

Stop Trying to Make MŠ Happen!

Or Why Moses Does Not Appear in the Proto-Sinaitic Inscriptions

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On May 20th, 2025, Michael Bar-Ron posted a 214-page unpublished “proto-thesis” on his Academia.edu page.¹ In it, he claimed to have found evidence for the historicity of Moses and the Exodus in the Proto-Sinaitic inscriptions, a group of early alphabetic texts from the Sinai Peninsula. Two months later, several online news sites including [Arkeonews](#), [Ancient Origins](#), and the [Jerusalem Post](#) ran features on Bar-Ron’s work with attention-grabbing headlines such as “Have We Found Moses’ Signature?” and “An Inscription Referencing Moses, Or Even His Own Words.”²

As a scholar of early alphabetic inscriptions—one who has already debunked bad readings of them on this very website!—I read these articles with a sense of déjà vu. Since their discovery in the early 20th century, the Proto-Sinaitic inscriptions have exerted a siren song on biblical apologists. Already in 1923, the German biblical scholar Hubert Grimme suggested that these texts contain the name Moses and thus constitute evidence for the Israelite sojourn in Egypt.³ Since then, others—including Charles Kramakhov and Douglas Petrovich—have advanced similar arguments.⁴ None of these earlier proposals won acceptance in the scholarly community.⁵

Despite the breathless headlines, Bar-Ron’s “proto-thesis” will likely meet a similar fate. In this piece, I highlight some of the most serious problems with Bar-Ron’s proposal. I conclude by suggesting some ways scholars can combat the click-bait-ification of scholarship. But first a bit of background on the Proto-Sinaitic inscriptions.

The first ten Proto-Sinaitic inscriptions came to light during W. M. Flinders Petrie’s 1904–1905 excavations at Serabit el-Khadem, an Egyptian turquoise mining facility and Hathor temple located in the Sinai Peninsula (Figure 1).⁶ Subsequent Sinai expeditions have recovered an additional 36 inscriptions, the latest in 2024.⁷ These inscriptions were left by West Semitic-speakers from the Egyptian expeditions. The date of the inscriptions remains debated—proposals range from the 19th to 13th centuries BCE—but recently a consensus has begun to coalesce around the reigns of Senwosret III (1837–1819 BCE), Amenemhat III (1818–1773 BCE), and Amenemhat IV (1772–1764 BCE).⁸ The Egyptian inscriptions at Serabit el-Khadem from these reigns contain more references to West Semitic-speaking individuals than inscriptions from any other period. They mention people from the southern Levant (*šmw*), people from the northern Levant (*rtnw*), five individuals with Semitic names, translators, and even a high-ranking Semitic official known as “Habidadum, brother of the Ruler of Retenu” (*hbdd[m] sn n ḥqʿ n rtnw*), who served as a junior partner in the Egyptian expeditions to the Sinai. Most likely, these individuals left the bulk of the early alphabetic inscriptions at Serabit el-Khadem.



Figure 1: A Map Showing the Findspots of the Proto-Sinaitic Inscriptions and Related Sites.
Drawing by the Author.

The Proto-Sinaitic inscriptions remain incompletely understood. Many are short and fragmentary. What little we can read of them we owe to the work of the Egyptologist Alan Gardiner. In 1916, he showed that the script of the Proto-Sinaitic inscriptions operated according to the acrophonic principle: each letter took the form of a pictograph borrowed from the hieroglyphic or hieratic script.⁹ The name of the letter describes the pictograph, and the sound value of the letter reflects the first sound in its name. The “house” pictograph, for example, has the value *b* because the first sound in its name, **bētu* “house,” is *b*. If the name **bētu* sounds familiar, it is the ancestor of Hebrew *bēt* and Greek *bēta*. By working backwards from the letter names attested in later alphabetic traditions, such as Greek and Hebrew, Gardiner and other scholars succeeded in reverse-engineering the sound values for most of the letters found in the Proto-Semitic inscriptions. Gardiner’s acrophonic proposal received confirmation in 1919 when the Austrian polymath Robert Eisler showed that the alphabetic and hieroglyphic inscriptions on Sinai 345 (Figure 2) are equivalent. The Egyptian inscription reads “beloved of Hathor, [lady] of turquoise” (*mry ḥw.t-ḥrw [nb.t] fk̓.t*), while the alphabetic inscription states “beloved of the Lady” (*m’hb’lt*).¹⁰



Figure 2: Sinai 345.

