

A Reply to Alan Millard's Response to My "Hebrew as the Language behind the World's First Alphabet?"

A Reply to Alan Millard's Response to My "Hebrew as the Language behind the World's First Alphabet?"
by Dr. Douglas Petrovich (21 April 2017)

After the publication of my recent article (for non-specialists) in ASOR's *The Ancient Near East Today* (<http://asorblog.org/2017/04/10/hebrew-language-behind-worlds-first-alphabet/>), which follows my book in identifying Hebrew as the language behind the world's oldest alphabetic script, Alan Millard published a critical reply in which he wrote "a negative review" of my article, and of my overall thesis (http://asorblog.org/2017/04/14/response-douglas-petrovichs-hebrew-language-behind-worlds-first-alphabet/?utm_content=buffer7fb6b&utm_medium=social&utm_source=twitter.com&utm_campaign=buffer). Given that Professor Millard's positive contributions to ANE studies are voluminous, and that he has offered personal assistance to my own research on several occasions, I am pleased to reply to his review.

Millard stated that it "seems irresponsible" for me to have published my book, and that my "work should be submitted to rigorous scholarly examination first, lest it prove misleading If it meets approval, then is the time to publicize it." Not only is Millard suggesting the practice of selective scholarly censorship, but evidently he is completely forgetful of our own personal correspondence in December of 2015.

At that time, I informed him about the book I was writing, and I asked him if he might consider writing the book's Introduction. He replied, "My understanding of the alphabet's origins and early history would make it awkward for me to write an Introduction to your volume, as you kindly suggest." In the next paragraph, he wrote, "I fear I shall not be comfortable reading more of your work and so ask you to excuse me." Thus Millard's earlier actions contradict his own current advice, because he himself refused to read my work, and he presuppositionally assumed that its take on the history of the alphabet is intrinsically incorrect.

Yet one tenet of sound scholarship is the willingness—at any time, and for a scholar of any rank—to subject one's view to scrutiny, and to abandon that view if further evidence proves another view to be superior. I also approached Gordon Hamilton, regarded by some to be the leading authority in the study of the proto-consonantal script, before publishing my book. I offered to meet with him in Toronto and show him all of my findings, but he turned down the offer. Later, when the book was on the verge of being in print and I offered him a discount on its purchase, he reiterated that he has no interest whatsoever in the book.

Therefore, considering that two of the top scholars in the world in this sub-field categorically refused to read or critique my work, it is difficult to understand how I can be criticized now for failing to submit my work to rigorous scholarship. Such criticism is hollow and hypocritical. The facts bear out that Millard's criticism regarding my thesis and publication should be reserved for his own actions, not for mine.

It should be noted that prior to publication, *Carta's* editors subjected my book to peer review, which failed to produce any legitimate reason to prevent its publication. So if such unofficial censorship as Millard has suggested is the scholarly community's way of responding to my thesis, then my work has no hope whatsoever to meet the approval of his proposed procedure for its publication, with no chance to arrive at

a time when it can be ready to be publicized. In essence, Millard's actions with me in 2015 are nothing short of dismissive of my research *a priori*, which is the antithesis of proper scholarly objectivity.

Millard objected to my statement that assessed Gardiner as having expressed how the first alphabet consisted of Middle Egyptian hieroglyphs that were used acrophonically, and he pointed out Gardiner's expression that the letters instead were "clearly modeled on" Egyptian hieroglyphs. What I was expressing is that the Hebrew creators of the alphabet took hieroglyphs, wrote them free-hand, and transformed them into pictographic alphabetic letters, which is no corruption of the facts on my part, and no misrepresentation of Gardiner. These original 22 letters were hieroglyphs that were utilized in a singular way: acrophonically.

Millard stated that almost every one of the early alphabetic inscriptions is broken or damaged, making the identification of signs and attempts to translate them tentative at best. Millard is correct that numerous inscriptions are broken or damaged (e.g. Sinai 347a, 350, 352, 354, 356, 358, 359, 362, 363, 364, 365a, 367, 368, 370, 372, and 373), but I purposefully avoided including in my book the inscriptions that were either damaged beyond legibility or were purely fragmentary, due to their position on broken surfaces.

The following inscriptions in my book are fully legible and essentially undamaged: Wadi el-Hôl 1, Wadi el-Hôl 2, the Lahun Bilingual Ostrakon (except for a minute portion of the right edge), Sinai 115's caption, Sinai 345, 346b, 351, 357, 360, 361 (except for a minute portion at bottom, center), 375a, 376, and 377. Sinai 346a (except for a small lacuna that requires a suggested restoration), 349, and 353 are slightly damaged, but they can be read confidently, with careful examination. Therefore, Millard's attempt to marginalize the legibility of all of the proto-consonantal inscriptions, due merely to the virtual impossibility of deciphering some of them with certainty, misrepresents the evidence and misleads the non-specialist.

