SECOND EDITION

Old Testament Textual Criticism

A PRACTICAL INTRODUCTION

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and Eric J. Tully

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For Ruth
Like her biblical namesake,
she too is אֵשֶׁת חַיִל (a capable woman)
—ERB

For my parents, Don and Connie,
who modeled a love for the Bible
and taught me to take seriously every word
—EJT

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ABBREVIATIONS

General and Bibliographic

AB	Anchor Bible
ABD	*The Anchor Bible Dictionary*. Edited by David Noel Freedman. 6 vols. New York: Doubleday, 1992.
AnOr	Analecta Orientalia
BA	*Biblical Archaeologist*
BAR	*Biblical Archaeology Review*
BASOR	*Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research*
BCE	before the Common Era
BDB	Francis Brown, Samuel R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs. *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1907; corrected printing, 1953.
BHK	*Biblia Hebraica*. Edited by Rudolf Kittel. 3rd ed. Stuttgart: Privilegierte Württembergische Bibelanstalt, 1937.
BHQ	*Biblia Hebraica Quinta*. Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2004–.
BHS	*Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*. Edited by Karl Elliger and Wilhelm Rudolph. Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1983.
BRev	*Bible Review*
ca.	*circa*, about, approximately
CE	Common Era
cent(s).	century/centuries
chap(s).	chapter(s)
corr.	corrected

Eng.	English Bible chapter/verse numbering
esp.	especially
ESV	English Standard Version
fasc.	fascicle
fig.	figure
GKC	*Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar*. Edited by Emil Kautzsch. Translated by Arthur E. Cowley. 2nd ed. Oxford: Clarendon, 1910.
HALOT	*The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*. Ludwig Koehler, Walter Baumgartner, and Johann J. Stamm. Translated and edited under the supervision of Mervyn E. J. Richardson. Leiden: Brill, 1994–99.
HBCE	The Hebrew Bible: A Critical Edition. Atlanta: SBL Press, 2015–.
HIBD	*Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*. Edited by Chad Brand, Charles Draper, and Archie England. Nashville: Holman Reference, 2003.
HUBP	Hebrew University Bible Project. Jerusalem: Magnes, 1975–.
JM	Paul Joüon. *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew*. Translated and revised by T. Muraoka. 2 vols. Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute Press, 1991.
JSS	*Journal of Semitic Studies*
KJV	King James Version
lit.	literally
LXX	Septuagint
MS(S)	manuscript(s)
NICOT	New International Commentary on the Old Testament
NIDOTTE	*New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*. Edited by Willem VanGemeren. 5 vols. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997.
NIV	New International Version
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
NT	New Testament
OBO	Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis
OT	Old Testament
pt.	part
ptc.	participle
VTSup	Supplements to Vetus Testamentum
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary

Textual Sigla

G	Greek Septuagint	SP	Samaritan Pentateuch
MT	Masoretic Text	V	Latin Vulgate
S	Syriac Peshitta	T	Aramaic targum(s)

Hebrew Bible/Old Testament

Gen.	Genesis	Song	Song of Songs
Exod.	Exodus	Isa.	Isaiah
Lev.	Leviticus	Jer.	Jeremiah
Num.	Numbers	Lam.	Lamentations
Deut.	Deuteronomy	Ezek.	Ezekiel
Josh.	Joshua	Dan.	Daniel
Judg.	Judges	Hosea	Hosea
Ruth	Ruth	Joel	Joel
1–2 Sam.	1–2 Samuel	Amos	Amos
1–2 Kings	1–2 Kings	Obad.	Obadiah
1–2 Chron.	1–2 Chronicles	Jon.	Jonah
Ezra	Ezra	Mic.	Micah
Neh.	Nehemiah	Nah.	Nahum
Esther	Esther	Hab.	Habakkuk
Job	Job	Zeph.	Zephaniah
Ps(s).	Psalms	Hag.	Haggai
Prov.	Proverbs	Zech.	Zechariah
Eccles.	Ecclesiastes	Mal.	Malachi

Old Testament Apocrypha

Add. Dan.	Additions to Daniel	Pr. Man.	Prayer of Manasseh
Add. Esth.	Additions to Esther	Ps. 151	Psalm 151
Bar.	Baruch	Sir.	Sirach
Bel	Bel and the Dragon	Sg. Three	Song of the Three Jews
1–2 Esd.	1–2 Esdras		
Jdt.	Judith	Sus.	Susanna
Let. Jer.	Letter of Jeremiah	Tob.	Tobit
1–4 Macc.	1–4 Maccabees	Wis.	Wisdom (of Solomon)
Pr. Azar.	Prayer of Azariah		

New Testament

Matt.	Matthew	1–2 Thess.	1–2 Thessalonians
Mark	Mark	1–2 Tim.	1–2 Timothy
Luke	Luke	Titus	Titus
John	John	Philem.	Philemon
Acts	Acts	Heb.	Hebrews
Rom.	Romans	James	James
1–2 Cor.	1–2 Corinthians	1–2 Pet.	1–2 Peter
Gal.	Galatians	1–3 John	1–3 John
Eph.	Ephesians	Jude	Jude
Phil.	Philippians	Rev.	Revelation
Col.	Colossians		

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INTRODUCTION

As long as authors have produced texts, there has been a need for textual criticism. One of the most famous errors occurred in a 1631 version of the King James Bible when the printer omitted the critical word "not" from Exod. 20:14 (the seventh commandment). The text read, "Thou shalt commit adultery," and the edition became known as the "Wicked Bible." The Bible is a text that has a great deal of significance in people's lives. It is studied and argued over and analyzed. Therefore, every word matters . . . even (and sometimes *especially*) a little word like "not." The discipline of textual criticism exists because every word is important and we want to ensure that we are reading what its authors intended to write.

However, the importance of OT textual criticism is matched by its complexity. The vast array of editions, variants, scribal errors, and proposed solutions can seem overwhelming, especially to a beginner. This book aims to introduce the discipline of OT textual criticism in a practical, accessible way without oversimplifying matters. This is a fascinating and exciting area of study with significant implications for our interpretation of the OT text.

Need for Old Testament Textual Criticism

Textual criticism has traditionally been called lower criticism not because it is a less significant study of the Bible than other disciplines, but because it is *foundational* to all other study.[1] Before we can exegete a passage in the OT, we must have a text to exegete! In textual criticism, we examine the text of our passage to determine what it says before we can determine what it means. There is no sense in exegetical wrangling over a difficult word or phrase if that word

1. This is in contrast to higher criticism, which investigates the history and message of the text itself.

or phrase is a corruption. On the other hand, if a difficult phrase is original, we are committed to understanding what the biblical author might have meant.

