

WAS THAMUDIC OF THE NEGEV A MIDIANITE SCRIPT DERIVED FROM PROTO-SINAITIC?

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Early 18th and 19th century explorers of the Sinai, Negev and Arabian deserts discovered rock-hewn inscriptions of former inhabitants and sojourners of these regions. Some of these inscriptions appeared to be graffiti composed of names and slangs whose origin came from a wide range of nomadic and caravaner cultures (Egyptian, Edomite, Moabite, sundry Canaanite, Nabatian, Greek, Roman, Arabian, etc.). Others appeared to be instructions, poetry, songs, prayers and religious worship spanning several millennia. Many of those in the Arabian deserts were representative of Semitic pre-Arabic language groups classified as South Arabian Thamudic scripts. While Proto-Sinaitic, Moabite, Edomite, and Proto-Canaanite inscriptions were translated using Hebrew roots, the Thamudic inscriptions were believed to be of more recent origin and thus were translated using classical Arabic roots. Although geographically the inscriptions of the Negev were farther northwest than other Thamudic inscriptions, the script of the Negev has been widely and uncritically believed to be a pre-Arabic script derived from the south Arabian script, classifying it with Thamudic. "Uncritically believed" because, until the recent publication of *Ancient Rock Inscription, Supplement to Map of Har Nafha* (196) 12-01, in which Thamudic inscriptions of the Negev were published, conclusions were based on an insufficient number of signs and failure to recognize the unique features of this script. With a collection of about thirty-five panels and the identification of significant archaic features we feel justified in suggesting an alternative to the widely accepted supposition.

Our studies of the existing 35 panels led us to ask several questions about the scripts of the Negev;

1. Are the rock-inscribed characters of Har Karkoum, Har Nafha, and the region of the central Negev representative of a distinctive alphabet or merely another local variation of the South Arabian, Thamudic family of scripts?
2. If it is a distinctive Semitic script or a close relative of the Thamudic alphabets,
 - a. Does it precede, or is it contemporary with, or post-date the other Thamudic and Semitic scripts?
 - b. What is its origin?
 - c. Who used it?
 - d. What is the language of its translation?
3. What are the translations of the already discovered panels?
4. What are the implications of this discovery to an understanding of the history, cultures and peoples who used this script?
5. What are the benefits of this knowledge to us today?

The first two questions will be answered in this article, while the remaining three will be addressed in a separate article entitled, "Some Preliminary Translations of Negev Thamudic As A Kenite/Israelite Script Expressing A Proto-Canaanite Language".

Our method was to first catalogue and compare all other known similar Thamudic alphabetic characters with those found in the Negev. The frequency comparisons and use of the ligatures between the scripts led us to conclude that:

- 1) The 35 panels of the Negev Thamudic evidenced a distinctive alphabet from other groups of Thamudic in letter form, use and style;
- 2) The Negev Thamudic (NT) contained archaic forms in greater frequency than other Proto-Canaanite and South Arabian scripts;
- 3) The archaic forms were similar to or identical to Proto-Sinaitic signs and ligatures suggesting that the NT is probably older and more closely tied to the Proto-Sinaitic alphabet than the later Thamudic and pre-Arabic systems. The work of Benjamin Sass on the origin of South Semitic and West Semitic Scripts (1991) presents a reliable framework with which we may examine the

question expressed. Sass pointed out that F. Cross (1954) gave his opinion that Proto-Arabic scripts developed from Proto-Canaanite script based on his examination of the shapes, stance, some of the letters and the unfixed direction of writing. To the above criteria Sass stated the following questions must also be addressed.

1. Do the archaeological evidence and writing sources confirm the existence of a literate society in the Arabian Peninsula in the fourteenth-thirteenth centuries <BCE>?
2. Do the characteristic features of the early south Semitic script—the letter forms, their names and order, and the direction of writing—demonstrate a link with the fourteenth-thirteenth-centuries <BC> Northwest Semitic alphabet? (Sass, 1991, p. 28.)

