

## BOOK REVIEWS

*The World's Oldest Alphabet: Hebrew as the Language of the Proto-Consonantal Script.* By Douglas Petrovich, with a contribution by Sarah K. Doherty and introduction by Eugene H. Merrill. Jerusalem: Carta, 2016, xvi + 262 pp., \$84.00.

Douglas Petrovich has released a provocative and polarizing monograph concerning the world's oldest known alphabet. In 2017, Petrovich became the professor of biblical history and exegesis at The Bible Seminary in Katy, TX. Previously, he taught on ancient Egypt at Wilfrid Laurier University in Waterloo, Canada. Petrovich and I work together in the excavation of Shiloh conducted by the Associates for Biblical Research.

Scholars tend to agree that the earliest attested alphabet belongs to the family of Semitic languages. They disagree, however, on the identity of that language. In this volume, Petrovich sets out to prove the language of the first alphabet was Hebrew—not Canaanite, Phoenician, or Ugaritic. (Hubert Grimme proposed the same thesis in his 1923 publication.) Petrovich updates the scholarship on the topic, offers solutions to the identity of the debated alphabetic letters, and generates better drawings in order to improve decipherment. To accomplish his goal, the author amasses an incredible amount of research from a vast range of disciplines.

The book targets an academic audience, although the author even hopes to reach “the non-specialist with no formal knowledge of Hebrew, ME [Middle Egyptian], or syllabics” (p. 12). For a popular summary of the book, the reader can view Petrovich's article, “Hebrew as the Language behind the World's First Alphabet?,” posted on the ASOR blog, *Ancient Near East Today*, in April of 2017 (<http://asorblog.org/2017/04/10/hebrew-language-behind-worlds-first-alphabet>).

After an introduction by Eugene Merrill, the volume presents four chapters: (1) “Background Matters to the Proto-Consonantal Inscriptions”; (2) “The Inscriptions of the Period of Egypt's Middle Kingdom”; (3) “The Inscriptions of the Period of Egypt's New Kingdom”; and (4) “Concluding Thoughts.” Petrovich created meticulous and attractive drawings of each inscription. The drawings use color coding and a reference system to facilitate comprehension. The back matter includes four appendixes, a list of abbreviations, a list of references, and a general index. Appendix 2 addresses “The Additional (Non-Original) Five Proto-Alphabetic Letters.” Appendix 3 features a word list for Middle Egyptian and the proto-consonantal script, and even includes conjectured words, such as רמת and נחלת (pp. 98, 232–33).

In his book, Petrovich treats sixteen inscriptions from four sites. Two of the sites occupy the southwest Sinai Peninsula (Serabit el-Khadim and Wadi Nasb) and the other two occupy Egypt proper (Wadi el-Hol and el-Lahun). Petrovich dates six of the inscriptions to Egypt's Middle Kingdom and ten inscriptions to the New Kingdom. The ten New Kingdom inscriptions all come from Serabit el-Khadim.

In dealing with the inscriptions, the author follows a fourfold procedure: (1) background to the inscription; (2) paleographic decipherment; (3) translation and orthography; and (4) potential historical value. This method of presentation enables the author to build his case step by step.

Petrovich offers three reasons in support of his thesis that the oldest alphabet is Hebrew (p. 191). First, the name “Hebrews” appears in the caption of Sinai 115, which possesses the earliest evidence of an alphabetic letter (proto-consonantal  $\aleph$ ). For Petrovich, the “Hebrew Caption” is “the smoking gun” (pp. 28, 192). Second, each proto-consonantal letter “was found to have a ME hieroglyphic exemplar from the ME sign list, and to match with a corresponding Hebrew word that is logically and acrophonically connected to the meaning of the pictograph” (p. 191). Third, three personal names from the Torah appear among the proto-consonantal inscriptions: Moses, Ahisamach, and Asenath (Sinai 361, 375a, and 376). Ahisamach sired the craftsman extraordinaire Oholiab, and Asenath married Joseph (Gen 41:45; Exod 31:6).

The caption of Sinai 115 dates to 1842 BC, during the lifespan of Joseph, says Petrovich (p. 28). He translates the caption as follows: “6 Levantines: Hebrews of Bethel, the beloved.” If the translation withstands scrutiny, Sinai 115 becomes the oldest extrabiblical reference to the Hebrews or Israelites—even older than the references on the Merenptah Stela (c. 1219 BC) and Berlin Pedestal 21687 (c. 1455–1418 BC) (p. 28). In addition, Sinai 115 provides justification for equating the Hebrews with the Apiru, according to Petrovich (pp. 73–74).