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Bar-Ron attempts to push the interpretation of the Proto-Sinaitic inscriptions further by linking them to the Exodus and reading them as a form of Biblical Hebrew. Crucially, he identifies the name “Moses” in two inscriptions: Sinai 357, which remains *in situ* inside Mine XIII, and Sinai 361, which was recovered from a pile of rubble above the entrance to Mine XIII and is currently housed in the Cairo Museum (Figures 3 and 4). In Sinai 357, he reads “this is from Moses” (*zt mmš*) to the right of the vertical column of text, while in Sinai 361 he sees “saying of Moses” (*n`m mš*) at the end of the first column.¹¹ Without this onomastic lynchpin, the rest of his argument quickly falls apart. None of his other readings relate unambiguously to the Exodus story, and he frequently invents just-so stories to tie inscriptions back to the Exodus. Take his reading of Sinai 360, for example: “(In that) you came (back), this is shameful! Let us depart!” (*z šb` t zt bš nmš*).¹² In Bar-Ron’s hands, this vague and enigmatic statement becomes a warning to the Israelites not to tarry at Serabit el-Khadem and worship at the Hathor temple.¹³ Accordingly, I focus primarily on the reading “Moses” in Sinai 357 and 361 and leave detailed critique of his individual readings for another time.



Figure 3: Sinai 357.

Photograph by Cédric Paulhiac. Courtesy of the Department of Antiquities, Egypt.



Figure 4: A Plaster Cast of Sinai 361.

Photograph by the Author. Courtesy of Harvard Museum of the Ancient Near East.

To assess Bar-Ron’s claims, it helps to understand what makes for a plausible reading of an ancient inscription. Such a reading must meet three criteria: 1) the identified letters must exist and match known exemplars; 2) the identified words and phrases must fit the grammar of the inscription’s language; and 3) the content of the inscription must fit its historical context. As I show in the following sections, Bar-Ron’s proposal falls short on all counts.

Epigraphic Issues

Put bluntly, Bar-Ron’s proposal to read “Moses” in Sinai 357 and Sinai 361 relies on letters that simply do not appear in these inscriptions. He has transformed a few stray tool marks and shadows on the rock surface into full-blown letters. Compare the unedited images of the relevant sections of Sinai 357 and Sinai 361 in figures 5 and 6 with Bar-Ron’s confident restorations of these sections in figures 7 and 8.

In Sinai 357, the only evidence for the letters that Bar-Ron reads as *m* and *š* are the two diagonal strokes to the right of the vertical column. But these strokes differ from the chisel marks that make up the unambiguous letters. They are both wider and deeper, matching the many other tool marks that scar the surface of the mine wall. Previously, I have read the inscription as “Bb-

mn fulfilled a vow to Teššob because he heard my utterance and gave me rest” (*’l ttp ndr ml’ bbmn k šm ’mr wrbšn*).¹⁴ Bar-Ron’s reading is not even wrong. His letters simply do not appear. In Sinai 361, on the other hand, the five-letter sequence “saying of Moses” (*n’ m mš*) that Bar-Ron identifies on the lower righthand corner of the inscription consists entirely of shadows cast by the contours of the rock surface.¹⁵ They are much shallower and more diffuse than the unambiguous letters and lack the series of parallel lines—remnants of the carving process—that appear in the interior of the intentional strokes. There simply aren’t any letters in this portion of the inscription.¹⁶ In his presentation of these inscriptions, Bar-Ron omits images of the carvings themselves, showing only his traced-over images (figures 7 and 8). In effect, he fails to show his homework.



Figure 5: Close-up of Sinai 357.

Photograph by Cédric Paulhiac. Courtesy of the Department of Antiquities, Egypt.

