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“New Observations on Scribal Activity in the Ancient Near East.”

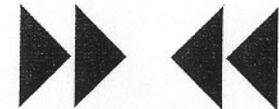
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Text, Script, and Media

New Observations on Scribal Activity in the Ancient Near East

SCOTT B. NOEGEL

Living in an age of microchips and monitors, one might think that the ancient eras that saw the heyday of the stylus share nothing in common with our baud-rate generation. Yet, as Edward Mendelson wrote in a report on Web sites created by Benedictine monks,

the relations between modern Web sites and medieval scriptoria, or writing rooms, is even closer than these monks may have guessed. The technology that connects millions of pages on the World Wide Web derives ultimately from techniques invented by the scribes and scholars who copied out the Bible more than a thousand years ago.¹

Mendelson's report focused primarily on the similarity of biblical cross-referencing systems to Web links, but it also offered new ways of looking at the role of media within the matrix of ancient scribal culture:

The marginal references to the Bible and the hyperlinks of the World Wide Web may be the only two systems ever invented that give concrete expression to the idea that everything in the world hangs together—that every event, every fact, every datum is connected to every other. Where the two systems differ drastically is in what their connections mean.²

Mendelson's remark illustrates how cybermedia have forced us to rethink both modern and ancient text-related issues and suggests that these two types of issues may not be altogether dissimilar or, at least, unworthy of comparison. Indeed, I would suggest that our modern experiences as technophiles offer new insights into issues of text and context in scribal systems antedating even the Middle Ages.

In this essay, I would like to take a step in this direction by examining scribal activities in ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia, and ancient Israel from the standpoint of the following cyberinduced issues: the cultural context of, and attitudes toward, script and various textual media; the

formative role of a script and the physical medium in shaping the cultural conception of language; the cultural significance of the compositional structure of various written media; and the cognitive function of images as text. My remarks will be exploratory and will remain cursory but will, I hope, suggest new avenues for research.

I begin with the general ancient Near Eastern cultural context of script and the textual medium, a context that cannot be understood without acknowledgment of the ancient widespread belief in the inherent power of words, both human and divine.³ As Georges Contenau has written,

Since to know and pronounce the name of an object instantly endowed it with reality, and created power over it, and since the degree of knowledge and consequently of power was strengthened by the tone of voice in which the name was uttered, writing, which was a permanent record of the name, naturally contributed to this power, as did both drawing and sculpture, since both were a means of asserting knowledge of the object and consequently of exercising over it the power that knowledge gave.⁴

The belief in the written and spoken power of words derives, ultimately, not from a courtly social matrix, where a king's word was law, but rather from religious associations attached to the very invention of writing. In the earliest texts from ancient Sumer (ca. 3300 B.C.E.), we find a pictographic cuneiform (or "wedge-writing") system employed to record the daily activities of religious authorities who were concerned foremost with the number of sacrificial animals and foodstuffs brought to the temple. The pictographic script gradually would become syllabically oriented over the next five hundred years, but would forever retain its connection to the images that the original signs represented. By 2500 B.C.E. this system had become rich in what we would call "literary" allusive sophistication and was employed by a variety of different language groups.⁵ Throughout the more than three-thousand-year history of Mesopotamia, both writing and reciting constituted sacred acts, and the highly protected technological privilege of a select few who were not just scholars but also magicians, physicians, and priests. Thus in second-millennium documents we hear that writing is the "cosmic bond of all things"⁶ and the secret of scribes and gods. In fact, the Mesopotamian gods also kept ledgers, or "tablets of life," on which they inscribed the destinies of individuals.⁷ Moreover, the Mesopotamian creation myth *Enuma Elish*, which was recited during a ritual enactment of the myth

on the fourth day of the new year festival, begins with an act of speaking that brings all things into existence.

