographic; in Early Alphabetic B (ca. 1400-1000/950), the script is generally linear, letter forms are simplified and lines are often horizontals (the Qeiyafa ostracon belongs to this stage); in Early Alphabetic C (ca. 1050-900, with an overlap with the previous period), the script becomes unidirectional, from right to left. Indeed, as Lemaire notes, in view of the discoveries made at the border between Philistia and Judah (at Izbet Sartah, Tel Gezer, Tel Zayit, Tell es-Safi/Gath, and Khirbet Qeiyafa), "the use of alphabetic script in this part of the country seems to have been a continuous tradition at least from the Late Bronze Age till Iron Age II".[118] Some scholars believe that this Early Alphabetic tradition developed into "national" scripts like in the Palaeo-Hebrew inscriptions from the 9th century on (the Tel Zayit abecedary[119] would attest to an intermediary stage),[120] others

113 *Ibid.*, p. 7.

114 M. Kochavi, "An Ostracon of the Period of the Judges from 'Izbet Ṣartaḥ", *TA* 4 (1977), pp. 1-13; A. Demsky, "A Proto-Canaanite Abecedary Dating from the Period of the Judges and its Implications for the History of the Alphabet", *TA* 4 (1977), pp. 14-27.

115 A. M. Maier, A. Zuckerman, S. J. Wimmer and A. Demsky, "A Late Iron Age I/Early Iron Age II Old Canaanite Inscription from Tell es-Sâfi/Gath: Palaeography, Dating, and Historical-Cultural Significance", *BASOR* 351 (2008), pp. 39-71.

116 E. Mazar, D. Ben-Shlomo and S. Aḥituv, "An Inscribed Pithos from the Ophel, Jerusalem", *IEJ* 63 (2013), pp. 39-49.

117 G. J. Hamilton, "Reconceptualizing the Periods of Early Alphabetic Scripts", in Hackett and Aufrecht (eds.), "*An Eye for Form*", pp. 42-50.

118 Lemaire, "West Semitic Epigraphy", p. 301.

119 R. E. Tappy, P. K. McCarter, M. J. Lundberg and B. Zuckerman, "An Abecedary of the Mid-Tenth Century BCE from the Judaean Shephelah", *BASOR* 344 (2006), pp. 5-46.

120 Lemaire, "Phénicien et philistien", p. 247; P. K. McCarter, "Paleographic Notes on the Tel Zayit Abecedary", in R. Tappy and P. K. McCarter (eds.), *Literate Culture and Tenth-Century Canaan: The Tel Zayit Abecedary in Context* (Winona Lake, 2008), pp. 45-59.

think that the Phoenician alphabet, itself stemming from the Early Alphabetic tradition, imposed itself on the Southern Levant in the 10th century and then evolved there into "national" scripts.[121] In both scenarios, there is an uninterrupted scribal activity, even a scribal tradition (regardless of its developments and ramifications) stretching from the 2nd to the 1st millennium. This is consistent with the indications of some continuity in the archaeological material found in Canaan from the Late Bronze Age to the Iron Age.

Further hints that the scribal tradition of the Iron Age may be traced back to the 2nd millennium include the continuous use of hieratic numerals; they appear on Egyptian texts from the Late Bronze Age as well as on Palaeo-Hebrew inscriptions from the Iron Age, and according to S. Wimmer:

> Das Szenario, wonach die mindestens im südlichen kanaan offenbar gut etablierte, hieratische Schreibtradition der pharaonischen Administration in der Zeit des Neuen Reiches, bzw. der Spätbronzezeit, zum Phänomen der in Juda und Israel üblichen Notierung von Zahl- und Sonderzeichen mit beigetragen hat, bleibt wahrscheinlich.[122]

It should be emphasized that the mastery of such a complicated system as the hieratic numerals seemingly points to the existence of a curriculum.[123]