Millard wrote, "He [Petrovich] declares that he came to believe that Hebrew is the language 'behind the proto-consonantal script . . . by weighing the options systematically and allowing the context of various inscriptions to determine which option is correct', without further explanation." In reality, the editors of ASOR's *The ANE Today* made an editorial decision to modify my wording. Here is what I actually wrote:

"Only when I understood that Hebrew is the language behind the proto-consonantal script did I weigh the options systematically and allow the context of various inscriptions to determine which option is correct. How I came to know that the inscriptions were written in Hebrew is completely accidental. . . ." In the context of my original writing (for submission to *The ANE Today*), what I was referring to as having *later weighed* are the options for the correct letter behind disputed consonants (e.g. whether the fish-pictograph is *d* or *s*). What I wrote was explained as thoroughly as my word-count allowed, and my book explains it all to a far greater degree. I cannot be responsible for what ASOR's editors chose to alter, and I should not be faulted for observing the word-count to which I was bound by the requirements of *The ANE Today*.

Millard stated that a glance at my Figure 6 shows "how dubious [Petrovich's] process is. In that text, Sinai 375a, the writing seems to run from the right edge of the stone around the top and down the left side, with some letters below the first few. Petrovich finds the biblical name Ahisamach by reading the first three letters from right to left, then the three below them. . . . No words are cited to prove the texts are in Hebrew." On the contrary, I claim in my book that the 3 hieroglyphs are found on the first horizontal line, not in the vertical column, as per Millard. Millard evidently did not have a copy of my book handy when he wrote these lines, nor did he even study keenly enough the images that I included with the ASOR article.

In my book, he would have found all of the (Hebrew) words that prove that the texts are written in Hebrew, although the only word in Sinai 375a that is exclusively Hebrew (i.e. not found in cognate form in other Semitic languages) is *Ahisamach*. Millard wrongly asserted I suggested that “the first three letters” read from right to left. If he had looked carefully at my own drawing of Sinai 375a, as displayed in *The ANE Today* article, he could have read the green Hebrew block letters to know I am asserting that the text reads left to right, not right to left. Plus, as anyone who reads Middle Egyptian knows, Sinai 375a’s horizontal rows *must* read from left to right, because the alphabetic letters are preceded by the tongue-of-ox hieroglyph (F20), which with this use means “overseer” and denotes the formulaic expression of overseer + the office overseen + the overseer’s name, an expression whose component parts never vary in their syntactical order.

While on the subject of Sinai 115, Millard attempted to take me to task for using the term “Canaanite syllabic letter,” a contradictory term. The fact remains, however, that I neither used that term, nor implied its validity. Never would I use such a term. Instead, I merely noted that Sinai 115’s caption contained two pictographs that are not hieroglyphs: “one Canaanite syllabic (or ‘syllable’) and one proto-consonantal letter.” Millard apparently distorted my wording by wrongly assuming that the word *letter* governs both the Canaanite syllabic and the proto-consonantal letter. He clearly did not read my wording carefully enough, because the second use of the word “one” should have signaled to him that these are two separate entities, not to mention the syntactical juxtaposition of “syllabic” versus “letter” (i.e. two different nouns).

Millard objected to my use of the terms “proto-consonantal script” and “proto-consonantal letter,” which he called meaningless, since—according to him—a consonant is not a letter, but a sound. *The Random House College Dictionary* does note that one definition for *consonant* is “a speech sound produced by occluding, diverting, or obstructing the flow of air from the lungs.” While Millard is correct about this use, Random House’s dictionary offers a second definition for the term: “a letter that represents a consonant[al] sound.” Therefore, Millard’s objection must be rejected, because a consonant can be a sound *or* a letter.

Millard’s objection to my statement that the number of original alphabetic letters is 22, and not 27, is not based on proper chronological considerations. According to him, the discovery of Ugaritic and further study of Babylonian dialects supports the idea that Hebrew reduced the number of consonants. The fact, however, is that (1) he is speaking of a later form of Hebrew, and that (2) no Ugaritic inscriptions predate the fourteenth century BC. My book demonstrates that Hebrew inscriptions, recorded in what is recognized universally as the world’s first alphabetic script, date back to *ca.* 1840 BC and are attested also in the eighteenth and fifteenth centuries BC. For Millard’s criticism to be valid, he must demonstrate that the proto-consonantal Hebrew script of *ca.* 1842 BC is predated by Ugaritic or other alphabetic inscriptions that utilize an even earlier alphabetic script. I am aware of no such earlier inscriptions, but I am ready to be informed.

