

Object Lessons

#1 Biblical Period

Timeline of Writing

3500BCE Beginning of cuneiform writing
3000 Beginning of hieroglyphic writing
1840 Writing in Serabit el Khadem
1200 Merneptah stele
12th-11th centuries Izbet Sartah, Bet Zayit abecedaries
10th century Gezer calendar, Kayafa ostrakon
9th century Bet David inscription
8th - 7th century Ekron inscription, bullae, lamelekh handles, Shiloach inscription, Sennacherib prism
6th century Lachish ostraca, Birkat Kohanim
Second Temple period Uziah inscription, switch to Assyrian letters (ktav ashuri)

What Happened Here?

וַיְהִי דְבַר־שְׁמוּאֵל לְכָל־יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיֵּצֵא יִשְׂרָאֵל לְקָרְאֵת פְּלִשְׁתִּים לְמִלְחָמָה וַיִּחַנּוּ עַל־הָאֶבֶן הָעֶזֶר
וּפְלִשְׁתִּים חָנוּ בְּאַפְקִי:

and Samuel's word went forth to all Israel.

Israel marched out to engage the Philistines in battle; they encamped near Ebenezer, while the Philistines encamped at Aphek. (Samuel I 4:1)

Alphabetical Order

איכה ב: (טז) פָּצוּ עֲלֵיהֶם כָּל אוֹיְבֵיהֶם שָׁרְקוּ וַיִּחַרְקוּ שֵׁן אִמְרוּ בִלְעֵנוּ אֵךְ זֶה הַיּוֹם שֶׁקִּוִּינוּהוּ מִצָּאֵנוּ
רְאִינוּ: (יז) עָשָׂה ה' אֲשֶׁר זָמַם בַּצֵּעַ אִמְרָתוֹ אֲשֶׁר צִוָּה מִיָּמֵי קֶדֶם הָרֹס וְלֹא חָמַל וַיִּשְׁמַח עָלֵיהֶם אוֹיְבֵי
הָרִים קִרְוֹ צָרֵיהֶם:

Sanhedrin 104 Rava says that Rabbi Yohanan says: For what reason did the prophet precede the verse beginning with the letter *peh* to the verse beginning with the letter *ayin* in several chapters of Lamentations? it is for the spies who said with their mouths [*befihem*] what they did not see with their eyes [*be'eineihem*].

Widespread Literacy

Gideon came to the Jordan and crossed it. The three hundred men with him were famished, but still in pursuit.

He said to the people of Succoth, "Please give some loaves of bread to the men who are following me, for they are famished, and I am pursuing Zebah and Zalmunna, the kings of Midian."

But the officials of Succoth replied, “Are Zebah and Zalmunna already in your hands, that we should give bread to your troops?”
“I swear,” declared Gideon, “when the LORD delivers Zebah and Zalmunna into my hands, I’ll thresh your bodies upon desert thorns and briers!” . . .
On his way back from the battle at the Ascent of Heres, Gideon son of Joash captured a boy from among the people of Succoth and interrogated him. The latter drew up for him a list of the officials and elders of Succoth, seventy-seven in number. (Judges 8)

Asherah

וַיַּעֲשׂוּ בְנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת־הָרַע בְּעֵינֵי יְהוָה וַיִּשְׁכְּחוּ אֶת־יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיהֶם וַיַּעֲבֹדוּ אֶת־הַבַּעַלִּים
וְאֶת־הָאֲשֵׁרוֹת:

The Israelites did what was offensive to God; they ignored the Eternal their God and worshiped the Baalim and the Asheroth. (Judges 3:7)

וַעֲתָה שְׁלַח קִבְץ אֵלַי אֶת־כָּל־יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶל־הַר הַכְּרִמָּל וְאֶת־נְבִיאֵי הַבַּעַל אַרְבַּע מֵאוֹת וְחֲמִשִּׁים וְנְבִיאֵי
הָאֲשֵׁרָה אַרְבַּע מֵאוֹת אֲכָלִי שְׁלַחַן אִיזָבֵל:

Now summon all Israel to join me at Mount Carmel, together with the four hundred and fifty prophets of Baal and the four hundred prophets of Asherah, who eat at Jezebel’s table.” (Kings I 18:19)

וַיַּשֶּׂם אֶת־פֶּסֶל הָאֲשֵׁרָה אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה בְּבֵית אֲשֶׁר אָמַר יְהוָה אֱלֹדֶד וְאֶל־שְׁלֹמֹה בְּנוֹ בְּבֵית הַזֶּה
וּבִירוּשָׁלַם אֲשֶׁר בְּחֻרְתִּי מִכָּל־שִׁבְטֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲשִׁים אֶת־שְׁמִי לְעוֹלָם:

The sculptured image of Asherah that he made he placed in the House concerning which God had said to David and to his son Solomon, “In this House and in Jerusalem, which I chose out of all the tribes of Israel, I will establish My name forever. (Kings II 21:7)

“For YHVH and His Asherah” (Inscription from Kuntillat Ajrud in the Sinai, 9th century BCE)

Ashtoret

וַיַּעֲזְבוּ אֶת־יְהוָה וַיַּעֲבֹדוּ לַבַּעַל וְלַעֲשֵׁתָרוֹת:

They forsook GOD and worshiped Baal and the Ashtaroth. (Judges 2:13)

וַיֹּאמֶר שְׁמוּאֵל אֶל־כָּל־בֵּית יִשְׂרָאֵל לֵאמֹר אִם־בְּכָל־לִבְבְּכֶם אַתֶּם שׁוֹבִים אֶל־יְהוָה הֲסִירוּ אֶת־
אֱלֹהֵי הַגֹּגֵר מִתּוֹכְכֶם וְהַעֲשִׁיתָרוֹת וְהָכִינוּ לִבְבְּכֶם אֶל־יְהוָה וַעֲבַדְהוּ לְבָדּוֹ וַיִּצֵּל אֶתְכֶם מִיַּד
פְּלִשְׁתִּים:

And Samuel said to all the House of Israel, “If you mean to return to God with all your heart, you must remove the alien gods and the Ashtaroth from your midst and direct your heart to God, who alone you should serve. Then you will be delivered from the hands of the Philistines.” (Samuel I 10:6)

וַיִּלָּךְ שְׁלֹמֹה אַחֲרֵי עֲשִׂיתָרֵת אֱלֹהֵי צִדְוֹנִים וְאַחֲרֵי מֶלֶכֶם שִׁכְזַי עַמֻּנִים:

Solomon followed Ashtoreth the goddess of the Phoenicians, and Milcom the abomination of the Ammonites. (Kings I 11:5)

The Baal and the Rain

“parched is the furrow of soil . . Parched is El’s soil furrow,: Baal neglects the furrow of his tillage. Where is powerful Baal? Where is the prince, lord of the earth?” (Ugaritic poem about Baal found in Ras Shamra, 15th-14th c BCE:)

וְהָיָה בַּיּוֹם־הַהוּא נֹאֵם־יְהוָה תִּקְרָאִי אִישִׁי וְלֹא־תִקְרָאִי־לִי עוֹד בְּעַלְיִ:

And in that day —declares the LORD— You will call [Me] Ishi, And no more will you call Me Baali. (Hosea 2:18-19)

Calves

וַיִּקַּח מֵיָדָם וַיִּצַר אֹתוֹ בְּחֹרֶט וַיַּעֲשֵׂהוּ עֵגֶל מִסִּכָּה וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֱלֹהֵיךָ יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲשֶׁר הָעֵלֹךְ מִמִּצְרַיִם:

This he took from them and cast in a mold, and made it into a molten calf. And they exclaimed, “This is your god, O Israel, who brought you out of the land of Egypt (Shmot 32:4)

וַיִּזְעַץ הַמֶּלֶךְ וַיַּעַשׂ שְׁנֵי עֲגֻלֵי זָהָב וַיֹּאמֶר אֲלֵהֶם רַב־לָכֶם מַעֲלֹת יְרוּשָׁלַיִם הִנֵּה אֱלֹהֵיךָ יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲשֶׁר הָעֵלֹךְ מִמִּצְרַיִם:

So the king took counsel and made two golden calves. He said to the people, “You have been going up to Jerusalem long enough. This is your god, O Israel, who brought you up from the land of Egypt!” (Kings I 12:28)

וְעַתָּה | יוֹסֵפוּ לְחַטֹּא וַיַּעֲשׂוּ לָהֶם מִסִּכָּה מִכֶּסֶף כְּתוּבוֹנִם עֲצָבִים מַעֲשֵׂה חֲרָשִׁים כָּלָה לָהֶם הָם אֲמָרִים זִבְחֵי אָדָם עֲגֻלִּים יִשְׁקֹוּ:

And now they go on sinning; They have made them molten images, Idols, by their skill, from their silver, Wholly the work of artisans. Yet for these they appoint people to sacrifice; They are wont to kiss calves! (Hoshea 13:2)

Molech

“and they built the shrines of Baal that are in the Valley of Ben-Hinnom, where they offered up their sons and daughters to Molech—when I had never commanded, or even thought [of commanding], that they should do such an abominable thing, and so bring guilt on Judah” (Jeremiah 32:35)

“Assuredly, a time is coming—declares God—when this place shall no longer be called Topheth or Valley of Ben-Hinnom, but Valley of Slaughter.” (Jeremiah 19:6)

Many Places or the One?

כִּי כֹה אָמַר יְהוָה לְבֵית יִשְׂרָאֵל דְּרֹשׁוּנִי וְחִיּוּ ה' וְאַל תִּדְרֹשׁוּ בֵּית אֵל וְהַגְלַל לֹא תִבְאוּ וּבְאֵר שֶׁבַע
לֹא תַעֲבְרוּ כִּי הַגְלַל גָּלָה יִגְלֶה וּבֵית אֵל יִהְיֶה לְאֵוָן:

Thus said the LORD To the House of Israel: Seek Me, and you will live. Do not seek Bethel, Nor go to Gilgal, Nor cross. to Beer-sheba; For Gilgal shall go into exile, And Bethel shall become a delusion. (Amos 5:4-5)

הַנִּשְׁבָּעִים בְּאַשְׁמַת שִׁמְרוֹן וְאָמְרוּ חֵי אֱלֹהֶיךָ דָן וְחֵי דֶרֶךְ בְּאֵר שֶׁבַע וְנִפְלוּ וְלֹא יָקוּמוּ עוֹד:
Those who swear by the guilt of Samaria, Saying, “As your god lives, Dan,” And
“As the way to Beersheba lives They shall fall to rise no more. (Amos 8:14)

וְכִי־תֹאמְרוּן אֵלֵינוּ אֱלֹהֵינוּ בְּטַחָנוּ הֲלוֹא־הוּא אֲשֶׁר הִסִּיר חֲזַקְיָהוּ אֶת־בְּמִתָּיו וְאֶת־מִזְבְּחֹתָיו
וַיֹּאמֶר לַיהוּדָה וּלְיִרוּשָׁלַם לִפְנֵי הַמִּזְבֵּחַ הַזֶּה תִּשְׁתַּחֲוּ בִירוּשָׁלַם:

And if you tell me that you are relying on the ETERNAL your God: is this not the very one whose shrines and altars Hezekiah did away with, telling Judah and Jerusalem, ‘You must worship only at this altar in Jerusalem’? (Kings II 18:22)

What We Do and What We Don't Do

לֹא־מִרְיָ יַעֲבֹר הַחֹדֶשׁ וְנִשְׁבְּרָה שִׁבְרָה וְהַשַּׁבָּת וְנִפְתַּח־הַבֵּר לְהַקְטִין אִפְּהָ וְלַהֲגִדִּיל שֶׁקֶל וְלַעֲוֹת
מִזְגָּגִי מִרְמָה:

saying, “If only the new moon were over, so that we could sell grain; the sabbath, so that we could offer wheat for sale, using an *ephah* that is too small, and a shekel that is too big, tilting a dishonest scale (Amos 8:5)