There is therefore no indication that the scribal culture vanished from Canaan at the end of the 2nd millennium. What apparently disappeared from the region at that time, more precisely around 1200 BCE, is the script traditions using clay tablets (namely the cuneiform tradition and the alphabetic cuneiform tradition), probably because they were limited to the central administration and the diplomacy in the palatial context and did not survive the collapse of this context. This had a dramatic consequence: the long texts were henceforth mostly written with the linear alphabet on perishable materials such as papyrus and leather, so the documentation is full of *lacunae*.[124]

In fact, instead of supposing that a "state" should wait for a certain level of development to (re)create the means of literacy, we should think that a state

121 C. A. Rollston, "The Phoenician Script of the Tel Zayit Abecedary and Putative Evidence for Israelite Literacy", in Tappy and McCarter (eds.), *Literate Culture*, pp. 61-96.

122 S. Wimmer, *Palästinisches Hieratisch: Die Zahl- und Sonderzeichen in der althebräischen Schrift* (ÄAT 75; Wiesbaden, 2008), p. 279. See already O. Goldwasser, "An Egyptian Scribe from Lachish and the Hieratic Tradition of the Hebrew kingdoms", *TA* 18 (1991), pp. 251-52.

123 Rollston, *Writing and Literacy*, p. 113.

124 A. Lemaire, "The Spread of the Alphabet", *Diogenes* 218 (2008), pp. 49-50.

could coopt an already existing scribal tradition for its own needs.[125] E. Blum may not be far from the truth when he comments: "the new political structures emerging in the Southern Levant in the first millennium could indeed rely on a well-developed literary tradition. Moreover, they had an obvious interest in educating and training their own administrative, political and cultic elite, small as it might have been."[126] On this last point I would perhaps be less affirmative since I am not sure that every member of this elite was necessarily trained to write and read long texts; maybe this concerned only a few professional scribes (see below). Yet the point remains. And the continuous scribal tradition we have pointed out is what constitutes the fundamental difference between the Southern Levant and Greece in the early 1st millennium. As a result, we cannot draw an analogy between these cultures and postulate that the 10th-8th centuries constituted a "Dark Age" in Palestine, during which no literature were put into writing. On this point I agree with S. L. Sanders:

> The alphabet during the Late Bronze Age was a local craft technique that acquired increasing prestige during the retrenchment of the Egyptian empire and the collapse of the major city-states. Indeed, for the writers of the alphabet, a low-budget and multimedia writing technology, there may have been no collapse, since it was tied to a local, less differentiated social structure that was far less vulnerable. It was only for Babylonian users that the transition between the Late Bronze and early Iron Ages was a 'dark age'.[127]

3.2 *Scribes*

Admittedly, it does not follow that trained scribes were omnipresent. Some scholars think that literacy was relatively widespread in the Iron Age, others doubt it; still others think that the available evidence does not suffice to decide.[128] The aim of the present article is not to discuss the extent of literacy in Iron Age IIA. However, let us assume for the sake of argument that the capacity to write "substantial" texts was reserved to a few,[129] which is the

125 This idea comes from S. Sanders ("Writing and Early Iron Age Israel: Before National Scripts, Beyond Nations and States", in Tappy and McCarter [eds.], *Literate Culture*, pp. 97-112).

126 Blum, "Solomon", p. 72.

127 S. L. Sanders, *The Invention of the Alphabet* (Urbana/Chicago/Springfield, 2009), p. 101.

128 Hess, "Literacy", p. 95.

129 K. van der Toorn, *Scribal Culture and the Making of the Hebrew Bible* (Cambridge/London, 2007), pp. 10-11.

picture that may be drawn in view of the epigraphic data as well as the biblical texts according to some scholars.[130] In C. Rollston's view, several features of the Palaeo-Hebrew inscriptions during the 8th-6th centuries suppose a formal, standardized training of the scribes, and contrary to intuition, mastering an alphabetic script was not an easy task but required months of training.[131] Accordingly, we should not construe any inscribed mark of ownership as proof for the presence of a professional scribe.

