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וְאֵת שֵׁם אַהֲרֹן תִּכְתֹּב

“AND INSCRIBE THE NAME OF AARON”:

STUDIES IN BIBLE, EPIGRAPHY,

LITERACY AND HISTORY

PRESENTED TO AARON DEMSKY

Presented to

AARON DEMSKY



Photo by Noam Demsky

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SOCIALIZED LITERACY IN ANTIQUITY

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The aim of this paper is to reiterate anew several aspects of literacy among the Jews in Antiquity and to reevaluate some unnoticed aspects of literacy. The basic texts that will be analyzed are biblical, though a few of them will be discussed with the help of post-biblical traditions.

Literacy is the knowledge and use of letters and scripts, the ability to read and write at least to some extent; the rate of literacy in a given society measures the percentage of people that are already literate. There are several grades of literacy, but the following paper will not discuss the exact rate of literacy nor what type of literacy the assumed knowledge implies.

Literacy began as a bureaucratic means with which to run the logistics of a monarchy, and it should be recalled that the most ancient texts are basic bureaucratic documents that look like a list or inventory (of taxes, foods, etc.) and have nothing to do with *belles-lettres*. Recently, after decades of work, the whole issue of literacy in “biblical times” was investigated thoroughly by A. Demsky.¹ There is no need to discuss this book and its importance in the study of literacy in Antiquity here; suffice it to say that one should read this study carefully because of its broad outlook and deep insight.

Now, before we begin our study of “socialized literacy,” it should be noted that this terminology, coined by Eric A. Havelock, relates to the connections between literacy and society, or better: how literacy made its impact on society and how it expanded from a small realm of priests and professional scribes and became an integral part of the society as a

¹ A. Demsky, *Literacy in Ancient Israel* (Jerusalem: Bialik, 2012) [Hebr.].

whole.² To be more specific, one may say “socialized literacy” develops when the percentage of literate people changes from about 1–2% of the population, which is the norm wherever scribes and clerks are used, to about 10% (and even higher when measuring basic reading ability).³ That is to say, the mass population, that until then had not been aware of the role of literacy in their lives, since it was confined to a small circle of clerks, became aware of what was going on “behind the scenes” and began to make use of literacy and appreciate it.

To understand the role of literacy in human thought and progress one should be aware of the studies of Jack Goody, which serve as a kind of a beacon in this dark field of research.⁴ Briefly: literacy enables a specific society to adopt new values and changes people’s mode of thinking and behavior. The higher the literacy rate is, the more a certain society is apt to change. However, in the present study, the exact rate of literacy will not be discussed nor the way in which literacy was initially adopted by the people of Israel. Rather, the discussion will focus on the process of “improvement” in literacy.

Hereafter a few cases will be discussed to demonstrate socialized literacy among the Judeans and Israelites in Antiquity as reflected in the Bible. Each of the cases will demonstrate what happens when the written word leaves the realm of priests or bureaucracy and will relate the impact of a new standard of writing on the whole society, not only in relation to literacy but to social status as well. It will be shown how the written word became part of theology and part of the Judaic values in Antiquity. One can see in these rules the grain of the much later (Quranic) characterization of Jews as: People of the Book.

A. THE WAYWARD WIFE

The case of the Wayward Wife (Num 5:5–31) describes a woman who is tested by being put through an ordeal in which the writing of a biblical

² Eric A. Havelock, *Prologue to Greek Literacy* (Cincinnati: Univ. of Cincinnati, 1971): 14.

³ On ancient literacy, see: M. Bar-Ilan, “Illiteracy in the Land of Israel in the First Centuries C.E.,” in *Essays in the Social Scientific Study of Judaism and Jewish Society*, II (S. Fishbane, S. Schoenfeld and A. Goldschlaeger, eds.; New York: Ktav, 1992): 46–61; Christopher A. Rollston, *Writing and Literacy in the World of Ancient Israel: Epigraphic Evidence from the Iron Age* (Atlanta: SBL, 2010).

