

**Literacy and History of Early Israel:
Investigating Historical, Archeological, and Biblical Evidence**

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“...do not!”. These two words are among the few identifiable bits of script etched into an ancient storage vessel¹. Though equivocal in meaning and in form², this ostrakon inscription unearthed during a 2008 excavation in Khirbet Qeiyafa adds to the growing evidence that knowledge of reading and writing were widespread among the Israelites during the Iron Ages. Excavations of dust covered correspondences, sherds containing Biblical names, and even a calendar used for agricultural harvesting all point to a literate United Monarchy³. Still, it would be erroneous to assert that the current literature based on these findings is unanimous⁴, particularly concerning the nature of the archeological inscriptions. Both the inscriptions’ status as genuine literary works and the language of these works have long been debated. Scholars like Misgav, Ganor, and Garfinkel hold that the inscriptions point to a literate Judean administration who wrote in Proto-Canaanite script, rather than nearby ethnic groups versed in Northwest Semitic languages⁵.

Fortunately, archeological evidence such as the ostrakon inscription does not stand alone. Paired with the evidence found in God’s Word and an understanding of historical contexts, the literacy of early Israel can be studied more wholistically. Archeological, historical, and biblical research conducted within the past few decades combine harmoniously to build a cogent case for the language and writing capabilities of the early Israelites. Knowledge of the literacy in ancient Israel not only provides insight into the culture, lifestyle, and technology of the Israelites during the Iron Ages, but it also provides academics with more historically accurate foundations upon which to base their future research. To obtain a more accurate understanding of the literacy of

¹Yosef Garfinkel, Saar Ganor and Michael G. Hasel, “Khirbet Qeiyafa Vol. 4. Art, Cult, and Epigraphy. Edited by M.G. Klingbeil (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 2018), 280.

²Garfinkel, Ganor, and Hasel, 290.

³Garfinkel, Ganor, and Hasel, 284.

⁴Ibid.

⁵Garfinkel, Ganor, and Hasel, 277; Yosef Garfinkel, Saar Ganor, and Michael G. Hasel, “The Contribution of Khirbet Qeiyafa to Our Understanding of the Iron Age Period.” 2010, 48.

early Israel, it is necessary to examine this archeological, historical, and biblical evidence from the Iron Ages.

Archeological Evidence

Archeology is unique in that it provides tangible evidence of past activity. Despite our inability to directly observe such activities, the Khirbet Qeiyafa ostrakon, 'Išba'al jar, Gezer calendar, and the Ophel, Shepehlah, and Lachish inscriptions can be used to speculate what life before the common era was like. Careful preservation of these archeological findings and comparisons between other, more complete scripts have enabled archeologists to draw at least provisional conclusions regarding the literacy of early Israel.

Khirbet Qeiyafa Ostrakon

The Khirbet Qeiyafa ostrakon is one of the most relevant pieces of archeological evidence for literacy in early Israel. Discovered near the western city gate, this inscription contains five lines of uniform letters written in ink⁶. These lines of inscription are divided into rows and can be read horizontally (i.e., narrow tip downward), with the stems of the letters positioned beneath the round body of the letters. The ostrakon stands out among other inscriptions because it is both the longest and oldest inscription of its kind⁷. In fact, radiocarbon dating places the ostrakon in the 11th to 10th centuries BCE, the time period believed by some to mark the beginning of the United Monarchy⁸. Similarities between the date of the ostrakon and the proposed existence of the United Monarchy during this same time period suggest that the ostrakon inscription was written by an early Israelite.

⁶Garfinkel, Ganor, and Hasel, 277.

⁷Garfinkel, Ganor, and Hasel, 280.

⁸Garfinkel, Ganor, and Hasel, 284; Haggai Misgav, Yosef Garfinkel, Saar, Ganor, "The Ostrakon." In *Khirbet Qeiyafa, Vol. 1: Excavation Report 2007-2008*, ed. Yosef Garfinkel and Saar Ganor (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 2009), 248.

Language of the Ostrakon

In addition to the date of the ostrakon, the ostrakon's language is also evidence of a literate early Israel⁹. According to Hasel and Hasel¹⁰, the ostrakon inscription is guided by rules associated with Proto-Canaanite writing, or Hebrew script, of the middle and late Bronze ages. Because alphabet-based writing was only adopted by the Phoenicians during the tenth century BCE, it follows that Proto-Canaanite script was the form used in Khirbet Qeiyafa, likely by the early Israelites¹¹. Other scholars also support the identification of the script as Proto-Canaanite while simultaneously acknowledging its limitations.