Still, two facts hint of the existence of a formal training for scribes already during the 10th century: first, the ability of scribes to maintain a tradition including the mastery of hieratic numerals; second, the standardization of the shape of letters and of the writing direction during the 11th-10th centuries, as Hamilton has pointed out. Such a standardization cannot be explained by a natural or spontaneous convergence of the practice of untrained scribes in several places; it rather requires a formal training.[132] The recent discovery of a second inscription at Khirbet Qeiyafa, dated to ca. 1000 BCE, written from right to left with letters of normalised stances (all this in contrast to the first inscription), seems to corroborate that this standardization was in process around that time in the region.[133] In addition, if Rollston is right, at least certain of the Southern Levant scribes learned to use the very normalised Phoenician script in the 10th century.

A few inscriptions might be ascribed to apprentices in a curriculum, like the Qeiyafa ostracon[134] and the Tel Zayit abecedary (somebody learning to write only his own name would not have needed to learn all the letters of the alphabet). It is possible that these sites belonged to the Philistines, but even in that case, it would be unreasonable to think that the Judaeans ignored this technique used at their frontier. And it should be emphasized that only a couple of professional scribes would have sufficed to produce literary works in Jerusalem; only long media such as papyri were needed. In other words, *even a very low rate of literacy would be enough to allow for literary works to be produced*

130 I. Young, "Israelite Literacy: Interpreting the Evidence", *VT* 48 (1998), pp. 239-53, 408-22; Rollston, *Writing and Literacy*, pp. 132-133; Na'aman, "A Sapiential Composition from Ḥorvat 'Uza", pp. 231-232.

131 C. A. Rollston, "Scribal Education in Ancient Israel", *BASOR* 344 (2006), pp. 47-74; idem, *Writing and Literacy*, pp. 92-94.

132 Carr, *Formation*, pp. 376-78.

133 Y. Garfinkel, M. R. Golub, H. Misgav and S. Ganor, "The 'Išba'al Inscription from Khirbet Qeiyafa", *BASOR* 373 (2015), pp. 226-229, esp. 229, 230-31.

134 A. Demsky, "An Iron Age IIA Alphabetic Writing Exercise from Khirbet Qeiyafa", *IEJ* 62 (2012), pp. 186-199.

in Iron Age IIA Judah.[135] In this regard, it is noteworthy that the Book of Samuel mentions only two scribes at the court of David, Seraiah (2 Sam 8:17) and Sheva (2 Sam 20:25).

3.3 *A "National" Script in the 9th Century*

Further evidence of a scribal culture in the early royal period is the emergence of a Hebrew "national"[136] script, most probably during the 9th century.[137] The script of the Mesha stele, written during the 2nd half of this century, is virtually identical to the Palaeo-Hebrew script; in all likelihood, Moab adopted it during the period of vassalage under the Omrides that the stele itself mentions.[138] In addition, some of the distinctive features of this script are perceptible in a few inscriptions from the 9th century found in Israel/Judah, notably inscriptions on jars found at Tel Reḥov stratum IV, which ended "no later than 834 BCE."[139] By contrast, an inscription from stratum VI (mid-10th century) contains an archaic *mem* (a vertical zigzag),[140] while an inscription from stratum V (end of the 10th century or beginning of the 9th century)[141] contains features (elongated *mem* and *nun*) similar to that found in the Tel Zayit script, itself regarded as Phoenician or as a transitional between the early Canaanite script and the Palaeo-Hebrew script. Although this repartition may be due to chance, it is possible that we have here a palaeographical sequence. In any case, one can tentatively date the emergence of the Palaeo-Hebrew script to the first half of the 9th century at the latest.

Such a development clearly reflects a strengthening of the scribal tradition, perhaps related to a development in the administrative apparatus. More importantly, according to Rollston:

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135 J. M. Hutton, *The Transjordanian Palimpsest: The Overwritten Texts of Personal Exile and Transformation in the Deuteronomistic History* (BZAW 396; Berlin/New York, 2009), p. 171.

136 I am using inverted commas because that this notion is debatable: see Lehmann, "National Script or Areal Scribe" (paper read at the SBL International Meeting, Vienna, July 2014). This ongoing debate is interesting and caution is needed in any case. Still, for the time being, it seems to me that the hypothesis of a role played by the royal courts (or the court scribes) in the "areal" peculiarities of some scripts should not be excluded.