⁴ J. Goody, *The Domestication of the Savage Mind* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ., 1977); J. Goody and I. Watt, “The Consequences of Literacy,” in *Language and Social Context: Selected Readings* (Pier P. Giglioli, ed.; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972): 311–357.

text is essential part of the ceremony.⁵ For the purpose of this study we will restrict the discussion to the written aspect in the ceremony.⁶

We know of no other ancient ordeal, in any culture, that requires the practice of writing.⁷ It should be noted that the whole concept of ordeal seems to contradict the Bible, where one sees that justice is carried out through a complex process: judges, testimonies, swearing and so forth. Moreover, an ordeal reflects a culture that relies on God directly, without the assistance of juristic procedure, hence, a less bureaucratic and very different culture than the biblical one. There is no doubt that the ordeal comes from a pre-literate or pre-institutionalized (or better: nomadic) society, because in such a culture there is no other way to know the truth; and the congregation, with the help of the priest, summons God to reveal the truth. The truth lies in the word, the written word of God. However, the biblical law that requires placing judges and scribes in the social order says (Deut 16:18): “they should be posted in all your gates,” wherein “gates” is a metonymic for towns. To sum up the case so far: ordeal in the Bible and writing as a part of the ordeal seem to be two oxymora.

Therefore, it is assumed that the whole ceremony of ordeal is a remnant of an archaic law of illiterate people, while writing reflects a more advanced society. Thus, it is assumed that a pre-literate custom was adopted and renewed in a literate and more advanced culture when this pre-biblical law was committed to writing. When the old archaic law was transmitted, and accepted in the Priestly Code, the law was not only committed to writing but the scribe considered writing so important that he included it in the old ordeal. The priest-scribe thus adapted the old custom by inserting a new ingredient into the ceremony: the written word (by a priest). The archaic law was “domesticated” (or: oikotyped⁸), only by and with an addendum: a written component, writing of the law itself, that should be included in the ceremony.

We can see here how the old-new law had an impact on the society in which it existed. The literacy rate of Judaic men in Antiquity was arguably between 3–10% of the population,⁹ but there is no dispute

⁵ For a full discussion of the ceremony and its interpretation, see M. Bar-Ilan, “Between False Reality and Fictional History,” review of *The Rite that Was Not: Temple, Midrash and Gender in Tractate Sotah*, by Ishay Rosen-Zvi. *Katharsis* 16 (2012): 73–111 [Hebr.].

⁶ Compare Demsky (N 1): 245–246.

⁷ “Ordeal,” *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics* (13 vols.; J. Hastings, ed.; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1917): 9.507–533; D. Sabbatucci, “Ordeal,” *Encyclopedia of Religion* (2nd ed.; 15 vols.; Lindsay Jones, ed.; New York: Thomson Gale, 2005): 6846–6851.

⁸ “Oikotype” is used in the study of folklore to refer to traditions as they change over time and space to be adapted by one’s own tradition.

⁹ M. Bar-Ilan, “Illiteracy as Reflected in the Halakhot concerning the Reading of

concerning the low literacy rate of women: a minute fraction of the female society could read or write.¹⁰ This means that a simple woman who, in most cases, was illiterate, came to the Temple and perhaps for the first time in her life, became aware of the importance of a written document; in that it could change her life. Thus, the wayward wife ceremony made common people, among whom almost all were illiterate, become aware of the impact of literacy in daily life, when God is manifested by His written law.

Before we end this discussion, a note should be made concerning a quite similar procedure mentioned in the Torah, and that is the method by which Aaron the priest was verified or nominated. This took place through a divine procedure, in which writing was an integral part of the divine selection ceremony. The case appears at the end of the story about Korah (Num 17:16–26). Once again, divine truth is assisted by the written word. In that ceremony, a priest was nominated while in the wayward ceremony the scribe who wrote the text must have been a priest. It is known that most scribes in antiquity, though not all, were priests, and that priests took advantage of their skills is clear by observing the written words inscribed on the garments of the High Priest, the role of the Ten Commandments in the tabernacle and so forth. The High Priest walked with words engraved on his ornaments, and thus he was like a walking bulletin-board. Priests practiced writing and Aaron the High Priest was “elected” with the divine written word, so it is quite clear why the procedure of writing played such an important role in the priestly ceremony of the wayward woman. All in all, we can see from this law the impact of the diffusion of literacy by priests over the whole society.

