CHAPTER TWO

THE ALPHABET, ORTHOGRAPHY AND PHONOLOGY

I. The Alphabet and Orthography

A. Phoenician

Phoenician was written in a twenty-two letter alphabet, called by the Greeks τα Φοινικεία γράμματα (“the Phoenician letters,” Herodotus, v. 58). In spite of its name, this alphabet had not been invented by the Phoenicians but, rather, had been devised in the Late Bronze Age and later, adapted by the Phoenicians to the needs of their language which, in the early Iron Age, possessed a repertory of twenty-two consonantal phonemes. The twenty-two letter alphabet was retained throughout the history of the Phoenician language, well into the Late Roman period, even though many of the original phoneme graphemes no longer existed.

In the matter of orthography, Phoenician scribes of the Iron Age employed the purely consonantal system of spelling used in Late Bronze Age II literary Ugaritic although they were acquainted with the system of matres lectionis (vowel-letters) used for the writing of contemporary Aramaean, Judaean and Moabite. Occasionally and selectively, however, they did use waw and yod, principally in the spelling of foreign words but also for some frequent inflectional morphemes. The letter he was not however used by them.

Instances of the use of the letters waw and yod, even in the spelling of foreign names, are exceedingly few: (i) ṭ is found for o in the spelling of Cypriote Greek royal names DMWNKS (Greek Δαμονίκος) and ḢNDRWNKŠ (Greek Ανδρωνίκος) on coins of Lapethos (see RPC p. 97-100); (ii) ṭ is found for u in the spelling of the ethnicon LWKY Lūkī (“Lycian,” CIS i 45). It is used exceptionally in the spelling of the Phoenician noun SWT sūt (“garment,” Byblos KAI 11). The letter ṭ is found for i in the spelling of the Cypriote Phoenician city-name DYΛ edil (Egyptian: Ramesses III Simons XXXV, 11 ί-d2-l; Assyrian: Esar. V 64 E-di-’-il.) In native Phoenician words, ṭ is most commonly found as a word-final vowel-letter for i in (i) the occasional plene spelling of the pronoun ṮNK ħaniki (“I,” for standard spelling ṮNK); (ii) in the plene spelling of the first singular
possessive pronoun -i ("my") although not in Byblian Phoenician or early Tyro-Sidonian Phoenician (KAI 24, the Kilamuwa inscription) nor in Cypriote Phoenician; the latter scribal schools preferred the archaic spelling -Ø of the pronoun; (iii) in the plene spelling of the third person singular (masculine and feminine) possessive pronoun i ("his/her"), of which examples of the original defective spelling are very rare. Rare and restricted in Phoenician orthography, the use of W and Y became common in Punic and in Neo-Punic.

Also used in Phoenician, if rarely, is final ’aleph to indicate the presence of a vowel, especially in personal and place-names. This device may have originated in the spelling of hypocoristic personal names like ’D ’Iddo (KAI 20). It is found in the spelling of the Greek personal name HRN’ Ηρηνή (KAI 56) and the Greek place-name L’DK’ Λαοδίκεια (Hill 1, 52). This orthographic device, rare in Phoenician, became very common in Punic orthography, serving to indicate the presence of any vowel.

Phoenician orthography was always a mixture of historical spellings, reflecting the pronunciation of an earlier period, and phonetic spellings, reflecting contemporary pronunciation. Historical spelling is represented by a word like MY (“who?”), pronounced mì but its standard spelling reflecting the earlier form miya, the yod being the consonant yod, not a matres lectionis. In contrast, the word for “fruit,” pìrì, was spelled PR (14.12), as pronounced, not PRY, reflecting the historical form pìry(u); so, too, in Punic, in which the word-final vowel was indicated by the vowel-letter (mater lectionis) aleph: GD’ gëdì < gidy(u), (“goat,” 69.9). Sometimes, historic spellings and phonetic spellings existed side by side; for instance, the standard spelling of the third person masculine singular possessive pronoun used with a noun in the genitive case was -Ø -i, the yod being a vowel-letter (mater lectionis); but still found occasionally is the earlier spelling -Ø. The use of a historical spelling or phonetic spelling is also determined by scribal preference and usage.

Inner Phoenician Orthographic Differences

Within Phoenician itself different scribal practices prevailed. For instance, Cypriote Phoenician orthography was distinct from that of Levantine Phoenician: the scribes of Cyprus occasionally used the “phonetic” spelling ’Z for standard Phoenician Ž in writing the singular demonstrative pronouns eždé (masculine) and eždō (feminine), employing the ’aleph to indicate the presence in pronunciation of the