137 Rollston, *Writing and Literacy*, pp. 91-113.

138 *Ibid.*, p. 54.

139 Aḥituv and Mazar, "The Inscriptions from Tel Reḥov", pp. 44-50, 195-199 fig. 7-11 (see p. 51 for the dating of stratum IV).

140 *Ibid.*, p. 190 fig. 2.

141 *Ibid.*, p. 193 fig. 5.

> It would be most difficult to argue that a culture capable of developing and employing a distinct national script with a developed scribal culture did not have the capacity to write texts of various sorts (…) I am absolutely certain that a nation (Israel) that has a scribal apparatus that is capable of developing a national script and employing standardized orthographic conventions is certainly capable of producing literature.[142]

3.4 *Indirect Traces of Semi-Cursive Traditions in the Region*

Another piece of (indirect) evidence from the 9th century has been pointed out by B. Sass and I. Finkelstein, who rightly note that the Levantine monumental inscriptions from the 2nd half of this century (Tel Dan stele, Mesha stele, etc.) are written in a "carefully executed version of the cursive"; so they "indicate the prior use of the alphabet, in ink-written documents it would seem".[143] It is important to recall that the very existence of the semi-cursive script[144] is due to the practice of scribes writing fast, because they were writing long texts. Moreover, in a forthcoming article, B. Sass notes the presence of cursive features in (mostly Hebrew) inscriptions recently found at Tel Reḥov strata V and IV, Tel Amal IV-III, Tell eṣ-Ṣafi/Gath A3 and Rosh Zayit IIa, i.e., in Cisjordan and in Philistia, all dating to the 9th century in his view. This leads him to a new position: "These earliest cursive inscriptions, all stratified, are to be regarded as rare non-perishable spin-offs of the lost scribal output in ink on papyrus or parchment—already in the first half of the ninth century BCE".[145] If we follow A. Mazar's chronology, we may have to slightly push some of the dates of these inscriptions back in time. According to him and Aḥituv, Tel Rehov stratum V is dated to "the last decades of the 10th century or to the beginning of the 10th century",[146] the inscription from Tel Amal "was found in a stratum dated to the late tenth or ninth centuries BCE",[147] and the Rosh

142 Rollston, *Writing and Literacy*, pp. 134-35.

143 Finkelstein and Sass, "The West Semitic Alphabetic Inscriptions", pp. 195-96.

144 The adjective "cursive" is generally used in a loose meaning by North-West Semitic epigraphers; it may be more accurate to speak of "semi-cursive". For an even more rigorous approach of the vocabulary, see M. C. A. MacDonald, "On the Uses of Writing in Ancient Arabia and the Role of Palaeography in Studying Them", *Arabian Epigraphic Notes* 1 (2015), pp. 1-50, esp. 4-5.

145 B. Sass, "Aram and Israel during the 10th-9th Centuries BCE, or Iron Age IIA: The Alphabet", in O. Sergi, M. Oeming and I. de-Hulster (eds.), *In search of Aram and Israel: Politics, Culture and Identity* (Orientalische Religionen in der Antike; Tübingen, forthcoming). I am most grateful to my colleague and friend B. Sass for sending me this article.

146 Aḥituv and Mazar, "The Inscriptions from Tel Reḥov", p. 51.

147 *Ibid.*, p. 57.

Zayit sherd comes from a stratum dated by ^{14}C in the 10th-9th centuries.[148] It is therefore possible—not sure—that some of these artifacts date from the late 10th century, in which case they would indirectly prove the existence of "cursive" at that time. Furthermore, we have already mentioned R. G. Lehmann's important observation that some features in the Aḥiram inscription, *ca. 1000 BCE*, are due to a hand "trained in fluent semi-cursive flat writing".[149]

Under these circumstances, it seems now impossible to defend the notion of a staggered emergence of literary genres in the period 1000-700 BCE in southern Canaan, as if people mainly wrote marks of property in the 10th century, then began to produce royal inscriptions, letters and hymns in the 9th century, prophecy in the 8th century, and finally literature by 700 BCE.[150] We must admit that long texts were probably produced in Israel and the surrounding countries from the beginning of the 1st millennium BCE.