B. THE BILL OF DIVORCE

The institution of marriage was inaugurated considerably earlier than the invention of writing, and all pre-literate societies had their own system of marriage and divorce without any writ. Later on, there were (rare) cases when the literate strata of the society or those from royal families wrote an agreement of marriage, especially when a significant sum of money was involved. However, there was no writ of divorce yet, either because of the assumed low rate of divorce (due both to traditional

the Scroll of Esther and the Hallel,” *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research* 54 (1987): 1–12 [Hebr.]; Demsky (N 1): 8–11.

¹⁰ M. Bar-Ilan, *Some Jewish Women in Antiquity* (Atlanta: Scholars, 1998): 31–51.

societies and low life expectancy) or predominantly because money was not involved in such cases.

However, this is not the situation in the Bible. In the Bible, there is no bill of marriage mentioned, though marriage is described a few times (e.g., Gen 29:22–23; Ruth 4). It should be recalled that this was the Jewish custom, to marry without any document, until the first century B.C.E.,¹¹ a custom that surely reflects illiterate society. However, now we must take a closer look at the bill of divorce,¹² and first we should read the law that appears in Deuteronomy (a book with far more references to written documents than found in any other biblical book).

The biblical law of divorce (Deut 24:1–4) has two different aspects: one that cites a condition, upon which a divorcee cannot go back to her former husband, and one that states how to terminate the connection between the couple in the first place. The legislator stresses a specific condition: that a woman who was divorced by A and got married to B cannot go back to A. This prohibition is, as a matter of fact, the mandatory rule that prevails in Islam (a divorced woman can go back to her husband only if she has been wife to another). Moreover, the second aspect of the biblical law is that the separation between the couple should be committed to writing, and this rule also contradicts the Islamic law. Since biblical law precedes Islam it seems that the Islamic law is based upon an ancient law that the biblical legislator opposed. Divorce documents were very rare in the ancient Near East,¹³ since the Mesopotamian law enabled one to divorce his wife orally. In other words, the biblical law of divorce contradicts the old regional law in two aspects, so it seems that the Israelite-Judean legislator wanted his followers to be separated from the laws that prevailed among the surrounding peoples, a well attested trend in the Bible.¹⁴

There is no doubt that divorcing by means of a document was not invented in Judea, since the Judeans adopted literacy much later than some of their contemporaries. However, implementing the divorce document as a rule that should be applied to all divorcees must have had some reason behind it. Chances are that the law of the bill of divorce comes from administrators with experience in bureaucracy. Based upon their

¹¹ M. Bar-Ilan, "Marriage and Other Basic Problems in Ancient Jewish Society," *Cathedra* 121 (2006): 23–52 [Hebr.].

¹² Compare Demsky (n 1): 157, 191.

¹³ S. Greengus, *Laws in the Bible and in Early Rabbinic Collections* (Eugene: Cascade, 2011): 35–40.

¹⁴ J. Braslavi, "The Torah against Ancient Divorce in the East," *Festschrift Korngreen* (A. Weiser and Ben-Zion Luria, eds.; Tel Aviv: haHevra leHeqer haMikra bEisrael, 1964): 44–56 [Hebr.].

experience, anything that is not written and signed is probably valueless (compare Jeremiah 32). They initiated clarification of private matters by using public or state bureaucracy. The presumption of the law is that a specific husband who divorces his wife is literate to the extent that he knows how to write a bill of divorce,¹⁵ or at least he lives in a society where one has ready access to a scribe. In any event, private status came under the eye of the super-power: the written word.

It is assumed that the bill of divorce was implemented to make the divorce definite (unlike an oral law that seems to be indefinite, as in Islam), or to reject anyone (the husband included) who undermines the validity of the new status of the divorcee (as can be seen in later Jewish experience). For example, in pre-literate societies a husband might send his wife without using any specific formula (such as in Hos 2:4: “She is not my wife nor am I her husband”), or a battered woman might have fled from her husband to her father (Judg 19:2), saying she is divorced although this was not her legal status. Now, when the bill of divorce became mandatory, a woman could not claim she was divorced, for example, until she showed her bill of divorce (Isa 50:1). Likewise, a possessive husband could not claim “she is still my wife,” when the woman could prove she is divorced. In other words, the bill of divorce provides some sort of clarification of the social status of the lowest rank (a divorcee is a status-less person) by adopting state bureaucracy and applying it in the domestic sphere.