Writing appeared in Egypt around 3000 B.C.E., in the form of the hieroglyphic script, a writing system that worked on phonetic, syllabic, and logographic levels. Though genetically unrelated to the Mesopotamian system, hieroglyphic Egyptian similarly expanded, over time, its repertoire of signs while retaining and multiplying their visual associations. The pictographic nature of the script permitted scribes to write in multiple directions: right to left, left to right, even top to bottom, and sometimes alternately left to right and then right to left, in "boustrophedon" (literally, "as the ox plows") fashion. Also, as in the Mesopotamian system, hieroglyphs were the tools of an elite priesthood expert in medicine and magic. The scribes guarded and boasted of their technological secrets, with a zeal that rivals even Microsoft.⁸ Writing was, to use the Egyptian expression, "the words of the gods" (*mdw-ntr*), and the scribal art was to the Egyptians an occupation without equal.⁹ The ibis-headed god Thoth is credited with the invention of writing and is said to be "excellent of magic" and "Lord of hieroglyphs." He appears writing the hieroglyphic feather sign representing the word *Ma'at*, which stands for the cosmic force of equilibrium by which kings keep their thrones and justice prevails. The link between writing and *Ma'at* suggests that Egyptian scribes viewed the scribal art as integral to maintaining this cosmic equilibrium.¹⁰

The spoken word was equally potent in Egypt. Execration and prophetic texts abound and bespeak a belief in the efficacy of spoken words. The oracular use of speech is evident in the term for the Egyptian temple's innermost sanctum or, literally, "the Mouth of the House" (*r3-pr*).¹¹ The written and the spoken word similarly play prominent roles in the Egyptian description of creation.¹²

The Hebrew Bible displays a belief in the power of words similar to the belief evidenced in Egyptian and Mesopotamian records. This is not surprising, since Israel became a cultural conduit and receptacle for Egyptian and Mesopotamian influences, and since in Canaan (which eventually would become the land of Israel) writing first appeared in cuneiform script.¹³ Even as the Israelites rejected parts of the cosmopolitan culture they inherited, the belief in the power of words prevailed. Thus, while the biblical legal code states that the Israelites rejected all forms of magical praxis and divination, the very presence of laws prohibiting such practices, and references to speech and words found elsewhere in the Bible, imply a belief in the power of words on a par with

Mesopotamian and Egyptian dogmata.¹⁴ Also, God's creation in Genesis takes place by fiat, and the Israelite holy of holies is called a *debir*, a word derived from the Hebrew root for "speaking."¹⁵ A belief in the power of words explains why the prophets often speak in the past tense about events they predict for the future. Once spoken, an event is as good as realized.¹⁶ The written word apparently was no less important, for as the God of Israel informs Moses in Exodus 32:33, "Whoever has sinned respecting me, him will I blot out from my text [*sepher*]." Job, too, cries out, "Oh that my words were written! Oh that my words were inscribed in a text [*sepher*]" (Job 19:23).

Despite their obvious differences, Mesopotamian, Egyptian, and Israelite cultures had in common a conception of words as vehicles of power, of creation by fiat, and of the oracular use of written and spoken words. This observation greatly affects how we understand the written words that these cultures have left us. What we label "literary" or "rhetorical" was to them a deployment of power—of divine and, in many cases, magical import—as demonstrated by the ubiquitous appearance of wordplay in these texts.¹⁷ Since words are deemed loci of power, puns and paronomasia must have more power because they magnify meaning through association.¹⁸ In the Mesopotamian and Egyptian scripts, wordplay often takes place purely on a visual level, suggesting that the visual dimension of the sign, like the spoken word, conveys power.¹⁹ Drawing on technojargon, we might say that written puns provide multiple links. Other devices, such as chiasm, acrostics,²⁰ and parallelism, might not be mere embellishments but rather manifestations of divinity and vehicles by which scribes harnessed the power of words.

The power of images extended beyond the script to iconography and the plastic arts. In Egypt, for example, sculptures also read as hieroglyphic signs, and drawings functioned as tools of magic.²¹ This is why Egyptian pharaohs wore sandals with soles that depicted the ritual annihilation of their enemies. By placing their foes beneath their feet, they could magically trample them daily. Since art was language in Egypt, drawings and sculptures also carried verbal dimensions.²² The name, being essentially a word, was also a locus of power that could be handled in written form only by experts familiar with the dangers of this power. This is why pharaohs possessed one secret name, and why cartouches were essentially hieroglyphs bound by the magical power of a knotted rope. We also see the belief in a tie between one's name and one's existence in usurping pharaohs' blotting of their predecessors out of existence by chiseling their names from inscriptions.

