ISRAELITE LITERACY: INTERPRETING THE EVIDENCE

PART II¹

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(5) Interpretation

(a) "Reading" and "writing"

In view of the comments in Part I of this article, we must now try
to suggest what we may know about the extent of literacy in ancient
Israel. Interestingly, the list of those who are said to read in our sources
largely overlaps with those who are said to write. There is, however,
the case of the skilled craftsmen in Exod. xxxix 30 who engrave the
simple statement "Holy to the Lord" on the high priest’s crown. Our
evidence does not allow us to see craftsmen reading, or even writing
longer texts. It is possible to interpret that the skilled craftsman mastered
only those literacy skills which were necessary for his trade. It is
important to note that epigraphic evidence suggests that some crafts-
men at least worked with outlines already traced for them by scribes.²
This one verse is all the biblical evidence we have to go on, however.
Nevertheless, with this possible exception, our literary sources from
ancient Israel portray the same groups—scribes, administrators and
priests—as being the ones who both write and read. Thus if this is
evidence for literacy, we may see that in ancient Israel literacy implied
skills in both reading and writing.

Here we come to the crucial issue. Even for these three clearly

² J. Prignaud, "Scribes et Graveurs à Jerusalem vers 700 Av.J.-C.", in R. Moorey
and P. Parr (ed.), Archaeology in the Levant Essays for Kathleen Kenyon (Warminster, 1978),
texts, such as abecedaries inscribed in stone, with the writing of skilled craftsmen who
had a practical knowledge of writing.
defined groups who are said both to read and to write: can we be certain that they were really literate, in view of our finding that Hebrew kātab can mean “to have someone write”, and qārā’ can mean “to have something read”? It must be frankly admitted that in only a minority of cases can we prove that the people in our lists (scribes obviously excepted) did not use a scribe’s services.3 We would emphasize again, however, that this situation was quite normal in antiquity, where it was regular practice e.g. for a written work of any type to be dictated to a scribe or secretary.4 We cannot expect our ancient sources unambiguously to show non-professionals regularly writing for themselves. This point made, however, is it still of some worth that our sources consistently show us scribes, administrators and priests as “reading” and “writing”? Apart from the functional literacy of craftsmen, we have argued that there is not one reference in the literary sources to an individual from outside these groups either reading or writing. Even taking into full account the common use of scribal intermediaries we still suggest that it is possible to talk in terms of a definite literate group in ancient Israel. What is meant by the expression “literate group” in this context is to indicate that those people who regularly dealt with written material in ancient Israel belonged to certain definite segments of society. This formulation is, of course, unsatisfying in that it raises but does not answer the question whether those members of society who regularly used written material would be encouraged to see the point of learning to use those skills themselves. Furthermore, even this cautious formulation is subject to the general problem of whether our written sources talk of these groups alone as reading and writing because they were the only members of the literate group, or whether the focus of the texts is simply on these groups anyway, to the exclusion of other possibly literate groups in society, albeit of lesser social status (note: there is only one mention of craftsmen). Nevertheless, it seems to be a reasonably formulated conclusion based on the evidence presented thus far.

3 E.g. Hoshiah in Lachish letter 3 (discussed below) seems to make an explicit claim not to have used a scribe to read; Moses does not seem to have had a scribe with him on Mt Sinai. Also note that David’s message to Joab concerning Uriah in 2 Sam. xi 14-15 seems to have been secret, and hence we may suggest that Joab alone read it, even though this is not explicitly described.

4 See Harris (below, n. 12), Achtemeier (below, n. 27), and S. Franklin, “Literacy and Documentation in Early Medieval Russia”, Speculum 60 (1985), p. 9.