וְלֹא־תוֹצִיאוּ מִשָּׂא מִבְּתֵיכֶם בַּיּוֹם הַשַּׁבָּת וְכָל־מְלָאכָה לֹא תַעֲשׂוּ וְקִדְשְׁתֶּם אֶת־יוֹם הַשַּׁבָּת כְּאֲשֶׁר
צִוִּיתִי אֶת־אֲבוֹתֵיכֶם: וְלֹא שָׁמְעוּ וְלֹא הִטּוּ אֶת־אָזְנָם וַיִּקְשׁוּ אֶת־עַרְפֹּם לְבַלְתִּי (שׁוֹמֵעַ) [שְׁמוֹעַ]
וּלְבַלְתִּי קָחַת מוֹסֵר:

Nor shall you carry out burdens from your houses on the sabbath day, or do any work, but you shall hallow the sabbath day, as I commanded your ancestors. But they would not listen or turn their ear; they stiffened their necks and would not pay heed or accept discipline. (Jeremiah 17:22-23)..

הַמְתַּקְדְּשִׁים וְהַמְטַהֲרִים אֶל־הַגְּזֹזֹת אַחֵר (אֶחָד) [אַחַת] בְּתוֹךְ אֲכָלֵי בֶשֶׂר הַחֲזִיר וְהַשֶּׁקֶץ וְהָעֶכְבֵּר
יִחָדּוּ יִסְפוּ נָאִם־יְהוָה:

Those who sanctify and purify themselves to enter the groves, imitating one in the center, eating the flesh of the swine, the reptile, and the mouse, shall one and all come to an end—declares God. (Isaiah 66:17)

Attempts at Reform

In the third year of King Hoshea son of Elah of Israel, Hezekiah son of King Ahaz of Judah became king. He was twenty-five years old when he became king, and he reigned in Jerusalem twenty-nine years; his mother's name was Abi^a daughter

of Zechariah. He did what was pleasing to the LORD, just as his father David had done. He abolished the shrines and smashed the pillars and cut down the sacred post. He also broke into pieces the bronze serpent that Moses had made, for until that time the Israelites had been offering sacrifices to it; it was called Nehushtan. (Kings II 18:1-3)

How to Desecrate

וַיִּתְּצוּ אֶת מִצְבַּת הַבַּעַל וַיִּתְּצוּ אֶת-בֵּית הַבַּעַל וַיִּשְׁמְרוּ (לְמַחֲרָאוֹת) [לְמִוְצָאוֹת] עַד-הַיּוֹם:
Kings II 10:27 And they pulled down the pillar of the Ba'al, and pulled down the house of the Ba'al, and made it a latrine unto this day.

When is the Spirit of Idolatry Broken?

“And they cried in a loud voice to the Lord their God” (Nehemiah 9:4). What did they say? Rav Yehuda says, and some say it is Rav Yonatan who says: Woe, woe [*baya, baya*], this [evil inclination for idol worship] is what destroyed the Temple, and burned the Sanctuary, and murdered the righteous ones, and caused the Jewish people to be exiled from their land. And it still dances among us, Didn't You give it to us solely for receiving reward [for overcoming it?] We do not want it, nor do we not want its reward. The people fasted for three days and prayed for mercy. a note fell for them from the heavens in which was written: Truth. . . The form of a fiery lion cub came forth from the chamber of the Holy of Holies. ..The prophet said to them: Throw it into a container made of lead and cover it with lead, as lead absorbs sound. As it is written: “And he said: This is the evil one. And he cast it down into the midst of the measure, and he cast a stone of lead upon its opening” (Zechariah 5:8). (Sanhedrin 64a)

Rav Ashi said to him [Menashe]: Since you were so wise, what is the reason you engaged in idol worship? Manasseh said to him: Had you been there at that time, you would have taken and lifted the hem of your cloak and run after me (Sanhedrin 102b)