In the summary of Benjamin Sass in which he linked the South Arabian script to Canaanite he observed a resemblance of ten out of twenty-two letters to Canaanite/Phoenician letter forms, also stating that this resemblance was sufficient to "confirm the position held by most scholars that consonantal alphabetic writing was adopted in South Arabia under the influence of the Northwest Semitic alphabet" (Sass, 1991, p. 86). We take the liberty of paraphrasing the above to fit the Negev script. We link the Thamudic of the Negev to Proto-Sinaitic and observed a resemblance of fourteen out of twenty-two letters to Proto-Sinaitic letter forms, also stating that this resemblance was sufficient to confirm the position not held by most scholars that consonantal alphabetic writing was adopted in the Negev under the influence of Proto-Sinaitic letter forms. Also observed in section 3.4.1 of Sass (p. 76) that in his discussion of each letter he did not find archaic forms for the Alif (Aleph), or the Ba (Beth) both of which we find in Negev Thamudic and other signs which spring from an alternative offshoot, such as the archaic Yodh, in which the body of the Set animal in abstract form became the Proto-Canaanite Yodh (𐤊 𐤋) while the tail of the Set (𐤌) animal became the Negev Thamudic Yodh.

4) NT's geographic proximity, use of archaic and Proto-Sinaitic forms, direction of reading and material culture found associated with the inscriptions suggest that this is an early offshoot of Proto-Sinaitic (possibly pre-Proto-Canaanite script) and associated with the lingua franca of the region which was the early Semitic or Proto-Canaanite language. The early age of this NT script is indicated by the archaic forms in use from the Proto-Sinaitic corpus. Thamudic of the Negev, like other inscriptions of that period, may read left to right, right to left, top to bottom, or boustrophadon. Also some archaic ligatures are carried into the Negev material. The following are a few examples:

Negev Thamudic Ligatures	
Proto-Sinaitic Ligatures	

The twenty-two sound sign Thamudic-like alphabet found in the Negev has characteristics necessary to identify it as an offshoot of the proto-Sinaitic alphabet. The number and nature of the archaic signs certainly suggest the possibility that it is older than the Proto-Canaanite script and that it may have been used by the early southern Hebrews and Midianites to write the Proto-Canaanite language. A comparative chart of the scripts is in the Tables and Illustrations section following this article.

Early in this century Hubert Grimme, and Van den Branden, suggested an early appearance of Thamudic and in the 1987, *BASOR* article Martin Bernal first identified the "pictographic Sinai alphabet as very old and in some way related to other alphabets" (Bernal, 1987, p. 11). He then suggested that the most obvious links of Proto-Sinaitic to the alphabets found on the Phoenician coasts were in Ugaritic and Thamudic alphabets. Continuing his focus on Thamudic he wrote:

These alphabets are particularly conservative, partly because many of them were used in remote deserts but more because the Arabic and south Arabian languages they represent seem to have been closer than any others to those spoken in the Levant in the early second millennium BC. [Or in other words closer to the Proto-Canaanite language.] Thus their letters have better phonetic correspondences to those of the original forms than do those of Canaanite, Greek, and Anatolian (ibid.).

Emmanuel Anati has suggested that the inscriptions found in the Har Karkom area exhibit significantly darker and lighter shades of patination on the same rock. This process would require centuries to build up between the initial placement of inscriptions. Professor Anati observed a rock near Har Karkom (172-173-174, Sita HK/316, pp. 163-164) with three distinct inscriptions that demonstrate activity at this site over a number of centuries. Our translation of his comments reads as follows:

This rock with the inscription has in front of it another rock in the natural form of a basin that was put there by man and supported by smaller rocks (so that the basin would be level). All around this . . . there is an aligned circle of rocks that indicate a fence. From one side (lower) you can see a view of the "plaza," from the other [side] it presents a majestic profile of Har Karkom.

This zone has the impression today of a silent desert though at one time it was full of life and human activity. On the trail that is above the site towards the west there is a heap (very large boulder) and next to it a black rock with inscriptions of at least three different phases of coating (desert varnish). In front of (and a little to the left of the inscribed rock) there has been posted (placed) a rock with a concave surface like a basin (as mentioned above). The area that surrounds it is a circle (made) from small rocks (Anati, E., *I SITI A PLAZA DI HAR KARKOM*, Archivi, Vol. 9 Capo di Ponte (Edizioni del Centro), 1987).

