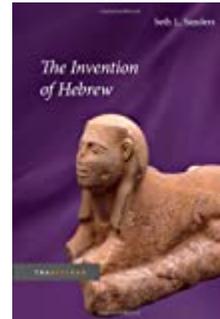




Seth L. Sanders. *The Invention of Hebrew*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009. xvi + 258 pp. \$50.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-252-03284-4.



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Social Implications of the Invention of the Alphabet

In this erudite and wide-ranging book, Seth L. Sanders sets himself the task of contextualizing the invention of the paleo-Hebrew script and its implications for an understanding of the development of biblical literature and thought from the methodological perspective of modern social theory. In undertaking this task, Sanders takes issue with many of the common hypotheses about the evolution of writing and its social setting, while ranging inter alia through the fields of ancient Near Eastern epigraphy and of social and political thought.

Sanders clearly sets out his goals and methodological framework in a brief introduction, in which he foregrounds his assumption that the "Bible is the first text to address people as a public," which in turn is an eventual consequence of the development in the Late Bronze and Iron Age Levant of textual traditions written in the vernacular (p. 1). Thus his study is an investigation of the development of a Levantine scribal culture distinct from those of Egypt and Mesopotamia, where writing was a tradition serving the needs of elites.

In chapter 1, "Modernity's Ghosts: The Bible as Political Communication," Sanders presents the intellectual background of the nineteenth-century source criticism (viz., that of W. M. L. de Wette and Julius Wellhausen) that has been foundational to modern critical study of the Hebrew Bible. This he identifies in seventeenth-century (political) philosophy and in eighteenth-century folklore studies and philology. Thus the study of the Bible is an intellectual enterprise inextricably linked to the construction of modernity. In the case of the former, the two most important contributions to the debate were Thomas Hobbes's *Leviathan* (1651) and Baruch Spinoza's *Theological-Political Tractate* (1670); in the case of the latter, Sanders draws particular attention to the works of Robert Wood, Robert Lowth, and Gottfried Herder. Hobbes and Spinoza laid the groundwork for the questioning of the authority of biblical literature as divinely given and unassailable. This questioning of the *authority* of scripture led to a questioning of the *provenance* of scripture. The cumulative effect of eighteenth-century biblical exegesis was to come up with a theory

of orality, which viewed Israel's primitive literary output as oral and poetic in nature. Thus national epic and ethnic identity preceded scribal culture and bureaucracy. Sanders traces the influence of these suppositions on the influential twentieth-century theories of the so-called Albright School, and in particular on its most important exponent, Frank Moore Cross, who posited a direct influence on early Israelite epic by pre-Israelite cultures and literatures. A similar theory propounded by Moshe David (Umberto) Cassuto served the identity formation of the nascent state of Israel in the mid-twentieth century.

In chapter 2—'What Was the Alphabet For?'—Sanders deconstructs the widespread assumption of an ineluctable evolutionary development of the alphabet, which assumes an upwardly moving trajectory from logographic to syllabic to alphabetic writing. Once again, it is Cross, with his theory of the rapid spread of the alphabet and its evolutionary contribution to moving the Israelites from a primitive oral stage to an advanced literary one, whose suppositions come under the sharpest attack. In spite of the assumption that the alphabet represented an evolutionary advance and the accessibility of knowledge to humanity as a whole, in point of fact the alphabet took close to one thousand years to assert itself over and against syllabic writing systems in the Levant. Sanders finds the key to a solution to this crux in his investigation of the uses to which writing systems were put. In distinction to cuneiform writings, which reflected a standardized international language and were a tool of a centralized authority, the alphabet was developed in the early second millennium BCE in peripheral regions among marginal groups to express brief sentiments in the writer's vernacular. Hence, there was no standardization until the first attempt at such at Ugarit in the century or two before the city's destruction at the end of the Late Bronze Age (ca. 1200 BCE). At Ugarit, where scribes were well versed in Akkadian-language cuneiform for conventional bureaucratic functions, a cuneiform alphabet was developed in the local vernacular for internal political and religious purposes, including the recording of local myths/legends, liturgies, and rituals. In this manner the texts in alphabetic cuneiform from Ugarit served a particular rather than a universal purpose. They were for internal consumption only. Sanders thus identifies a particularly West-Semitic use of writing in a people's formation of identity and common purpose.

