Ancient Israelite Scribal Apprenticeships

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APPRENTICESHIPS INSTEAD OF SCHOOLS

Ancient scribes learned their trades through apprenticeship. In this article, I provide comparative, archaeological, and inscriptional evidence to support this hypothesis for the apprenticeship learning model in ancient Israel and explore some of its implications for biblical literature. To begin with, the apprenticeship model means that there were no "schools" in the formal sense of the term. Scribes apprenticed in a variety of professions. These professions included government scribes, military scribes, priestly scribes, prophetic scribes, and so on. The learning process meant that each of these professions created their own "community of practice" (as anthropologists describe it). These close-knit communities created through apprenticeships used familial language to express their relationships. These communities collected, preserved, and passed on their traditions. This also means that there were no individual authors but rather communities of tradents.

Scholars of Mesopotamia and Egyptian scribalism discuss the model of apprenticeship,[1] but this model has not been emphasized for ancient Israel. For example, the classic works by James Crenshaw, *Education in Ancient Israel*, and Christopher Rollston, *Writing and Literacy in the World of Ancient Israel*, never mention apprenticeship as the mode of

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[1] For example, Dominique Charpin, *Reading and Writing in Babylon* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), 17–53; Niv Allon and Hana Navrátiová, *Ancient Egyptian Scribes: A Cultural Exploration* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), 110–111.

scribal education.[2] David Carr and Karel van der Toorn, who both draw heavily on comparative Near Eastern evidence, do mention apprenticeship, but do not develop it in their seminal works.[3] For this reason, apprenticeship needs to be illustrated and emphasized in the study of ancient Israelite scribalism. The ancient Near Eastern comparative evidence makes the apprenticeship model quite clear. For example, a classic example of the master and apprentice relationship may be found in the standard Sumerian composition known as *Schooldays*:

> My teacher said to me, You fellow, because you hated not my words, neglected them not, may you complete the scribal art from beginning to end. Because you gave me everything without stint, paid me a salary larger than my efforts deserve, and have honored me, may your pointed stylus write well for you; may your exercises contain no faults. Of your brothers, may you be their leader; of your friends, may you be their chief; may you rank the highest among the schoolboys.[4]

There was a respected master and a group of "brothers." The students were not family biologically, but the family metaphor reflects the tightly knit social community formed through apprenticeship learning.

Biblical scribes also learned to read and write through apprenticeships. A master scribe took on students or "sons." The use of the term "sons" for apprentices underscores the familial aspect to the scribal trade. For example, the administrative list of King Solomon's officials expresses this familial relationship. Elihoreph and Ahijah in 1 Kgs 4:3 are described as "the sons of *Shisha*—scribes" (בני שישא ספרים). The ex-

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[2] James Crenshaw, *Education in Ancient Israel* (New York: Doubleday, 1998); Christopher Rollston, *Writing and Literacy in the World of Ancient Israel* (Atlanta: SBL, 2010).

[3] See David Carr, *Writing on the Tablet of the Heart: Origins of Scripture and Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 12–13, 21, 77, 82; Karel van der Toorn, *Scribal Culture and the Making of the Hebrew Bible* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 56, 69, 89, 109.

[4] From the classic translation by Samuel Noel Kramer, *From the Tablets of Sumer* (Indian Hills: Falcon, 1956); see his critical publication, "Schooldays: A Sumerian Composition Relating to the Education of a Scribe," *JAOS* 69 (1949): 199–215.

pression, "sons of," should be read as a metaphor reflecting an early scribal community of practice. In this particular reference, the word *Shisha* was an Egyptian loanword for a royal scribe that is glossed by its Hebrew counterpart—ספרים "scribes," which was a later scribal addition explaining the old Egyptian loanword.[5]

Kinship Through Apprenticeship

Scribes were a family—both fictively and in actuality. The familial nature of ancient learning is also reflected in the use of the term ילדים "children." This term, which normally refers generically to "children" in biblical literature, can also be used to refer to communities. For example, in the story of the division of the kingdom (1 Kgs 12), "children" are an adult group of royal advisors. After the death of Solomon, a group of Israelites complain about high taxation and threaten to divide the kingdom if their burden is not lightened (vv. 3–4). Solomon's son, Rehoboam, considers the matter taking counsel with "the elders" and the "children" (ילדים). But these ילדים are Rehoboam's contemporaries, and Rehoboam was supposedly forty years old when he came to the throne, so ילדים are hardly "children." Both terms are related to traditional tribal and social structures. Nili Fox has pointed out the similarity of the ילדים to an Egyptian administrative group known as "the children of Pharaoh's nursery" (*ḫrdw n kȝp*).[6] This was an administrative term that

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[5] There has been considerable debate about whether the Hebrew term *Shisha* (שישא) should be understood as an Egyptian loanword. The original Egyptian term got garbled by later scribes, copyists, and translators so that a variety of different renditions are found in Hebrew manuscripts, parallel passages (i.e., 2 Sam 8:17; 20:25; 1 Chr 18:16), and translations (especially note the LXX). The confusion of this Egyptian loanword in the sources tells us that the later scribes no longer precisely understood it, and for this reason they added the interpretive gloss "scribes" (ספרים) for "sons of *Shisha*'; see William M. Schniedewind, *The Finger of the Scribe: How Scribes Learned to Write the Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 10.

