The purpose of this article is, first, to discuss some theoretical considerations surrounding the problem of literacy in ancient Israel, and, second, to attack the theory that the introduction of the alphabet brought widespread literacy to Israel. The problems will be discussed within the context of the sociology of innovation and communication.

A. The problem of defining literacy

It is important that we should begin by defining what we mean by the key term "literacy". There are at least three very important variables involved, all of which can have a profound effect on the way in which the pertinent historical data are analysed. "Literacy" has been taken to mean either the ability only to write, the ability only to read, or the ability to do both these things. A further variable, the one most often argued over in studies of modern literacy, is the degree of skill a person should acquire in reading and writing before he or she can be termed "literate".

These variables are not merely academic, and an unwillingness to consider them has had unfortunate consequences. To understand their importance, we need only consider how any one of them affects the way we discuss the problem of literacy in ancient Israel in the light of, for example, the writing found stamped on innumerable jar handles and pots. We could use this evidence to argue that the person who wrote "belonging to PN" on a jar handle a) could not necessarily read what he was writing, b) could write larger inscriptions, or c) could both read and write, not only these, but much longer inscriptions. We could likewise argue, using the same evidence, that the person who read this writing a) could necessarily write it too, b) could...
not write it, or c) could both read and write far longer passages. The point to be borne in mind is that in all these interpretations it is not the evidence which is the variable. It is our understanding of the term "literacy".

Studies of literacy and education in other societies show how very important these variables are, and how necessary it is to distinguish between them. It is known that completely illiterate and functionally literate (see below) people are capable of recognizing a large number of letter groupings, e.g., street names, personal names ²). Further, we know from the history of education that in many societies where literacy was first taught formally, reading skills were considered far more important than writing skills, and the aim of teaching literacy was primarily to teach the former. And it is further known that, in such instances, reading skills were taught only up to a very basic level, but yet those who had them were still termed "literate" ³). The problem of literacy, therefore, is not a black and white, either/or issue. It is a far more complex problem, and must be treated most circumspectly.

In this article we shall mean by the term "literacy" what is today known more correctly as "functional literacy", i.e., "the ability to read and write written symbols at a level of competence adequate for carrying out the functions of the individual's role in his customary social system" ⁴). This definition has certain advantages over others. First, it allows literacy to vary from role to role, from social stratum to social stratum, and from place to place. Second, it allows the requirements of literacy to change as an individual becomes either socially or geographically mobile. Third, it sidesteps the problem of having to define too closely such crucial but difficult terms as "widespread literacy", a point we shall return to below.

B. The diffusion of the alphabet

That writing can be classified as a technology is generally accepted ⁵). That the alphabet represented a quite considerable advance

⁵) See H. M. McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy* (Toronto, 1966), for the most vigorous defence of this viewpoint.