We can compare two hypothetical extreme views regarding the need for textual criticism of the OT. The first holds that the Hebrew text has been so carefully transmitted that textual criticism is, for all practical purposes, unnecessary. The second maintains that the text of the OT is so uncertain that it is impossible for text critics to recover the original wording of the Hebrew Scriptures.

In response to the first view, textual criticism is necessary because no one source contains *the* biblical text. We have multiple witnesses to the biblical text, including manuscripts in Hebrew, Greek, and a number of other languages as well. These manuscripts vary to different degrees, reflecting differences from each other in everything from spelling to the structure of an entire book of the Bible. Even within one manuscript there might be various traditions with competing variant readings. Douglas Stuart states: "The problems are real. There is no chapter of the Bible for which all ancient manuscripts have exactly the same wording. Many chapters, in fact, display textual problems in virtually every verse."[2]

We can see evidence in our English Bibles of this variation. For example, in Deut. 33:2 the NRSV has, "The LORD came from Sinai, and dawned from Seir upon us." A footnote indicates that the last word "us" comes from the Greek, Syriac, Vulgate, and targum, but the Hebrew has "upon them." By contrast, the NIV follows the Hebrew with "The LORD came from Sinai and dawned over them from Seir." Because the NIV has followed the Hebrew (which is the base text), they do not need to signal the existence of the variant reading. Here we have two major English versions in disagreement over the text of the Bible!

Our major English versions of the OT are based, for the most part, on the Hebrew text rather than on the versions.[3] This is because the majority of the OT was originally written in Hebrew and because the masoretic[4] Hebrew text was standardized and carefully copied. But the Hebrew text does not always contain the best reading. For example, in Judg. 14:15 the Hebrew has, "on the seventh day they said to Samson's wife." In this verse, however, the NRSV and NIV both follow the Greek and Syriac versions and translate, "On the *fourth* day they said to Samson's wife." Interestingly, the KJV follows the Hebrew. Once again, we are forced to choose between two mutually exclusive readings.

We cannot avoid practicing textual criticism if we are going to be serious exegetes of the biblical text. If we try to ignore variant textual readings and

2. Douglas Stuart, "Inerrancy and Textual Criticism," in *Inerrancy and Common Sense*, ed. Roger R. Nicole and J. Ramsey Michaels (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980), 98.

3. For more on this Masoretic Text, see chap. 3.

4. The spellings "masoretic" and "massoretic" alternate in the scholarly literature. "Masoretic" is the form used in the present work.

simply choose to follow one text, then we have just practiced textual criticism! The choice of one text means the selection of all of the distinctive readings in that text and the rejection of variants in all other texts, regardless of whether they are the best readings or not. The question is whether we are going to practice textual criticism by this kind of default selection, or whether we will practice it with as much perspective, background, and training as possible.

While one hypothetical view downplays the need for OT textual criticism, another emphasizes it to such an extent that the basic trustworthiness of the text is placed in doubt. For example, the following quote from Shemaryahu Talmon may sound quite disheartening:

> The scholar who takes a synoptic view of all the sources at his disposal is confronted with a bewildering plethora of *variae lectiones* in the extant versions of the Old Testament books. . . . It should be borne in mind that the printed editions represent the end of a long chain of textual development and of editorial activities which were aimed at unifying the sacred texts. These late editions can in no way be taken to exhibit faithfully the autographs of the biblical authors. In fact not one single verse of this ancient literature has come to us in an original manuscript, written by a biblical author or by a contemporary of his, or even by a scribe who lived immediately after the time of the author. . . . Even a cursory perusal of the sources available immediately reveals that not one tradition and not one manuscript is without fault.[5]

Talmon reminds us that we do not have access to the original autographs of the Bible, only copies, and these copies have faults. In other words, the original wording of Scripture is distributed across several manuscripts and translations, each of which might contain the best reading in a given instance.

This is not cause for discouragement. First, we must remember that the vast majority of the differences between manuscripts are quite minor. Many reflect insignificant pronunciations such as the difference between "tom*ā*to" and "tom*ah*to" or spelling differences such as "baptise" (UK) versus "baptize" (US). Relatively few of the differences, in terms of percentages, fundamentally change the meaning of the text. Talmon himself quickly balances the statement quoted above by saying that "these errors and textual divergences between the versions materially affect the intrinsic message only in relatively few instances."[6] Bruce Waltke suggests that, on average, there is about one textual note in *BHS* for each ten words. Textual criticism, by its very nature,

5. Shemaryahu Talmon, "The Old Testament Text," in *From the Beginnings to Jerome*, vol. 1 of *The Cambridge History of the Bible*, ed. Peter R. Ackroyd and Christopher F. Evans (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 161–62.

6. Ibid., 162.

focuses on the variant readings, but the 90 percent or more of the text that exists without variation must also be kept in view.[7]

Second, we need not be discouraged because the discipline of textual criticism gives us the tools to correct manuscripts and establish the original text. Textual criticism is not a symptom of a multitude of manuscripts with conflicting readings . . . it is the cure. With a disciplined approach and the proper background knowledge, we can sift through the variants and establish the text with a high degree of confidence and accuracy.

Elements of Old Testament Textual Criticism

What are the activities involved in actually performing textual criticism of the OT? What must the beginning text critic be able to do? First, one must be aware of at least the basics of the history of the transmission of the OT. This includes both the Hebrew text and the ancient versions of the OT. An awareness of how scribes copied—and of how translators rendered—the text will help the student deal with variant readings. Second, one must be able to collect the specific variant readings. This requires an ability to work with critical editions and apparatuses and to understand the terminology of the discipline and the ways that variants are presented and compared. Third, the text critic must understand how to compare the evidence. This requires a knowledge of how the various manuscripts and translations relate to each other historically and genetically. This book will introduce all of these topics and suggest ways to study them further.

Along with these very practical issues, the text critic also needs to understand some theory. Are some manuscripts or versions inherently better than others? What constitutes the "best" reading? What is our goal in textual criticism? This book will introduce these concepts as well, providing perspective and an entry into a rich and fascinating field of study.

