The Handwriting on the Sherds

Paul V.M. Flesher

A rather dry and technical scholarly article released Monday (April 11, 2016) about ancient handwriting generated breathless headlines this week. “Evidence on When the Bible Was Written,” wrote the New York Times. The opening sentence in The Washington Post’s article said, evidence suggests “that key biblical texts may have been composed earlier than what some scholars think.” “Bible Written Earlier Than Previously Believed?” asked The Christian Post.

The answer actually is no. The evidence belongs to a time period later than the time period other evidence has convinced most biblical scholars the biblical books of the Torah (Genesis to Deuteronomy) and the Former Prophets (Joshua to 2 Kings) were composed. Indeed, these biblical books could have been written a century or more earlier than this supposedly “new” evidence suggests. So, what is going on?

The article appeared in the respected American academic publication Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences. In true scientific fashion, it lists nine co-authors. The leaders of the team are Israel Finkelstein and Eli Piasetzky from Tel Aviv University in Israel. Finkelstein is a well-known, widely respected yet controversial archaeologist. Always pushing the cutting edge of knowledge, he has made his reputation by asking difficult questions and then trying to answer them.

The question of this research is how widespread was literacy - defined as the ability to write sentences containing instructions -- in ancient Judah. To give an initial answer, Finkelstein and his team looked at 16 ostraca, pieces of broken pottery that someone wrote upon. These were discovered several decades ago at Arad, a Judahite military fort in southern Judah and dated to the year 600 B.C.

The analysis was carried out by Piasetzky, a mathematician, and his team. They designed a computer algorithm for analyzing differences in handwriting that enabled them to determine when two documents were written by different authors. Applied to the 16 ostraca, they discovered that these texts, essentially requisitions for supplies, were composed by six different people.

The interesting result is that analysis of the content of these ostraca shows that some of the writers were low-level army officials, such as quartermasters and their assistants, rather than generals. The team concludes that this demonstrates that schools existed in ancient Judah, a conclusion for which there is a woeful lack of direct evidence. It also shows that access to education in these schools was widely available within the army.

The article’s odd claim is that these results show that certain books of the Bible, Deuteronomy and the books of the Former Prophets, were written earlier than scholars thought. The argument of Finkelstein and his team is that there is no comparable collection of inscriptions for the next 400 years. After these writings in 600 B.C., there is no large trove of inscriptions in Judea until 200 B.C. or so.

The argument is that these books must have been written by 600 because the handwriting analysis of these ostraca suggests widespread literacy by this time, and the lack of inscriptions prior to 200 B.C. indicates that they could not have been written after it.

That conclusion is great, and I am glad of the supporting evidence for early literacy. But, that is all it is -- supporting evidence.

Most of this was already known. In 2001, Ephraim Stern observed in his “Archaeology of the Land of the Bible” a study surveying what was known at the time: “One of the surprising results of the excavations of Judah in the 7th century BCE is the unusual amount of epigraphic material” (p. 169).

In other words, scholars have long known that in the century prior to 600, there was an explosion of writing in Judah. Along with inscriptions, there are graffiti, bureaucratic writings, letters, and weights and measures. And, don’t forget the thousands of bullae from Jerusalem and elsewhere. These lack writing, but constitute the impressions of seals that were used to seal up written letters for secure delivery.

This evidence matches how many historians understand the writing of these biblical works. The book of Deuteronomy, at least the law code found in chapters 12-26, was written or published in 622, during the reign of King Josiah. This was followed shortly thereafter by the composition of the Former Prophets, with only the last two chapters coming later. The latter dealt with Jerusalem’s fall to the Babylonians in 586 and events in the later exile.

So, rather than pushing back the earliest date of when biblical books were composed, the study by Finkelstein, Piasetzky and their team only help to firm up the tail of the dates in the already existing historical reconstruction.