[6] Nili Fox, "Royal Officials and Court Families: A New Look at the ילדים (*yelādîm*) in 1 Kings 12," *BA* 59 (1996): 225–232 (226).

was widely used during the New Kingdom period, and they were people who were raised and groomed for service within the Pharaoh's administration and this included scribal training. They were often foreigners, and one can assume many worked in the sprawling Egyptian administrative centers in the Levant during the heyday of the Empire. This provides a plausible vector of transmission for its use in an early Judean narrative. Rehoboam's ילדים seem to represent government bureaucracy over against the traditional tribal social structures represented by the "elders." The literary contrast then is not simply age, it is government bureaucracy versus the wise old local elders.

The prophet Isaiah slips easily from the term "students" (למדים) to the term "children" (ילדים) when he enjoins his apprentices to collect his oracles. We read in Isa 8:16–18, "Bind up the testimony; seal the teaching among my *students*. ... See, I and the *children* whom the Lord has given me are signs and portents in Israel from the Lord of hosts, who dwells on Mount Zion." This must be the prophet Isaiah speaking (note v. 17),[7] but did Isaiah mean to refer to his biological children here? This is unlikely since the text begins by speaking about his "students." But his students—apprentices of the prophet—became his "children." In this way, the book thus becomes the legacy of a community of prophetic scribes.[8]

ANTHROPOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

The seminal anthropological research by Jean Lave and Etienne Wegner in particular has fostered our understanding of apprenticeship learning.[9]

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[7] See the discussion and bibliography on this passage by David Davage, *How Isaiah Became an Author: Prophecy, Authority, and Attribution* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2022), 91–99.

[8] See, for example, the conclusions about the formation of the Book of Isaiah by Davage, *Isaiah*, 289–297.

[9] See Jean Lave and Etienne Wegner, *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), and Etienne Wegner-Tayner, *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity* (Cambridge: Cam-

In their book, *Situated Learning*, they explore how social networks are created by learning through apprenticeship. They use case studies drawn from craft guilds like tailors, butchers, or midwives. Writing was a craft like metalsmithing or pottery making. People learned these skills through apprenticeships, and this type of learning created long lasting, close-knit social networks that they call "communities of practice." As the Assyriologist Dominique Charpin points out, archaeological evidence suggests that "scribal apprenticeship may hardly have been different in their sociological reality from other ways of transmitting knowledge."[10] Lave and Wenger emphasize that their model "is not itself an educational form, much less a pedagogical strategy or a teaching technique. It is an analytical viewpoint on learning, a way of understanding learning."[11] They point out that learning is a social practice, particularly learning within the context of apprenticeship. Although this model has been taken up and applied to modern learning contexts, Lave and Wenger emphasize that communities of practice have been around as long as people have learned together.

Lave and Werner define communities of practice by three characteristics: a shared domain, a community, and a practice. They identify these characteristics based on a variety of different types of guilds with guilds being defined as professions where you learn through apprenticeship. They can then become formal networks, but they do not have to become formal. In antiquity, some prominent guilds included metalsmiths and potters who seem to form extensive informal networks.[12]

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bridge University Press, 1998). This model finds a variety of useful applications in the scholarly literature; for example, Joanna Kopaczyk and Andreas H. Jucker, eds., *Communities of Practice in the History of English* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing, 2014); Etienne Wegner-Trayner et al., eds, *Learning in Landscapes of Practice: Boundaries, Identity, and Knowledgeability in Practice-Based Learning* (London: Routledge, 2015).

[10] Charpin, *Reading and Writing*, 32.

[11] Lave and Wegner, *Situated Learning*, 40.

[12] See Nadia Ben-Marzouk, "Forged by Society: An Interregional Investigation into

Scribal learning also created informal social networks, though these could be formalized through employment in societal structures—for example, the palace or the temple. Writing was a skill within a limited group and in defined professions. Each profession created their scribes' shared domain and distinguished them from other professions. The shared domain was a common area of expertise. Literacy was one skill, but each profession—for example, government bureaucrat, soldier, priest—would have other shared areas of expertise. The shared domain created a community that engaged in the joint activities of their profession. Apprenticeship begins with learning the practice, but then also using the practice various professions.

A variety of professions in ancient Near East used writing.[13] For example, there were soldiers, government bureaucrats, prophets, and temple scribes. Each had different roles and functions, and there is evidence to suggest they each had their own community of practice. They belonged to different communities, which were their professions. Writing itself was not the profession. Later, perhaps during Hellenistic times, the scribe itself became a profession, but the scribe seems to be an occupation of a professional copyist of manuscripts. For example, there are at least seventeen manuscripts among the 900 Dead Sea Scrolls that are written in a "calligraphic" style—that is, they produced by professional copyists whose job was likely only to make "presentation" copies of scrolls that could be used in synagogues, archived in libraries, or became part of the collection of a wealthy elite.[14] But there were no such scribal copyists in ancient Israel. The observation that writing was a skill used

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the Social Implications of Metallurgical Knowledge Transfer in the Southern Levant and Egypt (ca. 5000–3000 BCE)" (PhD diss., UCLA, 2020).

[13] This is especially well illustrated in Niv Allon and Hana Navrátilová, *Ancient Egyptian Scribes: A Cultural Exploration* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), which explores the biographies of ten different Egyptian "scribes" with different professions.