Photographs from Anati's volume p. 164 are included by permission of the author. Script identification or translation would not be possible without several additional photographs taken from different angles and featuring various areas of the panel. Sketches made on site with explanatory notes and personal physical examination of the rock would also be helpful. From what can be seen in Anati's photo (Tables & Illustration Pages) differing shades of patination do appear to be present that would suggest the passing of several centuries between inscriptions.

Along with the above, other indications of the use of this Thamudic script in the Negev from its emergence out of Serabit el Khadim to 300 BC. include a persistent retention of pictographic signs (especially when used in connection with the divine names El and Jah and used in ways characteristic of 8th and 7th century BC. practices) also the use of a Persian loan word that could not have entered the vocabulary before 300 BC.. The above features are considered in detail in a subsequent paper titled, "Some Preliminary Translations of Negev Thamudic As A Kenite/Israelite Script Expressing A Proto-Canaanite Language."

Concluding his discussion of the "Alphabet of Primary Transmission," and in reference to ancient finds he (Bernal) added, "These finds have revived hypotheses proposed early in this century by Grimme that Thamudic should be dated to the second millennium" (1987, p. 12). Bernal was no doubt referring to the hypothetical Thamudic script that Grimme called "Old Thamudic" and Van den Branden called "Primitive Thamudic" (Winnett, 1937, p. 19.). Winnett said that the only reason the notion of an "Old Thamudic" script was not widely accepted was that Grimme could not produce samples of the script (Ibid.). *We suggest that the Thamudic of the Negev could very well be that ancient script.*

Our corpus of Thamudic inscriptions from the Negev is still small but if the format of the 1990 Archaeological Survey of Israel continues to find the same volume and scope of material there will soon be an abundance of inscriptions upon which to make more solid judgments. It is also probable that the large collection of Emmanuel Anati will yield valuable information on the early colonization and later pilgrimage utilization of the Har Karkom area.

5) The location, volume, and manner of distribution of panels requires a sedentary population sufficient to produce such a corpus. Our evidence produced two periods of time when such a demography existed capable of supporting the numbers and use of the script, the mid-second millennium BC and the 10th to 6th centuries BC Midianite/Kenite/Israelite society of the Negev. This is a particularly appealing group in explaining the origin, transfer and use of the NT script. In the opening paragraphs of M. Halloun's translations of the Negev inscriptions from Har Nafha he states:

The Thamudic inscriptions published herein enhance our knowledge of the scope of Thamudic settlement in the Negev. If at one time it was assumed that inscriptions discovered in the Negev were but traces of Thamudic tribes passing through the region, particularly along the main trade routes, this assemblage of inscriptions, as well as additional inscriptions published and unpublished, now calls for a reevaluation of the subject.

Halloun asserts that the recent identification and assemblage of Negev Thamudic requires a reevaluation of the subject that would explain the scope and dating of the scripts consistent with the archaeological evidences. Archaeological evidence from the first and second centuries AD (the presumed dates of the inscriptions) is insufficient to establish the history of settlement in the region, especially insofar as Thamudic settlement and sedentarization is concerned. Comprehensive epigraphic research could contribute a great deal to this complex subject (Halloun, Supplement, 1990 p. 36). A most probable period, prior to the unqualified first and second centuries, could be the tenth to early sixth centuries BC. This was the period when the largest population is known to have existed in the Negev. Y. Aharoni described the beginning of this period as follows:

In David's time—conversion of the semi-nomad zones to the south district of the Kingdom of Judah with permanent settlements <represents> more than a natural development. . . . The Negev of Judah, the Negev of Caleb, and the Negev of the Kenites reached a height of development unparalleled in all its history "The Negev of Judah" *IEJ*, Vol. 8, (pp. 26-38).

We suggest that the concept of writing and the forms of the Negev script were brought to the Negev by Midianite miners returning home from the Sinai. The following comments by Nelson Glueck are supportive of the above proposition:

The Kenites who were native to these mining regions and whose very name reveals that they were smiths, were evidently among the craftsmen who furnished the skilled labor in connection with the various mining, smelting, and manufacturing operations . . . The Kenites were the ones in all probability who introduced the Israelites to the arts of mining and metallurgy ("Kenites and Kenizzites" *PEQ*, 1940 January, pp. 22-24).

As the most probable miners of the Sinai the Midianites also qualify as probable carriers of the modified Sinaitic script to the Negev. While much of Israel and the north and west of Judah may have eagerly accepted the Canaanite script the descendants of the fervently nomadic tribes of the Negev heartland would understandably be more reluctant to give up their sacred script.