Millard noted that the summary I gave of my work (presumably in *The ANE Today* article) offers little that can support my assertions. It must be remembered, though, that the design of this venue is to offer a non-scholarly audience an opportunity to become acquainted with my findings, not to defend my position with extensive evidence and offer detailed argumentation. It also must be noted that I was under a strictly limited word-count, which prevented me from offering the amount of support for my assertions that I would have preferred. Instead, all of this support can be found in my book, *The World’s Oldest Alphabet: Hebrew as the Language of the Proto-Consonantal Script* (Carta: Jerusalem, 2016).

Finally, Millard expressed his skepticism about translations presented as facts that carry far-reaching implications, using the example of the early announcements of tablets from Ebla as containing biblical toponyms (i.e. names of ancient sites) within their texts, when in fact they do not. I certainly understand, accept, and welcome skepticism, as I fully realize the far-reaching implications of my findings, for which reason I approached Millard and Hamilton before going to publication. However, there is a thick and dark line between skepticism and *a priori*, dismissive rejection of a thesis before even looking at the evidence objectively and carefully. Moreover, my careful decipherment of 15 proto-consonantal Hebrew inscriptions has nothing at all in common with premature claims that the Ebla inscriptions contain biblical toponyms.

Thankfully, selective scholarly censorship has not won the day, as each and every person now has the opportunity to judge my claims for himself/herself. I published my book because I am confident that my thesis is fully supported by the evidence. Millard's claim that I was irresponsible for publishing *The World's Oldest Alphabet* is the opposite of what is true. Hopefully those who read my book will be much more objective than even some of the world's most recognized and decorated scholars. One's conclusion about my thesis never should be based on who supports or who rejects it, but only on whether or not the evidence I have presented proves to authenticate it.

A Response to Douglas Petrovich's "Hebrew as the Language behind the World's First Alphabet?".
Alan Millard, University of Liverpool (14 April 2017)

In his piece for *ANE Today*, Douglas Petrovich claims some of the thirty or so inscriptions engraved on stone monuments around the Egyptian turquoise mines at Serâbîṭ el-Khâdim in western Sinai mention biblical figures. The following comments refer only to what he has written there.

In 1916 the Egyptologist Alan Gardiner deduced the signs belonged to an early form of the alphabet. The letters, he said, were 'clearly modeled on Egyptian hieroglyphs' (not 'consisted of a number of middle Egyptian hieroglyphs'), each used acrophonically, as Petrovich explains. It is essential to be aware that almost every one of these Proto-Sinaitic inscriptions is broken or damaged, making the identification of signs and any attempt at translation tentative at best.

The summary Petrovich gives of his work offers little that can support his assertions. He declares that he came to believe that Hebrew is the language 'behind the proto-consonantal script ... by weighing the options systematically and allowing the context of various inscriptions to determine which option is correct', without further explanation.

A glance at his Figure 6 shows how dubious his process is. In that text, Sinai 375a, the writing seems to run from the right edge of the stone around the top and down the left side, with some letters below the first few. Petrovich finds the biblical name Ahisamach by reading the first three letters from right to left, then the three below them. Other letters stand in a vertical column with a couple of hieroglyphs among them. The arrangement is odd! No words are cited to prove the texts are in Hebrew. In fact, Hebrew and Canaanite written in consonantal script may be indistinguishable.

Inscribing the stele Sinai 115, we are told, the official responsible 'added a mostly hieroglyphic caption that includes one Canaanite syllabic (or 'syllable') and one proto-consonantal letter', which means the text contained three forms of writing mixed together! The term 'Canaanite syllabic letter' is contradictory, for the sign would either be a syllable, such as ba, gu, or a letter, such as b, g. The terms 'proto-consonantal script' and 'proto-consonantal letter' are also meaningless, for a consonant is not a letter but a sound; a 'proto-consonant' would be, if anything, the origin of a consonant.

One statement is ill-informed: 'The number of original alphabetic letters is 22, which conflict with the long-held conjecture that originally there were 27 letters, probably the result of incorrect extrapolation back from Ugaritic, a Semitic language with more than 22 consonants'. This displays ignorance of the study of Semitic languages from the 19th century onwards. That Hebrew reduced the number of consonants written was demonstrated through analysis of all then-known Semitic languages well before Ugaritic was discovered. The discovery of Ugaritic and further study of Babylonian dialects and Egyptian writings of West Semitic names supports it.

Petrovich's blog does not offer any grounds for accepting his ideas. Many scholars have written about the Proto-Sinaitic inscriptions, some examining the originals themselves, none agreeing completely on their decipherment, for anyone to present such astonishing claims for his research to the general public in a book as Petrovich has done, seems irresponsible. His work should be submitted to rigorous scholarly

examination first, lest it prove as misleading as some other attempts to read the Proto-Sinaitic texts. If it meets approval, then is the time to publicize it.

It is no pleasure to write a negative review; many years of reading ancient inscriptions inculcates a skepticism about translations presented as facts which carry far-reaching implications – the initial announcements about the tablets from Ebla in which Biblical places were allegedly found - are a warning example.