[14] On the "calligraphic" style, see Drew Longacre, "Paleographic Style and the Forms and Functions of the Dead Sea Psalm Scrolls: A Hand Fitting for the Occasion?" *VT* 72 (2022): 67–92.

in a profession may explain why are no ancient Hebrew seals that have the title, "the scribe."[15] Consider, for example, the case of Ezra. He is indeed called a "scribe," but that was not his profession. If Ezra had a seal, it would likely have had the title "Priest" not "Scribe." Yet, he was a priest who was literate—that is, he was also a scribe because of his profession as priest. Since writing was a skill, literacy need not be strictly limited to individuals holding the title, "Scribe."

WRITING AS A SKILL

Writing as a skill and not a profession can be illustrated by the claims of literacy for kings. For example, literacy was attributed to the famous pharaoh, Tutankhamen: "A copy of the decree, which his Majesty himself made with his hands." Another account of an earlier pharaoh states, "His Majesty proceeded to the house of the scrolls, When his Majesty unrolled the texts with the officials, Then his Majesty found the texts of the mansion of Osiris."[16] Pharaohs thus make the claim to have had scribal training. Likewise, the Assyrian king Assurbanipal notably claimed to be literate:

> Marduk, the sage of the gods, gave me wide understanding and broad percep-
> tions as a gift. Nabû, the scribe of the universe, bestowed on me the acquisition
> of all his wisdom as a present. ... I learnt the lore of the wise sage Adapa, the
> hidden secret, the whole of the scribal craft.[17]

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[15] There are examples of the title "Scribe" from the antiquities market, but these are probably forgeries; for example, Nahman Avigad, *West Semitic Stamp Seals*, revised by Benjamin Sass (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Soceity, 1997), nos. 21, 22, 23, 417. See, also, for example, Yuval Goren and Eran Arie, "The Authenticity of the Bullae of Berekhyahu son of Neriyahu the Scribe," *BASOR* 372 (2014): 147–158.

[16] Texts cited by Allon and Navrátilová, *Scribes*, 74–75.

[17] Cited from Irving Finkel, "Assurbanipal's Library: An Overview," in *Libraries before Alexandria*, ed. Kim Ryholt and Gojko Barjamovic (New York: Oxford, 2020), 373; also see Alasdair Livingstone, "Assurbanipal: Literate or Not?" *ZA* 97 (2007): 98–118.

There are also indications that Israelite kings claimed to be literature. The claims that David wrote psalms or that Solomon wrote wisdom texts like Proverbs and Ecclesiastes are probably later traditions, but the "Law of the King" in Deuteronomy directly requires literacy: "When the king sits on the throne of his kingdom, he shall write for himself a copy of this *torah* in the presence of the levitical priests" (17:18). One may imagine that claims for Israelite royal literacy were influenced by old traditions in both Mesopotamia and Egypt.

Preserving Tradition in Apprenticed Communities

The model of apprenticeship was not meant to foster individuality, but rather to replicate the master. In the deuteronomic example of king, he was meant to faithfully preserve the text, not author a text. When master scribe took on students or apprentices, they were taught the tradition in order to pass it on. In the case of the prophet Isaiah's students, their job was to "bind up the testimony" and to "seal the teaching," not to invent new traditions. Their job is to preserve the tradition, not to add to it or augment it. To be sure, the process of preserving a tradition could entail editing, augmenting, and elaborating. But the purpose was to preserve the tradition, not to invent a tradition.

The use of familial language becomes a reflection of a social group that replicates the master among the students. According to Lave and Wegner's research, such communities of practice are about the maintenance and reproduction of the group, which is "a historically constructed, conflicting, synergistic structuring of activity and relations among participants."[18] As we read in *Schooldays*, the ideal student does not hate the words of the master. The early education included a shared standard curriculum that included vocabulary lists and model texts like letters and contracts. This group learning created standards for spelling

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[18] Lave and Wegner, *Situated Learning*, 56.

and script that are evident in Hebrew inscriptions.[19] Students also practiced and memorized "canonical" literature that included proverbial sayings (like we find in the Book of Proverbs), stories (like the ones in Genesis), or liturgies (as we find in Exod 15 or the Psalms). The shared learning environment created a community that passed on the practice from one generation to the next.

Scribal communities were not a single community. Increasing urbanization and complexity in ancient societies created a variety of communities of practice that required literacy. In small isolated villages, everyone might have to make their own pottery, grow their own food, and build their own houses. But urbanization fostered specialization. A potter now makes pottery. A vintner makes wine. A metalsmith makes tools, jewelry, and weapons. Craft specialization was part of the major urban centers of the ancient Near East. Urbanization and complexity were part of near eastern cities like Babylon or Thebes as early as the third millennium BCE. Early Israel, in contrast, was largely a village culture in the days of the Judges (i.e., Iron I, 1150–960 BCE) and early kings (Iron IIA, 960–840 BCE). But the rise of the neo-Assyrian empire beginning in the ninth century brought massive changes ancient Israel and Judah. By the end of the eighth century BCE (i.e., the Iron IIB period, 840–700 BCE), urbanization had spread throughout the Near East including ancient Israel.[20] As a result, craft specialization developed and spread in ancient Israel as well. And literacy became a skill used in a variety of these specializations.

In the late Judean monarchy, writing was employed in a variety of old professions that previously may have used writing only sparingly. So, for example, in the seventh century BCE, we find an industrial complex for the production of wine at the site of Gibeon, just five miles north of

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[19] On scribal curriculum, see Schniedewind, *Finger*. For a discussion of standardization see Rollston, *Writing*, 91–126. On memorization as part of education, see Carr, *Writing*, 6–7.

[20] See Avraham Faust, *The Neo-Assyrian Empire in the Southwest: Imperial Domination and Its Consequences* (New York: Oxford, 2021).