The Lahun Bilingual Ostrakon underwent ceramic analysis by a special contributor to the book, Sarah Doherty. After examining the previously unpublished diagnostic rim of the vessel, she determined the vessel dates to the nineteenth century BC (pp. 7, 53–57).

Petrovich’s conclusions needle at multiple critical presuppositions sometimes found among disciples of biblical and ancient Near Eastern studies. For instance, his work counters the theories that the Israelites emerged from within Cisjordan or Transjordan without an Egyptian sojourn (pp. 182, 186–88). Moreover, the presence of the name Moses on a fifteenth-century-BC inscription flies in the face of the Documentary Hypothesis and its various versions (pp. 172, 194). For that reason, the inscription (Sinai 361) “may stand as the single most important PCH [proto-consonantal Hebrew] inscription of the entire Bronze Age” (p. 172). Furthermore, the book challenges notions of illiteracy and incompetency among the early Hebrews. The inscriptions show early literacy not just among the overseers but among the bakers, shepherds, miners, and slaves, and not only in the form of prose but in the form of sophisticated poetry, including proverbial wisdom literature. Wadi el-Hol 2 arguably constitutes “the oldest extant Hebrew proverb” (p. 51; cf. p. 192). Furthermore, the engravers were multilingual, fluent in both Hebrew and Middle Egyptian (pp. 182, 193–94). The evidence of literacy in the proto-consonantal inscriptions predates the evidence of literacy in the Gezer calendar by about eight centuries.

The volume offers a treatment of Sinai 378, a one-word inscription transcribed  $\aleph$  (“El/God”). Petrovich suggests that a Hebrew individual engraved the

inscription, and that the inscription evokes the God of the patriarchs (p. 185). Given Petrovich's penchant for demonstrating synchronisms with the Hebrew Bible, it comes as a surprise that he chooses not to discuss Sinai 358, which possibly reads "the everlasting God," a title for God used by Abraham himself (Gen 21:33). The inscription was discovered *in situ* inside a turquoise mine at Serabit el-Khadim. Perhaps Petrovich will engage that inscription in a subsequent edition of the book or in the book's forthcoming sequel, provisionally titled *New Evidence of Israelites in Egypt from Joseph to the Exodus*.

Not everyone will agree with all of Petrovich's interpretive decisions on a variety of fronts, such as the identification of the glyphs and letters, the direction of writing (e.g. sinistrotrograde versus dextrotrograde), and of course, the transcriptions, translations, and historical significance. To date, adversarial critiques of Petrovich's work have come from Alan Millard, Christopher Rollston, and Thomas Schneider, to whom Petrovich has posted open responses on his Academia profile page (<http://thebibleseminary.academia.edu/DouglasPetrovich>).

Did the author accomplish his goal? Time will tell. As Petrovich puts it, "Final judgment as to the accuracy of [my] findings should be reserved for three, four, or five decades after publication, not determined hastily" (p. xiii).

In light of the thorough research, clear communication style, and important implications, I highly recommend this treatise not only to Hebraists and Egyptologists, but also to everyone who holds an interest in ancient Near Eastern studies and the history of the Bible. Professors of biblical Hebrew can evaluate the author's proposal that some of the traditional names of the alphabetic letters are not original (p. 201; cf. fig. 1). This reviewer commends Petrovich for his unwavering commitment to studying the sojourn-exodus narrative and its historical milieu.

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*The Old Testament Is Dying: A Diagnosis and Recommended Treatment.* By Brent A. Strawn. Theological Explorations for the Church Catholic. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2017, xxvi + 310 pp., \$29.99 paper.

The OT is dying. In fact, in some circles it is all but dead. Moreover, with the death of the OT eventually comes the death of the NT, though that process may take a bit longer. Such at least is the scenario that Brent Strawn presents in his remarkably perceptive book. His claim is not nearly as preposterous or overstated as it might seem at first thought. There is a sense in which the OT is dying.

In order to grasp the significance of Strawn's alarming diagnosis of the current health of the OT, one must first understand the linguistic metaphor that undergirds his rather morbid assessment. According to Strawn, one way to think about the OT is that, like a human language, it is susceptible to losing its vitality and eventually dying out even among those who should instead be its advocates. One should not misconstrue Strawn's language metaphor to refer primarily to the languages in which the OT was originally written. This book does not attempt to