The belief in the power of words, despite its importance, is seldom incorporated into studies on ancient writing and literacy, yet even a scribal error, an accidental slip of the stylus, could have devastating consequences. An accurate memory is everything, copying is sacred, and knowledge of the associative subtleties embedded in a text is tantamount to secret knowledge of the divine.²³ The richer the allusive language, the more portents embedded in the text—or, in cyberlanguage, the more links embedded in a text, the more influential it is.

Our experiences with cybermedia, especially because we are biased users of particular platforms, also urge us to explore the various physical media to which ancient scribes committed their words and their cultural attitudes. For the Mesopotamians, the medium of choice was clay. Most of the writings that have survived, ranging from administrative and divinatory texts to poems and paeans, are in clay. There are a few documents in other materials, such as stone, but stone was not native to Mesopotamia (or to Egypt, for that matter), and so such materials were reserved for monumental inscriptions.

While clay as a writing medium might appear a mundane topic, documented religious beliefs about clay allow us to appreciate more fully the Mesopotamian scribes' approach to their material. It is of import, for example, that the Mesopotamians saw clay as the medium with which the gods mixed blood to form the first living mortal. The placental afterbirth also was called "clay," and the expression "baked brick" was an idiomatic term for "newborn," similar to the vulgar English idiom "bun in the oven," equating the womb with a heat source.²⁴ Clay is also the material that the Mesopotamians used to build their homes. Thus it is the material of creation, both for gods and for humans. When a scribe impressed a stylus into moist clay, he was, in a sense, participating in creation. He was giving form to language.

Several other examples can be mentioned that reveal the intimate connections among architecture, creation, and language in Mesopotamian culture. Ea, the god of magic, is said to have "built" his words,²⁵ and the gods did not "create" humans but rather "built" them (as we find also in the book of Genesis 2:22, in connection with Eve). We also find in Mesopotamia the use of clay cones inscribed with prayers and temple dedications. These cones were driven into temple walls and sometimes buried in the cornerstones of buildings, much like modern time-capsules. They were rarely intended for human eyes, and, once set into temple walls, would become the words that magically held the temple together and gave it longevity.²⁶ If the medium is the message, then in ancient Mesopotamia the message was constructive; it was creation,

a message reminiscent of modern technophrases like “build a cyber-portfolio” and “create a Web site.”

In Egypt, clay is the medium of builders, but papyrus is the preferred medium of scribes. Here, too, we find a religious attachment to the written medium, both in the script and in the Egyptian mythologies.²⁷ Thus the hieroglyphic sign representing a papyrus clump denotes concepts like “flourish,” “joy,” and “life” and appears as an apotropaic symbol on magical amulets. Several deities, such as the life-giving Nile god Hapi, appear with the papyrus hieroglyph, a fact that illustrates the connection of papyrus to divinity and creation. In Egyptian belief, papyrus pillars also held up the sky, and papyriform columns architecturally supported Egyptian temples, suggesting the forces of creation. As in Mesopotamia, the architectural connection to the creative aspect of writing obtains at the linguistic level as well. In Egyptian, the term “house” can mean a stanza of poetry, and “bricks” and “walls” can refer to stichs and lines.²⁸ With computer terminology in mind, I note that at an inscription at Edfu an unrolled papyrus scroll is referred to as “magic spread out,” thus characterizing scrolling and unscrolling as acts of magical praxis.²⁹ In fact, the word “magic” (*hk3*) appears with the determinative for a scroll. Writing on papyrus, therefore, was to those who employed the materials of magic and creation much as employing clay was to the Mesopotamian scribe.