3.5 *A Difference between the 10th and the 9th Century?*

The considerations above seems to indicate that a little more evidence of scribal activity exists for the 9th century than for the 10th century. What are we to conclude of this? On the one hand, it is perfectly possible, even likely, that the administration grew in the 9th century, and that the rate of literacy increased at the same time. Thus there would have been a progressive development rather than a sudden growth in the 8th century.

On the other hand, we should be careful not to reason *a silentio*. As we have seen, there may be a historical explanation (Neo-Assyrian influence) to the fact that steles appear in Southern Levant only in the 2nd half of the 9th century. In addition, for a country to develop a "national" script does not mean that it could not produce long texts before, as shown by the case of Mesha, who was still using a foreign script when he had his stele carved. The same can be said for Ammon, since the Amman citadel stele, dated to ca. 800, is written in Aramaic script, whereas the Tell Siran bottle, ca. 600, exhibits a "national" Ammonite script.[151] Indeed, a Southern Levant scribal curriculum arguably existed already in the 10th century, as we have seen. In fact, the number of inscriptions dated to the 9th century and written by Israelites scribes (Tel Dan, Mesha, etc., are foreign evidence) is almost identical to that of texts from the

148 *Ibid.*, p. 56.

149 Lehmann, "Calligraphy and Craftsmanship in the Ahirom Inscription", p. 146; see also pp. 147, 160.

150 See the description of the "expansion in genres" in Sanders, *The Invention of Hebrew*, pp. 79-80.

151 See e.g. Aḥituv, *Echoes*, pp. 357-67.

10th century.[152] All this mitigates the difference between the 10th and the 9th centuries.

In any case, although an increase in scribal activity is likely to have taken place in the 9th century, the increase of inscriptional evidence compared to the 10th century in no way implies that the conditions for the production of long, literary texts were absent before.

Conclusion

As we have seen, the two main reasons that seem to indicate that no Hebrew literature could have been produced in the early royal period are ill-founded. Moreover, there is solid and multiple evidence for the existence of a continuous scribal tradition stretching from the 2nd millennium into the 1st. Furthermore, we have indirect evidence of fast writing with ink ca. 1000 BCE in Phoenicia and from the beginning of the 9th century, perhaps even the late 10th century, in Cisjordan and Philistia. At the turn of the millenium, some scribal curriculum arguably already existed in Palestine and, in all probability, at least a handful of professional scribes lived in Judah, especially in the courts of David and Solomon. In addition, the scribal tradition evolved in Palestine, probably in the first half of the 9th century, into a "national" script. In sum, the conditions for the production of literature were already present in the 10th and 9th centuries. Therefore, to the question: "Could any Hebrew literature have been written in the early royal period?", the answer of an epigrapher is definitively positive. Of course, this is all the more plausible if Jerusalem controlled an extended kingdom with some impressive cities, as A. Mazar and other leading archaeologists think. But importantly, the same conclusion obtains even if one holds the view that Judah and Israel were only nascent polities during the 10th century (or one polity if one accepts the historicity of the United Monarchy).

That said, conceivably the Israelites were *able* to produce a literature but, for some reason, such as being an oral society, they *did not*.[153] However, this

152 Aḥituv and Mazar, "The Inscriptions from Tel Reḥov", p. 63: "the number of inscriptions dating to the ninth century BCE—a time when all agree that states run by royal dynasties existed in both Judah and Israel—is also small and in fact, is no larger than the number of inscriptions dating to the tenth century BCE. Thus, the quantitative aspect of literacy cannot serve as a reliable criterion for determining whether or not there was a state in Israel during the tenth century BCE."