The bill of divorce is a rare case, in which one can see the impact of literacy on the whole society. Unlike monarchic bureaucracy, which is restricted to governors and their clerks and unlike priestly literature, which is confined to old traditions, a bill of divorce has a daily and social impact: it enables a woman to get remarried. Making the bill of divorce mandatory by law had its own consequences, since the law shows how the values of the literate higher society, governors and scribes, penetrated lower oral classes.

To an extent this law forces literacy on illiterate people. Looking again at the low rate of female literacy, in comparison to that of males, it is clear that the bill of divorce penetrated illiterate culture and “enforced” people—if not to try to read the text—to realize what is in the text, or, what literacy is all about. Thus, an illiterate woman (or man, especially the one who wanted to marry that woman) must have had some idea concerning literacy, since without that document she would not be able

¹⁵ This law is unlike the law of Deut 6:9 and 11:20, which contains the command to write, while phrasing the verb in second-person singular (with the possessive: וּכְתַבְתֶּם) in a way that might be taken to denote: somebody should do it, not necessarily you.

to remarry. Everybody thus became aware of how the written word can change one's world.

A few words must be stated here concerning the differences between the case of the wayward wife and the bill of divorce, from the point of view of socialized literacy. In the law of the wayward wife a priestly scribe is mandatory and the case is restricted to a fraction of those women (and husbands) in society that "adhere" to the terms of the law. The ceremony is done only in the Temple, and though there were all sorts of people who watched this scene (*M. Soṭa* 1:6), it necessarily was related to a very restricted number of cases. Regardless of how strong an impression the ceremony left on people, it was still ephemeral. However, the bill of divorce case is very different: there was no mandatory priest-scribe, no mandatory Temple location, a relatively large number of women needed such a bill, and the bill of divorce was a daily artifact that a divorced woman could not afford to be without. The wayward wife law reflects a restricted priestly circle that runs the Temple, instructs, and supervises the society at large, while the bill of divorce reflects a society with much more social egalitarianism, except for the fact that both laws reflect males' superiority over females, which was taken for granted. From a literacy point of view, it seems that the bill of divorce law reflects a higher literacy-rate in society than that reflected in the wayward wife ceremony, since the law of the wayward wife comes from an archaic (tribal) society and was domesticated by the priests, while the bill of divorce law comes from the book of Deuteronomy, where town and urban life, always concomitant with literacy, is reflected more than in the other books of the Torah.¹⁶

The case of the bill of divorce shows how literacy was no longer restricted to the upper classes but penetrated the whole society. If this was not to the extent of being a catalyst for a literate society, at least it obligated people to be aware of the significance of a written document, a situation that one could not find earlier. One may assume that there were very few divorced women in antiquity, and therefore the impact of literacy affected only a small number of people. However, it seems this is not the case here, since any man who was interested in marrying a divorced woman, and there were many, must have had some notion concerning the meaning of the bill of divorce that the presumptive future wife was holding in her hands, even though all the surrounding people were illiterate.

Before summing up this discussion a note must be made concerning the stories about Abraham, the patriarch, with regard to literate society.

¹⁶ Don C. Benjamin, *Deuteronomy and City Life* (Lanham: Univ. Press of America, 1983).

Abraham divorced his wife Hagar without a bill of divorce (as opposed to the law discussed here), and he bought a piece of land without a written document (as opposed to the procedure reflected in Jeremiah 32). One can see in these cases the difference between a pre-literate society and a more advanced society. In pre-literate society transactions and social status changes were done orally, while in the later, more advanced society such changes were regarded as invalid until they were committed into writing. The usage of writing became part of the order of society; bureaucracy won.

Here is a rare case where one can apprehend the difference between the Judaic society as against all the surrounding cultures, since none of them deemed a bill of divorce to be mandatory (probably because of the low rate of literacy in the first place).¹⁷ Here we can see a clear case that not only demonstrates a difference between these societies but how socialized literacy played a role when literacy became a necessity to govern private and intimate matters. For the first time the written letter was not only a means of communication between a man and his king or God, but between two laity, a man and his former wife, to settle once and for all the new status of the woman: a divorcee. The written word began to play a role in the lives of laity, far beyond its original function solely among priests and royal scribes.