Such observations are suggestive as a backdrop when we examine scribal activity in the Hebrew Bible. The Hebrew word for writing surface, *sepher*, is used for a wide variety of media that include stone, clay, papyrus, parchment, and potsherds, and the verbs used for writing occur with equal variety.³⁰ Moreover, the words “scroll” and “tablet” often appear side by side, and both appear as media for containing sacred words. Yet the Israelites, unlike their superpower neighbors, evidently did not attach special religious significance to their written media (whether scroll, parchment, or tablet), even though the Hebrew Bible portrays words as loci of power and the creation of the first mortal from clay.³¹ It is the writing alone that is sacred, and the medium becomes sacred by default. It is as if the conception of the text transcended the written page. Even if we look to Jewish tradition as contained in the later Talmudic tractate *Sepher Torah*, we find that the parchment used for the Torah scroll must come from ritually clean animals, but this attaches no religious significance to the animal from which the parchment was taken.³²

The intimate connection between physical media and religious beliefs as reflected in these media also compels us to look anew at the composition of ancient Near Eastern texts. For example, the number of tablets

and verses comprising a particular ritual text may be not so much a function of space considerations as a consequence of cultural conceptions of certain numbers. For example, the Mesopotamian creation account was neatly composed on seven tablets, and seven was a well-known sacred number in Mesopotamia.³³ I am reminded of the rabbinic observation that the first line in the biblical creation of Genesis begins with seven words, the number seven playing a prominent structural role in that composition. The Mesopotamian Epic of Gilgamesh was redacted into twelve tablets that possibly correspond to the sexagesimal system of the Mesopotamians.³⁴ It is of note that the scribe who redacted the epic came from a family of exorcists steeped in the magical sciences.³⁵ I could cite other ancient Near Eastern texts, both biblical and extrabiblical, that illustrate such numerically allusive compositional structures.³⁶

In line with this observation is the use of numbers to represent words and names, a practice that appeared first in Mesopotamia and, later, in the rabbinic interpretive strategy known as Gematria. In Mesopotamia this practice was not literary whimsy; it was how divine secrets were derived from texts.³⁷ Many gods' names also can be read as numbers; thus the number thirty may be read as Sin the moon god; Ishtar, as fifteen; Enlil, as fifty; and so on.³⁸ The connection of deities to numbers is widespread and perhaps helps us to understand the numerical significance of later non-Mesopotamian divinities, such as the God of Israel, who, we are told in Deuteronomy 6:4, is One.³⁹ It also may explain the preoccupation that later Jewish scribes, such as the Masoretes, had in the ninth century C.E. with counting all the words and verses in the Bible. In fact, the tradition of counting letters and words must be far more ancient than the Masoretes, for it is embedded in the very word *sopher*, “scribe”—literally “one who counts,” or who “gives an account” as we might say.⁴⁰

Finally, our inquiry into ancient cyberesque conceptions of media naturally leads us to an examination of images as text. Throughout the Near East we find a fascinating conceptual correspondence between pictures and writing, surpassing even the power of a Nike symbol. In Egypt, the word *ḥt* means not only “written words” or “letters” but also an “artistic image,” “form,” or “sign.”⁴¹ To Egyptians, the sculpted image of a god was both an image and a living word. Thus the New Kingdom book of the dead depicts the weighing of the pharaoh's heart against the feather of truth (*Ma'at*) but would never show Pharaoh's heart tipping the scales. Had the scribe illustrated this, Pharaoh would not have entered into the afterlife, since the images enscripated Pharaoh's future.

Within the broader cultural conception of word as image and its association with creation, the Israelites appear somewhat anomalous, since

the Bible's ten commandments specifically prohibit the creation of graven images but demand the transmission of divine knowledge by way of the written and spoken words. Moreover, although the Hebrew word for an alphabetic letter (*ʾōt*) also means "sign, portent," the Bible nowhere connects the two semantic ranges or attaches religious import to particular letters outside the tetragrammaton, or sacred name of God, Yahweh. I believe that this puzzle can be solved, at least in part, with acknowledgment of the generative role that the sacred script (and, in the case of the Israelites, a consonantal script) played in ancient Near Eastern religions. Although the Hebrew script evolved from pictographic signs,⁴² and the Old Canaanite script that preceded it had adopted the directional flexibility of hieroglyphic Egyptian, by the time of the Israelites it had lost its pictographic associations, and its direction had become fixed. Thus its associative dimension was limited to such sound devices as paronomasia; and, by contrast with the Egyptian and Mesopotamian conceptions of writing as an act of creation, the book of Genesis reports creation as solely an oral work, even though later Jewish tradition recalls the role of the alphabet in the creative process.⁴³ I cannot help wondering if the nonpictographic script played a partial role in shaping the ancient Israelite conception of creation.