Plan of Attack

Following this introduction, chapter 1 deals with writing in the ancient Near East. A general understanding of ancient writing practices allows a better understanding of the transmission of the text of the Hebrew Bible and of how its best wording may be determined.

The next three chapters cover the transmission of the OT text. Chapter 2 summarizes the history of the transmission of the OT text from the time of

7. Bruce K. Waltke, "Old Testament Textual Criticism," in *Holman Introduction to the Bible*, ed. David S. Dockery, Kenneth A. Mathews, and Robert Sloan (Nashville: Broadman, forthcoming).

the writing of the individual biblical books until our modern era. Chapter 3 discusses the most important Hebrew manuscripts that are known at the present time. We discuss the Dead Sea Scrolls, the Samaritan Pentateuch, and the Masoretic Text, in chronological order. Chapter 4 discusses the most important ancient versions and the contribution they can make to the study of the OT text. Working again in chronological order, we introduce the Greek Septuagint, the Aramaic targums, the Syriac Peshitta, and the Latin Vulgate. This chapter concludes with a discussion of the particular challenges involved in working with ancient translations.

Given the information about the transmission of the text, how do we discover what is the best reading in a particular verse of the OT? Chapters 5–8 describe the practical steps involved in determining the most original reading. Chapter 5 introduces the critical apparatus and layout of *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* (*BHS*) and *Biblia Hebraica Quinta* (*BHQ*).[8] We are well aware of the dangers inherent in seeking to perform textual criticism solely on the basis of *BHS*.[9] Yet it is obvious that the beginner needs to start at just this point. For that reason this book will focus on this preliminary, but also necessary, stage of textual criticism—that is, making use of the information included in *BHS* and the in-process *BHQ*.

Chapter 6 surveys the typical kinds of scribal changes—both inadvertent and intentional—that have been introduced into the OT text through the years. Chapter 7 focuses on the principles for establishing the best text. These principles include how to evaluate both external and internal evidence. In a distinctive contribution among books on textual criticism, chapter 8 presents a textual commentary on the book of Ruth. It seems clear that an extended treatment of the textual issues in a short OT book will offer a decided advantage over the more usual discussion of various independent textual problems scattered throughout the OT.

The conclusion summarizes the results of this study of textual criticism. It prepares the student to continue critical study of the OT text. In addition, the final chapter indicates what steps are needed for the reader to pursue advanced textual analysis of the Hebrew Bible. Finally, two appendixes provide additional resources. Appendix A is a key to the Latin abbreviations in *BHS*. Appendix B presents a survey of the current, complex discussion of the goals of textual criticism.

8. *BHQ* is not yet fully available, but early fascicles have appeared. See the details in chap. 5.

9. Critics of *BHS* usually emphasize that the information listed is incomplete and that some of what is listed is incorrect. See James Barr, "Review of *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*," *JSS* 25, no. 1 (1980): 98–105; Ralph W. Klein, *Textual Criticism of the Old Testament: From the Septuagint to Qumran* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1974), 62–63, cites Harry M. Orlinsky's analogous criticism of *BHK*.

Textual Criticism and Inspiration

Before beginning, a word about inspiration is in order. Inspiration refers to the process by which God, through the Holy Spirit, ensured that the text of Scripture reflects exactly what he wanted it to say. For example, in the case of a biblical narrative, the inspired writer told the story with accurate details and just the right emphases to advance a particular theological agenda. And in the case of the book of Psalms, the inspired compiler selected some psalms out of the many that were available, and these were the ones necessary for the people of God. Most evangelical statements on the inspiration of Scripture refer in some way to the "autographs." The doctrine of inspiration teaches that the authoritative, original, completed texts of Scripture (i.e., the autographs) were superintended by the Holy Spirit to contain the precise language that God wanted to convey.

However, this divine inspiration does not apply to subsequent "transmission." When these texts began to be copied and promulgated, errors crept into the manuscripts. Scribes misread letters, documents were damaged, translators misunderstood the Hebrew text or tried to improve its clarity. Once an error was introduced, it often began to be copied repeatedly until it became a permanent part of a text tradition. This transmission phase is the domain of textual criticism. When students are first exposed to issues in textual criticism, they sometimes find the discussion of errors, multiple readings, and the search for the "best text" to be disconcerting. Naturally they ask, Do these issues undermine the inspiration of Scripture?

They do not. The inspired text is located in the original texts, not later copies.[10] But this underscores why anyone who affirms the inspiration and authority of Scripture should be most interested in discovering which one of the several variants in extant texts represents the best, most original wording of Scripture.[11] It is hoped that this book will help many students and pastors chart their way through this difficult but important area of biblical studies.

10. See Michael V. Fox's helpful distinction (borrowed from G. Thomas Tanselle) between the "work," the "text," and the "document" in his introductory chapter, "Is Text Criticism Possible?," in *Proverbs: An Eclectic Edition with Introduction and Textual Commentary*, HBCE 1 (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2015), 4–9.

11. Roger T. Beckwith makes two interesting statements about the areas of canon and textual criticism: "With no canon there is no Bible" and "with no *text* there is no Bible." *The Old Testament Canon of the New Testament Church and Its Background in Early Judaism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; London: SPCK, 1985), 5. The principle of *sola Scriptura* depends on an adequate understanding of canon and a clearly defined text of Scripture.

1

Writing in the Ancient Near East

Study of the transmission of the OT text begins with the origin of Hebrew writing and its development through time. But the field of Hebrew writing is just one small part of a fascinating area of study, the history of writing within human civilization. Clearly, within the scope of this book, no in-depth account of the history of writing can be offered. Yet it will be important to trace at least some of the main features of this story in order to understand more fully the details of the transmission of the OT text. This chapter is given, therefore, to a brief survey of writing in the ancient Near East and to a summary of the place of writing within the confines of the OT itself.