C. THE LAW OF *MEZUZA*

In today's terminology, there is a well-known law (typical of Jewish edicts) named *Mezuzah*; it states that the words of the Lord should be written on every doorpost of homes and gates of towns (Deut 6:9; 11:20). In modern times, but already in antiquity, Jews obey this law by putting a small parchment, in which these laws are stated in the Bible, on their doorposts. The parchment is rolled and hidden in a small box so one cannot read it unless he opens the casing, a procedure very rarely done. However, it is easily seen that the main idea behind the law is to make the words of the Lord conspicuous rather than to hide them. Jews

¹⁷ It is assumed this happened due to the difference between alphabetic letters as against hieroglyphics and cuneiform that were practiced in the surrounding area, a system that used some hundred signs, which diminished the literacy rate for obvious reasons. This explanation needs more elaboration in regard to the Phoenician script (from which the Hebrew alphabet arose), but it seems that social factors, such as the attitude towards women, should also be considered. See Y. Cohen, "Writing, Reading and Literacy in the Ancient Near East," *Cathedra* 152 (2014): 167–182 [Hebr.]. Cohen's paper should be read very cautiously.

in antiquity fulfilled this law in a concealed way,¹⁸ but the Samaritans fulfilled the law differently, by making the inscription large and public in a very dissimilar mode from that of the rabbis.¹⁹

The law of *Mezuza* appears twice in Deuteronomy but there is no need to discuss here the rare case of “duplicating” a biblical law, nor must we discuss the exact details of this commandment, as it was understood either by the rabbis or by the Samaritans. One thing is clear, that the legislator wanted every house and town’s doors to have graffiti where the words of the Lord would be written, to spread the Lord’s words far and wide. Thus, everyone everyday would confront the divine, and His words, and consequently all would know from childhood the importance of God and His commandments, as well as the importance of script.

This law takes advantage of the written word but there is a significant difference between this law and the former decrees that were discussed above. In the case of the wayward wife it is clear that the law is implemented in relatively rare cases. The bill of divorce must have been less exceptional, but in any event these cases reflect people in their intimate crises, or, individuals on the fringes of society (even liminal). However, the law concerning *Mezuza* discusses daily life, and unlike its forerunners does not reflect an event that happens once in a while, stipulated upon specific conditions, but rather a law that is mandatory for everybody. Writing on the doors and gates of the town reflects an urban society, which has developed a bureaucracy (Deut 16:18),²⁰ while the case of the wayward wife is “hidden” in the tabernacle, and the ordeal concept upon which it is implemented reflects the nomadic era. In the case of *Mezuza* it is virtually clear that the legislator wanted everybody to be exposed to the divine word and thus to spread the belief in God, unlike, for example, an inscription on a tombstone where script is related to a warning or even a curse. The implicit concept behind this rule is to spread the importance of literacy among all, including the illiterate. In other words, literacy became a vehicle for knowing God and thus a mode of identification was made between God and literacy. Knowing God meant, first, being literate, and this idea is reflected in the fact that while former prophets used to speak orally, later prophets committed their divine experience into writing after being commanded to do so. God writes and his followers

¹⁸ B. Z. Luria, *From Jannai to Herod* (Jerusalem: Qiryat Sefer, 1975): 252–261 [Hebr.].

¹⁹ Y. Ben-Zvi, *The Book of Samaritans* (Jerusalem: Yad Yishak Ben Zvi, 1976): 173–193 [Hebr.].

²⁰ It should be noted that Deuteronomy reflects scribalism much more than the other books in the Torah, which in turn implicitly reflects the role of literacy in society. Other books that reflect scribalism, such as Jeremiah, Ezra, Daniel, Esther, reflect scribal culture and not the social culture of the population.

and worshippers write as well (and are expected to read). Writing on the doorposts in *Mezuzot* enacts this idea.

D. THE LAW OF *TEFILLIN*

Almost in the same breath where it is stated that the words of the Lord should be inscribed on the door, the legislator states that one has to have the Lord's words on his body (Deut 6:8–9; 11:18–20).²¹ This law seems to be a modification of a former law (Exod 13:9, 16), as is clear from the fact that the divine “signs” were both mandatory when the children of Israel fled from Egypt: they had to have a sign on the doorpost of their buildings (Exod 12:7), and upon the bodies of those who were saved by the Lord.