For example, Misgav¹² states that the most that can be interpreted from the ostrakon is the following: (1) the script has a continuous meaning and is therefore not likely a list of names, and (2) the script is a form of correspondence. Furthermore, Misgav¹³ states that certain verbs used within the script are unique to Hebrew, and that Aramaic and Phoenician, languages proposed by others to be the script of the ostrakon, do not use the same verbs present in the Khirbet Qeiyafa ostrakon. Thus, the difference between verb usage serves as further evidence that the ostrakon is inscribed in Hebrew, a language used by the early Israelites.

Gezer Calendar Inscription

During the early 20th century, a small plaque made of limestone was discovered in the Canaanite city of Gezer¹⁴. Today, this inscribed limestone is referred to as the Gezer calendar

⁹Dale Manor, "Khirbet Qeiyafa 4 Excavation Report 2009-2013: Art, Cult and Epigraphy." *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 29 (2009): 231.

¹⁰Yosef Garfinkel, Saar Ganor, Michael G. Hasel. *In the Footsteps of King David: Revelations from an Ancient Biblical City* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2018), 119.

¹¹Garfinkel, Ganor, and Hasel, 127.

¹²Garfinkel, Yosef, Saar Ganor and Michael G. Hasel. *Khirbet Qeiyafa Vol. 4. Art, Cult, and Epigraphy*. Edited by M.G. Klingbeil (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 2018), 282.

¹³Garfinkel, Ganor, and Hasel, 281.

¹⁴William F. Albright, "The Gezer Calendar." *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research*, 92 (1943): 16.

and is dated to the period of King Solomon's reign over the Israelites¹⁵. Comparisons between the alphabets of the Sarcophagus of Ahiem of Byblus inscriptions, which date to the eleventh to early tenth century, strongly suggest that the script of the Gezer Calendar also dates to this same time period. Moreover, the calendar mentions a distinctly Israelite name most closely associated with the tenth century. These clues lead scholars to believe that the Gezer Calendar is written in Hebrew, a language often attributed to early Israelites in the second half of the tenth century BC.

'Išba'al Jar Inscription

While the Khirbet Qeiyafa ostrakon received much attention during the 2008 excavation season, it was not the only piece of evidence unearthed that speaks to the literacy of early Israel. Archeologists also discovered an inscription on the shoulder of a pottery vessel, known as the 'Išba'al jar¹⁶. This inscription contains 70 large letters written from right to left and divided into five lines. Analysis of the jar suggests that these evenly spaced letters were written by an early Israelite for several reasons. First, the inscription is representative of an individual skilled in Proto-Canaanite script¹⁷, a language associated with the tenth century BCE and Israel¹⁸. Second, the direction of the inscription from right to left distinguishes the script as Canaanite¹⁹.

Third, the jar's excavation site has only one Iron Age occupation layer. This shows that Proto-Canaanite script was still in use south of Canaan (i.e., Israel) in the 10th century BCE. Fourth and most glaring, the name of the jar itself is based on the inscription's inclusion of the personal name 'Išba'al, son of Beda. The name Beda' is unique and the name 'Išba'al is mentioned in the Bible. 1 Chronicles chapters 3 and 14, and 2 Samuel chapters 4, 5, and 11, for

¹⁵ Albright, 17.

¹⁶ Yosef Garfinkel, Mitka R. Golub, Haggai Misgav, and Saar Ganor, "The 'Išba'al Inscription from Khirbet Qeiyafa." *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research*, 373 (2015): 217.

¹⁷ Garfinkel, Golub, Misgav, and Ganor, 223.

¹⁸ William F. Albright, "The Gezer Calendar." *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research*, 92 (1943): 17.

¹⁹ Garfinkel, Golub, Misgav, and Ganor, 223.

example, all mention some version of these names²⁰. Interestingly, all mentions of 'Išba'al, son of Beda appear in the context of the Davidic period or earlier²¹. This evidence points to an inscription written by an Israelite of the 10th to 11th centuries BCE, further proving that reading and writing were known among early Israelites.

Historical Evidence

Archaeological inscriptions account for much of the information concerning ancient Israel's literacy. However, viewing these materials alongside contextual clues from history provides a more complete picture of this nation during the Iron Ages. Thus, it is also important to prioritize analysis of historical evidence such as cult materials, animal bones, and other artifacts to accurately place Israelites at the sites where these inscriptions were written and/or found. Doing so will add to the argument that the aforementioned archeological inscriptions could be works of early Israel.