Sumerian Writing

The history of writing in the ancient Near East begins with the Sumerians toward the end of the fourth millennium BCE.[1] This non-Semitic people either invented writing or adopted a writing system from another people,

1. Christopher A. Rollston, *Writing and Literacy in the World of Ancient Israel: Epigraphic Evidence from the Iron Age* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2010), 11. The earliest written documents were found at Uruk (biblical Erech; see Gen. 10:10) and are dated to ca. 3100 BCE. See Aaron Demsky and Meir Bar-Ilan, "Writing in Ancient Israel and Early Judaism," in *Mikra: Text, Translation, Reading & Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible in Ancient Judaism & Early Christianity*, ed. Martin Jan Mulder (1988; repr., Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2004), 2.

probably to assist in running their increasingly complex bureaucracies.[2] The Sumerian system of writing, in its earliest stages, was pictographic; that is, signs were used to picture specific objects and thus call them to mind. An ancient text might consist of a succession of pictures which, when strung together, told a story.[3]

Pictographic writing, though a start, is limited in what it can represent. At an early stage, therefore, the Sumerians improved their writing by using one sign to refer to several different things. A basic sign that indicated "foot" was also used to indicate the verbs "to go," "to stand," and "to carry."[4] The gain that resulted from this development was somewhat offset by ambiguity in what was expressed. Early Sumerian writing did not indicate pronunciation or most morphological information such as pronouns or adverbial markers. In its interest in economy, the writing system was far removed from the spoken language and was incomplete.[5] It functioned somewhat like a memory aid, in which the reader was required to supply information from his or her knowledge of the spoken language. Later, Sumerian writing became more explicit in representing morphological features (such as the plural).[6]

The major shortcoming of the Sumerian system is the large number of signs that were necessary to express thought.[7] A second complication of the system is the existence of polyphones and homophones.[8] Two additional

2. The vast majority of early Mesopotamian texts are administrative documents, unlike other ancient societies such as Egypt and China. They track income, disbursements, and transfers. See Jerrold S. Cooper, "Babylonian Beginnings: The Origin of the Cuneiform Writing System in Comparative Perspective," in *The First Writing: Script Invention as History and Process*, ed. Stephen D. Houston (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 72.

3. André Lemaire, "Writing and Writing Materials," *ABD* 6:999.

4. Christopher Woods, "The Earliest Mesopotamian Writing," in *Visible Language: Inventions of Writing in the Ancient Middle East and Beyond*, ed. Christopher Woods, Oriental Institute Museum Publications 32 (Chicago: Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, 2010), 43.

5. Ibid., 44.

6. Ibid., 45.

7. This same drawback is observed in the later Akkadian writing system that was developed from the Sumerian system (see the next subsection). Scholars have counted approximately six hundred distinct signs in the script used by the Sumerians and the Akkadians. See John Huehnergard and Christopher Woods, "Akkadian and Eblaite," in *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of the World's Ancient Languages*, ed. Roger D. Woodard (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 222. Contrast the tremendous difficulty of learning to read and write in such a system with the relative ease of the process using an alphabet of twenty-two letters (Hebrew).

8. A polyphone is a single sign that can have more than one phonetic value. An analogy in English is the letter sequence *ough*. The same sequence yields at least seven different sounds: plough, rough, hiccough, hough, cough, through, and though. Homophones are phonetically identical (i.e., they sound the same), but they have different meanings. For example, the Sumerian word *du* was used for "to go," "to build," "to butt," and "to free." See Jean Bottéro, *Mesopotamia: Writing, Reasoning, and the Gods*, trans. Zainab Bahrani and Marc van de

features of the Sumerian language were developed to combat this ambiguity. Specialized signs, called determinatives, were placed before or after words to indicate the general class of object or person, and so forth. For example, there was a determinative for deity, another for certain human occupations, and the like.[9] A second special sign, called a phonetic complement, was also used to enhance clarity in communication. For example, the Sumerian writing for the noun "wall" comprises two signs: (1) a pictogram that visually represents a city wall and (2) the *bad*-sign, which phonetically represents the pictogram's pronunciation as [bad].[10] Perhaps an illustration in English would be helpful. The ampersand symbol "&" is an ideogram that represents the conjunction "and." To aid the reader in correct pronunciation, the symbol could be rendered as "& [and]" (see also the discussion of ideograms, also called logograms, below in Akkadian Writing).[11] The system may strike the modern reader as cumbersome, but it provided a workable solution in its time.

Akkadian Writing

The Akkadians, a Semitic people, took over the Sumerian system of writing sometime in the middle of the third millennium BCE.[12] It must be remembered that the Sumerians were not Semitic. Therefore, the Akkadians adopted a script of another, unrelated language and used it to express their own language. The system is called cuneiform because it consists of wedge-shaped signs created by pressing a triangular-shaped stylus into clay tablets. The major change introduced by the Akkadians was a much greater use of syllabic signs. Their writing system was not exclusively syllabic, however. Their six hundred to seven hundred signs included the following: six signs to represent vowels, ninety-seven signs that represented "open" syllables (consonant + vowel or vowel + consonant), more than two hundred signs that indicated "closed"

Mieroop (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 69. An analogous situation in English can be observed in the use of "thru" as a variant of "through."

9. Dietz Otto Edzard, *Sumerian Grammar*, Handbook of Oriental Studies 71 (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 9.

10. John L. Hayes, *A Manual of Sumerian Grammar and Texts*, 2nd ed., Aids and Research Tools in Ancient Near Eastern Studies 5 (Malibu: Udena, 2000), 49. See also Hayes's textual commentary on line 4 of the Ur-Nammu 7 brick inscription (ibid., 63–64).

11. Our thanks to Anthony Lipscomb for this example and his assistance in this section.

12. Akkadian was eventually replaced by Aramaic and probably ceased to be a spoken language in the mid-first millennium BCE. However, it continued to be used in written form until the first century CE: John Huehnergard, *A Grammar of Akkadian*, 2nd ed. (Winona Lake, IL: Eisenbrauns, 2005), xxii. The documents most relevant for the biblical period are found in the Neo-Assyrian dialect of Akkadian (1000–600 BCE).

syllables (consonant + vowel + consonant), and about three hundred signs that were used as ideograms.[13] The ideograms were essentially the signs that the Sumerians had used before them, but they were probably pronounced as Akkadian words when the texts were read. Something analogous occurs when an English speaker reads "$2.00" as "two dollars." A Spanish speaker would read the same symbols as "dos dólares." Our modern numeral symbols are simply current examples of ideograms.[14]

The Akkadian language is important for biblical studies on several levels. In the first place, Akkadian is the earliest attested Semitic language, and its decipherment and study since the nineteenth century have proved helpful for the elucidation of features of the Hebrew language.[15] The existence of the Akkadian writing system from the middle of the third millennium BCE onward sets the writing activity of various OT personages in a proper historical and linguistic context. Creation and flood accounts in the Babylonian dialect of Akkadian provide material with which to compare and contrast the biblical analogs, while Akkadian legal documents, royal annals, and correspondence provide historical and cultural information.