It looks like the old practice of putting marks on one's body employed a “sign” only, not necessarily letters, and that old custom was modified into a more “modern” law in a literary society (similar to the adaptation of the ordeal of the wayward wife into a literary society). In any event, the legislator here had a much broader concept of spreading the word of God in comparison to the other ways described above. Unlike the wayward wife or the divorcee, who reflect the margins of society, here the legislator wanted everybody in the society to be exposed to divine words. By writing on both, (unmovable) buildings and (movable) people, no one in the society could have escaped the letters of the Lord. The Lord thus had dynamic publicity, and letters and their importance became known to all.

Not only that, but here the divine words have a specific and unconditional task: saving the bearer of the letter from the wrath of evil or demons. The apotropaic nature of the divine sign is clear-cut in the story of Exodus, though it is less apparent in Deuteronomy (unless one accepts the LXX translation of the biblical *Totaphot* as amulets). At any rate, now that one was surrounded by letters, either on each male's body or on each doorpost, or both, chances were that he would appreciate the value of literacy in a more profound sense than he (or his father) had. Never before had the legislator of Deuteronomy emphasized the impact of literacy on each and every one in society so clearly. One may say that the functional letter became a divine rescuer.

One final word is needed here to understand the role of literacy. In ancient Israel, there were ceremonies where literacy played a role, as is

²¹ D. Rothstein, *From Bible to Murabba'at: Studies in the Literary, Textual and Scribal Features of Phylacteries and Mezuzot in Ancient Israel and Early Judaism* (Ph.D. Diss, Univ. of California, Los Angeles, 1992).

seen at Mount Ebal (Deuteronomy 27). Divine words were inscribed on twelve stones and thus conveyed a divine message to all participants.²² Such a use of literacy was confined to a set time and place. However, the cases of *Mezuza* and *Tefillin* show the same trend of literacy promoting the divine message, but without a preset limit: everybody was exposed to the divine message without going to Mount Ebal. It was not done in a rare ceremony or at the Temple but took place in every house. Every building became a publication board for both God and literacy. One can call this the spread of literacy.

One last word about this spreading of the letter by God, or vice versa: spreading God by letter. The role of priestly scribes is very limited here. Only in the case of the wayward wife in the Temple is the scribe described as a priest. However, the scribe who wrote on the other occasions was no priest, or at least a priest was not necessary to implement the divine rule. If ancient scribes were “blamed” for keeping their secrets to themselves, as was understood by Goody, then these biblical rules show the opposite: an increase of literacy motivated by an increase of the belief in the biblical God without the priests as mediators. Furthermore, God was identified with His words and thus the Lord of the Jews demanded a certain literacy from His people, a demand heretofore never articulated.

E. THE LORD’S NAME ON THE BODY

Some of the previously discussed cases were quite rare in society. The case of the wayward wife and the case of the divorced wife could not take place without three conditions of the protagonist being fulfilled. They must: 1) be female; 2) be married; and 3) have developed bad relationships with their spouses. The following law of the *Mezuza* reflected urban society while the law of *Tefillin* presumably reflected every male. Through these types of divine written law, the power of the divine letter spread; it is now time to scrutinize a similar practice that transpired, though this time without a mandatory divine rule.

The following case is quite different because it was related to almost the whole of the society: definitively males and perhaps even females took part in this ritual of socialized literacy. Moreover, while former practices were “enforced” on people, the following practice relates to people who, of their own will, took advantage of the written word.

There were people who inscribed the name of the Lord on their arms

²² M. Bar-Ilan, “The Torah Written on the Stones on Mount ‘Ebal,” *Proceedings of Judea and Samaria Research Studies: The 2nd Annual Meeting* (J. Eshel, ed.; Ariel: Mikhlelet Yehuda weShomron, 1993): 29–42 [Hebr.].

(Isa 44:5), and this practice reflects not only an act of manifestation of the Lord but also a belief in the power of the written word. Unlike other texts that were written to be read by only a few people, a king, a priest or a governor, here is a text aimed to be read in public, one that reflects mass-literacy or at least shows the illiterate the advantage of the written word. A man whose body had the Name of the Lord written on it was a kind of walking text, meant to be read by anyone who saw it. It was an apotropaic practice and even potentially restored the circumstances under which inscribing the Lord's Name was practiced if we read the priestly blessing carefully (Num 6:27). Thus, the priests blessed the children of Israel and then they wrote down the Name of the Lord on each and every person who attended the ceremony. Awareness of the prohibition against tattoos (Lev 19:28) led people to write on their bodies with ink; we have later sources, in the Talmud and Hekhalot literature as well, where this practice is attested.²³

