

## Hebrew or Not?: Reviewing the Linguistic Claims of Douglas Petrovich's *The World's Oldest Alphabet*\*

*Petrovich's three arguments for reading the early alphabetic inscriptions from Egypt and the Sinai as Hebrew fall short, and with them his evidence for the historicity of the Exodus and the Israelite sojourn in Egypt.*

See Also: [Wandering in the Desert?: A Review of Charles R. Krahmalkov's "The Chief of Miners Mashe/Moshe, the Historical Moses"](#)

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July 2017

Douglas Petrovich's recent book *The World's Oldest Alphabet: Hebrew as the Language of the Proto-Consonantal Script* makes several sensational claims about both the origin of the alphabet and biblical history. In it, Petrovich argues that the Israelites invented the alphabet during the Egyptian Middle Kingdom (2055-1650 BCE) and recorded their language in a series of inscriptions from Egypt and the Sinai Peninsula, at places such as Wadi el-Hôl, Serabit el-Khadem, Lahun, and Bir en-Naşb (2016: 11–13) (fig. 1). He then analyzes and translates sixteen early alphabetic inscriptions as Hebrew. The content and language of these inscriptions, he claims, provide concrete evidence for the biblical description of the

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\* This review is adapted from a longer essay that will appear in the *Journal of the American Oriental Society*.

Exodus and the Israelite sojourn in Egypt (2016: 195–199). At root, however, Petrovich’s historical arguments rely on his claim that the early alphabetic inscriptions record the Hebrew language. This claim proves unsustainable in light of linguistic evidence.

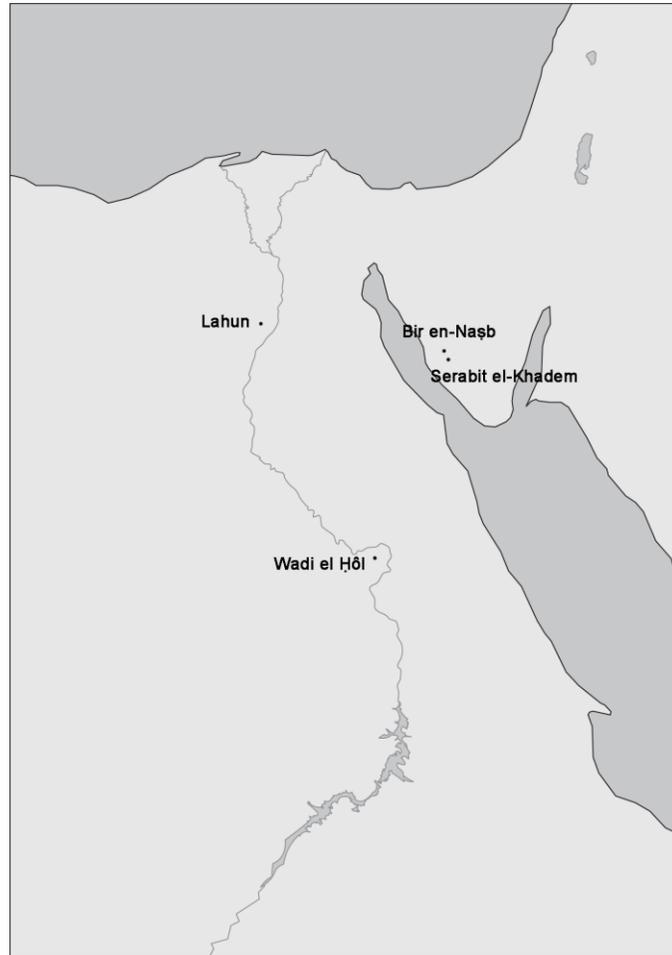


Figure 1: A Map of Egypt Showing the Distribution of the Early Alphabetic Inscriptions

The premise of Petrovich’s linguistic argument is that one must first identify the language of a text before being able to decipher it.<sup>1</sup> Accordingly, Petrovich (2016: 191) offers three pieces of evidence for identifying the language of the early alphabetic inscriptions as Hebrew: 1) the word “Hebrews” (Egyptian *ibr*) appears on the Egyptian stele Sinai 115 from the Egyptian turquoise mining facility at Serabit el-Khadem, in the Sinai Peninsula; 2) Hebrew names can be found for all of the original alphabetic letters; 3) the early alphabetic inscriptions contain the personal names Moses, Asenath, and Ahisamach, which are only found in the Hebrew bible. Unfortunately, none of this of evidence holds up under scrutiny.

