

**HEBREW INSCRIPTIONS,
FROM THE
VALLETS BETWEEN
EGYPT AND MOUNT SINAI**

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Hebrew Inscriptions, from the Vallets Between Egypt and Mount Sinai by Samuel Sharpe

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SAMUEL SHARPE

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HEBREW INSCRIPTIONS,

FROM THE VALLEYS BETWEEN EGYPT

AND

MOUNT SINAI,

IN THEIR ORIGINAL CHARACTERS, WITH TRANSLATIONS AND AN

ALPHABET.

By SAMUEL SHARPE,

AUTHOR OF "THE HISTORY OF EGYPT."

WITH TWENTY PLATES.

Oh that my words were now written !
Oh that they were imprinted on [mount] Saphar !
That with an iron pen and a leaden hammer
They were chiselled into the rock for ever !

Job xix. 23, 24.

LONDON:
JOHN RUSSELL SMITH, 36, SOHO SQUARE.
1875.

P R E F A C E.

IN the year 1820 Mr. G. F. Grey brought home from Egypt a number of valuable MSS. on papyrus in the enchorial character, and also copies of about two hundred inscriptions from the neighbourhood of Mount Serbal, chiefly from Wady Moattab. These latter were published in the "Transactions of the Royal Society of Literature for 1832." Some few are in Latin and Greek; but the larger number are in the unknown character, usually known by the name of the Sinaitic writing. These I am here endeavouring to explain.

The two best known works on these Sinaitic inscriptions are that by Professor Beer of Leipsic, of which the title is given below,* and the Rev. Charles Forster's "Sinai Photographed."

Professor Beer considers them as neither Hebrew nor Jewish, but written by Nabataeans, the inhabitants of the neighbourhood, mostly in the fourth century of our era. He forms an alphabet founded on the obvious Hebrew letters $\aleph \beth \gamma \delta \epsilon \zeta$, and with this alphabet he transcribes the inscriptions into Hebrew letters. But he makes very little attempt to translate them, and he thus offers no proof that his assumed alphabet is right. Had his characters when used consistently brought out a meaning which we could accept as probable, his efforts would have been of some value.

Mr. Forster proceeds differently. He supposes that these inscriptions were cut by the Israelites under Moses, and that they

* *Inscriptiones Veteres, literis et lingua hucusque incognitis, ad Montem Sinai serratae. Auctore E. F. F. Beer. Lipsiae, 1840.*

record the miracle of the Red Sea being divided to let the Israelites pass. He believes that he can read the Bible narrative in them by means of the Arabic language, into which he translates without transcribing.

Professor E. H. Palmer of Cambridge has had the advantage of examining the living rocks, and he is of opinion, as stated in his "Desert of the Exodus, 1871," that the Sinaitic inscriptions are in an Aramaean or Semitic dialect akin to Arabic; that while a few are Christian, a large portion are Pagan; that they are the work of traders and carriers, are of little worth, and have nothing whatever to do with the children of Israel. He adds, however, the valuable testimony to that of former travellers, that inscriptions are abundant on the road from Wady Feiran to the top of Serbal, and apparently uninjured by the weather.

Neither Professor Beer, nor Mr. Forster, nor Professor Palmer have satisfied the conditions required for us to accept their opinions as final. We cannot trust Professor Beer's transcripts without translations, nor Mr. Forster's translations without transcripts. Professor Palmer's work has neither transcripts nor translations. The decipherer should produce first an alphabet or table of characters, and then to some extent a language, and, lastly, a probable meaning to each sentence.

These three conditions are, I believe, complied with to a reasonable extent in the following pages. In Plates 2—20 are given rather more than one hundred of Mr. Grey's inscriptions which are to be deciphered. These are transcribed into the Hebrew letters by the help of the alphabet in Plate 1. They are then translated as Biblical Hebrew or Chaldee, and each is accompanied with such remarks as the case requires.

The conditions are complied with, as I say, to a reasonable extent only, because it will be seen that the alphabet is not so simple as to have only one character for each Hebrew letter; and the sense produced is sometimes doubtful. But these flaws in the proof are not greater than might be expected and allowed in the case of inscriptions possibly incorrectly copied, and written in the very smallest number of letters. The flaws would have been

fewer, and the proof would perhaps have appeared more complete, if those inscriptions only had been produced which can be most certainly read.