Egyptian Writing

Though many other ancient Near Eastern writing systems cannot be included because of limited space, at least one more needs to be mentioned before speaking briefly of the origin of alphabetic writing. The writing system of ancient Egypt is known as hieroglyphic writing. This earliest Egyptian writing system dates from around 3200 BCE.[16] It consists of two kinds of signs: ideograms (things, actions, concepts) and phonograms (sounds).[17] The system is definitely pictographic, but it is difficult to ascertain to what extent it was influenced by

13. David Diringer, *Writing* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1962), 42; Huehnergard and Woods, "Akkadian and Eblaite," 220–24.

14. Other examples of modern ideograms include a variety of "picture" signs used along roadways and streets to convey information to travelers regardless of their mother tongue. An outline of a phone signifies "telephone," "teléfono," etc.

15. For example, comparison with Akkadian assists us in reconstructing consonantal phonemes in Semitic, such as the different correspondences of the letter ע. In addition, the full writing system indicates doubled consonants and vowel pronunciations that were only recorded in Hebrew much later. See Sabatino Moscati et al., *An Introduction to the Comparative Grammar of the Semitic Languages* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1969). The book shows how the grammar of any single Semitic language can illuminate possibly misunderstood features in another related language.

16. Like Akkadian, Egyptian hieroglyphic remained in use until the common era, in this case the fifth century CE.

17. James P. Allen, "Egyptian Language and Writing," *ABD* 4:190.

Mesopotamian writing. Egypt had trade relations with the East in the fourth millennium, and one of the ideas that came to Egypt may have been the idea of writing, especially for documenting transactions and keeping accounts. Penelope Wilson writes, "It may never be possible to tell from the archaeological evidence exactly how far Egypt was influenced by external factors, but if there had been contact, the Egyptians went on and developed their own writing system and its uses in their own way without drawing anything further from outside."[18]

Hieratic, a cursive script written from right to left in horizontal lines, probably originated as a simpler form of hieroglyphic that could be used for writing on destructible materials such as papyri.[19] Later, this developed into another cursive script called Demotic (ca. 700 BCE).[20] In contrast to Mesopotamian languages, Egyptian writing maintained its pictographic character throughout its history.[21] It never developed to the same extent that Akkadian writing did, that is, with a complete loss of similarity to the original pictographs. In its first six hundred years, Egyptian writing was highly restricted and mainly used for creating monuments and for limited administrative purposes such as keeping lists and recording taxes.[22] A second difference between Egyptian and Mesopotamian writing relates to the representation of vowels. In Mesopotamian scripts, some vowels are written, but no vowels are expressed in writing in Egyptian. However, semivowels (weak consonants) are used, especially with loan words, which are typically written syllabically.[23] This feature is shared with early writing habits for Biblical Hebrew and certain other Semitic languages.

Alphabetic Writing

The final stage in the history of writing is the development of a true alphabetic script. While earlier scripts contained alphabetic signs, the invention of the

18. Penelope Wilson, *Sacred Signs: Hieroglyphs in Ancient Egypt* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 17. Barry Powell also finds it unlikely that two civilizations in the fourth millennium, linked by the Fertile Crescent, would have invented writing independently (*Writing: Theory and History of the Technology of Civilization* [Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009], 109).

19. The earliest example of hieratic is found on a papyrus from the reign of Khufu (ca. 2600 BCE); it also has hieroglyphs written on it. See Pierre Tallet and Gregory Marouard, "The Harbor of Khufu on the Red Sea Coast at Wadi al-Jarf, Egypt," *Near Eastern Archaeology* 77, no. 1 (2014): 8–10.

20. Allen, "Egyptian Language," 190. In its final stage, the Egyptian language was written alphabetically with Greek letters, which was Coptic (ibid., 191).

21. Elise V. MacArthur, "The Conception and Development of the Egyptian Writing System," in Woods, *Visible Language*, 149–82.

22. John Baines, *Visual and Written Culture in Egypt* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 118.

23. Personal conversation with James Hoffmeier.

alphabet meant that it used alphabetic signs exclusively, with individual letters representing single sounds of speech. As such, the alphabet is the most highly developed, the most convenient, and the most easily adaptable of all systems of writing ever developed. The use of the alphabet can be acquired by any child with relative ease. The difficulties inherent in earlier systems of writing were largely removed by the invention of the alphabet. Table 1.1 indicates the complexity of various writing systems.[24]

Table 1.1
Ancient Writing Systems

Language	Total Signs	Syllabic Signs
Sumerian/Akkadian	ca. 600	ca. 100–150
Egyptian	ca. 700	ca. 100
Ugaritic	30	—
Proto-Canaanite	28	
Paleo-Hebrew/Aramaic	22	—
Latin	26	—

The current, prevailing view among scholars is that the alphabet was invented in the first half of the second millennium by Canaanites living in Egypt. The earliest alphabetic inscriptions have been discovered in southern Egypt, at Wadi el-Hol, and in the Sinai Peninsula at Serabit el-Hadem.[25] At Serabit, there was a temple to the goddess Hathor as well as turquoise mines requiring the manual labor of foreign workers. Orly Goldwasser, an Egyptologist, argues that Canaanites had come to Egypt to work in the turquoise mines. Unable to read Egyptian texts and inscriptions, the pictorial nature of hieroglyphs prompted them to create a new script in which each letter represented one sound. Therefore, it was not elite scribes who invented the alphabet, but illiterate laborers.[26]

24. An example of a modern language that is based on ideographic principles is Japanese. In 2006, the current "List of [Ideographic] Characters for General Use (*Toyo Kanji Hyo*)," issued by the Japanese government, "recommends 1,945 characters for daily use, though 3,000 are used regularly in publications" (Soichi Iwasaki, "Japanese: Language Situation," in *Encyclopedia of Language and Linguistics*, ed. Keith Brown, 2nd ed. [Oxford: Elsevier, 2006], 6:93). In 2010, the "List" grew to 2,136 characters for general use (Soichi Iwasaki, *Japanese*, rev. ed., London Oriental and African Language Library 17 [Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 2013], 24).

25. Rollston, *Writing and Literacy*, 14. See also Ada Yardeni, *The Book of Hebrew Script: History, Palaeography, Script Styles, Calligraphy & Design* (New Castle, DE: Oak Knoll, 2002), 3.