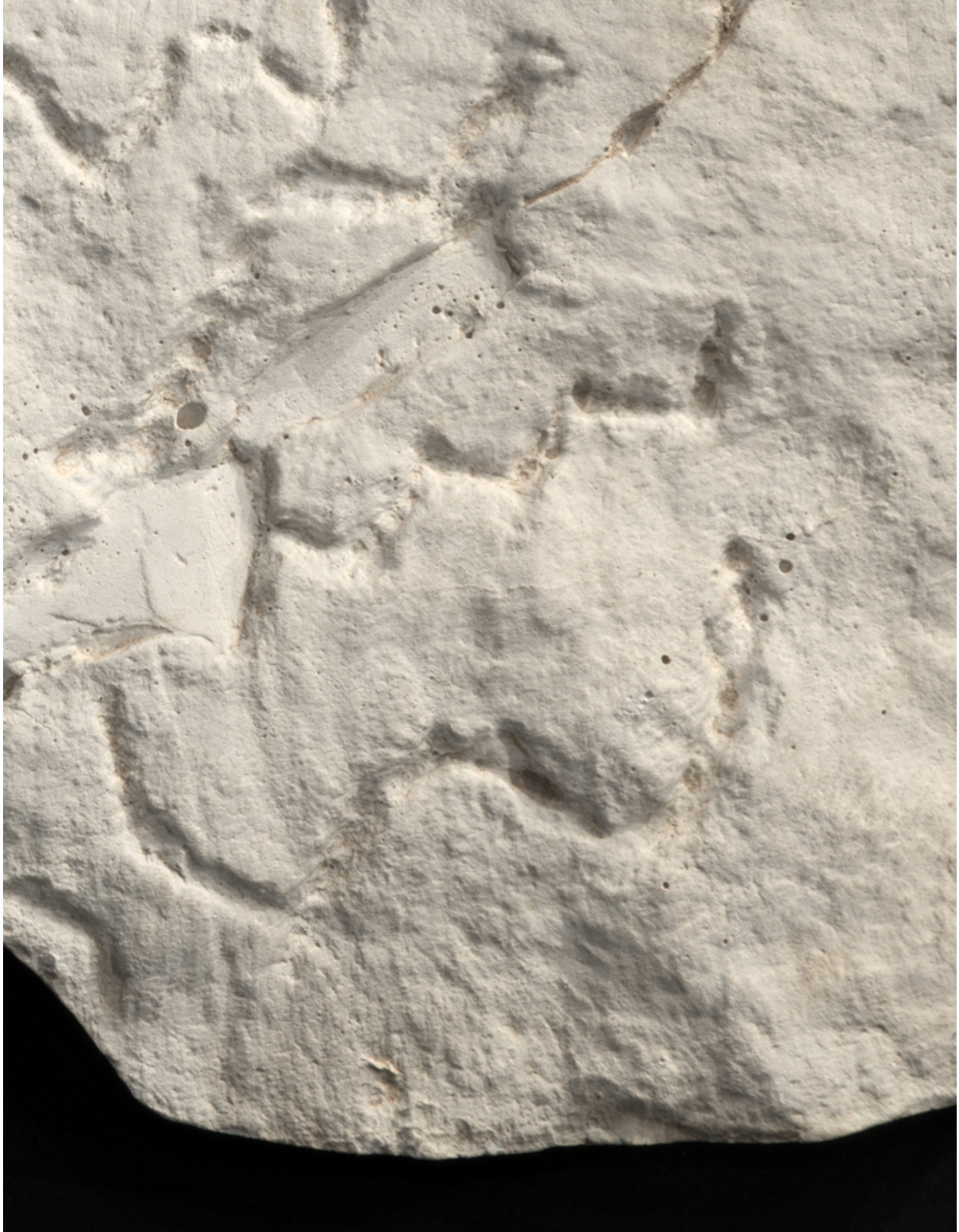


Figure 6: Close-up of Sinai 361.
Photograph by the Author. Courtesy of Harvard Museum of the Ancient Near East.

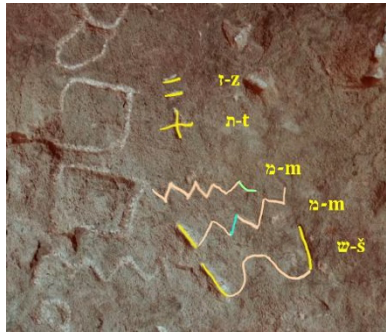


Figure 7: Bar-Ron's Drawing of the Letters *zt mmš* in Sinai 357.



Figure 8: Bar-Ron's Drawing of the Letters *n' m mš* in Sinai 361.

Linguistic Issues

Bar-Ron's proposal also suffers from a number of linguistic issues. The majority of these problems stem from his claims that the Proto-Sinaitic inscriptions are written in Biblical Hebrew, a language whose earliest attestations post-date Sinai material by a minimum of 400 years. Most seriously, several important words in Bar-Ron's readings are misspelled according to both the orthography of the Proto-Sinaitic inscriptions and Biblical Hebrew grammar—including the name Moses!

The square script used to write Biblical Hebrew consists of 22 letters. The Proto-Sinaitic script, by contrast, contained approximately 28 distinct graphemes (see Figure 9). The six additional letters served to distinguish sounds that had merged in Biblical Hebrew, such as *ḏ* and *s/z* (> Hebrew *צ*) and *ḏ* and *z* (> Hebrew *ר*). One such pair of letters was the thornbush and compound bow graphemes, which represented the sounds *s* and *ṭ* respectively. In Bar-Ron's reading of Sinai 357 and 361, the name Moses is spelled with the compound bow grapheme, making it *mṭ*. But we know from comparative linguistic data that the Hebrew name מֹשֶׁה should be spelled with the thornbush grapheme since it comes from the Egyptian name *ms*. In other words, "Moses" is misspelled in Bar-Ron's reading.

Bar-Ron's readings also deviate from standard Biblical Hebrew usage in other ways. If the language of the Proto-Sinaitic inscriptions did represent an early form of Hebrew as Bar-Ron claims, we would expect the feminine singular near demonstrative in *zt mmš* to be spelled *z't* (= Biblical Hebrew תַּאֲת), not *zt*. The aleph in the biblical form is not a later addition, but an integral component of the word, as comparison with related languages like Aramaic shows.

