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Mass Communication and Scriptural Proclamation: The First Step

by A. R. Millard

It is always pleasant when one contribution to our pages sparks off another, and we have to thank Dr. J. W. Montgomery not only for contributing his paper on "Mass Communication and Scriptural Proclamation" to our issue of January-March 1977 but also for (unconsciously) stimulating Mr. Alan Millard to contribute the following treatment of the same theme in an earlier phase.

IN his paper "Mass Communication and Scriptural Proclamation" (*EQ* 49.1 (Jan.-March 1977) 3-29), J. W. Montgomery has re-emphasized two important factors in the spread of Christianity. First is the double-storey structure of relatively safe travel and common knowledge of Hellenistic Greek in the empire founded by Augustus, at the birth of the faith. After a long interval came the second, the invention of printing which enabled Luther to publicize his protest as no other reformer had been able to do. No historical accident underlay these occurrences. Dr Montgomery asks, "Must we not say that the eternal Logos employed the mass communication technique of printing to insure and further the recovery of his gospel in the sixteenth century, even as He used Roman communications and Greek language in the original dissemination of it in the first century?" He makes the further statement "the God of Christianity is uniquely a communicative Deity" (pp. 19, 20).

As an appendix to that study we would draw attention to an earlier invention which was developed to a readily usable pitch at another major moment in the story of divine communication, the alphabet.

Before 3000 B.C. the people of southern Mesopotamia discovered how to place pictures in series to convey messages, and then how to treat the pictures as symbols for the sound-values of the pictures alone (so drawings of a thin man and a king set side by side might yield "thinking"). Impressing the pictures with a sharpened reed upon lumps of clay—the obvious writing surface for the riverine cities—brought a shift from recognizable pictures to conventional groups of wedges, the well-known cuneiform script. In the first place the signs were produced for the Sumerian language, it is believed, then adopted for the Semitic Akkadian (Assyrian and Babylonian) during the third millennium B.C. Some six hundred

signs were employed, most of them with syllabic values (ab, ba, bab, eb, be, etc.), until the system fell out of use in the first century A.D.

From Mesopotamia the idea of writing spread, notably to Egypt. There the pictures were derived from local life, and retained their shapes throughout the history of hieroglyphs, until the eighth century A.D., for formal writing, but were reduced to less recognizable forms for the cursive script (hieratic) at an early date, and to a quasi-shorthand (demotic) in the first millennium B.C. Beside signs to be read with pictorial value, Egyptian scribes set others to be read phonetically in order to ensure correct reading of the picture. As in cuneiform, there were hundreds of signs, both pictorial and syllabic in use together.

Invaluable as these scripts were as a means whereby man could pass his thoughts through space and time, their cumbersome stores of signs were also a barrier; comparatively few men could devote themselves to learning such complexities, so writing became the craft of a specialist class, the scribes.

Now the cuneiform script could represent the sounds of almost any language through its syllabic system, and so it became the vehicle of record and communication for many peoples and states of the Near East during the third and second millennia B.C. The parade example is the archive of an Egyptian Foreign Office department which included scores of letters addressed to the king by Canaanite and other princes writing in the Babylonian script and language, with a few others written in the same script but in the non-Semitic Hurrian and Anatolian languages. That archive was deserted at Amarna about 1360 B.C., probably some decades before the birth of Moses. A few of the clay tablets bore secretarial notes written in ink in Egyptian, and one fragment belonged to a vocabulary of Babylonian and Egyptian words. Some Egyptian scribes evidently needed to learn other languages and writing systems for diplomatic purposes. Unlike cuneiform, the Egyptian script was awkward to adapt for other tongues because it was bound to Egyptian by its many word signs. No examples of Egyptian applied to other languages have been found outside Egypt, and very few within her bounds. Egyptian scribes faced difficulties in writing foreign names, and developed a series of syllabic signs, each of a consonant and a vowel, without regard to their primary picture value to do this (called Group writing by Egyptologists). On a par with this were several independent scripts current during the second millennium B.C. At least six were known in the Levant, among them Hittite Hieroglyphs, Cretan Linear A and B, Cypriot, Byblian. All required sixty or more signs for basic expression.