The close alliance of Israel with the Kenites is stated in the Bible and is in harmony with the observations of both Nelson Glueck and Benjamin Mazar. (B. Mazar, "Arad and the Family of Hobab the Kenite" *JNES*, Vol. XXIV, No. 3, July, 1965, pp. 297-303; and N. Glueck (1940) pp 22-24). The composition of that population is described in the following passages from the Bible:

And the children of the Kenite, Moses father-in-law, went up out of the city of palm trees with the children of Judah, into the wilderness of Judah, which lieth in the south of Arad; and they went and dwelt among the people (Judges 1: 16-17).

Intermarriage and integration (of the two peoples) continued and built on the foundation that began when Israel wandered for forty years in the wilderness, both peoples accommodating the promises recorded in Numbers.

The Kenite kinship to Israel is also expressed in the words of Moses to Hobab:

And he said, Leave us not, I pray thee; forasmuch as thou knowest how we are to encamp, in the wilderness, and thou may be to us instead of eyes. And it shall be if thou go with us, yea, it shall be that what goodness the Lord shall do unto us, the same shall we do unto thee (Numbers 10:31-32).

Under the United Kingdom the integration of these peoples seems to have been completed. Arad became a fortified city with the approval of the royal House of Judah, even as it is written in the Book of Samuel:

When an Israelite King constructed a fortress on the site there was also built within the holy precinct, a house of God. . . . And the sons of Hobab continued to function within it as priests, the sons of Hobab being righteous with Israel (I Samuel 15: 6, and Numbers 10:22).

Extensive excavations at the site of Tel Arad have to some extent affirmed a major degree of integration. The site was occupied from the tenth century BC until the destruction of the kingdom of Judah. Strata six to eleven at Tel Arad show use of the Hebrew language on inscription material (920-595 BC). The fifth strata, fifth to fourth centuries) indicates that Aramaic was the prevailing language (Y. Aharoni, "The Arad Inscriptions," *IES*, Jerusalem, 1981). The above should not be taken to infer that all Midianites, or even that all Kenite Midianites, were integrated into Israel. It is suggested that only the Hobab clan and all that joined with them became assimilated into Israel.

Two Proto-Sinaitic Inscriptions:

The two inscriptions featured herein have been the subject of considerable attention since the 1929 publication of Cowley ("The Sinaitic Inscriptions", *JEA*, vol. 15, p. 218), the decipherment of W. F. Albright in 1928/29 ("A Neglected Hebrew Inscription of the Thirteenth Century BC", *AFO*, vol. 5, pp. 150-2) and a reappearance in his 1966 book titled, *The Proto-Sinaitic Inscriptions and Their Decipherment* (Harvard University Press, Cambridge). The latter work on these two panels was "corrected" by Anson Rainey in a 1981 *IEJ* (vol. 3, pp. 92-4) article titled, "Some Minor Points in Two Proto-Sinaitic Inscriptions". Other recent articles include A. Rainey (1975, pp. 11-114), Beit Arieh (1978, pp. 179-82), and B. Sass (1988, p. 27).

Gerster's No. 1, and Inscription No. 357 provide further reinforcement for the Hobab/Kenite/Israelite union and suggest a date two hundred years earlier for Kenite/Israelite activity in the Sinai (i.e. earlier than the date set by W. F. Albright and popularized by Cecil B. DeMille). For both inscriptions the translations of Wm. H. Shea will be presented without argument.

The Translation of Gerster's No. 1, (by Shea):

"And for the congregation and Hobab a mighty furnace."

Shea then suggests that an alternate (and smoother) reading would be:

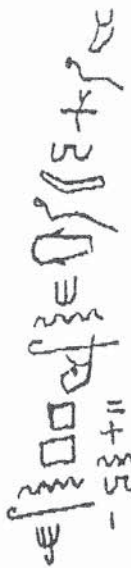
"A mighty furnace (i.e. a smelter) (was supplied) for the congregation (of Israel) and for Hobab (the Kenite from Midian, *Ibid.* p.85).