Jerusalem. Sixty-three wine cellars were excavated with a capacity for producing 25,000 gallons of wine annually![21] Vintners there used writing to label the jars of wines. More than 50 labels were found inscribed on the jars. They are not sophisticated inscriptions. One of the longer labels reads, "Gibeon. Belonging to the walled plot, (that is) belonging to Hananiah." This is basic literacy, writing used by vintners. They are not writing the Bible, but it illustrates the use of writing as a skill in different sectors of society. Some professions like a vintner or a tomb cutter did not require a high level of literacy. Writing was a utilitarian tool. Palace or temple scribes, in contrast, would have required more sophisticated levels of literacy.

Apprentices at Kuntillet ʿAjrud

The publication of the inscriptions from Kuntillet ʿAjrud revealed the practice of writing skills for the military-administrative profession for the first time.[22] The location for these inscriptions is critical for this interpretation. Kuntillet ʿAjrud was a remote desert fortress, sponsored by kingdom of Samaria (northern Israel) in the ninth and eighth centuries BCE. It served as a trade station along a desert caravan route from Eilat on the Red Sea to Gaza on the Mediterranean coast. The function of the site itself as a military and trading fortress along the Eilat-Gaza road meant that military and mercantile activities that required writing might be expected there.

A close examination of the Kuntillet ʿAjrud inscriptions show master scribes and apprentices at work. They used large storage jars like a blackboard to practice writing.[23] They wrote exercises, washed off the practice

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[21] James Pritchard, *Gibeon Where the Sun Stood Still* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1962), ix.

[22] These were first published in Ze'ev Meshel, ed., *Kuntillet ʿAjrud* (Jerusalem: IES, 2012). Comments here summarize my analysis of the inscriptions in *Finger*, 23–48.

[23] See my *Finger*, chapter 2.

exercises, then reused the jar for more exercises. Excavators found draw-
ings, scribbles, and more formal exercises on these jars. They doodled
with letters (KA 3.15), scribbled their ABCs (KA 3.11–14), jotted vo-
cabulary lists (KA 3.7, 8, 10), and wrote model practice letters (KA 3.1,
6, 9). There is also practice with hieratic accounting symbols. The jars il-
lustrate the elegant hand of a master scribe alongside the rudimentary
letter shapes of apprentices. The title of one of the plaster wall inscrip-
tions (KA 4.1) refers to "Apprentices of the Fortress Commander" (*n'ry .
šr'r*), who likely were required to memorize and recite the poetic texts
inscribed in the gate of the fortress. All in all, the Kuntillet ʿAjrud in-
scriptions provide a remarkable glimpse into a community learning its
trade with a specific archaeological context. They were not training to be
scribes as a profession, but rather they were learning scribal skills as part
of their training in a military-administrative community stationed at a
trading fortress.

Terms for Apprenticeship

The Hebrew title, "Scribe" (ספר), as well as the other positions that re-
quired scribal training like "Recorder" (מזכיר), "Royal Steward" (אשר־
על־הבית), or "Servant of the King" (עבד המלך) likely required complex
social networks and hierarchies.[24] The Hebrew word בן is usually trans-
lated as "son," but it does not need to be understood as strictly familial
and can also refer to a "guild." For example, the "*sons of the gatekeepers*"
(for example, Ezr 2:42) are not biologically related, but rather members
of a social group. As Lave and Wegner have pointed out, a guild in-
cludes "apprenticeships, young masters with apprentices, and masters
some of whose apprentices have themselves become masters."[25] But the

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[24] For a list of various administrative titles and discussion, see Yitzhak Avishur and
Michael Heltzer, *Studies on the Royal Administration in Ancient Israel in the Light of
Epigraphic Sources* (Tel Aviv: Archaeological Publication Center, 2000).

[25] Lave and Wegner, *Situated Learning*, 56.

term *guild* can be misleading. It is usually associated with medieval societies, which is where Lave and Wegner took their case studies. For this reason, Lave and Wegner also coined the jargon "communities of practice," which underscores some of the less formal aspects of education through apprenticeship. The ancient scribal guilds were informal associations created through learning that had a shared domain and maintained a common practice. Scribes belonged to guilds or "communities of practice" in the ancient world like other craftspeople. As Charpin observes this in Mesopotamia, "the scribe was considered an artisan and was renumerated as such."[26] In this respect, the scribal guild has parallels with metalsmiths, potters, and other artisans in the ancient near east. They learned in similar ways, namely through apprenticeships.

The apprenticeship system in ancient Israel is indicated by the Hebrew title, נער, which is known both in biblical texts and inscriptions.[27] The translation of this term has been the subject of a great deal of discussion, partly because of its seemingly broad semantic range. The standard biblical Hebrew lexicon offers its first definition as "lad," "adolescent" and its second definition as "young man";[28] however, this seems misleading as many of the passages cited for such definitions could just as easily be translated as "servant" or "apprentice." For example, in the Joseph narrative we read about a נער "who was the servant of the chief steward" (Gen 41:12). Joshua, the adult servant of Moses, is also given the title נער (Exod 33:11). The prophet Balaam also has two servants who are given the title נער (Num 22:22). Gideon has a servant named Purah who is his נער (Judg 7:10–11). Abimelech has a נער, who is responsible for carrying his weapons (Judg 9:54). One could be designated as a נער from birth (Judg 13:7; Jer 1:5–6), but the נער could be of

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[26] Charpin, *Reading and Writing*, 22.