Now, it should be recalled that in the Bible there is a law that tells the high priest to wear a special gold ornament where the name of the Lord is inscribed on his forehead (Exod 28:36, 39:30). The practice discussed here is similar to this practice of the high priest, except for one obvious difference: lack of gold (and of priesthood, of course). In any event, while the high priest could have shown his divine inscription to a small circle of people, restricted to the Temple area, a layman could have walked with the Lord's Name everywhere and anyone could be exposed to the power of the word. Moreover, the written text had no hierarchy. It is needless to point out the resemblance between this similarity and the one discussed above: a priest-scribe in a solitary ceremony as opposed to a live daily document, in which many people were interested. To reiterate: these practices show the penetration of literacy into the realm of the illiterate while making them aware of the power of the written text.

F. OVERALL

As to the reasons why the Judean and Israelite religions turned to the usage of script in such a manner, one can only speculate, and hereafter some ideas are given in summary. It seems that the main difference between the Israelites and the other cultures surrounding them was the belief in one God that cannot be seen. Therefore, when the Mesopotamians or the Egyptians presented their gods as idols, the Israelites were required

²³ M. Bar-Ilan, "Magic Seals on the Body among Jews in the First Centuries C.E.," *Tarbiz* 57 (1988): 37–50 [Hebr.]; idem, "So shall they put My name upon the people of Israel (Num 6:27)," *HUCA* 60 (1990): 19–31 [Hebr.].

to use a symbol with no image in their presentation; thus, script came to be considered as resembling God. In both the Sinai and the Ebal covenants, written words played a major role. In the Sinai tradition, the script was written by God and delivered to Moses before the people of Israel stood in a covenant (Exod 31:18). In the Ebal tradition (read: Israelite tradition) the script was written on the stones during the process of the ritual ceremony of the covenant. Thus, the script was the representative of the Lord Himself. The high priest wore the name of the Lord on a golden diadem, and he himself was decorated with a few more scripts on his body; all of these together were a kind of hypostasis of the Lord. So, before the Jewish people were known (by the Quran) as the people of the book, they used their script in a fashion different than those in the surrounding cultures. The “offshoot” of this notion was using the script as a divine symbol, since there was no other symbol to represent the Lord. According to this understanding God Himself was present in the ordeal of the wayward wife, by the holy script that He had written, a text that was rewritten during the rite of passage of the wayward wife. God made a kind of a testimony concerning a woman whose husband divorced her. God Himself was present while His name was written on the body, and thus the script was somehow identified with the Lord. In other words: the spread of the Name of the Lord coincided with the spread of script, since images were forbidden.

It appears that literacy became a tool in the sacred war of the biblical God against idolatry, spreading the belief in one God among all strata of society, in all places, and to all ages and statuses. While idols caused people to bow or make sacrifices, the letters of the Divine made people become aware, not only of the Lord, but of literacy as well when letters became a manifestation of God.

CONCLUSION

While evaluating the many seals that come from the kingdom of Judah A. Millard wrote as follows:

The number of Hebrew seals only makes sense in a society where writing was widespread and well-to-do citizens were able to recognize their name, at the very least.²⁴

²⁴ A. Millard, “The Corpus of the West Semitic Stamp Seals: Review Article,” *IEJ* 51 (2001): 76–87 (esp. 82).

Now, what made the society in Judea so different from that in Mesopotamia? It need not be said that the Judeans did not invent bureaucracy, and that not only the Judeans had only twenty-two letters in their alphabet. The answer to this, so it seems, is in the aforementioned cases of literacy that played a role in religion and society in a way that was manifested to all. While the script disseminated the belief in the Lord, it also disseminated the power of script and literacy. One could not stay untouched by the divine letters and religion, and literacy empowered both. Literacy stopped being restricted to bureaucracy and priestly realms, so everyone in society was addressed, one way or another, by literacy and religion combined. No doubt, this unique combination enhanced the literacy rate.

The adoption of the rules of the Torah into the practice of a daily reading led to the adoption of literacy to some extent, more than in the more archaic Judean society, not to mention other societies, and thus literacy had a daily role in the lives of all.