Since I have written at length about ancient scribes, it is only appropriate that I conclude by quoting one of them. The citation comes to us from the stylus of a nameless Egyptian master of script, and although it was written at a time and in a place wholly foreign to us, it reminds our tech-savvy world that the utility of technology depends upon the quality of its use, and that its quality provides for its own legacy. Here are the words of the sage:

As for the erudite scribes from the time of those who lived after the gods, they could prophesy what was to come, their names have become eternal, [and though] they are no more, they finished their lives, and all their relatives have been forgotten. They did not make for themselves pyramids of metal, with coffins of iron. They were not able to leave heirs in children, pronouncing their names, but they made heirs of themselves in the writings and in [the scrolls of wisdom] which they composed.⁴⁴

NOTES

1. Edward Mendelson, "Monastery of Christ in the Desert, New Mexico," *New York Times Book Review*, June 2, 1996.

2. *Ibid.*

3. Sheldon W. Greaves, "The Power of the Word in the Ancient Near East" (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Berkeley, 1996); J. N. Lawson, "Mesopotamian Precursors to the Stoic Concept of Logos," in R. M. Whiting, ed., *Mythology and Mythologies: Methodological Approaches to Intercultural Influences*, Melammu Symposia II (Helsinki: Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, 2001), 68–91.

4. Georges Contenau, *Everyday Life in Babylon and Assyria* (London: Edward Arnold, 1955), 164.

5. For the development of writing and its relationship to "magic," see Jean Bottéro, *Mesopotamia: Writing, Reasoning, and the Gods* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992); Jean Bottéro, "Symptômes, signes, écritures en Mésopotamie ancienne," in J. P. Vernat et al., eds., *Divination et Rationalité* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1974), 70–197.

6. A. W. Sjöberg, "In Praise of the Scribal Art," *Journal of Cuneiform Studies* 24 (1972), 126–31.

7. Shalom M. Paul, "Heavenly Tablets and the Book of Life," *Journal of the Ancient Near Eastern Society of Columbia University* 5 (1973), 345–53.

8. See, e.g., the famous Egyptian texts known as "The Satire on the Trades" and "In Praise of Learned Scribes," translated in James B. Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1950).

9. For the connections among writing, speech, and "magic," see Robert Kriech Ritner, *The Mechanics of Ancient Egyptian Magical Practice*, Studies in Ancient Oriental Civilization, no. 54 (Chicago: Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, 1993). The importance of writing also can be seen in the word *rb*, "knowledge," which contains the papyrus scroll determinative.

10. On the possible origin of the deity Thoth, see Carleton T. Hodge, "Thoth and Oral Tradition," in Mary Ritchie Key and Henry M. Hoeningwald, eds., *General and Amerindian Ethnolinguistics: In Remembrance of Stanley Newman* (Berling: Mouton de Gruyter, 1989), 407–16; for more about Thoth, see also Ritner, *Mechanics of Ancient Egyptian Magical Practice*, 35. On *Ma'at*, see Jan Assmann, *Ma'at: Gerechtigkeit und Unsterblichkeit im alten Ägypten* (Munich: Verlag C. H. Beck, 1990) and, more recently, Emily Teeter, *The Presentation of Maat: Ritual and Legitimacy in Ancient Egypt*, Studies in Oriental Civilization, no. 57 (Chicago: Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, 1997).

11. Adolf Erman and Hermann Grapow, *Ägyptisches Handwörterbuch* (Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlag, 1995), 92.

12. Cf. the role of the scribal god Thoth in the Memphite Theology.

13. A. Leo Oppenheim, *Ancient Mesopotamia: Portrait of a Dead Civilization* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), 236.

14. See, e.g., I. Rabinowitz, *A Witness Forever: Ancient Israel's Perception of Literature and the Resultant Hebrew Bible* (Bethesda, Md.: CDL Press, 1993).