[27] See John MacDonald, "The Status and Role of the *Naʿar* in Israelite Society," *JNES* 35 (1976): 147–170; Carolyn S. Leeb, *Away from the Father's House: The Social Location of the Naʿar and Naʿarah in Ancient Israel* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academia Press, 2000).

[28] *HALOT*, ad loc.

various ages. Most famously, the young boy Samuel was made the נער of Eli (1 Sam 3:1). He was his apprentice. How long did Samuel remain a נער? Presumably until the death of Eli, at which time he took over the position of Eli and ceased to be a נער, that is, he was no longer the apprentice but inherited the mantle of the master (1 Sam 4:18). The title נער was not necessarily related to age, but rather position.

One of the most curious uses of a נער is for King Solomon. Solomon actually calls himself a נער when addressing God, even though he had just become king (1 Kgs 3:7). In this case, Solomon uses נער as a metaphor. It is a self-deprecation has to do with experience as well as his relationship to God as king.[29] Essentially, Solomon tells God that he is his apprentice. If we understand the metaphor of God as the ultimate king, then Solomon was indeed his נער.

נער is already known as a formal title in Ugaritic administrative lists. For example, one military list begins with the heading: *nʿr mrynm* "Apprentices of the Chariot Warriors" (KTU 4.102); another administrative list refers to the *nʿrm bʿl šdm n* "Apprentices of the Field Master."[30] The title "Field Master" relates to the administration of agricultural holdings of the palace, and the "Apprentices" (נערים) are subordinates to the master. This list further illustrates that נער has to do with hierarchy and social structures as opposed to age.

Hebrew inscriptions nicely parallel the Ugaritic lists. At the fortress of Arad (about 50 miles south of Jerusalem), we have two fragmentary lists of names that use נער as a title (Arad 15:4; Arad 100:1, 2).[31] The term also appears on several seal impressions, including at least five from the same individual, "Eliakim, Apprentice of Yochin" (*ʾlykm nʿr ywkn*)

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[29] On this metaphor, see Marc Brettler, *God is King: Understanding an Israelite Metaphor* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1989).

[30] See John Macdonald, "The Unique Ugaritic Personnel Text KTU 4.102," *UF* 10 (1978): 161–173; Pierre Bordreuil and Dennis Pardee, eds., *Une Bibliothèque au Sud de la Ville*, Ras Shamra-Ougarit 18 (Paris: Publications de la maison de L'Orient et de la Méditerranèe, 2012), RS 94.2439, no. 22.

[31] See Yohanan Aharoni, *Arad Inscriptions* (Jerusalem: IES, 1981).

excavated at different places.[32] These parallel the use of the title on the fragmentary literary text at Kuntillet ʿAjrud mentioned above.[33]

One of the clearest examples of נער as an apprentice is in a political coup by Jehu (2 Kgs 9:1–4). Here, the נער is clearly older and is part of a community of prophets:

> Then the prophet Elisha called *one of the sons of the prophets* and said to him, "Gird up your loins; take this flask of oil in your hand, and go to Ramoth-gilead. When you arrive, look there for Jehu son of Jehoshaphat, son of Nimshi; go in and get him to leave his companions, and take him into an inner chamber. Then take the flask of oil, pour it on his head, and say, 'Thus says the Lord: I anoint you king over Israel.' Then open the door and flee; do not linger." So the נער, the נער *of the prophet*, went to Ramoth-Gilead.

Elisha delegates the role of anointing Jehu as king to his נער, who was a member of a community of prophets. The נער could not have been a youth, rather the נער is one from "the sons of the prophets." As Robert Wilson observes in his classic work, *Prophecy and Society in Ancient Israel*, "the group labeled 'sons of the prophets' seems to have had a more rigid structure. ... the group was capable of coordinated social action and had a hierarchical structure."[34] This type of structure is also suggested by the story of a "band of prophets" in 1 Sam 10 (especially v. 5). In story of Elisha's commissioning of one of the sons of the prophets, the term נער gives us further evidence for an apprenticeship system among the prophets in ancient Israel.[35]

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[32] Four were excavated at Tel Beit-Mirsim (Avigad, *Stamp Seals*, no. 663). An additional unpublished example of this seal impression was reportedly excavated in the recent salvage dig at Beth-Shemesh. I am uncertain about the authenticity of three unprovenanced seals using the title *nʿr*, see Avigad, *Stamp Seals*, nos. 24, 25, and 26.

[33] For a more extensive discussion, see Schniedewind, *Finger*, 42–48.

[34] Robert Wilson, *Prophecy and Society in Ancient Israel* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980), 141.

[35] See my forthcoming article, "The Isaiah Bulla, Jeremiah the Priest/Prophet, and Reinterpreting the Prophet (*nbyʾ*) in the Persian Scribal Community," in *Jewish Culture and Creativity: Essays in Honor of Michael Fishbane on the Occasion of His Eighthieth Birthday*, ed. Elisha Russ-Fishbane and Eitan Fishbane (Cambridge: Academic Press).

Perhaps the most well-known biblical example of "the son of a prophet" is in the story of Amos at the royal shrine in Bethel. Amos vehemently rejects the title saying, "I am not a prophet, nor am I the son of a prophet" (7:14). Although this seems like a disingenuous claim, the context of Amos' denial suggests that he is rejecting "prophet" as a professional title related to the bureaucracy of the royal shrine as well as the apprenticeship of prophets like that expressed in the Elijah-Elisha narratives, particularly in 1 Kgs 9:4.