Petrovich’s reading of “Hebrew” (*ibr*) in Sinai 115 runs into epigraphic and linguistic difficulties. Epigraphically, it relies on an unlikely interpretation of the eighth sign on the stele. This sign consists of a rough square in outline form (fig. 2), which resembles both a hieroglyphic *p* (fig. 3) and early alphabetic *b* (fig. 4). Similar looking *p*’s appear on contemporary Egyptian inscriptions from Serabit el-Khadem (e.g., Sinai 516; fig. 5) and, since the remainder of Sinai 115 is written in Egyptian, the eighth pictograph most likely represents a hieroglyphic *p*. Petrovich (2016: 18–19), however, opts for an alphabetic reading because the eighth sign

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<sup>1</sup> This is not necessarily the case. As E. J. W. Barber (1974: 6–12) points out, Old Persian, Akkadian, Elamite, Sumerian, Hittite, and Ugaritic were all unknown languages prior to decipherment. Seen in this light, Petrovich’s insistence that the early alphabetic inscriptions must record a known Semitic language, as opposed to a previously undiscovered one, seems strange.

differs from more common renderings of the hieroglyphic *p*, which are executed in *bas relief*. Yet the outlined form is a valid variant of the *p* hieroglyph, which occurs in other Egyptian inscriptions, and cannot be dismissed as an anomaly. Also problematic is Petrovich's reading of a hieroglyphic *r* following pictograph eight (2016: 19). The available photographs feature a roughly oval shape following the eighth pictograph, but it is unclear whether this shape is a hieroglyphic character or damage to the surface of the stele. Petrovich does not acknowledge the second possibility or offer argue in favor of reading a hieroglyph here.



Figure 2: The Eighth Pictograph from Sinai 115 (Courtesy of the Egypt Exploration Society)



Figure 3: A Hieroglyphic *p* from Sinai 115 (Courtesy of the Egypt Exploration Society)



Figure 4: An Alphabetic *b* from Sinai 351 (Image by A. M. Wilson-Wright)

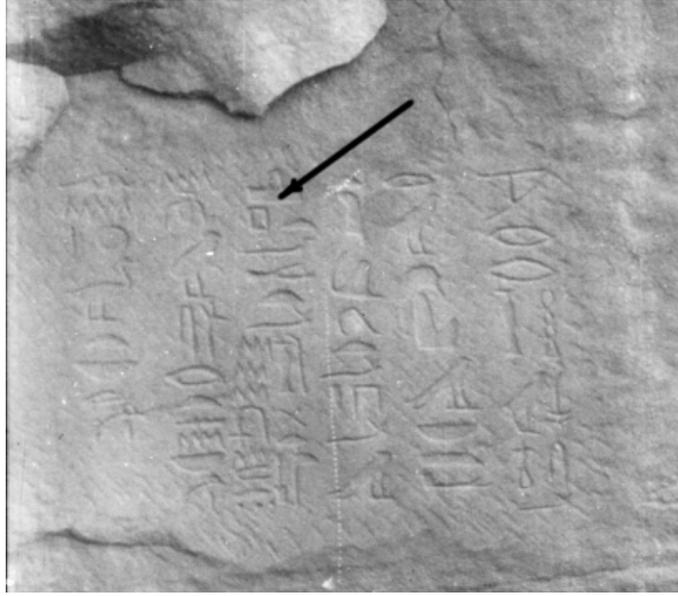


Figure 5: A Hieroglyphic *p* from Sinai 516 (Courtesy of the Semitic Museum, Harvard University)

Even if we accept Petrovich’s reading of eighth pictograph, it is unlikely that *ibr* represents the word “Hebrew.” In Biblical Hebrew, the word for Hebrew, *ʿibrî*, is written with an initial ʿ (a notoriously difficult-to-pronounce sound called a voiced velar fricative; it is produced by constricting the muscles at the back of the throat). Although this sound is also found in Egyptian, the word that Petrovich claims means “Hebrew” begins with a glottal stop (the sound found in the middle of the exclamation “uh-oh!”). To explain this mismatch, Petrovich (2016: 24) proposes two possible scenarios: as the first recorded instance of the word Hebrew, *ibr* was not subject to the later conventions of spoken and written Hebrew; or the pronunciation of Hebrew ʿ was closer to that of Egyptian *i* than Egyptian ʿ. The first is an argument from exceptionalism and cannot be sustained. The second

argument falters on linguistic evidence. In Middle Kingdom writings of Semitic personal names, Semitic *ḥ* is always represented by Egyptian *ḥ*, never by *i*, which shows that Semitic *ḥ* was closer in pronunciation to Egyptian *ḥ* than *i* (Hoch 1994: 492–497; Schneider, 1992: 116–174). Conversely, Egyptian *ḥ* always corresponds to Hebrew *ḥ* in Egyptian loanwords into Hebrew (Muchiki, 1999: 264). For these reasons, *ibr* most likely does not represent the word “Hebrew.”

Even if we accept Petrovich’s reading and translation of Sinai 115, the appearance of the word “Hebrew” in a Middle Kingdom Egyptian inscription from Serabit el-Khadem does not guarantee that the alphabetic inscriptions from Wadi el-Ḥôl, Lahun, Bir en-Naṣb, and New Kingdom (1550–1069 BCE) Serabit el-Khadem were written in the Hebrew language. In fact, it is unclear whether the early alphabetic inscriptions even record the same Semitic language and Petrovich does not offer any evidence that they did. At most, Petrovich’s reading—bracketing for a moment its epigraphic and linguistic drawbacks—shows that individuals identified as Hebrews may have been present at Serabit el-Khadem during the Middle Kingdom (2055–1650 BCE) and the Egyptians wrote about them in a single stele.