153 Cf. W. M. Schniedewind regarding texts sometimes ascribed to the time of David and Solomon: "Writing did not play an important enough role in early Israelite society to

is unlikely for two reasons. First, Israelites did not wait until the 8th century to put other kinds of texts into writing, and the burden of proof is on scholars who think that the Israelites deliberately refrained, when it came to literary works, from using this technique, all the more since fast writing in ink was in use. Secondly, this would be an historical anomaly. Literature was composed and transmitted in writing before and after this period in Palestine, as well as during this very period in other countries of the Ancient Near East.[154] To take an example in the immediate vicinity of Israel, indeed in a territory that at times belonged to the Northern Kingdom, the plaster inscriptions found at Tell Deir ʿAlla in the Jordan Valley, dated to the first half of the 8th century, contain a long prophetical text that was most probably copied from a scroll, as we have already noted. The text itself was certainly composed before: A. Lemaire would say in the 10th or 9th century,[155] E. Puech thinks perhaps even in the 2nd millenary.[156] If such a text was transmitted in writing since Iron IIA (or even Iron I) in the Jordan Valley, then why would Israel and Judah have excluded writing for the transmission of their own literary works? This is not to say that we should dismiss orality as a means of composing literary works; in fact, there may have been an interaction, even a continuum between Israelite orality and literacy.[157] But this is different from the "romantic notion of an oral period in the history of Israel followed by the time of literacy in which Israel literature becomes written and bookish".[158]

In sum, from an epigraphical point of view, the existence of a Hebrew literature in Iron Age IIA is *possible*; from an historical point of view, grounded in analogies, it is *plausible*. It is important to note that this does not prove that sources or redactions of the texts we know, i.e. the biblical books, were part of

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warrant writing down these songs and stories, proverbs and parables." (*How the Bible Became a Book* [Cambridge, 2004], p. 63).

154 A. Millard, "The knowledge of writing in Late Bronze Age Palestine", in K. Van Lerberghe and G. Voet (eds.), *Languages and Cultures in Contact: At the Crossroads of Civilizations in the Syro-Mesopotamian Realm: Proceedings of the 42nd Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale* (Louvain, 1999), p. 217.

155 Lemaire, "Levantine Literacy".

156 E. Puech, "Bala'am and Deir 'Alla", in G. H. van Kooten and J. van Ruiten (eds.), *The Prestige of the Pagan Prophet Balaam in Judaism, Early Christianity and Islam* (Themes in Biblical Narrative: Jewish and Christian Traditions 11; Leiden/Boston, 2008), pp. 25-47.

157 S. Niditch, *Oral World and Written Word: Ancient Israelite Literature* (Louisville, 1996). See also the notion of "oral-textual milieu" adopted by Hutton (*Transjordanian Palimpsest*, pp. 168-175), and the concepts of "oral-written transmission of literature" and "oral-written curriculum" studied by Carr (*Formation*, pp. 13-36, 403-31).

158 Niditch, *Oral World and Written Word*, p. 134.

this literature. Clues to this should rather be sought in exegetical studies that hypothesize a *Sitz im Leben* in the 10th-9th centuries for parts of the Books of Samuel and Kings,[159] for instance, and in the linguistic dating of texts in Archaic Biblical Hebrew which *may* hint that they stem from the 2nd millennium and have been transmitted in writing; but that is another story.

159 E.g. A. Caquot and P. de Robert, *Les livres de Samuel* (CAT 9; Geneva, 1994); J. Vermeylen, *La loi du plus fort: Histoire de la rédaction des récits davidiques de 1 Samuel 8 à 1 Rois 2* (BETL 154; Leuven/Paris, 2000), p. 688; B. Halpern, *David's Secret Demons: Messiah, Murderer, Traitor, King* (Grand Rapids/Cambridge, 2001), pp. 57-72; W. Dietrich, *The Early Monarchy in Israel: The Tenth Century BCE* (Biblical Encyclopedia 3; Atlanta, 2007), pp. 227-316; M. Sweeney, *I & II Kings* (OTL; Louisville, 2007), pp. 31-32; Blum, "Solomon", pp. 70-71; Hutton, *Transjordanian Palimpsest*, pp. 364-366; B. Halpern and A. Lemaire, "The Composition of Kings", in B. Halpern and A. Lemaire, *The Books of Kings* (VTSup 129; Leiden/Boston, 2010), pp. 123-153.