These texts provide a useful background for reading two seal impressions from Lachish, which Yohanan Aharoni interpreted as follows, "Belonging to Jeremiah, son of Zephaniah, Son of the Proph[et]."[36] These seal impressions were found in an administrative locus with other administrative seal impressions and an administrative list (Lachish no. 22), and they support the reconstruction of "Prophet" (*nby'*) as an early administrative title. In the Lachish seal impressions, the "son of the prophet" would as the title of a prophetic apprentice related to government administration, precisely the title that Amos rejects.[37]

SCRIBAL COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE IN THE INSCRIPTIONAL RECORD

Archaeological excavations have uncovered communities of scribes working in Jerusalem. One of these, the family of Shaphan, was already known in biblical literature. Shaphan, the son of Azaliah, was the scribe

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[36] Yohanan Aharoni, "Trial Excavations in the 'Solar Shrine' at Lachish: Preliminary Report," *IEJ* 18 (1968): 166–167 (167) nos. 6–7; and Yohanan Aharoni, *Lachish V* (Tel Aviv, 1975), 19–22 nos. 6–7. On the critical issues with this reading, see Anat Mendel-Geberovich, Eran Arie, and Michael Magen, "The Lachish Inscriptions from Yohanan Aharoni's Excavations Reread," in *From Sha'ar Hagolan to Shaaraim: Essays in Honor of Prof. Yosef Garfinkel*, ed. Saar Ganor et al. (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 2016), 111*–133* [Hebrew]. In spite of these issues, Aharoni's interpretation seems correct as I argue in "Isaiah Bulla."

[37] For a discussion of the title "Prophet" and its early use as an administrative title, see my article "Isaiah Bulla."

who read the "book of the covenant" that was found during King Josiah's time and prompted his religious reforms (see 2 Kgs 22–23). From their activities, Shaphan's family appears to be government bureaucrats. Shaphan's sons, Gemariah and Elasah, are also scribes or officials mentioned in the Book of Jeremiah (Jer 29:1–3; 36:10). Another apparent son of Shaphan, Ahikam, was a government official (2 Kgs 22:12). Shaphan's grandson, Gedaliah, became governor of Judah during the Babylonian occupation and was later assassinated (Jer 39:14; 41:2). The skill of writing was part of the family's education of these various figures, and they become employed in a variety of administrative functions. This scribal family finds corroboration from a seal impression belonging to Gemariah, son of Shaphan, excavated in Jerusalem (see Figure 1). Other members of this scribal family seem to be known from seals and impressions that come from the antiquities market. They are probably authentic, but no matter. In this case, archaeologists digging in the City of David have already given us striking evidence for this scribal family known in biblical literature.
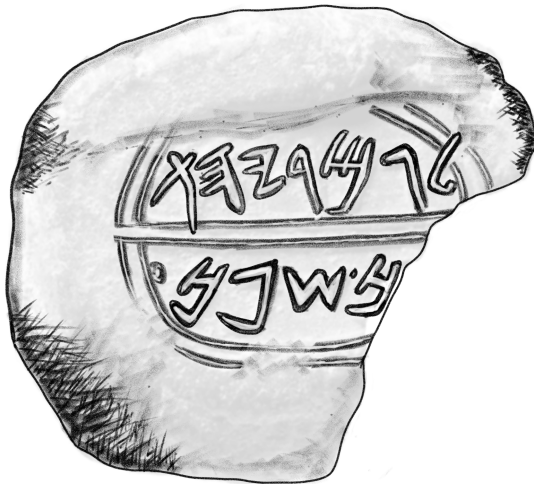

Figure 1: *A Seal Impression, "Belonging to Gemariah, son of Shaphan"* (drawing by author)

Between the City of David and the Temple Mount in Jerusalem, a new and previously unknown group of scribes and administrators has come to light in Ophel excavations.[38] Seven seal impressions among a larger cache of impressions were discovered in these excavations tell us about a scribal family related to a patriarch named Bes. Three of the seal impressions (B2/B3/B4) were struck by one seal (Figure 2), and it nicely illustrates three generations of the scribal family.

Figure 2: *Drawing of Seal from Impressions B2/B3/B4* (drawing by author)

B2/B3/B4
1) *[l]yrḥm*   "belonging to Yeraḥmi-
2) *[ʾ]l | bn | nḥm*   -ʾel, son of Naḥum,
3) *[bn |]bs*   son of Bes"

Seal Impression B5 has different names but also concludes with "the son of Bes." Seal Impressions B6–B8 are fragmentary examples, but the different paleography suggest that they were three different seals belong-

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[38] See Eilat Mazar, *The Ophel Excavations to the South of the Temple Mount, 2009–2013*, Final Reports, Vol. II (Jerusalem: Shoham, 2018), 256–263.

ing to as many as three other members of the scribal family. Another indicator that this group of seal impressions are part of the same community of practice is the use of the vertical divider ("|") between words, which is quite uncommon for seals but used consistently in this whole group. It marks a distinct scribal community—a master and his sons or apprentices. The seals seem to come from as many as five different individuals of a scribal community of practice.

The B2/B3/B4 seal provides a typology for the Bes scribal seals. They have three registers, which is unusual (typically seals had only two registers). Each name is separated by a vertical stroke, which is unique to this group of seal impressions. Each register was separated by a double line. Based on the unusual three-line register of names, the vertical stroke, and the repetition of the patriarch Bes' name in the register, we may assume that three generations are mentioned because of the prominence of Bes as a figure within this scribal guild.