Chapter 3, 'Empires and Alphabets in Late Bronze Age Canaan,' examines the various systems of writing in use in the Levant from ca. 1500-1100 BCE and the so-

cial/political implications of their employment. In spite of the use of what he terms 'Canaanite-Akkadian,' a local pidgin of Akkadian mixed with northwest Semitic elements, evidenced for the most part in the Amarna Letters, a local alphabetic tradition (eventually incorporating Egyptian hieratic numerals) slowly developed alongside. Other than those employing the Ugaritic alphabet, the alphabetic texts of this period are short dedicatory inscriptions or statements of possession. There is no literature per se in the southern Levant. Hence, Sanders feels it is wrong to speak of alphabetic literacy during this period. In his opinion the authors of these short texts were craftsmen, marking their territory and possessions.

Nonetheless, a radical change in the use and diffusion of the alphabet occurred during the Iron Age, beginning in the ninth century BCE. This is the subject matter of chapter 4, 'The Invention of Hebrew in Iron Age Israel.' Examining the relatively small collection of epigraphic finds from the southern Levant, Sanders is able to identify a progression in the use of the alphabet to convey information. With the breakup of the large empires at the end of the Late Bronze Age, a power vacuum was created that led to the establishment of national states in the southern Levant, among which Israel and its language were to have pride of place. The inscribed arrowheads of the Iron Age I at the end of the second millennium BCE are indicative of the consolidation of power among petty local warlords. In the late ninth century BCE, however, monumental inscriptions in three local vernaculars, Ammonite, Aramaic, and Moabite, indicate state and identity formation based on the personal perspective of the ruler, in which the sovereign speaks in the first person directly to his audience/subjects. Assuming the forms of inscriptions from the Neo-Assyrian empire, the local rulers aggrandize themselves within their local spheres of influence to their subjects not in the language of international treaties but in their peoples' distinctive dialects. Inscriptions in a distinctly regional Hebrew script, developed from standard Phoenician, appear as of the eighth century, significantly in a standardized form in both Israel and Judah, thus indicating an 'emerging' national identity-making process. Significantly, the earliest truly literary texts (putatively) in Hebrew are either prophetic (Deir 'Alla) or monumental (Siloam Tunnel) in which the narrative becomes central, yet neither is a royal inscription, being either written to (in the case of the former) or by (in the case of the latter) common people. The earliest Hebrew writing was thus an artisanal activity, taking place outside the large bureaucratic centers. Its aim was to communicate to the broader public, but not on be-

half of the king. In the letters from Lachish and Mesad Hashavyahu Sanders identifies a need to communicate in which reading becomes hearing and retelling, activities that are central also to biblical texts, as is indicated by the Shema (Deut 6:4). Thus Hebrew writing allowed the creation of a revolutionary literature divorced from royal privilege and prerogative.

Sanders initiates his conclusion by adopting Michel Foucault's understanding of the radical break that biblical literature represented with the past. Rather than the state speaking in the third person, biblical literature is non-statist and directly addresses and engages its audience. As the mediating force in this new literary approach Sanders identifies prophetic authority, which becomes the tradent of scribal culture. This process reaches fruition during the exilic period (as of 586 BCE), dur-

ing which various older genres are incorporated and reformulated through the prophetic medium of direct discourse. The multivalence of the literature thus created is what gives the Bible its power to speak directly to the reader over the course of the centuries. Sanders concludes that biblical politics is an essentially *generative* mode of political communication that helps create its audience by the very means through which it addresses it (p. 171).

This is an important monograph that synthesizes much previous work yet arrives at an original and provocative understanding of the influence of the development of the Hebrew script and its associated scribal culture on the formation of biblical literature. Anyone interested in the subjects touched on in this book will have to engage with Sanders's work.

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