In the interest of identifying the time period of these events Shea recalled the text of Judges 4:11, and stated that it was Hobab (not Jethro) that remained with Israel in the Sinai for one year. Also that the inscription dates to the New Kingdom period of Egyptian history, "the same general period in which the biblical Exodus took place." Both the name Hobab and the word for congregation are linked with the language of the period and the geographical region. He then concludes with: "We have here in this inscription, then, a contemporary text inscribed by someone from among the biblical people of Israel [or a Kenite] not long after they had left Egypt, while they were encamped in Sinai" (*Ibid.* p.88).

A paragraph on the impact of this inscription upon the date of the Exodus is also helpful.

The Date of the Exodus. For those who consider the biblical Exodus to have been an historical event there has been a long standing discussion over the date when it was thought to have occurred. Two main dates have been proposed: one in the thirteenth century BC., under the nineteenth Egyptian Dynasty of the Ramessides, and the other in the fifteenth century, under the Eighteenth Dynasty of the Tuthmosides. If the interpretation of this Proto-Sinaitic inscription proposed above is correct, it is decisively in favor of the earlier date (*Ibid.* p. 93).



Proto-Sinaitic Inscription No. 357, (translation by Shea):
Translation:

"We continued mining for Abib. The king Thutmose heard and said, 'Four.'

A smoother English paraphrased version was then provided:

"We continued mining for (the month of) Abib. The king Thutmose heard and ordered, four (months of mining)."

Shea continued his commentary and conclusions by pointing out that the mining season was usually from January to the end of March, but the king now required them to work an extra month (a fourth month) into the season of intense heat (Shea, *Ugarit-Forschungen*, Band 20, 1988, pp. 301-306). Two brief observations are added by Shea:

First, the reference to a Thutmose in the second vertical line of the inscription dates the time when this text was inscribed to the early 18th Dynasty when the Thutmosides occupied the throne of Egypt. That chronological indicator also provides a general date for the development and use of this early alphabetic script in the other inscriptions of this type found in the same region. Second it provides a context for the use of the month name of Abib which, prior to the discovery of this inscription was known only from the biblical record of the Exodus (*ibid.*, pp. 307-308).

In all of the photos of the above inscription, that we have been able to access, none give convincing evidence of the presence of the name of Thutmose, but transliterations of both the vertical and horizontal lines of text are generally in agreement. Where word divisions should be made is, at this point in time, entirely left to the discretion of the translator. Therefore all translations of these two Sinaitic inscriptions must remain only in the realm of possibilities. (Readers that want the history of these inscriptions and the bases for each sound assignment should refer to the complete article by Wm. H. Shea).

Also, while working on this material at the Ecole Biblique library we encountered an article by Itzhaq Beit Arieh. (the second of three articles appearing under the title, *Explorations "At Serabit El-Khadim,"*) and authored by 1. Raphael Giveon, 2. Itzhaq Beit Arieh, 3. and Benjamin Sass. Arieh's exploration of the "Mine L" area enabled him to make significant corrections of the signs comprising Inscription No. 357 (1977) and the Gerster No. 1, Inscription. We cannot ignore his work and do not have space to include it in detail (the detail will be supplied in subsequent article). A brief statement of the impact of Arieh's corrections will be included.

Arieh On No. 357: The transliterations of Itzhaq Beit Arieh confirm Shea's transliterations with the exception of the last two letters in the name Shea translated as "Thut-"mose. Arieh did not offer a translation (Arieh, et.al. 1977, p. 179).

Arieh On Gerster's No. 1: Eight sign changes require a reconsideration of the translation (*ibid.*, p. 363).

Column	Shea's transliterations	Arieh's signs	Harris/Hone translations
I	W L 'A D	W L ' D	"And for the congregation
II	T W Kh B B	T W Kh B B L	and Hobab" (the T may be a symbol)
III	'A D Y	(Our	[Columns III & IV are too uncertain
IV	R K R /	transliterations)	to allow an educated guess.]

Translation (of columns I, & II); "And for the congregation and for Hobab, The overall effect of the work of Arieh was to strengthen the sign identification arrived at by Shea.

The inscriptions examined for this study are concentrated in the area occupied by Kenites and Israelites from the time of Israel's arrival in the Sinai and through the time of their wondering in the Negev. Kenite skills in mining, smelting, desert survival, and the writing skills and script that both groups may have brought from the Sinai to the Negev were all reinforced by their union.