The Bes cache is especially critical because we know something of its broader archaeological context. First of all, the Ophel area of Jerusalem was a royal administrative district between the City of David and the Temple Mount. The excavator, Eilat Mazar, reconstructed a large Gatehouse complex here that served an internal passageway from the mostly residential areas of the City of David into the administrative, royal, and religious areas in Ophel and the Temple Mount. The cache was part of a larger group of thirty-four seal impressions. Most notable among these other seal impressions including one "Belonging to Hezekiah, son of Ahaz, King of Judah" and another fragmentary example with the royal insignia.[39] So, this collection of seal impressions is part of a royal and administrative enclave in Jerusalem.

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[39] Mazar, *Ophel Excavations*, 273–274, does not offer a reconstruction for seal impression B21, but the royal insignia is clear. Line 2 is the end of a theophoric name. I read it as [*l*-PN]/{winged scarab}/[ʿ*bd* (or, *bn*) *ḥzqy*]*hw*/[*mlk yhd*]*h* "[belonging to PN, servant/son of Hezek]iah, [king of Juda]h." Given the personal name in the first line, I prefer "son of" and then we can only guess which royal prince it might have belonged to.

The excavations in the Ophel administrative area also yielded evidence for a prophetic scribal community. Alongside the "son of Bes" cache were two seal impressions related to the prophet Isaiah that are also dated by their archaeological context to the late eighth century BCE (see Figure 3).[40] The first reads, "Belonging to Isaiah, Prophet" (*lyšʿyh[w]/nby[']*), and a second seems to be his son or apprentice, "Belonging to Iddoyahu, (son of) Isaiah" (*lʾdyhw/yšʿyhw*).[41] It is not merely coincidence that these seal impressions were found within ten meters of a seal impression that reads belonging to Hezekiah, the king of Judah. There were also eight *lmlk* ("belonging to the king") seal impressions found in this same area.[42] These seal impressions as well as other archaeological finds reflect a royal administrative context.

Figure 3a, b: *Seal Impressions of Isaiah (a) and Iddoyahu (b)* (drawings by author)

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[40] The official scholarly publication is Mazar, *Ophel Excavations*, 247–280. A more convenient discussion can be found in Mazar's popular article, "Is this the Prophet Isaiah's Signature?" *BAR* 44, 2–3 (2018): 64–73, 92.

[41] Mazar, *Ophel Excavations*, 263–64 (no. B9), translates the name in the second bulla as ʿAdiyahu, which is just an English translation. I choose the English translation that makes the etymology of the name and its social context more obvious.

[42] For the *lmlk* seal impressions, see Mazar, *Ophel Excavations*, 182.

How can we be certain this is the same Isaiah as mentioned in biblical literature? First of all, Isaiah (biblical Hebrew, ישעיהו) was an uncommon name in ancient Judah. This name was unknown in the excavated inscriptional record until Mazar's excavation in the Ophel where the name appears twice.[43] Consider, for example, that the name Isaiah never appears in the register of all the seal impressions excavated in the City of David by Yigel Shiloh.[44] There are 85 names on 45 published seal impressions. Several other names appear three or four times, but "Isaiah" does not appear. There's no question that the root ישע "to save" was known and used broadly in Hebrew and Northwest Semitic languages. For example, the related Hebrew names, Hosea and Hoshiah, create names using the ישע root in the Hiphil conjugation, which reflects the common refrain in biblical Hebrew "Save, O Lord," but this is grammatically different.[45] The *hiphil* verbal form of the root ישע is common

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[43] Mazar, *Ophel Excavations*, 264, says that Isaiah was a common name based on inscriptions, but this is based on antiquities market artifacts. The name Isaiah becomes somewhat popular in post-exilic biblical genealogical lists (see Ezr 8:7, 19; Neh 11:7; 1 Chr 3:21; 25:3, 15; 26:25), but this is hardly surprising. It likely reflects the prominence of the historical prophet Isaiah and the Book of Isaiah in later post-exilic tradition. The name Isaiah appears at least thirteen times on objects from the antiquities market, but this is hardly surprising. Benjamin Mazar also excavated a fragmentary inscription that he reconstructed, *lyšʿ<y>hw*, "belonging to Isa<i>ah," which also would have been contemporary with the biblical Isaiah, but it is missing a letter which is hard to explain as a mistake. On this, see F. W. Dobbs-Allsop et al., *Hebrew Inscriptions: Texts from the Biblical Period of the Monarchy, With Concordance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 223–224; Yonatan Nadelman, "Hebrew Inscriptions, Seal Impressions, and Markings of the Iron Age II," in *Excavations in the South of the Temple Mount: The Ophel of Biblical Jerusalem*, ed. Eilat Mazar and Benjamin Mazar, QEDEM 29 (Jerusalem: Hebrew University, 1989), 138.

[44] Yair Shoham, "Hebrew Bullae," in *City of David Excavations: Final Report VI*, ed. Yigal Shiloh (Jerusalem: Institute of Archaeology, 2000), 51. More have been published from the City of David by Eilat Mazar, but there are still no other examples with the name "Isaiah."

[45] Christopher Rollston, "The Yešaʿyah[û] ["Isaiah"] Bulla and the Putative Connection with the Biblical Prophet: A Case Study in Proposography and the Necessity of

in Biblical Hebrew, while ישע is never used with the *qal* in Biblical Hebrew. The name Isaiah had to be used with the root ישע as a noun, which explains why the personal name Isaiah was uncommon in ancient Judah and hitherto was unknown in the epigraphic record.