15. Contra Francis Brown et al., eds., *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1951), who propose an Arabic cognate *dobara* "back, behind." See also the ancient Greek and Latin translations that treat the word as if connected to the common Hebrew verb *dābar*, "speak."

16. E.g., Ezekiel 29:13. Compare Psalm 85, which begins by telling us that God has restored the captivity of Jacob and forgiven the iniquity of his people and then concludes with a prayer for the enactment of these very events.

17. For an accessible treatment of the subject of wordplay, see Scott B. Noegel, ed., *Puns and Pundits: Word Play in the Hebrew Bible and Ancient Near Eastern Literature* (Bethesda, Md.: CDL Press, 2000).

18. Similarly, see Scott B. Noegel, "Atbash in Jeremiah and Its Literary Significance: Part 1," *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 24:2 (1996), 82–89; Scott B. Noegel, "Atbash in Jeremiah and Its Literary Significance: Part 2," *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 24:3 (1996), 160–66; Scott B. Noegel, "Atbash in Jeremiah and Its Literary Significance: Part 3," *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 24:4 (1996), 247–50.

19. See, e.g., Carleton T. Hodge, "Ritual and Writing: An Inquiry into the Origin of Egyptian Script," in M. Dale Kinkade et al., eds., *Linguistics and Anthropology: In Honor of C. F. Voegelin*

(Lisse, The Netherlands: Peter de Ridder Press, 1975), 331–50; Scott B. Noegel, "Wordplay in the Tale of the Poor Man of Nippur," *Acta Sumerologica* 18 (1996), 169–86.

20. See, e.g., W. M. Soll, "Babylonian and Biblical Acrostics," *Biblica* 69 (1988), 305–32; H. M. Stewart, "A Crossword Hymn to Mut," *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 57 (1971), 87–104.

21. Ritner, *Mechanics of Ancient Egyptian Magical Practice*, 111–43.

22. See M. Etienne Droiton, "Une figuration cryptographique sur une stèle du Moyen Empire," *Revue d'Égyptologie* 1 (1933), 203–29. See also Scott B. Noegel, "Moses and Magic: Notes on the Book of Exodus," *Journal of the Ancient Near Eastern Society* 24 (1997), 45–59. Mesopotamian iconography conveying textual information also is known. See, e.g., I. L. Finkel and J. E. Reade, "Assyrian Hieroglyphs," *Zeitschrift für Assyriologie* 86 (1996), 244–68; J. A. Scurlock, "Assyrian Hieroglyphs Enhanced," *Nouvelles Assyriologiques Brèves et Utilitaires* (1997), 85–86.

23. Alasdair Livingstone, *Mystical and Mythological Explanatory Works of Assyrian and Babylonian Scholars* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986).

24. See the important brief note in Anne Draffkorn Kilmer, "The Brick of Birth," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 46 (1987), 211–13.

25. See, e.g., the remark about Ea, god of magic, in *Enuma Elish* XI: 175–76 *mannuma ša lā ʿEa amatu ibann[u]* (lit.) "Who other than Ea can build word / ideas?"

26. Oppenheim, *Ancient Mesopotamia*, 234–35.

27. Papyrus was associated with the Deltan cosmology of the god Ptah, who created all life from a primeval papyrus thicket. Some Egyptian myths did involve clay, such as the myth of Khnum, a ram-headed god responsible for making humankind on a potter's wheel. Nevertheless, it is Ptah and papyrus that concern us here.

28. Cf. the Talmud Bavli Meg 16b, Talmud Yerushalmi Meg 3:8 (74b), *Sot* 12:9, which refer to Moses' Song at the Sea in Exodus 15 as composed of alternating stichs of "one-half brick over a whole brick, and a whole brick over a half-brick."

29. Cf. Isaiah 34:4, "All the host of heaven shall dwindle away, and the heavens shall be rolled up like a scroll [sepher]."

30. E.g., *kārat*, "cut"; *hāqaq*, "engrave"; and *kātab*, "inscribe." The latter covers not only writing with ink but also inscribing; see, e.g., Exodus 31:18 and Isaiah 44:5.