The appeal to letter names also proves problematic. In the second appendix to the book, Petrovich (2016: 205–206, 209–211, 217, 220–222, 224) discounts ten traditional letter names (*gîmel*, *hê*, *zayin*, *ḥêt*, *ṭêt*, *sāmek*, *ṣādê*, *qôp*, *šîn*, and *tāw*)

because they do not appear in Biblical Hebrew. As a motivation for this practice, he writes, “If one grants that the original alphabet could have been Hebrew, the question arises as to the original names of each Hebrew letter, given that the alphabet is based on an acrophonic system<sup>2</sup> and that there is a long and well-established tradition of fixed Hebrew words that correspond to each letter of the alphabet” (2016: 201). In other words, Petrovich’s proposed names rely on the assumption that the inventors of the alphabet spoke Hebrew, and thus his appeal to letter names turns into a circular argument. At best, this argument serves as potential confirmation that Petrovich’s hypothesis is correct. If he could not find Hebrew names for the letters of the alphabet, it would be unlikely that the inventors of the alphabet spoke Hebrew. It does not show *a priori* that early alphabetic inscriptions record the Hebrew language.

Petrovich’s final argument for seeing Hebrew as the language of the early alphabetic inscriptions relies on personal names, but this argument suffers from three problems. First, personal names are poor markers of linguistic affiliation because they often come from different languages. Egyptian names, like Phineas and Passhur, appear in the Hebrew Bible (Exod 6:25; Jer 20:1), yet no one would

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<sup>2</sup> The acrophonic principle refers to the link between sound and pictograph found in some writing systems. In an acrophonic alphabet, the phonetic value of each letter comes from the object it represents. If English were written in an acrophonic alphabetic, a house pictograph, for example, could represent h-sound because ‘house’ begins with ‘h’. In a Semitic language, by contrast, where the word for house is *bayt*, a house pictograph represents the b-sound.

claim that the Bible is written in Egyptian. Or, to cite a more contemporary example, my first name comes from Norwegian—it is a dialectal spelling of Arne, itself from Old Norse Arni ‘eagle’—but I publish exclusively in American English. Second, two of the personal names that Petrovich flags as being exclusively Hebrew—Moses (< *mśy* ‘born of DN’) and Asenath (*ns-n(y)t* ‘Belonging to Neith’)—most likely come from Egyptian and so it would be unsurprising to find them in an Egyptian context such as Bir en-Naşb or Serabit el-Khadem (Muchiki 1999: 208–209; Van Seters, 1987: 115–116). Third, Petrovich’s appeal to personal names forms a circular argument: he only found these names by reading the early alphabetic inscriptions as Hebrew; yet he cites them as evidence that the early alphabetic inscriptions were written in Hebrew.

Petrovich’s three arguments for reading the early alphabetic inscriptions from Egypt and the Sinai as Hebrew fall short, and with them his evidence for the historicity of the Exodus and the Israelite sojourn in Egypt. But could we come up with better arguments for reading the early alphabetic inscriptions as a Hebrew and salvage Petrovich’s historical claims? This seems unlikely due to the gulf of centuries separating the earliest Hebrew texts from the early alphabetic inscriptions. The earliest possible witnesses to the Hebrew language date to the 9<sup>th</sup> century BCE (Rollston 2012: 68), while the earliest alphabetic inscriptions date to the reign of Pharaoh Amenemhat III (1831-1786 BCE). A thousand or more years

is a long time in linguistic history and allows for plenty of time for languages to change dramatically. In the history of English, for example, a similar span of time separates contemporary English from Anglo-Saxon (Old English), which differs considerably from modern English and would not be intelligible to an English speaker today. Compare, for example, the opening lines of the Lord's Prayer in contemporary English (NRSV translation) and Anglo-Saxon:

Our father in heaven,  
hallowed be your name.

Fæder ūre, ðū ðē eart on heofonum,  
Sī ðīn nama gehālgod

Presumably, Hebrew's 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BCE linguistic ancestors would differ at least as much from Iron Age Hebrew as contemporary English differs from Anglo-Saxon. Thus, even if the early alphabetic inscriptions did record a linguistic ancestor of Hebrew, it would likely be so different from Hebrew that we would consider it a separate language.

Ultimately, Petrovich's three pieces of evidence for reading the early alphabetic inscriptions as Hebrew are fatally flawed: the word "Hebrew" does not appear in the Egyptian inscription Sinai 115 from Serabit el-Khadem, and even if it did, its presence does not demonstrate the early alphabetic inscriptions from other locations were written in Hebrew; the ability to find Hebrew names for the letters of the alphabet relies on the assumption that the Israelites invented the alphabet;

and personal names fail as an indicator of linguistic identity because they often come from other languages. In addition, it is unclear that Hebrew existed as a distinct language during the Middle Kingdom, when many of the early alphabetic inscriptions were written. In light of these many problems, Petrovich's book cannot provide reliable proof for the historicity of the Exodus and the sojourn in Egypt.

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