

Education, Literacy, and Illiteracy in Ancient Near Eastern Culture

OLADOSU, Opeyemi Tunbosun

Theological Seminary of Adventist University of Africa, Nairobi, Kenya

Introduction

The issue of literacy in the Ancient Near East (ANE), that is, the ability to read and write, is a contested topic in biblical and ANE scholarship.¹ While some believe that literacy was relatively widespread in the ANE, others argue that a high level of literacy is a phenomenon strictly of the modern world.² It is then necessary to ask, when did the Ancient Near East become literate? To what degree was the illiteracy level in the ANE? How did the people in the ancient world educate their children and preserve their history, values, cultures and heritage from one generation to another? This paper attempts to proffer answers to these questions.

¹ James D. Moore, "Scribal Culture in the Ancient Near East", accessed on 27 June 2014. Online. Available on <http://www.oxfordbiblicalstudies.com/resource/scribal.xhtml>

² See, for example, Allan R. Millard, "The Question of Israelite Literacy," BR 3/3 (1987): 22-31; "The Knowledge of Writing in Iron Age Palestine," *Tyndale Bulletin* 46 (1995): 207-17; Ian M. Young, "Israelite Literacy: Interpreting the Evidence, Parts I-II," *Vetus Testamentum* 48 (1998): 239-53, 408-22; Susan Niditch, *Oral World and Written Word: Ancient Israelite Literature* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996).

ANE: Brief Geographical Description

Today, the Ancient Near East is called the Middle East or sometimes Southwest Asia.¹ ANE encompasses the region of Mesopotamia in the east, Asia Minor or Anatolia in the north, Syro-Palestine and Egypt in the West, and the Arabian Peninsula in the south.² It should be noted that the Old Testament history takes place in the region of Syro-Palestine on the eastern Mediterranean coast. This territory now includes the States of Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, and Israel.³ The region from Egypt through Palestine into Mesopotamia is referred to as the Fertile

Crescent and Western civilization was born within this crescent-shaped expanse of arable land, sandwiched between sea and desert.⁴

The term “ancient” could refer to historical “Ancient Times,” covering approximately 3000 years, beginning late in the fourth millennium B.C.E with the appearance of urban centres and the earliest written records.⁵ The basic population stock of the Middle East, excluding Egypt, spoke Semitic languages which include Hebrew, Aramaic, Akkadian, Arabic and others.⁶

Development of Literacy in ANE

Evidence reveals that the Ancient Near East embraced majorly nomadic societies. Hence, they had little use for writing.⁷ Writing materials were not readily available in the desert and had to be imported from the settled regions coupled with the harsh weather condition that did not encourage the keeping of materials that could be easily destroyed. Nomadic societies developed effective ways-of-life

¹ Andrew E. Hall and John H Walton, *A Survey of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 28.

² Ibid.

³ Hall and Walton, 28.

⁴ Christian E. Hauer, William A. Young, *An Introduction to the Bible: A Journey into Three Worlds*, 2nd Edition (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1990), 17.

⁵ J. Maxwell Miller and John H. Hayes, *A History of Ancient Israel and Judah* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1986), 25.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Macdonald M.C.A, “Literacy in an Oral Environment,” in *Writing and Ancient Near Eastern Society*, eds, Piotr Bienkowski, Christopher Mee, and Elizabeth Slater, (London: T & T Clark, Library of Biblical Studies, 2005), 51.

and social structures based on the use of powerful memories and oral communication, in which literacy could find little useful function.¹

According to Dutcher-Walls, literacy in the ancient world was limited to members of the upper classes and to scribes employed by royal, administrative, and temple institutions.

Many people in lower classes probably had only functional literacy, enough to write or recognize their names and a few words for social and economic transactions.²

Historically, about 3200 B.C.E, the Mesopotamian and Egyptian civilizations developed a system of writing.³ The early writing system was pictographic.

Based on the archaeological and historical evidence, it appears literacy began early in some regions of the Ancient Near East.

1. Mesopotamia: It is on record that the world's earliest known writing came from Mesopotamia. By 3100 B.C.E. conventional signs representing specific words had spread throughout Mesopotamia.⁴ The inhabitants of Sumer in Mesopotamia are credited with the first writing system, the first schools, the first law codes and the first written law.⁵ Mesopotamians developed cuneiform which is a series of wedge shaped marks that designated syllables and were capable of expressing a full range of meaning.⁶

The record shows that the first use of writing appears to have been for record keeping in the trading centres.⁷

¹ Ibid.

² Patricia Dutcher-Walls, *Writing in the Ancient Near East*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academics, 2002), 38.