6. In conclusion, between the fourteenth and sixth centuries BC a literate Midianite/Israelite society existed in the Sinai and the Negev. This society continued in the area where the greatest assemblage of the inscriptions have been found thus far. The Hobab/Kenite/Midianite/Israelite groups were both geographically positioned to transmit the Proto-Sinaitic script to the region of the Negev with their own modifications of that alphabetic system. The common language used by these groups has generally been translated through the Hebrew/Proto-Canaanite root words.

SUMMARY

Our answers to the initial questions are:

1. Are the rock-inscribed characters of Har Karkoum, Har Nafha, and the region of the central Negev representative of a distinctive alphabet or merely another local variation of the South Arabian, Thamudic family of scripts?

Answer: The petroglyphs appear to be representative of a distinctive alphabet derived from the Proto-Sinaitic script.

2. If it is a distinctive Semitic script or a close relative of the Thamudic alphabets,
 - a. Does it precede, or is it contemporary with, or post-date the other Thamudic and Semitic scripts?

Answer: As an early Semitic script we suggest that the Thamudic of the Negev is probably the undiscovered "Old Thamudic" or Proto-Thamudic script suggested to exist by Grimme, Bernal, Van den Branden, Rabin, and Winnett with an origin in the mid-second millennium BC pre-dating the other Thamudic and Proto-Canaanite scripts. However, it continued to exist along side the other Proto-Canaanite and older Semitic scripts until possibly as late as the 4th century BC.

- b. What is its origin?

Answer: The Negev Thamudic was developed from the Proto-Sinaitic script in the mid-second millennium BC.

- c. Who used it?

Answer: Hobab/Midiannite/Kenite/Israelite miners and traders working for Egyptian masters in the Serabit el Kadim region of the Sinai transported this script in the mid-second millennium BC to the area of the Central Negev with their own alphabetic modifications. They continued to use it along side other Proto-Canaanite/Hebrew scripts in the area until there was a disruption of their society (possibly the Assyrian and Babylonian invasions in the late eighth, seventh and sixth centuries BC.).

- d. What is the language of its translation?

Answer: The most probable language of these people was Proto-Canaanite or Old West Semitic (Old Hebrew).

The next article entitled "Some Preliminary Translations of Negev Thamudic As A Kenite/Israelite Script Expressing A Proto-Canaanite Language" will examine some of the possible translations of the existing Thamudic panels from the Negev. ["Tables and Illustration" pages follow.]

TABLES AND ILLUSTRATIONS

Comparative Chart of Archaic West Semitic, & South Semitic Sign Forms

Sign Name	Negev Tharnudic Script	Proto-Sinaitic Script	Proto-Canaanite Script
	X X H H	V H Q	K X F
b.	A O O A J C O	O O P Y L O	G G
g	T T	G P	T T A A
d	P P P Y ←	ψ	D D
h	Y X X V	Y P	E E
w	E O O O O	E	Y F Y Y
z	T I H		I
kh	M M M W W	ψ	M ± M
t		⊕	
y	P P A d b	P P P K	Z Z
k	P M M M	M	W Y K
l	T T L L L	L P P	G L P
m	C C C M M M	M M M	M M M
n	O I L L	L L	L L
s	H H		F
.	O O < >	O O	O O
p	S S S		J J J
tz	R P R		R P
q	P P		P P P
r	C C C	C C C	P P P P
sh	Z S W	S W Z	W Z
t	+ X	+ X	+ X

Nahal 'Avedat 22.2

+ d e y P Y

Nahal 'Avidat 81.1.2

+ P H X P P P P P P

Nahal Zena' 90

ψ X U X U - ⊕ + X Y + O X + O

Winnett's 907a

A P + P I X X P I T P P P

Winnett's 907b

+ P P H X P I M P P e

Nahal 'Avedat 22.2

l-d whyl'

Nahal 'Avidat 81.1.2

tyl' 'tlp rh ddw

Nahal Zena' 90

htb hy ty

Winnett's 907a

hy' yl' ddw

Winnett's 907b

hb' yl' ddw

Tharnudic of the Negev, like other inscriptions of that period, may read left to right, right to left, top to bottom, or boustrophedon. Also some archaic ligatures are carried into the Negev material.

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