26. Orly Goldwasser, "How the Alphabet Was Born from Hieroglyphs," *BAR* 36, no. 2 (2010): 43–44.

The script was developed according to the "acrophonic" principle in which the shape of the letter looked like an object which began with that sound. For example, a letter that looks like flowing water makes the sound [m] for the word *mym* (water). A letter with a long downstroke or tail makes the sound [n] like *nhsh* (snake). And the letter that sounds like [k] looks a bit like a *kp* (hand).[27] This early script, which we call Proto-Canaanite, consisted of twenty-eight signs which could be written upwards, downwards, right, left, backwards, or forwards. Letters might even face different directions[28] or have different orientation (rotation).[29]

As it continued to evolve and find wider usage, the direction of the script became fixed in a right-to-left direction around 1000 BCE. At that same time, the Greeks adopted it, but used it in a left-to-right direction and with the addition of vowel letters.[30] In the ancient Near East and Palestine, the Proto-Canaanite script gave rise to the later Phoenician, Paleo-Hebrew, and Aramaic scripts (see fig. 1.1).[31] It is important to remember that a script is different from a language. For example, French and English both use the Latin script (or alphabet).[32] In the same way, these various scripts that developed from Proto-Canaanite were used with Hebrew, Aramaic, and various dialects; and Hebrew switched from the Paleo-Hebrew script to the Aramaic script in the course of its history (see chap. 2).

The Phoenician script developed about 1000 BCE with a reduced twenty-two consonants and a fixed right-to-left direction. It was used in commerce around the Mediterranean Sea, and several inscriptions have been found in this script in Israel from the biblical period.[33]

The Paleo-Hebrew and Aramaic scripts developed from the Phoenician script. The Paleo-Hebrew script is first documented in the ninth century in Israel and nearby Moab.[34] It kept the same number of signs as the Phoenician script, but the shape of a few letters differed slightly.[35] Israelite writers used the

27. Rollston, *Writing and Literacy*, 14. See also Powell, *Writing*, 177–78.

28. Yardeni, *Book of Hebrew Script*, 7.

29. Demsky and Bar-Ilan, "Writing in Ancient Israel," 9.

30. Lemaire, "Writing and Writing Materials," 1000.

31. Adapted from Demsky and Bar-Ilan, "Writing in Ancient Israel," 6.

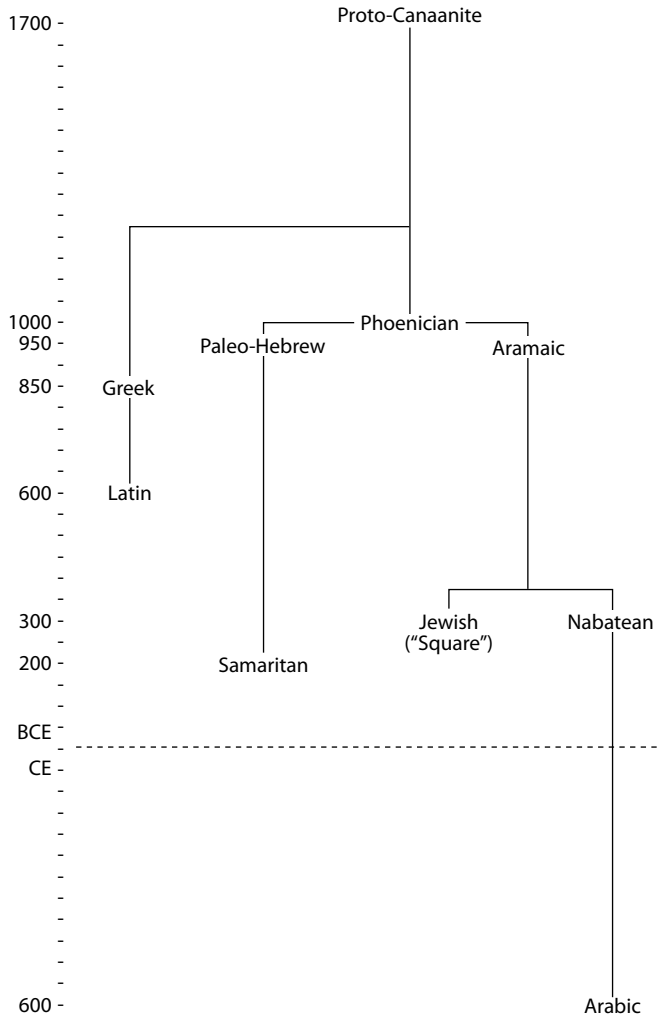
32. David Diringer notes that the same basic alphabet is used today by writers of English, French, Italian, German, Spanish, Portuguese, Turkish, Polish, Dutch, Czech, Croatian, Welsh, Finnish, and Hungarian, among others (*The Alphabet*, 3rd ed. [London: Hutchison, 1968], 13).

33. Yardeni, *Book of Hebrew Script*, 11. For example, the famous Gezer Calendar from the tenth century BCE is written in the Phoenician script.

34. Demsky and Bar-Ilan, "Writing in Ancient Israel," 9.

35. Yardeni, *Book of Hebrew Script*, 17. The Paleo-Hebrew script has been found in a number of ancient inscriptions including the Siloam Tunnel inscription in Jerusalem, the silver scrolls from Ketef Hinnom (Jerusalem), and the Samaria ostraca.

Figure 1.1
West Semitic Scripts



Paleo-Hebrew script until the early sixth century. At that time, the Aramaic language was the lingua franca, and the Aramaic script began to be used for official correspondence throughout the region.[36] In the exile, the Jews began to speak and write Aramaic in order to conduct business and communicate with their neighbors. As a result, they adopted the Aramaic script for writing

36. Ibid., 27.

and copying Scripture.[37] By the third century BCE, a new Jewish variant of the Aramaic script developed with its own characteristics. This came to be called the Jewish or square script, and it is this script that was then used for copying the books of the OT later in its transmission.[38]

Writing in the Old Testament

Writing is central to the theology of the OT because it is through writing that God's mighty acts, covenant relationship with his people, and subsequent expectations are passed down to future generations. The first occurrence of the verb "to write" in the OT is found in Exod. 17:14 when YHWH tells Moses to write down his promise that he will utterly blot out the memory of Amalek. YHWH says that Moses must then "place" it in the ears of Joshua. The point here is that the written word would serve as a reminder of what God had promised. In 24:4 Moses writes down all the words of YHWH's covenant with Israel and then reads it to the people (24:7). That writing was to serve as a witness to what God had done and the necessity of a response on their part. It was intended for all people, not just the elites, including future generations yet to be born. A few verses later, in 24:12, it is God who has written down the stipulations of the covenant, which are for the instruction of the people. Just these three examples illustrate the central place of writing in the theological foundation of the nation of Israel. It is the written word that allows future generations access to former words and deeds which would otherwise be lost to them. This is so critical that each king was to have a copy of the Torah and was to read from it all the days of his life that he might learn to fear YHWH (Deut. 17:18–19). Texts such as Deut. 6, Josh. 4, and Ps. 78 emphasize the necessity of YHWH's people instructing future generations about the character, power, deeds, and expectations of YHWH; the failure to remember would certainly result in apostasy and destruction.