³William Matthew McCarter, "Literacy in the Ancient Near East", Accessed on 29 June 2014. Online. Available on: <http://www.Voices.yahoo.com/literacy-ancient-near-east.html>.

⁴ Jerry H. Bently, Herbert F. Ziegler, *Traditions & Encounters: A Global Perspective on the Past from the Beginnings to 1500*, Vol. 1(Boston: McGraw Hill, 2000), 47.

⁵ Anthony R. Ceresko, *The Introduction of the Old Testament: A Liberation Perspective*, (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1999), 35.

⁶ William McCarter, 2.

⁷ McCarter, 2.

2. Egypt: The ancient Egypt experienced a millennium of progressive civilization.¹ One of the achievements of Egypt during this period is the invention of writing.² The language of the ancient Egyptians is written with a system of picture signs. The formal script, in which the pictures are usually recognizable, is called hieroglyphic.³
3. Arad: Two Hebrew archives dating mainly to the time of the Judahite kingdom were discovered at the fortified sites of Arad and Lachish. Both archives consist of many texts, primarily administrative and military in nature. These demonstrate that in the context of a military setting, literacy played an active role.⁴

Another discovery which establishes the literacy in the ANE is the Dead Sea Scrolls found in the Levant. These ancient scrolls written in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek dated to the Greco-Roman time.⁵ Further archaeological findings provide evidence of a general literacy permeating the culture of the ancient near east prior to the time period of the united monarchy in Israel. The Mari Texts dated 1813 B.C discovered in 1923 contains 20,000 texts which include names like those found in Genesis. These names include Canaan, Nahor, Serug, and Terah.⁶

Also, Nuzi library was discovered in 1925 and contains thousands of texts that were written in the 15th century B.C. Many of the customs described in the Bible are substantiated by these Akkadian texts.⁷

¹ William Sanford Lasort, David Alla Hubbard, Frederic Wm. Bush, *Old Testament Survey: The Message, Form, and Background of the Old Testament*, 2nd Edition, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Cambridge, U.K, 1996), 35.

² Edward M. Burns et al, *World Civilizations: Their History and Their Culture*, Vol. 1, 7th Edition (London: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1995), 28.

³William W. Hallo, William K. Simpson, *The Ancient Near East* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Publishers, 1971), 196, 197.

⁴Piotr Bienkowski, Mee Christopher, and Slater Elizabeth, eds., *Writing and Ancient Near Eastern Society* (New York: T&T Clark, 2005), 23.

⁵ David M. Carr, *Writing on the Tablet of the Heart: Origin of Scripture and Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 3.

⁶ Walter D. Huyck, "Literacy in the Ancient Near East" accessed on 27 June 2014. Online. Available on <http://www.thischristianjourney.com/ThisChristianJourney/General Pages/Literacy in the old testament.htm>

⁷Ibid.

It is interesting to note that Bible itself provides indications of literature that pre-existed its authorship and may have contributed to its context. This supports early literacy. Walter gives the following examples: “This is the book of the generations of Adam” (Gen. 5:1). This suggests that the descendants of Adam were written down just as the king lists of Egypt and Mesopotamia were written down in the earliest time.

Joseph received Pharaoh’s signet ring with which to seal written documents, which indicates that literature was in common use in his day (Gen 41:42). A written bill of divorce was to be given to a woman divorced by her husband (Deut 24:1-3). The book of the Wars of the Lord indicates that books were available in the community (Num 21:14).¹

Education in Ancient Israel

Education has as one of its fundamental aspects the imparting of culture from generation to generation. In this sense, formal education can be traced in Ancient Israel and Judah to around 1300 B.C.E with the adoption of the Torah, which means “teaching”, “instruction”, or “law” in Hebrew.² Hezer observes that three Torah commandments provide for education in the general society. They are encapsulated below:

1. Number 10 – To read the ‘*Shema*’ twice daily, as it is written “and thou shalt talk of them... when thou liest down, and when thou risest up’ Deut 6, 7).
2. Number 11 – To learn Torah and to teach it, as it is written “thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children” (Deut 6,7).
3. Number 17 – For every man to write a Torah scroll for himself, as it is written “write ye this song for you” (Deut 31, 19).

Thus, the father was obligated as the first teacher of his children in Jewish history (Deut 11:19).³

¹ Walter D. Huyck, “Literacy in the Ancient Near East” accessed on 27 June 2014. Online. Available on [http://www.thischristianjourney.com/ThisChristianJourney/General Pages/Literacy in the old testament.htm](http://www.thischristianjourney.com/ThisChristianJourney/GeneralPages/Literacy%20in%20the%20old%20testament.htm)

² Catherine Hezer, “Jewish Literacy in Roman Palestine” *Texts and Studies in Ancient Judaism* 81 (Tuebingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 2001), 503.