Into this variety was born the one that was to supplant them all, the alphabet. Somewhere in Syria-Palestine, perhaps at the cos-

mopolitan port of Byblos, a perceptive scribe took the decisive step. All the syllabaries had separate symbols for each consonant when next to different vowels (ab, ib, da, du, etc.), and some had signs for longer sound groups. Now the number of signs was to be greatly reduced; one symbol was to serve for each consonant plus any vowel, ba/i/u, etc. Discarding most of a syllabary had to be done in such a way that a distinct sign remained for each consonant of the inventor's language. Either lengthy experiment, or careful analysis of the language's sound-stock was involved in the process. Although the result would seem to be open to ambiguity, it can function to a limited extent in English ("speedwriting"), and is more practicable in the Semitic languages which rest heavily upon consonantal patterns. Furthermore, although pictorial at first, the characters had very simple forms, so being easy to inscribe. Apparently the pictures were chosen on the acrophonic principle, "Door is for d". Consequently any intelligent person could learn to read and write without making that their profession, and so the monopoly of the scribes could be broken.

A few examples scratched or painted upon stone or pottery show this alphabet in use in Canaanite cities from about 1600 to 1200 B.C. Workmen at the Egyptian turquoise mines of western Sinai (Serabit el-Khadem) scratched short dedications at the shrine of their patron goddess in very similar letters. During these centuries the shapes of the characters became quite abstract, and were almost standardized throughout Canaan by 1000 B.C. All the specimens we have are available because they were written upon durable surfaces, but we may assume much more writing was done upon papyrus, and has perished. Papyrus was the normal writing material of the Egyptian officials representing the Pharaoh as overlord of Canaan, yet of their records only half a dozen notes of taxes have survived, and those simply because they were scribbled upon potsherds. Writing with ink naturally encourages a more cursive handwriting, while inscribing upon harder materials favours more angular shapes. This means that the pieces we can see, mostly incised, are likely to preserve a less advanced form of the script than was current simultaneously upon papyrus.

Our assumption that the alphabet was widely employed for writings of any sort in Canaan rests in part upon discoveries at the port of Ugarit (Ras Shamra, near Latakia). Babylonian scribal tradition dominated the chancery there about 1300 B.C., as it had for a millennium all over Syria, so the clay tablet was the common writing material. (Any papyrus documents left in the ruins will have perished, but even letters from Egypt were written in cuneiform on clay tablets, so there was probably little papyrus there.) When scribes who were accustomed to writing upon clay met the alphabet,

either at Ugarit or further south, they imitated its concept by concocting an alphabet of specially conceived cuneiform signs, eventually numbering thirty in the Ugaritic version. Clearly the advantages of the few signs of the alphabet were realized, although the Babylonian script continued alongside it. The scribes of Ugarit wrote myths and legends on clay tablets in their new script, as well as letters, diplomatic and administrative documents, and religious rituals. Some are very long texts with hundreds of lines of writing, others are short notes, a mere line or two. These documents are continually cited for the light they throw on Canaanite culture and religion; our interest here is in their testimony to the free use of an alphabet for recording anything. By analogy, we would argue that similar use was made of the linear alphabet, the one and only original, in Canaan during the last few centuries of the second millennium B.C.

That was the time when the people of Israel were settling in the land of Canaan, promised to them by their ancestral God. He had spoken to their leader Moses, giving rules for their life in the new land as His people. These rules, we are told repeatedly, were written and preserved, and copied. Oral tradition may have been an adequate means of preserving many things, but the tradition is clear that these were written, and throughout the ancient Near East what was set in writing was authoritative. The laws were to be taught by one generation to the next, and to be read in public once every seven years. Various theories have assumed that Moses wrote in cuneiform, or with Egyptian hieroglyphs (echoing Stephen's remark in Acts 7: 22); they would involve complete translation into Hebrew at a later date, or a transcription from one script to the alphabet. It is far more likely that he used the alphabet, just arrived at its standard form. While there would always be need for the professional scribes, it was now possible for the ordinary Israelite to learn his letters and so to read the sacred Law, if he had access to a copy. The words of Israel's "uniquely communicative Deity" could easily be preserved and disseminated from this very early time onwards. Many signs of divine overruling accompanied the entry of Israel into Canaan; the development of the alphabet was not the least of them.¹

University of Liverpool

¹ The early history of the alphabet is outlined and references to other discussions supplied in "The Canaanite Linear Alphabet", *Kadmos* 15.2 (1976), 130-144. For writing in Israel, see "The Practice of Writing in Ancient Israel", *The Biblical Archaeologist* 35.4 (1972), 98-111. [Both articles by A.R.M.]