These problems illustrate the difficulties of retrojecting a known language into the past. Even if the language of the Proto-Sinaitic inscriptions did represent the ancestor of Biblical Hebrew, and even if we accept the lowest possible date for the Proto-Sinaitic inscriptions, these inscriptions would still predate the earliest identifiable Hebrew text by some 400 years. Although rates of linguistic change vary from language to language due to the vagaries of history and geography, we would still expect the Proto-Sinaitic inscriptions to exhibit some differences from Biblical Hebrew. Think of how much the English language spoken today has changed in the four centuries since the English of Shakespeare and the King James Bible. But Bar-Ron would have us believe that Biblical Hebrew remained static for the same period of time—if not longer.

Historical Issues

Even if the name “Moses” did appear in Sinai 357 and 361 with the correct spelling, there's no guarantee that it would refer to the biblical Moses. The name Moses enjoyed broad popularity throughout Egyptian history as an abbreviation of names of the form “*DN-ms*,” “The deity DN bore”—think Thutmoses (i.e., “Thoth bore”).¹⁷ Because the turquoise mines and Hathor temple at Serabit el-Khadem operated under an Egyptian aegis, it would not be particularly surprising to find an Egyptian name in the Proto-Sinaitic inscriptions. We know from Papyrus Brooklyn 35.1446, which documents the transfer of 95 servants to a woman named Senebtisi, that several West Semitic-speakers adopted or were given Egyptian names while living and working in Egypt.¹⁸

Conclusion

Bar-Ron's proposal to find Moses in the Proto-Sinaitic inscriptions relies on letters that do not exist, do not spell Moses, and do not constitute a smoking gun. Without the appearance of the name Moses in Sinai 357 and 361, the rest of his readings fall apart.

The many problems with Bar-Ron's proposal raise an important question about the practice of archaeological journalism: Why did so many news outlets report on such a flimsy theory? At this point, it has become *de rigueur* among scholars to excoriate online media for fomenting the click-bait-ification of scholarship. This, I believe, is the wrong tack. It would be great if outlets like *Arkeonews*, *Ancient Origins*, and the *Jerusalem Post* exercised more caution before platforming sensational claims—especially if they have not appeared in a peer-reviewed venue. But we cannot escape the attention economy. Headlines like “Scholars Urge Caution” or “Interpretation of Ancient Artifact Complicated” simply do not drive engagement like grandiose ones do. Instead, scholars should learn to work with the attention economy rather than lamenting its existence.¹⁹ If we change how we communicate our work to the public—by focusing on why we find it exciting and relevant—news outlets would have less need to amplify the sensational claims of apologists.

To that end, I conclude by highlighting why the Proto-Sinaitic inscriptions remain interesting even if they do not mention Moses. As some of the oldest unambiguous alphabetic texts, the Proto-Sinaitic inscriptions provide crucial information about the invention of alphabetic

writing, a technology used by billions of people today. These inscriptions suggest an early date for the invention of alphabetic writing. Moreover, the dual parentage of the letters shows that the alphabet emerged in a multicultural context: West Semitic-speaking individuals borrowed Egyptian signs and gave them new meanings. In a way, Egyptian hieroglyphs are the ancestor of our alphabet! Finally, these inscriptions suggest possible motives for the invention of the alphabet. If, for example, most of the inscriptions invoke deities, we might posit a religious trigger for the invention of alphabetic writing. Only time and further research will tell. But one thing is clear: the study of the Proto-Sinaitic inscriptions is interesting enough without resorting to clickbait.

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¹¹ Bar-Ron, "Presenting Critical Readings," 63–78.

¹² Bar-Ron, "Presenting Critical Readings," 109–10.

¹³ In reality, very few West Semitic speakers had access to the Hathor temple to judge from the distribution of alphabetic inscriptions from the Sinai: only four of the 46 Proto-Sinaitic inscriptions hail from this sacred space.

¹⁴ Aren M. Wilson-Wright, "Sinai 357: A Northwest Semitic Votive Inscription to Teššob," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 136 (2016): 255.

¹⁵ Ironically, the sequence *mš*—or something approximating it (see the section on Linguistic issues below)—does appear in Sinai 361 immediately above Bar-Ron's putative *n'm mš* as well as in four other inscriptions (Sinai 349, 351, 353, and 360). Previous proposals to link the Proto-Sinaitic inscriptions to the Exodus have focused on these texts.

¹⁶ See my reading of this inscription in Aren M. Wilson-Wright, "'Beloved of the Lady Are Those Who ...': A Recurring Memorial Formula in the Sinaitic Inscriptions," *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 384 (2020): 151–53.

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