In 1860, Dr. Lepsius of Berlin published a number of the Sinaitic inscriptions for the Prussian Government in his "Denkmaeler aus Ägypten und Äthiopen." Several of these are Greek; of the others, some had been published by Mr. Grey, but some were new to us. But I have not been able conveniently to make use of Dr. Lepsius's work, and I have confined myself to Mr. Grey's inscriptions.

Though the Greek inscriptions are not translations of the others, they gave me the first hint to their meaning. Several begin with the word *μνησθη*, *let him be remembered*. This naturally leads us to look for the same thought in the others; and it was not difficult to take the first letters in the very first of our inscriptions for *ל זכר*, *for a memorial*. With this beginning the task is plain. If the inscriptions are in the Hebrew language, or in a dialect of Hebrew, it is by no means an indeterminate problem to find the meaning by putting such a force upon each of the unknown characters as shall make good sense, taking care that each character, wherever it is met with, bears the same force. This would be easy if all the inscriptions were of one age, and cut with the neatness which we find in the Greek and Roman inscriptions. But unfortunately this is not the case. Many are very carelessly cut—perhaps by unlettered persons, who did not give to a letter always the same form. Thus, though we cannot say that we have here several alphabets, yet we have more than one form for some of the letters, and some letters so badly formed as to leave their force doubtful. In many of Mr. Grey's inscriptions the letters are so entangled together, that I have thought it better to leave their deciphering unattempted, and they are not included in these pages.

This recovery of a piece of lost knowledge, of the power of reading an interesting page of history, will probably lead travellers to enlarge that page by bringing home copies of the other inscriptions on and near to Mount Serbal.

To those who have never amused themselves with deciphering

writing in an unknown alphabet, an English example may be interesting and useful.

The following is an advertisement in the *Daily News* of October 5th, 1871 :—

N C. pbcyct. mnpz. gb. Setanco. Asnfs. Iqyfsj. be. m.
 Jqnaa. ma. ng. Manpqangq. be. ap. gyna. seo. lz. cbeqg.
 Liyga. gb. ca. gqsis. Naa. xj. Naaa. ha. pno. caag. ebh.

The problem to be solved is the same in this case as in the Sinaitic inscriptions, namely:—

Having a quantity of writing in unknown characters, let it be granted—

1st. That the language is known, or has been rightly guessed (in the one case English, in the other case Hebrew);

2nd. That the characters have been used consistently, and always have the same force throughout; and

3rd. That the writing contains sentences which were written in order to be understood.

Required the translation of the writing, and the force to be given to each character.

I add the answer, namely, the transcription of the above, and the alphabet.

In this case the transcription and the translation are the same.

1st line. Am coming back to England. Leave R. Hives on b[oard].

2nd line. Shall be at Blackheath on L. C. till end of month.

3rd line. Write to me there. All ks well. We can meet now.

THE ALPHABET.

For	a	read	l	For	j	read	s	For	s	read	e
"	b	"	o	"	k	"	—	"	t	"	g
"	c	"	m	"	l	"	w	"	u	"	—
"	d	"	—	"	m	"	b	"	v	"	—
"	e	"	n	"	n	"	a	"	w	"	—
"	f	"	v	"	o	"	d	"	x	"	—
"	g	"	t	"	p	"	e	"	y	"	i
"	h	"	w	"	q	"	h	"	z	"	k
"	i	"	r	"	r	"	—				

It will be seen that the answer is not wholly satisfactory. In the alphabet we have the letter *w* twice, which should not be. In the transcription we have "All ks aell," which should probably be "All is well." We have single letters to which a meaning must be given by conjecture, and a proper name which may or may not be right. The writer, or the printer, may have made mistakes. But we cannot be far wrong in the meaning of the sentence. It may be usefully compared to our Sinaitic inscriptions; the difficulties are nearly the same in each case. There is, however, this difference. In the English we have only about one hundred letters; all doubt would be removed if we had a larger quantity. In the Hebrew on the other hand, where we have a sufficiently large quantity, we have two other causes for uncertainty: the writing is by various hands, and the characters, where repeated, are not strictly of the same form; and, again, they are not divided for us into words. But in each case the possible errors are confined within very narrow limits, because in each language the ways in which the letters can be combined into words are limited in number.

32, HIGHSURY PLACE,
September, 1875.