The importance of writing for ancient Israel does not necessarily mean that there was widespread literacy. Note that even in the examples just mentioned, the written text often serves as a basis for oral proclamation and does not require facility in reading and writing. There is an ongoing debate among scholars as

37. Ibid., 41. Yardeni notes that because the Paleo-Hebrew script provided a traditional tie back to the land, it is difficult to understand why Jewish scribes changed to Aramaic. He suggests the possibility that the Paleo-Hebrew script had become associated with the Samaritans by that time (cf. Neh. 13:24).

38. Demsky and Bar-Ilan, "Writing in Ancient Israel," 9.

to how widespread literacy was in ancient Israel.[39] Some argue that literacy was widespread,[40] while others claim that only the elite could read and write.[41]

In any case, the copying (and in some cases writing) of Scripture was done by professional scribes with formal training.[42] Scribes were usually from the elite class because their training required that they live without an income for a certain amount of time. They were usually associated with the palace or the temple and were responsible for taking dictation, recording decrees, maintaining records, and, of course, copying documents.[43] They were trained with sophisticated techniques, including extreme consistency in the writing of individual letters as well as spelling and the layout of the text.[44] These practices go back to Babylonian practices in the third to second millennia. Babylonian scribes made lists of words and placed them into categories in order to check for consistent spelling. There is also evidence that they signed documents

39. Christopher Rollston defines literacy as "the ability to write and read, using and understanding a standard script, a standard orthography, standard numeric system, conventional formatting and terminology, and with minimal errors of composition and comprehension" (*Writing and Literacy*, 127).

40. Those who argue for widespread literacy usually point to the relative ease of using a syllabic alphabet in contrast to the hundreds of signs in other ancient writing systems. In addition, there are a number of references in the Bible to average, everyday people reading and writing. Although he argues that literacy was *not* widespread, Menahem Haran mentions the following examples. In Deut. 6:9 every Israelite is commanded to write the words of the law on the doorposts of houses and gates. In Deut. 24:1–3 there is a reference to a (hypothetical) man writing a bill of divorce for his wife. In Judg. 8:14 the young man from Succoth could write down the names of seventy-seven men for Gideon (Haran, "On the Diffusion of Literacy and Schools in Ancient Israel," in *Congress Volume: Jerusalem 1986*, ed. J. A. Emerton, VTSup 40 [Leiden: Brill, 1988], 81–82). Archaeologists have also found many inscribed seals, receipts for payment, and even an inscription on a tomb warning would-be thieves of the consequences for breaking and entering. This might suggest that even thieves were literate. Demsky and Bar-Ilan argue that the hundreds of seals with writing (rather than pictures), the ubiquity of vulgar script identifying the owner of everyday objects, inscriptions by and for craftsmen and farmers, and writing that popularized the message of the prophets all point to common literacy in ancient Israel ("Writing in Ancient Israel," 15–16).

41. Haran argues that Chinese is extremely complex with thousands of signs, and yet literacy is widespread there today. Therefore, literacy need not be connected to the type of alphabet in use. Even with a relatively easier syllabic alphabet, literacy must still be taught. Furthermore, biblical references to the writing of common people often refer only to names or lists or to tasks that could have been accomplished by a scribe on that person's behalf ("On the Diffusion of Literacy," 84). Rollston estimates that literacy rates were probably similar to other ancient societies where perhaps 5–10 percent of the population was literate (*Writing and Literacy*, 128). Even nonliterate people could perhaps have written their names or understood the contents of a receipt of payment.

42. Lemaire notes that even if literacy was widespread, not everyone could read and write with ease ("Writing and Writing Materials," 1005).

43. Rollston, *Writing and Literacy*, 85–88.

44. Christopher A. Rollston, "Scribal Education in Ancient Israel: The Old Hebrew Epigraphic Evidence," *BASOR* 344 (November 2006): 60–65.

which they had copied for later checking and evaluation. Inscriptions show evidence of correction, such as a letter inserted above the line and the label "damage" on tablets even when corrected restoration was obvious.[45] These procedures assisted in avoiding and correcting errors which would have inevitably crept into texts copied by hand. Evidence indicates that the same was true for scribes in Israel during the biblical period. High standards for careful and accurate copying with built-in schemes for checking and correction constituted intentional attempts to avoid error.[46]

Depending upon the purpose and audience of the writing, a variety of materials were available, including stone, metal, potsherds, wood, papyrus, and leather.[47] Stone was used for monumental inscriptions and steles (pillars or plaques inscribed with treaties or laws as a public witness). Seals and weights also bore writing, and archaeologists have found graffiti on stone as well. Metal, such as gold, silver, copper, or bronze, was used for special tablets.[48] Clay was a cheap, common material. People commonly wrote in ink on broken potsherds as an ancient "scrap paper" for lists, brief letters, and short documents. Wooden tablets, covered in wax, could be reused by using the flat end of a stylus to rub off old letters and make room for new ones.[49]

With improved technology, longer documents were written on papyrus or leather. Much of our knowledge of the use of these writing materials comes from finds in the Judean Desert, including the so-called Dead Sea Scrolls. These are important because they are the earliest direct evidence for scribal practices and materials and they allow us to infer that similar practices were in use during the earlier biblical period. Alongside some clay ostraca,[50] a few copper scrolls, and two wooden tablets, most of the texts from the Judean Desert were written on papyrus and leather, on individual

45. Alan Millard, "In Praise of Ancient Scribes," *BA* 45, no. 3 (1982): 145–46. Millard writes, "Throughout the history of cuneiform writing there was a tradition of care in copying. Babylonian scribes were aware of their weaknesses and established various conventions to overcome them. No one could claim they always succeeded, but it is important to be aware of the fact that they tried" (ibid.).

