Inventors of the First Alphabetic System: Hints from Two Alphabetic Inscriptions in the Middle Bronze Age (1900-1500 BCE)

Chulhyun Bae*

Abstract

During the Middle Bronze Age (1900-1500 BCE) some Asiatics, called Canaanites, who would have learned Egyptian writing, hieratic and hieroglyphic Egyptian scripts, left the earliest specimens of alphabetic writing. Yet they could reconstruct and remember the general form of the letters they had learned through the meaning of the names, on the basis of their acquaintance with Egyptian writing systems. The appearance of the alphabet is a remarkable advance in civilization, outdating the clumsy writing systems of the Near East. At the time of its creation, it was a practical expedient to counter the lack of a native writing system among Canaanites who had migrated to the Nile Delta as foreign workers. This new device was never regarded as an improvement or a replacement for the sophisticated systems of Egypt or Mesopotamia. No large scale writing or official use was involved at the time of its creation. The alphabetic system, however, enables ordinary people to read and write even the simplest of words and sentences and left far reaching consequences for human civilization.

Keywords: alphabet, hieroglyph, hieratic, Proto-Sinaitic, Wadi el-Hol, Serabit el-Khadem, Semites, acrophonic principle, disruptive innovation

* Associate Professor, Department of Religious Studies, College of Humanities, Seoul National University, e-mail: baech@snu.ac.kr
1. Introduction

There are a myriad of ways in which the transmission of knowledge has taken place throughout human history. From the very beginning of human civilization, the spread of human knowledge, the core of civilization, has been crucially facilitated by the use of writing. Writing, as a method of recording and communicating information, forms part of this human knowledge that emerged and evolved over millennia. Its appearance, in several forms, dates from around the end of the fourth millennium before the Common Era.

Of the various writing systems that emerged from the ancient Near East, the alphabetic system has undoubtedly exerted the most permanent influence upon human civilization. The two other dominant systems of writing, Mesopotamian cuneiform and Egyptian hieroglyphics, were invented in the Middle East around the end of the fourth millennium BCE. They were each used for more than 2500 years and eventually disappeared along with their respective cultures. The alphabetic system, however, has remained in use without interruption into modern times and is still pervasive today. In fact, with the notable exceptions of Chinese and Japanese, the most common languages of the world utilize alphabetic scripts that are ultimately descended from the linear West Semitic alphabet.

The functional advantage of the alphabet over other writing systems lies in its minimalism. Unlike logographic systems, like ancient Egyptian or Sumerian, in which a given symbol denotes a word, or syllabic writing, in which a sign represents a syllable, alphabetic writing is economical. Its graphic representation of phonemes, consonants or vowels drastically decreases the number of signs to no more than 30. This would no doubt have made the system easier to learn and master. The alphabetic system is based on the minimally acrophonic principle in which a picture symbol of an object represents phonetically the initial sound of the name of the object.

Alphabetic writing was simpler and easier to learn than the Egyptian hieroglyphic writing or cuneiform scripts of the ancient Near East. This particular form of human knowledge spread into regions and civilizations that are different one from another. The intention of this paper is to try to comprehend the manner in which the first alphabetic scripts arose in the