There has been some debate about the correct reading of the Isaiah seal impression. Namely, some scholars have suggested reading it as "Belonging to Isaiah, (son of) Nobai" (*lyšʿyh[w]/nby*).[46] This reading has several problems. First of all, Nobai is a meaningless Hebrew root, whereas the term *nbyʾ* meaning "prophet" is well-known in both Hebrew and Aramaic. Second, the Hebrew expression "son of" (בן) is missing in the seal impression, even though there is ample room and seals almost invariably include "son of" when there is available space. The engraver actually enlarged the letters in the final register instead of using the standard word *bn* "son of" (see Figure 3a). But the word בן was not appropriate for this Isaiah because he was not the son of a prophet nor was he an apprentice. This seal is also exquisitely carved reflecting his high status and probably his relationship as a consultant to the king.

The fact that the name "Isaiah" was unknown among excavated artifacts until Mazar's excavations makes it all the more remarkable that the name appears on another seal impression from the same assemblage (Figure 3b). The second seal impression reads, "Belonging to ʿIddoyahu, (son of) Isaiah" (*lʾdyhw yšʿyhw*). Who was this ʿIddoyahu? He was probably a son or apprentice of the Isaiah mentioned on the other seal impression. In this respect, the name of the seal's owner is quite revealing because it is related to the name Iddo (BH, עדו or עדוא), which is well-known in the Bible as the name of several biblical prophets (2 Chr

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Methodological Caution," in *Biblical and Ancient Near Eastern Studies in Honor of P. Kyle McCarter Jr.*, ed. idem, Susanna Garfein, and Neil Walls (Atlanta: SBL, 2022), 414–417, uses all the names use the root, ישע (such as Hosea and Joshua) to argue that Isaiah is a common name, but this is misleading.

[46] See especially Rollston, "Yešaʿyah[û] ["Isaiah"] Bulla"; see my extended critique in "Isaiah Bulla."

15:1–8; 12:15; 13:22; 28:9; Zech 1:1, 7).[47] The root for this name is
עדד, and an interesting Old Aramaic inscription uses a related term in
recording that prophetic messengers (*ʿddn*) spoke to Zakkur about how
the god Baal had made him king and delivered him from his enemies
(KAI 202A, 11–15). Indeed, the root is used in Hebrew words like עֵד
"witness, testimony" that are related to the prophetic mission. The name
ʿIddoyahu thus has deep connections to the prophetic profession. This
makes the relationship between the Isaiah seal impression and the ʿId-
doyahu seal impression even more interesting. Given the fact that the
name Isaiah has not appeared elsewhere in an excavated inscription, the
most plausible explanation is that the seal of ʿIddoyahu belonged to the
son of the very Isaiah known from the other seal impression. In this in-
terpretation, the prophet Isaiah may have given his son a name related
to the prophetic profession.

The Isaiah seal impressions from the Ophel excavations reflect as-
pects of the prophetic scribal community suggested by the Book of Isai-
ah itself. The Book of Isaiah points to the close working relationship
that the prophet Isaiah had with the palace. This begins with the super-
scription to the book (1:1), and it is reflected in the call narrative of the
prophet (6:1). Most pointedly, we see Isaiah's close association with the
royal palace the Syro-Ephraimite crisis in Isa 7 as well as the story of
Sennacherib's invasion (Isaiah 37//2 Kings 19). Perhaps even more per-
tinent is the story in Isa 8, where the prophet Isaiah enjoins his students
(v. 16), whom he refers to as "the children that YHWH has given me"
(v. 18), to collect the prophet's teachings. This story reflects the familial

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[47] Also cognate with another prophetic name, Oded (עדד; 2 Chr 15). The name
Iddo also illustrates the variation of spelling with and without a final aleph (see Zech
1:1, 7; 1 Chr 6:6; 2 Chr 12:15; 13:22; 2 Chr 9:20; 1 Kgs 4:14; Ezr 5:1; 6:14; Neh 12:4,
16). The name ʿAdiyahu or ʿIddoyahu appears once in the Hebrew Bible (2 Chr 23:1),
and the Syriac version there transcribes it as the name Iddo. The name ʿAdiyahu also
appears in Arad 58:1. The LXX spells the name Iddo as Αδδω reflecting both the
doubling of the dalet (from the root עדד) as well as the interchangeability of the a and i
in the transcription of the name.

nature of the prophetic scribal community, and they remind us that it was through the scribal "community of practice" that texts were collected, preserved, and passed on.

Conclusion

In sum, this article has provided evidence for the apprenticeship learning model and has explored some of its implications. Apprenticeship learning and the resulting communities of practice underscore that biblical literature was collected, edited, and preserved by communities and not authors. This is one reason that biblical literature routinely omits authorial statements. Moreover, writing was learned for professions and scribe was not itself a profession. Rather, scribe was a title that could be used by various professions including palace scribes, military scribes, temple scribes, craft scribes, and prophetic scribes. Each of these professions would have had its own scribal community, and each scribal community could develop its own sociolect (spelling, paleography, lexicon, etc). For this reason, it is important to differentiate the size, type, and scope of scribal communities at different periods in the history of ancient Israel and Judah.[48]

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[48] This is the topic of my longer extended study, *Who Really Wrote the Bible? The Story of Scribal Communities* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, forthcoming).