46. Ibid., 152.

47. For a discussion of writing and materials in ancient Israel, see Graham Davies, "Some Uses of Writing in Ancient Israel in the Light of Recently Published Inscriptions," in *Writing and Ancient Near Eastern Society: Papers in Honour of Alan R. Millard*, ed. Piotr Bienkowski, Christopher Mee, and Elizabeth Slater (New York: T&T Clark, 2005), 155–74.

48. For example, the *Copper Scroll* (3Q15), found at Qumran in the Judean Desert, is a list of treasures supposedly hidden around the area.

49. We have discovered many examples of stone and clay inscriptions, and even some metal ones, but very few wooden tablets have survived in the climate of Palestine.

50. Ostraca are broken pieces of pottery that were used as writing material. Ancients scratched letters into the dry clay or used ink to write on them. The singular of "ostraca" is "ostracon."

sheets or scrolls. The writing material is mostly distinguished by genre: literary texts are found on leather, while letters and administrative documents are found on papyrus.[51] Papyrus was created by drying thin strips from the papyrus plant and laying them in two layers at perpendicular angles. They were then pressed, beaten, and smoothed.[52] It was a less durable writing material than leather and less professional because it was not as easy to make straight lines or neat columns on it. It was also more expensive than leather because it had to be imported from Egypt. On the other hand, the scribe could make limited erasures.[53]

Leather was readily available, but it required a substantial process of preparation. It was taken from calves, fine-wooled sheep, medium-wooled sheep, wild and domestic goats, gazelles, and ibexes.[54] The artisan removed the hair by treading on the skins, striking them with sticks, or soaking them in water with excrement or vegetable materials. The enzymes assisted in the breakdown of the hair. Skins were then cured in saltwater and treated with meal or flour. Finally, they were treated with a tanning solution of natural vegetable and tree products.[55] The skins were stretched, dried, and smoothed with a rock and then cut into the largest sheets possible for use in a scroll.[56] Scribes used black ink made of soot mixed with oil and vegetable material or red ink created with mercury sulfide.[57]

Conclusion

This chapter has surveyed the history of writing from the first systems of pictographic script to the final, and fortuitous, invention of the alphabet (see table 1.2 for representative samples of early cuneiform and alphabetic signs; see table 1.3 for a summary of the history of writing). In the OT, writing held a central place in the faith and life of the community. It was in writing that God established his covenant with his people, made his will known, and conveyed his character and deeds to future generations. These are recorded and passed down in the sacred writings of Scripture. The availability of an

51. Emanuel Tov, *Scribal Practices and Approaches Reflected in the Texts Found in the Judean Desert* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 31.

52. Lemaire, "Writing and Writing Materials," 1003.

53. Tov, *Scribal Practices*, 32.

54. Ibid., 33.

55. J. B. Poole and R. Reed, "The Preparation of Leather and Parchment by the Dead Sea Scrolls Community," *Technology and Culture* 3, no. 1 (1962): 10–14.

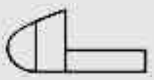
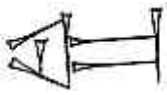
56. Meir Bar-Ilan, "Writing Materials," in *Encyclopedia of the Dead Sea Scrolls*, ed. Lawrence H. Schiffman and James C. VanderKam (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 2:996.

57. Ibid., 2:997.

alphabetic script for the earliest writing of the OT books must not be undervalued. What would have been much more difficult through the means of cuneiform or hieroglyphic writing was, in fact, greatly facilitated by the existence of an alphabetic script. And not only that, but the availability of the OT to its readership would have also been *very* limited had it been written in the systems of Mesopotamia or Egypt.

When we practice textual criticism, we are entering a world that is foreign to us: a world of scribes, changing scripts, and letters in ink on leather parchment. We analyze the ancient text of the OT in order to identify errors that might have crept in during the copying process and to reconstruct the final, authoritative text(s). Therefore, the more that we know about scribal practice, such as spelling conventions, word divisions, abbreviations, and corrections, the better we will be able to weigh the evidence. As scripts changed, types of errors changed. In one script, two letters might share similar components and be easily confused. But in another script, different letters might be similar and susceptible to being confused. The texts that we possess, even the oldest ones, are copies of copies, created in the context of many cultural and linguistic transitions in the writing process. Textual criticism is an exciting journey into this foreign world. We turn next to a description of the history of the transmission of the OT text in the Hebrew language.

Table 1.2
Cuneiform and Alphabetic Signs

Writing System	Sample Sign	Value
Sumerian (pictograph)		*SAG* (head)
Sumerian (cuneiform)		*SAG* (head)
Akkadian (Classical Neo-Assyrian)		*rêšu* (head)
Egyptian (pictogram and determinative)		*tp* (head)
Ugaritic		*r*

Writing System	Sample Sign	Value
Paleo-Hebrew		*r*

Sources: René Labat and Florence Malbran-Labat, *Manuel d'épigraphie akkadienne (signes, syllabaire, idéogrammes)*, 6th ed. (Paris: Geuthner, 1988), 90–91 [Sumerian and Akkadian]; Alan H. Gardiner, *Egyptian Grammar*, 3rd. ed. (Oxford: Griffith Institute, Ashmolean Museum, 1957), 449 [Egyptian]; Cyrus H. Gordon, *Ugaritic Textbook*, AnOr 38 (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute Press, 1965), 15 [Ugaritic]; GKC, "Table of Early Alphabets," following p. xvi [Paleo-Hebrew].

Table 1.3
History of Writing

Language/Dialect	Major Features
Sumerian (from ca. 3100 BCE)	pictograms ideograms syllabograms determinatives phonetic complements
Egyptian (from ca. 3000 BCE)	pictograms vowels not represented in writing
Akkadian (from ca. 2500 BCE)	ideograms signs for vowels signs for syllables earliest attested Semitic language
Proto-Canaanite (ca. 1550–1450 BCE)	early stage of alphabet development
Phoenician (from ca. 11th century BCE)	further development of alphabet

For Further Reading

Demsky, Aaron, and Meir Bar-Ilan. "Writing in Ancient Israel and Early Judaism." In *Mikra: Text, Translation, Reading & Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible in Ancient Judaism & Early Christianity*, edited by Martin Jan Mulder, 2–38. 1988. Reprint, Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2004.

Naveh, Joseph. *Early History of the Alphabet: An Introduction to West Semitic Epigraphy and Paleography*. Jerusalem: Magnes, 1987.

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