Cult Materials

Materials excavated at Khirbet Qeiyafa provide "well-stratified contexts" of cult activity associated with the tenth century Israelites²². Among the materials are mazzebot stones, cult rooms, temple models, basalt altars, libation vessels, and a clay figurine²³. Interpretation of the function of these materials varies. Some scholars view the materials, specifically the vessels, as toys, while others claim that they are clearly related to cultic activity. According to Manor²⁴, the latter interpretation can be justified due to the presence of other cultic-like artifacts found nearby.

²⁰1 Chronicles 3, 14; 2 Samuel 4, 5, 11 NKJV

²¹Garfinkel, Golub, Misgav, and Ganor, 230.

²²Dale Manor, "Khirbet Qeiyafa 4 Excavation Report 2009-2013: Art, Cult and Epigraphy." *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 29 (2009): 229.

²³Yosef Garfinkel, Saar Ganor, Michael G. Hasel. In *the Footsteps of King David: Revelations from an Ancient Biblical City* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2018), 131-161

²⁴Dale Manor, "Khirbet Qeiyafa 4 Excavation Report 2009-2013: Art, Cult and Epigraphy." *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 29 (2009): 230.

The seven mazzebot stones are evidence that cult practice had already begun in the early kingdom of Israel. For example, 2 Kings describes an abolishment of such stones which suggests that cult activity was common during this time²⁵. Excavators have also identified three cult rooms. One room contained a basalt altar, a large limestone basin, a pottery libation vessel, a seal, and a scarab. Similar to the mazzebot stones, these materials are referenced in the Bible as playing a role in cult activity²⁶.

Aside from the mazzebot stones and cult rooms, excavations at Khirbet Qeiyafa unearthed four temple models. The unique architectural motifs in these models align with the Late Bronze Age and the Iron Age²⁷. For example, the limestone temple model is decorated by a series of triglyphs and a triple-recessed doorway, two features which have been traced to various cultic and/or palatial structures throughout the eastern Mediterranean basin. One such structure is the Solomonic temple, which was constructed in the tenth century BCE.

Lastly, the head of a clay male figurine was found. While it appears that the figurine dates to the tenth century BCE, the artifact is unusual in form and unlike other figurines then known in the biblical period. Still, it is possible that some of the population practiced the cult of idols at the site; artifacts such as the figurine could reach a city through by way of trade or travel. Overall, the cult materials provide evidence that early Israelites inhabited the site of Qeiyafa where many 11th and 10th century BCE inscriptions have been found.

Animal Bones

Animal bones are also helpful in placing the early Israelites at the site of the inscriptions. The presence or absence of pig bones in particular provides details regarding the dietary intake

²⁵2 Kgs 23:8 NKJV

²⁶Yosef Garfinkel, Saar Ganor, Michael G. Hasel. In the Footsteps of King David: Revelations from an Ancient Biblical City (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2018), 109.

²⁷ Garfinkel, Ganor, and Hasel, 146-155.

of the site's inhabitants, as well as the time period in which these inhabitants existed.

Archeologists have identified pig bones at two Philistine sites, but such bones were absent at Khirbet Qeiyafa²⁸. The absence of pig bones at the site complements God's prohibition of pork consumption written in Leviticus²⁹. Because this prohibition was intended for the Israelites and archeologists found no pig bones, Qeiyafa can be identified as a Judahite site.

Biblical Evidence

It is difficult to interpret much of the archaeological and historical evidence without reference to the Bible, as evident in the prior sections. Clearly, the Bible is complementary to this evidence, and therefore, the case for literacy in early Israel can benefit from a compilation of scripture that provides context and descriptions of the individuals, practices, events, and locations associated with the evidence. Many of the verses relevant to the literacy of early Israel are found in 1 Chronicles, 1 and 2 Samuel, 2 Kings, among books.

1 Chronicles and 1 Samuel

Garfinkel and others³⁰ state, "Khirbet Qeiyafa is tremendously important in terms of various aspects relating to the archeology and history of the Iron Age and the Biblical tradition". So, it is not surprising that the Bible mentions the site both in 1 Chronicles 4:31-2 and in 1 Samuel 17:52³¹.

²⁸Yosef Garfinkel, Saar Ganor, Michael G. Hasel. In the Footsteps of King David: Revelations from an Ancient Biblical City (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2018), 113.

²⁹Lev 11:1-8 NKJV

³⁰Garfinkel, Yosef, Saar Ganor, and Michael G. Hasel, "The Contribution of Khirbet Qeiyafa to Our Understanding of the Iron Age Period", 2010, 39.

³¹1 Chron 4:31-2; 1 Sam 17:52 NKJV

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