31. Note also the semantic range of the Hebrew word *bayit*, which means "house" as well as "dynasty, family."

32. This does not rule out, of course, the possibility that the animals from which parchment was made possessed a sacred significance in the period before the Israelites began to use the material.

33. For the use of seven in ancient Near Eastern literature, see W. R. Dawson, "The Number 'Seven' in Egyptian Texts," *Aegyptus* 8 (1927), 27–107; S. E. Loewenstamm, "The Seven-Day-Unit in Ugaritic Epic Literature," in S. E. Loewenstamm, ed., *Comparative Studies in the Bible and Ancient Near Eastern Literatures*, AOAT [Alter Orient und Altes Testament] 204 (Neukirchenvluyn: Neukirchener Verlag 1980), 192–209; Scott B. Noegel, "The Significance of the Seventh Plague," *Biblica* 76 (1995), 532–39.

34. See, e.g., Wolfgang Heimpel, "The Sun at Night and the Doors of Heaven in Babylonian Texts," *Journal of Cuneiform Studies* 38 (1986), 127–51.

35. See W. G. Lambert, "A Catalogue of Texts and Authors," *Journal of Cuneiform Studies* 16 (1962), 59–77. P. A. Beaulieu, however, convincingly suggested to the American Oriental Society (March 20, 1996) that this author belongs to a family of *kālū*, "lamentation priests." The difference in profession matters little here, since both occupations required a knowledge of "magic."

36. See, e.g., the praise of Enlil, which contains fifty lines, fifty being the number of Enlil's name. This was pointed out to me by Professor Anne Kilmer of the University of California–Berkeley, who also informs me that she has collected a great deal of information on this topic and is preparing it for publication under the title "Weaving Textual Patterns: Symmetry in Akkadian Poetic Texts"; see, provisionally, Anne Draffkorn Kilmer, "Fugal Features of Atra-

Hasis: The Birth Theme," in M. E. Vogelzang and H. L. J. Vanstiphout, eds., *Mesopotamian Poetic Language: Sumerian and Akkadian*, Cuneiform Monographs, no. 6 (Groningen: Styx Publications, 1996), 127–39. We might add to this the so-called acrostics, which are found in the Bible and in Egyptian and Mesopotamian literature (see n. 20 above). For the use of numbers in biblical and rabbinic compositions see Robert Gordis, *Poets, Prophets, and Sages: Essays in Biblical Interpretation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1971), 95–103.

37. Livingstone, *Mystical and Mythological Explanatory Works*; Laurie E. Pearce, "The Number-Syllabary Texts," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 116 (1996), 453–74.

38. See, e.g., Jean Bottéro, "Les noms de Marduk, l'écriture et la 'logique' en Mésopotamie ancienne," in Maria de Jong Ellis, ed., *Essays on the Ancient Near East in Memory of Jacob Joel Finkelstein*, *Memoirs of the Connecticut Academy of Arts and Sciences*, no. 19 (Hamden, Conn.: Hamden Books, 1977), 5–28.

39. I cautiously add here Gemini and the Trinity. The relationship between numbers and gods was first espied by K. Jaritz, "Geheimschriftsysteme im alten Orient," *Adeva Mitteilungen* 8 (1966), 11–15, and was applied to the biblical material by Cyrus H. Gordon, "His Name is 'One'," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 29 (1970), 198–99.

40. It is of interest to note Z. ben Hayyim's observation that the word *masorah* is related to the tradition of scribal counting; see Z. ben Hayyim, "mswrh wmswrh," *Leshonenu* 21 (1957), 283–92.

41. Note that *tpt* is written with the determinatives *wḏt*, "magical eye of Horus," and the papyrus scroll.

42. The discovery in October 1999 at Wadi el-ḥol, Egypt, of an early alphabetic script related to the inscriptional hieratic of early Middle Kingdom Egypt may shed light on this issue. Several of the letterforms discovered there relate closely to those in the so-called proto-Sinaitic script, found several centuries later in the Sinai.

43. See, e.g., the explanation of the raised letter *he* in *b^hbr'm* as "with the *he* . . . he created them [the heavens and the earth]" (Midrash Rabbah 1:10).

44. I have based this rendering, with some modification, on the translation of John A. Wilson in Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, 431.