³ *Ibid.*, 503.

Further, it is observed that most education in ancient time was vocational instruction designed to train people to work in specific trades and crafts. Most of those who later learned to read and write became scribes.¹

There are further biblical evidences in favour of early literacy in the time of patriarchs, prophets and kings. Moses is said to have written (Ex.17:14) the Decalogue (Ex. 24:12; 34:27), the words of Yahweh (Ex. 24:4). Samuel wrote down the charter of the newly created kingship of Saul (1Sam. 10:25). David wrote letters to his commander Joab (2 Sam.11:14) and details of the Temple administration, as did his son Solomon (2 Ch.2:11). Isaiah the prophet wrote (2Ch.26:22; Isa.8:1) and dictated to a scribe (30:8). Jesus Christ and his apostles made constant reference to the written Scriptures (e.g. “it is written” – *gegraptai* – occurs 106 times). Jesus himself was literate (Jn.7:14-15, reading (Lk.4:16-19) and writing publicly on at least one occasion (Jn.8:6).²

Materials for Writing

It is observed that almost any smooth surface was used for writing.³ According to Moore, the objects used in writing in the ANE include:

1. Clay: The vast majority of extant cuneiform texts are preserved in clay. Using a stylus, wedges were impressed on midly wet clay tablets, which they dried and sometimes fired dried.
2. Stone and Plaster: Stone and plaster are known to have been used for monumental texts. Stone monuments were often incised, though some Phoenician texts were embossed carvings. Ink was also used on plaster and stone.
3. Parchment: This is a writing material made from animal hide. It was an expensive material. It was written on with ink and could be reused a limited number of times after a scribe scraped or sanded the original writing off of the parchment. Most of the Dead Sea Scroll texts were

¹ Jerry H. Bently, Herbert F. Ziegler, *Traditions & Encounters: A Global Perspective on the Past from the Beginnings to 1500*, Vol. 1(Boston: McGraw Hill, 2000), 47.

² Douglas J.D, Hillyerr N. and Bruce F.F, eds., *The Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, Part 3 (Sydney and Auckland: Inter-Varsity Press. Tyndale House Publisher, 1980), 1657-1658.

³ *Ibid.*, 1658.

written on parchment. Parchment can be written on both sides, but if a document were intended to be a long scroll, it would only have been written on one side.

4. Papyrus: This is made from a reed plant that grows in marshlands. Papyrus was manufactured in rolls with sheets glued together. A scribe would cut off the length of papyrus needed for a given document.
5. Ink: Two colours of ink were used since the earliest times, black and red. Black ink was typically made of soot, water, and gum Arabic. Red ink was made of an iron-based mineral, water, and gum Arabic. Erasing ink was difficult. It could be blotted off before it dried or scraped or sanded off after it had dried. Many documents written in ink become defaced over time because ancient ink was not very permanent.
6. Seals: Seals are made of either stone or clay. They were used to impress in clay or wax to seal a document; many of these seal impressions, known as *bullae* survive in the archaeological record.¹ In 1 Kings 21:8 Jezebel seals Ahab's documents which means she affixes a signet-ring to a wax or clay patty that binds the strings and knots surrounding a rolled-up papyrus or parchment document. (Also, Jer. 32:10-44, Neh. 9:38; 10:1).²
7. Writing-boards: The tablets used by Isaiah (30:8) and Habakkuk (2:2) may have been writing-boards made of wood or ivory with a recess to hold a wax surface. Such writing-boards, could be used for writing in any script. The earliest yet found, at

Nimrud, Assyria, is inscribed with a long composition of 6,000 lines dated c. 705BC and is a type also shown on the sculptures in use by scribes for field notes.³

¹ James D. Moore, "Scribal Culture in the Ancient Near East", accessed on 27 June 2014. Available on <http://www.oxfordbiblicalstudies.com/resource/scribal.xhtml>

² William G. Dever, *What did the Biblical Writers know & when did they know it?* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2001), 204-205.

³ Douglas, Hillyerr and Bruce, 1658.

Conclusion

Although, evidence for the degree of literacy varies according to time and place. However, from archaeological findings and historical records available it appears that literacy occurred early in the Ancient Near Eastern Cultures. Writing was a hallmark of civilization and progress in the ANE. Also, education is entrenched in the religious practices of the people in the then world. This is evidenced in the number of available documents from the ANE.

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